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Lessons from Utopia

ABSTRACT

Over the past decade the Center for Artistic Activism has trained over 1000 activists and artists from around the world how to be more creative in their activist work and strategic in their artistic practice. Central to this training is the concept of Utopia. This article explains how Thomas More's Utopia was designed not as a plan of an ideal society, but as a prompt to stimulate the reader's own political imagination. It is argued that Utopia is essential for social movements, and can be used to demonstrate another world could be possible, as a means to critique the present society, as a method to generate new models of society, as a tool to orient movement towards a goal, and as a way to motivate others into joining the struggle for social change. The liabilities of the artistic activist use of dystopia are also discussed.

KEYWORDS

utopia
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artistic activism
art
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social movements

Utopia is on the horizon: I go two steps, she moves two steps way. I walk ten steps, and the horizon runs ten steps ahead. No matter how much I walk, I'll never reach her. What good is Utopia? That's what: it's good for walking.

(Galeano 1995)

CENTER FOR ARTISTIC ACTIVISM

When we met a decade ago, Stephen Duncombe was looking for a way to make activism more creative, and Steve Lambert was looking for a way to make art more effective. With a long career as an activist, Duncombe was frustrated by the standard march, chant, repeat model of so much activism at the time. Lambert, a practicing artist, was disappointed that most of the political art he saw was sequestered in store front galleries, its sound and fury

signifying nothing to anyone outside the small, politically aligned group in the room. United in dissatisfaction, and each convinced the other had the answer we started what would become the Center for Artistic Activism.

We began as a research institution, and the first thing we learnt was that people were already merging arts and activism creatively and effectively, and had been doing so for millennia. We studied artistic activism around the globe, cataloguing the different approaches people use, interviewing artistic activists, and researching what works. From this research we developed a number of training workshops, including the School of Creative Activism, where we train activists to create a bit more like artists, and the Art Action Academy, where we train artists to strategize a bit more like activists.

Through these workshops we have taught, and learned from activists and artists from across the United States and all over the world. We have worked with school de-segregationists in rural North Carolina and anti-war veterans in Chicago, young undocumented immigration activists in San Antonio and older folks in Boston working on Tax Justice, religious leaders in New York and transgender activists in Berlin, organizers working on national independence in Scotland and rights for Roma in Macedonia, sex workers in South Africa and radical artists in Russia. We have even run trainings with public school students in high school art classes and with third graders who were imagining what their future school might be. We have trained nearly a 1000 activists and artists (and ones to be) from four continents, a dozen countries, and a number of states within the United States. In every case, we have seen how learning to think creatively about activism has inspired and energized people, bringing a sense of discovery and play to the serious business of social change. We have seen how innovative and creative approaches bring concrete wins in activist campaigns.

One of the ‘innovations’ we have found particularly effective is, like the practice of artistic activism itself, actually quite old; the ideal of Utopia. Independently of one another, we had both been working with Utopia for years. Lambert had been creating artworks that prompted audiences to imagine alternatives and ask ‘what if?’ and Duncombe had edited a Creative Commons edition of Thomas More’s *Utopia* (2012) and designed a web-based platform that allowed users to write their own Utopias. So perhaps it is no real surprise that Utopia has become a centerpiece of both the analysis and training we do at the Center for Artistic Activism. What follows is an overview of our thinking about Utopia and its application in arts and activism, in short: Lessons from Utopia.

As we always do in our workshops, first we start with an exercise.

EXERCISE: IMAGINE WINNING

1. Think of a problem you have been working on lately, or an issue you are passionate about. It might be a concern you have been struggling with for a long time, or it might be a campaign you are just thinking of beginning. Do not worry too much about what it is, we are after something bigger here.
2. Now, call that problem or issue into your mind and... *Imagine Winning*. Imagine what would happen if you have limitless funding, countless volunteers to help you, popular and political support, and everything goes your way. Picture the best-case scenario. What would success look like?

3. Take out a few sheets of paper or a sketchbook and sketch a picture (using words or images) of what that win looks like.

Done?

4. Now we are going to challenge your imaginative skills. Picture this: your authors have the ability to time-travel. We have seen the future and, guess what? We have come back with good news for you: You Did It! You Won! Everything you described above has happened. *Everything* did go your way. Yes, like magic, it is done. Take a moment and bask in the win. Hold a glass aloft. Put your feet up. Set aside the voices that tell you this is all silly and just allow yourself to dream for a moment. Relax and breathe in the sweet air of victory. It feels good.

And, you can do better. Your vision of success may be too modest.

Once, when doing research for a public artwork in San Francisco, Lambert and his friend, Packard Jennings, asked urban planning officials a similar question about winning. With everything at their disposal, and anything possible, what would success look like for them in transforming the city? The officials leaned back in their chairs and thought for a moment, and then, after another few moments finally replied: 'We would have more trees and more bus lines'. More trees and more bus lines are great, but these planners could do *anything*. This was far from the kind of bold vision Lambert and Jennings were hoping for. So they told the professional planners 'Ok, congratulations! You won! You have more trees and bus lines'. And then they asked: 'What would you do next?' That is what we want you to do now.

5. Go back to your imaginary win, and now that you have that success under your belt, ask yourself, 'What would I do next?'

If you are freaking out, it is to be expected. It is hard to imagine accomplishing something that you have been working on and dreaming about for a long time. It is even harder to imagine what would come next. Acknowledge your discomfort and put it away. Just think about what would come next and draw a picture of what this next challenge would be.

Guess what? You accomplished it. You won, again. Congratulations!

This challenge was met, even more easily than the last. The details of *how* you did it are not important. The point is, you are very, very good at what you do and you achieved your objective. Now... ask yourself: what is next?

6. Repeat the step above at least *five* times and continue until you reach a place where no further wins are possible, and there is nothing more to do. A world where everything you have wanted to do has been achieved. A world in which you can – if you wish – retire from being an artistic activist and spend the rest of your life painting pictures of thatch-covered cabins in the woods. The world of your dreams.
7. Now, take a moment to imagine living in this world you have won. See it in your mind and picture it vividly. Imagine walking around this world. If it helps, pretend that we have come to visit you from another dimension (we can travel in space as well as time) and you are taking us on a tour, showing us this amazing world that you have been able to bring into being.

Spend a few minutes thinking about and answering these questions.

- Where do you live?
- When we leave your house or flat, what do we see outside?
- What are people doing? How are they living?
- As you walk around, what do you hear? Smell? And feel?

8. Describe this amazing place in your sketchbook. Draw pictures of it.

This is what winning looks like. *This* is what you are fighting for. *This* is what gets you out of bed every morning to face the hard work that being an artistic activist calls for. And *this* is what is going to motivate others to join you. *This is your Utopia.*

Lesson 1: There is an alternative

We use this exercise in all of our trainings, and guiding people through it is one of our workshops' most difficult moments. Over and again, participants find themselves struggling to imagine a world where they have succeeded. It is as if they are afraid to allow these thoughts to enter their minds because acknowledging them will make it too difficult to return to the everyday reality of setbacks and struggle.

Being so close to the issues we are struggling with, we often get caught up in the immediate problems we face. Once, when we were working with the group of criminal justice advocates in Houston, Texas we witnessed this first hand. The activists were organizing and agitating for rights and services for incarcerated young people. We asked them what a win would look like for them. Their immediate response was very specific: the full implementation of Texas State Senate Bill 103, a piece of legislation that offered some protection and rights to incarcerated youth and their families. Their objective was understandable. A lot of the group's organizing effort had been focused on this bill, and a number of the activists present were mothers whose own children had been incarcerated. 'Winning' the proper implementation of SB 103 would be a considerable political as well as personal victory. It made a lot of sense for these activists to focus on this bill.

The problem was this: *no one* outside these activists, and some lawyers, bureaucrats and politically active prisoners knew, much less cared, about Senate Bill 103. So we pushed them like we just pushed you in the exercise above. And after a few rounds of asking, 'and then what?' we got to another place: a place far beyond a single legislative victory. They described a place where incarcerated youth are back living with their families, sitting down at a big table and eating meals together. A place where the smell of pancakes waft through the apartments and sounds of children playing outside come in through open windows. A place, where people are cared for, mistakes are forgiven, crime is not a problem, and jails are a thing of the distant past. A place where the sun shines and everyone is happy.

They described a fantastic world, but this was what those activists in Texas were *really* fighting for – it was the core vision that motivated them. And, as important, it is a vision of a world that other people can fight for as well, no matter what their relationship is to the Texas prison system. Senate Bill 103 was merely an objective – an important objective that needs to be won – but only a step towards a much larger goal. It is very difficult to build a movement

around a problem – what we need is a goal. A place that others – whether they are aware, care or understand our specific problems or objectives -- want to reach with us.

In our workshop, we are there to carry (and sometimes prod) people forward through this process. Here you must push yourself. Revisit the exercise above and see if you can push a little further. Envision *total* success, beyond what you think could ever be possible. Then spend at least a few minutes wandering around that world. Do not be afraid of where it might lead you. Some participants in our workshops encounter tremendous resistance when thinking through their series of victories. There is a feeling that articulating successes presents a danger, and it is better to protect one's self by never envisioning what we truly want. Most participants are able to push past this resistance and, sometimes for the first time, illustrate the ideal world they are fighting for. We have lost count of the times the process has led to tears of joy, both from the speaker and everyone around them, as they describe simple things like a dream of sitting down to a family dinner. From Kenya to Connecticut, regardless of the group or issue, it is remarkable how similar and relatable these ideal worlds are. As diverse as we are, we share some common dreams.

Our goals need to encompass our most personal fantasies and our common aspirations. They need to be far out on the horizon to guide our journeys and attractive enough for others to want to join us on our walk. Our goals must be Utopian, for imagining Utopia is essential for any creative and effective transformative action. As the radical scholar Robin D. G. Kelley reminds us; 'The most radical art is not protest art, but works that take us to another place, envisioning a different way of seeing, perhaps a different way of feeling'. That is what this article is about: using imagination to set goals that inspire people, give direction and stimulate creativity, envisioning a different way of seeing and feeling. Finding Utopia.

Perhaps you are not convinced. After all, is not politics a serious business dealing with dire realities that we cannot just imagine away through silly speculations about fantasy worlds? And is not the function of activist art to problematize and challenge, not conjure up happy visions of unicorns and rainbows? You are not alone in this distrust of Utopia. Once, when running a workshop, we were interrupted by an 'activist' artist who upon hearing us hint at utopian ideas, insisted that 'we need to be honest about *what cannot be done*'. He demanded, with righteous urgency, that we focus on the hard realities of the dire situation and the limits of what we could possibly do. This, he insisted, was being realistic; he dismissed our interest in Utopia as naive.

Our interest in Utopia is far from naive – it is based in a serious, grounded and *realistic* assessment of how power works, and why change happens. We will share our theory of power with you now: *the dominant system does not dominate because most people agree with it; it dominates because we cannot imagine an alternative.*

Many activists and artists operate under a different premise that the biggest problem we face is that most people do not understand The Problem. And, since most people do not understand what is wrong, it is our job to tell or show them The Problem. This may be true in some cases. But in most instances, people know something is wrong, they are suffering, or are witnessing suffering. Night after night they watch the horror show of reality on the news, and every day presents new examples of how messed up the world is. It is not that people do not know that something is wrong, it is that alternatives are so difficult to imagine.

‘There Is No Alternative’ was the mantra of Great Britain’s Conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. To any complaint about the inequity of power or wealth or the brutality of cuts to public services – in short: the ruthlessness of capitalism – she would simply reply: ‘there is no alternative’. It was an effective tactic, and her mantra has been embraced by rulers around the globe to justify austerity and promote the spread of neo-liberalism. Thatcher understood that the job of the powers-that-be is not only, or even primarily, to keep people down. Instead, it is to deny us the possibility of looking up.

To keep people down you need to apply constant pressure. This may be effective in the short run – it is still the favored method of the many authoritarian police states – but it has long-term costs. It is very expensive to run a prison camp 24/7. More important, it provides a tangible enemy on which the downtrodden can focus their anger and disappointments. Once people can identify the instruments of their oppression these forces can be challenged and overthrown. Take away the oppressor’s guns, knock down the walls, change his laws, and anything seems possible.

But what if nothing seems possible? What if the world we live in is the only possible world there is, and our station in life is not the result of political decisions, but the natural, inevitable outcome of history? There may be inequality, injustice and oppression but if ‘there is no alternative’, then what is the purpose of rebelling? You can’t change reality; like gravity, it is a law of nature. Given enough time, those in power may not even need guns and laws as people normalize control so completely that they expect it, accept it, and even ask for it.

Power works both ways: keeping us down and insuring we do not look up. The question for those of us interested in changing the world is this: Where do we apply our efforts and deploy our talents? Is it more effective to focus on the controls that keep us down, or on opening up the skies so people can imagine an alternative? It is not an either/or situation, but we seem to spend a lot more of our time and attention focusing on what keeps us down rather than looking up. Challenging oppressive laws and throwing politicians out of power is absolutely necessary, but getting rid of the problems we face does not guarantee a better outcome. Even if capitalism, patriarchy, and white supremacy are doomed, it does not really matter if we cannot imagine an alternative. We believe that the job of artistic activists is to examine the present with a critical eye, *but also* to imagine and create a new world, and help others do the same. To conjure up Utopia or utopias.

Lesson 2: There is no-place like Utopia

The word ‘Utopia’ was invented 500 years ago by Thomas More to describe a fictional, far-away island in his book of the same name. More’s fictive world is everything his sixteenth century European home was not. Utopia has a democratically elected government and priesthood, where women can attain positions of power; there is public health and education and Utopians are guaranteed the freedom of speech and religion; Utopia provides foreign aid to other countries, targeted towards their poor; living and labour are rationally planned for the good of all and, perhaps most utopian of all: there are no lawyers. (More was a lawyer himself.) At the root of Utopia, the source from which everything grows is the shared wealth and the community of property. The quality of this society is best described thus:

[E]very house has both a door to the street and a back door to the garden. Their doors have all two leaves, which, as they are easily opened, so they shut of their own accord; and, there being no property among them, every man may freely enter into any house whatsoever.
(More 2012: 90)

Utopia is, well, pretty utopic.

But for a book that gives birth to such a commonly used word, *Utopia* is an exceedingly curious text, full of contradictions, riddles and paradoxes. The grandest and best-known paradox is the title itself. 'Utopia' is a made-up word, created by More from the Greek words *ou*, meaning 'not', and *topos*, meaning 'place'. Utopia is a place, which is literally, no-place.

The power of Utopia lies in its ability to be possible and impossible, real and unreal, all at the same time. Through telling us a story and leading us on a journey, he convinces us that Utopia is a real place. He gives us specific details on how the Utopians live, what their mating customs are, and how their cities are constructed. The world that More sketches is so lucid, so convincing that we imagine we are there. Like watching a good movie or seeing a great performance, we lose ourselves into this other world. What is foreign becomes familiar and what is unnatural is naturalized. More is a master of affect. We are not just *told* that an alternative model for structuring society *could* be possible, we are *shown* and thus *feel* that it *is* possible. Through More's vivid writing he provides us with a vision of another, better world.



Figure 1: Ambrosius Holbein, Utopia, 1518, Woodcut in Thomas More's Utopia, Folger Shakespeare Library Digital Image Collection, Public Domain.

And then he takes it away by calling the whole thing No-Place. Why? More wants us to imagine our own Utopias. The problem with most Utopias, be they prophesied by holy men, imposed by political dictators, or envisioned by scientists on the pages of *Popular Mechanics*, is that the Utopias they propose are presented as The Answer. All the imagining and planning is done by the enlightened few and the job of the rest of us is to get used to it. And, what if we do not? Well, then the problem is with the people, never the plan. Off to the gulag with those who disagree!

More solves this problem by refusing to allow us to believe in the possibility of *his* Utopia. He takes us there – lets us see it and feel it – but then reminds us that this place is just imaginary. He does not want us to simply swap our world for his alternative, so he makes his alternative impossible for us to inhabit. But it is too late for us to go home; we have been exposed to the idea of an alternative. We have been to Utopia, and once we can imagine someplace else, then we know that the world we live in today is not the only one possible. We can imagine another world.

Utopia is not a place we will ever reach; it is space that helps us think about where we want to go. It is not a realistic *plan* of a new society, nor is it a cynic's *prank*, it is a *prompt* to help us imagine for ourselves. 500 years ago More gave us the key to unlock the secret of Utopia; it is not a place, it is a tool for imagining.

Lesson 3: Putting Utopia to work

Theory is fine, but the important question for those we work with is practical: how does Utopia help artistic activists to bring about the social change they desire? Here are five ways we have found to make Utopia work.

INSPIRATION: UTOPIA DEMONSTRATES ANOTHER WORLD IS POSSIBLE

Creative Utopian projects have the ability to transport people into a radically alternate universe. This is not an alternative we think about or consider, but one, we can see and feel, and maybe even taste, smell, touch and hear. It is an alternative we affectively experience – and this makes it very effective. As we have argued above, the biggest obstacle to change is the belief that there is no alternative: that the world as it is now is the world as it always was, and will forever be. To catch a glimpse of a different way of living and being can free us from this prison house of the imagination.

Oftentimes protests or socially engaged art exhibits are attended as an obligation, the political equivalent of eating spinach. We know it is good for us, but that does not mean that we will enjoy it. Utopia works differently. If well constructed, Utopia is something that people are attracted to. It is a place that people want to come to, to visit, to live within and to help create. It is a place where people want to go and a place where people will follow us. It 'demonstrates' the world we want to bring into being.

And, of course, Utopia is no-place. We cannot create a real utopia, but as artistic activists we can stage it temporarily. With props and people we can perform it. For a brief time, and in a small place, we can create the experience of an alternative.

We created just such an alternative once in a park in the capital city of Macedonia. In the spring of 2014 we travelled to Skopje to work with activists advocating for the rights of LGBTQ and Roma peoples. These groups were marginalized at best, and actively discriminated against at worst. The