

# Artivism: A new educative language for transformative social action

Artivismo: Un nuevo lenguaje educativo para la acción social transformadora

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## ABSTRACT

This study describes the concepts, historical precedents, language and fundamental experiences of artivism. It shows the research activities from two main universities (Complutense de Madrid in Spain and Nottingham Trent in UK) as well as other cultural institutions (Élan Interculturel from France and Artemiszio from Hungary), which have explored the educational potential of artivism as a new way of achieving social engagement using innovation and artistic creation. The paper defines precisely artivism as a new language which appears outside the museums and art academies, moving towards urban and social spaces. Artivism is a hybrid form of art and activism which has a semantic mechanism to use art as a means towards change and social transformation. The analysis collects some central experiences of the artist phenomenon and applies semantic analysis, archiving activist experiences, and using urban walks and situational research, analyses the educational and formative potential of activists and their ability to break the classroom walls, and to remove the traditional roles of creator and receptor, student and professor, through workshop experiences. Finally, it reflects upon the usefulness of artivism as a new social language and an educational tool that breaks the traditional roles of social communication.

## RESUMEN

Este estudio describe los conceptos, antecedentes, lenguaje y experiencias fundamentales del artivismo, a partir de las actividades de estudio en la Universidad de Nottingham Trent y en la Universidad Complutense de Madrid, con la colaboración de otras entidades culturales como la francesa Élan Interculturel (Francia) y Artemiszio (Hungría), explorando la capacidad educativa de nuevas formas de compromiso social mediante la innovación y creación artística. El artículo acota y define el artivismo como un nuevo lenguaje que surge del desborde de la creación artística académica y museística, hacia los espacios y lugares sociales. El artivismo, hibridación del arte y del activismo, tiene un mecanismo semántico en el que se utiliza el arte como vía para comunicar una energía hacia el cambio y la transformación. El análisis recoge algunas de las principales experiencias en artivismo mediante diversas técnicas – estudio de ejemplos de artivismo mediante análisis semántico, realización de archivo de fenómenos artivistas siguiendo metodologías de paseos urbanos e investigación situacional, y estudio de la capacidad didáctica y formativa de los artivistas y sus trabajos por su facilidad para romper los muros de las aulas e invertir los roles de creador y espectador, alumno y profesor, mediante experiencias en talleres– para de esta manera reflexionar finalmente sobre la utilidad del artivismo como nuevo lenguaje social y como herramienta educativa, capaz de romper los roles tradicionales de la comunicación social.

## KEYWORDS | PALABRAS CLAVE

Artivism, innovation, social change, educommunication, revolution, integration, arts, language.  
Artivismo, innovación, cambio social, educomunicación, revolución, integración, arte, lenguaje.



### 1. Artivism. Conceptual basis

At the dawn of the XXI century, Artivism (a blending of art and activism) arose spontaneously as a global language. It evolved from urban and graffiti art, and situationism, all of which were creative forms from the twentieth-century (Ardenne, 2008; Andreotti & Costa, 1996; Abarca, 2017; Szmulewicz, 2012). With the new century, a communicative explosion stretched beyond technological media, towards urban spaces. Cities became full of conquered spaces regained for expression. The genres, expressive modes, and communication tools, which a massive transcoding (Manovich, 2005) has blended into a new common space, laid the basis for experimentation and transformation of the ways of communicating.

Artivism is based on the recovery of artistic activity for the purpose of immediate social intervention (Expósito, 2013). As explained by Abarca (2016: 2-3), it has specific features that make it eminently ephemeral and practical in its permanent balance between visibility, durability, and risk. As this expert says, “working with a specific context implies playing with the meanings and connotations of the objects that compose it. As with any other form of public art, the final result of a work of urban art is always the sum of the meanings proposed by the artist and those of the elements that were in place”. If the art fulfilled standard functions of transmission of ways of doing things in times long past, of representing the human space, of anchoring social and cultural dynamism in profound perceptions (Coomaraswamy, 1996; Campbell, 1992; Maslow, 1988), the arrival of artivism took a new look at the old concepts by fighting the mercantilist and elitist status of artistic activity.

By applying methodologies of urban walks and analysis in situ (Clarck & Emmel, 2008; Pink, 2007) in our cities, we find an anonymous, ephemeral, collective and dynamic art that invades spaces and spheres of activity traditionally reserved for expressive omission (urban areas, means and places of transition and transport, non-places or sites that have lost their meaning (Augé, 2009), empty containers and moments or times that have lost their function (Sánchez-Ferlosio, 2000), all of which are transformed into the voice of a new, young and creative society.

In the words of Lippard (1984), artivism is not an “oppositional” art (it does not try to criticize or systematically oppose anything) but works with alternative images, metaphors, irony, humor (Fernandez-De-Rota, 2013), provocation or compassion, to generate an informative process. It is both an “outward” and “inward” art, according to Lippard. What distinguishes it from simple political art is the progressive character, under development, which leads it to work within contexts, to be directly involved in the public social space and to represent in direct contact with the recipients (Gianetti, 2004).

Simon Sheikh (2009), with the same idea, indicates that activist art subverts the very notion of the aesthetic object, entering into a process of involvement more important than the creative process itself. In progress and dynamic, artivism changes materials and media, practices and styles, roles and rituals, and ceases to be idiomatic in the art world, to become pragmatic in social life (Sheikh, 2009).

The language of artivism is multiple and generative; it does not respect fixed cultural rules. As Abarca points out (2016: 5), “thanks to the unregulated nature of their practice, urban artists can ignore the limits dictated by private property that determine where they can or cannot act. A work of urban art can simultaneously cover two or more contiguous surfaces belonging to different owners, thus ignoring the division of matter and space demarcated by money. Urban art can, therefore, make visible how these limits of action and physical boundaries are arbitrary and cultural. It can return space and matter to its natural state when everything was for everyone’s use, and nobody owned anything”.

Artivism coincides with the most extensive and complex institutional and political crisis in the whole world, in which disenchantment and the dissolution of political symbolism (Dayan, 1998) have led to a lack of faith in traditional political processes.



Figure 1. From the Madrid-born Artist SpY, Painting in Stavanger (Norway) (<http://spy-urbanart.com>).

Our thread will go diachronically from an analysis of the background to the phenomenon, to the study of the language of activism, specifically addressing the socio-political functions of this language, and finally showing observations obtained from workshops with students that illustrate the formative potential of activism.

## 2. Background and first experiences

To understand the phenomenon, we must trace the emergence of political and rupture art in the context of this century. Activism has its roots in the artistic avant-gardes of the early XX century (Dada, Futurism, Surrealism) (Riemchneider & Grosenick, 1999). Throughout the twentieth century, new names for art such as performance, happening, body, land, video or conceptual art, have implied an essential element of activism: “the dematerialization of the artistic object” (Valdivieso, 2014: 7): “The background of activism should be sought within what we might call counter-cultural movements of leftist activism, such as the situationist International (France), the Hippies (USA), the Indiani Metropolitanani (Italy), the Provos (Holland) or the Spassguerilla (Germany); all of them emerged in the decade of the sixties and seventies of the last century. In the Spanish case, these practices of creative activism were not articulated until the eighties and nineties within groups such as Agustín Parejo School or La Fiambrera”.

The conceptual art of the mid-twentieth century provides another critical feature, according to Hodge (2016: 186), “they argued that the final product itself is not as important as the process, so that artistic gifts are irrelevant to their goals... conceptual art is an artistic form that confronts and questions the idea of producing traditional works of art (...) it has always challenged the established ideas of production, exhibition, and contemplation of art (...) Conceptual artists focus on their ideas and produce an art strange to traditional painting and sculpture that does not need to be seen in a gallery. They deliberately create works that are difficult to classify according to artistic traditions (...) they often reflect their frustration and irritation towards society and political issues”.

One of the trends of XX century art gradually evolved towards a type in which the art object is not the essential element, but placed more importance on the process of generating the work and removing the commercial value of the created object. Contributing to this are the social movements that appear at the end of the XX century, such as the “alter-globalization movement” or “anti-globalization”, which, by the end of the century, generated a new protest vocabulary that would be applied in different contexts of activism.

In 2014, Julia Ramírez-Blanco, in her work “Artistic Utopias of revolt”, proposes a genealogy of community protest environments, as an art of liberated space, a space taken up by activism to grant social, community or political functions.

In “Art, liquid?”, Bauman (2007: 43) reflecting about the third culture, describes this new art: “Liquid modernity is a situation in which distance, the lapse of time between the new and the discarded, between creation and scum, have been drastically reduced. The result is that destructive creation and creative destruction converge in the same act”.

All the social movements of the beginning of the XXI century are already, in the words of De-Soto (2012), “open source revolutions where knowledge, techniques, practices, and strategies are learned and replicated with improvements”. For these movements, the essential language is activism. Let’s analyze how it works.

**Activism is a global phenomenon of growing importance. Although its background goes back decades, the significance it has acquired as a language close to social life and new generations is something entirely new. As a means or language of social transformation, it can serve to give new energy to the needs for expression in cities and current urban environments. Its formative value and its capacity to break the limits of the classroom and to involve young people in its practices are discussed and shown in this article.**

### 3. The language of activism: Semantic analysis

Of the activist forms that we have analyzed and will use in the examination of their social and educational functions, a rich range of expressions have been obtained that use art as a way of channeling ideas. In these, the individual or collective artist, anonymous or identified, recovers a function of correction of a social imbalance (Gianetti, 2004). The strength of activism lies not merely in its aesthetic avant-garde, but in its catalytic power to point out injustice, inequality or emptiness in human development. This is the common attribute of activism, where the language it uses is a fundamental feature.

The re-semantic action (to create or rescue new meanings) of the objects, spaces or buildings in the artistic phenomena that we have recorded, functions to revitalize the world of human sensations and cognition. It leaves a trace of the necessary humanization of life in large cities, whose psychological transformation and alienation (Simmel, 2002; Appadurai, 2001) has led to non-places and spaces without meaning, stealing the individual's capacity to participate.

The groundbreaking, revolutionary and transformative dimension is used here as a way to find a new language. The truncated meanings, the violation of aesthetic categories and conventions, and the break with the traditional order are used to regain communication with the social world.

As analyzed by Kombarov (2017: 2), expert in the work of the activist Pier Pavlensky, whose performance in Moscow is shown in the illustration above, activism is a means of effective expression because it does not individualize the meaning, but "divides it", that is to say, by breaking or splitting it into precise planes unlike the usual ones, it re-signifies human presence. Kombarov considers activism as a new language different from the media, the advertising world, and the cultural industry. This new language appeals to subjectivization, to the use of the body, and other diverse communication systems to avoid the loss of meanings.

The language of activism often implies the use of the artist's subject as a means for the disruption of abstraction, or to avoid the loss of representative capacity, and to recover individual freedom of expression. According to Kombarov, the total subjectivization and use of the body and its capabilities in space brings the subject into the public discourse empty of humanity, saturated with imaginary manipulation. In the work of the artist Pavlensky, the positioning of the artist's body, and the presentation of the subject in the urban space is a process to generate a new human presence. In this process, the subjectivity of the artist is used as a bifurcation system of political discourse, to make it reach the receiver: "The structure of subjectivity is bifurcated: subject is understood as the sensational subject of desires and bodily needs, and on the other hand, the desiring subject finds himself in the discourse, denoting his biological level through the symbolic" (Kombarov, 2017: 4).

This language allows using bodies or objects (Barbosa-de-Oliveira, 2007) as a sensory channel to transmit intellectual experiences that materialize with force: they recreate a space, an object, a subject. These processes link the recipients with the artist in new ways (Kombarov, 2017: 5). As this author understands, the truth, in the process of progressive loss of representational capacity implied in mass society and mass communication, hardly appears anymore, except as an event.

Activists generate events because they break the structure of conventional communication, erupting into the social space to attract attention and inoculate thought in their recipients. They do it through emotionalization, subjectivization, the rupture and invasion of spaces, or through adapting non-artistic means and times to artistic expression.



Figure 2. "Carcass" by Pier Pavlensky. Performance in Moscow (2008).

In this performance by Pavlensky, the Russian artist sewed his mouth to make a photo session in the Red Square in Moscow, expressing not only political content but an entirely new language. What we see in this artist is the re-establishment of the power of the body to transmit the desire for freedom. The repressive act is denounced here with beauty, integrity, and clarity. As Lethaby (2017), of the British Arts and Crafts movement, said in the XIX century, preceding activism, “art is liberated humanity, and everything else is slavery”.



Figure 3. Pavlensky, Performance “Stitch” (Courtesy of Vyacheslav Kombarov).

#### 4. Activism as experiences of autonomy, resistance or disobedience

Activism is a current language of independence and freedom. In our research activities, we have recorded hundreds of activism experiences around the globe. We will now highlight some essential prototypes from our archive to study their cases. A clear example is Banksy, graffiti artist, political activist and unidentified film director, who carries out his work from Bristol in the United Kingdom anonymously. The artist defines graffiti as the revenge of the lower class or guerrilla that allows an individual to wrestle power, territory, and glory, in front of a larger and better-equipped enemy. Banksy’s works have addressed various political and social issues, including anti-war, anti-consumerism, and anti-fascism.



Figure 4. Banksy. Artist’s website ([www.banksy.co.uk](http://www.banksy.co.uk)).

Banksy attacks various rules of conventional art. The first one is the authorship of the artist and the cult of the ego. The anonymity of the author, and the always transgressive character of his pieces, which appear on surfaces and spaces of all kinds and all over the world, ends with the convention of art in museums and places of worship. With this communicative power, he draws attention to realities and situations, as he has recently done in the border territories dividing Israel and Palestine. In addition, it fulfills the requirement of ephemeral art, which has been erased or eliminated in many parts of the world. And it is entirely outside the market.

Especially compelling is the case of China where, under apparent calm, powerful forms of activist protest have been developing. One of the most famous is the Chinese artist Ai-Wei-Wei. Another crucial example is that of the activist Wang-Zi. As a gay man, something considered a crime in his country; he has resorted to the popular art of paper cuttings that constitute a collective cultural memory, to represent the life and emotions of the gay individual. Wang-Zi has been incorporating new forms of artistic expression into his repertoire.

In Spain, the economic crisis of recent years has become a true incubator for activism. Luzinterruptus, a collaborative and anonymous group created in 2008 and working in large cities such as Madrid and Berlin, is characterized by interventions in the public space using light as raw material. In 2014, they carried out their protest

action in Madrid “The Police Is Present”, in rejection of what is popularly known as the muzzle law, referring to the Organic Law of Protection of Citizen Security, approved by the Popular Party in July 2015.

The artists of this group work with the luminous flux and its supports, and their performances are always associated

with this element. To protest about the presence of police in the streets, they generated a visual *trompe l’oeil* with illuminated boxes on cars. The playfulness, surprise, and creation make us visualize the idea of artists. As indicated by Clark & Kallman (2011), “in an increasingly alienated public space, these displays, which recover the artistic voice, bring us closer again to the “*civitas*”, to the “active democratic citizenship space”.

A similar Spanish example is that of the collective Basurama, founded in 2001, which is an example of activist creativity that has centered its area of study and action on production processes and the generation of waste involved. The “Agostamiento Project” was a site-specific contribution to the “Abierto x Obras program” that took place in the old cold storage room of the Slaughterhouse in Madrid. The collective proposed an interior landscape created by planting 7,000 sunflowers that had been cultivated next to the inhabitants of the “Gran Vía del Sureste”, in the “Ensanche de Vallecas”, an iconic neighborhood of the real estate bubble. Their creation, in the words of Basurama, “is an invitation to chat and eat sunflower seeds, looking to the future from the darkest place”. This project was made in Madrid in 2016.

The rediscovery of public space or the shared world allows artists to illuminate social life. With it, the artists get “a spatial reconfiguration of the perceptible and the thinkable, as a promise of a new territory of the possible” (Segura-Cabañero & Simó-Mulet, 2017). Following these outstanding examples analyzed from our files, let us proceed with an explanation of the links between activism and educational contexts to which we may have access.

### 5. Educational functions. Activism workshops

Once the prototypes were known, we developed experiences in activism workshops for young people. After several weeks working with artists and young university students, activism turned out to be a fundamental educational form, in addition to a language and way of communicating and expressing autonomy, dissidence, and opposition. If, as we know, the revolution of the XXI century is above all an educational revolution, in which the learning communities obtain their education from breaking the limits in classrooms, in search of new identities, new ways of understanding meanings and adopting new educational roles (Wenger 1998; Aparicio-Guadas, 2004), activism offers us a new channel for educational communication.

Indeed, education, which has been in crisis for over a decade must abandon the hindrances identified by researchers (Aguaded, 2005): the



Figure 5. Work of Wang-Zi (VärldskulturMuseerna: <https://bit.ly/2rick3d>).

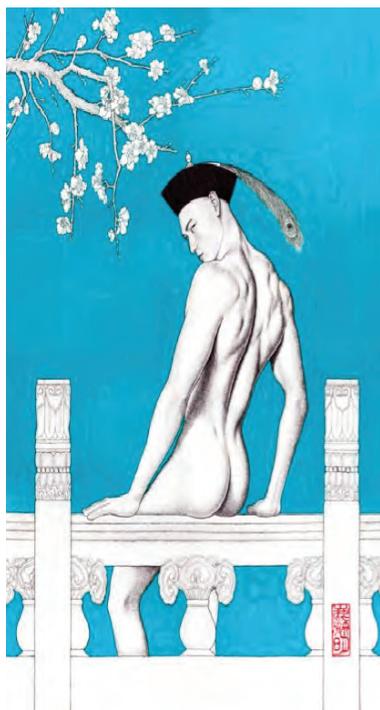


Figure 6. “Calendar” Work of the Chinese artist Musk Ming ([www.muskming.com](http://www.muskming.com)).

absence of freedom, the “writing-centrism”, the mastery of theoretical knowledge, students in a passive and receptive position, and rigidity in positions and academic roles (Aguaded, 2005: 30). Instead, in the “educommunication” leading up to the halfway point of the XXI century, the approaches to education proposed by authors such as Paulo Freire and Mario Kaplún rule, in which not only communication and education are seen in intimate relation, but with a liberating purpose of global civic education (Middaugh & Kahne, 2013; Pegurer-Caprino & Martínez-Cerdá, 2016). In the processes in which educción advances towards constituting a liberating element and a generator of active communities capable of empowering themselves, activism can provide all the necessary elements to re-signify teaching and move away from the formation of mercantilism or the extreme reification of culture.



Figure 7. Luzinterruptus (<https://bit.ly/1w4GZPw>).

As De-Gonzalo and Pérez-Prieto, who collaborated with us in the workshops as leading artists, state in their work “La Intención” (2008), these are some of the normal educational functions of activism that are effects of this part of our work:

1) Activism integrates the individual in the symbolic construction of reality, away from the passive positions to which global communication, digital technologies or advertising and political indoctrination lead. Activism is immediate social intervention, participation, and active awakening. Culture is fundamentally experienced (La Intención, 2008). And art is of great interest for those phenomena that engender what these authors call “generative chains” (2008). These generative chains are effectively produced in workshops with young people, renewing in them the impulse towards the conservation and generation of culture, that is, producing true education.

2) Activism generates in people languages to express themselves, becoming emitters, and not just recipients of messages. The manufactured, constructed character, the craftsmanship of activist interventions teaches how to proceed to participate, moving away from the traditional forms of art and leading to the disappearance of their effect on everyday life.

3) Culture is a necessary food for human socialization. With it the individual is freed from competitive, passive, commodified views of life, adopting a playful, hedonistic, shared or generous vision of it. Activism is a social ethics literacy, which leads to a “non-individualistic autonomy” of the person (2008). In the world of art, the simple political idea of the search for equality is transcended, in favor of an idea not of egalitarian unification, but of similar creative expansion of the diverse, in a qualitative and attributive equality.



Figure 8. Basurama (<https://bit.ly/2JXExDt>).

4) In the end, activism guarantees the integration of the individual in a construction of collective spaces and contexts, which is both individual and marked by the creative personality of each human being in their different capacity. Art and creation have personal traces, and at the same time, they are collective and collaborative contributions. It is again a transcendent function of the individualistic/social dilemma of the non-artistic ways of conceiving social life.

Artistic literacy has to do with the ability of art to re-establish and channel human expression. As Abarca (2016: 8) indicates, “a work of urban art allows the viewer to measure the physical dimension of the environment by projecting its own physical dimension on it”. The creative environ-

ments generated in activism humanize spaces (Garnier, 2012) and involve young people, as we can see in the workshops we have organized. Creativity expands in a network among young people (Hernandez-Merayo & al., 2013). This art regains its educational function because it gives young people an active and participatory role.

The sociopolitical literacy of activism works at deep levels of human experience, beyond the construction of the usual maps of meaning and universes in which the media, political institutions, economic and productive powers

emit their dominant imaginaries (Castoriadis, 1975). At this deep cognitive level, art can establish new ways of facing the human experience (Toro-Alé, 2004; García-Andújar, 2009). And, when it triggers actions such as the construction of a collage or the painting of a wall in an urban garden, what we appreciate is how it anchors cognition and direct action in a unique educational link. As Abarca (2016: 9) reiterates, “urban art is, therefore, a call to action. It makes the viewer aware of its own power. It brings us back to the time when each person could reorder their environment as much as the potential of their body allowed before the moment in which the power of a few began to determine the limits of action of all others. It evokes that inherently human reality, repressed by the alienating environment in which we live”.

The process of converting activism into a form of social literacy has multiple beneficial results. This is a series of results from our research that we wish to highlight here, obtained from the direct participation of young people in our activism workshops:

- It directly connects with the need for practical integration and participation of young people sentenced today to passive roles and rejected by the professional world.
- It rescues the normal functions of art towards its de-commodification and recovery of a spontaneous and non-speculative character.
- It breaks academic and professional barriers about who can or cannot intervene, reversing the traditional roles of cultural expression.
- It re-signifies urban spaces degraded or without personality.
- It acts at the level of fundamental cognitions of the environment in which we live. It undoes the tendency to fictionalize social life, encouraged by the rise of digital media, indicating the immediate material dimension of human existence.
- It connects the life of young people with material and pragmatic aspects that make them co-responsible for the social structure and urban context. It invites participation in their creative environments and transmits to young people the spirit of rupture and liberation that always accompanies dynamic initiatives of social action. These results derive from the concrete experiences of artists, students and researchers in the activism environment. In educational contexts related to citizen participation, social action and the development of communication, activism liberates an entirely new capacity and energy.

## 6. Conclusions

Our study establishes concepts, linguistic descriptions and cultural and educational functions of activism, with examples on a global scale, and explores its potential as a new formative language.

The development of analyses, archive, and experiences in workshops has allowed us to justify the importance of the activist phenomenon in real contexts of education and social life.

As Lippard (1984) observes, activism tends to see art as a mutually stimulating dialogue, and not as a specialized lesson or an ideology imparted from above. Its dynamism, its expressiveness, the rupturing structure of its language, makes it an art for non-artists, an instrument of creation for the non-creative, and therefore, an ideal way toward change and social evolution. It is a new form of freedom.

According to Valdivieso (2014: 20), the attention that the “official channels” of the world of art have been giving to activism lately entails a danger: the instrumentalization of protest movements, from the art system, and the reduction of these to mere artistic expressions, thus neutralizing and anesthetizing its political and social intentions through its “musealization”.

However, activism moves away from pure aesthetic art and approaches non-artistic expression, to environments and non-artistic media, as Mullin (2017) says. It creates a dialogue with amateurism, with the hybrid and heterodox spirit. It introduces rupture, the carnivalesque, and mockery in traditional canonical styles. All this leads it to the reintegration of art in the social environment, and to enrich the conventional artistic medium with imagination and life, while putting it at the service of educational needs, which are vital today.

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