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ABSTRACT

In recent decades the importance of emotion for social mobilization has been recognized. Likewise, there has been a recent upsurge of descriptive and theoretical work done on creative forms of activism that mobilize affect. What is missing is an evidence-based, empirical study of the variable impact of creative vs. conventional forms of activism on a public audience. To address this knowledge gap, the authors designed and staged a public experiment on the comparative effect and affect of creative vs. more conventional forms of activism over three days on a busy bridge in Copenhagen, Denmark. Our experiment design allowed us to analyse differences and similarities on several levels: attention, thought, feeling, memory, and action. We found that a creative approach was more effective at delivering upon traditional advocacy objectives like awareness, engagement, and receptiveness than conventional means. In addition, the affective responses of most people we interviewed and observed were decidedly more positive towards the creative interventions than for more conventional ones. Follow-up surveys also revealed that creative activism proved to be more memorable and result in more ensuing action on the issues. A 'double edge' to creative activism, however, was also observed. The novelty, humor, and surprise of creative forms of activism that generated interest and mobilized affect, could also result in 'non-productive confusion,' scepticism regarding the issue, and undermining the seriousness of the activists and their cause. Qualifications aside, the data gathered from the "Copenhagen Experiment" strongly suggest that creative activism is more effective, in part because it is more affective, than conventional forms of activism.

Emotions, movements, and creativity

The study of social movement and collective action has often had a certain rationalist bias (Aminzade & McAdam, 2001; Goodwin & Jasper, 2004; Goodwin et al., 2001; Gould, 2009). This is obviously explicit in rational choice theory (Olson, 1965), but it is also strongly implied in both the political process approach (McAdam, 1999; Tarrow, 1989;

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This article has been corrected with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

Tilly, 1978) and resource mobilization theories of social movement (McCarthy & Zald, 1977). As Douglas McAdam, amongst others, has pointed out: 'the early proponents of these main approaches failed to assign any real explanatory importance to emotions' (McAdam, 2017). The result is that affective component of social protests tend to be understudied (Solomon, 2003).

Increasingly, however, analysts of social movements have realized that emotions are a necessary – and key – causal component of any explanatory theory (Chan, 2016; Deborah, 2010; Jasper, 1997, 1998, 2004, 2011). Political opportunities and constraints, along with organizational vehicles and the resources they possess, make up the structural *potential* for political action. But action is almost always triggered by shifts in popular thought and feeling. 'Emotions give ideas, ideologies, identities, and even interests their power to motivate,' writes James Jasper (1998). Emotions of fear, anger, and hope therefore need to be channeled into identity and ownership – especially with less personnel and tangible issues like climate change (McAdam, 2017; Nisbet, 2009). Furthermore, within social movements and amongst social actors, Edward Hacket and John Parker argue, 'affective processes are also crucial for generating new ideas, values, grievances and strategies' (2012, 40). That is, emotions can stimulate creativity.

Conversely, creativity can stimulate emotions. As thinkers dating back to Plato have recognized (and feared), it is through creative actions that emotions can be expressed, communicated, and mobilized for social change (Book X, 1955). Following in the footsteps of Schiller, 2014), Dewey (1934), and Arendt (1959), Hans Joas (1996) reminds us that creativity is at the center of human experience, as well as human action. For Joas, in particular, *creative* action exists alongside and even overarching, *rational* action and *normative* action. Recently the sociology of creativity is being recognized for its importance (Godart et al., 2020). This recognition is valuable because 'the study of creativity, creative action, and creative work is central to understanding what Herbert Blumer (1969) referred to as joint action' (Corte et al., 2019). These researchers also stress how the sociology of creativity recognizes that creation and legitimation are two interrelated but distinct processes which spring from creativity. Both are crucial for activists to be able to mobilize social movement: creation, because political imagination is key when proposing alternatives, and legitimation because democratic participation must resonate with the broader public. Furthermore, in the last couple of years research has demonstrated that interactional risks that lead to successful novelty must be taken if one wants to secure group cohesions, and vice versa (Fine & Corte, 2017; Hackett & Parker, 2012). Subsequently, creative action like the kind we are testing in this experiment not only has an impact on the targeted public, but also on the activist community taking action (although the former will be the focus of this study).

Activists, advocates, and socially engaged artists have increasingly come to appreciate the importance of appealing to emotions and using creative means of expression, communication and engagement in the service of social change (Bishop, 2006; Duncombe & Harrebye, 2016; Groys, 2014; Kester, 2013; Lippard, 1984; Mouffe, 2007; Reed, 2005, 2016). Today, more than ever, we live in a highly mediated world where the political topography is characterized by signs and symbols, stories and spectacles. If the first rule of guerilla warfare is to 'know your terrain and use it to your advantage,' the savvy activist has learned that drawing on the creativity of the arts is an affective and effective way to wage successful battles on this political landscape

(Duncombe, 2007; Harrebye, 2016; Holly, 2015). As Wang and Soule (2016) have argued, there is also a relationship between the increasing proliferation of activist interests and the creative tools used in activist campaigns. Our current 'post-truth' environment also provides fertile ground for this type of activism. Even for those committed to telling the truth, it has become clear that the simple presentation of facts falls upon deaf ears, and if facts are to be heard and heeded, they must be made into engaging stories and compelling images that capture attention and resonate with the ways people make sense of their world (Ganz, 2011; Lakoff, 1996; Westen, 2007). To borrow and extend terms from Joas (1996) we might say that in recognizing the limitations of more *normative* forms of activism such as speeches, marches, and rallies (normative, in that they appeal to, and make manifest, values such as liberties, rights, solidarity, etc. as well as reproduce traditional forms of activism) and more *rational* oriented models of advocacy like flyers, factsheets, and reports (rational, in that appeals are made to fact and reason), social actors have turned toward *creative* activism.

'Creative activism' goes by many names: artivism, artistic activism, aesthetic activism, socially engaged arts, social practice arts, community-based arts, arte útil, activist art, or political art. What unites them all is the use of aesthetic techniques and artistic mediums to generate emotional *affect* for the purposes of social *effect*. While creative activism has become an increasingly established practice, its foundation is still a matter of faith rather than fact. Some theoretical work has been done on the question of the affect and effect of the practice (Bacon & Korza, 2017; Borstal & Korza, 2017; Cohen-Cruz, 2016; The Culture Group, 2013; Duncombe, 2016; Harrebye, 2011; Stern & Seifert, 2009; Williams, 1997; Wouters & Walgrave, 2017). Yet, a systematic review of literature and organizational practices reveals little data on whether this form of activism actually works (Perlov, 2016). What is so far missing from the field is an evidence-based, empirical study of the impact of creative forms of activism on a public audience. This study is an attempt to fill that gap.

This article is primarily an empirical piece contributing to the research field by showing how an experimental design can be constructed to measure the comparative differences in question, and offering results that can function as scientifically supported premises for further inquiry. We hope, however, that it also makes a theoretical contribution by conceptualizing the 'double-edged' nature of creative activism, and how a necessarily contextualized tactical balancing act is a precondition for creative interventions to have longer term impact on the social movements that they play into. 'Productive confusion' is one example of how that line can be walked.

The experiment

To do this study we designed a public experiment comparing creative and conventional approaches to street activism. We were looking for differences or similarities between the two approaches on several levels, all essential for social mobilization:

Attention: stopping, listening, and/or interacting with activists.

Thought: opinions and knowledge about the issue.

Feeling: positive or negative emotions about the intervention and the activists.

Memory: of both the intervention and the issue.

Action: changes in behavior in response to the intervention.

To test the impact of our interventions on these parameters we wanted an issue that was current, yet not widely known. It needed to have a robust informational component, and be an issue about which most people did not have strong and fixed preconceptions and biases. Had we used migration, for instance, which was being widely debated and contested in Denmark and across Europe at the time, it would be more difficult to tell whether we were measuring the impact of our experiment or the attitudes and emotions people had brought with them. As such, we chose as our issue a 'meat tax' being proposed in Denmark as a way to curb climate damaging methane emissions produced by meat production. This issue had been recently introduced in the Danish Parliament by a small political party and was therefore a current concern, yet not one that had been much discussed or debated by a wider political public. The connection between meat production, methane gas, and climate change also necessitated explaining technical information. Finally, in Denmark where taxes and plant-based diets are not as controversial as in many other countries, the issue of a meat tax was likely to spark interest rather than immediate confrontation.

For the purposes of our experiment we developed the following hypotheses:

(A) Creative interventions, being more affective, will also be more effective than conventional ones in delivering short term, instrumental, activist objectives.
(B) Insofar as it is memorable and 'moves' people toward action, creative activism will also result in longer-term impact.
(C) Creative forms of activism may attract attention, but will not convey information as well as conventional forms of activism. Conversely, conventional forms may not attract as much attention as creative ones, but will be able to deliver information accurately and effectively.
(D) The effectiveness of creative activism can be tested, measured, and compared.

Over the course of three days – 15, 16, and 17 of May, 2018 – we mounted a series of activist interventions in the middle of the walkway of Dronning Louises Bro, a popular and well-traveled bridge in Copenhagen, Denmark. Each day from 15:00 to 17:00, under a large banner announcing the issue, we paired a conventional activist intervention – public speaking, petitioning, flyering – with a creative way of accomplishing the same task in a classic A/B experimental model. In each case we replicated 'the ask' but varied the experience. On the first day of the experiment, a traditional speech was paired with a free-style rapper conveying the same facts musically. The next day, earnest and polite petitioners in street clothes were set against petitioners dressed in full cow costumes and backed by a powerful mobile sound system emanating loud farting noises. The final day, the same earnest volunteers passed out flyers to passersby, but when it came time for the switch, they donned cow costumes, the farting sound system was turned on and, in a new addition, piles of genuine cow dung were laid out like a minefield across the walkway, each with a little sign sticking up proclaiming 'this shit is an issue.'[1]

Photo 1: CPH Experiment. Photo credit: Mads Emil Hilmer

To conduct the experiment, a research team was assembled from students from Roskilde University and volunteers with two Copenhagen-based advocacy groups: ActionAid Denmark and Rapolitics. A core group of eight volunteers were involved over the course of the experiment, with up to ten additional helpers rotating in and out on any given day. Trained in advance, volunteer observers watched public interactions and took notes, a camera person filmed the interactions to capture micro-dynamics and general movement patterns, and interviewers stopped passersby to ask their opinions, record their responses and gather contact information for a follow-up survey we administered via email and SMS two weeks after the intervention.

With our observations, we were interested in gauging the quantity and quality of interest in the interventions: recording how many people stopped to listen (and for how long), as well as their receptivity to signing petitions and taking flyers. We also observed the quality of these interactions with the activists, looking for and recording reactions like talking, laughing, clapping, scowling, or capturing the intervention on a smartphone.

For the spot interviews our team introduced themselves as researchers attached to a local and international university (those of the PIs) and asked people who had shown interest in the intervention what they thought and felt about the issue as well as the intervention, and how likely they were to take some sort of action based upon what they had seen and learned. These interviews averaged two to three minutes each. At the conclusion of each interview, we asked if we could follow up with a few questions later and gathered contact information. In two weeks time we sent out a short survey. The

interviews were conducted primarily in Danish, as were all the surveys. Interviews were transcribed, and both interviews and surveys were translated into English, and then checked for accuracy by the native Danish PI. More detailed methodological descriptions and reflections follow as we present the data and our analysis in this article.[2]

Copenhagen is, in many ways, an ideal place to undertake such a study. The people of Denmark live in a social-democratic, universal welfare state characterized by open democratic processes, freedom of speech, low levels of corruption, relatively high levels of trust, a formally organized civil society, and a tradition for public civic advocacy (Frederiksen, 2019). Dronning Louises Bro is one of the busiest passages in Copenhagen, measured in bikes and pedestrians, and is known as a space for cultural events, a place for youngsters to hang out, and for activists, or 'facers' as they are commonly called, to solicit signatures or donations for their social causes. The circumstances under which this experiment took place does, of course, have implications for the extent to which we can generalize our findings and recommendations across cultural, social, political, and historical contexts. Had the same experiments taken place in New York, Accra, Singapore, in a different location in Copenhagen, another town in Denmark, or on another issue, the response may well have varied. Our experience working with activists around the globe, however, leads us to believe that this experiment can be replicated and that our findings have scientific bearing and thus wider relevance.

Quantitative findings

Capturing attention

On the first day of the experiment, in which we compared a conventional political speech with a creative rap conveying the same facts, we stationed five observers around the action site. Each observer was provided with two worksheets: one for observing the speech, the other for the rap. The observer was instructed to make a small hash mark in a simple grid every time they observed a certain behavior. As one might imagine, there was variance between observers. Even with universal criteria provided, what constitutes an observation of 'interest' for one person may not be so for another. As such, comparing *between* observers tells us little. However, comparisons *within* any one observer's records are valid as these observers, it is safe to assume, are using the same personal criteria for observation and notation whether they are observing the conventional or creative intervention.

As seen in Table 1, observers noted people giving almost twice as much 'Attention,' defined as 'person stops and takes notice [for] 10–15 sec' when the subject was rapping their message rather than merely giving a speech (300 observations to 151). When it came to 'Interest,' i.e. 'get closer/smile/nod/point/talk to friends about,' observers noticed a nearly three to one difference (131 to 53) favoring the rap to the speech. The number of times observers noticed people who 'look bored or confused' that is, displaying an 'Uninterest' in the actions, was about even, with a small (dis)advantage given to the speech over the rap (68 people marked as Uninterest[ed] in the speech, as opposed to 64 for the rap). Instances of 'Interaction,' such as 'laugh/clap/call out' were not as common as the former behaviors, but where it was observed the rap far out performed the speech, again by more than three to one (111 to 36). While observations of people who 'Participate,' characterized as 'ask question/join in discussion,' was split evenly, the participation observed with the traditional speech was largely negative, with people

Photo 2: Day 1 Rap/Speech. Photo credit: Mads Emil Hilmer

voicing their objections to what was being said. When it came to observing passersby 'Document,' or 'take photo/video' of the intervention, more than twice the number of people were observed documenting the rap as opposed to the speech (27 to 12).

To summarize, in every category of positive audience behavior observed – Attention, Interest, Interaction, Participation, and Documentation – the creative rap outperformed the conventional speech, and in many categories this difference was substantial. Indeed, the one response where the conventional approach outperformed the creative was also one of the most negative: Uninterest.

Getting agreement

Quantitative data from the second day of the experiment, contrasting a conventional and creative approach to petitioning, was gathered by comparing the number of signatures obtained, relative to the numbers of approaches made, within a set time period of thirty-five minutes. Again, the creative approach outperformed the conventional one. Each of the four volunteers was able to attain more signatures relative to approaches dressed as farting cows than as human facers.

Although there were predictable differences in the results of the individual petitioners, taken together we see a clear pattern (see Table 2a and Table 2b). Of the 248 people approached by the traditional facers, forty-two agreed to sign a petition asking the government to consider a meat tax, a success rate of a little less than 17%. Dressed as farting cows, the same four petitioners approached 145 people and were able to get forty-

Table 1. Speech/Rap Public Reaction

Public Reaction	Attention person stops and takes notice 10-15 sec	Interest get closer/ smile/ nod/ point/ talk to friends about	Uninterest look bored or confused	Anger look upset or mad	Interact laugh clap call out	Participate ask question join in discussion	Document take photo video
Observer 1 walkway	**Speech**: 72	14			2	2 (1 hostile)	6
	Rap: 124	44			11	3	11
Observer 2 walkway	**Speech**: 6	6	10				1
	Rap: 19	4	12			1	1
Observer 3 walkway	**Speech**: 40	23	4		2	3 (2 hostile)	3
	Rap: 98	50	5		9	1	9
Observer 4 across street	**Speech**: 20	6	14				2
	Rap: 45	31	10				6
Observer 5 bench	**Speech**: 13	4	40		7		
	Rap: 14	2	37		16		
TOTAL							
Speech	**151**	**53**	**68**		**11**	**5**	**12**
Rap	**300**	**131**	**64**		**36**	**5**	**27**
Ratio	**1.99**	**2.47**	**.94**		**3.27**	**1**	**2.25**

one people to sign, a rate of success just a bit more than 28%. As such, we find there is a *significant* higher probability of getting a signature when a creative approach is used.

Interestingly, conventional facers were able to approach many more people than the farting cows – 248 to 145 – over a similar thirty-five minute period and so the absolute number of signatures received by each method is approximately equal. What explains this? One explanation may have to do with a difference in the number of people crossing the bridge each time. Pedestrian traffic has ebbs and flows and this may account for some of the difference. Unfortunately, because of equipment failure (detail on this below) we were unable to account for this variable. Another explanation, and one suggested by the data supplied by both the speech/rap observations as well as the spot-interviews and follow-up surveys, is that the duration of the interactions with passersby is longer when creative tactics are used. In other words, the cows were able to approach fewer people because the people they did approach were curious or surprised and wanted to talk longer with the cows. The conventional facers, on the other hand, could be more readily understood, categorized and then quickly assented to or, more often, just as quickly dismissed. In the activist business of trying to reach hearts and minds, deeper engagement is advantageous.

Stimulating interest

On the last day of our experiment, we compared the speed in which the volunteers were able to hand out flyers to people walking or bicycling across Dronning Louises Bro. Stationed in two teams, approximately twenty-five meters to each side of the banner and sound system, each of four volunteers were supplied with a pre-counted number of flyers and told to distribute them to whoever was receptive to taking one and continue until all the flyers were distributed.

Photo 3: Day 2 Petition. Photo credit: Mads Emil Hilmer

Again, the creative approach seems more effective in accomplishing the traditional activist activity of flyering. The conventional facers distributed 160 flyers in twenty-seven minutes. The creative facers handed out the same number in only nineteen (see Table 3).

Table 2a Signatures Collected.

Petitioner	Farting Cow Signatures/Total Approaches	Conventional Facer Signatures/Total Approaches
1	10/35 = 28.6%	7/40 = 17.5%
2	9/40 = 22.5%	14/90 = 15.5%
3	7/52 = 13.5%	10/76 = 13.2%
4	15/18 = 83.3%	11/42 = 26.2%
TOTAL	**41/145 = 28.3%**	**42/248 = 16.9%**

X^2 test (1, N = 393) = 6,7, p = 0,001

Table 2b Signatures Collected.

	Signature	No Signature	Total Approaches
Farting Cow	41 (28%)	104 (73%)	145
Conventional Facer	42 (17%)	204 (83%)	248

Table 3. Flyer Distribution.

Flyer	Number Distributed	Start & End Time	Time Elapsed
Conventional	160	15:07–15.34	27 minutes
Creative	160	15:50–16:09	19 minutes
Difference			8 minutes

Photo 4: Day 3 Pamphlet. Photo credit: Mads Emil Hilmer

Expressed in percentages, the creative approach resulted in the distribution of the same amount of flyers as the conventional approach in approximately 30% less time. A notable difference. However, because of the failure of a GoPro style camera we had positioned in the middle of the bridge to record people crossing, we were unable to count the total number of people walking or biking across the bridge during the respective time periods when our volunteers were handing out flyers. While unlikely, because the time intervals were close, it is entirely possible that fewer people crossed while our conventional facers were in action and a surge of people accounted for the increased speed in which the creative cows were able to hand out the same number of flyers. As such, these numbers remain merely suggestive.

Making an impression

In addition to observing what there was to observe and counting what there was to be counted, we conducted short spot interviews with people who had taken an interest – positive or negative – in the interventions by stopping and listening, signing a petition, or taking a flyer. Volunteer interviewers, armed with tape recorders, stopped people approximately ten-twenty meters away from the action and asked a short series of questions regarding why they had stopped, what they thought and felt about the action, and whether they were likely to take any further action as a result. A total of 108 interviews were conducted, forty-nine with people after witnessing the conventional action, and fifty-nine with people after the creative one (several interviews included more than one person, bringing the total number of people interviewed to 115). A more extensive qualitative analysis of these interviews follows this section, but while we are still within the realm of numbers, we thought it instructive to code and count the frequency of keywords that were used repeatedly by respondents to describe the interventions.

The first thing one notices is the frequency of strong positive words, such as: 'fun,' 'funny,' 'captivating,' 'interesting,' 'cool,' and 'different' used to describe the creative interventions. This is in contrast to the frequency of negative words that the conventional intervention evoked: 'unnoticeable,' 'not surprising,' and 'annoying' (the latter word was used a total of eighteen times, from 'a little annoying' to 'very fucking annoying' to describe the conventional approach). Conversely, when conventional interventions were described positively, the terms used were relatively tepid: 'Fine/OK,' 'Nice' and 'Positive.' Likewise, in the few instances when the creative intervention was described negatively, the words and phrases used were also weak: 'did not feel much,' 'a little annoying,' 'unserious,' and 'a little silly.' While we discuss the issue of double-edged, or responses that might have a positive or negative connotation – or both – in more detail in the next section, it is worth noting here the type of responses that fall into this category. Conventional interventions evoked responses reflecting the routine nature of the intervention, terms like 'harmless,' '*hyggeligt*' [cozy], 'normal,' 'I don't mind,' and 'just a job.' The double-edge of the creative actions, however, suggested something out of the ordinary, if perhaps too much so: 'shocking,' 'provoking,' 'disturbing,' and 'uncomprehending.'

The descriptive words and phrases used, as well as the frequency of their use, suggest that the conventional actions were experienced as routine at best and annoying at worst.

Table 4. Normative Descriptions.

Conventional	Day 1 Speech	Day 2 Petition	Day 3 Pamphlet

Negative	Unnoticeable x 2
	Not surprising x 2
	Moralizing
	Lecturing
	Invading
		Annoying x 10
		(from "very fucking annoying"
		  to a" little annoying").
		Bad reputation.
			Annoying x 8 (from "fucking
			  annoying" to "annoying")
			Hate facers
			Persecuting
			Exploiting
			Scientology-like
			Intrusive

Positive	Fine/Okay Serious	Fine/Okay x 6 Cool x 2 Really good approach Very friendly	Nice x 3 Positive x 2 Interesting Fine/Okay. Cool A little funny Informative Good initiative Great idea
Neutral or Double-Edged	A little ambivalent	Harmless *Hyggeligt* [cozy] A bit strange Just a job	Normal Just there All right I don't mind
Creative	**Day 1** **Rap**	**Day 2** **Cows**	**Day 3** **Shit**
Negative	Did not feel much x 2 Unserious x 2 A little silly x 2 Unimportant Embarrassing A scam	It does not touch me	A little annoying x 2

Positive	Fun/Funny x 7
	Different x 4
	Wildly interesting x 3
	Very good x 2
	Poetic x 2
	Meaningful x 2
	Skills/well done x 2
	Inspiring x 2
	New way to convey a message
	Fine/OK
	Fights for it
	Surprising
	Food for thought
	Capturing
	Wise
	Empathetic
	Vivid
	Sensuous
	Inclusive
	Positive
	Entertaining
	Strong
	Sympathetic
	Non-aggressive
	Brave
	Cool
	Good idea
	Nice
		Fun/Funny x 12 ("very
		  funny" to "quite funny")
		Captivating x 4
		Different x 3
		Cool x 2
		Fine/Okay x 2
		Curious x 2
		Effective x 2
		Catchy
		Happy
		Great
		It works
		Very passionate
		Very serious
		Clear
		Cute
		Interesting
		Smart
		Surprising
		Hard to avoid
		Meaningful
		Fights for it
			Fun/Funny x 9
			Cool x 4
			Captivating x 3
			Curious x 2
			Want to know
			  more x 2
			Good approach x 2
			Interesting
			Makes you wonder
			Attracts attention
			Eye-catching
			Very different
			Lovely
			Works
			Respect
			Creates urgency
			Fine/Okay
			Very exciting

Neutral or Double-Edged	A little ironic A little disturbing A little depressing	Do not mind Provoking A little scary Absurd Shocking Tired of facers ("no matter who it is"). More activist	Uncomprehending Disturbing Pretty extreme

The creative interventions, on the other hand, were seen as out of the ordinary and captured the attention of people through humor or surprise.

Looking over our quantitative data as a whole, for nearly every measure we employed: observations of interest, number of signatures gained on a petition, the quantity and speed of flyers handed out, and the frequency 'negative' and 'positive' words used by passersby to describe their reactions, the creative approach proved more successful than the conventional one in attaining the desired objectives.[3]

Creative activism is not only good at capturing the attention and interest of citizen, it also plays into the desire for media outlets for content that is surprising and entertaining. Although the news media was not a variable included in our study, it is worth noting that on the evening of the final – and most extravagant – day of our experiment, the biggest tabloid in Denmark, *Ekstra Bladet*, led their web news with a story of our 'demonstration' (Wentoft, 2018).

Qualitative findings

As significant as these numbers are, it is qualitative data that allows us to understand what people *think, feel,* and *act* upon the interventions. The following analysis is based on observation reports, interviews with people on the bridge, and a follow-up survey. Unlike the quantitative analysis above, this analysis is not divided up by days, since we are primarily interested in people's differing responses regarding creative vs. conventional activist strategies, regardless of the specific tactics they witnessed. Through a collective, triangulated, coding process whereby the two PIs and a graduate research assistant went through the data looking for similarities, diversions, and patterns, we structured the analysis in cross-cutting themes.

Conventional activists are predictable (and annoying)

The most common term used to describe conventional activist interventions is 'annoying.' It is used eighteen times to characterize these actions, whereas it's only used twice to depict the creative ones. Why is this the case? Many people we talked to seem to experience an overload of facers on the streets. Like this respondent, for example:

> There are just so many of them here . . . It's everyday. Every time you go up and down the street . . . It's a bit too much. (Interview #53, day 2, conventional)

The conventional facer is part of the noise and hassle of modern life, another demanding appeal of the busy day. Here, 'a bit too much' can be understood as being too common (as in too many facers) *and* being too aggressive (demanding too much of people).

From our interviews, we identified three distinct types of confrontational facers: the proselytizer, the bully, and the salesperson. The proselytizer uses shame and guilt to convert the public. As one person said:

> If someone wants to talk to me, I'm fine with just listening. I have also experienced being stopped where the basic feeling has been bad . . . where it feels as if it is just meant to create guilt or bad conscience if I did not accept their contact or do what they want me to do. (Interview #38, day 2, conventional)

A lack of respect for other people's boundaries is how one of our respondents recalls our conventional facers when surveyed two weeks later:

> I remember it as somewhat disrespectful [*grænseoverskridende*] as facing often is, because there seems to be a demand that you should support the cause, financially, and thus you can not just have a conversation to gain knowledge. (Survey #5, day 1, conventional)

Finally, a number of those we interviewed also felt that those doing the conventional actions were trying to manipulate them and that they are often 'tricked' into buying whatever these people are 'selling.' As one person expressed, activists are:

> Bloody annoying! You've spent your time and good heart- but at the end of the day, many of them just want your money . . . (Interview #73, day 3, conventional)

What conventional activists have going for them is the stamp of approval from democratic tradition. What they have against them is the endless repetition of tradition which seems to numb people to the intention and content of the message being conveyed. As one person concluded,

> In Denmark, we have free speech to say what we want. I think someone often says something on Dronning Louises Bro. [But] I do not know how often I really notice it. (Interview #1, day 1, conventional)

Creative activism promises something different

What people were missing from the conventional facers, they seemed to find in the creative interventions. One aspect mentioned, many times, was the sheer novelty of the engagement. As one person stated simply:

> It is a new way to get out a message. (Interview #13, day 1, creative)

Part of why facers were seen as annoying is that they are predictable. This also explains why the novelty of the creative expression itself is seen as a positive. A respondent who witnessed the creative rap told us:

> It's not exactly what you expect when you sit here . . . [I]nstead of an ad on Facebook or a bus advertisement. It's a little different way to get an old message out. (Interview #18, day 1, creative)

Instead of demanding attention like conventional facers, creative interventions spark curiosity. Whereas people have developed techniques to circumvent the conventional facers – as with many other familiar, and undesired, aspects of urban life – this becomes more difficult with creative interventions because they are new, and thus unfamiliar. Without their responses pre-determined, people give the creative activist interventions attention they might otherwise not. As one person responded:

> Normally I pass by, but this was a little fun. It was a lot of fun. It's a bit different. (Interview #72, day 2, creative)

Conventional activism usually tries to minimize confusion. Creative approaches, when done well, are able to consciously leverage confusion into curiosity. An interview

Photo 5: Poop Protest. Photo credit: Mads Emil Hilmer

with a mother crossing the bridge with her daughter demonstrates the power of prompting the passerby to ask 'What is this!?':

> Respondent: [I stopped] Because I wanted to see what this was about. My first thought was that it is nice to see cow shit in the city because she [her daughter] must learn about it and experience it. My second thought was "what is this!?"
>
> Interviewer: So you became curious?
>
> Respondent: Yes, that's why I took it [the flyer]. (Interview #101, day 3, creative)

What we call 'productive confusion' seems to be key to understanding part of the effectiveness of creative activism. This person explains her willingness to stop and take a flyer,

> Because it's fun and quite extreme, so I simply had to find out what it was about. I needed an explanation of what I saw. (Interview #103, day 3, creative)

'Fun' and 'funny" were the most commonly used words to describe the creative activist interventions on the bridge (see Table 4).[4] If one of the things that turn people off from conventional activists is their moralizing – 'you should do this' with an accusatory pointing finger – then making politics fun takes a different approach. As one responded explained it,

It's good to make it a fun thing instead of telling people "don't eat meat". People are gonna be upset. It's very personal. I thought it was nice because it was fun. (Interview #35, day 1, creative)

With a little bit of humor, it seems, people's initial dislike for and suspicion of activists is mitigated and a space for political interaction, identification, and even affiliation is opened up. As Åsa Wettergren (2009) has shown, the emotional energy and fun in a creative tactic like culture jamming can facilitate collective identity and community formation. Gary Alan Fine and Ugo Corte extend this point in their focus on smaller groups' cohesion and continuation: 'Central to group continuation are occasions of collective hedonic satisfaction that encourages attachment' (2017, 64). Such moments serve as what they call commitment devices, building affiliation, modeling positive relations, and moderating interpersonal tension.

Humor also opens space for reflection and critique. Ben Fincham (2016) usefully points out how the sociology of fun reveals a paradox of fun: that fun is part of a normal, happy life, yet fun can also subvert the norm. When dissecting the dissident humor of culture jammers, Jamie Warner writes that, 'If we can laugh at it, we can examine it, evaluate it (. . .) Laughter has the power to disrupt any analytical paralysis engendered by fear' (2007, 33). This is particularly relevant in activism aimed at dictatorships (Popovic, 2015), but it is also true in relatively stable and well-functioning democracies like Denmark, our setting, where apathy and indifference numbs the passerby to regular actors and actions in the political arena (Harrebye, 2019). The risk of activism being too much of 'a fun thing,' of course, is that your politics are not taken seriously.

The double edge of creativity

Creative activism can and often does have a double edge. What is fun can also make it appear frivolous. The very thing that attracts some people can repel others. And a tactic that creates 'productive confusion,' if pushed too far, can result in miscomprehension, or non-productive confusion. This danger brings to mind James M. Jasper's 'Dilemma of Cultural Innovation,' that is, 'To appeal to your various audiences you must use the meanings they already hold and pushing too far may cause you to lose them' (2004, 13). Like avant-garde art, artful forms of activism walks the line between interest and outrage, legibility and illegibility, sense and nonsense.

As positive as many people were to the novelty, surprise and fun of creative activism, there was also an undercurrent of *ambivalence* in the reactions of a number of people toward the creative means used. A snippet from an interview with two people who have just navigated the cow dung minefield illustrates this:

Respondent 1: I thought it was a little weird, so I thought what is this about?

Interviewer: So you got curious?

Respondent 1: Yes, I think that's because it's very different from what you usually see, you know, that there's cow-shit all over the place. I think that was a little annoying.

Respondent 2: That is, of course, something that people notice. I think, on the other hand, that the problem may be that for some people it may just be annoying. For them, it will only annoy them and disturb them—instead of making them curious. But at the same time,

> I think it's a good idea because you remember it a little better—because you notice it. (Interview #100, day 3, creative)

Here, attention, curiosity, and being memorable – all positives in the world of activism – are mixed with disturbance and annoyance.

Another respondent, interviewed the previous day, articulated a similar seemingly paradoxically point of view when they told us that,

> It was so absurd. So that was quite effective. (Interview #70, day 2, creative)

How is it possible for something to be absurd, yet also be effective? Or annoying, and also 'a good idea'? Rational sensemaking is straightforward and logic is the name of that game. But we know from psychology, the arts, religion, and advertising, that another type of sensemaking is just as powerful when conveying a message. For the message to have an impact it does not need to make sense in any clear cut way. Indeed, it is the *dissonance* between ideas and emotions which often leads to profound and moving experiences.

More conventional forms of activism tend to disregard the affective qualities of interactions with the public, relying instead upon an idealized understanding of a rational democratic public sphere. For example, one person, when asked what they felt about the conventional public speech, stated bluntly that,

> I do not know if I feel anything about it. (Interview #1, day 1, conventional)

Push and pull

Many of the negative feelings towards conventional facers had to do with their 'pushy' attitudes. They were 'disrespectful', 'over the line,' 'manipulating,' 'telling them what to think,' and just trying to 'sell' them something. Facers are, by definition, in your face. Our interviews and observations suggest that the rapper, the cows, and even the shit, had a different affect and effect on people. Instead of being pushed to take an interest, as with the case of the conventional interventions, the creative interventions seemed to pull people in – even if through curious disgust. Some people we talked to made the comparison between conventional and creative approaches explicit. For example:

> I got a little curious about what this was about. It looked interesting. I think that's a good way—it creates a lot of attention! You are getting used to being stopped by people on the streets who want to talk to you about some subject. I think it's a good thing to do something a bit different. You cannot walk by without wondering what is happening. (Interview #96, day 3, creative)

More conventional approaches tend to lend themselves to push strategies: confronting strangers, clipboard at the ready, flyer in hand, and talking points ready. Our study seems to suggest that it is easier to engage people when it draws their attention, pulling them in by generating some sort of feeling, be it amusement, novelty, curiosity, confusion, or even disgust. But pulling people in to look, listen, watch, or smell is one thing, getting them to remember your message, reflect on it, and maybe even take action – the ultimate goals of any activist intervention for social change – is something different. This more lasting impact is what we turn to now.

Long term impact

To obtain data on longer-term impact we designed a short follow-up survey. Two weeks after the experiment was over we sent four questions, via email or SMS, to all the people we had initially interviewed who were willing to give us their contact information - a total of ninety-nine of the 115 people we interviewed. Nearly a third of the people we reached out to responded to our survey (29 of 99). Since we had tagged contact information by day and action, we were able to match specific responses to specific interventions. Twelve had witnessed conventional actions and twelve had seen creative ones. (We rejected four respondents who had witnessed both creative and conventional interventions and we could not differentiate which intervention they were responding to, and one because they had been involved in the experiment.)

Question 1: What do you remember from the action you saw that day?

As per our hypothesis, a significant majority (9 to 3) of people who witnessed the creative interventions were able to provide detailed descriptions of the action itself after two weeks' time. Whereas the number of those who witnessed the conventional actions were evenly split, with six respondents having only vague recollections and five recalling the event with some detail. Not surprisingly, what was remembered most vividly was the scatological spectacle of the creative intervention. Here is one example:

> I remember the shit on the streets and the loud farting noises, and that the action was about paying attention to all the greenhouse gases emitted in the production of meat. I also remember the signs in the stool: "This shit is a problem," I think it said. (Survey #28, day 3, creative)

One reading of responses like this is that what spectators remember is only the spectacle. A closer read, however, reveals a more nuanced picture of what is recalled and why. The person also accurately remembered the issue of greenhouse gasses produced in meat production, and this is a pattern we identified across several responses. If we were to draw a lesson here it might be this: the creative spectacle is memorable, but it is not the only thing remembered.

Question 2: If you remember, please let us know what the political message was?

In addition to what might make a lasting, visceral impression, we were interested in how each style of intervention impacted what information people recalled about the issue being advocated. We coded their responses as 'clear and accurate' if they remembered that the action was about meat consumption, its link to greenhouse gasses and/or climate change, and a call for a tax on meat. 'Incomplete' if they could only recall one or two of the three elements of the message. And 'inaccurate' if they misconstrued the message entirely.

We found that amongst those who witnessed the conventional action the number of 'incomplete' or 'inaccurate' responses were much higher than those who could clearly and accurately recall the message (10 to 1). Surprisingly, amongst those who witnessed the creative intervention, the people who had a 'clear and accurate' recollection were evenly split with those who did not (6 to 6). 'Incomplete' responses made up the vast majority of responses to the conventional action (9 of 11) but under half of those recalling the creative one (5 of 12). Others, albeit an extreme minority in both cases (1 conventional, 1 creative) just got the message plain wrong when remembering the interventions, usually mixing it up with a plea for animal rights. Overall, the data runs counter to our original hypothesis

that conventional activist interventions might result in higher and more accurate knowledge retention, and suggests that the creative activist format does not necessarily exclude people from getting the political message, if anything the opposite seems to be the case.

Question 3: Have you thought of the incident since and, if yes, how?

Information needs to be thought about and reflected upon in order to become memorable and ultimately actionable. When it came to thinking about the action in the intervening weeks, again the creative approach seems to have more impact than the conventional one. Of those who witnessed the creative intervention, a majority (7 of 12) *had* given the incident considerable thought in the intervening time, as opposed to only a minority (2 of 11) of those who had witnessed the conventional action. A majority (6 of 11) of those who witnessed the conventional event *had not* given the intervention any thought since, as opposed to a minority (3 of 12) who experienced the creative action. The number of people who had rather vague recollections of the action were roughly equal (creative: 2 of 11, conventional: 3 of 11).

Question 4: Have you done anything related to the matter since (e.g., changed your habits, talked to a friend about the subject or something else)?

The replies to our survey suggest that people witnessing the conventional intervention are less likely to take action than those who have participated in a creative one. Ten of the twelve people witnessing the conventional approach reported having not done anything related to the matter since. Only one person definitively reported doing something new. However, amongst those who witnessed the creative intervention, five of twelve reported doing something new in response to the intervention. The majority of these new 'doings' involved talking to someone about the issue, the intervention, or both. Of the remaining seven people who had witnessed the creative intervention, six were doing something issue-related before, and one took no resulting action.

It must be acknowledged that these accounts of actions, like all the responses here, are self-reported. What we can say with confidence is that those who witnessed the creative intervention were much more apt to report some sort of active response, as opposed to those who witnessed the conventional version.

It is aso important to remember that while the response rate on the survey as a percentage was quite high for this sort of research instrument – nearly one-third of those contacted responded – the total numbers were low: only twenty-four valid responses. As such, any conclusions drawn must remain suggestive. However, taken as a whole, the responses received from the follow-up survey seem to suggest that the more creative interventions result in better recall of both the interventions and the issues, and is also likely to stimulate more reflective thought and follow-up action than the conventional counterpart.

Conclusion

We began this project with a series of hypotheses to be tested by a social experiment. We now return to those hypotheses.

 A. Creative interventions, being more affective, are also going to be more effective than conventional ones in delivering short term, instrumental, activist objectives.

When it comes to instrumental activist objectives, such as holding attention, getting signatures, and handing out flyers, the quantitative data strongly suggests that more creative, novel, and provocative spectacles perform better than the known rituals. In addition, our qualitative data demonstrate that respondents made more favorable associations with the creative actions than with the conventional interventions. Words like 'fun' and 'funny,' 'different,' 'surprising,' and 'captivating' were used to describe the former, whereas words like 'annoying,' 'lecturing,' 'predictable,' and 'unnoticeable' were frequently used to describe the latter. Thus, ordinary facers and their traditional approach seem to carry heavy negative connotations whereas more creative approaches unsettle expectations and create openings for more positive and receptive engagement with the activists and their cause, leading to 'productive confusion.'

B. Insofar as it is memorable and 'moves' people to action, creative activism will also result in longer-term impact.

Our follow-up surveys suggest that more people, proportionately, who saw, heard (and smelled) the creative actions took some sort of action than those who witnessed the conventional ones. As such, the data suggests a correlation between creative activism and being moved to later action related to the cause. Albeit, this activity was self-reported and the majority of those 'actions' reported tended to be communicative – talking to friends and families – rather than changes in behavior or political activity. Still, it is important to remember that one of the ways people are influenced is through the opinions of those who matter to them most (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955).

C. Creative forms of activism may attract attention, but will not convey information as well as conventional forms of activism. Conversely, conventional forms may not attract as much attention as creative forms, but will be able to deliver information accurately and effectively.

Although the evidence we have is limited, it seems to suggest that this is *not* the case. People who were present for the creative actions were not only more attracted to the intervention, had more positive associations with the activism, and engaged in more corollary action as a result, but they also recalled the issues being presented with more accuracy than those who had witnessed the conventional actions. In hindsight, we should not be too surprised, as cognitive scientists have been pointing out the interconnection between emotions and ideas for two decades, nevertheless, it was still a surprise to have this hypothesis disproved.

D. The effectiveness of creative activism can be tested, measured, and compared.

The Copenhagen Experiment was itself an experiment to see if we could create a research project that might generate data to test the impact of creative activist interventions against more conventional ones. To do this we had to limit the size and scope of what we were studying. We purposely chose to look at things we could measure both quantitatively and qualitatively: observations of attention, numbers of signatures received and flyers handed out, word use by respondents, self-reported opinions, memories, and

actions. We also, again intentionally, decided to concentrate on shorter term, instrumental, and conventional activist objectives rather than longer term shifts in consciousness and imagination, which may be what creative forms of intervention do best. This was a conscious choice on the part of the PIs, who believed what was first needed was a test of whether creative means could better deliver on conventional outcomes before testing the effect and affect of creative activism on more creative aims, something we aim to do in future research.

Delimitations noted, the data and analysis presented in this report prove it is possible to test and measure the effectiveness of different forms of activism, creative activism included. Again and again, in nearly every quantitative and qualitative measure we employed, we were able to generate compelling data that not only allowed us to compare conventional and creative forms of activism, but to also conclude that the latter was more effective, in part because it was more affective, in capturing people's attention, gaining their agreement, stimulating their recall, and even generating supportive action.

So what is the significance of this quirky experiment on a bridge in Copenhagen? On a theoretical level, we believe our experiment makes a strong case for the political effect of creative, affective tactics. Conventional activist traditions and rituals may be necessary to gain some level of public recognition and democratic legitimacy, but they can also undermine impact by rendering activism predictable and making activists a routine annoyance. In such an environment, innovation and surprise – what we call 'productive confusion' – offer ways to cut through the political expression of what Georg Simmel once identified as the 'blasé attitude' (1950). This can come at a cost. Creative activism has a 'double edge,' and what is surprising and fun can tip into nonsensical and frivolous, thus creative innovation and political legibility have to be held in balance. The implication for democratic theory is that we need to reconsider the ideal of public deliberation and consensus (as formulated by Habermas, 1989), not by replacing them with agonistic confrontation (as suggested by Mouffe, 2007), but by opening up to how emotions (for good and for bad) can be mobilized to engage a public desensitized by constant demands and endless appeals for their political attention. There is, however, always a risk of these creative interventions merely adding to the political noise of modern life and leading to further desensitization, thus the demand for more creative surprise, and so on, ad infinitum.

On a practical level we hope our findings influence the efforts of activists and advocacy organizations, by demonstrating that creative activism is more affective *and* effective than conventional forms. This is not to suggest that creative activism can or should replace conventional forms of activism (both normative and rational), but that creative activism can work alongside more conventional forms of democratic participation, and that one can even use creative means to make strong normative appeals and meaningful rational claims. Furthermore, the social innovation of activists and social movements has the capacity to diffuse into regular politics and the everyday life of ordinary citizens (Jeppesen, 2021). Our findings have implications for our understanding of the mobilization of emotion by movements on both sides of the political spectrum. Recent events around the world have proved anti-democratic, ethnonationalist governments and social movements also use creative tactics for manipulative ends.

To wage campaigns that attract media interest, stimulate emotions, change minds, and motivate actions, activists in recent years have embraced tactics that aim to be more imaginative, surprising, sensuous, funny, and fun than conventional approaches. Yet, a question still haunts the practice: Do these creative forms of activism actually work better than conventional ones? The Copenhagen Experiment is an early and modest attempt to answer this question, and our results suggest the affirmative. This is why we recommend that the old activist toolbox make more room for new creative tools.

Notes

1. While creative activism draws from a wide variety of the arts, in this experiment we limited ourselves to music, spoken word, costume, recorded sound, and physical installation, in order to be able to measure comparative differences between these particular formats and the conventional ones. Other social movements and social actors apply other artistic means of expression.
2. We received the necessary official permits from both Copenhagen municipality and the Danish police department to conduct the experiment. In conducting the experiment and processing the data we have followed the applicable research ethical standards in Denmark, including the European General Data Protection Regulations.
3. The one exception seems to be that the conventional methods resonated more favorably with people who were already sympathetic to the cause (vegetarians) or the method (facers), that is: 'the choir' of the converted.
4. In English the words 'fun' and 'funny' have subtly different meanings. In Danish there is not a similar distinction, so we have grouped the words together.

Acknowledgments

Disclosure statement

Funding

Notes on contributor

Stephen Duncombe, Professor of Media and Culture at New York University, has authored and edited six books and numerous articles on the intersection of culture and politics, including *Dream: Reimagining Progressive Politics in an Age of Fantasy* and the *Cultural Resistance Reader*. Duncombe, a life-long activist, is currently co-founder and Research Director of the Center for Artistic Activism, a research and training institute that helps activists to create like artists and artists to strategize like activists. http://stephenduncombe.org/

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Appendix

The interview script, survey questions, additional tables, additional photos, video, and other information can be found in the appendices of the complete report from which this article is adapted: https://c4aa.org/2019/09/the-copenhagen-experiment-report