

Injecting Imagination into Degrowth

About the authors and their positions

Labelled a ‘domestic extremist’ by the police and ‘a magician of rebellion’ by the press, John Jordan has spent the last 25 years merging art and activism. He has worked in various settings, from *Tate Modern* to squatted social centres, from international theatre festivals to climate camps, and co-founded *Reclaim the Streets* and the *Clown Army*, co-edited *We Are Everywhere: The Irresistible Rise of Global Anti-Capitalism* (Verso, 2004), and co-wrote the film/book *Les Sentiers de l’Utopie* (Editions Zones, 2012). He now co-facilitates the *Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination (Labofii)* with Isabelle Fremeaux.

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www.degrowth.de/en/dim

1. What is the key idea of Artivism?

Artivism, merging the boundless imagination of art and the radical engagement of politics

Artivism is not really a movement. It’s more an attitude, a practice which exists on the fertile edges between art and activism. It comes into being when creativity and resistance collapse into each other. It’s what happens when our political actions become as beautiful as poems and as effective as a perfectly designed tool. Artivism is the [Clown Army](#) kissing riot shields to push the police away; it’s the [Yes Men](#) secretly infiltrating the world’s media pretending to be corporate mouthpieces; it’s when flocks of [flamenco dancers](#) shut down banks promoting austerity in Spain; it’s when the [Brandalism collective](#) hacks hundreds of bus shelters in the midst of a state of emergency and replaces the adverts with radical messages. What it’s definitely not about is making *political* art, art *about* an issue, such as a performance about the refugee crisis, or a video about an uprising. It is not about showing new perceptions of the world, but about changing it. Refusing representation, artivism chooses direct action.

Proponents of direct action believe that to change things, it is best to act directly on the matter instead of asking others to do things for us. It is the opposite of lobbying and protest marches. Direct action is about transforming the world in the here and now, together. By breathing the spirit of art onto direct action, we can come up with irresistible forms of resistance. If you see a bulldozer cutting down a forest to build a new airport, you don’t write a song about it, you put your body in its way (maybe while singing!). The most beautiful thing, however, –the aesthetic goal– is *winning*: enabling the survival and continued abundance of the living forest and its ecosystems. With artivism, the beautiful and the useful overlap.

Artivism as an indiscipline

Some might prefer to call it ‘creative resistance’, and some ‘art activism’. Others, following the words of the German artist and co-founder of the

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Green Party [Joseph Beuys](#), might call it ‘social sculpture’. The authors of ‘Artivisme: Art, Action Politique et Résistance Culturelle’ (Lemoine & Ouardi 2010), however, simply say that artivism is an ‘indiscipline’, something with refusal rooted in its heart. In fact, it refuses to be contained by the problematic discipline of art or by the separate identities of ‘artist’ and ‘activist’ – labels that assume that artists have a monopoly on creativity and [activists one on social change](#), suggesting that somehow other people are neither creative nor involved in changing the world!

Artivism treats social movements as a material. Their forms of action and alternatives are forms that our collective imagination can change and reinvent. In the same way that an artist might work with wood or paint, artivism might look at plans for direct action to shut down an open-cast coal mine and imagine how it could be made more powerful and theatrical. It might involve designing the layout of a climate camp so that it is more convivial and open as a place to welcome new people. It might involve inventing new ways of holding horizontal assemblies or designing a shared ritual for before going out to sabotage a military base with your affinity group. When, as Gerald Raunig writes, ‘[art machines and revolutionary machines overlap](#)’ (Raunig 2007), we get a moment of artivism.

2. Who is part of the movement for Artivism, what do they do? A rich, diverse and colourful movement, which can bring down empires in the most unexpected ways

The strategies employed by activists depend on the political context of their work and are too numerous to fit here, but one brilliant handbook and website of tactics, theories and principles is [Beautiful Trouble](#). One example from the book is how to create protests that do not look like protests as a key strategy for those working in repressive regimes or during states of emergency where public dissent is banned. The [Orange Alternative](#) did this wonderfully during martial law in Poland in the late 1980s. Despite protest bans, they called for a ‘Gnome’ gathering, to demand better ‘Gnomes’ rights’. When faced with thousands of young people wearing orange gnome hats, the regime’s soldiers did not know what to do, and the generals did not call the tanks in. For the first time since martial law was declared, a mass of people had taken public space back, had a great time doing it, and managed to spread a sense of confidence far and wide. Within a few years the whole of Eastern Europe was out in the streets. [Some historians](#) claim that the movements that brought down the Soviet Empire began with artists, guerrilla theatre and musicians opening up space for dissent (Horáková & Vuletic 2003). Humour has often been at the centre of activist tactics.

Another common tactic is reverse-engineering, which asks the hacker question: ‘What can this thing do?’. This involves hacking a daily object and tur-

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ning it into a machine of resistance. You can reverse-engineer anything, including laws: Students at the University of Texas fought back against the new campus carry gun law by strapping on dildos! The organisers of [Cocks Not Glocks](#) explained that, although it is illegal to openly carry dildos on campus, they are 'just about as effective as [guns in] protecting us from sociopathic shooters, but much safer for recreational play'. This also illustrates the principle of 'put your target in a dilemma position', which means that you put your opponent in a situation where they are forced to respond to your action. But whatever they do, they lose, by appearing either ridiculous or violent.

Those involved in artivism are as diverse as their tactics, some went to art school, others to theatre academies, some simply managed to avoid having their creativity sapped from them at school and want to apply it to political action. Artivism's greatest strategies are perhaps innovation and confusion, as repeating the same tactics –the A to B march, the picket, the internet meme, the blockade, the protest camp, the riot– can quickly lose its impact. The most successful actions are often those where new forms are invented that manage to take the authorities by surprise. That is why movements need to constantly innovate their tactics faster than the authorities are able to respond to them; including, of course, tactics to protect protesters from police violence. In the last decade we have seen a range of creative shields, from the book-block shields made from giant books covers (the image of a cop beating George Orwell's *1984* is unforgettable), to the Climate Camp's shields with beautiful photographic portraits of those affected by the climate breakdown pushing through police lines to shut down the builders of a new runway.

Many popular tactics were originally invented by artists, including [denial-of-service](#) (DoS) attacks for blocking the websites of opponents, now infamously used by Anonymous.

Creativity and crafting new forms needs time and attention, but given the urgency and speed of activism this is never easy. The spirit of art thus also brings a different rhythm to activism, one that is much more in keeping with the aims of degrowth; a de-accelerated, slower, more considered approach, but no less passionate.

3. How do you see the relationship between Artivism and Degrowth?

Opening up the space to dream: nurturing collective creative thinking and the spirit of play within the degrowth movement

At the moment, it feels as though artists have made fewer connections with the degrowth movement than with other movements such as refugee

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support, climate breakdown, anti-austerity, alter-globalisation, etc. Why this is the case is hard to fathom.

Climate and the concept of the Anthropocene are huge themes in the art world at the moment. However, much of it is sadly part of a corporate elite using culture as a cheap research and development tool and an effective public relations exercise to promote green capitalism. Volkswagen consultants working with artists and ecologists during the [Über Lebenskunst](#) project at Berlin's art centre *Haus der Kulturen der Welt* (2010-2012) to look at the future of transport is just one of many examples. At the recent COP21 (2015) in Paris, many big name artists played the role of 'artwashers' by creating work for a corporate greenwash event, *Solutions COP21*, which brought together some of the world's biggest polluters, from fossil fuel corporations to car manufacturers, from industrial agriculture giants to builders of airports and motorways, for a fair to demonstrate that they had the real solutions to the crisis.

Business-as-usual events like this love to use art as a mask to hide their corporate crimes and give themselves an air of contemporary sophistication. 'Artwashing' cleans their logos, and makes us forget that they are destroying living communities of people and ecosystems for profit. An important strategy of artivism is to critique artists and institutions who collaborate with 'artwashing', using what Foucault termed *parrhesia*, the act of a person taking the risk to 'say everything', to speak the truth dangerously against what the majority believe. Since 2010, the [Liberate Tate collective](#) has been doing this with stunning interventions in the art museum against BP funding. (These interventions were ultimately successful, as in March 2016 BP announced that starting in 2017 it will no longer fund the Tate). If more artists were involved in movements such as degrowth that strive towards coherence between ideas and ways of living, fewer artists would be busy feeding the suicide machines of capitalism with one hand and claiming progressiveness with the other, and maybe more would be encouraged to apply their creativity to social movement forms.

Participatory pedagogy

The fact that the degrowth conferences of 2014 included an [art thread](#) together with scientific, economic and social threads is encouraging. More of these initiatives should be developed so as to break the 'academic' conference mould and include more creative forms of knowledge sharing as well as a more holistic approach. Artists' teaching practices tend to be more horizontal and based on [participatory popular education models](#) that seek to develop the shared critical knowledge already present, rather than a 'top down' knowledge transfer (via PowerPoint or a conference) from the knower to the students. Artists tend to go beyond mere talking and listening –working and playing with the body and materials; engaging head, heart and hand equally. This should be a key pedagogical strategy –perhaps a re-

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turn to the pedagogic idea of the ‘polytechnic’, where learning philosophy was no different from learning how to make a chair.

The process of making things together can be a good mobilising tool for developing strong affinity groups and bringing people into movements for the first time. After all, it may be a lot less frightening for first-time activists to attend a workshop to learn –as in the case of [Tools For Action](#)– how to make giant inflatable silver cobblestones for an action, rather than taking part in a big assembly discussing a campaign against a new fracking license.

Setting up transdisciplinary solutions workshops/laboratories around particular topics, where artists/designers would be brought in not as the ‘aesthetic communicators’ of the ideas, but as creative participants trying to find solutions in collaboration with other disciplines, would be an important step towards merging the degrowth movement with the spirit of artivism.

Creating spaces that nurture such creative thinking and playing as part and parcel of a movement process is key. The degrowth movement, despite its at times overly academic tone, could have the capacity and sensibility to embody this spirit, because at its heart are notions of a change in our culture towards qualitative rather than quantitative ways of being. Degrowth has been called '[an example of an activist-led science](#)'. Perhaps one day we will be able to say that it was an activist-led art as well.

4. Which suggestions do they have to each other?

Making degrowth irresistible: the role of desire and fantasy in creating a new culture

I write as someone living in a wood-heated yurt in a small commune on an organic farm in France, where degrowth is at the centre of our collective's values. For us, degrowth is coupled with good living. As the French slogan goes: *Moins De Biens, Plus de Liens* –Fewer Things, More Relationships. But in popular mainstream culture degrowth is often misperceived as an activity that involves self-control (stop shopping, stop driving, stop flying, etc.) and privation (don't want or buy new things, etc.), that calls for a return to the past (stop using fossil fuels/new technologies, etc.) where life was hard (grow your own vegetables, make your own bread, stay local, etc.) and happiness rare. In addition, degrowth is usually framed within an apocalyptic timeline of a planetary life support system collapse –not exactly making it the most desirable of movement imaginaries. Such caricatures of degrowth are a far cry from notions of abundance, pleasure and play that are often present in artistic processes and that are concepts that capitalism has taken away from us.

As with most traditional progressive politics, degrowth has a tendency to work in a scientific, ‘reality’-based manner. Much of the work seems to be

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passing on information, statistics, facts, economic analyses, etc. It often feels overly academic and heady and ignores emotions –Where is the dreaming and fantasy? While there have been spaces for other forms of intuitive learning, celebrating, etc. at the recent degrowth conferences, this is often seen as merely an addition to the 'rational' lectures and workshops.

Stealing fantasy back from capitalism

Capitalism has captured our fantasies with the spectacle of consumerism; its celebrities have become our mythological heroes, its video games our wild adventures. It promises us the fantasy of a better life that can always be even better. Fantasy itself is the fuel of the entertainment business, popular culture and most religions, and yet we fear it as a tool of politics. We distrust anything that might seem irrational and relegate it to the 'arts programme'.

Artivism, however, recognises that [politics has always been about fantasy](#), because at its heart is imagining what kind of future world we want. We have been able to use such tools, steal them back from popular culture and create what Stephen Duncombe, [author](#) and founder of the Centre for [Artistic Activism](#), calls '[ethical spectacles](#)'. There, we collectively perform our dreams via imaginative participatory actions, creating new realities via symbols and stories that construct a truth together rather than waiting for it to set us free. The degrowth movement could learn from this and acknowledge that successful politics are as much an affair of desire and fantasy as of reason and rationality. To leave all these powerful tools in the hands of capitalism is a mistake. As long as capitalism's lures are perceived to be more fun and more able to speak to our desires than degrowth, we will fail to make the radical cultural changes that are so necessary, and buying an iPad will still be way cooler than riding a donkey.

Instead of artists flocking to apply their creativity to the movement, they continue to work in the advertising industries and other machines that reproduce capitalism's desire traps. Without their creativity degrowth will remain a beautiful set of ideas rather than a new culture. The questions we must ask are: How do we learn to educate each other to desire differently? How can degrowth become as sexy as capitalism? And how can small really become beautiful? And, last but not least, how can we begin to sense the inherent violence of industrial civilisation, to really, deeply feel the crimes against life that it perpetuates, to shake off the anaesthesia, the numbness, and return to aesthesia, the senses?

More coherence is needed

What degrowth can bring to artivism and especially to the art world is the drive for coherence between thinking and living. Separating what we believe in from how we act in the world inevitably leads to suffering, and confusing role models. With many in the cultural field there is a chasm between their

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politics, aesthetics, ethics and everyday life. Many artists and cultural producers fly from conference to biennale, to carry out work about climate change, while others exhibit anti-systemic work in museums sponsored by banks. Not considering their life as a material to work on, a concept Foucault articulates as ‘a technique of life, an art of living’, they reproduce separations of capitalism. Instead of applying their creativity to questions of how we could travel without causing climate breakdown, how we could organise without domination, how we could grow our food without destroying our soil systems, how we might build new communes, they continue to live in constant contradiction between what they believe in and how they behave. Degrowth's focus on holistic practices could change this.

5. Outlook: Space for visions, suggestions or wishes

Building a culture of resistance where art and activism are no longer separate from everyday life

One of the most urgent tasks is to build a *culture of resistance*. I don't believe that we will be able to put in place solutions to the ongoing social and ecological catastrophe without acts of resistance. Those who profit from the present economic system will not relinquish their power. We need movements that are able to show desirable alternatives while being prepared to resist the current system. Without a shared set of values and behaviours, without a culture where acts of resistance (from protest to sabotage) are supported by a wider population than that which is actually ready to take part in them, we will not have the systemic change necessary to achieve justice and avoid the collapse of our life support systems on this planet.

That is why things like bringing degrowth and a climate camp together are key, because not everyone is going to be suited for the front line of resistance. But all these people need to feel part of a shared culture. Yet movements so often forget this and don't see the importance of creating the material infrastructures and affective sensibilities that support resistance in the long term. Unfortunately, many in the transition town networks – or in other cultures of ecological alternatives such as permaculture et al. – while thinking long term solutions and material infrastructures, seem to think that our culture will be able to magically transition from capitalism to ‘something nicer, greener, etc.’ without resistance. I don't believe this culture will somehow undergo a voluntary transformation to a sane, equitable and sustainable way of living. I think we have to undo much of this culture and rebuild entirely different ways of being and sharing our worlds and that this is what resistance is: confronting and dismantling unjust structures of power to make way for other cultures to flourish.

03 Artivism

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This is what a culture of resistance looks like

A culture of resistance is one based on sharing our material and emotional support with those involved in a movement of resistance.

A culture of resistance is when in winter 2015 in France citizens opened up their homes and farms to the 200 people in the tractor and bike convoy that rolled up from the *zad* occupation (an autonomous resistance zone against a planned airport in western France) to the COP21 in Paris, despite the state of emergency and bans on their movements. A culture of resistance is *not* the so-called 'ecological' philosopher Bruno Latour refusing to sign [a letter](#) against the building of the same airport because he fears his name being associated with radical ecologists.

A beautiful example of a culture of resistance was the underground railroad that enabled slaves to escape the southern United States. It's *not* the French government evicting refugees from their self-made Calais camps to force them into a prison-like set-up with no communal space. At the heart of a culture of resistance is refusing a culture of domination in favour of a definition of love that enables the other to be free.

Breaking down the separations

In the end I think that in the new culture that will come after the culture of capitalism and domination, the role of art and activism will change radically. Art as a thing separate from everyday life, a thing for the rich to collect and profit from, a thing to watch or to own, done by others, will be over. It will be seen as a verb rather than a noun; a way of doing, a certain quality of paying attention that anyone can practice in everyday life, not just the 'artists'.

Perhaps the notion of the activist as someone who is a specialist in transforming society, will disappear too, as in a society of the commons, run with local assemblies and a confederation of commons rather than the hierarchical state, everyone will feel part of a process of social transformation, part of a practice of politics. In this society, politics will not be separate from ethics anymore. Aristotle saw the pursuit of the good of the political community as a branch of ethics, the pursuit of human good as a whole. This pursuit he called *Eudaimonia*, meaning 'the good life', and he believed it was the ultimate goal of all human beings. 2300 years later, perhaps the degrowth movement will bring us closer to this dream than ever before.

Links und Literature

Links

The Center for Artistic Activism in New York: <http://artisticactivism.org/>

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The Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination: <http://labofii.net/>

Applied as well as further literature

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