Art as Seeds for Action and Change

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My goal as an artist is to disrupt, unsettle, and rupture dominant narratives to assert, demand, and center those who are commonly othered, particularly immigrants of color. I use art, and more specifically, a needle and thread, as a corrective to the master’s tools[1] and as a tool for social justice. As an artist and arts educator, I have encountered more and more individuals, particularly artists of color, seeking advice and support on how to use art for social justice. Often, they are told

[1] This concept that art is a corrective to the Master’s Tool was said by Lisa Woolfork in “Artist-Activists Reimagining Justice: Aram Han Sifuentes and Lisa Woolfork,” Women’s Leadership and Resource Center at University of Illinois, Chicago, March 17, 2022. See event https://wlrc.uic.edu/events/artists-activists-1/

that their art practices and/or art itself isn't an effective tool for social change. Often, this sentiment gets internalized, and artists of color stops themselves in their practices, believing that art isn't enough. Here are some insights and advice I have on the power of art. In many ways, I'm also speaking to a younger version of myself, who too encountered these external and internalized sentiments.

Tell Your Own Stories

Through art, music, and writing we have the power to tell our own stories. Our stories are often not told, actively forgotten, and/or suppressed, perverted, distorted, and oversimplified by dominant culture. Through art, we tell our own stories and truths on our own terms.

Center Yourselves and Shift the Frame

By telling our own stories, we shift the frame and put ourselves in the center. We live in a society where most things are defined

by whiteness and white racial logic[2]. When we tell stories and truths from our own perspective, we rupture white narratives and define ourselves and our experiences to ourselves and our communities. Alongside this rupture, our stories create cultural shifts that is at the core of creating large cultural and social change.

Representation Matters

By telling our own stories, we claim space. We become visible and proud. There is something profoundly powerful about seeing the many nuances and complexities of your story and your experiences reflected to you; it's a sigh of momentary relief. Then we fight for more.

Push Back: Talk Back to Power

This is one of my favorite ways to use art: to talk back to power. I use art to do this a lot because I work with vulnerable communities, such as non-citizen immigrants, who don't have

[2] Rubén Gaztambide-Fernández, Amelia M. Kraehe, and B. Stephen Carpenter II, "The Arts as White Property: An Introduction to Race, Racism, and the Arts in Education," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Race and the Arts in Education* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

freedom and the space to talk back to power without fear of reprisal. Art can create this space under the guise of creativity. Talking back to power can also take on different tones such as in-your-face, strident, witty, and/or subversive. We also have the ability to not acknowledge power and create a world for ourselves.

Use Art as a Pathway to Heal and Maintain Well-Being

We live in a society where so many pathways to healing are cut off, corporatized, or just made inaccessible (including art).[3] It is undeniable that art is a pathway to healing, and even if this society makes it hard for us to make art in our everyday lives, we must do so for our well-being.

Create Opportunities for Collective Gathering and Making

In many non-EuroWestern cultures, 'art' is made collectively, not by an individual. Making art together creates spaces for our knowledge—connected through lived experiences—to be

[3] One of my best friends, somatic therapist Willi Farrales, said this to me in a phone conversation. [3] This point was made in a recent lecture by William Estrada in my class at SAIC in Fall 2019.

shared and uplifted. These spaces of collective making become radical spaces to speak, listen, validate each other, talk through our political differences, share stories and resources, learn about the self and others, and playfully come up with strategies to live and fight. Our oppressive society peddles us individualism. We must push back and find as many opportunities as possible to gather, share, and make collectively. In these moments we can connect, empathize, humanize, empower one another, and oftentimes even in spaces where we don't fully agree with one another. It is important to create spaces where we can come together and connect as our complex selves and have our full selves be embraced.

Imagination and Action

Art is the language of imagination. Art allows us to imagine and present alternate pasts, presents, and futures. Through art, we can see our imaginations come to fruition. This is where we can come up with our own answers and solutions for the problems

that we see and experience. I use art in this way to create socially engaged projects—such as voting stations for those who legally can't vote—that reimagine what civic engagement can look like if it were truly made accessible to all. At its best, art can push against structures of capitalism, white supremacy, and power to imagine and create new worlds. Once we see these worlds, it is up to us to make them a part of our everyday. Imagination and dreams are the inspiration for action. We demand change because we can see different and better worlds. Imagination is what gives us hope. The seeds for action are indignation with the way things are and imagination for the way things can be.

In these ways, art is integral to an ecosystem fighting for change.[3] Making art and storytelling through art, can create significant cultural shifts that contribute to radical change. In our collective making, sharing, expressing joy, and creating culture, we declare that we are never never other.[4] We are

[4] This comes from a quote from Avery Gordon in Ghostly Matters where she states, "Complex personhood means that even those called 'Other' are never never that." Avery F. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Hauntings and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis, MI: New University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 4.

here. We are resilient and committed to fight for our human rights to create better worlds.