

# Cultural activism in the community

**Michael Buser (michael.buser@uwe.ac.uk)**

Centre for Sustainable Planning and Environments, University of the West of England

## Background

This project (completed 2012) explored literature and debates surrounding cultural activism and communities of place. The primary outputs were a scoping study and discussion paper, a two-day international seminar and community outreach in the neighbourhood of Stokes Croft, Bristol.

## Cultural Activism is...

...a type of organising where art, activism, performance and politics meet, mingle and interact. Notable examples include culture jamming, subvertising, muralling, rebel clowning, urban knitting, guerrilla urbanism, and many other whimsical, non-violent approaches to protest and activism.

## Discussion paper themes

The scoping study outlined three broad concepts positioning cultural activism as a set of activities which:

- Challenge dominant constructions of the world
- Present alternative spatial arrangements or 'ways of being' in the city
- Disrupt relationships between art, politics, participation and spectatorship.



## International seminar

Our seminar brought together over 60 participants and speakers from across the UK, Europe, Australia and North America. Presenters from urban studies, activism, art, sociology, psychosocial studies, women's studies, media studies, performance studies and cultural geography spoke about creative activist projects. The aim was to strengthen interdisciplinary exchange and generate enthusiasm for a new research agenda around the notion of cultural activism in communities.

## Key Recommendations

The project report includes a series of recommendations for future research and engagement on the following themes:

### Emotion, affect and sensuous solidarities

Passion, the embodied nature of activist practices, and strong affective experiences contribute to the strengthening of social bonds, solidarity and shared understandings about place.

### DIY activism

Particularly in the context of fiscal crisis, Do-It-Yourself activism is often seen as part and parcel of 'good' neoliberal capitalism. In such a condition, the search for 'alternative imaginaries' often gives way to compromise or co-optation.

### Communities and temporality

The radical and transformative potential of cultural activism is often situated in ephemeral 'moments' of disruption.

### Participation and spectatorship

Cultural activist practices are often framed by expectations about audience behaviour which equate passivity with ignorance and active participation with emancipation. We argue for a more nuanced engagement with spectatorship and an exploration of other ways of learning and knowing.

### Working across disciplines

The project explored the value and difficulty of working across disciplines. At our seminar, we noted divergences in language and vocabulary, outputs, values and epistemological framings.



## Stokes Croft – art and activism

Our project included a series of discussions and events in the neighbourhood of Stokes Croft (Bristol) where we spoke about the role of art and creativity in social and urban change. Working with local artists we installed temporary/unusual seating to challenge assumptions about a so-called 'derelict' site in the area (locally known as the 'Bearpit'). We used the seating as a playful way to have a dialogue with people in the local community and to celebrate the convivial aspects of being in urban public spaces.

## Project team

### Researchers:

Michael Buser, UWE  
Jane Arthurs, UWE

### Artist/designer:

Will Datson

### Community partner:

Bearpit Improvement Group

## Contact

**Main Contact:** Michael Buser

**Email:** Michael.Buser@uwe.ac.uk

**Telephone:** 0117 32 83075

**Project website:**

[www.culturalactivism.org.uk](http://www.culturalactivism.org.uk)



Arts & Humanities  
Research Council

