

POLITICS OF VISIBILITY
CONTEMPORARY ART AS A CATALYST FOR
SOCIAL CHANGE

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Politics of Visibility: Contemporary Art as a Catalyst for Social Change

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Art has always reached beyond aesthetic pursuit; it is a mirror to society, reflecting its complexities, contradictions, and aspirations. It is a provocation—and a powerful tool for transformation. In today's world, where identity politics, systemic inequities, and environmental crises profoundly shape both American and global discourse, contemporary art holds unparalleled potential to challenge oppressive systems and amplify underrepresented voices. It exists at the intersection of personal expression and collective consciousness, offering both a critique of entrenched power structures and a vision of alternative futures.

This essay explores how contemporary art intersects with culture and resistance in the 21st century. By interrogating visibility, accessibility, ethics, and hybridity in contemporary practice, I aim to illuminate how art transforms cultural narratives while fostering resilience and social change.

The Battleground of Visibility

Visibility is inherently political. For communities historically relegated to the margins, to be seen is to resist erasure. Yet visibility is fraught with contradictions: Who gets to be seen? Who controls the lens? Who profits from representation? And what does it mean to exist in spaces that were not designed for you? These questions are central to contemporary art's role as both witness and agitator.

Contemporary art, rooted in the interplay between individual experience and broader societal forces, thrives on its ability to disrupt normative narratives around what is made visible and for whom. Artists like Zanele Muholi use photography to celebrate Black queer identities in South Africa, reclaiming agency over storytelling by insisting that representation

must be self-determined. Similarly, El Anatsui transforms discarded materials into monumental sculptures that critique consumerism and colonial legacies, challenging viewers to confront uncomfortable truths while celebrating resilience within marginalized communities.

The Black Lives Matter murals that filled streets worldwide after the murder of George Floyd exemplify art's power as a collective act of resistance. More recently, art builds for Palestine across American college campuses have emerged as powerful expressions of solidarity—redefining what it means to create art in service of justice. In a society marked by persistent political polarization and enduring inequities, artists are using their work to confront injustice and advocate for change.

My own practice echoes this ethos. Through experimental video, live performances, and sound design, I explore themes of resilience, redefinition, and reclamation. In *VISIBILITY*, an experimental video installation, I interrogate how trans¹ bodies are simultaneously hypersexualized and erased by modern media.² Drawing from NYC ballroom culture and contextualizing it within the expanded context of the 80s AIDS crisis, the piece juxtaposes archival footage with contemporary accounts of the Black trans femme experience, revealing the cyclical nature of oppression they face. This work functions as both a historical archive and a call to action—demanding recognition while challenging systems that largely perpetuate such erasure.

Visibility is never passive; it is a battleground. Even at the individual level, visibility requires navigating societal expectations and resisting externally dictated frameworks of meaning and worth. For those with marginalized identities, simply existing in public spaces often invites scrutiny, judgment, regulation, or even hostility. Choices in self-expression, whether through clothing, gestures, or speech, are frequently politicized—misinterpreted as inherently provocative or as statements of defiance when they are, in fact, expressions of

¹Shorthand for “transgender”

²Trans visibility exists in a paradox: trans people are often reduced to objects of fascination or fetishization while their humanity is erased through misrepresentation or outright exclusion from mainstream narratives. This dynamic reflects broader societal patterns that render trans lives visible only when they conform to narrow stereotypes or serve as spectacle.

identity. This dynamic underscores how visibility can simultaneously empower and endanger vulnerable communities, forcing individuals to balance authenticity with safety.

Through fashion and other artistic mediums, existence itself becomes an act of resistance, and visibility becomes an active reclamation of autonomy—a declaration that the voices of the excluded and oppressed, however often silenced, will not be erased. It transforms representation from a passive act into one of agency: a refusal to conform to imposed narratives and an insistence on self-definition.

Accessibility and the Ethics of Representation

At its core, contemporary art is about storytelling—about who gets to tell their story and whose stories are deemed worth telling. Yet one of the most pressing challenges in contemporary art is its accessibility—or lack thereof. The art world often operates within elitist structures, such as galleries, museums, and academia, that alienate the very communities they claim to represent. These spaces frequently prioritize exclusivity over inclusion, perpetuating a cycle where underrepresented voices are tokenized rather than honored or empowered.

As a trans, Afro-Indigenous artist navigating intersecting identities, I am acutely aware of how representation shapes reality. To counter this exclusionary framework, I prioritize participatory, community-centered creation. In several of my music projects, I have blended traditional West-African diasporic instruments like the mbira and talking drum with reimagined everyday household items—a broken microwave, pill bottles strapped to a creaky door with rubber bands and duct tape, and more—to democratize music-making. This project invited audiences to engage with the ingenuity of historically overlooked cultures while questioning Western definitions of “high art.” By transforming mundane objects into instruments of cultural expression, the project challenged hierarchies that dictate what is considered valuable or worthy in artistic spaces.

However, accessibility in art is not simply about physical access; it is also about ethical representation. What does it mean to portray oneself versus others responsibly?

Art is memory, pulled from the marrow of moments. A camera doesn't just capture light, or shadow, but the weight of the unseen: unvoiced echoes of laughter, undercurrents of emotion, quiet between breaths. A photograph doesn't just reflect what was; it preserves it, distills it, sometimes even distorts it. But what if your subject is another—someone who trusted you with their likeness, their presence, their time? Where does the line fall between an artist's vision and a subject's autonomy? Between artistic and personal value?

"We" capture strangers without asking, turning fleeting, unguarded moments into stories we claim as our own. Street photography, candid portraits, images stolen in passing—they're unspoken contracts between observer and observed. But when the subject is someone you once knew, someone whose existence still stains your being—whose fingerprints are "fixed" all over your life (not that they're necessarily too tender to erase but that they're too deeply etched to rub out)—the contract feels heavier. More fragile... Their image carries more than the weight of a stranger's anonymity and invites unspoken questions of what is owed to the past. To maintain (and eventually leave behind) something beautiful from something now broken feels like alchemy, but is it theft or tribute? Do we have the right to share that which was once shared with us in a different context? "The artist owes their truth," they say, but what happens when that truth bruises? When it exposes? Does the value of creation outweigh the need for respect?

While art often seeks truth through its depictions, that truth can risk exploitation when it fails to account for the dignity and agency of those portrayed. This tension between artistic vision and ethical responsibility becomes even more pronounced when documenting subjects from vulnerable communities. An artist's truth, however "paramount" it may seem, can

perpetuate harm and risk exploitation if divorced from context or consent.

For example, overhead aerial drone photographs of Indigenous groups in the Amazon³ or candid images of children on “African” streets⁴ often reduce their subjects to symbols of poverty or exoticism for Western audiences. These photojournalistic depictions frequently frame other humans as objects of pity rather than individuals with agency. Similarly, Stanley Forman’s Pulitzer-winning photograph *Fire Escape Collapse* (1975),⁵ while undeniably powerful, sparked controversy for its graphic depiction of tragedy without consent from those affected.

These examples raise critical questions: Is it ethical to expose one group’s pain for the potential benefit or increased awareness of others’? Does documenting suffering risk perpetuating harm by turning lived experiences into spectacle? The answer lies in collaboration: art must center the voices it portrays, transforming spectatorship into partnership. Ethical creation prioritizes consent and shared authorship, ensuring that communities who have historically been silenced or excluded lead their own narratives rather than being reduced to objects for external consumption.

I grapple with these tensions regularly in my own practice. Whether exploring themes of grief within my communities or creating work that channels awareness and solicits support through depictions of resilience, I strive to ensure that my subjects are collaborators rather than passive participants. This approach requires listening deeply and honoring context—acknowledging that every image or story carries histories far beyond its frame.

Accessibility in contemporary art cannot be achieved without addressing these ethical considerations. It is not enough for marginalized perspectives to be acknowledged; they must be heard on their own terms. Art must move beyond representation as an end goal toward fostering genuine partnerships rooted in trust and mutual respect.

³Example: <https://www.unilad.com/news/world-news/amazon-brazil-tribe-drone-footage-cut-off-from-world-918644-20241209>

⁴“Tarzanization” of Africa; <https://sites.manchester.ac.uk/global-social-challenges/2023/12/19/the-misrepresentation-of-africa-by-the-media/>

⁵<https://medium.com/@SFSword/a-photographic-study-of-death-2e887a4ce7a1>

Art Beyond Aesthetics

Artistic endeavors are often viewed as something to be pursued only with the intention of mastering them, so as to “justify” (and be able to capitalize on) the effort, rather than as fundamental to the human experience. Amidst a time so thoroughly shaped by social media algorithms and commercialized creativity, there is an urgent need to reclaim art as something more than aesthetic appeal or profit-driven production. Art must return to its roots as an intrinsic aspect of human expression—a source of joy, meaning, and intellectual fulfillment, and a means of exploring our shared humanity.

Art’s power lies in its hybridity. As a professional whose work and studies straddle multiple specialties (music composition, urban studies, civic technology, lens-based media, etc.), I see art as inherently interdisciplinary. My work often integrates traditional Afro-Cuban musical forms with experimental electronic techniques or blends Indigenous Venezuelan aesthetics with contemporary digital media. These intersections allow me to explore not only my own identity but also broader questions about cultural hybridity in an increasingly globalized world.

For instance, my research in Senegal on Wolof sabar drum language seeks to digitize traditional rhythms as part of a broader effort to preserve cultural heritage while informing sustainable development frameworks. This fusion of ethnomusicology and technology underscores art’s role in reimagining sustainability through ancestral knowledge systems.

Technology, Ethics, and the Future of Art

The intersection of art and technology offers thrilling possibilities for innovation and democratization of access yet raises equally significant ethical dilemmas. Tools like artificial intelligence (AI)-generated imagery and virtual reality have expanded the boundaries of what art can achieve but risk replicating colonial patterns if divorced from community input. Who owns AI-generated art? How do we avoid commodifying vulnerable narratives? These

questions demand that artists and technologists prioritize ethical frameworks over novelty.

Institutional Accountability

While individual artists play a crucial role in shaping contemporary culture, institutions like museums, galleries, and universities bear an equally significant responsibility. They must do more than simply showcase diverse voices; they must work to actively dismantle barriers that exclude historically marginalized communities from accessing or contributing to the arts.

All too often, institutions gesture toward diversity without enacting the deeper changes necessary to foster equity. While platforms like the Vera List Center foster critical dialogue around visual arts and social justice, true progress requires a redistribution of resources and power. For example, institutions could expand fellowships for BIPOC⁶ and gender-diverse creators or support collaborative public art projects led by underrepresented communities. Moving beyond curation toward co-creation ensures that these communities lead their own representation, and it is entirely possible for institutions to prioritize accessibility without necessarily sacrificing—or otherwise compromising—intellectual rigor or artistic depth.

Conclusion

Audre Lorde’s adage, “The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house,” reminds us that art cannot remain complacent within oppressive systems, nor can it exist in isolation from the systems it seeks to critique; it must actively work against them—subvert them. For me, this means advancing work that challenges dominant narratives and amplifies silenced histories, while ensuring that those works are accessible to—and co-created by—the communities most impacted by pervasive systemic inequities.

⁶Black, Indigenous, and People of Color. Used to collectively refer to these communities, recognizing that each have faced and continue to face systemic inequalities due to racism and white supremacy.

Contemporary art is not a luxury; it is a lifeline, and as we navigate an era defined by accelerating technological change and deepening social divides, it remains a vital tool for envisioning new mechanisms and opportunities for justice, solidarity, and belonging. It allows us to question what is possible while grounding us in the realities of our shared histories. Contemporary art has the capacity to reshape how we see ourselves and each other, challenging deeply rooted systems of dominance and subordination. But this potential can only be realized if we commit—as artists, audiences, and institutions—to fostering inclusivity at every level, because art does not merely reflect culture—it molds it. And in molding *it*, we mold ourselves.