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Citation for published version

Hussein, Nesreen and MacKenzie, Iain (2017) Creative Practices/Resistant Acts. *Contention: The Multidisciplinary Journal of Social Protest*, 5 (1). pp. 1-13. ISSN 2330-1392.

DOI

<https://doi.org/10.3167/cont.2017.050102>

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Introduction: Creative Practices/Resistant Acts

Nesreen Hussein and Iain MacKenzie

This special issue stems from a one-day interdisciplinary symposium organised in May 2012 at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London under the title “Creative Practices/Resistant Acts: Cultural Production and Emerging Democracies in Revolutionary Nations”.¹ The symposium brought together artists, activists and scholars from various backgrounds, cultural traditions and political contexts to bring into dialogue different modes of engaging with, and understanding, “creative practices” as acts of resistance in times of political unrest. The contributors presented artistic, political, historical and analytical perspectives from Egypt, Syria, Palestine, Greece and Germany. In different ways, the contributions emphasised the power of art and creative acts in fuelling global mobilisations, destabilising hegemonic narratives of oppression and taking part in reclaiming people’s senses of empowerment, belonging and identity. They ranged between paper presentations, performative demonstrations, live participatory performance and roundtable discussions. One of the common threads that brought the contributions together, and that initiated the conceptualisation of the event, was a shared understanding of revolutions as inherently “creative acts”. Those acts are not only manifest in the proliferation of forms of artistic expression and modes of resistance that consciously utilise creative tools, but they are also evident in how spontaneous and organised acts of resistance transform public spaces and urban geography performatively as a response to the transformation in people’s attitudes towards the status quo. Demonstrations, marches, occupations, various acts of civil disobedience mark the formation of “alternative communities” that find a platform for the re-

¹ The symposium was a collaboration between the School of Arts and the School of Politics and International Relations at the University of Kent, Canterbury. The Faculty of Humanities’ Strategic Research Development Fund, and the School of Politics and International Relations Research Support Fund, both provided financial support for this event.

formed narratives of democracy in various mediums and artistic traditions. In different ways, the contributors examined the role of “creative practices” in generating new understandings of citizenship, democracy, agency and identity within forms that include the performed as well as the performative.

Notably, the symposium was held less than two years after the first sparks of the “Arab Spring” were ignited in Tunisia at the end of 2010, which was followed by the revolutions that spread around the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. During those revolutions, a diversity of art forms were reclaimed or reshaped; from graffiti to street performance to song and poetry, intervening in the spaces of authority and subverting dynamics of oppression. The poignancy and affectivity of those forms as “tools” for resistance and expression, and the gravity, impact and the socio-political implications of the revolutions could not have passed unacknowledged without trying to engage with them and with different perspectives from and about them in an exchange that took place within the artistic, scholarly and international community in the UK.² The fruitful exchanges led to our urge to document and extend the experience to some extent to a wider audience in the form of a publication with an interdisciplinary emphasis aimed at a diverse readership. The time distance between holding the symposium and the publication of the issue saw significant shifts in the socio-political and cultural landscapes in the MENA region and beyond, following the Arab revolutions. Nevertheless, the relevance of the contributions remains evermore present and pressing, for the issues raised through them start in specific moments in time but then they are usefully extended into wider consequences that go beyond temporal strictures. And at a time of critical transformations in today’s global politics and power structures, at a time when public conversations about identity, belonging and collective action could not be more important, the papers in this collection provide valuable opportunities to

² One of the contributors, Ziad Adwan, could not join the symposium from Syria due to the rejection of his visa application to enter the UK. His contribution, however, is included in this collection.

reflect back on the resistive power of art and creative acts and their ability to intervene in political discourse during critical times in potent and affective ways. The papers are opportunities to ask: would a close examination of artistic expression and creative acts of resistance lead to a better understanding of the nature and implications of political and social revolt? In a time of uncertainty, when nations are going through political and social changes, how can a focus on creative practices be part of the wider debate about the current state of affairs, as well as the debate about our futures? What kinds of trajectories can be drawn between revolutions and popular uprisings in different regional and global communities, and how can this be identified in acts of resistance?

In response to the above questions, among others summarised below, the collection includes a selection of the papers presented at the symposium in addition to a new article that offers a response to the participatory performance. The result is a publication that joins a body of scholarly and literary work that emerged in the wake of the Arab Spring. These include, for example, the special issue of *Theatre Research International* journal on “Theatre and the Arab Spring”, edited by Hazem Azmy and Marvin Carlson (2013), and the special issue of *Contemporary Theatre Review* journal titled “Theatre, Performance and Activism: Gestures towards an Equitable World”, edited by Jenny Hughes and Simon Parry (2015). While these two important journal publications eloquently look at the myriad ways by which theatre and performance can offer tools to make better sense of the complex socio-cultural and political realities defining this era, both in relation to the Arab Spring as well as other contexts of activism, this issue here extends its critical frameworks into the fields of politics and literature in addition to theatre and performance in a conscious attempt to bridge the gap between the social sciences and the humanities, and to foster a multitude of voices. By implication, *Contention: The Multidisciplinary Journal of Social Protest* presented itself as an appropriate home for the issue. The journal’s multidisciplinary approach to the study of

collective actions, social movements and other forms of political and social contention responds aptly to the interdisciplinary scope of the issue. Its interest in reconstructing the fragmentation of the scientific discourse by hosting a diversified range of contributions from different theoretical, methodological and philosophical approaches ideally extends one of our aims, exemplified in our collaboration as co-editors. Bringing together discourses from the fields of theatre, performance studies, literature and politics plays a part in challenging the polarisation inherent in perceptions around those disciplines, and highlights the inter-relationship between art and creative practices on one hand, and politics and resistant acts on another.

Framing the Problems

The area of overlap between creative practices and acts of resistance has become both larger and more obscure. In this issue, we explore this overlap from the perspective of different disciplines with a focus on the MENA and Mediterranean regions. By way of introduction, however, we aim to frame the problems presented by this increased domain of creative practices of resistance and, in the process, clarify what is at stake with a view to providing impetus for further research into this important aspect of contentious politics. While the articles in this issue demonstrate that any analysis of the roles, functions and effects of creative practices of resistance requires an in-depth, almost ethnographic, concern with the detail of what happened in any given situation, they do also point to intriguing ways of framing these insights as contributions to a general theory of how creative practices and resistant acts may be thought to intersect. With that in mind, we shall begin with reflections on the different ways the relationship between art and politics has been modeled and how one model in particular opens up the interesting domain of creative practices and resistant acts in ways that the others do not. It will become apparent that at the juncture of creative practices

and resistant acts one finds the notion of the event. How one then articulates this notion does much to shape the frame one places around the relationship between creative practices and resistant acts. We will conclude by discussing how this general framing of the problems operates within and through the articles in this special issue.

Art and Politics

In her book, *Art and Politics: A Small History of Art for Social Change since 1945*, Claudia Mesch provides a compelling account of the ways in which artists have contributed to social and political change since the end of World War II.³ Tackling a range of key themes, including post-colonialism, feminism and anti-globalization, Mesch frames her account with a clear statement of how she understands the relationship between art and politics. She claims ‘that certain artists and the works they created intentionally contributed to the construction of new political or social consciousness, and that artists continue to believe, to the present day, that their art can be and is political in nature’.⁴ This view of the relationship between art and politics, we would suggest, neatly encapsulates the contributory model with which we can begin our survey of the different ways in which these domains interact. The fundamental idea of this model is that art and artists are able to contribute to political and social debate at the level of more-or-less intentional interventions in the political domain. This model presumes that there is a domain of the political – Mesch refers to it as ‘the activity of collective or group decision-making that also affects other groups within that social body’⁵ – within which art is able to contribute both inventive formulations of key issues and imaginative solutions to the political debates of the age. Importantly, Mesch recognizes that such contributions can be

³ Claudia Mesch, *Art and Politics: A Small History of Art for Social Change since 1945* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013).

⁴ Mesch, *Art and Politics*, 2013, 2.

⁵ Mesch, *Art and Politics*, 2013, 2.

both state-sponsored and directed against the activities of the state; be they war, colonization or the juridical frameworks that have denied whole sections of the population equal rights. Furthermore, she details the ways in which propagandist art came from both sides of the Cold War and, regardless of which side it came from, state-sponsored artists produced some of the most striking and long-lasting images of modern and contemporary art. Similarly, the anti-state art that came to prominence in the 1960s was by no means homogeneous in style or content and, indeed, was often compromised by its relation to state-sponsored activities. In this way, a complicated and intriguing picture of the intertwined worlds of post-WWII art and politics emerges. For all of this complexity, however, the over-arching framework is one that presumes a domain of politics to which art contributes.

One of the tensions within this contributory model is related to the nature and scope of art vis-à-vis politics. In the comment quoted above, for example, Mesch slips from a claim about ‘certain artists’ to one about ‘artists’ and equivocates about whether or not art ‘can be’ or ‘is’ political in nature. Ultimately, we would suggest, she remains uncertain as to whether or not all artists are engaged in politics and all art is political. This uncertainty is productive from the perspective of art history, with which she is primarily concerned, because it keeps open the possibility of different contributions to politics from a variety of different artists and art forms. However, from the perspective of social and political theory this openness comes at the cost of closing down what we understand by politics and the political. Perhaps there is a different way of theorizing the relationship between art and politics that doesn’t set limits to our understanding of politics and the political? In fact, this is how we would suggest one could understand the influential work of Jacques Rancière.

Notably in his book *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, Rancière (2004) develops an alternative to the contributory model of the relationship between

art and politics.⁶ Developing his earlier work on Foucault, Rancière proffers what we will call a constitutive model to account for this relationship. On this model, the everyday domain of politics is simply that which polices the senses whereas the redistribution of this policed world is an intrinsically artistic practice that constitutes radically new political interventions in the everyday world of policed relationships. This constitutive model, therefore, rests upon the presumption that the domain of the senses is primary to the practices that organize it by way of decision-making collectives, as Mesch puts it. As such, the domain of art conditions the world of politics and it is through artistic intervention that new understandings of the political are constituted. As with Mesch, Rancière's constitutive model offers a similarly complex rendering of the effects of this reversal of the priorities between art and politics. It enables him, for example, to give a particularly clear appreciation of the shortcomings of the aesthetic regime of modernity and the claims of the avant-garde.⁷ But the overall shape of the proposition is clear: the aesthetic domain constitutes its own 'meta-politics' and, as such, undercuts contributory models with a more radical model of the aesthetic as constitutive of political redistributions of the policed world of everyday politics.

For all that his model may offer a radical redrawing of the relationship between art and politics tensions remain. According to Peter Osborne, for example, Rancière's account of the constitutive and disruptive power of art leads to a politically conservative retrenchment of the political nature of art within the abstract realm of the aesthetic.⁸ Or as Osborne and Alliez ask; 'can the aesthetic image distinguish itself from or within the spectacle of capital-becoming-image'?'⁹ Perhaps Rancière's emphasis on the constitutive role of art in the public

⁶ Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible* (London: Continuum, 2004).

⁷ Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 2004, 20-30.

⁸ Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art* (London: Verso, 2013).

⁹ Eric Alliez and Peter Osborne, eds *Spheres of Action: Art and Politics* (London: Tate, 2013: 10).

sphere will be it difficult to demarcate art that resists and art that becomes subsumed within that which it is trying to resist?

Both the contributory and constitutive accounts, therefore, seem plausible and yet also open to concerns about the nature and scope of art vis-à-vis politics and the risk of artistic practice becoming subsumed within the object of its critique. Is there a way of conceiving of the relationship between art and politics, from the perspective of resistance to established orders, which captures both the contributory and the constitutive dimensions without the associated dangers?

Creative Practices/Resistant Acts: A Process-Oriented View of the Problem

The problem of the relationship between art and politics can be phrased in this way: is it possible to conceptualise the relationship between art and politics in a manner that doesn't nest these domains one within the other in a latent disciplinary hierarchy? Is there a way of talking about the deeply connected relationship between art and politics that nonetheless accords an equal status to both these domains, thereby avoiding the traps of either a limited concept of the political or art's potential subsumption within the state and capital? In reaching for an answer to these questions we must first address two preliminary questions. First, can we specify more precisely what is meant by art and politics in the context of contentious politics? Secondly, how might greater specification aid our re-conceptualisation of the relationship between art and politics in the context of such contentious politics?

It is already evident that there is considerable conceptual slippage in some of the key terms concerning the relationship between art and politics, not least that that these are contested concepts in their own right. Addressing this relationship from the perspective of contemporary forms of contentious politics already engenders the first important clarification.

The focus on contentious politics brackets questions relating to the composition and nature of social movements qua movements, in order to draw attention to forms of protest and resistance that may emanate from them and from elsewhere. Hence the importance of the concept of ‘resistant acts’, where these are understood as what a political actor does in defiance of established regimes of power.¹⁰ The ‘political actor’ may be an individual artist or activist, but may also be a collectivity, and indeed may be a constellation of particular forces that include not merely human agents (Jane Bennett’s important discussion of the role of ‘vibrant matter’ is instructive in this latter respect).¹¹ There is no doubt that this initial specification of the need to focus on resistant acts raises important philosophical issues, however, the aim in the first instance is to shift the terms of the debate in such a way as, momentarily at least, to bracket off the problems associated with the terms ‘politics’ and ‘social movement’, neither of which in themselves are intrinsically tied to the idea of resistance.

Some preliminary remarks on the side of art can also be established. It is often presumed by those who talk about art, that it is the product of an individual artist, usually a (male) tortured genius; that art must be displayed in an art institution, public or private, for it to be considered as art; and, that artists always produce an art object be it a painting, musical score, play-script, sculpture etc. However, each of these key assumptions has been called into question in the developments of contemporary art; developments, for example, that include collectives engaging the public in sites beyond the gallery and museum in ways that do not leave an art object behind (see, for example, the collection by Thompson, for a useful

¹⁰ Howard Caygill, *On Resistance: A Philosophy of Defiance* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

¹¹ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010).

collection discussing some of these themes).¹² While increasingly commonplace in debates within contemporary art, being wary of presuming too much about what constitutes an artist and an art object has not, with some exceptions, found its way into discussions regarding the interface of art and politics.¹³ With this in mind, we propose that it is more conceptually precise to talk of ‘creative practices’ than simply of ‘art’ when thinking about the ‘art-politics’ nexus in the context of contentious politics. Creative practices, to offer up a definition, are repeated activities that work on the given (be it, material, psychic, organic, collective, and so on) in order to make a difference. Accepting that there is a nebulous quality to this definition it nonetheless wards off hasty assumptions about the nature of art and shifts our theoretical focus toward both those practices that are self-proclaimed artistic interventions and to those that make a difference to our experience of the world without being overtly declared works of art.

While these conceptual definitions go some way toward sloughing off a set of presumptions about politics, social movements, artists and art-works that may otherwise muddy the waters there is a more positive implication that is worth stressing. The insistence upon ‘resistant acts’ and ‘creative practices’ opens up the idea that there is a connection between acts and practices that may aid our understanding of their relationship. This connection can be conceived in two related ways. First, it suggests that there is a sense in which a creative practice and a resistant act may be part of the same process. This is important because it takes us away from the often-implicit reification of the terms art and politics that follows from our implicit reification of the artist and political actor. The concept of ‘resistant acts’ places emphasis upon the act of resistance itself, and makes no hasty

¹² Nato Thompson, *Living as Form: Socially Engaged Art from 1991-2011* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2012).

¹³ One interesting exception is Alina Jelinek’s, *This is Not Art: Activism and Other Non-Art* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013).

judgments about the author of the act; similarly the idea of 'creative practice' is employed to focus on the repeated activity of altering the world of shared experiences without presuming too much about artistic agency in the background, so to speak. Behind the act and the repeated act or practice there resides not the actor or artist but the process in which both are involved. Secondly, this specification, and the process-oriented view it engenders, needs to be tempered by our insistence upon the idea that creative practices are not always resistant acts and vice-versa. In other words, we must specify that it is only under certain conditions that these two tendencies join forces in the same process. We can, however, think through these conditions in a general manner: whatever the relationship between creative practices and resistant acts something happens in both cases. When that which happens is a significant challenge to the established orders (artistic and political, but also material, psychic and so on) we are led to the idea that they may be part of the same event, even if spatially and temporally distinct. In this way, therefore, it is possible to conceive of a processual relationship between creative practices and resistant acts in the sense that they form distinct parts of the same event.

The processual model of the relationship between creative practices and resistant acts, in drawing our attention to the fact that they are related processes within the same event, leads us away from presumptions about the thing-like qualities of the domains of either art or politics that tend to result, as we saw above, in hierarchical accounts of that relationship. Furthermore, we are then able to conceive of what happens as not simply contributory or constitutive but as potentially both. Creative practices may contribute to and constitute resistant acts and resistant acts may contribute to and constitute creative practices. The relationship between them is one of mutuality rather than hierarchy. In short, this theoretical reframing of the problem has established a way of thinking about the mutually contributory and constitutive nature of the art-politics relationship under conditions of contentious politics.

The primary theoretical innovation that enables this reframing is the eventual status of both acts (that manifest practices) and practices (made manifest in repeated acts). There is much that could be said, philosophically, about the relationship between processes, events, practices and acts,¹⁴ and setting out this framework here is simply the first step in a discussion of how we might bring this philosophical work to bear on matters of contentious politics. We will now turn to the articles in this special issue in order to convey how this processual model of the relationship between creative practices and resistant acts resonates with the detailed analysis each author offers of the recent uprisings in the MENA and Mediterranean regions.

Article Summaries

While there is no substitute for in-depth engagement with each of the articles in this volume, as they are all richly detailed and reflective accounts of the intersection of creative practices and resistant acts, there are certain themes that can be elaborated as we summarise their respective contributions. Each of the articles conveys that importance of viewing the processes that join creative practices and resistant acts from within; in the language of process philosophy, immanently. They also demonstrate that the events under discussion are always multi-dimensional in respect of the processes they express and in respect of the intrinsic complexities that arise within creative practices and resistant acts when viewed distinctly. It might be thought that these two general features – an immanent understanding of the complexities of particular events – might make analysis difficult if not impossible, from the perspective of social science aimed at generalization. And yet, they all equally convey

¹⁴ James Williams, *A Process Philosophy of Signs* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016); Iain MacKenzie and Robert Porter, *Dramatizing the Political: Deleuze and Guattari* (London: Palgrave, 2011).

that the view from within is also a view that can profitably provoke further conceptual and empirical work in contexts outside of those directly addressed. One might go further; an immanent, processual and event-oriented account of the relationship between creative practices and resistant acts is not only possible but also necessary if we are to shed light and clarity on this increasing domain of contentious politics. In this respect we can see the value of working at the interface of the humanities and social sciences.

In 'Flying Above the Bloodshed: Performative Protest in the Sacred City of Damascus', Ziad Adwan analyses the 'flying protests' that took place in Syria in 2011. These protests would emerge quickly and dissolve just as quickly, thereby making it difficult for the Syrian authorities to act in time to stop them or detain those involved. Bringing the language of theatre to his analysis, Adwan constructs a compelling account of how and why these flying protests worked so well. As he notes, while the protestors may not have been consciously aware of creating theatrical moments, thinking of the flying protests in this way proffers a mode of understanding that is often missed by social scientists who tend to dismiss or downplay the fleeting and ephemeral. Adwan's participation in these flying protests was in the form of both actor and spectator. One of the benefits of a theatrical analysis is that it makes clear that both of these perspectives are internal, or immanent, to the events themselves. Another benefit is that it gives a rich set of reflections on the dynamics of performance and drama within the protests themselves and in the game of cat-and-mouse with the Syrian authorities. The moments of intensity that accompanied these protests made the negotiation of the performance and the drama a process of constant negotiation and action in the heat of the moment. As he concludes, the flying protests made it clear that contentious politics is not always about who is stronger but who is quicker.

In her contribution "'For a Martyr from Afar": A Response to Laila Soliman's *No Time For Art*', Caroline Rooney delves deeply into the nature of the relationship between

creative practices and resistant acts, from the side of one particular creative practice. Where Adwan addresses this relationship by considering the theatrical nature of a series of fleeting resistant acts, Rooney develops her reflections through a self-consciously creative practice that seems almost indistinguishable from a resistant act itself. Taken together they provide two (of many) imperceptible sides of the same event. Laila Soliman's *No Time for Art* is a documentary performance series that operates on several levels at once: it brings into view the courage of the Egyptian revolutionaries and the brutality waged against them; it invites audience participation as an act of memory but also advocacy on behalf of the martyrs; it combines visual and auditory elements in a compelling mix of courtroom and public square; and much else besides. In her response, Rooney eloquently draws out many of these complexities based on her own viewing of, and participation in, one production in the series. At stake is nothing less than the nature of activist art in times of crisis and the contribution of such art in forging the bonds of collective solidarity out of subjective artistic intervention. One of the conclusions Rooney draws out is that unfinished, unending art will always allow for the engendering of its resistant and activist trajectories.

While flying protests and a documentary performance series may appear to have the processual and evental built in, so to speak, there may be reservations regarding how well this model of the relationship between creative practices and resistant acts fits with what we often assume are more traditional sedentary forms of public demonstration, such as occupying major metropolitan squares. The articles by El-Desouky and Sotiropoulos show that this is not the case, at least considering the recent occupations of Tahrir and Syntagma. In his contribution, El-Desouky conceptualises the 'connective agency' that resulted from the deployment of Egyptian cultural practices called *amara*. Forms of chanting, sloganeering, sculpting and much more combined to create a cultural space within Tahrir that drew out and reconstituted modes of Egyptian identity in a dynamic reiterative fashion. Theorising this

effect with the help of Badiou, Zizek and Ranciere, El-Desouky shows convincingly the integral nature of such cultural creative practices to the resistant act of occupation. One of the key conclusions that results is the importance we should give to the resonance of such practices as they emanate from the event of occupation throughout Egypt, to the present day, and across the world. Such resonance is an immanent feature of the event itself, ultimately unbounded by space and time.

Turning to Syntagma, Sotiropoulos approaches many of the same issues but from the perspective of political philosophy. Once again, addressing these issues with the sensitivities of a participant-observer allows for a nuanced and convincing account of the internal dynamics of the square-movement at Syntagma; one that gives voice to the complexities of the guiding sign of that process, 'real democracy'. In many respects, this motif is a well-worn, even tired, sign around which to rally. Sotiropoulos shows that even so, the processes involved in articulating and enacting this motif in Syntagma were far from exhausted or exhaustive. Indeed, as the argument progresses it becomes increasingly clear that there is an inexhaustible nature to this motif, one that echoes in a distant but distinct manner, the inexhaustibility of the artwork that Rooney addresses. Where unending art engages resistance in new and demanding ways, so too unending claims for real democracy can be said to engage creative practice in new and demanding ways.

Conclusion

There is much in the articles of this special issue that pushes against the process-oriented model of creative practices and resistant acts that we have outlined here and much that remains to be specified. But the collection as a whole makes it clear that there is ample scope for further research into this most pressing aspect of contentious politics. Where art and

politics meet, in the dynamics of creative practices and resistant acts, surprising conclusions follow about the nature of contentious politics, the nature of art and the nature of their relationship. This is surely worthy of continuing research.

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