ART, SOCIAL JUSTICE AND COMMON SENSE[1]*

Considerations and questions

The aim of this non-paper is to build a conceptual framework for making the role of art in changing common sense more intentional and verifiable. Changing common sense is crucial to the successful outcome of collective and public actions aimed at social justice. For art to play a role in this change, however, it must reach those who view "culture" as the privilege of a minority. How to achieve this? With what impact? What role does contemporary art play? These and other issues are tackled here with some responses as well as further specific questions.

This is the result of a collective journey of readings, analysis and discussion that started out in June 2022 with a seminar[2] and an initial paper, and continued with further readings,[3] an additional seminar[4] and a series of internal discussions within ForumDD[5]. The material will be used, debated and challenged in the Spring 2024 Seminar, a further step in ForumDD's Workshop on Common Sense.

    I.   *Why 'common sense' is relevant for social justice*

    II.   *Mechanisms that challenge/change common sense*

    III.   *Art and its impact on common sense*

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[1]* Edited by Fabrizio Barca and Alessia Zabatino. (NB: translations are often editors' responsibility).

[2] The 1st internal seminar, entitled *'Languages, frames and common sense: Scientific approaches and analysis',* held in Rome on 10 June 2022, was attended by Filippo Barbera (University of Turin), Cristina Bicchieri (University of Pennsylvania), Barbara Collevecchio (psychologist), Alessia Crocini (H-Farm digital marketing), Leonardo Delogu (artist), Marco Faillo (University of Trento), Anna Lo Iacono (Fastweb), Claudio Riccio (Latte Creative), Filippo Riniolo (artist), Simona Sacchi (Bicocca University of Milan), Gea Scancarello (journalist), Katia Scannavini (ActionAid Italia), Luciano Stella (Mad Entertainment), as well as members of the ForumDD Coordination.

[3] See the texts cited in the notes following the text.

[4] The 2nd in-house seminar, entitled *'Languages, frames and common sense: Methods, artistic expressions',* held in Turin on 20 July 2022, was attended by Filippo Barbera (University of Turin), Francesco Cascino (curator), Barbara Collevecchio (psychologist), Elisabetta Consonni (choreographer), Antonio Damasco (Italian Network of Popular Culture), Leonardo Delogu (artist), Camilla Ferrari and Francesca Gobbo (Italian Institute of Photography), Giulia Maino (Amleta Collective), Francesco Maltese (Dravelli Foundation), Dario Nepoti (Business Community Palermo Mediterranea), Simona Sacchi (Bicocca University of Milan), Anna Serlenga (Collective Corps Citoyen), Katia Scannavini (ActionAid Italy), Luciano Stella (Mad Entertainment), Gabriele Vacis (director), as well as members of the ForumDD Coordination.

[5] These interlocutions involved all the active citizenship organisations that helped set up the ForumDD: Basso Foundation, ActionAid, Caritas Italiana, Cittadinanzattiva, Dedalus Cooperativa sociale, Messina Community Foundation, Legambiente, Uisp.

I. Why 'common sense' is relevant for social and environmental justice

With Anthony Atkinson (2015), ForumDD believes that the increase in equality and social and environmental justice[6] in the 30 post-war years came to a halt and was then reversed as a result not only of policy choices and a weakening of workers' bargaining power but also of a change in common sense. By **common sense**, we mean the mental frames and predispositions and beliefs that lead us to see certain problems and phenomena rather than others, and that instinctively guide us in shaping our moral values and beliefs; that is, what we tend to consider 'right' and 'wrong'. In any given society, different common senses can co-exist, but one often prevails[7].

The change in the prevailing common sense today, shaped by neo-liberal culture's hegemonic view of the world, has meant that diminished workers' power and current policies now tend to be considered 'normal' or 'right'[8].

Some words that have played a crucial role in the way we form judgements can be used as **examples** of this change in common sense. These include: *merit*, associated with the accumulation of wealth, rather than the social utility of thinking and acting in the private, public or social sphere; *poverty*, instinctively attributed to people's lack of effort rather than to the context of their birth and life; *public*, which has become synonymous with mismanaging resources rather than with managing them in the general interest; *freedom*, increasingly identified with the right to '*exit*'—from a service, from a city, from a state—rather than with 'voice', the right and/or duty to critique and participate in governance; *migrants*, identified as a threat to identity and security, rather than—paradoxically in contrast with the above—as an expression of the freedom to *exit* and

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[6] The DD Forum understands social justice as "sustainable substantive freedom", i.e. as the ability of each person to do the things to which he or she assigns value in all fields of human life, without reducing the similar freedom of future generations: in this way, social justice also includes the environmental dimension, i.e. respect for and maintenance of the ecosystem conditions that allow for that freedom. The conceptual reference is both to the concept of "full development of the human person" in Article 3 of the Italian Constitution, and (also in the expression) to Amartya Sen's theory of capacities and social justice (see in particular, *The Idea of Justice*, Allen Lane, 2009). For each person, it is not only a right, but also a duty, given the requirement of universality (cf. Elena Granaglia, *Uguaglianza di opportunità*, Il Mulino, 2023); in our Constitution the duty is enshrined in the 'task' entrusted to the Republic to 'remove obstacles' to that freedom.

[7] Theoretical reference is among others to Gramsci, Kuhn, Goffman, Kahneman and, with particular regard to political language, Lakoff.

[8] See ForumDD's analyses and arguments in Fabrizio Barca and Patrizia Luongo (eds.), *Un Futuro più Giusto*, Il Mulino, 2020.

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as a fixed feature of human civilisation.

The issue is not that interpretations and images evoked by the new common sense are unfounded; in fact, arguments in their favour can often (though not always) be produced. **The issue is that the mental predisposition with which we view, say, poverty or migrants leads us to make certain judgements and behave in certain ways rather than others.**

Any public policy that aims to reduce inequality has to grapple with these and other expressions of common sense that have developed over the last forty years. **They are powerful obstacles to any attempt to gather sufficient consensus regarding these policies, to creating a social bloc strong enough for them to be implemented, and even to opening a reasonable debate**, i.e., a debate that takes into account other values and points of view. This is why any public policy design, however <u>well-founded and rigorous</u> (as we believe ForumDD's proposals are), **should also aim to change common sense, or at least challenge it** with regard to the **vocabulary** of essential words/concepts it adopts.

There are **further words/concepts that have been appropriated and repurposed by the authoritarian dynamic over the last fifteen years[9]** which should also be challenged. These concern moral sensitivities[10] that underlie many of our instinctive reactions. In particular: *loyalty*, which the new common sense tends to view as a duty towards a presumed 'original' community, rather than towards a community united by a vision and a project for the future; *authority*, increasingly associated with the concentration in a Caesar (public or private) of the power to decide and resolve complexity, rather than entrusting this role to a process of democratic debate that is adequately guaranteed to be accessible, open, informative and reasonable; *purity*, as a repudiation of diversity, rather than relying on absolute moral principles. Reversing, or at least applying a strong shock to this new common sense, is crucial for creating consensus and implementing policies that differ from the ones forcefully proposed by authoritarians today.

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[9] See Karen Sennert, *The Authoritarian Dynamic*, Cambridge CUP, 2005.
[10] Such sensitivities are considered by some to be 'innate', as cornerstones of the very evolution of our species: see Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind*, Pantheon Books, 2012.

Question 1

Do you agree that there is a relationship between the prevailing common sense and consensus/implementation of public policies?

Question 2

What other common-sense words (besides those mentioned above) are essential as a premise for reorienting public policies towards social and environmental justice?

II.Mechanisms that challenge/change common sense

There is a lively scientific and political debate on how common sense is formed and our first seminar identified many features which we outline here. **Over the course of our life, our mental frames are gradually formed** based on the experiences, information and emotions that are grafted onto our personal traits. In this regard, part of the current debate revolves around the existence and consistence of innate universal models or *archetypes* (the great mother, the hero's journey, etc.) and how they are stated and elaborated by each person differently, depending on their own experience. It is generally accepted, however, that Individual or collective experience, together with accumulated information, produce in each person an instinctive association of judgements and values— *stereotypes*— assigned to certain categories of people (gender, somatic features, place of origin, etc.) or to certain situations. The issue is how to ensure that these stereotypes do not degenerate into *prejudices*, i.e., into rigid mental frames for interpreting and evaluating reality.

The survey conducted so far allows us to outline the following **mechanisms that challenge/change common sense**:

1. *Information.* Can information about 'how things really are' change common sense? Empirical research seems to suggest that **information alone is not enough[11].** Information is a necessary component of other mechanisms.

2. *Communication.* Communication can certainly **pander to and consolidate** prevailing prejudices and common sense, both in traditional mass media and contemporary social media (favouring the creation of bubbles where common sense seeks and obtains asseveration). Whether communication can also contribute to **challenging and changing** common sense, beyond a temporary emotional effect, seems to depend, among other things, on certain requirements: **whether the message is reiterated**, perhaps subliminally, for example by presenting a 'different normality' in images of everyday family life or, conversely, associating particular ethnic profiles with crime; **whether the message is clear and simple** and speaks to moral sentiments; **whether the message is associated with collective mobilisation.**

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[11] See in particular the strand of empirical research promoted by Cristina Bicchieri, S.J.P. Harvie Professor of philosophy and psychology, University of Pennsylvania, and director of the *Center for social norms and behavioral dynamics.*

3. _Public debate/contestation_. As Amartya Sen argues[12], when it is _heated_ ('a space for contestation'), _open_ (even to distant points of view, which, acting as an 'impartial spectator'[13], challenge entrenched beliefs) and _informed_, public debate is where the **reasonableness** of arguments can be tested. By 'reasonable' he means, "defending an idea [...]and taking into account the views and ideas of others": only some opinions survive the debate and conditions are created for compromise between surviving opinions, which will guide decisions and actions[14]. **Common sense is often a barrier to reasonable debate.** It can prevent or forestall it, and often stands in the way of reasonable arguments since, by persuading people to see certain problems and phenomena and not others, it will prompt them to cloak instinctive convictions in self-referential rationality[15]. Moreover, **creating spaces for public debate can have a retroactive effect on common sense** when their very openness turns them into a place for critical analysis that undermines common sense. In particular, if debate leads to collective decisions, the process of participating in these spaces tends to modify mental frames, thus producing a **co-evolution between common sense and collective decisions**. For this co-evolution to take place, there needs to be an awareness of the sway of instinctive beliefs and both the will and capacity to bring them to the surface and deconstruct them. It is therefore an **intentional political action**, part of a mobilisation process (Gramsci).

4. _Mobilisation/movement_. Collective mobilisation around a future vision or aim— political mobilisation that adopts 'ritual interactions'[16]—supports and empowers other mechanisms. It can trigger a chain of expectations that the **'mobilising aim' is mutual**, a **'collective effervescence'**, that can contribute to developing new mental scaffolding on which to firmly base one's judgements. Mobilisation can be effective at a local level, energising public debate, but also at higher, even world, levels. This requires **persistence over time and an active political organisation** that is commensurate with the mobilisation.

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[12] See Amartya Sen, _The Idea of Justice_, Mondadori, 2009.

[13] See Adam Smith, _The Theory of Moral Sentiments_, 1759.

[14] 'Between justice and democracy' - Sen (2009) writes - 'there is an intimate link [since] the demands of justice can only be affirmed with the help of public reflection and ... this is constitutively linked to the idea of democracy'.

[15] On this tendency of ours, see again Jonathan Heidt, _The Righteous Mind_, Pantheon Books, 2012.

[16] On this and other points, see Filippo Barbera, _Le piazze vuote_, Laterza, 2023 (especially chapter 1).

At this stage of the research, it thus appears that **different combinations of these mechanisms** can challenge or change common sense. Information, communication and public debate can be blended, while **political mobilisation recurs as a key tool linked to all the others**.

> **Question 3**
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> Is the characterisation of the four mechanisms convincing? What should be corrected?
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> **Question 4**
>
> Are there any further requirements and limits for public debate and political mobilisation to be used as tools to challenge and change common sense?
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> **Question 5**
>
> Using these or other tools, how do you explain the powerful effect on common sense of the neo-liberal world view?

There is one further mechanism we have not yet explored, however: that is, _art_. On an empirical level, we find art **associated with the other mechanisms**: part of (or complementary to) the public debate in communities and mobilisations/movements; a symbolic catalyst in mobilisations; an often essential 'tool' of communication. On a conceptual level, we know that art can **disorientate, excite, and urge us to interpret reality in other ways**. This further mechanism thus opens up the vast, age-old theme of the relationship between art and politics.

III. Art and its impact on common sense

"*Art is anything we call art*", is Dino Formaggio's definition,[17] recently evoked by the art critic, Angela Vettese[18], to remind us of the caution that needs to be exercised when defining art. But then Vettese herself offers us some constituent features that serve our purpose. Art is "*a thing made or modified by man*" —or, we would add in contemporary times, even "*simply*" the process of making it — which deserves consideration "*beyond any possible use value*" and which arouses "*sensations*" by acting "*on sensory systems that generate emotional and cognitive responses.*"

How does this process take place? We are helped here by the neuroscientist Vittorio Gallese[19], who is keen to research the impact of aesthetic experience—experimental aesthetics—not only on the brain, but also on the body. Gallese is convinced that the "*symbolic creations and expressions*" of art promote empathy: that is, the ability to understand the other from within. Existing studies on the way paintings and photographs are enjoyed show that **the reception of artistic images activates mechanisms of 'embodied simulation' of the actions, emotions and bodily sensations depicted in them**. That is, the brain areas that usually underlie our actions, emotions and sensations are activated, along with individual memories and imagination associated with them. In addition, our cortical system transforms the work into an idea of movement: even when the image is devoid of body content, we feel and simulate the artist's creative gesture, the brushstroke, the cut, the graphic sign.

Experiments using film and audio-visual materials to investigate how the brain and body interface with the digitised world, show the same activation of 'embodied simulation', particularly with certain styles of filming that bring the observer closer to the scene. The experiments show that these effects are found in all individuals, regardless of their knowledge of the works, culture and subjective aesthetic canons, which only condition their implicit liking and explicit aesthetic opinion. For this reason, Gallese writes of an "empirical universality" of art users. Considering how important images are in the digital world and the

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[17] Dino Formaggio., *Art,* Isedi, 1980)

[18] Angela Vettese, L'*arte contemporanea,* Il Mulino, 2017.

[19] Cf. Vittorio Gallese, *Body and action in aesthetic experience. Una prospettiva neuroscientifica,* in U. Moretti, *Mente e bellezza. Arte, creatività e innovazione,* Torino, Umberto Allemandi Editore, 2010; Gallese V., *Arte, corpo, cervello: per un'estetica sperimentale*, *Micromega*, n. 2, 2014.

universality of embodied simulation, it is evident that the development of neuroscientific research can steer art in directions that most affect us. As we shall see, this option is of particular interest in contemporary art. But first, let us turn to the channels through which art influences us and the impact of that influence.

The art critic, Vincenzo Trione, writes, "*art has the power [...] to reveal facets of the present that we, alone, would not have the courage or strength to grasp.*"[20] In his analysis of the relationship between art and politics, the economist Geoff Mulgan[21], argues that art, by using images, words, sounds, smells, in addition to the process mentioned above, "can warn, denounce, and mock, prodding, scratching, unsettling, opening up, and liberating," and it can be "redemptive" but "it redeems at a tangent, not head on." In our synthesis, it can bring about **simple, momentary *breakthroughs* in common sense,** or, as Mulgan prefers to call it, in the '*social imagination*'. Before examining the qualifiers "simple" and 'momentary', and by taking also other analyses into account,[22] we can summarise the **possible forms of these breakthroughs** as follows:

> *emotional displacement, estrangement* from our linear way of life and thinking, from dominant narratives and representations, and, therefore, a perception of radical alternatives even in the re-signification of objects, works, places, historical and contemporary events*;*
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> *opening to other people's points of view,* stepping outside ourselves and our circles or worlds;
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> *perception of human power,* its strength, its limits or its ambiguity;
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> *premonition* of a possible future, utopian or dystopian, shaping an unexpressed collective unconscious;
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> *release of* hidden subjective or collective/group *aspirations* and the drive to express them, including through art itself.

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[20] Vincenzo Trione, *Artivism. Art, Politics, Commitment,* Einaudi, 2022.
[21] Geoff Mulgan, *Prophets at a Tangent,* CUP, 2023.
[22] See in particular the articles hosted by *ROOTS§ROUTES. Research on visual cultures, www.roots-routes.org.*

> **Question 6**
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> Are the different potential impacts of art on our way of seeing things well understood here? What should be specified, corrected, added?

The **political potential of art** has always been very much in the minds of people and their rulers. The historical features of the relationship between art and politics suggest two theses, which we summarise as follows:

> Firstly, **the momentary breakthroughs produced by art can prelude, facilitate, or accompany stable changes in the mental frames through which we see things, but they cannot determine them on their own; they must therefore be associated with the political power of collective mobilisations/movements that, like a wedge, widen these breakthroughs.**
>
> Secondly, **art is not neutral, i.e., it can be used both to consolidate and preserve a given common sense and to change it, and it can be functional to both social justice and to its opposite.**

Let us look at these two theses in detail.

III.1 The association between art and mobilisations/movements that impacts common sense

The limit of the role of art in changing common sense through different types of breakthroughs is encapsulated in the words 'simple' and '*momentary*' as mentioned above.

'Momentary' indicates that the breakthrough is the result or sign of a shock, a scratch, a warning, an unsettling—as Mulgan, Trione and others write—but that it is ready to close again if a wedge does not come about to keep it open and or open it further.

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'**Simple**'—as Mulgan stresses—indicates the *uncomplicated* nature of the message stemming from sounds, images, words, or smells. Examples include: the popular heroism of the defence of Leningrad in Shostakovich's music, the transformation of work and toil into the founding values of a new society in Diego Rivera's murals, the illusion of power given by the masterpieces of the baroque architects, painters and sculptors of Rome and Venice[23], the abrogation of the dictatorship of 'likes' in Ben Grosser's digital incursions. Artists—Walter Benjamin, quoted by Trione, said—free themselves "in *advance of the burden of a demonstrable explanation*". When, on the other hand, art attempts to provide a logical rationale for a political and social objective and to prescribe it in a detailed and complex manner, it runs the serious risk of becoming ineffective and banal[24].

Question 7

Are the 'breakthroughs' produced by art, in themselves, truly momentary? Do studies in experimental aesthetics help us answer this question? Do they suggest longer-lasting effects? If so, which ones?

Thus, **in order to substantially influence common sense—our shared instinctive convictions—art seems to have to be associated with a political process** that exploits, widens and consolidates breakthroughs by means of ongoing, all-embracing actions. By measuring the complexity and intersectionality between different dimensions of the human condition, these actions can build hope and commitment to change.

In the first section of this exploration of what influences common sense, we suggested that

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[23] This example, which adds to Mulgan's, comes from reading Francis Haskell, *Patrons and Painters*, Yale University Press, 1980. The powerful in Rome and Venice used artists of the highest calibre whom they financed 'to give themselves and foreigners the illusion of a power that in reality had no foundation'.

[24] Geoff Mulgan, *Prophets at a Tangent*, CUP, 2023, argues: "When the arts try too hard to prescribe or describe, when they are didactic, or when they seek too intently to serve a social or political goal, they become banal."

mobilisation and collective movements, combined with information, communication and public debate play an important role. Examining the political role of art confirms this, but it adds an original rupturing role for art itself.

"Works of art *can form part of a **movement***. *But they cannot lead it*," Mulgan writes. But there may be more. Art is an important, perhaps very important, part of every movement and collective mobilisation, since it can challenge or bring about a change in common sense. Take for example, the role of the **Futurist art movement at the beginning of the last century**. Fascism exploited the Futurists to shore up common sense in support of the new empire, while the various Russian artistic avant-gardes played a pro-active role that almost anticipated the Bolshevik revolution: "*The Russian avant-garde realised its own artistic revolution several years before the Bolshevik Revolution of* 1917"[25], where the label "Futurism", often used to identify these avant-gardes, "*symbolises the dynamic power of renewal, the desire to build a new world and an aspiration towards the future*".

Question 8

Do you agree with this complementarity between art and collective mobilisations/movements? What comes first? And, then, do mobilisations/movements always need art? And do they always end up diminishing the value of art in the long run?

There is another **case, however, where art and politics coincide, with a powerful impact on common sense**.

That is, **art that 'uses the body as a means of expression'**. Codified as '*body art'* in the 1950s, it has actually existed since the beginning of human life on earth in the form of

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[25] From Evgeny Barabanov, *The Undefeated avant-garde*, in *Persecuted Artists*, Druck Verlag Kettler, Bönen, 2003. In the book - and in particular in Hans-Peter Rieser's essay, *The Suppression of Art and the Persecution of Artist under the Dictatorship of Europe* - the innovative impact of these avant-gardes is described even in the early years of the revolution, under the impulse of the People's Commissar for Education, Anatoly Lunacharsky, a writer himself, and then their progressive exclusion (from the mid-1920s) and then repression and persecution by the Soviet state.

tattoos, scarification, body modification or hairstyling, as well as the progressive alteration of the face and body or even sounds or gestures produced by bodies. This form of 'art' is a primary tool of all those who exercise a leadership function. In the particular case of political leadership, we could thus argue that the faces, mimicry, postures, gestures and sounds of figures such as Hitler or Mussolini, Thatcher or Berlinguer, Trump or Putin are ***performances*** (***body politics***) that produce and renew in their 'spectators' breakthroughs in common sense, **which are continually widened by the wedge of collective mobilisations/movements inspired and guided by those same leaders**.

Question 9

Is this hypothesis of seeing political leadership as a coincidence of (body) art and politics reasonable or forced and, above all, is it useful?

III.2 The non-neutrality of art

The second thesis, the **non-neutrality of art**, is well known, but touching on it will help us.

Citing the 'Festival of the Supreme Being' entrusted to David by Robespierre in 1794, Mulgan writes, "Deranged imagination is as much a part of our history as creative social imagination." Examples of art being used to support authoritarian designs and reduce social justice regarding fascism and the degeneration of the Bolshevik revolution (see footnote 24) were mentioned earlier. **Art lends itself to accompanying (or being used by) movements and mobilisations to influence common sense in order either to increase or reduce social justice**.

We can go further. **Art can also contribute to preserving and consolidating common sense**. It can, for example, provoke premonitions of a possible dystopian future, a sense of human impotence or the immutability of power imbalances. It can thus confirm the prevailing view and discourage any aspiration to change.

The example given earlier of Baroque art in Rome and Venice applies here. The case of

expressionism is more complex and of particular interest. Originating in Germany, it "*asserts the primacy of a passionate subjectivity against social norms and traditional artistic forms*" and can be interpreted as an "*artistic avant-garde movement that responded rebelliously to the development of bourgeois society in the era of industrial capitalism*", "*a defensive manoeuvre against the oppression of the subject*" in the new society that was emerging. Douglas Kellner, who offers us this interpretation[26], notes, however, that **the artistic revolt was not matched by an alternative vision of the future, an invitation or openness to change**. Ann Kaplan, in one of her essays supporting this thesis that cites Fritz Lang's *Dr. Mabuse the Gambler*[27], observes that while the expressionists' emphasis on "*love, passion and care for the human person challenged the code of bourgeois egoistic individualism ... it was incapable of going beyond it.*" Confined to the alternative between 'chaos' and 'tyranny', "*the expressionists either chose chaos, in a mad attempt to drag everyone down, or, tired of chaos, found themselves suddenly drawn, like Lang, to bourgeois law and order.*"

Inequality in the allocation of power and wealth is evidently an important factor in how art is used to sway common sense. Throughout history, those in whose hands power and wealth are concentrated have always **exerted a strong influence on art** through commissions, shaping it to serve their own interests and ultimately its impact on common sense. We will return to this point later with regard to contemporary art. And yet, the history of the relationship between art and politics is replete with artists—Caravaggio is a prime example—who have **escaped this conditioning, aspired to do so,** or, as we have seen above, **acted autonomously or in a context of mobilisations against the interests of the existing power.**

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[26] Douglas Kellner, *Expressionism and Rebellion*, in Stephen Eric Bronner, Douglas Kellner, *Passion and Rebellion The Expressionist Heritage*, Croom Helm ltd Publishers, 1983.

[27] Ann Kaplan, *Fritz Lang and German Expressionism: A Reading of Dr. Mabuse, der Spiegel*, in Bronner, Kellner (1983).

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Question 10

With regard to historical experience, does the role of art in preserving and consolidating common sense present distinctive features? Is it always marked by images of the irreversibility of dominant powers or dystopian scenarios?

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We are now ready to take the final step and interrogate the relationship between art and common sense in the contemporary world.

IV. Contemporary art and common sense

In describing the contemporary paradigm of art, Trione writes, "*Unlike what had happened in the 20th century, tendencies enter a crisis ... artists tend to let themselves be led by an individualistic impulse [...] to consign themselves to a marvellous diaspora."* And yet, this **individualism** is marked by a **strong connection with politics**, either with **social and political ferment and movements, or with the growing role assigned to art by capitalism and the wealthy**. The **obstacles** and **opportunities** for the role of art in destabilising and changing common sense derive from all these aspects.

Before identifying these obstacles and opportunities, it is useful to recall some features of the galaxy of contemporary artists emerging from the material consulted so far, with particular reference to Italy[28].

There are many **global artists** who, within networks of social-political engagement and participatory and counter-information projects, using signs of dissent and rebellion, aim to raise awareness and trigger debate on issues central to social and environmental justice. These artists can be gathered under the label '**artivism**', the complex geography of which

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[28] In addition to the aforementioned Mulgan and Trione, the sections summarised here refer to all the other essays cited in the notes.

Trione attempts to outline, tracing echoes of previous avant-gardes: mystics, pedagogues, urbanists (finding disturbing aspects in urban spaces we consider normal), luddites, collectives. In their actions, the process sometimes takes on more importance than the finished work: *"every process that has an artistic purpose is artistic."*

There are also many **street artists**. "*A bit like monks, a bit like guerrilla fighters*", Trione comments, they paint on city walls all over the world, especially in marginalised places. "They *adopt a direct, immediate style [...] to make themselves instantly understood*" — what we defined before as "simple". They use bright colours, violate the rules of decorum, aim to denounce and invite rebellion. Some of them have become famous, like Banksy or Blu, and often play with the art and media system, straddling between using it and being used by it. In many other cases they are linked to local struggles or movements in the territory where they work.

Other artists are **part and parcel of the commercial and financial system of art,** a system driven by the role of art in the lives of the wealthy, i.e., by real capitalist accumulation strategies. Art openly aimed at elites or museums that speak to the few (as denounced by Michelangelo Pistoletto). "*An art world that played at radical shock but no longer worried anyone as the prices hurtled upwards,*" as Mulgan puts it. Architecture for 'urban regeneration' directed by big private interests. "*Imagination factories - film studios employing thousands on SFX; design and advertising studios manipulating images and ideas; big teams producing complex online games with hundreds of millions of players.*" Governed by profit goals, **they can nevertheless offer spaces for artistic autonomy**, according to a pattern that was also typical in the past.

In this varied context, although devoid of trends and currents, certain themes can be clearly identified that aggregate the creative energies of artists. A significant part of contemporary art is in fact engaged, in different forms, on two connected fronts: **tumultuous migrations and decoloniality[29]; climate collapse.** The works produced on these fronts evoke risks, the

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[29] Decoloniality refers to the process of liberation from colonial oppression and the injustices and contradictions that still arise from it today, such as racism and Eurocentrism in history, geopolitics, knowledge and power and relational dynamics.

precipice heading towards material and moral catastrophes, and they are highly charged with denunciation and an evocation of **dystopian scenarios**. Here, in Trione's summary, are the key words: "disturbing", "disorder", "disaster", "photograms of an end that never ends", "glimpses of alarm", "apocalypse", "cartographies of a shipwreck", "tragedies", "damned", "marginalisation", "fragility of the ecosystem", "ecological crisis". With disturbing and lacerating images and signs, artists on these fronts often shatter and challenge our norms. Many of them try to avoid the risks of anaesthetising pain and misery, or turning it into an aesthetic issue, by linking themselves to ongoing emancipation movements or, in the case of migrants, by restoring (Trione) their sense of dignity.

A new generation of artists concerned with decoloniality is pushing for a much-needed rethink to overturn **the Eurocentric perspective**, as Anna Serlenga informs us[30]**.** They are attempting to change the common sense generated and survived by this founding perspective of colonialism. A number of artists also recognise themselves as racialised subjectivities and produce works that are not only about injustices observed in other parts of the world and suffered by other people, but also about what they experience first-hand, as part of a social group in a given historical period.

In the texts consulted, the artistic productions described as exemplifying and impacting on these issues have one point in common that is important for the purposes of our work: **long-term production time in a specific territory.**

Take the artistic practices of decolonial walks and "odonomastic guerrilla warfare", described by Giulia Grechi[31], for example, which identify colonial legacies in the road names of a given territory and intervene to make them critically visible and/or modify them. Further examples are the work of the collective *Decolonize your eyes* in Padua, the project *Viva Menilicchi!* by Wu Ming with the Rete Anticoloniale Siciliana, and the "Urbafrican treks"of the Tezeta collective in Rome. And again, the *Atlas of transition project,* supported by the Fondazione Emilia Romagna and curated by Piersandra Di Matteo, which

[30] Anna Serlenga (ed.), *Performance and decoloniality*, Luca Sossella Editore, 2023

[31] Giulia Grechi, *Di monumenti al cadere e musei infestati: colonialità postuma e rimediazioni decoloniali*, in Serlenga A. (ed.), *Performance e decoloniality*, Luca Sossella Editore, 2023.

experimented with "*performances of citizenship*," working "*on the blurred boundaries between performance and everyday life, social rituals and performative dimensions, production time and free time. The artists devised projects that allowed interaction by interacting with the social, spatial-temporal routines of places, suggesting different protocols.*"[32] One of their group was the artist Tania Bruguera who realised a referendum campaign as a 10-day performance, complete with posters in collaboration with the Cheap collective, pamphlets, radio programmes, opening up spaces for debate, conflict and tension on migration policies in 25 mock polling stations in the city of Bologna. The question they posed was, "Borders kill. Should we abolish borders?".

> ### Question 11
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> However sketchy, does this map have glaring deficiencies to fill? What other thematic and operational fronts bring artists together?
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> ### Question 12
>
> What does the fact that for many artists the local level is the preferred field of action for dealing with social and environmental justice issues indicate?

There would, of course, be much more to add, but for now it is enough for us to try to enumerate the **new obstacles and opportunities that have opened up for art to changing common sense in the direction of greater social justice.**

IV.1 Obstacles (surmountable?)

Two obstacles specifically concern contemporaneity. A third obstacle re-proposes an age-old question in contemporaneity.

A first obstacle is identified by Mulgan in the **weakening of the 'prophetic role' of art,**

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[32] Interview by Roberta Da Soller with Piersandra Di Matteo, in Serlenga A. (ed.), *Performance and decoloniality*, Luca Sossella Editore, 2023, p. 164.

particularly its ability to create breakthroughs in common sense that would predispose us to the idea of a fairer future.

In support of this thesis, Mulgan first points to the increased reluctance of artists to prefigure utopian or heroic scenarios, concentrating instead on the depiction of negative outcomes and dystopias: **social scepticism is accommodated, not opposed**. Here then, Mulgan writes, "is *the postmodernist ethos, which has been so influential in the arts, encourages a playful, ironic scepticism of any absolutes or certainty, let alone any sense that history might have a meaning or direction*." The breakthrough produced by art does not lend itself to accommodating an alternative mental frame open to the possibility of change. This limitation was also present in the past, as we saw in the example of expressionism. But it has been reinforced by neo-liberal culture with its strong push towards the '**privatisation of hope**'[33] : an individualist twist that, by denying a social dimension, extinguishes collective hopes and keeps only personal ones alive.

A further Mulgan argument in support of the weakening of the prophetic role of art concerns the **increasing rapidity with which an artistic message often tends to be enjoyed**, which makes the breakthrough irrelevant. Each message, immediately followed by another, and then by yet another, does not give the person receiving it time to reflect, appropriate or adapt it to themselves. The breakthrough becomes hyper-momentary, hardly leaving a trace. Body and brain are barely impacted. This is a tendency avoided by artists who engage, as we have seen, in works and practices with production over a long period in a specific territory, and in general by experiences linked to collective mobilisations/movements, as we shall see below.

The second obstacle to the destabilising role of art concerns its relationship with capitalism. The novelty lies not in the conditioning of art by those with the means to finance them, a factor that has always existed. But in **capitalism's systemic use of reproducible images and sounds**. "*It is one thing to ask what becomes of the work of art in the era of its reproducibility, it is quite another to ask what becomes of the work of art when the economy*

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[33] Slavoj Žižek, *The Courage of Hopelessness. A Year of Acting Dangerously,* Melville House, Brooklyn NY, 2018.

feeds on creation and invention [...] capital does not invent, it only absorbs with immense intelligence, and re-attributes to itself, a posteriori*, what it has absorbed and of which it has dispossessed the real producers,"* the philosopher Judith Revel argues[34]. It is above all the 'imagination factories' mentioned earlier that condition or chloroform the destabilising capacity of art. A significant part of the artistic supply is thus intentionally 'non-subversive' of the social and political context or actually aims to consolidate it.

This **consolidation function** does not necessarily take place by inviting people to perceive the current state of affairs as 'right'. It works in a **more sophisticated way**. Communication oligopolies provide a channel for artistic production, especially films and TV series, which narrate the other side of things —in war, ethnic or border conflicts, in consumer abuses, or in racial or gender (less class) discrimination. However, this exposure is 'controlled', **and miles away from any context of public debate and mobilisation**. It offers itself as a **place to vent guilt so as not to have to deal with the troubles of the world**. You could almost say that these artistic productions produce **self-repairing breakthroughs**. Nevertheless, artists can and do use these spaces provided with a market objective to send out their own destabilising messages, and perhaps go on to connect them with their own political or communication networks so that the breakthroughs they have produced lead to something significant. The question, as in the past, is: **who uses whom?** How, for example, can an Italian popular comedy such as 'Cose dell'altro mondo' (2011 Francesco Patierno) bring about more 'momentary breakthroughs' concerning the migrant issue than a politically engaged and refined Italian film like 'Io capitano (2023, Matteo Garrone)? The question becomes: who can widen a momentary breakthrough? In the case of the politically engaged film, the breakthrough can be widened if, for example, thousands of school teachers use it as a basis for discussion with their students - as has happened with 'Io capitano'.

The third obstacle in the contemporary world, as in the past, is that many categories of people are excluded from building a relationship with artistic works. Data for Italy show that cultural consumption is strongly conditioned by socio-cultural background, age, educational qualifications and wealth[35]. While neuroscientific experiments show that we are universally

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[34] Judith Revel, The creative power of *politics, the political power of creation*, p. 51 in Baravalle M. (ed.), *The Art of Subversion,* Manifesto Libri, 2009

[35] Cf. Nicole Moolhuijsen, *Communicating in art museums: between criticality and innovation*, 2017

united by 'embodied simulation' when we come into contact with a work of art, **data on cultural participation show that we are far from universal: contact with art is the privilege of only a part of the population**. The potential of art to change common sense cannot therefore be separated from reflection and action aimed at widening cultural participation, starting from the places of production and fruition and moving on to the issue of accessibility in all its various forms.

> ### Question 13
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> How can the artistic spaces offered to the denunciation of injustice by 'imagination factories' or popular films be exploited so that the breakthroughs brought about cannot easily be self-repaired? What role could large public networks, such as BBC, RAI, ARTE, play?

IV.2 Opportunities (exploitable?)

The new opportunities offered by contemporary arts derive from the possibility of exploiting two of their features: their **connection with collective movements/movements, locally and/or nationally/globally**; and their **openness to using digital technology.** Let us explore these two distinct opportunities.

Some contemporary '**artivists'**, Trione observes, shy away from a relationship with stable forms of political mobilisation for fear of being used by them, and end up falling into a '*politicisation of powerlessness*'. That is, this relationship takes place within self-referential groups which speak to themselves about the particular dimension of perceived human suffering, without seeking intersectionality with other dimensions of human subalternities or even within a '*safe space*' closed to criticism and conflict. Or, again, we have seen forms of **opportunistic relations** between artists and agents of change in specific territories: the former moved by the financial resources made available by the latter, the latter interested in

(https://che-fare.com/almanacco/cultura/comunicare-nei-musei-darte-fra-criticita-e-innovazione/);

ISTAT, *Leisure and cultural participation*, 2022 (https://www.istat.it/it/files/2022/09/Tempo-libero-e-partecipazione-culturale_Ebook.pdf);

ISTAT, *Entertainment and shows* (https://www.istat.it/it/files//2023/03/Spettacoli-intrattenimenti-23-marzo.pdf).

'filling places with people', whatever.

Other artists, though, connect, or seek connection, with collective and intersectional mobilising actions, whether on a small local level, or on a larger— national or international—level. Let us consider these two levels separately.

At the **local level,** the phenomenon is widespread and includes: street art; community art practices (often in marginalised places and with the involvement of vulnerable people); forms of artistic self-production; training; workshops; collaborative installations; experimentation; increasingly varied practices of involving entire local communities in artistic productions where supply and demand for art sometimes coincide. These practices are consistent both with the theses of the *cultural studies of* the 1960s,'according to which, as Mulgan observes, "*culture is ubiquitous, not just the preserve of arts institutions*" and with a conception of collective action and public policies that sees the collective vision of a possible future as the initial step towards bringing places towards greater social justice[36].

We have also found this connection with local movements and mobilisations in the **presence of art in the actions of the citizenship organisations which make up the ForumDD**[37]**.** This takes different forms, which—apart from a subsidiary function in events and festivals—we can catalogue according to the different objectives pursued, sometimes in combination:

> Educating/capacity building/encouraging aspirations, aiming to empower, disrupt subalternities, build relational capital.
>
> Communicating values, experiences, information in an event with an attractive/exciting/disruptive tool.
>
> Creating permanent spaces for cultural aggregation, as a complementary tool to trigger processes that disrupt underdevelopment traps in marginalised areas.

The breakthroughs in common sense that each of these forms can produce are clear. But we

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[36] Trione writes about some of these forms: "*devices capable of nurturing in those who live in a neighbourhood, a spirit of identity, a sense of roots, a civil conscience, renewed dignity, an awareness of belonging to a community*". Take the detailed analysis of these effects in the Roman neighbourhood of Tor Bella Monaca made by Carlo Cellamare and Francesco Montillo in *Periferia. Abitare Tor Bella Monaca*, Donzelli, 2020.

[37] Below are some of the projects implemented by the 8 active citizenship organisations: Progetto *Memoriae*, Naples, Officina Gomitoli, Coop. Dedalus; Progetto *Filo Spinato*, Rome 2021, UISP; Programme *I Parchi della Bellezza e della Scienza*, Sicily 2010-2021, Messina Community Foundation; *Festambiente* (since 1989, Tuscany) and *FestambienteSud* (since 2005, Apulia), Legambiente; CHEAP involvement in the Festival della Partecipazione, Bologna 2022, ActionAid.

have found, in these and other cases, that **these breakthroughs are neither recognized nor conceptualised as an explicit, intentional goal**. Generally, no information is compiled and there are no evaluations regarding whether breakthroughs in common sense actually take place.

> ### Question 14
>
> How can we make the awareness and evaluation of their impact on common sense a central issue for these alliances between social movements and art? How can local experiences that do not know each other but share similarities be brought into the system?

Even on a **national or international scale**, the connection between contemporary arts and political movements opens up opportunities, perhaps less explored than those on a local scale, where the momentary breakthrough produced by artistic practice is filled and widened by political mobilisation that aims to effect change for a better future.

These opportunities have manifested themselves significantly in the case of 'cultural re-signification practices' of statues and monuments or other public spaces, particularly by highlighting the colonial past they celebrate, a trend that accelerated after May 2020 as a result of the Black Lives Matter movement. This is a **powerful example of the impact on common sense**—a subversion, from hero to rogue, of the way of looking at a celebrated figure—and of the coming together of arts and mobilisations[38]. But it is not the only one. Numerous experiences of digital augmentation of reality work in the same direction. By superimposing digital elements on city space, they alter existing architecture or monuments, and destabilise the frames we use to look at things[39]. In the field of audio-visuals, the film

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[38] The protests of the Black Lives Matter movement have reached a global scope, becoming demonstrations against racial violence, colonialism, patriarchy and other forms of social injustice. Attacks on monuments symbolic of these injustices have taken place from Europe to the American continent and New Zealand. In Italy, the most emblematic case was the attack on the statue of Indro Montanelli.

[39] See the numerous examples described by Roberto Paolo Malaspina and Sofia Pirandello in the article *Interactive Memory. Counter-monuments in augmented reality,* in the journal *ROOTS§ROUTES, including in* particular the action "#vendesiroma" by an anonymous collective of artists in defense of the Casa delle donne Lucha y Siesta at risk of eviction and sale in 2019 and the action of the collective Manifest. AR collective which, through an app, took part in the Occupy Movement protests by means of AR works (messages, installations and sit-ins), circumventing police controls. https://www.roots-routes.org/memoria-interattiva-contro-monumenti-in-realta-aumentata-di-roberto-paolo-malas

Welcome Venice (2021, Andrea Segre) has recently generated and widened spaces for debate between public decision-makers and activists of the Alta Tensione Abitativa movement, supporting a bill to regulate short-term rentals to protect the right to housing, particularly in cities plagued by excessive tourism. In the field of design, one of Mulgan's examples stands out: the aspiration and commitment of designers to be guided, in discussion with citizens, in the choice of technologies and materials they use[40].

What is happening in some **independent cultural centres, museums and exhibition spaces in the area of the production and acquisition of contemporary works and in the rearrangement of spaces and collections is** significant**.** In some cases, we are in the previously-discussed area of denunciation and awareness-raising without a projection into the future or links to collective movements.

This is the case of works try to avoid the white-washing of historical episodes, such as, in Italy, the kidnapping of Aldo Moro[41] or the unsolved tragedy of Ustica[42] . But **in many other cases there is a projection into the future and a search for connections.** A growing segment of the museum sector internationally is, in fact, abandoning the supposedly neutral position that was once a feature of a museum-like institution and moving towards a new perspective. In the texts describing this new trajectory and the practices linked to it[43], museums are described as "*crucial civic resources"* (Bodo, Cimoli), as "*activist museums, active agents of cultural change"* (Janes, Sandell), which "*means recognising themselves as crucial actors in the public sphere; becoming a place for speaking out, searching for meaning, confrontation*

pina-e-sofia-pirandello/ The actions of defacing works of art carried out by some movements, in Italy as well, has a different objective: challenging government inertia by drawing attention to a theme that goes beyond the work of art itself, such as the urgency of energy transformation.

[40] It is the British Royal College of Art, and, in particular, the projects of Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby.

[41] See Francesca Blandino, *Active Art. Rossella Biscotti and art as a means of social transformation*, in *ROOTS§ROUTES. Research on visual cultures.* https://www.roots-routes.org/engagement-and-conflictlarte-attiva-rossella-biscotti-e-larte-come-mezzo-di-trasformazione-socialedi-francesca-blandino/

[42] Cf. Silvia Mascheroni and Giovanna Brambilla, *Repairing the Living: Museums, Art and Cultural Heritage for a Meaningful Relationship between Experiences and Memories*, in *ROOTS§ROUTES*. Research on visual cultures.
https://www.roots-routes.org/riparare-i-viventi-musei-arte-e-patrimonio-culturale-per-una-relazione-di-senso-tra-vissuti-e-memorie-di-silvia-mascheroni-e-giovanna-brambilla-2/

[43] Cf. Robert Janes, Richard Sandell, (eds.), *Museum Activism,* Routledge, 2019; Simona Bodo, Anna Chiara Cimoli (eds.), *Il museo necessario. Maps for complex times*, Nomos Edizioni, 2023; several contributions by Nicole Moolhuijsen including *Why today museums and their way of making culture are more important than ever* (2020), *In Italy there is a museum that investigates gender diversity: the Fondazione Querini Stampalia in Venice* (2022), *Museum activities for teenagers on LGBTQIA+ issues* (2023)

between agonisms; setting aside once and for all the myth of neutrality and creating an image of a better future"[44]. Amsterdam (Rijksmuseum), Oxford (Pitt Rivers), Cologne (Rautenstrauch-Joest), Rotterdam (Kunstinstituut Melly) and London (Museum of Homelessness) boast the most avant-garde museum institutions along this trajectory. In Italy, the Fondazione Querini Stampalia in Venice and the Museum of Natural History and Archaeology in Montebelluna are recognised as forerunners of this new way of being a cultural institution.

Activist museum practices range from the restitution of works and artefacts taken away in the colonial period, to the rewriting of captions and texts to eliminate colonial legacies and highlight issues related to gender and sexual orientation, from experiments to ensure sensory and cognitive accessibility, to processes of collective learning, decision-making and open programming. There are even **museums run by activist collectives**, such as the Museum of Homelessness in London, which claims the right to housing by combining exhibitions, performances and public actions. These themes and dynamics unite activist museums from different parts of Europe and the world. According to Moolhuijsen, the high level of trust that museums hold in public opinion makes these cultural institutions **ideal for** "***creating debates and stances on necessary and urgent changes** [...] to pull people's debates and imaginations towards a more collaborative and sustainable future to be built together.*"[45]

The will to become agents of change is also characteristic of some independent cultural centres. In Italy, BASE Milan recently published the manifesto '*An idea for a cultural centre'*, drafted with groups of people, informal associations and organisations belonging to underrepresented communities within the cultural sector. The aim of the alliance and the manifesto is to '*explore new ideas and approaches to building a cultural institution that acts as a sounding board for voices and energies on the margins of public life, creating spaces of expression and self-narrative around which to build a community capable of producing social transformation*'. The guidelines contained in the manifesto list practices and operational

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[44] Bodo, Cimoli (2023), p. 29.

[45] Cf. Nicole Moolhuijsen, *Teenage museum activities on LGBTQIA+ issues*, Artribune.com, 21 May 2023.; where she writes '*If an institution offers itself as a context in which to deal with such issues, the message that gets through is that they themselves are not divisive. The aim is to create a dialogue,* https://www.artribune.com/arti-visive/arte-contemporanea/2023/05/musei-attivita-teenager-lgbtqia/.

tools to work on the physical, sensory, cognitive, and financial accessibility of spaces and the enlargement of audiences[46].

All these experiences of museum activism, given the observed exclusion of *a large portion of the population* from access to art, culture, museums, and cultural centres, can lead to making an **actual impact on common sense if they become a conscious part of collective movements that aim to overcome that exclusion**, or who reproduce and disseminate the emotional breakthroughs received by those with access to art.

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Question 15

Artistic work on already existing symbols in public space seems to have a strong capacity for viral dissemination: is it because of its complementarity to mobilisations, in the higher accessibility of art in public space, or, for our purposes, is there an additional lesson?

Question 16

How can the messages and emotional breakthroughs produced by museum or cultural spaces reach beyond the limited circle of visitors? What strategies and practices can be put in place to broaden cultural participation?

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And here we come to the second opportunity offered by **digital technology**.

We have already seen how digital technology achieves augmented reality and how artists who construct autonomous paths within 'imagination factories' can exploit it. Mulgan points to two other opportunities. On the one hand, the possibility, which he himself promotes, of investing in the connection between technology and artistic research outside the logic of large corporations by financing widespread research (as in the experiment of translating Holocaust memoirs into holograms). This would **bring the disorienting and predictive**

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[46] https://base.milano.it/wp-content/uploads/Manifesto-ITA_tracciato.pdf

capacity of art directly into the process of production on the basis of new power relations: the breakthrough produced by art would be transformed directly into imagination and social practice.

On the other hand, there are **existing practices of *hacking*, whereby** any citizen can improvise and produce, reproduce or alter art or ideas. On one hand, they limitlessly increase the supply of art, making artistic messages ever speedier in the process. On the other, they open up individual and/or networked opportunities for artistic expression. In the latter case, there may be **cumulative processes of systemic impact on the way we see things**.

Question 17

What real opportunities are there for these and other uses of digital technologies to strengthen the influence of art on common sense in the direction of social justice? What do existing experiences and studies of experimental aesthetics suggest?

V. *In conclusion*

The history of the relationship between art and politics and the analyses we have examined have given us a better understanding of the way art can destabilise and open simple, momentary breakthroughs in common sense. When art is combined with mobilisation processes and movements, these breakthroughs can become permanent and give rise to a new common sense. Considering concrete examples of contemporary art, we have identified the obstacles and new opportunities that arise when exercising this destabilising role.

Each step of this journey has presented us with some questions, 17 in total. The answers will enable us to take a **new step towards our twofold goal**:

- to make available a conceptual framework to help make the role of art and artistic practices in changing common sense towards social justice more verifiable and intentional;
- to offer to any public policy and collective action some guidelines for combining art and mobilisation with the purpose of addressing and overcoming the obstacle of prevailing common sense.