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Partying to Protest: Are Artivists Reigniting Political Engagement?

Article by Sedera Ranaivoarinosy
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While far-right movements tighten their grip on Europe's politics and seek to capture culture – buying media outlets, installing partisan figures in cultural institutions, and shifting the boundaries of public discourse – a counterwave is emerging. Across the continent, "artivists" are reclaiming culture as a space for democratic resistance and using art to promote solidarity and inclusion. Can they reawaken Europe's political imagination and reengage citizens?

It's a rainy Saturday night in September, at an old, decommissioned railway site in the southeast of Paris – now turned into a temporary venue for events celebrating social and cultural innovation. Despite the downpour on this second night of the Fluctuations Festival, the audience – a lively mix of men and women aged roughly between 20 and 45 – is dancing hard and chanting loudly. On stage, four members of the French collective Planète Boum Boum have put up an energetic performance.

The crowd shouts in unison: "*La vraie menace n'arrive pas en bateau, elle est ici, c'est les fachos !*" ("The real threat doesn't arrive on boats, it's here already: the fascists!")

As frenetic techno beats slash through the crowd, the four performers are yelling their slogans into the microphones with conviction. They engage in simple but efficient choreographies that the audience can easily mirror back. Staying in tune is beside the point; onstage and off, everyone is having a great old politically conscious time.

Yet beyond the concert venue, the political atmosphere is radically different. The first shockwave came in 2002, when Jean-Marie Le Pen, the founder of Front National and an army veteran accused of torturing Algerian independence fighters in the 1960s, reached the second round of the presidential election. Sixteen years later, however, the party rebranded itself as Rassemblement National (RN, National Rally), and it now enjoys unprecedented support: RN has the most representatives in the European Parliament and is the single largest party in the National Assembly.

Across Europe, too, the political landscape is turning a dark shade of blue. Far-right parties are in government in more than a quarter of EU member states. Even in countries where they are not ruling, they wield considerable influence over political and public discourse. This is also visible at the EU level, where the European People's Party – the largest political group in the European Parliament – has increasingly sided with the far right.

These developments make spaces for resistance – like the one in the southeast of Paris – crucial. Throughout Europe, collectives, non-profits, and individuals are organising to rekindle the fire of democratic engagement. Some of the most successful initiatives have been mobilising tools taken from beyond the traditional political militancy playbook: the arts. The term "artivist" is increasingly being used to describe people who take part in protests through art.

Cultural resistance, rediscovered

A portmanteau of "art" and "activist", this term first emerged in 1997 to describe the union of Chicano artists in the United States and the Zapatista movement in Mexico. It captured a moment when artistic expression and grassroots activism merged to challenge social and political inequities in both countries. Today, as right-leaning governments in countries like Italy, Germany, Hungary, and France increasingly defund independent art practices or install politically aligned figures at the head of key cultural institutions, the (re)emergence of this politically engaged approach to art seems especially significant.

"We haven't invented anything new," says Marie Cohuet, a member of the Planète Boum Boum collective. "When you look at the history of struggles everywhere, there were always people making music, singing, putting on shows, and doing things that, in one way or another, help to keep the struggle going in the long term, to create a sense of cohesion."

Planète Boum Boum, a collective of nine activists that met through the organisation Action Justice Climat, says its goal is to "bring partying to protests and protesting to parties". They energise marches or political gatherings and are now also more regularly invited to DJ in "apolitical" clubs and events.

Only one member of the group has formal musical training, as most only started singing when the collective was formed. When these activists noticed music and dance were effective levers, they decided to incorporate them into their work. Their approach – which they describe as "techno-activism" – combines the historical nature of raves, made to bring people together, and the theories of French philosopher Florian Gaité, a free party expert. Gaité espouses a radical vision of clubbing and dancing wherein the useless, futile, and unproductive exhaustion of the body is an act of anti-capitalist resistance.

Credit: ©Planète Boum Boum

Planète Boum Boum's rise in popularity started in 2023 when footage went viral showing some of its members leading a march against unpopular pension reforms through dance. Since then, their Spotify profile has amassed hundreds of thousands of streams.

"These are difficult times we're living in. Our political context is deteriorating. Racist attacks are exploding, and we have deep inequalities. On a global scale, it's terrifying," Cohuet says. "I think there's a real need to come together and feel that we have a certain power and strength when we unite. Music really creates that. That's what works well with Planète Boum Boum: we use a lot of caricature, satire, and humour. It's important to feel that we're not doomed, that we have the ability to change things."

The collective engages with a wide variety of topics. Planète Boum Boum addresses social and climate justice from different angles, including by calling for the preservation of public services, criticising unjust pension reforms amidst global warming, and highlighting the incompatibility of far-right ideologies with environmental action. This comes at a crucial time for Europe: despite the rising ecological awareness, Green parties and environmental regulations have taken a hit as the continent grapples with the high cost of living and a war on its soil. At the same time, far-right parties have capitalised on these crises to both fuel and speak to citizens' sense of insecurity. Still, thanks to social media, artivist visibility has grown, sustaining social, green, and anti-fascist organisations.

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"We regularly collaborate with unions, socially committed media outlets, and cause-driven collectives. The goal is to try to spotlight their efforts and to give them strength, either by mobilising people who wouldn't normally hear about these issues or by pointing them to a specific action, such as coming to a demonstration on a given date, signing a petition, or joining a collective," Cohuet explains. "We've managed to participate in raising awareness about causes at key moments, such as the vote against the inclusion of PFAS in everyday products, the privatisation of rail freight by the government, or issues surrounding the Duplomb law."

These success stories resonated deeply within French society. In February 2025, legislators voted to ban PFAS (known as "forever chemicals") from cosmetics, clothing, shoes, and ski waxes starting in 2026. In the dead of summer in 2025, over 2.1 million citizens signed a petition housed on the National Assembly's official platform to demand the repeal of the Duplomb law, which included a clause that would have allowed the reintroduction of acetamiprid, a highly carcinogenic pesticide. Under public

pressure, the French constitutional court struck down the controversial provision.

Music driving change in Greece

Meanwhile, other artivist organisations have chosen to act on a more local level. For example, El Sistema Greece uses music education to enhance social inclusion. It offers free music classes in refugee camps and shelters for unaccompanied minors, as well as for the local population in urban centres in Athens and Corinthos.

“We work on three levels: our students, their families, and then society,” Angeliki Georgokostas, the general manager of El Sistema Greece, explains. “We work with our students to increase their self-esteem. We try to create an environment that will encourage and motivate children to become active citizens. When we have our classes, our concerts, we have people from different ethnicities, languages, and religions, and they are all coming together just for music.” She adds that the organisation’s goal is to make Greek society more open to diversity, and to get over the fear of the newcomer we see growing in the country”.

Since 2016, more than 3,500 people have taken part in El Sistema Greece’s classes. In the 2024-2025 school year alone, nearly 16,000 people attended their performances.

El Sistema Greece's students in class. Credit: ©Ilias Stefanidis

"We do concerts not only in our community settings but also in the biggest theatres of Athens, like the Stavros Niarchos Foundation Cultural Centre and the Athens Concert Hall. We try to be in mainstream culture. This way, people who are not directly connected to the students also see this orchestra achieving a good result from

individuals of 40 different nationalities and such different backgrounds. We hope this can spread the seed that this could also be our society," Georgokosta says. "We often also use repertoire that is not classical or Greek. We have used repertoire from the countries of each of our students. We want to celebrate all of the people that exist within our community."

Greece has been tightening immigration controls since 2019, going so far as to issue a three-month suspension of asylum applications in July 2025 in violation of international law. Its government has also been accused of corruption. At least 325.000 protesters gathered in Athens and Thessaloniki in February 2025 to seek justice for the 57 people who died in the 2023 Tempi crash between a passenger train and a freight train. This rail accident, the biggest in the country's history, has led to an ongoing political scandal. Official reports say the crash was due to human error and an ill-maintained railway network, but families of the victims claim details of the accident are being covered up. An expert report they commissioned shows the freight train was carrying chemicals that led to its explosion and the asphyxiation of passengers previously unharmed by the collision.

But El Sistema Greece's artivism creates bridges in communities fractured by polarised political discourse, and its students are turning to the organisation to navigate Greece's politically charged atmosphere. "We're seeing that [these political developments are] hard for everyone to process, even our team. So we're meeting with universities and people who have been working in social sciences for many years so they can lead discussions on these topics with all of our students. We see how crucial it is. We cannot avoid it anymore."

This engagement will expand what the organisation had already initiated with its Young Leaders programme, a cohort of 15 students who met once a month for workshops on how they could use music, El Sistema Greece, and its community to make decisions and talk about subjects they care about. One key aim of the programme was to teach participants about children and human rights so that they could understand and defend their and other people's rights.

El Sistema Greece held the Echoes of the World concert in 2025. Credit: ©Ilias Stefanidis

"We are becoming a more holistic programme that is not only about music but how it can be used as a powerful tool to talk about the most pressing social issues of our times. It's also about creating the space for children to talk for themselves and speak out and express what their future should be, and for them to have a say."

Re-enchanting politics

What is at stake for artivists, whether on a national or local scale, is narrative change, both in who is telling the story and embodying new futures, as well as what collective imaginary is being promoted.

“Art and culture are the last shields we have to defend democracy, freedom, our capacity to understand, respect, and discover each other, and to go beyond what makes us different. It also trains our creativity,” says Paula Forteza, the founder of the Paris gallery Artivistas, which promotes Latin American artivists living in France and in South America.

The Artivistas team, with Paula Forteza at the centre, in Paris, on the symbolic Place de la République. Credit: ©Anne Le Breton

Forteza is the co-president of the non-profit Démocratie ouverte and was a member of Parliament in France from 2017 to 2022. She turned to artivism as a way to explore new paths to democratic participation once she realised that the conventional political route would not be the most effective for her, given the institutional distrust

from citizens.

“What I felt in politics is that it really lacked creativity. I think politicians would do well to take art classes or workshops to renew their ideas,” Forteza says. “I think we really need to develop art practices. They’re antidotes to far-right values and what their spokespeople are trying to implement: intolerance, disdain, aggression, violence, and polarisation.”

This cultural battle is growing increasingly complex as the far right has also been investing heavily into the cultural sphere to amplify its messages and shift the Overton window to spread hate-fuelled speech – by acquiring media outlets and publishing houses as well as funding cultural products that perpetuate outdated historical narratives of white hegemony.

Works by Cristian Laime and VicOh, represented by the Artivistas gallery at the Spera Art Fair in Montrouge in 2025. Credit: ©Artivistas Spera art fair

As people turn away from traditional media and politics, artivists play a key part in keeping the fight against injustice alive. Guided by creativity, joy, and non-violent resistance, their actions can help build a caring and participatory society.

“When I was studying in Argentina, I wrote a thesis where I cross-referenced periods of economic crisis with cultural activity and artistic production. Through the data, it became very clear that in times of crisis, cultural activity exploded,” Forteza recalls.

“Artivism can certainly re-enchant politics – in the noble sense of the word – and the battles around values. I think that it speaks to a wider audience. It has the kind of sincerity that’s inherent to artistic expression, which comes from the heart.”

Sedera Ranaivoarinosy is a freelance writer, editor, facilitator, and translator based in Paris. Trained in broadcast journalism and dramatic literature in New York, she worked for five years in the philanthropy and social economy sector. She is a member of the editorial committee that created the Marseille Charter on information and migrations. Her writing has appeared in *Macadam*, *IJNet*, *Springback Magazine*, *Carenews*, and *Women who do stuff*.

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