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KQED Arts

Hell No, We Won't Go: Outstanding Radical Art and Global Movements in 2014

By Christian L. Frock
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Recently *New York Times* film critic A. O. Scott asked, “Is our art equal to the challenge of our times?” Querying the role of culture en masse (films, music, books, theatre and, yes, visual art), Scott expressed a vague disappointment with today’s artists in addressing the issues of our era, from wealth disparity to racial inequality to climate change to violence, and so on. To this question, I would say if you don’t know, you haven’t been paying attention — or perhaps more gently put, look beyond what you think you already know.

Expecting today’s radical culture to look like the radical culture of yesteryear is a mistake. Scott cites select standards of bygone eras as iconic masterworks in times of upheaval, including *A Raisin in the Sun* and Woody Guthrie songs, without seeming to dwell much on the contemporary shifts that have enabled far greater opportunities for self-expression and resistance, chiefly social media and a networked global community. In the future, 2014 will be considered a watershed historical moment with

radical shifts in art, culture, collective communities and action — this article is a mere sample of highlights from the year in which art, collective action and social media changed everything.

But first, take note: As is well known, in July the world witnessed the homicide of Staten Island resident Eric Garner at the hands of police — Garner’s death was filmed with a cell phone camera by his friend Ramsey Orta in a video that went viral online. It is one of the most astonishing examples of citizen journalism the world has seen, for the way in which it presents a clear miscarriage of justice and for the way in which it has been freely and publicly distributed, bypassing conventional journalism and documentary filmmaking.

Soon after, Orta was indicted on unrelated weapons charges, in an act of possible retribution for exposing the police — a online petition calls upon the NYPD to drop these charges, not only as a matter of protecting Orta as a whistleblower, but to also defend the rights of citizens to film or photograph the police.

It is impossible to imagine this historical moment without the evidence of Orta’s video. I am not arguing that Orta’s video is an artwork, but it has been a catalyst for many of the actions, artworks and generative dialogs about racism, police brutality/militarization, civil rights and protest that have come after it. The precariousness of his situation now, and his virtual disappearance from the media, represents a grave threat not only to his own personal freedom, but to our own. Speaking up on Orta’s behalf now is a matter of protecting everyone’s freedom to stand up to injustice in the future.

#BlackLivesMatter #BrownLivesMatter #Ferguson #Eric Garner #ICantBreathe #AllLivesMatter #NoJusticeNoPeace

This was the year the United Nations condemned U.S. police brutality on the global stage. It was also the year artist Steve McQueen won an Oscar at the Academy Awards for Best Picture with *12 Years a Slave*, the first black filmmaker and the first visual artist in history to win the award.

In Missouri, protestors took to the streets to demonstrate against the killing of Michael Brown, an unarmed 18-year-old African American, and some took to the St. Louis Symphony to disrupt business as usual, captured in videos that went viral on YouTube. Mary Engelbreit, the sweetly saccharine illustrator of cherry pies and cats, among other innocuous images, created a protest print to benefit the Brown family — at last count, she had raised more than \$100,000.

This fall, St. Louis-based street artist Damon Davis wheat-pasted iconic images of hands throughout Ferguson, in a gesture that has been called by some “the most powerful street art in America.”

Immediately following the non-indictment in the Garner case, Congressman Hank Johnson performed an original protest poem on the floor of the U.S. House of Representatives, in an unconventional example of government moving more quickly than artists. (Congress has artists, who knew?)

Perhaps the most iconic moments of resistance in 2014 include mass die-in protests all over the world — from Grand Central Station to shopping malls to city streets to schools to hospitals, people laid down in protest to declare that black lives matter, brown lives matter and all lives matter. Twitter released a data rendering of iconic hashtags tweeted around the world in a single day and the image was captivating, yielding the powerful objections of a dispersed global community. Organizers in New York initiated Millions March, “A Day of Anger,” and millions took to the street everywhere — French Street artist JR’s protest images of Eric Garner’s eyes became an icon of the movement.

In the Bay Area we saw many gestures of solidarity with local victims of police brutality. Justice 4 Alex Nieto, a community action group organized around the unresolved homicide of Mission resident Alex Nieto at the hands of SFPD in March of this year, organized numerous actions and disruptions, including protest banners at AT&T Park featuring the work of local artist Oree Originol during the playoffs and World Series. (Remember those iconic sails in McCovey Cove?)

The Anti-Eviction Mapping Project (AMP), an action group spearheaded by artist and organizer Erin McEloy, among other organizers, released a new map detailing police-related deaths in Oakland from the 1970s to today, revealing that 99% of the victims have been people of color. AMP, of course, has also been instrumental in revealing lopsided data associated with gentrification, evictions and displacement as a result of new tech wealth in the city — to the extent that their work is regularly cited in the development of new city policies regarding both police brutality and gentrification.

This summer, longtime San Francisco resident and pioneering Chicana artist Yolanda López forced the issues of elder displacement and gentrification with her performance project *Accessories to an Eviction* and held public rummage sales in various art venues to narrow her lifetime possessions and raise money in the face of her forthcoming eviction from her home of several decades.

Meanwhile, on the heels of numerous nonprofit and commercial galleries being forced to relocate or shutter and in the wake of Intersection for the Arts, the city's oldest nonprofit, suspending programs, the Bay Area art community rallied around the revival of The Lab and raised more than \$54,000 via Kickstarter with 601 micro-funders. (In March, Kickstarter announced a milestone billion dollars in crowd-funding initiatives, with more than 5.7M funders worldwide.)

Digital rights and privacy were never far from public discourse — this fall Edward Snowden was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize for outing government surveillance, a story that was featured in the Laura Poitras-directed documentary *Citizenfour*.

Artist Trevor Paglen, who also contributed cinematography to the film, was recognized by the Electronic Frontier Foundation with the Pioneer Award, the first in the prize's history to go to a visual artist, for his open source photographs of secret government agencies, the NSA among them.

#YesAllWomen #IBelieveHer #BringBackOurGirls

Women's rights came to the fore in the national dialog about violence against women. In her Ray Rice-inspired make-up tutorial on YouTube, after the athlete was exposed for spousal abuse, young filmmaker Megan MacKay asked, while applying orange-tinted makeup, "Orange you sad that the American news source most dedicated to truthful journalism turned out to be TMZ?"

Meanwhile in New York, Columbia University art student Emma Sulkowicz has exposed the rampant college sexual violence epidemic by carrying her dorm mattress everywhere — and will continue to do so until her alleged rapist is expelled — and spawned a movement of collective support. Images of Sulkowicz carrying her unwieldy mattress on her own are provocative, images wherein her peers voluntarily help her are only more so.

#FreePalestine #UmbrellaRevolution #YaMcAnse #Ayotzinapa

In Pittsburgh, Conflict Kitchen, the socially engaged artwork/take-out restaurant run by artist Jon Rubin and Dawn Weleski and featuring cuisine from locales around the world in conflict with the U.S., received credible death threats for serving Palestinian food and landed in a media frenzy when a funder publicly expressed discomfort with the project's aims. Here in the Bay Area, the Oakland Palestine Solidarity Mural commanded a city block and featured contributions by a host of artists, including the legendary artist and former Black Panther Minister of Culture Emory Douglas.

Further afield, artists initiated global actions to address unrest — In April, artists created giant "aerial portraits" to remind drone operators that they were bombing people on the ground in Pakistan, and not "bug splats."

In Damascus, artists gathered shards of pottery from the refuse of the Syrian War to create the world's largest mosaic.

In Hong Kong, myriad artists participated in the Umbrella Revolution, launching countless icons of resistance in the digital ether. In New York, the 2014 Climate March was the largest the world had ever seen and #floodwallstreet initiated a day of artistic action, summoning people to wear blue and to take to the streets in a river of human forms.

The murder of 43 teaching students in the rural community of Ayotzinapa, Mexico exposed astonishing government corruption and instigated widespread resistance around the world, including a Tumblr of images created by artists to stand as a public record.

In Norway artist Jonas Dahlberg was selected to create a massive land art memorial to the victims of the 2011 Utøya gun massacre that killed 69 people, mostly youth.

Artists also advanced the cause of artists. In Chile, artist Papas Fritas allegedly stole and destroyed \$500 million worth of student debt paperwork. Socially engaged artist Rick Lowe won a MacArthur Genius Prize for his work on *Project Row Houses*, a community-based initiative that re-imagines social engagement, housing solutions and artistic action. San Francisco-based artist and 2014 John Simon Guggenheim Fellow Stephanie Syjuco self-published her complete award application online for the edification and advancement of other artists. New York-based artist Steve Lambert, co-director of the Center for Artistic Activism, publicly declined his candidacy for the lucrative Art Prize on the grounds of moral integrity and, in the process, raised important questions about funding in the arts.

All across the country, adjunct professors voted to create unions, most notably at several Bay Area art schools, including Mills College, San Francisco Art Institute and California College of the Arts, redefining considerations of artist-driven labor through collective bargaining. W. A. G. E., a New York-based artist advocacy group, released a fee calculator to encourage artists to collect fees for their work. And, for anyone who still needs encouraging, popular musician and composer Questlove urged artists to write more protest songs. As if on cue, singer-songwriter D'Angelo released his first album in fourteen years titled *Black Messiah*, and many have already predicted it contains new anthems for these times.

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As much as 2014 was a year of brutal violence, heartbreak and failures of justice, it was also an incredible year of art and uprising and change. People have become savvy about leveraging the tools at their disposal and connecting online, which means that we don't have to wait for someone to write and publish the next literary masterpiece to see movement happening around us — it is happening now, in real time, everyday, on the screen.

It can be said that today's radical culture bears little resemblance to the radical culture of bygone eras — this does not mean that art is shrinking from the challenges of our time, on the contrary, art is rushing at these challenges from every angle and from everywhere, en masse, every day, with the promise of more in the days ahead.

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