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Students as Arts Activists: Insights and Analysis from a Politically Engaged Assessment

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ABSTRACT

Throughout the second year of their BA programme at York St John University (UK), drama and dance students engage with a compulsory module titled "politically engaged practice." As part of this they are given a deliberately provocative assessment brief that requires them to "plan, design and implement a small-scale politically engaged piece of acts activism."

This paper explores the experience of asking students to become, if only temporary, political activists. It does so by first setting out how arts activism is framed and defined for the module as an intersection between effect and affect. Under the headings "dialogical activism," "culture jamming" and "quiet activism," it then provides a typology of the kinds of arts activist projects undertaken by students. Suggesting that the assessment offers an opportunity for "authentic learning" the paper describes how students articulate the impact of the module on their sense of social consciousness and relationship to political issues.

Finally, the paper reflects on the role of activism within the

academy, particularly in a context where universities are frequently accused of operating under a liberal bias that imposes particular political perspectives on students.

The assessment brief is intended to be a provocation, an impulse to action through which students can immerse themselves in active learning. It reads: ”working in small groups you should plan, design and implement a small-scale politically engaged piece of arts activism.”

All assessment briefs require a degree of tacit knowledge in order to understand what is being asked—what after all is an “essay” or required by the instruction to “reflect critically?” This unpacking is certainly needed here, as the task is intricately tied up with the content, which in turn is tied up with questions of aesthetics and effect and affect. However, if ever I have designed an integrated moment of assessment—defined by Marilyn Lombardi as one where assessment is “not merely summative” but “woven seamlessly into the major task in a manner that reflects real-world evaluation processes” (2007, p. 3)—it is this one. The result is, I believe, a particularly powerful learning experience for both students and the instructors.

In this short essay I have sought to think critically on the experience of asking students to become (even if only temporarily) arts activists. I do so by first setting out the *context* in which it is located, also providing a brief *definition* of how arts activism is framed for these circumstances. I then outline the *actions* undertaken, providing a broad typology of the kinds of activist projects students have pursued. Next I explore the kinds of *impacts* that have occurred, suggesting that amongst the most transformative were those that effected the students’ own social consciousness. Finally I present some brief reflections on the role of *activism within the academy*.

Throughout this paper discussion will included anonymised reflection, feedback and discussion from students.

CONTEXT AND DEFINITION

The arts activist assessment comes towards the end of a year-long process of engaging students—predominantly second year BA

students studying drama and dance—in questions of political arts practice. This takes the form of two modules, the first—Politically Engaged Practice 1—looks outwards and introduces students to key concepts and arts practices, exploring how the arts impact upon and are impacted by social movements and political agendas. Based upon this critical and contextual grounding, the second module—imaginatively titled Politically Engaged Practice 2—makes a couple of significant shifts. Most importantly, as introduced above, it operates a movement towards practice as it requires students to plan and implement their own arts activism project. These will be explored in detail in a moment. In doing so it also focuses on arts practices that seek to make an *immediate* intervention—however small, ambitious, radical or fleeting—into the political sphere. That is it focuses specifically on arts *activism*.

This difference between what might be termed broadly "political performance" and "arts activism" is inevitably subtle and fuzzy, but one that Marcela A. Fuentes articulates clearly through the term "artivism," writing:

> This neologism defines productions by artists who use their craft to mobilize concrete action in response to social issues. The term "artivism" characterizes a drive towards action in the making of an artistic intervention. In artivist projects, the main goal is to trigger responses and not merely represent a state of affairs (2013, p. 32-33).

The key element here is the description of how arts activism typically entails action directed towards an immediate and identified change. We can see this focus on action, on doing, in other definitions, such as the glossary of *Art, Activism and Recuperation* that defines artivism as "An activist looking to create change using the medium and resources of art" (Trevor, 2010, p. 8).

The utilisation of art in this manner is in one sense obvious. As Suzanne Nossel writes on artivism, "art has the ability to change our minds—inspiring us to take on different perspectives and reimagine our worlds. If we can agree that art's ability to change the individual psyche is profound and undeniable, why have we activists, who are in the business of changing the collective mind, shied away from

employing art directly?" (2016, p. 103)

The hesitation that Nossel observes feels connected to the (re-) deployment of art as explicitly instrumentalist. If activism is focused on "concrete action," change and *effect* then art (particularly rich, rewarding, memorable art) is often more ambiguous, elusive and produces *affect*. In outlining this debate, Stephen Duncombe persuasively brings these ideas together, suggesting that the very efficacy of arts activism comes through the indirect, perhaps partly incomprehensible, experience of affect—a process he terms *æffect*. The significance of this, for Duncombe, is to recognise that the processes by which we change our minds and form opinions are complex and not solely the preserve of facts of dispassionate knowledge:

> As recent developments in cognitive science suggest, we make sense of our world less through reasoned deliberation of facts and more through stories and symbols that frame the information we receive. And, as any seasoned activist can tell you, people do not soberly decide to change their mind and act accordingly. They are moved to do so by emotionally powerful stimuli. As such, when it comes to stimulating social change, affect and effect are not discrete ends but are all up in each other's business (2016, p. 117).

When working with the students it was this complex intersection of ideas that we explored. We were asking them to operate as practitioners and artists, to consider the affective impact of their work on audiences; and also as activists, mindful of political efficacy. Crucially, therefore, they needed to consider a kind of political aesthetics, where the aesthetics of their action—whether in form, in appearance, in tone, in tradition—align with and support the goals of their activism.

ACTION: ARTS ACTIVIST PROJECTS

In the two years that the module has been running to date, a range of activist projects have been undertaken. As is the nature of the module, these have been small-scale, experimental, ephemeral and DIY. As is

the nature of assessment, and the diversity of a student cohort, they have ranged from the sustained, inspired and thoughtful to the more confused or hesitant. Reflecting on the projects it becomes possible to begin to draw out some typologies, describing the kinds of arts activist approaches that the students have adopted—defined by ethos and aesthetic, rather than topic or politics. Of course these types overlap, but this section will explore broad categories under the headings: dialogic activism; cultural jamming; and quiet activism.

Dialogic activism

Subtle distinctions reside between ideas of dialogical art (Grant Kester), conversational art (Homi Bhabha) and relational aesthetics (Nicholas Bourriaud). Fundamentally, however, each describes a conceptual and aesthetic shift from considering art as a one-way relationship between the art work and individual spectator to various ways in which this relationship can become an exchange or encounter. As Kester puts it, dialogical art describes:

> the possibility of a dialogical relationship that breaks down the conventional distinction between artist, art work and audience—a relationship that allows the viewer to "speak back" to the artist in certain ways, and in which this reply becomes in effect a part of the "work" itself (1999/2000).

Emerging predominantly from community arts practice, dialogical art resists the idea that art has to be a fixed entity, an object or artefact produced by a special kind of somebody called an "artist." Instead dialogical art is produced through the encounter, a co-production or co-creation by whomever is participating in the exchange. Examples here might include Rosana Cade's work "Walking Holding" (2013-14) which "involves one audience member at a time walking through a town or city holding hands with a range of different people" or Deborah Pearson's "Drifting Right" (2014) which she describes as a one-on-one performance "in a canoe for an audience member who is also a right-wing voter […] it is a piece about talking to conservatives, and sharing a boat with a conservative." With both these examples the substance of the "work" shifts from being an entity to an exchange—the "work" is

what happens between the artist, the participant and the action.

The desire to initiate such exchanges has been a recurring feature of students' responses to this module, seeking to design a form of creative doing that stimulates or maintains a politically engaged conversation.

One group located their project around the taboo of menstruation and specifically the "tampon tax" (under UK and EU law tampons are currently classed as a "luxury" and subject to value added tax). To explore and expose this theme they organised a Make Your Own Tampon workshop, hosted in the Student Union, in which anyone was welcome to join them in making homemade tampons (and also tampon bunting, tampon earrings, tampon accessories). In their reflection on the project one group member wrote:

> Our aim was to create a piece of arts activism that was dialogical, we wanted to make an event that was both non-hostile to the audience, where the art was *created* by the audience. Without the presence of participants we wouldn't have had an event […] the participants' responses became the art.

The students described the making of the tampons as a "metaphor" or a "gimmick"—the actual thing was the exchange between the participants about the issues and ideas raised by the initial provocation. Following on from the module, the students received an invitation to re-create the Make Your Own Tampon workshop as part of "Beyond the Vote," a festival celebrating 100 years of women's suffrage in the UK.

Another group similarly sought to initiate conversations, this time about nuclear weapons. They did this through approaching passersby and asking if they would mind if they "drew around your shadow," itself a reference to the "nuclear shadows" that were all that were left of people and objects obliterated by the atomic explosions in Nagasaki and Hiroshima. This unusual request acted as an interruption to everyday life and an avenue into conversation. The students sought to present the work in a politically neutral manner, as neither for or nor against nuclear armaments, but as a desire to bring to the surface something that has largely slipped from our everyday consciousness. As one participant commented "I think this piece has started a

conversation that needs to be carried on."

This interest and desire to produce dialogical projects perhaps reflects a sense amongst students that the conversations that matter to them – and there have also been dialogical projects on education, invisible disabilities, mental health and male suicide—are not taking place within public discourse and/or are doing so in a manner from which they feel excluded. They also indicate the importance of a civic politics, of a true democracy needing to be one where people have the right to be heard and sense that they are being listened to. Indeed, one group of students framed their activism as a "listen-in," stating:

> I never considered something as simple as listening could be classed as political, due to it being an everyday task. But if you allow someone to have one hour of your day to sit and tell you whatever they like or whatever is on their mind—well, how would you feel?

Cultural jamming

Culture jamming is a form of activism that seeks to imitate, satirize and thereby subvert the power of media and branding by using its very familiarity as a form of critique. Central to ideas of culture jamming is that our daily lives are saturated with media images and branding which seek to have an impact on us but over which we have little or no control. In this manner the majority of media culture is the opposite of dialogical; while it may often be described as "communication" it is rarely if ever interested in a genuine exchange. While dialogic art seeks to offer an alternative to advertising culture by creating intimate, one-off, hand-held and local encounters between participants, culture jamming takes an alternative approach of using the tools and images of media culture in order to construct a different message.

While culture jamming often appropriates the polished aesthetics of mainstream media, of most interest for this module were those instances that utilised the body and had a more handmade immediacy. Two examples addressing similar concerns are Yolanda Dominguez's series "Poses" (2011) and Celeste Barber's "#celestechallengeaccepted" (ongoing from 2015). Both operate through a similar concept, ordinary women with ordinary body shapes

recreating the idealised bodies and appearances presented in fashion and advertising. Barber's work is photographic, located on Facebook and Instagram; Dominguez recreates the poses of high fashion advertising in public settings: in streets, doorways and parks. With both the act of mimicry draws attention to the impossibility, and inherent ridiculousness, of the original.

For students, who are the targets of endless, all pervasive, inescapable media messages, the possibility of responding to and talking back to such representations through culture jamming spoke to them directly. Like the examples of Barber and Dominguez this was often in terms of where they felt it touched on them personally, in terms of body image, beauty and identity.

Inspired by Dominguez's "Poses," one group undertook a project in which they replicated the outlandish postures of fashion mannequins, standing in shop windows or on shop floors amongst clothing displays wearing t-shirts with the slogan #beyourownmannequin. The objective was to highlight the difference between the body types and shapes of the mannequins and those that most people actually have. As one of the group members said, "We want to encourage people to be their own mannequins instead of trying to become a body size which is near impossible to achieve."

What is interesting about this project is that it utilised a form of culture jamming, but also maintained a physical presence, placing themselves and their bodies on the line. This act of showing up is integral to much activism. Their project was picked up and written about by Yahoo News (Eriksen, 2017) where they faced their own experience of trolling: ranging from "Liberals will protest ANYTHING!" to "Face reality you are fat and ugly. Protesting will not change that, a good diet and exercise will."

What all the culture jamming orientated projects have had in common is that the students often have a contradictory relationship to branding and advertising. At once aware of and concerned about its influence on their lives, they are also deeply invested in it and genuinely enjoy the pleasures that it gives them. Culture jamming allows them to playout both parts of this relationship, working *with* the references that they love and enjoy, while also reclaiming a little bit of the space for themselves.

Quiet activism

In a much reproduced article titled “Give Up Activism,” Andrew X presents a critique of what he terms the “activist mentality,” in doing so describing factors that I found resonated with how the students engaged with and at times resisted becoming activist. By “an activist mentality,” writes X:

> What I mean is that people think of themselves primarily as activists and as belonging to some wider community of activists. The activist identifies with what they do and thinks of it as their role in life, like their job. […] The activist is a specialist or an expert in social change. To think of yourself as being an activist means to think of yourself as being somehow privileged or more advanced than others in your appreciation of the need for social change (1999, p. 3)

Few, if any, of the students on the module identified with the “activist” as presented in this description. Indeed for many it clearly articulates much of what they found off-putting and alienating about activism and politics more broadly—esoteric, self-regarding, elitist, exclusory. All of course perceptions that grass roots activism would hope to cast itself in opposition to. One student reflected on her relationship to ideas of activism:

> Through the process I struggled to find my inner activist. I felt that I did not have any strong political views or a subject I was extremely passionate about. The term activist itself was a complex thought. Always when thinking about activists I would relate the notion to aggression, signs and marches—to me there was no way of relating activism to art or to myself. Yet this suggests that the only actions that bring about social change are the actions of a person defined as an activist. I realised I found this demeaning to the everyday actions of others who may not view themselves as activists, but who bring about social change in their everyday actions.

In contrast many students were more able and willing to locate themselves in terms of ideas of “quiet activism,” describing forms of

political activism that, in the words of Laura Pottinger, steer away from "antagonistic, vocal and demonstrative forms of protest" and instead "expands the category of activism to include small, quotidian acts of kindness, connection and creativity" (2016, p. 215). Examples of quiet activism might be typified by forms of "guerrilla activism," such as yarnbombing, guerrilla gardening and other forms of "craftivism" (Hackney, 2013). An example of a quiet activist projects undertaken by the students was one that attached knitted gloves and a card containing information about rough sleeping to anti-homlessness architecture and street furniture around the city centre.

For students, quiet activism also encompassed their attitude to dialogical art, where they defined their acts of conversation, their acts of listening, as moments of everyday kindness and community that resisted the impersonal, frantic and inhumane experience of much of contemporary life. In this vein, another group recreated Yoko Ono's famous work "Mend Piece" in the University Library, with the students spending a day attempting to repair broken china teacups as a metaphor for mental ill-health and distress. As one student put it, this was a form of dialogical quiet activism, where the aesthetics were appropriate to their issue:

> Inviting passers-by to help us rebuild broken teacups created a zone where discussion about mental health could happen. Questions about the teacup and its connotations to fragility and mental instability were raised, leading to a range of discussions around why we are considered so fragile; what we can do to resist this ideology; and how we could improve our generation's, and future generations' mental well-being.

IMPACT: OUTWARD AND INWARD EFFICACY

As discussed earlier, one of the definitions of activism is the desire for social change—change in an active and often immediate way. It seems tempting, therefore, to measure or think about activist projects in terms of their success in producing change, to think about words such as effectiveness and efficacy. Indeed, Stephen Duncombe presents an interesting provocation that arts activism is often *too* hesitant in this regard and should seek to assert and measure its impact more

confidently and more systematically.

In their reflections students were indeed very hesitant to claim significant impact, their discussions crouched with an immediate awareness of the smallness of their actions and the vastness of some of the issues they were addressing. They spoke, instead, about the value of changing even one person's mind, about starting a conversation about something that might stay in the mind, about momentary impacts and effects being "enough."

What is also striking, however, is that in their reflections students were more assertive and more confident about the impact that undertaking the projects had had on themselves. Confident, moreover, in asserting the value of this impact. They had been through a process whereby they grappled with and then started to identify, declare and own their own active positions in relation to politics and social issues. They grappled with and started to identify their own relationship to ideas of activism. For example, one student who'd participated in the Make Your Own Tampon project, commented:

> Speaking of myself, I've grown into the idea of becoming an arts activist. It is shockingly easy to slip into being apathetic about political issues, especially if they don't severely impact you as a person.
>
> I knew that our event would not be relatively earth shaking, or that it would change the tampon tax law, but the fact that we got people talking about the tampon tax and educating people on the period poverty crisis is a step in the right direction to change, which is why I would refer to myself as an activist after going through the process and seeking to break taboos through conversation and crafting.

Another that:

> I feel that I have made change, albeit it personal; in investigating these political issues, I feel that I can identify as an arts activist. The artistic explorations I conducted made me see mental health from a different perspective. Whilst this outcome may be a small change, I feel that awareness is one of the key factors to effect

change.

The arts activist projects, therefore, acted as a kind of consciousness building; an educational processes through which where they came to know and recognise their own stake in and responsibility to a broader social democracy.

REFLECTION: ACTIVISM IN THE ACADEMY

The module is not optional. It is compulsory for all the students enrolled on our "performance" suite of degrees (which includes BA Drama, BA Drama Education and Community, BA Drama and Dance). As a final reflection I want to consider the pedagogic and political implications of placing a compulsory element of political activism within the university curriculum.

To an extent this might be a non-issue, we are simply asserting the centrality of politics to all arts practice. Of the many repetitions of the maxim "all art is political," Toni Morrison puts it particularly clearly:

> All good art is political! There is none that isn't. And the ones that try hard not to be political are political by saying, "We love the status quo" (Nance, 2008).

We want our students-as-artists to be aware of this, and understand that no arts practice can exist outside of politics. Yet, there is a difference between seeking to provide students with a critical framework through which to analyse the relationship between politics and arts practice, and requiring them to undertake their own piece of arts activism. To do so perhaps feeds into and confirms a long established trope that academia is awash with liberal bias that sets out to influence, or even indoctrinate, students' political opinions. The fear seems most prevalent in the US (topic of books such as Ben Shapiro's *Brainwashed: How Universities Indoctrinate America's Youth*, 2004, David Horowitz's *Indoctrination U: The Left's War Against Academic Freedom*, 2009, or Jordan Peterson's recent video "Dangerous People are Teaching your Kids," 2018) but is certainly also a prominent discourse in the UK.

It is true that the assessment does not require students to develop

arts activism with any particular political ideology, simply that they are politically engaged. This is perhaps a little disingenuous, however, as students will inevitably be able to detect their tutors' political values. Linvill and Grant discuss, for example, how within a grade orientated culture some students are likely to respond to perceptions of instructor political bias through "self-silencing and disingenuous expressions of their own beliefs" (2015). In other words, students may produce activist projects that fulfil what they believe are their assessor's political ideologies. Certainly, my own political ideology would most likely be classified as left wing; moreover I have asked myself how I would respond to a group of students who proposed (as a for instance) that they wanted to produce an activist project that was anti-immigration, nativist or even racist in focus.

Students own anonymous module feedback suggest that these issues are not seen as a problem, with remarks such as liking how they liked being left to make their own projects. Other comments have included "we were able to fully understand that everything is political because we could do anything in our projects;" "I enjoyed creating our own arts activist group as I could be part of a project that suited my political concerns;" "I feel that this module has allowed me to explore myself and what I care about." For some students the module no longer felt like a module, with one remarking "The project didn't feel like an assessment" and for another "It didn't feel like we had to do it, but in fact rather enjoy it." In other words, for some students the projects were real world actions with real world consequences, producing "authentic learning" (Lombari, 2007), including of the impact of the process upon themselves.

Of course this was not the experience of all, although resistance was more frequently couched in terms of rejection of *all* politics, rather than specifically that of the instructors. One student honestly recounted her journey:

> I still dislike politics. I started this project with a hatred for anything political. In saying this, as the process went on I found I had a small interest in the political aspects that affect everyday life. I find politics complex and confusing therefore I try to avoid it. However, I have learnt that it is important to talk about politics because conversation is the first step to change.

While students haven't reported concerns with instructor bias it is worth considering that there could be various reasons for this. Possibly it indicates the extent of their self-silencing, perhaps not wanting to acknowledge even to themselves that they have adjusted their positions in relation to grading or tutor influence. Alternatively, as arts students they have perhaps already been self-selected by cultural and political perspective. Finally it is possible that the group nature of projects means that they tend to gravitate to topics where they can build consensus, such as important but less contentious issues of mental health or body image.

As a final remark, I have a sense that there would be nothing weirder, nothing more pedagogically inappropriate and deceitful, than setting out to teach a module on politically engaged practice and arts activism from a position of supposed neutrality. All teaching must model what it seeks to achieve, and so here I wonder if the module itself should not be conceived as an activist project. I think I am able to speak for my colleagues in describing the conscious positioning of our drama and dance programmes as immersed with a social justice agenda: we want our students-as-artists-as-activists to make a difference and to take responsibility for the change they want to produce in the world around them. Certainly the module hopes to bring about change and is the first step in this larger ambition.

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(Trentham/IOE Press, 2010), Kinesthetic Empathy in Creative and Cultural Contexts (co-edited with Dee Reynolds, Intellect, 2012), Experiencing Liveness in Contemporary Performance (co-edited with Anja Mølle Lindelof, Routledge, 2016) and Applied Practice: Evidence and Impact Across Theatre, Music and Dance (co-edited with Nick Rowe, Bloomsbury, 2017). For further information visit Matthew's website.