# BRIEF HISTORY OF ARTIVISM

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*Artivism* is not a movement or a collective, but a constellation of artists who combine their practices with activism. Artivism, which according to Gérard Paris-Clavel's idea is a *«political practice of art and not a practice of political art»*[1], is difficult to define because most of these artists refuse to be grouped into a recognizable movement. The forms of their actions and their degree of involvement in political struggles are variable: one of their only common points resides precisely in their mistrust of the institutionalisation of artistic movements[2].

However, the space in which these practices evolve is described and perceived as «the history of a questioning that has been circulating in the art and activist worlds since around the mid-1990s»[3], a «juxtaposition of political claims and plastic means [,] (...) a phenomenon by which the difference between work and public disorder tends to fade away.»[4]. Artivist practices, in their various forms (from theatrical action in protest to graphic artwork of diversion), are very much impregnated by performances. Artists seek to provoke situations, to create *«creative forms of struggle»* thought of as experiences for spectators - actors.[5] The idea is to think of *protest and mobilisation techniques as artistic practices*, and sometimes to reinject happiness into the often too serious protest. It is also a question of changing the specific art issues: moving from a market art to a policy of gratuity and exchange, from an individualistic to a collective approach, from infinite commentary to a concrete, immediate and performative struggle that explores utopia, from performance to participation and dialogue.[6]

However, there are limits and pitfalls in which artivist practices can fall. Among these we find the risk that art will lose it's autonomy, it's independence, by putting itself directly at the service of social movements to lead political struggles.[7] The second risk is *folklorisation*: if this art form can hardly be a means of propaganda, it takes the risk of putting symbolism and spectacle first and thus making the political message ineffective.[8]

As for the influences and origins of artivism, we must both consider the artistic *avant-gardes* of the 20th century, as well as the popular tradition of carnival and counter-culture, along with a long history of *protest, civil disobedience and insurrectional creativity*.

In many of the artivist actions we see some resurgences of the features of carnival: *«Inversion of social hierarchies, crossover of gender, triumph of madness and absurd, cult of spontaneity, belief in the magic of the power*

*of imagination, emancipation by joy, eroticism of bodies, music and dance: the repertoire of carnival actions offers a particularly rich register of social commentary on power relations, defeatism, serious injunctions, self-denial, and submission to what are presumed to be an indisputable established order. The return to the right side, but at the wrong end, of a world upside down».*[9]

The artistic genealogy of artivism should first be considered in the light of the context of the avant-gardes of the late 19th century, and even more so of the early 20th century: Dadaism, russian Futurism, Surrealism, etc. The artistic production of these avant-gardes is inseparable from the context in which these movements were born: the birth of Dadaism in Switzerland during the First World War led them to campaign for peaceful internationalism, a rethinking of bourgeois culture in all its components. With them, an *anti-art idea* is gradually born, they encourage public participation with a form of proto-performance, cabaret. The surrealist and Russian futurist movements are also closely linked to their political context, to the Russian revolution and Marxist struggle in which they more or less took part, by depicting everyday life, imagination and game in their art. Art continued to become more involved in defending political causes, so when Picasso painted Guernica in 1937 to denounce the massacres of civilians during the Spanish War, he said: «No, painting is not made to decorate apartments. It is an instrument of war, offensive and defensive against the enemy».[10]

After the World War II, political art forms took a new turn, and artists' demands became more diversified. Especially in the 1960s and 1970s, the artists were particularly concerned with *LGBTQ+, feminist, civil rights, ecological and other pacifist struggles*. The slogan of the 1960s *«Personal is political»* sums up this new dynamic. It is also the period during which art in the public space was more and more present and developed, from urban sculpture to performance, to happening, and during which the vocabulary to describe these practices appeared.

By questioning our relationship to the body or historical amnesia, in front of an audience that became more and more an integral part of the work, artists like Joseph Beuys or Michel Journiac laid the foundations of an artivist practice.

In the 1980s, new changes gradually took place. On the one hand, a multiplication of geographical centres practicing committed art appeared, particularly in Eastern Europe. Moreover, although some of the resistance movements against the dominant culture have been criminalised, others have received particularly resounding media coverage.[11] Some artists, for example, used *newspapers* to give the image the strength of mass infor-

mation. On November 19, 1993, Jenny Holzer published in a special issue of the Süddeutsche Zeitung Magazin the photographs of a project entitled *Lustmord*.[12] Jenny Holzer exhibited photographs of women's bodies, on which she recorded accounts of rape from three points of view: those of the victim, the rapist, and a witness.[13] This work denounced the mass rapes of Bosnian women that took place during the war in the former Yugoslavia. The cover of the magazine highlights a sentence: «Where women die, I am awake», written with blood from German and Yugoslav donors. The artist's action was then both a tool for direct *denunciation of political news,* but also a reflection on the violences perpetrated by the mass media and the importance of using it to create scandal and awareness. The context of the development of artivism itself, referred to by this name in the last twenty years, is to be understood as a «world where the fall of the Berlin Wall has brought liberalism into a complete phase of globalisation.
A world that on September 11, 2001, has come to an end as the era of generalised surveillance. Where the ecological issue becomes an emergency. Where the representative system is in crisis due to the increasingly structuring influence of political marketing and the media.»[14] The French journalist Jade Lindgaard asks herself *«What spaces still exists for critical thought and action in mediatic capitalism?»*[15]

Initiatives, often led by collectives, are spreading all over the world - whether in countries immersed in capitalism and liberalism or in war zones. One example is the «Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination» created by Isabelle Fremeaux, John Jordan and James Leadbitter in 2004 not far from London. The collective describes itself as a place where «art creativity and the radical engagement of activism merge to create new forms of civil disobedience and post-capitalist life. (...) We encourage artists to leave the prisons of the art world, to no longer be buffoons of the temples of culture, but to devote their creativity to *new forms of life and struggle*»[16]. The laboratory has seen the emergence and persistence of collectives and actions of significant importance in the history of artivism, such as the Clowns Army, which leads actions based on non-violence to defend an anti-capitalist, pacifist, and ecological vision. For example, they carried out a symbolic action to clear the Seine, block large supermarkets, disturb demonstrations celebrating a national war history, etc. In 2004, the Insurgent Imagination Laboratory also published a *«instructions manual»* to disrupt the proper functioning of London-based multinationals, offering the following options: «how to make a musical chair in a Starbucks» or «how to play hide and seek in a Gap store». But the last two decades have also brought a considerable increase in the field of artivism in Central and South America. For example, «very

particular artistic forms that citizens' movements used in Colombia after the 2016 referendum rejecting the agreement signed between the government and the guerrillas led by the FARC. This contribution demonstrates how, in the example of Bogota, the street has become an alternative place of public expression for the «invisible», and how the city became *«a real field of social experimentation»*[17]. In a somewhat similar approach but with an interest in other themes, the *«Muchacha Fanzine»* was created, which is a «Do it Yourself Xicana Feminist fanzine dedicated to promoting social consciousness & decolonizing mind»[18]. Chicana feminism challenges the stereotypes that Chicanas (which reflects a cultural identity adopted by some Mexican Americans but also by people from other Latin American countries) face across lines of gender, ethnicity, race, class, and sexuality.

Among the other major centres of Artivism is South Africa, which propose reflections on both post-Apartheid life and the defence of other minorities. One example is *Zanele Muholi*, who founded an association of visual activism for the LGBTQ+ community called *Inkanyiso*.

Artivist practice is therefore based on several aspects: involving the spectator through new forms of fights, changing the way of claiming, reaching another audience. Actions are often reproducible, based on operating instructions, simple and symbolic actions. But there is a significant gap between the apparent simplicity of some of these actions and the possibility of having them applied to a wider range of audiences. Their application requires for social workers to know how to accompany the necessary progress in raising awareness and verbalising the ideas that participants want to bring to their artivist practice. The next step is for the youth workers' assistants to be able to propose plastic - or not - solutions to guide the participants in the artistic shaping of their ideas. This manual aims to offer suggestions to support this process for social workers, by giving examples of activities carried out, the temporality of different activities, and by exposing some of the risks inherent in these workshops, such as the risk of reproducing the power relations that we tend to dissipate in this kind of project.

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