

Connected Communities

Cultural activism in the community

Michael Buser & Jane Arthurs



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Executive Summary

This discussion paper explores literature and debates on cultural activism and communities of place. Cultural activism is defined as a set of creative practices and activities which challenge dominant interpretations and constructions of the world while presenting alternative socio-political and spatial imaginaries in ways which challenge relationships between art, politics, participation and spectatorship. In our paper, we present a small range of cultural activist practices (e.g., culture jamming, subvertising, rebel clowning) which call upon irony, humour and the carnivalesque to disrupt commonly-held understandings and ways of constructing the world. Our broad aim is to tease out the ways these practices imagine and conduct 'resistance', present future imaginaries and engage audiences in situated community environments. In doing so, we consider how temporality and ephemerality might contribute to the development of radical, autonomous spaces and opportunities for democratic debate and political contestation. The paper also summarises associated scholarly and community-based work including the project seminar where participants discussed cultural activism as well as collaborative work with activists in Stokes Croft, Bristol.

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Key words

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This review examines cultural activism, a type of organising where ‘art, activism, performance and politics meet, mingle and interact’ (Verson 2007: 172). This includes engagement with a broad spectrum of creative practice such as theatre, performance, music, art, poetry and literature and other means of engaging sensory experiences as a means to challenge dominant ways of seeing and constructing the world. Notable examples include culture jamming, subvertising, muralling, rebel clowning, urban knitting, guerrilla urbanism, political theatre and many other whimsical, non-violent approaches to protest and activism.

In discussing cultural activism, contemporary accounts often bypass the political activism of the 1970s and 1980s around race, immigration, feminism and women’s rights, youth, LGBT rights and other forms of identity-based activism which also displayed both creative and political elements (for example, Cohen 1993). Rather, scholarly reviews commonly situate these practices within the lineage of the 20th century avant-garde movements of the Dadists, Surrealists (Fenton, 2004), Guy Debord’s *Society of the Spectacle* (1967) and Situationists International (Ford 2005; Scholl 2011; Grindon 2011) as well as the counter-culture activist movements of the 1960s typified by the Diggers and the Yippies.

While it is impossible to point to a single, unifying political ideology, cultural activism is commonly framed by diverse concerns around social and environmental justice, authoritarianism, capitalism, consumption, globalisation and the pursuit of reinvigorated lived experience. The most visible of these efforts has been the activism surrounding the alter-globalisation and anti-capitalism movements typified by summit disruption protests, Global Days of Action and the Occupy movement. Our interest in this paper is to tease out implications for ‘place-based’ community activism and environments – situating these processes in a neighbourhood orientated concept of community activism.

This paper is organised by three broad concepts positioning cultural activism as a set of activities which:

- a) **challenge dominant constructions of the world**
- b) **present alternative socio-political and spatial imaginaries**
- c) **disrupt relationships between art, politics, participation and spectatorship.**

A) Challenging dominant constructions

As a critique of hegemonic constructions of the world, cultural activism can be seen as a practice of cultural resistance (Duncombe 2002). David Pinder describes cultural activism as ‘those radical and creative practices that are ‘critical and politicized in relation to dominant power relations and their spatial constitution’ (2008: 731). It is an activism that seeks to disrupt commonly-held assumptions and expectations about the world.

The contemporary resurgence of cultural activism is often traced to the Zapatista Army of National Liberation, a rebellion founded by indigenous people in the state of Chiapas, Mexico in 1994 who sought to challenge global processes of neoliberal capitalism (Johnston 2000; Carrigan 1995; Johnston and Laxer 2003). While the initial armed uprising was quickly repressed, the Zapatista’s ongoing struggles and global calls to resist neoliberalism inspired and energised activists around the world (Ryan 2008). For activists and academics alike, the Zapatistas re-defined and revised ideas around Justice and liberty for a post-modern age, challenging subordination in Mexico by transforming their ethnic identity ‘from fragmented, ethnically distinct communities to pluricultural coexistence in regional and national arenas’ (Nash 1997: 261). For some, this worldwide rebellion and call to ‘*practice Zapatismo in any way possible, in any place possible*’ was a precursor to the alter-globalism protests of the late 1990s as well as a more general reintroduction of the ‘carnavalesque’ in protest and activist movements.

In the UK, carnivalesque tactics are commonly associated with activist groups such as Reclaim the Streets (RTS) and the Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army (CIRCA). Founded in London in the early 1990s, RTS famously merged protests with parties, ‘taking over streets and turning them into pulsing, dancing, temporary carnivals in their demand for public space’ (Duncombe 2007: 68). In retelling the movement’s origins, John Jordon noted the emergence of ‘a new breed of artist activist’ (2002: 350) who called upon Situationist-inspired tactics of *détournement* – e.g., closing roads to traffic and holding parties in the streets. This reversal of hierarchy and order – the transformation of so-called dead motorway into living human space – was celebrated by RTS and their carnivalesque construction of ‘a world inside out’ (Bakhtin 1968).

CIRCA, another example of ‘tactical carnival’, was founded in 2003 in response to President Bush’s visit to the UK. Through their non-violent, clowning tactics at summit meetings and other sites of intervention, CIRCA sought to upset accepted lines of confrontation, confusing and subverting dominant cultural codes (Scholl 2011) and, in the process, created ‘joyous, diverse, fluid and life affirming’ forms of direct action and civil disobedience (St. John 2008: 179-180). As with RTS, CIRCA used performativity, creativity, *détournement* and the carnivalesque towards counter-hegemonic possibilities through interventions in specific sites.

B) Alternative imaginaries

For scholar-activists such as Stephen Duncombe, cultural activism's potential is found not in a critique of spectacular society but in its ability to connect with people's dreams. For example, in addition to disruptive interventions, RTS and CIRCA both situated their activism in a positive vision of the future and a change-oriented focus that was experienced in collaboration and dialogue with particular political struggles. Duncombe (2007) envisages such 'ethical spectacles' – prefigurative, participatory, open-ended, transparent and self-organising forms of activism – as attempts to bring new worlds and possibilities into being.

Paul Routledge highlights how the practice of cultural activism can de-programme normative spatial functions and consensus realities by articulating new imaginaries and meanings. For example, the presence and actions of rebel clowns at summit protests temporarily transformed spaces of intimidation and coercion into 'clown spaces of play and mockery' (2012: 443). This ephemeral break with socio-spatial norms mirrors the temporary autonomous breaches RTS activists created as they reclaimed streets for human use and enjoyment. These intentional disruptions and disorientations of 'consensus reality' subvert the normative functions of space through a kind of 'festal hacking' – 'a ritual of de-reification which renders power and contradiction visible at its most central and reified sites, practices which enable the performance and construction of lived alternatives' (St John 2008: 172).

While there is clearly evidence of durability in particular situations (e.g., Christiania in Copenhagen), it is worth questioning the value of tactical carnival where it is predicated on the quick dispersion of the open spaces it creates (Bogad, 2011). Further, as temporary outlets for 'letting off steam' and 'sanctioned transgression' might these activities reinforce prevailing structures of privilege and hierarchy (St. John, 2008: 175)? Reflecting on neighbourhood-based activism in Brussels, Corijn and Groth (2011) argue that the forgotten spaces, those left aside by market and state forces (e.g., abandoned buildings) provide unique opportunities for temporary re-appropriation and political-cultural activism, fostering a type of insurgent urbanism which clashes with and challenges dominant perspectives on urban meaning and regulation.

Hakim Bey's Temporary Autonomous Zone (TAZ) moves this politics of temporality a step further. Advocating disappearance and permanent temporality, these 'pirate utopias' avoid spectacular society altogether; 'As soon as the TAZ is named (represented, mediated), it must vanish, it will vanish...once again invisible because undefinable in terms of the Spectacle (Bey, 2007: 93). What is particularly engaging about these frames is their potential to re-politicise space. For example, not only might ephemerality circumvent or escape co-optation and recuperation, but these conditions might also enable unique frameworks for radical thought and action through direct (temporary) disruptive engagement with hegemonic authority or an outright refusal to participate 'in spectacular violence, to withdraw from the area of simulation, to disappear'. (Bey, 2007: 93). At the level of 'neighbourhood' or communities of place, this temporality can be seen as a possible contrast to processes of gentrification often attributed to artists (e.g., Hoxton) and the emergence of 'creative quarters' which position cultural institutions and activities as a means of urban regeneration.

C) Politics and art in cultural activism

These practices connect with longstanding debates within media and performance studies, around the role of socially engaged art, community publics, participation and conceptions of audience 'spectatorship'. For groups such as RTS and CIRCA, it is the very nature of open and participatory activist encounters which lead to emancipatory moments and the development of sensuous solidarities (Routledge 2012). Similarly, Sandlin and Milam (2008) argue that the culture jamming practices of groups such as Adbusters and the Reverend Billy create powerful sites of learning and foster a type of participatory, resistant cultural production. By enabling an active participation and engaging learners corporeally, the authors argue, these creative practices hold the potential to transform passivity into action and to draw participants into the creation of a community politic.

The political potential of these performative encounters is underpinned by a belief that through processes of active participation and reciprocal communication, each individual is capable of instigating and propelling change (Kanngieser 2011). This activation of the individual draws upon long-standing concerns with audience non-intervention, exemplified by the Situationists' attempts to eliminate passivity – a symptom of the Society of the Spectacle. Indeed, Bishop notes that since the 1960s, artistic attempts to encourage participation have generally been associated with:

- a) A desire to create an active subject, empowered by the experience of physical or symbolic participation
- b) A gesture of ceding authorial control through an egalitarian collaborative creativity.
- c) A perceived crisis in community and collective responsibility (Bishop, 2006: 12)

These characteristics – where the spectator/audience is compelled to take up a position towards the action – can be found in most cultural activist practices. However, Jacques Ranciere recently challenged much of the contemporary *Debordian* discourse that treat the spectator as an ignorant or passive figure as well as prevailing understandings which equate participation and 'action' with learning, democracy and emancipation. In contrast, Ranciere claims that 'Being a spectator is not some passive condition that we should transform into activity. It is our normal situation' (2012: 17). Indeed, Bishop notes, as an artistic medium 'participation is arguably no more intrinsically political or oppositional than any other' (2006: 12). The implication here is that even as spectators, we are capable of interpretation and appropriation in ways that transcend passive/active dialectic. For cultural activism, the challenge is to envisage 'ethical spectacles' in a way that does not rely solely on active participation as a frame for questioning hegemonic discourse and opening up alternative imaginaries.

Collaborating activities

The research team conducted two related and mutually supporting levels of collaborative activities focusing on: *research and scholarship*; and *community-based activism* described below.

Scholarship: The scoping study and draft papers were presented at various stages including:

- *Urban knitting and the city: new uses for comfy jumpers*, Centre for Sustainable Planning and Environments (UWE) seminar (14.02.12);
- *Cultural activism and the politics of place-making*, Planning Research Conference (Birmingham) 13.04.12)
- *Beyond the rebel clowns: cultural activism and place-making*, Digital Cultures Research Centre (UWE) seminar (02.05.12)
- *Cultural activism and the politics of place-making*, Interpretive Policy Analysis Conference, Tilburg, Netherlands (06.07.12)
- *Spectacular activism*, project workshop, Bristol (04.09.12)

The project workshop was held in Bristol on 4 September 2012 and brought together ~60 participants across the disciplines of urban studies, activism, art, sociology, psychosocial studies, women's studies, media studies, performance studies, and cultural geography. The aim was to strengthen interdisciplinary exchange and generate enthusiasm for a new research agenda around the notion of cultural activism in communities. Themes which emerged included:

- limited communication between literatures related to cultural activism, community, and cultural resistance;
- a number of unresolved tensions: solidarity/exclusion; insiders/outsiders; resistance/co-optation; formality/informality; temporality/permanence;
- conflicts between role of the university, researcher, activists, communities and activist-scholars in understanding or participating in activist processes;
- a debate related to time including notions of 'when to act' as well as comprehensive and durable framings of art/activism (as opposed to the traditional 'double-take' or shock effect).

Further information (and presentations) can be found at: <http://culturalactivism.wordpress.com/>

Community-based activism: included outreach and discussions with artists and activists in Stokes Croft, Bristol (People's Supermarket, Coexist and the Community Kitchen at Hamilton House, the Bearpit Improvement Group, the People's Republic of Stokes Croft, and the Matthew Tree Project). In addition, we brought symposium participants to Stokes Croft for a tour and discussion with local groups engaged with cultural activism where we explored sites of transformation and spoke about the role of art and creativity in social and urban change.

A follow-up initiative was conducted with the Bearpit Improvement Group (a community interest company run by a group of volunteers seeking to transform the St James Barton Roundabout (known colloquially at the Bearpit) at the edge of Stokes Croft into a welcoming, safe, diverse and inclusive space). Working with local artists we installed temporary/unusual seating to challenge assumptions about the Bearpit as a derelict, dangerous site while supporting creative ways of re-imagining

conviviality. We used the seating (in the form of children's blocks) as a means to forge dialogue with the local community and celebrate the sharing and human exchange aspects of being in urban public spaces. For images and more information see <http://culturalactivism.wordpress.com/> and the Facebook page <http://www.facebook.com/BearpitBristolArt>

Recommendations for future research

Key lessons and recommendations for investigation:

Emotions, affect and 'sensuous solidarities': In Stokes Croft we found that passion, the embodied nature of activist practices, and strong affective experiences contributed to the strengthening of social bonds, solidarity and shared understandings about place. However, these collective identities also contributed to exclusion in certain sites. Investigations into emotional and affective experiences could help draw out notions of place, community and identity within activist/performative environments. This might also include understandings of activist burnout, the role of professionals and volunteers and issues of trust related to divergent positioning as well as the potential exclusionary characteristics of cultural activist practices.

DIY Community activism: Within the context of fiscal crisis, austerity and social unrest, DIY activism is sometimes seen (paradoxically) as part and parcel of 'good' neoliberal capitalism. In such a condition, resistance and the search for 'alternative imaginaries' often gives way to collaboration, compromise and other means of 'getting the job done'. This reflects a notable fluidity between concepts such as resistance/co-optation; insider/outsider; solidarity/exclusion and so on.

Communities of temporality: the radical and transformative potential of cultural activism is often situated in 'moments' of disruption. Might such moments, freezones and temporary autonomous zones actively support a re-invigorated radical democratic practice? What do they offer for the re-politicalisation of urban life? How do activists (and academics) transform disruptive moments into longer term commitments and sustainable change?

Participation and spectatorship: cultural activists use creative practice and performativity to challenge hegemonic constructions of the world and to advance social and environmental goals. These practices are often framed by expectations about audience behaviour which equate passivity with ignorance and active participation with learning and emancipation. Ranciere and others argue for a more nuanced engagement with spectatorship and an exploration of other ways of learning and knowing. These debates bring together the arts directly into communication with disciplines such as urban studies, politics and others concerned with democracy and participation.

Working across disciplines: The value and difficulty of working across disciplines was made clear at our seminar where we noted divergences in language and vocabulary, outputs, values and epistemological framings. However, we imagine this as a process of becoming which requires an element of risk-taking and displacement from disciplinary norms.

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The references listed here are only those cited in the discussion paper. Further references as well as definitions are available on the project website at <http://culturalactivism.wordpress.com/>.

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External Links

Project web sites:

UWE site:

<http://www1.uwe.ac.uk/et/research/sustainablepe/projects/culturalactivism.aspx>

Michael's wordpress site:

<http://culturalactivism.wordpress.com/>

Our public seating 'intervention' on Facebook:

<http://www.facebook.com/BearpitBristolArt>

The Bearpit Improvement Group

<http://www.the-bear-pit.org.uk/>

The People's Republic of Stokes Croft

<http://www.prsc.org.uk/>

A few cultural activist groups and relevant information on the web:

Adbusters

<https://www.adbusters.org/>

Center for Artistic Activism (Stephen Duncombe co-founder)

<http://artisticactivism.org/>

Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army (CIRCA)

<http://www.clownarmy.org/index.html>

Platform (arts, activism, education, research)

<http://platformlondon.org/>

Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping

<http://www.revbilly.com/>

The Yes Men

<http://theyesmen.org/>

Zapatista Army of National Liberation

<http://www.ezln.org.mx/> (in Spanish)

The Connected Communities

Connected Communities is a cross-Council Programme being led by the AHRC in partnership with the EPSRC, ESRC, MRC and NERC and a range of external partners. The current vision for the Programme is:

“to mobilise the potential for increasingly inter-connected, culturally diverse, communities to enhance participation, prosperity, sustainability, health & well-being by better connecting research, stakeholders and communities.”

Further details about the Programme can be found on the AHRC’s Connected Communities web pages at:

www.ahrc.ac.uk/FundingOpportunities/Pages/connectedcommunities.aspx

