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Environmental Activism: Using Art as a Means of Action

Abstract

With a planet facing imminent climate catastrophe, environmental advocacy and action is especially germane. This essay assesses the efficacy of employing art in environmental movements. The central question this essay seeks to answer is ‘How effective is art as a medium of environmental activism?’. By analyzing how individuals interpret art and examining several case studies, this essay demonstrates how art can supplement and enhance support for environmentalist movements. Due to increasing accessibility of art to more diverse communities and the innate tendency to rationalize and make connections, art, in all forms, is the perfect medium for inspiring our peers to act. Case studies of modern ecoartists provide examples of the various ways in which artists are creating meaningful pieces that engage their audiences to respond. This essay seeks to challenge artists to see how their work can be used in the environmental movement, urge activists to incorporate art into their campaigns, and for everyday earthlings to let artists and activists inspire them to be stewards and champions of our earth.

Introduction

“A picture is worth a thousand words”: a common phrase that comments on the powerful messages that art is capable of portraying. Whether it be a canvas, camera, or clarinet, artists use their preferred medium to transform thoughts, lessons, and emotions into a new creative form.

Think about it: How did you learn the alphabet? Or the days of the week? Many people cite the alphabet song, or the days of the week set to the tune of The Adam's Family theme song as being the method in which they learned these basic facts, not by sitting at desks listening to their preschool teachers lecture them. People retain information through art, such as catchy jingles, colorful canvases, and rhyming poems. Because of this inherent quality, art has been used alongside pivotal social and political movements in history. For example, Billie Holiday's "Strange Fruit", Banksy's "Girl With Balloon", and Paul Revere's "Bloody Massacre Perpetrated in Kings Street in Boston" all convey provocative messages as stand-alone pieces of artwork, and furtherly controversial pieces when one looks at the larger context of the piece. Art has the power to change the world.

As the world is poised to head into half a year of a global pandemic due to a deadly respiratory virus, our greatest global threat still remains climate change -- an actual planet ending crisis. When drumming up visions of earth work, images of renewable energy generators, sustainable agriculture, and recycling plants are evoked. Or my favorite, mobs of angry millennials and Gen Z'ers with fists raised in front of their clever signs that were made on the backside of a cardboard Amazon package. Environmental activists are people from a broad range of backgrounds confronting and combating the looming ecological catastrophe, from actors like Leonardo DiCaprio to young girls like Little Miss Flint, all working to remediate the global systems that are creating this emergency. And despite all the marches, flashy celebrities, adorable little girls, many of our world leaders still manage to offer only tuppence to an environmental debt that requires a Swiss bank level of funding. With little attention and even littler financing, the save-the-earth movement is in dire need of finesse. It needs evocative beauty

and creative minds that bring the melancholic and apathetic off of their chairs to enlist in the front lines of our world's greatest pandemic -- total annihilation. What is the centerpiece of the movement? Saving the earth is beautiful, and that is where art comes in. By using art in environmental movements, the same ideas that people have been preaching since Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* will become more accessible and incite a diverse collection of inventive solutions.

What is art?

A nuanced concept to define, what is labeled as art versus not art has been a topic of much dispute that has perplexed philosophers since Plato's time ("The Definition of Art"). However, for the purpose of this essay I will be defining art as such: any intentional creation that serves some greater aesthetic purpose. More specifically, this includes visual arts such as paintings, drawings, sculptures, photography, and even graffiti, film and poetry. Additionally, performing arts such as dance and music fall into my definition of art. All of these art forms can be used powerfully by ecoartists to inspire their audiences to think about an environmental injustice.

How can art be understood by *all*?

Unlike speeches or dissertations, art can be widely understood by people of all ages, socioeconomic statuses, languages, ethnicities, sexualities, (dis)abilities, education levels, you name it. There is an available art form that speaks to all.

The limited ability of everyday people to interpret art the *right* way could be seen as a weakness of using art as an effective means of communication. However, the variety of artistic understanding and reflection could create exactly the type of momentum that environmental activists need. David Perkins, a researcher of education methods at Harvard University, writes in his essay *Art as Understanding*, “We bother with art, and many other ‘impractical’ pursuits because such activities play out our powerful motive as sapient organisms to operate our understanding system” (Perkins, 118). In short, humans seek to comprehend things, such as art, because it helps us further understand the world. When we see a painting or hear a song, we are quick to ask questions about what the intentions of the artist were or what it means in our life. For years, the art world has debated over the highly contested issue of what is the *right* way to interpret art. Intentional Fallacy is an idea curated by W.K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley that suggests that the intention of the artist is a nonissue (“Who decides what art means?” [01:20]). Literary theorists Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels argue that the singular method of interpretation of artwork is the intention of the artist (“Who decides what art means?” [02:24]). And, others fall somewhere in between this thought spectrum. However, in recent years, there has been a general consensus that there is no right way to interpret art. However, you decide to interpret art is up to you. Your opinion is valuable. In the scope of environmental activism, disagreements about environmental focused art are helpful because it evokes conversation: “discourse [about art] serves to sharpen, amplify, and deepen experiences. The right word, when one is standing in front of a work or even has in memory an experience of it, may help one reorganize one’s perceptual experience of the work, disclosing dimensions previously missed” (Perkins, 125). Dialogue about art can generate diversity and creative solutions to issues of

climate change and environmental injustice. In the field of earth work, diversity and variety is necessary for fixing problems in a holistic manner.

Furthermore, with the increasing levels of technology and internet access, art can be made accessible to more audiences. Studies conducted by the Pew Research Center found recent technological advances and growing availability of the internet influenced art exposure. All aspects of the art world have become easier to manage: from advertising and promotion, to finding talent, reaching wider and more diverse audiences, and opening discussions about specific pieces of art (Thomson et al.). This increase in accessibility and exposure to people not typically included in conversations about art is monumental because the places experiencing the greatest impact of environmental degradation are disproportionately homes to the disenfranchised members of society. By increasing accessibility to artistic outlets, the people who are facing the ramifications of exploiting our earth can effectively participate in conversations and solutions to these problems.

What is a Successful Piece of Art?

Due to the subjectivity of art, there is no general formula to calculate the success of a piece. However, this subjectivity is what makes art so powerful in the first place. What speaks to you, may not speak to someone else, but both of you walk away with a more developed understanding of how one exists within the biosphere. Thus, one way to determine the success of an art piece is to measure how many people it touched. If we create more art, then the chances of inspiring someone will increase. If a piece of art touches the right person at the right time, that could be enough to catalyze a whole movement, whether that person of connection be an

eloquent orator, a brilliant engineer, a charismatic leader, or even someone who shared what they felt by said piece of art. Sharing art results in reaching more audiences, inspiring more creativity, and greater mobilization among audiences.

Case Studies: Art in Action

For generations artists from all walks of life have fashioned stunning pieces that challenge their audiences to think about nature and their role in it.

When I was in second grade, my mother showed me two photographs of a nearby lagoon. The first photo showed the beautiful aquatic landscape providing refuge to several bird species and marshy grasses, while the second photo showed the dilapidated lagoon with water levels that made it look like a pathetic puddle in comparison to the previous photo. These images were distributed by the municipal water district to demonstrate how flippant water usage has real effects on the very ecosystem that locals find pride in. Those photographs deeply resonated with my seven-year-old understanding of how I exist on the planet. From then on, I was committed to being water-wise. As I continue to learn more about the intricate systems that operate between humans and the natural world, I remember those photos that started all of this for me.

Xiuhtezcatl (pronounced shoe-tez-caht) Martinez is an indigenous youth climate activist that spreads his message through his hip-hop music. Just at the age of six, Xiuhtezcatl began advocating for environmental justice locally and nationally. In his teens, he turned to hip hop because of its intrinsic ability to connect, educate, and inspire people, primarily his youthful audience (Martinez). His lyrics are a call to action for his listeners to reconnect to nature and protect our lands for the generations to come. Oftentimes people consider folk and soul songs to

be the norm for traditional protest music, but Xiuhtezcatl's raps about youth empowerment, decolonization, and environmental justice juxtaposes the modern top-ranking hip hop songs. In his song "Boombox Warfare" featuring Jaden Smith, he raps, "People singing songs of freedom while we marching [*sic*] in the streets. Yes this is critical. This is my resistance. Artists hold more power than these crooked politicians. This is Boombox Warfare" ("Boombox Warfare" [0:53]). Over the years, he has emerged as a young leader, and has been particularly successful due to his ability to connect a wide range of audiences. He has collaborated on songs with several celebrated musicians and celebrities, spoken at the United Nations multiple times, been featured on many celebrated news sources, sued the US government for climate inaction, and in 2019 he was ranked in Time 100 Next (Earth Guardians). Xiuhtezcatl and his music serve not only as an inspirational figurehead for the youth environmental movement, but also as an example of the power of art.

Cynthia Lu is a young poet who recently found her voice in the world of environmental advocacy. In her youth, environmental injustices plaguing our planet seemed to be a fact of life and not something that she had the power to combat (Bow Seat). However, learning about fellow artists and activists helped her uncover the inherent power and promise of her own voice (Lu). In an interview with Cynthia she explained how sharing art with people who otherwise might not connect is a distinctive unifying element of the medium. She adds, "In poetry specifically, I've found that the brevity of the form demands a certain sense of urgency, where there is only so much space to make your point, and so each word and comma and line break becomes more valuable in communication". This quality of creating a sense of urgency is especially important for the environmental movement because it persuades people to act. When asked about art in

activism she responded: “I think activism is a natural extension of art, and while I can’t speak on the impact of my own work, my exposure to other activists has shown me its effectiveness in communicating political truths—because after all, they stem from personal truths”. Although fairly new to the scene, she has won multiple awards and competitions with her poems, notably her submission of *sea butterflies* (a poem about ocean acidification and the interconnectedness of all beings on the planet) to the Bow Seat Ocean Awareness Project. Competitions like the Bow Seat Ocean Awareness Project are a means of motivating and validating young ecoartists, like Cynthia, as well as revealing all of the possibilities of the intersection of arts and the caveats of the environmentalist movement. As Cynthia plans to continue her passion this fall while beginning her first year in college, she urges other young artists and activists to lean into vulnerability and put themselves out there because we have a duty to add and restore beauty to this planet.

Conclusion

Art is an effective tool for changemaking. Art has the power to connect, reach and inspire people from all backgrounds, thus making it the perfect medium for mobilizing environmentalists. Admittedly, there are limitations, however art taps into a realm that is not brought up enough in dialogue about environmental health. It broadens the conversation to more people, educates, stimulates creativity and passion, all of which are desperately needed in this fight for environmental justice. With the end of humanity as we know it looming over our heads if we continue exploiting our earth’s finite resources, art is needed now in the fight to remediate our diseased planet. With the technology that has been made available to us, art is more

accessible than ever to receptive audiences. This new-found accessibility instigates productive discourse about pieces of art and their wider implications. Applying this process to the environmental movement, we begin to see real change.

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