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Accidental Activists

When Cultural and Artistic Practices Become Unintentionally Impactful

Large scientific attention has been devoted to the role of cultural and artistic practices in the society, the impact they can have on social groups, their function to help, empower, advocate for, transform and change both minority groups and the mainstream. While endeavoring to have such practices recognized as socially impactful, scholars warn against considering everything as being socially engaged. The core of this debate lies in the tension between the concepts of “art for art’s sake” and “art for non-artistic outcomes”.

This tension is evident in different instances that we will highlight and discuss in this paper. It is the case of artistic performances or art pieces that are considered to be socially engaged and meet the criteria of different forms of social action, but were not intended to be such by the artist. Similarly, those practitioners (eg : professional artists, art teachers, facilitators, or trainers) who provide the structural and relational means and conditions for creative processes to take place, are also often identified as socially engaged. The assignation of a social intention is even more common in the case of artists and creators who are members of minority groups or have strong ties with a specific local community and geographic locality. As such, these artists are often assumed to be activists in support of a *cause* for their *group* and/or *place*. In all these instances, cultural and artistic practices are considered as *political acts*.

These categorizations warrant further investigation. In this paper we will explore the utility of the theoretical underpinnings/definitions of what constitutes social action through the arts when it comes to *accidental activists*. We propose this category to identify art practitioners who did not intend for their work to have a specific social impact and political function. We will employ examples of music artists with a migrant background or from specific urban settings in order to better understand the role of artistic intention in the categorization of socio-political activism.

Keywords : *art activism ; socially engaged art ; minority cultural expression ; urban art ; music and politics.*

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