

International Museum of Art for Change

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Abstract:

My project aims to create an educational, expressive, and inclusive platform for activist art that addresses social and political issues with a view to producing concrete social change: The International Museum of Art for Change. This museum is about empowering individuals and communities on an international scale in our contemporary globalized world: a place where silent voices can be heard. This museum is important because it gives activist artists a platform to share their urgent missions and global concerns with a wide range of audiences in the public arena. Art can make critical issues more accessible to the public. By collecting and exhibiting this activist art in a museum it can become a place where people come together and engage in a critical dialogue and reflect on society. The activist artworks in the museum deal with globally important issues such as climate change, human rights, hunger, gender equality, wild conservation, and poverty. This museum promotes important global issues and makes them accessible to an international public through art.

First, the importance and purpose of displaying activist art and the criticality of this type of art will be explored through theoretical research. Research on the political position of activist art and the relationship between cultural institutions and activism is also included. The Museum of Art for Change should be with and for diverse communities. Theoretical research and interviews with activist artists will identify how a museum can move towards inclusivity and accessibility in the organization and program. Activist art requires a museum design that

generates feelings that people feel involved in and dare to express their opinions. Therefore, the design aspects of inclusivity and accessibility of cultural institutions will be explored. Theoretical research, case study research, and interviews on building design and expression that enhance its function as an activist art museum is included. Following, theoretical research will explore how an activist art museum may function now and in the future. The overall building design and the program should be future proof.

This paper demonstrates the importance to design a new museum typology that reduces inequity between communities by being an inclusive, educational, and expressive platform for activist art. The design empowers individuals and communities by combining an inclusive and accessible public building design with art that invites people to engage in a critical dialogue and reflect on society. This research contributes to the larger discourse on architecture in terms of designing an educational and expressive cultural platform for critical dialog.

Keywords: activist art, inclusive museum, social change, diversity

Word Count: 4571

Introduction

In November 2011, the Dutch cultural and creative sector developed the Code Cultural Diversity (CCD). The aim of the CCD is for the Dutch cultural and creative sector to represent the multi-ethnic and cultural character of Dutch society. Despite the attention the CCD generated for cultural diversity, the Dutch public cultural institutions can still not be called inclusive.¹ Visual artist Matthijs de Bruijne worked as an artist for the Dutch Union of Cleaners FNV. These cleaners are part of the often-invisible working class in the Netherlands, de Bruijne helped them visualize their messages and contribute to creating an identity. De Bruijne states that out of the 2000 workers, only one has visited a museum during his lifetime. The cleaners felt that museums were not intended for them.²

Cultural institutions such as museums are often not accessible and inclusive for everyone and especially not to the communities living in the surrounding neighborhoods of the museum project site Tarwewijk, Rotterdam. This is a problem because the inequity between neighborhoods in the city needs to be reduced. This is important because you need to provide better resources to the residents regardless of their social status and income. Museums and cultural institutions must take an activist position. My project aims to create an educational, expressive, and inclusive platform for activist art that addresses social and political issues with a view to producing concrete social change: The International Museum of Art for Change. This museum is about empowering individuals and communities on an international scale in our contemporary globalized world: a place where silent voices can be heard. This museum is important because it gives activist artists a platform to share their urgent missions and global concerns with a wide range of audiences in the public arena. Art can make critical issues more accessible to the public. By collecting and exhibiting this activist art in a museum it can become a place where people come together and engage in a critical dialogue and

reflect on society. The activist artworks in the museum deal with globally important issues such as climate change, human rights, hunger, gender equality, wild conservation, and poverty. This museum promotes important global issues and makes them accessible to an international public through art.

This paper demonstrates the importance of designing a new museum typology that reduces inequity between communities by being an inclusive, educational, and expressive platform for activist art. The paper will start with defining activist art. First, the importance and purpose of displaying activist art and the criticality of this type of art will be explored through theoretical research. Research on the political position of activist art and the relationship between cultural institutions and activism is explored. The Museum of Art for Change should be with and for diverse communities. The research purpose of the second chapter is to identify how a museum can move towards inclusivity and accessibility in the organization and program. The research will include interviews with activist artists and theoretical research on inclusive museums. Activist art requires a museum design that generates feelings that people feel involved in and dare to express their opinions. Therefore, the design aspects of inclusivity and accessibility of cultural institutions will be explored in the third chapter. This chapter includes theoretical research, case study research, and interviews on building design and expression that enhance its function as an activist art museum. Following, theoretical research will explore how an activist art museum may function now and in the future. The overall building design and the program should be future proof. Lastly, the final chapter will validate the importance of designing a new museum typology, the International Museum of Art for Change, being an inclusive, educational, and expressive platform for activist art. The essential elements for this platform are concluded in the final chapter.

This paper contributes to the larger discourse on architecture in terms of exploring a new museum typology that reduces inequity between communities by being an inclusive, educational, and expressive platform for activist art. The design empowers individuals and communities by combining an inclusive and accessible public building design with art that invites people to engage in a critical dialogue and reflect on society.

Defining Activist Art

For over 40,000 years, artists have been using artistic expressions, such as cave paintings and spectacles, to move people. The impact and power of art have thrilled and worried people throughout history.³ In his book, *The Republic* Plato explains his fear of art due to the power of artists to create worlds and move their audience. Due to his fear, Plato envisioned little or no place for art in his ideal society.⁴ Artworks that address and use their power to impact social inequality and injustice are defined, among many other definitions, as activist art. The emotional affect of art and the goal of activism to generate an effect are combined in activist art. Activism targets a discernible end for social change. Social change only happens when the people in the society act. Before people act in the world, they must be moved and art, particularly activist art, has the power to do so. Activist art confronts, makes you think, and therefore gives a different view on social issues and generate social change.⁵ The purpose and style of different kinds of activist art highly differ in and around social movements. Research shows that artworks can be very direct aiming for particular ideological topics. On the contrary, artworks can be very complex and layered in evoking feelings and ideas. A poster used in the Black Lives Matter movement is compared to a historical novel addressing racism. While both artworks have played an important role in social movements and social change, they are not equivalent. One artwork was meant for a single occasion whereas the other was meant to leave a lasting mark on the world. Each aesthetic expression should be analyzed

individually in relation to its specific context, where it is inextricably entangled in protest against forces that limit human potential.⁶

While there is consensus on the fact that art moves us, it is difficult to determine why and how it does so. For many artists, this is even an uncomfortable topic to address. Justifying the impact of art is often considered heresy. Besides, the real impact of art is difficult to measure. In the case of activist art, determine whether social change happened because of something an artist did in the cause of social change is complex.⁷ Research of the Center for Artistic Activism explains that assessment of impact is essential for artistic activism to live up to its world-changing potential. They suggest a query-driven methodology that sharpens the knowledge of artists by taking the artists on a journey to understanding and their own creative and political process. The identification of the ability of activist art differs between activist artists. Some artists stress the ability of activist art as awareness through access to information, while others identify this ability as making ideas into something co-created that fosters conversation. Other artistic activists describe the objective of activist art as creating a disruption of the dominant consensus and creating spaces for dissent. Another view of activist artists on the role of activist art is aiding and amplifying the impact of existing social movements and organizations. They join forces with other activist methods to generate social change. And some activist artists identify the objective of activist art is to inspire dreaming, providing alternatives for seeing, being, and doing.⁸

So far, this chapter has focused mainly on the use of art as a progressive force that can lead to social and political change. But there is another scope to the use of art that can be traced as far back as to classical antiquity: art for propaganda purposes. The subordination of art to political regimes seemed a fruitful conduit for politics throughout history. The arts have often

been used in both decent and indecent ways to achieve political goals.⁹ For example, during the French Revolution, whose leaders consciously and systematically employed various art forms to promote their values. These various art forms include sculptures, paintings, engravings, and national festivals. The national festival is described as “those vast, spectacular demonstrations in which the arts named, plus architecture, music, poetry, drama, the dance, oratory, and fireworks were all effectively combined”.¹⁰ Many propaganda techniques such as the national festival were first created and perfected during the French Revolution. According to historian David Dowd, most artists were happy and proud to serve their fatherland with their artistic talents during the Revolution.¹¹ This fairly positive view on propaganda has completely turned over the years. Nowadays, artists oppose propaganda. Propaganda is associated with the propaganda art in dictatorial regimes, where arts only have an instrumental role to play in this unambiguous representation of ideology.¹² While most artists do not agree with the statement of George Orwell that “All art is propaganda.”, there is a link between arts and politics.¹³ Propaganda and activist art may both address political goals, there are not equivalent. Propaganda dictates a certain ideology and only contains statements that do not allow for new experiences. Activist art, on the other hand, allows for reflection on society through art. Where propaganda only delivers a message, activist art does allow for new experiences.¹⁴ Since the International Museum of Art for Change will exhibit art that addresses issues such as climate change, human rights, hunger, gender equality, wild conservation, and poverty, it is important to clarify that the museum takes a political stand. While the activist art will convey urgent social and political messages, it must allow for dialogue and reflection.

In defining activist art, the vulnerable position of this type of art and the artists in the world is essential to discuss. Speaking up and protest for social change unfortunately may come with

risks. There are numerous examples of activist artists all over the world who have been prosecuted for their artistic activist expressions. An example is the famous Chinese artist Ai Weiwei who was imprisoned for 81 days by the Chinese government in 2011. Although he was formally charged with tax evasion, the actual cause of his detention was his expression of criticism of the Chinese government. In addition to his detention, Ai received a high fine and his passport was taken for four years by the Chinese government.¹⁵ Violations of human rights and injustice in the activist art world do not only occur in the dictatorship of the world. The International Museum of Art for Change needs to note that the museum could face resistance and intimidation due to the political stand the museum takes in the social debate. Therefore, it is essential to the safety of both employees, artists, and audiences can be guaranteed.

In 2017 eight performers and artists of the Artist collective Fossil Free Culture NL were taken by the police and detained for a few days, after an unannounced performance in the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam. With the performance, the collective called on the museum to break free from the toxic and misleading partnership with oil giant Shell.¹⁶ While the environmental movement rallied and demanded the release of the artists, the art world was deafeningly silent. The Van Gogh Museum was in a hurry to defend the interest of Shell.¹⁷ Another example of a cultural institution that was called on to take an activist position and reflect on themselves is the Melly institution in Rotterdam. This institution was formerly named Witte de With, named after the VOC fleet supervisor Witte Corneliszoon de With, who was involved in colonial exploitation. The former Witte de With was a citizen for years for using this polluted name before they changed it to Melly.¹⁸ These events represent the gap between the social movements and the high-end art world. The International Museum of Art for

Change must take an activist position and reflect on itself at all times as a cultural institution to be a representative for activist artists and social movements.

Inclusive organization and program

As the problem statement in the introduction argues, museums are often not inclusive to diverse communities. The new art museum should move towards inclusivity and accessibility in the organization and program, to engage with the most diverse audience possible. It is essential to provide cultural resources to residents regardless of their social status and income. Research shows that exhibiting activist art reaches towards an inclusive museum typology since activist art aims to embrace all parts of the society and create awareness. The objective of activist art to empower individuals and communities on an international scale provides for inclusivity.¹⁹ Artistic activist Soejeng Tsao argues the importance of addressing different social themes in a museum to draw people outside the bubble. By exhibiting various social themes people's awareness can be raised on themes beyond obvious interests.²⁰ The integration of various social themes and the integration of different perspectives is essential both for inclusion and critical reflection.²¹ You cannot reflect critically if everyone agrees with you. Pravini Baboeram notes that perspectives you disagree with, contribute to sharpening strategy and insight to strengthen social movements. At the same time, Baboeram argues that the diversity of perspectives must be placed in the broad social context of the museum's position and missions. Diversity of perspectives can be shown, but the position of the museum in the social debate and how the programming wants to contribute must be clear. In terms of a diversity approach, Baboeram highlights the significance of working interdisciplinary.²² Besides, research shows that that collaboration between various art disciplines improves the inclusivity of a museum.²³ Therefore, the different mediums of

activist art, visual arts, performance arts, and literary arts must be represented in the International Museum of Art for Change.

Besides artists who present their art in cultural institutions, some activist artists use the public domain as their canvas. One of those artists is JR, who claims to have the largest art gallery in the world. JR exhibits his art in the public domain of the whole world, through which he reaches people who usually do not visit cultural institutions.²⁴ Art exhibited in the public domain can be used as an outreach stagey for cultural institutions to interest non-art audiences. Harmen de Hoop argues that, in addition to attracting new audiences, the museum will stay lively and relevant with temporary project-based exhibitions in the public domain. By making these temporary exhibitions travel through the neighborhood, the art will allow for positive gentrification. So, there will be a neighborhood revival, but temporary, so less destructive. This nomadic model of temporary exhibitions could be outdoor in the public domain or indoors in, for example, an abandoned building. The outreach strategy of this nomadic model improves the accessibility and inclusivity of the museum. It makes the activist art more tangible for residents regardless of their social status and income.²⁵

Research argues that the inclusive museum should implement educational public programs. The museum as an event space for education and awareness asks for workshop and performance spaces to be included in the program.²⁶ Workshop spaces could also function as a center of empowerment for social movements and communities. Visitors could participate in these movements and be involved instead of just be informed. Educational and creative workshops for children are also a method of including and attracting children in an art museum.²⁷ An inclusive activist art museum should be free of charge, or people buy a ticket

according to their capacity. A well-priced food menu suitable for all diet types improves the accessibility of a museum restaurant or café.²⁸

Diverse cultural representation in the museum organization improves the inclusivity and accessibility of a museum. Residents from the surrounding neighborhoods could be employees of the museum. This could enhance the feeling of connection with the context and function as an outreach strategy. Social movements should have a dominant position in an activist art museum organization.²⁹

Inclusive building design

This chapter explores various building expression and design aspects that enhance its function as an activist art museum. The activist art museum requires an inclusive and accessible design. De Hoop states that to reach a diverse range of visitors in terms of culture, social status, and income the museum should be turned inside-out. A ‘shopping window model’ museum with the art visible for 24 hours to interest non-art audiences.³⁰ Making the art freely accessible and visible makes the museum more inclusive. This inside-out museum typology should be part of public routing to attract audiences and confront them with the urgent missions of activist art.

Case study research of The Whitney Museum of American Art explores the broader conceptualization of the objective of inclusion. What began as the inclusion of visitors with disabilities, expanded to accommodate for the inclusion of minority groups and individuals who feel excluded by cultural institutions. As a result of the dialogue on museums as a safe space that the Whitney Museum hosted, the museum opened ‘All Gender’ restrooms.³¹ By responding to the needs of a minority group, this is noted as small but significant changes that

can help a museum feel more accessible and responsive for audiences as well as staff and artists.³²

To accommodate the diverse mediums of activist art, the exhibition spaces must be neutral, but at the same time, the white box principle must be avoided. The white box principle is associated with the non-accessible high-end art world. On the other hand, specific spaces could bore or annoy visitors over time. The urgent missions of the activist art should be expressed in the museum design.³³

Future proof

The aim of activist art is social change. Change is defined as to make or become different.³⁴ So, one day, the social change of a social theme will come. Activist art has a temporality to it. Therefore, all exhibitions in the Museum of Art for Change will to some extent be temporary. But there will always be urgent social or political issues and global concerns because perfection does not exist. Showing the process of social development through history is also interesting to show. It is important to note the influence of the temporality of activist art on the interior and program of the museum.

Another significant influence on the future of a museum to agree is the turnover of a museum. In 2019, the income of museums in the Netherlands contributed an average of more than 50 percent of the total turnover. The other 50 percent consists of government grants.³⁵ Present-day, the museums are closed due to the corona pandemic. This means that museums completely dependent on the government and emergency support. The Dutch Museum Association reports that almost one-third of the temporary contracts have not been renewed due to the sharp drop in revenues caused by the pandemic. One in ten museums also reported that they had fired permanent employees. The alarmed Museum Association the government

that more government emergency grants are necessary to the loss of jobs. In April 2020, around 25 percent of the museums alarmed the government that they may no longer exist due to the corona pandemic measures without enough emergency grants.³⁶ These reports show the importance of a stable financial position to ensure existence in the future.

Conclusion

For the International Museum of Art for Change to be a progressive force that can lead to social change, it is essential to implement a new museum typology. This typology is an inclusive, educational, and expressive platform for activist art. By accommodating the new typology, the museum has the power to empower individuals and communities on an international scale and reduces inequity between communities. In conclusion, the new museum typology should present a diversity of perspectives and disciplines, placed in the social context of the museum's position. In addition to the museum on site, a nomadic model of exhibitions in the surrounding neighborhoods of the site should be realized. The museums organization should reflect a diverse cultural representation and respond to the needs of minority groups. Further, the activist art should be freely accessible and part of the public routing, visible 24 hours a day. The urgent mission of activist art should be expressed in the museum design. The findings of this paper are implemented in the design of the International Museum of Art for Change project.

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