Ways Of Depropriating Images

Sónia Díaz, Gabriel Martinez

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SONIA DÍAZ & GABRIEL MARTÍNEZ
Un Mundo Feliz
Escuela ArteDiez, Madrid \ Spain

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INTRODUCTION

Looking is a conscious act, a political act, which demands a slow tempo. The gaze is altered by the direct experience of the observer and by the social context in which the image is inscribed, establishing a non-mechanical relationship between art and its context. What defines each epoch is its way of looking and *depropriating*, of questioning limits and expanding the thresholds that limit us. But what is the way of looking in our times? How can we freely create a new activist sphere with real subversive power?

1. DEPROPRIATION: A COLLECTIVE METHOD

Marcus Boon (2013, 31) defends the cultural and social value of the copy and sees 'depropriation' —an exercise of subtraction that maintains a double contradictory movement of appropriation-expropriation— as a tool that allows other forms of sociability to be modelled and a device that favours freedom of expression through the creative exercise of counter-appropriations in order to bring forth 'one's own'. Boon raises the problem of the possible uses of the terms 'appropriation', 'reappropriation', 'misappropriation', 'ex-appropriation' and 'de-appropriation' or 'inappropriable'. Emphasising that the idea of appropriation is intimately linked to the gift, the free gift, the ultimate 'gift of being' of sentient things. Depropriation allows things to happen freely, without imposing closed rules or conditions, it functions as a 'flow of being' that manifests indifference to possessing. It belongs to an ethics of giving that is opposed to ownership. It is a form of 'renunciation' (Boon 2013, 224) that leads to liberation and independence from people and things, in the case of visual activism, from images. While this may all seem very positive, Boon reminds us that this can generate a situation of terror of the emptiness of the self.

Depropriation, in our opinion, becomes a model of seeing images, of assuming them with a logic that allows for countless versions of something that can be shared by a group of people without the need to claim authorship, of an image that can be unrecognised and even misidentified. There is in this model a sense of improvisation, temporality and subversive misrepresentation that can be very useful for activism. The Internet is the 'space of appropriation' because the code allows it, and its ubiquity, interactivity and accessibility offer the possibility of being able to share any kind of textual and audiovisual information, which gives it great potential for political struggle. Marcus

Figure 1.
Continuous reuse of Un Mundo Feliz
pictogram by the collective Salva Lo
Público as a stencil and by workers of the
Madrid Public Health Service on banners.
© Un Mundo Feliz and © Salva Lo Público

asserts that 'depropriation means learning to relax' (Boon 2013, 230). In this way, by eliminating the exclusive or privileged use of something, we are opening it up to the use of many others. Thus the possibility of re-appropriation of a wealth that only belonged to a few arises. The activist philosophy that promotes the free exchange of culture argues that such appropriations are possible, that the new logic of the 'multitude' and its forms of life (Virno 2003, 42) as a commonplace is the 'enjoyment of the copy'. Once again we are confronted with the possibility of making possible and accessible an 'economy of the gift', 'gift economy', 'freeconomy', etc. The most subversive value of the copy-as-gift is that it is cheap - free for the one who produces it and totally free for the one who receives it. It is useless in a utilitarian —commercial— sense, and yet it has an expressive potential based on improvisation, on the encountered experiences it provokes. This can be seen in the subcultures based on the exchange and gift of fanzines and other self-published objects.

Depropriation as cloning is a method of great activist use. Its potential for paraphrasing, copying, falsifying, revalidating and re-presenting gives it a special place for visual critique because it allows a praxis of continuous re-use of concepts and images for the construction of new utopian constellations. Its value is not aesthetic but strategic as a generator of conflict and counter-power. The aesthetic language of economic and political power, its logos, its messages and its philosophy are cloned through fakes or false images. But the system also uses these counter-messages to its advantage in order to sell more with guerrilla marketing and pseudo-activist commercial campaigns. That is the idea, cloning confuses the opponent and blurs the opposition between the conflicting parties; it is a *give and take* that is endlessly repeated and duplicated. Cloning

Figure 2.
Iconic depropriation through the
recontextualization of images from
popular mass culture. Three examples:
Disney, Barbie and Hello Kitty.
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allows symbols to remain in time. The student occupation of Tiananmen Square in 1989 as a spontaneous and critical reaction against the official Chinese communist regime is replicated by the occupation of new symbolic spaces with the Arab Spring in Egypt, the 'City of Sun by 15M or the Occupy movement on Wall Street. Cloning occupations and their messages are forms of communication that start from symbolic public spaces and create a shared experience of greater significance than the local event. This is a recurrent feature of international activism. Cloning Chinese Communist Party posters in Beijing to criticise the system and spoofing or replicating capitalist commercial advertisements for critical purposes has become a widespread tactic. The May 68 demonstrations with graffiti, posters and banners have been a recurring example for contemporary dissident graphics. The main reason is that it uses media that are cheap, accessible and socially and collectively effective. The key possibly lies in its potential for self-expressiveness. People like to get their hands dirty and participate. Visualise their opinion and participate creatively with words and images. An example that shows us the most intimate communication is in the photos taken by mobile phones. It is a format that is widely replicated due to its simplicity in its production and dissemination on the networks. Selfie-photos and selfie-posters use the self-portrait technique to express a personal opinion, support and opposition to different causes that the person believes to be important.

Like Katsiaficas (Jacobi 2012, 71), we can argue that copying and cloning is not a medium in itself, it is essential that what is cloned and replicated retains the values of the original in order for the messages to remain meaningful. The concept of 'cloning' is strongly inspired by the relativist and capitalist postmodernism of the 1980s. However, critical activism when playing with iconographies recreates new histories and appropriates

Figure 3.
Typographic depropriation through
glyph manipulation and mash-up. Three
examples from the political types project:
Impact(o), Stencil Mix and Arial Symbol.
© Un Mundo Feliz

the symbols that social and political movements have created over time, continually taking them up and giving them new interpretations and uses. All critical cloning is the aesthetic reuse of images and symbolism imposed by the powers that be, in order to critique those same powers. Many of these emerging artistic strategies share these same premises: appropriation art, because appropriation is not only a way of questioning the authenticity of the work and the author, but a critique of cultural history. The most important thing about appropriation, from a critical point of view, is that it is a method that allows us to re-contextualise meanings.

A question repeated by many of the radical communicators is, is it worth recovering or reviving elements of the past or is it better to create entirely new material? From our perspective activists know that there is an immense variety of socialist, communist, anarchist and libertarian images waiting to be revived, images of people reclaiming their right to free speech, to struggle, to food, to life, to love…. Very recognisable images such as the fist or the dove of peace are loaded with a predefined meaning. Whenever we revitalise these images we can tap into all the emotions and hopes that are already imprinted in people's consciousness. In short, if we recover these images, it is because they are recognisable.

2. RECURSIVITY: A CREATIVE MODEL

The Internet is recursive. The concept of recursion is linked to repetition. But in order to repeat itself, recursivity needs something to happen previously and, in this way, it is associated with

other previous and subsequent repetitions. According to Padilla (2012, 43-44), recursion is a great creative resource because it produces something new through consecutive repetitions. In communication design, recursion occurs when messages and images are nested within other phrases and images in potentially infinite chains. In a recursive system the parts possess properties that transform them into a whole. The elements are independent and yet share the same characteristics as the total system. Their way of growing is by integrating elements into a larger whole. The consequences of a recursive system is that it eliminates hierarchies as each fragment is a complete whole. It presents itself as something open-ended that continually replicates and multiplies. It allows potentially infinite images and messages to be constructed from a limited number of resources.

Images have an unlimited expansive capacity. The content and goals of activist communication are formalised using meaningful political rhetoric and aesthetics in tune with society and produce a much bigger image than an artist or designer acting independently. This idea of an expansive image makes it possible to think and act as a group and in a collective and collaborative way so that symbolic political communication is possible. The expansive effect is brought about by the mass media —television, telephone, computers— which make the growing wave of global protests visible. The new social movements make effective use of the new technologies, endowing them with a strong symbolic power. The images of occupied squares around the world are

Figure 4/5.
Pictomontage, mixing of several pictos, as a creative form of recursivity. Protest Peace dingbat font and Woman Sans.
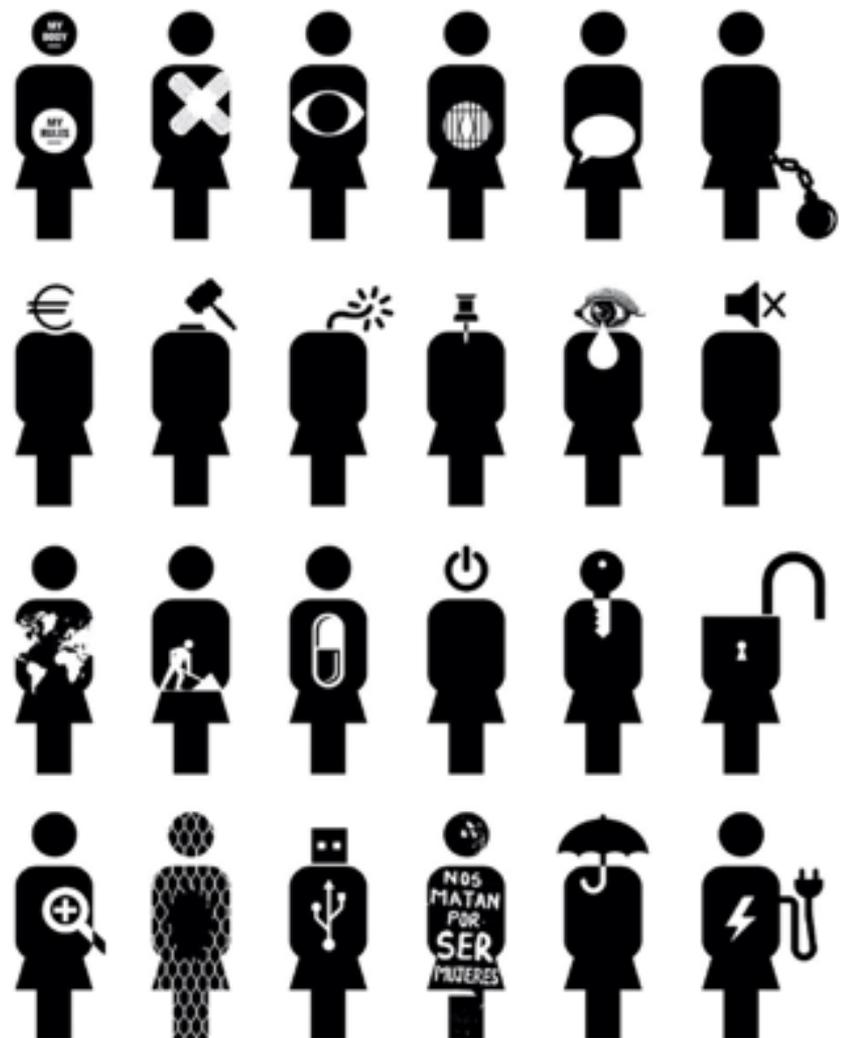© Un Mundo Feliz

Figure 6/7.
Sticker Bombing Project and Okupazion festival. Temporary occupation of a public space, freestyle exhibition, random installation of stickers and free distribution of stickers and fanzines.
© Un Mundo Feliz and © Okupazion Collective

Figure 8/9.
Sticker Bombing Project and Okupazion festival. Temporary occupation of a public space, freestyle exhibition, random installation of stickers and free distribution of stickers and fanzines.
© Un Mundo Feliz and © Okupazion Collective

so convincing that it is no longer the number of direct participants that matters, but the number of followers. There are two levels to these activist demonstrations, the micro and the macro. The micro is what happens in the performative space itself where the collective executes the performance-images, where the form is the message. The macro level is the one that communicates the images that are already distanced from the experience, it is the spectacular representation that is retransmitted.

3. AUTONOMY: A FORM OF ACTION

According to Katsiaficas (2009) the concept of 'autonomy' has been used to refer to the 'independence of individual subjectivity' although the use that interests him is that which refers to collective relations within social movements. She gives as an example of the autonomous feminist movements that put forward a 'politics of the first person' where individuals act according to their own will, from a self-managed consensus. It was in the 1970s, in Germany, that the activists of the anti-nuclear movement called themselves autonomous in order to defend the logic of the new spontaneous forms of militant resistance. Most of the autonomous groups we know today are represented by radical pacifists, counterculture and squatters, who, according to Katsiaficas, are guided by a form of direct democracy endowed with 'conscious spontaneity' to change everyday life.

Autonomy makes it possible to create contesting spaces outside the territory of dominant politics to generate the 'phenomenal forms of contemporary radical activism'. Their own logic leads them to be an invisible movement organised in small self-governing communities and specialised in direct-action. These two reasons place them outside the system and they are seen by public authorities as 'dangerous' anti-system groups. This is a complex issue because the 'spectacular' visualisation of the movement comes from the most radical and extremist sectors. Autonomy makes it possible to construct a marginality that can be positive or negative, depending on how it develops. For the media and the powers that be, marginality is in itself the confirmation of its dangerousness. However, the margins in which the autonomous model moves are the most propitious for promoting social creativity. Being on the margins means being able to move freely, not having to take anything for granted. It allows us to take advantage of what is different and to actively promote dissidence. Working on the margins gives the possibility of inventing paths that have not been trodden. It allows us to get confused without having to explain ourselves. It is the ideal place for experimentation because the margin does not belong to anyone, it is the genuine place of passage, the frontier without a border.

Another interesting contribution of the autonomous is its resistance to uniformity, systematisation and order or the grid. In this sense, what unites the autonomous as a movement are the differences, each group defends its own lifestyle, its own clothing, its own idea of politics, creates its own rules and lives its life outside a society controlled and limited by the consumption of ideas and 'uniform forms'. The autonomous movement stands for individual freedom and critical non-conformism in the face of individual freedom based on consumption.

For Katsiaficas (2009) these 'marginals' are 'central to social change' because, despite being a silent crowd, they work to produce alternative models based on other values (feminism, sexual liberation, equal rights for foreigners), other forms of social organisation
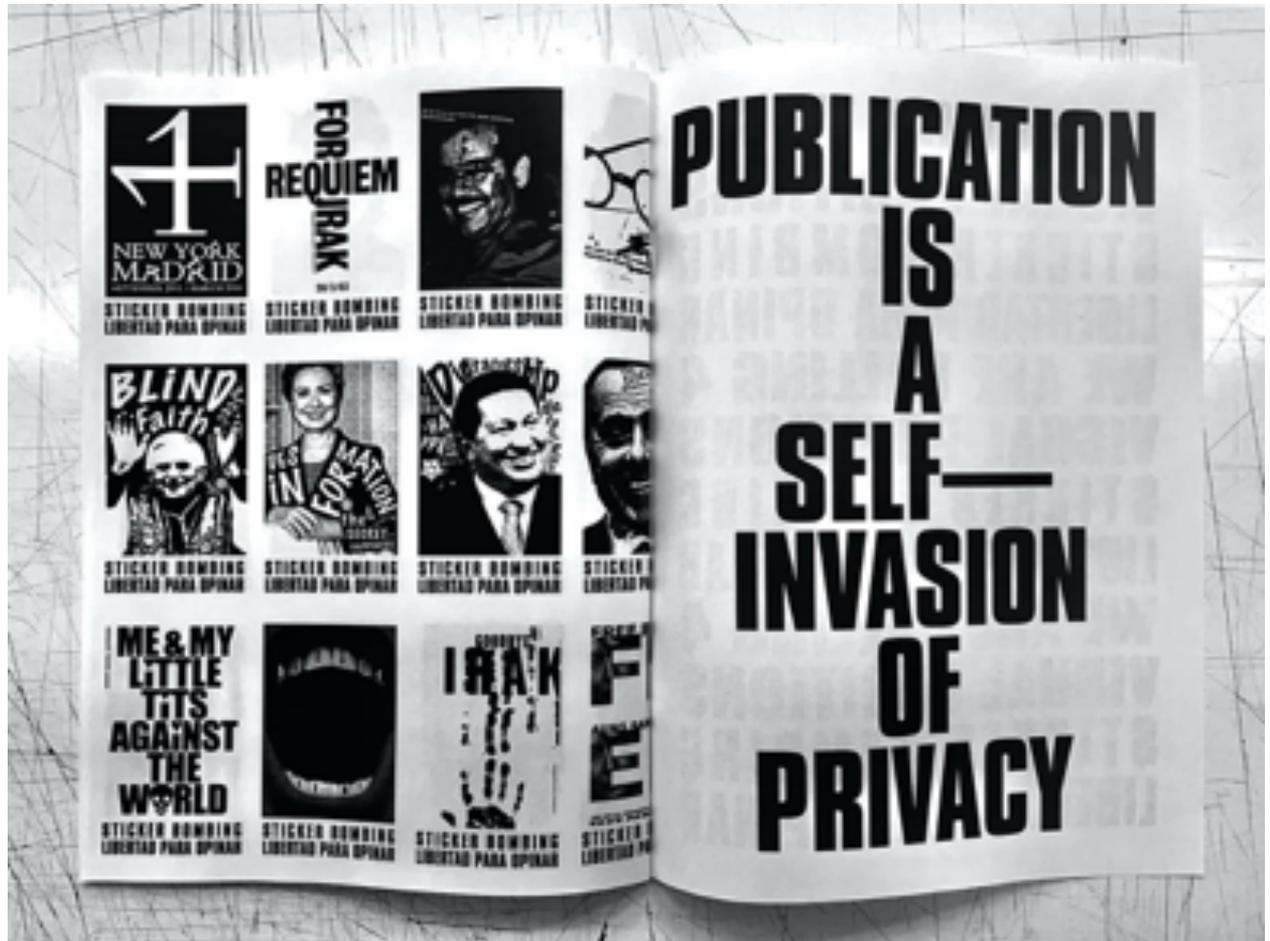
Figure 10/11/12.
Self-publishing and fanzines as a creative
expression of self-management
© Un Mundo Feliz

Figure 13/14.
Pictopia Stencil, instant poster self-printing
workshop using stencils and Crit-Icon Stencil,
free distribution project and use of different
graphic material.
© Un Mundo Feliz and © Espacio_E Gallery

—shared group lives, self-directed employment and study programmes,cooperative work relations— that over time influence the evolution and improvement of static institutional models. The sum of all forces (movements, tactics, ideas), their configuration and sudden activation in a given context connecting a group of people 'at essential levels of life' is what Katsiaficas calls the 'eros effect'. This effect works instinctively driven by a 'rationality of the heart' if the situation is right. It is a passion for social transformation. In the words of Katsiaficas (2009): 'The eros effect refers to the sudden, intuitive awakening of solidarity and mass opposition to the established system'.

4. SELF-MANAGEMENT: A POLITICS OF EMANCIPATION

Many networked activisms design unfinished devices where participation is key. Their philosophy is to allow and motivate other nodes to make their own decisions and act autonomously. They are forms of agency for emancipation and the construction of

Figure 15/16/17.
Exhibitions: Towapo at Centro Arte
Complutense of Madrid and A.R.S.
Anti Rape School at Insituto Leonés de
Cultura in León and A.R.S. Anti Rape
School at ESAD Matosinhos, .
© Un Mundo Feliz and © Instituto
Leonés de Cultura

subjectivities that manifest the new liberating politics of which Alain Touraine speaks when he states that 'we no longer want a democracy of participation; we need a democracy of liberation' (Sandoval 2003, 50). According to Padilla, many hackers and activists are setting up 'politically oriented enterprises' born out of the precarious option. These activist and non-profit initiatives base their economic model on personal and collective sustainability, managing resources, infrastructures and service provision with an alternative strategy. They are in the market in an ambiguous way, as their work is very much anti-business and their services are based on a social model where work and militancy seek to be compatible (Padilla 2012, 107-108).

Another model is presented through the personal initiatives of what Margarita Padilla calls 'anyone'. Here new rules appear where the small and open is an enormous potential factor for change because it allows a direct connection with other 'anyone', giving rise to 'emergency phenomena' (Padilla 2012, 111). Graphic creativity applied to causes has a logical existence and seeks spaces in which to develop. Society needs these visual manifestations and demands new spaces - physical and virtual - for their practice. There are many culturally regulated models such as competitions, graphic biennials and exhibitions in institutional spaces, but what becomes more interesting is when it takes the form and resources of the underground and the 'anybody', thus avoiding control. When criticism is authorised, the most authentic and radical values and perspectives are always lost. That is, those with the greatest transformative potential.

5. THE GIFT: A DEVICE FOR CREATIVE REBELLION

Marilyn Strathern (1988) in The Genre of the Gift notes that the characteristics of the gift 'are defined in their interrelationship' and that the logic of the gift is the 'production of social relations'. This premise is very similar to that of Caroline Humphrey and Stephen Hugh-Jones in their analysis of the 'peaceful' activity of bartering (Humphrey and Hugh-Jones 1997). What is remarkable about these social customs is that over time they have coexisted with other more formal economic transactions. The gift and exchange as marginal activist practices have great value. We are interested in emphasising that, although it may have use and exchange value, its main reason lies in its capacity to question capitalist political-economic relations. The gift functions with an autonomous logic that allows for bewilderment, play and 'the construction of autonomous modes of relation within the framework of cultural capitalism' (Claramonte 2011, 25).

Implicit in these forms of social outreach are the concepts of free exchange and the gift economy, which as Gregory Sholette suggests can become activities of great subversive power or 'gifts of resistance' (Sholette 2008). On the subject of art and the gift economy there are very interesting projects such as 'The Gift. Generous Offerings, Threatening Hospitality' (2002/2003), 'Exchange rate of bodies and values' (2002), 'What we want is free: generosity and Exchange in recent art' (Purves 2005), 'The work & the Gift' (2005), and the work of the *Temporary Services* collective (1988), which proposes many of its proposals from this experience of gratuity, erasing the dividing line that exists between art and everyday life. The main idea underpinning this model is free circulation and generosity as a practice of reciprocity (Jacob 2005, p.6) exemplified by the mountains of sweets and posters of Felix Gonzalez-Torres,

the culinary events of Rirkrit Tiravanija, the collaborative project 'Food' (1971) led by Gordon Matta-Clark and the gift-experiments 'Free Manifesta' and 'Free Biennial' by Sal Randolph. It is important not to forget that generosity is not something passive, it requires the responsibility of the participants to provoke a real creative rebellion.

For activists, the free gift becomes an act of disobedience and 'passive resistance', and an example of non-violent struggle against the dictatorship of capitalism. The gift is a subversive activity of boycotting the market economy. The ghost-paintings spray-painted by Alan Gussow in New York as a critique of the military attacks promoted by Ronald Regan in 1982 (Sholette 2008), the International Shadow Project projected by Donna Slepack and replicated all over the world thanks to a DIY publication. The white painted bicycles used as street furniture by *Visual Resistence and The Street Memorial Project* that would later inspire the New York Ghost Bike as well as in cities around the world such as Canada, Austria, Brazil and the Czech Republic. The importance of these DIY and fringe creative manifestations is beyond doubt. They are an example of creativity that develops on the fringes of the market. They mark a path to be followed by activists looking for other scenarios and other messages. Pedagogies of resistance and informal social production are a form of re-appropriation and creation of a common space. A commonplace that is not productive and yet is able to create a culture of 'free cooperation' through 'tactical means'. As Gregory Sholette states, these gifts of resistance come with instructions: study it, use it, and then please re-gift it generously to others (Sholette 2008). However, we cannot forget that the value of these projects lies in enabling 'informal social production'. And if they succeed as commercial objects, then this is a symptom of their failure.

6. EXPOSING ONESELF: EXHIBITIONS AND POLITICAL POSITIONING

As we have already reiterated, the way we see the world depends on our frames or mental structures and these frames shape our goals and action plans. Cultural frames shape cultural and social policies; but when these do not fit our needs we should propose a change. According to George Lakoff (2007, 17) 'to change our frames is to change all this. Frame change is social change'. For the Un Mundo Feliz collective the objective has always been clear, to think differently is to speak and act differently. If we consider design as a public activity, it should always and manifestly intervene in the development of life in society and express political and cultural values. Our approach is based on a social model according to which, as Pierre Bernard (2001) points out, 'the social responsibility of the graphic designer is based on the desire to take part in the creation of a better world.'

Un Mundo Feliz's exhibition projects are situated in the debate on cultural production from a political and social perspective. That has always been our commitment as curator-designers: to provide clarity, because 'when the ideology of an exhibition is not recognized as part of the exhibition itself, its sociabilizing potential is sacrificed for the sake of formal values.' To prevent this from happening, Olafur Eliasson states that, it needs to be made 'manifest in some way to the visitors' because it is a matter of commitment to make this representation visible. For Eliasson (2012, 51), 'an exhibition cannot remain outside of its social context' and must 'be of the time'. This is our main political commitment.

7. CODA: THE BEST WAY TO DISAPPROPRIATE IS TO SHARE INTANGIBLE GOODS

The digital revolution, according to Margarita Padilla, has brought a new set of resources: immaterial goods. These new goods do not follow the logic of material goods as 'they are abundant because the cost of copying tends to zero and because copying does not wear out the original', they can be easily shared, self-produced and duplicated, and the more they are used the more social value they accumulate. The success of this immaterial strategy is due to the fact that its production is the result of remixing, recycling and recombining material already given that it is not destroyed in the process of continuous reworking. This model is genuinely political and proposes a new economy of sharing and enjoying abundance, which in turn fights against the censorship of copyright, artificial
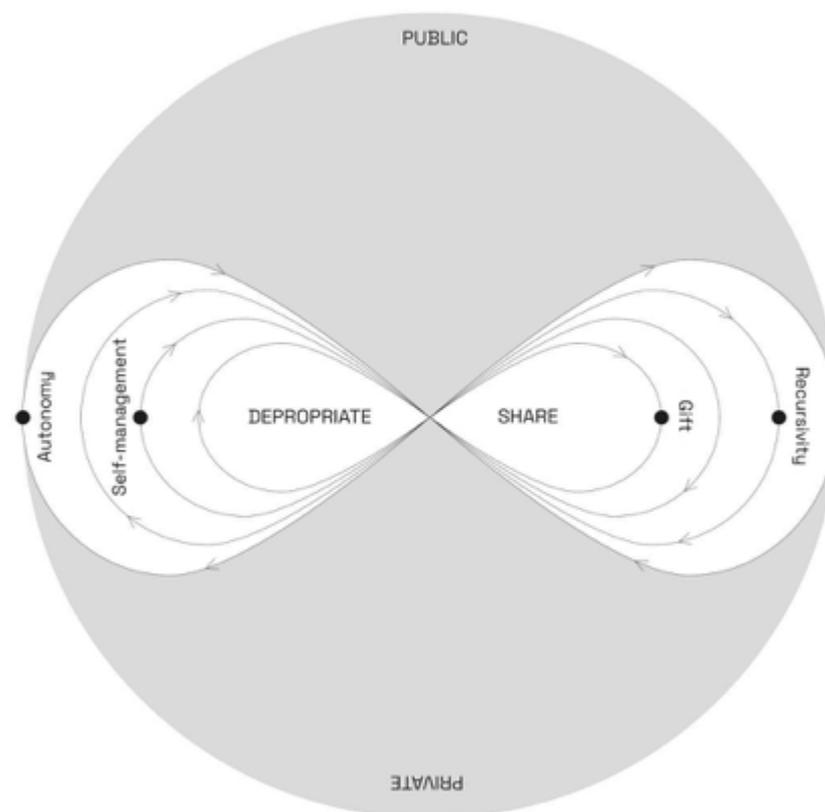
Flowchart of free subversive-activist circulation in a new public-private sphere.
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scarcity and obscurity imposed by the codes of established power. This new system extols 'the massive and generalised possibility of consuming-producing videos, audios, images, designs, ideas, conversations...' (Padilla 2012, 62) in a totally free way, creating a new public-private sphere of great subversive power (Zafra 2010).

In 2005, the online platform *Sharing is Good* (Hacktivistas.net 2011) proposed a radical philosophy based on achieving many effects at little cost. Their struggle focused on combating all kinds of privatising forms of cultural production. In their manifesto 'sharing is good' they argued that creativity is protected by sharing it, that this action of sharing culture, knowledge, technique and power is a legitimate and legal right.

The fundamental contribution of Hacktivists is the defence of copyleft, where all their production is public and open, that is, in the public domain (Padilla 2012,

101). The concept of free circulation makes a difference because many visual activists maintain an idea of ownership and authorship that, due to its restrictions, may no longer make sense in the 21st century.

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