TURNING TO Art IN A TIME OF C...
When Michael Brown, an unarmed African-American teenager, was shot and killed on August 9, 2014 by a white police officer in Ferguson, MO, parts of the nation exploded in grief and outrage. Thousands took to the streets to protest for justice, and thousands more turned to art as a way to confront and process the events that have taken the lives of Brown and many others. In this time of crisis, as in many others, people turned to art as a way to affirm their humanity, challenge the status quo, and imagine a better future.

After Brown’s death, imagery of hands raised up in surrender—the pose Brown was in when he was gunned down—and the hashtag #blacklivesmatter became the central image and message of a nationwide movement, extending far outside Missouri. And in Ferguson, plank-board hands installed on the lawns of Ferguson homes rose from the ground. *The St. Louis American* newspaper was repurposed as a canvas as one artist painted protesters and civil rights leaders over the day’s grim reports. A glass casket was marched through the streets, reflecting the faces it passed.
The vision for the reflective casket came from 26-year-old De Andrea Nichols—a community arts organizer, designer, Community Engagement Manager at the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis, and a steady figure on the ground in Ferguson. “I wanted people to be able to see themselves in this struggle,” she said. “I wanted to evoke empathy. It could have been any one of us.”

Nichols joined a local “ARTivists” group led by organizer Elizabeth Vega to create plastic shields with the faces of Malcolm X, Coretta Scott King, Michael Brown, and other Black figures painted on the front. “The point was to shield us from the police who were always in riot gear no matter what. We responded to their antagonizing with art.”

While the spirit on the ground was participatory, there were always bystanders, admiring the art from the sidelines, asking to take a photo with a banner, shield, or sign, peeking out the windows of their homes. “Art has been transformative not only to those who are creating these artifacts and tangibles, but also to those experiencing it as viewers,” Nichols says. “There is intrinsic value... art highlights people’s willingness to be vulnerable and transparent with each other, and it is the way to communicate how we feel about what is going on.”

This exchange between artist and viewer creates space for conversation, understanding, and even education. And not only for those in Ferguson, but for millions of people watching intently from all over the world.

Damon Davis, a 29-year-old St. Louis-based interdisciplinary artist and the creator of some of the most powerful images of the movement, holds this sentiment close: “The role of the artist in every movement is to create, educate, and inspire. Through those elements we cause disruption and challenge the status quo.”

Davis photographed, in stark black and white, the raised hands of peaceful protesters who have played a vital role in the movement. They were then enlarged into posters that Davis pasted on the boarded-up fronts of business damaged in the looting and rioting of more violent protests, with the consent of business owners. The raised hands, in all their power and simplicity, speak: We are here. We matter.

Hands Up lawn sculptures created by Damon Davis and artist Basil Kincad in response to the murder of Mike Brown and the Ferguson protests. Installed on lawns of Ferguson homes. Photo by Damon Davis.
BUILDING THE INFRASTRUCTURE & LOOKING FORWARD

Both Nichols and Davis are graduates of the St. Louis Regional Arts Commission’s Community Arts Training Institute (CAT), a five-month intensive program that offers professional development and networking opportunities to artists of all disciplines, as well as community activists, social workers, educators, and policymakers. The goal is to foster strong cross-sector partnerships and create arts programs in under-resourced communities. Nichols speaks highly of the program, calling it “the most robust network and community of support for artists who are using art as a change-making tool.”

Programs like CAT and the RAC’s new Community Social Impact (CSI) fund—launched in the wake of Ferguson and intended to support local artists and organizations that are working on arts programming that impacts the community positively—are essential to the health and longevity of artists and arts organizations in this movement. RAC has created an evaluation component alongside the CSI grants, offering workshops to their grantees on how to best evaluate the impact of their projects. “This is the first year in RAC’s 30-year history that we are putting an evaluation tool alongside the issuance of a grant,” says RAC Director of Marketing Sherry Sissac. “We want to be sure these projects are sustainable.”

In Ferguson, there is a sense of building and rebuilding, not just the physical spaces, but for the future of the people. Nichols explains, “Many of us in the design community have been called upon to mentor youth and young organizers in Ferguson with learning digital skills and literacy. The Ferguson Youth Tech initiative is a group of young folks creating visuals and infographics as a way to document the movement.”

Thanks to Davis and Nichols, and the thousands others continuing to create in a myriad of ways, art continues to promote dialogue, make powerful statements, and push toward justice. Nichols also sees art as offering an important chronicle of the movement. “Art is the historian…we’ve been creating artifacts, in all different forms, to mark this moment, to tell this story.” And the story of the movement is the story of Michael Brown, Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, and more. Told and retold with each painting, print, and poem. Carried on each banner and sign. Alive in song and color.

QUICK LOOK

Get Involved Online

There are plenty of ways to get involved! Start here.

- St. Louis Regional Arts Commission
  www.art-stl.com
- Connected for Justice
  www.connectedforjustice.com
- Damon Davis’ website
  www.heartacheandpaint.com
- De Andrea Nichols’s website
  www.deandreanichols.com
- Our collection of #blacklivesmatter projects from across America
  https://storify.com/Americans4Arts/black-lives-matter