

Lifestyle & Culture

Art and activism: a new form of action



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The fact that protests have become so frequent this last year is justly important. A number of protesters took to the streets to show their power. Topics such as the political turmoil and the environment have been on top of the agenda.

Apart from the usual Facebook meme, a comic or illustration, arts in Malta have kept quiet which does not compare to what has been done globally so far to tackle these issues. Climate change, for example, has been discussed and interpreted by multiple international artists to raise awareness and visually show the impact humans have had on climate. Some artists have taken it upon themselves to become activists, hoping to acknowledge what is happening in their art.

One movement comes to mind when discussing this ever-growing topic – activist art. This term seems newer to the art world but has been around for quite some time. The Tate institutions that have declared a climate emergency only last June describe environmental art as being at the forefront of addressing social and political issues that involve the natural and urban environment. On the other hand, activist art is described as art describing the grounded act of “doing”, addressing political or social issues.

These types of arts work to empower the individual to do something and it is generally worked within a public space so that artists can work closely with communities to generate the works. One form of art acknowledges, the other form of art acts on what is necessary.

Activism in art started quite early on in the 20th century, culminating in recent years as the world seems to be waking up to various issues that threaten humankind. Ai Wei Wei, a Chinese artist is prolifically known for his activism nowadays. At the moment, his team of researchers are documenting the demonstrations that have taken Hong Kong by storm and he is using social media to show to what extent these protests are escalating. He is using his influence as an artist to bring awareness to these protests which are a result of an extradition bill that send people to China to face trial.

Banksy can also be considered as an activist making waves through his art. His most infamous work that took the art world by storm was the shredding of one of his popular images, the Girl with balloon. As the hammer falls in a Sotheby's auction for it over a £1 million price tag, a shredder is activated and the whole image is almost



Breathe in – Breathe out. Photo: Bozica Milojevic



Photo: Andreas Mares, Zugvogel

gone. However, the shredder malfunctions and a quarter of the image is “saved”. Although his stunt isn't necessarily understood, some articles claim that this was done to mock the exuberant behaviours encountered within auction houses and the enormous price on art. Banksy recently published a video on his Instagram dealing with the issue of homelessness in various parts of the world. A homeless man is simply taking a sip of water, fixing himself to sleep on a bench for another cold night. What Banksy does to simply drive the point home, is paint two reindeers taking off as if this man is Santa on a sleigh. An ode to a holiday that nowadays, unfortunately, is rarely celebrated for its meaning but rather drowning in consumerism.

Other artists are being creative and making waves through different art forms. Jeff Hong, an

artist currently based in New York City uses notable cartoon characters to create imagery that is true to situations happening now. Hong tackles poverty, consumerism, pollution, animal testing and many other topics. Characters include Winnie the Pooh looking on deforestation, Elsa set on a melting ice cap and Ariel soaked in oil struggling on a sandy beach. You might think that this form of art is humorous, but it somewhat leaves you thinking about different circumstances.

The Venice Biennale, on the other hand, has seen a flood of pavilions focusing on climate change and the crisis that the globe is facing consequently. Acqua Alta has prominently featured in an installation by Tomás Saraceno. His works in this pavilion complemented each other – one focused on greenhouse gases in forms of clouds that move to a choreography of

tides and weather which would suggest an ideal post-fossil-fuel world. Saraceno also installed a sound installation with the sound of the siren that alerts Venice residents of high water. This play with visual and sound made climate change an element of debate and whether humans should respond to the predicament that they have found themselves in. Ironically enough, the Venice Biennale had to close its doors after flooding hit an all-time high, breaking records.

Marina Abramović also made an appearance with a virtual reality piece entitled Rising. In this VR experience, visitors are left helpless as large waves from a falling glacier engulf them. The artist is then seen through a digital double submerged in a tank of water looking on at the visitor. Protests have become a way for people to share their dismay for the effect certain events are having on the environment. Protests

from groups, for example, started to target institutions that are funded by oil and gas companies. Greenpeace targeted the Victoria and Albert Museum in England after the opening of an exhibition titled The future starts here. The latter was sponsored by Volkswagen. Greenpeace's response was to dismantle a VW Golf car reiterating that “the future doesn't start here”. This action highlighted components within the car that contribute to pollution.

So, what can Maltese artists do in the wake of such turmoil? What is their role? Should they become activists and highlight issues that our island is going through or stay passive while international artists dominate this scene? Is the new artistic generation tackling these issues? Leanne Lewis, a graduate from the Master of Art in Fine Arts dealt with nature and its destruction with Diaphanous. This interactive installation consisted of four hanging sheers of printed see-through chiffon. The latter represented a re-interpretation of a personal environment showcasing trees and their growth rather than their disintegration.

The APS Mdina Cathedral Contemporary Art Biennale, under the artistic direction of Giuseppe Schembri Bonaci, now open to the public, is dealing with mass appropriation and destruction of habitats, which are a reality of our modern surroundings. Maltese and international artists have worked with digital media to create digital artworks that will surely spark debate but also impose awareness. It also questions the artist on how art can be used to confront these issues while keeping in mind its role in the conflict between materiality and nature.

For more information visit www.mdinabiennale.com