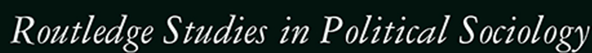

PERFORMANCE ACTION

THE POLITICS OF ART ACTIVISM

Paula Serafini

Performance Action

Performance Action looks to advance the understanding of how art activism works in practice, by unpacking the relationship between the processes and politics that lie at its heart. Focusing on the UK but situating its analysis in a global context of art activism, the book presents a range of different cases of performance-based art activism, including the anti-oil sponsorship performances of groups like *Shell Out Sounds* and *BP or not BP?*, the radical pedagogy project *Shake!*, the psychogeographical practice of *Loiterers Resistance Movement*, and the queer performances of the artist network *Left Front Art*. Based on participatory, ethnographic research, *Performance Action* brings together a wealth of first-hand accounts and interviews followed by in-depth analysis of the processes and politics of art activist practice. The book is unique in that it adopts an interdisciplinary approach that borrows concepts and theories from the fields of art history, aesthetics, anthropology, sociology, and performance studies, and proposes a new framework for a better understanding of how art activism works, focusing on processes. The book argues that art activism is defined by its dual nature as aesthetic-political practice, and that this duality and the way it is manifested in different processes, from the building of a shared collective identity to the politics of participation, is key towards fully understanding what sets apart art activism from other forms of artistic and political practice. The book is aimed at both specialist and non-specialist audiences, offering an accessible and engaging way into both new empirical and theoretical contributions in the field of art activism, as well as wider subjects such as participation in the arts, collective identity, transgression, prefiguration, and institutional critique.

Paula Serafini is a cultural politics scholar, artist, and educator. Her work is concerned with the relationship between aesthetics and politics, particularly in relation to contemporary cultural practices and institutions and environmental and social justice movements. She is currently a Research Associate at CAMEo Research Institute for Cultural and Media Economies, University of Leicester, and holds a PhD in Social and Cultural Analysis (King's College London), an MA in Anthropology & Cultural Politics (Goldsmiths College), and a BA in Art History and Cultural Management (Universidad del Salvador, Argentina). Her previous publications include journal articles in *Third Text* and *Anarchist Studies*, and the edited collection *artWORK: Art, Labour and Activism*, co-edited with Alberto Cossu and Jessica Holtaway (Rowman & Littlefield International, 2018). She has curated projects and exhibitions in London and Bath, and is involved in a number of art and editorial projects in London and Buenos Aires.

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Paula Serafini

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The Politics of Art Activism

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To my grandparents

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Introduction

The last decade (2008–2018) was marked by the financial crisis of 2008 and the wave of revolutionary uprisings and social and political unrest that sparked in the Middle East and subsequently spread across countries and continents (Mason 2012). While several movements struggled against repressive regimes in countries such as Libya and Egypt, others in countries such as the UK, Spain, Italy, and Greece organised against the implementation of austerity measures and neoliberal economic policies. This period also saw the emergence of the Occupy movement in the US and then in cities across the globe, demanding a more equal distribution of wealth and an end to the mechanisms that reproduce inequality. The last five years have seen yet another surge of protest movements of transnational dimensions, many of which are still fighting for freedom and equality and against austerity, but also addressing issues such as racism and institutional violence (Black Lives Matter), climate change (Climate Marches and affiliated movements), and gender violence (*Ni Una Menos*). Recent years have also seen the emergence of protest movements linked to specific political events, such as marches opposing the rise of Donald Trump in the US and the Brexit referendum in the UK, and the Umbrella Revolution in Hong Kong against proposed reforms to the electoral system. Several of these protests were in turn intertwined with wider movements for equality and freedom.

But alongside these movements there were also numerous other practices of resistance taking place that did not make the global news or fit into a narrative of 'waves' of global protest due to scale, marginality, or not fitting the 'event' logic. These include new as well as long-standing movements such as the 2011 Public Service Unions' strike in Botswana, movements in Argentina working against the economic and social effects of neoliberal policy, and mothers of the disappeared organising for justice in Mexico.

All of these struggles and movements share one thing: the proliferation of creative tactics, striking images, and theatricality. Student protests in the UK featured giant shields in the shape of books, a tactic borrowed from Italian activists. Tahrir Square in Egypt became a site for street art and for communal singing (Wahdan 2014). Occupy, a movement that had several artists at its core, stood out for the aesthetics of its DiY (Do it Yourself) camps,

but also engaged in creative interventions in the shape of performances, eventually setting up the subgroup Occupy Museums (McKee 2016). Climate Marches across the world featured striking visuals, costumes, and props, most notably in 2014. And the 'pussy hats' (pink knitted hats made in response to the misogynistic remarks of then-presidential candidate Donald Trump[1]) brought craft making to the political arena, providing previously un-politicised publics an opportunity to participate in a feminist movement.

While many of these tactics are new, art and creativity are not uncommon in activism and social movements (Tucker 2010, Reed 2005), and many creative forms of protest still relevant now had in fact been perfected during a previous wave of local and global movements in the late 1990s and early 2000s, known as the alter-globalisation movement (Graeber 2002:66). This previous wave of protests has also inspired a rich body of literature on creativity and social movements (e.g. Juris 2008, Shepard 2011), which has without a doubt not only influenced a new generation of activists, but has also shaped the way social movements are approached by several scholars today. But despite the fact that the connections between art and creativity and social movements have been well acknowledged and documented in the past decade, and to some extent before, there is still a significant gap in the theoretical and methodological approaches to this subject. This is particularly the case when it comes to producing contemporary studies that are interdisciplinary and that can speak to both the aesthetic aspect of these movements and actions and the organisational dimension. It is this gap that this book wishes to address.

Approaches to art activism

The relationship between art and politics and the role of art as a vehicle for social change have long been objects of interest for art historians, philosophers, and cultural theorists alike, from Benjamin's (1970) work on the artist as producer and the politics of the means of production to Rancière's (2007, 2010) deliberations on politics and aesthetics and T.V. Reed's (2005) seminal work on the culture of social movements. Within a broad range of literature on art and politics, which spans topics such as the politics of aesthetics, the social nature of art, the politics of art institutions, and the art of social movements, there has been a body of literature dedicated to what we can define as activist art, or art activism. Lippard famously describes activist art as a practice that "operates both within and beyond the beleaguered fortress that is high culture or the 'art world'" (1984:341), is not confined to a particular style and "is probably best defined in terms of its functions" (ibid:342), and "is, above all, process-oriented" (ibid:343). Activist art—or art activism, as I will refer to it from now on—differs from political or critical art in that it is not just criticising social and political structures; it is involved in trying to effect change (Lippard 1984, Groys 2014). Art activism is however an elusive term, which has been used to refer both to the work of artists mobilising to change society (and/or the cultural sector in particular) and to the creative and artistic tactics of activists operating outside of the

cultural sector altogether. Variants of this term also include artistic activist art and *artivism*, which different authors have often used interchangeably. The subject of this book is the practice of art activism, and I use this term to refer to practices that employ artistic forms with the objective of achieving social and/or political change, and which emerge from or are directly linked to social movements and struggles. While adhering to Lippard's description and understanding of this practice, I concentrate here on practices that are linked to or emerge out of grassroots projects as opposed to the institutional art world, shifting focus away from the art world, which is still at the centre of much literature on the topic (e.g. Lippard 1984, Sholette 2011, Jelinek 2013, Thompson 2015, McKee 2016).[2]

Of particular interest when speaking of art activism is a wave of writings that sprung up around the time of the alter-globalisation movement and continues to date, in large part originating from the US, where activists/artists/cultural workers—on many occasions turned scholars—have documented the stories of spectacular interventions, mass performances, direct action projects, and other creative initiatives for social change, and have also produced manuals for the cultural revolution (e.g. Duncombe 2002, 2007, Reed 2005, Holmes 2009, Shepard 2011, Sholette 2011, 2017, Boyd and Mitchell 2012, Thompson 2015, McKee 2016). Several of these works have at the same time developed important theoretical perspectives on issues such as the state of the cultural sector and the position of art workers as political subjects.[3]

While this wave of publications makes up the bundle of 'contemporary classics' on art activism, and has introduced concepts that have shaped our way of looking at creative resistance—many of these works will be drawn upon throughout this book—there is nonetheless a lack of theorising on the internal processes and micro-politics of art activism, an issue that is at the core of this study. In order to address this gap, I argue, it is not only imperative to shift focus towards the internal everyday processes and micro-politics of art activist practice, but it is also necessary to do so through an interdisciplinary lens that can provide a deeper understanding of how aesthetics and politics interact in the practice of art activism. To that end, I propose an interdisciplinary framework that goes back to essential concepts and theories on aesthetics and politics and the social nature of art, as well as perspectives from social movement studies and from performance theory and sociology of the body. These last two perspectives will be particularly important in terms of looking at experiences and processes, as I will demonstrate in what follows, and are suitable for the kind of embedded ethnographic methods this study is based on, which I will describe further along this introduction.

Politics and the public sphere

Politics, argues Castoriadis, "concerns the overall, explicit institution of society and the decisions that concern its future" (1993:105–106). In the

context of this book, which looks specifically at the processes of art activism, it is useful to consider certain understandings of politics and the political that can be useful for framing the kinds of phenomena and processes I will be investigating. Amin and Thrift, for instance, put forward an understanding of the political as "how the desire for a different future can be threaded into people's lives as both a set of existential territories and an *expressive* allegiance so they believe that they, too, can have a stake in the world" (Amin and Thrift 2013:x). They propose looking at politics "not as a stable field but as a field whose form and content are continually redefined" (ibid:6). The present study is not a work of political theory and does not employ a political theory framework. However, keeping in mind this understanding of politics and the political is important, as what I will do here is look at the different processes through which politics are enacted, and explore the politics and experiences of these processes. I am adopting a position which acknowledges that "difference and disagreement are central to existence" and "[p]olitical projects [...] cannot stay fixed" (Amin and Thrift 2013:xii); in other words, what could be described as an agonistic vision of society and of the public sphere (Mouffe 2000).

The public sphere was famously theorised by Jürgen Habermas (1991), who claimed the public sphere emerged in the eighteenth century in Europe and the US. It was "an arena outside of the state and the family, [...] where unimpeded conversation took place and new forms of criticism of existing power could be voiced" (Tucker 2010:18). While Habermas gave mention to the physical spaces where the public sphere was enacted (salons and coffee houses, for instance) his focus was on its discursive element of it, namely the role of the written word. The public sphere and public spaces as discursive and physical arenas for aesthetical-political action will be discussed in this book in relation to cultural institutions as contested spaces, the re-signification of public spaces, and issues of access, meaning who has a voice in these public arenas. Chapters 6 and 7 in this book will expand on the public sphere and look at critiques to Habermas's model, namely his failure to conceive of subaltern publics as opposed to a homogenised one. This critique was developed by theorists such as Nancy Fraser (1990), who argued subaltern publics are realms created by disenfranchised groups where they can raise issues of identity and generate solidarity links in a way that is not possible in the dominant public sphere (Tucker 2010:19). Indeed, as Butler argues,

> one reason the sphere of the political cannot be defined by the classic conception of the polis is that we are then deprived of having and using a language for those forms of agency and resistance undertaken by the dispossessed.
>
> (Butler 2015:79)

In his analysis of art and politics, Rancière (2010) equates the political act to the aesthetic act, considering them both to be ways of disrupting consensus (Rancière 2010:140). He describes consensus democracy as a form of democracy in which people are reduced to subjects, and politics is perceived as an affair handled by professional politicians. But actual politics, he claims, is the activity that can overturn this 'proper' distribution. The act of *dissensus*, a breaking of the consensus, argues for equality that reverses this unequal distribution of political—and artistic—participation. Rancière sees the political act as a particular instance—a speech situation—in which the subordinate or excluded stand up for themselves. This act is litigious, because it exposes and contests the arbitrary hierarchy in society and the fact that only privileged voices can be heard. By allowing the unrepresented to speak, the political act generates a redistribution or sharing of the sensible (Rancière 2010:139). This is particularly complex in the context of social orders that officially presuppose and promote equality, but at the same time repress it. Rancière argues that "politics invents new forms of collective enunciation" (ibid:139), while aesthetics create new forms of individuality. "Art and politics each define a form of dissensus, a dissensual re-configuration of the common experience of the sensible" (ibid:140).

This idea of dissensus can be compared to the notion of transgression, as the act of dissensus looks to disrupt the consensus and transgress the distribution of the sensible in the public sphere. This book will look at the meaning and experience of transgression in a variety of contexts, adhering to what can be understood as a postmodern perspective on social movements that "privileges difference over unity and historical breaks over continuity and emphasizes transgressive behaviours and ideas" (Tucker 2010:52). However, this will be done keeping in mind that transgression should be understood as one way of enacting politics and not the only way, as this would limit the repertoire of action, neglecting certain forms of politics that are not regarded as transgressive but that can be key aspects of resistance (those non-spectacular, everyday community-based acts of solidarity in situations of oppression, for instance).

This book will argue that in addition to transgression, prefigurative politics is very much entrenched in contemporary art activist practice. Prefiguration can be understood as the implementation 'in the now' of processes and ways of relating that we wish to see in a future, ideal society (Maeckelbergh 2016). It can also be described as "world-making" capacity, "the ability not just to produce a program in the future but also to open up new notions of what the future might consist of" (Amin and Thrift 2013:9). Amin and Thrift (2013) argue that there are three political arts that movements of the left should invest in developing: invention, organisation, and affect. This book tries to understand how these arts are developed by different contemporary movements, looking at their prefigurative capacity, internal processes and negotiations, and personal and collective affective experiences.

Art, aesthetics, and sociopolitical engagement

Arnold Berleant claims that the body is always involved in aesthetic activity, whether in a more active way—as in participatory or interactive art—or in everyday and personal creative acts. He proposes that experience is always embodied, and therefore proposes that when looking at the experience of art we think of a form of *aesthetic embodiment* as opposed to the Kantian (1978[1790]) aesthetic experience. This approach to the experience of art adds "intensed focus, charged meaning, and perceptual power, for embodiment is highly perceptual" (Berleant 2004:86). In *Art as Experience* (2005 [1934]), John Dewey proposes integrating art into the experience of everyday life by freeing it from the limited realm of the museum. Like Berleant, Dewey places emphasis on experience rather than artefact when describing the value of art. This perspective is also espoused by contemporary theorists in the study of participatory arts (e.g. Kester 2011).

In his study of the aesthetics of social movements, Tucker argues that

> Aesthetics can be transformative and transgressive, "defamiliarizing the world" and inventing a sense of new political and social possibilities. Like its sister activity play, it can take to the streets, parks, and other public venues and inform a vision of social life that opposes capitalist and bureaucratic instrumental reason in favor of a qualitatively different social, political, and personal world.
>
> (Tucker 2010:7)

He argues that looking at aesthetic politics is important in both the practice and study of contemporary activism and social movements, as "Aesthetic politics appeals to and relies upon identification with emotions, visual styles, and images when constructing political activities and ideas" (Tucker 2010:5). Tucker adds that the last century is characterised by a distinctive aesthetic politics that is opposed to "instrumental rationalization and the capitalist commodification of experience and pleasures", and is concerned with "emotion and symbolism rather than moral meanings". As a result, it "allows for particular types of strategies", including performance-based ones (Tucker 2010:45), a point to which I will return later in this introduction.

Acknowledging the potential of art as transformative experience, the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have seen the emergence of artistic practices that are geared towards the social. The 1970s, for instance, were an important moment for community arts (Poll 2010), and the 1990s and beginning of this century saw the rise of socially engaged art. Socially engaged art is the term used to refer to art projects that are participatory and engage with specific communities, and through this work intend to bring about short- or long-term change at a local scale. It is, in a way, a type of 'critical' (or 'political') art because it tends to criticise the structures and effects of capitalism (Bishop 2012), but it is more commonly aligned to a reformist political position as opposed to a radical or transgressive one.

These artists aim at producing art that takes one step outside the art institution and into other spheres, and in this way blurring the boundaries that separate art from life. The engagement with communities is the reason why this type of practice is sometimes referred to as 'activist art'. But even if they take place within communities and outside the physical space of art galleries and museums, these projects are still conceived by artists within a professionalised art world, and hence are commissioned, funded, and supported by these same institutions (Jelinek 2013:27).

After socially engaged art, and following this path towards inserting art in everyday contexts, came what is known as social practice. Sholette (2015:95) speaks about the rapid expansion of the field of social practice due to its ability to create connections between the visual arts and a variety of other practices that we can consider social (or intervening the social sphere), including different forms of research and everyday practices such as walking and cooking. He adds that "by working with human affect and experience as an artistic medium social practice draws directly upon the state of society that we actually find ourselves in today: fragmented and alienated by decades of privatization, monetization, and ultra-deregulation" (Sholette 2015:109).

Practices that fall into the categories of socially engaged art and social practice do on occasion blur with art activism, as these are not fixed distinctions. Regardless of which category they fit, engaged, participatory practices have been at the centre of a debate between autonomy and social embeddedness for the transformative potential of art, a debate that is over a century old and that has been revisited by scholars of socially engaged practices. In order to deconstruct this debate, I will first return to the work of Jacques Rancière, this time focusing on his ideas on aesthetics.

The transformative potential of art

Jacques Rancière defines aesthetics refers to "a specific regime for identifying and reflecting on the arts: a mode of articulation between ways of doing and making, their corresponding forms of visibility, and possible ways of thinking about their relationships" (2004:10). For Rancière, aesthetics is the domain of the sensible, and his work on aesthetics and politics is concerned precisely with how the sensible is distributed. He describes the distribution of the sensible as

> the system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously disclose the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it [...] This appointment of parts and positions is based on a distribution of spaces, times, and forms of activity that determines the very manner in which something in common lends itself to participation and in what way various individuals have a part in this distribution.
>
> (Rancière 2004:12)

The distribution of the sensible is important in a study of political action because it "reveals who can have a share in what is common to the community based on what they do and on the time and space in which this activity is performed" (Rancière 2004:12).

Aesthetics for Rancière "determines the place and the stakes of politics as a form of experience" (Rancière 2004:13). And, argues Charnley, "For Rancière, the experience of the aesthetic in art is one of autonomy", one that acts as a motor for "calling into question the social and political constraints of the state" (Charnley 2011:41). In her reading of Rancière, Charnley argues that Rancière identifies two poles for political art: a strand that seeks to blend art and life, and art that puts forward a social critique from its position within the autonomous art sphere (Charnley 2011:42). She adds that "Rancière often seems wary of work that attempts to bridge the gap between art and life, insisting that this practice must end in disappointment" (Charnley 2011:38).

Adopting a similar position to Rancière's, key theorists of participatory art Bourriaud and Bishop both reject activist art as predictable and futile (Kester 2011:31), and claim that it sacrifices aesthetics for the sake of social change (ibid:59). These critics believe that art, in its autonomous realm, has a capacity for transforming subjectivities that is unique to its experience and should not be compromised by placing art at the service of activist projects. This strand of thought rejects the idea of art being 'instrumentalised' for social or political ends, and celebrates art's autonomy as a guarantee of artistic freedom. But, argues Kester, "By maintaining such an absolute division between the sequestered realm of art practice (textualized, detached, authorially-regulated) and social or political engagement (which is always at risk of compromise)", this perspective fails to contemplate "the possibility that social interaction or political engagement itself might transform subjectivity or produce its own forms of insight" (Kester 2011:59).

Kester's position opens up the idea of a kind of practice that is committed to social change but which does not abandon the quest for aesthetic experiences. Following this line of thought, Charnley argues that there is a third strand of "politicized collaborative art, where aesthetic autonomy and socio-political claims are superimposed. The question remains how this contradiction can be understood as the starting point for the politics of these works, rather than as some kind of negation of it" (Charnley 2011:50).

The question posed by Charnley, which lies at the core of this book, is whether art can dissolve the boundaries between itself and the social, while still putting forward a strong and powerful critique that uses the language of artistic practice. Here I will look at a series of art activist practices as both grassroots activism and art, arguing that the tensions between aesthetics and politics are indeed a crucial aspect of this kind of practice, but that prefigurative approaches to art activism can begin to dissolve some of these tensions and achieve forms of art making that are embedded in politics and using art as a form. In this book, I will challenge the distinction between art

and activism, following Kester's position, and go one step further, examining the relationship between aesthetics and politics in different aspects of art activist practice, in order to argue that the production of subjectivities emerging from this context is a distinct one.

Social movement theory

An interdisciplinary framework for the study of art activism should include theories and approaches from the field of social movement theory. This will prepare the ground for an understanding of art activism's organisational politics, and the ways in which it is defined by its relation to wider social and movements. The theories that have been built around social movements offer differing and sometimes seemingly contradictory positions, valuing or focusing on one aspect of social mobilisation over another. To grasp this complexity the study of social movements has generally been broadly divided into two traditions: resource mobilisation theory (RMT)—largely based in the US—and new social movement (NSM) theory—European based and/or influenced (McDonald 2002, Della Porta and Diani 2007). Alberto Melucci explains these two traditions for studying collective action in the following way: the European, he states, focuses on the processes behind the formation of collective action, while the American, on the other hand, proposes an "analysis of the actual mobilization process" (Melucci 1996:16).

RMT emerged in the 1970s, with the work of sociologists such as Charles Tilly (1978) and John D. McCarthy and Mayer Zad (1977, 1979). It is mainly concerned with the acquisition and mobilisation of resources within movements towards achieving political goals, and looks at movements as organisational structures led by rational individuals. It reacts to previous theories of collective behaviour which viewed collective action and social movements as irrational, often as no more than 'mobs'. Within this strand some scholars focus more on economic aspects, and others on political ones. McAdam et al.'s (2001) work has been key towards rethinking RMT into a wider approach that is often referred to as 'Contentious Politics'. The method employed by McAdam et al. is to conduct a series of comparative analyses of social movements in order to identify recurrent mechanisms and processes, and explain how these facilitate the development of movements. They propose an interdisciplinary approach, and a unification of the analysis of all contentious politics—social movements, strikes, revolutions, and so on.

McAdam et al. (2001) propose looking at different examples of contentious politics throughout history, and identifying similarities in the way in which certain mechanisms developed and combined in order to give place to processes, which in turn may develop into episodes. The problem with this approach is that it assumes that mechanisms are similar or identical across a variety of times, locations, and sociopolitical contexts, conceiving of them in universal terms, as fixed categories that can translate from one episode

to another. In a study of art activism that looks at process, the concept of mechanism is useful, but this conception does not allow an in-depth contemplation of the role of culture in how mechanisms are shaped, something I will return to towards the end of this book. Neither does RMT contemplate the role of emotion in social movements, being a reaction to previous theories that viewed protesters as irrational actors (Goodwin and Jasper 2004). For these reasons, the contribution of structural theories emerging from RMT to studies like the one I propose is limited, and it might be more useful instead to look at cultural constructionist approaches emerging from NSM theory.

NSM theory identifies a turn towards cultural and identity politics in social movements that emerged in a post-industrial society. NSM scholars propose looking at movements as cultural as well as social, focusing on the analysis of collective identities and symbols. This strand of thought not only adds to the understanding of social movements, but also leads to a deeper understanding of social and cultural change, given that "movements arise out of what is culturally given, but at the same time they are a fundamental source of cultural change" (Johnston and Klandermans 1995:5). Main exponents of this approach are Alberto Melucci (1985, 1989, 1996) and Alain Touraine (1981). Melucci (1996) acknowledges and emphasises the differences between various social movements and the contexts within which they are conceived. He argues that because of these differences, existing analytical tools are on many occasions inadequate for a thorough analysis. Like McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly, Melucci sees the notion of social movement as an analytical category. He also argues that movements are not units, but rather the product of multiple and varied processes. Unlike McAdam and Tarrow, however, he states that "[n]o phenomenon of collective action can be taken as a global whole since the language it speaks is not universal" (Melucci 1996:21).

The notion of a social movement is an analytical category. It designates that form of collective action which (i) invokes solidarity, (ii) makes manifest a conflict, and (iii) entails a breach of the limits of compatibility of the system within which the action takes place" (1996:28). A central aspect of this strand of thought in the study of social movements is the concept of collective identity (Bernstein 2005:54), which is formed in the context of collective action. Understanding collective identity is important in the study of art and social movements, because it provides insight into the reasons why people join movements, stay, and leave; the way movements are perceived by the public, and the way movements and activism are experienced. Gerbaudo and Treré explain that the concept of collective identity remains to this day a key question for activists and researchers, "one which is decisive to understand the emergence, persistence, and decline of protest movements" (Gerbaudo and Treré 2015:866). In the case of art activism, as I will explore in Chapter 1, collective identity is also a lens through which we can learn about the relationship between aesthetics and politics in art activist practice.

Theories emerging from and inspired by NSM theory offer a valuable framework for the study of art activism because they consider culture not only in terms of the 'content' of political actions—for example, values and message—but also in terms of its capacity to shape a set of skills, tools, and habits from which to construct "strategies of action" (Swidler 1986). This perspective on culture is fitting for an analysis of artistic practices within the context of activism, since I will be conceptualising these as strategic, political practices that serve to communicate and reproduce a movement's identity and ideology, but that also stand as political actions in themselves. It is important to note, however, that this approach only acknowledges the roles of emotions in social movements superficially, and does not fully engage with theories on bodies and embodiment, which I will argue are necessary in order to conduct a study of performance-based art forms in activism. Combining this focus on symbols, codes, and identity with a focus on the embodied experience as described by McDonald (2006) with a focus on the embodied experience, as I will discuss in what follows, will make for a comprehensive framework that will be suitable for the study of social movements today, and especially those that involve creative and artistic practice as modes of expression and direct action.

Embodiment, emotions, and resistance

Kevin McDonald (2004, 2006) argues there has been a shift from older forms of organisation to new experiences in social movements, allowing an 'embodied intersubjectivity'. He proposes the concept of the 'embodied movement' as a way of addressing the failure of instrumental and expressive approaches in exploring experiential aspects of movements. In order to understand the background of McDonald's concept of embodied movements, however, it is necessary first to look at how embodiment has been developed by disciplines such as philosophy and sociology. Embodiment is described as "the physical and mental experience of existence". It is "the condition of possibility for our relating to other people and to the world" (Cregan 2006:3). It follows that "[e]mbodied social relations exist both as the context […] of and as an outcome […] of given social formations" (ibid). Embodiment is therefore a crucial aspect of our development as individuals and social beings, and a prerequisite for collective action. The notion of embodiment was a result of a long philosophical tradition of thinking about the mind and the body, rejecting previous dualistic understandings of mind and body as separate entities, and embracing a view of human beings as neither "minds nor, strictly speaking, bodies, […] but rather mindful and embodied social agents" (Crossley 2001:3). Phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty (1962), explains Crossley, argues that "our bodies are not objects of experience for us, but rather our very means of experiencing" (Crossley 2001:16).

According to Merleau-Ponty, society is not the context in which we situate objects, nor is society something conceived inside individuals' heads. Rather, it is found in the interactions among people, where we also find the

meaning of the things we do (Merleau-Ponty 1962:303). Bodies are central to sociality because instead of incorporating or embodying the social, they are inherently social in their material composition. But the way that individuals relate to one another has changed throughout time. The move from traditional to modern and postmodern societies has produced an increased abstraction and a reinterpretation of embodiment. This abstraction opens bodies to rationalisation and processes of commodification (Cregan 2006). If we consider this in relation to contemporary politics and struggles against oppression and for basic rights of subsistence, it is safe to say that resistance and opposition to commodification, surveillance, and objectification have become central to struggles around bio-politics—described by Butler as "those powers that organize life" (2015:196)—and the politics of the body. Regardless of their content or message, embodied political practices such as performances can therefore be understood as forms of direct action against the disembodiment of contemporary societies and the parallel surveillance and control over bodies.

The body has indeed a long history of being understood and used as a tool for resistance and subversion (Doyle 2001). Under authoritative regimes, economic austerity, and with a lack of prospects in life, the body may be the one thing over which individuals can maintain at least some control. This idea is akin to Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World* (1968), in which the medieval carnival is presented as a space for celebration where bodily excesses such as drinking, eating, and dancing make up a form of subversion against the oppressive powers of feudal lords and the church. The idea that the carnival as a model of embodied, popular subversion has been adopted by social movements has been developed by numerous scholars (e.g. Graeber 2007, Tucker 2010), and indeed "There is now a large and increasing body of writing which sees carnival not simply as a ritual feature of European culture but as a *mode of understanding*, a positivity, a cultural analytic" (Stallybrass and White 1986:6). Without assuming that all carnivalesque is intrinsically political, it is worth keeping in mind the potential of carnivalesque aesthetics as vehicles for transgression and liberation (Stallybrass and White 1986), particularly in the case of practices that thrive on mass theatrical and satirical expressions of dissent and those that centre the body in their transgression of social norms, as I will discuss in Chapters 2 and 4 in this book.

Considering the political potential of embodiment and embodied actions, McDonald (2004, 2006) calls for a turn in social movement theory towards the embodied experience, as opposed to the predominant focus on collective identity. In the first place, as McDonald points out, this focus is needed in the study of contemporary social movements because movements are increasingly breaking with the concept of 'we-ness' and challenging the notion of collective identity as the main basis for collective action. This is not to say, however, that there is no sense of collective identity at all within these movements, or that embodied experiences cannot be shared and collective.

It means, rather, that collective identity is no longer central for the development of a movement, and that personal experience and individuality have gained new roles in the sphere of political action (McDonald 2006). Looking at embodiment, argues McDonald, is the right approach for studying these kinds of experiences.

In addition to this, many aspects of collective political activity are deeply embodied. Marches, for instance, are highly symbolic rituals—for example, marching on May Day—but at the same time they are embodied practices, as this kind of political activity relies on walking (Bonilla 2011). In these cases, the embodied experience is further enhanced by the collective: the multitude, the collective singing or chanting, and the coordinated route are all forms of expression and communication through embodied practice. As Juris explains, "activists perform their networks through diverse bodily movements, techniques, and styles, generating distinct identities and emotional tones" (Juris 2008:89).

The embodied experience is also crucial for the formation of personal identities, and this is a process that can take place in the context of social movements. McDonald, borrowing from Melucci (2000), argues that the modes of action most common to contemporary movements are increasingly constructed and shaped by forms of embodied communication (McDonald 2004:486). But the embodiment of political action not only allows the individual to connect with others through embodied forms of communication, or to challenge the increasing abstraction in social relations. It also allows her to claim a certain control over her body, in the sense of making use of the body as a political tool. This is particularly relevant in the case of political actions such as occupations, sit-ins, and 'die-ins', in which the body is politicised by its materiality and presence in a space. In these activities there is a collective embodiment of a political message, which is made of individual bodies that together amount to something greater. As Butler argues, it is the space in between bodies where the political act is found (Butler 2011). By restructuring the dynamics of a space through the embodied experiences that take place there, activists can change not only the use, but also the meaning of a space, as following chapters will argue.

Strictly related to the role of embodiment in social movements is the place for emotions and affect. It was only recently that scholars have once again begun to place emotions at the centre of studies of protest, acknowledging that emotions do not amount to irrational behaviour, and considering both the culturally constructed aspect of emotions and the more primal and universal aspect. This task has been mostly pursued by scholars coming from an RMT background, responding to the already-mentioned lack of theorisation around culture and emotion in this tradition.

James Jasper notably argues that "emotions are as much a part of culture as cognitive understandings and moral visions are, and all social life occurs in and through culture" (Jasper 1998:398). It is therefore of great importance that emotions are considered when studying the cultural aspect of

activism and social movements, and also that we understand how emotions develop. In a first instance Jasper argues that emotions are "culturally constructed [...] rather than being automatic somatic responses" (Jasper 1998:399). Emotions, he adds, "involve beliefs and assumptions open to cognitive persuasion", and "are also tied to moral values" (ibid:401). However, he later acknowledges that primary (reactive) emotions like surprise or anger are more universal and connected to bodily states, in contrast to secondary ones like shame or compassion which depend on a cultural construction and shared meaning. Jasper then introduces the concept of *affect*, which is a long-term feeling—for example, trust, love, or respect. According to Goodwin, "[a]ffects are positive and negative commitments or investments—cathexes, in psychoanalytic language—that we have toward people, places, ideas, and things" (Goodwin et al. 2004:418). Affects have also been conceptualised as a way of relating to others, for instance, in the case of a contagious smile or yawn. Affect can thus be said to place the individual in a circuit of feeling and response with others (Tomkins 1963 referenced in Hemmings 2005).[4] Affective and reactive emotions are integral to protest as they are to any social action. Moreover, feelings are what drive us into acting upon something, and "there would be no social movements if we did not have emotional responses to developments near and far" (Jasper 1998:405). Sara Ahmed explains that "emotions *do* things, and work to align individuals with collectives – or bodily space with social space through the very intensity of their attachments" (Ahmed 2004:26). In art activism emotions and affect are important in relation to individual and collective experiences, as they are in the building of narratives.

Emotions can lead people to become involved in social movements, cause them to stay, or make them want to stop participating, and activists also appeal to emotions strategically in order to incite people to take action (Jasper 1998, Gould 2004). Furthermore, it is important that we look at emotions and experience because the actions involved in activism and protest are often risky, intense, passionate, and they usually revolve around issues that are emotionally charged for participants. Emotions are also an integral part of both the expression and construction of identities, given that "the strength of an identity comes from its emotional side. Identities can be cognitively vague, for instance, yet still strongly held" (Jasper 1998:415).

Emotions are embodied because "they entail some combination of sensation, behaviour and disposition [...] Emotion thus entails an articulation of bodily activity and worldly social context" (Crossley 2001:45). As Ahmed argues, "it is through the movement of emotions that the very distinction between inside and outside, or the individual and social, is effected in the first place" (Ahmed 2004:28). Finally, it is important to also consider how culture, rituals, and art are key to building and maintaining certain emotions, since they contribute to making movements enjoyable. "The richer a movement's culture –with more rituals, songs, folktales, heroes, denunciation of enemies, and so on – the greater these pleasures" (Jasper 1998:417).

The most notable limitation to this framework is that even though a focus on emotions allows a closer look at the subjective experience of actors, it usually does not "provide a sufficient sense of conscious awareness. Agency remains elusive" (Jasper 2004:2). Nevertheless, neglecting the role of emotions would result in an important lack in the study of social movements as a whole, and more importantly, a key lack in the understanding of the embodied experience of art activism.

Performance theory and performance as a medium

Art activism can adopt a variety of forms and media. It is true, however, that among contemporary activist groups in the UK, there is a widespread trend for engaging with the performing arts, whether theatrical performances, spoken word, walking as art, or music. It might be argued that this is due to the fact that performance—and specifically performance art—

> has become a highly visible—one might almost say emblematic—art form in the contemporary world, a world that is highly self-conscious, reflexive, obsessed with simulations and theatricalizations in every aspect of its social awareness.
>
> (Carlson 2007:74)

Furthermore, performance is a live art form, and as such, a form suitable for political action. Indeed, many forms of politicised contemporary performance art, such as feminist performance, originated from a tradition of performative political struggle, such as the civil rights movement in the US (Preciado 2009:116).

Performance links image and emotion through an embodied act (Juris 2008:65). It is an embodied expressive practice that can be open to participation, it can take place anywhere and relies more on the body than on external materials and instruments, it can be unexpected, and due to the verbal and body languages that compose it, it is a practice that allows narratives, pedagogical pieces, as well as highly symbolic work. Most importantly, performance has a twofold political potential, which lies on the one hand in the fact that it is a staged reflection on the society we live in (Turner 1987), and on the other, in how it promotes an embodied sense of agency among performers and participants (Juris 2008:76).

But when looking at performance-based practices as art activism, it is important to clarify the perspective we are adopting, given the different ways in which performance has been theorised. Richard Schechner explains that,

> There are two main realms of performance theory: (1) looking at human behaviour—individual and social—as a genre of performance; (2) looking at performances—of theatre, dance, and other "art forms"—as a kind of personal or social interaction. These two realms, or spheres, can

> be metaphorically figured as interfacing at a double two-way mirror. From one face of the mirror persons interested in aesthetics genres peep through at “life”. From the other side, persons interested in the “social sciences” peep through at “art”. Everything is in quotation marks because the categories are not settled.
>
> (Schechner 1985:296)

Following from Schechner, Peter Caster argues,

> That “double-mirror,” […] offers a means to read activism and performance forward and backward, as staged activism and activist performance. By activist performance, I mean a production explicitly acknowledging itself as theatre and framed by dramatic convention that associates itself with a particular social project. […] Staged activism, on the other hand, even if it employs theatrical strategies of representation, asserts that what the audience experiences is really real.
>
> (Caster 2004:114)

Caster explains what he means by ‘real’ by referring to the difference between an actor playing a character on death row and an actual person on death row calling in from prison as part of a play. He emphasises the crucial difference between someone telling their own story and the representation of a story. But focusing solely on the presentation versus representation of the subject dichotomy risks overlooking the importance of context, processes, and dynamics of a performance as a political act. In this book I argue that what characterises a performance as an activist act, or a ‘performance action’ (Serafini 2014) is the ‘realness’ of the activism taking place in the form of a performance, and this realness is dictated by a series of factors, such as the intentions and strategic objectives of actors involved and their position in relation to wider social movements. A performance action can be about the direct presentation of voices, but it is also about confronting power, about location, and about the connection between that action and a wider struggle.

When looking at performance actions, it is worth noting that the line between theatre and performance art is sometimes blurred. Performances by the same groups can vary from being strictly scripted to no script at all, and performers sometimes choose to adopt characters (Verson 2007:180), while other times perform an artistic action ‘as themselves’, as in the example provided by Caster. This second approach to performance moves away from the tradition of theatre, inviting a comparison with some strands of happenings, performance art, and body art, which argue for a presentation of the artist and a ‘real’ action or situation, as opposed to a *representation* of a character and a script (States 1996:8). In either case, performance in the context of activism is never just representation; it is also a political act—for example, an occupation or intervention—carried

out by activists (Serafini 2014). In these complex instances, "multiple selves coexist in an unresolved dialectical tension" (Scherchner 1985:6), and it is this distance between performer and character that allows a political, aesthetic, or personal commentary to be inserted in the performance (Scherchner 1985:9). This space between performance and life, according to Shaughnessy, is "a space for intervention and change" (Shaughnessy 2005:201).

Besides theatrical performance and performance art, activists resort to other types of embodied performance-based artistic practice such as singing, dancing, and music performances. These all tend to share a collective quality (Shaughnessy 2012), a sense of the body as a means of expression and enjoyment (Shepherd 2006), and a sense of duration, which will determine the place and time when the action takes place, and the kind of interaction with the audience. Street et al. (2008), for instance, speak of the role of music in political participation. They situate music as an instrument for motivating and conducting political action (Street et al. 2008:276), as well as a mode of creating knowledge and reinforcing collective identities (ibid:274). George McKay also recognises the role of music as an embodied practice generating movement and contributing to mobilisation, and points out the potential that music has for claiming or transforming the public space (McKay 2007:2). This position sees both the formal aesthetic characteristics of music and its embodied nature as having an inherent political power.

In addition to the relevance of the embodied aspect of performance, it can be argued that the political potential of this practice is linked to its performative aspect (Parker and Kosofsky Sedgwick 1995). I will explore the role of performativity in performance actions in the following chapters, particularly Chapters 3, 4, and 6. But a final thought on performance-based practices as activism comes as a response to Jelinek's thoughts on the artistic media and genre of radical art. She argues,

> [B]y and large, art that questions market norms or norms that maintain the status quo continues to be made using a limited range of media, namely the dematerialised or new media. There is also a corresponding limitation to the range of processes: relational, dialogic, multiple-authored or community-located being the primary modes legitimated.
>
> (Jelinek 2013:104)

These kinds of processes, she says, are clichés in politically engaged artistic practices, which prevent both artists and publics from acknowledging the potential for resistance and subversion in other forms of art, such as painting. She also argues that what is 'radical' and what 'works' as radical art depends on the context of the art practice. For example, we cannot say that participatory performance or graffiti are inherently radical methods or media because their radicalism will depend on the context, content of the work, and dynamic of the artwork—for example, participatory art

might be open to the public but at the same time maintain hierarchies or operate within certain power relations. Although Jelinek's point on context is by all means true, there is an important thing to note. The practice of art activism emerges from both art *and* activism. This means that the choice to resort to certain kinds of open, live media is not a mere symbolic cliché, but rather an aesthetic and political choice. Recurrent strategies such as performance are predominant, as my following chapters will show, because they allow a space for performative instances of self-transformation, as well as prefigurative forms of art making and organising that are in line with grassroots political and social work, which other practices that are less open to collective, embodied experiences might not.

Art activism in the UK

While this book is concerned with the processes and politics of art activism on a wider scale, it is mostly based on interviews and observant participation carried out in the UK. The UK has a rich tradition of popular protest and of intersections between artistic practice and politics (Poll 2010; Bishop 2012). Looking back to the 1980s and early 1990s, for instance, we can see cultural and political movements which combined rave culture, a DiY ethos, and environmental concerns (McKay 1996, 1998), such as the joyful protests of Reclaim the Streets (Jordan 2002, Juris 2008). The late 1990s and early 2000s in turn saw a series of alter-globalisation events which drew on street theatre, music, and the carnivalesque, and in this period the UK was the stage for a number of landmark protests and actions, including the ludicrous tactics of Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army (Fremeaux and Ramsden N/A), and the J18 Carnival against Capital (Tancons 2011). The legacy of these collective, embodied, performance-based forms of protest is still present in the UK, and has inspired the practices of many contemporary movements and groups reacting to climate change, racism, and the austerity measures following the 2008 economic crisis, including some of the groups featured in this book.

This rich history, still present in the current landscape of creative protests, makes the UK a fruitful place for conducting research on art activism. At the same time, and even though the research I have conducted is ethnographic, this book does not focus on the particularities of the UK context, but instead uses insights gained from analysis of a variety of UK-based art activist practices in order to begin to suggest a theory of art activism that can be built on, applied, and contextualised to other regions. While many elements and processes will be conditioned by the particular UK context—and in many cases London specifically—the ideas and concepts that emerge from this study should still be in many ways applicable to art activist practices elsewhere, as I will demonstrate through comparison with practices in other locations.

Key questions, methodology, and structure

The issue with past research on art activism is ontological as well as methodological. On the one hand, there are numerous studies that focus on issues relevant to art activism—such as participation and collective identity—but their object of study is either institutional artistic practice or social movements. This poses an ontological problem, as theories that are built on and for the analysis of these two fields as separate and distinct are not always suitable for the analysis of the in-between practice that is art activism. On the other hand, studies that have addressed art activism more directly mostly do so from a limited disciplinary perspective, posing in this way a methodological problem, as I argued earlier in this introduction. This book looks to address these issues, building on key theories from the arts and the study of social movements and activism, but acknowledging the limitations as well as the strengths of past studies, and suggesting an interdisciplinary perspective that might be useful in the study of other art activist practices as well.

This study is concerned with the internal processes and politics of art activism, and looks to fill a gap in the field by applying an interdisciplinary perspective that can consider the aesthetic and the organisational and political aspects of this kind of practice. The main questions I set out to explore are: How does art activism work in practice? What is the relationship between the aesthetic and the political aspects of art activism and how are these two facets negotiated? What characterises the experience of art activism? How is the work of art activists conditioned by the spaces and frameworks in which they operate? And finally, through which processes, if any, does art activism allow instances of personal, collective, and structural change?

It is important to state that even though this book looks at the tensions between aesthetics and politics in art activist practice, this does not mean, that I am establishing a theoretical position that sees aesthetics and politics as always distinctively separate. It means, rather, that looking at art activism from the inside requires adopting the perspective of those who practise it. And while we can engage in theoretical discussions on whether aesthetics and politis are separate, and under what circumstances they merge (see, for instance, my discussion of Rancière earlier in this introduction), this book will argue and demonstrate that in practice art activists often speak about aesthetics and politics as two aspects of their practice, and that the tension between these two aspects is present in various facets of and processes within that practice. Focusing on how aesthetics and politics merge, overlap, *and* are in tension with each other will therefore allow us to better understand the nature of art activism.

The bulk of the research presented in this book was conducted between 2012 and 2015. I carried out long-term ethnographic research in London and short-term research in Derby, Manchester, and Bristol. During this time I took part in performance actions, psychogeographic walks and protests, interviewed activists, and took on the role of art and activism facilitator for

the radical pedagogy project Shake! I followed a tradition of politically engaged ethnography (Shukaitis et al. 2007, Juris and Khasnabish 2013) that is committed to the fair presentation and representation of participants' voices, as well as a deepened awareness of issues of power and positionality (Punch 2012). While the findings presented here are mostly the result of this period of intense ethnographic and desk-based research, I have included more recent events and developments related to my main case studies, and also referenced newly formed groups in the UK and elsewhere.

This book will look mainly at contemporary cases of art activism in the UK. Chapters 1, 2, and 3 will focus on Art Not Oil, a coalition of groups and organisations that stand against oil sponsorship of arts and culture in the UK. I will particularly concentrate on Shell Out Sounds (an environmental choir singing against Shell and for a fossil-free culture) and BP or not BP? (an activist theatre troupe that stages interventions at organisations such as the British Museum and the Royal Shakespeare Company) and will refer to the work of Liberate Tate (a collective staging performance actions at the Tate galleries). These groups are significant because they are among the most high-profile examples of performance-based activism in the UK. Their performance-based approach is at the avant-garde of the environmental movement, and also, their strategic use of cultural institutions as both targets and platforms of dissent has become, as subsequent chapters will show, a growing trend in both the US and the UK (and most recently also France and the Netherlands) in the wake of a movement for museum liberation. Through an analysis of these groups' processes and the experiences and narratives of their participants, Chapter 1 will look at the development of collective identities in art activism, Chapter 2 will look at participation as a creative and political act and develop a framework for understanding participation in performance actions, and Chapter 3 will address the relationship between transgression, performativity, and prefiguration in the development and staging of performance actions.

Chapter 4 will in turn look at the work of Left Front Art, a network of radical queer artists that work in partnership with trade unions, and Liz Crow, an artist whose work explores, among other themes, disability, austerity, and structural violence. This chapter will explore contemporary understandings of the personal as political and examine the relationship between personal and structural transformations through the perspectives of embodiment, performativity, and transgression. Chapter 5 will look at walking and psychogeography as art activism through the case of Manchester-based group LRM, focusing on issues of ethics, aesthetics, and public space. Chapter 6 presents the case of the art and activism youth programme Shake! in order to examine the tensions between aesthetics and politics and between the individual and the collective in a radical pedagogy context. Chapter 7 returns to the work of Art Not Oil and focuses on the relationship between art activists and art institutions, developing ideas on the public sphere, site-specific practice, and

institutional critique, and situating Art Not Oil within an international museum liberation movement. It also references the work of the anti-capitalist festival P A N D E M I C as an example of art that not only works outside the institutional framework, but stands directly in opposition to it. Finally, Chapter 8 brings together the key findings from previous chapters in order to suggest the foundations for an interdisciplinary theory of art activism that focuses on process, and that looks at how the tension between aesthetics and politics is manifested in the different facets of this practice. Here I will propose that the tensions between aesthetics and politics can be better understood if we look at the strategic and the prefigurative as two related aspects in the political approach of the groups in question, and that embracing prefiguration as an overall approach to art activism, including both aesthetic and political aspects, can allow for a greater balance between the facets that are in tension.

Notes

1. See, for instance, Jessica Bain's article on Pussy Hats: www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/feminism-donald-trump-pussy-hat-protest-washington-women-a7557821.html.
2. I choose to use the term art activism as opposed to activist art or other variants of the term as it does not assign weight to one or the other component of the practice. 'Activist art' or 'artistic activism', for instance, seem to imply an activist flare in art practice or an artistic note in activism, respectively. This book argues that there are particularities to art activism as a practice that is both art and activism, and therefore this term is better suited for the kind of analysis I am pursuing.
3. It is worth noting the predominance of work written by white male authors in this substantial list. As a matter of fact, while there are indeed many women and non-binary people involved in these movements in the US, as are people of colour, the written works that have gained most attention and achieved the status of 'contemporary classics' of art activism have mostly been written by white men. This homogeneity should be considered as it speaks of the power dynamics in the world of art activism and the scholarship surrounding it.
4. The concept of affect has been theorised and contested by many scholars, and can therefore take on meanings different to those presented here. For more on the theorisation of affect see Gregg and Seigworth's *The Affect Theory Reader* (2010).

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1 'Harmonic disobedience'

Constructing a collective identity in an activist choir

Introduction (Hallelujah)

Shell Out Sounds is an activist choir that formed in 2013 to protest against Shell's sponsorship of the Classic International Series of concerts at Southbank Centre in London.[1] This sponsorship deal had been in place since 2007, and came to an end in 2014, when Southbank Centre announced it would not be renewed for the new season. After this deal came to an end, the group continued to perform occasionally, targeting other Shell-sponsored institutions such as the National Gallery. Shell Out Sounds is part of the Art Not Oil coalition, a coalition of activist groups that protest against sponsorship deals between cultural institutions in the UK and fossil fuel companies.[2] Art Not Oil opposes the way that fossil fuel companies attempt to generate a 'social license' to operate by sponsoring culture, 'green-washing' their image, and diverting attention from the industry's record of environmental damage and negative impact on communities across the globe (Platform 2011, Evans 2015).

I joined Shell Out Sounds on June 2013, after responding to an open call on Facebook for an afternoon of protest singing at the Southbank Centre. I met the group at 12:00 pm at a practice space in a theatre nearby. When I arrived, there were already around ten people there. Soon we were fifteen, plus two people who were filming the event. I found the group as a whole to be open and friendly. It looked as if many of those there did not know each other, so before we started singing we introduced each other. We were asked to say who we were, what we did, why we were there, and if we had any previous experience with singing. Some people were activists, some musicians or singers, and many were involved with choirs. Myself and two other women, however, seemed nervous about singing. I even confessed that even though I really enjoy singing, I had not really sung since my last school play fifteen years ago. In contrast to this, the more professional and experienced singers said they were not nervous at all.

We followed introductions with some warm-up exercises in order to loosen up the body. This was also intended to make people interact with each other, as we made funny noises to the person on our right. Soon

afterwards we began practising the song for the day: a reworked version of Leonard Cohen's *Hallelujah*:

I dreamed we'd seen the earth before,
It was green, and it pleased us all,
But you don't really care for humans, do ya?
It goes like this, you drill and dig
You frack the rock and you crash your rig
The tar sands are a poison, Hallelujah

Hallelujah

The Delta is a darkened place
A blackened soil you won't replace
Still you lie but still we see right through ya
The river burns, no tree is spared
The oil it flows and the gas it flares
The pipeline's oil and broken, Hallelujah

Hallelujah

You've broken the ice and snow
To a land we hoped you'd never go
It's time to stop the madness now, but do ya?
You saw the graphs some years before
Now some say 6 degrees or more
The Arctic should stay frozen, Hallelujah

So we went down to the concert hall
With the name of Shell upon the wall
But art and oil don't mix we can assure ya
It goes like this, a song, a plea
'Til our concert halls are fossil free
Our voices will be singing Hallelujah!

Hallelujah.[3]

The song, directed at Shell, positioned the fossil fuel company as a conscious inflictor of environmental damage, aware of the consequences of its actions and the warnings given by the scientific community, but still going ahead with its activities. The song also positioned the 'we'—the singing protesters—in opposition to Shell's activities and announced that the singing would continue until Shell's sponsorship of Southbank Centre came to an end. In this way, the song acted as a lyrical manifesto, which explained what the struggle was about and how the enemy would be confronted. Furthermore, the direct accusations acted as an open denunciation of the company's business model,

exposing what they do and how their practices damage the environment, thus acting as a way of communicating information on environmental issues.

As we began practising the song, Greg, who was one of the people facilitating the rehearsal, stressed the importance of harmonies. Different people took on different parts of the song and played around with various arrangements, creating complex and haunting sounds. We collectively discussed what arrangements sounded better, and made aesthetic decisions as a group. For instance, we decided to begin the song with humming, and to sing parts of it in a softer voice, creating a crescendo effect towards the chorus. At the same time, however, tasks such as distributing parts brought up issues of individuality and artistic selves, as there were two singers who seemed to want to take the solo part. This made evident a tension between the collective identity of the group built around singing together towards one goal, and the individual identities of certain participants as artists, who also wanted to make the most out of an opportunity to sing.

The first time we sang the song I felt electricity in the air. The melody itself was powerful, and the various harmonies, with multiple voices blending in and out, intensified the beauty of Cohen's melody. But also, the lyrics referring to the devastating effects of fossil fuel extraction carried a very grim and sad message; a message that was countered by the hopeful act of singing in protest against the destruction of the environment. As a result, the feelings evoked were conflicted, as the song was made up of a beautiful and powerful melody, a haunting arrangement of harmonies and a dark set of words brought together in a defiant performance.

After almost two hours of rehearsing we left the practice space and walked together towards our performance venue, Southbank Centre. The programmed concert for that day at Southbank Centre was the last one of the Shell Classic Season for that summer. It was a piece about postwar economics and violence, and it was sponsored by Shell. The banners we had with us read 'Shell: art not in your name' and 'Art is a means for survival-Yoko Ono'.

Once we were at Southbank Centre, we had to decide whether to perform inside the venue or outside. The decision was complex, as there were many issues to take into account. In the first place, where would we be able to gather a larger audience? Second, what would look better on photography and video? And third, what would the implications of singing in different parts of the venue be in terms of the relation to the space, the staff members, and the public? How transgressive did we want to be, and how transgressive would it be to carry out a singing intervention in a space that is privately owned, but still open to the public? In the end we decided to do two performances of the song: one inside and one outside the venue. This choice was made collectively. However, there was a singer who did not want to go inside and chose to stay outside for that part. She was concerned that performing inside the venue without explicit permission from security staff was risky, and as she said, 'too political'.

This singer's position provided me with further insight into the different backgrounds of the people joining the action, and their motivations

for doing so. As mentioned previously, some singers came from an activist background, and did not sing professionally. Others, such as the singer in question, were inclined to join because they met other members through their participation in a choir, and even though they might support the causes that the choir fights for, they did not have a background of involvement in political activities—hence they were hesitant about how transgressive or 'political' they wanted the action to be.

Throughout the various performances there were three people filming and one recording audio with us. While we sang, we gave out leaflets—which included the lyrics to the song—and tried to interact with the public. We performed the song a few times, inside and outside the Queen Elizabeth Hall (one of the venues at Southbank Centre). In the end, we realised that performing outside was better, as the weather was good and we had a greater chance of interacting with people. When we did our first performance inside, the people sitting at the vestibule café did not pay much attention, while during our performances outside passers-by engaged more, and even clapped along and stopped to take pictures. Nevertheless, only a couple of passers-by ended up joining the choir. Due to the special harmonies, solos, and changes to the lyrics we had made during the practice, it was a difficult song for people to join in with on the spot. These complexities made the piece more beautiful but less accessible, which contradicted the initial purpose of choosing a familiar melody so that anyone could potentially join in.

Including all performers who were at the rehearsal, some that met us there, and a few members of the public who joined in, we were a total of twenty people singing. A few passers-by also came to talk to us and congratulated us. Southbank Centre staff did not interfere in any way. After the action concluded, several photos and a video were up on Facebook and Twitter within a few hours. The action was self-described as a 'guerrilla choir', and images of the event were also shared by the social media accounts of other Art Not Oil groups.

This first experience as part of the Shell Out Sounds choir brought up several interesting questions that would continue to arise in future actions and planning meetings with this group and with others. In the first place, I was intrigued by the constitution of the group's identity as a choir and as an activist group, as well as by the dynamics of participation. How did the group see itself? What were people's motivations for taking part in this particular kind of protest? What were the potential and limitations of participation? In addition to this, using song as a medium meant that this political act was communicated through two channels: on the one hand, a discursive and symbolic channel constituted by the lyrics of the song, and on the other hand, the bodies and voices of people, communing through harmonies, and occupying the site and surroundings of the contested cultural venue. How did these two channels complement each other? How did performing bodies carry and communicate a political message?

Using song as a form of protest within a musical venue also highlighted other issues around the objectives and potential outcomes of this kind of

practice. The performance, being unsanctioned and criticising the institution's sponsorship deal, positioned the group in an antagonistic relationship with said institution, even if the actual target of the environmental group is the fossil fuel company and not the arts centre. But also, at the same time as a critique was communicated, an alternative mode of producing and sharing music was put into action in the very context where the programmed concerts take place: a form of musical performance that is not professionalised and that is participatory—though this is also complex, given the mingling of professional and amateur singers and those seeking solo opportunities. This poses interesting questions around the possibilities for prefiguration within this and other art activist groups' practices, which I will discuss in the following chapters.

In the remainder of this chapter, I will focus on the issue of collective identity in art activism, and explore this through the practice of Shell Out Sounds. I will ask: do they see their work as art or as activism? What do they understand by art and its potential for change? And how do they negotiate their artistic and political objectives? Adopting a position that looks beyond the 'instrumental uses' of music and considers how music can shape political objectives and the experience of political actors (Street 2003:126), I will borrow mainly from Melucci's (1996) theory of collective identity as well as from other works on collective identity and narrative (Johnston and Klandermans 1995, Polletta et al. 2011, Prins et al. 2013) in order to look at how this process develops in the context of a group that uses performance as a form of political action, and investigate how useful this framework is for the specific study of art activism.

The collective identity of movements

As argued in the introduction to this book, new social movement theory is a strand of social movement theory (SMT) that looks at the cultural aspect of movements and collective action. One of the key concepts to emerge from this strand of thought is the collective identity of movements, notably developed, among others, by Alberto Melucci (1985, 1989, 1996).

Collective identity in the context of collective action can develop around a number of things, be it social traits, belonging to organisations, or shared experiences or values. Identity is important for an individual in order to make sense and give meaning to their actions. It is also an essential aspect of movements, because "collective identity creates a shortcut to participation. People participate not so much because of the outcomes associated with participation but because they identify with the other participants" (Klandermans et al. 2002:236). However, the construction of identity is not only the product of psychological mechanisms; there are also social processes involved. Della Porta and Diani argue that identity does not necessarily come before action, but is in a way parallel to it and transformed by it. In the context of social movements, they claim, rituals such as yearly marches and commemorations have an important role in shaping these identities, and they also act as a form of communication. Protests, for instance,

"have a ritual dimension, which often assumes a powerfully dramatic and spectacular quality" (Della Porta and Diani 2007:110).

Melucci, for his part, sees "collective identity as an interactive process through which several individuals or groups define the meaning of their action and the field of opportunities and constraints for such an action" (1996:67). He goes on to argue that emotional investment is a crucial part of collective identity, since it allows individuals to feel part of a common unity. Emotions like passion, love, and hate are important because "there is no cognition without feeling and no meaning without emotion" (1996:71). Melucci's thoughts on identity and emotions are continued in his analysis of collective experience, which he argues involves emotions as well. The construction of the collective is also necessary for the emotional balance of activists. The creation of a 'we' and an 'us against them' helps to maintain levels of morale and unity. In relation to this, Della Porta (2005) speaks of the formation of 'tolerant identities', which are formed in the context of heterogeneous transnational movements. The emergence of shared identities among heterogeneous groups evidences the importance of the 'us' against 'them' division, which can be observed in many contemporary movements such as Occupy (the 99% vs. the 1%).

At the same time, Melucci (1996) argues that while in the past social actors were mostly mobilised as members of organisations, today due to factors like higher educational levels, mass culture, and the generalisation of citizenship rights, individuals have become self-standing subjects of action. He adds that the identity of the individual and how it is formed proves to be crucial for the development of the subject as an actor, and that it is access to resources and the ability to act and choose within a society that allows a person to think of themselves as an individual and construct their own identity. Not being able to access these resources—meaning economic resources, education, civil participation—and become an actor in society, however, stops the individual from fully constructing their identity, and may in turn result in a motivation for mobilisation towards gaining access to these same resources.

The question of identity—both individual and collective—is not only necessary in order to understand what happens inside social movements, but it also explains how social movements develop. Contrary to Della Porta and Diani (2007), Melucci (1996) argues that mobilisations are often started by those who already have an identity and wish to defend it. These are later on joined by those who do not have a defined identity and join the movement in a quest for such an identity. In addition to this, he argues that those that mobilise themselves are groups that are in some ways central—in terms of geographical location, educational/cultural level—but marginal in others—for instance, employment or access to the political system (Melucci 1996:310). This argument, however, will not apply to all contemporary movements, especially if we move towards the Global South. In the case of indigenous women in Chile for instance, mobilised groups are marginalised in terms of location, rights, gender, *and* access to the political system (Richards 2005).

Only on some occasions might they be partially central—for example, a mobilisation in the capital city. Finally, collective identities can be thought of as complex phenomena that are in constant mutation and thus defy static descriptions. Collective identities are shaped by a fragile dependence on the itinerant relationships of individuals to movements, on constantly evolving visions for change, on ways of organising that change over time, and on shifting power relations outside and within movements (Holland et al. 2008:97).

Another aspect that is key to the development of movements and collective identities is ideology. A "child of the Enlightenment" (Eagleton 2013:1) ideology is a contested term with a complex history, and has been theorised from political, philosophical, and psychological perspectives. Locating the term in the context of social movements, Melucci argues that "[i]deology is a set of symbolic frames which collective actors use to represent their own actions to themselves and to others within a system of social relationships". It includes a "definition of the actor her/himself, the identification of an adversary, and an indication of ends, goals, objectives" (Melucci 1996:349). Ideology can be understood as "a fairly broad, coherent, and relatively durable set of beliefs that affects one's orientation not only to politics but to everyday life more generally" (Benford and Snow 2000:613), and is integral to the formation of identity, as a form of definition and reiteration of one's aspirations and one's place in relation to society.

In the context of social movements, ideology and identity are produced and reproduced through the use of language and symbols. The importance of these is clearly articulated by Melucci:

> Contemporary movements strive to re-appropriate the capacity to name through the elaboration of codes and languages designed to define reality, in the twofold sense of constructing it symbolically and of regaining it, thereby escaping from the predominant forms of representation. [Movements have] refused the predominant communicative codes and they have replaced them with sounds, idioms, recognition signals that break the language of technical rationality.
>
> (Melucci 1985 as referenced in Melucci 1996:357)

In relation to this, another important aspect of social movements that contributes not only to collective identity building, but also to the organisation and sustainability of movements is the construction of narratives. Polletta explains that looking at narratives and storytelling in the study of social movements can provide key insights into how movements recruit members and what kind of impact they have on mainstream politics (Polletta 1998). People's stories provide us with insight into their understanding of themselves and the world around them (Polletta et al. 2011). Looking at the role of stories and narratives in the formation of identities is important, as Prins et al. note, because "Although researchers taking a social constructivist perspective on identity agree that identities are constructed and negotiated in interaction, few studies have examined just

how that construction and negotiation between group members actually occurs" (2013:95). Here I will look at two different kinds of narratives: the ones activists build around their own practice—which as I will show later are linked to ideology and constitute a key aspect of the collective identity-building process—and the outward-facing ones activist groups construct strategically as a way of positioning their practice in the public realm. Instead of conducting an analysis of narratives that is based on structure, I will focus on themes and the connections between narratives and ideology, and narratives and strategy.

In what remains of this chapter, I will look at the processes behind the construction of a collective identity for the environmental choir Shell Out Sounds. Drawing from interviews, anecdotes, and an analysis of the internal processes and interactions of the group, I will bring out the complexities of how collective identity is built, exploring, as I do this, how the tensions between the aesthetic and political aspects of the group's practice become visible.

(De)constructing the collective identity of Shell Out Sounds

Shell Out Sounds can be described as an open, grassroots group that upholds values such as horizontality, equality, and participation. It has a diverse membership, made up of long-time activists, art professionals, singers, and artists, all concerned—at least on some level—with environmental issues. There is a small core of around five people who remain a constant part of the group and have been there since the beginning or shortly after, and there are others who flow in and out with less consistent involvement. Even though the maximum number of core or organising members at the same point does not normally exceed six, there are around twenty more people on a mailing list who are keen on singing and take part in actions with varying frequency, sometimes participating in the planning stages of performances as well. The process of planning an action entails the email conversations with ideas, and the meetings, which usually act as rehearsals too.

Shell Out Sounds uses music as a channel for political communication and action, building on a long tradition of music as a site of resistance. "From the folk songs of rural England to the work songs of slaves, from anti-war protest songs to illegal raves, music has given voice to resistance and opposition" (Street 2003:120). But Shell Out Sounds being constituted as a choir is not unrelated to the fact that their initial space of intervention was the Royal Festival Hall, a concert hall at Southbank Centre. As Danny, long-standing Shell Out Sounds member explains,

> [P]eople go there to listen to music. So if we speak to them in the idiom or in the language which they are expecting to hear, basically, I think it's got a lot more chance of penetrating than if it's … you know, just shouting at them. 'Cause that's what happened at the Southbank, people used to turn up in grim reaper outfits and get arrested every time. And then when they started turning up singing, they weren't arrested anymore.[4]

The way in which music intersects with politics in the practice of Shell Out Sounds is a specific one: the group puts forward a political message through their lyrics, but they also conceive of the act of singing as a physical intervention in a strategic space, making their performances into activist actions or performance actions (Serafini 2014). This particular approach can also be seen, for instance, in the activism of Reverend Billy and the Stop Shopping Choir, who have for years been staging spectacular singing interventions at multiple private and public spaces (Lane 2007), including shopping centres, museums, and most recently branches of banks that are involved in the funding of the Dakota Access Pipeline in the US. It could also be seen in the singing of Solidarity Sing Along, a choir that emerged as an offshoot of the 2011 Wisconsin uprising, also in the US (Paretskaya 2015). The choir made its demands for citizen rights through political lyrics but also through the physical occupation of spaces, pressuring local authorities through a long-term, part-time occupation that called for rights while exercising these same rights in the public act of assembly (Butler 2015) and singing.

In terms of the content of the songs that Shell Out Sounds performs, these are usually remade versions of familiar tunes, which are given new lyrics in order to reflect the aims and political stance of the group. An example of this has already been given in the reworded version of Leonard Cohen's *Hallelujah*, and other notable examples include the remaking of the Spiritual classic *Wade in the Water*—now *Oil in the Water*—and a whole repertoire of environmental and anti-Shell Christmas carols. As a protest choir, the act of singing and the sound of song are crucial in terms of defining the aesthetics and identity of Shell Out Sounds. As described in the case of *Hallelujah*, songs are performed as a choir, sometimes featuring solo parts. As a way of making pieces more complex and beautiful, songs always feature harmonic arrangements, and sometimes a guitar (on one occasion there was also an accordion!). Regarding the importance of harmonies, one of the core members of the group, Greg, says:

> I find it less satisfying to sing things in unison. I think musically it's much less exciting to sing if everyone sings a tune. [...] I think harmony does something. [...] With different projects I've experienced it has an extraordinary impact. It is something about voices blending, creating a form, and the fact that [it has] enormous potential to reach people.[5]

In addition to harmonic arrangements, another aspect to consider in relation to the aesthetics of Shell Out Sounds is the choice of tone. The group's repertoire of songs includes earnest lyrics about destruction and pollution, some other upbeat satirical songs ridiculing Shell, and also songs of hope for a better future. The voice levels and tones—as well as body posture and movement—for each performance is related to the lyrics and message at hand, and due to the variety of approaches to the matter the group has adopted in their performances, the soundscapes have not been consistent

throughout, resulting in flexible and morphing aesthetics. The changing tone in performances is one of the elements of Shell Out Sounds' actions connected to the constant negotiation of aesthetics and strategy, as ideas for beautiful celebratory performances clash, as I will describe later, with suggestions of more transgressive and shocking ones (Figure 1.1).

In the case of Shell Out Sounds, as in other activist groups and movements, the constant coming and going of participants, the varying levels of commitment, and the different backgrounds and identities of members are factors that together amount to a fluid collective identity that is always under renegotiation. But in addition to this, in this particular case the nature of the group is both artistic and political, since it is a protest group *and* a choir. There is, therefore, a further key negotiation that is exclusive to the collective identity-building process of art activist groups: are we first a group of artists or an activist group? Is our identity narrated and built around our mode of action, which is singing, or around our views on oil sponsorship? Art activist groups find themselves halfway between art and activism. Their practice, it can be argued, is a hybrid, and as a result the collective identity of the group is not only a result of the above-mentioned processes and negotiations, but also has a clear dual aspect. Due to this dualistic nature, different members have opposing views on the collective identity of the group and on the nature of its actions—even if groups have an 'official' position on whether they call themselves artists, activists, or something else. Considering participants' varied perspectives on their own practice is key towards a deepened understanding of art activism, especially if we are to

Figure 1.1 Art Not Oil collective performance at the National Portrait Gallery, 21 June 2014. Image by the author.

avoid generalised arguments that homogenise differences in experience for the sake of arriving at universal conclusions (Thompson 2015:64).

Danny from Shell Out Sounds explains:

> There's always been a kind of … a dichotomy I guess between us as artists and us as activists, and I've always been in the latter camp. I think we are activists using art, and not artists using activism. And that's kind of what I worry about is, if it becomes a platform for people's artistic expression … uhm, then things can get lost. You know what I mean, the power of the message can get lost.

Danny often refers to Shell Out Sounds' performances as acts of 'harmonic disobedience', emphasising the disobedient character of the group's actions. But Greg, who is also a long-standing member of the group, offers a different view, and describes Shell Out Sounds as a community choir. In response to this statement, I asked Greg: "If Shell Out Sounds is a community choir, what community is it representing?" He replied: "People who want to make a change […] we are a community of people who meet around the desire to see an oil-free Southbank." Greg therefore defines the group first in terms of its artistic element (the singing), but then acknowledges the political incentive behind the group. While recognising both elements, his definition differs from Danny's, and showcases the dual and arguably fragmented nature of Shell Out Sounds' collective identity.

Greg also commented that he thought it was a shame that some people think Shell Out Sounds "are quite a raggedy group, they are not really singers. They are activists who use singing as a tool." He is not entirely happy with the level of musical quality the group has managed to achieve, but he still sees the group as a choir, not a group of activists using singing. Interestingly enough, at the same time he argues that because the choir never achieved this ideal level of musical quality, the fact that the group turned up again and again to sing in protest was the most valuable thing they have done so far. In this way, he acknowledges that the most successful facet of the group has been the strategic one, despite his personal focus on artistic quality.

Flesher Fominaya explains that for Melucci,

> [c]ollective identity as a process involves cognitive definitions about ends, means and the field of action; this process is given voice through a common language, and enacted through a set of rituals, practices, and cultural artefacts. This cognitive framework is not necessarily unified or coherent but is shaped through interaction and comprises different and even contradictory definitions.
>
> (Flesher Fominaya 2010:395)

This idea of a fragmented cognitive framework rings particularly true in the case of Shell Out Sounds, as participants put forward understandings

of the group's collective identity that are contradictory, emphasising either the political or the aesthetic aspect of the practice. In their study of Moroccan-Dutch youth, Prins et al. argue that "[i]dentification as a Muslim transcends both the Moroccan and the Dutch identification" (2013:83), suggesting in this way that there are different levels of identity. The boundaries of some identities such as ethnicity, they add, are less defined, while others such as religion offer a fixed set of rules and behavioural mandates. This can be useful in understanding activists' different forms of identification with the group, as artists or as activists. However, in this case it can be argued that neither form of identification is more fixed than the other, and this is precisely what creates tension in the building of a collective identity.

There is another factor that further problematises the positioning and framing of art activism as a hybrid practice. This is the fact that even though aesthetics and politics are connected, merged, and overlap on many levels in practices and spheres ranging from politics, to the media, and creative labour, the language and terms of reference employed in the West for describing and attempting to deconstruct these connections seem to perpetuate a distinction between aesthetics and politics, and a need for one of the two to win over the other. This explains the variety of terms such as 'political art', 'creative activism', 'activist art', etc., which place emphasis on either the artistic aspect or the politics. Acknowledging this tension, artist activist John Jordan explains:

> [A]rt activism is that which is just on the edge between art and activism, and you're always gonna have the gravity of both those worlds trying to pull you down. So you're gonna have the gravity of the art world trying to go 'come on, if you just make it more beautiful, more artistic, more poetic' and then you got the activism world going 'come on, come on, you can be more radical, you can be more full on, it can be more creative'.[6]

If we cannot abandon the underlying assumption of aesthetics and politics as separate phenomena, and both theory and practice perpetuate this separation, we can think of art activism as an 'in-between' as well as dualistic, and in this way position it as a specific kind of practice that differs from other artistic practices and from other forms of activism, and that is therefore governed by the juxtaposition of processes, frameworks, and objectives from these two fields. This way of looking at art activism relates to Sholette's (2016) understanding of art and politics as a spectrum, in which we have artists doing political art or activism on one end, and activists doing creative protest on the other. But instead of striving to identify the exact location of different practices within a spectrum, I argue that looking at these kinds of practices as 'in-between' the two ends allows us to focus on what the in-betweeness means (i.e., the messiness, the tensions, and the negotiations between aesthetics and politics). In this way, we can avoid falling into the trap of conducting an analysis that is only informed by a social movement perspective, or by an arts one.

Collective identity and ideology: when ideas clash

Shell Out Sounds' collective identity and the differing narratives expressed by the group's members are shaped by the ideological positions of members, and more precisely, their ideological position on the role of art in society and the links between art and political action. This became evident, for instance, in the planning of an action for early 2014. One of the members, Greg, proposed staging a spectacular procession at Southbank Centre. He suggested a celebration of nature inspired by one of the concerts from the Shell Classical Season, which was taking place on March 16 and would feature Gustav Mahler's Symphony No. 3, an ode to nature. As a response to this theme, Greg proposed creating a celebratory piece featuring not only singers but also musicians. He envisioned a carnivalesque procession with brass instruments and animal masks taking over the whole of the Royal Festival Hall—one of the venues at Southbank Centre—and celebrating the beauty of nature and of all that which is endangered by pollution, climate change, and the devastating effects on the environment generated by the business model of companies like Shell. He suggested having musicians and singers descending from different staircases at the top of the Royal Festival Hall and coming together into a large marching band in the foyer.

When he proposed the idea, Greg made it clear that he did not want this performance to be about Shell, but about nature and life. It would be on the one hand an occasion of mourning for the damage that has been done to the environment by oil companies, but also a celebration of all that is beautiful in nature, thus aligning itself with the tone of Mahler's symphony. The group's opposition to Shell, suggested Greg, could be mentioned in a flyer explaining the background to the performance, but he argued it should not be explicitly mentioned through song, costumes, or banners, as this would disrupt the aesthetics of the action. Greg's proposal got some support from members who thought it was a very exciting idea. However, other members such as Danny had reservations about it, as they wanted Shell's doings to remain the focus of any action developed by the group, and wanted Shell Out Sounds to continue to carry out its role as a group with a specific mission: sharing information about Shell, protesting against Shell's actions and its sponsorship deals, and contributing to the defamation of its brand. Greg's argument was that changing strategies for once, and adopting a more positive and celebratory aesthetic, could open up new possibilities, such as engaging with new audiences. This potentially positive outcome, however, was countered by the suggestion that this kind of action was not bold or transgressive enough, and hence would not be effective in pressuring Southbank Centre into dropping Shell, or giving Shell bad publicity. Greg responded to this by pointing out that a celebratory kind of performance could still be transgressive, as the space and moment for the procession would once

more disrupt the day of an official concert performance as in most previous actions. He added that most importantly, the music and the grandiosity of the procession had potential for transgression in themselves, and therefore there was no need for more confrontational techniques and explicit references to Shell.

In the end, this project was not taken forward due to lack of planning time. But the proposal created an interesting debate around the different tones that a singing protest could take, around the locus and nature of transgression—which I will be discussing further in Chapter 3—and also provided an interesting insight into the tensions present within the collective identity of the group. While Danny claimed that a very clear message against Shell and a guerrilla approach would be more effective, Greg placed emphasis on the aesthetic elements of the action, believing that a celebration of nature with a separate and more discreet reference to Shell could achieve better results as both a transgressive action and a way of inviting deeper reflections on environmental issues. Greg's proposal for a procession supports an understanding of art as a language that can produce change through engaging audiences with beautiful and grand performances, which are eye-catching and have a potential for transmitting universal truths through the language of music. Danny's conception on the other hand is that art can be a powerful tool for direct action, as singing in protest at Southbank Centre is not only a collective, enjoyable, creative act, but also an effective way of protesting at a site where other forms of protest are more likely to be censored (Figure 1.2).

Figure 1.2 Shell Out Sounds singing at Parliament Square with Occupy Democracy activists, 21 December 2014. Image by the author.

This disagreement showed a fundamental difference in the way that members of the same group think about art and its potential for social change, an issue that is usually taken as a given, shared understanding among art activists, but that in reality is highly contested. It brings to mind Melucci's writing on ideology and how it acts as "a set of symbolic frames which collective actors use to represent their own actions to themselves and to others" (Melucci 1996:349). What this particular incident suggests is that in this context there is not only the need to negotiate artistic and strategic objectives as a collective, but that different individuals' ideas on the nature of art and its potential for protest within an art activist group can also generate tensions in the planning of actions, and contribute in this way to an unstable collective identity that is in constant negotiation.

The artist vs. the collective

In the context of art activist groups such as Shell Out Sounds, the development of an aesthetic-political action will require several stages, in which issues such as message, form, logistics, and political objectives are discussed and agreed on. A collective identity in these instances will guide collective action, and how decisions regarding the best way to proceed are taken as a group. In some instances, as when discussing the message to be transmitted by an action, the discussion will build on a shared understanding of certain specific environmental and political issues and goals, even if personal positions around these issues vary. In other instances, as when deciding the harmonies for a song, the shared knowledge and love of music is the common denominator for actors. But this shared love of music is also rooted in each participant's individual artistic identity. With this in mind, I will now look at how individual identities intersect and interact with collective identity-building processes, suggesting that this interaction, specific to art activist groups, is in fact a key factor in this process.

As mentioned earlier, Shell Out Sounds is made up of a diverse group of people, some who are professional or experienced singers, and some who are not. As a result, the levels of musical knowledge and proficiency are not equal among all participants, and the fact that some are not able to understand and reproduce certain codes and jargon makes the issue of a collective identity based (even if partially) on the act of singing all the more complex. My own position as a music enthusiast with some training in playing instruments, but no previous training in singing, resulted in frequent exclusion from specific decision-making processes on the issue of how a piece would be performed—for example, how many parts? Will we have solos? Will someone sing the bass part? Which parts will be sung in unison and which in harmonies? In addition to this, the artistic identity of individuals creates a point of tension when there are members who heavily identify with the artistic side of the group and much less so with the political or activist side of it.

On the day of the *Hallelujah* performance in June 2013, one of the participants was very keen on doing a solo, but someone else was keen as well. This meant that on top of deciding if there would be solo parts, it was important to decide who would sing the solo parts and how these parts would be allocated. After some discussion, awkward 'oh you should do it' exchanges, and attempts to try different arrangements, the first participant who was very enthusiastic about the solo got to sing the part she coveted. Issues of character and diplomacy were part of the process and these cannot be dismissed, as they are an integral aspect of the internal politics of any activist group. However, what this also comes to show is that the stronger identification with the singing aspect of the group that some of the participants had, determined the direction in which planning conversations would go. The desire for a solo part that a few singers expressed meant that allocating parts, which was an aesthetic aspect of the action, became a major planning point, while other points which fell under strategy and political objectives became less relevant at that point. The dual aspect of the group as a choir and activist group, and consequently, its complex collective identity, give place to opposing forms of individual identification with the group: some identify with it more as activists, some more as artists. As a result, the group moves from having a set of political objectives and priorities that define its collective identity to also including collective and individual artistic objectives, and the disproportionate investment of certain members in the latter aspect results, on some occasions, in a neglect of the initial political objectives.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I carried out an exploration of collective identity in art activism by looking at the internal processes and interactions of Shell Out Sounds and the ideas and experiences of art activists involved with this group. Taking new social movement theory and concepts such as identity, ideology, and narrative as a basis for my analysis, I was able to identify three main characteristics of the process of collective identity building that are specific to Shell Out Sounds as an art activist group. The first is a lack of cohesion in the way that members describe their practice, some positioning the group as an activist group, and others, on the other hand, as a community of artists. The second is a clash in ideological positions on the political potential of art, an issue that was manifested in the planning of performance actions. And the third is the presence of artistic individualities that conflict with collective political and strategic planning. In relation to this latter point, we can think of how the individual and the collective are reflected in the embodied act of singing. While singing in unison brings people together in a horizontal arrangement of diverse voices, harmonies and solo parts mark difference.

The collective identity of social movements and protest groups, as argued earlier, is in constant transformation and negotiation, and hence it is useful to look at collective identity as a process, rather than as a characteristic of

movements. The same applies to the narratives that participants build and that feed into this identity; "to say that a collective narrative exists is not to say that it is inflexible or unchanging. Like identities, narratives are subject to debate and change" (Prins et al. 2013:87). While this is true of all social movements, what my analysis of Shell Out Sounds suggests is that groups that engage in artistic practice as a mode of action not only experience the dynamics and tensions common to grassroots activism, but are also defined by the duality of their practice, as artistic and political. This duality brings about a series of tensions, found in the different ways in which participants identify with a group, the way they narrate their own experiences and express their understandings of their collective practice, and their conflicting ideological positions on artistic practice as a mode of political action. Tensions therefore arise not only around the relationship between the individual and the collective, but also around artistic and political objectives, and these two dichotomies are intrinsically related. Art activism, it follows, presents a particular set of negotiations and tensions that are specific to this 'in-between' dualistic practice, and that define the way in which the process of building a collective identity will develop.

The particularities of how a collective identity process functions when a group or movement is conditioned by an artistic commitment serve to show how when it comes to understanding this process in different contexts there is a gap in theories of collective identity derived from SMT. The idea of collective identity derived from SMT—new social movement theory to be more specific—is developed as a 'one-size-fits-all' category fit for understanding the process of building a collective identity in all kinds of (new) social movements. But the specific case of art activist groups shows that there are certain issues and processes common to this kind of practice that determine how collective identity develops, and that these are not fully analysed or recognised by these theories.

The findings on this matter based on the specific case of Shell Out Sounds were confirmed by instances of observant participation and interviews conducted with people from other art activist groups. The artistic side of art activist practice is in many cases a draw for participants, and for a few it is more so than the actual political objectives the practice seeks to achieve. At the same time, I have also encountered activists who are not particularly fond of art practice, but are aware of how art can be a strategic tool in certain contexts and are hence involved in the planning and staging of performance actions. Finally, conversations around the political potential of aesthetics and the different ways in which art can be a powerful tool for social change were common among all the groups with which I have conducted research. The ambiguous nature of art inevitably creates a space for a variety of opinions on how art intersects with activism, and hence this ongoing tension between artistic and political objectives weighed in different ways by participants of the same group, as described in this chapter, ends up becoming a defining trait of most art activist collectives. Despite some clichéd phrases

commonly used when speaking about art—which many of us are guilty of using—and in spite of any official description of their practice that any group might have, the individual narratives provided by members around the role of the arts in society and politics and around the nature of art activism have always been rich, and full of contradictions.

By focusing on the tensions between artistic and political objectives, I was able to show that examining the process of collective identity building is necessary in order to understand the complexities of activist groups that use performance as a form of protest and direct action. While tensions between the aesthetic and the political—in this case, the strategic element of the group's practice, more precisely—became increasingly evident throughout, tensions between individual subjectivities and the collective also began to emerge, and will be further explored in the chapters that follow.

Notes

1 See http://shelloutsounds.org/.
2 Art Not Oil has its origins in a campaign created by the group Rising Tide UK in 2004, and later became a coalition including other groups such as BP or not BP?, Liberate Tate, Platform, Science Unstained, BP Out of Opera, and UK Tar Sands Network. At the time of writing, Art Not Oil is expanding to include a greater number of groups and organisations. See www.artnotoil.org.uk/.
3 Shell Out Sounds (2013).
4 Danny Nemu, personal interview (2014).
5 Greg, personal interview (2014). Greg is a pseudonym.
6 John Jordan, personal interview (2014).

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2 A Viking longship

Participation in performance action[1]

Introduction

In social movements there is more often than not power in numbers. Events such as marches, occupations, and protests count on a large number of bodies together in one place in order to generate a strong impact, and the success of an action is often measured in these terms—10,000 marched, 1,000,000 marched—regardless of the later consequences—or lack thereof—that these events might have on social and political issues, public policy, or corporate practice. To this end, protests, especially when carried out in public spaces, tend to be open participatory events, trying to attract as many participants as possible. Artistic protests in particular often rely on the element of spectacle (Duncombe 2007, Farrar and Warner 2008), and a large numbers of participants is on many occasions a means of achieving this kind of aesthetic shock. Furthermore, participation can sometimes be linked to a group's mission and values of inclusivity and horizontality. But building a practice that is fully open to participation has its challenges, and the way that the elusive concept of participation itself has so far been theorised from an art theory perspective often leaves us with more questions than answers.

In this chapter, I will refer to specific performance actions (events that are both performances and forms of protest linked to campaigns or movements) as well as interviews and conversations with members of UK-based groups Shell Out Sounds (a protest choir) and BP or not BP? (an activist theatre troupe), both part of the anti-oil sponsorship coalition Art Not Oil. I will look at how participation develops in the context of performance actions that target oil-sponsored cultural institutions, exploring the different forms that participation can take as well as the tensions that arise when participation comes into conflict with other aspects of these actions. I will also consider the embodied aspect of participatory performance actions, and from this I will begin to suggest a new understanding of participation that considers both its creative and political facets, and that challenges previous understandings of participatory art that have so far failed to acknowledge the particularities of art in an activist context.

Participatory art

Participatory art is that in which the people participating constitute the artistic medium and material of a piece (Bishop 2012:2). In the context of institutional art practice, the artist is a producer of situations, and the audience—or part of it—is regarded as a co-producer or participant, instead of as spectators (Shaughnessy 2012). Participation has become a regular style and tool for "re-orienting the relationship between individuals and art institutions and questioning the power structures that have been associated with notions of single authorship" (Brown 2014:1). Claire Bishop (2012:11) refers to artist Jeanne von Heeswijk's thoughts to argue that participation as a form of art and communication has been adopted by artists because the model of producer and passive viewer of images has been co-opted by the commercial world. There is a search, therefore, for a different type of interaction in art making that can fight passivity and alienation. In the context of art activism, participation is key for a number of reasons. In the first place, as argued earlier, there is power in numbers. Second, activist actions in public spaces usually aim at getting the general public involved with a certain issue and sometimes also 'recruiting' more people. It is therefore only logical that many performances carried out by activists are open and participatory. And third, in the case of performances, a democratic and open participatory nature aims at creating an emancipated, politically aware, and active subject (Bishop 2006). It also looks to promote equality by dismissing the hierarchical concept of the author, and finally, it looks to strengthen social bonds through collaboration.

Participation, following this line of thought, could therefore be seen as a potential channel for the enactment of a kind of prefigurative politics. We can think of participatory performance action as a form of collective action, and "collective action is a 'form' which by its very existence, the way it structures itself, delivers its message" (Melucci 1996:76–77). This idea is mirrored by Benjamin's thoughts on the work of art. Benjamin (1970) argued that the politics of an artwork lie in its means of production more than on its content. In art activism the means are part of the message, and this notion is relevant when analysing participatory performance as a method for political action.

But most theories on participatory art refer to art that takes place within the framework of the art institution. Nicholas Bourriaud (2002) famously coined the term 'relational aesthetics' to describe work that is participatory and that aims to build micro-utopias by reconfiguring social relations. Bishop argues that these conceptions, however, have been more powerful as ideals than as real transformations (2012:2). Indeed, as argued by Stallabrass, in institutionalised participatory art,

> Active participants tend to be few, elite, and self-selecting. Secondly, in these temporary utopian bubbles, no substantial politics can be arrived at, not least because even among those who do attend, real differences and conflicts of interest are momentarily denied or forgotten. A merely gestural politics is the likely result.
>
> (Stallabrass 2004:1811)

In a critique of Bourriaud's (2002) framework of relational aesthetics, Bishop asks: "If relational art produces human relations, then the next logical question to ask is what *types* of relations are being produced, for whom, and why?" (Bishop 2004:65). This question is particularly relevant if we consider that most participatory artworks fall under the category of 'socially engaged art', or art that engages with specific communities and social issues. For his part, Kester (2004, 2011) continues to champion forms of art that are relational and participatory, but changes the discourse towards collaboration and dialogue. He advocates art projects that don't take participants as resources but rather include them in a conversation. Kester moves away from Bourriaud's institutionally bound perspective, and away from Bishop's scepticism over the aesthetic validity of socially engaged art (Charnley 2011). But even though the projects championed by Kester are closer to activism, pedagogy, and other social practices, and take place within communities and outside the physical space of art galleries and museums, these projects are still conceived by artists within a professionalised art world, and hence are commissioned, funded, and supported by these same institutions (Jelinek 2013:27).

This brings up two major issues. In the first place, socially engaged participatory art projects designed by artists—especially when coming from outside the communities they work with—may give place to complex power dynamics with participants. The notion of inserting oneself into a community and transforming participants is problematic because it can acquire an 'evangelical' tone (Shaughnessy 2005:209), depriving people of their agency for self-transformation. Second, artists are conditioned by the rules of the institutions which dictate what art is valuable and what is not, what is regarded as a successful project, and how much support a project receives. It is important to note, once again, that the above perspectives on participatory art are based on institutional art practices, which differ in context and process from art activism. In this chapter, I will therefore look at participation in the context of art activism, and ask: How does participation take place in activist performance actions? What is at stake when deciding to make a practice participatory? And in what ways does participation in performance actions differ from participation in an institutional context? I assume here a position that does not see participation as a style or approach that can be applied in the same way to a variety of contexts, but rather an idea that will be shaped by particular frames of reference (Brown 2014:3).

Participation vs. quality

In the case of Shell Out Sounds, an activist choir protesting against the links between Shell and the Southbank Centre (as well as other cultural institutions in London), wide participation in actions is not only encouraged, but also actively sought. The group usually puts out open calls, uses social media channels, and tries to engage with passers-by during performances in order to recruit more participants for future actions. This is not only to help create

a mass movement but also very necessary, since commitment levels in the group vary—being an activity most have to juggle with work, study, and/or family obligations—and hence numbers fluctuate from action to action.

Shell Out Sounds encourages participation in specific performances, but is also open to new organisers who can contribute to planning actions. One of the group's defining traits is that it is a collective that does not hold auditions and is open to anyone who would like to join. In addition to this, as Greg from Shell Out Sounds explains, the group has a type of soft leadership that is fluctuating and based on people taking on responsibilities voluntarily, which he sees as a positive thing.[2] Members of the group see the openness and flexibility of the choir as some of Shell Out Sounds' main assets. However, this means that there is difficulty when trying to maintain a fixed number of singers that can attend regular rehearsals before actions, beyond a few regular main organisers. This type of dynamic poses certain challenges in terms of the artistic goals of Shell Out Sounds, given that several members are fully committed to delivering high-quality music performances in addition to the political goals the group strives for. But is it possible to achieve the desired level of aesthetic quality and consistency in singing without regular rehearsals? And second, if quality is a concern, should the choir be open to everyone who wants to join, regardless of their experience and artistic talent?

Conversations around the intention to create good-quality pieces and the open nature of the choir were ongoing during my time spent with the group as a researcher and member, and gave place to instances of negotiation almost every time the group was planning an action. For instance, on one occasion due to a concert date approaching fast, one of the members mentioned there was a decision to be made: should there be an open call for this, or is it best to go for a smaller 'tighter' performance?—that is, more rehearsed, and more solid in terms of being sung by the regular, more experienced singers, who would be able to harmonise and develop songs into more polished pieces with multiple layers. In another instance, when planning the performance action *Oil in the Water* at the Royal Festival Hall, there was discussion about bringing in a professional singer, given that the group would be singing a Spiritual piece, which some argued would sound best if led by an experienced Spiritual singer.

As Greg admits, focusing on the artistic quality of actions can be a problem when trying to run an open group:

> I'm obsessed with doing it well, and in Shell Out Sounds [...] you can say you want it to be a kind of excellence or amazingness, but that can alienate people who are very passionate but not committed to music, 'cause they believe that participation is all, and [...] the sound you make is secondary to the fact that you are all coming together to make this.

On this same matter, Danny from Shell Out Sounds says:

> I think basically you want your group as large as possible, but you need to be clear, 'I'm sorry, mate, you can't sing. You should be handing out flyers on this one'.[3]

Remembering a Shell Out Sounds carolling event in December 2013, Bridget from the same group says that:

> It would be good as well if we had, or had had more people […] who are really strongly musical, and not just singing, able to kind of compose and lead […] It could feel a little bit more professional I suppose, with professional musicians.[4]

Members' concerns with the quality of the singing problematise the idea of the choir as open and inclusive, as this suggests a turn towards a differentiation in the roles of participants—making the act of singing an exclusive activity—or towards a professionalisation of the choir, encouraging more 'strongly musical' people in particular to join. When the artistic objectives of the group become a priority, this sometimes contradicts the values of inclusion and horizontality that the choir intends to reproduce as a non-hierarchical group. This is evidenced by Greg's comments, in which he compares Shell Out Sounds to Liberate Tate, an art collective staging performance art pieces that is also part of the Art Not Oil coalition:

> Liberate Tate is like fifty people carrying out the idea of a small group of people. And actually it's what they do that I aspire to, which is why … my relationship to this group [Shell Out Sounds] is complicated, and makes me possibly a difficult person to be in the group […] I did a two-year community music course, and yet I wanted to be the one who's making the thing that needs to be like art, in the sense that it reaches you and gives you an emotional impact. I mean there's emotional impact in lots of people singing carols together, I mean 'cause that can be moving. But I want the thing that is like… that *makes* it musically. Which means I am kind of in the wrong place.

Another factor that is important to consider in relation to participation is the specific artistic medium of performance actions. Different forms of performance, be it performance art, theatre, or singing, are more or less accessible to participants, and due to their characteristics can pose different kinds of challenges towards achieving a pleasing aesthetic product in the context of activist actions. In all cases, the complexity level of a performance piece—be it music, theatre, or performance art—might need to be compromised in order to adapt to limited rehearsal time and accommodate participants

who join in on the day. But as Greg once pointed out, singing requires more skill than taking part in a silent piece of performance art, and it is more difficult to get talented singers on board than to get a person who is willing to take part in a group performance art piece. Groups like Liberate Tate do not require any particular talent or skills from casual participants, and can achieve a high visual impact by focusing on choreography, use of colour, and symbols. In the case of singing, it is sound which is the focus, and which has the potential to create a long-lasting impression. If the singing talent and experience of participants is not 'good enough', then the group will not achieve the level of artistic quality sought, and will need to rely on shock quality in order to make an impact on audiences, targeted institutions' staff members, and other stakeholders, as opposed to making a lasting impression through what is perceived as artistic excellence.

On the same issue however, Danny points out that in comparison to acting, which is the medium of preference for activist theatre troupe BP or not BP?, singing as a group can be less intimidating than taking an acting role in a theatrical performance. He explains that

> [N]ot many people are happy to go out in front of a crowd of strangers, and sometimes hostile strangers, and start belting out iambic pentameter. But in a crowd of people doing a call and response song, people are quite up for it. And I kind of think that the choral singing, it could become massive. I could imagine a thousand people on the Southbank singing over the river, towards the city of London. You can't really do that kind of thing with theatre.

Danny's visualisation of a massive choir shows the importance of numbers in generating a spectacular action, in which the expertise and talent of participants take a back seat. This tension between massive actions and smaller 'tighter' ones was recurrent in my observations, and manifested differently in the work of each group. While the desire to achieve 'quality' is always present, it is in constant negotiation with strategy and logistics and with the intention to have an open participatory practice, and this negotiation will take different shapes according to the specific action being planned, and the goals in place. While some performances might benefit from a rehearsed script, choreography, or song by a small number of people carrying a specific message, at other points filling up a cultural space with hundreds of people will call attention in a different way, potentially creating both an 'ethical' spectacle (Duncombe 2007) and a situation open to participation.

Participation as a strategy: the BP Viking funeral

An example of a mass performance in which participation was a defining element and an objective from the start was the case of the BP Viking funeral organised by BP or not BP?, which took place on 15 June 2014 in the context of the Vikings exhibition at the British Museum, sponsored by the

fossil fuel company BP. This example will offer a different perspective on participation, and will be particularly useful to examine as a contrast to the kinds of constraints under which Shell Out Sounds operated as a protest choir. For this performance action, BP or not BP? held a Viking funeral, in which the evil 'BP Vikings' were buried and then ejected from the museum. In order to attract participants, the action was advertised beforehand on social media with the announcement that BP or not BP? would bring a longship into the British Museum, and the general public was invited to join in this venture.

For this action, I was involved in the planning stages, developing a script for the performance alongside other participants. At an early planning meeting held with five other group members, we agreed that we wanted this performance action to be participatory and large, including as many people as possible. Also, we wanted something for people to do, so the objective was not to gather a large audience, but to recruit participants who could take on tasks and in this way be integral to the performance as a whole, adhering to Bishop's (2006) description of a politically aware and emancipated subject, but with the intention of adding agency and political participation to the mix. We split into two groups in order to think through different aspects of the performance, and that is when my group came up with the idea of the human longship. This ship would be made up of rows of people held together by their arms, marching at the same pace, creating the shape of a ship using their bodies. We also decided to incorporate some props in order to make the concept of the ship more obvious to spectators, so we discussed masts and figureheads we could hold as the ship moved around. Eventually, sometime closer to the date a prop specialist from the group also made an outer coat for the ship out of fabric that was painted like wood, and carried 'BP Viking' logos on it. As people formed the shape of the ship, those standing at the edges would carry the cloths and surround the whole structure in them, providing a more visually convincing representation of a ship.

On the day of the action a group of around twenty-five gathered in a rehearsal venue. Some of those who were present began practising the movements of the ship, and roles were assigned to some people who would lead the ship once inside the museum, and instruct the participants joining last minute the ways in which they could join the performance action. As the group practised the ship movement and tried to get it right, we focused on how to hold on to each other and how to walk, and had to learn to use our bodies collectively in order to master such things as turning. It was interesting to hear comments from other participants who were watching. Someone mentioned that if people smiled, laughed, or looked distracted, it did not really look like a ship, as human emotions emphasized the fact that it was made up of people. Putting on a stern face, on the other hand, would convey the feeling of a Viking ship and of a funeral procession, thus making the whole ship representation more believable, and drawing attention away from the bodies that constructed it.

Once inside the museum, and after enhanced security checks that caused delays, denied entrance to some, involved the confiscation of props, and ended in the arrest of an activist dressed as a Viking, a few people decided to take

charge and make the action take place anyway. One of the *actorvists* (a term normally employed by BP or not BP? members) called for attention from the public and began to tell the tale of the 'BP Vikings'. A few people in Viking costume then joined the scene, and as the performance progressed, the actorvists made calls to the larger group and to the audience at different points throughout, signalling them to get into poses. The cry of "Midgard"—the human realm in Norse mythology, which must be defended from the BP Vikings—called for participants to get into a defensive pose as if holding a shield. The cry of "Ragnarok"—the end of the world, where BP is leading us and that we are fighting against—called for participants to raise their weapons (be they props or imaginary) up high, as though preparing to strike. These calls were repeated several times throughout the performance, as well as a 'horn call' that people could join in by using their hands as a horn. Information about these poses and actions, as well as other details, had been sent by email beforehand to those people who had responded to the open call on Facebook.

After this first part of the performance, it was announced that there would be a funeral procession for the BP Vikings. Participants and spectators were then asked to come closer to the lead performers, and a few BP or not BP? actorvists began to place people into rows, explaining how the longship would be taken forward. Then the fabric that made up the ship's outer layer was lifted, and the longship began to move forward, from a spot close to the entrance of the British Museum's Great Court, towards the back of the same Court. As we marched in unison, we began a call and response song:

> BP, BP
> (BP, BP)
> Won't let me breathe
> (Won't let me breathe)
> We are the rising waves
> (We are the rising waves)
> The climate grows in me
> (The climate grows in me)

As the longship moved across the hall, the mood it projected was solemn. Since the group's drum had been confiscated, we began marking rhythm by stamping, setting in this way both the pace for movement and singing and the tone of the performance.

The collectively built human longship was an embodied statement, initiated by BP or not BP?, and put together by the will and belief of a larger group of people. It transmitted an earnest message about BP through the language of performance, and through the embodiment and projection of solemnity. At the action debrief, everyone from the group agreed that singing had had a major role in keeping the performance together. It merged with the stamping and gave the procession rhythm, and the beautiful melody sung in unison made the performance both interesting, and it seemed, enjoyable for museum visitors (Figure 2.1).

Figure 2.1 BP or not BP?'s BP Viking longship inside the British Museum, London, 15 June 2014. Image by the author.

In its procession, the longship moved forward until finishing a half-turn around the rotunda in the Great Court, and then came to a halt. There, the ship was deconstructed, and the BP Vikings laid down on the floor, as if ready for burial. One of the performers explained there would now be a burying ritual, and invited people to bring forward offerings. Some people laid the Viking's own weapons and shields on them—these were made out of cardboard and bore BP logos. Others, mostly experienced performers, recited poems in celebration of the death of BP. After the burial, the initial plan was to carry the BP Vikings outside the museum. However, improvisation and participant initiative led to the ship re-morphing and advancing towards the exit, while the chant was repeated. Once outside the Vikings posed for photos, and as the participants took over the stairs of the museum, other forms of improvised protest chants started taking place:

> Whose museum? Our museum!
> Whose planet? Our planet!
> When I say BP you say: No thanks!
> When I say sponsorship you say: No thanks!
> Whose future? Our future!

The action succeeded in recruiting non-members of the group to take part, several of them joining in with Viking poses and taking on roles as part of the ship. Many of them were people who had signed up in advance, and once at

the museum one could already spot participants sporting paper Viking hats as per the emailed instructions, despite many of these being confiscated by security upon arrival. But also, some people who felt compelled to join were museum-goers who were caught by surprise. In total, there were around 100 people actively involved in the performance and around 100 more museum visitors who became spontaneous audience members, or arguably, as my next section will propose, became participants in a way as well.

Types of participation in performance action

In theatre, as in live art, participation can take different forms. A play, for instance, can be seen as being participatory when there is interaction with an audience, and in performance art and live art, work is regarded as inherently participatory when it makes use of people as a medium for the artwork itself (Bishop 2012). But as Kaija Kaitavuori (2014) points out, writings on participatory art have so far failed to acknowledge and analyse the different forms and levels that participation can take. Looking at participatory art in an institutional context, Kaitavuori proposes a topology of participation that distinguishes between the following features: first, whether participants are taking part in the production of the work or in its display. Second, whether participants are following the artist's instructions and merely reacting to their prompts, or whether they have the opportunity to choose how to participate. The combination of different forms of interaction with the work and the stage at which participants intervene, argues Kaitavuori, leads to four classifications of participants: targets (reactive participation in the display only); users (active participation in the display only); material (reactive participation in the production stage); and co-creators (active participation in the production space). This framework could be challenged in that it is sometimes difficult to make distinctions between the production and display phases of certain pieces, as it is to distinguish between participants that are following artists' instructions and those that engage with the piece freely—considering that certain pieces can give the illusion of agency but participation is still determined by the dynamics of the institutional art space. However, this framework is useful for thinking about how participation can take different forms, and it provides a way in for thinking about how this might be different in the context of art activism.

Following from Kaitavuori's (2014) framework, I find it necessary here to make a distinction between collaboration and participation, terms that are often employed interchangeably but which can be used as a way of differentiating between those taking the initiative and developing a concept for a piece, and those that participate in it, however involved they might become. I employ here an understanding of collaboration that implies parties or actors coming together to develop a project or action, and an understanding of participation as the act of joining an existing project, initiative, or event. Informed by the work of Shell Out Sounds and BP or not BP?

described here as well as by the work of other art activist groups, I have identified three types of participation that we can encounter in the specific case of performance-based activist actions, and that apply to people who are participants, as opposed to organisers of an action.[5]

Moving outwards from the collaborating core of an action (those involved as organisers), the first form of participation is casual participation by people who see open calls or receive invitations to take part in actions. They are not involved in the planning stages, but may be regular participants and have some insider information about what the action is about, and what is going to happen—as in the case of people who signed up via social media to take part in the BP Viking funeral. In this case, information about Viking poses and other specifics had been distributed by email to people who signed up in advance. This knowledge of aspects of the performance and other things such as the starting time, the theme, and the dress code generated a marked difference between this kind of participant and others who held no information in advance.

The second type of participation can be described as spontaneous participation, and is the kind of participation by passers-by who were surprised by the performance and were drawn to join in. This dynamic is more or less frequent according to the type of performance and what is expected from people. If we compare BP or not BP?'s performances with those of Shell Out Sounds, for instance, we can see how the fact that each group uses different art forms determines the ways in which spontaneous participation can take place. As a protest choir, Shell Out Sounds is limited to musical performances, and participation in one of their performance actions will most likely entail singing. This can be intimidating to passers-by who do not know the lyrics and arrangements to a song, and as a result the group does not usually succeed in including a great number of passers-by in their actions.[6] BP or not BP?, on the other hand, put on theatrical performances. While taking a lead role in one of their performances might entail a speaking part, it is also possible for casual and spontaneous participants to join in without taking such a role. The participatory approach to theatrical performance that BP or not BP? adopt means that participants do not necessarily need to act, sing, or learn lines, but can be part of a performance in ways that do not require particular talents or knowledge, and rather rely on using their bodies, following the crowd and improvising, as the BP Vikings example shows. As a result, BP or not BP? performances have more potential for being accessible to newcomers, while Shell Out Sounds performances need to overcome the barrier of their artistic form in order to engage the general public as spontaneous participants.

The third and final type of participation is that of spectators—members of the public who become audiences once a performance begins, but who remain at a distance. This form of participation could arguably be regarded as passive, but in the context of these performance actions, people who stop to watch make a significant contribution to the situation, as an audience is important in terms of the reach and legitimisation of an action; the more

people that stop to watch, the more exposure of a message, and the more pressure on a target—in this case, the cultural institution sponsored by a fossil fuel company. In the same fashion as in more traditional kinds of protest and direct action, there is power in numbers. In the Vikings performance, more than a hundred people were watching and taking pictures and filming, and a few asked if the group would perform again. It is therefore important to also consider how people who do not take an active role in participatory artworks experience them from the 'outside' (Bell 2017:80). Are there different sensations, experiences? Is the political efficacy different? One of the BP or not BP? members noticed, for instance, a mother explaining the BP shields on the longship to her daughter. Instances like this one serve to show how these artistic actions can indeed, through the use of performance, song, and visual material, start conversations around oil and sponsorship, and why spectacular aesthetics can sometimes be a way of achieving this goal.

In the BP or not BP? Vikings performance, participation was at the heart of the action. The idea of the longship came out of a desire to have a large group of people being actively involved, as opposed to a smaller group of actors in front of a large audience. This was linked both to a strategic desire to attract and engage people with the group's practice and make it more spectacular (which could in turn lead to media coverage and more exposure for the campaign), but also to a conception of art as democratic and inclusive, ideals that aim at generating a kind of politically engaged participation, meaning a kind of creative participation that allows at the same time a space for agency and political participation. On this occasion, BP or not BP? managed to effectively integrate non-members who expressed a desire to participate in their actions: by encouraging people to sign up to an action in advance and sending 'secret' easy-to-follow instructions by email, people could become actively involved in an action without having prior involvement with the group. Having some kind of insider knowledge provided a sense of purpose; their presence and role in the action mattered.

Embodied politics: participation as a political act

Because of the physicality of performance as a medium, participation in activist performances is an embodied act. In the case of BP or not BP?'s Vikings performance, participants were expected to join in call and response singing; get into Viking poses that involved certain facial expressions, noises, and attitudes; use their hands as a horn in order to create a unison sound; and finally, join with others to create a longship with their bodies, jointly representing a collective fight against BP. In instances like these, embodied participation can amount to an enjoyable activity filled with feelings of adrenaline and pleasure, and this can enhance the feeling of collective power in a political action (Juris 2008). Art activist John Jordan, who was part of Reclaim the Streets and founding member of CIRCA (Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army) and the Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination, highlights the importance of creating instances

of direct action that are pleasurable to participants. He explains that this is important

> [b]ecause in a sense, there's a kind of sacrificial thing in non-violent direct action, you know, you're putting your body in danger. And of course you are having pleasure while you're doing it, because it's exciting, it's adventure […] It's a kind of collective ritual, […] you are working together under risk and adrenaline. Your bodies are sharing this kind of risk, and that's really important and interesting for creating strong collectives and collective power.[7]

Similarly, Greg from Shell Out Sounds explains that

> [t]he moment before the action, if you know you're gonna do something good, it can be very empowering because the adrenaline is there and… you've got a purpose. As if the night just before a gig [but] you're doing something disobedient for a good reason.

In the case of the Vikings performance, adrenaline and enjoyment were a big part of the action. And, as can be the case with choir singing, the feeling of unity and collectivity was also achieved through the collective effort of forming a ship, in which each person's body had the same importance, and which could only move forward if everyone was walking at the same pace and towards the same goal. The evident importance of each and every participant in the venture of forming a human longship contributed to reinforcing the power of the collective, and the fact that a hundred bodies in space can do something powerful. For this reason, performance is a chosen mode of action for many activist groups as opposed to other forms of art. As Greg explains:

> [W]e need to use our bodies to make noise. Visual art is amazing, and some people need to do it. But in terms of the transformative collective act, you can sing together, but it's very hard to go paint a picture together.

In addition to the bonds that are formed between participants, and the embodied experiences that strengthen a sense of collective power, embodied performance can also be an opportunity for personal expression and transformation for participants. In contrast to other more traditional forms of political action, performance allows a place for protest and direct action to take an expressive and creative form. Furthermore, as argued by Brown,

> Particiaptory artworks can […] amplify the effect of an individual's self-placement in a fictional world by making tangible the sensory, emotional, and ethical effects of encounters within that world, or by displaying the outcomes of a participant's action or inaction in response to a particular set of circumstances.
>
> (Brown 2014:7)

But also, in the Vikings action, for instance, new participants' decision to reshape the longship and take it outside was a creative expression of agency and of political subjectivities, carried out through body movement and song. The possibilities that creative practice open up for the transformation of political subjectivities have been noted by Rancière, who sees "aesthetic acts as configurations of experience that create new modes of sense perception" through which these transformations can take place (Rancière 2004:9).

Considering this, what do these dynamics of embodied participation tell us about performance as activism? Earlier in this chapter, I presented some key ideas on participation in socially engaged art as it develops in an institutional context. These kinds of art practices, I explained, attempt to generate through their work social dynamics that challenge the idea of authorship, and that restate values of community and collaboration or activate participants as political subjects (Bishop 2012, Shaughnessy 2012). The change that these practices attempt to generate through participation is directed at participants themselves, both on a collective and personal level (Bourriaud 2002), and, as I have argued, the kinds of transformations and the extent to which these changes can occur in an institutional context are questionable.

In the case of performances by BP or not BP? and Shell Out Sounds, participation is partly linked to a desire to maintain an ethos of openness and collaboration. But even when these values are an important feature in these groups, the main objective of their performances is to produce a structural change at an institutional level—bringing an end to oil sponsorship of the arts—and to change attitudes about fossil fuels and corporate power on a wider social scale. What, then, is the potential for collective and personal transformation of participants in these actions, when the main objective for change lies outside the social interactions and relations formed within the artwork? (Figure 2.2).

Performance actions such as those by Art Not Oil groups are tied to specific social, political, and environmental agendas. Building a human longship at the British Museum to protest against BP, or taking over the main hall at the Royal Festival Hall for an afternoon of un-commissioned political carols, entail both an act of participatory performance and an instance of protest and direct action. If compared with instances of institutional participatory art, activist performances allow opportunities for politically engaged participation, in addition to opportunities for artistic, embodied, expressive participation, as participants engage with concrete agendas and objectives for social change. This allows political subjectivities to be transformed, as participants are not the targets of change, but agents that become involved physically and symbolically with a political issue through creative protest. While participants take part in a performance action that was conceived and planned by a smaller group of art activists and therefore could arguably not be seen as 'co-creators' (Kaitavuori 2014), they are not only taking part as participants that follow the invitations and guidelines of a performance, but also as political actors with agency, who choose to support an

Figure 2.2 BP or not BP?'s BP Vikings performance at the British Museum, London, 15 June 2014. Image by the author.

environmental and political cause by joining an act of protest. Embodied performance actions provide the space for the arguably unfulfilled objectives of institutional participatory art to be fulfilled, as participants become engaged, political subjects with agency and an objective for change that transcends the self, instead of becoming targets or even users of a participatory piece. This idea will be further developed in the following chapters, where I will look at participation in other forms of art activism, such as radical pedagogy projects (Chapter 6).

Limits to participation in Art Not Oil performance actions

While these performances generate spaces for political participation and the formation and expression of political subjectivities, there are limits to how participatory actions can be, and to what extent they can put into practice the values of democracy and inclusion that many of these groups embrace. While there is room for participants to take the lead and make a performance their own as in the case of the Viking funeral, there will always be a distinction between those who are 'in the know' and those who are not. This insider knowledge unavoidably creates hierarchies and leadership during actions, as people who were involved during the planning will be leading the rest. This is not something that can be easily changed, as open calls and openness to passers-by are bound to generate this kind of dynamic. Since performance actions are strategic, interventionist, and

sometimes unannounced, there are limits to how much information can be shared beforehand, and that alone establishes a specific kind of power dynamic among everyone involved, even if the action itself is collectively taken forward.

A high proportion of members from the activist groups analysed here have previous knowledge of and/or experience in the performing arts, and all of these groups have a predominantly white and middle-class composition. The people who are occasional participants in actions by these groups tend to be of similar backgrounds as well. There are a number of reasons why these groups tend to mostly only attract white middle-class participants. As members of Liberate Tate and BP or not BP? have stated in the past, they are aware of the fact that being a group of mostly white activists has given them certain privileges when operating inside cultural venues (Liberate Tate 2012:138), largely because of the way in which their interventionist actions are perceived by museum staff as 'non-threatening'. Under the social and political climate of the UK, people of colour do not have this privilege, and this might influence their decision when it comes to taking part in actions of an interventionist nature. But also, and despite the specific language and form of these actions, the wider environmental movement in the UK—as in most Global North countries—can be described as predominantly white and middle class (Cotgrove and Duff 2009), as well as fragmented and two-tiered.[8] This is the case not only for direct action groups, but also for NGOs and other campaigning organisations.[9] The lack of diversity in these environments is, then, not only a result of the space that is intervened or the particular mode of action, which in this case is performance, but is also related to the way that environmental issues are framed within a particular social context, and how these are related or not to other struggles faced by working-class and BME (Black, Asian & Minority Ethnic) individuals (Serafini 2017). Due to the particular focus of this book, I will not be able to expand further on this very important matter. I believe, however, that this would be an equally important project, which could usefully contribute to a better understanding of activist dynamics, and to the work of groups that are already challenging through their work the lack of diversity in environmental movements.[10]

Conclusion

In this chapter, I examined the role of participation as a relational dynamic, an objective, and a strategy for art activist groups, highlighting the particular ways in which participation takes place in performance actions, the political potential of embodiment, and also the limitations to participation and inclusion in these particular types of campaigns. I argued that while participation can be actively sought by art activist groups, an open approach can sometimes be in conflict with artistic objectives, often framed as artistic quality. The cases reviewed here contribute to a demystifying of participation, acknowledging the negotiations art activists must make when

planning participatory performances and analysing how participation can render certain practices unstable (Brown 2014:4).

By presenting the case of BP or not BP?'s Viking longship action, I was also able to build a framework for understanding the different forms that participation can take in performance actions: casual, spontaneous, and audience. These categories build on the work of Kaitavuori (2014), the first two categories representing 'active' participants and the second representing the audience, also a type of participant, even if passive. All three types of participants become involved in what Kaitavuori would call the display part of the artwork, which she marks as different from its production. Finally, I also looked at participation as an embodied, political experience, and argued that this experience is characterised by the position of participants as political subjects as opposed to targets of change, who by being part of a political action with a target outside of themselves acquire political agency.

This perspective on participation, specific to activist performance actions, challenges previous frameworks for looking at participatory art (Bourriaud 2002, Kester 2004, 2011, Bishop 2006, 2012) by suggesting that performance action can generate different forms of participation specific to art activist practice, and that participation in art activism can allow a type of political agency that is not commonly achieved in an institutional setting. Also, looking at participation was useful as a way of uncovering tensions between aesthetics, prefigurative values, and political objectives in art activist practice, and also in the relationship between individual and collective experiences, which was explored in the previous chapter in relation to identity. In the next chapter, I will return to the practice of Art Not Oil groups, in order to look at how transgression and prefiguration are negotiated in the planning, execution, and experience of performance actions.

Notes

1 Sections of this chapter have been previously published in Serafini, Paula (2015) 'Prefiguring Performance: Participation and Transgression in Environmental Activism', *Third Text* 29(3): 195–206.
2 Greg, personal interview (2014). Greg is a pseudonym.
3 Danny Nemu, personal interview (2014).
4 Bridget McKenzie, personal interview (2014).
5 While this distinction can sometimes be blurred and activists can shift across time from one role to the other, I argue that it is still useful to consider the difference between those involved in the planning and execution of an action and those who become involved in the latter stages, as this difference in agency—marked by different levels of input and knowledge—are key to the study of participation.
6 An exception to this was the *Carols Not Barrels* event, which adopted the format of carol singing and hence became appealing to the general public as a familiar kind of activity. I will expand on this performance in Chapter 3.
7 John Jordan, personal interview (2014).
8 See, for instance, Valentine, Katie (2013) 'The Whitewashing of the Environmental Movement'. *Grist*. 24. http://grist.org/climate-energy/the-whitewashing-of-the-environmental-movement/. Accessed 30 December 2014.

9 See Jurado Ertll, Randy (2014) 'Lack of Diversity Within the Environmental Movement Continues to Persist'. *The Huffington Post*. www.huffingtonpost.com/randyjurado/lack-of-diversity-within-_b_5779048.html. Accessed 30 December 2014.

10 See the UK-based groups Shake! (Chapter 6 in this book) and The Wretched of the Earth.

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3 From transgression to prefiguration

Performance action as a blueprint for social change[1]

Introduction

Transgression in the arts is usually related to what is known as 'shock factor'. "Shock, disruption, or ontic dislocation are accorded an intrinsically liberatory power in the tradition of avant-garde art, capable of revealing new, critical insight into the formation of individual and collective identity" (Kester 2011:183). Kester (2011) explains how in contemporary art theory and criticism—he refers, for instance, to the work of Claire Bishop—there is a tendency to champion art that is controversial and makes the viewer uncomfortable, and to uphold this kind of practice as the right path for artists aiming for social impact. Such is the case of Santiago Sierra, whose body of work is based on revealing (and reproducing) the exploitation of poor, marginalised subjects.[2] This type of work looks to shock the viewer by exposing them to the harsh realities of an unequal system. But this approach assumes a unique bourgeois art world viewer who will presumably react to the raw exposure of the capitalist system and be incited to take action. There is a significant leap from the production of the work to the expected effects, as there is no tactical specificity in the understanding of the public (Kester 2011:184).

In social movements, on the other hand, transgression can be understood in terms of shock, controversy, and brushes with the law, but also in a movement's processes and long-term objectives. In his book *Activism!*, Tim Jordan identifies two types of political action: one that looks to generate social or political change while still maintaining and perpetuating the existing system and its mechanisms (e.g. campaigning for a new law), and one that is transgressive, and challenges the status quo and its institutions (Jordan 2004:33). Transgression can be understood as going "beyond the bounds or limits set by a commandment or law or convention, it is to violate or infringe" (Jenks 2003:2). In the context of contemporary political activism, it is linked to "the contradiction of existing social structures, institutions and ethics" (Jordan 2004:37). Transgression, adds Jordan, is what distinguishes movements that think of the future as a slightly changed version of the present from movements that envision different futures. In other words,

he identifies as transgressive those movements that create in their present actions a model for their vision of a better world.

Jordan (2004), as McDonald (2006), argues that these forms of transgressive activism rely on certain forms of coordination known as dis/organisation. These forms stand against the hierarchical and bureaucratic codes of the institutions and organisation commonly found in society, and take the shape of open networks, flat structures, and consensual decision-making:

> What is key about dis/organization is not just the way it puts principles of equality and justice into action, but that in doing so it brings a little of the future into the present. Dis/organization is a prefigurative politics, because it attempts to preview what social change may bring.
>
> (Jordan 2004:69)

Transgressive activism, therefore, can involve a prefigurative approach to doing politics. Maeckelbergh (2011) and Sitrin (2006) describe prefiguration in activism as the present use and enactment of forms of organisation, action, and social relations that put forward in the now the values and ideals of the kind of future society towards which we are working. In other words, processes and means are closely related to a movement's ends. A well-known example of prefigurative politics has been the Occupy movement, which through its attempt at a horizontal and inclusive form of organising aimed to challenge in present time the hierarchical and exclusive forms of organisation of a capitalist society (Maeckelbergh 2012). And before Occupy came the alter-globalisation movement in the late 1990s and early 2000s, inspired by movements in the Global South such as the Zapatista Army for National Liberation (EZLN). The alter-globalisation movement was about reinventing democracy and building new forms of organisation. It prioritised horizontal networks over top-down structures, and upheld principles of consensus decision-making. Ultimately the movement aspired to "reinvent daily life as whole" (Graeber 2002:70).

For decades the dominant view in activist and academic circles has been that prefiguration stands in opposition to strategy. Prefiguration was regarded as an inward-looking approach to politics that focuses solely on processes, and strategy as a pragmatic path towards achieving a movement's objectives (Maeckelbergh 2011). The alter-globalisation movement, however, challenged this view, combining a series of direct action tactics, horizontal, democratic, decision-making processes, and the aim of dismantling capitalism, which put forward the idea that prefiguration can indeed be strategic. For movements that look to challenge the distribution of power and build new social structures, Maeckelbergh argues that "prefiguration is the most effective strategy (perhaps the only strategy) because it allows for goals to be open and multiple" (Maeckelbergh 2011:2).

In the study of contemporary participatory art practice, on the other hand, we find a different framework for distinguishing between practices

that are constructive and those that are interventionist. Claire Bishop, for instance, marks a division between the "authored tradition that seeks to provoke participants" described at the beginning of this introduction, and a "de-authored lineage that aims to embrace collective creativity; one is disruptive and interventionist, the other constructive and ameliorative" (Bishop 2006:11). While Maeckelbergh argues that strategic interventions are not incompatible with constructive, prefigurative approaches, Bishop "prescribes political and socially-engaged art to one of two options; disruption and intervention, or collective construction" (Serafini 2015:196).

Combining these two theoretical perspectives will be useful when asking the following questions: can participatory performances emerging in the context of social and political activism be both constructive and prefigurative, and transgressive and interventionist at the same time? And, if performance action has potential for prefiguration, in what stage, process, or aspect of the performance is this potential found? Prefiguration has often been understood mainly as one of two things: either "the building of movement 'alternatives' or institutions" or a "way in which protest is performed" (Yates 2015:2). In this chapter, I will explore both understandings of prefiguration while focusing on the latter strand of thought, and I will also argue, following Maeckelbergh (2011), that prefiguration can go hand in hand with the strategic aspect of art activist practices.

This chapter will explore the ways in which transgression and prefiguration develop as key features of performance actions by two groups opposing oil sponsorship of the arts—Shell Out Sounds and BP or not BP?—as part of a campaign aimed at dismantling fossil fuel companies' social license to operate. I will do this by looking at the specificities of transgression in art activism, how prefiguration is performed and enacted, and then examining the relationship between transgression and prefiguration in performance actions as instances of political action and creative expression.

Transgression in the performance actions of Art Not Oil

Shell Out Sounds is a London-based environmental choir that stands against the links between the fossil fuel company Shell and the Southbank Centre (among other cultural institutions in the UK that have ties to the fossil fuel industry). They are part of a coalition of groups and organisations called Art Not Oil. On 25 October 2013, Shell Out Sounds had an unannounced performance inside the concert hall at Southbank Centre's Royal Festival Hall, which was part of a campaign against Shell's sponsorship of the Classical Season at this venue. Minutes before the São Paulo Symphony Orchestra began playing, fifteen activists dressed in black and wearing purple sashes stood up from their seats in the choir section and began singing a rewritten version of the Spiritual classic *Wade in the Water,* now renamed *Oil in the Water*, which spoke of the environmental and human cost of fossil fuel extraction. As they sang, a group of young people seated nearby

began clapping along. Halfway through the song, singers dropped a banner that read ‘Oil in the water’ and featured a Shell logo made into a skull. The audience received the banner with a round of applause. Once the song ended, protesters left the auditorium, as audiences clapped once more. The intervention was later mentioned in a number of reviews for the orchestra’s performance.[3]

When discussing this performance action, Greg, one of the singers from Shell Out Sounds, mentioned it was his favourites from all the performances the group had done. He said, “it was the most invasive, and it’s the one we had the most—strangely, the one where we expected to have the most … anger and opposition, […] but had the most palpable sense of being supported.”[4] Singing inside the concert hall was something the group had not attempted before (most of their performances take place outside or in the foyers of oil-sponsored cultural institutions), and because of this singers regarded it as their most ‘transgressive’ action to date. During the performance, however, there was no attempt by security to stop or remove singers, and there was even a repeated performance afterwards in the foyer.

But attitudes from both security guards and audiences had been very different for a performance that had taken place earlier that month. On 1 October 2013, six Shell Out Sounds singers, myself included, went to the Royal Festival Hall on the evening of an all-Beethoven concert by the Orchestra Mozart. Armed with flyers describing Shell’s negative impact on the environment and on frontline communities across the globe, we waited for the interval in the mezzanine, and as people came out into the foyer, we began to mingle among them and sing, sharing flyers as we walked by. The song we sang was a revised version of a Shell jingle from the 1950s:

> We’re going well, we’re going Shell
> But the Arctic’s going to hell, hell, hell!
> Profiting hard, destroying the Earth
> You can be sure of Shell![5]

Each time we sang the song, we changed ‘the Arctic’ for other keywords, such as ‘Alberta’, ‘the Delta’,[6] and ‘the climate’. We went for a ‘cheeky’ mood, clicking, smiling, and swaying as we sang.

As we sang along some people applauded, and some became furious. One audience member began screaming at Greg, saying we were “ruining everything”, and unsuccessfully attempted to punch him. The man said we were being childish, and tried to take away our leaflets. Security staff had to intervene. Minutes afterwards, an affluent-looking older woman told another singer, Helen, that we were ruining her experience and were not allowing her to reflect upon the music. Helen told her that people were dying because of Shell, to which the woman responded: “I know that, but I don’t want to be told about this right now!” A few other members of the audience also had negative reactions. However, at the same time there were several

people who congratulated us, and said there should be more of what we were doing. Some Southbank Centre employees were also quietly whistling along to the song. After a few minutes of singing in the foyer outside the concert hall, security asked us to go downstairs to the main foyer on the ground floor. When some singers tried to go back up the stairs, they were stopped. We carried on singing in the ground floor foyer and gave out leaflets, filming parts of our song and engaging in conversation with people. We moved merrily as we sang, walking about in the downstairs foyer. This Shell Out Sounds performance also received a mention in a review of the Beethoven concert.[7]

What these two examples clearly show is that the transgressive nature of an action is multi-layered, based partly on the act of transgressing spatial boundaries and limits by appropriating spaces for political goals, but also depending on other issues such as the particular moment for an intervention, and the content and mood of a performance. The extreme reactions to the jingle singing pose the question of whether it was the particularly merry and sarcastic attitude embodied in the clicking and smiling which angered people, considering that the performance *Oil in the Water*, which was received with applause, expressed the same message but with a different mood, and was in fact more transgressive in spatial terms, having taken place inside the concert hall itself.

There is yet another Shell Out Sounds performance action that made me reflect upon the locus of transgression in art activism. On the day of the *Hallelujah* performance as described in Chapter 1, there was a participant who was hesitant about singing inside the Queen Elizabeth Hall building at the Southbank Centre, claiming this would be 'too political' for her. She said she was happy to sing outside the entrance, but would not go inside to sing. The singer's concern poses an interesting question regarding what makes an action transgressive and what makes it 'political', and brings me back to the idea of the political as theorised by Jacques Rancière (2010), and addressed in the introduction to this book. Is the political in this action found in the act of singing and in the oppositional nature of the lyrics sung, as Rancière would propose, or does singing become an act of dissensus only if it is also transgressive in spatial terms, meaning an uninvited entrance and a disruption of the dynamics inside the cultural venue, as this singer suggests? It would be, according to this latter view, the spatial position of the group vis-à-vis the venue that makes the act of singing more 'political'—or politically transgressive—and not the content of the song itself, which the singer was happy to perform outside the building.

But even if performers take their singing inside the hall, and disrupt the dynamics of the venue, how spatially transgressive can this uninvited performance be, when the foyer of the venue is open to the public, and moreover, the venue is already a place for musical performances? Shell Out Sounds' performances are usually unexpected interventions, but they somehow adhere to the purpose of the cultural organisation they are intervening, since they use song and music as media. If the action takes place inside the venue,

is the transgressive aspect of the performance then found in the content of the songs, which is overtly political and denouncing the sponsorship deals of the organisation, or is it found in the fact that the performance is unsanctioned, and hence even though there is no trespassing in legal terms, there is a form of spatial transgression in the appropriation and re-signification of the space?

This brings back similar questions to those raised by Greg's proposal for a celebration of nature at Southbank Centre, which I described in Chapter 1. Is the potential for transgression in a performance located in its content and aesthetic form, or in the degree of intervention—and as a consequence, disruption—that the action causes in a particular space? Is the presence of uninvited bodies what is disrupting the dynamics of a cultural venue, or is it their particular message within that setting which has the potential for transgression? In Shell Out Sounds' repertoire we come across different types of actions, including ones that intend to shock audiences through controversial, in-your-face lyrics, adhering to the idea of transgression espoused by artists such as Santiago Sierra and his supporting critics, and others that aim at being transgressive through interventions that are strategically disruptive in terms of time and place.

These examples suggest that transgression should not be understood in binary terms, in which an action is either transgressive or not. Rather, the different ways in which an action can be transgressive—in other words, the different facets of an action that have the potential for breaking boundaries, be these spatial, symbolic, or other—mean that there are grades of transgression, and that an action can be transgressive in one sense—for instance, unapologetic, denouncing lyrics—and not so much in another—remaining outside the targeted institutions and not disrupting specific performances.

Another point to consider is that in the case of Shell Out Sounds (as in other groups with similar organisation and tactics), the level of intervention and transgression is considered in the process of planning an action, during which there is a collective negotiation between issues like impact and participation that a group wishes to achieve. While disrupting an event or exhibition and pressuring museum directors is a desired outcome for groups like Shell Out Sounds and others in the campaign against oil sponsorship of the arts, antagonising museum visitors is not. This negotiation is sometimes difficult, especially when planning an action that is intended to be participatory and safe for families, which is often the case for Shell Out Sounds, but that at the same time intends to give a headache to the institution. What the previous examples also serve to show is that although some elements of a performance action can be planned ahead, transgression is not a single-sided dynamic, but a struggle over power and control between protesters and the venue. In other words, "[p]eople and things only transgress if they are conceived to be in the 'wrong place': if there is no 'wrong place', then there is no transgression" (Cresswell 1996 as cited in Dines 2012:104). How transgressive an action is will depend on activists' strategic use of space and choice

of date and time and on the content of their songs and performances, but also on the reactions of the audience and venue staff. These reactions will determine whether an action runs smoothly, is barely noticed, or turns into a tense situation that can potentially place more pressure on institutions to rethink their sponsorship deals, that can receive media attention, or even generate risk of an arrest.

This two-way nature of transgression is made evident by the different reactions that venues have had in the face of interventionist performances that Art Not Oil groups have held at various London cultural organisations. While Southbank Centre never tried to prevent a previously announced performance from taking place at their venues, the British Museum did try to stop the BP Viking longship performance by BP or not BP? described in Chapter 2 (as well as other more recent performances). Knowing that activists were coming, the museum put into place bag checks outside their entrance, and placed police on site. Several visitors who were joining the performance had their props confiscated, and one activist was arrested at the entrance.[8] This kind of reaction did not take place in other venues such as Tate Modern, however, where Liberate Tate held a previously announced participatory performance called *Hidden Figures* on September 6 the same year. When talking to a Liberate Tate member sometime before that action, she actually expressed how she felt the group's performances had opened up a space for transgressive art in the gallery—an interesting statement considering that the gallery willingness to accommodate this kind of intervention can be seen as the annihilation of their transgressive nature.[9]

In an interview with long-time art activist John Jordan, he discussed the locus of transgression in art activism, in reference to the work of Liberate Tate:

> I think one of the greatest works of art activism that Liberate Tate ever did […] was the blade,[10] I think it was genius. Absolutely genius, because you know, it really was direct action […] [The Tate] had to spend a lot of money to get that thing out. It was beautiful, it was participatory […] and for me direct action is fundamentally about blocking, and costing […] the institution that you want to force to change. It's not informing people of information.[11]

Referring to his involvement in the early stages of Liberate Tate and to the work of the collective during the first few years that followed, he explains:

> [W]e really pushed the aesthetic in Liberate Tate, and really pushed the idea of 'this is gonna be art activism with a really strong aesthetic'. […] I feel at the moment, […] Liberate Tate is making political art actually, as opposed to interventions […]. I think the power of art activism is that it's neither

> art nor activism [...] and I think it's absolutely key to be in this kind of in-between [...] space in a sense. [A]nd I think by saying 'oh, we're performance, we're not protest', [...] especially in a culture where protest is increasingly criminalised and so on, I find it really problematic.

According to Jordan, in order to maintain the 'in-between' status of art activism, performance actions need to remain transgressive, and avoid getting too invested in aesthetics—while at the same time acknowledging that aesthetics are indeed important. He places emphasis on the direct action aspect of performances, and generating a cost to targeted institutions. In relation to this, a discussion with Danny from Shell Out Sounds brought out the fact that in other places such as the US, activists like Reverend Billy,[12] who stages musical and theatrical performances against consumerism and for social and environmental justice, have been arrested multiple times for singing interventions at public and private spaces. In the case of Reverend Billy these include several shops and banks, which he and his choir target as sites for exposing realities of economic inequality, unsustainable corporate practices, and environmental crisis.[13] Thinking of the consequences of this, Danny says "I think every time someone gets arrested for singing it just makes the whole system look more and more brutal".[14] The question that follows then is, what happens if, on the contrary, museums become comfortable with these kinds of interventions? Jordan's statements above suggest that if there is no tension between protesters and museums, these performances lose strength as instances of direct action, and become absorbed as inconsequential critiques that remain in a symbolic realm.

The examples analysed here contribute to an understanding of transgression as something that can sometimes be an objective category—for example, when trespassing or transgressing legal boundaries—but can also be something that only occurs if an action is perceived as transgressive by others. If a tree falls in the forest and nobody is around, does it make a sound? If a group of activists takes over a museum but the museum does not seem bothered, is their action still transgressive? Transgression can therefore be understood as a relationship between two or more parties; an act is only transgressive if perceived as such by others. Transgression can also be seen as an action—to transgress the norms and spatial boundaries of a museum, for instance—and as a quality that can be found in different aspects of an action, from the lyrics or words of a performance, to the transgression of spatial boundaries, or the precise moment when the action takes place. But also, if we go back to Greg's and other singers' reflections on the *Oil in the Water* action, transgression can be understood as an experience. It is an attitude that art activists consciously decide to take on when they say that they want an action to be transgressive (or disruptive, or interventionist), regardless of how the action ends up being received by the public and the institution (or any other stakeholders, depending on the case). It is also an embodied act that can be found in the words spoken and sung by activists, as well as in

their bodies trespassing and occupying spaces. Finally, it is also worth mentioning how transgression, as suggested by John Jordan's words, can be what distinguishes art activism from political art, and hence is a crucial aspect of this kind of practice. The way in which transgression develops as part of art activist practices will continue to be explored in the following chapters, as I introduce other case studies that focus, for instance, on urban spaces and on transgressing boundaries between private and public in performance art.

One further consideration in relation to transgression is how it fits within a wider aesthetic-political practice with an agenda for social change. Bevir's reading of Foucault frames transgression as "an expression of agency in a world where the impact of a normalizing power makes agency highly vulnerable to various forms of distortion" (Bevir 1999:80). However, as Dines argues, "disruptions to the spatial status quo do not in themselves lead to social transformations". According to this latter view, the performance interventions carried out by the art activist groups described here will then only generate social (and personal) change if the processes of performances allow an act of transgression to develop into a concrete challenge to the status quo (Dines 2012:105), and enact in this way the idea of transgression put forward by Tim Jordan (2004). Later in this chapter, I will address the relationship between transgression and prefiguration, and show how transgression and prefigurative approaches to social change can be closely related. Before this, I will look at performativity as an integral part of activist performance, shifting the focus once more towards the embodied experience of the subject, and thus providing a bridge from issues of transgression to an exploration of prefiguration in performance actions.

Performativity in performance as political action

As argued in Chapter 2, there is a duality in art activism as an aesthetic-political practice, found in the fact that activists engage in artistic performance and political action at the same time, embodying the roles and positions of artists and activists simultaneously. In order to better understand this duality and how it is enacted and experienced, it is useful to refer to issues of performativity in performance actions.

Performativity can be found in rituals and ceremonies, philosophical essays, and scripted behaviours such as theatre (Parker and Kosofsky Sedgwick 1995:2). The founding work in this field was J.L. Austin's *How to Do Things with Words* (1962). In it, Austin explains how speech is related to act, and act to identity. He also points out that there is a difference between what is said and the act of saying it. Butler explains that Austin talks on the one hand of perlocutionary acts of speech, which are acts "performed as a consequence of words". In this case "the words and the thing done are in no sense the same" (Butler 1995:197). Illocutionary acts of speech, on the other hand, are "actions that are performed by virtue of words". So, in illocutionary acts "the meaning of a performative act is to be found in this

apparent coincidence of signifying and enacting" (ibid:198). In their account of Austin, Parker and Kosofsky Sedgwick argue that there are negative performatives such as "count me out", and explicit performatives such as the "I do" uttered in marriage ceremonies (Parker and Kosofsky Sedgwick 1995:9).

Parker and Kosofsky Sedgwick agree with Butler (1995) in arguing that the notion of performativity has allowed a deeper appreciation of how identities are iteratively constructed by means of citational processes (Parker and Kosofsky Sedgwick 1995:2). They add that explicit performatives have the power to mobilise transformative effects on interlocutory space, and thus the idea of performativity can engage in fruitful associations with theatrical performance, ritual, and activism (Parker and Kosofsky Sedgwick 1995:13). In the case of Reverend Billy, for instance, performing the role of a man of the church and preaching as a form of activism gives place to an "ongoing, performative self-fashioning that relies on irony to both create community and refuse its fixity in the same gesture" (Lane 2007:358). In the case of performance actions by ACT UP! (AIDS Coallition to Unleash Power) activists in the US and beyond, mobilised by the injuries of homophobia, death, and inaction from the state,

> theatrical rage reiterates those injuries precisely through an "acting out", one that does not merely repeat or recite those injuries, but that also deploys a hyperbolic display of death and injury to overwhelm the epistemic resistance to AIDS and to the graphics of suffering, or a hyperbolic display of kissing to shatter the epistemic blindness to an increasingly graphic and public homosexuality.
>
> (Butler 1993:23–24)

Performativity is a useful framework for looking at speech instances that put into action certain realities through the public enouncement of specific words (Butler 1995). When considered alongside Rancière's (2010) theory of dissensus as a speech act and a political act that disrupts the consensus of the status quo, performativity provides a useful framework for looking at artistic practices that have a political or social aim.

Shell Out Sounds' *Hallelujah* performance, for instance, ended with the lyrics:

> It goes like this, a song, a plea
> 'Til our concert halls are fossil free
> Our voices will be singing Hallelujah![15]

The lyrics positioned the 'we' (the singing protesters) in opposition to Shell's sponsorship of the Southbank Centre, and announced that the singing would continue until this deal was over. By singing these words, protesters were performing and enacting their embodied resistance and their commitment to continue their protest until the sponsorship deal with Shell came to an end.

Similarly, on the song sheet for the Shell Out Sounds' 2013 *Carols Not Barrels* event were the words:

> Can we continue to let culture provide a smokescreen for human rights abuses, land grabs, oil spills and climate change?
> This holiday season, join us to take back Christmas from corporations, and embrace the spirit of community and social justice.
> Let our voices be heard on cultural sponsorship.[16]

Here, messages of opposition are intertwined with performative utterances that announce a 'taking back' of Christmas, enacted through the act of singing and having voices being heard in the context of a participatory artistic-political event.

In her study of protest singing as part of the citizenship movement emerging in Wisconsin in 2011, Paretskaya argues that

> what exactly the group sings is no more important than how it does it, how it structures relationships with the group and with the outside world [...] But at the same time the discussion of repertoire can illuminate these social relationships, internal as well as external.
>
> (Paretskaya 2015:10–11)

She adds that lyrics are also important because they contribute to building a history of the movement, by constructing, telling, and retelling its story (Paretskaya 2015:11). While in this book I focus on the processes of performance actions more than on content, the examples presented above are important because lyrics and texts produced by Shell Out Sounds contribute to the process of collective identity building of the group explored in Chapter 1, by constructing, performing, and reproducing a narrative. Most importantly, as performative utterances these lyrics enact some of the values that the group upholds, and therefore are part, as following sections will show, of a prefigurative approach to art activist practice.

Reflecting on the power of song as protest, Danny from Shell Out Sounds says (Figure 3.1):

> [W]ith art we can say stuff, which is more difficult to say in other formats. [...] You can sing farcical and quite funny Christmas carols, and it carries a lot more weight than kind of complaining about sponsorship in a bitter and serious tone. [...] It's just quite good to sing, you know. People singing together, it makes them happy. And it's good for people to be happy when they're doing activism rather than bitter. I mean, from the beginning you are motivated by harmony, or you're trying to seek harmony. And that's kind of what we're doing. We're not turning up at the Southbank because we want to shut it down. We're turning up because we want it to be run in a way that is more harmonious with the rest of the world really.

Figure 3.1 Shell Out Sounds doing a second edition of Carols, nor Barrels outside the National Gallery, London, 21 December 2014. Image by the author.

Danny's statement brings together issues of artistic form, embodiment, and performativity, and makes visible the connections between strategy and prefiguration within the group's practice. While singing, he argues, can be a strategic way of communicating certain messages, it is also a way of ensuring participants enjoy their role as activists. Having said this, Danny equates the harmonies created by singers' voices to the harmony sought for in the work of cultural institutions—meaning more ethical forms of funding as well as more democratic processes. Singing in protest, therefore, can be understood as a performative act, as the harmonies produced by singers aim at a harmonisation of the Southbank Centre. But it is also a prefigurative way of putting forward a more harmonious form of culture, based on values of openness, participation, and collectivity (as described in Chapters 1 and 2), and in opposition to corporations and neoliberalism. This idea is contained in the phrase 'harmonic disobedience', often used by Danny in order to describe Shell Out Sounds' acts of performance protest. He says he likes this term because it is an oxymoron, positioning the idea of disobedience as something that can be harmonic.

The way in which Danny speaks about harmony in relation to both the actions of Shell Out Sounds and the practices of Southbank Centre can also be extended to harmony as a wider social and environmental objective, considering that Shell Out Sounds' actions emerge from an environmental

movement. A comparison with Joseph Beuys' views on radical ecology inevitably comes to mind, given that, as Adams describes:

> An approach to ecology worthy of the epithet "radical" is one that does not limit its concerns to ecological systems within the natural world. Radical ecology also sees these in connection with larger patterns of human life: social forms; economic theories, practices and interests.
> (Adams 1992:26)

According to Beuys, art as a form of knowledge production and as a social interaction is the right path towards constructing a new social order that is in harmony with nature (Adams 1992:26). This idea will be further developed in the following section, in which I will look at the potential for prefiguration in performance.

Prefiguration in performance action

BP or not BP? is an activist theatre troupe, also part of the Art Not Oil coalition, which started out as a Shakespearean-themed resistance to fossil fuel company BP's sponsorship of the Royal Shakespeare Company in 2012. They have since moved on to target another BP-sponsored institution in London, the British Museum, and have held numerous performances inside the museum. BP or not BP? has a core of around twenty people who plan actions. This core, however, is not fixed, as even though some members have been continuously involved as organisers, other people flow in and out of the planning group. The group is committed to functioning through a democratic system of self-allocation of tasks, and people take on responsibilities according to their preference, skill, and availability. It has been noted by some organisers, however, that there is still an informal soft leadership held by a few of the original founders of the group, or what Gerbaudo (2012) would refer to as 'choreographers'. This is partly due to some people being more enthusiastically involved, but also related to long-standing members possessing more experience and knowledge about how to plan and carry out actions. The disproportionate involvement of some people is in fact something the long-standing organisers are aware of and actively try to address, and they do this by encouraging others to take on responsibilities, and providing training and support to newcomers. While soft leaderships exist within the group, the distribution of tasks and the way in which performances are planned pose a challenge to the idea of the author in an art piece, because performance actions are collectively produced by a fluctuating group of both artists and people who don't identify as artists. Moreover, performances differ from traditional theatre in their process due to this flowing and informal dynamic: even though tasks are allocated, there are no set formal and hierarchical roles such as director, producer, or playwright, and the processes of writing a script and producing an action require several stages at which different people become more or less involved. (Figure 3.2)

Figure 3.2 BP or not BP? performing at Tate Britain, London, 19 January 2014. Image by the author.

For groups emerging from social movement and grassroots spaces, the concern with moulding art-making processes that are horizontal and democratic is an extension of a political programme that is concerned with countering hierarchical relations of power in every space. But also, as argued by Sholette, "recently established artists' groups and collectives appear to treat organizational structure as just another artistic challenge, as if it were a material or medium to be manipulated" (Sholette 2011:161). This perspective is useful as many of these groups have an approach to their practice that is holistic, and in which a concern for aesthetics and a concern for a politically coherent practice feed each other.

Shell Out Sounds for their part challenge the concept of the traditional choir through their own internal dynamics and processes, by operating under principles of openness and equality, and bypassing processes of exclusion such as auditions. Chris from Shell Out Sounds explains that:

> Shell Out Sounds' performances are both a protest against oil sponsorship and an affirmation of the value of art as something that should be accessible to all. There are no auditions or selection procedures to join Art Not Oil's campaign groups. This means that all members, regardless of their experience or training, can be involved in the creative process and bring new ideas.
>
> (Garrard 2014:N/A)

Despite the parallels and commonalities with a community choir format, the activist origin of Shell Out Sounds allows a particular kind of dynamic to take place, in which musical, social, and environmental objectives coexist

and often need to be negotiated, and in which processes are guided by shared values that have been passed down from a tradition of grass-roots movements. This particular intersection of objectives, values, and processes challenges the normative of musical groups and choirs, proposing in a prefigurative way an alternative kind of culture. This is exemplified by Shell Out Sounds' *Carols Not Barrels* event, which took place on 1 December 2013.

Carols Not Barrels was an open and participatory Christmas season singing event, which took place at a number of different cultural venues in London and which had been previously announced and promoted though Facebook. The group sang popular carols with new environmental lyrics and lyrics against Shell. Members picked their favourite carols and rewrote them, and then some were collectively selected for singing on the day. The morning carolling session took the group—myself included—to the Science Museum and the steps of the Victoria and Albert Museum. Towards the afternoon, we relocated to Southbank Centre, where we were met by some more singers. Once inside, the group of around thirty singers went down some steps and into an open area in the Royal Festival Hall foyer. We distributed leaflets with our new carol lyrics, and began to sing. As we kept singing a few people joined in, making it a forty-strong choir. Most singers knew about the event beforehand, and a few were passers-by. In addition to people joining, the choir managed to get the attention of several families who were using the foyer space. After each song singers received applause from the audience, and intervals between songs were used for addressing the public with information about Shell, sponsorship, and the fossil fuel industry. The event had an inviting family tone to it, and on this occasion security staff did not intervene at any point.

The repertoire of carols covered a wide range of moods, from the cheerful *Rudolph the Branded Reindeer* to a new version of *God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen* addressing poverty in the UK, and a hopeful wish for a *Green Christmas*. Since songs were written by different members of the choir, the carols represented the variety of approaches to singing as activism that different people had. After singing inside for a while, the group moved outside, where an accordion joined in. The singing went on for about an hour, and closed with *Green Christmas*, which was an emotionally charged moment as the song conveyed feelings of hope, unity, and peace. Even though many singers were not regular group members, a temporary collective identity was formed around a shared goal of coming together for social good, a shared mood of hope for change, and an opposition to the fossil fuel company Shell as a symbol of greed and environmental damage. The action even succeeded in recruiting new members to the choir, and some of the participants asked to join the Shell Out Sounds mailing list. Furthermore, through an open, collective singing event, Shell Out Sounds and everyone who joined in were able to collectively appropriate the space of a cultural venue and use it for a political end, turning the foyer of the Royal Festival Hall into a space of

dissensus and counterculture against the fuel industry and for environmental and democratic values.

After the carolling was over, a few of the singers contributed their thoughts for a short film about the event, which was being shot by a commissioned filmmaker. When sharing her thoughts about the day, one of the singers said:

> We've been talking about how Southbank represents culture and the things that are good about culture, and Shell represents the things that are bad about the world, and that we represented more of what's good, in terms of coming together without any officialdom or sponsorship or—we just made goodness between us.

Greg from Shell Out Sounds talks about the importance of the approach activists choose to have towards campaigning, and the difference between opposing something and proposing something new:

> We had this whole debate about whether it'd be Art *Not* Oil, we've got Shell *Out* Sounds, and we're defined by our desire to have someone not present, and I find that very frustrating. But I haven't come up with something that is more captivating. [...] We want the absence of Shell, so we define ourselves in that way. I would say, you know, I wouldn't want the word 'protest'; I wouldn't want to say that we are using music *against* something.

He adds that:

> [I]n terms of ... creating a proto-anarchic future system, where you need vast amounts of organisation and personal commitment, [...] if music, and art, and creativity, and expression, and singing together were at the heart of all of that, it would be so much more possible. And so much more fun! [...] The world we want to create is one of magic, wonder and beauty and joy and silliness, and fun, and follies, and all those things that music can do.

Greg's views on art and music as constructive forces rather than forces of opposition resonate with his approach to activism, which despite not claiming to aim for a reconfiguration of the cultural sphere, is committed to a rethinking of what art can achieve and what role art should have in society. By creating spaces for politically motivated art making that counters neoliberal dynamics as well as the oil industry in particular, Shell Out Sounds prefiguratively develops an alternative kind of culture, which separates itself from the institutional art framework and emphasises the power of collective art making, even if this is not their primary objective.

Art activist practices such as the ones I have described here are grounded in a political programme, with a set of values and objectives that

frame and guide practices. When speaking of contemporary UK-based environmental and social justice groups, a rejection of hierarchies and a questioning of the professionalised idea of the artist are in many instances built into the ethos of their practice, despite the fact that their main objectives are tied to an environmental agenda and not a reform of the cultural sphere. In the case of BP or not BP?, a commitment to horizontality and inclusiveness results in a democratic division of tasks and decision-making processes, and in a fluidity in the involvement of members of the group, who can contribute to different planning stages, being more and less involved as they feel, and not responding to traditional divisions of creative labour. Most notably, the process of writing a script as described earlier entails several stages at which different participants become involved in order to discuss artistic and strategic aspects of the performance, suggesting in this way a reconfiguration of the way in which scripts are written, and a rejection of the idea of the author, as the work is not attributed to any particular person within the group. In this context, processes achieve a highly democratic form in spite of the soft leadership of more seasoned members.

The practice of Shell Out Sounds also puts forward a particular kind of dynamic that brings together interventionist strategy with the horizontal values of an open and collaboratively run choir. Despite the internal conflict between quality and open participation described in Chapter 2, which sometimes calls into question their horizontal values, there is a shared awareness around the fact that oil sponsorship is not the only problem with cultural institutions, and that the group represents an alternative form of culture that stands in opposition to corporations and neoliberal values. Shell Out Sounds' position at the intersection of a community choir and a direct action group challenges the traditional processes of musical groups and choirs, and proposes a prefigurative alternative kind of culture that is based on merging art with the practice of social change.[17]

When considering the potential for prefiguration in art activism, however, it is necessary also to note the limitations to prefiguration within these practices. Having argued in this chapter that strategy and prefiguration can be complementary approaches to social change, there are still certain strategic elements that are specific to art activist performances, and that may inhibit or limit the full potential for prefiguration in certain aspects of these kinds of activist initiatives.

In the first place, as I began to suggest in Chapter 2, there are sometimes discrepancies between the dynamics behind the planning of an action and the dynamics that take place during a performance. Horizontal structures, collaboration, and democratic processes in participatory performance actions can be understood as prefigurative forms of art making. However, the fact that open, participatory performance actions inevitably maintain an organiser/participant distinction constrains the ways in which occasional

participants can become active within these performances, and how much agency they have within that space. As argued in Chapter 2, performance actions can generate spaces for artistic engagement, self-transformation, and political agency for participants as they become involved in an action with a social/political target outside of themselves. However, the organiser/participant (or author/participant) distinction means this potential for agency and transformation is in a way limited by the fact that participants are entering a pre-constructed situation. This is particularly the case for performances that are choreographed or scripted, which automatically create a distinction between organisers that are in the know and participants that are joining later on.

It is, however, possible to escape this dynamic, if the medium and form of the action allow for less guided participation. An example of this was Shell Out Sounds' *Carols Not Barrels*, as the nature of the event was simple and familiar enough, and anyone physically able to could join in the carolling, creating a performance action in which there was no clear distinction between organisers and performers, and thus the prefigurative processes of democracy and horizontalism that govern planning stages were still present throughout the performance.

The second strategic element that can conflict with prefigurative approaches is the focus on media reach, and how this can shape performances. Elsewhere (Serafini 2014:334–335) I described the paradox inherent in interventionist performances that are conceived as participatory experiences and onsite interventions, but are at the same time produced with the main objective of disseminating documentation of the performance online. This placing of value on media presence and or/shares on social media as ultimate objectives and measurement of success compromises actions for many art activist performances, since elements such as participation and audience interaction, which are usually actively sought, can end up being neglected for the sake of a performance that is easy to capture on video. In these cases, things like narrative, sound, and visual elements are all developed with the production of a film in mind, instead of focusing on the interaction with a specific site and with a particular public. During my instances of observant participation, I have noticed, for instance, how getting the BP or Shell logo on photos was often a main strategic point that determined aesthetic choices and the way in which a space was used. This does not mean that performances that are spectacular, strategic, and/or media savvy are not valuable or should not take this approach. Farrar and Warner (2008) have indeed argued that there is much potential for radical interventions through a reclaiming of the spectacle. However, it means that the focus on social interactions and the reproduction of certain values of openness and participation take a secondary role when a performance is developed with the specific aim of obtaining a media product out of it, and depending on a group's values and initial objectives, this can be counted as a loss.

Conclusion

In this chapter I argued that the locus of transgression in performance actions can be found in different aspects of this practice, from the trespassing of spatial boundaries to the disobedience of the norms and rejections of the canons of an institution. Transgression as an embodied act can take place through the oppositional words uttered by activists in defiant performative acts, but also through the presence of bodies occupying spaces. The question that follows is, what is the relationship between transgression and prefiguration in performance action? Can one lead to the other?

In an interview with Bridget McKenzie, cultural learning consultant and member of Shell Out Sounds, I asked, "What do you think makes an artwork political?" Bridget responded:

> Well … I suppose there are two things. One is it gives people a voice, enables political discourse to happen. It works with people, it's participatory. It works with people who are particularly deprived of voice or needing facilitation to express their voice. And then on the other side of that coin, or maybe at the other end of the spectrum, is using that voice to actually enforce change. So going straight for the jugular, going for the people who hold the power to make decisions […] It's quite rare for an artwork to be both trying to understand, engage and help people express their voice, and then definitely trying to campaign to make a change; a definite change, a legal change, political change.[18]

Chris from Shell Out Sounds, on the other hand, offers a different view, and argues that work which carries sharp political messages can at the same time engage in dynamics of participation and processes that are inherently political:

> [A]rt as a form of activism has two dimensions. It is 'Political' with a capital P by virtue of the specific message conveyed; song lyrics might give voice to a protest or a painter can satirise iconic images of political leaders. However, it is also 'political' with a small p as a result of its potential to shift consciousness through new experiences and opportunities to participate. In an environment dominated by sponsored and corporate art, exploring new artistic forms or simply making new work that intervenes in the existing system is itself a radical political act.
>
> (Garrard 2014:N/A)

This latter take on art activism positions performance actions as occasions for making political interventions that carry a political (and in this case, environmental) message, and that at the same time prefigure alternative forms of art making by allowing inclusive and democratic instances of creativity that counter the institutional framework. In other words, performance

actions according to this view can be strategic and transgressive in planning towards a specific political objective, while at the same time prefiguratively enacting alternative forms of making art.

Marianne Maeckelbergh argues that in fact "a prefigurative strategy involves two crucial practices: that of confrontation with existing political structures and that of developing alternatives, neither of which could achieve the desired structural changes without the other" (Maeckelbergh 2011:15). This means that a confrontational approach need not be incompatible with a prefigurative one, and that actually the combination of confrontation and construction is needed in order to produce structural change. In order to prefigure a new society, we cannot just ignore present power structures and build our own. We must confront these, transgress them, and attempt to dismantle them while building new structures and ways of relating to each other in the process. Art, and specifically embodied, collective practices that allow instances of performativity, can be a medium for this. Earlier in this chapter I explained how Bishop distinguishes between a kind of politically engaged, participatory performance that is interventionist and one that is constructive and ameliorative (Bishop 2006). But the practices analysed here show that contrary to Bishop's distinction, collective performance and interventionist acts are not necessarily two ends of a spectrum. In the case of activist performance action, transgression can indeed go hand in hand with prefiguration.

Similarly to the alter-globalisation activists who rejected the structures of representative democracy and engaged in the creation of their own structures, these anti-oil activists generate their own forms of art making, inspired by the horizontal and democratic ethos of grassroots movements, and defined by an interventionist nature. These groups' alternative forms of art making emerge from acts of transgression: spatial and symbolic transgression of cultural spaces that involves a contravention of the space's dynamics and rules and the appropriation and re-signification of a physical space for a political use. If we go back to Tim Jordan's (2004) definition of transgressive movements, we could argue that groups like Shell Out Sounds and BP or not BP? are not transgressive in their official, strategic demand—ending oil sponsorship of the arts—as this is a reformist demand which is not challenging the wider structures of institutions nor the idea of sponsorship itself. Rather, it is their prefigurative art-making processes that qualify the group as transgressive, as they challenge preconceptions on performance making and creative and political participation. In performances by Art Not Oil groups, transgression and prefiguration are intrinsically connected: transgressing spatial boundaries and the norms and dynamics of an institution opens up a space for art activist performances that propose another form of doing and experiencing art in that space, as a horizontal, democratic, and inherently political activity. The result is a temporary use of cultural institutions that is at the same time a form of direct action and an artistic instance that is in line with a specific, transgressive vision of a democratic culture and society.

In a conversation with Danny from Shell Out Sounds, he stated: "There's much more hateful things going on in the world than oil sponsorship, but I think that's quite a good point of attack to critique the entire machine of industrialised capitalism." With these words, Danny puts a spotlight on the fact that the environmental issues that fuel Art Not Oil performance actions are not isolated from other social and political issues. The current environmental crisis is connected to a set of neoliberal values that governs not only policy on energy, but increasingly also on social and cultural issues, such as funding for the arts. Challenging oil companies and challenging the structures of the art world are therefore more connected than one might think, as they are both attacks on neoliberal values that dominate society and culture. With this in mind, and even though a reconfiguration of the cultural sphere is not the main objective of these groups, the alternative forms of participatory art that they put forward can be seen as prefigurative responses to the neoliberal values of the contemporary art world, proposing more democratic forms of art that carry a desire for social change at their core. These forms of art making that challenge the processes of institutional art are therefore not accidental, and are at the same time symptomatic of a commitment to prefigurative politics common to many movements across the globe in a time of economic crisis and neoliberal responses.

Notes

1 Sections of this chapter have been previously published in Serafini, Paula (2015) 'Prefiguring Performance: Participation and Transgression in Environmental Activism', *Third Text* 29(3): 195–206.
2 See, for instance, *160 cm Line Tattooed on 4 People El Gallo Arte Contemporáneo. Salamanca, Spain. December 2010*, a video documenting an action in which Sierra paid four sex workers addicted to heroin the equivalent of a heroin shot in exchange for their consent to be tattooed. For more see www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/sierra-160-cm-line-tattooed-on-4-people-el-gallo-arte-contemporaneo-salamanca-spain-t11852.
3 See, for instance, a review in the blog *Orpheus Complex*: http://orpheuscomplex.blogspot.co.uk/2013/10/sao-paulo-symphony-alsop-swingle.html.
4 Greg, personal interview (2014). Greg is a pseudonym.
5 Shell Out Sounds (2013).
6 'Alberta' and 'the Delta' made reference to Shell's operations in Canada and Nigeria, respectively.
7 See a review in the *Evening Standard* www.standard.co.uk/goingout/music/orchestra-mozarthaitink-royal-festival-hall-music-review-8853054.html.
8 See Danny Chiver's article for *The Ecologist*, 'British Museum – is BP driving your heavy-handed approach?'. 17 September 2014. www.theecologist.org/campaigning/2559477/british_museum_is_bp_driving_your_heavyhanded_approach.html. Accessed 26 February 2015.
9 A more recent performance by Liberate Tate titled *Time Piece*, which took place in 2015, involved escalating tactics: members of the collective stayed inside the gallery after its closing time and for a total of twenty-four hours. While in the end there were no arrests, performers were threatened with arrest if they failed to leave the premises after closing time, and the police were called.

10 Jordan refers here to a performance titled *The Gift*, for which Liberate Tate brought a wind turbine blade into Tate Modern and offered it as a donation to the gallery's collection. See www.vice.com/en_uk/video/liberate-tates-the-gift-tate-modern-art-prank-bp.
11 John Jordan, personal interview (2014).
12 See www.revbilly.com/.
13 See, for instance, John Vidal's article for *The Guardian*, 'Reverend Billy faces year in prison for JP Morgan Chase toad protest'. 25 November 2013. www.theguardian.com/environment/2013/nov/25/reverend-billy-jpmorgan-chase-toad-protest-talen.
14 Danny Nemu, personal interview (2014).
15 Shell Out Sounds (2013).
16 Shell Out Sounds (2013).
17 Despite emerging from an environmental position and having clear objectives related to disabling the social license to operate of fossil fuel companies, in recent years some Art Not Oil groups have begun to explicitly incorporate other issues into their campaigns, such as the privatisation of museum and gallery workers' contracts and the repatriation of objects. This is discussed in detail in Chapter 7.
18 Bridget McKenzie, personal interview (2014).

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4 Breaking barriers

Bodies, institutions, and codes[1]

Introduction

This chapter explores the notion of the personal as political (Hanisch 2000), an idea popularised by feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s. It was conceived as a bridge between the first three chapters of this book and the three chapters to follow, before moving on to a theoretical discussion in Chapter 8 that will bring together issues explored throughout the book. Here I will return to issues such as transgression and performativity discussed in Chapter 3, while also focusing on two key aspects relevant to much contemporary art activism: embodiment and the relationship between art activists and institutional structures and codes. My objective is to contribute to a rethinking of the personal as political by tracing how the aesthetic and the political are negotiated through the use of the body as a tool of action and expression in relation to institutional spaces, mainstream movements, and social norms.

My interrogation will therefore return to the idea of transgression, but will do so through the perspective of the body. In their literary study of poetics and transgression, Stallybrass and White argue that "the human body, psychic forms, geographical space and the social formation are all constructed within interrelating and dependent hierarchies of high and low", which also govern the realm of culture and aesthetics (Stallybrass and White 1986:2). They add that "transgressing the rules of hierarchy and order in any one of the domains may have major consequences in the others" (ibid:3). This can be so, for instance, in the case of the carnival as a subversive event, as argued in the introduction to this book. Following this viewpoint, I will look at transgression as the inversion of norms and symbolic hierarchies through embodied performance in artistic practices that look to enact structural change.

I will begin by presenting the case of Left Front Art, a network of queer artists that work in partnership with trade unions. I will look at the politics and processes behind this initiative, which looks to queer the trade union institution through performances and other artistic practices, as well as mobilising the LGBTQIA arts scene. I will then look at the work of two artists doing performance in political contexts, Liz Crow and Antonio Onio, and explore their views on activism and the connections between the personal

and the political through an embodied lens. This empirical chapter will serve its purpose as a bridge by introducing themes that will be further explored in subsequent chapters, mainly embodied practices, the personal as political, and the relationship between art activists and institutions.

Left Front Art: building a bridge between workers' unions and the LGBT community

On 21 January 2014 I attended a performance by Portuguese artist Antonio Onio at the Trade Union Congress (TUC) building in London. The event was organised by Left Front Art, a network that promotes radical queer art from the UK and beyond. When my friend invited me to this event, the first thing that came into my mind was: "How come this is this taking place at TUC?" I then came to learn that Anton, a lay activist who is part of Left Front Art and had co-organised the event, was also a branch secretary for Unite, Britain's biggest workers' union.

In his performance-presentation, Onio shared the personal story of how he became involved in the arts, his negative experiences in dance education, and intimate details about his health. He explained how personal stories can be politically significant, acting as powerful comments on sexuality and society. The sharing of personal stories of illness and sexuality, intertwined with his performance—which included singing to the audience—amounted to an intimate, honest moment and a collective experience. The openness and vulnerability of his sharing allowed a space for empathy and identification, in which he spoke to the audience from a subjective place while addressing larger social issues that go beyond his own life experience.

After attending this performance, I was intrigued by how Antonio Onio had come to perform at TUC and what it was that Left Front Art did. The following month I interviewed Anton, who would provide me with an insider perspective on the work of Left Front Art and the connections between queer artists and British trade unions. As we talked about art and politics, he shared with me the kind of work that Unite and Left Front Art do, and how art is approached as a way of engaging LGBTQIA communities with unions, and union members with the work of LGBTQIA artists.

At the beginning of the interview, Anton explained,

> I've been involved in what we might call activism for many, many years. Decades. And a group of us ten years ago got together and had a sort of loose network/ think tank called Left Front Art. […] We were recognising that there was a resurgence in queer performance and queer art which had a political slant on it. […] It was a not just LGBT activists but also people that were involved in their trade unions—but also very much left wing—and one of the things that brought us all together was the fact that we were on the left of various things, and on the left of the trade unions.[2]

Anton identifies the work of Left Front Art as positioned within the radical left. He said they are inspired by the Bolshevik revolution and their views on society, and by the Situationist International's use of art as a confrontational challenge to alienation. He shared that the one thing that all artists they work with have in common is that they are all involved in some form of activism in their own countries (the network is international in its scope), doing "queer stuff that doesn't fit easily within the mainstream".

Anton explained that Left Front Art began to work with Unite because they realised their position in the trade union movement was useful as a vehicle, or as a form of access. He explained,

> [T]he trade union is the largest [form] of self-organisation for the working class in this country [...] We believe in social progress and stuff like that. And the way that it's structured in our country is that the trade unions are bringing a way of communicating to the working class.

But despite the potentially mutually beneficial connections that can come from building bridges between queer artists and the trade unions, Anton explained that this is not a simple exercise, and despite the fact that the union sees value in events that attract people, there is always a lot of convincing and negotiation to do:

> [At the union] they weren't firmly convinced about art, and people in Britain on the left don't really identify with art, they see it as a middle class thing. [...] and also, the vast majority of the left in trade unions in the UK is heterosexuals. [...] It's predominated by middle aged white heterosexual males.

He added that what they have been trying to do is to get "politically active queers" who do not have a fixed workplace involved with the union, but the union is not immediately welcoming and friendly. Anton said that there are certain politics of LGBT activism that make some artists' political work not welcome by some people. He explained,

> [T]here's what's called the 'respectable' and the 'unrespectable' side of the LGBT. You've got organisations like Stonewall,[3] and certainly the trade union movement that believe in equality, but that means not being discriminated against, which is good, being allowed to marry, which we support. But it's also very… couples getting together and being together like heterosexual couples. They don't like mixing it with the SM nights, or stuff that queers identify with. And that's the other thing about bringing in people; what you might call the 'LGBT trade union establishment' don't really identify with it.

Anton shared that sometimes trade union organisers experience shock when they see the online profiles of artists who will be performing as part of the union programme. Things like body piercings and implants, and other non-normative aesthetics, provoke strong reactions and reservations. But, most importantly, Anton explained that nine out of ten times performances involve artists being nude, and this has led to people thinking "oh, this is all about sex and perversion". Anton attributed this to what he describes as a strong social tradition in the UK against nudity. The way in which artists use their bodies as a way of transgressing social codes and challenging heteronormative structures in the way they 'appear' publicly (Butler 2015:39) is then at the same time an integral part of what Left Front Art does, and one of the things that generates resistance from the trade union. While artists like Antonio Onio put on embodied performances that seek to provoke emotional connections and a space of openness, their use of their bodies, perceived by others as transgressive, can sometimes be counterproductive to this same objective of connecting with people. The aesthetics and embodied nature of the carnivalesque as a subversive reclaiming of the body can open up opportunities for collective pleasure and subversion, but this potential can be thwarted if aesthetic and embodied gestures are seen as unacceptable by part of that collective. In this case, there are cultural attitudes towards the body that need to be surpassed.

At the same time as there are reservations about these kinds of events from the side of the trade union, which makes the exercise of connecting these two sectors difficult, queer artists sometimes also have reservations about becoming involved with unions. Anton explained that some artists need quite a bit of convincing, and when they perform at unions they don't usually advertise these events widely. He said that making these connections is a "building bridges exercise", because many queer artists come from self-organised or DiY backgrounds, and are not used to functioning within structured organisations. He added,

> A lot of the queer artists we get involved with are a bit sceptical of trade unions because it seems quite…not just conservative socially, but actually they don't go that far. Which is true, because basically their job is to represent workers on the collective basis, and to defend jobs and workers' conditions. They are not revolutionary organisations. […] Trade unions are very bureaucratic, and they are quite conservative. And that often doesn't seat easily. But, on the other hand, they are also quite well concerned with this stuff. I think, you know, desperate times…

Once the bridge is crossed between the union and queer artists, there are further connections to be made between union members and the wider LGBTQIA community. The events organised within this framework are open and widely promoted in order to bring in a diverse audience and to encourage LGBTQIA people to join the union, as well as influencing the

structure and culture of the trade union as an organisation. Anton shared that a lot of young LGBTQIA people in London are in precarious or insecure work, and hence it is difficult to engage with them. Since 2007, to this end, Unite have been looking at different things they could do in order to engage people. That year they kick-started the LGBT network in the Southern Eastern region of the TUC, and began to organise events for LGBT history month. These became major events, and they succeeded in attracting many people who were interested in politics but did not identify with trade unions. They used the occasion of LGBT month to host the launch of a book on LGBTQIA arts in the labour movement. Since then, they began to think about events that would at the same time bring in large audiences and celebrate individual LGBTQIA artists. In March 2011, when the TUC and the Labour Party called a national demonstration, they planned an event in the run-up to it. The event was called Queer Noise Festival, and it took place at the Brixton club, Mass. Anton explained it had "several political splinters interspersed with performance art and also different queer artists from across Europe playing their music".

Finally, in 2012 Unite and Left Front Art put on an event at Congress House (the TUC headquarters): an afternoon that looked at several decades of LGBTQIA liberation. This was followed by an evening of performance art, poetry, and folk music. Anton emphasised that they made the event as inviting as possible, with refreshments and an entertaining programme. He added that holding events at this location is strategic because Congress House is based in Soho—a neighbourhood in central London with a long-standing queer history and numerous LGBTQIA venues—so people who work in the area can drop by after work. He explained,

> [W]e made it for like a six o' clock start. Blanketed them and encouraged people to come along, so that they could come and see things outside the over-processed commercial gay scene that you get in Old Compton Street [Soho]. And to get people thinking, so even if it wasn't overtly political, just by being exposed to some [of the art] and to get people to start thinking outside of the box.

Anton explained that Left Front Art originated from the idea of using art to form people, and to "get some sort of movement between all these different schools of thought going". He explained it can be different forms of art, from photography to performance—the latter, he argued, is a good way of communicating with people. In order to cater to different audiences, they try to mix up their cultural offer, bringing a variety of films, performances, and other art forms that address a variety of LGBT and other political and social themes in different languages and media.

With the theme of engagement and participation in mind, I asked Anton if they had plans for doing any interactive workshops as part of their programme. He responded that they want to move in that direction, but that it

would take some time. He added, "You noticed when the Q&A came with Antonio, it was very hard, people are reluctant to say anything. But yeah, we would like to do that, and that's gonna take some time to bring people over".

In terms of the objectives and outcomes of these events, for the union the objective is to recruit new members, and they always have recruitment staff present. However, the most important thing is to get people interested, not necessarily to make them sign up to the union. These kinds of events, said Anton, are "putting queer culture in the labour movement orbit, and putting the labour movement in the queer orbit". Talking of the importance of the arts, he added:

> The thing is, it's much better having a performance, or having someone give a presentation the way that Antonio did, than having a panel of speakers talking at you for a long, long time. Which is how the left in the trade union movement traditionally functioned, and it still does function.

Several of the Left Front Art/Unite organised events, such as the one on the build up to the 2011 march, connect LGBTQI issues with other pressing social and political issues in the UK. For instance, in 2013 they commissioned a Spanish photographer, Francesco, to do portraits of LGBTQIA people who contributed to their local scene in European countries that were undergoing severe austerity measures. The exhibition was unveiled at Unite House (headquarters of Unite the Union in London), where the photographer spoke in the company of a representative from the Greece Solidarity Campaign, and the chair of the London and Eastern Unite branch. The different forms of engagement that Left Front Art resort to are evidence of a strategy that looks to connect LGBTQIA and broader sociopolitical issues—such as austerity and workers' rights—through artistic events. By making connections between different social and political issues, these events draw in a variety of audiences, thus fostering links between two different spheres and different publics.

At the same time, Left Front Art is committed to a radical type of leftist politics that challenges not only the traditional structures of unions, but also mainstream, commodified expressions of LGBTQIA activism. The positioning of Left Front Art's work as counter to the 'over-processed' commercial gay scene in the neighbouring area is a clear statement on the current status of mainstream LGBTQIA culture, as many events and initiatives that were once counterculture have now been commercialised and commodified (Bell and Binnie 2004, Enguix 2009), and can become void of any potential for social change. But, at the same time, it is important to ask whether introducing radical queer art practices into institutional spaces, such as trade unions, does not in some way give place to an institutionalisation—and consequently, de-radicalisation—of these practices, which need to adapt to the structures and limitations of these institutions.

While the joint work of Left Front Art and Unite has begun to make important connections between LGBTQIA communities and the trade union, Anton identifies the barriers ahead, which stop them from generating the kind of cultural movement they wish to achieve. He shared:

> We're not at the stage where we were with the Situationists, where they're going to do something spontaneous. And there are reasons for that. It's licencing regulations, it's a very regulated country now, in terms of what we can and cannot do. And you have to jump through hoops, and there's a limit to what I can get away with at Congress House, because they've got protocols and things, so you can't have a full blown extreme performance there.

Anton's statement confirms the reasons behind the suspicions that many radical queer artists have about engaging with unions, and bringing transgressive art into spaces that are bound by regulations and protocols. It is, however, in this space of constant negotiation between structural limitations and radical content that Left Front Art functions, using embodied forms of communication to challenge structures and perceptions, and create personal bonds between the LGBTQIA arts community and the labour movement.

Anton shared with me that one of the most inspiring events of 2013 was a fundraising event for medical aid in Greece, which hosted poetry readings, talks about Palestine and Greece, workshops, and a naked dinner. He said it is necessary to have more of these events. In his words: "[I]t's us getting people to think 'yes, there's more to (life) just going home, paying the rent, watching television, and then just doing nothing else'." His words suggest advocacy for a change in the way people engage with politics and engage with each other. Left Front Art does not advocate one-off political events, but for a long-term change of consciousness: a rejection of commodified culture, and a type of artistic-political practice that is embedded in everyday life, as a tool for transforming attitudes and structures, but also as a way of living. By bringing transgressive queer artists into the trade union context they simultaneously foster engagement with LGBTQIA issues, challenge the boundaries of mainstream queer activism and of the labour movement, and advocate a non-commodified experience of art that permeates all aspects of daily life.

Our bodies, our struggles

The case of Left Front Art is an example of transgression enacted through the body: a direct confrontation of the norms and codes of the union—and their inherent heteronormativity—through performances and other creative forms that push and challenge institutional and social norms on the appropriate look and behaviour of bodies, while also addressing wider

structural issues. But the relationship with one's body in the making of art and activism, can be quite complex, especially when dealing with issues of gender, race, sexuality, disability, and other matters that define our daily social and embodied experiences as well as our identities. In an interview with filmmaker, performance artist, and activist Liz Crow, founder of the creative media company Roaring Girl Productions, I asked her about the use of the body; whether it is something she thinks about during her process when working on performances. She said that since she is dealing with disability as a theme in her work, the body is very present. However, her work is about social structures, and hence she actively tries to divert attention from the body, and place focus on how certain structures of society affect disabled people.

An example of this is her famous performance *Resistance* on Trafalgar Square's Fourth Plinth, which was part of Antony Gormley's *One & Other* project. For this performance Crow went on the plinth in her wheelchair and wearing a Nazi uniform to bring attention to the seventieth anniversary of Aktion T-4, the first Nazi elimination programme, which targeted disabled people and would then become the blueprint for the systematic murder of Jews, LGBTQIA people, and other minority groups.[4] As a disabled artist, she chooses to shift focus from her own body towards the elements of a society that through its systems and structures disables people. She uses art as a way of doing this, and sees art as a challenge to the idea that activism necessarily entails suffering. At the same time, however, much of Crow's work is based on her openness about her disability and her body. In *Lying Down Anyhow*, an autobiographical writing piece, Crow shares her experiences of lying down in public spaces (and of being prevented from doing so). In later a piece expanding and reflecting on those first writings, she explains:

> *Lying Down Anyhow* begins in the physicality of the body, the freedom that is, for me, the act of lying down. Yet, when I ask why lying down in public is so very hard to do, it transforms to a story about external codes and constraints, those emotional, social, political and cultural influences that shape the body's way of being. *Lying Down Anyhow* is less the story of a troubled body than of its interface with the language, values and physical structures that limit the possibilities of lying down in public places.
>
> (Crow 2013:89)

The author adds: "To lie down, in social spaces, is not a simple act of physiology; it is a statement. In the midst of codes that say you do not do this, to lie down in public is confrontation" (Crow 2013:86). In this project the artist takes on the role of activist, challenging the norms that control bodies in public space, re/writing the rules, and encouraging others to do so by taking that stand. She does so by sharing both her private and public embodied experiences, the particularities of her daily life, in a way that is exposing

her as a subject, but is most importantly also exposing the underlying biopolitics of regulations imposed by the state through public space law and norms of public conduct. In a way, the simple daily act of lying down can unintentionally become an act of civil disobedience by the mere fact that it is transgressing codes of public conduct. Crow's work points to the relative nature of transgression as an embodied act, and to the relational nature of bodies. As Judith Butler argues, "the body is less an entity than a living set of relations; the body cannot be fully dissociated from the infrastructural and environmental conditions of its living and acting" (Butler 2015:65).

Crow's work takes openness and vulnerability and makes them powerful weapons for confronting the state. A similar approach is taken by performance artist Antonio Onio, whose performance, mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, I attended at the TUC headquarters. In his performance Onio talked about activism not as a force but as exposed vulnerability. He said that force and confrontation don't change anything, and that he believes in 'turning the other cheek'. Instead of protesting in the streets, he argues for a different type of resistance in the body, situating "emotions and weaknesses as catalysts for strength". Being vulnerable, he said, cannot be co-opted or exploited by capitalism, as many protest movements are. He said we must find ways of exposing our own flaws and vulnerabilities. We must create spaces for thinking of other alternatives to capitalism and the norm on sexuality. Being vulnerable, he argued, can create those spaces. He described counter-intuitive acts such as throwing money to the streets in the hope that it will come back to us some other way. Acts that ignore the system, make us vulnerable in its eyes but remain our choice, and are defiant through passivity and vulnerability. He proposed a soft kind of embodied activism. Vulnerability as power, as a choice. Are exposure and honesty necessarily bad, or are we told they are bad, weak, negative? An embodied attitude that we can control. Power in our bodies, and a challenge to prevalent values of strength and endurance.

Following from Onio's thoughts, it is important to consider that the body is not vulnerable in itself, but it is vulnerable to economics, to history. Vulnerability is always "formed and lived in relation to a set of conditions that are outside, yet part of, the body itself" (Butler 2015:148). Understanding that it is not a fault of the body or of the subject to be vulnerable, but a structural issue, can lead to a claiming of vulnerability as an empowering identity. We are vulnerable when the conditions required for us to live our lives are not provided or are taken away, and "[a]cting in the name of that support, without that support, is the paradox of plural performative action under conditions of precarity" (2015:65).

In our conversation Crow shared that she sees activism as a broad spectrum of practices, from road blocking to petition signing. They are all different ways towards the same goal: social change. She sees art as being increasingly involved in activism, and also considers direct action to be a form of performance. For instance, she told me about a bus blockade she was part of which

was protesting against the lack of public transport for wheelchair users. She said that the press loved it because it was a very visible symbol of lack of access. It was a form of performance, she added, because you need to develop a very thorough consciousness of yourself in space, and in relation to others (e.g. bus driver, the police). She added: "When the police approach and you have to come up with an adequate reaction, that is a performance." Crow views her embodied activism as performance, and her embodied performances as activism. While she is also a filmmaker she sees her performance work as more directly linked to activism, as it is work that is relational. Through these embodied pieces her work targets structural issues, norms and codes, and, ultimately, the state. Through empowering embodied performance, it enacts the "struggle between the power of performance in the arts and the performance of power by the state" (Ngũgĩ 1997:12).

Conclusion

Butler argues that,

> under conditions in which infrastructures are being decimated, the very platform for politics becomes the object around which political mobilization rallies. And this means that demands made in name of the body (its protection, shelter, nourishment, mobility, expression) sometimes must take place with and through the body and its technical and infrastructural dimensions. When this happens, it may seem that the body is the means and ends of politics. But the point is precisely to underscore that the body is not isolated from all those conditions, technologies, and life processes that make it possible.
>
> (Butler 2015:128–129)

The cases presented in this chapter enact a vision of art as a means and space to comment on vulnerability, to rethink what it means, to connect with others through it, and to channel it as a tool for action. As Butler argues, we need to be "able to think vulnerability and agency together" (Butler 2015:139). Claiming vulnerability as an identification and a tool for action makes the personal political in a way that places the fault and burden of vulnerability on the system, not the subject. It is also a way of challenging the boundaries between private and public spheres, a key task towards effecting change in the representation of specific identities (Deutsche 1992). A similar analysis can be applied to Black Lives Matter, the movement against police brutality and systemic racism that emerged in the US in 2013, later to become an international movement. With embodied, performative gestures such as 'hands up, don't shoot!' taking place in the streets in the context of mass demonstrations, Black Lives Matter activists performed not only a 'visibilisation of black life' (McKee 2016:185) but also a visibilisation of the vulnerability of black life in a racist system.

The practices examined in this chapter also offer valuable insight into the way in which art activism, and in particular embodied performance actions, are intervening physical and discursive institutional spaces. The personal as political is enacted here as a way of generating structural change, be that in the culture of institutions such as trade unions, or in the regulations of public space and the accessibility of public transport. Left Front Art artists and activists are situated in an in-between position, as they operate between the loose, informal, network format of Left Front Art, and the highly structured framework of the trade union. In their work, there is constant tension and negotiation with the union because of their protocols, structures, and culture, which are in some ways resistant to the transgressive, embodied work of Left Front Art's LGBTQIA artists. Left Front Art artists use nudity, sex, and non-normative aesthetics as ways of challenging heteronormativity. This can be seen as a manifestation of carnivalesque transgression, but also, the embodied aspect of performances is intended to open a channel for empathy and communication with audiences through vulnerability, as "*the act* of performing and theatricalizing queerness *in public* takes on ever multiplying significance" (Muñoz 1999:1).

In the case of Liz Crow's work, transgression is achieved through an embodied reversal of roles that leads to a cognitive dissonance when she embodies the figure of a Nazi soldier. But in her work there is also direct transgression of public space codes; by bringing attention to her body lying down, the artist puts up a mirror to the figure of the state and the ableist, classist nature of its rules and conception of public spaces. The contradiction between the seemingly passive act of lying down and the transgression of the law that this implies is what makes Crow's *Lying Down Anyhow* such a powerful piece. Stallybrass and White (1986) see transgression as symbolic inversion, or the contradiction of cultural and social norms. The practices examined here are examples of a transgression of norms through the body. These disobedient bodies, in their openness, materiality, and presence, make statements about the personal as political as they irrupt into public spaces.

The threads of embodiment, public space, and transgression that framed this chapter will continue to give shape to the analysis offered in the following chapters. I will expand on the issues addressed here by looking at psychogeography and transgression of public spaces (Chapter 5), embodiment and the personal as political in radical pedagogy (Chapter 6), and the relationship between art activists and cultural institutions (Chapter 7).

Notes

1 Sections of this chapter have been previously published in Serafini, Paula (2015) 'Beyond the Institution: Community-Centred Art Activism against the Commodification of Culture', *Anarchist Studies* 23(2): 68–88.
2 Anton, personal interview (2014).
3 Stonewall is a UK-based LGBTQIA rights charity, the largest of its kind in Europe, whose main activity is lobbying for policy.
4 For more on this performance see www.roaring-girl.com/work/resistance/.

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5 Loitering in the city

Psychogeography as art activism[1]

Introduction

Public art can be understood in broad terms as art that "acts in the public realm" (Miles 1997:1). It is public in that it takes place in public spaces (e.g. a sculpture in a square, or a mural), but it is also public in that it is accessible to, and made for, the people. In regions where redevelopment programmes and gentrification are displacing local populations, public art has been regarded with mistrust, as a common tool used by developers in these processes (Deutsche 1992:37, Kester 2011:1995). This perception of public art is also linked to the realisation that the definitions of 'public' and 'public use' are relative, and are not constructed by the public as a whole. Rather, these terms are defined by sectors of the public who hold more power over others. With regard to this, Deutsche asks, "Is it possible to speak with assurance of a public space where social groups, even when physically present, are systematically denied a voice?" (Deutsche 1992:38). However, she argues, as a counterpart to this phenomenon,

> artists and critics eager to counteract the power exercised through neutralizing ideas of the public have sought to re-appropriate the concept by defining public space as a realm *of* political debate and public art as work that helps create such a space.
>
> (Deutsche 1992:39)

This chapter is concerned with a particular form and understanding of public art that departs from the public art proliferated by property developers. In other words, a kind of public art that is concerned with the idea of the public, with public space, and the right to the city (Harvey 2008). The 'public' work of artists and activists that stand against capitalism and for equal access to public space, and for the legitimisation of the art produced by non-professional artists and in everyday spaces (Bonnett 1992:70). Standing against a neoliberal current that defends redevelopment as a provider of public space, "these works defend notions of a public realm that are formulated in distinct oppositions to all facets of the privatization and bureaucratization of cities" (Deutsche 1992:41).

Examples of this kind of 'public art' that does not align with public art as a genre, but rather is public in its open nature and in its intervention of the public space, are abundant and a cornerstone of countless social movements. In the UK these include Reclaim the Streets in the 1990s who took over roads and highways for temporary parties featuring costumes, sandboxes, and the planting of trees (Jordan 2002), and the joyful carnivals against capital in London in 1999 and more recently in 2013. In the US, where the urban parties of Reclaim the Streets also resonated with artists, activists, and community organisers, there is as well a history of urban interventions, including mass cycling outings of activists dressed as clowns (Shepard 2011), and interventions on the physical structures of the city, such as the work of REPOhistory and their unsanctioned plaques and signs that honour moments of radical history (Sholette 2011:88–89). In Argentina, graphic arts and research collective Iconoclasistas developed a collective mapping manual that champions the power of mapping as a tool for redefining spatial and temporal relations, and generating new territorial perspectives that allow collective transformations.[2] And in Mumbai, the *Why Loiter?* project examines women's experiences of public spaces and the idea of justice in the urban space. Their book *Why Loiter? Women and Risk on Mumbai Streets* maps the experiences of women in the city but also calls for the reimagining of urban space justice. We could also position within this tradition Liz Crow's piece *Lying Down Anyhow*, discussed in Chapter 4. In this work the artist and disability rights activist examines the clash between lying down, an act that is central to her daily life, and the codes and regulations of behaviour in public spaces.

Public, creative, political practices that centre on the rethinking of public space have become a growing phenomenon across the world, and are of particular interest at a time when it is not only the idea of the public that is in crisis, but also the idea of democracy. Artists, activists, and researchers have for years been looking at the urban space as an inherently political site: "If the modern city classifies our lives through the organization of streets and buildings then resistance implies an exploration of the spaces between or within them" (Jenks 2003:146).

One such form of engaged creative practice in an urban setting is psychogeography, and also the contemporary practices that are informed by it. Psychogeography, as developed by the Letterist International and then theorised and practised by members of the Situationist International[3] such as Guy Debord, can be understood as the study of the effects of the environment on people's behaviour and emotions (Pinder 2005). It was conceived as a political and artistic practice, which employed the *dérive*—a walking practice intended to disorient the subject and allow them to experience and analyse the city from a new perspective—as its main tool. Psychogeographical *dérives* were planned and had a purpose, but lacked destination (Sharanya 2016:201). Acknowledging the current popularity of psychogeography as a creative practice of resistance with a strong history in the UK and

increasingly practised in many parts of the world (Pinder 2005, Richardson 2015), this chapter will examine the politics of psychogeography as art activism by focusing on the practice of LRM, a Manchester-based collective that practises psychogeography. I will explore issues of walking as creative and political practice, play as a form of transgression, the possibilities and challenges of framing political walking as art, and the ethics of urban exploration.

Sunday loitering

Manchester is known as the world's first industrialised city. It is also known for being an important centre of capitalism in the nineteenth century, as well as having an important role in the development of Marxist politics. The city went through a period of decline as a result of deindustrialisation, and suffered considerable damage due to bombings during the Second World War and then the IRA bombing of 1996. From the 1980s onwards, regeneration began to take place, with major redevelopment programmes spreading across the city, many of these happening quite recently. It is in this context that the practice of LRM takes place, in the midst of an economic boom that is threatening to destroy the city's 'industrial soul',[4] and a housing crisis that suggests inevitable displacement of communities in Manchester and surrounding areas (Wallace 2015).

On the first Sunday of April 2014, I attended a psychogeographical walk in Manchester. We wandered down the deserted canals and up to the Manchester City stadium, looking for clues of a past civilisation and portals to other planets. I met the usual walkers of the group plus new attendees like myself, and as we walked we talked about regeneration in the city, the Occupy movement, and Neil Gaiman novels. This walk was organised by Morag from LRM, a "Manchester-based collective of artists and activists interested in psychogeography, public space and the hidden stories of the city". They are inspired by the Situationist practice of psychogeography as a form of engaging with public spaces, and they state:

> We can't agree on what psychogeography means but we all like plants growing out of the side of buildings, looking at things from new angles, radical history, drinking tea and getting lost; having fun and feeling like a tourist in your home town. Gentrification, advertising and blandness make us sad. We believe there is magic in the Mancunian rain.[5]

The way in which LRM self-defines as a group, together with the description of their practice, provides a broad sense of the political position and ideology of the collective. In the first place, the group description states the involvement of activists and their interest in public space. Second, the description of psychogeography as their practice ties in with their interest in radical history, and a rejection of gentrification and advertising. This positions the

group as an entity of resistance against certain urban phenomena that are a product of capitalism, and the effects these have on the city's population. Speaking to Morag, she pointed out some other specific issues in particular that she tries to address with LRM, such as women's right to the city and certain trends in management and control of public spaces (Atkinson 2003). Morag mentioned, for instance, how a ban on public consumption of alcohol is enforced in several working-class areas of the city, but not when it comes to 'posh people drinking their Marks & Spencer wine' in public parks. But in addition to this ideological position expressed through discourse, LRM's politics are constructed and manifested, as I will explain, through their conceptualisation and way of exercising creative practice, including the way in which they relate to the city and to other people.

LRM's embracement of psychogeography means that the collective chooses walking as their main mode of action. Their monthly walks are the main constant activity of the group, and they take place every first Sunday of the month from 2 pm onwards and last approximately two hours, typically followed by a visit to the pub. Morag shared that the usual numbers are from ten to fifteen participants, with quite an even gender balance. According to her, walks usually take place in central parts of Manchester, but follow different routes each time. In addition, walks can also take different formats and moods. Some, for instance, are 'explicitly political' and somehow protest-like, taking the form of walking protests. Some, on the other hand, are didactic: they include several historical facts about the city and are built around prompt phrases and questions such as 'Let's look at power structures and what you see. Where's inequality? Who's in the space?' Finally, others are more game-like, and entail people finding their own path. What is common across all walks is the intention to socialise with new people, discover new paths, and reconfigure the way that the city is experienced.

The second LRM walk I attended in June that same year was based on algorithms, and was one of the more ludic and game-like kinds of walks. Six of us held small bags with three 'chips' in them: one had a number drawn on it, another an arrow, and another an icon (e.g. a house, a moon, a star, a heart, a leaf, or a musical note). We took turns to toss the chips and interpreted them freely. We followed the arrows in order to generate arbitrary unexpected paths, and interpreted symbols as we liked. My chip with an icon that looked like a moon, for instance, directed me to architectural features in the form of crescents. We walked through the busy shopping streets looking for stars, and the empty business streets looking for leaves. Through this playful activity, we were able to reclaim certain spots in the city and use them for new alternative purposes.

Pinder explains that "[p]art of the significance of psychogeography and walking practices is [...] the way in which they allow encounters with apparently 'ordinary' and 'unimportant' activities in the city, against the grain of powerful discourses of the urban" (Pinder 2005:391). Similarly, Jenks explains that

> psychogeography depends upon the walker 'seeing' and being drawn into events, situations and images by an abandonment to wholly unanticipated attraction. This is political, it is a movement that will not be planned, or organized instrumentally—it will not be mobilized.
>
> (Jenks 2003:147)

With its game-like format, potential for artistic creation, and playful forms of relating to other people and to the environment, the ludic walk I took part in went beyond a comment on gentrification, shopping, and capitalism, and enacted a different way of relating to public space: a creative, collective, and playful way of experiencing the city.

Transgression, play, and performativity in the city

LRM's way of navigating public spaces flirts with the idea of transgression, as spaces are used for purposes other than those for which they are designated. As Morag explains, for some reason LRM walks often end up in car parks, a kind of urban space designed and reserved for cars and not for people. Even when trespassing in the legal sense does not occur, the new uses given to spaces—such as wondering around business areas at weekends and playing games in deserted parts of the canals—constitute a reclaiming of the city and a reconfiguration of what place, space, and social connections are supposed to be like in an urban setting.

In one of their flyers, LRM suggests:

> Draw a heart on a map. Follow the line, try to stay true. How do you feel as you walk? What can you see? Who is missing? Can the city touch you? Will you fall in love on the streets?

The other side of the same flyer reads: "Our city is wonderful and made for more than shopping. We want to reclaim it for play and revolutionary fun."[6] The reference to feelings and the sensorial shows how the psychogeographical walk is conceptualised and experienced by LRM as an embodied activity, which is largely based on sensorial perceptions of the environment (Rhys-Taylor 2013) and how these experiences affect our emotional state. The walks intend to allow participants to recognise these feelings and sensations and take control in creating their own new ways of experiencing the city, through the embodied political acts of walking and reclaiming public space. LRM also embraces the idea of magic in the city, as exemplified by their reference to "magic in the Mancunian rain", but also in their approach to play, as was the case in the walk in which we looked for portals to other dimensions. Magic, argues Bonnett, is "a central aspect of the imaginative power of psychogeography", that in contemporary psychogeographical practices has been used as "a way of offering an aura of depth, yearning and possibility that transforms walking

Figure 5.1 Psychogeographical walk with Loiterers Resistance Movement, Manchester, 2 June 2014. Image by the author.

into a practice and site of potential and drama" (2017:1). Magic is not only an aesthetic device, but can, in this context, be "a symbol and practice of subversion and creation" (Bonnett 2017:3) because of its association with the occult and 'non-rational'. Magic can be "a form of counter-perception, that is seen and felt in the city but that also enables its imaginative reclamation" (Bonnett 2017:4).

At the same time, LRM promotes play and revolutionary fun as a way of doing politics, in the tradition of several past and present creative protest movements in the UK and elsewhere (Shepard 2011). Play in this context acts as both a form of transgression and a prefigurative way of relating to the city, as LRM denounces and resists gentrification and changes in the urban ecology, and also engages, through play, in social relations with local people who were not previously active around these issues. In reference to this, Morag explains (Figure 5.1):

> [W]hat I learned quite quickly was going for a walk creates a space to have conversations… And that's good because you get a good mix of people, and like the guy who I only met last week, doesn't feel like the kind of person I'd meet in any other way, he seems quite… un-political, and interested in history. And then you've got people who come from you know, different spaces.[7]

Stuiver et al. (2012) argue that people construct identities of place by observing everyday reality, but also through immaterial things such as

stories. On his part, Frédéric Gros claims that through the practice of walking, the subject gets to truly know herself (Gros 2014). Pinder brings these two perspectives together, and borrowing from de Certeau, proposes that walking can be a way of creating alternative personal narratives about the city. He explains that de Certau "likens practices of walking to the speech act whereby pedestrians 'enunciate' spaces" (Pinder 2005:401). In other words, walking can in itself be a performative act (Butler 1995), through which the subject can create a counter-narrative of the city that challenges prevalent discourses around urban space, as well as actively transforming the uses of those spaces. By engaging previously unpoliticised participants, LRM provides a space for them to rethink and perform new narratives about their experience of the city that incorporate new ways of feeling and understanding their position in an urban setting.

But is it 'art'?

Despite the highly creative aspect of their practice, Morag explains that she is conflicted by the notion of art, and does not always see LRM as an art project:

> I could not see it as art and it is funny actually, because I was always kind of interested in DiY art, and I also draw… But then I ran a course that I wrote, which was about the art of walking, and it was about how walking and art are really linked, and I can now see it from that point of view.

Morag's acceptance of the category of art is then linked to the embodied aspect of her practice, found in the act of walking. Her hesitation around the word 'artist', as she explained to me later, lies partly in her respect for artisans and craftsmen, and partly in her disagreement with the canons and standards of the art world. This disagreement is at the heart of LRM's practice, and is the basis for their active and prefigurative challenge to the mainstream notion of art.

In the first place, LRM's walks challenge the notion of the author and the idea of participation as practised within the institutional framework, as the walks and games they engage in are a collaborative practice in which people are not mere bodies for an artwork, but participants with agency in the activity. Unlike artistic walks or participatory works of public art performed by artists coming from an institutional framework, this is not the work of an artist directing participants, or an artist collective collaborating, but rather the collective work of different kinds of people, some of whom regard the practice as art, and some who do not, but all having agency in their experience and creating meaning.[8] Morag explains:

> People come to LRM and they contribute. This is the thing about ownership and artists, because I really feel strongly that walks are

> co-produced. Walks I do on my own are more kind of *flâneur* or whatever. If I take photos on that walk or I produce something at the end, I own that and I produced that. But anything I write about a first Sunday is kind of co-produced because it is about the conversations and, you know… it is not just me.

She also comments, however, that despite her efforts to maintain a democratic, horizontal, and truly collaborative kind of practice, on some occasions this is not easy to achieve:

> I guess it's one of those weird hierarchies as well because, at one point, I gave anyone who wanted it the password to the blog, and they could post anything they wanted on it […] but actually most people didn't want to do it. I do try to be open […] but with the best will in the world, it would be disingenuous to say that we are totally equal, because I tried really hard to make it like that for a really long time, and then eventually it was like 'actually you know what? It's silly to pretend that'. And I think one [of the reasons] was a couple of the founding members actually just left Manchester. So when everyone was here, it was much more collective. As they left, I kind of carried on and other people came in. So I guess I'm accidently a little bit in charge, but I still feel uncomfortable with that.

'Loitering with Intent: The Art and Politics of Walking in Manchester and Beyond'

In October 2016, two years after my walks with LRM, I found myself in Manchester again. My trip coincided with LRM's exhibition *Loitering with Intent* at the People's History Museum, a happy coincidence that allowed me to reminisce on my time spent with LRM and return to some earlier thoughts on walking as art, participation, and what happens when psychogeography is framed as art practice.

Loitering with Intent: The Art and Politics of Walking in Manchester and Beyond was housed in a temporary exhibits hall on the ground floor of the People's History Museum, and had free entry. The accompanying text on the exhibition's website read:

> Walking is often taken for granted as an everyday activity but it has extraordinary resonance. This exhibition explores how walking can be a work of art or a political act. Footsteps create desire lines and shared histories; creative walking can become performance art that helps re-imagine, remap and reshape the world. Protest marches, mass trespasses and quiet acts of pedestrian rebellion reclaim space and assert rights.[9]

The large, bright room was populated with tall, solid exhibition panels, dotted across the room and creating an informal path for visitors. The panels

held a variety of works from artists, academics, and psychogeographers from the north-west of England and beyond, including photography of found objects; texts and photo-essays documenting walks; drawn maps, collage maps, and emotional maps; archival material such as posters, zines, and leaflets; installations; and film. Together, these pieces displayed the breadth of mediums that can be used in psychogeographical practices and their documentation.

In the spirit of participation and the democratisation of the arts, the exhibition included opportunities for visitors to contribute to it. One such opportunity was a panel where visitors could share information about upcoming events with other 'loiterers', as well as photos and field reports from their walks. Another one was a panel with a paper sign reading 'this is YOUR space'. The panel was covered in sticky notes of all colours with an array of messages similar to that of a toilet cubicle door, with people declaring 'they were here', others spreading messages of love and world peace, and of course the always-present drawing of a penis. At the exhibition there was also a table with leaflets and postcards, which the visitors were invited to take home. Among these was a handout of 'Play the City Now or Never!', a game by Idit Elia Nathan and Helen Stratford. The handout had instructions for how to turn it into a cube that can be tossed and played with in the city, proposing different tasks depending on which side it lands on.

The spaces for visitors to include their thoughts and mark their presence in the exhibition are in line with LRM's open nature and their predilection for coproduction as a form of making. It is worth noting, however, that the rest of the exhibition followed traditional curatorial standards, whereby each piece was attributed to one or more authors. In fact, it is significant that most of the exhibited work, except for publications, was single-authored. This included the drawing documentation of an artist's walk from Newcastle to Leeds, an emotional map of Stockport, and photo-collages of abandoned buildings.

This brings us back to Morag's distinction between the collectively authored nature of LRM's walks and other work she has done outside of this collective. The first question that emerges is why, given that LRM's practice is collective, as is much psychogeography, most of the works exhibited are singly authored. Is it because unlike single-authored work, collective walking and psychogeographical projects and their documentation are often not conceived as art? Or is it because the type of work that is collectively produced and documented does not fit with exhibition canons? Second, in the exhibition one could see a clear distinction between the work of artists and the messages and posts from visitors-turned-participants. This raises the question, therefore, of whether these opportunities for visitor engagement are really democratising the exhibition or rather perform a symbolic function, when the distinction between artwork and visitor contribution is still present.

The politics of psychogeography

When examining the politics of psychogeography, it is important to consider the politics of walking in the city, and how the figure of the *flâneur*, the psychogeographer and the urban explorer have been constructed and reproduced in literary works and in the imaginary of cities, as well as reinterpreted through practice across time. The *flâneur*, most commonly associated with Baudelaire's writing, emerges from the streets of nineteenth-century Paris. A quintessential urban figure engaging in the arts, leisure, and embracing the city as experience, the *flâneur* is white and male, and he possesses cultural capital as well as the time and freedom to explore the city. In terms of his relationship to the urban environment, "[t]he *flâneur* does not demand of things that they come to him; he goes to things. In this sense, the *flâneur* does not destroy the auras of things; he respects them" (Groys 2013:63). While determined to soak the city in, the figure of the *flâneur* stands in a position of detachment from the city and those who inhabit it; he is an observer (Boutin 2012:126). As such, initial accounts of *flânerie* emphasise visual mastery and confirm a sensory hierarchy. This is not detached from political implications, as in nineteenth-century Western society several thinkers associated senses to class distinctions, linking women and the lower classes to the 'baser' senses (Boutin 2012:126), such as smell.

From the idea of the *flâneur* followed the Surrealist *dérive* in the early twentieth century, a kind of urban walking expedition that revolved around the element of chance. In the 1950s, the Situationists put forward their version of the *dérive*, that of the politically engaged psychogeographer who is aware of the sensorial stimuli of the city and seeks to analyse their effects, with the aim of using this knowledge to transform urban spaces. But this new urban subject was still male, and in most instances still white. The Situationist *dérive* longed for an encounter with otherness, which "is reflective of their own historical positions as mostly white, male Europeans in search of everyday difference" (Sharanya 2016:200).

Gibbons (2015) explains how, from its beginning, psychogeography ignored the paramount role of race in the experience of the city. When Algerian psychogeographer Abdelhafid Khatib was continually arrested for his attempt to conduct nocturnal *dérives* of Les Halles in Paris in 1958, the reaction of his Situationist comrades was little more than sympathy, and his experience did not lead to the inclusion of race in psychogeographical theory. This is also evidenced by the fact that Khatib's story remains, as Gibbons puts it, a mere footnote in some psychogeographical texts. Sharanya argues that the Situationist *dérive* (Figure 5.2)

> performs a dual function […] it highlights the spaces wherein difference occurs, such as in racially segregated pockets where the mere performance of dérive will uncover "alterities" of experience and affect, but also emphasises embodied difference, which affects the dérive as well as the affective responses one may have to a local.
>
> (Sharanya 2016:200–201)

Figure 5.2 Image taken during a walk with Loiterers Resistance Movement, Manchester, 2 June 2014. Image by the author.

Psychogeographical walks are constrained as well as enabled by the embodied identities as well as the bodies of participants. Race, gender, sexuality, and ability, for instance, condition the way in which people experience the city, and hence psychogeographical practice must be conscious of issues of access and of power and privilege (Pinder 2005:402). While questioning claims that pyschogeography is intrinsically masculinist, Bonnett admits that "lone male voyagers [...] take their freedom to roam, at any time of day or night, for granted" (2017:8). Sharanya explains how as a woman practising psychogeographical ethnography in Delhi she had to adapt the timing and scope of her walks to the times of trains, the flow of crowds, and her perception of certain areas as more or less safe. She also refers to the *Why Loiter?* project (mentioned in the introduction to this chapter), and speaks of how loitering in Mumbai—being in the public space without a concrete purpose—can be dangerous for a woman. Actively choosing to loiter in the city can then also be seen as a radical act that challenges perceptions of women's expected behaviour in public spaces. But, she adds, this choice is only afforded to some, as several marginalised figures find themselves loitering not out of choice. In fact, "the very framing of 'loitering' varies across socio-economic and religious identities, and the neoliberal co-option of women's visibility in public as inherently liberatory can be unproductive, as it casts one's movements as accessible or even desirable to all" (Sharanya 2016:204).

In the case of LRM, these issues are actively addressed in different ways. Morag has done work on women's right to the city and to spaces that are

deemed as 'dangerous' for women within and outside the collective. Also, in our conversations she expanded on how walking in the city can sometimes be something people find themselves doing not out of choice, but for economic reasons, and how this experience of movement in the city results in a specific perspective. Finally, LRM's work is also informed by awareness of how disability determines one's experience of the city. Morag shared that her own physical limitations with walking have influenced her own practice, as well as her views on walking in general.

The Situationists positioned their practice as political and artistic, but they rejected—at least on paper—the idea of art as a sphere with its own institutions. LRM distinguishes itself from the canons of institutionalised practice in that its relation to the themes and spaces that are a basis of its practice is strongly rooted in specific values and political ideologies, thus determining the kind of aesthetic and political approach it has to subjects such as architecture, urban decay, and gentrification. Morag explains, for instance, how they are concerned with avoiding the fetishisation of estates, and not falling into 'ruin porn'. On many occasions she referred to issues of class and how some people who have taken part in their walks like going into estates and gawking, something she, having grown up on an estate herself, consciously avoids.

Fetishisation and commodification of working-class and minority ethnic spaces and cultures are common phenomena among artists and other creatives, and ought to be avoided (Todd 2015). These issues are important when determining whether a certain kind of urban exploration is guided by a political project that wishes to engage with and/or transform the current situation of a city, or whether it is guided by other motivations such as the aesthetic value of the ruin (Gansky 2014) or the search for adventure. These ethical concerns and considerations that go beyond the artwork itself are commonly bypassed by many artists who deal with political issues in their work but do not fully engage with the social and political implications and impact of their own 'political' art.[10] In the work of LRM, even when walks are ludic or historical and not overtly political, there is always a political goal enacted in every walk, which is to transform the way the people of Manchester live in the city. The fact that one of the objectives of the walk is to attract people who had not been involved in activism before, and to offer an opportunity for politicising the daily activity of walking, also speaks of how this work is different from institutionalised practices, as the walks are tied to a specific political objective, and campaigning and politicising attitudes is one of the main desired outcomes. As Pinder explains, "[w]alking provides a means of engaging with urban spaces and experiences in ways that move beyond specialized arenas, whether those of art or academic institutions" (Pinder 2005:402). This means that by engaging in an alternative use of space a political act is taking place, in addition to an artistic action.

Jenks argues that most psychogeographical practices do in fact tend to be politically aware and engaged (Jenks 2003:150). Pinder, however, points out

that these kinds of practices can sometimes carry a colonial legacy linked to the idea of 'exploration', which can lead to an unequal power balance between the urban explorer and local communities in the sites explored (Pinder 2005:388). The power dynamics in the 'explorer-explored' relationship will heavily depend on who the explorer is, what community is being explored, and whether the agency of local communities in transforming urban spaces is acknowledged (Hall 2015:2), or whether cities are perceived by artists and urban explorers as blank canvases.

Conclusion

LRM embodies a Situationist ethos in its politicised walks, which take art out to the streets and make use of public spaces as sites for creative resistance and a collective reimagining of the urban experience. Their practice relies on the embodied nature of walking, the element of play, and the transgression of spatial norms as tools that facilitate creative and politicised experiences, which result in a re-signification of specific public spaces, as well as the production of an independent, non-commodified form of public art, or art in public spaces. Instead of adhering to one of the "three main currents within British psychogeographical walking-literary, art and activist" (Bonnett 2017:5), LRM's practice bridges art and activism, adopting an artistic stance that is political, non-institutional, and community-based.

A question that emerges is what happens when practices such as LRM's walks do engage with institutional spaces and frameworks. LRM's exhibition was held at the People's History Museum, an institution that is community centred. Yet the format of the exhibition, while incorporating interactive elements, adhered to a traditional curatorial canon. Perhaps a reframing of objectives around each aspect of LRM's practice is important here. The exhibition, due to its format, does not allow the same forms of participation, coproduction, and agency as the walks. But it can serve other purposes, such as inspiring people to engage in psychogeographic practices, or rethink their relation to their own environment.

The work of LRM aims for the politicisation of everyday spaces through a re-centring of sensory experiences and a rethinking of the subject's relation to their environment, and as such it opens up important questions around the relation between the aesthetic and the political in contemporary psychogeography. LRM frames its practice as open, collective, and creative, and these are the elements that make it appealing to participants that are not politically active as well as to those who are. The embodied, sensorial, and aesthetic aspects of its practice are what allows their political rethinking and re-appropriation of space to take place: the aesthetic gives place to the political. Deutsche (1992) argues that artists have become concerned with two aspects of the public: issues of spatial arrangement and issues of visual representation. She argues that despite a tendency of critics to relegate issues of representation to the private sphere, these two can be aligned. In the work

of LRM, an interest in new sensory and aesthetic experiences of the city is directly connected to the political objective of democratising public space through interventions in the urban setting, aligning in this way spatial issues with a people's visual—and more broadly, aesthetic—experience of the city.

In terms of the objectives and goals of LRM, Morag stands with one foot in a grounded and more contained standpoint, and one in optimistic utopianism, arguing:

> Walking in of itself won't change inequalities, but it might provide some imaginative ideas or some insight or some connection, because actually if you talk to someone or you walk with them, it does break down barriers. It is a bit idealistic, but I kind of feel there's nothing wrong with utopia as an aim.

But perhaps the most pressing question that the case of LRM invites, when considered alongside the politics of psychogeography and urban exploration in the current sociopolitical landscape, is linked to the possibilities of psychogeography being transforming for a group of people with different identities and political subjectivities. Can open, collective, and collaborative psychogeographical practices such as these allow transformative experiences for diverse groups of participants that have different positionalities, everyday realities, and experiences of the city? Can any participatory creative practice do this? Sharanya points us to the discrepancy between theory and practice in the *dérive*: not everyone has the same freedom of movement in the city (2016:200). It follows that a psychogeographical walk with certain common parameters will not only be a different experience for different subjects according to issues such as gender, ability, race, nationality, religion, and class—and how these identities are shaped by the culture and norms of different cities, regions, and countries—but it will also be political in a different way for different subjects. As a mixed group goes on a *dérive* in the streets of Manchester, most of them will be challenging the designated uses of urban spaces. Some of them might be thinking of how they would not normally be in that area alone after dark. And others might have a sudden feeling of being the only 'other' in an area of the city, until encountering another 'othered' subject, which fellow psychogeographers (those who are not othered) will not interpret as familiarity, but as difference.

Notes

1 Sections of this chapter have been previously published in Serafini, Paula (2015) 'Beyond the Institution: Community-Centred Art Activism against the Commodification of Culture', *Anarchist Studies* 23(2): 68–88.
2 See Iconoclasistas' mapping manual here: https://issuu.com/iconoclasistas/docs/manual_mapping_ingles.
3 The Situationist International was a group of artists, thinkers, and activists based in Paris and other European cities, active from 1952 to 1972. They

developed the practice of psychogeography and advocated for art as a revolutionary medium. See Wark (2011).

4 See Alec Herron's article for The Guardian "Manchester's second coming—but are developers destroying its industrial soul?" www.theguardian.com/cities/2016/jun/08/manchester-second-coming-heritage-developers-destroying-industrial-soul. Accessed 15 February 2017.
5 From the Loiterers Resistance Movement blog, http://nowhere-fest.blogspot.co.uk.
6 LRM flyer collected in 2014, date unknown.
7 Morag Rose, personal interview (2014).
8 For more on participation in institutional art and in art activism see Chapter 2.
9 People's History Museum website, www.phm.org.uk/whatson/loitering-with-intent/. Accessed 16 October 2016.
10 This issue was at the heart, for instance, of the controversy caused by Brett Bailey's Exhibit B, organised by the Barbican Centre in September 2014. The exhibition, which recreated human zoos from the nineteenth century, was cancelled after protests denounced it as exploitative and racist. While the artist and the venue claimed the piece was a critical response to racism and argued for freedom of expression, protesters not only questioned the message of the exhibition, but also focused on the exploitative dynamics produced by a white artist directing black actors in chains inside cages within the framework of an institution that caters to a white middle-class audience.

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6 New narratives

Rethinking activism through art in the youth project 'Voices that Shake!'

Introduction

This chapter explores the dynamics and processes of the London-based art and activism youth programme Voices that Shake! (often known as Shake!), in order to examine how art and activism intersect in a pedagogical context. I first became involved with Shake! in 2013, when I met James from Platform (Shake!'s parent organisation), who introduced me to Farzana, Shake!'s coordinator. I initially entered the Shake! space as a researcher/volunteer, participating and helping out in their 2013 summer course *Power, Propaganda, Perceptions*. By the end of that year one of the team members had left the project, and my role had evolved to core team member as Art & Activism Facilitator and Strategic Advisor, a role I held for three years. For this reason, my perspective on Shake! will be twofold, based on interviews and ethnographic observations, but also on reflections about my own contributions to the project and conversations I have had with participants and facilitators in my role as core team member.

I will begin by presenting Shake!'s structure and model, and then move on to an analysis of the experiences, thoughts, and work of facilitators and participants, focusing on embodiment and performativity, and how these aspects of their aesthetic-political practice aim to produce instances of personal transformation while also enacting prefigurative politics. I will look specifically at spoken word poetry as one of the main elements of these courses. I will also look at the tensions that arise between the individual and the collective in a practice that addresses both personal transformations and structural change, and conclude with a reflection on the nature of activism and how art activism functions within this particular context.[1]

The Shake! model

Shake! is a programme on art and activism for young people aged sixteen to twenty-five, which was created in 2010. During its first few years, the programme ran two five-day intensive courses each year, as well as an artistic showcase after each intensive course (since 2017 the delivery format has begun to change to adapt to new objectives, the needs of participants, and

other factors). In addition, Shake! hosts continuity events throughout the year, such as poetry writing workshops, film nights, and professional development sessions, and keeps past participants updated with opportunities to attend training, perform, gain work experience, and become involved in community projects and activism. One of Shake!'s objectives is to create a community out of past and present participants and facilitators.

The project is run by a core team, which for most of the time I was conducting research consisted of Sai Murray and Zena Edwards (Poetry Facilitators), Farzana Khan (Facilitator and Coordinator), and myself (Art and Activism Facilitator). Each course also features film and music facilitators, and a number of guest speakers. Shake! originated as a project by London-based environmental justice organisation Platform and was the brainchild of campaigner Ben Amunwa, supported at its beginning by Jane Trowell from Platform and the then-volunteer and facilitator Ed Lewis, in partnership with poets Zena Edwards and Sai Murray. In an interview, Jane[2] explained that Shake! emerged out of a need to intervene in the future of Platform as an organisation, and in the environmental sector more broadly, through the training and support of young artists and activists of colour.[3] As Ed and former Shake! participant Selina Nwulu explain, these spaces continue to be dominated by white middle-class people (Nwulu and Lewis 2012:155).

In addition to responding to the need identified by Ben and Platform, Shake! is also a project that follows the needs and interests of its participants. Sai explains that "Shake! is a youth project, so young people define the outputs".[4] The Shake! intensive five-day courses consist of a series of discussions and practical sessions around social and political issues which take place during the first two days of the week, and workshops in different art forms—poetry/spoken word and film, and since 2015 also zine-making—which take place mostly in the following three days. Regarding the structure of the week, Shake! coordinator and facilitator Farzana comments:

> [T]his kind of model worked, because it was a kind of finding the premise, building the foundations, and then giving young people free reign to create art that was authentic and coming from where they wanted it to.[5]

The discussions and workshops throughout the week tackle issues such as race, gender, capitalism, and climate change, while responding to the main themes that frame each five-day course. Some past themes for different courses have been *Propaganda, Power, Perception*; *Remembering, Re-imagining, Reparations*; *Headspace*; and *States of Violence.*

Radical pedagogies

From the beginning of my involvement with Shake!, conversations with facilitators and participation in planning sessions led me to learn that the

programme was conceived as a radical pedagogy project, and as such, courses are structured according to principles and ideas inherited from critical, feminist, engaged, and radical pedagogies, such as those of Paulo Freire (1970) and bell hooks (1994, 2003). For this reason, the workshops and talks about political and social issues are heavily discussion-based and dialogical, and top-down dynamics are consciously avoided. In line with these strands of thought, creativity and artistic production are embedded into the course as fundamental learning and teaching experiences (Endsley 2013:114). I was able to observe how these ideals are enacted by mechanisms such as always sitting in a circle, limiting the amount of content delivered, and dedicating most of the time in each session to discussion, focusing on participants' experiences as sources of knowledge. In later courses such as *Remembering, Re-imagining, Reparations* and *Headspace*, these principles were also enacted through creating opportunities for participants and former participants to facilitate exercises or sessions themselves, or return as guest speakers. In terms of the dynamics of the room, core team member and poetry facilitator Zena pointed out on several occasions that the role of facilitators during the course is to provoke discussions and ask questions instead of giving answers (Figure 6.1).

Figure 6.1 Group workshop during the Shake! course *Surviving the System*, London, October 2016. Image by the author.

In order to create a space that challenges the power dynamics of standard education models, that is safe for participants and puts forward a holistic approach that looks at mind, body, and soul, a typical day in a Shake! intensive course includes the following: warm-up exercises that energise the body and foster group cohesion, designated moments for sharing at the beginning and end of the day—during which participants and facilitators share inspirations and report back on their days—and moments of free-flow writing that allow a 'digestion' of the content dealt with throughout the day. In addition, Shake! attempts to build a decolonial practice (Escobar and Mignolo 2010) that challenges power and unlearns oppression through intergenerational dialogue, collective learning experiences, and horizontal non-hierarchical dynamics that counter the relations, structures, and modes of learning of the official education system. This is visible, for instance, in how facilitators take part in group exercises alongside participants. These values are present in the Shake! course space and also guide the practice, processes, and organisational forms of the core team, which at the time of research was mostly female and made up of people of colour and Global South people. Farzana shares that:

> The team in itself is representative. And also [...] I do think that our team does believe in those values, so when you go into a Shake! environment, somebody said you can't separate the coordinator or facilitator from a participant. And that's the best compliment ever, 'cause that's what we want to achieve.

What this commitment to the values and methods of radical pedagogies looks to achieve is a safe space in which participants and facilitators can learn from each other (Nwulu and Lewis 2012:147), and in which everyone is encouraged to make their opinions heard. This mode of approaching an educational experience can be understood as prefigurative radical education, enacting the values it upholds through practice.

Shake! participants from the 2014 course *Headspace* touch on this issue in the short documentary *Education?*,[6] which they shot during the intensive course. The film brings together a variety of views on the current education system in the UK, and then presents the example of Shake! as one way of complementing or countering formal education by creating the education you want to see and you want to have. The film is evidence of the important role of out-of-school settings as "alternative knowledge spaces [...] where literacy learning is authentic and purposeful for [...] people of colour" (Fisher 2003:363) and other marginalised young people. Shake! is positioned as a project that is not only ameliorative, but also prefigurative, and through its alternative structure proposes a different form of education altogether.

Personal and structural change

Farzana explains the multiple objectives behind Shake! in the following way:

> One aspect of it is located in personal transformations, so the young people that we work with, we hope, and the facilitators, go through some kind of personal transformation within their art and activism. So that's either being more informed about political issues, or becoming more skilled in a particular art form [...] And then it tries to make a structural change, and that's both politically—in different political issues that we are looking at [such as] environment, race, power, and media—but also within the system. One of the key areas that Shake! is interested in is power and privilege, so looking at how the environmental movement as a whole is predominantly white and middle class, and looking at structural changes within the system and how to shift the power balance.

In other words, Shake! is about personal as well as structural change. During my first period of observant participation as a volunteer, I noticed how on the first day of intensive courses other facilitators emphasised this by explaining that the Shake! five-day course is a personal transformation space. The continuity programme, including youth-led workshops that take place outside of the intensive course as well as showcases and opportunities for performing and sharing artistic work, on the other hand, aims to contribute in a more direct way to structural change in different spheres of society, such as political activism, education, the art world, and social and cultural policy. Farzana describes the connection between self-transformation and a wider collective movement for change as "justice work inside out". This focus on the individual could arguably bring about comparisons with a libertarian approach, placing the sovereign individual as the starting point. However, as following sections will argue, this is linked to the fact that in the practice of Shake! self-healing is positioned as a necessary starting point towards collective structural change.

The embodied development of political subjectivities through spoken word

Spoken word is a form of poetry conceived to be performed, which has different histories and traditions across continents, many linked to the expression of countercultures (Gräbner and Casas 2011) and in particular the experiences of African diaspora communities (Fisher 2003, Endsley 2013). At Shake! intensive courses, participants have the choice of specialising in one artistic form after the second day of the course: poetry and spoken word, film, and most recently also zine-making. The poetry element is also present at the beginning of the week, as some short moments of free writing and poetry are allocated for the whole group from day one. These writing breaks

are key towards developing the structure for the course, and contribute to the development of participants' voices. In the first place, they provide a break from intense political discussions. Second, they provide a space for reflecting upon these issues, articulating thoughts, and expressing feelings that these discussions may have triggered. And third, the possibility of reading aloud one's writing reinforces Shake!'s objective of providing young people with a safe platform for sharing, encouraging them to literally speak out and be heard. Because of this, the Shake! space can be understood as what Fisher calls a 'literocracy', the place where literacy and democracy meet, or "a space in which each participant ha[s] an opportunity to access both written and spoken words while speaking his or her own truth" (2007:4).

Besides these writing and sharing breaks, participants who choose poetry and spoken word as their art form have further opportunities to focus on their writing during the latter part of the week, participating in exercises that serve as inspiration and trigger points for poems. These workshops usually combine discussion on social and political issues on the one hand, and poetry writing and performing skills on the other, thus integrating these two facets of the course: the political and the artistic.

Narratives: owning your story through poetry

Shake! intensive courses consistently touch on the idea of dominant narratives in society and in the media and the need to challenge these, be they narratives about race, the economy, immigration, climate change, or other pressing issues. This is linked to an understanding that "[a]s well as having an important function for the individual in the process of self-making, the telling of stories serves a vital social function in communal acts of constructing societies and cultures" (Robson 2012:2). In February 2014 Shake! held an intensive course under the theme *Remembering, Re-imagining, Reparations.* Throughout the week, poetry facilitators Sai and Zena spoke of 'the battle for the story'; in other words, the need to own our stories. They highlighted, for instance, the importance of identifying continuums and patterns in the stories of young black people, from Ken Saro-Wiwa to Mark Duggan.[7] They asked: how do we interrupt that story, that cycle, so we can take it in a direction where we take control? How does protest take place? How do we intervene in these narratives? The objective behind this discussion was to create awareness among participants of how these patterns of events translate to local stories, and how they, as young engaged people, can interrupt them.

This model was echoed in other workshops as well. For instance, Sai led a workshop on definitions, which looked at the political weight and hidden meaning of words and phrases such as 'slave trade', as well as alternative terms for a number of words that perpetuate different forms of oppression. Being in control of words, Sai argues, changes the story. Finally, during a poetry workshop on that same course, participants engaged in different writing exercises, including one that entailed confronting a figure of

authority from one's life through a poem. This exercise, in which negative past experiences were confronted, allowed an opportunity for performativity, in which young people took ownership of a situation, spoke up against oppression, and rewrote the course of that story.

Polletta argues that "[m]ovements in which the goal is selftransformation as much as political reform may see personal story-telling as activism" (Polletta 1998:430). Echoing this, writer and community artist Claire Robson explains the significance of writing and performing stories in the following way:

> Particularly in marginalized communities, it is important to construct bodies of artistic work which represent lived experiences so that they can be made visible and examinable. By using texts as commonplaces for shared interpretations and discussions, learners can examine their personal and cultural situations. By creating and performing them, they may be able to recover experiences lost to insidious trauma and thus come to understand their situations differently.
>
> (Robson 2012:5)

In youth art and media programmes such as Shake!, often one notes the "deep level of ownership participants can have of projects they take part in, and how they make connections with their own personal histories, sense of identity, and values" (Sobers 2009:193). When I asked Farzana why art is such a major component of Shake!, she also referred to the (re)framing of narratives that art allows:

> Before we can even champion for justice, we have to be able to say 'this is what justice looks like', and it's really important for individuals to engage with that. I think that's the place when art comes in because art's a place where you remove your limitations and your constraints, and everyday moralities, [...] everything is possible. So we can actually reimagine whatever limits have been placed for us, I guess that's the key.

For Shake! facilitators, art is understood, pratised, and experienced as a space where one can break free from a dominant discourse, as well as the tool through which narratives can be reimagined and rewritten. By providing participants with the space and tools to take ownership over their stories they are self-empowered, and can rewrite their position in the world, as the following examples will show.

Developing political subjectivities

At Shake!, participants are encouraged to produce work that is not only a response to the political and social issues discussed during the course, but that also reflects and voices their personal feelings and experiences. As a

result, the majority of poems produced throughout the week are politically and emotionally charged, as they emerge from intense discussions during which participants open up to others about personal experiences and ideas. An example of this form of poetry is Onysha Collins's *Energetic Apathy*. In this piece, the former Shake! participant—who later went on to become film facilitator for one of the courses—presents the concept of 'energetic apathy' as British society's conscious decision not to address issues of racism and inequality. The following are extracts from her poem, which I saw Onysha perform at the *Power, Propaganda, Perceptions* Shake! course in 2013:

> As I watch my pen caress this paper and the thoughts from my brain fly free line by line, I think about the world and see that regardless of race, politics, or moral obligation.
>
> There's a disease that's permeated into the hearts of humanity.
>
> […]
>
> Energetic Apathy- the decision to passionately deny the existence of injustice in any area of society, because the alternative forces you to think that my energy or apathy determines if someone else sinks or swims.
>
> In conflict man always looks at the what instead of the why, as I pray I realise it's what I don't do that'll cause others to die, yet no matter how hard I try there's always someone who wants to encourage pollution of the mind. If I speak about the inequality I face because of my colour or creed, I'm consistently told 'it's not a problem, we're in the twenty first century.' Yet time doesn't evade grown men coming up to me and saying they're ready to hang some monkeys.
>
> […]
>
> Free your mind from Energetic Apathy, and evaluate how the life you lead can be an inspiration to future generations for positivity.[8]

In this poem, based on Onysha's experiences and views on British society, there is an intention to denounce a specific attitude, as well as to assert her own views and stand up to certain social and political issues. Onysha not only expresses her views, but also gives a name to a problem she identifies, and performs a rejection of 'energetic apathy' by the very act of writing and performing her poem. The poem and its performance are therefore an illocutionary performative, as Judith Butler would argue, or an instance in which an action is enacted through uttered words (Butler 1995:198).[9] Through the public sharing of this piece, Onysha performs and develops her political subjectivity.

A second example of work produced by participants during Shake! courses is a poem by Annie Rockson called *My Application*. In this piece, Annie challenges understandings of origin, background, and belonging by saying she cannot explain where she comes from in a dotted line. The poem continues to describe her mixed heritage, British and African, and the sociocultural environment she comes from. The poem, full of rich images,

makes a turn for the performative when the poet refers to her own place in society and her attitude towards life. Below is an extract from her piece, which I have seen Annie perform in the context of Shake! courses, Shake! showcases, and other public events, such as a conference on migration and diaspora at the School of Oriental and African Studies in 2014:

> I'm a prisoner of the human mind and a slave to my emotions
> I love and hate at the same time,
> but refuse to remain shackled in the bitter taste of resentment built up inside. From a life too long ago to even remember.
> I'm a fighter and defender.[10]

In this way, Annie is not only expressing her ideas and emotions about her background and place in society; she is also standing up to a society that tries to box and simplify identities and negate an important and painful part of history. Her words, embodied and performed loud and proud, become performative as they put into action her resistance to being categorised, and enact the same words she utters: "fighter and defender".

The poetry sessions during Shake! courses, therefore, provide a space for reflection and expression, but also, spoken word poetry in this context can become a performative practice, in which the process of developing and furthering a political subjectivity is enacted. By voicing out personal ideas and feelings, the embodied act of spoken word performance fulfils Shake!'s mission of cultivating young people's confidence to speak up and to develop their own political voices. The act of performing these subjectivities in public and for others, a powerful learning experience because of its embodied and relational qualities (Endsley 2013:111), is also the decisive act in which participants claim their right to a voice in the public sphere and perform their role as political subjects (Rancière 2010:139). Finally, spoken word poetry can also be a medium for building individual and collective identities, and recording and transmitting oral histories (Fisher 2003).

Embodiment and performativity

The live performance of spoken word poetry can be seen as the embodiment of a piece; the bringing to life of ideas, feelings, and words. Considering that the poetry that Shake! participants write and perform acts as performative statements of their political subjectivities, the embodiment of their poetry, and the way in which their bodies are used as a channel for communication also needs to be addressed, since the physical utterance of words is the way in which participants share their truth. As mentioned earlier, participants are encouraged to read aloud their poetry every time there is a writing slot throughout the week. But it is in the latter three days of the course, when they have chosen which art form they will specialise in, that issues of spoken word as performance are fully addressed by facilitators (Figure 6.2).

Figure 6.2 Shake! participant sharing her poetry on the final day of the course *Headspace*, Bernie Grant Arts Centre, 2014. Image by the author.

During poetry workshops at Shake!, facilitators dedicate time to working on performance techniques, so that performers can adequately transmit and evoke emotions, which aids the delivery of a message. Projecting one's voice, for instance, is described by facilitators as releasing the energy of words from within you when you perform a piece of spoken word. It has been noted by facilitators that participants often feel shy about sharing their writing, and this is evident in their body language, from the tone and volume of their voice to their posture.

In the 2014 February Shake! course, poetry facilitator Zena and guest music facilitator Marcina focused on developing two specific aspects of spoken word performance: body movement and projection. The body movement techniques included a choreographed performance of a collective poetry piece, and focused on rhythm, posture, targeted delivery, and visual aspects of the choreography. Projection, in turn, focused on voice and attitude. Through a series of exercises, such as repeating lines in different tones, speaking as if addressing different people, walking around, and projecting words towards a physical target, participants learned how to speak up and use a confident and loud tone of voice when performing. These aspects of spoken word performance are not exclusive to Shake!, and are important for any performer. However, in the context of this course the different performing techniques, the use of one's voice, and the embodiment of poetry are linked to the aim of allowing participants to develop their political subjectivities, as having one's voice heard becomes a performative act of personal transformation and political resistance.

Spoken word as an 'emboldening' medium

Given its focus on self-transformation, on expression, and on young people engaging indepth with political issues, Shake!'s work has often been described by facilitators, participants, and supporters of the programme as empowering for young people. But Farzana explains how discussions at Platform—Shake!'s parent organisation—have led to the use of the word 'emboldening' instead. She says:

> I never felt empowering was right, because you take away autonomy from the young people who in and of themselves are artists and activists, and also, how much we as facilitators are taking away […] So I think saying, 'we empower' just didn't feel right, to establish that kind of power relationship. […] Shake! is a process of emboldening; young people have something to say already, and what they go through is emboldening, and I think that captures it best.

In an interview with Sai, I asked him about his views on spoken word in relation to the objectives Shake! wishes to achieve. He said:

> I think it's been really emboldening, and that's really evident in some of the young people who've gone off from Shake! and actively joined campaigns and continued their work. So I think it's been a great space to talk about issues and then continue to craft poems and spoken word pieces after Shake! has finished. […] And I think as a medium spoken word is incredibly immediate cause that's what we have, voice. […] In terms of tools it's super accessible, so pen and paper or just a phone, or even just a voice. It's limited tools, and everyone is able to engage with that and use their own words.

Sai's thoughts position spoken word as a powerful tool for discussing political issues, and also provide valuable insight into the politics of spoken word as a medium. Issues around immediacy and accessibility are not only important logistically, but also politically: in order for art to be a vehicle for young people to embark upon self-transformation, it needs to be accessible on all levels. This accessibility and flexibility of the medium was evident during my observations, as I noticed that many participants wrote down and read out their poems from their mobile phones. From this, one could argue that mobile devices allow participants to engage with poetry and spoken word in new ways that are in line with their everyday modes of communicating and capturing and sharing data (Endsley 2013:115, boyd 2014,). However, poetry facilitator Zena noted that the immediacy of writing with a pen on a piece of paper is disrupted when writing poetry on a phone instead, and hence the practical benefits of using mobile devices for creating and sharing poetry might interfere with the creative process. This poses interesting questions around the aura of certain artistic processes and whether these should be

compromised or not for the sake of accessibility in radical education and/or in art activism projects.

During a conversation with Shake! participant, poet and visual artist Orla Price, she shared with me her views on how spoken word is a particular experience, which is different from poetry:

> [S]poken word […] I think it gives me more of a feeling of power or even purpose. I think it has more impact, […] 'cause you write poems on a page, and you might get them published, or you might put them online or something [and] you're not seeing any reaction, you're not feeling any reaction, and you're not feeling what it does to yourself. I think a lot of times with spoken word you can feel the words inside you. It sounds a bit weird, but yeah![11]

Jane from Platform adds that:

> [T]here's something already kind of very dynamic about it as a form. It's not a poet reading a poem, that's a completely different thing. We're talking about a performance, and I think that's very dynamic, I think it's very, very empowering to think that you could be that person. And I think that also, there's a connotation of authenticity in production with that. It's not pretentious, […] it's something about needing to say something. There's a whole set of cultural connotations for spoken word; the way it's delivered in the context of race, which is very dynamic and very liberating.

(Self-) reparations and well-being

> Even though many scholars and intellectuals mock the world of self-help, it is an important realm of self-recovery for the racially colonized mind.
>
> (hooks 2003:38)

As mentioned earlier, the type of change that Shake! looks to achieve is integral: from what Shake! activists would define as a holistic self-transformation process that looks at mind, body, and soul in unity—a key process, as bell hooks would also argue—to structural change that addresses different spheres in society. To that end, the process of self-transformation is approached as an embodied one, which understands the body as a tool for communication and expression—as discussed, for instance, in relation to spoken word performance—but as a site of healing and of resistance.

As part of the February 2014 course, *Remembering, Re-imagining, Reparations*, guest facilitator Esther gave a workshop on reparations. She explained that reparations knowledge is important not only to imagine social change, but so we can bring it about. In her workshop she discussed issues such

as the incomplete narrative of slavery in the UK, the differences between identity and nation, and the importance of maintaining or bringing back the art, culture, and way of life of diaspora groups, with specific reference to slavery. Esther then explained that we need different types of reparations as individuals and as a society: self-made, political, relational, economical, personal. She concluded by asking the group to think about how we can use art in our reparations work. In this way, her workshop made a connection between the personal and the structural, arguing that self-transformations are an important first step in the path towards enacting social change.

Following the principles of self-reparations and self-preservation as important steps towards social change, Shake! pays attention to well-being, embodiment, and the body throughout the activities of the course and continuity activities as well. As mentioned earlier, each day of the course begins with collective warm-up sessions, which include activities such as games, trust exercises, yoga, dance, body movement, and meditation. The objectives of these exercises are multiple: trust building, fostering collectivity, and physical and emotional well-being. But in addition to warm ups, *Remembering, Re-imagining, Reparations* was the first Shake! intensive course to have a well-being workshop as part of its offer, in which the group shared and discussed techniques for coping with stress and enhancing well-being. This workshop aimed to approach well-being holistically, and issues of physical well-being, mental health, and spirit were all addressed. Farzana explains that there was a need for this workshop because during Shake! courses participants deal with intense topics, work long hours, and feel tired and drained. Also, the workshop is a response to the situation that many activists are in, when campaigning affects their overall well-being. Activism can be a mentally and physically exhausting activity, leading to problems such as depression and isolation, an issue that was also addressed by interviewees from other groups featured in this book.

In the case of Shake! in particular, dealing with personal stories and politically charged issues throughout the week has caused many participants to cry—especially at the end of the first day—or to express they were overwhelmed by their emotions. In reference to the mental health aspect of the well-being workshop, Sai argues that under the current capitalist system there is pressure for young people to conform and fit the norm, and depression and other mental health conditions are highly stigmatised. Having spaces where young people who have experienced trauma and marginalisation can talk about these issues openly and connect the dots between well-being and how this is influenced in different ways by the world in which we live is essential. As argued by Sara Ahmed in her discussion of Audre Lorde: "For those who have to insist they matter to matter, self-care is warfare" (Ahmed 2017:239).

The way in which Shake! courses approach and incorporate issues of well-being, self-preservation, and embodiment is prefigurative, as courses go beyond having discussions around well-being and actually begin to put

into action the principles of self-reparation and self-preservation being discussed. These principles and ideas are enacted in a number of ways, such as the games, performance techniques, and exercises that foster a continued focus on the body, both as a means for relating to others and as a tool for resistance. Audre Lorde once said: “Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare” (1988:131). In the context of Shake!, self-preservation as well as instances of transformation are seen as important parts of a wider process of social change, and are a product of a decolonial perspective[12] that emphasises embodied knowledge and learning, and addresses social change in a holistic way, from personal healing and self-transformations to structural change.

The individual vs. the collective in art activist radical pedagogies

During Shake! courses there is a series of mechanisms and factors that lead to the creation of feeling of community among participants. First of all, spending five days with a group of people and sharing thoughts and feelings in a space that is constructed as safe can allow bonding to happen between participants and with facilitators as well. The use of embodied exercises and activities contributes to the generation of trust and making people feel comfortable, and the sharing of past experiences, especially around sensitive subjects such as race, mental health, sexuality, and gender, also fosters intimacy and bonding. At the same time, after day two of the week participants are split into different groups (film; spoken word and poetry; and lately also zine-making), in which they spend most of the remaining time of the course. As a result, the dynamic of the group changes, and while the film group works together towards the same film project, poets attend workshops in which they mostly work on their own pieces.

In order to foster the sense of collectiveness and teamwork during the week—which the film group slips into easily due to the nature of film-making—poetry facilitators have in some instances encouraged participants in the poetry group to work on collective poems. During a workshop in the Shake! course of February 2014, participants chose stanzas from their individual poems and turned them into two collective ones; one was on the theme of ‘remembering’ and the other on the theme of ‘reimagining’. The group practised the performance aspect of these pieces, including a choreography and the inclusion of choruses in different languages (*I remember/I imagine. Je me souviens/J’imagine. Yo recuerdo/Yo imagino …*). Encouraging participants to resort to their mother tongues or vernaculars as part of the creative process was linked to Shake! facilitators’ recognition of the importance of language as identity, as a tool for communication, and as a tool for resistance (hooks 1994:173). It also suggests an attempt at creating a collective piece that said something about the group—since

it was a diverse group in terms of ethnicity and on that particular course also in terms of nationality—and also celebrated the individuality of each participant.

As beautiful as the piece was, and as engaging as it was for me to take part in that process as a participant-facilitator, there was an evident tension between the collective and the individual in this joint project, which brings to mind some questions around the possibilities and limitations of poetry and spoken word as transformative tools in a collective setting. Several participants were very eager to work on their own poems, instead of spending time rehearsing a collective piece. Also, despite the fact that this collective poem brought together stanzas from everyone's work, it did not represent any one participant's voice in the way that their own, whole poems did. Part of the message as well as the voice behind each of those stanzas was lost when it was taken out of context and merged with other people's words. This puts into question how effective this exercise was as an artistic activity and as a form of political expression. If the intention behind the poetry workshops was for people to develop their own voices and political subjectivities, could the collective, in this case, be disrupting that process? Poetry and spoken word have proven to be powerful tools for expression and self-transformation (Fisher 2007). But the fact that, as I have observed, the collective poetry pieces are rarely participants' favourite part of the course, and that these fail to transmit a message that represents poets' voices—either their individual voices or a new, collective one—shows that spoken word, in this context, does not succeed in creating a collective identity, but rather remains as a tool for group work and exploring different writing techniques.

The individual and collective aspects of Shake! must also be considered in relation to the outcomes and achievements the course has accomplished so far. When I asked Farzana what she thought had been the greatest achievements of Shake!, she stressed the personal transformations that both participants and facilitators go through.

But Ollie, a former facilitator for Shake!, offers a different perspective, which puts into question Shake!'s focus on self-transformation:

> There's a strong emphasis on personal expression, which I think is potentially a double-edged sword […]. So I think people feel personally empowered, that's good, and it might be motivating and so on. At the same time, is there a danger if we are doing stuff which gets people to focus a lot on their voice and their individual perspectives? […] Is there a danger that that could cloud out this kind of more collective identity? And you could see the two working together, […] and we want to be alive to the humanity of others as individuals, and I think art is good for that, or can be. I just think that […] that's something which maybe links in a way to the fact that there hasn't been such a kind of, an activist sort of focus to things, you know.[13]

In reference to Annie's poem *My Application*, shared earlier in this chapter, Ollie says:

> Annie's poem for instance [...] was really great, right? And I find that I really like this because there was a political edge to it, I mean, because she's talking about the way in which her cultural experiences, and her cultural history and so on might be effaced by bureaucracy and by the state. At the same time, [...] I'm not sure if as a project we've done enough to draw around the political implications of experiences and feelings like that, and see how they knit together with other experiences and feelings other people have and what the implications of that might be, politically. Maybe it would be different if people were doing stuff collectively, but I don't think that people who've done film stuff particularly then, sort of [become politically active as a collective].

Ollie's concerns address the fact that the Shake! model prioritises personal transformations during the intensive course stage, and does not try to build a defined collective social movement with a shared collective identity and set of objectives, unlike the kinds of movements and groups analysed in the first three chapters of this book. Rather, Shake! approaches structural change by intervening in the spheres of campaigning, academia, and the art world, through performances, films, and workshops carried out by young people—sometimes jointly with facilitators as well. These concerns can be linked to the fact that there are different understandings of what activism is, particularly around the personal/structural change dichotomy. In the following section, I will address this issue in more depth, as I rethink activism and its connections with art through the practice of Shake!

Rethinking (art) activism

> We need activism that doesn't have its parameters defined and set by western ideology on what is 'appropriate' and 'effective' activism.
>
> (Shake! Twitter account, 13 September 2014)

With the above statement Shake! establishes the need to not only work on personal and structural change, but to also address long-standing oppressive dynamics and understandings that are tainted with a limited Eurocentric perspective and that still persist within activist spaces today. Having looked at how personal transformations are enabled in Shake!, and how the focus on the individual can be perceived and experienced as conflicting with the generation of a collective identity, I will now explore how the idea of activism is understood and practised in this context, examining also how artistic practice is approached as a tool for change, and focusing on the tensions between aesthetics and politics.

Shake! as activism

When I asked Farzana about her thoughts on how Shake! intersects with activism, she said that it depends on the definition of activism, but that with Shake! we look at political issues and "we are looking at the political through the personal too". In her reflection, Farzana relates activism to a number of elements, including the fact that Shake! deals with political issues as a pedagogical project, and the focus on the personal as political. We could indeed consider the practice of the radical educator as activism in itself (Trowell 2017), her role being "not to *introduce dissensus*, but to facilitate a participatory (or 'collaborative') space, which leads to the emergence of dissensual experiences that *already exist* within the social fabric, and the collaborative production of knowledge from these experiences" (Bell 2017:79). But Farzana also adds that "the other way is that it's activism within activism. It's something that is also challenging the environmental [activist] sphere, saying 'well actually, it's not representative, it's not diverse'" (Figure 6.3).

It is at this level of engagement that the Shake! model intends to become, once more, a prefigurative force for social change: by actively challenging the lack of diversity in activist circles—among other spheres—in the UK. My observations and conversations with facilitators and participants, and the fact that a large number of participants remain involved with Shake! after taking part in the intensive courses, suggest that young people of colour come to Shake! because most of the movements and activist projects in the

Figure 6.3 Drinking tea and sharing readings during the Shake! course *Foodfight* at Spotlight, August 2015. Image by the author.

UK right now do not represent them, and as a result they do not identify with those spaces. Shake! responds to this by providing a space for building skills that can challenge the practices of environmental and political movements, and skills to create other new spaces. By facilitating a space for political discussion, self-transformations, and the nurturing of political subjectivities, Shake! acts as a subaltern space and fosters the emergence of a new 'subaltern public' (Fraser 1990) of activists, especially young people of colour, with an awareness of decolonial thought, issues of power and privilege, and race, applied to the context of environmental and social justice activism. In this way, the project approaches issues of structural change by actively contributing to the transformation of the environmental and political activist circles in the UK.

In line with the idea of activism as a broad contextualised practice, and the principles of self-care and self-reparations discussed in previous sections, Shake! champions and puts into practice the idea that (art) activism can be several different things, and that it should not be limited to direct action and campaigning but also include acts of self-preservation and of care within our communities—things that are usually overlooked but are crucial to the resistance of some of the most marginalised people in society. This has been the subject of many internal conversations among core team members, in which we also discussed how in the case of young people—and especially young people of colour—standing up and speaking your truth through a poem or a film can in itself be an act of activism. We also talked about the need to reconcile the predominant view of activism as an outward-looking practice with the idea of self-care. These discussions, during which I learned to broaden and contextualise my own ideas around activism, also centred the fact that people of colour and minorities are often neglected and isolated by the structures and dynamics of mainstream politics and of activism as well, so they often do their activism within their communities. For a marginalised community, therefore, daily acts of resistance and survival are instances of activism.

Expression / activism

Having established that Shake! frames activism as a broad, contextualised concept that can—especially in the case of marginalised communities—be found in individual acts of daily resistance, it is necessary to now explore the ways in which art can function as a tool for transformation and as a form of activism in this context. Speaking of the activist aspect of Shake!, Sai says:

> The activist element of that is engaging young people with issues, and the call out we give them is 'What makes you angry?' 'What injustices are you experiencing and know about?', and then to respond to those using art. So that's where the activism comes in, 'cause it's a direct response to those feelings.

When discussing art and activism with Ollie, former Shake! facilitator, he suggested a different view: "[P]roducing some political art is not it seems [...] a sufficient condition for then becoming politically active, if being politically active is something different from just producing art." This reflection brings up the important question of whether producing so-called 'political' art equates to being politically active, or if it is something different.

If we look at the model that Shake! proposes, participants that come to Shake! are expected to go through a number of different stages: seeing injustice, feeling anger/frustration, learning skills, expressing themselves, doing something about it. If we look at what takes place during the intensive courses, we can see that there are moments for political discussion, acquiring creative skills, producing art, and then sharing this art, acquired knowledge, and skills at the public showcase and in different contexts in each individual's daily life—which may or may not include participation in broader social movements. But this still poses the following question: are the last two stages of the model—expression and action— separate things, or is expression *in itself* a form of actively addressing an issue?

If we return to the theories on political and critical art explored earlier in this book, it could be argued that artistic expression of a political message does not necessarily amount to art activism, if the artist or work is not directly involved in a practice for social change (Lippard 1984, Grindon 2010:11). But if we move forward to an understanding of art activism that is contextualised rather than abstract and attempting to be universal, the political expressions that emerge from Shake! are not only commentaries on political issues or cathartic exercises within a radical pedagogy project. These artistic works that target a number of issues such as race, colonialism, and state violence, produced by marginalised young people and part of a process of developing and strengthening political subjectivities, are then penetrating the public sphere when they are shared in public events and even online, and in this way, enact dissensus by interfering with the dominant discourse of the status quo and inserting marginalised voices with messages of dissent. If, like Rancière (2010), we understand politics as the redistribution of the sensible, and following from Benjamin (1970), we look at both the content of the artwork and also at who takes control over the means of production, the creative acts of Shake! participants not only express critiques of society, but also irrupt in the public sphere by taking control over artistic media and producing their own work which is then shared and distributed. This work is actively attempting to enact structural change by means of diversifying artistic practice and challenging dominant narratives. We must also consider, in relation to this, that the lack of affiliation to wider movements that characterises much of what Shake! does is not due to a disengagement from politics, but to the aforementioned fact that many movements and activist spaces in the UK are still exclusionary and do not represent the experiences of marginalised young people of colour. It is important to also note here that Shake!'s position in relation to the art world is different to that of groups like

BP or not BP?. While some art activist groups actively choose to operate outside of the institutional framework,[14] Shake! strategically chooses to be visible in certain artistic, activist, and academic environments even when its practice is critical of these spaces, as the presence of young marginalised voices in these arenas contributes to the legitimisation of these voices.

Art as an instrument/art for art's sake

When asked about his views on art as activism, Sai replied that when answering this question, he always looks to Nigerian writer and activist Ken Saro-Wiwa, who used to say that art must provoke change, do something. Sai said he follows this line of thought, and does not want to do 'art for art's sake'. In another interview with former Shake! participant Orla, we discussed how she first began to draw connections between art and activism. This brought us to a conversation on art and politics, and also to the idea of 'political art'. She explained:

> I started working on a magazine *HeadSpace*, which me and my friends founded, and it was all about art, creative writing. But we were using those as tools or platforms to tackle the issue of mental health, and how society sees mental health, so I guess the combination of those two things made me see that art is more than something in a gallery, and that it can be very socially engaged and useful.

When I asked Orla about the different artistic media she uses, she responded:

> I started spoken word poetry after I graduated from uni, and I also write short stories, although those aren't political at all, I just do them for fun. Yeah, and then I make art, I do illustration and drawing and all, so paint and stuff.

The way Orla split her work into 'political' and 'not political' caught my attention, as this is a distinction I have used in the past to refer to my own artwork and projects, one that is quite common among many artists/activists. I therefore asked Orla about this distinction, and whether making art that is political or not is a conscious decision for her. She responded:

> Oh, no, and actually in some respect maybe they are political? I don't think I've ever sat down and like 'Oh! I'm gonna write something political that will change shit!' It's more like … I guess I went through a phase of writing these stories about how genocide could happen, and just messing around with different ways where the conclusion to every story was a genocide, I don't know if that's political.

Orla's hesitation around what makes a piece of art political or not reveals a tension between political art as that which is used as an instrument towards

change (in Orla's case, her magazine), and art that may be considered political because it has a political theme or content. This long-standing debate is very much present in the work of Shake!, and is related at the same time to a tension between the personal and the collective, and between self-transformations and structural ones. I asked Orla how she would compare Shake! to other spaces or projects that combine art with activism. She responded:

> I think [Shake!] was different because it was a lot about *your* opinion, and expressing *your*self. Whereas I think, when I volunteered for Amnesty we had a specific campaign or a specific goal, that sort of thing. And if you wanted to do something creative it would be within that, rather than actually using yourself and your own identity to promote some type of issue.

Here Orla makes a distinction between art that is produced for the sake of aiding an already standing campaign, and art that emerges from individual expression and interests, without being limited by a preset goal and a framework. This brings up the following question: is artistic practice that is constrained by (political) objectives still art, or is it at most a 'creative' form of activism as some (e.g. Jelinek 2013) might argue?

When asked if she felt Shake! was a space of activism, Orla said:

> Yeah, I think that's activism. You are empowering people, you are looking for a reaction, it isn't just mere representation. That's the way I look at it. Maybe some people take part and they just want to represent their feelings. But I think there is a certain reason people want to do that, and that you are looking for something, some type of change, and that's activism.

Here, Orla interprets activism as a matter of intention and agency, defining it as someone's intention to produce change. But she also suggests there is an element of empowering others involved, and a quest for a reaction. She then adds:

> I think when it's contained within the Shake! space, it's sort of, you can look at it more as art. But I think once we start bringing that into the world, and we start engaging other people and noticing what they think, then it becomes more activism.

Orla's ideas here make a turn for the external, as she makes a distinction between the internal events of Shake! as art, and the engagement, through art, of other people outside of Shake! as instances of activism. The personal/collective—in this case also internal/external—dichotomy is once again present, as it is here suggested that art is only activism when it engages other people.

Challenging narratives, redistributing the sensible

Explaining the composition and claims of contemporary social movements, Melucci argues that the dispossessed are those who do not have access to jobs, resources, or basic work conditions, but also those who do not possess a political voice (Melucci 1996). Already a decade ago, Della Porta and Diani added, borrowing from Touraine, that we are living in a "programmed society", and that the struggle of the dispossessed is not over means of production, but over the control of information (Della Porta and Diani 2007:54). Although the plurality of contemporary struggles across the world in a time of austerity, climate change, and social unrest cannot be reduced to a fight over the control of information, the idea of the dispossessed as those who struggle for their voices to be heard in the public sphere and in the physical public spaces where it is enacted, and who fight for control over information and narratives, resonates with the creative actions put forward by the groups discussed in this book, who employ artistic means in order to irrupt into the public sphere and challenge the status quo. Both collective, organised direct actions and individual creative acts of subversion can generate an interruption in mainstream discourse and permit a redistribution of the sensible (Rancière 2010:139) that gives space to the oppositional voices of a counterpublic.

The different approaches to activism that art activist groups embrace depend on the particular objectives of each group, but also on the particular context of a practice. The case of Shake! specifically serves to show that the act of dissensus takes a different form and has different political implications according to who is the one breaking the dominant discourse. While the struggle over information and control over narratives might define all of the groups examined in this book, when young people of colour disrupt the consensus there is a redistribution of the sensible that is based around *who* gets to occupy and speak on certain platforms, in addition to the content of the new narratives put forward.

Conclusion

My role in Shake! as a facilitator and researcher, and the conversations I have had with other facilitators and participants, have allowed me to identify the key elements that define what Shake! does, and how certain aspects of the Shake! model are sometimes in tension with one another, allowing fluid experiences and open-ended ideas on what both art and activism are. Shake! is a project that intends to achieve personal and structural change, providing participants with a space for self-transformation, and producing content and instances of knowledge exchange that aim at enacting changes in multiple spheres of society beyond the two yearly intensive courses. The type of creative activity that takes place during Shake!, and the ways in which it is framed by different participants and facilitators, inevitably leads

us to rethink what art activism is, and what it is that makes a politically charged artistic piece 'count' as a political act. Yet the reflections of facilitators and participants of Shake! and the rhetoric built around the project present a number of contradictions and tensions around this matter.

In the first place, Shake!'s dual focus on expression and self-transformation as individual instances of change, and on intervening in activist, creative, and political spaces as forms of structural change, creates an internal/external dichotomy. If the Shake! model is made up of two facets, then is the self-transformation one a prelude into the 'real' activism—the structural change—or are both facets two balanced sides of one 'activist coin'? While Shake! facilitators advocate the importance of instances of self-expression, they also defend a position of art as an instrument, not 'art for art's sake'. But if they indeed implemented an instrumentalist approach to art making, wouldn't this limit the kind of art that young people can do as part of their process of self-transformation? Does this art need to be tied to a political cause in order to be activism, or can it be activism because of the role it has in developing a young person's political subjectivity? Is the activist nature of an artwork found in the content of the piece, the context of its production, or the effect it has as an agent of social change? Although these questions are unlikely to have definite answers, I suggest that beyond certain contradictions that can be found in the rhetoric built around Shake's practice, the project's prefigurative redefining of both art and activism can help us begin to form some responses.

If we look at the processes behind Shake! and the dynamics that take place during Shake! courses, we can see that the instances of personal transformation that the project looks to facilitate take place both through performative acts of creativity, which for the most part take the form of embodied performances of poetry and spoken word, and through group exercises and activities. By dedicating time to forming and expressing feelings and ideas about social and political issues that affect them, participants are able to develop political subjectivities that are later expressed and performed in the public sphere, making their voices heard in a way that, as many participants have expressed, they has never been heard before. In addition to this, I argue that in the intersection between artistic training and the participants' process of developing political subjectivities, we can identify instances of prefiguration, which are particularly interesting for the study of art activism. The enactment of prefigurative politics in this context is the product of three main elements. In the first place, a space is provided that puts into practice values such as equality, horizontality, dialogical learning, decolonial perspectives on art and on healing, and the value of young people's voices. Second, throughout the week there is an implicit redefinition of what artistic practice is, what it can do, and who is entitled to engage in artistic production—Shake! advocates a democratisation of the arts, and reinforces young people and people of colour's right to reclaim creative practice and creative spaces. And third, Shake! places emphasis on the body as a

means for artistic expression, as a tool for resistance, and as a way of relating to others.

These conditions make up a space in which the discussions around politics, the sharing of opinions, and the engagement with social and political issues on both a personal and a collective level are part of the artistic process, thus reconfiguring participants' relationship to both politics and artistic practice. The merging of these two facets brings into action a mode of creative expression that is equally rooted in three principles: articulating thoughts about an issue, artistic expression, and embodied resistance. Putting this model into practice means that Shake! not only aims to create social change through the arts, but actually enacts this change in its processes, producing politically charged work, but also enacting a radical model for aesthetic-political practice. As a result, Shake! is also an example of prefigurative radical education practice, based on a horizontal (Maeckelbergh 2012) form of organisation, a commitment to dialogical learning (Freire 1970), and a recognition of art and embodied knowledge as legitimate sources that can help us understand the world around us and the experiences of others, as well as enact social change.

This links with the final point of this chapter, which is the rethinking of activism and specifically of art activism as a path for social change. Shake!'s practice is based on the idea that personal acts of resistance can be activism, and when these take the form of creative work that communicates personal experiences, producing and sharing this work can contribute to structural changes. This stems from the fact that activism at Shake! is not only about the content of the art produced, but also about the importance of young voices and voices of people of colour being heard in the public sphere. By providing spaces and opportunities for performing, being involved in campaigns, and sharing work, Shake! brings together personal and structural change. In addition to this, the work of Shake! and the narrative that has generated around the project lead to an understanding of activism—and art activism in this case—that is not only about content and/or process, but is also contextual. The same art piece or the same content could be activism or not depending on factors such as who is speaking, when, where and what for, and what the processes are behind that piece. In many cases, it is not just about a poem that denounces a particular social issue, but it is also about a young marginalised person performing that poem in public—Shake! participants like Annie, Onysha, and Orla, for instance, have performed at a variety of artistic, academic, and activist events. This idea of context also applies to other practices presented in this book, as performances by Art Not Oil groups, for instance, would not have the same impact if they did not take place at the museums they are targeting, or if the performances were commissioned.

In presenting the case of Shake!, I have attempted to provide an insight into how politically motivated artistic practice in a pedagogic context can go beyond communicating a political message in artistic form, and actually

enact the ideas and values advocated in its very processes and dynamics. Looking at art activism in different contexts, such as in education, serves to show how aesthetic-political practices can take different forms and be experienced and understood differently according to context, social factors, and the motivations and backgrounds of those involved.

Notes

1 In this chapter, I will focus on the art-activism interactions that take place at Shake! and not as much on the pedagogical aspect, as this focus will allow reflections that can contribute to the core themes and questions of this book.
2 Jane Trowell, personal interview (2014).
3 Shake! focuses on race and prioritises the voices of young people of colour. However, the course is open to all young people and the programme encourages applications from people who face oppression due to other issues such as gender, disability, sexual orientation, and class.
4 Sai Murray, personal interview (2014).
5 Farzana Khan, personal interview (2014).
6 Film available at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=y32MHdLlNsE.
7 Ken Saro-Wiwa was an Ogoni activist and writer who was killed by the Nigerian military in 1995 because of his activism against Shell. Mark Duggan was an unarmed black man killed by a police officer in London in 2011.
8 Poem acquired directly from the author, 2014.
9 For more on performativity see Chapter 3.
10 Poem featured in *Birthday Magazine*: http://birthdaymagazine.co.uk/2013/10/23/over-to-you-annie-rocksons-my-application/.
11 Orla Price, personal interview (2014).
12 For more on decolonial epistemologies see, for instance, Escobar and Mignolo's *Globalization and the Decolonial Option* (2010).
13 Ollie, personal interview (2013). Ollie is a pseudonym.
14 See Chapter 7 of this book.

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7 Breaking the mould

Art activism and art institutions

Introduction

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o argues that "[t]he struggle between the arts and the state can best be seen in performance in general and in the battle over performance space in particular" (Ngũgĩ 1997:11). He adds that in a performance the struggle over space is concerned with "its definition, delimitation, and regulation" (Ngũgĩ 1997:12).

Previous chapters in this book have addressed the way that art activists plan performance actions, facilitate participation, and allow instances for personal and collective transformation. They also addressed public at public space and the public sphere in practices that take place in the streets and that look to engage with, and, on occassions, transform the public space, as well as those that aim at having their voices heard in the public realm. This chapter will return to the performance actions of the anti-oil sponsorship campaign groups of the Art Not Oil coalition in order to examine the relationship between these groups and the institutions they target. It will return to issues of space, look at site specificity and institutional critique, and follow the growth and development of the Art Not Oil campaign from a focus on oil sponsorship and environmental issues to a wider stance that includes other instances of critique, and that aligns these groups with an international museum liberation movement. Before this, the idea of autonomy from cultural institutions will be discussed. By looking at and problematising ideas of site specificity, autonomy, critique, and the public sphere, this chapter will explore the specificities of the relationship between these contemporary art activist practices and major cultural institutions.

The search for autonomy: positioning art activist groups

Gavin Grindon (2010) argues that art produced by activists cannot really exist in the context of art institutions because institutions do not want to take risks, and will prefer art that has a political edge to it, but not art that is radically transgressive. In reality, in many cases art activists actually *choose* to remain outside of institutional frameworks, and an understanding

of this rejection can be helped by considering the characteristics of contemporary UK-based activist movements outlined and explored in previous chapters. In the first place, for many activists it would be an ethical problem to work with or for institutions that have hierarchical structures, corporate sponsors, and who have the power to censor whatever art they do not find appropriate—or that their sponsors do not find appropriate. The neoliberalisation of the art world (Jelinek 2013) and museums' increasing adherence to "corporate models of activity" (Stallabrass 2004:14) is something that many artists and activists alike are aware of, and sometimes actively choose to reject. In the second place, because art activism is conceived by practitioners as a tool for direct action and community building in addition to reflection and public engagement, remaining within the framework of the institution and the limited sphere of the art world would hinder these practices from fulfilling their full ideals and potential (Holmes 2004), as art in institutional contexts is often "disconnected from actual political processes" (Stallabrass 2004:20). As Mouffe argues, for art to achieve social change we need to widen "the field of artistic intervention, by intervening directly in a multiplicity of social spaces in order to oppose the program of total social mobilization of capitalism" (Mouffe 2007:1).

Holmes (2010) explains the need for autonomy[1] in transgressive art through the analogy of activism in the museum as a game: 'Liar's Poker'. In Liar's Poker the artist claims to have the highest card, which is the ace of politics. But she is usually bluffing. Sometimes the artist will pretend that she is bluffing—for instance, "to pretend that you are only pretending to occupy the museum"—up to the point when she plays the card. Then she withdraws her winnings, or gets kicked out of the museum. Holmes calls this the 'frame of hypocrisy', which is to say that within the institutional framework political issues are not dealt with; they are only represented (Holmes 2010:19). Similarly, Grindon (2010) argues that this kind of art

> might mimic the practices or raise the issues of activism, but it does so in a context without consequence. One can be as subversive and questioning of social relations as one wishes in a gallery [...] But doing so within actual social relations has greater risks, which many artists and institutions are less willing to take. Much that is labelled art activism is not, in fact, particularly active when it comes to changing society.
>
> (Grindon 2010:11)

Stallabrass offers similar thoughts in his take on politicised work at documenta, a major art exhibition that takes place every 5 years in the city of Kassel, when he argues that "as long as such work remains within conventional art-world structures, such critiques contain self-evident contradictions that weaken their likely power" (Stallabrass 2004:188).

In response to this, Holmes suggests that the adequate reaction to the state of the art world is to exit it and move into "marginal realms of opposition" (Holmes 2004:551). By this, he means the space that political activism

offers; a space without the safety net of art institutions, away from the corporate sponsors, impact evaluations, and media partners, and embedded in actual social practice that actively works against the system and towards a better reality. Art activism is the only 'real art'—if we employ an understanding of art as a transgressive and transformative experience—because the sphere of political activism provides a free space for thinking and imagining a better world.

An example of art abandoning the institution completely and inserting itself in other spheres in order to effect change was P A N D E M I C, a multimedia DiY anti-capitalist art festival that first took place in Sheffield in 2011, and later moved on to other cities in the UK. It was inspired by the ideas and work of the Situationist International, and stood against the alienation of the subject under a capitalist society. I first heard about P A N D E M I C through a friend, and participated by contributing artwork to the second and third editions of the festival: Leeds in April 2013 and Derby in October the same year.

From a 2012 P A N D E M I C zine, which includes artwork and writing by different contributors, comes the following:

> The purpose of P A N D E M I C is to inspire as many people as possible, to involve people who are not just the usual already "converted" art educated types. [...] P A N D E M I C has evolved in direct opposition to the prescribed and elitist, market-driven nature of the artworld, and the government funded stuff which is only commissioned because it ticks agenda boxes. P A N D E M I C exists with no money spent or earned at all.
>
> P A N D E M I C is in direct opposition to the artworld and art market - this world is boring and dead - it consists of a series of cliquey institutionalised in-jokes, and is fundamentally controlled by rich buyers and investors.

This zine feature/manifesto put forward by the collective, situates the groups' practice as oppositional to the art world and proposes an alternative mode of producing, showcasing, and experiencing art that does not involve monetary transactions of any sort, thus separating itself from government-funded and third sector cultural organisations as well.

P A N D E M I C events brought people together in order to produce, share, and experience art in a non-commodified manner and in a non-institutional framework, attempting to prefiguratively build an alternative for artistic experiences. There was no selection process for participants and the festival actively included and showcased artists with different kinds of ability. The exhibition in Derby, for instance, included work by artists with learning disabilities and mental health conditions. Furthermore, the politicised nature of the event turned the creative act—and the consumption/experience of art—into a political act, but a self-contained one. Instead of

targeting specific institutions in society, be it cultural ones, political ones, or the media, P A N D E M I C built an alternative space that used art as a tool for talking about politics, engaging with social issues, bringing people together, and rethinking how art could function in society in an inclusive, horizontal, and non-commodified manner.

But when thinking of the positionality of art activist groups in relation to art institutions, it is paramount to consider that often it is difficult to escape the art world all together, as oppositional practices can in fact be considered part of that ecosystem. As Sholette argues:

> Even those artists who claim to care nothing about the "art world" in New York, London, Berlin, and so forth, or those artists who produce "community-based" projects and installations in small cities and towns, or those who operate collectively at the outermost spatial and geographical regions of the market, still inadvertently play a role within this world.
>
> (Sholette 2011:123)[2]

Furthermore, more often than not artists as well as grassroots activists collaborate with and/or receive funding from NGOs and public agencies, as well as sometimes from private organisations. In some instances groups might collaborate with the same organisations they are challenging in their work (Kester 2011:125), as in the case of critical work commissioned by museums.[3] While a study of art activism need not centre on the art world, as I have argued in the introduction to this book, considering how different activist groups stand in relation to its institutions is useful in order to understand the power dynamics in place between grassroots and institutional initiatives and how art activism practices might differ from institutional ones.

Speaking of Occupy in the US, for instance, McKee states that "artists who engaged with Occupy undertook an exodus or desertion from the art system, on the one hand, while taking that system itself as a target of action and leveraging on the other" (McKee 2016:25). He adds that "Occupy and its afterlives would be unthinkable without a certain proximity to and entwinement with the art system and its attendant tensions and contradictions" (McKee 2016:32). This is due to the fact that the movement often engaged with the arts by adopting art as a language and as a resource, and by making use of cultural venues as sites of protest and doing politics. This was the case, for instance, for Occupy Museums, a collective that emerged from Occupy Wall Street and "calls out economic and social injustice propagated by institutions of art and culture".[4]

The groups and practices discussed in this book range from those that completely reject the framework of cultural institutions and operate outside of it to those that challenge them while keeping a foot in, and those that on occasion work together with institutions in an attempt to transform them. What they all have in common, however, is the commitment to social and

political issues that are at the root of their practice. Their work mostly originates from social movements, grassroots spaces, and political organising rather than in the frame of the institution. In this sense, while sometimes maintaining connections to the art world, these groups aim to preserve a level of autonomy by framing their work outside of institutional frames and criteria.

Site specificity

Art Not Oil is a coalition of groups that stand against oil sponsorship of the arts and for a fossil fuel-free culture. While the coalition is diverse, including grassroots groups, NGOs, artists, and different forms of campaigning activity, the coalition includes several groups such as Liberate Tate, Shell Out Sounds, and BP or not BP? whose main activity takes the form of performance actions at the institutions whose sponsorship deals they are targeting. Because of this, and regardless of the fact that these performance actions are not commissioned by art institutions, it is useful to look at them from the perspective of site specificity, as this will allow an interrogation of the relationship between performance action and site, in terms of aesthetics, processes, and politics.

Site-specific art can be understood as art that is created for a specific location, and responds to the particularities of that space (Kwon 2002). Kwon argues that in contemporary site-specific art there can be multiple layers of sites, from the physical space of an artwork to the art world that frames it, to specific social, political, and economic issues or sites the work addresses. Sites can be understood as (inter)textual as well as spatial (Kwon 1997:95), and indeed the museum as a site can be described as "the union of physical place, including museum buildings, objects, and exhibits, with intangible or virtual 'places' that create a multi-dimensional environment through the connection of people with objects and memory" (Leach 2007:200).

As site-specific, performance actions by Art Not Oil groups adapt to and respond to the physical characteristics of a space. 'Recces' at the early stages of actions are common—see, for instance, the process behind the BP Vikings action in Chapter 2—and actions are always planned keeping in mind the specificities of the site. Art collective Liberate Tate's 2015 performance *Time Piece*,[5] for instance, took over the Turbine Hall at Tate Modern for twenty-four hours, beginning at high tide on 13 June and ending at high tide the following day. During this time performers used willow charcoal to write down phrases about art, activism, and climate change on the Hall's sloping concrete floor, beginning at the bottom end of the slope and making their way up, as a tide, towards the top end. The performance was envisioned specifically for this location, as the floor of the Turbine Hall not only provided a suitable surface for writing, but also a striking visual metaphor for a rising wave of resistance (Figure 7.1). Similarly, BP or not BP? performances often take place in the vast, bright Great Court at the

Figure 7.1 Liberate Tate performing *Time Piece* at Tate Modern, London, 13 June 2015. Image by the author.

British Museum. This choice of performance space—which is due to several factors including accessibility, risk, mobility, and reaching audiences—has resulted in recurring tropes in BP or not BP? performances, such as the use of the double staircase in the Great Court for a dramatic entrance, or the ceremonial processions around the round Reading Room (a colossal rotunda at the centre of the Court). Furthermore, several BP or not BP? performance actions seek to include the various BP logos that are found on banners and walls of the museum as central visual elements. This on occasion determines not only the angles for photos and videos, but also the scripts of performances

Another factor that influences how a group will choose to plan their actions is the type of artistic activity that takes place at the cultural institution they are targeting. In all cases, be it theatre, visual arts, or music, the art forms that are found at institutions targeted by Art Not Oil groups have served as inspiration to activists planning performance actions against oil sponsorship. Such was the case for Liberate Tate's 2011 performance Human Cost, which featured two veiled figures pouring an oil-like substance on a naked man lying on the floor of the Tate Britain gallery, and marked the first anniversary of the BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico (Liberate Tate 2012:138). This performance, which used the naked human body as a focus point, took inspiration in the gallery, as it responded to the sculptural display *Single Form: The Body in Sculpture from Rodin to Hepworth*, which was sponsored by BP. Similarly, Shell Out Sounds' *Oil in the Water* performance

action at the Royal Festival Hall described in earlier chapters included a verse sung in Portuguese, which was a tribute to the São Paulo Symphony Orchestra performing at the hall on that evening.

In addition to being an aesthetic choice, the decision to respond to the content and form of exhibitions can be seen as a strategic choice aimed at avoiding confrontation with security forces and the police, considering the power of art as a form of protest that generates confusion and is hard to define and pin down (BAVO 2008:114), as well as hard to repress or control (Graeber 2007). Danny Nemu from Shell Out Sounds explains that singing "gets you into places, you can do it with quite a small group of people and it's very hard for the police [to deal with]".[6] On the other hand, sometimes activists strive to make evident the differences between their kind of grassroots, participatory, DiY political forms of art, and the often-elitist art of large cultural institutions. In his formal analysis of the Occupy Wall Street camp, McKee compares the horizontality of activists' signs displayed on the ground with the symbolic verticality of the Wall Street skyscrapers (2016:105). A similar comparison can be made of the grassroots DiY aesthetics of BP or not BP? against the grandiose imperial walls of the British Museum.

The response to the art forms that inhabit cultural institutions is a second element that allows us to look at the performance actions of Art Not Oil as site-specific work. But site-specific art that is at the same time participatory also engages, on most occasions, with the community of that space. In her work on socially engaged and applied performance, Shaughnessy argues that in most site-specific applied performances such as interventions in neighbourhood buildings, in offender institutions, or in health facilities, practitioners engage with participants that have a daily, emotional, and sometimes long-term connection to a space (Shaughnessy 2012:97). Speaking of site-specific dialogical projects, Kester argues that "[t]he particular constellation of forces in place at a given site, brought into conjunction with the consciousness and predisposition of participants, are generative in ways that exceed both the conditions of site and the subjectivity of individual actors" (2011:37). But how well do the performance actions of Art Not Oil fit within a framework of site specificity, considering the particularities that differentiate their aesthetic-political practice from institutionalised art?

In the case of anti-oil sponsorship interventions, participants in performances include both museum-goers who have varying degrees of involvement with the institution—from tourists to museum members—and activists whose motivation lies in an environmental cause and a set of campaign objectives. Several Art Not Oil groups often resort to a narrative around the relationship of oil companies to museums that relies on the emotional connection of the London public to the city's cultural institutions. The use of phrases such as 'Let's kick BP out of our beloved cultural institutions' in flyers and petitions aims to appeal to people's emotional attachment to certain organisations, hoping they will support these actions, and/or feel compelled

to act themselves. But in these instances the objective of performances is still not to transform a community's relationship to a space, but rather, to appeal to the public's existing sentimental connection as a strategic way of gaining support for a cause. Site specificity in this sense is determined by the focus on the internal politics of the institution (the site) and the environmental damage caused by its sponsor(s), instead of the effect it has on the public that is built around that cultural organisation.

At the same time, however, there is arguably another community that is built around cultural institutions, which is composed by its workers. Therefore, it is important to consider the ways in which gallery and museum staff are intentionally and unintentionally affected by these interventionist performance actions, whether or not they become involved in them. While during my observant participation I have noted many occasions on which these performances have caused confrontational encounters with security staff at museums, I have also observed and experienced complicit support from staff, as was the case of front desk workers at Southbank Centre quietly humming along Shell Out Sounds' songs and directing discreet smiles at singers. When staff relate to the political issues that these groups bring up in their actions, these performances act as a public statement on ideas they have but can rarely voice themselves due to their roles in these institutions. These actions therefore have the potential to alter staff's relationship to their work environment, by the mere fact of voicing and exploring questions that relate to the ethics of the institution in which they work, and on occasion, generating or furthering discussions on these issues among staff themselves.

The effect that these performances have on staff, however, can also sometimes be problematic, as a review of one of Liberate Tate's 2015 actions highlights. Referring to cleaning staff clearing up the fake bills thrown to the ground by performers during *The Reveal*, a reviewer says: "One wonders about the effects of the campaign when it's low-level museum staff who have to deal with the messy realities."[7] Indeed, the tension between wanting to generate an imposition to institutions but not wanting to inconvenience cleaning and maintenance staff—who are often the most vulnerable employees in the institution in terms of pay and contracts—is present in the planning of these groups.

The discreet agreement and support from staff in some London cultural institutions has actually become extended and noticeably more open since late 2014, when Art Not Oil and the Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS) began to support each other's campaigns, drawing attention to the links between the ethical concerns surrounding corporate sponsorship and the move towards privatisation of gallery and museum staff, particularly in the case of the National Gallery.[8] Performances by Art Not Oil and BP or not BP? specifically and PCS representatives' speeches alike began to draw the connections between different contentious processes and deals in cultural institutions. Indeed, a survey conducted with British Museum staff, many of which are represented by the PCS, revealed that 62 per cent

of members thought oil sponsorship of the museum was not ethical.[9] Both movements began bridging issues under an anti-neoliberalism discourse and a desire for change in the cultural sector as a step towards wider social and political change (Serafini 2017). This, as I will argue later, has been the result of an evolution of the campaign from a specific target that was fossil fuel companies, towards broader issues of environmental and social justice.

Critiquing the institution

Site-specific art established itself as a genre around the late 1960s to early 1970s. In its beginnings, the "site" in question was initially a physical location, composed of the material aspects of the said space. But soon after came forms of conceptual art, feminist art, and institutional critique that, as argued earlier, "conceived the site not only in physical and spatial terms but as a *cultural* framework defined by the institutions of art" (Kwon 1997:87–88). Site specificity then has come to mean to "decode and/or recode the institutional conventions so as to expose their hidden yet motivated operations", and their "relationship to broader socioeconomic and political processes of the day" (Kwon 1997:88). Site specificity is therefore, from this perspective, akin to institutional critique, and increasingly falls into social critique more broadly.

Emerging in the 1960s, institutional critique is an artistic practice and genre that examines, critiques, and exposes the structures and politics of galleries, museums, and other art institutions, as well as reflecting on the role and condition of art itself (Alberro and Stimson 2011). Exponents of institutional critique including Andrea Fraser and Hans Haacke have examined through their work such issues as the display of art in museums, the role of museums as public institutions, and the politics of curatorial practice. Institutional critique has been broadly divided into two stages. In the first stage emerging in the 1960s, artists "examined the conditioning of their own activity by the ideological and economic frames of the museum, with the goal of breaking out" (Holmes 2009:55). This strand was linked to the anti-institutional politics of the time. The second stage, starting in the 1980s, "pursued the systematic exploration of museological representation, examining its links to economic power and its epistemological roots in a colonial science that treats the other like an object to be shown in a vitrine". This stage adopted a "subjectivizing turn, unimaginable without the influence of feminism and postcolonial historiography" (Holmes 2009:57).

As critics of BP's and other oil companies' sponsorship of the arts, Art Not Oil groups are also critical of the institutions that hold sponsorship deals with companies from this industry. But these groups come from an environmental background, and their main stance is against the oil industry and its human and environmental impact. Is it useful then to look at these performances as instances of institutional critique, or are these actions something else, considering their position in relation to institutions

and to wider social movements? In order to answer this question, it might be useful to trace the evolution of Art Not Oil and the groups it brings together in terms of their stance on issues of cultural policy and institutional politics, to see what kinds of critique these performances give place to.

At the time when I began conducting research on these issues in 2013, none of the Art Not Oil groups, despite the clear opposition to elements of institutional culture such as what is described as unethical sponsors, and a conscious preference for dynamics of art making that are open, collaborative, and inclusive, claimed to have a transformation of arts institutions and of the cultural sphere as their primary objective. I asked Greg from environmental choir Shell Out Sounds about his thoughts on cultural institutions, and whether he thought the work of Shell Out Sounds was in any way contesting the structures of the art world. He said:

> In terms of the institutions and allowing people to think about them in a different way, I think it's a question of whether what you do is a way of saying 'do we need this institution at all?' or, does it just mean to fundamentally reconsider, you know; can we keep the good parts? Can we keep the building and reorganise the structure? If there's a board at the Southbank that isn't made out of bankers, property developers, entrepreneurs, if you just replaced those people with people who are seen as more positive, would that be OK? Or do you need to fundamentally rethink it? But that starts to diverge on this other anarchist critique of cultural institutions, which I'm not afraid of.[10]

Greg's position, which is shared by many activists I have encountered, is that of acknowledging the problems with cultural institutions, but not wanting to distract focus from the environmental cause. This choice is partly due to the fact that not all activists any one group agree on their views on institutions. Some critiques are more radical than others, even when it comes to the issue of sponsorship itself. In reference to this, Greg adds:

> Well there's something about groups, isn't it? There's probably something to be said for a lot needing to agree on a programme of … statements of any kind really. […] It might be nice to think that we were all passionately committed to a complete re-ordering or re-structuring of society, including cultural institutions.

But in addition to the difficulty of getting a diverse group of people to collectively agree on other issues beyond the environmental objective that brings them all together, the lack of a stronger, explicit critique of other aspects of cultural institutions was—and to an extent, still is—linked to a concern around antagonising audiences, considering that the direct public (and target) for these interventions is indeed the public that attends and works at cultural institutions.[11] As mentioned earlier, Art Not Oil groups

have for years reproduced a narrative that positions cultural institutions as beloved pristine organisations, which are being tarnished by oil companies and which need to be saved or 'liberated'. Even though these groups target institutions directly, a more explicit and confrontational critique of institutional practices would mean a change in narrative from oil companies being the 'bad guys' to this role passing on to arts organisations, and might make the general public and professionals in the cultural sector more hesitant about supporting the cause.

Shifting focus completely to the institution instead of the sponsor opens up other questions related to the way the institution works. Speaking of the tensions between campaigns that are 'audience-friendly' and a revolutionary rethinking of art, art activist John Jordan offers the following views:

> I'm totally against the kind of institutionalisation of the art world, and the Disneyfication of culture, and the whole elite bourgeois culture that the Tate represents. And you know, in a way … of course you're not gonna win a campaign by saying you're against the Tate, and against BP, and against everyone. But I think you can be a bit more subtle and careful […] because for me, as a revolutionary artist, I think the notion of art is really problematic. I think we need to redefine art, expand the concept of art … something that's linked to everyday life, that's fundamentally never separate from everyday life, and […] the idea of the artist as a monopoly of creativity I think is an incredibly destructive thing.[12]

In this way, Jordan argues for the need to bring together the direct action aspect of protests against oil sponsorship with a prefigurative challenge to the art institution, placing emphasis on the processes of art activist practices and the way in which actors position themselves in relation to the institutionalised art world. It is not enough then to engage in aesthetic-political practice that targets oil companies, it is also necessary, as argued in Chapter 3, to do this in a way that puts forward certain values and ideas around the role of art in society; namely the idea that art can be a democratic tool for revolutionary change. While many of these groups actively seek a democratisation of art through the processes that guide their practice, the narratives around their work, which are focused on fossil fuels, can sometimes contradict this, if they fail to acknowledge how other aspects of cultural institutions beyond oil sponsorship are exploitative, undemocratic, elitist, and/or unsustainable.

But while it remains the case that the Art Not Oil campaign still concentrates on oil sponsorship, in the last few years some groups like BP or not BP? have begun expanding their scope, and including a critique of other aspects of institutional practice as part of their overall narrative and as part of their performance actions. Ngũgĩ speaks of the memories that performance spaces carry, referring in his study to the colonial history of the National Theatre in Kenya. Indeed "site-specific art can lead to the unearthing of

repressed histories, provide support for greater visibility of marginalized groups and issues, and initiate the re(dis)covery of 'minor' places so far ignored by the dominant culture" (Kwon 1997:105). In the case of BP or not BP? performance actions, we find a parallel with the politics and history of the British Museum as a performance space, given its links to Empire, and nowadays, to the oil industry through BP's sponsorship. The history and the collection of the British Museum have had significant influence in the kinds of performances that BP or not BP? has carried out in that space. Several actions have responded to the themes of BP-sponsored exhibitions and events, such as the BP Vikings action described in Chapter 2, and more recent actions in 2016 responded, for instance, to the *Sunken Cities* exhibition of Egyptian artefacts.[13]

Since BP or not BP?—previously known as Reclaim Shakespeare Company and targeting BP-sponsored Royal Shakespeare Company plays—moved on to the British Museum as their main site of intervention, their campaign has grown from BP-specific to a wider, more nuanced critique of the relationship between BP and the British Museum, covering issues of human rights abuses, repatriation of objects, colonialism, and the repression of dissent. This can be seen, for instance, in a performance action addressing the issue of stolen land, environmental threats, and stolen Indigenous Australian artefacts coinciding with the *Indigenous Australia: Enduring Civilisation* exhibition at the British Museum in 2015 (Serafini 2017) (Figure 7.2). Other groups such as Liberate Tate, however, have on occasion engaged with the wider politics of the institutions they target but never in such explicit ways, showing how within the same coalition there are different ways of managing strategic approaches, aesthetic visions, and prefigurative approaches that draw connections between environmentalist goals, social justice, and the creation of a more democratic, harmonious, and just culture.

Delivering a campaign and performing a set of actions that revolve around such symbolically powerful institutions as museums and galleries calls for a critique and a rethinking of the campaign's objectives in relation to those institutions, but also for a consideration of how the site and its politics are part of a wider structure of power that can uphold the status quo, or instead become points of resistance and change. In the words of Boris Groys:

> The museum is not secondary to "real" history, nor is it merely a reflection and documentation of what "really" happened outside its walls according to the autonomous laws of historical development. The contrary is true: "reality" itself is secondary in relation to the museum—the "real" can be defined only in comparison with the museum collection. This means that any change in the museum collection brings about a change in our perception of reality itself.
>
> (Groys 2013:24)

Figure 7.2 Banner signing in solidarity with Aboriginal Australian activists during a BP or not BP? performance action at the British Museum, protesting against BP's sponsorship of the exhibition *Indigenous Australia: Enduring Civilisation*, 19 July 2015. Image by the author.

In relation to this, Jess from BP or not BP? says:

> We've realised that cultural spaces are fantastic spaces for this battle between society and big oil to play out. They are a brilliant way to reach the general public, but also because of the cultural power of these spaces, what we do in them also has extra power. So it's this debate that is a global and also a national debate. We are using the British Museum as a stage for that debate to be had, and that seems like a really, really useful and worthwhile thing to do, even if we lose and BP sponsors the British Museum for ages.[14]

This understanding of the power of museums as site of contention has for some time been of interest to scholars (Luke 2002), but has in the past few years gained special attention from activists as well (Dean 2016, Not An Alternative 2016).

When considering the wider social and political issues that some Art Not Oil groups such as BP or not BP? address in their performances, it is also important to bear in mind that thinking of "site as something more than a place—as repressed ethnic history, a political cause, a disenfranchised social group—is a crucial conceptual leap in redefining the 'public' role of art and artists" (Kwon 1997:96). BP or not BP?'s move towards a position that stands against corporate power and privatisation in the cultural

sector and for the decolonisation of cultural institutions stems from the realisation that activism centred in and around such symbolically charged institutions as museums needs to address the history, symbolic power, and position of those institutions if it is not to be complicit in other injustices and forms of oppression occurring in or connected to those spaces. One of the ways in which this stance has been enacted is through solidarity with other struggles taking place at the British Museum and other cultural institutions. This includes the mobilisation of museum and gallery workers against the privatisation of their jobs, and the campaign of blacklisted workers against Carillion, one of the companies involved in the high-profile blacklisting of construction workers case (Smith and Chamberlain 2015), which is currently facilities operator for the British Museum. Another way is the gradual transformation of the narratives behind the group's performances, which have evolved to include issues of human and workers' rights. This was the case in a performance carried out with Gilberto Torres Martinez, a former oil sector union leader from Colombia who was abducted by paramilitaries in 2002, and who came to London to file a case against BP, a shareholder at the time of the company he was working for and which is accused of ordering his abduction (Serafini 2017). As mentioned earlier, other performances have made reference to issues of colonialism and the repatriation of objects, while others have been staged in collaboration and in solidarity with other campaigns and groups. Such was the case of an intervention planned with the group London Mexico Solidarity against BP's sponsorship of the British museum's Day of the Dead celebration in 2015. This took place at a time when BP was negotiating a new business deal with the Mexican government. BP or not BP?'s practice has slowly moved towards a wider anti-corporate, social and environmental justice stance, which upholds a decolonial approach in terms of source communities' rights, the democratisation and rethinking of artistic practice, and the unearthing and exposure of the museum's colonial legacy.

The campaigns for the transformation of cultural institutions that BP or not BP? has worked in partnership and in solidarity with are just a few examples of all the campaigns that are currently active in the UK and in other parts of the world addressing these and other related issues. The year 2016 has seen the trending of the hashtag #MuseumDetoxFlash as a result of the Museum Detox Network's call for flash mobs to highlight the lack of diversity in UK museums and advocate a diversification of the cultural sector and its audiences.[15] But also, the proliferation of groups and movements addressing the ethics of the sponsorship and broader funding of museums, as well as other issues related to museums' governance, their relationships with source communities, the narratives told in exhibitions, and lack of diversity in exhibiting artists, has led, among other things, to what has been called a 'museum liberation movement' (Not An Alternative 2016). In the US, key exponents of this movement include Decolonize This Place,

The Natural History Museum, and G.U.L.F. (Global Ultra Luxury Faction). Decolonize This Place has gained significant media attention as a result of staging protests at the Brooklyn Museum with the aim of drawing parallels between the displacement of Palestinians as a result of the Israel-Palestine conflict, the displacement of local communities in Brooklyn due to gentrification, and the fact that the museum is built on Native American land.[16] And G.U.L.F. have, among other things, staged spectacular performance actions at the Guggenheim Museum in New York in opposition to the unfair treatment and alarming conditions of migrant workers in the building of new museums in Abu Dhabi (McKee 2016). In Europe, movements against oil sponsorship of the arts have recently flourished in countries like France (Libérons le Louvre) and the Netherlands (Fossil Free Culture NL). As US-based collective Not An Alternative puts it, what all these groups, networks, and movements have in common is that "[d]espite their differing objectives, rhetoric, and strategic positioning, their strength comes from their common practice of treating the museum as a site of insurgency. Institutions' names, symbols, perspectives, and ideals become objects of political struggle" (Not An Alternative 2016:6).

Not An Alternative argues that institutional (or museum) liberation is not reformist, but that it is rather about using cultural institutions as bases for action against the capitalist state (Not An Alternative 2016:6–7). But there is in fact a variety of approaches and objectives put forward by the different groups that are currently making use of institutions either as targets of their protests or as platforms for wider social and political issues. There have indeed been several campaigns and movements under the umbrella of museum liberation and that have been reformist in nature, demanding rights for museum workers, the end to an unethical sponsor, or the diversification of museum audiences and artists on display, without demanding a complete restructuring of the way culture is produced, shared and experienced. However, the trajectory of Art Not Oil as presented here suggests that many of these UK-based groups have indeed discarded a reformist approach for more radical, holistic strategies that are prefigurative and challenge the politics of culture as well as aiming to advance environmental and social justice.

The museum as public space

In the performance actions of Art Not Oil, as well as in other comparable actions by groups in the UK, the US, and elsewhere, the museum is not only a site of performance and a target of critique but is also a public space, within which art activists are exercising their right to protest, and where the politics, processes, and ethics of that same space are also being challenged. In her analysis of the relationship between art and public space, Rosalyn Deutsche argues that

> the term *public space* does not designate an empirically identifiable terrain or even a space produced by social relations. Nor does public space refer only to concrete institutional sites where meanings are manufactured and circulated. It designates instead the relations structuring vision and discourse themselves.
>
> (Deutsche 1992:44)

In this sense, museums can be perceived not only as public spaces but also as entities in the public sphere (Barrett 2011), a concept most famously elaborated by Habermas (1991). Deutsche adds, however, that because of their underlying aestheticist ideologies separating collections from the rest of society, art institutions can act as fragmenting forces, and as such can be considered "the antitheses of public space" (Deutsche 1992:46). In response to this, a new wave of museology beginning in the late 1980s and early 1990s has attempted to democratise the museum by rethinking its relationship not only to its public but also to its own history (Barrett 2011:4). Attempts have been made to incorporate the voices of source communities and local communities in the planning of exhibitions and public programmes, with differing levels of success. Commissioned works of institutional critique have also been an important feature of this strand of museology. But the work of groups like BP or not BP? puts forward a different kind of critique that challenges not only specific areas of museum practice such as corporate sponsorship and the provenance of exhibits. Their work also puts forward a different perspective of *how* museums can be public spaces and how they can be platforms for and of the public sphere.

Barrett argues that in the study of museums and the public sphere,

> The *performative* aspect of democratic sites is often overlooked, while the existence of physical space is prioritized over the practice of democracy. The practice of being part of the public in the space of the museum—recognizing how being a citizen in the museum constitutes the public—is valuable for understanding the democratic nature of the museum.
>
> (Barrett 2011:16–17)

Adhering to the view put forward by Barrett (2011:22), who builds on several critiques of Habermas's public sphere (e.g. Fraser 1990), I argue that in campaigns such as those described here, democracy is exercised in the museum by challenging norms and codes upheld by the status quo. The public sphere is not one in which oppositional views need to adhere to normative mainstream ones, but one where views are challenged in a variety of ways, from direct confrontation to slower, discursive processes. It is the "acknowledgement of the existence of different cultural values"—such as those put forward by Art Not Oil groups and the entities and communities they work

with—that "introduces a challenge to the normative aspect of Habermas's public sphere" (Barrett 2011:40). As Fraser proposes:

> We should question whether it is possible even in principle for interlocutors to deliberate as if they were social peers in specially designated discursive arenas, when these discursive arenas are situated in a larger societal context that is pervaded by structural relations of dominance and subordination.
>
> (Fraser 1990:65)

Barret says that except for literature, Habermas sees cultural forms as belonging to the private, because the act of aesthetic judgement is subjective (Barret 2011:40). But "the inclusion of aesthetic experience as a legitimate part of the public sphere is [...] significant for understanding the museum as a public sphere" (ibid:31). As discussed in Chapter 2, the performances of groups like BP or not BP? have the potential of allowing a kind of aesthetic experience that is also political. These performances stand in line with what is presented by Fraser (1990:62) as a revisionist historiography of the public sphere that challenges the dismissal of private interests, advocates a plurality of voices as a step towards democracy instead of a hurdle to an ideal public sphere, and suggests that the bracketing of social inequalities among actors is not possible, since equality is indeed a condition for democracy, and hence the existence of inequalities needs to be visible in order to be addressed.

In their attempts to reconfigure the space of the museum as a space for a symbolic battle over issues of representation, the sustained consequences of colonialism, the environment, and corporate power, the performance actions of Art Not Oil groups have always been received with an attempt to contain, be this by surrounding performers with security staff, denying access to certain rooms, or enclosing performances as they happen so as to contain them and keep them out of sight from visitors. Ngũgĩ argues that "the more open the performance space, the more it seems to terrify those in possession of repressive power" (Ngũgĩ 1997:26), whether in open public spaces or in the space of the cultural institution. Situating the act of political performance as oppositional to the figure of the state, Ngũgĩ argues that "[t]he performance space of the artist stands for openness; that of the state, for confinement. Art breaks down barriers between peoples; the state erects them" (ibid:28). The attempt to contain, stop, or repress performance is significant because the struggle for performance space as a site of dissent is linked to a basic struggle for democracy and social justice (ibid:29).

Conclusion

Institutional critique as an artistic practice can nowadays be seen as canonised, and "characterised by a certain amount of depoliticization and

self-reference" (Raunig and Ray 2009:xv). As a result, much of the debate on institutional critique has been on whether or not art is doomed to be confined to its own autonomous sphere, as Andrea Fraser would argue (2005), or whether artists can enact a form of critique that implies an exodus from the institution (Holmes 2009, Raunig and Ray 2009), and engage with issues and movements operating in other areas of the public sphere. But what is not contemplated is what happens when 'non-artists' such as activists, or artists operating outside of the institutional art world, come into the spaces of institutions and utilise them as platforms for advancing social, political, and environmental causes by means of critiquing aspects of their structures and practices. Is this still institutional critique?

I have established earlier in this chapter that many art activists actively reject the framework of cultural institutions and try to work outside of this structure. But when we look at the performances put forward by some Art Not Oil groups like BP or not BP?, it could be argued that since the interventions of cultural institutions take place within institutional spaces, and performances interact with and affect the workers and publics of these institutions, art activist groups of this nature are functioning within an institutional framework. Mel Evans (2015:160–161) borrows from Emma Mahony (2013), for instance, who argues that anti-oil groups such as Liberate Tate stand at an "interstitial distance"[17] from institutions, meaning the right distance—not completely within, but not completely outside institutions—at which a powerful critique of the institution can be made. But even if interventions take place in the physical spaces of the institutions that are being critiqued, and even if activist groups also engage with institutions in other ways—be it hijacking their social media trends, sending complaint letters through their official channels, or using the language of art as a form of protest—the framework within which these interventions originate is different to the framework of the art institution as a platform for the production of symbolic value and social relations. Sholette (2011) argues that art activists often cannot escape being part of the web of the art world. However, I argue, they can choose the processes and frameworks they work from, and developing a practice from the context of grassroots activism allows these groups to somewhat resist the co-optation, isolation, self-censoring, and adaptation to funders to which institutional art is subject.

The performances by Art Not Oil groups analysed here emerge from the context of political activism and are conceived as unsolicited acts of transgression, produced by activists, artists, and non-artists, who enact a particular set of values such as horizontalism and the rejection of traditional roles in collective art making, and who have specific targets and goals, in addition to an understanding of art that is different to that of the institutional framework. These political interventions go beyond institutional critique, as they are expressions of a wider anti-oil agenda that is embedded in issues of environmentalism and social justice. For this reason, the interventions of groups targeting oil sponsorship of the arts take place outside the

institutional framework. Their physical presence in the space of a cultural institution does not equate to operating within the institution's framework, but can rather be seen as a temporary appropriation of space, in which the consensus of the museum is broken, its rules are bent and rejected, and the values and processes of grassroots, democratic, anti-corporate activism momentarily triumph over those of institutional artistic practice.

If we look at the formal and symbolic aspects of these performance actions we could say that there is a form of institutional critique taking place, as there is both an explicit critique of institutional practice and a reference to an aesthetic and discursive canon of institutional critique as a genre—some groups such as Liberate Tate in fact situate their work within this tradition (Evans 2015). But given that these performances and instances of critique emerge from and are tied to wider campaigns, the institutional critique taking place originates outside of the institutional framework, it sits within wider strategic objectives, and it is the product of prefigurative ways of working and long-term goals rooted in environmental and social justice campaigns. As Liberate Tate have argued, in these contemporary forms of art activism "Rather than a dialectic of critique and containment, in which an isolated critical artwork is inevitably commodified, these practices confront art institutions without relying on them" (Liberate Tate 2015:83).

Considering this connection to wider issues, we could argue that in activist performance actions:

> [t]he real politics of the performance space may well lie in the field of its external relations; in its actual or potential conflictual engagement with all the other shrines of power, and in particular, with the forces that hold the keys to those shrines.
>
> (Ngũgĩ 1997:13)

In this context, participatory performances bring political protest into the cultural institution: not a representation of protest, but the 'real thing'.

Notes

1 Here Holmes speaks of autonomy *from* the institution, as opposed to the common understanding of autonomy as artists being autonomous from other spheres of life by operating within a defined, autonomous, cultural sphere.
2 It is paramount to consider as well the drastic differences in terms of cultural policy and funding of the arts across countries and regions. Sholette points out, for instance, the difference between radical artists' relationship to institutions in the UK and in the US. In the latter, "A lack of public funding for art, as well as the absence of an actual Left discourse or parties makes it difficult to avoid some level of dependency on the institutional art world" (2015:97).
3 See for instance the work of London-based collective sorryyoufeeluncomfortable, http://cargocollective.com/syfu.
4 See http://occupymuseums.org/index.php/about.
5 For more see www.liberatetate.org.uk/performances/time-piece/.

6 Danny, personal interview (2014).
7 Packard, Cassie (2015) 'Performers Shower Tate Britain with Fake Pounds Over Oil Money Ties'. *Hyperallergic*, http://hyperallergic.com/179114/performers-shower-tate-britain-withfake-pounds-over-oil-money-ties/. Accessed 11 February 2015.
8 See Polly Toynbee, 'Inside the National Gallery, a portrait of modern inequality'. *The Guardian*, 2014, www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/jan/20/national-gallery-portrait-inequality-museum-privatise-staff-wages-squeezed. Accessed 3 February 2015.
9 See a 2016 article by Liz Hill for *Arts Professional* www.artsprofessional.co.uk/news/british-museum-breached-ethics-code-claim-protesters.
10 Greg, personal interview (2014).
11 I refer here to top management employees of cultural institutions, who hold the power to cut ties with their current sponsors.
12 John Jordan, personal interview (2014).
13 See Ashitha Nagesh's article "Protesters storm British Museum with massive kraken for 'splashmob'" for *Metro.co.uk*: http://metro.co.uk/2016/09/25/mermaid-protesters-with-massive-kraken-storm-british-museum-for-splashmob-6152114/.
14 Jess, personal interview (2016).
15 See, for instance, Nicola Sullivan's post for the *Museums Association*, "BAME museum workers conduct flash mob at Museum of London" www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/news/02112016-bame-museum-workers-conduct-flash-mob-at-museum-of-london.
16 At the time of the protest the museum was hosting an exhibition titled *This Place*, which had received funding from organisations that were also donating to the Israeli Military (IDF). The museum had also recently been host to an event for property developers, at a time when the effects of gentrification were displacing local inhabitants. See Rebecca McCarthy's article for *Hyperallergic* here: http://hyperallergic.com/297401/faced-with-brooklyn-museum-inaction-protesters-target-two-exhibitions/.
17 Mahony employs Simon Critchley's concept of interstice. See Critchley, Simon (2007) *Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance*, London and New York: Verso.

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8 Towards a theory of art activism

Introduction

This final chapter brings together findings from previous chapters in order to begin to sketch the foundations of an interdisciplinary theory of art activism that places emphasis on the processes and politics of this practice. My proposal is simple and reiterates the objectives set out in the introduction to this book; namely, that in order to better understand art activism as a practice it is necessary to look at it from an interdisciplinary perspective that considers organisational, relational, and aesthetic aspects, and to focus on internal processes and experience in addition to motivation, outcomes, and formal and symbolic characteristics. In this chapter, I will therefore return to the main themes explored in this book: collective identity, participation, embodiment, transgression, performativity, prefiguration, and the public sphere. I will draw comparisons between the ways in which these processes and elements develop and function in different art activist practices, and look at how the tension between the aesthetic and the political is manifested in these practices. This exercise will serve three purposes: to demonstrate how a framework that looks at these particular elements can help us further understand art activism; to offer some conclusions on the tensions between aesthetics and politics in art activism and the centrality of this tension to art activism as a practice; and finally, through this analysis, to also offer insights that can contribute to expanding our understanding of issues such as collective identity, prefiguration, embodiment, and transgression in ways that are applicable beyond the specific practice of art activism.

Understanding collective identity in art activism

In Chapter 1 I looked at how collective identity develops in the case of the protest choir Shell Out Sounds. Taking Melucci's (1996) theory of collective identity as a starting point, I suggested that the process of building a collective identity for art activist groups is defined by certain factors in addition to those contemplated by Melucci and others (e.g. Della Porta and Diani 2007), and that these factors are exclusive to groups that resort to art as a

form of action. These include the different ways in which people identify with the movement (as activists or as artists), the ways in which they understand and narrate their actions as art or as activism, and the ways in which different understandings of art as a political force influence the internal dynamics of the group, as well as the planning of actions.

The case studies in this book have also shown that there are often tensions between individual narratives and understandings of a practice and the collective narratives built and presented by groups. The tension between personal and collective narratives is further problematised when considered alongside tensions between the aesthetic facet of a practice and the strategic one. Different forms of identification with a group and different framings of individuals' narratives will amount to conflicting contributions to the building of the collective identity of an art activist group. This last point is not necessarily specific to art activism, and attention to the tensions between collective and individual narratives and different ways of identifying with a group could be useful for the study of other groups and movements that are multifaceted and offer more than one form of identification.[1]

Considering the tensions between the collective and the individual described in previous chapters, alongside the different forms of identifying with a movement, the formation of personal narratives, and the instances of self-transformative experiences in the midst of collective action, one can conclude that in order to fully understand the process of collective identity building it is necessary to look at the personal narratives and experiences of participants, as these bring to the surface the tensions and contradictions in the wider, collective narrative. This does not suggest a focus on individual actors' actions as opposed to the collective, or that collective identity should be individualised. Rather, it means that it is important to embrace an approach that acknowledges the experiences of passionate, collectivised individuals who are connected to the embodied whole and through their bodies and their experiences (Butler 2015) can provide evidence for understanding the ways in which affects and collectivity develop in the context of collective action.

The experiences of activists explored here show that collective identity is not only constructed around the meaning and objectives of actions, but is in fact also largely constructed around the tactics, tools, and methods employed by these groups; in this case, art practice. Melucci argues that social movements have "refused the predominant communicative codes and they have replaced them with sounds, idioms, recognition signals that break the language of technical rationality" (Melucci 1985 in Melucci 1996:357), but he does not look into the processes behind the emergence of these codes, limiting his analysis to a macro level. This is an indication of the fact that theories on collective identity tend to focus on the collective identity of movements rather than that of activist groups, a recurrent issue across different strands of social movement theory. There is therefore not only the need for social movement theory to

consider the particularities of specific forms of action such as art activism, but also the need for further work that builds a bridge between sociological studies of social movements and in-depth ethnographic studies of activist groups, in order to develop tools that allow us to better understand the different scales of collective action and their collective identity processes, from small-scale groups and networks to the wider social movements that comprise them.

The individual vs. the collective in art activism

The cases examined in this book argue that performance action can be a medium for personal transformations, as well as a practice in and through which collective identities are formed, manifested, and negotiated. This double potential of radical performance as a collective enterprise and tool for self-transformation is echoed in Kershaw's writings on contemporary drama. Shaughnessy explains that,

> For Kershaw, 'contemporary drama and theatre' in its form and content needs to embrace 'resistant' and 'transcendent' practices, creating work which empowers individuals as autonomous agents whilst also facilitating collective identities.
>
> (Shaughnessy 2012:187)

Due to the evident importance of the differing ways in which personal experiences contribute to the construction of a collective identity, it is important to consider the relationship between the individual and the collective experience in art activism. My analysis of the art and activism youth programme Shake! showed that for the artists-activists and educators involved in the programme, working on personal transformations and the development of political subjectivities is a necessary first step in a path towards social change. Dealing with trauma and understanding the concept of personal reparations, developing skills for enhancing well-being, and examining the forms of oppression faced in daily life are crucial, from this perspective, for participants to develop and strengthen their political voices. Although Shake! acknowledges and reiterates the importance of community building and solidarity, in their practice a focus on self-transformation is necessary in order to allow participants to work through their personal traumas and experiences of oppression—whether tied to race, gender, class, or other forms of oppression they experience—and find their own position in the world and in a larger collective struggle for social justice. Adopting a collective approach from the beginning would not allow these spaces for self-exploration, transformation, and expression and would risk negating the plurality of experiences of a mixed group of young people, hence inhibiting the development of their political subjectivities. Rancière argues that "[a]rt and politics each define a form

of dissensus, a dissensual re-configuration of the common experience of the sensible" (Rancière 2010:140). He adds that "politics invents new forms of collective enunciation" (Rancière 2010:139), while aesthetics create new forms of individuality. In the case of Shake!, the individual creative experiences undertaken by participants are necessary as a first transformative step towards political action and social change after the course, be this in the form of spoken word performances or collective action in social movements and/or within their communities.

A similar dynamic between the individual and the collective can be observed in other examples of art activist practice. Performances by artists who are part of Left Front Art (a network of radical queer artists), as in the case of artist Antonio Onio, begin with a moment of personal expression and self-empowerment that leads to a collective, shared experience. But the psychogeographic walks of LRM, on the other hand, create opportunities for collective experiences first—group walks in opposition to capitalism and systems of urban control—within which participants then have the space for individual creative experiences of transformation as they become aware of the relationship between their bodies and their selves and the city. Here, it is the collective situation which gives place to the instance of personal transformation.

It is perhaps in performances by anti-oil sponsorship groups that are part of the Art Not Oil coalition where the emphasis on the collective over the individual is greatest, both because the primary objective of these actions is found outside of the participants themselves, and because the genre of collective performance finds its strength precisely in its collective aspect. But participation in these actions does also allow opportunities for participants to engage creatively and politically in the transformation of their political subjectivities, thus maintaining an experience that is transformative on an individual level as well as collective. The difference between groups like Shake! and Art Not Oil is that the latter take the collective act of performance as a starting point, with the hope that the dynamics of horizontality and the possibilities for political agency that these performances allow will in turn result in instances of self-transformation within a collective setting. The former, on the other hand, upholds self-repair and self-transformation as a necessary first step towards collective action.

The relationship between the individual and the collective marks all of the cases presented in this book. While different art activism groups approach instances of self-transformation and collective action differently, taking one or the other as a starting point, in all cases the embodied nature of activism and the emotional and affective spaces inhabited by participants will be crucial in managing this tension and the transition from one state to the other. As Sara Ahmed argues, emotions work "to mediate the relationship between the psychic and the social, and between the individual and the collective" (Ahmed 2004:27).

Participation

The relationship between individual and collective experiences can also be addressed from the perspective of participation. In previous chapters I put forward the argument that art activism provides a space for participatory practice that does not have the constraints of institutional art, and in which participation can be an inherently political act as well as a creative one. Participation in art activist practice, however, can take many forms, as despite usually being committed to prefigurative forms of collaboration, different dynamics and contexts can lead to a variety of forms of participation that are more or less horizontal, inclusive, and collaborative.

Different forms of participation

My analysis of Art Not Oil groups Shell Out Sounds and BP or not BP? in Chapter 2 showed that a larger part of performance actions intervening museums and galleries are deliberatively participatory, and offer spaces for participants to actively contribute to a situation, and to become politically active in those interventions. At the same time, however, while the planning of actions by groups like Shell Out Sounds and BP or not BP? is a horizontal and collaborative process, performances that invite the public to take part will never be fully participatory and democratic as newcomers do not have agency in some of the basic aspects of an action, which are decided upon by a smaller organising group during planning stages. This, as discussed earlier, is linked to logistical issues that are inherent to activist practice such as the need for controlling access to information, but also to the fact that mass actions like flash mobs will by default entail a smaller group of people working on the planning in advance and sending out instructions to a wider one.

In Chapter 2 I referred to the case of BP or not BP?'s BP Vikings performance action in order to explore the different stages of participation that performance actions of this sort could take. I argued that in addition to fully participating members, who are consistently involved with a group and are part of the planning behind an action, there are other types of participation. The first one is people who are casual participants. They may occasionally take part in these kinds of performance actions, responding to emails or open calls. They are not involved in the planning stages of an action, but know what will happen, when, and where. The second is spontaneous participation of people who come across an action and decide to join in, and this will depend on how open an action is, as some encourage the general public to take part and some do not. And finally, a third kind of participation is that of spectators, who unexpectedly become part of an audience to an action, and are therefore becoming part of the event as they become part of the wider political action as well.

This framework, based on levels of participation and the contribution made to a performance action through participation, was developed as a response to performance actions by Art Not Oil groups specifically. However, it can also be useful in order to understand the dynamics of participation in other forms of art activism that are durational and relational. If we consider the case of the autonomous art festival P A N D E M I C, discussed in Chapter 7, it could be argued that only those who contribute to the event with their artwork are true participants of the event, as the strong DiY ethos of this series of festivals aims to democratise art practice and counter society's consumption-like attitude towards the arts as well as the exclusive nature of the term 'artist'. A 'passive' public that enters a space in order to 'consume' the art on display would therefore not seem different to the passive audience of a conventional gallery space. However, by entering this countercultural space and contributing to the exchanges that take place there, an audience or public becomes an agent, albeit with a limited kind of participation, as their presence contributes to making P A N D E M I C a live form of alternative culture. Similarly, in performances by Left Front Art artists that enter the trade union spaces, as discussed in Chapter 4, a public that engages with these artists is far from a passive audience, and is actually contributing to a process of challenging and transforming the culture of that institution. Without an audience present, that challenge cannot happen, as the transgressive performance is only effective in the face of a trade union audience to engage.

But if we move away from performance actions and look at the practice of Shake! as a radical pedagogy arts programme, participation needs to be approached differently, and in relation, once more, to the tensions between the individual and the collective aspects of this kind of practice. The experience of Shake! intensive courses is inherently participatory, and based on an ideal of building community. At the same time, however, the spoken word element of Shake! remains as an individual and deeply personal act, that is highly political but thrives on being rooted in personal experiences and the significance of young people making their voices heard. While taking part in the Shake! intensive course and sharing the process of building and strengthening political subjectivities through the arts are collective experiences, participation in Shake! (and, in particular, for the young people specialising in spoken word) differs from participation in other art activist projects in that each individual voice is developed and enhanced through training in and performing spoken word, instead of being merged into one collective project. We can see, then, how participation in art activism can take a variety of forms and levels of involvement, and can be seen as both a collective and personal experience. Any framework applied to the study of participation needs to consider the particularities of a practice (Brown 2014)—its form, objectives, and politics—in order to understand in what way participation plays a role within that practice, and how it allows or inhibits artistic and political aims.

Participation as political

In Chapter 2 I looked at the performances of BP or not BP? and other Art Not Oil groups, and argued that one of the reasons that participation takes a political form in these performance actions is the fact that they have distinct political objectives. Participants that join in become part of a protest event that offers the opportunity to become politically active, and unlike most participatory artistic practices within an institutional framework, participants are not targets of a performance—as the main objective is not to transform participants—but rather become active agents in a specific struggle. This is also the case for LRM's walks. In their practice there is a search there is the aim to engage new participants, but like Art Not Oil their work has a common, external political objective; in this case, challenging the dynamics of the city and opposing certain mechanisms of control.

But is this still the case for more community-centred art activism that does indeed have the transformation of the subject as one of its main objectives? Can participants still be active political agents when they are also the subjects and targets of a practice? In Shake!, healing and empowerment are key issues, and the development of participants' political subjectivities is at the core of the programme. However, Shake! is also very much about changing the structures of power in society, entering and influencing spaces of social activism, art practice, and knowledge building, and introducing ideas of horizontalism, intersectionality, and embodied learning in these spaces. As a result, while centring on personal transformations, Shake! still encourages participants to be active agents in a programme for social and political change. Similarly, the performances and events staged by Left Front Art aim at influencing the perceptions of trade union members and members of the LGBT community alike; these groups are the target of their artistic interventions. Left Front Art's overarching aim is to mobilise both groups towards change in the trade union movement and in society at large. Participants who are addressed through their art are therefore not only targets for transformation, but also seen as part of a collective to be mobilised so that together they can address wider social and political issues.

What these types of art activism have in common is that participation goes beyond the parameters of participatory art practice and into the realm of political participation. And seen from the perspective of collective political action, participation is not only political as in other kinds of protests, but is also artistically creative. The cases presented here suggest that creative participation acts as a path towards political participation. But art can only provide a path towards active political participation when it occurs within the frame of political action, as opposed to institutionalised art practice, considering the limitations of trying to enact social and political change from within an institutional art context, as argued earlier in this book. In other words, creativity can only lead to political participation when the processes of a practice, guided by political values and objectives, create a space

for political participation to occur. This is because of the opportunity to join a political, social, and/or environmental cause offered by activism, but also because of the lack of constraints this space offers, in comparison to institutionalised art. In institutionalised participatory practices there are quite often set dynamics in place that condition and limit the way in which a piece will develop (Jelinek 2013), hindering political participation in a way that would not occur in the context of unsanctioned, political activism. To say the least, "[c]ollaborative works that make a strong political claim run into the problem that this free space of art is constituted, or at least surrounded, by practices that re-inscribe social divisions" (Charnley 2011:39). This understanding of participation and how it develops differently in an activist context provides further support for Holmes's (2004) proposal of exodus from art institutions.

But in addition to the possibilities that participation opens up in art activism, in Chapter 2 I also argued that participation is sometimes positioned against aesthetic objectives, regarded as a kind of approach that could interfere with the ability of achieving desired artistic outcomes, framed as artistic 'quality'. It is therefore only when art activist groups embrace widened participation and the aesthetic possibilities of an open practice, as in Shell Out Sounds' carolling event or BP or not BP?'s Viking funeral, that groups are able to put forward practices that fully challenge this dichotomy, as well as going beyond the standard participatory practices that emerge from institutional contexts. I will return to this point towards the end of this chapter, when I analyse the relation between aesthetics and politics more in depth.

Embodiment

In this book I have used embodiment as a thread across different chapters and sections, from participation to performativity, the use of this concept has been important in order to describe the experiences and processes of art activism, including the experience of participation as an aesthetic-political experience, as developed in Chapter 2. Considering the arguments made on embodiment in relation to different art activist practices, I will here ask: how is the embodied experience of art activism a distinct kind of experience?

In order to answer this question, it is useful to first look at how these groups think about and use bodies as part of their performance-based practices. The performances of Art Not Oil groups, for instance, show an understanding of the body as the locus of expression, knowledge, and resistance. By producing performances that are deeply embodied—be they solemn choreographies, human-made ships, or animals dying in an oil spill—these groups move away from an overly conceptual and intellectualised approach to environmental issues and instead present the body as fragile, exposed, and vulnerable to climate change; both the individual expressive body and the collective body of resistance. In the practice of Shake!, in turn, the body is put at the centre, recognising that gendered, racialised bodies are harmed,

moulded, and oppressed by a capitalist system, and that trauma healing through the arts is a first step towards personal, social, and political change. In a similar way, Left Front Art artists often do work that centres around the body, not only in performances but also in other artistic and social events such as naked dinners. These are part of a vision for living that reclaims bodies from stigma and control and advocates freedom and a different way of experiencing our bodies and our relationship to others. In all these cases, as in others such as the work of performance artist Liz Crow, whose work explores the structural aspects of disability, placing the body at the centre of art activist practice manifests a particular approach to art making, but also to activism and to the practice of life in general. Focusing on the body allows a re-connection with the body, and a path towards different ways of experiencing the individual and the collective, as well as inhabiting a space. This idea was developed in Chapter 4 in relation to Butler's (2015) work on vulnerability, precarity, and collective assemblies.

A second way of looking at embodiment in art activism is the double role of performer/activist taken on by members of performance action groups like those in Art Not Oil. On the one hand performers are in character, modifying their bodies with costumes and props, using their voices for song and for enacting theatrical scenes, and following choreographed moves in order to portray mischievous oil company managers, oblivious museum directors, or even take on the shape and form of oil spills. On the other, however, the body is the place of resistance, the object of transgression, and a body at risk. By putting on an unsanctioned performance, art activists are also situating their bodies in opposition to the institution, occupying a space, exerting pressure, and transgressing norms. This means activists' bodies are fulfilling, as well as experiencing, two roles at once.

It is necessary to point out, however, that this dual nature of the embodied experience of art activism does not imply a Cartesian separation of mind and body. I am not positioning the practice of art activism as the simultaneous experience of the 'rational' pursuit of a political objective and the 'physical' act of performing. Quite the contrary, I argue it is a complex embodied experience in which the subject embodies two kinds of objectives, and two (albeit intertwined) positionalities: that of the artist and that of the activist. At points the two facets can be identified and experienced as distinct, and sometimes they become one. This conception of art activism corresponds with the way in which participants have described their experiences and narrated their involvement in art activism, as evidenced by the interviews and conversations with art activists presented in this book. Also, this way of thinking about the embodied experience of art activism aligns with the way in which art activist performances, interventions, and projects are developed, and with the emotions and affects that surround the practice. Furthermore, my experiences as a participant and/or organiser in several art activist actions has allowed me to observe that this complex, dual experience is also confirmed by the way in which these practices are perceived

both by the general public and by figures of authority. While sometimes they are perceived as protest, sometimes they are seen—especially by the general public—as artistic performances, evidenced, for instance, in visitors' differing reactions, from anger and dismissal to applause, video recordings, and requests for repeated performances. Navigating the space between these two categories is something art activists often find themselves doing when it comes to liaising with authorities, with the public, and with the media. But while choosing to present oneself as an artist in certain spaces or situations is a strategic choice, the risks of the activist action are still present for the embodied subject—and this risk is particularly true for activists who are targets of discrimination, institutional violence, and police brutality, as is the case, for instance, for black activists in the US and in the UK. Despite the fact that the art activist actions examined here are manifested as performances (what I have referred to as performance actions), the interventionist aspect of these actions means that they are not representations of political acts, but actual political interventions (Serafini 2014).

In the different context of the psychogeographical practice of LRM, we can see how the embodied act of walking is also approached as both a political and a creative act. On the one hand, walks are ludic, creative, and enjoyable, allowing bodies to open up to sensing the city, loosening the constraints of expected behaviour in certain parts of the urban environment, and taking part in a collective, imaginative game. On the other hand, walks often lead to instances of transgression, in which bodies occupy urban spaces for uses other than those they were designated for. Also, as Morag from LRM explains, some of the walks they do take the explicit form of walking protests, bringing out the political aspect of the practice even more explicitly.[2]

A similar dynamic takes place in the practice of Left Front Art and the artists they bring into trade union spaces. While their embodied performances attempt to create connections with audiences through an aesthetics of honesty and vulnerability manifested in the use of the naked body as a form of communication, the naked body is at the same time the locus of transgression, challenging societal norms—more precisely, the rules and the culture of the organisation they are performing for and within. Finally, in the spoken word performances of Shake! participants we can see how the embodied act of performing a piece is at the same time an artistic performance and a defiant political act, returning to Rancière's (2010) redistribution of the sensible. While spoken word performance is a creative act, in this context it is also the act by which a young person develops their political subjectivity, and penetrates the public sphere in order to speak their mind and interrupt the dominant discourse.

In these kinds of art activist practices, the body is reclaimed from a state of commodification and rationalisation through the parallel embodied experiences of creativity and political action, which allow instances of agency, creativity, and freedom. This view of art activism as an embodied experience made up of two facets that are intertwined can provide useful

insights into the nature of embodiment and the embodied experience more generally, especially when considering the individual and collective aspects of this practice. Research presented here suggests that while aesthetic-political experiences can be individual performative acts, as in the spoken word of Shake!, collective participatory performances—like those by BP or not BP? and walks by LRM—can also act as a gateway towards the embodiment and development of political subjectivities. Collective and individual aesthetic-political experiences in the context of art activism are deeply connected, and feed into each other. The reclaiming of the body from the increasing processes of rationalisation and control fostered by a post-industrial society is facilitated by the creative and the political aspects of this kind of embodied practice, and takes place through both the individual and collective experience of art activism. Indeed, if the embodied acts of appearing and assembling in public are, as Butler (2015) argues, inherently political, and constitute forms of resistance in themselves, then politics are enacted without or before the act of speech. This understanding is in tension with positions such as Rancière's (2010), which situate the act of speech as the definitive political act.

Performativity

Art activist performances, being acts of creative expression and political action, can be considered to be performative in nature, as they allow the development, enactment, and reproduction of political subjectivities. These performative instances can take different forms and develop in different ways across a variety of art activist practices. The performance actions of Art Not Oil allow instances of performativity by creating a space where participants are not only performing a role in a play or performance piece, but also enacting politics at the same time. These performances allow moments of collective performativity, when groups collectively chant performative statements such as "'Til our concert halls are fossil free, our voices will be singing Hallelujah", or use their bodies to occupy a museum space and generate and enact an alternative, counterculture dynamic within that space—it is worth noting, for instance, the chants of "Whose museum? Our museum!" that took place during BP or not BP?'s Viking Funeral action at the British Museum (Chapter 2). Similarly, when LRM go on psychogeographical walks, a new connection with the urban space is generated as participants create new performative narratives about their surroundings that change their relation to the city. Finally, while Left Front Art artists put on performative acts of transgression that begin with their own embodied experiences, Shake! participants engage in performative acts of spoken word as they confront the oppressions they face through their own writing and performing. Following once more from Butler (2015), these acts are performative on a discursive level as well as an embodied one, as the presence of certain bodies occupying

cultural venues, public spaces, and claiming back the art sphere is as politically significant as the words they utter.

The cases of Shake! and Left Front Art in particular are evidence of how affect and emotion are linked to performativity, as affect and emotion are often both the starting point of an embodied performative act and the way in which that act is shared with others through personal, aesthetic-political performances. As Ryan argues:

> By invoking the concept of affect, it becomes possible to broaden discussions around performativity in art interventions; to consider the ways in which activists might be inadvertently *moved to* create or be *moved by* affective intensities tied to world events or indeed to their own creative acts.
>
> (Ryan 2015:46)

Affect is therefore a key aspect of art activist practices in two ways. While it is linked to the motivations and values underpinning the development and processes of performance actions, as discussed in the introduction to this book, it is also a main aspect of the experience of participating in art activist actions, linked to both the creative and political aspects of the embodied experience.

Acknowledging the performative aspect of performance actions is important because it is one of the ways in which the dual aspect of aesthetic-political performances is manifested, as the creative act becomes political through the performative enactment of certain political ideas and values. It is also a quality of the transgressive act, which will be analysed in the following section, and a necessary element of prefiguration, since performative utterances, processes, and actions are some of the ways in which art activists can put into practice their values and/or objectives in the now.

Transgression

A discussion of the embodied performance of politics and the performative aspect of political action inevitably leads to a discussion around transgression. Transgression in art activism is closely linked to the idea of dissensus (Rancière 2010), as dissensus is the transgression of boundaries and the disruption of dominant discourse, be it by a voice, a gesture, or, as argued earlier, a body standing, sitting, or lying down 'where it shouldn't'. Art activism thrives on the idea of transgressing boundaries, be these the spatial boundaries of art institutions or other public and private urban spaces, or the structural, symbolic, and ideological boundaries of these institutions and spaces. The transgressive act can be found in the content of a lyric, or in the way in which the processes of art practice are subverted, and transgressing certain kinds of boundaries does not imply also transgressing others. For instance, while certain groups are happy to trespass spatial boundaries and

reclaim artistic spaces, the art practices they put forward can remain in line with the aesthetic canons of institutionalised art practice, as is the case of art collective Liberate Tate. Other groups, on the other hand, combine spatial transgression and spectacular tactics with prefigurative challenges to the processes of institutionalised art practice. The different ways in which transgression is embraced by art activist groups is often a manifestation of the tensions between aesthetics and politics characteristic of this kind of practice, as different groups negotiate their own limits as well as their ideas around what it means to be transgressive in politics and in art.

As argued in Chapter 3, while certain forms of transgression such as trespassing are defined in legal terms, others are not as clear-cut and rather function as a relationship; an action is only transgressive if it is received as such by an audience (e.g. the public and staff at a cultural institution). Transgression for art activist groups is an important part of their practice not only because of its symbolic significance in defying the norms of the targeted institution, but also because it pressures the institution by altering its functioning, and because it gains attention from the public and, on occasions, from the press.

In the work of LRM discussed in Chapter 5, spatial transgression is an important aspect of their practice, but instead of transgressing institutional spaces, LRM explore and subvert public—and sometimes private—outdoors urban spaces. Transgression in their practice is linked to two objectives. In the first place, challenging the culture of control of urban spaces by subverting the uses of particular sites and transgressing spatial boundaries as a political act. This is also true of Liz Crow's piece *Lying Down Anyhow*, discussed in Chapter 4. Second, transgression is part of a personal process of connecting with one's city in a new and different way, and building new narratives around one's experience and place in the city. Transgression is therefore an important part of challenging structures and forms of governance, and an important part of personal transformations. Similarly, in the performances of Left Front Art artists such as Antonio Onio, transgression starts with the artist reclaiming their body and transgressing social boundaries around sexuality and nakedness, but it goes on to push the boundaries of a specific institution: the trade union. Transgression can therefore also be an embodied act that defines the art activist experience, and a way of relating to other people and to physical and institutional spaces.

Finally, transgression is in many cases the first step towards prefiguration, in that it opens up spaces for new, prefigurative approaches to art and to activism, and to the practice of social change. To transgress current norms and boundaries is necessary in order to break through those limits and be able to conceive and begin to build something new. But also, in the case of interventions in cultural institutions, transgression and prefiguration are linked in the sense that bringing prefigurative forms of art making that have certain political values and objectives at their core into institutional spaces is a transgressive act in itself, because it goes against the norms and canons of sanctioned, institutional art.

Prefiguration

Throughout this book, I have argued that the various art activist groups explored approach their practice in a prefigurative manner. I have described how prefiguration is found in horizontal forms of organising (Maeckelbergh 2016), in the open nature of performances, in the relationship to spaces, and in the challenge to and rejection of institutional frameworks, among other things. In Chapter 3, I explored how prefiguration and strategic transgression interact, arguing that art activist practice can at the same time be interventionist and prefigurative. I looked at the processes behind the actions of BP or not BP?, and explained how the idea of authorship is dissolved by the groups' horizontal and democratic practice, and how their process of script writing, for instance, defies both hierarchies and specialised divisions of creative labour. Other examples have also shown a variety of prefigurative approaches: Shell Out Sounds, for instance, makes specific claims to a prefigurative kind of culture that functions outside of institutional standards and frameworks and that is opposed to the corporatisation of the arts. And LRM follows a prefigurative approach that challenges the institutional category of artist, democratises psychogeographic practice, and, most importantly, reclaims the streets as a place for creativity and everyday politics.

When discussing the revolutionary potential of art, artist activist John Jordan says:

> [M]ost artists think 'oh, I'm an artist, I'll work in a social movement, that's what I'll do. I'll do the posters, I'll do the graphics, I'll make the films'. And in a way I am more interested in 'no, help design the forms of disobedience, help design the way we have meetings, help design the way we live, help craft post-capitalist life'. That's the role of the artists to me. It's, you know, 'how do we craft a post capitalist life?'. Not 'how do we make the fucking posters for the revolution?'.[3]

Through aesthetic-political practice, these groups are simultaneously devising more democratic forms of art making outside and at the margins of cultural institutions, fighting for social change, and creating blueprints for different aspects of social life.

In theoretical terms, the way in which these groups embrace prefigurative politics poses a challenge to contentious politics (McAdam et al. 2001) as a framework for the study of movements, as it problematises the category of mechanism. By developing art activist practices that allow a merger of certain values and new forms of making art with strategic practices and forms of intervention, protest, and direct action, these groups create a prefigurative practice that does not see a clear separation between mechanisms, objectives, and values. While certain processes of art activism can be transferrable or emulated in different contexts, they cannot be regarded separately from a set of values and objectives that inform them.

Having argued that these groups have a prefigurative approach to art activism, it is worth noting that looking at some of these movements as prefigurative poses certain challenges. Many of these groups stand in opposition to something, and have built narratives around their practice that are based on this opposition—while Art Not Oil opposes oil sponsorship of the arts, LRM opposes gentrification and mechanisms of control in urban spaces. These groups' *raison d'être* is to bring an end to something, and in the case of Art Not Oil, the thing opposed is concrete and localised, meaning success is easily measurable. What this means is that if these groups were to be successful, they might cease to exist. It is worth wondering then, how one can prefigure a practice that is tied to an oppositional stance. But going back to my earlier chapters, which looked closely at the actions of Art Not Oil, prefiguration does not necessarily need to be aligned with the cause that defines a movement or activist group, and can actually occur parallel to it, or in spite of it. In the case of Art Not Oil groups like Shell Out Sounds and BP or not BP?, prefiguration is found in the processes behind the performance actions of these groups, and prefiguring performance is not a primary objective, but rather the result of a particular approach to art as politics and the group's commitment to horizontalism and democratic values, which allows prefigurative forms of art making to emerge (Serafini 2015). So even when these movements achieve their strategic objectives, the forms of art making they put forward have the potential to live on in other projects, both because their struggles are part of wider movements towards environmental and/or social justice, and because the series of processes and values they enact in their practice can inspire other work. Indeed, when the Tate announced in 2016 that they were parting ways with their sponsor BP, this did not stop the collective Liberate Tate from staging performances against the fossil fuel industries at the Tate galleries and other cultural venues.[4]

It is important as well to consider that no movement or practice can be purely prefigurative (Yates 2015), particularly within a system that creates dependence on its existing infrastructures for most activist activity. Rather, prefiguration is found in some elements of groups' practices, more often than not coexisting with strategic approaches (Maeckelbergh 2011). Furthermore, while all the groups presented here are prefiguratively constructing alternative ways of producing, sharing, and experiencing art and culture, in most cases they are not generating completely new artistic forms, media, or genres. Rather, they are using—and sometimes reclaiming—practices such as choir singing, performance art and theatre, and developing them in uncommodified ways, and in line with a particular set of values and political objectives. In these actions there is not a rejection of art, but rather a reclaiming and reconfiguring of artistic practice, that is based on rejecting structures of power and devising a kind of practice that is in line with a more just and democratic social and political project.

When looking at the way in which prefiguration relates to aesthetics, there are a few further issues to contemplate. In her study of applied

performance, Shaughnessy (2012) describes certain practices that, similarly to performance actions, are dialogical and process-based, prioritise context over content, and allow subjectivities to be formed through dialogue and exchange. This kind of creative work is particularly concerned with the politics and ethics around it, in addition to aesthetics. Shaughnessy then presents Bishop's views, which question the possibilities for such kinds of work. Bishop argues this type of work relinquishes artistic autonomy and jeopardises aesthetics for the sake of prioritising social betterment, because it is too concerned with the politics of the art itself—for example, being politically correct and aware of privilege—and thus hinders the possibility for any art that is highly provocative or challenging (Bishop 2006:178, in Shaughnessy 2012:199). But authors such as Kester (2004, 2011) argue that the ethics of participatory art are indeed important. Indeed in all kinds of artistic practices, as bell hooks argues,

> [O]ne can be critically aware of visual politics—the way race, gender, and class shape art practices (who makes art, how it sells, who values it, who writes about it)—without abandoning a fierce commitment to aesthetics.
>
> (hooks 1995:XII)

In the cases of art activism studied here, a prefigurative approach included the consideration of the wider politics of art practice. From LRM's stance against 'ruin porn' to Shell Out Sounds' open policy, all these groups uphold a set of values that they prefiguratively enact through their practice. This, as suggested earlier, inevitably affects the aesthetic choices they make. But is this necessarily, as Bishop would suggest, an impediment towards creating work of aesthetic value? As discussed earlier in this book, in her critique of relational aesthetics Bishop points out the difference between judging art based on aesthetic merit versus judging art according to its ethics—which in the case of relational aesthetics means looking at the type and quality of social relations created as a result of a piece (Bishop 2004). She argues that if relational work is to be judged on the social relationships produced, it is important to establish what relationships we are looking at.

In this book I have referred to the differences between participatory art forms that take place within an institutional framework and those that emerge from the context of activism. Some of the main differences I have explored are the kind of social relationships and instances of self-transformation and of political agency that participatory performance actions allow. From this then, two points emerge. In the first place, the kinds of social relations and political experiences that emerge from art activism provide a response to Bishop's sceptical take on the social relationships formed through participatory work. This is possible because contrary to institutional art practice, in the context of activism certain ideals of transformative social interactions can be fulfilled, instead of remaining purely

symbolic, both in terms of the transformation of political subjectivities through political action and in terms of the formation and enactment of collective identities. And second, Bishop's dichotomy begs the question: can't artistic work be considered on the grounds of both ethics and aesthetics? While this study is not preoccupied with the aesthetic judgement of art activist practice, but is rather an exploration of its processes and politics, I suggest practices that merge the artistic and the political in an attempt to escape an 'either this or that' framework should be appraised accordingly. A focus on aesthetics alone would negate the important distinction between art activism and other forms of artistic practice. But a sole focus on ethics and politics, on the other hand, would negate these performances' claim to art[5] and the redefinition of art that comes with this claim. An interdisciplinary framework such as the one proposed in this book is therefore necessary in order to address this kind of hybrid practice and escape the urge to analyse and frame aesthetic-political work in one discipline or the other.

Art activism and institutions

The argument against art institutions as spaces that do not allow truly radical art making (Holmes 2010:19) is founded on a variety of factors, including the corporatisation (Stallabrass 2004) and neoliberalisation (Jelinek 2013) of the arts, and the recuperation and neutralisation of critical and political art (Rancière 2006, Holmes 2010, Trevor 2010). This does not mean that there is no value in art that is produced within an institutional circuit, or that institutional art cannot make any kind of impact in society. What it means is that art that is not bound by funders, sponsors, curators, hierarchical organisations, and the trends of the art world can transgress certain cultural and social boundaries that other art cannot, and in this way prefiguratively facilitate processes for social change.

In Chapter 7 I looked at how certain Art Not Oil groups position their practice in relation to the dynamics of the art institutions they target. I argued that even though these groups operate within the spaces of cultural institutions and can therefore be understood as a kind of site-specific practice, their performance actions still function outside of the institutional framework. These unsanctioned performances defy the exclusive definition of art upheld by the institution; they are the product of processes akin to grassroots activism, and they deliberately break the rules and transgress the boundaries of the said cultural spaces. Increasingly, some groups like BP or not BP? have also engaged in forms of critique that target curatorial practices and also other aspects of institutional politics, such as the conditions of gallery workers and struggles for the repatriation of artefacts. In many cases, as argued earlier, these instances of transgression and reclaiming of cultural spaces gives place to prefigurative forms of art activism that challenge the processes and dynamics of institutional art. But tensions between the artistic and the political present in each of these groups' processes influence the

way in which their practice acts as an oppositional form of art. In the case of Liberate Tate, for instance, the group maintains a narrative around their practice that positions them as an art collective, thus aligning themselves closer to institutional art practice. In addition, Tate Modern currently holds documentation of one of their performances—*The Gift*—in their archive,[6] a fact that can be seen both as legitimisation of their aesthetic practice and as recuperation of their transgressive act.

Left Front Art's position in relation to institutions is a particular one. While Left Front Art operates as an informal network of artists, they do a lot of work jointly with the trade union Unite. Their objective is to build bonds between the LGBT community and the union, and also to influence the culture of the union, pushing its boundaries through artistic performances and events. Left Front Art therefore do not operate under the framework of art and cultural institutions—although individual artists who are part of that network might—but their work aims at changing the culture of another type of institution: the trade union. In their work there is a contradiction between their radical queer politics and the reformist approach they have towards their work with the institution, and this comes as a consequence of acknowledging and embracing the power that the trade union has as a form of organising workers, despite the limitations and problems it might have as a hierarchical, traditionally-structured organisation. Similarly, Shake! artists and activists advocate a way of practising art that opposes the elitist and exclusive canon and dynamics of the art world, but they still aim at introducing young, marginalised voices into these spaces, in order to change the dynamics of the art world and effect wider structural change through these channels. The presence of young people of colour and their perspectives in these spaces is seen as an important stand against racial oppression, even if there are still other problems with those institutions that contradict Shake!'s values.

Contrary to this approach, P A N D E M I C fully rejects the idea of any kind of institutionalised and/or commercial art practice, and creates its own alternative spaces. Similarly, LRM's 'First Sunday' walks are a collective practice that remains non-commercial and detached from any institutional affiliation. Morag from LRM explained in a personal interview that despite the fact that she sometimes leads walks on commission and has worked with cultural and academic institutions in the past, these walks are deliberately unaffiliated to any programme or source of funding so that they remain completely autonomous and independent. LRM's stance changes, however, when we consider the exhibition they organised at the People's Museum. The way in which art activist groups make art inevitably takes as a reference the mainstream models of production and consumption of art in society, acknowledging the place of cultural institutions as symbols of capitalist democracy, elitism, and Empire, but also heritage, education, and culture. Whether reformist or abolitionist, and whether concerned with issues of access, inequality, or censorship, the different positions taken by art activist groups are always narrated in terms of their relation to the mainstream art world.

The public sphere

The concepts of public art, public space, and the public sphere have been discussed in previous chapters in reference to cultural spaces as sites of contention, public spaces in the city, and the idea of aesthetic-political action as embodied and discursive acts of dissensus that break the consensus of the public sphere. In Chapter 7 I challenged the idea of a Habermasian public sphere in which citizens leave aside their private interests and subjectivities for the sake of participating in a homogenous public sphere in which issues of 'public' concern are addressed. I presented this challenge by arguing, in line with critics of Habermas such as Nancy Fraser (1990), that there is no possibility of a homogenous public sphere and that the public sphere is made up of multiple voices (Tucker 2010:19), and embedded in it is the struggle for recognition of the oppressed. Considering this, it is of utmost importance for subaltern publics to have spaces to create new languages and rethink identities and subjectivities before moving on to challenges for space and legitimacy in the public sphere (Fraser 1990:67). This was evidenced perhaps more prominently in the case of Shake!

In this book, I have also addressed the issue of the personal as political, a statement that contradicts the core of the public sphere as theorised by Habermas. Butler, for instance, challenges the private/public distinction (an argument also made by Harendt), in her claim that in assemblies formed around issues of precarity, 'private' issues such as health, subsistence, and reproductive rights result in these issues becoming visible in the public (Butler 2015:86). In this book I have showed how art activists working on issues such as race, sexuality, and disability blur the private/public distinction in their work. But I have also argued that they do not do this by merely making the personal public, but through interventions that address the systems and structures that perpetuate forms of inequality affecting everyday life.

Another issue that was developed was the role of the body and the embodied experience in acts that intervene in the public sphere. Through the analysis of different forms of performance-based activism I was able to argue that the political act is not just a discursive one or a speech act, as Rancière (2010) argues, but also an embodied one, following Butler's (2015) argument on the importance of bodies appearing in the public space, where the public sphere is enacted. This puts forward an understanding of the public sphere as a discursive space (Barrett 2011:18), as described by Habermas, but also as a spatial and material one. As Butler argues, in mass demonstrations in the streets "the very public character of the space is being disputed, and even fought over when these crowds gather." We must therefore look at how "[a]ssembly and public speech reconfigure the materiality of public space and produce, or reproduce, the public character of that material environment" (Butler 2015:71).

It is worth noting, however, that the embodied and the discursive aspects of the political act of intervening in the public sphere should not be seen as

distinct; as one or the other, or as one occurring before the other. It is only too easy to fall into distinctions of the discursive as the rational side of politics and the embodied as the irrational and emotional. If we look at the experience of participating in performance actions, for instance, as discussed in Chapter 2, we can see how embodied experiences that are creative and political position actors in two roles at once, and allow for multiple experiences and interactions with others (as artists and as activists) during the same event. The relation between the embodied and the discursive can be compared to that between the aesthetic and the political. We must defy the urge to see them as separate, or as easily distinguishable stages of an action or an experience, and instead think of them from the perspective of experience, and therefore, as simultaneous. Thus the question becomes not only how does the embodied presence of actors in a space allow for discursive acts to happen, or what is the embodied character of discursive political acts, but most importantly, how are the embodied and the discursive both part of political action, and in particular, how are these aspects manifested in practices that merge the political with the artistic.

Aesthetics, strategy, and ethics

Aesthetics and process

Even though I have maintained a focus on the processes, internal politics, and experience of art activism throughout this book, I have also explored issues of aesthetics, mostly in relation to these three other components. When exploring the aesthetics of Shell Out Sounds, for instance, I looked at the content of the songs performed, the way in which they were arranged for singing, and the overall tone and mood of performances. In the work of Left Front Art, I made reference to the body and nakedness as a kind of embodied aesthetics that attempt to transgress the space and culture of the trade union. But when talking about aesthetics, we should not restrict ourselves to the visual or auditory characteristics of an artwork or performance. Aesthetics include the sensorial and the embodied in a wider sense (Berleant 1992, 2004), and this extends to the way in which we interact with a space, the way we embody a specific art form or medium, and how we connect with other people. Considering this, the distinction between aesthetics and process begins to blur, and it becomes evident that the process behind an artwork and/or creative action is as significant when talking about aesthetics as is the final output.

In the case of BP or not BP?, for instance, participation and interaction are elements that drive the planning of most performance actions, determining what a performance will look like and how it will be experienced by participants. In the work of P A N D E M I C, a total openness to exhibits and performances by any interested person, without selective or curatorial criteria, is a politically motivated but also aesthetic choice, which rests on an anti-institutional agenda. In all of these cases, the aesthetic choices

made by art activists stand in relation to the values, ideology, and objectives that make up an agenda for social change. Sometimes they are in line with groups' values and objectives, as in the cases just presented, and sometimes they are in tension with certain values and objectives of a group, as was the case of a Shell Out Sounds action in which certain participants were aiming for a 'tight' or good quality musical performance at the expense of the openness and participatory potential of the action.

I have argued in this book that in art activism the processes behind an art piece or action are important as political practice, and that therefore there is a reason why art activists continue to resort to certain forms of art making. In the cases I have presented, embodied, dialogical, and performative art forms clearly dominate the field, as these allow prefigurative forms of building community as well as spaces for self-transformation. But even when the processes behind certain practices attempt to be prefigurative in terms of organisation and the rejection of the structures and canons of institutional artistic practice, these are in many cases also defined by a strategic element, as in the case of performance actions by Art Not Oil groups. It is therefore worth looking at how strategy interacts with both the prefigurative processes and the aesthetics of art activism.

Strategic choices

Each group that makes up the Art Not Oil coalition has a different approach towards the shared aim of ending oil sponsorship of the arts. While Liberate Tate adopts a sombre, dignified, and minimalist aesthetic that is marked by the use of veils and black clothing and props, BP or not BP? uses theatricality and humour as its main weapons. In Chapter 7, I argued that each group's approach not only depends on members own artistic and activist backgrounds and personal preferences, but most importantly on the context of each particular institution, which conditions what kind of aesthetics might work best in a particular space. In all cases, however, the chosen medium and aesthetic repertoire are not only influenced by the wider processes of the practice and the values guiding it, but are also in constant negotiation with the strategic choices made in order to achieve the goal of ending oil sponsorship of the arts. This issue is present in considerations such as choosing a specific space or moment for a performance, making a performance video friendly (Serafini 2014), and creating costumes that are easy to smuggle into a museum. Art making in these cases is not a 'pure pursuit of beauty', or a reflection on the question of art itself. Rather, art activism is defined by the fact that aesthetic choices are in direct dialogue with both the values that a group or individual holds—equality, inclusion, and horizontalism to name a few; the strategic choices made by the group; and the objectives for change that they wish to accomplish.

Liberate Tate's mode of action, for instance, is subverting performance art against the museum, employing it as a form of protest. Using performance

art is strategic for many reasons. In the first place, performance allows a space for intervention and direct action, which is particularly appealing to activists (Liberate Tate 2012). The potential for participation and duration of performance can be turned into tools for pressuring the museum: a large amount of people dominating a space for a considerable amount of time poses an inconvenience to the institution, and an artwork that invites the public to watch and/or participate also makes it harder for the institution to block, repress, or dismiss that action. But furthermore, performance art has since its beginning been regarded as an avant-garde practice that pushes the boundaries of art (Berghaus 2005). The Tate galleries—and especially, the Tate Modern—position themselves as bastions of the arts and leading figures in the contemporary art world. Subverting performance against the museum places Tate in an uncomfortable situation in which by intervening, they would be shutting down the same kind of avant-garde and progressive art of which they claim to be advocates. In a similar way, BP or not BP?—who started out as a Shakespeare-themed theatrical activist troupe called Reclaim Shakespeare Company—has reclaimed and subverted Shakespeare in order to stage anti-BP plays that denounce the oil company. Their first performances involved invading stages minutes before the curtain would go up at the BP-sponsored Royal Shakespeare Company plays, and their Shakespearean form helped them ensure audience support in that context. While there are many reasons why activists resort to art practice as a form of action, which include enhancing the experience of activism and generating spaces for imagining new alternatives (Shepard 2011), in the case of protests that specifically target cultural institutions this choice is in large part also a strategic one.

Instrumentalisation

Considering the role of strategy in certain art activist practices—particularly those that have a direct action or interventionist aspect—it is inevitable that I return to the issue of the instrumentalisation of the arts briefly discussed in the introduction, and implicitly or explicitly addressed by various art activists whose words I have included in this book. Art activists within Shell Out Sounds, for instance, offer contrasting views on the strategic and instrumental use of art as protest and direct action, some supporting a view of art as a strategic way of occupying certain spaces and performing confrontational politics, and others advocating for a view of art as intrinsically political and able to effect change because of its potential to communicate and move people.

A long-standing question is whether a kind of art practice that is conditioned by a political agenda and a set of objectives that frames it can truly be ‘free’ or not, and whether this freedom from instrumentalisation is indeed a necessary condition for something to be understood as art. In the realms of art history and art theory there still seems to be a strong resistance to art

that is closely tied to concrete campaigns and political objectives (Sholette 2017), and these kinds of practices are usually dismissed as not art, but something else (Jelinek 2013). As part of her argument differentiating art from activism, Jelinek claims that,

> If an artist is concerned to make art, they will conform to artworld discourse and its prescriptions. If, on the other hand, a person is concerned with *doing good things in the world*, their focus will lie elsewhere, with no regard to artworld norms and discourse.
>
> (Jelinek 2013:95)

The first problem with Jelinek's argument is that she positions the norms and discourse of the art world as necessary conditions for art, when these are only conditions for art that functions within the institutional and/or commercial circuits. Limiting the concept of art to that which is institutionalised would automatically dismiss endless other art forms, from street art to the work of non-professional artists and of course, art activism. Second, as previous chapters have shown, while art activists might reject the norms and institutions of the art world, Jelinek's proposal that activists making art do not care about art world discourse is not true. Many activist groups that produce art as a form of protest are very much interested in producing work that has 'high artistic value', especially if they have a background in the arts themselves. Having emerged from the context of political activism, the political goal or objective of these actions is ultimately what initiated them, but their aesthetic considerations can in most cases be as important as their goals—even if they do stand against the norms and structures of the institution. This divide between arts and politics not only affects the way art activism is regarded by art critics and historians, but it is also a division that is applied within the institutional art world itself, and that is utilised for dismissing the work of artists working on social, political, and identity issues (this brings us back to the earlier debate on aesthetics versus ethics). As bell hooks explains, in relation to political art made by people of colour:

> The inability of unenlightened critics and artists who have not divested themselves of white-supremacist thinking to accept that an individual may engage the particular in relation to race, gender, or class while simultaneously evoking an aesthetic that transcends these categories continues to be the standpoint that overdetermines the critical reception of art created by people of color. Any work by these artists that overtly articulates and calls attention to these concerns is automatically seen as "political" and lacking in appreciation for aesthetic concerns. Yet no artist from any marginalized group has ever suggested aesthetic merit is not relevant.
>
> (hooks 1995:102)

It is important to note that while so-called 'political' or 'activist' art has had its moments of being in vogue, most notably in the last five to ten years, the dismissal of work by artists of colour and Global South artists working on political issues is still ingrained in the art system.

Returning to the idea of instrumentalisation, and considering the relationship between aesthetics, process, and strategy in art activism, we can see art activism as instrumentalised art practice, a concept discussed in Chapter 6. But does this necessarily mean that artistic freedom is compromised, or that art becomes *just* an instrument in a campaign or action? Marcuse states that "the risk to the degradation of the meaning of art through its instrumentalisation, as always with its commodification, is great" (Marcuse 2007:23). But as Stallabrass argues, contemporary institutional art practice, which is widely regarded as autonomous and free, is indeed increasingly instrumentalised by the forces of capital:

> The uses to which art is put, and the identity of those who use it, are often far from mysterious. Since the fall of Eastern European Communism and the emergence of capitalism as a truly global system, these uses have become both more advanced and more evident.
>
> (Stallabrass 2004:10)

Art activism is distinct from institutional art in that it is instrumentalised not for reasons of economic development or for sustaining the power of a 'regime culture' (Marcuse 2007). Instead, it is guided by visions of social change that allow it to be a prefigurative practice, a space for expression, and a space for developing political subjectivities, in an attempt to enact through practice the values and processes of a future ideal social configuration. Instrumentalisation, in this case, is not the restriction of artistic freedom, but the reason why these practices adhere to democratic, open and horizontal principles, and what leads them to become alternative non-institutional spaces for transformative art practice. As Stallabrass argues, dismissing the myth of the useless artwork as most pure, "it is works of evident use that press on the contradictions inherent in the systems of art, that seek to liberate themselves from capital's servitude" (Stallabrass 2004:201).[7]

Ethics

Issues of ethics are intrinsically interwoven with both politics and aesthetics. Indeed, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish the aesthetic from the political and the ethical in collaborative art (Charnley 2011:42) as the categories of form, content, and objective blur. Furthermore, as this book has argued (for instance, in relation to psychogeographical practice), the issue of ethics in art is inseparable from context and the wider relations of power that surround a practice, since "ethical questions are invariably implicated in social and economic ones" (Butler 2015:23).

In the debate on participatory and socially engaged practices led by figures such as Bishop (2012) and Kester (2011), and discussed at multiple points in this book, the place of ethics in art is an issue of contention. Kim Charnley argues that

> The 'aesthetic' in Kester's 'dialogical aesthetics' is fundamentally an ethical practice of engagement with the other. Yet for Bishop, the 'ethical turn' is a threat to the authorial autonomy and complexity that are the *sine qua non* of art as aesthetic practice. Both critics accuse the other of placing in jeopardy the political power of art.
>
> (Charnley 2011:39)

Bishop, continues Charnley, ends up naturalising the exclusive nature and economic power of the arts for the sake of autonomy, while Kester equates this autonomy with inequality. "Both arguments are struggling with the contradiction that is created when art's autonomous criticality is superimposed onto art as a socio-economic nexus of power" (Charnley 2011:49). But both authors remain focused on professional art practice (as Kester's dialogical art is still art produced by professional artists who collaborate with local communities). Looking at art activism and in particular its position with respect to the institutional art world opens up other perspectives on ethics and power, particularly around the negotiation of artistic objectives, strategic political ones, and the commitment to prefigurative processes and social relations that do not reproduce forms of social and political oppression.

Conclusion

Having brought together what I argue are some of the key elements of art activist practice and applied these as analytical categories for looking at the processes of different groups, I have attempted to provide the reader with a deeper understanding of the way in which art activist practices work, and what it is that distinguishes this kind of aesthetic-political practice from other aesthetic and political forms of expression and action. Art activism, as this chapter has shown, is defined by its dual nature as aesthetic and political practice, and by the tensions and negotiations through which this duality is manifested. In this last section I will explore these tensions further in order better to understand how this tension informs art activist processes, and suggest a framework that can explain the ways in which the political and aesthetic facets of this practice interact.

The tension between aesthetics and politics in art activism is present from the stages of creative planning to the dual embodied experience, the construction of collective identities, and the forms of participation that it allows. It also governs the relationship these groups have with cultural institutions as political targets, reclaimed sites, aesthetic referents, and

symbols of elitist culture. The specific negotiations in which this duality and tension are manifested include not only the relationship between political strategy and aesthetic objectives, but also the ways in which both strategy and aesthetics relate to the prefigurative approach taken by art activists.

The duality that emerges from the aesthetic and political aspects of art activist practice is therefore manifested in a triad relation that includes both strategy and prefiguration as ways in which the political aspect of the practice is developed and manifested. What examples given in this book suggest is that the tension between aesthetics and strategy means a negotiation between artistic objectives and efficacy towards achieving political goals; the tension between aesthetics and prefiguration is manifested in the negotiation between artistic quality (and artistic freedom) and ethics; and the tension between strategy and prefiguration is visible in the choices made between efficacy and ethics, meaning producing work that is not only strategic towards achieving a political goal, but that enacts a groups' values in the now (Figure 8.1).

The tension between strategy and aesthetics, between aesthetics and prefiguration, and between prefiguration and strategy are present in the practice of all the groups presented here, but the ways in which they negotiate and reconcile the different aspects of their practice will vary. In the work of Left Front Art, for instance, the transgressive values and aesthetics of artists often need to be negotiated in the trade union context, sacrificing prefigurative forms of action and art making for the strategic sake of bringing a political message inside the institution of the trade union. This is different when they organise events and actions in other contexts. In the work of Shell Out Sounds, aesthetic quality is in constant tension with both the group's intention to maintain an open, democratic, and prefigurative practice, and with their need to put on strategic, effective performances. The way in which

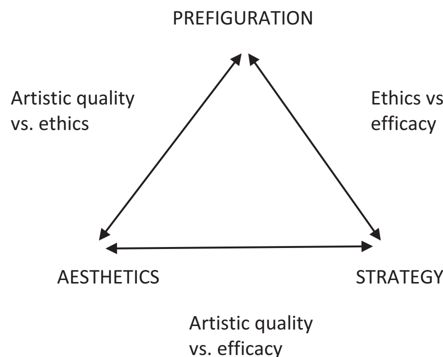

Figure 8.1 Strategy-aesthetics-prefiguration triad of art activism.

these tensions are negotiated is also linked to the ways in which individual and collective experiences interact, as previous sections in this chapter have shown.

In the instances of prefiguration that these groups enact, however, there is an attempt to reconcile the tensions present in their practice. As discussed in reference to participation, for instance, performances in which participation is not regarded as irreconcilable with artistic quality, but rather embraced as an opportunity for a particular kind of (ethical) aesthetics, give place to actions that allow a prefigurative form of art making to emerge, in which the aesthetics of a performance are the result of political values and objectives in action. Strategy, aesthetics, and the prefigurative enactment of horizontal and democratic values can be seen as the three components of a triad of art activism, but prefiguration in this case is not only one of three components; it is also the process and approach that can allow the solving of tensions between strategy and aesthetics, allowing each element to feed off the other. Prefiguration is the key towards reconciling tensions between aesthetics and strategy because a prefigurative approach entails building a kind of practice that is sustainable, reflects and enacts a series of values, and strives to make art in a way that brings together means and ends. When prefiguration is embraced and it is in synchronicity with strategy and aesthetics rather than in tension, transgression and strategic approaches become part of a constructive—in addition to antagonistic—force, opening spaces that go beyond critique and instead build alternative forms of art making rooted in the political. It is key here to think of prefiguration as “a way of understanding the broader significance of movement praxis—and as such any numbers of seemingly ‘instrumental’ actions have their place within the larger process of prefiguration” (Maeckelbergh 2016:125).

As Lucy Lippard has argued, “[t]he intricately structural quality that characterizes activist art results from the complexity of the position these artists find themselves in, fraught as it is with economic, aesthetic, and political contradictions” (Lippard 1984:355). Pursuing a holistically prefigurative approach opens up greater potential for art activists to build a kind of practice that can pursue and achieve their political and aesthetic goals, while building sustainable, democratic artistic practice and forms of organising, sharing, and living.

Notes

1 An example of this would be religious-environmental direct action groups.
2 Morag Rose, personal interview (2014).
3 John Jordan, personal interview (2014).
4 This was also the case for Shell Out Sounds. When Shell stopped sponsoring the Southbank Centre Classical Season, the group went through a hiatus, but then continued to do sporadic performances at other Shell-sponsored venues.
5 It is important to also consider whether an aesthetic judgement of a performance action necessarily implies referring to a certain canon—for example,

one emerging from a Western tradition of art making and understanding of aesthetics—or whether judging a piece on aesthetic grounds can escape this, a question I will hopefully be able to explore indepth on another occasion.

6 See Milliard, Coline (2012) 'Tate Turns Down Activists' Wind Turbine Gift', *Blouinartinfo*, http://uk.blouinartinfo.com/news/story/833991/tate-turns-down-activists-wind-turbine-gift#. Accessed 8 May 2015.

7 The idea of instrumentalisation as freedom can also be considered in relation to the work of William Morris, who rejected the idea of art for art's sake and advocated an abolition of the specialised, autonomous art sphere. Morris believed that the advancement of capitalism and the division of labour had caused a separation between art and everyday labour, and that bringing back art into everyday life would not only make for a better society, but was in itself a right of every worker (Kocmanovà and Purkyné 1967). While Morris's ideas are framed differently to contemporary critiques of the art world and art activism and to ideas of instrumentalisation, his work was seminal in questioning the need for artistic autonomy, and is still relevant today when examining the relationship between art, labour, and activism.

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Afterword

Chapter 8 presented my proposal for the foundations of a theory of art activism that is focused on the processes and politics of practice, as opposed to formal aspects and outcomes. In the introduction to this book I argued that there were methodological as well as ontological issues to consider in relation to the literature on art and politics. Until now, processes of art activism have not been examined in depth in the literature on social movements. At the same time, most literature on art activism and political art seems to emerge from the limited framework of art theory, and, more often than not, work looking at the politics of engaged art practice still focuses on art that develops within an institutional context. Furthermore, there is a lack of ethnographic studies on art activism that offer an inside perspective on micro-politics.

This book aimed to provide an interdisciplinary perspective to the study of art activism that would bridge this gap by bringing together theories from social movement studies and art theory, in order to grasp some of the often neglected particularities of art activism as a practice. This study is therefore not only an ethnographic exploration of art activism in the UK, but also a call for further interdisciplinary work that can lead to a deeper understanding of creativity and politics at a time of global social and political unrest. The current climate calls for flexible, adaptable techniques of opposition, resistance, and political mobilisation (Amin and Thrift 2013:130). It also calls for innovative and sustainable ways of creating alternative structures and organisations.

The findings presented here emerge from research on art activism in the UK, but speak to wider contemporary issues in research and in practice. Rethinking collective identity and the idea of the personal as political are paramount at a time when the individualisation of everyday life is being fuelled by increasingly precarious labour practices and the myth of meritocracy, and when identity politics are both crucial to movements fighting against institutional violence in the Global North and South, yet are being challenged by the Right as well as by sectors of the Left. Considering the multiple layers of transgression in art activism and approaching it as a contextualised experience as well as a kind of relationship lays the ground for important questions on the relationship between personal transformations and structural ones, and how art and creativity

can facilitate experiences that address both. The findings in this book therefore speak to other contexts beyond art activism, including education, community work, and other forms of art practice and of organising.

Findings on prefiguration will also hopefully speak to such practices, as will my analysis of the relationship between art activists and institutions. While this analysis was focused and looked specifically at how art activists interact with these organisations, it is hoped that this will contribute to further thinking on the role of cultural institutions in contemporary society, and whether cultural institutions can be allies in initiatives for structural change, or whether unsanctioned appropriations of cultural spaces are the only way of shifting the symbolic power of museums and galleries and using them as platforms for uncompromised demands. It is also hoped that the analysis of prefigurative art activist practice offered here can be useful for both scholars and practitioners in imagining new ways of making art that reacts to the increasingly commercialised and 'neoliberalised' state of the art world.

These final thoughts are being written at the time of a Trump presidency. At a time of the UK's negotiations for exiting the European Union. At a time of a resurge of the Right across Latin America. And at the time of major displacement of people in North Africa and West Asia who are fleeing war and repression. But while several major political events and instances of institutional violence, austerity measures, and war have shaken the world in the last few years, we have also witnessed the emergence of strong movements of resistance. Black Lives Matter in the US stood up against continued institutional racism and violence on black citizens. *Menos* in Argentina, Brazil, Guatemala, and other countries in Latin America rose against gender violence and for gender equality. The Standing Rock Sioux Tribe has put the struggle between environmental justice and land rights and ruthless capitalism, on the international news agenda. And the Labour Party in the UK has seen a resurge under a new leadership, backed by young voters as well as strong networks of grassroots activists and organisations that are beginning to re-engage with mainstream politics.

Considering the global economic and political climate, this book ends with one final affirmation of the crucial role of art and creativity in surviving hardship, in fighting the good fight, and in constructing new alternatives. We must continue to create spaces for embodied, collective, creative experiences of political agency. And we must continue to search for the balance between artistic goals, strategy, and prefigurative approaches, in the hope that we can fulfil the 'dual function of affirmation and negation' (Bell 2017:80) leading to a sustainable practice in art activism that is transformative on individual, collective, and structural levels.

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