

FRESH PERSPECTIVES/3

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# THE ART OF DISOBEDIENCE

*Arts and Politics*



picture from *Top Goon* - courtesy of [Masasit Mati](#)

Daniel Gorman

October 2015

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## FRESH PERSPECTIVES

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### The Art of Disobedience

#### *Fresh Perspectives on Arts and Politics*

by Daniel Gorman

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# About

While preparing this publication on arts and politics we came across countless artists and artworks dealing with the issue, and a number of publications approaching the question from different – often complementary, sometimes contradictory – perspectives. We also soon realised that arts and politics are inextricably linked to other topics like gender, globalisation, environment and economy, which are all topics of separate publications in this same Fresh Perspectives series. This publication deals with the fundamental questions linked to engaged arts and, as such, it works as the central tile of a puzzle, with a little corner in common with each of the other IETM publications – planned and already published.

However, during the process, we also felt that the more we found out about artistic practices struggling to create a better world, the more we witnessed real-life politics miserably fail when confronted to increasingly dramatic humanitarian tragedies, like the thousands of people desperately knocking at Europe's doors, fleeing from endless wars whose reasons we cannot grasp anymore (if ever war had a plausible reason). It took courage, experience and lucidity to work out a text that could fairly present the complexity of the topic, not giving in to pessimism, and providing food for thought both for seasoned practitioners and for beginners in the arena of politically engaged arts.

We are grateful to our partner [LIFT – London International Festival of Theatre](#) for suggesting artist, cultural manager and activist Daniel Gorman as the author of this challenging publication. Talking from his own practical experience in Europe and in zones in times of conflict he takes us on a journey through four crucial questions: What use are the arts when your country is burning? Can the arts help to build a better

world? Can you accept funding for your arts coming from ethically controversial sponsors? Is it 'right' to call for the cultural boycott of a country?

For this publication we wish to thank all those who replied to our call for contributions: Alexander Manuiloff (BG); Alicia Talbot (AU); Ania Obolewicz (UK); Belarus Free Theatre (BY-UK); Bill Aitchison (UK); Brigid Pasco (US); Cynthia Cohen (US); Deborah Pearson (UK); Diana Arce (US); Eugenio Amaya (ES); Fabio Biondi (IT); Gabor Takacs (HU); George Sachinis (GR); Igor Stiks (UK); Jaime López Molina (ES); Jenny Svensson (NO); Jesus Algovi (ES); Joseph O'Farrell (UK); Kate Nelson (UK); Liz Pugh (UK); María María Achakutscher (MX); Marton Oblath (HU); Mehdi Farajpour (FR); Mel Cheong (MO); Michael Walling (UK); Nabil Ahmed (YE); Nazli Tabatabai-Khatambakhsh (UK); Nicolas Bertrand (FR); Nil Dinc (FR); Pamela Cohn (DE); Paula McFetridge (UK); Pedro Manuel (NL); Ragna Weisteen (SE); Rosie Kay (UK); Samuel Erskine (UK); Sarah Günther (HU); Sean-Poul de Fré Gres (DK); Sergej Korsakov (RU); Stefania Zepponi (IT); Tania El Khoury (UK-LB); Todd Lester (US); Whitney Dufrene (US).

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## IETM

is a dynamic, engaged and forward-looking network for the performing arts sector as well as a resource and reference point for innovative contemporary art. IETM consists of over 550 subscribing professional performing arts organisations from more than 50 countries. They are engaged in innovative, contemporary performance work and are committed to cross-border artistic exchange and collaboration.

## LIFT

For over three decades LIFT has presented the stories of the world to every corner and community of London, supporting and nurturing artists and organisations who have changed the landscape of arts practice in the UK. The core values of LIFT remain constant: LIFT is passionate about providing opportunities that develop the talent, skills and creativity of artists and young people and that break down the barriers to participation in the arts. LIFT champions international cultural exchange, supporting artists from the UK and around the world to create and share work with London's diverse audiences that explores the big ideas and important stories of our times.

## DANIEL GORMAN

Daniel Gorman is an arts consultant, researcher and producer whose work focuses on increasing dialogue, communication and collaboration, while promoting social justice and equality through the arts. He holds an MSc in Middle East Politics from the University of London, is festival director of [Shubbak: A Window on Contemporary Arab Culture](#) and is a co-founder of [Highlight Arts](#), an organisation which works in collaboration with artists in areas in times of conflict.

Artists have power. The power not just to create, but also to transform. For as long as 'art' has existed, it has been 'socially-engaged'. Political art, socially-engaged art, art activism, is nothing new. We could, for example, count several ancient Greek plays as the work of 'political activists'. Performing arts and satire played huge roles in revolutionary Europe and in the Russian Revolution 1917. Work critical of the Soviet Union continued in all countries behind the Iron Curtain. Meanwhile across Western Europe and North America theatre and dance reflected on and engaged with emancipatory movements throughout the 1950s and 1960s and onwards. Collectives like the Situationist International and Fluxus challenged and interrogated the role of art in society. Individual artists engaged topics ranging from women's liberation to race equality, from an end to colonial rule to LGBTQ rights. The 2000s have provided equally fertile ground, as artists and political struggles have become more connected across political or geographic barriers.

# 01.

## INTRODUCTION

*We are not idealists. We know that art alone does not make the revolution. But we are not fools. We know that revolution is impossible without the art.*  
Frente Popular, Dario Santillan<sup>1</sup>

The world is becoming more political. Politics is entering *through the back door and lying in your bed*<sup>2</sup>. Global warming and large-scale climate protests. Austerity politics across Europe. Uprisings across much of the Middle East and their subsequent repression. Fortress Europe and the targeting of refugees. What role do artists have at this key moment, where political engagement and apathy lie side by side? What is art **for**?

This research, commissioned by IETM and LIFT, aims to scratch at the surface of some of the discussions currently taking place amongst a number of 'political arts practitioners'. From direct action to art which engages with political issues from the stage, this paper sets out to provide a primer, a starting point, for discussions on art and politics in 2015. At the IETM Bergamo meeting in spring 2015 we were asked to produce a work looking at 'what to think about when you're risking it'. We hope this is it.

<sup>1</sup> Cited in <http://platformlondon.org/2015/07/08/poetry-that-changes-us-and-join-shake-in-august/>

<sup>2</sup> Quote from 'David', an Iraqi refugee living in Damascus, 2010. Interview with the author.

There are many available studies and discussions focusing on the theoretical relationship between art and politics<sup>3</sup>. This is not one of them. With a conviction that every work of art has a political dimension, we could go down infinite routes. Thus for the purposes of this publication we'll be looking at work which overtly aims to engage with current political states of being and affect them, work which aims to reassert *the power of culture over the culture of power* in the words of Edward Said, used as inspiration by the Palestinian Literature Festival [PalFest](#).

In making such a strong delineation this report of course has limitations – for one, the political tendencies of the researchers. For example we have not covered work aiming towards exclusion or gentrification, although it could certainly be argued that that is a meeting point between art and politics. We focus instead on 'critical art', which Chantal Mouffe defines as *art that foments dissensus, that makes visible what the dominant consensus tends to obscure and obliterate*<sup>4</sup>, art that takes a stand, which challenges the dominant hegemony.

This publication focuses primarily on case studies which are based on in-person, online and email interviews, with further support from questionnaires completed by over 60 individuals from the IETM network and wider afield. We look at the complex topic of politically engaged arts through four broad themes that emerged

<sup>3</sup> See for example C. Mouffe, 'Artistic Activism and Agonistic Spaces'; B. Holmes, 'Artistic Autonomy'; E. Said, 'Culture and Imperialism'.

<sup>4</sup> C. Mouffe, 'Artistic Activism and Agonistic Spaces', p. 3

from discussion with those responding to our call. Following this introduction, the second chapter confronts us with artists working in, or about, areas of conflict and with the question *What use are the arts when your country is burning?* The third chapter looks at artistic projects that let the audience reflect on controversial topics ignored or manipulated by the mainstream media, thus enhancing discussions and democratic participation – moving *Towards a better world*. The fourth chapter focuses on the use of *Arts in the public space*, a political space by definition. The last chapter questions *The limits of arts* by looking at the case of boycotts, whether dialogue has to stop when the arts become a tool to protest a controversial economic sponsor or political regime. The *Conclusions and recommendations* are a series of ideas and recommendations, built on the interviews conducted with international practitioners to suggest common points, values and strategies that can be utilised in different contexts. Finally, the *resources* listed at the end of the publication will hopefully help interested readers dig further into the different topics.

*The arts are all about making things visible, making things palpable, making things affective, and politics is all about the limits of what is visible and what is sayable and hearable. Politics needs the arts to interrogate these limits and art is in a privileged position to be able to understand the value of expression and of saying the unsayable. This is what dissent is, it's about saying the unsayable. Despite the fact that we hear constantly how we have access to the internet and we have access to alternative means of communication, a lot of the time the same material is being replicated – the agendas are set by broadcast media and then replicated on websites. We actually have very few mechanisms to know the world in different ways. Art is one of the few routes by which we come to experience aspects of the world that we would otherwise be unaware of.*

Bernadette Buckley, interviewed for this research



## 02.

WHAT USE ARE THE ARTS  
WHEN YOUR COUNTRY IS  
BURNING?

*My art is a weapon in the struggle for my people's freedom and for the freedom of all people*  
Paul Robeson

It should come as no surprise that the relationship between art and conflict is a contested field. How do we define conflict? Is it solely armed conflict? What about structural violence and global inequality? How do artists and organisers on the outside of an area of conflict recognize power dynamics, and engage in meaningful solidarity, amplifying the voices of those in difficult times? For this section we present thoughts on these questions from a number of key practitioners working in areas in times of conflict, or in solidarity with artists therein.

There is currently a rise in interest in the work of artists in areas of conflict. This work runs the risk of ascribing too much power to art, whereby it is seen as a potential panacea to the ills of the world, with the power to resolve deep socio-political and economic issues. Whilst we reject this role of cure-all, we do believe that art can play an important part in times of conflict, highlighting alternative narratives and a diversity of voices.

At a moment when accessing narratives from outside the mainstream media can be incredibly difficult, art can offer a direct engagement between those outside the conflict and those within, through the presentation of work being created by those either inside or with a direct relationship to conflicted environments. Argentinian director [Lola Arias](#) has made powerful reconstructions of those involved in the Falklands War, and provoked discussion around the seldom-mentioned dictatorships in both Argentina and Chile through her performances. Senegalese arts collective [Kàddu Yaraax](#)'s work 'The Trial of the Clandestine Migrants' highlighted the



Lola Arias, 'The Year I Was Born' at LIFT 2014 (picture: courtesy of LIFT)

Kafka-esque nature of European border controls. Organisations such as [Theatre Without Borders](#) aim to strengthen the visibility of artists working in conflicted environments. In recent years there has been a strong international interest in the work of artists from Syria, such as the cartoonist [Ali Ferzat](#), the documentary production of [ProAction Film](#), the [outpouring of writing by Syrians](#) since 2011, the anonymous filmmakers of the [Abounaddara](#) collective. And from outside Syria, theatre makers in Lebanon such as [Lucien Bourjeily](#) (whose '66 Minutes in Damascus' premiered at LIFT and simulated a regime abduction) and [Tania El Khoury](#) (whose 'Gardens Speak' put the audience into the role of mourner and witness to the lives of those killed in Syria and buried informally), have provided key insights into the lives of those in their neighbouring country.

Times of crisis can also provide a spark for politically engaged arts, when people look to the artists for answers to radically changed circumstances. As Eugenia Tzirtzilaki has said about Greece: *During the 'golden years' of prosperity, very few artists cared about 'political' art. In fact, the idea of being political as an artist bore a sense of*

*being outdated, disillusioned, boring or even grotesque. It was as if 'serious' or 'interesting' contemporary art was above and beyond social issues*<sup>1</sup>. This status quo changed radically during the Greek financial crisis.

Challenging stereotypes is also a key part of this work. Whilst not focusing solely on areas in times of conflict, Bangladeshi photographer, writer and curator [Shahidul Alam](#)'s work on how the arts from 'inside' can challenge media stereotypes of the 'majority' (rather than the pejorative title of 'developing') world is particularly informative. In 2004 Alam set up [Majority World](#), a photography agency specifically aimed at redressing the power imbalance faced by photographers working outside of the Global North. In a similar vein, [Invisible Borders](#), an Africa-wide photography collective, works with artists and individuals in contributing to the patching of numerous gaps and misconceptions posed by frontiers within the 54 countries of Africa through art and photography.

Furthermore, for people within a conflicted moment, art can offer different possibilities

<sup>1</sup> in E. Tzirtzilaki, 'Live arts and social unrest: the Greek crisis case' (unpublished - courtesy of the author)

to those that appear universal, the hegemonic truth offered by the power-brokers. If *nations ... are narrations* as proposed by Edward Said, then the arts can provide a narration of new possibilities, new forms of social organisation and lives not defined by conflict. As Syrian art collective Masasit Mati (interviewed later in this paper) puts it: *Art has the unique gift of being able to provoke and make people react, to question and challenge without being forced to give answers and solutions.*

- **All collaborations need to recognise the power on which they are based – James Thompson, In Place of War**

In Place of War is a UK based research organisation which was founded in 2004 and exists primarily to amplify the voice of artists (mainly theatre practitioners) living and working in areas in times of conflict. It grew out of founder James Thompson's work as a theatre practitioner, based on a visit he made to Sri Lanka in 2000. *The reason it's a research organisation is an ethical choice, to say that rather than international theatre companies needing to go and offer something to warzones, we have something to learn from the theatre that's happening there already.* This commitment to learning from what already exists, rather than entering a new context with pre-conceived ideas is vital. As practitioners from outside conflicted areas, there is a huge amount of baggage we bring with us. Indeed, as Thompson says, *everything you do will be read through a history of the conflict and colonial power.*

A key point therefore if engaging in a conflicted environment is to enter with an open mind and a closed mouth.

Building on this point is the need for an awareness of the acute power imbalances being played out when artistic practitioners from the Global North enter into scenarios in conflicted areas of the Global South. *All collaborations need to recognise the power on which they are based. There are very few absolutely equal partnerships. We just have to look at the European visa rules as an example. Any collaboration needs to look at the power differential at the outset.* This should be born in mind when conceiving projects too, and Thompson is very clear about the risks of 'Romeo and Julietism', bringing two opposing sides of a conflict together in the very artificial arena of an international project, only to conclude the project and then for life to go on as it was before.

*Try and avoid the XYZ work, (International artist X, brings project Y, to country Z), although this is the kind of work which is most easily funded. However, it is possible to do this more effectively, particularly if it's part of a bigger and long-term initiative relating to a social need, of which the arts is just one component. Having a strong local partner on the ground, having a broader (e.g. NGO) partner from the country where you're based, being part of something greater than just what you're doing, so that when you leave it's not just a single project, it's part of a wider system of projects. So you're not just going there to do a play, or a performance, or a festival, but that these activities are part of a wider network of social action that you're contributing to. If there's a campaign about voting rights, or public participation in local democracy, the arts bit might be a small component of a wider movement, and the part you contribute to will be sustained by being a part of something greater.*

Finally – as artists and producers, we need to recognise our limitations, Thompson advises:

***There are times when your work is so compromised by the political environment that you should not be doing it. It can be very difficult to know this in advance, but it's important to recognise that the arts are used strategically to give an impression of the humanness of certain contexts or of certain political actors, and we have to be very aware how we may be used.***



Tania El Khoury, 'Gardens speak' (picture from [Tania El Khoury's website](http://Tania El Khoury's website))

• **Art is always a symbolic act – Milo Rau**

Milo Rau is a Swiss theatre maker whose work focuses on reconstructions, both of what has happened (in the case of 'Hate Radio' and 'The Last Days of the Ceausescus'), and increasingly on what could happen (in the case of 'The Congo Tribunal' and 'The Moscow Trials'). Rau's art works in tandem with real political processes, confronting power structures and undermining hegemonic narratives through a rehearsal of the possible.

Although art may not change the world at the moment of its performance, art can demonstrate that another way of thinking, of living, is possible. This was demonstrated to Rau when he spent time in Romania following the revolution there. He found that although the communist elites went on to become oligarchs, the brief window of revolution showed that their power was not total. *These weeks in winter '89 when revolution happened really in the streets will always be as a part of the biography of the people who lived it and they know that it is possible, and for that it was worth it, even if it changed nothing.*

**Art is always a symbolic act:** *you can't resolve the problems, but what I think we can do is to show what might be possible. Because people think it is impossible; in terms of the Congo they think '6 million dead people, a totally corrupt regime, international enterprises acting totally outside the law, and so on, and so it's impossible to give justice to people in that region of the world' but we go there and really try to show that it is possible to challenge this in the presence of the government, of the military services, of the activists, of everybody. And we invite everybody and we make the trial in a*



Milo Rau, 'The Congo Tribunal' - picture from [The Guardian](#)

*very legal form. And this shows that it is possible. We didn't write an essay to show it could be possible, we showed in real time that it can happen. And I think that's what we can do, to show it in reality. And for me that's what political art is, you show what seems impossible in reality and then it perhaps becomes possible.*

To do this kind of work takes a huge amount of time, and Rau and his team generally spend two to three years working on a topic in the place itself, alongside local advisors and activists. Although Rau has explained that he doesn't always take the advice of his advisors, their input is vital, as they help him and the team understand what sort of complexities they may be entering into.

Simplicity is a key element of devising the work, to have a clear and straightforward concept, avoiding the pitfall of the post-modern impulse to overthink and complicate an action before you begin. As Rau says, *make a very clear action and then things will become more complex.*

And finally – *Insist. In the end everything works, you just have to insist. This sounds kind of like Scientology, that if you really want something it will happen, but it's somehow true with political art. Everything can become real. Don't take no for an answer.*

**I really believe in that real symbolic power of art, of revolution, of activism, even if I know that at the end we will not destroy capitalism in a performance.**



- **We see theatre as infinite possibilities**  
- Belarus Free Theatre

The Belarus Free Theatre (BFT) was originally established in Belarus in 2005 to produce shows, to provide an alternative education to young people through the medium of theatre, and to campaign for freedom of expression and human rights. Their first initiative was to instigate the International Competition of Contemporary Drama. The key aims behind this initiative were to bring to audiences in Belarus the work of Belarusian playwrights who received recognition outside of Belarus but were prohibited in the country and, at the same time, works of well-known international playwrights who were prohibited in Belarus. The additional aim of this international work was to provide a tool of public awareness of life in other countries and continents.

The company has gone on to produce a huge number of plays of their own material, many of which deal with subjects considered taboo by the Belarusian government. They have developed a body of work that focuses on personal and societal taboos and campaigns on human rights. However, *the whole point of our struggle is that we are outraged by the Belarusian regime because they prohibit the theatre that talks about the world and people in it.* As a result of their work, the founders and artistic leaders of the company were forced into exile and they are now political refugees in the UK. The BFT now exists between two spaces, the UK and Belarus. In Belarus the company is illegal and exists in hiding, keeping their performances secret and low-key. They communicate with their audience to arrange shows via text message, with meeting points from which audience members are escorted to the performance venue. This could be a suburban house lent to them for the event, or a disused canteen, or a clearing in a forest, or a garage. This leads to a unique interaction between audience and performer.



Belarus Free Theatre, 'Trash Cuisine' (picture: Svetlana Sugako, courtesy: LIFT)

**Because the audience is taking a considerable risk to see the show there's this very strong complicity between the audience and the company;** *it's a shared space, there's no division between company and audience, they come through the same door, they share the same need to speak freely.*

This complicity has the further benefit of creating a stage for the free exchange of ideas, as once the audience has taken the risk and made the considerable effort to see a show, they generally want to stay and talk about the issues raised by the production.

*BFT shows raise issues that are not talked about in Belarus; they go into taboos and areas where the Government will not disclose information about its activities, about state-sponsored violence and disappearances, about persecuting sexual minorities, all these kinds of things that are not spoken about. So once the play is finished you have this opportunity to stay and talk, so it is a very special space.*

*The performance is the first stage of an event, the second stage of discussion is equally as important.*

It's important to note that the BFT's aim to tackle taboos is not limited to those in Belarus. *We are not interested only in Belarus and its taboos. We are interested in contemporary people with all their personal taboos and taboos of their societies wherever they live. The biggest problem of Belarusian regime is that they are afraid of their own people.*

BFT is a clarion call to those working in less restricted circumstances. As they put it: *We see theatre as infinite possibilities. When you want to be courageous, when you want to take risks, when you want to push boundaries, you have to find the environment where that is possible, and it is possible in theatre, the experience of Belarus Free Theatre proves this. The main thing is to encourage the sector to overcome the obstacles to greater risk taking.*

- **Lampoon the ultimate red lines – Masasit Mati**

Launched anonymously online in 2011 as a covert response to the Syrian regime's violent repression of peaceful protests across the country, 'Top Goon' is a taboo breaking, hilariously satirical puppet show, ridiculing the regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria. Since it began [Masasit Mati](#) have gone on to complete an additional two series, reflecting on the deepening conflict in Syria and the largely ignored civil society movement. The group describes their reasons for creating the show as follows:

*We decided to make a theatrical satire which could be disseminated online, given the importance of social media from day one of the uprising. We wanted to lampoon the ultimate red line in Syria, the dictator and his god-like status. This is why Assad became the main focus of Top Goon. **We specifically chose to use an art form which was both political and satirical in order to make it accessible to both the art world, but also the non-art world.***

The first season of Top Goon is particularly significant. It launched in November 2011 with '[Beeshu's Nightmares](#)'. The show was made inside Syria, began with the puppet Assad claiming *I'm not crazy* and was dedicated to *Gayath Matar and all our martyrs and detainees*. The team behind it feel this season was of key importance as **it broke existing taboos and dared to undermine narratives put up by the Syrian authorities** at a time when only very few were doing so. It also took a novel approach, using the arts to express these ideas. The high viewership numbers for these episodes and the fact that we were contacted by local Syrian groups who wanted to start using puppet theatre for their projects was an amazing outcome for us and resulted in mutual co-operations and live performances in North Syria. It really created a new bond between artistic creators within our country Syria, and led to new co-operations with international artists based in the Middle East as well as Europe and the US.



Masasit Mati, 'Top Goon' (picture from [Masasit Mati's website](#))

Dissent in Syria meant imprisonment (for example in the case of [Bassel Khartabil](#)), violent attacks (for example in the case of cartoonist [Ali Ferzat](#)) or death (for example in the case of [Bassel Shehadeh](#)). For the Masasit Mati collective, puppets, along with being a tool of satire world-wide, provided a level of safety to the team taking part. *The use of puppets and the fact that we did not use our personal names, along with only working with a small circle of trusted people for the entire production (from writing to rehearsing to filming and editing) allowed us to keep safe. Until today, none of the members of Masasit Mati Collective have been arrested or harmed due to their involvement in Top Goon.*

The lasting legacy of these episodes, their huge viewing numbers, the fact that they have been showcased internationally (including at the [Victoria and Albert Museum](#) in the UK and [Kurzfilmtage Winterthur](#) in Switzerland) shows that the arts have an ability to transcend time bound or even context-specific framework. The group also cite international engagement as a key aim, with their work providing a tool to present a different perspective on the people and ideas behind the Syrian uprising.

## 03.

TOWARDS A BETTER WORLD -  
ART AND CITIZENSHIP

*Only art is capable of dismantling the repressive effects of a senile social system that continues to totter along the deathline: to dismantle in order to build 'A SOCIAL ORGANISM AS A WORK OF ART'*  
Joseph Beuys

It's time to reclaim the concept of 'Community art'. Concurrently with the coming together of neo-liberal economic practices and the 'baby boomer' fixation on the transformation of the self, many artists have utilised their craft to challenge this form of self-centred individualism through the building of community engagement and citizenship practices. Working in a vast array of methods, with a vast array of groups, theatre makers are highlighting to those in the 'audience' that they can be responsible for their own actions. A natural progression of Joseph Beuys' philosophy that 'everyone is an artist' would be that 'everyone is an activist'. As Peter Wiebel puts it: *we are now seeing a new kind of social action emerging, a 'performative democracy' centred around the global citizen*<sup>1</sup>.

Perhaps one of the clearest examples of an 'arts and citizenship' project is the story of Antanus Mockus, the former mayor of Bogota who utilized artistic practice as a key tenet of his campaign to reduce violence in the city. Using the concept that people hate being ridiculed more than being fined, he introduced 400 mimes as traffic police and managed to reduce traffic fatalities by over 50% in his first term. There are many other examples we could cite of organisations engaging in artistic citizenship work, for example groups like Performing Arts for Crisis in Europe (PACE), the huge amount of artistic involvement in the discussions around the independence referendum in Scotland in 2014 and the incredible participatory theatre and education work of Káva in Hungary.

<sup>1</sup> P. Wiebel, *People, Politics and Power in 'Global Activism'*, p.59



'Traffic mimes' in Bogotá, Colombia. Picture: courtesy of the Office of Antanas Mockus, mayor of Bogotá (from *Freakonomics*)



Motus/Andreco, 'Lerba cattiva non muore mai' (picture: Alice Bettolo, courtesy: Sant'arcangelo Festival, from [frizzifrizzi.it](http://frizzifrizzi.it))



Funding organizations are also increasingly requiring artists and arts organizations to demonstrate their worth, to show the economic and social value impact of their work<sup>1</sup>. This may seem like a perfect merger of artistic desire and funding agenda, and for many it is, however we need to remain aware that for those in power *art can be a good way to provide the idea that things are changing, whereas in reality they are not*. As Carlos Costa (*Visões Úteis*, Portugal) has warned: *sometimes artists can even get more resources if we 'express louder' [their] politically engaged DNA*<sup>2</sup>. And of course, balance is needed between actual political engagement and aesthetic concerns - what Fabio Biondi from *L'Arboreto* (Italy) calls *the balance between poetics and politics*.

Socially engaged practice, working broadly on the theme of building citizenship, is *art that is about unleashing a sense of being in common, of being part of something bigger than a discrete human body, and of feeling a sense of saying 'I can' and 'we can' at the exact same moment*<sup>3</sup>. This is work that can challenge the status quo and explore new ways of living together. It is no surprise therefore that art and occupations of space can go hand in hand, such as within the Occupy movements in the USA and Europe, the occupations of Tahrir Square in 2011, or the occupations of buildings, both legal (such as the work of MOTUS, Italy with the *2011>2068 Animale Politico Project* which aims to *imagine, without limits or inhibitory factors, other forms of existence, resistance, subsistence, resonance, community, communication, cooperation, inhabitation... and, of course, revolution!*) and illegal (such as Teatro Valle and many others), across Italy over the course of 2011 - 2014.

What all of this has in common is that it works with a broad spread of people to engage in the process of living together, whether that's through incorporating the arts into community place-making (as in Waymarking), or the spontaneous community actions that went hand in hand with artistic occupations common across

Greece. A number of initiatives happened alongside the peaceful occupation of the National Opera House in Athens (which began in January 2009). These included the transformation of the Navarinou parking lot into 'the park' and the opening of the Skoros free shop, where no money is allowed for transactions. Art was part of a broader societal change. As to the reason why art was utilised to such a strong extent in this context, Eugenia Tzirtzilaki sums it up: *Other than art, what other means do we have to keep alive the public dialogue about what matters?*<sup>4</sup>

This is participatory arts at its most raw, reaffirming the theatre in its broadest sense to be a place for political discussion, encouraging people to be responsible for their own actions. This has been clearly demonstrated recently in a European context. With global migrations knocking harder and harder at the doors of Fortress Europe, more and more artists and companies appear to be taking on the responsibility of opening a space for discussion with citizens about this issue - a challenge that most elected governments do not seem to be willing to respond to. From 'Vadi-Névadi' by Czech Archa Theatre, based on work with the inhabitants of the small town of Kostelec nad Orlicí (including the Roma community and the host of a refugee camp) to RULE, a border crossing game played by the audience focusing on migration and asking critical questions about hospitality. From the longstanding work of Counterpoint Arts exploring refugee and migrant experiences to the Silent University, an autonomous knowledge and platform for exchange run by and for refugees, asylum seekers and migrants. From the ArtRefuge artists working in collaboration with refugees around the world to the work of PanoDrama in Hungary (see below), theatre and the arts are working to empower those who are without a voice in standard 'democratic' consultations and, ultimately, to question the practices of democracy as we know it.

Created in 2009, Waymarking was founded by Sarah Spanton due to her concerns that *artist's weren't seeing themselves as a part of the society we live in (sometimes) and are mainly seen as separate from the rest of society (looking in). Their role in society is mainly undervalued, except as an entertaining diversion, or an investment opportunity (visual arts). I think society needs to see us differently. I wanted to explore the interaction between artists and the world we live in.*

Waymarking's work utilizes the arts as a tool for community dialogue. It is Spanton's belief that *the transferable skills aspects of the arts and creative activities are particularly valuable for engaging with people. Artistic practice can facilitate lateral thinking, diagnostic and problem solving skills and the ability to make connections between apparently disparate things.*

Sarah Spanton, Waymarking, interviewed for this research

<sup>1</sup> for more on the 'measurement of the impacts of the arts', see IETM's 'Mapping of types of impact research in the performing arts sector (2005-2015)' at <https://www.ietm.org/en/publications>

<sup>2</sup> Interviewed for this publication

<sup>3</sup> C. Esche, Self-Empowering in 'Truth is Concrete', p. 98

<sup>4</sup> E. Tzirtzilaki, 'Live arts and social unrest: the Greek crisis case' (unpublished - courtesy of the author)

## Humanity has not withered away

Across Europe, organisations and individuals are responding to the large numbers of refugees crossing the border with solidarity, compassion and direct actions of support. A wide number of these originate from the cultural domain. An example of this is Pobuda Staknimo glave (*Let us put our heads together*), an initiative initially stemming from Mladi Levi festival, Ljubljana, Slovenia, and growing by the day. **The statement by Let us put our heads together** (launched on September 3rd, 2015) reads:

*On the borders of Fortress Europe the pressure of those who are fleeing from violence and war in search of a better life is increasing. They turn to Europe because it prides itself on nurturing values of solidarity, humanism and the right to freedom of movement. Yet the institutions of Europe, including those of the Republic of Slovenia, are not living up to those ideals. Quite the contrary, they are closing borders, increasing repressive measures and are fomenting feelings of endangerment and hostility. We are witnessing one of the most shameful moments in the history of the European Union. We cannot remain silent in the face of the cynicism, arrogance and indecisiveness of our governments. Therefore let us come together as individuals and as a community and spare no effort to prepare a decent welcome for refugees in Slovenia, regardless of whether they are merely passing through or whether they decide to stay.*

*We are certain that our plans are just and absolutely necessary therefore we call on the Government of the Republic of Slovenia not to criminalize our actions. We have prepared a list of five principles we believe are necessary for the Government to adhere to if it is serious in its commitment to solidarity with refugees:*

- 1. Principle of not deporting refugees - Slovenia must not deport refugees, regardless of whether they ask for international protection or not.*
- 2. Principle of free transit - Slovenia must take into account the wishes and needs of refugees. Those who wish to continue their journey must not be hindered to do so. Slovenia must help them according to its capabilities to continue their journey to their countries of destination.*
- 3. Principle of openness - For those refugees that decide to remain in Slovenia - either permanently or for a short while - we recommend that accommodation be sought in the following order: a) those who can should be given the opportunity to take care of accommodation themselves; b) housing refugees with residents who are prepared to take them into their homes; c) housing refugees in community centres of the open type that are not removed from urban centres or the local community and allow free access for institutions and volunteers. People must be able to terminate their stay at these centres at any moment. Centres for foreigners and other institutions under police supervision and/or where freedom of movement is restricted are not acceptable under any condition. Refugees must be housed in open accommodation or with residents who offer to house them in their own homes.*
- 4. Principle of equal treatment - there must be no categorisation of people on the grounds of their geographical origin or any other personal circumstances. Different treatment can be based solely on the expressed wishes of the refugees themselves and never on any other personal circumstances.*
- 5. Principle of information - the Government of the Republic of Slovenia must disclose information about the number of official procedures involving persons without a Schengen visa on the territory of the Republic of Slovenia on a regular basis. The public has a right to be informed about all of these official procedures. All procedures involving refugees must be transparent and must enable monitoring.*

*The aid extended to refugees must not be limited to providing them with the bare necessities of life. In addition to providing them with safe shelter and food all people must have access to education, healthcare, sports, art and spiritual care. Individuals, initiatives and the non-governmental sector can contribute much especially in the latter three areas. Do not stand in the way of true humanism!*

*Initiatives are blossoming all throughout Europe that prove that humanity has not withered away. Let us also rise to the challenge!*



picture from [ArtRefugeUK](http://ArtRefugeUK.com)'s website



- **We're attempting to confront ourselves and our audiences**  
- PanoDrama

Founded in 2007, PanoDrama is an organisation founded by the dramaturg and producer Anna Lengyel, originally devoted to facilitating the movement of new drama and emerging theatre artists between countries on the one hand, and developing new plays and documentary pieces on the other. Their work increasingly focuses on questions of citizenship and exclusion, in both a Hungarian and wider European context. In 2010 they began working on 'Word for Word'. This was the first verbatim theatre project in Hungary, built from more than sixty hours of interviews, with a strong political agenda. This project came about following the attacks on Roma individuals that took place in Hungary (and also across a number of European countries) in 2008, as part of a rising tide of xenophobia across the continent. It culminated in [a series of racist anti-Roma attacks in Hungary](#), in which 6 people died, including a five year old boy. Those responsible were not caught until after the ninth, most deadly attack. 'Word for Word' premiered two weeks before the murder trial began.

*'Word for Word' uses the facts of the series of attacks, investigating the responsibility of the majority society for the creation of the current Hungarian atmosphere. For two statements are simultaneously true: the murders are clearly condemned by 90% of the white Hungarian population. However, at the same time according to a number of indicators, 95% of the same group have racist views on the Roma to a smaller or greater extent. We're attempting to confront ourselves and our audiences with this latter fact. If we succeed, we can begin working on a solution for this problem.*

This focus, on looking at the larger, collective responsibility for the creation of an atmosphere in which attacks can take part, rings relevant throughout citizenship practices, and can certainly find parallels in the dangerous rhetoric around refugees and migrants emerging across Europe in 2015.



PanoDrama, 'Word for word' (picture: courtesy of Anna Lengyel)

Following the success of 'Word for Word', PanoDrama created 'Slaves of Justice', a theatrical trial focusing on institutional racism in Hungary. This production, based on 1200 pages of court protocol and more than a hundred hours of interviews, presented the details of a contentious case in Hungary, where a far-right group had visited a Roma settlement during the period of the attacks and murders in 2009, in order to intimidate the residents. The attacker's car was in turn attacked by those residing in the camp. Although all escaped without injury, the state brought a case against the Roma residents for committing a hate crime against 'Hungarians', seeming to cast aside the 'Hungarian-ness' of the Roma residents of the camp. 'Slaves of Justice' presents a summary of the case and puts 'laypeople' into the role of jury, charged with bringing back a verdict. These 'laypeople' consist of high-school students (in Hungary), and pre-selected audience members in international versions.

A potential restriction of this work is the fact that it takes place in theatres, and thus to a fairly restricted audience. To counter

this PanoDrama work together with secondary schools to ensure students and teachers can attend, and are currently developing their active citizenship work outside the theatre, through the creation of 'The Silent Generation'. This is a pan-European youth focused project, which aims to *prevent 2018's first voters from starting their public life cynically and help reclaim their future*. Through building a verbatim theatre piece focusing on a common European history of resistance to tyranny, PanoDrama will work directly with school groups and professional theatre makers to build active citizenship. *In an experience different from any history lesson or other school or family exposure they'll have learnt to get excited about their grandparents' generation, often from other countries, due to the deeply personal nature of the meetings and the thorough methods of oral history and verbatim.*

This focus on utilizing verbatim theatre to build engaged, socially relevant long-term projects tackling some of the most contentious topics in Hungary and across Europe, are hallmarks of PanoDrama's work.

- **Creative occupations as an exercise in retaking public ownership of space - Teatro Valle Occupato**

In 2011, a group of artists and activists in Rome gathered to discuss what might become of the closed Teatro Valle, an 18th century theatre and former opera house in central Rome. The theatre had been closed since 2010, and there were growing public concerns about its fate. In response to this growing sense of concern, groups of artists under the banner of the *Lavoratori Precari Dello Spettacolo* (precarious workers of the performing arts) joined forces with activists from the more politically active leftist movement in Italy and occupied the building. Timing was key. Alongside growing political mobilization in Italy as a result of a series of privatization referendums there were international and global movements, including those across the Middle East in 2011 and the *Indignados* in Spain, all making direct action a viable and accepted route.

As Donatella Della Ratta, a friend of the occupiers, an academic and journalist, puts it:

*There was a general sense of outrage about the fate of the theatre, so an occupation was seen as an accepted way of reacting to this and the only way to save the Common Good. The artists and political activists came from different groups, but the space brought them together and catalysed them to work on a common struggle with a focus on citizenship and arts. So this group met and decided to take the building. Initially the occupation was only supposed to last a few days, as a symbolic act, but they had 1000 people attending in the first 3 days from the local area and the cultural sector. The occupation ended up lasting for 3 years.*

Over the course of these three years, the project became a living experiment of performance art, citizenship and community engagement. According to Della Ratta a significant amount of the time in the theatre was dedicated to citizenship building, with seminars and workshops focusing on topics such as 'what does it mean to be a citizen', training



An event in Teatro Valle Occupato

*sessions on the concept of the Common Good and how to protect it, and much more. Alongside this, and I would include this under the banner of citizenship, were workshops and trainings for artists and for arts technicians, focusing on lighting or set design. These trainings are usually very expensive in Italy, so they offered them for free or donation.*

Teatro Valle won a number of awards and became a huge inspiration to other political arts groups across Italy and internationally. More and more arts- focused occupations of buildings took place in Italy. *The cultural occupations became a kind of virus, spreading across Italy. At this time there began a movement of occupied theatres in Italy, in Naples, Sicily and many other places. The Teatro Valle started to spread this idea of the right to occupy culture. **The idea was that if the municipality won't help us to have cultural activities we need to just take a space and do it ourselves. In essence these projects aim to provide the services that are not provided by the municipality.***

This 'virus' was seen as a threat to the status quo, so inevitably many of the occupations were cleared, a large number by force. Teatro Valle is once again closed, being held in a state of political limbo by the municipality. However, the fact that the occupation took place highlights the possibility of transgression, and the possibility of direct community building. Della Ratta confirms that *these creative occupations were an exercise in retaking public ownership of space, and demonstrating that a space which was abandoned can gain a new life and be available for the local community or for the whole city.*

- **Art {is} a radical imaginative space 'more political than politics itself'**  
- Jonas Staal

Founded by Dutch visual artist [Jonas Staal](#) in 2012, the [New World Summit](#) explores the potential of art to highlight and challenge the limitations to international democracy, by hosting parliamentary summits for those on the edge of international political systems, such as stateless political organisations that are being placed 'outside' of democracy. So far there have been four summits hosting representatives of 'stateless states' worldwide, the most recent in [Brussels](#) in 2014.

In the post-WWII era, Staal writes, *politics has financed art's duty to be free. Any direct ideological commitment has become suspect, as a result of the role played by art in the Nazi and Stalinist system. The conclusion of both politics and the art world has been that it is better not to be engaged at all, than to be engaged with the 'wrong side'. A generic politics – a politics replacing ideology with management – has sponsored an equally generic arts. We believe that any art that does not dare to contextualize itself within a larger political project is at risk of becoming nothing but mere entertainment for the voter-consumer and his managers.*

The New World Summit was established to challenge this shift to the 'generic'. As politics is unable to act upon the promise of what Staal calls 'fundamental democracy', the New World Summit explores at what level art can operate as an instrument to create an 'alternative political space'. *The New World Summit opposes the democratist notion that there is such a thing as a 'limit' to democracy, for democracy is either limitless or it does not exist at all. The existing political order is unable to act upon this principle, as its interests are largely defined by geopolitical economic and political interests. The New World Summit thus claims art as a radical imaginative space 'more political than politics itself, as a space where the promise of an emancipatory, fundamental democracy can take shape. The New World Summit pushes this question of 'what is art', with an enactment of the possible as its creative work.*



Jonas Staal, 'The New World Summit' - 2014 edition in Brussels (picture from [Jonas Staal's website](#))

- **Help people see themselves in the Other – Eugenia Tzirtzilaki**

'Linda, prima vista' is a participatory performance which premiered in 2014 at Cheapart art space in Athens, Greece. Organised by the [Libby Sacer Foundation](#), the work is a collective performance of an interview with Linda, a woman from Albania who went to Greece and worked there as a cleaning lady for ten years before returning to her country. Prior to leaving, Linda was interviewed by a friend of hers and spoke freely about her past and future, her children, love, borders and racism and her life. In the performance room a long hanging curtain divides the space in two, separating the audience from a chair, a light and a table with a transcript of the interview with Linda. Audience members go one by one behind the curtain and read at first sight (*prima vista*) part of the text out loud. They can read as much as they want, one line or a few pages, unseen by the others except for their black silhouette on the curtain.



Eugenia Tzirtzilaki, 'Linda - Prima vista' (picture: still from [Youtube](#))

Eugenia Tzirtzilaki began to create the performance from a found text: *I edited the original text Talking with Linda, an Albanian immigrant talks about her life (edited by Helen Syrigou-Rigou and published by Open Borders Editions), so that the interview lasts 2 hours, and I replaced all references of 'Albania' with 'there' and 'Greece' with 'here'. In this way, for more than half the text, the audience couldn't tell if this woman was a Greek migrant abroad or a foreigner living in Greece. This was an important point.*

This work stemmed from a very specific political situation, the rise of the neo-Nazi party Golden Dawn, which can be seen to mirror the growing rise of the far right in many European countries. With austerity hitting hard on people's everyday lives, the extreme right discourse sounded convincing for an increasing number of people and impacted on the public discourse – migrants endured violent attacks on a regular basis. Tzirtzilaki felt that counter-arguments are not enough at this critical moment:

*I wanted to make a piece that wouldn't preach Christian values or rationally argue against racism, but that would actively and tangibly help people see themselves in the Other. **I didn't think that hiring great actors would help that cause. Putting Linda's words in the audience's mouths was far more effective.***

The special format of the performance, requiring the audience to engage actively in reading the text, means that, it literally couldn't go on if people didn't want to be part of it as Tzirtzilaki states. *If at any point nobody was willing to continue reading, the whole*

*thing would stop. But people were eager to keep the story going, embracing Linda's words and there was barely a pause for the 2 hours the performance lasted. From what was said to me afterwards by the participants/audience, it made a difference in how they thought and how they felt.*

*Through reading Linda's words together, we found out who she was. And also that she could be anybody, and that we could be her. We really listened to what she had to say, as we usually do when we are part of something that will not go on without us.*

## 04.

## ART IN THE PUBLIC SPACE

*The freedom to make and remake our cities and ourselves is ... one of the most precious yet most neglected of our human rights*

David Harvey<sup>1</sup>

As public space becomes increasingly privatized and we enter the era of the post-modern city, one *characterised by growing polarisation and inequality between social groups*<sup>11</sup>, the occupation of physical space forms a key battleground for challenging the dominant hegemony. The huge mobilizations across the Middle East in 2011, the Occupy movement in the USA and Europe, Euromaidan in Ukraine and on-going demonstrations against austerity in Europe have all been characterized not just by their occupation of public space, but the creative tools utilised in doing so. These tools form part of a key arsenal in challenging the hegemonic power structures they fight through a combination of humour, education and art. A physical presence in the very public eye, artists can engage an accidental audience, one who (if conditions are favourable) can be mobilized by the very act of coming across the unexpected. Of course this interaction can also take place in the digital public sphere, but for the purposes of this report we'll be erecting a false wall to focus on physical as opposed to digital public space<sup>2</sup>.

The spectacular mobilizations across the Middle East in 2011 showed the world how this could be done, with horizontally organized groups of individuals and collectives gathering and performing very public demonstrations of defiance, incorporating significant amounts of creative dissidence to counter the narratives propagated by, and the repressive policies practiced by, the state. These movements turned large public squares into a 'public theatre of civility'

as Charles Tripp has termed it<sup>3</sup>, with poetry, music and theatre forming key methods of sharing the story beyond state media. This challenge to established power through civility neutralized and ridiculed the performance of coercive violence against it, even making this violence counter-productive in many cases.

Many occupations of public space are a kickback against the ongoing daily occupation of public space from private enterprises and the state – advertisers, corporations and the coercive arms of state power. With clear links to the Situationist movement, and harking back to groups such as Provo, territorial occupations invite us to *compose new places, to alter the normalized ways of interacting in a territory with other bodies and objects, as well as shortening the subjective distance between apparently isolated conflicts* as Federico Geller puts it<sup>4</sup>.

There are some spectacular examples of creative public space occupations, from the gigantic street puppets of Royal de Luxe to the very public 'Big Brother' style project questioning the concept of 'good migrants', 'Please Love Austria'. There are also a significant number of groups who've formed institutions with a focus on pushing this type of large scale, public art-activism. These include Action terroriste socialement acceptable in Canada, the Centre for Political Beauty in Germany, H.E.A.T Collective and the Centre for Artistic Activism in the USA, the works of Xt/tnt in France and the Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination in France/UK.

1 A. Minton, 'What Kind Of World Are We Building? The Privatisation Of Public Space', RICS (2006), p. 5

2 For a short but intense reading about the false distinction between 'real' and 'virtual', check IETM's article 'Who's afraid of the digital?'

3 C. Tripp, 'Performing the Public', p. 24

4 F. Geller in 'Truth is concrete', p. 175



- **It's pointless if disobedience is purely symbolic**  
– John Jordan, Lab of ii

The Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination ([Lab of ii](#)) works on making the political artistic, invigorating activism through the arts, 'producing work which pushes activists aesthetics, to make activism irresistible, as irresistible as Capitalism', as John Jordan, a co-founder of the Lab of ii puts it. The Lab of ii has created large-scale direct actions with playful artistic cores, from The Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army, founded in 2002 and seen in action at the G8 summit in Gleneagles, Scotland, to the Bike Bloc at UN Climate Summit in Copenhagen to the Climate Games around the COP21 summit in Paris in December 2015. As they put it on their [website](#): *We are not an institution or a group, not a network nor an NGO, but an affinity of friends who recognise the beauty of collective creative disobedience. We treat insurrection as an art and art as a means of preparing for the coming insurrection.*

In discussing their work they are clear that the separation between arts, activism and everyday life is not a useful one, indeed it is this which large scale public interventions can challenge. Jordan puts it this way:

*Art is paying attention, to paraphrase Allan Kaprow. **This notion that art is something separate from everyday life is a very Western and recent concept, art as a fundamental part of everyday life is actually much more common, even in Western practice, through Dada, Situationalism, surrealism and so on. It's always been there as an idea of breaking down these divisions between art and life AND art and politics.***

However, labels can be useful in order to get your audience on board, as Jordan details: *If I'm talking to a bunch of activists in a squat I might call what we do art activism, or activism. Or if I'm talking to the Prague Quadriennale I'll talk about it as a radical form of scenography. Or if I'm speaking to water engineers I'll discuss it as environmental work. So it's just about framing. Use the language that people are used to.*



Laboratory of insurrectionary imagination, clown police during the G8 in Scotland 2005 (picture from [Lab of ii website](#))

This approach to the artistic everyday can be seen to build on the theories of Joseph Beuys and his concept of social sculpture, broadening this to include social movements and civil disobedience. Citing Oscar Wilde's quote that *all progress in history was made through disobedience*, Jordan expands that *from women wearing trousers to the right to a weekend to the right to a union, these all happened because people **disobeyed**. We're at a moment in history whereby it's only through mass forms of disobedience that we're really going to be able to get beyond 'business as usual'.*

And where do the arts sit in this? According to Jordan: *You can get away with things under the shield of art, I think this is rarely well used. Art often contains little micro-moments of disobedience which can be useful, but it's very rare for art to be designing forms of disobedience and using the shield of art for real movement building and real action. Often it remains on the symbolic level. Of course all disobedience has a symbolic level, but in a sense **it's pointless if disobedience is purely symbolic**. It has to have a concrete level too. You can get away with things if you say it's 'art'.*

Jordan is very critical of the level of self-censorship taking place in the Global

North in engaging in these discussions and the creation of strongly politically engaged work. As he says: **We have a massive privilege living in the West, we are able to do forms of civil disobedience and not be shot and not be put in jail for the rest of our lives and we have to use this privilege.**

*Artists, through the culture of stardom and fame, have the idea that if they engage politically they will sacrifice their cultural capital, they'll be seen as an activist, not an artist. **It's vital to put your politics before your career. We are here to transform the world, not to build a career, and unfortunately I feel a lot of political artists are actually aiming to build a career, not to transform the world. We're in a moment in history like no other.** There's never been a time when the activities of a few (the rich) are more powerful than geological activities, we're completely destroying the possibilities of the life support system of our planet and those who will suffer the most are the poor, and we've got 10 years to deal with the climate catastrophe according to most of the science. **So if there was a time to make political art which wasn't a representation of the world, but which was transforming the world, this is it.***

## 05.

## THE LIMITS OF ART? BOYCOTT AS A CREATIVE PROCESS

*The system is utterly dependent on sponsorship from companies and large firms*  
Christopher Frayling, former chair of ACE <sup>1</sup>

Over the course of researching this publication, funding is a question that has come up again and again. Artistic projects cost money to produce. All money is dirty money. But is some dirtier than the rest? Should we just take the money and run? How do we as artists and organizers decide what's acceptable? Can we? As Alexandros Mistriotis has put it: *There is no certainty we are fighting the good fight. And even if there was, we have no control over the end result. So, although we will not stop acting and interfering, doubt is our everlasting companion.*

Clearly, this is a discussion particularly pertinent in the Global North, where selection of funding is more of a possibility. Furthermore, the question of which money is 'dirty money' is of course a relative concept. For example, whilst tobacco funding has become illegal in some countries, in Indonesia (for example) it's largely acceptable, seen as a more positive alternative to that of mining companies<sup>2</sup>. In a restricted funding environment, should artists have to decide which funding is acceptable? And in the case of corporate funding, is it possible to find a track that doesn't compromise the legitimacy of the art?

In the discussion of 'art and politics', one of the most heated topics is that of the moment (if indeed there should be one) when artistic dialogue stops. This can happen in very different ways. Artists can be censored by political powers for purely political motivations, or by private corporations for the uncomfortable critique of their practices. This can, and often does, backfire, as Freemuse reminds us – *All that is banned is desired*<sup>3</sup>.

Artists can have their work closed down by angry crowds who feel offended by an artwork, possibly even without having seen the performance or exhibition in question. The Barbican Theatre cancelled Brett Bailey's 'Exhibit B' on its opening day in London in 2014 as a result of pressure from hundreds of protestors (and thousands of signatories of an online petition); the organisers of the Month of Photography in Paris decided to cancel the exhibition of the photographer Diane Ducret showing naked pictures of herself and her daughter, citing alleged offense to victims of sexual abuse. In these and other numerous similar cases of (preventive) 'censorship by the crowd', the mechanisms of the arts market, the courage of cultural venues and the use of social media are all key elements to discuss.

But artists themselves can also decide to draw a line, to limit how their work is presented and engage with the wider political context in which it exists. A number of artists and organisations are rising to these questions, and problematizing the relationship between big business and the arts. In February 2014 a group of artists invited to participate in the Sydney Biennale called for a boycott, citing the sponsorship of Transfield, a company engaging in the detention of asylum seekers. The boycott succeeded, and the Biennale dropped the sponsor. Gulflabor, a recently formed collective of visual artists, are calling for a boycott of the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi due to a lack of workers' rights on the construction site.

For the purposes of this publication we will look at some of these questions through a focus on two key topics: Oil sponsorship of the arts, and the on-going Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions campaign focusing on Israeli state funded cultural institutions.

Of course this 'drawing of lines' is not an action on which there is consensus. Those who called for a boycott of Russia following the crackdown on LGBT activists in the country in 2014 were not universally applauded, including from within the Russian LGBT network who issued the following statement around the Sochi Olympics boycott: *We call for organizations and individuals who are attending the Games to exercise freedom of expression and freedom of assembly and to not fall accomplices to the homophobic policies by censoring own beliefs, statements, and identities.* However, some saw the call to boycott as a form of creative response in itself. For example, when there was a call to boycott the St. Petersburg edition of Manifesta (2014) as a protest against LGBT repression, curator Joanna Warsza suggested we should see this as *a call to all biennials at large to be more responsive to political situations and more daring in their engagement'. Boycotts make institutions more sensitive, more vulnerable and more apt to change. And institutions should not suppress them but consider the claims. So I would consider the boycotts as a form of mobilization, not a form of quitting*<sup>4</sup>.

Similarly there have been strong critiques of those choosing to boycott institutions funded by petrodollars, and many criticisms of those choosing to adopt the Palestinian-led call for Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions of Israel. This section of the publication aims to explore whether and how artistic dialogue can continue across a barricade.

<sup>1</sup> cited in 'ArtWash', p. 49

<sup>2</sup> Jeannie Park, Padepokan Seni Bagong Kussudiarja (PSBK), interviewed for this research

<sup>3</sup> As censorship (by political power) would be worth a publication by itself, we don't focus on the issue in this publication; however you're invited to join IETM's LinkedIn group on freedom of expression to follow and contribute to the discussion

<sup>4</sup> Nato Thompson, Engagement or Disengagement? A Conversation About Manifesta 10 with Joanna Warsza, Creative Time Reports, 26 June 2014

## Oil and the Arts

Since 2007 arts budgets have been slashed across many countries in Europe. Taking a lead from the North American model, arts organisations internationally are being encouraged to diversify their funding sources, to look into philanthropic sources and private partnerships. There are cases of private institutions and even companies that have been funding radical arts activities internationally for a number of years now, for example the soap company Lush, who provide support through their 'Charity Pot' without a requirement of logo placement. But others are overtly sponsoring the arts for their own benefit, with arts organisations and audiences seemingly convinced that corporate sponsorship is vital. As Naomi Klein put it: *We become collectively convinced not that corporations are hitching a ride on our cultural and communal activities, but that creativity and congregation would be impossible without their generosity*<sup>1</sup>.

Art Wash, a book by Mel Evans which examines this practice states: *Associations with high art are sought by oil companies in their mission to perform a role of Corporate Citizen...Performance is a core part of communications. This rule applies from public relations to protest. To artwash is therefore part public relations and part theatre...The performance of Corporate Citizen is a necessary act to maintain a guise of social acceptability*<sup>2</sup>.

Oil companies' funding of the arts has become a lynchpin of protest. In Norway, where so much of the public funding is tied to fossil fuels, [Stopp Oljesponsing av Norsk Kulturliv](#) focuses on the links between Statoil and arts funding. In the UK, organisations such as the Reclaim Shakespeare Company have conducted Shakespearian protest against BP sponsorship of the Royal Shakespeare Company, jumping on stage in Stratford upon Avon just prior to a performance to declaim:



Leon Kuhn, 'It won't wash' (picture from [Art not Oil Coalition's website](#))

*What country, friends, is this? Where the words of our most prized poet / Can be bought to beautify a patron / So unnatural as British Petroleum? / They, who have incensed the seas and shores / From a dark deepwater horizon.* The recently launched [Fossil Funds Free](#) is a commitment to 'not take any oil, coal, or gas corporate sponsorship'. This commitment was coordinated by [Platform](#) (UK) with support from [Art Not Oil Coalition](#) (UK), [Not An Alternative](#) (US), [The Natural History Museum](#) (US), [BP Or Not BP?](#) (UK), and [Stopp Oljesponsing av Norsk Kulturliv](#) (Norway) and included [Artsadmin](#), [LIFT](#) and the [Royal Court Theatre](#) among many others as signatories on launching.

These artistic interventions are particularly interesting as artists have a vested interest in ensuring these institutes (museums, galleries, theatres) survive. Thus it can be argued that artistic protests can carry an extra weight. Artists sit both inside and outside the museum, and it is this boundary that holds the space for the sparks of social debate to catch fire<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> N. Klein, 'No Logo', p.35

<sup>2</sup> 'ArtWash', p.13 -14

<sup>3</sup> 'ArtWash', p. 155



- **Everyone draws a line somewhere – Liberate Tate**

In the UK, one such art collective is Liberate Tate, who utilise live artistic practices to highlight and challenge oil sponsorship of the Tate galleries. The collective has a core group who meet regularly and a wider community (ranging from 50 and 500 artists and activists from a whole host of disciplines) who take part in performances.

The origin of the collective is particularly interesting. In 2010 Tate Modern held a workshop on 'Disobedience'. Prior to the workshop beginning, the workshop convener was asked not mention the BP sponsorship of the gallery and, as a result, Liberate Tate was born.

Since then the group have made dozens of live art, unsanctioned performance interventions in Tate spaces, given performative lectures, contributed to academic artistic journals and taken part in panel discussions about their work in cultural spaces across the UK and Europe. On a more traditional campaigning side they also submit freedom of information (FOI) requests, scour reports and accounts, lobby various bodies and *generally cajole*. As a result of a two year legal battle over a FOI request it was found that BP support comes to circa 0.5% of Tate's overall operational income<sup>1</sup>. As Liberate Tate put it: *The idea that BP is funding something that 'otherwise wouldn't happen' is a myth.*

The cornerstone of Liberate Tate's work is artistic performance. Works such as 'Human Cost' (an 87 minute work performed in the Tate Britain on the anniversary of BP's Gulf of Mexico oil spill), 'Parts Per Million' (a walk through the Tate Britain tracing the increase in carbon in the atmosphere over each decade represented in their collection) and 'Time Piece' (a 25 hour durational performance at Tate Modern) use unsanctioned, very public artistic performance to question the suitability of BP as a sponsor from a clear artistic

<sup>1</sup> Tate Director Sir Nicholas Serota phrases this as closer to 20% of the overall sponsorship income for the Tate – <http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2015/apr/19/oil-companies-arts-sponsorship-cynical-pr-strategy-says-activist>



Liberate Tate, 'Human cost' (picture from Liberate Tate's website)

aesthetic. As they put it: *Our performances only truly take shape within the space of the gallery – without that context they may retain a certain aesthetic, but lack the depth of form that the gallery space lends it. Our pieces are situational, gestural and draw out the presence of BP – these essences can only manifest through live work. **When we're making the work in the gallery, we are absorbing BP's presence and spewing it back into the gallery space to amplify the impact of oil sponsorship of the arts.***

*Our work is completely unsanctioned, unofficial, uninvited. So **we can't ever fully separate art and activism in the context of our work, and we wouldn't want to, we need both to make our live art performances happen.** All our materials, be they bodies, oil-like substances, real wind turbine blades, giant black squares, plinths, charcoal and paper – all these things have to be brought into the gallery for our work to happen. We use creative activist tactics along with choreography and game theory to develop the logistical side of our work. Activism also injects a sense of playfulness to our work – it's more obvious in some pieces than others, but **the sense of mischief is always present.***

In terms of determining what your limits are, whether as an artist or an organisation, Liberate Tate advise you to discuss it as a collective, work out where you draw the line. *The key is to establish what staff draw a line against – because **everyone draws a line somewhere.***

Looking at the impact of their work, it is clear there has been a shift in the feeling towards oil sponsorship of the arts in the UK since Liberate Tate launched, and a huge amount of public discussion in the media as to the suitability of oil sponsorship for the arts. Liberate Tate are clear that *BP are using and abusing art in the UK in order to continue its devastating operations overseas. But **if art has the power to grant BP a social license to operate, art has the power to take it away.** And our performances have gone some way to make visible BP's unhealthy influence on the arts.*

## Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions

*Israel's wars are fought on the cultural front too*  
Letter sent announcing cultural boycott of Israeli state sponsored arts sent by 700 artists to Guardian newspaper, 13/02/15

As seen, artists can occupy a crucial role as initiators or supporters of boycotts, whether to protest against controversial sponsors of cultural events or against the political power organising or supporting an event. Probably the most well-known and successful example of a boycott campaign (working hand in hand with economic sanctions) was that which helped end South Africa's apartheid policy<sup>1</sup>. For the purposes of this publication we have chosen to focus on one of the most prominent, discussed and contested current examples of this kind of artistic boycott, the call for a boycott of Israeli state supported actions in the academic and cultural realm.

Similar to the South African artists' plea in 1976 for a boycott of arts supported by the government, the call for a boycott has not come from outside. The Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) campaign was launched on 9 July 2005 by a group of 171 Palestinian NGOs, and focused on economic and political boycotts of Israeli goods and state-sponsored institutions. The guidelines are very clear that this is not a boycott of Israelis, but of the Israeli state. A key part of the BDS movement is the Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (PACBI). This movement was launched from inside Palestine and adheres to the aims of BDS, with a specific focus on academic and cultural workers, with groups outside the region adding their voices. It is important to view this boycott as a tactic, rooted in its wider context, as John Berger said when signing up in 2006<sup>2</sup>. *As Nelson Mandela has pointed out, boycott is not a principle, it is a tactic depending upon circumstances. A tactic which allows people, as distinct from their elected but often craven governments, to apply*

<sup>1</sup> see [http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/35/206&Lang=E&Area=RESOLUTION](http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/35/206&Lang=E&Area=RESOLUTION)

<sup>2</sup> see <http://www.pacbi.org/etemplate.php?id=415>



*Banksy's graffiti in Gaza (picture from [Banksy's website](#))*

*a certain pressure on those wielding power in what they, the boycotters, consider to be an unjust or immoral way.*

The project has now developed considerably. By August 2014 over 500 cultural workers and artists in Ireland had signed a pledge to boycott Israel, in February 2015 in the UK Artists for Palestine was launched with a letter from over 700 artists to the Guardian newspaper, pledging support for a boycott of Israel and on August 9th 2015 a group of artists at the 56th Venice Biennale launched the 'Artists letter for Palestine'. Those against include the recently founded 'Culture for Coexistence' who state: *Cultural boycotts singling out Israel are divisive and discriminatory, and will not further peace. Open dialogue and interaction promote greater understanding and mutual acceptance, and it is through such understanding and acceptance that movement can be made towards a resolution of the conflict.* Within such a conflicted environment, the group Boycott from Within provide a perspective on supporting the BDS call and continuing dialogue from within Israel.

- **This boycott ... should open dialogue**  
**- Yael Lerer,**  
**Boycott from Within**

The group Boycott from Within is an association of Jewish and Arab Israelis founded in 2008 and calls for action as follows:

*We, Palestinians, Jews, citizens of Israel, join the Palestinian call for a BDS campaign against Israel, inspired by the struggle of South Africans against apartheid. We also call on others to do the same.*

*As people devoted to the promotion of just peace and true democracy in this region, we are especially opposed to the international community's decision to boycott the Palestinians in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. This is particularly outrageous given the international community's prolonged support of Israel's apartheid and other daily violations of international law.*

*We are deeply concerned about the potentially irreversible damage inflicted on Palestinians*



by both Israeli brutal occupation and international policies and have come to the conclusion that the occupation will end only when its cost for Israelis, its elites in particular, outweighs the benefits.

In light of attacks on boycott supporters, we emphasize that a critical stance against the occupation, including explicit BDS actions taken by individuals and organizations, are not Anti-Semitic. On the contrary, only resistance of this kind as part of the struggle for peace based on justice and equality will enable a common future for Arabs and Jews in the region.

We endorse the Palestinian call as is. We stand against all forms of racism and oppression and support and encourage BDS actions as a legitimate political activity and a necessary means of non-violent resistance. We will act inside and outside Israel to promote awareness and support of BDS.

Yael Lerer was the founder of Andalus press, a publishing house set up to translate the work of Arab authors into Hebrew. She is a co-founder of Boycott from Within, and explains her reason for starting the group as follows:

For me it is very important to speak about boycott as an Israeli citizen who on one hand is responsible for what's going on and is willing to pay the price, but on the other hand, which is more important in general, that **this activism is for the sake of all inhabitants of this land, Israelis and Palestinians alike**. There is a perceived division like it's a football match, you're either pro-Israeli or pro-Palestinian, and I don't agree, especially when we share the same country, it's one place. **It's not a match that one will win and the other will lose and it will end. The end of the occupation is a win-win for everyone.**

In terms of the tactics of a boycott she feels it is key to have an on-going, long-term and engaged strategy of highlighting the occupation. **It's very important to remind the Israeli elites, the artists, the intellectuals – you cannot continue like this, living your life as if there was no occupation. You cannot do your theatre in Tel Aviv, or come as a foreign artist to perform there, ignoring the fact**

**that citizens in nearby towns like the city of Qalqilya are living under the same government, the same army, the same economic regime, living under the occupation, and as such do not have these opportunities.** This is what we are trying to say. And because of this division, because people will say about those who support BDS that they're 'pro-Palestinian', but we can say 'we are Israelis, we are activists working for the two people who live in this country and we're saying to the world – come to help us, come to save us'. The change can only come with international intervention, and I think the boycott is a minimal thing which we can do.

Lerer is clear on countering the perception of boycott as censorship, as she says: Culture and academia is all about the free exchange of ideas and anti-censorship. **This boycott should not be a form of censorship, it should not be something that ends dialogue, on the contrary, it should open dialogue.** This idea can be seen in the recent 'Welcome to the Fringe' initiative, a crowd-funded initiative to support Palestinian artists and Israeli artists who reject state funding, to attend the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, spurred on by the BDS call. As Naomi Klein, on being published by Andalus press [put it](#): *This is not a boycott of Israelis. It's a boycott of pretending that everything is normal in Israel, because that's what cultural producers are usually invited to do.*

Lerer is equally clear on the terms of the boycott, and the long-term view required by this kind of action: **Although there are grey areas, the principles of the boycott call are clear. You should not boycott Israeli individuals, you should boycott only Israeli state-sponsored institutions.** Sometimes people get this wrong, sometimes people try and hijack the campaign for censorship, but we shouldn't let this dissuade us. **In South Africa it took 30 years to build the boycott. It's a big task.**



## 06.

CONCLUSIONS AND  
RECOMMENDATIONS

*Everything is Art. Everything is Politics*  
Ai Wei Wei<sup>1</sup>

This paper has aimed to provide some thinking material on the complex and diverse relationships between arts and politics. The widely differing contexts within which organisations and artists are discussed here does not mean that some general ideas cannot be drawn, including:

**Inherent politics**

Your work already is political, in that it is in the public domain and therefore engages in dialogue with this public. You are responsible for what politics it defines and represents. Artists can champion political causes outside of their usual boundaries, ask challenging questions and advocate for those outside of the dominant narrative. Political art has the power to demonstrate that what was thought to be impossible could, in fact, be possible.

**Self-censorship**

As artists and organizers we need to think about why we shy away from some topics, and whether we can engage with them through artistic means. If theatre is of 'infinite possibilities', how can we engage creatively with topics which would otherwise be 'off limits'? Dare to speak up, experiment with artistic forms and don't impose any do's or don't's. Be bold and don't look for the politically acceptable way of expressing something. Speak truth to power. Be ready to take criticism, use your work as a way to open a discussion.

**Protection**

We cannot discuss self-censorship without discussing actual censorship and repression. How do we best protect those we work with, and ourselves, if dealing with taboo and transgressive topics? Ideas discussed include anonymity for participants, discussing comfort levels and needs within the group at the earliest possible stage, and utilising international attention and status to provide a layer of protection. If providing support to those in conflicted or dangerous situations, the offer of the space and freedom to create and the opening of networks are hugely valuable.

**Recognise the power imbalances**

Wherever we work, and whomever we work with, we need to work to recognize and challenge power imbalances. None of us are neutral. This is particularly heightened if working on Global North/Global South collaborations, or from outside areas in times of conflict with artists working inside areas in times of conflict. We need to take history into account. On a more individual level, generally the artist will be at the centre of the work produced. This can be seen as a key difference between socially engaged work, and activism, which tends to be carried out more anonymously. In some ways, the more brutal the political topic, the more likely the artist is to benefit from it. We need to overtly recognize this dichotomy if engaging in this work.

**Discuss**

Speak to everyone. Those you're working with, those you're struggling against. Those viewing the work, those protesting against it. Incorporating discussion elements into your work is vital, and doing so during the process is as key as it is during the aftermath. Try not to let your preconceived ideas prejudice the outcome, and work to build complicity with your audiences.

**Measuring Impact**

Measuring the impact of socially engaged arts remains a challenge, however, linking with wider campaigns and breaking out of the artistic box can help us to see the impact in terms of political change as well as audience response. This measuring of impact is vital if we are to avoid the trap of developing projects with good intentions or that provide us with the adulation of audiences, but little discernable impact. Evaluation should be done using clear indicators, ideally in tandem with those who work in a common field of practise, both creatively and politically.

**Funding and boycotts**

We cannot separate the work we do from the context from which it emerges. This is perhaps whittled down to its most stark in the discussion of funding, and whether artists should take a stand in relation to the sources of their financial support. This publication has sought to examine not whether boycotts should take place, but rather if it is possible to both conduct a boycott and continue dialogue. From the examples of those we interviewed it seems clear that this is not just possible, but vital for a campaign to succeed. Rather than engaging in mud throwing, the arts have an ability to tackle large scale issues through creativity and humour, forming new techniques and wider solidarity in a struggle for social justice.

**Disobey!**

Lastly – from all those we interviewed, a key point: don't be afraid to transgress. Find your tools, find those you trust working with, and use the arts to break down taboos.

Art and politics are two deeply intertwined fields; trying to separate the two is like trying to extract the rain from the ocean. Once we accept we're political beings as well as artists, and therefore political artists, we can move forward, working on common struggles and harnessing creative tools and international networks to work for a common good on a global scale.

<sup>1</sup> Cited in <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/weiwei-isms-by-ai-weiwei-trans-larry-warsh-8446379.html>

**Resources**

The following list provides some suggested further reading on the topic of arts and politics.

Boyd, Andrew & Oswald Mitchell, David, 'Beautiful Trouble: A Toolbox for Revolution' 2012. OR Books

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Mesch, Claudia, 'Art and Politics: A Small History of Art for Social Change Since 1945' 2013. I. B. Tauris

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Thompson, Nato, 'Living as Form: Socially Engaged Art from 1991-2011' 2012. MIT Press

Tripp, Charles, 'Performing the Public: Theatres of Power in the Middle East' 2013. Constellations

Tripp, Charles, 'The Power and the People: Paths of Resistance in the Middle East' 2013. Cambridge University Press

Wiebel, Peter (ed.), 'Global Activism: Art and Conflict in the 21st Century' 2014. ZKM/MIT Press

**Websites:**

Antipode - <http://antipodefoundation.org/>

Culture and Conflict - <http://www.culture-andconflict.org.uk/>

Guernica - <https://www.guernicamag.com/>

In Place of War - <http://www.inplaceofwar.net/>

Journal of Aesthetics and Protest - <http://www.joaap.org>

Lateral - <http://csalateral.org/wp/>

Museum of Arte Útil - <http://museumar-teutil.net/>

Syria Untold - <http://www.syriauntold.com/en/>

Third Text - <http://thirdtext.org/>

IETM's *Engage!* newsletter offers IETM members a selection of socially and politically engaged arts projects.