

Performing “Moral Resistance”? Pro-Life and Pro-Choice Activism in Public Space

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Abstract

This article focuses on acts of resistance regarding reproductive politics in contemporary Britain. Drawing on empirical research this article investigates grassroots activism around a complex moral, social, and political problem. This article therefore focuses on a site of resistance in everyday urban environments, investigating the practice and performance involved. Identifying specifically the territory(ies) and territorialities of these specific sites of resistance, this article looks at how opposing groups negotiate conflict in public space in territorial, as well as habitual, ways. Second, the article focuses on questions around the impact, distinction, and novelty both in the immediate and long term of these acts of resistance for those in public space. Here, then, the focus shifts to the reactions to this particular form of protest and questions the “acceptability” of specific resistances in the public imaginary.

Keywords

protest, public space, abortion, emotion, body politics

Introduction

Debates regarding abortion in the United Kingdom have grown in recent years and include increased media attention, as well as discussions in U.K. parliament. Though public opinion and attitudes toward abortion in the United Kingdom have not changed significantly since the act was passed in 1967 there has been a renewed interest in how protest and debates regarding reproductive health, and indeed reproductive rights, are changing. Of particular interest is the performance and performative dimension of activism around reproductive rights in the public sphere. Suggestions have been made that the tactics of Pro-Life groups in the United Kingdom have begun to change, moving to more “militant style activism,” as favored by U.S. Pro-Life groups. Additionally, groups have shifted not only the *language* of the debate, focusing on human rights, and moral responsibilities but have also shifted the *place* of campaigning, moving from the political to the public sphere. This move makes activism regarding abortion not only more visible but also increasingly prevalent. The response from feminist and Pro-Choice groups has argued that

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this change in tactics represent an “attack” on reproductive rights more broadly and it is the move of these campaigns into the public sphere which has prompted the U.K. media to regard them as “more militant,” radical, and disturbing. The very visibility and use of specific tactics makes these campaigns distinctive and highlights the importance of performance within debates regarding protest. While protests regarding reproductive rights are not “new” (Cull, 1997) what has changed is the way in which these protests are employing specific tactics including the “transference” of American styles of protest.¹

This article discusses the limits of resistance in public places in the context of artistic practice and political movements. The article focuses on the distinctive nature of protest regarding reproductive rights. This involves a discussion of the specific of space that Pro-Life and Pro-Choice groups utilize. We also discuss how these protests are distinctive by drawing on notions of performance and performativity; more readily, protest as performative “act” which requires “rehearsal.” Finally, the article assesses the impact and longevity of these forms of protest.

We refer to Lefèbvre’s (1968) concept of the right to the city with regard to the “right to protest” in public space and the acceptability of specific forms of resistance (L. Jackson & Valentine, 2016). Further, we draw on Harvey’s (2008) and de Certeau’s (1984) work regarding the practice and navigation of everyday life as a response to hierarchical power structures; this is used to explore both the “everydayness” of these protests as well as their distinctiveness. This example reflects broader debates within feminist literatures regarding “choice,” agency and autonomy over one’s body (Arthur 1998). Furthermore, protests regarding bodily autonomy develop the feminist idea that “the personal is political” (Domosh, 1997) bringing the “intimately geopolitical” (Pain & Staeheli, 2014) into the public, and indeed politically “everyday” (de Certeau 1984) realm. While the loss of public space is widely presented as a result of transformed political, economic, and cultural rules (Smith, 1995), studies have also focused on the potential of public space for spontaneous everyday practices and open-ended social encounters (Frers & Meier, 2007; Watson, 2006). However, as (Frers & Meier, 2017) argue, the actual effects of impromptu acts of resistance remain understudied. It is therefore necessary to understand the ways in which these types of resistance enter the practices of those who are present in public places, and how they may be temporally situated *and* simultaneously mobile in their performativity.

The example discussed in this article presents a unique opportunity to explore how the intimately geopolitical is challenged in and through public space, affording the opportunity to assess the way in which acts of resistance, as performances of political, moral, and social ideals, have impact, and are impacted upon, within public space. The idea of the “body as a battlefield” (Simonsen, 2000) is thus presented as the focus from which oppositional views regarding a “hidden” issue—that which involves the geography most “intimately intimate” (Jackson, in press)—are brought to light. Regarding the concept of distinction, this article discusses the extent to which the campaigns discussed utilize “novel” approaches, that of displaying graphic imagery within public places, to discuss “impact” in relation to the reactionary critique of the public audience. Focusing on the concept of distinction, we draw on Bourdieu’s (1984) research regarding taste in society. The different aesthetic choices people make are all distinctions, that is, choices made in opposition to those made by other classes; in these social tastes, Bourdieu finds a world of social meaning. Bourdieu argues that the social world functions simultaneously as a system of power relations and as a symbolic system in which even the smallest distinctions of taste become the basis for social judgment. For Bourdieu, then, a person’s taste is a product not just of their own intimate desires, but comes from that person’s position in the social field. While this issue takes Bourdieu’s understanding of distinction to understand the complexity of urban social relations in different ways, we draw out ideas regarding distinction with regard to the acceptability of specific behaviors and acts within (public) place(s) (drawing on the work of Cresswell, 1996). We argue that distinction, presented as a tactic to challenge ideas of decency and acceptability in public space, is in the deliberation, or challenge, of the idea of “difference” and the cementation

of that difference. “Standing out” as “other” in social and urban space brings into question discussions regarding the right to the city (Mitchell, 2003) as well as understandings of social and cultural politics of exclusions more broadly (Sibley, 1995).

Second, we discuss the concept of duration with regard to protest. Here, duration is important to consider not only with regard to temporal longevity but also emotional longevity and the stretching “impacts” that particular forms of protest may have on “witnesses.” Finally, drawing out the concept of expansion, we discuss the territorialization and territorial practices of the groups that perform these specific acts of resistance, and indeed explore the specific locality and positionality of the protest itself. Abort67, the group at the center of this research, engage a “new form” of resistance, a moral resistance, which seeks to address and challenge questions what is socially, emotionally, scientifically, and morally acceptable in terms of the sanctity of human life. Here, their message represents a tension between personal agency and the limits of this in individual’s decision-making capabilities in everyday life. Seen as a “nuisance” due to the social and spatial positioning of the protest, this specific campaign brings into question who has access, and the right, to public space and what acts are “acceptable” within the “public” arena.

The Temporality and Distinctiveness of “Resistance”

We discuss the “limits of resistance” in the following ways; first, by developing broader discussions of territory and territoriality (Wastl-Walter & Staeheli, 2004), by understanding territory and the practice of territoriality as an expression of social power, defining who or what belongs where (Storey, 2001; Wastl-Walter & Staeheli, 2004). Here, we combine discussions of protest and territoriality in what Routledge (1993) calls “terrains of resistance.” The territorial positioning, and indeed territorial performances, of the campaigns are therefore vital to understanding how and why particular campaigns take up and occupy public space in different forms, and begin to explain specific reactions from the public to these campaigns. While there have been discussions regarding protest and temporality (Kornetis, 2009), McAdam and Sewell (2001) argue that most scholarship discussing dominant temporalities in the study of social movements and revolutions does not directly discuss temporality at all. Here, they suggest that studies of protest, which involve discussions of some form of temporality, are instead not informed by a particular conception of time, conforming to “one of the two analytic templates: long term change processes or protest cycles” (McAdam & Sewell, 2001, p. 90). Responding to this claim we investigate temporality as a factor in how these campaigns are positioned (and received) territorially, in particular public spaces.

Second, the performance and performativity of protest itself must be noted (McFarlane & Hay, 2003; Szerszynski, 1999). Thus, we draw on ideas from Butler (1990) and Goffman (1956) to reflect on the importance of performance and performativity to resistance. Distinguishing between these concepts, Gregson and Rose (2000) outline that

we maintain that performance is subsumed within and must always be connected to performativity—that is, to the citational practices which produce and subvert discourse and knowledge, and which at the same time enable and discipline subjects and their performances. (p. 433)

Distinguishing between Butler (1990) and Goffman’s (1956) discussions regarding performance and performativity, Gregson and Rose argue that while Butler’s notion of performativity is deployed through a linguistic perspective, Goffman’s perspective is drawn out through human geography which “sees social identities as performed.” This, they find, implies that “identities are in some sense constructed in and through social action, rather than existing anterior to social processes” (Gregson & Rose 2000, p. 434). Thus, they find that the idea of performance offers the possibility for thinking about the way in which identity and agency are constructed. We argue

that protest is itself both performance and performative; protest is an “act,” performed on a stage (that of public space). The space itself must also be thought of as performative, “that more needs to be made of the complexity and instability of performances and performed spaces” (Gregson & Rose, 2000, p. 433). They further state “[performance], what individual subjects do, say, ‘act out’—and performativity—the citational practices which reproduce and/or subvert discourse and which enable and discipline subjects and their performances—are intrinsically connected, through the saturation of performers with power” (Gregson & Rose, 2000, p. 434). Individuals involved in resistance are themselves performing their beliefs and identities in particular ways that are both scripted and involve specific relations of power. Understanding the way that performance “plays out,” they find that “conceptualising performance as staged, as played for spectators both behind the scenes . . . construe(s) performance as theatrical and dramaturgical, the produce of intentional, conscious agents” (Gregson & Rose, 2000, p. 436). This is rooted in a “Goffmanesque” understanding of the idea of performance. Invoking the importance of space in/as/ of the act incorporates “the street” (Simpson, 2011), demonstrating a situated “stage” that involves specific actors, at specific times, engaging with specific audiences for a specific purpose. It is this idea of “performance” that we engage with through the example of Abort67’s displays, that the space which is used by them is also a performative relation of power.

Jones, Jones, and Woods (2003) suggest that activism is an alternative way of performing politics and of resisting dominant discourses—a way for individuals to “do” politics in different ways. Thus the context, the site, within which activism takes place is important. A more nuanced “local” approach, specifically focusing on the “everyday site” (and performance) of resistance and protest is therefore necessary. Place matters (Cresswell, 1996); it impacts upon the “scale,” duration and distinction of protest, particularly when regarding the acceptability, and performance, of specific “resistant” behaviors in public spaces (Cresswell, 1996). As Simpson (2011, p. 418) argues, “the status of the street as a public space and its situation as a “lively and contested public domain” (P. Jackson, 1998, p. 176)” are of particular significance. Simpson’s (2011) work thus relates to the ways in which the performative dimension of acts of resistance, in the public sphere, represent an active way of engaging the public in politics. Subsequently, public spaces constitute an arena through which public debate can take place (Fyfe, 1998). This “arena,” and the very practices and performances within, is of tantamount importance when rethinking terrains of resistance in the contemporary city.

The resistance discussed in this article is of particular interest in its representation of the collapse of the dichotomy of public/private divide (Staeheli, 1996, 2003; Staeheli & Mitchell, 2004) wherein feminist geographers have called for the private to be made political through recognition of its relevance. Through this type of resistance, private, personal, and intimate issues are made public through specific acts and performances of resistance, and indeed in the messages being spread. These debates are “politicising the private” (Anderson & Jacobs, 1999) by locating the site of the body (and indeed body politics) in public space (Longhurst, 2001). Our focus here is on the way in which Pro-Life and Pro-Choice campaigns use spatial tactics as practice, not only of territoriality but also of their distinctiveness and their ability to leave a lasting legacy on their public witnesses.

There is a dearth of work on campaigns regarding abortion in the United Kingdom, with the exception of Cull’s (1997) research into the Pro-Life Alliance. Research regarding abortion primarily focuses on issues regarding the stigma of abortion (Jackson & Valentine, 2016; Kumar, Hessini, & Mitchell 2009; Norris et al., 2011; Shellenberg et al., 2011), the role of morality (Jackson & Valentine, 2014), and rights-based discourses (Lokeland, 2004). This discussion therefore develops the use of specific images as a central tactic, developing work by Petchesky (1987) and Rohlinger (2006) whose research focuses on these debates within the United States.² This discussion draws on the emotions that are included in Pro-Life and Pro-Choice campaigns to highlight the novelty of specific groups’ practices. Though emotional geography is a

burgeoning field, the extent to which emotions have been discussed with regard to activism is limited (Askins, 2009; Brown & Pickerill, 2009; Wilkinson, 2009). These discussions have tended to ask whether emotion belongs as a tactic in mainstream activism, and whether the use of such emotion further challenges the acceptability of activism in different ways in the public imagination (Cresswell, 1996). We therefore explore the ways in which the use of emotion in activism facilitates particular types of messages and leads to questions around the “place” of activism in specific sites in the public sphere.

Method

This discussion is informed by data collected for a research project on attitudes toward, and living with, difference. The data presented here were part of a project looking at how groups in conflict, or with competing rights, negotiate each other’s presence in different spaces. We conducted 28 in-depth semistructured interviews with key informants most of whom had direct experience of participating in Pro-Life or Pro-Choice activism either online or in public space. Participants were contacted directly through the organizations they were affiliated with, and meetings arranged with one of the research team. These were complemented by eight research focus groups with a variety of participants who had been influenced by the topic and held either strong Pro-Life or Pro-Choice opinions. We also spent considerable time out on displays, vigils, and protests with various Pro-Life groups between November 2012 and February 2014, conducting ethnographic observations of group dynamics, approach to the protests and vigils in terms of tactics, and interactions between group members and the general public and between group members and counter-demonstrators. Our analysis of empirical data is therefore premised on an approach that recognizes that these methods must be “apprehended as performative in themselves, as doings” (Dewsbury, Harrison, Rose, & Wylie, 2002, p. 438). We present them as encounters that offer insights into emotions, embodiment, and affect (Jayne, Valentine, & Holloway, 2010). The interviews and focus group transcripts were transcribed and coded using NVIVO text analysis software which was then further analyzed thematically. All participants are referred to by the use of pseudonyms to protect anonymity, though their group affiliation is used where permission was granted. Discussing the performance and territorialization of these protests we draw on observations made while out on displays with Abort67, a Pro-Life campaigning group that uses graphic images of abortion to educate the public as to the realities of abortion itself. We also present interview data from interviews conducted with members of Abort67 and various Pro-Choice campaigning groups.

Territorializing Resistance

Abort67 are a Pro-Life group based in the United Kingdom, with links to the Centre for Bioethical Reform in the United States. The group operate displays in the public sphere, using large graphic images of aborted fetuses. These images are displayed on large boards or on banners which are erected (see Figure 1). They position themselves in two distinct ways, either outside a clinic where women access abortion and reproductive health care services, or on pavements outside (or near to) public institutions such as universities. The group label themselves an educational group, informing the public as to the reality of abortion through making the hidden visible. What is particularly interesting about the groups’ displays is the way in which they define and operate through specific territories (Storey 2001), which are defined by the group. The display team sets up the boundary around the display using “warning signs,” informing passers-by that graphic images lie ahead. In the most rudimentary definition, territory is an area claimed by a single person or group which is marked by social or material boundaries (Wastl-Walter & Staeheli, 2004). Such territories and boundaries are produced and designed under particular conditions to serve



Figure 1. Spatial positioning of an Abort67 display, 2012, photograph. *Source:* Authors.

specific ends (Storey, 2001, p. 15). Using warning signs extends the display territory; Abort67 operate a particular spatial and territorial strategy to create maximum exposure and impact. From this position, they are able to not only spread their message but also garner a reaction from those in the public sites in which they situate themselves. Performing this territorial act, display volunteers stand in a line, occupying a stretched linear, spatially stretched in the boards that mark their position. Extending this territory further are the pavement counselors, individuals from Abort67 who approach passers-by to hand them leaflets while attempting to engage them in conversations about abortion (see also Figure 3).

Demonstrating the very performativity of these displays, the group reacts to each specific site that they occupy, noting not only how to “fill” the space to garner increased attention but also where to locate themselves for “maximum impact.” This was noted in the observations carried out:

Today the group are stood on the opposite side of the road to the University—this was based on advice from Mitchell (a resident of X). Upon travelling to the original site, I had two subsequent texts from Karen to inform me that their location had changed upon the advice of their local supporter. This demonstrates the often ad-hoc nature of this type of display and the value and importance of local knowledge for each individual display. This new location ensured that there was a high level of “foot traffic” from students accessing lecture theatres, and from members of the public. (Research diary notes, December 2012)

The group gets ready—Adam quickly walks down to the site to see how much space there is and decides against using the large signs as there is only a small portion of pavement for them to set up; the group are careful not to stand on the property of the clinic as this would be considered trespassing. The spatial awareness and positioning of the display is particularly interesting; there are a number of discussions about appropriate places for them to stand, as well as an awareness of the legality of where they can and cannot stand . . . After a few minutes of discussion outside the minibus Adam advises the group to take down just two of the smaller boards—the group decides on the two they think will be most effective (and relevant) to this site. Iona and Amy ensure there are enough leaflets

for everyone and I am offered a stack of leaflets to hand out (which I decline). This discussion takes about 15 minutes, but the set-up by the pavement is much quicker as there are no large banners to erect. Time is taken to ensure that the video cameras are set up properly (with replacement batteries). The group decide to split up, with the main bulk of the group standing with the boards, and small factions splitting off to cross over to the other side of the road. (Research diary notes, December 2012).

The group responds to each “site” that they occupy, using the space available. For example, they might use the railings of a public park to attach their banners to on a windy day, shielding themselves and ensuring the images remain in place for passers-by to see, or lean a large banner against an abandoned shop window to stop counter protesters attempting to push it over. Discussing this particularity with Adam, he stated,

With very few resources, we can take a lot of ground. We can achieve quite a lot. (Adam, Abort67)

The group do not need a large-scale operation in order to make the most of the materials they have. On a number of displays that we attended, the group size was between six and eight (Figure 1); they are able to maximize the impact of this small group size by using each spatial location to their advantage. Abort67’s claiming of territory is countered by Pro-Choice groups in the various locations in which the display operates. While observing, we witnessed different groups approaching to counter the display (dependent on the location). Pro-Choice groups counter to this specific type of display usually takes the form of covering up the images that are being displayed, as well as trying to promote their own (Pro-Choice) message, normally on handwritten signs and banners. For example, at one location the group use colored paper to cover up Abort67’s signs and in another use decorative scarves which they attempt to drape over the banners. This becomes a “game,” a performance, as Abort67 must try to out maneuver the Pro-Choice groups to ensure that their signs are still visible. For example, when Pro-Choice countering uses multicolored paper, a number of Abort67 members are stood behind railings with their signs. They therefore simply move their signs so that they are still visible. In the case of the scarf draping, members of Abort67 lift the large banner higher (as it is on poles) out of reach of the countering group; the group are “dancing” with each other, responding and moving with each rhythm to enhance their visibility (Cresswell, 2006). While Mason’s (1992) research suggests that it is the reduction of proximity between street performers and their audience that results in a more impactful arrangement, Abort67 sometimes have to negotiate this distance to ensure that they maintain control over the original territory. Abort67’s fluid reaction denotes a move away from the “script” from which they originated (Simpson, 2011) suggesting the very reactive performance of territory in spaces of resistance. In another example, the countering Pro-Choice group starts off small but grows in size. Only a small division exists between the groups, which is made smaller still by the Pro-Choice groups’ attempts to display their own signs behind Abort67’s boundary line (see Figure 2). Unable to “negotiate” this foray into their territory on this occasion, these actions call into question the division of territory and the demarcation of boundaries that activist groups perform.

While territory can be marked by material (visible) or symbolic boundaries (Wastl-Walter & Staeheli, 2004), it is also created by actions and interactions. Within this example there are not only physical demarcations of territory but also attempts to re-claim and re-territorialize the space by chanting and shouting thus evoking and controlling an affective territory (Thrift, 2004). Multisensory approaches to protest are enacted, not only to extend and stretch the group’s message but also to reiterate the performance through the audible landscape; thus, while passers-by might be able to avoid looking at the displays, they are not completely unaffected with other senses invaded by Abort67’s display. While this can be seen as a counter-territorializing move, this also ensures that the display becomes more noticeable, moving to become about who can



Figure 2. Pro-Choice signs displayed behind the “boundary line” set up by Pro-Life group , 2012, photograph. *Source:* Authors.

control the territory and space in different ways. The display thus transforms into a fluid performance, enacted both by group members and by the public.

Performing Resistance

Whilst these displays are territorially shaped and driven, bound by the very lines and stances that each individual member of the group takes, they are also actively performed. The displays become expertly “choreographed” even their reactions to potential disruptions is handled in pre-rehearsed imaginative ways (Harrison-Pepper, 1990, as cited in Simpson, 2011, p. 420). Szerszynski (1999, p. 221) outlines that protest is a performance through the conception of the “game”—relying on the following of shared, negotiated meanings and values. It is also in the active construction, and negotiation, of the “we-they” boundary that demonstrates the performative element of the protest (Szerszynski, 1999). For Abort67, the displays take a considerable amount of time to set up and maintain. The group therefore learns to work together, actively building their boundary and maintain the stage from which to promote their message. The performed dimension of the campaign is noted below:



Figure 3. “Performing” the Pro-Life message, 2012, photograph. *Source:* Authors.

Abort67 rehearse their “routine” in their utilisation of a group “script” which takes form in a number of different ways.³ Individuals joining Abort67 as members are asked to sign a volunteer agreement, agreeing to particular codes of behaviour and the promotion of particular, standardised, messages. New members are also trained how to respond to tricky questions and reminded to stick to scientific fact, rather than arguing over religious beliefs or get angry. (Research field notes, March 2013).

This idea of a “script” is reiterated through my interactions with David and Mark,

After being introduced by Karen, I spent time with David and Mark who were happy to talk to me. They discussed their tactics, the wider concept of Pro-Life and talked me through what they were doing that morning and what typically happened during a display. Mark talked a lot about educating those who haven’t already made their minds up regarding abortion, saying that this was their main target audience. Mark’s discussion with me seemed almost scripted; to me it was interesting to note that Abort67 had a single message that was repeated over and over by different members. (Research field notes, November 2012)

The code of conduct is not the only thing that reiterates the scripted performance:

When speaking to Isabel and Nichola about their experience, Nichola hands over a small model, about the size of a 12 week old foetus, she names her “Grace,” and reiterates the message whilst “Grace” is in my palm and states “isn’t it amazing, how small she is . . . that’s a 12 week old baby.” I am shocked by this very physical presence and am surprised that even with preparation for such emotional tactics holding this model makes me feel sad, somehow vulnerable whilst making the “abstract” issue of abortion most present and real. Isabel explains that they use this approach with women entering clinics and I feel this tactic is one that is passed on from member to member. I cannot help but reflect on this as an active performance, noting the “fleshy materiality” of the “body” which is placed into my possession. (Research field notes, November 2012)

The participation is never complete (Gregson & Rose, 2000); there is a stretching of the social impact of protests of this nature, through their very enactment of affective dimensions (L. Jackson

& Valentine, 2016). The corporeality and “reality” of the discussions that the group members have with the public are further presented as performance (see Figure 3) and this becomes an element of the protest itself in different ways:

It seems to me that each member of the group has their own role to play. Isabel and Nichola seem comfortable with the idea of approaching women directly whilst others, such as Karen and Adam, are there to ensure that everything runs smoothly, call upon the police and manage the situation. Members such as Mark and David are happy to hold the banners and attempt to engage those who pass by, whilst younger members of the group such as Amy connect with the younger audience wherever possible. (Field notes, November 2012)

Here, we refer to the work of Goffman (1956) who saw interaction as an engagement between individual(s) and audience(s). Here, individuals perform and observers interpret their actions. Goffman’s analysis regarding interaction requires an active, prior, conscious, and “performing self.” Members of Abort67 both “become” and “already are” actors, entwined with the performance of their “roles” through action (in approaching others, in the props they use), and through utterance (different approaches to speech and to engaging with passers-by). The idea of the conscious performer is an interesting one to think through here; members adhere to a “script,” an agreed “contract” through which they must engage within specific bounds of acceptability for the group, yet not necessarily to those witnessing the display. Through my interactions with the group, I see them transform from individuals, laughing, joking, chatting, to become “official faces” of the organization they represent—their stance changes, their roles predefined, orchestrated, rehearsed. This performance, then, is one that is played out on the street, in space (Gregson & Rose 2000), involving the “site of protest” (L. Jackson & Valentine, 2016), thus, the performance of the Pro-Life display is both spatial *and* social. These displays are thus distinctive because the space, the “site,” that is selected for the performance is not done so at random, it is itself scripted—it is selected as a site to cause “maximum impact” by the organizers. These specific spaces create the distinctiveness of Abort67’s campaigns—it is in their selection of the spaces that observers object to—that these displays should not take place near the space of the clinic, should not take place in public spaces, due to the affective impact on observers. The space selected thus holds its own power, it becomes powerful and power laden, an identifying element specific to Abort67.

The strategy of the group is not just reiterated through signs, images, discussions, and chanting but is performed with the use of props (see discussion of the model above) which again taps into the multisensory experience and tactic of the group, here with kinaesthetic aspects such as weight and lightness. The props involved in the performance are not only from the group. Abort67 rely on the presence of those resisting their ideas; such “drama,” they believe, adds to the weight of the impact that they have. In the notes above, I refer to the moment that a Pro-Choice group arrives, bringing their homemade banners and signs with them. They use these to cover Abort67’s professionally printed signs; this is celebrated by Abort67 members who see the presence of such Pro-Choice groups as a necessary part of the display itself:

The Pro-Choice group were labelled “the cover up brigade” by Kathryn who remarked “oh look there’s enough of them now and they are coming over . . . here come the cover up brigade.” Kathryn said that she found it very interesting that as they had travelled to different places around the country the usual response they got was one of covering up Abort67’s images—she felt that they were being covered up because the images were “clearly shocking and therefore they must mean something to people.” (Research field notes, December 2012).

This is all caught on camera:

I note the use of video cameras and taking of photographs whilst out with the group. Adam informs me that they video their campaigns so that they cannot be accused of any untoward behaviour. (Research field notes, December 2012).

After noticing the use of video cameras we note that a number of clips from these videos and photographs taken at the displays are uploaded onto Abort67's Facebook group, Twitter feed, and their website, stretching further the performance of the event itself. It must be remembered that these actions are only completed (turned into performance) when they are observed; the protest is never fully realized until it has been witnessed, and engaged with, by the public in everyday consciousness (Szerszynski, 1999, p. 224). Though the performative aspect of these displays is certainly unique, it is important to discuss the way in which this type of resistance is received by the public, as well as by countering groups.

Impact, Distinction, and Resistance

The impact that this campaign has lies in its distinction from other Pro-Life campaigns in the United Kingdom. Abort67 bring an intimately political (Pain & Staeheli 2014), private issue into the public sphere in a very particular way, making it impossible to “un-see,” playing with witnesses' memory of the protest performance. The campaign's distinction comes from the use of graphic imagery which is seen as out of place in the public sphere (Cresswell, 1996) and mark this particular group out as distinctive. The impact that the group has subsequently revolves around these particular tactics and ways of performing. The overwhelming response to Abort67's campaign tactics was negative, with one Pro-Choice campaigner, Mary, arguing

I personally think that standing outside abortion clinics shouting at the women or holding up pictures of plastic foetuses . . . or whatever. I think that's beyond the normal kind of demonstration isn't it? I mean normally you walk along the street holding your placards and things like that. You don't actually stand outside a place where people are going to have treatment and so I think targeting the women is wrong. (Mary, DWCA)

The immediate impact of the campaign may be witnessed in reactions from people on the street. Witnessing these displays, there are a number of different responses, ranging from horror and surprise, through to anger,

Around 3:30 pm John and Clare approach a male passer-by on the opposite side of the road. At first he appears to be engaging with them before walking away. He moves towards the bus-stop and then begins shouting abuse at the main group. He shouts “you're poison, you're the real baby murderers, why don't you just fuck off and go get a real job . . . you force women to have children and it's because of you people are dying”. . . He walks back to the bus stop and quickly hails the next bus. In all, the exchange only lasts a couple of minutes, but I am quite shaken at the abusive and violent nature of outburst. Karen reiterates that this happens, but this incident was not at all bad—she reiterates that they face much more severe abuse and that the only thing they can do is not react to it but stay quiet, unless the individual is willing to engage in dialogue. Thinking about their roadside positioning I ask Karen if there has ever been an incident of drivers not looking where they are going as they slow down to look at the displays. She replies that there have never been any accidents, but that some people have quickly pulled up their car to get out and “have a rant” at the team. I notice that a number of travellers on buses stare at the displays, as well as those driving cars. A few people visibly shake their heads in disgust at the display and there are no horns sounded in support of the campaign. (Research diary notes, November 2012)

Short-term reactions from the public, though negative, clearly demonstrate the strong impact that this type of campaigning has. Abort67 have taken this anger and poured it back into the messages

they print on their signs, with some of their signs printed with “if you support abortion, why does seeing it make you so angry?” Members of Abort67 take positives from these types of reactions, using it to justify their approach. For example, Adam explained,

We had one situation where we were at the clinic in [city], the usual spot, kind of round the corner from the entrance and this woman drove past and few seconds later, she’d parked up and she came round the corner. She was in floods of tears and she was screaming at us, just absolutely devastated . . . On the street people swear at us and use physical means to express their disdain for us . . . (Mark, Abort67)

I speak to Claire about the incident later in the day as it still had an impact on me:

She explains that they usually approach people by asking questions such as “do you have an opinion on abortion?” She says that these open questions usually start a dialogue with people and is open rather than confrontational or aggressive. She explains that the Pro-Choice protestors are antagonising whilst the Pro-Life protestors are peaceful. In her approach to demonstrating she explained that “you’ve either got someone in the first minute or not at all . . . you can see it in people’s body language whether they are going to stop to talk to you or not. (Notes from Research Diary, December 2012)

Reflecting further on people’s reactions to this specific performance of resistance, there are questions regarding both impact and duration.⁴ While the displays take place in the short term, the long-term impact of the displays can stay with someone, as another Pro-Life campaigner argued,

You don’t know who is walking past and how that person will react. You just don’t—let’s say you did the vigil in a public park, you don’t know that the woman walking through that park was raped two years ago, had an abortion, was completely fine with it. Walked past it, saw your banners, thought about the abortion, thought about the rape and all of that came back and she went home and was really depressed about it. (Wes CMF)

Wes argued that it was difficult to assess the extent to which these campaigns had a long-term impact on individuals. He suggested that the reactions, seen positively by Abort67 members, might actually lead to more pain and suffering and that these should not be considered successful campaigning. Davidson, Smith, and Bondi (2005, p. 5) find that “questions about how emotions are embodied and located merit further elaboration in the context of typical and less typical everyday lives.” Our emotions, then, are important to consider in terms of their “socio-spatial mediation and articulation rather than as entirely interiorised subjective mental states” (Davidson et al., 2005, p. 10). Therefore, the emotional impact of such protest, in terms of their longevity, their duration, their “stretching,” cannot be underestimated, nor should they be ignored. However, Diane, a Pro-Choice campaigner, questioned the extent to which this campaign actually impacted on people’s lives, and their decisions around reproductive health care,

When they trumpet about having a turnaround, that a woman hasn’t done it, I think its crap, basically. I think what happens is that some women are frightened and will turn away and they’ll come back to have a later abortion at a later date and they’ll go through the whole thing again. I don’t think it has an impact on the number of people having abortions . . . It’s not reducing the number of women who have abortions. (Diane, Pro-Choice campaigner)

The long-term impact of the campaign is therefore difficult to assess, though Adam argued that, because of their campaigning, the issue was now being discussed much more widely.

Adam also insisted that the group were also having an influence in parliament, with discussions being more widely held, and with the matter of abortion being taken more seriously.⁵ What

we noted in our observations, however, was that not only did these campaigns appear to impact on others, drawing out varied emotions from anger, to sadness; they impacted on ourselves (Askins, 2009), making us distinctly aware of our own bodies in the process and the potentiality of human life. However, the longevity of this form of resistance warrants further discussion. The longer term impact and duration of such campaigns might inform how we discuss resistance in the public sphere and the impact that these might have.

The immediate impact of the campaign is temporally limited; individuals have to really engage with people on the street for the campaign to have real impact. If there is no time to dialogue then there may be limited impact in terms of changing people's opinions, as demonstrated below:

As the group pack up, Jeremy approaches a female student waiting for the bus. He chats for a couple of minutes and rushes over asking for a spare leaflet to give her, by the time he gets back to the student, she has got onto the bus and doesn't respond to Jeremy's calls to try to give her the information. (Field notes, December 2012).

Thus while each member of the group has their role to play and these roles are designed to engage people differently, these engagements may be only superficial. This further explains Pippa's "quiet" and "vulnerable" approach, where she draws people in as a "little old lady," drawing them in to her personal space to "catch" their attention. Watching the displays, I noticed she was far more successful at engaging with people than some of the others in the campaign, though Isabel and Nichola, friendly in their approach were also successful in creating dialogue. Karen argued that groups countering their displays were purely reactionary and that this approach changed while they were in it for the long term, determined in their rehearsed performance. She explained,

We're in it for the long haul. You'll find we'll be here next year and the year after and after. These opposition groups come and go and they're new faces all the time. (Karen, Abort67)

Members of Abort67 were therefore fairly confident of the longevity of their campaign and their ability to change people's minds, either through the public sphere or through the political arena. However, discussing Abort67's use of imagery and their specific approach in the long term Pro-Choice activists remained skeptical,

I'm not concerned about them at all actually. In fact if anything I think that the fundamental anti-abortion lot outside the clinic probably do more to raise support for us than they're a problem. (Alice, BPAS)

Instead of changing the public's opinion over the long term, Pro-Choice groups felt that the tactics of Abort67 actually did more to raise support of women's right to access abortion in the United Kingdom, as Sarah suggested,

You did not see kind of mass rallies against it or anything like that. So I don't see there being a real change in the way people perceive it. If you look at the way Parliament, MPs, they know there's no votes in being really stridently, morally Pro-Choice but they also know there are no votes in being anti-choice . . . Because it's a conscience issue. They can vote how they like. (Sarah, Pro-Choice Journalist)

As Foster, Kimport, Gould, Roberts, and Weitz's (2013) research on the impact of protestors outside clinics in the United States found, the negative effects of protester interaction did not extend beyond the short term. While women in this study were upset by the protesters initially, it

did not affect their subsequent feelings of having an abortion and, therefore, the particular duration of these acts of resistance, and their distinction, as a different way of presenting Pro-Life politics, may be limited.

Conclusion

In this article, we have looked at the way in which a contemporary form of resistance plays out in the public sphere, not only noting its distinctiveness, duration, and impact but also focusing on the very spatiality, and indeed territoriality, of this campaign. There are a number of key findings emerging from this example. First, we have highlighted the way in which acts of resistance are performances, much like a stage play yet performed in “the street.” Here, passers-by, witnesses, become engaged in the performance; while members of the activist group have rehearsed lines as actors, those passing by also become actors within this stage show. This performed understanding of the site of resistance is most noted in the territorial negotiation. In this particular example, it is the “game” that Pro-Life and Pro-Choice activists play, one that involves a spatial negotiation and spatial positioning (and re-positioning) of their organizational bodies such that they are able to spread their campaign message in different ways which is important. These negotiations inform us of who owns and controls territory(ies) and indeed, who owns and controls public space. While discussions have abounded regarding access to, as well as the right to perform in, the public sphere we have added further complexity to these debates by highlighting the negotiations *between* groups of resistance who compete for their right to claim public space.

The role of performance can be further explored and understood through the notion of saturation. Performativity, Gregson and Rose (2000, p. 441) argue “involves the saturation of performances and performers with power, with particular subject positions.” Therefore, in disrupting and enacting power and different positionalities of power and “the powerful” with regard to their messages, their interactions and their ability to disrupt powerful ideologies regarding abortion, Abort67 not only recognize but use and promote their ability to provide shock, horror, and awe; it becomes a part of the act, part of the performance, and part of the script which is developed for the next display. It is also important, however, to note not only the power within these performances but also the messiness of interaction, thus as Gregson and Rose (2000) argue

to see performances simply as the theatrical products of knowing, intentional agents at some remove from their other selves, other performers, audiences, and power is misplaced. Rather, these performances are at all times interrelational between individual subjects and performative. They are saturated with power, bound up within and enmeshed within in very complex ways, the already established knowledges which they cite. (p. 445)

The slippages and distinctiveness of power relations within Abort67’s displays, the use of space and the scripted action of their displays, is continually slipping—it is relational in that the observer, those interacted with always involve some form of unpredictability. Thus, the performance of the Pro-Life display is both scripted and unscripted, predictable and prone to the unpredictable, thus, always in a process of becoming.

This particular example allows us to reconsider the *impact* that protest has as well as its’ long-term implications. While in this example there are the rights of those accessing a particular service (to be protected at a sensitive time), there are also the rights of those who perform acts of resistance in terms of freedom of speech (Foster et al., 2013). As Stuart Hall (1980) argued, in the process of decoding a message and retranslating it into social practices, one reserves the right to make a negotiated application to local conditions. Here, the linked but distinctive moments of production, circulation, distribution, consumption, and reproduction are crucial. As such, the local and situational context of where these protests are located is important. The context in which

resistance is performed connects more broadly with complex longevity(ies) of this type of resistance which is linked to particularities such as novelty. Additionally, time is an important factor to acts of resistance and must therefore be considered. What is clear in this example is that Abort67's use of shock tactics is seen as unacceptable and morally wrong, as one interviewee commented,

We don't promote campaigns for breast cancer generally by showing women who've had horrendous breast removal. We don't sort of say—get tested, go and have frequent screening by showing women that have had mastectomies, do we? So I just think it's very emotive, I think it's unfair and I think it's damaging. (Steve, health care worker)

While the distinction of this particular campaign lies in their novel tactics, this may ultimately wear off, with the shock factor reducing as individuals become normalized to such images (Linfield, 2010). As Pickerill (2006, p. 280) warns “for activists who rely upon novelty to gain attention from the media, government, adversaries and the public. . . . There will always be the threat of normalization.” The use of graphic images, though limited in their impact, may therefore have even less impact over the long term as the wider public becomes normalized to their presence. However, Abort67's members remain positive about the influence they have through this approach, suggesting that they cause enough of an effect that their opposition complains to the extent that group members are arrested, thus, further cementing to them the importance of what they are doing.

We argue, therefore, that we need to understand acts of resistance not in isolation from, but connected to, broader social, cultural, and political discourses. As highlighted by Adam throughout this discussion, there has indeed been more discussion around reproductive politics. However, the group fear that this could be due to a series of high-profile cases, such as the death of Savita Halappanavar in Ireland. Subsequently, acts of resistance in public space not only demand attention through their taking over of public space but are also unique in their positioning on the fringe of politics and political action and at the fringe of social and cultural opinion. Consequently, the performative dimension of resistance is important, and we suggest that particular performative dimensions may lead a change in public consciousness and opinion due to their distinctiveness as well as the duration with which they enter the public consciousness.

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Notes

1. For discussion of the transnational connectivity of ideas regarding social justice see Valentine, Vanderbeck, Sadgrove, Andersson, and Ward (2013).
2. Debates regarding abortions and protest are often highlighted within the British media. Such articles in mainstream newspapers such as the *Guardian* and the *Times* and in more left wing publications such as “Spiked” (online) look toward the acceptability of these protests, as well as debating the very moral and social fabric of the right to “freedom of speech” and the limits to this when such an intimately sensitive issue is at stake.

3. The volunteer agreement (code of conduct) handed out from Abort67 leaders to new volunteers asks them to read and sign the following agreement:

I will never pressure members of the public to look at the Pro-Life display.

I may offer Pro-Life literature to members of the public but will never push it on them.

I will always treat people with respect, even if they are angry and/or verbally abusive

I will not shout at people or use abusive, threatening or insulting language

If asked a secular question, I will respond with a secular answer only. If asked a spiritual question I may give a spiritual answer (note: people may reject spiritual answers)

I will never trespass on private property or disrupt any event at which the educational display takes place

If members of the public threaten property, I will call for law enforcement officers. I will not attempt to physically stop anyone who makes such a threat or attempts to carry it out.

If members of the public threaten staff, volunteers and/or myself, I will call for law enforcement officers. I will make reasonable efforts to remove others and myself from the presence of those making threats, but if I am unable to do that, I understand that I am allowed to take lawful steps to protect myself from risk of injury

I condemn all abortion-related violence

I understand that if I disregard this volunteer agreement I may be required to discontinue participation in educational displays, at the discretion of Abort67

I acknowledge that I have read and understood this volunteer agreement, and I agree to abide by it. (Handout supplied by Abort67, 7/11/2012)

4. Sheriff's (2012) article was written as a direct response to Abort67's "Clarkson Tour" of winter 2012. This article discusses the impact of the displays held at the University of Nottingham's campus, at which the author was present.
5. See examples with which this article opened.

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