

**The Radical Mundane and Mundane Radicals:
Cultural Self-Organization and London Social Centres**

Peter Conlin

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By: Peter Conlin

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Chair

Dr. Jack Bratich External Examiner

Dr. Dr. A. Kruzynski External to Program

Dr. Dr. Johanne Sloan Examiner

Dr. Eric Shragge Examiner

Dr. Charles Acland Thesis Supervisor

Approved by

Chair of Department or Graduate Program Director

Dean of Faculty

ABSTRACT

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Peter Conlin, Ph.D.

Concordia University, 2011

This thesis develops an appraisal of self-organization, which refers to projects directed and managed by the users and participants, and related concepts of participation and collectivity, in sites that attempt to combine culture and oppositional politics. In engaging this subject matter various tensions are drawn out between activism and art, and a study of social centres—a kind of community centre for radical activists—is conducted within the British context in the first decade of the 21st century.

I explore how social centres develop certain practices that are akin to artist-run projects and participatory art practices, yet these are deployed within activist contexts. Rather than in an institutional setting or professional field, social centres attempt to create experimental social spaces out of various kinds of gaps—involving abandoned buildings, free time outside of employment and education, legal grey areas, as well as an emergent space between more coherent fields—and within these precarious spaces cultivate activist communities based on alternative ways of living and acting. The crux of the research lies in an examination of the potentials and limitations of these collectively organized, multi-function spaces.

These practices are examined primarily within the social context of neoliberalism understood as an application of entrepreneurial logic to all areas of society, encouraging self-reliance and an incorporation of self-realization within economic production. Self-organization is therefore implicated in neoliberalism, and yet can also be a place to resist these tendencies and re-imagine social life.

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1. Introduction

This thesis examines small-scale projects and organizations that combine cultural work with political engagement, and operate through participatory forms and modes of self-organization. I begin with an analysis of artist-run spaces and then focus on a type of organization referred to as a social centre. The research concerns activities and debates occurring primarily in the UK in the first decade of the 21st century, and involves a case-study of rampART social centre that was in operation from 2004-2009. Principally I am examining self-organized projects that combine activism with cultural activities in the context of neoliberalism, which through policies and a more general psychological landscape espouses entrepreneurial values. In this introduction I briefly describe what a social centre is, establish a framework to consider some of the relations between art and social change, and give an initial definition of self-organization. I will also specify notions of radicality and anti-capitalism, as they are central to my case study, and consider the discourses, research frameworks and methodologies I will be using in this thesis.

This project began as an inquiry into changes in artist-run initiatives. I have been active in various artist-run projects, primarily galleries and media centres, in Canada for around 15 years. Initially I was drawn to these organizations because they appeared open to an active participation from members and, at least on the surface were places to develop experiments and risky projects that questioned some of the main conventions of visual art (e.g. the art market and the “genius myth” of artistic production); as well, the

rhetoric surrounding most of these artist-run organizations was couched in a politically progressive language oriented to socially engaged art practices. However during this time I also came to see a very non-committal practice of collective organization and a pronounced disinterest in establishing clear alternatives to the dominant terms of the art field. I assumed this had something to do with what I perceived to be an increasing professionalization in art. In addition to this, many of the artists and intermediaries who were involved in these art scenes made claims of their work being “socially engaged” in one way or another, but would always and rather obsessively refuse explicit political positions; and it was common to find references to Marxist concepts, but rarely anti-capitalist positions. I wondered about this mutually agreed upon but rarely spoken of refusal. There also seemed to be an increasingly close alignment between the objectives of artist-run centres and funding bodies, with very little autonomous spirit.

In my experience as an artist, and in arts organizations, I have often noted that artists often pride themselves on being non-dogmatic and avoiding instrumental and didactic tendencies, almost to the point of being dogmatically non-dogmatic. So I began to wonder if this insistence on maintaining separation had the effect of keeping artists from direct participation in political movements. Here I am thinking of environmental campaigns, forms of anti-globalization activism, neighbourhood-based struggles over public resources and anti-gentrification battles, and more recently, anti-cuts protests and occupations. Beyond the political content of an artwork or text, what happens when artists join-up with groups and organizational efforts not just as citizens, but working with their ideas, subversive humour, skills and insights in the context of various political

fights? Much of this has to do with connecting with other groups and organizations in broader mobilizations outside of the specialized art field.

I decided not to spend several years of research detailing what I saw as a lack of vitality in these organizations and practices. Instead, I set out to find different kinds of activities beyond artist-run initiatives that were explicitly political, oppositional and exhibited a more committed approach to close group-work and collective organization. The intention of this research was then to explore collectivity and political opposition, in emergent zones in which the aesthetic and political mix, and from which alternative social relations to neoliberal capitalism might develop. I based this exploration on a scene, centred around loose organizations called social centres, that are at once dedicated to political activism and building a “culture of resistance” comprised of, among others, musicians, artists, researchers, alternative media producers, film-makers, as well as dedicated activists.

From this orientation, the main focus of the research was to look at rearticulations of art in an emergent space of social creativity, and related to this, the search for a particular kind of political agency in the context of a Direct Action radical left. I wanted to see what we might learn from an anti-capitalism comprised of exploring participatory forms and affective bonds. My interest and participation in social centres is also part of my fascination with an openness, and also a direness, in activities outside of formal education or paid employment, and having tenuous connections with professional fields and legitimated areas of practice.

I located this concern for agency, especially collective agency, in forms of self-organization, primarily practiced by those from non-dominant class positions who develop their own projects independent of existing organizations and institutions as a way of side-stepping hierarchies. More precisely, the ambivalences of this project are quite specific to people from “aspirational working class” backgrounds—those who in a sense find themselves within a class trajectory of “climbing,” yet through both exclusions and defiant rejections of this quest, can be considered as “bad neoliberal subjects” seeking alternatives.

My overall method of research, to begin with, employed a multifaceted approach, with theorizations and historical research on different assessments of self-organization grounded in Cultural and Media Studies (comprising combinations of social sciences and humanities research, particularity research that has been influenced by Pierre Bourdieu), sociology (social movement studies and theories of social class), art history (histories of artist-run initiatives, theories and histories of the avant-garde and the discourse and criticism around contemporary art), and a Foucaultian assessment of neoliberalism. I deployed Bourdieu’s cultural theory as a way to structure and integrate what might otherwise be a more diverse set of insights. This carried with it a set of challenges such as managing the complexities of fieldwork, and finding ways to combine it into theoretical research.

The method I fashioned for this research drew upon my experience as an artist and a social centre participant, and was tied to my biographical trajectory as already

mentioned above. This dimension of the research was formalized to a certain extent through ethnographic approaches to fieldwork and qualitative research tools of semi-structured interviews and the compilation of field notes. I elaborate further on this aspect of my research at the end of this chapter.

I developed this multi-sided method in order to produce a broad-spectrum analysis, including subjective and objective insights, different disciplinary approaches, theoretical explorations and data gathered from fieldwork. I believe that the flexibility and diversity of this method enabled a vivid way into the contexts which underscores the objectives of the research, and allowed an insightful way to assess self-organization.

What is a social centre?

Social centres are a relatively new kind of entity in the UK that began in the early 2000s emerging out of various traditions and other forms of organizations. By the late 2000s (the main period of my study), there were between three to eight centres operating in London at any given point. In general they are a mix of community centre (primarily for activists, musicians and radical academics), music venue, as well as a space for presentations, exhibitions and screenings. Social centres in London are primarily located in squatted buildings, which is to say, spaces neither rented nor owned. The claim on the space is through occupation and use, and this both opens up opportunities that would otherwise not be possible given London's prohibitive rents and yet also places social

centres in a precarious legal¹ and social space, which generally limits the life-span of a social centre due to inevitable evictions. Squatting allows groups to setup organizations without the need for funding, and is part of a politics of reclaiming urban space by taking disused, sometime derelict buildings that are often left abandoned due to fluctuations in the real-estate market and patterns of speculation. These gaps in the urban fabric are then transformed into lively spaces for socializing and cultural activities that comprise the basis of an activist community.

Social centres serve as hubs for a political scene that exists beyond the terms of the mainstream left in which cultural events and socializing play an important role. On a pragmatic level they function as resource centres, with meeting rooms, workshop spaces and usually art studio areas and basic media facilities. Most social centres in London have a large assembly space, usually with a stage, a projection screen and a sound system. In addition to this, social centres usually have fully equipped kitchens and many act as informal hostels. These spaces and facilities enable social centres to serve as focal points through which various kinds of movements cohere. In continental Europe, especially in Italy, Spain and Germany, they are more numerous with some cities having 10-20 different social centres; and outside of Europe they are relatively uncommon. Social centres in London are sometimes referred to, depending on their specific make-up, as autonomous spaces, Infoshops or art squats.

¹In England (Wales and Scotland have different arrangements) the legal terminology for squatting is “adverse possession” which acknowledges the legal occupation of properties under certain conditions. Colloquially this is known as “squatters’ rights.” Squatting and trespassing are not handled under the criminal code and are considered civil disputes.

I'll now describe some moments in social centres to give a sense of these environments and activities which are at the core of my research. Entering into social centres, especially for the first time, is rather thrilling. There is usually a sense of a threshold, whether this is like climbing into a tree house, crawling into a bunker or walking into a palace. They can be in shockingly dismal industrial spaces or in awesome Georgian mansions, complete with hand painted wall paper, chandeliers and 16 foot ceilings; but irrespective of the kind of building, they are almost always dilapidated to some degree. That most social centres are squatted inflects the whole experience. They occupy an indeterminate position in urban space in the way they are ephemeral, unpredictable, quasi legal, neither owned nor rented, and offer a mix of practical resources and spaces for adventure.

Perhaps the social centre experience culminates most of all in the beginning moments, and given the short life-span of social centres, these moments are rather frequent. The inception of Bowl Court social centre, an off-shoot of rampART social centre, began after weeks of walks and explorations. A building was selected in Shoreditch, a neighbourhood known for its night life, a few blocks away from The City of London (the banking district). Preparations were made and we entered the building on a Saturday evening. Initially someone climbed in an open window and then let the others in. Unsure exactly where it was, I got to the general area a little late and headed down a tiny lane, left onto another one, past the back of shops and restaurants adjacent to a construction site, and found a Victorian warehouse that seemed to be the place. I knocked on a non-descript door of a three story boarded-up building. About 12 people were

already inside cleaning, exploring, assessing and scheming, as well as turning on the water and arranging a provisional kitchen. Someone had discovered the remnants of a recording studio in the basement. Our collective attention was split between addressing practical matters (how to fix the roof, figuring out where to build stairs) and wondering what kind of projects we could develop. The atmosphere was exciting and stressful—squatting in London is not a criminal act, but breaking and entering is and the first few hours are the most dangerous. Over the next few days we took down and put up walls, built stairs and set up a café area, multi-purpose rooms and a dance-floor. Underlying all of these activities and practicalities, was the development of affective bonds between the participants and a development of group cohesion.

Within three weeks the building was transformed from a derelict shell into a vibrant social space. The social centre was busy: communal cooking during work sessions, café nights and long and surprisingly enjoyable meetings where we planned events, arranged screenings and contacted musicians, as well as strategized on how to deal with the inevitable contact with the owner, which in this case turned out to be the Hammerson Corporation, a multinational property corporation that builds shopping malls and high-rises. The social centre was adjacent to a massive construction site, and would most likely be torn down. From a real-estate point of view, the building was just a temporary place-holder until more lucrative circumstances arose. The place afforded impressive views of the new towers of the City of London, which from our perspective appeared as the catastrophe of the banking sector and urban “regeneration” unravelling before our eyes.

The first public event was called the “Space Is the Place: Side Stepping the Property Ladder,” and was part of a series of events taking place in various London autonomous spaces over a weekend in June 2008. An area on the ground floor was wall-papered with tabloid headline posters taken from displays in front of corner shops. In this context they functioned as a “found text” composition, depicting a media presence in London largely driven by an infatuation with scandal, dread and reflecting the escalating financial crisis of 2008². A group of street artists produced a large series of works on the walls around the construction site opposite Bowl Court, on the outside of the building and on the inside walls of the social centre. Immediately across the lane was a large blue wooden fence typical of those surrounding construction sites, with diagonal slats covering the entire surface of the fence to discourage fly-posting. These diagonal laths were incorporated into an abstract pattern of dots and flowing lines. On the social centre building and on another fence, working on a theme more or less responding to London’s heavily surveyed urban space, photographic images of people were glued on and combined with spray painted images and patterns. The street art produced a cityscape that reflected and distorted the one all around us.

We set up a Squatters Estate Agency, “connecting people to empty places,” that parodied real-estate agencies which at that point were ubiquitous in London, still within the property boom prior to the colossal financial crisis that occurred a few months later.

²Examples of the newspaper headline posters: Bank Crisis Starts Panic, Royal Gay Sex Blackmail Plot, Blood Bath in City: 1,000 Jobs Axed, Official: Housing Crash on Way, Bank Chief Warns of Recession, Queen Hit by Credit Crunch, Mayor: Heathrow Shames London, Army on Petrol Strike Standby, Bank Heading for the Rocks.

Our agency display was comprised of photographs of abandoned buildings primarily in the East End and the borough of Hackney, with descriptions listing the benefits and attractive features of the properties. The term “property ladder” is in common usage in the UK, both in news media and everyday speech. It reflects a social norm that equates adulthood with not only debt and the acquisition of property, but is also tied into the flow of supposedly ever-escalating investment values. The invitation read: “During the weekend you'll have the opportunity to meet up with others in need of housing and go out as a group to put the empties of London back into good use. Before the end of the weekend you could have yourself and your friends a new home.”

The weekend also featured screenings of films on housing and squatting, such a newly made experimental documentary *Utopia London* (2008) on the development of post-war public housing, and a BBC documentary *Property is Theft* on squatting in London in the 1970s. No social centre week-ender would be complete without an all night party, which in this case was organized by an experienced group called Music and Lights who often staged events at rampART. Two floors, comprised of several different rooms, were used for the party and were arranged with projections, netting and different kinds of lights. The music was primarily Drum and Bass and Dubstep DJs, with different music on the ground floor and the first floor. At that point Dubstep was a relatively new genre of music in London's continual over-turning of successive styles. It has no lyrics and is comprised of low, slow and disturbing ultra low bass that drives the music rather than beats or melody. Dubstep is a distant and contorted evolution of dub reggae that developed in the late 2000s, and in its initial phases was mostly produced by black-

British DJs from south London. I couldn't help but think of the music as being part of the urban fabric of London and ultimately, as with so many different forms of music, a way to cope with a grinding yet chaotic daily life and to momentarily emerge from it. During the party the social centre became very crowded, and the "carnage" spilled out into the laneways. Parties, cafes and dinners comprise a large part of the activities in social centres. They are often tied into other events, such as free schools, book fairs and protests (such as the series of protest against the G20 summit in London in the spring of 2009 following the credit crisis). The parties usually raise funds for various campaigns or activist groups, and also function as meeting places and cathartic outlets for those involved in the hectic and stressful life of Direct Action activism. Larger parties have "rave-like" environments, and are often organized by people with experience organizing large scale raves.

Although the scope of events can be impressive, social centres can seem like they are barely organizations—just slightly beyond the form of a purposeful group, in almost a degree zero of organizational formation—and as a result they are highly mutable and unstable, prone to the upheavals tied to changes in political and cultural contexts, and the constant turn-over and burn-out cycles of the participants.

Social centres have different emphases, with some oriented to function as a community resource with a library, bike workshop and meeting spaces, while others are dedicated art spaces (also known as art squats) such as MADA and the occupations organized by Random Artists and Temporary Autonomous Art. Most of them have strong

contacts with activist communities, although mainly drawing on forms of activism that merge with various cultural and music scenes. Almost all of social centres in London have a bohemian feel with a self-proclaimed orientation to “radical politics,” which in the period of my study was mostly based on “green anarchism” (anti-authoritarian, environmentalists) and a form of anti-capitalism.

Social Centres, as this thesis analyzes, function as spaces for collective energies which are largely comprised of a population that is excluded or refuses positions in dominant institutions—whether in terms of full-time employment, positions in university and art institutions, or involvement in formal political processes (within various levels of government or mainstream NGOs). There is often the sense that social centres are places for “deviant psyches,” to use Franco Berardi’s term (2009). This includes a section of the participants with psychological disorders and some with (primarily petty) criminal records. Although most of the participants would more accurately be described as “bad neoliberal” subjects in the sense of not fitting into the imperatives and behavioural norms typical of quotidian life in a neoliberal society, such as the patterns of consumption and ownership. London social centres, at their best, are psycho-social environments conducive to the collective production of transformative ideas, protest actions and practical survival.

Exits from art and the social turn

How can we characterize the relationship between the above activities to art organizations? Have we clearly left the field of art, or, given the interdisciplinary nature

of contemporary art, especially as it pertains to socially engaged and participatory art practices, are these kinds of scenes still within the purview of art? Similarly, from the perspective of a campaign-based notion of social change, social centres can often appear as highly ambiguous spaces that might appear to have little to do with political organization as it is conventionally understood. I assert that social centres lie in an emergent area of practice, in certain ways acting as an “over-flow” from the field of art.

One way to approach the relation of art to social centre activity is through ideas of bohemia and counter cultures, or through Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello’s related concept of the artistic critique, as defined in *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (2005). The artistic critique is “rooted in the invention of a bohemian lifestyle,” and critiques bourgeois society based on an indignation of capitalism’s “disenchantment and inauthenticity” and “foregrounds the loss of meaning, and in particular, the loss of the sense of what is beautiful and valuable” (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005, 38). It stresses the tendency of capitalism to dominate human beings, subjecting them to the profit motive, while “hypocritically invoking morality” (Ibid., 40). Against these forces, the artistic critique presents “the freedom of artists...their refusal of any form of subjection in time and space and, in its extreme forms, their refusal of work” (Ibid., 45).

To explore the relationship of artistic practice to social centres further, I always found it curious that the name rampART—and this all caps spelling of the last three letters is maintained in most of its publicity materials, website texts and email posts—has the word art in it, but it was never really an art space *per se*, in the sense of primarily

organizing exhibitions for an art audience. Related to this, over half of the participants at rampART had fine art training and experience in art organizations, and yet made no direct attempt to develop the space as a dedicated art gallery. What is going on in this residual overlap? On an auto-biographical level, like many other participants, I had shifted from art making and organizational work in the art field, to a more diffuse practice that fits closer with certain activist communities, and in the process of doing this, discovered an entire scene that seemed to be caught in a process of rearticulating interests and energies. This thesis largely tracks this shift and rearticulation.

Obvious ways to connect artist-run spaces to social centres would be to directly focus on “art squats,” or to investigate art exhibitions which are sometimes organized in social centres and the images and aesthetic objects which abound in these spaces (street art murals, the posters, paintings, impromptu installations and slogans that inter-play with the architectural spaces of these intriguing spaces). However, my own way into these spaces, and that of many of the people involved in them—which is also the tack I will be taking in the thesis—is to consider them as experimental social spaces and places to explore participatory forms connected to an ethical or social aesthetics.

By transferring certain aspects of artistic practice into an emergent, activist field I don’t want to suggest that we lose all criteria from which to assess these activities, and enter into a free space social creativity beyond categorization or criticism. Instead, we can evaluate social centres in terms of a transference of the aesthetic into the fashioning of participatory modes of acting and ways of being together. In this light, such an “ethical

aesthetic” (Maffesoli 1996, x) collects what is otherwise a supplementary effect of arts education, namely, the acquisition of a shared “situative” perception of reality (Ibid., 141), where activities and experience formerly, and often exclusively associated with art are reinscribed into inter-subjective ways of seeing and the generation of affective spaces. Of particular interest for me here is that this rearticulation of aesthetic experience allows for intriguing forms of political agency.

The connection and division between art and politics is massively complicated, especially as a radical refusal of the political, such as those connected to *l’art pour l’art* or Abstract Expressionism, often have political intentions—such as the refusal of limiting concepts to the existing limits of political discourse or positing the uselessness of art as a provacational gesture. And so even though there is considerable overlap and interest between art and politics, the combination of the two is nevertheless at once overwrought and underdeveloped. The aesthetic in the context of London’s social centres, as I will explore in this thesis, is close to Grant Kester’s view of the aesthetic as being “linked to the social and political through its function as a mediating discourse between subject and object, between the somatic and the rational, and between the individual and the social” (Kester 1998, 8). Within this definition, the aesthetic can be further defined as “an ideal political and ontological form” (Ibid., 8), which has moral power, by which Kester means “its drive to envision a more just and equitable society” (Ibid., 9). More generally the aesthetic has the unique ability to identify and describe the operations of political, social, cultural and economic power, “while at the same time allowing it to think beyond the horizons established by these forms of power” (Ibid., 10). From this point of view activist

art is not a deviation or hybrid from the real experience and aims of the aesthetic; on the contrary it arguably has a stronger claim on the aesthetic than Greenbergian formalism which is premised on social disengagement or Michael Fried's view of art as a "mute presence" where anything outside of the discipline of art was considered as a "alien substance,"³ and should not enter into the art system out of fear of degradation and mutation.

By foregrounding my own trajectory and movement in relation to the art field, I realize I could be accused of "merely" profiling an auto-biographical condition—of moving from the art field to a less defined area of practice that involves activism with socio-aesthetic dimensions. However, from my case study and field experience, I found that this tendency is endemic to a large section of people with art backgrounds and visual art training. In fact it is often pointed out that only a tiny minority of those who pass through art colleges actually continue to make art in the professional field. This research looks at one possible area where they end up. Researcher Stephen Wright has made the very question of leaving the art field the focus of his work. Consider the following quote, which I include at length because I feel it provides a very good entry point to consider social centres in relation to art activities.

The task of the day is to "revive art's transformative potential within the broadest possible frame," to use Alexander Alberro's expression. By all means; I certainly endorse the thrust of that remark. But what, exactly, is to be understood by "the broadest possible frame"? What lies beyond the frame, even in its broadest possible extension? Is there any art out there, any potentially transformative art, beyond the broadest possible frame? The frame, I assume, is the performative frame, which enables those symbolic activities and configurations known as art to appear as such. For without that frame, of course, those

³As Messer, the director of the Guggenheim museum, described Haacke's 1971 exhibition *Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, A Real Time Social System* (Kester 1998, 13).

activities and configurations might well be visible—their coefficient of visibility might indeed be very high—but not as art per se, at least not according to current conventions... Yet that frame, like any frame, is also a limitation... a limitation, above all, to art's transformative potential. When we say, unaware that the frame is in place, we didn't "even" know something was art, the adverb is very telling: in order for something to be perceived as art, it must be framed as such, but more importantly, the more distinctly framed the more incisive it is. This is a highly dubious claim, however, for we can just as easily say, once we are aware of the frame's invisible but powerful presence, that it is "just" art. There too, the adverb is revealing: just art, not the potentially more transformatory, corrosive, even censorship-deserving real thing. In short, then, while the frame is an almost magically powerful device, it is also a debilitating one. And this is the reason, I think, that an increasing number of art-related practitioners today are seeking not to broaden the frame still further—thereby pursuing art's already extraordinary colonization of the life-world—*but to get outside of the frame altogether* [my emphasis]. Every year, more and more artists are quitting the artworld frame—or looking for and experimenting with viable exit strategies—rather than broadening it further. And these are some of the most exciting developments in art today, for to leave the frame means sacrificing one's coefficient of artistic visibility—but potentially in exchange for great corrosiveness toward the dominant semiotic order (Wright 2007).

Following from this, social centres can be seen as performing aesthetic acts without the desire to be framed as such. So it is art without a frame, and in a similar way, creative activity without the art field. "Field" here is derived from Pierre Bourdieu's application of a relational mode of thought to cultural production: an element is defined through its relationship to other elements, which also determines its meaning and function (Bourdieu 1993, 6). The artistic field can be defined as the "manifestations of the social agents involved in the production of literary or artistic works, of course, but also political acts or pronouncements, manifestos or polemics, etc." (Bourdieu 1993, 30). Fields for Bourdieu are historically constructed and contingent, but also involve fundamental laws, which he terms *nomos*: principles of "vision and division" that separates one field from another (Bourdieu 1997, 96). The *nomos* permits the division between art and non-art, and between legitimate and non-legitimate artists (Bourdieu 1996, 230). So in social centre scenes we see people pursuing activities that can be seen to bear certain relations to

contemporary art practices, artist-run organizations and avant-gardist manoeuvres, yet without adhering, or even trying to adhere to the *nomos* that founds the art field.

Within Bourdieu's conception, fields are sites of power struggles, which Bourdieu terms "struggles for position": individual authors seeking recognition, and particular forms and genres seeking validation; at stake are reputations, sales, funding and jobs. The essential force that drives the field is the relation between position and disposition, that is, the struggle for position with a field that is generally shaped by cultural capital, more particularly, the cultural capital that is inherited and internalized in one's behaviour (manner of speaking, sense of humour, sense of amazement, etc.). In Bourdieuan parlance this is the *habitus*, which is the embodiment of one's social class. The relation of *habitus* to field, disposition to position, is underscored by class dynamics and divisions of power. Therefore, in addressing whether social centres can be seen as art, or why would people leave the field, it is essential to bear in mind the dynamics of social class.

Cataloguing parental levels of education and income of 12 participants at rampART indicated that 9 had what could be classified as working class backgrounds, which according to Bourdieu's formulations, lack cultural and economic capital and places them in marginal or disadvantageous positions within the art field predominantly comprised of higher class positions; not to mention, having the wrong class background in the field means that agents will be without a "feel for the game" within the field, especially as the finer moves are contingent upon having a disposition that affords an intuitive sense of the *nomos* which unconsciously coordinates the action. Surely the fact that one's class background doesn't match the suitable disposition for the field must have something to

do with shifts away from art as such, and are indicative of a possible intensification of the class exclusivity of the art field. As success in the art field is closely tied not only to obtaining graduate degrees, and specifically prestigious degrees from a dozen or so “name schools” (see Thornton 2008), it appears as though there is an increasing class homogeneity in the art field. It is beyond the scope of this research to outline this in detail, but this tendency leads my attention to the areas *around* the field of art, and this is why the question of social class is fundamental for understanding social centres.

The relation between social centres and art is also connected to the compound relationship of art to politics. In general this thesis looks at the relation between activism and art, or at least coherent political movements and the aesthetic, but even when narrowed in this way, the relations are still very complex, and practically it seems very hard to bridge. I have found that combinations between activists and artists are not that common, and generally one finds either activist groups dismissive of artists and who often see art as simply another tool, or artists collectives, generally in either closed groups functioning more or less as an individual artist or fledgling “start-up” galleries, often with the goal of becoming institutionalized and either decidedly apolitical or with a politics that is so implicit as to seem indiscernible.

The word social is crucial in considering these issues. In the late 1960s and 1970s cultural studies, as well as in certain ways post-structuralist theory, sought to examine the cultural as not reducible to the social, either in the terms of structural Marxism or functionalist social sciences, but in fact to view phenomena in light of a complex set of

relations and determinations between the cultural and the social. In art at this time there was an opposite or complementary move where the role of the social in the aesthetic was seized upon. This was exemplified by the movements of Conceptual Art, Fluxus and Feminist art during this time, and by exhibitions such as *Art into Society: Society into Art* (1974) at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London or *Art for Whom?* (1978) at the Serpentine Gallery, also in London, which sought to foreground the interdependence of art and society and to dispense with the notion of art as a separate, disengaged realm. The direct inclusion of the social into the aesthetic was at this time a radical move and seemed to open a range of possibilities.

Joseph Beuys' concept of social sculpture is one of the better known examples of this social-political turn in art, particularly his office of information for the "organization of direct democracy through referendum" at the Documenta 5 exhibition in 1972 (in Bishop 2006, 120). For 100 days of the exhibition Beuys was present, primarily discussing his ideas and plans for social transformation with members of public. "The real future of political intentions must be artistic. This means they must originate from human creativity" (Ibid., 124). Beuys actively pursued this through radical education projects, comprised in the founding of a network of free schools. For Beuys at this time the point wasn't to produce art academies, the goal was nothing less than social revolution through aesthetic engagement.

I want an area of freedom that will be known as the place where revolution originates, changed by sweeping through the basic democratic structure and then restructuring the economy in such a way that it would serve the needs of man and not merely the needs of a minority for their own profit. And that I understand as art (Ibid., 124).

The grandiosity and certainty of these claims has subsequently been critiqued and rather deservedly mocked. Nevertheless, aspects of this tradition continue, including the assertion that art's role is to enact radical social transformation. Much of this current work is associated with the term Relational Aesthetics, which is a term coined by French curator Nicolas Bourriaud in the mid 1990s. Relational Aesthetics is “a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space” (Bourriaud 2002, 113). The idiom “post-relational practices” is sometimes used to denote participatory art connected to this tradition, yet beyond the specific terms Bourriaud used in the mid 1990s when he initially theorized the concept.

Self-organization and participation

An orientation to the social and political in relation to the aesthetic is connected to the concepts of participation and self-organization. Self-organization, to begin with, is a fundamental concept for this research and requires some explanation. It is related to ideas of self-governance and self-management, connected to notions of autonomy (which literally means self-given laws) and the activist practice of Direct Action. Evidently, the term is comprised of a notion of a “self,” a kind of discrete entity separate from a non-self or other. In the context of informal, grassroots activities this “self” is primarily opposed to the figure of large institutional structures or systems, controlled by authorities in “top-down” and hierarchical relations. The concept of organization is opposed to disorganization—activity lacking coherence and self-governing capacities—on the one hand, and management in the sense of bottom-line allocation of resources on the other.

The more general concept of self-organization has its roots in computer science and systems theory, biology, as well as in sociology. In these fields self-organization usually refers to an entity that sets its own pattern independently of centralized coordination or external stimulus. A notable theorization of self-organization is by the German sociologist Niklas Luhmann (1995), who connects it with the related term *auto-poesis* (literally self-creation) as a way to account for differentiation in society and the ways that autonomous fields are capable of responding to an environment without recourse to an overall social system.

The term has a lineage on the political right, such as in Friedrich Hayek's term *catallaxy* that describes a "self-organizing system of voluntary co-operation" (Hayek 1973, 109) in regards to the functioning of capitalism, and on the left, such as Karl Marx's reference to workers' self-organization and worker-led self-inquiry in *Capital*, or in debates over whether Vladimir Lenin's *What is to be Done* is for self-organization, such as in the central role workers councils (soviets) played in creating revolutionary change, or against, in the sense of self-organization as being merely a spontaneous coalescence that requires leadership by vanguardist revolutionaries. Michael Albert's text *What is to be Undone* (1974) criticises this aspect of Leninism and its influence on leftist thought. Instead Albert looked to the development of self-organized models rather than party structures as the prime mode of anti-capitalist activity.

Self-organization has a rather common usage in London's social centre scene. For example, a phrase "the book fair is self-organized" means that the event has been

initiated and directed by the users and participants themselves, rather than a larger/institutionalized force (corporate publishers or a government department). In the parlance of the scene around social centres, it is also related to a “DIY” (do-it-yourself) attitude and also the practice of Direct Action. Direct Action is often used as short-hand for a kind of activism, associated with anarchism, characterized by civil disobedience (such as blocking roads or occupying buildings), pranks (super-gluing oneself to Gordon Brown) and interventions that have an immediate effect (such as shutting down a G8 summit); however, more than this, it refers to an overall strategy that rejects the pursuit of social transformation through appealing to sanctioned authorities, and instead seeks to make changes without such mediation (see Graeber 2009). An example of this broader notion of Direct Action would be the London art squat named DA Gallery, and the subsequent MADA project. DA here refers to Direct Action, and so the idea is to apply a Direct Action approach to the creation of an art gallery.

The specific term “self-organization” is not used that often in art discourse, and instead the term “artist-run” or “artist-led” is more common. I will examine artist-run practices explicitly in chapter three where I look at the history of alternative art spaces beginning in late 1960s and early 1970s stemming from a situation where kinds of art making were excluded from existing channels or otherwise lacked exhibition spaces. In response to this artists developed their own spaces (galleries, media centres, production facilities, publications).

Walter Benjamin's "Author as Producer," a public lecture written in 1936, serves as a foundational text in addressing self-organization in relation to the politics of cultural production and raises questions that continue to be relevant. The text is primarily focused on literary production, but its ideas are intended to apply to various cultural sectors. Benjamin is highly critical of the acceptance of existing production systems, and limiting artistic production within these terms, and thus merely "pass[ing] on an apparatus of production without transforming it" (Benjamin 1970, 88). Apparatus here means both an aesthetic form, such as the novel, and also the system of production and dissemination. He rejects the division between artists, who provide the creative content, and support and administrative positions that serve to produce this creativity. The essay focuses on ways to alter how culture is made and experienced, and this is considered within anti-capitalist struggles in a very particular way: Benjamin is highly critical of a radical left who, under the stipulations of the existing bourgeois production system, imitate working class authenticity or attempt to make political statements within the existing production system, rather than challenging the way that capitalist production systems, whether in industrial or fine art contexts, control culture.

To an author who has thought through the conditions of production today... his work would never merely be developing products, but always at the same time working with the means of production themselves. In other words, his productions must possess, in addition to and even before their characteristics as works, an organizing function (Ibid., 89).

Benjamin's intention here is to unseat sterile oppositions between criticism and production, form and content, and culture and politics. In the place of these he turns to material relations and the notion of technique, which at once embraces literary form,

publishing and distribution. He essentially looks at the dead ends of the politically engaged writer attempting to work with the form of the novel, and instead considers Soviet newspapers produced in the 1920s as an example of a more productive outcome of these tensions—where the divisions between writer and reader, and literature and journalism are crossed.

As mentioned, self-organization in social centres and in some artist-run projects has an anti-institutionalism that implies an opposition to dominant practices and concentrations of power, however, self-organization or self governance can now be seen, according to Eva Sørensen and Peter Triantafillou (2009), as part of a current social logic that includes such activities into key social institutions. In fact, in a Foucaultian turn, forms of self-governance are not only included but demanded by central authorities. In this view, which I identify as part of neoliberal patterns of governance outlined in the following chapter, governance is seen as no longer the exclusive domain of a centralised authority (usually the state), which organizes areas of activity on behalf of citizens, but rather the state exercises its power through the practice of self-governance on the part of individuals, groups and organizations of all manner. This is both a more radical intensification of classical liberal governing based on free subjects governing themselves, at the same time as disrupting public and private distinctions and more traditional divisions between the governing and the governed which classical liberalism depended upon. Sørensen and Triantafillou also connect the expansion of the capacities of self-governance with entrepreneurialism.

The role of governing authorities (be they private or public) seems to be less about producing disciplined and docile bodies and more about creating entrepreneurial individuals and collective actors that are constantly improving themselves in terms of health, wealth and social skills (Sørensen and Triantafyllou 2009, 3).

To be entrepreneurial for the authors is largely synonymous with being self-governed.

The implications of this are that “leftist” projects of emancipation and self-determination are combined with “rightist” ideals of a withdrawal of public services and self-reliance.

The authors are enthusiastic about this synthesis as providing a basis for a new kind of public governance. While aspects of Sørensen and Triantafyllou’s argument are, I believe, essential for understanding the contemporary context of self-organization, it would be a mistake to then conclude that all self-organization has been incorporated into dominant power and also to accept Sørensen and Triantafyllou’s terms of either an outmoded notion of the public safe-guarded by top down governance or a future of private-public fusions and entrepreneurial values instilled at every level of the social. Instead, it means that one cannot assume that because activity is self-organized it has an inherently progressive or subversive potential, and this directs us toward contestations over patterns of self-governance as a site of political importance rather than restricting the terrain of political struggle to more traditional institutions (such as parliament and the judiciary).

This ambivalence regarding practices that have been formerly identified with leftist politics becoming partially integrated into conservative political projects, or aspects of oppositional practices expanded into a more general social logic, runs right through this thesis. The rising importance of the discourse and practice of “participation” is a related example. To introduce participatory activities and values, it first has to be acknowledged that they are hardly exclusive to London social centres or socially engaged

artists. The concept of participation seems to have acquired a rather central role in contemporary society. Referring to the work of social ecologist Murray Bookchin, Peter Reason states that:

Participation is a political imperative: it affirms the fundamental human right of persons to contribute to decisions which affect them. Human persons are centres of consciousness within the cosmos, agents with emerging capacities for self-awareness and self-direction. Human persons are also communal beings, born deeply immersed in community and evolving within community... Participation is thus fundamental to human flourishing, and is political because, particularly in these times, it requires the exercise of intentional human agency, political action in public and private spheres, to encourage and nurture its development (Reason 1998, 148).

At the height of activities against neoliberal globalization (otherwise known as the anti-globalization movement), similar normative references to participation came to permeate the discourse of global movements, whereby saying “no to neoliberalism” as manifest in counter-summits went together with an underlying message: the need to invent forms of political engagement from below (Della Porta 2005). Thus one could see the development of “new democratic arenas” such as the World Social Forum. Participation is seen as the basis of social transformation in Michael Albert’s (founder of ZCom and the author of *Parecon – Life After Capitalism*) work on the “participatory economy” comprised of strategies and schemes of altering the capitalist economy through a decentralized process of participatory decision making and self-management in workplaces and organizations of all manner. For me the crux of participation is about forging new social relations as opposed to formulating political demands *per se* on the basis of existing identities or subject positions. These practices are about avoiding an endless deferral of the rather well worn phrase “another world is possible” to some point in the future—after successful lobbying of the appropriate authorities or after the

revolution—and instead seeing this other world as within the present and part and parcel of any organizing process.

Currently, references to participation as a normative principle reach far beyond grassroots social movements, to the point that we are now living in the “participatory society” (Keane 2003, 8). The term has entered the vocabulary of local institutions with practices of “participatory budgeting” (Baiocchi 2005, 32) and in national governments in processes of consultation, transparency and accountability; it has also become prevalent in civil society organisations which often claim the agency of such participation (Mayo 2005). References to the “need for participation” in processes of decision making are even visible on the websites of international financial institutions and corporations, in the context of corporate responsibility programs (Vandenberg 2000). Participatory relations are at the core of Wiki forms and Web 2.0. Tobias Van Veen reports that rave culture “abounds with participatory micro-economies of sharing, gift-giving and performance” (Van Veen 2010, 31). Even the British Conservative party seems to have taken the participatory turn, as seen in their election slogan “social responsibility not state control,” and in their current social policies, connected to austerity cuts, under the rubric of the “big society” which posits a devolution of state power into participatory social action. The “big society” is the *leitmotif* of the Cameron government and its values of citizen empowerment through participation in community services underscores the withdrawal of state funding (i.e. the state will no longer fund such and such a service, however the national government will provide certain resources to enable the community to organize its own programs), as well as the promotion of academy schools (similar to American

charter schools). The implementation of “top-down” participatory schemes should alert us to the risks involved in institutionalizing these practices and values.

Art has a long engagement with participatory forms, traditions of self-organization and collective production which have been pursued through questions of authorship, in artist-run projects of all manners and collaborative work. My assessment of the current situation in art, specifically in London, is that the place and nature of collectivity has changed, and collective organizing has diminished on the level of galleries, media centres and venues. In chapter three I lay out certain transitions within artist-run initiatives that have resulted in the current patterns where most artist-run organizations on the whole move quickly into formalized structures, run by a professionalized staff closely entwined into institutional relations. What is even more significant is that most artist-run galleries show very little interest in even making such claims of collectivity. However, they are indications that practices and discourse associated with collectivity in art have been rearticulated within the terms of participation, whether this is in individual art practices, the experiments developed by museums and various other institutions and by “artist collectives”—small groups of artists who produce under a collective title and deploy collaborative methods of working. Closely related to this are the practices associated with the term Relational Aesthetics, which foreground the social dimensions and inter-connectiveness of aesthetic experience. I would add that this re-inscription of collectivity in art almost always avoids political activism and questions of collective ownership and control of artworks, media and institutions. In all this vaunting of participation there is often the belief, both in art and

activism, that merely being participatory, however this understood, is synonymous with challenging the status quo and undermining established concentrations of power.

An orientation to participation can lead to contradictions between political opposition and the aim of bringing people together. The participatory practices seen in social centres and many art practices seek to counter individuation and alienated social relations through forging connections between people that are not just a means to an end, but, to use Giorgio Agamben's phrase, "a means without end." This can challenge power structures dependent upon forms of subjectivity synonymous with the individual. However, even though there can be this critical and oppositional aim of participatory practice, the point is often most of all to collaborate not oppose, and in fact it is not hard to see that if a strong emphasis is placed on building and foregrounding social connection, it can run counter to developing oppositional relations. There doesn't seem to be a way to deny that participatory forms stress inter-connections, mutual action and points of negotiation, and run contrary to the establishment of critical distance and a spirit of confrontation. Politically speaking, "collaboration" has a sinister ring. At the same time, how else does one oppose dominant power, especially for subordinate groups, without sharing, cooperation and drawing upon mutual strengths?

Janet Wolff's *The Social Production of Art* (1983) views all art as the result of collective activity, yet this reality is generally denied and invariably subsumed under an individual artist's name and associated with institutions and traditions based on the myth of individual creation. In this denial and devaluation of art's collective nature, false

scarcities are created in which only certain individuals are deemed capable and only few opportunities are available, and thereby squandering and contorting the power of collective production. Collective ways of working can be seen as a rearticulation of the Marxist concept of productive forces, and thus collectivity isn't anti-capitalist as much as it is the very thing that capitalism turns on and seeks to control. Therefore, collective ways of working onto themselves are hardly an alternative. It is only when they are combined with oppositional political movements that they become so.

This denial and/or exploitation of collectivity is also seen in counter-cultural activities. George McKay (1998) examined what he refers to as “DIY party protest” culture of the 1990s in the UK. This refers to a series of occupations to protect forests and neighbourhoods from highway expansion and industrial development which combined aspects of rave culture with political protest. “DIY” (Do-It-Yourself) refers to a culture of self-organization/cultural self-organization, connected to earlier punk movements, with an emphasis on rejecting the role of experts and passive audiences, and encouraging mass participation and the ability of people to learn and organize for themselves. McKay points to a certain narcissism and hedonism within DIY culture which was connected to the post-Thatcher period marked by opportunism and entrepreneurial initiative. This can be seen in the way 1990s rave culture rather seamlessly combined with the “new culture industries” (McRobbie 2002). McKay concludes that we should be mindful of the distinction between “doing it yourself” and “doing it ourselves” (McKay 1998, 27). In fact, he points out it was only when raves were under threat from the Criminal Justice Act that they became politicized and took on more of a collective focus.

This ambivalence, and the ideological proximity of collectivity to entrepreneurialism, hits upon a crucial issue tied to neoliberalism. Bourdieu defines neoliberalism as a program based on “the methodical destruction of collectives” (Bourdieu 1998), referring to actions such as those under the terms of the Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI), designed to protect foreign corporations and their investments which “call into question any and all collective structures that could serve as an obstacle to the logic of the pure market” (Ibid., 1998). Collectivism here refers to the ability to act in consort to control and direct resources and living conditions. However, it is important to see that certain forms of collectivism are obstacles to the market and yet others are not. In fact, under neoliberalism we can see examples of an expansion of capitalist production into collective practices, such as the way Open Source software production has been harnessed by corporations resulting in a kind of competitive collectivism. As I will examine in chapter two, competition becomes the organizing principle in neoliberalism society, yet many of these competitive structures are not the result of *laissez-faire* capitalism, but developed with the support and direction of the state.

This brings us to an overall dynamic I address in this thesis: the ethos of self-organization is an important mode through which neoliberalism proceeds, and yet because of its principal role, self-organization and related configurations of the self, become significant areas for resistance and alternatives. As Andre Gorz succinctly phrases it:

When self-exploitation acquires a central role in the process of valorization, the production of subjectivity becomes a terrain of the central conflict...Social relations that elude the grasp of value, competitive individualism and market exchange make the latter appear by contrast in their political dimension, as extensions of the power of capital. A front of total resistance to this power is made possible. It necessarily overflows the terrain of production of knowledge towards new practices of living, consuming and collective appropriation of common spaces and everyday culture (Gorz 2004, 23).

Gorz's argument here is close to post-Fordist theorists who stress that current social struggles transpire most of all on the level of subjectivity. This is the so-called "social factory" as Negri phrased it. The organization and orientation of subjectivity in many ways determines the scope of more overtly macro-political forces, and I will argue in chapter two that neoliberalism stresses that one must have a "developmental" relationship with oneself. In this social climate, according to Foucault, the self is a resource that must be maximized with the aim of improving ones "capital-ability" (Foucault 2008, 225). Nikolas Rose has described this form of subjectivity as the "entrepreneur of the self" (Rose 1989, 226).

The above quote by Gorz brings together various issues—competition, collectivity and the development of social relations—as potentially exploitative or resistant, and views the potential of alternative (non-competitive, against the interests of capital) social relations as tied to a class politics after the end of the traditional concept of the proletariat. Gorz's *Farewell to the Working Class* addresses a post-class condition where group collectivity, both in the relation to surplus value, as well as in group cohesion and identity exists, but not as it has been described in most Marxist theories; and thus Gorz looks to the potential of the "non-class." Thus participation, in the sense of "[s]ocial relations that elude the grasp of value, competitive individualism and market

exchange” (Ibid., 209), is a way into the nature of current (post) class realities. I explore this further in chapter six where I examine the intersection between contemporary class dynamics in social centres and ideas of collectivity.

The ambivalence around ideas and practices of participation are connected to what I see as the decline of oppositional relations. Although it can be difficult to pin down specific ways that contestation and conflict are eliminated in various fields, what seems even harder is to identify the ways in which oppositional relations “are still” maintained. My test case for such oppositionality, which also embraces kinds of participation, is the London social centre scene and radical social movements that are associated with it, comprised of anti-capitalists, radical environmentalists and various single issue campaigns and anti-gentrification struggles. These groups self-identify as “radical,” and I would like to elaborate on what is meant by these terms and positions.

Radicalism, anti-capitalism and research frameworks

“Radical” is a recurring word in London social centres and apparent in the names of organizations and events such as The Radical Theory Reading Group, in organizations such as Radical Islington, Housemans books: “radical booksellers since 1945,” the Radical Dairy (name of a recent social centre) and the Radical History Group (which organizes walking tours of the East End). Scanning a recent rampART newsletter, one finds notices for the “radical workers bloc” on an anti-cuts march, a talk by with Michael

Albert “Radical Ideas for Revolutionary Action,” and a Radical London Network⁵ discussion at Housemans (12 October 2010). Other terms like “loony left”, ultra-left or Richard Gott’s “hit and run left” are used describe these activities from a mainstream perspective, although there is an ambivalence in participants in the radical London scene identifying with “the left” owing to a libertarian or anarchist ethos that attempts to escape what it sees as a series of dead-ends of the traditional left and a perceived puritanism of British socialism.

“Radical” here generally refers to anarchists, libertarians and independent socialists (as opposed to party-based groups such as the Socialist Workers Party). Beyond the use of the term, radical positions evidenced in the social centre scene include a “no borders” position on immigration, against non-collective property rights, for the abolition of prisons, anti-statist attitudes, for an end to the automobile as a dominant force on urban space, and supportive of a queer politics that rejects emancipation through marriage and the power of the “pink pound.” At times these positions are asserted in a concrete way specific to certain contexts (the desire for a carbon free future involves the development of social centres with self-sustaining power generation). Other times the positions are developed as a provocation and a generative process, working with the presumed “impossible” status of these positions when seen through the lens of neoliberal common sense and the going terms of capitalist discourse. Radical here is a way to expand politics and struggles beyond the given terms and limits of what are seen as reasonable and

⁵“A network of independent local groups that support and participate in community-based campaigns and struggles, and spread radical, anti-capitalist, anti-authoritarian and pro-working class ideas and solidarity in their areas” (from the Radical London website).

“responsible.” An example is the activist group No Borders, which is heavily involved in London social centres. The group has the objective of eliminating all immigration control, and thus presents a drastic challenge to the existing notions of what is considered to be realistic, as well as forming a practical support network for undocumented people and organizing Direct Action protest actions against the expansion of migrant detention centres.

Radicalism in social centres is also an organizational matter, comprised of a rejection of state funding and commercial sales. In addition to this, there is a commitment to consensus decision making connected to the values of direct democracy as opposed to majoritarianism, and related to anti-authoritarianism and the rejection of fixed leadership positions. Much of this radicalism culminates in various forms of anti-institutionalism, as defined by Roberto Unger: “anyone who accepts the established institutional framework as the horizon within which interests and ideals must be pursued is not a progressive” (1998, 123).

In order to work through the question of radicalism further, as it is crucial for the research, I will identify the main discourses I am working with, and in so doing open up a reflexivity between the frameworks I am using to develop my analysis and the situations I am studying—that is, what is the relationship between the putative radicalism of the subject matter and the radicalism or non-radicalism from which I am examining it?

It could be asked—why use Bourdieu and cultural studies in a primarily sympathetic study of radical movements? Through this lens, will these practices only

ever appear irrelevant or elitist? Why not use manifestly “radical theory” to study radical practices? I’d like to move through these questions to clarify my approach to research, and also address some of the biases and tendencies within certain ideas of radicalism.

Geographer Paul Chatterton is one of the few academics who has concentrated on social centres and “cultures of resistance”⁶ in the UK (Hodkinson and Chatterton 2006, Chatterton 2010a, 2010b). Chatterton, along with Anita Lacey who has also examined UK social centres (2007) from an International Development perspective, assesses social centres as primarily based on activism. I believe this view isn’t entirely correct as I see them as more accurately about the production of alternative ways of living and acting within a kind aesthetic politics, which from certain points of view is intensely committed to activism, and from others is not activist enough. Discourse around notions of “cultures of resistance” has a closer fit, such as the research in the *Journal of Aesthetics and Protest*, the work of Stevphen Shukaitis, John Jordan, Kirsty Robertson, David Graeber and Steven Duncombe. This strain of research is usually based on Deleuzian concepts and often written from an overtly green anarchist perspective (radical environmental movements with anarchist politics) vaunting DIY culture. This discourse, as well as Chatterton’s, champions these activities and is highly exuberant. It does this in order to counter dismissals of activism, especially as radical activities and aesthetic politics can appear to be lacking the practical concerns of anti-cuts campaigns or anti-racism activism. Beyond this, the affirmative quality of this discourse comes from an attempt to build the movement. Shukaitis is probably the clearest example of a researcher using

⁶The term also appears in George MacKay (1998) and in Stephen Duncombe (2002).

radical theory to look at radical scenes. In chapter four I examine his work more closely. Shukaitis is searching for a new set of concepts through which to articulate, legitimate and expand radical culture and activist practices. There is much I admire in this discourse, however, the nature of my research is quite different.

Another component of radical theory that contributes to the literature of radical scenes in London (featured in reading groups and both formal and informal discussions, and informs certain terms and analysis which circulate within it), includes theorists coming out of Autonomist Marxist traditions, Slavoj Žižek's anti-liberalism and the "communization" and "insurrectionist" texts associated with the Invisible Committee, and the journal *Tiqqun*, along with the texts and discussions on the website Libcom.

My rejection of aspects of such self-described radical theory stems from its avoidance of empirical work and the way it often skips over institutional and mediation questions. This discourse tends to be based on philosophical pronouncements in a grand intellectual style, and is often closer to social prophecy than social theory. As well, my attitude toward research, in comparison, is much less celebrational and at times quite sceptical. However, this is not arising from a hyper-objective outsider applying a cool, hard lens of empirical social science, rather, from an insider perspective. I see how social centres are caught in a series of binds and contradictions that require critical reflection as a form of care.⁷ I would rather do this than compose sermons in the radical vulgate. Consequently, much of my research is focused on the frustration, doubts, as well as the

⁷This attitude is in part shaped by Clive Robertson's study of Canadian artist-run centres (Robertson 2006, iii).

excitement that comes out of being intensely involved in these groups. There is much to be learned from the mixed situation presented in social centres, and in fact, I believe they are entry points into fundamental issues of contemporary society, specifically the never-ending impasses of the left and the dominance of neoliberalism.

In terms of a general approach and tone in the study of radical scenes, I am closest to the media studies research of Chris Atton (1999a, 1999b, 2002) and the work he carried out on British Infoshops. I relate to the way he seems to have one foot in these scenes and organizations and one foot in academia. He works with a familiarity that comes out of having been a committed participant in these scenes, and yet asks hard questions and scrutinizes the direction they are moving in. I am also relatively close to the research of Pierpaolo Mudu, who is a member of SQEK (Squatting in Europe Kollektive, a continental European research group on social centres), in the way he mixes academic work with an involvement in the social centre movement. However I don't share the over-reliance on empirical social science research methods, and SQEK's project of using research to institutionalize social centres.

Beyond these questions of approach and attitude, I employed specific field research methods which I will elucidate at the end of this chapter. For now I would like to establish some important issues that arise in using some of the theoretical legacies associated with cultural studies to examine social centres and radicalism in London. This draws me into the particularly vexing question of what is meant by cultural studies. Its definitions have been highly contested and self-reflexively studied by cultural studies researchers. I am also aware of making contact with cultural studies long after its

emergent moments, and also past “the boom” (Grossberg et al. 1992, 1) of interest in the early 1990s. I make use of aspects of the cultural studies tradition because I am primarily focused on understanding cultural transformation and the meaning of contemporary cultural practices which Angela McRobbie (1992) has identified as the central question of cultural studies; and in particular, the way cultural studies places the question of agency and experience of the everyday as central. I am influenced by the way this research seeks out the political stakes of the quotidian, such as in a series of articles in the journal *Marxism Today* during the Thatcher period that sought to provide a way to “understand what is going on, and especially to provide ways of thinking, strategies for survival and resources for resistance” (Stuart Hall, 1990, 22).

This stress on the contemporaneity of cultural practice focuses on the confluence between top down and bottom up forces. This doesn’t necessarily divide cultural works and everyday experience as such, rather, points to the importance of cultural works on the way they enter into ordinary moments. In this regard, a particular strain within cultural studies that has influenced my research has been ethnographic methods of study, by way of discourse on subcultures and post-subcultures. In the face of an over-reliance on post-structural theory, I have found cultural studies approaches, in particular the more ethnographically oriented work of Sarah Thornton and Andrew Ross, as well as the work of Angela McRobbie, very important in presenting modes of study that combine an exploration of social and cultural practices that are part of, but not reducible to, questions of discourse and textual analysis. In this research there is sensitivity to activities which

occur in time and space, and have experiential dimensions aside from linguistic formalism on the one hand and the political economy on the other.

I take the cultural studies development of neo-Marxist analysis as the starting point for my own research, wherein culture doesn't function as a superstructure of the economic, but sits in a play of "over-determination" from and to the economic and the political, while still maintaining the coordinates of capital and labour. Outlining the rearticulations of social class has been an integral part of the entire cultural studies project, from the early research on subcultures, to Lash and Urry's (1987) examination of the impact of "disorganized" capitalism on class formation, and is evident in the receptions of Bourdieu's work, specifically research based on the figure of the cultural intermediary, such as in the work of David Hesmondhalgh. This research deploys various kinds of analysis to expose patterns of inequality and to understand the ways that forms of domination are established and legitimated.

Overall, cultural studies research has provided me with a model for interdisciplinary research. More specifically, it is a way to combine "historical, critical, interpretative and empirical" (Carey 1997, 3) discourses and methods of study, forming both a wedge and common space between disciplines; at the same time as functioning with a critical inventory and political ethos to coordinate and push this inter- or non-disciplinarity. On a basic level it encourages a mix of social science and humanities analysis, without the containment of positivism and the behavioural sciences.

Although American Lawrence Grossberg (2010) has observed, optimistically, that there is no concentrated bibliographical basis of cultural studies, no single story of cultural studies and instead a kind of shared lack of consensus on possible canonical texts, nevertheless there is a critical foundation of cultural studies, especially the work influenced by the British-based Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies as purveyed by Grossberg himself, based on Gramscian conjunctural analysis. I do not proceed directly through the language of conjunctures nor work to identify the formations of hegemonies as such. However, an assessment of the ways in which the economic, cultural and political combine is essential, and in my work I explore these joinings through a Foucaultian inflected analysis of the context of neoliberalism.

It will be evident that Bourdieu has been a very influential theorist for my research practice, and as I have already pointed out, this is closely tied into cultural studies research. In fact I am informed more by this kind of synthesis of Bourdieu into a whole host of other concerns, such as in McRobbie's *British Fashion Design* (1998), than basing research solely on a more or less direct application of Bourdieu's formulas, such as Tony Bennett et al's (2009) attempt to restage the main frameworks of Bourdieu's *Distinction* in the context of contemporary Britain, Simon Stewart's (2008) study of the taste cultures of elderly small town theatre goers or Michael Grenfell's (2003) analysis of Young British Art (YBA) based on Bourdieu's definition of avant-gardism. Instead, I have a very different relation to Bourdieu's theory which might appear unconventional. My interest was to apply Bourdieu's theory of practice, which addresses the interaction between *habitus*, shaped by differing forms and levels of capital, to an arena of practice

usually referred to as a field. Bourdieu's theory provides a strong set of tools to study these complex interactions and serves as a cogent way of unifying an analysis. However where I differ for more orthodox applications of this theory is to apply it to a much less defined zone of practice. While the social centre scene in London was not necessarily void of field dynamics, it was nevertheless clearly without the stability and institutionality of almost all of the fields Bourdieu has considered in his major studies.

My engagement with Bourdieuan theory is based around a challenging double movement. I find that deploying Bourdieuan concepts to emancipatory movements is troubling, in the right way, because they reveal that supposed liberated zones are still tied to class-based *habitus*, and even without a determined field dynamic are still animated by struggles for positions and recognition. At the same time I attempt to trouble some of the classic Bourdieuan formulations, reconsider the figure of the new cultural intermediary, and see whether they might, when applied to emergent spaces, expose some libratory directions not usually explored in Bourdieuan scholarship. Nick Crossley's *Making Sense of Social Movements* (2002) is a related example of extracting a Bourdieuan framework beyond its typical coordinates in order to overcome obstacles in specific social movement research, yet struggling against what Crossley sees as the conservative function of the concept of *habitus*.

As this research addresses affective politics and engages in a critical reflection on leftist projects, Grossberg's *We Gotta Get Out of this Place* (1992) is an important reference point. The book is incredibly prescient in various ways, chief among these is how it addresses an affective turn in political organizing during the 1980s, where affect is

understood as the concentration of energies which are then mobilized through the activation of hopes and fears connected to everyday situations. My research shares many of the concerns of the book and also differs from it in several crucial ways. A consideration of this difference provides a good clarification of the direction I am taking in this research. Grossberg begins from a firm anti-right-wing position in the early 1990s, and yet is highly ambivalent about capitalism. In the context of a post-Reagan ascent of neo-conservatism and a left fragmented and disoriented by identity politics, Grossberg more or less seeks to learn from the right about affective politics through an analysis of a “mundane conservatism” (Ibid., 28) that played a key role in right wing political movements of the time. From this, Grossberg looks to the importance of reclaiming conventional sites of power and authority. The book advances a kind of studied modesty in its political ambitions and on balance is oriented to a change from within ethos, evidenced in the project of “rearticulate[ing] capitalism without... giving up the critique” (Ibid., 390).

While cognisant of the differences in national contexts (American and British) and that *We Gotta Get Out of this Place* is not exactly Grossberg’s last word on these matters (i.e. *Caught in the Crossfire’s* (2005) analysis of social imagination and various other texts theorizing affect are highly pertinent to these issues), the orientation of my thesis can nevertheless be seen in relief to the above set of concerns. I am considering forms of anti-capitalism in the aftermath of a Third Way politics developed by centre-left governments that has rendered notions of left and right increasingly empty and indistinguishable. I am purposely considering positions that attempt to reject the terms of

capitalism as comprising the bounds through which political struggles can occur, and I see it as important in this current conjuncture to consider bold anti-capitalist stances and non-capitalist futures. Considering Grossberg's 1992 book, one cannot help but think that many of his prescriptions for the left, such as an embrace of policy mechanisms, were realized in the subsequent decades by Clinton-era Democrats and even more so in the New Labour project; however in ways which might appear as perverse versions of what Grossberg called for, resulting in the intensification of privatization and managerialism. I am responding to an intensive period in which the British left attempted to, as Grossberg advocated, "operate within the system of governance" (Ibid., 391) through backing the Labour Party and in the flowering of NGOs, QUANGOs⁸, think-tanks, task forces and supposed centres for progressive policy (notably DEMOS which drew in many cultural studies researchers). I am instead motivated to see what we can learn from the radical left and to consider a politics not focused on claiming authority in institutional sites of power, but rather based on an affective politics tied to participation and the forging of social bonds, which we can consider as a radical mundane.

In terms of an inclusion of radicalism, specifically forms of anti-capitalism, into cultural studies research, Jeremy Gilbert's *Culture and Anti-capitalism: Radical Theory and Popular Politics* (2008) is especially relevant and can help to further specify my objectives. In this book Gilbert can appear to be presenting a particular narrative of British cultural studies: "cultural studies began life as a self-consciously radical discipline

⁸ Quasi-Autonomous Non-Governmental Organizations which are publicly funded but not directly controlled by the state.

which was influenced by its proximity to, and its dynamic relationship with, the politics of the British labour movement” (Gilbert 2008, 10). This project expanded into the New Left movement that emerged from the labour movement in the 1960s, combining Marxism beyond the terms of political economy with anti-war activism, and women’s and anti-racist movements. Yet by the 1980s the New Left movements dispersed or dissolved and with it, cultural studies lost its direct connection with a powerful political movement. In Gilbert’s words it was “the end of that political project which gave coherent political identity to the mainstream of cultural studies for forty years: the New Left” (Ibid., 69). From here cultural studies became politically disoriented, went in various directions, and ended up usually in an accommodationist mode and isolated in the context of academic research. In the aftermath of this, there seemed to be only the dire choice between “a pragmatic accommodation to liberal capitalism or complete political irrelevance” (Ibid., 70). In response to this disengagement from the movement politics of the new left, Gilbert considers aspects of what he calls the anti-capitalist movement and whether this might restore a radical political footing to cultural studies research. This is more or less the history Gilbert presents, however, with a very particular emphasis—Gilbert perceives an inability of the anti-capitalist movement to scrutinize itself, and sees it as incapable of strategizing ways of building into a popular movement. In fact it is the failure of the anti-capitalist movement to develop cultural theory which has blocked its development in becoming a powerful movement, and thus the book presents the possibilities of cultural studies playing that role, and in so doing, enabling the movement to move beyond activist enclaves and enter into a powerful cultural-social movement.

Gilbert hedges this with phrases like “set up a dialogue between the anti-capitalist movement and cultural studies” (Ibid., 13), but he is in fact going as far as presenting cultural studies as nothing less than a potential consolidation of the anti-capitalist movement.

Anti-capitalism for Gilbert is essentially the alter-globalization movement⁹ (with an emphasis on Social Forums which emerged from anti-summit protests, along with Reclaim the Streets actions), and he ties cultural studies together with this anti-capitalist movement because “they both have their intellectual and spiritual roots in the racial movements of the 20th century, they both tend to be informed by egalitarian, pluralist and libertarian critiques of contemporary societies” (Ibid., 10). These values could be seen as widely accepted, mainstream, and don’t warrant the moniker of radical, however, Gilbert points out that currently even moderate reformist initiatives, such as the Make Poverty History campaign, are not implemented; and thus we have reached a state where even reformist agendas can only be implemented through fundamental transformations of economic and social institutions.

Although many of Gilbert’s assertions about activism and radical subcultures reveal little actual experience in these milieus, nevertheless, the book correctly addresses the issue of vanguardism within anti-capitalist movements, and this picks up on a problematic that runs through my research on cultural self-organizations and social centres: the tendency of an inwardness, often referred to, both inside and outside of these

⁹ The term alter-globalization is used by many UK activists instead of anti-globalization to indicate that the movement is not against globalization in all its forms. The term comes from the French *altermondialisme*.

scenes, as the activist or anarchist “ghetto.” There is a significant contradiction between the ideal of creating a radically democratic and participatory space and vanguardism. Social centres in London are all about bringing together committed people and developing a movement based on direct involvement which rejects what are seen as passive forms of engagement such as shopping, voting and mediated kinds of sympathy. But this poses a problem: how to make a broad movement when so few people are able, let alone willing, to commit to this level of participation. Gilbert asserts that without resolving this contradiction, anti-capitalism retreats back “into an isolated trench, the political ghetto of hardcore anti-capitalist anarchism” (Ibid., 130); and he sees cultural studies as a way to connect the hard core with a sympathetic yet distant population at large in its ability to bring together explicit political action with the implicit politics of cultural experience. Yet this runs contrary to the participatory ethos of the radical scene that seeks to forego such mediation.

Gilbert’s *Culture and Anti-capitalism: Radical Theory and Popular Politics* was published in 2008, and at that time the alter-globalization movement was waning, with the high point of the movement occurring around the turn the millennium. In 2008-2009 when capitalism faced a crisis strong enough to make those in power fear an imminent breakdown of the entire economic system, the once powerful anti-capitalist movement barely stirred causing some commentators to ask “whatever happened to the counter-globalization movement?” (Kees and Dowling 2010, 67). This demonstrates a problem with Gilbert’s approach of making the alter-globalization movement synonymous with anti-capitalism.

Anti-capitalism draws upon various traditions and is hard to define, and in fact, we should be careful of answering too quickly and resorting to previous instances of the left or giving existing Marxist thought the last word on anti-capitalism with the danger of foreclosing possibilities. Chatterton provides a provisional definition with respect to social centres:

[anti-capitalism] describes a broad variety of movements with roots as old as capitalism itself which reject outright or disrupt the normal workings of “capital” and “capitalism” and seek to replace it with another system. But there is no singly defined anti-capitalist movement or set of ideas, and there is certainly a broad set of contemporary writings in this area. What we also see around the edges are groups ranging from NGOs, lobby groups, trade unions, liberal reformers, and protectionists, who oppose neoliberalism and globalization and hence are usually against a particular aspects of “capitalism” rather than an outright rejection. Definitions of anti-capitalism that have most currency in social centres relate to strands of anti-capitalism whose birthplace was on the streets of Seattle in 1999, which privileges direct democracy, non hierarchy, the use of an experimental, playful approach to activism, a transnational outlook and a rejection of bureaucracy, ideological dogma (Chatterton, 2010b, 8).

Social centres, as Chatterton mentions, have been aligned with the alter-globalization movement and have been active in large scale, dramatic mobilizations around G8/G20 summits, and in this sense accords with Gilbert’s view of anti-capitalism. However, the anti-capitalism of social centres does not primarily lie in big moments of rupture and high profile demonstrations, but rather in the ordinary everyday practices where people foster experience outside capitalist social relations. Chatterton has stressed that this kind of anti-capitalism is both radical and mundane, as well as accessible and feasible in the sense that it isn’t about waiting for the revolution, the total reconstruction of society or following the intricacies of arcane theory. Although pejoratively linked to the term lifestyle, this is about the pursuit of an intensified way of life that attempts to avoid the problems of separating out proper activist activities from other practices of organization,

cultural experience and socializing. The anti-capitalism of social centres is an attempt at this kind of holism, and in operating through this mode, exposes itself to various trepidations associated with a so-called “lifestyle” approach to political action.

Understanding this combination of activism and mundane experience, as well as culture and politics, is the focus of this research.

Fieldwork Method

Given these issues and objectives, a review of how I performed the research is required, especially with respect to the way I conducted the fieldwork. The thesis is based on motivations and theoretical frameworks developed from my experience and training in Canada, and fieldwork conducted in the UK. While this shift in context exposed the research to a series of adjustments and compensations, it also created various juxtapositions that enabled a perspective that otherwise wouldn’t have been possible. It had the effect of “making the familiar strange,” and was conducive to a more ethnographic relation to the art milieu. As well, shifting emphasis from primarily the art field, something that I was very familiar with, to the social centre scene and activist culture which I was not, created another set of contrasts and plays of being an insider and an outsider. I subsequently immersed myself in the world of radical activist culture in London for three years and became well acquainted with it.

As much as I was a PhD student “looking for organizations to research,” I was also seeking personal involvement and looking for a way to situate my own practice (as organizer, teacher and artist) beyond the horizon of visual art. My intention was to

incorporate, to a certain extent, my subjective experience and autobiographical position in order to implicate myself in the research and to practice a kind of reflexivity of both studying and, in a sense, being a part of the object of study. I wasn't only drawing upon my own experience in artist-run projects, activist groups and social centres, but also on a sensibility and a set of techniques I developed through my art practice—incorporating subjective experiences, an attentiveness to physical environments and the visual language of objects, as well as using oneself as a “test subject” coming out of the spirit of certain performance art traditions.

My field work combined this desire and proclivity with research methods derived from the social sciences. There is a long history and intense debates within the fields of anthropology and other social sciences over the role of the researcher, the nature of objectivity and how to understand subjective viewpoints in ethnographic work. I am a stranger to the ethnographic world and an initiate into many of these debates. In many ways I jumped right into these, which is not entirely unheard of in ethnographic investigation. According to the musician turned social scientist Howard Becker, this kind of research almost always involves improvisation and innovation, within the practical art of ethnographic work.

I must admit that the methods I used in this thesis are a transitional step rather than a fully realized procedure. I have moved from primarily working as an artist, with critical writing as an added dimension, to solely producing academic research. At times I have felt that I went, in a sense, too far the other way in producing what I imagine to be

appropriate scholarly work. I would prefer to research in a much more fragmentary way, building up literary montages of found texts in an open-ended exploration of the material culture of the radical “creative” left; I suppose, that is, more of what the reader might expect from an artist. However, I attempted to strike a compromise between my curiosities and sensibilities and the demands of rigorous academic work. The result has perhaps an over reliance on sociological approaches, with sporadic areas of intensities where the analysis adopts other modes of knowledge production. At certain points this compromise might appear compromised, and in other points I believe the research is lucid and makes me wonder what else is possible within these methodical orientations.

Practically speaking my field work began when I “joined” rampART social centre, and entered into various groups in the social centre scene: reading groups and discussion events, The London Free School (radical popular education), activist campaigns (Save the Light, Private Equity Action Network), militant research work (the Carrot Workers Collective and the Micropolitics research group). As well I also attending art openings, demonstrations and *dérives*. All this to say, I became very active in the radical scene in London. I got to know people, situations and took field notes.

I complemented this immersion with a series of 19 semi-structured recorded interviews with various organisers and participants of social centres and artist-run projects. The interview process involved the development of a series of questions, generally organized within four or five different areas of inquiry, and within these comprised of two or three questions with possible follow-ups. My ideal was to combine

well-worked questions (sometimes developed from spontaneous questions from previous interviews). After several initial interviews, and rounds of writing and re-writing, the questions were largely internalized and I would work with a list of a few encapsulated terms that would act as cues. I was often interviewing peers and approached the interviews as such—creating a conversational tone, set-up around an exchange of information and experience, through a potentially shared set of concerns. The questions were based on getting people to describe situations, along with a series of problematics that I had identified (and had often “wrestled with” myself) which I would present to the interviewee for their assessment. This was often done with a view of developing commonality and to build a relationship, as much as it was for research purposes or curiosity. At times I would blindly contact an organization or group, following-up on an email contact on a website or on a flyer; other times I would speak with a friend of a friend and proceed through their introduction. In general people agreed to be interviewed because of one or a mix of the following: they are interested in the subject matter, it is their job or role to answer inquiries or they want to promote an organization, an event or themselves.

Sarah Thornton, author of *Club Cultures* (1996) and *Seven Days in the Art World* (2008), has been influential for this research in the way she merges aspects of cultural studies with ethnographic investigations of art institutions and “underground” scenes in London. Yet her work, as much as I identify with it, also serves as something of a foil to draw out certain tendencies and problems largely based around the way her research actively depoliticizes and isolates phenomena. Her explorations of various subcultures in

London provide a vivid example of how to engage and examine these sites. As well, I couldn't help but relate to Thornton's position of also being a Canadian, who became immersed in the British context, specifically underground London, and used this sense of cultural displacement, at times almost non-existent and other times severe, as a generative element for the research. Also, Andrew Ross' work has served as a strong model of how to combine many different forms of analysis—historical research, statistics, theory and the ethnographic—particularly in the research in *No Collar* (2003) that looked at the development of new forms of labour.

Clifford Geertz's concept of thick description (1973) is frequently cited as a core activity of ethnographic work and has had a considerable life outside of anthropology. It involves careful attention not just to the appearance of particular details, but how they are enfolded into a context, such as the interlocking of physical locations with subjects' state of mind. In many ways the significance of thick description is tied to an attempt to bring anthropology back from structuralist abstractions and the synchronic reduction of phenomena. This is no longer the dominant paradigm in research, but nevertheless thick description continues as an important attitude of observation and interpretation and has informed my field work.

One of the reasons I developed a strong ethnographic dimension is that it seemed more effective in analysing informal organizations and flexible structures, and in particular horizontal networks. As noted by Gavin Smith (1999), a more traditional sociological rigidity, with its survey techniques and mass enquiries, is seen as incapable

of responding to informal scenes, and could either miss these kinds of activity altogether or deem them as statistically insignificant.

Performing ethnographic work and producing research with an autobiographical dimension, in projects that I support beyond my role as a researcher, exposes the research to accusations of “over-rapport” (Atkinson and Hammersley in Stewart 2010, 90)—an over identification with an area of study which blinds the researcher to problematic areas and undermines critical scrutiny which can lead a tendency to celebrate subject matter. And yet in other ways, in maintaining certain kinds of distance and not fusing my research directly with the groups in my studies, I fall short of the practices of “co-research” found in activist research or the ideal of militant research as developed by the Argentinean group Colectivo Situaciones. There is an element of neither fish nor fowl in how I research. I definitely became an insider in social centres, and in certain ways became an outsider in artist-run scenes. I allowed a direct integration of my life and research, and yet I was not necessarily practicing political ethnography, participatory action research (PAR) or what is known as activist research; nevertheless I was certainly influenced by these methods.

An example of politically oriented ethnography is the practice of institutional ethnography as defined by sociologist Dorothy E. Smith.

The aim of institutional ethnography is said to be reorganiz(ing) the social relations of knowledge of the social so that people can make use of it as an extension of their ordinary knowledge of the lived actualities of their lives. Such an inquiry, extending people's ordinary experiential knowledge, has as an implicit—or sometimes explicit—orientation to activist projects of advocacy, intervention and social change (Smith 2005, 3).

What I share with this is the close attention to “the everyday” experienced in specific situations and to examine the “everyday as problematic” (Smith 1987, 161) from the view point of those in these settings. As well, Smith’s form of ethnography, informed by Marxist and feminist theory, is focused on how people interface with institutions (such as social services and daycare facilities), and how the fabric of everyday experience is interwoven into power relations. The intention is to practice “a sociology *for* people” (Smith 2005, 32), rather than *about* them. Thus the closeness of the ethnographic engagement is not primarily about representing people, as it is of practicing sociology with and for them.

What I don’t share is Smith’s assumption that there is a clear demarcation between myself as researcher and “them.” For better or worse, there is often a lack of distinction between myself and the subjects in my research. In Smith’s work there is a dynamic of intervening into situations and into a kind of assumed passivity of subjects who are unable or restrained from making certain assessments, which are then empowered by the researcher. I was “hanging out” (to use the postwar Chicago School social science lingo) with people who were similar to myself in terms of relative education level, age and shared experience in art and community involvement. The notion that I could bring participants in social centres to a higher level of awareness of the ways they are entwined in power struggles and ideological forces would be seen by them (and me) as highly patronizing. I did share the ideas from my research with social centre participants, and contributed to debates within the community informally and in

workshops, but never with the assumption that it would be a catalytic agent to empower them.

In many ways I was conducting research on peers, with relatively similar levels of education, social class backgrounds, familiar political orientations and life experience. The social centre scene is also comprised of people with a wide range of national backgrounds, and issues around residency and nationality were not decisive. This was not a “high risk” group. I didn’t have a role of “helping” these people understand themselves, or the goal of using my research to benefit their endeavours in a narrow, concrete sense. I organized various discussion events within social centres which drew upon the questions in my research as a more or less natural way of feeding back into the scene I was studying.

Similar to my relation to Smith’s institutional ethnography, though I am sympathetic to militant research¹⁰ and participatory action research (PAR)¹¹, I don’t claim to practice these methods. However what I do share with these traditions is a rejection of the conventional distinction between subject (researcher) and object (researched) characteristic of modern sociological research.

Chapter summaries

In chapter two I assess the context of neoliberalism in shaping policy and overall social

¹⁰Militant research, as developed by the Argentinean group Colectivo Situaciones over the past two decades, is a transversal (across disciplinary, institutional and individual/groups boundaries) method that combines social struggles with various lines of inquiry. Participants are considered “co-researchers”.

¹¹PAR was initially developed in the mid sixties (Whyte 1989) and linked social research with popular education and grassroots activism in the context of anti-imperialist and anti-colonial movements.

relations based on an entrepreneurial ethos wherein subjects relate to themselves as a material to be developed and maximized. In such a context competition is looked to as the formative organizational force in society. Thus processes of neoliberalization, rather than professionalization or institutionalization, alters forms of self-organization, and has a tendency for both artists and activists to be subsumed by entrepreneurialism in the way projects are developed and also in their relation and management of the self. I also consider neoliberalism, especially in the UK, as articulated within a Third Way logic of overcoming ideological antagonism.

Chapter three looks at the history of artist-run projects from the late 1960s to the late 2000s. This is thematized around the concept of alternatives, in which desires for alternatives to the power relations in the art field are mixed with the need for new kinds of cultural infrastructure—exhibition spaces, publications and production spaces. Under these conditions the role and mission for artist-run projects was highly contested. I chart how over time this contestation became relatively settled, and in the context of the UK, artist-run projects came to function as primarily alternative entry points into existing structures. This was affected by the rapidly growing market for contemporary art. I observe that experimental approaches and the inclusion of emerging artists and forms have in many ways been taken up by larger institutions creating less distinction between artist-run organizations and museums. As well, I assert that in the first decade of the 21st century aspects of self-organization dedicated to interdisciplinary experiments and collective ways of working can be located more in artists collectives and Relation Aesthetic practices, rather than in artist-run galleries. I conclude by critically assessing

the intention of Relational Art to pursue unalienated social exchange without directly addressing capitalism in a confrontational way. This highlights the relevance of more activist-based activities seen in social centres as a viable continuance of self-organization and the exploration of social bonds.

In chapter four I analyze the relations, and for the most part divisions, between art and activism. I consider Chantal Mouffe's term "artistic activism," George McKay's "culture of resistance," and Stevphen Shukaitis' idea of the social imaginary and aesthetic politics. These terms hold a certain amount of promise and they point to activities such as Reclaim the Streets occupations, and creative forms of political protest, which in the context of London, are embedded within social centres. I then establish the influences that lead to the development of social centres in London in the late 1990s and early 2000s. I end the chapter by examining the links between political militancy and the avant-garde, and consider ways that these connections have been occluded in the art field, primarily during the postwar period; and that a redevelopment of these connections from the 1970s onward produced a concept of "political art" bracketed off from both general art practice and activism. I then assert that the potential of more militant fusions of artistic activity and everyday practices lies in emergent zones of practice, such as in social centres, outside of the formal field of art.

Chapter five is a case study of rampART social centre which I examine in terms of its relation to urban space, the events and cultural activities and the kinds of people involved. I then look at the forms of participation which occur at rampART, which are

based on the experience of spending time together in particular milieus, the shared experience of under-going various stressful events and the process of collective decision making. All of this requires considerable levels of commitment and is very much based in a physical space. From this I observe that participation in the social centre is marked by motivational-expressive and experiential kinds of participatory experience, as opposed to participation defined by membership, recruitment and the efficacy of achieving goals.

Continuing with a study of rampART, chapter six addresses the role social class plays in social centres. I find that social centres in London are predominantly made up of people from “aspirational” working class or lower middle class backgrounds, and I explore the relationship between this class composition and self-organization through Bourdieu’s concept of the new cultural intermediary. Rejecting the rather dire situation Bourdieu outlines for the figure of the intermediary, I consider that more than just occupying a potentially compromised intermediary zone between the working class and the bourgeoisie, it is important to consider a class indeterminacy at play in this demographic. Instead of seeing this dislocation from traditional class groupings and trajectories as a loss of class agency or a decline of the relevance of class, I develop the case that there are emergent forms of class agency active in rampART, which are nevertheless caught in a series of contradictions, and that the commitment of social centre participants to forms of collectivity is an essential aspect of this incipient agency.

2. Neoliberalism and the Third Way

“...[T]his multiplication of the ‘enterprise’ form within the social body is what is at stake in neo-liberal policy. It is a matter of making the market, competition, and so enterprise, into what could be called the formative power of society” (Foucault 2008, 148).

“Economics are the method. The object is to change the soul” (Margaret Thatcher 1981).

To understand self-organized activities connected to activism and art in the first decade of the 21st century it is essential to analyse the discourse of neoliberalism and the policy climate of the Third Way. In this chapter I will examine neoliberalism as it is constituted in rationalities, policies and practices, and identify some implications of these for aesthetic practices and urban social movements. From this it will be apparent that the figure of the entrepreneur is central, and that forms of self-organization and self-governance have an ambiguous relationship to entrepreneurialism that requires further analysis. Related to this, I also want explore the decline of political antagonism under the influence of Third Way ideas and policies.

I want to be clear from the outset that my intention is not to set-up a binary of self-organization verses neoliberal institutions. In fact, the reading of neoliberalism I am basing this research on seizes upon the practices of self-organization, connected to an ethos of independence, initiative and enterprise, as one of its prime modes of operation. While not neglecting the relation between emergent movements and powerful institutions, my emphasis is on the dynamics and struggles *within* small informal groups, as well as rationalities in operation in all areas of society. In this way I largely abandon, or at least strongly rearticulate processes of professionalization, institutionalization and incorporation of informal practices into dominant institutional channels. Instead it is the

practices and discourse connected to “neoliberalization” which I will focus on.

By identifying neoliberalism as defining the socio-political context from the 1990s to present I feel it is necessary to address the objection that since the economic crisis of 2008 neoliberalism has ended. Why bother using neoliberalism as a main contextual framework if neoliberalism is in fact over or has been transferred into some new form of governance/ideology? Works such as Kean Birch and Vlad Mykhnenko’s *The Rise and Fall of Neoliberalism* (2010) argue that for first time in what seems like decades, there is widespread disillusionment and scepticism toward market dynamics as the answer to organizational development and social problems, and a wariness about building and sustaining public systems through the logic of financialization and investment, such as Private Finance Initiatives, the financialization of social security or the development of universities through capital funds. My short response is that neoliberalism isn’t over. Accepting David Harvey’s historical account (2005), neoliberalism begins and intensifies through crises that are deliberately triggered or at least amplified, and which then require drastic restructuring, such as what Milton Friedman referred to as the “Miracle of Chile” in Pinochet’s restructuring of the Chilean economy (under the advisement of economists trained by the University of Chicago), the New York debt crisis of the mid 1970s and I think we can also add the current UK “austerity programs” responding to the “crisis of public debt” which began with a dramatic reduction in corporate tax after the bank bailouts of 2008-2009. The Cameron government has declared, like other neoliberal leaders in the past, that even if the economy recovers over the next few years, public services will not be restored. Naomi

Klein's related idea of "disaster capitalism" (Klein 2007) reinforces the view of neoliberalism advancing through crisis, and thus the financial crisis and the Conservative austerity measures of 2010-2011 are indications of a continuance of neoliberalism.

Neoliberal policies are usually associated with the decline of the Keynesian welfare policies, the removal of market regulation, the financialization of housing and social security programs, the integration of public and private interests, and the recasting of a decentred yet attenuated state with economic policies influenced by Chicago School political economy theorists. These traits are seen as comprising the central aspects of neoliberalism by most of the notable researchers of the discourse such as Harvey, Nick Couldry, Wendy Larner, Jane Kelsey and Naomi Klein. Harvey has also defined neoliberalism as the restoration and consolidation of class power—redistributing wealth upwardly into the top few percentiles in a process he refers to as "accumulation by dispossession" wherein part of working and middle class individuals' income, and especially commonly held resources, are moved into the private hands of the very wealthy. Harvey contrasts this form of accumulation with the way that capitalist surplus in the postwar period was, to a large extent, diverted into the development of public infrastructure, such as health, education and transportation systems. "This was what upset the capitalist class and caused a counter movement toward the end of the 1960s—that they were not getting enough control over the surplus" (Harvey 2009). And in response to this, "neoliberalization was from the very beginning a project to achieve the restoration of class power" (Harvey 2005, 16), and "a political project to re-establish the conditions for capital accumulation and to restore the power of economic elites" (Ibid., 19). While I take

this upward redistribution thesis to be true, and agree that the dispossession and financialization of social infrastructure has profoundly restructured so many institutions and practices, my entry point is to address why people, tacitly or not, have consented to these changes. I want, to explore how Neoliberal social relations have such credibility as a basis to understand possible points of resistance.

Wendy Brown, in a Foucaultian-derived assessment, has pointed out that reducing neoliberalism to a set of policies and social consequences fails to address what organizes these policies: a political rationality (Brown 2006, 38). Without this research objective we will fail to see “what is neo in neoliberalism” (Ibid., 40), and instead read events as a radical extension of the classical liberal political economy. As well the term neoliberalism, as it is often used by leftist critics, addresses the restructuring of the “developing world,” however by looking at rationalities we can find a way into these dynamics within the so called developed world. Therefore I will be using a Foucaultian framing of neoliberalism, primarily from *The Birth of Biopolitics* (2008).

The book, which is based on lectures given in 1978-1979, comes later in Foucault’s career, and thus is after his initial research on knowledge, institutions and power, and around the time he developed a series of analyses on practices associated with “the care of the self.” *The Birth of Biopolitics* produces a genealogy of the modern state based on the concept of governmentality. The semantic linking of governing (‘gouverner’) and modes of thought (‘mentalité’) indicates that it is not possible to study the technologies of power without an analysis of the political rationality underpinning

them (Lemke 2001). Significant here is a conception that goes well beyond more conventional assessments of the state or the government.

Foucault places the overt emergence of neoliberalism (which he also refers to as Ordo-liberalism) within a discourse developed in the 1930s German economic journal *Ordo*, and later influenced by Friedrich von Hayek, as well as the Chicago school economic theories in the postwar period exemplified by the work of Milton Friedman. Contrary to classical liberalism which viewed competition and exchange as natural states, and sought a *laissez faire* relation between the state and the market to allow these processes to develop, neoliberal theorists, rather, considered market activity not as natural, but something which required organization and development. Thus neoliberalism is not anti-statist, but requires extensive state development in order to create the conditions for the market to develop. Economic rationality is the key to society, however, it must have the proper conditions to flourish, and this necessitates the development of governance practices. In this way “one must govern for the market, rather than because of the market” (Foucault 2008, 120). Neoliberalism is often seen as first and foremost an ideology based on the “belief that open, competitive, and unregulated markets, liberated from all forms of state interference, represent the optimal mechanism for economic development.” (Brenner and Theodore 2002) However Foucault is adamant that neoliberalism is not anti-statist. Economic rationality is the key to society, however, it must have the proper conditions to flourish, and this necessitates the development of governance practices with respect to both the self and the state.

Wendy Brown describes neoliberalism, in this sense, as a “constructivist project,” wherein neoliberalism is not founded on ontological claims of the *homo economicus* of Adam Smith, but rather on producing normative assertions of the necessity of economic dynamics, and thus it seeks the “development, dissemination, and institutionalization of such rationality” (Foucault 2008, 41). The role of the government is to intervene not on the market but on society, “in its fabric and depth” (Ibid., 145) to foster the development of market activity. In this way *neoliberalism is an institutionalization project, as much as it might also be seen as one of deregulation*. The health and growth of the economy is *the* basis of state legitimacy. Thus the purpose of all the state’s activities—welfare, education and health—is to enable economic activity. A key distinction between the liberal political economy and neoliberalism is that, for the latter, the economic extends and includes the personal lives of individuals. Classical formations saw a limit or a tension between individual morality and economic systems; neoliberalism takes the interdependency between these realms as its starting point.

In keeping with this dynamic, neoliberal economics puts an emphasis on an ethos of competition instead of exchange, and views the development of entrepreneurialism as the basis of society more so than the logic of the commodity *per se*. According to Foucault, a neoliberal society is “not the society of the spectacle, not a supermarket society, but an enterprise society” (Ibid., 251). Neoliberalism is ultimately about the basis of life in market activity, through a “social ethic of enterprise” where *homo economicus* is not the man of exchange or the consumer, but “the man of enterprise and production... making the market, competition, and so enterprise, into what could be called the

formative power of society” (Ibid. 148). Even though Foucault stresses production, it is a productivity rooted in a theory of labour which, rather than being tied to issues around time and effort in relation to productive output, is based on the way individuals manage themselves and their “capital-ability” (Ibid. 225).

The development of the individual is centred on the new invisible hand—not the market forces of supply and demand, but in the very essence of competition which becomes for neoliberalism the prime force of social life. Unlike in previous moments in capitalism when the state was viewed as something that had to be curtailed to allow the natural flow of the market, the neo-liberal state acts on the conditions of the social to create the possibility of competition and enterprise. Foucault’s genealogy of this interventionist tendency in Ordo-liberalism, surprisingly, identifies the influence of Husserl’s theory of constructed essences in the way that competition does not emerge “naturally” but rather as an essence that has to be constructed and formalised.

This emphasis on relating to oneself as material to be developed and invested fits within the shift from more fixed social practices to flexibility, usually seen within the transformation from Fordism to post-Fordism. French social-psychologist Alain Enrenberg summarize these changes:

Whatever the field considered, the world has changed rules. They are not any more about obedience, discipline and conformity with morals, but flexibility, change, speed of reaction, etc. Self-control, psychic and emotional flexibility and capacities of action make each individual endure the load, to adapt permanently to a world which loses precisely its permanence (Enrenberg 1999, 53).

If this assumption is correct and the neo-liberal strategy does indeed consist of replacing (or at least supplementing) rigid regulatory mechanisms by developing techniques of self-

regulation, then an analysis must start with the study of an individual's capacity for self-rule and how this is linked to forms of political rule. It is in this light that cultural self-organization, including those involved in social centres and fledgling art organization, are in the direct path of neoliberalism.

Facets of the neoliberal project were first clearly developed, in terms of state policy in the UK, during the Thatcher period under the heading of “enterprise culture,” as identified by Keat and Abercrombie (1991). To give a sense of the intense ideological nature of this project under the Conservative government, considering the following quote by Margaret Thatcher:

I used to have a nightmare for the first six years in office that, when I had got the finances right, when I had got the law right, the deregulation etc., that the British sense of enterprise and initiative would have been killed. I was really afraid that when I had got it all ready to spring back, it would no longer be there and it would not come back... But then it came. The face began to smile, the spirit began to lift, the pride returned (in Keat and Abercrombie 1991, 1).

Though the Thatcher government implemented a whole set of structural changes—privatization of public assets, the removal of regulation especially on financial services and the reorganization of publicly funded bodies (health, education and the arts)—it was ultimately focused on creating a dramatic cultural shift, where enterprise “takes on a paradigmatic status” (Ibid., 3). The intention was to encourage specific qualities, in all areas of social life, such as independence, boldness, initiative, self-reliance, risk taking and a sense of personal responsibility. Often economic and institutional reform combined powerfully into the ideological objectives of “enterprise culture,” such as the “right to buy” program which encouraged and assisted tenants of public housing to buy their flats. The program was a considerable success, within its own terms of reducing overall

numbers in public housing, and in promoting the connection between civic entitlement and ownership, as well as fostering an investment commodity relation to housing and in so doing altering urban space (Deakin and Edwards 1993).

This focus on entrepreneurial values continued under Tony Blair's leadership of the Labour Party. An important early moment of this came in the rewriting of Clause IV of the Labour Party constitution in 1995. The phrase "the common ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange," was replaced with "in our common endeavour we achieve more than we achieve alone, so as to create for each of us the means to realize our true potential" (Andrew and Heffernan 2003, 5). In this we move from the redistribution of wealth and resources, expressed in blunt socialist principles, to an almost new-age inflected pledge of the individual's quest for meaning in the party's new project of the redistribution of opportunity through the terms of achievement, creation and realization of potential. The rewriting of Clause IV is a well known moment in British politics of the 1990s and can be seen as the formal beginning of the New Labour project, however what is a less mentioned but perhaps equally significant "reform," also from 1995, is the change in the way the main policy objectives of the Labour Party were established. At this time the process was shifted from a general vote at a party congress (cast by delegates of general Labour Party members), to policy aims determined solely by the executive members of the party (the leader and the cabinet). In this way the recasting of social democratic principles into personal development and achievement coincides with an enhancement of top down executive control.

Sociologist Nikolas Rose has applied a Foucaultian analysis of neoliberalism to contemporary British society and developed the figure of the “entrepreneur of the self” (Rose 1989, 226). Within this envisioning, neoliberal governmentality deploys techniques for leading and shaping individuals without at the same time directly controlling or being responsible for them. From here a kind of ambivalence becomes apparent. Neoliberalism, so described by Rose, entails a considerable measure of social control while the conventional apparatus of the state recedes, and therefore, it can be seen to open up possibilities, premised as it is on individuals carrying out governance in their own micropolitics, in a new regime of the self that is neither intrinsically progressive or regressive, neither left nor right.

The power effects certainly do not answer to a simple logic of domination, and nor are they amenable to a “zero sum” conception of power...From a variety of directions, the disadvantaged individual has come to be seen as potentially and ideally an active agent in the fabrication of their own existence (Rose 1996a, 59-60).

In this way Rose stresses that this regime of governmentality is not specific to a particular political ideology, nevertheless he observes that rightwing political projects have been most effective in directing this regime of governance and the self according to the terms of neoliberalism. For Rose it remains to be seen if there can be a viable leftist version of self-governance.

Angela McRobbie is more unequivocal on the effects of this kind of entrepreneurialism. Consider her description of how the term is applied to the field of cultural production:

Because as cultural producers in a “talent led economy” they must differentiate themselves from others, and one very obvious way of doing this is by embodying their own talent or portfolio of skills, they are their own human cultural capital. Where speed

is of the essence this means “branding the self” so that a client can access in a flash the kind or quality of work which is associated with the person. The freelance creative person must flag up talent in an unashamedly competitive and individualistic manner. Self-reliance is total and the state steps back as the “entrepreneur of the self” takes over as the new archetype in the arts and cultural field (McRobbie 2002, 517).

Such a description of a “culturepreneur” should make it clear that this handling of the term “entrepreneur” is more ideological than a reference to the actual activities of entrepreneurs and the existing commercial usages of the term.

It is necessary to take a further step in order to explore the areas where neoliberal values and policies implicate the participants of self-organized projects, specifically in the way that enterprise is about more than just marketization and the development of one’s skills, but rather the enlisting of aspirations and bids for self-realization. The research of Franco Berardi (2009), an autonomist Marxist philosopher, is especially helpful in this regard. Berardi, in the context of theorizing the concept of alienation, identifies two main definitions of enterprise. One is the humanistic definition from the Renaissance that defines enterprise as the ability to shape the world independent from fate or divine will. The other principle definition of enterprise is from classical Marxist theory which views enterprise as the ability to use surplus capital to generate more capital. This occurs primarily through manipulating labour to valorize capital while simultaneously devaluing workers. Berardi asserts that this gave rise, in industrial society, to the familiar opposition between enterprise and labour. However, the labour conditions specific to post-Fordism—marked by digital communicative organization, the use of non-hierarchical organization and a reliance of psychological investment in work—creates a situation where enterprise now means something vastly more complex

than during industrial capitalism. Under current conditions post-Fordist workers have come to consider their labour (competencies, creativity and their innovative and communicative energies) as a form of enterprise and to place this special form of labour “as the most interesting part of his or her life” (Ibid., 80). This post-Fordist combination of enterprise and labour, with its emphasis on creativity, draws upon aspects of the Renaissance notion of enterprise as a human transformation of the world, which is then enfolded and “subdued” (Ibid., 84) into a contemporary version of capitalist enterprise. Berardi’s thesis is that through the personal involvement and self-direction required by post-Fordist forms of work, the opposition between capital and labour is muted, and transferred into subjective and psychological registers.

This point is important and establishes a condition that is examined in subsequent chapters on the political potential of self-organization. Berardi observes that in the 1960s and 70s there was an attempt to resist the alienation of Fordist labour through disrupting the hierarchical control of work. According to Berardi, people rejected the role of the worker and looked to personal satisfaction and self-realization as a form of resistance. Berardi himself, and his fellow post-Operismo activists during the 1970s were caught in this belief. The development of the pirate radio station Radio Alice, which played an important role in Italian student protests, frequently used the slogan: “The practice of happiness is subversive when it becomes collective” (Cote 2003, 14). For Berardi this epitomizes a kind of resistance connected to a “personal is political” attitude as articulated by feminist and gay right activists who stressed that what mattered wasn’t only political power as it related to government and business, but “what was at stake was

first of all the quality of life, pleasure and pain, self-realization and respect for diversity: desire as the engine of collective action” (Berardi 2009, 93). However due to transformations in labour processes, the hierarchical structure of the factory model changed dramatically, and in so doing, “[t]he aspiration to self-realization became fundamental in the reconstruction of a functioning social model perfectly fitting with digital modalities” (Ibid., 94). That is, self-realization and the pursuit of personal fulfilment became enlisted in enterprise and the development of one’s self as human capital.

The workers’ disaffection for industrial labour, based on a critique of hierarchy and repetition, took energies away from capital... All desires were located outside capital, attracting forces that were distancing themselves from its domination. The exact opposite happened in the new information-productive reality of the new economy: desire called new energies towards the enterprise and self-realization through work. No desire, no vitality seems to exist anymore outside the economic enterprise, outside productive labour and business. Capital was able to renew its psychic, ideological and economic energy, specifically thanks to the absorption of creativity, desire and individualistic, libertarian drives for self-realization (Ibid., 96).

Locating self-realization within the productive order has several drastic consequences, primarily among these is that the development of one’s self occurs within a competitive dynamic which has the psychological effects of anxiety and depression. Berardi notes that the phenomena associated with depression, in previous times outside of competitive and productive contexts, was not onto itself considered as pathological. Yet in a post-Fordist context, depression is not a “moral pain” or “sad passion” (Ibid., 100), but rather the outcome of blocked action in situations where individual initiative becomes the measure of a person. “There is no competition without failure and defeat, but the social norm cannot acknowledge the norm of failure without questioning its own ideological fundaments, and even its own economic efficiency” (Ibid., 100). In

contemporary society alienation moves from metaphor to a specific diagnosis, and is “replaced by words capable of measuring the effects of exploitation on cognitive activity: panic, anxiety, depression” (Ibid., 134).

So the question is: what is the political response to the new alienation of self-enterprise? This is the very question of those involved in self-organized projects at this point in history, and the usual responses seem to be either to work within the terms of social-cultural entrepreneurs, or reject these either through the figure of the autonomist artist or the counter-culture bohemian. For Berardi the response lies rather in a radical reorientation of our desires in a practice that mixes political resistance with activities associated with therapy and aesthetics into a practice of “militant existence” (Ibid., 135), and this aptly describes what I believe is the ideal underlining the participatory practices of social centres. “Political action needs to be conceived first of all as a shift in the social investments of desire” (Ibid., 139). The political forces that have produced pathologies in the social imagination—panic, depression, attention disorders—have to be met with new kinds of desire independent from competition, acquisition, possession and accumulation. This points to certain resistant practices which I will examine in chapter four when I consider the ethos and background of social centres.

Although Berardi’s ideas are compelling, they often lack empirical investigations and an understanding of policy contexts which create the environment for the kinds of transformations he describes. As well, I assert that it is not only forms of social desire that have been undermined, but also vital forms of political antagonism appear to have

been euphemized, and thus I would like to return to the task of establishing the broader context of neoliberalism through an interrogation of the concepts and policies of the Third Way.

The Third Way, as I will establish, is a kind of ideology that presents itself as the end of ideology. This can be identified in policies and an overall ethos which is closely aligned with neoliberalism as I have just discussed it, with an effect of depoliticizing struggles through an elimination of political antagonisms. The concept of the Third Way has been developed most notably by the sociologist Anthony Giddens in *Beyond Left and Right* (1994), and in the policies of the Labour party under the leadership of Tony Blair for whom Giddens served as an advisor. The usual gloss of the Third Way is to occupy the middle ground between socialism and capitalism, and Third Way policies and positions were most often asserted by centrist-left and/or social democratic political parties in the late 1990s, such as Blair's Labour government, the Liberal Party of Canada under Jean Chrétien and Paul Martin, Gerhard Schröder's "Neue Mitte" in Germany and the Labour Party of New Zealand, which Jane Kelsey has identified as one of the early advocates of neoliberal policies (Kelsey 1995). Some proponents of the Third Way see it as in fact the next step for the social democratic project and "a renewal of social democracy" (Giddens 1998). I would make the qualification that this is only the next step for social democracy once market mechanism and values have become unassailable. It is the mix of attempting to maintain certain objectives of social democracy, while implementing market solutions, which typifies the promise of the Third Way:

something different and distinct from liberal capitalism with its unswerving belief in the merits of the free market and democratic socialism with its demand management and obsession with the state. The Third Way is in favour of growth, entrepreneurship, enterprise and wealth creation, but it is also in favour of greater social justice and it sees the state playing a major role in bringing this about (BBC, 1999).

As I have mentioned, though the Third Way was an international phenomena, it has a particularly intense association with Tony Blair's British "New Labour" party that began in 1994. Blair's Third Way was inscribed in a mix of legislation, policy, ideology, political philosophy, "vision" and spin. New Labour and the concept of a Third Way are inextricable to a certain extent, and Alex Callinicos (2001) has argued that both are largely inseparable from neoliberalism. There is also the matter of whether New Labour is in fact new, as Mckibbin (in Powell 1999, 285) has questioned in examining parallels between New Labour and the very old Labour of the 1920s.

Considering Third Way politics in the British context not that long after the departure of Tony Blair and the end of the Labour government, one faces a lingering cynicism toward the concept as little more than New Labour spin, and given the drastic cuts to public services by the Cameron government, the Third Way could be seen as no longer relevant to what is happening in the UK or beyond. However, the Cameron government moved into power on a "red Tory" platform and is in coalition with the centre-left Liberal-Democrats, and thus the spirit of moving beyond right and left appears to be alive and well; and beyond the context of electoral politics, the political philosophy of the Third Way, I'll argue, continues to maintains its influence.

Even if New Labour's Third Way is seen as opportunistic and largely an ideological subterfuge, there was nevertheless a strong Third Way effect, beyond the presence of Tony Blair, that became active within different fields, and therefore it is important to see its nuance and promise. Giddens, as mentioned, is the prime theorist of the concept in the UK context. He began by addressing what he saw as a paradoxical situation: the left is now literally conservative in its attempt to preserve vestiges of the welfare state; and the right is radical in its attempts to transform existing public institutions, as well as in the attempt to open society to market forces right wing initiatives often end up undermining commitments to traditional values. This results in a crisis for both the right and the left. Within Giddens' thesis of reflexive modernization—a second phase of modernity contending with the effects of the initial period without its certainties—contemporary politics faces a whole new set of dangers and risks which the traditional political movements of both social democracy and conservatism are incapable of addressing because they are too rigidly attached to specific forms of economic and social development. For Giddens, the political landscape since the 1960s has been drastically transformed: there has been the loss of class antagonism as a defining social force, the weakening of traditional democratic systems due to the impact of globalization, and the decline of mass-based interest groups at the same time as there has been a growth of different kinds of social movements based on regional identity, gender and single issue social struggles. All of this has forged a situation where the former left-right spectrum is no longer functional. A practical example of this is Giddens' distinction between welfare systems and redistributive concepts that sought to address inequalities

tied to industrial capitalism and the current social support system that attempts to alleviate a whole range of “risks” owing to all manner of economic, social and environmental effects of which more traditional left and right analysis and strategies cannot adequately contend.

Tellingly, the complete title of the Giddens’ book I referenced above is *Beyond Left and Right: The Future of Radical Politics*. The inclusion of the word “radical” is provocative, counter-intuitive and also essential in distinguishing the concept from a vague, opportunistic centrism. Radicalism is asserted as a way to overcome what are seen as impasses in the right and the left, while still maintaining democratic process based on the deployment of different ideas of society—antagonism and struggles *without* the clash of ideologies. At stake is the continuation of the very notion of political difference. There needs to be a radical dimension in the over-coming of right and left otherwise the claim would seem to lead directly to a homogeneity verging on fascism in the dispensing of an ideological balance between contrasting world views.

Steve Bastow and James Martin argue that a certain version of the Third Way is nothing less than the ascent of a new understanding of social and political life “based on principles that both transcend and absorb key aspects of the ideological field” (Bastow and Martin 2003, 140). Their view is that the older political settlement of left and right was based on the establishment of provisional stabilizations through a “hegemonization” of a particular ideology. In contemporary society the process of differentiation driven by opposing sides attempting to establish leadership is replaced by a self-reflexivity within

institutions and subjects, wherein antagonistic principles are “re-ordered” into internal processes. “Third Ways pin their hopes on individual subjects recognizing for themselves the need to transcend the stale alienating materialism of earlier systems of belief” (140). Politics is not the outcome of “‘hidden hands’ and structural and impersonal forces proper to ideological antagonism,” carried forward by the “passive bearers of class interests” (141); rather, politics lies in individual subjects and this new politics gains its dynamism from an internal antagonism respective to all actors and not limited to former ideological structures.

This view of a radical Third Way (as opposed to the Third Way we have seen from centre-left politicians from the mid 1990s), begins by acknowledging that there is a plurality of antagonisms not limited to right and left. If “difference [is] interwoven into the very idea of community” (153), then political difference based on a clash of binary ideologies is supplanted. Yet such a radical democratic Third Way of agonistic communities and reflexive selves is not compatible with existing parliamentary democracy *per se* and would, for Bastow and Martin, ultimately lie in the dispersed power of self-governed associations.

Contrasting this radical Third Way is the more expedient Third Way of the Blair government, which proceeded through a discourse of “modernization” that pervaded almost all New Labour policy. Modernization is required because society and the economy have raced ahead of right-left politics which have left so many concepts and critiques outmoded. Much of Third Way discourse has a vanguardist tendency that seeks

“advancement,” makes accusations of obsolescence and seeks creative solutions. Unlike the radical Third Way mentioned above, according to Bastow and Martin in a comprehensive analysis of the principle policy documents, New Labour sought to overturn the political antagonism between right and left not with a plurality of antagonisms and communities based on difference, but instead with a recourse to the morality of community, with the family at its core. We move beyond left and right in the rebuilding of community, understood as a force within civil society encompassing both localities and also larger bonds of social cohesion (social capital as it is defined Robert Putnam, not Bourdieu). Callinicos (2001) has noted that if socialism had survived in the Third Way, it was not as political movement (with an alternative economics and a set of critiques), but rather as socialist values that emphasize communitarianism. Once again this is not necessarily new and is in keeping with a notorious comment by Morgan Phillips, General Secretary of the Labour party in the 1950s, that “[s]ocialism in Britain owed more to Methodism than Marx” (in Worley 2009, 131). Within this ethical approach to social problems, poverty under New Labour was usually seen as the result of “social exclusion” (a term deployed almost at every turn by New Labour) not structural inequality—social bonds are made through work, family and community, which in turn build individual responsibility and economic prosperity.

Considering that the economic direction of New Labour was largely consistent with neoliberalism, and encapsulated in Peter Mandelson’s¹² famous quote “[New Labour] is intensely relaxed about people getting filthy rich,” the idea of getting beyond

¹²A powerful cabinet minister and co-founder of New Labour.

left and right is just a ruse or a rationalization of Labour's turn to the right; and rather than overcoming rigidities and dogma of the old politics, the Third Way of New Labour seemed rather dogmatic in its insistence that market principles must be applied to almost all sectors and forms of administration.

To draw this assessment of the Third Way to a close, I question whether the tendency to shift political conflict outside of competing ideologies and into technocratic, self-proclaimed self-critical organs is itself an ideological move. The Third Way seems to be ideological in the way Žižek uses the concept—that which directs action but remains obscure. Ideology has not become irrelevant in New Labour's Third Way, rather, in these circumstances reveals its deeper truth (Sharp 2004, 24), which results in a situation, to use Brecht's words, where "the struggle against ideology has become a new ideology" (in Benjamin 2002, 97).

Given that the Third Way operates in a denied ideological register and that neoliberalism and entrepreneurialism converge within Third Way attitudes, the influence of these forces on art practices and creative activism is complex and is not neatly manifest in cultural and social policies. These forces converge and inflect the practice of various fields both through the effect of state policies and also through a rationality and rhetoric that exceeds policy. Given this mixed situation, a basic understanding of British cultural policy, and related social policy, in the new labour period (1997-2008) is required to compliment broader discussions of neoliberalism. Overall this period saw an intensive instrumentalization of culture according to "social inclusion" and "creative

industries” initiatives, at the same time as a continuation of more traditional arts funding based on the notion of the individual artist autonomous from industry.

These two dimensions of cultural policy—support of individual fine artists and the development of creative industries—came to mutually reinforce each other in different ways beginning with restructuring of the arts council and the government department responsible for it. In 1994, the Arts Council of Great Britain was replaced by the Arts Council of England, the Arts Council of Wales, the Arts Council of Northern Ireland and the Scottish Arts Council. The National Lottery was also announced in 1994 and respective arts councils were given responsibility for distributing lottery funds. The Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) was established in 1997 under New Labour, responsible for policy on

the arts, sport, the National Lottery, tourism, libraries, museums and galleries, broadcasting, creative industries including film and the music industry, press freedom and regulation, licensing, gambling and the historic environment (DCMS).

In 2002, the Arts Council for England and the regional arts boards were merged into a single body, the Arts Council England (ACE), which centralized state control of arts funding (Francis 2005, 138-9). Under this configuration various creative industries policies were developed. As Nicholas Garnham has argued, the very term “creative industries” involves the inclusion of technologically based industries such as software or videogames, along with the arts and cultural industries often leading to inflated claims for arts contribution to economic growth (Garnham, 2005). Where earlier tensions within cultural policy existed between imperatives to foster “talent” (based on the conventions of individual authorship) and to “extend access,” current tensions exist around

encouraging talent (defined more narrowly in terms of intellectual property generation) and encouraging employability.

The DCMS emphasizes “individual creativity, skill and talent,” as well as economic growth through intellectual property generation (as stated in the DCMS website). Tensions still exists around, on one hand, fostering individual talent, and on the other hand, the issue of “access.” However, what is significant is that the more traditional understanding of “access” (as encouraging non-traditional audiences to participate in the arts) is understood generally in terms of employability and specifically in terms of jobs in the creative industries. Museum attendance or music lessons, for example, encourage people to develop their creative potential, and thus to participate in the creative industries, which the DCMS describes as “the centre of successful economic life in an advanced knowledge-based economy” (DCMS, 2001). In other words, creativity becomes yet another form of human capital. A 2008 “mapping document” entitled *New Talents for the New Economy* defines creativity and the creative industries in even more explicit and narrow terms: that the creative industries are expanding at twice the rate of the economy as a whole, but that the UK’s comparative advantage faces challenges from other countries (DCMS, 2008). “Art star” figures such as Damian Hirst and Tracy Emin, along with pop musicians such as Noel Gallagher from the rock band Oasis (a particular favourite of New Labour) were enlisted in DCMS marketing campaigns associated with the economic prosperity and cultural activity in the late 1990s. Chris Smith, the Culture Secretary of this time (and one time squatter), produced *Creative Britain* (1998) which contains a rather giddy set of ideas based on creativity as a catalytic agent sweeping

British society and producing prosperity, diversity and an array of other social goods. The book is replete with a Damien Hirst print on the cover, and is now something of an artefact of the economic, cultural and ethical frenzy known as “Cool Britannia” (for more information on this see Stryker McGuire’s (1996) “London Rules”).

New labour social policy combined with cultural policy in certain key ways, principally in the discourse of “social exclusion” which originated from several different contradictory policies from several countries, nonetheless sharing a core belief in *equating full-time paid employment with participation in society*. In *The Inclusive Society?: Social Exclusion and New Labour* (1998), Ruth Levitas describes three types of social inclusion discourse. The redistributionist discourse (RED) emphasises poverty as a prime cause of social exclusion (however, social exclusion is seen as not only material but also cultural); it calls for the redistribution of resources (Levitas 1998, 14). The more punitive moral underclass discourse (MUD) that demonises those who do not fit a neo-conservative vision of a social order (family, nation, job), blaming the state for creating a “culture of dependency” (Ibid., 21). The social integrationist discourse (SID) originates in French policy and was adopted by the EU; it is communitarian, emphasizing paid employment as providing social integration (Ibid., 26-27). Levitas summarizes these discourses in terms of what they construct the “excluded” as lacking: “in RED they have no money, in SID they have no work, in MUD they have no morals” (Ibid., 27). Within the UK SID and MUD have been the most influential.

Social inclusion policies put artists (as well as activist and anyone else engaged in non-lucrative endeavours) in a contradictory position. By emphasising normative forms of work and life (as work is seen as providing social integration and personal discipline), it provides justification for withdrawing support for those in irregular work situations. Activities that do not fit either into paid employment or improving employability are delegitimized. What does this mean for the cultural sector, which involves a great deal of unpaid and underpaid work? Certain forms of unpaid work certainly are about employability, such as the internships in arts organizations. Thus cultural funding for artist-run spaces was partially subsumed by social inclusion directives. The danger here is under-valuing unpaid or marginally paid activities, which enable the production of cultural work and events that would not otherwise be supported by the market or the state. Such activities appear to be increasingly lost in both creative industries and social inclusion policies. Artists, especially those who don't produce saleable objects, also draw a source of income through funding from social inclusion programs. They become "service providers" for marginalized groups and agents in the delivery of government policy. This subjects them, in a certain sense, to similar conditions as other public sector workers, and artists are also increasingly reliant on this role as a source of income.

From this, we can consider what are the implications of this as applied to the notion of the autonomous artist. Not surprisingly, some critics have called for a return to gallery-based cultural forms (see Bishop 2004). Related to this, others have asserted the importance of artistic autonomy in the face of the bureaucracy and crass commercialism of the cultural industries, rejecting any engagement with cultural policy, even a critical

one (see Leslie 2005). However, this response is problematic because, as mentioned, some of the conventions of the art field (such as artistic autonomy and the artist as an exemplary figure) have been already incorporated into “talent-led” creative industry policies.

Ironically, at the same time as state support is withdrawn and artists experience increasingly precarious conditions, they are required to act as agents of social cohesion, through their involvement in public art projects engaging marginalized groups of people. In 2004, the Glasgow-based Cultural Policy Collective (CPC) published a text entitled “Beyond Social Inclusion: Towards Cultural Democracy.” They mentioned the Scottish Executive’s 2001 National Cultural Strategy, which contained the phrase, “culture promotes social cohesion” (Scottish Executive, 2001). While their work is focused specifically on the Scottish context, their critiques of top-down implementation and lack of sustained engagement could equally be applied to the UK in general: “too many programs are defined with a missionary ethos... their content often bears scant relation to the lives they aim to improve”; “local people—rightly or wrongly—perceive them as being promoted at the expense of more urgent priorities like housing, safe play-areas, or proper policing” (CPC 2004, 11). The authors of the report argue that these programs promote “a parochial sphere of action that is almost wholly dependent on professionalized community organizations,” with little power given to communities to determine their own needs (CPC 2004, 33). If culture is seen as promoting social cohesion (in the face of a perceived moral crisis), then this leaves little room for conflict or even different points of view.

I would like to conclude this chapter by considering a set of circumstances in art and community organizations around the foreclosure of various kinds of conflict in favour of cohesion and pragmatic (service) functions. To begin with, consider what is arguably the most progressive development in art museum culture during the first decade of the 21st century: New Institutionalism. It is similar to the Third Way in that it has had a particularly strong influence in states marked by social democratic movements. The term of New Institutionalism (NI) was appropriated from the social sciences and redefined within a discourse used by curators (such as Charles Esche, Maria Lind and Lene Crone Jensen) and critics (such as Claire Doherty and Nina Möntmann). NI was first developed in mid-sized art institutions such as Witte de With (Rotterdam) and the Rooseum (Malmö) and later on in programs within larger museums such as the Van Abbe Museum (Eindhoven), MACBA (Barcelona) and the Tate Modern in London.

The intention of NI is to move away from art museums as being solely “white cube” exhibition spaces and instead to take on “platform” structures or “cluster-like” or “rhizomatic forms,” to use a favourite curatorial conceit. The idea is to mix production with exhibition, as well as to engage different kinds of audiences through a range of activities, such experimental pedagogical activities and dance parties, with a view of making the art museum into “part community center, part laboratory and part academy” (from the profile of the Rooseum). Especially significant for the present study, NI museums have been very inclusive of art collectives and artist-run initiatives, such as 16

Beaver¹³, The School of Missing Studies, Nomads and Residents and the Copenhagen Free University, yet this inclusivity is by invitation only, through careful selection processes and in controlled circumstances. The goal is not only to make an art museum into a flexible platform (beyond simply a place to view artworks), but also, and this is a point I want to emphasize, of disengaging from challenges external to the institution in favour of “self-reflexive” examinations. Rather than critique and diversity being the product of oppositional relations and the formation of alternatives beyond the direction of instituted practices, the ideal is for the NI museum to emerge and redefine *itself* out of “participatory institution-forming activities” (Möntmann 2007). The espoused values of NI are invariably fluidity, open-endedness, discursivity and participation, rather than confrontation, dissent, contestation and conflict. It is interesting to note that the experimentalism and mixed-use formats are consistent with the aims of the artist space movement of the early 1970s and aren’t that far from some of the activities, as we will see, in social centres; however, with NI this fluidity and experimentalism isn’t determined by communities, emergent artists or marginal spaces, but by medium to large scale institutions and their directors and curators.

Even though NI might bear certain similarities with the history of alternative spaces in terms of embracing a wide range of activities and working with novel organizational forms, its proponents nevertheless take issue with the claims of those alternative spaces. A critical concern for New Institutionalism (NI) is the rejection of

¹³16 Beaver is a New York-based project that describes itself as “a space initiated/run by artists to create and maintain an ongoing platform for the presentation, production, and discussion of a variety of artistic/cultural/economic/political projects. It is the point of many departures/arrivals” (16 Beaver).

what is seen as the pursuit of a mythical outside typified, according to NI curators, by alternative spaces of the 1970s. In dismissing marginal spaces as part of some illusory outside, the importance of productive tensions and contestations between larger institutions and alternative spaces or less/non legitimated practices is denied. Instead, the project of NI is to encompass a wide variety of roles, in fact almost all of the roles (producing artwork, exhibition and critically appraising the art), organized and lead by a small executive core of consisting of a museum director, a few curators and a few carefully choose collaborative partners. The complexities and potential threats of a more multidimensional cultural milieu, with unknown regions and an uncertainty as to who or what is necessarily producing work of value, is replaced by a few “progressive” institutions in a more or less self-appointed role as not only leader but also critic within a carefully managed inclusivity. Is self-critique, especially within executive hands, really possible, and, as Bourdieu might say, who criticizes the critic? And doesn’t such concentration weaken a true diversity of practice and the stakes and scope of critique? This is indeed a danger identified by Alex Farquharson (2006), who sees NI as leading toward the museum becoming a *Gesamtkunstwerk* (total art work) with the curator occupying a very privileged position.

In the late 2000s New Institutionalism has moved into larger institutions owing to the success of curators such as Charles Esche, but at the same time it is showing clear signs of decline. The Rooseum closed in 2007 and various NI programs are no longer maintained. Möntmann declared that “criticality didn’t survive the “corporate turn” in the institutional landscape” (Möntmann 2007) and that progressive institutions are being

“dismantled” (Ibid. 2007) by neoliberal policies. I am not suggesting that NI is significant because it is the dominant trend in art institutions, rather it is significant in that it comprises tendencies and limits of self-described progressive practices in the field of art. When I was active as an artist the options were, to simplify, either NI-like opportunities or activities related to the “corporate turn.” NI had/has the tendency to absorb alternative models (small scale, emergent, grassroots), into, as mentioned, tightly controlled institutional contexts. In spite of the important work that has come out of NI, it deserves critical scrutiny owing to the danger of homogenizing practice, and its over-reliance on self-criticism that in many ways usurps the space and audiences of less institutionalized activities and emergent voices. It is important to challenge NI because it has come to represent the horizon of what is possible in the art field on an organizational level.

The experience of community organizations and urban social movements also offers much to learn from in terms of the tendency to replace political opposition with partnerships, technocratic managerial strategies and service provision. The literature related to these activities presents accounts of the transition from activities directly connected with social movements and political critiques to the so-called third sector (volunteer, non-for-profit community organizations, neither market nor state), and instrumentalized into various service provision models.

Margit Mayer has outlined several defining characteristics of this process of the depoliticization of urban social movements, as well as ways that this tendency has been resisted. During the early phase of urban social movements, according to Mayer, the relationship with the state apparatus was relatively clear-cut and antagonistic. As urban

social movements changed over time there was a lessening of ideological coherence in the different strands of the movements, and levels of institutionalization and professionalization increased.

According to Mayer, in the Keynesian period political forces and social science regarded the sphere of civil society as a largely non-political sphere, distinct from state policies and institutions.

But ever since neoliberal policies ceased to ignore “civil society,” and especially since they began to pay attention to the zones of social marginalization and to activate and integrate civil society stakeholders into a variety of development and labour market policies, the political opportunity structures for urban movements have fundamentally changed (Mayer 2006, 205).

This is a very important point: the terrain of the political expanded, and civil society entities (such as community groups and strands of cohesion and informal organization often referred to as “social capital”) were brought into political processes, through using them as a means of provision for services and to address social problems, at the same time as civil society groups’ non-political status was maintained.

Closely tied to this, various levels of the state, especially the power of city governments (London is a good example as its government was restructured and drastically limited in the conversion of the Greater London Council into the Greater London Authority in 1986) are no longer the centres of power they once were, or rather, they now exercise their power in a different way. According to Mayer, their new role is to broker deals because they can no longer dictate the overall terms. Local governments, whose political leverage and competence has diminished and who therefore have “vanished as direct antagonists for the urban movements,” now play the role of “steering

partnerships and furthering civic engagement” (Ibid., 205). In contracting various community groups (e.g. to address welfare dependency), governments embed parts of the local urban movements within sanctioned “activating” structures. Of interest here is that former power centres (such as branches of the state) are no longer coherent loci, instead, their power is merged with other parties and now exists in relational forms (‘partnerships’, ‘stakeholders’, community boards, consultation processes). This not only makes the relations of power more diffuse and undermines clear distinctions, but also subsumes the demands for participation (connected to a politics of direct democracy) that were a central aspect of the earlier social movements. Mayer notes that the language of the third sector supposes that all relevant players are now “at the table,” which assumes a shared set of references and a common process through which to proceed. From this, conflict is eliminated *a priori* because the starting point is a mutuality and set of common terms. Under such an arrangement, the resources and organizational mobilization capacity of social movements atrophies—cut off from funds and disoriented within these new relations.

The question then becomes how to maintain a “conflict perspective” (DeFilippis et al. 2010) within this context. DeFilippis et al. assert the necessity of maintaining connections between social movements and community organizations in this arrangement, and to identify a common terrain of social struggle. The structures of funding and organization serve to “narrow conceptions of community organizing” by “squeezing out conflict models from the community organizer’s arsenal of strategies and tactics” (DeFilippis et al. 2010). This results in not only undermining connections with

social movements and political antagonism, but at worst such community work could “help bring neoliberalism to the grassroots” (Ibid., 104).

These tendencies of fragmentation when movement politics are transferred into institutional administration, are related to processes of “NGOization” as defined by Arundhati Roy as the process through which non-governmental organizations come to lead and organize local struggles. In the context of the so-called developing world, NGOs are usually financed and patronized by aid and development agencies, which are in turn funded by Western governments, the World Bank and some multinational corporations. However this phenomena is not limited to the developing world. There is a strong presence of “NGO culture” which shapes the nature of community organizing, and as David Harvey has argued, much of the activity of the political left.

There are now vast numbers of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that play a political role that was scarcely visible before the mid-1970s. Funded by both state and private interests, populated often by idealist thinkers and organizers (they constitute a vast employment program), and for the most part dedicated to single-issue questions (environment, poverty, women’s rights, anti-slavery and trafficking work, etc), they refrain from straight anti-capitalist politics even as they espouse progressive ideas and causes. In some instances, however, they are actively neoliberal, engaging in privatization of state welfare functions or fostering institutional reforms to facilitate market integration of marginalized populations (microcredit and microfinance schemes for low-income populations are a classic example of this). While there are many radical and dedicated practitioners in this NGO world, their work is at best ameliorative. Collectively, they have a spotty record of progressive achievements, although in certain areas, such as women’s rights, health care, and environmental preservation, they can reasonably claim to have made major contributions to human betterment. But revolutionary change by NGOs is impossible. They are too constrained by the political and policy stances of their donors. So even though, in supporting local empowerment, they help open up spaces where anti-capitalist alternatives become possible and even support experimentation with such alternatives, they do nothing to prevent the re-absorption of these alternatives into the dominant capitalist practice: they even encourage it (Harvey 2009).

A serious consequence of NGOs becoming one of the central actors addressing social problems is the loss of an active membership base as evidenced. For many NGOs,

collecting fees is the sole basis of membership. Kees and Dowling (2010) examined how the presence of NGOs has drastically altered the function of the World Social Forum and its regional extensions such as the European Social Forum. Well resourced, NGOs can afford to travel to all the events in large numbers and also to fund the forums, and indeed to “manufacture the need for funding” by insisting on a “professional environment” (Kees and Dowling 2010, 76).

All of the tendencies I am looking at here, whether NI in the art context or the inclusion of activism into social provision, can be connected with the concept of “mainstreaming” as discussed in the context of (post)feminism by Angela McRobbie in *The Aftermath of Feminism* (2009). Mainstreaming addresses the idea that, although feminism may have lost popularity as a protest movement, it continues in the “practical world of women’s issues” (McRobbie 2009, 152) where it has been translated into policy and regulations administrated by experts. For the protagonists of mainstreaming this means that formerly marginalized women now “have a voice” in the corridors of power. Now that gender issues are widely accepted by state institutions, there is a turning away of forms of inequality outside of these official discourses (such as a feminist critique of capitalism) and an end to feminist subversions of cultural norms. In this translation into a “mature,” professionalized feminism, comfortable within state and corporate environs, there is little interest in radical aspects of feminism and no real requirement for active social movements. Previous forms of solidarity are made redundant as these issues have now entered into human rights discourse managed by proper authorities, and thus, “gender mainstreaming in effect replaces feminism” (McRobbie 2009, 155). As well, on

a career level, women with feminist inclinations can also pursue careers in “gender mainstreaming” institutions through state and EU agencies as well as in NGOs. The implication here is to examine what is lost in this translation, which is the essential thrust of my research on radical self-organization.

In this chapter I have analyzed various aspects of neoliberalism as a way to assess the overall social context in which to understand self-organization between 1997 and 2008. Neoliberalism was defined as a restoration of class power and privatization, however, not through *laissez faire* relations of the state to economic activity, but rather, through a new directive that seeks to institute the proper conditions for competitive economic activity to flourish. Creating the condition for enterprise becomes the tasks of governance and this is within a Foucaultian analysis that situates neoliberalism within “governmental” practices that bring together the management of the population with the development of the self. From this perspective economic activity isn’t driven by exchange as much as by production, understood as a maximization of human capacities. This led into a discussion of enterprise, both touching upon ideological initiatives dating back to the Thatcher period, and by looking at Berardi’s ideas of how post-Fordism has positioned self-realization within the productive order. In this context, one’s emotional energy and desires takes on economic significance which contributes to a new form of alienation experienced as depression and anxiety. I then moved on to a discussion of policy through the general terms of Third Way approaches that sought to overcome the political antagonisms of left and right. More specifically, I examined the terms of cultural and social policy during the New Labour period marked by creative industry and social

inclusion policy objectives. These intensely instrumentalized artistic work in the pursuit of innovation, employability and attempted to use art as a way to build social cohesion. I concluded the chapter by examining the decline of antagonism in the fields of art and community development, especially through a mix of technocratic control and recasting of former coherent sites of power into relational functions.

I will now turn to the history of artist-run initiatives which lead up to this contemporary context. What marks a continuity between the contemporary social context and the end point of artist-run organizations, as I will show, is the establishment of a settlement which has precluded contestations in art field in favour of an integration between more marginal self-organized practices and large institutions.

3. Artist-run initiatives and alternatives

The previous chapter looked at the diminishment of political conflict within the context of neoliberal rationality and policies. This chapter examines the status of contestations and antagonism in the history of artist-run projects, specifically addressing the tensions and limits of self-organized “alternative” art spaces. Also, it investigates the context of the art field in the first decade of the 21st century in London as it pertains to self-organized art projects.

This chapter is structured around identifying significant currents in the history of self-organized art projects since the late 1960s, which are sometimes also referred to as independent or alternative spaces. My emphasis is on the UK context, and London more specifically, however since these patterns of organization are international, I make frequent reference to examples from various national contexts. Although artists organizing their own exhibitions, publications, production facilities, etc. can be seen at various points in Modern art history—the Salon des Refusés of 1863, various artist’s societies, such as the Society of Artists of Great Britain in the late 18th century, or the beginnings of the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London immediately after the Second World War¹⁴—my focus is on artist-run activity that coalesced in the late 1960s. At that point there was a coherence in self-organized activities which became identifiable as an organizational movement. Although this was closely interwoven with Conceptual Art, video art and feminist practices (Nemeroff 1985, Wu 2002, Lippard 1973), this

¹⁴Established in 1946 by a group of artists, writers and intermediaries as an alternative to the Royal Academy

burgeoning of activity in the late 1960s and 1970s has been referred to as the “artist’s space movement” or the “alternative space movement” (Kester 1998, 111). After the end of the 1970s this movement became associated with various artist-run traditions tied to city contexts and various stylistic movements. I will thematize this history through the fraught concept of “alternatives.” What I am really sketching out here is a history of fraught-ness within artist-run activities, comprised of conflicts, bold assertions, ambiguities, back-tracking and backlashes.

The fraught character of artist-run spaces, a kind of distressed plenitude, intensifies when the highly ephemeral nature of these spaces, usually tied to early phases of art careers (i.e. emerging artists), generally marked by certain anti-institutional stances and sometimes by volatile actions in their early moments, is combined with the fact that artist-run centres, individually and collectively, have nevertheless endured. In fact, certain ones have become highly institutionalized such as the Showroom and Gasworks in London, or PS 1 in New York, which is now a fully fledged art museum. All of this results in a relative stability and an underlying identity crisis. Artist-run organizations have an unusual convergence of temporal frameworks. As a type of organization which coalesced in the early 1970s, through the 1990s and 2000s they have entered into a middle-age in the sense that they are now a well known entity in the art field that has gone through various incarnations, crises and reformations; and yet bearing in mind that they are primarily run by younger artists, they are continually born anew. Although this combination might seem to have a certain promise, this chapter analyzes the ways in which a kind of settlement has been achieved in the art field, tied to processes of

marketization and professionalization, and posits that the scope of artist-run centres has narrowed with much of the self-determined activities and diversity of practice now occurs in art collectives and participatory art projects.

This mix of stability and crisis, ageing and youth would seem to call for reflection and responsiveness to new articulations. Although there have been a certain number of self-reflective texts and events in the past decade—various international artist-run centre conferences, books such as *Alternative Art New York* (2002), *Decentre* (2008) addressing the Canadian situation, and specific to London, debates in *Art Monthly* in 2007 and more recent panel discussions such as “A Zoology of Spaces” (2009) at Auto-Italia and “Radical Incursions” (2009) at Central Saint Martins College of Art—discourse on artist-run spaces is relatively subdued, especially when considering the large number of these spaces that exist globally. In London there is a sense, ascertained from my interviews and fieldwork, that the key artist-run centre debates already happened in late 1990s. But this is getting ahead of myself. In order to see how we got here I will provide an over-view of the key developments in artist-run activities since the late 1960s. To begin this, consider the following statement made in 1978, not even 10 years after the first appearance of artist-run initiatives:

As far as physical space is concerned, since 1967-68, or “the day of the loft,” we all know what an alternate space is going to look like, we also know how work is going to look like in it. The individual artist’s needs go beyond the alternate space’s existing resources now, and that is happening more and more...The artist will resolve these problems for himself or herself when they leave the alternate space for the street, the subway, the local bar as they’re already doing (Wallace 1978, 49).

I begin with this comment to establish that even the early phase of artist-run projects was marked by a rather self-conscious and ambivalent attitude. A constant I’ve found in

researching artist-run activities is that each successive generation assumes that earlier ones were more committed to a decidedly “alternative” stance yet were somehow naive, operating from supposedly clear cut distinctions between alternative and mainstream. An example from the mid 1990s is Malcolm Dickson, organizer in Artist-run initiatives in the UK:

The original impetus to establish the artist-run space was conceived as an ideological quest to destabilise the prevalence of complacent thinking, and create a contextual framework that made art more of a meaningful activity. The motivation now is more pragmatic and functional revolving around the potential of “making it” and the “demand” to exhibit more work. The notion of an alternative does not have the critical import it previously embodied (Dickson 2001, 70).

As intimated by the quote by Brenda Wallace, and which I will further delineate, the practices and discourse of artist-run projects and alternative spaces, seemingly from the get-go, were wrapped up in troubled questions about the nature and viability of alternatives. Artist-run initiatives in the late 1960s/early 1970s were often, consciously, in the grips of a set of contradictions around seeking alternatives to dominant practice and at the same time attempting to succeed within dominant terms. Considering debates and statements in publications from the 1970s and early 1980s that addressed artist-run centre communities, such as *The Fox* (New York), *Centrefold* (Canada) and *AN Magazine* (UK), there was anything but a consensus about an ideological quest for artist-run centres. Instead one finds a constant debate and countervailing assertions on what self-organized art projects could mean. Though I am thematizing the history of artist-run spaces through the concept and rhetoric of “alternative,” and in many ways this charts the passing of this term out of circulation, it is not a matter of shifting from radical alternatives to the status quo, rather, a passage from strong, continually shifting tensions around different ideas of

what an alternative could be and the limits of this, to what I see as a post 1990s settlement of these tensions. Clearly this occurred in different ways in various city and national contexts, but coherent tendencies are evident. The implications are that the antagonisms and dynamics related to possible alternatives in self-organized projects have moved out of the visual art field into a more diffuse area of culture, comprised of projects spaces, activist milieus and community spaces.

Visual art of the early 1970s was marked by what Lucy Lippard famously referred to as the “dematerialization of the art object” (1973)—the development of performance, video, process-based experiments and interdisciplinary work. These were non-objective forms of art, deliberately outside of both commodification forms (e.g. there were no art market mechanisms in place at that time to sell art videos), and outside the conventions of what most galleries and museums considered legitimate art. In *Art of the 1970s: Cultural Closure?* (1994) Bart-Moore Gilbert characterises the 1970s as a “culture of post-avant-gardism,” which “implies a contestatory as well as a temporal relationship to the 1960s avant-garde. In other words, the assumed connection between formal innovation and political radicalism, central to the avant-garde, came under question” (Gilbert 1994, 20). When radicalism could no longer be limited to formal qualities of the work and artistic activities no longer fitted within existing exhibition frameworks, artists necessarily sought new kinds of spaces and one’s they would actively shape. As these were new kinds of organizations, not only were there no dedicated funding schemes for them, but terms like artist-run or alternative space didn’t exist. These kinds of spaces were something new and they proliferated rapidly, emerging out of both exuberance and a

frustration. “We had reached a time. A time of standing still. Of closed doors to growth and evolution. Doors of curatorial and editorial policies. A language filled with slammed doors. A language that needed new verbs and nouns and adjectives” (Sischy 1980, 72). Funding bodies received applications for a kind of activity that didn’t match existing categories. Brian O’Doherty, an administrator of the America National Endowment of the Arts in the U.S., stated that a provisional term for this new entity was “intermediate space” (in Larson 1977, 35) in the sense of being between artist production studios and traditional exhibition spaces. O’Doherty considered this to be an exciting part of the NEA’s programming “because nobody could quite pin it down and it was therefore free to evolve” (Ibid., 35). From a contemporary perspective it seems remarkable that an arts funding body could work with a category that was deliberately under-defined and left open to change. In addition to fund-raising and artists sharing expenses, early state funding for artist-run spaces in Canada and UK often came from miscellaneous make-work programs often outside of art council funding.

Most artist-run spaces at this time had a strong orientation to interdisciplinarity. Almost all the early artist-run initiatives, irrespective of national context, attempted to combine activities that would otherwise be divided up into art, theatre, video/media and activism such as Vancouver’s Intermedia, PS 1 or the Kitchen in New York. Specific to London during the late 1960s, there was a rapid development of independent organizations that brought together visual art and film, such as the influential London Arts Lab in 1967, which was a part of the London Filmmakers’ Co-op. “The Arts Lab was a short-lived attempt by the American Jim Haynes to combine all arts—drama, film,

fine art and music—under one roof’ (London Filmmakers' Co-op). This became a template for a kind of interdisciplinary organization, and various other arts labs developed in London at the end of the 1960s. Also at this time in London were radical political film collectives such as Cinema Action and artist-run organizations such as SPACE which provided studio spaces originally in squatted buildings and then through special arrangements with city councils; as well as self-organized entities such as Release, which provided legal advice and Air which was an archive and information centre for young artists.

The development of new art forms, audience relations and a commitment to interdisciplinary work leads directly to the difference between alternative and alternate. Were these art spaces alternate, which Raymond Williams (1981) defined as developing an option beyond existing avenues, or alternative in the sense of dissenting from existing practices and structures, and opening the way to oppositional relationships? In the attempt to facilitate new kinds of interdisciplinary work, were exclusionary frameworks and gate-keeping mechanisms challenged, or were they more pragmatically responding to a need? And when does the project of increasing venues and options for artists cross-over into mounting challenges to the ways art could be made and exhibited, and vice versa? Even in a city the size of London, up until the late 1980s, contemporary art was exhibited primarily in a handful of commercial galleries and four larger institutions—Hayward Gallery, the ICA, the Whitechapel Gallery and the Serpentine Gallery. As late as the 1980s there existed few other channels for younger artists and new forms, and as such there was a continual need for the development of infrastructures and venues.

The Kitchen in New York, founded in 1971, is a case in point in the alternate/alternative question. The organization was focused on video, music, media and dance; and some of its initial projects involved cable television and radio. The motivation was to expose more mainstream audiences to artistic experiments. The organization saw itself as successful in that “many of the artists first presented at The Kitchen are now shown in major museums and galleries” (Gear 1980, 55). Here mainstream and alternative were considerably mixed in a very clear presentation of an artist-run project that sees itself as a conduit into existing art institutions.

In terms of approaches that could be considered as alternative or even oppositional, oriented to making direct challenges to existing structures, would be the co-operative spaces that functioned as alternatives to existing dealer run galleries, and a plethora of art projects working with groups outside of the usual white middle class demographic of artists and audiences that sought “collective and socially organized art-making rather than profit or prestige oriented work” (Ibid., 68). Some of these would later become institutionalized as community art.

Julie Ault, a member of Group Material and a historian of artist-run projects, saw certain artist-run centres in New York as being characterized by a dislodging of classifications and professional roles—artist, administrator, curator, critic. John Walker’s assessment of British art in the 70s noted that there were three main approaches for alternative art: try to reform existing spaces; work in non-art spaces (new audiences through different finds of communication and patronage, poster collectives), and create artist-run alternative spaces. “Since none of these was completely satisfactory, all three

were tried” (Walker 2002, 9).

Astrid Proll presents a view of London in the 1970s where a political underground mixed with all manner of artistic activities, in which a squat subculture played a central role. Proll went to London to avoid arrest in Germany related to activities with the Baader-Meinhof Gang. In London she lived in various squats, was active in grassroots community organizations and was a part of network of artists collectives. Film maker Derek Jarman and photographer Jo Spence were better known figures who emerged from this scene. “Squats were the basis and precondition for the emergence of political activism, art and alternative life. These houses, removed from the circulation of capitalist valorization, were open spaces for experimentations of all kinds toward a life lived without economic constraints” (Proll 2010, 11).

At this time there were also artist-run activities tied to socialist traditions, often associated with the demand for an accessibility of culture under the heading “cultural democracy.” For the proponents of this approach, the experience of the fine arts was considered to be a right of all citizens and ought to be part of a democratic society. In this context, with certain contradictions, certain types of artist-run activities were oriented to a direct engagement with citizens. The exhibition *Art for Whom* at the Serpentine Gallery 1978 was an example of this, and was an intervention of an artist-run project into an institutional space. Related to this, another direction of self-organization took was in the form of artists’ unions. In Britain the Artist’s Union was formed in 1972, and had similarities to the Art Workers Coalition in New York. Part of the Artist’s Union was the Women’s Workshop, which organized a series of exhibitions, notable among these was

Ca.7500 which was comprised of 26 American and European female artists, and was originally supposed to be held at the Royal College of Art Gallery, but ended up in a converted warehouse (Pollock 1987, 12).

Yet another significant British artist-run initiative at this time was the Artists Placement Group, which placed artists in various public and private institutions—mental hospitals, government ministries, businesses (such as British Steel) and the media. This was not an “artist-in-residence” program, but rather an attempt to merge art with other fields. Artists occupied something of a participant observer roll with an “open brief” (Kester 1998, 62) as to what form and to what end the placement would lead. This is an example of an artist-run initiative that went well beyond the gallery format, and in the deployment of the artist as a figure who brings in different kinds of framings beside those normally used in institutional settings. It is an example of a move away from art as based on visual forms and expressive of what art critic Grant Kester calls a “dialogic” exploration between situations, the artist and the audience. Alternative projects in London at this time, if a generalization is to be made, were more focused on challenges to elite culture than on the function of commercial galleries and commodification. The art market in London was, relative to New York, not that well developed in 1970s (Renton 1991, 15).

Important aspects of artist-run activities in London during the 1980s consisted of a continuation of interdisciplinary projects, and increasing pressures and discomforts with alternative approaches. Significant artist-run projects in London during the 1980s included the Black Audio Film Collective which was originally formed by a small

collective of fine art and sociology students developing slide-text works. They were active during the race riots in Brixton and Birmingham, and produced the film *Handsworth Songs* in response. During this time another notable artist-run organization was the Brixton Art Gallery, organized around large open meetings which determined the direction of the gallery and its programming. There was also the development of several large project spaces where a group of artists rented a building from the local council government for very low rent, and sometimes, as was the case with Chisenhale, no rent, and fixed it up into studios and an exhibition space. This model, where a group of artist rent a space for studios and use a common area as a gallery, is a standard form for artist-run spaces in London even to this day, and includes spaces such as Studio Voltaire, Cubitt, and 5 Years Gallery.

Even though the artist-run phenomena had been in existence for scarcely a decade, by the end of the 1970s there was a heightening of critical reflection on what this movement was all about. In 1980 Ingrid Sischy editor of *Artforum*, asked “alternative to what? To Whom? And for Whom?” (Sischy 1980, 72). The question was not an attempt to dismiss alternatives, but to deepen them through specification and to end a kind of free floating, unexamined alternative-ness which was accepted as inherently progressive or political.

Another example of this self-questioning was the New York collective Group Material’s attempt to find a more substantive notion of alternative. A 1981 statement of theirs reads:

Caution! Alternative Space! We hated the association with “alternative spaces” because it was clear to us that most prominent alternative spaces are, in appearance, policy and social function, the children of the dominant commercial galleries in New York. To distinguish ourselves and raise art exhibition as a political issue, we refuse to show artists as singular entities...Group Material want to occupy that most vital of alternative spaces—that wall-less expanse that bars artists and their work from the crucial social concerns of the American working class (in Goldbard 2002, 186).

Group Material was a collaborative group of 10-13 artists active from 1979-1996. They represent a significant case of an institutionalization of an artist-run project, in the way they went from making poster projects on city buses and creating independent exhibition spaces that sought primarily local neighbourhood involvement, to being selected in the 1985 Whitney Biennial, which is one of the most prestigious exhibitions in the US. They responded to the Whitney invitation by making an exhibition, *Americana*, within the exhibition and producing what they thought an America biennial should be—open to artists normally estranged from the institutions in the professional art field, as well as including products from grocery and department stores. They were intervening into what they saw as the typical selection process based on “greatest hits of what had been previously validated through sales in commercial galleries” (O’Neil, 34). Making a *salon des refusés* within the Whitney Biennial was a direct attempt to create a self-organized space, with the resources and legitimation available from the Whitney museum, and it was the centre of a debate around issues of co-optation and institutionalization focused on whether their presence in the Whitney Biennial was a mere appeasement against the charges insularity and purveying a niche culture for the wealthy.

During this time some artists started referring to themselves as “cultural producers,” and saw the whole project of alternative practices as necessarily leading

outside the conceit of “the artist” and the conventions and institutions of art itself. In 1980 Alan Wallach wrote:

they are “alternative” only inasmuch as they augment the number of available art spaces. But because they are conceived of as art, in the same sense that a gallery or a museum is an art space, they have not significantly affected the way art is experienced nor have they noticeably influenced art itself...A real alternative requires a critical examination of all existing categories of art and artistic experience. But...the art world exists by maintaining and renewing the cult of art (in Greenberg et al 1996, 406).

British artist Peter Dunn, active in the exhibition *Art for Whom*, stated that “a socialist cultural practice cannot be gallery-oriented” (in Kenna et al., 56, 1986). Instead, the direction should be toward the development of new audiences through different uses of communication media and patronage. In the 1980s he was a part of the Docklands poster project which sought to resist the Canary Wharf developments on the Isle of Dogs. By this time the inherent contradictions of alternative spaces perhaps reached a breaking point. Chin-Tao Wu assesses the artist-run attempt as a counter-system or “oppositional periphery” (Wu 2002, 44) comprised primarily of privileged middle class white artists who failed to acknowledge their own connection to power (Ibid., 44). For Wu it was this failure for artists to interrogate their own relation to power in alternative projects that limited their ability to develop new kinds of audiences or a radically different context for artistic careers. “Not surprisingly, some of them reproduced the very systems of institutions and values that they had set out to challenge. They became rather museum-like, or like ‘the establishment of the anti-establishment’” (Ibid., 45).

When speaking of the question of alternatives in the context of the UK in the 1980s, it is impossible not hear the pronouncement “There is No Alternative” attributed to Margaret Thatcher. Although there is no clear instance when she specifically used this

phrase (Berlinsk 2008), the idea that there is no other viable way to organize society other than through free market institutions is a constant in her rhetoric. In many ways this political climate, and the inability to find viable alternatives to the capitalist political economy, severely affected the options available in the art field; and continues in the inability to find alternatives to neoliberalism in the present moment.

The overall, simplified narrative of cultural policy in the UK moves from a 1970s conflict between a conservative program of maintaining national treasures and a leftist cultural democracy approach of increasing accessibility to culture, into the climate of the 1980s when the market became more or less inseparable from cultural production, and conflicts arose over what sort of markets should be developed and supported. It is remarkable that Joanna Drew, the influential director of the visual art section of the Arts Council of Great Britain from 1978-1986, would say in 1979 (Drew 1980, 59), discussing what she saw as a very clear division between public and private art activities, that “there’s not much indication in this country that commercial and business patronage for the “unpopular” contemporary arts is likely to figure very large in the near future” (Ibid., 62). In the next several years the Thatcher government dramatically restructured the Arts Council toward business interests and commercial activity. This occurred by first appointing ideological figures to the key leadership positions of the Arts Council, such as the replacement of Kenneth Robinson with Sir William Rees-Mogg as chairman in 1982 (Wu 2002, 65). Rees-Mogg then made a series of internal appointments. The Association of Business Sponsorship for the Arts (ABSA) was initiated to encourage corporate sponsorship programs. The 1987/88 annual report of the Arts Council explicitly

addressed the business sector, the first in example of this since its inception (Wu 2002, 43). The decade ends with the Arts Council chairman Peter Palumbro, another Thatcher appointee, declaring “I am convinced that the way forward for the arts in this country must be by means of a partnership between public and private sector funding” (Ibid., 68).

In 1987 the Serpentine Gallery, formerly run directly by the arts council, was made “independent,” which meant removing it from Arts Council direction with the goal of gaining corporate sponsorship and its own revenue generating projects. The Hayward Gallery and the Southbank Centre were similarly given “complete freedom” to find corporate sponsors. Antony Thorncroft, a correspondent for the *Financial Times* wrote “there is maybe no reason why the South Bank should not prove one of the more conspicuous successes of privatisation” (in Ibid., 69).

These changes were part of an ideological project of the Thatcher government known as “enterprise culture,” discussed in chapter two of this thesis. The structural policies—privatization of services whenever possible, a financialization of the economic objectives of government shift from assisting in production and employment to creating favourable investment climate, with the Bank of England given more authority and autonomy—were coupled with the ideological project of encouraging market values and entrepreneurial relations. All of this affected the overall arts context in Britain in promoting market activities and market thinking, with Art and Business, a further development of ABSA developing “partnerships” with artist-run galleries.

As much as the Thatcher revolution was changing the Arts Council, the Greater Council of London¹⁵ (GLC) was governed by the left of the Labour Party, including Ken Livingstone as mayor. Not surprisingly the GLC had a stormy relation with the national government, however its cultural policy also promoted a market-based approach to culture. As Nicholas Garnham wrote in a position paper for the GLC in 1983:

While this tradition [of public cultural policy] has been rejecting the market, most people's cultural needs and aspirations are being, for better or worse, supplied by the market as goods and services. If one turns one's back on an analysis of that dominant cultural process, one cannot understand the culture of our time or the challenges and opportunities which that dominant culture offer to public policy makers (in McGuigan 2004, 42).

Cultural Studies researcher Simon Frith asked "how have local Labour parties come to deploy terms like "market niche" and "corporate image" in their cultural arguments?" (in McGuigan 2004, 43). His own response, in the context of a Raymond Williams Memorial Lecture, was to look at the mistake of seeing ordinary culture and mass media as synonymous, and making cultural work, what he defined as the collective realization of identity through symbolic activity, synonymous with jobs. Jim McGuigan interpreted this market/employment turn in Labour cultural policy as endemic of a rationality: "the reality generating power of market reasoning and the new management thinking was functioning ubiquitously across the institutions of British society" (in McGuigan 2004, 43).

The GLC's arts policy was very active, developing an extensive range of programs with influential researchers and administrators who would go on to have a strong presence in the arts in the UK over the next several decades through serving in

¹⁵The name for the municipal government in the greater London area, which was restructured by the Thatcher government, and became the Greater London Authority.

various powerful institutions, and many of its advisors and administrators went on to play important roles in the New Labour government of the late 1990s. The GLC developed a range of community art programs, as well as various programs aimed at development of the cultural industries through supporting independent, small-scale commercial projects. Best known among these was Rough Trade Records.

The decade ended with the extremely successful self-organized exhibition *Freeze* in 1988 which was the beginning of the Young British Art (YBA) phenomena. The success of this exhibition, however, was entirely along the lines of capturing the attention of art-world dealers and powerful intermediaries, and in many ways signifies that the last remaining import of “alternative”—an alternate way into the establishment rather than to develop different values and practices. This leads into the 1990s which is considered to be a very active, if not heady time for artist-run projects in London. Art journalist Rosie Millard characterizes this period: “The day Saatchi’s favourite dealer opened in the east end was the confirming moment that the hearty, back-slap of established art and the nervy intervention of “alternative” art were as one” (Millard 2001, 8).

The artist-run centre situation in London during the 1990s involves several inter-related factors: artist-run organizations increased in number and expanded exhibition opportunities for younger artists, at the same time as large institutions and museums embraced contemporary art and not only exhibited new work and emerging artists, but also took on experimental roles that historically were more closely associated with artist-run projects; this was tied to a kind of main-streaming of contemporary art in London at

this time when British artists gained exposure and success both in mainstream media and in the global art world; and finally, art markets for contemporary work rapidly expanded.

British contemporary art of the 1990s was tremendously successful in terms of the sales of works in the global art market, and its presence in prestigious art world exhibitions and collections. The 1997 the *Sensation* exhibition at the Royal Academy of Arts had the highest attendance of any British art exhibition (YBA 2000, iv). It also was unprecedented in its penetration of mainstream media presence and state interest and support in the UK. Art historian Julian Stallabrass asserted that British society has generally frowned upon contemporary art, with influential movements such as Pop Art being exceptions and in many ways driven by foreign interest. Rosie Millard concurs with Stallabrass, and claims that 20 years ago in London David Hockney was the “only celebrity” British artist, and he lived abroad (Millard 2001, 23). Contemporary Art in the 1990s seemed to secure a new place for newly made art in Britain. Often in a calculated manner, leveraging a *succès de scandale* logic that served as a very effective way of bringing together certain avant-gardist tendencies (shocking audiences, producing difficult and baffling work that attempts to assault presumed bourgeois values, and strategies of mixing high and low cultural references) with the hyper-active British media climate, artists used their new found celebrity to gain coverage in newspapers, both tabloid and “respectable” papers. Channel Four’s sponsorship of the Turner Prize contributed to the popularization of contemporary art. Through lead up stories and the highly rated award ceremony, contemporary art moved into television spectacle. The Turner Prize has been controversial in the choice of its short-listed works and winners,

such as the nomination for Hirst's shark in formaldehyde entitled *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* in 1992, and the 1999 short-listing of *My Bed*, a dishevelled bed by Tracey Emin. The Turner Prize has a high visibility in the UK's mass media, and also carries a high level of symbolic capital in the art field to the point where, as Thornton (2008) has noted, it doesn't recognize as much as create the importance of artists.

Though the critical import of this work and its long term socio-cultural impact are debatable, nevertheless Hirst and Emin had become household names by the end of the 1990s. This success coincided with a strong economy, driven largely by the financial sector, and an initial wave of optimism tied to the election of Tony Blair's Labour government after 18 years of Conservative rule. Of course this media interest had little coverage of artist-run activities during this period, yet many the well known contemporary artists, in particular those associated with YBA, had their beginnings in various artist-run platforms. Because of this notoriety, the 1990s are seen as something of a golden age of artist-led activity as celebrated in the *Life/Live* exhibition at the Musée d'Art Moderne in Paris in 1996 curated by Hans-Ulrich Obrist. This served as an international recognition of the contribution of London's artist-run spaces, and involved projects by City Racing Gallery, Bank and Beaconsfield galleries.

In addition to artist-run galleries, there were also a series of self-organized temporary exhibitions, usually in warehouses. They were developed by artist-curators, and, as Stallabrass puts it in his important study on YBAs *High Art Lite*, they were usually "surrounded by artist-theorists, artist-critics and artist-teachers" (Stallabrass 1999,

52). As mentioned, the most prominent of these was the *Freeze* exhibition in 1988 that featured 16 artist including Hirst, Michael Landy and Sarah Lucas. It was a large scale exhibition held in an empty London Port Authority warehouse in the Docklands. Part of its notoriety was tied the fact that “no one had produced such a well packaged event independently” (Renton 1991, 25). The exhibition did not draw large numbers of the general public, but became influential because the right collectors and art dealers attended, such as Charles Saatchi, Norman Rosenthal (the secretary of the Royal Academy) and Nicholas Serota (who would go on to become the director of the Tate Modern). In this way the “alternative” art scene crossed over with interests and investments from numerous art dealers, and thus side-stepped the usual mediating institutions. Most notable of the collectors in attendance was Charles Saatchi.

The combination of Saatchi’s investment with the YBA group of artists and artist-run projects dominated visual arts in London in this period. Wu described this as “the Saatchi effect”: “what Thatcher had been to politics in the 1980s, so Saatchi was, or clearly saw himself as being, for art in the 1990s” (Wu 2002, 159). In 1999 Saatchi produced the book *The Saatchi Decade*, which weighs 5 kg and profiles his YBA collection. It seems astonishing that a dealer would name a decade after himself, and perhaps even more so that this characterization has taken on a general acceptance. The book has a photograph of Margaret Thatcher on the title page. Thatcher was a former client of the Saatchi Brothers marketing firm (and who produced the famous “Labour isn’t working” advertisement in the electoral campaign that brought the conservative government into power).

The most well known artist-run projects in London during this decade decidedly functioned as alternative ways into markets and biennale representation, with only a few organizations, such as the Stuckists¹⁶, maintaining the role of contestation or perusing art in areas beyond the practices and values proliferated in the institutionalized art world. YBA exemplified the process of working through “alternative spaces” rather than the usual channels of the private and public system, and seeing them as alternative paths into the establishment than seeking a different and autonomous way to practice art. As well the Scottish artist Douglas Gordon developed the initial part of his art career through Glasgow’s Transmission Gallery, a very active artist-run gallery which Gordon was heavily involved in (Gordon-Nesbit 2005). If there was a critique in this wave of artist-run activity, it was of the slowness of public institutions to recognize new work.

Though the decade ended with a rapidly expanding economy and historically low unemployment rates, much of the dynamics of self-organization in London during the 1990s was tied to the flourishing of artist-run exhibitions tied to the economic recession that began the decade. Recessions in London are frequently seen as a lucrative period for self-organization because during a recession the art market contracts and the public system is cut back, thus opening up a space for projects that would be difficult or impossible to market in a healthy commercial system, and unsupportable by public funding bodies (Vishmidt 2009).

The term alternative often appears in artist-run centre discourse of the 1990s, but

¹⁶Co-founded by musician and painter Billy Childish in 1999, the Stuckists were a protest against the neo-conceptualism associated with YBA. They criticized this work for its lack of skill and craft, and opened a gallery space profiling primarily painting. They also staged a series of protests at the Turner Prize ceremonies.

generally as a symbol of outmodedness, and as a temporal point of distinction between generations. It often appears in defiant rejections of early artist-run rhetoric; but at the same time, various organizers who still desired the development of art making beyond the given terms of art world success were confronted with a situation of not wanting a YBA model of exhibitions, yet without the resources to create viable “alternative” practices.

Another development in the 1990s that changed artist-run practices was the phenomena known as the “rise of the curator.” This resulted in a new prominence of curators in the art field, the attainment of an “auteur” status for curators, and in the late 1990s, a proliferation of curator training graduate programs. On the one hand, part of this phenomena was the figure of the artist-curator or independent curator, which represented an extension of a self-organised ethos into curatorial practices; on the other hand the impact of the rise of the curator, in its institutionalized versions, was not only a potential challenge to artists’ ability to organize their own exhibitions (without self-organization artists must fall back into the passivity of being “chosen” or engage in promotional activities to attract attention), but is a part of a re-casting of the way the art field and its communities function. Curation is not just the selection and organization of exhibitions, it legitimizes which activities are allowed to happen within sanctioned spaces. Then the question becomes why did artists see that it was futile for cultural work to exist outside of this legitimization apparatus? This is endemic to a situation described by JJ Charlesworth: “The acknowledgement of the role of the contemporary art institution in *producing* an art scene, and not merely representing an already existing one, lies behind many recent discussions regarding curatorial practice and the role of the curator, especially the role of

the curator-as-author” (Charlesworth 2008).

Connected to this was the significant development in the 1990s of large art institutions basing more of their programming on contemporary work. The former division between museums showing work that had passed the test of time, and private galleries, artist-run projects and *kunsthal*-like venues dedicated to showing newly made work had broken down, with the Tate Modern being an example of an institution trying to, in a sense, become a total institution—exhibiting old masters, hosting the Turner Prize for contemporary art, developing programs for emerging artists and organizing a vast array of special projects, performance and discussions. If large institutions were in a sense doing it all, then artist-run projects were in part occluded and in other ways more integrated into museums. A good example of this was the previously mentioned exhibition *Live/life* that literally presented London artist-run centres—both the artist associated with them and the organizations own activity—within the Musée d’Art moderne in Paris. Curator Hans-Ulrich Obrist is seen to have been “inserting laboratories back into institutions” (Millard 120, 2001), and this crosses over with the Relational Aesthetics projects curated by Nicolas Bourriaud of staging bold experiments, once aligned with primarily artist-run spaces and smaller experimental centres, in large institutions such as the Palais de Tokyo in Paris. This kind of programming entered into New Institutional practices as discussed in chapter two; and reflects the tendency of museums to take on a range of activities and experiments which usurp or absorb the role of former self-organized projects.

An example of a different kind of artist-run project at this time, and one that is

closest to a cross-over with social centres was the Info Centre in London, open from 1998-1999. It was organized by Henriette Heise and Jacob Jacobson, who would later develop the Copenhagen Free University¹⁷. The Info Centre combined an exhibition space, archive and bookshop. The first “info sheet” of the Info Centre stated: “We are committed to an understanding of art practice that is not exclusively related to the making of art works, but also includes the establishing of institutions for the experience and use of art and generally the making of institutions for human life” (Jacobson 2003). The project, in particular, had the objective to move past the pitfalls of institutional critique. “What had begun life in the 1960s as an interesting new practice had, by the late 1990s become ossified into a reflex towards, rather than a passionate refusal of power” (Ibid). As well, they didn’t want it to become alternative in the sense of being an “anti-institution,” because they had no interest in positioning the Info Centre in relation to mainstream institutions or the dominant culture. “We did not view mainstream institutions or the dominant culture as necessarily being in opposition to us; we simply refused them in their totality” (Ibid.). The development of the project was not intended to be a critique, but rather a means of taking control of both production and distribution, and opening a space to autonomously reconceptualize what art could be. Thus rather than being either oppositional or alternative, which are inherently in a reciprocal relationship to a mainstream or dominant other, Heise and Jacobsen refer to their stance as “self-

¹⁷The Copenhagen Free University operated from 2001 to 2007. Information on the website describes it as “an artist-run institution dedicated to the production of critical consciousness and poetic language. We do not accept the so-called new knowledge economy as the framing understanding of knowledge. We work with forms of knowledge that are fleeting, fluid, schizophrenic, uncompromising, subjective, uneconomic, acapitalist, produced in the kitchen, produced when asleep or arisen on a social excursion—collectively” (Copenhagen Free University).

institution.” The short time span of the Info Centre was deliberate, connected to what they referred to as a “starburst” strategy where a self-institution is maintained long enough to gather and formalize a community of individuals and groups, only subsequently to be abolished with the intention of disrupting cooptation yet contributing to an informal network.

The self-organized gallery City Racing ran from 1988-1998, and can be seen as an interesting example of a London artist-run project of this time in that it started in a squatted space, collectively and very informally organized by 5 individuals (Burgess et al. 2002, 34). A community developed around the gallery, connected to other artist-run organizations. The gallery itself produced an impressive catalogue of exhibitions, from which several artists would later gain prominence associated with YBA. The organizers of City Racing described the conclusion of the gallery in this way:

When City Racing had started, the demarcation between important and insignificant spaces was clearly drawn. Major exhibitions were only supposed to happen in major galleries. The growth of artist-run spaces, of which City Racing was a part, helped turn London into a more complex culture...City Racing was now surplus to requirements (Ibid., 157).

This description of the artist-run project as becoming surplus opens up this discussion, finally, to a consideration of the current context of artist-run projects. Has the project become redundant or a victim of its own success?

I would characterize the artist-run situation in London in the 2000s in the following ways: market mechanisms continue to be powerful, at the same time the enthusiasm for art dealers has declined, and for many artists a “90s style” art market zeal would be something of a symbolic liability. In a variety of statements in recent artist-run

centre forums there is a clear desire to avoid Saatchi-type art market attention as it might taint one's artwork and career. Specific to artist-run activity, there isn't a "buzz" as there was during the 1990s, and artist's spaces are not, relatively speaking, that prominent in major events in London. The word "decline" is sometimes thrown around in reference to artist-run communities; at the same time there are some new directions developing that I will touch upon, connected to more of an air of co-operation and openness in contrast to the "shark-infested waters"¹⁸ of the past.

Along these lines, Stallabrass and several other art writers have made the comparison between Damien Hirst's decadent situation in the late 2000s and the withering appearance of the formaldehyde shark in *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* (1992). The sale of Hirst's *For the Love of God* (2007), a skull encrusted with 8,601 diamonds, for the preposterous sum of £50 million (Sutcliffe 2007) and his litigation of a teenager for stealing a box of pencils allegedly worth £500,000 from one of his installations (Irvine 2009) points to the souring of the Hirst model of art making and the accompanying zeal for contemporary art in Britain during the 1990s. The state of the art field in London at the end of the first decade of the 21st century sees the end of a gleeful embrace between the art market and artist-run culture, at the same time as there continues a strong orientation to market-based art production. The artist-run projects that have survived into the 2000s in London have professionalized

¹⁸The name of the book, *Shark-Infested Waters: The Saatchi Collection of British Art in the 90s*, by Sarah Kent.

relative to the organizations of the 1990s, with staff holding graduate degrees and the organizations adopting formalized administrative practices.

In many ways the art climate of the late 2000s in London isn't necessarily more difficult for artist-run initiatives to function in; the real change is that it is increasingly difficult to distinguish self-organization from the activities of large institutions. The involvement of powerful institutions in new and experimental work has unquestionably reshaped artist-run centres in ways that only now becoming apparent. They find themselves, potentially, in a much more central role given the ascent of contemporary art in the UK, yet nevertheless organizationally they are fledgling, under-funded and generally at the bottom of prestige hierarchies. Examples of art museums showing emerging artists and engaged in experiments are ICA's radical "experiment in de-institutionalisation" (director Ekow Eshun's description quoted in Charlesworth 2010) for the 2010/2011 programming year in which various groups and individual artists will organize projects and exhibitions for the year investigating "alternative ways of thinking about production and labour, and how can we act collectively?" (Ibid). This self-proclaimed "radical" programming by the ICA also coincided with a budget shortfall that disrupted the institutes' ability to carry out normal curation (Teeman 2010, Charlesworth 2010). A further example is the Hayward and Serpentine Gallery's conference *Deschooling Society* which explored Ivan Illich's radical anti-professionalism and critique of institutionalized education in texts such as *Deschooling Society* (1971) and *Tools for Conviviality* (1973). The conference discussed Illich's ideas in relation to contemporary art and pedagogical experiments. It is striking that Illich's profound

critiques of institutionalism became content for powerful cultural institutions in a way that is not seen as contradictory. A final example, as part the Tate Modern celebration of its first 10 years, was the *No Soul for Sale—A Festival of Independents* exhibition in May 2010. This was an exhibition of over 30 self-organized cultural projects¹⁹ from around the world. It was a strange phenomena seeing “independent” projects, receiving no exhibitions fees and covering their own travel and production expenses, providing the Tate free programming. Rather than a celebration of independent arts, instead, it seems to be an exploitative shift from autonomous organizing to a romantic idea of artistic independence. This is summed up in an open letter written by the artist group Making a Living.

The title *No Soul for Sale* re-enforces a deeply reductive stereotypes about the artist and art production. With its romantic connotations of the soulful artist, who makes art from inner necessity without thought of recompense, *No Soul for Sale* implies that as artists we should expect to work for free and that it is acceptable to forego the right to be paid for our labour (Making a Living 2010).

The move of large art museums to show emergent projects is complimented by various artist-run organizations extending their remit to present historical collections and canonical figures. In this double move the differentiation between kinds of arts organizations has become highly ambiguous. The pattern is exemplified by many former artist-run spaces ascending to the status of “contemporary art institutes,” such as PS1, Plugin ICA and the Showroom. The implication is that the goal for certain artist-run projects is to no longer be artist-run.

¹⁹Including Alternative Space ArtHub (Shanghai), Artists Space (New York), e-flux (Berlin), PiST (Istanbul), Artspeak (Vancouver), Latitudes (Barcelona), no.w.here (London), Loop (Seoul), The Royal Standard (Liverpool), Tranzit (Prague), VIAFARINI (Milan), White Columns (New York), and Y3K (Melbourne).

In order to further elucidate the current condition, recent developments of the art market need to be clarified. Up until the end of the 1980s, according to Julian Stallabrass, collectors avoided newly made work because it was considered too risky and so they focused on historical work. In the postwar period, even in cultural capitals, the market for contemporary work was in its very early stages of development; and large museums, with very few exceptions, functioned mainly to collect and exhibiting historical artwork. However this was to change, beginning in the late 1960s. The American art historian Leo Steinberg summarized this in a lecture at MOMA in 1968:

Avant-garde art, lately Americanized, is for the first time associated with big money. And this is because its occult aims and uncertain future have been successfully translated into homely terms. For far-out modernism, we can now read “speculative growth stock”; for apparent quality, “market attractiveness;” and for an adverse change of taste, “technical obsolescence.” A feat of language to absolve a change of attitude. Art is not, after all, what we thought it was; in the broadest sense it is hard cash. The whole of art, its growing tip included, is assimilated to familiar values. Another decade, and we shall have mutual funds based on securities in the form of pictures held in bank vaults (in Panero 2009, 26).

The art market saw a further development in the 1980s. However the intensification of the market for contemporary art became extreme in the late 1990s. According to Bloomberg’s statistics (in Lewis, 2007), prices for contemporary art increased fourfold between 1996 and 2006. Art critic Ben Lewis has researched the way that a speculative bubble grew during this period, as a part of the hyper-investment climate, which he sees as having “hijacked” contemporary art—saturating art scenes with money, or more likely its promise, and giving prominence to dealers, arts fairs and auctions. The rise of art consultants contributed to this, giving advice to uninformed investors, thus broadening the investment potentials in contemporary art.

In understanding the impact of marketization on self-organized galleries, we cannot just refer to an intensified art market, but must assess the overall impact of market rationality into all manner of practices and discourses. Market rationality has infused non-profit organizations and public administration with a dynamic of competition. This is what Jim McGuigan (2004) refers to as managerialism and Paul Du Gay (2000) addresses as “entrepreneurial governance.” This dramatic reorientation continues Thatcher’s social and cultural policy reforms of the 1980s, and leads to a hollowing out of the “public” status of many large institutions. These changes in polarity have a range of direct and indirect effects on the entire art field. Specific to artists and artist-run milieus, market interest (having proper “gallery representation” and having one’s work bought by the right collection) becomes a source of legitimacy, and serves as a way to be taken seriously as an artist even if one doesn’t make money, or in fact, if one has to subsidize one’s market practice with day-time jobs and grants.

We can see similar tendencies in the development of the “art fair,” which has become a powerful contemporary exhibition form, in certain ways up-staging gallery and museum exhibitions. They are essentially visual art trade shows where dealers and galleries set up stalls and larger galleries, auction houses and intermediaries then sample the wares and set up business relations. In London the largest and most prestigious is the Frieze Art Fair, associated with *Frieze Magazine*. Beyond setting up buying and selling opportunities, the fairs have various lecture series and events and in this way extend out to act as broader sites of legitimation. It is common in art fairs to see stands by artist-run galleries and other kinds of grassroots arts organizations. Transmission Gallery was one

of the first prominent UK artist-run centres to take part in the Frieze Art Fair in 2004 (Gordon-Nesbitt 2005). This was something that, even after all of the market expansion of the 1990s would have been unthinkable even a few years prior. Various alternative art fairs have developed as well, such as the Zoo Art fair in London, the Southampton Alternative Art Fair, and the Toronto Alternative Art Fair. Rebecca Gordon-Nesbitt has examined how the lack of travel funding has resulted in arts councils encouraging artist-run initiatives to participate in local art fairs as a way to broaden their networks. It seems unusual that the term “alternative” became so problematized within artist-run communities, and yet proliferates freely in the context of art fairs.

In a similar dynamic of market-based activity affecting all manner of practices whether they are part of the market or not, Sarah Thornton’s *Seven Days in the Art World* (2008) gives us a detailed account of the highest strata of the art field which is experienced by only a tiny minority of artists; however, in an intensely hierarchical system, these conditions have wide-spread effects. The book gives a detailed account of seven key sites in the set of institutions known as the art world—such as a studio class in an international renowned art college, details of Christie’s auctions, and a prestigious art publication. Thornton’s writing is at times more oriented to the production of journalistic wit and exposés, rather than ethnographic depth as her work is sometimes credited. Similar to the omissions of her book *Club Cultures* (1996), Thornton’s book on rave culture in the UK, where she avoids discussing grassroots scenes and the encounter between rave culture and anti-road protests, *Seven Days* is telling in what it doesn’t mention. It takes the limits of the art world as the limits of art, and in fact avoids any

focused discussion of artworks and ideas. With the exception of her visit to a California Institute of the Arts masters seminar where she is obliged to report on the content of the class, the book is a study in high art world manners and prestige rituals. Rather than seeing this as necessarily just a flaw in Thornton's research, it is endemic to a spirit and structural condition in contemporary art, which the changes in artist-run activity that I have been charting in this chapter reflect. Thornton renders a world antithetical to self-determined activities and grassroots autonomy, even though a vast number of artist-run centres are dedicated to producing artists and artworks for these exalted and largely inaccessible contexts. It is difficult not to see that when the antagonisms and contestations within artist-run activities are smoothed out, art leads to a domination by the centres of power that Thornton depicts.

Art Historian Johanna Drucker has developed a similar image of contemporary art, although in a more theoretical way. Drucker provides us with the reference points of an art field that has moved away from attempts at relative autonomy, opposition or negation and toward affirmative relations and complicity. Drucker writes with considerable excitement about this "twilight of resistant aesthetics" (Drucker 2005, xvi) where art is liberated from alternative projects, reflexive investigations of institutional power and destabilization of commodity forms; and instead focuses on a seemingly universal experience of "transforming lived experience into symbolic form" (Ibid., xv).

Whether this is true or not in those precise terms, there are many indications of current artist-led projects that support something like it. Oppositional relations and points of conflict are rarely found in the relationship between artist-run organizations and arts

council or museums. As an administrator at Cubitt artist-run gallery informed me, “the goals of the arts council and the gallery largely coincide.” Clive Robertson (2006), examining the Canadian context, detailed changes in the organizational culture of artist-run centres. He found that there was an increasing tendency to put organizational stability above participatory vitality and, related to this, to consider disputes within and between organizations as a sign of inefficiency rather than as productive and democratic. I think this tendency can hardly be isolated to the Canadian situation.

Recent discussions in artist-run communities, and here I am referring to series of panel discussions in London (Zoology of Spaces January 2010, Radical Incursions June 2009, “Independent spaces and emerging forms of connectivity” at *Nought to Sixty*, ICA June 2008), generally viewed the concept of “alternative” as an historical or legacy term, with an occasional sense of loss or obligation. I would venture to say the term has moved from a “kiss of death” indication of outmoded-ness that it might have been in the late 1990s—in the hyper trend conscious atmosphere of contemporary art—to something with the connotations of organizational alterity which is both familiar and yet difficult to fully comprehend through the reference points of the late 2000s. Because “alternative” is such a fundamental concept it seems impossible that it could recede entirely from the organizational imagination of art and yet an active identification and use of the term is no way evidenced. Thus the idea of “alternative” is more spectral than anything else, and its presence is more in terms of haunting practices and debates.

Beyond the rhetoric, recalling the City Racing quote that referred to its project as having become unnecessary, whatever alternative might mean is wrapped up in the

ambiguity of developing an art infrastructure where none had existed and whether or not this might involve dissident and radical politics. This infrastructure is now well developed, and in this respect concludes these questions. The artist-run initiative The Hex²⁰ stated at the Radical Incursions conference that “there is no longer a need for self-organized exhibition spaces in London, there are many and most do it very well” (Conlin 2009). For The Hex this opens up the question of what else artist-run can mean, and significantly they are moving away from an artist-run gallery model towards an art collective structure exploring group dynamics and artistic sociality through experimental residencies and quasi-communes. In fact there has been a proliferation of artists collectives, groups and platform entities in the past decade, which points to the continuation and relocation of the more collective and experimental sides of the artist-run project away from galleries and other venues and into group-based practices.

There are “still” upwards of 30 artist-run centres currently active in London, primarily galleries. There seems to be more of an attitude of collaboration and altruism in artist-run community, as opposed to the zealous competitive spirit of the 1990s. Speaking to organizers one hears a Deleuzian language of flows, reference to platform entities and “cultural ecologies”. An example of this is the group Spacemakers who act as an agency that matches vacant spaces (empty apartments, arrangements with city governments and landlords) with people who are looking for spaces, whether it be for production, exhibition or non-art activities. “Our role is as a catalyst, bringing out the possibilities

²⁰The Hex began as a project space located in the spare room of a flat in a public housing estate in 2006. The group developed projects exploring the nature of domestic and exhibition space. As a community began to coalesce around the activities of the project space, the group then developed a range of different projects addressing the role art plays in building social bonds.

which were already present in a situation and making connections which might not have been obvious” (Spacemakers). The alternative-ness here doesn’t lie in critiques of the art system, but in the desire to forge connections, to enable proliferations and encourage open-ended forms of activity. This typifies a kind of faith in connectivity and a network formalism, which leaves content, questions of power with respect to the art world and politics in general wide open.

The changes to the artist-run project I have been examining here can be understood through Bourdieu’s concept of the “relative autonomy” of the field, and more specifically, possible fluctuations or loss of autonomy. Bourdieu explicitly developed the concept of field autonomy with respect to the literary field, though he applies the same dynamics to the art field (Bourdieu 1993, 37). For Bourdieu fields are affected by two principles of hierarchization. The first is the heteronomous principle, whereby artists and writers are subject to the same laws as other fields, and success is measured by conventional economic indicators such as book sales. The second is the autonomous principle, whereby artists and writers are validated only by their peers, especially within the “restricted field of production” of specialists (Ibid., 38), which Bourdieu also characterises as “producers who produce for other producers” (Ibid., 51). The more autonomous the field becomes, the more it operates by its own codes and criteria. Also, questions of autonomy are manifest in divisions or convergences within larger class interests. The autonomous cultural field, in its purest expression (19th century France), holds a *dominated* position in relation to the field of power (in other words, it is at odds with the most powerful section of the ruling class based around business, military and the

upper echelons of the state, with a cultural orientation to classical art), but is nevertheless in a *dominant* position in society as a whole, through its overall (albeit sometimes adversarial) position within the dominant class.

Related to this, in the highest autonomous condition, there is a “systematic inversion of the fundamental principles of all ordinary economies: that of business..., that of power... and even that of institutionalised cultural authority” (Ibid., 39). This is also what Bourdieu terms the “the economic world reversed” (1993). This principle should not be confused with an anti-capitalist politics, as it fits within the dominant economic logic: an investment in one’s reputation and visibility, or a trade-off of immediate sacrifice for future gain. For example, early economic success can be a career risk, as being labelled “crassly commercial” can damage one’s chances at future success. However, the field can never be entirely independent from the demands of the state and the market, hence the qualifier “relative.” Most of the history of artist-run spaces, which focused on the development of self-organized production and exhibition dedicated to peer validation away from commercial pressures, would seem to fit easily within the relative autonomy of the restricted cultural field. However, what is significant with artist-run projects in London during the 1990s is that although City Racing, Bank and Beaconsfield were on the whole dependent on state funding, they played an active role in market activities and the development of the YBA careerism, and were in no way opposed to the intensification of the art market during this period. Therefore they were not playing the more traditional role, as Bourdieu has defined it, of forgoing immediate financial rewards and eschewing market interest long enough to accumulate enough “symbolic capital” (or

accumulated prestige) which could then be transformed into concrete rewards in the long term. Contemporary art, even in marginal, self-organized spaces, does not seem to be operating as an economic world in reverse where the loser, eventually, takes all; rather, peer validation and market success seem to be closely related.

The situation of artist-run activity in the late 2000s, marked by an intensive capitalization of the cultural field, as discussed both through the intensification of a market for newly produced experimental art and indirectly through the proliferation of “art fair” exhibition formats, as well as in the loss of antagonist relations to the established institutions, points toward a diminishment of autonomy in this area of the art field. This is similar to the findings of Oliver Scholler and Olaf Groh-Samberg (2006), who analyzed how neoliberal society is premised on the loss of contrast between the economic and cultural. They argue that the traditional antagonism, as Bourdieu defined it, between artistic/intellectual and economic factions within the ruling class has been overcome in the neoliberal period. In this context universities are losing their autonomy, being driven more by economic interests and thus signifying a unification within the dominant class. It is beyond the scope of my research to definitely declare this, and to make many of Bourdieu’s rules of art null and void according to his own precepts, but when considering artist-run initiatives in London, there seems to be clear signs that the basic formula of an inversion of economic value, tied to production of cultural capital, is no longer operable.

One response to this situation is to lament the loss of the golden age of artistic autonomy. However, rather than viewing this as simply a decline, might the rise of

heteronomy in the art field, and in artist-run activity in particular, be seen as allowing certain potentials? Here I am thinking not of the lessening of distinction between economic and symbolic value, but rather, the way that artistic value and experience and other kinds of social practices have become imbricated. Examples of this include participatory art forms and other kinds of community-based practices, which combine mixing social and cultural aims, and yet face a new set of perils without the protection of the relative autonomy of the field.

In this chapter I have been detailing the way antagonisms in artist-run activity, between self-organization and art museums or between alternative envisionings of art and dominant ones have largely been settled. However, in what seems to be a less autonomous art field, or at least, with artist-run initiatives no longer premised on the logic of relative autonomy, might we find a reinscription of antagonisms? As mentioned in the consideration of the Thatcher government of the 1980s, questions of alternative career paths and fields of practice for artists are integrated into political questions of alternatives. The larger context for an absence of meaningful alternatives and antagonism in the cultural field is surely tied to the lack of counter arguments to neoliberal capitalism and antagonism towards neoliberal social relations (marketization, entrepreneurialism, financialization). This leads me to move from artistic autonomy to political autonomy, and to shift from addressing tensions between commercial and symbolic value in the art field, to the struggle against the logic of capital in general. What are the counter-rationalities, and other ways of living, feeling and acting that are separate from neoliberal social relations, and how is this articulated in cultural self-organization?

With this in mind, I'd like to close this chapter with a critical examination of socially engaged "Relational" art practices. This follows in the trajectory of artist-run activities as I have discussed, in the way that the interdisciplinarity and collectivism that has been a large part of this tradition, have in many ways been transferred into art collectives and participatory practices; while the side of the artist-run project dedicated to forming venues has become professionalized and less distinguishable in its aims from larger art institutions. While certainly not all art exploring participatory practices and building social exchanges can be made synonymous with Relational Aesthetics, it is nevertheless the most visible and highly recognized version of this kind of art and so is a good place to begin to examine the potentials and limits.

As mentioned in the introduction, Relational Aesthetics was initially coined and theorized by the curator Nicolas Bourriaud and served as a way to validate participatory art practices of the 1990s (also associated with other curators including Lars Bang Larson, Hans Ulrich Obrist and Maria Lind) which at the time were either ignored or tied to concepts of performance art primarily from the 1960s and 1970s. Well known relational artists mentioned by Bourriaud are Félix González-Torres, Pierre Huyghe, Philippe Parreno and Rirkrit Tiravanija. There is a difficulty in using the term owing to the disparate art practices associated with it. Artist Liam Gillick has been vociferous on this point, stressing that many of the criticism of Relational Aesthetics apply more to Bourriaud than to the actual work. Nevertheless, I feel that Bourriaud's concepts do effectively encapsulate some clear tendencies in recent art with a focus on participation.

Contemporary Art, for Bourriaud, is an emphatic continuation of the avant-garde “carrying on the fight by coming up with perceptive, experimental, critical and participatory models, veering in the direction indicted by Enlightenment philosophers, Proudhon, Marx, the Dadaists and Mondrian” (Bourriaud 2002, 12). It continues, but with one major difference—this activity is no longer presented as a teleological phenomenon, within an inevitable historical evolution. Examples of Relational Aesthetics include:

Rirkrit Tiravanija organises a dinner in a collector's home, and leaves him all the ingredients required to make a Thai soup. Philippe Parreno invites a few people to pursue their favourite hobbies on May Day, on a factory assembly line. Vanessa Beecroft dresses some twenty women in the same way, complete with a red wig, and the visitor merely gets a glimpse of them through the doorway. Maurizio Cattelan feeds rats on “Bel paese” cheese and sells them as multiples, or exhibits recently robbed safes. In a Copenhagen square, Jes Brinch and Henrik Plenge Jacobsen install an upturned bus that causes a virtual riot in the city. Christine Hill works as a check-out assistant in a supermarket, organises a weekly gym workshop in a gallery. Carsten Holler recreates the chemical formula of molecules secreted by the human brain when in love, builds an inflatable plastic yacht, and breeds chaffinches with the aim of teaching them a new song (ibid., 7).

For Bourriaud contemporary art is akin to Lyotard’s reading of Post-Modern architecture as being “condemned” to creating a series of modifications to a space inherited by Modernity, and it must abandon the desire for overall reconstruction. But instead of being “condemned” he sees this condition as an opportunity. Instead of *tabula rasa* impositions, we “learn to inhabit the world in a better way” (ibid, 13). We are tenants of culture, and change occurs through recycling and intervening on what is already here. Gone is the grand project of a total transformation of society. Instead there are artistic practices functioning as minute social experiments which Bourriaud describes as “hands-on ‘micro utopias’ and tiny revolutions” (ibid, 27). What they lack in scale they make up for in the status of being actualized free spaces, not grand “what if” potentials.

For Bourriaud art works are no longer preoccupied with the modernist reflexive question “what is art,” or the surrealist desire for an aesthetization of all life, but instead with broadening the boundaries of art and responding to fundamental transformations in contemporary society, primarily, the impact of the internet and digital technologies, but also the cumulative effect of cinema. Very characteristic of Relational work is that it responds to the impact of these technologies, but doesn’t necessarily use these technologies, and in fact this kind of art is usually very low-tech and generally employs mundane items (e.g. book shelves and domestic spaces) and activities (e.g. making soup and picnicking). The political claims of the work are considerable and overlap strongly with those of social centres—to overcome the utopianism (in the sense of “blue print” of an ideal society) of past-avant-gardes through realizing micro-utopias in local situations. The role of cultural works is no longer to form imaginary and utopian realities, but to be different ways of living and acting within the existing real, whatever the scale chosen by the artist. Importantly, these ways are generally premised on fostering “conviviality” and harmonious social relations.

To critically assess this kind of art making, with particular respect to the question of political conflict in the “participatory society,” brings me to an area seemingly well covered in contemporary art discourse. Claire Bishop’s “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics” (2004) set off a series of debates around the nature of Relational Aesthetics. I will briefly summarize Bishop’s main argument, and other related critiques of Relational art, and consider the limits of her notion of antagonist art.

Bishop's critique of Relational Aesthetics, firmly based in formalist artist practices marked by the post-war avant-gardist project focused on the relation between composition and medium tied to painting and sculptural traditions, begins by focusing on the idea of conviviality. Relational art work has the tendency to avoid conflict and tensions between people in the attempt to create convivial spaces and using artistic forms as a way to forge kinds of social exchanges; and even further along these lines as identified by Bishop, it deems antagonistic sociality as detrimental for political community and naively views art institutions as spaces where people are freed from existing structures of inequality and can attain harmonious relations. Instead Bishop believes that art shouldn't be a place to magically overcome social tensions, but rather, to act as a way of locating and activating antagonisms, such as in the work of Santiago Sierra²¹.

As of 2010 Relational Aesthetics has been extensively critiqued and debated, in addition to Bishop's criticisms (which resulted in various debates and further texts by her, Bourriaud, Gillick, and others), Hal Foster (2003) has questioned its anti-objective stance and raised doubts about the critical potential of the open-ended quality of Relational projects. However there is a fundamental line of critique which has largely been missed by the existing literature on Relational Aesthetics. Stewart Martin's criticism is one of the few that addresses the nature of the sociality in Relational Aesthetics in the context of anti-capitalism. Martin observes that Relational Aesthetics "implicitly proposes" (Martin

²¹ A Spanish artist who made a series of works examining and foregrounding exploitation by primarily exploiting people in symbolic way, such as *8 People Paid to Remain inside Cardboard Boxes* (1999) where he paid Guatemalan workers to sit inside cardboard boxes in an exhibition space, or another project where he paid prostitutes from Brazil, in the drug of their choice, to have a line tattooed across their backs.

2007, 371) a critique of the political economy in its exploration of social exchange disengaged from capitalist exchange, yet “how the form of relational art... opposes the commodity form” (ibid, 371) is seldom questioned. There is a sense in which relational artworks are conceived as autonomous communes, even if they are actualised only momentarily. This is perhaps most evident in Tiravanija’s works, and especially in his most ambitious to date, *The Land*, which he co-founded in 1998 in some rice fields outside Chiang Mai, Thailand. Described as a “lab for self-sustainable environment” (Bourriaud 2002, 12) it has been the site for various artistic projects to facilitate what we could think of as an eco-aesthetic community.

Martin is not mistaken in his reading of the intentions and political implications of Relational Aesthetics. As Bourriaud states in his text *Postproduction* (2006):

When entire sections of our existence spiral into abstraction as a result of economic globalisation, when the basic functions of our daily lives are slowly transformed into products of consumption (including human relations, which are becoming a fully-fledged industrial concern) it seems highly logical that artists might seek to re-materialize these functions and processes, to give shape to what is disappearing before our eyes. Not as objects, which would be to fall into the aesthetics of reification, but as mediums of experience: by striving to shatter the logic of the spectacle, art restores the world to us as an experience to be lived. Since the economic system gradually deprives us of this experience, modes of representation must be invented for a reality that is becoming more abstract each day (Bourriaud 2006, 26).

So the question is—how does Relational Aesthetics form a social exchange that resists capitalist relations? Bourriaud’s emphasis on art as a social space and a kind of exchange, instead of limited to an aesthetic object, presumes that it can evade commodification by merely avoiding objectification. “The eradication of the “objectivity” of the commodity eradicates capitalist exchange” (Martin 2007, 378). For instance, Bourriaud endorses the

artist Vanessa Beecroft's²² use of people in her works as emphasising art as a form of social encounter, yet to consider her works as a social interstice disengaged from capitalist exchange is absurd.

Relational aesthetics pits itself as an emancipated network from capitalism, which instead of seeking to exploit social connectivity attempts to explore its potential beyond the dictates of capital. The attempt to redeem alienated social relations within art “without eradicating what caused it are liable just to suppress the problem and function ideologically...Overcoming the alienation of social relations in art remains bound to a political project of anti-capitalism” (ibid, 386).

This returns us to the necessity of making direct connections between aesthetic work and political projects. A good example of this is the group Not an Alternative which develops projects that combine campaign activism with artistic practice. Their project *Tomorrow Is Another Day (After the Economic Crisis)* (2010) is a response to Tiravanija's *Tomorrow is Another Day* (1996) Relational project. For this project Tiravanija built a scale replica of his East Village apartment in an art gallery. He invited visitors into his space to watch television, eat dinner, take naps, etc. with intention of blurring the lines between life and art, creating an open-ended participatory social space where unusual bonds between people could develop. As Not an Alternative put it: “With participation now a dominant paradigm, structuring business models, creative and activist practice, the architecture of the city, the internet, and the economy, we have to ask: what

²²An example of Beecroft's art is *VB55* (2005), which featured one hundred women standing still in a gallery, oiled from the waist up and wearing nothing but a pair of pantyhose, for three hours.

are the limits of participation? Who gets to participate, and who is left out?” (Not an Alternative 2010).

Almost every artist and event Bourriaud refers to is intensely institutionalized and without fail working from prestigious institutions, and yet institutional settings, and their exclusions, are almost never discussed in his texts. The project of expanding the social bonds of art is seemingly unaffected by the tendency of art institutions to reproduce class distinctions and cultural barriers. Rather than including animosity into Relational practices as Bishop advocates, it is necessary to address the framing of these practices as antithetical to its aims of conviviality, and as Martin points out, to directly oppose the cause of alienated social relations. One way to do this is to develop experiments in forging social bonds outside of the art field, within anti-capitalist activism. I posit that social centres are spaces which produce forms of conviviality within a movement that seeks the eradication of capitalist social relations.

To position social centres as sites for activities explored in Relational Art, or that they might be seen as an activist continuation of the artist-run project requires qualification. Although various moments within artist-run initiatives, especially in their emergent moments, have many similarities with London social centres in the 2000s, I am not suggesting that there is a historical trajectory that moves directly from artist-run centres, and their discontents, to social centres. Social centres in my study have little truck with artist-run galleries in London, and art organizations and discourse have almost no direct connection or reference to social centres with the exception of acknowledging “art squats” as occupying a kind of bohemian fringe for art students and emergent artists.

Interestingly, even though there is little connection between social centres and artist-run centres (in terms of developing projects, audiences, funding sources, etc.), there is, as mentioned in the introduction, a significant portion of people active in London's social centre scene (in certain places almost half of the people involved) who have fine art backgrounds and experience in artist-run projects. The fact that many participants in social centres have visual art backgrounds, and yet there is only a very limited connection with the art field, calls for further exploration of these divergences and obscured convergences.

My general finding in this chapter is that by the late 1990s and 2000s artist-run initiatives have become very specialized visual art projects, no longer seeking alternatives or dedicated to developing interdisciplinary platforms. They generally adopt professional roles and conventional administrative structures rather than collective practices, and have become less distinct in their purview and aims from larger art institutions, yet still with relatively tiny budgets and precarious conditions. I examined various debates around the notion of "alternative" in the 1970s and 1980s, and the decline of these differences in the 1990s when, in the context of London, self-organization was primarily about seeking alternative ways into the existing positions in the art field. The final point I ended on—redirecting cultural self-organization into anti-capitalist forms of social exchange and situating these within an activist context—begs a whole series of questions and requires a consideration of the overlaps and tensions between art and activism which the next chapter will address.

4. Art and Activism

I explained that I had spent most of my life trying to find a space, which contained both the social engagement of politics and the irresistible imagination of art, that I was constantly striving to develop a creative practise that was engaged directly in social change rather than creating representations of issues and struggles. I didn't want to illustrate political change I wanted to make it. "Do you paint paintings of protests" he asked me. I sighed...

Then on an early morning in 1994 I climbed over a wall topped with shards of broken glass and everything changed. For the first time I threw my body in the way of a bulldozer to stop the construction of a road, the M11 link road which was due to destroy 350 houses and several ancient woodlands in east London. Suddenly Live Art²³ meant something completely different—the pragmatic collided with the poetic, the performative with the political (Jordan 2004, 179).

I argued in the previous chapter that contestations have been largely quelled in Artist-run projects, with anti-institutional stances and oppositional politics almost entirely eliminated. This chapter looks at other areas of cultural practice where we can find oppositional stances and connections between aesthetics and activist movements. I locate these in social centres in London connected to an emergent space of "radical culture." In many ways this arena can be seen as a kind of heir to counter-cultures of the past, and a part of current autonomous social movements. Activity in and around social centres has certain links with art practices, however it is outside of the art field and the connections are often indirect. I will begin by analyzing some aspects of the relation between art and activism, and then move onto a more specific understanding of the antecedents and historical roots of social centres in the UK, describing their current attributes. I end with a short examination of the relation between political activism and the avant-garde and

²³ A British term for Performance Art.

consider whether the activity in social centres can be considered as avant-garde.

Because much of the activity in social centres combines cultural and political movements, I will begin this discussion by examining the relation between art and politics. To define the nature of this relation is daunting, and it is also connected to the relationship between various counter-cultures and kinds of political opposition. It can be argued that it is a mistake to assume a separation because the definitions of the political and the aesthetic are, at least theoretically, interdependent and thus art is always political. As well, politics is always wrapped up in the deployment of symbolic displays, and any projection of power is invariably dependent upon certain usages of language, bodies of images, all manner of styles and forms through which ideas and actions take shape. As well, the production and reception of art is always aligned with various ideologies and powerful groups, and is tied to class and economic systems. But to hone the question further, I want to address the relations between the field of art and activist practices. Of issue here is not directly the question of “political art,” and the long, complicated histories of how art can or can’t be political, and the related debates on the relation of form and content or form and function. Instead there is the question of what is the relation between social movements, activism and activities traditionally associated with artists.

To engage with the nature of this relationship consider the following statement by Julian Stallabrass on the artwork entitled *The Bridge* (2000) by the Swiss artist Thomas Hirschhorn in the exhibition *Protest and Survive* at the Whitechapel Art Gallery in London:

That the passage between the two—art and politics, that is—should feel provisional and rickety is fitting. It has become a cliché in the contemporary art world to claim that the two cannot mix well, or that their alliance breeds tyranny, or that art can be political only in the continual recitation of contradiction. How has it come about that the bridge, so robust as recently as the 1970s, is now so frail? (Stallabrass 2000, 44)

The Bridge was an artwork in the form of a temporary passageway between two entities in London's East End—the Whitechapel Art Gallery and Freedom Bookshop (in a building which houses various other “radical” organizations). The artwork was a functional walkway made of a rudimentary structure and clad in ephemeral material and odds and ends, such as cardboard, plastic sheeting and Hirschhorn's trademark—packing tape. Whitechapel Art Gallery is a prestigious public art museum and therefore emblematic of the institution of art, and Freedom Books has an overtly Anarchist political orientation and tied to grassroots political activism. Freedom Books is connected to Freedom Press, a publisher of radical political text active since the late 19th century. The site is in the East End of London, a neighbourhood with a vibrant history of radical politics, working class activism, as well as a setting for various riots, strikes and large scale demonstrations. Currently it is home to various activist communities and is also the location of RampART social centre (the focus of my case study in the following chapter); it is also home to a high density of artists and art-run organizations. *The Bridge* allowed one to leave the cafe area of the art museum, a typical middle-class space of understated design and over-priced coffee, and enter into Freedom Books with its “grass-rootsy” appearance of overflowing shelves and other markers of an under-resourced organization. The artwork was effective if only on the level of giving the spectator a bit of perspective from which to consider both worlds on either side of the bridge and wonder about their

relationship. One response could be to see either world as almost a parody of itself, and becoming conscious of this judgement, we could ask what is the nature of this vantage point that permits us to form these reflections—does the artwork posit itself as neither/nor or above and beyond? In the end do we have to choose a side, and if so, which side is it really on; or is the bridge in fact the Third Way?

However we might think through the nature of this bridge space, it seems odd that Stallabrass in the above quote refers to the bridge as the precarious link between art and politics. “Political art” of various kinds, especially given that definitions of politics can be very broad and inclusive, proliferates widely in contemporary art. Although exuberantly apolitical art, such as the YBA art referenced in the previous chapter has gained considerable attention in the past two decades, all manner of political art circulates in contemporary art institutions. More recent, high profile examples include The Serpentine Gallery’s Centre for Possible Studies in London (2008-2011) and almost all of the Documenta exhibitions which are often criticized for being overly political²⁴. It has to be added that most of this political art is heavily sponsored by powerful corporations including investment banks and firms with weapons manufacturing divisions (for example Siemens). The prominence of Hirschhorn himself, almost a “blue-chip artist” with solo shows in some of the most prestigious art museum, attests to the status of political art. Hirschhorn’s *The Bridge* and its rickety-ness more aptly applies to the

²⁴ Documenta is a major international exhibition held every 5 years in Kassel, Germany. The exhibition began in the immediate postwar period showing “degenerate art” that had been banned by the Nazis. Notable exhibitions are Documenta IX (2002), curated by Okwui Enwezor, looking at political issues of the developing world; and Documenta V (1972), curated by Harald Szeemann, featuring Robert Filliou’s poetic Marxist assemblages, Hans Haacke’s institutional critique and Beuys’ workshop on direct democracy.

relationship between activism and art. In the major counter-globalization protest movement of the late 1990s and early 2000s, actions which involved hundreds of thousands of people and spanned the globe, it is hard to think of any well known contemporary artist who played an active role. In the 1990s and 2000s, beyond occasional campaigns against cuts to arts funding, artists seem almost invisible in activist contexts. Some exceptions to this would be the Yes Men, who make performative interventions against corporations²⁵, or the American group Critical Art Ensemble who explore issues around bio-engineering. However, these activities, associated with the genre of “tactical media,” usually occur in the context of news media. If these groups present work in art institutions, it is generally considered as just one site among others (such as the internet, television news media and activist milieus).

An artwork that typifies certain tendencies of current “political artwork” would be *Black Shoals* by Cefn Hoile (2004). The work takes a real-time feed of investment activity and converts it into a celestial projection on the gallery ceiling similar to a planetarium, and the title is a pun on Black-Scholes which is an equation used in financial derivatives pricing. The experience of the piece is a playful and rather astounding exploration of the naturalization of market forces into an almost infinite space of cosmic

²⁵The Yes Men primarily define themselves as media activists. Their practice is largely based on impersonating or copying—or as they call it, “identity correction” (Yes Men 2011)—entities that they are opposed to, through pretending to be spokespersons or creating fake websites. An example of their work is a project they did on December 3, 2004, the twentieth anniversary of the Bhopal disaster. One of the Yes Men, Andy Bichlbaum, appeared on BBC World posing as Jude Finisterra a Dow Chemical spokesman. Dow is the owner of Union Carbide, the company responsible for the chemical disaster. The fake Dow spokesperson announced Dow planned to liquidate Union Carbide and use the resulting \$12 billion to pay for medical care, clean up the site and fund research into the hazards of other Dow products.

movements evoking the oracle-like function of market analysis. However intriguing it might be, the work is distant from activism and refrains from taking an oppositional stance against capitalism. In this light *The Bridge* between art and radical politics isn't creaky so much as it is imaginary, perhaps prefiguring a future connection or linking us with past moments.

Jeremy Deller, a Turner Prize winner in 2004, has produced two remarkable works *The Battle of Orgreave* (2001) and *Baghdad, 5 March 2007* (2009) that further elucidate the nature and function of contemporary political art. *The Battle of Orgreave* is a reconstruction of the infamous confrontation between the police and striking miners in the UK in 1984. It marked the defeat of the miners and was the climax of a series of struggles between the labour movement and the Thatcher government from which in certain ways the British left has never recovered. The restaging of the event involved over 800 people, many of who were police constables and picketers from the actual event, and was made into a film by Channel 4. The work is a more or less faithful reproduction of the historical event. Deller has no discernable political position in the work, and it was developed with no connection with current labour movements. It is a startling re-enactment of one of the most dramatic political moments of late 20th century Britain, and is very effective, as it was intended to be, in generating discussion and deliberation around issues of the Thatcher legacy, the fate of organized labour and collective action. *Baghdad, 5 March 2007* is comprised solely of the wreckage of a car damaged by a carbomb in a book market in Baghdad during the violent aftermath of the invasion of Iraq in 2004. It is significant that Deller chose not to use wreckage from a

coalition airstrike, but instead the debris from an insurgent suicide-bomber. The work was originally used in a Relational Aesthetic type project entitled *It Is What It Is* that toured across the USA on the back of a truck in the company of a US soldier and an Iraqi citizen, and was used to stage a series of encounters and discussions. The title incisively refers to the lineage of Minimalist sculpture with its claims of absolute literalness and non-referentiality, as well as a term from American military culture used to contend with the starkness and chaos of daily life in war. While these works are compelling, highly informed and represent perhaps the pinnacle of political contemporary art, it is telling that the role of the artist is largely to present disinterested frameworks, independent from political movements (e.g. anti-war activism) and without a discernable position. The intention is that the artwork is not to take a position, but instead to present a dialogic framework that can facilitate a highly charged and discursive response from viewers.

Most of the connections between art and political movements currently on offer are in the form of retrospectives, such as the 2009 exhibition *Forms of Resistance: artists and the desire for social change from 1871 to the present* at the Vanabbe Museum the curated by Will Bradley, Charles Esche and Phillip van den Bossche; or work that imports activist symbols into art world exhibitions, such as Oliver Ressler's documentaries. When there is work with explicitly political content it is often art *about* political situations, though generally without direct connections with activists groups and social struggles. Further along this line, there is a small genre of artworks that formalize and abstract activist signifiers, such as Carey Young's *I am a Revolutionary* (2001); or artists such as Gillian Wearing, Mark Gubb, Fred Forest and Daniel Buren in their work

with visual devices such as blank placards, banners and flags. Activism seen from this context feels like a vague spectre haunting art, or a parallel world which is only glimpsed in twilight moments. Such projects often disengage the work from activism, in a similar way that certain social science studies of social movements often have little connection with social struggles, such as Klaus Klandermans work on social movements. On the activist side, especially in the context of Direct Action activism, suspicion of artists and intellectuals is common. Anything that smacks of the art world or the academy is automatically dismissed as part of the problem. An example, which is hardly atypical, is a screening in a London social centre of Oliver Ressler's video *What Would It Mean To Win?* (2008). Ressler makes experimental documentaries primarily shown in art contexts. This particular video was on the protests against the G20 summit in Germany in 2008, and was screened to a room of primarily activists, many who had participated in these protests. Ressler's film is under-scored with Autonomist Marxist concepts²⁶, and the activists he interviews were a handpicked group of mostly academics well grounded in this discourse. The majority of people watching the film were alienated from the its theoretically-laced language. They didn't have a background in this theory and didn't want to get one. Even mentioning terms like "post-Fordism," which is somewhat self-evident and I think crucial, would trigger considerable resentment toward academic and artistic types. The open-ended nature of the film and its formal devices setup to explore the goals of protest only seemed to be met with defensiveness or disinterest.

Given such divisions and suspicions it is important to recall that connections

²⁶The political side of the artworld has a predilection for prophetic, post-structural Marxism exemplified by Anthony Negri.

between forms of activism, political militancy and art, historically speaking, have been very prominent for at least the last century. Widely known examples—well established within art history—include Gustave Courbet’s participation in the 1871 Paris Commune, the relation between Productivists and communism in the post-revolutionary Russia, Diego Rivera murals on working class movements in the 1930s, the role of films, posters and what we now might call “street art” in the up-risings of May 68, and Gran Fury’s AIDS posters connected with Act Up activism in the 1980s. It seems tempting to come to the conclusion that the closer we move to the present day, the harder it is to find similar examples. But what is the meaning of this lack of activity? It could be argued that the scope and fabric of political struggles has changed, that field dynamics—both in art and political activism—have aged and consolidated, making such overlaps difficult and unlikely. However, as I will address, it is the reconstituting of what is considered to be political action and aesthetic engagement which has in fact opened a space between more traditionally defined limits of art and activism, and it is within this space that social centres can be located.

A telling example of an encounter between an artist-run gallery and Direct Action activism is when the members of City Racing, an artist-run gallery mentioned in the previous chapter, were somewhat accidentally involved in a protest to save the London neighbourhood of Leytonstone from a motorway expansion. Several members of the gallery had cheap studios in expropriated houses in the area as part of the process of clearing the neighbourhood for the roadway expansion. In a sense the government was using the artists more or less as unpaid security guards to protect the buildings after

residents had left and before they were torn down. However, the artists using the studios got involved in a campaign against the motorway. They participated in legal proceedings and media dispatches to fight the development, and just as that phase of the campaign looked doomed, a large group of highly committed anti-road activists flooded into the area and transformed the struggle by deploying various cultural strategies—visually transforming the neighbourhood through painting houses in dramatic ways, forming barricade-sculptures and constructions of all sorts, along with an extensive use of slogans. This group was called the Dongas Tribe, and this kind of activism has certain direct connections with the social centre milieu of rampART and the radical culture scenes in London.

The Dongas tribe turned defeat into victory. They were itinerant protestors...Their life was total protest. They made camps on derelict land and in derelict houses. They established the independent Wantstonia and Leytonstonia [two anti-motorway occupations]. The republics were well decorated with colour, sculpture and slogan. There was paint everywhere. The art of republics was the enemy of the white walled gallery, it wasn't mediated critique it was visual noise...It was the kind of art that made the trained artist feel nauseous (Burgess et al 2002, 45).

The City Racers felt both an attraction and discomfort, in fact revulsion, with the activity of the Dongas tribe, and a sense of fascination and incommensurability between art as they knew it in the gallery and the artistic output they saw in Leytonstone; as well, they experienced the merits of two different kinds of self-organization which only overlapped occasionally and accidentally—the organization of the gallery and the anti-motorway struggle.

The limits between art and activism are revealed when museums attempt to include activism within their programming. One example of this is Gavin Grindon's

report on an activist-art project developed for the United Nation's COP15 Climate Change Conference in December 2009.

In Copenhagen, both Gallery Nicolaj and Freie Internationale Tankstelle pulled out of hosting the *Bike Bloc* art-activist project when it became clear that the project was not a hypothetical fantasy bound to the gallery but would actually be carried out in the streets, with all the risks of real social activism. Instead, *Bike Bloc* found a home in the Candy Factory, one of the city's several activist social centres. There is a curious dynamic here. At the same time that "activism" is being received with unprecedented enthusiasm by liberal art institutions, it is being criminalised and excluded as "terrorist" by political establishments. In the UK, organisations such as the sinisterly named National Extremism Tactical Coordination Unit have turned their attention to non-violent climate activists, and new anti-terrorist police powers are now regularly used to discipline and interfere with social movements (Grindon 2010, 333).

Grindon focuses our attention on the attraction art institutions have for art-activist hybrids, and yet their refusal to support this work when it makes unpredictable moves directly in the political field. For Grindon all this points to a tendency in art institutions to limit political engagement to kinds of deliberation usually confined to the rather narrow sections of the populations who attend art museums.

Another example of this attraction/aversion of art institutions toward activism is the workshop "Disobedience Makes History: Exploring creative resistance at the boundaries between art and life" which ran for several weeks at the Tate Modern in the winter of 2010 facilitated by the Laboratory of Insurrectional Imagination (LII), a group co-organized by John Jordan. The Tate described the event as addressing: "What is the most appropriate way to approach political issues within a publicly funded institution?" After several months of planning, the curators who organized the workshop stipulated that "[u]ltimately, it is also important to be aware that we cannot host any activism directed against Tate and its sponsors, however we very much welcome and encourage a

debate and reflection on the relationship between art and activism” (Jordan 2010, 43).

This appears to be a similar case of an art institution including an activist practice, yet attempting to render it as an object for reflection.

However in this case the participants of the workshop refused to accept these terms, and decided instead to focus on climate change in the context of the Tate and examine BP’s role as a major sponsor and whose former CEO, John Browne, serves as the head of the board of trustees at the Tate Modern. Because of this LII was asked to find a new direction or stop the workshop. The attempt to censor the workshop emboldened the participants, and they proceeded to display the words ART NOT OIL in the highly visible top floor windows of the Tate. To program a workshop on disobedience and to “curate” a well know activist-artist (Jordan), yet to insist that project be limited to debate and reflection is revealing. Jordan, who wrote of this experience in an article for *Art Monthly* entitled “On refusing to pretend to do politics in a museum” (2010), felt that the museum was attracted to the idea of appearing political and forging ties with activists so long as the work stayed on the level of deliberation and avoided a direct engagement with institutional power. In the end an odd symbiosis seems to have occurred: Jordan was delighted that the attempt to censor the workshop radicalized the participants and raised the stakes and visibility of their activities, and whether consciously or unconsciously, the outcome of the workshop served the Tate Modern in presenting it as a place where rules are broken and transgressive artist pursue their antics.

A further statement to consider along these lines is by the artist Victor Burgin who cleanly separates art from direct political engagement:

Art, at least in our western populist liberal democracies, has no direct political agency. When I joined the protest march against the Iraq war in London, when I joined demonstrations against the National Front in Paris, I acted as a citizen, not as an artist... When I refused to cooperate with “obligatory” but intellectually ridiculous government research assessment exercises, when I refused to join a “compulsory” training day for academic staff run by a private management training consultancy, I acted as a university teacher, not an artist. The work of “political artists” usually harms no-one, and I would defend their right to make it; what I cannot support is their self-serving assumption that it “somehow” has a political effect in the real world. In a university art department, I would prefer as my colleague the artist who makes watercolours of sunsets but stands up to the administration, to the colleague who makes radical political noises in the gallery but colludes in imposing educationally disastrous government policies on the department. The political agency of artists is not “on the ground” in everyday life—at this level they must be content to act as citizens—their agency is in the sphere of representations (Burgin 2010).

Burgin, highly recognized for his Conceptual Art work in the 1970s, here tells us what I think is a rather common position among artists: that there are certain things artists do, and certain things regular citizens do; being politically active is best left to the efforts of citizens and the most annoying thing seems to be when artists try to be political, because after all, art has “no direct political agency.” What is perplexing is that Burgin gained recognition through a series of projects that sought a direct engagement of art with the social world. Best known of these is *Possession* (1976) which was in the form of a poster that was fly-posted around Newcastle. It worked with the visual language of advertisement using a stock image of a couple embracing on a black ground with the text above the image in bold letters “what does possession mean to you?” Beneath the image is the phrase “7% of our population owns 84% of our wealth.” So how can we make sense of the artist who produced a classic work of 1970s political art, in what I think is a strong example of art that attempts to directly engage with social issues beyond the

framing of the institution of art, and who then declares several decades later that political art is “self-serving” and essentially futile?

Is this said in defeat or embarrassment, or perhaps the field of art has changed and the whole notion of applying art directly into political situations has become deeply problematic? My interpretation is that political art has developed into a relative minor genre; and so contained and conventionalized, it has become undesirable. But this leaves aside the larger question of whether art can have a direct political agency. There is something resigned about accepting the divisions between political artists and the politics of any citizen, and the related split between creativity and aesthetic involvement in everyday life versus the specialists in the professional art field. A desire to move beyond these divisions has motivated me to look at the practices in social centres as a site where we can find aspects of artistic political agency. An artistic-political agency, “on the ground” in everyday life sounds fascinating, too good to be abandoned, so what could it look like?

To locate this putative cross-over, logically speaking there are three general possibilities in the relation of art to activism: and, either/or, neither/nor. Of course in actual fact various practices invariably mix these possibilities contingent upon situations and definitions. To expand on the first of these, art *and* activism might sound fairly self-evident, but what is the nature of this joining? For Gerald Rauning, as outlined in his *Art and Revolution: Transversal Activism in the Long Twentieth Century* (2007), the potential for fundamental social change lies in the multiple forms of the conjunction “and” (Ibid., 384). That is, transformational power crystallizes in how art and political action are seen

to relate, combine, join, exchange, etc.; and moreover, that certain joinings might redefine what a revolutionary moment could be. Conventionally the tendency has been, when creative political activism is recognized by the institutions of art, for it to appear under headings like “political art”, “socially engaged practices” or “community art” wherein practices are shunted off into specific genres and bracketed off from the usual activities of the field. A stronger combination operates from a different conjunction: art *as* activism, or activism *as* art, such as Nina Felshin’s *But is it Art? The Spirit of Art as Activism* (1995). Felshin looks at “activist art” in the American examples of what should now be considered as classics of socially engaged art of the late 20th century: Gran Fury’s AIDS posters, Group Material’s projects, Suzanne Lacy’s socially-engaged performances reclaiming daily acts of women’s lives and Canadians Carole Conde and Karl Beveridge’s collaborations with trade unions. As well she presents a genealogy of this combination between art and activism: “a remarkable hybrid emerged in the mid-1970s, expanded in the 1980s, and is reaching critical mass and becoming institutionalized in the 1990s” (Ibid., 9). Other models of fusions would be Chantal Mouffe’s term “artistic activism” (2007), including “new urban struggles” like Reclaim The Streets in the UK or the American tactical media group the Yes Men; or Stevphen Shukaitis’ concept of “aesthetic politics” (2008), including International Workers of the World campaigns, the Revolutionary Clown Army and alternative marching bands. I would locate social centres within these kinds of fusions. The emphasis here is that it is not just a combination or additive processes, but by doing activism that engages with an aesthetic dimension a new kind of practice is formed; similarly, a potential is open by making art in a way that is

tied to social struggles.

The second relation is *either art or activism*. This is a relatively common attitude that accepts the division between the fields as clear and for the most part impassable, with the activities in the respective fields largely invisible or of little consequence to each other. Whether art has a latent political effect, or activism alters or enriched aesthetics is not a concern and any possibly connections are left to the interplay in the overall social field, almost as a side-effect. This split can be hostile, such as with activists who see the entire art field as “part of the problem,” the London group Class War who write-off almost any visual art activity as part of middle class arrogance, or conversely artists who hold a particular antipathy for activists.

A final, more surprising relation is *neither art nor activism*, and it is here also that I locate the radical scenes connected with social centres. Artist and organizer Susan Kelly (2005) has explored this condition of politics that doesn’t look like conventional politics and art that that doesn’t look like art. Kelly considers projects that seek to deliberately work in a zone that is indefinable according to existing notions of what art and activism are supposed to be. Guattari’s concept of transversality is useful in understanding this space which eludes conventional framings and areas of practice. He first developed transversality as a way to re-organize institutional practices of psychiatry in a way that rejected the traditional relations between the analyst and the analysand and open collective practices that worked *across* the confines of the institution itself. As Kelly points out, “Guattari used the term transversality as a conceptual tool to open hitherto closed logics and hierarchies and to experiment with relations of interdependency in

order to produce new assemblages and alliances” (Ibid.). In his activist work Guattari deployed transversal practices as a critique and a rupture from inherited forms of political organization such as the party. Kelly’s examples of transversality, outside of institutional and discursive bonds of art and activism, include the group Ultra Red who produce collaborative audio works and experimental pedagogy connected to housing and labour struggles, the migrant rights group No One is Illegal who used the art exhibition Documenta as a base for their activities²⁷, and the Russian collective Chto Delat (Russian for “What is to be done”). Other examples of transversality that point us in the direction of social centres, at least their ideal type, are a kind of Direct Action activism characterized by organizer John Jordan as stretching beyond the bounds of the traditional political field.

John Jordan, already mentioned in connection with the Laboratory of Insurrectional Imagination, is one of the founders of the Reclaim the Streets (RTS) movement of the late 1990s. This is a movement I will discuss in more detail because of the way it has been so influential for social centres and radical culture in London, and is arguably one of the most important contributions to activism in the UK in the past 20 years. RTS actions could be simplified as a combination of anti-road occupations with elements of rave culture, in what George McKay has labelled “the party and protest” movements. For Jordan, RTS represents a radical break with both traditional ideas of political and aesthetic action:

²⁷Kein ist mensch/No One Is Illegal began in 1997 at Documenta X.

our movements are trying to create a politics that challenges all the certainties of traditional leftist politics, not by replacing them with new ones, but by dissolving any notion that we have answers, plans or strategies that are watertight or universal (in J. K. Gibson-Graham 2006, 8).

The notion of “neither art nor activism” can be considered as more of a tactic of negation, rather than an outright refusal, in order to produce a fruitful relation between art and politics. As Stevphen Shukaitis, an influential theorist of radical protest movements, summarizes:

perhaps we can call this an aesthetic of refusal: but it is neither a refusal of the aesthetic domain, nor a call to realize art by transcending it. It embodies, rather, the refusal to separate aesthetics from the flux of the ongoing social domain (2007).

This is a little problematic in a time when art seems to include an ever-expanding array of practices, such as the art practices associated with Relational Aesthetics which potentially include all manner of human interactions, as well, the “personal as political” strand of activism which continues to spread into the nanofibers of the self. It is also a gamble in terms of the dynamics around legibility—the pros and cons of something not being clearly identifiable (as an art project or a form of protest). Legibility can enable and disable political agencies—a political act can be seen in a new light by claiming it as art and this legitimization might also make it harder to criminalize, or a subversive gesture can be written off as merely art. Similarly, the ideal for RTS was to create a “free space” for socializing—beyond the terms of commodified entertainment or other normative conventions—and also as a place to build a movement through friendships and collaborations. Much of this special atmosphere comes out of the collective experience of liberated or liminal spaces, or shared disobedience, however, amidst these events one can ask—to what extent this is just another party?

I will now shift from an examination of overall art-activist relations to the historical context of social centres by first identifying some characteristics of radical scenes and their roots, and then look specifically at the history of social centres. Although the term “transversality” makes art and activist hybrids seem novel, there has in fact been a tradition of these cross-overs, in particular coming out of 1960s and 1970s counterculture. In many ways current social centre scenes and creative activism draws upon the tradition of street theatre, happenings and the political pranks of the Yippies and early Green Peace media stunts. Specific to the UK, it is possible to trace a throughline, as George McKay (1996) has, from the “free festivals” movement of the 1970s, such as Pilton (which would later become Glastonbury) or the Stonehenge Free Festival, to anarcho-punk (with the band Crass playing at the Stonehenge Free Festival in 1980), to acid house and rave scenes in the late 1980s (in the so called “second summer of love”), to anti-road occupations and RTS and finally ending in the scene around social centres, Climate Camp occupations and art squats. Current radical scenes are not only in the fallout of this earlier counter-culture, whether they want to be or not, but are also active in the long aftermath of its commodification and spectacularization—the so-called “conquest of cool” in Thomas Frank’s (1997) coinage. This is a useful trajectory to bear in mind to help understand social centres and the spaces between art and activism I am exploring, however, there are many other antecedents and histories which I would like to examine.

To begin with, it would be remiss not to address the term counterculture in relation to the activities I am researching, however, the term seems irredeemably tied to

the 1960s with its focus on the “transformations of consciousness.” The scenes I am looking at, though they certainly have drugs, sex, music and alternative lifestyles, are less assuming and could never take on the mantle of “*the* counterculture.” As well the term is tied to a stable binary of mainstream culture versus counter culture which is too simplistic for such a segmented society. In many ways Nancy Fraser’s (1992) term “counter-public sphere,” George McKay’s (1996) “culture of resistance” or a particular subculture connected to direct-action activism and autonomous social movements are more appropriate.

Contrasting these cultural associations, Paul Chatterton has characterized social centres as “activists’ hubs” (Chatterton 2006, 312), yet in actual fact large numbers of people involved in social centres, for better or for worse, aren’t activists in the more narrow sense of organizing campaigns, demonstrations and protests. It is a mistake to see London social centres solely in this light because activities in social centres coincide, but are not primarily focused on organizing demonstrations and campaigns. Either it is a mistake to characterize social centres as primarily activist spaces, or they can be so long as the definition of activism is carefully qualified. That is why I use the somewhat unsatisfying terms “radical culture” or “social centre scene” which refer to activities that are connected to activism, but are in many ways more of a subculture or a kind of cultural scene conducive to the development of activism.

Researchers examining social centres, especially in continental European contexts, generally frame them within autonomous social movements, such as in the work

of Vincenzo Ruggiero (2000) and Pierpaolo Mudu (2004). Autonomous activism as defined by George Katsiaficas (1997) is a kind of activism that grew out of certain post May 1968 social movements, and includes a whole host of groups from the 1970s to the 1990s and extend up to present, with Direct Action “black blocks” being probably the most visible. The autonomous movements Katsiaficas refers to are most active in Spain, Germany and especially Italy connected with its tradition of Operismo and post-Operismo “autonomous” Marxism associated with Negri’s theorizing, which is a type of Marxist activism that rejected ties with the Communist Party and organized labour. In fact coherent Autonomous movements primarily exist in nation states that had strong communist organizations, and appeared as an alternative direction for those on the left to pursue beyond reductive base-superstructure economic terms and rigid organizational hierarchies. The UK has never had communist movements to such an extent, with Trotskyist or Leninist socialism (such as the Socialist Workers Party) having more of an influence. Currently for activists in the UK, autonomous activism has a more limited meaning, most often seen in the term “autonomous spaces”, which is primarily used to describe anarchist or even independent spaces that have no ties with the state, commercial enterprises or the third sector. More common and more “at home” in terms of picking up on British activist and subcultural traditions is anarchism. It is curious that one seldom hears the term, or more significantly, encounters overt anarchist concepts in social centres in London; yet when push comes to shove, people will frankly identify themselves and their organizations as primarily anarchist. It often remains an unsaid, underlying ethos or way of life which I discuss further in the next chapter.

The kinds of activities seen in social centres—whether they are called autonomous, anarchist or coming from more cultural or life-style motivations—have been shaped by a kind of activism observed by various researchers (Shukaitis and Graeber 2007, Gibson-Graham 2006, Klein 2002) that emerged from the alter-globalization movement that began in the late 1990s. This activism looked to the Zapatista movement, in particular the Zapatista rejection of the “two-step strategy” of revolutionary movements of seizing state power as a prelude to social transformation, which Shukaitis and Graeber claim as “a new revolutionary paradigm...which rejected classic Marxist ideas of vanguardism and the very project of trying to seize state power for one of building autonomous communities rooted in new forms of direct democracy” (Shukaitis and Graeber 2007, 12). Zapatista inspired approaches, whether they bear any actual or direct connection with the Latin American social movement, are nevertheless key and something of a touchstone for all manner of activity in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Klein sums up this approach to creating social change:

By asserting and creating multiple other ways of being in the world, these movements rob capital (or the state) of its monopoly and singular definitions of time, space and value, thereby destroying its hegemony, while at the same time furnishing new tools to address a complex set of problematic power relations it confronts us with from particular embedded locations (Klein 2002, 220).

Even though a Zapatista inspired alter-globalization ethos has been influential, the current context of radical culture is decidedly in what we could call the post-alter-globalization moment. The activist movements that coalesced in anti-G8, G20 or FTAA summit protests, notably Seattle in 1999, Quebec City in 2001, Gleneagles in 2005 and Rostock in 2007, which were connected to the “global justice movement” (Della Porta,

2007) or the “movement of movements” (Bello, 2004), entered a crisis and became more dispersed. As well, the related World Social Forum movement²⁸ by the late 2000s was dwindling. Anti-summit protests continue, although in the UK activism has become reoriented through a series of single-issue campaigns focused on climate change, migration control, and the financial system. For radical culture in London, the most prevalent among these has been the Climate Camp movement—with its large “camp” occupations such as Heathrow in 2007, Kings North in 2008 or “Climate Camp in the City” in the City of London in April 2009.

Beyond a connection with activism in its more narrow sense, social centres are sites for experimental subjectivities, social relations and ways of living that are seen in a range of practices which all emphasize “participatory” culture, and go by names such as DIY, Direct Action, prefigurative politics (Downing 1984), self-organization or self-instituting, “constituent power”, direct democracy and so on. Much of this revolves around the goal of creating a kind of agency, individual and collective, that enables political action. I will analyze this in the following chapter through empirical findings and social movement theory. At present I wish to theoretically clarify the approach of these practices, and historicize the connections to various movements and traditions.

As disparate as these practices might appear (autonomous social movements, UK anarchist subcultures, and events like reading groups, art exhibition and music concerts), there is an over-riding way to conceptualize them that is consistent with the overall

²⁸RampART social centre hosted events during the 2004 European Social Forum as a part of the “autonomous spaces” component.

dynamic I am looking at in this thesis: the ethos of cultural self-organization is at the same time the mode through which neoliberalism proceeds, and yet because of playing this central role, it can be seen as a significant area of disruption and the staging of alternative practices. Chantal Mouffe understands this through the terms of the aesthetic and social critique developed by Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello in *New Spirit of Capitalism*, and echoes Berardi's assessment, discussed in chapter two, wherein former counter-culture resistance has merged with post-Fordist production:

The aesthetic strategies of the counter-culture: the search for authenticity, the ideal of self-management, the anti-hierarchical exigency, are now used in order to promote the conditions required by the current mode of capitalist regulation, replacing the disciplinary framework characteristic of the Fordist period. Nowadays artistic and cultural production play a central role in the process of capital valorization and, through "neo-management", artistic critique has become an important element of capitalist productivity (Mouffe 2007).

In this way, according to Boltanski and Chiapello, the aesthetic critique has not only been neutralized by capitalism, but has fused with it as one of its prime modes of exploitation and expansion. However Mouffe posits that although elements of the aesthetic critique have indeed entered into a close relation to dominant power, they can, by virtue of this very positioning, offer an opening into different strategies of opposition. I argue that this altering of social relations is the core assumption and practice in cultural activism as a mode of opposition.

To expand on this further, the leitmotif of social centres is "joyful insurgency" (Shukaitis and Graeber 2007), with an emphasis on "imagination" as the very heart of transformational politics. Yet as Shukaitis points out, "[t]o invoke the imagination as underlying and supporting radical politics, over the past forty years, has become a cliché"

(Shukaitis 2009,10). But what is meant by this political imagination, and are current “imaginary politics” in radical scenes presenting us with anything different? Shukaitis’ research provides a particularly compelling framework to answer this and the related question of what does it mean to invoke the power of the imagination when it has already been seized by dominant power or seen as a “60s cliché? Shukaitis adopts a stance that seems to me unavoidable: radical cultural politics is “continually reconstituted against and through the dynamics of recuperation”, with a view to “keep open an antagonism without closure” (Ibid., 10).

What is meant by a social or radical imagination? Differing from C. Wright Mills’ sociological imagination, which is the capacity to envisage how macro structures impact on the individual, the social imagination is tied to creativity and political action.

The importance of the imagination finds its fullest expression in the work of Cornelius Castoriadis (1975) and his conception of the social imaginary as a radical, self-instituting form: the very capacity to create new forms of social relations and organizations that determine the course of social and historical development. The social imaginary is not a network of symbols, or a series of reflections, but the capacity for symbols and reflections to be created in the first place. It is these shared capacities, and their ability to give rise to new forms of what is thinkable, of new social possibilities or organizations and new modes of understanding (Shukaitis 2009, 14).

The imagination in this sense is not extraneous to social struggles and activities within fields. Shukaitis sees that the imagination has played a relatively minor role in social movements prior to the 1960s, mainly lying in “a secret drift of history that runs from medieval heresies to bohemian dreams of the Big Rock Candy Mountain in the 1930s. It

is a drift that connects Surrealism with migrant workers, the IWW²⁹ with Dadaism, and back again” (Ibid., 14).

A starting point for Shukaitis, which is a useful way to understand what social centres are all about, is the concept of aesthetic politics:

Rather than assuming the existence of a forum where politics, those inter-subjective understandings that make collective life possible, can be articulated through art, here we see the creation of an affective space: a common space and connection that is the necessary precondition for connections, discussion, and communities to emerge. This is aesthetic politics—not necessarily because of the directly expressed content of the work—but because of the role it plays in drawing lines of flight away from the staggering weight of everyday life, in hybridizing sounds and experiences to create space where other relations and possibilities can emerge (Ibid., 101).

Activism and art are together in building a different social realm. Essential to this is the practice of “affective composition” (Shukaitis 2007) which is a conception of an aesthetics based on the relations and experiences that emerge from the process of collective creation rather than the content of individual artistic composition. The term “composition” brings together class composition, understood in the sense of mobilizing collective forces, with composition as the essential practice of art making within the modern envisioning of art. As forms of collective capacity and self-organization are increased, strengthened by the circulation of struggles and ideas, the capitalist state attempts to find ways to disperse them or to appropriate these social energies for its own workings. Thus the cycles of the composition, decomposition, and re-composition of struggles are formed.

²⁹The Industrial Workers of the Workers, also known as “the Wobblies”, is a trade union that has aspects of anarchist self-organized principles rather than traditional union structures. Shukaitis has written about the activities surrounding the IWW’s organization of Starbucks’ workers in New York City.

Close to Shukaitis' idea of aesthetic politics is the concept of the Temporary Autonomous Zone (TAZ) developed by Hakim Bey (the pen name of Peter Lamborn Wilson) in a text that has circulated widely in the scenes in my research. TAZ refers to the social-political tactic of creating temporary spaces that elude structures of control. Bey argues that the best way to create a non-hierarchical system of social relationships is to concentrate on the present and on releasing one's own mind from the controlling mechanisms that have been imposed on it. TAZ was adopted by parts of rave culture in the UK in the early 1990s, especially in "free parties" (free from the restrictions of the legal club scene). Examples of Temporary Autonomous Zones include The Cacophony Society, Burning Man, Critical Mass and Food Not Bombs. Reclaim The Streets is also a strong example, and as already mentioned, very influential in the development of social centres and current radical culture scene in London, and thus requires special consideration. Consider this description of a Reclaim the Streets action:

Imagine: it's a hot summer's day, four lanes of traffic move sluggishly through the grey stinking city haze, and an airhorn pierces the drone of cars. Suddenly several groups of people appear, running out from side streets carrying 20-foot-long scaffolding poles. In a perfectly choreographed acrobatic drill, the scaffolding poles are erected bang in the middle of the road in the form of tripods and people climb to the top, balancing gracefully 20 feet above the tarmac. The road is now blocked to traffic but open to pedestrians. Then that spine-tingling peak experience occurs. Drifting across this extraordinary scene is Louis Armstrong's voice singing "What a Wonderful World" this wondrous sound is coming from an armoured personnel carrier which is now standing in the car-free street. Within minutes thousands of people have filled the road (Jordan in Duncombe 2002, 354).

RTS was originally formed in London, in 1991, shortly after the Twyford Down action which was the UK's first anti-road protest camp including members of Dongas (an anti-road direct-action group) and the environmentalist group Earth First! (SchNEWS

1997, 23). Although the occupation of Twyford was inspirational for RTS, it was primarily an ecological struggle focused on protecting nature from road development. RTS was a highly urban movement, oriented to “the street” as a space for public life, and viewed the automobile as symptomatic of capitalism (Aufheben 1998). Various RTS statements used Situationist inspired language with an emphasis on desire for a new experience urban space not based on capitalist production and consumption, the end to dead time and a desire for adventure.

Those involved in RTS were also spurred on by the Claremont Road occupation mentioned earlier in this chapter in relation to City Racing gallery. Jordan describes the occupation as an art spectacle with tangible stakes:

This was theatre like you’d never seen it; theatre on a scale that would not fit any opera house. It was a spectacle that cost the government over £2 million to enact; a spectacle in which we were in control, for which we had set the stage, provided the actors and invited the state to be in our play; to play our game. Eighty-eight hours later the last person left was plucked off the tower; all that was left to do was destroy the street and with it not only a hundred years of local history but also an extraordinary site of creative resistance (Jordan in Duncombe 2002, 352).

Following this, RTS organized the first of a long series of occupations beginning in 1995 on Camden High Street in London (Do or Die 1996), and ending with a street party against the arms trade in September 2003. During this time there were approximately 8 actions per year, with larger ones drawing 20,000 people (Klein 2000, 318.). RTS actions were typically large dance parties, with banners, costumes and props on temporarily occupied (8-18 hours) motorways or large streets. A statement by RTS encapsulates their intentions for the occupations:

We are basically about taking back public space from the enclosed private arena. At its simplest it is an attack on cars as a principle agent of enclosure. It's about reclaiming the streets as public inclusive space from the private exclusive use of the car. But we believe in this as a broader principle, taking back those things which have been enclosed within capitalist circulation and returning them to collective use as commons (in Duncombe 2002, 352).

Using what could be considered an early example of “flash mob” tactics, the location of the RTS occupations would only be announced shortly before an event with often deliberately cryptic directions (‘take a district line at such a such a time – instructions to follow’), with the effect of disrupting police control and creating a sense of adventure among participants. A mass of people would converge and slowly block traffic to the point of completely closing the road. A sound system would be brought in, along with decorations forming a carnival-like environment. This basic format became a model of protest that circulated around the globe during the late 1990s and early 2000s. RTS was organized through regular open meetings and other more exclusive, secretive meetings due to the fear of police infiltration.

The event on the 18th of June, 1999, called “Carnival against Capital” but subsequently referred to as J18, is considered by almost all of the activists I have been in contact with who were active in this period to be one of the largest and most successful actions of the RTS movement. It was an early example of a counter-globalization protests (it coincided with a G8 summit in Birmingham), with the WTO protest in Seattle following in November of the same year. The event involved about 10,000 people and shut down the banking district of London. Other RTS events formed direct alliances with striking Liverpool Dockers and Tube Workers in London. The idea of the actions, beyond a specific road development, labour struggle or summit, was to build political and social

alliances and a general “culture of resistance.” The overall experience of occupying a large, strategic area of the capitalist city and transforming it into an alternative social space can be incredibly empowering for participants and give them a tangible sense that dramatic transformations can be made and that they don’t have to take a back seat to the usual occupation of the city—consumer capitalism.

With connections to concepts like “social imagination” and the RTS actions, social centre culture can be associated with new social movements as defined by Habermas as movements that “deviate from the welfare-state pattern of institutionalized conflict over distribution” (Habermas 1981, 33). Accordingly, new social movements are mainly concerned with the “grammar of forms of life” (Ibid., 34) and engaged in conflicts around the quality of life, equality, individual self-realization, participation and human rights. Habermas argues that such conflicts should be understood as resistance to tendencies to colonize the life world, and are aimed at revitalizing buried possibilities for expression and communication. Continuing through this logic, the impact of social movements cannot be gauged by their direct effects on political systems, but rather in values and experience from which various political mobilizations emerge. However, as I argued in chapter two, neoliberalism in a post-welfare state context is centred upon the inclusion of self-realization into circuits of production—in a process Foucault refers to as “capital-ability”—and in this way enfolds subjective practice within an overall economic order. Therefore questions of self-realization and expression are linked with the politics of material conditions and distribution of resources.

Ruggiero, in his analysis of Italian social centres, reminds us that a view of social movements as oriented to the development of cultural values, quality of life, new forms of subjectivity, etc. is more a question of new social movement *theory*—an analytical frame through which various kinds of movements, including even more traditional practices such as convention organized labour struggles, can be viewed. So the difference is really between new social movement theory and the other modes of analysis, principle among these being resource mobilization theory, with its emphasis on organizational structure tied to questions of leadership, inter-group alliances, and the specific conditions through which movements emerge. Synthesis between new movement theory and resource mobilization theory by this point in time is hardly miraculous, but still very significant. Ruggiero and Chatterton present models that combine these approaches in the study of social centres, and in the following chapter I will also present such a synthesis of rampART.

Now that I have laid out certain relations between art and activism and sketched out some of the main terms and the nature of cultural activism in social centres in London, I will now move through the specific histories that led to social centres. To begin with, the term “social centre,” through my fieldwork experience, interviews and review of research literature specifically on social centres, appeared in London only in the early 2000s and was taken from continental organizations. Spaces like social centres existed in the UK before, but went under names like Infoshops, autonomous spaces and anarchist or squat centres. Even though current spaces in the UK might be called social

centres, they aren't necessarily like their continental namesakes, which have nevertheless been very influential in the UK.

Chatterton (2006) has outlined the development of autonomous spaces in the UK as occurring in three overlapping waves. The first emerged under the guise of anarchist autonomy clubs of the 1980s inspired by punk and tied to anti-fascist activism and "claimants rights" initiatives. Autonomous spaces and punk centres of the 1980s, notable among them was the Autonomy Centre located in the East End of London. "Generally known as "Autonomy Clubs," these radical spaces were both the symbols and centres of punk's second wave, which fused anarchist politics with a wider DIY counterculture among an angry and non-conformist youth generation alienated by the political project of Thatcherism" (Ibid., 306). Important political struggles for these spaces revolved around the Claimants' Union for the rights of the unemployed, antifascist issues and animal liberation. They were set-up and run by collectives of anarchists or communists and highly politicized anarcho-punk bands like Crass and The Apostles who helped fund their existence. Autonomy Clubs mixed live music with book fairs, fanzine conventions, discussion groups, films, debates and political workshops (Martin, 1994). Although the kinds of have music have changed, in many ways this roster is similar to the activities in social centres 20 years later. The next wave in autonomous spaces in the UK began with the mobilizations leading to the Poll tax riots in 1990, activism against the Criminal Justice Act of 1994 and the anti-road occupations that fused with aspects of rave culture. The third wave saw establishment of social spaces connected to the alter-globalization movements of the early 2000s, and among these is the social centre model I am

researching.

There are a range of related “radical spaces” such as squat cafés, protest camps, convergence centres, eco-villages, as well as Infoshops which have served as antecedents to social centres. Infoshops were largely a 1990s phenomena (though a few are still around) in North America and Europe, with cooperatively run libraries and/or bookstores (comprised of zines, political publications from an ultra-left or anarchist perspective and books made in small runs in home-made or from small publishers), reading rooms and internet terminals. In the UK they often function as counter-citizens advice bureaux offering information on claiming benefits, dealing with housing associations, legal matters and practical information on squatting, as well as serving as places for debate and discussion, and sometimes serving as a location for alternative media production. They appear like grass-roots bookstores, with displays and book cases. There is generally an overwhelming display of posters and invites for current events, music performances, political demonstrations and open meetings. According to Chris Atton (1999), one of the few to do research on these organizations in Britain, the British model grew out of the aforementioned squatted anarchist centres of the 1980s, such as the 121 space in Brixton. A typical example would be the Autonomous Centre of Edinburgh (ACE), which had its roots in the Edinburgh Unemployed Workers Centre in the 1990s in a building owned by the city council and run voluntarily by unemployed people. In face of benefit reforms (re-branding the dole as “Job Seeker’s Allowance in the late 1990s), the centre played an active role in struggles against welfare reform, the anti-poll tax activities and anti-road protests. In its heyday the Infoshop had a cafe, darkrooms, reading/publication areas,

meeting rooms, a community art space and music workshops. It was cut off by the council due to these political activities in 1994, and resisted eviction for 6 months. Afterward it continued autonomously in a rented storefront, and in this phase became more centred around anarchist and activist subcultures. Another way to describe this is that it turned into a social centre with a vegan cafe, an “underground record store,” a “people’s food co-op,” and sought to be a space, as described by ACE, for “socializing in an anti-sexist, racist, homophobic environment,” and to be an “epicentre of alternative/DIY kulture” (in Atton 1999, 63).

Before considering the continental influence on British social centres, the impact of the Maastricht treaty of 1995 should be noted. The treaty allowed free passage of European citizens within the European Union, and for members to be able to live (with basic levels of social support and healthcare) and work in any country within the EU. As well the impact of discount airlines in the late 1990s cannot be underestimated in its impact on pan-European activities, especially among groups with very low incomes. The current social centre scene in London is highly international. From my experience I would estimate that membership in most groups and organizations is often comprised of over 50% non-British citizens.

As noted, the term “social centre,” and certain related practices, can be traced in part to continental European activities, predominantly in Italy and Spain, and also Germany, Netherlands and Denmark. I will focus on the model of the Italian *centri sociali*, as it has such a strong tradition and has been influential on groups in London, and briefly outline their main features. Most existing *centri sociali* date back to the 1990-

1993 period following a large wave of student protests. In the past 15 years there have been about 250 social centres in Italy (Mudu 2004, 928). In Milan in 2000 there were 28 social centres, with 12 of those being considered larger facilities (Ruggiero 2000, 173). The average monthly attendance for all social centres in Milan is about 20,000 visits (Ruggiero 174). They are usually found in the historic centres of cities, often occupying old factories, schools and hospital buildings that have been left dormant for years. Some of these are squatted, some are not. Examples of better known social centres, with international reputations, are Leoncavallo and Forte Prenestino in Rome.

Centri sociali are seen as arising from the collapse of communist movements and Operismo, which left a considerable vacuum in the Italian political landscape (Mudu 2004, 921). They were a component in an emerging set of non-parliamentary actors including activist groups, radio stations, bookstores and political collectives. They are tightly networked with other social centres, in a very sectarian climate with various centres identifying with certain ultra leftist groups principally either communists or anarchists, and in certain cases with fascist movements. For examples various social centre are associated with the group *Disobbedienti*, which is aligned with the post-Operismo political movement. Currently affiliations are occasionally made with political parties, including Communists, the Green Party and the fascist Northern League party.

If a major generalization can be made, Italian *centri sociali* are much less “underground” than their British counterparts, with a higher visibility both in the physical city and in the mainstream media. They are often venues for music groups which, in a

British context, would perform in commercial venues. Along these lines, they are more in the model of social enterprises, and filling the space that existing commercial circuits in Italy don't cover. In this position they often play a key role in cultural movements and music scenes, such as Italian hip-hop and cyber punk (Ibid., 925). Larger social centres are capable of hosting events for audiences of up to 5000.

They are self-managed through open meetings, self-financed through cafe and bar sales and rely almost entirely on volunteer labour. The tendency is to have no written charter, keep no records or written reports and have an extremely high turnover of personnel (Ibid., 923). During the 1990s squats became “normalized”³⁰ all over Europe, and in Italy, by 1998, 50% had entered into agreements with primarily municipal governments (Ibid., 923). Splits developed between those social centres that enter into relations with institutions and those who refused.

Activities in *centri sociali* include: political debates, legal advice, a base for immigrant activism, concerts, film clubs, exhibitions, dances for the elderly (*centri sociali* function as general community centres in a way they rarely do in the UK), music production, discos, language courses, computers and yoga classes, etc. (Ibid., 926). They also regularly organize demonstrations and street parades. Some of them have production facilities for music media and this fits within the self-organized ethos of producing what one consumes (Ruggiero 2000, 177). According to Ruggiero, the main motivation for people visiting social centres was for “sociability” or the desire to “stay together,”

³⁰“Normalized” means entering into contractual tenancy relations (generally with rental fees) with either private landlords or more likely municipal governments.

followed by attending concerts or art events, and lastly to participate in political campaigns (Ibid., 174).

Having considered the development of social centres in the UK, in terms of historical antecedents and influences, I would like to conclude this chapter by returning to the relationship between art and activism. It could be asserted that although social centres and radical culture scenes present combinations of culture and politics, they really have little to do with art as it has come to be defined. Such a claim relies on certain assumptions that I would like to unfold and challenge through a consideration of the avant-garde. The avant-garde has historically presented us with various scenarios that include both a radical synthesis of the activities that have been traditionally associated with art and activism, and also scenarios that are completely antithetical to anything to do with overt politics. More precisely, the avant-garde presents us with two contradictory tendencies: the integration of art and life into a transformational praxis or revolutionary moment (similar to the goals of Shukaitis' aesthetic politics or RTS actions); and a complete separation of art from the rest of life (*l'art pour l'art*). This is carried over into the tension in contemporary art between the desire to protect aesthetics from an integration with other areas in society, which would generally lead art being subsumed by the cultural industries and transformed by instrumentalist forces, and the position that art's radical potential can only be realized by a direct application of art into social struggles—which we can see in activist art, community art and arguably certain Relational Aesthetics practices. Forms of autonomy or separation are looked at either as that which enables or prevents art from realizing its potential. But perhaps these

approaches aren't as distinct or opposed as they might appear. Therefore some kind of third position seems to be a reasonable approach—in order to be socially engaged one requires a perspective and practices enabled by autonomy and thus the importance of interdependencies or productive contradictions between autonomy and heteronomy; but what are ways these approaches mix yet maintain integrity? As Jacques Rancière has expressed it, “[h]ow can the notion of “aesthetics,” as a specific experience, lead at once to the idea of a pure world of art and of the self-suppression of art in life; to the tradition of avant-garde radicalism and to aestheticization of common existence?” (Rancière 2002, 134). For Rancière, understanding the politics of aesthetics means comprehending the way autonomy and heteronomy are linked: “playing an autonomy against a heteronomy and a heteronomy against an autonomy, playing one linkage between art and non-art against another such linkage” (Ibid., 150).

But what are ways that we can understand these mixtures of art and politics, autonomy and heteronomy, especially in an activist context with its usual commitments to concrete action and instrumental effects? What are particular instances of “playing an autonomy against a heteronomy”? One version of this is art historian Hal Foster’s *The Return of the Real: the avant-garde at the end of the century* (1996) which presents us with a conception of art comprised of a vertical and horizontal axis. The vertical axis is temporal, diachronic and which doesn’t break with a past but rather is oriented to the methodical development of the traditional area of visual art competence. This is in keeping with Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried’s estimations of the project of Modern Art as oriented toward disciplinary purity and “maintain[ing] past standards of

excellence” (Greenberg quoted by Foster), while continuing the advancement of the field through reflexive interrogation. The horizontal axis has a synchronic, spatial dynamic which seeks to break with past formations and extend the breadth of artistic competence into “social dimensions” (Foster 1996, xi). Certain movements have favoured one axis or the other, and yet others still, Foster posits, such as the Neo-avant-gardism of the 1960s kept both axis in “critical coordination” (Ibid., xi). Foster diagnoses much of the art of the 1990s as having lost this coordination, and his work is in many ways a call for a restoration of coherence and balance within the art field. The focus of his criticism is what he terms the “ethnographic turn” of 1990s art work, which demonstrates a rejection of, as Peter Burger phrased it, “a historical succession of techniques and styles” in favour of “a simultaneity of the radically disparate” (Ibid., xi). Foster, limiting art to the traditional bounds of the liberal public sphere, sees a danger in the horizontal model of losing expertise and whatever consensus that has been achieved around art thus far, and leading to a free-for-all of “interpretative communities shouting past each other” (Ibid., xiv).

For Foster, even the “ethnographic art practices” of the 1990s (such as the work of Renee Green, Allan Sekula and Fred Wilson) violated the coordination between the breath and historical depth in the art field, and therefore one wonders how activism and art could ever meet under these stipulations. A different approach, put forward by cultural critic Brian Holmes (2004), is a genealogy that leads directly from the historic avant-garde to activist contexts. Holmes sees avant-garde art of the past as presenting an ever widening scope of intervention, with the objective of undermining the imaginary

environment necessary for capitalist reproduction. As Brian Holmes puts it, “[a]rt can offer a chance for society to collectively reflect on the imaginary figures it depends upon for its very consistency, its self-understanding” (Holmes 2004); or described another way as, art is a process of “psychic deconditioning and disidentification” (Holmes 278, 2007) from the dominant symbolic order. He begins with a fairly standard avant-gardist lineage comprised of the dialectical pairing of Dada and Constructivism, both with the aim of art overcoming its own status as “merely” art whether destructively, as in the case of Dada, or constructively in the project of Constructivism’s infusing design, architecture and early mass media “with a new dynamics of social purpose and a multi-perspectival intelligence of political dialogue” (Ibid. 273). From this Holmes considers the postwar Situationist International’s project of *détournement* and radical cartography, and sees the next step of avant-gardism as lying in the democratizing, participatory movements of the 70s and 80s, such as punk, mail art and AIDS activism. The genealogy concludes with the larger scale “DIY geopolitics” such as RTS, the Euro Mayday movement and the tactical media group the Yes Men. In this trajectory of the avant-garde we see “the slow emergence of an experiential territory where artistic practices that have gained autonomy from the gallery-magazine-museum system and from the advertising industry, and can be directly connected to attempts at social transformation” (Holmes 290, 2007).

Even further along these lines, art historian Gene Ray has examined not so much the passage from avant-gardist art to cultural activism, but rather how deeply committed avant-garde artists of early 20th century were to radical politics. Ray argues that the avant-garde has been depoliticized, similar to the ways Hal Foster has demonstrated how

Russian Constructivism was stripped of political significance and presented in postwar western art institutions as formalism. Ray sees that from its beginnings in the nineteenth century, “the artistic avant-gardes oriented themselves in relation to the political avant-gardes of their own time” (Ray 2006, 6). The particular artistic avant-gardes he focuses on are:

the groups of the international Dada network, and above all Berlin Dada, in the four years from 1917 through 1920; the various groupings of the surrealists, from the Barres trial in 1921 to the publication of the second and final issue of *Clé* in 1939; and the Situationist International, in the twenty years spanning its Letterist proto-formation of 1952 to its self-dissolution in 1972 (Ibid., 2).

In contrast to the cliché of avant-garde rebellion limited to the scorn of bourgeois manners, Ray observes that artists of these historical avant-gardes were also

anti-capitalists and activists—or, in their own twentieth-century idiom, “militants.” They may have disagreed sharply on the role of the state and on the projected forms of post-revolutionary society. But they shared a damning critique of capitalism and a radical rejection of partial or reformist solutions that would leave the structures of exploitation and domination in place (Ray 2006, 6).

The Dada movement exemplifies this for Ray, especially in the activities of the Berlin Dada groups in the months following the so-called November Revolution of 1918. It is worth looking at this involvement outlined by Ray in a bit of detail if only to off-set the incredulity that continues to regard the avant-garde as non-activist and resistant to direct political action. Leading up to this point in 1918 Dada members George Grosz, Wieland Herzfelde and John Heartfield had established Malik-Verlag, the publishing organization for their antiwar journals and portfolios of Grosz’s corrosively satirical drawings. The group around Malik-Verlag supported the Spartakistsbund who were, along with other leftist groups, part of an armed uprising lead in part by Rosa Luxemburg. Also at this time Grosz, Heartfield and Jung had joined the new, yet-to-be Bolshevized German

Communist Party (KPD). As a result of the publishing work in support of Spartakistsbund, Herzfelde was arrested and held for 13 days.

Shortly after this a Dada manifesto was produced demanding “the international revolutionary union of all creative and intellectual persons in the whole world on the basis of radical communism” (Ray 2006, 9). In 1920 the First International Dada Fair was held, and the jokes and pranks typically associated with Dada “paled before the fully-conscious and consciously political demolitions of Grosz” (Ibid., 10) In particular Ray points to the “corrected masterpieces,” such as a slashed reproduction of Botticelli’s *Primavera*, which were shown side-by-side with a barrage of bluntly anti-capitalist placards and posters; one, bearing a photo-portrait of Grosz, reading: “Dada is the Deliberate Decomposition of the Bourgeois Conception of the World/ Dada Stands on the Side of the Revolutionary Proletariat” (in Ibid., 12).

In considering Holms and Ray’s alternative art histories of a politically militant avant-garde, the question arises as to why are these might be seen as merely revisionist or alterative histories? Why does the “case have to be made” for the connections between art and political militancy in the first place? One likely answer to this is the dramatic realignment of the concept and practices of the avant-garde during the postwar period. Serge Guilbaut’s (1983) examination of Abstract Expressionism presents a very clear version of the depoliticization of the avant-garde during this time, both in terms of artistic production and the critical reception of art, which has had a strong and enduring influence on the art field.

Guilbaut begins with considering what seems like a rather specialized question of why Abstract Expressionism achieved such a particular status not just in American art but in the entire art field. Guilbaut asserts that the reason why this kind of art, exemplified by Mark Rothko and Jackson Pollock, superseded other movements was due to a drastic redrawing not only of the artistic avant-garde but of the political landscape of the left in the postwar period. Guilbaut follows debates in art beginning in the 1930s and reveals an avant-garde with direct, unabashed connection with communist ideas and political movements. Although primarily about art in the American context, as the title of the book suggests—*How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom and the Cold War*—Guilbaut's thesis is that the cultural fate of the West in the post-war context was greatly affected by the cultural and political debates in New York beginning in the 1930s, continued into the anti-communist diatribes of 1947-48 and finally emerged into a reorientation of the avant-garde that promised an aesthetic freedom beyond the madness of polarized world politics. The end point of these shifts and debates was a radically depoliticized art, yet nevertheless in alignment with the dominant political ideology of the time; thus “artistic rebellion was transformed into aggressive liberal ideology” (Guilbaut 1983, 200).

Abstract Expression grew in dominance in the immediate postwar period not out of its aesthetic value alone, but also through its political suitability and ideological use. Consciously or unconsciously, cooperation between the avant-garde and the liberal political establishment saw the rise of an art form that celebrated individual freedom seemingly cleared of its direct participation in political movements. This ascendancy was

a combined effect of the work of critics such as Clement Greenberg and Mayer Schapiro, and the development of art exhibitions replete with CIA sponsorship. It may sound like a conspiratorial view, but Guilbaut makes a largely inconvertible case for the “de-Marxization” (Ibid., 17) of art in the postwar period.

Guilbaut presents the turn to abstraction not as the result of reactionary forces or simply capitulation, rather, it served as a refuge for a cultural left who could no longer inhabit political positions due to Sovietism. “[Abstraction] allowed a militant, committed art that was neither propagandistic nor condescending to its audience” (Ibid., 197), and this was not only a reorientation of the avant-garde, but of the left itself both in the American and European context.

Faced with the annihilation of the individual in the totalitarian regimes and with the absorption of the individual into the mass of consumers in the capitalist regimes, the American left tried to stake out a middle ground from which the individual painter or artist could assert his independence of both left and right (Ibid., 198).

However, this “neutral” position was rather easily enlisted.

The avant-garde artist who categorically refused to participate in political discourse and tried to isolate himself by accentuating his individuality was co-opted by liberalism which viewed the artist's individualism as an excellent weapon with which to combat Soviet authoritarianism (Ibid., 143).

The goal was then to fight for the *Vital Centre*, which was the title of Arthur Schlesinger's influential book published in 1949. Modeling an early version of Third Way dynamics, conflict and radicalism are seen as no longer driven by left-right tensions, but instead through the daring of the avant-gardist who pursues expression as opposed to political freedom.

I am not suggesting that this was the last word on the depoliticization of the avant-garde, and that nothing has changed in the art field since Abstract Expressionism. It is significant to note that Conceptual Art of the late 1960s, which began as a critique of almost everything Abstract Expressionism stood for (the artist as a spiritual, expressive individual, engaged both with the inner reaches of his psyche and the true nature of pictorial space and oblivious to all else), was one of the first avant-gardist movements to be embraced by the corporate world. In his account of 1960s conceptual art, *Conceptual Art and the Politics of Publicity* (2003), art historian Alexander Alberro focused on impresario Seth Siegelaub, who, influenced by the theories of Marshall McLuhan, promoted the work of now-canonical conceptual artists and encouraged information and communication technology corporations, notably Xerox, to sponsor the 1968 exhibition *Information*. Xerox sought to enhance their corporate image through an association with radical contemporary art because they would be seen as innovative and forward-thinking. Such processes of “image transfer” between art and the corporate world have of course become old hat, but what is significant here is that the Conceptual Art exhibition *Information* is a very early example of a redefinition of avant-gardist creativity from coldwar individual freedom to *innovation* within the terms of business and technology.

It is not until the 1970s that we see artists reconsider their depoliticized situation. In London this was evidenced by Peter Kennard’s photomontages for the Workers Press, Jo Spence’s socialist feminist artwork, and the formation of the League of Socialist Artist and The Artists’ Union; as well as Gustav Metzger’s involvement in the International Coalition for the Liquidation of Art and his instigation of an art strike from 1977 to 1980.

But even though, simplifying matters, art becomes repoliticized in the 1970s, and much of this work was incredibly radical in its aims, it was then bracketed off as within the genre or niche of “political art,” and something very different than political radicalism of Berlin Dada as described by Gene Ray.

The difficult relations between art and activism, and the continuation of aspects of avant-gardism in activist practices point to the relevance of social centres as a possible coalescence between cultural and political radicalism. It is therefore necessary to analyze the specifics of current self-organized projects. Following the contextualization I have provided in this chapter, the next chapter will empirically examine the case study of rampART social centre and its radical scene, with a particular aim of analyzing forms of participation.

5. Case study of rampART social centre

Having examined the historical context for artist-run projects and social centres, and addressed some of the terms and ethos of the radical cultural scene in London, what is now required is to perform a close-up, multifaceted study of rampART social centre. Social centres and their scenes lay claims to being emancipatory, involved in the production of radical subjectivities and engaged in a “prefigurative politics” (Downing 1984, 37) wherein groups attempt to practice alternative principles in the present, not merely criticizing existing systems and making demands for future circumstances. These values and objectives come together in forms of participation active in rampART, and thus this is the focus of my analysis in this chapter. I open this up by first examining the basic structure and position of rampART in terms of urban space and then assess the kinds of events and cultural activities conducted in the social centre. This leads into an examination of the participants involved in the organization with respect to their backgrounds and the commitments they make; and finally I directly analyze the nature of participatory practices in social centres.

To understand these aspects necessitates a detailed and intimate engagement with social centres. As mentioned in the introduction, I have been an active participant in rampART and the radical scene in London for three years, and drawing upon this, I will provide descriptions with a strong ethnographic dimension—personal and experiential—with a view to exploring the texture of a social centre in London. This is then expanded by an analysis based on interview material³¹, basic demographic data and factual

³¹ I conducted 19 interviews of participants and organizers of social centres and artist-run projects.

information pertaining to urban space and a cataloguing of events for one year at rampART. As well, I apply pertinent social movement theory, especially Alberto Melucci's, in order to study the nature of social centre participation.

Urban space

The entrance to rampART is rather narrow, and, as the building is squatted, has been made narrower still to assist in barricading should bailiffs attempt eviction. RampART doesn't have opening hours so one must visit during a specific event, and even at such times the door is often locked so a visitor rings a pound-shop door bell, and awaits entry upon visual inspection through the mail slot. During tense times (immediate threat of eviction or under police scrutiny) partial barricades have to be removed to let visitors in. In spite of all this, entry is more novel than intimidating—more like entering a tree house than a safe house. It can feel like you have to know someone to get in or simply be in the know in terms of already having a familiarity with spaces like this and their entrance routines. The building itself is semi-dilapidated (leaky roof, bad toilets, wonky windows, etc.) and full of jury-rigged repairs. Numerous stickers, notices (mostly out of date) and tags appear on the walls.

On the outside of the building is a mural around the ground floor, in a “street art” style reminiscent of 1990s rave visuals. There is a hand-painted “rampART” sign with “hippie-like” lettering and the street number is written in chalk above the entrance. For a long time there used to be a mock blue and white police-tape above the door with the text “polite line – do not cross.” From the entrance, through a short hallway, one comes into

the main hall which has a stage with a projection screen in one corner, and a bar and kitchen in another corner. Arctic camouflage netting hangs from the ceiling in part of the hall as decoration, and the space is lit by clusters of regular energy saver bulbs and florescent strips.

The building has three floors and is about 6000 square feet in volume, comprised of larger open areas and smaller meeting rooms, a library, workshop/studio spaces, store rooms, several bedrooms and two kitchens. At one time it was a girls school, and before that it was probably used for light industrial manufacturing. The main hall can seat about 75 people for a screening or talk, and during parties can fit 200, spilling out onto the street and upstairs. At times, during large parties and at meetings before the protests around the G20 summit in April 2009, there were over 300 people in the building, with the building's wooden structure creaking under the load. The furniture consists of old sofas, used easy-chairs and a vast number of small wooden chairs presumably left-over from the girls school days. The hall area varies from being quite tidy and attractive in a grassroots-underground way, to being cluttered, to being abjectly dirty. The battle against entropy (dirt, rats, spilled beer and the amassing of junk—furniture parts, bike parts, sewing machines, building materials, decorations) here is an endless losing battle. The 70 year old building is heavily used, minimally maintained and poorly built to begin with. The roof leaks and the building is heated solely by portable electric heaters.

I first entered rampART in December 2007. Up to that point I had never been in a squatted building or a social centre, and hadn't even heard of the term "social centre." I

got word that rampART, which began in May 2004, was having an emergency meeting because it was under threat of eviction. In London it is not a criminal offence to occupy an abandoned building, however, the landlord can regain possession through a legal process of eviction. I was exploring London and searching for organizations that seemed interesting, something that I could get involved with—as much for my research as for my own desire to participate in a collectively organized project that mixed culture with political dissent. I was told by friends of friends that rampART might be of interest, and was open to people joining. It seemed I shared something with the people at rampART—a similar attitude, disposition, a desire for a kind of process politics wherein how people work together is as important as specific issues, concepts or campaigns. Although, as mentioned, I had never been involved in a social centre before and hadn't been in London for very long, I nevertheless “got” the organization and felt relatively comfortable getting to know people and playing a role in the organization. The reasons why I felt relatively at home in a social centre and had a seemingly pre-existing familiarity, however partial, with a kind of organization I had never been involved with before are complicated, and involve having a relatively similar class background and *habitus* to the other participants, and also speaks of the hospitality and openness of those in the organization.

Getting acquainted with one of these kinds of organizations, or disorganizations, during a time of crisis—as mentioned my first time in the place was at an emergency meeting—is not that unusual, as these kinds of spaces are always going through one kind of crisis or another, whether they are being evicted, in the grips of a dramatic action (such as serving as a convergence centre for a large scale protest or in the aftermath of a police

raid) or in the midst of group-based conflicts, full-blown mutinies or reformations, money troubles, etc. The situation in these kinds of organizations changes every few months—new faces appear and others are never seen again, the issues and lingo shifts and the feel of the group evolves; as well, new social centres appear suddenly and other ones stop. When I first became involved in social centres in London, there were five centres I could clearly identify (rampART, the Morgue, the Library House, Belgrade Road and the Radical Dairy); three years later none of these existed (rampART was finally evicted in October 2009). The life of a London social centre runs anywhere from a few weeks to several years. RampART was active for over 5 years (May 2004 to October 2009), which is considered a long time for an organization of its type. It continues on as a group organizing events in other spaces.

RampART functioned primarily as a venue for various groups (activist and cultural) to use for events, meetings, parties, discussions, thematic cafes, reading groups and screenings; as well as for art exhibitions and music performances. In addition to this, rampART was used to temporarily billet people, such as 40 Bolivians on a tour of the UK, Plane Stupid³² activists released from police arrest and during the G20 protests of 2009 there were over 100 people who stayed for several days. In addition to this, it regularly hosts visitors from other social centres and “people in the movement” from around the world. As mentioned the building is squatted and thus rent-free. Other expenses of the organization are funded primarily through drink sales and entrance

³² An environmental Direct Action group focused on stopping airport expansion and occupied the main runway of Stansted Airport in 2009.

“donations” at the many parties, cafes and concerts. The organization has a collective structure with no formal roles.

RampART was located on Rampart Street, its namesake, which is a short, narrow, cobblestoned street in the Whitechapel area of the East End of London. The neighbourhood is run-down and very busy. The architecture is primarily Georgian, in varying states of repair. Whitechapel has always been more or less poor and populated by recently arrived immigrants. The neighbourhood has a long history of radicalism, being home to 19th century anarchist and communist groups, and was comprised of large Jewish and Irish immigrant populations. In 1936 the Cable Street Riot occurred in the area when the British Union of Fascists, led by Oswald Mosley and authorized by Scotland Yard and the Home Office, attempted to march through the East End. Anarchist, Communist and Jewish groups organized a resistance to the march, and this ended up in the well known riot. Whitechapel is now a predominantly Muslim neighbourhood comprised of people with Bangladeshi backgrounds. In 2010 the English Defence League, an anti-immigrant, quasi-fascist group threatened to march through the neighbourhood, however the march, was opposed by Islamic groups, anarchists and neighbourhood activists of all sort. The march was cancelled, with no doubt the collective memory of Cable Street playing a role. Whitechapel has numerous gentrified pockets given its proximity to The City of London and Canary Wharf—two banking districts on either side of the neighbourhood of which I will elaborate on further in this section. RampART is also near Brick Lane, which is a street that mixes “hipsters” (and their cafes, bars, bike shops, galleries and boutiques) with Bangladeshi restaurants and clubs. RampART fits the area

with its rough around the edges yet heavily used quality, but it has very little connection with the Bangladeshi community—various attempts have been made (afterschool activities with 6th form girls, a concert in support of the hip-hop group Fun^da^mental when it was investigated under terrorist legislation³³), but the gap between anarchist squatters and Islamic residents was not easily bridged. RampART was also surrounded by buildings that have been or will be renovated into luxury flats, and the rampART property itself has been granted permission to be redeveloped into similar residential flats. However, due to a relative over-supply and the current recession, the building still remains undeveloped.

The building is a ruin within a ruin, in the way one encounters not only leftovers of its previous official uses as a factory and school, but also numerous artefacts from earlier rampART projects, such as the radio room (replete with an “on air” sign)³⁴ and remnants of the “hack lab.” As much as it is a vibrant hub of “resistance culture” in London, it’s also like an attic of radical subculture, with bits and pieces of seemingly every radical project, neighbourhood campaign and youth culture trend, (stencils, stickers, graffiti from anti-G8 summit protests, various written slogans and tags), as well as bits of activist infrastructure (white boards, sound equipment, banners). In a very ephemeral scene, the social centre acts as a lee space where ephemera collects. There are leftovers of health and safety signage—exit signs, fire extinguishers—from an attempt a

³³John Hutnyk’s “Pantomime Terror: Diasporic Music in a Time of War” (2007) provides a good account of this event at rampART.

³⁴The radio studio was primarily used for internet streamcasts. It was originally set up during the European Social Forum in 2004, when rampart hosted the “off-social forum” program. It was also used for various other events and at various times was connected to a low-power FM transmitter.

few years ago to accord with regulations. Detritus of a consumer society finds its way in as well—several rocking horses, stuffed animals and computer CRT monitors. I assume they were things found on the street, residents' (former) possessions or stuff shifted over from other squats after evictions; but that's just a guess, I never actually saw anyone bring them in. When asked, no-one knows for sure. A squatted building can be re-appropriated surplus value or just simply occupying something which has been more or less discarded, replete with an accumulation of all manner of things which are no longer wanted.

As mentioned, the first few visits to a squatted space can feel both a little uneasy like trespassing (feeling somehow one could get into trouble with the law even though it is legal to squat in the UK), but also thrilling as one enters into a liminal legal and social space. It can't be under-estimated that holding events in an occupied space, temporarily beyond the social relations of rent and ownership, has a pervasive and potentially transformative effect; although this effect is hard to describe. It actually is not easy to conduct a thought experiment where we try to imagine life without possessions, and harder and stranger still to do this through an organizational experiment with a real building connected to various communities. Property in a capitalist society is more or less sacred and a squatted social centre is a transgression, however defiant or muddled. A tangible sense of this fades and the arrangement eventually starts to feel more routine—the “squat” feeling becomes a familiar mode. However fringe squatting might seem, Colin Ward reminds us that “[s]quatting is the oldest mode of tenure in the world, and we are all descended from squatters. This is as true of the Queen with her 176,000 acres as it

is of the 54 percent of householders in Britain who are owner-occupiers. They are all the ultimate recipients of stolen land, for to regard our planet as a commodity offends every conceivable principle of natural rights” (Ward 1980, 54).

To analyze squatting in London is to study various forms of precariousness. When active in these spaces, the question you stop asking is “how long do you think we’ll be here?” People do occupy squats for years, and although rampART was in 15-17 Rampart Street from 2004-2009, after an eviction, the rampART was relocated in 3 different sites between October 2009 and March 2010. When you don’t institutionalize, and organize without state or market funding, this is the temporal framework. Occupation of an empty building is for the participants an assertion, “claiming a space” and an intervention into the city; it is also filling a gap, at least for the moment, no-one else wants. In many ways social centres in London put little pressure or demands on state power; in other ways the whole point of autonomous organizing is to pursue activity independent from the approval of dominant institutions and not tied to the sanctioning of the state. The figure of the “anarchist squatter” continues to be a favourite object of fear and allure for the mainstream press and the state³⁵, and is connected to various moral panics. To squat is to be in a continual, easy-going siege where one faces so many imminent eviction threats, fires, leaks and incursions of all sorts. Unlike the heroic defences of squatted social centres in continental Europe—such as Cox 18 in Milan and Ungdomshuset in Copenhagen—London spaces continue without the obvious signs of militancy. The

³⁵In 2009 the Metropolitan Police issued press releases warning of a “summer of rage” tied to possible unrest triggered by the financial crisis, and singled out anarchists as plotting attacks (Daily Mail, 2009).

attitude in London is generally: if forced, just move on to another building, don't waste energy defending what will be inevitably lost, set-up something new. It is out of hard work, luck and muddling through rather than rigid adherence that the organization continues. As I will develop further, a social centre moves along in slides and jerks, endemic to the conflicts and interdependencies between neoliberal society and the radical left, and within the vagaries of unpaid labour and burn-out cycles.

The location of rampART and related organizations can be characterized as in the "periphery of the centre." They are located primarily in East London, Hackney and South East London—particularly in the boroughs of Tower Hamlets and Southwark just outside of central London. Why are these organizations in these places? The organizations appear in affordable yet reasonably central areas. Because most of them are squatted, and therefore don't pay rent, the level of affordability applies more to their participants and audiences. The population of greater London is between eight and ten million depending on where the line is drawn, and although London can certainly appear crowded, or even overwhelmed as the tabloid press often portrays it, the population of central London has actually declined slightly since 1980 and more significantly since the late 1930s when it reached its peak, largely due to trends toward lower population density (Hamnett 1997).

Applying data from Chris Hamnett's comprehensive *Unequal City*, which charts major economic and social trends in London since 1960, rampART's location is in an area of high unemployment and one of the lowest income areas in greater London. Although it is also an area where property values are disproportionally increasing relative

to other areas, and with a sharp rise in numbers of professionals residing in the area; and in this way can be considered as an area of intensive gentrification. The urban fabric of Tower Hamlets (rampART's location) is thus characterized by the combinatory effect of the development of expensive property within a poor neighbourhood, in a simultaneous mix of gentrification, flight of traditional working class away from the city centre and the development of a "new urban poverty" (Wacquant 2008) consisting of immigrant communities shut out from traditional class struggles; as well as residual populations from earlier working class populations, which are sometimes referred to as the "workless class" due to high levels of multi-generational unemployment. All of this has resulted in various forms of upheaval and fragmentation; however, for the most part, it is not a "powder keg" of ethnic and class tensions. All of these changes also mean there are many abandoned buildings, and thus the area is conducive for squatting.

It is this mix of wealth and poverty, and development and deterioration which marks the overall social climate of this research. The decade between 1998 and 2008 was one of most prosperous ever for the UK, with more than 40 successive quarters of economic growth (The Economist 2009); yet as Walquant (2008) and Harvey (2005) have analyzed, neoliberalism is distinguished by increases in poverty simultaneous with economic growth and prosperity. This "uneven development" (Harvey 1996, 295) is contrast with the economic growth of the Keynesian postwar period, that on balance saw a correlation between prosperity and the decline of poverty, and an overall lessening of economic inequality.

To elaborate more on the position of rampART in terms of how it fits into urban-economic space, it has to be stressed that London is considered to be one of the principle banking centres of the world (Massey 2007), and after the decline of manufacturing related employment, the banking sector is often seen as the “golden goose” of the economy. Former mayor “red” Ken Livingstone, a Labour politician who developed exchanges between London and Hugo Chavez’s Venezuela, has claimed that the banking sector has created one million jobs which off-set the decline of manufacturing in greater London. This is not just to reference the macro-economic climate of contemporary London, but is to identify the charged nature of urban space. The banking sector is physically based in two areas: the City of London (not to be confused with Greater London Authority which is the name of the municipal government for London), which sits on the eastern edge of central London made up a series of large historic buildings such as The Bank of England and a cluster of towers built in the past few decades, such as the iconic 30 St Mary Axe, otherwise known as the Gherkin, which replaced the Baltic Exchange building extensively damaged by an IRA bomb. The other banking district, Canary Wharf, is on the Isle of Dogs further to the east. Canary wharf is a dense area of bank towers and luxury high-rises surrounded by working class residential areas in East London, and has an “emerald city” effect when seen from afar as its gleaming towers rise above an otherwise mundane residential city-scape. Canary Wharf was built during the Thatcher period on the former Docklands—a vast area of warehouses and shipping facilities. The Port of London went from being the fourth largest in the world at the end of the 1960s to being essentially non-existent by the 1980s. It is hard not to view Canary

wharf's dense cluster of gleaming towers, scarcely over 2 decades old, as an eerie symbol of post-industrial power.

RampART, and most of its related scene, was physically located between The City of London and Canary Wharf. Protest actions aimed at The City from the radical political scene, and its antecedents, have been common, such as the Stop the City blockades in the 1980s, the J18 Reclaim the Streets occupation in the 1990s, and the April 1st demonstration in 2009 following the credit crisis. Though the City's power is oriented to the global banking field, it is certainly connected to the over-active real-estate climate in London. Even when the market is depressed, London seems dominated by the forces of property speculation. Practically speaking real-estate is an important determinant in almost all aspects of life in London (where and how you live, where you work and socialize, how and what you consume) and the impact on the radical scene is no different.

To understand the context of squatting in London—both residential and for organizations—requires an assessment of the housing situation in London. Until the mid 1980s almost 50% of the population of London (Hamnett 1997, 84) resided in public housing, known locally as “council housing.” Home ownership has increased since the 1980s (part of a deliberate “Right to Buy” policy of the Thatcher government and later continued by New Labour), and public housing sharply decreased to a still significant 25%. Currently in England there are over 1.7 million people waiting for social housing with priority given to families and “at risk” populations (CORE 2009), and thus for a

younger single person it is almost impossible to get access. Private rental, 11% of housing in England, makes up a relatively small percentage of housing, and is expensive and without rent control or other tenant's rights due to the deregulation of tenancy agreements in 1994. A Greater London Authority document (Greater London Authority 2008) lists the average of the lowest quadrille for a 1 bedroom flat is £150/week, and a shared flat or bedsit £74/week; a more usual amount for a cheap 1 bedroom flat in the East End costs £850/month. Added to this is £500/year per person in Council tax irrespective of income; as well tenants pay for water (around £300/year for a 1 bedroom).

According to England's Empty Homes Agency there are 784,495 unoccupied houses in the UK, and the number rises each day (in Hoby 2009). A 2003 report estimates that there are 15,000 squatters in England and Wales, an increase of 60% since 1995 (Ibid.). Although this is a decline from the glory days of squatting in the mid 1970s, as reported in the BBC documentary *Property is Theft*, when there were 30,000 squatters in London alone. Under the circumstances of the late 2000s, especially considering that "signing on" to benefits is much harder, people attempt to find ways around these conditions, and squatting is seen by many as a way to buy time and space. This not only applies to individuals, but small organizations such as artist-run spaces, such as City Racing and Area 10, as well as Acme studios (which is now funded by Arts Council England and administers over 400 artist studios), the Vortext jazz club and the Synergy community centre all began in squatted locations. When it comes to radical politics and cultural activities outside of either the art world or entertainment markets, squatting is almost unavoidable.

Transportation is also a determining factor on the location of rampART and how it functions. Due to the large physical size of London, and combined with the fact that car ownership is very low among people active in social centres and public transportation is expensive, scenes are closely tied to neighbourhoods. The distances and transportation costs discourage regular events that bring in people from many different neighbourhoods and thus tends to fragment an overall sense of a community. Tubes and trains are on a zone system wherein the more zones travelled, the more expensive the cost. Central London is in Zone 1 and the furthest suburbs are in Zone 7. All of the organizations mentioned in this study are in Zone 2, with the exception of MADA which was in Zone 1. Even within zones 1-3 it is common for travel times to be over an hour each way, and a three zone one-way trip (in 2010 prices) on the Tube costs around £2.50 (just under \$5), and on the train about £3.50. Partly in response to this, bicycle transport is very common, although this further limits the distance people can travel. Tobin's case is typical. He is very committed to the radical scene, edits a publication and is a very determined squatter, but living in "the far southwest," faced about one hour and half travel time to many events. He realized in a given fortnight he could only travel to a few events in the East End or Hackney where the majority of social centre related events are held.

Events and lifestyle

To consider the events in social centres, it has to be noted that they attract relatively small but still rather significant numbers of participants and audience members. A survey at a national (UK) social centre gathering in January 2007 (in Alessio 2008) reported that for the fifteen social centres which participated, there were in total around 350-400 people

directly involved in running the spaces, organizing around 250 events per month and gaining an audience of between 4,000 and 6,000 people. A point of comparison is the figure of 20,000 visits per month to social centres in Milan. Furthermore, social centres, depending on how we classify them, have declined in the UK somewhat since 2007. If we consider numbers in London, they went from five or six in 2007 to three or four in 2010; as well, a national gathering in Leeds in the spring of 2010, entitled “Social Centres in a Time of Crisis,” only saw six social centres participate.

There is a fairly predictable set of events which one can find in radical scenes in the UK, continental Europe and North American: vegan food, bike workshops, participation in “critical mass” bike rides, open-source DIY computer workshops, direct-action activism, post-rave dance parties, punk music, culture-jamming and street art. But beyond this general set, which comes close to a cliché of contemporary activist culture, I want to give a sense of the culture of rampART in terms of particular events and lifestyles.

“For me living in a squat was this experience of life and politics fusing together,” reflects Brenda³⁶ who was active in social centre culture in London. “The people you squat with being the same people you do political activity with, whereby there is no boundary between the two and you are constantly wandering together with your small tribe.” Living together in a squat allows activists to better coordinate their daily

³⁶ I have used pseudonyms for all of the participants I interviewed.

engagements in one place, without need to find space for their political participation since they are already immersed in it.

Another way in which lifestyle comes to provide a common grounding for participants is the connection between politics and forms of alternative entertainment, and in particular squat parties and benefit parties which are set up to finance campaigns and protest actions, and which are also occasions in which activists can consolidate relationships. Anna reports how after having arrived in London she “was going to different parties at different squats, still trying to find out what was going on and things like that.” The existence of shared lifestyles woven around specific places and events provides the participants of social centres with a common grounding outside more explicitly political activities, thus relieving them from the task of constantly having to look around for “like-minds,” and a community of others with similar orientations.

While this overlap between life and politics allows people to better “coordinate all the aspects of their life,” as Mark phrased it, there is also a risk of losing contact with society at large since as Lacus puts it, “it becomes a completely internal world. You become disconnected from the world outside.” The strong bonds created in the social centre community can appear as exclusive and fence off people who are not into the lifestyle aspect of autonomous politics. Exemplifying this situation is the story of Tobin who after having completed a masters degree in social and political theory at the University of Edinburgh arrived in London eager to get involved in the radical scene. He relates that during the early moments of becoming involved in these groups, “people were

a bit suspicious of me because I didn't dress like an anarchist, or talk like an anarchist."

He goes on to recount the difficulty of entering into the social centre community.

Although he shared some of its politics, it was not part of his lifestyle.

For the hardcore of the scene it is a whole way of life. They live in a kind of very political squat and hang out in social centres, and were in activist groups and were putting on benefit nights. I felt that they were not particularly welcoming to those people who had slightly more ordinary lives and wanted to get involved in activism.

Tobin, similar to others, highlights the risks of ghettoization in the radical scene whereby it becomes difficult to distinguish between participation as a way of life and a purposeful political activity, and just a party space where people gravitate in order to hang out with their friends and "get away with stuff" more conventional settings wouldn't permit. According to Gary:

You can occasionally bridge that contradiction and I think the Video Basement (a social centre in central London in 2009) did it quite well at its best. You sometimes go in there on a weekday and there'll be people in their suits who just come down from their office work, and there'll be dreadlocked eco-radicals, fretting about whether we had enough soya milk. And there would be class struggle anarchists and there'd be people like me going in and asylum-seekers as well. That kind of space created a really fertile ground for communication across the different boundaries which would normally exist in the city. I should qualify that by saying that this was the Basement at its best, and at its worst it would just become a trendy anarcho-lifestyle hang-out. But at its best it bridged that.

Although there were definitely insider-codes at rampART and other social centres, there was no clear, prevailing style of dress tied to a particular subculture. Instead there was a mix of particular subculture looks, such as Goths, "fixie hipsters," Shoreditch "fashion victims," anarcho-punks or contemporary Mods, along with a large section of people who can't be easily identified by these groupings. There is a "basic squat look" consisting of heavily worn clothes, hoodies, canvas sneakers, which could be labelled as "peace punks" or "squatter punks" (also called "crusties"); however, at any given event or meeting at rampART only a certain section of the group would fit this description. The

fact that participants of social centres in London encompass several generations and nationalities tended to undermine subcultural uniformity.

To look at social centre culture in terms of anti-capitalism and the control of urban space, social centres can be positioned within contestations of the urban. Social centres are not only bases for a range of political groups and activist campaigns that target housing issues and contribute to anti-gentrification struggles (such as the London Coalition Against Poverty, meeting spaces for various “save council housing groups” and the Save the Light campaign against the “regeneration” of Shoreditch) they are also in themselves an attempt to inhabit urban space for uses and experience outside those advanced by capitalism. As Douglas, active in Social centres described to me in an interview, “anti capitalism, whatever that means, needs somewhere to materialize, to come together. It used to be in the work place and now we are looking for new places.” Susan reinforces this role: “a lot of this has to do with using a social centre as a platform or a space where you can develop other things that would mean you could take control of your life.” The “things” that Susan refers to include: free schools, DIY workshops, talks, film screenings with discussions and just having a space, such as a cafe, where people can gather and exchange views and local information, especially in terms of developing an awareness of neighbourhood struggles and to link these with wider concerns. As Susan explains:

So it's basically creating space where you're allowed to develop that analysis and discuss and socialise and, really, increase your understanding of what's happening in the world and what you can do about it. People want to develop and they want to analyze and identify as part of a bigger thing and whatever. I think it's still important because there's nothing like that in the city.

In terms of the anti-capitalism and subjectivity, Gibson-Graham (2006) discuss how a post-capitalist politics engages “new practices of the self through the process of (re)subjectivation” (Ibid., xxv). Aspects of this can be seen in Ted’s description of the social centre project:

I think it is important to not ask the big “Why are we here?”; maybe there doesn’t need to be a big reason, and to think that it is just a big exercise to see what we can get away with and what we can do—what the collective imagination can dream up. A process with no kind of aims or destinations, it’s kind of what you develop along the way.

The mention of a collective imagination and what it “can get away with” reveals the affective dimension of anti-capitalism in this context—the emotional connections and responses to one another, the shared desires and questioning that comprises the vitality and potential of the social centre experience.

The anti-capitalism of social centres, which is really comprised of fashioning a set of values and social relationships that attempt to counter an entrepreneurial leveraging of the self, also lies in organizational work and collective decision-making. As Chatterton describes, “rebuilding social relationships around emotional responses, solidarity and trust and shared practices of working and learning together” (Chatterton 2006, 310). Practically speaking much of this occurs in social centres in organizing events and in addressing problems through horizontal organizational structures which have been passed down from the peace and feminist movements of the 1960s. A rejection of formal organizational structures, offices of leadership and standing committees, goes hand in hand with some fairly rigorous organizing principles which are, in effect, a program for expanding and embedding a politics of self-organization. This is achieved in practice through the use of consensus decision making, direct participation and a rejection of

hierarchical organizations (such as political parties or religious groups) in weekly assemblies. Rotating facilitation duties, having open agendas and welcome sessions are all used in order to be as transparent and inclusive as possible.

Beyond the more general experience and organizational cultural at rampART, a review of public events from October 2008 to October 2009 shows that the main types of activities were benefit parties, themed cafe evenings usually with a screening or presentation and discussion, film screenings (primarily documentaries), art exhibitions, education events, and reading groups. During a busier month, such as May 2009, there were four Cinema Libre screenings (one per week), four benefit parties, one cafe evening and a BBQ workday; or April 2009 when rampart acted as a G20 protest convergence space (from late March till April 4), hosted three benefit parties, one education event, one discussion event and a cafe evening. An example of a slow month is December 2008, when there was one party, a discussion event and a reading group. Added to these events were the weekly rampART meeting and non-public events such as rehearsals for musical groups (and sometimes theatre groups), and various activist group meetings (such as Climate Camp London).

I cannot recall ever hearing someone use the word “programming” in the social centre scene, nor is it used on websites or promotional material. From a scene point of view, to speak of “programming” would be to fall into an instrumental relation of seeing rampART as “merely” a venue developing content. Most of the events at rampart were organized by individuals or groups proposing events, although a certain number of events

were organized by participants of rampART. Proposals were usually made verbally during the weekly general meetings. Written proposals, almost always in email form, came from individuals or groups less acquainted with the scene, or for complicated events which required more extensive explanation and planning. Events were seldom refused. Ones that sounded poorly organized or problematic were generally postponed until the organizers were given an opportunity to rethink the event and address whatever concerns were raised.

The benefit parties were social events which kept the scene functioning and practically generated funds for various projects or campaigns. Entry for these events was by donation and generally £3 for those on benefits/low waged and £5 for everyone else. With the exception of certain events or over-crowding, generally no-one was turned away because they couldn't pay. Beer and cider (and sometimes wine) were sold "by donation" for £1.50, which is 50 pence more than buying it in a corner store. Many people would bring their own drinks. The events ran without a liquor licence, and were presented, legally speaking, as a private party. Parties at rampART typically ran from 9 pm until 3-6 am. There were surprisingly few problems with local police. There were occasional fights or people overly intoxicated or suffering ill effects of a drug.

In terms of the kinds of music at these parties, in the last year of rampART there was a predominance of dubstep DJs, drum and bass and reggae DJs, and punk gigs every month or so. Dubstep is remarkable in the way it often crosses over into various music scenes, venues and played by different kinds of DJs, such as drum and base and reggae

DJs, and has influenced grime (a London derivative of hip-hop). It requires very good sound equipment to produce its optimal, visceral effect. It is sometimes associated with the drug Ketamine (known as wonky, “K” or special K).

There was always an ambivalence around whether rampART was a party space, an activist centre, a subcultural hang out or something else. Much of this depended on which angle one entered—it could appear as a completely activist scene for those already in those circles and with those objectives, or one could come solely to social events and think of it, while being aware that there is something “political” going, as primarily an environment for socializing and listening to dubstep.

A characteristic activity—one that brings together politics, creativity and socializing—of rampART and other London social centres was the hosting of “free schools.” A free school is a platform based on popular “radical” education, also known as anarchist free schools and free skools. They are generally organized over a week or week-end and are comprised of workshops, discussions, screenings and performances where skills, information, and knowledge are shared with the ideal of breaking down student/teacher relations. During my field work free schools flourished in London, such as the Temporary School of Thought, the Really Free School, the London Free School and the School of Everything. Free schools usually include an almost impossibly wide range of activities—from practical to theoretical, the sublime and the ridiculous. Examples of workshops from a London Free School (held at rampART and the Library House) in the spring 2008: Biofuels: Exacerbating Climate Change, Plumbing Skill

Share, The Workshop of Nothing, Lego Sculpture, Feminism and Autonomous Spaces, Debt Non-payment Workshop, Full-unemployment Cinema, Introduction to First Aid, Calling All Teachers – What is Worth Knowing?, EXPERiMENTALdrawing, London Cleaners Strike, Art School Failings and the Possible Alternatives, Contemporary Dance Workshop, Laughter Workshop, Bicycle Maintenance, and How to Make a Pinhole Camera. The specific content of workshops is often a pretence for creating connections between participants and community building; and the emphasis is generally, beyond examining a question or learning a skill, on organizing further activities beyond being a one-off event where participants never see each other again. The atmosphere at free schools is convivial and somewhat utopian in the sense of the multitudinous nature of the topics, with most workshops and events searching for transformative yet playful ideas, and also in the way that a free school creates an environment where concepts and exchanges occur.

As mentioned, film screenings were a regular part of rampART's events. Some notable examples of are *Crisis in the Credit System* (2009), directed by Melanie Gilligan. The film is a four-part drama dealing with the credit crisis, scripted and directed by artist Melanie Gilligan. The film was screened at the opening of Bowl Court social centre (a rampART off-spring) and also as part of a Free School in 2009. Gilligan was in attendance to discuss the film with the audience. *Crisis in the Credit System* uses fiction, sometimes feeling like science fiction, to communicate what is left out of documentary accounts of the financial crisis, and reflects the strangeness of life in which “the financial

abstractions that penetrate our lives appear to be collapsing” (Gilligan 2009). The plot of the film is summarized as:

A major investment bank runs a brainstorming and role-playing session for its employees, asking them to come up with strategies for coping with today’s dangerous financial climate. Role-playing their way into increasingly bizarre scenarios, they find themselves drawing disturbing conclusions about the deeper significance of the crisis and its effects beyond the world of finance (Ibid.).

Other films shown at rampART include *The Age of Stupid* (2008) a film on climate change from the point of view of a survivor of a world-wide ecological disaster one hundred years in the future; *Brad: One More Night At the Barricades* (2008), a documentary on the life and death of Brad Will, a journalist and activist killed by the police in Oaxaca Mexico, with the director Miguel Castro present at the screening; and *Utopia London*, (2009) a documentary on ambitious and egalitarian public housing projects build in the postwar period. A final example is *The Trail of the Spider* (2008) by Anja Kirschner and David Panos which addressed “urban development,” gentrification and related kinds of displacements in East London by transferring tropes of cowboy western films onto contemporary London. The film was set in the vacant lots and marshes in the borough of Hackney used for the development of the 2012 Olympics.

Participants: time and age

There were about 22 active “members” of rampART who regularly contributed to the organization, out of a larger group of approximately 100-150 who were less frequently involved. To be active in this case involves attending at least one weekly meeting per month and assisting with one event per month. This group was comprised of 13 male and 9 female, mostly white, although from a variety of different nationalities (e.g. Italian,

Turkish, Latvian, Irish, Canadians and Americans). There were only a few active members who were actually from London. In terms of the educational backgrounds of the participants of rampART, most had at least a few years of undergraduate studies, and many held bachelor or graduate degrees. In terms of social class, most participants in the social centre came from an upwardly mobile working class or lower middle class backgrounds, with class origin here ascertained in terms of parental occupation and education level.

In the following chapter I will analyze the class situation in social centres, however at present I would like to examine the age composition of rampART and the time requirements for participating in this scene. From data collected during my field work, the average age of people active in social centres is rather low (around 31 years), although it is not as low as one might expect for an ostensible youth subculture. In fact there are people in their 60s and early 70s among the participants of social centres in London. Of my interviewees, one was in her 50s, three in their 40s and many in their 30s. These demographics on the one hand confirm that the older people get, the more they tend to drop out of the scene. Nevertheless, on the other hand, such demographics point to a relative diversification of age within this scene.

This tendency in age composition should not be taken as a signal that this scene is starting to reflect social averages, or attracting “normal people,” rather what we see here is that even those participants who are not biologically young are characterised by youth-like life conditions, and in particular the availability of free-time and lack of work or

family commitments. What becomes apparent in my field work is the crucial role played by an extension of situations of “instability,” “freedom to choose” and “reversibility of decisions.” For Melucci, a sociologist of social movements, these situations constitute the hallmarks of the experience of youth, or more precisely, “extended youth” (Melucci 1996, 127). In this way it seems that the youth of today aren’t as young as they used to be. This is in keeping with what Andy Bennett, youth culture researcher, sees as a shift in the concept of youth away from a purely chronological social category with related cultural practices, to a “discursive construct” (Bennett 2007, 34) with varied aesthetic and political sensibilities that “has ceased to be the exclusive domain of teenagers and people in their early twenty-something’s” (Ibid., 37).

For Melucci, who has particularly stressed the connection between current social movements and the experience of youth, contemporary societies are marked by a protraction of youth, whereby nowadays “[b]eing young is [...] more than just destiny; it is a conscious decision to change and direct one’s own existence” (Melucci 1996, 126).

In complex societies an autonomous life-space for the younger age categories is created through mass education. It is mass schooling that delays entry into adult roles by prolonging a period of non-work. It also creates the spatio-temporal conditions for the formation of a collective identity defined by needs, lifestyles and private languages. [...] The youthful condition, defined by *transition* and *suspension*, is protracted and stabilized so that it becomes a mass condition which is no longer determined by biological age. The imbalances between school and the labour market extend the period of transition: delayed entry into the adult roles is not just freedom, but reflects also an imposed and lived marginality, characterized by unemployment and the lack of any real economic independence (Ibid., 119-120).

According to Melucci, people are pushed to remain longer than before in these “transitional” and “suspended” situations; and while this situation opens up some forms

of freedom and exploration it also condemns “young” people to marginality and precariousness.

My field work shows that participants in social centres mirror this condition to a degree. Despite the taunts of “get a job”³⁷, and the labelling of squatters and activists as “dole scroungers” in the mainstream media, few activists are actually unemployed and yet they haven’t fully entered the labour market. In my sample only 20% declared themselves as unemployed, while 40% were students. The final 40% of my interviewees work, but often find themselves in part-time, flexible or short term contracts exemplifying “precarity” and insecurity.

Precarity is a term used to describe living and working conditions without predictability or security, which has been theorized by French sociologist Maurizio Lazaretto (2009a, 2009b) and taken up by groups connected with the EuroMayday social movement³⁸. There can be an ambivalence in the way people seek to end exploitation of “the precariat” and are concerned about the personal and social cost of these conditions, yet refuse the rigid patterns and norms which have traditionally been attached to social security regimes. Some EuroMayday activists even advance “the precariat” as the new proletariat, with the implication of it not only being an exploited group but a potentially transformative or revolutionary class.

³⁷ Passersby heckling Climate Camp participants at Blackheath on August 30th, 2009.

³⁸ The EuroMayday movement began in Italy around 2001 and spread to other western European nations. It employed carnival-like forms of agitation (parade floats, media interventions and costumes) in the style of Gay Pride and Love Parades of the 1990s. These were developed to address casualized conditions of work forces outside of traditional labour organization. The events were not only focused on May Day, but also tied to various other situations (such as the passage of legislation) and special days, such as February 29th which is San Precario day (the patron saint of precarious workers).

There is a bind in that these scenes, and their related cultural and activist practices, requires having “suspended time” in which participants are severed from work and family commitments and can engage with cultural projects or activism, yet most of the people in this scene come from working class backgrounds with little material support for their practices. So how do they balance supporting themselves financially and yet have the time which is a fundamental condition for participation in this scene, especially as physical attendance often becomes the only marker of membership?

The policies of welfare-state reform, with the erosion of unemployment benefits and similar forms of assistance, have had a strong effect on the social centre scene. There appears to be a shift from the early 1990s when people active in these kinds of scenes were able to easily qualify for welfare provisions (“the dole” in local parlance), or were students with grants (and prior to the introduction of tuition fees), and as a result could fully commit to projects outside of either formal education or paid employment. However with a benefit system that makes it increasingly harder to qualify for assistance, a desire not to be tied to the state, as well as contending with tuition fees and high levels of student debt, most of the people in the organizations I looked at work, including those who squat. Ed, active in this scene for 19 years and active at 56a Infoshop reports on changes he has seen:

when we started [in 56a] everyone was on the dole, everyone had 24/7 to do what they wanted. That’s the total difference—*everyone*—the scene was made up of people on the dole...now everyone works, apart for me, most of them work part time; no one has an office job a kind of 9 to 5 as far as I can tell, they do mainly things that come out of their interests such as working with bicycles, or they do a shit jobs like counting cars for data. One person works in an organic food warehouse. No one really has a career job, oh I forgot one person does—she was a doctor in Croatia, she went through a bunch of stuff now she is working in a hospital.

Ed comes out of a tradition of working class anarchists, who organized squatted centres which were unofficial dole clubs and claimants unions³⁹. Informal unemployed people's centres are one lineage that led up to the current social centre scene in London. There are also middle class "counter-culture" traditions of squatting, such as the Villa Road squat (occupying an entire block and home to various organizations, cafes and initiatives) in the 1970s which, according to a BBC documentary *Property is Theft*, consisted primarily of white "Oxbridge" middle-class graduates.

Those in the scene who are employed are often in the category of cultural workers, which for Hanspeter Kriesi (1989) constitutes a "new middle class" of new social movements. Web designers, project managers for NGOs, campaigners, teachers, editors, copy-writers, sessional university lecturers and researchers, artists and journalists are among some of the typical quasi-professional figures to be found in this context. These are all professions which often escape from the standard of 9-to-5 work patterns, allowing people to manage their time more flexibly, and thus making it possible to reconcile work with political participation and other activities. Many people work in NGOs, which in certain cases can also bestow resources to be used for their own activities. "Now there are more people working in NGOs small or large, whose resources they can also use to continue their own activism," explains Mark. "Sometimes, if it is a sympathetic group, they can spend some of their time working for a campaign which is

³⁹One year after this interview Ed moved off social assistance and onto the ranks of "the self-employed." In so doing he became eligible for housing benefits and tax credits. This shift from unemployed to money losing self-employed is increasingly common for the people in this scene. Interestingly Ed has started to get contract work doing out-reach programs for art institutions.

not exactly the NGO's remit, but is within the wider, broader remit of affecting social change."

These occupations show how the working people in the scene who don't have "free time," at least have "flexible time" which is afforded by part-time and free-lance work arrangements. This is to a large extent due to the fact that participating in the scene is bound to the demand of being physically present in the spaces. But flexible time is not the same as free time, and this is the main tension in this scene between people who work, rent flats and have limited time; and those who squat, live in council housing and/or draw on benefit schemes. This split is responsible for the recurring rift in social centres in London between those who reside in the building and the non-resident collective members. Almost everyone I have spoken to in this scene, causally or in interviews, is very familiar with "this fine old chestnut" of a problem. As Brenda active in the Library House social centre told me:

I have heard and experienced this thing many times. If someone for example raises the issue of the difficulty of coming to meetings, the response always given is—if you are not there you cannot make decisions. Were you at the meeting? We can't wait for you! This is one of the responses which you get more often. Which for me is a consequence of the *privilege to be present*. Clearly it is something which also depends on will. But not all the people can be there all of the time.

Brenda goes on to suggest that this "privilege of presence" is fundamentally tied to one's own life circumstances, and that unemployment or the absence of family and work commitments facilitates participation.

You have to be a person that works little, that doesn't have a family... in other words there are few mothers. You need to have a physical presence, but also a virtual presence, but definitely *you need to be there* and you need to have a certain level of privilege to be there and you need to allow yourself not to work. Which is possible in Britain for English people, who can have the dole, but it is not possible for people who have no rights. But it is like that also in Italy.

The impossibility of satisfying the condition of physical presence can however be partly offset by participating in email list discussions, in a kind of virtual-presence. For example Brenda notices how important it is for those participants who work to be employed

in a job in which you can stay online all the time. Maybe you are working, but you can check your e-mail every hour, which makes a lot of difference, because it means that you want to maintain a contact, that you have lifeline, an umbilical cord which connects you to this movement.

Nevertheless for her being there physically remains something impossible to substitute with e-mails, forums or phone calls.

Participation and organization

Q: What is an organization you find really inspiring, or if rampART could be anything, what would it actually look like, what would it actually do?

Doug: A hive, a beehive, but without the queen.

Q: Or just queens?

Ivor: Oh no, that would be terrible!

In rampART there is a participatory ethos—under headings such as self-organization, collectivity, autonomy, anarchism and Direct Action—and a shared belief that there is a politics in the very way the group acts and organizes aside from the effects of these actions. In this section I will identify and analyze what this ethos is and ways it is practiced. It is something of an ideal that is rather elusive, and there is a feeling that we can't presume to know from the outset what collective action means. If there is an idealism in rampART, it is always mixed with a sense of muddling through. The following is excerpt from an interview with Ivor and Doug, two organizers at rampart

who were part of a group who expanded rampART in the early days from “a few people who cracked the building” into a very active collective.

Q: Would you describe rampART as a self-organized space?

Ivor: Well, I’m not sure, it’s hard to tell. We all grew up in hierarchical societies, and that comes through I think. Of course, we always try to make rampART as self-organized as possible, but you know, brought up in a hierarchical capitalist society, and also a society that lives off of specialized division of labour, and so on, and so these things have always made it practical to run this space in a different way, but also created obstacles to a purely self organize place. Only some people can do certain things, you see problems of access, which has been a problem with however long rampART has existed... We of course had our own hierarchies where some people have more rights to be there than others.... at certain times [rampART] is autonomous and other times it is not...at certain points it comes as a gift, as a present and not paid for. People volunteer, everything fits together, a process to deal with things collaboratively.

Doug: Better decisions come out of a collective.

Ivor: Well *other* decisions do, and that’s what we wanted to do. So we put up with all of that crap to run a social experiment.

Q: Do you see a politics to that way of working?

Ivor: Definitely yes.

Doug: It’s basically respecting people and seeing people as equal.

Ivor: That was our activism at the time.

Before moving into this further, it is first necessary to backup a little and consider some of the basic conditions of the organization. As mentioned above, there is no formal membership in rampART nor in any social centre I have seen in London, although people often used terms like “a member of the collective” which is invariably a result of spending time and participating in events. There is a constitution document at rampART which states that a collective member is someone who has attended three meetings, though in reality a collective member is someone who simply attends meetings regularly and takes an active role in the centre. The constitution was drafted at an earlier point and

was subsequently ignored. In the time I was active no one ever made reference to the constitution except in jest. Therefore we have to speak in terms of a “sense of membership”—a sense of belonging and identification—which one feels after putting in time and getting to know other participants through meetings, working on events, participating online and especially going through crisis moments.

RampART’s main decision-making body was the “rampART collective,” with seven or eight core members, connected to a larger active group of about twenty people. “The collective” works with various user groups⁴⁰ to produce the centre’s activities. Most social centres refer to themselves as “collectives.” There is no president or chair position, and most decisions are made in weekly Monday evening meetings. Although these meetings are open to the public, they are mostly comprised of existing collective members and individuals or representatives from other organizations proposing events. These meetings are attended by between three and twenty people, and are usually one or two hours with crisis meetings stretching over three hours largely due to giving all in attendance a chance to speak about the issues, along with inevitable arguments and tangents. The group operates, loosely, through consensus decision-making wherein decisions are not voted on but instead require general agreement (or the lack of strong opposition) from everyone present. This process is rarely discussed, and its positive value

⁴⁰ Such as the Noborders group who do Direct Action activism against immigration controls; the band 52 Commercial Road which is a post-rock group who were something of a house band at rampART; Behind Bars a LGBT group who organize parties to raise awareness and funds for campaigns (both local and international) against oppression related to sexual orientation; and Climate Camp (official name: Camp for Climate Action) which organizes events and protest actions—mainly in the form of camps sometimes with over 5,000 participants—concerning climate change.

is largely assumed. The notion of “calling a vote” would be met with contempt as the goal is to pursue a non-majoritarian idea of democracy. With larger numbers, the meetings use a semblance of Robert’s Rules, with a speakers list and an active facilitator; smaller meetings are “self- facilitated,” to use a term from Ed at 56a Infoshop which describes the preferred mode of organization. RampART meetings are always minuted (posted to an email list after the meeting) and work methodically through an agenda, beyond that they are highly informal and can be rather enjoyable and social. It is relatively common for people to drink alcohol during meetings and smoke. Squats are one of the last public indoor spaces where smoking is permitted in London, although some social centres, such as The Library House have no-smoking policies, frown upon people drinking at meetings and work with more formal meeting facilitation techniques. Meeting skills are learned from participating in other groups, such as Climate Camp which has rather scrupulous meeting protocols, or, in the language of this scene, they are “skill shared” by a group such as Seeds for Change in workshops with titles such as “Consensus Decision Making and Facilitating Consensus” (an event at 195 Mare Street social centre, June 2010). Seeds for Change (as described in their website) is a “non-profit co-op providing training and resources to grassroots campaigners and to NGOs, Co-ops and other organizations in the social sector.” They represent a cross-over between Direct Action groups (such as elements in the Climate Camp movement), NGOs and more mainstream campaigns.

Most social centres in London have their main weekly meetings on Monday night, or sometimes Sunday. This is the first available night after the parties and the rest of the

weekend, and the last available night before mid-week nights which are often occupied by social and cultural events. Thus the weekly meeting becomes a temporal fixture, regulating the rhythm of activity in the scene and provides participants with a sense of consistency in an otherwise tumultuous environment where spaces are short-lived and people are constantly moving in and out. It acts as an anchor in the way it brings all those active in the organization together in a recurring, fixed slot in their weekly diaries, and functions to set up further events and activities.

The meetings, and all other events, are announced on various email lists and through rampART's electronic newsletter and website (a Wordpress blog). Although to subscribe to these email lists one would already have to be in "the know" to a certain extent. Nevertheless it is relatively common to meet people active in rampART events who discovered the place through Google searches. The organization relies heavily on emails and websites to promote events, with paper flyers produced only for a few events by particular user groups.

Organizational meetings are emblematic of so much that goes on in the radical scene in London. They are not only important to make decisions and prepare actions, but also in building emotional ties. The meetings are in ways like clubs to forge connection between like-minded people who share non-dominant values; and also to foster trust among people who often engage in risky activities where they need to put their bodies on the line. The risks here are those involved in Direct Action activism and facing landlords who attempt to repossess their buildings "the old fashion way;" as well squats have been

violently raided by police, especially during the time of large demonstrations. Within the autonomous scene meetings are particularly important because of the centrality of presence as mentioned. If one wants to participate one has to be there.

Although the rhetoric of participation might be co-opted or otherwise deployed by dominant groups, its practices are certainly not abandoned by social movements. To examine the participatory ethos in non-institutionalized social movements it is first necessary to differentiate, through terms afforded by social movement theory, ways that the concept has been defined and practiced. The importance of the term “participation” in contemporary radical political discourse is accompanied by two phenomena which contribute to recasting the location of this process across the private/public divide: mediatization and the individualization. On the one hand in recent years we have witnessed the rapid diffusion of digital communication technologies in social movements, with the rise of internet-based forms of activism (McCaughey and Ayers 2003; Jordan and Taylor 2004) and computer-supported social movements (Juris 2008). Digital communication technologies make possible new forms of participation at a distance or tele-participation (Nichols 1994), thus loosening the connection between participation and contexts of physical proximity, as well, much of the recent discussions on social movements have concentrated on the investigation of social networks sustaining collective action (McAdam 2003, Juris 2008). On the other hand we have seen the emergence of individualized forms of collective action, exemplified by ethical consumerism and a politics tied to consumption (Micheletti 2004, Littler 2008). These

practices, displayed in spaces of consumption such as supermarkets, raise questions about the location of participation in the public sphere.

As a result of these processes which modify our understanding of participation, it becomes urgent to clarify what exactly is meant by this concept, and to then see how we can characterize participation in London social centres. This entails looking in more depth at what established areas of scholarship—specifically social movement theory—have identified by that term, paying particular attention to what role is assigned to questions of culture and communication in the analysis of participation. These can be broken down into three main approaches: first, the *instrumental* view of participation which is characterised by resource mobilisation theory; second, the *motivational-expressive* vision proper to the social psychological approach to social movements elaborated in particular by Bert Klandermans and the view of participation established in the study of so-called new social movements. Finally a variety of authors (Melucci 1996, Dubet 1994, McDonald 2006) have set the basis for a third framework of analysis of social and political participation: the *experiential* view—a phenomenological approach to social movements with emphasis on processes. I place the kinds of participation evidenced in social centres as built upon the motivational-expressive and especially the experiential, especially as it is driven by a voluntarist dynamic.

Instrumental approaches tie participation to the recruitment of party-like entities, with formalized roles where one has a defined way to participate, such as in voting, fund-raising or structured marches. These approaches are engaged by resource mobilisation scholars particularly concerned with the strategies developed by social movement

organizations for attaining certain goals. Attention is concentrated on the variety of resources that must be mobilized, the linkages of social movements to other groups, the dependence of movements upon external support for *success*, and the tactics used by authorities to control or incorporate movements. In this context, participation is assessed in quantitative terms, with attention paid to figures such as turnouts at protest events. Accordingly, participants are seen as a resource to be mobilized in various ways, and the discourse concentrates on the ways in which social movement organizations can maximize participation for goal-attainment. Participation is ultimately judged by the ability of a group to achieve finite political goals, such as changing legislation and policy. Questions of culture are rarely examined in this context, and references made to processes of communication are mostly technical. In this context communication is represented as a “meta-resource” which among other things (consensus building, counter-information) also allows social movements to mobilise participants. This approach to participation would fail to engage what is important in an organization like rampART, which is dedicated to a politics of process, with a micro-focus on group dynamics, personal empowerment and a desire for altering the overall social and cultural context that both falls short and over-shoots mobilization-participation conceptions.

Another fundamental element which characterizes the resource mobilization analysis of participation lies in the formal affiliation of group as a *conditio sine qua non* of participation (Leighley 1996). As a consequence, most of this analysis of participation tends to focus on the process of recruitment. Thus little attention has been traditionally paid to what happens once participation has begun, that is, to the question of sustained

participation. This tendency also derives from the fact that most of the organizations which have been analyzed by resource mobilization theorists are characterized by a high degree of formalization and professionalization. Specifically, trade unions, lobbying organizations and NGOs have been among the typical case studies for resource mobilization scholars.

The second way to understand participation is through the concept of personal motivation as a force that leads individuals into action and collective activities. In the influential essay “Mobilization and Participation” (1984), Klandermans argued that “social psychology can expand resource mobilization theory in an important way by revealing processes of social movements’ participation on the individual level” (Ibid., 584). Counter to the idea of rational choice which characterized previous approaches to collective action, Klandermans asserts that people would be active only if they were reached by mobilization attempts. Moreover he argued that this activation would be strongly influenced by their expectations about other participants’ behaviour. Thus, “expectation that others will participate works as a self-fulfilling prophecy... a collective good *can* motivate persons to participate in a social movement if they expect that others will also participate” (Ibid., 597).

In this assessment of participation, a central role is given to *identity* in social movements, by defining “collective identity” as a “process” rather than as an essence. A process “is constructed and negotiated through the ongoing relationships linking individuals or groups” (Melucci 1996, 67). For Melucci,

[i]dentity is what people choose to be, the incalculable: they choose to define themselves in a certain way not only as a result of rational calculation, but primarily under affective bonds and based on the intuitive capacity of mutual recognition. Such a remarkable affective dimension is fundamentally “non-rational” in character, without yet being irrational. It is meaningful and provides the actor with the capacity of making sense of their being together (1996, 66).

As this quote demonstrates, identity is not seen in foundationalist terms. In fact for Melucci “collective identity allowing [social networks] to become actors is not a datum or an essence; it is the outcome of exchanges, negotiations, decisions, and conflicts among actors” (Melucci 1996, 4). Eyerman and Jamison who have studied different forms of cultural practice in social movements such as slogans and political songs liken the articulation of a movement’s identity to a form of social learning. They argue that:

Organizations can be thought of as vehicles or instruments for carrying, transporting, or even producing the movement’s *meaning*. But the meaning, we hasten to add, should not be reduced to the medium. The meaning, or *core identity*, is rather the cognitive space that the movement creates, a space for new kinds of ideas and relationships to develop (Eyerman and Jamison 1991, 60).

Here questions of culture and communication are seen as important elements of the activity of social movements, in a society where symbolic processes have become crucial. Nonetheless, it is my contention that in this literature there is a risk of reducing the action of social movements to a pure symbolic level, and to nothing more than the production and circulation of codes of collective identity. What puts the accent on expressive rather than instrumental action in this characterization of new social movements is the fact that participation isn’t analyzed and gauged through the process of taking power or influencing policy decisions, rather in the collective production of meaning.

Finally this brings us to the third way of analyzing participation that moves beyond cognitive practices and into phenomenological processes of *embodiment* and

spatiality as examined by Kevin McDonald (2006), Francois Dubet (2002), and Melucci (1985, 1996). In all these different works the adoption of the concept of experience is a way of foregrounding the complex subjectivity of actors which cannot be reduced to a specific “logic of actions.” The spaces where people gather and the ways they participate are essential.

For the social centre scene in London, participation is closely tied to spending time together in the squatted spaces I have described earlier, collectively animating the semi-wreckage leftover from investment cycles and waves of development and decay. The experience of these spaces turns on a voluntarism, on a pull rather than a push which is driven by an individual’s will and desire. The radical scene perceives itself as distinct in this respect from NGOs and state-funded community organizations on the one hand, and hierarchical movements, in particular, the proselytizing of Leninist politics on the other. Both are based on leading people and directing them with invasive communicative engagements. In London this is exemplified by the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) with its members flogging newspapers and other attempts to directly recruit people. Counter to this type of engagement, the groups in my research nurture a voluntarist ethic, what I call an “ethic of self-activation.” While this position reflects the attempt to depart from the paternalism of Leninist politics, it also reflects subcultural tendencies. The onus is on individuals finding their own way in, for people to know people, know a lingo and already have, in a Bourdieuan parlance, a feel for the game (the workings of its discourses and practices) and the correct disposition to inhabit the available positions. This can lead to the scene feeling like a secret society with its own language, making it

difficult for many to enter or for it to spread as a broader movement. Sometimes events are purposely organized (computer workshops, flea markets or screening Charlie Chaplin films) to break this, and in general there is a spirit of conviviality towards newcomers in attempt to overcome these barriers. The voluntarism fits into a spatial imaginary of convergence which is visible in the strong investment dedicated to the process of gathering, which comes to be seen not as a pre-condition but as a result of collective action.

This orientation has a direct bearing on the communicative practices which dominate the radical culture scene. This is visible in particular in the shift from traditional political leaflets handed out in public space, to flyers and invites which are instead meant to be picked up by interested participants themselves. This micro-media, to use Sarah Thornton's term (1995), has moved from the monochrome, text-only leaflets of previous activist phases, to invites akin to concert promotions and night club advertisements, which use humour and alluring graphics that convey a sense of pleasure and play rather than sacrifice and sense of duty. Combined with this "pull" type of distribution of publicity, is the deployment of an "aesthetic of attraction," where events promise fun—partying, creativity, food, drink and drugs. Even confrontational demonstrations and Direct Action (such as breaking into a building or D-locking oneself to obstruct passage) put an emphasis on adventure, tempting mischief and theatre. The ideal, not always realized, is not to suffer for the cause, but to celebrate and socialize. This is also expressed in some of the visual presentation of activist publicity. In this situation we thus see the deployment of a "magnetic engagement," and while participants are not explicitly

sought after, attractive forms of publicity are adopted which make it more likely that they will “come by themselves.”

From an interview Marina asserts: “I normally don’t like to tell people what to do. What I can accept is to facilitate, to explain to people how a certain situation is going to be and then leave it up to them how to organize.” This brings us back to the significance of the concept of “facilitation,” such as Ed’s references to the best meetings as being “self- facilitated.” Antithetical to this are pushy attitudes and the idea of dragging someone to a meeting, as though this type of engagement would ruin the whole spirit of the movement. This attitude is particularly manifested in the outright rejections of practices of recruitment which are well summed up by Ed’s involvement in 56a Infoshop: “people can engage as much as they want with this space. But I am not trying to convert them or recruit them. There is nothing to join here. They should decide *by themselves* whether and how they want to participate.”

Central to this ethic is a valuing of choice, whereby individual participants are framed as autonomous subjects responsible for making their decisions and taking responsibility for their own actions. In fact, for Francesca, an Italian activist who has been involved in social centres both in Italy and the UK, “the question of choice is fundamental to our politics. What makes us different from other groups is that we think individuals have to decide, that they need to make the first step.” The risk however is that the ethic of self-activation might be easily turned into little more than a form of individual libertarianism which while being all about choice overlooks the importance of

commitment and solidarity. In this context, the voluntarist expectations placed on self-selecting participants opens a way for their engagement, with the social centre scene discriminating against those who do not have a great amount of self-motivation to not get involved.

In this chapter I have constructed a multifaceted study of rampART. I began by looking at rampART's physical qualities and its location in the city. Typical of London's social centres, it is in a squatted building in a peripheral-centre location. Social centres tend to "shadow" the banking sector, and this occurs not only in their locations, such as rampART lying between the City of London and Canary Wharf, and in social centre-based activists targeting banking districts in protest actions, but also in the way that most of the abandoned properties that are occupied by social centres are neglected due to fluctuations in real-estate speculation. Within these gaps, which exist in both market cycles and in the fabric of the city, social centres develop for an unknown and usually short period.

Events in rampART are primarily comprised of a mix of parties, cafe nights and screenings. Free schools events, combining a vast array of workshops in an environment conducive to forming social binds and further collective organizing, are a significant and dynamic part of these activities. The participants are predominantly white though from a mix of primarily western nations. The average age of those involved was in the early 30s, which is a little old for youth culture and thus indicative of a more protracted notion of youth that is based more on maintaining degrees of flexible time than on simply biology.

Participation in rampART is based on the outcome of exchanges, negotiations, decisions, and conflicts; and requires being present in the space with others in the group. Although this is somewhat mediated by email lists and phone communication, ties to the space and the group are spatially and experientially grounded. This is the source of tension, tied into the material conditions of the participants in a neoliberal, post-welfare state social context. Social centres are run by entirely unpaid labour and require large time commitments. Contrary to the stereotypes of “lazy sods” and “dole scroungers,” many of the people involved in social centres are employed, although often in flexible ways such as in temporary, part-time or self-employed working arrangements.

Most of those active in rampART are in more or less precarious situations, in that they have little security in terms of employment and housing and come from primarily working class backgrounds that are aspirational yet with little material support to drawn upon or sense of future entitlement. There is an ambivalence in this scene around deliberately not wanting security and cultivating kinds of flexibility, and yet also experiencing the negative effects of these circumstances. Although social centres might appear as an extreme example, this condition is rather widespread in British society, especially for younger generations.

I ended the discussion by characterizing the nature of participation in London social centres as chiefly based on a politics of process, with a micro-focus on group dynamics and personal empowerment. Notable here is a kind voluntarism, which I described as an “ethic of self-activation” and a pull rather than a push driven by an

individual's will and desire rather than the results of outreach and mobilization techniques. The radical scene perceives itself as distinct in this respect from NGOs and official campaigns on the one hand, and Leninist groups on the other.

Against the entrepreneurial values looked at in chapter two (based around the maximization of oneself as resource for economic competitiveness), here group processes and collectivity are stressed, yet a collectivity limited to the participants of this scene, and the outcome of their exchanges and actions. This is consistent with a “party for your right to fight” attitude, as post-subculture researcher Graham St John (2004) coined it, where socializing, intrigue, good times and cultural experience are essential for building movements and bids for social change. A danger of this strong emphasis on self-direction is exclusivity, as well as instability due to the collapse of projects because individuals no longer feel compelled and can no longer have the time and energy. From this examination I would like to move further into a study of the kinds of people involved, and in particular to understand the class dynamics within social centres.

6. Class, collectivism and cultural intermediaries

One must imagine Sisyphus happy (Camus 1986, 123).

...a notion of a working class which refuses identity as well as capital, echoing Karl Marx's notion of the working class as the class which acts to eliminate itself, the class of no class (Vishmidt 2009).

In my field work I identified that the majority of people involved in self-organized projects had working class backgrounds, and more specifically, came from an upwardly mobile or “aspirational” working class, along with people from the lower strata of the middle class. Given this highly specific class composition it became apparent that to understand how self-organization works in this context is also to come to grips with the nature of this class grouping and the ways that current class antagonisms are articulated or dispersed. Extending from this, the class background of the participants matters because it is tied to fundamental divisions of power and systemic forms of inequity in society, and I wanted to see how the bids for emancipation and transformation of those active in social centres connected and diverged from their class positions.

Occasionally I heard the accusation around the social centre scene, mainly from people who had been involved since the 1980s, that most activities were being run (and ruined) by middle class kids, not like in the old days of working class solidarity. In reality there were only four or five people involved in the general rampART collective of about 20 people who were from a clear middle class (professional, university educated parents) or higher class background. So if rampART was in actual fact still predominantly

comprised of people with working class backgrounds, then it seemed to me that this resentment and frustration was actually due to *the way* its participants were working class. Social centres in London are not full of “middle class activists,” nor are they enclaves of working class militancy. Their class reality is much more complex, and thus this section is about intermediate class groupings and particular kinds of class indeterminacy which can be paralysing or enabling in terms of political agency. The framework for this discussion is primarily through Pierre Bourdieu’s, and subsequent cultural studies’ theorizations of “the new cultural intermediary,” and leads to questions around the ability of this class factions to act collectively and the nature of collective agency.

Following on from the previous chapter that provided an overview of rampART social centre, this chapter will provide a series of sketches of organizers in social centres and related organizations (appearing in italicized text) to provide detail on the kinds of people involved with respect to class dynamics. I will be pulling back from a clear isolation of social centres, to a more general discussion of self-organized projects that reengages with artist-run patterns. To explore the combination of self-made endeavours with a class dynamic specific to an aspirational working class, I will be working with Bourdieu’s figure of the new cultural intermediary: “The upwardly mobile individuals who seek in marginal, less strictly defined positions a way of escaping destinies incompatible with the promise implied in their scholastic careers” (1984, 363). I view Bourdieu’s intermediary as an effective analytical framework to address these issues, which drawn in some of the ambivalences around entrepreneurial values identified earlier

around the drive to create independent initiatives and how this relates to neoliberal capitalizations of one's personal resources in order to climb through hierarchies. Bourdieu's concept of the intermediary is also replete with various shorting-comings and erroneous assumptions which I will also examine.

Davin, Area 10 art space: business cycles and the cycles of creative life

Davin is 33 years old and is an artist, sessional art college teacher, organizer of Area 10, gardener, renovator and father. Interviewing Davin at Area 10⁴¹ was almost like a "studio visit" with an artist, yet at the same he was close to presenting himself as synonymous with the organization. Most of his positions and ideas were under-scored by a tension between anti-institutionalism and being an astute player in institutional processes.

He failed his Art A levels (university preparation exams) twice. Undeterred, he applied to art college anyway, which is uncommon in the UK, and was accepted into a BA at Central St. Martins Art College based on the strength of his portfolio and his "oratory skills" in the admissions interview. The whole notion of art A levels is a point of aggravation for him, and a barrier that threatened to derail his artistic career. Davin's parents were craftworkers who then developed fine art practices. His parents seem bohemian and mobile. When he was growing up he lived in various places all around Europe, and various areas in the UK. By the time he was 16 he had gone to 16 different schools, all of them "run of the mill" state schools. Davin came from a background with

⁴¹Area 10 started off as squatted space that was used for various kinds of performances and exhibitions, and gradually became a more dedicated art space with a rental contract from the local municipal government and funding from various cultural programs.

a certain engagement with high culture, at the same time shows signs of cultural, and definitely financial, insecurity in occupying his position in the cultural field. He now seems caught up in the intensity and exhaustion of running a fledgling organization.

He appears extremely busy, working long days of intense multitasking, and yet he is nevertheless very amenable to being interviewed. Questions like “tell me about your background” are met with full, seemingly prepared responses. He often spoke in a mannerist way, responding to practical questions with long, convoluted answers that were at times remarkably elliptical, deploying rhetoric beyond his capacity. He presents himself as something of a Renaissance man, mixing philosophy, anthropology and new management lingo. But at the same time occasionally stopping and asking me for the precise word or for me to confirm if he had defined a concept properly.

His position at Area 10 appears to be in the grips of a “creative industry” policy climate, and an increasingly institutionalized art field that seems to affect many aspects of his work. It was remarkable in that he seemed both to be embedded in that language, and yet made clear signs of frustration and contempt for a bureaucratization of art. Here is a poet-business man, mixing consultation exercises and entrepreneurial initiatives, with psychological mapping, tactile experience and art historical references. At times he seems to present himself as heroic—the protagonist in the impressive struggle to found an organization like area 10, even though he acknowledged it came out of a collective and that there are now two other co-directors.

He provides keen insights into how universities and other art institutions have identified and formally included once informal networking and social activities, in fact, he is hired to develop these initiatives. He explains the ways that they are now built into their undergraduate art programs. He sees that this has also happened with municipal governments in regeneration policies. He is awarded contracts from these programs (art colleges hire him to run professional development courses, and he has served as a consultant for urban planning sessions), at the same time he finds these processes, with their bureaucracies, unsettling. He describes his favourite art teacher as hopelessly disorganized (but with excellent instincts); and believes in the creative potential of disorganization. But he works as an organizer and is actively contributing to defining and restructuring Area 10, with requisite transparency and structural elements to make it acceptable to levels of government.

In describing Area 10 he offers hand-written early manifestos, recent statistics of audience numbers and extensive descriptions of his negotiations with the local municipal council. A recent manifesto text vaunts the terms: “communicate, collaborate, create.” He operates self-consciously within the ideal of a holistic integration of art and life, close to a neo-avant-garde play of creativity, fluidity of meaning and everyday experience.

Davin is clear that Area 10 is no longer a collective, instead it is fragmentary and collaborative, and he is seeking to implement an unorthodox structure that avoids conventional hierarchies. He draws out the organizational structure on a piece of paper with pride. It is a complex and organic looking diagram with various overlapping

entities. He points out its ethical principles and its pleasing formal qualities, yet in many ways the structure he is describing is a rather standard organizational hierarchy moving from board and director, into secondary and tertiary groups and positions. His position at Area 10 is voluntary, though he is attempting, after three years without pay, to find a way to stabilize the organization and create a paid position for himself and the other organizers. He doesn't want arts council funding for Area 10 due to fears of bureaucratic complication and dependency, although semi-autonomous projects connected to Area 10 can pursue it. He uses terms like "at the end of the first 3 year cycle," and I am unsure if it is a business cycle or the cycle of life.

What I would like to underscore here is the make-up of Davin's upwardly mobile yet not fully institutionally sanctioned drive, which I think is reflective of a mixed class background where his parents have post-secondary education and a certain exposure to high culture, and yet this isn't fully consecrated. This has contributed to an ambivalent situation where he seeks to take advantage of self-made opportunities (he essentially created his position at Area 10) that might not be possible in a more legitimate space, and yet haunted by the need for this legitimation. Davin overcame cultural barriers to get into art school and occupy a position in the art field, however precarious. He comes across as living by his wits, at the same time as have an incredible appreciation for the complexities and multidimensional realities of the situations and challenges he has to address. There is the feeling that if Davin didn't have to overcome these barriers and create his own opportunities, he would be in a very different position; and in fact be a very different person. This is largely consistent with Bourdieu's figure of the

intermediary who comes from a somewhat dominated class group and who aspires to higher positions, yet “without possessing the cultural competences, the ethical dispositions and, above all, the social capital and investment sense” (1984, 363). In this way the subjects in my research closely match this as they are part of a particular class fraction seeking “positions which offer no guarantee but, in return, ask for no guarantee” (Ibid., 358). The aspirations and insecurities of my interview subjects exhibit dynamics that resonate strongly with the attributes, and even spirit of the new cultural intermediary.

For the most part the new cultural intermediary is not only located in, but synonymous with, the formation of a phase of consumerism which began in the late 1960s related to the commodification of emotional development and cultural exploration. Bourdieu sometimes refers to them as “need merchants” (Ibid., 365), in that they attempt to cultivate and market authenticity, and are experts in popularizing lessons from the art of living that have been first established by the “ethical avant-garde” (Ibid., 365), which refers to those with experimental life-styles and who seek new emotional modalities. The groups I am researching are both within and outside of this. They create voluntary or low-paying activities to suit various ambitions, which are usually politically and culturally rather than commercially motivated; and in terms of capital, they have moderately high levels of cultural capital (university degrees, cultural competencies) and very low levels of economic capital. Life-style plays a key role in these scenes, but specifically a life-style that attempts to reject the commodification of lifestyle. Through this chapter I will present the participants of social centres and fledgling cultural organizations, in Bourdieuan terms, as occupying an unusual place between the new cultural intermediary

and an avant-garde artist. However they lack the class background and dispositions to fully occupy a legitimate position of an avant-gardist in the cultural field or leadership positions within the political field. At the same time, some of the figures in the case studies are in fact in a voluntary or incipient phase, and transiting into a more fully-fledged intermediary position, tied to a more commercial logic as distinct from the avant-garde project. In Bourdieu's language, they will come to "professionalize the faiths they used to profess" (Ibid., 366). This is not uncommon in social centre activities as people shift from organizing "free parties" to running commercial clubs and enter into occupations as event organizers, as well as organizers working for NGOs.

I would like to delve into the ways the social centre scene can be considered avant-gardist, in Bourdieu's terms, which revolves around a dynamic of refusal. Although historical context plays a role in Bourdieu's understanding of the avant-garde, it is primarily defined as set of patterns and rules of a particular area of the field of cultural production, which Bourdieu calls "the field of restricted production" (Bourdieu 1993, 115). Cultural activity produced from this location has a relative autonomy from commercial pressures and institutionalized criteria of legitimacy. In this sub-section of the field, as discussed in chapter three, the objective is to accumulate symbolic capital (recognition from other recognized actors in the field), which in the heroic moments of the restricted field (primarily in the 19th century), is inverse to economic value, in a game of "loser takes all" (Bourdieu 1996, 21). Ultimately the goal of the restricted field is to attain complete autonomy from social forces and other fields, and to ascend to a realm of pure art, in the sense that the cultural field determines its own rules.

Specific to the individual within the field, he or she is driven toward forms of social indetermination and refusals of roles in the pursuit of radical autonomy. The cross-over between Bourdieu's definition of the avant-garde and those active in social centres lies in the practices of social indetermination expressed as a disinterest in the usual paths in life—social norms, occupational trajectories and property ownership. For the artist these are connected to aesthetic indeterminations wherein the avant-gardist seeks forms which exceed the given areas and existing conventions. The writer Gustave Flaubert represents a strong example of an avant-garde artist for Bourdieu, and Flaubert's credo "write the mediocre well" (Bourdieu 1996, 94) is an example of an avant-gardist strategy of using generic novelistic conventions, yet combined with an extreme attention to the prose within this form. The result is a blend of lyricism with vulgarity that produces writing which seems to be beyond the usual positions and takes on a striking quality owing to its indeterminate and "*unplaceable*" (Ibid., 97) status. "Flaubert's entire existence and all of his works are inspired by this will to sever all ties and roots, to place himself above all conflicts between classes and between segments of the leading class and, at the same time, above those in the intellectual field who implicitly or explicitly take part in these conflicts" (Ibid., 92).

These aesthetic refusals are complimented with the desire to defy social gravity as well. Central to the modern avant-gardist project are questions of interest and disinterest, in which "aesthetic disinterestedness is rooted in practical disinterest and indetermination chosen as a style of life" (Bourdieu 1987, 78). This "new way of living the bourgeois condition that defines the modern intellectual and artist" (Ibid., 78) culminates in the

rejection of *le sérieux* (Ibid., 80): that aptitude to be what one is through coming into one's own. This is the seriousness of conforming to what is expected, assuming the position and occupying the occupational role set out for a respectable middleclass adult. The avant-gardist, in terms of life choices and ethics, deliberately refuses to take him or herself seriously, "derealizes" *le sérieux* and attempts "to inherit without being inherited" (Ibid., 80). However, there is a second step in this refusal which distinguishes it from mere adolescent rebellion—to inscribe this refusal into works of the imagination. To refuse to take one's destined place, and yet also to refuse the paralysis of this refusal, which results in the condition of "social weightlessness" (Ibid. 81) that marks the avant-gardist character.

I assert that aspects of Bourdieu's avant-gardism, in terms of character and "practical disinterestedness" can be seen in London's radical culture scene, especially when it comes to anti-institutional attitudes and rejection of roles that seem to be laid out for them, at the same time as wanting to avoid the paralysis of refusal for refusal's sake. This raises an interesting scenario: can there be avant-gardist attitudes in people and fields which are not connected to the dominant classes? It would seem one can only reject *le sérieux* if one already has it. The "loser takes all game" only operates within an overall winning position, otherwise it is just loss?

In social centres and art squats we see refusals and desires to defy social determinacy, but without occupying privileged positions within the restricted field of cultural production. As well, there is the desire to deliberately cultivate a social

placelessness, but as a political act of self-determination. Practical disinterest is the first step in an emancipatory process, to be followed by a re-engagement of interest according to an alternative criteria. This is a mark of differentiation from both the Bourdieuan avant-gardist, for whom this signified placelessness is the end point, as well as the working class trait of “making a gift of necessity”—that is, converting limitations and lack of mobility into points of virtue. Rather than seeing the refusals and indifference of social centre participants toward confirmed middle-class positions and credentials as merely a compensation for the inability to occupy these positions —there is instead the rejection of roles tied to a political and social order which you denounce—whether it is the tedium of working class occupations, a life-time of occupying insecure middle-class positions or playing one’s part in an oppressive way of life?

This ambivalence returns us to the indeterminate position of the new cultural intermediary, which appears lucrative for those with a certain amount of cultural capital but are unable or unwilling to convert it into something more substantial (economic gains or *bona fide* positions), or those without proper educational capital to pursue the kinds of activities they desire. These groups possess incomplete or uncertified cultural capital, and therefore seize upon self-organization as a way to create alternative, *mala fide* positions. The new cultural intermediary deploys a kind of Bourdieuan DIY that often seeks to self-professionalize these newly created positions, in order to side-step their social destiny. At the same time they have an “anti-institutional temperament” (Bourdieu 1984, 366), however along the lines of making a gift of necessity, there is always a question of whether they reject institutions on principle or because they are excluded from more

vaunted positions. Accordingly, the new cultural intermediary oscillates between a desire to radically transform and the aspiration to secure status.

Ian, MADA art squat: “I don’t want them to and I don’t not want them to; I think they eventually will.”

Ian is 29 and never went to university. He is one of the main organizers of DA!, which was a group who squatted a series of impressive buildings between 2008-2009 and used them primarily for art exhibitions. He is also a hairdresser and has one daughter and another due in May. He grew up in London and Cornwall, and his parents run a guest house in the south of France. He spoke with a rather refined British accent, although he dropped out of Sixth-form⁴². “I thought I’d go get myself a job because I wanted to do something with my life. So I got a job hairdressing.” He spent a formative period in Paris where he was hairdresser, involved in art squats in a “haute culture” scene that mixed fashion with a somewhat fringe art scene. It was this experience that inspired him, and where he gained an informal education in art. He also learned a way of organizing and developing opportunities coming out of collaborative work in non-institutionalized spaces. He later spent a year in Japan hairdressing, became bored with hair and fashion, and returned to London to start an art squat.

Ian has a degree of anti-institutionalism, mainly out of the desire to avoid red tape and inflexible structures. He forthrightly presented himself as a reflective but non-theoretical person. He said he was bad “on paper” and very good in person. “I could sell the idea if

⁴² A British equivalent to Quebec’s CEGEP.

I was able to actually get past the written phase.” He saw his difficulty with theoretical language as an obstacle to pursuing his projects in recognized art spaces. Squatting was one way around all that. The art squat he was currently working on was called MADA in the West End of London in the extremely wealthy neighbourhood of Mayfair. DA comes from the activist tactic of Direct Action, but in the context of the art field, especially in a fringe, avant-garde area, seems closer to a fragment of Dada.

DA was a large group of over 30 people without a formal structure (no appointed roles or regular meetings). Ian is very open to speaking with the press, and this makes him an exception in a group that is very suspicious of the media. The squats they organize have received international attention, featured in The Telegraph, The Guardian and The Washington Post. Tensions around these issues between him and the group were quite evident. He respects their opinions and realizes the only way the project moves forward is to work with a consensus of what people want to do and their stances, in particular, a refusal to actively elicit art world attention even though he would prefer to do so. There is an evident tension in his role as a self-appointed spokes-person in a large collective project suspicious of media interest. During the MADA exhibition he gave a public lecture entitled “the future of DA! By Ian McDaw.”

In a certain way Ian could be considered as a disorganizer of art. “Art doesn’t really happen in an organized way, because you can’t actually try to set up a specific environment for art.” But at the same time he is quite practical: “DA is somewhere on the scale—there’s total freedom, and there’s total organization. Neither of them

exist. But I think an institution takes it too far down the road of organization, and I personally think we might be too far down total freedom.” DA!, at this point, is an informal group that proceeds entirely through friendship and social connections. He said there isn’t really an aesthetic criteria, but an ethos of the way they work. There wasn’t a commercial motivation for the MADA exhibition, although some of the works could probably be bought. “Maybe you could call me a social artist,” he said. “I don’t create objects, but I create spaces and opportunities for artists to communicate.”

When asked if he wants art writers, curators and collectors to take note of MADA, he responds “I don’t want them to and I don’t not want them to. I think they eventually will.” When asked whether artist-run projects can be an alternative to the art world or an alternative way into the art world he responded: “I have to be true to myself, and do what I have to do. And however it gets incorporated or doesn’t get incorporated, that’s how it will turn out.”

From this description we can see Ian is an example of a self-taught and self-made art organizer, very active in the fringes of high culture yet without credentials, which in Bourdieu’s terms is indicative of a mixed class position resulting in blend of high enthusiasm and lack formal authority. In this situation Ian is at times indifferent to this authority and other times desires it. His enthusiasm for speaking to the press indicates a willingness to bypass sanctioned art authorities and garner legitimation through more popular channels, and in this respect is a classic Bourdieuan intermediary subject, especially one with a petty bourgeois or otherwise mixed class background. This comes

across in the way, when asked about how he approaches the work of organization, he sometimes lapses into a mythology that it just comes together in a poetic labour (not wanting to be seen as merely an administrator), and other times he is more practical and frank about the tasks required to work with artists and develop exhibitions, and feels he has nothing to lose by speaking of it in more prosaic terms.

My reading of the new cultural intermediary is really more indicative of a class position developed from fissures in previous compositions. The new cultural intermediary is often made synonymous with occupations associated with new media and Public Relations, and particularly occupations in the “creative economy” (Sean Nixon and Paul du Gay 2002, Jennifer Smith Maguire 2008); however my emphasis is on the way the concept of the cultural intermediary can connect ethical orientations and desires for certain life-styles, with realignments within intermediary class groups—aspirational working class, the petty bourgeoisie, downwardly mobile middle class, etc. The organizers and participants of self-organized projects, as in Ian’s case, are most of all defined by their fragmented middle and working class positions.

As we see in Ian’s situation with MADA—where he is motivated to develop exhibitions that wouldn’t be possible in more formal organizations yet in other ways he would gladly join sanctioned spaces if he was able—intermediaries are a study in oscillations and ambivalences, side-stepping manoeuvres, mismatches between dispositions and positions, complexities related to a divided *habitus*, combinations of dissent and precariousness. The theory of the cultural intermediary comes into its own as

an insightful way into the ambiguities of intermediate class formations, especially the liminal class experience traditionally labelled as the petty bourgeois. However, there is tendency to limit the cultural intermediary to an occupational category. David Hesmondhalgh regards the concept of the new intermediary as ultimately a media critic mediating between production and consumption, a particular profession associated with “cultural commentary in the mass media” (Hesmondhalgh 2006, 226). Hesmondhalgh concludes that the discourse of the new cultural intermediary has come to include such a disparate group (in fact it’s something of “a dog’s dinner” (Ibid., 227)) of occupations and class concerns that the whole concept has become “confusing and unhelpful due to its wide range of uses” (Hesmondhalgh 2002, 66). The main culprits of this degradation are those, such as Mike Featherstone, Keith Negus and Sean Nixon, who have “conflated” the new petite bourgeoisie with the figure of the intermediary. Hesmondhalgh urges the corrective of working through “creative manager” assessments of the division of labour in the media field. My emphasis is just the opposite as I argue that the cultural intermediary, in the specifics of his or her organizational work and cultural management, brings us most of all to the complex relation between self-made occupational situations and social class. When Hesmondhalgh labels analysis of the intermediary tied to issues of class composition as the product of conflation and misunderstanding, he reveals perhaps a tendency in cultural studies of the 1990s to apply Bourdieuan concepts in order to understand aspects of new cultural industries while diminishing the critique of class hierarchies and inequality. This tendency is exemplified by Sarah Thornton’s *Club Cultures* (1996) which is an ethnographic study of the UK club scene of the 1990s that

rewrites Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital, one of the main determinates of social class and the "lynchpin of a system in which cultural hierarchies correspond to social ones" (Thornton 1996, 10). Instead Thornton deploys the term "subcultural capital" to theorize "hipness" and the status conferred to its possessor disconnected from the overall social field, and thus produces "[d]istinctions of culture without distinction" (Ibid., 1). In so doing, Thornton renders a space that is seemingly free from the larger realities of social class and systemic forms of inequality.

Rather than identifying club scenes and "underground" spaces as classless, or limiting a discussion of the intermediary to technical issues in the relation between production and consumption, I view the intermediary as most importantly an effective means through which to address alterations in class dynamics, especially newer social positions beyond those afforded by conventional class analysis. Bourdieu developed the figure of the cultural intermediary to examine the petite bourgeoisie social class. This was within an overall, long term study of how divisions between different social groups are made and the ways forms of superiority and control are maintained through claims of cultural distinction. The frequently cited passages on the new cultural intermediary, in media and cultural studies discourses and sociology, are from a section in *Distinction* (1984) entitled "Cultural Goodwill" dedicated to the cultural patterns of what he refers to as the new petit bourgeoisie, occupying an intermediate zone between the "executant" working class and a declining bourgeoisie, and marked by a relatively heterogeneous class composition. The traditional petite bourgeoisie, as distinguished from the new, are marked by middlebrow tastes and an "avidity combined with anxiety" (Bourdieu 1984,

323), that is, an enthusiasm for high culture without assuredness and authority. The new petite bourgeoisie aren't entirely separate from this blend of enthusiasm and lack of authority—as evidenced in Ian and Davin's situations—but instead of a reverence, they have a potentially subversive enthusiasm for high culture, and with respect to intermediary figures in social centres and radical culture in London, have mixed motivations about occupying positions of authority—they don't want to replicate authoritarian systems yet they want to be taken seriously and have a real effect on activities. Structurally the new petite bourgeois is defined most of all by interruptions in normal class trajectories. Various aspirations, falterings, leaps and absences all seem to land agents into this promising and deceptive social space. This enthusiasm mixed with disempowerment not only applies to the cultural field, but might also be seen at play in activist scenes, which as Nick Crossley (2002) has identified are dominated (or “over-represented”) by higher class positions and display similar class tensions and forms of distinction as those found in the cultural field.

What is at stake in this modest, often maligned class grouping of the petty bourgeois, which generally no-one in their right mind would want to identify with, are indeterminate class positions which offer us insight into contemporary class constitutions, and as I will assert, the possibilities of autonomous practices beyond relations of domination. It is ironic that most of the participants of social centres describe their politics and organizations as radical and as the antithesis of everything that might be considered petty bourgeois (such as conformist and small-minded attitudes). Yet in actual fact, in terms of class origin according to Bourdieu's terms, they are almost entirely

comprised of variations of this class. The pejorative views of the petty bourgeoisie might have to do with what Ranciere has called their “impossible identification” (Ranciere 1987, ix), excluded from what the working class and bourgeois are supposed to be, they are “doubly and irremediably excluded for living as workers did and speaking as bourgeois people did” (Ibid., ix). The petty bourgeoisie moves in the zone, at once wide and razor thin, between serious culture and the working class conditions.

There are a myriad of class theorizations of the zone between labour and capital which Marx labelled as “contradiction incarnate” (in Eagleton 2004). More colloquially the intermediate class is usually known as the “lower middle class.” In the context of contemporary European social movements, sections of this class are sometimes referred to as the “precariat” (mentioned in the previous chapter)—a generation of educated people facing high levels of material insecurity, shut out from unionized sections of the working class and older middle class generations with job security or permanent employment. The new petite bourgeoisie is close to Lash and Urry service class, with its “dislocating effect on the relationship between capital and labour and an irredeemably disorganizing effect on capitalist society in general” (Lash and Urry 1987, 162). The service class was developed in part from the deskilling of the working class, and “appropriated skilled work” in occupations with nascent career formations. The new petite bourgeoisie could also be seen as a fledgling, lower strata of John Frow’s knowledge class and the Ehrenreichs’ professional managerial class—a group who’s economic and social status is predicated on education rather than the ownership of capital or property. This also leads to a constant “fear of falling” tied to its contingent social

position. This insecurity, along with mixed alliances to both the working class and bourgeoisie, makes this a politically ambiguous group. Terry Eagleton, in a review of Mackenzie Wark's *A Hacker Manifesto*, views the hacker (the new info-proletariat) as essentially a petty Bourgeois, and notes that these mixed alliances have "made the lower middle class so slippery a political bedfellow in its day, as likely to be seduced by fascism as enlisted by socialism" (Eagleton 2004, 42).

What is the potential of this class, as evidenced in self-organized projects, and is it possible either within or outside of Bourdieu's formulations, for an intermediary to act collectively, beyond the contractions and obedience to higher class groupings? For Bourdieu the new petite bourgeoisie are fatally caught between their solidarities with "the dominated classes" and being in service to the dominating class. They are inclined towards challenging the cultural order as it is articulated in "the monopoly of competence," (Bourdieu 366, 1984) and they have a "hostility to hierarchies and "the" hierarchy, the ideology of universal creativity" (Ibid., 366); but most of the social roles available to them are akin to being "intellectual lackeys" (Ibid., 366) that enable these hierarchies, and hence creating a dissonance between their class dispositions and field positions, such as a former May '68 revolutionary becoming an industrial psychologist (Ibid., 367). Thus the Sisyphean intermediary is "obliged to live out their contradiction," between wanting to be one thing, and actually being another. The reference to May '68 is important because Bourdieu's new cultural intermediary is in part an historically specific figure, drawing upon research conducted in the late 1960s and writing the book in the aftermath of the uprisings of 1968, which for those on the left in

France was a climate of disappointment, confusion and despair. Although Bourdieu has a tendency to portray phenomena in a structuralist way, the new cultural intermediary is tied to the context of that time, thus the question becomes what are ways that the cultural intermediary is articulated today?

Bourdieu's descriptions of the new cultural intermediary leaves little possibility of political agency, but is it possible to reconceive the figure of the intermediary that allows a different outcome? A section in Bourdieu's *The Rules of Art* (1996), entitled "Bohemia and the invention of the art of living," furnishes us with a different account of a similar figure. The section looks at a rapid expansion of graduates and provincial migration in the mid 19th century into Paris, which bears a close resemblance to the intermediary. "These new comers" (Bourdieu 1996, 54) are drawn into nascent cultural industries (printing, fashion) which do not require qualifications "guaranteed by scholarship" (Ibid., 55), and at the same time as they pursue experience outside of work. This rag tag group are essentially bohemians—some of whom are artists, and others are more oriented to an artistic mode of life—occupying an emergent space in 19th century Paris. The parallel between these bohemians, eking out a living in cultural related work and pursuing their ethical and aesthetic experiences, with the new cultural intermediary lies in their displaced positions in the pursuit of occupations that don't require sanctioning by the proper authorities or having high levels of economic and cultural capital. However what separates them is that for the 19th century version there is the possibility of agency and emancipation. Bourdieu observes that although the 19th century example presents us with a burgeoning bohemia fraught with exploitation, we should "guard against the

widespread inclination to reduce this fundamentally ambiguous process solely to its alienating effects...we forget that it exercised liberating effects, too, for the example of offering the new “proletarian intelligentsia” the possibility of earning a living” (Ibid., 55).

As well, the Bohemian intermediary is oriented to the “art of living” as the new petit bourgeois is, however the former is seen as potentially defiant, in the face of both the then ossified fields of painting and sculpture, as well as against the routines of modern industrial life. In contrast the life style pursuits of the new intermediary are almost always rendered as pathetic, cashed-in versions of political and aesthetic defiance; and by comparison, Bourdieu continually stresses the “ambivalent” nature of the 19th century working class intellectuals and “penniless bourgeois.” This disparate group “defies classification” (Bourdieu 1996, 56) with “double or divided habitus” (Ibid., 57), and unlike the new cultural intermediary who Bourdieu renders as more or less paralyzed by such divisions, this heterogeneity enables the 19th century bohemian to mount symbolic challenges and create alternative formations.

In a very different examination of working class populations, Hall *et al.* (1976) in their analysis of subcultures, warn against the tendency of interpreting working class subculture as merely “status failure,” dependent on the assumption that working class aspirations are limited to the attempt to secure middleclass positions, and that all their struggles can be traced to this lack of mobility rather than the desire to move beyond such divisions in the first place. Graham Murdock stresses that these subculture experiences can be seen as “collective attempts to come to terms with the contradictions of their

shared social situation” (Murdock 1973, 9), and function as site for the pooling of social and symbolic resources. It is beyond the scope of my discussion to reconcile the discourse of working class subcultures with Bourdieu’s cultural intermediary, however I mention this, in contradistinction, as examples of not unrelated instances of figures moving beyond “positional suffering” (Bourdieu 1999, 4) into forging collective challenges.

Much of Bourdieu’s askance for the new petite bourgeoisie seems to be related to his scepticism verging on disdain for a commercial counter-culture that emerged at the end of the 1960s—the hippy entrepreneurs who championed self-made approaches. Does this mean that the potential of the new cultural intermediary is limited to the extent to which the intermediary is less a structural configuration and more a product of a historical moment and a specific generation? We now have the children (and the children’s children) of the new intermediaries in Bourdieu’s original study. There is a legacy of the new petite bourgeoisie, no longer so new but continuing to be significant. The possibilities of the contemporary intermediary rests the nature of current class composition and the potential for collective agency.

Doug, rampART—work ethic and alternative ethics

Doug is in his early 30s, and his day time job is a contract web designer for non-profit organizations (community groups, leftist publications and campaigns), but Doug’s passion is radical community organizing, which was his capacity at rampART and also at the Columbia Solidarity Network. He also has a visual art practice. Doug came from a

working class family in suburban South East London who moved out of inner London in the 1970s.

During his Fine Art studies in university he focused on performance art and participatory, community-based art practices. He was reasonably successful as a student and continues to make art, however, he found that the competitiveness of the art field, especially in London, to be antithetical to his interests in art making. As a result he repositioned his activities into a kind of social activism that combines political campaigns with cultural dimensions.

He is very good at facilitating meetings and takes on the challenges specific to an organization like rampART, such as balancing an informality and openness with being methodical and responsible. As well as technical capacities with software and website construction/management, he is effective in getting projects organized, calling people into question and setting up structures, without a heavy hand. He is considered to be a pivotal figure in rampART and has good relations with almost everyone in the organization, which is surprising given the factional nature of “radical scene” politics and the tensions involved in a squatted organization that is almost in perpetual crisis. He was involved in rampART for three of its four years of existence.

His response to various art groups that have proposed projects to rampART reveals a scepticism toward the opportunistic side of artists who he sees as more concerned about personal advancement than anything else. Doug continues his art practice, which is deliberately separate from his work at rampART and not for exhibition in the

professional art field. His aesthetic inclination is for a “radical popular” (akin to zine-culture); and contemporary art that is deliberately made for non-specialist audience, eschewing classicism and conceptualism. Doug makes a clear split between socially-engaged work, and art work done for one’s own pleasure. However the legacy of the anti-road movements, Reclaim The Streets and current projects such as the Laboratory of the Insurrectional Imagination, Space Hijackers and the playful Direct Action protest of the Climate Camp movement are where his interest really seems to lie—creative interventions into political sites. So long as it doesn’t get “flaky” and holds a direct challenge, such as Space hijackers driving two white military tanks (one was a diversion) around central London during an international arms trade show—a project that he admires.

In the interview I asked about where he sees himself in 10 years, wondering if he would seek a career as a community organizer. He adamantly expressed that he couldn’t work in a more conventional kind of organization, unless it was for a limited time on a project he saw as important.

He is hesitant when it comes to stating political goals. He feels people come together in practice in way they wouldn’t in theory. For him rampART is about practically working on projects. He is sceptical of manifestos and political statements. He feels strongly that rampART is a place where more extreme projects are developed that wouldn’t have a place in conventional, civic organizations or political parties.

Doug often served in self-effacing, supportive roles, even though he was really one of the un-appointed leaders of an ostensibly leaderless organization. His outlook on things is generally optimistic, and doesn't seem conflicted or frustrated.

There is a defiance in his positions and preferences (he rejects certain high art practices rather than reverentially accepting them). In many ways Doug is an example of having "post-class" politics. He doesn't merge his own situation, either in his contract design work or his efforts at rampART, with a politics tied to social class. He is aware of the tendency of those with higher class positions to assume director roles, even in grassroots organizations and campaigns, but in other ways he could be seen as having abandoned traditional working class identification and concerns.

His situation is a case in point in the way that a class dynamic underscores the London social centre scene, and yet with the exception of links to the still functioning group Class War⁴³, class is rarely mentioned. Overt class politics seems to have little to do with the politics favoured by those in social centres (environmentalism, migration issues, animal rights, and more general refusal of capitalist social relations which does not lay claims to being a direct class mobilization are the common issues). How can there be a class agency in the way social centres work, at the same time as there is so little identification? Is there a possible way to view disidentification as a political strategy, and see class indeterminacy as a potential ground for a new class politics?

⁴³ Class War is a London-based anarchist group formed in the 1980s, and is known its tabloid-like publication originally called *Stand up and Spit* that gives a working-class commentary of current events. The group also co-organized demonstration such as "Bash the Rich" protests and "Stop the City" occupations in the 1980s. Class War rhetoric calls for an insurrection of "the working class" against "the ruling class."

In 2009 there was a wildcat strike in at the Lindsey oil refinery over the use of Italian contract workers for jobs that were not advertised locally. The then prime minister Gordon Brown gave a controversial speech in which he used the phrase “British jobs for British workers.” This incident caused rifts to appear within the social centres and other radical groups, and revealed uncertainties in the British left in general. On the one hand there was an underlying identification with the traditional working class and a sympathy for the impoverished, former industrial cities in the North of England; on the other, there was a strong identification with immigrants and campaigns against xenophobia which in contemporary Europe—such as France expelling Roma holding French passports, the banning of minarets in Switzerland, and the emergence of the English Defence League—is very pervasive. Is there a way that these forces could be reconciled? Is there a class composition *à venir* which could coalesce, without reverting to a traditional class language that is usually limited by ethnicity and generational divisions?

Traditionally class agency lies in over-coming the *in itself* condition of a class and to gain a *for itself* dynamic of collective, self-determined action. This is expressed in the model of class agency described by R.E. Pahl (in Crompton 2008, 120) as the S-C-A chain, where social Structures give rise to Consciousness which in turn lead to Action. In this passage from objectively shared material conditions and relations to capital into an informed collective force, a class becomes *for itself*. Class consciousness in this sense is the equation of ideas and theories with relations to labour and capital. However these conceptions of class are “depth” models, relying on a representational logic. The insistence of most contemporary “surface” theories, in contrast, rejects a clean separation

between a pure underlying reality and conscious representation of it, where concepts merely reflect economic circumstances. Consequently, if older “consciousness” theories of class are applied to current situations they will invariably find classless situations and *in itself* class realities, however, if different models of class agency are deployed, then perhaps a more active class dynamic can be evidenced. John Frow in *Cultural Studies and Cultural Value* sees a limited form of agency in the “knowledge class” even though it is “a class which is necessarily not-for-itself (in its classical sense), and a class which is coherent only in its lack of structural cohesion” (Frow 1996, 127). From a Bourdieuan perspective class unconsciousness is more appropriate than class consciousness, as collective power ultimately lies in dispositions and in the intricacies of the *habitus*, and thus negates the coupling of agency and coherence proper to classical Marxist theorizations of class agency.

In the essay “What Makes a Social Class?” (1987) Bourdieu addresses the question of whether class exists as an analytic or in reality. Bourdieu’s response, differing from a “depth” approach, is that class analysis, while based on empirical data, only becomes a part of actual classes through a political process where theoretical frameworks enter into the practical experience of agents. In this way class is a symbolic struggle, and the area where this struggle has the most potential is in intermediary class positions.

While...economic and cultural capital produce clear cut distinctions between agents at extreme ends of the distributions, they are evidently less effective in the intermediate zones of the space in question. It is in these intermediate or middle positions of the space that the indeterminacy and the fuzziness of the relationship between practices and positions are the greatest, and that the room left open for symbolic strategies designed to jam this relationship is the largest (Bourdieu 1987, 12).

These intermediate zones, which are inevitably the territory of the petty bourgeois, are constituted by a “fuzziness” which, rather than being a loss of potency, creates a potential for action through a lack of clarity. This signifies an interesting turn where all the things that have traditionally considered to be markers of the impossibility of collective action—disidentification, ambivalence and liminality—can, under certain circumstances, become potentially the very basis of class struggle, or not, depending on an active, strategic relation to this status funk. Ambivalences and disidentifications of class do not necessarily evidence the disappearance of class; rather, they comprise both patterns of class domination on the one hand, and complex set of responses and resistances (in the place of consciousness) on the other.

Extending from this, older conceptions and analysis of class can act as an outright barrier for new class formations. The collaborative researchers under the name J.K. Gibson-Graham (1996 and 2001) focus not on class belonging, but rather on class becoming. If class is something that is actively made, and continually remade, then solidarity lies more in people coming together in struggles and situations which aren’t entirely known. The way that class and class contradictions have been reified and institutionalized, socially and culturally, into capitalist society points to the possibility that to continue forms of class struggle requires a dis-identification with hitherto notions of class groupings. This is especially true in class obsessed UK, where “the working class” is maintained in the social imagination as still largely based on the figure of the white male

manufacturing labourer. So the question becomes—to what extent are pre-existing notions of class identity an obstacle which has to be overcome to enable an agency against capitalist domination and toward post-capitalist futures?

One expression of such an over-coming is the post-class politics of Andre Gorz, where he sees the development of a non-class who defy class relations of all manner by no longer identifying themselves with production or capital. In

Farewell to the Working Class Gorz states:

The point is now to free oneself from work by rejecting its nature, content, necessity and modalities. But to reject work is also to reject the traditional strategy and organizational forms of the working class movement. It is no longer a question of winning power as a worker, but of winning the power to no longer function as a worker (Gorz 1982, 67).

However as Berardi pointed out in chapter two, the price of no longer being defined as a worker *per se* is that one's entire self becomes subsumed under the sign of production, namely an entrepreneurialism which seeks to develop all aspects of one's life in the new *homo economicus*. The task could then be to transfer antagonisms from work place militancy to a militancy of existence, which for Berardi lies in a rejection and re-imagining of neoliberal subjectivity. Another way to see this is in terms of moving from collectivism as understood in traditional class politics tied to organized labour and the party to a collectivity based on an art of living involving shared desires and a micro-politics of the group. Now, as established in chapter five and elaborated in this chapter, most of the people involved in rampART and the organization itself, are subject to the vagaries of precarious conditions. So we could ask how effective are these strategies of this new collectivism and militancy?

Joan, rampART—in both worlds, with “chameleon” defence and acerbic offence

Nearing 60, Joan is one of the older and also one of the most active people at rampART. She is a veteran of various youth culture movements that have swept through London over the decades—hippie, punk, Goth and rave culture. She comes from an aspirational working class Jewish family from suburban Northeast London. Her parents made her take elocution lessons, and she was partially educated in a lower tier private school and then, due to a lack of funds, returned to a state school where she was mocked for her “posh” accent. As a result she says she has learned “chameleon” survival tactics that enable her to match an environment for self-protection. Although meek could not be a more mistaken description, as she has a remarkable combination of street smarts and intellectual aggressivity.

She attended university in a former polytechnic—a community college converted to a degree granting institution in the 70s—and she is currently a senior lecturer (on a permanent part-time basis) in another former polytechnic. She identifies as an anarchist, and although feels a solidarity with working class groups she never refers to herself as someone from “the working class.” From elocution lessons to lecturer, Joan’s position illustrates Paul Wakeling’s (2010) view of the oxymoron of the working class intellectual as both Eliza Doolittle and professor Higgins, albeit with tattoos, dreadlocks and an acerbic wit that is effective on both “wide boys” and Oxbridge types. She is dedicated to rampART because she sees it as essential for developing radical culture. Mutual support and community building are crucial for Joan, although community for her has little to do with traditional social units or longings for village life; instead it begins in supporting

others who share similar values and reject traditional normative structures that underlie conservative notions of community.

Unlike many of the rampARTers, her material situation is not precarious, with a reasonable income, job security and a lifetime tenancy in council housing. As well, she has established a legitimate role as a researcher and writer, and is not in an emergent or climbing position as are most of the other participants in social centres, who face not only economic insecurity but also a contingency in their status and identity. As a career academic, she has a foot in both institutional settings and the chaotic realm of social centres. And yet although these contrasts are particularly strong in her case, many of the participants in rampART also straddle different worlds.

What social class is Joan? She exemplifies the ambiguous class composition I have been discussing, owing to her aspirational family background, with a doctorate and a semi-middle class material condition. She nevertheless does not fit easily into bourgeois values and settings and is a strong ally of traditional working class militant groups, perhaps more so than anyone else in rampART, such as Class War and the Whitechapel Anarchist Group.

She is perhaps the strongest believer in social centres of anyone involved in the scene that I had met. Without her involvement it would be difficult for rampART to function, yet without a social centre there is the sense that her life wouldn't be the same.

Joan's situation indicates that there is a significant difference between the intermediaries Bourdieu refers to and the participants of social centres, and this lies in the

overt commitment to collective work—both specific to running organizations, and participation in larger social and cultural movements. Bourdieu's intermediary, specific to post May '68 France, is predicated on a resigned individualism produced by the loss of hope for collectivity. This is described as generationally specific: "the mood of a whole intellectual generation which, weary of desperately hoping for a collective hope, seeks in a narcissistic self-absorption the substitute for the hope of changing the social world or even of understanding it" (Bourdieu 1984, 366). The only thing collective seems to be an under-current of despair and isolation from collective forms; and it is this loss which is then compensated through the lifestyle consumerism that the intermediaries both look to and take advantage of. Joan's case is interesting in that unlike most of the intermediaries I am examining who were born in the 1970s, she is chronologically closest to the figures in Bourdieu's study, and unlike the generational mood described by Bourdieu she is one of the more ardent believers in collectivism.

But what is meant by this term "collectivity"? It is a hard concept to pin down, and it shares much with the related concepts of participation and community, as well as its instantiations in socialist traditions. Many of the groups in the social centre scene in London explicitly refer to themselves as collectives, such as the rampART collective, the Library House collective (a social centre), the Anarcho-Feminist Kollektive, the Wombles collective (a prominent anti-capitalist group active from 2000-2006 and involved in various social centres such as The Grand Banks), and phrases like "collective organizing" are frequently used in this scene. While other groups and organizations do not use this rhetoric, they generally subscribe to a collective ethos which can be identified

through aspects of participatory practices discussed in the previous chapter: non-hierarchical structures, a commitment to group process of how things are decided and organized which aspires to alternative forms of social relations outside of patriarchy, capitalism and in certain parts of the scene, hetero and homo-normativity. As well, there is a belief in collective ways of acting through a voluntarism of shared desires, rather than through a question of collective ownership or a mass collectivity imposed through a system or party affiliation. Finally, collectivism in the context of social centres is also based in a sociality connected to embodied experiences and spatiality—eating together, sharing time and particular spaces, going through intense experiences together—through which a collective agency and identity emerges.

Blake Stimson and Gregory Sholette (2007), invoking a communist-like scenario, assert that “[t]here is a spectre haunting capitalism’s globalization, the spectre of a new collectivism” (Stimson and Sholette 2007, 1). This is expressed both in what the authors see as a current thirst for collectivity, as evidenced in the proliferation of collaborations and participation in recent art activity, and in an interest in “collective intelligence” tied to new forms of productions such as open source software development and in the proliferation of social networking and wiki-forms which the authors see as manifesting a vitality that entrepreneurial capitalism seeks to exploit. For Stimson and Sholette this spectre, a disfigured expression of a repressed force, also animates the decentralized networks of Al Qaida. The authors then sketch out a narrative of Modern collectivity, which was repressed and decollectivized during the cold war, and then rearticulated into

the cultural politics of the 70s and 80s, and currently is in a state of resurgence beyond the terms of Modernism.

As the title of Stimson and Sholette's edited collection implies—*Collectivism after Modernism*—there is a binary between an older collectivism comprised by the monolithic solidarity of trade unions and homogeneous class groups operating on a representational logic, affiliated with party structures and materialism; and a new collectivism that lies in shared identities and affectual dimensions, with a constitutive rather than representational logic. Stimson and Sholette see the next stage of collectivity as moving beyond these poles into a situation described by Marx as the “self-realization of human nature constituted by taking charge of social being here and now” (Ibid., 13).

Where does the collectivity in London social centres sit in relation to the positions mentioned above? Melucci, and other new social movement theorists, tends to associate the practices of entities like social centres with a collectivity of values and ethics. One of the strongest expressions of this view of collectivism is Michel Maffesoli's concept of neo-tribalism outlined in *The Time of the Tribes* (1996). Maffesoli is a French sociologist who developed this theory during the 1980s and 1990s. His concept of tribe locates aspects of social intimacy and enchantment, which have been traditionally associated with rural or premodern societies, within contemporary society and amid urban environments, as well, these bonds are elective and flexible instead of rigid and traditional and can be comprised of heterogeneous persons. Maffesoli's concept of tribe, which is not to be understood in the anthropological sense, is based on an “ethical

aesthetics” (Ibid., 10) stemming from a shared affective experience that binds small groups. Neo-tribalism applies to many of the groups described in subculture and post-subculture research, but significantly, also to more mundane and general groups which are excluded from these studies, such as co-workers and hobbyists, who share a particular experience of everyday life. Tribes are based on networks of acquaintances and circles of friends; and Maffesoli wishes to give such entities a sociological status that was once reserved for concepts such as social classes, the individual and the mass. Tribe formations have a potential “disalienating effect” on everyday experience, but also can play a role in ethnic nationalism. In many ways Maffesoli’s sees tribalism as most of all a departure from both individualism and its other, collectivism; although when he uses the term he is referring to the collectivism of 20th century socialism and communism—the collectivity (and uniformity) of the mass. The division between individual/mass and tribe is also carried over into the distinction between the social (seen as anonymous, structural and rational) versus sociality (marked by ambience, flexibility and affective experience).

Maffesoli’s work at times comes close to being almost a caricature of postmodern social science with its enthusiastic embrace of flexibility and the irrational. Maffesoli has no place for overt politics and “activist progressivism” (Maffesoli 1995, 11). Instead, politics is restricted to expanding the art of living and the de-individualizing experience of life. His post-political theories presume that older forms of hierarchy are eroded by new kinds of social relations which transform without the need for overt political projects, and function on the level of altering fundamental social relationships through changing emotional registers and emotional bonds.

Another current delineation of collectivity related to Maffesoli's sociality lies in the investigation of social networks, especially through the role of digital technology (Juris 2008). In much of this research lies the notion that systems of connections, in themselves, constitute collectivity. I am sceptical of this tendency to reduce questions of collectivity into network dynamics, which can function almost like structuralist formalism which ignores vital concerns about content, ideology and actor's motivations. To see rampART as a node in a network of ultra-leftists, anarchists, and various other social and cultural movements, however, would over-look much of what happens there. As well, because of the commitment of explicit political projects (anti-capitalism, alter-globalisation movements and more recent anti-cuts activism against the Cameron government), and also an engagement with the materialism involved in squatting politics (appropriation of resources connected to an opposition of private property), the practices and values exhibited by rampART cannot be fully associated with Maffesoli's neo-tribalism. Instead, the social centre project lies within Stimson and Sholette's envisioning of a collectivism after Modernism that seeks to fuse aspects of a Maffesolian collectivity, based on elective affinities, flexible connections and emotional experience, with overt activism, systemic critique and coherent political positions.

In this chapter I have identified the self-organizers of social centres and art projects as part of an indeterminant class grouping tied predominantly to the aspirational working class. I explored this class dynamic through Bourdieu's figure of the new cultural intermediary, which is valuable in the way it leads to the very essence of self-organization: those from lower class positions develop their own projects independent of

existing organization and institutions as a way of side-stepping hierarchies as part of an “ethical avant-garde” which attempts to develop new ways of living. Related to this, I considered the ways a social centre participant could be viewed as avant-gardist in Bourdieuan terms. Significant in this discourse is the notion of rejecting “*le sérieux*,” which is a derealization of conventional markers of adulthood. This is an apt description of a large part of the social centre project, however without material security, legitimacy or entitlement afforded to the bourgeois avant-gardist.

Bourdieu’s theory became more problematic and less apt in the way the discourse of the intermediary is inseparable from individualistic and narcissistic lifestyle pursuits, and seems to leave little room for collectivity and oppositional relations. I considered social centres as reconciling aspects of the intermediary with collective practices, especially tied to indeterminant class positions. I point to the possibility of this “fuzzy” class grouping leading to an emergent form of class agency. However such possibilities are mitigated by the inaction of this class faction to act against its own precariousness. Both the potentials and short-comings of the intermediaries in social centres lie in the nature of a newer form of collectivism. In place of traditional ideas of the collectivism linked with the socialist project of collective ownership and income distribution, there is a micro-group collectivism that isn’t based on homogeneous groupings and rigid structures. Although social centres attempt to combine this elective and affective collectivism with more conventional political struggles and direct challenges to power, these are still highly instable and incipient.

7. Conclusion

I started off this research by looking for new directions for some of the potentials seen in artist-run activity based on collective ways of working, the development of interdisciplinary platforms and the desires for social transformation and new ideas. I wanted to explore how the dynamism of informal yet organized entities and the possibilities of aesthetic experience could be directly applied to political struggles. I studied social centres in London in this respect, and looked at the way they function as platforms that bring together activists, artists, musicians, filmmakers, researchers, and all those whose aim is for the collective realization of independent educational, cultural and activist projects. Social centres can be seen as offering instances of an “on the ground” aesthetic political agency in everyday life, where the aesthetic is not solely understood as the beauty of visual forms, but rather, on the one hand, of a social aesthetic of how one lives and acts, and on the other hand aesthetic in the sense of a politics wrapped up in cultural forms and experience. This is connected to what I labelled the “radical mundane” of anti-capitalist experience revolving around the attempt to inhabit urban space in different ways through the experience of squatting and the collective occupation of gaps in the neoliberal city of production, consumption and property speculation.

I’d like to sum up the main issues of the thesis and highlight the important insights of the research by critically assessing the effectiveness of the “radical mundane” and the social centre project in general. I studied how an agency, in the sense of the ability to act with a degree of autonomy, is no longer really the focus in more traditional

sites of artist-run initiatives (such as galleries and media centres run by artists), and that collective determination of projects operating from the desire to reduce the separation between organizer and spectator, and to develop forms of participatory engagement are more likely located in Relational Aesthetic type practices. However these practices also have some serious draw backs, foremost among them is the attempt to ameliorate alienated social relations without opposing capitalist power. Could there be such a thing as an anti-capitalist Relational Art practice, and if so, what forms could it take? I considered the activities of UK social centres as a provisional answer to this.

The tact I have taken in this thesis—examining social centres by first considering artistic practices and organizations—is tricky in that it can set up a series of expectations and unproductive binaries, but I feel there is a rearticulation of aspects of art underway, and the relocation of former artists and organizers into the emergent zone of social centres, “cultures of resistance” and Direct Action activism appears to me as a very significant development. On the one hand social centres are in no way a replacement or a direct continuation of artist-run spaces, and yet on the other hand, depending on both how one understands art and also how deeply one is drawn to a fundamental questioning of art, the connection between social centres and their related cultural scenes can function, in fact, as an alternative to the project of alternative art spaces. If we can question the gallery as the eternal focal point of art, as well as move outside the conceit of “the artist,” then all manner of connections and genealogies become viable. Connected to this, the thesis considered the relation between political and artistic avant-guards, such as, historically, the way artists active in Berlin Dada were communist militants. This

consideration was extended to include social centres in the way they fuse different kinds of avant-garde projects together through the combination of cultural activity and activism, as well as in the refusal of normative social trajectories.

A more straightforward objective of this research was to describe social centres as they are not a very well known entity with a limited research literature. They emerged in the UK around 2001, and arose out of Infoshops, anarchist autonomous spaces and Reclaim the Street festive occupations, as well as from a strong continental influence of the *centri sociali* model. Usually located in squatted spaces in “centre periphery” areas of London, they are highly unstable and exist in relatively small numbers, ranging from three to eight during the period of the research. This instability is fully integrated into the social centre experience and ethos, that attempts to turn precarious conditions and into tactical opportunities and arenas of experimentation. Although social centres are not numerous, they nevertheless involve a diverse range of communities, which draw on thousands of participants who are highly committed, and develop an impressive series of events, as well as offering resources for activist groups and campaigns. They are highly participatory spaces, where the audience or users also function as the unpaid organizers in non-profit, voluntary organization. Participation in social centres is also defined on an experiential level, as opposed to formal membership or defined by tangible results. Activities turn on a voluntarist “pull,” where participants are drawn into these spaces rather than recruited, marketed or directed. This openness and self-directedness can also make them exclusive and contribute to the instability of these spaces and scenes.

Social centres have a particular class dynamic specific to an “aspirational working class” faction that occupies an intermediary position between traditional working class composition and clear middle class formations. This mixed class grouping looks to self-organization as a way to side step economic and cultural hierarchies, as well as a space to challenge these power structures in the construction of autonomous spaces. I asserted that there is potential for a class agency for this group operating in a relatively indeterminant space, which is manifest in a form of collectivism; and yet there is also a great deal of ambivalence in this group’s interests, and an uncertainty as to whether these affective mutualities evidenced social centres—through collective desires, sociality, a forging community—can alter the material and symbolic divisions which maintain class dominance.

These class dynamics are closely tied to the context of neoliberalism and an entrepreneurialism based on personal initiative and the maximization of one’s subjectivity for competitive relations and economic performance. I considered this context primarily through a Foucaultian “governmental” analysis and an emphasis on a rationality that underscores and saturates economic and macro-social forces. Of interest here is the proliferation of an entrepreneurial logic in fields that hitherto had nothing to do with investment thinking, and the notion of the “entrepreneur of the self.” As well, considering Berardi’s analysis of the way personal involvement and self-direction is required by post-Fordist forms of work, the opposition between capital and labour in this context is muted. This places the self-organizational ethos of social centres—“doing things for oneself” and taking initiative, with a focus on self-realization—as being

directly implicated in aspects of neoliberal enterprise; and this is further intensified if we accept that the aesthetic strategies of the counter-culture—the search for authenticity, the ideal of self-management and an anti-hierarchical exigency—are now used in post-Fordist modes of capitalist production, replacing the disciplinary framework characteristic of the Fordist period. There is a danger in the ethos of self-organization of accentuating a regime of initiative and self-reliance. Rather than finding “resistance” to neoliberalism and autonomy, one enters into the prime modes of exploitation in the post-Fordist context.

What then is the political response to neoliberal enterprise and these dangers? This is the very question those involved in self-organized projects, and perhaps almost everyone, during the first decade of the 21st century has to confront. The initial responses seem to be either to work within the terms of the entrepreneurialism—social-cultural entrepreneurs—or to reject these either through the figure of the autonomous artist or counter-culture bohemian. I have presented the participants of social centres as instead, through collective activities and experiences, as attempting to alter and remap entrepreneurial subjectivity, at the same time as contributing to political struggles against the reduction of the public sphere. Social centres are places to reconstitute the self, develop other modes of care of the self not based on competitive individualism and market exchange in the pursuit of new ways of living in appropriated common spaces.

In a sense social centres are all about “enterprise,” however in terms of undertaking difficult or important projects in bold and energetic ways. Accepting the

view that neoliberal society involves an increasing “responsibility” for one’s life in the way that ambition has been generalized as public resources dwindle, ambition is no longer exclusive to the ambitious or those who want to take chances. Under such conditions the production of the self becomes pressurized and psyche energy is integrated into the economy, and Berardi reminds us of the staggering emotional cost and the social loss of this integration. The “cure” here isn’t adapting deviant psyches to the entrepreneurial imperative and its behavioural norms, rather, “the creation of psychological cores capable of transforming a certain mental cartography into a liveable space” (Berardi 2009, 136). Thus in certain ways social centres are implicated in a neoliberal rationality that calls for initiative and self-reliance; and yet in other ways they are a kind of neoliberal drop-out centres, where the beautiful losers of entrepreneurship attempt to collectively rework themselves. This not only allows a refusal of neoliberal psychological imperatives, but also foment an activist expression through claims and disruptions in urban space.

Related to this are the ambivalences around the importance of participatory forms, which are vaunted by social centres and yet are also central to state and business interests, as well as implicated in the divestment of public services. Values and practices of self-organization—diminishing the distinction between production and consumption, of those who direct and run an organization and those who use its services—are in many ways close to official social policy of New Labour and the Cameron government’s policies of the “big society.” However, participation in social centres means something much more specific and oppositional, based on a politics of forging new social relations as opposed

to formulating political demands. These practices are about avoiding an endless deferral of another world merely being a possibility at some future date, through the sanctioning of the proper authorities. A critical objective of this research was to politicize the concepts of participation and collectivity that are proliferating in various discourse (e.g. in the art field, in social and cultural policies and in NGO discourse), and to examine attempts to combine a participatory ethos with explicit anti-capitalist views and political antagonisms.

The issues around whether participation can be a mode of resistance are connected to the question of the usefulness of micro-political and affective modes of political engagement. The sociologist Melucci, who I referenced in chapter five with respect to understanding the participation seen in rampART, more or less celebrates a kind of politics associated with these organizations, which when seen from the point of view of more traditional campaign activism or party-based socialism can appear as ineffective in mobilizing populations and winning political battles.

Movements are lost and there is no character occupying the scene. But there are a lot of submerged networks, groups and experiences that insist on considering themselves “against”. But who cares about them? They seem more interested in themselves than in the outer world... They don’t have big leaders, organization seems quite inefficient, disenchantment has superseded great ideals. Many observers consider these realities, which don’t challenge the political system and are not interested in the institutional effects of their actions, as a residual, folkloristic phenomena in the big scenario of politics. I am convinced, on the contrary, that these poor and disenchanted forms of action are the seeds of qualitative change in contemporary collective action (Melucci 1985, 815).

Contrary to the claims of ineffectiveness, Melucci instead points to a more fundamental change in the nature of political action. Throughout this thesis I have discussed social centres in terms of the potential of forging different kinds

of social exchange, resistance on the level of subjective experience and forging emotional bonds, all of what could be considered as affective or micropolitics. I have asserted that social centres are sites to challenge neoliberalism in terms of conscious and subconscious structures, through the development of a resistant ethos and Direct Action protest. Yet it could be argued that this politics leaves macro structures in place. Occupying a few abandoned buildings as a way to challenge a social and political system based on accumulation and ownership could appear laughable. I'd like to therefore consider the effectiveness of affective politics in this context.

The concept of micropolitics has a very particular meaning developed by Deleuze and Guattari (1987) referring to the combination of social and psychic reality, resulting in a politics on the level of desire. This has many similarities with Foucault's concept of a "microphysic of power" (Foucault 1997, 17) which is an interface between institutions and bodies, and social and psychological practices. The definition of neoliberalism deployed in this thesis is largely based on tracing macro forces and overt situations (e.g. changes in policy and services based on the logic of competition and privatization) down to a microphysic analysis. In assessing the effectiveness of social centres I am in part drawing on these theoretical legacies, but also in a more general way of addressing issues of power and control not in entire populations but on the level of groups, as well as in informal processes and in local situations.

A case in point, as addressed in chapter six and earlier in the conclusion, is how effective are social centres in contemporary class struggles? I examined how social centres are largely animated through a class dynamic of the aspirational working class that looks to self-organization as a way to side-step economic and cultural hierarchies, and open up a space for alternatives. Bourdieu has continually pointed to an individualism and opportunism that commonly arises in such side-stepping manoeuvres, however my experience in social centres didn't confirm this. I saw viable collective work, by a group of people drawn to these projects as a way out of an individualism and competitiveness which can be particularly oppressive in London. As well, the activists tied to social centres, such as in the intense relationship between social centre resistance culture and the Climate Camp movement, could be considered to have been effective even according to the most bottom-line notions of political action, such as contributing to the cancelation of the third runway for Heathrow and the termination of the expansion of the Kings North coal-fired power station. This is especially significant when considering that parliamentary power seemed unable to act decisively or show leadership on these issues. However, these victories didn't really change the material conditions of the participants or disrupt class-based hierarchies.

As stated, social centres might potentially open up an indeterminate space of class becoming, involving the development of collective practices, but the tangible effects of this activity lies in non-class-based politics. In terms of a class agency, the activities in social centres seem to be more on the level of a prefiguration or an exploration rather than a mobilization. The restructuring of the relation of capital to labour has led to the

growth of “precarious” conditions, defined by non-permanent forms of employment, insecure housing and social support systems, the increase in person debt and self-exploitation (e.g. unpaid internships or the myriad of other forms of free labour). Although there are exceptions, this rise of precariousness has seen a very little resistance in the UK context. Social centre participants are certainly not alone in facing precarious situations, however they certainly bear the brunt of these conditions, and given the political focus and determination of those involved, it is startling to see so little action on issues tied to their material conditions and class interests. This is one area which clearly separates UK social centres from their continental counterparts, who have incorporated anti-precarity struggles into the culture of their organizations and movements. In many ways, as perverse as it might be from more traditional leftist views, the UK social centre experience comes close to embracing and exacerbating one’s precarity. The whole point of these places is for people who don’t want a life-long job or to define themselves through the terms of paid employment whatsoever. Social centres cultivate flux, although not the calculated flexibility of contemporary labour patterns and profit extraction. This returns us deep into the realm of an affective politics where the goal often seems to be for a self-directed precarity, which is also tied to a politics that is almost purely tactical and opportunistic. The onus is on working within gaps and loop holes—in the city, in property law, in stolen moments and spare time. The spirit is defiant yet compliant in the refusal to engage with the terms of dominant institutions and more traditional leftist politics. Squats and the squatting life are completely without security which can be very debilitating, yet because of this very condition, it also enables activities that wouldn’t

otherwise be possible. The overhead is very low and there is small but highly self-motivated group of participants who are used to acting very quickly in ways that more secure arrangements often aren't able to match due to an inability to muster proper resources or the reluctance to take a chance.

The anti-capitalism of social centres lies in creating authenticity from estrangement, and seeking to resist alienated social relations, or rather, working toward what unalienated social relations could mean. Again, this occurs in the micropolitics of building friendships, trusts and the fabric of networks which cannot be reduced to the merely personal. However the danger here is that it just results in in-clubs, enclaves and radical margins which might block a more broad-based popular movement. This points to the limits of collectivity based on group dynamics and elective bonds as Maffesoli defined them. Under such an ethos, can there be a collective, broad-based movement based on such small, fragmentary entities?

The stakes of the anti-capitalist micropolitics evidenced in London social centre have been further elevated in the post-financial crisis climate of austerity cuts, and related anti-immigrant sentiments. These issues have recast the entire landscape of social centres in London, and leads us to further interrogate the relevance of such an anti-capitalism, influenced by anarchist anti-statist views, at a time when state sponsored public programs are weakening, ironically limiting the time for involvement in social centres and political culture in general. Furthermore, can we let ourselves be distracted by notions of creative resistance as an end in itself, and are social centres and those who research them, stuck in

a world of outsider politics? Isn't it more important, as Todd Gitlin (1997) has charged in a critique of cultural studies research, to instead search for robust ideas and practical reform strategies? At a time when public services of all manner are under an aggressive assault and British society is being radically restructured in way that exceeds Margaret Thatcher's boldest initiatives (with 500,000 public service jobs to be cut, a 25% reduction of municipal budgets, tuition fees to increase from £3000 to £6000-9000, the end of public funding of humanities and social science departments, the closure of all manner of support for disadvantaged communities and the list goes on). Isn't micro-politics irrelevant in this current conjuncture of not only austerity measures, but also in the resurgence of mass protest movements? In such a time it would seem that the importance of everyday subversion and interventions into subjective forces recedes.

Not surprisingly, I think that micropolitical issues are crucial, more than ever, because neoliberalism derives a great deal of its power, effectiveness and legitimacy through its own micropolitics that must be countered. The rationality of cuts and of the crisis of public debt tied to the stabilization of the banks, is sustained not only by neoliberal values that accept the loss of public infrastructure as fiscal responsibility, but also because social desire and the ability to act collectively have been so undermined. There is a lack of confidence and belief that enables people to make challenges, refuse circumstances and imagine alternatives. As urgent as many of these anti-cuts struggles can be, there is a danger in casting aside value challenges and organizational work on the level of affect (including forms of socializing, bonding and the fostering of a collective spirit) such as those effort seen in social centres, and to reduce struggles to the raw

preservation of state programs and resources. The left had little response to the banking crisis of 2008, which to me points to a failure of the social imagination, and an inability to think and act beyond the usual dreams of acquisition, possession and entrepreneurial development. These kinds of failures have everything to do with what might be labelled as micro and affective politics.

As addressed in chapter five, social centres are not immediately oriented to instrumentalist modes of political action (ousting a government or changing a specific piece of legislation) or the accomplishment of specific goals. Rather, as I have explored in this research, they are about fostering a kind of political culture, as well as a practical and cultural infrastructure conducive for developing ideas, connections, experiences and social bonds which then enter into all manner of social struggles. It is in this way that micro and macro forces combine, and alignments between broad and narrow approaches to politics form. What I have seen in social centres, at best, is a mix of a general culture of resistance, conducive to building a confidence and defiance in participants and which practically develops a community of highly skilled and motivated activists, through which other, more tangible struggles can draw upon.

These sorts of alliances, and the effects of this radical political culture, have contributed strongly to specific accomplishments including: the successful poll tax resistance in 1992, the Reclaim the Streets movement that was incredibly pivotal in the European context of moving alter-globalization activism from a few isolated actions to a full-fledged social movement; and more recently, as mentioned, successes in

environmental issues. The vibrant UK student movement and anti-cuts campaigns of 2010-2011 (e.g. UK Uncut⁴⁴ and local borough-based groups) have been in part based on various kinds of occupations and protest actions which draw heavily on the people and the networks connected to social centres in London, as well as an overall political culture which has enabled a resistance to the austerities measures despite the inaction and paralysis from the Labour Party, the mainstream press and the Trade Union Council.

A final example, which exemplifies what the social centre movement is capable of and the way it can connect the affective with the instrumental and marginal spaces with institutions, is the Middlesex University Philosophy department occupation in May 2010. A well regarded department, which is a centre of radical philosophy and the “emancipatory” philosophical traditional, as Peter Hallward (a instructor in the program) described it, no longer fit with the business model of the highly entrepreneurial Middlesex University, with satellite campuses in Dubai and Mauritius. A group of students and faculty in a last ditch effort to save the department occupied the Mansion Building, and later the library at Trent Park campus from May 4 to May 21. The student and faculty were bolstered by a large number of participants from the social centre scene, with their experience of squatting, Direct Action and self-organization. During this time the building was converted into an “experimental transversal space” (as stated in their blog), which was really a social centre by any other name, with a full program of lectures,

⁴⁴ UK Uncut is an umbrella term for groups that stage occupations against tax dodging corporations such as Vodaphone, Barclays and Boots. The actions are generally high-spirited events that receive high levels of popular support and have proliferated around the world including groups such as Las Vegas Uncut and Nova Scotia Uncut.

discussions, films and meetings about a wide range of topics, including student activism, university politics, Spinoza, Lacan and Benjamin. Websites and email lists connected with various social centres circulated information and calls for assistance, as well as promoting the teach-ins and other activities held in the occupied philosophy building. The occupation acted as a focal point for an international campaign which in the end saved the department. It seems ironic that the survival of a prestigious university department depended in part on the energy and commitment of those involved in social centres. I in no way want to suggest that it was merely the presence of participants of social centres that made the defence of Middlesex philosophy possible, but there was no doubt it played a crucial role in the occupation and complimented the work by the University College Union, celebrity philosophers such as Zizek and Badiou, the general public voicing concern and the lobbying efforts of faculty members. What the Middlesex situation has in common with the other accomplishments I have just mentioned is that they are situations which involved a rather wide-spread public support, at a time when few of the existing institutional players (parliament, unions and large media outlets), certainly not in the initial phases, were capable or willing to act.

It has to be acknowledged that it has taken the “austerity measures” to, on the one hand, bring social centres out of the “political ghetto of hardcore anti-capitalist anarchism” (Gilbert 2008, 130) and into these broader struggles, and on the other hand, it is the direness of the situation and the lack of alternatives which has made a larger public more receptive to the organizational forms and radicalism associated with social centres. This has answered to a certain extent the question of how to make a broad movement

when so few people are able or willing to commit to the level high of participation required or to a manifestly anti-capitalist politics. It is a strange situation where things have started to get bad enough for some brilliant possibilities to be realized, however incipiently—a fundamental questioning of the tenets of neoliberalism, an invigoration of the social imagination and a growth of vibrant, broad-based collective organizing. Where this alignment might go isn't clear, and few are overly optimistic at this point. It has been my intention in this research to understand the limits and potentials of radical self-organization, and perhaps certain insights from this can be drawn from this to see future directions for these cultures of resistance.

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