



## The power of art to heal the world

by Marta Inez Rodrigues Pereira

There are times when I am feeling down and want to be left to myself, cocooned in my sacred solitude, but my job forces me out to an exhibition preview or to the last days of one that is said to be unmissable – and which I obviously haven't seen. But once I've got a glimpse of the artwork, I suddenly feel so much better, so relived and at peace again.



Vincent van Gogh, *The Starry Night*, 1889

(photo taken by me at MoMA, New York)

But this is not the “power of art” I mean to talk about. This one is the more profound irrational effect that neuroscientists investigate and about which I'd love to know more.

The “power of art” I mean to discuss is that which I hear many people in the art world talking about, i.e. the responsibility of art and artists to change the world and the uniqueness of art as a universal communicator.

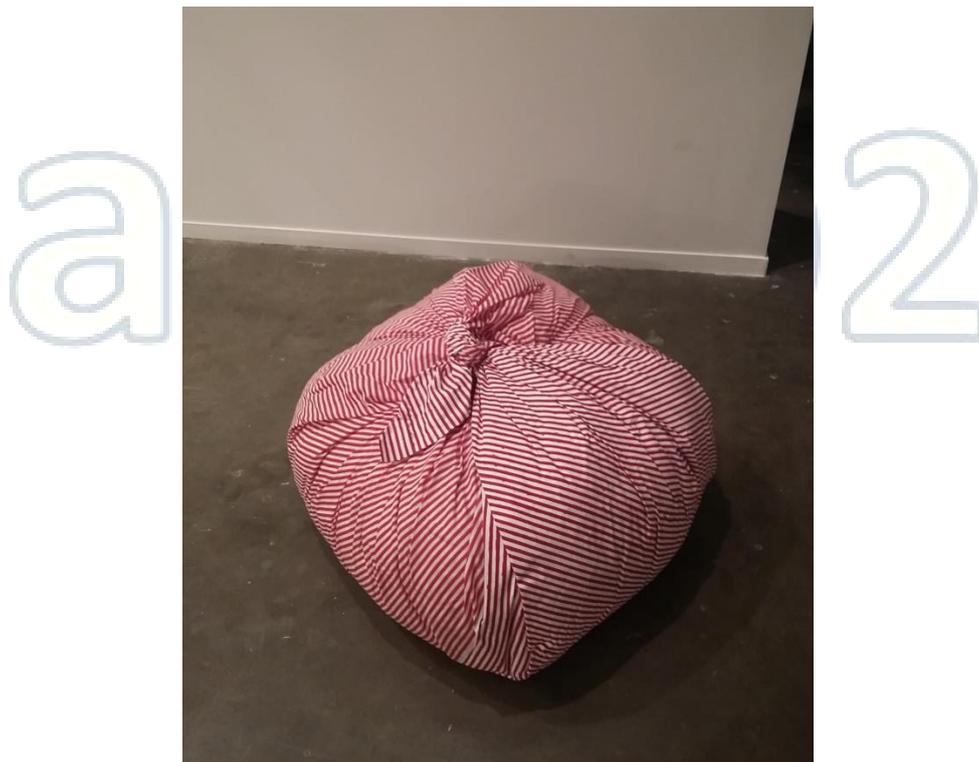
The world is now going through tough times, although, if we look at it historically, it may not seem so bad, and I sometimes see art being proposed as THE means to enlighten people to better ideas.



I do not have a fully formed opinion on this, but my first questions are: is art, as a means of communication, any different from any other; and are artists, as citizens and political beings, any more responsible (or any wiser) than any other person?

I understand that the visual arts, whether primitive, classical, modern or contemporary – or whatever other classification or category there is – communicates through a set of symbols and codes and these need to be known to the viewer in order to be in any way appreciated. Of course, these symbols and codes may be purely aesthetic, cultural or they may have profound religious or philosophical meanings, but still, the viewer has to be able to interpret something (and it doesn't really matter if it was the artist's precise intention). For instance, for a purely aesthetic appreciation, the viewer needs to be able to interpret the work as beautiful, macabre or whatever, but something must be understood or at least suspected and stirred within in order for it to have meaning.

How often do we not, still, hear people talking about contemporary art in terms of "even my five year old child could do it" or "is that a work of art or some sort of leftover?" For these people, who do not have the set of codes necessary to interpret contemporary art, it is just meaningless.



Cinthia Marcelle, *Sem título (G)*, da série *Com-contra-de-desde*, 2011

(photo taken by me at Vermelho gallery's stand during SP-Arte 2017)

Why, then, when it comes to inequality and migration issues, for example, should art communicate better than a good piece of economic text? As long as one dominates the language, either seems to



be equally efficient. If one is an economist, one may even prefer the text for its factualness and ease of understanding.

And considering that, despite all the talk about globalization, people still have very different lives, values, education, religious beliefs, sets of symbols and tastes, why do people affirm that art is universal? Doesn't art represent one's education, culture and experiences?

As for artists being the chosen ones, i.e. the people who will show the light, I really don't see why it should be so. Artists are human beings just as any other; they have their political sympathies, their background, their fortunes, their nationalities, their realities, their opinions and their hang-ups. One artist's opinions may differ from another's just as those from any other individual. Each individual artist should be respected for who they are, but people who make a difference can come from any profession, be they artist, politician, scientist, philosopher, economist, sociologist or "house person".



Ai Weiwei, Straight, 2008-2012

(photo taken by me at the Royal Academy of Arts, London)

As human beings and citizens of the world, artists should be entitled to express their opinions, political or not. However, these should not be taken as any better or worse than anyone else's.

Oh, maybe we could say art is easier to spread than a written text, for example. But, is it really? How many people (as a percentage of world population) go to museums, art galleries, biennales and art fairs? To me art seems far more belonging to a closed club of admirers.

However, art makes a difference to me. I came a long way and gave up a lot to be with it. And I do appreciate many artists who defy and speak out. But let's not think too much of ourselves.

Does anyone agree with me? I'm open to other ideas.