

Activist art as a space for collective learning

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative survey study investigates the artistic and collective strategies used by contemporary activist art collectives to engage with social and political issues, and explores their relevance for arts education. Members from six collectives were interviewed, with the interview's analysis focusing on the themes of *activism*, *collectivity* and *pedagogy*. The findings reveal a variety of artistic strategies that blend artistic expression with political engagement. Key strategies include reframing, presenting alternatives, performative resistance, and DIY practices that foster critical making. Collective strategies center on shared authorship, inclusive collaboration, and the creation of safe and brave spaces for dialogue and co-creation. The study highlights the potential of activist art to transform arts education in an interdisciplinary, participatory practice. In this practice, students experiment with new forms of artistic interventions in public spaces, collaborate across differences, and engage art as a tool for inquiry, empowerment, and social change.

KEYWORDS

Activist art collectives;
Artistic strategies;
Collective strategies; Arts
education; Participation;
Embodied learning; Civic
engagement

Introduction

Artists have long used their work to critically reflect on society, drawing on a rich tradition of politically engaged art that includes Dada's anti-war provocations, Russian Constructivism's revolutionary ideals, Mexican Muralism's public education, and the Situationist International's critiques of consumer culture and capitalism. In recent decades, a new wave of artists and collectives use art as a tool for social change and activism, addressing issues such as racism, gender inequality, and environmental concerns.

Collectivo Lastesis, a feminist collective from Valparaíso, Chile, embodies this approach in their performance-based work. One of their most powerful pieces is *Un Violador en tu Camino* (A Rapist in Your Path), a bold street performance that challenges sexual violence, victim-blaming, and state complicity. Inspired by the research of Argentine

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feminist anthropologist Rita Segato, who examines the social roots of rape, the performance is both a raw protest and a call for systemic change. With its rhythmic chant, striking choreography, and clear message, it demands accountability and breaks the silence surrounding sexual violence. First performed in front of a police station in Valparaíso, Chile, the intervention has since then been performed in 200 cities worldwide, becoming a global symbol of feminist resistance.

Figure 1

Un Violador en tu Camino, Collectivo LASTESIS. Valparaíso, Chili (2019). Photo by LASTESIS



As this example illustrates, activist artists go beyond merely creating visual identities for protest groups or critiquing issues within art institutions. Instead, they prioritize agitation, protest, and subversion as active forms of artistic expression (Sholette, 2022), employing a heterogeneous range of strategies that encompass aesthetic, participatory, and pedagogical practices. Activist artists, for instance, have contributed to and participated in social justice movements such as Occupy, Black Lives Matter, and Kick Out Zwarte Piet², by developing and sharing strategies for collective action, radical pedagogy, and performative street interventions (Dias Ramon & Snow, 2023). Through artistic forms and pedagogical strategies, they address pressing social issues, challenge political structures, and encourage audiences to view the world from new and critical perspectives (Emelife, 2022).

Their practice is fundamentally collective: activist artists often collaborate with political activists and local communities to foster social change through artistic interventions (Sholette, 2022). A key component of this work is its pedagogical dimension. Drawing on thinkers such as Paulo Freire (1970) and bell hooks (1995, 1998), these practices emphasize critical thinking, social engagement, and collective action. In doing so, they blur

² Kick Out Zwarte Piet is a Dutch social justice movement, founded by poet Jeffrey Afriyie and artists Raul Balai and Quinsy Dario, aimed at ending the Dutch blackface tradition of Black Pete (Zwarte Piet).

the boundaries between art, protest, pedagogy, and public discourse, raising fundamental questions about how to unite, act in solidarity, and resist collectively.

Existing scholarship on activist art has largely focused on its theoretical and discursive frameworks (e.g., Bishop, 2012; Groys, 2018; Kester, 2011; Thompson, 2015; Sholette, 2022; Steinbock et al., 2021; Vanhaesebrouck et al., 2011). Yet, as Eburne et al. (2018) note, the most impactful activist art is often “unarchived, moving from criticism to activism, performed on the ground, in the flesh, at the moment, and in direct relation to specific historical and social contexts” (p. 174). To my knowledge, there remains a lack of in-depth, context-specific research examining both how activist artists integrate artistic, collective, and pedagogical strategies to foster social change, and how these approaches might inform educational practices. This is remarkable, given current developments in the field, where arts education increasingly adopts a socially engaged role, particularly in the context of stimulating active citizenship. Yet there remains limited knowledge and expertise on how arts education can meaningfully undertake this task. While scholars such as Helguera (2011) and Heijnen (2015) have examined pedagogical strategies within socially engaged art, their work does not specifically address activist art and its collective dimensions. This article aims to fill that gap by examining how the practices of six activist art collectives can inform pedagogical models in arts education that foster active citizenship, critical creativity, and social engagement.

Before discussing the methodology and findings of this study, I will first examine the theoretical underpinnings of activist art through the following lenses: *art and activism*, *art and collectivity*, and *art and pedagogy*. These lenses are essential for my research, because they provide a framework for understanding activist art practices, collective methodologies, and the ways in which activist art fosters a different approach to learning. These lenses will also serve as the foundation for my analysis of the lived experiences of activist artists, allowing me to explore the practical impact of their practices, including their potential for arts education.

Theoretical framework

Art and activism – Public space as a creative space for political dissent and social action

At one level, activist art is a singular facet of the field of socially engaged and participatory art (Bishop, 2012). What sets it apart, however, is its clear focus on political protest and social activism, primarily occurring outside the conventional spaces and institutions of the art world (Groys, 2018). Or, as Dietachmair and Gielen (2017) point out, activist artists “step out of fiction, outside the walls of the black box theatre and white wall museum, to act in real life [...]” (p. 19).

Typically situated in public spaces, activist art engages communities through direct action and participatory practices, including forms of guerrilla communication such as adbusting, graffiti, and hacktivism (DeLaure, 2017; Himma, 2006). These unconventional strategies foster collective resistance and create spaces of mutual recognition by providing communities with means to speak, visualize, and publicly express opinions (Dietachmair & Gielen, 2017; Moralli et al., 2021). However, in today’s media-saturated world, where digital platforms dominate public discourse, traditional protest methods have diminished in

visibility and impact. As Duncombe and Lambert (2021) argue, activist art must therefore evolve toward more innovative, digitally mediated forms capable of capturing global attention and engaging dispersed audiences. Consequently, public space should be understood as both physical and digital, enclosing the interconnected fields in which contemporary activist art operates.

Through creative forms of political dissent and social action, activist art provokes emotional and intellectual responses that challenge dominant narratives and social norms (Bishop, 2012; Duncombe & Lambert, 2021; hooks, 1995; Rancière, 2004). Rather than just offering concrete solutions, it seeks to spark political imagination by introducing alternative forms and experiences that disrupt the existing order (Steinbock et al., 2021). A criticism, however, is that this focus on symbolic intervention raises doubts about its social impact and the extent to which it moves beyond generating awareness. Duncombe and Lambert (2021) argue that relying on awareness as a catalyst for change is increasingly insufficient in an information-saturated world where visibility rarely translates into transformation. The challenge for activist art is therefore to bridge the gap between symbolic disruption and tangible impact.

A further criticism concerns the assumption of the artworld that activist art is inherently progressive, since similar aesthetic strategies and emotional appeals can be appropriated by radical or far-right movements. This underscores the need to examine whose values and political aims are being advanced, raising important ethical and definitional questions about the boundaries and responsibilities of artistic activism.

As arts education increasingly embraces a socially engaged role, especially in the context of stimulating active citizenship, these tensions carry significant pedagogical implications. Engaging students (both future artists and future art educators) with the strategies and limitations of activist art introduces a different approach to learning, one that encourages critical reflection on meaningful engagement and civic participation. By exploring ethical dilemmas, political stakes, and practical challenges, students can move beyond symbolic acts to consider how collective artistic strategies might inspire action and cultivate critical creativity within arts education.

Art and collectivity – Collective organization, critical thinking and making together

Collectivity is a core principle in activist art collectives, where collaboration and shared responsibility drive both creative and political actions. Activist art fosters solidarity, not through hierarchical structures, but through a collective commitment to mutual support and reciprocity (Montgomery & bergman, 2017). Through collective action, activist artists create environments where individuals can unite around common causes, embrace diverse perspectives, amplify voices, and strengthen their collective impact.

An interesting aspect of working collectively is that the messy, sometimes inefficient ways in which collectives organize and create, offer space for alternative forms of resistance: rather than adhering to the belief that everything must be quick and efficient, collectives embrace the chaos, imperfection, and flexibility that are needed in times of uncertainty, which can be an empowering approach (Groten, 2022), although it occasionally slows down practical decision-making.

Working collectively goes, however, beyond reorganizing creative processes; it also reshapes artists' identities, shifting them from individual autonomy toward experimental collaboration (Wesseling & Cramer, 2022). This shift challenges traditional notions of authorship, particularly in the global North, where artistic value is often tied to the individual artist. Collaborative activist art practices, which frequently involve multiple participants or entire communities, therefore raise critical questions about ownership: who can claim authorship of the work – the individual artist, the collective, or the community (Bourriaud, 1998; Kester, 2004)?

Collectivity also reconfigures working methods. Artists collaborating with non-artists often take on hybrid roles – such as researcher, facilitator, or agitator – thereby blurring the boundaries between art, research, and activism (Wesseling & Cramer, 2022). This resonates with Ratto's (2011) notion of *critical making*, which integrates conceptual reflection with embodied, community-oriented practices. Critical making thus redefines artistic production by challenging the conventional separation between theory and practice, or between conceptual thought and material creation, divisions that have long structured artistic work in the Global North (Cramer, 2022).

Through collaborative making processes, activist art practices can create a space for critical exploration and reimagining of social issues, incorporating diverse perspectives drawn from the participants' varied experiences and areas of expertise. In this context, creation serves as a tool for social commentary and activism. This approach might offer a new perspective on education, where students can collectively explore and discuss their political and social views through artistic production. Also, the multidisciplinary nature of activist collectives aligns well with education that seeks to embed art into other disciplines within the school curriculum, which often requires collaboration on thematic projects.

Art and pedagogy – Art as a method for understanding and engaging with the world

Elements of activist art collectives, such as their focus on social change, presence in public space, collective action, pedagogy, and critical making can offer valuable insights for education that encourages students' understanding and engaging with the world. Helguera (2011) emphasizes this pedagogical aspect, arguing that socially engaged art fosters critical thinking and participation by involving audiences as co-creators rather than passive observers. This perspective aligns with the “educational turn” in contemporary art (Rogoff, 2010), an approach grounded in Dewey's experiential philosophy of art that prioritizes process, dialogue, and contextual engagement over the production of finished objects (Dewey, 1934). It also reflects the idea of “education as art”, which views teaching and learning as inherently creative and transformative acts, similar to artistic practice (Heijnen & Bremmer, 2020). Moreover, Lucero (2011), drawing on pedagogical theories of Dewey, Freire, and hooks, underscores how socially engaged art supports progressive, student-centered learning by promoting critical thought, personal voice, and real-world relevance. It also invites educators to experiment with underutilized, participatory learning methods (Bremmer et al., 2021).

Specifically focused on activist art pedagogy, Dewhurst (2014) and Desai (2017) emphasize its potential to empower students as active participants in social and political transformation. In this context, activist art introduces a pedagogical approach that, while

building on principles of socially engaged and student-centered learning, emphasizes distinctive elements: collective, process-oriented, creation, active intervention in social and political contexts, and learning in public spaces. This shifts arts education away from a primary focus on technical skills or interpretation toward learning environments where students not only critically engage with the world but also actively intervene in it, exploring social issues and co-creating social and political meaning through artistic practice.

Methodology

Aim and research questions

This article aims to explore artistic and collective strategies of activist art collectives, as well as their (pedagogical) approaches to social and political issues, through the analysis of empirical data collected among six contemporary activist art collectives. The findings shall be used to inspire contemporary approaches to arts education that foster critical creativity and social engagement. In this study the following questions were addressed:

Which artistic and collective strategies do activist art collectives employ to address social and political issues? And: how can activist art practices inform contemporary approaches to arts education?

Research design

This study was set up as a qualitative survey study involving the perspective of six contemporary activist art collectives. A qualitative survey study was chosen for its ability to capture participants' experiences in rich, nuanced detail, revealing complexities often overlooked by large-scale surveys. The interview data were complemented by contextual information drawn from field documents, including art journals, reviews, and artists' websites, to provide a more comprehensive analysis. Furthermore, one or two participants from each collective took part in a semi-structured interview, in total eight participants. Although this small number is a limitation, the use of these in-depth interviews enhances transferability by enabling readers to relate the findings to their own experiences and contexts, and to draw insights that are personally meaningful or relevant (Stahl & King, 2020).

Sampling method

I applied purposive sampling to choose the collectives based on "expectations about their information content" (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 230). Drawing on the theoretical framework, selection criteria were designed, based on the frameworks' emphasis on activist art as a socially and politically responsive practice, rooted in public space and collective action. Accordingly, participants were selected if their practices: (1) address contemporary social and political issues, reflecting the critical and interventionist nature of activist art; (2) seek visibility and impact in public space, engaging audiences beyond conventional art institutions; (3) act as pedagogical spaces for political dissent and collective action, encouraging both critical thinking and critical making. These criteria ensured that the cases analyzed exemplify the dimensions highlighted in the literature and allow for a

theoretically informed exploration of how activist strategies can inspire pedagogical practice.

Two different strategies were used to select the six practices in this study. To prevent a Eurocentric bias, I included practices of artists who are located in Indonesia and Kenya. Array Collective (1), Todo por la Praxis (2) and PAWA 254 (3) were selected on the basis of recent publications about contemporary activist art: *Art Monthly* (Laws, 2022), *The Urban Activist* (Molina, 2022) and *The Journal of Law, Social Justice & Global Development* (Halliday, 2019). Taring Padi (4), Tools for Action (5) and Fossil Free Culture Netherlands (6) were selected via my personal network of colleagues, artists, and curators.

I contacted the various collectives and asked them if I could interview one person of their collective to speak on its behalf. Therefore, in the analysis, I refer to the collectives as a whole rather than to individual participants.

Practice descriptions

I will briefly describe each of the participating collectives, using information gathered from the artists' websites and art journals.

Fossil Free Culture Netherlands

Fossil Free Culture Netherlands (FFCNL) is a collective of artists, activists, and researchers working at the intersection of art and climate activism. FFCNL engages in Strategic Artistic Disobedience, a combination of activist strategies and art. Their founding goal is to end oil and gas sponsorship of public cultural institutions in the Netherlands, and more broadly, to critically erode social license for the fossil fuel industry. The participant for the interview was co-founder Frida Daniela Paes Leao.

Figure 2

FFCNL performance Keep Dancing at Nemo Science Museum, 2020. Photo by Anisa Xhomaqi.

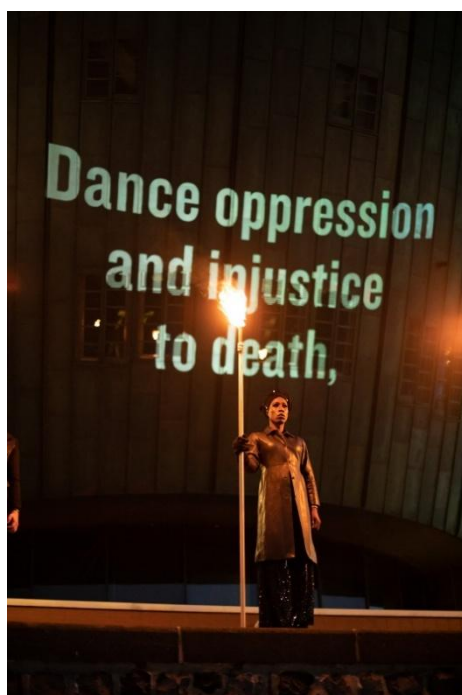


Figure 3

FFCNL intervention This is the Sound of Your World Collapsing at Groninger Museum, 2022. Photo by Laura Ponchel.



Tools for Action

Founded by Bambí Benkö in 2012, Tools for Action (Rotterdam, the Netherlands) quickly became a network of artists, activists, tinkerers and theoreticians. They offer skill-share workshops in which attendees learn how to create inflatable sculptures and use them in political actions, combining unconventional aesthetics with political engagement. Through this approach, Tools for Action experiments with innovative forms of collective action. Currently, their practice focuses on educational programs and how to engage future generations in political action. The participant for the interview was founder Bambí Benkö.

Figure 4

Mirror Barricade (Dortmund, 2016). Tools for Action & Theatre of Dortmund i.c.w. Schools against Racism. Photos by Bambí Benkö.



Taring Padi

Taring Padi is an art collective based in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, that uses art as a tool for political expression and education. Taring Padi was founded in 1998 by a group of art students and activists in response to the Indonesian socio-political upheavals during the

reformation era and the fall of Suharto. As such, Taring Padi's artistic practice is always part of socio-political actions and expressions of solidarity with a wide range of communities. Banners, woodcut posters, and life-sized cardboard puppets are Taring Padi's artistic tools to agitate, educate and organize themselves, their community, and the diverse solidarity actions they are involved in. The participants for the interview were members Alexander Supartono and Ladija.

Figure 5

Exhibition Tanah Merdeka (liberated land) in Framer Framed (2023) by Taring Padi. Photos by Maarten Nauw.



Arra y Collective

Array Collective is a group of 11 individual artists based in Belfast, Northern Ireland, who come together to create collaborative actions in response to the sociopolitical issues affecting their country, such as abortion rights, queer rights, anti-gentrification, Irish language rights, and environmental rights. Their collective works on various projects – such as protests, rallies, workshops, exhibitions and events – are often organized in collaboration with local communities. The participant for the interview was member Emma Campbell.

Figure 6

The Druithaib's Ball (2021), Array Collective. Photo by Tom Flanagan c/o Galway Arts Centre.



Figure 7

Galway Pride Parade, Array Collective (2021). Photo by Tom Flanagan c/o Galway Arts Centre.



PAWA 254

In 2011, photographer-turned-activist Boniface Mwangi, founded PAWA 254 in Nairobi, Kenya's capital. The name PAWA 254 combines Kiswahili slang for power (PAWA) with Kenya's international dialing code (+254). Mwangi's vision for PAWA 254 was to empower activists, creatives, and citizens to drive social change by merging art with activism. Members of PAWA 254 played an active role in Kenya's Occupy Parliament and Gen Z protests (June-August 2024). They took part in the demonstrations, hosted radio shows and podcasts to raise awareness, and organized an exhibition to showcase the work of activist artists involved in the movement. The participants for the interview were members Bernhard Karathe and James Kamau.

Figure 8

#RejectFinanceBill, PAWA 254 (Nairobi, Kenya). Photos by Wangui.



Todo por la Praxis

Todo por la Praxis (All for Praxis) is a Spanish collective whose main focus is the social function of art and direct action. Their objective is to use artistic practice as a catalyst for transformation, creating spaces and tools for critical reflection. Their practices include, for example, projects that develop and use counter-advertising or guerilla-style communication

to question the city model and its consequences, including gentrification, evictions, segregation, touristification, and social control. The participant for the interview was co-director Jo Muñoz.

Figure 9

“I did not come here to die.” Light projection as part of the project Migration is Forever. Photo courtesy of Todo por la Praxis (2022).



Figure 10

“No one told me what it meant to migrate.” Light projection as part of the project Migration is Forever. Photo courtesy of Todo por la Praxis (2022).



Research method: semi-structured interview

This research draws on qualitative, semi-structured interviews, as these allow the researcher to access individuals' attitudes and values in relation to particular topics (Silverman, 2013). Interviews work particularly well in tapping into the lived experience of participants, in this case, the activist artists (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018). Given the study's objectives, semi-structured interviews were selected as an appropriate method, providing the flexibility to capture artists' situated experiences while also facilitating a cross-analysis to identify recurring patterns.

The interview topics were primarily based on the research question and included, for example, the artistic and collective strategies for addressing contemporary social and

political issues. Additionally, I asked the participants about their perspectives on pedagogy. Examples of questions were: “What do you see as the potential strengths and limitations of using art as a medium for social and political change?”, “Can you define what collectivity means to you, both personally and professionally?”, and “What do you think is important to educate young people about social justice/activism?”

I executed the interviews between March and September 2024. Six participants of the activist art collectives were interviewed online using videoconference software. Two participants were interviewed on location in Nairobi. The interviews were voice-recorded and transcribed verbatim. All participants provided me with active consent prior to the interview.

Researcher positionality

As a white, female researcher with a left leaning orientation, I am aware that my own background and beliefs inevitably shape how I approach, interpret, and interact with the activist artists. My position aligns with many of the progressive ideals expressed within activist art, which may introduce potential biases in interpretation. Throughout the research process, I have sought to maintain reflexivity by critically examining my assumptions, being attentive to diverse perspectives within activism, and ensuring that participants’ voices remain central to the analysis.

Data analysis

Deductive thematic coding was applied to identify themes in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). During this process, the coding was mainly aided through a pre-existing thematic framework (Bremmer, 2015). The main themes of the pre-existing thematic framework for coding the interviews were: art and activism, art and collectivity, and art and pedagogy.

After deductive coding, I applied inductive coding within these main themes and clustered codes into subthemes based on their shared characteristics (Saldaña, 2009). Subthemes I found for the main theme “art and activism” were “art as a tool for political dissent”, “reimagining the form and language of protest”, “social impact”, and “balancing art and activism”; subthemes for the main theme “art and collectivity” were “building community” and “critical making”. Finally, for the main theme “art and pedagogy”, I found the subthemes “activist art as informal education” and “artist-educator hybridity”.

The findings section was sent to the participants for a member check to ascertain they were quoted in the right context. None of the participants requested that their quotes be altered or removed.

Findings

Art and activism: Public space as a creative space for political dissent and social action

In this paragraph, I will explore the artistic strategies of activist art collectives and their engagement with contemporary political and social issues in the public space.

Art as a tool for political dissent

The activist art collectives examined share a deep conviction that art and politics are intertwined, yet this belief manifests through diverse ideological orientations and strategies. For some, the boundary between artistic practice and political action is almost indistinguishable. FFCNL, for instance, maintains that it is the artist's duty to convey a powerful political message through their work. Their approach, known as *strategic artistic disobedience*, merges art with civil disobedience, as they argue that “they really empower each other [...] civil disobedience is a tool that we, as citizens, should use to increase our political influence [...] combined with art, it is even more powerful, because art touches your feelings and your deepest beliefs.” Similarly, Todo por la Praxis describes their artistic practice as an alternative strategy for transformation: “Art has the possibility to open a narrative field, to explore from other perspectives, and then introduce a critical perspective in a poetic way.” In contrast, PAWA 254 focuses primarily on raising critical awareness by informing citizens about governance and human rights in Kenya, emphasizing that “art is a universal language, which can send messages to general citizens about what is happening within the country.”

Collectively, these perspectives illustrate that, for these collectives, art functions not merely as a form of creative expression but as a political tool for resistance and social engagement. In doing so, their work blurs the boundaries between artistic practice and activism, generating new forms of artistic protest.

Reimagining the form and language of protest

Many of the artists express that their work is driven by a deep concern for the current state of the world. Throughout our conversations, an underlying sense of urgency becomes palpable, reflecting their commitment to addressing pressing social and political issues through art. In this context, artistic activism is perceived as a compelling alternative to more conventional forms of protest, making such protests more creative, more entertaining, or more powerful.

For Tools for Action, the emotional resonance of art plays a crucial role in driving social change, offering a different kind of political engagement. Where activism can be harsh and polarizing, artistic activism holds the potential to be more sensitive, or, as Tools for Action puts it: “art is all about reaching people in an emotional way.” Similarly, FFCNL believes that to truly shift mindsets and touch the core of human experience, one must tell stories and create imagery rather than aim for abrupt, radical action. “Aesthetic experiences make you kind of open and relaxed to receive whatever comes to you.” Todo por la Praxis also mentions the deeper reach of art. For them, art has the possibility to transform protests into a more complex, poetic, and therefore more attractive form of activism.

These aesthetic and affective strategies often intersect with practical, hands-on approaches. Taring Padi, for instance, employs banners, woodcut prints, and cardboard puppets to agitate, educate, and organize communities, transforming demonstrations into performative acts of political engagement. However, they deliberately avoid labeling their work as “art”, noting that “many people see art as something elitist, as something you see in a museum or gallery, not as part of their everyday life.” By reimagining Indonesia's shadow

puppets as accessible activist tools, they reposition art as an everyday practice of resistance and collective empowerment.

Another striking example of an activist tool used by Tools for Action during the pro-Palestine protests at the University of Amsterdam in May 2024 is the “book block”. Drawing inspiration from anti-austerity demonstrations in Italy, Dutch activists, including Tools for Action, crafted these protective shields from foam and cardboard, with each block displaying the title of a book related to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. As Tools for Actions explained: “With these book blocks, you arm yourself with knowledge, with books of resistance, turning the physical object into both a form of protection and into a pedagogy.” In this way, protest is reframed from a confrontational act into a pedagogical practice of collective learning.

Together, these practices illustrate how artistic activism reimagines the form and language of protest, by making it more creative, accessible, and emotionally resonant.

Social impact

For the collectives studied, achieving social impact is a central concern, with the primary aim frequently being to create tangible impact in the real world. However, this impact can take many different forms. For instance, PAWA 254 aims to start conversations about urgent social issues, such as government accountability, corruption and gender-based violence, through exhibitions, masterclasses, protests, podcasts, and radio. “We want to make such conversations cool among the young people”, says PAWA 254. As for impact, PAWA 254 has seen changes and different outcomes within the government and at the community level. “The community and even those groups of citizens who are in different places, have been able to understand about those issues through art.”

This collective impact is also exemplified by Array Collective’s campaigns for abortion decriminalization and equal marriage movements, where art played an important role in destigmatizing these issues. As Array Collective puts it:

“With art, you’re helping people to digest things in a different, more human-connected way. For example, by using humor, because with humor you align people in [...] not necessarily gentle, but in a way that connects us as humans, rather than, you know, with data or by dictate or anything.”

While many collectives view art as a powerful tool for social change, Todo por la Praxis remains more cautious about its direct impact, recognizing its role in raising awareness but questioning its capacity to transform reality. As they note, art puts important issues on the table and makes them visible, ideally sparking conversations among people who would otherwise never engage with such topics. Unfortunately, these are often the people who are already interested in their work, not “those people from far away” (Todo por la Praxis).

These varying perspectives indicate that while artistic activism holds great potential for fostering social change, its impact is often complex, indirect, and dependent on context, ranging from raising awareness to initiating tangible shifts in public discourse or policy.

Balancing art and activism

Many of the artists interviewed struggle to balance art and activism, navigating tensions between aesthetic expression and political action, as well as between autonomy and collectivity. Both Tools for Action and Taring Padi grapple with the tension between political goals and individual recognition, though they approach it in different ways. Tools for Action point out that the individualistic mindset and the artist's ego can be significant obstacles: while egos may play a role, as an activist, your focus is on the political goal. For them, "activism is much more selfless than art." As an artist, however, building credibility and visibility becomes more important. As a result, it can happen that a protest is hijacked for the art practice, as a form of extractivism, but also that credits are handled less carefully, whereby not everyone who participated is mentioned and the artist receives most of the credits.

More explicitly, Taring Padi rejects the traditional notion of art as a product of an individual genius, seeing it as tied to elitism and capitalism. Instead, they prioritize values like equity, diversity, and openness, producing art that is a collective endeavor rather than the work of a single artist. Tools for Action also struggled with this dilemma between political goals and individual recognition. For them, it is finding a balance between the two, because as an artist "you also have to be realistic, you have to survive." However, it is important to show sensitivity to all participants.

These reflections highlight the ongoing negotiation within activist art between personal ambition and collective purpose, illustrating how artists strive to balance visibility, integrity and political commitment.

Art and collectivity: Collective organization, critical thinking and making together*Building community*

For the majority of the collectives discussed, collectivity and community-building lie at the heart of both their artistic practice and activism. Collectives like FFCNL highlight that building community is not merely a strategic approach, but a direct challenge to the individualism maintained by capitalist society, because "you know, the individualistic mentality and mindset of our days are horrible." Similarly, Tools for Action sees collectivity as a "gateway to radical politics", believing that collaboration in artistic projects fosters solidarity and deepens political engagement. Working together on artistic projects can lay the groundwork for more direct, transformative actions – and, in some cases, even forge lifelong friendships (Tools for Action).

Building community is also a very important aspect of Taring Padi's practice, which originated within an activist community and continues to be supported by this community. On their website, Taring Padi describes their approach as being based on a non-hierarchical and inclusive structure, welcoming both new and longstanding members from different backgrounds. This inclusivity allows the collective to grow through a variety of perspectives and prevents the development of any form of exclusivity. As such, Taring Padi's approach is deeply participatory: through workshops, they empower communities (e.g., fishing and farmer communities) by teaching them how to create their own activist tools with simple

and accessible materials like cardboard, giving them the ability to take action independently, “so they do not need us anymore”.

Todo por la Praxis carries out many collaborative projects with different communities too. Just like at Taring Padi and Array Collective, these projects are based on particular problems that occur in the community, for instance, problems that arise with urban planning, such as evictions, demolition and gentrification. A key challenge for them is how to engage in state-supported projects without reinforcing the state’s agenda, while also remaining sensitive to the vulnerability of the communities they work with.

As artists, it is always complex to work from a position of privilege, especially when attempting to highlight issues related to class and politics in a territory under violation. In this context, the importance of artistic practice is clear – it must collaborate, assist, and denounce, without being condescending (Todo por la Praxis).

When it comes to collective strategies, Tools for Action is shifting its focus from political action and public assemblies to establishing a commune in Estonia, a space that offers practical, alternative solutions for collective living and resistance in response to social and political challenges. “In times of resource scarcity, increasing political and social tensions, and growing repression, it becomes essential to create “cracks in the system” – alternative, anarchic spaces where people can recharge, connect with like-minded individuals, and find refuge when facing persecution.” As part of this vision, Tools for Action is establishing a space for living, working, and dreaming together, aligned with principles of collective study and ecological sustainability.

Critical making

For Array Collective, working in a collective is all about bonding, sharing tasks, learning from each other, backing each other up, trust and fun. “The great things about Array are the camaraderie and the craic, as we say here [...] having a good laugh with each other [...] Propelling each other to keep making work, but also at the same time not taking ourselves too seriously [...]”. Likewise, Taring Padi mentions that working collectively also includes hanging out, as in eating, drinking, and dancing together, because it is very important to relax and enjoy, without the constant pressure of achieving goals: “From time to time we should free ourselves from this kind of rigid planning and just go by the flow” (Taring Padi). This mindset closely aligns with the concept of *lumbung*, the Indonesian term for a communal rice barn, which, in a conceptual sense, emphasizes building relationships grounded in values such as generosity, regeneration, and humor. As a practice, *lumbung* involves sharing resources, collective decision-making and celebrating, mirroring Taring Padi’s emphasis on joy, togetherness, and mutual care as important aspects of collective artistic work (Ruyters, 2023).

This relational approach also informs the dynamics within other collectives. For Tools for Action, being part of a collective means learning to listen and offer support to one another. Instead of asking “What do I need?”, you ask “How can I support the others?” Therefore, it is important to create both a safe and a brave space, in which members feel free to express their thoughts, without the fear of being attacked or excluded, even if they disagree. In this space, “you can challenge each other, but at the same time be intimate and familiar with each other” (Tools for Action). This dynamic not only fosters personal growth

but also expands your own practice as an artist. For instance, collaborating with artists from different disciplines challenges you to step outside your comfort zone and expand your creative boundaries. Or, as Array Collective puts it, “the collective creates an environment where you can be braver, funnier, and more experimental, than on your own.”

For FFCNL, working collectively is about sharing common concerns, amplifying social and political influence as a group, and offering mutual support and recognition. FFCNL can be described as “a marriage between activists and artists,” working within a horizontal structure that ensures everyone feels comfortable and validated. However, this horizontal approach can occasionally lead to delays, as the desire for input on every decision doesn’t always produce the best ideas. As a solution, FFCNL decided that while everyone should be able to voice their opinions, final decisions should be made by those most qualified in a given area. For instance, artists, with their experience in transforming ideas into art and creating the aesthetics of a performance, are better equipped to handle the creative aspects. On the other hand, activists, who tend to be more strategic and mobilization-oriented, possess a deeper understanding of organizing and political action. Therefore, recognizing and respecting each other’s expertise is essential: “To be humble and accept that the other person may have more knowledge than you in a certain area.”

Art and pedagogy: Art as a tool for understanding and engaging with the world

Activist art as informal education

The first thing that stands out if it comes to education is that several collectives (Taring Padi; PAWA 254; Tools for Action) describe their activist practice as a form of education. For instance, Taring Padi sees art as a tool for political education, particularly because such topics are often absent from Indonesia’s official state curriculum. Through their art, Taring Padi seeks to raise awareness and educate people about various political and social issues. The member of Taring Padi illustrates this, by saying that, for her, Taring Padi is a way to learn more about the political situation in Indonesia, since at her university they do not really talk about contemporary Indonesian politics. This corresponds with PAWA’s aim to stimulate critical thinking about political and social issues through art, by informal masterclasses and mentorship programs with and for artists, outside formal education: “The education system, the curriculum that is in place, favors the political elite. So, I would say, most of the awareness happens after you finish secondary level” (PAWA 254).

However, at times, there is a lack of understanding and goodwill, as not everyone grasps the significance of art. To address this, PAWA 254 prioritizes civic education and engagement: “We are trying as much as possible to educate the community about a certain art that is used to address a certain governance or human rights issue.” In this way, the impact of activist art transcends mere expression, actively representing communities and driving social change.

The above demonstrates that, through their pedagogical efforts, these collectives reach a wider audience beyond the art community. For instance, PAWA 254 has expanded its focus to digital activism, allowing them to engage not only urban artists and communities, but also young people in rural areas of Kenya. A similar shift is evident with Taring Padi. Since being awarded the title of best Indonesian art collective of the year, their

profile, or stigmatization as they call it, as a *left art collective*, seems to change. Nowadays, more students are visiting their studio, and their work is being shown at Islamic schools: “Young women in hijab, discussing our work in their class, that is unprecedented [...] that they start to accept this kind of visual style, this kind of iconography, that they study this [...] that encourages us as a collective to keep doing what we are doing.”

Artist-educator hybridity

Many of the collective members interviewed also work in education, blending their roles as activist artists and educators to inspire students and connect artistic practice with larger social issues. For instance, a member of Array Collective, who teaches at Belfast School of Art, emphasizes the importance of helping students recognize their potential impact beyond the classroom. Instead of focusing solely on personal issues, she encourages students to consider how their actions affect the broader community. Central to her teaching philosophy is collaboration, reflecting the interconnected nature of activist art, where no artist works in isolation. Whether collaborating with technicians, studio staff, social media teams, or fabricators, the creative process is always a collective effort: “And that is just a great tool for life in general, I think. Taking responsibility for things, chipping in, the world beyond the classroom [...] just take a little bit of the blinkers off, you know.”

For Tools for Action, the value of art activism in education lies in teaching students how to collectively impact society and understand various (artistic) ways of being effective. Likewise, FFCNL emphasizes the importance of learning students to create art in public spaces. By engaging with “ordinary citizens”, students learn how to make their artworks accessible, engaging, and meaningful for the society they live in. As FFCNL puts it, “it is very important to go into public space, you know, with an open mind, ready to speak out.”

Additionally, Todo por la Praxis highlights the pedagogical value of transforming mindsets, fostering critical thinking, and encouraging perspectives that challenge the status quo. They note that in recent years, it has become increasingly difficult to engage young people in Spain on issues that are crucial for understanding their realities and encouraging them to take a stand. They argue that a key way to link art and activism is by questioning the educational models that perpetuate this disconnect. Specifically, they focus on the hidden curriculum – the unspoken values and assumptions embedded in education – as a way to foster more meaningful engagement. Like Taring Padi and PAWA 254, they are critical of formal education and suggest ways to transform educational practices within schools. At the same time, PAWA 254, Taring Padi, and Tools for Action all point to the inspiring sight of young people from around the world taking to the streets, such as the global pro-Palestinian student protests and the Gen Z protests in Africa, as evidence of a growing movement of youth activism that aligns with their push for educational transformation and engagement.

Discussion

In this discussion section, I first address the initial research question by examining the (1) artistic and (2) collective strategies that activist art collectives use to engage with social and political issues. I then turn to the second research question to explore (3) the pedagogical

relevance of these strategies. The discussion shows how these strategies function in practice and lays the foundation for understanding their pedagogical implications.

Artistic strategies

The findings indicate that activist art not only critiques existing conditions but also generates new ways of seeing and engaging with social and political issues. Four interrelated artistic strategies emerge from the findings, which can be defined as: *reframing*, *presenting alternatives*, *DIY*, and *performative resistance*. First, *reframing* involves deliberately shifting perspectives to reveal what is overlooked or misrepresented in dominant social and political narratives. *Todo por la Praxis*, for instance, employs guerrilla-style communication and counter-advertising to unsettle taken-for-granted assumptions (Walsh et al., 2021), while Tools for Action's "book blocks" reframe protest as a form of collective learning. Second, *presenting alternatives* refers to proposing imaginative models for social transformation. Examples include Tools for Action's Estonian commune and FFCNL's storytelling practices, both of which invite participants to explore new frameworks for social and political engagement (Steinbock et al., 2021). Third, *Do-It-Yourself (DIY) practices* feature hands-on, grassroots modes of making that emphasize autonomy, resistance, and accessibility (Cramer, 2022; Von Busch, 2022). Rather than relying on institutional or commercial infrastructures, collectives such as Tools for Action, PAWA 254, and Taring Padi develop self-made tools for political mobilization, especially in street protests. Taring Padi's banners, woodcuts, and cardboard puppets illustrate how DIY practices translate political perspectives into accessible, material forms that support collective agency. Lastly, *performative resistance* takes shape through embodied, theatrical acts of disobedience. Using costumes, choreography, and props, collectives such as FFCNL and Array Collective turn protest into poetic yet confrontational interventions that reclaim public space through artistic expression.

Collectivity, inclusive participation and social impact

The findings reveal *building community* as an important collective strategy, grounded in fostering dialogue, creating safe and brave spaces, and developing accessible, skill-sharing environments. This approach lowers barriers to participation by promoting mutual understanding and encouraging open exchange, offering a valuable model for pedagogical contexts that seek to build socially engaged learning communities. However, despite its potential, the community-building approach also faces a significant challenge, as noted by *Todo por la Praxis*: the risk of limited reach, often described as "preaching to the converted". In such cases, collective practices may primarily engage those already aligned with activist or artistic values, creating a kind of exclusive bubble. Overcoming this limitation requires deliberate efforts to open up entry points for wider and more diverse audiences, particularly those unfamiliar with the language or frameworks of activist art.

A commitment to achieving social impact informs another collective strategy among the activist art collectives. Rather than focusing solely on raising awareness, artistic activism is concerned with generating real change for the communities they work with or the causes they support (Duncombe & Lambert, 2021). This means not just talking about change, but actively working towards it, together with those directly affected. In line with Haraway's

(2016) notion of “staying with the trouble”, this involves remaining present in the complexities of social issues and engaging with them collaboratively rather than seeking quick or individual solutions.

Activism informing pedagogy

To address the second research question, this section examines how the artistic and collective strategies identified in the findings can inform pedagogical practice. The artistic strategy of *reframing* can, for instance, equip students to question dominant social and political narratives while exploring alternative ways of seeing and understanding the world, thereby developing critical visual literacy and creative engagement in public space. *Presenting alternatives* may further enhance imagination and hope, supporting students with confronting complex global challenges constructively rather than succumbing to feelings of powerlessness and immobilization. In addition, *DIY practices* can offer a model for independent, practice-based learning, emphasizing experimentation, resourcefulness, and ownership of process, materials, and message, encouraging the development of artistic voice and social responsibility through critical making. Finally, *performative resistance* may enhance confidence, bodily awareness, and collective expression, allowing students to experience activism as a lived, embodied and affective form of learning.

Translating the collective strategies into arts education requires rethinking traditional notions of authorship and collaboration. This entails shifting the focus from the individual to collective, process-oriented creation, welcoming the “messiness” of group work (Groten, 2022) and supporting co-creation and collaboration across differences. Such collective modes of working can encourage educators and students to critically assess inclusivity and accessibility, ensuring that artistic work resonates with and invites participation from diverse audiences. Moreover, these strategies model how artistic practice can engage with real social concerns and mobilize collective agency, encouraging students not only to reflect critically but also to act meaningfully beyond the classroom. In doing so, students develop capacities central to contemporary citizenship, including collaboration, social responsibility, and the use of art as a tool for social engagement, alongside practical competencies such as organization, problem-solving, and logistical coordination (Roos, 2025).

Yet questions remain regarding reach and impact. If socially engaged art circulates primarily within sympathetic communities, how can it engage broader or more diverse audiences, including young people with differing or more conservative views? The analysis suggests that while activist art holds substantial pedagogical potential, its effectiveness depends on inclusive and accessible strategies, insights that arts education can adopt to enhance its social relevance.

Conclusion

This study draws on interviews with members of six contemporary activist art collectives, examining the artistic and collective strategies they employ to engage with social and political issues, and exploring their relevance for arts education. The lenses “activism”, “collectivity” and “pedagogy” were used to answer the research questions: *Which artistic and collective strategies do activist art collectives employ to address social and political*

issues? And: How can activist art practices inform contemporary approaches to arts education?

My analysis identifies a diverse set of artistic and collective strategies employed by the activist art collectives studied. Taken together, these practices demonstrate how artistic activism reimagines the form and language of protest by making it more creative, accessible, and emotionally resonant – from protest puppetry and inflatable barricades to direct action, collective dreaming, queer performances, and book blocks. By integrating creativity, playfulness, performativity, and poetic expression, these collectives move beyond critique, simultaneously challenging dominant narratives and presenting alternative visions of the future.

Beyond their activist impact, these practices nurture collectivity, inclusivity, and shared responsibility. They show how activist art can function both as a tool for political action and as a form of collective learning. In this way, they bridge domains often seen as incompatible in Global North art discourses, connecting aesthetic inquiry with social impact, individual expression with collective action, and artistic experimentation with pedagogical engagement.

While previous scholarship (e.g., Heijnen, 2015; Helguera, 2011) has examined pedagogical strategies within socially engaged art, there remains limited understanding of how activist art collectives integrate artistic, collective, and pedagogical strategies to drive social change, and how these approaches might inform arts education.

Across different contexts, the activist art collectives reveal common patterns in fostering active citizenship, critical creativity, and social engagement, providing a model for arts education that goes beyond technical skill-building toward context-rich, participatory, and inquiry-based learning. Drawing on these insights, the study proposes several concrete pedagogical recommendations for arts education. First, educators should embrace collective, process-oriented learning that prioritizes dialogue, experimentation, and shared authorship over individual outcomes. Second, fostering safe and brave spaces allows students to engage critically and emotionally, while learning to navigate discomfort and difference. Third, integrating activist art strategies in public space can connect classroom practices to broader social issues and realities, encouraging civic engagement and social responsibility through the arts.

In a time characterized by widespread disempowerment, particularly among younger generations facing intersecting global crises, such practices take on renewed urgency. While these artistic-pedagogical strategies do not offer definitive solutions, they do provide a framework for rethinking agency, collective solidarity, and initiating meaningful forms of engagement and action.

Conflict of interest

The author(s) declare none.

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