



Centre  
de recherche  
et d'enseignement  
sur les  
DROITS DE LA PERSONNE



HUMAN RIGHTS  
Research  
and  
Education  
Centre

40



uOttawa

## The Arts & Human Rights Consultation

19-21 July 2024 / *Résidence Les Cordeliers, Avignon, France*

"My people will sleep for one hundred years, but when they awake, it will be  
the artists who give them their spirit back" – Louis Riel

### Food-for-Thought

The interdisciplinary domain of human rights relates to the realm of the arts in numerous ways. Beyond documentation, advocacy, and prompting empathy, the juxtaposition of art with human rights could yield several significant outcomes, both conceptually and in terms of practice. The arts can provide humans with the invaluable opportunity of collective catharsis and healing; artistic creations are themselves exemplary manifestations of freedom of expression, often targeted by repressive regimes; the arts can be seen as a powerful political modality, even perhaps the cornerstone of worldviews, and a transformative force that can help resolve stuck processes that emerge out of linear discourses.

In spite of these characteristics and the obvious inseparability of art and human rights, the domain of human rights has been systemically alienated from the realm of aesthetics in such a way that today art appears often to be outside of the human rights field and merely a prestigious 'add-on', which can simply be foregone. The academy's faculties of art and law have also been physically divorced, eliminating the possibility of spontaneous interactions and co-creative collaborations. This fabricated state of separation has critically affected the content, relevance, and sensibility of human rights, where in the absence of the arts the pursuit of justice, rights, and an end to human suffering has become an all-too-abstract business. It also largely misses the open-ended opportunities of the full range of the human spirit, relations and creation. Human rights can no longer afford this self-impoverishment that has diminished the illuminating flame of change, that human rights once kindled in the hearts of humans across the world. In the light of these epistemological and practical challenges, the art and human rights nexus ought to be revisited and bold questions raised – to examine, reflect, (re)posit and debate, leading to alternative visions and propositions. Here are a few thematic frameworks for further contemplation on the art and human rights relationship:

- **Art as Dialogue:** The role of art – its creation and use – in human communication is self-evident; art is the realm of diversity, where variegated horizons can engage in dialogue and conversation; what can art as a form of dialogue contribute to (and has so far achieved in) the field of human rights? What is currently missing in the discourse on human rights to which art as communication can respond? What more and better can be created and used in today's rapidly evolving communications ecosystem?

- **Art as Education:** Art presents and offers enormous possibilities for sharing knowledge, insight and wisdom; it can facilitate, stimulate and delight in the learning experience. Art, in harmony with multiplicity of truth, enables critical and creative thinking; educational content can be diversified through the inclusion of artistic expressions; art can create accessible and inclusive pedagogical environments. What are possible outcomes of considering art as education in terms and respect for human rights? How can art contribute to fostering a culture of respect for human rights? Can art as education bridge the gaps in the actualization, promotion and securing of human rights?
- **Art as a Way of Life:** The arts are woven into the fabric of everyday life for many people; it is an indispensable component of how humans perceive their being and view their world. For several societies and communities, life without art is an impossibility. What are the possible outcomes of appreciating art as a way of life, as an irreducible element of being human? What are the novel and emerging forms of art that are shaping who we are today? What is the relevance of such forms of art to human rights? What are the consequences of seeing art and life as inseparable?
- **Art as Change:** Art empowers humans through materializing or otherwise channeling our creative agency. Creation is the backbone of change; this characteristic of art seems to be of particular relevance to human rights. What can art change in human rights, both in terms of methodology and practice? What kind of innovation in the field of human rights can art engender? What can and ought to be transformed in human rights through the creative power of art? What do human rights look like seen through the prism of art? How are human rights being changed and innovated through emergent art forms using new technologies?
- **Art as Therapy:** Healing is a complex process, necessitating a shift in perspective; visual art, storytelling, dance, sculpture, music, etc. can create the opportunity for mending traumas. What role can art play in the field of human rights towards addressing and possibly ending human suffering? What aspects of justice are to be left to the realm of art and what does that mean and look like?
- **Art as Play:** Play is integral to the realm of aesthetics. Musical instruments, theatrical performances, games, and sports are all played. Play is also characteristic of how children view and engage with the world. Further, considering the role of language in the context of human rights, art as play is at the heart of “language-games” (Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 1953) in various settings, e.g., peace processes, conflict resolutions, negotiations and debates, as well as the articulation of laws. What opportunities can this delightful, creative and participatory aspect of art create in the field of human rights? What innovations can be expected in this regard acknowledging art as play?
- **Art as Fulfillment:** Art is an undeniable aspect of humanity. Our immense potential for creative agency is the essence of our spiritual and intellectual being, development and life. Art as fulfillment is reminiscent of how ‘beauty’ may be perceived as “purposive without purpose” (Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, 1790). What light can this understanding of art shed on human rights? What could the truly and fully free and creative spirit constituting art gift human rights? Can this core value in art liberate human rights from its own limitations? Can art manifest full and dignified lives for everyone everywhere – can art realize human rights?