"ART IS NOTHING IF YOU DON'T REACH EVERY SEGMENT OF THE PEOPLE."

—KEITH HARING

WHY ART MATTERS IN SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

Most art that is created in protest will not be acquired by museums, nor is this usually the goal of activists and artists working together. Most often, we aim to reflect and respond to the immediate causes that are grounded in our social movements. And whether used in a march, a social media campaign or as guerrilla art in a public space, protest art helps social movements inform the public of issues, challenge the status quo, convey collective goals and messaging, imagine a vision of change and persuade others to take action.

Informing the Public

When used in public spaces, protest art serves as a mighty tool to help people learn about social issues. As an example, *Chalked Unarmed* was a guerrilla art series by public performance artist and *Mirror Casket* collaborator Mallory Nezam. The project invited citizen collaborators to create chalk outlines, like police outlines of murder victims, on pavements across their communities. Each outline was filled with the name, date and location of a person who had been murdered by a police officer.

Making Messages Visible

In protests across the globe, people tend to write and illustrate their calls to action on cardboard, posters or banners. At marches, where it can be hard for target audiences to hear each individual's voice, signage allows each person's message to be seen, and the results are often full of creativity and passion.

Imagining a Vision for Change

Protest art effectively helps people develop a language and create a vision for how outcomes in a community can be better. While projects like the *Mirror Casket* challenge viewers to look inward to see themselves differently and empathise with those whose lives have been lost, other works may propel people forward to imagine a new reality.

Influencing Action

Efforts like Decolonise This Place and Theatre of the Oppressed use performances, flash mobs and "spect-acting" (whereby a member of the audience also becomes part of the performance) to engage with people across the world and explore how justice and equality can become reality. Each experience that the artists facilitate is directly tied to demands for organizations and government leaders to change a policy, boycott unjust spaces, disinvest from harmful companies or stop violent or inequitable public actions. For example, Theatre of the Oppressed ran a performance in 2016 entitled *The Housing Circus*, based on the real life experiences of different individuals trying to receive housing benefits. Told from the perspective of LGBTQ+ individuals and war veterans living in New York City, Theatre of the Oppressed used this performance to suggest policy changes.

Challenging the Status Quo

One of the common impacts of protest art is to push against the norms and rules of society. Artists like Elizabeth Vega, Ai Weiwei, Banksy and others have mastered using art as dissent. Such works often take existing materials and cultural artefacts and re-purpose them, or they might remix messages from advertisements, buildings, monuments, news articles or political documents in ways that point to their hypocrisy, outdated messages or other flaws.



TRY THIS:

1. Write a list of all the social issues that you know about. From your list, circle two or three that matter most to you. Brainstorm how art might be used to protest your selected issues as well as how art might help spark solutions to address them.

2. Organise an artivist team around a cause you care about. One of the arts of protesting is to work in community and collaboration with others in order to raise your voices around a social cause. Who among your friends or family can you partner with to create art together? Who within your community has created protest art before? Make a list of people you know and reach out to them to share your ideas.

3. Create a protest sign. Write or draw a sketch of what your sign will say. Then gather materials around your home like markers and cardboard to create your sign.

4. Use everyday materials like boxes to build a sculpture that can be carried in marches, installed at different sites or used in public to draw attention to a social issue.



AN ARTIST'S DUTY AS FAR AS I'M CONCERNED IS TO REFLECT THE TIMES...

Nina Simone

02 WHAT EXACTLY IS PROTEST ART?

How I First Encountered Protest Art

Before I co-created works like the *Mirror Casket*, my understanding of protest art had come from artefacts I saw in my hometown's civil rights museum. I spent my childhood in rural Mississippi, and then my family moved to Memphis, Tennessee, which is where Dr Martin Luther King Jr was assassinated in 1968 by a White supremacist, James Earl Ray, on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel. The Lorraine Motel was transformed into the National Civil Rights Museum in 1991 to memorialise the scene of Dr. King's murder and honour the work of the civil rights movement of the 1960s.

Dr. King had been in Memphis to speak in support of sanitation workers who were striking for fair wages and safer working conditions after two waste handlers were killed by a malfunctioning dustbin lorry. One of the works of art that became iconic of the strikes and labour marches was the 'I Am a Man' poster, which was the brainchild of activists and union officials. After the riots and protests that erupted nationwide following Dr. King's death, 'I Am a Man' posters continued to be used alongside posters that read 'Honour King: End Racism!' These posters helped urge people to see the humanity and dignity of Black Americans.

Simultaneously, numerous social movements were happening in the United States and across the world, including the student movement, the anti–Vietnam War movement, the women's movement, the gay rights movement and the environmental movement. Extending through the 1980s and into the 2000s, uprisings like the Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street and other cultural revolutions continued across the world, and protest art was front and centre as an anchoring device for messaging and movement building. This chapter will take a look at some of these protests and the art they generated in more detail.



SYMBOLISM

Protest art often makes use of symbols, which can quickly convey powerful meaning.

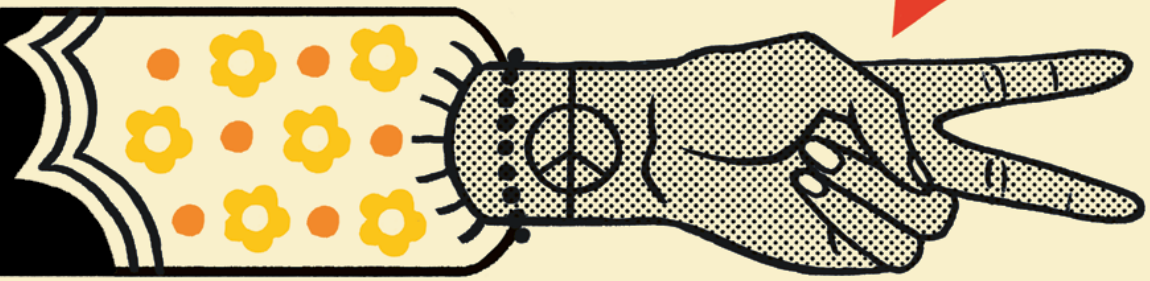
Paper Cranes

In Japan, it is believed that someone who folds 1,000 origami cranes will be granted a wish. In 1945, two-year-old Sadako Sasaki was in the vicinity of the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima. She suffered long-term effects from that exposure, including developing leukaemia. Before she died at the age of 12, Sadako folded more than 1,000 cranes, and the paper crane went on to become a symbol of peace.



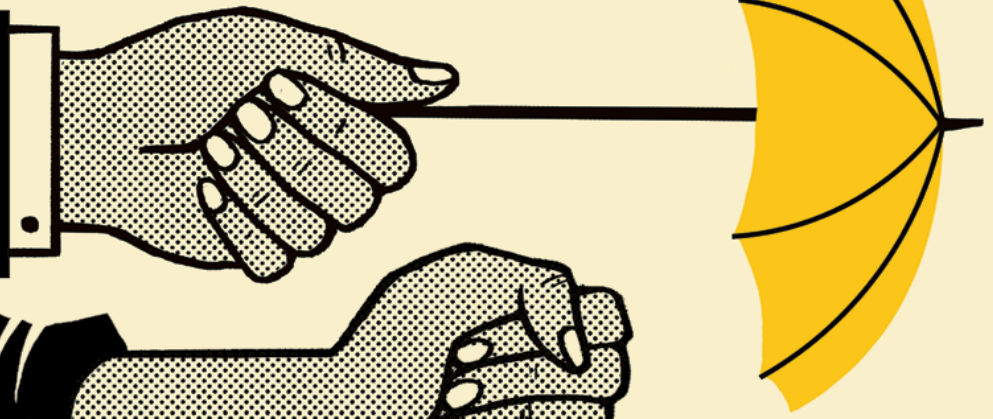
The Peace Sign

The peace sign was created by the British artist Gerald Holtom in 1958 as the logo for a campaign for nuclear disarmament in the UK. It has since become an iconic symbol of calls for peace.



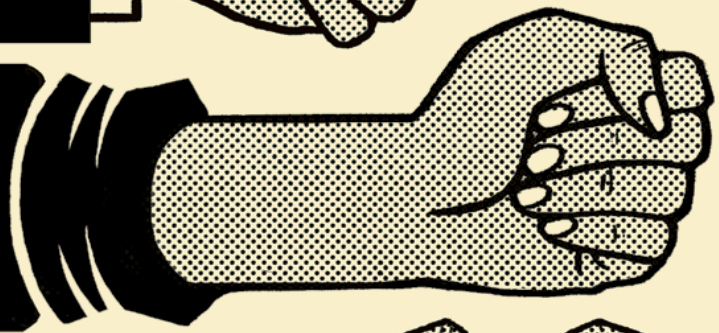
Umbrellas

During protests for democracy in Hong Kong in 2014, activists used umbrellas as shields against tear gas and other aggressions by the police. The umbrellas came to symbolize the protests and gave the movement its name (read more on pages 52–53).



The Clenched Fist

The image of an upraised clenched fist is a powerful symbol of protest and resistance. Some of its first uses were by labour unions in the early 1900s, before it grew in popularity and became a symbol of many causes, including Black Power, the anti-apartheid movement and the feminist movement.



The Rainbow

The rainbow is the most iconic symbol of the LGBTQ+ movement. It represents diversity, acceptance and the spectrum of human sexualities and genders.



COLOUR

Colour is an essential aspect of any visual artwork. Different colours tend to evoke different moods, energies or feelings and protest art has utilised these properties to gain attention, support content and drive action.

The Umbrella Movement – Hong Kong

Yellow

Happiness, positivity, joy and warmth all come to mind when we think of the colour yellow. However, it can also represent sickness, caution and social ills.





Orange

The colour orange can depict a range of concepts and emotions – from joy, fun and creativity to health, stimulation, irritation and caution.

Orange Revolution – Ukraine

LGBTQ+ movement – Universal

Purple

Historically, purple dye was very expensive and difficult to source, so the colour tended to be reserved for royalty. In modern times, purple is associated with courage, ambition, wisdom, peace and relaxation, as well as the LGBTQ+ movement.

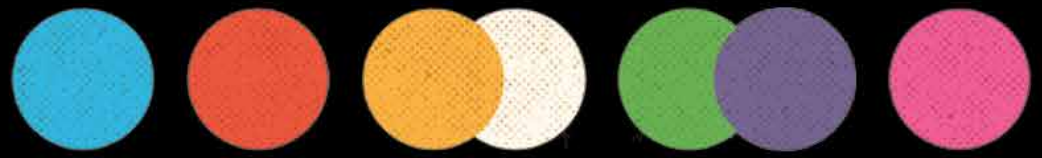




Black

Black can connote a wide range of qualities, from mystery and darkness to despair, strength and sophistication. Because black was one of the first colours used in art, its versatility is boundless and timeless – from the charcoal that prehistoric artists used to draw to the felt pens, paints and digital prints found in protests around the world.

Black Panther movement – US



Period poverty – UK/US

Pink

Bright-pink pigments have been found in prehistoric shale in the Sahara, thought to be from ancient organisms. Pink is sometimes associated with the feminine and has been used in the fights against period poverty. Animal rights activists have also used pink in protests against meat eating.



Women's suffrage – UK/US





Green

Green is one of the oldest and most common hues in nature as well as in art. It can represent money, success, freshness, harmony, growth, illness, decay and more.

Abortion rights – Argentina

Indigo Revolt – India

Blue

Blue is one of the most popular hues used across contemporary societies. It is the colour of the two largest features of nature – the sky and water – but different pigments such as YInMn are still being discovered to this day.





Red

Red can represent passion, love, life, anger, erotica, fire, power and sacrifice. Because of its versatility, red was one of the first colours to be broken down into different shades and used in art.

Carnation Revolution – Portugal

White

White often represents purity, innocence, safety, cleanliness, life and death. White paint made from lead, which is highly toxic, was used by artists for hundreds of years before it was banned in the late twentieth century.

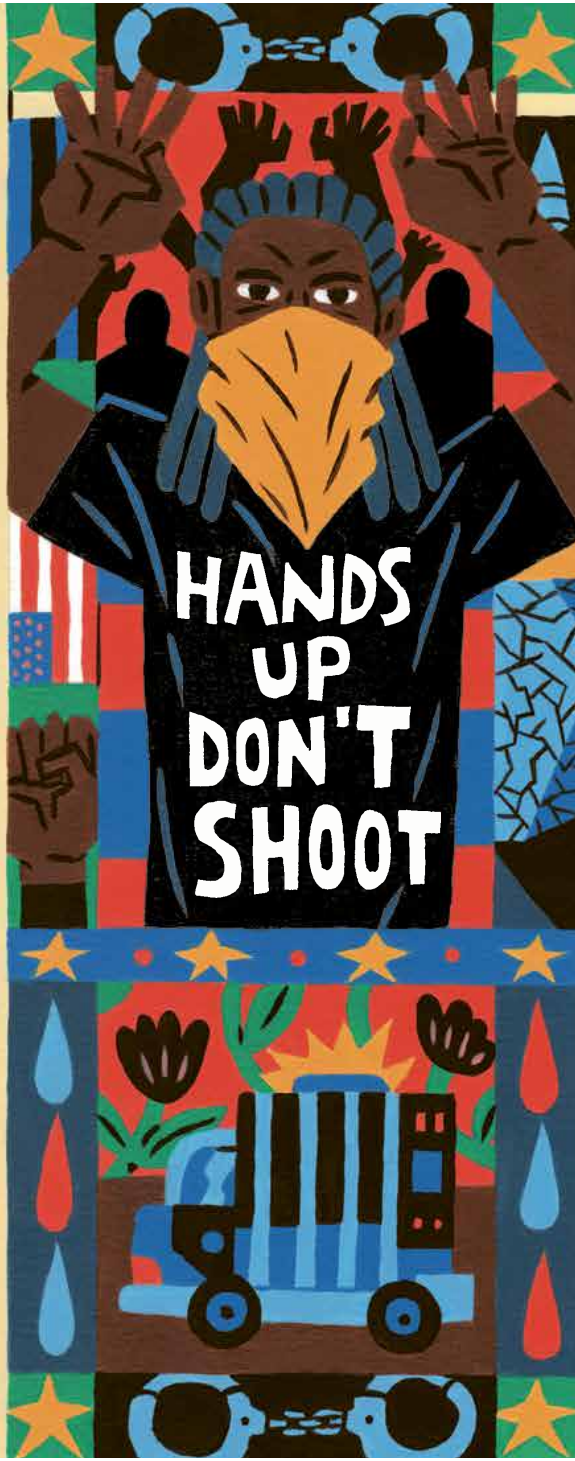
03 YOUTH LEADERSHIP AND PROTEST ART AROUND THE WORLD

A VISIT TO SOUTH AFRICA

I got the chance to visit the home of former South African president Nelson Mandela during a solo adventure to Africa a few years ago. Upon visiting the Apartheid Museum, which chronicles the history of ending apartheid rule in the nation, I was struck by the ways that art and graphics had influenced the social movement, and also by the stories of youth leadership that had propelled the nation toward freedom. Having witnessed the vision and power of youth voices first-hand at the Ferguson Uprising, this visit made me want to learn more about how young people worldwide have led social movements.









TRY THIS:

1. Organise a flash mob.
Gather friends to join you to create a dance, skit or theatrical performance in public. (Be sure not to do anything that would get you in trouble).

2. Create a unique name and symbol for your cause. Research symbols that have been used to represent protests and social movements. Sketch and design a symbol that relates to your social cause and conveys what you stand for. Explore adding colours to the symbol that represent its themes and values.

3. Wear your cause.
Fashion can be an easy form of artistic expression to wear to protests and in public. Paint a T-shirt with a protest message that shares your vision for positive change.

'THE ROLE OF THE ARTIST IS THAT OF A SOLDIER OF THE REVOLUTION'.

DIEGO RIVERA