

ACTIVE IDEALISM

A SELF-GUIDE INTO THE DAUNTING TASK OF TRYING TO CHANGE THE WORLD.

The concept of activism can be a very ambiguous one, starting from its inconsistent definition. For instance, the Oxford dictionary defines the term as “the activity of working to achieve political or social change, especially as a member of an organization with particular aims”; while Merriam-Webster dictionary defines it as “a doctrine or practice that emphasizes direct vigorous action especially in support of or opposition to one side of a controversial issue”.

We can tell that the first definition is more broad... technically, even voting could count as activism since it's an activity to achieve political change. The second definition proposes a less passive tone, which I think is more accurate. It also tells us one of the most interesting aspects of activism: it is a reaction. Without a trigger, there wouldn't be the need to act against something. Having said this... Why is activism not the norm? Shouldn't it be the natural way of proceeding after being provoked? [In the words of Winona LaDuke](#), a Native American environmentalist:

“Someone needs to explain to me why wanting clean drinking water makes you an activist, and why proposing to destroy water with chemical warfare doesn't make a corporation a terrorist.”

This could already tell us something about how society is managed by authorities. Although some movements have been able to grow through the years such as Black Lives Matter, activists usually start as a minority compared to corporations or governments in terms of scale. It is more convenient to keep society distracted in order to impose certain things. Activism then, is the alarm call. However, even if it's expected to be a well intentioned practice, it faces the risk of easily becoming radicalism and at its very worst, terrorism.

Radicalism shouldn't necessarily mean a bad thing. After all, it should be expected that extreme unjust circumstances call for extreme reactions. In this sense, it would be absurd to expect moderation in the context of resistance and protest. However, we must not forget some successful demonstrations of mild activism such as Martin Luther King Jr's contributions to the civil rights. The word "radical" could sound intimidating as it might suggest violence or any action that is out of bounds. However, if we look further to the origin of the word, it is in fact, not that outrageous. [As explained by Merriam-Webster](#); "Radical was first an adjective, borrowed in the 14th century from the Late Latin radicalis, itself from Latin radic-, radix, meaning 'root.' And the earliest uses of radical are indeed all about literal roots, hinging on the meaning "of, relating to, or proceeding from a root... Root itself is a familiar element in metaphoric language—we talk about "the root of the problem," "putting roots down," "a family's roots"—and so perhaps radical was destined to develop figurative use too."

It is interesting to contemplate the expression "root of the problem" since it suggests a harsh but efficient problem-solving method. Consequently, to pull off the roots of a social issue would be synonymous with taking a radical measure against it and eliminating the foundation of a radical or activist initiative as well.

If we think about it like that, then it doesn't seem harmless at all. But of course, morality and ethics are broad and subjective concepts, often tied to religious and cultural aspects that will differ from person to person. We will always have the philosophical dilemma of who's the hero and who's the wrongdoer. This is when terrorism comes in the picture.

For example, if a group of extremists bomb a city in the name of their religion they might consider themselves activists since they have a particular aim fueling such a destructive mission. If we look back to the definition, this case could still apply as "direct vigorous action in support of or opposition to one side of a controversial issue". But of course, it is expected that to the majority of people they will undoubtedly be considered terrorists with pure evil intentions.

Moving away from the complexity of activism as a general concept, I will focus on activism within the world of art and design. It is my goal to guide myself into the maze of activism to discover what is the best way in which we can try to make a change in the world. I have thought of different ways in which artist and designers can contribute to activism and will proceed to break them down. Naturally, there will be some overlapping aspects between these branches, but his categorization only serves as a means to discover different possibilities in which artists and designers can also be activists.

AWARENESS

This is perhaps the most natural way of activism expected by an artist: creating work that depicts the world's issues with the intention to express them, bring them into the conversation and question them; eventually serving as historical human footprints of a determined spatial and temporal context. We have countless examples of this, including extremely famous and classical ones like Picasso's Guernica narrating the Spanish Civil War bombings, or novels like Les Misérables by Victor Hugo addressing poverty, injustice, and human rights in France.

More contemporary well-known examples include Banksy's and Ai Weiwei's entire body of work. If we think of the film industry then the list is huge, with countless movies that portray social realities in different genres from Drama to Documentary. It is so common to cover social aspects in art that I'm even skeptical whether it counts as activism or if it should simply be an artist's responsibility, with the power of creating messages that choose not to ignore the reality of their times.

On second thought, there are countless subjects that one could use as the central point of an artwork; so choosing to react to social issues is still a good display of both courage and consciousness by an artist.

Art plays a powerful role in raising awareness globally, since it doesn't have to be limited to the geographical context of the issue in question. Coming from a small country as the Dominican Republic, it made me happy to read about a fellow Dominican artist, Teresa María Díaz Nerio and how she has successfully addressed some of our local issues in international platforms across Europe.

On the other hand, it is crucial to apply critical thinking when addressing social issues. We must be aware of counterproductive actions and misleading messages. The role of spreading these messages is so relevant and serious that it can also become quite controversial if we don't do it in a conscious and respectful manner.

For instance, Alessio Mamo is a visual artist who claimed to raise awareness of poverty and hunger in India through his "[Dreaming Food](#)" project. However, he turned out to be exploitative and cruel towards the subjects, since he made them imagine food while standing in front of a table full of fake meal props. As one would expect, he faced a lot of criticism for his lack of empathy and distasteful approach to the issue he tried to address.

Another aspect that we must take into account is that raising awareness can also become a quick and less committing way of feeling like we're engaging in a cause while it's often simply a facade of consciousness. We can see this often in social media. It is very common for people to feel comfortable sharing a story or post in their feed to join an apparent trend or to show that they care while not even reading about the issue to begin with or try to find out different ways of contributing. Like every tool of course, is about how we use it, so even within the virtual setting of social media there are more efficient ways of displaying engagement than others.

PROTEST

Joining protest demonstrations will often imply leaving the comfort of our studios and simply go outside and join the masses in the streets. We can of course, still include art making while we protest. Musicians have achieved this successfully throughout time. By lending their words, instruments and voices to social justice, what once might have started as a few chords in a raw demo and handwritten scraps of paper could potentially turn into an anthem. A legendary example would be Bob Marley whose greatest hits often contain lyrics that relate to political resistance and the pursuit of peace and unison as humankind.

I also think of other great lyrics in Spanish by Latin American artists like Los Fabulosos Cadillacs, Calle 13 and Rita Indiana. While I personally find a lot of their songs moving, I can't think of a more impactful example than the song *Un violador en tu camino* (A rapist in your path) by Chilean feminist collective LASTESIS. [What started as a street performance in 2019](#), suddenly became viral through social media. In a matter of months, the song, accompanied by the original dance routine, became an hymn performed by millions of women during feminist protests in Mexico, Argentina, Spain, Colombia, France and the United States... it was also translated to more than 10 different languages. According to Geochicas, as of 2021, "Un violador en tu camino" had already been performed in over 400 locations in over 50 countries.

Some important parts of the lyrics include the following:

***Y la culpa no era mía, ni dónde estaba ni cómo vestía... El violador eres tú.
And it wasn't my fault, nor where I was, nor how I dressed... You are the rapist.***



This is a great example of global collaboration, where thousands of activists are united by a bigger goal that transcends their own local demands. While legislations are different from country to country in the end, the general demand is the same: respect for women's rights. In this sense it is moving how a song can become a universal anthem for a cause.

Another great way of supporting protests beyond physically joining is by creating and sharing resources to be used freely. Graphic material can be very useful, ranging from protest signs and posters, to infographics, safety information leaflets and t-shirts. This can be done individually in an independent way or also collectively through organizations like [AIGA's Design for Democracy campaign](#).

In order to be good artists and designers we are required to be trained in skill in order to articulate clear concepts effectively, but when we're thinking of a protest setting, technical skills are irrelevant compared to the ability of acting with immediacy. Speaking of graphic design, within a protest setting, it should be about being as visible as possible, rather than being impeccable. Let's take graffiti for example, even though street artists and mural painters can display impressive technical skills, when we encounter a striking, powerful message it doesn't matter how well painted it is, if images appear pixelated, if the typography is consistent, if the handwriting is neat or even if the spelling is correct. It is about showcasing a gut feeling, coming from someone who's most likely feeling angry, sad or powerless. We can take the example of a naive but incredibly moving [Black Lives Matter protest sign drawn by a kid](#).



DOCUMENTATION

Documenting is also a way of creating awareness and opening certain dialogue. Photography is probably the most powerful medium for capturing reality. In this sense, documentary photography can transition more into the role of journalism than art. It can potentially become evidence in the search of justice, since it is a crucial way of bringing events to light, that could otherwise remain hidden.

It can also be subject to controversy. Often times, the photographer is not related to the scene and is merely a spectator. We can take the example of the shocking picture of a vulture posing next to a starving girl in Sudan. The fact that someone is standing in a camera while taking a distance from a subject who is suffering makes us wonder if they could have assisted the victim instead of capturing the moment. Maybe they could've done both? It seems that the photographer himself was traumatized by this, since he committed suicide four months after being awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Feature Photography.

Let's say it's not an extreme case of someone who is about to die. We can also think of the documentation of poverty conditions in which a huge amount of people live on a day to day throughout the world. While documenting the precarious day-to-day might be an effective way to sensitize the viewer about issues they might not be aware of (or reminded of frequently), it is extremely important to do so in a way that it doesn't become a spectacle. In the case that these photographs also translate into professional success and financial rewards for the artist, I believe there is a moral obligation to provide tangible help to the persons and communities photographed.

It should be common sense to leave ego behind in these cases, although this might be challenging for artists since we can be commonly self-absorbed. The idea of someone going to a poor neighborhood and taking some impactful pictures with cameras and lenses that are probably worth months of food, then submitting them to a contest and exhibiting them in the comfort of a gallery, miles away from the original setting of the pictures sounds harsh but it can happen often. Not to mention, there is also a revictimization process where the subjects are viewed as inferior, if they're used as models without a financial reward or consent for the least. There might be excuses for this like the language barrier but I think there's not enough effort to communicate with them and they're simply not even considered worthy of being asked for permission. They're already vulnerable and yet they're prone to be taken less seriously as someone from the photographer's socioeconomic background that they encounter on the street. Maybe this is due to the fact that there is no threat of being involved in tricky legal situations unless someone interferes as a mediator.

Another way in which documentation gets out of hands is when portraying victims of violence. There is a thin line between documenting with a purpose of justice and documenting for pure morbidity. It is important to ask how can some pictures possibly help. When victims are photographed, or in the worst case scenario, corpses; a picture will hardly serve any noble cause. In these cases, written documentations and less explicit pictures should be sufficient journalism material.

This brings me to a horrible piece of news that I haven't been able to forget since I found out about it and still shocks me to this day.

A horrendous femicide case took place in México in 2020, in which Ingrid Escamilla was not only brutally stabbed to death by her former partner; he also skinned her body after murdering her. As if reading about this scene wasn't atrocious enough, some newspapers decided it was reasonable to publish uncensored pictures of her mutilated body in their front pages. On top of it all, the newspapers also included incredibly tasteless and insensitive titles like "It was cupid's fault", hinting some kind of "funny", out of place coincidence since the crime was committed around Valentine's Day. This kind of writing seeks to turn tragedy into a sickening form of entertainment while also carrying an obvious display of misogyny by protecting the male criminal and softening his guilt. In a case like this, the person documenting the horrific scene is not contributing at all to the fight against violence. In fact, this photographer along with the entire team of employees from different media companies that approved these publications are all guilty of Ingrid's revictimization and a disrespectful and painful interruption to her relative's grief process.



Below, some fragments of a news intervention project I made in reaction to this event. It only works properly in Spanish, since I altered the original headlines "LA CULPA LA TUVO CUPIDO / LA PRENSA / DESCARNADA" (It was Cupid's fault / The Press / Skinned) to spell "LA CULPA LA TUVO LA PRENSA DESCARADA" (It was the shameless press's fault).



CHARITY

This implies thinking as human beings first, before artists and actually make an impact in the life of a person or a group of people. We can simply volunteer and help an NGO with pro bono design work, or maybe any kind of work they need even if we don't put our main field of expertise at practice. We can consider our time as a valuable donation and it can be very helpful to put that time to use for a good cause without expecting anything in return.

In some cases, charitable actions can go hand in hand with art. A famous singer going to a children's hospital to sing for a young fan who's battling cancer can be a publicity stunt in favor of the artist's reputation. Simultaneously, this less noble intention doesn't invalidate it as a good action if it helped brighten a sick person's day.

As there is always two sides of a coin, entertainment can sometimes not blend very well with activism. It is extremely important, especially for celebrities with the power to influence large amounts of people, to note the difference between using relevant social topics as content for entertainment, possibly diminishing the seriousness they're perceived with and placing themselves in the spotlight with a protagonist role; than using their platforms to actually help with the information and real contribution to these causes.

An incredibly moving example I encountered while researching for another one of my projects is the heroic historical achievement of Marcel Marceau, known as the world's greatest mime artist. He was a remarkably passionate performer, who claimed to be born to be a mime.

Originally born as Marcel Mangel, he was forced to change his last name in order to hide his Jewish background during World War II. He joined the French resistance and helped save more than 70 children from the Holocaust, by simply doing what he did best: performing pantomimes. Not only was mime his profession and vocation, it also became a way of survival in the frightening context of a war. [As described in an article](#), "The kids loved Marcel and felt safe with him... The kids had to appear like they were simply going on vacation to a home near the Swiss border, and Marcel really put them at ease." Marcel himself recalled the event "I went disguised as a Boy Scout leader and took Jewish kids, also in scout uniforms, through the forests to the border, where someone else would take them into Switzerland".

As an artist, the best way to make an impact in the world is in fact, being a human being above all. Whether we use our art skills for this goal or not is not that relevant, as long as we're humble, put ourselves behind and focus on the greater cause.

After analyzing different ways of engaging in activism, I realize that **there is not a single or better way of doing this, but rather different levels of commitment and wrong ways of attempting it.** We should admire artists who display higher levels of commitment, since some of them might even sacrifice their own personal safety with the brave decision of engaging in certain dialogues. However, we must not overlook smaller efforts that are still successful when thoughtfully executed. In the end, our desire for engaging in activism can depend on a lot of factors and it works best when it's genuine rather than pretentious. While being indifferent will not lead us anywhere, we must understand that intentions are not enough and we have the duty to reflect on our actions and inform ourselves when trying to achieve something bigger than us. Some actions certainly cause a bigger impact than others, but every single effort and action counts towards resistance and the pursuit of social ideals; as long as it's not counterproductive.

While trying to be aware of the world that surround us, we must be aware of ourselves first, in order to display coherent actions that come from good-hearted intentions and truthful concerns.