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# Affect's Effects: Considering Art-activism and the 2001 Crisis in Argentina

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## Abstract

*Anxious of straying too far from traditional rational actor models and an assiduous positivism, social movement scholars have displayed a persistent tendency to overlook the specificities of visual tools and aesthetic experience in claim-making and political protest. Often, as a direct consequence, the possibilities for mobilization and the matrices within which action takes place are described and understood in ways that are oversimplified, even distorted. Notably, small steps have been taken to overcome these distortions by building in a theory of affect that reserves a crucial space for the extra-discursive in the study of contentious politics. Extending some of these insights, this article reveals how an affect-informed approach can be particularly illuminating in studies of art-activism. It takes stencil protests from the aftermath of the 2001 crisis in Argentina as a case in point, discussing affects and their effects on porteño street artists. In so doing, it strengthens the case for greater incorporation of affect as a tool for understanding in literatures that deal with questions of framing, art-activism and the possibilities for social change.*

Keywords: art-activism; affect; Argentina; protest; stencil; culture; emotion; aesthetics; crisis

## Introduction

That social movement theorists neglect the importance of emotions is a statement which no longer holds true. From the late 1990's, a number of scholars (including Jasper 1997; Jasper 1998; Goodwin, Jasper and Polletta 2001; Flam and King 2005) moved to address a gap in the literature on protest and mobilization. These scholars sought to inject and correct the political process tradition with questions of passion, compassion, fear and anger; what may be described as 'the glue of solidarity' (Collins 1990 cited by Jasper 1998:399). Amongst these valuable scholarly works a particularly notable early intervention was James Jasper's 1998 article for *Sociological Forum*, entitled '*Emotions of Protest: Affective and Reactive Emotions In and Around Social Movements*'. In this work, Jasper observed that the literature on social movements tends towards a pre-occupation with cognitive meanings and moral values, paying little or no attention to the role of sentiments or 'affects', which he describes as underlying positive or negative affinities that help to shape emotional responses (ibid.).

The idea of affects or affect, as this article will argue, provides social movement scholars with a slippery but useful conceptual advance that has not yet been incorporated in ways that maximise its potential. Affect's status as an academic buzzword and its multiple uses can be an unfortunate deterrent for many. The use of the term in this paper builds upon approaches pioneered by James Jasper and adapted by Deborah Gould. Here, affect is defined as a non-rationalised experience of felt intensity that results from external stimuli and precedes cognitive processing but may yet incite or complicate action. It is argued that an affect-informed approach can provide novel and lateral insights around some of the most salient questions for social movement scholars, including questions about how and why people are moved to act, as well as the dynamics of framing within social movements. In particular, it is argued that the incorporation of affect offers some unique insights as to what art-activism can do in protest.

The article therefore proceeds as follows: first, it reviews the main conceptual developments and theoretical tools advanced by political process scholars and their critics, suggesting that greater attention should be devoted to the incursions of affect theory. It then goes on to explore the ways in which Deborah Gould's affect-informed approach could be extended to great effect in discussions around art-activism, taking stencil interventions in the aftermath of Argentina's 2001 crisis as a case in point. It concludes with the suggestion that affect allows us a much wider view of art-activism, its mobilising potentials and transformative possibilities. Emphasising the multiple and complex ways that art production works over activists and spectators, and illuminating the liberating potentials in cognitive indeterminacy, it makes an argument for the aesthetic richness of political art interventions that departs from the more regularised attention to their cultural cohesion and ideological coherence as a part of collective action frames.

## Social movements, culture and emotion: towards an affect-informed approach

Studies of social movements and collective action have proliferated since the 1960's, developing along different trajectories in Europe and the United States. The former, largely an outgrowth of the Marxian/Hegelian philosophy of history, moved towards questions about the structural conditions of the post-industrial society after 1960. The latter originated with the now infamous 'collective behaviour' studies into group psychology that often presented protesters as irrational or hysterical mobs. Following a series of empirical and theoretical refutations, this behavioural approach gradually came to incorporate questions of rational or strategic conduct; the ways in which actors themselves come to perform cost-benefit analyses before engaging in political action. However, as Crossley (2002) and Coy (2001) note, a broad consensus emerged amongst a significant proportion of theorists from both theoretical trajectories. This compromise, embodied in the 'political process approach', suggested that three main sets of factors can help us to understand social movement genesis and behaviour: organizational strength or 'mobilising structures', environmental conditions or 'political opportunities'; and the collective processes of interpretation, attribution and social construction that mediate between opportunity and action, usually signalled by reference to 'framing processes' or 'cognitive liberation' (McAdam 1982).

The term 'frame' as employed here refers to a persuasive device used to fix particular meanings, organise experience and guide action (Snow et al. 1988). Originally described by Goffman (1974) as 'schematas of interpretation', frames are said to be purposefully employed by political agents in order to focus the attention of a target audience on specific dimensions or explanations of issues in contentious politics. Snow et al (1986) distinguish between four types of framing process. *Frame bridging* is described as the attempt by a social movement to mobilise potential adherents who might share some of its grievances but lack the organizational base for expressing their discontent. *Frame amplification* refers to the process by which the movement emphasises particular values and beliefs that have previously lain dormant in its self-presentation. *Frame extension* is the attempt to bring new ideas and values that are considered to have potential resonance with an intended audience, into the movement's frame. *Frame transformation* refers to the transformation of a movement's ideational foundation.

Whilst the framing approach has gone some way towards correcting earlier theories that portray the fate of social movements as largely determined by the configuration of structural opportunities and constraints, the framing literature does have several weaknesses. So far it has contributed relatively few extended empirical enquiries into how activists and movements more generally go about framing their struggles; what kinds of devices they use in their attempts to guide interpretations and, the relative merits of different kinds of 'contentious performances' (Tilly 2008) for these ends.

Art interventions (visual and aural modes such as painting, singing and dramaturgy) for example, frequently do 'framing' work by mediating interpretations of contending ideologies and perceptions of the opportunity structure at hand. Indeed, we can call such interventions 'performative',

acknowledging that that they can constitute and reconstitute a subject through their very projection or enactment. Jasper (1998) points out how singing was particularly important to the civil rights movement. He draws on Durkheim to suggest that song can provide an all important moment of unity amongst a disorderly crowd and he further suggests that lyrics drawing on fundamental beliefs and narratives can reinforce those very narratives; they constitute a form of shared knowledge that contributes to feelings of solidarity. Yet, it would appear that art interventions do so much more than channel and bolster discourse. Those who have engaged in forms of protest can likely attest to the fact that it is not just protest lyrics and photographic realism that generate sentiments and authenticate frames. Rather, there can be something special in a rhythm, in a visual, that can take hold and educe action. Borrowing from Baudot's discussion on the value of art, it is possible to speak of intuitive or intrinsic attachments that are distinct from art's instrumental and extrinsic properties (See Baudot 2012).

Unfortunately however, social movement scholars have done very little theoretical or empirical work in this area. They have on the whole tended to neglect the role of art interventions in political protest, relegating them to an auxiliary status, either stalling at the problem of intentionality or reductively ploughing art actions for discursive constructs and strategic intent. In this way, a focus on the rationalisable and categorisable obscures other effects, namely those emerging from the field of sensate perception. Failing to take heed of a message that has been oft repeated by scholars of aesthetics, from Baumgarten and von Humboldt through to Marcuse, mainstream social movement theory inadvertently reifies philosophy's bias towards logic and empiricism, which leaves the sphere of sensual life largely uncharted.

It is argued here that recent developments in the literature on emotions and social movements, namely the import and fuller elaboration of a theory of affect, yields new possibilities for discussion around the role of art interventions in contentious politics. In an early expose, Jasper drew attention to prevalent tendencies to over-state the centrality of cognitive processing in political action; a lasting consequence of the thoroughgoing displacement and scholarly flight that occurred around the collective behaviour tradition in the late 1960's. Twelve years later, Deborah Gould's work revealed the limits of the emotional turn seen in works like that of Jasper (1997); Eyermann and Jamison (1998); and McAdam, McCarthy and Zald (1996). Adhering to a rational-cognitive bias that has become increasingly prevalent in the literature, these approaches tend to speak of human agency in terms of strategic planning, evaluation and political calculation. Mood, impulse, sensate experience and other non-rational triggers for action are largely avoided or at best considered peripheral, leading to distortionary narratives about what happens in protest. Against this backdrop, Gould draws on and extends social movement theory's emotional turn, through explicit attention to affect and its mediations.

Affect seeks to describe that which in many ways defies description. Semantically unstructured, affect emphasises 'in between's', potentialities and incongruence. For that reason it should be treated with great caution and

employed with careful explication so that it does not become a hollow, catch-all term. Gregg and Seigworth (2010) count least eight different modes of usage of the term affect in current scholarship and these range from works in neuroscience and cybernetics through to a tradition of a social aesthetics building on Baumgarten and others which re-centres epistemological focus to the realm of sensate experience (see for example, Highmore 2010). The way the term is used by Gould (2009; 2010) draws on the work of Brian Massumi, such that affect is treated as a non-conscious and non-rationalised experience of intensity that results from some kind of sensory stimuli. Always-already there, but not always adequately interned by available cognitive categories, affective intensity is the corporeal quality of feeling; the fuel or extinguisher for action. Gould's approach seems to differ from that of Jasper (1998) and it goes much further. Where Jasper regards affect as an energy that can be experienced as either positive or negative and only reservedly comments on its mediations, Gould attributes neither a positive or negative value to affect. Indeed to do this is arguably already acceding to the work of cognition. In Gould's formulation, affect is deemed distinct from 'emotions', which describe sensations that have been rationalised, checked against previous sensual experience and categorised in the mind of the subject. This crucial distinction provides the springboard for a re-evaluation and re-articulation of dominant conceptual tools such as collective action frames and political opportunity structures.

Greater discussion around the role of affect in protest is imperative for several reasons. As Gould's work demonstrates, '...affect retools our thinking about power' (2009:27) in that it reveals an additional field in which and through which power operates. Gould is concerned in particular with the ways in which affective states have altered the stakes for AIDS activism; the ways that affects become attached to the discourses of hegemonic power and resistance, advancing or foreclosing on action. Moreover, scholars may come to learn much more about the actual mechanics of cognitive liberation, movement socialization and the possibilities for social stasis and change by recognising that quite often something happens to the body before discursive frames or rhetorical devices can do their work on our cognitions. Some *thing*, *energy* or *state of being* has to be harnessed in these processes.

This is an argument, which is implicitly extended in Ty Solomon's illuminating discussion of affect and discourse in responses to 9/11. Solomon (2012) highlights the fact that most studies of the social construction of the War on Terror tend to centre on its various narrative strands and contingent linguistic structures and seek to show that the understandings which dominate media representations for example, do not constitute an objective condition. Yet, in 'tracing linguistic structures as such' (ibid. 2012: 911), there is little clue as to why certain discourses gain appeal over others; there is no exploration of what resonance in fact entails or why it sometimes leads us to embrace the least rational or empirically viable option. It is here that amorphous and unspecifiable states of mood, and the ways that they are channelled, should gain centre stage, particularly in questions of *frame bridging*; *frame amplification*; *frame extension* and *frame transformation*.

The prevalence of a rational-cognitive bias is perhaps nowhere more apparent than in works addressing the role of art and culture in social movements. For example, whilst invoking fresh insights from interactionist traditions to suggest how social movements produce knowledge and promote cultural transformation, Eyermann and Jamison's approach relies on an explanatory formula that repeatedly and somewhat narrowly 'calls attention to the creative role of consciousness and cognition in all human action, individual and collective' (1998:21). The main problem with this image of culture and art-activism is that it underspecifies the indeterminacies that often come with sensory exposure and creative expression. As a direct result it promulgates the assumption that protest art either tows a tight ideological line and is aesthetically devoid, or that its cultural-ideological 'incoherence' will prevent it from galvanising others into a political response.

An affect-informed approach sounds out a third way between these confined visions of politico-creative action. It shows that that art-activism is neither wholly a strategic-rational exercise nor is it a return to the supposedly irrational undertakings of the mad and the bad. Such an approach underscores the important difference between the non-rational, often unpredictable bodily affects imbued with potentials for change *or* stasis and the cognitive processes of interpretation and classification, which unite with them, layer over them and may determine their effects.

By invoking the concept of affect it becomes possible to broaden discussions around performativity in art-interventions; to consider the ways in which activists might be inadvertently *moved to* create or be *moved by* affective intensities tied to world events or indeed to their own creative acts. The work of International Relations scholar, Roland Bleiker, is illustrative in terms of the former. Seeking to extend the concept of 'moral shock', Bleiker (2009) argues that at certain historical junctures, moments of crisis and transition, communities, or indeed entire societies may experience a gap or pause in comprehension brought on by the lack of adequate categories for describing and processing the phenomenon at hand. In these instances, acts such as painting and musical composition can perhaps enable us to express compulsions that we cannot yet verbalise. Their non-linguistic character here offers something unique. It is possible to consider too, the ways in which affective states might be transmitted through sensory contact with visual or aural interventions; how moods can carry, infect and absorb us in ways that we are not immediately attuned to.

Finally, the import of affect offers much to debates around the value and function of art in the social world, posing an explanation for the kind of unalloyed sensations and responses - even the 'intuitive value' described by Baudot (2012) - that is generated by experiencing an artwork; those impacts upon the body which exist beyond accessible discursive categories. Crucially and very much relatedly, 'affect is important to the extent that it is autonomous' (Hemmings 2005:549). In this way, it seems to exist in a reserved space, one of the few conceptual advances able to defy both the rationalising endeavours of older social theory and the postmodern preoccupation with deconstruction

(ibid).<sup>1</sup> Rather than stalling at the problem of intentionality or attempting to deconstruct it, an affect-informed approach illuminates complexity and indeterminacy; thereby pointing to new locations and possibilities for resistance and empowerment that more usually go unnoticed.

### Se cayó el sistema

In 2001, following a period of economic decline linked to a raft of poor policy choices, Argentina experienced an extreme social, political and economic breakdown. Widespread protests and governmental paralysis engendered a state of near-anarchy and led to the now infamous spectacle of five presidents taking office over just ten days. In this context, characterised by tumult and confusion, a number of stencil collectives emerged in the city of Buenos Aires, each of them prompted to add their visual mediations to the uproar. Forming a part of what has widely been described as a 'grassroots democratic movement', these artist-activists have themselves been subject to acts of framing that understate the factors, motivations and purposes for their interventions. These are explored in the sections to follow.

The spectacular collapse of the Argentine economy in 2001 has been the topic of much past debate by local and international economists, political scientists, politicians and sociologists. A decade of neoliberal programming that reduced welfare, damaged local industries and made the economy vulnerable to speculative flows has been blamed, as have corruption and economic mismanagement, including the sustained reliance on an artificial exchange rate, embodied in the 'convertibility system'. Balanced retrospective assessment suggests that it is impossible to isolate a single explanatory factor to the crisis. However, it is clear that the government's ill-advised actions in the wake of hyper-inflationary crisis exacerbated economic and social woes. In December 2001, Argentina's middle classes, denied access to their dollar-denominated savings, took to the streets alongside an outraged proletariat, banging their empty pots and pans and demanding '*que se vayan todos*' [throw them all out]; an indictment of the entire political class.

As social tensions mounted in the latter half of 2001, the walls of Buenos Aires became flooded with hastily graffitied inscriptions; spontaneous and impassioned outbursts against the politicians. Common refrains included the now emblematic '*que se vayan todos*' [throw them all out] '*violencia es robar*' [It is violence to rob] and '*congreso traidor*' [traitor congress]. Other inscriptions recalled previous failures of government to uphold the social contract. Perhaps most poignantly, protesters invoked the atrocities of the Dirty War with allusions to the year '1976', the phrase '*nunca mas*' [never again] and the slight adaptation, '*nunca mas bancos*' [banks, never again]. Additionally, Longoni (2006:4) writes that, '...there arose a striking number of groups composed by visual artists, film and video-makers, poets, alternative journalists, thinkers, and social activists who created new ways of intervention related to social facts and movements ... These new ways comprised popular

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<sup>1</sup> Whilst affect itself seemingly defies deconstruction, the works that employ it as a conceptual tool and give it linguistic contours obviously do not.



assemblies, pickets, factories recovered from inactivity by their former workers, movements gathering the unemployed, bartering clubs, etc’.

The stencil collectives Vomito Attack; BSAS Stencil and StencilLand are amongst those artist-activists who felt impelled to action in the midst of the socio-economic unravelling, updating the long valorised technique of political stencilling to provide a diversity of expressions in the wake of the crisis. Each of the artists worked with an improvised and improved method of stencil production in which a colour photo is reduced to monotone, manipulated with graphics, printed, and then traced and cut from old x-ray films. Lyle (2007:79) explains, ‘The stencil was the ideal art form for a penniless grassroots democratic movement. Easily cut out of plastic-most stencillers in Buenos Aires use old x-rays scavenged from hospital trash - each image requires only a fine mist of spray paint’. Lyle, amongst many others, overstates the cohesion, ideological unity and sense of purpose of such a movement, particularly in its earliest manifestations. This is borne out by a closer analysis of the artist-activists, their reflections and interventions.

In a 2011 discussion, GG, who makes up one third of the collective BS.AS Stencil explains that the events of 2001 prompted he and his collaborators to shift gear. Prior to the crisis GG had been working as a graphic artist in the city but he indicates that the burst of activity on the streets and the strength of conviction of the populace motivated him to turn his creative talents to a greater social purpose. He explains that, ‘[n]one of us were political activists. None of us had ever really painted in the streets...’ (GG 2011a). Yet as he notes elsewhere, ‘It was in the air...You would see all the people in the streets and think, ‘I have to do something’ (GG cited by Lyle 2007). After some reflection, he suggests that *porteños* never feel truly secure. Recalling past crises, he implies that there is a persistent and underlying anxiety that the government is beholden to interests other than those of the electorate. GG explains that this is a feeling that stays with him in his day-to-day life and since 2002 has taken expression through his artistic practice (GG 2011b).

BS.AS Stencil were perhaps the first stencil collective to emerge in the wake of the crisis. Its members, GG, NN and Deborah, began working on the streets early on in 2002. Speaking to the journalist and blogger Erick Lyle in 2007, NN claims: ‘I lived downtown and everything was happening all around me...the City was in the mood. It was hot and no one had any money’. Meanwhile, as Deborah explains, ‘[t]he stencils on the wall were like a common language everyone shared’ (Deborah, cited by Lyle 2007). They were fuelled by the same impulses and animosities, yet they sought to fill a gap left by repetition of the same linguistic refrains. The group resolved to create and disseminate gentle yet sardonic visual references to the everyday obstructions, annoyances and fractures in Argentine political culture and society. For example, an image of the sinking Titanic linked the prospects for the Argentine economy to that of the ill-fated ship. The accompanying phrase ‘*se cayó el sistema*’ [the system is down], invoked the computer-speak, often heard in Argentina’s banks as well as other service outlets where processing equipment routinely failed to operate, leading to long queues of hot, disgruntled customers (ibid.).

BS.AS Stencil's NN notes too that the group's interventions were not just about Argentina's woes. They were driven by the sense that problems at home were symptomatic of a greater, global affliction; US economic and cultural imperialism. Many Argentines reviled the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and its most powerful donor country for imposing loan conditions that forced millions into the informal sector and led to cuts in healthcare and education. As the economic crisis unfolded, they witnessed televised broadcasts of President Bush and Secretary of State Colin Powell expressing the need for an armed response to combat the immaterial entity, 'terror' in response to the 9/11 atrocities. They watched as bombs began to rain down on civilians in Afghanistan, many feeling disdain at the abhorrent disproportionality in emerging rates of civilian mortalities. At the time, 'The feeling was also anti-Bush. In the whole world.' (NN cited by Lyle 2007).

BS.AS Stencil's most recognised intervention featured the former US President George W Bush's head, crowned with a pair of Mickey Mouse ears and accompanied by the slogan 'Disney War'. The mischievous juxtaposition of Bush's portrait and Disney's mouse ears evoked and supported a range of critical perspectives on American foreign policy, US cultural penetration and of course the intelligence and competence of the 'world's [then] most powerful man'. The stencil has had astounding uptake across the world, appearing in London, Copenhagen, Costa Rica, Melbourne, Bogota, Tel Aviv as well as other distant places (BS.AS Stencil 2013). The global appeal and swift reproduction of the stencil across centres of financial power can be seen as an interesting corollary to forms of globalised finance and market integration that accelerated the crisis.

Transposed from BS.AS Stencil's *'Disney War'*

GG explains that initially the design by NN had been destined to become a T-Shirt logo. However, carried along by the 'spirit of that time', the group decided instead to air their sentiments in public. 'The spirit of that time was to

get out there and make yourself heard. If you wanted to make a point you had to do something about it' (GG 2011a).

Nico and Santiago who together formed the duo Vomito Attack, began to intervene in the public spaces in 2001 with their highly politicised stencils and ad-jams. They make the following statement about how their interventions evolved from their frustrations at the raft of misinformation circulating in the mainstream media that was sponsored by the government and political parties:

...we arrived in Buenos Aires in December and the crisis exploded. Without any possibilities of work, no money and a lot of free time – the project started growing. At first we did cut and pastes from newspapers and magazines changing the meaning of the contained information. Then we decided to use the streets as our main canvas, so we translated all that information to stencils and went out to paint.... The name comes from how we recycle images, ideas and information. No fucking copyright exists for us. And also it's a peaceful and good way to get out all the shit that makes us sick (Vomito Attack 2007).

To be clear, the kinds of 'shit that made them sick' have been listed to include rampant consumerism, political corruption, the dictates of the International Financial Institutions (IFIs) and (at least initially) the elitist art establishment (see Lyle 2007). Their highly politicised interventions targeted what they perceived to be Argentina's fundamental social ills, embodied in '*poder, corrupcion y mentiras*' [power, corruption and lies].

Despite their later fame and absorption into the art circuit, in 2001 Vomito Attack, BS.AS Stencil and other stencillers did not consider their actions to constitute 'art'. StencilLand underlines this point:

I emphasise that I do not think that the intention of those who painted in the crisis and explosion of 2001 was art. It was a generalised reaction, it was a protest. The streets in my neighbourhood - I lived in Congreso, the epi-centre of the stencils and the chaos - were filled with political paintings amongst other outrages. The people broke windows, looted shops, set fire to everything they could, it was chaos. (StencilLand 2011, author's translation)

StencilLand, further explains that he had been making caption graffiti on and off since the 1980's and cut his first stencil in 1997 to advertise his friend's rock band. However, stencilling did not become a regular or especially meaningful activity for him until the crisis: 'In 2002 I started seeing on my way to work, one stencil, the next day another, and with each passing day it looked like the walls were made of mutating colours. I commented on this to my friend and he said to me "these are stencils, you remember what we painted before? Well, it's the same".' (ibid.) But, it wasn't the same for StencilLand. Following this conversation, he spent some time deliberating about why people would spend time and money painting pictures on the walls of the city. He claims that, 'Without ever finding the answer to that question, I cut a stencil, I bought a spray can, and that night I went out to paint' (ibid.). One of his first interventions translated Michelangelo's statue of David the

giant-slayer into a stencil and subverts it by placing in his hands a kettle and gourd of yerba mate.



StencilLand's *'El David'*

#### 'Interior things' and transformative possibilities

When asked what their work is about, the artist-activists have very different answers; some allude to processes of purgation, while others point to the broader social impacts, underlying ethics and mobilising potentials of their interventions. Santiago from Vomito Attack explains that: 'Making stencils is my way to express my... interior things' (Santiago cited by Lyle 2007). He explains that they decided to sign their work Vomito Attack because, '...when you vomit it all out, you're better'. Interestingly, Santiago here emphasises and celebrates act of stencilling for its personal, corporeal and remedial benefits rather than for its instrumental and communicative functions. For him, political street art is far more than a political tool; it is also a rehabilitative one, boasting its own cathartic effects.

There are interesting parallels here between Santiago's explanation and Aristotle's exposition of 'purgation' in his *Poetics*, which of course forms an important part of the pre-history to contemporary debates and discourses on affect and aesthetics. Where Plato viewed poets and painters with disdain for their acts of imitation, arguing that 'poetry feeds and waters the passions instead of drying them up; she lets them rule, although they ought to be controlled, if mankind are ever to increase in happiness and virtue' (Plato 360 BCE/1976), Aristotle placed value on the poet's ability to both bring about and facilitate a purgation of 'pity and fear'. For Aristotle, purgation constituted an integral part of tragedy by supplying a catharsis and relief, although he did not

indicate whether this 'catharsis' should be experienced by the audience or by the poets themselves.

Later artist-activists including Bertolt Brecht, have pointed to the potentially regressive political consequences of taking spectators on an emotional journey that 'carries them away' (through catharsis) and prevents them from realising their critical capacities and political responsibilities in their lived realities. In this vein, his 'A-effect' was an innovation that sought to produce a social-critical audience response by keeping spectators 'disconnected' from the action on-stage (Brooker 1988). Crucially, Brecht's work implied that all art has a political consequence. It highlighted the pervasiveness of ideology, as well as ideology's complex inter-linkages with the corporeal and its co-optive potentials.

StencilLand's reflections on his art-activism are thus significant here in that they show some level of attunement to these concerns. Rather than aim for an ideological or informational transmission, his pieces direct audiences away from clear comprehension. He claims that the pull and allure of street art production results from something beyond political commitment or political conjecture:

...behind each of my images is a much darker or twisted story...I do not intend to relay a message, I do not expect that the viewer "understands" my ideas exactly; that is not my goal. The main target of my stencils is me. I enjoy the different stages of the process: sketching ideas in a notebook design from the PC, cutting the templates and then painting. Commonly this combination is what I enjoy. It may be the case that my work leaves a taste of dissent, but it is rather something internal, perhaps my own self-criticism, that is transformed into the "engine" which brings me back to continue designing (author's translation).

Conjunction with post-crisis society has meant that many read StencilLand's 'Apocalpsis Love', as a commentary on the toxicity of the political environment in Argentina. However, StencilLand's explanation of the composition further exemplifies the complexities at stake here. The artist claims that he enjoys it when his work can 'evoke a smile [from an audience] without them fully understanding'. As a qualifier he provides the following lengthy and intricate clarification:

In 1914, France used tear gas as a chemical weapon in a war: World War I. It was utilised as a weapon the following year by the German troops. Then it was a weapon used from Spain to China. In the aftermath of war, both the military and civilians should continue with their lives, but the residual toxic waste remained. There came a time when these people seemed to return to their usual routines. There are pictures where the police performed their duties but with a gas mask... For them it was usual but now, remembering those times, it seems crazy. I asked myself what would be the biggest oxymoron...to what extent should [people] get used to wearing the masks? I thought of a marriage...

We now live in a developed society, where weapons have mutated, are more modern, more deadly and more destructive. We are used

to seeing violence on TV every day... We all know someone who has been the victim of a robbery or assault... Women are more fearful and some carry pepper spray in their handbags. Some civilians are armed and they carry weapons on public roads without permission. Teens carry knives to school and there is no way out of a dance or party without punches and blood. If we took a picture of our reality and future generations could see, I wonder if they would think it "ridiculous, contradictory, that we lived with all this violence but that it seemed to pass unnoticed, as if nothing happened. "Apocalipsis love"...reflects all that thought and more, things of yesterday that now seem incredible and the possibility of today's mode of living amazing some distant future generation (author's translation).

The sort of intervention into the public sphere indicated here is one that goes much further than existing work on framing allows us to understand. Whilst StencilLand's activist-art does seem to subvert and redeploy familiar representations and cultural symbols, it does so in a way that seeks to incite and encourage freedom of thought and feeling rather than advocating an alternative frame.

GG from BS.AS Stencil is rather less elaborate but no less interesting when describing what his work is about. He states:

For me, painting is a way of demonstrating to the public that anyone can express an idea or emotion with just a few pesos. You don't need the millions that brands pay to be in the spotlight. You don't have to be a politician who pays people to paint his propaganda. You can go out alone and express yourself with a couple of pesos with a can of spraypaint, latex paint and a brush, or a stencil (GG 2011a).

His explanation underscores the didactic possibilities and inclusive properties of the stencil as a protest tool in a way that is rather more in line with Lyle's description of a grassroots democratic movement than are his assertions about what led him to the street. Quite notably though, GG has taken this pedagogic imperative even further in the aftermath of the crisis. He reflects, 'It was the act of painting on the street that made me re-think what I could do' (GG 2011b). Together with NN and other Buenos Aires based stencil artists, including StencilLand, GG initiated a collaborative stencil *taller* [workshop]. The *taller*, which teaches youngsters how to create stencils from start to finish, is based at Hollywood in Cambodia, a bar lovingly refurbished by the stencil artists, who, previously unknown to each other, became friends and occasional collaborators in the aftermath of the crisis. As GG explains, 'When you start to paint outside, you [have to] give more attention to the walls. I noticed that there were a lot of other stencils around...We started seeing paintings all over the Congreso area. We used to always remark, "There are other guys painting here also!"' (GG 2011a).

In a 2011 discussion, GG explains that for street artists like himself, Argentina is not like other countries: '[h]ere we do not compete for space to paint; we do not obstruct each other's work. We share opportunities and we are happy to cooperate with each other on different projects'. He believes that this has something to do with the conditions under which they took to the street; the chaos and confusion of 'throwing them all out', together with the prolonged

nonappearance of legitimate forms of vertical power. The suggestion is that this chaos and crisis of ideology and representation, made space for the development of new structures and ways of relating. This is manifest in the relationships between the stencillers but may also be a factor in the emergence of the distinctive 'horizontal' modes of organising (see Longoni 2006; Sitrin 2007), seen amongst the *piqueteros*, for example.

### Affect and effect

The dialogues presented here, which centre on the purpose and motivations for political stencilling in the wake of the 2001 crisis can be probed to reveal insights pertinent to social movement theory and imperative to its conceptual advance. The comments of the artist-activists tend to support the argument put forward here, that affective intensities are determining factors in contentious politics; especially in the acts and outcomes of political street art production.

When social movement scholars speak of *framing*, defined as the act of building and projecting a new discourse; and of *cognitive liberation*, the unravelling of a previously held ideological position or faith in the system; they often treat the two terms as though they are synonymous and/or synchronous. However, the distinction between the two concepts is very important. 'Cognitive liberation' is perhaps best thought of as a stage, pause or break, which may occur amid the dismantling and rebuilding of frames. Making this distinction allows us to think about what might occur when there is an absence or delay in the emergence of newer and more credible discursive frameworks, as well as what in fact impels us towards new frames.

It is here that the work on affect offers an alternative vision of protest art and points to the limits of existing work on framing as a tool for understanding. Bleiker's work on *Aesthetics and World Politics* points to affect's propensity to dismantle existing frames with immediacy; to shock or shake people out of ingrained ways of thinking about and understanding the world. This seems to be what is occurring when GG indicates that he and his fellow stencillers were drawn into the protests by an engulfing energy or mood amongst *porteños*, rather than by any particularly cohesive political argument. His suggestion that there was 'something in the air' that pushed him to pursue an entirely new creative mode and join fellow citizens on the streets is significant, pointing to a *power in operation beyond ideology*. GG himself does not put a name to this sense of compulsion, yet he acknowledges that it moved him to act. Similarly, StencilLand suggests that he found himself painting without knowing or understanding why. In these instances, affect - that 'something in the air' - appears to have invoked a kind of emancipatory moment, whereby 'normal' social arrangements and routine activities are abandoned without full rationalisation. These moments of 'freefall' (following Bleiker 2009) or *actual cognitive liberation*, which may occur prior to the uptake and adaptation of pre-established categories and discursive frames, can provide a crucial space in which actors may find themselves able to access and elaborate novel modes of being and new understandings about their relation to the world around them.

*How?* Well, one possible way is through the making and doing of political street art. Feigenbaum (2010) and Halsey and Young (2006), arguing from the literatures on ICTs and subcultures respectively, claim that there is an important affective dimension to the act of graffiti writing that turns it into a heuristic act. Based on the notion that art serves as a means for accessing some kind of immanent beyond that enables human beings to step outside of themselves, the latter argue that graffiti writing *does things to* the graffiti writers' bodies as much as it does things to the surfaces on which they write. Meanwhile, the former explains how graphic acts of contestation on or around 'globalised fences' work as '...affective engagements through which people forge connections with others and with their surroundings, often confronting or re-imagining conceptions of themselves as political subjects in relation to the spaces around them' (Feigenbaum 2010:125).

The artist-activists' comments about their interventions would seem to support these kinds of insights. StencilLand, for instance, points to the ways in which his stencils may forge a connection, evoke a smile and response in the viewer. Meanwhile, GG's comments in particular, seem to suggest that painting on the street helped him to re-imagine his social functions and responsibilities as a citizen, turning him into a protagonist and teacher. Moreover, he explains how street art production forced him to pay greater attention to his visual surrounds and how, as an upshot of this, he came to build meaningful friendships with other artist-activists. It is therefore possible to think about the ways in which street art production during the crisis facilitated 'a *fissure* in representation' (O'Sullivan 2001:28), transforming the self-conceptions of artists and their visions of what actions and reactions were possible. In other words, bringing immanent possibilities to the fore.

The public mood in the wake of the crisis certainly helped to create background conditions conducive to the increased appeal or resonance of street art interventions that could be read in simple 'anti-system' terms. However, the complex meanings attached to the stencils, which are described by StencilLand and Santiago oblige us to go further than a simple decoding and deconstruction of familiar symbols and cues. Their comments demonstrate that although their aesthetic interventions may well transmit certain messages and impulses unto viewers, the full range of artistic and affective stimuli for their art, is never fully accessible to viewers. The variety of unspecified 'interior things', the joy, anger, indeterminacy and even catharsis that are glimpsed here through their reflections, remain remote.

When these interventions are seen to operate as part of a frame we should be mindful of how affects affect (or how affect affects) their mobilising potentials. Gould's claim that affects are cognition and discourse-defiant is significant here as it implies that no framing, ideology or other discursive device that attempts to capture the meaning in art will provide a wholly satisfying solution for members of the public. This leaves open the possibility of 'better matched' counter-frames emerging to recapture affective intensities. Thinking in this way reveals how 'affect greases the wheels of ideology but it also gums them up' (Gould 2010:33). Crucially, it also preserves something of



the aesthetic richness of political art interventions; the argument being that it is never possible to simply reduce an art intervention to a fixed ideological decoding, even when a particular reading appears obvious.

### Conclusions

The discussion and case study presented above offer an opportunity to begin thinking about art-activism and affect together. They seek to give a glimpse of what insights an affect-informed approach to social movement theory could yield, particularly in illuminating just what street art interventions do and what they provide during periods of contentious politics. Backed by the articulations and reflections of the Argentine stencil artists themselves, this paper reveals some of the complexities at stake in art-activism. It also extends the significant inroads made by Jasper and Gould by drawing out why affect can be thought of both in terms of 'the glue of solidarity' and as a 'grease for the wheels of ideology'.

The discussion presented herein illuminates some of the challenges posed by incorporating these kinds of aesthetic critiques but navigates around them to suggest the utility rather than futility in an affect-informed approach. In particular, it points to the ways in which affective states present during crisis and incomprehension might spur aesthetically rich and politically important artistic responses. It is argued too, that the productive process itself can have a heuristic effect on artist-activists, pushing them in new directions and transforming the ways in which they relate to the world around them. Significantly therefore, the case study suggests that people can be *moved* to act politically and creatively, and it attests to the ways that they can also be *moved by* their own creative acts. This has important implications for the ways in which social movement scholars tend to think about the possibilities for mobilization and social change. Moreover, as this paper argues, there is a crucial case to be made for a clearer distinction to be drawn between the act of framing and moments of 'cognitive liberation'. It is suggested that the latter term can in fact make conceptual space for affective interplay, while the former, in much of the existing literature, refers to efforts to build on or capture affective intensity, channeling it into an ideological device.

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*\*\*Images are the author's own\*\**