

Art As a Form of Resistance in Public Health Advocacy

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the vital role of art in public health advocacy as a tool of resistance and social change. From historical responses to the bubonic plague and 19th-century racial health issues to the activism during the HIV/AIDS crisis and the modern-day COVID-19 pandemic, art has played a critical role in mobilizing communities, shifting public perceptions, and prompting policy shifts. Art's ability to connect emotionally, provide platforms for underrepresented voices, and express complex societal issues is highlighted as a unique form of advocacy. Through examining past and present examples, the paper emphasizes the power of art in addressing public health challenges and fostering resilience. Challenges such as underfunding and political risks are acknowledged, alongside opportunities for greater integration of art in public health initiatives. Ultimately, art is posited not only as a reflection of society but as an active agent capable of driving social and political transformation in public health.

Keywords: Public health advocacy, art as resistance, social change, community engagement, health equity.

INTRODUCTION

Academic inquiry often separates artistic utterance from jurisprudence or politics, positing the work of art as transcendent rather than living. In the realm of public health, however, art has often been used as a tool of resistance. From the response to the bubonic plague to HIV/AIDS activism, art has been an explicit and implicit aspect of the engendering community. In all cases, art has been and can be wielded in the public health realm to shift the location of political immobility. Advocacy and visual imagery engage vital aesthetic-political implications: aesthetics have everything to do with drives and appetites, with pleasure and pain, desire and longing. The same tenets that plague, that follow through with these bodies are, fittingly, the criteria of and common tension inherent in all art; thus, becoming fundamental criteria for historical and contemporary policy consideration [1, 2]. Arts-based organizing and advocacy have played crucial roles within public health from articulating victims' health concerns during the bubonic plague, working to combat misplaced concerns with Black dirt and body in the 19th and 20th centuries, and epitomizing the struggle for bodily sovereignty during the initial years of the AIDS pandemic. Art has often been central to creating and dissecting a community where clear and present danger mobilizes public health policy. From historical to contemporary cases, art has been leveraged to articulate biopolitics. The arts have often been the best tool in the re-appropriation of a robust collective voice and framed as a structure for negotiating and establishing specific disease landscapes that operationalize public policy. In exploring both these historical narratives and current practices, art will be problematized within the lens of public health as a form of resistance wherein art becomes an activist's draw that directly interrogates and establishes a space for judicial implications [3, 4].

Background of Public Health Advocacy

Public health advocacy is a nursing strategy grounded in the principles of social justice, attaining health equity, and caring for populations. Its aim is how to save lives, prevent or limit disease and morbidity, and improve the quality of our communities' inhabitants. Numerous strategies are advocated to bring about

change, such as direct advocacy to the government, consumer pressure in the marketplace, and international trade. This paper explores developments in public health advocacy. Several key players and evolving networks are identified; problems in evaluation and promoting public health advocacy are raised [5, 6]. Social justice, health equity, and marginalized people have become the new buzzwords of the emerging 21st century, pointing toward these key notions. However, for those of us living in the antipodes and working within the syndromes of colonization and post-colonization, the ethnicization of politics, and concerns relating to border control, we have been working on these principles for some centuries. Indeed, concepts like social justice and horizontal organizational structures have been central to our ways of working, and it is from this strength that a range of strategies have been tried and refined in the artistry of public health advocacy. Public health and its nursing antecedents have long been engaged in advocacy as a means of improving the social conditions that enhance people's opportunities to attain equitable and optimal health. More than mere political sloganeering, this exploitation of political power, of officialdom, captures the very essence of what distinguishes the trajectory of public health reform. The recent seeds of the Huki Campaign of New Zealand Maori are rooted in this tradition [7, 8].

Role of Art in Social Change

Many art forms have the power to promote social change. The role of art in creating spaces for such transformations happens at several levels. Fine and performing arts, as well as narrative and digital arts, for example, arise dialogues and conversations, often with strong emotional resonance. While public health communication typically targets thought-based change in audiences, many arts have the particular power to change hearts and therefore promote behavior change as well as shifting viewpoints. Art can serve as both venues for reflection on the larger society and as reflective enterprises of society. In this way, such media as murals, dance, theater, and music can raise awareness, encourage debates, and provide community expression and advocacy. This is often especially true when the artists originate from and speak to communities conducting or being subjected to participatory initiatives in local settings [9, 10]. In practice, many arts have been used to represent social meanings and promote social change. Visual arts, such as murals and graphic design, have been used as a means of health promotion. Performing arts, such as drama, dancing, music, and theater, express health issues, encourage debate, and promote social change. Narrative arts, such as storytelling and drama, are tools to capture and communicate case stories, illustrating multi-level social determinants of health and drawing attention to the relationship between individual choices and societal norms. Documentary filming, oral narratives, autobiography, and focus groups serve this effort as well. Written arts include poetry, which gives voice to feelings, experiences, and opinions in an artistic and evocative form. In our times, digital arts provide new venues for health communication, including using new social media and gaming. The role of the artistic becomes critical in efforts to combat social ills and promote social change. Public health advocacy, it becomes evident, is not only about images but is produced by those who are represented. [11, 12].

Historical Examples of Art in Public Health Advocacy

In the fields of activism and public health, there have been several historically significant moments where art has been used to promote resistance and public health advocacy. Artists have created posters, murals, street theater, and film, and installed public exhibits promoting respect for people with disabilities since the movement began. One of the most clearly drawn examples of the integration of art in public health advocacy is in the mobilization by artists during the AIDS crisis. In the 1980s, struggling to know how the virus was passed along or how the virus worked, stigmas were attached to sex, sexuality, drug use, relationships, gender, class, and global trade. To tell accurate narratives about the toll that AIDS was taking on their bodies, cities, communities, and friends, artists created entire theater ensembles, adventurously interethnic and diagnostically incisive novels, music, dance, murals, posters, and graphics that documented local and overseas horrific experiences of living so inexplicably differently from the two Canadian mom and apple pie fundamentals. From the very beginning of this pandemic, artists have stood at the intersection between the worst affected populations and those who have the social power, economic resources, and political will to ameliorate their suffering. At each of these intersections, arts-activist collaborations have had the power to change conversations in a way that charts an entirely new direction for institutions, health care, cultural perceptions, and the future. For instance, artists were on the front lines of doing 'what our elected officials should have done, but wouldn't do.' Though this paper does not argue that art is essential to protect and care for the general public from COVID-19, the correlation between art's role during the AIDS crisis and art's role during COVID-19 is reflected through a natural

disease's ability to create a social movement of resistance with or without relying on ostensive love or care for the infected [13, 14].

The AIDS Crisis and Activism

Early advocacy efforts related to the HIV/AIDS epidemic can be traced back to the artistic expression of individuals and communities. The activist art and performance work that came out of the AIDS crisis and accompanying art world activism helped increase public awareness of the epidemic, shift some public perceptions of the suffering of those with AIDS, and create the social conditions for the development of treatments for the virus. Given the inaction of state and federal governments in response to the HIV/AIDS crisis, especially in the first half of the 1980s, artists filled the void and became compassionate witnesses who sought to dignify the lives of people in the United States and elsewhere who were living with or affected by this emerging illness. More specifically, through their diverse practices, artists hoped to invite people to grieve the suffering and mass deaths—the big, silent elephants—that dominated the news from the mid-to late-1980s and continued as a constant feature of everyday life throughout the 1990s in varying degrees [15, 16]. This art did this not only through representations of those who were sick and dying or of those who directly loved the sick and dying, but it also appealed to the broader public in the form of critique—partly in advance—that addressed a more generalized fear of what remained then—at least in part—a terrifyingly mysterious illness. Artists thus turned their homes, studios, and performance and exhibition spaces into activist battlegrounds where new forms of sociality and resistance took shape. Some artists worked toward developing inter-materials—both visual and discursive materials—related to the epidemic that those engaged in the ongoing work of fighting the virus and caring for those who were infected and affected by it could use [17, 18].

Current Applications of Art in Public Health Advocacy

1. 'Corona Art': Art and Crisis
2. Digital Art and Social Media
3. Crossing Art and Health

Throughout history, artists have played a role in engaging, informing, and challenging the public and those in power. Today, art continues to leverage social discourse by creating a visual and somatic response to the challenges facing public health, often placing individual experiences in a wider cultural, social, economic, and political context. Perhaps because public health emergencies often emerge from gaps in risk policy, the capacity to communicate health risks with the public is vital. Health organizations have turned to artists to take on a variety of tasks in public health emergencies, from creating powerful and compelling public campaigns to translating complex data, scientific information, and policy into user-friendly guidelines. Community-based, collegiate, and other local or regional health organizations have also worked alongside artists for decades to help represent the needs and concerns of local communities and populations. Art's use in public health advocacy has thus been well documented and is continuing to gain growing recognition through research and best practice guidance [19, 20]. Over the past year, artists have led many innovative, exciting, and vibrant public health efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic. Art's role in expressing collective resilience and hope in response to the current crisis, while also taking on and interpreting global issues, exemplified art's potential. More public health initiatives should aim to follow its examples in drawing from positive human empathetic connections during health emergencies. In the following, we discuss some ways that artists and community organizers are using visual art to communicate public health needs during the COVID-19 pandemic, and how digital and social media have transformed this role. We also describe recent examples of artists working directly in collaboration with health organizations, building from a reciprocal perspective: one that sees art as both a tool and an outcome of good health [21, 22].

COVID-19 Pandemic Response

The arrival of COVID-19 in early 2020 took the world by storm. Amidst the chaos and uncertainty, people across the world found presence and resilience in expressing themselves creatively. Many traditional artists adapted their expressions to bolster their communities, spreading messages of resilience in the form of murals, virtual performances, and poetry. Art proved a dependable tool in community-based public health engagement for people of varying literacy levels and ages. While the pandemic left us isolated from our families, friends, and peers, art continued to connect us and served as a means of emotional and psychological healing. COVID-19 also brought out fake cures, extreme skepticism, and fear, leaving public health officials to refute or address concerns at impossible speed. These sentiments of misinformation and fear are not new and are more deeply embedded in certain communities than others

[23, 3]. During COVID-19, there have been some stunning examples of collaboration between public health agencies and artists, and connections of artists and others in our communities. Artists, photographers, and journalists bravely documented the pandemic's arrival, treating clinics as installations. In these instances, we have seen successful public health advocacy campaigns supported by works of art dramatically displaying loss and grief that current policymakers struggle to register. In truth, the power of art to express and connect is important in times of crisis; it is pivotal to what makes us human. The people of Khorog reflect the power of art to connect people, expressing their individual and collective emotions while advocating for a better future. These compositions showed reality, upholding the dignity of those shown and advocating for a better life following the pandemic response [24, 25].

Challenges and Opportunities of Using Art in Public Health Advocacy

There are several potential challenges to incorporating the arts into public health advocacy. First and foremost, the persistent underfunding of the arts and social services overall, at both state and federal levels, means that there is limited funding available for arts-based programming and advocacy. Also, because of the potential reach of arts-based projects, they are inherently politically risky. Arts programming that seeks to promote public health is no different and can be met with political resistance. Additionally, there is little high-quality evidence regarding the effectiveness or best practices for using the arts in public health advocacy to support the messaging contained within a work [26, 27]. Despite these challenges, the inclusion of arts programming in public health advocacy and, indeed, public health promotion, is a critically important step towards making sure that platforms are available for voices other than the dominant narratives in public health. The challenges listed above are worth overcoming because arts and culture have a reach that data does not. Or, more accurately, cannot, because, as mentioned earlier, data are not neutral. There is no way to translate research findings into action and policy if science is something that interests people rather than power. Of course, engagement with art is not a perfect proxy for power, but against the backdrop of power, science can be irrelevant. Besides, art and public health are, in many cases, mutually reinforcing. Public health concern for health equity and health access naturally involves concern for issues of cultural accessibility and dissemination. While art and science are not the same, artists and public health practitioners are often, fundamentally, activist career paths. Art and public health workers are natural allies in the work of social change. Both are reflections of public good and civic life; and, one might say, both are places of formalized social care. This viewpoint acknowledges the ethical commitment of both the art and public health fields to serving the common good. Art can be an experiment, a laboratory for translation, a place of hope-building and destigmatization – serving a different role than traditional research in addressing power and driving social and political change. Since neither art, science, nor advocacy have any mitigated claim to truth or power, all are subject to question by the people. Along these lines, it can be argued that art is the clearest expression of the most developed embodiment of public health's message, whether through data, narrative, advocacy, or social change campaigns [28, 29].

CONCLUSION

Art has demonstrated an enduring capacity to serve as a powerful vehicle for resistance and advocacy within public health. Historical and contemporary examples—from the resilience in the face of the AIDS epidemic to the creative responses during the COVID-19 pandemic—show that art can challenge dominant narratives, shift perceptions, and inspire action where traditional public health methods may fall short. Despite challenges such as limited funding and political pushback, the transformative potential of art in public health advocacy cannot be overstated. Integrating art more formally into public health strategy could strengthen advocacy efforts, empower marginalized voices, and create deeper community connections. Art's inherent ability to convey emotion, foster empathy, and engage the public makes it a necessary partner in the fight for health equity and social justice. The relationship between art and public health is, therefore, not just complementary but vital for meaningful social change.

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