Researching Artivism through the Event Approach.
Epistemological and Methodological Reflections about Art and Activism

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Abstract

Il progetto ERC ARTIVISM si concentra su varie forme d'arte utilizzate dagli attivisti per formulare rivendicazioni politiche. Da una prospettiva multisensoriale in città molto diverse, sparse su tre continenti (Douala e Yaoundé in Camerun, Los Angeles negli Stati Uniti d'America, Genova e Viareggio in Italia e Nizza e Marsiglia in Francia) vengono esplorate la creatività e la performance come forme sovversive di espressione politica Applicando un approccio diretto all'evento piuttosto di una prospettiva centrata sul gruppo, il team del progetto ERC ARTIVISM ha elaborato specifici metodi di apprendimento, *field-crossing* e antropologia audiovisiva (riprese video, disegni). I primi risultati mostrano come l'ascesa della speculazione, della turistificazione e del city-marketing siano gli obiettivi scelti dagli attivisti che organizzano performance politiche carnevalesche, veri e propri carnevali indipendenti in un contesto di securizzazione, controllo e censura.

The ERC ARTIVISM project focuses on various art forms used by activists in order to formulate political claims. From a multisensory perspective, creativity and performance as subversive forms of political expression are researched in super-diverse cities on three continents (Douala and Yaoundé in Cameroon, Los Angeles in the United States of America, Genova and Viareggio in Italy and Nice and Marseille in France). Applying the event approach instead of a group-centred perspective, the team has elaborated on methods of apprenticeship, field-crossing and audio-visual anthropology (filming, drawing). Preliminary results indicate the growing importance of speculation, touristification and city-marketing as targets chosen by activists who organise independent carnival and carnivalesque political performances in a context of securisation, control and censorship.

Parole chiave/Key Words

Artivismo; arte; attivismo; performance; carnevale; eventi; Camerun; Italia; Francia.

Artivism; art; activism; performance; carnival; events; Cameroon; Italy; France.

Introduction: Artivism, art activism, or art and activism?

L'art ne vient pas coucher dans les lits qu'on a faits pour lui; il se sauve aussitôt qu'on pro-nonce son nom: ce qu'il aime c'est l'incognito. Ses meilleurs moments sont quand il oublie comment il s'appelle.
Jean Dubuffet

While doing fieldwork with politically engaged activists using art to express their claims, I came across Jean Dubuffet's famous citation against a limiting definition of art, printed on a postcard put on the wall of an activist's restroom. Like Dubuffet, many activists do not care about the definition of art but are aware of the fact that the aesthetics are connected to the political[1]. Furthermore, many activists share the assumption that we have been living for a long time in a "society of spectacle"[2]. They follow its choreographic logics, developing spectacular and innovative ways of introducing claims in unexpected forms into public spaces.

After having expressed a critical (and widely criticized) opinion towards the recent exponential development of social or useful art, art historian Claire Bishop[3] underlines the way participatory art follows the politics of spectatorship. Whereas Bishop writes that moral intentions of contemporary artists frequently pave the road to hell, curator Peter Weibel argues that «Audience participation in art as a consequence of the performative turn has probably created the historical prerequisites for the new civic participation in democracy»[4]. As I have written elsewhere[5], "artivism"[6] is a neologism combining the

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[1] J. Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics, The Distribution of the Sensible*, Continuum, London 2004.

[2] G. Debord, *La société du spectacle*, Buchet-Chastel, Paris 1967.

[3] C. Bishop, *Artificial Hells. Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, Verso, London 2012.

[4] Cfr.: https://zkm.de/en/blog/2013/12/peter-weibel-global-activism (last accessed 26/09/19).

[5] M. Salzbrunn, *Artivism, Politics and Islam – An Empirical-Theoretical Approach to Artistic Strategies and Aesthetic Counter-Narratives that Defy Collective Stigmatisation*, in C. Günther, S. Pfeifer (eds.), *Jihadi Audiovisuality and its Entanglements*, Edinburgh University Press, pp. 174-175.

words "art" and "activism". It refers to both the social and political engagement of militant artists[7] and the use of art by citizens as a way of expressing political positions[8]. The term gained notoriety through its use by Latin-American activists and artists working in California: the group Mujeres de Maiz, founded in 1997 in East Los Angeles, has included "women of color artivists" in their recent oral history project.[9] Referring to Chicana artist Judy Baca, founder of the SPARC laboratory in 1996 in Los Angeles, Chela Sandoval and Guisela Latorre use the term "digital artivism", observing that the combination of '"activism" and digital "artistic production is «symptomatic of a Chicana/o twenty-first-century digital arts movement»[10]. The increasing interest in mural art has led to a professionalisation of mural artists who started as political activists and now travel globally and participate in mural art festivals or tours organised by the local governments of cities like Porto[11] or Cologne[12], which have been marketing mural art as a tourist attraction.

So far, artivist creations have either been researched by art historians[13], architects[14] or curators[15]. Only certain studies have been written from a social science perspective (Serafini's PhD was published in a political sociology series in 2018) or have included art and activism in broader social movement studies which mainly focus on the G8 summits, from Seattle 1999 to Genova 2001 and G20 in Hamburg 2017, or on the Forum Social

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[7] S. Lemoine, S. Ouardi, *Artivisme, Art, Action Politique et Résistance Culturelle*, Editions Alternatives, Paris 2010.

[8] M. Salzbrunn, ERC-ARTIVISM proposal: *Art and Activism: Creativity and Performance as Subversive Forms of Political Expression in Super-diverse cities*, 2015, ERC-CoG-2015-681880; M. Salzbrunn, *Artivisme*, in *Anthropen. Le dictionnaire francophone d'anthropologie ancré dans le contemporain*. Peer-reviewed 2019. https://www.anthropen.org/voir/Artivisme; F. Malzacher, Steirischer Herbst (eds), *Truth is concrete. A Handbook for Artistic Strategies in Real Politics*, Sternberg Press, Berlin 2014, p.14.

[9] https://www.mujeresdemaiz.com/20th-anniversary (last accessed 26/09/19).

[10] C. Sandoval, G. Latorre, *Chicana/o Artivism: Judy Baca's Digital Work with Youth of Color*, in A. Everett (ed.), *Learning Race and Ethnicity: Youth and Digital Media*, The MIT Press, Cambridge MA 2008, p.81.

[11] See the current research project dedicated to street art in Porto: https://www.streetartcei.com/ (last accessed 26/09/19).

[12] http://cityleaks-festival.de/ https://blog.koelntourismus.de/en/arts-culture-en/the-best-quarters-and-spots-for-discovering-street-art-in-cologne/ (last accessed 26/09/19).

[13] C. Bishop, *op. cit*.

[14] M. Bouchier, D. Dehais (eds), *Art et esthétique des luttes. Scènes de la contestation contemporaine,* Métis Press, Genève 2020.

[15] N. Thomson, *Seeing Power*, Melville House, New York 2015; P. Weibel, *global aCtIVISm. Art and Conflict in the 21st Century,* Mit Press, Cambridge MA 2015; F. Malzacher, *Putting the Urinal back in the Restroom. The Symbolic and the Direct Power of Art and Activism,* in F. Malzacher and steirischer herbst (eds), *Truth is concrete. A Handbook for Artistic Strategies in Real Politics*, Sternberg Press Berlin 2014, pp. 12-25.

Mondial (in particular Porto Alegre, 2001) or Occupy Wall street (written namely by the activist and anthropologist David Graeber[16]). The way the repression of public protest performances has been appropriated or turned back through humourous or grotesque laughter has also been researched, namely by Aldo Milohnić[17], who refers to broader carnival studies. However, as Serafini states, «there is not only the need for social movement theory to consider the particularities of specific forms of action such as art activism, but also the need for further work what builds a bridge between sociological studies of social movements and in-depth ethnographic studies of activist groups, in order to develop tools that allow us to better understand the different scales of collective action and their collective identity process, from small-scale groups and networks to wider social movements that comprise them»[18].

Serafini aims at challenging the distinction between art and activism by understanding collective identities and the relation between aesthetics and the political in art activist practice. Even though she pleads for an in-depth ethnography and conducts herself immersive studies in different contexts, she very much focuses on groups and their dynamics and only partially on individual biographies and motivations[19].

Other relevant studies on artivism focus on the integration of art, technology and activism leading to digital artivism, like the Critical Art Ensemble[20] and its successors, the Electronic Disturbance Theatre[21]. Indeed, contemporary hacktivists can be considered as

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[16] D. Graeber, *Revolutions in Reverse: Essays on politics, violence, art, and imagination*, Minor Compositions, New York 2012.

[17] A. Milohnić, *Artivistic interventions as humorous re-appropriations,* in **«**European Journal of Humour Research**»,** n.2/3, 2015, pp.35-49. http://dx.doi.org/10.7592/EJHR2015.3.2.3.Milohnić (last accessed 10/02/2021).

[18] P. Serafini, *Performance Action. The Politics of Art Activism,* Routledge, London 2018, pp. 164-165.

[19] Ivi, p. 10.

[20] The CAE was founded in 1987 by Hope and Steve Kurtz, Steve Barnes, Dorian Burr, Beverly Schlee, with the long-lasting cooperation of Beatriz da Costa, Ricardo Dominguez. See http://critical-art.net/ They explore the relationships between art, technology, radical political activism and critical theory. CAE's actions and installations are linked to tactical media movement. See: A. M. Monteverdi, *Critical Art Ensemble*, in «Digimag», n. 23, April 2007. http://digicult.it/hacktivism/critical-art-ensemble/ (last accessed 02/02/2021)

[21] EDT was founded in 1997 by Ricardo Dominguez, Brett Stalbaum, Stefan Wray and Carmin Karasic. The Electronic Disturbance Theatre 2.0 was run by Bret Stalbaum, Amy Sara Carroll, Elle Mehrmand, Micha Cárdenas, Ricardo Dominguez. Their aim was to practice electronic civil disobedience in solidarity with the Zapatistas, recognizing that political action was needed both online and off. They de-

the inheritors of cyberpunk networks, often situated in squatted houses or social centers[22]. A majority of studies have focused on social networks, following namely the inherent logics of cyber-artivism. By researching artivism from an event and place approach, developing innovative methods like field-crossing[23], apprenticeship, and multisensory and audiovisual ethnography[24] I wish to fill the gap left by more holistic and group-focused approaches.

Researching artivism through events

As I have mentioned in my ERC ARTIVISM project proposal, artistic expressions that illustrate political claims and demands for civil rights «become manifest in political, cultural, organised or spontaneous events celebrating belonging and non-belonging by "means of performance"»[25]. Typically, such events are carnivals[26], festivals[27], pilgrimages[28], assemblies, and demonstrations. Events are therefore particularly suitable entry-points to the field of

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veloped *FloodNet*, a kind of browser-based online sit-in. Users visiting the FloodNet page activated a Java applet that reloaded a target website repeatedly in an HTML frame, thereby slowing it down with excess traffic. See: https://rhizome.org/editorial/2016/dec/01/tactical-poetics-floodnets-early-1990s-virtual-sit-ins/; http://digicult.it/it/hacktivism/no-borders-struggles-the-electronic-disturbance-theatre-2-0/ (last accessed 16/02/2021)

[22] T. Bazzichelli, *Dell'arte, del cyberpunk, dell'hacking,* puntoinformatico.it, web, 27 luglio 2001; M. Pasquinelli (ed.), *Media activism: strategie e pratiche della comunicazione indipendente*, Derive e Approdi, Roma 2002.

[23] M. Salzbrunn, *Researching and Practicing ARTIVISM through Fieldcrossing* (under review, 2021); M. Salzbrunn, *Approaching the Economies of Festive Events through Multisensory and Audio-visual ethnography: Insights from Nice and Viareggio*, in «Journal of Festive Studies», vol. 4 (forthcoming 2022).

[24] S. Pink, *Doing Sensory Ethnography*, Sage Publications, London 2009.

[25] W. Pfaff, *Creating Belonging by Means of Performance*, Abschlussbericht SNF/Dore-Institute for Cultural Studies and Arts, Bern 2011.

[26] M. Salzbrunn, *Belonging als Performance in Paris und Cherbourg: versteckte Semantiken des Karnevals,* in «Jahrbuch für europäische Ethnologie», n.6, 2011, pp.145-172; M. Salzbrunn, *How diverse is Cologne carnival? How migrants appropriate popular art spaces*, in «Identities» n.21, pp.92-106.

[27] M. Salzbrunn, *Mobilisation des ressources culturelles et participation politique: l'apport des cultural studies à l'analyse des rapports sociaux dans un contexte festif,* in «Migrations société» n.133, 2011, pp.175-192; M. Salzbrunn, *Rescaling Processes in Two "Global" Cities. Festive Events as Pathways of Migrant Incorporation*, in N. Glick Schiller, A. Caglar (eds), *Locating migration: rescaling cities and migrants*, Cornell University Press, Ithaka 2011, pp.166-189; M. Salzbrunn, R. von Weichs, *Sacred Music, Sacred Journeys: What Makes an Event Postcolonial?*, in «ThéoRèmes. Enjeu des approches empiriques des religions», n. 4, 2013.

[28] M. Salzbrunn, Raphaela von Weichs, *op. cit*.

art and activism and to the public space that is appropriated by marginalised social actors and collective groups»[29].

Furthermore, researching art and activism through events helps to avoid a limited perspective on pre-defined groups and widens the horizon to broader forms of participation, including spontaneous, punctual or changing ways to join artivist actions. A focus on events, combined with situational analysis and consideration of multiple forms of belonging[30] also avoids reducing artivists to a single cause since in many cases, several events mingle different issues and/or an individual can be engaged or sympathize with various causes (antifascism, environmental issues, feminism, LGBTQ+, education, anti-gentrification and anti-turistification claims, etc.). Nevertheless, the understanding of events created by artivists also requires an in-depth understanding of their life-worlds through a share of everyday-life in a long-term research setting. Multisensory analysis allows us to widen the ways we perceive social realities, focusing not only on seeing but also on smell, taste, hear and touch senses.

The ERC ARTIVISM project focuses on a broad geographic perspective, privileging super-diverse cities[31] (Douala and Yaoundé in Cameroon; Los Angeles/California in the United States of America; Nice and Marseille in France as well as Genova and Viareggio in Italy), focusing on three genres -carnivals/festive parades, cartoons/comics/graphic novels and street art– which allows us to operationalise our core concepts of performa-

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[29] M. Salzbrunn, *L'événement festif comme théâtre de conflits en zone urbaine: le carnaval des sans-papiers à Cologne*, in M. Klinger, S. Schehr (eds), *Lectures du conflit,* Néothèque, Strasbourg, pp. 111-126; M. Salzbrunn, *Mobilisation des ressources culturelles et participation politique: l'apport des cultural studies à l'analyse des rapports sociaux dans un contexte festif,* in «Migrations société», n.133, 2011, pp. 175-192.

[30] N. Yural-Davis, K. Kannabiran, U. Viethen (eds), *The Situated Politics of Belonging*, Sage, London 2006.

[31] See the ERC ARTIVISM website for detailed description of the researchers' profiles and their specific fieldwork. I am referring here to data I collected in presence, on my principal empirical field (Genova; Florence, accompanied by Sara Wiederkehr) or as a field-crosser (following the method I developed, see: M. Salzbrunn, *Conclusion: Field Crossing in Paris and Tokyo. A Fruitful Experience in Doing Anthropology of the Street*, in *From Community to Commonality. Multiple Belonging and Street Phenomena in the Era of Reflexive Modernization*, Center for Glocal Studies, Seijo University 2011; M. Salzbrunn, *Approaching the Economies of Festive Events through Multisensory and Audio-visual ethnography: Insights from Nice and Viareggio*, in «Journal of Festive Studies», forthcoming; M. Salzbrunn, *Researching and Practicing Artivism through Fieldcrossing* (under review, 2021)), in Cameroon (with Federica Moretti, both introduced by Raphaela von Weichs), Nice or Marseille (with Pascal Bernhardt and Federica Moretti).

tivity, liminality, and precarity[32]. Drawing is a central technique used in these art forms, since not only a comic starts with a drawing, but also a mural and a carnival float, and even choreographies of parades. Furthermore, each of these art forms is being performed in public or semi-public spaces: carnival and carnivalesque parades are obviously performances, planned or disruptive, and always carrying a potential for surprises, disturbance, unexpected developments. Comics are sometimes drawn live and displayed during Comic festivals, together with other art forms like a "concert dessiné" (live drawing during a live concert on stage) or a cosplay competition at Mboa Comic Festival in Douala and Yaoundé. Certain murals in California are also being created during urban events implicating the participation of the neighbourhood with musicians, storytellers, performers, etc. Hence different art forms are interlinked, but also connections between fields can be observed: through people travelling between places, through mediators carrying ideas from one spot or initiative to another, or through digital social networks in which ideas and references circulate.

Preliminary conclusions

Gentrification/Anti-touristification issues

In several Mediterranean cities, gentrification and touristification processes have been contested through independent carnivals and carnivalesque actions. In Firenze, the SET network of South-European cities has organised its first anti-touristic carnival in 2019, with disruptive performances within the most touristic spots next to the Duomo. A moquery performance was inspired by writings on communication guerrilla, namely those published by the collective autonome a.f.r.i.k.a. gruppe, Luther Blissett, Sonja Brünzels[33]. A group of artivists wearing white masks was doing a group performance following absurd commands. During the carnival procession, members of this freshly created and ephemeral group in which I actively participated were distributing white papers to

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[32] M. Salzbrunn, ERC-ARTIVISM proposal: *Art and Activism: Creativity and Performance as Subversive Forms of Political Expression in Super-diverse cities*, 2015, ERC-CoG-2015-681880, p.9 www.erc-artivism.ch

[33] autonome a.f.r.i.k.a. gruppe, Luther Blissett, Sonja Brünzels: Handbuch der Kommunikationsguerilla, Verlag Libertäre Assoziation & Schwarze Risse, Rote Straße, Hamburg 1997.

tourists, saying: «This is a tourist map of Florence», actually inviting them to create their own map on a blank sheet (Fig. 01). Despite the intention to criticize mass tourism, the targeted tourists actually felt entertained and took photos.

Fig. 01. Performance instructions for the anti-touristic carnival in Florence. Photo: Monika Salzbrunn

This phenomenon of providing amusement also occurred during the Carnevale della città di sotto in Genoa (Fig. 02) during the same year, which intended to ridicule tourism as well. Artivists from different social centers (Burrida, AutAut357, Terra di Nessuno, etc.) and squatted places like the Libera Collina di Castello and the Latteria occupata in Piazza Sarzano created small floats as well as individual and collective performances portraying mainly cruise ship tourists with inelegant clothes, giant selfie sticks and superficial conquering body language. The Murga Invexenda music and dance group as well as circus artists from the Saltimbanchi senza frontiere network developed improvised and planned mini theatre scenes within the old city centre, denouncing financial speculation, racism, and the treatment of refugees. The event was intended to surprise, create disruptive experiences and events within public space; create social links and relations, and help people to become aware of political, social, and economic developments to struggle against.

Fig. 02. Carnevale della Città di Sotto, Genova. Photo: Monika Salzbrunn

Several ideas about carnivals have been circulated among activists and artists in the French and Italian Mediterranean coast, namely between Marseille (Fig. 03), which hosts an independent carnival for already 20 years, and Genova.

Fig. 03. Carmentran of the Carnival of La Plaine Marseille (2019), representing the Mayor as the Sun King Louis XIV, sitting on the ruins of real estate speculation. Photo: Monika Salzbrunn

Both cities suffer from increasing cruise ship tourism and speculation, although both city centres host a high percentage of inhabitants living under the poverty line, in contrast to

Nice where the city centre has been gentrified a long time ago, and which has been a major tourist spot from the 19th century onwards. Together with Viareggio in Tuscany, the city of Nice hosts a century old spectacular carnival, created for wealthy winter tourists[34]. More than two decades ago, critical voices against the elitist character of the official carnival had led to the invention of several independent carnivals in and around Nice[35].

Boundaries between official carnivals and independent carnivals are being blurred, namely through individuals who navigate between both, e.g. being paid by the official carnival organizers and participating in the anti-official carnival events. During the Covid-19 pandemic, carnival activities and carnivalesque political actions have been continued through social networks and sometimes brought back to the streets: The carnival artists from Viareggio keep working on their float creations, posting the work in progress on Instagram or Facebook. In Marseille, people have been invited via social networks to celebrate carnival on their balcony, and in the Rhenanian city of Cologne where music is a fundamental element of popular culture[36], collective singing events have been organized via Facebook or Zoom. More confidential artivist circles like those active in Genova have shared ideas, comments, performances, flyers, banderoles, short music performances via private whatsapp groups and organised short performances posted on Facebook.

Although the lockdown and travel restrictions have an impact on our fieldwork, we keep following the events and the people who shifted more and more to social networks, gaining further insights into the links between artivism in material and immateri-

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[34] A. Sidro, *Le carnaval de Nice et ses fous*: *Paillassou, Polichinelle et Triboulet,* Serre, Nice 1979; M. Salzbrunn, *Approaching the Economies of Festive Events through Multisensory and Audio-visual ethnography: Insights from Nice and Viareggio*, in «Journal of Festive Studies», vol. 4 (forthcoming).

[35] C. Rinaudo, *Carnaval de Nice et carnavals indépendants. Les mises en scène festives du spectacle de l'authentique*, in «Sociologie et sociétés», 2005, n.37, pp. 55-68. https://doi.org/10.7202/012276ar ; M. Salzbrunn, F. Moretti, (2020), *Il carnevale tra limiti, trasgressioni, rinnovamenti e rivendicazioni. Resistenza festiva a Nizza, Marsiglia e Viareggio*, in «LEA Lingue e Letterature d'Oriente e d'Occidente − Quaderni di LEA Scrittore/Scritture d'Oriente e d'Occidente», n. 9, Dicembre 2020, pp. 399-414, https://oajournals.fupress.net/index.php/bsfm-lea/article/view/12445.

[36] B. Ellinghaus, M. Salzbrunn, *Music and migration: Cologne Carnival as a state of mind*, in «Revue européenne des migrations internationales», n.35, 2020 [transl. by K. Booth and A. Poméon O'Neill]. ttps://www.cairn.info/revue-europeenne-des-migrations-internationales-2019-3-page-33a.htm

al, private, semi-public, and public spaces, playing with and adapting to the context[37]. As the pandemic provides also a pretext for certain governments to limit political expression within public space, artivists are becoming increasingly vulnerable.

Some of them risk being arrested not only because of their provocative or critical political messages, but just for gathering outside. Censorship and control are also of growing importance in cyber-artivist publications, since social networks not only provide new spaces for action and expression, but also opportunities for governments to survey and control opponents. These vulnerabilities increase the researchers' responsibility for her/his implication, knowledge share and production and preservation of trust relations and artivists' integrity.

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[37] S. Pink, H. Horst, J. Postill, L. Hjorth, T. Lewis, J Tacchi (eds.), *Digital Ethnography. Principles and Practice*, Sage, London 2016, p. 8.

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