

ACTIVISM: Artful Tactics of Social Change in Urban and Cyber Space

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Everyone seems to be talking about public space, but I wonder what they are referring to. What do people mean by public space? The streets are now built and un-built by private corporations. The squares and piazza's are conceived and developed as nodes in the network of global cities, transport and planning infrastructures. The parks are locked-up at night. Perhaps when people speak about public space they are referring to the discursive space of the mainstream media. Perhaps they imply all of the above to the degree people engage with them in everyday life. Moreover the interest in public space has emerged at a time when not only the examples I have sited above but every sphere of life seems to be invaded by business and economic priorities. The main theme of my paper is not therefore to define public space or grumble about definitions but to introduce three different articulations of it – their contours and expressions as adequate to this contemporary context. Firstly I talk about a government urban renewal scheme and a public art project opposed to its adverse effects. Both argue that public space is important and both propose its rather too easily accessible revision. The second part of my paper, and the main focus of my interest are the new social movements which engage in cultural and political practices that articulate a rather more cramped and complex space. This space does not offer any easy or inevitable way out but the efforts of new social movements, I argue, are no less productive.

In 2001 London's streets, squares, parks, and underground stations were subject to a Government clearance program of homeless, prostitution and illegal street trade. In response, or rather a particular response to these events, by Transgressive Architecture, was to use images to re-install rough sleeping, public sex, and busking and to contrast this representative re-appearance of the excluded subjects with government marketing affirming 'inclusive public

spaces foster tolerance and radical thought'. The images and text stained on white sheets were placed on the ground in the affected sites and described by the architect as 'monuments to the communities of people cleansed from public spaces' (Doron 2000: 1). The *Bad Sheets* project also incorporated documentary film and imagery of each sheet installation, a compendium of terms to highlight the intentions of the project and a little media attention. It also included a series of academic articles in which the architect responsible explained in detail his opposition to the UK Government's program of social cleansing as fundamentally to do with the perception of public space contained in the then newly released Urban Task Force publication, *Towards an Urban Renaissance* (Urban Task Force 1999). This publication marked Government preparations for a white paper on urban policy and development, the first in the UK for over 20 years. Chaired by Sir Richard Rogers, the Urban Task Force are a Government Select Committee composed of the heads of UK based architecture, construction, urban and transport planning industries, including head planners from central London's Local Authorities. They have disseminated what they believe UK cities should be and the design-led urban renewal strategy needed to get there. In public lectures, publications, and the media the Urban Task Force speak about public space as though it were constituted only by exclusively 'legitimate' practices despite the existence of communities and usages outside this vision. By excluding the existence of homeless people, prostitution and illegal street trade from their vision, Transgressive Architecture states that the Urban Task Force lead us towards 'homogenous, culturally blunted and less democratic' cities. Furthermore Transgressive Architecture notes that the Urban Task Force's description of public space as an 'Outdoor Room' there-by domesticates the 'essence of public space – its supposed boundlessness' (Doron 2000: 44). By boundlessness, that is a space free of the domesticating tendencies of exclusion, confinement and enclosure, Transgressive Architecture recalls a modernist utopia. The utopian public space imagined in modernity with its claims to neutrality, transparency and of being open to all is now a social space that is always already stratified, inhabited, divided, owned and thus always subject to conflicting values. Moreover Transgressive Architecture's conception of public space is one of essentially exclusionary practices and discourses that are imposed on people and communities existing within public space and who are consequently excluded by it. Those

excluded are thus characterised by the sheets themselves which are described as 'unauthorised'. At the most basic level this implies the art objects were illegal interventions, because the architect did not request the relevant permit to exhibit them from the Local Authorities. At the level of semiotics however the project presents a revised vision of what 'legitimate' public space should be (but isn't). In this revised situation the activities and communities excluded by the Government's new urban policy are incorporated and thus 'authorised'.

The *Bad Sheets* project is indicative of the debate about the political importance of what takes place in public spaces of cities which has been conducted as if public space is an ontologically diverse but fundamentally unproblematic category. The prevailing question has been what experiences and life stories are placed in the spaces of the city and how these processes of selection and representation obscure other, potentially richer and more accurate representations. Although this has been a fruitful line of investigation it is one which like the *Bad Sheets* project concentrates on intervening in the processes which obscure, distort, and marginalise, and fails perhaps to pay adequate attention to the degree to which these same processes *produce* publicly recognisable concepts of public space. In the last instance, the difference between these two approaches is a difference between an understanding of public space and everyday life as pre-discursively formed and *subsequently* represented by the media, city planners and government bureaucrats and one which sees public space as a realm that can only be conceptualised and performed *through* its public articulation at the level of discursive enunciation and regulated practice. To illustrate this point further the Urban Task Force were not simply an authorised discourse on public space which they subsequently imposed as a particular representation or conception of what it is, or what it could or should be. They were instrumental in the popularisation and necessary visualisation via a burgeoning literature of textbooks, journalism and academic work of the vectors of public space, its trajectory through the physical and social infrastructure of British cities and which they lent a glossier sheen and leaner design. Those who propounded its doctrine – political leaders, state bureaucrats, research scientists, academic theorists, curators, journalistic popularisers – did not merely describe the future 'Renaissance' of cities and public spaces. *They prescribed it.* Therefore although Transgressive Architecture opposes the state sponsored discourse of Sir Richard Rogers and the Urban Task Force

the *Bad Sheets* project re-introduces subjects who have been excluded by it as primarily victims or passive objects of these designs. However perhaps the *Bad Sheets* do show us how to start to change things to create inclusive public space; through the small deviations, the little divergences and oppositional meanings, but what goes on beneath and above meaning, and where do you go from essentially being in the position of the eternal critic. If, as Peter Marcuse has stated, 'Homelessness exists not because the system is not working but because this is the way it works' (Rosler 1991: 50), then perhaps to create an alternative to public space, cultural and political practices must in the first instance pose a challenge to it as a realm of regulated practice and modulated discourse. That this is articulated by concrete examples of theory-in-practice at the level of the forms of political and cultural participation, decision making structures, organisation, and modes of communication that are constructed in the process of the challenge.

The second part of my paper moves on to discuss the work of new social movements. I argue that the work of new social movements allow a glimpse of the conditions of possibility that exist within everyday life to challenge it on its own space. I would also suggest that new social movements articulate the 'cramped spaces' and 'impossible positions' in which minorities and 'small peoples' find themselves as always already 'traversed by determining social forces that cramp their movement [offering – *N.K.*] no possibility of settling into coherent and self-determined identity' (paraphrased from Deleuze quoted in Thorburn 2001: 79). So while I argue that new social movements are actively articulating new spaces of cultural production and political participation (and there-in lies the glimpse of potentialities and optimism) they also reveal the extreme difficulty of such a position, even at the level of the sheer amount of work needed to occupy a 'productive', rather than simply 'resistant' or 'oppositional' space. My aim here is to engage with these practices of new social movements at a conceptual level. I will relate their decision making structures, organisation, modes of communication and forms of political and cultural participation to the wider cultural context of late capitalism. I wish to clarify that I do not aim to give an all-encompassing analysis of new social movements, nor attempt to define them. Neither do I wish to select a specific case-study of an area of conflict that would narrow the focus and allow a closer scrutiny of their work. This would involve

the question of how to choose; a question already being answered by individuals within the movements according to their interests and by agencies according to their priorities of worries. I do however situate new social movements within the broad framework of the common opposition to capitalism but one which is not also unified by a notion of a socialist alternative. On the contrary, I would argue that such a vision has been displaced by a proliferation of micro-struggles and the diversity of projects in which there seems to be no suggestion of a need for universal rules. This as Sylvie Lotynger put it in a different context suggests 'the desire to allow differences to deepen at the base without synthesising them from above, to stress similar attitudes without imposing a general line, to allow points to co-exist side by side' (quoted in Terranova 2003). I should clarify that this work falls within the context of my PhD research, in which my interest is the activism that new social movements develop as non-spectacularised forms of cultural production and non-representational forms of political expression.

This characteristic of new social movements became particularly evident to me during the period of mass political protests in 1999–2001. The puzzlement of journalists in the mainstream media regarding this 'movement with no sign' (Terranova 2003) led me to a realm of cultural production and political participation that is not limited to the reproduction of signs or discourse. New Social Movements operate both above and below the line of mainstream representations and discourses and thus encompass practices which can accommodate and develop this position. As an illustration whilst mainstream media coverage of the mass protest events in Seattle in 1999 and Genoa in 2000 operate under the sign of the spectacle, in this case the spectacle of violence, they present activist practices as merely semiotic expressions of dissent and obliterate the real issues of police brutality and the wider context for the protests. However, as Nick Thornburn has noted, 'There is a difference between having alternatives and having the mass of *status quo* media acknowledge them' (quoted in Terranova 2003). The new social movements via internet mailing lists and by setting up their own independent media in combination with city-based micro-protests and rally's disseminated, discussed, evaluated and participated in such a way that the Genoa and Seattle events could evolve rather than dissolve. In fact it is during these moments of spectacular convergence of environmentalists, anti-capitalists, labour movements, minority, gay, lesbian and civil rights groups amongst many others,

that the level of analysis, evaluation, and discussion between them, the problems encountered, the formulation and re-formulation of the problems they wish to address intensifies. This intensity of communication is however grounded in the circulation of collectively produced experiences and information. They thus challenge nominally neutral public space in cyberspace and the space of the city that is on its own space by actively creating an alternative to it. As an aside even within these flows the debate surrounding the ability of the mainstream media to co-opt within itself the signs of dissent can be heard from veteran activists warning against any easy enthusiasm for inherently revolutionary solutions or forms of practice.

The localised operations of previous eras of resistance movements relied upon a set of practices such as picket lines, strikes, sabotage, demonstrations, advertisements and leafleting campaigns. Struggles for civil rights, equal pay, better working conditions, the protection of the environment, women's rights and student revolts were dispersed across a variety of spatially separated and qualitatively different sites. They were divided by degrees of privilege, by ethnicity and gender and dis-organised in that many were not operating within the realm of conventional labour movements. Though conventional protest practices are still very much in existence they are now operating alongside carnival forms of protest and a degree of connectivity offered by new technologies. Computers and the internet, e-mail, digital audio and video, desk-top publishing, mobile telephones, and broadcast media such as cable and radio form 'the circuit of high technology capital within which the circulation of struggles is also produced' (Witheyford 2002: 200). Alliances are formed and connections are made within new social movements to create new combinations of struggles. A drive for better working conditions is combined with issues of race and gender discrimination and environmental protection. Alliances are formed between feminist and ethnic minority rights groups, and environmental protection groups with housing activists to challenge the same corporate entities on many different levels.

This connectivity however is not used as an attempt to create a mass movement of public objectors based on consensus. New technologies have actually articulated the lack of any identifiable unitary purpose as it also introduces the diversity of causes and practices with the possibility of collaboration, convergence and recognition that does not rely for its existence on a consensus from within. As Harry Cleaver states, 'new social movements are changing constantly

and only momentarily forming those solidified moments we call 'organizations' (Cleaver 1999). This, the activist-artist collective the Critical Art Ensemble suggest is a strength rather than a weakness. In their book, *Electronic Civil Disobedience, Simulation, and the Public Sphere* (2000) they state that conflict arising from 'a decentralized flow of particularized micro-organizations (cells) that would produce multiple currents and trajectories [and] a dialogue between a variety of becomings would resist bureaucratic structure as well as provide a space for happy accidents and breakthrough invention' (CAE 2000: 15).

To summarise, I would argue that the use of public space has of late provided an accessible category for those who maintain the need for something different from that which exists in the culture of late capitalism. Notably by the Urban Task Force it articulated the need for a more modulated and regulated set of urban policy initiatives. For Transgressive Architecture it implied the urgent need to recognise the exclusionary nature of such initiatives in the interest of the re-introduction of excluded subjects. Public space has in these cases dissolved the conditions of its own production at the same time as it disguises the very difficult, almost impossible task of democratic social change. In the first instance it is necessary to engage with the cramped conditions of life in order to change them. This I argue can be seen in the emergence of new social movements who are actively constructing from within these spaces, alternatives that challenge the conditions within which they find themselves.

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Aktivism: sotsiaalsete muutuste riikalised taktikad linna- ja küberruumis

Kokkuvõte

Artikkel analüüsib aktivismi kui spetsiifilisi tegevuse ja kaasatuse tüüpe võimaldavat nähtust. Aktivismi vaadeldakse kaasaegse loometegevuse uue vormina, mis võimaldab uuel moel avalikku ruumi sekkumist.

Käesolev töö on osa laiemast interdistsiplinaarsest ühiskondlikust programmist, mis tegeleb avalikkuse osalemisega avalikus linnaruumis toimuvates loomingu- ja kultuuriprojektides, ajendamaks linna uuenemist, jätkusuutlikku arengut ja kodanikualgatust. Keskendudes esmajoonel otsese aktsiooni ja kontekstuaalse kunsti praktikatele, püüan konkreetsetele juhtumitele toetudes välja selgitada aktivismi põhilised vormid, kontseptsioonid ja kontekstid, osutada peamistele seda loovatele jõujoontele, hinnates aktivismi vastandumistaktikaid ning mõista, kuidas erinevad taktikad loovad võimalusi uute osalus- ja koostöövormide ning kaasavate praktikate jaoks tänapäeva avalikus sfääris. See toob kaasa ka modernistlikus traditsioonis neutraalseks peetud avaliku ruumi ümberhindamise sotsiaalseks ruumiks, mis on alati kihistunud, asustatud, jagatud ja omatud ning seega alati vastanduvate huvide tander.

Teadlikult on püütud hoiduda kultuurianalüüsile omasest esitusviisist. Selle traditsiooni kohaselt nähakse aktivismi isetegevusliku kultuurivormina, individualistlike naudinguihade subkultuurse tsoonina, mis eirab oma strateegilist vangitsetust kultuuri äärealadele. Samavõrra pole aktivism pelgalt koht poliitilistele praktikatele, mis loovad protesti või vastupanu semiootilisi väljendusi. Aktivismi produktiivse mõju on jätnud tähelepanuta ka kollektiivsete ühiskondlike liikumiste sotsioloogiline analüüs. Niisamuti ei saa aktivismi vaadelda kui lihtsalt praktika