

# Live Art and Activism

## Mapping art and action

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*The evening before. Alone. Suspended in half-sleep. I wake. Guts burble. It's morning. I should eat, but don't feel like breakfast. Thoughts zip ahead. Hands moisten. Nerves fizz. There is a buzz in the air. I focus on others. Mull over logistics. Make tea. Rehearse. It is a safe space. The group grows. We tune into our bodies slowly. Building trust. We draw strength from each other. We giggle. Jokes release tension. There is joy. It is time. We have to leave. There is nothing more to be done. Everyone has their roles and knows what to do. The point of no return. Let myself go. Be carried by events. We enter and hold the space. Under veils. Not looking at security. Veils: anonymity, visual uniformity, a feeling of safety.*

Live Art takes many different, elusive, ever changing and shape-shifting forms. The bodies of artists working in Live Art perform in a range of spaces, from peripheral edges to mainstream cultural venues. Live Art is emergent and often 'in articulation' at the moment of doing. It influences culture on many levels, by keeping spaces of difference and dissent open, or by seeping or erupting into mainstream culture. Some Live Art practices, such as the work of David Hoyle, operate at an intersection with activism, and activist groups like Sisters Uncut, deploy Live Art tactics and approaches in their activism. Both Live Art and activism exist on a spectrum; from the day-to-day practices of living differently, to collectively shaping society in our workplaces and cultural spaces, to forming groups, self-organising and taking direct action to make change. Liberate Tate has drawn influence from a range of working processes along this spectrum; it is towards the 'taking direct-action' end of the spectrum that we found our home and it is from this point that we would like to explore Live Art and activism.

### *Liberate Tate: performance interventions inside the gallery*

We believe that there should be no fossil fuel sponsorship of our cultural institutions in a time of climate change. Oil companies had been sponsoring Tate for twenty five years and civil protests outside the gallery were not working. BP was inside the gallery so we wanted to be there too. We decided to do this by making performances; a language that spoke to the gallery-going audiences and management. And, in 2016, after six years and sixteen unsolicited performance interventions in Tate Modern and Tate Britain, Liberate Tate won its campaign to get Tate to drop its sponsor BP. This massive success was one many had thought impossible, at least for several decades. Our creative persistence won, reclaiming Tate from BP, and denying BP the social licence it had sought to buy from the gallery.

Over this period we adopted a range of tactics and approaches to our work, which ranged from delivering and installing a 1.6 tonne, 16 meter long wind turbine blade in the Turbine Hall at Tate Modern (*The Gift*, 2012) to counting the parts per million of carbon in the atmosphere as we walked through the chronologically hung BP galleries at Tate Britain (*Parts Per Million*, 2013). As the date of the BP contract renewal approached we knew we had to add extra pressure and in *Time Piece* (2015) we smuggled sustenance and books into the Tate Modern Turbine Hall and occupied it for two tides of the adjacent Thames river; writing quotes about art, activism and climate change on the floor. With the contract still not signed, we kept the pressure on with *Birthmark* (2016), a performance in which we offered volunteers the opportunity to receive live tattoos of the carbon parts per million that were in the atmosphere on the date they were born.



Bridge action against domestic violence, 2016. Photo by Sisters Uncut

We began our collaboration as artists and activists and formed as a collective. Writing as two members of a core group of around 12 people who studied Tate and creatively explored its spaces over this period, we represent a network of 500 others who joined us in our performances or helped distribute information and disseminate our work. Inside Liberate Tate we were a diverse feminist/queer-led group with a range of members from artists, performers, grassroots organisers, Tate staff, community food growers, academics, NGO workers, publishers, geeks, hairdressers, people who've worked in fashion and advertising, oil nerds, eco-build specialists and theatre-makers. It was during the process of making work together we realised that we were practicing a form of non-binary art activism; a way of working that does not privilege art or activism, but fuses both.

For many years there has been a restricted protest vocabulary: lock-ons, marches or banners. In Liberate Tate our work is equal parts Live Art and direct action. For example, durational performance could be viewed as a kind of occupation, or the interpretation panels in galleries as leaflets.

There are also differences. Live Art is generally sanctioned by the consent of the space being worked in, through an invitation to perform. Direct action is almost always a disruptive and uninvited guest. Performance images and videos are often copyrighted or their use is restricted; in direct action the aim is to use as many channels as possible to ensure what is being highlighted is seen. In the cultural sphere, we are subject to the health and safety checks and constraints of galleries. In activism we take care of health and safety planning ourselves.

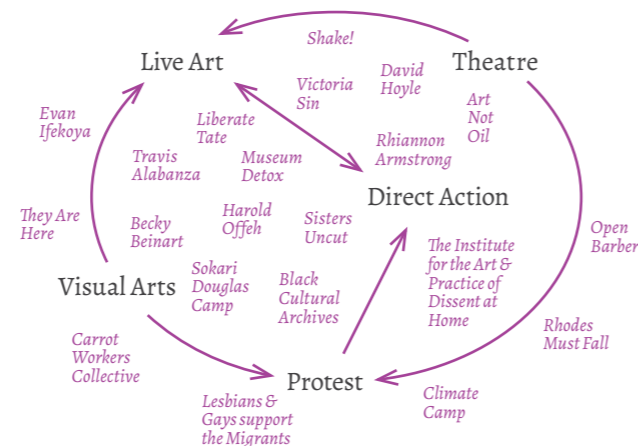
Live Art and activism are enmeshed in many of our works. The rituals we used to open and close our performances set the work in a narrative which contained it and meant there was less potential for the loss of momentum, dissipation and confusion that can happen at protests. Our creative working process is

both reactive and reflective and some of the projects took many years to develop, while others were done relatively quickly.

### Mapping: art and action in the UK

The government's current political agenda of austerity, xenophobia and its dire record on energy infrastructure, disability rights, privacy, the right to protest and climate change has created the conditions for many artists and groups drawing on Live Art and activism. Liberate Tate understood that a performance is harder to shut down than a protest and many groups have followed suit, making works that mirror the languages and framing of the contested site.

We're not saying the following groups would embrace the lexicon we're trying to inhabit around Live Art and direct action. At the same time we can't fail to recognise that our work has taken place within a context sculpted by the work of other socially-engaged artists and protest movements. In trying to understand their work in these terms, we are attempting to move beyond existing discussions around political art/theatre, performance and protest, and towards artful intervention as a dynamic force affecting structural power, not limited to a scope that is descriptive, representational or superficially decorative.



There are an abundance of groups, artists and activists that inspire us and that form part of our creative community, whether working in sites of protest, gallery commissions, or public spaces. This work affects a dialogue between Live Art, theatre, visual arts, protest and direct action, part of an ongoing redefining of terms fundamental to this kind of practice. The Institute for the Art and Practice of Dissent at Home, They Are Here, Evan Ifekoya, Rebecca Beinart, Harold Offeh, Travis Alabanza, Rhiannon Armstrong, Victoria Sin, Sokari Douglas Camp and David Hoyle escape the enclosures of galleries and programmed arts events to explore public spaces, community centres, bars, and high streets to differently intervene and ignite new political and social conversations and collaborations. Where Art Not Oil, Museum Detox, Rhodes Must Fall and Carrot Workers Collective have clearly defined agendas with regard to their demands of arts establishments, Black Cultural Archives, Open Barbers and Shake! work within their chosen networks to build a community and shared language, principles and aesthetics. Lesbians and Gays Support the Migrants and Climate Camp, like Sisters Uncut, are more obviously protest and yet the aesthetic is fundamental, and the interventions the groups make are artistic beyond pretty banners.

Part of our understanding of activism is based around longevity: where the work continues its campaign as part of a long-term vision, building up over time. Some artists remain committed to long term political and social themes in their work, but the commissioning and funding structures in the arts often encourage a momentary critique to wilt into another funding round or disparate point of focus for the next commission. Campaigning to win and change the situation requires a rearticulation of an argument in ever more depth and refinement, rather than a finished form and conclusion.

This is where it is important to address the question of money. In both Live Art and activism, funding models are challenging. Collaboration forms networks of mutual aid to both make work and take action. Artists

and activists may find a range of crowdfunding sources or build around a social enterprise model, like Open Barbers, but it is rare that everyone involved in creating these spaces, communities, moments and interventions would be paid - and indeed this generosity of time allows a freedom of involvement, numbers of people, and personal engagement than would otherwise be impossible on a budgeted project.

### Sisters Uncut: performing protest

Sisters Uncut is a direct action movement with groups set up across the UK to defend women's refuges, and call for local and national government action to reopen the 34 women's refuges closed by the Conservative government. Their campaign centres on the specific, harsher impacts of the 'austerity' cuts on women, especially women of colour and immigrant women. Their means of protest have consistently taken an artful approach: around two hundred women joined hands in a circle to blockade Oxford Circus in 2015. Streams of purple and green smoke flares - a nod to the Suffragettes - have become a visual cue to the group's presence as they occupy council offices and bridges, and the images of defiant protesters within this haze have travelled globally, speaking to a resurgent feminist movement.

In 2016, Sisters Uncut hijacked the première of the film Suffragette with the powerful slogan 'Dead women can't vote', in order to extend their exploration of enfranchisement and violence against women. A number of protestors lay, as if dead, across the red carpet, in the path of well-heeled actors such as Helena Bonham-Carter, who helpfully turned every media interview they did that evening into an indictment of the government for failing to maintain women's protection services. The protest took the well-rehearsed drama of the actors' entry into the cinema on opening night and turned it into a new stage, switching the roles of the lead actors from celebrants of 'just how far women have come' to disruptive commentators on the status quo



Top: Suffragette Parliament action, 2016. Photo by Sisters Uncut  
 Bottom: Suffragette premiere, 2016. Photo by Sisters Uncut

demanding a feminism based in social justice. No longer could the film be used as a liberal whitewash of the feminist agenda as complete, but rather a rallying call for justice beyond the vote.

That same year, merely months after Tate announced BP sponsorship would end, Sisters Uncut made their way to Tate Modern to call for an investigation into the death of artist Ana Mendieta. Forming a circle, holding hands and facing outwards, a group of women and non-binary people undid black clothing to reveal arms covered in blood, making a ring of blood around an exhibit by Carl André, Mendieta's husband, widely believed to be her murderer. Regular calls to stop exhibiting his work until justice has been served have been made by arts communities across Europe.

*Conclusion: art action and active art*

Both Liberate Tate and Sisters Uncut make Live Art in a social sphere rather than in a theatre or gallery. Our work has a social or political agenda and a connection to direct action and both groups often use pre-existing structures or events to draw attention to issues which might otherwise be ignored. While not engaging in traditional forms of dialogue, such as negotiation or discussion, the work is often made with other artworks, performances, social movements and historical events in mind. Sisters Uncut has a hybrid aesthetic of protest and Live Art, while in queering art and activism, Liberate Tate consciously avoided replicating historic forms of protest, practicing the art of getting out of our individual comfort zones – as artists and activists – in order to work together. Like Sisters Uncut, we were (self) organised and persistent. We were urgent, but we also employed reflective and creative processes to make our work. We learnt new skills, created networks and shared resources with other groups working for environmental and social justice.

The works and actions that make up contemporary art-activism are often built on regionally specific dialogues around the most effective, disruptive forms of protest needed to achieve the aims of a campaign. These actions are also informed by the experimental practices, histories and discourses of socially-engaged art in the UK, taking further inspiration from global arts practices, protest and examples of creative resistance. We would like to see more crossover and collaboration between the practices of art and activism in the UK. What might that look like? Animal rights activists moving beyond the blood and nudity to artworks like the French farmer who stormed the Louvre with 40 sheep. No Borders activists allowing the discourses around bodies and borders in Live Art to pose an alternative to Theresa May's hostile environment. Artists standing with community struggles in the long-term, allowing the power of imagination to channel real gains. Politics that repeats the same slogans and art that considers social issues briefly and objectively can neither be enough, but Live Art practices which are deeply engaged in communities and struggles can show us a fairer, queerer, world to come.

*The Institute for the Art and Practice of Dissent at Home*

A home-based initiative, run by a family of two adults and four kids from of a family home in Liverpool.

[twoaddthree.org](http://twoaddthree.org)

*They Are Here*

A collaborative practice steered by Helen Walker and Harun Morrison working across media and types of site particularly civic spaces.

[theyarehere.net](http://theyarehere.net)

*Evan Ifekoya*

An interdisciplinary artist, exploring the politicisation of culture and aesthetics.

[evanifekoya.com](http://evanifekoya.com)

*Rebecca Beinart*

An artist and educator whose projects explore the territory between art, ecology and politics.

[weareprimary.org/people/rebecca-beinart](http://weareprimary.org/people/rebecca-beinart)

*Travis Alabanza*

A performance artist whose multidisciplinary practice screams about their survival as a Black, trans, gender non-conforming person in the UK.

[travisalabanza.co.uk](http://travisalabanza.co.uk)

*Rhiannon Armstrong*

An artist who makes engaging artworks for and with those who do not necessarily think of themselves as art audiences.

[rhiannonarmstrong.net](http://rhiannonarmstrong.net)

*Victoria Sin*

An artist using speculative fiction within performance, moving image, writing, and print to interrupt normative processes of desire, identification, and objectification.

[victoriasin.co.uk](http://victoriasin.co.uk)

*Sokari Douglas Camp*

A sculptor whose primary material is steel. Her public artworks include Battle Bus: Living Memorial for Ken Saro-Wiwa and All the World is Now Richer, a memorial to commemorate the abolition of slavery.

[sokari.co.uk](http://sokari.co.uk)

*David Hoyle*

An English performance artist, avant-garde cabaret artist, singer, actor, comedian and film director.

[facebook.com/davidhoyleartiste](https://facebook.com/davidhoyleartiste)

*Sisters Uncut*

An intersectional feminist direct-action collective, united by a desire to campaign for better domestic violence services that recognise the particular experiences and needs of women of all backgrounds.

[sistersuncut.org](http://sistersuncut.org)

*Art Not Oil*

A coalition of organisations seeking an end to oil industry sponsorship of the arts.

[artnotoil.org.uk](http://artnotoil.org.uk)

*Museum Detox*

A networking and support group for BAME museum professionals.

[museumdetox.wordpress.com](http://museumdetox.wordpress.com)

*Rhodes Must Fall*

A movement to decolonise physical space and challenge the structures of knowledge production that continue to mould a colonial mindset that dominates the present.

[rmfoxford.wordpress.com/about](http://rmfoxford.wordpress.com/about)

*Carrot Workers Collective*

UK-based group of precarious workers in culture & education.

[carrotworkers.wordpress.com](http://carrotworkers.wordpress.com)

*Black Cultural Archives (BCA)*

The only national repository of Black history and culture in the UK.

[blackculturalarchives.org](http://blackculturalarchives.org)

*Open Barbers*

A queer and trans-friendly hairdressing salon in East London, for people of all genders and sexualities.

[openbarbers.co.uk](http://openbarbers.co.uk)

*Shake!*

Bringing together young people, artists & campaigners to develop creative responses to social injustice.

[voicesthatshake.org](http://voicesthatshake.org)

*Lesbians and Gays Support the Migrants (LGSM)*

A community with a history of oppression by the UK state and media standing in unqualified solidarity with those migrants currently facing persecution.

[lgsigmigrants.com](http://lgsigmigrants.com)

*Climate Camp UK*

A grassroots direct action campaign organising annual camps at sites of climate pollution such as Kingsnorth power station and Heathrow airport to be able to live together with a vision of a sustainable future.

[No longer active]

*Harold Offeh*

An artist with a performance-based social practice who explores the inhabiting or embodying of history, often using humour.

[haroldoffeh.com](http://haroldoffeh.com)