

## 8 Make It Matter: Using Art to Engage the Heart and the Imagination

More than twenty years ago in *From Art to Politics*, Murray Edelman observed, “In a crucial sense, then, art is the fountainhead from which political discourse, beliefs about politics, and consequent actions, ultimately spring.”<sup>1</sup> And yet art continues to be overlooked as an advocacy strategy, and artists are generally not considered to be political actors who intentionally effect political changes through their artwork.

There are intellectual and cultural reasons for this oversight. Political scientists tend to view art as a form of cultural expression rather than as political advocacy. When art is explicitly political, as in the case of protest art, it is commonly considered to be a component of the protest strategy or a tool for social mobilization and publicity, rather than as a strategy in itself.<sup>2</sup> Since artists are generally not the decision makers for policy, and since they commonly operate outside political institutions (advocacy art is considered distinct from government propaganda, which does operate inside political institutions), it has been difficult for political scientists to incorporate them into theoretical models that focus on actors and institutions.

Not surprisingly, cultural scholars, art historians, and artists themselves have more complex and nuanced understandings of the profound influence that artists and their creations can have on politics.<sup>3</sup> However, there is often a tension between art that inspires political action and art as political action. Anthony Downey articulates the dilemma well in his *Art and Politics Now* (2014): “There is a distinction to be had between art practices that engage with politics, and the overall aims of political activism: art as a practice does not necessarily have any clear-cut goals, nor are its end results quantifiable in terms of desirable or fixed outcomes.”<sup>4</sup> While art as a practice may be different from political activism, he acknowledges that in the

sphere of environmental advocacy in particular, “we witness a deliberate blurring of any distinction between eco-activism and art practice.”<sup>5</sup>

For the most part, scholarship about art’s role in politics either describes a range of artistic works that are engaged with a specific political issue, such as civil rights, AIDS, or the environment,<sup>6</sup> or focuses on a single or small number of works and discusses how those particular pieces were influential in a specific political battle.<sup>7</sup> The last political scientist to engage theoretically about how art relates to political action was Edelman, and his focus was primarily on art’s symbolic value, the way that it can frame public understandings of political issues through the images and narratives it creates.<sup>8</sup>

In this chapter I take a slightly different approach. I am primarily concerned with artists as political actors and art as an effective advocacy strategy, which is sometimes related to art-as-symbolism, but not always. The examples in this chapter aim to illustrate and explain aspects of art’s efficacy as an advocacy strategy and focus on a selection of art and artists who have generated proenvironmental change. Individually and collectively, the examples selected here demonstrate how artists can effect political change through their networks by attracting the attention of, eliciting an emotional response from, and inspiring policymakers and the public. These individuals are then activated to make change, and that energy travels through multiple networks, energizing the decision makers to act. Through their influence on multiple stakeholders simultaneously, artists are able to shift the way entire networks of people are responding to the political challenges they face.

The examples set forth here are not intended to be a comprehensive review of political art in the four countries that serve as this book’s focus. Furthermore, I do not distinguish between art that emerges organically from the inspiration of the artist and then has political effects (whether intended or not) and art that is commissioned for the specific purpose of generating a desired political or social effect. Both forms represent the use of art as an advocacy strategy.

Instead, this chapter is concerned with the interplay between artists, their audiences, and political responses. While I am sensitive to the concerns of artists that their cultural production not be considered to be valuable only when it serves a political, social, or moral purpose, my intellectual focus here is on examining the ways that art and artists can be political as well as cultural. As in the other chapters, I first ask why art as a strategy is effective and then move to discuss the ways that art’s “engage the heart” and “inspire

the imagination” strategies can be scaled up—from a single incidence of success to one that generates positive change for a wider set of people and places.

### **Art as Effective Advocacy: How It Works**

When I asked my interview subjects why art was an effective advocacy strategy, they emphasized the power of art to connect with people’s emotions and imaginations. As many of them described it, scientists and journalists can fill your head with numbers, but they can’t make you care. As Ruby Yang, an Oscar- and Academy Award-winning filmmaker, phrased it to me in a 2011 interview in Beijing, “Reporting and journalism is about stating the facts, but [in filmmaking] we use broader strokes and draw people into the story and characters. We present the facts in a way that people can relate to, so that they say, ‘I want to do something,’ when they get to the end of the film. And they also ask questions. We give voice to people that don’t have voice—orphans, gay men, villagers.”

Furthermore, the process of making art in a specific place can draw people directly into their environments, as well as connect individuals and communities that may not realize their ties to one another.<sup>9</sup> This section will focus on four reasons why art is such an effective advocacy strategy: it makes the invisible visible; it makes political problems culturally relevant; it facilitates the imagination; and it enables community connections.

#### **Make the Invisible Visible**

Artists can help audiences connect to people and phenomena that they cannot see, or that they do not see in their regular lives. Giving me the example of radioactivity, Eiko Otake, a Japanese dancer who has been active for decades in antinuclear campaigns, said of artists’ political role, “We make the invisible visible.” Her collaboration with photographer William Johnston, *A Body in Fukushima*,<sup>10</sup> captures images of Otake’s body as it moves through the destroyed, radioactive, and recovering spaces in Fukushima. The ethereal nature of her work allows viewers to see her as embodying the landscape, the radiation, the community and landscape’s rebirth, or the viewer’s own body, depending on the image and the viewer’s own perceptions. Elaborating further on why “making the invisible visible” is so politically powerful, she observed during a 2013 interview with me in

Middletown, Connecticut, “Art can help bridge the gap between the issue and the individual. ... It gives someone ‘emotional access’ to the issue.”

To give a historical example of important artists in Japan’s environmental movement, Otake referenced the work of Eugene Smith, whose compassionate and horrific images of the effects of mercury poisoning on the people of Minamata played a critical role in generating national and international outrage about the costs that individuals and communities were paying for economic growth. *Tomoko Uemura in Her Bath* is perhaps the most iconic image of the antipollution movement in Japan and perhaps worldwide. A black-and-white photo published in *Life* magazine in 1972, it captured the agony and compassion of a mother bathing her deformed and emaciated child. The wrenching image touched the hearts of millions, stirring Japanese nationwide to demand solutions from their government.<sup>11</sup> *Tomoko* was intentionally created by Smith to become a symbol of the crisis in Minamata.<sup>12</sup> Not just an emotional expression of pain, it was the deliberate creation of an artist seeking to generate political and social change.

In *Paradise in the Sea of Sorrow: Our Minamata Disease* (1990), Michiko Ishimure accomplishes with words what Smith did with photographs—she makes the stories of victims accessible to the public, arguing that the tragedy of industrial pollution is not “their” problem, but rather “our” disease—a collective problem faced by a whole community. By mixing victims’ stories with medical accounts, government reports, and the author’s own observations and reactions, Ishimure elicits feelings of anger and admiration for the proud victims who are suffering. Published almost twenty years after the disease devastated Minamata, the work engaged a new generation of Japanese. Its publication contributed to a new wave of activism on the part of victims seeking compensation, as well as city and environmental activists working to commemorate the tragedy while engaging in proactive environmental education and activism.<sup>13</sup> To remember its history and honor the many victims of the disease, Minamata City established an eco-park on reclaimed land built on top of the toxic sludge that remained in the bay. The park contains a stone memorial to the life-forms that died as a result of the pollution. In 1999 the city received ISO (International Standards Organization) 14001 certification to establish Minamata as an eco-city, and it became an official eco-town recognized by the Japanese government in 2001.<sup>14</sup>

More recently, video has become a choice medium for artists to make the invisible visible. Ruby Yang’s *Warriors of Qiugang*<sup>15</sup> tells the story of the

successful fight of a small village to shut down the factory that was polluting its community. It is full of the drama of all good films—an unlikely hero, a dark and seemingly unbeatable villain, and supporting characters who are relatable to any viewer in any country as neighbors, friends, and classmates. It was nominated for an Academy Award in 2011. Although it is difficult to demonstrate direct political effects, within two months of it being posted online by *Yale Environment 360*, the Chinese government pledged \$30 million to clean up the river featured in the film.

A final example of how art can make the invisible visible and generate positive change comes from South Korea. Tree Planet, a social enterprise committed to reforesting the planet (and discussed in greater detail in the next chapter), became concerned when it heard that many of the beautiful ginkgo trees lining Garosu-gil Avenue (Tree-lined Avenue) in Seoul were disappearing. It made the missing trees visible to the public through a photo exhibition at the entry of Garosu-gil Avenue that portrayed photographs of the trees in pain. Shoppers added their names to a petition to support tree planting, and their names were turned into leaves that gradually filled in a bare tree that was projected onto a screen installed on the avenue.<sup>16</sup>

Tree Planet needed two thousand signatures for its campaign, but over only four days it gathered nearly ten thousand. In March 2013 it planted 413 trees. While it wasn't able to replace the missing trees on the original Garosu-gil Avenue, it was able to create a new *garosu-gil* avenue along a different street in the Dogok-dong neighborhood that previously had no trees. One of the new trees was then photographed and put onto a canvas by photographer Lee Myeong-ho. The artwork sold for \$45,000, and the proceeds will be used to plant more trees on more treeless streets in Seoul.<sup>17</sup> The sTreet Campaign won Tree Planet and its collaborators the 2013 Red Dot Design Award for communication design and the 2014 iF Design Award grand prize.<sup>18</sup> Art made the invisible, missing trees visible to the public and generated new trees to purify the air, cool the sidewalks, and provide beauty for the city.

### **Make the Environment Culturally and Socially Important**

Although Ishimure's writings and Yang's documentaries are direct critiques of capitalist systems that promote excessive consumption by people who are far removed from the workers who make their products and the environmental harm caused by their production, capitalist market and social forces can also be harnessed to promote proenvironmental behavior. When

a CEO sets a reusable coffee mug on the conference table at the start of a meeting or a big-name celebrity pulls out her reusable water bottle in the middle of a press conference, it sends a powerful signal to those watching that these eco-friendly practices are not just acceptable but also socially desirable. As a result, proenvironmental behaviors and their associated accessories can become trendy status symbols.<sup>19</sup>

The cultural phenomenon of artists influencing proenvironmental consumption patterns is perhaps the most obvious in the area of sustainable fashion. While ideas of sustainable fashion have been around for more than a century,<sup>20</sup> in the twenty-first century it has become a big business supported by industry retail giants like H&M, Gap, and Uniqlo, as well as major designers such as Eileen Fisher.<sup>21</sup> These big-name, mass-producing designers and distributors are becoming more sustainable by increasing the extent and transparency of their environmental, social, and governance reporting, generally seeking to get as close as possible to a circular economy production model that generates low to zero waste and offers safe and dignified working conditions to employees throughout their supply chains. Additionally, niche designers like Hung Weiyu, Ayako Yoshida, and Im Seonoc and new, innovative eco-fashion distributors such as Redress (based in Hong Kong) focus on “upcycling,” which takes discarded fabrics and used clothing and turns them into higher-value, luxury items.

As in the foregoing trendy fashion examples, environmental art is frequently crafted to elicit proenvironmental behavior. Occasionally, however, it is designed not to make eco-friendly behavior “cool” but rather to make eco-harmful behavior “uncool.” A funny and crass version of this could be found in Hong Kong in spring 2019. Graffiti art around several areas with well-known restaurants had the message “Shark fin makes your penis small. Very small.” spray-painted on various surfaces.<sup>22</sup>

In the same way that artists can make the things you put on and in your body “cool,” they can also transform cultural practices tied to how we think about and move through public space. One of my favorite examples is Green Pedestrian Crossing, designed by Jody Xiong of DDB China, which promoted nonmotorized transportation options. Xiong placed giant white canvases with bare trees in the middle of Shanghai crosswalks. Blot- ters with eco-friendly green paint were placed on the curbs on either side of the road. Pedestrians would then fill in the “leaves” of the tree as they

crossed the street, helping them understand how their walking was helping the environment. DDB estimates that its campaign reached nearly four million people, and citizen awareness of environmental protection rose by 86 percent in the city.<sup>23</sup>

Pop music can reach audiences who might not otherwise care about environmental issues, spurring outrage, hope, longing, and calls to action. Taiwanese American Wang Leehom's 2007 *Change Me* album focused on the issue of climate change, not only discussing its problems but also issuing a call to action among its listeners. The album sold more than a million copies within its first month and went on to become one of the top ten selling Mandarin albums of the year.<sup>24</sup> Longtime environmental activist and seven-time Golden Melody Award winner Lin Shen Xian released *Quit Plastic Poison* in 2016, and critics give him credit for contributing to the political pressure on political leaders that resulted in Taiwan's 2018 announcement of a comprehensive ban on single-use straws, cups, bags, and utensils to be implemented by 2030.<sup>25</sup>

Artists contribute to the meaning, the experience, and sometimes the security of other advocacy activities, especially protests. Musicians and other celebrities can draw nonactivists to protests. In post-Fukushima Japan, musicians played a vital role in crafting the experience of the no-nuke protests, which often took on the feel of a music concert where environmental issues could be discussed rather than a protest with an occasional band. Many participants came to the events more because their favorite band was playing than because they had a commitment to environmental issues. They would learn about the issues while attending the protest/concert and leave resolved to become more politically involved.<sup>26</sup>

In Taiwan, martial arts can enhance the cultural relevance and the security of environmental events. In one particularly notable protest in 1987, activists seeking to stop the development of a fifth naphtha cracker (a large, industrial petroleum-processing facility) in Houchin, Taiwan, blockaded the access gate, and confrontations with police and security personnel had frequently been marred by violent clashes. In December the organizers worked with a local temple to erect a spirit altar at the gate to the complex. During the planning of the event, it appeared that the ceremony would be highly contested and perhaps stopped by police. However, as part of the ceremony, the temple's traditional martial arts group performed, using large swords

and spears. The police, who had assembled for the day, stood down, and the ceremony went off without any violence. In the end, a negotiation with the plant was reached to remove the altar and replace the activists' banner at the gate.<sup>27</sup> Thus, artists can play critical roles in ascribing cultural relevance to advocacy efforts; sometimes it is the presence of not just their art but also their bodies (and their swords) that matters.

### Capture the Imagination

Perhaps the most iconic artist to capture our collective, global environmental imagination is Hayao Miyazaki. Beginning with *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (manga, 1982; film, 1984) and continuing throughout his long and productive career, whose work includes *My Neighbor Totoro*, *Princess Mononoke*, and dozens of other films, Miyazaki has been able to stir millions of viewers around the world. His worlds allow us to imagine environments that are better than our own, where the lush, silent forests overwhelm us with a feeling of peace and awe, and where we can talk with the spirits of the trees.<sup>28</sup>

Miyazaki's films also help us imagine more alarming futures that might come about if we don't take care of our planet. *Nausicaä's* bleak world is dominated by machines, run by a militaristic state, and haunted by a toxic forest. It is similar enough to our own world to instill fear, allowing us to cheer eco-warrior Nausicaä as she battles and triumphs, and leaving us yearning for a similar hero for our own world. Viewers who have difficulty imagining a future where the sea levels rise when they read scientific studies of glacier runoff will have no trouble picturing themselves living in a world of rising seas once they've watched *Ponyo on the Cliff by the Sea* (2008), where the ocean first floods beaches and roads, and then swallows houses and villages while children and fish seek safety and companionship amid the rising water.

Imagination enables people to inhabit worlds that do not exist in our current reality. Ah Cheng's novella *King of Trees* (1985) is set in the lush jungles of southern Yunnan, where urban youths have been sent by authorities to clear out the "useless" trees of the wild forest to plant "useful" trees that can be harvested. Based on the author's own experience during the Cultural Revolution, the novella reveals the deep divide between urban and rural understandings of nature. Like Miyazaki and many others in this genre, Cheng deeply questions ideas of "progress" when contrasted with conceptions of "primitive," "backward," and "simple." Whereas governments and



business seem to be pushing forward some kind of “progress,” these novelists and filmmakers require audiences to question their own experience—Is their urban life better than the nature-filled life of their grandparents? Do the city scientists really understand how to identify and grow “useful” trees better than the rural farmers?

For a final example in this section, I turn to Japan immediately after the 3/11 disaster. In June 2011, just three months after the disaster, I was speaking with artist Ozawa Tsuyoshi in Tokyo about a project that he had just finished in Fukushima. He was so saddened to hear that a local Fukushima high school couldn’t have its graduation because the school had been destroyed. As a result, all the children in the area were stuck in evacuation centers, bored and with nothing to do. He wanted to do something for them, and came up with the idea of a kite-making workshop. The children would write, draw, or paint something they liked on the traditional paper—pictures, poems, stories—and then they would turn the paper containing their words and images into colorful kites and fly them.

Some of the pictures and stories were so sad—destroyed homes, lost loved ones—but the kites created joy and symbolized hope as they flew high above in the breeze. It was cathartic and fun. The devastated community members who were living in temporary shelters laughed as they ran after the soaring kites. For that afternoon, at least, the grim reality of leaking radiation and flattened houses gave way to sunshine and the laughter of children. The community could play, remembering the world before the disaster and imagining a future when healing would have already happened. The medium of kites requires people to cooperate with nature to fly them high and make them dance. The power of the kite’s art came much less from the beauty of the product itself and much more from the process of making and flying them—the sense of joy and freedom that they elicited from participants’ imaginations.

### **Connect Communities**

As in the example of the kite making in Fukushima, the process of making art can frequently be even more powerful than the artistic product itself. One of the goals of place-based and community-engaged environmental art is to use the art-making process to connect individuals and communities that are linked through their environment but might not realize it. Different types of individuals are drawn into the project and interact with

people very different from themselves, but they discover common ties and understanding by working on a common project together.

A good example of how this can work is Ichi Ikeda's Moving Water project, which occurred from 2006 to 2008 along the Kedogawa River in Kagoshima, Japan. The community around the Kedogawa River is rural, and the river flows down from Sakurayama (Cherry blossom mountain) to the East China Sea. At the top of the river is a forestry school and at the bottom, a fishery school. Although the city has only about twenty thousand residents, the logging community and the fishing community rarely interact. Ikeda's water project made visible, through art, that the river is a common thread that connects everyone together.

The project began in 2006 with Moving Water Days. Participants first created a number of eighty-liter water boxes. The water boxes symbolize water as a human right; the World Health Organization has determined that every human needs eighty liters of water to support daily life—drinking, washing, cooking, and other activities. It is difficult to visualize how much water eighty liters is, so Ikeda made water boxes—eighty centimeters cubed and weighing eighty kilograms. Participants then transferred water from the present to the future by carrying the boxes from the mouth of the river up to its source in the mountains using bamboo backpacks. During the final Moving Water Days, they displayed the boxes in different places and used the backpacks to create a water wheel at the mouth of the river to symbolize the water cycle that brings water to the planet.<sup>29</sup>

The project expanded during its second year. Ikeda worked with a local nongovernmental organization, Eco Link Association, to help him connect with the forestry and fishery schools and recruit a diverse set of participants. As he recounted to me in a 2011 in a Toyko interview, "We had all types of people from the community—farmers, salt makers, teachers, construction workers, people from the forestry school, river school, and ocean school. . . . Water follows a cycle: forest → river → ocean → forest. We want to make that kind of society." Participants gathered dead bamboo from the forest and constructed rafts that were connected to the shore at the Kagoshima fisheries high school and extended out about one hundred meters into Kagoshima Bay, which then connects to the East China Sea. The rafts were then released from shore and, while standing on the rafts, the paddlers spelled out *SAVE WATER* using semaphore (flag letters). They then changed the shape of the assembled rafts—from a line stretching out from

the shore to a floating circle. The symbols for the water cycle were placed around the circumference of the circle, emphasizing their relationship to one another. As Ikeda described it, “The fishery school wasn’t connected to the community, so I connected the two with my art. Art is a collective enterprise. . . . It really raised everyone’s awareness.”<sup>30</sup>

In the final year, energy surrounding the project was even higher. Earlier in 2008 Ikeda and his water boxes had been featured at a UN conference on the environment in New York City,<sup>31</sup> so the residents were even more excited to take part. They used bamboo and other natural materials to create five floating islands to symbolize the earth’s five main landmasses (of the seven continents Europe and Asia are merged, and Antarctica is excluded). Rice shafts were used to mark the desert, and cedar leaves were used to represent the green leaves. As Ikeda described the work to me in 2011, “Actually the [real] desert is bigger [than it is in the piece], but I hope for a smaller desert, more like what we made.” Both the community-building process to create the work and the final work itself not only offer a powerful symbol of the importance of our environment, they created a tangible connection between the people, the earth, and the water. A photo of *Five Floating Isles* graces the cover of this book.

A different form of connection can be seen in the work of Kim Young-il, one of the official artists for the 2018 Olympic Games in Pyeongchang, South Korea.<sup>32</sup> Kim has been photographing Pyeongchang’s landscapes for thirty years and wanted to do something to help the people in Seoul feel connected to the place that was hosting the Olympics. In *Mountains in PyeongChang & Sound of Korea*, Kim displayed fifteen of his pieces around Seoul’s pedestrian walkways to invite residents and visitors to walk through Pyeongchang’s landscape before and during the games. The visual works were accompanied by recordings from the area—mountain winds, splashing waves, and the ringing of a temple bell. Taken together, they enabled pedestrians traveling through the megacity to be transported to a more natural place.

### Scaling Art Advocacy: Expanding the Effect of Art Advocacy

Of all the advocacy strategies discussed in this book, art is the least scalable. It is the most difficult to extend its efficacy beyond a single place and moment. Before I move on, I would like to clarify how I will be using the word *scale*. As in my discussions of the other strategies examined in this

book, the word *scale* is used in this chapter as a verb to discuss how an advocacy effort is expanded or extended beyond its first instance, when it moves beyond its community of origin and beyond the first set of advocates involved. With art, the word *scale* is usually used as an adjective to describe the physical size of artwork (e.g., a large-scale sculpture of an elephant vs. a small-scale sculpture of an ant). However, to remain consistent with the other chapters, I continue to use the word *scale* as a verb to describe the expansion of the scope and extent of the advocacy effort rather than as an adjective describing the size of the artwork.

One of the most powerful aspects of most art—particularly public installations and ephemeral live performances—is precisely that it is not replicable. It must be experienced in a particular place at a particular time, and its meaning would change if the piece were moved, repeated, or copied and placed elsewhere. However, although these art forms cannot usually be expanded past their original installation or performance, their use as an advocacy strategy sometimes can be. This section suggests three ways that art advocacy can scale: go viral via social media, hit the road, and cultivate local art.

In all three cases, the efficacy of art as an advocacy strategy lies in its capacity to create and activate diverse networks of people within a specific community and across multiple communities. By engaging emotion and activating the imagination of diverse stakeholders, networks become energized, propelling policymakers to act and priming them to be open and interested in proenvironmental solutions when they sit down to make policy. Unlike most of the other strategies discussed in this book, art advocacy is less about targeting particular nodes in a network and seeking to influence the most powerful people in the network. Instead, it is more about affecting the entire network by shifting the culture in which the network exists such that hundreds or even millions of individuals connected to a network view the environmental issues we face as urgent problems that must be addressed.

### **Go Viral**

As discussed earlier, new communication technology has enabled some forms of art—photographic images and video especially—to be viewed much more broadly than used to be possible. No longer must someone go to a theater to watch a film or visit a gallery to see an image; we can now access them on our phones. Although the experience of watching a

film on a phone may be less intense than watching it in a theater, the ability to share the experience with friends located elsewhere means that millions of people can watch the same film or see the same image almost instantaneously. The individualized experience of looking at something on a phone can become a collective experience shared with one's friends and thousands, sometimes millions, of others.

Perhaps the most extreme example of this occurring in the environmental art space is the multimedia documentary about air pollution *Under the Dome*,<sup>33</sup> created by former CCTV journalist Chai Jing. It was released on February 28, 2015, on an official *People's Daily* website that also contained an interview with the filmmaker and an expression of gratitude from the minister of environmental protection. The film was viewed more than one hundred million times in the first twenty-four hours, and within four days, after having been viewed more than two hundred million times, it was censored and removed from all social media in China.<sup>34</sup>

Although full of horrifying statistics, the film's power comes not from the data it shares but from the way it connects those numbers to personal stories that the viewer can easily relate to. The film opens with the director's own story of discovering a tumor in her unborn child, a tumor she was convinced was caused by air pollution. Later, viewers can feel their hearts crack open when Chai interviews a six-year-old child. "Have you ever seen a real star before?" "No, I haven't." "What about blue sky?" "I've seen one that's a little blue." The story becomes even more personal when she talks about the collective self-delusion that she and so many others have been perpetuating about China's air pollution. "We kept calling it 'fog.'"

The images, stories, and art in this film are what make it powerful. Reports in newspapers and journals have extensively documented the extent of China's pollution problems with plenty of facts, statistics, and analysis. In contrast, the film makes that "fog" clearly visible as threatening pollution, offers an emotional connection to the victims, forces the realization that the viewer is vulnerable, and inspires him or her to be part of the solution. As the film closes, Chai declares, "I'm not going to shirk the responsibility, I'm going to stand up and do something." She then pleads, "If you don't know how to fix it, please stop breaking it." After watching the film online, thousands of people responded, committing to personal actions in their public comments, such as walking rather than driving to work, in order to become a part of the solution.

Why was the film banned? Probably not because it documented China's pollution problems. As discussed extensively in this book, the Chinese government has been working very hard to raise awareness of pollution issues and convince individuals, companies, and local governments to improve environmental outcomes. Likely, the problem was Chai's declaration at the end of the film, "We have the right to know, the right to participate, the right to sue for damages." Gary King, Jennifer Pan, and Margaret Roberts's insightful analysis suggests that most censorship in China is not due to content; rather, "[China's] censorship program is aimed at curtailing collective action by silencing comments that represent, reinforce, or spur social mobilization, regardless of content."<sup>35</sup> It seems likely that, while initially supportive, the government became worried when it became apparent that the film was not being seen by a small group of environmentally minded activists but had gone viral—albeit briefly—to reach millions of angry citizens and perhaps spur them to act.

Chai's documentary exerted political pressure through the networks that it influenced. As a well-known journalist, Chai used her individual influence over people in her own network, but her use of art was not aimed at the powerful "node" actors but rather aimed at activating multiple networks simultaneously by engaging with the broader public. Viewers used social networks to spread their anger, and those same networks ultimately reached policymakers who first acted to shut down the video and then acted to strengthen policy—China's thirteenth Five-Year Plan, which was put into place almost exactly one year after *Under the Dome* was aired, has aggressive air quality targets in addition to other environmental targets that it has strengthened.<sup>36</sup> As with other instances of art activism, it is difficult to draw a direct causal connection between the art and the policy outcome, but in the case of *Under the Dome*, it is easy to see how the art raised public awareness of the issue and increased political pressure on decision makers to act in proenvironmental ways.

### Hit the Road

It is common for popular exhibits to travel from one gallery to another, but usually there is no overt relationship between exhibition locations, and audiences are unaware of where the show was previously or where it is going next. The recent trend of "pop-up" exhibits generally follows the same model, only the exhibition time is much shorter and the locations can be unconventional.<sup>37</sup>

However, it does not have to be the case that exhibits remain disconnected from one another even in the case of place-based art. Since it is usually the case that pop-up exhibits are carried by a single truck, multiple venues can be connected to one another if that is part of the artists' vision. The places where the art stops along the way can become connected to one another by a common experience, and that sense of connection can be made more obvious when the visitors interact with and respond to the art in some way such that they leave their own mark on the exhibit. This allows for the possibility of a dynamic relationship among people in different locations who, through the moving exhibit, co-create an unfolding, collective experience or artwork, as well as a network of individuals who have become connected through the art.

An example of how this has worked is the Daylily Art Circus (the daylily represents rebirth in Japanese culture), which connected the victims of the 1995 Kansai earthquake with those of the 2011 earthquake in Tohoku.<sup>38</sup> Organized by Kaihatsu Yoshiaki, the interactive exhibit began in Kobe in August 2011, displaying large air-filled sculptures and combining those with interactive activities for children. The whole exhibit was contained in an Daylily Art Circus truck, which would stop at different destinations every day, starting in Kobe in August and finishing at a village outside Sendai in September. The initial stops were not just opportunities to exhibit the art and engage participants; they also served as fund-raising opportunities. As the exhibit got closer to the epicenter, the flow of money reversed and aid was distributed to communities devastated by the triple disaster.

The Kansai region was physically quite disconnected from the disaster in the Tohoku region—its inhabitants did not feel the earthquake, are on a different power grid so were largely unaffected by the disruptions in power supplies, and are far enough away that even if the Fukushima plant had blown up like Chernobyl, they would have faced little to no nuclear fallout. And yet, thousands of refugees from the Tohoku/Fukushima disaster took refuge in Kobe (including me—me, my husband, and our two small children were living in Tokyo when the earthquake hit, and we moved to the city to stay with friends for several uncertain weeks afterward). Additionally, residents of Kansai also felt especially connected to the victims in Tohoku because the devastating earthquake that hit their region in 1995, which killed about five thousand people and displaced three hundred thousand, was still fresh

in the minds of many. Thus, the Kansai region was filled with people who “want to do something,” and the Daylily Art Circus helped them engage meaningfully in a common experience with counterparts in Tohoku while contributing financially to communities that needed aid.

During an interview with me in 2011, Kaihatsu described how helpless he felt at the time of the 1995 earthquake in Kobe. “At the time I couldn’t do anything. I couldn’t go there and was kind of frozen. . . . This time after the disaster I was better prepared. In some ways I’ve been preparing for this [post-Fukushima activism] for fifteen years.” As he explained his motivation and inspiration for the traveling exhibit, he said, “I am an artist, so I can give art. If I were a farmer and grew tomatoes or apples, I would send tomatoes or apples to the victims. If I could do construction, I would help fix houses. I can’t make tomatoes or fix houses, but I can make joy.”

Like the kite workshop described earlier, Kaihatsu’s exhibit was designed to elicit joy. The sculptures were made of the same nylon material as the blow-up lawn art that shows up across American lawns over holidays or in front of used-car shops to beckon customers inside. They were large, colorful, funny, and sometimes ridiculous. Some of them flapped around, generating spontaneous laughter from anyone watching. Giant clowns, animals, flowers, and other figures drew in viewers and participants. Children would reach out to hug elephant trunks, and adults would marvel at the pure whimsy of the figures. When the Daylily Art Circus truck stopped, it held art-making workshops for kids—children in the early part of the trip drew pictures and wrote messages of hope to the children who would be visited later.

The Daylily Art Circus ran for several years. In 2011, its first year, it made the journey from Kobe, which was physically unaffected by the disaster, to Sendai, which was devastated. In its early stops in areas unaffected by the disaster, it collected donations and art filled with hope and encouragement to be passed from Kansai residents to their counterparts in Tohoku. Farther along, when it stopped in Tohoku and Fukushima, it frequently held its workshops outside, because people were still living in the school gyms, where the exhibits in Kobe had been held. In those localities, it shared the art of hope created by those in the early part of the trip and conducted its joy-producing workshops in the devastated communities, reassuring residents that others were rooting for them to recover and giving them an afternoon of laughter and smiles with wiggly sunflowers and smiling blow-up elephants before they had to return to school gyms to sleep.



In 2012 it returned to several towns around Fukushima that were still suffering. In 2013 the circus truck once again traveled from sites in Kansai to those in Tohoku, stopping at schools, community centers, and public parks along the way. In 2014 it once again visited recovering communities in Fukushima. In 2019, although it was no longer making the long trek up the coast, a few of the sculptures were displayed in a commemorative exhibit in the Fukushima Prefectural Museum.

In the manner of most art, the Daylily Art Circus did not scale in the regular meaning of the word—the sculptures were not mass-produced and spread around the world; they didn't get bigger physically in some way. However, the advocacy element of the art was scaled. The art was not displayed in a single place or even a dozen, disconnected places. The display and interactive participation that occurred in one place was then connected to exhibits in different communities. It revealed and amplified the connection between those in Kansai and those in Tohoku, their mutual vulnerability to natural disaster, their common reliance on nuclear power, the outpouring of volunteers to support victims, and the capacity of art to facilitate healing. Collectively, the power of the whole tour sutured place and time together. Art as an advocacy strategy could move beyond a single place to affect multiple communities across a longer period of time, linking victims and supporters, citizens and policymakers, together in multiple networks of humanity and art making.

### **Cultivate Local Art**

As discussed earlier, place-based art draws its power from the specific time, place, and community in which it is created.<sup>39</sup> Therefore, it is generally impossible to scale art of this type. However, it is possible to multiply the places where the art is developed and displayed, and this has been occurring around the world as global cities compete to attract the creative class,<sup>40</sup> and rural communities strive to revitalize their communities and avoid extinction.<sup>41</sup> Although arts festivals can sometimes be purely economic ploys by local governments,<sup>42</sup> and their proliferation can spread audiences too thin as well as forcing artists to choose among competing festivals,<sup>43</sup> their proliferation is offering interested artists unprecedented opportunities to engage in environmental advocacy. This section will illustrate how this works with three examples.

Perhaps the most heart-warming story is that of Huang Yung-Fu, a ninety-six-year old grandfather who saved his Taiwanese village from demolition

by painting it.<sup>44</sup> Rainbow Village, as it has come to be known, was a village of 1,200 homes that were largely occupied by former soldiers like Huang, who came to Taiwan when the nationalist army retreated from the mainland. As the soldiers and their families aged, died, and moved away, developers began buying up the land. By 2008 only eleven houses remained, and the government began planning to demolish the rest.<sup>45</sup>

Feeling bored, lonely, and a bit helpless in his fight to save his village from demolition, Huang took up painting at the ripe young age of eighty-six, painting a bird inside his house and then moving to the outside. He liked the results. The images were cheery and hopeful. He decided to keep painting, covering his neighbors' walls with bright flowers, whimsical cats, mythical beasts, and other fanciful creations that erupted from his imagination until the entire village was bursting with colors.<sup>46</sup> In 2015 the Defense Ministry pledged to preserve the village as a cultural site,<sup>47</sup> and Rainbow Village now receives more than a million visitors every year.

On a slightly larger scale in South Korea, the Sea Art Festival was held for the first time in 1987 in the run-up to the 1988 Olympics in Seoul, just months after the June Democracy movement, and one month before a new constitution was established that guaranteed a range of new democratic rights to South Korea's citizens. Now a valued tradition, the festival moves to different beaches around Busan, showcasing site-specific installations and bringing local residents and international visitors to less visited areas in South Korea.

The theme of the 2017 festival was "sea+art+fun." While many of the pieces were inspired by nature but not particularly political (e.g., "a slice of summer"),<sup>48</sup> others had strong political messages. For example, PERBOS's *Floride* showcased whimsical, treelike creations that were reminiscent of Dr. Seuss's truffula trees and were designed to make viewers smile and want to play. However, the installation's description read, "A critical outlook on society and environment lies beneath the seemingly light and humorous work. The artist collected and combined waste resources produced from raw petroleum material at a demolition site and produced works in the form of palm trees, throwing a critical outlook on the stance between human civilization and environment."<sup>49</sup>

Rural Japanese villages have been using art festivals as a method to revitalize their communities for nearly twenty years, and the country now boasts the largest number of art festivals in the world.<sup>50</sup> Art festivals gained popularity as a method of revitalization with the success of the Echigo-Tsumari

Art Triennial, which displays art across approximately two hundred villages in the Echigo-Tsumari region of Japan.<sup>51</sup> Like many rural areas around the world, the villages in this mountainous part of Japan had been suffering from depopulation as young people moved to the cities for work and did not return. Begun in 2010, the Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennial sought to create a tourist attraction that would bring young people and visitors to the area, stimulate the economy, and offer opportunities for urbanites to connect with nature.

Inspired by the traditional concept of *satoyama* (mountain village), which evokes images of the landscape and traditional lifestyle of rural Japan, the festival aims to promote the idea that “humans are part of nature.” The method of displaying the works, spread across two hundred villages, is intentionally “inefficient” and “deliberately at odds with the rationalization and efficiency of modern society. Wandering among the artworks which emphasise the beauty and richness of *satoyama* and reveal the accumulated temporal layers of human inhabitation opens the senses to the wonder of existence and revives the soul.”<sup>52</sup> In addition to reviving the local economy, the festival offers an opportunity for artists to engage in environmental activism, such as when Hong Kong-based artist Ricky Yeung “planted” bright yellow construction beams in a rice field to protest the spread of urban development that displaces farmers.<sup>53</sup>

Echigo-Tsumari’s success has inspired others—the Setouchi Triennale draws visitors to twelve islands and two port towns in the Seto Inland Sea.<sup>54</sup> Annual art and music festivals also take place in Miyagi, Sado Island, and Kitakyushu, to name a few.<sup>55</sup> While the other festivals may not place *satoyama* and nature at the center of their themes, artists in Japan have a long history of using these venues as sites for social and environmental activism.<sup>56</sup>

## Conclusion

Art is a powerful advocacy strategy. As a cultural practice, it has the tools to engage people’s emotions and imaginations in ways that can make an intellectual problem become a personal one. It can make issues matter to people in ways that are difficult or impossible to achieve merely by providing scientific information.

There is a deep paradox at play when artists engage in advocacy. One of the sources of their power is that they are generally not considered to

be politically powerful. They don't sit on policymaking committees, and they're not (usually) elected for public office. As a result, they're able to push the envelope on permitted action because they blur the boundary between expression and activism. Artists are permitted to make art that critiques society and the government, art that outrages or disgusts viewers, art that reveals injustice and makes you cry. This is permitted at local art festivals, in small galleries, and sometimes even in public spaces.

However, this unusual level of freedom accorded artists can sometimes lead them to misjudge what they can get away with. This is what happened to one of China's most well-known artists, Ai Weiwei. Ai has been producing art related to a variety of social and political issues throughout his career. In terms of his environmental art, he frequently deals with pollution issues. For example, following a huge oil spill in northern China that threatened the Yellow River, Ai created a ceramic installation, *Oil Spills* (2006), that looked like giant puddles of oil clustered on the gallery floor.<sup>57</sup> *Tree* (2010) was constructed from dead branches gathered from the mountains of southern China and intended to mimic a traditional custom found in Jiangxi Province where curiously shaped trunks and roots are purchased in markets to be displayed at home. The Tate commentary suggests, "*Tree* can be read as a reference to [the] Taoist ideal of harmony—unifying the work of man with nature as well as linking the earth and the sky."<sup>58</sup>

In 2008 Ai was a darling of the Chinese government for his spectacular design of the Olympic stadium, which showcased the rise of China to the world. One year later, a devastating earthquake in Sichuan killed nearly eighty thousand people, and Ai joined the public outrage when it came to light that many of the deaths of children could have been avoided had corrupt officials not pocketed money that had been intended for school construction. He began investigating and creating works that drew on and fed the outrage—*Remembering* was constructed using nine thousand school backpacks to represent the children who died.<sup>59</sup> His activism led to police beatings that landed him in the hospital, the demolition of his studio, and house arrest. In spring 2011, while activists in the Middle East were engaged in overthrowing their authoritarian governments, Ai was arrested on charges of tax evasion. He was held for three months and then released to home arrest. In 2015 Ai left China and moved to Berlin. In 2018 authorities demolished his Beijing studio without warning.<sup>60</sup> He now makes and displays his art around the world, but has not returned to China.<sup>61</sup>

While some have called Ai a “force of nature,”<sup>62</sup> political scientists and other scholars should stop treating artists and their artistic contributions to advocacy as exogenous forces akin to earthquakes. As the examples in this chapter and others have demonstrated, organizations around the world have recognized their importance and systematically incorporate art and artistic expression into their advocacy. Artists themselves are important actors who play influential roles in shaping both public opinion and public policy. Scholars should pay closer attention to the role of artists and incorporate them explicitly into their advocacy models.



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# **Effective Advocacy**

## **Lessons from East Asia's Environmentalists**

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