

**Subverting the Spectacle: A Critical Analysis of Culture**  
**Jamming as Activist Performance**

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## **Abstract:**

This thesis is a critical analysis of culture jamming as a form of activist performance that focuses on the relationship between performance, politics and ideology in the context of late-capitalism. Culture jamming is defined here as an overtly theatrical approach to political activism that primarily targets corporate power through the appropriation of the signs and symbols that constitute its branding. Drawing on a range of different examples including Reverend Billy and the Stop Shopping Choir, the contemporary subvertising movement, the Yes Men and Liberate Tate, this thesis explores the way in which culture jamming intervenes in the ideological construction of the real by reintroducing a sense of the political into everyday life. Situating my analysis in relation to Guy Debord's theory of spectacle and the concept of 'the performative society,' I draw on a range of theories from performance and theatre studies, philosophy, critical theory and cultural studies to develop the concept of 'political force.'

Using this idea as my primary reference point I argue that culture jamming is able to meaningfully challenge the pervasive sense of cynicism characteristic of neoliberalism by transforming our experience of everyday life and, in some cases, producing a sense of the world beyond capitalist realism's horizons of the thinkable.

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## Introduction

This thesis is a critical analysis of culture jamming as a form of activist performance. The term ‘culture jamming’ was first coined by cultural critic, Mark Dery, in 1993 in an article entitled *Culture Jamming: Hacking, Slashing, and Sniping in the Empire of Signs* (2010). As we shall see throughout this thesis, it is an overtly theatrical and performative approach to political activism that primarily targets corporate power through the appropriation of the signs and symbols that constitute its branding. For Dery, this approach can be understood as a means of both literally and figuratively ‘jamming’ the endless flow of signification that animates the socio-political landscape of late-capitalism by ‘introducing noise into the signal as it passes from transmitter to receiver, encouraging idiosyncratic, unintended interpretations’ (Dery, 2010: n.p). As the communications scholar Christine Harold has suggested, culture jammers pursue these aims by subverting and challenging ‘the marketing rhetoric of multinational corporations’ through practices such as media pranking, corporate sabotage, subvertising and trademark infringement (Harold, 2004: 190). Whilst thinkers like Dery and Harold trace the emergence of culture jamming back to the late 1980s and early 90s – a period coextensive with the emergence of neoliberalism as the hegemonic ideology of Western capitalism (terms that will be discussed in detail shortly) – political theorist Richard Gilman-Opalsky contends that its theoretical and practical underpinnings were first articulated in the late 1950s by the Situationist International – a group of radical thinkers and artists formed in France out of the ashes of the Letterist International – and the well-known concept of *détournement* (Gilman-Opalsky, 2013: 3). Defined by the group’s most influential theorist, Guy Debord, as ‘the fluid language of anti-ideology’ (Debord, 1983: 208), *détournement* can be best understood as the

subversion of dominant cultural texts through the appropriation and recombination of various textual elements into a new ensemble. As we shall see, each of the case studies discussed in this thesis make extensive use of the *détournement* in their performance practice; from the anti-consumer 'retail interventions' of Reverend Billy and the Stop Shopping Choir (who appropriate evangelical rhetoric as a means of staging a performative critique of commodity fetishism) to the institutional critique of Liberate Tate (whose critique of Tate's relationship with British Petroleum hinges on the creative appropriation of the gallery's curatorial practices as a means of reshaping its identity from a position of 'interstitial distance').

Culture jamming is not a social movement in and of itself, but is a critical sensibility practiced by a confluence of artists and activists. It is an approach to activism characterized by a critical attitude towards the present and is performed through acts of political and aesthetic *appropriation*. This is the main way in which the term 'jamming' is understood in this thesis. However, there are two other understandings of the term that will be deployed elsewhere in my analysis. Firstly, jamming is also used to describe moments of *interruption* in which activists use performance as a means of literally jamming the various ideological performances that characterize everyday life under late-capitalism. This understanding of jamming informs my discussion of the performances of Reverend Billy and the contemporary subvertising movement in chapters 2 and 3 respectively. Secondly, and related to this, jamming will at times be understood as a process of *improvisation* in which activists use appropriation as a means of producing new versions of dominant cultural and political texts. Though this understanding of jamming might be readily applied to all of the

examples discussed in my thesis it is most explicitly drawn upon in my analysis of the Yes Men's political pranking in Chapter 4.

The understanding of jamming as appropriation might be thought of as analogous to the Situationist concept of *détournement*. Though I do not consider culture jamming to be a straightforward recapitulation of the Situationist International's political project it is important to emphasize the extent to which the concept of *détournement* is linked to the group's attempt to radically transform the experience of everyday life under capitalism. This political project was carried out in explicit opposition to the alienating logic of the 'spectacle' – a mode of capitalist production theorized by Debord that is characterized by the production and consumption of mediatized representations. In the opening statement of *The Society of the Spectacle* (1983) Debord updates Karl Marx's famous opening lines of *Capital* as follows: 'In societies where modern conditions of production prevail, all of life presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation' (Debord, 1983: 1). Whilst these 'spectacles' frequently take the form of images Debord's theory is more concerned with the way that this mode of production structures social relations and produces a pervasive sense of distraction and critical inactivity. This is why he argues that the spectacle is 'that which escapes the activity of men, that which escapes reconsideration and correction by their work' (Ibid: 18). Now, as we shall see in Chapter 1, the form of abstraction described by Debord is a historically specific phenomenon whose changing dynamics have been subsequently re-evaluated by a number of thinkers since the 1960s (most significantly in the work of Jean Baudrillard, whose concept of simulation forms a key theoretical reference point for this thesis). In other words, our experience

of what we might term 'social reality' remains ideologically mediated by the representational economy of late-capitalism to the extent that its logic penetrates the fabric of everyday life. However, I also retain the key theoretical principle that motivates Debord's analysis; power, representation and production are closely connected to one another and have a significant bearing on our experience of reality and everyday life. As such, I argue that the logic of the spectacle remains a key part of contemporary late-capitalism.

The term 'late-capitalism' refers to a particular configuration of capitalism that is characterized by the predominance of corporate power and financial capital as well as 'a new international division of labor, a vertiginous new dynamic in international banking and the stock exchange[...]new forms of media interrelationship[...]computers and automation [and] the flight of production to the third world' (Jameson, 1991: xix). Whilst there is an important debate to be had over the sense of specificity associated with the term (insofar as it can encompass a rather broad period of history), and the appropriateness of the 'lateness' ascribed to it, Jameson's definition remains a useful reference point for understanding the broader political, social and economic dynamics that culture jamming is responding to. Also important to note here is the relationship between late-capitalism and postmodernism that is central to Jameson's analysis. Whilst I make extensive use of the work of one of the principle theorists of postmodernism, Jean Baudrillard, I have decided not to focus on the term or engage in the ongoing debate over its validity in relation to the politics of contemporary performance. Indeed, where Jameson describes postmodernism as late-capitalism's structure of feeling (Jameson, 1991: xiv) I use the term 'capitalist realism' (discussed below). As we shall see throughout this thesis the

latter concept is an enormously useful lens through which to engage with and articulate culture jamming's broader political significance.

As such, my own analysis is focused on analyzing the ways in which culture jammers use performance as a means of challenging and subverting the hegemony of neoliberal ideology. More specifically, I am interested in theorizing the transformative power of culture jamming by positioning it as an approach to activism that is able to produce moments of 'the radical' in performance, an idea developed by British theatre scholar, Baz Kershaw. Following the definition offered by cultural theorist Raymond Williams, Kershaw locates the radical in performance as those moments which give rise to new forms of freedom and association that transgress ideology and gesture 'beyond existing systems of formalized power' (Kershaw, 1999: 18). Whilst I am critical of Kershaw's claim that the radical in performance is transgressive of ideology (as I argue in Chapter 1 one is always already *in* ideology insofar as it operates as an unconscious fantasy that structures reality) I am intrigued by his observation that it emerges in situations 'where the threat of ideological incorporation and co-option is intense, and where tolerant repression offers its subtlest welcome' (Ibid: 19). Whilst I will be developing my own theoretical concepts for engaging with the kind of processes described by Kershaw his emphasis on the transformative power of the radical greatly informs the direction of my own analysis and argument. Indeed, this thesis argues that culture jammers use *détournement* (and other related tactics of appropriation such as defacement, rupture and overidentification) in order to challenge the false necessity of capitalist realism and, in doing so, enable participants to experience a sense of the world beyond our current structure of feeling.

***A critical attitude towards the present: Culture jamming as emergent cultural practice***

The term 'structure of feeling' is used by Williams to theorize the ways in which the meanings and values that characterize a particular cultural and historical moment are actively 'lived and felt.' As with much of Williams' work the term is underpinned by an understanding of culture as a dynamic 'process' (rather than a static and unchanging 'site') that is characterized by 'practical consciousness of a present kind, in a living and interrelating community' (Williams, 1977: 132). Whilst this thesis engages with forms of cultural practice quite different to those examined by Williams my analysis arises out of a similar desire to understand how the political significance of cultural practice emerges out of the dynamic interaction between it and its socio-political context. The dynamic, event-based, embodied nature of performance makes it an extremely useful vehicle through which to explore culture jamming's relationship to our current structure of feeling. As has been noted by practitioners and theorists from Bertolt Brecht to Augusto Boal, performance's capacity to defamiliarize the meanings and values which structure our experience of the social real, and its potential for generating new versions of the world which run counter to those dominant narratives imposed by structures of power, have made it an important field of activity for exploring and reflecting on the ideological composition of the real. Broadly speaking then, my analysis is concerned with thinking about the extent to which the political significance of culture jamming – and of performance more generally – is inextricably bound up in its engagement within our contemporary structure of feeling. Continuing with the work of Williams I argue that culture jamming can be considered an example of *emergent* cultural practice. This is not to argue for the historical novelty of culture jamming by positioning it as an

entirely new field of practice. Indeed, as Williams argues, emergent cultural practices are not defined by their formal innovation, nor the politically oppositional tone of their content. Indeed, such practices are concerned with the production of 'new meaning and values, new practices, new relationships and new kinds of relationships[...]which are substantially alternative and oppositional' to those articulated by dominant practices (Ibid: 124). For example, whilst the diffuse interventions staged by activists in the contemporary subvertising movement (discussed in Chapter 3) are unable to enact a sustained political opposition to corporate power's influence on public space their emergent qualities lie in the way that they make possible new configurations of urban space that assert a collective sense of the right to the city. In summation, defining culture jamming as a form of emergent practice is a means of foregrounding the 'critical attitude towards the present' that motivates it and is key to understanding its broader political significance.

One of the most significant critical diagnoses of late-capitalism's structure of feeling is that offered by the late cultural critic and theorist, Mark Fisher, whose short but incisive critique of neoliberal ideology, *Capitalist Realism* (2009), is an important reference point for my analysis. I will be unpacking Fisher's argument and the implications of it for the development of my own argument in more detail in Chapter 1. For now, however, it should be noted that the concept of 'capitalist realism' refers to a structure of feeling characterized by a specific set of behaviours, perspectives and affects that are shaped by the impossibility of imagining an alternative sense of the world beyond capitalism (Fisher, 2009: 2). Deeply connected to the hegemony of neoliberal ideology, capitalist realism is what emerges when a given social order becomes so naturalized, so associated with 'common sense' that it has

become co-extensive with reality itself. The concept of capitalist realism has also influenced the historical and geographical focus of this thesis. All of the examples of culture jamming discussed here have been shaped by, and respond to, the specific historical and political dynamics described by Fisher. For instance, all of the case studies are drawn from an Anglo-American context (the one exception to this is the French subvertisers Les Déboulonneurs). Moreover, these practices also sit within a clearly identifiable historical span – all of the performances and artworks discussed were staged in the years between 1999 and 2018. This period is one in which the practices, structures and policies associated with neoliberal capitalism have gradually become more pervasive and far-reaching to the extent that they have become a normalized part of everyday life (thus producing the sense of malaise that Fisher associates with capitalist realism). Whilst this broad historical span encompasses a significant number of globally significant events (9/11, the second Gulf War, the global financial crisis of 2008 and the birth of the Occupy movement, for example) I have chosen it because it represents something of a high point in the history of culture jamming. By this I mean that the activists discussed in this thesis have been at their most prolific, and made their most politically interesting work, during this period.

This thesis argues that the political significance of culture jamming lies in its capacity to intervene within the construction of the real in a manner that runs counter to the sense of the world cultivated by capitalist realism. Moreover, I will be arguing that performance is key to understanding, critiquing and identifying the limits of such a process. With these ideas in mind, my analysis is informed by the following research questions: To what extent can culture jamming be conceived as an approach to performance that presents a meaningful challenge



to capitalist realism's pervasive hold over our political imaginations? What might a critical analysis of culture jamming reveal about the complex relationship between politics, performance and ideology under late-capitalism? What lessons might be drawn from the examples of culture jamming discussed in this thesis that inform the development of future forms of activist performance and its future study?

### ***Beyond media activism/Towards the political force of performance***

Responding to these questions requires us to move beyond the dominant narrative offered by existing scholarship on culture jamming. Written from the field of sociology, communications studies and media studies such work focuses on culture jamming's relationship with the mass media and, as such, frequently positions it as a form of media activism. For example, for sociologist Vince Carducci, culture jamming is a form of critical media practice which aims to 'mitigate the asymmetrical effects of power and other distortions in the communications apparatus, cutting through the clutter as it were to clarify otherwise obscured meaning' (Carducci, 2006: 118). Others have described it as a form of activism which exploits the malleability of mediatized representation as a means of challenging 'the ability of corporate discourses to make meaning in predictable ways' by inserting new 'resistant' meanings into the field of popular culture (Harold, 2004: 192; Sandlin and Milam, 2008: 331). Whilst these analyses are right to focus on the way that culture jammers use the mass media as a platform through which to critique corporate power (a notable feature in the work of the Yes Men, discussed in Chapter 4) they frequently rest upon the assumption that it is possible to meaningfully democratize the structure of the mass media. Following the work of Baudrillard, I argue that

distortion and non-communication are to some extent written in the very structure of the media itself (Baudrillard, 1981: 169). Indeed, the difficulty of restoring a sense of genuine communication or clarity to the field of the mass media can be seen in the work of Adbusters, the Canadian subvertising group founded by former advertising executive, Kalle Lasn. In his book *Culture Jam: The Uncooling of America* (1999), Lasn describes his work with Adbusters as a form of media warfare in which the group would attempt to outflank the corporate mass media by buying airtime on local TV stations in order to show their own satirical advertisements and to publicize 'Buy Nothing Day' (held every year on 23<sup>rd</sup> November) to encourage individuals to refuse to engage in mass consumer culture (Lasn, 1999: 32 & 95). The work of Adbusters is reflective of some of the more problematic impulses of the early culture jamming movement of the 1990's, such as its preoccupation with attempting to 'level the playing field' of the mass media and consumer culture simply by introducing subversive material into it or by conflating political action with consumer choice. Indeed, as Max Haiven has argued, this approach risks reinforcing neoliberalism's myth of a fully democratized mass media and its culture of individualism (Haiven, 2007: 95). For this and other reasons – namely, that the group's artistic output offers fairly little insight into culture jamming as a form of activist *performance* – I do not discuss the work of Adbusters in this thesis.

The predominance of this narrative is perhaps due to the influence of Dery's original article – which explicitly situates the practice in relation to Umberto Eco's theory of 'semiotic guerilla warfare' (C.F. Eco, 1990) – and the now cult status enjoyed by Adbusters. Whilst I will be drawing attention to the ways in which culture jammers manipulate the mass media through the staging of their performances my own analysis attempts to move beyond this

perspective. I will be critically engaging with the relationship between culture jamming, everyday life, and the real as it relates to various ideologies that comprise contemporary late-capitalism. Such an approach is underpinned by a conception of politics as a performative, world-making process in which subjects attempt to intervene in the construction of the real. This idea is informed by the work of theorists such as Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe and Jacques Rancière and will be discussed at length in Chapter 1. For now I would like to address two important points for my argument here. First this thesis is concerned with how and when politics happens *in performance*. In other words, I am interested in exploring how politics emerges in and through the unfolding of the performance event rather than treating it as an assumed point of departure. As I argue in Chapter 1, this approach focuses on the transformative dynamic that characterizes performance and performance-like objects. In this way politics emerges in the form of transformative moments that reconfigure our taken-for-granted *sense* of the world. As we shall see throughout this thesis the above understanding of the relationship between politics and performance is closely related to Rancière's concept of 'dissensus,' which, he argues, does not refer to the absence of consensus or a generalized sense of conflict 'as such' but describes 'a specific type thereof, a conflict between *sense* and *sense*' (Rancière, 2010: 139). In this way the fabric of the sensible is disturbed through the coming together of divergent senses of the world.

If there is a useful connection to be made between culture jamming and the mass media then it lies in the way that activists exploit the malleability of the media to produce these moments of dissensual reconfiguration. This leads me to my second key point; culture jamming's capacity to challenge capitalist realism's hold over 'the horizons of the thinkable' needs to be distinguished

from the more sustained interventions produced by social movements.

Speaking as someone interested and involved in far Left politics I suggest generating a meaningful alternative to neoliberalism requires a further democratization of mainstream political parties and a reshaping of them in an explicitly progressive manner. This also requires the creation of new and alternative media institutions and a widespread rethinking of economic commonsense through sustained grassroots activism. In short, it requires the creation of an extensive counter-hegemonic project that brings together a multiplicity of social movements and presents a meaningful and sustained political challenge to neoliberalism. It is clear that culture jamming – with its focus on singular interventions that produce fleeting moments of rupture and transformation – is unable to do alone. However, this does not mean that it cannot play a meaningful role in the construction of the imaginative and aesthetic structures that might underpin this counter-hegemonic project. Indeed, as the political theorist Chantal Mouffe has argued, the significance of artistic activism, conceived as counter-hegemonic practice, lies in its capacity to widen the field of the politics by ‘intervening in a multiplicity of social spaces in order to oppose the program of total social mobilization by capitalism.’ The objective of ‘artistic activism’ is to use aesthetics as a means of ‘[undermining] the imaginary environment necessary for its reproduction’ (Mouffe, 2007: 1). Following Mouffe, my own analysis will attend to the ways in which culture jamming is able to open up new spaces for encountering and engaging with politics and its capacity to transform the context of its enunciation.

This final point forms the backbone of one of the core theoretical ideas developed in this thesis; the concept of ‘political force.’ Broadly speaking, I will be using this term to describe the ways in which the performances discussed in

this thesis are able to transform the context of their enunciation in new and politically significant ways. The term will be used to include a wide range of political effects that emerge through the unfolding of a particular performance event or encounter; from subtle shifts in the spectator's perception of everyday life to moments of rupture that transform the socio-political activity that takes place within a particular context. The concept of political force is therefore intended to emphasize the way that politics emerges in and through the dynamics of each performance event and (more significantly) the extent to which its emergence is closely related to Rancière's reconfiguration of the sensible (an idea discussed at length in Chapter 1). Using this term enables my analysis of culture jamming to move beyond the focus on media activism and a preoccupation with the way it is able to change the minds of spectators or encourage them to engage in their own forms of action. Whilst these are important features of all forms of activist performance my own analysis is focused in exploring how performance events are able to intervene in the construction of the real and transform the experience of everyday life in unexpected and politically significant ways. Broadly speaking then, the political force of performance can be understood as a process of defamiliarization that makes possible new configurations of sense and association (much like those described in Kershaw's discussion of the radical) that run counter to capitalist realism's hold over the horizons of the thinkable. Again, such moments take place in a multiplicity of spaces and contexts, and often emerge in unforeseen (though not entirely unintended) ways. Most important to note here that political force always entails some kind of qualitative transformation of the sensible by means of performance.

### ***Notes on methodology and the aims of my analysis***

My analysis engages with the concept of capitalist realism as a structure of feeling that shapes and informs the examples of culture jamming that are discussed throughout this thesis. However, whilst this approach requires me to make reference to the affective qualities of these different case studies my analysis is not predominantly concerned with affect as such. Instead, affect should be understood as a small but important part of the political force of culture jamming. My analysis is thus primarily concerned with the counter-hegemonic potential of culture jamming; the ways in which activists use performance to create moments of rupture and transformation that challenge the ideas, values and assumptions that constitute capitalist realism's pervasive hold over the horizons of the thinkable. In order to identify such moments of transformation and articulate their broader socio-political significance I use a methodological approach that draws on theoretical perspectives from a broad range of disciplines including theatre and performance studies, critical theory, cultural theory and anthropology. This framework is constructed through a sustained engagement with the work of three key thinkers whose ideas and interests form the theoretical backbone of this thesis; Baz Kershaw, Erika Fischer-Lichte, and Jacques Rancière. I will be outlining the key concepts and ideas that underpin this framework in Chapter 1, in which I will trace a trajectory of critical thought on the politics of performance in relation to oppositional artistic practices across the last century and up to the present day. For the time being I would like to briefly elaborate on the relationship between the above thinkers and the key ideas that inform my analysis. Firstly, Kershaw's theory of the radical in performance provides the critical starting point for the theory of political force developed throughout this thesis. As mentioned earlier, I am

interested in how culture jamming is able to produce moments of the radical in performance that give rise to new forms of freedom and association that gesture 'beyond existing systems of formalized power' (Kershaw, 1999: 18). Though my work departs from Kershaw's original theory (insofar as I reject his suggestion that the radical emerges through the intersection of modernism and postmodernism) his concept of the radical provides this thesis with a key methodological principle; like Kershaw my analysis is concerned with locating politics as something that emerges through the gradual unfolding of the performance event. Fischer-Lichte's performative aesthetics (outlined in her influential monograph, *The Transformative Power of Performance* [2008]) provides me with a critical vocabulary for describing this process. Though Fischer-Lichte's work primarily focuses on dramatic theatre and performance art I find her writing on performativity – described as an act of speech that 'entails a transformative power' (Fischer-Lichte, 2008: 24) – and her concept of the autopoietic feedback loop to be extremely useful tools for identifying and articulating the moments of rupture and transformation constitutive of the radical in performance. Indeed, her emphasis on the contingency and unpredictability of the performance event (which is essential to the generation of meaning) can be usefully placed in dialogue with the work of Rancière. Two collections of essays by the French philosopher, *Dissensus* (2010) and *The Emancipated Spectator* (2011), have meanwhile informed my thinking on performance and the concept of political force more broadly. In both texts he advances a theory of politics and aesthetics that reveals both concepts as deeply intertwined and, more significantly, foregrounds the dynamic encounter between spectator and object/event as essential to understanding the political significance of art. Both ideas are central to the way in which I will be analyzing the examples of culture

jamming under discussion in this thesis and the broader claims I will be making regarding the politics of performance.

By drawing on these perspectives I will be constructing a flexible yet coherent and rigorous framework that aims to foreground the ways in which culture jamming engages with politics as a performative, world-making process in which activists intervene in the symbolic construction of the real. With this aim in mind the style of analysis pursued in each chapter is structured around close readings of specific performance events and artworks. This approach allows me to identify the aesthetico-political strategies that inform each group's approach to culture jamming and to articulate broader theoretical points regarding the relationship between politics, performance and ideology whilst remaining committed to the singularity of each performance event and artwork. Indeed, whilst I will frequently refer to each group's 'model' of activist performance it is important to highlight the fact that such models are composed of a multiplicity of examples that are informed by a range of aesthetico-political strategies.

With these aims in mind I will be analysing each of the performances discussed in this thesis as 'live' events. However, it should also be noted that I was not able to witness the majority of these first-hand. This is a common issue for many performance scholars and has led me to make several important methodological choices. Firstly, I have made extensive use of photographic and video documentation of each performance. Documentation has been a relatively polarizing theme within theatre and performance studies for some time. For example, Peggy Phelan has famously argued that performance 'cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representation: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance' (Phelan, 1993: 146). Whilst I agree that it is important to attend to



the ways in which documentation shapes and informs one's analysis of a given performance I would also argue that documentation provides the fundamental basis for performance to be discussed as an object of academic discourse in the first place. Without access to documentation I could not have carried out this research project or advanced the kind of performance theory I am proposing in this thesis. Secondly, I have also tried to include where possible the perspectives of the practitioners whose work I discuss by drawing on a range of secondary sources including interviews, newspaper articles, books and academic literature. Combining both visual documentation and secondary sources in this way has enabled to reconstruct each performance event in a manner that facilitates the kind of close reading that my analysis requires.

Documentation represents an important tool for researching and writing about performance. Indeed, one might argue that (for better or worse) documentation provides the fundamental basis for performance to become an object of academic discourse in the first place. For example, in the case of Liberate Tate, the group's extensive visual documentation of its practice and the several academic articles authored by them has provided me with several useful sources for exploring the aesthetic-political strategies that inform its interventions and for critically reflecting on the institutional dynamics that frame the production and consumption of them. This brings me to the final methodological decision underpinning my analysis; the extensive use that I make of an anthropological technique termed 'thick description.' This approach consists in prefacing many of my close readings with extended passages of descriptive writing that provide for the reader a sense of the structure, activity and key moments that characterize each performance event. Popularized in the work of Clifford Geertz, thick description is designed to portray to the reader the

'multiplicity of conceptual structures' that characterize social and cultural events (Geertz, 1973: 10). Though originally developed and pioneered by Geertz, thick description (or 'performative writing' as it is sometimes referred to) has been taken up as a methodological tool by a number of influential theatre and performance scholars, including Peggy Phelan (1993), Baz Kershaw (1999), and Patrick Duggan (2012). Though used differently by each author the technique can be a useful analytical approach and 'tool through which the arguments and theoretical modelling can develop' (Duggan, 2012: 6). My own use of thick description is thus aimed at rendering the performance events discussed in this thesis accessible to the reader by 'setting them in the frame of their own banalities' and '[dissolving] their opacity' through a form of writing that is both descriptive and interpretive in style (Geertz, 1973: 14). In many of these chapters thick description is also used as a structuring device that creates a sense of rhythm for the reader. Such passages function as short introductions and interludes in which the rich (and at times chaotic) activity of the event is revealed to the reader before they are once again returned to the more structured business of performance analysis. Readers will notice that I briefly depart from this approach in Chapter 3, in which I use photographic documentation of the artworks under discussion as one of my primary resources. This change is due the fact that the chapter's subject matter (the practices of the contemporary subvertising movement) is composed of performance-like visual artworks and objects. The combination of description and interpretation that characterizes thick description also implies that the act of writing about performance is itself a form of documentation. I do not have the time or space here to explore the implications that arise from the acknowledgement that my research and its accompanying methodologies

participates in the institutionalization of activist performance and live art.

However, I would strongly encourage readers to reflect upon the extent to which the analysis itself can be understood as a discursive documentation of culture jamming *as performance* and (as I argue below) to consider this as one of the key aims of this thesis.

In summation, my methodological approach is aimed at identifying those moments of rupture, transformation and transgression that constitute the political force of culture jamming. It is a strategy for analyzing and identifying the politics of performance as something that emerges through the dynamics of the performance event rather than something that precedes it or takes place after it has occurred. The aims of this thesis are therefore threefold. Firstly, I aim to provide readers with a resource that explicitly engages with, and reflects upon, culture jamming as a form of *performance*. Secondly, I outline a theory of performance that foregrounds the performance event as key to understanding the complex relationship between politics, performance and ideology under late-capitalism. This will involve politicizing some significant ideas from performance theory (such as Fishcer-Lichte's aesthetics of performance) and, conversely, re-reading key texts from critical theory and philosophy in terms of performance (such as Rancière's writing on politics and aesthetics). Thirdly, I will be reflecting on the broader political and cultural significance of culture jamming as it relates to our current structure of feeling. In short, this thesis is an analysis that critically engages with the extent to which culture jamming might offer a model of contemporary performance that is able to reintroduce a sense of the political into the experience of everyday-life under late-capitalism.

### ***The structure of this thesis and the shape of my argument***

This thesis is composed of five chapters, the first of which can be considered both a literature review and a piece of theoretical writing that outlines the key concepts and ideas that inform my analysis. The other four focus on specific case studies that provide readers with an overview of the key practitioners in the field of culture jamming and illuminate the broader theoretical points that this thesis aims to articulate. Again, my aim in these latter chapters is to provide the reader with a clear overview of the aesthetic and political strategies used by culture jammers and, more broadly, to construct a working theory of performance that foregrounds its capacity to challenge, subvert and transform the political construction of the real. My argument in Chapter 1 unfolds in three sections and, as such, aims to establish three important ideas. In section one I focus on the relationship between politics, ideology and the real. I propose that politics is a performative, world-making process in which subjects attempt to intervene in the construction of the real. This discussion will also introduce some key terms used throughout this thesis such as neoliberalism, capitalist realism, ideology and hegemony. I suggest that part of culture jamming's broader cultural significance lies in the way that it is able to reintroduce a sense of the political into the experience of everyday life. In section two I focus on some of the key conceptual ideas that inform culture jamming and the social context it is responding to. I focus on the Situationist concept of *détournement* and its relationship to Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle*. I argue that the latter describes a mode of power characterized by the organized control of mimesis and that the former underpins the transformative power of culture jamming. I then connect these ideas to Baudrillard's theory of simulation, which, I argue, can be seen as an intensification of the processes of abstraction and

alienation described by Debord. These ideas provide the theoretical foundation for my argument in section three in which I focus on theorizing the concept of political force - a term that I use to describe performance's capacity to transform the context of its enunciation. Drawing on Kershaw's concept of the 'performative society' and Jon McKenzie's 'age of global performance' I argue that performance has taken on a new kind of significance in our contemporary moment. With this established I outline the key ideas that inform the concept of political force. In particular, I focus on the themes of excess, contingency and transformation, each of which are essential to identifying and articulating the political force of each of the examples of culture jamming discussed in this thesis. I propose that political force is shaped by the contingencies of the performance event and, as such, its emergence is to some extent incalculable (though by no means entirely unintended). I conclude by returning to Jacques Rancière's writing on aesthetics and politics, focusing in particular on four important concepts that recur throughout this thesis – dissensus, aesthetic separation, the emancipated spectator, and aesthetic community. I suggest that these concepts, when used in tandem with ideas drawn from theatre and performance studies, provide us with a useful critical vocabulary for theorizing the political force of culture jamming.

Chapter 2 discusses Reverend Billy and the Stop Shopping Choir, whose practice I define as a performative critique of commodity fetishism. My analysis focuses on exploring how the group uses performance to disrupt and transform the performance of retail space in politically meaningful ways. My argument unfolds in two parts, both of which are structured around detailed analyses of two performances. Section one comprises an analysis of the group's famous intervention at Disneyland. Drawing on Tony Perucci's theory of 'ruptural

performance,' Žižek's concept of ideological fantasy, and Maurya Wickstrom's writing on retail space, I argue that the political force of the intervention lies in the way that it fleetingly dissolves the representational structures that sustain the park's ideological fantasy. Section two departs from this critique of commodity fetishism in order to explore the prefigurative elements of the group's work. My analysis here focuses on an encounter that took place between Reverend Billy and his choir and a family in a retail car park that appears in the documentary film *What Would Jesus Buy?* (*What Would Jesus Buy?*, 2007). Using the concept of 'symbolic exchange' I contend that the encounter is characterized by a sense of reciprocity and generosity that transforms the way in which individuals are able to appear, and relate to one another, within this particular form of retail space. Though fleeting and ephemeral, artificial and constructed, I contend that this encounter performatively produces a new form of aesthetic community that gestures towards a sense of the world beyond capitalist realism.

A number of these ideas form the basis for my analysis in Chapter 3, in which I discuss the work of the contemporary subvertising movement. My aim in this chapter is to theorize the performance and political force of subvertising. I contend that the performance of subvertising lies in the way that it subverts the ideological performance of advertising and critically engages with the construction and experience of urban space. I argue that its political force emerges in the way that the practice performatively affirms a sense of 'the right to the city' in resistance to capitalism's abstraction of social space. In section one I attend to some of the core theoretical perspectives that inform my analysis. I outline the ideological performance of advertising, which, following the work of Louis Althusser, functions as a form of interpellation that transforms

individuals into subjects of ideology. Drawing on the work of Debord and the spatial theories of Henri Lefebvre, I situate this analysis in relation to the production of urban space. Specifically, I argue that outdoor advertising contributes to the fragmentation, homogenization and hierarchical ordering of urban space characteristic of late-capitalism. With these ideas established, I turn my attention to theorizing the 'event-like' structure of subvertising. Drawing on Michael Taussig's writing on defacement and Rancière's theory of the emancipated spectator I analyze an artwork created by British designer Stanley Donwood, and outline the key characteristics that constitute the event-like structure of subvertising. In section two, I focus on two key case studies that, I contend, affirm the right to the city by re-introducing a sense of the Political into everyday life. The first of these is Darren Cullen's *Become A Suicide Bomber* (2017) which I discuss in relation to Taussig's theory of defacement. I suggest that the artwork turns the ideological performance of advertising against itself and, in doing so, performs a 'drama of revelation' that illuminates the State's reliance upon representation as a means of maintaining its legitimacy. The second example is the citywide intervention staged by subvertising collective Brandalism during the UN's climate change conference in Paris, 2015. The group erected hundreds of subvertisements across the city in protest against the conference's 'greenwashing' by corporate power. I argue that the intervention can be considered a performative re-writing of urban space that affirms the right to the city in response to the French government's repression of civil disobedience during the conference. I conclude my analysis in section three by analyzing two examples of subvertising as instances of 'tactical misuses,' a concept that I draw from Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life* (2011). Both examples – the public acts of defacement staged by

French subvertising group, Les Déboulonneurs, and a piece of participatory art created by Adblock Bristol in 2018 – use the tactical misuse of advertising space to transform the performance of the city in a manner that affirms defacement as a legitimate political tool that is essential to securing the right to the city. Significantly, both examples explicitly integrate ‘live’ performance and participation into their structure. Taken together they can be considered a new, emergent form of subvertising that amplifies the event-like qualities of the practice in new and politically significant ways.

In Chapter 4 I discuss the political pranking of culture jamming duo the Yes Men. My analysis in this chapter departs from the focus on everyday life in chapters 2 and 3. Developing some of the key themes from these chapters I analyze the duo’s practice in relation to globalization, the performative society and Baudrillard’s theory of simulation. My argument unfolds in two stages. In section one I develop a theory of pranking as performance through reference to one of the group’s most famous pranks – the Bhopal hoax. I begin with Christine Harold’s definition of pranking as a mode of textual adaptation that produces new and subversive versions of dominant cultural texts. I then synthesize Harold’s ideas with the concept of ‘hacktivism’ – a form of digital activism that developed out of the hacking culture of the early 1990s. Whilst I do not consider the Yes Men’s practice a form of hacktivism I suggest that it offers a useful concept through which to theorize the performance of pranking. In particular I focus on Jon McKenzie’s notion of ‘machinic performance’ and Gabriella Giannachi’s writing on hacktivism and globalization. Throughout this section I argue that the Yes Men’s practice is able to intervene in the performance of globalization in a way that globalizes local concerns and draws attention to the systemic violence that underpins this regime of production. My



analysis in section two focuses on the way that the group use pranking as a means of simulating new versions of the real that subject the false necessity of capitalist realism to the possibility of its negation. I begin by focusing on *The Post-Consumer Waste Recycling Program* – a performance lecture staged by the Yes Men to a group of American college students, in which they posed as representatives of McDonalds and the World Trade Organization. I argue that the performance can be considered a form of ‘overidentification,’ a form of ideological critique that uses mimesis as a strategy of resistance. I argue that the performance overidentifies with the market fundamentalism of neoliberalism as a means of revealing its contradictions and, in doing so, draws the audience into a discussion around the ethics of globalization and the dehumanizing logic of capitalism. Through this I argue that the performance transforms the ‘reflexive impotence’ (or cynicism) associated with capitalist realism into a form of skeptical spectatorship that embodies the ‘skeptical imperative’ theorized by performance scholar Liz Tomlin (Tomlin, 2008). Through the performative inauguration of a new version of the real the Yes Men carve out a space of critical distance that enables the audience to critically reflect on the issues raised by the performance. Following this, I further develop these ideas through an analysis of the group’s pranking of the US Chamber of Commerce. Drawing on the work of Taussig and Baudrillard I coin the term ‘mimetic entanglement’ to describe the way that the new version of the real simulated by the performance produced a series of performative effects that subjected the false necessity of capitalist realism to the possibility of its negation.

My analysis in Chapter 5 concerns the work of Liberate Tate – a collective of artists, activists, writers and curators who have been protesting British Petroleum’s sponsorship of Tate since 2010. Where prior chapters

focused on the way culture jamming contests the symbolic construction of the real and attempts to transform the spectator's experience of everyday life this chapter engages with this process in a specific institutional context. Indeed, whilst my analysis in this chapter takes place in light of BP's decision to end their sponsorship agreement with Tate, my own interest lies in critically investigating the political force and potential limits of the group's practice by placing its relationship with Tate at the centre of my investigation. As such, my analysis in section one of this chapter focuses on outlining the theoretical and political context of this relationship. I begin this task by relating the group's critique of BP sponsorship to the history of corporate sponsorship of cultural institutions in the UK. I argue that the phenomenon is part of the free market ideology of neoliberalism and, as such, is one of the ways in which capitalist realism is able to reproduce itself at the level of cultural production. With this context established I turn my attention to the relationship between Liberate Tate and Tate. Drawing on the work of Pierre Bourdieu, I situate the group's practice within his 'field of cultural production' – a field of 'position takings' comprised of different social actors (such as producers, cultural institutions, publishers, and critics) who collectively produce and determine the social value of artworks within an existing network of power relations (Bourdieu, 2011: 30). I then define Liberate Tate as a contemporary avant-garde: '[A] minoritarian formation that challenges power in subversive, illegal or alternative ways[...]by challenging the assumptions, hierarchies and/or legitimacy of existing political and/or cultural institutions' (Sell, 2011: 41). I further embellish this point and address its practical implications through an analysis of Liberate Tate's *Hidden Figures*, a performance staged in Tate Modern in 2014. I argue that the performance is reflective of the ways in which the group's position within the field of cultural

production and its status as a contemporary avant-garde has shaped the aesthetico-political strategies that characterize their approach to performance and culture jamming. My analysis in section two applies these ideas to an analysis of two distinct but interrelated examples of the group's practice – *The Gift* (2012), and the group's unofficial audio tour of Tate Modern, *Tate à Tate* (2012). Both sections of analysis focus on the way that the group's relationship to Tate has shaped the staging of both performances. Moreover, I engage with the different ways in which they are able to transform the space in which they take place. Though they are distinct in form and function I argue that the political force of both performance lies in how these moments of transformation might defamiliarize the spectator's experience of the gallery in an overtly political manner. Taken as a whole, I suggest that Liberate Tate's practice can be considered a performative repetition of the phrase 'we are the institution' that aims to reclaim the gallery as a site for political debate and discussion.

Broadly speaking then, this thesis argues that culture jamming's political significance extends well beyond its capacity to playfully subvert the representational strategies of corporate power. Through the various acts of appropriation that characterize each of the examples discussed in this thesis culture jamming meaningfully contributes to the imaginative and aesthetic structures that underpin the ongoing counter-hegemonic struggle against neoliberalism. Indeed, I argue that all of the groups discussed in this thesis offer an idiosyncratic approach to performance that can contribute to this process by reintroducing a sense of the political in everyday life. More broadly, I contend that culture jamming represents a field of contemporary performance that allows scholars to better encounter and understand how politics happens *in* performance. In summation, my analysis can be considered an affirmation of

contemporary performance and its potential to reenergize our political imaginations by challenging the taken-for-granted assumptions that undergird our current structure of feeling.

## Chapter 1: Towards a Theory of Political Force

### Introduction

In the introduction to this thesis I argued that culture jamming should not be defined as a social movement in and of itself and that it is not identifiable with a coherent aesthetic style. Instead, it is a critical sensibility founded upon the principle of appropriation. Drawing on Williams I proposed that culture jamming, for the purposes of this thesis, is best understood as an *emergent* form of activist performance practiced by a confluence of activists and artists with a shared interest in contesting the hegemony of corporate power. As noted earlier, the term 'emergent' is an extremely useful concept for theorizing the dynamic nature of cultural practices, especially when applied to those (like culture jamming) that are concerned with transforming our experience of everyday life and symbolic construction of the real. This is because, as Williams suggests, emergent practices are not politically oppositional in the sense that they denounce an existing social order but because they are concerned with the production 'of new meanings and values, new practices, new relationships and new kinds of relationships[...]which are substantially alternative and oppositional' to the dominant (Williams, 1977: 124). The term carries with it the utopian promise of the 'not yet' – the emergence of a nascent set of desires and ambitions that find concrete form in practices that are subject to a sense of constant transformation and reformulation. 'Again and again', Williams continues, 'what we have to observe is in effect a *pre-emergence*, active and pressing but not yet fully articulated, rather than the evident emergence *which could be more confidently named*' (Ibid: 126, emphasis my own). As Williams makes clear here, emergent practices are defined by locating the new

meanings, values and relationships that are expressed within them and the new forms of experience that they make possible for participants. This latter point is a key part of my argument in this thesis: I am interested in the ways in which culture jamming not only represents new forms of experience but is able to actively produce a sense of them by means of performance. The broader political significance of culture jamming thus lies in the way that its practitioners attempt to reconfigure our experience of everyday life, always open to the idea that our naturalized, commonsense experience of it is contingent and therefore haunted by the possibility of its negation.

The intention of this chapter is to outline a theoretical framework through which to articulate and explore these ideas and to map out the broader political context that culture jamming operates within and responds to. Moreover, I also work towards providing a definition of the concept of political force. Political force is one of the key theoretical ideas underpinning my analysis of culture jamming and, as such, forms a substantial part of my original contribution to knowledge in the field of performance theory. Such an idea – which aims to foreground the transformative, dissensual power of culture jamming – will help us to better understand the relationship between performance, politics and ideology expressed in each of the case studies discussed in this thesis. With this aim in mind this chapter offers an account of each of these ideas and their relevance to the concept of political force. My argument unfolds in three sections. In section one I explore the relationship between politics and performativity. Drawing on J.L. Austin's theory of performative utterances and Judith Butler's writing on gender performativity my analysis focuses on the way that politics might be understood as a performative, world making process in which subjects attempt to intervene in the symbolic construction of the real. I

then relate these ideas to Rancière's aesthetic and political theory (focusing specifically on his notion of the 'distribution of the sensible' and his understanding of politics as 'dissensus'). Following this, I turn to Fisher's notion of capitalist realism – which, as I argued earlier, offers a critical diagnosis of our contemporary structure of feeling – and discuss its relationship to neoliberal ideology. Referencing various theories on neoliberalism and linking these to Slavoj Žižek's concept of 'cynical distance' I contend that our contemporary structure of feeling is characterized by a decoupling of politics from everyday life.

My analysis in section two deepens these ideas by exploring two key theoretical perspectives in the relationship between capitalism, representation and everyday life. I begin by further discussing the Situationist concept of *détournement* – an idea that underpins the insurrectionary logic of culture jamming and its attempt to transform everyday life. I then situate this concept in relation to Guy Debord's writing on spectacle. I argue that the society of the spectacle is founded upon '[the] affirmation of appearance and [the] affirmation of all human life[...]as mere appearance' (Debord, 1983: 10). I suggest that this logic extends the basic obfuscations of commodity fetishism into the fabric of everyday life. Following this, I turn to Jean Baudrillard's theory of simulation and hyperreality. I argue that whilst the spectacle has not been totally subsumed by simulation the latter can be productively read as an intensification of the process of abstraction described by Debord. Though the sense of abstraction produced by simulation undermines the extent to which activism is able to critique the ideology of late-capitalism from a position of critical distance, it also provides activists with opportunities to intervene in the symbolic production of the real.

In section three I draw on a number of theories from the field of performance and theatre studies to articulate the concept of political force. I focus on the idea that the concept can be situated in relation to Kershaw's concept of the 'performative society' – a situation in which performance has become built into the fabric of everyday life and has become a key process in the continuous negotiations of power and authority under late-capitalism (Kershaw, 1999: 13). I argue that the political force of culture jamming lies in exploiting the excess of theatricality that prevails in the performative society. Using theories drawn from theatre and performance studies I outline three key ideas underpinning the concept of political force – excess, contingency and transformation. Synthesizing these ideas with Rancière's writing on aesthetic separation and dissensus, I argue that the concept of political force is a useful substitution for the notion of efficacy insofar as it helps us to better understand the way that performance events are able to act on and transform the context of their enunciation. In summation, I argue that activists are able to manipulate the excessive and contingent character of performance as a means of reconfiguring our experience of everyday life in a way that gestures towards a sense of the world beyond capitalist realism.

### **Section One: Politics as a Performative**

The first task in constructing my theoretical framework is to explore the concept of politics itself. More specifically (and with a view towards the concept of political force under construction here), I am less interested in offering my own specific definition of politics than in constructing a critical vocabulary for thinking about politics in performative terms. Any analysis of contemporary performance should take seriously the multiple meanings of the word 'politics.' For example,



as Joe Kelleher suggests, the term can be taken to mean both the activities of the state and the institutions that comprise it or the broader process by which resources are distributed and struggled over in society (Kelleher, 2009: 2). For the purposes of my own analysis I will be focusing on the way in which politics is implicated in the production of the real. By the real I am not referring to some original material essence that precedes social action. Rather, the real is the product of ideological mediation constructed via practices of ‘discursive articulation.’ This latter term is a concept used by political theorists Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe in their landmark text *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (2001). For Laclau and Mouffe, society is fraught with differences and antagonisms to the extent that it cannot be grasped as a coherent, self-defined object nor can the notion of a ‘social order’ be defined as a natural underlying principle. Instead, every social order (such as neoliberalism) must be defined as a precarious, contingent attempt to ‘domesticate the field of differences’ that characterizes what we think of as society (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001: 96). The concept of hegemony described by both thinkers as a process whereby the dominant social order attempts to present itself as natural and founded upon consensus (that is, co-extensive with the real itself). This is achieved through practices of ‘discursive articulation’ that arrest the flow of differences that characterize society and construct a centre (Ibid: 112). An example of this process can be seen in Fisher’s observation that neoliberalism has installed a ‘business ontology’ into institutions such as healthcare and education to the extent that ‘it is *simply obvious* that everything in society[...]should be run as a business’ (Fisher, 2009: 41, emphasis in original). In other words, the dominant values of neoliberal ideology – profit, individualism and risk – have inserted

themselves into the fabric of everyday life to such an extent that they have become coextensive with the real itself.

Much of my analysis throughout this thesis will be concerned with exploring the different ways in which culture jammers attempt to critique and intervene in the construction of neoliberal hegemony by subjecting it to the possibility of its negation. Such an approach requires a more nuanced conception of politics that foregrounds its inescapably aesthetic character. I contend that neoliberal hegemony (like any other social order) is an aesthetico-political formation that produces a particular 'distribution of the sensible.' This is a phrase coined by Rancière to describe the 'dividing-up of the world (*de monde*) and of people (*du monde*)' through which the social order is constituted. This 'dividing-up of the world', he suggests, 'should be understood in the double sense of the word[...]as that which separates and excludes[...]and] that which allows participation' (Rancière, 2010: 36). Importantly for Rancière, politics is a practice that disrupts and reconfigures this distribution of the sensible by opening up a space in which those who were once excluded become visible and assert themselves as legitimate political subjects (Ibid: 37). I will unpack Rancière's idiosyncratic thinking on the relationship between politics and aesthetics in more detail shortly. For the time being I want to outline some basic theoretical principles regarding the transformative, performative character of politics. Such ideas will provide useful points of reference when we arrive at the concept of politics as 'dissensus.'

My analysis here draws on the work of J.L. Austin and Judith Butler, in particular the former's concept of the 'performative utterance' and the latter's writing on gender performativity. For Austin, performative utterances are speech acts that 'do not "describe" or "report" or constatae anything at all, are not "true or

false.” They are world-making, event-like statements in which ‘the uttering of the sentence is, or is part of, the doing of an action, which would not *normally* be described as, or “just”, saying something’ (Austin, 1975: 5, emphasis in original). As performance scholar, Erika Fischer-Lichte, notes, Austin’s theory of the performative utterance reveals the extent to which speech always ‘entails a transformative power.’ However, this transformative power is contingent upon a series of conditions, the fulfilment of which will determine the success of the utterance: ‘A performative utterance always addresses a community, represented by the people present in a given situation – it can therefore be regarded as the performance of a *social act*’ (Fischer-Lichte, 2008: 24 - 25, emphasis my own). In order to clarify the social character of performative utterances I will now cite a popular example of one. When, as a vicar or priest overseeing a wedding ceremony, I say to the bride and groom ‘I now pronounce you husband and wife,’ I am not simply describing a situation but am also bringing a new state of affairs into existence through the transformative power of language. Through this simple statement the couple become legally married. Now, the success of this performative utterance is obviously dependent upon the fulfilment of certain social conditions; the couple must consent to the arrangement, I must have the legal and/or religious authority to perform such an act and the ceremony needs to include the signing of documents with a witness present in order to be legally binding. Through this quotidian example we can already see a connection between politics and the performative. Politicians and other political actors frequently draw on the transformative power of language to bring new legislation into being, to announce official policy and to move others towards action. Such figures must use their vested authority as a means of doing so. Indeed, any performative that fails to meet the necessary social

criteria is labeled by Austin as 'infelicitous,' 'unhappy,' or, most curiously, 'non-serious.' Austin describes as 'non-serious' performative utterances that are stated by an actor on stage or presented in a poem or soliloquy. Such utterances, he argues, are '*in a peculiar way hollow or void*' and are used in ways '*parasitic*' upon language itself (Austin, 1975: 22, emphasis in original). Whilst I do not have the space here to go into exhaustive detail regarding the complex distinctions between happy and unhappy, serious and non-serious performatives, it should be noted that such distinctions are by no means clear-cut. Indeed, as we shall see in my discussion of the Yes Men in Chapter 4, the ubiquity of simulation under late-capitalism (in which the distinction between reality and representation has been totally erased) has created a situation in which 'non-serious' performatives are often taken as legitimate speech acts (a situation that the Yes Men have frequently and effectively exploited to their own benefit).

As I argued earlier in my discussion of Fischer-Lichte's aesthetics of performance, the transformative power of the performative utterance is an important point of reference for the concept of political force under construction here. The notion of performativity implicitly undergirds some of the ideas presented by Laclau and Mouffe regarding the contingent nature of hegemony; it is a process whereby the real is performatively produced through practices of discursive articulation. Indeed, Rancière's understanding of politics as dissensus reinforces such an idea insofar as the disruptive power of the latter lies in the way that it transforms and reconfigures our distribution of the sensible. In other words, dissensus can be understood as performative because it draws on the transformative power of language and social action to bring a new state of affairs into being. However, Austin's theory of the performative can

only take us so far in this regard because his analysis contains almost no reference to politics whatsoever. It is for this reason that I turn to the work of Judith Butler whose writing on gender performativity takes the concept of the performative in a more explicitly political direction. Much like the concept of the real that I discussed above, Butler conceives of gender not as an underlying essence that precedes the subject but, on the contrary, as ‘an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*’ (Butler, 2006: 191, emphasis in original). However, Butler is not suggesting that gender has no material significance by insisting upon its socially constructed nature. Indeed, the concept of performativity is deployed to foreground the ways in which the construction of gender is grounded in material circumstances. Gender is positioned as a process of bodily inscription ‘produced through the stylization of the body[...] understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self’ (Ibid: 191). In other words, whilst the notion of an abiding gendered self remains an illusion it is an illusion that has a material effect on the subject’s embodied experience of the world.

Whilst this thesis is not concerned with gender and its relationship to the body, Butler’s theory of performativity raises some important points for my argument here. In describing gender as a ‘real’ that is produced through the ritualized, performative repetition of bodily acts, she opens up a space for thinking about politics in similar terms. Again, such an idea can be seen in Laclau and Mouffe’s concept of hegemony outlined above; hegemony produces the illusion of a social order as a coherent, self-defined totality that is secured through practices of discursive articulation. As we shall see in my discussion of Mark Fisher’s *Capitalist Realism* and its relationship to neoliberalism, the

current social order has achieved hegemonic status by penetrating the fabric of everyday life in areas such as work, leisure and cultural production. These practices reproduce the structure of neoliberal ideology by rendering it coextensive with reality itself. Finally, we can locate a potential form of resistance to this situation by following Butler's argument a little further. She argues for a mode of performative resistance that aims to exploit 'the arbitrary relation between such acts, in the possibility of a failure to repeat, a de-formity or parodic representation that exposes the phantasmatic effect of abiding identity as a politically tenuous construction' (Butler, 2006: 192). Many of the examples of culture jamming discussed in this thesis use *détournement* to exaggerate and subvert the representational practices of corporate power in order to defamiliarize them and reveal their historical contingency. Performance is thus used as a means of subjecting neoliberalism to the possibility of its negation by exposing it as 'a politically tenuous construction.' With these ideas in mind I would like to make two interrelated points. Firstly, politics is a performative practice composed of a series of acts that produce the reality they purport to describe. Culture jammers intervene within this process by turning this performativity against itself in order to reconfigure and transform our perception and understanding of the real. Secondly, this sense of politics as a performative does not precede the performance event. Indeed, this thesis will explore the ways in which politics emerges throughout the unfolding of the performance event by locating the moments of transformation that take place within it. In other words, culture jamming is not political simply because it addresses political issues but because it attempts to performatively intervene in and contest the construction of the real.

### ***Jacques Rancière: Dissensus and the distribution of the sensible***

Rancière's writing on politics and aesthetics offers a useful vocabulary for deepening our understanding of the performativity of the political. Underpinning Rancière's theoretical project is a consideration for the ways in which the political can be productively read in aesthetic terms and, by extension, the inescapably political character of aesthetics. The importance of this idea can be seen in his notion of the 'distribution of the sensible' (described above) – a framework that partitions and mediates between the visible and invisible, the sayable and unsayable, those who are included within a particular community and those who remain excluded from it (Rancière, 2010: 36). This idea will help us to understand Rancière's idiosyncratic understanding of politics. We should begin by noting that, for Rancière, politics implies a sense of radical equality that exists in tension with the hierarchical ordering of liberal democracy. Key to this is the opposition that he sets up between 'politics' on the one hand and the 'police' on the other. For Rancière, the police are not limited to the specific social institution that represents the interests of capital and holds a monopoly over violence. The police is 'a symbolic constitution of the social[...]Its essence lies in a certain way of dividing up the sensible' (Ibid: 36). The police order works to define and mediate which subjects are included and those who are excluded; those who are visible and those who are invisible; what is politically sayable and doable, and that which is not. In short, it maintains the hierarchy upon which the distribution of the sensible is founded. As Chambers argues:

Rancière repeatedly invokes the phrase "police order" to refer to *any* hierarchical social order – the orders in which we all circulate, each and every day. He uses "policing" to designate not only policy making[...]but also parliamentary legislation, executive orders, judicial decisions, and the vast array

of economic arrangements. Most of what we would take to be politics turns out to be police: from the principles of interest-group liberalism to the actions of bureaucrats and executives; from elections to welfare (Chambers, 2010: 61)

In short, the police order is composed of the institutions of power that govern us; the elected officials that 'speak' or 'act' on 'our' behalf; the discourse economy that makes these things meaningful; and (importantly for this thesis) the institutions of corporate power that exert an immense amount of influence in sustaining and legitimizing such hierarchies. The police order, in Rancière's parlance, refers to any system that is involved in the organization and structuring of society according to a specific hierarchy – the allocation and distribution of bodies to specific roles and positions within this hierarchy. Important to note here is the issue of legibility: To be outside of the police order is to be '*unintelligible* – not just marginalized within the system but made invisible by the system' (Ibid: 63). The police order defines and mediates what it is to speak, who is able to speak and what kinds of speech are considered legitimate and intelligible. Similarly, it also defines and mediates what it is to act politically, who is able to engage in such actions and the ways in which these acts are made meaningful within a given distribution of the sensible.

The concept of 'the police' brings us closer to Rancière's idiosyncratic understanding of politics. For Rancière, politics is not to be equated with 'the exercise of power and the struggle for its possession' (Rancière, 2010: 27) but understood as a form of *dissensus* – a radical, eruptive force that makes visible 'a gap in the sensible itself' (Ibid: 38). If the police order is on the production and maintenance of hierarchy that allocates roles to subjects and determines their visibility (or lack thereof) within a given social order then politics 'consists



in disturbing this arrangement by supplementing it with a part of those without part' (Ibid: 36):

The police is that which says that here, on this street, there's nothing to see and so nothing to do but move along. It asserts that the space for circulating is nothing but the space of circulation. Politics, by contrast, consists in transforming this space of "moving-along", of circulation, into a space for the appearance of a subject: the people, the workers, the citizens. It consists in re-figuring space, that is in what is to be done, to be seen and to be named in it (Ibid: 37)

This passage is an excellent description of Rancière's notion of 'dissensus,' a term that he deploys throughout his writings on politics and aesthetics.

Dissensus does not mean the absence of consensus or the generalized sense of conflict 'as such' but is 'a specific type thereof, a conflict between *sense* and *sense*' (Ibid: 139, emphasis in original) in which the fabric of the sensible is disturbed through the coming together of two different senses of the world.

Politics, for Rancière, therefore consists in rupturing the supposedly 'natural' order of the sensible by bringing it into conflict with those bodies and ideas that are excluded from it. This process makes visible a gap at the heart of the sensible that subjects the hierarchical ordering of the police to the anarchic sense of equality in which those 'beyond the count' forcefully submit their claim as legitimate political subjects.

Such a process is performative and transformative in nature insofar as it heralds the emergence of new political subjects and fosters 'new forms of collective enunciation [and] re-frames the given by inventing new forms of collective experience' (Ibid: 139). The idea of politics as dissensus is a key

concept in this thesis and will play an important role in the later chapters in which I analyze specific instances of culture jamming. Indeed, the idea that politics involves the invention of new subjects and the transformation of the sensible is also a central part of Rancière's aesthetic theory. In section three of this chapter I will synthesize these ideas with theories drawn from theatre and performance studies that emphasizes the transformative and excessive character of contemporary theatre and performance. I am particularly interested in the ways in which dissensus produces a sense of excess or surplus within political art, the effects of which cannot be fully accounted for in advance of the performance event. Such an idea is a key part of the concept of political force – a term that I use to describe the ways in which performance is able to transform the context of its enunciation through the dissensual reconfiguration of the sensible. These moments of dissensus are varied and the effects that they produce are often contingent, spontaneous and in some cases entirely unintended.

Before I continue, however, I want to reflect on two key issues with Rancière's theory of dissensus. Firstly, it might be argued that dissensus reduces the field and scope of political action to isolated instances of disruption. As political theorist Peter Hallward argues: 'Rancière's emphasis on division and interruption makes it difficult to account for qualities that are just as fundamental to any sustainable political sequence: organization, simplification, mobilization, polarization, to name a few' (Hallward, 2006: 125). Moreover, as theatre scholar, Janelle Reinelt, comments, 'one of the liabilities of Rancière's thought is a tendency toward individualism and against collective action' (Reinelt, 2015: 247). Whilst I will be arguing that the moments of dissensus produced by culture jammers are valuable for the new modes of experience that

they make available for participants these critiques remind us of the limitations of thinking in these terms only. Indeed, in setting up such a sharp distinction between politics and the police order Rancière's analysis risks overlooking the ways in which politics 'is ordinary' (to borrow a phrase from Williams). We need to be aware of the fact that politics is also enacted through more quotidian forms of action that do not necessarily culminate in the disruptive moments of dissensus that Rancière valorizes but, in a cumulative sense, do contribute towards transforming our structure of feeling.

It is for this reason that I return to the work of Williams. His analysis of culture and society is underpinned by a vision of politics as something reliant upon asserting a sense of collective solidarity from below, so to speak. Indeed, Williams' approach repeatedly emphasizes the importance of long term engagement with institutions in order to reshape them, or, in other cases, the construction of alternative institutions and movements that might foster emergent cultural practices (Williams, 1977: 124). Whilst I do not draw heavily on the work of Williams in this thesis the spirit of his analysis informs much of my thinking around culture jamming's broader political significance. Such an approach will be important to bear in mind in chapters 3 and 5 in which I discuss the contemporary subvertising movement and the work of Liberate Tate respectively. In both cases I will be discussing how performance and performance-like artworks are used to draw attention to the ways in which corporate power organizes and frames our experience of public space and cultural institutions. However, these reflections will be complemented by a perspective that reinforces for the reader the extent to which these practices can be understood as forms of collective action that work to foster new

relationships between individuals and the spaces in which such interventions take place.

For example, in the context of subvertising groups such as Brandalism and Les Déboulonneurs I will be arguing that the moments of dissensus that they produce become more politically significant if we consider them as diffuse interventions that are able to transform our experience of urban space and collectively affirm a sense of the right to the city. In the context of Liberate Tate, I will be arguing that the group's interventions and artworks become more meaningful when situated within the institutional context that has shaped them. So, whilst they are able to produce moments of dissensus we also need to be mindful of their potential to endorse Tate's cultural power and identity as an institution committed to liberal humanist values. Both of these arguments require thinking about dissensus in relation to the broader socio-cultural context in which it emerges and is responding to.

### ***Capitalist realism and neoliberal ideology***

To return briefly to Rancière, I contend that the distribution of the sensible in which we are currently enmeshed can be productively understood through the concept of capitalist realism – a phrase coined by the cultural theorist and critic Mark Fisher, in his monograph of the same name. As mentioned earlier, the phrase refers to 'the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible to even *imagine* a coherent alternative to it' (Fisher, 2009: 2, emphasis in original). Fisher describes capitalist realism as 'a pervasive *atmosphere*, conditioning not only the production of culture, but also the regulation of work and education, and acting as a kind of invisible barrier constraining thought and action' (Ibid:

39). As such, it manifests itself as a pervasive set of 'behaviours and affects' that arise out of the overarching belief that 'the world is governed by neoliberal ideas that show no sign of waning' (Fisher and Gilbert, 2013: 90). In order to unpack the implications of Fisher's analysis for the development of my own argument we need to briefly attend to the relationship between capitalist realism and neoliberalism. Broadly speaking, neoliberalism is generally taken to refer to an economic and political ideology that advocates for the deregulation of labour markets, the privatization of public infrastructure, and the sovereignty of financial capital. Rooted in the economic theories of Friedrich Von Hayek and later, Milton Friedman, neoliberalism eventually surpassed Keynesian economics as the dominant political and economic model of Britain and the United States by the 1980s, in large part thanks to economic and social policies rolled out by Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan respectively. Though not a unified system of thought, the politics of neoliberalism is grounded in a belief that human wellbeing can be secured 'by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedom and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong property rights, free markets and free trade' (Harvey, 2011: 2). It is within this economic framework that neoliberalism pursues what Will Davies has described as '*the disenchantment of politics by economics*' (Davies, 2014: 8, emphasis in original). This latter point is extremely important for understanding the way in which capitalist realism functions as a structure of feeling that is produced by and works to reproduce the values of neoliberal ideology. As several theorists have observed, one of the primary characteristics of neoliberalism is the way in which it presents itself as 'post-ideological' by establishing itself as coextensive with 'common sense'; a non-negotiable facticity in which alternative visions of

the world are denounced as 'deeply ideological, as biased, as mad or nostalgic – of a bygone era' (Cammaerts, 2015: 528).

The post-political character of neoliberal ideology forms a key part of Fisher's argument and is closely related to his engagement with Slavoj Žižek's writing on ideology. In *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (2008) he argues against the 'illusion' that we live in a 'post-ideological society.' This is because ideology primarily functions as an *unconscious fantasy* that structures our experience of the real. Žižek posits that ideology is therefore at its most effective when we are unaware of it or believe that we are acting outside of it: '[I]deology is not simply a "false consciousness," an illusory representation of reality, it is rather this reality itself which is already to be conceived as "ideological"' (Žižek, 2008: 15). In this way, Žižek reworks Karl Marx's basic formula of ideology – 'they do not know what they do, yet they are doing it' – by transferring the illusion to the act of doing itself:

What they misrecognize is not the reality but the illusion which is structuring their reality, their real social activity. They know very well how things really are, but still they are doing it as if they did not know. The illusion is therefore double: it consists in overlooking the illusion which is structuring our real, effective relationship to reality. And this overlooked, unconscious illusion is what may be called *ideological fantasy* (Ibid: 30, emphasis in original)

The notion of ideological fantasy will be of particular importance in Chapter 2 during my analysis of Reverend Billy and the Stop Shopping Choir in which I argue that the political force of the group's practice lies in its capacity to fleetingly rupture the representational structures that sustain the ideological fantasy of consumer culture. More significant, however, is the way that Žižek's

analysis foregrounds the extent to which ideology is woven into the fabric of everyday life. Our consumption of commodities, advertising images, news media and cultural institutions is always already mediated by ideology. However, the efficacy of neoliberalism and capitalist realism lies in the way that these are all presented as *non-ideological*. For Žižek, the post-ideological illusion of everyday life under capitalism is secured through what he terms ‘cynical distance’: ‘[I]n contemporary societies, democratic or totalitarian[...]The ruling ideology is not meant to be taken seriously or literally.’ In other words, we are aware of the falsehoods presented by a given ‘ideological universality’ yet we continue to act as if this were not the case (Ibid: 24). Again, the double illusion identified by Žižek lies in the way that we assume that this sense of distance amounts to a transgression of ideology itself rather than being the ideological illusion *par excellence*.

Fisher develops Žižek’s notion of cynical distance to theorize the idea of ‘reflexive impotence,’ a term which he uses to describe the fact that individuals ‘know things are bad, but more than that, they know they can’t do anything about it’ (Fisher, 2009: 21). This sense of reflexive impotence is characteristic of the decoupling of politics from everyday life that is one of the constitutive features of capitalist realism:

At work, we learn to accept worsening pay and conditions as “just the way things are” in a competitive and globalised world. “Politics” becomes something that we engage in only at the ballot box, if we even consider that to be worthwhile[...]or, if we’re of a more activist bent, it’s something we do at protests of various kinds. In either case, work becomes decoupled from politics[...]I think it’s best not to see capitalist realism as a political position but as something

*which precludes political involvement and identification* (Fisher and Gilbert, 2013: 91, emphasis my own)

As Fisher continues, 'it follows that one of the most effective steps in the struggle against capitalist realism will be the invention of new ways in which people can become involved in politics' (Ibid: 91). In a later volume, *Ghosts of My Life* (2014), he turns his attention to popular culture and argues that 'the 21<sup>st</sup> century is oppressed by a crushing sense of finitude and exhaustion.' This cultural and social malaise emerges out of the 'slow cancellation of the future' that is inaugurated by neoliberalism's pervasive hold over the horizons of the thinkable. This results in a cultural situation and structure of feeling that 'has lost the ability to grasp and articulate the present' (Fisher, 2014: 8 - 9). It is here that the intersection between capitalist realism and the theories of Rancière come more firmly into view. If the distribution of the sensible describes the structures of sense that mediate our perception of the political then capitalist realism's decoupling of politics from everyday life might be understood as a new regime of sense whereby the seemingly post-ideological character of neoliberalism has rendered itself coextensive with the real itself. In other words, capitalist realism produces a distribution of the sensible that effaces the historically contingent and 'politically tenuous construction' (Butler, 2006: 192) of neoliberalism. Again, if politics is to be understood as a performative act that intervenes in and challenges the symbolic construction of the real then it follows that one of the key ways in which culture jamming might challenge the hegemony of neoliberal ideology is to reintroduce a sense of the political into everyday life by means of performance.



## Section Two: From the Society of the Spectacle to the Hyperreal

In order to better understand how culture jammers are able to perform such a transformation of everyday life we need to attend to the work of the Situationist International and their concept of *détournement*, which, as Gilman-Opalsky argues, constitutes the practical and theoretical basis of culture jamming (Gilman-Opalsky, 2013: 3). Formed in the 1950s out of the ashes of the earlier Letterist International, the Situationist International was a group of writers, artists, agitators and professional drifters concerned with creating a revolutionary project through which to liberate everyday life from the alienating effects of modern capitalism. The group was interested in countering the logic of consumer culture through the production of ‘the constructed situation’ – ‘a moment of life, concretely and deliberately constructed by the collective construction of a unitary ambiance and a game of events’ (Unsigned, 1958, cited in Bishop, 2012: 85). The creation of these moments of ‘specific [non-equivalence]’ was conceived as a vehicle for injecting a sense of spontaneity and collective participation into everyday life (Wark, 2015: 95). As Claire Bishop notes, such situations were characterized by a ‘refusal of bureaucracy and consumerism’ in which the ‘free activity of the game’ was explicitly positioned in opposition to the ideology of consumer culture (Bishop, 2012: 86). The concept of *détournement*, described by Debord as ‘the fluid language of anti-ideology’ (Debord, 1983: 208), is best understood in relation to this broader political and social project. For the Situationists, *détournement* was a tool for negating the ideology of private property by means of appropriation. The practice involves taking elements of cultural texts (paintings, advertisements, novels, poems, music, film) and recombining them with one another to produce a new

ensemble; the audio from a kung-fu movie is erased and replaced with a commentary on dialectical materialism; the phrase 'Red Lips Are Pretty' is cut out of a lipstick advert and added to a montage of photographs from the Spanish Civil War; an anti-Soviet propaganda poster created by neo-Fascists adorned with the phrase 'Union Makes Strength' is defaced with the rejoinder '...And Coalitions Make War' (Debord and Wolman, 1956: n.p).

The political significance of these examples of *détournement* does not just lie in the new subversive texts that they create but in the very act of appropriation itself, which, as mentioned above, is conceived as a negation of the ideology of private property:

Capital produces a culture in its own image, a culture of the work as private property, the author as sole proprietor of a soul as property. *Détournement* sifts through the material remnants of past and present culture for materials whose untimeliness can be utilized against bourgeois culture. But rather than further elaborate modern poetics, *détournement* exploits it. The aim is the destruction of all forms of middle class cultural shopkeeping. As capital spreads outwards, making the world over in its image, at home it finds its own image turns against it (Wark, 2015: 39)

Wark's summary here brilliantly encapsulates the political value of *détournement* as it relates to the spectacle's colonization of everyday life. If capitalism's relentless reproduction of the world in its own image is related to the production of commodities (which is its *modus operandi*) then *détournement's* negation of private property and its affirmation of culture as common property is a means of contesting the regime of appearances upon which the spectacle's power depends. The transformative power of

*détournement* is one of the central concepts running throughout this thesis and is essential to the notion of political force under construction here. From the ruptural performances of Reverend Billy and the Stop Shopping Choir to the work of Liberate Tate I will be exploring the ways in which each of the groups discussed in this thesis use *détournement* as a means of resisting the pervasive sense of capitalist realism and transforming the spectator's experience of everyday life.

### ***The society of the spectacle and the organized control of mimesis***

In order to better understand the ideological context that culture jamming is responding to and that *détournement* is being deployed against we need to situate the concept in relation to Debord's theory of spectacle. Though written in 1967, Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* (1983) is a remarkably prescient text that remains hugely relevant today. Broadly speaking, his analysis concerns the way in which capitalist production has entered into a new phase dominated by the production, dissemination and consumption of spectacle. Updating the opening statement of Karl Marx's *Capital*, Debord writes: 'In societies where modern conditions of production prevail, all of life presents itself as an immense accumulation of *spectacles*. Everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation' (Debord, 1983: 1, emphasis in original). Later he argues: 'The spectacle is *capital* to such a degree of accumulation that it becomes an image' (Ibid: 34, emphasis in original). However, as Debord reminds us, the spectacle should not be reduced to a collection of images. Indeed, it is 'a social relation among people, mediated by images' (Ibid: 4). It is for this reason that Debord's analysis can be partly read as an extension and development of Marx's theory of commodity fetishism. The fetish character of

the commodity, Marx argues, lies in the way that we misperceive exchange value as a natural property of the commodity rather than 'the mode of expression[...]of a content distinguishable from it' (Marx, 1981: 127). The commodity form therefore estranges us from the social conditions that produced it – that is, the socially necessary labour time that went into its production and that its exchange value is an expression of (Ibid: 129). This process endows the commodity with an *appearance* of autonomy that leads us to mistake the act of exchange for a social relation among objects mediated by people, rather than a social relation among people mediated by objects. The concept of commodity fetishism will be used extensively in my analysis of Reverend Billy and the Stop Shopping Choir in Chapter 2. In the society of the spectacle the ahistoricizing performance of the commodity permeates our experience of everyday life to such an extent that it produces an '[estranged] present' in which the subject is '[separated] first of all from his own time' (Debord, 1983: 161). In other words, the subject is estranged from actively intervening in the construction of the real, reduced to the status of a spectator.

Debord's characterization of the spectacle as a form of abstraction and alienation is essential to understanding the broader implications of my argument here. As Gilman-Opalsky notes, Debord's analysis places a strong emphasis on the causal relationship between ideology and the spectator's perception of everyday life. In other words, it is a theory of hegemony that proposes that the dominant social order both determines the symbolic construction of the real and conditions the way that we perceive it (Gilman-Opalsky, 2011: 69). So, whilst the concept of spectacle 'unifies and explains a great diversity of apparent phenomena' it can be broadly understood as '[the] *affirmation* of appearance and [the] affirmation of all human life, namely social life, as mere appearance'

(Debord, 1983: 10, emphasis in original). Common examples of this would include the mass media (complex political events are transformed into easily consumable images and narratives), advertising (the subject is presented with a fantasy object signifying happiness, sexual fulfilment or wealth), and the film industry (the endless cycle of summer blockbusters replete with dazzling special effects and shallow characterization). However, we might also include here concepts such as the economy. For example, the free market is often presented as a benevolent, neutral force whose impact can only be directed and tweaked by making small changes to the structure of the economy. In reality the market is anything but neutral; it is the result of the dominance of a particular form of economic production and organization, and its impact reflects the contradictions and antagonisms that characterize any class-based society.

Following Debord's analysis, the spectacle affirms these institutions as natural and beyond our control. Thus, 'the spectacle is not identifiable with mere gazing[...]. It is that which escapes the activity of men, that which escapes reconsideration and correction by their work. It is the opposite of dialogue' (Debord, 1983: 18). It is through this affirmation of appearance that the spectacle produces a sense of alienation and abstraction that is inextricably bound up in the 'spectacularization' of everyday life. Such an idea refers to the way that '[l]ived reality is invaded by the contemplation of the spectacle whilst simultaneously absorbing the spectacular order, giving it positive cohesiveness. Objective reality is present on both sides' (Ibid: 8). As Wark has suggested, this process has only intensified in our contemporary moment, in which '[e]ver finer fragments of everyday life become moments in which the spectacle insinuates its logic, demanding the incessant production and consumption of images and stories' (Wark, 2013: 7). This dynamic is mirrored across different spheres of

daily life; play is transformed into leisure (in which we are required to reproduce our own labour power); political conflict is sublimated into an electoral politics played out by near identical political figures, all of whom act on behalf of capital and have marginally different ideological interests; and freedom is reduced to the restricted freedom of consumer choice. In summation, the logic of the spectacle is built into the rhythms of everyday life.

There is an important mimetic dimension to Debord's argument here. The theory of spectacle traces a particular logic in the historical relationship between representation and the real. In other words, the affirmation of reality as appearance and appearance as reality is a dynamic concerned with presenting the world around us a natural thing rather than the product of ideological mediation. As Gilman-Opalsky notes, the spectacle is not a monolithic entity. Indeed, part of its efficacy lies in the way that it provides us with a multiplicity of competing narratives that we are free to identify with or reject altogether. However, in spite of this apparent diversity 'the fact is that we can only ever understand ourselves within the context of an already existing social, political, and economic environment,' the construction of which we have no power to observe or intervene in (Gilman-Opalsky, 2011: 69 - 70). In other words, whilst we are free to choose from a range of lifestyles and ideologies we are routinely prevented from intervening in the ideological construction of the real itself. As I argued above, *détournement* presents itself as a means of negating capitalism's monopoly over representation and the spectacular construction of the real. Also important to note here is that Debord's analysis maintains a distinction between reality and representation; mirroring the ahistoricizing performance of the commodity form, the spectacle simply obscures our ability to comprehend the ideological construction of the real. This important distinction

will later be erased according to Baudrillard's theory of simulation, an idea I will turn to shortly. Before doing this, however, I want to link Debord's reflections on spectacle to the relationship between mimesis and consumer society.

Over twenty years before the publication of *Society of the Spectacle*, Frankfurt School theorists Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno published their influential philosophical text, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (2007). There they coined the phrase 'the culture industry' to describe the ideological function of mass culture, conceiving of it as a system of manipulation, propaganda and control. The concept is useful to consider here alongside Debord's analysis because it foregrounds the intersection between mimesis and consumer culture. Indeed, much like spectacle, the culture industry reflects 'the compulsive character of a society alienated from itself' (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2007: 95). According to Horkheimer and Adorno, the films, television programs, songs and radio shows produced by the culture industry force consumers to 'orient themselves according to the unity of production,' with each of its particular manifestations reproducing individuals as subjects of capital (Ibid: 97 & 100). In other words, representation and mimesis are used to foster a sense of identification with the system of domination itself. In a later chapter, entitled *Elements of Anti-Semitism*, they reflect on the ritualistic discipline, complex symbolism and carefully choreographed public performances of German Fascism, arguing that these can be understood as 'organized imitations of magical practices, *the mimesis of mimesis*' (Ibid: 152, emphasis my own). This 'organized control of mimesis' is a constitutive feature of late-capitalism. For Horkheimer and Adorno it refers to modernity's tendency towards repressing the mimetic faculty and replacing it with more directly controllable forms of representation aimed at the manipulation of consciousness and shaping

subjectivity according to the demands of the market. We have already seen traces of this in Debord's analysis of the spectacle, in which the logic of spectacular representation has become more and more built into the experience of everyday life. This logic also lies at the core of capitalist realism, which can be described as the result of neoliberal ideology's capacity to shape our sense of self according to the values of individualism, entrepreneurialism and risk. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the domain of contemporary advertising, which continually interpellates viewers according to such values. So, a crucial point of intervention for culture jamming is to counter this process of identification by rupturing the organized control of mimesis facilitated by the culture industry.

### ***Beyond the spectacle: Baudrillard's theory of simulation***

The abstracting logic of the spectacle is thus embedded into the fabric of everyday life in a manner that resembles the ideological manoeuvrings of the culture industry. Important to note in this regard is the distinction we can make between the spectacle as a *representation* of reality, and the real itself. The spectacle is an obfuscation of the real in the sense that intensifies the basic premise laid out in Marx's theory of commodity fetishism; there exists a concrete reality that is obscured by the spectacle insofar as the latter erases any trace of the former's contingency by presenting it as natural and founded upon consensus. This position is more or less abandoned by Jean Baudrillard in his later writings on simulation and the hyperreal. Broadly speaking, Baudrillard posits that the production of the image-as-commodity has become so pervasive and far reaching that it has come to subsume the very distinction between representation and the real, resulting in what he terms a 'hyperreal



henceforth sheltered from the imaginary, and from any distinction between the real and the imaginary' (Baudrillard, 1994: 3). This is because *representation* has been replaced by *simulation*: 'Representation' he argues, 'stems from the principle of equivalence of the sign and the real.' That is, representation mediates, and thus makes intelligible, reality. Simulation, by contrast, 'envelops the whole edifice of representation itself' by replacing the real altogether and substituting it for the signs of its existence (Ibid: 6). In other words, simulation is always a representation of *another representation*. In contrast to Debord's theory of spectacle simulation is not an obfuscation of the real precisely because there is no longer a definable real of which to speak, only further representations.

The principle of simulation can be seen in practice through reference to the work of culture jamming duo, the Yes Men, whose political pranks are predicated upon their ability to successfully impersonate representatives of corporate power. This is often achieved by creating a 'fake' website that purports to represent the corporation, which then leads to the duo being invited to attend conferences and other media events. The 'fake' website is always a representation of *another* representation (an original website), which corresponds to yet another representation (the corporation's branding), which is designed to signify the 'real' of the organization itself (by transforming its faceless bureaucracy into a coherent, self-defined totality). The whole strategy exploits corporate power's reliance upon simulation in order to produce a convincing imitation of it.

The roots of Baudrillard's theory of simulation can be traced to an earlier collection of essays, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (1981), in which he attempted to synthesize Marx's theory of value with Ferdinand de

Saussure's semiotic theory. One of Baudrillard's more significant claims in this volume is that use value is a fabricated quality of the commodity rather than a natural part of it. It is the presence of use value that guarantees the logic of commodity fetishism. In other words, use value provides a fictitious alibi for exchange value that promises to the consumer that it will fulfil a particular need for them (Baudrillard, 1981: 148). This is related to the concept of the signified which, as Baudrillard argues, performs a similar function for the signifier; 'the "world" that the sign "evokes"[...]is nothing but the effect of the sign, the shadow that it carries about, its "pantographic" extension' (Ibid: 152). It is unclear if Baudrillard sees this as part of the fundamental structure of signification, or if he understands it as an historical development that accompanies the rise of consumer culture and the mass media. For the purposes of this analysis I argue that it is more useful to view the 'autonomization' of the signifier in light of the latter. Indeed, Baudrillard does suggest that the 'sign' has surpassed the commodity as the dominant object of production and consumption under late-capitalism, to be manipulated as it circulates throughout society (Ibid: 65). One only need think of the power of financial capital in our current historical moment to find an example of the sign's predominance over the physical commodity.

As Steven Best suggests, this situation constitutes the contextual and conceptual foundations upon which Baudrillard develops his theory of simulation and the hyperreal:

No longer constrained by an objective reality, or tied to some signified in a simple binary relation, the signifier is free to float and establish its own meanings through its manipulation in coded differences and associative chains[...]Freed from any stable relationship with a signified[...]the signifier becomes its own referent and this autonomization becomes the basis of

semiological domination[...]Signification is now radically relativized and anything can pass as 'meaning' or 'reality' (Best, 1994: 52)

Thus, signs are no longer tied to a material referent and so are able to signify any referent that they, or rather those controlling them, choose to. This autonomization of the signifier destabilizes meaning and enables the sign to produce reality as a simulation. As Baudrillard argues, '[a]bstraction today is no longer that of the map, the double, the mirror or the concept[...]It is the generation by the models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal' (Best, 1994: 1). Simulation is not an imitation of reality but a replacement of it – hence, the hyperreal has come to constitute our entire sense of reality altogether (Hegarty, 2004: 50). In the autonomous state that facilitates this malleability of meaning and reality, representation no longer mediates a pre-existing real but comes to constitute it altogether as simulation.

By comparing this form of abstraction to Debord's theorization of spectacle we can better understand the implications of Baudrillard's analysis for the purposes of my own argument. The spectacle obfuscates reality via dissimulation (it masks the existence of another version of the real) whilst hyperreality is predicated upon simulation, which threatens the very distinction between truth and falsity, the real and the imaginary, thus leading to a decay of the real itself (Baudrillard, 1994: 3). Somewhat ironically, the age of simulation is driven by an obsession with the real – the endless drive to constrain the ambiguity of the 'symbolic' (a term that I will discuss in more detail in Chapter 2) (Hegarty, 2004: 51) – that leads to its decay. Liz Tomlin has observed that this has produced a widespread culture of cynicism towards the real, 'in which reality-television shows, news reports, documentaries, eye-witness statements and statistics given by state and opposition groups alike are all treated as

commensurate narratives with little credence given to the reality or truth of any one version over any other' (Tomlin, 2013: 146). Such a situation presents an evident threat to any radical artistic practices that wish to reveal the 'truth' behind a given ideological obfuscation, precisely because the very notion of truth has been rendered suspect by simulation.

Does this mean that the concept *détournement* itself is also rendered obsolete? I would argue that this is not the case for two key reasons. Firstly, Baudrillard's argument should not be taken as a totalizing account of the social, but rather understood as a broader dynamic at play within the complex circulations of power under capitalism. As Best suggests:

Baudrillard is wrong when he says we are no longer within a disciplinary society, or a society of the spectacle[...]What we see today is not discipline or simulation[...]but a complex interplay of various mechanisms of social control that include discipline, spectacle, simulation, and the classic overt violence of the state (Best, 1994: 55)

So, whilst we may indeed experience varying degrees of simulation (illustrated through certain cultural objects as they circulate through the public sphere) it would be better to understand it as an intensification of the sense of abstraction produced by the spectacle. With this in mind, we should retain Debord's dialectical thinking (which identifies both division and unity as competing dynamics within the spectacle) insofar as it opens the spectacle up to further analysis and critique. Secondly, as Fisher has argued, Baudrillard's concept of simulation identifies the emergence of a new dynamic within contemporary power 'in which subjugation no longer takes the form of a subordination to an extrinsic spectacle, but rather invites us to interact and participate' (Fisher,

2009: 32). No longer relegated to the status of spectators, simulation presents activists with numerous opportunities to intervene in and exploit the simulated production of the real. Indeed, Tomlin has offered the useful proposition that a radical performance practice might be founded upon an attempt to explore the differences between different orders of the real in the absence of any stable referent (Tomlin, 2013: 147). Developing Tomlin's line of thinking further I suggest that the malleability and plasticity of the real characteristic of late-capitalism presents activists with opportunities to subject capitalist realism to the possibility of its own negation through acts of *détournement* that exploit corporate power's reliance upon simulation. Again, this is an approach used to great effect by the Yes Men, whose simulated websites allow them to infiltrate and critique corporate power *from within*. This and other forms of transformative resistance form a core part of the performance analyses presented in this thesis. To unpack the theoretical underpinnings of them in more detail I now turn my attention to the power of performance and the concept of political force.

### **Section Three: The Power of Performance: Towards a concept of Political Force**

#### ***Mapping the performative society***

My discussion of the work of Debord and Baudrillard is essential to understanding the socio-political context that culture jamming is responding to. Having established these ideas I would now like to explain and define the concept of political force – a key theoretical idea that I will be employing throughout this thesis to articulate the radical potential of culture jamming. The concept is a means of addressing the relationship between performance, ideology and politics in a way that positions the latter as something that

emerges during one's experience of a performance event or an encounter with a performance-like artwork, rather than something that precedes or takes place after this experience has ended. The political force of performance describes the way that it acts on, transforms or reconfigures the context of its enunciation. In summation, the concept of political force is rooted in the excessive, contingent and transformative power of performance. Readers will note here an obvious connection between political force and the theory of performativity that I described in section one. There I argued that politics should be understood as a performative practice in which subjects attempt to intervene in the symbolic construction of the real. This is not the only understanding of politics that can be used to analyze contemporary performance but it is the one best suited to pursuing the aims of this thesis. As mentioned in the Introduction, the concept of political force is used to include a range of outcomes to artistic practice, ranging from the adjustment of the spectator's perspective to actual alteration of socio-political activity. The political force of culture jamming thus lies in the way that both subtle shifts in perception and the widespread transformations in the performance of everyday life are able to subject the sense of the world cultivated by capitalist realism to the possibility of its negation. All of these moments of transformation engage in a form of political action that is highly performative in character.

In order to unpack these claims in more detail I begin by situating my analysis in relation to the 'performative society' – a term used by Kershaw in his analysis of radical performance. The conceptual underpinnings of the performative society can be found in Raymond Williams' 1974 lecture, 'Drama in a Dramatized Society.' Williams uses this lecture to extend his analysis of culture beyond the study of literature and theatre into the field of everyday life.

The notion of the dramatized society is premised on Williams' claim that 'drama is no longer coextensive with theatre' and that it has become 'built into the rhythms of everyday life' (Williams, 1983: 11 - 12). What Williams is describing here can be understood as a profound shift in the means of cultural production and reception that took place during the 1970s, a period in which cinema had already consolidated itself as a dominant cultural form, television ownership in the United Kingdom had become extremely common, and the mass media had come to play an increasingly central role in the framing and dissemination of political events. This proliferation of mediatization disperses dramatic representations throughout society to such an extent that it becomes a 'habitual experience.' Williams claims that individuals now see more drama in a week 'than most human beings would previously have seen in a lifetime' (Williams, 1983: 12). Thus, the roots of the performative society are found in this widespread dispersal of theatricality and drama throughout the social.

For Kershaw, this has transformed the performative into 'a major element in the continuous negotiations of power and authority' in the context of liberal democracies. 'In such societies,' he argues, 'performance has gained a new kind of potency' because mediatization 'weaves ideological conflict into the very fabric of society' (Kershaw, 1999: 13). I would disagree with the extent to which the ideological conflict described by Kershaw can be understood as meaningful in the context of spectacle. As I argued earlier, one of the effects of neoliberal hegemony and capitalist realism has been the decoupling of the political from everyday life. Moreover, the spectacle has produced a flattening out of political difference that reflects the homogenizing effects of consumer culture. With that said, we can still draw a number of useful connections here between Kershaw's description of the performative society, spectacle, and simulation. Implicit in his

analysis here is the idea that the performative society is closely connected to the workings of neoliberal capitalism. The structures of liberal democracy, global financial markets and the mass media weave the dynamics of performance and theatricality into the fabric of social and political life. This produces an excess of theatricality that, I would argue, is connected to Debord and Baudrillard's respective claims regarding the image-as-commodity. For example, corporate power is increasingly dependent upon simulation as a means of securing its social and political legitimacy (an idea we can see in BP's sponsorship of cultural institutions like Tate) or the way in which branding is used to foster a sense of mimetic identification between the consumer and the values of the brand (a phenomenon I will discuss at length during my analysis of Reverend Billy). Moreover, neoliberalism is adept at interpellating its subjects as spectators and actors in a range of performances indicative of the new world 'dis-order' articulated by Kershaw. For example, individuals are now encouraged to 'perform' on the job market, whilst shopping is positioned as an act of identity construction through which we are encouraged to mimetically 'try on' otherness in the highly theatricalized brandscapes of consumer society (Wickstrom, 2006). Moreover, the coupling of liberal democracy to free-market capitalism results in an ideological worldview in which performance is positioned as a matrix that mediates our perception of political and economic 'success.'

The idea that performance and performativity are built into the structure of late-capitalism and neoliberalism is also present in another key text on the performative society, Jon McKenzie's *Perform, Or Else* (2001). McKenzie's argument is built around three distinct yet overlapping 'performance paradigms' – cultural, organizational and technological. The coming together of these three paradigms and their respective 'challenges' – the efficacy of cultural



performance, the efficiency of organizational performance, and the effectiveness of technological performance – extends the challenge to ‘perform, or else’ (the order word of the performative society) throughout neoliberalism’s distribution of the sensible. This leads McKenzie to argue that ‘[p]erformance will be to the twentieth and twenty-first centuries what discipline was to the eighteenth and nineteenth: an onto-historical formation of power and knowledge’ (McKenzie, 2001: 176). As theatre scholar Jenny Hughes, has argued, this is indicative of ‘a performance-obsessed system of production’ that is deeply connected to the values of neoliberal ideology (Hughes, 2011: 19); from the economic performances of corporations and nation states, to the performances of workers in a precarious and shifting job market, we are always being challenged to ‘perform, or else.’

For McKenzie, the emergence of the performative society can be read as an extension and intensification of the disciplinary episteme theorized by Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* (1991). It has become the dominant modality of power in the contemporary world:

Disciplinary power[...]functions continuously and in a decentralized manner through distinct institutions that cluster around the bodies of the subjected[...]performative power operates as a polyrhythmic network.

Discontinuously continuous, continually discontinuous, it incessantly breaks down and starts up again as its widely dispersed command and control centers function at times in alliance, at times in conflict[...]Discipline’s enclosed space is being transformed into a networked space or rather a network of divergent spacings, while its serialized passage of time (school, army, work, hospital) is becoming polyrhythmic time, an undulating current of temporal interference (McKenzie, 2001: 189)

McKenzie's reading of power in the performative society is reflective of the sense of plasticity and fluidity described by Fisher in *Capitalist Realism*. Power no longer operates according to the enclosed spatial and temporal continuity imposed by disciplinary societies, but through the overlapping mechanisms of diverse modes of performance. Indeed, a key feature of McKenzie's argument is that each of the three performance paradigms and their respective challenges constantly overlap and map onto one another. In a later essay he coins the term 'machinic performance' to describe the ways in which different modes of performance 'cut across people and mechanisms' and map onto and communicate with one another (McKenzie, 2005: 23). To take an example from this thesis, we could argue that the sponsorship arrangement between BP and the Tate galleries constitutes a machinic performance that aims to improve the cultural efficacy and organizational efficiency of BP by integrating the broader cultural performance of Tate into the corporation's branding. This machinic performance is further completed and complicated by the actions of Liberate Tate, whose practice aims to disrupt the organizational performance of BP and Tate by drawing on the strategies of cultural performances such as live art and political activism. The ongoing conflict between these three parties illustrates the dynamic and overlapping nature of the performance paradigms and illuminates the extent to which performance has become embedded in the workings of contemporary power under capitalism.

The concept of the performative society is enormously useful for my analysis of culture jamming for three key reasons. Firstly, it has altered the ways in which power operates in contemporary late-capitalism. It follows that any performance analysis of culture jamming must take into account the ways in

which power leverages performance as a means of maintaining its legitimacy. Moreover, it is important to consider the extent to which these new forms of performative power have shaped the political and aesthetic strategies characteristic of culture jamming. Secondly, Kershaw and McKenzie's contention that performance has taken on a new significance in 'the continuous negotiations of power and authority' in the contemporary world makes the analysis of these kinds of practice ever more urgent. Finally, McKenzie's observation that artistic performance impacts on, and is impacted by, technological, organizational and economic performance offers a useful point of entry for theorizing the political force of performance. For example, as Gabriella Giannachi has noted, McKenzie's analysis reveals the way that excess is built into the structure of performance, 'a flickering *surplus* which, however unstable, can effect real social and political change precisely because of its *ontological hybridity*' (Giannachi, 2006: 3, emphasis my own). This suggests that the political force of culture jamming might lie in its capacity to use the ontological hybridity of performance as a means of subverting the various machinic performances that circulate under late-capitalism. I now turn my attention to constructing a theoretical framework through which to articulate how such moments of disruption and transformation take place. I will be discussing two key ideas – the concept of performative excess and the transformative power of performance.

### ***Performative excess and the contingent nature of performance***

We now need to connect Kershaw and McKenzie's theorizations of the performative society to the former's analysis of radical performance. Broadly speaking, the performative society is characterized by an excess of

performance in which the challenges of efficacy, efficiency and effectiveness are braided into the fabric of everyday life. The intervention made by radical performance is that it leverages this sense of excess in order to produce various kinds of freedom which 'reach beyond existing systems of formalized power' in a manner that produces an embodied sense of new freedoms and experiences through the unfolding of the performance event (Kershaw, 1999: 18 - 19). It is here that we can make an important observation regarding the *excessive* nature of radical performance; the radical is always defined by a surplus of meaning that cannot be easily contained by cultural praxis. As Kershaw argues: 'In general terms[...]radical performance is made problematic by cultural praxis, in that it invites an ideological investment that it cannot of itself determine[...]it is always a creative opportunity to change the world for better or worse, a performative process in need of direction' (Ibid: 20). The surplus of meaning characteristic of the radical is closely related to the notion of performative excess – the capacity of performance to produce a multiplicity of meanings and exceed its representational function to the extent that it begins to *act on the world* in unexpected and politically significant ways. The 'pluralistic significance' that Kershaw ascribes to performance is rooted in the sense of ontological hybridity described by Giannachi. I argue that this is key to understanding its transformative power. My interest therefore lies in exploring how the excessive nature of performance might produce the new forms of collective experience and meaning characteristic of dissensus as it relates to the concept of political force.

A useful starting point in this regard is Peggy Phelan's claim that performance both exceeds and eludes the recuperative and commodifying structures of representation by way of its disappearance (Phelan, 1993: 146).

The political value that Phelan assigns to this ontology of performance resides in its non-reproductive character (an idea that is enormously important to her critique of the relationship between gender, representation and resistance). Performance, she contends, 'plunges into visibility – in a manically charged present[...]into the realm of invisibility and the unconscious where it eludes regulation and control' (Ibid: 148). Phelan's intention here is to explore the political potential inherent in the refusal to appear, conceived as a kind of 'active vanishing, a deliberate and conscious refusal to take the payoff of visibility' (Ibid: 19). The various disappearing acts that constitute the field of performance offer, for Phelan, a means of jamming 'the smooth machinery of reproductive representation necessary to the circulation of capital' (Ibid: 148). One needs to be critical of the political value that Phelan assigns to the idea of live performance. For example, it risks overlooking the fact that the cultural and political significance of liveness is a historically contingent phenomenon inseparable from the changing technological structure of society. As Auslander argues, the privileging of live performance over mediatized representation ignores the extent to which the former derives its authority through reference to its mediated other and, conversely, mediatized representation derives its authenticity from the live (Auslander, 2008: 43). However, the value of Phelan's argument lies in the way that it invites us to attend to the fact that performance frequently exceeds its representational function.

As Sophie Nield has argued, the analysis of protest and political activism as performance is often premised foregrounding the staged quality of such interventions, often by identifying the way that activists deploy symbolism and representation as a means of dramatizing political issues. The problem with foregrounding the symbolic properties of public protest, she argues, is that it

reduces such actions to purely symbolic interventions that refer to ‘some “real” activity or set of relations elsewhere.’ Arguing against this view she suggests that the significance of protest actions ‘pivots on the forms of space they produce[...]what kind of world becomes possible, and what can (and cannot) take place there’ (Nield, 2006: 54). Indeed, such an idea forms a core part of my analysis regarding the notion of performative excess. I am arguing here that culture jamming, rather than being a purely symbolic activity concerned with the semiotic production of meaning, always exceeds its representational function to the extent that it is able to act on and qualitatively transform the context of its enunciation. These moments of transformation make possible new forms of experience and identification within these spaces. Again, such an idea is rooted in the excessive nature of performance which, as Kershaw notes, always involves far more than the production of signs (Kershaw, 1999: 66). Indeed, as various theatre scholars have argued, performance poses a potential site of resistance to traditional semiotics insofar as its objects ‘achieve their vitality[...]not by signifying the world but by being *of it*’ (States, 1983: 20). For example, Keir Elam has argued that ‘theatre is perhaps the only art form able to exploit what might be termed “iconic identity”’ in which the ‘sign vehicle’ both denotes and *is* the very thing it represents (Elam, 2002: 21). As Patrick Duggan suggests, this relationship can be understood as ‘a tripartite circulation of tensions, unique to live performance.’ The sign vehicle acts as ‘the thing itself,’ is a mimetic representation *of itself*, and finally implies the presence/reality of that thing within the outside world (Duggan, 2012: 65).

Whilst each of these analyses are attending to forms of theatre practice broadly concerned with the staging of dramatic texts for audiences aware that they are watching a play (unlike the examples of culture jamming discussed in

the thesis) they nonetheless illuminate the 'pluralistic significance' that Kershaw identifies as key to the production of performative excess. Like many theatre practitioners, culture jammers often deliberately blur or draw attention to the distinctions between these different modes of signification to produce moments of ambiguous legibility in which the performance cannot be easily read according to a single interpretive framework. For example, Reverend Billy and the Stop Shopping Choir often appropriate signifying practices from a range of performance forms and blend them together in ways that complicate the legibility of their interventions. This will be seen most clearly in the intervention the group staged in Disneyland in 2005 (a performance that I discuss at length in Chapter 2). Another manifestation of this can be seen in the work of the Yes Men. The duo's performances exploit the excessive nature of performance in order to efface the gap between reality and representation by creating simulated versions of reality that are mistakenly interpreted as real by their audiences. This process will be key to my discussion of the concept of 'mimetic entanglement,' a phrase that I coin to theorize the political force of the group's Chamber of Commerce hoax. My central point here is that culture jamming often draws upon the excessive character of performance and theatricality as a means transforming the context in which such performances take place. This idea is key to the transformative power of performance, an idea to which I now turn.

### ***The transformative power of performance***

The notion of transformation is an important part of the concept of political force under construction here and has been a central idea in the discipline of performance studies since the field first emerged in the 1960s. As McKenzie

argues, the discipline is characterized by the challenge of efficacy – a critical focus on the power of cultural performances to both reaffirm and challenge social structures and hierarchies. However, ‘whilst performance’s efficacy to reaffirm existing structures and console or heal has consistently been recognized, it is its transgressive or resistant potential that has come to dominate the study of cultural performance’ (McKenzie, 2001: 30). This preoccupation with the transformative power of performance is emblemized in the concept of liminality used extensively in the work of anthropologist Victor Turner, and his frequent collaborator Richard Schechner. Borrowing the idea from ethnographer and folklorist Arnold van Gennep, Turner uses the term to describe the processes of transition and transformation characteristic of many rituals. ‘Liminal entities are neither here nor there,’ he argues, ‘they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, and convention’ (Turner, 1995: 95). They function as in-between spaces of becoming in which a degree of transformation is permitted to take place. Within such space, participants play ‘with elements of the familiar and defamiliarize them[...]Novelty emerges from unprecedented combinations of familiar elements’ (Turner, 1982: 27). Turner’s descriptions of liminal entities reflect the themes of defamiliarization and transformation we have covered throughout this chapter. Indeed, for Schechner, liminality is a founding principle for all forms of theatre and performance. He argues that it serves as an ‘anti-structure’ through which ‘the tensions of social order and disorder’ are refracted (Schechner, 2003: 218). This principle greatly informed the work of experimental performance makers in the 1960s and ‘70s including Jerzy Grotowski, the Living Theatre company, Allan Kaprow and Schechner’s own Performance Group (Ibid: 151 - 161). As McKenzie notes, these strategies were deployed in order to



engender alternative forms of community and social relations through the transformative power of the performance event in opposition to 'the rationalized alienation of modern society' (McKenzie, 2001: 38). The transgressive impulses of these practitioners brings us closer to understanding the political force of performance, in which the creation of liminal spaces and structures enables the dissensual reconfiguration of the sensible. Many of the performances discussed in this thesis create liminal spaces that are both separate from, and implicated within, the sphere of everyday life. It is within such spaces that normative social structures are temporarily suspended, or in some cases intensified in order to expose their contradictory nature.

As Erika Fischer-Lichte argues, the dynamic, durational and intersubjective qualities of performance present a significant challenge to traditional aesthetics theories such as semiotics or hermeneutics. These theories are often concerned with providing a totalizing account of a given artwork by positioning it as a static object and foregrounding its representational qualities (Fischer-Lichte, 2008: 16). Drawing on the work of Austin, Butler and influential theatre historian and theoretician Max Herrmann, Fischer-Lichte outlines an aesthetics of performance that foregrounds performativity over expressivity as a key lens through which to read the transformative power of the performance event. Performance events are always to some extent self-referential insofar as they constitute new versions of the real founded upon 'the bodily co-presence of actors and spectators.' The 'interactive and confrontational' encounter that characterizes the performance event sets in motion 'a self-referential and ever-changing feedback loop' that renders each performance 'unpredictable and spontaneous to a certain degree' (Ibid: 38). This 'autopoietic feedback loop' (Ibid: 39) forms the foundation for an aesthetics of performance in which the

embodied and intersubjective encounter between performers and spectators is essential to the generation of meaning and the broader political and cultural significance of each event. I argue that it is the materiality of performance – understood as ‘fleeting, transient[...]made up of the continuous becoming and passing of the autopoietic feedback loop’ (Ibid: 75) - that enables the performative constitution of the new forms of collective experience characteristic of dissensus and, by extension, the concept of political force under construction here.

The concept of the autopoietic feedback loop provides us with a useful critical lens through which to discuss the transformative dynamic that is central to the concept of political force. Indeed, Fischer-Lichte’s broader performance theory highlights the ways in which this transformative power is bound up in the contingencies of the performance event. Throughout this thesis I will be identifying the ways in which the dynamics of the autopoietic feedback loop influence the direction of the performance event and, by extension, produce the unpredictable moments of transformation that constitute the political force of culture jamming. More significantly, Fischer-Lichte’s emphasis on contingency can help us to better understand Rancière’s theory of dissensus and its connection to performance. As Rancière has argued, the concept of aesthetic separation upon which dissensus is founded implies ‘a disconnection between the production of the artistic *savoir-faire* and social destination.’ In other words, there is no determinable relationship between the production of an artwork, its performance within a given context, and the various political effects it produces (Rancière, 2010: 139 & 141). What Rancière is arguing here is that the emergence of dissensus is to some extent incalculable. This is because the very concept entails a moment of rupture in the correspondence between sense

and sense upon which this determinable relationship might depend. It would be a mistake to totally jettison the very notion of intentionality from our analysis insofar as every instance of political activism is created with the intention of producing some kind of political effect. However, as I will be arguing throughout this thesis, many of the most interesting moments of transformation that occur within culture jamming emerge when activists are able to productively respond to the ever-changing dynamics of the autopoietic feedback loop and the sense of spontaneity that characterizes it. Synthesizing Fischer-Lichte's performance theory with Rancière's notion of dissensus will better enable me to articulate the ways in which culture jammers are able to use performance as a means of generating unforeseen or unintended political effects that emerge out of (and are utterly specific to) the contingencies of the performance event.

***Beyond efficacy: Political force and the reconfiguration of the sensible***

We have established two important points regarding the political force of performance. Firstly, it emerges when performance exceeds its representational function and begins to act on the context of its enunciation. Secondly, its emergence is contingent upon, and shaped by, the unpredictable dynamics of the autopoietic feedback loop. Because of this unpredictability the various moments of transformation that constitute a performance's political force cannot be fully accounted for in advance. Before concluding my analysis I would like to link these ideas more explicitly to the concept of politics that I outlined at the beginning of this chapter, in which I argued that politics is a performative, world-making process in which individuals attempt to intervene in the construction of the real. To do this I want to return to Rancière's writing on politics and aesthetics, focusing in particular on how the concept of dissensus relates to

political art. My starting point here is his essay, *The Paradoxes of Political Art*, in which he begins by critiquing two distinct principles that underpin the concept of political efficacy as it relates to art. These are the principles of representational mediation and ethical immediacy. According to the former, the efficacy of political art lies in the way that mimesis is used to represent certain values and ideas through images, dramatic action and words that will subsequently influence the beliefs and behaviours of the spectator (Rancière, 2010: 136). For Rancière, this principle is insufficient, insofar as it is underpinned by the assumption that the spectator will both identify with the representation, and act or think accordingly. This is something that cannot be guaranteed in advance. Moreover, it relegates the spectator to a passive consumer of meaning (an idea that I will expand on shortly). The latter principle (of ethical immediacy) attempts to abolish the distance between the artwork and the community by having 'all living bodies directly embody the sense of the common' (Ibid: 137). Whilst this principle 'points right at the core of the question of political efficacy' it does so 'by jettisoning both art and politics in the same stroke, fusing them together by framing the community as artwork.' The problem with this model, Rancière suggests, is that it is founded upon a model of consensus that does little to disrupt the distribution of the sensible upon which the dominant social order rests (Ibid: 137).

Both principles rest upon an assumption that art 'compels us to revolt when it shows us revolting things[...]and that it incites us to oppose the system of domination by renouncing its own participation in that system' (Ibid: 134 - 135). The former assumes a determinable relation between the intentions of the artist, the performance of the artwork within a given context, and the interpretation of the spectator. The latter is underpinned by a definition of

politics as founded upon consensus and community as an inclusive entity (politics, for Rancière, is always an act of dissensus in which those who are considered 'beyond the count' constitute themselves as speaking, visible subjects). Both of these models of efficacy are underpinned by a logic of cause and effect (a correspondence between sense and sense) that has a significant impact on the way that we analyze performance. Performances are often considered to be efficacious because they produce some discernible political outcome, such as successfully persuading the spectator to stop shopping or pressuring a cultural institution to end its sponsorship agreement with an oil corporation. Whilst these effects are not insignificant they tell us very little about the dynamics of each performance event; the new forms of identification and experience that they make possible, the moments of rupture and defamiliarization that they produce, and the manner in which they transform the dynamics of the spaces they take place in. This kind of analysis removes the critic or theorist from the performance itself and reduces it to the status of a provisional event that lays the groundwork for the "real" business of politics.

The concept of political force is a means of returning analysis to the significance of the performance event and the aesthetic experience that it produces. It is a means of positioning politics as something that emerges in and through the dynamics of the event itself rather than a static object that precedes it or takes place after it has finished. It is for this reason that Rancière's concept of dissensus is of particular importance. For example, Rancière contrasts the two principles of efficacy to that of aesthetic separation, a phrase used to describe the sense of disconnection that characterizes the aesthetic regime. This disconnection refers to 'the suspension of determinable relation between the artist's intention, a performance in some place reserved for art, and the

spectator's gaze and the state of the community' (Ibid: 137). It is within this context that dissensus emerges. By renouncing the correspondence between representation and reality, form and function, artwork and community, aesthetic separation produces the disjunction and conflict between sense and sense that enables '[the reconfiguration] of sensory experience' characteristic of dissensus (Ibid: 140).

Rancière's lesson here is extremely useful for the purposes of this thesis. It enables us to centre our analysis on the way that culture jamming is able to rupture the distribution of sense that characterizes our contemporary structure of feeling in ways that cannot be fully accounted for in advance. Emerging through the unpredictable dynamics of the autopoietic feedback loop the political force of performance performs a 'labour of fiction' that 'undoes, and then rearticulates connections between signs and images, images and times, and signs and spaces, framing a given sense of reality, a given "commonsense"' (Ibid: 149). Throughout this thesis I will be drawing attention to the ways in which culture jammers are able to intervene in the construction of the real through such moments of reconfiguration. Again, whilst these moments emerge out of the decisions made by activists they cannot be fully accounted for in advance insofar as they emerge out of the gradual unfolding of the performance event. Moreover, and because of this unpredictability, Rancière also enables us to radically rethink the relationship between spectators and artworks. Writing in *The Emancipated Spectator*, he argues that spectatorship is not a passive activity but one characterized by observation, selection, comparison and interpretation. The spectator 'participates in the performance by refashioning it in her own way – by drawing back, for example, from the vital energy that it is supposed to transmit in order to make it a pure image and

associate this image with a story which she has read or dreamt, experienced or invented' (Rancière, 2011: 13). The meaning of political art emerges out of the dynamic encounter between the spectator and the performance and/or art object. Meaning exists as 'the third thing that is owned by no one[...]but which subsists between them' (Ibid: 15). Such an idea forms a key part of my analysis in Chapter 3 in particular, in which I discuss the performance of subvertising as a dynamic process in which meaning and transformation emerge out of the dynamic encounter between spectator and artwork.

Finally, the principle of aesthetic separation that underpins much of Rancière's writing on dissensus provides us with an invaluable tool for theorizing the inescapably communal nature of live performance. If, as Fischer-Lichte argues, performance is characterized by the bodily co-presence of performers and spectators (Fischer-Lichte, 2008: 38), then each performance event can be understood as a fleeting form of community. Understanding the significance of these instances of community requires us to renounce the sense of consensus implied by the term, insofar as it would serve to reinforce our current distribution of the sensible. In contrast to this Rancière proposes the concept of the 'aesthetic community.' Aesthetic communities are structured by a sense of disconnection insofar as they actualize new forms of being together *and* (because of their fleeting nature) stand as a monument to an as yet unrealized, or absent, 'people to come' (Rancière, 2011: 59). The fleeting aesthetic communities actualized in performance reconfigure the ways in which bodies appear and relate to one another within space. They trace out as-yet unrealized versions of the real that are yet to come to pass. And, finally, they draw attention to what is rendered invisible, absent, or unsayable within our current distribution of the sensible. In summation, the aesthetic communities

that emerge through the unfolding of the performance event do so in a way that reject consensus and instead draw attention to the ways in which disconnection structures our experience of the real.

Through the principles of aesthetic separation and dissensus we can see how culture jammers bring together existing fragments of cultural texts and place them into conflict with one another, thus producing new cultural texts that reconfigure the fabric of sensory experience. In some cases this involves simply rupturing and transforming the spectator's experience of everyday life. In other cases these effects are more far reaching insofar as they gesture towards a sense of the world beyond capitalist realism's hold over the horizons of the thinkable. The political force of culture jamming thus lies in the way that it both exploits and enables us to encounter the performativity of the political in a multiplicity of social spaces. Throughout the rest of this thesis I will be analyzing the various ways in which the political force of culture jamming emerges through the dynamics of singular performance events or as the culmination of a multitude of interventions.

## **Conclusion**

My analysis above has outlined three key ideas that will inform the rest of my analysis in this thesis. Firstly, my analysis of culture jamming is underpinned by a definition of politics that conceives of it as a performative, world-making process in which subjects attempt to intervene in the construction of the real. I suggest that the political force of culture jamming can be seen in the way that activists directly engage in this process. Moreover I also argue that we can use culture jamming as a means of better understanding the performativity of the political. Secondly, the insurrectionary, transformative power of culture jamming



is rooted in the concept *détournement*. Though I will not always be explicitly engaging with this concept during my analysis I argue that the various acts of appropriation that constitute each of the case studies discussed in this thesis can be considered instances of *détournement*. Moreover, this concept (and by extension, the practice of culture jamming itself) is shaped by and critically engages with the abstracting power of late-capitalism. This was highlighted through my discussion of the work of Debord and Baudrillard respectively. The ideas of both thinkers will be important reference points throughout this thesis. Finally, the political force of performance is rooted in its capacity to exceed its representational function and act on the context of its enunciation in a manner that reconfigures the experience of everyday life and gestures towards a sense of the world beyond capitalist realism. This is a contingent process that emerges through the unpredictable dynamics of the autopoietic feedback loop.

Throughout this thesis I will be drawing on these ideas – both explicitly and implicitly – to critically engage with the political force and potential limits of a number of different artists and activists. In Chapter 2, I argue that the political force of Reverend Billy and the Stop Shopping Choir’s activism lies in the way that their interventions rupture the ideological performance of retail spaces, or ‘brandsapes.’ These moments of rupture place the representational strategies of such spaces into conflict with the undisciplined activity of the performing body in a way that temporarily dissolves the ideological fantasy produced by the brandscape. In Chapter 3, I use Michael Taussig’s theory of defacement and the spatial theories of Henri Lefebvre to analyze the performance and political force of the contemporary subvertising movement. I argue that the artworks and interventions created by these artists performatively affirm a sense of the ‘right to the city’ in the face of the advertising industry’s creeping colonization of

everyday life. Through the tactical appropriation of abstract space groups like  
Brandalism use subvertising as a means of transforming urban space into a site  
for re-encountering a sense of the political in everyday life. In Chapter 4, I  
engage with the Yes Men's political pranking in relation to the performative  
society, globalization and simulation. I argue that the political force of the duo's  
performances lies in the way that they are able to intervene in and disrupt the  
performance of globalization. Such performances radically transform our  
understanding of globalization as a regime of production and, more significantly,  
subject the false necessity of capitalist realism to the possibility of its negation.  
Finally, in Chapter 5 I test the political force of culture jamming in a specific  
institutional context. Focusing on the work of activist collective, Liberate Tate, I  
examine the extent to which the group's interventions are able to radically  
reshape the identity of Tate from a position of interstitial distance. The political  
force of the practice reveals itself in the way that these performances  
dissensually reconfigure the spectator's experience of the gallery space in an  
overtly politicized manner.

## Chapter 2: Reverend Billy and the Performative Critique of Commodity Fetishism

### Introduction

*It is 1998, and Reverend Billy has entered the Disney store in Times Square, New York. Wielding a large, stuffed Mickey Mouse toy he launches into an impassioned attack on the Disney corporation: "Mickey Mouse is the anti-Christ! This is your opportunity to stop shopping and save your souls! We are suffering from a consumer narcosis here in Manhattan, a hypnosis has overtaken all of us on this once great island and within a few months, by the year 2000 we will all be within a hellishly expanded Disney Store, we will all be on the shelf my children! [...] I am Reverend Billy, I am urging you to leave the Disney store at this time, Manhattan is turning into a suburban mall! We're all turning into ghouls here!' He is met with disdain by many of the customers in the store: 'Why don't you save your breath!?' shouts one man. Another confronts him: "I'm a tourist and I don't think you're funny at all [...] all you did was upset my grandma and that little girl over there" he says pointing to a space where an old woman and a young girl should be. "I mean she was really upset" he continues, "she was just buying some Mickey Mouse stuff..." As he trails off another shopper intervenes on Billy's behalf: "Yeah well that's the point, he's trying to make a point, I mean these people have enough money that they can just put a sign and a shop anywhere, this is his right to talk also. I don't think he upset your grandmother, your grandmother should look at what's going on in the world." Billy ignores the crowd's protestations and intensifies his preaching: "People don't understand, these cute little animals are corporate logos people! They're not really animals at all, and it's getting to the point where we're going*

*to be covered with these things, they'll be all over our bodies. When we die we'll be like Nascar Chevrolets, and we'll be covered with Eeyores and Mickey Mouses and all these little Tinkerbell animals who'll be hellishly smiling on our bodies, meanwhile we're broke and Disney has all the money!" Eventually the Police arrive and Billy is escorted out of the store still warning customers of their impending doom: 'Now's your chance, don't shop at the Disney store, please. Hallelujah!"*

Reverend Billy, whose real name is Bill Talen, was born in 1950 to Dutch Calvinist parents in Northfield, Minnesota. After several years working as a performer, writer and producer in San Francisco and becoming disillusioned with the increasingly de-politicized arts scene of his adopted home he moved to New York in 1993. Settling in Manhattan's Hell's Kitchen neighbourhood, Talen bore witness to the commercial developments that transformed Times Square and Broadway into sanitized, tourist-friendly, heavily commercialized areas under the stewardship of the city's then Mayor, Rudolph Giuliani. This process of gentrification included the opening of the Disney Store in Times Square – an event that coincided with the Lion King musical opening on Broadway in 1997. According to Jill Lane, this had a decisive impact on the development of Reverend Billy:

For Talen, the scene was nothing less than apocalyptic: it was three years before the millennium, in the heart of Manhattan, square one of globalization, home of a (then) ever-expanding Wall Street and inflated Nasdaq, home to a rapidly moving urban "ethnoscape" of eight million people – migrants, exiles, tourists, workers, rich and poor – and there, in Times Square itself, suddenly appeared Disney on Broadway. The force of the image radicalized Talen. With

the help of a dinner jacket and fake collar, Bill Talen became Reverend Billy (Lane, 2002: 67)

Taking inspiration from the street preachers he saw performing in Manhattan and encouraged by his mentor – the theatre-loving Reverend, Sidney Lanier – Talen developed the persona as a way of responding to the sense of alienation and disgust he felt in the face of this process. Appropriating the costume, rhetoric and gestures of American evangelism and combining this with an anarchic disregard for authority, Talen's early performances consisted of intervening in retail spaces such as the Disney Store and Starbucks to deliver fiery sermons denouncing consumer culture. Soon, he was joined by a number of likeminded performers – including director, Savitri D. – who formed his famous Stop Shopping Choir. With the addition of the choir came an increased diversity of tactics. Their performances now include elaborate costumes, choreographed dance numbers, and a repertoire of original songs that draw heavily on Gospel music and musical theatre. More recently, Reverend Billy and his choir have begun collaborating with other activist groups and involving themselves in political causes beyond the rampant consumerism of American society. The group has collaborated with groups from the UK's Art Not Oil coalition (Liberate Tate and BP Or Not BP), participated in protests against the Dakota Access Pipeline led by indigenous communities in America, and staged a series of 'die-ins' at Grand Central Station, New York, in solidarity with Black Lives Matter.

My analysis in this chapter is concerned with exploring the ways in which Reverend Billy and the Stop Shopping Choir are able to disrupt and transform the performance of retail space in politically meaningful ways. We can see such a process at play in the retail intervention described above. Reverend Billy's

presence in the Disney store physically and symbolically disrupts the smooth flow of both economic capital and bodies that animates the space. According to performance scholar Tony Perucci, Reverend Billy's practice can be understood as an example of what he terms 'ruptural performance' (Perucci, 2008).

Operating in the liminal space between social and aesthetic performance, ruptural performances act as 'necessary interruptions' within everyday life and aim to disrupt the 'intractability and intransigence of consumer culture' (Perucci, 2009: 1 - 2). Whilst such performances frequently appropriate the kind of theatricality associated with the society of the spectacle their ultimate aim is to rupture the ideological framework that structures our identification with consumer culture (Ibid: 3). In short, Perucci's argument positions performance as an eruption of action that, as Phelan famously observed, 'clogs the smooth machinery of reproductive representation necessary to the circulation of capital' by challenging the pervasive sense of abstraction and inactivity induced by the society of the spectacle (Phelan, 1993: 148). Perucci's poetics of ruptural performance thus serves as one of the guiding theoretical principles of this analysis. It provides us with a critical vocabulary for articulating the political force of Reverend Billy's practice in overtly performative and theatrical terms.

In order to better understand the political significance of ruptural performance we first need to define and explain the ideological framework that structures our identification with consumer culture. For the purposes of this analysis, I contend that Reverend Billy's practice can be broadly understood as a performative critique of commodity fetishism. As I explained in Chapter 1, the concept of commodity fetishism describes the way that exchange value appears as something objective or immanent to the commodity (rather than as an expression of the labour power that produced it). '[B]y equating their different

products to each other in exchange as values,' argues Marx, '[individuals] equate their different kinds of labour as human labour. *They do this without being aware of it*' (Marx, 1981: 166, emphasis my own). The act of exchange transforms the commodity into an autonomous object and, as such, is misperceived as a social relationship between objects mediated by people. When we shop we are engaged in a social relationship with the organization selling the commodity and the workers whose labour power constitutes its exchange value. This social relationship is effaced in the mediating role played by the commodity form and the process of abstraction from which it derives its exchange value (in which concrete forms of labour are generalized into abstract labour). Important to note here is the performance-like quality of the commodity which works to mask the social relationship that it mediates and erase any trace of its historicity. In short, the commodity both *dissimulates* and *imitates*. Countering the ahistoricizing performance of the commodity is an important part of ruptural performance and will form a central thread running throughout my analysis in the first section of this chapter.

Baudrillard radically extends this sense of theatrical dissimulation and mimesis. Again, to recall my analysis in Chapter 1, Baudrillard argues that use value (which, for Marx, is the very precondition of exchange value itself (Marx, 1981: 126)) is *not* a natural part of the commodity. Indeed, it is just as contingent and fabricated as exchange value. This is because consumerism 'does not answer to an individual economy of needs,' but is instead 'a social function of prestige and hierarchical distribution' that reproduces the ideology of class. Use value 'does not derive primarily from vital necessity or from "natural law," but rather from cultural constraint[...]it is an institution' (Baudrillard, 1981: 30). The real value of the commodity is not its use value or its exchange value

but its 'social value' as a sign. Acting as a theatrical alibi for the commodity 'use value is often no more than a practical guarantee (or even a rationalization pure and simple)' of the commodity's social desirability (Ibid: 29). As Wickstrom suggests, use value is 'an alibi that the market depends on to grease the wheels of the purchase[...]the made up reason why I should buy this product or fall for this brand' (Wickstrom, 2006: 37). It is here that the relationship between consumerism and mimesis comes more firmly into view. According to the model outlined by Baudrillard commodities are desirable because of the culturally constructed values that they signify, making possible a form of mimetic identification with the values and resonances that the commodity appears to embody. Important here is the principle of copy and contact that Taussig argues lies at the heart of mimesis, in which the production of a likeness or the imitation of an object produces 'a palpable, sensuous connection between the body of the perceiver and the perceived' (Taussig, 1993: 21). Again, the fetish character of the commodity lies in the way that these values and resonances are not objective parts of the commodity, yet they are experienced as such by the consumer in the act of exchange.

The notion of commodity fetishism forms a key part of my analysis in which I argue that Reverend Billy's practice can be considered a performative critique of commodity fetishism that illuminates the extent to which the latter's logic has penetrated the fabric of everyday life. Though it does not articulate its critique in explicitly Marxist terms it is clear that the group's performances are able to reveal the fetishistic character of the commodity; that the relationship between objects assumed in the act of exchange is in fact a social relationship between subjects; that the commodities bought by consumers are the products of an exploited labour force; and, perhaps most pertinently, that their



participation in this power structure contributes to their alienation under capitalism. For example, in her own analysis of the intervention at the Disney store, Jill Lane argues that the provocations unleashed by Reverend Billy work to illuminate 'the underlying psycho-social investments' that sustain our connection to the brand (Lane, 2002: 68 - 69). Billy articulates this critique in overtly corporeal terms by describing a process in which the corporation lays claim to the body of the consumer by worming its way into their sense of self. For Lane, this is evidenced in the behaviour of the young man who confronts Billy, arguing that '[he] unwittingly speaks the script the Disney imagineers long ago wrote for him[...]As though by a programmed consumer instinct, the man blames the Reverend, not on his own behalf, but on behalf of a child and grandmother' who are nowhere to be found in the store (Ibid: 70). In attempting to denounce Billy's actions the young man inadvertently dramatizes the sense of artifice at work in the store itself; it is an acknowledgement that his connection to the brand is structured around an implicit identification with the magic of the commodity form.

These ideas form the basis of my argument in section one, which is structured around an analysis of the group's famous intervention at Disneyland, California through the lens of Perucci's theory of ruptural performance. Though Perucci has already conducted an analysis of Reverend Billy's practice as a form of ruptural performance (C.F. Perucci, 2008), my own analysis engages more explicitly with the concept of ideology by putting the notion of ruptural performance in dialogue with what I term 'the ideological performance' of Disneyland. Though I will be focusing on how the intervention at Disneyland unfolded as a 'live' event my analysis is based on the extensive video documentation of the performance that appears in the film *What Would Jesus*

*Buy?* (2007). I also draw on an account of the performance written by Reverend Billy in his book of the same name (Talen, 2006). I begin by arguing that the park can be defined as a contemporary 'brandscape' – a form of retail space that uses mimesis as means of fostering an embodied, sensuous connection between the brand and the consumer through the production of the *really made up* (Wickstrom, 2006). Drawing on the work of Luis Marin, Baudrillard and Žižek, I suggest that the park materializes a fantasy version of American prosperity that is performatively enacted through the visitors' embodied experience of the park. With this framework established I return to Perucci's notion of ruptural performance in order to critically engage with the following question: to what extent is Reverend Billy's intervention at Disneyland able to produce a rupture in the ideological fantasy materialized by the park? I argue that the political force of the intervention lies in the way that it fleetingly dissolves the representational structures that sustain the park's ideological fantasy in a manner that both illuminates and subverts the power of the really made up.

My analysis in section two departs from this critique of commodity fetishism in order to explore the prefigurative elements of the group's work. Instead of asking how Reverend Billy's practice might subvert the authority of the really made up and illuminate its connection to corporate power I invert the terms of my analysis: How might Reverend Billy and his choir use performance as a means of producing their own versions of the 'really-made-up' that give rise to new modes of being-in-the-world beyond the confines of capitalist realism? My exploration of this central idea takes place through a performance analysis of an encounter that took place between Reverend Billy and his choir and a family in a retail car park. This encounter also appears in *What Would Jesus Buy?* and functions as an interesting counterpoint to the more raucous and

spectacular intervention at Disneyland. Using the concept of symbolic exchange I contend that the encounter is characterized by a sense of reciprocity and generosity that transforms the way in which individuals are able to appear, and relate to one another, within this particular form of retail space. Though fleeting and ephemeral, artificial and constructed, I contend that this encounter performatively produces a new form of aesthetic community that gestures towards a sense of the world beyond capitalist realism.

### **Section One: Reverend Billy Visits Disneyland**

*It is 25<sup>th</sup> December, 2005. Reverend Billy and a few dozen members of his choir are visiting Disneyland in Anaheim, California, enjoying the build-up to Disney's 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Christmas Day parade. Clustered around the Main Street USA district of the park, members of the group are dressed in everyday clothing and have split up into smaller groups to avoid being spotted by park security. The area is full of people, mainly families who have decided to spend Christmas day at Disneyland, and everyone is excited. The crowd are engrossed by the distracting spectacle of Mickey Mouse attempting to reach the summit of the faux-Matterhorn mountain that sits at the end of Main Street. The mountain is adorned with large numbers from 1 to 50. Every time Mickey gets within touching distance of the big number 50 at the top of the mountain he comes crashing down to earth, much to the distress and mirth of Minnie Mouse and Donald Duck respectively. Like Sisyphus before him, Mickey is condemned to repeat this tired spectacle ad nauseam, cheered on by the baying crowds who shout 'GO FOR IT MICKEY' and 'CONGRATULATIONS ON YOUR 50<sup>TH</sup> MICKEY,' cheering and whooping each time he stands up, collectively groaning as he falls to the bottom again. Billy begins to prepare for his performance,*

*using the noise of the crowd as cover for his vocal warm-ups. Eventually, Mickey triumphs; on his final ascent of the mountain he pauses and loudspeakers that line both sides of the street make an announcement: 'If you would like to take a picture of this historical moment, Mickey doesn't want you to miss it, he'll wait for you to run to the camera store on Main Street[...]you can buy a good camera full of film, go ahead, Mickey and Minnie will wait for you. You'll have this moment forever.' As Mickey makes his way down from the mountain, the parade begins. From behind the façade of the immaculate Main Street USA come a cavalcade of dancers, singers, coaches, and a whole host of Disney characters. Stripping off his tracksuit and hat, Billy merges with the parade and is soon joined by his choir. Billy begins to preach: 'Isn't it wonderful. We asked Santa – and Santa gave us what we wanted. And now here we are in Disneyland! Look at this Main Street, Main Street USA! Here we are in the midst of this prosperity! But wait a minute, something's wrong! Back in America, it's not this prosperous. The Main Streets are shuttered, empty, outsourced!' At first the crowd cheer the choir, most likely mistaking them for a local church choir. Soon, however, they begin to register the content of the message. Some were intrigued, some were laughing and clapping the choir, whilst others were furious: 'How can you do this on Christmas Day!' Soon, Billy has attracted the attention of park security guards who begin to surround him. Unperturbed, he continues his sermon: 'Stop Shopping! Let's slow down our consumption children.' The choir continues to sing 'What Would Jesus Buy?/Buy the Heaven, Get the Hell.' More officers converge on the group. Sensing that his time with the parade is nearing an end, Billy bursts into a frenetic sermon, desperately articulating his message of consumer redemption: 'We made Christmas! Santa is our creation! We made Mickey Mouse! We built cars, wars...and what we*

*made, we can unmake! We can change!' By now the choir is submerged in a sea of sky blue uniforms. The presence of more officers seems to embolden Billy: 'Children, where is that product from? What about the products on the shelves in Disneyland? Go and find the label! This is Main Street USA! Where is it made? Sri Lanka? China? The Philippines? We can't afford to be apolitical anymore! Where are these things from? Why is our Main Street dead? Why is the weather so hot? Why is there no work? Why do we keep buying?' As he reaches his dramatic climax, Billy is completely surrounded by security. Real police merge with security guards as he is read the Trespassing and Disorderly Conduct Act. Soon, he is strong-armed out of fantasyland, taken behind the façade, and thrust into one of the holding cells in Disneyland jail. Some time later, Billy finds himself staring in the face of Snow White, who takes a final drag of her cigarette and throws it to the ground, before joining the queue of seven dwarves waiting to join the parade.*

### ***Ruptural performance as a necessary interruption of happenings***

Reverend Billy's intervention at Disneyland, California was the culmination of the choir's month long tour across the United States in which it travelled the length of the country in order to save it from the coming 'shopocalypse.'

Travelling on two bio-fuelled buses the choir staged its infamous retail interventions by day and performed in small theatre spaces and churches by night. The intervention at Disneyland took Reverend Billy and his choir into the ideological heartland of consumer culture, bringing them face-to-face with a corporation that has become 'the flagship of American-style, neo-colonial corporate culture' and whose overarching aesthetic strategy perfectly embodies the magic of commodity fetishism (Lane, 2002: 67). I begin my analysis with this

performance because it dramatizes some key ideas that are central to understanding the political force of the group's practice. Through an analysis of this performance I argue that it produces a moment of performative excess that ruptures the ideological fantasy sustained by the park and illuminates the power of the 'really made up' (a term that, as we shall see, is essential to understanding commodity fetishism under late-capitalism and its relationship to the ideological performance of retail space). In order to unpack this process in more detail I draw on Perucci's concept of 'ruptural performance' – a theory which offers a useful framework through which to read the performance and the sense of excess that it produces. Most significantly the intervention is emblematic of the *interruptive* style of most ruptural performances. According to Perucci's poetics, interruption appears as an intervention into the 'estranged present' of the spectacle that '[makes] conscious what is habitual so that it is available for critique' (Perucci, 2009: 5). In the context of Reverend Billy's practice such interventions might be said to make present the various ways in which the logic of commodity fetishism penetrates our habitual experience of the real. In other words, interruption constitutes a step towards uncovering the uncanny, or 'secretly familiar' (Taussig, 1999: 49), power of the commodity and its manifold operations within everyday life. With this in mind one might argue that the interruptive style of ruptural performance makes it a contemporary inheritor of the epic theatre tradition – an idea that Perucci explicitly acknowledges through his frequent references to Walter Benjamin, including his claim that defamiliarization in the epic theatre is 'fostered through interruption of the [dramatic] action' (Benjamin, 1999: 304). Benjamin's concepts of *Jetztzeit* and 'profane illumination' form a key part of my argument later in this analysis

and subsequent sections of this thesis (such as my analysis of the work of Liberate Tate in Chapter 5).

The intervention at Disneyland is interruptive in two interrelated ways. First, the group's members literally interrupt the performance of the Christmas Day parade by inserting themselves within it. Second, this first moment of interruption produces an instance of performative excess that disturbs and disrupts the representational structures that sustain the ideological fantasy of the park, thus causing it to fleetingly dissolve. It is important to reiterate here that the sense of rupture that I attribute to the performance was identified through extensive and detailed analysis of the performance's video documentation and Reverend Billy's written reflections on it. The political force of the performance thus emerges in small moments that were experienced and witnessed by only a small group of people at a time. However, these small moments take on a new significance when we situate them in relation to Benjamin's writing on epic theatre, for example. For Benjamin, it is a process in which the imposition of new elements into a given situation serves to defamiliarize it by disrupting and transforming the spectator's quotidian perception of it (Benjamin, 1986: 235). Now, as I argued in Chapter 1, this is not to suggest that the spectator is a completely passive observer who needs to be emancipated. On the contrary, following Rancière, this process of defamiliarization should be understood as an instance of dissensus that subverts the distribution of the sensible. Throughout my analysis I will be emphasizing the different ways in which the disruptive character of ruptural performance sets in motion performative effects that open up gaps within the fabric of the sensible. Such moments are constructed through the dynamic and

unpredictable nature of the autopoietic feedback loop, and as such implicate the spectator within the emergence of dissensus.

### ***The ideological performance of Disneyland***

In order to better understand how the group's intervention functioned as a 'necessary interruption' of the park we need to define what exactly the performance is interrupting. We can do this by returning to the idea of commodity fetishism and ideological fantasy in order to explore the various ways in which Disneyland expresses the logic of both. In his own analysis of Reverend Billy's practice as ruptural performance, Perucci argues that his interventions work to interrupt the estranged present of the consumer spectacle constructed through 'the performance of the ahistorical presence of the commodity' (Perucci, 2008: 317). This point offers a useful point of departure for theorizing the ideological performance of Disneyland. As I argued earlier, the sense of misperception that characterizes commodity fetishism lies in the way that consumers mistake the act of exchange for a relationship between objects mediated by individuals rather than its opposite – a social relationship between individuals that is mediated by the commodity form itself (Marx, 1981: 169). Disneyland reproduces this same logic in the way that it enables visitors to consume the Disney brand by visiting and staying in the park, thus reaffirming its fetish character as an autonomous object endowed with special qualities. However, given that the park is about much more than the exchanging of physical commodities, it seems that there is something more complex taking place. Susan Willis, for example, has argued that though critics often describe Disneyland as a commodity in and of itself she suggests that the park 'problematizes the function and relationship of actor and audience; and with it,



worker (producer) and consumer' such that it acts as a site of production that both actualizes and legitimizes the ideology of consumer culture (Willis, 1991: 13). Willis' argument here parallels a line of thinking that has been significantly developed by Maurya Wickstrom in her various performance analyses of contemporary 'brandsapes' – a term she uses to refer to 'experiential [environments] through which the consumer comes to embody the resonances of the brand as feelings, sensations, and even memories' (Wickstrom, 2006: 2). Such spaces, she argues, de-emphasize the exchange of physical commodities (though this is still an important, if secondary, function) and instead encourage consumers to engage in forms of immaterial labour whereby they 'loan the brand's character the phenomenological resource of [their] bodies, playing out its fictions, making them appear in three dimensions *as if they were real*' (Ibid: 2, emphasis my own). Wickstrom's focus on the 'as if' is crucial to the development of my analysis here insofar as it places the issue of mimesis at the centre of our concerns regarding the park's ideological performance. Following Taussig, Wickstrom's analysis turns on the idea that brandsapes deploy mimesis as a means of '[suturing] the real to the really made up' (Taussig, 1993: 85). That is, the brandscape creates a material space that facilitates an embodied experience of the brand as a form of ideological fantasy. This kind of mimetic identification is at play in the Christmas Day parade, and is an essential to understanding the way that the park performatively reproduces the logic of commodity fetishism.

What kind of fiction is being played out in Disneyland? It is certainly correct that the park's various 'zones' work to establish a sense of mimetic identification with the feelings and resonances of the brand that Wickstrom speaks of. However, according to the analysis of philosopher Luis Marin, there

is a deeper ideological fantasy being enacted. For Marin, the fiction being performed at Disneyland is not simply the story of the brand itself but that of American capitalism as a whole. In other words, Disneyland functions as an ideological container through which the visitor experiences the ideology of consumer society as a founding 'mythic narrative' of America. Labelling the park a 'degenerate utopia,' he argues that:

[T]he visitors to Disneyland are put in the place of the ceremonial storyteller. They recite the mythic narrative of the antagonistic origins of society. They go through the contradictions while they visit the complex; they are led from the pirates' cave to an atomic submarine, from Sleeping Beauty's castle to a rocketship[...]By acting out Disney's utopia, the visitor realizes the ideology of America's dominant groups as the mythic founding narrative for their own society (Marin, 2005: 241)

The processes of mimetic identification that characterize the brandscape reflect a triumphant affirmation of capitalist prosperity in America in which the constitutive antagonisms of its history (the brutal legacy of settler colonialism, the economic depression of the 1930's, and the country's neo-colonial activities during and following the Cold War) are disavowed through the utopian narrative offered by the park. The ideological performance of the park can be understood as an instance of the really made up because it allows visitors to experience this fantasy *as if it were real*. This reading is vindicated in the *mise-en-scene* of Main Street USA (the physical and symbolic centre of the park); an idealized, fantasy image of American capitalism sheltered from the ravages of time in a state of perpetual economic prosperity. Important to note here is that the function of this fantasy is not to offer an escape from the real, but to offer a

return to it by way of its representation. As Baudrillard argues, 'Disneyland is presented as *imaginary* in order to make us believe *that the rest is real*[...]The imaginary of Disneyland is neither true nor false, it is a *deterrence machine set up in order to rejuvenate the fiction of the real in the opposite camp*' (Baudrillard, 1994: 12 - 13, emphasis my own). An oasis in the desert of the real, Disneyland expresses the logic of commodity fetishism not because the park *is* a commodity but because it participates in the commodification of the real under late-capitalism. The park produces a simulated, fantasy version of America that (to use the terms deployed by Baudrillard and Žižek) offers its visitors a *reencounter* with the 'real' America via the framework of the really made up.

### ***Interrupting the 'ahistoricizing' performance of the commodity***

If the 'degenerate utopia' of Disneyland reaffirms the tautological aphorism that Debord identifies as the totalizing logic of the spectacle's commodification of the real – 'that which appears is good, that which is good appears' (Debord, 1983: 12) – then Reverend Billy's sermon aims to return the audience's gaze to the constitutive antagonisms that lie just out of frame: the decline of independent businesses, the deindustrialization of America, and the outsourcing of production to the Third World. The playfully disruptive energy of interruption can be seen in the rhetorical content of Reverend Billy's sermon: 'Children, where is that product from?' he asks, 'Where is it made? Sri Lanka? China? The Philippines?' (Talen, 2006: 171). This passage can be understood as an attempt to re-narrate and re-situate the commodity in relation to the context in which it was produced. As Perucci notes, this approach runs counter to 'the seamless performance of the estranged present of the spectacle' and the logic

of commodity fetishism (Perucci, 2008: 320), in which the history of the commodity is erased. This is achieved by rhetorically invoking the social conditions that are effaced in the ahistoricizing performance of the commodity. These are represented as a series of ruinous, ghost-like images, such as the boarded-up, dilapidated shop fronts of the 'real' Main Street USA: 'Back in America, it's not this prosperous. The Main Streets are shuttered, empty, outsourced[...]Why is our Main Street dead?[...]Why is there no work? Why do we keep buying?' (Talen, 2006: 173). However, the process of interruption truly begins in the opening moments of the performance, in which Billy describes how 'thousands embraced – cheered for – the choir, apparently thinking that we were from some local church.' His account here illustrates the process of estrangement that followed as the joy of the visitors slowly turned to confusion and, in some cases, outright anger at their presence: 'Some people bent over laughing, clapping: thumbs upping.' Others became incensed: "'How can you do this on Christmas day?!'" (Ibid: 171). This description is reflective of the 'astonishment' that Benjamin uses to describe an audience's experience of epic theatre's defamiliarizing power (Benjamin, 1986: 235). Important to remember here, however, is that this moment of astonishment does not arise from the realization that Disney is an exploitative corporation. On the contrary, it is a response to what we might describe as the 'ambiguous legibility' of the intervention and its framing.

The intervention cannot be neatly integrated into the aesthetics of the wider performance event in which it is nested. On the one hand, the vivid green robes of the choir and their enthusiastic gospel songs appear to fit in with the joyful festivities of the parade. On the other hand, the group's 'stop shopping' message and the righteous fury with which Billy delivers his sermon operate in

tension with this celebratory tone. The introduction of the choir into the parade therefore subverts the framework according to which the audience is able to interpret and experience the original performance, prompting the kind of astonishment described by Billy. Moreover, in the passages cited above we can see how this sense of juxtaposition is intensified by Billy's sermon, which places two senses of reality into conflict with one another; the ideological fantasy of American prosperity is contrasted against the exploitative underbelly that supports it. It is in this way that the intervention continues the defamiliarizing impulse of the epic theatre tradition. It attempts to interrupt the machinery of theatrical representation and self-reflexively highlight the latter's collusion in staging, and sustaining, the ideological fantasy of the park. It is an attempt to defamiliarize the sense of prosperity symbolized by the park's *mise-en-scene* and perhaps induce in the spectator a sense of critical awareness of its constructed nature.

***Moving forward: The limits of revelation and the symptomatic critique of ideology***

The analysis presented above sketches out what might be understood as a 'symptomatic critique' of the park's ideological fantasy that draws attention to the constitutive antagonisms and contradictions that are repressed in the idealized image of American prosperity. The intervention attempts to interrupt the ideological performance of Disneyland (which, as noted above, mirrors the ahistoricizing performance of the commodity) by treating it as a symptom of some broader social and cultural malaise. The fantasy image of America is denounced as a false representation that masks the oppressive inequalities of the 'real' America that lies beyond its walls. However, we should be wary of the

extent to which this analysis might reinforce a problematic binary whereby the performance is positioned as a seemingly more 'authentic' antidote to the seemingly 'dishonest' theatricality of consumer culture. Indeed, the analysis of the park's ideological performance that I presented earlier should caution us against such a reading. For example, as Wickstrom notes, we are often well aware that the experience facilitated by the brandscape is a fiction that bears little resemblance to social reality itself, and yet 'we nevertheless flock to them, desiring the pleasure of materializing the brand's transformative promise as if it were our own' (Wickstrom, 2006: 3). At stake here is the paradoxical logic of ideology under late-capitalism. As I argued in Chapter 1, one of the most notable features of contemporary ideology is the way that it permits a certain level of cynical distance towards it. As Fisher notes, its role is not to propagandize on behalf of capital but 'to conceal the fact that the operations of capital do not depend on any sort of subjectively assumed belief' (Fisher, 2009: 33). One of the most important features of Žižek and Fisher's Lacanian-Marxist analysis is the emphasis they place on fantasy as a *support* for reality, rather than a distortion of it. As Žižek contends, it is 'an "illusion" which structures our effective, real social relations and thereby masks some insupportable, real impossible kernel' (Žižek, 2008: 45). This is why ideological fantasy should be understood as an instance of the really made up – it enables us to affectively 'buy into' the fiction of the brand whilst maintaining an awareness as to its essentially constructed, fantastical nature. All that it requires of us is that we continue to act *as if* we believe in it.

It is for this reason, Žižek argues, that we must avoid recourse to metaphors of 'demasking' or of 'throwing away the veils which are supposed to hide the naked reality' (Ibid: 25). Indeed, in his poetics of ruptural performance,

Perucci cautions against reading such practices as ‘revelatory’ performances that are able to unmask ‘hidden truths.’ Echoing the ideas of Fisher and Žižek, he suggests that our contemporary world is characterized by a certain awareness of the conditions of exploitation, arguing that we have developed ways of averting our gaze from them (Perucci, 2009: 11). The fetish character of the commodity (the ideological fantasy *par excellence*) might therefore be productively understood as an instance of Taussig’s ‘public secret’ – as something that is generally known ‘but cannot be articulated’ (Taussig, 1999: 5). Working within the terminology of my argument so far, I argue that the public secret can be understood as mediating the visibility of power within our contemporary distribution of the sensible. The paradoxical logic of the public secret is integrated into the structure of disavowal that underpins the ‘really made up’ – we are aware of its fantastical, constructed nature yet continue to identify with it nonetheless. Rather than hinting at a potential limit in Reverend Billy’s practice this seeming impasse brings us closer to a greater understanding of its political force insofar as it requires us to further interrogate just how the intervention is able to rupture the park’s ideological fantasy (instead of just denouncing its constructed nature).

With this in mind, the aim of ruptural performance (such as that practised by Reverend Billy) should be to intensify the contradictions of this paradoxical structure of belief by producing moments of rupture in which the fantasy can no longer sustain itself as a coherent whole. Such a critique of ideological fantasy might, as Fisher himself has suggested, involve ‘invoking the Real(s) underlying the reality that capitalism presents to us’ (Fisher, 2009: 43). This invocation of the Real cannot take place through a symptomatic critique that denounces fantasy as mere illusion precisely because it cannot be represented directly. It is

important to note here the distinction between the 'real' as I have been using it so far and the Lacanian Real that informs the work of Žižek and Fisher. Whilst the former is represented and produced via processes of ideological mediation, the latter is 'that which resists symbolization: the traumatic point which is always missed but none the less always returns' (Žižek, 2008: 74). Whilst it resists symbolization we can encounter the Real through 'fractures and inconsistencies in the field of apparent reality' (Fisher, 2009: 43). The eruption of the Real is always a moment in which the ideological fantasy that structures reality loses its symbolic and imaginative coherence. For this reason I now turn my attention to identifying and analyzing how such moments might arise in the intervention at Disneyland. In contrast to Perucci's theory of 'the necessary interruption' I propose that we might characterize these moments as 'unnecessary eruptions of the Real.' This does not mean that the two are mutually exclusive. Indeed, I am proposing that such moments of eruption arise out of the necessary interruption staged by Reverend Billy's ruptural performance. These eruptions of the Real are incalculable (though not entirely unexpected) because they emerge out of the contingencies of the performance event. Moreover, because the Real is impossible to symbolize, they can only be retroactively understood through reference to the fleeting ruptures in the fabric of the sensible that they create. I am particularly interested in how these moments might illuminate the structuring power of ideological fantasy considered as an example of Taussig's public secret.



***Unnecessary eruptions of the Real: Profane illumination and the transgression of the public secret***

I contend that these unnecessary eruptions took place in the moments leading up to and including Reverend Billy's arrest. The emergence of the police produced a blurring of the actual and the artificial that could not be neatly integrated into the representational structures that sustain the park's ideological fantasy, thus causing it to temporarily dissolve. In short, the intervention was able to produce a moment of performative excess that fleetingly transformed the context of its enunciation. This process was triggered by the disruptive presence of Reverend Billy and his choir. Jill Lane has commented that the group's disruptive effect on retail space can be linked to its willingness to stage 'the body's awkward resistance and failures to conform to [the] homogenising choreographies of consumption' (Lane, 2002: 61). In other words, the group's members' refusal to perform according to the script that mediates the ways in which bodies are expected to behave within retail space is what enables them to undermine its ideological performance. However, in the context of the Disneyland intervention the group did not refuse to perform, indeed, it's members performed in precisely the wrong way. The choir's presence within the park was, at first, far more challenging to decode for the audience because of the intervention's ambiguous legibility. As mentioned earlier, the group's carnivalesque appearance and the evangelical zeal of its musical repertoire meant that its members almost blended in with the ecstatic, celebratory theme of the parade. It is when the audience began to catch on to 'stop shopping' message of the music and Billy's sermon that a sense of confusion and astonishment began to take root: 'People were listening. You could see their faces light up when they caught our Stop Shopping message. Parents were

speaking to each other over the top of their kids' heads, discussing if this was OK' (Talen, 2006: 171).

These responses give us a clearer sense of the moment of eruption I am describing here and the political significance we might ascribe to it. As Perucci argues, ruptural performances

tend to confound the boundaries of the real and the artificial. The actual event of the performance is generated by means of artifice, in which audiences often don't initially realize that they are in a performance[...]audiences often first suspect that something isn't right, but are not sure if something is amiss.

Ultimately, though, the "breakthrough" occurs that things aren't normal, they are strange, and we are in the midst of an event. It is this eventness (and the anticipatory process of becoming [an] event) that enlivens the occasion of the here and now (Perucci, 2009: 9)

By inserting itself into the parade the group introduced a new layer of meaning (grounded in a refusal to positively identify with the brand and its affective resonances) into the original performance. The sense of astonishment, discussion and (in some cases) outright anger that this provoked in the audience is a response to the fact that the group's presence undermined the 'realness' of the really made up. That is, it fractured the theatrical and ideological coherence of the parade. Such a moment is valuable if only because, as Perucci observes, it gives rise to an enlivened sense of sociality and 'temporal immediacy' that Benjamin famously described as *Jetztzeit* – or time filled with 'the presence of the now' (Perucci, 2008: 319). The production of these moments of sociality – characterized by discussion, confusion, astonishment – is valuable for the defamiliarizing effect it has on retail spaces

that are primarily geared towards fostering a sense of mimetic identification between the consumer and the brand.

The interruptive and eruptive power of the intervention can be productively understood as a form of defacement. As Taussig writes in his book of the same name, the defacement of a sacred object or image has the effect of arousing ‘a strange surplus of negative energy[...]within the defaced thing itself’ (Taussig, 1999: 1). Moreover, this desecration of the sacred often produces ‘an effusion of proliferating defacements’ (Ibid: 25). I will be engaging with Taussig’s theory of defacement in more detail in Chapter 3, where I will be using it as one of my primary theoretical reference points for exploring the performance of subvertising. Here the concept offers us a useful touchstone for articulating how the political force of Reverend Billy’s intervention works to complicate the relationship between ideology, mimesis and the really made up that characterizes the park. Defacement is inextricably bound up in the sympathetic magic of mimesis; ‘defacement of the till-then-inert copy triggers its inherent capacity for life into life’ (Ibid: 24). The defacement of the Christmas day parade triggers the sense of enlivened sociality that I described above and, more significantly, a sense of performative excess that generates a spectacle of collapse. This process began when park security and local police surrounded and eventually arrested Billy. I will now quote his account of the intervention at length in order to give a sense of the powerful theatrical image that this created:

I get more exuberance from the singers. We’re turning around the giant Christmas tree at the end of the street and start back, now facing the Magic Castle, and I’m inside a circle of uniforms now but it only helps the drama. I’m taller, I’m still making eye contact with the crowd – I’m the raving head over the top of the police escort. Trying to go for that last tough yard[...]Its not long now.

The circle is tightening. I'm being read the Trespassing Act, the Disorderly Conduct Act...the word "Private Property" – the scurrilous refuge of the powerful is repeatedly invoked. There are maybe twenty-five cops. Several of them are giving us speeches that they are REAL police[...]They do have a problem in that so many people here are in costumes, from police to 1880s sideshow barkers and piano pounding dandies, and all the way up the fabulist ladder to the dancing hippos in Fantasia – all in the pay of the Mouse (Talen, 2006: 173)

The emergence of the police from behind the kitsch wooden façade of Main Street USA can be read as a moment of slippage between the representational, the real and the really made up in which the borders and boundaries that separate the park's fantasy from the real America beyond began to dissolve and blur into one another. This moment can be understood as an eruption of the Real in performance insofar as the moment described by Billy produced a fracture that destabilized the representational coherence of the park's ideological fantasy. Much like the sense of enlivened sociality discussed above, the action here undermined the organized control of mimesis that underpins the authority of the really made up insofar as it produced forms of action that fleetingly negated the sense of mimetic identification that the brandscape works to foster. More effectively than the rhetorical content of the sermon then (which was only able to draw attention to a disjuncture between fantasy and reality), this encounter is a moment of performative excess that collapses the boundaries between the symbolic and the real, the artificial and the actual.

This moment of collapse produces a moment of conflict between two senses of the world; one comprised of the park's peaceful fantasy image of American prosperity, and the other the repressive actions of the police. As

mentioned above, Perucci has elsewhere characterized these moments as instances of Benjamin's *Jetztzeit* – a 'time filled with the presence of the now' (Benjamin, 1999: 252). However though the German theorist's concept of 'profane illumination' (an idea he discusses in an essay on Surrealism) might more effectively convey the broader significance of the intervention. Benjamin describes profane illumination as 'a materialistic, anthropological inspiration, to which hashish, opium, or whatever else can give an introductory lesson' (Benjamin, 1986: 179). Though he only hints at the specifics of the term, profane illumination might be best understood as an instance of lucidity comparable to either religious or drug induced intoxication or (more accurately) to that of a dream. Though it operates as a fantasy space, Disneyland could never be described as dream-like. The symbols that animate the park signify nothing other than the Disney brand itself and are designed to convey a vague sense of imprecise, manufactured nostalgia. Emerging out of the excesses of performance profane illumination works to temporarily dissolve the representational structures that sustain the park's ideological fantasy and illuminates the very power of the public secret; the manner in which it works to mediate a given distribution of the sensible. The ecstatic and chaotic energy of the intervention however produces a series of moments that could well be understood as dreamlike; the hallucinatory, stream of consciousness sermon espoused by a televangelist-like preacher amidst a sea of cartoon characters and the emergence of the police from behind the quiet 1800s façade of Main Street USA. What this spectacle of collapse illuminates through the profanity of defacement is the efficacy of the public secret as such – the lengths that will be gone to in order to preserve the sacred space of the commodity in the face of the comedic violence of defacement.

## **Section Two: The Re-enchantment of Everyday Life**

### ***Transforming the space of circulation: Reverend Billy in the car park***

*It is December 2005. Reverend Billy and his choir are performing in the car park of a nameless shopping complex somewhere near Los Angeles, California. It is nearly Christmas so the choir is singing songs and preaching to the people coming and going from the complex of shops. Eventually they are approached by a security guard and politely asked to leave the car park. Instead of leaving the group continue singing and parading around the car park, gently flanked by the lone security guard. Following the lead of its director, Savitri D., the choir is led to a couple cradling a small baby. As the performers approach the infant the choir lower their voices and sing: 'What do we have to give? Do we shop til' we die? What would Jesus buy? What would Jesus buy?' Reverend Billy slowly approaches the father, who is holding the baby, rests a hand gently on his shoulder and prays: 'We ask you the fabulous creator, the Mother Father god that is not a product, come into the soul of this blessed baby, give this child and give its parents the loving power not to be lost to the mindlessness of consumerism.' After finishing his prayer, Billy leans closer to the father and softly whispers in his ear, asking 'What's the name of your child?' 'Roxanna Elizabeth' the father replies. Billy sings the name back to his choir, who reply with a repeating chorus of 'Roxanne Elizabeth,' before shifting gently into a gospel refrain: 'Amen. Amen. Amen. Bless the child.' As his choir's singing slowly fades into silence, Billy leans over and softly kisses the baby on her forehead. With a broad smile Billy gazes lovingly at the child as he slowly steps away, before the security guard returns and asks him to leave.*

### ***Dissensual reimaginings***

My analysis so far has focused on the resistant character of Reverend Billy and the Stop Shopping Choir's practice. The political force of the group's performative critique of commodity fetishism emerges in the way that it ruptures and transforms the ideological performance of retail space. Whilst this has gone some way towards identifying the radical potential of the group's work, my analysis has done little to address the pre-figurative politics that are expressed in many of its performances. By 'pre-figurative' I am referring to an approach to performance that gestures towards a sense of the world beyond capitalist realism's horizons of the thinkable. Such an idea returns us to the sense of the radical invoked by Kershaw, who identifies its emergence in the capacity of performance to '*reach beyond* existing systems of formalized power' in order to create 'currently unimaginable forms of association and action' (Kershaw, 1999: 18, emphasis in original). This section of my analysis is therefore concerned with exploring how the group's approach to culture jamming might foster the emergence of those radical forms of association that lie buried, *in potentia*, beneath the fabric of the sensible. In order to address this issue in a way consistent with the analytical approach I have adopted thus far I will begin by inverting the terms of my analysis. Instead of asking how the group's practice is able to subvert the authority of the really made up, I propose a different question: How do Reverend Billy and the Stop Shopping Choir use performance as a means of creating their own versions of the really made up that give rise to new forms of identification and association beyond the stifling confines of capitalist realism? By this, I am referring to the way that performance has the capacity to produce versions of the real that gesture towards a sense of the world that transgresses the principle of exchange that dominates everyday life

under capitalism. Now, a key point of my analysis here is that such performances do not attempt to literally represent a society beyond capitalism. Instead, they perform what Rancière has described as a *labour of fiction*; a playful reframing of the real that reconfigures the way that individuals are permitted to appear and relate to one another within a given distribution of the sensible (Rancière, 2010: 141). These new versions of the real can be considered instances of the really made up because, whilst they are fleeting and ephemeral, constructed and artificial, they produce meaningful transformations of the space in which they emerge.

One such example of this process in action is the encounter that took place between Reverend Billy and his choir and a family in a retail car park (described above). Like the intervention at Disneyland discussed earlier, the encounter took place during the group's tour of America, documented in the film *What Would Jesus Buy?*. Moreover, it can also be considered a 'necessary interruption' of retail space that attempts to reconfigure the context of its enunciation. The encounter was triggered by the intervention of a security guard, who attempted to escort Billy and his choir out of the car park whilst they were preaching their stop-shopping gospel to passersby. Instead of acquiescing to the guard's demands, the group was able to produce a quiet, fleeting moment of kinaesthetic empathy between two groups of people. Most significantly, what occurs in this space is a new form of exchange centered on reciprocity and mutual generosity. The introduction of this activity into the car park seems to be politically significant because, as I will argue shortly, the principles of reciprocity and mutual generosity stand in opposition to the abstractions of use value and exchange value that permeate the fabric of everyday life. In order to explicate this idea more clearly I draw on the concept



of symbolic exchange. This is an idea developed by Baudrillard, who appropriates the work of anthropologist Marcel Mauss (in particular his analysis of *potlatch* and gift exchange) to theorize a mode of exchange *beyond value*. I will be using the concept as a means of analyzing the encounter's transformative power and its broader political significance. I will be arguing – through this theoretical lens – that the encounter's political force emerges as an eruption of the 'non-identical' that subverts the logic of value and the principle of exchange. In order to do this, however, we first need to unpack the concept of symbolic exchange and understand the broader political and social significance that Baudrillard attaches to it.

### ***Beyond the logic of 'value': Potlatch and symbolic exchange***

The concept of *potlatch* is essential to understanding Baudrillard's theory of symbolic exchange. The concept finds its way into his writings via the work of French anthropologist, Marcel Mauss, and his landmark study of forms of exchange in so-called 'archaic' societies, *The Gift* (2000). The word refers to a specific gift giving ceremony held annually by the Native American Kwakiutl people, though Mauss uses the term as a catchall to cover similar rituals practiced by indigenous peoples in Samoa and New Zealand. Mauss identifies two key elements of *potlatch*: Firstly, the act of giving confers a certain amount of 'honour, prestige, and *mana*' upon the recipient. Secondly, the recipient is obliged to reciprocate such gifts 'under pain of losing that *mana*, that authority' (Mauss, 2000: 8). Thus, the obligation to give and the obligation to receive constitute the essence of *potlatch* (Ibid: 39 - 43). As such, *potlatch* performs an essential social function that expresses the collective, symbolic relationship between different tribal groups. Gift giving may in some cases reaffirm social

ties and alliances between tribes or begin a new cycle of conflict. Important to note here is that this sense of reciprocity is something entirely different to our own experiences of gift giving under capitalism. Writing as early as 1944, in his influential text that diagnoses the social ills of capitalism's burgeoning consumer culture, *Minima Moralia* (2005), Adorno wistfully remarks on how the practice of gift giving 'has degenerated to a social function exercised with rational bad grace, careful adherence to the prescribed budget, sceptical appraisal of the other and the least possible effort' (Adorno, 2005: 42). For Adorno, the prescribed nature of gift giving under capitalism mirrors the logic of exchange value, which renders all objects equivalent with one another. In contrast to this, the gift in Mauss' analysis is always a singular gesture that is bound up in the identity of the giver. As such, *potlatch* is underpinned by a very different kind of reciprocity to the rather hollow one described by Adorno; every gift must be returned with interest. Moreover, the wealth bestowed by the gift is not accumulated – it is more often dispersed (through the continual cycle of reciprocal giving) or in some cases destroyed by the recipient (Mauss, 2000: 37). The importance of all this is to stress two of the most important features of *potlatch* for my own argument. Firstly, it is a form of exchange that exists outside of the system of value (insofar as it cannot be conceived of in terms of exchange value or use value). Secondly, whilst the gift must be returned with interest, it is the very act of giving itself that is important, rather than the specific object or service given. In summation, each gift is a singular gesture that can never be fully reciprocated even though it demands to be.

For Baudrillard, *potlatch* represents a potential model of social relations founded upon reciprocity and based on a form of exchange that transcends (and in some cases, destroys) the very notion of value itself. Key to

understanding this is the way that he conceives the construction of value under capitalism. As Willis notes, Baudrillard's theory of value is founded upon a homology between the use value/exchange value binary and the theory of signification proposed by Ferdinand de Saussure, in which meaning is produced through the relationship between signifier and signified (Willis, 1991: 15). We should recall here that Baudrillard's critique of Marx centres on the idea that use value is just as much of an abstraction as exchange value insofar as it 'cannot be viewed as an innate function of the object, but as a social determination' that acts as an alibi for exchange value itself (Baudrillard, 1981: 136). Baudrillard sees such a process at play in the structure of signification: '[s]ignified (and referent),' he argues, '*are only an effect of the signifier.*' Neither the signified nor use value can be viewed as concrete realities expressed through the vehicles of signifier and exchange value respectively. Instead, 'they are only simulation models' which '*provide the latter with the guarantee of the real, the lived, the concrete*' (Ibid: 137, emphasis my own). In other words, commodities are not consumed to fulfil a concrete social need but to act as signifiers that convey 'the being and social rank of their possessor' (Ibid: 31). Similarly, in the context of signification, the mass media do not represent a concrete social reality, nor do they facilitate communication. Instead, they produce the signs of a real that does not exist (Ibid: 169). Interestingly, Baudrillard's analysis displays a remarkable fidelity to Marx's original analysis by extending the fundamental obfuscation of commodity fetishism towards society as a whole. At stake in his analysis then is the very construction of the real itself and, by extension, the illusion of social relations that it produces.

For Baudrillard, both value and meaning are abstractions that produce the illusion of a concrete reality through 'the law of the code' – a concept that he

uses to denote the reality principle itself (Ibid: 152). The abstracting, tyrannical logic of the code reduces everything to a series of equally exchangeable objects, abolishing any sense of particularity, non-identity and ambivalence in the process. Against this, Baudrillard posits the ambivalent singularity of symbolic exchange, 'of which the gift is our most proximate illustration':

In symbolic exchange[...]the object is not an object: it is inseparable from the concrete relations in which it is exchanged, the transferential pact that it seals between two persons; it is thus not independent as such. It has, properly speaking, neither use value nor (economic) exchange value. This is the paradox of the gift: it is on the one hand (relatively) arbitrary: it matters little what object is involved. Provided it is given, it can fully signify the relation. On the other hand, once it has been given – and *because* of this – it is *this* object and not another. The gift is unique, specified by the people exchanging and the unique moment of the exchange. It is arbitrary, and yet absolutely singular (Baudrillard, 1981: 64)

It is the singularity of symbolic exchange that enables it to resist the alienating effects of consumer culture by transgressing the logic of value and principle of exchange that dominates the experience of everyday life under late-capitalism. With these ideas in mind, we are better placed to situate the concept of symbolic exchange within the broader dynamics of my argument. Emerging through the dynamic, contingent and unpredictable unfolding of the autopoietic feedback loop that underpins the performance event, symbolic exchange enables the emergence of a reciprocal model of social relations that ruptures the tyranny of the code and the various abstractions that it produces. Activist practices that are able to produce such moments of rupture might achieve what

Fischer-Lichte has described as 'the reenchantment of the world' through 'the theatricalization and aestheticization of our environment' (Fischer-Lichte, 2008: 181); a defamiliarizing, reconfiguration of the sensible that transforms our perception of the real and gestures to a sense of the world beyond the stifling confines of capitalist realism.

***Transforming the space of circulation: Aesthetic community as monument to an anticipated present***

The sense of singular reciprocity that characterizes *potlatch* and the concept of symbolic exchange is a principle that runs throughout the work of Reverend Billy and the Stop Shopping Choir. Both concepts enable us to better understand the pre-figurative dimension of the group's performances and the political force that underpins them. As Lane notes, the group's practice can be characterized as 'an everyday renewable sacrifice,' characterized by the ceaseless donation of both time and bodily energy, that aims to realize 'new configurations, new revelations, new ways of being in public, being a public' beyond the narrow forms of subjectivity and community offered by consumer culture (Lane, 2002: 80). On many of its tours (including the one documented in *What Would Jesus Buy?*) the group frequently split its time between donating energy and resources to various activist causes by day, before performing for money in small theatre spaces and church halls by night. More important, however, is the way in which a sense of the symbolic emerges in the performance interventions staged by the group. We have already seen a sense of this in the intervention at Disneyland, in which the ambiguous legibility of the performance produced a moment of rupture in which the representational structures that sustain the park's ideological fantasy collapsed in on

themselves. However, whilst the intervention's disruptive ambiguity introduced the singularity of the symbolic into the park it lacked the sense of reciprocity characteristic of the gift. In contrast to this, the encounter in the retail car park is structured around a gradually intensifying sense of reciprocity between both groups of participants.

When watching the encounter unfold one is struck by how the physical dynamic that frames the relationship between both groups develops. The encounter is marked by a gradually intensifying sense of reciprocity and mutual generosity characteristic of symbolic exchange. Members of the choir begin by slowly moving towards the couple who at first seem confused by their presence but gradually allow them to enter their personal space. The hushed, gentle singing of the choir enfolds the immediate space, generating the kind of auratic atmosphere that facilitates the increasing proximity between the choir and the family. As if responding to this, Reverend Billy makes the decision to place his hand on the father's shoulder – an act of gentle physical contact that breaches the separation between the two groups. This gradual accumulation of affective intensities culminates in Reverend Billy kissing the baby on her forehead and reciting a short prayer for her. Both groups are visibly moved by the encounter; the couple and Reverend Billy have broad smiles on their faces and several members of the choir are filmed weeping as they sing. The political force of the encounter emerges in the way that the sense of intensifying reciprocity characteristic of symbolic exchange reconfigures the ways in which individuals appear and relate to one another within retail space. What began as a retail intervention warning consumers of the sins of consumption was transformed into a quiet, fleeting moment of kinaesthetic empathy and community between two groups of strangers in the most quotidian of non-places, the retail car park.

The term community is used here in two key ways. First, it is a community that is performatively constituted through the dynamic interactions between both sets of participants that underpin the workings of the autopoietic feedback loop. This community emerges as a temporary version of social reality that is founded upon a sense of collective responsibility for the wellbeing of the baby. Reverend Billy's request to 'the fabulous creator' to 'come into the soul of this blessed baby' and to give both her and her parents 'the loving power not to be lost to the mindlessness of consumerism' (What Would Jesus Buy?, 2007) is reflective of the spirit of this encounter. Indeed, the baby is *the* central figure upon which the entire encounter turns; all of the acts of physical reciprocity that characterize it are geared towards caring for her. The baby is the figure around which this new collective body is able to physically and symbolically constitute itself; the community is focused on protecting her from the pervasive alienation of consumer culture and her presence gestures towards a potential future beyond capitalism. In short, the collective sense of care that this establishes becomes the foundation for a form of collective solidarity that produces a new sense of being-together and being-in-the-world that transcends the narrow horizons of consumer culture. Secondly, this new community (which arises out of the transformation in the way bodies are made visible and relate to one another within retail space), is also an instance of what Rancière terms an aesthetic community – a community of sense woven together through the transformation of 'ordinary experience' into a new combination of sound, rhythm, image and space that produces a new sensory reality (Rancière, 2011: 56). This aesthetic community is dissensual for the way that it establishes a new regime of sense that it exists in opposition to the 'ordinary experience' from which it emerges. In other words, the solidarity and care of encounter, and the

community it engenders, stands in conflict with the desolation of the car park (with its incessant comings and goings of socially atomized subjects).

It is through this act of symbolic exchange and the aesthetic community that it produces that the political force of the encounter emerges. As Rancière notes in his discussion of the distinction between the police order and the practice of politics as dissensus, the latter is characterized by the way it reconfigures the former's monopoly over sense:

The police is that which says that here, on this street, there's nothing to see and so nothing to do but move along. It asserts that the space for circulating is nothing but the space of circulation. Politics, by contrast, consists in transforming this space of "moving along", of circulation, into a space for the appearance of the subject: the people, the workers, the citizens. It consists in re-figuring space, that is in what it to be done, to be seen and to be named in it (Rancière, 2010: 37)

We can usefully apply this thinking to the encounter in the car park. The retail car park is the space of circulation *par excellence* – a space dedicated to facilitating the seamless flow commodities and the consumers who purchase them. It is a space in which there is quite literally nothing to see. And yet, through a series of contingent moments, this space of circulation is transformed into one characterized by the emergence of 'the people' – represented here as a community of collective care, reciprocity and understanding.

As mentioned earlier, my reading of the encounter is based on footage taken from the documentary film, *What Would Jesus Buy?*. This means that the sense of reciprocity that I have ascribed to the encounter is influenced by my own mediatized encounter with the original performance event. For example,



the footage significantly heightens the encounter's sense of theatricality by directing our attention to small gestures (such as Billy placing his hand on the father's arm or a member of his choir crying during the performance) that end up taking on a new kind of visibility and significance. Reflecting on the mediatized (re)presentation of the encounter raises two important points for my analysis here. First, the encounter's significance as an instance of symbolic exchange is, to some extent, dependent upon a process of mediatization that subsequently makes it appear somewhat constructed and artificial. However, this observation needs to be situated within the broader argument of this chapter regarding the pre-figurative politics of the group's work and the efficacy of the really made up. Whilst the encounter and the community that it performatively produces is fleeting and ephemeral, constructed and artificial, it nonetheless can be read as a powerful representation of a possible model of social relations beyond capitalist realism's horizons of the thinkable. Secondly, the mediatized (re)presentation of the encounter importantly emphasizes what Rancière describes as the 'dual body' of an aesthetic community. This 'dual body' reflects the way in which the film, as an aesthetic object, 'actualizes the form of community that is its goal' in a way that transforms it into a monument to an absent, anticipated present:

The artistic "dissensual community" has a dual body. It is a combination of means for producing an effect out of itself: creating a new community between human beings, a new political people. And it is the anticipated reality of that people[...]To the extent that it is a dissensual community, an aesthetic community is a community structured by disconnection (Rancière, 2011: 59)

It is a fleeting, contingent community whose being together embodies a set of social relations that are yet to come. However, as an instance of the really made up the reciprocal model of social relations that characterizes the encounter subjects the dominant version of the real to the possibility of its negation and its potential transgression by a new community of people whose time is yet to come.

## **Conclusion**

Through both of the examples analyzed above we have seen how Reverend Billy and the Stop Shopping Choir's performative critique of commodity fetishism is able to produce moments of transformation that resist the ideological fantasy of consumer culture and performatively materialize forms of aesthetic community founded upon social relations that take us beyond capitalist realism's horizons of the thinkable. Whilst these two performances are rather different from one another I argue that they can both be understood as moments of rupture that challenge and change the performance of retail space. Indeed, the two central concepts at play here – the resistant and the pre-figurative – are important ideas for my argument going forward. We can see how the political force of culture jamming emerges not only through acts of negation, but also through powerful moments of transformation that create forms of appearance, association and action that run counter to neoliberalism's distribution of the sensible. Moreover, I suggest that the kinds of sociality that they bring forth are important reminders of the capacity for culture jammers to move beyond the straightforward critique of the spectacle towards transforming the experience of everyday life. These ideas will form a core part of my analysis in Chapter 3, in which I examine the performance-like artworks of the

contemporary subvertising movement. Extending some of the ideas developed here I will be identifying similar moments of rupture and transformation. These, I suggest, allow us to better understand the performance *of* subvertising and its political force – which can be glimpsed in the way that such interventions performatively affirm the right to the city in resistance to the abstracting logic of the spectacle.

## Chapter 3: Subvertising and the Right to the City

### Introduction

In November 2016, subvertising collective Special Patrol Group, hacked over four hundred advertising boards on London Underground train carriages, replacing the original adverts with its own subvertisements. Entitled 'Advertising Shits In Your Head' (also the title of a pamphlet authored by the group in collaboration with other activists), the campaign functioned as a performative manifesto for the international subvertising movement. Each of the four pieces outlined the political rationale behind the group's work. One statement reads: 'Removing, replacing and defacing advertising is not vandalism. It is an act of tidying up that is both legally and morally defensible.' Another emphatically argues: 'The visual realm is a public realm. It belongs to everyone, so no one should be able to own it' (Figure 1) (Special Patrol Group, 2016). Special Patrol Group's intervention can be considered a tactical intervention into the production of urban space that draws attention to the ubiquity of corporate advertising on public transport. It is a diffuse, marginal performance that appropriates the city's transport infrastructure as a means of resisting the spectacle's unceasing colonization of everyday life. Indeed, it is through this simple act of *détournement* that the images take on a self-consciously performance-like quality; by appropriating public transport as a site for staging its critique the group was able to reach a potentially massive audience. Moreover, the rhetorical composition of each statement self-consciously places the act of performance at the centre of their message by asserting the importance of defacement as a means of affirming a sense of collective ownership over the visual realm and the city in general. With this in mind, we

might argue that the intervention performs *through* the city whilst also using this as a means of self-reflexively commenting on the performative composition of urban space itself.

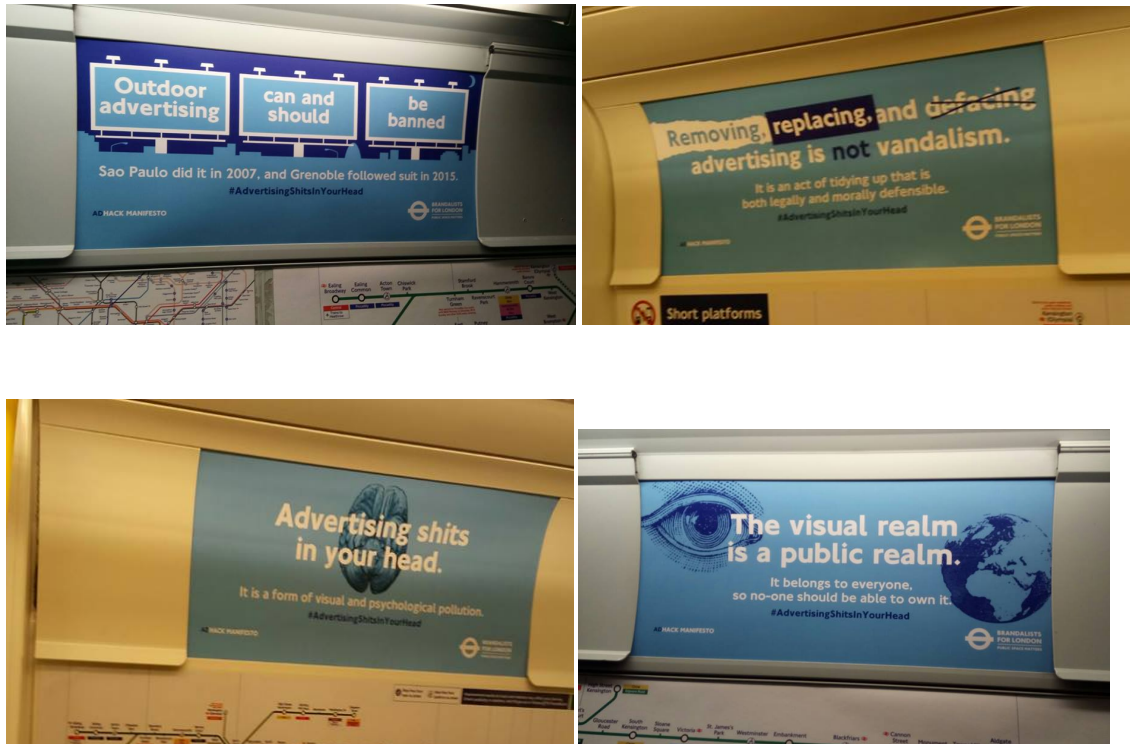


Figure 1 (photo credit Special Patrol Group)

Subvertising – defined here as the subversion of public advertising by means of appropriation and defacement – is one of the most widely known and frequently encountered forms of culture jamming discussed in this thesis. Through the appropriation and manipulation of the signs, symbols and representational practices used by the advertising industry activists use subvertising as a means of contesting the presence of corporate power in public spaces. It should be noted here that the practice is notably different from the other case studies discussed in this thesis insofar as its practitioners create visual artworks and deface advertising billboards rather than stage ‘live’ performances. Indeed, it is for this reason that I will be primarily using photographic documentation (rather than thick description) of the examples discussed in this chapter as a means of structuring my analysis. Aside from the work of AdBlock Bristol (whose

participatory artwork I had the good fortune of experiencing first-hand) all the artworks discussed and analyzed in this chapter were encountered second-hand via their photographic documentation. In many cases these artworks came to my attention via the various social media platforms that their creators use to publicize and celebrate their work. I do not have the space here to reflect on how this way of encountering and learning about subvertising has influenced my analysis of the work and the efficacy that I attach to it. However, it is worth noting here that increased popularity and presence of subvertising in public space is reflective of the increasingly 'viral' nature of activism in the performative society. In our contemporary historical moment activists working in a range of environments now create interventions that are designed to 'perform well' on the various social media platforms that characterize everyday life under late-capitalism. Future scholars may wish to explore how the complex interplay between the 'live' and the 'online' aspects of culture jamming has shaped its aesthetic composition and the practice's broader socio-cultural significance. For the purposes of this analysis, however, I will be focusing only on the 'live' component of this relationship by attending to the manifold ways in which subverters use defacement as a means of intervening in the production of urban space.

With these considerations in mind performance represents an incredibly useful lens through which to analyze and articulate the political force of subvertising. As demonstrated in the short section of analysis presented above, many of the artworks and interventions covered in this chapter exhibit distinctly performative or performance-like qualities. Foregrounding these qualities in analysis is key to understanding the radical potential of these examples, which, I argue, lies in the way that they use *détournement* and defacement to

performatively affirm a sense of 'the right to the city' (an idea that I draw from the work of Henri Lefebvre, whose work I shall discuss shortly).

Whilst subvertising is most commonly associated with the genesis of culture jamming the practice has been influenced by other visual art practices such as graffiti and street art. The rhetorical style of subvertising (in which activists appropriate and subvert the linguistic tropes of advertising) can be traced back to the slogans painted throughout the streets of Paris during the events of May '68. The most famous of these phrases, 'Beneath the pavement, the beach', is attributed to the lesser-known Situationist René Viénet (Wark, 2015: 148). Mark Dery argues that the formal development of subvertising was pioneered in the 1980s by a diverse range of groups including the Guerrilla Girls (who used provocative posters to articulate their critique of the patriarchal institutions of the contemporary art world), Gay rights activists ACT UP and Gran Fury, and the Billboard Liberation Front (Dery, 2010: n.p). Moreover, the ideological critique articulated in many of the examples of subvertising discussed in this chapter is paralleled in the work of British street artist Banksy, whose images take aim at consumer culture, 'the social organization of mass society, and the contradictions arising from late-capitalism's attempts to smooth over the rough edges of urban experience'. This critique is frequently articulated in a visual style that 'owes much to the Situationist interventions of the 1960s and the avant-garde use of montage' (Thompson, 2010: 49). The use of montage and the critique of late-capitalism's appropriation of urban space that underpins the work of many street artists can also be found in the interventions staged by the contemporary subvertising movement. Whilst I will be focusing exclusively on the latter in this chapter I would invite other scholars to consider exploring this connection in more detail.

At a more pragmatic level subvertising warrants inclusion in this thesis because of the extensive role it has played in the development of culture jamming as a critical sensibility. Whilst it is unclear where and when the term first emerged, Mark Dery has claimed to be the first writer to situate the practice within the broader phenomenon of culture jamming. Interestingly for the purposes of this analysis, he defines subvertising as ‘the production and dissemination of anti-ads that deflect [the advertising industry’s] attempts to turn consumer attention in a given direction’ (Dery, 2010: n.p). Dery’s analysis here implicitly positions subvertising as a form of ideological critique that attempts to negate the consumer’s performative identification with the fantasy of commodity fetishism. Taking his cue from the legacy of the Situationists and Umberto Eco’s theory of ‘semiological guerrilla warfare’ (C.F. Eco, 1990), he suggests that the political significance of subvertising lies in the way that it is able to introduce subversive meaning into the spectacle of consumer culture whilst simultaneously dismantling the very structures upon which this system rests (Dery, 2010: n.p). Several scholars have repeated this symptomatic reading of subvertising, focusing on its capacity to reveal the ‘hidden’ truth behind corporate branding and the way that *détournement* is used to intensify and highlight the contradictions inherent in many advertising images (Carducci, 2006; Haiven, 2007). Such analyses focus on exploring the extent to which subvertising is able to meaningfully challenge or change consumer behaviour by exposing them to this information. For example, Vincent Carducci has argued that Adbusters’ preoccupation with authenticity means that they ironically function as a kind of ‘consumer avant-garde’ that both challenges and rejuvenates the advertising industry (Carducci, 2006: 119). This line of thinking is also pursued by Emrah Irzik, who argues that subvertising is limited because



it relies on the same mode of representation that it aims to critique, thus failing to move beyond a 'permanently defensive position' that is unable to enact meaningful change (Irzik, 2010: 144). Whilst I find both analyses valuable for the way that they situate the aesthetic strategies of subvertising within a broader sociological context neither engage with the performance *of* subvertising. My analysis in this chapter is concerned with theorizing the performance of subvertising and its political force by attending to its relationship with urban space. To recall my discussion of Rancière in Chapter 1, the principle of aesthetic separation means that an artwork's performance within a given context – a specific distribution of space, time and sight that conditions its appearance – is essential to understanding its political significance (Rancière, 2010: 141). With this in mind, the politics of subvertising cannot be understood outside of its relationship with urban space; the different ways in which it appropriates outdoor advertising space and performs *through* the city. Attending to this dimension of the practice will lead us to a greater understanding of its potential limits and its political force.

As performance scholars have consistently argued, when we refer to 'the city' we are not referring to a physical object, but a dynamic entity. A city is made up not only of its buildings and other physical structures but also the laws and institutions that govern it, the forms of social practice that animate it, and, finally, the representations that form our imaginative conception of its cultural, political and historical identity (Schipper, 2014: 22). The dynamic character of the city leads Carol Martin to suggest that cities can be understood as 'live performances' in which the behaviours of its inhabitants 'gives cities their unique character, ambience and tone' (Martin, 2014: 11). This sense in which the city is composed of a multiplicity of performances that contribute to its

identity is why Henri Lefebvre likens its production to a poetic, collective activity: '[T]he city is an oeuvre, closer to a work of art than to a simple material product' that is subject to continual reproduction (Lefebvre, 1996: 101). Whilst the logic of capitalist production and accumulation inscribes meaning onto the city 'from above,' so to speak, it exists in tension with 'the succession of acts and encounters' that animate the city:

This urban life tends to turn against themselves the messages, orders, constraints coming from above. It attempts to *appropriate* time and space by foiling dominations, by diverting them from their goal, by deceit[...]In this way the *urban* is more or less the *oeuvre* of its citizens instead of imposing itself upon them as a system, as an already closed book (Lefebvre, 1996: 117)

Subvertising forms one of the many practices of appropriation that reclaim the right to the city against the actions of capital. Indeed, performatively affirming the right to the city is a key concern of the contemporary subvertising movement, whose work can be seen as a response to the commodification of urban space and everyday life under late-capitalism. I argue that, when read in this way, the performative qualities of subvertising come more firmly into view. I contend that the performance of subvertising consists in the way it appropriates the performance of outdoor advertising as a means of drawing attention to the ubiquity of corporate power in public space. Its political force lies in the way that these acts of tactical appropriation have the potential to transform the spectator's experience of the city in a manner that negates the sense of abstraction that predominates through the spectacle's colonization of everyday life.

For example, in 2012, the UK based subvertising collective, Brandalism, affixed public health warnings (in the style used on tobacco packaging) to several advertising billboards across the UK. One billboard advertising the Peugeot 208 car was given the simple statement 'Warning: Advertisements manipulate you on a subconscious level' (Figure 2) (Brandalism, 2012). The statement is placed in dialogue with the image of the car in a manner that radically alters the meaning of the image. The phrase that accompanies the image of the car - 'New Peugeot 208: Let Your Body Drive' – is transformed from an affirmation of individual freedom to a darkly ironic comment on the way that advertising attempts to colonize the consumer's sense of self by submitting their body to the brand. Whilst this simple act of defacement is not especially complex it is significant for the way that it directly engages with the ideological power of advertising in shaping individuals' experience of everyday life. More significantly still, it reflects the way that subvertisers use defacement as a means of writing themselves into the urban environment through the performative alteration and modification of public advertising spaces. Beyond attempting to reveal the hidden truth behind the spectacular veneer of corporate branding subvertising is able to perform a far more radical gesture; it reclaims public space as a site for articulating a critique of neoliberal hegemony, for expressing a sense of the world beyond neoliberalism and for transforming the spectator's experience of everyday life.



Figure 2 (photo credit Brandalism)

We can already observe here a number of important connections between subvertising and the ruptural performances of Reverend Billy and the Stop Shopping Choir. Both can be read as necessary interruptions that attempt to rupture the estranged present of the spectacle by introducing a sense of the political into everyday life. However, where the former draw on the disruptive power of spectacle as a means of interrupting the performance of retail space, the contemporary subvertising movement is characterized by diffuse, marginal, performance-like interventions that subtly insert themselves into the urban landscape via the numerous advertising boards that now populate the neoliberal city. However, both groups are concerned with producing a critique of consumer culture centered on negating the pervasive hold it has over our daily lives. As such, my argument unfolds following a structure similar to the one used in Chapter 2. In section one I outline some of the core theoretical

perspectives that inform my analysis. I begin by discussing the ideological function of advertising. Building on some of the ideas developed in Chapter 2, I focus on the idea that the presence of outdoor advertising in urban space enables the logic of commodity fetishism to penetrate the fabric of everyday life. I conclude that it functions as a form of ideological interpellation that, following Marxist philosopher, Louis Althusser, transforms individuals into subjects of ideology (Althusser, 1984: 48). Following this, I relate these ideas to work of Henri Lefebvre and his notion of abstract space. I argue that public advertising contributes to the fragmentation, homogenization and hierarchical ordering of urban space characteristic of late-capitalism. With these ideas established, I turn my attention to theorizing the 'event-like' structure of subvertising. Drawing on Michael Taussig's writing on defacement, I analyze an artwork created for one of Brandalism's UK interventions – Stanley Donwood's *Stop. Right. There.* – in order to outline the key characteristics that constitute the event-like structure of subvertising. I suggest that one of the primary features of subvertising is that way that it actively anticipates the gaze of the spectator. Drawing on the ideas outlined in Rancière's essay, *The Emancipated Spectator*, I argue that the political meaning of such artworks arises through the dynamic, intersubjective encounter between spectator and object. In this way, subvertising affirms the spectator as an active participant in the production of meaning. I conclude that this understanding of subvertising both foregrounds its performative qualities and, more significantly, moves us away from a narrow conception of the practice that limits its political significance to the straightforward communication of meaning.

With these ideas established, my analysis in section discusses two case studies that demonstrate the resistant political force of subvertising. I begin with

Darren Cullen's *Become A Suicide Bomber* (2017), a subvertisement that satirizes royal navy advertising campaigns. Drawing on Michael Taussig's theory of defacement, I argue that the artwork turns the ideological performance of advertising against itself and, in doing so, performs a 'drama of revelation' that illuminates the State's reliance upon representation as a means of maintaining its legitimacy. Following this, I turn to the events of COP21, the UN climate change conference held in Paris in 2015. My analysis focuses on the citywide intervention staged by Brandalism during the conference, in which they erected hundreds of subvertisements across Paris in order to protest the event's 'greenwashing' by corporate power. I argue that the intervention is a performative re-writing of urban space that affirms the right to the city in response to the State's repression of civil disobedience. I conclude my analysis in section three by focusing on two examples of subvertising as forms of 'tactical misuse' – a concept that I draw from Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life* (2011). Both examples – the public acts of defacement staged by French subvertising group, Les Déboulonneurs, and a piece of participatory art created by AdBlock Bristol in 2018 – use the tactical misuse of advertising space to transform the performance of the city in a manner that affirms defacement as a legitimate political tool that is essential to securing the right to the city. Significantly, both examples explicitly integrate 'live' performance and participation into their structure, resulting in a new mode of subvertising that amplifies the practice's event-like qualities in new and politically significant ways.

## **Section One: Advertising, Social space and the Logic of Commodity Fetishism**

### ***The ideological performance of advertising: The aesthetic promise of use value and interpellation***

The presence of outdoor advertising in urban spaces has become a ubiquitous feature of the contemporary neoliberal city. This is because it performs an essential ideological function in the context of consumer society that enables the logic of commodity fetishism to penetrate the fabric of everyday life. If the ahistoricizing performance of commodity fetishism obfuscates the social conditions that produced the object, then advertising uses representation as a means of filling this 'empty space' by inscribing the commodity with a new set of meanings that signify its potential use value (Jhally, 2000: n.p). In other words, as Wolfgang Fritz Haug argues, advertising acts as a vehicle through which the commodity is endowed with an 'aesthetic promise of use value' that is essential to guaranteeing its capacity to operate as an object of exchange: 'Whoever controls the product's appearance can control the fascinated public by appealing to them sensually' (Haug, 1987: 17). What Haug and Jhally are describing here is the way that representation is used to create the *appearance* of use value (an idea we have already covered in Chapter 2 via Baudrillard's writing on value and signification). Advertising enables the 'empty' commodity to embody a set of idealized social relations and values despite the fact that, as an object of exchange, these constitute an obfuscation of the underlying reality that produced it. As Jhally continues, contemporary advertising thus focuses on using the aesthetic promise of use value as a signifier of social status and lifestyle by linking specific commodities to the values and practices associated with a broader 'consumption community.' Commodities are presented as

providing 'magical access' to 'a previously closed world of group activities' (Jhally, 2000: n.p). The aesthetic promise of use value therefore acts as the practical guarantee of the commodity's sign value; its capacity to designate a particular form of social reality by signifying 'the social rank and being' of the object's possessor (Baudrillard, 1981: 29 - 31). In short, by expressing the logic of commodity fetishism advertising plays a key role in the production of capitalist realism and its constitutive forms of subjectivity, in which the individual is defined via their participation in consumer culture (as opposed to other forms of collective action and community). The ideological performance of advertising is thus premised upon constructing a secondary reality by fostering a sense of identification with the values and ideals connoted by the commodity.

Again, this sense of identification has less to do with the physical features of the commodity than with the affective resonances that it is able to embody thanks to the 'magical work' performed by the advertisement. What this analysis offers us is a set of tools for thinking about how the ideological performance of advertising operates as a form of 'interpellation' that is implicated in the symbolic construction of the real. Indeed, it is through the concept of interpellation – a term used extensively by Marxist philosopher, Louis Althusser – that we can better understand the full implications of this process. Broadly speaking, Althusser uses the term to theorize the way that ideology transforms 'individuals' into 'subjects.' The famous example that he uses to illustrate this process is a scene in which a police officer calls out to an individual on the street by shouting 'Hey, you there!' It is the very act of being hailed by ideology (in this case represented by the police officer) that the individual is transformed into a subject of it. This is because, Althusser argues, the individual '[recognizes] that the hail was "really" addressed to him, and that



“it was *really him* who was hailed” (Althusser, 1984: 48). Importantly for the purposes of this analysis, interpellation takes place in the most quotidian of social situations. Indeed, for Althusser, the most powerful moments of interpellation occur in seemingly *non-ideological* contexts, precisely because we are unaware of being within its reach (Ibid: 49). As Terry Eagleton has noted, there is a performative quality to interpellation insofar as Althusser likens the ‘act’ of hailing to the transformative power of the speech act (Eagleton, 2007: 19). The transformative character of interpellation might be usefully placed in dialogue with the analysis presented above. If, as Jhally and Haug contend, advertising constructs a fantasy version of the real independent of the social conditions that produced the commodity, then this performative function is completed by the way that it transforms individuals into subjects of that reality.

Before I move on I want to highlight a key idea regarding the analysis above and subvertising. I contend that subvertising appropriates the ideological performance of advertising. In other words, the practice can be understood as a *détournement* of its performative structure in a manner that self-reflexively draws attention to its interpellative function. In the context of this analysis, this idea is best exemplified in both Stanley Donwood’s *Stop. Right. There.* and Darren Cullen’s *Become A Suicide Bomber*. Both examples knowingly draw attention to the interpellative function of advertising in a manner that resists the abstraction of urban space. The examples discussed in section three of this chapter approach this task in a different way. Both Les Déboulonneurs and AdBlock Bristol subvert the ideological performance of advertising by performing defacement as a self-consciously political act. In other words, performance and participation are explicitly used to rupture the interpellative function of advertising and, in doing so, transform the spectator’s experience

and use of urban space. My aim here is to emphasize that the event-like qualities of subvertising (to be discussed in more detail shortly) emerge through activists' critical engagement with the ideological performance of advertising.

### ***Advertising, abstraction and the production of social space***

The performative quality of advertising's ideological performance also has a significant impact on the production and experience of urban space under late-capitalism. This is a process that follows the logic of the spectacle described by Debord, who argues that the latter's colonization of everyday life creates 'a unified space' characterized 'an extensive process of *banalization*' that destroys 'the autonomy and quality of places' (Debord, 1983: 165). What Debord is arguing here is that the 'estranged present' of the spectacle has a spatial, as well as temporal, dimension that actively shapes the way in which space is produced and experienced. It is a process of abstraction whereby the configuration of space is more and more directed according to the logic of the spectacle and the principle of exchange. This latter principle, we should recall, reduces qualitatively different objects to equally exchangeable units within a generalized system of equivalence. It is because of this principle that space displays an increased tendency towards homogenization. As McKenzie Wark has argued, Debord's writing on spectacle and his work with the Situationists had a strong influence on Henri Lefebvre's writing on the relationship between space and everyday life (Wark, 2015: 95). For the purposes of this analysis, I am interested in the way that Lefebvre provides us with a critical vocabulary for describing the social context in which subvertising operates and to which it responds, in particular his writing on the relationship between abstraction and social space. Abstraction here is understood as a tendency that undergirds the

production of space under capitalism. It is a process that tends towards fragmentation, homogeneity and the reproduction of capitalism's deeply hierarchical social relations.

According to Lefebvre, social space is not a natural or empty structure that pre-exists the activities that take place within it. Rather, it is a multidimensional, contradictory entity that is continually (re)produced according to the broader forces of production that structure society (Lefebvre, 1991: 77). Social space is both an object of consumption and a productive resource; it is a political instrument that facilitates the state's control over society and reproduces the hierarchical ordering of space according to property relations; a collection of symbolically significant 'institutional and ideological superstructures'; and, finally, a site of potentialities – 'of works and of reappropriation' – that contest the dominant orderings of space and '[inaugurate] the project of a different space' (Lefebvre, 1991: 349). These latter points regarding the institutional and ideological superstructures and the potentialities that animate social space are essential to understanding the political force of subvertising. As I will argue shortly, subvertisers recognize the deeply ideological role played by advertising in the abstraction of social space. Moreover, the moments of transformation constitutive of the practice's political force emerge through the way that it actively engages with the 'potentialities' of social space highlighted by Lefebvre.

The ideological role played by advertising in the production of social space comes more firmly into view when we attend to the notion of abstraction. As Chris Butler notes, Lefebvre uses the term to describe the way that social space is commodified in a way that reflects the principle of exchange. Echoing Marx's argument regarding the logic of the commodity form abstraction breaks

space down into discrete, equivalent units that are divided according to their social functions (Butler, 2012: 141). The hierarchical nature of social space under capitalism is reflected in the way that this process of commodification divides space into residential and commercial areas, sites of production and consumption, spaces of leisure and sites of social containment (Lefebvre, 2003a: 210). It is within this context that advertising contributes to the abstraction of social space according to the logic of exchange. For Lefebvre, it transforms urban space into 'a network organized for and by consumption' that subjects time outside of work to 'the same system[...]of yield and profit' that characterizes the productive forces (Lefebvre, 2003b: 20). Today, this spectacle of consumption reaffirms the values of individualism, self-entrepreneurialism and material wealth characteristic of neoliberal ideology. Many advertisements reproduce existing social hierarchies through the objectification of women's bodies or reactionary representations of ethnic minorities. The constant stream of advertising images that one encounters when travelling through urban areas by foot or by car can be likened to a continual process of ideological interpellation whereby 'the neoliberal ethic of intensive possessive individualism, and its cognate of political withdrawal from collective forms of action becomes the template for human socialization' (Harvey, 2008: 32). Indeed, as Wark suggests, this 'colonization of everyday life by the commodity form diminishes the role of collective experience' (Wark, 2015: 99). The possibility of collective experience – an aesthetic experience in which the collective emerges as a legitimate political subject – forms a central part of securing the right to the city.

For Lefebvre, such moments (or situations) can be reclaimed through practices that transform the fragmented, homogenized and hierarchical

abstraction of social space into 'a creative and fulfilling aesthetic experience, which encompasses "the full and complete *usage*" of space by its inhabitants' (Butler, 2012: 392). In other words, the right to the city is affirmed through practices that are able to rupture the abstraction of social space by reintroducing a sense of sociality that runs counter to the fragmented and homogenized ordering of space. In the sphere of political activism this role has been traditionally fulfilled by protest actions such as marches and occupations. These forms of activism perform the 'full and complete usage' of the city by using it as a site for dramatizing a sense of ownership over its horizon of meaning. As Sophie Nield has argued, the political force of such activities lies in the way that they implicate themselves within the continual reproduction of social space, to the extent that 'the resonances of performance remain long after the event itself is over, and form part of a differently configured relationship between site and event' (Nield, 2012: 223). The new meanings that are generated through the dynamic interaction between site and event become inscribed within the former's 'horizon of meaning.' This latter concept (also theorized by Lefebvre) is defined as 'a specific or indefinite multiplicity of meanings, a shifting hierarchy in which one, now another meaning comes to the fore[...]by means of a particular action' (Lefebvre, cited in Nield, 2012: 231, emphasis my own). The right to the city affirmed by subvertising resides in rupturing this sense of homogeneity by reintroducing a sense of the political into the production of urban space. In order to do this we need to better understand the event-like structure of subvertising by attending to the ways in which these artworks perform within the social real.

***The event-like structure of subvertising: Defacement and the drama of revelation***

*The most striking thing about advertisements is that you do not notice them. As I walk through the streets I am confronted by such an array of advertising images that I attempt to filter them out. This is the natural response to the relentless visual pollution that I encounter almost every day. I do not let my gaze settle on a single one and instead attempt to focus on the minutiae in between: the shards of light that burst through the small gaps in the trees; the strange shapes and angles produced by the peculiar mixture of high-rise office blocks and old buildings; the faces of the commuters who pass me on their way to work. I am so well-practiced at not looking at these images that I no longer notice when my gaze does eventually settle on them, nor do I appreciate the fact that they still linger on the peripheries of my field of vision. This is the treacherous potential of the marginal – it is that which hides in plain sight and escapes contemplation, creeping into my consciousness the moment that I discard it as unremarkable. As my gaze slides between these images I find myself drawn to one in particular that stands out from the concrete grey of the city. In front of me is a black and white pathway bordered on either side by a dense wall of gnarled woodland trees. The trees form an archway that shelters the path, which slowly extends into the distance until it recedes beyond my field of vision. At the foot of the frame (where the path is at its widest) reads a single command: ‘STOP. RIGHT. THERE.’ I cannot be sure what made me stop first – the command or the mysterious path in front of me. Whatever the case the image feels faintly dreamlike in its inscrutability – it attracts my attention precisely because it suggests other possible directions of travel beyond my journey to work, yet the*

*disembodied command at the heart of the image repels me from it and arrests my movement in the moment of seeing.*

As I argued earlier, this analysis is concerned with theorizing the political force of subvertising in terms of the way that it performs through the city. This kind of analysis requires us to reflect on the way the practice can be thought of in explicitly performative terms and to the significance of the encounters that are fostered between the spectator and artwork. Earlier, I argued that the political force of subvertising lies in the way that it is able to performatively affirm the right to the city by contesting the abstraction of social space. I would now like to deepen my analysis by outlining the event-like structure of subvertising in relation to the concept of 'defacement.' Defacement has become an important political and aesthetic concept that has shaped the practice of many of the groups discussed in this chapter (an idea that I will outline below). As such, my use of the word encompasses several different versions of it including the addition of new textual elements to existing advertising images (such as Brandalism's practice of affixing health warnings onto outdoor advertising, or when Les Déboulonneurs scrawl graffiti onto advertising billboards), the dissemination of subvertisements that consciously satirise and subvert pre-existing images (such as Darren Cullen's *Become A Suicide Bomber*), and the creation of entirely new artworks that do not necessarily refer to anything outside of themselves yet constitute acts of defacement because of their placement within spaces reserved for advertising images. An example of the latter can be seen in Stanley Donwood's *Stop. Right. There.* (Donwood and Brandalism, 2014), described above (Figure 3).



Figure 3 (photo credit Brandalism)

Taussig's theory of defacement serves as a useful concept for theorizing the event-like structure of subvertising. It implies that subvertising – when conceived in terms of defacement - has the capacity to defamiliarize our perception of advertising by drawing attention to its theatricalized construction. In the opening pages of *Defacement*, he writes that '[w]hen the human body, a nation's flag, money, or a public statue is *defaced*, a strange surplus of negative energy is likely to be aroused within the defaced thing itself' (Taussig, 1999: 1). He continually returns to this central motif throughout his analysis, in which defacement unleashes sensations of pleasure and disgust, curiosity and



contempt. If *détournement* describes the conceptual process underpinning the aesthetics and politics of subvertising then defacement is a means of giving form to its performativity. When encountering a defaced object one is always aware of the presence of the subject who both observes and acts upon their surroundings, thus treating urban space as a canvas through which to write him or herself into the production of social space. This sense of performativity and theatricality is identified by Taussig through his frequent references to the relationship between defacement and mimesis, in which he argues that the defacement of 'the till then inert copy triggers its inherent capacity for life into life' (Ibid: 24). In other words, defacement serves to 'reanimate' everyday objects to the extent that they begin to 're-perform' for our gaze in new and unfamiliar ways. Taussig likens this process to a 'drama of revelation' which 'amounts to a transgressive uncovering of the secretly familiar' (Ibid: 51). This drama of revelation is not concerned with revealing the 'true' reality that lies behind the theatrical mask of power but in drawing attention to the contradictions inscribed into the mask itself. Understanding and unpacking the manifold ways in which this drama of revelation takes place forms a core part of my analysis regarding the event-like structure of subvertising. I contend that, by rearranging the visual composition of advertising images through the addition of new textual elements, subvertisements produce moments in which the 'secretly familiar' is rendered strange and uncanny.

These small, symbolic acts of defacement produce minor alterations within the urban through the production of new representations and aesthetic objects. Defaced objects are messages staged for the gaze of an absent and unknown addressee. They trace out 'the ruses of other interests and desires that are neither determined nor captured by the systems in which they develop'

(De Certeau, 2011: xviii). With this in mind I would like to suggest that defacement – when understood as a form of tactical appropriation of urban space – might usefully accompany the concept of *détournement* for articulating and discussing the event-like structure of subvertising. We can see the effects of defacement – its defamiliarizing power and its self-conscious theatricality – in an artwork created by British visual artist, Stanley Donwood, and erected by Brandalism in 2014, entitled *Stop. Right. There*. Though I have used thick description to describe the way that the artwork ‘performs’ in relation to urban space the encounter I describe is entirely fictional (though significantly informed by my response to seeing other subvertisements). I have chosen to construct this hypothetical encounter as a means of creatively exploring the event-like structure of subvertising and the potential affect that the artwork might have on the spectator. The artwork is an enigmatic representation that aims to produce a moment of estrangement that draws attention to the role played by public advertising in structuring our experience of everyday life. What is most striking about this is that the artwork does not rely on communicating a clear political message in order to produce this effect. Indeed, it is produced, I argue, because of the way that the artwork anticipates the gaze of the spectator and, in doing so, actively implicates them within the production of meaning. Such a process can be likened to the one described by Rancière in *The Emancipated Spectator* (2011). For Rancière, being a spectator is not ‘some passive condition that we should transform into activity’ (Rancière, 2011: 17). On the contrary, spectatorship is an *active* process of observation, selection, comparison and interpretation (Ibid: 13). According to this model, Rancière contends that meaning is not produced through a process of one-way communication in which the artist creates a representation endowed with

meaning that is to be passively consumed by the spectator, nor is it completely shaped according to the interpretation of the audience. Instead, it is generated in and through the dynamic interaction between the artwork and the spectator. Meaning emerges as 'the third thing that is owned by no one[...]but which subsists between them, excluding any uniform transmission, any identity of cause and effect' (Ibid: 15). It is important to note here that Rancière is not suggesting that artistic practices must attempt to emancipate the spectator from a state of passivity. For him, the spectator is always already emancipated. However, I suggest that this does not mean that the artist or activist can take emancipation for granted. There remains a useful distinction to be made between practices that actively ignore the critical faculties of the spectator and others that affirm them as active participants in the generation of meaning.

I would contend that subvertising is an example of latter in which meaning is generated through the dynamic interaction between the artwork and the spectator. In the case of *Stop. Right. There.*, this can be seen through reference to the performative command at the heart of the image. Through the command 'stop right there' the artwork directly hails the spectator in a manner similar to the scene of ideological interpellation described by Althusser. This defaced, disembodied command transforms the relationship between the spectator and the artwork because it implicates them within the structure of the representation itself. This approach might be described as a moment of 'coming-into being with something other, an encounter which necessitates a moment of both transformation and reflection' (Wark, 2015: 97). This sense of intersubjectivity arises through the way that this command produces a doubling or splitting of the spectator – an act of defacement in which '[o]bserver melts into the observed in confusing ways, subject and object keep changing places

in unpredictable rhythms, language becomes manifestly treacherous, both sharpening and disarming the critical faculty through hazy ambiguities' (Taussig, 1999: 105). This blurring of boundaries between subject and object that shapes the encounter emerges through the way that the image directly 'hails' the spectator. As a result of being inscribed into the representational structure of the artwork, and having their gaze mirrored by it, the spectator is made aware of the contingency of the encounter. In other word, this moment sets in motion a mimetic machine in which the spectator is drawn into the sticky web of copy and contact, oscillating between originator and object of the gaze. Continually shifting between observer and observed, part of and apart from the image, the spectator is split into two roles – audience and actor. When read in this way, the intention underpinning the minimal and enigmatic design of the artwork becomes easier to see; it is a vessel or mirror that enables the spectator to inhabit the roles of both performer and audience. The political force of the subvertisement therefore lies in the way that this encounter renders visible the manifold ways in which outdoor advertising structures our experience of urban space; the seemingly marginal, banal images that we unconsciously yield to and interpret as we journey through the city. This affirmation of the critical faculties of the spectator is where I think the political value of the work lies. In confronting the spectator with the agency of their gaze the artwork induces within the spectator a moment of critical attention. This moment constitutes a temporary rupture in the inactivity and passive contemplation that characterizes the spectacle. It is a moment in which the negation of attention performed by advertising images is denied and reversed.

## **Section Two: Towards a Poetics of Defacement: Subvertising and the Rewriting of Urban Space**

### ***An encounter with the Political: Darren Cullen's Become A Suicide Bomber***

Darren Cullen's *Become a Suicide Bomber* (Figure 4) cunningly exploits the theatrical quality of outdoor advertising as a means of drawing attention to the relationship between State power, mimesis and ideological interpellation. The artwork is a fake Royal Navy recruitment poster that was placed in bus shelter advertising boards across London in 2017, urging the city's residents to become suicide bombers. Illustrated in Cullen's idiosyncratic, cartoonish style the poster features an image of Royal Navy officers framed by the sights of a submarine periscope, accompanied by the following statement: 'The crew on our nuclear submarines are on a suicide mission. To launch their missiles means death is certain, not just for them, but for the millions of innocent people those bombs will obliterate, and for the rest of us too[...]To find out how you can become a suicide bomber, visit: [royalnavy.org.uk](http://royalnavy.org.uk).' Broadly speaking, I contend that Cullen's artwork resists the abstraction of social space by staging a drama of revelation that enables the spectator to encounter a sense of the Political in everyday life. The capitalized term 'the Political' is one that I take from the work of Chantal Mouffe who (echoing Rancière's distinction between the police and politics) uses it to refer to the inescapable 'dimension of antagonism' that is repressed (though never eradicated) by the dominant social order. In contrast to this, 'politics' (according to Mouffe's particular reading of the term) consists of the formalized institutions, discourses and practices whose role is to establish order in the face of the Political's contingent and antagonistic nature (Mouffe, 2013: 2). If, following the analysis of urban space proposed above, the

abstraction of social space refers to a narrowing of what it is possible to encounter and experience within space beyond the horizons of consumer culture, then it follows that a potential mode of resistance to this is to introduce moments of antagonism that rupture the seamless homogeneity of social space. More significantly, such moments of antagonism draw attention to the manner in which space is dominated by the presence of outdoor advertising insofar as it renders such objects strange or uncanny through the process of defamiliarization I described above.



Figure 4 (photo credit Darren Cullen)

I contend that Cullen's satire of military advertising campaigns is well placed to perform such a role, precisely because it stages a direct confrontation with the representational strategies used by State power. Whilst this dependence upon representation is not a particularly new phenomenon it takes on a new kind of significance when situated in relation to the mediatised landscape of the performative society. Indeed, thinking through the complex relationship between the State and representation is a key part of Cullen's artistic practice. In 2012, he published *Join the Army* (2012), a satirical comic book that playfully subverts the British Army's depiction of life in its advertising campaigns. This was followed by *Action Man: Battlefield Casualties* (2014), a short film produced in collaboration with the charity, Veterans for Peace. Whilst both artworks were exhibited and consumed in different contexts than that of Cullen's subvertisement, they nonetheless demonstrate the artist's interest in interrogating the way that State power's use of representation is related to the experience of everyday life. For Cullen, this process can be clearly seen in the way that such advertising campaigns romanticize military life by presenting it as a meaningful career path for alienated, primarily working class, young people:

I've always been interested in army recruitment ads[...]they show military life as something between an adventure holiday and a computer game. The focus is on action and excitement. They never show a soldier lying in a cold ditch holding in his guts and crying for his mother. I liked the idea of taking the bombast of the adverts but switching the bullshit with something more resembling the actual, horrific truth[...]the advertising budgets for these campaigns are astronomical and there's almost nothing in the media that ever tries to redress the balance and tell the other side[...]Our culture is so pro-military that it's almost impossible to criticize any element of the armed forces

without a disclaimer about the “fine work our soldiers are risking their lives... etc etc.” The boundary for debate has been intentionally narrowed (Cullen, 2013: n.p)

Cullen’s analysis here reveals a number of important ideas for the development of my own analysis and my broader argument regarding the political force of subvertising in relation to the homogenization of social space. These ideas will form an important part of my analysis of *Become a Suicide Bomber* not only because they inform the aesthetic and political intentions behind Cullen’s practice but also because they reveal the broader socio-political dynamics that shape the artwork’s ‘performance’ within urban space.

Firstly, his references to the action and excitement featured in military advertising reflect an awareness of the way that the pronounced theatricality of the advertising industry is an effect of its development under capitalism. One is reminded here of Horkheimer and Adorno’s references to the calculated special effects that predominate under the culture industry (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2007: 99) and Benjamin’s analysis of propaganda as an art ‘designed for reproducibility’ and mass consumption (Benjamin, 1999: 218). The military advertising campaigns satirized by Cullen use theatricality as a means of creating representations that are able to ‘perform well’ in the context of mass dissemination and consumption. Such representations are reproducible because they guarantee the transmission of specific ideological effects in the context of an aesthetic regime in which the image is created and disseminated in order to *move* the masses to action. Secondly, and connected to this, is the fact that Cullen implicitly connects this to the idea of ideological interpellation. For Cullen, military advertising campaigns involve far more than the literal recruitment of new members. They are engaged in a broader project in which



individuals are recruited as subjects of ideology through the implicit identification and recognition of their messaging. The ubiquitous presence of such campaigns within everyday life serves to naturalize what he terms the 'pro-military' sentiment that characterizes the UK's contemporary structure of feeling, thus rendering it 'impossible to criticize any element of the armed forces' without using terms that remain sympathetic to the sacred status afforded to the military in public life.

Broadly speaking the aim of *Become A Suicide Bomber* is to use defacement as a means of turning the performance of interpellation against itself. As the philosopher and literary critic Kenneth Surin notes in his analysis of Taussig's work on defacement reveals the various ways in which power is dependent upon mimesis as a means of naturalizing its rule (Surin, 2001: 207). In a discussion of the politics of liberation that might be extrapolated out of Taussig's book he argues that '[a] more tenable freedom[...]would be one that comes into being when its illusion-permeated counterpart is demystified, when the masked face of the state-machine is shown to be just another mask' (Ibid: 208). I argue that we can see this process at play in the visual and rhetorical composition of *Become A Suicide Bomber*. The creation of the defaced copy aims to radically subvert the ideological coherence of the original. For example, the term 'suicide bomber' is used to illuminate the extent to which the normative representation of the British armed forces achieves coherence only through reference to its constitutive 'Other.' This is because the term is implicated within a 'Self/Other' binary characteristic of an orientalist worldview in which the non-Western world is positioned as 'barbaric' and characterized by an irrational religious fanaticism. The figure that forms the other side of this binary is that of the British soldier who represents and upholds democratic values to be

exported across the world. Cullen's artwork places these two figures into contact with one another and, in doing so, performs an act of defacement that desecrates the 'sacred' institution of the British armed forces.

However, as Taussig notes, the sense of desecration wrought by defacement is not only achieved through a simple *inversion* of the sacred. On the contrary, it is the result of a more complex process whereby the profane is brought into dialogue with the sacredness of the 'face.' 'Sacred things,' he argues, 'are defined in many Western languages by their astonishing capacity for pollution, danger and filth,' a reflection of the Latin root *sacer*, which means both 'accursed and holy.' As such, the political force of defacement lies in the way that it 'conspires with this faithful ambiguity[...]this accursed share that was there all the time, latent, so to speak' (Taussig, 1999: 52). In other words, defacement releases a latent profanity within the original image or object in a way that highlights the extent to which this was always already present within it. The blending of these different frames of reference characteristic of subvertising is what enables it to bring the sacred into association with the profane. The drama of revelation performed by the subvertisement lies in the way that it illuminates the extent to which the State relies upon representation as a means of reproducing the hegemonic ideology through which the military is presented as a sacred, noble institution.

We can see then how activists are able to mobilize defacement not only as a means of revealing the limits of power's monopoly over representation, but also as a potentially liberatory strategy for transforming our perception of the everyday. Such an idea is bound up in Taussig's enigmatic concept of the 'public secret' – a term that I drew on during my analysis of Reverend Billy's performative critique of commodity fetishism. Citing novelist Elias Canetti's

assertion that 'secrecy lies at the core of power' (Canetti, cited in Taussig, 1999: 7). Taussig defines the public secret as 'that which is generally known, but cannot be articulated' (Taussig, 1999: 5). As such, the public secret is positioned as a form of social knowledge that is indispensable to the operations of power:

[K]nowing what not to know lies at the heart of a vast range of social powers and knowledges intertwined with those powers, such that the clumsy hybrid of power/knowledge comes at last into meaningful focus, it being not that knowledge is power but rather that active not-knowing makes it so. So we fall silent when faced with such a massive sociological phenomenon, aghast at such complicities and ours with it, for without such shared secrets any and all social institutions – workplace, marketplace, state, and family – would founder (Ibid: 7)

The concept of the public secret is extremely useful for unpacking the political force of *Become a Suicide Bomber* insofar as it reveals its transformative power. As I argued in Chapter 2, the power of the public secret is closely related to that of the really made up; we are aware of the constructed, contingent nature of ideology, yet we continue to act *as if* this is not the case. We can productively apply this framework to the performance of Cullen's artwork. We know that the seemingly unending arms race that characterizes the 21<sup>st</sup> Century is a phenomenon that, at best, contributes to a precarious and unstable geopolitical situation and, at worst, could result in the extinction of all life on earth. Cullen's artwork reveals one of the primary disciplinary effects of capitalist realism, in which this knowledge is continually disavowed (or simply ignored) precisely because neoliberal capitalism renders it nearly impossible to

imagine a coherent alternative to it. *Become a Suicide Bomber* takes this public secret at face value, so to speak, by drawing attention to the way in which this ideological contradiction is written into the ideological mask itself. By reanimating the sympathetic magic of mimesis the negation of appearance that characterizes defacement 'puts this habitual operation into reverse' (Ibid: 54). It is an act of profane illumination that renders strange the seemingly banal qualities of everyday existence in which ideology is at its most effective. It is for this reason that the subvertisement is able to open up a space for encountering a sense of the Political within everyday life in a manner that resists the abstraction of social space.

### ***Reclaiming the right to the city: Brandalism at COP21***

On 29<sup>th</sup> November, 2015, the day before the UN's conference on Climate Change in Paris (COP21) was due to commence, several hundred pairs of empty shoes filled the city's Place de la Republique (Figure 5). Staged by international campaigning organization Avaaz, the intervention became an iconic image of the conference. I was not in Paris to participate in the intervention or witness the various performances that converged on the city over the course of the conference – the State, the theatrical PR strategies of corporate power, and the interventions staged by the assorted activist groups that travelled to the city for the conference. However, the assemblage of photos, videos and newspaper articles that I used to follow the conference from afar made it clear to me that what was unfolding was a complex social drama symptomatic of the political antagonisms that have become part of our contemporary structure of feeling. Indeed, the antagonistic nature of the event was reflected in the near ubiquitous corporate sponsorship of the conference,

which attracted the ire of many activists who saw the arrangement as indicative of neoliberalism's inability to tackle the accelerating ecological crisis of climate change. Prominent sponsors included energy companies such as EDF and Engie, the car manufacturer Renault Nissan, and banking firm BNP Paribas. Activists rightly identified the involvement of these organizations as a form of 'greenwashing' – a public relations exercise in which corporations cultivate sponsorship relationships with environmental causes in order to foster the impression that their policies and products are similarly minded. This sense of discontent was compounded by the fact that many were skeptical of the idea that world leaders might come to a lasting agreement that could hold such interests to account. The Paris Climate March was scheduled to take place on the 29<sup>th</sup> November to voice these concerns, whilst several smaller demonstrations and performative interventions were planned to coincide with the rest of the conference under the heading of 'The Climate Games.' However, many of these planned protest actions were prevented from taking place due to the state of emergency declared in France two weeks before the conference following the terrorist attacks that took place in the capital on Friday 13<sup>th</sup> of November. This state of emergency placed a ban on large public gatherings in the city, including the Climate March. Smaller actions and street theatre performances were permitted to take place within specially designated zones with a heavy police presence. Activists were also required to submit relevant paperwork in advance of the event detailing its structure, content and expected attendance numbers (Orr, 2016: 26). When some activists defied the ban and attempted to assemble in Place de la Republique they were met with the full force of the State – tear gas, kettling and multiple arrests.



Figure 5 (photo credit REUTERS/Eric Gaillard)

As I argued in section one, the right to the city hinges upon ‘the full and complete usage’ of urban space. The abstracting logic of exchange value is substituted for the dynamic, sensuous materiality of use value. It is a right grounded in the capacity to physically occupy urban space in order to reclaim it as a site for ‘centrality,’ ‘gathering,’ and ‘convergence’ (Butler, 2012: 391). The banning of public gatherings such as the climate march represented a denial of the right to the city insofar as it prevented the embodied occupation of space through which political discontent is normally expressed. The intervention staged by Avaaz was a symbolic action created in response to this denial of the right to the city. The empty shoes convey a sense of absence and disconnection that is reflective of the State’s propensity for repressing the Political as a means of re-establishing social order in the face of contingency. The representational ingenuity of the intervention lies in the way that the empty shoes affirm a sense of the right to the city in absence of this activity; arranged

in rows of mute solidarity they stand in for the sound, movement and song that constitute the poetics of protest. In this way, the intervention creates what Rancière has termed ‘a pensive image’ that occupies a ‘zone of indeterminacy between thought and non-thought, activity and passivity’ (Rancière, 2011: 107). On the one hand the shoes invoked the city’s history of radical politics by acting as physical traces of the many past occupations that form part of the square’s horizon of meaning. However, we might also say that the shoes are ‘waiting to be filled,’ so to speak, thus acting as a monument that anticipates the appearance of a political subject whose time is yet to come. Bringing both of these ideas together I suggest that the sense of absence performatively invoked by the intervention treats this historical moment as both a failure to live up to the legacy of radical politics and an expression of hope that gestures towards the emergence of the coming generation whose future actions might redeem it. Bringing these two senses of the world into dialogue with one another signifies a refusal to acquiesce to the demands of the dominant social order by subjecting it to the possibility of its negation.

The above analysis maps out the political and imaginative context that informs my discussion of Brandalism’s widespread takeover of the city during COP21. Styling themselves the ‘unofficial partners of COP21’ the collective collaborated with local activists and a global network of artists to protest the ‘greenwashing’ of the conference by erecting over 600 subvertisements in bus stops across the city. The intervention was composed of a series of artworks that, taken together, aimed at illuminating the conference’s public secret; the international effort to combat climate change has been compromised by the profit motive of global capitalism. The broader political strategy of the intervention is reflected in a subvertisement created by Revolt Design that took

aim at one of the conference's more outrageous sponsors, Air France (Figure 6) (Revolt Design and Brandalism, 2015). The artwork depicts a member of the company's aircrew with her index finger raised to her lips in an expression of coy indifference. The pose is reflective of the paradoxical status of the public secret; it is that which many are aware of but must continually disavow as a means of keeping up appearances. Other images sought to represent the collusion between corporate and state power that prevents the meaningful structural change from ever taking place. One artist, Bill Posters, presents us with the unsettling juxtaposition of a smiling Barack Obama and his youngest daughter happily swimming in the waters of Florida's Gulf Coast whilst a towering plume of smoke produced by the burning wreckage of the Deepwater Horizon oilrig looms ominously in the background (Figure 7) (Bill Posters and Brandalism, 2015). The image is characterized by the artful blending of the sacred and the profane that accompanies any act of defacement – a cut into 'wholeness as holiness' that opens up new meanings, perspectives and flows of energy that emanate from the defaced copy (Taussig, 1999: 3). Bringing together the smiling statesman with the tower of smoke that overlooks him is a powerful image of the ways in which we continually avert our gaze from the destructive excesses of capital. Such excesses are kept at bay through the presence of well meaning, but ultimately complicit, political actors.



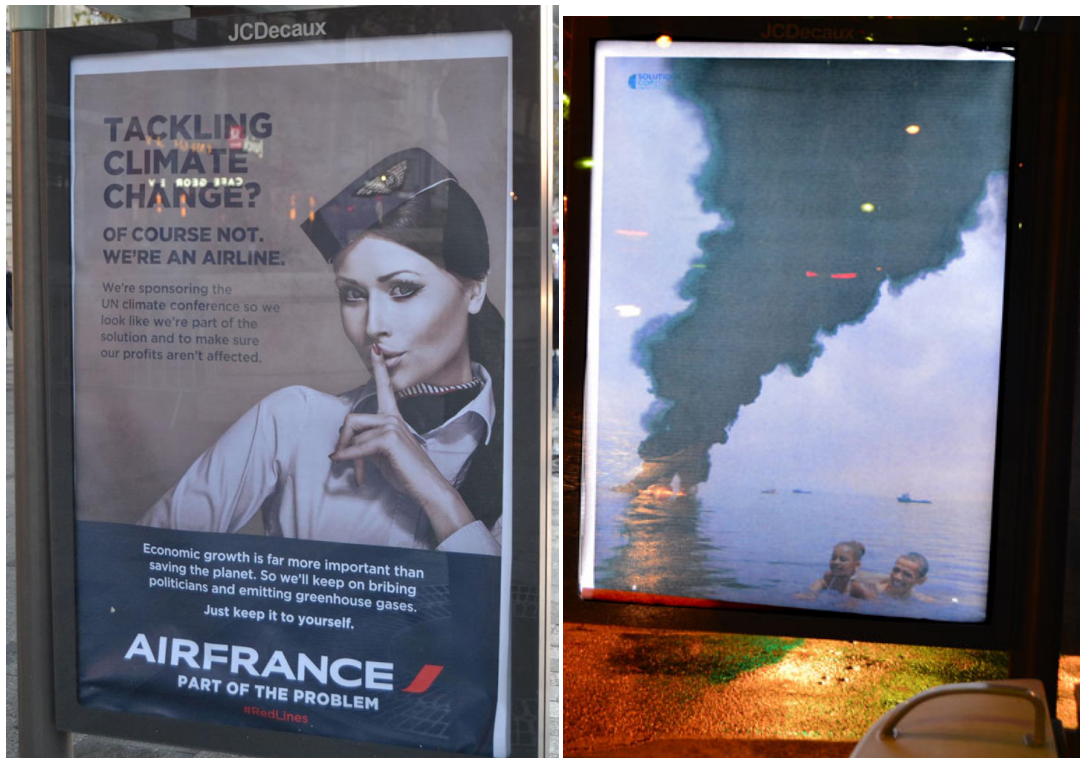


Figure 6 (photo credit Brandalism) Figure 7 (photo credit Brandalism)

The aesthetic composition and placement of both artworks can be productively understood through reference to Mouffe's theory of artistic activism, in particular her claim that such practices need to 'directly [intervene] in a multiplicity of social spaces in order to oppose the program of total social mobilization of capitalism' in order to 'undermine the imaginary environment necessary for its reproduction' (Mouffe, 2007: 1). The greenwashing of the conference is symptomatic of the repression of the Political under neoliberalism in which the dominant political and economic order is presented as an objective fact underpinned by a social and political consensus. Brandalism's intervention works to make present the contradictions and antagonisms that are repressed through the construction of neoliberal hegemony. Taken as a whole, the intervention functions as a political '*performance*,' a term coined by McKenzie in *Perform, Or Else*. The term develops out of his analysis of the age of global

performance and is used to describe those ‘minor performances’ which ‘break with the sociotechnical system producing [them],’ generating new modes of performance that establish themselves within the broader framework of the performative society (McKenzie, 2001: 228). These ‘minor performances’ (such as the ones staged by Brandalism and Avaaz) ‘can emerge anywhere, anytime[...]from the most intimate to the most public of relations’ and are defined by their repetitive citation of other sociotechnical performances (Ibid: 228). My use of the term is inspired by the diffuse nature of Brandalism’s intervention which, taken as a whole, produced a small rupture in the way in which the city was experienced in the context of COP21. In other words, we can understand the performance as composed of a series of minor ruptures (or ripples) in the fabric of the sensible. As Perucci notes, the moment of disruption that emerges in ruptural performance unfolds when the audience ‘first suspect that something isn’t right, but are not sure if something is amiss’ (Perucci, 2009: 9). Such a statement might usefully describe the diffuse, ‘performance-like’ nature of the intervention. The small acts of defacement that constitute the intervention produce a sense of strangeness within the urban environment, in which the seemingly ‘staged’ quality of the images contrast with their banal place within advertising boards across the city. Any passerby who encounters more than a few of these subvertisements is caught up in a liminal space between the ‘real’ and the ‘artificial’ that results in the creeping realization that what they are witnessing is a staged ‘event’ that breaks with the quotidian experience of urban space. Taken as a whole, the intervention confronts the spectator with a new ensemble of meanings that challenges the hegemonic control of corporate sponsorship through a process of defamiliarization that returns the gaze of the spectator to its contingent and contradictory nature.

My final point regarding the intervention relates to the way in which this diffuse process of defamiliarization affirms a sense of collective ownership over the city in a manner that challenges corporate power's capacity to control the official narrative of COP21. As Wark suggests, the significance of *détournement* as a form of praxis lies in the 'reciprocal devaluing and revaluing' of textual elements that constitutes its core gesture. This process, he argues, amounts to an affirmation of culture as 'common property[...]an active place of challenge, agency and conflict' (Wark, 2015: 40 - 41). Though Wark is describing the Marxist spirit that underpinned the Situationists' approach to cultural production, his emphasis on 'common property' can be usefully extended to the very act of appropriation that lies at the heart of Brandalism's 'minor performance.' The appropriative force of *détournement* embodied by the intervention can be read as a poetic expression of ownership that reaffirms a sense of the right to the city. This is because the intervention reconfigures urban space as a site for challenging the narrative of the conference and the hegemonic character of corporate sponsorship more broadly. Like the empty shoes that filled the Place de la Republique, the intervention performative transforms the streets into a diffuse activist text in which contestation and challenge are key features of its visual composition. Understood in this way, the intervention can be understood as a re-writing of urban space that embodies the appropriative spirit of Lefebvre's right to the city.

## **Section Three: Tactical Misuse: Transforming the Performance of Urban Space**

My analysis so far has conceived of subvertising in a fairly narrow sense – the creation of visual artworks that satirise consumer culture, corporate power, and the military. These examples have usefully illuminated the practice's capacity to resist the abstraction of social space under capitalism. However, they rely on a straightforward form of *détournement* in which corporate branding is replaced by a subversive and politically antagonistic ensemble of images. We might argue that, by exchanging one form of representational content for another, there is a risk that these subvertisements become integrated into the endless flow of images that characterizes the neoliberal city. In short, whilst they are able to challenge the hold that corporate power has over urban space they are unable to challenge the fundamental structure of outdoor advertising or question the necessity of its presence within the city. It is for this reason that I now turn my attention to two unique examples from the contemporary subvertising movement that are able to produce more complex transformations of urban space. The two examples I use in my analysis here are the public acts of defacement performed by French subvertising group Les Déboulonneurs and a participatory intervention staged by AdBlock Bristol in March 2018. Both of these examples centre on the tactical appropriation and misuse of public advertising boards and, more significantly, directly integrate live performance into their structure. This more explicitly performance-led approach is used as a critical methodology for exploring and unleashing the subversive 'potentialities' of 'the urban,' by drawing on the capacity of performance to foil, divert and challenge the domineering strategies of power through moments of tactical appropriation and sabotage. I suggest that the way in which both examples

directly incorporate live performance into their structure is reflective of an emergent approach to culture jamming that is characterized by a synthesis of subvertising, political theatre and participatory art. Analyzing and understanding this particular approach might contribute towards future projects that attempt to reclaim the right to the city through resistance to the pervasive colonization of everyday life by corporate power.

Before discussing these examples I want to briefly unpack the notion of 'tactical misuse' – a term that I draw from the work of Michel de Certeau and his book *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Central to my analysis here is the distinction De Certeau makes between tactics and strategy. According to De Certeau, strategies are characterized by 'the triumph of place over time' in which the formal qualities of space (the activities permitted to take place there, its separation and division into various zones of production and consumption) are fixed through the establishment of 'an autonomous place' (De Certeau, 2011: 36). As I argued earlier, advertising contributes to the production of abstraction of social space insofar as it imposes a set of values and meaning onto the sites in which it appears. It is a means of weaving the interests of corporate power into the fabric of everyday life through the strategic ordering of space. Tactics, on the other hand, are defined as new and novel 'ways of using the products imposed by a dominant economic order' by exploiting the gap that exists between the strategic production of space and the multitude of possible uses that might be made of it (Ibid: xiii). In other words, a tactic is 'a calculated action determined by the absence of a proper locus[...]it operates in isolated locations, blow by blow' by taking advantage of 'opportunities' (Ibid: 37). Tactics are therefore a way of using space that is distinct from its official construction. Of crucial importance here is the emphasis that De Certeau places on tactics as

a form of writing that (as we have seen throughout this chapter) contributes to a poetic re-writing of urban space. 'Although they use as their *material* the *vocabularies* of established language,' he argues, 'these "transverses" remain heterogeneous to the system they infiltrate and in which they sketch out the guileful ruses of *different* interests and desires' (Ibid: 34, emphasis in original). The opportunistic writing that is enacted through the tactical appropriation of space dramatizes defacement as a potential form of agency that emerges out of the spectacle's colonization of everyday life.

It might be argued that each of the examples discussed so far in this chapter can be understood as examples of De Certeau's tactics, insofar as they appropriate the spaces reserved for advertising as a site for introducing new and subversive meanings that run counter to the dominant values of neoliberal capitalism. However, as I argued above, the extent to which these examples are able to challenge the way in which such spaces are *used* is limited because they are predicated upon changing the content of the advertising board rather than challenging this form of communication itself. They are, in effect, using such spaces in a way that is only slightly different from their intended function. The work of Les Déboulonneurs and the intervention staged by AdBlock Bristol are characterized by a more explicit sense of *misuse* in which the act of appropriation directly contradicts the official function of the space itself. Indeed, it is through this process of tactical misuse that subvertising takes on a more dissensual shape insofar as it transforms one form of sensory presentation (one that is reserved for corporate power) into another one that runs counter to the strategic and hierarchical ordering of the neoliberal city.

For Les Déboulonneurs, this kind of tactical misuse is based on public displays of defacement that are staged in order to generate media attention and

provoke a response from the police. The group has written a detailed outline of the structure of these events in a manifesto published on its website (Les Déboulonneurs, 2006: n.p). First, it chooses a public space in a busy urban area that features several large billboards. Members of the local press are contacted several weeks before the intervention and informed of its date, time and location. On the day of the performance a large number of activists (sometimes up to around 40 people) converge on the site and begin spray painting and daubing the billboards with 'anti-advertising messages' such as 'Advertising = Violence.' Other activists are on hand to engage curious passersby in conversation and to distribute pamphlets explaining the rationale behind the intervention. Members of the local media are treated similarly. This continues until the police arrive. When approached by the police they are instructed to remain calm and to voluntarily admit to defacing the billboard (activists are given prepared statements to read to officers if they are arrested). The event ends following the arrival of the police or when the activists decide that the billboards have been sufficiently defaced. Media coverage of the event usually emerges the day after it has taken place or, in some cases, a matter of hours later.

These public acts of defacement offer a unique model for thinking about the different ways in which the tactical misuse of advertising space can be used to transform the experience of the city. I contend that the most significant part of this group's work is the decision to perform these acts of defacement in front of an audience (in contrast to groups like Brandalism whose members typically put up their posters at night whilst disguised as employees of the companies responsible for the advertising boards they use). The fact that the intervention is staged as a form of public performance enables the group to present

defacement as a symbolic act of civil disobedience that is linked to one's right to the city. The activists are positioned as public performers, rather than anonymous figures. This is designed to affirm defacement as a legitimate political act and a form of public discourse rather than an act of vandalism. Indeed, the group's decision to invite local journalists to the event and to directly engage in conversation with passersby reflects a desire to control the way in which the event is represented. The carefully planned nature of such events means that they have the potential to transform urban space into a site for public debate and discussion around the presence of outdoor advertising. It is an opportunity for activists and citizens of the city to discuss the way that advertising shapes our experience of the city and everyday life.

It is here that the transformative power of tactical misuse comes more firmly into view. Outdoor advertising is frequently experienced as an unremarkable part of the urban landscape and, as such, is able to effectively interpellate individuals as subjects of consumer culture. Moreover, the performance of advertising is a form of communication that forecloses any right of reply. The political force of Les Déboulonneurs work thus lies in the way that it ruptures the ideological performance of advertising by performing its own right to reply and enables others to offer their own. Such events have the potential to produce forms of sociality and collective experience that are otherwise excluded from such spaces. Moreover, these moments of transformation help to normalize the idea that the presence of advertising in urban space can be critiqued and challenged by anyone. For example, as related on the official website for 'Subvertisers-International' (a global network of subvertising activists), on 25<sup>th</sup> March 2013, members of the group were formally acquitted of all charges of damaging private property following their arrest at an event held



several months earlier. Members of the group had argued to the court that their ‘fundamental “right of reception” had been violated by being forced to engage with toxic commercial advertising in public space,’ with the judge acquitting them on the grounds that their actions constituted an expression of free speech (Subverters International, 2016: n.p). The group’s acquittal has acquired a cult status in the contemporary subvertising movement, such that the 25<sup>th</sup> of March has become the official date for the day of global action (entitled ‘Subvert the City’) organized by Subverters International from 2017 onwards.

In March 2018, I had the good fortune to encounter one of the actions staged in Bristol for Subvert the City by a collective of local activists called ‘AdBlock Bristol’ (Figure 8) (AdBlock Bristol, 2018). The action was extremely simple: A digital advertising board located on a busy high street in South Bristol was covered by two sheets of white paper (one for each side), a pot of coloured pens was attached to the side of the board. The sheets were left completely blank save for a piece of text written on each sheet – ‘How are you?’ and ‘I think...’ Passersby were invited to respond to these by writing their thoughts and ideas onto the sheets. As my encounter with the billboard took place on Sunday afternoon both sheets of paper had been considerably filled with the thoughts and reflections of local residents. The contributions written on the board ranged from thoughtful reflections on the nature of urban life to simple statements and drawings, many of which were clearly composed by children. Indeed, when I arrived I saw two groups of children writing on the board whilst their parents stood nearby and talked to one another. This simple moment of casual sociality created through the simple act of inviting people to deface the billboard seems reflective of the transformative power of tactical misuse. The intervention created a new use and purpose for the billboard that is significantly

different from its usual function. It became a gathering place for local residents to talk to another, a place for children to creatively engage with their surroundings, and a site for expressing thoughts and concerns about issues affecting the local community.



Figure 8 (photos my own)

In both interventions, participation and public performance are used as a means of reconfiguring the performance of urban space in which particular sites are transformed into a forum for creative engagement with the right to the city. In the case of Les Déboulonneurs, this involves creating and staging a public spectacle that is structured around a number of predetermined roles; activists who perform the acts of defacement, others who engage with passersby by

discussing the case against outdoor advertising, and members of the local media. I suggest that this is because the group's interventions are designed to appear as a conscious engagement with civic issues such as the right to reply and the ethics of advertising in public space. Engaging with these issues through the use of workshops and community campaigns is a growing trend within the contemporary subvertising movement. The work of Brandalism is particularly relevant in this regard. In 2016 the group launched 'Switch Sides', a campaign aimed at encouraging individuals working in advertising to reconsider the ethics of the industry and participate in political campaigns against it. The group distributed pamphlets to workers at twenty-five different advertising agencies (including Saatchi & Saatchi, Ogilvy & Mather and Wieden+Kennedy). The pamphlet delivered to these workers contained personal stories and testimonies from other members of the industry that '[highlighted] the recognisable moments of joy and despair that workers in some of the world's most renowned agencies have experienced and[...]the morally bankrupt culture of the advertising and public relations sectors' (Brandalism, 2016: np). More recently, the group has run subvertising workshops across the UK at venues including the DIY Space for London, the Foundry in Sheffield, and the Colab Centre in Exeter. These events reflect the growing interest within the movement to engage communities in discussion around the ethics of public advertising and the efficacy of subvertising as a political tool.

The fact that such performances are carefully staged for the gaze of the media suggests that they are intended to function as a model of civic participation to be consumed by a broader audience than those who happen to be in attendance. In contrast to this, AdBlock Bristol's intervention is not a spectacle nor can it be considered an explicit engagement with the politics and

ethics of advertising in public space. Indeed, it is far more emblematic of Rancière's principle of aesthetic distance. This is because the intervention does not try to produce a correspondence between sense and sense. There is no clear goal or final destination for the intervention, only the open-ended embrace of a series of possibilities. Its political force lies in the way that its open-ended construction invites passersby to engage with it in any way that they choose. In this way they are affirmed as active participants in the ongoing production of meaning. Allowing participants to perform their own acts of defacement without reference to a predetermined political or artistic goal is what enables the intervention to make possible new forms of activity within that space. It is the seemingly unrelated or unexpected phenomena that take place at the margins of the event (the parents talking to one another whilst their children engage with the artwork) that illuminate the more significant transformative qualities of the intervention. What both examples have in common, however, is their capacity to challenge the distribution of the sensible through the transformative power of performance. Both reflect Rancière's contention that the efficacy (or political force) or art lies in its capacity to 'reconfigure the landscape of what can be seen and what can be thought' within our current distribution of the sensible 'in order to sketch a new topography of the possible' (Rancière, 2011: 49). In *Les Déboulonneurs*' public acts of defacement this involves using performance to challenge the political and ethical legitimacy of advertising's hold over public space and, through this, explore the limits of what is considered a legitimate form of response to it. This is also the aim of *AdBlock Bristol*, whose artwork attempts to carve out a space for politically legitimate defacement. Through the changes that it creates in its immediate environment it is able to challenge the fragmentation and homogeneity characteristic of capitalism's abstraction of

social space. I argue that both interventions can be understood as a small eruption of dissensus within the fabric of everyday life that make possible new ways of acting within, and interacting with, the urban environment in a manner that actively intervenes in the production of social space.

## **Conclusion**

The analysis presented above offers an account of subvertising that takes us beyond its characterization as a form of semiotic warfare or media activism. In analyzing the practice in relation to the city, the production of space, and defacement we have been able to better articulate and understand its performative nature. Indeed, the significance of subvertising lies in the way that activists use defacement to foster dynamic interactions between the spectator and the artwork in a manner that transforms the experience and perception of urban space. Moreover, we have seen how the practice is able to integrate other forms of action and representation into its basic structure in order to produce more complex and dynamic forms of transformation grounded in the tactical misuse of advertising space. Such interventions not only transform the spectator's experience of everyday life but also introduce moments of heightened sociality into spaces organized and directed towards consumption. Taken as a whole, the interventions staged by the contemporary subvertising movement can be read as a collective attempt to performatively affirm the right to the city in a way that stages a visible confrontation with the representational strategies of corporate power. Important to note here is the way that these moments of transformation are made possible by using *détournement* as a means of exploiting corporate power's dependence upon representation. This idea has been a key conceptual thread running throughout this thesis, and is

something that we already encountered in the work of Reverend Billy and the Stop Shopping Choir. This focus will greatly inform my analysis in the following chapter, in which I analyze the political pranking of the Yes Men in relation to globalization, simulation and the performative society.

## Chapter 4: The Yes Men and the Political Force of Pranking

### Introduction

#### ***Dow does the right thing: The Yes Men's Bhopal Hoax***

*It is December 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2004, the twentieth anniversary of the Bhopal disaster – a gas leak at a Union Carbide pesticide plant that exposed over 500,000 of the city's residents (particularly those living in the slums in the vicinity of the plant) to the highly toxic methyl isocyanate, resulting in the deaths of around 3,787 people and long term, debilitating illness for many thousands more. At the BBC World studios in Paris, Jude Finisterra, a spokesperson for Dow Chemical, is about to make history. He has been invited to give an interview on behalf of his employers regarding the ongoing humanitarian issues that continue to face the people of Bhopal. Dow Chemical purchased Union Carbide in 2001 and until now has made little effort to accept any responsibility for compensating the victims of the disaster. Today, Jude will announce a radical new direction for the corporation that will make them ethical trailblazers in the corporate world.*

*The interview begins at 9am: 'Joining us live from Paris now is Jude Finisterra[...]good morning to you. A day of commemoration in Bhopal, do you now accept responsibility for what happened? A short pause. 'Steve, yes. Today is a great day for all of us at Dow, and I think for millions of people around the world as well. It's been twenty years since the disaster and today I'm very, very happy to announce that for the first time, Dow is accepting full responsibility for the Bhopal catastrophe. We have a \$12 billion plan to finally, at long last, fully compensate the victims – including the 120,000 who may need medical care for their entire lives – and to fully and swiftly remediate the Bhopal plant site.'*

*'Jude, that's good news that you have finally accepted responsibility,' replies the interviewer. 'Some people would say too late – three years, almost four years on. How soon is your money going to make a difference to the people in Bhopal?' Again, Finisterra's answer defies expectation; Dow are currently in the process of liquidating union carbide and will deliver the money 'as soon as we can,' before adding that 'this is the first time in history that a publicly held company of anything near the size of Dow has performed an action which is significantly against its bottom line simply because it's the right thing to do. And our shareholders may take a bit of a hit, Steve, but I think that if they're anything like me, they will be ecstatic to be part of such a historic occasion of doing right by those that we've wronged.' There is something unreal about the final sentence. Even if the content of the speech is surprising, Finisterra's delivery feels at odds with the familiar tropes of corporate management-speak. His words are weighted carefully and delivered assuredly. His superlatives do not feel like vague platitudes designed to placate audiences. There is a feeling of pathos to his words – perhaps because Dow's plan sounds disarmingly simple, yet astonishingly overdue all the same.*

*Following the interview Finisterra is greeted by a technician who leads him to the radio room for his second interview of the day. 'What a nice thing to announce,' she remarks. 'I wouldn't work for Dow if I didn't believe in it' replies Finisterra.*

### ***Pranking, Politics and the Age of Global Performance***

The Yes Men's Bhopal hoax, documented in the film *The Yes Men Fix The World* (2009), is perhaps the most well-known of the duo's political pranks, a practice that they and scholars have come to term 'identity correction' (Harold,



2004). By constructing a 'fake' website under the name of 'Dow Ethics' (a nod to the popular trend of corporations incorporating environmental or charitable concerns into their branding and organization structure), the duo (composed of activist-artists Igor Vamos and Jacques Servin) found themselves invited for an interview with BBC World. Whilst they had always intended on using the interview as a means of drawing attention to the plight of Bhopal they decided that, rather than directly criticizing Dow and Union Carbide, they would instead announce a radical new direction for the company. By artfully manipulating the processes of signification that constitute the authority of corporate power they were able to produce a critical simulacrum that temporarily subsumed the entire edifice of the mass media into its logic. This meant that the hoax generated a series of performative effects that, I argue, are essential to understanding its political force. First, the announcement became a top story on Google News for over two hours following the interview. During this period Dow's market value on the Frankfurt Stock Exchange fell sharply as brokers intervened to mitigate the financial loss that would've resulted from both the liquidation of Union Carbide and the subsequent redistribution of those funds to the victims of the Bhopal disaster. Hours later Dow issued an official statement denying the legitimacy of the announcement and reassuring investors that it had no intention of liquidating Union Carbide or compensating the people of Bhopal. Shortly after this, Servin (who played the part of Jude Finisterra) was invited for an interview in Channel 4 News with veteran broadcaster Jon Snow. The interview is significant for the ways that it provided the duo with an opportunity to comment upon the political aims of their work. During his conversation with Snow, Servin focused on the dishonesty and irresponsibility of corporate power, arguing that 'Dow has been promulgating a hoax, by which they've convinced people that

they can't do anything about Bhopal[...]and we wanted to prove that that was not accurate' (The Yes Men Fix the World, 2009). Here, the practice of 'identity correction' is outlined as a twofold strategy in which the group utilizes performance as a means of both subverting the organization's identity and, following this, discussing the violence that lies behind the brand and its veneer of corporate responsibility.

How were the Yes Men able to create such a convincing simulation of corporate power? Can pranking be considered an effective mode of activist performance in relation to neoliberalism's pervasive hold over our political imaginations? What does this strategy tell us about contemporary negotiations of power and resistance in the context of the performative society? By drawing on some of the major points highlighted in the analysis presented above we can make a few important points in response to these questions. First, the success of the prank lies in the way that the Yes Men were able to exploit the simulated nature of corporate power. As Baudrillard argues, in the simulated environment of late-capitalism, power has become reliant upon producing the 'signs of its resemblance' in order to maintain its legitimacy (Baudrillard, 1994: 23). Here, Baudrillard should not be mistaken for arguing that power is dead or that it lacks authority. On the contrary, in the face of the disappearance of the real, the 'real' that grounds the legitimacy of power and authority must be artificially produced by way of its simulation. This idea returns us to Fisher's observation that neoliberalism's hegemony is secured partially because it is able to present itself as coextensive with reality itself (Fisher, 2009: 16). This was an idea that we touched on in Chapter 3, in which I argued that the ideological performance of advertising is a form of interpellation that transforms individuals into subjects of consumer culture. However, just as subvertising is able to reveal the

contingency of advertising through the tactical misuse of space, the Yes Men similarly exploit power's dependence upon representation as a means of revealing its essentially constructed and contingent nature. This brings us to a second important point; through the tactical *misuse* of mediatized representation the Yes Men use pranking as a means of performing a critique of global capitalism that subjects it to the possibility of its negation. This mode of radical performance performs a 'labour of fiction' (Rancière, 2010: 141) that consists in challenging the dominant narratives and forms of perception through which the relationship between reality, representation, and appearance is constructed in political terms.

### ***The historical lineage of identity correction***

Unlike the work of Reverend Billy and Liberate Tate, the Yes Men's pranks are hybrid performances that combine hacking, live performance, and media manipulation. Combining these different forms of practice enables the duo to exploit the plasticity of the real in the age of simulation. In spite of the obvious idiosyncrasies of their practice there are some notable forerunners to the Yes Men's work. For example, the duo's pranks can be read as an extension of the 'put-on' approach characteristic of American radical performance in the 1960s. Described by Craig J. Peariso as 'a mode of inauthentic self-presentation based in the performance of stereotypical identities', the put-on was used to great effect by activist groups like the Yippies, the Gay Activists Alliance, and Black Panther activist Eldridge Cleaver (Peariso, 2014: 8). In 1967 the group (led by its most famous member Abbie Hoffman) took a guided tour of the New York Stock Exchange and, upon reaching the building's observation deck that provides visitors with a view of the trading floor, sprinkled dollar bills down onto

the floor below and watched as traders scrambled to try and pick up as many as they could (Ibid: 45). As scholar and performer of activist performance Larry Bogad argues, the intervention caused such chaos that it suspended business for the day and 'made more visible the rapaciousness of the institution' (Bogad, 2016: 19). We can also identify the work of performance artist Joey Skaggs as a historical precursor to the Yes Men. Skaggs' idiosyncratic 'image-events' are predicated on the creation of fake news-stories that exploit the media's need for spectacular narratives and images. For example, in 1976 he staged *Cat House for Dogs*, an event which began by running an advertisement for a dog brothel in New York's *Village Voice* magazine and culminated in several media organization's running sensationalist new stories about the fake business. As Harold suggests, Skaggs' intervention reveals the plasticity and malleability of meaning in the age of simulation, in which '[m]essages and images mutate as they migrate through the vast variety of media outlets, until questions of source and original intent cease to matter' (Harold, 2004: 195).

Whilst I do not wish to underplay the historical and political differences between the 'put-on' culture of the 1960s and 1970s it is clear that the exaggerated and 'inauthentic' forms of communication developed in this period have had a significant influence of the work of culture jamming groups like the Yes Men and fellow culture jamming groups such as the Billionaires for Bush and the short-lived Oil Enforcement Agency.<sup>1</sup> The Yes Men have been performing their unique brand of pranking since 1999, though they had both been involved with the activist organization, ®™ark, for several years prior to this. The organization's primary objective is to fund and produce multimedia art

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<sup>1</sup> Bogad provides a more detailed discussion of both of these lesser-known groups in *Tactical Performance: The Theory and Practice of Serious Play* (2016).

and activist projects that explore the interrelated spheres of economics, culture and performance (Giannachi, 2006: 28). For example, in December 1993 Igor Vamos (who often goes by the pseudonym Mike Bonnano) was involved in the Barbie Liberation Organization, a project organized and funded by ®™ark. The prank consisted in buying several hundred Barbie Dolls and G.I Joe action figures from local toy stores and switching their voice boxes. The toys were returned to the stores following the switch to be re-sold to unsuspecting customers. On Christmas day children opened the boxes to find Barbie growling ‘Dead men tell no lies!’ and ‘Eat lead Cobra!’ whilst the G.I Joes exclaimed ‘Let’s plan our dream wedding!’ (Harold, 2004: 198). In 1996, whilst working as a programmer on the game *SimCopter* (a spinoff the more famous *SimCity*), Servin (who now goes by his own pseudonym, Andy Bichlbaum) created an algorithm that would generate swarms of muscle-bound men dressed in nothing but swimming trunks who would then start passionately kissing one another. This celebration of queer sexuality was designed to happen only a few times per year. However, due to an error in Servin’s coding, the event was triggered on a daily basis. Whilst the game’s developers, Maxis, quickly spotted this ‘Easter Egg’ and terminated Servin’s contract, around 50,000 copies of the game had already been distributed and sold. The hoax was again funded by ®™ark, who paid Servin \$5,000 for his trouble (Keeley, 2017: n.p). It was not long after these projects that the duo began to work together to create more ambitious and explicitly political pranks. Notable examples of this include the aforementioned Bhopal hoax, a performance staged at a financial services conference in London unveiling Dow Ethics’ new ‘Acceptable Risk Model’ (an algorithm that would allow corporations to take full advantage of deregulated labour practices in the Third World by forecasting economic profit in relation to

potential loss of life due to poor working conditions), and organizing a press conference at the US Chamber of Commerce to announce a dramatic shift in the organization's policy on climate change.

### ***Empire, globalization and the performative society***

My intention in this chapter is to theorize the Yes Men's activist practice in relation to three key ideas; globalization, the performative society and the possibility of challenging the false necessity of capitalist realism. My understanding of globalization is drawn from Hardt and Negri's influential analysis of power and production under late-capitalism, *Empire* (2003).

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc they argue that 'we have witnessed an irresistible and irreversible globalization of economic and cultural exchanges' that heralds the emergence of 'a new form of sovereignty' called 'Empire' – 'the political subject that effectively regulates these global exchanges, the sovereign power that governs the world' (Hardt and Negri, 2003: xi). The decline in power of individual nation states has given rise to a new form of sovereignty 'composed of a series of national and supranational organisms united under a single logic of rule.' Empire is therefore a '*decentered* and *detritorializing* apparatus of rule' that gradually incorporates the entire world into its 'open, expanding frontiers' (Ibid: xii). Production under Empire takes the form of biopolitical production, 'the production of life itself, in which the economic, the political, and the cultural increasingly overlap and invest in one another' (Ibid: xiii). Moreover, though Empire emerges as an historical entity through changes in the capitalist mode of production and the development of new forms of imperial rule, it nonetheless presents itself as *outside of*, 'or at the

end of,' history itself (Ibid: xv). In other words, Empire is presented as a transhistorical absolute that governs nearly all aspects of human life.

As such, the concept of Empire presents us with a useful lens through which to theorize globalization as comprised of a multiplicity of different political, cultural and economic performances much like those described by Kershaw and McKenzie. As Hardt and Negri argue:

Globalization[...]should not be understood in terms of cultural, political, or economic *homogenization*. Globalization, like localization, should be understood instead as a *regime* of the production of identity and difference, or really of homogenization and heterogenization. The better framework, then, to designate the distinction between the global and the local might refer to different networks of flows and obstacles in which the local moment or perspective gives priority to reterritorializing barriers or boundaries and the global moment privileges deterritorializing flows (Ibid: 45)

Understanding globalization as a *regime of production* enables us to conceive of it as a fluid process that breaks down boundaries between nation states in order to better facilitate economic and cultural exchange that takes place *within* the framework of Empire. Correlative to this process is the local, which, conversely, signifies moments in which part of the deterritorializing performance of globalization is ruptured and subverted. Again, for Hardt and Negri, both of these processes take place within the broader structure of Empire. This final point is crucial for my own argument insofar as it is impossible to '(re)establish identities that are in some sense *outside* and protected against the flows of capital and Empire' (Ibid: 45). This means that the forms of resistance to Empire are actively shaped by it and, as such, perform within its structures.

When discussed in relation to Fisher's notion of capitalist realism we might argue that globalization can be thought of as a process whereby the former's occupation of the horizons of the thinkable asserts itself by means of performance. In other words, globalization is one of the main ways in which we encounter the hegemonic status of neoliberalism through various ways in which it performs throughout different spheres of everyday life. For Gabriella Giannachi, understanding globalization in these terms has a significant bearing on how we articulate the relationship between politics, performance and resistance. Drawing on Hardt and Negri's theory of Empire, she argues that 'a critique of capitalist processes must and can only be produced by and within the processes that regulate it.' By inserting themselves into the various economic, organizational, cultural and technological performances that characterize globalization's deterritorializing power 'radical practices can aesthetically subvert the mechanisms at the heart of globalization and empire' (Giannachi, 2006: 12). I argue that we have already seen such a process at play in the Bhopal hoax, in which the Yes Men exploit corporate power's dependence on representation as a means of actively intervening within the performance of globalization itself. Following the ideas highlighted by Giannachi, the performance was staged across a number of different performance paradigms; technological, cultural, discursive and economic. Putting these different paradigms into dialogue with one, the performance worked to counter the dehumanizing logic of globalization and literally (if only fleetingly) re-routed the broader performance of globalization itself.

Much of my own analysis here develops out of Kershaw and McKenzie's respective claims regarding the performativity of power under late-capitalism. As Kershaw argues, performance and performativity have become key



processes in ‘the continuous negotiations of power and authority’ under late-capitalism (Kershaw, 1999: 13). Indeed, as McKenzie has observed, performance has replaced discipline as the dominant formation of power and knowledge that structures our contemporary world (McKenzie, 2001: 176). In this way, the emergence of Empire might be usefully understood as ‘the age of global performance,’ a state of affairs in which ‘discursive performatives and embodied performances are the building blocks of an immense onto-historical production[...]the *performance stratum*’ (Ibid: 171, emphasis in original). The age of global performance is characterized by the relentless proliferation of constantly overlapping and mutating cultural, organizational, technological performances that dynamically shape the socio-political landscape of late-capitalism. Of particular importance to this analysis is McKenzie’s claim that ‘there is no performance without challenge, without claims and contestations, demands and accusations’ (Ibid: 171). The order word of the performative society, ‘Perform, or else,’ is not only addressed to the contemporary neoliberal subject but is also appropriated by culture jammers through radical acts of *détournement* that extend this challenge to the institutions and structure of power that shape the performance of globalization.

Building on the arguments I put forward in chapters 2 and 3, my analysis here is concerned with thinking about how the Yes Men’s performances might function as necessary interruptions that intervene with the performance of globalization by enacting their own version of the challenge to ‘Perform, or else.’ With this aim in mind, my argument unfolds in two stages. In section one, I develop a theory of pranking as performance. I begin with Christine Harold’s proposal that we view pranking as a form of culture jamming that is able to playfully redirect the endless flow of mediatized representations that

characterizes the cultural and political landscape of late-capitalism through the production of new cultural texts (Harold, 2004: 197). I then synthesize Harold's ideas with the concept of 'hacktivism' – a form of digital activism that developed out of the hacking culture of the early 1990s. I apply McKenzie's concept of 'machinic performance' to the concept of pranking in order to theorize the relationship between the former and culture jamming (McKenzie, 2005). My analysis uses the Bhopal hoax as a performance model through which to develop these theoretical ideas which form the basic theoretical framework through which to read the Yes Men's performance practice.

My analysis in section two focuses on the performative inauguration of new realities, an idea that I coin to theorize the ways in which pranking is able to produce new versions of the real that (like the Bhopal hoax) subject the false necessity of capitalist realism to the possibility of its negation. I begin by focusing on *The Post-Consumer Waste Recycling Program* – a performance lecture staged by the Yes Men to a group of American college students, in which they posed as representatives of McDonalds and the World Trade Organization. I argue that the performance can be considered a form of 'overidentification,' a form of ideological critique that uses mimesis as a strategy of resistance (Žižek, 2017; Arns and Sasse, 2005). I argue that the performance overidentifies with the market fundamentalism as a means of revealing its contradictions and, in doing so, drawing the audience into a discussion around the ethics of globalization and the dehumanizing logic of capitalism. Drawing on Liz Tomlin's concept of 'the skeptical imperative' (Tomlin, 2008: 369), I argue that this form of audience engagement transforms the reflexive impotence (or cynicism) of contemporary ideology into a form skeptical spectatorship. Through the performative inauguration of a new version of the real the Yes Men carve

out a space of critical distance that enables the audience to critically reflect on the issues raised by the performance. Following this, I further develop these ideas through an analysis of the Chamber of Commerce prank, in which Servin posed as a member of the organization in a 'fake' press conference held at the National Press Club in Washington, DC. During this performance Servin announced to the assembled journalists that the Chamber would be radically reversing its stance of environmental regulation to support the position of then president, Barack Obama. Drawing on the work of Taussig and Baudrillard I coin the term 'mimetic entanglement' to describe the way that this new version of the real ended up (like the Bhopal hoax) producing a series of performative effects that that subjected the false necessity of capitalist realism to the possibility of its negation.

## **Section One: Pranking, Hacktivism & 'Machinic Performance'**

### ***Pranking and the production of new cultural texts***

Having established the broader aims of this chapter I would now like to unpack some of the key contextual and theoretical concepts underpinning my analysis. The intention of this section is to construct a critical vocabulary through which to make sense of the Yes Men's practice and to unpack the different ways in which it functions as a form of performance. Moreover, I also want to situate the group's work in relation to the broader social and cultural dynamics characteristic of the performative society. I begin with the concept of pranking, which I define as a form of performative adaption that involves the appropriation of the rhetoric and signifying practices of dominant cultural texts in order to produce new versions of them. The creation of these new texts can be understood as a form of abstraction that defamiliarizes the assumptions and

values contained within them. The basic conceptual underpinnings of this idea are drawn from the work of communications scholar, Christine Harold, who proposes that we view pranking as a form of culture jamming that is able to playfully redirect (rather than blocking or negating) the endless flow of mediatized representations that characterizes the cultural and political landscape of late-capitalism (Harold, 2004: 197). As such, the concept of jamming that underpins Harold's analysis corresponds to the third understanding of the term that I highlighted in the introduction to this thesis; jamming as a form of *improvisation* that produces new versions of dominant cultural texts:

Jamming, in this second, interpretative sense requires both practice and knowledge of one's instrument as well as a dynamic exchange among a community of agents. Jamming, although it often implies a free-form chaos, requires knowledgeable and disciplined players to work[...]To jam as a musician does is to interpret an existing text[...]as when a group of jazz musicians appropriate an existing piece of music, or a set of chord progressions and, in doing so, produce a new interpretation. *This interpretation does not necessarily correspond to anything outside it itself* [...]However, *it does contain familiar textual residues* (Ibid: 197 - 198, emphasis my own)

There are two important ideas to take from the definition of pranking offered by Harold. Firstly, in producing new versions of dominant cultural texts pranksters do not set out to communicate a specific political message. Rather, the political force of pranking lies in its improvisational quality – its capacity to produce unforeseen (yet not entirely unintentional) moments of performative excess that arise out of the contingencies of the performance event. We have already seen

this process at play in the work of Reverend Billy and the encounter in the retail car park in which the political force of the car park arose out of a dissensual reconfiguration of retail space that was contingent upon the specific dynamics of the performance event. Secondly, the new text that the prank creates 'does not necessarily correspond to anything outside of itself.' Whilst Harold's point is not meant as an allusion to the work of Baudrillard it enables us to more confidently argue that the Yes Men's practice can be productively understood in relation to his theory of simulation. I will be exploring this idea in more detail in section two of this chapter. For now, however, I contend that the political force of the group's practice emerges through the way that its performances deliberately efface the gap between the real and its representation. The political significance of this is clear; if capitalist realism thrives on presenting neoliberal capitalism as coextensive with reality through its gradual narrowing of the horizons of the thinkable, then the Yes Men's practice offers another model of performance whereby activists are able to intervene in the construction of the real in a manner that works to challenge this.

Broadly speaking, the practice of 'identity correction' unfolds in three stages, each of which can be illustrated through reference to the Bhopal hoax. First, the duo creates what we might term a signifier of authority, some of kind of object or representation that enables them to simulate the authority of corporate power. This is usually a fake website and some fabricated professional credentials that give them access to the spaces in which they wish to perform. Second, having gained access to these spaces, they stage short 'live' performances that form the basis of the prank. These performances nearly always involve performing on behalf of a corporation using a fictional name. In the case of the Bhopal hoax, this involved using the media platform provided by

the BBC to announce a radical direction for Dow Chemical. Through this gesture the performance engages with an affirmatory, prefigurative politics that works to directly challenge the neoliberal consensus that forms the ideological basis of capitalist realism. Indeed, as Harold argues, groups like the Yes Men are able to exploit the media's penchant for spectacular imagery in order to create 'a venue for issues that the commercial media often ignore' (Harold, 2004: 202). Whilst I am critical of the extent to which the Yes Men's practice can be viewed as a democratization of the mass media it is important to note that the duo's appropriation and exploitation of the media apparatus enables them to intervene in the performance of globalization.

This brings us to the third and final stage of the performance model; the performative effects that are generated by the earlier 'live' performance. These performative effects, which emerge out of the dynamics of the autopoietic feedback loop, are where we might locate the political force of the duo's practice. They are the 'third thing' that subsists between the participants involved in the performance and the source of its transformative power. In this way, media coverage forms a central part of the Yes Men's work. In an interview with *Art In America* magazine, Vamos and Servin suggest that the success of a project is often contingent upon the amount of media coverage it is able to generate, noting that the coverage enables them to indirectly collaborate with journalists by '[giving] them a way to communicate things that they wouldn't normally be able to communicate' (The Yes Men, 2014: n.p). Again, whilst I disagree that the Yes Men's activism can be considered a democratization of the mass media it is nonetheless important to consider the media coverage that arises from their pranks as part of the broader structure of each performance. Indeed, analyzing how this coverage contributes to the performative effects that

are produced by the prank is essential to understanding the political force of the duo's practice. For example, in the context of the Bhopal hoax, this had the effect of producing a temporary rupture in the fabric of the sensible in which the people of Bhopal emerged as a political subject in a media landscape that often only pays lip service to such issues. The performance is affirmative insofar as it gestures towards a real beyond capitalist realism, a situation in which corporations choose *not* to act in accordance with the logic of exchange and accumulation that routinely reduces human beings to mere objects in its relentless pursuit of profit.

Important to note here, however, is the way that this sense of affirmation exists in dialectical tension with the other performative effects that serve to dissolve this new version of the real only hours after its articulation. The drop in Dow's market value demonstrates that even if Dow had chosen to 'do the right thing' the global financial system in which the corporation is enmeshed operates as a deterrence machine that quickly suppresses any alternative vision of the real that is irreconcilable with the deterritorializing flows of globalization. For example, in *The Yes Men Fix The World*, Vamos and Servin interview independent trader, Kevin Finn, to get his perspective on the events of December 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2004:

I got a call from my clerk in the middle of the night. Dow Chemical made some announcement that the stockholders of Dow Chemical didn't like because Dow's stock went down. The S&P 500 Futures went down. My friend tells me he thinks it's, you know, some global conspiracy of traders trying to screw us[...]you're a Dow shareholder, and you're expecting the \$20 billion to go towards a dividend to come back to you, or to come to buy some new chemical plant, and [instead] it's going to these people [Bhopalis] that, at least at this

point, aren't able to get any money. I mean, you could see how that would...how they would be upset about that, right? (The Yes Men Fix the World, 2009)

Finn's statement here verbalizes the logic of a system governed by the principles of exchange and accumulation that routinely reduces nuanced ethical issues to purely financial ones. What is most striking is the fact that he acknowledges that Dow shareholders would have been fully aware of the fact that the Bhopalis would be receiving the money as compensation, yet this awareness did not prevent them from selling their shares anyway. Ultimately, any ethical concerns that might have emerged from this awareness were superseded by financial concerns. In the film, Finn's performance does not suggest that he is trying to justify the shareholders' reaction at a moral level. Indeed, he is not placing a value judgment on their actions but merely justifying them in relation to the norms and assumptions he has become familiar with as a participant in the global financial markets. In short, their actions are perceived as perfectly natural and non-ideological. This brings us to a final important observation about the prank and the performative effects that it generated; it illuminates the absence of the Big Other at the heart of contemporary power. In other words, it reveals that, as Fisher notes towards the end of *Capitalist Realism*, 'there are no overall controllers[...]the closest thing we have to ruling powers now are nebulous, unaccountable interests exercising corporate irresponsibility' (Fisher, 2009: 63). Perhaps then the Yes Men's performance is at its most effective when we focus on the way in which it draws attention to the violence at the heart of Empire. The near automatic repression of difference reveals itself to be a function of a system of exploitation that has no other



purpose or agenda other than the indefinite perpetuation of its own existence at all costs. It is capitalist realism in action.

### ***Hactivism and machinic performance***

If pranking involves the production of new cultural texts through appropriation and adaptation then we still need to make clear the how this process is shaped by the structures of the performative society and, by extension, the political significance that we might ascribe to it. Whilst Harold's analysis provides us with a basic conceptual framework I argue that the ideas developed by theorists such as McKenzie and Giannachi in relation to the practice of hacktivism provide us with a useful critical vocabulary for articulating the performance of pranking. According to Giannachi, hacktivism is a form of activism that makes use of digital technologies to produce interventions that are resistant, global and performative in style (Giannachi, 2006: 13). As Tim Jordan argues, the practice is generally considered to be an outgrowth of the hacker culture that formed in the 1980s and 90s and is associated with 'illicit computer intrusion' carried out by 'explorers and criminals online.' However, as Jordan continues, a 'hack' can refer to any innovative use of technology (Jordan, 2002: 120). Indeed, this is one of the key ideas that I wish to retain in my attempt to synthesize the concept of pranking with the theory and practice of hacktivism. One of the most popular tactics used by groups such as Cult of the Dead Cow, the Electrohippie Collective and (more recently) Anonymous is the 'denial of service attack' (DDOS). This involves participants running a computer program that subjects a website to an overwhelming amount of user requests to access it, thus causing the page to malfunction or temporarily shut down (Ibid: 123). In 1998, the Electronic Disturbance Theater famously adapted this technique in support of

the Zapatista uprising in Mexico. Using a piece of specially designed, free software called 'Floodnet' the performance was designed to highlight the ongoing conflict between the Zapatistas, the Mexican Army and various Paramilitary groups that had devastated the Chiapas region of Mexico. Not only did Floodnet submit multiple requests to the Mexican government's website it also allowed users to request specific non-existent phrases such as 'human rights' and 'justice.' This would subsequently create error messages on the page displaying the names of people killed during the repression. The messages would then circulate on a number of other related pages. Reflecting on the group's work, Giannachi remarks that the performative use of digital technology and the Internet enabled the Electronic Disturbance Theater to globalize a specifically local political concern to a global audience (Giannachi, 2006: 19). The group was able to exploit both the Internet and the mass media as a means of staging its critique of the Mexican government in a way that addressed a global audience whilst remaining committed to the political and geographical specificity of the issue. This idea is clearly one of the intentions that informed the Bhopal hoax. The Yes Men used the Internet to 'hack' both the identity of Dow Chemical and the networked space of the mass media in order to draw attention to the ongoing problems in Bhopal. This had the effect of increasing the global visibility of the issue whilst also adding a sense of global pressure to pre-existing local social movements attempting to hold Dow accountable for compensating the victims of the disaster. Whilst I am unable to comment on the long-term effectiveness of this strategy, it is clear that one of the key features of the Yes Men's practice is its ability to globalize local issues and, in turn, localize global concerns in a way similar to the work of hacktivists like the Electronic Disturbance Theater.

For the purposes of this analysis, I favour a broad definition of hacktivism that foregrounds its hybridity and its capacity to address the dehumanizing effects of globalization by producing hybrid performances that combine the virtual and actual in politically significant ways. Hacktivism can be broadly understood as any activist practice that is characterized by the tactical misuse of technology in a way that globalizes local concerns and localizes the global dynamics of capitalism. Such an idea might be usefully applied to many of the examples of culture jamming discussed in this thesis. However, I suggest that the term is best limited to this chapter insofar as it will give my analysis a sense of analytical clarity and specificity that is well suited to unpacking the complex nature of the Yes Men's practice. Whilst defining the Yes Men's practice as a form of hacktivism would serve to narrow its scope, the group's work responds to similar conditions and issues as the activities of groups such as the Electronic Disturbance Theater. This is clearly evidenced by the duo's earlier involvement with ®™ark but is also reflected on their use of 'fake' websites, their ability to bluff their way into various corporate events and conferences, and their propensity for exploiting the mass media as a stage for articulating their critique of globalization. Indeed, the Yes Men's work is informed by the ideas and ideologies developed during the World Trade Organization protests that took place in Seattle in 1999, a period in which activists experimented with combining 'online' and 'offline' protests (at one point using DDOS attacks to bring the WTO conference's digital network to a complete halt) (Jordan, 2002: 123).

More importantly, however, the concept hacktivism provides us with a useful critical vocabulary through which to describe the Yes Men's work in overtly performative terms. Drawing on theories developed from the analysis of

hacktivism by performance scholars such as McKenzie and Giannachi will help to clarify some of the conceptual ambiguities that accompany Harold's analysis of pranking as textual adaptation. McKenzie has attempted to theorize the performance of hacktivism by applying some of the key ideas that he developed in *Perform, Or Else*. Hacktivism is defined as a form of 'machinic performance,' – sociotechnical performances that involve multiple human and non-human actors, take place across multiple 'performative sites,' and are characterized by overlapping combinations of cultural, organizational and technological performance (McKenzie, 2005: 24). McKenzie illustrates this idea in relation to TOYWAR – an 'online theatre of war' that unfolded between November and December, 1999. This conflict took place between a collective of avant-garde artists, etoy, and the American toy company, eToys. As McKenzie recounts, the latter attempted to sue the former for trademark violation following an incident in which a young boy accidentally visited etoy's website whilst trying to find the online store of the toy company. Following a legal battle which resulted in etoy closing its website and moving to a new address the artists sought the assistance of ®™ark, who created a fund to cover the artists legal fees, and the Electronic Disturbance Theater – who launched several DDOS attacks on the eToys website. After shutting down the company's website for several days the lawsuit was dropped and the company paid the artists' legal fees (Ibid: 25). For McKenzie, both etoy and eToys can be understood as machinic performances because of the way that they integrate forms of cultural, organizational and technological performance into their structure. Moreover, the actions of both parties are shaped by the respective challenges of efficacy, efficiency and effectiveness. For example, etoy's 'cultural performances' often parody the values of organizational efficiency associated with the corporate

world. The group also integrate technical effectiveness into its broader organizational performance by using its website to store video and photographic documentation of its work (Ibid: 26). Moreover, McKenzie argues that the collision between these two machines that resulted in 'identity crisis, brand confusion, experience overload' and created a temporary fusion of both performances that formed 'an even greater machine: TOYWAR' (Ibid: 27). He concludes by arguing that 'the machinic [performances] of hacktivism strive to be *mutant* desiring-machines[...]that connect different spheres of knowledge and practice' and 'cut across different technological and social systems' (Ibid: 28).

The analytical framework proposed by McKenzie here can be usefully placed in dialogue with the Yes Men's Bhopal hoax. The prank is characterized by a collision between two machinic performances characterized by overlapping combination of cultural, organizational, and technological performance. First, the Yes Men produced a fake website that exploited the values of organizational efficiency and technical effectiveness in which corporations use the virtual as a means of interfacing with the actual. The creation of this fake website was used as a means of responding to the challenge of efficacy characteristic of cultural performance insofar as the group used the prank as a means of globalizing the local of issue of the Bhopal disaster. In this way, the performance challenged the limits of corporate responsibility and the horizons of possibility that frame our perception of global capitalism. The creation of the fake website triggers an autopoietic feedback loop in which the original representation generates a number of performative effects that enable the challenges of efficacy, efficiency and effectiveness to interact with one another. Furthermore, the Yes Men's announcement undermines the corporation's

organizational performance to produce a moment of organizational *inefficiency* in which it is forced to release a statement condemning the action and reaffirming its commitment to not compensating the people of Bhopal. Playing with 'the semiotic ambiguity between economic, theatrical and discursive performance' the Bhopal hoax actively subverts 'the mechanisms at the heart of globalization and empire' (Giannachi, 2006: 12). In other words, the performance operates in the interstitial space between different performance paradigms and, in doing so, is able to insert itself into and disrupt Dow Chemical's machinic performance.

However, as I have argued throughout this analysis, whilst the Bhopal hoax was able to disrupt the performance of globalization the performative effects that it produced demonstrate the ways in which the system of global capitalism operates as a deterrence machine that quickly suppresses any alternative sense of the real that is irreconcilable with the principle of accumulation. However, the political force of the performance lies in the way that politics emerges as '[a] harbinger of unpredictability and the new,' thus enabling something 'genuinely new to be *thought*, in a time in which global capitalism has such a monopoly on what we can think' (Hynes, Sharpe and Fagan, 2007: 109). In other words, the Yes Men's practice has the potential for challenging the false necessity of capitalist realism, precisely because the new, simulated versions of the real that their pranks produce are founded upon gesturing towards a sense of the world beyond this state of affairs. In the following section of this chapter, I will further interrogate this issue in relation to the concept of subversive affirmation. Developing the ideas discussed above, and synthesizing them with Baudrillard's theory of simulation, I explore the ways in which the performative inauguration of new realities is able to challenge the

taken-for-granted assumptions that underpin our perception of globalization as a regime of production.

## **Section Two: The Performative Inauguration of New Realities**

### ***Exploiting the structures of simulation***

The work of Baudrillard is of great importance to understanding the performance strategies and political force of the Yes Men's practice. For example, as I suggested earlier, the Bhopal hoax can be understood as a critical simulacrum that exposes the constitutive violence endemic to global capitalism and Empire. Whilst Baudrillard's later work has been criticised for the manner in which his analysis seemingly renounces the possibility of a viable mode of resistance to capitalism or an alternative to it, I contend that his work remains an invaluable tool for thinking about the social terrain that culture jamming operates within and is shaped by. More importantly, there remains a radical impulse within his writing that provides a useful framework for thinking about how to meaningfully challenge the sense of fatalism associated with capitalist realism. One of the paradoxical features of capitalist realism is that its pervasiveness means that it must be infinitely plastic, able to adapt to each crisis that it is faced with in order to shore up its ontological consistency. The very sense of plasticity means that 'even the glimmers of alternative political and economic possibilities can have a disproportionately great effect' (Fisher, 2009: 80). It is Baudrillard who provides us with the tools for understanding how power is reliant upon producing a simulated version of the real as deterrence against critique. I suggest that the political force of the Yes Men's practice lies in the way that it exploits the malleability and plasticity of the real as a means of

subverting corporate power and, in doing so, subjects the false necessity of capitalist realism to the possibility of its negation.

In *Simulacra and Simulation*, Baudrillard argues that the real is now itself simulated, 'produced from miniaturized cells, matrices, and memory banks, modes of control, and it can be reproduced a number of times from these' (Baudrillard, 1994: 2). As such, it is the production of the real itself by way of simulation that has become the dominant mode of production under capitalism. This is an idea that we briefly explored in relation to Disneyland – a deterrence machine that rejuvenates the fiction of the real. As the term 'hyperreality' suggests, the historical moment described by Baudrillard is characterized by an excess of the real that reflects a paranoid obsession with authenticity, truth, and meaning that emerges from the death of the real itself. It is a 'panic-stricken production of the real and of the referential, parallel to and greater than the panic of material production' (Ibid: 17). The situation described by Baudrillard has significant implications for the role of radical politics in the contemporary world. For example, Tomlin has argued that it has produced a pervasive sense of mistrust in which 'all appearances are assumed to be simulated.' She argues that we are living in an age of cynicism whereby representations of the real – from political discourse to eye-witness accounts of events – are treated as equally exchangeable truths amongst many others (Tomlin, 2013: 146). Rancière has criticized Baudrillard for the totalizing and politically nihilistic tenor of his analysis by arguing that it renounces the emancipatory aims of the Marxist tradition, and in doing so falls victim to the same recuperative logic of capitalism that it claims to critique (Rancière, 2011: 33). However, Baudrillard's analysis does not necessarily signal the end of resistance as such so much as the formation of a new socio-political terrain upon which political action is



developed. In our contemporary moment, in which neoliberal capitalism has such a pervasive hold over the horizons of the thinkable, it seems vital to explore modes of political action that can rupture the seemingly objective status of neoliberalism.

It is within this context that the Yes Men's practice, which is premised on exploring the imaginative possibilities that arise from the plasticity of the real, might play a crucial role. In the following section of this chapter, I present analyses of two case studies that, I suggest, use simulation to performatively produce new versions of the real. The first is *The Post-Consumer Waste Recycling Program*, a performance lecture staged by the duo that uses overidentification as a means of illuminating the dehumanizing effects of global capitalism. The second is their pranking of the US Chamber of Commerce, in which Servin held a press conference posing as a representative of the organization in order to challenge its stance on climate change. Both performances use two different kinds of affirmation to perform a 'labour of fiction' that exploits the simulated nature of corporate power in order to challenge the false necessity of capitalist realism.

### ***Fostering critical spectatorship: The Post-Consumer Waste Recycling Program***

*A group of students and staff are assembled in a lecture theatre of an unnamed American university. Two smartly dressed men in suits have arrived to give a presentation. They have brought with them two boxes full of McDonalds hamburgers. Before the presentation begins they distribute the burgers around the room. The two men introduce themselves; the first is a spokesperson for McDonalds and the second is a representative of the World*

*Trade Organization. 'I'd like to thank everybody for coming,' begins the representative from the WTO, 'you have many education choices and we're all grateful at the WTO that you have chosen to listen to us for an hour and to our messages that will impact everyone.' As the audience members eat their hamburgers he launches into a passionate polemic on the efficacy of globalization: 'Trade liberalization is a project of faith, it's a crusade, and in any crusade there are problems. One of the problems we run into, in this crusade, is starvation in the third world' He then points towards the universal sign for recycling that has been projected behind him.*

*'You may recognize that symbol from those green bins you see, you know. Where cans, bottles, blah blah...The kind of recycling that I'm talking about, that we have developed at the WTO, is not really this irrelevant kind of recycling where the target, individual consumers like you and me, of non-edible industrial products is such a tiny part of the problem. Rather, we're talking about really recycling what counts, where it counts. To begin to understand the theory behind this you must realize that the human body is not really very efficient: when ingesting heavy foods only about 20% of the nutrients are absorbed by the elementary passageway, while the other 80% finds itself expelled in post-consumer byproducts. Already twenty years ago, NASA scientists began to tap into this nutritional gold mine by developing filters that could transform their astronauts' waste into healthy hygienic and even delicious food once again. With the use of this technology a single hamburger, for example, can be eaten more than ten times – providing a cumulative total of three times the nutritional value of the original fresh hamburger.'*

*On this final point quiet laughter spreads throughout the room. 'Now again, a certain amount of cultural openness is required as we investigate*

*solutions.’ Upon finishing his speech, the WTO representative opens the floor to questions. The first student is angry at the proposal: ‘Coming from a Third World country, I found most of what you said pretty offensive. It’s as if “everyone is equal but some are more equal than others” and who’s to say that people in the Third World want a burger?’ Far from addressing the students’ concerns, the answer given to the question reiterates the perverse logic of the program: ‘I in my heart find it to agree that cultures deserve an equal consideration perhaps to develop on their own terms, but we’re different; we’re culturally different, we’re rich they’re poor. This is the most humane solution we can come up with that stays within the market logic.’ Later, he states that ‘the reality is that we already treat people in the Third World far worse than we treat our domestic animals. That’s not saying it’s right, it’s just saying that that’s the reality’ (The Post-Consumer Waste Recycling Program, 2010)*

Like the Bhopal hoax, The Yes Men’s *Post-Consumer Waste Recycling Program* used representation to produce a critical simulacrum. The performance was founded upon a world-making strategy that performatively produced a new version of the real founded upon the intensification of the rhetoric associated with neoliberalism. My analysis of the performance is based on a video recording of it that can be accessed for free online. Though the footage is edited to foreground the reactions of certain members of the audience and does not show how the piece ended (thus leaving open the possibility that the group revealed to the audience that it was a hoax) my analysis focuses on how the opening and middle sections of the performance implicate the audience within the construction of this critical simulacrum. More specifically, I argue that the performance can be understood as a form of

subversive affirmation, or more specifically, *overidentification* (I will discuss the distinction between these two terms shortly). Overidentification is a term used by Žižek to describe a mode of ideological critique that amplifies the rhetoric of a given ideology in order to illuminate its violent subtext. For Žižek, ironic distance is often considered an inherently subversive form of critique. This assumption elides the extent to which contemporary ideology is actually dependent upon its subjects assuming a certain level of ironic distance to it in order to be at its most effective (Žižek, 2008). As Fisher reminds us, capitalist realism is founded upon an overvaluing of external actions over inner belief – as long as one behaves *as if* they are conforming to a given ideology they are permitted to retain their own disgust or contempt for it (Fisher, 2009: ). Against this view he positions overidentification as a more effective strategy insofar as it is able to expose ‘the obscene superego underside of the system’ (Žižek, 2017: n.p). In other words, overidentification takes ideology at its word, so to speak, by overtly performing the very process of identification itself. In many ways, overidentification performs a similar role to Brecht’s concept of the social *gestus*, in which the social and political nature of an individual’s actions are (through exaggerated repetition) revealed to the audience (Brecht, 1964: 200). The aim of overidentification then is to dramatize the repressed subtext that motivates ideology.

This aim formed a key part of the Yes Men’s performance. For example, the group made deliberate use of quasi-religious rhetoric in a manner that likened free market capitalism to a divine project of liberation. The deterritorializing practices of globalization under Empire were described as ‘a project of faith’ and ‘a crusade.’ This rhetoric set the stage for a more exaggerated form of overidentification with the market fundamentalism of

neoliberalism, materialized through the ritualistic usage of the McDonalds hamburger. Lacking in nourishment and nutrition, but rich in artificial flavour, the burger signified the culture of instant gratification that motivates the ideology of consumer culture and the free-market. For the performance's immediate audience, however, it performed a more direct, affective function. By eating the burgers the audience engaged in a physical and affective identification with this ideology. The burgers were consumed in order to produce a moment of communion between the participants as share in the fruits of the free-market.

As the performance unfolded, the logic of neoliberal ideology (with its uncompromising faith in the invisible hand of the free-market) was followed through to extreme conclusions. Indeed, the fictional WTO initiative proposed by the Yes Men put a perverse, free-market spin on the concept of wealth redistribution, in which the unequal distribution of resources is tackled through an intensification of the pre-existing hierarchies of the free-market. Thus the challenge of organizational efficiency was taken to its most extreme; the Third World is given access to cheap food once it has literally passed through the bodies of Western consumers. Revealing the precise nature of this strategy to the audience followed their consumption of the burgers. Thus, the audience members were implicitly implicated in the dehumanizing logic of globalization. Again, the aim of this is was to reveal the extent to which globalization – governed by the logic of neoliberal capitalism – is undergirded by this dehumanizing logic. However, instead of didactically representing this the Yes Men used the tactics described above as a means of directly implicating the audience within this process. Before the floor was opened to questions the notion that faeces could be used to feed people in the so-called Third World was not explicitly referenced or discussed, but remained implicit in the

imperialistic and quasi-religious rhetoric used by the Yes Men. It is telling that the first question asked of the group came from a student who self-identified as a citizen of the Third World. The responses elicited from the other students were made possible through this performance of overidentification and the duo's clever simulation of corporate power. The audience was deceived into thinking that the strategy proposed by the WTO was a genuine one. It was not until this first question was asked that the dehumanizing logic of the program became an explicit and legitimate object of discussion for those in the room.

The answer given by Servin (playing the role of the WTO spokesman) to the first question doubled down on the prank's basic premise, thus provoking further angry responses from the audience. One student commented that 'the WTO might be lacking a human element' and asked if the speakers had ever seen starving people. Again, Servin responded by intensifying the hierarchical rhetoric of the performance: 'In the WTO there are questions that we have about this, as human beings we have a...kind of firmer grasp on theory. We are able to, fortunately, simply direct world trade in a more theoretical way in collaboration with our colleagues at the largest corporations.' Another student grappled with the ethical implications of the program: 'I actually feel burned,' he argued, 'the way that I feed my cat or my dog, that's actually better. And the people you're talking about, because we're talking about people aren't we? The people you're talking about, we're giving them lower, we're giving them shit' (*The Post-Consumer Waste Recycling Program*, 2010). It is significant here that the student slowly verbalized the theme of dehumanization, as if he had only just realized the extent to which this has become a normalized part of globalization. Again, these responses, in which the dehumanizing logic of the free-market was revealed by the input of the audience, were elicited as a result

of the exaggerated overidentification performed by the Yes Men. It was through these moments – in which members of the audience were directly implicated in a discussion of the ethical and political legitimacy of free-market capitalism – that the political force of the performance emerged. Whilst it would be too much to assume that those in attendance were moved to a radical contemplation of the false necessity of capitalist realism, I argue that the performance produced a moment of rupture in which some of its basic foundations became subject to debate. Crucially, this resulted from the fact that the performance eschewed didacticism as a political strategy. In other words, it took seriously Rancière's claim that spectatorship involves critical reflection upon the representations that are presented to the audience and, more significantly, that the political force of the work emerges through the dynamic interaction between performer and spectator. The meaning of the performance was negotiated through a process of continual transformation that was contingent upon these interactions – it emerged as a 'third thing' that subsisted between everyone involved in the performance event.

As Wark writes in *A Hacker Manifesto* (Wark, 2004), hacktivism is founded upon the production of abstractions – 'new concepts, new perceptions, new sensations, hacked out of raw data' (Wark, 2004: 002). By this, Wark is describing a process in which nature is transformed into second nature through the creation of a new version of the real. Through the production of this copy we are able to reflect upon the contingency of the original. As Wark argues, the hacker 'touches the virtual – and transforms the actual,' and 'calls into being[...]a new world and a new being' (Ibid: 071 & 072). This basic framework might be productively applied to the Yes Men's performance, in which the production of a new version of the real was used to intensify the contradictions

of the original. Much like the Bhopal hoax, the performance reiterated the dehumanizing logic of globalization. However, its political force resided in the way that it illuminated its status as a regime of production. In other words, the production of this 'abstraction' enabled the demystification of the original in such a way that it revealed the dehumanizing logic that drives it.

I suggest that this approach is significant for the way that it transformed the cynicism associated with the hyperreal and capitalist realism into a form of critical spectatorship. For Tomlin, this kind of approach, which she has labelled 'the skeptical imperative' enables us to productively use the dynamics of simulation (in which truth and meaning are rendered malleable and precarious) in a manner that 'sustains our desire to seek political resolutions whilst simultaneously[...]rupturing the totality of ideology before it can establish itself as such' (Tomlin, 2008: 369). The broader political significance of the performance therefore lies in the way that it made possible a space of *critical distance* within the fabric of the sensible that enabled participants to engage with the contingency of neoliberal ideology. Such moments are of vital importance in the context of an historical moment in which the possibility of critical distance is frequently annulled through the totalizing effects capitalist realism and the logic of simulation.

***Staging Baudrillard's bank robbery: The Yes Men impersonate the US Chamber of Commerce***

*11am, Monday 19<sup>th</sup> October, 2009. A group of journalists have gathered at the National Press Club in Washington D.C. for a press conference held by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce. Only a few hours earlier they had received a press release from the Chamber announcing that it would be reversing its position on*



*climate change by explicitly supporting Barack Obama's environmental legislation that it had spent the last year being vigorously opposed to. The announcement has already generated traction in the media, with a number of prominent news shows breaking the story as soon as they received the press release. Later they will be forced to retract the story following a statement from the Chamber explicitly denying the change in policy and claiming that it had been the victim of a hoax. The journalists assembled at the National Press Club are either unaware of this development or are keen to clarify the Chamber's position following the press release. Jacques Servin of the Yes Men (performing in the role of Chamber spokesperson, Hingo Sembra) addresses the room: 'There is only one way to do business and that is to pass a climate change bill quickly so that, this December, President Obama can go to Copenhagen with a strong position.' Following a number of questions, Servin patiently explains the Chamber's decision in economic terms, arguing that 'the subsidies for clean coal that have been given by this administration are completely misplaced' and that the money would be better invested in renewable energy sources and technologies. Denouncing the legitimacy of clean coal, he states that it is in the best interests of his organization 'to put our money where the proof is.'*

*Moments later the conference is interrupted by Eric Wohlschlegel, a representative of the Chamber of Commerce, who denounces the conference as 'fraudulent press activity and a stunt.'*

*Wohlschlegel's interruption is followed by a dialogue between him and Servin that could have been lifted straight out of an absurdist drama:*

*Servin: Who are you really sir?*

*Wohlschlegel: 'Do you have a business card? Are you with the US Chamber?'*

*Servin: I do. We can discuss afterwards.*

*Wohlschlegel: Are you with the US Chamber of Commerce?*

*Servin: Yes I am.*

*Wohlschlegel: Well I work there and I do not recognize you at all.*

*(Pause)*

*Servin: Could I see your business card?*

*After several minutes of this exchange Wohlschlegel has successfully corralled many of the journalists out of the room. As they leave he presses on his business cards into their hands and questions their organizational affiliation, as if paranoid that everyone present is involved in an elaborate hoax at his expense (The Yes Men Fix the World, 2009)*

In their influential essay on the subject, *Subversive Affirmation: On Mimesis as a Strategy of Resistance* (2005), German theoreticians Inke Arns and Sylvia Sasse, make the important point that overidentification is but one possible iteration of the broader practice of subversive affirmation. They argue that, whilst both are concerned with generating a sense of excess that reveals the obscene subtext of ideology, the former is geared towards an exaggerated adoption of its rhetorical tropes and signifying practices (Arns and Sasse, 2005: 448). There are other modes of subversive affirmation that are premised on more subtle forms of identification, in which the artists or activist uses mimesis as a cover for normalizing new ideas that would ordinarily be difficult to espouse. In contrast to *The Post-Consumer Waste Recycling Program*, the Yes Men's pranking of the US Chamber of Commerce represents a more effective and nuanced form of subversive affirmation. Much like the Bhopal hoax, the duo exploited the simulated nature of corporate power as a means of creating a

critical simulacrum in which they were able to legitimately pose as representatives of the Chamber of Commerce. Again, the production of this simulacrum produced a series of performative effects that, I argue, are key to understanding the political force of the performance. Through reference to the video of the performance included in *The Yes Men Fix the World* I will now reconstruct and analyze these performative effects and reflect upon their broader political significance in relation to the concept of subversive affirmation.

The first of these is the encounter between Servin and the 'legitimate' Chamber representative, Eric Wohlschlegel. The encounter created a moment of undecidability in which the audience of journalists was unable to ascertain the legitimacy of either figure. This sense of undecidability is instructive because it illustrates a key point of Baudrillard's theory of simulation regarding the status of illusion in the context of hyperreality. 'The impossibility of rediscovering the absolute level of the real,' he argues, 'is of the same order as the impossibility of staging an illusion' (Baudrillard, 1994: 19). To recall my analysis above, our contemporary moment is characterized by a preoccupation with the real in which the production of a simulated version of the real is 'parallel' to that of material production. In such a situation, fakery, deception and imitation become difficult to perceive precisely because the real is itself simulated. In order to explicate this idea, Baudrillard presents a provocative scenario to the reader:

Organize a fake holdup. Verify that your weapons are harmless, and take the most trustworthy hostage[...]Demand a ransom, and make it so that the operation creates as much commotion as possible – in short, remain close to the 'truth,' in order to test the reaction of the apparatus to a perfect simulacrum. You won't be able to do it: the network of artificial signs will become inextricably

mixed up with real elements[...]in short, you will immediately find yourself once again[...]in the real, one of whose functions is precisely to devour any attempt at simulation, to reduce everything to the real – that is, to the established order, well before institutions and justice come into play (Ibid: 20)

For Baudrillard, any attempt at illusion is immediately ‘devoured’ by the logic of a system whose only strategy ‘is to reinject the real and the referential everywhere, to persuade us of the reality of the social’ (Ibid: 22). Thus, the falsified signs of the staged holdup become inextricably entangled with the real. Such a proposition has far reaching implications for the status of politics in the context of late-capitalism – the flattening out of the distinction between representation and reality is what enables all possible versions, interpretations, and discourses of the real to be true. For example, conspiracy theories and ‘fake news’ are now marshalled to help individuals make sense of an increasingly complex and opaque world. As Baudrillard argues, the function of contemporary ideology is no longer to falsify the real but to conceal the fact that ‘the real is no longer real’ in order to save the reality principle (Ibid: 13). The narratives offered by conspiracy theories and fake news are popular and alluring because the simply interpretive frameworks that underpin them enable different, ideologically divergent groups to construct their discreet versions of the real that reflect back their values, ideals, fears and prejudices.

Grappling with these issues is another task for a future research project. I mention them, however, to highlight the context in which the Yes Men’s practice is operating. Against the more pessimistic readings of Baudrillard’s theory I posit that simulation also offers activists opportunities to exploit and play with the malleability and plasticity of the real in politically significant ways. My argument hinges on the idea that subversive affirmation represents an effective

strategy for doing this precisely because it enables activists to simulate corporate authority to such an extent that this simulation becomes inextricably entangled with the real. This can be seen in the context of the Chamber of Commerce hoax; a 'fake' press release was disseminated and taken as legitimate; performers announced a radical new direction for the organization; and, even when a legitimate representative of power arrived on the scene, an element of doubt remained. As Taussig argues, this process is bound up in the very functioning of mimesis, characterized by a twofold process of copy and contact: the production of a likeness, imitation or copy and the subsequent 'palpable, sensuous connection' between the body of the perceiver and the perceived:

To ponder mimesis is to become sooner or later caught, like the police and the modern State with their fingerprinting devices, in sticky webs of copy *and* contact, image *and* bodily involvement of the perceiver in the image (Taussig, 1993: 21)

For Taussig, mimesis is, first and foremost, a form of knowledge that is related to the production of the real and it is this process that culture jammers like the Yes Men are able to exploit. Such an idea is essential to understanding the notion of mimetic entanglement: Through the manipulation of the machinic performances characteristic of globalization, the Yes Men are able to produce simulated versions of the real that do not represent or misrepresent it but efface the very distinction between the two. I propose that the group's use of subversive affirmation sets in motion a process of 'mimetic entanglement' in which a representation collides with the real and begins to produce material effects.

Whilst the Chamber of Commerce eventually intervened to denounce the news as false the organization could not prevent the story from being widely circulated by prominent media outlets (such as the conservative Fox News) and becoming a major topic of debate on the news that morning. The confusion generated by the prank, followed by the Chamber's subsequent denunciation of it, created a moment of undecidability in which notions of truth and falsity were temporarily suspended. One of the primary effects of this was to turn the gaze of the mass media back onto the organization itself. Much like the Bhopal hoax, this forced the Chamber to justify the reasoning behind their decision. This can be understood as a theatricalization of the political interests that lie behind such organizations by demonstrating that the Chamber of Commerce (which portrays itself as a governmental institution) is actually a lobbying body that acts in the interests of corporate power. More significantly than this, however, is the way that the process of mimetic entanglement set in motion by the Yes Men subjected the dominant social order to the possibility of its negation. The duo used subversive affirmation as a means of actualizing a new version of the real that clashed with the stated beliefs of the organization. This *labour of fiction* – in which performance was used to reconfigure what is doable, sayable and visible within a given distribution of the sensible – ruptured the naturalness of capitalist realism by articulating a sense of the world beyond it. The political force of the hoax lies in the way that it was able to produce material effects that ended up transforming the organization's official policy. Like the Bhopal hoax the Yes Men's decision to prank the Chamber of Commerce was designed to put pressure on an organization with the hope that this would result in changing its behaviour. However, *unlike* the Bhopal hoax (which concluded by reaffirming the structural violence of global capitalism), the performance was successful to

the extent that that this pressure played a role in changing the organization's official stance on climate change; only a few weeks later the Chamber announced that it would be supporting Obama's proposed environmental legislation (*The Yes Men Fix the World*, 2009).

## **Conclusion**

The work of the Yes Men is reflective of the extent to which culture jamming is shaped by the dynamics of the performative society. As we have seen, the duo is able to insert itself into the performance of globalization by exploiting the overlapping performance paradigms that constitutes the age of global performance. More significantly, it is because of this approach that the Yes Men's practice offers a model of activist performance that is able to productively work within, and exploit, the framework of simulation. Rather than reinforcing the sense of relativity associated with simulation these performances retain an ethical and political commitment to resisting the dehumanizing logic of global capitalism. Much like the work of Reverend Billy and the contemporary subvertising movement, whilst these moments of transformation are fleeting they nonetheless creatively explore the possibility of a world beyond capitalist realism's horizons of the thinkable. This is demonstrated in the Yes Men's commitment to a politics of affirmation that attempts to critically challenge the taken-for-granted values and norms of the institutions that make up global capitalism. Indeed, whilst it is important not to conflate the Chamber of Commerce's decision to change its public stance on climate change legislation with a sustained transformation of the organization's political identity, I would argue that we need to take seriously the possibility that culture jamming is able to achieve this. This latter point forms the basis for my analysis in Chapter 5, in

which I examine the work of activist collective Liberate Tate. Though their practice bears little aesthetic resemblance to the Yes Men's work their interventions reflect a desire to critically reshape and democratize cultural institutions from within.



## Chapter 5: Liberate Tate as Vested-Vanguard

### Introduction

*13th June 2015. Liberate Tate activists have assembled in the Turbine Hall of Tate Modern, armed with a small collection of books, a stack of willow charcoal sticks, sleeping bags, food and water. They will occupy the space from 11.53am until 12.55pm the following day – a period that begins high tide on the first day and ends on high tide on the second. Beginning at the far end of the hall they begin transcribing lines from their collection of books onto the gallery floor. For over 24 hours they quietly and diligently perform their task, slowly but surely covering the entirety of the floor in writing. Written and arranged in a non-linear fashion, the blocks of text that make up this intertextual mosaic enter into new discursive and aesthetic relationships with one another. Many awkwardly jostle for position with one another whilst others gently curve around their counterparts to create pleasing triangular and circular patterns. Some of the more polemical passages stand out from the crowd as aphoristic fragments torn from the pages of some famous political or artistic manifesto. Passages from the science fiction literature of Ursula Le Guin and Aldous Huxley intermingle with the dense philosophical reflections of Felix Guatarri and the radical cultural theory of bell hooks. Key phrases from Tate's official ethics and environmental policies are placed next to analysis taken from the pages of Mel Evan's Artwash and Chin Tao Wu's Privatising Culture. During the gallery's open hours visitors are afforded a birds eye view of the performance, watching from the upper walkways and staircases that surround the Turbine Hall. Some glance at the unused books arranged in rows around the performers. Others read the performance's accompanying text, which describes the performance as an*

*exploration of time – lunar time, tidal time, ecological time, geological time ‘and all the ways we are running out of time: from climate change to gallery opening hours; from the anthropocene to the beginning of the end of oil sponsorship of the arts’ (Liberate Tate, 2015b). After the gallery closes the performers continue their work. They take turns to eat, drink and sleep in the hall overnight. The performance concludes on 14<sup>th</sup> June, with the entirety of the Turbine Hall’s floor covered in text. After the performers have packed up and left the gallery’s cleaning staff begin mopping up the remains of the performance, erasing Liberate Tate’s story from the floor.*

*Time Piece* (2015) is one of the many performance interventions staged by Liberate Tate, a group of activists, artists, writers and curators who have been protesting British Petroleum’s sponsorship of the Tate Modern and Tate Britain since 2010. The group is part of the Art Not Oil coalition – a network of activist groups campaigning against the presence of oil money in some of the UK’s most famous cultural institutions, including the National Portrait Gallery, the British Museum and the Southbank Centre. Whilst all of these groups use performance as their primary means of engaging with this issue their work is extremely diverse in form. For example, BP Or Not BP draws on the traditions of epic theatre and agitprop to stage its interventions at the British Museum, whilst the activist choir Shell Out Sounds uses music to protest Shell’s sponsorship of the Southbank Centre. The oldest and most established of these groups is Platform – an artist-led activist collective founded in 1984 by James Marriott and Dan Gretton (Heddon, 2012: 193). The group shares several members with Liberate Tate (the two groups even collaborated with one another to create the alternative audio tour of the Tate galleries, *Tate à Tate*,

discussed in section two of this chapter) and has developed a unique form of performance practice that combines installation art, ethnography, and live art with more traditional forms of political organization and agitation (Bottoms et al., 2012: 128). In spite of this diversity of tactics all of the members of the Art Not Oil coalition are united by a common interest in using performance as a means of creatively exploring the ethical and political issues that underpin and arise out of the murky relationship between the oil industry and the arts.

Liberate Tate's critique of oil sponsorship rests on the central point that BP is able to exploit its association with the gallery in order to secure what is known as the 'social licence to operate' in the face of the oil industry's dwindling social acceptability. A key part of this is secured through the access that sponsorship provides to an influential audience of 'special publics': 'business people, media executives, civil servants, high level civil society and public sector officials [...]and anyone else in a position to bear weight on major political and economic decisions' (Evans, 2015: 79). Moreover, As Chin-Tao Wu notes in her meticulous study of the relationship between cultural institutions and corporate power, *Privatising Culture* (2003), cultural institutions' association with liberal values, artistic innovation and cultural preservation '[has] provided the business world with a valuable tool for the projection of itself as a liberal and progressive force' (Wu, 2003: 125). By lending financial support to institutions like Tate, BP gains access to the special publics who underpin their political influence. It also enables them to present themselves as responsible 'corporate citizens.' For Liberate Tate, Tate's association with BP renders the gallery complicit in the 'greenwashing' of both BP and the broader oil industry. This sense of complicity is furthered by the fact that, according to Mel Evans (a prominent member of the collective), BP's sponsorship of Tate only accounts for

0.6% of the gallery's operating budget (Evans, 2015: 59). The group's activism is thus motivated by a desire to protect the identity and integrity of Tate whilst also drawing attention to the ways in which oil sponsorship is used as a tool for deflecting attention from an industry with a vested interest in preventing the industrial reform necessary to meaningfully tackle global warming and climate change.

This chapter might have focused on all of the groups that comprise the Art Not Oil coalition. However, I have decided to focus exclusively on the work of Liberate Tate. This is for two key reasons. Firstly, the group's performances have received significant attention and acclaim in the years leading up to, and following, BP's announcement in March 2016 that it would not be renewing its sponsorship deal with Tate upon its expiration in 2017 (Khomami, 2016: n.p). I am interested in exploring how the political force of the group's practice might also be read as an accumulation of multiple interventions that contributed to the public scrutiny that played a key role in BP's decision to end its twenty-six year relationship with Tate. Secondly (and connected to this) my intention is to focus on the specific institutional dynamics that characterized Liberate Tate's relationship with Tate. In prior chapters I have been concerned with the way that the political force of culture jamming emerges through its contestation of the symbolic construction of the real and its capacity to transform the spectator's experience of everyday life. Here, I focus on how this process of transformation works within a specific institutional context. This chapter is therefore concerned with how the transformative potential of culture jamming is shaped by this broader institutional context and, more specifically, critiquing the extent to which Liberate Tate's practice can be considered a meaningful challenge to the hegemony of neoliberalism.

With these aims in mind, my analysis takes as its starting point Evans' claim that the issue of oil sponsorship is an opportunity to 'challenge the institutional body from within' by bringing questions from outside the gallery into the institutional space (Evans, 2015: 162 - 164). What kind of aesthetic and political strategies have the group developed in order to enact this 'challenge from within'? How are these strategies shaped by the wider power dynamics that frame their relationship to Tate? To what extent can Liberate Tate's performances meaningfully transform the spectator's experience and understanding of the gallery? Can the group's campaign be considered a meaningful challenge to the practice of corporate sponsorship and the broader ideology of neoliberalism? My aim is to critically reflect on the different ways in which this 'challenge from within' is enacted and the effect that it has on the various performance spaces that comprise Tate Modern.

The style of analysis pursued in this chapter follows the form I have been using throughout this thesis. Drawing on my reflections from Chapter 1 regarding the performativity of politics and the contingent, excessive nature of live performance I will analyze each performance as a specific 'live' event. Aside from *Tate à Tate* (which I experienced at the Tate Modern in 2015) I did not encounter any of these performances as live events. In this regard my analysis has benefited enormously from the extensive video and photographic documentation of each performance produced by the members of Liberate Tate. The group's decision to exhaustively document their performances is reflective of a broader trend in the history of performance art in which artists have integrated documentation into the staging of their work and viewed it as a key part of their artistic practice. Philip Auslander has argued that this trend began in the early 1970s when artists such as Chris Burden and Gina Paine

began using photography as a means of supplementing and providing access to the original performance event. 'In this respect', he argues, 'no documented work of performance art is performed solely as an end in itself as an end in itself: the performance is always at one level raw material for documentation, the final product through which it will be circulated and with which it will ultimately become identified' (Auslander, 2008: 31). Whilst mediatization will always shape one's analysis of a performance that has not been experienced 'first-hand' Auslander's critique of liveness reminds us that no performance is ever free of this influence. For the purposes of this analysis I have chosen to use documentation as a tool through which to reconstruct the original performance event and reflect upon ways in which it transformed the various spaces that comprise Tate Modern.

Evans' proposition cited earlier clearly informs the staging of *Time Piece*. Watching documentation of the performance, one is struck by the fact that it bears little resemblance to traditional political occupations. Dressed head-to-toe in black the activists copy out sections of text from the collection of books that surround them with purposeful and quiet diligence. The performance literally uses the Turbine Hall as a gigantic text, or palimpsest. This latter term is frequently used by practitioners and theorists of site-specific performance to describe the way in which the identity and meaning of space is performatively (re)produced through each performance event. According to Cathy Turner, the concept conceives of space as 'an aggregation of layered writings' whose meaning is subject to a continuous process of transformation via the different performances that take place within it (Turner, 2004: 373). Space is thus conceived as a 'scraped out document, its previous meaning and inscriptions rubbed out but still vaguely legible, onto which the performance will write a new

text' (Nield, 2012: 221). *Time Piece* can be understood as a dramatization of this principle; the concatenated layers of writing that comprise the intertextual mosaic created by the performers gives rise to new narratives, poetic insights and abstract shapes generated through the citation and reiteration of existing texts. In this way the palimpsest is made visible through the very act of writing itself. It is a form of collective and creative labour that invites the spectator to reflect upon the idea that this process forms the basis of the institution's entire identity. Through this, performance brings forth a new aesthetic community that is composed of two different sets of resources - the poetic (the insights, ideas and expressions of a range of different writers) and the everyday (food, drink, writing tools and sleeping materials) – that are woven together through the labouring bodies of the performers.

The preceding analysis of *Time Piece* outlines some of the key issues I am interested in exploring in this chapter. First, the performance is reflective of the broader aesthetico-political strategies that shape Liberate Tate's practice. As Liberate Tate and Platform member Kevin Smith notes in an article written for *Red Pepper* magazine, the group's work is informed by a desire to produce performances that are 'conceived, rehearsed and executed as live art' and that 'casual gallery-goers would feel pleased to stumble upon [and that] many of the staff working in Tate would feel professionally pleased to have hosted' (Smith, 2016: n.p). Blending in with the gallery's curatorial practices Liberate Tate's performances engage with the potentialities of the space and produce forms of aesthetic experience that invite reflection upon issues of ownership and accountability in relation to the institution. With this in mind, I contend that *Time Piece* is staged in such a way that it becomes 'legible' within the culturally coded space of the gallery insofar as it is presented as an object of aesthetic

enjoyment as well as an activist gesture. Second, this sense of legibility is symptomatic of a broader tension running through Liberate Tate's work; the group performs from a position that is both inside and outside the borders and boundaries of the institution. The 'institution' referred to here can be understood as Tate, but also the broader institution of *art* itself. For example, my earlier reference to Auslander's discussion of performance art and its documentation in relation to Liberate Tate highlights one of the many ways in which the group's practice is shaped by the conventions of the institution of art as well as political activism. Moreover, as I argue below, the work of Liberate Tate members Mel Evans (a member of Platform) and Gavin Grindon (an art historian and curator) is further evidence of this ambiguous relationship to the art world. Design scholar Emma Mahony, has characterized this as a position of 'interstitial distance' in which the collective performs its critique from within the physical spaces that comprise Tate, but at a strategic distance to it (Mahony, 2014: 14). This concept of interstitial distance is essential to understanding the political force and potential limits of Liberate Tate's practice. For example, whilst establishing a sense of interstitial distance enables the participants to affirm a sense of collective ownership over the gallery's identity this approach is contingent upon a broader strategy in which their performances are staged in dialogue with Tate's curatorial practices. As I will be arguing later in this analysis, such an approach renders the group's work susceptible to recuperation by the institution itself.

Identifying and engaging with such tensions is one of the key analytical threads running throughout this chapter. I am interested in foregrounding the group's relationship with Tate as a means of illuminating the political force of their performances. I will engage with the role played by Tate in shaping the



aesthetico-political strategies that inform the group's practice, identifying the moments in which these performances affirm a sense of collective ownership over the institution's social, cultural and political identity, and exploring the ways in which they are able to politicize and transform the spectator's experience of the gallery itself. I begin this task by relating the group's critique of BP sponsorship to the history of corporate sponsorship of cultural institutions in the UK. I argue that the phenomenon is part of the free market ideology of neoliberalism and, as such, is one of the ways in which capitalist realism is able to reproduce itself at the level of cultural production. With this context established I turn my attention to the relationship between Liberate Tate and Tate. Drawing on the work of Pierre Bourdieu, I situate the group's practice within his 'field of cultural production' – a field of 'position takings' comprised of different social actors (such as producers, cultural institutions, publishers, and critics) who collectively produce and determine the social value of artworks within an existing network of power relations (Bourdieu, 2011: 30). Following this, I define Liberate Tate as a contemporary avant-garde movement following the definition proposed by Mike Sell: '[A] minoritarian formation that challenges power in subversive, illegal or alternative ways[...]by challenging the assumptions, hierarchies and/or legitimacy of existing political and/or cultural institutions' (Sell, 2011: 41). In particular, I argue that the group is a 'vested-vanguard' – a minoritarian formation that, though *procedurally* disempowered, is embedded within the structure of the institution and in possession of the necessary social and cultural capital needed to reshape its identity and political direction from within (Ibid: 71).

These ideas form a key part of my argument: By foregrounding the relationship between a given avant-garde and the institution with which it

engages we are better able to understand the power dynamics that inform the former's practice and the broader cultural and political significance that we might ascribe to it. Indeed, one of my central claims in this chapter is that Liberate Tate's performances are designed to be legible within the culturally coded space of the gallery. In other words, their interventions are presented as objects of aesthetic enjoyment as well as activist gestures. This is an idea that I will theorize in relation to Paul Crowther's concept of the 'sensuous manifold' (Crowther, 1993: 4). These final points are elaborated through a short performance analysis of *Hidden Figures* (2014). This open-ended piece of participatory performance, which incorporated references to Kazimir Malevich's famous painting *Black Square* (1915), focused on Tate's decision to omit crucial monetary figures from documentation relating to their funding agreement with BP following a freedom of information request filed by Liberate Tate's frequent collaborators Platform. The performance is reflective of the ways in which the group's position within the field of cultural production and its status as a 'vested-vanguard' have shaped the aesthetico-political strategies that characterize its approach to performance and culture jamming.

These ideas form the basis for my analysis in section two, where I conduct a performance analysis of one of the group's most famous performances, *The Gift* (2012). The performance involved the collective in exploiting a legal loophole (the Museums and Gallery Act 1992) by donating a wind turbine blade to Tate Modern and requesting for it to be included in the gallery's permanent collection. My analysis focuses on the gesture at the heart of the performance – the act of donating the blade and requesting that it be accepted as a work of art. Drawing on Perucci's theory of ruptural performance and the concept of reciprocity associated with gift-giving I argue that the performance enabled

Liberate Tate to enter into a critical dialogue with Tate. Moreover, I suggest that the ambiguous legibility of the performance (underpinned by its legal status) created a heightened sense of sociality in the Turbine Hall that affirmed its capacity to act as a public space. Whilst I argue that Tate was able to subsume the critique into its identity by formally rejecting the blade but accepting documentation of the performance into their archive, I suggest that the moment is essential to understanding the political force of the group's work. I conclude my analysis with a discussion of Liberate Tate's unofficial audio tour of Tate Modern, *Tate à Tate* (2012). Again, I foreground the ways in which the group draw's on its vested-vanguard status to create an aesthetic experience that is structured in dialogue with the gallery's history and curatorial practices. Drawing on the host/ghost model used in the analysis of site-specific performance I engage with the concept of 'haunting' in order to theorize the piece's political force. In contrast to the other examples discussed in this chapter I suggest that the piece places the participant in a position of interstitial distance in order to radically defamiliarize their experience of the gallery in an overtly political manner. Finally, I draw on Benjamin's writing on history and argue that the piece produces a dissensual counter-narrative of the institution and its relationship to oil sponsorship that illuminates the ways in which the historical crises of late-capitalism continue to haunt our experience of the present.

## **Section One: Liberate Tate and The Field of Cultural**

### **Production: Towards a Performance Theory of the 'Vested-Vanguard'**

Throughout this thesis I have been arguing that the political force of culture jamming lies in its ability to reconfigure the spectator's experience of everyday

life by rupturing capitalist realism's hold over the horizons of the thinkable. It is within this context that we must situate Liberate Tate's critique of oil sponsorship. Though private patronage of the arts is not a new phenomenon, I argue that corporate sponsorship is a phenomenon specific to late-capitalism and is connected to neoliberal hegemony. Whilst the USA has longer history of corporate sponsorship, in the UK the practice began in earnest during the early years of Margaret Thatcher's conservative government in 1970. According to Wu, the political transformations enacted by Thatcher not only refashioned the economic and social policies of the British government but also set in motion a process that would dramatically reshape the cultural landscape of the UK (Wu, 2003: 47). The stringent budget cuts that characterized all four of her arts ministers' periods in office did not so much open the doors for corporate sponsorship as actively welcome it in. In order to account for the significant gap in funding that followed the £5 million cut to arts expenditure in 1979, the government launched 'an aggressive campaign' to encourage private sector investment, with the aim of boosting private sponsorship by £1 million in 1979 'to double that figure for the coming year' (Ibid: 54 - 55). Following Thatcher's resignation in 1990 (the year that BP began its sponsorship of Tate) her successor, John Major, transformed Tate into a non-departmental public body (NDPB). This new status meant that Tate's income would be split between three different sources. One-third would be guaranteed to come from the State, another third would be self-generated, whilst the final third would be secured from sponsorship agreements with third-party sources like BP (Evans, 2015: 44). So, whilst the shift to NDPB status guaranteed cultural institutions like Tate a secure stream of public subsidy, it also forced them to adopt business strategies that could match this funding. Two years before the shift NDPB status

Tate hired recently-departed director, Nicholas Serota, whose willingness to integrate corporate sponsorship and business strategies from the private sector into the organization's operating model played a key role in his appointment (Ibid: 51). It is for this reason that I suggest that corporate sponsorship of the arts has to be understood as a political process that is bound up in the constitution and legitimization of neoliberal hegemony. This is primarily because it allows the logic of neoliberal ideology to actively shape the identity of cultural institutions like Tate. Indeed, it is a process through which capitalist realism reproduces itself at the level of cultural production, in which corporate power is presented as essential to preserving cultural heritage, fostering artistic innovation, and securing the survival of art galleries and museums across the country.

At a more conceptual level, corporate sponsorship of cultural institutions can be usefully linked to the changing historical relationship between art, culture, politics and power. Indeed, the process contributes to the loss of culture's 'affirmative' character in the context of late-capitalism. The influential Frankfurt School theoretician Herbert Marcuse uses the term 'affirmative' to describe the social role of bourgeois culture. This, he argues, was predicated upon a separation between the 'real' world of everyday life and loftier mental and spiritual faculties of the intellect. The affirmative character of bourgeois culture lies in this constitutive separation between these two spheres. For Marcuse, the 'decisive characteristic' of this culture is 'the assertion of a universally obligatory, eternally better and more valuable world that must be unconditionally affirmed' in dialectical opposition to 'the factual world of the daily struggle for existence' (Marcuse, 2009: 70). In other words, the 'semiautonomy' of culture – its capacity to exist at a remove from the realm of economics – is

what enables it act as a mirror that reflects back upon the world the idealized, Utopian image of a society that both celebrates and conceals 'the new conditions of social life' (Ibid: 71). Marcuse's view here is a relatively pessimistic one, insofar as the affirmative character uncritically celebrates the pain and suffering characteristic of daily existence and obfuscates its underlying causes. He develops a more optimistic analysis in *The Aesthetic Dimension* (1978), in which the semiautonomy of culture is conceived as a potentially liberatory tool. Marcuse argues that the revolutionary potential of art is grounded in its 'transcendence of immediate reality' which 'shatters the reified objectivity of social relations and opens a new dimension of experience: rebirth of the rebellious subjectivity (Marcuse, 1978: 7). In other words, it is art's separation from 'the process of material production' that enables it to 'demystify the reality produced in this process.' In this way, aesthetic practices are able to '[challenge] the monopoly of the established reality to determine what is "real,"' (Ibid: 22). For Marcuse, the affirmative character of culture (secured by its semiautonomy) is a tool for creatively reconfiguring the present insofar as the new reality imagined in the artwork subjects the existing order of things to the possibility of its negation. It provides a space of critical distance for rethinking the real itself.

For Fredric Jameson, this affirmative character is abolished in the context of late-capitalism and postmodernity. This, he argues, is because of the increased entanglement between culture, politics and economics. Thus, we have witnessed 'a prodigious expansion of culture throughout the social realm, to the point at which everything in our social life from economic value and state power[...]to the very structure of the psyche itself - can be said to have become "cultural" in some original and yet untheorized sense' (Jameson, 1991: 48).

Such a situation poses a significant challenge to our assumptions regarding the political role of art which, he suggests, is underpinned by ‘a single, fundamentally spatial, presupposition[...]of “critical distance”’ (Ibid: 48). We have already seen, through the work of the Yes Men, how culture jamming attempts to reclaim this space of critical distance by critiquing the performance of globalization *from within*, so to speak. However, the involvement of corporate power in the funding of cultural institutions presents us with a far more complicated situation.

The recuperation of radical aesthetic practices made possible by the loss of semiautonomy makes it difficult to conceive of an artistic practice that is able to present a significant challenge to capital. It is within this context that Mouffe (departing from her more traditional political analysis) develops her theory of art as ‘counter-hegemonic practice.’ Recognizing the extent to which radical artistic gestures have become susceptible to recuperation due to the lack of critical distance from the system that they denounce, she looks to carve out a conceptual space within which aesthetic practices might meaningfully oppose the hegemony of neoliberalism. The objective is to both widen the sphere of political action and intervention – a practice that is made necessary by the increased ubiquity of corporate power within areas such as cultural institutions – and to ‘undermine the imaginary environment’ necessary for the symbolic reproduction and legitimation of neoliberal hegemony at the level of everyday life (Mouffe, 2007: 1). Conceiving of art in these terms requires identifying the ways in which it ‘foments dissensus [and] makes visible what the dominant consensus tends to obscure and obliterate.’ These moments of dissensual reconfiguration are not limited to specific forms of art, but emerge within ‘a

manifold of artistic practices aiming at giving voice to those silenced within the framework of the existing hegemony' (Ibid: 4).

This conceptual framework might be readily applied to many of the examples of culture jamming discussed throughout this thesis. However, Mouffe's theory is best suited to the work of Liberate Tate because the institutional context in which they operate is a clearly identifiable site through which neoliberal hegemony (and as such, capitalist realism) is able to reproduce itself. In the analyses that follow I will be identifying the various ways in which the group is able to dissensually reconfigure the space in which they perform through an engagement with the issue of oil sponsorship. Such a process involves reclaiming the semiautonomy of art by performing from a position of interstitial distance. As I will now argue, this approach is decisively shaped by Liberate Tate's relationship to Tate and the broader field of cultural production in which the group is enmeshed.

### ***Liberate Tate as vested-vanguard***

Liberate Tate was formed in 2010 following a workshop on art and activism hosted by Tate Modern entitled 'Disobedience Makes History.' The workshop was facilitated by veteran activist, John Jordan (member of the Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination) and focused on the following question: 'What is the most appropriate way to approach political issues within a publicly funded institution?' Prior to running the workshop, Jordan received an email from Tate that ended with the following statement: 'Ultimately, it is also important to be aware that we cannot host any activism directed against Tate and its sponsors, however we very much welcome and encourage a debate and reflection on the relationship between art and activism.' During the workshop Jordan decided to



project the email's text onto the wall and asked participants to discuss whether or not they should obey Tate's demand. After a lively discussion and debate two-thirds of the group decided to devise an intervention to be staged at Tate Modern targeting their relationship with BP (Jordan, 2010: n.p). The result was Liberate Tate's first intervention – attaching the words 'Art Not Oil' to the windows on the upper floor of the building (Jordan, 2010: n.p; Evans, 2015: 118). The situation that led to Liberate Tate's formation is intriguing for the way that it dramatizes several key issues that inform the group's work – censorship, disobedience and accountability. Liberate Tate's formation was prompted following a moment of censorship in which the gallery attempted to shut down conversation regarding the political and ethical implications of Tate's acceptance of oil sponsorship. This revealed a central antagonism within the institution's identity; a desire to foster a community of engaged members through debate over the political role of cultural institutions whilst excluding any discussion of its own decisions. This antagonism is one the central issues that motivates Liberate Tate's activism insofar as it sees it as a barrier to Tate's accountability as well as providing much needed PR support for the oil industry. What is important to note, however, is the fact that this critique emerges as an indirect result of the gallery's curatorial identity practices. The significance of this will be better understood if we unpack in more detail the institutional dynamics that frame and shape Liberate Tate's practice.

I begin by situating the group's work in relation to Pierre Bourdieu's 'field of cultural production.' Whilst Bourdieu's theory is not explicitly concerned with political activism it is important that my own analysis acknowledges the ways in which Liberate Tate's critique of oil sponsorship is participating within this field. Indeed, this is especially important when we consider the fact that their work is

so concerned with questions of value, cultural heritage and establishing a sense of collective ownership over the institution. Indeed, it will enable us to better understand how oil sponsorship is an issue related to production and power. For Bourdieu, the field of cultural production is 'a space of position takings' in which the cultural artefacts and practices produced by the 'social agents' involved in their creation are 'inseparable from the space of literary or artistic positions defined by possession of a determinate quantity of specific capital' and the 'occupation of a determinate position in the structure of the distribution of this specific capital' (Bourdieu, 2011: 30). Whilst art is afforded a level of 'relative autonomy' within the field its production and reception is decisively shaped by the broader power relations that structure it. Because of this, the value of an artwork is collectively shaped and determined by a constellation of different social actors and the varying degrees of economic, cultural and political capital that they possess. Thus, the field of cultural production is a site of contest and struggle between various social actors. Bourdieu's analysis here is extremely useful for my own argument insofar as it foregrounds the connection between cultural practice and the broader political antagonisms that shape society. The field of cultural production is both a 'field of forces' that play a determining role in the production and reception of artistic value *and* 'a field of struggles tending to transform or conserve' it (Ibid: 30). If oil sponsorship is one of the broader forces of power that currently shapes the field of production at the level of cultural institutions, then Liberate Tate's activism (and the actions of the Art Not Oil coalition more broadly) is one of the various sites of struggle working to contest this influence and transform the norms and values of the field. Moreover, as a 'producer' in its own right, the value of Liberate Tate's practice is partly determined by the cultural capital it accrues over time as an

object of discourse. This means that we will need to take into consideration the extent to which the group's work actively participates in the field. Understanding the relationship between Liberate Tate and Tate is an essential part of theorizing the political force and potential limitations of the group's practice.

We can gain further insight into the role that the workshop plays in shaping Liberate Tate's critique by relating it to Bourdieu's writing on the role played by discourse within the field. According to Bourdieu, discourse functions as 'a critical affirmation' that legitimates the value of 'the work which occasions it[...]and on the other hand an affirmation of its own legitimacy.' In this way critics are involved in a collective struggle 'for the monopoly of legitimate discourse about the work of art, and consequently in the production of the value of the work of art' (Ibid: 35 - 36). Viewed in this way the workshop run by Tate is a form of discourse that affirms the status of activism as a legitimate and valued form of artistic practice. In other words, it contributes to the ongoing institutionalization of activism by deeming it worthy of critical engagement through the medium of the cultural institution. However, as Bourdieu shows us, this process of affirmation works both ways; Tate's decision to host a workshop on activism also functions as 'an affirmation of its own legitimacy' insofar as it implicitly positions it as a progressive institution that is associated with the history of radical cultural practice. Liberate Tate's formation is the product of the affirmative function of discourse. So, whilst the group's work is a struggle against the influence of corporate power within the field of cultural production we also need to recognize the fact that this is to some extent a by-product of the gallery's curatorial identity. This is because the group's formation was contingent upon, and made possible by, the workshop held by Tate. As I will be arguing in my analysis of *The Gift* we need to be aware of the manifold ways in

which the group's performances function as an endorsement and celebration of Tate's cultural value.

Exploring Liberate Tate's relationship with Tate is a key concern for design scholar Emma Mahony, who analyzes the group's practice through reference to the work of philosopher Simon Critchley, and his concept of interstitial distance. Mahony's suggests that whilst Liberate Tate performs its work within the physical spaces of the institution it does so at 'a strategic distance to [it].' Her argument here is premised upon two key ideas. Firstly, she contends that Liberate Tate's critique is not an 'auto-critique' insofar as 'they are not part of the art establishment.' Secondly, she argues that the participants' actions can be considered 'unauthorized interventions that take place on Liberate Tate's own terms' (Mahony, 2014: 14). The first of these two claims is questionable precisely because of the fact that the group's practice is embedded in the field of cultural production. Indeed, several members of the group work as curators, writers, artists and academics. Evans has been involved as a creator, organizer and performer with Platform (Bottoms et al., 2012: 128), a group whose practice frequently blurs the boundaries between art and activism. For example, between October and November 2009, Evans and fellow Platform members James Marriot, and Kevin Smith (also a member of Liberate Tate) held a month long residency at the Arnolfini gallery in Bristol entitled 'C-Words: Carbon, Climate, Capital, Culture' (Bottoms et al., 2012: 133). Staged to coincide with the UN's COP15 in Copenhagen, the residency comprised over 25 performances, events, installations, exhibitions and workshops created by Platform members and their collaborators (including John Jordan's Lab of Insurrectionary Imagination) that explored the complex intersections between cultural practice, ecology, climate change and the fossil

fuel industry. This insider status is also reflected in the frequent participation of art historian and curator Gavin Grindon, in the group's work. He was present as a videographer during one of the group's first interventions, *Licence to Spill* (2010) (Evans, 2015: 4). Curator of the V&A's 2014 exhibition of art and activism, 'Disobedient Objects', Grindon also performed in the first live streaming of *All Rise* (2013), a performance in which members of Liberate Tate filmed themselves walking through Tate Modern whilst whispering extracts from the transcription of BP's trial following the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill. This footage was live streamed online over the course of five days. Interestingly, this performance 'interrupts the theatre constructed by sponsorship' (Liberate Tate, 2013: n.p) by using the court transcripts as a means of blurring the boundaries between what is part of the institution's identity and that which seemingly exists outside of it. Whilst I do not suggest that the group's proximity to the art world means that its work is inescapably co-opted by the institution we should remain cognizant of the fact that (as *All Rise* reminds us) the distinction between what is 'of' the institution and what exists 'outside' of it is not as clear cut as Mahony's analysis suggests. Moreover, I am unable to agree that Liberate Tate's performances take place *entirely* on the group's own terms. The simple fact that *Time Piece* could not have taken place without the gallery's consent is evidence of this. More broadly, whilst many of the group's performances challenge Tate's ability to deflect criticism of its relationship with BP it can also be argued that their aesthetic composition is significantly shaped by the gallery's history and curatorial identity. This is an idea that I will unpack in more detail during my analysis of *Hidden Figures*.

In spite of these criticisms I find Mahony's analysis valuable for the way that she foregrounds the relationship between Tate and Liberate Tate as

essential to understanding the political significance of the latter's work. What is required is a more careful analysis of how this sense of interstitial distance is cultivated by means of performance, the ways in which it is continually negotiated across different performance events, and the extent to which it changes according to the contingencies of each situation. Throughout the remainder of this analysis I will explore how different interventions staged by Liberate Tate are able to use this sense of interstitial distance as a means of transforming the institution from within and assert a sense of collective ownership over its cultural and political identity. It is because of this that I argue that the group can be productively understood as a contemporary avant-garde following the definition offered by Mike Sell:

The avant-garde is a minoritarian formation that challenges power in subversive, illegal or alternative ways, usually by challenging the routines, assumptions, hierarchies and/or legitimacy of existing political and/or cultural institutions (Sell, 2011: 41)

The definition proposed by Sell is significant because of the emphasis it places on the institutional characteristics of the avant-garde and the fact that it invites us to reflect on the way in which the political aims and aesthetic strategies of an avant-garde are shaped by the very institution it aims to critique. My use of the term here is not meant to imply that the group's work is aesthetically or politically 'cutting edge', but to argue that the critical stance that it takes up in relation to Tate places it within a long history of avant-garde practices whose primary aims have been to subvert, challenge and reshape the hierarchies and assumptions of political and cultural institutions. In foregrounding this institutional relationship the avant-garde is positioned as a critical sensibility that

is both enacted and encountered by way of performance. In the context of Liberate Tate, this critical sensibility is manifested in the way that the group draws attention to the contradictions inherent in oil sponsorship, which is seen as undermining Tate's cultural integrity. More specifically, I contend that Liberate Tate can be thought of as a *vested-vanguard*, a term used by Sell to describe a minoritarian formation that, though procedurally disempowered, is still embedded within both the physical and conceptual frameworks of such institutions (Ibid: 71). Liberate Tate is a vested-vanguard because many members of the collective are participants in the field of cultural production and paid members of Tate. More significantly, its practice is actively shaped by the institution's curatorial identity. My decision to describe the collective as a vested-vanguard is a strategic move that foregrounds the critical relationship between the institution and the activists that I contend is essential to understanding the political force of the group's practice.

### ***Frames of legibility: Liberate Tate's Hidden Figures***

*We are at the foot of the slope inside Tate Modern 's Turbine Hall. It is Saturday 14 September 2014. A black square is pulled outwards by four artists who pause to beckon in the rest of the all-in-black art collective, Liberate Tate, to perform the piece. Shoulder-to-shoulder the black square is surrounded by dozens of performers taking up its cloth edges, pulling it tight and raising it to chest height. A crowd gathers. The performers begin to jerk the fabric into life. The black square is flat like paper, tight like a drum. The black square is an oily fretful sea. Waves crash across its meniscus (Liberate Tate, 2015a: 78)*

Liberate Tate's *Hidden Figures* is reflective of the ways in which the group's vested-vanguard status has shaped the aesthetico-political strategies of its work, and the various tensions that this produces. For the purposes of my own analysis, I argue that the performance is staged in such a way as to be legible within the culturally coded space of the gallery and, by extension, *illegible* as a form of political activism. The sense of ambiguous legibility (an idea that I drew on during my analysis of Reverend Billy's intervention at Disneyland) that underpins the performance is essential to constructing the interstitial distance characteristic of the group's activism. The piece is very simple in its execution; activists hold a large, square-shaped black cloth and invite gallery visitors to playfully interact with it in any way they choose. The performance was staged to coincide with Tate's then upcoming court appearance before the Royal Courts of Justice after omitting crucial information from the minutes of several meetings that took place between the gallery's Ethics Committee and its Board of Trustees. The documents, which were obtained by Liberate Tate's frequent collaborators Platform, following a freedom of information request, were covered in numerous redactions in the form of small black rectangles that obscured information from the eyes of the reader.

Writing in an article on the performance for the influential theatre and performance journal, *Performance Research*, Liberate Tate argue's that these redactions 'did not dissuade[...]they made us more curious about what was hidden under the ubiquitous black rectangles'. This act of secrecy was seen by the collective as a blatant contradiction of the gallery's status as a public institution, arguing that 'an institution invites visitors through its doors, but blocks those thresholds swiftly and firmly when too many questions are asked' (Liberate Tate, 2015a: 79). The black square used in the performance is both a



reference to these redactions and Kazimir Malevich's iconic Suprematist painting, *Black Square* (1915). The painting was being hung at the gallery at the time as part of one of Tate Modern's famous 'blockbuster' exhibitions, *Malevich: Revolutionary of Russian Art*. For Liberate Tate, this large-scale retrospective of the Russian artist's body of work 'formed a curious backdrop to Tate's redactions':

The exhibition followed the common formulation that for modern art the *Black Square* represented a landmark year zero. The summer it opened, for the first time, carbon dioxide levels in the Northern Hemisphere exceeded 400 parts per million. The size of the climate crisis at a structural level is blocked out, conceptually, by most of us as we go about our lives. Tate's redacted text and Malevich's *Black Square* met our performance *Hidden Figures* as parallel shapes, lines and visions (Liberate Tate, 2015a: 79)

What makes the performance legible within the gallery is the way that it functions as an aesthetic object that consciously draws upon Tate's longstanding association with performance art and, of course, Malevich's painting. Performance has been a key feature of Tate's curatorial identity since the late 1960s when the Tate Modern gallery first began to invite artists to stage live art for both an invited audience and gallery visitors. Many of the more recent instances of live art staged in the Turbine Hall – such as Mario Garcia Torres' *Following Piece (with Evo's sweater)* (2007), Tania Bruguera's piece of 'decontextualized' performance art *Tatlin's Whisper #5* (2008), and Bojana Cvejic's *Spatial Confessions: Moving Part* (2014) – explore the ways in which it functions (or might be made to function) as a form of semi-public space that both produces and precludes different forms of visibility and the physical

relationships between visitors (Tate Modern, 2016: n.p). This rich history has played a decisive role in Liberate Tate's practice insofar as its interventions are designed to blend in with the gallery space by drawing on the features of the performances described above and making reference to the gallery's curatorial practices.

More significantly, the performance (like the painting itself) refuses to signify any clear political message to its audience or attempt to engage audience members in any overt form of political participation. Thus, the staging of *Hidden Figures* is reflective of the group's aim to produce artworks that 'casual gallery-goers would feel pleased to stumble upon [and that] many of the staff working in Tate would feel professionally pleased to have hosted' (Smith, 2016: n.p). This sense of legibility informs the highly self-referential, non-representational aesthetics of the performance; in spite of the references made to Suprematist art, climate change, and the politics of oil sponsorship the performance does not communicate any clear political message or content. This isn't to say that these contextual ideas are irrelevant to understanding the artwork but that they are superfluous to understanding the event as the participant encounters it. To get a better sense of the singularity of the event and its affective properties we need to attend to the way in which it functions as an aesthetic object, or a 'symbolically significant sensuous manifold' – a phrase used by aesthetician Paul Crowther to define the structure of art (Crowther, 1993: 4).

Broadly speaking, the sensuous manifold refers to 'complex wholes which are present to the senses, realized in imagination or through emotional identification.' In theatre and performance, for example, sensuous manifolds are typically created through the expressive use of objects, bodies and sounds. The

phrase 'symbolically significant' is more complex insofar as it can refer to representational forms of art, symbolic or non-representational forms such as music and abstract sculpture, and more functional practices such as architectural design (Ibid: 4). I contend that *Hidden Figures* is an example of the second order identified by Crowther, in which symbolic form is created out of an existing sensuous manifold – an arrangement of bodies, objects and sounds that (as Fischer-Lichte would have it) its realized through a constant process of becoming and transformation. The unrehearsed and open-ended structure of the performance means that this process is underpinned by a tension between collective reciprocity and individual desire; tightening and slackening, lifting and lowering, the performers at the edge of the square manipulate the fabric together by responding to the movements and impulses of their fellow performers (this is a gesture that appears across many of Liberate Tate's interventions in which the individual dissolves into the collective). Moreover, the participation of gallery visitors in the performance is not directed towards any concrete ends, but is characterized by the free, open and playful movement of bodies. These 'hidden figures' sketch out shapes and movements that are only partially visible to the spectator who views the piece from outside of the square. In this way the intervention weaves together different forms of collectivity and visibility to bring forth a new community characterized by aesthetic separation. This community exists as a self-contained, self-referential event that does not refer to anything outside of itself (indeed, it is this non-representational quality that most illuminates the connections between *Hidden Figures* and Suprematist painting).

Functioning as a symbolically significant *sensuous manifold*, the performance is directed towards producing a sense of aesthetic pleasure or

enjoyment within the spectator. As Crowther argues, enjoyment in this aesthetic sense 'does not presuppose any belief that the work will be of some specific practical utility to us. It engages, rather, a more global sense of life[...]which is validated in terms other than the means/utility logic which is the nexus of everyday practical existence' (Crowther, 1993: 181 - 182). It is because of this that I suggest that the performance is illegible as a form of political activism. It makes no demands upon its participants and communicates no political message via representation. This is not to say that the performance is not political but that its political force emerges through a moment of dissensus in which two conflicting senses of the institution are brought into conflict with one another. The open and participatory structure of the performance – the purposeless free play that characterizes it – exists in tension with the black square that obscures the figures that animate it. As the group argues, the self-referential and participatory structure of the encounter was essential to the political aims of the performance:

Where Liberate Tate's open, participatory performance experienced the public gallery as a public space able to initiate new encounters and reflect on social issues, Tate's closed redaction to information requests exhibited a dark underside to the notion of the gallery as public: an institution that eagerly invites visitors through its doors, but blocks those thresholds swiftly and firmly when too many questions are asked (Liberate Tate, 2015a: 79)

This statement regarding the performance's relationship to Tate brings us back to the circumstances surrounding the group's formation in 2010. The aesthetic community produced in *Hidden Figures* is one in which the visibility of the

institution – it's very sense of 'publicness' – is compromised through its relationship with corporate power.

In this way, the performance is *also* staged for the gaze of the institution. Because it is illegible as a form of political activism, but legible as an object of aesthetic enjoyment, Liberate Tate is able to occupy and use the space in a manner that affirms a sense of collective ownership over it. As Claire Bishop notes, *détournement* is a strategy concerned with using existing works of art in a subversive fashion rather than the creation of new works (Bishop, 2012: 83). The *détournement* of Malevich's painting enables the group to enter into a symbolic dialogue with Tate. This act also means that the group's critique is integrated into the inner workings of the space. Read in this way, we can see how the performance negotiates a sense of interstitial distance within the gallery space by turning Tate's curatorial strategies against itself – transforming the painting into an image that symbolizes the uncomfortable connections between oil sponsorship, corporate power, cultural institutions and the historical avant-garde.

## **Section Two: Staging the Critique From Within – *The Gift* and *Tate à Tate***

The analysis presented above raises some important points about Liberate Tate's practice that greatly informs the direction of the rest of my argument here. First, the sense of ambiguous legibility that characterizes *Hidden Figures* is what enables the group to negotiate a sense of interstitial distance by means of performance. There are several important threads to pick up on here. By creating performances that are designed to be read and received as artworks in the context of Tate's longstanding association with performance art and the

historical avant-garde allows the group to operate within the physical spaces of the gallery whilst also maintaining a sense of distance that is opened up through the moments of dissensus like the one described above. Second, this kind of gesture is emblematic of the ways in which vested-vanguards draw on their familiarity with the histories and cultural practices that characterize the institution in order to critically reshape it from within. Whilst it would be wrong to suggest that Liberate Tate's practice takes place entirely on the gallery's own terms, we also need to acknowledge the extent to which the aesthetico-political strategies that inform its performances have been shaped by Tate. This idea serves as a useful counterpoint to Mahony's claims regarding the 'unsanctioned' nature of Liberate Tate's practice. The legibility of the performances like *Hidden Figures* means that the group's work cannot be considered completely unsanctioned insofar as the forms of appearance it assumes are shaped by the gallery's own distribution of the sensible. Further exploring the political implications of this issue forms the basis for my analysis of *The Gift* and *Tate à Tate*, two interventions that negotiate a sense of interstitial distance in distinct ways. What both have in common, however, is the way in which they are able to reconfigure the audience's experience of the gallery in an overtly politicized way.

### ***The Gift***

*7th July 2012. Over two-dozen activists dressed in black are carrying a 16.5 metre, one-and-a-half ton wind turbine blade from St. Paul's Cathedral, London, to the Turbine Hall of Tate Modern. Due to the blade's enormous size and weight it is divided into three sections, each one carried by 6 or 7 activists. Upon arriving at the gallery they are met with serious resistance. As soon as the*

*first section of the blade crosses the space's threshold Tate security begin to swarm around it – groping and grabbing at its handlers. Undeterred, the activists continue to carry out their task and slowly force their way past security. As they patiently assemble the blade, a crowd of curious onlookers joins them. Standing hand-in-hand, the visitors form a protective barrier around the mighty cargo as its bearers slowly piece it back together. As the final piece of the blade slots into place the crowd cheers and the activists slowly depart. Cordoned off by gallery staff using retractable barriers, the blade lies alone and inert in the Turbine Hall – ‘a polished bone-like object holding sadness and beauty’ (Evans, 2015: 147).*

Liberate Tate's *The Gift* was underpinned by the ingenious exploitation of a legal loophole; in accordance with the Museums and Galleries Act 1992, the turbine blade was donated to the gallery to be considered for inclusion in its permanent collection. The simple gesture of donating the turbine blade is reflective of Sell's claims regarding the vested-vanguard's capacity to challenge power by exploiting the assumptions, hierarchies and practices of the institution within which they are embedded (Sell, 2011: 41). As I argued above, drawing on this kind of institutional familiarity is a key characteristic of Liberate Tate's practice and is reflective of the group's ability to challenge the institution by turning its curatorial practices against it. Indeed, donating the turbine blade was designed to generate discussion and debate over the ethics of oil sponsorship, as well as the broader political role of cultural institutions like Tate. As legal scholar Sarah Keenan notes in her account of the performance:

As videos of [the performance] in the Turbine Hall show[...]Tate was not thrilled with its gift. Indeed after calling the police, Tate managers discussed charging

the collective for fly-tipping. The law has noticeably little to say about gifts, they being private but non-contractual (for lack of consideration) shifts in ownership, and even equity not coming to the aid of 'volunteers'. That Liberate Tate took advantage of this legal ambiguity to install the blade in the Turbine Hall while Tate managers and police stood in circles looking helplessly on, was part of the genius of the action (Keenan, 2012: n.p)

Following Keenan's short but incisive analysis we can draw a number of important points that will help construct one potential reading of the performance. Firstly, the performance can potentially be considered an instance of ruptural performance that dramatically transforms the activity that is able to take place within the Turbine Hall. As Keenan's analysis demonstrates, this moment of rupture is produced because of the legal ambiguity surrounding the act of gift giving – whilst Tate wanted to shut down the performance by calling the police, the legal status of the gift meant that they were unable to do so. At play here is a distinct but related iteration of the ambiguous legibility that I identified in my analysis of *Hidden Figures*. The donation of the blade was at once an act of civil disobedience, a perfectly legal charitable donation, and a piece of experimental performance art. It is because of this sense of ambiguous legibility that the intervention embodied the 'baffling' and 'confounding' qualities that Perucci associates with ruptural performances. Key to this, he argues, is the way that ruptural performances elude legibility and, in doing so, leave their audiences unable to respond to them in an appropriate manner (Perucci, 2009: 16). Again, in the case of *The Gift*, this is evidenced by the fact that gallery staff were unable to shut down the performance in the way that they wanted because of the donation's legal status.



This sense of rupture is intensified by the way that the performance knowingly drew on the powerful cultural symbolism associated with gift giving that I covered in Chapter 2. My intention here is not to discuss the extent to which *The Gift* constituted a genuine act of symbolic exchange according to Baudrillard's highly specific reading of the concept. Rather, I use the notion of reciprocity as a means of articulating its political force. The performance's demand of reciprocity (implicit in the act of donating the blade itself) put the institution in a difficult situation; if Tate had rejected the blade then it would have reaffirmed the fundamental disagreement between it and the activists, if it had accepted it then it would've implicitly legitimized the group's critique. As Keenan goes on to note in her analysis, Section 7 of the Museums and Galleries Act defines such gifts as 'gifts to the nation.' This means that spaces such as Tate Modern are 'spaces that belong to Britain, spaces of national belonging' (Keenan, 2012: n.p). Broadly speaking then, this reading of *The Gift* tells us that the performance reaffirmed a sense of collective ownership over the institutional space in a manner that fostered a process of dialogue between Tate and Liberate Tate.

We might argue that, based on the above analysis, the performance was far more confrontational than the other examples discussed in this chapter. Indeed, the political force of the performance seems to lie in the way that this confrontational approach inaugurated an instance of sociality within the Turbine Hall that both intensified and celebrated its capacity to function as a public space. This claim needs to be understood in relation to the broader ideological functioning of the space itself. As performance scholar Jen Harvie has argued, the Tate Modern is designed to produce a sense of performative agency amongst visitors whilst also reinforcing the values associated with neoliberal

ideology. On the one hand the gallery affirms a sense of subjective agency through the organization of its artworks into thematic areas (rather than the more traditional practice in which they are distributed according to chronology or country of origin). This, Harvie argues, implicitly encourages the gallery visitor to traverse the space with relative freedom and 'to make her own links and narratives about the artworks' relationships and meanings' (Harvie, 2009: 207). This sense of agency is facilitated from the moment visitors enter the wide, open space of the Turbine Hall. 'The effect of entering the space,' Harvie suggests, 'is to feel liberated and entitled – to move where one wants and how one wants' (Ibid: 207). Against this 'performative' reading Harvie offers a materialist analysis that outlines the ways that the gallery reproduces its visitors as 'subjected objects within our culture's dominant ideologies[...]consumers in an age of superficial spectacle, and as objects in an age of[...]surveillance' (Ibid: 208). Moreover, the building's history and design (it occupies a refurbished industrial building, Bankside Power Station) both 'fetishizes the triumph of a post-industrial, post-Fordist, late-capitalist economy' and 'reinforces a dominant capitalist ideology [by implicitly celebrating] conspicuous *leisure* as a condition of our affluent society' (Ibid: 211). Finally, she also argues that the sense of freedom and release associated with the Turbine Hall might just as easily be understood as oppressive and manipulative because its panoptic design spectacularly objectifies visitors and they enter and interact with the space (Ibid: 211).

Whilst the moment of sociality produced by *The Gift's* rupturing of the space is an ill-defined mass of conflict, solidarity and confusion (in documentation of the performance one sees footage of security staff attempting to forcibly prevent activists from wheeling the blade into the hall, gallery visitors

joining hands with activists to 'protect' the blade and others simply contemplating this spectacle from a safe distance), its significance lies in the way that this intensified the contradictions around Tate Modern and its acceptance of oil sponsorship. No longer a space of quiet contemplation and 'conspicuous leisure' the hall was characterized by a questioning and contestation over the artwork itself. In the group's video documentation of the performance we hear the voice of a gallery visitor commenting on the artwork. I quote this passage at length in order to give the reader a full sense of the visitor's argument:

It's unbelievable. I can't believe how just a few people could make a piece of art that's so beautiful to go into the Turbine Hall and how much money is normally spent on putting a show on at the Tate. For instance, I don't know how much the Fiona Banner's [piece]<sup>2</sup> cost to put up in Tate Britain but I believe the headline was to get the airplane into the Tate cost maybe £100,000 or more and that was the headline, that was what was important about the artwork which sort of shows the priorities of Tate and how they misunderstand what's happening in the world at the moment and they need to really think about what they're doing if they want to pretend that they've got some critical or radical sense that art can play a part in society in that way. Because at the moment they're just a joke, it's just a joke (The Gift documentation, 2012)

Whilst the opinion of this gallery visitor might not be representative of those opinions held by all those who witnessed the performance it serves as a useful indicator of the discussion prompted by *The Gift* around the issue of value and

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<sup>2</sup> The speaker is presumably referencing Fiona Banner's *Harrier and Jaguar* exhibition. Exhibited in Tate Britain's Duveen Gallery in 2010 the piece featured several decommissioned fighter planes suspended from the ceiling of the gallery.

its relationship to Tate's status as a public institution. In this way the performance reactivated the sense of subjective agency associated with the space in a manner that reaffirmed a sense of collective ownership of it. Taken as a whole, the performance can be read as the performative repetition of the phrase 'we are the institution.'

The political force of *The Gift* lies in the way in which it reconfigured the performance space by intensifying the contradictions around Tate Modern and its acceptance of BP funding. However, the critical gesture that underpinned this strategy is at risk of recuperation because of the way that Tate was able to subsume this critique into the institution's identity. Key to this is the fact that the gesture at the heart of the performance hinged on the demand that the blade be accepted by the gallery, and by extension recognized and valued as a 'legitimate' artwork. Whilst the group used this gesture as a means of entering into a critical dialogue with Tate I would also suggest that the gallery's response nullified this critical gesture. By rejecting the blade but agreeing to store documentation of the performance in its archive, Tate sublimated the impact of the intervention by reducing it to a mediated trace of its existence. This established a sense of temporal distance between the performance and the institution, transforming the former into an object of the discourse economy in a manner that allows Tate to literally 'absorb its critics.' As Paul Mann suggests, the efficacy of recuperation in the context of late-capitalism is underpinned by strategies of discursive engagement (like the one used by Tate) that are able to integrate even the most marginal or emergent cultural practices into the very structures they aim to critique and subvert (Mann, 1991: 15). The broader issue at stake here is the precarious nature of the avant-garde and, perhaps more significantly, the potential limits of spectacle as a mode of political action. Whilst

the spectacular staging of *The Gift* enabled it to amplify the tensions around Tate and its acceptance of oil sponsorship its reliance upon spectacle meant that it could do little to challenge the fundamental structure of this institutional power.

However, whilst recuperation might be an unavoidable fact of the performance I would suggest that acknowledging this is essential to understanding the political force of the group's work. Indeed, as Sell has argued, 'the co-optation of an avant-garde[...]is not necessarily the end of the story. Quite the contrary[...][this] transformative moment[...]can provide much valuable information' (Sell, 2011: 42). Emphasizing the transformative moment in which Tate absorbs Liberate Tate's critique reaffirms the extent to which the collective are able to contest the gallery's identity. Indeed, as Evans notes, 'the archiving strengthens Liberate Tate's position by making an institutional critique from both outside the specific gallery and also from inside the broader institution of "art"' (Evans, 2015: 163). *The Gift* thus demonstrates how interstitial critique – far from being the stable and inherently subversive model suggested by Mahony – is always to some extent susceptible to this kind of recuperation. For Evans this seems to be a risk worth taking in order to sustain and normalize the ongoing battle against oil sponsorship. Nevertheless, it would be useful to explore a different iteration of interstitial distance that is perhaps more resistant to the ever-present risk of recuperation and control.

### ***Tate à Tate***

The analysis presented above demonstrates how Liberate Tate uses performance as a means of critiquing Tate from a position of interstitial distance. Again, interstitial distance is something that is *negotiated* through the

unfolding of the performance event rather than something that precedes its articulation. In the case of *Hidden Figures* and *The Gift* this was facilitated by the way both performances occupied the Turbine Hall and the ambiguous legibility of their staging. In the final section of this chapter I want to explore another of the group's interventions that I think illuminates the political force of their practice from a very different perspective – *Tate à Tate*, an alternative audio-tour of Tate created in collaboration with Platform. The piece is very much informed by Platform's previous use of the form. In 2007 the group produced *And While London Burns*, an audio-walk that takes the listener on a journey through London's financial district and focuses on the impact the industry has had on climate change. For theatre scholar Joanna Tompkins, the piece is produces a re-narration of the city in a manner that explores the complex intersections between 'the local and the global, past and future' and invites the listener to reflect upon the ways in which they might 'contribute to a collective solution' to the impending climate catastrophe (Tompkins, 2011: 228 & 237). The capacity for audio-tours to blur the boundaries between different temporal and spatial settings through the medium of performance might be usefully applied to the concept of interstitial distance and the role that this plays in *Tate à Tate*. Broadly speaking, the significance of the piece lies in the way that it places the listener/participant in a position of interstitial distance that defamiliarizes and politicizes their experience of the space. This approach produces a dissensual counter-narrative of the institution and its relationship to global capitalism that eludes the strategies of recuperation that I highlighted above.

In 2015, I travelled from Bristol to London to visit Tate Modern and experience *Tate à Tate* for myself. The following analysis is thus informed by

and based on my personal experience of the piece, though I have also tried to articulate my ideas in a manner that is sensitive to the multiple ways in which other participants might experience it. The piece is comprised of three unofficial audio tours that are to be experienced in Tate Modern, Tate Britain and the Tate 'boat.' For the purposes of brevity and clarity my analysis focuses on the Tate Modern audio tour, which takes the participant on a journey through the building that recounts the history of BP in relation to a series of politically charged artworks housed in the gallery. This process, in which the political meaning of the intervention emerges out of its critical engagement with these artworks, is reflective of the group's vested-vanguard status. Much like *Hidden Figures*, Liberate Tate draws on its members' knowledge of the gallery's artworks and curatorial practices in order to stage a re-narration of the gallery space that foregrounds Tate's relationship with BP.

The tour unfolds three stages. Part 1 focuses on the history of BP's involvement in geo-politics through the lens of artworks housed in the 'Citizens and States' collection such as Harun Farocki's video installation *Workers Leaving the Factor in 11 Decades* (2006) and Teresa Margolles' *Flag 1* (a flag stained with the blood and soil taken from gang shooting sites around Mexico's northern border) (2009). Part 2 explores the 'Energy and Process' collection, discussing artworks such as Pino Pascali's *Trap* (1968), in relation to the environmental impact of the fossil fuel industry. Part 3 leads the participant on a meandering journey back to the Turbine Hall, accompanied by an audio-collage that focuses on the contradictions around oil sponsorship and cultural institutions (this journey culminates with the narrator asking the participant to lie face up on the floor of the Turbine Hall). The tour is peppered with small moments of playful provocation in which the narrator invites the participant to

perform unusual acts. In one part of the recording she asks them to 'locate a security camera in a top corner of one of the rooms, walk towards the camera, smile like a Hollywood starlet whose just had \$64,000 of dental work, and wave.' In another she offers some unusual advice: 'In the unlikely event that you lose your way ask a gallery assistant to give you a very hard slap' (*Tate à Tate*, 2012). Whilst these provocations do not need to be taken literally by the participant they are significant because they highlight the extent to which practices of surveillance and control are built into the physical structures of the gallery. Indeed, it is through such strategies that the tour actively challenges and subverts the sense of subjective agency that Harvie associates with Tate's curatorial practices. Instead of being able to traverse the gallery according to our own wishes and desires (and thus construct our own narrative of the space) we are asked to follow one that is already written for us. Moreover, the moments of provocation described above draw attention to the different practices of surveillance and control that are obfuscated by the sense of subjective agency that the gallery's curatorial structure aims to produce.

With these ideas in mind, I contend that the sense of interstitial distance produced by the piece is secured through the way that it deliberately blurs the boundaries between what is of the site and what is brought to it. The piece does not ask the listener to resolve this blurring of boundaries. Indeed, its political force lies in the way that this transforms the spectator's experience of the space through a process of defamiliarization that posits that what is seemingly brought to the site *was there all along*, so to speak, waiting to be uncovered. In order to unpack this idea I attend to the notion of 'haunting' as it appears in theories of site-specific performance, in particular Mike Pearson and Cliff McLucas' 'host/ghost' model that Turner argues has become an essential part of the



critical vocabulary surrounding such work. Broadly speaking, this model is intended to distinguish between the site (the host) and what the performance brings to it (the ghost), a process that is elegantly described by Turner as the various 'ephemeral architectures' that a performance constructs within a given site (Turner, 2004: 373). Nield has critiqued this host/ghost model for relying on a sense of temporal hierarchization that positions the performance as a brief, fleeting occupation of the space that vanishes upon completion leaving the site unchanged. This approach, Nield argues, subordinates performance to 'the dominating and dominant power which controls and determines space' (Nield, 2012: 223). However, I contend that a more nuanced picture emerges if we take a closer look at the very concept of 'haunting' that the model invokes.

As Fisher argues in an essay on hauntology, the word 'haunt' is closely related to the German word for the 'uncanny' – *unheimlich* - a term that refers to the disturbing power of the unknown *and* the domesticity of the familiar. The word 'haunt,' he argues, can thus signify 'both the dwelling-place, the domestic scene and that which *invades or disturbs it*' (Fisher, 2014: 125, emphasis my own). Understood in this way the performance – conceived as a ghost-like haunting of the host – is both *of* the site and something external or alien to it. In other words, its defamiliarizing power lies in the way that the sense of strangeness it produces is revealed to be part of the site itself, embedded within the familiar. Contrary to Nield, the metaphor of haunting that underpins the host/ghost model is an affirmation of performance's defamiliarizing power precisely because it is able to foreground that what is seemingly strange and unfamiliar as actually bound up in the very history of the site itself. *Tate à Tate* enables the participant to act as a physical vessel whose presence is necessary

to bring forth the ghost-like re-narration of the space. In other words, they are both a bystander to, and active participant in, the act of haunting itself.

I argue that this places the participant in a position of interstitial distance. Again, this is achieved because the audio tour positions the participant as an 'active spectator, or author of meaning, who evokes the narratives the surrounding landscape is now required to perform' (Tomlin, 2013: 148). Indeed, as Tomlin continues, walking performances and audio tours have the capacity to reconfigure the sensible through a 'theatricalization' of the landscape in which they take place. As she argues, familiar objects take on self-consciously theatrical qualities that are intensified by the disembodied speech of the narrator and the imagination of the participant:

[I]t might be said that performance walks, whilst offering an experiential reality to the walker, do so by enabling the walker to *alter the order of the reality of the surrounding landscape* by transforming it into a representation of itself. In this way, "real" objects *become signs of something else* and "real" people become characters in a performance which is imposed on them by the imagination of the walker (Ibid: 151, emphasis my own)

Whilst the audio tour's narrator directs this process of reconfiguration the participant is needed to complete it. In this way the participant plays a key role in the generation of meaning. For example, during part 1 of the tour we are asked to re-imagine *Flag 1* as a memorial to those killed in the 2003 invasion of Iraq and, following this, given an account of BP's role in supporting and benefiting from it following the nationalization of the country's oil industry in 1972. We are then asked to consider and reflect on 'the fact that the profits BP makes from draining Iraq's oil is helping to fund the gallery [the] painting is

hanging in' (*Tate à Tate*, 2012). Again, whilst the narrator prompts these reflections they only become meaningful through the active spectatorship of the participant. Much like my analysis of subvertising in Chapter 3, meaning emerges here as the third thing that is owned by nobody but subsists between the participant, narrator, and the artwork under discussion.

More significant still is the way in which the process of defamiliarization characteristic of haunting tends to blur distinctions between 'what is "of" the site and what is brought "to" it' (Turner, 2004: 374). In other words, because the meanings generated by the performance are brought forth through the threefold encounter between narrator, participant and the various artworks featured in it, the distinction between what is of and what is external to the site begins to break down. The new narrative of the institution that is performed by *Tate à Tate* might be thought of as part of the institution itself – an idea that is encouraged by the narrator's request that the participant reflect on the role that oil sponsorship plays in exhibiting the various artworks on display. Again, the history evoked by the narrator is not positioned as something external to the space but as something bound up in its contemporary identity, embodied in the institution's relationship with corporate power.

In *The Emancipated Spectator*, Rancière argues that the art gallery does not just refer to a type of building but also a specific distribution of the sensible founded upon the separation of objects from any 'specific destination' that are presented to the "'indifferent" gaze' of the spectator (Rancière, 2011: 69). Whilst he celebrates the aesthetic regime for the way that it emancipates art from its dependence upon ritual I argue that the form of common sense that it produces is also linked to the disavowal of the political characteristic of neoliberalism. This can be seen in the way that the piece subverts the sense of subjective

agency that Harvie identifies as part of the gallery's curatorial structure. As Harvie's analysis makes clear, whilst the gallery's curatorial structure might be read as an affirmation of individual agency this needs to be situated in relation to the way that the gallery celebrates and reproduces the logic of neoliberal capitalism (Harvie, 2009: 207 - 208). Visitors are treated as individual consumers free to engage in the conspicuous consumption of Tate's artworks. The defamiliarizing, ghost-like power of *Tate à Tate* reverses this strategy. During my own experience of the audio-tour I found myself encountering these artworks not as isolated objects disconnected from a specific destination but as a series of fragments that (thanks to the work of the narrator) can be situated within a broader constellation of art objects. Each artwork appears as a monad through which several layers of meaning converge to tell the complex historical links between cultural production, global capitalism and climate change.

There is a useful connection to explore here between *Tate à Tate*'s defamiliarizing power and Walter Benjamin's *Theses on the Philosophy of History*. Writing against the teleological focus of historicism (in which history is treated as a steady progression towards some final utopia) Benjamin argues that '[t]he tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the "state of emergency" in which we live is not the exception but the rule' (Benjamin, 1999: 248). In other words, the horror of events such as the Deepwater Horizon oil spill or the Iraq War are not historical aberrations but are built into the structure of capitalism itself. Benjamin argues that we can better understand this by arresting the flow of homogenous empty time characteristic of capitalism. In such moments '[w]here thinking stops in a configuration pregnant with tensions, it gives that configuration a shock, by which it crystallizes into a monad' (Ibid: 254). In *Tate à Tate* such monads are encountered as images (both physically present and

imagined in the mind of the participant) of historical moments of crisis and the flow of the homogenous empty time is arrested by the defamiliarizing presence of the ghost. Through this the piece produces an instance of *Jetztzeit* – ‘time filled with the presence of the now’ (Ibid: 252) – in which the past is brought into dialogue with the present. In this way, the audio tour shows us that the violence of the past (so often confined to the dustbin of history) continues to haunt our experience of the present. Again, it should be noted that *Tate à Tate* produces a form of interstitial distance that renders it less susceptible to the structures of recuperation and control than Liberate Tate’s other interventions. This is because the dissensual counter-narrative of the institution emerges out of the participant’s encounters with the artworks that constitute the tour’s narrative and their ghost-like presence within the gallery. Moreover, it is not dependent upon a form of appearance that would allow the institution to ‘absorb its critics,’ so to speak.

## **Conclusion**

As I have shown, Liberate Tate’s practice is motivated by a desire to affirm a sense of collective ownership over the institution through the critique of oil sponsorship. The group’s practice offers a useful model for thinking about the extent to which culture jamming is able to use *détournement* as a means of transforming cultural institutions from within. More specifically, however, I think that their practice is significant for the way that the various aesthetic strategies used for critiquing oil sponsorship become a lens for reflecting on the political construction of the gallery and the forces of resistance attempting to transform it. For example, we might argue that the group’s use of *détournement* in fact represents a significant departure from the revolutionary project of the

Situationist International precisely because of the extent to which the political force of its work is reliant upon its vested-vanguard status. In other words, the group's capacity to critically navigate the institution from a position of interstitial distance is guaranteed by its members' status as social and cultural insiders of the institution and the cultural capital that comes with it. More significantly I would argue that the idea of 'liberating' Tate implies the existence of an otherwise 'pure' institution that is waiting to be freed from the shackles of oil sponsorship. Whether or not the group's members are aware of this does not alter the fact that their performances do not engage with Tate's longstanding association with colonialism and its status as an institution primarily visited by the middle classes. Indeed, I would suggest that future projects might critically engage with the way that the gallery's curatorial practices reproduce the structure of class power and privilege characteristic of the contemporary art world. In short, the ability to performatively enact the phrase 'we are the institution' is always dependent upon the fact that there are others who are at best excluded and at worst wholly alienated from Tate as a public body and cultural institution. However, rather than using these reasons as an excuse to dismiss the group's work out of hand we should view its work as an important model that might be built upon by future activists and social movements attempting more widespread and systematic changes in the structures of power that characterize cultural institutions like Tate.

## Conclusion

### *The argument and critical contributions of this thesis*

The analysis presented above focuses on the different ways in which culture jamming is able to forcefully intervene in the ideological construction of the real, often by challenging the false necessity of capitalist realism in order to produce a sense of the world beyond its horizons of the thinkable. The theoretical underpinnings of this argument outlined in Chapter 1 focus on the different ways in which politics can be thought of as a performative, world-making process in which subjects attempt to intervene in the ideological construction of the real. My decision to articulate my understanding of politics in performative terms is partly a response to the political and historical moment in which this research project was formulated – described by Mark Fisher and others as a politically flattened and homogenized landscape that has become almost impervious to oppositional ideas and practices. The performative and theatrical nature of culture jamming is thus conceived as a potentially useful tool for activists aiming to challenge the pervasive sense of finality associated with capitalist realism. Indeed, as I argued in Chapter 1, in spite of its near total occupation over the horizons of the thinkable, capitalist realism remains vulnerable to an ideological critique that recognizes its contingency. Throughout this thesis I have argued that overtly theatrical and performative activist practices are capable of recognizing and exploiting this contingency by drawing on the performative dimension of the political (a condition that is explicitly disavowed within our current distribution of the sensible). Another central component of my argument is that culture jamming also enables us (as critics, scholars, audience members and performance makers) to encounter the

performativity of the political in the context of late-capitalism and the performative society. The concept of political force is key to understanding this process insofar as it demonstrates the extent to which performance exceeds its representational function and begins to act on the context of its enunciation in politically significant ways.

As I outlined in the introduction to this thesis, the theoretical basis for this concept emerges out of a sustained engagement with the work of Kershaw, Fischer-Lichte and Rancière. In many ways my analysis can be understood as an extension and further development of Kershaw's theory of the radical insofar as it is concerned with identifying the different ways in which politics happens *in* performance as a result of the unpredictable unfolding of the event itself. However, where Kershaw briefly makes reference to the 'unpredictable' and 'excessive' character of radical performance, my own analysis treats these two themes as key ideas to explore when discussing the relationship between politics, ideology and performance. Indeed, my use of Fischer-Lichte's 'aesthetics of the performative' is designed to extend this focus on the excessive and contingent nature of performance. Finally, the work of Rancière furnishes my analysis with a way of thinking about the relationship between politics and aesthetics that views the two as inextricably linked and, more importantly, understands the former (politics) as something inherently disruptive in its relationship to power. In other words, Rancière's theory of dissensus facilitates a further politicization of the performance theories advanced by Kershaw and Fischer-Lichte.

The concept of political force provides us with a useful reference point for summarizing my argument in broad strokes and for reflecting on its significance in relation to the field of performance studies more generally. Firstly, it should



be noted here that the argument of this thesis traces a gradual *accumulation of political force* in which the effects produced by the performances under discussion become more far-reaching and substantial in their impact on the world around them. Indeed, we might argue that their performative power increases in its complexity. For example, in Chapter 2 I explored the notion of political force as ‘rupture’ by attending to the various ways in which Reverend Billy and the Stop Shopping Choir’s performative critique of commodity fetishism is able to disrupt the performance of retail space. The sense of force under discussion in this chapter was sometimes quite dramatic and spectacular (as in the intervention at Disneyland), and at other times more subtle and nuanced in impact (as in the encounter in the car park). However, what united both of these performances was the way in which they emerged as fleeting, ephemeral interventions into everyday life. In other words, these performances were premised upon a rupturing of sense that was experienced by only a few people and for only a brief period of time. My analysis in Chapter 3 had a similar focus, though the case studies I discussed were far more diffuse in nature. Whilst I argued that subvertising has the potential to be used as a disruptive presence within urban space its political force primarily lies in the way that it affirms defacement as a political tool for reclaiming the right to the city. One might argue that the full impact of the various interventions staged by Brandalism, Special Patrol Group and others can only be fully grasped when understood as a constellation of events that work to gradually transform our relationship to urban space. The sense of force identified and described in Chapter 4 was more complex and far-reaching than that of the preceding analyses. Indeed, the Yes Men’s pranks are reflective of the extent to which culture jamming’s hybrid nature (its capacity to combine cultural, organizational,

technological and economic performance) is able to proactively intervene in the broader economic and political processes that underpin globalization. Thus, the political force of performance was articulated as a wholly unpredictable and somewhat precarious form of political praxis insofar as its effects *could not be guaranteed in advance*. This stands in sharp contrast to the sense of force that underpins the work of Liberate Tate. Whilst the group's performances are able to transform and defamiliarize the spectator's experience of the museum space, their full significance comes more firmly into view when we understand each one as contributing to a sustained and organized engagement with the politics of oil sponsorship. In other words, Liberate Tate's careful, considered and informed engagement with Tate produced sustained transformations to the institution's business practices (in a way that is distinct from the disruptive and more fleeting transformations performed by the Yes Men).

The sense of accumulation that characterizes my argument is not intended to privilege or celebrate one model of culture jamming over another. Instead, it is intended to demonstrate the broad range of effects that constitute performance's political force and, more significantly, advance a case that positively affirms culture jamming's capacity to reshape the world we live in. I argue that all of the case studies discussed in this thesis make a significant contribution to the imaginative and aesthetic structures that might inform the broader counter-hegemonic struggle against neoliberalism and the pervasive sense of cynicism characteristic of our current structure of feeling. In this way my analysis has used performance as a means of shifting our understanding of culture jamming away from its rather narrow conception as a form of media activism. From the ephemeral ruptures in retail space staged by Reverend Billy to the moments of mimetic entanglement created by the Yes Men each of the

examples of culture jamming discussed in this thesis stand as a critical affirmation of performance's capacity to engage in nuanced, challenging and efficacious forms of political action that challenge the rather narrow sense of the world offered by neoliberal capitalism.

With these ideas in mind I would like to reflect on the broader discursive 'force' that this thesis might have within the field of theatre and performance studies – the contribution to new knowledge that it has made and the potential work that it might inform in the future. Firstly, this thesis is one of the first long-form research projects to *explicitly* engage with culture jamming as a form of activist performance. As mentioned earlier, much of my argument hinges on the idea that performance represents an extremely rich lens through which to view the practice, insofar as it is able to identify its capacity to transform our experience of the world and challenge our contemporary structure of feeling. As such, I think that this thesis will be a useful secondary source for performance scholars who wish to engage with culture jamming in this way. For example, the theoretical ideas developed throughout this thesis ('political force', 'disruptive ambiguity' and 'mimetic entanglement', for example) might form the basis for a critical vocabulary that is able to discuss culture jamming in overtly performative and theatrical terms. Indeed, my arguments in each of these chapters regarding the political force of culture jamming (read in isolation *and* as an accumulation of effects) might form useful points of departure for other scholars interested in the practice. Secondly, I argue that the concept of political force (perhaps the most significant theoretical concept developed in this thesis) can be considered a useful contribution to the field's ability to analyze and articulate the ever-changing relationship between politics, ideology and performance. As I have made clear throughout this thesis, the term is a useful tool for identifying and

understanding how politics happens *in* performance. Understanding how performance is able to generate unexpected material effects that transform the context of its enunciation remains a vital and important aspect of research into this area. The concept of political force might therefore be used, critiqued and adapted by theatre and performance scholars who wish to further their understanding of this process. The concept might also inform the work of scholars from other fields such as cultural studies, politics and sociology, especially those who wish to respond to the growing importance of performance to the functioning of society in the context of late-capitalism.

Finally, I propose that this research may be of some benefit to activists and artists who are looking for inspiration for their own work or wish to critically reflect upon the efficacy of their practice. It should be noted here that I do not consider the ideas developed in this thesis to be of more value than the hard fought practical experience that one develops through organizing within activist circles. On the contrary, my hope is that this thesis might provoke the kind of discussion, debate and reflection among activists and academics that is essential to developing an effective form of political praxis.

### ***Reflections on methodology and key research findings***

My use of a primarily theoretical methodology in this thesis is intended to provide a flexible but coherent framework through which to foreground culture jamming's political force. It has been developed as a means of enabling me to provide nuanced and detailed responses to each of the research questions that frame my analysis: To what extent can culture jamming be conceived as an approach to activist performance that presents a meaningful challenge to capitalist realism's pervasive hold over our political imaginations? What might a

critical analysis of culture jamming reveal about the complex relationship between politics, performance and ideology under late-capitalism? What critical lessons might be drawn from the examples of culture jamming discussed in this thesis that might inform the development of future forms of activist performance? Answering these questions has led me to develop a critical vocabulary for articulating how culture jamming engages with politics as a performative, world-making process in which activists intervene in the ideological construction of the real. The combination of theoretical reflection, close reading, thick description and the regular use of interviews and articles written by the practitioners under discussion have enabled me to achieve this aim. As such, my methodological approach has provided readers with both a clear overview of the practice *and* a rigorous theoretical discussion of the work itself.

As mentioned earlier, one of the primary findings of this thesis is that culture jamming exploits the performativity of the political as a means of reintroducing a sense of it into the experience of everyday life. This idea was particularly important to my discussion of Reverend Billy and the Stop Shopping Choir in Chapter 2, in which I argued that the group's critique of commodity fetishism is able to rupture the ideological fantasy of consumer culture. This theme was further developed in Chapter 3 and my discussion of the contemporary subvertising movement. Beyond drawing attention to the ubiquity of outdoor advertising, activists are able to use *détournement* defacement as a means of performatively affirming the right to the city in opposition to capitalism's abstraction of social space. Another key finding is the fact that culture jamming offers activists a means of intervening in, and disrupting, some of the political and economic processes that shape our globalized world. This

was most evident in my discussion of the Yes Men, in which I argued that the group use performance as a means of disrupting the performance of globalization. However, this was also key to my argument in Chapter 5, in which I proposed that Liberate Tate is able to critically reshape the identity and institutional practices of Tate from a position of interstitial distance. The interventions discussed in this analysis (such as the audio tour *Tate à Tate*) use performance as a means of drawing attention to the links between the seemingly closed-off, hermetically sealed world of the White Cube gallery and the current environmental and ecological devastation being wrought by the oil industry.

Again, each of these analyses claim that culture jamming's political significance can be best understood *in terms of performance*. In other words, the above findings have been made possible because of the analytical flexibility that is offered by performance as a methodological tool. By making performance the central methodological tool of this thesis I have been able to identify the multiplicity of ways in which activists use *détournement* as a means of reconfiguring our experience of everyday life and challenging capitalist realism's hold over the horizons of the thinkable. In this way my analysis has revealed the extent to which aesthetics, mimesis and theatricality shape our experience and political engagement with neoliberalism. Thus, I conclude that culture jamming is a form of activism that has been decisively shaped by the performativity of the political under late-capitalism. The intensification of this performativity (a process that I outlined through reference to the work of Kershaw and McKenzie) will give rise to new, as yet-unrealized forms of activist performance that will respond to the new set of challenges that structure the performative society. Understanding these new forms of performance – many of

which are taking shape today – will be my task for future research projects and will undoubtedly be addressed by other scholars. The aim of this thesis has been to provide a reference point for developing the critical vocabularies required to explore these issues.

### ***Moving forward: Suggestions for future research***

With these ideas in mind there are a number of areas and issues that might be developed in more detail by myself and other scholars in future projects. For example, the issue of documentation represents an enormously rich potential area of study in the context of culture jamming. I have decided not to engage with this issue in much detail because (as I have consistently argued) my analysis is founded upon foregrounding the performance event as key to understanding the political force of culture jamming. I would invite other scholars to explore how documentation informs the staging of these events, how our analysis is framed by the process of documentation and the ways in which it contributes to the broader institutionalization and canonization of activist performance in the context of both academia and the field of cultural production.

Moreover, I suggest that some of the key ideas discussed and developed in this thesis might be productively applied to the analysis of contemporary social movements. These movements (which do not centre on easily identifiable figures like Reverend Billy and the Yes Men) also embody the transformative potential of culture jamming. Examples of this might include Black Lives Matter and other campaigns against institutionalized racism, grassroots housing activism such as Focus E15 and Acorn, various forms of antifascist organizing, and the postcolonial work of campaigns like Rhodes Must Fall and Decolonizing

the Curriculum. Focusing on the work of these movements requires us to more directly engage with issues of class, gender, race and sexuality precisely because these are collective, class issues that frequently find themselves at the centre of radical social movements. Whilst this thesis has not explored these issues in great detail I argue that it represents an important starting point for applying the insurrectionary logic of culture jamming to a range of different political projects.

As I have argued throughout this thesis, performance can be understood both as an important form of cultural practice *and* as an effective critical methodology for exploring and understanding the performativity of the political under late-capitalism. Indeed, the accumulation of political force that I have traced throughout the argument of this thesis suggests that culture jamming can be read as an important manifestation of the radical in performance. That is, it is reflective of performance's enduring power to radically transform and challenge our embodied experience of the world in a manner that runs counter to the one cultivated by capitalist realism. In this way I hope to have provided readers with an insight into the role that culture jamming might play in contributing to the imaginative and aesthetic structures that might inform the ongoing, counter-hegemonic struggle against neoliberalism. This is a particularly urgent task given the current historical moment, characterized as it is by a number of proliferating crises including the return of fascism as a global political force, the imminent threat of environmental catastrophe caused by climate change, and the ongoing humanitarian crises that have displaced millions of people now trying to seek refuge in Europe. The political force of performance can and should be harnessed by those who wish to challenge the ossified structures of power that are complicit in the normalization of racist values and sustaining the



various policies that continue to make the lives of marginalized groups unbearable. My hope is that such insights might, in some small way, productively inform the development of future research projects in this area and the new forms of activist performance that will contribute to this wider political project.

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