**On Common Spaces, Affinity, and the Problem of a Torn Social Fabric.**

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Abstract

In this chapter, we discuss several collaborative art projects of David Graeber and the Yes Women Group, exploring values such as creativity and redefining "art" as part of a larger project of liberation. Focusing on the feminist actions undertaken by the Yes Women Group, we show how collective art practices may help to reshape relationships and repair broken social ties, while at the same time, revealing new forms of affiliations beyond nations, borders, and blood relations. We conclude with a discussion of Carnival4David, an international funeral event memorializing the life and legacy of David Graeber in 2020. This memorial was organized by a broad and overlapping assembly of art and activist groups, including ZAD, the Church of Stop Shopping, ExRebellion, as well as friends, peers, and readers of David Graeber. The Memorial Carnival used the artistic strategies that Graeber celebrated to overturn relations of power, not only social and political but also the eternal power of the biological order that we all, as humans, are mortally afraid of.

A revolution on a world scale will take a very long time. But it is also possible to recognize that it is already starting to happen. […] Attempts to create autonomous communities in the face of power [are] almost by definition revolutionary acts. And history shows us that the continual accumulation of such acts can change (almost) everything.

David Graeber, *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology*

In Memoriam

David Graeber was an anthropologist and activist. He was also: an amateur guitar player, a lover of Japanese and Kurdish food, an anarchist, a science fiction enthusiast, a professor, a writer, and in a seemingly impossible way, a friend to hundreds if not thousands of people all over the world. He died unexpectedly in Venice in September 2020. Here we explore where and how David Graeber's activist and artistic ideas came together in practice, including in feminist practices. Specifically, we highlight his strategies for creative inversion, chief among them ‘avoiding,’ ‘tweaking,’ and carnivalesque mockery, efforts of stitching back together a torn social fabric.

Before his death in the midst of the CoVID-19 pandemic, David was perhaps best known as a public intellectual. He was among the many suborganizers of the Occupy Wall Street movement, which succeeded in radically changing public discourse on inequality and social justice. He participated in a number of artistic initiatives, was an avid public speaker, and maintained an active Twitter account. In the incomplete sixty years that he lived, David wrote several international bestsellers, two of which—*Debt: The First 5000 Years* (2011)and *Bullshit Jobs: A Theory* (2018)—continue to be public favourites. He also wrote hundreds of articles, recorded numerous videos and audio interviews and even co-authored several children's books. Two weeks before he died, he completed (with archeologist David Wengrow) *The Dawn of Everything*, the book he hoped would rewrite human history.

David strongly believed that the emergence and growth of the feminist movement were among the major achievements of the twentieth century. Feminism was a game-changer for David, not only because, in defending women, it was defending the rights of perhaps the largest oppressed group in the world, but because the feminist optic changes the way we see the world, shifting the focus from production and consumption to care and freedom.

The Yes Women

The Yes Women Group is an art collective founded by David Graeber and Nika Dubrovsky in 2018. It was created partly as a joke and partly as a political statement, as well as a spinoff from the Yes Men, a pair of activist-artists and media hoaxers who became famous in the 2000s for their bold impersonations of spokesmen of powerful institutions, such as the World Trade Organization, Dow Chemical, and Shell Oil.[[1]](#footnote-0) One of their favoured strategies was to register fake websites for existing organizations, and then accept invitations to conferences and television appearances to speak in their name, in this way hijacking mainstream media for purposes of social critique. These tactics exposed the ludicrous corruption of corporate actors to a wide audience. The Yes Women adopted its name in homage to their subversive strategies of social critique through teasing, impersonation, and ridicule.

Never mind us!

While the intended spirit of the Yes Women Group was to be funny and to make jokes, defeating enemies with laughter and tickling, their first project involved the dreary and highly bureaucratized case of hundreds of thousands of divorced women pensioners from the former German Democratic Republic (GDR), who had lost about 30 percent of their pensions following the reunification of the two Germanies.[[2]](#footnote-1) For many years, these women of the former GDR had no influence in the public space. They were labeled by their reunified society as losers, because they were women, because they were older, because they were *osti* (natives of ‘Ost’ East Germany) and, above all, because they were divorced. Figuring out what had happened to them, why exactly they were being punished and by whom was a serious challenge. One of the main tools for targeting pensioners has been the government's use of complex bureaucratic language of insurance numbers and the legal wording. Despite the United Nations recognizing their case as a structural injustice and ordering the German government to compensate them for thirty years of underpayment, years of negotiations and litigation had yet to produce any desired outcome.

As one of the minds behind the Occupy slogan “We Are the 99%,” David may have been the best person in the world to translate the violent bureaucratese and red tape the German authorities had been throwing at the divorcees into a universal language that all humans understand: “Divorce is Not a Crime!” “Did You Really Mean All That You Told Us about Freedom?” and “Don't Mind us!” While hearing their stories, David came up with slogans one after the other to encapsulate their struggle. It was essential for The Yes Women to reframe these women's stories beyond the legal language of state power because these stories of dispossession and diminishment relate not only to these women but to all of us.

But clever and witty slogans are one thing – penetrating the media and gaining traction is another. Elderly divorced women from the former Soviet GDR did not easily capture the spotlight. If only they were sexy young blondes living in poverty instead! These women’s thirty-year struggle for economic justice (Poverty is Violence!) resonated with all the ills of our time: patriarchy, Western colonization of the East, and the institutional violence manifested in poverty and bureaucratization. But while math and logic were on the women’s side, political will was against them. Moreover, the media was unfriendly, to say the least. These women and their supporters had fought for recognition through the conventional means of demonstrating, lobbying, and petitioning[[3]](#footnote-2). They had knocked on doors but were ignored. The GDR pensioners realized that their political message was getting lost amid the legalistic jargon about ‘contribution years’ and ‘equalization of entitlement’. All attempts to find support through traditional means were unsuccessful, and in the end, David and Nika took up the cause in their own hands. They offered the women what they had: their ideas, their experience, and their free time, and the women accepted it. They were desperate. ‘“Nothing helps anymore!” they said. “We've tried everything.”

In November 2019, The Yes Women stormed the thirtieth-anniversary celebration of the fall of the Berlin Wall at Alexanderplatz. They marched through the proceedings carrying banners declaring the manifest injustices involved in the case of the divorced pensioners. They staged a guerilla projection of a collage depicting six of the 300,000 divorced women from the former GDR standing shoulder-to-shoulder under the slogan: “Never mind us!” (German: “Lasst ..euch nicht stören”).[[4]](#footnote-3) The celebration of the reunification of the two Germanies is a celebration of the success of the German national project, with the state congratulating itself with huge billboards, extravagant laser shows, and all kinds of festivities. It cost German taxpayers millions. The Yes Women’s intervention confronted the self-satisfied state with its broken promises.

On Giant Puppets

In “On the Phenomenology of Giant Puppets,” Graeber reflects on the artistic technique of mocking the monumental. He discusses the symbolism of giant puppets in the context of the alter-globalization movement.[[5]](#footnote-4) Although the mobilization should have ended with a large-scale public discussion and critique of International Monetary Fund and G8 policies, these events were considered too insignificant to be covered by the mainstream media. But the spectacle created by giant puppets and ‘black bloc’ elements such as the smashing of Starbucks windows managed to capture what reality itself could not. The construction of these massive papier-mache puppets fascinated Graeber. For him, as handmade objects, they symbolized the enormous amount of hidden labour carried out behind the scenes in all social movements:

There are brainstorming sessions to come up with themes and visions, organizing meetings, but above all, the wires and frames lie on the floors of garages or yards or warehouses or similar quasi-industrial spaces for days, surrounded by buckets of paint and construction materials, almost never alone, with small teams in attendance, molding, painting, smoking, eating, playing music, arguing, wandering in and out. Everything is designed to be communal, egalitarian, expressive*.*[[6]](#footnote-5)

What intrigued Graeber was how the activists - creators of the Giant Puppets - were convinced that their collaborative work could potentially change the rules of the game more effectively than could any overt use of force.

‘A giant puppet is the mockery of the idea of a monument,’ writes Graeber, ‘and of everything, monuments represent the unapproachability, monochrome solemnity, above all the implication of permanence, the state’s (itself ultimately somewhat ridiculous) attempt to turn its principle and history into eternal verities’[[7]](#footnote-6). In this spirit the Yes Women’s guerilla projection of otherwise unseen pensioners at Alexanderplatz was mounted as an assault on the monumentality of German reunification. It aimed to invert the triumphant nationalist symbolism by calling attention to the women who had been swept under the carpet.

The Yes Women had planned a second intervention for the spring of 2020 when dozens of members of the Association were to engage in a collective art project taking place in multiple German cities simultaneously. Octogenarian women found themselves enthusiastically brainstorming a public art project that would have them spraying political graffiti in public spaces. As one member of the Yes Women Group put it, ‘All these meetings, demonstrations, petitions and endless discussions, in an amazing way, keep up the women's spirits and their youthful enthusiasm’[[8]](#footnote-7). It is no coincidence that many journalists who interviewed elderly divorced pensioners (their average age is 80!) noted that they did not look old, poor and humiliated. Many said that most of them look energetic and full of life if you compare them with other, much more well-off, pensioners from West Germany.

While formal appeals to the state all failed, the women did succeed in building for themselves a parallel, participatory framework that exists independently of the state and state-centered systems. The interpretative labour these women put into narrating the injustices they suffered following German reunification transformed their private suffering into a political struggle against erasure.

David Graeber was always ready to stand up for seemingly hopeless cases. Even when it is difficult and risky, people who dare to speak truth to power or are pursuing what to him is one of the most important human freedoms: the freedom to alter the prevailing social order. They might not achieve any instant results, yet the very movement in that direction is itself an expression of freedom. In *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology,* he describes an alternative politics nested in what he calls “practical imagination.” Its purpose is to identify and empathize with the perspective of others, which is necessary to maintain the fabric of society.[[9]](#footnote-8) Just as political action can be violent, it can be imaginative, and these constitute two opposing ontologies. Giant puppets belong to the political ontology of the imagination and embody thinking within a nonviolent framework. What “provokes the most violent reactions on the part of the forces of order,” writes Graeber, “is precisely the attempt to make constituent power—the power of popular imagination to create new institutional forms—present not just in brief flashes, but continually”[[10]](#footnote-9).

Other Adventures of the Yes Women

Meanwhile, the Yes Women have been at work on a number of campaigns related to the feminist movement in Russia. One involved an attempt to help three teenage girls defend themselves in a criminal case of ‘conspiracy to commit murder’.

The Khachaturian sisters murdered their father, who had raped them for years. Russian court prosecutors asked for decades of imprisonment for the girls, rejecting their right to self-defense.[[11]](#footnote-10) The law refused to empathize with the teens’ reality, but instead concentrated on their violation of patriarchal statute. Had the teenagers had been attacked by a rapist on the street, their right to self-defense would have been recognized immediately; however, they were violated by their own father while he was providing them with food and shelter, and that, according to the Russian court, is a completely different matter. During the trial, investigators cited testimony from relatives that the girls “annoyed their father because they did not do their household chores well: cleaning and cooking, and possibly, even dating young men.”

The group Yes Women intervened, posting imitations of photoshopped large-scale murals produced in different Russian cities in support of the Khachaturyan sisters on the walls of residential buildings. Teaming up with many grassroots initiatives to help the girls stand up for their rights, the Yes Women drew public attention to the sisters' trial. In mocking, almost clownish banter, the artists depicted a cartoonishly vulgar father and the girls, who eventually managed to stand up for themselves and end the abuse. In the murals, the Khachaturian sisters looked like heroines rather than bad housekeepers stripped of any subjectivity. In the murals the Yes Women depicted the world as they wished it to be, not as it actually is.

This action references the famous campaign, as part of which the Yes Men in cooperation with other activist groups, such as United for Peace & Justice, Code Pink, the AntiAdvertising Agency, Improv Everywhere, and others, printed and distributed a fictional version of the New York Times that reported on the good news we hoped to see, such as the end of the Iraq War.[[12]](#footnote-11) On the one hand, these “monumental murals” were meant to project a visually significant and even tragic critique of contemporary Russian culture, but on the other hand, they were all just photoshopped simulations—that is, they were practically a joke. By creating a new common sense, The Yes Women constructed social reality and thereby made a conscious attempt to change it.

The involvement of many activists in public campaigns led to a revision of the case and in August 2021 the sisters were found to be victims in the case against their father.

Another Yes Women intervention involved the story of Yulia Tsvetkova. Tsvetkova is a human rights activist and artist who was prosecuted in Khabarovsk region on charges of “distribution of pornography.”[[13]](#footnote-12) She had been posting handmade drawings of a vagina on social media, as part of a discussion about the body, gender and morality. The Yes Women applied their proven technique of colliding the public and private, the monumental and the personal, the expensive and the costless, the serious and the ridiculous. Russian poet Galina Rymbu dedicated her new text, called ‘My Vagina’ to Julia Tsvetkova.[[14]](#footnote-13) As a poet should, Galina narrated a very personal and at the same time universal women’s experiences of life through the sensations of her vagina: the birth of her child, having a period, making love, being ill. The poem caused a major furore on social media, with some users (mostly men!) protesting that the anatomic details offended their sense of aesthetics. Nevertheless, the poem went viral and was translated into many languages.

The Yes Women “painted” a giant wall of an anonymous building, submerged in fog and lost among similarly faceless residential developments with the quote from Galina Rymbu's poem. There was special poetry in this landscape combined with Galina's sharply intimate narrative.

And the simile, like Rymbu's poem, prompted a flurry of accusations on social media, ranging from ‘would you want your children to read about menstruation when they are on the way to school?’ to ‘show something appropriate, like Pushkin's poetry, in a public place’—neglecting to add that the great Russian poet Alexander Pushkin was persecuted continuously by the state censors. The Yes Women worked with the full range of ‘photoshopping’, swinging from faux examples of large-scale public art, as mentioned, to very personal intimate poetry and back to the marginality of photoshopped fakes created for publication on social networks.[[15]](#footnote-14) The technique of production and the content of the project are melded together with its social dynamics. The products are the fragile opinions formed in the space of social media; handmade, photoshopped, marginalized, and initially positioned as private, weightless—like a song, like an anecdote, like a comment.

But can this, in fact, have an impact on the way our society is organized?

In one conversation, members of the Yes Man Group suggested that the totalitarian regime of the USSR was destroyed by anti-Soviet jokes. Stalin used to lock up joke tellers in the Gulag, but the good news is that such regimes can't last long, because it's almost as difficult to forbid people to laugh as it is to forbid people to treat elderly women with respect or to prevent people from thinking about what your vagina feels like during childbirth or while making love.

Intergalactic Carnival4David

David Graeber passed away on September 2, 2020, and it was October 11, 2021, when artists, activists, writers, and readers of David's texts gathered at a worldwide event to celebrate his life together. Carnival4David was, indeed, a rather surprising event. Some people viewed the idea with suspicion, if not hostility. Western culture tends to treat death with reverence. Nevertheless, in two hundred and fifty sites around the world, a great number of people supported the Carnival, because death is despair in itself and it is best, as the characters in David’s favorite television series, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer,* said to laugh in its face.

The Carnival4David was decentralized, with local gatherings ranging from hundreds of participants to just one. It was a burst of creativity that included videos, photos, masks, talks, discussions, readings, and the forging of new human connections. It mixed virtual online space with offline actions. Without interruption for twelve hours, the broadcaster, Herbst Festival in Graz, Austria, gathered live footage of events from New Zealand to New York, from London to Penza, from Tokyo to Paris and mixed them together with virtual zoom carnivals. Local carnivals were conceived and implemented by people or groups without any top-down guidance, beyond the loose agreement to wear masks and create connections to David Graeber's legacy and the ideas he represented.

As an anthropologist, David spent his life making the case that humanity has always been experimenting with new ways of being. Our collective history is not a straight line. The story of civilization is one of constant reinvention. Power structures come and go, institutions rise and fall, authority waxes and wanes, but in the end, it’s all just people doing stuff together. Carnival4David honored David’s legacy by creating an international show of collaboration and solidarity, a collective body of friends, readers, fans, and perhaps enemies - in other words, a real society—united around the vision all shared with David of a more collaborative tomorrow.

Our social order, shaped by violence rather than care, yet David Graeber used to say that 'the ultimate, hidden truth of the world is that it is something that we make, and could just as easily make differently. This is the anarchist critique that David embodied.

Welcome to love and eternity, dear David!

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