

## Art is slippery: 6 ways you can use it to build peace

By Jacob Lefton 12 February 2015



An artist works on a Ladakhi painting. Photo by: Kiran Jonnalagadda

There is Picasso's legendary reply (<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2005/jan/08/highereducation.news>) to a German officer visiting his studio in occupied Paris: "Did you do this?" (indicating a photo of Guernica). "No, you did."

There is nothing new about socially engaged art. Art intent on affecting positive cultural change has a strong and vibrant history, and artists have often been at the forefront of adopting new technologies to explore that expression. Now, technologist peace builders are turning their attention to the burgeoning wealth of knowledge that artists are amassing about the uses of democratized technology ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Democratization\\_of\\_technology](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Democratization_of_technology)) and interconnected tools.

Peace builders eager to engage artists and cultural workers who exist both in and outside of the technological landscape will find myriad examples ([http://culturalpolitics.net/social\\_movements/art](http://culturalpolitics.net/social_movements/art)) of projects (<http://www.creativityworks.org.uk/>) to learn from and discussions to read (<http://www.e-flux.com/journal/on-art-activism/>).

In the handbook *Education for Socially Engaged Art: Materials and Techniques* (<http://pablohelguera.net/2011/11/education-for-socially-engaged-art-2011>), Pablo Helguera writes, "SEA is a hybrid, multi-disciplinary activity that exists somewhere between art and non-art, and its state may be permanently unresolved. SEA depends on actual — not imagined or hypothetical — social action."

So what are some practical ways we can use art to catalyze real action, to do what Helguera calls "move beyond the symbolic"?

### Build visual narrative and identity

Visual narrative and identity has long been important to political and social movements. Simple attention to detail goes a long way to making a memorable impact, and much of that work is done digitally by designers like Molly Mcleod (<http://mollymcleod.com/>) whose work

is focused on “saving good causes from bad design.”

## Bridge cultural, geographical and other barriers

Many projects attempt to bridge cultural, geographical and other barriers through collaboration by design. Their completion relies on interaction from their audience. Rafael Lozano-Hemmer’s interactive light installation, “Open Air ([http://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/28/opinion/art-and-technology.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/28/opinion/art-and-technology.html?_r=0))” was “at once a visible voice-mail system, rant line and a stage for free speech.”

## Record important history, stories and cultural heritage

Some projects record, archive and make accessible important history, stories and cultural heritage. “Moving Images (<http://www.movingimages.asia/>)” — produced by Groundviews, a Sri Lanka-based citizen journalism organization — is a multimedia portrayal of life in Sri Lanka after the conflict, while “Voices of Rwanda (<http://voicesofrwanda.org/>)” records and preserves the testimonies of survivors of the Rwandan Genocide.

## Expose and energize debate about the oppression and oppressors

Open Society Foundation’s project “Moving Walls 22 / Watching You, Watching Me” explores the intersection between photography and surveillance, with several of their photographers actually utilizing mass surveillance tools and techniques to produce their work

## Educate through visualization

Standouts in this area include several visualizations by Randall Munroe like “Money (<https://xkcd.com/980/>),” produced after the 2008 financial crash, and “Congress (<https://xkcd.com/1127/>),” a historiography of partisan affiliations of the U.S. Congress. Burak Arikan’s “Networks of Dispossession (<http://burak-arikan.com/networks-of-dispossession/>),” produced around the time of the Gezi protests in Turkey, use visualizations to show “collective data compiling and mapping on the relations of capital and power within urban transformation in Turkey.”

## Play and make games

A hot debate currently rages about the “artistic merit” of games, but there is no doubt that many computer and board games produced today address social and civic issues. This field is flourishing as organizations like Games for Peace (<http://gamesforpeace.org/>) and Games for Change (<http://www.gamesforchange.org/>) encourage and support an ever-increasing number of developers who create socially engaged works. The recent PeaceApp competition received more than 100 submissions of games built as platforms for cultural dialogue and conflict management. Games aren’t limited to the screen — the Toolbox for Education and Social Action’s (<http://www.toolboxford.org/project/co-opoly-the-game-of-cooperatives/>) Coopoly is a board game that teaches players the ins and outs of negotiating a cooperative business

“Don’t speak, point! ([http://www.lunchoverip.com/2007/04/dont\\_speak\\_poin.html](http://www.lunchoverip.com/2007/04/dont_speak_poin.html))”

So goes the credo of technologist Ethan Zuckerman (<http://www.media.mit.edu/people/ethanz/>) on the future of news media in the era of the citizen journalist. By that he meant the role of a traditional journalist is increasingly to be a facilitator, curator and enabler. So it is for an artist who hopes to create positive change and empowerment, whose goal is to work collaboratively with generally democratic ideals.

There are many more examples, and too many approaches to list them all. Art for peace will also play a key role at this year’s Build Peace (<http://howtobuildpeace.org/build-peace-art/>) in April where we’ll be exploring art and cultural works as tools for mediation, reconciliation and rebuilding.

As Deborah Fisher writes (<http://www.abladeofgrass.org/blog/ablog/2013/sep/26/bullshit/>), “[A]rt is slippery. It means a lot of different things to different people at different times, but it does have this one little bit of consistent, concrete magic. A great artwork embraces paradox, and contains multiple, sometimes contradictory, truths. I think it’s this quality that gives a great SEA project the ability to reframe, reshape, or for a moment redistribute power.”