

Art as Protest, Protest as Art

Ceilidh Munroe

It is undeniable that there is an art to protesting. Waves upon waves of signs, held by hands of all shapes and colours, thrust high into the air, all to demand “We aren’t doing enough. We can do better”. Hand-drawn phrases or images on cardboard, taped to broom handles and scrap wood. Banners spray painted or sewn, carried by groups of people marching in a line like an avalanche. The messages of the makeshift headlines can be anything from humorous (“I like my poutine hot, not my planet”) to irate (“silence is murder”); stark text or elaborately drawn images.

Often the biggest struggle in communicating one’s fear or anger regarding a certain subject is the inability to successfully express emotions and make them understood by another person with different emotions. How can you make someone care about an issue if the most exciting thing you can muster to inform them is “according to National Geographic only 9 percent of global plastic is recycled”. Without a human element, it is difficult to engage with a topic enough to affect change. This intersection - the place where facts and ideas meet meaningful communication to inspire action - is where art can exist in its most effective state. Art has the ability to inspire consideration, thoughtfulness, surprise, anger, fear, awe, and joy. Why could it not also inspire direct action? How

many times have you watched a documentary about overfishing, or the fast fashion industry, and finished it feeling compelled to assess your own implication in whatever issue was just brought to your awareness? A dry statistic like “every month 1.8 billion people across the globe menstruate, yet 25% of menstruators experience period poverty” inevitably fails to inspire you to address socioeconomic inequality in access to services. A beautifully crafted Persian rug composed of tampons and embroidery thread, however, offers a gateway to exploring and connecting with issues surrounding menstruation and the myriad ways it exists as a taboo in many parts of the world. A statistic is dry and finite; there is no room to interpret it into the ways it might impact your own life. An artwork, however, draws you in and asks you to think. Art, in its many forms, encourages consideration and interpretation. A beautiful landscape photograph displayed with xenophobic phrases gives one pause when considering times they have heard (or said) such phrases in their own life. Fluid abstract works paired with poetry viscerally embody how it feels to experience the world from the position of ‘other’. Protest signs at a march communicate ideas and encourage community responsibility and mobilization.

Science and technology can give us the facts, but art engenders the passion. The terrifying, monotonous stream of data throughout COVID-19 made abundantly apparent the fatigue that comes

with consistently ingesting statistics. Eventually desensitized to the proliferation of the disease, we collectively turned to cultural production to provide hope and make everything feel real. Bare statistics fail to toe the line between beauty and heartbreak, love and catastrophe. Art bridges that gap and allows us a communal space to explore our emotions and formulate ideas for how we want to change. The protest sign may be a statement of fact or opinion, but it is also an expression of passion, rage, and persistent belief. It calls on others to feel with us, march with us, act with us, make change with us. The delicate embroidery of Nasim Makaremi Nia, the photographic works of Ethel Brown, or Violet Drake's digital paintings can be at once a beautiful object while also a protest sign calling us to action. Learn about menstruation and the inequitable distribution of sanitation products globally. Learn about localized xenophobia and othering in Canada. Learn about trans, queer, and differently-abled bodies participating in a system not explicitly designed for them. Allow art to introduce you to new worlds, to have new thoughts, and to explore new ideas. While some may love the pedantic exactitude of numbers and statistics, art in its many forms is a universal language for communicating and harnessing powerful emotions.