

MAKING SPACE

ARTIVISM AS CIVIC RESISTANCE

CIVICUS

AUTHORED BY
Inés M. Pousadela, Head of Research and Analysis

EDITED BY
Andrew Firmin, Editor-in-Chief

CIVICUS RESEARCH TEAM
Victoria Ubierna, Research Programme Officer
Nour Zargouni, Research and Communications Officer
Andrea Canaval, Research Intern
Sophie Mhango, Research Intern
Juan Martín Sabogal, Research Intern

WITH THANKS TO
Susann Pham, external consultant

SUPPORTED BY
Art Rights Truth, a project of the Centre for Applied Human Rights and the History of Art Department at the University of York

INTERVIEWS
Tara Abdullah
Killa Ace
Adeela
Laura Al Jundi
Anonymous/Myanmar
Iman Aoun
Darcy Ataman
Hope Azeda
Daria Cybulska
Nicola Haskins
Ma Hnin
Mina Jawad
Nik Kowsar
Ezenwa Okoro
Razali Samsudin
Omaid Sharifi
Brian Silweyz
Saleem Vaillancourt
Tom Wheeler

DESIGN AND LAYOUT
Juliana Pecollo

DATE OF PUBLICATION
November 2026

COVER
Composite image showing performances of LASTESIS' 'A rapist in your path' in Amsterdam, The Netherlands, and Athens, Greece, in December 2019, as part of the protests against gender-based violence that took the Chilean performance around the world. Photos by Romy Fernández/AFP and Louisa Gouliamaki/AFP.

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION 3
ABOUT THE RESEARCH 5
KEY FINDINGS 7
WHAT IS ARTIVISM 9
WHAT ART BRINGS TO ACTIVISM 12
THE ART IN ARTIVISM 15
THE ACTIVISM IN ARTIVISM 19
USES OF ARTIVISM 22
- Reframing narratives and raising awareness 26
- Strengthening and healing communities 28
- Confronting power 30
- Mobilising and campaigning 33
- Bearing witness and keeping memory alive 35
- Supporting other artivists 37

ARTIVISM UNDER PRESSURE 39
- Artivism in repressed and closed civic space 40
- Artivism in exile 44

IMPACTS OF ARTIVISM 47
CONCLUSIONS 50
OUR CALLS FOR ACTION 52

INTRODUCTION

In October 2020, young Nigerians took to the streets to protest against police brutality, and security forces opened fire, killing several people and arresting many. For **Ezenwa Okoro**, a playwright and poet with the **Street Project Foundation**, the crackdown forced him and his peers to find a way to keep pushing for change without risking their lives. Foregrounding young Nigerians' talent in dance, drama, film, music and poetry, they launched the **Artvocacy Movement**. Through radio dramas and photo storybooks, the group has since mobilised over 4,000 young people in four regions of Nigeria, persuading many who were thinking of emigrating to stay and push for change at home.

Okoro's intentional use of art to push for social change makes him an artivist. This report draws on around 300 cases like his that CIVICUS has mapped across 86 countries. It looks at how people use art to resist repression, process harm and push for change, particularly in places where civic space is heavily restricted.

Restrictions on the space for civil society are on the rise. The **CIVICUS Monitor**, our collaborative initiative that tracks civic space around the world, rates 83 of 198 countries and territories as having repressed or closed civic space, indicating systematic repression of freedoms of association, expression and peaceful assembly. Civic space conditions are deteriorating. Today, only some seven per cent of the world's population lives in countries where civic space is open or narrowed. In many places, independent organising, advocacy and protest carry serious risks, including criminalisation, detention, intimidation, violence and forced exile. Yet creative forms of dissent and solidarity persist. Drawings appear on walls overnight, plays are staged behind closed doors, songs circulate online and exhibitions go up in diaspora communities.

As the usual avenues for advocacy, organising and protest close, art opens alternative routes for activism. These routes matter all the more because the struggle is increasingly fought over narratives. Authoritarian leaders and anti-rights movements portray civil society as foreign-funded and hostile to national values, and build support by appealing to emotion and identity. Reports and statistics struggle to counter these appeals, but art works on the same terrain of feeling and identity, and can reach people who might never attend a protest or read a report. It's a language many activists already speak. For the young people at the forefront of many recent **Gen Z-led protests**, creative expression comes naturally to the way they organise and speak out. Authoritarian leaders, for their part, know how far art can reach, which is why they put so much effort into censoring and jailing artists and forcing them into exile.

Our report looks at what art can do that conventional activism struggles to, which art forms artivists choose and which causes they take up. It explores what people use art for. Six uses stand out:

- reframing how issues and excluded groups are seen
- strengthening and healing communities
- confronting those responsible for injustice
- mobilising people behind demands for rights
- bearing witness to abuses and keeping memory alive
- supporting other artivists

All six appear in varying civic space conditions, although the balance shifts as civic space closes.

Civic space restrictions change how work is done and what it costs. Where civic space is repressed or closed, artivists often turn from pressing for policy decisions to keeping records and sustaining communities, while those who confront power shift from campaigns to one-off interventions that expose abuses, and protect themselves through anonymity and by using coded language and hidden venues.

Those forced into exile produce some of the most confrontational work, focused on the country they've had to leave.

Drawing on artivists' accounts, our report looks at the difference they believe their work makes. It closes by weighing the risks the work carries and setting out recommendations for civil society organisations, funders, governments and international institutions.



ABOUT THE RESEARCH

This report is based on the CIVICUS artivism database, which also powers our **online map**. It presents 307 cases of artists, collectives, movements and organisations that use art for social and political change in 86 countries. The database includes seven cases whose main work belongs to the past, so the figures presented in this report refer to the remaining 300.

The database isn't a representative sample of artivism around the world, because no complete list exists. Its biases reflect how it was built. Cases from the Americas are over-represented because several of our team members are based in Latin America and ran searches mostly in English and Spanish. Colombia stands out partly because our team has strong contacts there, and likely also because of its peace process following decades of armed conflict, in which art has emerged as a strong tool for communities and victims to keep memory alive and demand justice. The USA stands out because English-language sources are the easiest to find, and possibly also because it hosts many diaspora and exiled activists and artists. Because of the keywords we searched for, activist groups that use art only occasionally may be under-represented. Even so, the database offers a good overview of how people use art for change, and the patterns we found hold even when cases from Colombia and the USA are left out.

To put together the database, we wrote a short description of each case using publicly available sources. When people shared information with CIVICUS on condition of anonymity, we used it without attributing it to them and left out any details that could identify them. We described people and groups in their own terms.

We classified each case by its main purpose, how it engages its audience, whether it's led more by activism or art, whether it affirms or denounces, whether people are based in their home countries or in exile and whether it has faced repression. Our categories are ideal types. Many cases combine several purposes and ways of working, so each was classified by what it does most.

An AI model helped with the first round of coding, and a researcher independently coded a sample of cases so the two could be compared and disagreements reconciled. The lead researcher resolved disagreements, used the reasons behind each decision to sharpen our definitions and reviewed all cases against them. Coders agreed least on how far a case leans towards activism or art and on how it engages its audience, the two judgements that call for most interpretation.

To compare civic space conditions, we used the **CIVICUS Monitor's 2025 ratings**. Given that the main difference turned out to be the severity of restrictions rather than the precise rating, we mainly compared 151 cases in countries where civic space is open, narrowed or obstructed with 132 in countries where it's repressed or closed, noting individual ratings only where they stand out. We separately analysed the database's 17 artivists in exile, overwhelmingly from countries where civic space is closed, regardless of the civic space rating of the country now hosting them, because they work in relative freedom but focus on countries where speaking out is dangerous. Where we compare them with cases based in their host countries, we say so. We classed diaspora artists, who live abroad through migration or family background rather than forced flight,

according to where they are based, and did the same with cross-border projects and artists who've returned home.

Our analysis of the database is descriptive. Because the two groups we compare differ in size, we always compare shares rather than absolute numbers. We tested the differences between them statistically and highlight those that pass a standard test of significance. Smaller differences are treated as indications. Our figures are shares of all 300 contemporary cases, including organisations that make up the infrastructure of artivism, which support artists but produce no work of their own. The exceptions are figures on whether cases take an affirmative or oppositional stance and on whether activism or art leads their work, which don't apply to these organisations and so cover only the 262 cases that produce work.

To understand why artivists do what they do, what they think it achieves and what it costs them, we drew from 19 interviews with artivists and researchers in or from Afghanistan, Brazil, Central Asia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), The Gambia, Iran, Iraq, Kenya, Myanmar, Nigeria, Palestine, Rwanda, South Africa, Sudan and Syria, along with one on digital risks for artivists worldwide. Interviews have been published as part of CIVICUS's rolling series of interviews with civil society activists, experts and leaders on our **CIVICUS Lens** platform. We also used unpublished end-of-project reflections by the teams behind seven of the 10 projects commissioned in 2024 and 2025 by We Are (For) Civil Society, a call for artivists we ran jointly with **Art Rights Truth**, a University of York research project.



KEY FINDINGS



- Artivism is found in every kind of civic space setting. CIVICUS has mapped 307 cases of people and groups who use art for social and political change in 86 countries with civic space conditions ranging from open to closed, as well as in exile.



- Artivists pursue six broad purposes. Reframing narratives and raising awareness is the most common, constituting the main aim of a third of cases. Strengthening and healing communities, confronting power and mobilising and campaigning come next, followed by supporting other artivists and bearing witness. Few artivists set out mainly to influence policy, but around one in six include it among their aims.



- Theatre and performance is the most widely used art form, appearing in around 30 per cent of cases, followed by murals and street art, sculpture and installation and film. Human rights is the most common cause, followed by social justice, gender equality and freedom of expression.



- Most artivism works on attitudes, communities and public debate, expecting decisions to follow. A third of cases take their work into the media or public space, just over a quarter make it with community participants and a fifth show it in art spaces. Only one case in 20 works mainly to change a specific decision, law or policy.



- Most artivism is constructive. Seven in 10 cases take an affirmative stance, representing, healing, celebrating or proposing alternatives, while three in 10 focus primarily on exposing abuses and naming those responsible.



- Priorities shift as civic space restrictions intensify. Where civic space is repressed or closed, artivists pursue the same range of objectives, but policy-oriented work falls from a quarter of cases to a tenth, while documentation and memory work grows from under a fifth of cases to almost a third. There are also indications that building communities becomes a more common main purpose, rising from around one in eight cases to one in five.



- As civic space shuts down, the share of oppositional work stays the same, but where routes to mobilise people or influence policy are blocked, more of it takes the form of one-off interventions that expose abuses. Artists and arts organisations also appear to take a bigger role as activist groups using art become less common, and where civic space is closed, a significantly higher proportion relies on anonymity, coded language or hidden venues.



- Artivists pay a much higher price for their work where civic space is closed. In countries with repressed and closed civic space, publicly available sources report that artivists have faced arrest, prosecution, censorship, destruction of their work, threats, violence or forced exile in around one in six cases, against almost none in countries with more open civic space. The real figure will be higher, because not all repression will be reported and many artivists don't publicise threats they face.



- Exile produces the most confrontational artivism. All but one of the exiled artivists in our database come from countries with closed civic space. Their work continues to focus on the countries they left, and around two thirds of those producing work take an oppositional stance, exposing abuses and naming those responsible.



- Much of the support that keeps artivism going where civic space is restricted comes from countries where it's relatively open. Organisations based in countries with more open civic space fund, train, shelter, relocate and defend artists, many from countries where civic space is repressed or closed. The same holds for work with exiled artists and displaced communities. Most of these initiatives are based in countries where civic space is relatively open, and around a third are run by exiles.



- Artivists claim impact most confidently on how participants see themselves, how others see them and how the public talks about the issues they raise. They claim policy wins cautiously and as impacts shared with other campaigners. Where civic space is closed, the impact they stress most is keeping their communities and spaces going in the face of repression. These effects are real but hard to measure, which puts artivism at a disadvantage with funders that want measurable results.



- The visibility that gives artivism its power also puts artivists in danger. They face censorship, criminalisation, violence and exile, mostly at the hands of states but also from non-state sources including criminal gangs, nationalist groups and religious authorities. Exposure can endanger the people they work with, and short-term, cautious funding often fails them.

WHAT IS ARTIVISM

The word ‘artivism’ joins art and activism. It took hold in the late 1990s among Chicano artists and musicians in East Los Angeles, USA, after a group of them travelled to Mexico to meet the Zapatista movement in Chiapas. But the practice is much older than the word. People have long used art intentionally to change how power is exercised or how society sees itself.

Artivism is best understood as a continuum. At one end are artists whose work carries a political message. Art is a means of expression in its own right, and for them, its political force lies in what it says and makes people feel. Among them, Colombian sculptor **Doris Salcedo** builds installations from the **testimony of armed conflict victims**, and South African artist **Mohau Modisakeng** uses performance and photography to investigate how apartheid’s legacy marks the Black body. Neither runs a campaign, yet both make a political argument through their work. We chose to exclude from this end of the continuum art that uses politics merely as a backdrop, such as a commercial film set during a war, if it isn’t aimed at changing how audiences see an issue.

At the other end are civil society activists, movements and organisations for whom art is one tactic among many, chosen because it draws attention or moves people, and judged by what it achieves for their cause. For instance, in 2012 and 2013 the **Idle No More** Indigenous movement staged flashmob round dances in **Canadian shopping malls**



against legislation that weakened Indigenous land rights. In October 2015, the UK feminist direct-action group **Sisters Uncut** staged a **'die-in'** on the red carpet of the *Suffragette* film premiere, setting off smoke flares to protest against spending cuts to domestic violence services under the slogan 'Dead women can't vote'. We chose to exclude from this end of the continuum actions where art is incidental, such as holding a printed banner or logo placard.

Between the two sits a wide zone where activism and art fuse. Collectives such as **ArtLords** in Afghanistan, the **Fearless Collective** in India and the anonymous **Guerrilla Girls** in New York use art as their main tool of activism, and their members tend to see themselves as both activists and artists.

The Chilean collective **LASTESIS** has the same dual identity. Formed by four artists from design, theatre and visual arts backgrounds, it explicitly uses performance to popularise feminist theory. In November 2019, amid widespread protests, the group created ***Un violador en tu camino*** (A rapist in your path), a participatory performance piece that translated anthropological research on gender-based violence into driving electronic rhythms, synchronised choreography and symbolic dress. It was first performed in Valparaíso and then staged en masse outside the Supreme Court in Santiago on the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women. Within weeks, women in over 50 countries adapted the chant and choreography to challenge police brutality and state complicity in their contexts.

Groups that make art with a community around a shared cause also belong here, even when the result hangs in galleries. Such is the case of South Africa's **Keiskamma Trust**, founded in 2000 to support a rural community devastated by HIV/AIDS. Alongside education, health and music programmes, the trust runs an art project in which local women create large embroidered works. The best known, a 120-metre tapestry telling the history of the Eastern Cape, has hung in the national parliament since 2006.

Some organisations in our database produce no work of their own. Instead, they make it possible for others to create, through residencies for artists at risk, safe havens or regional networks. They are part of the infrastructure of artivism.

Many of the people we interviewed don't call themselves artivists. While some, such as **Omaid Sharifi** of ArtLords, embrace the label, others flatly reject it. **Ma Hnin**, founder of the Myanmar exile collective **A New Burma**, says most of the people she works with 'want to wear the hat of an artist, a creative', and not that of an activist or a human rights defender. For some, the word sounds too political, as it's too close to activism. **Razali Samsudin**, UK-based founder of **Manifest Studio**, observes that 'many people don't want to call themselves artivists, because activism is often seen as extreme or radical'. And in many places the label is dangerous.

> "In places such as Tajikistan, calling yourself an activist is seen as openly confrontational and therefore risky. Terms such as community organising can also attract unwanted attention. Many people choose safer labels and call themselves volunteers or describe their work as a social activity, even when this doesn't reflect what they actually do.
>
> **Daria Cybulska**
> **CIVIL SOCIETY RESEARCHER | United Kingdom**

According to civil society researcher **Daria Cybulska**, in Tajikistan even calling yourself an activist can make you a target.

For others, the term falls short. **Tom Wheeler** of **Treesistance**, which works with Indigenous communities in the Brazilian Amazon, views activism as 'fundamentally a western construct'. For his Indigenous partners, defending land and culture is 'intrinsic to survival', and another word, 'resistência', better reflects their understanding of their long-term, intergenerational struggle.

This report includes everyone whose work fits our definition of artivism, while acknowledging that this may not be how people describe themselves. To do otherwise would fail to recognise many who work under the heaviest restrictions, where calling themselves artivists may be risky, and tilt the picture towards those safe enough to claim the term. When we describe individual people and groups, however, we use the terms they use for themselves.



> Turning up with a camera and asking people to explain their culture on the spot is a very western way of working... For us, everything starts as an audio recording while we are sitting together, having tea, walking in the forest, just talking about people's experiences. Many of these stories would simply never be told in front of a camera.
>
> **Tom Wheeler**
> **TREESISTANCE | The Netherlands**

WHAT ART BRINGS TO ACTIVISM

Artivists use art to achieve things that petitions, policy briefs and protests struggle to, often because those tools have proved ineffective or are dangerous to use.

Through humour, metaphor and symbolism, artivists are able to say things they would be punished for if stated plainly, while leaving room for deniability. In Thailand, where criticising the monarchy can bring a long prison sentence, the theatre company **B-Floor** has spent years addressing censorship and political violence through imagery and movement, using little or no dialogue. In 2016, it marked the 40th anniversary of a 1976 massacre of students in Bangkok with Fundamental, a wordless physical performance. Soldiers were **sent to watch**, but the show was able to run its course.

Coded expression is far more common where repression is heaviest. Over a fifth of cases we mapped in countries with closed civic space rely on anonymity, coded language or hidden venues, compared to almost none where conditions are better. A **documentary filmmaker** in Myanmar who sometimes works anonymously says that because installation and video art are little known in the country, such work stays 'relatively under the radar'. For some activists, as in Nigeria, art has taken the place of street protest once protesting became too dangerous.

Artivists also use art to reach people who conventional activism misses. Civil society organisations may struggle to reach people beyond their immediate networks, while, as Tom Wheeler **puts it**, 'art and storytelling are how you break through' to other audiences. Popular culture often provides the opening, tapping into what people know and enjoy. According to Gambian musician **Killa Ace**, hip hop works because it speaks to young people in their own language. The same reasoning lay behind *Na We Be Dis* (This is us), a radio drama in Pidgin English produced by **Jos Repertory Theatre** and Brain Builders Youth Development Initiative, which set out to show Nigerian listeners what civil society is and does. Its producers estimated it reached 300,000 to 400,000 listeners a week.

Some art forms reach further because they're easy to copy or share. Berlin-based Afghan theatre-maker **Mina Jawad** explains that in Afghanistan few people have access to books or galleries, but music made

> "I'm a rapper and activist... I think messages are all the more effective when delivered in a language that young people understand, as is the case with hip hop. I also host a radio civic education programme called *The Gambia* Tonight... My organisation engages artists and influencers to play an active role in civic education, to build community at the local level and play the role of national watchdogs, keeping our government and public officials accountable.
>
> **Killa Ace**
> **MUSICIAN | The Gambia**



in the diaspora is heard across the country despite the Taliban's ban on music, because it's freely available on YouTube.

Where activism is distrusted, art 'helps rebuild legitimacy', as Daria Cybulska **puts** it. In Central Asia, she points out, governments portray activists as enemies of tradition, the state and society, and in the absence of diverse media, many people believe them. But by drawing on shared cultural references and on art's capacity to move people, activists are able to present themselves as members of society who care about its future.

The teams behind projects commissioned through the We Are (For) Civil Society initiative in Malaysia, Nigeria and Uganda encountered the same mistrust of anything seen as 'activist' or 'NGO-driven', and found that art helped them get past it. In Kampala, **KQ Hub Africa** painted murals depicting traditional forms of mutual aid to show that civil society has deep roots in Ugandan life. As the team found, 'a mural invites curiosity before confrontation'. An older man who saw one of the murals told the group that it had made him question his belief that civil society organisations 'belonged to outsiders'.

Artivists also help audiences experience emotionally what they might otherwise know only in the abstract. South African choreographer **Nicola Haskins** brings climate change into the theatre through dance, where it becomes 'personal, immediate and visceral'. ***The Gaza* Monologues**, developed by **ASHTAR Theatre** in Palestine, gives young Gazans a way to tell their stories so, as co-founder **Iman Aoun** explains, they can be seen 'as people with a face and a name rather than numbers'.

Art can also keep a record of what those in power want forgotten. Omaid Sharifi **describes it** as an archive that embeds people's experiences 'in the collective memory of humanity'. In Sudan, the youth-led cultural group **Adeela** uses art and storytelling to **document human rights abuses** and civilian trauma in the context of the country's ongoing civil war. A New Burma is **recording the stories** of 100 women from Myanmar, treating them as evidence and historical record 'at a time when they are being deliberately erased'. A **Myanmar filmmaker** keeps shooting documentary footage with no prospect of showing it, convinced that 'this is a historic moment and it needs to be recorded'. Such record-keeping is particularly common where civic space is repressed or closed.

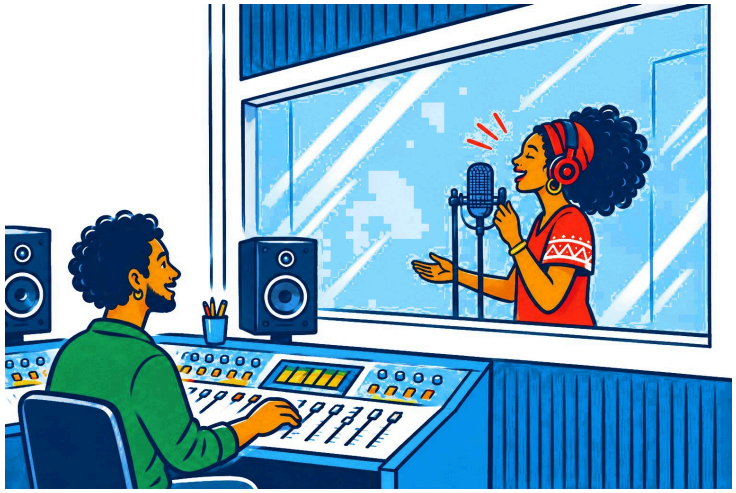
Art also opens up difficult conversations. **Hope Azeda**, founder of Rwanda's **Ubumuntu Arts Festival**, observes that 'you can't just stand in front of a crowd and say "let's talk about genocide"', but art makes it possible to begin. The same approach can bring people to the table. In Cameroon's conflict-affected Northwest Region, the team behind **The Chronicles of Courage and Survival**, a project commissioned through We Are (For) Civil Society, opened a civil society forum by screening its short films instead of giving speeches, and found that 'for the first time a government official actually engaged with us'.



Art offers survivors of violence a way to work through trauma without reliving it. **Darcy Ataman** of **Make Music Matter**, whose music therapy programmes work with survivors of sexual violence in the DRC, among other places, explains that when people write songs, painful experiences come out through lyrics and metaphor 'in a way that doesn't cause retraumatisation'. People who would avoid a therapy appointment because of the attached stigma readily come to make music. Facilitators of the **We Remember** project who work with families of disappeared people in Sri Lanka found something similar. Collage and image-making eased conversations where 'standard testimony taking or a formal workshop makes people too emotional or vulnerable'.

Where restrictions are placed on gatherings, art gives people a reason and a place to meet. In Afghanistan, as Mina Jawad **explains**, 'the fact of coming together is itself political, regardless of whether there's a declared political agenda'. According to Daria Cybulska, independent arts venues play a similar role in Central Asia, offering '**breathing spaces**' where people, particularly those whose identities may put them at odds with the authorities, can exist without fear.

Artivism has its limits. The visibility that gives public art its force also invites backlash, as the experience of cartoonist **Nik Kowsar**, jailed and then forced to leave Iran, shows. And art can also be used against human rights. As Hope Azeda **recalls**, in Rwanda it was used to incite violence. Art also rarely brings change on its own. In Nigeria, the Street Project Foundation's creative campaigns helped build support for the **#NotTooYoungToRun** campaign to lower age limits for political office, but the law to introduce the change came as a result of a wider programme of advocacy and mobilisation by a coalition of youth activists and civil society groups. In Cameroon, film screenings brought officials into dialogue, but turning that dialogue into advocacy took forums where civil society groups and lawyers planned their next steps together.



> "They handed us the lyrics of the songs they had written for us to record, and it was all very heavy subject matter... There was not one frivolous song in there. We had given them no direction... we realised that for them music was an acceptable way to talk about taboo issues they couldn't normally talk about.
>
> **Darcy Ataman**
> **MAKE MUSIC MATTER | Canada**

THE ART IN ARTIVISM

Artivists work in every art form, and most combine several, either in a single piece or across different works. Each case in our database is recorded under every form it uses, so categories overlap. Practices that combine forms within single works are classed as multidisciplinary, and those that collect, preserve or exhibit the work of others are categorised as curation and archiving. We class work made to circulate online as social media art, but not work that's simply shared online.

The most widely used form is theatre and performance, appearing in close to 30 per cent of cases. This art form gathers people easily, adapts to small or hidden venues and can be interactive. **ASHTAR Theatre** in Ramallah, Palestine, for instance, uses **forum theatre** to invite audiences on stage to rehearse solutions to systemic problems, using interactive performance to break taboos and challenge decision-makers.

Murals and street art come next, at close to 20 per cent. **Shamsia Hassani**, described as Afghanistan's first woman graffiti artist, painted women with closed eyes on war-damaged walls in Kabul. In Medellín, Colombia, the **Fuerza & Graffiti** collective paints murals commemorating victims of Colombia's armed conflict, among them civilians murdered by soldiers and falsely presented as guerrillas killed in combat.

Sculpture and installation are just as common. Members of the **Congolese Plantation Workers' Art Circle** model sculptures in local river clay that are then cast in Belgian chocolate made from Congolese cocoa, a primary commodity of colonial exploitation. The collective directs the proceeds from its art sales towards buying back former plantation land for ecological restoration.

Film comes close behind. In Australia, the **Karrabing Film Collective**, comprising over 30 members from the Northern Territory's Belyuen community, uses filmmaking to expose the state's mistreatment of Indigenous people and resist commercial pressures to open ancestral lands to mining.

MAIN ART FORMS

- Theatre and performance
- Murals, graffiti and street art
- Sculpture and installation
- Film and documentary
- Multidisciplinary or mixed media
- Photography
- Illustration and graphic design
- Music and song
- Digital and new media art
- Painting

Next are those who combine several art forms in a single work. The Eritrean-born, London-based artist **Aida Silvestri**, for instance, joins embroidery with photography. In her ***Even This Will Pass*** series, she adds hand-stitched lines of thread to blurred portraits of Eritrean refugees to map their migration routes.

Photography, illustration and music are also frequently used. The South African photographer **Zanele Muholi**, who describes themself as a 'visual activist', has spent two decades portraying Black LGBTQI+ people to counter their erasure from public view in a country where constitutional protections have failed to stop violence against them. Venezuelan illustrator and self-identified artivist **Daniel Arzola** also champions LGBTQI+ rights. In 2013, he launched **No soy tu chiste** (I'm not your joke), a poster campaign against homophobia and transphobia that went viral and was translated into 20 languages.

In Anaheim, California, the hip hop, soul and cumbia band **Weapons of Mass Creation**, whose name comes from a member's poem describing creativity as a weapon against colonialism, writes about police brutality, immigration and generational trauma in the communities where its members grew up. The collective **views** its art as an intentional form of cultural resistance and community amplification against mass-produced music and systemic oppression.

Digital and new media art features in around one case in nine, and includes some of the newest forms of artivism, such as digital mapping and 3D reconstruction. In Ukraine, the **Center for Spatial Technologies**, a multidisciplinary research organisation that blends architecture, computer science and humanities, has reconstructed the Mariupol Drama Theatre, where thousands of civilians sheltered before a Russian airstrike destroyed it in March 2022. With no access to the site, which is under Russian occupation, the team built a 3D model of the building from thousands of photos, videos and social media posts, then had survivors walk through it virtually and describe what they had seen. The reconstruction serves as evidence of a war crime and a memorial to the people who sheltered there. It has toured art venues across Europe as an installation. Because of the way the evidence is presented, visitors can feel what happened as well as understand it.

Painting is less common in our database, but it has produced some of the best-known work. From the 1960s, Colombian painter **Beatriz González**, who died in January 2026, turned press photographs of her country's violence into flat, brightly coloured canvases. In ***Auras* anónimas**, installed between 2007 and 2009 in Bogotá's Central Cemetery, she sealed almost 9,000 empty, looted niches with silk-screen prints of silhouettes of people carrying the dead out of conflict zones, taken from newspaper photographs. In Beijing, **Li Yan** paints disasters as if reporting them. In his *Accident* series of 2007, groups of small canvases set car wrecks, bombed-out buildings and mug shots alongside scenes of everyday life. The series criticises the way media coverage turns disaster into pieces of routine news.

> One of the standout pieces [of the Gaza Biennale] is a mural of children flying kites against the backdrop of a bombed-out building, symbolising both fragility and the enduring sense of hope. Another striking installation uses fragments of demolished houses to create a mosaic, representing the persistence of life in the midst of destruction.
>
> **Omaid Sharifi**
> **ARTLORDS | Afghanistan**



Textile work is less widespread but central to women's memory and healing work. In Delhi's **Rafooghar** (The House That Mends) and South Africa's **Intuthuko Embroidery Project**, women stitch together to work through gender-based violence, while in Afghanistan embroidery and weaving give women banished from public life a reason to meet.

Poetry is the medium of **Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner** from the Marshall Islands. She brought the threat of rising seas caused by climate change to world leaders with her poem 'Dear Matafele Peinam', written to her seven-month-old daughter and **performed** at the opening of the 2014 United Nations (UN) climate summit. In Kenya, spoken word poet **Brian Silweyz** calls out political leaders who fail the people they are supposed to represent. In '**Tuwajibike**' (Let us be accountable), he takes on crumbling roads, period poverty and youth drinking, and tells his member of parliament to fix the roads instead of waiting for God to do it. In 2024 he **performed** at a memorial concert in Nakuru linked to Kenya's **Gen Z-led protests**.



Printmakers include the Malaysian collective **Pangrok Sulap**, whose members carve large woodcuts and print them together with rural communities in Sabah. Comics are the medium of exiled Egyptian artist **Ganzeer**, whose dystopian science fiction graphic novel *The Solar Grid* features environmental collapse, corporate control of water and a whistleblower hunted by the authorities. Dance gives visibility to sexual diversity in the work of **Natyarasa**, Cambodia's first all-male, openly gay classical dance troupe.

Other forms are rarer but carry weight in specific settings. Radio reaches audiences with low literacy or no internet access, as *Na We Be Dis* did in Nigeria. Oral storytelling is important in the work of the Kurdish collective **Hunergeha Welat** (Art of the Homeland), based in Qamishlo in north-east Syria, which blends the *dengbêj* tradition of epic vocal narrative with modern music and video to rally support for Kurdish resistance and celebrate women's role in the struggle against the Islamic State terrorist group and in broader movements for gender equality.

> "For over 40 years, the diaspora has maintained links with Afghanistan through music... Listening to music is already a form of defiance, since music is banned. People still listen in their cars. They turn it off approaching a checkpoint and back on once they're past. I wouldn't call it a conscious act of resistance so much as an everyday rebellion.
>
> **Mina Jawad**
> **THEATRE-MAKER | Afghanistan**

Craft and traditional art are the medium of the **Pacifica Mamas**, first-generation Pacific Island migrants in Auckland, New Zealand, who teach weaving and other traditional Pacific arts to keep their communities' heritage alive away from home. They also **run a programme in a men's prison**, using traditional weaving to give incarcerated men a sense of belonging.

Puerto Rico's **AgitArte** takes puppetry to the streets through **Papel Machete**, a workers' street theatre collective whose members, including students, teachers and waiters, build papier-mâché puppets to tell stories of economic injustice and working-class struggle. In Argentina, **Iconoclasistas**, comprising a graphic artist and a researcher, create maps and pictograms and run mapping workshops with communities across Latin America. Using icons they design, participants draw maps of their territory that mark who controls the land and where agribusiness and mining are causing harm. The maps are artworks made for a political purpose, helping communities understand and resist what is happening to their land.

Some work is made specifically to circulate online. The anonymous Finland-based Sámi collective **Suohpanterror**, for instance, designs satirical posters on Indigenous rights to be shared on social media. Food can also be part of the artwork. In Zagreb, Croatia, the artists behind **Art in the Heart of Community** brought people from established communities together with recently arrived migrants to cook and swap recipes, then displayed photographs of the dishes they made together on billboards across the city under slogans such as 'Breaking borders with food'.

Some artivists curate and publish the work of others. **Interference Archive** in New York collects the posters, recordings and zines of social movements. **FemLibrary Armenia**, a queer feminist library in Yerevan, translates feminist texts into Armenian.



> "One particularly successful radio drama series addressed the trend of young Nigerians wanting to leave the country due to economic hardship, known as the 'Japa syndrome'. By telling compelling stories, we've encouraged young people to stay and fight for change instead of fleeing, because leaving only serves the corrupt politicians who benefit from the status quo.
>
> **Ezenwa Okoro**
> **STREET PROJECT FOUNDATION | Nigeria**

THE ACTIVISM IN ARTIVISM

Artivism serves a wide range of causes, and most artivists work on more than one. The most common, human rights, is the broadest, featuring in almost 30 per cent of cases in our database. The **Belarus Free Theatre**, for example, stands up for freedom of expression and the people jailed for exercising it. When President Alexander Lukashenko's authoritarian regime barred it from theatre venues, the company defied censorship by staging its plays in secret, in basements, flats and forests. Since being forced into exile, it has paired its productions with campaigns for the release of political prisoners and sanctions against those responsible for repression.

Close to a quarter of cases in our database focus on social justice. **AgitArte** challenges inequalities of class, gender and race in Puerto Rico by performing at protests, running popular education workshops and supporting relief efforts in communities hit by hurricanes.

Gender equality and freedom of expression come jointly third, each the focus of around one case in five. In 2019, activists staged **Feminnale**, Kyrgyzstan's first feminist contemporary art exhibition, to put women's **economic independence** at the centre of public debate. It soon became a test of freedom of expression, as nationalist threats and government intervention forced works off the walls.

Cultural heritage and identity, and environmental and climate justice, are almost as prominent. In China, to draw attention to toxic air pollution, the artist known as **Nut Brother** spent 100 days walking Beijing's streets towing a 1,000-watt industrial vacuum cleaner, then mixed the collected particulate dust with clay to forge a solid brick.

Cambodian Living Arts was founded in 1998 by **Arn Chorn-Pond**, a musician and genocide survivor, to revive the country's traditional performing arts. The Khmer Rouge targeted and killed **most** of the country's artists, so bringing their arts back to life is a way of repairing

MAIN CAUSES

- Human rights
- Social justice
- Gender equality and feminism
- Freedom of expression
- Cultural heritage and identity
- Environmental and climate justice
- Democracy and civic participation
- Memory and historical justice
- Community development
- Racial justice and anti-racism

part of the genocide's damage and rebuilding a cultural identity the regime set out to destroy.

Next come causes focusing on how societies govern themselves and deal with their past, each featuring in close to a fifth of cases. **For Freedoms**, a US artist-led coalition that promotes civic participation, launched its 50 State Initiative, erecting hundreds of artist-designed billboards across every US state to encourage political dialogue and voter engagement ahead of the 2018 midterm elections. Peru's **Grupo Cultural Yuyachkani** staged a play, ***Adiós Ayacucho*** (Goodbye Ayacucho), that follows the ghost of a disappeared peasant leader travelling to Lima in search of his missing bones so his body can finally be laid to rest.

Community development drives groups such as the **Kibera Arts District** in Nairobi, Kenya, which has turned a street once known for crime into a hub of galleries and workshops where local glassmakers, jewellery makers, painters and tailors produce and sell their work. The district also runs creative programmes and mentoring for young artists. Youth empowerment is the focus of Senegal's **Guédiawaye Hip Hop Centre**, which trains young people in rap and other urban arts and runs projects on civic participation and democracy.



Many artivists focus on the struggles for rights of excluded groups. Through its mural initiative **RestaurAmoras**, the Mexican feminist collective **Siempre Unidas** confronts gender-based violence by painting memorial portraits of femicide victims, transforming city walls in Quintana Roo into public demands for justice. Transgender rights drive India's **Aravani Art Project**, an initiative that brings transgender women and cisgender artists together to design and paint large-scale public murals that claim visibility in urban spaces.

In Brazil, racial justice is the cause of São Paulo's **Frente 3 de Fevereiro**, a collective formed in 2004 after the police killing of a Black dentist. It uses films, performances and street interventions to denounce racism and police violence against Black Brazilians, including racism in football. Decolonisation defines the work of Brazilian artist **Adriana Varejão**, who replicates decorative Portuguese colonial tiles only to break them open, exposing sculptural, flesh-like interiors that evoke the visceral violence endured by Indigenous and enslaved African populations. Also in Brazil, Indigenous land rights mobilise the Huni Kuin artists of **MAHKU**, who channel proceeds from international art sales to buy back and protect their ancestral Amazonian territory.

India's **Sahmat Collective** has mobilised artists against religious fundamentalism since 1989, when it was founded weeks after street theatre artist Safdar Hashmi was attacked and killed while performing. At one point it invited Hindu, Muslim and Sikh auto-rickshaw drivers in Delhi to decorate their vehicles with poetry and communal harmony slogans. The **Godhadi collective**, led by the London-based Dalit queer feminist

artist Abhaya Rajani, challenges caste discrimination. Its work centres on godhadis, traditional Maharashtrian patchwork quilts, into which Rajani embroiders anti-caste protest text to illuminate the invisible labour of Dalit women.

The consequences of war shape the work of Syrian illustrator **Diala Brisly**, who has painted **murals** in schools and school tents in refugee camps in Lebanon to encourage displaced children back into education. Migrants' rights inspire Nigerian sculptor **Fasasi Abedeen Tunde**, who survived a Mediterranean crossing in 2015 and now confronts viewers in Rome with **sculptures** of drowning figures.

In Buenos Aires, Argentina, poverty is the focus of **Proyecto Calle** (Street Project), which has distributed disposable cameras to over 400 people experiencing homelessness to document their daily lives. New York's **Chinatown Art Brigade**, an Asian American artist-activist collective, partners with the Chinatown Tenants Union to combat gentrification and displacement. Through its Here to Stay project, it pairs community-led oral history workshops with large-scale outdoor projections, beaming tenant portraits, eviction data and bilingual slogans directly onto buildings that are being gentrified.

Resistance to state authoritarianism has driven Chinese artist **Ai Weiwei**, co-designer of Beijing's Olympic stadium, ever since he **exposed corruption** in school construction that caused thousands of children's deaths in the 2008 Sichuan earthquake. More recently, his work has focused on colonialism, displacement and the rights of migrants and refugees. Democratic accountability is the cause of the UK group **Led By Donkeys**. In 2019 it put up billboards across the country quoting pro-Brexit politicians' past promises that leaving the European Union would be quick and easy, exposing the gap between their rhetoric and what was happening.

Agricultural revitalisation drives the Spanish arts collective **Inland/Campo Adentro**, which commissions rural artist residencies and operates a training school for shepherds to defend pastoral communities against land abandonment.

Indonesia's **Koalisi Seni**, an artists' coalition, tracks artistic freedom violations and advocates for **legal** changes. Slovakia's **Platforma Otvorená Kultúra** defends the country's cultural sector against censorship, ideological purges and political capture. In 2024 it organised a national culture strike to **demand** good governance, fair pay and an end to political censorship.



USES OF ARTIVISM

Artivists pursue six broad purposes. The most common, reframing narratives and raising awareness, is the main aim of a third of cases in our database. Next comes strengthening and healing communities, at around one in six cases, followed by confronting power and mobilising and campaigning at around one in seven each. Supporting other artivists accounts for around one in nine, and bearing witness to keep memory alive for around one in 10.

Most artivists pursue more than one purpose, and some aims are more common as secondary goals than main ones. Policy reform is rarely an artivist group's sole focus, but around one in six makes it an explicit goal. For instance, the Philippine collective **Dakila**, while primarily organising young people through arts festivals and popular culture, petitioned the country's Commission on Human Rights to hold fossil fuel firms accountable for climate change and actively lobbies lawmakers to pass comprehensive anti-discrimination protections for LGBTQI+ people.

SIX PURPOSES



REFRAMING NARRATIVES AND RAISING AWARENESS



STRENGTHENING AND HEALING COMMUNITIES



CONFRONTING POWER



MOBILISING AND CAMPAIGNING



BEARING WITNESS AND KEEPING MEMORY ALIVE



SUPPORTING OTHER ARTIVISTS

Artivists also differ in what they try to change, and on this basis our research distinguishes four approaches: discursive, participatory, expressive and institutional. The discursive approach is the most common, accounting for a third of database entries. It seeks to change public debate by placing art in media and public spaces, where people encounter it without having chosen to, unlike visitors to a gallery or a museum.

Bosnian-American artist Aida Šehović, for instance, set out to collect fildžani, the small cups used to serve Bosnian coffee. She collected one for each of the 8,372 people killed in the 1995 Srebrenica genocide, for an installation called ***ŠTO TE NEMA*** (Why aren't you with us?). She began in Sarajevo in 2006 with 923 cups donated by the Women of Srebrenica association. Every year until 2020, on the anniversary of the genocide, she set out the growing collection in a public square in a different city, including New York, Toronto and Venice, as families, survivors and people around the world donated more. The 15th and last installation took place at the genocide memorial at Potočari-Srebrenica in 2020.

Participatory approaches come next, accounting for just over a quarter of cases. They seek to change the people who take part in making the work and the communities they belong to. **Big hART**, an Australian arts and social justice company that runs long-term projects with disadvantaged communities, offers a good example. Alongside the local community of Roebourne, Western Australia, the group developed a play, ***Hipbone Sticking*** **Out**, about the death in police custody of John Pat, a 16-year-old Indigenous boy from the town, and performed it in 2013 at the Canberra Theatre with a cast drawn largely from Roebourne residents.

FOUR APPROACHES



DISCURSIVE

Takes art to the streets and other public places to shift public debate, reaching people as they go about their daily lives.



PARTICIPATORY

Makes art with people to change the participants and their communities.



EXPRESSIVE

Shows art in galleries, theatres, festivals and publications to change how audiences who choose to engage see an issue.



INSTITUTIONAL

Uses art to press those with the power to change a specific decision, law or policy.

The expressive approach, taken by a fifth of cases, seeks to change how audiences see an issue. This kind of work is typically shown in festivals, galleries, publications, screenings, theatres and artists' own channels to people who choose to engage with it. What separates it from the discursive approach is the audience the work is first made for. A play about sexual violence staged in a theatre is addressed to people who choose to see it, while the same message performed in a public square is addressed to anyone who passes by. The difference is one of degree, since both kinds of work can travel well beyond their first audience. Most people who see a street performance see it in photos and videos shared online. An exhibition can reach a wide audience in the same way, through press and social media coverage.

An example of the expressive approach is the video ***Writing in the Rain*** by Indonesian artist **FX Harsono**, shown in galleries including the **National Gallery of Victoria** in Australia. Exploring forced cultural assimilation, it shows Harsono writing his Chinese name over and over, as he learned to do as a child before he adopted an Indonesian name, while rain washes the characters away.

The borders between these kinds of work can be porous, as seen in the case of Kenyan-American artist **Wangechi Mutu**. In 2019, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York commissioned her to fill the four niches of its Fifth Avenue frontage, which had stood empty since they were built over a century earlier. She made **four bronze women** that rework caryatids, the female figures carved as columns in classical architecture, which she sees as bodies given 'a deep responsibility to hold up buildings and empires'. Her figures sit instead of carrying the building and are not fixed to it. The title of the work, *The NewOnes, will free* Us, names those Mutu believes will bring change, including children, women, new immigrants, activists and environmentalists. Although a museum commissioned it, the work sat above one of New York's busiest avenues, where passers-by saw it without having made a conscious decision to.

The institutional approach, the rarest, targets those with the power to change a specific decision, law or policy. What separates it from the discursive approach is the target. While the discursive approach seeks to change how the public thinks, the institutional approach presses decision-makers directly. Only one case in 20 in our database works mainly in this way. Most artivists instead work on attitudes, communities and debate, expecting decisions to follow. The remaining cases, around one in eight, are organisations that support other artivists and produce no work of their own.

South Africa's **Empatheatre** based its play ***Lalela uLwandle*** (Listen to the sea) on four years of research with people who depend on the coast, among them small-scale fishers, spiritual healers and holders of Indigenous knowledge. It follows three coastal residents from different backgrounds through the history of South Africa's coastline under

> "I put up a public installation because I wanted the public exposed to it, not just the small art community that already agrees with these ideas. By the end of the first day, people started tearing the piece down and burning parts of it... I think the backlash comes from the visibility. The art community is tiny, and art typically stays inside galleries where very few people see it. But when you bring it out into the public space, it exposes feelings the public didn't know were there.
>
> **Tara Abdullah**
> **ARTIST | Iraqi Kurdistan**



apartheid. After each performance the cast stays on stage to lead a public discussion on ocean governance. The play was performed at the **COP27 climate summit** and at UN World Ocean Week in New York before an audience that included UN ocean officials. An audio version was used as evidence in three court cases brought against Shell and the South African government over offshore oil and gas exploration.

Artivists also differ in how they position themselves towards those in power. Some work is oppositional. It exposes abuses or names those responsible. An example is ***Mujeres Custodias*** (Women Protectors), a mural artists Raúl Ayala and Mona Caron painted in Quito, Ecuador, during the UN Habitat III conference in 2016. It portrays Indigenous women land defenders and protests against mining and oil drilling in the Amazon. Other work is affirmative. It represents, heals, celebrates, documents or proposes alternatives without targeting anyone in particular, as the women of the Keiskamma Trust do in their embroidered histories of the Eastern Cape. Seven out of 10 cases are affirmative.

Affirmative work is not necessarily less political or less risky than oppositional work. Giving a voice to people who are expected to stay silent can provoke a backlash as harsh as open denunciation, as shown by the case of **Tara Abdullah**, an artist in Iraqi Kurdistan who faced legal action for her work to share women's experiences of violence.



> "More and more now it is about finding positive stories and celebrating them through street art or a film or through other media... So much of what civil society does is about countering things that are negative. This is important work, but I also think that civil society should be going towards what it wants to see in the future.
>
> **Saleem Vaillancourt**
> **PAINT THE CHANGE | United Kingdom**

REFRAMING NARRATIVES AND RAISING AWARENESS

Artivism is most commonly used to shift how people understand an issue, a group or a history. Reframing occurs across all settings, from open to closed civic space. Just over half of reframing cases come from artists whose work embeds political critique, such as Ghanaian sculptor **El Anatsui**, whose metallic tapestries reframe the history of the transatlantic slave trade. Most of this work is exhibited in galleries and museums, followed by the media and public space. A quarter is produced collaboratively with frontline communities, and very little of it directly targets policymakers.

Theatre and performance is the most common art form among these cases, as in the work of Germany's **Romnja Power Theatre Collective**, which stages the overlooked histories of Romani and Sinti women. Sculpture and installation follow, then film and murals. The issues addressed are diverse. Cultural heritage, environmental justice, gender equality and racial justice each appear in around a quarter of cases and LGBTQI+ rights in roughly one in five. India's **Aravani Art Project**, for instance, paints murals drawn from the stories, songs and myths of the transgender community, often close to the community's own spaces, and challenges the stigma trans women face by helping them claim an identity as artists.

Much of this work enables excluded groups to tell their own stories and dismantle stereotypes. In Burkina Faso, the designers, filmmakers, illustrators and writers of **Les Sans-Nom** challenge social taboos around sexual and gender identity. In the USA, **Sins Invalid** centres disabled, queer and trans artists of colour to challenge the framing of disabled bodies as 'less than'. In Kentucky's coalfields, **Appalshop**, founded in 1969, trains young people in media production to counter national caricatures of Appalachian poverty. Indigenous collectives lead similar work. Australia's **Karrabing Film Collective**, Brazil's MAHKU and the Amazonian women's music collective **As Karuana** draw on film, murals and song to carry ancestral knowledge into contemporary political struggles.

Many art-led cases in this group confront the colonial and racial histories that official narratives sanitise. Guyanese-British artist **Hew Locke** reworks imperial monuments and royal iconography. To expose an industry that still follows the trade routes colonialism built on slave labour, El Anatsui creates **shimmering metallic hangings** with flattened liquor bottle tops discarded by Nigerian distilleries. Dominican Republic-born painter **Firelei Báez** populates her canvases with figures from Afro-Caribbean folklore and the Haitian Revolution, recovering narratives that colonial archives erased. **Adriana Varejão** brings her critique of colonial violence into the permanent collections of the Guggenheim and Tate. In mass media, textile artist **Nneka Jones**' hand-embroidered US flag **featured** on the cover of *Time* magazine's 2020 special issue on racial justice. She left it unfinished, with the needle still in the canvas, to suggest a nation still being remade.

Some work makes the invisible visible. Climate change, which involves processes that may be hidden in the everyday or hard to understand, has prompted some of the most inventive interventions. Hawaiian artist **Sean Yoro** paints portraits on melting icebergs and semi-submerged sea walls, using their rapid disappearance to convey climate urgency. In Scotland's Outer Hebrides, Finnish artists **Timo Aho** and **Pekka Niittyvirta** installed LED lines triggered by tidal sensors to show how high future seas will rise across coastal villages.

Other work challenges gender norms, even where doing so is dangerous. In 2019, Kyrgyzstan's **Feminnale** opened at the National Art Museum in Bishkek, funded largely through crowdfunding after major donors rejected it

as too radical. Following death threats, mob intimidation and protests, the culture minister **ordered six artworks removed** and the museum's director resigned to protect her staff from violence. According to its organisers, however, public discussion of women's rights **became more sophisticated** afterwards.

In neighbouring Kazakhstan, artist **Suinbike Suleimenova** launched the feminist media initiative FemFilmCA, screening films and producing educational resources to spark public debate on misogyny. In Kabul, photographer **Fatimah Hossaini** established **Mastoorat Art**, a civil society organisation that seeks to challenge stereotypes of Afghan women and give women artists a platform.

Some artivists have turned reframing on civil society's image. The projects commissioned through We Are (For) Civil Society answered claims that organised civil society is foreign, disloyal or self-serving. In Nigeria, **Jos Repertory Theatre** and Brain Builders Youth Development Initiative set their radio drama, *Na We Be* Dis, in a shared compound with an overbearing landlord, so listeners could recognise civil society in neighbours organising together. In Central Asia, the **A0 of Freedom** project reclaimed the poster, long a tool of Soviet propaganda, for hopeful messages about civil society. In Mexico, the engravings of **Nuestra Ruta** show human rights defenders through their joys as well as their struggles. In Kuala Lumpur, **Project Future Malaysia** commissioned five Malaysian artists, among them the Indigenous artist Shaq Koyok and the Pangrok Sulap collective, to make work on causes civil society takes up, such as censorship, ecological loss, gender and land rights, for its 2025 Carnival of the Bold.

Such work tends to be intentionally affirmative. **Paint the Change**, a UK-based public art organisation, grew out of Education is Not a Crime, a mural campaign against the Iranian government's ban on Bahá'í people, the country's largest non-Muslim religious minority, attending university. The Bahá'í community responded to the ban by setting up an underground university, a response **Saleem Vaillancourt** describes as meeting injustice 'not with conflict but by building a positive alternative'. The campaign painted murals on unequal access to education in cities including São Paulo, Brazil; Cape Town, South Africa; and Detroit and New York, USA.







STRENGTHENING AND HEALING COMMUNITIES

Around one in six cases in our database work mainly on the people and communities who take part in workshops, performances and other creative activities. Some develop the skills and leadership of participants, particularly young people. Others help people recover from trauma and keep their culture alive, or generate income and support community development.

This use of artivism appears to become more common as civic space becomes more restricted, from around one in eight cases where civic space is relatively open to one in five where it's repressed or closed. It's mostly the work of groups. Over three quarters of these cases are led by collectives or organisations, such as the **Wajukuu Art Project** in the Mukuru settlement in Nairobi, Kenya. In around three in five, activism and art carry equal weight, typically with a group making art with a community around a shared cause.

Community work relies on a participatory approach and is overwhelmingly affirmative. In countries the CIVICUS Monitor rates as repressed, affirmative work made with participants accounts for a third of all cases. Theatre is its main tool, as for Cambodia's **Lakhon Komnit**, which creates plays with excluded communities about the problems they face. Murals come next, as painted by **Kibera Creative Arts**, which brings together street artists with young people in Nairobi's largest informal settlement, followed by music, as made by the Kenyan hip hop artist **Octopizzo**, whose songs deal with poverty and life in Kibera. Its most frequent issues are community development, as in the work of Thailand's **Prayoon for Art Foundation**, which runs participatory art festivals and workshops to revive towns and villages away from big cities, and youth empowerment, followed by human rights, social justice, cultural heritage and peacebuilding. Africa and Asia, home to over a third of database entries, contribute three in five of these cases.

For many groups, the aim is recovery from violence. Make Music Matter's **Healing in Harmony** programme, whose flagship site operates at Panzi Hospital in Bukavu, DRC, builds recording studios inside community health facilities. Groups of 10 to 25 trauma survivors, many of them survivors of sexual violence, spend four months writing and recording songs with a local producer while a therapist integrates psychosocial care into the creative process. Participants retain the rights to their songs, and each cohort concludes with a public concert. Make Music Matter has had over 11,000 participants to date. Its founder, Darcy Ataman, **summarises** the shift when survivors perform their work: 'Shame is gone, agency is back'.

Women's groups use art to work through gender-based violence together, often through textiles. In Delhi, Rafooghar brings together **Hindu and Muslim women** from neighbourhoods in the south-east of the city, including Shaheen Bagh, where in 2019 and 2020 women led a **months-long sit-in** against a citizenship law that discriminated against Muslims. In Ekurhuleni, South Africa, the 16 Black women of the **Intuthuko Embroidery Project** formed to earn an income and now use embroidery to tell stories of gender-based violence in their communities. In Bogotá, Colombia, girls formed **Resistencia Chiquita** after the 2016 rape and murder of an Indigenous girl, Yuliana Samboní. Their aim was to process and prevent gender-based violence through murals and performance. However, their work came under attack in August 2026, when the new head of Colombia's child welfare agency, María Carolina Restrepo, **ordered the removal** of a mural the girls had painted in one of its offices, claiming it showed the 'alleged instrumentalisation' of children.

Other groups work with communities marked by mass violence. Rwanda's **Ubumuntu Arts Festival** is held at the Kigali Genocide Memorial. In Medellín's Comuna 13, **Agroarte** uses art and gardening to remember the people disappeared after a 2002 **military operation**, many of whom are believed to lie under the rubble of La Escombrera, a dump on the city's edge. Its members tend gardens and make graffiti and hip hop in their memory. In ***Cuerpos Gramaticales*** (Grammatical bodies), its best-known performance, staged repeatedly since 2013, over a hundred people stand half-buried in the earth for six hours, planted in place of the bodies hidden in the ground.

Artist **Lily Yeh**, based in Philadelphia, USA, turned derelict lots into art parks with local residents, then took the model abroad, including to a village of genocide survivors in Rwanda, where children and families designed and built a memorial park.

Many organisations use art to give young people skills, a voice and safe spaces. **ASHTAR Theatre** in Palestine runs a three-year programme training young people in theatre and life skills. **The Freedom Theatre** in the Jenin refugee camp in the occupied West Bank runs acting training and youth activities as cultural resistance to occupation.

Theatre of the Oppressed, the method developed by Augusto Boal in Brazil, has travelled widely. In Chiang Mai, Thailand, **Gabfai Community Theatre** uses mobile theatre to help people exercise their right to communicate. In Nairobi, the Kibera Arts District, Kibera Creative Arts and Octopizzo, who grew up there, work with young people in Kibera, one of East Africa's largest informal settlements, while the Wajukuu Art Project does the same in Mukuru.

Some community art turns into economic and territorial resistance. In 2017, the **Congolese Plantation Workers' Art Circle** opened the **White Cube**, a museum designed by the architecture firm OMA, on a former Unilever palm oil plantation in Lusanga, DRC. In Cherán, Mexico, **Colectivo Cherani** paints murals rooted in Purépecha culture as part of the community's self-government since its 2011 uprising against illegal loggers linked to organised crime. Malaysia's Pangrok Sulap takes on corruption and illegal logging in Sabah, while in Chicago, USA, **Theaster Gates** turns vacant buildings into spaces for community development.

Where civic space is repressed or closed, community work often means keeping some kind of space open. **Sudan Civic Lab**, founded in Khartoum after the 2019 revolution, offered a safe space to the city's underground art scene alongside civic education. In Bishkek, the **Kuduk Cultural Centre** runs programmes on eco-art and memory work across Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. There is a sense that these spaces can sustain connections and resilience, keeping alive latent civic capacity. As Mina Jawad **notes** of Afghan women's circles, there's no empirical measure of the resilience such spaces create, but those who take part pass it on to their children. In Palestine, as Iman Aoun **puts it**, society 'needs to feel alive, not just survive'. This work matters politically because of the spaces and ties it creates.

> "When I started the Ubumuntu Arts Festival at the Kigali Genocide Memorial, many people questioned it. They were hesitant to hold a festival in a place that bears the weight of humanity's failures. But to me it made perfect sense. How can we talk about humanity without acknowledging its darkest moments?
>
> **Hope Azeda**
> **UBUMUNTU ARTS FESTIVAL | Rwanda**



CONFRONTING POWER

Calling out the abuses of the powerful is the main purpose of around one case in seven and features among the purposes of a quarter of cases in our database. It's the most public use of artivism. Over four in five of these cases centre on confrontation work in public space or through public debate, and in over half activism and art carry equal weight. Theatre and performance is the most common art form among these cases, closely followed by murals and street art, then installation and illustration and, less often, digital work. Freedom of expression is the leading issue, with human rights a close second, then anti-authoritarianism and social justice.

The use of artivism to confront power continues as civic space closes, and may even become more common. Denunciation is the main purpose of almost one in five cases in countries where civic space is repressed or closed, against around one in nine where it's more open, and of almost a quarter of cases led by exiled artivists. Where civic space is restricted, confrontation is less often part of a sustained campaign and more often a one-off public intervention that exposes abuses. Civic space restrictions change both the way artivists confront power and the price they pay for it.

Walls are the cheapest medium for confrontation, and the most contested. A stencil costs little and can be repeated, so a single artist can spread the same message across a whole city. In Afghanistan, **ArtLords** painted pairs of open eyes on government buildings under the slogan **'I See You'**, a challenge to corruption and a demand for accountability. In Cairo in 2011, after the uprising that toppled dictator Hosni Mubarak, Egyptian artist and designer **Bahia Shehab** took the Arabic word for 'no' in calligraphic styles and stencilled it across the city's walls with messages aimed at the military council then in power, saying no to military rule, a new pharaoh, violence and stripping the people, a reference to a woman protester stripped and beaten by soldiers in Tahrir Square. The army regularly whitewashed her images, and they reappeared overnight.

Walls are contested because what is painted on them can be painted over. After the Taliban returned to power in 2021, most of ArtLords' **2,000-plus murals** were destroyed or defaced. In Tashkent, Uzbekistan, local authorities painted over the anonymous street artist **Inkuzart's** stencils on fuel prices and the state car monopoly, sometimes within hours.

The contest over a wall can spread across a country. In Medellín, **Fuerza & Graffiti** co-created the *Las cuchas tienen razón* (The mothers are right) mural with women searching for relatives who were disappeared and buried at La Escombrera. After the city's mayor had it painted over in January 2025, the mural was replicated in 76 places across Colombia. At least 20 of the copies were censored or erased. The dispute culminated in a July 2026 Constitutional Court **ruling** that recognised the work and its replicas nationwide as protected expressions of historical memory.

Performance can put the artist's body on the line. The Guatemalan artist **Regina José Galindo** uses her body to confront discrimination, violence and the legacy of armed conflict. In 2003, she walked from the Constitutional Court to the National Palace after dipping her bare feet in a basin of human blood, leaving footprints in protest against the presidential candidacy of a former dictator.

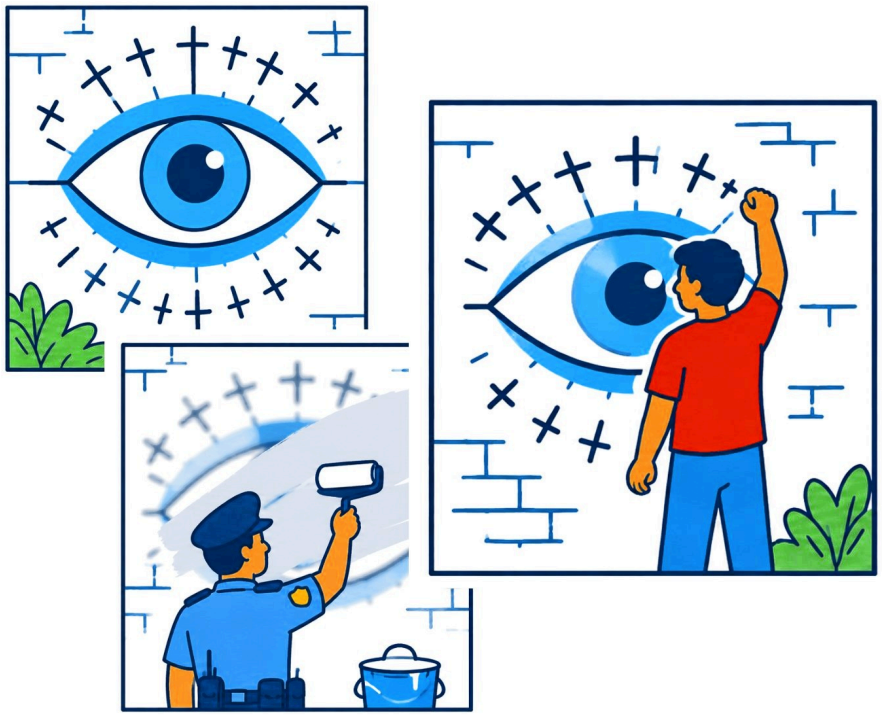
In Havana, Cuba, members of the **OMNI-Zona Franca** collective, which has worked outside official institutions since 1997, once buried

themselves in a mound of rubbish to protest failing municipal services. In the Philippines, the **UGATLahi Artist Collective** brings performance into street protests, building papier-mâché effigies of the president that are burned at rallies during the annual State of the Nation Address. For the Russian group **Pussy Riot**, the location of a performance was important. The group's 2012 guerrilla performance in Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Saviour highlighted links between authoritarian political and religious power, leading to the jailing of several members.

Music turns denunciation into something crowds can sing, and singers can pay for it. The Gambia's Killa Ace, who works with Senegal's youth-led Y'en a Marre movement, recorded a song, 'Combat Corruption', after a change of government in 2017. In response, he's been **arrested and beaten** by police and is 'often targeted, stopped and screened' because 'the government views me as an enemy'. In Turkey, **Grup Yorum**, a collective that blends political critique with traditional Kurdish and Turkish folk music, drew over 250,000 people to its free concerts before being hit with a nationwide performance ban in 2016, along with repeated raids and mass arrests. Imprisoned band members went on hunger strike to demand the right to perform, and two of them died in 2020.

Where civic space is more open, confrontation often relies on humour and spectacle to reach mass audiences. The US duo **The Yes Men** impersonate corporations and governments in elaborate hoaxes to expose the costs of unaccountable power, while the Chicano cartoonist **Lalo Alcaraz** satirises anti-immigrant politics in the USA. The UK's **Led By Donkeys** has projected video onto landmarks and painted the road outside the Russian embassy in Ukrainian colours. Germany's **Centre for Political Beauty** has built a replica of the Berlin Holocaust memorial next to the house of a far-right politician. But spectacle can still carry costs. The Chilean studio **Delight Lab** projected the word 'Dignidad' onto a Santiago tower during mass anti-government protests in 2019, but its projections of words such as 'hambre' ('hunger') during the COVID-19 pandemic **led to threats**, the publication of its members' personal details and the hacking of its social media accounts.

Other artivists keep up pressure on the powerful over many years. Since 1985 the USA's **Guerrilla Girls** have used statistics-driven posters to expose discrimination in the art world. Finland's **Suohpanterror** has used its satirical posters to press for ratification of the International Labour Organization's convention on Indigenous and tribal peoples. In November 2025, artists in the USA turned confrontation into a nationwide wave of



protest. Spearheaded by playwright Lynn Nottage and artist Dread Scott, the **Fall of Freedom** campaign coordinated over 600 exhibitions, performances, readings and other creative protests against authoritarianism and censorship across the country, at a time when some institutions were self-censoring in an attempt to avoid Donald Trump's wrath.

A smaller number of cases criticise power through books or work shown in galleries, theatres or their own channels. In the UK, Sarah Williamson's **Art Activist Barbie** poses dolls with placards in front of museum artworks and shares the images with thousands of followers online to expose the dominance of the male gaze in collections. Chinese artist **Liu Bolin** began painting himself into urban backdrops as a silent protest against the demolition of his Beijing studio. Mozambican sculptor **Gonçalo Mabunda** turns decommissioned weapons from the civil war into thrones that mock power built on violence.

Confrontational work carries the highest risks of any use of artivism. In 2000, cartoonist **Nik Kowsar** drew a crocodile strangling a journalist and gave it a name that rhymed with that of an Iranian religious leader. He denied any resemblance, but acknowledges 'there was a political message there', and the religious establishment saw it too. Thousands of clerical students gathered for four nights calling for his death, and he was jailed and is now in exile. Kowsar argues that political art works because it 'goes directly to the point' and 'exposes the absurd', which is why governments try so hard to silence cartoonists. Where civic space is closed, much of this work is made anonymously or from abroad.



> "All I had done was draw a crocodile that was shedding crocodile tears and strangling a journalist, while claiming that the journalist was killing him... When you produce content that powerful people or organisations dislike, no matter how that content is packaged, they will try to shut you down by all means, including allegations and criminal charges like undermining national security, working with the enemy, indecency or attacking Islam.
>
> **Nik Kowsar**
> **CARTOONIST | Iran**

MOBILISING AND CAMPAIGNING

Some artivism serves organised collective action, giving movements images, rituals and songs, or making specific demands of power-holders. This is the main purpose of around one in seven cases in our database. In around a third, activist groups that use art take the lead, while very few are led by artists. Over four in five are led by movements or organisations. Theatre and performance is the most common art form used, followed by film and music. Democracy and civic participation is the leading issue, observed in over two in five cases.

This use of artivism depends more than any other on the space to organise openly. Policy influence features among the purposes of a quarter of cases where civic space is open, narrowed or obstructed but only in a tenth where it's repressed or closed. Mobilising peaks in conditions where civic space is obstructed and protest is contested but still possible, being the main purpose of almost one in five cases in such conditions.

Art can carry a movement well beyond the place where it began, particularly when its form is simple enough for others to copy. Women around the world learned and staged LASTESIS's *Un violador en tu* camino. In the same way, the **Red Rebel Brigade**, silent figures in blood-red robes devised by a street theatre company from Bristol, UK, for Extinction Rebellion in 2019, has inspired local troupes in many countries, becoming one of the most reproduced images of the climate movement.

Other artivists make art for movements to use at protests. In New York, the **Resistance Revival Chorus**, which grew out of the 2017 Women's March, performs freedom and protest songs at demonstrations under the motto that joy is an act of resistance. In Yogyakarta, Indonesia, the **Taring Padi** collective has made banners, posters and puppets for social movements since 1998. In Argentina, **Grupo de Arte Callejero** designed the graphics for escraches, the public actions through which the human rights organisation **H.I.J.O.S.**, founded by children of disappeared people, exposed dictatorship-era perpetrators living with impunity in their neighbourhoods.

In Germany, **Tools for Action** makes giant inflatables in silver reflective foil for protesters to use. Its inflatable cobblestones are a playful take on the paving stones protesters have long torn up to throw or build barricades with. They can be tossed over a crowd or pushed towards police lines without hurting anyone. In 2016 the group built an 80-metre **mirrored barricade** with which it faced a neo-Nazi march in Dortmund, forcing the marchers to look at their own reflections.

Ahead of the 2026 FIFA World Cup, the **No ICE in the Cup** campaign, **launched** by the pro-democracy network Horizons Project with Paola Mendoza as lead organiser, gathered posters from artists in 10 of the 11 US host cities and released them for anyone to download and display, as part of a broader campaign to keep immigration enforcement away from stadiums and public spaces.

Some artivism presses specific demands or targets those responsible. In Washington DC, residents campaigning against gentrification mobilised under the hashtag **#DontMuteDC** after a shop that had played go-go, the city's home-grown Black music, was told to turn it off following a complaint from a resident of a new luxury building. A petition gathered over 80,000 signatures and the campaign went on to win a law making go-go the official music of DC.

In the USA, artists have organised against democratic backsliding on a national scale. **For Freedoms** registered in 2016 as the country's first artist-run political action committee, and by 2023 it had **produced over 650 billboards** tied to election years and to campaigns with partner movements. Artists also campaign for their rights. Slovakia's **Platforma Otvorená Kultúra** combines protest with collective negotiations and legal support for cultural workers, while Indonesia's **Koalisi Seni** trains artists in policy advocacy and campaigns for them to be recognised as workers.



Where civic space is repressed or closed, artivists still mobilise, but on different terms. Cuba's **Instituto de Artivismo Hannah Arendt** (INSTAR) was born in 2015 from a 100-hour collective reading of Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* at the home of the artist Tania Bruguera, whose passport was confiscated after her arrest in December 2014 for planning a free-speech performance in Havana's Revolution Square. Police **detained** her again as soon as the reading ended. Today, INSTAR's work has three strands. In its Wish Tank, people **express their hopes for change**. In its Think Tank, activists, artists, economists and urban planners turn these ideas into policy proposals. Its Do Tank puts the proposals into practice in public space through actions and performances.

> "Spoken word is my form of protest. As well as performing on stage, I go into matatus, Kenya's shared minibuses, to take the message where it matters most. With my friend and fellow poet Willie Oeba, I do civic education on different matatu routes. Through poetry we start the conversation. We challenge passengers to elect better leaders, exercise their democratic rights and hold leaders accountable.
>
> **Brian Silweyz**
> **SPOKEN WORD POET | Kenya**

BEARING WITNESS AND KEEPING MEMORY ALIVE

Documentation and memory-keeping is the main purpose of around one in 10 cases in our database and features among the purposes of almost one in four. This is the use of artivism that grows most clearly as civic space becomes more restricted. It appears among the purposes of almost a third of cases in countries where civic space is repressed or closed against under a fifth where it's more open.

Witness work is the most individual form of artivism. Over half of these cases involve individual artists and close to two thirds of those that produce work in this area are artists or arts collectives whose work carries a political message, as opposed to activist groups. Its tools are those of the record. Photography is the most common, followed by curation and archiving, digital media, illustration and installation. Almost three quarters of these cases deal with memory and historical justice, and over two in five with war and displacement.

Some witnesses record events as they happen. Since 2010, the anonymous Syrian video collective **Abounaddara** has made short films about individual Syrians on all sides of the country's civil war, an approach it calls 'emergency cinema', with the aim of **showing an immediate image** of Syrian society. In Chile, **Antes del Olvido** was formed during the 2019 uprising to record protest sites and monuments as 3D digital models, building an online archive **viewed** as 'a political tool, an artefact for collective memory'.

Others gather evidence for future accountability. Ukraine's **Center for Spatial Technologies**, for example, has worked with human rights investigators to gather over 100 hours of witness testimony on the Mariupol theatre bombing. In Sri Lanka, families of the disappeared who took part in the **We Remember** workshops made posters that were shared with the UN Committee on Enforced Disappearances for its first review of the country in 2025.

Some give faces to victims who statistics reduce to numbers. In Iraqi Kurdistan, **Rebin Chalak** cast the faces of Yazidi women who escaped captivity by the Islamic State terrorist group in plaster, producing 23 masks that let viewers focus on individual faces rather than statistics while protecting survivors' identities. The Mexican project **No Estamos Todas** (We Are Not All Here), founded by **two illustrators** who remain anonymous, draws portraits of victims of femicide across Latin America from family testimonies to counter the numbing effect of statistics. Also in Mexico, **RestaurAmoras** started out during the 2021 protests that followed the

> "We have used film, illustration, music and photography to commemorate victims of the war and highlight the suffering of affected communities. Our 'The Blue Sultanate: Arts Revive the Memory of Sennar' event brought together artists to honour survivors and reclaim cultural memory. Through a video, 'The Famine Scenario', we drew attention to the use of starvation as a weapon of war in El Fasher.
>
> **Adeela**
> **YOUTH-LED CULTURAL GROUP | Sudan**



death in police custody of Victoria Salazar, a Salvadoran refugee. Its murals become shared acts of mourning, as families are invited to add brushstrokes to the portraits.

Other witnesses work on the past that states would rather forget. Colombia, still living with the legacy of over half a century of armed conflict, contributes almost a quarter of these cases. Photojournalist **Jesús Abad Colorado** has documented the conflict's human cost for three decades. Visual artist and social communicator **Erika Diettes** works with victims and survivors on photographic installations about grief and disappearance. Artist **Juan Manuel Echavarría** co-led **The War We Have Not Seen**, a project in which former rank-and-file combatants spent two years painting their experiences of the war.

In 2002, Peru's **Yuyachkani** accompanied the first public hearings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Ayacucho, **performing** in churches, markets and squares. In a 2003 documentary, ***S-21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine***, Cambodian filmmaker **Rithy Panh** brought survivors of the Khmer Rouge's S-21 prison face to face with their former guards, and in his 2013 film ***The Missing Picture*** he used hand-carved clay figurines to recreate images the regime destroyed.

In Indonesia, scholar and visual artist **Elisabeth Ida Mulyani** challenges the official narrative about mass killings in 1965 and 1966. Japanese contemporary artist **Yoshiko Shimada** uses etching, installation art and performance to confront Japan's wartime history, focusing on military sexual violence and the state-sanctioned 'comfort women' sexual slavery system. Multidisciplinary artist **Diana Rakhmanova** shines the spotlight on the largely silenced legacy of Tajikistan's civil war. In South Africa, the **District Six Museum** keeps alive the memory of over 60,000 people forcibly removed from a Cape Town neighbourhood under apartheid, working with former residents and campaigning for restitution.

Archives keep the record, preserving what communities and movements produce. The USA's **Interference Archive**, run by volunteers and open to anyone, preserves the badges, flyers, posters and zines movements produce, which would otherwise be thrown away, while the **Afghan Visual Arts and History** research collective and multimedia platform preserves Afghan visual culture amid displacement and cultural erasure.

Bearing witness poses risks. In 2017, Kurdish artist and journalist **Zehra Doğan** was **sentenced** to almost three years in prison in Turkey for spreading 'terrorist propaganda' after she shared her digital painting of the destroyed town of Nusaybin on social media. As she was denied access to art supplies in prison, she **kept painting** on bedsheets and newspaper, using plant matter and her menstrual blood. Her case became a global symbol of artistic freedom, rallying support from organisations including **PEN America** and inspiring a **New York mural** by Banksy. She now lives and works in exile.



SUPPORTING OTHER ARTIVISTS

Doğan's case also shows how much artists under pressure depend on support from others. Some of the cases in our database are best understood as providing infrastructure for artivism by funding, training, sheltering and defending artists so they can keep working. Supporting other artivists is the main aim of around one in nine cases, and none of these organisations produces any artivist work of its own. These organisations tend to be based in countries where civic space is relatively open, so artists under pressure often have to look abroad for support.

Funders provide vital resources to sustain artivism. Based in Beirut, Lebanon, **Culture Resource** funds young artists, supports their travel and runs programmes for artists at risk across the region. Some funders bring artists together with other agents of change. Among them, the Swiss **Bertha Foundation** funds activists, lawyers and storytellers to work together on shared issues, while the Dutch organisation **Hivos** supports artists and media-makers as part of its work with civil society movements.

Others pass on skills. New York's **Center for Artistic Activism** trains activists and artists in creative tactics and maintains an online database of artistic actions for others to learn from. **Beautiful Trouble** equips social movements with strategic tools and training to help them become more 'creative, effective, and irresistible'. Headquartered legally in New York but functioning as a decentralised global network, the organisation originated as an activist toolbox compiled by dozens of artivists, now available in multiple languages. Operating from Taipei, Taiwan, the **Mekong Cultural Hub** fosters regional exchange among practitioners in Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Taiwan, Thailand and Vietnam, delivering professional development through collaborative initiatives, residencies and virtual workshops.

Other initiatives carve out spaces, online and offline, where work can be exhibited free from state control. In Beirut, **Haven for Artists** provides creative studios and a feminist public library, while the digital platform **Through the Window** offers queer artists from Turkey a censorship-free exhibition space online. In 1994, after Cuban censors cancelled an exhibition by Ezequiel Suárez, a multidisciplinary and conceptual artist, he and fellow artist Sandra Ceballos showed the banned works in her Havana apartment. That improvised exhibition grew into **Espacio Aglutinador**, now Cuba's longest-running independent gallery showcasing art rejected by official institutions.

> "If their work touches on issues authoritarian regimes, criminals or abusers want to suppress, [those actors] may be able to identify and locate creators and trace their followers and contacts. I have been building Manifest, an offline, privacy-friendly infrastructure that brings creative tools together with documentation and archiving features... It's designed to work without an account and keep people's work on their own device, so there is no central database of users for anyone to seize.
>
> **Razali Samsudin**
> **MANIFEST STUDIO | United Kingdom**



Other organisations monitor threats, campaign for artistic freedoms and policy reform and provide protection, including relocation, when artists face danger. Through its Southeast Asia Artistic Freedom RADAR initiative, the Singapore-based arts media organisation **Arts Equator** has **recorded** over 800 challenges to artistic freedom across six Southeast Asian countries since 2010. Denmark's **Freemuse** pairs global monitoring and **annual reporting** with advocacy and emergency assistance, while Sweden's **Safe Havens Freedom Talks** provides global meeting platforms where civil society organisations, cultural defenders and state bodies share strategies on funding, legal aid, safe communication and shelter city initiatives for threatened artists.

For artists needing direct sanctuary and long-term refuge, Norway's **International Cities of Refuge Network** offers one-to-two-year residencies in member cities worldwide, while **Safemuse** runs safe havens in Hvitsten and Oslo, Norway. In Prague, Czech Republic, the **Artivist Lab** provides housing and studios for displaced Ukrainian artists. To sustain artists in exile, **Artists at Risk Connection**, a global initiative incubated under PEN America, provides emergency and resilience grants, while New York's **Artistic Freedom Initiative** provides pro bono immigration representation and resettlement support, including a dedicated programme for Afghan artists.

This infrastructure has its limits. Most support is temporary and depends on outside funding, which shapes who can be helped and for how long. Some artivists struggle to fit the categories funders use. Iman Aoun **argues** that the distinction funders draw between 'real' art and political art decides who gets support, and pushes work seen as too political to the margins. The way artivists organise also matters. Myanmar exile Ma Hnin, for instance, **notes** that 'collectives aren't recognised the way registered non-governmental organisations are'.

Artivists are clear about what they need. Killa Ace **lists** 'funding to support projects, protection and risk mitigation initiatives, help to cover legal fees and capacity building'. Much of the infrastructure helps artists once they have had to leave. The kind of support needed to let them keep working safely at home is harder to come by.



> "I have heard people stigmatising Palestinian theatre-makers and demonising our art by dismissing it as 'merely political', as if there were a difference between 'real' art and art that is politically engaged... Treating art and politics as separable also has practical consequences, because it shapes who gets funding and recognition. Art seen as too political gets marginalised.
>
> **Iman Aoun**
> **ASHTAR THEATRE | Palestine**

ARTIVISM UNDER PRESSURE

In 2020, **Tara Abdullah** went from door to door in Sulaymaniyah, Iraqi Kurdistan, collecting clothes and stories from women who'd experienced violence. She stitched the garments together and hung them along five kilometres of the city's main street, from the court to the public park. Women there can't speak openly about violence; they even cover their underwear when they hang out the washing so no one sees it. The installation didn't survive the day: people began tearing it down and setting parts of it alight, and the backlash soon moved online.

Two years later, Abdullah's Voice Project broadcast a two-minute message built from the same stories through 66 synchronised speakers in four cities and three nearby towns, using megaphones of the kind mullahs use to call people to prayer. Clerics took her to court. The case was dismissed, but she had to leave Iraq for a few weeks and was blacklisted from permits and funding.

Abdullah's experience shows how civic space restrictions shape how artivists work and the price they pay for it. This section looks first at artivists working where civic space is repressed or closed, and then at those forced to keep working from exile.







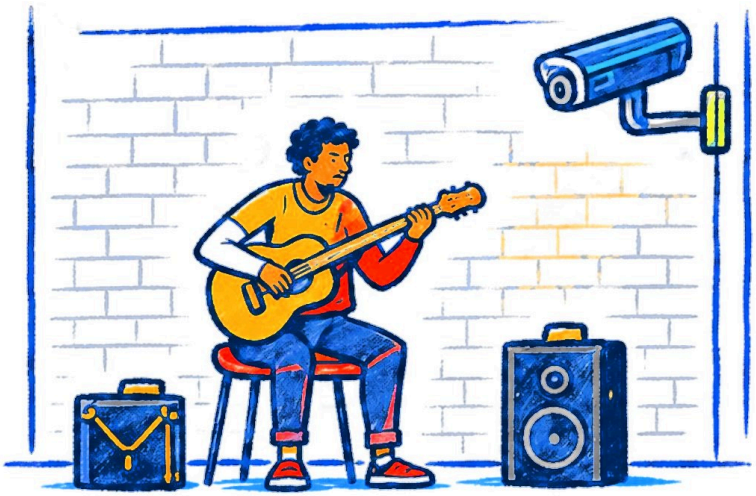


ARTIVISM IN REPRESSED AND CLOSED CIVIC SPACE

Civic space shapes what artivists prioritise and how they work. All uses of artivism appear in every civic space condition, and the share of oppositional work stays the same, with between a quarter and three in 10 cases taking an oppositional stance regardless of civic space conditions. What changes is what confrontation is for. Where civic space is more open, it often serves sustained campaigns that mobilise people or press for policy change. Where civic space is repressed or closed and those routes are blocked, it more often takes the form of one-off public interventions, such as a mural, stencil or performance, that expose abuses, contradict official narratives and keep a record of what those in power deny.

As civic space closes, other things shift too: which uses grow, who does the work, how openly they do it and what it costs them.

Where civic space is repressed or closed, community work and documentation grow, while pressure on decision-makers shrinks. In these settings, artivism is less about winning a decision than about keeping communities and records alive until change becomes possible. Colombia's **Colectivo Dexpierte**, for instance, keeps a record of political violence and the silencing of victims of state crimes through its posters and stencils. Those that continue to advocate for policy change take indirect routes. Such is the case of Syria's **Culture Tank Factory**, a think-and-do tank founded in 2024 by artists, journalists and researchers, many in exile,



> If you think too much about risk, your body and your thinking get blocked. Sometimes you just have to do it. Of course you need risk management, but a lot of what happens depends on context, experience, common sense and decisions made on the fly. Myanmar is a high-risk country, so every choice about our work is inherently risky... Holding a camera can be dangerous, and you have to manage a lot around that.
>
> **Anonymous filmmaker**
> **Myanmar**

which holds **labs and panels** that bring together activists and artists from inside and outside Syria to rethink cultural policy, reclaim public spaces and widen access to art.

Who does the work appears to change too. In repressed and closed conditions, activist groups using art fall from around one in seven cases to roughly one in 12, while artists and arts organisations rise from just over a third to over two in five. As room for organised activism shrinks, more of the work seems to fall to artists.

Aims and themes shift as well. Compared with cases in countries where civic space is open, narrowed or obstructed, those where it's repressed or closed deal far more often with war and displacement, at around one in seven against one in 30, and are almost twice as likely to focus mainly on empowering participants, as artivists work to keep spaces open. Cases from countries where civic space is closed stand out further. Freedom of expression is their most common theme, appearing in over a third against around one in six elsewhere, followed by war and displacement and anti-authoritarianism, while almost a third aim to denounce and confront. Many of the most confrontational voices against governments that have closed civic space are in exile.

Because open criticism is dangerous where civic space is heavily restricted, artivists look for cover. They present activism as art, work under pseudonyms or wrap their message in fiction. In China, curator Zheng Hongbin organised **public interventions** that he presented as art to tackle issues domestic media struggled to cover. In one, staged as a homage to the film *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing,* Missouri, trucks with slogans calling for an end to conversion therapy, an abusive pseudo-scientific practice that targets LGBTQI+ people, drove past clinics that offered it. In another, the Shenzhen-based artist and activist known by his pseudonym, Nut Brother, exhibited bottled water from a township with polluted groundwater. The authorities closed the exhibition, but photos had already circulated online and mainstream media reported on the pollution, leading to officials promising to dig deeper wells.

In Nigeria, the team behind ***Na We Be Dis*** opened every episode with a disclaimer that it was a work of fiction. But such cover has limits. In the case of China, police contacted the company that supplied Zheng Hongbin's trucks, and a local resident who helped the artists was arrested. As the lead team of Project Future Malaysia noted of its work, its artistic cover 'was not full protection'.

Where censorship is formal and routine, artivists work within the constraints. In Singapore, **ArtsWok Collaborative**, which uses theatre and other arts to open public dialogue on sensitive social issues, must submit all its scripts for licensing. Speaking on a podcast, its co-founder, Ngiam Su-Lin, **described** this as a negotiation, because when a work is blocked, artists can adapt it, find another creative approach or withdraw it. The skill, she says, lies in 'knowing where the boundaries are and then navigating them'.

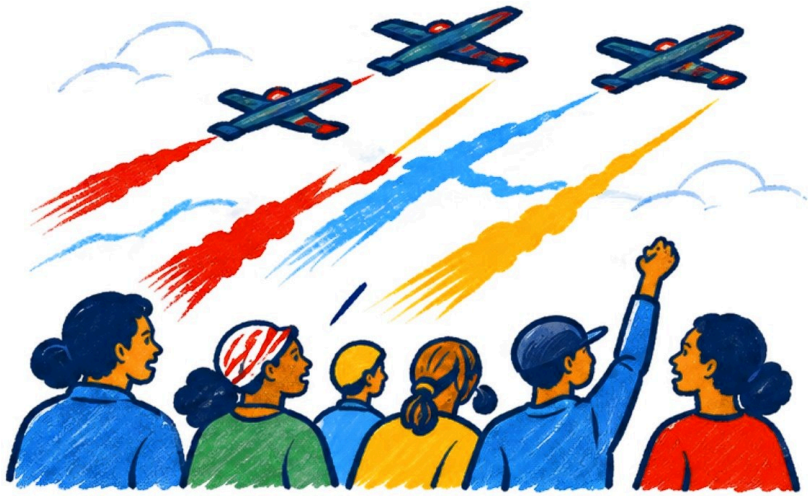
Exiles working in host countries with severe civic space restrictions face similar constraints. Ma Hnin **explains** that the Myanmar junta's airstrikes are a sensitive subject in Thailand, given how close the two countries' militaries are. So when **A New Burma** mounted an exhibition about them in Bangkok, it presented the accompanying panel discussion as a debate about innovative education, since the Myanmar military is bombing schools.

Theatre is more common where civic space is restricted, because it can take place in more private spaces. It features in around a quarter of cases where civic space is more open, roughly a third where it's repressed and almost two in five where it's closed. In restrictive settings, performances can take place behind closed doors and may be followed by discussion among people who know and trust each other. **Theatre 705**, a feminist

group operating in a **basement** in Bishkek, screens everyone who asks for a ticket, so the personal stories told on stage stay in the room. Its shows have included a Romeo and Juliet story about a feminist and an ultra-patriot, and a piece confronting taboos about the female body.

Even indoors, however, theatre can come under surveillance. In 2015, under military rule in Thailand, when **B-Floor Theatre restaged** Bang-La-Merd, a play first inspired by a prosecution under the lèse-majesté law that criminalises criticism of the monarchy, plainclothes soldiers filmed its performances.

Keeping a place for independent art open can be a struggle. In Baku, Azerbaijan, the community of **Salaam Cinema** occupied its building in 2019 to stop its demolition. The space now hosts a **queer and feminist film festival** in one of the most hostile countries in Europe for LGBTQI+ people.



Some spaces don't last. In Almaty, Kazakhstan, the queer-led rave space and arts platform **bULt** hosted hundreds of events between 2020 and its closure in 2025. In Hanoi, Vietnam, **Nhà Sàn Collective** has kept experimental art going through temporary, unannounced projects in public spaces since its original studio closed under pressure from the authorities in 2011.

Where no physical space is safe, artivists move online. A New Burma set up a **digital gallery** to show work that artists inside Myanmar can't exhibit there. All the artworks can be downloaded, so people anywhere can print them and put on their own exhibition.

Where civic space is repressed or closed, artivists can pay a high price for their work. Repression appears in the descriptions of around one in six cases in such contexts, against hardly any in more open conditions, and the real figure is certainly higher. In August 2020, police **arrested** 10

> "It's all about the framing. We created an exhibition that we called *When We See the* Planes. It compared what seeing a plane means to most people – typically a holiday or an exciting trip – with what it means to people in Myanmar: fleeing, building bunkers, hiding in the jungle. … We realise people around the world know when there's been an airstrike on a school in Gaza, but almost nobody knows when this happens in Myanmar.
>
> **Ma Hnin**
> **A NEW BURMA | Myanmar**

artists from the **Sudan Civic Lab** as they rehearsed a play at its offices in Khartoum. A court sentenced five, including filmmaker Hajooj Kuka, to two months in prison for 'public nuisance' after they chanted pro-democracy slogans at the police station. In 2011 **The Freedom Theatre**, which operates in the Jenin refugee camp in the occupied West Bank, lost one of its founders, Juliano Mer-Khamis, when he was **shot dead** as he left the premises. In December 2023, Israeli forces raided the venue and **detained** three of its members and leaders, holding one **in administrative detention** until April 2025.

Repression also takes less visible forms, such as brief detentions, censorship, fines and removal of work. In the context of Russia's war on Ukraine, for instance, Russian police **detained** members of the **Yav** street art collective **before they could finish a work on political repression, and authorities dismantled** another of its installations shortly after it went up. In Kazakhstan, authorities **tried and fined** filmmaker Suinbike Suleimenova in 2019 for filming a protest at the Almaty Marathon.

Censorship can stop work before it's made. Ahead of Cameroon's 2025 presidential election, authorities rejected one of the video scripts submitted by the team behind **The Chronicles of Courage and Survival**.

The threat doesn't always come from the state. In Bogotá in August 2024, gunmen **killed** Camila Espitia and Camilo Sánchez, two young members of the **Distreestyle** hip hop collective, after a session in a community garden. Investigators **found** that a local gang ordered the killing because the two had opposed drug sales in a neighbourhood park.

Many independent spaces survive on personal funds and informal donations. Because independent money is scarce at home and can be risky to take, artivists look abroad. When they obtain external support, particularly if it means leaving the country, **explains** Tara Abdullah, they typically use 'the exposure and funding to keep building pressure back home'.



ARTIVISM IN EXILE

Most artivists work in the countries they come from. Almost nine in 10 contemporary cases in our database are based at home. Of those that have crossed borders, over two in five are exiles who've been forced to leave. A similar number belong to diaspora communities. A handful are transnational projects with no single base. A few have returned home after exile.

When staying in their home country becomes impossible, many artivists take their work abroad. Artivists and collectives forced into exile make up six per cent of contemporary database entries. Almost all their case descriptions record repression. Nik Kowsar, forced to leave Iran in 2003 due to death threats, **sums up** why many fled, noting they had 'freedom of speech' but not 'freedom after speech'. All but one exile comes from countries where civic space is closed. The exception, **Nigeria's Fasasi Abedeen Tunde**, fled after armed men attacked the polling station where he was working in the 2015 election and his house was set on fire.

Almost all exiles work from countries where civic space is open, narrowed or obstructed, over a third of them from the USA. The only exceptions are two Myanmar initiatives that are based in Thailand, where civic space is repressed. Some eventually return home. The Gambia's **Killa Ace**, for instance, **fled to Senegal** in 2015 when the National Intelligence Agency targeted him over a song denouncing state killings and censorship under President Yahya Jammeh, and returned after a change of government in 2017.

Exiled artivism is the most confrontational, with two thirds of our database's exile cases that produce work taking an oppositional stance, more than twice the share of any other group. Most exiles are individual artists who fuse art with activism, working in the media or public spaces to shape debate on a specific issue. Much of the confrontational artivism visible where civic space is open is aimed at countries where it's closed.

Exiled artivists keep producing work about the countries they left. Human rights is the most common theme, in over two thirds of the cases, followed by anti-authoritarianism, freedom of expression and democracy.

Now based **in Portugal**, Ai Weiwei continues to challenge censorship and the human cost of global production through monumental installations on labour, mass production and migration. Egyptian musician Ramy Essam has continued his political resistance through music from Finland and



Sweden, where residencies with the Helsinki-based Artists at Risk programme and the International Cities of Refuge Network have supported his work. After his 2011 anthem 'Irhal' (Leave) became the **soundtrack** to the Tahrir Square protests, Essam was arrested, tortured and ultimately forced **into exile** in 2014. From abroad, in 2018 he released a track satirising President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi. The ongoing danger became clear when the song's lyricist was sentenced to three years in prison. The music video's director **died in state custody** in 2020.

The founders of the **Belarus Free Theatre** received asylum in the UK in 2011, but the ensemble kept performing in Minsk until the government intensified its repression following mass democracy protests in 2020, and in 2021 the company **relocated** all its members out of Belarus. Its productions have since been staged in over 40 countries. Having lived in Prague since arriving as a student in 2008, Belarusian artist **Rufina Bazlova** became an exile after her **embroidery** documenting the 2020 protests went viral online. Unable to return safely, she launched an **international collaborative project** where volunteers across the world hand-stitch individual embroidered portraits depicting Belarusian political prisoners.

Tania Bruguera **agreed to leave** Cuba in 2021 in exchange for the release of 25 jailed activists, and continues to run INSTAR from the USA. The institute's film festival, which showcases independent cinema from countries where artistic freedom is under attack, has been the target of a **smear campaign** by Cuban officials and government-affiliated artists, who accuse it of links to foreign intelligence agencies. Bruguera has also restaged the 100-hour reading of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* abroad, including in February 2024 at the **Hamburger Bahnhof**, a contemporary art museum in Berlin, Germany.

Some exiles lose their medium when they leave. For muralists, displacement severs their connection to public space. After the Taliban painted over her Kabul murals, Shamsia Hassani, now based in the USA, could no longer engage everyday street audiences. Unable to replicate the civic context of her graffiti, she **shifted** her work from public walls to canvas and online platforms. Egypt's Ganzeer, known for murals such as ***Tank vs Biker*** in revolutionary Cairo, turned to comics and graphic novels after a public smear campaign drove him from the country in 2014.

Yet others continue to paint walls. Afghanistan's ArtLords now operates from Turkey and the USA, where five of its artists have **recreated** some of the murals the Taliban whitewashed in Kabul. Yemeni artist **Murad Subay**, whose campaign **The Walls Remember Their Faces** memorialised over 100 Yemeni people forcibly disappeared since the 1960s, continues working from France. In 2019, he **painted a mural** in Paris denouncing French arms sales to the Saudi-led coalition fighting in Yemen.



Exiled artivists speak to those still at home, diaspora communities and international publics. A New Burma **shows its work** mostly to foreigners, so it avoids images of bloodshed and tells its stories 'with as much dignity as possible', hoping to win Myanmar some of the sympathy the world has shown for Gaza. From exile in France, Diala Brisly reached back into Syria through her work. She **illustrated children's books** given to displaced people in camps. Mina Jawad wrote her play **for Afghan men in Germany**, confronting them with their misogyny.

Many turn to others who've been displaced. Among our cases, almost a third of exiled individuals or groups deal with migration and refugee rights, compared to under one in 10 not in exile. Having been through displacement, many use their work to help others facing it, offering practical support and a community to people who've had to start again elsewhere.



Most people and groups working on displacement engage directly with displaced, migrant or refugee communities, and most are based in countries where civic space is relatively open. **Make Music Matter** has run its songwriting programme with Venezuelan refugees in Peru and Syrian refugees in Turkey. **Pangea World Theater**, based in Minneapolis, USA, centres immigrant and Indigenous artists. Its play ***Journey to Safety*** toured for eight years and informed policy on domestic violence against migrant women.

Around a third of initiatives doing this work are run by exiles, including **Asociación por el Arte Libre** in Costa Rica, **Chto Delat** in Germany and **Artists' Shelter** in Thailand, which support fellow exiled artists from Cuba, Russia and Myanmar. Other groups are formed by people with migration or refugee backgrounds. In Berlin, **Mpower**, a self-organised collective of girls and young women founded in 2015, runs film clubs, summer film camps and workshops in which girls make their own films and explore their identities.

> "During the war people inside and outside Syria lived completely different realities. Those who stayed dealt with constant threats to their lives and safety, and those who left faced displacement and exile. Our goal is to bring those experiences together so we can learn from one another and build a common vision.
>
> **Laura Al Jundi**
> **CULTURE TANK FACTORY | Syria**

IMPACTS OF ARTIVISM

Public descriptions of artivist work say much about what it sets out to do but little about what it achieves, so evidence of impact has to come from artivists' accounts. These accounts identify impact at several levels: on people who take part in their work; on audiences who encounter it; on wider public debate; on policies and material conditions; and, where repression is severe, on the survival of communities and spaces.

Artivists most often say their work changes how participants see themselves. Tom Wheeler **says** that **Treesistance's** biggest impact comes when Indigenous people see their own reality on screen, stop seeing themselves as victims and start seeing themselves 'as people with agency, as fighters', an effect he calls real but hard to measure. The team behind the **Movement and Activist Archive of T-Shirts**, a collaboration between artists Aditi and Asanda, runs workshops in Himachal Pradesh, India, and Makhanda, South Africa, in which young people hand-print T-shirts celebrating activists and human rights defenders from Africa, Asia and Latin America. They found that young people who thought political activity was for 'older or more educated people' began to see themselves as active participants. Seeing their experience voiced in public can do something similar for people who've always been excluded. Tara Abdullah **recalls** that in response to her public installations, many women contacted her anonymously to tell her how much relief the work gave them, 'as someone was finally saying what they'd wanted to say themselves'.

Some describe changes in participants' relationships with others. In Sri Lanka, a woman taking part in the **We Remember** workshops drew herself as a deer that had 'learned to grow horns' to protect her children but stayed strong only thanks to other women, and the group concluded that peer solidarity was 'as important as official advocacy'. After taking part in **Make Music Matter's** songwriting cycles, survivors of sexual violence who'd been stigmatised or thrown out of their homes performed their songs at concerts that attracted large crowds. Performing changed the way the community saw them and the way they saw themselves. Some turned away husbands who'd driven them out and then wanted them back, and others began to care for children conceived through rape.

Others describe their work as a path to healing. Hope Azeda **views** the act of talking about the genocide in Rwanda as 'the first step towards healing', and recalls that when conversations about it began, the trauma that surfaced was 'a release of long-held energy'. Her **Generation 25 project** takes these conversations to young Rwandans born after 1994, who can carry inherited trauma.

Artivists also describe changes in how audiences understand issues. Mina Jawad **recounts** how audiences of all ages and many nationalities reacted to her play in Berlin. While three or four people walked out, recognising their behaviour in what was criticised on stage, others cried, danced and celebrated. At Project Future Malaysia's Carnival of the Bold in Kuala Lumpur, audience members said Rupa Subramaniam's work on gender and ritual led them to connect gender equality with their cultural traditions for the first time. In Nigeria, a listener to ***Na We Be Dis*** said an episode about refuse clearance reflected what was happening in his area and changed his view. Instead of concluding that the government didn't care, he began to see what local groups could do.

Some work also reaches wider public debate. When **Paint the Change** painted 20 murals in Harlem, New York, residents drew a parallel between

the denial of education to Bahá'í people in Iran and African Americans' experience of discrimination. For **Saleem Vaillancourt**, the project's biggest success came when this story was broadcast inside Iran in Persian on satellite television and seen by millions. *The Gaza Monologues* has **reached** audiences worldwide. In 2010 it was performed simultaneously by 56 theatre companies in 36 countries and in 18 languages, involving around 1,500 young people, and has since been performed in around 65 countries.

Artivists are more cautious about claiming impacts on policies and material conditions. Nicola Haskins doesn't claim her work on the climate crisis has brought about change alone, but **believes** it may have sparked 'micro-changes that contribute to the wider movement'. Ezenwa Okoro shares the credit, **saying** the Artvocacy Movement's mobilisation helped persuade the government to set up the National Youth Entrepreneurship Development Fund, but attributing the result to persistent advocacy as well as art, and to work done 'in collaboration with other advocates'.

Some impact is practical. Every Guardian of Nature T-shirt Treesistance sells equips one of the Forest Guardians who protect Indigenous territories in Brazil. In Sudan, **Adeela's** Voices from Under Siege fundraising channel **helped** deliver essential support to besieged areas.

Where repression is severe, artivists see survival as impact. Daria Cybulska **argues** that the core impact of independent arts spaces in Central Asia is 'not their scale, but their endurance', since they help people 'stay connected, protect their mental health and imagine alternatives in hostile environments'. Ma Hnin **describes** how after a wave of arrests in Thailand left many in the Myanmar exile community scared and shaken, a two-day workshop restored her energy, as young people came up with ideas such as a podcast studio and projects on sexual violence among exiles, noting that 'the same community that wears you down also lifts you back up'.

Artivists are open about where their work falls short. Some people they want to reach don't believe it can make a difference. Tara Abdullah **recalls**



> "Dancers embody the physical and emotional turmoil experienced by couples as they navigate storms, droughts, floods and desolation within their own bodies and minds... By focusing on severe droughts in South Africa, I bring the audience into a space where they can feel the desperation of communities struggling without access to water.
>
> **Nicola Haskins**
> **CHOREOGRAPHER | South Africa**

women turning her down with the question 'Are you superwoman? Things won't change'. Some work may never reach an audience. An anonymous Myanmar filmmaker **describes** taking risks to shoot footage that 'nobody sees'.

Short-term funding is a real limit, bringing the risk of producing work that resonates with audiences only to lose them. When *Na We Be Dis* ended, a regular listener in Bukuru, Nigeria, wrote to the producers in frustration, lamenting the loss of a space that 'gave us language for our struggles, laughter in the middle of hardship, and hope where there was none'. Funders' demand for measurable results is another obstacle, since the impacts that matter to artivists most, on confidence, imagination and solidarity, are the hardest to evidence.



CONCLUSIONS

Artivism is civil society work. It works on how people think, how communities hold together and which issues reach public debate, shaping the ground decisions are made on. A vital minority names and confronts those responsible for abuses, but most artivism is affirmative. It gives excluded people a voice, helps communities recover from violence, keeps a record of abuses and imagines alternatives.

Art offers civil society tools that conventional advocacy lacks. A song in the language young people speak or a mural on a neighbourhood wall reaches people who would never read a policy brief. Art can make an abstract injustice feel personal. It can open up subjects too painful or dangerous to raise directly and let survivors approach them at a bearable distance. And where governments portray civil society as foreign or self-serving, art can contribute to presenting it as part of everyday community life, rooted in local traditions.

As civic space closes, art becomes one of the few channels through which civic action can carry on. Where activist groups can no longer work openly, artists tend to take on more of the work, and the focus shifts from pressing decision-makers to preserving memory and holding communities together. Confrontational work shifts from sustained campaigns to one-off interventions that expose abuses. Much of this work moves indoors, relies on coded language or is made anonymously or from abroad.

Art's ambiguity makes much of this possible, since a play can pass as culture while a protest meeting, seen as political, would be suppressed. But the cover is thin. Deniability buys time and some protection, but anyone relying on it should recognise the limits. Non-confrontational work can be just as dangerous as confrontational work. Artists who've helped women speak about violence, given LGBTQI+ people a stage or painted a mural with girls have faced censorship, prosecution and threats. Often it's who speaks in public, as much as what they say, that elicits backlash. The state isn't the only threat. Criminal gangs, nationalist groups and religious authorities have also targeted artivists.

Artivism in countries where civic space is repressed or closed leans heavily on support from abroad, mostly from countries where civic space is more open. This outside support keeps a great deal of work alive, but it's fragile. It's mostly temporary, tied to donor categories that sit awkwardly with collectives and artistic responses, and wary of art seen as too political or too radical. Much support arrives only once artists have



been forced to leave, while help to keep working safely at home is much harder to find.

Regimes that force artists out often find their sharpest critics working from abroad. Exile produces the most confrontational artivism in our database, and much of the denunciation visible in countries where civic space is open is aimed at countries where it's closed. In exile, the work depends on host countries being willing to protect artists and on finding ways to reach audiences back home. Distance can bring some safety, but it cuts some artists off from their audiences. And there's no guarantee repression won't follow them across borders, with acts of **transnational repression** against artivists or targeting families they've left behind.

Art rarely achieves change on its own, and artivists know it. Policy victories in particular typically come where artivists work alongside civil society advocates, experts and lawyers. For civil society organisations, the lesson is to involve artists from the start of a strategy, as partners whose work opens doors that advocacy, litigation and mobilisation can go through. The impacts artivists claim most confidently, on how people see themselves and how the public talks about an issue, are the hardest to measure, which puts artivism at a disadvantage with funders that want numbers. Yet they're also the ones that will sustain civil society through hard times.

Artivists will keep doing their work no matter what. Whether they do so alone, and at an unacceptable cost, depends on whether civil society organisations, funders, governments and international institutions stand with them and work alongside them.



OUR CALLS FOR ACTION



- Civil society organisations must work with artists as partners, and combine creative work with advocacy, litigation and mobilisation, since art rarely brings change on its own.
- Civil society organisations, and anyone seeking to amplify work made where civic space is restricted, must adopt a do-no-harm approach that puts the safety of artists and participants ahead of visibility.
- Civil society organisations must pay artists fairly, share decision-making with them and the communities they work with, and respect their ownership of their work.



- Funders must provide long-term, flexible and core support to artivists working in restricted civic spaces and in exile, and cover legal and security costs.
- Funders must support the independent spaces and networks that keep artivism going where civic space is restricted, alongside programmes that relocate artists, and support unregistered collectives.
- Funders must accept qualitative and participatory forms of evidence, such as practitioners' reflections, in place of output metrics that can't capture changes in debate, resilience, solidarity and trust.
- Funders and cultural institutions must be bolder. They must back work that challenges those in power and stand by artivists when governments object, rather than withdraw support for fear of upsetting them.



- Governments must respect and protect artistic freedoms, repeal laws used to criminalise artistic expression and end the censorship, harassment and prosecution of artists.
- Governments must stop portraying civil society as foreign, disloyal or disruptive, and recognise artists and cultural workers as part of civil society.
- Governments and city authorities in countries where civic space is relatively open must expand residencies, relocation programmes and visas for artists at risk, and act against reprisals targeting exiled artists and people who work with them at home.



- International and regional human rights institutions must systematically document violations of artistic freedoms and raise them in country reviews. They must make room in their processes for the testimony artivists produce.

CONNECT WITH US

civicus.org

lens.civicus.org

info@civicus.org

@CIVICUSalliance

/CIVICUS

@CIVICUSalliance

HEADQUARTERS
25 Owl Street, 6th Floor
Johannesburg, 2092
South Africa
Tel: +27 (0)11 833 5959
Fax: +27 (0)11 833 7997

UN HUB: NEW YORK
We Work
450 Lexington Avenue
New York, NY, 10017
United States

UN HUB: GENEVA
11 Avenue de la Paix
Geneva, CH-1202
Switzerland
Tel: +41 (0)22 733 3435