



The Power of Artistic Speech

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Received 13 Oct., 2025; Revised 25 Oct., 2025; Accepted 27 Oct., 2025 © The author(s) 2025.

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I. Introduction

Article 19 of the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights guarantees that "everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression."¹ The term "freedom of expression" encompasses multiple categories, including journalism, activism, and religion. Yet arguably the most important category of human expression is art. Art absorbs and critically reflects the zeitgeist, as well as forcing its audience to encounter ideas that are unpopular and controversial. Because the proverbial picture is worth 1,000 words, artistic expression influences society the most. Performance art, visual art, body art, and music have a unique propensity to impact our beliefs, alter our perspectives, and challenge societal norms. Throughout history, artistic creativity has served as an effective strategy to popularize reform movements and challenge political oppression. For this reason, art is perhaps the most essential and efficacious form of human expression.

Journalism — one of the most basic ways to convey political speech— requires readers to take time to read all the facts on a page. On the other hand, visual art can question reality through arranging colours on a page, provoking emotion with movements of the body, and pushing the boundaries of ideas using architectural shapes. Furthermore, art is a universally accessible form of expression. Whereas text on paper needs to be translated for others to interpret, art can be deciphered wherever and whenever.² This allows art to reach all corners of the Earth through platforms such as social media, meanwhile also creating discourse within communities. Beyond that, the distinctive ability of art to be free from rigid structure and regulation is why this form of expression is the most powerful, yet underrated, form of speech.

The speech we are exposed to—rather than the speech we express—provides us with the greatest benefits. In the context of social reform, other people's artistic expression is vital for creating transformative change and education—more so than our own artistic speech. Not only are we influenced by other people's thoughts and opinions, our freedom of speech builds upon the ideas expressed by others.

The Limitations of Free Speech and Expression

The fundamental issue with any form of speech is that it can never be entirely free. There are both formal and informal restrictions to the extent to which a person can express their opinions. Legal restrictions come in many forms; according to the Constitution of the Republic of Singapore, Parliament guarantees, through clause (1)(a) of the 14th Amendment, that "every citizen of Singapore has the right to freedom of speech and expression" unless that speech conflicts with the "morality and restrictions designed to protect the privileges of Parliament."³ Similarly, in the United States, the First Amendment generally grants broad leeway for expression—including hate speech—though speech that stokes imminent violence or compromises national security can be limited.⁴ Informally, and beyond the bounds of government regulation of speech, cancel culture is a form of social censorship, as the public reinforces societal norms while shutting down offensive ideas. Sigal Ben-Porath, an expert on free speech and former chair of the University of Pennsylvania's Committee on Open Expression called cancel culture the "remov[al of people] from prominent positions on account of an ideological breach."⁵ A paper by Juan S. Morales and Margaret Samahita concluded that individuals who hold controversial opinions "adapt to external pressures by self-censoring" in a climate rife with cancel culture.⁶

Artists, like political speakers, face similar limitations and pressures on their expression. The United Nations' Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) called for the protection of artists due to the censorship, threats, and harassment they face.⁷ Around the world, artists who voiced their views on wars and politics risked suppression. For example, there is "legislation against films that show the country in a negative light" in Cambodia; "a singer ... on death row for distributing allegedly blasphemous lyrics" in Nigeria; and travel bans for challenging leaders in places such as China, Thailand, and Jordan.⁸

Art Activism and the Freedom of Expression

Despite free speech limitations, artists continue to use their skills to present their perspectives and fight for social change. A single sketch, production, or sculpture can represent an entire ideology or expose disparities in society more effectively than any essay or speech. For example, the 1996 musical *Rent* by Jonathan Larson is widely recognised for raising awareness on the AIDs epidemic whilst "celebrat[ing] the lives of a group of young, racially diverse, LGBTQ artists and activists."⁹ This "pop cultur[e] phenomenon" followed a struggling group of artists who suffered from HIV/AIDs.¹⁰ In a world where mainstream media avoided these issues and directors showed no faith in Larson, *Rent* received national attention after winning four of the ten Tony Awards it was nominated for in 1996.¹¹

The legacy of *Rent* is manifested in the other Broadway musicals it inspired, such as *Spring Awakening* (2006) and *Next to Normal* (2009). Larson's decade-long dream to bring recognition to the LBGTQ community through his musical exceeded all expectations. His platform not only inspired other voices, but Larson's artistic activism paved the way for countless organizations such as Broadway Cares/Equity Fights AIDS and The Trevor Project to continue destigmatizing HIV/AIDs.¹² This highlights the success of Larson's musical to inspire beyond just the art industry by validating the struggles of the marginalized communities throughout history. Tragically, however, Larson never lived to witness its success, as he passed away the night before its debut.

Another instance where art stimulated profound social change occurred after the rise of Mexican muralism between the early 1920s through the late 1950s.¹³ Funded by the Mexican government to promote a sense of national identity, Mexican muralism quickly became part of the country's culture. Following the Mexican Revolution, the movement aimed to unify the largely illiterate population, and art successfully transcended these barriers. Some of the more notable artists within this movement were Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, and David Alfaro Siqueiros, dubbed "Los Tres Grandes."¹⁴ These artists made large-scale wall paintings in public spaces depicting revolutionary leaders and laborers in pre-colonial Mexican history. *Destruction of the Old Order* by Orozco in 1926 depicted two peasant-like figures turning back to watch the collapse of "nineteenth-century neoclassical structures," walking towards a new age after the Revolution.¹⁵ Located on the first floor of the National Preparatory School in Mexico, the mural stands between two others of Orozco's works, *The Trench* (1926) and *Maternity* (1923). *Maternity* depicts the initial optimism in the birth of a newly unified nation, using Renaissance influence to evoke hope. *The Trench* used expressive lines and a dark palette to highlight the "emotional content of the mural": the death of many faceless soldiers in war.¹⁶

These murals not only offer a commentary on the Mexican Revolution, but they were a vehicle for Orozco to reflect his political opinion through his artwork, using art as critical expression. Depicting Mexico as "the vanguard of art a century ago," the success of muralism in Mexico impacted art globally as well, spreading to neighboring cities such as Los Angeles, San Diego, and San Antonio in the Chicano Art Movement.¹⁷ Though Mexican muralism is now, a century later, considered a less-popular art form, its relevance reverberates as part of Mexico's national identity. According to American art historian Barbara Haskell, muralism had a "seismic influence" on the development of street art.¹⁸ The Mexican Muralism movement shows the ability of art to bring a community together by serving as an accessible way for underprivileged individuals to understand the goals of the government. Many of these artworks are still for show in museums such as the Art Institute of Chicago and the Museum of Modern Art in New York.¹⁹

One of the most famous examples of transformative, activist art was the street art movement arising during the Arab Spring (2010-2012). As waves of pro-democracy protests swept across the Middle East and North Africa, "the vast proliferation of ...the arts" became a visual and creative tool of grass-roots protest against corruption, economic stagnation, and rise of authoritarianism.²⁰ Thirty-one-year-old French-Tunisian artist eL Seed used "calligraffiti" to protest against the resurgence of "ultra conservative Islamic groups", and show dissent towards the government by featuring classical Arabic script from the Quran in his graffiti, particularly "decorating the tallest minaret in Tunisia with a verse from the Quran that tackles intolerance."²¹ Other artists honored the deaths of innocent civilians at the hands of the government, showing collective

resilience. The use of street art during the Arab Spring helped unify people based on shared struggles and visual resistance spanning geographical barriers. Protesters throughout countries such as Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, and Libya saw their fight documented by the graffiti painted by street artists, thus reinforcing their collective identity fighting for democracy and freedom of expression.

eL Seed's recent work in 2015 at the Shubbak Festival in Shoreditch, London, even featured a quote from John Locke, demonstrating the connection between artistic expression and human freedom: "It is one thing to show a man that he is in error, and another to put him in possession of truth."²² According to eL Seed, the quote "opens up a dialogue about the collective responsibility we have toward each other" after "the massacre in Sousse, Tunisia, and the shooting in Charleston the same month."²³ From Cape Town, Africa, to Mykonos, Greece, eL Seed's art has evoked emotion on an international scale.

As these examples attest, art plays a critical role in sustaining cultural identity and challenging oppression. From ancient cave carvings to monumental historic architecture to interpretive modern art, artistic expression represents the pinnacle of freedom of speech.

The Benefits of Other's Freedom of Speech

While our own capacity for self-expression is often honored and celebrated as an individual right to free speech, the speeches, writings, paintings, and performances we produce are never wholly our original work. In other words, our opinions are intimately shaped by the society that surrounds us. Before we could form words, we looked at picture books to comprehend an idea about the world around us; we acted out motions to describe our needs; and we copied the movement of our caretaker's mouth to finally pronounce our first words. The early exposure to school plays, movies, and music shaped our cognitive development, taught us social values, and improved our emotional intelligence.

The same idea extends to the art we are exposed to as adults; our opinions and knowledge are continually propped up by previous works, styles, and ideas. Even the most original art pieces were inspired by the expressions of others; as Serbian conceptual artist and performer Marina Abramović notes, Rembrandt's self portrait from 1640, *Self Portrait at the Age of 34*, hung in London's National Gallery, could "hardly be a ... personal work," since, he copied the pose of *Portrait of Gerolamo Barbarigo* painted by Titian.²⁴ This shows that, as important as our own freedom of speech is to us, it is others' freedom of speech that benefits us the most.

Furthermore, it is through art that we spark other forms of expression. For example, the different interpretations of art generate social discourse by building bridges between communities. Art is especially impactful when it drives collective action by uniting people through cultural symbols, shared narratives, and visual observation. *Guernica* by Pablo Picasso, a response to the bombing of a Basque town during the Spanish Civil War, now serves as "an anti-war symbol, and an embodiment of peace."²⁵ This proves the ability of art to trigger dialogue on important topics expressed by the artist.

II. Conclusion

In a world where speech is increasingly regulated, the role of art remains a powerful and efficacious form of expression. In ways that mere speech cannot accomplish easily, art fuels social change and conveys fast, intrinsic comprehension in its viewer. More importantly, it is not just our own freedom of expression that shapes us, but the exposure to the expression of others that challenges our thinking, empowers our thoughts, and ultimately inspires the empathy needed for social change.

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