Intervening in the environment of the everyday

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1. Introduction

Gramsci, perhaps more than any other marxist writer of his generation, draws our attention to the ways in which power is both consolidated and contested within taken-for-granted aspects of everyday life.¹ Language, theatre, pulp fiction, and painting are all potential arenas in which clashes between different groups struggling for moral, cultural, political or economic dominance might be fought. Political ecologies are criss-crossed with such hegemonic struggles. Hegemonic projects, in turn, might be considered socio-natural projects. Indeed, as I will argue in this paper, political change is bound up in reworking the socio-natural relations through which everyday environments are produced and experienced. In excavating this concept of nature in Gramsci, I seek to bring it together with some of his more overtly 'cultural writings'. I argue that within the work of certain interventionist art projects we see the way in which everyday environments have become both a subject of and, importantly, a means of, artistic production. Thus, interventionist art, whilst potentially a starting point in a struggle for 'a new culture' and 'a new civilization' (Gramsci, 1985, p. 98), can also become a provocative and a participatory entry point for democratising natures and developing a broader revolutionary politics. Bringing both together, we find a platform for what Gramsci terms the struggle for 'a new reality' and a 'new moral life' (Gramsci, 1985).

In considering these interventions into the environment of the everyday, it is possible to explore an unresolved tension within Gramsci’s writing. On the one hand Gramsci recognises the ever-present agency of everyday people. Thus, all are potentially intellectuals, all are potentially philosophers, and ‘the Modern Prince’, as he refers to the future Communist Party, must represent a real synergy between party and populace. However, whilst going a long way in disrupting the vanguard’s role in leading the masses, this never quite vacates Gramsci’s overarching philosophy of praxis. In Hollo-

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¹ For others marxist theorisations of the everyday see Lefebvre (1991), Benjamin (1999) and Vaneigem (1983).
way’s (2006, p. 270) terms, a critique of hegemony still cannot begin from within. Concepts like counter-hegemony and, presumably, the war of position, “are additions, not integral to the concept itself”. For this reason, hegemony is “the great cop-out category, the great crossover to bourgeois theory” (Holloway, 2006).

If, as I intend to in this paper, we are to delineate those aspects of Gramsci’s thought that are of relevance for a contemporary green-left politics, we cannot simply ignore those aspects we are uncomfortable with. The problem of the vanguard is far from an isolated one. Indeed artistic avant-garde movements have begun from similarly problematic starting points. Thus, within avant-garde praxis, whilst divisions between artistic practice and everyday life are targets to be destroyed, it remains artists, as extraordinary figures, who are the privileged agents of change. The revolutionary subject remains one who has specialised knowledge and creative expertise. Miles (2004, p. 8) points to this tension within the historic avant-garde:

“the avant garde occupies a location paradoxically both inside and outside the wider society: it seeks to represent the condition of society as it is, devising an appropriate language for the purpose; and it sees ahead, as if having a vantage point on high ground or looking to the future (and at the present) from a belvedere”.

Whilst Holloway’s criticisms have some validity, I argue that through recognising how hegemony is situated within the act of producing everyday environments – not as an add on but as something integral to the concept – hegemony and everyday praxis can, once again, be seen to be necessarily, ineluctably intertwined. An external critique of hegemony from a Party organisation or an avant-garde is not the central goal; rather the conditions of possibility for radical critique are immanent within the socio-natural relations of day-to-day life – in the tower block, the street or the water tap. When the socio-natural relations that comprise everyday environments become both the subject and medium for interventionist practices, entry points are opened up for a radically democratic politics.

In making this argument, I begin by reviewing aspects of Gramsci’s ‘cultural writings’, looking at how he situates artistic practice within the struggle for a new reality. Following this, I consider Gramsci’s concept of nature, showing the important similarities this has with both the cultural writings and with Smith’s (1984) quixotic conceptualisation of the production of nature. Importantly, Gramsci was committed to an understanding of the world that refused simplistic divisions between nature and society. His concept of nature and his view of political change thus come together. The struggle for revolutionary change is a socio-natural project rooted in the experience of producing everyday environments. Following this, I look at specific urban interventions through the work of artist Siraj Izhar and the interventionist collective City Mine(d). In the work of these two, I suggest, we see radically democratic practices in which the city itself becomes a key resource for the means of artistic production. Following Benjamin (1973), in arguing that transforming the means of artistic production is central to artistic struggles for political change, I suggest that urban interventions open up the nature of the city as an inspiration for everyday people to create alternative urban futures. Rather than being rooted simply in representational practices or in transforming the consumption of art (through ‘doing’ art in public space), both City Mine(d) and Izhar democratisate the process of producing art. In doing so, they focus attention on the experiences latent within everyday environments. In this way, the environment of the city is both a resource and a terrain over which democratic struggles to create a new reality might be conducted. I conclude by emphasising the ways in which this speaks to debates about gramscian thought, as well as developing a radical philosophy of urban political ecological praxis.

2. Possible artists

Gramsci’s writings are steeped in an awareness of the profound shifts taking place in the cultural world, especially in literature and the arts. As theatre critic for the Socialist weekly, Avanti!, he published over 200 reviews of plays and was one of the first to draw attention to the relevance of Pirandello’s innovations in the theatre. During Gramsci’s eighteen month spell in Moscow, between 1922 and 1923, Trotsky turned to him for his opinion on the radical practices of the Italian Futurists; even at this early stage, Gramsci (1985, pp. 52–54) was sensitive to some of the ambivalences within this high-Modernist art, whilst simultaneously recognising that the majority of its practitioners had fallen under the sway of Fascism. Throughout the prison notebooks there is a profound sensitivity to cultural questions, whether in Gramsci’s battles with Croce (1971, p. 371, 1991, pp. 326–476) or within his sense of the possibilities and potentials latent in the cultural terrain. Large sections of the prison notebooks are dedicated to trenchant analyses of the new styles of literature emerging in early 20th century Italy, to debates around journalistic practice and to vital questions around who reads what and why. Although many of these reviews are of real interest in themselves, my interest is more in the approach Gramsci developed towards the study of culture. Rather than taking his insights into the development of Futurism as the basis for an analysis of contemporary interventionist art, my interest is in the methodological possibilities opened up within his work.2

Perhaps Gramsci’s best-known methodological insight is to interpret struggles over culture as key facets in the establishment and stabilisation of common-sense understandings of the world. Nineteenth-century Italy had failed to develop a genuinely national-popular literature, hence the reliance on popular literature from France. The question of how to build alliances and unite the Southern peasantry with the Northern proletariat rests, at least partly, on developing the kind of connections made possible through literature and language. Nevertheless, Gramsci (1985, p. 30) remained opposed to cultural impositions such as Esperanto. The unifying potentials of language need to be exerted from “the bottom upwards”. This reflects a broader theme within Gramsci’s (1985, p. 93) cultural writings, the sense in which cultural practices cannot simply be forced on people in an instrumental fashion. Rather, political organisations must both reflect and build upon already existing practices. In turn, he rejects any understanding based on a simple mechanistic relationship between art and politics, criticising “the fatuous naivety of the parrots who think that with a few brief and stereotypical formulas they possess the key to open all doors (those keys are actually called ‘picklocks’)” (ibid.). Instead, a new art will be born from, and is a part of, the formation of, a new strata of intellectuals with a new mentality. As I will argue later, the production of new natures and new relations between people and things is a step in the generation of this new artistic praxis. Conversely, the production of new natures might emerge from the forms of consciousness made possible through this new artistic practice.

Such an understanding is intimately related to Gramsci’s understanding of hegemony. Hegemony encapsulates the consensual relations through which people actively, optimistically, assent to leadership. It describes the cultural – or moral, intellectual, linguistic and folkloric – ‘glue’ through which societies are held together in a common world-view, often in spite of vast material disparities. And it refers to one of the key strategic developments within Gramsci’s open Marxism. Creative practice is both an important moment and a tactical resource within the kind of war of position

2 This echoes Lukács’ (1971) claim that if every one of Marx’s theses were found to be false, it would not be necessary to renounce an orthodox Marxist position. Orthodoxy, he claims, is to be found in method alone.
that might be necessary to challenge hegemonic formations when open class struggle is neither productive nor possible. Gramsci’s transformation of Lenin’s notion of hegemony broadens the understanding of political agents from the proletariat and the peasantry to journalists, to artists, to a broad range of everyday people, simultaneously wresting it from an elite of political functionaries in the state apparatus. In short, Gramsci’s understanding of hegemony is anchored firmly in the everyday. Thus, developing an underground struggle to transform both the dominant forms and the main content of journalism, literature and art is a starting point for stimulating new ways of experiencing the world (Gramsci, 1971, p. 346), generating a new, organic strata of intellectuals (Gramsci, 1971, pp. 5–23) and transforming the educative experience. Gramsci’s role in establishing the journal L’Ordine Nuovo is a pre-eminent example of how this insurgent role might be developed. Here a new relationship was established between readers and the party. As L’Ordine Nuovo showed, what we understand as ‘culture’ is a terrain shot through with power relations, fields of struggle and, above all, creative possibilities.

In spite of his insistence on the development of artist-intellectuals organic to subaltern groups, the figure of the Party still hangs heavily in Gramsci’s work. In this regard, he is often criticised for an inability to develop a critique of hegemony from within a working class movement (Jameson, 2004; Holloway, 2006, p. 270). Thus, “innovation cannot come from the mass, at least at the beginning, except through the mediation of an elite for whom the conception implicit in human activity has already become to a certain degree a coherent and systematic ever-present awareness and a precise and decisive will” (Gramsci, 1971, p. 335).

For me, as I’m sure for most of a left democratic persuasion, this is one of the most dispiriting aspects of Gramsci’s work. Just as we find a theorist who utterly transforms the notion of the Party to one rooted in a dialectical relationship with the populace, the Modern Prince returns to perform a vanguardist role in bringing enlightenment to subaltern groups. Here, hegemony appears an external concept. The mediation of the Party is necessary for its transformation. Of course, Gramsci is far from alone amongst historical materialist writers in such a conception of the vanguard. However, for other marxist humanists, such as Lefebvre and Benjamin, inspired respectively by the Surrealists and by Brechtian theatrical techniques, it becomes possible to transform this (hierarchical) notion of the avant-garde – as an elite travelling in front of society – into one in which critique is integral to everyday life. Avant-garde groups develop this critique of everyday life, exploiting pre-existing tensions, raising open the immanent potentials, rather than clattering in with a detached, external set of ideals or doctrines.

There are, in fact, perhaps paradoxically, quite similar claims within Gramsci’s writings. Thus, in his telling insights on the philosophy of praxis, Gramsci lays emphasis on what might be considered to be an immanent critique. Such a critique would begin, he suggests, not from the idealist immanentism of Croce but from the fusion of politics, practice and philosophy to be found in the philosophy of praxis. Thus:

"it seems to me that the unitary ‘moment’ of synthesis is to be identified in the new concept of immanence which has been translated from the speculative form with the aid of French politics and English classical economics” (Gramsci, 1971, p. 400).

In a letter to his sister-in-law Tania, Gramsci reasserts this importance, insisting on a “realistic, immediately historical ‘immanence’” (Gramsci, 1988, p. 220). This would be a non-mechanistic ‘immanence’, drawing the best from the dialectical method of Hegel. What Gramsci would seem to be calling for is a critique of the contemporary moment that builds on latent tensions within society or, more accurately, given the inseparability of the social and the natural, the starting point is the socio-natural. An immanent critique begins through taking existing reality and the ideas through which this reality is interpreted on its own terms. It develops paradoxes, inconsistencies and tensions within this existing state, thereby requiring far less guidance from a vanguardist entity. The struggle to build a new reality emerges from this critique of the present: the conditions of possibility for revolutionary change are continually sown within the everyday. If the possibility for developing an immanent critique is present within these Hegelian moves in Gramsci’s writings, embedding this possibility within the production of everyday environments opens up yet more fecund terrain. The critique of everyday life is thereby seen to be embedded within the experience of working and producing the socio-natural.

3. Possible environments

Whilst a concept of nature runs throughout Gramsci’s writings (Fontana, 1995), this does not translate easily into either tools for political ecological analysis or an environmental politics. In developing an avowedly gramscian political ecology, I would suggest that it is important to consider how Gramsci’s concept of nature might be transformed into political ecological tools to challenge socio-ecological injustices. Without wishing to give undue coherence to what is really a terrain of debate, I would suggest that central to political ecological approaches is a concern with the ways in which specific forms of societal organisation come to influence and shape both environments and our understandings of those environments. As Robbins’ (2004) introduction to the field makes clear, political ecology is fundamentally opposed to apolitical understandings of environmental change. Political ecologists develop both critical and normative frameworks for understanding and transforming anthropomorphic environmental change. To a limited extent, Gramsci’s writings have been put to work within the traditions of political ecology that Robbins outlines, most explicitly in the work of Moore (1996, 2005). More recently, Wainwright (2008) has also developed a Gramscian political ecology as part of his postcolonial Marxist dissection of “capitalism qua development” amongst the Maya of Belize. Gramsci works well in such contexts. He draws attention to subaltern struggles, offers numerous insightful comments on the need to link peasant struggles with urban working class movements and provides a framework for considering the ideological framing of nature.

Much less has been written on how the concept of nature in Gramsci might inform a political ecological analysis. Here, I suggest, we might find more useful resources within the analytical toolbox of urban political ecology (Heynen et al., 2006). Urban political ecology has developed as a field that seeks to dissolve the reified forms of nature within the city. It asserts that the city is a socio-natural assemblage (Swyngedouw, 2004) or a created ecosystem (Harvey, 1996) through the urbanisation of nature, power circulates through socio-natural conduits within the city. Thus, returning to Robbins’ neat definition of political ecology, its urban variant is deeply opposed to apolitical readings of the environment of the city (Kaika and Swyngedouw, 2000). It seeks to show how the environment shapes and is shaped by power relations. Nature, always understood as a differentiated unity, consolidates forms of rule (Swyngedouw, 2007), reaffirms and propagates ideologies (Kaika, 2005; Loftus and Lumsden, 2008) and produces distinct subjectivities (Ekers and Loftus, forthcoming).

Conceptually, there are numerous shared concerns with Gramsci’s work here. Indeed Swyngedouw’s writings on the Spanish waterscape represent, in all but name, classic Gramscian studies of the development of Fascism. The concept of nature in Gramsci’s...
work provides neglected and yet equally important grounds for cross-fertilisation. In a remarkable political ecological transformation of Marx's *Theses on Feuerbach*, Gramsci writes of how socio-natural relationships are forged “actively, by means of work and technique” (Gramsci, 1971, p. 351). These relations are “active and conscious” (Gramsci, 1971). Importantly “each of us changes himself, modifies himself to the extent that he changes and modifies the complex relations of which he is the hub” (Gramsci, 1971). The revolutionary subject described in Gramsci’s work is therefore one who emerges from the process of (and developing conscious-ness of) producing nature. The urbanisation of nature provides both constraints – the urbanisation of hegemony and the concrete manifestation of an alienated nature – as well as possibilities for the development of revolutionary strategy.

Developing this concept of nature, Fontana (1995) argues that Gramsci’s view rests on an understanding of how human activity results in the ‘domination of nature’. Transforming the Hegelian Master/Slave relationship, Fontana suggests, might open up possibilities for a new ecological consciousness. In part inspired by Smith’s (1984) trenchant critique of the Frankfurt School’s concept of nature, urban political ecologists have been critical of theorisations of nature that imply such an external or dualistic relationship (Harvey, 1996; Swyngedouw, 2006). Although targeted at Schmidt’s (1971) more pessimistic view in *The Concept of Nature in Marx* Smith’s comments (1984, pp. 30–31) are prescient in our consideration of Fontana’s (similarly titled) *Concept of Nature in Gramsci*:

> “...the negative triumphalism of the ‘domination of nature’ idea begins with nature and society as two separate realms and attempts to unite them. In Marx, we see the opposite procedure. He begins with nature as a unity and derives as a simultaneously historical and logical result whatever separation between them exists...Instead of the ‘domination of nature’, therefore, we must consider the much more complex process of the production of nature. Where the ‘domination of nature’ argument implies a dismal, one-dimensional contradiction-free future, the idea of the production of nature implies a historical future that is still to be determined by political events and forces not technical necessity” (Smith, 1984, pp. 30–31).

Whilst Fontana is not claiming that the concept of nature in Gramsci is the same as that later developed by the Frankfurt School – and Gramsci’s optimism of the will, echoed in Fontana’s writings is in utter contrast to the pessimism of Horkheimer, Adorno and Schmidt – Smith’s insistence that Marx’s method leads more clearly towards a sense of the production, rather than domination, of nature is integral to our transformation of Gramsci’s concept of nature into a tool for a viable political ecological analysis. Indeed the latter’s re-reading of the *Theses on Feuerbach* leads firmly towards a conception of socio-natures that are internally (not externally) related and co-constitutive. The political consequences of this are, I think, important. For Gramsci, political change is bound up in the rich possibilities provided by the socio-natural (Smith, 1984, p. 354). Changing the world is simultaneously a process of changing oneself, and, implicit in this, producing new natures, new cultures and new political ecologies (Smith, 1984). Interestingly, Fontana (1995, p. 221) lays great prominence on this transformation of reality or “creare il reale”, situating Gramsci’s conception of nature within it: however, in something of a contrast, the starting point for this new reality might, I argue, be found in relating Gramsci’s latent conception of the socio-natural to an expanded understanding of the production of nature.

Whilst I have argued elsewhere (Loftus, 2007) that this expanded conception of the production of nature must necessarily include non-waged work such as collecting water, here I suggest it might also imply artistic production. Critical spatial practices are simultaneously acts of producing culture and nature (not that the two can be separated). They are socio-natural practices. The struggle for a new civilization simultaneously produces new artistic possibilities (as shown in the previous section) and new environmental possibilities. Rather than inverting the domination of nature, as Fontana suggests, the key revolutionary task is to produce natures in radically different ways. Importantly, the act of producing natures necessarily excludes no one: Gramsci’s oft-cited aphorisms that everyone is an intellectual (Gramsci, 1971, p. 9) and that all are philosophers (Gramsci, 1971, p. 322) are important here. Indeed, intellectuals and philosophers create (Gramsci, 1971, p. 345). Thus, all humans have the potential to be able to change the world in progressive, egalitarian and socio-ecologically just ways. In Smith’s terms (1984), all possess the agency to produce new natures and more humanising geographies.

What this suggests to me, and what I would like to explore in the rest of the paper, is that Gramsci’s concept of nature, if related to an expanded conception of the production of nature as artistic production, opens up a new front for political action. This is certainly not to deny the importance of the war of position; however, political ecologists are already reasonably well-versed in such subaltern studies. Instead, I argue, understanding hegemonic struggles as simultaneously cultural and socio-natural projects permits a somewhat different grammatical political ecology to emerge. Through understanding and transforming the ensemble of socio-natural relations to which Gramsci refers us, we might discover further conditions of possibility for revolutionary change. In the following sections, I demonstrate the ways in which urban interventions, as critical spatial practices working with and through the socio-natural fabric of the city, provide just such conditions.

### 4. Interventionist possibilities

‘Urban intervention’ is clearly a rather broad label to give to widely divergent practices. As other writers have noted, urban interventions work in the space between art, architecture and activism (Miles, 2004; Rendell, 2006). At the most general level, they are artistic and architectural practices that seek to intervene in the everyday life of cities. In a historical materialist sense, they seek to better understand the city, whilst also changing it (see Marx, 1974, p. 423). Building on everyday urban knowledge and experiences, urban interventions are often forms of cultural resistance. Within the geographical literature, urban interventions have been considered under broader banners such as ‘the arts of urban exploration’ (Pinder, 2005). For Rendell (2006), building on both Rosalind Krauss’ understanding of the expanded field and a range of more recent site-specific art works, urban interventions are better considered as critical spatial practices. Here, she builds on geographers’ work on the everyday production of space, in order to develop insights into critiques of everyday spatial practice. Whilst several practitioners are critical of the imposition of a historical lineage, it is quite possible to situate urban interventions within a longer avant-garde tradition encompassing Surrealism and Situationism: strategies of detournement, not to mention the active creation of situations, would seem to find echoes in many of the practices of those considered. Contemporary examples range from Christian Nold’s BioMapping project (Nold, 2007; see Kwan, 2007 for comment) – in which participants wander through specific neighbourhoods wearing both a lie detector and a global positioning system, thereby producing a detailed and collaborative emotion map of the local area – to the anarchitects Space Hijackers’ staging of a party on the Circle Line of the London Underground (Space Hijackers, 1999). Within London, the development of radical artistic practices committed to a more socially and ecologically just world has been well-represented in the work of groups such as PLATFORM. The latter has pioneered artistic work on the carbon
web, the corporation and the hidden, subterranean rivers of London. From walking tours to free-sheet newspapers, their work has opened artistic practice up to new groups of people whilst continually renewing their activist commitments.

Trying to capture some of the key motivations behind recent interventionist work, Miles (2004) suggests that provocation and participation are central. He cites work by Cornford and Cross as key provocations – their Camelot in Stoke on Trent involved a security fence being erected around three patches of grass between the bus station and the shopping centre. The subsequent debates that raged in the local papers and on local buses about this publicly-funded project seemed to achieve exactly what the artists intended: the fence became a provocative invitation to discuss the politics and uses of public space. Through other examples, Miles emphasises the move away from individual working practises towards group-based participatory projects, citing Lacy’s (1994) New Genre Public Art as part of this move, whilst also linking it to interventionist projects. As Miles would no doubt agree, Kravagna (1998) asserts that, within New Genre Public Art, participation is used in a way that paradoxically reasserts the artist’s role as removed from the day-to-day troubles of those they seek to “help”. Linking back to the earlier discussion of the paradoxes of the avant-garde, he proposes the work of Stephen Willats - whose projects have developed new lines of communication between residents in tower blocks of West London and – and Clegg and Guttman’s Open Public Library as quite different examples of radical participation. These artists work with the fabric of particular locations and the “audience” act as co-producers of the works.

Seeking to better understand such interventionist practices, City Mine(d) convened a series of workshops in London between 2006 and 2007. The workshops sought to provide a platform for urban interventions as well as developing a network of mutual support amongst practitioners. The London series was part of similar ventures in Barcelona and Brussels. An urban forum was hosted by the group in June 2006 and subsequent workshops were organised in January and February 2007 around ‘Intervening in the Sustainability of Publics’ in Barcelona and Brussels. An urban forum was hosted by the group in June 2006 and subsequent workshops were organised in January and February 2007 around ‘Intervening in the Sustainability of Publics’. In what follows, I will draw from the different workshops as well as discussing in more detail specific projects by City Mine(d), the convener of the original workshops, as well as Siraj Izhar, one of the workshop participants. I draw on these two not because I argue their work is wholeheartedly representative, but rather because I think their practices shed a revealing light on the preceding discussion of grammatical political ecologies. I seek a dialogue, a two way exchange between interventionist works of art and grammatical political ecologies. Neither should subsume the other in this dialogue; rather, one provokes re-theorisations of the other (see Rendell, 2006). The research process, developing through workshops and conversations with the artists, reflects this process of co-authorship of many of the paper’s ideas.

The first project referred to is a public work developed by City Mine(d). This Brussels-based group both initiates and supports urban interventions in London, Barcelona and Brussels. It has evolved into the current tripartite collective over the last decade and a half. Emerging out of a squatter’s movement in Brussels in the 1990s, the group brings together both fanciful utopianisms with a hardened policy activism. Their work is variously categorised as Situationist, public art, educational and developmental. These contradictory definitions simultaneously capture some of the widely differing perspectives within the group – whilst also failing to capture its true creativity. Ideas blossom within City Mine(d)’s scruffy offices: there is a true courageousness in the manner in which they are able to continually explore new terrains of working practice and new ideas. More recently, the Barcelona group has become closely involved with the squatters’ movement of that city, the Brussels group has worked on small-scale micro-enterprises, and the London branch has, within only a few years, developed a tremendous network of interventionist practitioners. The workshops in 2006 represent one aspect of this, as did the Network Book for Urban (P)arts (City Mine(d), 2004) written in 2004. The group’s politics remain diverse: individuals continually refuse a neat categorisation as anarchist, socialist or leftist. Perhaps part of the group’s continuing energy lies in this non-partisan commitment and the democratic understanding of the possibilities for change in the city that result. The group is often fiercely opposed to the supposition that it is a Situationist-off-shoot, seeing the former as an elitist, factional grouping, focussed more on out-radicalising previous manifestos than in working with everyday people to bring about change in the city. In important ways, the group fosters a particular process-based approach to urban politics. Having occupied a key position within urban networks over the last decade and a half, City Mine(d) has a rich understanding of some of the successes and failures, the promises and the pitfalls of interventionist practices. I would argue it also has important lessons for our understanding of a grammatical political ecology.

The intervention I turn to in this essay is one of City Mine(d)’s more recent projects. It consisted of constructing a network of plastic tubing linking some of the key community facilities in an area of Brent, a suburban London borough in the North of the city, in early 2006. On a cold March afternoon, the roads around Preston Road tube station, where the network was assembled, felt far from the typical artists’ playground of Hoxton or Brick Lane; perhaps unfairly, the area felt boring, indistinct and uninspiring. With the network assembled, ping-pong balls could be fired through it and local residents were invited to write thoughts, inspirations, protests or musings onto the balls. New conversations might be stimulated in the process. Prior to this, the process of constructing the network involved bringing together new coalitions of actors, charting incredibly complex webs of planning regulations and provoking a range of debates about the role of art, the disconnected “community” and the use of public and private space. Later, I argue that by tapping the hidden politics of an everyday London locale, City Mine(d) embark on a serious yet playful grammatical political ecology.

First, however, I turn to the practices of one further “urban interventionist”, Siraj Izhar. An independent artist, Izhar has focussed considerable energy on developing “visual eco-systems”; these acquire a life of their own beyond the initial act of artistic production. Perhaps Izhar’s best-known project, Public Life, and its predecessor Strike (initiated in 1992 before finally closing in 2003) involved the transformation of a disused public lavatory in Spitalfields into a public space for artistic experimentation (Izhar, 2004a). In an early account, Izhar (1997) describes how the main protagonists in the project responded to “a curatorial need to make art which could develop its own chain of meanings and associations” and “invent its own spaces”. The group began by occupying the toilet block. It then developed a working relationship with the new owner, who had acquired the disused lavatory from the then Liberal Democrat controlled Tower Hamlets council in an auction. Between 1992 and 1996, Strike hosted a variety of experimental works, whilst at the same time trying to develop its viability as an ongoing “truly public” space. In order to do this, it had to achieve a combination of commercial viability and charitable status. In 1997, a registered charity was established, and, in 1999, a lease was drawn up. Izhar describes how by this stage Strike was beginning to be co-opted in processes of speculative development (Izhar, 2004b). It had transformed a derelict forgotten toilet into somewhere rich in cultural and economic possibilities, and also cultural and economic profits. Because of this, the landlord delayed the signing of the lease and watched the ground rent of the public lavatory escalate further and further. At this point, Spitalfields was

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3 See, for example, ‘Brentford Towers’ and the discussion in Willats (1996).
becoming one of the central flashpoints in battles over gentrification. For Public Life, as Strike had now become, it was crucial to acquire the planning permission on which various grants had been made, thereby permitting the public lavatory to become a digital art and music venue. By the time this was finally granted, late in 2003, the landlord had sought repossession of the lavatory and Public Life would voluntarily cease to exist in its original form, not wishing to compromise its work with protracted legal dispute (Izhar, 2004a,b).

An early article in The Guardian by Patrick Wright (1995) describes Strike in almost mocking terms. For some critics, the project clearly represented the epitome of inaccessible avant-garde art. The Wright article describes a visit by baffled young men from Northern Ireland to a frenetic Dada-ist display in which ping-pong balls were flying. OUTRAGE activists were raging against the Anglican church and flares shot to the ceiling. Whilst there is no doubt truth in this description, both Strike and Public Life sought to be something quite different from an unintelligible and exclusive club for artists. Instead, the public lavatory sought to develop a free, autonomous space in which anyone could launch a project and in which art could develop new forms, new languages and new contents outside of the commercialised world of the gallery space. As with the rest of his work, Izhar’s hope was that the space would become a thriving ecosystem, drawing together the energies of the East End, and moving well beyond art as an institution. Public Life was to be an environment, or more accurately a visual ecology which fostered what Gramsci might refer to as possible artists. In turn, possible artists would help to foster and extend the possible ecologies of Public Life.

In some ways, the ecosystems potential intended of Public Life is better represented in subsequent works. Although not yet materialised, Izhar’s award winning Living Memorial for Ken Saro Wiwa is exemplary. Designed around the perfect symmetry of the Carbon C60 molecule, the Living Memorial envisions three vast spheres floating in the skies above London (Izhar, 2005). Coloured green, red and blue, the spheres represent the “natural” environment, the produced environment and the cultural environment. Via a modem and a tiny computer, and displayed on 200 LEDs within the interlinked spheres, these register: the levels of carbon monoxide and dioxide in the urban environment; the energy flows of specific parts of the city; and a constant flow of messages that broadcast poetry and information about environmental justice. The working interrelations between nature and culture, understood as differentiated unities, are thereby laid bare. A server on the ground helps to coordinate these functions. Izhar has proposed five temporary locations for the spheres. First, he focussed on the three key sources of power in this liberal capitalist state (the Houses of Parliament, the City and the judiciary). Secondly, he focussed on two local high streets as everyday locations (rather similar to the streets of Preston Road). The permanent location is intended to be above the Thames. Currently awaiting a swathe of planning permissions, and still with several major obstacles to surmount, the Living Memorial is a hugely ambitious project. It is both rooted in, and provides new visualisations of, the environment of the city (Izhar, 2005). It is a mobile, living beacon to environmental justice, rooted in socio-ecological struggles and intended to perform an important function in transforming the political ecology of the city. In what follows, I attempt to develop a closer dialogue between these interventionist practices as a way of informing a Gramscian approach to political ecology.

5. Conditions of possibility: intervening in the environment of the everyday

Both participation and provocation – two of the defining criteria of recent interventionist work (Miles, 2004) – are clearly fundamental to the work of City Mine(d) and Izhar. I think, however, they work in particular ways that have a bearing on how we read the political possibilities embedded within the city. For Izhar’s Living Memorial to Ken Saro Wiwa, the floating spheres are intended to both transmit and receive data by communicating through the everyday technologies of the mobile phone and the text message. The points of engagement are to be found all over the city; moreover they are to be found all over the world. Such participatory entry points open the Living Memorial up to hijack: importantly, this hijack is through the very participation the project invites (Interview Izhar: 25th March 2006). Indeed, as the project embeds itself further within the ecologies of the city, Izhar’s authorship, and the content he originally conceived as a memorial to the Nigerian hero of the environmental justice movement, becomes less and less prominent. Other meanings and new content come to the fore. As with Public Life, the Living Memorial develops a form of art that can create its own chain of meanings and associations. It becomes the visual ecosystem hoped for. There are obvious echoes of Bourriaud’s (2002) claims around the development of a relational aesthetics in the 1990s: the artist is positioned within a matrix of relations and the finished work of art becomes less important than the artistic act. Whilst Izhar situates his work very much within such developments (Interview Izhar: 28th September 2007), for City Mine(d) the practicalities of effecting change are often of the greatest concern. As with its rejection of the Situationist tag, City Mine(d) are awkwardly positioned within contemporary artistic movements.

In spite of this, with The Ping-Pong Project, the group did foster a participatory matrix or ‘relational aesthetic’ that operates through the physical network of tubing and ping-pong balls. On completion, the messages, the communication and the very success or failure of the work are very much decided upon by the participants themselves. The project was always, in this respect, and here we begin to find echoes of urban political ecology (Heynen et al., 2006), much more about relating to urban processes than finished products. A City Mine(d) associate, Chris, describes this process-ethical in what are almost Dada-ist terms: “When we came up with the idea of the ping-pong network, we spent a long time trying to think about what we should do with the balls once they’d been collected. After hours of thinking about it, we realised we should do nothing. Absolutely nothing. The balls are fired and that is it” (Chris, personal communication). Funded in part by the local London borough, this made explaining the project’s outcomes somewhat problematic (Interview Segers: 20th June 2006). On the concluding day of the network, there was something delightfully perverse about the Mayor of Brent, speaking through a crackly microphone, declaring that he would take the balls to the head of the council and that action would be taken. The seemingly pointless act of firing ping-pong balls met the realities of local government bureaucracy in wonderfully paradoxical fashion. City Mine(d) appear to revel in such paradoxes. For me, however, neither the apparent futility of Dada, nor the Mayor’s hope for a new entry point into a deliberative democracy capture what the Ping Pong Project achieved. To me, rather, it seemed to be about reworking the environment of a mundane London Borough in a manner that permitted new forms of everyday practice to emerge.

In creating effective entry points, again both physically – as people had an open tube in their local pub – and socially – as the project opened up a new dialogue between key local agents – the ping-pong project turned this process-based understanding of the city into an infrastructure for transforming art and politicking space.

Whilst far from an explicit political ecological critique, as I have already suggested, City Mine(d) work with similar tools and approaches to urban political ecologists. The Ping Pong Project confronted the dislocations and forms of alienation that exist in the community as a step towards dissolving the reified socio-natural
relations that comprise the city (Loftus, 2007). In Gramscian terms, the project brought to the fore the ensemble of relations through which individuals and their environments are co-produced (Gramsci, 1971, p. 352). Acquiring consciousness of these relations is, as Gramsci reminds us, crucial for “the real philosopher… the politician” and the activist (Gramsci, 1971). The residents of Brent were the agents in this process: they actively participated in forging new lines of communication and blurring the boundaries between artist and audience, between production and reception. Over the course of a ten day period, well over a thousand ping-pong balls – inscribed with a variety of creative and less creative insights – were fired through a strange and yet wonderful network.

If this echoes Gramsci, there are, as Jim Segers4 of City Mine(d) states himself, further similarities with Benjamin’s (1973) reading of Brecht. In a brief aside in his classic lecture, The Author as Producer, Benjamin (1973, p. 90) makes the (over)optimistic claim that readers’ letters were able to become editorial content in the Soviet press of the 1920s. He then goes on to link this to Brecht’s efforts to democratise theatre. Thus, for Benjamin (1973, p. 100), transforming the means of artistic production was key to opening up the revolutionary possibilities in artistic practice. Brecht “opposes the dramatic laboratory to the finished work of art”: through alienation techniques, he opens up the play to critique, debate and discussion, disclosing conditions rather than reproducing them. To make a somewhat bold claim, I think we witness in certain urban interventions a similar transformation of the means of artistic production in a way that relates to my earlier argument to broaden our understanding of the production of nature. In both Izhar’s and in City Mine(d)’s work, the content of their interventions is provided by everyday people who, as Gramsci would emphasise, are inseparable from the environments of which they are a part: the role of the artist is thereby not to provide content; rather it is to democratise the means of artistic production. Rather than developing finished works of art in the city, the city is turned into a laboratory for dramatic experimentation. In Izhar’s work, the spheres of the Living Memorial freely transmit the information and ideas that others wish to see in them. The Living Memorial is an infrastructure for developing debates about the environment of the city and about environmental justice connections around the world. The same might be witnessed in City Mine(d)’s Ping-Pong Project. Here, artistic production permeates the local pub; it enters into the libraries, the post office and the bowling club. Mundane environments are opened up to creative production and political debate in a way that rarely occurs in either ‘public art’ or its establishment counterpart. The relationships which make them mundane and which prevent communication are brought to the fore. With Izhar’s and in City Mine(d)’s work, we come much closer to the avant-garde hope that the separation between art and life might be radically dissolved (Bürger, 1984). For these interventionist practices, the starting point, the means and the medium are the scattered debris of everyday urban environments – a derelict toilet in Spitalfields or a bowling club in North London.

As should now be clear, I think it insufficient to read this process of artistic or cultural production as somehow distinct from the concept of nature that runs through Gramsci’s writings. At the outset, I noted the manner in which Gramsci (1971, p. 354) seeks to elaborate a philosophy of praxis grounded in a conscious understanding societal change. Beginning with the latter’s concept of nature, I would argue, is not a question of reversing the ‘domination of nature’ as Fontana (1995) argues. Rather it is about transforming the production of nature as a way of creating those new realities that Fontana (1995) quite rightly sees as so central to Gramsci’s overall philosophy of praxis. As agents in this process – situated in Spitalfields, the bowling club in Brent, or wherever else – the everyday person becomes, in Gramsci’s (gendered) terms, “the real philosopher” who “cannot be other than, the politician, the active man who modifies the environment, understanding by environment the ensemble of relations which each of us enters to take part in” (Gramsci, 1971, p. 352). Importantly, as is shown elsewhere (Gramsci, 1971, pp. 353–354), it is clear that this ensemble of relations is intended to mean the socio-natural. He continues:

“If one’s own individuality is the ensemble of these relations, to create one’s personality means to acquire consciousness of them and to modify one’s own personality means to modify the ensemble of these relations.” (Gramsci, 1971)

This echoes in remarkable ways Gramsci’s (1985, p. 98) sense of the relationship between art and culture in the struggle for a new civilisation. Here, he suggests that possible artists and possible works of art emerge from the “struggle for a new moral life that cannot but be intimately connected to a new intuition of life, until it becomes a new way of feeling and seeing reality”. Thus, through recognising the urbanisation of nature and the environment of the city as a terrain over which hegemony is consolidated and contested, and over which the struggle for a new culture might be conducted, urban interventions generate radical possibilities. The nature of the city becomes both an inspiration and a means of artistic production. In turn the conditions of possibility for revolutionary change are seen to be latent within the environment of the everyday. Experiencing this and, in turn, being able to intervene in the processes through which this experience is produced is key to the revolutionary possibilities in gramscian political ecologies. If a gramscian political ecology opens up such a productive critique, I think, therefore, it also speaks to some of the disquiet I feel towards the not-quite-resolved need for external enlightenment within Gramsci’s philosophy of praxis. Embedding the war of position within such socio-natural processes provides both an everyday and a transformative politics. Simultaneously the means of artistic production are democratised, and the conditions of possibility are generated, for

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4 Jim trained in stage design and both Brecht and Benjamin are personal inspirations.
a new sensibility, a new way of experiencing the city, a new reality and a new philosophy of praxis.

6. Against meccano

In one of the letters to his wife from prison, Gramsci (1988, p. 88) asks how his son Delio is getting on with Meccano. He continues “This is of real interest to me, because I have never been able to decide whether Meccano is the best modern toy for children or not, seeing that to a certain extent it seems to me to rob boys of their own inventive spirit” (Gramsci, 1988). One of the crucial questions for a gramscian political ecology, it seems to me, is how to develop Gramsci’s thought in a manner that does not rob it of its inventive spirit. How might one put his ideas to work in a manner that opens up possibilities rather than closes them down? Just as Gramsci, in Stuart Hall’s words “came to ‘inhabit’ Marx’s ideas, not as a straight-jacket, which confined and hobbled his imagination, but as a framework of ideas which liberated his mind, which set it free, which put it to work” (Gramsci 1991, p. 8), how might we liberate gramscian thought from the straight-jacket of a Meccano approach which put it to work” (Gramsci (1991, p. 8)), how might we liberate gramscian thought from the straight-jacket of a Meccano approach that fits his ideas together through a pre-conceived, mechanistic formula. Katz (2004), concluding her monograph Growing up Global turns to the revolutionary potential in children’s inventive, tactile and experiential play. Here, she builds on Benjamin’s (1997) writings on the mimetic faculty. Perhaps in relating Gramsci’s concept of nature to the playful and participatory practice of urban interventions, there are similar grounds for hope. My hope has been to develop a conversation that opens up more than it closes down. Hegemony, I have argued is produced, reproduced and challenged through the act and experience of producing natures. By working with such acts and experiences, and by turning everyday natures into a means and medium for artistic production, the artists discussed in this paper propose simultaneously revolutionary and humble possibilities. They work with everyday people in generating new ways of thinking about, and thereby new ways of making, reality. Nonetheless, a sense of a better world is sometimes hard to find. Perhaps too often, we rely on others, with their visions of a brave new world, to guide us. The environmental movement thereby becomes something driven by knowing individuals seeking to shape the actions of others on the route to specific ecological blueprints. However, as Gramsci’s immanent critique suggests, a sense of a better world can sometimes flash before us in our everyday lives as we begin to figure out the mess of the present. New ecological imaginations appear as we figure out the topsy-turvy processes out of which contemporary environments are made. If the contemporary city is one traversed by socio-environmental injustices of quite ugly extremes, this is because it is produced – by you and me – under specific historical and geographical conditions. In recognising how integral our own acts are in making this reality, an immanent critique of the everyday is made possible. Bringing together: Gramsci’s concept of nature; geographers own writings on the urbanisation of nature; and the imaginations of urban interventions, I suspect we might unlock some of the potential in such an immanent critique. In this sense, together, I think we can strive for a dialectical urbanism and a gramscian political ecology based not on Meccano blueprints but on debate, dialogue and an awareness of the possibilities in the oft-neglected society of things.

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