

Artivism, Artistic Activism, and Educational Practices of Artivism

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Overview:

Artivism is a portmanteau that describes the blending of arts and activism. While the term's precise origins are not definitively known (Diverlus, 2016), scholars have suggested its earliest appearance was in the late 1990s in California among Chicana/o artists (Sandoval & Latorre, 2008) and it subsequently reached more mainstream scholarship with several publications in the latter half of the first decade of the 2000s (e.g., Asante, 2008; Sandoval & Latorre, 2008). Early uses of the term focused on issues related to racialization and social marginalization (e.g., Sandoval & Latorre, 2008, retroactively identified the work of Judith Baca in California on *The Great Wall of Los Angeles / The Tujunga Wash Mural* project in the 1970s/1980s as artivism; see also Baca, 1980). Since this time, artivism has been taken up more widely globally (e.g., Aladro-Vico et al., 2018; Hailu, 2020; Kang, 2005; Zebracki, 2020).

There is no real consensus about the defining characteristics and qualities of *artivism*, although most scholars cite its neologistic origins as combining art and activism in their description. The openness of this description, combining a dual regard for artistic production and activist intent, has provided a productive space for artists, activists, and scholars. Scholars have used artivism in two main ways:

- Some describe artivism as necessarily having a participatory quality, inviting marginalized community participants to work alongside facilitating artists/activists to co-create socially/politically engaged art or art that is oriented around a social justice theme (e.g., Sandoval & Latorre, 2008; Rhoades, 2012; Roig-Palmer & Pedault, 2019). This usage may be particularly useful in acknowledging early uses of the term among racialized and marginalized communities and the practical/participatory quality of this intervention.
- Other scholars use artivism to more generally refer to artistic work that engages in activism or to describe any form of artistic activism that utilizes art as a focus for social, political, or cultural commentary; the implication of this more general understanding points to the vital role of public or audience engagement in achieving activist goals/outcomes (e.g., Diverlus, 2016; Hailu, 2020; Kang, 2005; Zebracki, 2020).

The related term/phrase *artistic activism* is also used more broadly to describe art that has activist intentions, whether rooted in participatory artistic creation, marginalized community-based activities, or other forms of social or political art and activism (Duncombe, 2016; see also Centre for Artistic Activism, <https://c4aa.org>).

Scholars have also focused on the educational qualities of artivism. For instance, Aladro-Vico et al. (2018) argue that artivism has transformative potential that is inherently educational and pedagogical. The transformational nature of participating in creating art that prompts reflection on social or political issues is inherently educational in nature, requiring learning about social and political issues but also thoughtfulness in creating meaningful art (see Aladro-Vico et al., 2018; Reason, 2018; Rhoades, 2012; Roig-Palmer & Pedneault, 2019). This educational quality may also be seen when participation is not the main focus of artivism; encountering art in public spaces, during

activist events/activities, or in looking at art through a social/political lens may also prompt learning and reflection that has educational potential (e.g., Hailu, 2020; Kang, 2005; Zebracki, 2020).

Additional Points:

- Diverlus (2016) argues that most art necessarily engages in activist practice because of its inherent purpose in providing social, political, and cultural commentary. Diverlus argues that art must have a social consciousness to reach its full potential, suggesting that activism is the natural expression of this potential. He makes clear that he believes activism can take many forms and that too often preconceived notions about what is considered worthy activism (e.g., anticapitalist, anticonsumerist, antiglobalization, antiwar, and ecological/environmental issues) inadvertently limits artists' understandings of their work as activist; rather, art should broadly be understood as encouraging social transformation and engaging with "more nuanced social issues that are also local and personal" (p. 199). Activism seeks to create visions of a socially just world and artistic practice should seek to tie together "community and political activism and art making" (p. 192). What is incumbent upon artists is to take this responsibility seriously and work to cultivate this mindset in their own practice and in the work of mentorship and community with other artists and activists. (Another related term here is *artistic citizenship*, which is the title of the volume Diverlus's chapter appears in; Elliot et al., 2016.)
- Jordan (2016) explains activism as follows: "Activism is not really a movement. It's more an attitude, a practice which exists on the fertile edges between art and activism. It comes into being when creativity and resistance collapse into each other. It's what happens when our political actions become as beautiful as poems and as effective as a perfectly designed tool..... What it's definitely not about is making political art, art about an issue. It is not about showing new perceptions of the world, but about changing it. Refusing representation, activism chooses direct action."
- The educational nature of activism, as I noted above, has been treated by several scholars:
 - Aladro-Vico et al. (2018) argue that artistic activism emerged where art could be mobilized for activist aims along social, community, or political lines—that this is the heart of activism. They claim that activism is an educative language for transformative social change.
 - Rhoades (2012) combined critical civic praxis and activism, which they also referred to as "a social justice arts-based pedagogy" (p. 318), to provide a way of addressing social justice issues for their video-making project focused on inequities faced by LGBTQ youth.
 - Roig-Palmer and Pedneault (2016) describe activism as "a tool that contributes to social justice by amplifying the voices of marginalized individuals in their communities" and as being necessarily "educational in nature" (p. 92).
- *Activist art* and *artistic activism* are commonly used terms alongside activism, and they are often used interchangeably with activism (or variations of both terms appear in combination to discuss overlaps of art/activism). One of the clearest examples of this linkage between activist art and activism is in Duncombe's (2016) article on *æffect*. Many of the scholars writing about activism draw on Duncombe's (2016) treatment of activist art, which attempts to describe how activist art

“works”; he coined the term *æffect* (a combination of effect and affect) to articulate how activist art engages both goals of artistry and activism. His rationale for this term relies on the understanding that activism has a focus on changing the world, creating an *effect*, while art is focused on creating a feeling or personal emotional response, or *affect*; in order to refer to activist art’s impact, he sees it as imperative to consider both intentions, combining these two meanings to create the term *æffect*. (It’s worth noting that Duncombe never uses the term activism in this piece—although Duncombe’s article does appear in the special edition of a journal introduced by Nossel’s (2016) piece, “Introduction: On ‘artivism,’ or art’s utility in activism.”; see also Duncombe & Lambert, 2021.)

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