

Melody Seraydarian

Word Count: 1,034

The Digital Age of Armenian Activism: How Art and Politics Work Hand-in-Hand

Like many Gen Z Armenians, my days as an activist for my people had a humble beginning: comfortably positioned in a stroller, gently being pushed by my mother through a crowd the morning of April 24th at the Turkish Consulate General. In truth, I don't remember much, but I will never forget looking up and seeing my mother's poised face, like a lighthouse and its embracing beacon, illuminating a clear path through a relentless sea of protest posters, raised fists, and swaying flags. She — and more than a thousand other Armenians — marched. They marched for a cause, for a reason — they marched with rage, defiance, exuberance...every and all emotion they possess for themselves and the 1.5 million martyrs before them.

Amid the pandemic and the Artsakh War, that level of vehemence and enthusiasm on a virtual level is near-impossible, but as shown through multiple instances in our peoples' history, we Armenians don't know the definition of the word "impossible". Firm believers in the saying "When we fall, we get back up", ardor and devotion courses through our veins, whether it be towards our immense love for our religion, our colorful culture, or our traditional cuisine. Now, as a result of unprecedented circumstances, social media posts have replaced those beloved hand-painted posters of red, blue, and orange. At first glance, many, especially older Armenians, will throw digital activism under one blanket statement: "useless and ineffective". The results demonstrate that this claim is far from the truth.

If anything, digital activism has amplified our love for our culture and now serves as a modern outlet for Armenians to connect on the national-level. Digital activism has had a long history of adapting to new mediums, being one of the most dynamic strategies of growing our cause. Communications technologies and easy, digestible resources on social media have helped increase our political action through mass mobilization on the largest scale we as a people have ever seen. Armenians all around the globe are now engaged in conversations that concern the future of our people, conversations that pre-Information Age were simply not possible.

Though apathy sounds like the easier option, political, cultural, and nonprofit Armenian organizations have propelled an active participatory culture on social networking sites through graphic design, a powerful component of the Armenian social justice movement, breaking all political, social, and linguistic barriers that were once a major hindrance in our dialogue. Art is not just a means of aesthetic power; it is also our form of cultural interconnection. It is no secret that the Armenian people are a marginalized people, especially those Armenians living in the motherland and in the Middle Eastern diaspora. Living in the United States as an Armenian-American, among other things, is a privilege and it is of vital importance that we shift our mindset from merely doing charity for those Armenians to working hand-in-hand with those Armenians living in second- and third-world countries, we can finally elevate the voices of our people that are most affected by repressive issues and collaborate with them toward a broader solution. Armenian issues do not start and end at genocide recognition and our people saw that during the Artsakh War. There are a variety of social issues in Armenian including domestic violence, child labor, and a high unemployment rate that have only been exacerbated due to the pandemic and war. These are issues that all previously uninformed Armenian people can band together and advocate to put a stop to as a unit.

So how can one get involved? It's not as difficult as it may seem. The second one puts their foot in the water, the real change begins. Start by building on the work and progress that is already happening on the Internet, and eventually, zero in on a specific and create something entirely new. New-age media outlets that place an emphasis on Armenian affairs and diasporan issues work exclusively on social media and have done phenomenal jobs making information and resources as accessible as they possibly can be in our day and age. The times have changed, and information design and data visualization are the complex data in the simplest and most artistic way possible. A quick reshare of these educational infographics effectively gets a message across. Designers use aesthetics, a core principle of advertising and raising awareness, to complement a work's usability and elevate its functionality.

Though art and aesthetics are often undervalued, facilitating change in Armenia and Artsakh to rebuild and restore our country can easily be done through means of design. Art is the universal language, after all. When creating a design, whether done consciously or not, the artist communicates at a high-powered emotional level to those of us in the Armenian community. It also helps facilitate the imperative conversations we need to be having regarding the changes forced upon us as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Artsakh. As well as being a tool to speak within our people, design transcends the bubble we have created and speaks directly to the shared humanity that is present in each and every person on the planet. Looking towards the future, it is art, design, and social media that collectively serve as the perfect venue for political engagement on a grand level, restoration and advancement of Armenia, and vitalizing tradition and cultural values.

No matter what medium or platform, art and design can put a stop to oppressive, anti-Armenian sentiment internally, interpersonally, and systematically. It is time to forgo the

antiquated methods of change and leave them in the past. The pandemic and the Artsakh War have spawned a new breath of motivation into the Armenian community. Digital activism soars beyond hashtags and Instagram story reposts. It is beyond the sad truth that many still view our fight for justice as a passing annual event that affects a small ethnic minority a supposed one day a year. It is about unity. Unity is the foundation of the Armenian people, and though we all are born activists, it is our job to continue and to remain activists. For any house to stand, the foundation must be solid and when we stand united, we will never be broken.