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**SUMMATIVE ASSESSMENT:
VISUAL ART AND SOCIALLY ENGAGED PRACTICE ELECTIVE 2022**

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HOW DO *THE LABORATORY OF INSURRECTIONARY IMAGINATIONS* AND *REVEREND BILLY AND THE CHURCH OF STOP SHOPPING* EFFECT SOCIAL CHANGE USING CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE?

This essay investigates the experts working at the intersection of art and activism; pioneers of *expressive politics*¹ and political art. Reverend Billy and The Church of Stop Shopping (RBCSS) and The Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination (Labofii) are activist collectives who use creative forms of non-violent disruption to raise public awareness of climate change. It is not a new activity to combine arts and activism, they are inextricably linked by their co-existence in left-leaning circles², but the collectives take tools from the art world and resources from activism to harness the imaginations of publics through creative civil disobedience.

Writer Carol Becker believes artists are 'making the world complex' by slowing down, honing-in on challenging issues and asking 'what is missing in the conversation?'³ This essay will argue that it is the role of the socially engaged artist activist to go further and engage publics through inclusive actions at the point of questioning. In this essay I search for evidence of community mobilisation against the driving forces of the climate emergency⁴, through engagement with the self-organising collectives, with reference to the writing of Grant Kester and artworks of Suzanne Lacy and Jeremy Deller. I discuss socially engaged art's role in climate activism and, in parallel, activism's role in community art, in order to better understand the intersection. For the second phase of the essay I unpack the challenges of RBCSS's and Labofii's work: conflict, as addressed by Anthony Schrag, and risk, with reference to Extinction Rebellion. Finally, in order to justify the social change they claim to make, I observe the tangible effect of their active influence on communities and provide evidence of both collectives' work locally and further afield. I refer to the writing of Claire Bishop and Nicolas Bourriaud to argue that participation is what turns art into activism.

There are many definitions of *social change*. In this essay I will not follow the narrative that legal reform and legislation change are sole markers of success⁵ but instead acknowledge the bottom-up influence communities contribute to change; celebrate and understand the societal impact of grass roots cultural shifts paving the way to law changes and global trends. This is because the collectives

¹ A phrase coined by Reverend Billy Talen, as referred to here: Vidal, J. (2013). *Reverend Billy faces year in prison for JP Morgan Chase toad protest*. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2013/nov/25/reverend-billy-jpmorgan-chase-toad-protest-talen> (Accessed: 11/5/22)

² Frascina, F. (2021). *Art and Activism in the Age of Systemic Crisis: Aesthetic Resilience*. Available at: <https://www.artmonthly.co.uk/magazine/site/article/art-and-activism-in-the-age-of-systemic-crisis-aesthetic-resilience-reviewed-by-francis-frascina-march-2021> (Accessed: 16/5/22)

³ Becker, C. (2013) *On The Role Of The Artist In Society*. Available at: <https://caroldbecker.com/on-the-role-of-the-artist-in-society> (Accessed: 3/5/22).

⁴ A global issue in acceleration, climate change is not the fault of one industry or state, nor is it caused equally by all. UN. (2022) *What Is Climate Change?*. Available at: <https://www.un.org/en/climatechange/what-is-climate-change> (Accessed: 4/5/22) I am keen to note here that the collectives I write about in this essay acknowledge that the weight of responsibility for climate destruction lies with the powers of the Global North and feel that action must be taken within the Global North in order to Decolonise and Decarbonise the Global South, which suffers significantly more from the effects climate chaos than we do in the Global North. See also: Riaz, A. (2021). *Views from the global south: how to decolonise the climate crisis*. Available at: <https://www.euronews.com/green/2021/09/29/views-from-the-global-south-how-to-decolonise-the-climate-crisis> (Accessed: 16/5/22)

⁵ Bilz, K & Nadler, J. (2014). Chapter 10: *Law, Moral Attitudes, and Behavioural Change*. The Oxford handbook of behavioural economics and law, Eyal Zamir and Doron Teichman (Eds.) 2014 pp 241.

on which I am focusing my research do not have the power to change laws themselves, but do have influence on the general public. Therefore my use of *social change* refers to local and small-scale cultural shifts that aim to influence government policy and culture at large.

Although laws on demonstrations often change⁶, across the US, UK and Europe it seems to be widely understood that *civil disobedience* is peaceful in nature⁷. Despite essentially being about breaking the law, remaining *non-violent* is one of few guidelines followed by peaceful protestors⁸. However, creating massive inconvenience is encouraged and can often lead to police violence in retaliation⁹.

In this essay the term *collective* loosely describes both RBCSS and Labofii as it implies organisation without hierarchical structure. *Collective* is similar to *community* in that they are broad terms that apply to domestic, activist and artist contexts. I use *community* (common unity) to define a group of individuals held together by one or more identifying factors¹⁰.

SECTION 1: Where Art and Activism Intersect

This first section introduces the collectives' work and then looks at other examples of where art and activism intersect and mobilise publics. Labofii operate across contributors, callings and continents and reach institutions and communities with equal success. RBCSS operate slightly differently as they have an acting figure-head (the Reverend) of the collective, although, as I have discovered, this patriarchal figure is just a caricature. *Activism* is another broad term I define by being any practical efforts to effect social change. *Artistic Activism*¹¹ merges activism's tools to effect change with art's creative ways to affect change.

Labofii are a collective of innovative artist-activists who respond to contemporary issues in creative, collaborative ways in order to draw attention to the subject at hand; most often, the climate crisis and

⁶ For example, Kill The Bill demonstrations against the most recent law changes in the UK. The Big Issue. (2022) *What are the kill the bill protests?* Available at: <https://www.bigissue.com/news/activism/what-are-the-kill-the-bill-protests-police-crime-sentencing-courts-bill/> (Accessed: 4/5/22)

⁷ Quote: '*The political tactic of disobeying a law deliberately, in order to bring about some change. The disobedience should ideally be public, non-violent, and committed by activists willing to face the penalties of the law.*' Oxford Reference. (2001) *Civil Disobedience*. Available at: <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803095614418#:~:text=The%20political%20tactic%20of%20disobeying,the%20penalties%20of%20the%20law.> (accessed: 4/5/22)

⁸ *Protest*, on the other-hand, although a broader term than civil disobedience, is notably different in that it can be legal and activists often communicate with local authorities to organise a suitable (law-abiding) time and place in advance of a static demonstration or procession.

⁹ Quote: ...'a police officer snapped the finger of a protester holding a scaffold in Trafalgar Square, causing what doctors confirmed would be a life changing injury.' Gayle, D. (2019) *Extinction Rebellion protest: Met accused of 521 abuses of power*. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/nov/20/extinction-rebellion-protest-met-accused-of-521-abuses-of-power> (Accessed: 4/5/22)

¹⁰ Community consultant and strategist Richard Millington defined the five factors of community as *interest, action, place, practice* and *circumstance*. Millington, R. (2022). *What are the five types of community?* Available at: <https://archinfos.com/library/lecture/read/59792-what-are-the-5-types-of-community> (Accessed 9/5/22)

¹¹ The Centre For Artistic Activism. (2018). *Why Artistic Activism?* Available at: <https://c4aa.org/2018/04/why-artistic-activism> (Accessed 5/5/22)

associated disasters¹². As discussed in this essay, Labofii hold those accountable by disrupting the systems within which legislative and constituency powers operate.

Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping are a collective who criticize consumerism and climate destruction through 'expressive politics' in the format of gospel preaching parody; they stage sit-ins and blockades. RBCSS is fronted by *postindustrial flâneur*¹³ Reverend Billy Talen, a character developed by playwright William Talen, who imitates the preaching style of a passionate messenger of God. RBCSS famously oppose what they refer to as mono-culture - the corporate taking over of small businesses. And a global 'opposition to encroaching mono-culture would remain an underlying theme of The Church's activism throughout the next 20 years'¹⁴. Talen's wife, Savitri Durkee is the director of the collective, which now has a large church as well as a London-based Stop Shopping sister choir, a radio show and regular public appearances – both legal and illegal.

'Artistic Activism is a dynamic practice combining the creative power of the arts to move us emotionally with the strategic planning of activism necessary to bring about social change.'¹⁵

An example of combining creative power with strategy is when Labofii toured a circus show across the UK for two months in the early summer of 2005¹⁶. Alongside free evening performances on market places and city parks, Labofii's fringe events included non-violent direct action (NVDA) training for audiences wanting to participate and city-wide interventions. They worked hard to capture the imagination and enthusiasm of the public with a model traditionally used for disseminating information within arts institutions, the lecture. However, this was a 'spoof' lecture about the history of civil

¹² Climate Centre. (2020). *Climate Related Disasters Increase More Than 80% Over Last Four Decades*. Available at: <https://www.climatecentre.org/450/un-climate-related-disasters-increase-more-than-80-over-last-four-decades/> (Accessed: 17/5/22)

...Markedly, they also live on the site where they produce their work. In 2016 the group relocated from a London squat to occupy 4000 acres of countryside in Brittany, due to be destroyed to make way for a new airport: Zad For Ever. (2021). *A Lighthouse to Cancel The End of The World*. Available at: <https://zadforever.blog/2021/05/14/a-lighthouse-to-cancel-the-end-of-a-world/> (Accessed: 5/5/22)

Established in 2004, they 'bring together artists and activists to co-design and deploy creative forms of direct-action, which aim to be as joyful as they are politically effective.' Labofii has delivered talks and workshops on civil disobedience within institutions such as Arts Admin (Arts Admin. (2019). *Two Degrees Festival 2019*. Available at: <https://www.artsadmin.co.uk/events/4236/> (Accessed: 5/5/22)

and Berliner Festspiele (Berliner Festspiele. (2015). *Labofii*. Available at: https://www.berlinerfestspiele.de/en/berliner-festspiele/programm/bfs-kuenstler/bfs_kuenstler_detail_99554.html (Accessed: 5/5/22)

as well as occupying, blockading and travelling across cities and countrysides of Europe and Britain. The motivation for Labofii's actions comes from a collective understanding that those in power are failing to prevent climate destruction; for example Labofii claimed Notre Dame des Landes councilors were ignoring constituent's calls to halt new airport plans for 40 years.

¹³ Lane, J. (2002). *Reverend Billy: Preaching, Protest, and Postindustrial Flânerie*. *The Drama Review* (2002) 46 (1 (173)): 60–84 and Seal, B. (2013). *Baudelaire, Benjamin and the birth of the Flâneur*. Available at: <https://psychogeographicreview.com/ baudelaire-benjamin-and-the-birth-of-the-flaneur/> (17/5/22)

¹⁴ Urging passersby to stop shopping in Starbucks and calling out 'Earthelijah!', Talen was first seen speaking in Time Square in 1998 and soon after formed a Stop Shopping choir which had notable fame within New York. But this theatre was rarely seen inside arts spaces, it instead pushed into the territories of private corporate businesses and government buildings, giving RBCSS's sweet evangelical demeanor an anarchic edge. It was not long before they had a large following and were working with community groups to resolve local social issues, using civil disobedience as a model for getting their message across to wealthy corporations in capitalist America. Talen, B. (2021). *About: early history*. Available at: <https://revbilly.com/about/> (Accessed: 5/5/22)

¹⁵ The Centre For Artistic Activism. (2018).

¹⁶ An example of Labofii's disruption is their 200-strong Clown Army; a group of inspired members of the public gathered throughout a UK tour of a circus-show-come-rebel-recruitment-and-empowerment-lecture congregated in Scotland and descended on the 2005 G8 summit. Labo.zone. (2005). *Circa Tour and G8*. Available at: <https://labo.zone/index.php/car-cellule-dactions-ritue lles-in-collaboration-with-h-artlab/?lang=en>

disobedience, delivered not by a lecturer, but by a clown. Without creative ingenuity Labofii's lecture would have been dry and inaccessible, but with well positioned theatricality it was a fun cultural event that entertained as well as educated audiences.

Artist Suzanne Lacy's *Between the Door and The Street*¹⁷ was a dialogical art¹⁸ project that required women to be in conversation with one another (about the struggles of sexism, racism and other forms of oppression they faced) along a street in New York. Although it was a radical idea to address women's issues on the street, it was not disruptive. Lacy's important message about women not being listened to by society at large didn't reach lawmakers because the artist sought permission to use the street for her work, so was only communicated to her attentive art audience. No pedestrians, traffic or police were affected by the art because it was regulated by the council. Although the artist is celebrated for her work with communities, I would argue this project was not activism.

An alternative legal approach to addressing social issues creatively, which I do consider to be activism, was Jeremy Deller's re-enactment¹⁹ of the battle of Orgreave²⁰. Although very well organised and supported by the local community, council and funders, the artist did expose the un-addressed abuse of power during the original 'battle' between striking miners and police officers in 1984. And so by centralising the miners in his film, Deller teaches audiences about a recent and brutal miscarriage of justice.

¹⁷ Lacy, S. (2013). *Between The Door and The Street*. Available at: <https://www.suzannelacy.com/between-the-door-and-the-street/> (Accessed 6/5/22)

¹⁸ Coined by Grant H Kester, Dialogical Art or Dialogical Aesthetic describes a recent (post-avant-guard) shift in socially engaged practices towards diverse and discursive contexts as a tool for exchange within – and central to – artworks. Krenn, M. (2013). *Interview with Grant Kester*. Available at: http://martinkrenn.net/the_political_sphere_in_art_practices/?page_id=1878 (Accessed: 6/5/22)

¹⁹ Quote: 'Accordingly, to re-enact is to experience the past by reactivating either a particular cultural heritage or unexplored utopias. If to re-enact means not to restore but to challenge the past, history is thus turned into a possible and perpetual becoming, an opening for invention and renewal.' Baldacci, C. (2017). *Re-enactment Strategies in Contemporary Art and Theory (Berlin 16-17 November 17)*. Available at: <https://arthist.net/archive/15974#:~:text=Accordingly%2C%20to%20re%2Denact%20is,opening%20for%20invention%20and%20renewal> (Accessed 7/5/22)

²⁰ In 2001 contemporary conceptual artist Jeremy Deller created a re-enactment of what he and the press referred to as a 'battle' between police and miners that originally happened in Orgreave, South Yorkshire, in 1984. Police (Metropolitan and the army, as well as local officers) chased striking miners through the village on a day that is widely remembered now as an abuse of power on the force's behalf.

Conn, D. (2017). *The Scandal of Orgreave*. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/may/18/scandal-of-orgreave-miners-strike-hillsborough-theresa-may> (Accessed: 6/5/22).

Deller commissioned 'two-hundred former miners who had been part of the original conflict' (2001) and another eight-hundred people (most of whom were trained in reenactment: medievalists and stage fighters) to participate. In the documentary film of the re-enactment, audiences hear accounts of the miner's experience, as well as seeing the artwork made by Deller and filmmakers; it's a work of remembrance, historical accuracy and anecdote and exposes the impact of both Thatcher's closure of mines across the country and her order for police to brutally aggravate demonstrators. The BBC was told to edit footage to make it look like the miners started a riot, when in fact, as Tony Benn (MP for Chesterfield 1984-2001) explains in the film, the reverse was true. (14:10) *The Battle of Orgreave (2001)*' Online video recording. The re-enactment was performed to an audience, and as it travelled through the village and dispersed up fields and along streets, the theatre became an immersive epic.

Eckert, Stephan M. (2021) *Immersive Theatre*. Available at: <https://contemporaryperformance.com/2021/11/09/immersive-theater/> (Accessed: 5/6/22)

Not only is it clear that the process of re-enactment is powerful for the ex-miners (39:18 *'It's fantastic, I've shook hands with a lot of lads I haven't seen for well over seventeen years'* – Malcolm Bray, former miner)

During the circus show, Labofii presented their plan to take a 'clown army' to Scotland for the 31st G8 Summit²¹ in early July. Labofii's idea could only be realised with the willingness of the audience to contribute. In this case, Labofii exemplify the vulnerability that an artist/activist experiences when proposing an idea that requires audiences to become active participants. This vulnerability is a key characteristic of socially engaged art and of activism. Labofii mobilised²² over 200 people during their tour by using shared knowledge to equip and empower publics and a unifying aesthetic; their capacity to enact social change lay as much in selling the idea of fun to participants as it did in explaining why it would be politically powerful to disrupt the conference. The clown army blocked motorways and train tracks and made tabloid headlines as they confused Scottish police with non-violent mischief²³, thanks to the audiences empowered to take action.

A police officer is quoted saying 'This isn't a normal travelling theatre company, you know.'²⁴ This encapsulates the power of art and activism working in synchronicity; the art masking, or to an extent legitimising, the activism and disrupting society.

"Every major social movement throughout time has integrated art and activism."²⁵

SECTION 2: Challenges, Conflict and Risk

This section addresses the extent to which conflict can contribute positively to activism, with reference to the research of Anthony Schrag. I'll discuss how risk is both a challenge and essential within the work of Labofii and RBCSS. To conclude I refer to a prolific moment both collectives came together, united by a large campaign, Liberate Tate.

Schrag's phd thesis²⁶ unpacked the extent to which conflict is ever present in socially engaged practice environments, arguing that it sustains society at large and therefore dominates the volatile relationship between artist, institution and public(s). But he also named this tension a 'productive conflict' and suggested that art provides a 'potential for transformation'; it encourages a desire for change in communities by harnessing creative tools. The well-established global movement Extinction

²¹ Where the eight leaders were having an annual general meeting and activists were flooding to Auchterarder, Scotland, where current UK prime minister Tony Blair hosted talks from 6-8 July 2005. Tempest. M. (2005). *Protestors Try to Storm G8 Summit*. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2005/jul/06/g8.world> (Accessed 6/5/22)

²²An important element of any social movement, *mobilisation* is the assembling and planning of groups who are empowered to seek systemic change. Science Direct. (2008). *Mobilization*. Available at: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/social-sciences/mobilization> (Accessed: 6/5/22)

²³ Quote:... 'Clown Army platoon of more than 200 rebel clowns made it up to Gleneagles for the protests, and the mainstream media had a hay day with headlines such as the Daily Mail's G8 anarchists planning to send in the clowns.' - Labo.zone (2005).

²⁴ Overheard during a protest at Scotland Yard in 2004. Labo.zone. (2022a). *WHO*. Available at: <https://labo.zone/index.php/who/?lang=en> (Accessed: 11/5/22)

²⁵ Frasz, A & Sidford, H - Helicon Collaborative. (2017). *Mapping the Landscape of Socially Engaged Practice*. Available at http://artmakingchange.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Mapping_the_Landscape_of_Socially_Engaged_Artistic_Practice_Sept2017.pdf (Accessed: 1/5/22)

²⁶ Schrag, A. (2015). *Agonistic Tendencies: The role of conflict within institutionally supported participatory practices*. (PHD Thesis, School of Arts and Cultures)

Rebellion²⁷, who use civil disobedience to draw attention to the climate crisis, acknowledge the extent to which conflict exists in every situation and have a strategy²⁸ that helps rebels process and utilise conflict.

“A democratic society is one in which relations of conflict are sustained, not erased”.²⁹ So how do activist groups harness conflict to instigate change?

Anti-capitalism opposes economic growth and ‘mono-culture’. When harnessed by non-violent protestors, conflict serves to disrupt capitalist growth, and subsequent climate destruction, by drawing attention to mass-dissatisfaction. An example of RBCSS directly addressing corporate giants is the Disney Store interventions of 2003³⁰. Famously RBCSS teamed up with ‘sweatshop activists’³¹ to protest, in the form of a sermon with gospel singing voices, against the invasion of national chains in the Disney stores of New York; workers and performance artists united in objecting to companies contribution to climate destruction³², the eradication of independent businesses and oppression of workers³³. The Mickey Mouse toy nailed to a crucifix must have upset passersby as well as intimidated store staff, but news of RBCSS’s radical action spread across the world and successfully dirtied the reputation of the multinational mass media corporation, Disney, precisely because the conflict was so public.

Reverend Billy had been arrested over 75 times by 2013³⁴. He does have privileges such as being white, heterosexual and male that mean he is treated differently by police³⁵ and the US³⁶ legal

²⁷ Quote: *Extinction Rebellion is an international movement that uses non-violent civil disobedience in an attempt to halt mass extinction and minimise the risk of social collapse.*

They also see moments of conflict as a shift towards change, which is positive.

Extinction Rebellion. (2022). *About us*. Available at: <https://extinctionrebellion.uk/the-truth/about-us/> (Accessed: 10/5/22)

²⁸ For dealing with internal and external conflict (ie with police): XR UK Conflict System (2021). *Transformative Conflict Agreement*. Available at: <https://sites.google.com/view/xruk-transformativeconflict/> (Accessed: 10/5/22)

²⁹ Schrag (2015): Quote: ‘*Claire Bishop paraphrases Laclau and Mouffe in arguing that...*’ C. Bishop. (2004) ‘*Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics*’: *October*, Volume 110. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press. p. 66. In reference to E. Laclau and C. Mouffe (1985) *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. London, Verso.

³⁰ Quote: “Talen has taken some 500 people into the store for “transgressive performances,” where actors pose as shoppers and throw “articulate fits” in response to the sweatshop Goofies on the shelves.” Hemispheric Institute. (2003). *Reverend Billy*. Available at: <https://hemisphericinstitute.org/en/enc03-performances/item/1519-enc03-reverend-billy.html> (Accessed: 13/5/22)

³¹ A term taken directly from the timeline provided in RBCSS large online archive that refers to sweatshop workers (underpaid workers who work in inhumane conditions, turned activists): Talen, B. (2021) *About: early history*. Available at: <https://revbilly.com/about/> (Accessed: 5/5/22)

³² Quote: *In total, Walt Disney’s estimated emissions are 16.6 million tonnes of carbon annually. The company’s emissions are equivalent to the annual emissions made by 3.6 million passenger vehicles. It would take around 275 million tree saplings growing for ten years to sequester these emissions*: Narayanan, M. (2021). *Walt Disney produces 6.7 million tonnes of carbon emissions annually*. Available at:

<https://app.impaakt.com/analyses/walt-disney-produces-67-million-tonnes-of-carbon-emissions-annually-32944> (Accessed: 15/5/22)

³³ Quote: *Since the late 1990s, human rights groups have reported that many of Disney’s consumer products have been made in sweatshops in Bangladesh, China, and Haiti*. From: Dreier, P. (2020). *Disney Is Not The Greatest Place On Earth To Work*. Available at: <https://www.thenation.com/article/economy/disney-iger-labor/> (Accessed: 15/5/22)

³⁴ According to: Forbes. (2013). *Environmental Activist Reverend Billy Is Possibly Facing Up To One Year In Prison*. Available at: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/monteburke/2013/11/15/environmental-activist-reverend-billy-is-possibly-facing-up-to-one-year-in-prison/?sh=20852e3c523f> (Accessed: 13/5/22)

³⁵ Travis, A. (2011). *White male culture dominates police, says review*. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2011/apr/05/white-male-culture-dominates-police> (accessed 13/5/22)

system, but it is inspiring to followers of his work to know that he has put himself in the way of the law so often. When Talen is arrested, we know he has taken a personal risk, and what the consequences will be³⁷. This risk contributes an important role to civil disobedience and mobilisation for RBCSS because of its publicity. The internet is flooded with images of the Reverend being arrested in Disney stores and outside of banks, but I would argue that nothing RBCSS does is as disturbing as the exploitative behaviour of the capitalist giants they take on in actions³⁸. Creative and social risks that show vulnerability pay off because they simultaneously attack those responsible whilst teaching those without authority (the general public) about sustainability and that knowledge empowers mass-mobilisation. RBCSS's law-breaking actions lead to respect from audiences³⁹.

Artists who expose corruption within the art world run the risk of exclusion from that space. Both collectives have burned bridges with art-world leader Tate. After Tate commissioned Labofii to hold workshops on art and activism, but warned against any attention being paid to the Tate sponsor and oil giant British Petroleum (BP)⁴⁰, Labofii retaliated with socially mobilised creativity. During the public workshops those in attendance formed a new collective called *Liberate Tate*⁴¹. And then during a busy summer gala of 2010⁴² Tate had a party celebrating 20 years of funding from BP, just two months after the BP Deepwater Horizon explosion that killed 11 workers and released 4.9 million barrels of oil into the Gulf of Mexico⁴³. *Liberate Tate* staged an intervention; *License To Spill* involved barrels of treacle being poured across the floor of the Tate gala⁴⁴ which invoked panic amongst prestigious guests and staff of both Tate and BP. *Liberate Tate* also invited RBCSS to perform an

³⁶ Heideman, P. (2020). *To Break the Power of the Police, We Need to Mobilize the Power of Labor*. Available at: <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2020/06/police-labor-union-organizing-cops-racism> (Accessed: 13/5/22)

³⁷ Having been arrested and imprisoned for activism myself, I can testify that hardest part of arrest is the isolation once you've been processed, alone in a cell, before release. Being part of a movement and knowing there are comrades supporting your actions is empowering and useful during the enforced solitude.

³⁸ Corporate giants like Disney are such a danger to workers and planet alike, there is only one reasonable reaction to this destruction, and that is of the organised retaliation of RBCSS.

³⁹ Quote: *It is all very un-British, RTCC's friend remarks. Not being a climate activist or churchgoer, she finds the preaching "scary". The overall verdict is "cool and weird". From the rest of the crowd, which no doubt includes some of the activists that are hosting the choir, the joy is palpable. For the final song, every single person is on their feet, clapping.* Darby, M. (2015). *Meet Reverend Billy, Preacher of The Climate Apocalypse*. Available at: <https://www.climatechangenews.com/2015/05/08/meet-reverend-billy-preacher-of-the-climate-apocalypse/> (Accessed: 15/5/22)

⁴⁰ Information on BP: Greenpeace. (2010). *Fact Sheet*. Available at: <https://www.greenpeace.org/usa/wp-content/uploads/legacy/Global/usa/planet3/PDFs/BP%20bad%20behavior.pdf> PDF (Accessed 16/5/22)

⁴¹ *Liberate Tate*. (2022). *Give Museums Some Tough Love*. Available at: <https://liberatetate.wordpress.com/> (Accessed: 15/5/22) and The Guardian. (2016). *Liberate Tate's Six Year Campaign To End BPs Art Gallery Sponsorship – In Pictures*. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/gallery/2016/mar/19/liberate-tates-six-year-campaign-to-end-bps-art-gallery-sponsorship-in-pictures> (Accessed: 16/5/22) and Sutton, B. (2016). *Liberate Tate Activists Look Back on Six Years of Fighting BP Sponsorship*. Available at: <https://hyperallergic.com/288254/liberate-tate-activists-look-back-on-six-years-of-fighting-bp-sponsorship/> (Accessed: 16/5/22)

⁴² Vimeo (2010) *'Licence to spill': an oil spill at the Tate Summer Party celebrating 20 years of BP support* Available at: <https://vimeo.com/45435669> (Accessed: 15/5/22).

⁴³ History.com. (2010). *Massive Oil Spill Begins In Gulf Of Mexico*. Available at: <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/massive-oil-spill-begins-in-gulf-of-mexico> (Accessed: 16/5/22)

⁴⁴ As well as staging oil spills, they created a pop-up tattoo parlor and later attempted gifting a huge turbine blade to the art gallery.

exorcism in the Turbine Hall⁴⁵; singers and Billy preached in their evangelical style before they spilled black liquid across the floor. The interventions of Liberate Tate are effective actions because activists travel to demonstrate within the walls of the institution, entertaining fascinated publics and embarrassing staff and stakeholders.

Liberate Tate succeeded in their campaign when BP stopped funding the art gallery in 2016, after 26 years of investment. The group worked hard to publically humiliate Tate and raise awareness until it became too damaging for Tate to continue with the alliance. BP and similar companies⁴⁶ like to support the arts to improve their reputation so losing Tate may have also been damaging for the oil giant.

Holding the art world accountable is a risk for the collectives as they cut ties with potential funders. But RBCSS expose internal issues to publics, as well as creating artful and entertaining performances that educate and empower onlookers to participate. *Anarchism* is essentially skepticism about authority and state. Both Labofii and RBCSS have embraced a non-higherarchical collective model. Labofii in particular appears to be completely decentralised, with no one person claiming they organise actions (unlike RBCSS who do have the Reverend as a recognisable, if just performative, figure-head). In the documentary film *Pockets of Resistance* Labofii member John Jordan quotes socialist philosopher John Holloway and asks 'How do you change the world without taking power?' and I suspect the answer lies in community practices. Social engagement requires horizontal organisation. Direct action requires unity. Labofii and RBCSS are models of collective resistance that aim to change the world⁴⁷ without taking power. The risks they take as a decentralised network pay off because we are left noticing not the performers but those in power, flustered and exposed⁴⁸.

SECTION 3: Effect and Evidence

In this section I shall look more closely at the effects Labofii and RBCSS have had on their immediate communities, and further afield. I refer to my own experience with RBCSS and then conclude with a look at Claire Bishop's take on relational aesthetics. For this essay *participation* is about people contributing to an idea, action, discussion or artwork; fundamental to socially engaged practice. Artist Liz Lerman wrote 'Artists, participants and audiences are consistently engaged at a level where

⁴⁵ The Turbine Hall is a large space in the Tate Modern. Liberate Tate. (2022). *The Exorcism of BP*. Available at: <https://liberatetate.wordpress.com/performances/the-exorcism-of-bp-july-2011/> (Accessed: 15/5/22)

⁴⁶ Di Liscia, V. (2020). *Amid Climate Crisis, Shell Ends Partnership with Two Major UK Art Institutions*. Available at: <https://hyperallergic.com/547093/shell-uk-art-institutions/> (Accessed 18/5/22)

⁴⁷ Quote, Reverend Billy: ... 'cultural shape-changers of history, people like Cesar Chavez, Malcom X and Dr. King, artists like Fela Kuti, Phil Ochs, Lenny Bruce and Abbie Hoffman – the people who took on characters or changed the people around them by being outrageous, by breaking into conservative social norms'... Quirke, S. (2016). *The Irreverent Reverend Billy of The Church of Stop Shopping*. Available at: <https://www.streetroots.org/news/2016/06/02/irreverent-reverend-billy-church-stop-shopping> (Accessed: 17/5/22)

⁴⁸ Merrill, J. (2014). *Tate galleries forced to disclose the extent of controversial BP sponsorship deal*. Available at: <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/art/news/tate-galleries-forced-to-disclose-the-extent-of-controversial-bp-sponsorship-deal-9942927.html> (Accessed: 17/5/22)

values are at stake, and where human integrity is on the line⁴⁹ and this vulnerability is integral to both participatory arts and to activism.

*Swarming*⁵⁰ can be used as a disruptive form of civil disobedience, examples of this are Labofii in Copenhagen and Critical Mass, which is global. In *Pockets of Resistance*⁵¹, a Labofii activist describes their arrival in Copenhagen for the UN Climate Summit of December 2009 as an opportunity to disrupt the event using local resources; old push bikes. We see hundreds of members of the public swarming the city and blocking major roads on upcycled bicycles, repurposed from scraps. The message to the UN summit was clear; the people were not satisfied⁵². A resource on *Empowering Nonviolence*'s website describes the positive impact of aesthetics in a blockade; expressions of creativity that catch the public's eyes as they're forced to confront the disruption in a road, shopping centre or train station (*Visuals: don't "just" blockade – tell a story*⁵³). And later in the film, Jordan says 'The world changes through people being disobedient, not obedient, to create new laws' (4:30) as we see clips of people gathering over maps of Copenhagen and strategizing together. Labofii use free tools, local knowledge and resources to create site-specific⁵⁴ actions, and the old *swarming* model has been adopted by activists throughout history⁵⁵.

RBCSS access community in a different way to Labofii. As New Yorker's search for an actively anti-capitalist movement to follow that offers a community alternative to those of organised monotheistic religion, the Church of Stop Shopping's congregation continues to grow, as people flood their regular 'service'. And their online presence is large too, thanks to loud and eye-catching protests that get them tabloid headlines and plenty of video documentation. As well as producing films (feature length: *What would Jesus Buy?* 2007, smaller gospel music videos such as *CRONIES* 2013 and their docu-

⁴⁹ Borstel, J. (2005). *Liz Lerman Dance Exchange: An Aesthetic of Inquiry, an Ethos of Dialogue*. Available at: https://animatingdemocracy.org/sites/default/files/documents/labs/dance_exchange_case_study.pdf (Accessed: 7/5/22)

⁵⁰ England, C. (2018). *Climate Change Protesters 'Swarm' London In Escalating Civil Disobedience Campaign*. Available at: <https://eachother.org.uk/climate-change-protesters-swarm-london-in-escalating-civil-disobedience-campaign/> (Accessed: 8/5/22)

⁵¹ Christensen, R and Nielsen, M. (2011). *Pockets of Resistance*. Available at: <https://youtu.be/Ncb-Akm9dgs> (accessed: 3/5/22)

⁵² New Internationalist (2009) described the demonstration: '*Art activists the Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination are designing and building a 'resistance machine' made from hundreds of recycled bikes. The Bike Bloc is part postcapitalist bike gang, part art bike carnival, and will swarm through the streets of Copenhagen as part of the protests. Bike hackers, welders, climate campers, artists and engineers are all encouraged to take part.*'

⁵³ Using colour, signage, structures, dance, etc to draw attention to the activism's goals: Metheven, A. (2018). *Blockades: a short guide to getting in the way*. Available at: <https://www.nonviolence.wri-irg.org/en/resources/2018/blockades-short-guide-getting-way> (Accessed: 8/5/22)

⁵⁴ Pearson, M. (2010). *Site-specific performance*. Palgrave Macmillan Limited. Coles, A., ed. (2000). *Site-Specificity: The Ethnographic Turn*. London: Black Dog Publishing.

⁵⁵ The creativity and collaboration of the action makes it accessible and it's commonplace that people overcome the barrier of legal implications because swarming is very easy to join, brief and enjoyable. Critical Mass is a monthly event happening in many cities across the world, they tend to land on the last Friday of the month, just after working hours (between 5-8pm). Self-organising local cyclists (commuters, hobbyists, athletes, children and adults alike) of the city swarm together through its main traffic-ways, often with music playing on a sound system, themed costumes, placards and flags promoting better cycling infrastructure for the sake of the city and the climate. This is very fun, empowering and uplifting activism that I've been involved in since I got my first bike. The unity of a swarm of cyclists in a dangerous environment (on the road with cars, lorries and busses), cycling the normal commuter routes as well as taking all four lanes of city fly-overs, reminding the drivers and the council of our presence, validates my experience as I become part of that temporal community. 'Cycle for a cleaner future' is a sign I've had on my own bike, for example.

series *News from the Natural World* 2022), RBCSS have done many tours to take their message to cities across America and the UK. In the *Community Activism* section of their website, RBCSS do not just refer to the work they do to decolonise (racial justice, land justice and immigration), tackle homophobia, sexism, education (libraries, class and gender disparity, access needs), the 'shopocalypse' (consumption, waste, sweatshops, etc), the list goes on... but they also encourage readers to contact them directly about joining actions and projects already established. Notably, RBCSS reach out to and embed themselves in communities, whereas Labofii reach to individual rebels and other activist groups as their first port of call⁵⁶.

I was fortunate to see RBCSS at the end of their Earth Riot UK Tour, during COP26 Climate Fringe⁵⁷. As well as joining in many of the marches and demonstrations across the city, the collective were hosted at Centre for Contemporary Arts for an uplifting evening of song and preaching; Reverend Billy warned us of the shopocalypse and of the effects of climate collapse on the global south, the responsibility of the global north to act, the destruction of the natural world and the choir called for us to join in with them until everyone in the studio theatre was singing. Out of curiosity I asked the three peers with whom I attended the event some questions about how they experienced the participatory performance; specifically, if they felt an influence, and what that was (Appendix).

One participant 'felt included in the conflicting absurdity and urgency of their message' which is down to creative licence RBCSS have within their own activism. Another participant felt included 'to laugh in the face of adversity' and that 'we need a choir like this here in Glasgow'. And another 'felt motivated to make my own work thinking about some of the words they said.' – an example of the impact of song and political statements delivered with performativity and gumption. I found the collective were a passionate, lively and diverse group of performers and by the end it felt like the whole audience had officially joined the choir, and it's micro-culture of exuberant, defiant, inclusive unity. However, I also felt empowered to fight for climate justice and left the event inspired. Interestingly none of us felt we learned new information in that evening but we have each thought or spoken about RBCSS since that night; suggesting that the act of coming together is perhaps more important than learning new information. We all recognise the combined impact of fun and strength of message.

In the 1990's curator Nicolas Bourriaud generated the term *Relational Aesthetics*⁵⁸ to describe artworks made for and about human social contexts and relations. He wrote of a 'DIY microtopian ethos' that focuses on how we inhabit the world *now*, instead of building a distant *future* utopia. This feels similar to the work of climate activists who see their message as urgent and imminent change essential for the preservation of life on earth.

⁵⁶ Labo.zone (2022b). *Friends*. Available at: <https://labo.zone/index.php/friends-inspirations/?lang=en> (Accessed: 9/5/22)

⁵⁷ Climate Fringe. (2021). *Reverend Billy & The Stop Shopping Choir*. Available at: <https://climatefringe.org/events/reverend-billy-the-stop-shopping-choir/> (Accessed: November 2021)

⁵⁸ Bourriaud, N. (2002). *Relational Aesthetics*. Dijon: Presses du Réel

Clair Bishop's *Artificial Hells*⁵⁹ celebrates Kester and Bourriaud's belief that 'by encouraging an audience to join in, the artist can promote new emancipatory social relations' and cultures for change. RBCSS's director, Savitri Durkee⁶⁰, organises activists like they're a theatre company, except her shows happen in public spaces with higher risks; some performers are arrested or kettled⁶¹. The *Highly choreographed*⁶² performances are like microtopian moments of RBCSS's defiant culture that calls upon passersby to participate in songs and marches that draw attention from the media and ultimately the government. Collectives like this empower people with the tools and support to take action: free and public resources available online and in-person enabling grass roots creative climate activists movements to spread⁶³.

CONCLUSION

In the cases of Labofii and RBCSS, the experimental nature of art legitimises unusual behaviors in activism and the frameworks for civil disobedience offer space for those with creative minds to thrive on the world's stage, and embolden others to participate.

In order to address the extent to which RBCSS and Labofii influence social change, I first looked at the strengths both collectives have in art and activism. I discovered the intersection of where the tools of arts (such as costume, choreography and aesthetic) and of activism (such as intervention and swarming) mutually benefit one another, is a suitable context for socially engaged practitioners to equip and mobilise communities. I demonstrated this by referring to successful movements in both collective's timelines; Labofii's 200 person-strong clown army and the constant gathering and expanding of Reverend Billy's associates. I also investigated a movement that united Labofii and RBCSS in one place. The Liberate Tate actions highlighted the capacity of activist networks fighting to

⁵⁹ Bishop, C. (2012). *Artificial hells : participatory art and the politics of spectatorship*. Verso.

⁶⁰ Savitri D. (2022). Available at: <https://revbilly.com/savitri-d/> (Accessed: 17/5/22)

⁶¹ Groundwater, C. (2020). *What is Kettling? The controversial police tactic explained*. Available at: <https://www.gq-magazine.co.uk/politics/article/what-is-kettling> (Accessed: 17/5/22)

⁶² Kalish, J. (2021). *Veteran anti-consumerist crusader Reverend Billy takes aim at climate change*. Available at: <https://www.npr.org/2021/11/26/1059103460/reverend-billy-church-stop-shopping-choir> (Accessed: 17/5/22)

⁶³ ACT – Artists Citizens on Tour, Activate, Art Climate Transition, Art Works for Change, Artists Project Earth, Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment, Bimblebox Art Project (Australia), Biosphere Soundscapes (Australia), Cape Farewell (UK), Center for Sustainable Practice in the Arts, City As Living Laboratory, Climarte (Australia), Climate Acts, Climate Museum (US), Climate Museum UK, ClimateCultures (UK), Climate Stories Project, Climate Visuals, Climate Wisconsin, Creative Carbon Scotland, Curating Cities, Dear Climate, DearTomorrow, Do The Green Thing, Dragonfly, Earth Celebrations, Ecoartspace, Eco Arts Foundation, Extraction: Art on the Edge of the Abyss, Extreme Ice Survey, Fernland Studios, Fossil Free Culture NL (The Netherlands), Future Materials Bank, Globaia, Green Art Lab Alliance (Europe, Asia, Latin-America), Green Europe Experience, Green Kids, Inc., Green Music Australia, Hip Hop Caucus, Human Nature (UK), Inside the Greenhouse, Invisible Dust, Julie's Bicycle (UK), Kinnari Ecological Theatre Project (Southeast Asia), Laboratory for Environmental Narrative Strategies, Land Art Generator Initiative, Living Data, Mustarinda (Finland), Our Climate Voices, Platform (UK), Symbio(s)cene, Superhero Clubhouse, The Arctic Circle, The Climate Museum, The ClimateMusic Project, Tierra Sol Art & Resiliency Institute and Women Eco Artists Dialogue. From: Artists & Climate Change. (2022). *Organizations*. Available at: <https://artistsandclimatechange.com/organizations/> (Accessed: 17/5/22)

Enmedio, Beautiful Trouble, The Yes Men, PENG!, Fossil Free Culture, Tools For Action, Not An Alternative, The Activist Network and Mujeres Creando. From Labofii's friends list: Labo.zone (2022b)

Brooklyn Anti Gentrification Network, Retail Action Project, Reclaim Pride Coalition, Code Pink, New Sanctuary Coalition, Bernard Polombo & El Taller Latino Americano, Orleans Prison Project, Father Frank & Iowa Catholic Workers, Tareke Ortiz, Resist CVE, Coalition to Save Chinatown, Picture the Homeless, The Zad, Hemispheric Institute, Defend Democracy in Brazil, More Gardens, The Black Institute, Sylvia Rivera Law Project, Gays Against Guns, Code Pink, Imani Henry Equality for Flatbush, NYC Community Garden Coalition, Street Vendors Project, Picture The Homeless and We Charge Genocide, to name a few of RBCSS's friends list: Rev Billy. (2022). *Saints*. Available at: <https://revbilly.com/saints/> (Accessed: 17/5/22)

decolonise, decarbonise and decentralise society and destabilise capitalism. The work of Liberate Tate encompassed all of these current issues and put BP at the centre of the public's vision; humiliation on the world's stage. I explored examples of mobilisation of communities; cycling, singing, clowning, whatever the intervention's theme was, it seemed that fun and mischief were central to public engagement. The microtopian ethos, if only positioned at the feet of business giants in accessible city sites of the global north, where these activists are working, does counter the monocultures of Disney, BP and their friends at the top of the art world, Tate. Labofii and RBCSS effect social change using civil disobedience by capitalising on high-profile actions that are transparent in intention and eye-catching to the public; making both collectives relatable, trustworthy, dynamic, legitimate and active members of the community.

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Appendix:

Three audience responses

Case study 1

Q1. Did you enjoy yourself at the Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping Choir COP26 event at CCA?

Yes

Q2. Did you learn something new?

No

Q3. Did you feel included in that space?

Yes

Q4. Have you thought about it since?

Yes

Q5. Have you seen the group online since that night?

Yes

Q6. Have you spoken about the group or that evening with someone since?

Yes

Q7. How did Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping Choir's message influence you?

I found it very uplifting made me feel like I wanted to be part of the movement of climate justice, such a great way to spread the message with song and easy then to tell other people about them. A lot of the lyrics stayed with me after and felt motivated to make my own work thinking about some of the words they said.

Q8. OPTIONAL: another observation/thought you have about that event, the message, Reverend Billy, the Choir or the audience?

I really liked the way they asked the audience a few questions and when they came into the crowd at the start. I think it is really special to feel like I am participating.

Case study 2

Q1. Did you enjoy yourself at the Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping Choir COP26 event at CCA?

It's not that simple...

I felt kind of on edge the whole time because it reminded me of Church and also Billy seemed like a bit of a megalomaniac but besides that I did enjoy myself, yes.

Q2. Did you learn something new?

No

Q3. Did you feel included in that space?

Yes

Q4. Have you thought about it since?

Yes

Q5. Have you seen the group online since that night?

No

Q6. Have you spoken about the group or that evening with someone since?

No

Q7. How did Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping Choir's message influence you?

The repetition of protest slogans influenced me and.. I felt included in the conflicting absurdity and urgency of their message which felt very American to me since American activists tend to be worn out by constant defeat and disappointment, their songs were full of life and energy..

Q8. OPTIONAL: another observation/thought you have about that event, the message, Reverend Billy, the Choir or the audience?

I don't know how you get past the looming fear of being interpreted as a cult. Even when a group's message is universal and good there is still an air of exclusion that may be linked to our own intergenerational traumas.. could be a means of survival, I'm not sure.. My memory of that night was overall great and I really appreciated the groups transparency and concretely leftist (not neoliberal like many american leftist groups) beliefs

Case study 3

Q1. Did you enjoy yourself at the Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping Choir COP26 event at CCA?

Yes

Q2. Did you learn something new?

It's not like that...

Maybe learn isn't the right word for me; I didn't learn any new 'information' but on an experiential, sensing and feeling level I felt I gained something, grew in new directions and was nourished by something fresh.

Q3. Did you feel included in that space?

Yes

Q4. Have you thought about it since?

And...

Thought about the way they performed with this sense of organized spontaneity and how they seemed so cohesive as an ensemble but how it was so evident that the whole was made up of all these different voices, personalities, experiences.

Q5. Have you seen the group online since that night?

No

Q6. Have you spoken about the group or that evening with someone since?

Yes

Q7. How did Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping Choir's message influence you?

I actually didn't tune into the words they were saying my immediate response is always to the music and the melody, the singing and timbre of voices, to the performance, the relationships and chemistry, the atmosphere; I never know the lyrics to songs but it left me with a sense of coming together, to be together helping each other+, listening and giving space, of sharing and casting off ego to be a part of something but in you're own unique personal way. To laugh, to wear colour, to sing, to smile, to laugh in the face of adversity and to not give a fuck what anyone thinks.

Q8. OPTIONAL: another observation/thought you have about that event, the message, Reverend Billy, the Choir or the audience?

I just thought we need a choir like this here in Glasgow.