

From dogma to anarchy: Models of participation in utopian approximations

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Conceived in 1516 by Thomas More, *utopia* is a fictional portrayal of a perfect society, the existence of which serves to challenge a difficult, present circumstance. Etymologically, it comes from the Ancient Greek words meaning *no place* or *nowhere*, but in its many subsequent iterations, the place of utopia moved from an imaginary island in the Pacific Ocean to a temporal landscape, acting as “a glass through which the darkness of the future illuminates the present” (Noble, 2009, 19). Ernst Bloch (1959, 43) further clarified the conception of utopia by noting that it is always anticipatory and depicts potentiality, not mere fantasy. Creating a critique of society in the form of a potential new world is an attractive prospect for artists, whose experiments in utopia have been wide ranging in subject matter and diverse in implementation. However, artists’ understandable desire to reimagine society brings up important questions about how to best invest the public in utopian work, and how closely one can guard authorship when the result is intended to be collective.

In this essay, I will explore this by looking at three utopian works: *Le ZAD*, a commune partially created and documented by the Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination (Lab of ii), Joseph Beuys’ *7000 Oaks* (*7000 Eigen*, 1982), and the canon of *Star Trek* through the lens of participation, a technique frequently used to encourage collectivity. According to Claire Bishop (2006, 12), there are three primary agendas for making participatory art: creating an active and empowered subject, creating a non-hierarchical social model (by ceding authorship to the spectator), and initiating a collective responsibility for a community crisis. These motivations are present in all three works; however, each of the works, as I shall argue, employs a different participatory model, situated on a spectrum of co-authorship: *anarchic*, *dogmatic*, and *coevolutionary*.

Le ZAD (or *Le Zone à Défendre*) claimed 4000 acres of western France as a “liberated zone, a vast laboratory of autonomy, where 200 people in 60 different collectives live together without the state” (Lab of ii, 2017). Initially set up as a protest against the building of a new airport for the city of Nantes, a letter was distributed by residents of the area inviting people to squat the land and buildings during a climate camp, a project run by the Lab of ii in 2009. The occupied area sprouted diverse artisanal and artistic spaces like a pirate radio station, a tractor repair workshop, a brewery, medicinal herb gardens, a rap studio, a dairy, a newspaper, a library, a large surrealist lighthouse where the flight control tower would have been built, and the headquarters of the Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination (Lab of ii, 2017). In order to earn the label of *utopia*, there must be an experiment that manifests utopian ideas into material reality (Becker, 2011, 68). In this case, the occupied land served to block the airport project, bringing together diverse segments of society, and presenting a powerful symbol of anti-capitalist resistance. This inspired many outside the commune to participate as well. When the French government attempted to forcibly evict the occupants between 2012 and 2018, over 40,000 people pledged to save it. People both outside and inside the walls engaged in creative civil disobedience, published blogs, maintained social media accounts, offered legal representation, and gave interviews. In this way, authorship of the movement was claimed by many participants.

The open invitation to squat the land encouraged a broad social diversity, in a model of participation that could aptly be described as *anarchic*:

“The movement itself is large and has great solidarity, but there’s a great diversity of people and opinions (...) From those who’ve got degrees to people from the streets or those who just want to get away from their families (...) some are already politically engaged, some just broken by conventional life” (CrimethInc., 2018).

This created a non-hierarchical society within the commune, and with that came a dramatic increase in individual freedom. This environment was perfect for what Jacques Rancière would term *emancipated spectatorship*, a quality of participation wherein individuals freely interpret the work through the lens of their own experience (2009, 13). What *Le ZAD* represented to each of its many authors varied widely, but their interpretations of the experience still serve as utopian inspiration to a variety of squatting movements, protestors,

artists, and environmental activists. The attempt at approximating a real utopia in the countryside of Nantes, however, collapsed with the victory of the cause. Following France's 2018 announcement that it would fully abandon its plans for the airport, the anarchic model of participation allowed for no way to establish consensus about what to do next. Some collectives in *Le ZAD* accepted the victory, and sought to drive out others who, for many different reasons, wished to continue resisting cooperation with the French authorities. This lack of ideological agreement paved the way for the commune's end (CrimethInc., 2018). The remaining residents were required to provide documentation in order to live there, thereby relinquishing their citizenship of utopia and reintegrating into the country of France.

Joseph Beuys, a German artist and political activist, envisioned a utopia that would insert itself into the praxis of everyday life in order to transform it. When he unveiled *7000 Oaks* for Documenta 7 in Kassel (1982), he intended that the long-lived trees, paired with basalt stones, would connect with "the social body of the future" (Körner, Bellin-Harder, 2009, 6). Seven thousand stones were piled on the lawn in front of the Museum Fridericianum in an arrow shape, pointing at a single oak sapling. Instructions were then given that the stones could only be removed when paired with a newly planted tree. Beuys did not live to see the planting of the final tree in 1987. It was instead planted by his son to mark the opening of Documenta 8 (Bruce, 2017). Beuys wanted to create a utopia in which every human being would be viewed as an artist contributing creatively to the "total artwork of the future social order" (Beuys, 1973, 114). He called for direct democracy, equality, and above all, solidarity as the ideal of humanity. He hoped this "electrifying truth" would supersede all religions and political parties and inspire people to practice an alternative way of living and working (Beuys 1982, 119-120). *7000 Oaks* was conceived as a *social sculpture*, the stones set to mark the beginning of the transformation of society, and the trees an insertion of nature into the everyday lives of the public.

The work required the public, as participants, to navigate bureaucracy and zoning laws in order to plant the trees in difficult urban environments that were often covered over with cement. Despite the artist's rhetoric about direct democracy, the model of participation he conceived could be called *dogmatic*. A societal problem is addressed using a specific ideology on the part of the artist, and multiple modes of participation are available to

spectators; however, the invitation to collaborate does not extend to joint authorship of its ideology, and this can result in difficulty creating widespread social interest. The young trees were vulnerable, and would require the sustained care and commitment of the community, bringing them together in a creative act. But many residents of the city were not enthusiastic about maintaining the trees of *7000 Oaks*, and some of Beuys' patrons, unable to see it as art, pulled his funding. He spent much of the next several years after the unveiling of the piece raising the capital necessary to maintain the project, and ultimately had a hard time persuading the city to take his money in exchange for their care (Körner, Bellin-Harder, 2009, 6-7). Nevertheless, the iconic trees with their stone markers are still standing, and widely celebrated, today. They are not only a part of the local history of Kassel, they were embraced by individuals, artistic organizations, and city governments around the world who planted descendants of Beuys' oaks in their own urban environments. Because the trees can potentially live for 300-400 years, the utopian society that Joseph Beuys envisioned still holds the potential to bear witness to its realization. The approximation of this utopia, however, extends only so far as individual participants invest in the ideology of the artist.

Another long-lived project awaiting the fulfillment of its ideology is *Star Trek*, a canon of work that depicts humanity several centuries from now. Conceived by Gene Roddenberry in the early 1970s, the original television series will celebrate its 55th anniversary in 2020. The techno-utopia of the Starfleet Federation represents a post-scarcity society, pointing to "a future in which human civilization is advanced enough to provide everyone with the basic necessities of life" (Saadi, 2017). Other ideals propounded by the show include secular humanism, non-colonialism, and equality. The interest in *Star Trek* lies not only in its imaginative representation of a utopia, but in the representation of that society's *participants*, members of a future humanity that embodies the utopian legacy of the spectators themselves. The show created a large and enduring community of fans, or *Trekees*, who participated in pivotal ways by spawning creative contributions like fan fiction, merchandise, and conventions. Although it was not the original intention of Gene Roddenberry, these contributions became an indispensable part of the *Star Trek* landscape. The participants also applied the principles of the show to their everyday lives in very concrete and personal ways. In a study analyzing fan letters, a frequent theme is "how their affection for a particular character or series influences their attitude to work and how much

enjoyment they get out of it” (Geraghty, 2005, 177). Here, too, a quality of *emancipated spectatorship* is demonstrated (Rancière, 2009).

This model of participation in which the spectators, who through their contributions to the work have become co-authors of its objectives, could be described as *coevolutionary*¹. A hierarchy of authorship exists in the form of a team of artists and producers who control the overarching narrative and main content, but they are heavily influenced by the spectators, who identify strongly enough with the work that they use *Star Trek*'s design, values, and characters to generate their own creative output and steer the ideology. When artists and producers give permission for co-authorship in this way, they create ideological stakeholders whose passion for the canon can overflow into the praxis of everyday life. For instance, in response to a letter writing campaign in 1976, NASA named its first Space Shuttle Orbiter *Enterprise* after the ship in the original television series. Then, recognizing the enthusiasm for space exploration generated by the show, NASA employed actress Nichelle Nichols (Lieutenant Uhura on the original series) to recruit African-Americans and women to become astronauts. Nichols had been persuaded to remain on the show in its early days, despite frustrations with the size of her role, by Martin Luther King, Jr., who was a *Star Trek* fan and saw it as inspirational to the African-American community (Day, 2011). Each of these actions sprang from ideological stakeholders in the work translating the fictional utopia beyond the praxis of their everyday lives in order to mold the cultural landscape of society.

The models of participation defined and explored in this essay— anarchic, dogmatic, and coevolutionary—represent three distinct strategies artists can use to approximate utopias on a large scale. *Le ZAD* (anarchic model) had the power to bring large numbers of people together in support of a specific cause. However, once the objective of the cause was met, the utopia expired. 7000 Oaks (dogmatic model) created a legacy that maintained an undiluted ideology, but this purity limited passionate participation. In *Star Trek* (coevolutionary model), the creative team maintains artistic control and allows the community of participants to steer the ideology of the work, thus creating long term mutual investment. The degree of

¹ Coevolution is a term I am borrowing from biology: “involving successive changes in two or more ecologically interdependent species that affect their interactions” (Merriam Webster Dictionary)

co-authorship in each model effects the trajectory of utopian artworks. Ultimately, the choice of participatory model depends on the objective of the artist.

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