

The limits of critique: 'artivism' and post-politics

by Manuel Delgado

Over the last three decades, political art has taken different forms which have been grouped – in an imprecise way, and accompanied by the typical problems of defining limits and content, as so often happens when reducing into a unit – under the general label of activist art, or «artivism». These creative productions offer political denunciations and inherit the vehemence of agitation and propaganda, yet seem to assume a wider range of implications, both in terms of having unique and different theoretical roots, and because of not settling, as agitprop, to be mere carriers of party slogans, or tools available for teaching popular pedagogy in revolutionary projects. Artistic productions within this new genre appear as formulas for public or contextualized art, in that they interpellate the spaces they interact with – the street, the plaza, semi-public areas – in order to address the inherent qualities that demonstrate their willingness to cover up all types of ruptures and cracks, signs of vulnerability in a socio-political system that these artistic productions reject and discard.

The central issue in this movement aims to, effectively, exalt the value of public space, not only as a territory but also on a theoretical level. This activity questions the willingness of power structures, in order to neutralize them and exorcise the threat that their hegemony imposes on collective action in urban exteriors, accelerating to the utmost the latent subversive possibilities in ordinary human interaction, in order to tear holes in everyday life. Artistic activism, which in many ways is heir to the imagination and praxis of the Situationists, mainly emerged from the anti-globalisation movement at the end of the '90s, accompanying large, transnational calls for action, or local activities tied to newly minted social movements acting on behalf of feminist issues, against real estate speculation, for the civil rights of ethnic or sexual minorities, for precarious or unemployed workers, or regarding the environment, cyberspace, and so on. The new formats and discourses of dissidence based art initially developed from a nucleus within the United States, which already had a certain number of cannons established by individual artists or collectives, including: Wochenklausur, Suzanne Lacy, Reclaim the Streets, ACT UP, Guerrilla Girls, WAC, or Santiago Sierra, such that it is possible to locate the primary sources of inspiration in cultural critics like Suzanne Lacy, Nina Felshin, Nicolas Bourriaud, Hal Foster, Martha Rosler, Rosalind Deustche, or Rosalind Kraus, among others.

In search of new paths of action, one of the obsessions of artivism has always been to avoid the attractive temptations posed by the artistic and cultural branch of the institutional system that serves as a mechanism for creating production and distribution standards. Acting as a new opiate for the populace, at this level Culture is revealed to be an exempt, superhuman stratum, whose great art centres are cathedrals, distributing its grace in a Pentecostal manner, i.e., without involvement or responsibility expected by the public, who is now recognised as a new, faithful congregation. This environment from which artivism flees was seen as an industry capable of digesting and making a caricature, and then a business, of any aesthetic political statement.

Perhaps it is time to evaluate this artist interest in transcending, on one hand, the hegemonic control on the field of representations, and on the other, the spent models of

political art, essentially stemming from an obsolete Marxist tradition. When undertaking this assessment, we must not merely question whether activism has been able to resolve, finally, the growing abyss between art and life, overcoming the posturing of artistic authorship, the separation between creator and public, or the classic models of cultural and artistic creation and management. It would also not only be necessary to review whether it successfully achieved its ambition to escape the gravitational force of museums and cultural centres, without becoming – as feared – a source of flashy and shocking fuss, worthy of filling the monstrous halls of the great cultural institutions, which seek to reach their quota for political critique. Nor would it only mean asking whether someone has bothered to measure, somehow, the real effectiveness of the events that stem from these new expressions of creativity. We don't know if the ideal that activism introduced has achieved its goals by upsetting realities or disturbing consciousnesses, if the shock triggered by artistic protests has been strategic, in any sense; nor do we know if it has modified, even slightly, the aesthetic sensibilities of some, or even any, people. Nor should we only wonder if, by this time, the goal of militant public art to reach a public who attends or who hopes to participate is no longer aimed at a minority of select fans or a determined museum space, but now directly addresses mass media, or specifically, YouTube.

The question that should be raised, in actuality, shouldn't interrogate the results of post-modern political art, but rather its origin and revise what it owes to the different perspectives that supported it from the outset, because it renounced the defining value of social class and the meaning of the political struggle as a struggle of not only movements, but also of positions. Activism has been formulated from its beginning as part of a vindication of the way public space can transform into what the modern project promised that it would become, thus demonstrating its dependence on the movements characterised by the historic phase Slavoj Žižek calls post-political. One must question not only the connections that emerge during the genesis of activism, but also the nature of its premises, to «generate new subjectivities», «diversify antagonisms», «proliferate political subjects», «generate imaginative fluxus», «create new cognitive tools»... beyond modifying social structures or inspiring the popular prey of dominant power to occupy and demolish it, the latter of which has been disregarded or even ridiculed in the name of a fun and colourful understanding of social disobedience.

In contrast to artistic creations in the service of agitation and political or class-based propaganda, activist art, in an apparent adaptation of the imposed conditions of a new post-Fordist capitalist era, rejects any framing principle that is organisational or even ideologic. Instead, it places itself at the service of circumstantial social movements, calling for a fantastic, real democracy from which a mythical public space is expected to materialise. In fact, the latest great civil movements seen in industrialised nations propose democracy as an antidote to capitalism – such as 15M in Spain, or Occupy Wall Street in the USA – and are nothing more than the apotheosis of this general festivalisation of protest that activist art presaged. The colossal performance of occupying plazas – often without even recognising their origins in the colour revolutions of former Soviet countries – have acted as authentic, activist super-productions that have claimed as their own the post-political project of overcoming the class struggle. Thus, it appears as if new paradigms are emerging when, in fact, they are merely variations, albeit creative ones, of old republicanism, where public space is merely the physical spatialisation of one of its derived concepts: the so-called civil society.

We are left with an enactment of a post-Marxist perspective committed to an increase in participation and self-management, which demands a continuous activation of the public at the margins of formal politics, as a way of developing a permanent audit and review of

financial and governmental powers, on behalf of the sharpening of abstract democratic values. The final aim is not to construct a historic block or to become a theoretical or practical point of reference, nor to cultivate an ideological struggle or to nourish the organic foundation of social change. Instead, it aims to promote an imaginary horizontal territory based on individual, responsible and rational autonomy, where people associate with equals through autonomy and solidarity, in order to confront contingencies and express their feelings and opinions regarding different issues on hand. All this in a public space that serves as a stage for great civic virtues, a self-managed frame for discussion and action wherein each individual lives up not only to his/her maximum level of political institutionalisation, but who has also entirely invested moral dignity as a non-negotiable foundation of the mystical democracy of freely consented obedience.

It is in connection with this theoretical substrate that activist proposals introduce a redefinition of the concept of the public sphere, which they demand be emancipated from the state in order for it to become a natural framework of and for radical democracy – a backstage where discussion is not only about what can be done, but what what must be said, where people come together and the seminal role in the conflict, previously usurped by institutional power, is reinstated. This elucidation of public space as a place that belongs to all, and which exists only when everyone can access it and find an area free of domination, is what leftist citizens have been demanding, claiming they can overcome and even delegitimise the old frame constituted by unions and political classes. This constituent dynamic to which activism wishes to contribute does not long for the future, but rather the opposite, voicing a nostalgia for the mythology of the democratic agora, as elaborated in readings of Kant's political philosophy by authors such as: Hannah Arendt, Reinhardt Koselleck or Jürgen Habermas, or, taken to the utmost levels of impatience or radical tendencies, by Negri, Hardt, Virno, Lazzarato, etc.

Flashmobs, performances, improvisations, irruptions, interruptions... The question is not whether this field of supposedly new creative experimentation is, or is not, art. Rather, one should ask if it is revolutionary or not, or if it is at least an effective contribution towards truly overcoming the capitalist system. Perhaps activism has explicitly shared an understanding of political action that is not a generator of processes and structures, but an anthology of creative outbursts, a sort of choreographic suite, a comedy, like a television sitcom. Modest agitation and propaganda appear to have been substituted for a new style of political art that emerges with the intent to rip apart everyday reality, when what it really does is elevate witticism, the surprise party, or the joke to the level of both the struggle and the artistic genre, without clarifying if this is an homage to or a parody of the ironic insolence of Surrealism, Dada, or the Situationist movement.

Raising questions about art that is, by definition, designed to question should derive pertinent results. This is the intention of the second edition of LIMEN. If in the first edition – ARTS CENTRES AS TOTAL INSTITUTIONS – we asked to what extent the great cultural and artistic containers have stopped being what they once were – factories, prisons, convents, hospitals, barracks – places designed to be the guards and custodians of beauty and creativity, the second edition – called THE LIMITS OF CRITIQUE – questions whether the supposed permission critical public art has to escape from the moral and physical constraints of cultural institutions or museums is real or efficient. The project wishes to think, and engage thinking, to discuss and engage discussion, about the extent to which the goals of artistic intentions, to generate alternative channels and parallel environments, have been achieved. We also wonder whether what unsettles us is not eventual failure but the generalisation that now serves as a model for protest, through which the guarantee of consistency and duration and the definition of the collective all

become, in the very least, problematic. It is no longer a question about if it is, or would be, possible to escape from the abduction exercised by the overarching frames of production and cultural distribution. Instead, we must consider to what extent activism has contributed to the deactivation of the social struggle through excessive dependency on means of communication – which are attentive only to action when it takes the form of a show – and the multiplying potential, but also banality, of social networks.

In this light, we must call on artistic activism to direct its own relentless criticism towards itself, and deal honestly with its own contradictions and paradoxes, to establish whether, once under scrutiny, it continues to defend the efficacy of this artistic typology as an instrument for denouncing the context in which it is produced. The dilemma formed both from artistic creation and theoretical discussion move firmly between two extremes. The more optimistic approach stays loyal to the conviction that new artistic formats and more militant public art has something to offer to social struggles, transcending the physical and moral walls imposed by institutions and interacting with the real universe it pretends to change. The more sceptic view doubts the viability, even the reality, of this escape, and points to the suspicion that activism has given too easy a triumph to the field of social struggles, contemplating how, to paraphrase Mayakovsky, the ship of art has ended by smashing against that which it wanted to break: the dreary routine of everyday life.