

RESEARCH REPORT

The Radical Potential of Poetic Gestures

Tina Carlisi

Concordia University, Montreal, Canada
tinacarlisi@hotmail.com

Who are cities for? How can poetic micro-actions make visible the politicization of space and offer crucial ways of thinking about critical spatial practice in contemporary urban processes? Inspired by radical art practices that visualize and enact social imaginaries,¹ combined with theories on the production and occupation of social space and our right to it, my art projects *Taking Back the Sky* and *Taking Back the Land* invite micro-actions that resist techno-driven and neoliberal notions of public space.

Experimenting with imagining new forms of tactical practices, *Taking Back the Sky* is a call to action to occupy the sky as an act of resistance to drone technology surveilling and intruding our social spaces.

Taking Back the Land is an invitation to guerrilla gardening, and engages with ideas linked to spatial politics, everyday life, and the right to the city. These two projects draw conceptually upon histories at the intersection of art and activism from the mid-sixties to the early seventies that adopted prefigurative direct action as methods to reimagine and remake urban life. In this essay, I propose that revisiting these histories and the social ideals linked to them through artistic research practice can lend support to concepts that remain pivotal in defining critical spatial practice. I will situate myself as an artist/researcher and then discuss these projects in terms of conceptual inspiration, methodological approach and their final artistic



Figure 1: *Taking Back the Sky*, 2015. Credit: Tina Carlisi.

¹ Philosopher Charles Taylor (2004) defines the social imaginary as a way a people imagines its collective social life.



Figure 2: *Taking Back the Land*, 2015. Credit: Tina Carlisi.

articulations. This essay will conclude with reflections on the radical potential of poetic gestures, and how they may stimulate a renewed utopian thinking about art education today.

Inspired by the idea of possibility, my artistic research practice intersects with printmaking, art actions and social encounters. I am interested in how art can provide utopian spaces to express an imaginary, incite action, or foster social forms—even if ephemeral or short-lived. Working through different materials and strategies, I assemble only what I consider necessary to express an ideal, a moment or a desire. I am interested in social movement cultures, and particularly in investigating historical moments when the political and the poetic meshed in ways that continue to resonate today. Acknowledging the heterogeneous genealogies of political image making, art actions and social practices, I adopt minimal materials and strategies. To engage with materiality and embodied experience—and with concepts in general—artistic research is distinct from other forms of qualitative methods inasmuch as ‘it does not begin with a predetermined set of questions or assumptions, but arises from the particular situations or contexts being investigated’ (Slager 2012: 24). Furthermore, artistic research practice allows for an embodied emphasis on space, hence providing concrete ways to think about critical spatial practice discourse.

Jane Rendell introduced the term ‘critical spatial practice’ as an alternative to the contested category of ‘public art’ and to ‘allow us to describe work that transgresses the limits of art and architecture and engages with both the social and the aesthetic, the public and the private’ (Rendell 2006: 6). This new designation, she argues, draws attention to the critical and the spatial, and more appropriately situates discussion of art practices that are critically engaged and address broader social and political issues. Emerging from a multimodal research process, *Taking Back the Sky* and *Taking Back the Land* emphasize critical engagement with the spatial. Specifically, these projects aim to make visible hidden structures through a poetic call to action to reclaim our autonomy and transform shared public space.

The Sky Is the Limit

Taking Back the Sky subtitled *White Kite Plan: Ban the Drone, Fly a Kite*, is a tactical print project that was researched and produced in Amsterdam and performed at Zandvoort Beach.

Involving a series of fabric kites screenprinted with text in English and Dutch², the project suggests that, in principle, the sky belongs to everyone, and thus draws attention to how public space is increasingly

² This series of kites also includes versions with Provo’s symbol and other typographic references to their printed matter.



Figure 3: *Taking Back the Sky*, 2015. Credit: Tina Carlisi.

becoming privatized, militarized and technologized. My conceptual concerns draw upon my research on Provo, an anarchist movement based in Amsterdam active from 1965–67. Provotarians, as they called themselves, were a loose association of ‘individuals with very different ambitions: subversive agendas, artistic motives, utopian ideas [and] concrete plans’ (Experimental Jet Set 2012: 6). Arguably a critical precursor to and invisible influence upon art activism today (Kempton 2007), my initial motivation to research Provo was rooted in investigating how they joined printed ephemera with actions in public spaces to create provocative engagements. During a research trip and artist residency in Amsterdam, I researched Provo by consulting archival materials, conducting informal interviews, and attending various events and exhibitions celebrating its fiftieth anniversary.

Embedded in print and action, Provo’s art activism sought to counteract the influence of post-war consumer and car culture in the Netherlands. The movement’s proposals—whether symbolic or concrete—were anti-authoritarian and focused on environmentalism and voluntary shared resources, which I argue have impacted contemporary thinking about performing new urbanisms. *Taking Back the Sky* is conceptually and materially inspired by Provo’s tactics, like bold graphic design, referencing forms that are part of the Dutch imaginary, and prefigurative action. Their best-known intervention, *White Bicycle Plan*, led me to use my own work to critically explore who does and does not enjoy the freedom to transform public space.

When Amsterdam’s civic leaders rejected a Provo proposal that the city provide 20,000 free bicycles, group members painted 50 bicycles white and left them unlocked all about the city for people to use without cost. A practical idea to reduce pollution and traffic, their tactical intervention remains relevant, as the idea itself reflected their particular context. Staging an intervention using an iconic symbol—the bicycle—celebrated what traditionally has been Netherlands’ main mode of transportation. While the 50 white bicycles were immediately confiscated, Provo’s action continues to resonate globally with the spread of bicycle-sharing systems—granted, often not free—and the appearance of bicycle paths as common features in major cities striving to be more sustainable.

Extrapolating on Provo’s utopian proposals to transform cities from concrete jungles to places with more green spaces, social spaces and free spaces, *Taking Back the Sky* proposes that leisure can be a form of resistance against neoliberal notions of the public sphere. Historically reserved for the most privileged, leisure and the availability of free time across socio-economic classes threaten systemic forms of control that discourage social and political engagement, and self-emancipation.



Figure 4: *Taking Back the Sky*, 2015. Credit: Tina Carlisi.

As leisure is a particular type of time that allows for individual reflection and the sharing of quality time with others *Taking Back the Sky* traces connections between free time, free space and autonomy in immediate and open-ended ways. In addition to being a poetic call to action, the project recalls the colloquial phrase 'the sky is the limit' to propose the notion of possibility as part a critical spatial practice. Carol Becker argues that possibility is a spatial concept connected to the future: 'To hope for what does not yet exist . . . one must use one's imagination' (Becker 2016: 7). Therefore, do imaginative spatial practices (Tonkiss 2006) inherently entail tactical forms?

Flourishing the City

In a second artistic research project, *Taking Back the Land*, I draw connections between free time, free space and autonomy through tactical spatial practices. Researched, produced and performed in Montreal, this project uses printed matter and edible wildflower seed bombs to introduce people to 'guerrilla gardening,' a term and practice, which involved the tactical planting of seeds in neglected public spaces, developed by artist Liz Christy in New York City during the early 1970s, when the city was in a socio-economic decline. Seeing plants growing out of rubbish, and recognizing the phenomenon's great potential (Awan et al. 2011), Christy began to guerrilla garden in vacant lots and eventually produced Manhattan's first community garden, which since her passing bares her name and continues to be a little refuge in the city's midst.

Drawing from Christy, *Taking Back the Land* is both a poetic reflection and an action to reimagine and remake the city. It also incorporates Henri Lefebvre's (1968) concept of the 'right to the city,' which is not about access to necessary services, so much as the ability to transform oneself by transforming the city. Joern Langhorst (2014) proposes that the right to the city today implicitly comprises a right to urban nature. Wild urban nature in post-industrial spaces, Langhorst argues, acts as a third space,

'a place in the margins that can serve as a location of resistance against dominant neoliberal agendas of urban growth camouflaged as sustainability and resilience—by providing empowering, inclusive and alternative versions and experiences of 'urban nature.' (ibid.: 1128)

Taking Back the Land considers Langhorst's proposal and requires participants to conceive of the urban context as a complex spatial site for potential transformation. Unlike the research process for *Taking Back the Sky*, which delved into a particular anarchist movement, *Taking Back the Land* evolved from text-based

sources to iterative actions, while the project's inspirational framework is the result of intentionally delayed information.

The idea for *Taking Back the Land* came to me whilst walking in a de-industrialized Montreal neighbourhood. There, in an area considered a food desert, I came upon a tiny green space by the train tracks lush with many crabapple trees. Intrigued by this wedge of urban nature, I began my research and artistic inquiry, and learned that a small church had stood there in the 1800s, until the congregation became too large and it was torn down. In recent years, the land was granted park status and named at the request of a citizen's group (Duquette 2009). Residents continue to be socially and politically engaged with the park, especially in light of a recent threat of demolition proposed by the railroad company. Fortunately protestors stood against this proposal, which was driven by private interests, and saved the park.

Inspired by such citizen initiatives, my project really germinated as a result of delayed information sparked by an urban legend. Supposedly, the legend went, someone from the neighbourhood had planted the crabapple trees more than twenty years ago. True or not, the idea that one person's action had transformed a space resonated with me. This urban legend speaks to a particular imaginary, which Charles Taylor describes as 'the way ordinary people "imagine" their social surroundings, and this is often not expressed in theoretical terms; it is carried in images, stories, and legends' (2004: 23). I approach artistic research in ways that do not suppress qualities associated with the creative process, like spontaneity, serendipity, enchantment, and imagination. In regard to artistic research, Jeremiah Day proposes that delayed information can be enabling, creating a space of becoming, or what he refers to as 'investigatory poetics' (2013: 66). This limited horizon within an aspect of my research allowed me not only to find creative possibility but also to create possibility, namely the potential found in each seed bomb.

Tactical approaches emerge through everyday forms of knowing. My experiences with urban foraging form part of an investigatory poetics and have radically shifted how I see the city. Flora are often taken for granted, their positive impact on urban dwellers ignored, together with their potential to shift our total dependence upon non-local food consumption. Interestingly, it is argued that modern forms of anarchism stem from the Diggers, a Protestant radical movement in seventeenth-century England. The Diggers fought for common land and the right to grow food in disused or neglected spaces (Awan et al. 2011). A key component of *Taking Back the Land* is seed bombs, each stamped with a letter indicating one of three edible plants that can grow anywhere in Montreal's green spaces.



Figure 5: *Taking Back the Land*, 2015. Credit: Crissy Jarvis.



Figure 6: *Taking Back the Land*, 2015. Credit: François Primeau.

As a print artist and researcher on the visual traditions of social movement cultures, I recognize the potential of multiples to circulate a message, and, in the case of seed bombs, to propose action.

With 200 seed bombs produced and distributed, each participant can grow an edible plant in public space. The project includes a series of takeaway postcards screenprinted with information and recipes for edible plants. A larger, poster-sized version of these postcards was also wheat-pasted about the neighbourhood.

Out of context, the posters, which carry the phrase ‘taking back the land’ or ‘reprendre la terre’ on a solid green background, remain open to interpretation. ‘Land’ suggests a semantic shift for the city, as something that is not neutral, like tillage or common terrain. The active phrase also echoes Indigenous land-rights movements, acknowledging that Montreal is traditional Kanien’kehá:ka (Mohawk) territory. As a series—seed bombs, postcards and posters—the project acts as a poetic gesture to reimagine our urban spatial context as connected to history and nature, not separate from us. Like *Taking Back the Sky*, this project suggests that individuals’ autonomous gestures can make visible spatial politics and transform space. As Lefebvre (1991) has argued, the city represents not only the setting, but also the stakes of political contestation. *Taking Back the Land* is a call to action, but also a symbolic and critical project, questioning power, ownership and ecological concerns.

It Takes So Little to Change So Much

Taking Back the Sky and *Taking Back the Land* use minimal materials and strategies to suggest poetic actions that occupy space in expansive ways. Provo’s manifesto for its white-bicycle plan proclaimed, ‘A bike is nothing, almost something!’—a critical reconsideration of the bicycle’s substantial impact, in place of cars, in reshaping the city. Liz Christy, whose guerrilla gardening attempts began with a few scattered seeds, eventually cultivated a community and revitalized neighbourhoods through gardening in neglected lots. Understanding the contexts from which these radical practices emerged remind us how ‘the wave of gentrification has wiped out thousands of anti-capitalist infrastructures’ (Thompson 2015: 77), and underscores how global neoliberalism has transformed cities into spaces of managed consumption and ubiquitous forms of surveillance (ibid.).

Granted, urban spaces that were fought for in the past may need to be fought for again. Space is an unstable condition (Hirsch and Miessen 2012). *Taking Back the Sky* and *Taking Back the Land* are conceptual projects inspired by radical histories, which can inform critical modalities of spatial practice today. My artistic research revisits the 1960s and 1970s, which continue to inform how radical urban spatial

practices are imagined. With new social movements' rejection of the political party as the primary model of political agency, 'individuals were able to engage with a range of politics and enlist in various alliances at different points. Urban preservation has often brought different types of people' together (Tonkiss 2006: 64–65). We benefit from the connections between histories and the imaginaries linked to them in different places and periods, as both may reveal ideological continuities across spatial practices and assist us as we invent new ones. As Tonkiss reminds us, 'not all subversions of space are so dramatic' . . . 'there are moments and means of escape to be found in more minor practices' (2006: 131).

In this regard, Carol Becker makes a case for micro-utopias in art education, which address the public sphere's current complex state by creating spaces where people can interact in meaningful ways. She also discusses how artists' efforts at such engagement have assumed the form of community gardens, green roofs, bicycle-repair shops and various neighbourhood-based initiatives, interactive public installations and mass actions (2013). For Becker, such projects function as micro-utopian environments, which, while often short-lived,

'are nonetheless essential to the development of consciousness and to how we envision our future societies. They have the ability to make individual and collective desires visible and understood. And they use enormous imaginative capacity to bring people together' (ibid.: 51)

Art alone cannot change the world, but it can shape spaces that activate change. Critical spatial practices that involve micro-gestures and micro-utopias can create an impact, direct or poetic, grasping at the very root of something desirable, necessary and more humanly graspable.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

Author Information

Tina Carlisi, Artist and doctoral candidate, Individualized Program in Fine Arts, Concordia University, Montreal, Canada

References

- Awan, N, Schneider, T and Till, J** 2011 *Spatial Agency: Other Ways of Doing Architecture*. New York: Routledge.
- Becker, C** 2013 Microutopias and Pedagogies for the Twenty-First Century. In: Ambrožič, M and Vettese, A (Eds.). *Art as a Thinking Process: Visual Forms of Knowledge Production*. Berlin: Sternberg; Venice: IUAV, pp. 46–53.
- Becker, C** 2016 The Space Between What is and What Wants to Be: The Abandoned Practice of Utopian Thinking. *A Journal of Performance and Art*, 38(1): 6–13.
- Day, J** 2013 Digging. In: Ambrožič, M and Vettese, A (Eds.). *Art as a Thinking Process: Visual Forms of Knowledge Production*. Berlin: Sternberg; Venice: IUAV, pp. 62–67.
- Duquette, G** 2009 *A Brief History of the Streets and Parks in Pointe-Saint-Charles*. Montreal: Société d'histoire de Pointe-Saint-Charles.
- Experimental Jetset** 2012 *Two or Three Things I know About Provo*. Brno, Czech Republic: Moravska Gallery.
- Hirsch, N and Miessen, M** (eds.) 2012 *What Is Critical Spatial Practice?* Berlin: Sternberg.
- Kempton, R** 2007 *Provo: Amsterdam's Anarchist Revolt*. New York: Autonomedia.
- Langhorst, J** 2014 Re-presenting Transgressive Ecologies: Post-Industrial Sites as Contested Terrains. *Local Environment: The International Journal of Justice and Sustainability*, 19(10): 1110–1133.
- Lefebvre, H** 1968 *Le droit à la ville*. Paris: Anthropos.
- Lefebvre, H** 1974 (1991) *The Production of Space*. Translated by Donald Nicholson Smith. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Rendell, J** 2006 *Art and Architecture: A Place Between*. London: IB Tauris.
- Slager, H** 2012 *The Pleasure of Research*. Berlin: Hatje Cantz.
- Taylor, C** 2004 *Modern Social Imaginaries*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Thompson, N** 2015 *Seeing Power: Art and Activism in the 21st Century*. New York: Melville House; London: 8 Blackstock Mews.
- Tonkiss, F** 2006 *Space, the City and Social Theory: Social Relations and Urban Forms*. Cambridge; Malden, MA: Polity.

How to cite this article: Carlisi, T 2016 The Radical Potential of Poetic Gestures. *MaHKUscript: Journal of Fine Art Research*, 1(2): 13, pp. 1–8, DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5334/mjfar.17>

Published: 13 December 2016

Copyright: © 2016 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

]u[*MaHKUscript: Journal of Fine Art Research* is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Ubiquity Press.

OPEN ACCESS 