

Investigating politics through artistic practices: Affect resonance of creative publics

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Abstract

While artistic practices have been central to political movements throughout the 20th century, much analysis treats these modes of expression as distinct or separate from more traditional forms of civic practices and everyday political participation. Building on discussions of the cultural turn in civic agency and the shortcoming of cultural citizenship, the authors of this article interrogate the relationship between affect, artistic practices and participatory politics. We discuss the findings from a research project in which the researchers worked with artist-facilitators involved in a community engagement initiative around the 2015 Canadian Federal Election. The investigation made use of an innovative combination of qualitative methods including probe-based research methods to better understand how participatory artistic practices can play a role in the election cycle. Through an account of our investigation conducted with these artists, we explore the role of artistic practices and emotion in navigating the distinctions between politics and the political in everyday life.

Keywords

Artistic practice, elections, engagement, methods, participation, participatory culture, politics, public sphere

Introduction

While artistic practices have always been an important part of political movements, much analysis treats these modes of expression as distinct or separate from more traditional forms of civic practices and everyday political participation. Scholarship in

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the field of cultural studies has drawn attention to the far more complex, and at times contradictory, relationships between culture and conventional notions of political engagement such as citizenship (Hermes and Dahlgren, 2006). The ‘participatory turn’ (Jenkins, 2015) has meant that political participation is increasingly intertwined with identity, self-expression and everyday life as ‘personal action frames’ (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012). Often acting as a mediator between politics and the political, participatory culture now plays a key role in constituting the mediapolis during elections – a space that interweaves social and political life with communication networks and media discourses (Bakardjieva, 2016). Given that there has been a widespread decline in electoral participation over the past 30 years in Western democracies, it is of growing importance to interrogate the relationship between artistic practice, emotion and participatory politics facilitated by new communication sites.

As people respond to political issues using their creative capacities and the affordance of digital media, artistic practice is increasingly becoming an important site of political engagement. More specifically, practices associated with ideas of community art help give expression and affective intensity to the relationship between ‘the political’ (Mouffe, 2005) – the everyday relations of power that enable and constrain life – and ‘politics’ – the more traditional institutions of political power like elections. Our interpretation of artistic practice draws on Mouffe’s own Gramsci-inspired definition in which artists can challenge the ‘common sense’ social order by making ‘visible what the dominant consensus tends to obscure and obliterate ... aiming at giving a voice to all those who are silenced within the framework of the existing hegemony’ (Mouffe, 2008: 12). Following Mouffe’s (2008, 2013) assertion that artistic practices can contribute to questioning the dominant hegemony, we set out to investigate how participatory art-making challenges dominant public rituals related to elections within neoliberal societies.

Drawing on formations of artistic participatory practice that took place during the 2015 federal election in Canada, we investigate the specific relationship between participatory culture, artistic practices and elections as a particularly important case of how people intervene in a political field increasingly driven by spectacle and affect. This article aims to provide more insight into how *participatory artistic practices* are implicated in the mediation of politics and the political in the hope of better understanding how people find their way through, or lose themselves in, the ‘complex web of private and public worlds’ (Couldry, 2006: 335) that make up contemporary forms of election discourse.

We begin by describing the societal context of the election and explore a cross-country ecology of artistic practices that emerged leading up to the election. Second, we focus on one project, *Creative Publics: Art-Making Inspired by the Federal Election*, a participatory research project that inquired into how participatory artistic practices could serve as a space for low-tech, in-person political engagement in which participants used various forms of art-making as a way to express their feelings around election issues. Third, we describe how we used ‘affect probes’ (Zuurbier and Lesage, 2016) as a research method within the *Creative Publics* project to investigate how its artist-facilitators navigate between politics and the political in their practice. Our analysis pulls together these three investigations to explore how artistic practice is increasingly being used as a form of political discourse within neoliberal democratic societies and what the implications

are for considering how participatory politics paradoxically operates to both reinforce and counter the depoliticizing and anti-democratic nature of neoliberalism.

Changing patterns of political engagement and participatory art

Since the late 1980s, engagement with traditional political institutions in Canada, and across North America, in general has declined drastically (Howe, 2011). Eroding social capital, rising consumerism, changing norms of socialization, shifting media consumption patterns, increasing cynicism and mounting income inequality are all factors that contribute to declining civic engagement (Dahlgren, 2009). Researchers and social theorists attribute these factors to broad socioeconomic forces, namely globalization, individualization, changes to communication and media technologies and a crisis of political legitimacy that has weakened the state's influence over its citizens (Bauman, 2013).

These social, cultural and political shifts have resulted in younger generations moving away from institutionally driven 'dutiful citizenship' and towards 'actualizing citizenship', (Bennett, 2008) in which politics is understood as a broader set of concerns – from identity politics to community activism – and is often motivated by a sense of individual purpose and personal expression rather than an obligation to the government. Importantly, while participatory political practices often express a desire for a more democratic society, they are not guided by deference to elites or formal institutions (Cohen and Kahne, 2011).

Changing patterns of political engagement are often referred to as 'participatory politics', a concept that describes peer-based acts aimed at making, curating, and critiquing cultural content as a way to advance political goals. Drawing on practices of participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006), participatory politics can range from media production (citizen journalism, podcasting, video production, graphic design) and art projects (public art, theatre, music, visual art) to tech-based activities (building apps, websites and computers), digital activism (organizing, boycotting, petitions, hacking, digital campaigns) and lifestyle politics (Ratto and Boler, 2014). Within the context of these new, more informal kinds of political participation, the boundaries between politics, cultural values, identity processes and self-reliance become fluid. The political culture coming out of loose, everyday networks is often perceived as incongruent with traditional political institutions whose political acts are perceived to be less meaningful than of those networks. Media theorist Ethan Zuckerman (2014) suggests that these new forms of political engagement signal a deeper ideological shift towards 'post-representative democracy', in which political subjectivity and conceptions of democracy rely on theories of change beyond influencing representative governments and aim instead at shifting systems of power through culture, communication and everyday life.

While participatory politics broaden the terrain of politics, its disconnect with more traditional forms of political representation also presents a number of risks by creating close associations with neoliberal governmentality (Grundy and Boudreau, 2008). Neoliberalism's own critique of governmental institutions manifests itself as, among other things, a set of policy ideas associated with privatization, fiscal austerity, deregulation, free trade and reductions in government spending in order to enhance the role of the private sector in the economy (Boas and Gans-Morse, 2009). Drawing on Michael

Foucault, Wendy Brown argues that neoliberalism is not just a set of economic policies but operates to reshape political imaginaries and subjectivities around an ethos anchored in the logics of individualization and commodification. For Brown, neoliberalism is the mode of governmentality that ‘reaches from the soul of the citizen-subject’ (Brown, 2009: 39) and involves extending and disseminating market values to all institutions and social action. Neoliberal governmentality develops its own subjectivity, whereby the citizen is expected to rely increasingly on the self and therefore to depend less on the state and its supports. An emphasis on social, civil and political rights gets overtaken by new discourses of ‘active citizenship’ that emphasize creativity, self-entrepreneurship and consumption as a way to facilitate neoliberal ideals of individualism. As a result, there is the pressure on a creative, active citizen function ideologically to depoliticize and discourage collective forms organized politics.

But this seeming alignment between participatory culture and neoliberal governmentality is only possible based on what we perceive to be two false assumptions: The first assumption is that creativity stemming from artistic practices is necessarily individual, self-interested and apolitical and the second is that traditional political institutions are bereft of artistic participatory engagement.

In recent decades, the topic of participatory art has been hotly debated. Issues of authorship, ethics, aesthetic criteria, the vocabulary best suited to describe and critique participatory art and its social value have generated lively exchanges around this art’s relevance and role in social change agendas (see Bishop, 2012; Bourriaud et al., 2002; Foster, 2003; Kester, 2004, 2011; Kwon, 2002). It is not our intention to exhaustively retread these debates here. However, below we briefly draw from these debates to clarify the frameworks that inform our conception of participatory artistic practice.

Community-engaged arts, also known as ‘community arts’, refers to forms of artistic activity in a community setting where artists facilitate public engagement activities aimed at social, civic or political agendas, such as generating dialogue or mobilizing communities towards a common goal. The practice has its roots in social justice and popular education methods (Freire, 1972), and the goal is to help empower communities through coming together to create artworks that express their position and experience. Within this tradition, the idea of the individualized creative genius is rejected and artists work towards building tools for collective creativity (Kelly, 2017).

For the purposes of our analysis, we understand participatory artistic practices like community-engaged arts as having counter-hegemonic potential. As Mouffe (2013: 15) argues, certain artistic practices can play a critical role in counter-hegemonic struggles by challenging the post-political view that there is no alternative to the present order. Because participatory artistic practices remain open to collective, affective and expressive dimensions of communication, they can help facilitate counter-public discourse that privileges a creative-expressive rather than rational-persuasive approach to public discourse (Warner, 2005). Participatory artistic practices can foster political participation in ways usually overlooked or denied by hegemonic political institutions. This is important for those interested in political participation because, as Bakardjieva (2009, 2016) points out, subjectivity is not political by default, but apolitical subjectivities can be politically mobilized under different conditions and changed discursive dynamics. Just because

submerged forms of political engagement are not overtly visible to wider publics, it does not mean that they cannot engage in political discourse. We need new ways to see it, hear it, feel it and facilitate it.

We are interested in the extent to which participatory artistic practices can ignite emotionally charged form of politics. To what extent do participatory artistic practices simply represent the extension of a neoliberal project that seeks to produce a more atomized and affectively primed (and therefore ‘emotionally clouded’) citizenry? Could participatory artistic practices awaken new constituencies of political agents? These questions are all the more complicated when applied to traditional democratic institutions like elections, where affect is accommodated and administered inherently as part of their design. It is within this space of contradiction that we turn to participation, art and the 2015 Canadian Federal Election.

2015 federal election

In Canada, the national government operates as a parliamentary system, composed of three parts: the monarch, the Senate, and the House of Commons. There are 338 Members of Parliament (MPs) that are directly elected by eligible Canadian voters, with each MP representing a single electoral district. Although there are over a dozen political parties that participate in federal elections and only five of these parties have seats in the Parliament, the Canadian government has essentially operated under a two-party system in which the centre-right Conservative Party competes with the centre-left Liberal Party for control of the House of Commons. The far-left New Democratic Party and Bloc Québécois (a Quebec separatist party) are two influential smaller parties, but neither have been elected to power. The Green Party holds one seat.

The 2015 Federal Election was the longest in Canadian history. Running for 11 weeks, the length of the election greatly exceeded the 36-day minimum length. Since the 11-week campaign was more than twice the minimum length, the campaign spending limits more than doubled, to around \$50 million for a registered party running candidates in all 338 ridings. Since the Conservatives had many monied supporters, many observers saw this as a move by the incumbent Conservative Party as a way to establish an advantage over its opponents (Fletcher, 2015).

The extra-long election cycle allowed the electorate more time to consider candidate and party platforms, and perhaps a better chance for voters to make an informed choice. More time also allowed for a remarkable range of issues to get their due airing and the affective intensity of the campaign to increase. Resentment in the body politic was palpable as then Prime Minister Stephen Harper of the Conservative party had alienated large sections of the electorate with a series of aggressive policies and draconian actions against civil society. Over its 9-year tenure, the Harper regime was accused of making sweeping changes to laws and regulations without any debate in Parliament through omnibus budget bills that negatively impacted environmental protections, voting rights, government surveillance and public spending on social programmes. Outrage grew as the Harper government was accused of silencing environmental scientists, spying on activists and targeting civil society groups for audits through the Canada Revenue Agency (CRA) (Healy, 2008).

As the election date drew closer, there were two specific moments that evoked strong affective resonance from the Canadian public and had a decisive influence on the tone of the election. The first was when the Conservatives reasserted their position on banning Muslim women from wearing the niqab during citizenship ceremonies and threatened to take the matter to the Supreme Court. While only a small minority of women wanted to wear niqabs at citizenship ceremonies, it was used by the Conservative government as ‘dog-whistle politics’ to exploit Islamophobia as wedge issue to divide the public (Bryden, 2015). Their strategy backfired when they attempted to pass the ‘Zero Tolerance for Barbaric Cultural Practices Act’ and pledged to create a ‘barbaric cultural practices’ tip line for neighbours to report on each other if they suspected acts of polygamy, forced marriages and female genital mutilation (Powers, 2015). The public responded by condemning the move, the government lost in court and the architects of the policy eventually apologized with some claiming that it was the key mistake that cost them the election (Payton, 2016). The second moment was the Conservative government’s handling of the Syrian refugee crisis. After a photograph of a lifeless 3-year-old Alan Kurdi made international headlines in the middle of the election campaign, it was revealed that Kurdi’s aunt had tried to sponsor his family’s application for refugee status but was denied by immigration ministry led by Conservative MP Chris Alexander.

After these two attempts to use racism and fear-mongering for political gain and the Conservative government’s relentless attempts to undermine indigenous people, erode civil liberties and democratic institutions, the election quickly became about the ‘becoming’ of the collective identity of Canada. Collectively the country was asking: What kind of country do we want to become and what values guide us? The collective moral identity of Canada as a caring, open, diverse and progressive country was being openly contested by a hostile government and a prime minister who was increasingly perceived, in the words of once-staunch Conservative Conrad Black, as ‘... a sadistic Victorian schoolmaster’, with an ‘almost sociopathic personality’ (Black, 2015).

Given the contentious state of the election, perhaps it is not surprising that voter turnout increased to the highest in over 20 years from 61.1 percent in 2011 to 68.3 percent in 2015 (Elections Canada, 2017). Some observers suggest it was the ‘anyone but Harper’ unpopularity of the Conservative leader, others attribute it to a generational shift in values that favoured a youthful candidate promising public spending accompanied by the Liberal Party’s aggressive social media strategy targeting young voters and the numerous nationally networked, celebrity-endorsed, get-out-the-vote campaigns. But these post-rationalizations overlook the dynamic and fluid changes that occurred during the long election campaign itself – including the role of artistic practices and participatory politics in constituting new forms of political affect in response to events at the time.

National ecology of participatory political culture

In the months leading up to the election, an array of citizen-produced projects used various forms of artistic practices to motivate political engagement. The *Vote Savvy* project, for instance, started by students at the University of Guelph, produced over a dozen videos using satire to encourage viewers to organize vote mobs. They also started the #myfirsttime video meme series that invited participants to make videos describing their

first-time voting experiences. Similar projects like *Be the Vote*, *Right to Vote*, *31 Reasons* and *Voting Buddies* used photography, short videos, graphic design, hashtags and social media to engage young people to learn how to cast a ballot, how to encourage others to vote and how to organize in-person events. The *VOTE4NUDES* project even promised provocative nude photos sent over Twitter private message to those who could prove they had voted. Other projects used information and data to engage voters. *Strategicvoting.ca*, *votesswap.ca*, *iSideWith.com*, *votes.mp*, *Pollinize* and *I CAN Party* drew on data analysis to help people vote strategically and decide which candidates most aligned with their values. The mobile application *Vote Note* used GPS technology to pinpoint riding districts for voters and provide them with information about candidates, polling station locations and a clock that counted down to election day.

Many other projects used images, music and comedy to disseminate more explicitly anti-Conservative messages. *Harpoon* and *Shit Harper Did* engaged comedians and political cartoonists to make humorous videos aimed at convincing young Canadians to vote. *Imagine Oct20th* and *Rock the Indigenous Vote* consisted of decentralized music shows organized by musicians explicitly calling for a change in government. Canadian musicians wrote songs and made music videos to express dissent: The video for Blue Rodeo's song *Stealin' My Dreams* garnered over 389,200 views on YouTube (Blue Rodeo, 2015); indie bands *Hey Rossetta* and *Yukon Blond's* collaboration, *Land You Love*, received over 72,280 views (Sovereign Sentience, 2015); and Spoken word poet Shane Koyczan's poem *The Cut* (which refers to Stephen Harper as the 'pallbearer' of Canadian rights and freedoms) attracted over 144,000 views (Koyczan, 2015). Meanwhile, *Drake the Vote* collected 8597 signatures calling on hip-hop musician Drake to make a PSA about voting (Bowsher, 2015). An election-themed art exhibition also took place in Toronto called *The Vote Show* that included works from acclaimed Canadian artists. As part of *The Vote Show*, a Toronto-based art collective crafted the 'My Prime Minister Embarrasses Me' tote bags, which sold out soon after appearing online (Krishnan, 2015). *The Harper Toilet Paper* crowdfunding campaign produced rolls of toilet paper printed with the face of Stephen Harper to be distributed in competitive electoral ridings 'where we desperately need people to vote strategically' (Indiegogo, 2015).

The artistic practices described above do not fit neatly into the traditions of political information dissemination dominated by legacy media outlets. It is therefore not unsurprising that this transmedia ecology of participatory politics went largely unnoticed by legacy media outlets. Beyond using social media and occasionally airing citizen-produced videos, legacy media outlets rarely provide citizens with opportunities and information to participate meaningfully and creatively in public discourse. This often leads to journalists and elites manipulating each other, relegating the public to the role of alienated spectator (Carey, 1995; Mahoney, 2017).

More importantly, these artistic practices reveal the changing nature of political discourse brought about through participatory politics. It suggests that citizen-instigated discourse can ignite an affective agency that operates as a form of political motivation. When observed collectively, these creative political expressions reconfigured dynamics of power, agency and the symbolic codes that played out during the election. By blurring the boundaries between the personal and the political and by making the sociability of the

private sphere public, these projects reveal new political rituals that prioritize the affective resonance of artistic expression over rationality of deliberative discourse (Fenton, 2016: 96). Theories of affect propose a process-oriented understanding of political subjectivity, putting emphasis on ‘becoming’ as a way to understand what motivates, accelerates and sustains political activity of a particular kind. Seen from this perspective, artistic practices can be more empowering than the role traditionally assigned to citizens during elections, namely, voting. By *producing* political art rather than consuming what was produced by the mainstream media elites, these works demonstrate how affective politics can be used to in powerful ways to counter cynical appeals to the individualized citizen-consumer and support collectively orientated narratives in support of democratic engagement.

What we were interested in was how and to what extent artists and other citizens who create political art (rather than consume what was produced by the legacy media elites) could contribute to a media ecology in which affective politics is used to counter cynical appeals to the individualized citizen-consumer and support collectively orientated narratives in support of democratic engagement. As Bakardjieva (2016) argues in her discussion of ‘subactivism’ within the mediapolis, public engagement has a deeply personal and affective dimension where individuals ‘make social and political choices in their daily life congruent with their personal values, or in more general terms, to be the person they want to be’ (p. 286). Because artistic practices and political engagements intersect at an affective level, participatory artistic practices offer a productive frame to explore contemporary political feelings. In order to examine such intersections, the following section entails a case study of such a project with a focus on two different modes of data collection and investigation.

Creative publics – intimate exchanges

Art-making as a form of participatory politics can provoke new kinds of political interactions and operate as a social lubricant between strangers, standing in for the often-intimidating exchanges that political discourse can elicit. *Creative Publics: Art-Making Inspired by the Federal Election [Creative Publics]*, was a field study that the first author – one of the authors of this paper – designed as part of the national research project *Art for Social Change: An Integrated Research Program in Teaching Evaluation, and Capacity Building*.¹ Its aim was to investigate how a collaborative process of producing participatory art might generate political discourse and affective agency (Mahoney, 2017). The project consisted of four interventions across different public sites in Vancouver, British Columbia from September to October 2015 (Figure 1).

Housed in a 1970s airstream trailer converted into a mobile art studio, the project invited participants at each site to make mixed media collages (Figures 2 and 3), sing Civil Rights-era political songs as part of a street choir (Figure 4), draw slogans and illustrations on a five-foot-tall movable chalkboard on which appeared the word ‘vote’, or just relax and enjoy a free coffee. The project culminated in a large participatory art installation, VOTE (Figure 5), which displayed the collages during the final week leading up to the election. The project did not require an interest in or knowledge of mainstream political issues. As such, the interventions provided low-tech, in-person opportunities for political dialogue.



Figure 1. Creative Publics check-in table with the Tin Can Studio at Surrey Central Station, Surrey, British Columbia, Canada. Photo: Tara Mahoney.

The researcher's participation in these interventions provided the first insight into the intersection of artistic practice and political engagement. As the lead author observed the events, she overheard revealing and intimate discussions among strangers of how electoral politics was part of their everyday lives: Worried conversations about how scientists had been silenced at a time when climate change was accelerating. Exchanges about welfare cheques that left only \$10/day for food after paying rent. Expressions of anguish about how the government had refused to take in Syrian refugees even after the recent tragic events (see above). Heart-felt descriptions among participants who told each other what the collages represented – their young families and ageing parents, their dwindling incomes and painful addictions and their projected fears and plans for the future. In an interview after making a collage, a middle-aged white man started crying, expressing the sadness he felt over colonization and the deplorable way the Canadian government continues to treat Indigenous people. Another participant, a construction worker, was overheard telling a stranger about the shame he felt over never talking to his son about politics. At the collaging table, a middle-aged woman quietly confessed the reason she was staying so long was because she did not want to go back to her abusive home.

In a political context where 'facts' are often used as a way to establish understanding, exert power or motivate political action, these moments of exchange reflected a different



Figure 2. Collaging table, Burnaby, British Columbia, Canada.
Photo: Tara Mahoney.



Figure 3. Participant collage, Victory Square Park, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada.
Photo: Kim Gilker.



Figure 4. Street choir at Creative Publics intervention, Victory Square Park, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. Photo: Kim Gilker.



Figure 5. VOTE chalk board letters, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. Photo: Tara Mahoney.

type of political truth-telling. The invitation to artistically express political desire or difficulty, evoked forms of political communication that drew from emotion and personal experience. The process allowed the disruption of space and time within the urban environment, where conversations were slow and intermittent, often with long silences between exchanges. These were moments of testimony – a public recounting of experience that helps reveal the lived emotional reality behind political decisions. The act of testimony brought subpolitics into view through the affective communication of everyday experience. As Hannah Arendt (1972) points out in her discussion of ‘Lying in Politics’, ‘Factual truths are never compellingly true...Facts need testimony to be remembered and trustworthy witnesses to be established in order to find a secure dwelling place in the domain of human affairs’ (p. 6).

Creating a space for public testimony with the *Creative Publics* project allowed strangers to open up to each other, quickly and deeply, in ways rarely available in society at large. One of the interventions took place in the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver and another in the suburb of Surrey – both of which have highly heterogeneous populations of students, seniors, Indigenous people, professionals, homeless, people with a disability and drug users. The sites offered what Homi Bhabha (Bhabha and Rutherford, 2006) calls a ‘third space’, a space where grand narratives of formal deliberation were less important than attracting new actors and their perspectives.

How the art projects facilitated counter-public discourse presented both opportunities and limitations within the *Creative Publics* field study. On the one hand, the project offered elements of what some proponents of counter-publics have long called for – alternatives to dominant discursive practices that privilege reason and bracket embodiment. This approach was welcomed by participants, as evidenced by the commentary and responses discussed above. These responses are evidence of what Grant Kester (2004) calls ‘dialogical art’ – art where the intersubjective is integrated with social or political participation through art. Dialogic art is defined by two elements: the first is to recognize the social context from which others speak, judge and act; and the second constitutes knowledge grounded in our capacity to identify with other people.

On the other hand, this project cannot be understood outside the cultural contradictions of neoliberalism. For instance, these types of projects are being systematically defunded by government programmes while at the same time are increasingly becoming central to a range of governmental policies and private sector instrumentalizations where economic development is intimately bound up with notions culture and community. This commodification and cooptation have often resulted in a post-political discourse of ‘creative citizenship’ in which the social justice values of community-engaged arts are coopted for economic agendas (Grundy and Boudreau, 2008; McLean, 2014).

Despite the contradictions inherent in a project of this kind, its mode of political engagement speaks to a more fluid model of citizenship. The traditional structure of representative democracy simply cannot contend with forms of social telling that give expression to hybridity between ‘being political’ and the ‘politics of being’ (Fenton, 2016: 130) in which the distinctions between the public and the private sphere are blurred. For Chantal Mouffe (2013), the main task of artistic practice is ‘the production

of new subjectivities and the elaboration of new worlds' (p. 208). At a time when liberal democracy is in crisis, what is needed is 'a widening of the field of artistic intervention, with artists working in a multiplicity of social spaces outside traditional institutions in order to oppose the program of the total social mobilization of capitalism'. (Mouffe, 2013: 125). The observations and encounters recorded at Creative Publics sites demonstrate how participatory artistic practices reveal it is not only the personal that is political, but the *interpersonal*. In a context where the logic of neoliberalism is to create a cultural of individualism and competition, building trust and affective connection constitutes a counter-hegemonic act.

Participatory method: experiments with affect probes

As part of *Creative Publics*, we conducted an experiment using affect probes with two of the artist-facilitators who were involved with the project. The purpose of this part of the research project was to better understand how the artist-facilitators dealt with the affective dimensions of their practice. In some ways, the approach has parallels with other speculative or inventive social methods (Lury and Wakeford, 2012). In this case, our primary objective was to invite the artist-facilitators, rather than the public, to participate. Through this invitation, we hoped to better understand the kinds interpersonal exchanges taking place in these practices. We used the probes to create an exchange between the researchers and the artist-facilitators through a research method that was similar to the participatory artistic practices used by the artists themselves. Rather than only using traditional qualitative methods from which to observe participatory practice (which risked reinforcing the assumption that we could, as researchers, analyse the project while remaining detached from its own affective resonance), the probes spurred a sympathetic exchange between the two groups in which we not only analysed participation but actively engaged in its facilitation (see later sections). Using this approach, the sympathetic exchange afforded an opportunity for the researchers and the artists to share and discuss how politics and the political informed the *Creative Publics* project without the constraints of 'academese' that might have put the artists at a disadvantage.

Similar to cultural probes (Gaver et al., 1999), affect probes are specially designed packages that contain a collection of small, fun, creative activities (Zuurbier and Lesage, 2016). Probes should not be understood as a standalone method. They are conceived as a complementary method to other qualitative approaches in which each individual probe activity is designed to, if successful, 'generate some level of engagement and provide interesting responses' (Boehner et al., 2012: 197). A probe kit designed specifically for this project was given to both artist-facilitators. Other probe activities were sent via text message each day directly to their mobile phones. The probes were intended to accompany the ongoing activities of the artist-facilitators for the entire duration of the 2015 Canadian Federal Election campaign but were designed exclusively to engage the artists rather than the public. Each probe was designed to invite introspection and expression: for the artists to reflect on their lives, the world around them, and to playfully respond to the moments at hand. Activities included captioning images, writing haikus, taking photos and drawing blueprints. The artists received minimal instruction for how to complete



Figure 6. Probe Kit.
Photo: Tara Mahoney.

the activities and were encouraged to participate in them however they saw fit: either individually or with others, choosing to complete them in whatever order they liked, while ignoring activities that they did not want to complete.

The affect probe research as implemented in this project can be described in four interdependent moments of investigation. The following sections detail how these four moments unfolded from the perspective of the researchers (the authors):

Designing the probes

Before designing the probes, we arranged to meet the two artists in July 2015, a month before the start of the project in the hopes of getting to better know each other. The meeting was an opportunity to discuss the process and explain what to expect. The artists expressed a bit of nervousness about the project but seemed keen to conduct the experiment (Figure 6).

From the onset the probe was designed with sympathy for the artists as the priority, including what we knew about their art practice and what we felt would be aesthetically appealing. The entire probe kit was constructed with the *Creative Publics* project in mind, following its overall calendar through the electoral campaign. The design process entailed creating a series of over 20 activities for artists to play with over the course of the month. The goal was in part to gain insight into the artists' engagement with the election, including their participation as artist-facilitators in the *Creative Publics* project but also how political engagement connected to their everyday lived experiences.

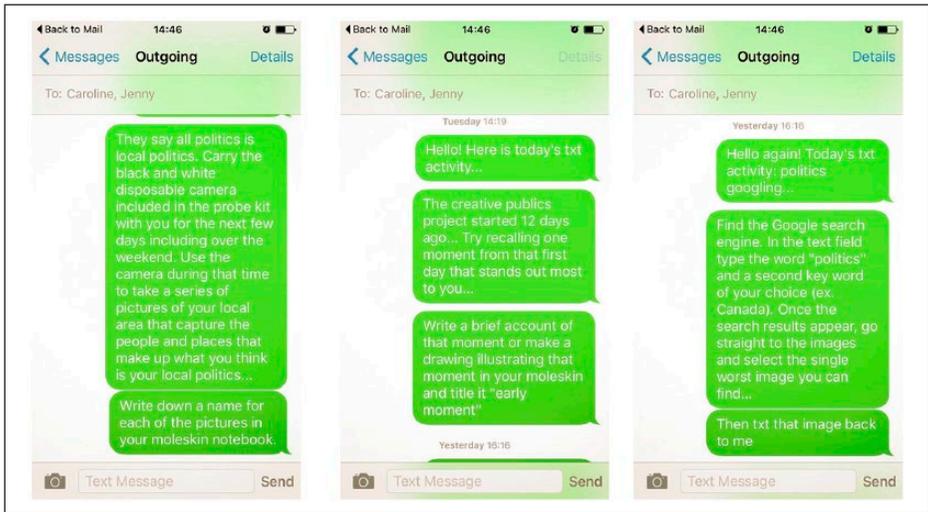


Figure 7. Text-message probes.

We were interested in learning how the artists navigated the unfolding events of the project and the unanticipated happenings that would inevitably take place during the election campaign. Because of the difficulty in anticipating what would take place, some of the probes were designed to touch on deeply personal issues (for example, drawing and writing activities that required the artists to share personal memories), while others were more topical (such as responding by text message to a recent news articles about one of the leaders' debates taking place that day), all based around the theme of the election. Taken together, the probe kit was a semi-inductive, semi-intuitive attempt on our part to create a series of activities that would, we hoped, get the artists to share their own personal notions of politics and the political without asking them to translate their views into our conceptual framework.

Interacting through the probes

We hand delivered the probe kit to the artists a few days before the first *Creative Publics* event. We instructed them to use the kit however, and whenever, they felt like it (in line with probe methods described by Gaver et al. (1999)). We also periodically sent a second parallel set of text messages probes (Figure 6). We designed these SMS probes to be introduced in the ongoing activities of the artists for the entire period covering the *Creative Publics* project affording us the opportunity to address more topical issues pertaining to the election. One of the methodological principles of the affect probes approach is that the creative acts prompted by probes foster reflexive moments for participants and researchers. Specifically, in this case, by engaging in a series of activities that resonated with our own conception of politics and the political, we could provoke the artists to express their views and reactions in an open-ended way that left room for conversation and questioning (Figure 7).

The moment of analysis as the researchers consider the probes:

We collected the probes left with the artists after the election. The analysis consisted of opening the assembled probes together (the three researchers) and examining them as a group over a period of a few days. As we went through each of the probes (including those that were not completed), we recorded our observations and impressions, trying to gauge which activities resonated with us. Resonance is sympathetic so the goal in analysis for the researchers was to uncover common resonance from the contributions of the artists, to explore the ways in which what they created in response to the probes caused a sympathetic intensity in us. This exchange between researcher and participant is one that occurs through sympathy. Brian Massumi (2014) describes sympathy as ‘An immediately felt awareness of the affective complexion of the situation’ (p. 78).

As we progressed through the analysis phase, it quickly became clear that the artists were fully aware of the kind of politics/political split we had originally identified. While neither of the artists presented themselves as politically engaged, how their own personal reflections and biographical experiences were reflected in their responses to the probes suggested a much more complex form of political engagement. Connecting these findings back to the observations in the previous section, we could also see that they had devised sophisticated means for moving between politics and the political when working with audience members in their works and that it was in fact a key part of their artistic practice. We started referring to this move as a ‘sympathy switch’—how the artists connected their own personal experiences with wider social, political and cultural issues as an inherent part of their work as artist-facilitators.

It was through this technique that they could draw people into their work. The artists continually switched back and forth between politics in their personal lives to broader political issues and back again. They seemed comfortable making connections between their own biographies and the events they encountered. It was also revealing to see how they drew from their personal biographies (both long-term childhood experiences and more recent everyday experiences) to express their artistic identities in shades of personal and public as well as politics and political. The probes revealed to some extent how the artists produced these sympathy switches: Through participatory artistic practices they were able to draw people into a conversation that allowed them to weave their own personal biography with those of others around them and to tentatively connect them with political events in ways that resonated with participants. For example, one of the activities asked the participants to ‘draw a blueprint of the most political space you’ve occupied’ to which a participant responded with a drawing of her childhood home (Figure 8).

In the post-election interview with the artist-participant, we asked her how the experience she illustrated in this drawing shaped who she is politically. She responded,

My mother was very, very poor as I was growing up and she had a lot of barriers to work and mental health issues ... so my politics are very left-leaning because I’ve seen how social programs, like social housing, actually saved her in a way. Without something like social housing, me and my brother wouldn’t have had a place to live. She was a single mom and it was really necessary. In contrast, my father is neoliberal, he’s an entrepreneur and he really feels that everyone has an opportunity to get ahead ... so those were always oppositional forces (in my

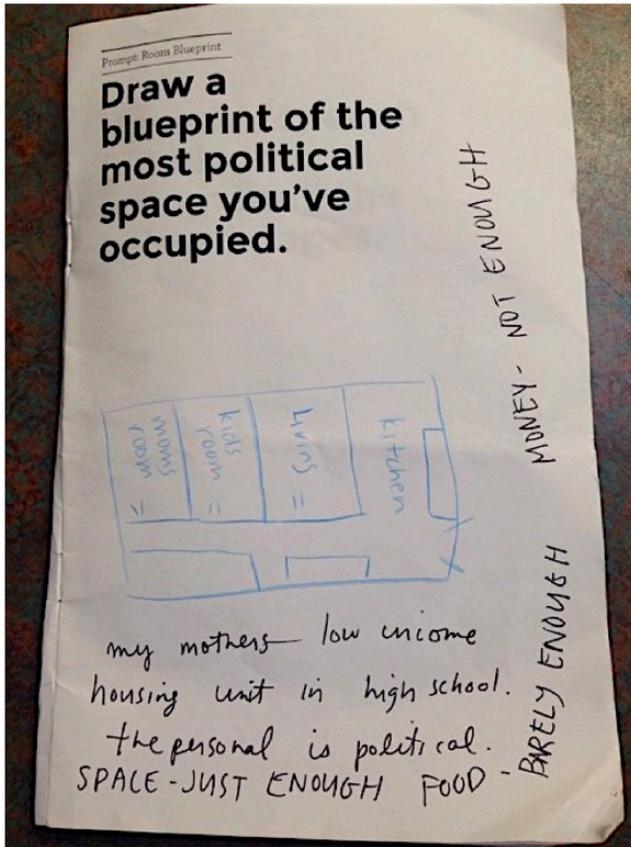


Figure 8. Booklet response in probe kit.
Photo: Tara Mahoney.

upbringing). I respect my dad a lot but ... that kind of attitude drives me crazy because I had this example (in my mother) of someone who was in need and those programs really, really helped.

Although they were implemented as a research method rather than as a participatory artistic practice, the affect probes afforded a different yet complementary form of participation in the *Creative Publics* project. The interpersonal exchanges between the researchers and the artist-facilitators enabled by the affect probe method allowed us as researchers to not only better understand the artist-facilitator's point of view but also to sympathize with the affective intensities that come with the kinds of participation they facilitated. In the recorded discussion about this drawing between the researchers, we reflected on our own upbringing and early memories of politicization. We expressed how our experiences differed from what was depicted in the artist's drawing and the multiple entry points into political subjectivity. For us, early moments of politicization were connected to issues of rights, laws and public space. Contrasting our experience with that depicted in the drawing helped us better understand how political subjectivity develops on a spectrum of

immaterial and material experiences, abstraction and tangibility, system and lifeworld. We better understood how our experiences of politicization reflected our own positionality and speculated that the participants' politicization was informed by the immediate needs of daily life rather than abstracted ideas of institutional and legal protocols.

Analysis – participatory media, affect and democracy in neoliberal societies

An analysis of these practices for participatory politics lends itself to both optimistic and pessimistic interpretations. On the one hand, participatory artistic practice offers powerful ways for people to exert both voice and influence on election issues and voter turnout. During the 2015 campaign, the artistic practices and participatory politics discussed here countered cynical appeals to the individualized citizen-consumer. On the other hand, critics of participatory politics point out that neoliberal rationality uses the rhetoric of participation, utopian aesthetics and pervasive interactive media technologies to accommodate demands for increased public engagement without any significant redistribution of economic and political power (Barney, 2010). Political philosopher Jodi Dean argues the proliferation of seemingly participatory acts create individualized 'fantasies' of political action (Dean, 2005) that obscure the necessity for collective political struggle and are exploited by power-holders as a way for citizens to redress their lack of efficacy. Her notion of communicative capitalism explains how 'communicative exchanges, rather than being fundamental to democratic politics ... are the basic elements of capitalist production' (Dean, 2005: 56).

In addition, surveillance scholars warn that the rhetoric of participatory media allows media companies to create "digital enclosures," wherein governments and corporations gather and track the data they need to categorize, order, and discipline citizen-consumers' (Andrejevic, 2007). These concerns are similar to those raised against Jürgen Habermas' (1989) notion of the public sphere where the universalized invitation to participate tends to assume an ideal set of conditions and ignore the realities of social hierarchies of power that determine who can participate and who cannot (Fraser, 1990). Indeed, digital engagement still favours those with class, race and gender privileges, who are more likely to have access to the time, knowledge and resources necessary for engagement (Hargittai and Walejko, 2008). These criticisms of participatory politics are indeed valid. What remains to be seen is the extent to which participatory artistic practices can reframe political participation in radical, progressive and critical ways that counter depoliticization while also mitigating the structural inequalities associated with neoliberalism.

What do the citizen-produced election projects, the art-making collage interventions and the affect probe experiment have in common? First, they demonstrate how playful experimentation can reveal alternative forms of participatory engagement within traditional political institutions like federal elections. Playful experimentation changes our everyday map of electoral politics – its topics, emotionality, practices, subjects and values (Rosanvallon, 2007: 250).

Inherent to the very notion of participatory politics are play and experimentation and the affective intensities that accompany them. Traditional political structures are fixed and constraining, often times intended to chill and demotivate. Play and experimentation involve establishing and superseding of rules and limits. Truly overcoming the incompatibility of traditional and participatory politics requires that the latter fill the

gaps and address the problems that the former is incapable of. Play and experimentation in participatory politics are means by which the varying range of possibilities for engagement are revealed and (re)articulated. They are also crucial to art and together work to uncover the spaces and issues that resonate but are not given adequate voice. The above account shows how people can come into contact with the political in ways that do not fit neatly into the structure of democratic institutions that often view participatory artistic practices as too frivolous to be seriously political.

Second, these examples support the argument that too much has been taken for granted in discussion of what neoliberalism is, and too little attention has been paid to examining the actual projects and techniques involved (Collier, 2012; Lerner, 2014). Contrary to the assertion of Jodi Dean and others, the examples explored here are not fantasies of political action within a totalizing regime of neoliberalism. They are real and legitimate attempts to develop a political voice within the context of neoliberalism. Dismissing participatory politics as futile in the face of global capitalism fails to acknowledge the powerful ways in which people develop tools, skills, social practices and norms that are shot through with affective intensities and that offer counter-rationalities to neoliberalism. Indeed, these examples show how artistic practice within elections is not necessarily an individual, self-interested and apolitical act. Rather, it is a collective expression of interpersonal acts that demonstrate new modes of political discourse and new political formations.

Conclusion

Our discussion is situated within ongoing discussion around the inclusive or exclusive nature of the public sphere, mostly notably kicked off by Nancy Fraser's critique of the Habermasian public sphere. Like Fraser, we question whether formal democratic institutions offer a broad enough conception of democracy and politics. Indeed, the examples explored in this article suggest that the socialability and creativity of the private sphere have the potential to open up new political habits and new political rituals that cannot be understood through the prioritizing of rational deliberative discourse (Fenton, 2016: 95). Looking closely at initiatives of participatory politics encourages us to ask new questions about the relationship between neoliberalism and political engagement. How does the flexible and chameleon-like nature of neoliberalism lend itself to wider and more diverse forms of electoral participation?

How does the artistic participatory engagement encouraged by neoliberalism allow citizens to provide alternative structures of political engagement? Looking ahead, we believe more experimental research on, and inspired by, artistic practices is needed to identify the subject positions and affective experiences of everyday life that have the potential to nudge people from the political to politics, and in the process, help to facilitate small acts that transform people into new agents of the democratic polis.

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