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**Activate the Urban:**

**Possibilities and Limitations of Urban Gaming as Activism**

For years I have lived in worlds created with digital magics, far away from this planet we call Earth, far away from the village I grew up in and far away from the city I was living in. I was convinced that in the virtual spaces of computer games I could find just as much (if not more) meaning than in the realities of my urban existence. Of course I did live the life of a regular student with a job on the side, but in the time I could spare from this 'normal' life I would enter the play driven existence of my troll hunter. One year ago after being faced with a more pressing daily reality I went on holiday to Hungary for a month in which I attended O.Z.O.R.A, a psychedelic trance festival, or as many call it a massive gathering of the tribes. During a week I lived in a world of multicolor and trance music. A world that merged the natural, green surroundings of the Ozora-valley with electronic music, creating both a physical space in which people felt safe to express themselves in creative ways and an auditive space from the different music stages. The festival seemed to me like a virtual reality in cyberspace, a space of freedom and creativity in which participants play with their identity as much as interact with each other and the given space. I felt more alive and at home in this physical, but almost virtual space of respect, love and direct experience, than ever before.

Ever since my experience with the above event my interest in the possibilities of creating magical realities in physical space has grown. While in a psychedelic trance festival the crowd itself will not be outspokenly activist, the masses will not gather with signs of protest in front of corporate buildings, many individuals in the gathering would feel themselves to be activists. The celebration of life, togetherness and positivity by sharing dance, trance and enjoyment is what is believed to be of utmost importance. To "be" and "be creative" could be seen as their form of activism, by playfully acting out their vision of a better world, directly in the temporary space of the festival. The psychedelic festivals taught me to combine my gamer heart with my activist heart, realizing that activism would not necessarily entail the loud protesting and criticizing of a world that felt no longer my own. I discovered that it was possible to be an activist be living out or acting

out what I believe in directly, instead of fighting a system indirectly without having any alternative realities to offer in exchange.

This article takes my experiences of the festival into the urban environment. New forms of protest have arisen in this day and age that are not consisting only of a "protest against", but a protest against by acting upon the public, urban space in positive, playful ways. For example, the Guerrilla Gardening movement, that plants seeds and creates gardens in public space without the interference of government planning, a form of Do-It-Yourself activism. Another example of this cultural form of activism is a group that calls themselves Space Hijackers. In their manifesto they state that they work against the dominance of governmental and corporate planning of public space, that has taken control of public space away from its inhabitants, by architectural design focused on functionality alone. (Space Hijackers, 2012)

"We attempt to create situations or place objects within architectural space that affect the way in which that space is then experienced. We create myths within space that then go to become a part of that space. Therefor the authority of the owner's text is unbalanced as another voice is heard."
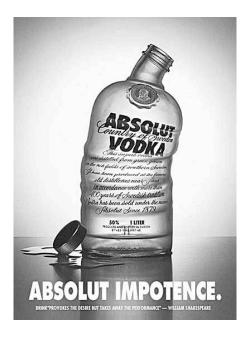
(Second Manifesto of the Space Hijackers, 2012)

For example Space Hijackers organized a party in the London metro line, hijacking a public transport device and turning it into a disco. Intermingling partygoers with commuters going home from their jobs and hence giving new meaning to the everyday reality of public transportation.

Since the rise of mobile technologies with GPS systems, like the iPhone, mobile and location based games have become a popular activity in public, urban space. Game designers and theorists like Jane McGonigal (2011) and Mary Flanagan have underscored the political characteristics and possibilities of urban gaming and play, but situating urban games in an activist framework has been unconvincing. Therefor this article aims to answer the question: *Can urban games be cultural activism? What are the possibilities and limitations of Urban Games as a form of cultural activism?* I will go about answering this question firstly by a discourse analysis of the theoretical approaches to cultural activism. Secondly, urban space will be situated within an cultural activist framework. Thirdly, the possibilities and limitations of urban games will be placed within the activist framework.

**Cultural Activism**

Cultural activism has been hailed as a new form of activism that reflects the current forms and acts of protest that are occurring mostly in urban environments. It is described as a diverse and multiform approach to political and cultural oppression by creative and playful interventions in public space. (Özden Firat & Kuryel, 2010) The latter mentioned Guerrilla Gardening and Space Hijackers are part of a movement that cannot be described as one centralized movement with one single political agenda. The movement itself is diverse and global with activists and activist groups all having their own specific approach to activism and their own point of view on what they are working against or what they are working for. What their activisms have in common is the playful, positive approach with which they intervene in their environment and the humor with which they get their message across. "This form of activism, with its insistence on creative interventions based on notions of humor, playfulness, and confusion appears to bring a novel dimension to conventional strategies of protest." (Özden Firat & Kuryel, p.10) So cultural activism is defined by its diversity of the people and their orientations and the playful, creative ways of protesting.

Emrah Irzik (2010) writes about the pitfalls of cultural activism by focusing on the practice of *adbusting*. Adbusting is a form of cultural activism by which the language of commercial advertisements is used to send a message of critique. This is done by mimicking or faking known



advertisements to mock the company behind the add or to show truths about practices of those companies that are hidden from the public eye. For example the use of advertisements of alcoholic beverages, by copying them and stating "Absolute Impotence" instead of "Absolute Vodka." (Irzik, p.138) and showing the bottle in a deflated way that might remind the viewer of a failing erection.

According to Irzik using advertisements focused on the public-as-consumer is a way for activists to make use of communication channels and media that are owned and controlled by commercial businesses and governmental institutions. This is done in a playfully creative way that nonetheless uses the language of commercialism to send out a different message. Creating media and communication channels of their own is  an expensive venture for activist that more often fails

than succeeds in the struggle against corporate media channels that are commercially financed or governmentally subsidized.

Adbusting is a form of parody playing with the language of consumer culture and therefor attempting to create through the use of humor an unraveling of this consumer language. An attempt to open the eyes of the public by disrupting the signs of their everyday existence. Not questioning adbusting as a strategic means of disruption and protest, Izrik rightly sees the pitfalls of this method. She refers to the Situationist International movement of the 1960's and 1970's, that were aware that "the re-use of old cultural elements in a revolutionary direction could only be achieved by orienting them toward a new sublime rather than referring back to their original significations." (Irzik, p.140) This new sublime, or vision of a different world or lifestyle, is exactly what Irzik claims the adbusting movement lacks. She claims that cultural activism as it stands now is too fragmented in its members and visions and therefor lacks the orientation of what it is specific about this current society that needs changing. Just negatively criticizing consumer society, albeit with humor and parody, is not enough to support positive social change. Parodying commercial advertisements could also create adversity with a public that is already bombarded with images and messages on a daily basis. It will not stimulate active participation from the public in itself. Adbusting as cultural activism, though a fun way of getting your activist message across is not social change itself, but merely one of the strategies that could be applied.

Anja Kanngieser (2010) describes the political potential of cultural activism through performative encounters established historically by Dadaist, Situationists and Berlin Umsonst, 'umsonst' translated means 'free' in english. She defines the performative encounter as "instances that converge around an ethical praxis form. They purport a certain aesthetic, creative and affective modality predicated on the desire for emancipation and self-determination. This is enabled through principles of active participation and reciprocal communication." (Kanngieser, p.117) An example of such a perfomative encounter is the event organized by Berlin Umsonst to collectively ride public transport without paying for it. Participants would be traveling in groups without paying for their tickets, together with experienced members that would know how to deal with legal issues encountered during traveling. Non-participant passengers would be informed about the occurring event.

Important about an event like this is that it was organized and supported by the activist group Berlin Umsonst, but that it included the public by both making them participants and by informing non-participants of the event that was directly taking place in their daily routine. Kanngieser sees the potential of the performative encounter especially in the countering of

hierarchical structures of identification between "activists as experts" and non-activists as "unenlightened masses." (Kanngieser, p.117) She illustrates this issue of hierarchy by an historical analysis of the ways that the public was approached and included by historical activist movements like Dada and Situationists International. The dadaist approach to the public was that of an audience that would view the dadaist artworks and performance. For the dadaist, the artist was the figure of revolution and intervention, working against the institutionalization of art and taking art back into the political realm. Though the dadaist placed themselves within the revolution, by making the artist a mythical revolutionary figure, paradoxically a hierarchical situation was created in which the artist-as-activist and the public stood on unequal grounds.

The Situationists, inspired by Guy Debord's theory about the society of the spectacle, realized that in order to advert the colonization of daily life by capitalist intentions "emancipatory self-determination by the individual and collective body" (Kanngieser, p.121) was necessary. In their performance encounters they tried to include the public by making them participate in the events. Even though the situationists averted the hierarchy between activist and non-activist as less enlightened masses, nevertheless the situationists would be the directors of the event, provoking the public to participate. In comparison the contemporary group Berlin Umsonst, not only creates events in which the individuals of the public are provoked into participation, but mostly in which the participants become constituents of the event taking place. This method of including the public and moving away from hierarchies is seen in more cultural activism of today. Both within activist groups themselves, that more often use a more loosely, horizontal organization, and towards the public. Another example of this would be the above mentioned Space Hijackers who organized a discotheque in the metro lines of London. Actors in that event were the organizers, the participants that actively constructed the event by participation and the commuters, who were not forced into participation, but became part of the event nonetheless.

Kanngieser (2010) characterizes cultural activism by the many diverse and playful methods of intervening in daily life without labeling themselves as specialists. In cultural activism often methods of collaboration are used in which all are welcome to be an active and constructive part of events, workshops and group discussions. Cultural activism of today is characterized by a more open and diverse hierarchy and politics.

Another important characterization of contemporary cultural activism is the way it focuses on experiences of daily life and daily routines of urban inhabitants, by disrupting them or by blowing them out of proportion like done in adbusting. Cultural activist would sooner creatively intervene in daily routines, then to stand in front of corporate buildings protesting against capitalist

culture. The cultural activist protest may be multiple and not directed against a particularly defined ideology, except consumer society or capitalist culture, but rather she would actively change the urban space in a playful way by planting seeds in patches of public greenery. This also means that the cultural activist of today could be your next-door neighbor working a nine to five office job and going out at night to take control of his environment. Interventions in daily life by the urban inhabitants themselves. The contemporary activist might not be someone that sees herself part of a bigger movement that sets out to create a new cultural narrative in opposition of an existing dominant narrative of oppression. Rather every activist or activist group has its own vision of importance and strategy of taking action. This fragmented character of activism might be a weakness, as Emrah Irzik states, or it might be a strength because it is more tangible to take action in your day to day existence by for example making your neighborhood a greener space to live in while by doing so, showing a different way to interact with your environment, a statement is made against government regulation and corporate control of the urban space.

## The Place of Urban Space within Activism

The urban space and activism seem to go hand in hand when researching histories and theories about activism. There seems to be no need for political ideology or creative interventions in rural areas and most theorists and activists seem to be born out of urbanity. Whether this need for rural activism exists or is needed is not the issue of this article, but the relation between activism and the city is. According to Henri Lefebvre, a French philosopher that focused on every day life and the urban, space is not a neutral given. Space is socially produced, or better stated, space is constantly in production by social and cultural forces. (Purcell, 2002) Lefebvre moves beyond the concept of a material, concrete space separating it from the inhabitants of this space. According to Lefebvre there are three forms of space that interact and form a triad. *Perceived space* which would refer to the material space that people encounter in their day to day existence. *Conceived space* which refers to the "mental constructions of space, creative ideas about and representations of space" (Purcell, p. 102) and *lived space* in which perceived space and conceived space are combined and in which everyday life takes place.

"Therefor, social relations and lived space are inescapably hinged together in everyday life. Producing urban space, for Lefebvre, necessarily involves reproducing the social relations that are bound up in it. The production of urban space therefor entails much more then just planning the material space of the city; it involves producing and reproducing all aspects of urban life."

(Purcell, p.102)

When space is produced by social practice it is no wonder that the city and life in the city is a primary focus of cultural activist interventions. The city is the most socially produced space of all in which there is a constant negotiation of different social groups and interests. Just be stepping out of my suburban apartment I am confronted with the production of urban space every step on the way, for example the construction site of a new railway track, of which I had no say, that has now annihilated a beautiful patch of wild, unused green and water. It is no surprise that groups like Space Hijackers state

"As time has gone by governments and corporations have played a larger part and become increasingly present in urban space. Every high street is now brimming with security cameras, (for our protection of course) and every public space is designed with traffic flow in mind."

(Second Manifesto of the Space Hijackers, 2012)

The choices of living, social interaction and entertainment are made for me by urban planners and architects with specific ideologies in mind that might not reflect my own.

Adriana de Souza e Silva and Larissa Hjorth (2009) offer a perspective on urban space as being inherently playful, based on the notion that play is intrinsic to social interaction. They add the playful production of space to Lefebvre's categories of social production of space. According to de Souza e Silva it is not just space that is playfully produced, but specifically urban space that is playfully produced because of the "mobility and interactions of people who inhabit these spaces." (de Souza e Silva & Hjorth, p.604) The playful character of urban space is not a new phenomenon, as is shown by the reflection on historical movements that used play to experience the urban space differently such as the *flâneur*, but is indeed newly highlighted by the introduction of mobile technologies with GPS systems. Because of these mobile technologies the urban space has
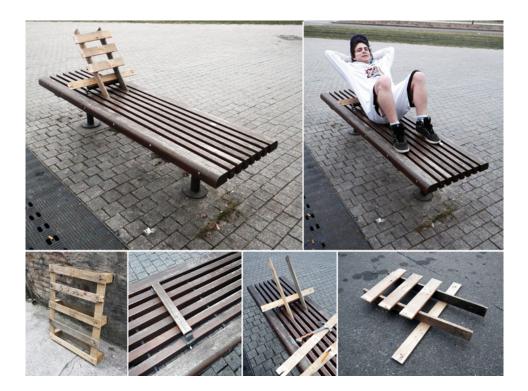
become the game board in which players play games both within the virtual spaces that merge with the urban space through mobile devices such as the iPhone.

The merging of the virtual game space and the actual urban space is defined as hybrid reality (de Souza e Silva, 2009) and is most apparent through games played in the urban environment that make use of GPS systems and connectivity between players that are playing from their computers at home that are interacting with players on the city streets. An example of a hybrid reality game is CAN YOU SEE ME NOW? (Blast Theory, 2001) A game in which both online players and players in the city space have to keep out of the claws of so called runners who are connected by GPS to a representation of the city map. Players can keep away from the runners by cooperation and by hearing conversations between the runners in the city. Players need to navigate themselves through the virtual representation of the city while being confronted by real life movements and experiences of the runners located in the actual city space. There is a merging or hybridization of virtual and urban spaces in the experience of both the players and runners.

Urban space is a result of social and cultural practices that can and will be playful. With Lefebvre's theory of production of space, space has become politicized. Cultural activism highly depends on playful interventions in urban space in order to show that the urban inhabitant can take control of their daily living environments that are otherwise so thoroughly planned by architects and dominated by corporate and governmental concerns. The self proclaimed *urban hacktivist* Florian Rivière plays with the urban space and his playful interventions are constructed by the urban environment itself. He does this by walking around the city space and letting unexpected situations and experiences be his guide at the moment of his strolling. This way of working reminds of concept of the *flâneur* (de Souza e Silva, 2009), but Rivière takes it a step further by actively reconstructing the urban space. For example Rivière created a back of a chair from a wooden pallet he had found on the streets which he put on a public bench that did not have anything to lean against. By Rivière's design the public bench became a lot more comfortable while he played with and criticized the affordances of the design of the public bench.

 Rivière wants to empower the urban inhabitants to use his interventions and take interventions of their own by showing that "there are no formal rules to hack public space" and he aims to "build a city without the control and slowness of government" and "reclaim the streets." (Rivière, 2012) Within cultural activism he is one of many artists or hackers that is trying to reclaim the urban space, but by proclaiming himself artist or urban hacktivist he does fall into the paradoxical hierarchical relation that the dadaist were suffering from, namely that of the iconic figure of the revolutionary artist that tries to educate the masses by showing them how to take

control of their everyday existence away from government and corporations. The strength of Rivière's work though is that intervenes in the everyday reality of city life by taking its known signifiers, like a park bench, and playfully designing it differently with materials freely found on the city streets themselves. Everybody could do this and he shows the passerby the playful options of re-imagining the city space.



## Urban gaming as activism

Adriana de Souza e Silva suggests that hybrid reality and location based games offer the possibilities to transform urban spaces into playful spaces, but do they offer possibilities for this playfulness to be activist in nature? Space in itself is a product of social forces of which playfulness is an intrinsic quality. One important characteristic of urban games is sociability. (de Souza e Silva, 2009) She states that urban games like hybrid reality games are inherently social because they depend on the collaboration and interaction between players in hybrid space. This of course does not count for all games played in urban space, someone that plays a game on his mobile phone is not necessarily social by interacting with other players or bystanders. Hybrid reality games have the power to create communities that can work together in public, urban space.

But the promise of community building might not be enough to be an activist statement alone. Ash Amin (2006) states that the collective power of urban space lies not in social interaction alone, but in "the entanglement between people and the material and visual culture of public space." Social interaction with other players or bystanders according to Amin is not necessarily of a political nature. People gather in public places, like parks, just to meet with friends in a relatively safe space in which the codes of behavior are understood and upheld. These socialization are not acts of political ideologies. Amin points towards the importance of site specificity and interaction with other people, but also interactions with the actual urban space, its architecture and visual culture.

Mary Flanagan points to the importance of attention to site specificity when analyzing urban games. Play can be a tool for empowerment and cultural change, but only when play is understood as a phenomenon attached to the local. Flanagan criticizes most urban games, because by their design they could be played anywhere. An urban games is not more than an entertaining experience that stays locked into the game experience and use the urban space as nothing more then a game space, thereby commodifying the urban space. "The key issue to examine with locative media and pervasive games is that many of these new, mediated experiences refer to and appropriate space while divorcing it from its meaning, history and significance." (Flanagan, web) A game that does not take into account this site specificity of urban spaces into its design is in danger of becoming just a fun experience, that does not offer ways to empower its players and bystanders nor take control of the urban space.

If urban games become nothing more then entertainment, detached from the awareness that space is socially produced, than they become products of consumption that are consumed by those who have the money and time to play them. This would mean that urban games stay in the realm of the white middle class and are played out on the doorsteps of those that need empowerment. If a city becomes a playing field, do the homeless or those living in slums become nothing more then living, breathing pawns on the gameboard? The act of play, a game or a playful intervention in urban space, should interact in meaningful ways with the urban environment. An urban game has the possibility to raise awareness about for example acts of government control by creating games around the presence of surveillance cameras on the streets.

Invisible Playground, a Berlin urban gaming collective organized game design workshops around the realities of surveillance in urban space. After the workshops the games were played. Invisible Playground's approach is interesting and could be placed in the cultural activist framework. They facilitated the workshops for designing the games around a specific issue, thereby

giving an activist framework, but not being the sole designers themselves. Hereby the problematic hierarchy between activists and non-activists was averted. The workshop and designs of the games by not only game developers empowered those involved and the thematic of surveillance created awareness. Still, the gaming in itself did not directly create social change or a lessening of surveillance in the city.

In order for urban games or play in the city to be of real value as an activist toolset it needs to activate participants to not only act in the (hybrid) game space, but for those actions to have real world consequences. A possible solution would be to understand that the merging of game space with daily life activities can have real consequences for the production of space. De Souza e Silva (2009) argues for a new logic of game space in which the traditional boundary between games and real life is lifted. Understanding the mechanics of hybrid reality games as acting both on virtual space and actual space could be a beginning of realizing the possibilities of games impacting on the urban environment., blurring the borders between reality and the game. This could open spaces to re-imagine reality and empower people to act upon their new visions of the world, but it is not a guarantee.

Urban games and the use of gaming elements have been enthusiastically heralded as the next big thing by governments, commercial businesses, museums, programs of education, futurists and world-savers alike. This means, that just as with adbusting, urban gaming can only be an activism strategy when appropriated by those with activist intentions. The act of play in itself could not be seen as activism, even though play is always social and therefor always political in nature. Many game designers and theorists see the possibilities of urban games, hybrid reality games, location based games or alternate reality games (McGonigal, 2011), for re-imagining a better world. Izrik's (2010) critiqued adbusting because the act of adbusting could not be the social change in itself, but merely a strategy. In comparison, urban games definitely show more promise as an activist strategy, because gaming is an active form of interaction with other participants, bystanders and the urban space while adbusting is just another message to consume and there is no guarantee for acting or action. Secondly, the act of gaming does make you re-imagine the world, albeit temporarily. Adbusting is a critical reaction to a world that already exists and because of this reactionary character it will not stimulate the imagining of a new world.

The collective imagining of a new world is exactly what cultural activism needs according to Izrik (2010) and yes, urban games do offer the possibilities for collective action and re-imagining. Besides they offer possibilities to make the public into participants and constituents of the events, hence reminding us of the power of the performance encounter (Kanngieser, 2010) and

they offer possibilities to act upon the urban space. But all of these are possibilities only and it depends on the design and the purpose of the urban game if it could be seen as activism. At the moment a lot of urban games, while they play with elements that remind one of activist interests like surveillance depend on government subsidizing or are financed by businesses for specific events. The design of urban games has yet to reach those with activist purposes and goals.

Lastly, I wonder, does activism always need to clearly state what is battled against or what the desired social change is? Does it even have to be collective, or can every single person that feels empowered, be an activist on its own? I am reminded of an interview I saw about the Oeral festival on Terschelling. Artists and performers were interviewed who were relatively young. I was taken in by the charisma of these performers. They were well spoken and seemed aware of their position in the world. The radiated a balanced and assured power and I couldn't help but think this was because of their creative lifestyle and the fact that their creativity had a positive effect on their environment, receiving positive feedback. In them I saw the kind of empowerment that I wished all people could experience. To creatively act upon their environment and become a more aware and optimistic individual for it. The scope of social change is hard to measure, who knows what inspiration and empowerment in one individual can do on the long run. Simply, acting upon your environment in positive ways can be considered activism as much as acting on a bigger scale can. In order to take back the urban space from government and corporate control, all its inhabitants first need to start realizing that things could be different and that by simply interacting differently with your environment this could already cause change. Well designed urban games would be a very good activist strategy for this.

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