Design and Activism:
A Relationship that needs Reflection

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According to Bart Cammaerts (2007a), activism is a relatively new term. It was introduced in the mid-70s to refer the ability to act and produce changes within society's history. In other words, activism is all about "generating the future of societies" (Jordan *apud* Cammaerts 2007a, 23). From this perspective, activism represents no more than the struggle of a minority group of society; a struggle for change that can be fueled by reactionary tendencies and aims, as well as progressive (Cammaerts, 2007a).

Hence, be it either by violent or by non-violent acts, these reactionary tendencies can be taken as expressions at the core of all processes of social changes. Regarding these expressions, I mean all tangible and visual demonstrations related to those, i.e., meetings, billboards, fanzines, journals, pamphlets etc. Either way, activists have been always challenged to develop and foster their own methods, tools and practices of visual communication.

In line with this, Umberto Eco (1976) once affirmed that within the past years of society, if one wanted to seize political empowerment it was necessary to intervene within the army and the policy. Nevertheless, nowadays it is necessary to intervene by means of the media.

Thus, alternative means of communication or "mass dissent" media – equally powerful and effective, defends the author (ibid) – needed to be created while at the same time mainstream mass media continuously tries to keep society's "control" – one of the many challenges for activists' visual communication mentioned previously.

The interesting point of the development of these alternative channels of communication is that they happen through the use of dominant means of communication itself – being analogous to what Eco defended: *"Revolutions are often resolved in more picturesque forms of integration"* (Eco 1976, 14).

So, like in a remediation process (Bolter & Grusin 2000), it is by re-taking and repurposing the use of media devices that activists utilize to communicate their main ideas. Thus, we must consider an activism act of resistance as *"a creative act that leads to the creation of new forms of thinking and alternative ways of living"* (Giroux & Evans 2014), which can be taken as a creative act of media activism itself.

Media activism begins with the appropriation of mass media to be used as the basis for the development of a "new" alternative means and it is considered as a broad category of activism since it utilizes media and communication technologies for social statements and political improvement.

According to Cammaerts (2007a), within this context, media should be understood not only as a medium to communicate, propagate and interact, but also as well as a "symbolic arena" where the struggle for social change is expressed and where meanings of the world and ideas of what citizenship entails compete.

The Situationist movement and its practice of *détournement* mainly influenced all media activism practices. The roots of *détournement* itself relies in the medieval ceremonies where the social order was inverted by the use of costumes, revealing the "natural persona" of the individual, i.e., the real and true intention and nature of that particular person.[1]

The movement was very conscious of the increasingly important mediating role of media in distorting events, truth and experiences. This is exactly the

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[1] For more information, see http://www2.fiu.edu/~mizrachs/Culture_jamming.html

purpose of media activism: to reverse the hierarchical relation between meaning and production created by mainstream. Therefore, instead of allowing for symbolic meanings to be dictated from the corporation bottom down, it creates meaning from the people bottom up.

This is at the essence of what Umberto Eco once defended as "semiotic guerrilla warfare" (Eco 1976). It is the act where complementary systems of communication should be considered and developed against its own system, meaning, dominant culture.

It is not by retaking or invading TV's studios that the production of massive ruling images is going to stop. This "can be frightening and can also seem utopian" (ibid, 3). Instead, Eco proposes:

> *"Precisely when the communication systems envisage an industrialized source and a single message that will reach an audience scattered all over the world, we should be capable of imagine systems of complementary communication that allow us to reach every individual human group, every individual member of the universal audience."* (Eco 1976, 12).

Hence, to exercise a "semiotic guerrilla warfare", or media activism in other words, is to use "forces of expression" with little and alternative mediums where dominant culture has no power or control.

Posters, for instance, are the perfect combination to "occupy" and break the system, since they are straightly in touch with individuals, in their environment and exposed, as any individual is (Eco, ibid). The streets and their billboards provide a channel of communication in which it is possible to create forms of communication guerrilla warfare: a manifestation complementary to the manifestations of the massive and technological communication.

The importance of posters in all activist movements through society's history is obvious. Nevertheless, today it is one more instrument available among all the digital, virtual and audiovisual tools.

Within this context, the role of the designer within social movements' communication processes is extremely important for the development of alternative (and creative, like they prefer to call) means of communication.

Outlining the designer from this perspective is in the first instance to ask why such a figure was not involved with social movements before (in case he/she wasn't) and, second of all, is to start seeing him/her as an activist himself. For Tim Jordan (2001; 2002), being an activist in such a current context can mean to

be someone who not just chains oneself to bulldozers, hacks websites or attends endless meetings. In addition, the author states that it also means that social solidarity and support campaigns against exploitation become central to building a new and better society. Hence, Jordan states, it is possible to see people that are not so much engaging in politics in an accidentally, perhaps carelessly, manner. Anyone nowadays can find himself or herself beginning to recognize their potential for creating new social forms. *"Small actions are just as central to activism as larger ones"* (ibid, 154). This means to be engaged with a particular cause – in this case, an activism cause.

Generally, in previous periods of social crisis and riots – the partisan movements during the First and Second World War, to recall one of the many – designers had a striking role.

With the help of designers, particular activist movement's visuals were constructed. Some of their work, for instance, is now considered a collectible piece of art, marking an era and the history of the movement to which they engaged.

Thus, the role of the designer inside activist movements varies and we shall reflect on the capability and the technical knowledge designers have to re-shape a social movement, e.g. by building new visuals, developing a new aesthetic for the movement.

Let us take the Russian graphic designers and artist Aleksander Rodchenko as an example. Heavily influenced by the upheaval within the Russian revolution of 1917, Rodchenko was one of the main versatile artists to emerge during the revolution. He worked as a painter and graphic designer before turning his focus to photomontage and photography. During his life, his works were always socially engaged and innovative:

> *"Powerful political images … and the close ups of ordinary working class people and their lives show that political awareness and activism can give rise to great artistic creativity and completely new aesthetic"* (Socialist Unity 2008)[2]

Unfortunately, affirms the SU Editorial Team, as a result of his experience of Stalinism, Rodchenko ended up believing that politics and art should be kept separate (ibid). But, this is not the point to stress right here. The example of

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[2] http://socialistunity.com/alexander-rodchenko-revolutionary-photographer/

Rodchenko illustrates how designers, from a very early age, have always been engaging with social movements and activist causes.

Guy Julier states, that there are many creative makers no longer willing to lend their "ethical surplus" out to the hegemonic culture (Julier 2013). According to Julier, an in-depth inquire proved that UK designers are profoundly dissatisfied with their work conditions and believes:

> *Beyond a realization of the straightforward exploitation of their own "ethical surplus", designers share a broader set of tumultuous political and economic circumstances in the West that may bring about politicization and a search for alternative models of everyday practice* (Julier 2013, 225).

Just like the "activism" term, these alternative ways of everyday practices may be also cited in the mid-70s, leading to the period of a radical thinking in design. Actually, design (and) activism impulses to develop new ways of working which coincides with geopolitical, economic, and environmental crises (ibid).

The pragmatic gesture of design activism goes beyond manifestos and public demonstrations, argues Thomas Markussen: *"design is not a boycott, strike, protest, demonstrations, or some other political act, but lends its power of resistance from being precisely a designerly way of intervening into people's lives."* (Markussen 2013, 38)

So, among all the activists nowadays it is necessary to also point out the figure of the designer as an active agent of fruition between fields of action: hegemony and counterculture.

For the designer Noah Scalin, for instance, to work with design and activism is *"about using the incredible power of visual communication as a tool for making positive transformation in our world – specifically by raising the voices of individuals and groups that would be normally overlooked in our current communications"* (Mays 2014).

Within the tools of the dominant culture, Scalin (2012), for instance, describes that he is able to create an alternative channel of communication and share his knowledge within society, that is, to break the limits of our own "bubble". Regarding this, Cammaerts claims the importance of media and how crucial they are as mediators of the different interests, spheres, and actors. *"Citizenship has always necessitated symbolic resources distributed through various means of [mass] communication"* (Urry *apud* Cammaerts 2006, 5).

Thus, like mentioned previously, to be an activist is not just to participate on non- or violent protests. To be an activist actually is to be the agent responsible for the creation of alternative ways of producing, disseminating and structuring society's culture.

In this sense, designers can be involved in culturally organizing social movements. That means, to put *"culture, including its concentrated expression – art – at the center of a social and political organizing strategy"* (Cocke 2014). There are many actors, agents and stakeholders within activist scenery that intentionally or unintentionally use [...] design processes to deliver their activism. Intentional use of design may involve the commissioning of professional designers by organizations or individuals with an activism orientation (Fuad-Luke 2009, 24).

It is important to stress this distinction between intentional and unintentional use of design processes since the topic here relies on intentions and skills distinctions. Not all participants from an activist movement might have the knowledge a visual communication designer has, although their intention is the same, that is, to catalyze social and cultural change.

If we take the poster as an example, the visual production of a non-designer might be effective for the movement or for a demonstration, but it will not have the measures of space between words and images, it will not have the calculation of words to use, the display of the colors, the size of image might be too big or too small, the reading might be confusing. These are kinds of details related to certain trained skills that designers have. Graphic design, for instance, has long been associated with social and political discourse and propaganda. Recent studies have shown a "rude health" for graphic design activism from the conflicts of the suffragette movement in the 1860s to the present day. The voice of graphic designers generally become more obvious during times of social and political change, either in the service of clients' needs or with concerns raised by the designers themselves. The latter is a good example of design-led activism. Showing a continuous search for responsible graphic design, the *First Things First* manifesto launched by Ken Garland in 1964 was republished by self-proclaimed "culture jammers" Adbusters in 1999, who have their own brand of graphic design activism particularly aiming transnational corporations. This is a demonstration that graphic design still has a central role to play in activism's wider purpose.

It was with the help of designers that the content and visuals of some activist movements were constructed.

What we want to express within this research is that within activism movements, designers are active agents / actors with a particular cultural capital and technical knowledge that is capable of not only producing, shaping and building services or goods, but also able to re-produce, re-/build and re-/shape a culture by improving its methods, practices and tools of communication. Through its ability to interact among those fields, designers are considered a determining factor in the production, organisation, sharing and diffusion of culture and knowledge, operating in an area in which it is difficult to have other professionals speaking and instructing people who are actively strugling against dominant culture.

With this, it is clear that designers have developed – together with technical advances – specific skills to create communicative structures that other people do not have as, in this case, activists and social movements. In this sense, designers stand out because of their knowledge and the ability they have to create powerful and creative visuals, not to mention communicative structures. Key skills in the design process, says Nico Macdonald (2002), include being able to conceptualize and weight-up a multidimensional problem, consider scenarios of use, think laterally and creatively, evaluate ideas and communicate effectively. Hence to use these skills in favor of activists and social movements is, accordingly to Glasser (2017), at its best an action fueled by empathy where the idea is always to keep in mind that other people matter. In this sense, to graphically dissent is to break established patterns of Design – be it as a study, be it as a practice - and to engage with a social cause/issue. To what regards this engagement, it means to have an active participating towards that particular issue, looking for better solutions and improvements to that matter.

> *"Throughout history, in a constant struggle to create a better and more just world, people have raised their voices in protest against corruption, wrongdoing, and the exploitation of power. The most effective designers have used their skills, and the means at their disposal, to create graphic responses that educate and spread these messages of defiance"* (The Design of Dissent catalog, 2017)

Knowing how to capture and disseminate events as they happen, creating particular social and political messages, designers are able to immediately respond to current issues and social events. What concerns a printed media, for instance, protest posters have always been a type of a voice for those with views

that were silenced by oppression. They are an anonymous voice that "speaks" to a large number of people, simultaneously. The message conveyed in a poster will go on speaking and influencing until it is taken, regardless if the viewer agrees or not with the statement. The thoughts and conversations triggered by the poster are the catalysts to action. Poster design is an important instrument to advocate social and cultural changes. In relation to this, Poynor (2012) states that the poster is just one among the various creative, intellectual and organizational tools in the strive to shape public opinion and use pressure on policy-makers holding the levers of power that might lead to change. Whether it is used in demonstrations, defiantly placed on a wall or available online, the graphic message aim is to attract attention, encourage and reaffirm people's voice.

Up to date, the poster proved to be a more than powerful tool of communication. So much that until today it is used, as much commercially as politically, as in political propaganda as in activism. Among the infinite array of examples existing today regarding graphic dissent posters, I will highlight *Otpor!*, in Servia; *Não é por 20 centavos[3],* in Brazil*; Occupy Wall Street and Women's March,* in the United States*;* and, more recently, *Polish's Konstytucja posters,* just to quote few*.*

Otpor! was a Serbian youth movement that started among a small group of activist students at Belgrade University. The movement played an extremely important role on Serbia's transition to democracy when they succeeded in overthrows Slobodan Miloševic's government. As one of their main tactics of communication, the movement used poster production to satirize, embarrass and undermine the legitimacy of the government. Although the group was provocative, they maintained a loyal and disciplined commitment to nonviolence and, therefore, printed media played an important role within the campaign. In what respects the "Não é por 20 centavos", also known as Manifestations of the 20 cents or Manifestations of June, were anti-austerity protests held in Brazil in between the 2011 and 2013, but gaining massive power during the Brazilian autumn of 2013. The graphic production and the involvement of designers and print studios have been unprecedented in the country. On the one hand, designers and creative studios created graphic pieces and made them available online while, on the other hand, printing studios offered to print and distribute such posters free of charge. We may even venture to claim that there are no records of such creative participation in protests and demonstrations throughout

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[3] It is not about 20 cents.

the country's history. Unlike *Otpor!* and NO causes, 'It's not just for 20 cents' aimed not to depose a dictator or president, but the reduction of rates on public transportation as improvements in their quality of life and services provided by the State. An example of involvement in the demonstrations in June is the Meli-Melo Printing Studio, from São Paulo. After suffering the demonstrations and seeing the brutality and abuse of power of the authorities, the studio decided to open its doors and print thousands of posters for free. Not only that, they also made available online all the posters for the demonstrators from the rest of Brazil to have access to them.

Posters also played an important role in the Occupy Movement. Actually, it all started with poster indexed inside the magazine issue. With a small ballerina posing above the well-known Charging Bull of Wall Street, the poster was calling American citizens to gather together and demand reforms in sociopolitical and economic global arenas. It was due to the movement that organizations such as Interference Archive[4], Power to the Poster[5], and Occupy Design[6] were created. All three are posters repositories for protesters and a virtual meeting place for *engaged designers* (Poshar 2018). The Occupy Design, for instance, is an online network to gather engaged designers from all over the world to discuss their role as designers and activists, their production within social movements, their duties and responsibilities, and to share their work – open source and always available to download. For them, designers that are involved in activism and social movements play a role in creating and shaping the everyday world we live in, thus, they believe it is necessary to act politically. According to their presentation on their website, they *"must use the power of Design to start to both answer the problems caused by systemic crisis and reveal the problems to us so we understand them better so, together; collectively with others; as part of a global movement; we can guarantee a future we can all live with. We cannot not change the world"*.

That is the role of designers to what regards their engagement with social movements: they cannot not want to change the world – and by world I mean micro and macro, public and also personal spheres. That is the challenge of our current situation – as professionals and as individuals. What I want to express is that within activism movements, the designer can be an active agent / actor with a particular cultural capital and technical knowledge that is capable of repurpose a whole existing cultural structure by improving its methods, practices and tools

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[4] http://interferencearchive.org/

[5] https://powertotheposter.com

[6] http://occupydesign.org.uk/

of communication. That is to say, through its ability to float among those fields, designers are considered a determining factor in the production, organisation, sharing and diffusion of culture and knowledge which means they operate not only as activists but also as cultural organizers and intermediaries, something we should be constantly reflecting as well as in on their ethical role – and involvement – not only towards society as a whole but specially for minorities, that is, activist groups.

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