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An archaeology of media activism: attempting to draft the history of digital culture for social change

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Abstract

The emergence of media activism over the last decades constitutes a new and relevant field of study for researchers of digital culture and social change, digital art historians and media archaeologists. Since the inception of the new millennium and the spread of electronic culture, media activism has grown into a field of its own with distinctive organizations, artists, curators and critics devoted to engaged practices that are close to political antagonism and far from the concerns of the elitist art world. Considering the worsening environmental and political crisis around the globe, the spread and conscious use of new technologies becomes essential to update the concept of activism, intended as a kind of action-taking art devoted to social issues. By establishing an epistemological framework along the lines of media archaeology and digital art history, the research highlights the role of media activism in the context of recent historical and societal developments, as well as its potentially leading role for behavioral and social change. From pioneering experiences to current practices, the paper explores how a growing number of practitioners are tackling societal concerns through digital strategies and thus drawing attention to several critical topics, such as: gender issues, environmen-

tal delinquency, racial discrimination, social injustices, political corruption, abuse of power, invasive technologies and surveillance abuse. In the course of the analysis, a relevant role is given to practices based on hacktivism, public engagement and intercreative procedures that aim at highlighting, disclosing, or spreading the state of affairs which are still uncovered in traditional media and thus expanding the role of investigative art/journalism in the Postdigital Age. The case studies presented show how media activism emerges as an autonomous field shaped by practitioners acting on the premise of a vocation on the fringe between society and the art world.

Keywords

activism; digital culture; media archaeology; media activism; public engagement; social change

Arqueología del activismo mediático: hacia una revisión de la historia de la cultura digital para el cambio social

Resumen

El surgimiento del activismo de los medios en las últimas décadas constituye un nuevo campo de estudio de gran relevancia para los investigadores de la cultura digital y el cambio social, los historiadores del arte digital y los arqueólogos de medios. Desde el inicio del nuevo milenio y con la difusión de la cultura electrónica, el activismo de los medios se ha convertido en un campo específico para organizaciones, artistas, comisarios y críticos dedicados a prácticas comprometidas próximas al antagonismo político y alejadas de las preocupaciones del mundo del arte elitista. Teniendo en cuenta el agravamiento de la crisis ambiental y política en todo el mundo, la difusión y el uso consciente de las nuevas tecnologías se vuelve esencial para actualizar el concepto de activismo, concebido como un tipo de arte de acción destinado a cuestiones sociales. Al establecer un marco epistemológico en línea con la arqueología de medios y la historia del arte digital, la investigación destaca el papel del activismo de los medios de comunicación en el contexto de los desarrollos históricos y sociales recientes, así como su potencial liderazgo en el cambio social y del comportamiento. Desde experiencias pioneras hasta prácticas más actuales, el artículo explora cómo un número creciente de profesionales están abordando una serie de cuestiones de relevancia social a través de estrategias digitales para dirigir nuestra atención hacia varios temas críticos, tales como: cuestiones de género, delincuencia medioambiental, discriminación racial, injusticias sociales, corrupción política, abuso de poder, tecnologías invasivas y abuso de la vigilancia. A lo largo del análisis, se otorga un papel relevante a las prácticas basadas en el hacktivism, el compromiso público y los procedimientos intercreativos que pretenden dar visibilidad, revelar o difundir situaciones aún no cubiertas desde los medios tradicionales, ampliando así el papel del arte y periodismo de investigación en la era posdigital. Los estudios de caso presentados muestran cómo el activismo de los medios emerge como un campo autónomo moldeado por profesionales que actúan sobre la premisa vocacional desde los límites entre la sociedad y el mundo del arte.

Palabras clave

activismo; cultura digital; arqueología mediática; activismo mediático; compromiso público; cambio social

Introduction¹

The presence and recent rise of activism in media art inevitably led us to reconsider the confluence of new social action, contemporary art and investigative journalism in the Postdigital Age. The use of new technologies to promote social change through artistic practices may be also related to anti-establishment sociocultural performances and

pioneering expanded journalist activities, in which the use of the internet often reflects the essential role of social media and popular digital culture in shaping the public opinion system. Over the last decades, an increasing number of interactive, immersive, and co-creative installations underline the short distance among colliding disciplines where the blurred distinction between the act of artistic creation, the duty to inform, the right to freedom of opinion and expression, and the chance

1. The article was mutually conceived by the authors, though "Introduction" and paragraphs 1 to 2 were written by Carolina Fernández-Castrillo and paragraphs 4 to 5 by Diego Mantoan. The Conclusion was written by both authors.

to induce a rebellion against inequalities turns into a challenging question to delve into. From the perspective of media archaeology and digital art history, this paper aims to explore the evolution of media artistic practices that give visibility to realities uncovered by traditional media and the promotion of awareness and social protest through innovative literacy practices. By doing so, we aim to enrich the methodologies of digital and public humanities for social change.

We are interested in the development of critical artistic projects by means of digital strategies to deal with societal concerns that still remain unknown for a large part of the population, as specific questions related to gender issues, environmental crime, greenwashing, racial discrimination, social injustices, political and economic corruption, abuse of power, invasive technologies, misuse of surveillance systems, digital divide, sustainable development, and many more. As we will see, the role of data visualization becomes an essential instrument of awareness and social protest in many of the examples. Firstly, by making complex data more accessible and comprehensible, and also, by identifying common patterns, essential to the process of making daily decisions on a global and individual scale. And even more, nowadays, hacktivist practices in media art expand info art as well as investigatory art by transcending a mere visualization of the information through the promotion of a real intervention in the facts. In the post-truth era, the central role of information as creative content and a medium itself is the breeding ground of an increasing number of artistic interventions “[...] to encourage citizen participation in the fight against misinformation and the abuse of institutional, economic and political-factual power within the realm of experimentation in digital culture” (Fernández-Castrillo 2021).

The focus of this research is to identify illustrative pioneering theoretical reflections and case studies of media activism from what we consider some of the main areas involved in this field:

- **Investigatory art:** beyond investigative journalism, immersive installations, and interactive documentary
- **Video art:** audiovisual performance, video essay, video installation, expanded cinema, and postmedia experiments
- **Social guerrilla campaigns:** unconventional marketing strategies, exemplary political campaigns, and subversive advertisement
- **Creative appropriation as activism:** remix practices, and critical digital intertextuality
- **Culture jamming:** videoclip, trailer, and mash-up
- **Networked culture:** social networks, transmedia storytelling, memes, videogames, and user-generated contents (UGC)
- **Hacktivism:** data activism and expanded information
- **Digital innovation and activism:** Artificial intelligence (AI), machine learning, virtual reality (VR), and metaverse

1. When activism, art and media collide

More than a movement, “activism” has been defined as “creative resistance” (Jordan 2020) or “indiscipline” (Lemoine & Ouardi 2010), an attitude when direct action becomes a meaningful and perhaps also a cathartic and/or aesthetically pleasing act. The founders of the Center for Artistic Activism, define it as a “hybrid practice that marries the creative force of art to the concrete results of activism” (Duncombe & Lambert 2021, 5). To Jordan, “artist activism is a vital form of arts entrepreneurship principled in innovation, creating social value, challenging social structures, and contributing to public good” (2023, 18-19). On the same line, Reed describes activist art as the “art that has been created inside or very close to social protest movements” (2019, xi). By trying to change current conditions or condemning past events – probably long-forgotten or even unheard-of –, activists integrate art into social action and/or social action into art.

From Picasso’s *Guernica* (1937) to anonymous and collective practices, art historian and independent curator Andrea Emelife’s research on protest art (2022) “reminds us of the art’s potential to influence, condemn, elevate, inspire, and rally against the status quo” (Emelife cit. Dinsdale 2022). According to Groys, the big difference with critical art is that “Art activists do not want to merely criticize the art system or the general political and social conditions under which this system functions. Rather, they want to change these conditions by means of art – not so much inside the art system but outside it, in reality itself” (2014). The agitation and protest as artistic media have never been so present in society since the popularization of the use of social networks and new technologies. As the activist Sholette sustains, “We are witnessing today a surge of artistic activism unlike anything since the 1960s and 1970s” (2022, 11).

As one of the founders of the activist collectives Critical Art Ensemble and Electronic Disturbance Theatre, Ricardo Domínguez points out that the first expressions of electronic civil disobedience started on 1 January 1994 with the digital Zapatismo and the alter-globalization movement (2009). In fact, the origin of the term “activism” is usually associated with a 1997’s gathering of Chicano artistic practices from East Los Angeles and Zapatistas’ actions in Chiapas (Mexico) (Wikipedia 2023).² However, Chicano/a activism began even earlier, with *America Tropical*, David Alfaro Siqueiros’ 80-foot-long mural about the exploitation of Mexican workers on Olvera Street in 1932 in Los Angeles (Baca 2015). From the late 1960s through the 1970s, there was a reemergence of Chicano/a artists, who “developed a dialogical, process-based, participatory, socially engaged, and community-based practices” (Gunckel 2015, 407) in which the social and context-specificity of the murals, silkscreen posters or photographs contributed to the alliance between activism and intermediality.

2. The Wikipedia offers a highly cited definition. However, the entry lacks specific references on the topic.



Figure 1. *The Great Wall of Los Angeles – The History of California Tujunga Wash Flood Control Channel Detail View* (1976-1984 [restored 2009-2011]). Judith Francisca Baca and youth assistants. SAHARA Public Collection

Source: Photograph by Dell Upton. (c) Research and scholarly non-commercial publications. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/community.18283745>

The new genre of public art, the democratization of cultural practices and the socio-critical dimension of the creative process opened a different relation with the audience. Also remarkable is the UCLA/SPARC's César Chávez Digital Mural Lab, founded in 1996 by Judy Baca as a new tool for public art (through the use of new technologies linked to an old project: *The Great Wall of Los Angeles* (1976-1983) that it is still considered the most ambitious mural project by a Chicano/a artist up to date (Sandoval & Latorre 2008). In that case, Baca engaged over four hundred at-risk youth from ethnic, gender, and social minorities to create an "interracial harmony" (Baca 2015, 416).

In her explanation of the role of the artist-activist, Davis justifies that "[...] Engaging spaces, reconstructing dominant aesthetics, taking up collaborative civic art, and/or using historical exploration as a form of healing activism are just a few ways young people can work to make the world a better place" (2016, 27; 30). Regarding the activist's tasks, Asante was one of the first to announce that "The activist must not be afraid to learn a new language in order to inspire and empower new people – by any medium necessary [...] The activist knows that to make an *observation* is to have an *obligation*" (2008, 203; 209).

Even if the artistic component may be questioned for the quality of the final output, conceiving art as a medium for social change is not a minor issue. From this new perspective, the uselessness associated with art would definitely be undermined. A position that reminds us of the old avant-gardes – as the 1910s Futurism or 1920s Russian Constructionism – when artists believed in their capacity to reconstruct the world (Fernández-Castrillo 2009). The innovative richness of transcending the possibilities of the medium itself to change the world is

a challenging goal for artists, an objective that becomes even more defiant with the intercreative dynamics of the Postdigital Age.

2. What is media activism?

The role of artists as provocative social agents has always been present along art history. In fact, assuming art as a form of communication, lead us to an endless list of anti-establishment artworks which provide a critical reading of the social reality. However, sometimes a disruptive interpretation of actual facts is not enough, and direct action – in analogical or digital terms – is required. Rawls defines civil disobedience as "a public, nonviolent, and conscientious act contrary to law usually done with the intent to bring about a change in the policies or law of the government" (1996, 356). Bringing users into social movements for the first time through online participatory strategies has proven to be an effective way to recruit new creative talents.

Global social movements such as #FridaysForFuture or #BlackLivesMatter, together with social guerrilla campaigns – for instance, by creating viral internet memes, among many other possibilities of culture jamming –, build connections with the people "to promote or prevent improvements in society" (Giesbrecht 2021) in which cultural innovation is often involved. In fact, new popular ways of expression – such as culture jamming, creative reappropriation, *mash-uptivism*³ or social design (Lievrouw 2023; Resnick 2015) – are usually related to common causes such as supporting social change or fighting inequalities.

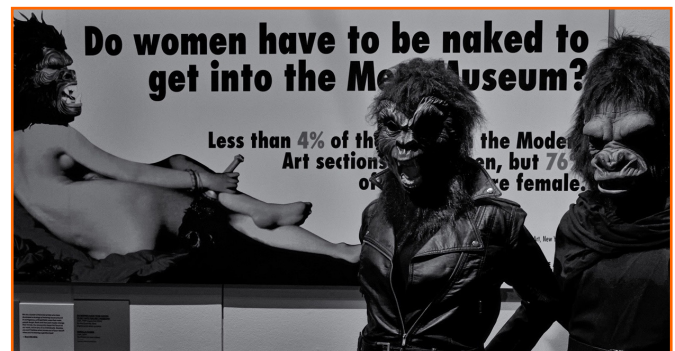


Figure 2. The Guerrilla Girls at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, on the occasion of the exhibition *Disobedient Objects* (2014)

Source: Source: Photograph by Eric Hybrechts. CC BY-ND. 2.0 DEED. <https://www.flickr.com/photos/15979685@N08/15330478694/>

We fully agree with Gill when he recognizes that "problems of hegemony involve not only questions of power, authority, credibility and, the prestige of a system of rule but they also involve the political economy and aesthetics of its representation in culture and its media" (Gill 2008, 68). As a matter of fact, activist contribution "makes visible

3. Carolina Fernández-Castrillo introduced in 2022 the term *mash-uptivism* (Fernández-Castrillo, Rogel and Romero Martínez 2022).

what the dominant consensus tends to obscure and obliterate” (Mouffe 2007) by framing and reframing the narratives and ideologies of our present (Alonso-Fradejas, Barnes & Jacobs 2022) through disruptive artistic practices. A task often connected to investigative journalist routines, known as “watchdog reporting” – practiced for example by ProPublica, a nonprofit newsgroup that shares its work under the Creative Commons license – by sharing unknown sensitive information of social interest. And also in relation with socio-cultural activities to bring into focus inequalities, such as Guerrilla Girls’ actions since 1985. This anonymous feminist group – famous for their guerrilla tactics and their legendary gorilla masks – stages pop-up exhibitions, street, and surprise art actions by employing culture jamming and remix culture strategies with internet and public performances, posters, merchandising, lectures, interviews, publications, etc. They struggle for (ethnic) diversity, and they also denounce the under-representation of female artists and curators in the contemporary art world.



Figure 3. Paolo Cirio, *Overexposed - HD Stencils* (2015). Acrylic spray paint on paper
Source: image courtesy of the artist

In the Postdigital Age, when the digital paradigm becomes the rule, we find an increasing number of embodied media and mixed reality activist projects. Through a constant provocation to the sociocultural limits and asymmetries of power, in his hacktivist interventions, the artist Paolo Cirio exemplifies the intersection between activism, digital culture and hacker practices. For the last two decades he has been considered the main representative “[...] of this new socio-cultural trend that gives continuity to Info Arts – in general – and to Investigatory Art – in particular –, placing himself at the forefront of Media Art” (Fernández-Castrillo 2023). Located in an uncertain domain – sometimes a hero, others a

villain – his defence of fundamental rights updates the conception of art-action for social change from the introduction of hacker skills into the activist field. In conversation with Cirio, he explained that “The hacking itself could be also considered a medium more than a technique or a practice” (Cirio in Fernández-Castrillo 2023).

The intersection between art, activism, and media brings us a new keyword: “media activism”. This concept was introduced introduced by Carolina Fernández-Castrillo in 2022 at the 59th Art Biennale as follows: “Media Artivism consists of artistic media practices that denounce inequalities with the desire to promote a social change”.⁴ Media activist works combine the creative and imaginative power of art with the rebelliousness and insubordination of activist procedures. The expressivity and emotional strength of the art, together with the defiant spirit of activism reach a higher range of action with the use of media and new technologies.

As previously mentioned, the denunciation and direct intervention into real problems is one of the main characteristics of activism, increased by the expanding effect of connective environments. A key aspect of media activism is the prominence of the media landscape in the creation of new strategies for public engagement using popularly extended and/or last-generation technologies. Together with the artistic interest of media activist works, the social impact of these projects is the most relevant contribution to take into consideration. And another important aspect is the increasing areas of action, together with new sociocultural genres and spaces for collaborative creation.⁵

Since the beginning of the 20th century, the potential democratization of cultural industries was perceived as a threatening and fascinating new scenario. Nowadays, with a more advanced society – in terms of media literacy –, users often become the main creators and protagonists of current socio-cultural campaigns for social change in the online context. UGC and cocreative synergies (Fernández-Castrillo 2014) prove the leading role of producers (Bruns 2008) and the mediatic idiosyncrasy of this new typology of art-action dynamics for social change.

3. Fringe history of engaged art practises

To give the discourse an art historical perspective, media adoption by artists in their foundational practices is as old as the European

4. Fernández-Castrillo coordinated the section “Media Artivism and Public Engagement” at the Venice Summer School in Digital and Public Humanities, organized by the Venice Centre for Digital and Public Humanities (VeDPH), Ca’ Foscari University of Venice (15 July 2022, Venice). The panel was also part of the 59th Biennale Arte 2022’s public events, where she introduced for the first time the term “Media Artivism” at her opening conference “Media Artivism and Expanded Information”.

As part of her research project “Digital Media Culture: Intercreativity and Public Engagement” (VeDPH-UC3M), Fernández-Castrillo also presented “Media Artivism against Climate Disinformation” at the Arts and Humanities in Digital Transition Conference at NOVA University of Lisbon (6th-7th July 2023, Lisbon).

Previously, she was the director of the International Conference on Transmedia Activism: Creativity & Expanded Information. The event was jointly organized by University Carlos III of Madrid (UC3M), the Venice Centre for Digital and Public Humanities and Istituto Italiano di Cultura-Madrid (22 February 2022 – UC3M & IIC Madrid, Madrid-). She also presented the conference “Beyond the Code: Hacktivism and Expanded Information” together with Paolo Cirio (Fernández-Castrillo & Cirio 2022), and Mantoan contributed to the round table presenting his research “Disrupting Communication Technology: Artists, Activists, and Behavioral Change” (Fernández-Castrillo, Alcalá, Barranquero, Mancinelli & Mantoan 2022).

5. In November 2022 Fernández-Castrillo initiated a conference tour with the historian Rebekah Rhodes at Saint Louis University-Madrid Campus to introduce the concept of blockchain activism as a specific field of media activism. They focused their contribution into eco-controversies by providing a background on crypto energy use and updated information on corporate response from artistic institutions.

Avant-Gardes. Futurism made it its signature characteristic to employ the mediatic means, as they were gradually available, to direct its effort toward society at large (Rovati 2015, 65-68). Disseminating new ideas via the press – as with Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's 1909 manifesto – or developing radio programs – as with Fortunato Depero's broadcasts – were not side products but the core of the new art for the industrial world (Fernández-Castrillo 2013). Embracing mediatic strategies meant that Futurists set themselves apart from the mainstream of their time to become actors of societal change, to the contrary of earlier movements such as Expressionism and Cubism that instead carved themselves a niche inside the art system. What makes this art a relevant historical example for the kind of media activism that we are trying to define is the artists' will to go beyond the restricted art field and, thus, not just address social or political issues, but seize a direct effect on society with the intention of producing a significant shift in paradigms and behaviors (Mantoan 2021, 17).

The intuition of adopting mediatic strategies to stir the debate on social, economic, and political topics reaches back to the invention of Gutenberg's print, as can be seen by its role in spreading leaflets during the peasant wars in sixteenth-century Europe (Bianco 2010). In the 19th century, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon still held prints as a separate artistic domain that fitted the concerns of the lower classes and could lead to social change (Facos 2011). In *Du principe de l'art et de sa destination sociale* (Proudhon 1865), originally intended for Gustave Courbet's catalog, the philosopher advocated for a new form of social art countering the bourgeois concept of art pour l'art and embracing print as for educational and societal change. As expressed by Proudhon, social art has a moral and social duty that activists still uphold today, setting themselves apart from the closed art circuit:

"[...] to express human life, to represent its feelings, passions, virtues and vices, works, prejudices, ridicule, enthusiasms, greatness and shame, all good or bad morals, in one word forms, according to their typical, individual and collective manifestations, and all with a view to the physical, intellectual and moral improvement of humanity, its self-justification, and ultimately its glorification". (Proudhon 1865, 376)

These words seemed to resonate still in the 1968 movements, when public artists consciously adopted the role of civic agents, thus operating on the fringe between the global and the local, between the art world and society at large (Mantoan 2022, 505-506). Throughout the 1970s, practitioners like Barbara Steveni, John Latham, Nancy Holt and Joseph Beuys called for public art to widen the scope of the visual arts and foster the debate on the conditions for a just and positive social development (Braddock & Ater 2014, 2-8). The theories and practices developed by public artists focused on the complex interactions between gender politics, racial discrimination, and environmental issues (Lippard 1976, 338). Particularly after the 1973 oil crisis, a growing number of practitioners embarked on public art projects that decidedly turned towards an ecologist approach, such as Latham christening

hills made of industrial debris or Beuys planting trees in urban areas (Braddock & Ater 2014, 6).

The scope of artworks referring to this new sensibility can roughly be divided into two principal kinds: on one side, there were awareness-raising projects that fostered a shift in the public mindset on various political, environmental or social issues – as in the case of Holt and Latham's aesthetic interventions in the public space, although without a clear denouncement of the current state of affairs; on the other side, there were radical action-taking projects – for instance in the ecological works of Beuys, Nicolás García Urriburu and Betsy Damon – which intended to involve the public and promote social change in a direct manner (Foster, Krauss, Bois, Buchloh & Joselit 2016, 654-60). An utmost interesting blend of these two directions, as well as a fundamental precedent to media activism, was the collaboration between Beuys and Latham that gave birth during documenta VI in Kassel, 1978, to the *Free International University* (Schwarze 2012, 122-124). Operating entirely as an independent satellite TV channel, this public artwork consisted of a broadcast palimpsest and autonomous platform for free speech and debates on the implications of economics, politics, and culture for the development of a truly democratic society.

Towards the end of the 20th century, the ongoing debate among socially engaged artists and critics tended to specify the aims and scope of public art even further, particularly by introducing elements such as the focus on social relevance, the open-endedness of the creative process and the structural involvement of the audience in the creative process (Crickmay 2003, 119-133). Back in the 1980s, Lippard, Caroline Tisdall and Su Braden maintained that socially effective art needed a change in the role and mindset of artists with regard to the places and communities that were involved (Braden 1978, 1-15). Practitioners envisaged a more distinct definition of public art that drove towards an embryonal idea of activism, a concept that considered the audience's and civic agencies' involvement essential parts of such transformative activities (Roth, Lacy, Morales & Holland 2001, 61). Still today, activism in the public sphere has abandoned the elitist art world to engage directly with prospective audiences and resort to the practice of negotiation of both means and meanings (Harding 1995). At this point, adopting the perspective of Howard Becker's Multiple Art Worlds theory, it is correct to say that public art – and, as such, activism in general – strives in grassroots experiences and organization networks that are separate from the art world (Becker 2008, 38). As a social and public art practice, activism is usually supported by artist-run galleries, alternative spaces, and group exhibitions with a distinctive anti-elite character at the fringe of the art world, thus operating as a catalyst of societal change (Baker, Krauss, Buchloh, Fraser, Joselit, Meyer, Storr, Foster, Miller & Molesworth 2002, 202-203). In recent years, this antagonizing attitude has been directed primarily against patriarchy, colonialism, capitalism and, extractivism (Boettger 2008, 154-161).



Figure 4. Giovanni Scotti, *Innobiliare Sud-Ovest* (2019-ongoing). Fake online advertisement
Source: image courtesy of the artist

4. Artist methodology, categories and samples

Having set the frame of today's media activism from an art historical perspective, it is important to highlight another feature that clearly emerges from such practices, which is the peculiar artist-audience relationship. Activism, in general, deals with "emancipated" spectators, thus superseding the traditional classroom paradigm of dominant mass cultural production and letting the public fully participate with their own stances in the cultural debate unleashed by the artworks (Rancière 2009, 10-15). Consequently, its methodology is "dialogic", since its participatory and socially engaged practices offer a space for an egalitarian type of critical thinking, meaning making and aesthetic understanding (Kester 2015: 155-157). Media activism can thus be said to have a discursive character that creates provisional consent between artist and audience, abandoning the illusion of universal truths, and allowing the coexistence of different stances in the public sphere (Habermas 1989, 47). For this reason, the artistic process becomes an open-ended means of civic agency that creates a shared and often unforeseen outcome in society (Schweickart 1996, 317).

A relevant feature of activism is that practitioners usually take the lead on theorizing the motives, methods and outcomes of their interventions (Braden 1978; Heinrich 1999, 27-28). Often, they are involved in art schools and universities for art-based research and innovative art education (Crickmay 2003). Because they are at the fringe of the art world, they resort to teaching activities and research grants as their principal source of income, having a high degree of independence from the art market (Throsby 1996, 345). For activists, having celebrity status or the mere acknowledgement in the art world are hardly feasible goals, but the benefit of freedom from market rules or political constraints is a much stronger lure that complies with their

commitment to activist agendas, their art projects being vocational endeavors (Wallen 2012: 239).

With the spread of digital culture, media activism has grown into a field of its own with distinctive artists, curators, critics and, organizations devoted to engaged practices that are often liminal to political antagonism and far from the concerns of the art world (Demos, Scott & Banerjee 2021). Practitioners visually and experientially resort to the consolidated grammar of contemporary art, as well as to their knowledge of past public and activist practices, though operating at the fringe of society and innovating artistic strategies through digital media (Mahony 2021). This happens simultaneously in different parts of the world, not just in developed countries, covering all five continents and addressing both global and local stances (Moore & Tickell 2014: 12-25). Media activists independently interpret their role in society employing postmodern strategies that can be divided into at least four categories according to the specific project's aim and the way digital media are employed:

- i) spreading disclosed information through hacktivism;
- ii) improving community engagement through networking;
- iii) countering market logic by disrupting digital business models;
- iv) innovating digital interfaces through sustainable infrastructure models.

These attitudes can be conveniently exemplified by four paramount projects in recent media activism. Concerning hacktivism, the case of Electronic Disturbance Theater's *Transborder Immigrant Tool* (2007-ongoing) clearly embodies a radical action of civil disobedience that digitally delivered information in the form of a mobile phone application to assist immigrants trying to cross the US frontier. Although volatile and perhaps difficult to access to migrants, the project was able to turn the spotlights on the human experience of transborder crossing given that the activist collective underwent official investigations requested by Republican congressmen for the alleged attempt to favor illegal immigration (Stalbaum 2010). As far as networking is concerned, the Bangalore artist collective *Aravani Art Project* (2016-ongoing) built a safe platform for transgender awareness in India's caste society amplified through a strain of activities on social media and blogs. The digital networking campaign helped foster the creation of social interventions and mural paintings into local communities and neighborhoods by protecting members of the transgender community and, at the same time, allowing them to go public as an organized group (Ottaviano 2020). When it comes to disrupting digital business models, subverting market logic lies at the core of *Innobiliare Sud-Ovest* (2019-ongoing) by Giovanni Scotti, who founded a fictitious online agency pretending to sell the abandoned American army barracks of Bagnoli in Naples, Italy. Posting fake advertisements on popular real estate websites and apps, as well as opening a territorial office in an amusement park and hanging billboards across the city, the project addresses the speculation of real estate markets affecting public spaces and the necessary involvement of communities to stir awareness on urban development (Vertaldi 2020). In regard of a thorough intervention on the digital structure of web media and its ecological consequences,

the collaborative work *Solar Protocol* (2020-ongoing) by Tega Brain, Alex Nathanson and Benedetta Piantella consists in a set of instructions that originated a client-server network across the globe. Each steward server of the network consists of a low cost 50W solar power panel with a 32GB server box and together they power a demonstrative website and exhibition platform with a responsive design programmed to reflect the intermittent energy level provided by natural systems (Brain, Nathanson and Biantella 2022). The project, thus, advocates an eco-effective approach claiming that the sustainability problem of the Internet implies the development of different business models, infrastructures, and – first and foremost – a different web aesthetic to the one that providers of online services, social networks and entertainment have pushed the users towards for sheer capitalist gain (McDonough & Braungart 2002). It is important to stress that such media artists are perfectly aware of the social relevance and imaginative power of their projects, which they hope might be instrumental to stir community awareness and participation in social change, as expressed by the creators of *Solar Protocol*:

“Finally, energy is also aesthetic. It’s a question of sensation: how far, how frequently, and how subtly, we communicate. And these questions are not disconnected from ecologies and politics. A transition in how we power our daily lives also implies that our lives will look and feel differently”. (Pasek & Piantella 2021, 2)



Figure 5. Tega Brain, Alex Nathanson and Benedetta Piantella, *Solar Protocol* (2020-ongoing)
Source: installation shot of a steward server courtesy of the artists

Conclusion

The theoretical reflections and case studies presented in this paper corroborate our assumption that media activism has emerged over the

last decades as an autonomous field shaped on the fringe between society and the art world thanks to the works of practitioners acting on the premise of a vocation towards social change. This new field has grown with distinctive actors and strategies that are close to political antagonism and far from the concerns of the elitist art world, particularly by pinpointing the role of practices based on hacktivism, public engagement and intercreative procedures that aim at highlighting, disclosing or spreading the state of affairs in traditional media and thus expanding the role of investigative art or journalism in the Postdigital Age. By transcending the mere visualization of the information, media activism so far has promoted concrete interventions on facts and contextual situations, thus attempting to encourage citizen participation and foster public consciousness in the fight for political, social, environmental and economic causes. In the Post-Truth Era, the central role of information taken as creative content and a medium for itself becomes the breeding ground for an increasing number of artistic interventions that adopt new technologies as fundamental tools to operate within society. Blending creativeness with artistic grammar, digital culture and thorough investigatory practices, the various practitioners presented in this paper helped us to establish not just the widened concept of media activism as a necessary update of art’s historical Activism, but also the epistemological framework of this field along the lines of media archaeology and digital art history. Since media, as well as the art world, are still dominated by capitalist, extractivist and patriarchal paradigms, media artists acting as civic agents de facto created their own sector within society characterized by a transformative potential to involve ever-growing audiences of self-conscious citizens far beyond mere art-related spectators.

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