



From Art to Civic Agency: How the  
CivicArt Methodology Transforms  
Small-Scale Artistic Interventions  
into Mechanisms of Civic  
Participation and Community  
Building

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**From Art to Civic Agency: How the CivicArt Methodology  
Transforms Small-Scale Artistic Interventions into Mechanisms of  
Civic Participation and Community Building**

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**Tbilisi 2026**

## **Abstract**

Across Europe and beyond, concerns over declining civic participation, weakening community ties, and increasing social polarization have prompted educators, policymakers, and civil society organizations to seek innovative approaches to civic engagement. While participatory arts and activism have gained increasing scholarly attention, existing research has largely focused on public protest, political expression, or large-scale artistic interventions. Considerably less attention has been paid to how small-scale, community-based artistic initiatives contribute to civic learning and community building at the local level.

This article examines the CivicArt methodology as an emerging approach to non-formal civic education that integrates artistic practice with participatory learning and community engagement. The study explores the following research question: How does the CivicArt methodology transform small-scale artistic interventions into mechanisms of civic participation and community building?

The analysis draws upon qualitative evidence from five CivicArt-inspired projects implemented in Georgia and Ukraine following an international CivicArt training programme. Although approximately twelve local initiatives were carried out within the project framework, this article focuses on five completed case studies that provided detailed reflective documentation. Using thematic analysis, the study identifies recurring mechanisms through which artistic activities evolved into processes of dialogue, trust-building, collaborative meaning-making, and sustained civic engagement.

The findings suggest that the significance of CivicArt lies not primarily in the artistic products generated by participants but in the participatory processes that artistic practice facilitates. Across diverse contexts, art functioned as a medium for creating psychologically safe spaces, encouraging dialogue, strengthening social relationships, fostering collective identity, and supporting participants' confidence to initiate community action. Rather than viewing civic participation as the direct outcome of artistic expression, the article argues that CivicArt creates the social and relational conditions from which civic participation naturally emerges.

The article proposes a conceptual model of the CivicArt methodology that positions artistic practice as a catalyst for community formation, civic agency, and grassroots participation. The findings contribute to ongoing discussions on activism, non-formal education, youth participation, and participatory civic pedagogy while offering practical implications for youth workers, educators, and organizations seeking innovative approaches to community development.

**Keywords:** CivicArt, activism, civic participation, non-formal education, youth work, community building, participatory arts, civic agency, Georgia, Ukraine.

# 1. Introduction

Across democratic societies, questions surrounding civic participation have become increasingly urgent. Declining trust in public institutions, political polarization, social fragmentation, and decreasing levels of civic engagement—particularly among young people—have challenged traditional understandings of citizenship and democratic participation (Putnam, 2000; Checkoway, 2011). Although formal education continues to emphasize civic knowledge, numerous studies suggest that knowledge alone rarely translates into meaningful participation. Young people may understand democratic institutions while simultaneously feeling disconnected from their communities and uncertain about their capacity to influence social change (Hart, 1992; Hoskins & Mascherini, 2009).

These developments have encouraged educators, youth workers, and researchers to reconsider how civic competencies are cultivated. Increasing attention has shifted from the transmission of civic knowledge toward participatory approaches that emphasize dialogue, collaboration, creativity, and lived experience. Civic learning is increasingly understood not simply as acquiring information about democratic systems but as participating in social processes through which individuals develop trust, empathy, agency, and a sense of belonging (Biesta, 2011).

Within this broader discussion, participatory arts have emerged as a particularly promising field. Artistic practice offers opportunities for individuals to explore identities, negotiate meanings, express emotions, and collectively imagine alternative futures. Unlike conventional educational approaches that frequently rely on lectures or structured discussion, participatory artistic processes engage individuals cognitively, emotionally, socially, and physically. This multidimensional engagement enables participants not only to discuss community issues but to experience cooperation, dialogue, and collective problem-solving directly through artistic creation (Dewey, 1934; Kester, 2004).

Closely related to these developments is the growing concept of activism—the intersection of artistic practice and civic or political engagement. Activism has become an increasingly important field of scholarship, examining how artistic expression can challenge dominant narratives, stimulate public debate, and mobilize communities around social issues (Duncombe, 2016). However, much of the existing literature concentrates on highly visible forms of artistic activism, including public murals, political performances, protest art, or digital campaigns. Such work has significantly expanded our understanding of how art can function as political expression, yet it often overlooks less visible forms of civic transformation occurring within local communities.

Small-scale artistic initiatives present a different dynamic. Rather than seeking immediate political influence or public visibility, they frequently prioritize dialogue, trust-building, relationship formation, and collaborative learning. Their impact may therefore be less observable through conventional indicators of activism but more profound in shaping the social foundations upon which civic participation depends. Despite their growing prevalence within youth work and non-formal education, these micro-level interventions remain comparatively underexplored within academic literature.

The CivicArt initiative provides a valuable opportunity to examine this phenomenon. Implemented through an international partnership involving organizations from Spain, Germany, Georgia, and Ukraine, CivicArt sought to strengthen civic education through artistic methodologies and participatory learning. Rather than promoting art solely as creative expression, the project positioned artistic practice as a vehicle for dialogue, reflection, community engagement, and civic participation. Participants first experienced the methodology during an international training programme before adapting its principles to their own local contexts through independently designed small-scale community projects.

While each local initiative differed considerably in its artistic forms, participant groups, and community settings, they shared a common methodological philosophy. Some projects explored urban identity through photography and public space observation; others combined meditation, collaborative drawing, storytelling, theatre, dance, or community workshops. Several focused explicitly on youth participation, while others emphasized intergenerational dialogue, local belonging, or inclusion. Yet despite these differences, striking similarities emerged in how participants described the outcomes of their experiences. Across projects, facilitators rarely identified the artistic products themselves as the most significant achievements. Instead, they consistently emphasized strengthened relationships, increased confidence, deeper reflection, new social connections, collaborative learning, and participants' willingness to initiate further community activities.

These recurring patterns raise an important theoretical question. If the artistic outputs differ substantially across projects while the social outcomes remain remarkably consistent, perhaps the transformative potential of CivicArt lies not in particular artistic techniques but in the participatory methodology that structures artistic experience. In other words, art may function less as the object of civic education than as its medium.

This article therefore investigates the following research question:

***How does the CivicArt methodology transform small-scale artistic interventions into mechanisms of civic participation and community building?***

Rather than evaluating the effectiveness of individual projects, the article seeks to understand the mechanisms through which artistic activities become civic processes. It argues that CivicArt represents more than a collection of creative workshops or examples of community art. Instead, it constitutes an emerging methodology of participatory civic learning in which artistic practice creates the social conditions necessary for civic participation to develop.

Building upon contemporary scholarship in participatory art, critical pedagogy, community arts, social capital, and youth participation, the article proposes that CivicArt operates through a sequence of interconnected processes. Artistic activities first establish psychologically safe spaces that encourage dialogue and shared reflection. These interactions facilitate collaborative meaning-making and strengthen interpersonal trust. As participants begin to experience themselves as members of a supportive community, they develop greater confidence, shared ownership, and willingness to engage collectively with local issues. Civic participation therefore emerges not as

an immediate consequence of artistic expression but as the cumulative outcome of relational, reflective, and collaborative experiences mediated through art.

The article proceeds in five sections. The next section reviews relevant theoretical perspectives on participatory arts, activism, civic education, and community building. This is followed by an introduction to the CivicArt methodology and the research design employed in the study. The empirical analysis then examines five CivicArt-inspired projects implemented in Georgia and Ukraine through thematic analysis, identifying the principal mechanisms underlying their civic outcomes. Finally, the discussion proposes a conceptual model of the CivicArt methodology and considers its implications for non-formal education, youth work, and future approaches to civic participation.

## **2. Literature Review**

### ***From Art to Civic Agency: Rethinking Civic Participation through Participatory Arts***

For much of the twentieth century, civic education was understood primarily as the transmission of knowledge about political institutions, constitutional rights, democratic procedures, and citizenship responsibilities. Schools were expected to prepare informed citizens by developing students' understanding of political systems, assuming that greater civic knowledge would naturally lead to increased participation. Although civic literacy undoubtedly remains an essential component of democratic societies, a growing body of research has demonstrated that knowledge alone is insufficient for fostering active citizenship. Individuals may understand democratic institutions while remaining disengaged from their communities, lacking both the confidence and the practical experience necessary to participate in civic life (Biesta, 2011; Hoskins & Mascherini, 2009).

This realization has contributed to a broader shift in civic education from information transmission toward participatory learning. Contemporary approaches increasingly emphasize that democratic competencies are developed through experience rather than instruction alone. Citizenship is no longer viewed simply as a legal status or a collection of factual knowledge but as a social practice requiring communication, cooperation, critical reflection, empathy, and collective problem-solving. Consequently, researchers and practitioners have sought educational methodologies capable of creating environments in which these competencies can be practiced rather than merely discussed.

One particularly influential contribution to this shift comes from Paulo Freire's concept of critical pedagogy. Rejecting the "banking model" of education—in which learners passively receive knowledge from teachers—Freire argued that meaningful learning emerges through dialogue, shared reflection, and praxis, understood as the continuous interaction between reflection and action (Freire, 1970). For Freire, education is inherently relational. Learners do not simply acquire knowledge; they construct it collectively through interaction with others and through critical engagement with their social reality.

Freire's work remains highly relevant to civic education because it positions dialogue not simply as a teaching technique but as a democratic practice in itself. Through dialogue, participants begin to recognize themselves as capable of interpreting, questioning, and transforming their own communities. Civic agency therefore develops through participation in collective learning processes rather than through passive reception of civic information.

The CivicArt methodology reflects this pedagogical tradition in important ways. Across the analyzed projects, facilitators rarely positioned themselves as instructors delivering predefined knowledge about democracy or civic participation. Instead, participants were invited to explore their local environments, reflect collectively on shared experiences, create artistic responses together, and discuss issues emerging from their own communities. Artistic activities therefore functioned not as isolated creative exercises but as frameworks for participatory dialogue, mirroring Freire's understanding of education as a collaborative process of meaning-making.

A complementary perspective emerges from John Dewey's philosophy of experiential learning. Dewey argued that education should not be separated from lived experience because individuals construct understanding through active engagement with their environment (Dewey, 1934). Importantly, Dewey regarded artistic experience as fundamentally educational because it integrates perception, emotion, reflection, and action into a coherent learning process. Art, in his view, is not simply the production of aesthetic objects but a way of organizing experience and generating new understandings of the world.

This perspective challenges traditional distinctions between artistic practice and civic learning. Rather than treating artistic activities as supplementary or recreational components of educational programmes, Dewey suggests that creative experience itself constitutes a powerful form of inquiry. Through making, observing, discussing, and reflecting together, participants engage in processes remarkably similar to democratic deliberation. Artistic collaboration requires listening, negotiation, adaptation, shared responsibility, and mutual recognition—all competencies central to civic participation.

Recent scholarship on participatory arts has further expanded this understanding by emphasizing the social dimensions of artistic practice. Nicolas Bourriaud's theory of Relational Aesthetics argues that contemporary art increasingly consists not of physical objects but of social interactions created between participants (Bourriaud, 2002). According to Bourriaud, the artwork is no longer solely the final product displayed in galleries; instead, it includes the relationships, conversations, and encounters generated during the artistic process itself.

Although Bourriaud developed his theory primarily within the field of contemporary visual arts, its implications extend far beyond artistic institutions. If relationships themselves can constitute artistic practice, then collaborative workshops, shared creative processes, and community-based artistic interventions become important spaces in which new forms of social interaction can emerge.

Grant Kester similarly argues that many contemporary artistic practices should be understood as dialogical processes rather than object-centered production (Kester, 2004). His concept of dialogical art emphasizes sustained conversation, listening, and collaborative knowledge

production between artists and communities. Artistic value therefore lies less in aesthetic innovation than in the quality of relationships created throughout the creative process.

These perspectives resonate strongly with the findings emerging from the CivicArt projects. Across the analyzed cases, facilitators consistently described dialogue, shared reflection, and collaborative creation as the most significant components of their activities. Artistic outputs—including posters, photographs, performances, murals, dance pieces, or community exhibitions—were valuable primarily because they facilitated interaction among participants rather than because of their intrinsic artistic qualities. In several projects, participants explicitly identified conversations, new friendships, and collective reflection as more meaningful than the artworks themselves.

The growing field of activism further strengthens the connection between artistic practice and civic engagement. Broadly understood as the intersection of artistic expression and social activism, activism encompasses diverse practices ranging from public murals and political theatre to digital media campaigns and participatory installations (Duncombe, 2016). Unlike conventional activism, which often prioritizes persuasion or protest, activism frequently seeks to engage emotions, imagination, and creativity as mechanisms for social transformation.

However, much of the existing activism literature focuses on visible public interventions intended to influence political discourse or challenge dominant power structures. Studies frequently examine protest art, street performance, visual campaigns, or artistic resistance within social movements. While these forms remain highly significant, they represent only one dimension of the relationship between art and civic participation.

The CivicArt experience suggests an alternative understanding of activism operating at the micro-community level. Rather than mobilizing participants around explicit political agendas, CivicArt projects sought to strengthen interpersonal relationships, encourage dialogue, and create opportunities for collaborative civic learning. Their objectives were not primarily confrontational but relational. Consequently, the transformative potential of these initiatives appears to lie less in direct political advocacy than in cultivating the social capacities upon which democratic participation ultimately depends.

This observation connects closely with Robert Putnam's influential theory of social capital. Putnam (2000) argues that democratic societies depend not only on formal institutions but also on networks of trust, reciprocity, and cooperation developed through everyday social interaction. Communities characterized by strong social capital demonstrate greater levels of civic engagement because individuals possess relationships that facilitate cooperation, mutual support, and collective problem-solving.

Importantly, Putnam distinguishes between institutional participation and community participation. Civic life begins long before individuals engage with formal political structures. Participation in local associations, voluntary organizations, neighbourhood initiatives, cultural activities, and informal community networks contributes to democratic resilience by strengthening interpersonal trust.

The five CivicArt case studies consistently illustrates this process. Participants frequently described developing friendships, expanding social networks, discovering shared interests, and initiating new collaborations after project completion. In one Ukrainian case, participants independently organized a public photography exhibition following the conclusion of the workshops, demonstrating that civic participation extended beyond the project's formal activities. In another project, participants continued communicating and organizing informal meetings after the official programme had ended, illustrating the emergence of durable community relationships rather than temporary workshop participation.

Closely related is Albert Bandura's concept of collective efficacy, referring to a group's shared belief in its capacity to achieve desired outcomes through collective action (Bandura, 2000). Collective efficacy differs from individual confidence because it emerges through collaborative experience. Individuals become more willing to initiate community action when they experience successful cooperation with others.

Several facilitators reported that participants gradually shifted from passive attendance toward proposing their own initiatives, suggesting ideas for future projects, or expressing increased confidence in contributing to community life. Equally significant, facilitators themselves frequently described personal transformation. Many reported greater confidences in organizing community initiatives, facilitating dialogue, and applying participatory methodologies independently in the future. This indicates that CivicArt strengthens civic agency not only among participants but also among youth workers responsible for facilitating community engagement.

The literature on youth participation further supports these observations. Hart's (1992) influential "Ladder of Participation" emphasizes that meaningful participation requires young people to become active contributors rather than passive recipients of adult-designed activities. Similarly, Lundy (2007) argues that participation depends upon creating opportunities for voice, space, audience, and influence. Young people must not only be invited to express opinions but also experience environments where their perspectives genuinely shape collective processes.

The CivicArt projects consistently embodied these principles. Rather than delivering predetermined civic messages, facilitators encouraged participants to interpret public spaces, identify community issues, create artistic responses, and collectively reflect on possible actions. Artistic practice therefore became a mechanism through which young people exercised participation rather than simply learning about it.

Taken together, these theoretical perspectives reveal a significant gap within current scholarship. Existing literature convincingly demonstrates that participatory arts, critical pedagogy, community arts, and social capital each contribute to civic engagement. Yet relatively little research explains how these elements interact within structured educational methodologies implemented through small-scale community initiatives.

Most studies examine either artistic processes or civic outcomes. Comparatively few investigate the mechanisms connecting them.

This article addresses that gap by conceptualizing CivicArt not simply as an arts-based educational project but as a participatory civic learning methodology. Rather than asking whether art

contributes to civic participation, the study examines the processes through which artistic experience becomes civic practice. It proposes that CivicArt operates through an interconnected sequence of relational mechanisms—including the creation of psychologically safe spaces, collaborative creativity, dialogue, reflection, trust-building, and shared ownership—that collectively enable civic agency to emerge.

Understanding these mechanisms is essential not only for evaluating the CivicArt initiative itself but also for advancing broader discussions on how participatory arts can contribute to democratic education, community resilience, and grassroots civic engagement in increasingly fragmented societies.

This completes the theoretical foundation. In the next section, we'll move from theory to practice by introducing the CivicArt methodology and the research design, where the conceptual framework developed here will be connected directly to the five analyzed case studies. That section will also present the methodological model that underpins the rest of the article.

### **3. The CivicArt Methodology and Research Design**

#### **3.1. The CivicArt Methodology: From Artistic Practice to Civic Learning**

Contemporary youth work increasingly recognizes that civic participation cannot be developed solely through the transmission of knowledge. While understanding democratic institutions remains important, meaningful participation also requires confidence, empathy, cooperation, critical reflection, and a sense of belonging. These competencies develop primarily through experience rather than instruction. Consequently, non-formal education has increasingly embraced participatory approaches that position young people not as recipients of information but as active co-creators of learning processes.

The CivicArt methodology emerged within this broader educational context. Developed through an international partnership involving organizations from Spain, Germany, Georgia, and Ukraine, the initiative sought to explore how artistic practice could become an instrument of civic education, community development, and youth participation. Rather than treating art as a separate educational discipline or merely as a creative activity, CivicArt positioned artistic expression as a process through which participants collectively explore social issues, negotiate meanings, and develop relationships that support future civic engagement.

Unlike many civic education programmes that begin with predefined social or political topics, CivicArt begins with participation itself. Participants first experience artistic collaboration, shared reflection, and dialogue before addressing broader civic questions. In doing so, the methodology assumes that sustainable civic engagement develops from interpersonal relationships and shared experiences rather than from abstract political knowledge alone.

This distinction is important. Traditional civic education often asks participants to discuss democracy, participation, or citizenship directly. CivicArt instead invites participants to

experience these principles through collaborative artistic practice. Democracy is therefore not introduced primarily as content but as process.

The methodology was initially experienced by youth workers during an international training course in Alicante, Spain, where participants engaged with a diverse collection of participatory artistic methods, including visual arts, collaborative storytelling, urban observation, performance, movement, creative writing, dialogue circles, zine-making, photography, and public space exploration. Rather than prescribing identical activities for future implementation, the training emphasized transferable pedagogical principles that participants later adapted to their own local realities.

Following the training, participants implemented approximately twelve independent small-scale initiatives within their own communities across Georgia and Ukraine. Although each project differed substantially in artistic form, participant profile, local context, and civic theme, all were designed around the same methodological philosophy.

This flexibility represents one of the defining characteristics of the CivicArt methodology. Rather than functioning as a standardized educational programme with fixed lesson plans, it provides a participatory framework that can be adapted to different social realities while preserving its underlying educational logic.

The five projects analyzed in this article illustrate this adaptability particularly well.

One project in Georgia explored togetherness through movement, meditation, collaborative visual art, and personal reflection, emphasizing emotional connection before artistic production.

Another Georgian initiative invited adolescents to explore messages embedded within urban street art before collaboratively transforming their observations into posters, videos, and literary works addressing local environmental and social issues.

In Ukraine, one facilitator developed a series of ten thematic laboratories combining theatre, photography, storytelling, collage, and stop-motion animation to encourage young people to reflect on identity, democracy, human rights, and local participation.

A second Ukrainian project encouraged participants to reinterpret their relationship with Mykolaiv through urban exploration, artistic creation, and discussions about belonging, resulting in both artistic products and proposals for future community initiatives.

Meanwhile, another Georgian initiative engaged children and families through painting, cyanotype workshops, and dance therapy, using artistic participation to strengthen cultural life within a rural community where opportunities for collective creative engagement remain limited.

At first glance, these projects appear remarkably different. They vary in artistic medium, participant age, social context, and thematic focus. Yet thematic analysis reveals a striking consistency beneath this diversity.

Rather than sharing identical artistic techniques, the projects share a common sequence of participatory experiences.

Participants first enter an intentionally designed environment emphasizing openness, equality, and psychological safety. Artistic activities then encourage observation, creativity, and personal expression while avoiding predetermined "correct" interpretations. Dialogue accompanies artistic production throughout the process, enabling participants to negotiate meanings collectively rather than individually. Reflection follows creation, allowing participants to connect artistic experiences with broader social realities. Finally, many projects extend beyond the workshop itself through continued relationships, community initiatives, or plans for future collaboration.

The consistency of these relational processes suggests that CivicArt should be understood less as a collection of artistic activities than as a methodology structured around participation itself.

### **3.2. Towards a Conceptual Model of the CivicArt Methodology**

The comparative analysis of the five projects indicates that CivicArt operates through a sequence of interconnected stages. Although facilitators adapted activities according to local needs, the same pedagogical logic repeatedly emerged across cases.

The first stage involves the creation of a psychologically safe participatory space. Rather than immediately addressing civic problems, facilitators invest considerable effort in establishing trust, equality, and openness. Icebreakers, movement exercises, informal conversations, artistic warm-ups, shared meals, or collective reflection circles help participants feel comfortable expressing themselves without fear of judgement.

The second stage consists of creative exploration. Participants engage with artistic processes that encourage curiosity, observation, imagination, and experimentation. Importantly, creativity is treated as an exploratory activity rather than an assessment of artistic ability.

The third stage introduces dialogue and collective interpretation. Artistic experiences become opportunities for participants to discuss local realities, exchange perspectives, and construct shared understandings of social issues. Here, dialogue functions as the bridge between individual creativity and collective learning.

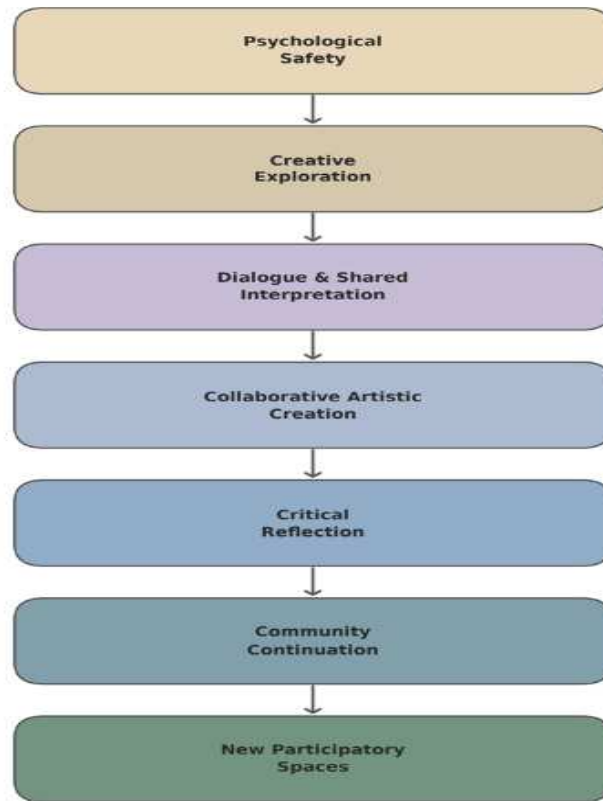
The fourth stage involves collaborative creation. Artistic products are typically developed collectively rather than individually, requiring negotiation, cooperation, and shared responsibility. The collaborative process itself becomes an exercise in democratic participation.

The fifth stage emphasizes reflection. Participants revisit their experiences, discuss emotions, evaluate group processes, and connect artistic activities with broader questions concerning community life, identity, inclusion, or participation.

Finally, the sixth stage extends beyond the workshop through civic continuation. Participants frequently initiate new activities, maintain social connections, organize exhibitions, develop future project ideas, or simply express increased willingness to engage within their communities.

This progression is illustrated conceptually in Figure 1.

**Figure 1.** *Proposed CivicArt Methodological Cycle*



Unlike linear educational models, this cycle is recursive. Each completed activity generates relationships and confidence that facilitate future participation, allowing the methodology to reproduce itself within local communities.

Importantly, artistic production is not positioned at the end of the process as its final objective. Instead, artistic creation occupies the middle of the cycle, functioning as a catalyst through which dialogue, cooperation, and collective reflection become possible. Civic outcomes therefore emerge indirectly through social interaction rather than directly through artistic expression.

This distinction represents one of the central theoretical propositions of this article

### **3.3. Research Design**

This study adopts a qualitative multiple-case study design to explore the mechanisms through which the CivicArt methodology facilitates civic participation and community building. Rather than evaluating project effectiveness through predefined quantitative indicators, the research seeks

to understand participants' experiences, facilitators' reflections, and recurring patterns across diverse local contexts.

The empirical material consists of five completed project reflection questionnaires submitted by facilitators implementing CivicArt-inspired initiatives in Georgia and Ukraine. These five projects were selected because they provided comprehensive qualitative documentation of project design, implementation, perceived outcomes, challenges, and facilitator learning. Although approximately twelve local initiatives were implemented within the wider CivicArt programme, only these five cases contained sufficiently detailed narrative material to support systematic qualitative analysis.

The projects differ substantially regarding geographical location, participant demographics, artistic methods, and community context, making them particularly suitable for identifying recurring methodological mechanisms rather than context-specific outcomes.

The analysis follows the principles of thematic analysis as developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The questionnaires were read repeatedly and coded inductively to identify recurring themes related to participation, artistic practice, dialogue, learning, relationships, civic engagement, and community development. Initial descriptive codes were gradually refined into broader analytical categories through constant comparison across cases.

Rather than treating each project as an independent unit of analysis, the study seeks patterns that transcend individual activities. This comparative approach enables the identification of shared pedagogical mechanisms that characterize the CivicArt methodology regardless of artistic medium or local context.

The findings presented in the following section therefore focus not on evaluating individual projects but on explaining how diverse artistic practices consistently generated similar forms of civic learning, community formation, and participant agency.

#### **4. From Artistic Practice to Civic Participation: Mechanisms of Transformation**

The central question guiding this study asks how the CivicArt methodology transforms small-scale artistic interventions into mechanisms of civic participation and community building. The comparative analysis of the five case studies suggests that this transformation is neither immediate nor primarily driven by artistic production itself. Instead, civic participation emerges through a sequence of interconnected social, emotional, and educational processes that consistently appeared across projects implemented in different communities, artistic disciplines, and participant groups.

Although the projects varied considerably—from meditation and collaborative drawing in Georgia to urban exploration in Ukraine, photography laboratories, dance therapy, and community arts workshops—they demonstrated remarkably similar patterns of participant experience. This consistency indicates that the CivicArt methodology is less defined by particular artistic techniques than by the participatory processes those techniques facilitate.

The analysis identified five interconnected mechanisms that collectively explain how artistic activities evolved into meaningful civic engagement.

#### **4.1 Creating Psychological Safety: Participation Begins Before Civic Action**

A recurring feature across all five projects was the deliberate creation of environments in which participants felt emotionally secure before engaging with social or civic questions. Contrary to conventional assumptions that civic education should begin by introducing public issues, CivicArt facilitators consistently invested time in establishing trust, openness, and interpersonal connection.

These environments were created through remarkably diverse artistic practices. In Georgia, one facilitator combined movement exercises, meditation, collaborative artistic creation, and personal storytelling to help participants experience togetherness before discussing broader community issues. Participants described becoming increasingly relaxed, emotionally open, and willing to share personal reflections as the workshop progressed.

Similarly, the Ukrainian project *Sketches of the City* was intentionally designed around dialogue, urban exploration, collaborative creativity, and informal interaction. Beyond producing artistic outputs, participants repeatedly emphasized feeling connected to one another and to their city through shared experiences.

These examples suggest that psychological safety is not a supplementary component of CivicArt but one of its central pedagogical foundations. Participants first experience themselves as accepted members of a temporary community before being invited to reflect on broader social realities.

This finding resonates strongly with Freire's concept of dialogical education, in which authentic dialogue becomes possible only when participants interact as equals rather than within hierarchical relationships (Freire, 1970). Likewise, Putnam's concept of social capital suggests that cooperation depends fundamentally upon interpersonal trust rather than institutional structures (Putnam, 2000).

The CivicArt methodology appears to operationalize these theoretical ideas by embedding trust-building directly into artistic practice.

Importantly, facilitators rarely described trust-building as an explicit educational objective. Instead, trust emerged organically through collaborative artistic experiences, suggesting that creativity itself may function as an effective mechanism for reducing social barriers.

This observation challenges many traditional approaches to civic education that prioritize political discussion before participants have established meaningful relationships with one another. The CivicArt cases instead indicate that the quality of interpersonal relationships substantially influences participants' willingness to engage with civic issues.

#### **4.2 Art as a Language of Dialogue Rather than a Product**

Perhaps the most striking finding emerging from the analysis concerns the role assigned to artistic production itself.

Across the five projects, facilitators devoted surprisingly little attention to evaluating the artistic quality of participants' work. Posters, drawings, photography, performances, collages, movement

exercises, and community installations were consistently described as vehicles for conversation rather than final objectives.

This observation distinguishes the CivicArt methodology from many community arts initiatives that ultimately emphasize exhibitions or artistic outputs.

Instead, the projects repeatedly demonstrate that art functions primarily as a shared language through which participants negotiate meanings collectively.

For example, the Rustavi project invited participants to explore street art throughout the city before collaboratively transforming their observations into literature, posters, and short films addressing togetherness, environmental responsibility, diversity, and urban identity. The creative products themselves were important, but facilitators emphasized that their greatest value lay in stimulating discussion, collaborative interpretation, and shared reflection.

Similarly, Olesia Musiienko's series of ten creative laboratories integrated theatre, collage, storytelling, photography, mural design, and stop-motion animation around civic themes such as democracy, identity, and human rights. Yet participants consistently described dialogue, cooperation, and mutual learning—not artistic production—as the most transformative aspects of their experience.

This finding closely reflects Kester's understanding of dialogical art, which argues that artistic practice should be understood as an ongoing conversation rather than merely the production of aesthetic objects (Kester, 2004). Likewise, Bourriaud's concept of relational aesthetics suggests that the primary "artwork" produced by participatory artistic practices may be the relationships generated among participants rather than the physical artifacts themselves (Bourriaud, 2002).

The CivicArt projects provide empirical support for these theoretical perspectives. Across cases, artistic media functioned as catalysts for interaction rather than endpoints of creative work.

Consequently, the artistic object becomes significant not because of its aesthetic qualities but because it embodies shared experiences, negotiated meanings, and collective participation.

### **4.3 Collective Creativity Generates Civic Identity**

The third mechanism emerging from the analysis concerns the transition from individual expression toward collective identity.

Traditional artistic education frequently emphasizes personal creativity and individual achievement. CivicArt, by contrast, consistently organized artistic production around collaboration. Participants rarely worked in isolation. Instead, they created together, interpreted together, and reflected together.

This collaborative dimension appeared regardless of artistic discipline.

Participants jointly produced posters, explored cities, created performances, developed photography exhibitions, designed community installations, discussed local challenges, and imagined future initiatives.

The significance of collaboration extended beyond efficiency or teamwork. Rather, collaborative artistic production required participants to negotiate meanings, reconcile different perspectives, distribute responsibilities, and construct shared narratives.

These interactions mirror many of the competencies associated with democratic participation itself.

Rather than learning about cooperation theoretically, participants experienced cooperation as an integral part of the creative process.

One particularly illustrative example emerged from the Ukrainian photography laboratories. Although participants initially joined to attend creative workshops, the project gradually evolved into an active youth community that independently proposed organizing a public photography exhibition based on images produced during the programme. This initiative was not suggested by facilitators but emerged from participants themselves as they developed shared ownership of both the artistic process and the community they had created.

Similar developments appeared across other projects. Participants proposed future initiatives, maintained communication after project completion, returned for subsequent activities, and expressed strong interest in continuing collaboration. Rather than concluding with the final workshop, artistic participation frequently became the starting point for ongoing community engagement.

This progression illustrates an important shift. Participants no longer perceived themselves merely as attendees of educational activities. Instead, they increasingly began acting as contributors to community life.

#### **4.4 Civic Participation Emerges Through Belonging**

One of the most consistent findings across all five projects concerns the relationship between belonging and civic participation.

Conventional understandings often assume that participation produces belonging. Individuals participate first and subsequently develop stronger connections to their communities.

The CivicArt cases suggest the opposite sequence. Participants first experienced belonging. Only afterwards did they express willingness to participate more actively. This pattern appeared repeatedly regardless of geographical context.

Participants described making new friends, feeling accepted within the group, becoming more confident expressing opinions, discovering common interests, maintaining communication after workshops, and proposing future collaborative activities. Facilitators similarly emphasized community formation rather than immediate activism as their most important achievement.

These observations suggest that belonging may function as a precondition rather than an outcome of civic participation.

Bandura's theory of collective efficacy provides one explanation for this pattern. Individuals become willing to engage collectively only after experiencing successful cooperation with others (Bandura, 2000). Civic confidence therefore develops socially rather than individually.

Similarly, Putnam argues that democratic participation depends upon networks of trust established long before individuals become politically active (Putnam, 2000).

The CivicArt methodology appears to operationalize these principles by allowing participants to experience community before asking them to transform it.

#### **4.5 From Participants to Civic Facilitators: The Multiplication Effect**

One of the most significant findings emerging from the five case studies extends beyond the experiences of participants themselves. While previous sections demonstrated how CivicArt strengthened trust, dialogue, belonging, and collective identity among community members, the empirical material also reveals a parallel transformation occurring among facilitators.

Across all analyzed projects, facilitators described substantial changes in their own professional confidence, educational philosophy, and willingness to initiate future community activities. Rather than simply reproducing activities experienced during the international CivicArt training, they gradually adopted a new understanding of their own role within community development.

This transformation is particularly important because it illustrates that CivicArt functions simultaneously as a methodology for participant learning and for youth worker capacity building.

For example, Ana Topuridze openly describes entering the project with significant uncertainty. Having previously worked primarily as an independent artist, organizing a public workshop represented an unfamiliar responsibility involving facilitation, logistics, communication, budgeting, and participant recruitment. Although these challenges initially appeared overwhelming, the successful implementation of the project fundamentally altered her perception of her own capabilities. Reflecting on the experience, she concluded that she had become considerably more confident in organizing community activities and translating personal artistic ideas into collective experiences.

A similar transformation is evident in Ioanna Kryvenko's reflections from Mykolaiv. Beyond discussing participants' learning, she emphasizes how the project enabled her to establish new professional relationships, identify future collaborators, improve facilitation skills, and strengthen confidence in coordinating larger community initiatives. Particularly noteworthy is her observation that one participant later became involved in supporting the organization's communication activities, demonstrating that facilitation itself generated new community leadership.

Olesia Musiienko similarly reports that implementing ten consecutive laboratories reinforced her belief that artistic methodologies can become effective educational tools. Rather than viewing art as an attractive addition to civic education, she increasingly understood creative practice as the educational process itself. This shift motivated her to continue developing similar programmes beyond the duration of the CivicArt initiative.

These reflections indicate that CivicArt produces a multiplication effect.

Participants acquire civic competencies through artistic participation, while facilitators simultaneously develop greater confidence to initiate future community projects. Consequently, each completed initiative increases the likelihood that additional civic activities will emerge independently within local communities.

This observation extends the theoretical discussion presented earlier. Existing literature frequently conceptualizes youth workers as facilitators of civic participation. The CivicArt experience suggests a more dynamic relationship in which facilitators themselves remain learners throughout implementation. Community-based artistic practice therefore becomes mutually transformative.

This reciprocal learning process reflects Freire's proposition that education should not distinguish rigidly between teachers and learners. Instead, all participants engage in shared processes of inquiry, reflection, and transformation (Freire, 1970). The CivicArt projects provide empirical support for this proposition. Facilitators consistently describe learning alongside participants rather than delivering predefined knowledge.

The multiplication effect also has practical implications for sustainability. Small-scale community projects often face criticism for producing only temporary outcomes. However, if each implementation simultaneously strengthens participants and facilitators, the methodology gradually expands local capacity for future civic initiatives without requiring continuous external intervention.

In this sense, the most important outcome of CivicArt may not be individual workshops but the creation of communities increasingly capable of organizing themselves.

#### **4.6 The CivicArt Transformation Model**

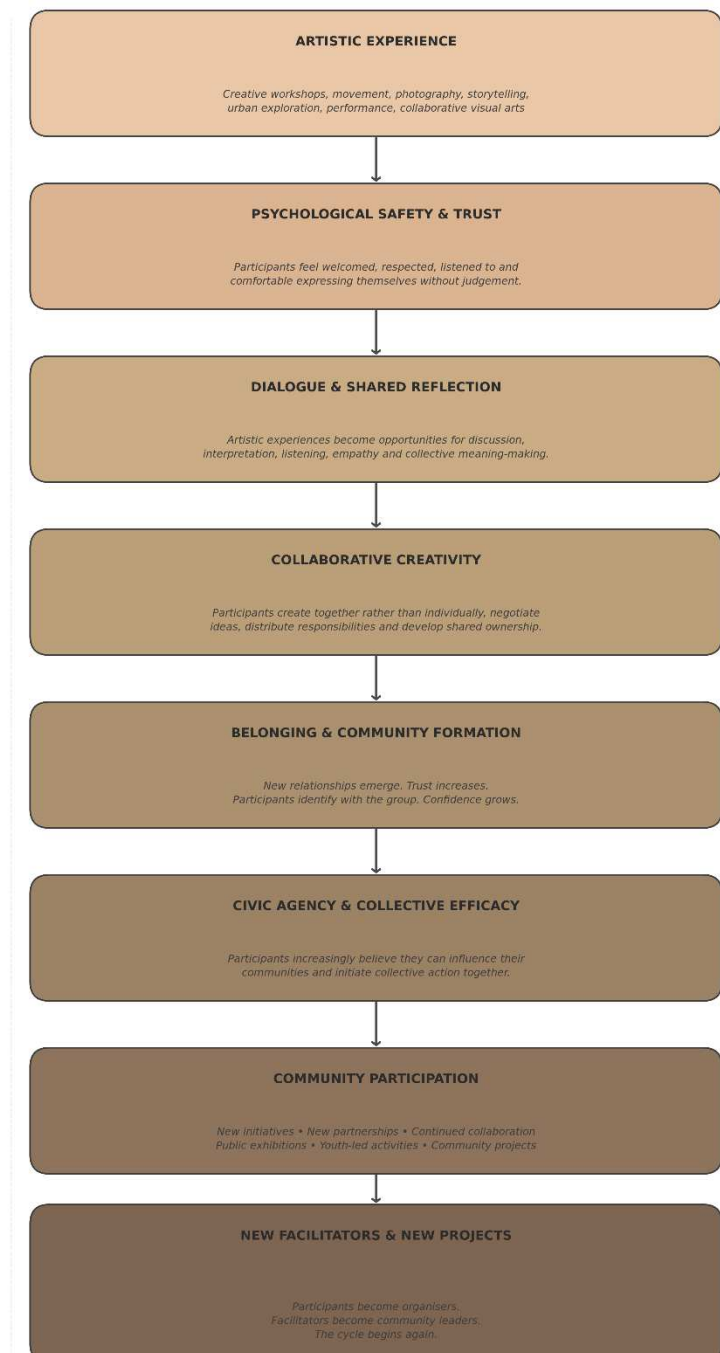
The comparative analysis demonstrates that CivicArt should not be understood simply as a collection of artistic activities or examples of community art. Instead, it represents a coherent methodology that transforms artistic participation into civic participation through a sequence of interconnected social processes.

Existing literature frequently assumes a relatively direct relationship between artistic expression and civic engagement. The five case studies presented here suggest a more complex process.

Artistic activities do not immediately generate civic participation. Instead, they first reshape the social environment in which participation becomes possible.

Figure 2 summarizes this transformation.

**Figure 2. The CivicArt Transformation Model**



This model illustrates that artistic practice functions primarily as the entry point into a broader participatory process rather than as the ultimate objective of the methodology.

Perhaps the most important implication of the model is the repositioning of art within civic education.

Traditional approaches frequently employ artistic activities as communication tools designed to transmit civic messages more effectively. CivicArt reverses this relationship. Artistic practice is not used to communicate civic participation; it allows participants to experience civic participation directly through collaboration, dialogue, shared responsibility, and collective creativity.

Consequently, the civic value of artistic activities lies not in the messages embedded within artistic products but in the relationships produced during their creation.

This observation also helps explain why projects employing remarkably different artistic techniques generated highly similar social outcomes. Whether participants engaged in photography, theatre, meditation, dance, storytelling, cyanotype, poster design, or urban exploration appeared less important than the participatory conditions under which these activities occurred.

The common denominator across all five cases was not the artistic medium itself but the methodological sequence through which artistic experience gradually evolved into community formation and civic agency.

The model therefore provides a conceptual explanation for the CivicArt methodology that extends beyond the specific projects analyzed in this study. Rather than prescribing particular artistic techniques, it identifies the underlying social mechanisms responsible for transforming creative practice into civic participation. This makes the methodology adaptable to diverse cultural contexts while preserving its core educational principles.

## **5. Discussion: Repositioning Art within Civic Education**

The findings presented in this study suggest that the CivicArt methodology extends beyond existing understandings of participatory arts and civic education. While previous research has demonstrated that artistic practice can contribute to civic engagement, the five case studies examined here indicate that the relationship between art and participation is considerably more nuanced than is often assumed. Rather than functioning as a direct instrument for promoting civic action, artistic practice appears to create the relational and emotional conditions through which civic participation becomes possible.

This distinction has important theoretical implications.

Much of the literature on activism conceptualizes artistic expression as a visible form of activism. Murals, public performances, installations, theatre, and protest art are frequently analysed according to their ability to communicate political messages, challenge dominant narratives, or mobilise public opinion (Duncombe, 2016). Although these perspectives remain valuable, they tend to focus on public visibility and political expression as the primary indicators of civic impact.

The CivicArt cases reveal a different pathway. None of the analysed projects sought to organise demonstrations, advocate political positions, or influence institutional decision-making directly. Instead, facilitators consistently prioritised creating environments in which participants could

meet, communicate, collaborate, and reflect together. Artistic activities therefore functioned less as instruments of political expression than as catalysts for social interaction.

The distinction may appear subtle, yet it fundamentally changes how civic participation is understood. Rather than asking how art persuades people to become active citizens, the CivicArt methodology asks how artistic experiences enable people to become communities in the first place.

Across all five projects, participants repeatedly described outcomes that preceded conventional civic action. They spoke about feeling listened to, becoming more confident, discovering common interests, building friendships, and experiencing a stronger sense of belonging. Facilitators similarly emphasised trust, openness, and dialogue as the most meaningful achievements of their work. These observations suggest that participation is not simply an activity people perform; it is a social capacity that develops gradually through relationships.

This interpretation aligns with Putnam's argument that democratic societies depend upon networks of trust and reciprocity rather than institutional structures alone (Putnam, 2000). Civic participation rarely begins in parliament, municipal councils, or elections. It begins when individuals believe that cooperation with others is both possible and worthwhile.

The CivicArt methodology appears particularly effective at cultivating these preconditions.

Unlike conventional civic education programmes that frequently introduce democratic concepts through lectures or structured discussion, CivicArt begins with shared experience. Participants move together, observe together, create together, and reflect together. Through these experiences they gradually develop the confidence necessary to engage in collective action.

This sequence also provides an interesting extension of Freire's concept of praxis. Freire argued that transformative education requires the continuous interaction of reflection and action (Freire, 1970). The CivicArt methodology demonstrates that artistic practice can function as an intermediary stage within this process. Art creates opportunities for participants to externalise experiences, negotiate meanings, and imagine alternative possibilities before translating reflection into community action.

In this sense, artistic creation does not replace civic participation. It rehearses it.

Creating a collaborative mural, designing a community exhibition, producing a short film, collectively interpreting street art, or developing a public installation all require participants to practice precisely the competencies expected in democratic life. They negotiate differing opinions, distribute responsibilities, solve practical problems, make collective decisions, and assume responsibility for shared outcomes. The artistic process therefore becomes a microcosm of democratic participation itself.

Another important implication concerns the relationship between individual and collective transformation. Many educational programmes assess success primarily through changes in individual knowledge, attitudes, or skills. Although such changes were certainly evident within the analysed projects, the CivicArt methodology consistently produced outcomes extending beyond individual learning.

- Participants developed relationships.
- Groups became communities.
- Facilitators established new professional networks.
- Projects generated follow-up initiatives.
- Creative collaborations continued beyond the official implementation period.
- These outcomes suggest that CivicArt produces not only individual learning but also social infrastructure.
- This concept deserves greater attention within discussions of civic education.

Social infrastructure refers to the networks, relationships, shared experiences, and mutual trust that enable communities to cooperate effectively (Klinenberg, 2018). While physical infrastructure such as schools, libraries, and cultural centres provides spaces for interaction, social infrastructure concerns the quality of relationships formed within those spaces.

Viewed from this perspective, CivicArt does not simply organise creative workshops. It invests in building social infrastructure through artistic participation.

This interpretation also helps explain why relatively small projects generated disproportionately significant outcomes.

None of the analysed initiatives involved large budgets, professional artistic institutions, or extensive participant numbers. Most consisted of one- or two-day workshops, while only one extended over several months. Nevertheless, participants repeatedly reported sustained relationships, increased confidence, new collaborations, and intentions to organise future activities.

These findings challenge the widespread assumption that civic impact depends primarily on scale. Instead, they suggest that the quality of participation may be more important than the quantity of participants.

Small-scale initiatives possess several advantages in this regard. They allow facilitators to establish personal relationships with participants, create psychologically safe environments, adapt activities to local contexts, and encourage meaningful dialogue. Rather than seeking immediate visibility or mass participation, they cultivate deeper interpersonal connections capable of generating longer-term civic engagement.

This observation has practical significance for youth work organisations and community practitioners operating with limited financial resources. Meaningful civic outcomes do not necessarily require large public campaigns or expensive cultural programmes. Carefully facilitated small-scale interventions may generate lasting community impact precisely because they prioritise relationships over reach.

Finally, the CivicArt methodology contributes to an emerging understanding of civic education as an embodied and creative practice.

- Democracy is often discussed as a political system.
- Citizenship is frequently taught as a legal status.

- Participation is commonly measured through voting rates or volunteering statistics.
- The projects analysed here suggest a broader interpretation.
- Citizenship is also experienced through cooperation.
- Participation develops through shared creativity.
- Community emerges through relationships.
- From this perspective, art is not an alternative to civic education.
- Nor is it simply an engaging teaching method.

Rather, artistic practice constitutes a distinctive form of civic learning in which participants experience democratic values before naming them, practice cooperation before discussing participation, and develop civic agency before identifying themselves as active citizens.

This may ultimately represent the CivicArt methodology's most significant contribution.

It shifts attention away from teaching democracy toward creating the social experiences through which democratic participation becomes possible.

## 6. Conclusion

This article set out to explore the following research question:

***How does the CivicArt methodology transform small-scale artistic interventions into mechanisms of civic participation and community building?***

The analysis of five CivicArt-inspired projects implemented in Georgia and Ukraine demonstrates that the answer lies not primarily in artistic production but in the participatory processes that artistic practice enables. Although the projects differed considerably in their artistic disciplines, participant profiles, geographical contexts, and community objectives, they consistently followed similar pathways of transformation. Across cases, artistic activities created opportunities for dialogue, strengthened interpersonal trust, fostered collaborative creativity, and generated a stronger sense of belonging. These relational processes subsequently encouraged participants to become more confident in initiating community activities and engaging with local social issues.

The findings therefore suggest that CivicArt should be understood not simply as an arts-based educational programme but as a methodology of participatory civic learning. Rather than using art to communicate civic messages, the methodology enables participants to experience democratic values through creative collaboration. Artistic practice becomes the medium through which individuals learn to listen, negotiate, cooperate, reflect, and assume shared responsibility. Civic participation emerges gradually as participants move from individual expression to collective action.

This distinction contributes to ongoing discussions surrounding civic education, youth work, and community arts. Traditional civic education has often concentrated on developing civic knowledge, while many activist initiatives have focused on public visibility and political expression. The CivicArt methodology occupies a different position between these approaches. It

neither treats art as an end in itself nor as a simple communication tool. Instead, it integrates artistic creation into participatory learning processes that build the social foundations necessary for civic engagement.

One of the most important findings concerns the role of relationships. Across all five case studies, facilitators consistently described trust, dialogue, confidence, friendship, and community formation as the most significant outcomes of their projects. Participants rarely identified artistic products as their primary achievements. Instead, they emphasised the experience of creating together, sharing ideas, discovering common values, and continuing relationships after project completion. Several projects generated follow-up initiatives, informal community networks, and new collaborations that extended well beyond the funded activities. These observations suggest that the long-term impact of CivicArt is better understood through its contribution to community capacity than through the immediate outputs of individual workshops.

The study also highlights the importance of small-scale interventions within civic education. Public discourse frequently assumes that meaningful social impact requires large-scale campaigns, extensive funding, or highly visible public actions. The projects analysed here challenge this assumption. Working with relatively modest resources and small participant groups, facilitators created environments in which meaningful dialogue, shared ownership, and collective agency could develop. This suggests that the quality of participation may be more significant than the scale of participation. Carefully designed local initiatives can strengthen the social infrastructure of communities by cultivating relationships that enable future civic engagement.

Another noteworthy finding concerns the transformation of facilitators themselves. The CivicArt methodology not only influenced participants but also strengthened facilitators' confidence, organisational capacities, and commitment to future community work. In several cases, facilitators described the experience as changing their understanding of education, leadership, and artistic practice. This reciprocal learning process increases the sustainability of the methodology, as each implementation expands the number of individuals capable of facilitating similar initiatives within their own communities.

Based on these findings, this article proposes the CivicArt Transformation Model, which conceptualises artistic practice as the starting point of a broader participatory cycle. Within this model, artistic experiences first create psychological safety, enabling dialogue and shared reflection. These interactions support collaborative creativity, strengthen interpersonal trust and community belonging, and gradually generate civic agency that encourages participants to initiate further community activities. Importantly, the model suggests that civic participation is not produced directly by artistic expression but by the relationships and collaborative experiences developed throughout the creative process.

While the findings provide valuable insights into the CivicArt methodology, several limitations should be acknowledged. The analysis draws upon five qualitative case studies implemented within two national contexts and relies primarily on facilitator reflections. Although these narratives provide rich insight into educational processes, future research could strengthen the evidence base through participant interviews, longitudinal observation, or comparative studies involving larger numbers of projects and different cultural settings. Additional research could also

examine the long-term sustainability of community initiatives emerging from CivicArt-inspired interventions and explore how the methodology functions in different educational, cultural, or institutional contexts.

Despite these limitations, the study demonstrates the potential of participatory artistic methodologies as innovative approaches to civic education. At a time when many societies face declining civic participation, increasing social fragmentation, and growing distrust in institutions, there is a pressing need for educational approaches that rebuild relationships as well as knowledge. The CivicArt methodology suggests that artistic practice can contribute meaningfully to this challenge—not because art itself solves social problems, but because it creates spaces in which people learn to engage with one another as members of a community.

Ultimately, the most significant contribution of CivicArt may not be the artworks produced during its activities, but the communities that begin to emerge through the creative process. When participants learn to collaborate, reflect, imagine, and create together, they also begin to practice the everyday competencies upon which democratic societies depend. In this sense, CivicArt demonstrates that civic participation does not begin with political action; it begins with human connection.

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