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# COLLECTIVE ARTS FOR CLIMATE JUSTICE

An introductory guide  
to the role of  
participatory visual arts in  
this era of climate crisis.

by Hannah Gelderman

HG

The arts have a critical role to play as we address the climate crisis and seek climate justice. The arts are powerful as (among other things) they can: <sup>1,2,3</sup>

Enhance climate communications<sup>3</sup>

Engage emotion and imagination

Facilitate dialogue

Hold space for complexity

Raise awareness

Invite reflection

Move people to action

In the next four zines I focus on how locally produced participatory visual arts...

...offer us a platform to tell our stories and envision our future,

support our climate justice movement and activism,

help us build community and collective power,

and increase our capacity to navigate crisis.

In the final zine I talk logistics.

This is powerful and important because all of these things help strengthen and sustain us as we push for climate action, fight for climate justice and build the world we want to live in.



What do you mean by 'locally produced participatory visual arts?'

Local...



... projects are created at the community level by community members. Locally produced projects can resonate with participants as they can draw on relevant histories, knowledge, values, and solutions. They can also strengthen connection and relationship to place.

**Participatory** ...and collective art (I use the two terms interchangeably) is art that is made by more than one person, which often involves collaboration between those who identify as artists and those who might not.<sup>1</sup> This includes both co-creation processes, as well as processes in which participants interact with or add to an artwork as viewers.

Visual arts...

...such as painting, drawing, photography and sculpture are the focus of this zine, but much of what I share is also applicable to the arts more broadly such as dance, music, theatre and poetry.



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This resource is intended to be useful to anyone who wants to leverage the power of the arts for climate justice.

## ARTISTS



How can we use our insights and skills to work for climate justice?

How can we contribute to the organizing happening in our community?

## ORGANIZERS

How can arts-based organizing help us engage people in the movement?

How do we make our activism more visual and creative?



And everyone else!

Before we go further let me introduce myself.

My name is Hannah, (she/her). I am a settler of Dutch descent living on Lekwungen and WSANEC Territories, in Victoria, BC, in the colonial state of Canada.



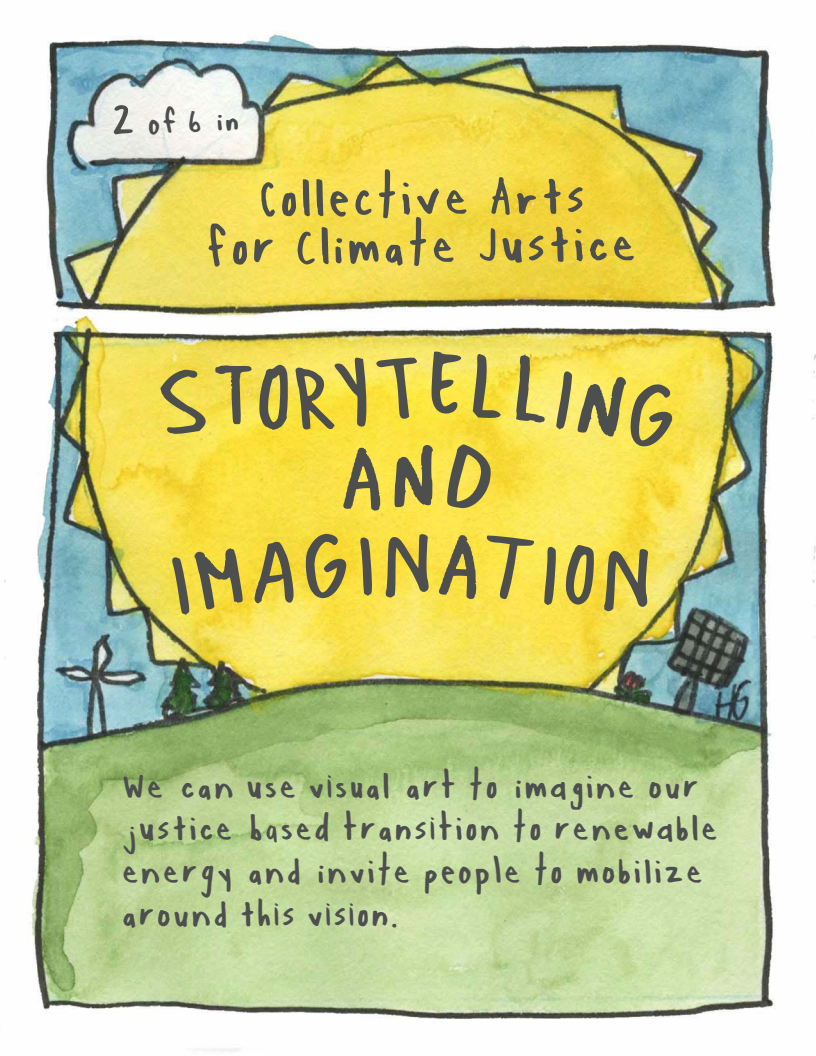
I have created *Collective Arts for Climate Justice* to share the powerful and necessary role participatory visual art can play as we seek climate justice.

I speak from my perspective and experiences as an artist and a climate justice organizer. I invite you to take and adapt what I say to fit your own experiences and contexts. I gain hope and energy from my work at the intersection of art and activism and I hope you can too!

This guide was created as a part of my Master of Education project at the University of Victoria. For the full project and contact info see [hannahgelderman.com](http://hannahgelderman.com). Please share and use this guide widely and get in touch if you want to chat, have questions or want to share ideas!

## References

- 1 The Center for Artistic Activism. (2018). *Assessing the Impact of Artistic Activism*. Retrieved from <https://c1aa.org/2018/02/report-assessing-the-impact-of-artistic-activism/>
- 2 Harlap, Y. (2006). *Toward Training: The Meanings and Practices of Social Change Work in the Arts*. Retrieved from [icasc.ca/resources/toward-training-meanings-and-practices-social-change-work-arts](http://icasc.ca/resources/toward-training-meanings-and-practices-social-change-work-arts)
- 3 Galafassi, D., Kagan, S., Milkoreit, M., Heras, M., Bilodeau, C., Bourke, S. J., ... Tabara, J. D. (2018). 'Raising the temperature': The arts on a warming planet. *Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability*, 31, 71-79. doi:10.1016/j.cosust.2017.12.010
- 4 Matarasso, F. (2019). *A Restless Art: How participation won, and why it matters*. London, UK: Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation. Retrieved from <https://arestlessart.com/the-book/download-a-digital-copy/>



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# STORYTELLING AND IMAGINATION

We can use visual art to imagine our justice based transition to renewable energy and invite people to mobilize around this vision.

Through art  
we can share  
stories...

We can tell the story of who we are and our experiences,  
we can tell the story of the world we want to build,  
and we can tell the story of how we will get there.



We can share stories of injustice and pain, as well as stories of resistance and survival.<sup>1</sup> This can give voice<sup>1</sup> to individual and collective experiences and raise awareness of issues and oppressive systems that need to change.

In response to this the visual arts also provide a way to imagine solutions to these systems and define how we want a different world to look.<sup>2</sup>



The stories we hear and tell can also challenge assumptions, provide new perspectives and present alternatives to dominant narratives.

# ENVISIONING A JUST AND SUSTAINABLE WORLD

In order to make something a reality and to know what we are working towards, we first need to imagine it.<sup>3</sup>

Through art, we can collectively envision our desired future,\* share that vision widely, invite others to see themselves in it, and then build it together.

We can imagine the radical, the bold, the visionary, and the beautiful.

Positive and hopeful future visions can guide and inspire people to work towards them.

\*Ensuring future plans are led by those most impacted by climate change.







Art, stories  
and hopeful  
future visions can  
invite emotional  
engagement,  
dialogue and  
reflection.

These are  
precursors for  
action, so people who  
may not have been  
engaged in climate  
justice may begin to  
make changes...

...and get  
more involved  
in collective  
efforts and  
action towards  
climate justice.<sup>1</sup>

## References

- 1 Berman, K. (2017). *Finding voice: A visual arts approach to engaging social change*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press. doi:10.3998/mpub.9256315
- 2 Bell, L. A., & Desai, D. (2011). Imagining otherwise: Connecting the arts and social justice to envision and act for change, special issue introduction. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, 44(3), 287-295, doi: 10.1080/10665684.2011.591672
- 3 Milkoreit, M., (2017). Imaginary politics: Climate change and making the future. *Elem Sci Anth*, 5, p .62. doi: <http://doi.org/10.1525/elementa.24>
- 4 Chandler, L., Baldwin, C., & Marks, M. (2014). Catalysts for change: Creative practice as an environmental engagement tool. *Leonardo*, 47(5), 506-507, doi:10.1162/LEON\_a\_00825

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# VISUALS IN ACTIVISM

Art can  
strengthen the  
climate justice  
movement...

...and  
make our  
organizing  
even more  
beautiful!

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Visuals and messaging in activism is critical.<sup>1</sup>

Signs, banners and other art can clearly state and share messages.

IMAGINE  
a rally  
with no  
**SIGNS!**

CONCISE AND CLEVER MESSAGES AND PHRASES, AS WELL AS IMAGES ARE STRONG COMMUNICATORS. THEY CAN RAISE AWARENESS AND INVITE REFLECTION FROM THOSE WHO READ AND SEE THEM.

Visuals can be emotive and shape the tone of an event which can help us control our message. We can also use humour which can be a very effective way to provide information and present new perspectives.<sup>2</sup>



Similar visuals  
can increase  
unity for events  
or a movement. This  
increases recognition  
and cultivates  
belonging.

Signs, banners  
and other props such  
as puppets or costumes  
can also increase visual  
presence and physical  
size of a crowd.  
**TAKE UP  
SPACE!**

The process  
of making and  
creating is healing  
and empowering.  
Collaborative projects  
also offer a time to  
build relationships  
and connections.



## References

- 1 I was introduced to most of the concepts in this section initially by David Solnit at Powershift Alberta, in Edmonton in April 2016, at his Arts Organizing for Social Justice Workshop.
- 2 Roy, C. (2016). More than laughter: Raging Grannies and creative leadership. In D. E. Clover, S.J. Butterwick, & L. Collins (Eds.), *Women, adult education, and leadership in Canada: Inspiration, passion, and commitment* (pp. 231-244). Toronto: Thompson Educational Publishing.
- 3 Duncombe, S., & Lambert, S. (2018). *Why Artistic Activism: Nine Reasons*. The Center for Artistic Activism. Retrieved from <https://c4aa.org/2018/04/why-artistic-activism/>

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# Collective Arts for Climate Justice

# POWER IN COLLABORATION

As we work  
collectively and  
creatively we can...

...build power and prefigure  
the world that we want.

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# WHY PARTICIPATORY AND COLLECTIVE VISUAL ARTS?



I am emphasizing the participatory (in the realm of visual arts) because of the power and necessity of collective work and action. To tackle the crises at the scale that is necessary we need to move away from individual solutions to collective action.



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Additionally collaborative art processes:

are an exciting and low barrier way to engage new movement participants,

offer a time for conversation and relationship building,<sup>1</sup>

are an opportunity to make things one cannot imagine or do alone,<sup>2</sup>

invite participants to reflect on climate change and their role in addressing it,<sup>3</sup>

and they can foster connection, relationship and reciprocity.



## CLIMATE COMMUNICATIONS AND PARTICIPATORY VISUAL ARTS



The most effective climate change communications come from a trusted messenger, are framed in the values of the target audience, are emotionally engaging and use relevant and positive imagery.<sup>1</sup>

The arts have the capacity to provide or enhance these aspects of climate communications and artists have been called on as a missing link in climate change communications.<sup>1</sup>

Arts based engagement around climate change is even more effective when it involves participation.<sup>3,1</sup> (As opposed to simply viewing a climate change related artwork). The participatory aspect combines the power of collaborative art processes with the effectiveness of arts based climate change communications.



# LAST, BUT NOT LEAST

Working collectively, creatively and democratically can be prefigurative. Prefiguration refers to the ways in which we can embody the world we want to live in as we organize for it.

If we want a caring, relational, joyful and inspiring world and we can already do that in our organizing, then we are succeeding, even if only these small spaces.<sup>5</sup>

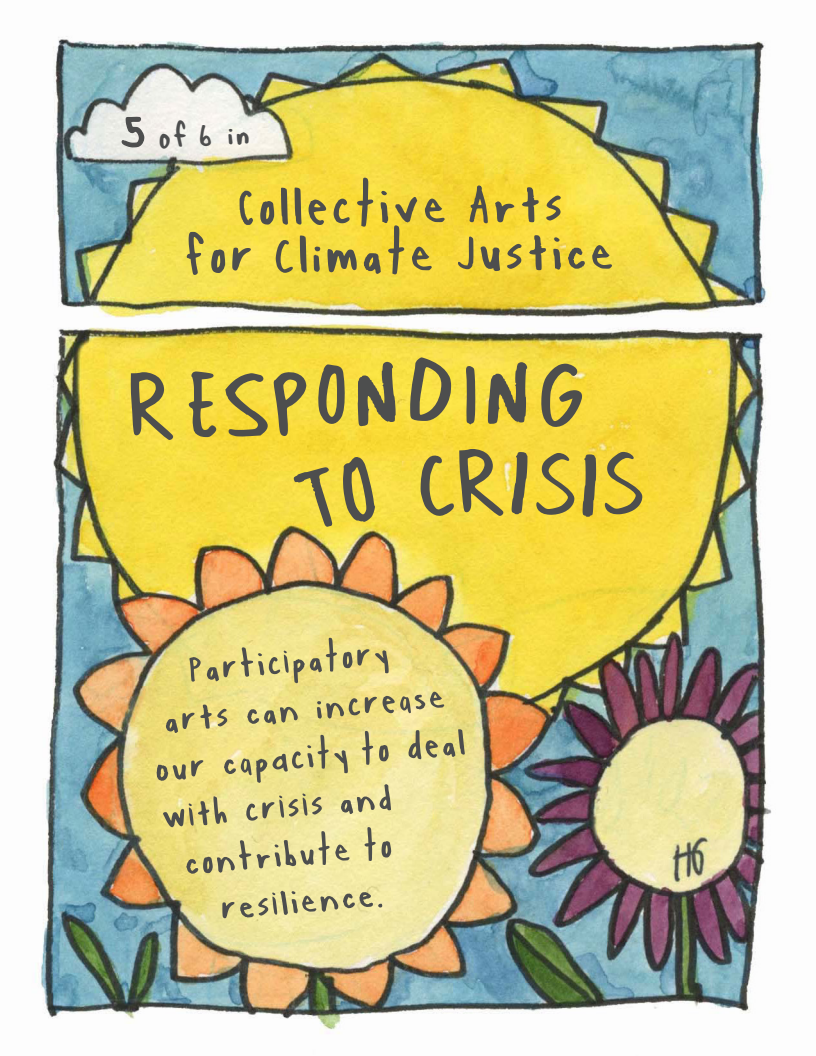
Sometimes it can feel like organizing is not having an impact, but recognizing the intrinsic value in working and building together can bring hope and energy.



## References

- 1 Berman, K. (2017). *Finding voice: A visual arts approach to engaging social change*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press. doi:10.3998/mpub.9256315
- 2 Matarasso, F. (2019). *A Restless Art: How participation won, and why it matters*. London, UK: Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation. Retrieved from <https://arestlessart.com/the-book/download-a-digital-copy/>
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- 5 Solnit, R. (2016). *Hope in the dark: Untold histories, wild possibilities* (3rd ed.). Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books.

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# RESPONDING TO CRISIS

Participatory  
arts can increase  
our capacity to deal  
with crisis and  
contribute to  
resilience.

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# ART AND CRISIS

Participatory arts can aid in response to crisis and natural disaster as they support healing, help restore a sense of place, and can foster resilience.<sup>1, 2</sup>

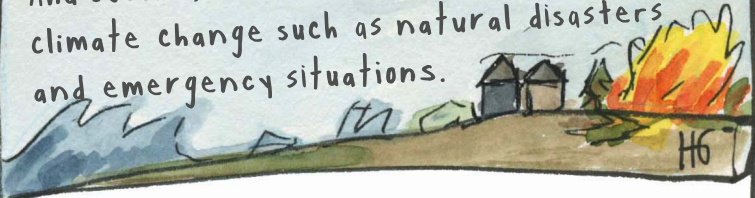
Resilience here is not 'bouncing back' (because our current status quo as a norm is damaging) but rather a process of enacting transformational change based in equity and justice, and being as prepared as possible to navigate difficult circumstances.<sup>3</sup>

OUR CURRENT CRISES ARE TWOFOLD  
(and very much connected).

First the slow crisis of capitalism and other interconnected systems of oppression.



And second, the sudden crises caused by climate change such as natural disasters and emergency situations.



Participatory art processes can play a role in both supporting people to function as best they can within the slow crisis (including resisting and dismantling the systems that perpetuate crisis), and when the time comes, to navigate the sudden crisis.

# The arts contribute to resilience and the response to crisis as they <sup>1,2,4</sup>

- Facilitate opportunities for connection and relationship

- Offer a means to process experiences

- Provide a way to re-imagine the community post-disaster



- Offer space for complexity and emotion

- Help restore a sense of place and community

- Support healing practices

Each of these responses can play a role at both the individual and collective levels, with the two levels directly impacting each other.

# COMMUNITY RESILIENCE IN RESPONSE TO CLIMATE CHANGE

There are several key aspects that help cultivate community resilience in response to climate change.



One aspect is for communities to create and hear hopeful narratives of the future<sup>3</sup>. This can help bring meaning and motivation, as well as help people move to collective action with inventive responses to challenging circumstances. Art can offer a means of visualizing a hopeful and re-imagined future

A hand-drawn illustration of a tall green plant with a yellow flower. The plant has a long, thin stem and a large, yellow, daisy-like flower at the top. To the right of the plant, there is a starburst shape. The plant is set against a background of green foliage. The initials 'HG' are written in the bottom right corner.

Others essential aspects for resilience in response to climate change include emissions reductions, a justice based transformation, increased adaptability and cross sector solutions work.<sup>3</sup>

Art contributes as one of many different tactics in fostering resilience and in working towards climate justice.



## References

- 1 Huss, E., Kaufman, R., Avgar, A., & Shuker, E. (2016). Arts as a vehicle for community building and post-disaster development. *Disasters*, 40(2), 284-303. <https://doi.org/10.1111/disa.12143>
- 2 Puleo, T. (2014). Art-making as place-making following disaster. *Progress in Human Geography*, 38(4), 568-580. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132513512543>
- 3 Fazey, I., Carmen, E., Chapin, F., Ross, H., Rao-Williams, J., Lyon, C., . . . Knox, K. (2018). Community resilience for a 1.5 °C world. *Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability*, 31, 30-40. doi:10.1016/j.cosust.2017.12.006
- 4 LeBaron, M., and C. Cohen. (2013). *Breathing Life into the Ashes: Resilience, Arts, and Social Transformation - PWIAS Inaugural Roundtable Final Report*. Vancouver: Peter Wall Institute for Advanced Studies. Retrieved from [https://commons.allard.ubc.ca/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1198&context=fac\\_pubs](https://commons.allard.ubc.ca/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1198&context=fac_pubs)

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LOGISTICS  
AND  
RESOURCES

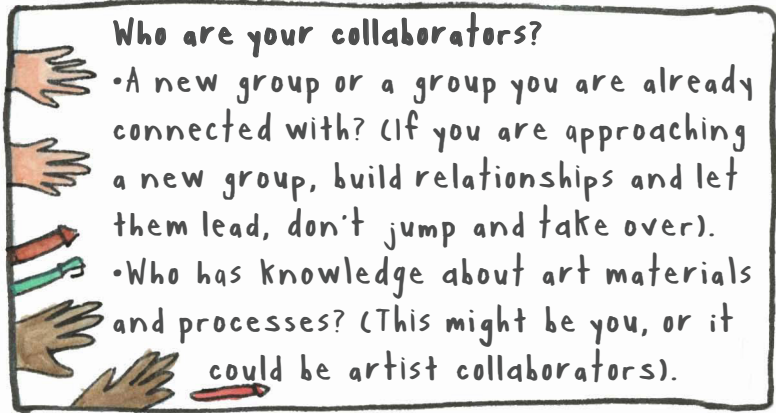
Now it's time to make art!

Some questions and  
considerations to help  
you get started!

HG

# IF YOU ARE GOING TO FACILITATE A PARTICIPATORY ART PROJECT CONSIDER THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS:

(This of course is just an intro)

An illustration on the left side of the box shows several hands of different colors (brown, tan, orange, green) reaching out. On the right side, there are several art materials including a red pencil, a green pencil, and a blue pencil.

### Who are your collaborators?

- A new group or a group you are already connected with? (If you are approaching a new group, build relationships and let them lead, don't jump and take over).
- Who has knowledge about art materials and processes? (This might be you, or it could be artist collaborators).

An illustration on the left shows three small framed pictures on a wall. On the right, there is a landscape with a windmill, two trees, and yellow hills under a blue sky.

### Where will you exhibit or share the project?

- At an event, as a direct action, in a gallery, at a festival, through a publication and/ or other ways!
- How will you promote the project?

An illustration at the top shows a wooden shelf with various art supplies: a yellow jar, a red jar, a blue box labeled 'HG', and a stack of papers. To the left, a blue curved shape with an arrow points towards the shelf.

### When and where...

... will you make and store the project? You'll need time and space to create the project and store supplies, both while the project is in process and after it's finished. Find accessible spaces!

An illustration showing a landscape with a small brown house on the left, a red boat on the water in the foreground, and a large, dark, stormy cloud on the right with rain falling. The sky is grey and the water is blue.

### What are local climate change impacts and solutions? What does climate justice look like in your community? Speak to this in the project.

# HAVE A PLAN FOR THE PROJECT AND PROCESS



What is your project concept & theme?

- Who determines this and how are decisions made about the project?
- What message are you trying to share?
- Who is your audience? How can you best engage them?
- What is your goal with the project?



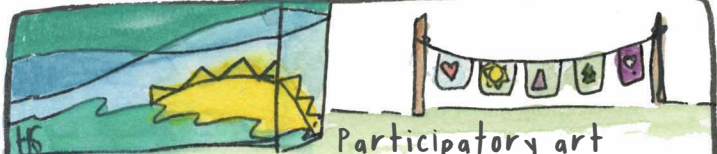
What medium

will you work in?

- What supplies are needed and where you can source them?
- Consider budget, transport & storage.
- Keep in mind the project timeline, and physical space for creation and storage.



- What are the steps to the project?
- What is your collective creation process?
- Who will be invited to participate?
- How will outreach and communication happen with this group?
- How will the process be made equitable and accessible for participants?



Participatory art projects can be large scale and long term such as a mural, or they can be short term and/or temporary such as an afternoon art build. Plan in accordance with the needs of those you are working with, as well as the available time and resources!

# IN CONCLUSION...

This guide is a conceptual introduction to why participatory visual arts are powerful and important!

For background information see [hannahgelderman.com](http://hannahgelderman.com).

For considerations on engaging in community based arts and then logistical how-to's please take a look at the resources on the right.

Power dynamics, histories, and ethics all need to be considered when engaging in community art.

The following resources provide some starting points for this reflection.

- [artsengage.ca/the-practice](http://artsengage.ca/the-practice)
- [www.arts.on.ca/oac/media/oac/Publications/Framing-Community-A-Community-Engaged-Art-Workbook.pdf](http://www.arts.on.ca/oac/media/oac/Publications/Framing-Community-A-Community-Engaged-Art-Workbook.pdf)
- [arestlessart.com](http://arestlessart.com) - download the book (chapter 6 for ethics, the whole book is informative!)



Check out these websites for resources and ideas on artistic activism and creative projects!

- [art.350.org](http://art.350.org)
- [actipedia.org](http://actipedia.org)
- [c1aa.org](http://c1aa.org)



Thanks for reading! I want to acknowledge that though I have my name as the sole author of this guide (in part because of the parameters in producing this for my MEd project), I have received so much support and feedback from friends, family, my partner and my supervisor. I have drawn on the research of many others, as well as my own experiences of participatory arts, which have all been in collaboration with others. I have also learned so much from other organizers and artists through trainings and workshops, as well as from working alongside them. All of this has informed my understanding and in different ways has led to the creation of this guide. Thank you to all who have been a part of it and to all those reading. I am grateful to be building a new world alongside you!

- Hannah

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