

THE NATIONAL UNION OF MUSEUM WORKERS AND GALLERY VISITORS

Free

SPOKEN CHOIR

To participate, underline every sentence that you agree with in this text, and then read these out during the event.

Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art, 27/07 & 12/10/2017, 17.00 – 19.00

ACTIVISM

An activist is an agent of social change. Activism is the voluntary participation in political, cultural, civic, pedagogical, logistical and aesthetic campaigns and movements. Activism is an engaged mode of citizenry that seeks to shape the conditions under which individuals act. For an activist a wall is a blank page, the floor is a desk and every window is a soap box.

ADVERTISING

Advertising is a mode of participating in the public sphere based on the ability to pay for rented space in publishing media (eg pages in newspapers, sponsored entries on social media, posters on walls in the street and the interior and exterior surfaces of buses). Advertising aims to convert passersby (including but not limited to pedestrians, readers, viewers and listeners) into consumers. A culture based on advertising, sponsorship and branding is one in which individuals come to understand themselves as always on the verge of becoming a consumer. Also, the experience of the dominance of advertising in culture gives the false impression that all information exchange is a form of advertising and therefore that advertising is the natural form of communication.

AGENCY

The capacity to act. Related to power and force, agency punches holes in the fabric of existing reality. Unlike mechanical sequences, which conform precisely to what is necessary, agency puts windows where there were walls and dinner where there was an empty plate.

ARTIST

A special category of worker. The artist is a worker (a producer of artworks) who has been understood, since the middle of the eighteenth century, as a non-worker, someone who plays rather than works, or someone who takes pleasure in what they do rather than working for a wage. Artists have also been seen as distinct from wage labourers because it is alleged that art cannot be taught or that artworks are unique and therefore cannot be reproduced by others with the same skills. Artists are producers (whether they supply objects for the walls of the super-rich or events for the participants of public museums). Even when artists don't make the work themselves (hiring specialists, getting the work produced by a commercial firm, employing technicians and assistants or hiring fabricators), artists are never merely the holders of capital who make profits from the labour of others. The proof of this is that artists cannot sell their company or brand to a capitalist who then employs the same people to produce the same kind of products.

BADGE

A physical surface attached to clothing with a pin to enable someone to display a slogan (or other form of information) on their body that expresses their political (or other) opinion. Badges that share the same slogan link individuals together like an almost invisible thread that runs through society attaching people to each other, chest to chest and collar to collar. The same thread acts as a barrier as if badges were always produced from metal melted down from fences that continue to separate us. It is the words (or other information) that gives badges this magical power.

BANNER

A public announcement too big to be carried by a single person. When carried by a small number of people (a couple or a family-sized group, normally), the banner is the cement that binds the bricks into something else, something beautiful. When attached to buildings, banners turn walls into screens and streets into auditoriums.

BOSS

Someone who drives you up the wall with their rules, instructions, memos, reorganisations, targets and cuts. Bosses don't do the work but manage those who do, often with little or no understanding of the tasks at hand but with an incentivised brief to reduce costs, improve productivity and get more for less. Bosses take a stopwatch to bed every night and only eat numbers. When workers are their own bosses, however, like in worker-managed factories in South America, the skies are lit up with new furnaces, machinery learns how to dance and the old bosses hang around the factory gates every morning asking if anybody needs to be bureaucratically violated today.

CITIZEN

A citizen is someone included in a political system that is based on the exclusion of others. A citizen is legally acknowledged as belonging to a state or nation or community. Citizenship is the practice of behaving, as an individual, in relation to or in concert with other citizens.

COMMUNITY

Community is traditionally understood in terms of a geographically bounded group who are in some sense homogeneous, of a piece, alike or recognise themselves in each other. As such, it often has the association of consensus. Historically contained within the village ordinance or the city walls or the nation's borders, a community is the result of overt and covert domination and social control based, ultimately, on the threat of expulsion and ruin. Community therefore has the twofold association of a longed-for comfort and a stifling conformity.

CONFLICT

Conflict is the heartbeat of all social systems and the only method of bringing about structural transformation. Conflict is perpetuated by power and yet an increase in conflict is the only hope against power. Conflict is imposed on us and is nevertheless the only sure way of removing those impositions. Conflict is permanent but no single configuration of conflictual relations survives for long. Conflict is the most hidden feature of any society because it cannot be revealed without being confronted. Conflict is the pretence of harmony in the face of inequality and conflict is, at the same time, the writing on the wall that change is necessary, inevitable and urgent.

LEADERSHIP

Leadership appears to be the quality of a leader just as walls belong to a house, but leadership is something conferred by others and, in a democratic organisation, leadership can be taken away from a leader who no longer represents them adequately. A leader is a representative of a group (eg a union, a political party or a nation) and, as a result, carries the power and influence of that group. When we don't understand that leadership is a power conferred on somebody by the people she or he represents, we can make the mistake of thinking that the power they wield is a power that belongs to the leader as an individual, as a personality even. Consequently, individuals who aspire to leadership typically present themselves as already having leadership qualities prior to obtaining actual powers through representation of others. So-called 'strong leaders' believe that they are leaders regardless of whether they have been appointed as leaders. Good leaders have a strong relationship with the people that have appointed them, share their values and give them courage to confront all obstacles in order to achieve their aims.

MARCH

A wall of people moving in unison through spaces that appear to be physical (there's usually a map) but which are in fact passages through bodies of people or between one body of people and another. Passersby assemble themselves in the form of two walls flanking the march, watching, Facebooking, listening, hissing, cheering, jeering, egging on or effing off. A march is a public demonstration, an act of publishing conducted as a massive collective live performance of walking, shouting and the display of banners, placards and badges. Marching is an uplifting experience in which your anger and despair, multiplied many times and planted all along a route that is a permanent memorial to your political desire, become the basis not only of a new community but a new you. Marching, like all forms of collective protest, is the craft of turning into a lion.

MEMBERSHIP

Membership is a form of commitment to others. As anyone who has ever become a member of a gym knows, being a member is not like making a one-off payment for a commodity or paying for a single service, but instead involves a commitment over time. Being a member of a political party or a trade union or even of a fan club typically establishes a bond that endures beyond the period of membership. In this sense, membership imprints itself on a person like a tattoo. Immigration officers on the border of the USA do not only want to know if you are a member of the Communist Party but also whether you have ever been a member. Membership sticks. Memberships can lapse or, in some cases, can be cancelled but trying to purify yourself of a membership from the past is like banging your head against a brick wall.

PARTICIPATION

Participation cannot deliver what participation promises. Participation is an image of a much longed-for social reconciliation but it is not a mechanism for bringing about the required transformation. Participation vainly hopes to provide the ends of revolution without the revolution itself. Participation seems to offer to heal rifts without the need for any messy and painful confrontations between rivals. Participation is often used as wallpaper to cover the cracks within a utopian image of social cohesion rather than as a tool for transforming the accidental relations between private individuals into the internal relations of a public.

PUBLIC

Public, in contrast with community, is characterised by discursive interaction and disagreement. The public appears to be unbounded and open-ended because it is not rooted in one geographical location or one identifiable group. Passing through the city walls as if they don't exist (which they don't anymore!), the public is the meeting point of a diverse range of communities. Whereas communities share a single culture, publics are constituted by a plurality of identities and perspectives. Publics cannot exist without internal differences, antagonisms and debates.

SLOGANS

A slogan is a linguistic act that binds people as advocates for a partisan opinion or action. A short pithy phrase that obtains universal assent is not a slogan: a slogan divides the room. Rather than describing the political state of affairs, the slogan simultaneously diagnoses the problem with the existing society and prescribes a remedy. Slogans cannot be issued by the state without undermining the pivotal feature that they ought to divide opinion, since the state formally represents the whole citizenry. However, insofar as the state is actually a means for one class to dominate all other classes in a given social formation, the state often issues slogans on behalf of the class it represents, but it does so successfully only by representing its sectional interests as universal ones, in which case its slogans do not have the characteristic of divisiveness that is so important for a slogan. Advertisements contain pithy and memorable phrases that people sometimes repeat to each other but these are not slogans. Slogans belong to the public sphere because they bind people through the publication of opinions. However, slogans exceed the public sphere insofar as they participate in, or even generate, social action. For liberals committed to deliberative democracy, slogans seem to be coercive (dictated by the leadership) and fall on the wrong side of the fence that distinguishes between the rational deliberations of the public sphere and the political activism that takes place on the street. In this sense, slogans are a form of language that belongs to action rather than argument.

SCAB

A strikebreaker who puts immediate private interests above the long-term collective interests of comrades, union members, class and the labour movement. Passing through a picket line and entering the walls of the workplace is an act of betrayal. To those who continue to strike, the scab is a diseased person, a virus-spreading threat to the whole community, and therefore someone to be shunned and kept at a distance. The scab is the former ally turned enemy agent.

STRIKE

The withdrawal of labour. Strikes sit at the heroic end of unpaid labour. Idleness is not a form of rest in the strike but a form of attack. Not working means the boss and the owner cannot make money off your back. Strikers are at a disadvantage when firms and governments provoke a strike which they have planned for by piling up stock and training the police in new techniques of malicious arrest. And when the media is advised by ministers to smear strikers and their union leaders, when strikers have their phones tapped and spies hide in cupboards during strike meetings, when the police are instructed to instigate violent confrontations, walling in strikers and then harvesting the ones who get isolated, battering strikers to the ground by police on horseback, then ferociously beating them by other officers on foot, then the strike turns into a confrontation between workers and the state.

UNION

A union is an organisation of workers, usually of a particular branch of labour, which represents their interests in the workplace and in the state. Having their roots in both syndicalist (protectionist) and corporatist (cooperative) traditions, unions often protect the interests of their members by building walls between one set of workers and the rest, but ideally break down walls between workers in order to represent the political interests of workers in general. In principle, unions are the mechanism through which workers act as a class to resist capitalism and the capitalist class, but in practice they operate more often as a link between workers and capitalist enterprises. Unions tend to be in favour of higher wages rather than the abolition of the wage system and they proceed on the basis that the workers must be exploited because as soon as the capitalist enterprise fails, the workers lose their jobs. Nevertheless, unions have been enormously important within the labour movement in supporting workers in their struggle for basic needs and political representation, providing the material basis for workers to organise themselves and develop as a political class, and the unions have been the seedbed from which radical and revolutionary political movements have emerged.

WORKER

The material basis of all material and immaterial wealth. A worker can be paid or unpaid, exploited by capital or paid for out of revenue (disposable income). Wage labour can be employed for profit or engaged as a luxury. When economists claim that labour is only one of the factors that produce wealth, they fail to recognise that all the other factors (capital, means of production, knowledge and so on) are nothing but labour that has already been turned into a product. In capitalism, the worker is the source of all wealth but appears to be dependent on the capitalist who pays the wages and therefore appears to be the real wealth creator. This illusion is underscored by the fact that, during a strike, the capitalist or the company that has prepared itself for a strike by hoarding products, can survive for much longer than the individual worker who is quickly reduced to cruel poverty. As such, it is little more than a fairy tale to imagine a great number of capitalist enterprises going to the wall because of a mass strike. It is true that capitalist enterprises would be nothing without the workers they employ but this dependency is as nothing compared with the immediate dependency of workers on their wage. Just as with slave economies before capitalism, the worker not only produces all the products and services that a society needs but also provides the wealth to the non-working owners that perpetuates the gap between rich and poor.

Freee is a collective made up of Dave Beech, Andy Hewitt and Mel Jordan. They use text, objects, bodies and conversation to intervene in the public sphere. This pamphlet is part of a series of works that bring activism together with the traditions of the avant-garde.

Font: Din; paper: PaPago 100 g/m²; trim size: 210 x 148.5 mm; print run: 100 copies.
Written by Freee. Designed by Joanna Deans. Organised by Miguel Amado.
Published by Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art.
© Freee, 2017