



15 - 17 May 2026

Rome , Italy

Art as Moral Witness: Social Justice Movements and the Limits of Interpretation

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Abstract

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This presentation examines the evolving role of protest art as a form of moral witness within social justice movements, and considers the limits of traditional aesthetic interpretation when confronted with politically urgent creative expression. Throughout history, artists have served as cultural catalysts, producing works that challenge socio-political norms and compel audiences to reckon with injustice. From the political muralism of the early twentieth century to contemporary digital activism, art created in the service of moral testimony resists easy categorization within conventional aesthetic frameworks that privilege formal beauty, technical mastery, or disinterested contemplation. This paper argues that protest art demands an expanded interpretive lens that accounts for ethical urgency, community participation, and the power dynamics inherent in artistic production and reception. Drawing on case studies spanning institutional exhibitions of activist art in major museums, non-institutional street-based interventions, and recent climate activism targeting cultural artifacts, the presentation explores a central tension: when moral messaging is foregrounded, does artistic merit suffer, or must our understanding of merit itself evolve? The analysis further considers legal and ethical boundaries, including censorship regimes and the ethics of using cultural heritage as a site of protest. Ultimately, this presentation calls for interpretive frameworks that honor both the aesthetic dimensions and the moral imperatives of art that bears witness to injustice, arguing that the dichotomy between beauty and activism is a false one.

Keywords: Activism; Aesthetics; Censorship; Ethics; Protest Art

