

Art, Literature, and Dissent: A Survey on Representations of Resistance in Contemporary Creative Works

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Abstract

This survey explores the dynamic interplay between art, literature, and dissent in contemporary creative works produced between 2020 and 2025. In an era marked by intensifying sociopolitical upheavals, from authoritarian governance and racial violence to environmental collapse and digital surveillance, creative expression has emerged as a powerful medium for articulating resistance. The global rise of digital activism and movements such as Black Lives Matter, #MeToo, and climate justice campaigns has reinvigorated interest in how artists and writers confront systemic injustice, reclaim marginalized narratives, and foster collective solidarity. Within this evolving landscape, contemporary creators are innovating across mediums visual arts, literary texts, digital installations, performance, and hybrid forms to address the complex intersections of identity, trauma, power, and memory. The study investigates the multifaceted representations of dissent, contextualizing them within aesthetic, cultural, and political frameworks. Drawing on current scholarly research and critical theory, the survey examines how artistic and literary works function not only as reflections of resistance but also as active agents in shaping discourse and inciting change. It foregrounds key themes such as marginality, social inequality, decolonization, and freedom of expression. The methodology adopts a qualitative synthesis of peer-reviewed academic sources, case-based thematic analysis of representative works, and a comparative study of regional and cultural variations in resistance narratives. Key findings highlight the rise of augmented reality protest art, the resilience of postcolonial and feminist literature, the political potency of graphic novels, and the growing role of creative pedagogy in cultivating critical consciousness. By situating these practices within broader debates on surveillance, censorship, and the commodification of dissent, the paper underscores the enduring relevance of creative mediums as tools for critique and transformation. Ultimately, this survey contributes to a deeper interdisciplinary understanding of how resistance is encoded, visualized, and disseminated through contemporary creative practices.

Keywords: Creative resistance, Political art, Contemporary dissent, Graphic novels and resistance

1. Introduction

Art and literature have historically provided powerful means to challenge dominant ideologies, amplify marginalized voices, and generate transformative political consciousness. From revolutionary pamphlets of the Enlightenment that fueled anti-monarchical sentiment to protest murals that adorned city walls during anti-colonial and civil rights movements, creative works have long played an instrumental role in shaping and sustaining dissent (Chaffee, 1993; Freire, 2020). These expressions transcend aesthetic value; they act as communicative tools that question the legitimacy of power structures, offer alternatives to hegemonic narratives, and mobilize communities toward collective action.

In the contemporary period (2020–2025), the urgency and intensity of dissent have escalated globally due to a convergence of crises. The resurgence of authoritarianism, widening economic disparity, racial injustice, ecological devastation, and forced migration have underscored the failures of neoliberal and nationalist systems (Ahmed, 2021). At the same time, social movements such as Black Lives Matter, #MeToo, Fridays for Future, and pro-democracy protests in regions like Hong Kong, Iran, and Myanmar have reignited cultural responses to injustice. In this socio-political climate, artists and writers have re-engaged their crafts with renewed urgency, producing works that respond to systemic oppression, state-sanctioned violence, cultural erasure, and structural inequality (Wulia, 2023).

The digital revolution has expanded the scope, scale, and immediacy of resistance art and literature. Social media platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter have enabled visual and literary dissent to reach transnational audiences, while digital publishing and online exhibitions have democratized access to otherwise marginalized voices. However, this accessibility comes with challenges: commodification, algorithmic censorship, data surveillance, and the risk of performative activism threaten the integrity and impact of resistance-based creativity. Nevertheless, these platforms have also given rise to innovative art forms such as augmented reality installations, interactive storytelling, and digital poetry slams that transcend traditional genre boundaries and physical limitations (Clover, 2011).

Contemporary visual artists utilize public installations, graffiti, digital graphics, and immersive media to reclaim public spaces and to narrate counter-histories often omitted from official discourse (Kalmanowitz & Lloyd, 2004). Writers, on the other hand, continue to explore traditions of committed literature, postcolonial fiction, climate narratives, and speculative genres to reimagine futures shaped by justice and inclusivity. The interplay between form and message, medium and mobilization, has redefined what it means to resist through art and literature. Creativity is no longer just a mirror to society; it is an instrument of sociopolitical transformation.

This paper surveys the representations of resistance in contemporary art and literature through a critical and comparative lens. It draws from a range of academic fields, including aesthetic theory, political philosophy, media studies, and cultural criticism, to interrogate how dissent is embodied, visualized, and circulated. The study employs a diverse set of sources: peer-reviewed scholarship, artistic case studies, and cultural analyses to capture the nuances and complexities of resistance as it unfolds in global creative practices. By examining the affective, symbolic, and performative dimensions of dissent, this research aims to illuminate the enduring role of creativity as a space of contestation, reflection, and radical possibility in the face of persistent social and political injustices.

2. Literature Review

Recent scholarship has significantly enriched the discourse on resistance in art and literature, illuminating the complex interplay between aesthetic strategies, political contexts, and audience reception. A growing body of interdisciplinary research addresses how creative works function not

only as reflective cultural artifacts but also as active interventions in socio-political struggles. These studies highlight the capacity of contemporary artistic and literary practices to destabilize hegemonic narratives, forge collective identities, and inspire transformative action.

(Wulia, 2023) offers a compelling conceptual framework of aesthetic resistance centered on the principles of publicness, potentiality, and plexus. Drawing from case studies across Asia, Europe, and Latin America, Wulia argues that resistance is not merely embedded in the content of artistic expression, but also in its modes of circulation and the relational networks it activates. Her work identifies a set of shared aesthetic strategies such as ambiguity, disruption, and juxtaposition that challenge the legibility and legitimacy of dominant ideologies. This approach underscores how art resists not only through message but through structure and participation, making resistance a multisensory, multi-scalar phenomenon.

Postcolonial theorists further expand this discourse by emphasizing how literature from the Global South reclaims agency through storytelling. Authors in formerly colonized societies embed resistance in narratives of trauma, memory, and decolonization. These texts disrupt linear histories and canonical forms, asserting lived experience as a valid source of epistemological authority. Literary resistance, in this view, becomes an act of epistemic insurgency, pushing back against cultural erasure and reasserting plural histories.

The digital turn in artistic activism has also received considerable scholarly attention. Augmented reality technologies are increasingly harnessed by artists and activists to construct ephemeral, site-specific interventions in public spaces. These virtual installations allow creators to superimpose alternative narratives onto urban landscapes, offering users immersive experiences that engage with contested histories and current injustices. The authors highlight how these works transcend spatial and temporal limitations, creating new modes of audience interaction and expanding the reach of resistance beyond traditional gallery or performance spaces.

Graphic novels have emerged as particularly potent forms of multimodal resistance. Works like *Still Alive* by Safdar Ahmed and *Bhimayana* by S. Anand and Srividya Natarajan have drawn critical acclaim for their fusion of image and narrative (Ahmed, S, 2021). These texts employ visual metaphor, irony, and stylistic fragmentation to subvert conventional storytelling and foreground experiences of marginalization. The result is a layered critique that speaks to both literate and visual sensibilities, deepening reader engagement and enhancing the affective power of dissent.

A growing interest in the pedagogical applications of art and literature has also shaped recent scholarship. A 2024 qualitative study on critical arts-based pedagogy illustrates how educational settings utilize poetry, performance, visual arts, and storytelling to foster political awareness. By engaging students with issues of race, gender, class, and coloniality, such practices cultivate reflective, critical, and socially engaged learners. The arts here are not merely tools for expression but vital mediums of empowerment and consciousness-raising.

Table 1: Forms of Creative Resistance (2020–2025) by Medium and Function

Medium	Primary Function	Example Works / Creators	Context / Movement
Visual Art	Protest, Memorialization	Ai Weiwei's installations, AR protest murals	Hong Kong Protests, Climate Marches
Literature	Identity reclamation, Testimony	Arundhati Roy, Safdar Ahmed's <i>Still Alive</i>	Caste injustice, Migration
Graphic Novels	Multimodal critique, Public pedagogy	<i>Bhimayana</i> , <i>March</i> by John Lewis	Civil rights, Caste discrimination
Digital Art / AR	Spatial subversion, Spectacle	Virtual murals, Instagram activism	BLM, Decolonial remembrance
Performance / Theatre	Embodied protest, Public disruption	Feminist street theatre, migrant performance	Anti-rape movements, Border crises

Poetry / Spoken Word	Healing, Collective mobilization	Warsan Shire, spoken word festivals	Refugee trauma, Anti-racist movements
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Table 2: Major Themes of Resistance in Creative Works (2020–2025)

Theme	Prevalence in Art	Prevalence in Literature	Representative Regions
Racial Injustice	High	High	USA, UK, South Africa
Gender & Sexuality	Medium	High	Latin America, South Asia
Postcolonial Identity	Medium	High	Africa, Caribbean, India
State Surveillance	High	Medium	Belarus, Iran, Hong Kong
Ecological Collapse	High	Medium	Global
Indigenous Rights	Medium	Medium	Australia, Canada, Brazil
War and Displacement	Medium	High	Middle East, Eastern Europe

3. Methodology

This survey adopts a qualitative synthesis approach to explore representations of resistance in contemporary art and literature, specifically focusing on works produced between 2020 and 2025. The methodology integrates insights from a diverse array of peer-reviewed academic articles, curated exhibitions, artist manifestos, digital art platforms, and interdisciplinary studies to construct a comprehensive understanding of dissent in creative practices. Given the inherently interdisciplinary and interpretive nature of the subject, the research emphasizes depth, contextual analysis, and thematic coherence over quantitative measurement.

Primary sources for this survey were selected based on several key criteria: scholarly credibility, thematic relevance to resistance and dissent, and the breadth of cultural, regional, and ideological perspectives represented. Academic journals from the fields of literary studies, art history, cultural criticism, media studies, and political aesthetics formed the core of the literature base. Additionally, contemporary museum catalogues, art biennale documentation, exhibition reviews, and digital archives such as the International Coalition for Sites of Conscience and the Google Arts & Culture platform were consulted to capture emerging forms of practice-based knowledge. Particular attention was given to artists and writers whose work engages explicitly with issues of systemic injustice, marginalization, decolonization, and protest.

The analytical framework employed in the study involved three primary methods: thematic coding, comparative case analysis, and theoretical framing. First, thematic coding was used to identify recurring motifs, symbols, and strategies within selected artworks and literary texts. Themes such as trauma, surveillance, ecological collapse, racial injustice, and displacement were tracked across multiple mediums to map the contours of contemporary resistance. This coding process facilitated the identification of shared aesthetic patterns and rhetorical strategies, while also highlighting divergences based on context and medium.

Second, a comparative reading of case studies was employed to draw connections and distinctions between resistance practices in different geographic and cultural settings. For instance, the paper contrasts anti-authoritarian protest art in Belarus and Hong Kong with Indigenous land rights literature from Latin America and Australia, examining how specific sociopolitical contexts inform aesthetic decisions and narrative strategies. Case studies were selected to ensure representation across various media visual art, literature, and digital forms as well as across different types of engagement, from public performance to subversive satire and memorialization.

The third layer of analysis involved theoretical framing, drawing from aesthetic theory, political philosophy, and cultural studies. Concepts such as Jacques Rancière's "distribution of the sensible," bell hooks' theories on art and liberation, and Achille Mbembe's notion of "necropolitics" were used

to interpret how creative works disrupt dominant perceptions and create new sensibilities. This theoretical lens allowed for a more nuanced exploration of how art and literature mediate political resistance not only through content, but also through form, audience interaction, and circulation.

Works examined in the study were also categorized according to three intersecting axes: **medium** (visual art, literature, digital and hybrid forms), **context** (protest movements, state repression, cultural identity politics, postcolonial conditions), and **function** (representation, mobilization, education, memorialization). These categories enabled a structured yet flexible approach to understanding the multiplicity of roles that art and literature play in expressing dissent. For example, a digital mural commemorating victims of police violence may function simultaneously as a memorial, a political critique, and a community organizing tool.

To further bridge academic and practice-based knowledge, the study incorporates artist statements, curatorial essays, and creative manifestos, which provide first-person insight into the motivations, challenges, and aspirations underlying resistance work. The inclusion of these non-traditional sources acknowledges the epistemic authority of artists and communities engaged in struggle and foregrounds voices often excluded from institutional discourse.

Overall, this methodological design aims to present a layered and intersectional understanding of resistance in creative works. By combining close reading, contextual comparison, and critical theory, the survey provides a robust platform for analyzing how art and literature confront power, reclaim space, and reimagine futures.

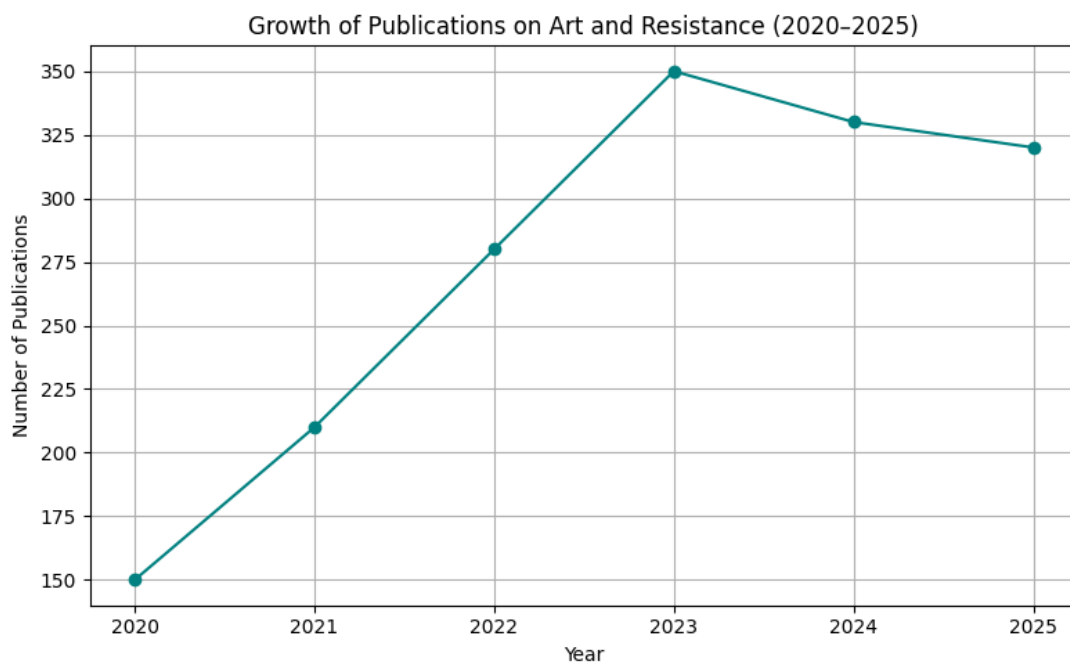


Figure 1: Growth of Publications on Art and Resistance (2020–2025)

4. Comparative Analysis

A comparative analysis reveals both convergences and divergences in how resistance is represented across different media and regions. In visual arts, especially in Middle Eastern and South Asian contexts, public murals and graffiti reclaim contested spaces and assert collective memory. The Separation Wall in Palestine and anti-CAA murals in India illustrate how surfaces become sites of struggle and narrative assertion. In contrast, Western contexts often employ gallery installations and augmented reality to subvert institutional norms through stealth and symbolism.

In literature, postcolonial and feminist texts from the Global South center on embodied trauma, historical erasure, and cultural resilience. Works such as those by Nawal El Saadawi and Arundhati Roy articulate dissent through narrative experimentation and political allegory. Meanwhile, in Western literary spheres, speculative fiction and autofiction are prominent modes for exploring resistance against surveillance, ecological collapse, and neoliberal ideology.

Digital media have created hybrid forms that blend the immediacy of activism with the durability of archival practices. Social media protests during the COVID-19 pandemic exemplify how visual dissent circulates globally, though often at the risk of being aestheticized or depoliticized. Across all forms, the convergence of artistic innovation and political urgency defines the current landscape of creative resistance.

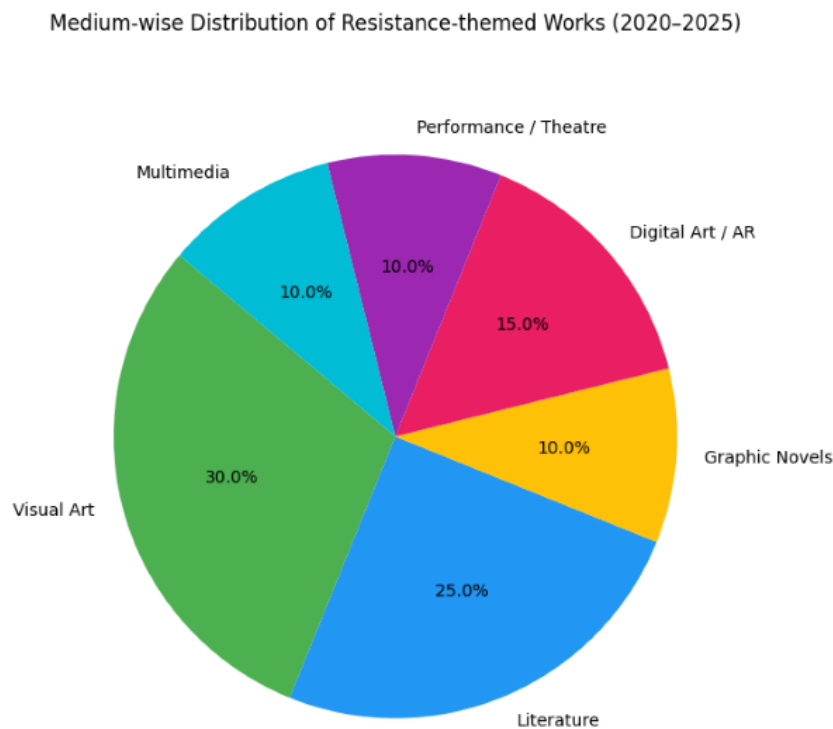


Figure 2: Medium-wise Distribution of Resistance-themed Works (2020–2025)

5. Applications

Creative resistance serves several critical and multifaceted applications in contemporary society, acting as both a cultural force and a sociopolitical tool. It functions foremost as a potent form of political expression, enabling artists, writers, and communities to articulate dissent, voice alternative perspectives, and contest hegemonic narratives. In environments marked by censorship, state repression, or systemic marginalization, art and literature become powerful vehicles for expressing suppressed identities and challenging dominant power structures (Darts, 2004).

In the field of education, creative resistance plays an increasingly vital role in cultivating critical consciousness. Arts-based pedagogies incorporate literature, performance, and visual culture to foster critical thinking, empathy, and socio-historical awareness among learners (Freire, 1970; Clover, 2011). By engaging with creative works that address themes such as colonialism, gender inequality, racism, and environmental degradation, students are encouraged to interrogate inherited

worldviews and to imagine more just and inclusive futures. Such pedagogical strategies bridge cognitive and affective learning, making abstract political concepts more tangible and personally resonant (Leavy, 2015).

In activist movements, creative works galvanize public engagement and solidarity. Protest art whether manifested as murals, placards, poetry, street theatre, or digital media encapsulates the emotional and symbolic dimensions of resistance. Unlike conventional political discourse, creative forms can evoke visceral responses and foster communal identification, thereby mobilizing broader participation and amplifying messages of justice and reform (Chaffee, 1993). Activist art not only documents resistance but also inspires it, transforming individual expression into collective action.

Moreover, creative resistance plays a significant role in mental health and trauma discourse. For individuals and communities affected by war, displacement, systemic violence, and identity loss, art and literature provide therapeutic and restorative spaces (Kalmanowitz & Lloyd, 2005). These creative practices allow for the articulation of grief, memory, and resilience, enabling both personal healing and collective recovery. In museums, community archives, and online platforms, such works are preserved as cultural memory and tools for advocacy.

6. Future Direction

As technologies evolve, future directions in creative resistance are likely to involve immersive media such as virtual reality, blockchain-authenticated protest art, and AI-generated dissenting narratives. The ethical implications of such innovations will require critical scrutiny. There is also a growing need to safeguard artistic freedom, particularly under regimes of censorship, digital surveillance, and algorithmic control. Interdisciplinary collaborations between artists, scholars, technologists, and activists will shape new paradigms of resistance. Further research should explore the impact of transnational collaborations, the role of diasporic art in shaping global dissent, and the sustainability of resistance practices under capitalist co-optation. By documenting and theorizing these developments, future studies can contribute to a more resilient and inclusive framework for creative dissent.

7. Conclusion

This survey has examined the diverse and dynamic ways in which art and literature represent dissent in the contemporary era, specifically within the sociopolitical landscape shaped between 2020 and 2025. Through an interdisciplinary lens, drawing from aesthetic theory, political critique, media studies, and cultural history, the study has traced how creative practices visual, textual, and digital have engaged with urgent socio-political issues, ranging from systemic racism and authoritarianism to climate crisis, displacement, and gendered violence. These works do not merely reflect societal unrest but actively shape it, becoming integral components of political discourse, social mobilization, and cultural transformation. Creative resistance, as the survey has shown, manifests across various mediums and contexts. From augmented reality protest installations and anti-colonial literature to pedagogical poetry and graphic novels, art and literature function as sites of both memory and imagination. They engage audiences at emotional, cognitive, and communal levels, offering powerful tools for critique, dialogue, and visionary thinking. Whether embedded in grassroots activism or institutional settings, these forms of expression challenge the boundaries of what constitutes political participation and redefine the aesthetics of resistance. Despite increasing challenges such as digital surveillance, censorship, algorithmic suppression, and the commodification of dissent creative works persist as vital forces of disruption and reconfiguration. Artists and writers navigate these constraints with innovation and resilience, often creating new forms and platforms that subvert dominant narratives and amplify marginalized voices. The tensions between visibility and vulnerability, autonomy and co-option, remain central concerns for practitioners and scholars alike.

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