

A Guide to Killing Still Life

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts  
in  
Digital Humanities

Department of Digital Humanities

University of Alberta

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## Abstract

The use of interventionist art to effect the neoliberal status quo was studied through a research creation at The University of Alberta in the form of a guerilla style art show. The main goal was to apply Chantal Mouffe's theory of Agonistic Space, Donella Meadows' Leverage Points, and Lawrence Lessig's theory of The Read/Write interfacing with media to investigate how public the University of Alberta's space was, while obtaining information about the public's interaction in embodying artistry of a post-commodification, post-commercial, post-neoliberalism, nature.

The results were inconclusive due to the fact the art show was taken down. It is unknown if more than one person was involved in the removal decision. The engagement with the remaining art showed that the Bitcoin donation idea was not successful. There was acknowledgement that the space was in question, rather than the art, when two classical, well-framed prints were placed where the other art was removed. They too were removed, regardless of their more traditional appearance.

“I want to walk this earth like it is mine.” –Gogol Bordello Tribal Connection

## Dedication

I dedicate this to my mother (Anyukam sok sok pusztit es koszonom) – Anyu, you fed me – physically, emotionally, and soulfully-with food, love, and hope. Selflessly, you gave love and acceptance. I wouldn't be where I am without you. Magdolna, you are my heart and you are my soul. Your shield of love that so gracefully protected all of us did not go unnoticed. And I am proud to say that you are the one who got me through and taught me what it was to be a warrior.

Apukam (Dad), you taught me to never take shit from anyone. You gave me my backbone. Thank you so much for teaching me how to be real. You taught me how to be a man, in a gentle and precise (finoman, as you always say) way.

Victoria – My younger sister, who somehow became my older sister, you taught me how to be respectful, use willpower, and dedication - that there are always options and solutions -that to make that call NOW, instead of thinking about it all day is better and healthier and right.

Meghan – I'm learning how to receive because you give so much. I've never been in love with a friendship until ours – you taught me that smarts are bullshit without love – and then corrected my grammar while giving me a cackle and a hug. I love you so much. You got me through this mofo more than you'll ever know.

Kevin – I don't know how you're not a CBC host – I've never met anyone who could listen to so much bullshit and still give sound advice. Thank you for your patience man! Thanks for keeping me together. Somehow you keep your cool no matter the chaos, and I've learned so much from that.

Wafa – You have no idea how much of a boost you gave me. Thanks so much for giving this a look and me advice.

I want to name all my friends: Tim, Isho, Aimiee, Tsaida, Carly, Swarchuk, Cam, Rachel, Britney, Darren, Leah.

Zoli, Landon, Greg, RIP. I'm mad this life is so absurd as to take the ones we love away.

## Acknowledgements

Natalie Loveless - Without a supervisor who can figure out your mess of thinking, there is no thinking right. I'll never forget meeting someone for the first time who was so soft spoken, yet so powerful. Insta-respect. You let me be wild, unruly, and late (sorry). I want to say I was lucky that you supervised this, but really it was just right. I don't think anyone else would have the patience, but more so the understanding of the process. You are amazing and I am so fortunate to have been guided by you.

Scott Smallwood – Thank you for not holding back with comments like “Ugh, write better.” I can't wait to see you on the playa and you can tell me what you really think. Seriously you are an inspiration with your projects.

Mo – You introduced me to this whole thing – I'll never forget when you said “Quit hitching more trains to it, instead fill the cars you already have”.

Sandra and Billy Sawchuk – Sandra you are the reason I took this program and you are the one that kept believing in me when I didn't – you also sat down and read countless hours of jumble. You inspired me and taught me so much – you are an amazing teacher!. Billy – thank you for your moral support and advice – your always the one I think of when figuring out what I should take seriously. Also, Billy, you're a genius. Love you guys.

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## Introduction

I spent much of my 20's hitchhiking and Busking (playing guitar for money) on the streets of Western Canada. Our group had a pretty free life. We would camp, or couch surf, eat at soup kitchens. We would talk art, and make art. We were in a lot of ways on the fringes of society, but in other ways – with our lower to middle income first world upbringings - not so much. We were all pretty broke most times, but also fortunate – we had friends or parents that didn't mind a visit. We had support structures and a type of morality that kept us out of trouble, most of the time. We treated all the spaces we were in as our own. We fixed our broken strings on our guitars and our broken clothes, on the fly. Sometimes we got jobs, but these were temporary. In hindsight, it may have been because those spaces were not ours.

We thought people who settled down, got careers, bought things (houses, nice cars) had it wrong. We assumed they thought about us the same way (that we had our unsettling attitude wrong), but with a chalky under taste of envy. No jobs, no bills, and yet somehow, not just surviving, but *living*. Contrary to all the advertisements about the proper way to live, we were somehow happy. We didn't care about material stuff. Our goal (unspoken) was to keep our minds and bodies free, with a minimalistic life style.

We wore our outsider status, like a badge and were disparaging when one of us took the bus instead of hitched, or a friend bought a fancy car. This wasn't our idea, it was informed by the hodge-podge of beatniks, punks, traveling monks, and others who came before us, whose romanticized stories of freedom, resonated with us. They had built a paradigm and we were happy to live in it.

There were times when we would bump into the system (as we called it). There were times we stole to eat and some of us got caught. But usually we were let off easy. There were times security or police would kick us off what we considered to be public space - ours to play music in, not knowing that many of these spaces were privately owned. We watched as rules for employment insurance, welfare and social programs became more and more limited, but didn't understand that this had been happening since the 1970's and was because western countries were embracing neoliberalism – the powerful idea that *markets* should lead people, not governments or their programs.

Neoliberalism is the political/social idea prescribed starting in the 1970's, asserting that all human connections should have a market-centered transaction between them. I am not against capitalism or markets, but I am against the idea that we are all merely consumers. This profit orientated system has devastating social, environmental and economic consequences (Monbiot, Neoliberalism, "The Ideology Of The Root").

We didn't understand what hegemony was – but we felt its power, its dominance, and its influence. We understood ideas, because we all read a lot, but we didn't understand that neoliberalism's hegemony was what made some people call others free loaders because they used social services, or that it spread the idea that a poor person wasn't smart and vice versa. We hung out with a lot of poor people. Some were smart, some weren't. They were all different in different circumstances. Some we liked, some we didn't, especially if they pan handled (asked for money) in lucrative spots – we thought those spots were for busking.

We hadn't fully internalized neoliberalism *yet*. But, we were already making rules: a guy with a harmonica; not a busker: if he was good; a busker; a guy asking for change: not a busker; a guy

with a fishing rod with change collection pan on the end, with a harmonica...we never did quite figure out that one. The point is that the rules seemed to seep down from above, about who was allowed in a space and who wasn't.

We saw the status quo as everyone just agreeing to be really crazy about money and stuff, as if these types of people were just born into the money is all that mattered mindset, We didn't realize that we were part of the normalization of these ideas and it was a conscious power move, part of the neoliberal hegemon paradigm, and that we too, were starting to play its game. In retrospect, who were we to tell someone "this space was for busking only"?

We didn't know what terms like commodification meant. We just thought people were stupid for advertising logos on their shirts. We didn't understand money, we just knew that we needed it at times. We dabbled in counter culture comics and 'zines. Adbusters was one of those, and it seemed comically cool in that it shared our sentiments about commercial culture.

Understand: there was no internet (at least not the widespread use and accessibility by the public), just word of mouth to explain where these alternative medias came from. Sometimes through album or cd liner notes we read some manifesto type stuff. At that point we mostly just saw the rebellious nature, rather than the theory, behind such writing. We wanted to change the system, but did not understand the basics, or the complexities of the current one. We just felt that the system was not leaving enough room for life. This feeling increased dramatically as one by one we started getting placeholder jobs, renting, etc. and being exposed to what felt like abuse by the system. We missed the colour of our "real lives."

That colour, that Burning Man celebrates, and that Adbusters defends, is a colour that I work to recreate through my art; one that is free from commodification, free from privatization of space,

and a busker style voluntary payment system (through Bitcoin<sup>1</sup>). That colour is what we all love in life. It is *not* a monetary transaction, it *is* connection; connection to life, to people, to the world, to oneself. It is a relationship with all that in which we find life. Neoliberalism taints this by inserting itself between those relationships - with the idea that money should be configured between all connections. Neoliberalism tries to make all connections a business transaction. Fuck that.

An important message...

While putting this project together I was trying to figure out how to effectively use interventionist art to change the status quo. I pondered on what new digital technology I could use to make my art pop out and give the audience a really engaging experience. Bitcoin seemed fun and interesting, and filled with a potential new way of interacting with art. Most importantly it has the potential to be a game changer – imagine people send money to artists who just put up their art where ever. In this sense it can democratize space much differently than a patronage, sponsor, or crowd funded source because it is immediate and does not rely on donors before it is made and exhibited. In this instance, it acts more like a hat or case used by buskers to collect money in.

Over the Spring semester of 2017 I decided to explore some of these ideas with an interventionist eye, installing art across the University of Alberta. I did this to cut out my own space within the campus, much like The Burning Man Festival cut out a physical space in the desert and Adbusters cuts out an alternative media space. These examples, which I investigate in the pages that follow, offer me a counter narrative, and operate as a site of resistance to the current model

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<sup>1</sup> Bitcoin is a very versatile virtual currency that cuts out the middle man (e.g. banks)(“Antonopoulos, Opening Remarks- Canadian Senate”).

For more information see [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T2zH-T\\_hmLs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T2zH-T_hmLs).

of neoliberalism. The three chapters in this document investigate three different platforms that try to challenge neoliberalism. I use three different theorists to find out what is effective, in challenging hegemonic ideas (Chantal Mouffe), how to implement it (Donella Meadows), and why it is important (Lawrence Lessig).

...Back to our program

In those years, if you said “The Digital”, most people thought of watches. Now, we are all tuned into our phones, computers, and social media. When the digital really started kicking in, with the internet leading the charge, we thought it (the free flow of information and in a yet to be commercialized space) would free us from the shackles of neoliberalism and corporate power. Instead, we are seeing the same game being played by giant monopolist companies that were played in the physical world. Just as private companies told us we couldn’t busk on their property, private companies are governing our virtual lives because they own the platforms we play on (e.g. YouTube, Facebook, etc.).

My journey from busking to graduate school was mostly motivated by money. That is a lie. I went on this journey because I wanted to learn and discover what I wanted to do. The money would be nice if it showed up. But, meaning has always meant more to me. If I was in it for the money, this is not the path I would have taken.

I need to fast forward here: I went from Busking to getting Canadian Securities Course certified (I took this because I was interested in building “a really cool” stock trading platform), to completing an undergraduate in Political Science (I fell in love with Political Philosophy), and

now this. I did this degree because I wanted to, and was fortunate enough to be able to. But meanwhile, the whole time along the way, I was making art.

There seems to be this idea that without money people would not work or do anything. The data does not show this (“Benefit or Burden?”; “Universal Basic Income”). Universal Basic Income (UBI) experiments have shown that when given the basic income, people still keep their jobs.

This could free up time and mental energy, so people could create things without the constant problem of money (or lack thereof) working against them. The world we live in could be a lot more creative, healthy, and less marginalizing<sup>2</sup>. It would free more minds up to offer solutions to the current problems we face. Money should be a benefit, not a hindrance for the vast majority of humans. In retrospect, had I received a basic income, I feel I could have been a lot more productive and a lot less stressed.

In my late 20s I started University, during a time when globalization and neoliberalism were being heavily critiqued. It was easy to become passionately left wing and learn how to express what felt so wrong with the way the world was unfolding. On the one hand, I could communicate Marxist, postmodern thoughts; on the other, much of it (I found out later) was overly ideological and didn’t account for “reality on the ground”.

One of my busking friends started selling things at festivals and had some of his stock made in Asia. He explained that he didn’t use a sweatshop, nor exploit his tailors, but rather, he gave them work (something I would later see as true). I found myself in a greyer area in regards to neoliberal globalization which was often criticized for using labour arbitrage (cheap labour in one country to make things to sell in another) to profit.

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<sup>2</sup> Health and education rise while poverty rates drop (“Universal Basic Income Pilot”)

## Things Get More Grey

At this time, I had a high paying job as a valet. What was interesting was that the driveway was city owned, yet the hotel charged people money to park there. *We* charged people to park there. Not because *we* owned it, or the hotel did, but because we were "incentivized" to make it seem legit.

We normalized the cost, the procedure, the expected behavior of the guests. Only a few outright *rightly* said we were thieves for the outrageous rates. Most paid it though.

It took about a week for the guilt to wear off. That is when I realized how much money I had been making – more than ever in my life. Coincidentally, it only took about a week to sound confident that the cost was fair, that it was a service and that it was business as usual.

Like Robber Barons we extolled taxes on travelers. The amount of times I said, "That will be 44 dollars" with confidence is insane. We were like muggers, holding people up with their status as hostage. But we had a well-made sign that made it official.

What an insight to how the world works this was. I realized just how pliable people were. Don't get me wrong, this was a legitimate business. This is like JSTOR<sup>3</sup> taking the work of students and other academic researchers, who (subsidized by tax payers), have spent countless hours and tons of money to produce research, and then JSTOR came along and started collecting and selling it. They privatized public information just like we privatized the public driveway.

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<sup>3</sup> JSTOR is a private non-profit company, which is a repository of academic research that charges money for its collection, of work they do NOT own. Aaron Swartz (an activist for the freedom of academic information) tried to make this information available to the world, got indicted, and committed suicide when he and his family were aggressively pursued to the point of facing dire financial circumstances (Knappenberger, "The Internet's Own").



I realized just how corruptible I could be. I realized that a large number of people could keep secrets if it profited them, but most importantly, I realized the system itself was corrupt and that a lot of people and companies were doing this: taking what was once considered a right and making it a product you had to pay for. Public goods turned to privately owned products. Not to take away any personal responsibility, but when one's seemingly only option to make a "decent wage", makes them feel morally compromised it's not a healthy system. I was finishing school and even as a part timer, I made more than any school related job would. And, while the job did give me money and time to travel and make art, it gave me more than just that. It gave me a precursor to the lesson that I later learnt traveling a specific country, still tender from the evidence pockmarked into its psyche of the heinous, horrible, unmentionable, crimes<sup>4</sup>. I learned it wasn't *they* or *them*, but rather, *all of us* that were capable of slight or brutal transgressions. That was a powerful lesson. We ordinary people can all be evil and so we need to be vigilant, questioning and aware. Up until these moments, I thought I was extraordinary in this regard, instead I found I was just ordinary, and that scared the hell out of me.

Many times, this corruptibility is caused by scarcity - scarcity of resources, but even more so, scarcity of options.

### Tricks for the Neoliberal Pimp

Neoliberalism encourages setting up false scarcity. We have more tools, resources, and automation, than ever and yet, that profit, freed up time, and resources, goes *not* to the worker,

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<sup>4</sup> In the 1970s, Cambodia's Khmer Rouge regime killed millions of its citizens ("The Khmer Rouge left 1.7 million dead"). During my trip I visited The Killing Fields and S-21 prison where people were tortured killed.

but the few who, through one ~~deceitful~~ savvy business move or another, have gained control of humanity's driveway – they are like valets demanding payment on publicly owned land - they take what is not theirs and sell it to others. Neoliberalism illegalizes rain water collection in Bolivia so citizens have to buy it from the Bechtel Corporation. Neoliberalism appropriates music from marginalized musicians and nods in approval when the rich copyright it. Neoliberalism believes everything should be a product for the market.

During the time working at the hotel, we used to get mad when people would sneak away without paying. Even we believed our lie.

Coming to a thesis near you...

I want to accomplish three things with this project:

1. Glean some insight into idea distribution. That is, try to show my ideas to an audience. I would like to test whether people engage with my art, and if they are willing to donate money. Both of these can be measured and tested through the Bitcoin QR code I have set up.
2. Change my own paradigm, which I have internalized from neoliberalism. I have been taught that all transactions should be monetized; I would like to break this idea, by putting up and “giving away” my art to the University of Alberta public.
3. Test whether I can put some art up on a wall of a semi-public institution to measure if we actually have any public space that can be interacted with and what those limits might be. This is an attempt at an art intervention, in the sense that I am engaging with the space of a university

and trying to show whether or not it allows free thought, through the form of art – whether the historical bastion of free thinking allows such a thing.

But first we visit the desert...

## Chapter 1 Burning Man



Fig. 2. The Way “Home”, 2013, California, Photo by Z.Varsanyi.

We were going to fly.

He, being a complete stranger introduced to me over an email by a soccer coach, and I. Him, a newer pilot, couldn't get the plane - even though flight plans had been pre-arranged...*owner didn't think it would be responsible...to fly into the desert.* Instead, we hijacked the lime green Challenger sporting the company logo he rep'd for.

We met outside my place for the first time. I stood waiting nervously, with minimal provisions in a bag, under a tree, sincerely ready to impress a blind date. We were cautiously jovial.

I'll fast forward through the many hot springs, American bowling alleys, country garage sales, small town diners, to the moment the road opened up. Death Valley: 10 miles of straight, "you can see everything" interstate. Descending.

I had asked him a day earlier how fast he had gone with this rugged new version of a classic. "220", he said, "with sweat in my eyes". I thought about that in this moment, looking into the valley skirted with giant jagged peaks, Neko Case on the radio. The pilot? - he thought the same. I looked over at the speedometer. 180,190,200, we rose. 210,220,230, nothing was said. *Teeth to teeth, the speed, the blurring aside us...*

Neko: *I wish I was the moon tonight.*

240, 250, 260, we were flying...

We were taking our time, but going at top speed.

In a recklessly responsible way.



Fig. 3. The Ride, Black Rock City, Photo by Z.Varsanyi.

When many people think about Burning Man, they think of it in two different ways:

1. It is a just a bunch of naked drugged up crazy people in the desert. While some of that can be true, the real truthful truth, is that to survive in the desert, especially for tent campers, it is no easy task. The preparations and logistics that individuals practice to get there, along with the self-care, discipline, and awareness, while there, turn the experience into what I would call radical self-responsibility. One of the main tenants you learn at Burning Man is know your boundaries. I am more responsible there than a night on the town. Everything in the desert has consequences.

2. They think it's just another festival -corporately run, the type you show up as part of a passive audience, ready to be entertained. And while many do act passively, the push to be active flourishes, the need to *express* is infectious. This isn't a shoe company with a bunch of bands booked and ready to be watched. This is you – *you* are the act.

There is an encouragement to express yourself and be accepted that you won't find anywhere else. There is a responsibility to be a participant (rather than a tourist), one gets an overwhelming desire to contribute, and personally and vigilantly own the space you inhabit for a week.

Black Rock City (as an independent run entity in the form of a city) also practices responsibility and this sort of vigilance - in the form of medical tents, rangers who liaison between the populace, and firefighters ready as first responders just to name just a few (it is important to note that these are all volunteers). There is room for craziness, there is room for living it up, but in the background there is a responsible infrastructure that takes care of its occupants. Responsibility to/for each other (community) seems comparably non-existent in the neoliberal model. There is an extreme dichotomy between the regular (neoliberal) world and Burning Man. Something which Chantal Mouffe would call the non-consensus of an agonistic space. There are rules that have been decided at the festival that do not apply in the outside world, and vice versa. That is not to say the outside world has no community, but it *is* to say that community responsibility is built into Burning Man's principles. The festival's platform is made for the people to live in, not for the platform to live off of the people. With neoliberalism the individual is merely a consumer and the community merely a market of things. At Burning Man, people feel/are empathetically sensitive to each other and compassionate, we matter, *we* are the reason for the event.

Corporations under the neoliberal ideology have one goal, which is to be efficient as possible, so as to profit. Under this system, the *system* is the event.

The line that divides Burning Man from the outside world is where theorist Chantal Mouffe's agonistic space takes place. Burning Man battles the current hegemon of neoliberal ideas through its own set of rules, benefits, and experiences that are in stark contrast to neoliberalism. The festival wins the hearts and minds of its attendees, who come away knowing that a better system is possible than the current neoliberal one.

### Agonism

Chantal Mouffe argues that there needs to be more agonism in politics in order to preserve democracy (Mouffe, *Agonistics*). Agonism is the idea that conflict is necessary and healthy for a democracy, and that to aim for consensus is dangerous. Conflict is necessary, she contends, and that it should be perpetual, without finality (Mouffe, "The Radical Centre",4). Consensus leads to a lack of opposition and therefore a lack of options. It creates a "a democratic deficit (Martin,14). For example, if political parties constantly reach consensus then they may as well be the same party. Opposition is needed, so the people in a democracy have choices and alternatives.

Agonism can take place in dedicated permanent place called agonistic spaces, which Mouffe contends should be provided by democracies. They can also be as temporary as an internet forum, a protest space, or art: the internet is a great place for a plurality of views, Occupy Wall Street offered alternatives to the current hegemon, and The Yes Men critiqued the current neoliberal model with satirical performance art (Bichlbaum et al.). Mouffe argues that currently, there is no alternative to neoliberal globalization from the right or left. She believes there should be a much more "vibrant agonistic debate" in politics (Mouffe, "A vibrant democracy needs agonistic confrontation"). One of the main solutions she thinks is needed, is for the political left to articulate and defend its position against the right, in a more antagonist way. She argues the

left has been neutralized by the transition from Fordism<sup>5</sup> to neoliberalism (Mouffe, “Democratic Politics and Agonistic”). This neutralization took place in both the economic and social spheres, as governments were increasingly powerless, due to corporations, under the neoliberalist model, taking more and more control of laws and economies. For example, a government may be labeled as left wing, but make the same decision as a moderate right wing one. We see this in Alberta as the left-wing party (seemingly environmentalists) fight for traditional right-wing positions like being pro-oil. Mouffe argues that if we take away the traditional political power of governments, that democracy suffers. When citizens choices are not respected, populism, which claims to be “for the people” arises. Currently, there are is a strong insurgence of right-wing populism manifesting in the West. She argues that there is a strong racist undertone (if not overt) within these parties, because she says, that if people cannot make choices through the political (in a post-political world), it leads many to make choices on more tribal ones, such as race, ethnicity etc. (Mouffe, "Democratic Politics and Agonistic"). This right-wing populism in the West is caused in large part from the failure of the left and its notion of liberalism. Liberalism believes that consensus can be formed and therefore no antagonism is necessary. Mouffe believes that one does not merely find a plurality of opinion and make a consensus between these inter-subjective voices, but rather, that there is always going to be a hegemon. This creates a hierarchy in which certain voices will be heard more than others<sup>6</sup>. If we concede to that, then the

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<sup>5</sup> Fordism refers to a socio-political system or mode of regulation that is supportive of mass production and mass consumption, and which, among other things, ensures the supply of physically healthy workers and financially healthy consumers (“The Sociology of Work”).

<sup>6</sup> Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau postulate that while Marxists and Neo Marxist believe that hegemony is formed by having different classes, they counter that in fact all social relations have hegemony built into them (Ballve, “Laclau and Mouffe on Hegemony”).



left must start vying for the top of the hierarchy, also known as the hegemony, otherwise there is no opposition to the right. The left must exclude certain elements of the right, instead of trying to form a consensus in the middle with them. It must be more adversarial. If there is no opposition, then there are no choices and democracy is endangered. As Mouffe states, “A well-functioning democracy requires a confrontation of democratic political opposition” (Mouffe, “Democratic Politics and Agnostic”). This opposition must not seek a final solution, but must always fight. “Chantal Mouffe defines the public space as a battleground on which different hegemonic projects are confronted, without any possibility of final reconciliation” (“Art and Democracy”).

We will examine hegemony for a moment. Hegemony as defined by Merriam Webster’s online dictionary is “the social, cultural, ideological, or economic influence exerted by a dominant group.” This document is concerned with the theory of cultural hegemony Antonio Gramsci postulated. He theorized that the ruling classes use a normalization (Foucault) process to legitimize their dominance through cultural texts (Nicholas, “Hegemony: WTF”). In this way, people are often ruled over, not by force, but cultural influences.

The hegemony makes it seem like the dominant ideology is the de facto best one and the norm. This is called normalization. In Michel Foucault’s 1975 book *Discipline and Punish* – he describes a prison in which rather than torture or death are used, the ideal behaviour is rewarded “to punish less, perhaps; but certainly, to punish better.” He further argues that the new mode of control becomes the model for an entire society, with factories, hospitals, and schools modeled on the modern prison”(Gutting and Oksala). Normalization of something makes its subjects feel that because something has always been done a certain way, it must be right. Normalization tries to conceal the fact that really it is just an idea (or group of ideas) that form an ideological

framework which then controls society. This framework is then consented to, by the citizens, regardless of whether or not it is in their best interests.

The dominant ideological framework (the hegemon) is a choice that refuses other frameworks, but as Mouffe articulates: “Every order is the temporary and precarious articulation of contingent practices. It means that all things could have been otherwise. Every order is predicated on the exclusion of other possibilities” (Mouffe, “About Agonistic Politics”).

## Paradigm Shift

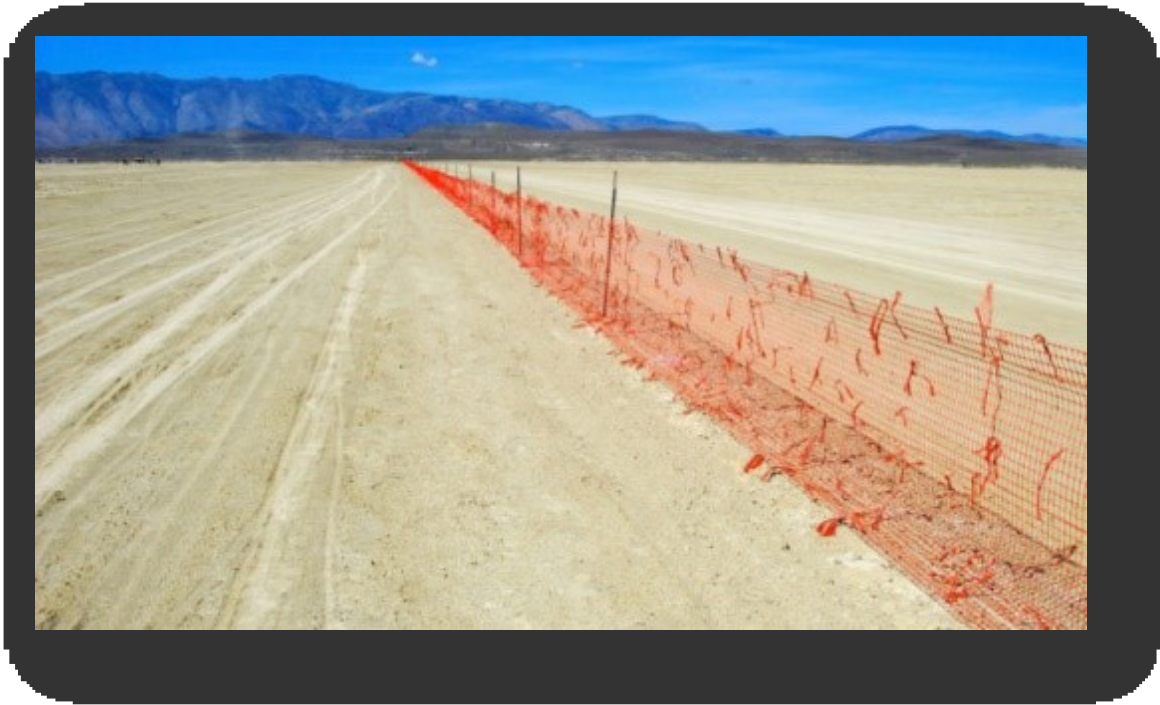


Fig. 4. Demarcation “Trash Fence” of the Burning Man Festival, Black Rock, Nevada, Photo by Unknown.

The first time I attended Burning Man, we tried to sneak in. Only one of us had a ticket (\$280). We got out of the van with our bikes and made a beeline for the snow fence that demarcates the festival border. My little pink BMX bike was just not fast enough to outrun the security in their dune buggies and Mad Max apparel. We were all rounded up and forced to pay 400 dollars to enter the event. This event questions the events “Radical Inclusion Principle”. The organization points out their low budget tickets for the less affluent. The fact that one does need to spend so much to get there and to get in does become a grey area in regards to Burning Man’s economic inclusion.

To go to Burning Man one has to buy a ticket, so not everything is really free. Not to mention taking work off and also buying the supplies needed to get and be there. That being said, Burning Man does lend itself to studies as a prototype for a gifting society for the idea of a Universal Basic Income (UBI). UBI is the idea that everyone should have a basic income, regardless of employment. Many prototypes are being researched, due to the fear that automation<sup>7</sup> will make unemployment ubiquitous; as well upheave the social order of jobs and careers. The gift economy of Burning Man shows how people could survive with roles, rather than long-term careers and jobs. The gift economy at Burning Man stretches out into the default world<sup>8</sup>. People spend countless hours fundraising, labouring on items that are given away for free (“gifts”) at the festival, but much of the work is done in the outside (“default”) world. Whether it is a Mutant vehicle in the form of a bus that transports people or a camp that feeds thousands; these acts extend into the world as a counter to what the current neoliberal model prescribes. These acts are not for profit, but for the community of Burning Man. By getting people to help (volunteer) for Black Rock City, the community is developed in the world outside as well as inside.

There is admittedly a different form of currency and that is usually through fame given to some of the creators –such as David Best who built many versions of The Temple. There is also much to be said about how “cool” someone is, that can come in many forms such as social prowess, creations, or even just looks. There is still a hierarchy; but in this case it is not based on class or money. This exemplifies Mouffe’s assertion that hegemony is not just a class related creation, but is inherent in all social relations (“Art and Democracy”).

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<sup>7</sup>Automation is the process of robots, computer software and other technology taking over human jobs.

<sup>8</sup> The “default world” is any place outside of The Burning Man festival. It also refers to status quo of regular life.

Burning Man inspires discussions about technology and how it affects our lives while, perhaps ironically, it was impossible to use one's cell phone while there. This did become an escape from portions of the digital world. On the one hand, many of the art projects are made from the thoughts, designs, and hard work of engineers and artists, while on the other, many people live in tents with the most basic of supplies for a week. This mixture of old technology such as tents and high tech like giant laser clocks seems to foretell a sort of science fiction future for the rest of humanity. This also acts as a metaphor for Chantal Mouffe's characterization of all hegemonies, as she mentions that all hegemonies are the result of old and new ideas.

The environment meshes into something I just haven't experienced elsewhere. The alternative economy, technology, inspiring friendliness, the art, the encouraged participation, all leads to a paradigm shift in the attendee. When one reenters the default world the influence of the neoliberal hegemony is no longer as strong.

### Consumption and Commodification

It is embarrassing to admit that in many of the early years I attended Burning Man my purchases totaled my whole year's discretionary spending. Add to this that the easiest way to buy all the provisions necessary on route was to go to a Wal-Mart Super Centre. Add even more insult and personal hypocrisy; there were times when I had to fly back home and much of the items ended up being thrown out due to space. These were my early trips with larger groups. During the last trip I found homes, donation drives and/or recycling areas for most everything I couldn't bring home. This was in part due to the organizations efforts in creating a strong recycling, donation system, and my own shame at my wastefulness. We also started skipping the big corporate stores

and used smaller local types. The more I went to the festival the more I realized I needed very little. There is so much given away inside –from food to drink, to clothing and even shelter that one could show up with only a small bag and water (Water is sacred and a faux pas to ask for) and still survive. When things are shared there is a lot less need for as many things. So how is it that our society consumes so much?

### The Beginnings of Commodification

In the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Sigmund Freud postulated that people had sexual and aggressive drives buried in their unconscious (a part of the mind that we are not conscious of, yet still drives much of our behaviour). His nephew Edward Bernays used Freud's ideas for companies eager to sell their goods (Curtis, "Century of The Self")<sup>9</sup>. Bernays has been credited as the first public relations professional. During a time when corporations were fearing overproduction (that they were making too many things and people would not consume them), Bernays helped corporations and governments drive peoples towards goods by hijacking (hacking) their impulses and behavior towards buying<sup>10</sup>. He was the first person to use emotions to sell products. He is credited with getting women to smoke by making them seem more powerful and independent if they did (Curtis, "Century of The Self").

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<sup>9</sup> Adam Curtis is a British documentary filmmaker who wrote, produced, and directed The Century of the Self which is a documentary about how Sigmund Freud's ideas were adapted into advertising and business through Freud's nephew Edward Bernays. The documentary posits that Bernays' use of his uncles theories led us into the consumer orientated culture we now experience. The consumerists and commodification systems to which many all over the world fall under the influence of is one of the (if not the main) issue that the three interventionist art groups investigated in this document is trying to intervene into and change. Bernays' led the march towards consumerism through the technological media of the day.

<sup>10</sup> "Edward Bernays was the first person to take Freud's ideas about human beings and use them to manipulate the masses" (Curtis, "Century of The Self")

As companies try to sell new products they often have a target audience, and to sell to that audience they will try to associate the product with the target audience's culture. Often companies will research what is important to that culture, simulate it, through a commercial or branding and sell that culture along with the product back to the target audience. This is called cultural commodification. It commercializes culture and turns it into a product. Cultural commodification has been a threat to Burning Man, but resisted by both the Organization and the attendees as much as possible. This is where the conversation between neoliberal market centric ideas argues with Burning Man's principles of Gifting and Decommodification.

The festival first disrupts the participant's consciousness, and once they come back to the default world, the individual has the ability to spread their experiences and a new outlook to the rest of society. In this way, The Burning Man Festival, directly and indirectly, challenges the current status quo and thus the current hegemon –neoliberalism especially through The 10 Principles of Burning Man<sup>11</sup>.

One can argue that due to the committees involved with the placed art that it is not as egalitarian as it presumes to be. Certainly, many people argue about the increasing number of rules that have increased with the population and timeline of the festival. They argue that its anarchist and libertarian roots have been squashed due to rules regarding where art can be "placed," how deep one can dig, water rules, safety codes etc. Much of this mountain of bureaucracy is there for a good reason – safety. But some of it, such as which art gets selected or funded or allowed, can hinder the free-spirited idea of the festival. I was fortunate to place a pavilion of art in Center Camp (a central camp where one can buy coffee, set up by the organization) and found the process

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<sup>11</sup> The 10 principles of Burning Man are Radical Inclusion, Gifting, Decommodification, Radical Self Reliance, Radical Self Expression, Communal Effort, Civic Responsibility, Leaving No Trace, Participation, and Immediacy ("Burning Man").

very simple. I actually woke up to an email from Center Camp’s head – I had forgotten I had even emailed her with a simple question: “Would you be interested in some art?” and attached a few pictures of said art. I met her once while I was there to be shown my spot, and the next day I was rolling my suit case through the dust to place my 10-piece art show. “The airport is that way!” people would yell jokingly. At Burning Man, it was much easier to share my point of view (in the form of art) with the public compared to the outside world, where such a space is not as readily available.



Fig. 5. Z Varsanyi, We See You, 2013, Centre camp at Black Rock City, Nevada, Photo by Z.Varsanyi.

### De-identifying Re-Identifying

The thing that always strikes me at Burning Man is the time it takes to adapt. It feels strange at first, changing into more ornamental clothes, introducing oneself to neighbors or camp mates or



old friends. But the biggest change is turning off the default world eyes we all have. For me, It usually comes in the form of seeing the opposite sex in provocative (or no) clothing. By day two I am usually over my trained city eyes. A large portion of our perspective is trained to commodify the human body into sexual products by commercials and media. I am not saying neoliberalism is solely responsible for this, but it does parallel the way we visually consume products. It takes a while for this to wane and instead focus on the connection one has with another. This corresponds to many of the onion layers the festival peels away in a participant. Many of these layers are nature/nurture or just packed into a person by the market.

The neoliberal ideology cares only about the market. If the money moving around the earth was building things, there might be more support for it, but U.S.\$1.8 trillion of global daily money transfers is just speculation money (Sandbrook,111). It is gambling. It does not build or service anything for the common citizen. This is just one aspect of neoliberalism which is in stark contrast with Burning Man. The Burning Man Organization spends its money self-perpetuating the experience for the community<sup>12</sup> rather than merely profiting off of it.

Just the act of being different from a dominant system sets up a conversation. I would argue that Burning Man (in a macro sense) is engaging in a political conversation taking place in an agonistic space. Through its participants, the media, the internet, in the form of pictures of the art, Burning Man challenges the neoliberal paradigm. A participant de-identifies with neoliberalist capitalism, experiences a different model of being, and then on return to the default world re-identifies with the hegemon, but with new ideas and alternatives.

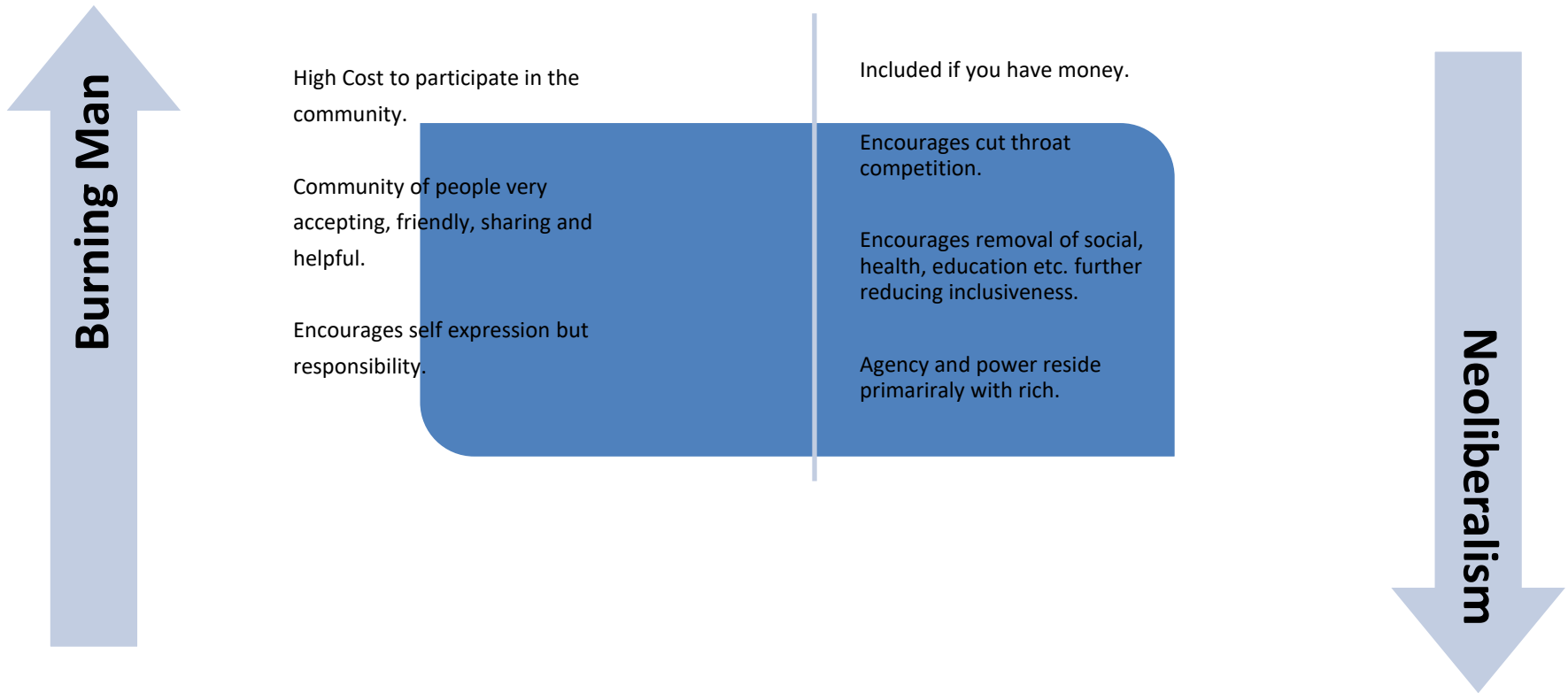
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<sup>12</sup> See <https://burningman.org/expenses/expenses-2015/#0> for a breakdown of costs.

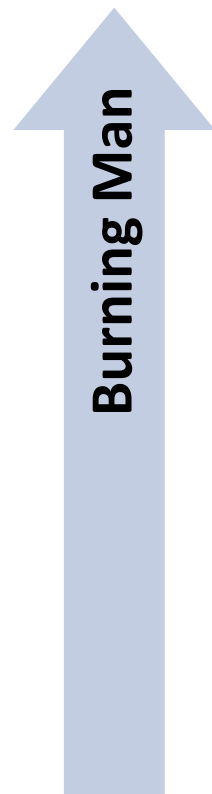
## Contrast

In this next section I contrast neoliberalism and Burning Man it is becomes clear when comparing Burning Man's 10 principles with aspects of neoliberalism:

## Radical Inclusion

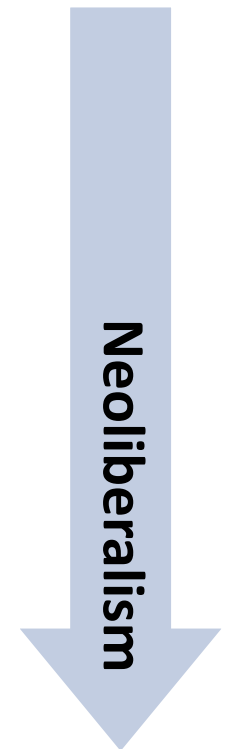


## Gifting

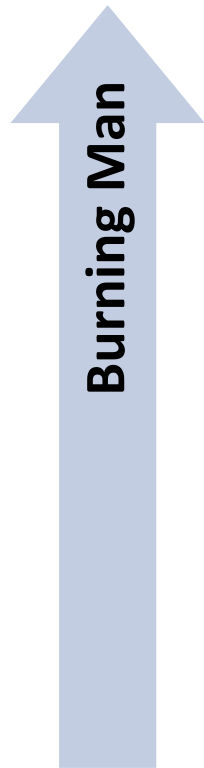


Easy to fulfill needs  
A lot of free and shared products and services  
One needs to pay for access .

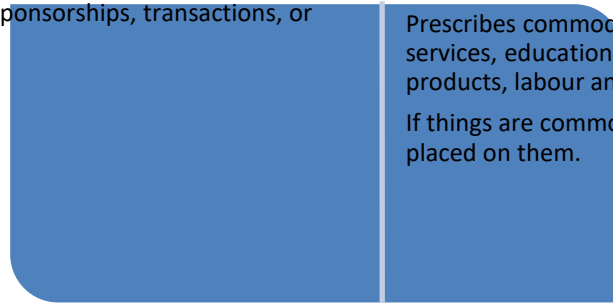
Everything has a price.  
If the world was able to prescribe to a gifting society neoliberalism could not exist.  
Many of BM's gifts are only available due to offshore low cost labour.



## Decommodification



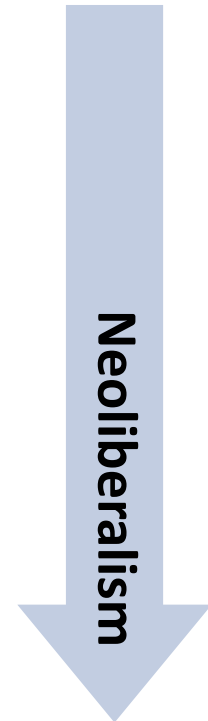
Social environments that are unmediated by commercial sponsorships, transactions, or advertising.



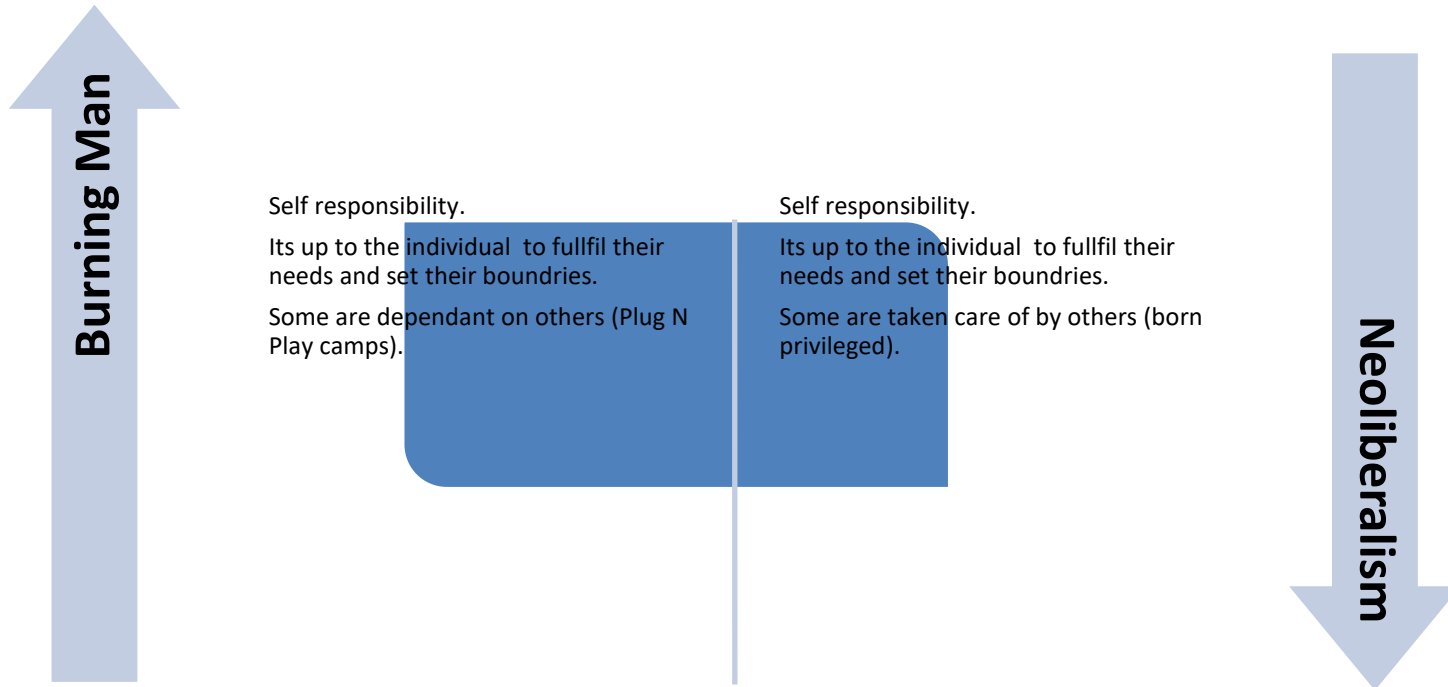
Built on commodification.

Prescribes commodifying everything -social services, education, health, services and products, labour and thus people.

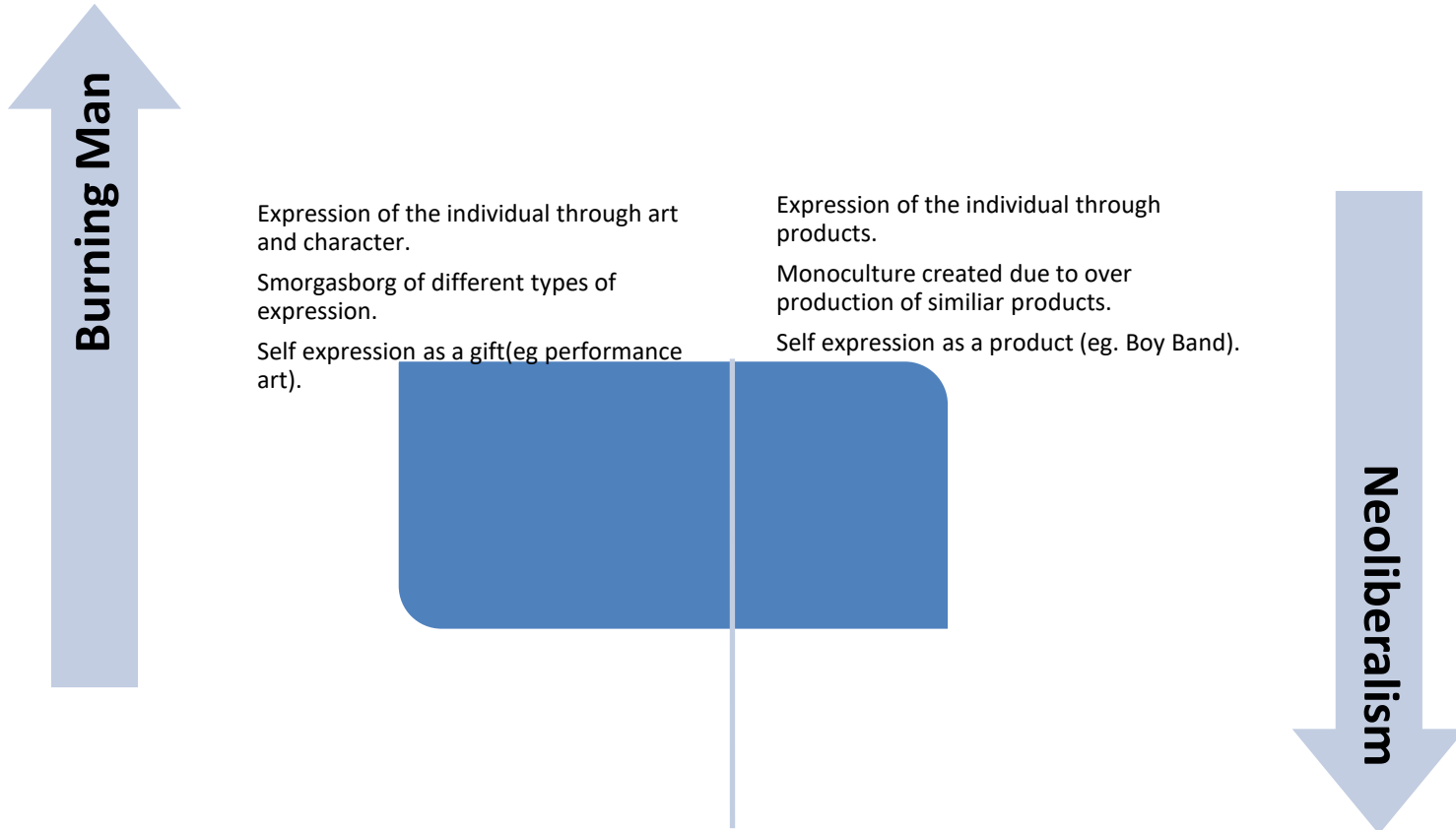
If things are commodified they will have a value placed on them.



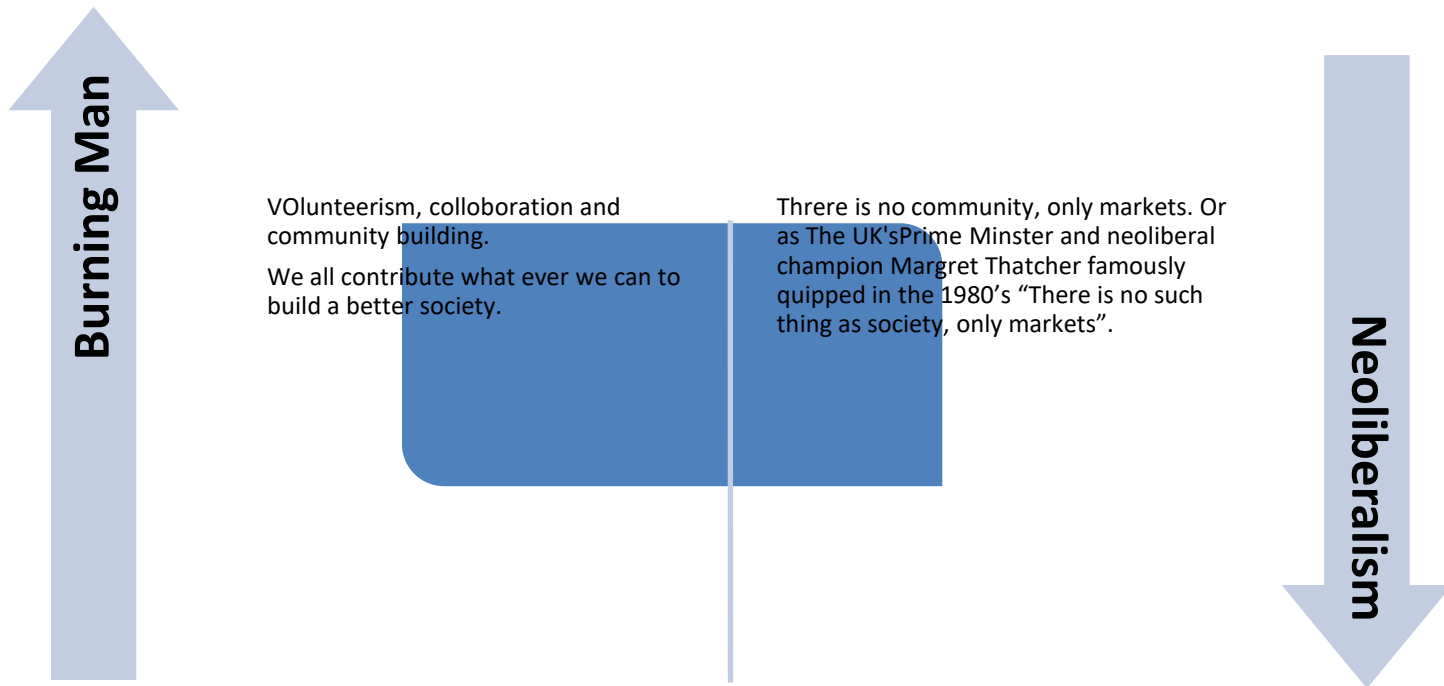
## Radical Self-reliance



## Radical Self-expression

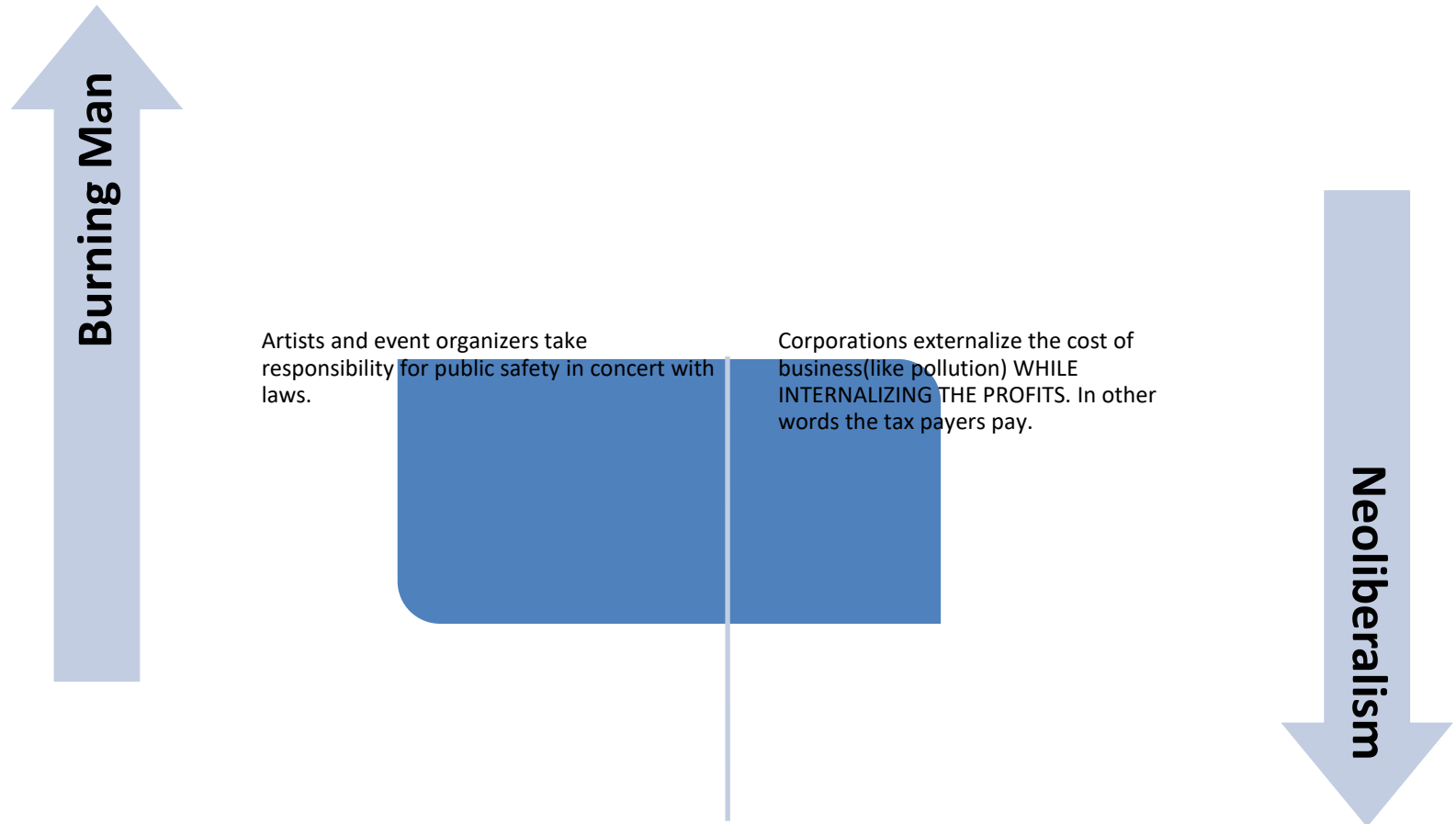


## Communal Effort





## Civic Responsibility



## Leaving No Trace



**Burning Man**

Littering shamed.  
Strict rules against land use.  
Major cleanup after event. You are responsible for your garbage.  
Camps that leave mess get punished next year.

Pollution, global warming, steep social inequality, compromised governments, these are just few traces.  
Profit takes precedent over the environment.



**Neoliberalism**

## Participation

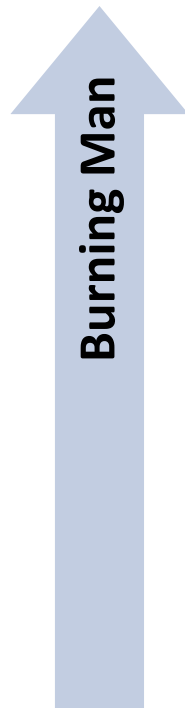
**Burning Man**

Participation is voluntary.  
"make the world real through actions that open the heart."  
Everyone encouraged to participate (Don't be a tourist).

Participation is forced as a means of survival (employment).  
Participation means buying things or working.  
Passiveneess in production of sellable goods and services encourgaed rather than art .

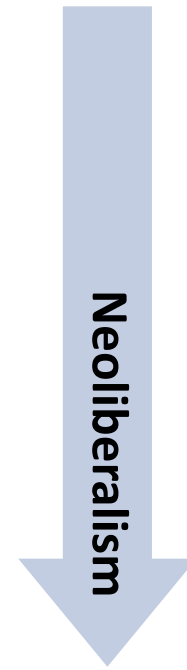
**Neoliberalism**

## Immediacy



Creates spontaneity.  
Living in the moment gives one more agency  
Active rather than passive

Passive rather than active.  
Commodification creates an image that people want to repeat.  
Attempt to make products more important than actions.



Attending Burning Man has always given me the inspiration to not only make art, but to try and live my life as art. Every time I go, I find myself refreshed and refocused. I always come away with a feeling I want to recreate in the outside world.

## Chapter 2 Adbusters



Fig.6. Poster, July 2011, Adbusters.

I grew up skateboarding. We would always be on the search for new places to ride. Sometimes these were emptied out water fountains, but mostly schools, public buildings –anything with

banks and objects we could grind. We would fix our decks ourselves, build ramps and it gave us a sense of DIY (do it yourself), that later translated in playing and booking shows in bands or making art. When we searched for spots to skate in the city, we unwittingly were given a sense of what the Situationist International called “derive”<sup>13</sup>. We would often be chased by security guards, and while we would try to treat the environment as our own to play with, we would often have to battle for it with those who “protected” it. This was before skate parks were so available. Skaters had their own sense of being unmitigated by main stream media. It was a club of outsiders who were a little freer to express themselves as individuals than the general public. Perhaps this was due to the sense of “derive” in which one looked at the environment within a “pyschogeographical” framework with a "a total dissolution of boundaries between art and life”<sup>14</sup>. When I skated the streets, it was a form of art in which each bank, curb, bench was looked at as something to interact with and create something new. Decades later, I still often look at regular curbs on a street and think about grinding my deck on them.

“No Skateboarding” signs were everywhere, which inspired an oppositional point of view as a skater, against the status quo. By ignoring what we thought were stupid rules, we strengthened our disregard for authority. In a lot of ways this was healthy because, as I became more aware of the government’s propensity to side with business over citizens, it was easier to challenge different types of authority. I had a type of mental template which I could use when making art that condescended the powers that be. This also opened me up to alternative attitudes towards society, such as punk, activism, etc.

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<sup>13</sup> Derive is a way of looking at the landscape in a new way and with the theory of unitary urbanism looked at the environment as enemy territory (“Situationist International Part 1”).

<sup>14</sup> For more information see [http://www.artandpopularculture.com/Constant\\_Nieuwenhuys](http://www.artandpopularculture.com/Constant_Nieuwenhuys)

At that time, reading skateboard magazines was a counter cultural action, and so perusing the Adbusters magazine (which was also oppositional to the mainstream) was an easy step to take. Skaters were often putting together rudimentary videos with their own points a view. Most were not “broadcast quality” – friends showed friends, but TV wouldn’t really play them - but there was a sense of creation many during “the read generation<sup>15</sup>” didn’t get to experience. This video experience led others and myself to try and make videos and films, though not to be seen by a vast audience given that the technology was just not there.

If only I was born later, after the days when the internet was only a phonebook with pictures. After technology made it cheaper to shoot, edit, and to watch, respectively, for the film maker and film fan. After the gatekeepers were torn apart by the voluntary distributors, named pirates. After, broadcast quality had no meaning. After, film makers had to also be grant writers and that was usually as far as the art could take anyone “not serious” enough. I had ideas, but didn’t have the silk gloves needed to tap the medias shoulders with and, to be honest, the bravery, to move to LA or New York, Montreal or Toronto.

The odds that a media organization like Adbusters could form and continue existing against such insurmountable technological and social constraints is amazing. We couldn’t even get our show “Peasant Vision” on public access TV, but when Kalle Lasn, the originator of Adbusters, could not get his Anti-Forestry industry TV spot broadcast<sup>16</sup>, he not only sued, but created one of the most influential anti corporate, counter culture magazines ever. Then, when the technology was right, he helped spark the Occupy movement. One thing is for certain, Lasn and the organization

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<sup>15</sup> The “read generation” is a term coined by Lawrence Lessig about the generation who passively consumed media rather than produced it. TV, radio are “read” YouTube, blogs, pirate radio, are “read and write” named after CD’s that allowed recording. The audience is part creator, part consumer. See page 68 for a more thorough explanation.

<sup>16</sup> For the history of Adbusters see: <https://www.activistfacts.com/organizations/36-adbusters/>



used leverage points. Later in this chapter, I use the theories of Donella Meadows, a political scientist who is well known for her breakdown of leverage points, to highlight why Adbusters was so effective and sometimes not so. It is not as important to agree with Adbusters on its many topics as it is to focus on its core goal. Adbusters is an anti-consumer social activist magazine that focuses on the modern individual's mental landscape. Our "mental environment", as the magazine calls it, has been bombarded by advertising and other forms of commercialized information (what most call mass media) for almost a century (if we are to take Edward Bernays as the starting point). Adbusters strives to remove the corporate brainwashing of people that has developed from this mass media and allowed corporations to run rough shod over our own interests and those who represent them (e.g. the government).

The organization calls for citizens to investigate their relationships to this world and each other and subsequently the systems which arise from these relationships. Adbuster's calls for people to culture jam corporations and the media. This is a form of what The Situationist International called Detournement. "Detournement appropriates and alters an existing media artifact, one that the intended audience is already familiar with, in order to give it a new, subversive meaning" (Malitz, "Detournement/Culture Jamming"). It can include changing logos around like from Burger King to Murder King, changing Billboards to manipulate their meanings, or flash mob events that bring awareness to certain issues. Culture Jamming or Detournement seeks to hijack and subvert the power of corporate media. In this way it seeks to disrupt the neoliberal system.

Donella Meadows states "...A system is a set of things—people, cells, molecules, or whatever—interconnected in such a way that they produce their own pattern of behavior over time" (Meadows).

In this case, the systems we are concerned with are people's political, economic, environmental relationships. Neoliberalism has tainted all of these relations by prescribing that the market decides everything. The goal then is to intervene so that we may take back power from the market and put it into the hands of responsible people who can then make choices that benefit humanity.

Donella Meadows is a systems thinker who believes there are certain leverage points that we (citizens, governments and workers) know of intuitively, but commonly use the wrong way. She believes that if we are to succeed in changing a system to work better for a desired effect, that we must know which leverage points affect which behaviors and lists them in an order of importance respective to their effectiveness. She had a eureka moment when she was at a NAFTA meeting in which she furiously started jotting down how to effectively deal with problems and conflicts within systems(Meadows). The leverage points system encourages art interventionists to seek effective solutions to the flaws within the system while showing the levels of effectiveness.

In my life, I have seen skateboarding slowly accepted into mainstream society with the proliferation of skate parks. That took many years of finding the right leverage points to find a solution to the destruction of public property (curbs, benches etc.). To outlaw or prohibit skating was doing nothing to offer a solution to the often-strained relationship between skaters and urban centres. Skate parks however, not only embraced skaters, but created community centres for youth. As Meadows says: people instinctively know where the leverage point is but push it the wrong way. In this case the point was between prohibiting skating versus embracing it, but in specific locations.

Donella Meadows lists 12 leverage points (in descending order of effectiveness)<sup>17</sup>, where one can intervene into a system to change that system. In the following section I will show the leverage points alongside Adbusters' techniques of intervening, so that I may glean some information for my project.

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<sup>17</sup> **PLACES TO INTERVENE IN A SYSTEM**

(In increasing order of effectiveness)

12. Constants, parameters, numbers (such as subsidies, taxes, standards).
11. The sizes of buffers and other stabilizing stocks, relative to their flows.
10. The structure of material stocks and flows (such as transport networks, population age structures).
9. The lengths of delays, relative to the rate of system change.
8. The strength of negative feedback loops, relative to the impacts they are trying to correct against.
7. The gain around driving positive feedback loops.
6. The structure of information flows (who does and does not have access to information).
5. The rules of the system (such as incentives, punishments, constraints).
4. The power to add, change, evolve, or self-organize system structure.
3. The goals of the system.
2. The mindset or paradigm out of which the system — its goals, structure, rules, delays, parameters — arises.
1. The power to transcend paradigms.

## Leverage Point and Adbusters

12. Constants, parameters, numbers (such as subsidies, taxes, standards).

*Meadows states that about 90 to 99 percent of our attention goes to adjusting these leverage points but concludes that there is not much power in these. Her examples include changing tax and interest rates, that may have short term consequences, but the system is still the same. things don not change in the long term. She also mentions through her bathtub model that "Putting different hands on the faucets may change the rate at which the faucets turn, but if they're the same old faucets, plumbed into the same old system, turned according to the same old information and goals and rules, the system behavior isn't going to change much"(Meadows). The neoliberal globalist system is so entrenched in politics that one person cannot change it easily. A CEO would face a shareholder revolt, a politician may face a loss of business confidence and investment, if either decide to go against profits.*

Adbusters

understands that having CEO's in charge will not change the game of neoliberalism. Adbusters Although in the past it has taken on specific CEO's, like Phil Knight of Nike.(for his use of sweatshops). This did have some success as Nike actually hired a third party to investigate their factory conditions.

11. The sizes of buffers and other stabilizing stocks, relative to their flows

*They are basically a stabilizing agent. If they (buffers) are too big they are slow to respond to changes, if they are too small they aren't ready for unexpected problems. UPS uses just enough drivers to get the job done. If something unexpected happens many deliveries aren't made and then drivers or middle management are blamed. A way this is controlled as a leverage point is the union which steps in and demands more of a buffer in the amount of drivers.*

Adbusters

*Adbusters' call to Occupy Wall Street dealt with this. When Bankers were leveraging too much money and didn't have enough to cover their bets when the market failed, the American tax payer had to bail them out because the banks were "too big to fail". Many of the protestors were calling for regulations (The Glass Steagall Act) to be reinstated that would allow for a bigger buffer against economic failures, by separating banks from (gambling) investment banks.*

10. The structure of material stocks and flows (such as transport networks, population age structures).

*Meadows uses the example of the Baby Boomers in which the increase in children put pressures on schools, colleges, housing and retirement.*

Adbusters

Adbusters often points at the structure of cities which are design for cars. If they were more pedestrian and bike friendly there would less cars and thus less pollution. These changes are expensive and take time however.

9. The lengths of delays, relative to the rate of system change.

*The length of delays in the feedback loop “are critical determinants of system behaviour” (Meadows). It is like adjusting the temperature of your shower. If the delay is long, one tends to overcompensate and turn it even more only realizing that the feedback loop is slow and the water is too hot or too cold.*

Adbusters

started the Occupy movement with their call for mass protests on the cover of the magazine along with Michael White, a now ex-editor-in-chief of Adbusters, as the creator of the #occupywallstreet meme (Adbusted). The timing here (right after the 2008 economic crash, with the entire world experiencing mass protests of some kind from Tunisia to Spain) seemed perfect. To stretch the hot/cold water metaphor a bit further. What was the right temperature that should have been maintained? These movements were a mixed bag of success and failures, but in the end seemed to fizzle out. The question is whether they did in fact fizzle out or whether they made changes to the systems to the system we haven't seen yet. Perhaps the information they shared will make another bank bailout impossible. Unfortunately, no rule based change was made in regards to banking laws.

8. The strength of negative feedback loops, relative to the impacts they are trying to correct against.

Adbusters

*Meadows states that negative feedback loops are important so that a system can adjust itself. If that information is not available or incorrect then the system cannot function properly. If a company fudges its numbers, an investor doesn't know what state the company is in. If a person doesn't feel pain then they don't know when they are being hurt and the damage done can be far greater had they felt the pain.*

Adbusters acts as a negative feedback loop to make people aware of the corporate effects on our lives. This includes raising alarm bells on our mental environments as well as the outer environments. Its staunchly anti-corporate attitude gives its consumers a narrative that they can use to self-identify themselves not by what they consume, but rather all the parts of life that are unquantifiable by the market. The human in humans. It makes people aware of the internalization of capitalism. So much of our lives have become a habit of consuming and Adbusters points that out.



7. The gain around driving positive feedback loops.

*A positive feedback loop reinforces itself. If you put money in your bank account, the interest will raise the amount putting even more money in your account. It is why the rich get richer. They invest their money, get more money passively and the cycle continues. If a pandemic sweeps across the world the more people it infects, the more contagious it becomes, until there are no more bodies to infect thus destroying itself. It is why positive feedback loops need to be regulated so as not to destroy themselves (Meadows).*

Adbusters

Pointing out the madness of Wall Street, Occupy Wall Street made it clear that the positive feedback loops of the rich getting richer at the expense of the majority of people was not acceptable. The Black spot sneaker points out that making money off of a shoe is still doable even without a race to the bottom where the worker and environment lose out. This race to the bottom is a positive feedback loop.

A company pays its employees less in another part of the world with less worker rights, environmental regulations, and then another country seeing the attractive economic investment from the company offers the company even less regulations and taxation, which is all propelled by the cheaper prices that consumers flock to, incentivizing the company to seek the lowest possible cost of doing business putting even more downwards pressure on regulations.

6. The structure of information flows (who does and does not have access to information).

*Information alone can change a system. Meadows uses two really good examples of this. One of which is a group of houses where in one the electricity meter was hidden away in the basement, and another where it was visible all the time. The one with the visibility had a 30% lower electricity usage. (Meadows).*

Adbusters

Adbusters promotes culture jamming so that the smooth function of the corporate machine is interrupted. Whether it is the magazine itself with critiques not heard on corporate news outlets or smoking billboards being jammed with cancer facts, Adbusters understands that the more people that get information, the more they can decide what they are willing to buy, rather than allow the market to tell them what to desire.

5. The rules of the system (such as incentives, punishments, constraints).

*Those that make the rules have a very powerful leverage point. Meadows uses the example of Free Trade talks which make rules for corporations, by corporation completely leaving out citizens. The rules that made marijuana illegal that have incarcerated a very large disproportion of black people in the US. The rules on lobbying has made the US government act in the interest of their donors (large corporations), rather than its citizens.*

Adbusters

What are the punishments of bankers who participated in the 2008 economic meltdown by a smorgasbord of crimes and misconduct? What are rules for what a corporation can sell in regards to health (I'm thinking about tobacco, alcohol, super sugar breakfast cereals for kids)? Adbusters points out the lack of regulations regarding the environment, advertisements that sell products that are bad for you, and so on. The Occupy movement was a direct response to the lack of rules regulating the financial sector of the US.

4. The power to add, change, evolve, or self-organize system structure.

*"A system that can evolve can survive almost any change, by changing itself... Insistence on a single culture shuts down learning. Cuts back resilience. Any system, biological, economic, or social, that gets so encrusted that it cannot self-evolve, a system that systematically scorns experimentation and wipes out the raw material of innovation, is doomed over the long term on this highly variable planet" (Meadows). Being so rigid with market only policies stifles new economic ideas.*

Adbusters

A system needs the ability to be able to listen to critics. It means taking advice from employees for a corporation. It means taking advice from its citizens for governments. Adbusters tries to add new ideas. Occupy was a discussion.

### 3. The goals of the system.

*“If the goal is to bring more and more of the world under the control of one particular central planning system (the empire of Genghis Khan, the world of Islam, the People’s Republic of China, Wal-Mart, Disney, whatever), then everything further down the list, physical stocks and flows, feedback loops, information flows, even self-organizing behavior, will be twisted to conform to that goal” (Meadows). If the goal is to give people freedom, liberty and pursuit of happiness than a far different paradigm would be taking place. Being able to change the goal of a system completely changes that system and its leverage points..*

Adbusters

“What is our one demand?” asked the edition of the magazine that helped spark the Occupy movement. In essence what is our goal? Adbusters is attempting to change our goals, change our perspectives and make the goal sustainability (in our financial, health and spiritual aspects and the relationship we have with our planet and each other).

2. The mindset or paradigm out of which the system — its goals, structure, rules, delays, parameters — arises

*“The shared idea in the minds of society, the great big unstated assumptions — unstated because unnecessary to state; everyone already knows them — constitute that society’s paradigm, or deepest set of beliefs about how the world works”(Meadows). This is a paradigm and once this shifts everything changes. When we thought the sun revolved around the earth- that was a paradigm. When we changed our belief all our notions of religion, science and society itself were changed.*

Adbusters

Status is everything. We need to give up the notion that a fancy car or big house makes a person better than the rest of us. We need a paradigm shift about what success is. Adbusters Buy Nothing Day highlights the internalization of capitalism. It shows that buying things is often an addiction rather than a tool to get life’s necessities.

## 1. The power to transcend paradigms.

*“There is yet one leverage point that is even higher than changing a paradigm. That is to keep oneself unattached in the arena of paradigms, to stay flexible, to realize that NO paradigm is “true,” that everyone, including the one that sweetly shapes your own worldview, is a tremendously limited understanding of an immense and amazing universe that is far beyond human comprehension”(Meadows).*

*This is the biggest leverage point because it involves changing oneself. To see that all paradigms are not true, just useful, empowers a person to see beyond paradigms and not overly attach themselves to one. It allows a person to be open and flexible in regards to changes.*

## Adbusters

To see the ironies and contradictions in Adbusters and accept them allows a person to not be too rigid, too consumed with ideology. The many writers cannot all agree on the many issues, but the conversation allows the audience to exercise their intellects and glean knowledge from different perspectives.. In his later years Karl Marx played the stock market (Jamie Kozma). The one constant in life is change so that even if we do settle on one idea it will eventually be

The list of leverage points is not a silver bullet way of changing a system, but it does give a map to how one can intervene and be more specific with solutions to problems within a system. As shown above, Adbusters tries to use these points to further its goal of intervening into our mental landscapes to make them less influenced by neoliberalism and more prone to acting within our best interests as citizens.

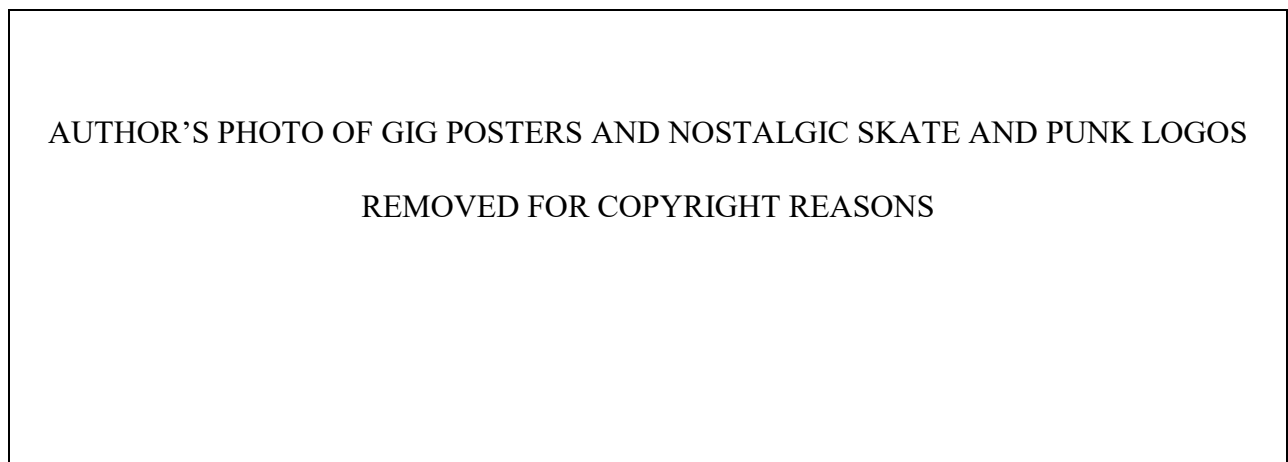


Fig. 7. Z Varsanyi, Nostalgia, 2018, Edmonton, Photo by Z.Varsanyi.

### Re-Detournement

Fig. 8. is an advertisement for Black Spot sneakers (a more recent version of “cool”). Earlier it was gig posters and nostalgia media items that punk and skaterboarders bought into (Fig.7.). Back when we skateboarded we bought certain types of brands. These were generally made by the skateboard community – popular skateboarders would start their own shops and be trend



setters for what was cool. Many of these companies were small at first but then became larger and larger as well as bought out by corporations like Nike. Increasingly, these corporations saw the lifestyle as something that was easily commodified and easily sold. What was once skaters selling “genuine” products to each other, became corporations selling products to their consumers. This cultural appropriation can be called corporate detournement (corporations hijacking a cultural artifact). But what if then something that is cool, has been appropriated and then is appropriated back with a strong social message. By creating and selling the Black Spot shoe, Adbusters “re- detourned” (re-hijacked) “cool” from corporations and it came with an anti-corporate message. It was sweatshop free<sup>18</sup>.

## BLACKSPOT UNSWOOSHER



Fig. 8. Shoe Poster, 2016, Adbusters.

<sup>18</sup> The Black Spot Unswosher is built in a unionized factory in Portugal (“The most ethical shoe”).

The Black spot shoe is an example of critical art and interventionist art. Chantal Mouffe outlines how to use critical art to effectively challenge the status quo. Not all critical art is interventionist art, but all interventionist art is critical art. It should not only criticize, but also, engage, the system. Chantal Mouffe's concept of critical art runs parallel to interventionist art in that she prescribes that it should criticize, but also engage the system, *with* solutions to the problem being criticized. The Black Spot shoe does this by criticizing and engaging the corporate shoe making business while offering the system a solution. She states that "...critical artistic practices can disrupt the smooth image that corporate capitalism is trying to spread, bringing to the fore its repressive character. And, in many ways, they can also contribute to the construction of new subjectivities" (Mouffe, "Art and Democracy").

## Chapter 3

### Minster Thingly Present: a guide to killing still life

A few years ago, I tried to have art shows. It didn't take me long to realize my art wasn't easy to present in galleries. There was too much competition and my work was just not what one could call “professional”. I reexamined what I wanted from my art. At first, it was recognition and money, but the many rejections did me a favor and let me evolve my thinking. I shifted my thinking and started making art for its own sake; I started showing it to share it. This changed my concept of what an art space could be. I no longer needed a tradition space to show art.



Fig.9. Z.Varsanyi, “Minster Thingly Presents Embrace Art Show”, 2011, FAVA, Edmonton, Photo by Z.Varsanyi.

I started asking for permission to put art up in unconventional places such as store fronts...hallways of businesses...bars...etc. I then had the idea (partly inspired by graffiti) to use

guerrilla tactics. I got sneaky and would go to the bars with a box of art, hand them a piece, and have the bartender put it in the back.

When I would return to those bars, I would walk in with confidence and tell them I was there to put up the art. When the bartender showed signs of confusion, I made sure to assertively remind him of the art that was in the back and maybe even checked my watch.

The worker would watch as I hammered a nail into the wall. And soon there would be the social dynamic of an assured and entertained, yet, confused employee of a bar, and a random piece of art that no one knows why is there, or how. I then extended my unsolicited art into the University of Alberta where I would put art up around campus.

Eventually, fellow artists started seeing the art and they'd invite me to their collaborative art shows in community halls, sports bars, and I reciprocated by inviting them to shows in my apartment. Through changing my paradigm of where a show should go, I realized that one can have one anywhere, which harkens back to Donella Meadows' main two leverage points concerning paradigms.



Fig.10. Z.Varsanyi, "Minster Thingly Presents Antichambre Art Show", 2012, Mars & Venus, Edmonton, Photo by Z.Varsanyi.

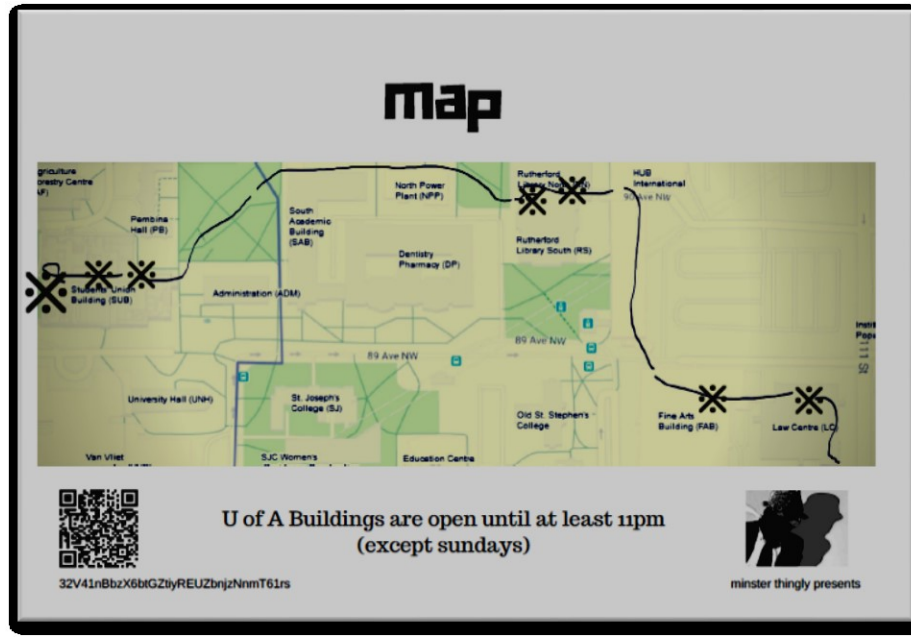


Fig.11. Z.Varsanyi, Minster Thingly Presents A Guide to Killing Still Life Art Tour, back of cardboard postcard, 2018, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Photo by Z.Varsanyi.

### What Happened at The University of Alberta Art Show?

On March 22<sup>nd</sup> 2018, I put up my art without permission in three different parts of The University of Alberta. My plan was to have a self-guided tour (using the map in Fig.11.) around the university campus. I made posters, postcards, and was planning on advertising far and wide. I spent countless hours planning and preparing my art. I made holders for the postcards I would tape beneath the art. I put up nails early, so the security cameras would only see me put the art up when the time came. I was ready. I borrowed a child wagon, and went around the University placing my art. It took about an hour and a half to mount all the pieces, posters, and postcard holders in three separate sections of the university.

Within three hours part three (SUB building) was taken down by a caretaker who works for the University. On a personal level, it was angering, defeating and deflating. I had spent money, time and energy putting the show together. On an academic level, I knew I had my third chapter for this document.

I wanted to try to make a physical agonistic space. I pictured people touring my art show and having discussions about its location; discussions about the nature of The University of Alberta's space. Was it public or private? Was it right to have an unsanctioned art show as the posters and postcards claimed it was? What was the difference between this and graffiti? I wanted to learn if true public space and/or Mouffe's Agonistic Space was available at the place most representative traditionally as a domain of free thought? Unfortunately, part two of my show was also soon taken down. I lost a few pieces. But, what irked me most (aside from no one seeing it) was I was never able to have an agonistic critical art fight with the University. Most of it was taken down due to a diligent caretaker, who I saw watching me put the art up. I pieced together part of what happened. The day after I put it up a friend texted saying nothing was in SUB. I quickly went to the University and started asking questions. I was told to find M, the caretaker on duty. He was the one who had seen me the day before. M and I spoke briefly as he led me to the mound of my art that he had stored in one of the Student Union offices. When asked why he took it down, he responded that it didn't belong there because art had never been there before. This is an example of normalization. Things don't need to be explicitly stated for people to act on behalf of the dominant structure, although it is not certain that he acted on his own accord.

The University should be a place where all forms of thought are investigated and allowed to flourish and become potential hegemonies in the future. What if some of my art generated new ideas that could be useful to society and those study it? Then, as a student, should I not be able to put them up, or even as a nonstudent but a taxpayer paying part of the University's budget? I really do think that according to Mouffe this would qualify as an agonistic space where everyone's ideas are allowed to be expressed but all vie for dominance. A more ideal outcome, in my opinion, would have been if my art was taken down by another artist and replaced with theirs, art that directly challenged the ideas in my art. I suspect one such thing happened in the law building where my anatomical heart went missing (See Fig.16. and Fig16a.). I picture a young law student taking the heart in a cynical way – as if to say there is no heart in law. My intervention was intervened into, which then becomes a conversation using art. I suppose the art in SUB was also intervened into.

A question arises when people place art into public space without permission. On the one hand should it not be controlled? While on the other if we form certain spaces with gatekeepers it becomes easy to only include those ideals (in art form) which match with the gatekeeper's ideals. This is not agonistic. What if advertisers started putting things up (who have way more manpower) to keep their ads above the rest of the noise? What about the fact that the walls would be completely covered and aesthetically not pleasing? There are seemingly no easy answers to this, and rules like “no ads”, “no hate speech”, “only a few per wall” etc. would be cumbersome to enforce and difficult to navigate as art can be interpreted in numerous ways. Or would it? Is this not the role of public media institutions like the CBC, who, try to reflect the population's opinions and are held responsible, by rules and regulations against hate speech, and are gatekeepers on quality, and are traditionally publicly funded rather than ad-based?



My art was framed and had simple messages. Its purpose was to incite a conversation about technology, space (physical and virtual), and the market-centric media that has increasingly pervaded our cultural space (through the neoliberalism mindset). That being said, the fact that the art was taken down leads us to the type of problems even publicly funded broadcasters of cultural products face: who gets to decide what that art is, who are the gatekeepers? In my case, it was a caretaker. I tested to see if it was my art or the space that was contentious for him. I placed Vermeer, and Hals prints, well-framed, in two of the spots my art was removed. Two days later they were gone and the nails removed. This proves it was in fact the space that was the issue rather than my art.



Fig.12. Zsolt Varsanyi carrying art that was taken down, 2018, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Photo by Z.Varsanyi.

## Public Space

This huge swing towards the neoliberalist model that persuaded governments to cut public funding and let the market take over has not only had social programs defunded but has changed the type of media we consume. Before the 1980s the CBC in Canada, as well as other countries that had strong public broadcasters, used their platform for public good and had social value (Gardner). After they were cut, many of these institutions, just as the CBC, turned to a partial ad-based model so that they could afford to go on. This led them to become much more market (as opposed to public) centric in their programming. This is an important distinction. When an institution like the CBC adjusts its programming to cater to advertisers, they skew their priorities. Many of its programs that informed groups of people have been taken off in favor of programs that are geared towards the lowest common denominator of viewers (and largest viewership) to increase the cost of commercial time. By the year 2000, programming was either syndicated in other countries or copied, leading to very monotone broadcasting the world over versus the distinct cultural and localized voices of countries and this one (Gardner, "A Matter Of Life And Death"). The distinction is that public broadcasting tried to bring in as many voices as possible to create a public discourse that led to a unity of citizens and created community. We digest and internalize the media we consume. It is important that our best interests as citizens are reflected in the media.

While the publicly funded broadcasters tried to include as many voices as possible, there was still a downside of the fact that these organizations had gatekeepers. And then the internet arrived promising a democratizing force which would allow everyone to be both producer and consumer. Unfortunately, as corporations like Facebook, Google, and other social media platform began

evolving the way to make money was to get people to mouse click on links. These links “click bait” used emotion to get the person to click.

In the early days of the internet, many new organizations tried to transfer the old business model onto the web (getting paid by advertisers for the quality of their organizations), but many news organizations (especially newer ones) found that whoever got the most clicks from users were the ones getting the most traffic which in turn led to more profits from advertisers. They found that to attract clicks, they needed to gear their stories towards their target audience. New news organizations started using this “click” centric model and found that viewers who were angered by the link titles and/or images would be the most likely to click on their links (Gardner, “A Matter Of Life And Death”) . Unfortunately, to make people angry one has to find, and many times create, the frame by which the story is told. This created the hyper-ideological split that is happening today with online media. A good example of this is Breitbart news, which editorializes their news with an extreme right-wing slant rather than just reports it. They use social media and its metadata to target people like-minded enough that will click on outrage-inducing links and headlines. This leaves people only exposed to their own biases, which creates a feedback loop in which the person’s biases are reinforced, rather than questioned.

The current way many are being informed is through social media on the internet, so as these new news organizations target certain demographics, they amplify their viewer’s political biases leading to a huge split in citizen’s opinions and what “facts” they base them on. As Barack Obama mentions on Letterman’s My Next Guest: When one “Goggles” Egypt, if one is politically active against the regime in Egypt, they get results that show political action in Tahir Square; if they are neutral (according to Google’s algorithms), they get vacation and tourist destinations. (Netflix).He continues to say that it is important that we are exposed to different

perspectives. It is even more important that we have a baseline of facts (Netflix). Unfortunately, the current model for media consumption is more concerned with the attentions of viewer, than the facts.

When the internet first emerged, many of its users believed it would democratize information and allow people to debate their perspectives. In the beginning it allowed people to produce videos, art, news, etc., reaching vast audiences, as well as consume these media. I tried to turn the walls of the University of Alberta into such a place. It seemed the perfect venue as it is a place where people both produces and consumes information. It should be a “read write” system and yet there are still old gatekeepers in the case of semi-public institutions like the university. In the case of media, we consume daily from the internet, the sad part is that it is not a democracy of ideas, a free place where we can write and exchange ideas, but rather a place where the gatekeepers have changed from arms-length government agencies to corporations like Google and Facebook whose goal is profit, not the public good.

### Read Write

Lawrence Lessig<sup>19</sup> presented a talk about The Read Write Generation. He talked about the fact that for over 50 years, with the advent of Television and Radio, people became merely “Readers” (consumers of media) without too many “Writers” (producers of media).

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<sup>1</sup> Lawrence Lessig is a professor at Harvard, formerly at Stanford, a lawyer, an activist and the core founder of Creative Commons, which augmented the older and less flexible version of copyright (Lessig) thus changing the space to allow a list of easy to follow symbols which give creators and users a legal standard to follow. His knowledge and experience dealing with intellectual property, self-expression, and public spaces allows a more

Since the beginning of recorded music until the mass adaption of the internet we in the West have been a “read-only” (as in non-recordable CD’s, and DVD’s) society. The media we consumed on a mass level was produced only after certain culture industry gatekeepers allowed the media past them. The artists’ access to the gatekeepers’ media distribution systems were contingent on their marketability, rather than their ideas. This is problematic in that; a few anointed people would be in charge of all the filters of all the ideas. One could only participate in mass consumed production of cultural artefacts if the gatekeepers allowed it. And its consumers were not able (allowed) to speak back. Corporate news is a prime example in that it was pressured to frame its stories through the corporate lens. Once the internet arrived, we once again became a “read write” society in which not only could we consume information, we could now produce to a massive audience (Lessig, “Laws That Chock Creativity”) regardless of its marketability. The culture industry gatekeeper cartel was finally over. People could finally produce media and share art, points of view, and stories, with each other without a middleman. Ideas and information could be freely exchanged by citizens. However, information is once again being monetized, because of its tremendous power, which is why, these three interventions: Burning Man, Adbusters and my art, are so important. “The corporations want a “read” generation” (Lessig, “Laws That Choke Creativity”), which something we should all resist because if they get their way we will lose the ability to express ourselves. All three examples of

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nuanced look into all three interventionist art groups in so much that commodification, consumerism can coincide with public spaces, in this case, more specifically the space many of us regard as public – the internet. The main point I use by him is his reading of the “read” versus “write”. It can be compared to a compact disk. There are some which are read only, that is, that one can play music or movies, but not add anything. Whereas “write” refers to being able to add to it like a CDR (Lessig, “Laws That Choke Creativity”).

interventionist art are about protecting the ability to “write.” They seek to protect the individual’s freedom to express themselves.

Art Pieces from the Show

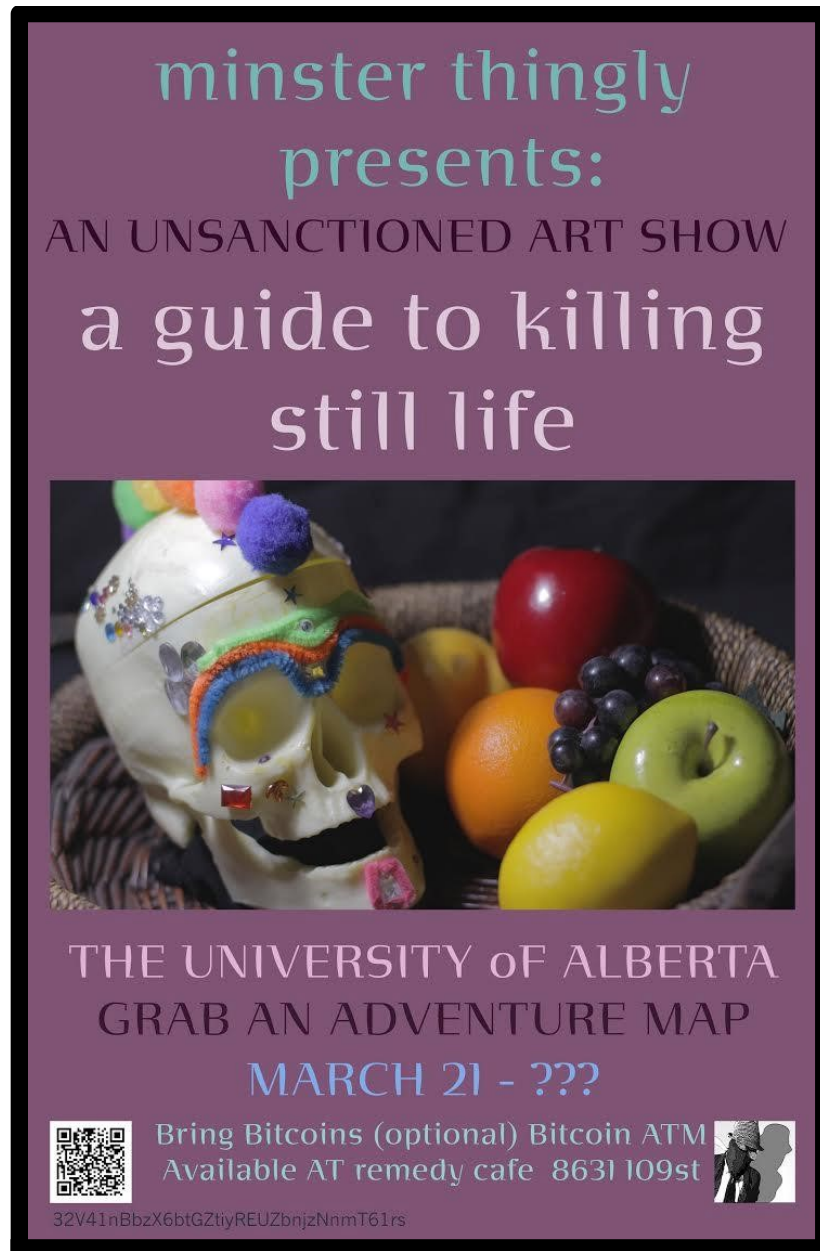


Fig 13. Z.Varsanyi, Kevin Nishimura, Art Tour Postcard, Cardboard 2018, Edmonton, Photo by Z.Varsanyi.

This Postcard (Fig.13.) was created to advertise my Unsolicited Art Show at The University of Alberta. It contains a QR Code for Bitcoin for donations. The back contains a map of all the



pieces scattered around campus (see Fig. 11.). Since most of the pieces were taken down, it has become a piece of art in itself. It speaks to the temporary nature of all things. This next section shows some of my art I had put up for my university art show.



Fig.14. Z.Varsanyi, "Occupy", poli-clay, acrylic, canvas, model figurines, 2018, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Photo by Z.Varsanyi.

I was inspired to make the piece "Occupy" (Fig.14.) to celebrate and mourn the Occupy Wall Street movement which was sparked by the 2008 financial crises and the subsequent bank

bailout. The city's mouth is hungry to silence those who unite in anger against the current financial system. Law and order keep them from what is on the tip of the tongue, change.



Fig.15. Z.Varsanyi, "Paint it White", poli-clay, acrylic, felt, canvas, model figurines, 2018, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Photo by Z.Varsanyi.

This piece called "Paint it White" (Fig.15.) came from an angry place when I heard the following story: In 1965, The Rolling Stones took a song called Maybe the Last Time from the gospel band The Staples Singers, which The Verve took a sample from (for 1997s Bittersweet Symphony) and were promptly sued when it became successful (by The Stones manager) (Goodman, "How

Allen Made”). This music is appropriated, then privatized, and commodified and the original creators are not credited, nor compensated. Take culture from the under privileged, repackage it, sell it back and sue anyone who does the same.

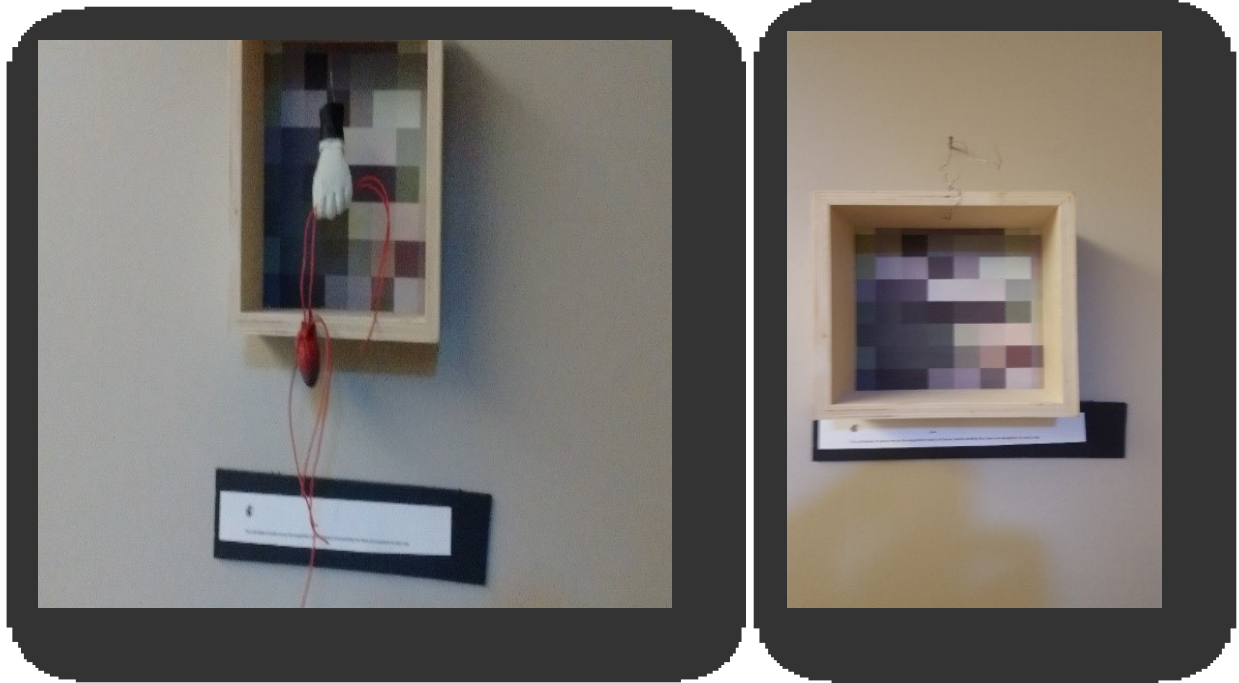


Fig.16. Z.Varsanyi, “Law”, poli-clay, acrylic, wire, frame, paper, 2018, University of Alberta , Edmonton, Photo by Z.Varsanyi.

Fig.16a. Z.Varsanyi, Unknown Intervener, “Lawless”, frame, paper, 2018, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Photo by Z.Varsanyi.

This piece called “Law” (Fig.16.) was inspired by a thought I had about how people in law must have to carry their hearts around like briefcases. I imagined them being able to open and close them at will in a methodical way, to be able to deal with both the powerful system and the breakable clients they represented. The justice system seems like a tough machine while people can be so fragile.

This piece called Lawless was collaboration. I hung the piece called “Law” in the Law Building and the heart was stolen out of the frame (as shown in Fig.16a). Secretly I hope a student lawyer took it and intervened in my art intervention as some sort of statement. I changed the name to “Lawless” and credited the person as “Unknown Intervener” because they just collaborated with my art and created something new.



Fig.17. Atlas, Z.Varsanyi, “Atlas’ Autograph”, marker, leather frame, 2018, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Photo by Z.Varsanyi.

The piece called “Atlas’ Autograph” (Fig.17) was inspired by a story I had heard about a young man who was charged with multiple counts of vandalism for writing his moniker in places. It seemed so ridiculous to me to face huge fines for such a small act. I took a picture of one of his “tags” and put it up at the University. It was missing within a day. I hope it was stolen by the artist. At what point does “art” become vandalism? When it is hard to remove? On the Art tag below the image I had written: Atlas please sign this photo – I give permission, I felt I was being ironic. And, if it was Atlas that stole it, I imagine he would have felt ironic too, as it was his art in the photo.

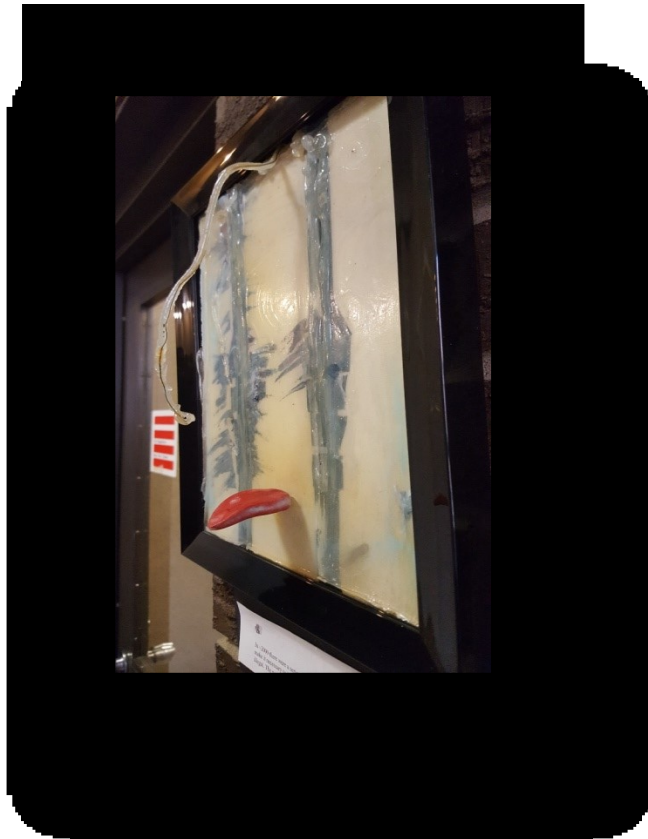


Fig.18. Z.Varsanyi, “Bolivia 2000”, poli-clay, acrylic, wire, 2018, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Photo by Z.Varsanyi.

This is a piece called “Bolivia 2000” (Fig.18.) and deals with my fear of multinational corporations. I was inspired to make this when I heard the story about how in the year 2000 there were a series of protests after Bolivia's water was privatized. A bill was introduced to make it necessary to have a permit to collect water. Collecting rainwater essentially would have been illegal. The populace kicked out the company and the government. Hands are gripping bars, made of water. A tongue reaches out to try and catch some rain.

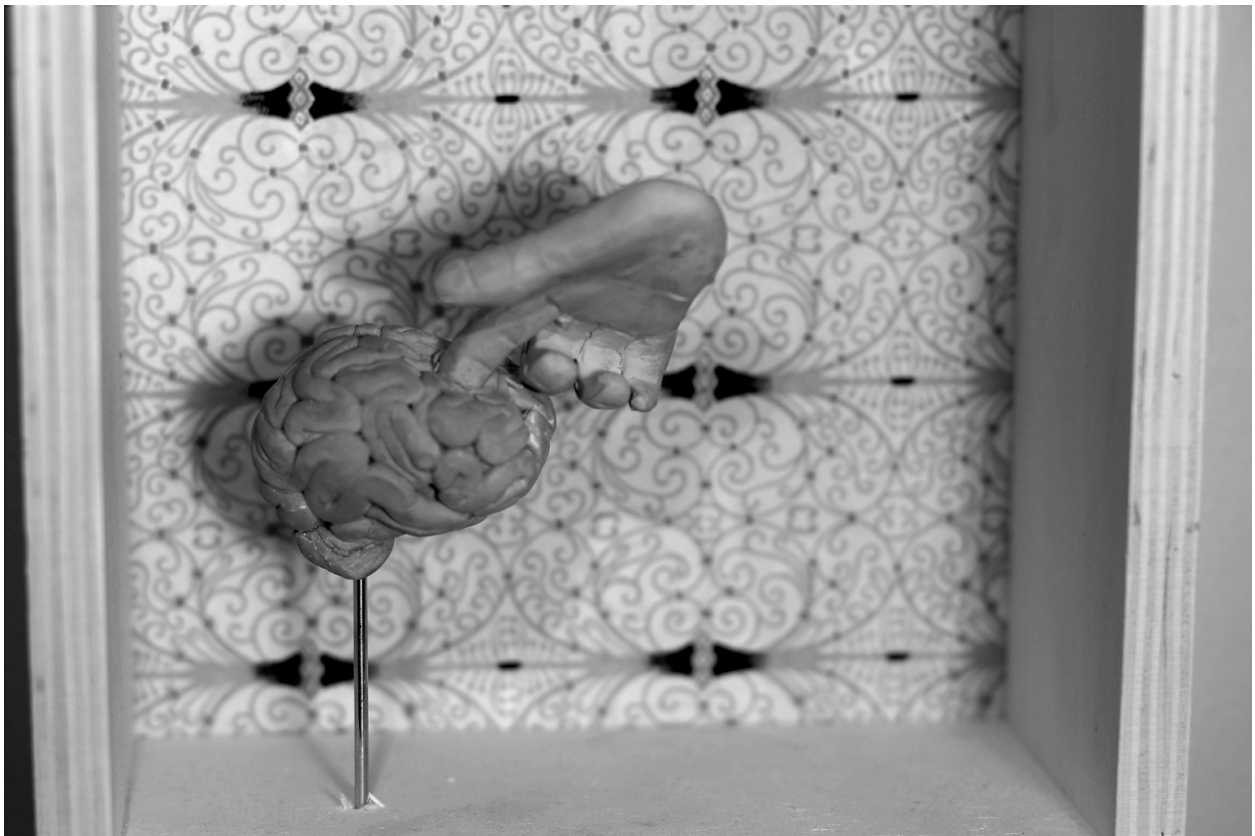


Fig.19. Z.Varsanyi, “Stolen Ideas” poli-clay, acrylic, paper, wire, 2018, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Photo by Z.Varsanyi.

This piece (Fig.19) is called “Stolen Ideas” and was inspired by the story of Aaron Swartz who tried to give the world what was already theirs, their information (as stated before, his life ended



in tragedy when he was caught downloading journals at MIT). Taking your thoughts and selling them back to you. Appropriating ideas paid for by taxpayers, then privatized and sold back to only *paying* members of the public. The bookstore with a new edition every year, pay-walled databases like JSTOR that should be free to all. This is the moment when the story of Aaron Swartz comes to a tragic end, and our responsibility starts. We must fight to keep academic online libraries from being privatized by corporations.

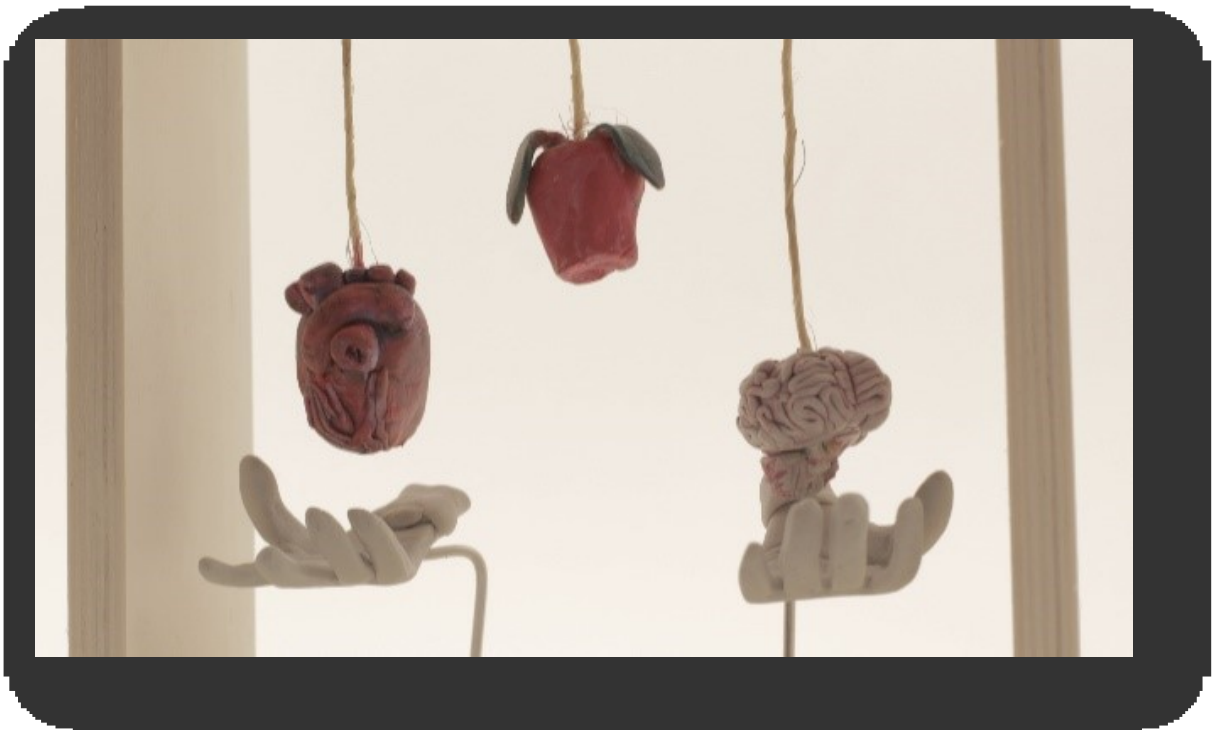


Fig.20. Z.Varsanyi, “You Only Get To Choose Two” poli-clay, acrylic, paper, twine, wire, 2018, University of Alberta , Edmonton, Photo by Z.Varsanyi.

I made this piece (Fig.20.) called “You Only Get To Choose Two” in regards to an issue I am always trying to correct. This is that in order to have a healthy life, I need a healthier attitude. I should not go for the prize unless it gives me more Brain or Heart. The fruit is a tool, not an end

goal. The fruit (apple) represents different desires that can unbalance a person's heart and mind. One really has to juggle sometimes and it's easy to forget what is important on life. For me, it's creating, relationships to family and friends, and as I get older, peace of mind, but the market centric environment makes it difficult for me to remember to live with gratitude, instead of want.

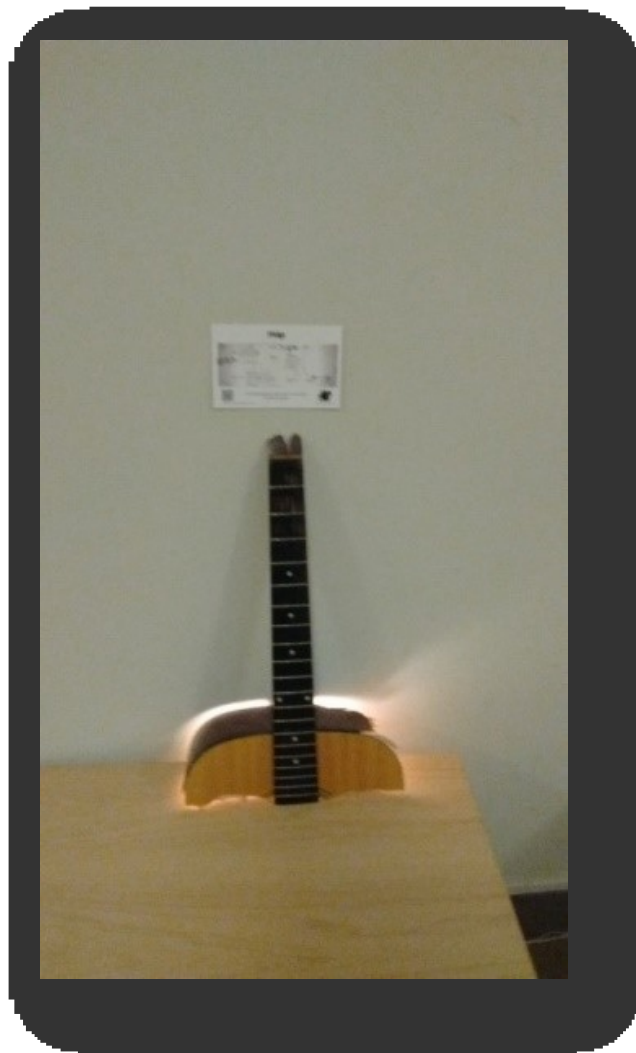


Fig.21. Z.Varsanyi, "Still Life Punk Song". broken guitar, led lights, 2018, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Photo by Z.Varsanyi



This piece (Fig.21) is called “Still Life Punk Song” It The represents the end of this punk ethos and goes along with the Still life Punk(Fig. 22). In the end Punk and Rock and Roll just become marketing gimmicks and commodified lifestyles. Somehow even self destruction has a cash value if romanticized right. Music makes more money when the artist dies.



Fig.22. Z.Varsanyi, “Still Life Punk” Plastic Skull, Plastic Fruit Basket, 2018, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Photo by Z.Varsanyi.

This piece (Fig.22.) is called Still Life Punk and was inspired by feeling ripped off by the punk mentality. It is also the image on the Art Show Advert (See Fig.1.), I found that often punks would over indulge in group identity and the groups rules. We were really hamstrung by our opposition to capitalism. Often we would forsake oppurtunities that would help us financially

because it was “selling out”. Our ideals were admirable and noble, but it’s still life – one has to pay the rent.



Fig.23. Z.Varsanyi, “Flowers of Tech” .barn wood, yoga mat, Tupperware, paper QR Code, led lights, pot, 2018, University of Alberta , Edmonton, Photo by Z.Varsanyi.

This piece “Flowers of Tech” (Fig.23.) was inspired by the hope I have for the future. Much of this hope stems from technology. I tried to use Bitcoin as a donation platform for my art show. I

am an advocate of Bitcoin because it can be a real equalizer in regards to finance. It can (in time) serve as a stable currency. It may be an alternative to the centralized system of banking, which has vast control over people's money. If the bank creates more money to fund a war or some other project, inflation occurs, which devalues money. This is a hidden tax. It also removes the limitations on freedom of association in the sense that one can freely exchange it with whomever they choose<sup>20</sup>. On the other hand, the internet also was to be this democratizing force and yet it has become centralized by big corps.

## Conclusion

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<sup>20</sup> In 2010, Visa, Mastercard, Amazon and Paypal all stopped payments to wikileaks due to pressure from the US government ( Singel, "Key Lawmakers Up Pressure").

When we used to busk, we would often play other peoples songs. Some were obscurepunk rock songs, some classic rock and others were Top 10 Hits. When I think about this now I realize we were often actually “re-detournementing” songs from corporations. We were taking music that they had commercialized and we were putting back into the streets. In the best cases we took songs that were in commercials, that the public linked to products, gave them our own style and sung them live to our audience. I hope there are people out there that thought of us, upon hearing the song later, instead of the product that had become synonmous with it.

I sometimes wonder why people paid us for playing other people’s songs and I believe it is because of what Chantal Mouffe says:“To buy something is to become part of a specific world to become part of an imigned community”(Mouffe, “Democratic Politics and Agonistic”). The difference here is that when people paid us, they weren’t buying a product, but rather paying for an immediiate experience. This is what I was trying to achieve with my art show at the university. People donating money (through Bitcoin) not for a product(my art), but for the experience of the show. So much of the art we make becomes appropriated by the market and sold back to us. As Mouffe says: “This has led some people to claim that art had lost its critical power because any form of critique is automatically recuperated and neutralized by capitalism”(Mouffe, "Art and Democracy").

Much of this show could be looked at as a failure due to so much of it being taken down right away. When I said this to a friend he corrected me. He said: “You did what you said you where going to do, you had an art show at the University of Alberta.” I need to remember that staement because it reminds me that everything is temporary. Just as Burning Man is temporary and all that is really left are pictures, and memories of the experience. The memory of putting the art up serves as a inspiration that will help for my next art show. I may not have reached as many

people as I wished with the show, but I myself have been reached. The fact that I interacted with The University, the way I did gave the sense that I was not just walking through the halls like a tourist, it gave me an immediacy, something I learnt at Burning Man, it also gave me the feeling I was writing, not just reading – I’m referring back to Lawrence Lessig in his Read Write dichotomy.

### My Ideal Public Space

I imagine a place where the people treat public spaces the way Burning Man attendees treat their environment. Burners treat the city like they own it. They respect it, but also are constantly manipulating it. There are still a lot of rules at the festival of what one can and can’t do in regards to art, but many of these are about safety. There is still a part of me who finds that the other rules stifle the creativity and I secretly praise the guy who burnt the man down early one year<sup>21</sup>. Many that year felt it was a way to bring the predictable nature of the festival out of its old routines. There were arguments for and against his action. Some said it was dangerous and disrespectful, while others thought the festival was getting stale. I felt it was a fresh injection.

An ideal public space is hard to pin-point because it too could grow stale. I still believe that street skating, for example, is most creative on the streets, not in a skate park. When one designates a certain area for art – it separates art from reality. If one needs to go to a museum or gallery to see art, it can become stale and available to only those who attend. I have recently been taking pictures at work of how I stack boxes (see below). I put them on Instagram under the “Stacked Art Series” moniker and my work place is suddenly a canvas.

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<sup>21</sup> See <https://www.sfgate.com/news/article/Burning-Man-is-burned-too-soon-arson-arrest-2524487.php>



Fig.24. Z.Varsanyi, "Precarious", cardboard boxes, 2018, UPS truck, Edmonton, Photo by Z.Varsanyi.



Fig.25. Z.Varsanyi, “Robot and the Machine”, cardboard boxes, 2018, UPS truck, Edmonton, Photo by Z.Varsanyi.

In my ideal space at the University of Alberta I grapple with the dichotomy of freedom of expression versus inciting violence and hate. How does one create a space Chantal Mouffe calls an agonistic space without simultaneously invoking the two main extreme threats against its very existence? Those two threats being: extreme censorship, and its opposite, extreme freedom of speech.

In extreme cases there are those who value making a safe space where nothing gets said, so as to not offend anyone– a sort of Disney idea, where thinkers are left feeling unoffended, but also

uninformed, and even more dangerously, they are left with a skewed idea of what the world is like.

On the other hand, there are those who cling to freedom of expression. They cling so tenaciously that anything goes such as hate speech, revolution talk -speech that can be the precursor and incitement of violence without a thorough understanding of its consequences.

I imagine a space that can be hacked, manipulated, even a bit destroyed and still maintain a truth of a time. Perhaps a spot where undergrads are told to write about and years later grads are told the same, perhaps a place that is tended by the student union. I imagine it being a designated space, but one which moves every year, so that the remnants of the previous year still remain.

In my investigating Donella Meadows' strategy for changing a system using leverage points, I attempted to ascertain whether or not I could make the walls of The University of Alberta more of a public space and specifically turn them into what Chantal Mouffe calls an Agonistic Space. I also used or attempted to use five of Meadows' leverage points.

According to Meadows, the sixth most effective leverage point is the structure of information flows (who does and does not have access to information).

With my art show, I was bringing to the forefront information that may not be on people's minds concerning neoliberalism. This information may be available in the countless classes and books at The University, but my perspective and importance I attach to these issues are what makes this an attempt at public discourse through information flows. There is a lot of information (noise some would call it) by highlighting my specific information, by using untraditional methods I tried to reach people with my message.



The fourth most effective leverage point on the list is the power to add, change, evolve, or self-organize system structure.

I tried to change the system from needing permission to put art up to one which allows people to freely display their ideas represented by the art. Of course, in this case, I did not have the power to change the system. More art may make the caretaker give up or get me into trouble. I could approach the University and challenge them on their right to take down my art. Or, it may be that others were inspired and will continue putting up art unsolicited.

The third most effect leverage point is the goals of the system.

The goals of the university's system are seemingly about educating its students. But since the late 1970's it has become more and more expensive and exclusive. I sought to communicate ideas not only to the university's populace through art, but also the public at large. I wanted to show an example of the free exchange of ideas.

I had a strong focus on the second most effective leverage point which is the mindset or paradigm out of which the system — its goals, structure, rules, delays, parameters — arises.

I tried to change the paradigm that implies that one cannot just put art up on their own accord and create a venue wherever they want to. I did exactly that. I could have paid one of the chosen advertising space companies and put my art up in bathrooms and ad designated spaces around the university, but using their platform instead of trying to create my own would have completely undermined this experiment.

The number one leverage point is the power to transcend paradigms.

I tried to change my own ideas about art as a product into art as a conversation. By risking losing all my art I challenged myself about dollar value associations about labour (making the art) into art for its own expression's sake. I tried to transcend the neoliberal idea that everything is a commodity. Although, I did use the digital to find a new way for artists to get paid, through digital Bitcoin, I think the donation model keeps my art from becoming commodified.

My research project tried to explore responsible ways to have Mouffe's Agonistic Space manifested physically in the University of Alberta. I used Meadows' leverage points to try to have the biggest impact. The biggest impact was not for the audience, but for myself. I did it and it has changed me, given me better tools for the future, and most of all the confidence to continue on in trying to make spaces my own.

We internalize the exterior. If that exterior completely and overwhelmingly tells us that everything is a commodity with a price, it is very difficult to not treat all the relationships to the world (including people, things and environment) as something to be priced and potentially sold as property. We live in a time when many of the traditional systems are in question.

Neoliberalism is the current hegemon. We must replace it with a better system if we are to be more than just commodities. Using art is an effective way to point out the flaws inherent in the system and offer solutions to neoliberalism's pitfalls.

The increasing pace of technology is both a challenge and a benefit that we can use to better our relationship to our social organizations. Platforms such as Burning Man, Adbusters, and art interventions spread ideas into the society at an increasingly exponential rate. Other platforms like Google or social media websites are also spreading information which needs to be parsed within frames that are socially productive. To be sure, this is a race against time, in which proper

mindsets need to prevail. By proper I mean mindsets that are conducive to healthy relationships with the social, political and environmental aspects of our lives. Regardless of political stripe, we must engage our system to change it for the better. Creating, as Mouffe says, Agonistic Spaces allows ideas to be shared, argued, and implemented. Using leverage points as Donella Meadows prescribes makes us more effective at changing the system into something beneficial to humans. The neoliberalism ideology is damaging us socially, politically and environmentally and needs to be stopped or at least pivoted into something that benefits society rather than merely makes profits for a few.

The biggest leverage point according to Meadows is to transcend paradigms. In order to do this one must not stick too hardily to one system and rather see what works and what does not. We must be vigilant in our own minds to not think one system will solve all our problems. In order to do that we must have discussions in agonistic space like the three mentioned so that we can use our human agency to control our environments to the most beneficial outcome.

In the beginning of this document I set three goals for myself (see page 9)

1. Glean some insight into idea distribution. That is, try to show my ideas to an audience. I would like to test whether people engage with my art, and if they are willing to donate money. Both of these can be measured and tested through the Bitcoin QR code I have set up.

I never had the chance to find out if the Bitcoin idea for donations would work as the show was over as soon as it started.

2. Change my own paradigm, which I have internalized from neoliberalism. I have been taught that all transactions should be monetized; I would like to break this idea, by putting up and “giving away” my art to the University of Alberta public.

I changed my paradigm and feel even more giving with my art.

3. Test whether I can put some art up on a wall of a semi-public institution to measure if we actually have any public space that can be interacted with and what those limits might be. This is an attempt at an art intervention, in the sense that I am engaging with the space of a university and trying to show whether or not it allows free thought, through the form of art – whether the historical bastion of free thinking allows such a thing.

Unfortunately, my art never got to test whether official university policy would allow an art show.

One thing I remember very clearly is that I was scared. I wasn't sure if the university would discipline me for putting my art up. I had a lot of support, but it was still intimidating doing something against a large institution like the University. I had to face the possibility of conflict and I feel braver for it. As Chantal Mouffe say “If we want people to be free we must always allow for the possibility that conflict may appear and to provide an arena where differences can be confronted. The democratic process should supply that arena.” I feel I exercised my radically democratic values.

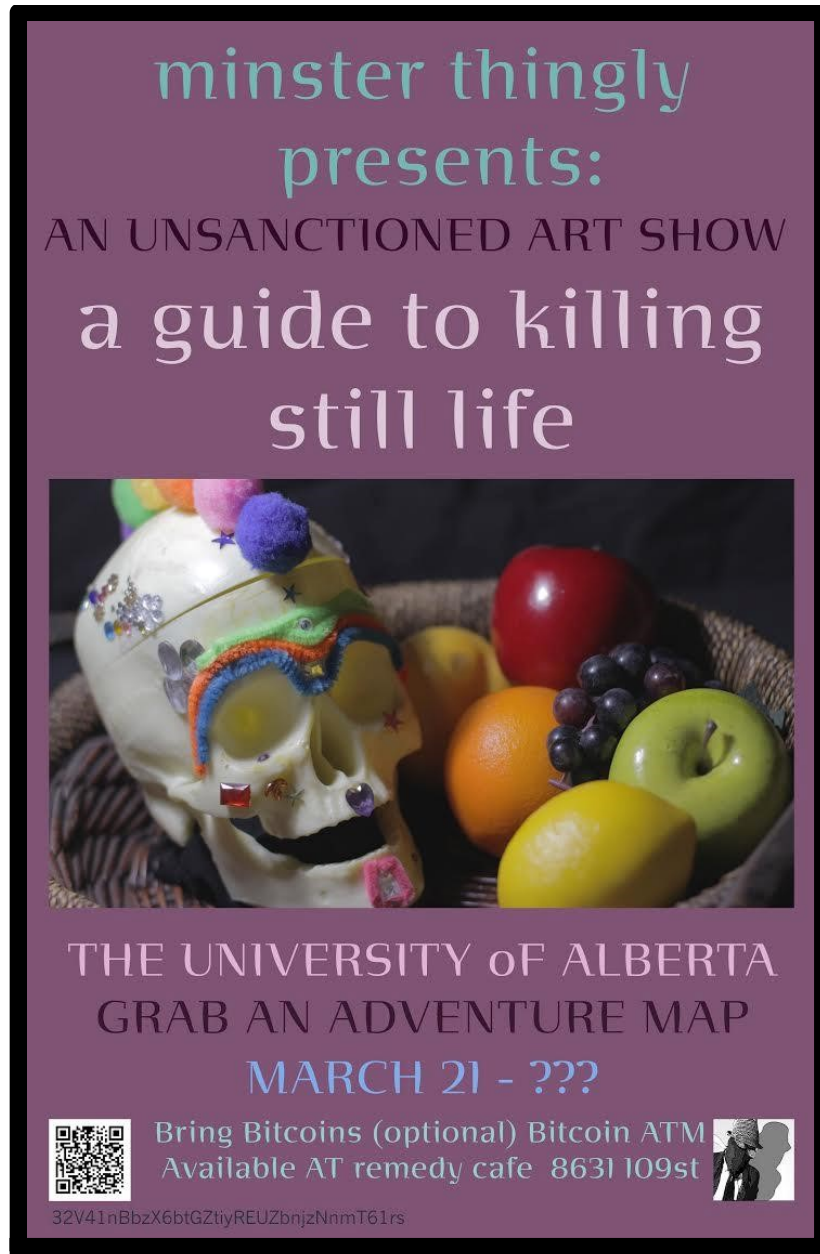


Fig 1. Z.Varsanyi, Kevin Nishimura, Art Tour Postcard, Cardboard 2018, Edmonton, Photo by Z.Varsanyi.

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