

Understanding the Role of Art in Social Movements and Transformation

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Abstract

According to Reed (2005) the arts function as cultural forms within social movements to transform society in numerous ways. These functions are to: encourage social change; empower and deepen commitment; inform larger society about social issues, harmonize social activists within the movement; inform internally to express or reinforce values and ideas; inform externally as a more effective way to communicate movement ideals to people outside the movement; enact movement goals directly historicize to invent, tell and retell the history of the movement; set a new emotional tone; critique movement ideology; and provide elements of pleasure and aesthetic joy. In the first part of this paper an examination of how the arts as cultural forms contribute specifically to contemporary social transformation will be discussed. In the second part of this paper an example of personal and social transformation will be illuminate these concepts.

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A wide range of art educators including Eisner (2004), Greene (2000), Carroll (2006) have referred to the personal and social transformative power of the arts. While the sanctioned purposes of art have been hotly debated during every period of history one cannot deny that works of art can have an instrumental social function. In traditional societies the arts serve to solidify and codify social order through the intentional repeated use of imagery and ritual (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2005). In contemporary democratic societies the arts not only function to maintain social traditions and describe the world, but also often explore issues of social justice, identity and freedom. Most artists and scholars agree that the arts alone cannot change society; but the arts give voice and form to individual and collective needs that motivate and sustain social movements. As movements evolve within contemporary society the arts play vital roles. The purpose of this article is to better understand specific instrumentalist functions of the arts in social movements and consequently how society is transformed. An example of personal and parallel social transformation in the art education classroom will be discussed.

According to American studies scholar, T.V. Reed (2005), all of the arts function within social movements as socially

transformative cultural forms. According to *Merriam-Webster's Online Dictionary* (2010) activism is "a doctrine or practice that emphasizes direct vigorous action especially in support of or opposition to one side of a controversial issue." Reed suggests at least ten overlapping, intersecting, functions of the arts within social movements. These functions serve within to encourage activists by empowering and deepening commitment, and harmonizing agendas of activists to reinforce group values and ideas. The arts are also used to communicate the issues and ideals of the movement beyond the activist group. Through re-presenting the history of an issue, the arts may establish or revise an emotional tone or a public perception. Along with critiquing issues of social justice within society, the arts may also be used to critique movement ideology, keeping the movement grounded and true to its purpose. Finally, the arts provide elements of pleasure and aesthetic joy, important for activists to recharge and rejuvenate their energy and efforts to continue their work in a social movement.

In the first part of this paper I use Reed's (2005) framework for the function of the arts in social movements to examine how the visual arts, as cultural forms, specifically contribute to contemporary social transformation. Artwork by a variety of

contemporary artists provide examples of each instrumental purpose. The examples provided are not unique or exclusive depictions of specific social functions, but illustrate the multiplicity of functions and purposes of art in social movements and transformation. In the second part of this paper I describe the interaction of pre-service art teacher educators with high school students during an art lesson, and creation of a mural and installation relating to relevant issues, resulting in personal and social transformation within both groups.

Functions of the Arts as Cultural Forms for Transforming Society

Within social movements informal networks of activists evolve and from these networks values, objects, stories, rituals or events, roles and leaders emerge (Lofland, 1995). Art can be used to reinforce values of the group, raise questions about current social conditions, and construct an image of social change. Visual images can inspire and create a source of identity with the cause. Perhaps the best known example, the civil-rights era anthem, *We Shall Overcome*, became a kind of “litany against fear” (Payne, 1995, p. 263). The song’s powerful connotations of freedom and justice now belong to the world; it has been sung by Germans at the fall of the Berlin Wall and at Tiananmen Square by Chinese protesters.

Visual artists utilize codes and conventions of their time that communicate more than verbal text. During periods of social unrest the arts can set an emotional tone and move activist participants or their au-

dience from fear to calm resolve, or from indifference to action. In *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima* (1972), Alison Saar transformed a familiar long exploited derogatory image of a subservient black woman, Aunt Jemima, by juxtaposing the image with objects of empowerment. The empowered Aunt Jemima holds a rifle in one hand, a grenade in the other and is overlaid with the image of the black power fist. While Saar’s image denoted the demands of the Civil Rights movement for political, economic, and social equity for African Americans it simultaneously acknowledges the historically close bond of the stereotypical “mammy” figure by the inclusion of a small background photograph of the Aunt Jemima image with a white child. Another layer of meaning seems to be rejecting the use of Aunt Jemima as a well known popular commercial icon, further complicating the associations and emotions experienced by viewers. *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima* launched Alison Saar’s career as an artist, as it portrayed a new vision of African-American women late in the Civil Rights movement.

Art as Empowerment

Even in cases of extreme deprivation and oppression people have shown an amazing capacity to resist dominating forces. Resistance often takes the form of folktales, theater, jokes, folk art and songs (Scott, 1992). These hidden social transcripts have cultural impact and become a force within any movement. As resistance becomes more overt the arts offer a means to solidify and take responsibility for enacting social change.

From the early 1970’s through 1989

General Augusto Pinochet began a repressive regime in Chile and attempted to silence all opposition. During his reign of terror any person perceived as a dissident was abducted from his or her home and never seen again. Nearly 10,000 people disappeared. The mothers of these victims used their traditional roles as mothers to protest the regime by organizing sewing workshops to create arpilleras, a traditional Chilean tapestry, to tell their stories of government violence and atrocities and to call for justice. The Catholic Church supported the women by helping them smuggle the arpilleras out of Chile to exhibitions and sales. The work of the mothers brought international attention to the human right abuses in Chile (Agosin, 1989). The images not only served to tell the world of the atrocities but also gave an unexpected voice and power to the grief stricken mothers.

A similar movement occurred in Argentina, where the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo wore white handkerchiefs as scarves on their head, with their child's name embroidered onto the white material (Bonner, 2007). The Argentina mothers organized weekly silent marches around Buenos Aires's Plaza de Mayo to call attention to the atrocities of the government. The emblem of the white scarf is still used today in Argentina as a symbol of resistance and solidarity in activist art.

Constructing art forms empowers artists to feel their own commitment to a movement or ideology more deeply. Artists like Jacob Lawrence often did an extraordinary amount of research before beginning

historical paintings like the migration series (Mattson, 2010). Lawrence found primary and secondary accounts of the early 20th century movement of African-Americans to northern cities and created artworks that deconstructed his contemporaries' idyllic view of the migration. Lawrence's paintings correlated with the Negro History movement that produced Harlem's Schomburg Collection of resources and became historical narratives and secondary historical sources.

The arts express the values and message to social movement opponents and undecided bystanders. Artistic forms often speak across boundaries of age, class, region and even ideology. Public muralist, Judith Baca, directed community youth in painting the *Great Wall*. The groups of Asian American, Native American, African American, Anglo, and Chicano youth studied and painted scenes of revisionist history of Los Angeles. The mural stories weave together stories of race, gender and class with humor and authenticity. "The entire story of multiple intersections, and the power system at its core, must be addressed if a radically democratic, truly multicultural society is to become more than a glittering promise" (Reed, 2005, p. 128). Many in Chicano communities continue to strive to maintain their identity while engaging in larger social networks that support equity in economic, cultural and political power.

Enacting Movement Goals

The arts not only can support activist goals, sometimes they directly achieve the goals and purposes of a movement, as

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eco-activist art helps restore an ecosystem. Artist, Lynne Hull, (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2005) constructs habitats for animals endangered by human's destruction of the environment. Her work directly addresses an environmental concern and is used to inform others.

Today film and digital images are increasingly popular media for presenting convincing arguments for change. While not presenting himself as an artist, Al Gore combined his Power Point presentation of ecological disaster with images of melting glaciers and scenes of New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, to convey his concern for the environment in the film documentary, *An Inconvenient Truth* (David, Bender, Burns, Chilcott, & Guggenheim, 2006). Visualization of the impact of human systems on the environment was presented as a persuasive argument for changing our individual and collective ecological footprint (Mirzoeff, 2009). While not taking direct action on the environment Gore's work has been highly effective in curtailing industrial practices impacting global warming. While Gore has talked about the dangers of global warming for many years his film seems to have best conveyed the seriousness of the issue and moves people to action.

Feminist artists such as the Guerilla Girls also used direct resistance tactics to anonymously raise awareness of museum biased practices (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2005). The performance tactics eventually had a direct impact on targeted museums and galleries resulting in exhibitions by women and artists of diverse racial and

ethnic heritage. Artists today continue to use guerilla tactics to break through the clutter of media noise and routines to make a visual statement of resistance.

History and Identity

Artists often invent, tell, and retell histories, some autobiographical, that attempt to depict historical stereotypes or assumptions have shaped collective memory and identity (Desai & Hamlin, 2010). Unlike texts seeking to objectively portray historical accounts, contemporary artists often use imagery to convince and persuade. Contemporary artists challenge and reframe our understanding of history by depicting individual stories that disrupt and discredit the grand narrative by revealing its omissions and biases. Images by artists like Kara Walker represent the untold oppressed stories of slaves that challenge the popular narrative of the genteel South (Mattson, 2010). Ironically, to depict kitsch parodies of historical romantic vignettes, Walker cuts large black paper silhouettes; a method previously associated with genteel portraits and romanticized landscapes. "Walker's works are controversial among viewers of all races and have provoked debate about how to represent the history of slavery in the United States" (Robertson & McDaniel, 2005, p. 57). Walker's work tells stories about slavery in the anti-bellum South that range from humorous to outrageous and sad. Walker suggests that some images irritate serious social re-constructivists, who do not appreciate her humor, and she questions the responsibility and ability of artists to deal with issues of social justice alone (Walker, 2010).

The work of Brazilian artist, Adriana Varejao, re-tells the story of Portuguese colonization of Brazil, often using the metaphor of cannibalism as a cultural allegory to depict the Brazilian absorption of a foreign culture while maintaining their own (Robertson & McDaniel, 2005). The violent imagery used by Varejao reveals that the absorption of culture was not without pain and struggle. Contemporary artists' re-constructions of history often challenge us to a better understanding of the present. The re-telling of history through presenting multiple viewpoints is critical for revising the historical record, but more importantly for the construction of identity today. Reed (2005) insists that while identities are not "frozen forms," they all are "collective and that social movements are among the key forces transforming/creating new cultural identities" (p. 308). He continues:

The move from print to broadcast media to networked computing and other new media has shaped identity generally and movement identities specifically. Alongside and entwined with new media, movements have been major forces in the creation of the contemporary emphasis on identities....The inherent paradox is that "identity politics" can exist only when identities are in question. Identity becomes an issue only when it is no longer presumed, taken for granted. (Reed, 2005, p. 309)

Another author, Sidney Tarrow (1997) argues that social movements will continue to play an important role in defining collective identities. While identity is an

increasingly fluid and varied concept social movements are likely to continue as a source of identity.

Setting an Emotional Tone

Art works have been created with the intent of establishing, rejuvenating or diffusing an emotional tone within a social movement. One of the most powerful and emotional visual reminders of the AIDS pandemic is the AIDS Memorial Quilt. Today there are more than 44,000 three-by-six-foot panels have been sewn together into a commemorative community artwork, with each panel designed to honor the memory of a loved one who lost their life to AIDS (The History of the AIDS Quilt, Names Project Memorial Foundation, The AIDS Memorial Quilt). The Memorial Quilt has

redefined the tradition of quilt-making in response to contemporary circumstances. A memorial, a tool for education and a work of art, the Quilt is a unique creation, an uncommon and uplifting response to the tragic loss of human life. The Quilt was nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize in 1989 and remains the largest community art project in the world. (p. 1)

Art works have also been created with the intent of bringing a sense of closure to old wounds and discord, thus commemorating the event. Among the most well-known examples of contemporary commemorative art are the Vietnam War Memorial by Maya Lin and the Civil Rights Memorial by the same artist (Storr, 2001). Both were in-

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tended to honor those who gave their lives to their country's greater good, but the racial heritage of Lin sparked controversy. Maya Lin's work was challenged when citizens became aware that an unknown Asian artist was creating a memorial to an American war in Asia. By the time Lin was commissioned to create the Civil Rights Memorial she was a well-known sculptor, but some critics still felt that a black artist should have been selected to construct the Montgomery memorial. Once viewed by the public each commemorative artwork evoked strong emotion and healing for the audience, raising the message above its contextual detractors and serving to harmonize social tension and national conflict.

Critiquing Social Movements

The arts often challenge dominant ideas, values, and tactics of a society and also social movements, and their tendencies toward dogma, by evoking emotions and meanings not easily reduced to narrow ideological terms. Artists explore the tensions and boundaries of public and private space. Jenny Holzer recently created a series entitled, *Redaction Paintings*, in which she presents individual pages of declassified documents.

The process of redaction allows the government to withhold details of documents that: have been placed in the public record according to the Freedom of Information Act passed by Congress in 1966. Holzer's use of these documents is a very self-conscious act of further publicizing and dissemination information that has been requested by citizens and

independent groups, often against the desires of the government. As an artist Holzer has asserted a right that all citizens have, and re-imagined these documents in a truly public way." (Desai, Hamline & Mattson, 2010, p. 105-106)

Holzer raises issues about the image of our country abroad and the Constitutional right of all Americans to access information about our government and the right to free speech. In a similar vein, *The Freedom of Expression National Monument* by Erika Rothenberg, John Malpede, and Laurie Hawkinson was constructed in Foley Square in New York City from August 17- November 13, 2004. The traditional concept of monument was re-conceptualized to a participatory space for people to verbalize their concerns about the government by speaking into a large red microphone. The art work both depicts and attempts to address the "real divide that many people feel from the systems of power and decision making in the United States" (Desai, Hamlin & Mattson, 2010, p. 102.) While a number of individuals expressed strong opinions and concerns, the reality of their voices actually impacting change illustrates the contradictions of the democratic ideals presented in the Bill of Rights, and the realities of the process of a representative democracy (Desai, Hamlin & Mattson, 2010).

Diffusion and Defusion

The power of these functions of activist art can be further distilled into two

primary roles of art in social movements and on society; diffusion and defusion (Reed, 2005). Through engagement of our emotions, activist art can communicate, support and extend the message of the social movements across society. Certainly not every contemporary artist uses their artwork as an avenue for activism, but the art work of many contemporary artists does serve to critique, defuse and diffuse the message of social movements. The voice of the artist becomes a catalyst for exploration of issues within society that can open avenues for dialogue and a diffusion of ideas in a non-violent manner that supports and encourages engagement in democratic ideals and processes.

Once symbols and images used in social movements, such as peace symbols or Afro hairstyles, are seen as unthreatening they became appropriated and defused in the larger society. While the original context of the symbol is lost the movement becomes further embedded within our collective history and culture. Cultural movements have the most impact when they are diffused into larger society in a less overtly ideological way, but lose their impetus when symbols of change are defused indiscriminately (Reed, 2005). Thus defusion and diffusion of imagery and symbols not only communicates across society during a social movement, but through time. The meaning and power of images and symbols of one generation may radically evolve and change as new generations view the images in the context of different experiences, environments, and values.

Creating Activist Art in the Art Classroom

Each semester I ask my art education methods students to work in small groups to create an installation that persuasively comments on a social issue of their choice. Last year instead of asking students to select their own topic for a small group installation everyone in the class addressed the same issue. This change came because of a topic that arose during a special service project.

Our pre-service art education class partnered with a high school in the metro Atlanta area with a school population that is 85% Latino. I worked with a faculty member designated as the Freshman Team Leader to develop a project for a group of 70 students who seemed “at-risk” for dropping out of school based on their attendance record and grades. Many of the students we worked with came from homes where only Spanish is spoken; in their high schools gangs are predominant and students routinely drop out of school at age 16.

For part of the project the art education students led at-risk students in the creation of a collaborative woven mural. For the mural imagery the high school students were asked to visualize and paint their goals for the future. The high school students also toured Georgia State University and attended a ropes challenge course facilitated by GSU faculty designed to build trust and camaraderie.

During the course of the project the GSU students discovered that in the state of Georgia each institution of higher



The Georgia State University Ropes Challenge Course is designed to promote trust and team work among participants.

The freshmen high school students who participated in the program were considered "at risk" and some were known to be members of rival gangs.

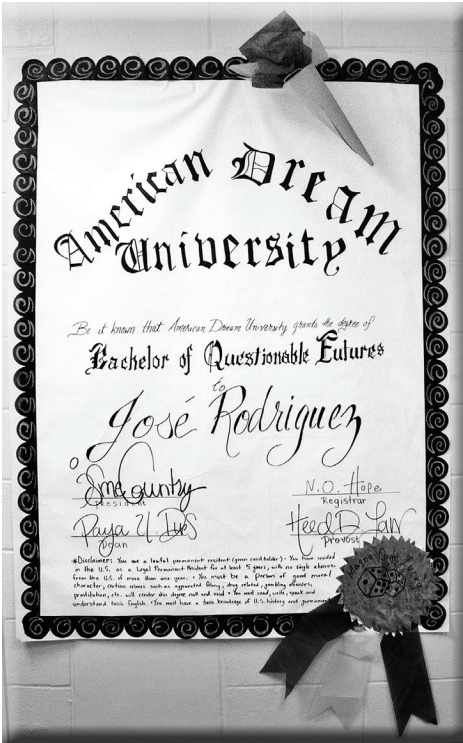
education can decide who they admit, but even if admitted undocumented students are charged out of state tuition and denied financial aid. Denying access to financial aid prohibits most undocumented students from entering Georgia colleges and universities. Our small partnering high school has a total school population of around 800 students; 500 of those students are undocumented residents. The longer we worked at the school the more stories of heart-break and frustration we heard from not only students, but also from teachers and administrators. One particularly touching story was about Anita, who wants to be an art teacher. She is president of her senior class and the art honor society in her school. She is at the top of her class with a 3.9 grade point average and she works part time to contribute to her family's income. Anita can't afford to go to school

in Georgia because of the current laws that prohibit her from receiving financial aid. She's very unsure of her future. This is a very demoralizing situation throughout this school and community that wastes human potential and ultimately erodes society.

After working with the high school students, researching and discussing the issue, GSU pre-service teachers constructed installations around the topic of undocumented immigrants' access to higher education. This was an emotionally charged and complex topic for most students to address. Students discussed their ideas within small groups and developed cohesive statements for their installations. Based on their discussion, two student groups constructed installations that addressed the injustice of an educational system that claims to prepare all students to realize their dreams and then blocks their access to that system. In one installation the false promises for education and a bright future were illustrated by hanging a carrot and over an enlarged inauthentic high school diploma that blocked access to further education. In another installation art education students raised the questions "What does it mean to be an American?" "What are the most important attributes that define being an American?" and "What are the responsibilities of the ruling majority in a democracy?" This was an interactive installation that invited viewers to contribute comments by writing on a large wall space. The invitation to respond provoked a lot of discussion in the hallway and written comments from participants.

These classroom experiences may be

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One installation questioned the validity of a high school diploma for students who may have grown up in the United States as undocumented immigrants.

Even when students earn a high school diploma they may not have access to the further education needed to achieve their dreams.

perceived as activist art, or perhaps transformational activism. The term “transformational activism” suggests that people need to transform on the inside as well on the outside in order to create any meaningful change in the world (Scott, 1992). As I listened to Georgia State pre-service teachers share their ideas and attitudes about this aspect of illegal immigration I noticed changes in their comments and discussion. The impatience and initial anger surround-

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ing the immigration topic gradually defused as students discussed the controversial topic and constructed a work of art. As the students found ways to resolve differences in opinions within small working groups they created a message that was diffused to a larger audience. The artistic process allowed the students to take a stand on an issue and have a voice, individually empowering, and collectively expressing their concerns. This process eventually elicited more questions about the issue. Although a solution to the immigration issue was not found, and little consensus within the large group was reached, the difficulty of grappling with complex social realities demonstrated the multi-layered nature of contemporary issues that require a citizenry willing to move past initial responses to solve problems. Students began to understand why some contemporary art simply raises questions or communicates ambiguity. Answers or solutions are not always immediately found. Based on their comments many of the students will continue to investigate the complexities of the immigration issue.

As previously mentioned, during the GSU mural project the high school students also changed, becoming more open to discussing their problems and considering ways that they could better support each other in reaching their goals to stay in school. Transformational politics guide participants to look inwardly to define their view of true power (Scott, 1992). Developing deep connections to others taps a new sense of belonging and trust. This supports power structures that are not over some-

one, but rather power to unleash collective creativity in constructing or re-conceptualizing society. Transformational activism supports looking for common values among members and then negotiating relationships that are productive and satisfying to all. In the process one or both parties may find their inner landscape and paradigms changing (Kriesberg, 1992).



During the final phase of the project Georgia State art education pre-service teachers worked with high school students to create a woven painted mural. Each student painted their goals on a strip of heavy paper.

The strips were then woven together to symbolize the importance of each individual's contributions and support to the overall success of the group.

Conclusion

Sustainability of the democratic process is based on the ability of individuals to develop their voice, exercise their liberties in responsible ways, and routinely adapt to changing leadership in policies and government. Thinking critically about the arts and their historic contexts may provide

students with “a way to practice the arts of *consideration and taking a stand*...the arts are the foundation of democratic citizenship and personal development” (Mattson, 2010, p. 18). The challenges of living peaceably in a diverse community require opening the minds of residents to new ideas, diverse cultural practices, and the re-constructed historical perspectives that can ultimately build more productive social relationships, including the democratic practice (Giroux, 2003). Social movements alter cultural codes that bring about social change. While the arts transmit traditional cultural mores important for maintaining social order, they are also an essential component of social movements that call for personal and collective social transformation. Paradoxically, while works of art can be put to political ends aesthetic texts cannot be reduced to only political meanings. If arts are to critique and transcend ideology the conflict between politics and art must not be solved (Reed, 2005).

As a society we need individuals with the will and passion to purposefully critique the actions and assumptions of society in works of art. Facilitating change within society is an ongoing function of the arts, through works of literature, music, and the visual arts, including digital media. Looking and thinking critically about contemporary visual art prepares students to become more thoughtful of the messages communicated and the power of those images to shape a socially just and equitable society. As students understand the relationship of the arts to contemporary social movements they may better understand how imagery

can signal the need for social change or justice and motivate personal and collective transformation in ways that maintain social stability by defusing conflict and diffusing multiple perspectives.

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