

THE MIRROR CASKET

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Of all the projects that the artists and I created, we became most known for the *Mirror Casket*. This project emerged from a series of dreams I had after my first nights of protesting. Each dream included men walking into the night carrying a casket that was made of mirrors. I couldn't shake the image, so I reached out to as many artists as I knew to ask for help to bring it to life. Six artists responded, and in a matter of weeks, we worked together to gather materials, design the casket, build it and march it from the street where Michael Brown Jr was murdered to the police department where many had gathered nightly to protest.

After its first use, the *Mirror Casket* appeared in subsequent marches across the region and was exhibited throughout Missouri, including in the capitol. During the year that followed, it gained the attention of the Smithsonian Institution, which acquired it for its latest museum, the National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, DC. Activist Angela Davis even wrote an article about it for *Smithsonian* magazine, titled 'The Art of Protest'.

Eventually, the public awareness gained from the *Mirror Casket* project and other protest artworks allowed me to meet, connect and work with dozens of artists to conceive and develop more creations, performances, videos and even apparel that address women's rights, LGBTQ+ issues, racial inequity, climate justice and education. Together we have used art to help grassroots groups and organisations lobby for policy changes and influence the ways in which our communities can thrive more equitably.

WHY ART MATTERS IN SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

Most art that is created in protest will not be acquired by museums, nor is this usually the goal of activists and artists working together. Most often, we aim to reflect and respond to the immediate causes that are grounded in our social movements. And whether used in a march, a social media campaign or as guerrilla art in a public space, protest art helps social movements inform the public of issues, challenge the status quo, convey collective goals and messaging, imagine a vision of change and persuade others to take action.

Informing the Public

When used in public spaces, protest art serves as a mighty tool to help people learn about social issues. As an example, *Chalked Unarmed* was a guerrilla art series by public performance artist and *Mirror Casket* collaborator Mallory Nezam. The project invited citizen collaborators to create chalk outlines, like police outlines of murder victims, on pavements across their communities. Each outline was filled with the name, date and location of a person who had been murdered by a police officer.

Making Messages Visible

In protests across the globe, people tend to write and illustrate their calls to action on cardboard, posters or banners.

At marches, where it can be hard for target audiences to hear each individual's voice, signage allows each person's message to be seen, and the results are often full of creativity and passion.

Imagining a Vision for Change

Protest art effectively helps people develop a language and create a vision for how outcomes in a community can be better. While projects like the *Mirror Casket* challenge viewers to look inward to see themselves differently and empathise with those whose lives have been lost, other works may propel people forward to imagine a new reality.

Influencing Action

Efforts like *Decolonise This Place* and *Theatre of the Oppressed* use performances, flash mobs and "spect-acting" (whereby a member of the audience also becomes part of the performance) to engage with people across the world and explore how justice and equality can become reality. Each experience that the artists facilitate is directly tied to demands for organizations and government leaders to change a policy, boycott unjust spaces, disinvest from harmful companies or stop violent or inequitable public actions. For example, *Theatre of the Oppressed* ran a performance in 2016 entitled *The Housing Circus*, based on the real life experiences of different individuals trying to receive housing benefits. Told from the perspective of LGBTQ+ individuals and war veterans living in New York City, *Theatre of the Oppressed* used this performance to suggest policy changes.

Challenging the Status Quo

One of the common impacts of protest art is to push against the norms and rules of society. Artists like Elizabeth Vega, Ai Weiwei, Banksy and others have mastered using art as dissent. Such works often take existing materials and cultural artefacts and re-purpose them, or they might remix messages from advertisements, buildings, monuments, news articles or political documents in ways that point to their hypocrisy, outdated messages or other flaws.





TRY THIS:


1. Write a list of all the social issues that you know about. From your list, circle two or three that matter most to you. Brainstorm how art might be used to protest your selected issues as well as how art might help spark solutions to address them.

2. Organise an activist team around a cause you care about. One of the arts of protesting is to work in community and collaboration with others in order to raise your voices around a social cause. Who among your friends or family can you partner with to

create art together? Who within your community has created protest art before? Make a list of people you know and reach out to them to share your ideas.

3. Create a protest sign. Write or draw a sketch of what your sign will say. Then gather materials around your home like markers and cardboard to create your sign.

4. Use everyday materials like boxes to build a sculpture that can be carried in marches, installed at different sites or used in public to draw attention to a social issue.



AN ARTIST'S DUTY AS FAR AS I'M CONCERNED IS TO REFLECT THE TIMES...

Nina Simone



A BRIEF HISTORY

Protest art has been a 'visual voice' for communities throughout history.

There is evidence that political satire has been used as far back as ancient Greece and Rome and perhaps even earlier. Ancient Egyptian artwork depicted men as animals, while sculptors in the Middle Ages carved humorous scenes into stone. Exaggerated plays and public performances to express dissent about political and social issues are also well-documented. In the 1800s and early 1900s, protest art took the form of etchings, satirical cartoons and publication covers; the last two categories are still useful strategies today.

Here's a look at the use of various art forms in protests of the modern era. This time line is representative but far from complete. What other instances of protest art through history and in the current day would you add?

1810–1820

Francisco Goya, Spain THE DISASTERS OF WAR

This series of 82 politically charged etchings show wartime scenes. Although the etchings were not published in Goya's lifetime, today they are seen as powerful indictments of the horrors of war.

1916

Dada Artists, Europe ART AGAINST WORLD WAR I

Led by revolutionary icons including Marcel Duchamp and Man Ray, the Dadaists voiced an artistic revolt against conventional society and war via performance pieces, sculpture, poetry and paintings.

1914–1918

Women's Suffrage Groups, UK VOTES FOR WOMEN

Between 1914 and 1918, an estimated 2 million women in the UK undertook roles that had traditionally been filled by men, as most men of age had gone off to fight in World War I. This helped spur women to demand the right to vote, and new printing techniques enabled the activists to spread their messages quickly via posters, sashes, badges and banners. British women gained the vote in 1918.

1920s–1930s

NAACP, USA

'A MAN WAS LYNCHED YESTERDAY'

A flag bearing these words was hung from the headquarters of the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People in order to raise awareness about the lynching of Black people in the United States. It was flown on multiple occasions until the building's landlords threatened the NAACP with eviction.



1920s

Diego Rivera, Mexico MURALS

Rivera was a leader in a government-sponsored Mexican mural project that ran during the 1920s. His large-scale works centred around political and social themes that reflected on Mexico's history.

1929

Igbo Women, Nigeria THE WOMEN'S WAR

In what is known as the "Aba Women's Riots of 1929" in British colonial history, thousands of Igbo women took action against colonial authorities who planned to impose a tax on market workers, that endangered their livelihood. Messages initially spread through the community via palm leaves, which symbolised a call for help. The women then began performing nightly chants, songs and dances, forcing some local chiefs to resign. The Women's War became a historic example of feminist and anti-colonial protest in Nigeria.

1944

Tōyō Miyatake, USA PHOTOGRAPHY

Japanese American photographer Miyatake captured the story of the imprisonment of Japanese Americans in internment camps during World War II through a series of poignant and powerful photographs.

1960s

Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, USA CIVIL RIGHTS SPEECHES

Led by the Rev Dr Martin Luther King Jr and others, the American civil rights movement sought to end racial discrimination and grant Black Americans equal rights by law. Several of Dr. King's iconic speeches helped inspire and bring attention to the movement.



1960s–1970s
Emory Douglas, USA
BLACK PANTHER GRAPHICS

American artist Emory Douglas created many of the famous graphic works associated with the *Black Panther* newspaper, including the 'All Power to the People' poster.

1960s–1970s
Anti-War Protests, USA
SLOGANS AND SONGS

The escalating US involvement in the Vietnam War led to increasing protests. Original folk songs became important expressions of anti-war sentiment, as did slogans such as 'Make Love, Not War'.

1975
Shigeo Fukuda, Poland
'VICTORY 1945'

Shigeo Fukuda was a multi-talented artist. Among his works are several important protest images, including 'Victory 1945', which depicts, in stark graphic style, an artillery shell apparently returning into a cannon barrel, a simple and affecting plea for an end to wars.

1987
June Struggle, South Korea
WORKERS' MARCHES

Throughout the month of June democratic protests broke out, leading to reforms that are still used in place in the South Korean government today. Originally started by students, and later joined by white collar workers, the movement included throwing toilet paper rolls in the streets.

1990s
Piss on Pity, UK
THE DISABILITY ARTS MOVEMENT

The disability arts movement became active in the UK during the 1990s. The provocative slogan 'Piss on Pity', coined by songwriter and activist Alan Holdsworth, was a rallying cry. The movement's activism led to the passing of the 1995 Disability Discrimination Act.



2010–2012
The Arab Spring
SOCIAL MEDIA

This series of anti-government demonstrations from Egypt to Tunisia, Syria and beyond led to some changes in regime. Helped by social media, the pro-democratic movement spread quickly.

2015–2016
Anti-Government Protests, Brazil
PIXULECOS

After allegations of government corruption and in an unstable economy, millions of Brazilians took part in anti-government protests across the country, resulting in the successful impeachment of its president. Men, women and children wore the vibrant yellow T-shirts of the national football team, and passed inflatable dolls that caricatured corrupt politicians called 'pixulecos' through the crowds.

2018
Pascal Boyart, Paris
GILETS JAUNES MURAL

In 2018, the street artist Boyart painted a mural in Paris celebrating the 'yellow vest' anti-government protests. It was based on a painting by Eugène Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People*, which glorified the French revolution of 1830.

2020
Black Lives Matter, Global
STREET ACTIONS

Founded in 2013 by Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors and Opal Tometi, the Black Lives Matter movement received international attention in 2020 following the unlawful killing of George Floyd, an unarmed Black man at the hands of the police. Floyd's calls for help were repeated across the world, summarized by the phrase 'I Can't Breathe'.