Creative Activism Research, Pedagogy and Practice

Creative Activism
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Edited by

Elspeth Tilley

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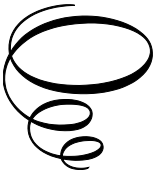

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Being true means feeling haunted.

—Timothy Morton

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FOREWORD

In recent years we have witnessed a surge in creative forms of activism around the world—and consequently the establishment of a recognised scholarly discipline dedicated to the study and refinement of a cacophony of related forms of democratic participation.

Traditional political categories are blurring, and unexpected alliances and collaborations are taking place among diverse social actors—artists and CEOs, business angels and activists, influencers and party politicians, celebrities, and public intellectuals. Rational deliberation is—for good and bad—giving way to more affective dimensions of politics. Even when scientific data and discourse are given precedence, say in matters of the pandemic and the climate crisis, facts themselves are not enough to lift the spirit and change the world. We need to summon emotions of curiosity, hope, and solidarity to function as action catalysts.

When the attention span decreases, we find new ways of grabbing people's attention. When populists simplify societal complexities, we bend our message in neon and carpet-bomb followers on social media. When people lose their trust in politicians, we form leaderless movements. When the public feels disconnected, we make the conversation intimate. When political questions revolve around a particular person's hypocrisy, we zoom out. When I give up, an everyday hero stimulates my political imagination by painting a picture, pissing me off, making me laugh, or bringing me to tears.

More experimental forms of activism are challenging conventional ways of doing politics. Balancing between critique, cooperation, and co-optation, the ethical creed of creative activism is to open up the democratic dialogue by questioning ideological axioms, thereby provoking alternative ways of thinking and being in the world. Sometimes dreaming up new worlds entirely. It is engaged in the 'how' rather than the 'what' and the 'who' of justice. That is, reimagining the frames within which we participate, and consequently changing how we do so through affective means. This book is a testament to the variety of ways in which that may play out in praxis.

Creative forms of activism are not better than more conventional types of mobilisation. They are different. That is why creative activism can complement the necessary but often faded organisations and democratic rituals in ways that ensure real engagement and social innovation. Vice

versa, conventional forms of participation can ensure systemic anchoring, learning continuity, and representative legitimacy, so that creative interventions do not just become a funny fart in the wind.

To improve our understanding of why, when, and how social movements shape our world—and hence our abilities to constructively feed into them—we must not only investigate the practical dynamics of the well-known theories of change but also have the courage to ask questions about the dangers and pitfalls of creative activism. Not to question its emancipatory and transformational potential, but to make the most of it.

What is the dialectic between our system's traditions and the possibility of reinventing these on the margins of the repertoire of contention? How do bureaucrat, teacher, and trickster best collaborate? Who should take the lead? Where in the space between design and improvisation are solutions typically found? When is the learning curve too steep for us to try something creatively new without careful facilitation? Why should we continue, even though success is difficult to define and even harder to measure?

The answers to some of these fundamental questions are to be found in this book. The most important answer is however still to be found in each of our individual experiences, as they are always conditioned by the social, cultural, economic, and political realities that we try to influence. To quote Amanda Gorman's inauguration poem (Washington, January 21, 2021—I cannot remember Joe Biden's speech): "If only we're brave enough to see it. If only we're brave enough to be it."

Silas Harrebye, Copenhagen, 2021

PREFACE

This collection is the first of its kind: a set of multidisciplinary scholarly cases offering broad, deep, theoretically informed, and frontline-tested insights into creative activism. The chapters reconceptualise creative activism in innovative ways, explore how its lessons can best be passed to the next generation of creative activists, and unpack the affects, aesthetics, promises, and limitations of real-world creative activism examples. Many of the cases demonstrate positive impacts but this is not a naïve or 'cheerleading' collection. Instead, the book offers a knowing take from critical thinkers and creative activists in the field, using scholarly tools to analyse, critique, and acknowledge the multi-layered challenges of driving social, cultural, and political change using creativity.

The chapters span Europe, The Americas, Oceania, and Asia. The forms of activism scrutinised are diverse—visual art, comedy, puppetry, dance, fiction, flash mobs, theatre in prisons, the pageantry of Extinction Rebellion, and the sticky-note-covered Lennon Walls of Hong Kong, to name a few. The issues tackled are similarly wide-ranging, from baby loss to rape culture to climate change. The authors are also varied, including People of Colour, Indigenous authors, trans authors, disabled authors, people writing from within and outside the academy, and more. Of the 41 authors published here, the majority are women. This is worth celebrating, given the foundational contributions of women to establishing creative activism have been largely invisible in much previous writing about the field. It also reflects a wider shift to acknowledging the need for inclusiveness—starting with gender diversity but certainly not ending there—in not only the voices but the ideas and processes of creative activism. As Ayana Johnson and Katharine Wilkinson note of the climate action movement:

> There is a renaissance blooming […]: leadership that is more characteristically feminine and more faithfully feminist, rooted in compassion, connection, creativity, and collaboration. While it's clear that women and girls are vital voices and agents of change for this planet, they are too often missing from

> the proverbial table. More than a problem of bias, it's a dynamic that sets us up for failure. To change everything, we need everyone.[1]

I see this shift occurring in other movements, too, so I am heartened that it is reflected in the numbers of women and non-binary authors who have written about their work for this volume: but even more I am encouraged by a strong sense that these writers bring something new and quite different to the table, including embodied and intuitive knowledges, growing recognition of emotion as a driving truth rather than an embarrassing burden in times of crisis, and an ethics of care.

However, there are still notable gaps in the range of voices. When I first sent out the call for contributions in February 2020, I was staggered by the volume of responses. More than a hundred inquiries arrived in my inbox within a few weeks, from all over the world: South Africa, Palestine, Jordan, Berlin, China, The Caribbean, and elsewhere. Creative activism is demonstrably a global and thriving practice. Then, the pandemic struck, followed by the murder of George Floyd. Many intending authors stepped back from writing about creative activism to prioritise the work itself—encouraging voting, campaigning for Black Lives Matter, and using their creative talents to champion essential workers or support public health messages. Many others were called to duties closer to home, supporting family and friends directly impacted by COVID-19. Some of the authors in this volume lost close family and friends to the virus: all were disrupted in various ways. It was notable, though, that the impact was greater on some than others, and those who could not write at this time and fell off the contributors' list were more likely to be from already-marginalised backgrounds.

So, while it feels like something of a miracle to have come this far and collected this rich array of voices, there are many more viewpoints to be heard. We are still only at the beginning of important conversations examining and verifying the role and potential of creative activism in making our societies the best they can be. There will be more volumes and, I hope, an opportunity for those who could not participate this time to tell their stories too. What strikes me most about the present collection, though, is the echoing of similar themes across the different writers and contexts despite their breadth and variance. Repeated notes chime throughout: about the importance of acknowledging different ways of knowing and of the crucial need for empathy and humility both within and by creative activism

[1] Ayana Elizabeth Johnson and Katharine K. Wilkinson, *All We Can Save: Truth, Courage, and Solutions for the Climate Crisis* (New York: Random House, 2020), XIX.

movements. About the complexity, slipperiness, and uncertainty of creative activism and how these characteristics might be transformed from challenges to resources. Of the need to transcend many of the typologies we take for granted and accept that there is still much that exceeds our old ways of seeing. About the opportunity presented by these unprecedented times to radically shift how we think and act and create and teach. About our responsibility to do that: to acknowledge the ever-present glimmers of our deepest ethical awareness telling us that there is more to be done and tune in to our prickling discomfort—to run towards, not away from, the things that haunt us.

As a whole, the collection captures a pervasive sense of possibility for harnessing the momentum of change that has been forced upon us by a pandemic and applying it to the rest of what we do. It articulates a sense of movement, from linear, separate, and mechanical ways of judging and knowing to fluid, permeable, rhizomatic, and organic ways of connecting and sensing. I am left empowered and enriched by the adaptability, resilience, and courage within these pages. I can only hope this truly is indicative of our new zeitgeist.

I want to acknowledge the staff at Cambridge Scholars Publishing for seeing the need for this book and for their patience and calm encouragement during the challenging times in which it was pulled together. A heartfelt thank you too to Kerry Taylor and Frank Sligo, both of whom gave specific and helpful advice on aspects of the manuscript, Kerry Chamberlain who generously circulated the call for contributors far and wide, April-Rose Geers for meticulous proofreading, Silas Harrebye for his kindness in providing such an inspiring foreword, and to my colleagues at Massey University Wellington, particularly Claire Grant for splendid spreadsheet wrangling, and Nick Holm, who always asks the best, thought-provoking, critical questions about creative activism's claims and processes.

Finally, I want to thank all 41 of the authors who have shared their work and insights here. I believe that now, at a time of such upheaval and urgent change, we need creative activism more than ever. Through the intellectual generosity of the authors featured in this collection, the response to that need will be strengthened as their insights help train more creative activists, clarify what works, and push the field to new heights of rigour and impact.

PART I:

REIMAGINING CREATIVE ACTIVISM

My heart is moved by all I cannot save:
so much has been destroyed
I have to cast my lot with those
who age after age, perversely,
with no extraordinary power,
reconstitute the world.

—Adrienne Rich

CHAPTER ONE

UNDEFINING CREATIVE ACTIVISM: FROM PRAXIS AND PARTICIPATION TO POIESIS AND PRESAGE

ELSPETH TILLEY[1]

> All creative activism, if it works well, is a work of art. The same way that every good work of art, if it concerns itself with reality and politics, is a form of activism.[2]
>
> Culture is the most powerful tool with which we change the world. Despite how fancy Parliament might pretend to be, it's never gonna be the cultural catalyst. Instead, it clings to relevancy, dragging its feet to build rules around what people create as norms, which is shaped by our music, books, art, TVs, poetry, dance and expectations of each other. Culture sets the scene for structural change; it sets the rules on fire, makes them irrelevant, or forces tough conversations.[3]

In 2015, planning a creative activism youth conference that would launch in 2016, I found myself repeatedly challenged to articulate what I meant by creative activism. To me, as an activist, educator, and theatre-maker whose work across each of those spheres feels not separate but inextricably

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[1] Dr. Elspeth Tilley (she/her) is Associate Professor of Expressive Arts at Massey University, Aotearoa (New Zealand). She is a Pākehā (migrant-coloniser) who lives and works on the tribal lands of Te Āti Awa under the terms of Te Tiriti o Waitangi. Elspeth researches and teaches transdisciplinary creative activism, and writes, directs, and produces political theatre.

[2] Ai Weiwei, "Ai Weiwei: 'Without the Prison, the Beatings, What Would I Be?,' " interview by Xan Brooks, *Guardian*, September 17, 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/film/2017/sep/17/ai-weiwei-without-the-prison-the-beatings-what-would-i-be.

[3] Chlöe Swarbrick (@chloe.swarbrick), Member of New Zealand Parliament, Instagram post, December 29, 2020, https://www.instagram.com/chloe.swarbrick/.

entwined, it seemed self-evident: creative works that advance social change. "Like what?" asked our sponsors. "I don't call myself that," noted many of our invited speakers. I settled on a shorthand: creative artists and artworks with a commitment to imagining and shaping a better world.

Our creative activism conference applied that parameter inclusively: we hosted novelists, painters, drag artists, musicians, poets, theatre producers, an upcycling fashion designer, an eco-music-festival organiser, and more. Anyone happy to explain how they were "using art to make a difference to our future and our world" was welcome.[4] It was only after the conference had run—to roaring acclaim from the young people, who seemed starved for role models and validation of their own prolific artistic social justice work[5]—that I discovered there were doubts from some outside the conference about our breadth and, specifically, strong feeling in some quarters as to whether we should be encouraging young people to centre politics in their art at all. I was accused of, at worst, encouraging a generation of 'bad artists' whose art would be 'preachy and crude' and, at best, losing sight of the specificity of creative activism as a genre by including forms such as the novel that 'don't really count' because they are more about poiesis (producing art) than praxis (producing action).[6]

I have grappled with these criticisms since and worked through them in both theory and practice. I remain committed to creative activism as crucial, inclusive, and able to take multiple and overlapping forms, including the poietic. I also remain convinced that art can combine positive aesthetic experiences—pleasure or curiosity—with strong political provocation without losing sight of what makes it art, and that if we remove politics from the way we teach creativity to young people, we are deluding ourselves. This chapter, therefore, by way of tendering an extended definition (or perhaps undefinition) of creative activism, begins by taking issue with people who say art should not be political. Here, I argue that art and politics are simply too knotted together to be separated. I thereby intentionally complicate and expand what we might understand by creative activism: its forms, content, sites, processes, and outcomes are all prodded for a sense of whether, if, and why, there may or may not be clear parameters to be found for this still-emerging category.

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[4] Create1world Conference Flier, Massey University, Wellington, Aotearoa New Zealand, 2016.

[5] Elspeth Tilley, "Theatre in the Age of Climate Change: An Educator's View," HowlRound Theatre Commons (Emerson College, Boston, MA), September 2016, http://howlround.com/theatre-in-the-age-of-climate-change-an-educator-s-view.

[6] Derek Whitehead, "Poiesis and Art-Making: A Way of Letting-Be," *Contemporary Aesthetics* 1 (2003), http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.7523862.0001.005.

Let us begin with form. In 1873, art critic and essayist Walter Pater praised "the love of art for its own sake"[7] as the highest type of wisdom. He argued that "Art comes to you proposing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for these moments' sake." He, and many who came after, urged that art should be liberated from moral responsibility because form, not content, was its purpose.[8] Formalist Clive Bell would later urge that audiences must approach art willing to enter a mode of "complete detachment from the concerns of life."[9]

Despite the subsequent passage of history, and art, through Modernism, Postmodernism and now the Anthropocene, some contemporary artists, educators, and critics still warn that we should not put art to work; that we must not use it for persuasive political ends lest we pollute its purest purpose; that we must see ethics as somehow separable from aesthetics; and that it is beauty, or something akin to a purity of form but ineffable and irreducible, that counts. I'm not opposed to beautiful art, but some of the most affecting art I've ever witnessed was downright ugly—and it moved me to weep, to understand something new, to take up a struggle, or to commit to a cause. I thought it was indisputable that art is more than its form. Yet, as someone who writes deliberately political plays, it has astonished me to have traditional 'art for art's sake' sentiments addressed to me repeatedly.

After some of our creative activism work was disparagingly termed 'polemical' by a critic, as though that were all that needed to be said about it to dismiss its validity, an artist collaborator and I fantasised momentarily about getting shirts printed with the slogan 'You say my art's polemical like it's a bad thing.' We ultimately resisted the temptation to commodify our anger but, fundamentally, I do not believe any art can be apolitical. I'm with Chantal Mouffe, who said: "it is not useful to make a distinction between political and non-political art. I don't think that there is art which is non-political."[10] Everything is political: in labelling us polemical, the critic was apparently unaware that he himself was being polemical.

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[7] Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry [1893]*, ed. Donald. L. Hill (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 190.
[8] Berys Gaut, *Art, Emotion and Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).
[9] Clive Bell, *Art* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1913), 54.
[10] Chantal Mouffe, "Agonistic Politics and Artistic Practices" (keynote address to New Patrons: A Proposal for Promoting Art in Civil Society, KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin, October 9, 2009), video, 35:53, https://vimeo.com/10375165.

Of course, in insisting that art is inherently political I am not saying anything new, but referencing particular aesthetic philosophies including, most recently, Marxist and feminist aesthetics. Plato investigated the relationships between art, morality, and notions of beauty and taste, proclaiming art to be so powerful that young people should be both compulsorily educated in it and protected from many (corrupting, in his opinion) examples of it. (Yes, Plato was in favour of censorship!)[11] Immanuel Kant, too, acknowledged the persuasive power of art, although more favourably than Plato, arguing that an artistic experience of "the beautiful, prepares us to love something, even nature, without interest; the sublime, to esteem it, even contrary to our (sensible) interest."[12]

Many others have considered these questions, such that views on aesthetics have traversed everything from categorising art as escapism, comfort, or education, to holding it capable of immense spiritual power. For a more precise take on art and politics, though, I turn to Georg Hegel. He argued that since art cannot accurately capture reality (and to strive to do so would be pointless since reality already exists), nor can it improve on reality (a painting of a fish will never be more than a secondary and limited imitation of a fish), art must serve some other purpose.[13] Hegel suggested that purpose might not be to reflect or embellish the 'real' but to startle us into recognising its very unreality: to illuminate the instrumentalism and falsity of the reality constructed by social structures of power.

In this sense, Hegel saw art (however 'unreal' its form may be) as more truthful in content than 'reality'—as speaking truth to power or, as Noam Chomsky couched it, not so much speaking truth *to* power (because "power knows the truth already; it is just busy trying to conceal it") but speaking truth *about* power.[14] Hegel's focus was on art's potential for undermining the naturalisation of capitalism as superstructure, but it is easy to extend his arguments to gender, race, heteronormativity, ableism, etc., too. Brazilian theatre maker Augusto Boal is often quoted as saying that art is a weapon

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[11] Nickolas Pappas, "Plato's Aesthetics," in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Fall 2020 ed., ed. Edward N. Zalta, article published June 27, 2008, last modified June 22, 2020, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2020/entries/plato-aesthetics.

[12] Immanuel Kant, "Critique of the Power of Aesthetic Judgement," in *Critique of the Power of Judgment [1790]*, ed. and trans. Paul Guyer, trans. Eric Matthews (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 5, 267.

[13] Georg W. F. Hegel, "Aesthetics," in vol. 1 [1835] of *Hegel's Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, ed. Hotho, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford, UK: Clarendon, 1975).

[14] Terry Eagleton paraphrasing Noam Chomsky, "The Truth Speakers," *New Statesman,* April 3, 2006, https://www.newstatesman.com/node/164028.

and it is the people who should wield it.[15] Or perhaps, as Jacques Rancière suggests, the corollary runs in the other direction: politics is always already art. For Rancière (building on the ideas of Walter Benjamin), politics is itself an 'aesthetic regime': a domain of sensory representation, symbols, gestures, spectatorship, constructed performances, and images aiming at affect, alongside which the comparable modes of art can effectively provide critique.[16]

The similarities do not end there: as Pierre Bourdieu has also observed of the art world,[17] the political domain is an exclusive one, into which only those who can navigate the specific aesthetic codes gain entry: everyone else is invisible. What better way, though, to counter the gatekeeping of an aesthetic regime, than with aesthetic practices? What better way to illuminate "the part of those who have no part," as Rancière terms those outside the political domain, than to offer an alternative space of performance?[18] Rancière rejected the idea that art should contain messages, yet his arguments illuminate art's form as a potently political vehicle.

Whether it is content, form, or both that enable art to have agency, we must ask *who is judging* the legitimacy or worth of content, form, or both. I ask the 'who says?' question because I have noticed that whenever suggestions arise that 'good' art and political art (or 'agitprop,' to note another term that has lost its specialised origins to become a commonly bandied pejorative wielded against political art) are mutually exclusive, those suggestions seem largely to come from people who belong to categories of privilege (white, middle class, heterosexual, cis-male, or some combination). Such views contrast starkly with, for example, that of poet Gloria Anzaldúa, who points out that:

> A woman-of-color who writes poetry or paints or dances or makes movies knows there is no escape from race or gender when she is writing or painting. She can't take off her color and sex and leave them at the door of her study or studio. Nor can she leave behind her history. Art is about identity, among other things, and her creativity is political…For many of us the acts of

[15] Augusto Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1985), 122.
[16] Jacques Rancière, *Politics of Aesthetics*, ed. and trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2004).
[17] Pierre Bourdieu, *Thinking about Art—at Art School*, trans. Michael Grenfell (Canberra: Centre for Creative and Cultural Research, University of Canberra, 2016).
[18] Jacques Rancière and Davide Panagia, "Dissenting Words: A Conversation with Jacques Rancière," *Diacritics* 30, no. 2 (Summer 2000): 113–26. https://www.jstor.org/stable/1566474.

> writing, painting, performing and filming are acts of deliberate and desperate determination to subvert the status quo. Creative acts are forms of political activism employing definite aesthetic strategies for resisting dominant cultural norms and are not merely aesthetic exercises.[19]

What perhaps escapes the analysis of the 'don't pollute my art with politics' camp is that their work is agitprop too—it just happens to be agitprop in favour of accreting the invisible systems that maintain their particular sets of privilege instead of manifestly disrupting them. It is this hypocrisy that artists such as Anzaldúa, whose lived experiences of marginalisation enable them to spot privilege in ways those wrapped in it often cannot, decry.

Feminist theory has encapsulated the problem brilliantly in the notion of the 'malestream.'[20] If you are working, speaking, or living in a patriarchy, feminist theorists point out, and if that work, talk, or existence is supposedly 'neutral,' actually it is 'going with the flow' of the cultural malestream, and thereby adds volume to that flow. To do nothing against the dominant direction is to endorse the dominant direction: only by actively 'swimming against the tide' of patriarchal power can you even hold steady against the malestream, let alone make headway. In my view, it follows inescapably, then, that the moment we expend energy engaging in the production of culture, we are directing that energy in a complex dance with all of culture's existing forces. We may be dancing on behalf of or against those forces (more likely a complex intersectional mixture of both) but art that pretends to be apolitical is dancing while claiming to stand still. Such art is not only reinforcing the existing power flows in that culture, but deliberately obfuscating that reinforcement—and that is a doubly political act. The distribution of power is unequal, so if we are not actively using our creative labour to disaggregate power, our creativity is cementing aggregation of power.

We can use this particular understanding of 'political' to reconsider Walter Benjamin's contention that art shifted from ritual to political only when it became technologically reproducible: that in the age of mechanical reproduction "instead of being based on ritual, it begins to be based on another practice—politics."[21] If to be political is not just to be actively

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[19] Gloria Anzaldúa, "Haciendo Caras, Una Entrada," in *Making Face, Making Soul/Haciendo Caras: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Feminists of Color,* ed. Gloria Anzaldúa (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1990), xxiv.

[20] Cheris Kramarae and Paula A. Treichler, *A Feminist Dictionary* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1996).

[21] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Production," in *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 217–51.

partisan but also to go with the flow or claim neutrality, then even ceremonial or ritual art is political and always has been. Boal notes of Aristotle, for example, that his plays structurally upheld the values of the aristocracy and constituted an "extremely powerful poetic-political system for intimidation of the spectator, for elimination of the 'bad' or illegal tendencies of the audience."[22] The printing press, camera, television, and other technologies of reproduction and distribution such as the internet added not the possibility of art being political, but of it more effectively distributing its "vision of the world in transformation," which might be "the means of carrying out that transformation or of delaying it."[23] Mass media communication has made art both more effectively conservative (Boal sees Aristotle's "repression of the people" at work in contemporary soap operas, movies, and television)[24] and potentially more widely and impactfully activist—that is, able to dynamically engage in interested acts of cultural intervention that push social justice upstream across multiple fronts.

Let us look more closely at what we might mean by 'activism' as content or process within creative activism. Julie Graham and Katherine Gibson, writing collaboratively as J. K. Gibson-Graham (which repudiation of academic publishing's insistent hierarchisation of authorship I see as an act of creative activism in and of itself), suggest creative activism can be identified because it creatively resists, undercuts, or opposes dominant frameworks or proposes alternatives: it is concerned with creating justice.[25] Michelle Fine outlines three principal forms of justice: recognition (validation of all identity including fluid, diverse forms of identity that don't fit pigeonholes); re-distribution ("the disruption and transformation of economic, racial, gender and sexual hierarchies"); and participation (deep involvement of those being discussed, in the discussion).[26] We can add more to these principles: disruption of bodily hierarchies such as ableism and fatism; disruption of geopolitical disenfranchisement and minority-world privilege; and creative processes that go well beyond participation or co-design to achieve concrete decolonisation or sovereignty-building. I am struck by Bethany Hughes' description (she is talking specifically about Indigenous women's protest performances) of artworks concerned with

[22] Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, xiv.
[23] Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, xiii.
[24] Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, xiv.
[25] J.K. Gibson-Graham, "Diverse Economies: Performative Practices for 'Other Worlds,' " *Progress in Human Geography* 32, no. 5 (2008): 613–32. https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132508090821.
[26] Michelle Fine, *Just Research in Contentious Times: Widening the Methodological Imagination* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2017), 110.

justice that are "not only beautiful and persuasive as rhetorical tools, but are powerful and constructive as political praxis of relation-making, obligation-fulfilling, and action-taking."[27]

It is worth pausing over Hughes' mention of relation-making for a moment and holding it alongside ideas of participation. Creative activism has often been categorised as necessarily participatory: Silas Harrebye has written of it as "a particular type of engagement and facilitation of other's participation,"[28] and as "civic, project-driven, and nonviolent forms of democratic participation where critical perspectives on a societal issue or a political system are communicated when, where, and in ways that no one else can or will."[29] Certainly the creative "temporal interventions such as strategic happenings, transformative events, and manufactured spectacles" that Harrebye describes epitomise the well-known, flamboyant and effective public creative activism events of The Yes Men[30] or the Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army.[31] These creative activists and others like them have used, as Harrebye describes, "a cynical approach, an ironic attitude and/or an imaginary quest in order to provoke reflection in the individual spectator and the public sphere at large."[32]

We can certainly trace some of the earliest appearances of the specific term 'creative activism' to such spectacular, event-based participatory actions. In 1993, New York City direct action group The Lesbian Avengers, responding both to a sense of lesbian "invisibility" and the charge that "lesbians don't have a sense of humor," vowed to prove both counts wrong with funny, flamboyant, queer-positive actions. They staged ballroom dances in elegant formal wear at train stations on Valentine's Day and pushed beds-on-wheels containing embracing women at pride marches. Their signature move was fire-eating,[33] in memory of Hattie Mae Cohen, a Black lesbian, and Brian Mock, a white gay man with a disability, who were murdered when white supremacists firebombed their house in 1992.[34]

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[27] Bethany Hughes, "*Oka Apesvchi:* Indigenous Feminism, Performance, and Protest," *Theatre Journal* 72, no. 2 (2020): 142. https://doi.org/10.1353/tj.2020.0029.

[28] Silas Harrebye, *Social Change and Creative Activism in the 21st Century: The Mirror Effect* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), xi.

[29] Harrebye, 17.

[30] https://theyesmen.org/.

[31] https://web.archive.org/web/20050706090055/http://www.clownarmy.org/.

[32] Harrebye, *Social Change*, 17.

[33] Kelly J. Cogswell, *Eating Fire: My Life as a Lesbian Avenger* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

[34] Arielle Gray, "The Lesbian Avengers Swallowed Fire as a Form of Protest," *Wbur*, June 17, 2019, https://www.wbur.org/artery/2019/06/17/lesbian-avengers.

The Lesbian Avengers wrote a manifesto that read, in part: "Lesbian avengers believe in creative activism: loud, bold, sexy, silly, fierce, tasty and dramatic…. Lesbian avengers don't have patience for polite politics."[35] The movement grew to become national, then global, and the Lesbian Avengers' handbook detailing how to "avoid old, stale tactics" and "look for daring, new, participatory tactics … the more fabulous, witty and original the better" is still available online and offers a rich grounding in creative activism planning and practice.[36]

Martha Langelan authored another of the term's early appearances, using it in 1993 to describe women needing to find activist techniques that were clever rather than physically forceful, to address harassment: "The effort to end sexual harassment is part of a long tradition of creative activism and social change, and the confrontation techniques we use today did not spring up out of a vacuum. Confrontation brings together in a systematic way two important strands of women's history—a centuries-old pattern of nonviolent political activism and the more recent innovation of feminist self-defense."[37] Langelan describes both collective acts of creative activism such as infusing marches with theatricality and costume, and individual, such as seeing off street hecklers by handing them colourful fliers featuring ingenious comedy putdowns of men who harass, or a professional photographer who snapped photos of her harassers then sold them at an art gallery in the same neighbourhood where they'd harassed her. Langelan also notes that while Mahatma Gandhi is often "considered the originator of nonviolent resistance, by his own admission, it was from the British women's suffrage activists that he learned the power of systematic, unrelenting, creative nonviolent resistance as a political strategy."[38]

By 1996, Andrew Boyd (founder of the 'Beautiful Trouble' and 'Beautiful Rising' collectives for sharing and comparing creative action knowledge, along with the satirical 'Billionaires for Bush' action), was arguably writing about creative activism in his book, *The Activist Cookbook*[39] although he

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[35] Valerie Kameya, "The Lesbian Avengers Fight Back," *Canadian Woman Studies* 16, no. 2, (1996): 99.

[36] Amy Parker and Ana Simo, eds., *The Lesbian Avenger Handbook*, (self-pub., 1993), http://www.lesbianavengers.com/handbooks/images_handbook2/LAHandbook_original.pdf.

[37] Martha Langelan, *How to Confront and Stop Sexual Harassment and Harassers* (New York: Touchstone, 1993), 75.

[38] Langelan, 76.

[39] Andrew Boyd, *The Activist Cookbook: Creative Actions for a Fair Economy* (Boston: Fair Economy Press, 1996).

used the term 'creative actions' not 'creative activism.' In several reviews of that book, though, the term creative activism appeared and by 2001, Boyd was running Culture Jamming 101 workshops subtitled 'A Report From the Front Lines of the New Creative Activism' for community organisers, as well as teaching "artful activism" courses at NYU.[40] By 2011, Jacques Servin, who had co-founded The Yes Men in 1996, was delivering regular seminars called 'Creative Activism Thursdays' at the NYU-collab, Hemispheric Institute of Performance and Politics.[41]

While most of these early applications of creative activism as a distinct term[42] do relate to organised participatory events that tap into the carnivalesque to playfully disrupt the predictable regulatory mechanisms of hegemony, we can also find early uses of the term applied to creativity produced more individually or privately such as poetry or literature. Jules Boykoff and Kaia Sand (authors of an important 2008 book on guerrilla poetry)[43] used the term creative activist about South African anti-apartheid poet Dennis Brutus in 2012,[44] and Rob Nixon meditated in 2011 on nonfiction writing such as memoirs, essays, and investigative journalism and its "imaginative and political … adaptive rhetorical capacities, the

[40] Andrew Boyd, "Culture Jamming 101: Pranks with a Purpose," copyright 2001–2002, http://wanderbody.andrewboyd.com/culturejamming101/description.html.

[41] David Montgomery, "The Yes Men Use Humor to Attack Corporate Greed," *Washington Post*, October 20, 2011, https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/the-yes-men-use-humor-to-attack-corporate-greed/2011/09/28/gIQACyJg0L_story.html.

[42] I want to emphasise here that I'm exploring the origins of the terminology, not the activities that might count as creative activism, which could arguably have occurred from the first moment a cave wall was painted with intent to alter, not just record, community norms–and of course the terminology is increasingly being applied retrospectively to activities that occurred before it was widely used. For example, looking back from 2018, Julia Ramírez Blanco categorises the 1993 occupation of Claremont Road in East London, in which "in a squatted row of houses, all available space was transformed and filled with elements that were both aesthetic and defensive—so when the authorities arrived to evict the protestors, sculptures were turned into barricades," as "creative activism." Julia Ramírez Blanco, *Artistic Utopias of Revolt: Claremont Road, Reclaim the Streets, and the City of Sol* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 87.

[43] Jules Boykoff and Kaia Sand, *Landscapes of Dissent: Guerrilla Poetry & Public Space* (Long Beach, CA: Palm Press, 2008).

[44] Jules Boykoff and Kaia Sand, "Dennis Brutus's Creative Activism," *Jacket2*, July 27, 2007, https://jacket2.org/commentary/dennis-brutuss-creative-activism.

chameleon powers that make it such an indispensable resource for creative activism."[45]

Other users of the term have applied it to individual creative acts that also involve a subsequent collective political action: for example, The Snatchel Project, which invited individuals across the USA to create knitted uteruses then post them to anti-choice Congresspeople, was described as creative activism in 2012.[46] Retrospective uses of the term have also broadened its application, for example, Rachel Lee Rubin's 2018 book *Creative Activism: Conversations on Music, Film, Literature and Other Radical Arts*[47] includes interviews with, as the subtitle notes, painters, poets, playwrights, novelists, and songwriters, documenting their political impacts from the 1960s to the present day. Then, in 2019, Catherine Kevin retrospectively named 1970s feminist "creative representations including still and moving images and creative writing [that] contributed to the process of identifying domestic violence as a specific aspect of gendered violence" as "creative activism."[48]

In thinking about these examples that are *not* participatory spectacles, I look to the poet Adrienne Rich, specifically to her contention, in her *Notebooks on Poetry and Politics*, that "in a history of spiritual rupture, a social compact built on fantasy and collective secrets, poetry becomes more necessary than ever: it keeps the underground aquifers flowing; it is the liquid voice that can wear through stone."[49] Depending on your stance towards reader-response theory you may or may not argue that the reader of an activist poem *participates* in the social justice of poets such as Rich, Anzaldúa, or Audre Lorde through their active meaning-making engagement with the text, as April-Rose Geers argues, compellingly, later

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[45] Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2011), 25.

[46] Lauren Kelley, "Seven Ways Citizens are Using Humor and Creativity to Protest Injustice," *Alternet*, March 26, 2012, https://www.alternet.org/2012/03/7_ways_citizens_are_using_humor_and_creativity_to_protest_injustice/.

[47] Rachel Lee Rubin, *Creative Activism: Conversations on Music, Film, Literature, and Other Radical Arts* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018).

[48] Catherine Kevin, "Creative Work: Feminist Representations of Gendered and Domestic Violence in 1970s Australia," in *Everyday Revolutions: Remaking Gender, Sexuality and Culture in 1970s Australia*, ed. Michelle Arrow and Angela Woollacott (Canberra: ANU Press, 2019), 202.

[49] Adrienne Rich, *What Is Found There: Notebooks on Poetry and Politics, Expanded Edition* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2003), 122.

in the present volume.[50] Derek Whitehead similarly makes a case for poiesis (the creative act or "leading into being" of the artwork) as generating an *encounter*:

> working with the raw materials of the imagination (ideas, concepts, schemata) and those of the material order (paint, clay, or stone), constitutes a means of renegotiating our sense of 'place' with a renewed and placeful place of poietic and non-exploitative encounter. I develop the idea that poiesis may be seen in those undertones of creative activity that drive us toward a space of 'unitary multiplicity,' wherein the artist, the artwork, and the receiver of such a work are brought forward in all the palpability of their self-presentation.[51]

Whether or not you agree with Whitehead that all art is in a sense performative in its address to an audience, there is no doubt that there are many visual artists, novelists, essayists, musicians, and poets who, while they may do some of their creative work in a space and time set apart from the causes they describe, know those causes intimately and can produce work that is transformational and motivates others to perceive their obligations to recognition and redistribution. These artists intervene in the dominant representation of social and political conditions and in so doing can model or provoke a praxis-led change: a step that is no less necessary to the achievement of activism than the praxis itself. Accordingly, Raymond Huber includes a range of artists in his book *Peace Warriors*, about people "who chose non-violent resistance in times of conflict," such as Aotearoa New Zealand painter Lois White whose work *War Makers*, depicts affluent lawmakers mocking a young soldier.[52] Tracey Nicholls talks of the way carefully crafted creative nonfiction #metoo stories of resistance and solidarity on social media helped initiate a shift in patriarchy's culture of rape and gendered violence "with words, ideas, and better stories."[53] Marina Gržinić and Aina Šmid talk of how, when "neoliberal politics seeks to foster an unwillingness to speak publicly about social contradictions," the role of

[50] April-Rose Geers, "Creative Writing for Human Rights: Participating in *From The Republic of Conscience*," in *Creative Activism: Research, Pedagogy and Practice*, ed. Elspeth Tilley (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2022), 123–143.
[51] Whitehead, "Poiesis," para. 4.
[52] Raymond Huber, *Peace Warriors* (Wellington: Makaro Press, 2015).
[53] Tracey Nicholls, *Dismantling Rape Culture: The Peacebuilding Power of 'Me Too'* (Oxon: Routledge, 2021), 11.