

Introduction paper
shall argue that
artists do not



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Introduction

Artists have historically used the various tools at their disposal to communicate issues of importance and provoke the society. The issues that art has been used to deal with include: war, violence, racism, and equality to name but a few. What makes art such an effective tool in addressing social issues is its ability to focus the community on the social problems. It has been shown that art can help people connect with some aspect of social reality in a manner that they could otherwise have not without the aid of art.

In light of the significant power that art and by extension artists hold, there arises the question of whether artists have a responsibility to address social problems through their works. This paper shall argue that Artists do not have the responsibility to address social problems in their work.

Why Artists Should not be Obligated to Address Issues

Most of the artwork expressed by artists is open to a number of interpretations. The meaning that an artist intends to convey may therefore differ significantly from that of the audience. A good example of this multi

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interpretation is the Eagle's 1977 hit song titled "Hotel California". While the song writer Don Henley suggests that the song is an artwork imbued with various sociopolitical statements which he goes on to articulate, various music critics interpret the lyrics differently. It can be assumed that ordinary listeners also have different interpretations of the song therefore defeating the purpose of the artist to convey a particular message. If it were the artist's responsibility to convey an opinion on social problems in their work it would be counter productive if the audiences do not understand it. The ideal of democracy that most Western nations hold is grounded in the concept of free speech.

If society were to compel artists to address social problems, then the freedom of expression of the artist would be violated. Art is chiefly a form of free expression and although it may be beneficial to society, the personal freedom of the artist has primacy. The personal interest of the artist should take precedence over any other consideration. As it stands, artists have different motivations for producing their artistic works. For most, the chief concern is commercial success. Christians et al. reveals that "entertainment media are 90% business and 10% public service" (28).

The profit motive is therefore the most compelling concern for the artist and they will go to great lengths to achieve this end. It would be very irrelevant to expect an artist whose only concern is commercial success to champion some social cause. Art is a form of expression and using it, artists can express various sentiments through the force in their brush strokes and through the variations of colors, or through their lyrics and rhythm of the song.

For example, music allows artists to express their current state of emotion. “Love the Way you Lie” which is a hugely successful work by the singer Rihanna is a vivid expression of the artist’s emotional state at the time. This demonstrates that art fulfills a role in the life of the artist and it allows them to into touch with themselves and who they are. Forcing the artist to address social problems which may not be of relevance to them may therefore inhibit their artistic expression. Artists produce their greatest works when they feel inspired. This works end up being of huge significance to the society as a result of the passion exhibited by the artist in his work.

Should an artist be compelled to produce socially conscious work as a result of supposed social responsibility, the work would lack the passion that comes from personal convictions. The work would therefore not have as great an impact. Forcing the artist to address social issues can therefore have an adverse effect on the artistic work therefore rendering it a weak force for social change. Artists should therefore be let to address social problems when they feel inclined to do so. The artist’s responsibility to society has been exaggerated and for this reason, some people feel that artists owe it to society to address social problems. While this view may have been true in the past, art no longer holds the prominence in people’s lives that it held in the past.

Art and the artists are no longer viewed as the social commentator or the life-giving force for the society. It is therefore grossly unfair to burden the artist with the responsibility of addressing social issues. Most of the modern artists lack social consciousness and are people of questionable moral standings. This is a fact that is made visible through their works which lack

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any depth and any real relevance. This is especially the case with most hip-hop artists whose lyrics talk about drugs, money, and women and romanticize violence. Forcing such artists to address social problems would be wrong since the artists themselves do not have the moral impetus to call for such changes. For example, it would be ironical for an artist like Lil Wayne to talk about social inequality or poverty since the public would view the artist as hypocritical in light of his previous works.

Why Artists Should Address Social Issues

Artists possess the means through which to deal with issues that the rest of society dares not address.

Through the various expressions available to them, artists can provoke the society to talk openly about issues that such as racism, gender violence and homophobia to name but a few. Without this provocation, the general public would be content to keep quiet about the issue and act like it was not important. Artists offset this by making the public face these controversial issues. It would therefore be irresponsible for the artist to fail to use this great power for the greater good by addressing social problems. Artists can use their work to trigger the viewer's attention to certain issues hence causing them to look into their own lives.

This may help bring about intervention on some social problems. The prolific pop artist Lady Gaga has used her artistic status to address various social issues. Her songs bring to sharp focus the issue of discrimination as a result of sexual orientation. The artist therefore raises awareness and social consciousness on the subject therefore fostering change. She also tackles the issue of homophobia that is deeply embedded in the hip-hop culture.

By doing this, the artist uses her work to change people's minds on the issue of homophobia by depicting gay people as every bit as normal as the straight people. This "new perception" is crucial for any social change to take place since it results in the doing away of stereotypical views. Art therefore serves to create the necessary preconditions before social change can occur. Artists would therefore be viewed as irresponsible if they failed to address significant issues in society since they possess the means to bring about change.

Art presents a good platform from which a vast range of social issues can be addressed. By addressing these social issues, artists can empower the population. This is the case when artists use their work to narrate personal experiences which relate to certain problems. By use of art, viewers are allowed to see the social problem in the eyes of someone who has been through it and hence it is more believable. For example, the renowned singer "Kelly Rowland" addresses the issue of bullying and school shooting through her song "Stole". The artist through this song acts as a commentary and related a social problem since they don't want to see it happen again.

Discussion

The role of artists in society has changed significantly over the years. While in the past artists were the social commentators who served to direct the attention of the public to areas of interest, this is no longer the case.

The discussions presented in this paper have revealed that for most modern artists, the main motivation is commercial success. As such, addressing social problems takes a back seat to most artists and they do not feel

obliged to tackle the issues. However, in as much as an artist may claim that his/her work is personal and he/she is therefore not expected to conform to any preset rules, the work of the individual artist fits into a broader social framework. The work of an artist has the power to mould and shape public values and opinions.

The artists do have some responsibility to the public who are the major consumers of their artistic products. Artists have some ethical obligation to take into consideration the manner in which their audience may perceive their work especially if the works may influence people to act in a certain manner. Even so, this paper has demonstrated that the positive impact that may come about from an artist addressing social problems can be greatly diminished if the artist addresses the issue out of a sense of obligation. Art is a versatile tool for enabling people to view an issue from a different perspective. By making people aware of various views on the same subject, an artist can make the society make positive changes.

However, Addressing social problem must come from the artist's own convictions and not any external pressures. Lady Gaga's social commentaries are made powerful by the fact that she believes in her cause for the marginalized people.

Conclusion

This paper sets out to argue that artists do not have a responsibility to address social problems in their works. To support this claim, this paper had demonstrated the various setbacks that would arise from requiring that all artists address social issues in their works. However, the paper has also

revealed the great power that art has in addressing social issues. Even so, the paper has demonstrated that the effectiveness of art in addressing social issues springs from the artist's passions and convictions on the subject. As such, whether or not an artist addresses social issues is a deeply personal matter and the artist should not be obligated to address social problems if he does not feel the need to.

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