**The spark, the spread, and ethics: Towards an object-orientated view of subversive creativity**

**Abstract**

This paper articulates the subversive and political potential of an object-orientated view of urban creativity. Drawing upon object-orientated philosophies, it further develops the political and subversive potential of the creativity rhetoric to argue that nonhuman material agency is an important factor in propelling subversive behaviour into sustained political change. By focusing on the agency of objects and their ability to challenge our own behaviour in the city, the paper posits a three-stage articulation of subversive creativity; the spark, the spread and ethics. From this, the paper argues that creativity can be posited less as a mechanism of change that is all too often co-opted and reappropriated by normalising forces, but as a subversive force that has a potential to create alternative and sustained political subjectivities.

**Keywords**

Objects, creativity, subversion, urban politics

**Introduction**



**Figure 1: ‘Camden Bench’ by Factory Furniture (Source:** [**http://www.factoryfurniture.co.uk/products-camden-bench.php**](http://www.factoryfurniture.co.uk/products-camden-bench.php)**, accessed 6th October, 2018)**

There is a recently manufactured bench that is celebrated as having ‘alternative’ uses *designed* *out* of it. The ‘Camden Bench’ (see Figure 1) made by Factory Furniture, “is designed with contemporary street seating needs in mind including resisting criminal and anti-social behaviour” (Factory Furniture, 2014, n.p.). The bench has been specifically designed to deter rough sleeping by having ridged and sloped surfaces, and attempts to eschew drug dealing by an absence of slots or crevices. It is coated in an anti-graffiti paint and has been specifically designed to make skateboarding on the bench highly problematic. It also apparently reduces littering, deters bag theft and is easy to relocate “away from a problem area” (*ibid.*). It was awarded the UK Design Council’s award for ‘best practice for reducing crime’ in 2011, and has been PAS68 approved by the Home Office for anti-terrorist use as a road barrier.

The bench is therefore a product of a creative industrial design process. Yet, the celebration of its design as eradicating all other uses other than ‘contemporary street seating needs’ has led to commentators labelling it the ‘perfect anti-object’ (Swain, 2013), as it is defined more by what it is not. This makes the bench a curious artefact of the urban terrain. More broadly, the bench is emblematic of a contemporary urban design and development process that reduces the capabilities of objects to be used subversively (and is an iteration of the wider process of ‘defensible architecture’ (Jencks, 2002)). The bench, and many other urban objects like it, is enforcing a particular kind of urbanisation; one that emanates from the collective and institutional will of the designers and commissioners of this bench. So far from creating new urban processes and subjectivities, it actually reduces the ability of urbanites to engage more creatively with their city by ‘locking down’ the usage of that object to a particular function. It stifles an alternative, perhaps subversive creativity. This paper aims to offer a theoretical position that both articulates and challenges that process, so as to catalyse a broader and more sustained subversive urban quotidian politics. In essence, the paper is a challenge to think about how not only to use the Camden Bench to sit on, but to *continually finding new ways of not sitting on it.*

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This bench plays into the recent literature around subversive creativity, a literature that mobilises a particular articulation of creative practice to critique normalising and centralising forces. From an urban perspective, this subversion has been based on a critical engagement with groups such as the Situationists International and their playful resistance of the city as spectacle (Pinder, 2005; Mould, 2015), but has also included more organised urban artistic and interventionists projects (see Harvie, 2013; Sachs Olsen, 2017). Within this broad field, creative practice is conceptualised first and foremost as a means of political action to subvert – and navigate the appropriative forces of – the capitalist city (de Leeuw and Hawkins, 2017).

In doing so, this line of academic work has opened up exciting new avenues of geographical inquiry and aids in the resistance to capitalist appropriation. For example, feminist and queer pedagogies have problematized the official masculine and heteronormative creative city policy projects by introducing into it ‘disobedient’ marginal identity subjects (see McLean, 2017, 2018). Additionally, working class based activist groups have utilised direct action, civil unrest and comedic interventions to highlight the specific structural violence of gentrification and austerity within a creative city discourse (see Harvie, 2013; Mould, 2018). Also, displaced urban communities in the Global South have engaged in performative and artistic memorialisation to highlight the injustices of colonialisation, but also to imagine more just urban futures (Till, 2012). Finally, there is an ever-growing cadre of research projects that have focused on specific sub-cultures, and how they use their human bodies in relation with the nonhuman materialities of the city to create new forms of subversive urbanism that are in stark contrast to a prescribed capitalist usage (Andron, 2016; Borden, 2001; Campbell, 2013; Duffy, 2013; Garrett, 2014; Mott & Roberts, 2013; Mould, 2009; Hawkins, 2013; Saville, 2009).

All these studies (and many more besides) have shown vividly how performative, activist, artistic and creative agency has critiqued, resisted and subverted the injustices of the contemporary city. However, there is always a challenge as to whether these actions can *maintain* critical political subjectivities beyond the short-term (McLean, 2017). There is a risk that these subversive practices lose their resistive potency, and/or fall foul of capitalism’s ever-increasingly sophisticated forms of appropriation (Frank, 1998; Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005). Put bluntly, how can they *maintain* their critique to normalising forces of rampant capitalist accumulation and resist co-option?

This paper argues that objects play a critical role in aiding in the maintenance of this subversively creative mindset and staving off capitalist appropriation. Because if something as relatively insignificant as the Camden Bench, through its technical design process can ‘lock down’ use to just ‘contemporary street seating needs’, then even this humble bench has what can be called a ‘thing-power’ (Bennett, 2009; Hodder, 2012). It has the power to *reduce* the way humans interact with the city. But if this bench has a thing-power that can singularise a particular process (i.e. capitalist urbanisation), then can such a power be directed in another, more subversive way? Can we have a theoretical articulation of subversive creativity that includes object-orientated philosophies to harness this thing-power for more political means? In so doing, does this combine more forcefully with human agency to propel the subversive critique of creative practice into new forms and sustained revolutionary futures? By looking to (de/re)fine subversive creativity, particularly when thought of as part of everyday quotidian urban politics, this paper focuses on a theoretical engagement with the *object*. By focusing on ‘thing-power’, this paper argues the subjectivities that are being created via subversive usage are made more *durable* in the urban terrain. Hence there is political potential that has thus far remained under-theorised, if only we consider the power of nonhuman objects as well as human subjects.

Hence, this paper draws upon object-orientated philosophies and their interjection into geographical inquiry. Notably, specific tropes within the work of Baudrillard (1996 [1968]), Bennett (2009) and Badiou (2005) will be used, the core thinking of which have been ‘translated’ into geographical inquiry by Shaw (2012), Shaw and Meehan (2013) and Ash and Simpson (2016). The paper uses these tropes not as a means to tie in their broader philosophical postulations, and therefore muddy the conceptual waters around subversive creativity. Rather as a multi-authored thread that ties together useful tropes to articulate and foreground how objects can be used subversively and politically within the city. Put crudely, the theorists’ selected ideas are used in service of articulating the object as a more powerful subversive force, not the other way round.

Hence this paper foregrounds how such theoretical developments can help us not only to understand better the political and subversive potential of objects, but also to realise alternative subjectivities beyond that which extends capitalistic schemas. As has been noted;

“Much of the phenomenon known as ‘human consciousness’ does not take place ‘in’ the bodies of the human but ‘with’ the dense scaffolding of things that enables and shapes human thought. … the result of this is that human politics and sociality has to be a politics and sociality of the non-human.”

(Ash and Simpson, 2016: 64)

Within the vast array of literature on subversive creative practices, objects are present within their ontologies. When discussing skateboarding Borden (2001) discusses how the body connects and responds to the materiality of the city through subtle undulations of the skateboard itself. Mould (2009) has shown how parkour is perfected via the intimate connection between (often worn and torn) flesh with raw concrete. But in these accounts and others, the urban object is more often than not under-theorised and subservient to a human-dominated landscape of creative political agency (cf. Dickens, 2008)[[1]](#footnote-1). Therefore, in order to fully appreciate the power of subversive creativity in these and other practices, and how it can be utilised as a means by which we can better comprehend, operationalize and maintain a political critique to the normalising forces of urban capitalism, there is a need to pay attention its ‘dense scaffolding of things’. Moreover, this requires a theoretical exploration of how this scaffolding maintains resistive and subversive subjectivities more durably than if there is only a sole focus on human agency.

Object-orientated philosophy articulates how objects are ‘inscribed’ with memories and act forcefully in the world (Bennett, 2009). Crucially, objects have a ‘cryptic reserve’ of such forcefulness (Shaw and Meehan, 2013) and hence offer an invaluable resource in *maintaining* creative political critique. In other words, understanding our political co-constitution with objects will be crucial in catalysing a critical positionality to forces of normalisation (a la Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005; Gibson-Graham, 2006). As Hodder (2012: 2, my emphasis) has noted, “as social actors, we tend to see things in ego-centred ways, in terms of what they can do for us. We hardly look at *them*”. So by ‘looking at them’, this paper develops a rhetoric that sees *objects as important actors of creative subversion*, and as having agency within urbanisation discourses that allows for alternative and political subjectivities to be maintained across time and space.

To foreground and clarify this argument, the paper offers a three-stage formulation: spark, spread and ethics. Drawing most readily on the work of Baudrillard the first section of the paper decouples an object’s function from a functionality that inscribes a certain socio-economic significance upon it. In so doing, this section highlights that objects, when stripped of their suppressive functionalities, are opened up to infinite creative possibilities; they are the ‘sparks’ of subversion.[[2]](#footnote-2) The second stage details how these sparks are seductive and can spread through other objects and humans. Using Bennett’s ‘thing-power’, this section argues that there is a potentially infinite resource within objects that will allow subversion to spread through the urban terrain. Finally, the paper argues that in order for such subversive agency to articulate alternative coherent subjectivities that can *continue* to resist normalisation, then there needs to be adherence to an object ‘ethics’. Here, the philosophies of Badiou (2001, 2005), which have already been utilised to articulate object-orientated approaches in geography (see Shaw, 2012), can be applied further if we posit his view of ethics as a fidelity to the spark and spread of subversive creativity. With this three-stage approach, this paper aims to theoretically articulate creativity as not only an ontology that can be used as a politically emancipatory characteristic, but also as a means by which we can envision broader spatial and societal transformations.

**The Spark: Function versus Functionality**

Consider a recent journey you took maybe on foot or by wheelchair, perhaps in a built up area and the various objects that you came across. You would have no doubt travelled upon pavements, been directed by a ‘do not walk’ sign via sight or sound, navigated or been blocked by some bollards that separated a space for cars from a space for pedestrians. Maybe you travelled down walkways or got into lifts that descend to subterranean levels and back out again, being contained by walls, streets and concrete all around. You may have even found your journey interrupted by a fence, bollard or temporary boundary, or maybe these restrictions were built into the journey continuously via messages on signs instructing you to ‘keep left’, ‘keep out’ or ‘alight here’. You may have even come across an anti-terrorist bench. All of these objects direct, restrict, contort, facilitate, hinder and catalyse our movement on a daily basis. They have been put in place for a particular reason, be it to facilitate or restrict mobility, and often to protect private space.

The Camden Bench example that opens this paper exemplifies how contemporary urban design and planning practices are continually ‘locking down’ usage by streamlining and repressing any function that does not conform to the immediate need of the hyper-globalising city; a need so often dictated by the needs of capital. This process is a condition of the reduction in political critique that can be employed through design of urban artefacts, or urban design more generally. Architectural geography scholarship has noted how urban space is increasingly designed with particular power-relations in-built, namely those that are primarily concerned with maintaining capitalist relations (Jacobs, 2006; Lees and Baxter, 2011; Sklair, 2006). Indeed, those gentrification schemes that employ a transformation (and often, privatisation) of the public sphere mobilise objects and the materiality of the city vehemently to smooth the flow of capital and marginalise unwanted bodies. For example, many creative ‘placemaking’ schemes (Markusen and Gadwa, 2010; Mathews, 2010) will often engineer outdoor space with public art, landscaped gardens, ping-pong tables and yes, even anti-terrorist benches, in an attempt to beautify (and hence raise the profitability) of the locale. Other forms of planning will be imbued with an ethos of defensible or ‘hostile’ architecture designed specifically to deter rough sleepers and other perceived anti-social behaviour (Petty, 2016). Blend this with the increasing saturation of urban surfaces with advertising material, there is an overwhelming sense that the objects of the urban terrain are being mobilised, and their agency streamlined, to produce a particular kind of capitalist urbanism. So, this *object*ification of urban space is then the instrumentalist representation of a particular kind of urbanisation; it is the management, maintenance and ordering of materiality, as well as our social production of it as users under a capitalist rubric.

The way in which objects are used ‘outside’ of that designed mandate produces urban space in different ways. Yet in an era dominated by neoliberal spatial development processes, it is often one of capitalistic accumulation which if streamlined and hyper-efficient, catalyses the production of more abstract spaces that are replicable (and hence profitable). So, within the realm of the urban, objects (artefacts, infrastructures, mediations or anti-anti-social benches) are given particular prescribed usages that are becoming increasingly refined, individual and singular, so when stitched together in a complex system or assemblage (i.e. into a city, infrastructure or network) it operates as efficiently, predictably and homogenously (i.e. as close to abstract space) as possible.

By increasing instrumental determinism, the singular usage of one object can be offset against another. A bin next to the Camden Bench would therefore be ‘more’ a trash receptacle as litter could not be deposited in the crevasses that are found in other types of benches (indeed, further analysis of Factory Furniture’s catalogue uncovers a bin that complements the Camden Bench’s design ethos). The more objects are instrumentalised, and then stitched together, the more there is a spatial representation that is predictable and adheres to a system of *functionality*.

It is here then that we can revisit the work of Baudrillard (1968), in which he articulates the metaphysics of objects, distinguishing between their *function* and *functionality*. The function of an object is its ability to satisfy a particular need or desire (i.e. it is functional) regardless of any wider system into which the object has been ‘drawn into’ (by design or mediation), which Baudrillard articulates as functionality. Therefore within the spaces of contemporary neoliberalised society, objects and their materiality (appearance, tactility, usability and longevity) are continually conforming to a wider process – the family, the city, capitalism, authenticity, religiosity etc. These meta-narratives are systems of signs that draw together (increasingly) singularly instrumentalised objects to contribute to that systems’ spatial existence; and if necessary replicate it. Indeed, as Baudrillard (1996 [1968]: 17) has argued;

“A bed is a bed, a chair is a chair, and there is no relationship between them so long as each serves only the function it is supposed to serve. And without such a relationship there can be no space, for space exists only when it is opened up, animated, invested with rhythm and expanded by a correlation between objects and a transcendence of their functions in this new structure”.

The capitalist ‘formations’ can therefore manipulate space by the designation of functions of multiple objects toward a broader system of *abstract* signs. As a result;

“The materiality of objects no longer directly confronts the materiality of needs, these two inconsistent primary and antagonistic systems having been suppressed by the insertion between them of the new, abstract system of manipulable signs – by the insertion, in a word, of *functionality*”.

(Baudrillard, 1996 [1968]: 68, original emphasis)

Critically, the functionality is an abstract system, one that is predictable and replicable. Objects then are performing a functional*ity*; the suffix ‘ity’ is related to the French suffix ‘ité, which “always marks the shift to an abstract, secondary meaning operating at the level of signs” (Baudriallard, 1996 [1968]: 68, footnote 45). As such, the function of an object is without this –ity. It is not pre-given and cannot be known in advance, the function is realised as it is used in any particular moment, in any specific place, for any appropriate purpose. An objects’ function is realised by the momentary connection between it and the user.

For Baudrillard, a new function is realised when we use objects to satisfy any particular need or desire we may have in any one moment and/or place, regardless of what functionality they ‘belong’. However this by itself implies that the agency is with the user, but Baudrillard goes on to argue that the object and user ‘become’ function, creating new subjectivities and human-object corporealities (à la Haraway (1991)), the characteristics of which can take whatever form the function requires at that particular moment or place. Be it a child jumping between bollards, a rioter using a discarded road sign as a shield against a sudden police attack, an urban explorer taking an opportunistic photo atop an abandoned train, a function of an object can be very ‘different’ and removed from its functionality. Furthermore, the *same* object can have very different functions. It is in realising the different *function*al possibilities of an object that do not have any wider context that we can begin to see creativity in its more visceral, non-contextualised, and non-functionality form (some have articulated this as ‘whimsy’ (Mann, 2015; Anderson, 2014)).

To return to the Camden Bench example, while it is trying to restrict different usages, it could very easily be used as a podium, a canvas or a platform. Despite the efforts to design out ‘anti-social’ behaviour, it would not take much effort at all to use the bench in ways that are not conducive to ‘contemporary street seating’ (indeed, a group of skateboarders targeted the bench specifically to perform tricks on (Perraudin and Quinn, 2014), see also Figure 2). Indeed an object’s functions are infinite as there are potentially infinite ways in which that object can be used. The functionality of that object however is always pervasively present within and around the object before any actual usage occurs. Such functionalities are mediated through signs and the metanarratives to which the object purports. Branding, instruction manuals, our cultural and/or social conditioning, they all ‘tell’ or direct humans and things on how to use a particular object (and, with the case of the Camden Bench and its subversive skaters, that can come from ‘official’ city narratives or indeed the accepted norms of the skateboarding subculture).

This is the *functionality* and it is this that can be represented to us through a system of signs, and therefore can be manipulated by broader ‘top-down’ capitalist formations or indeed ‘bottom-up’ subcultural or community-focused norms. So we use that Camden Bench as a bench because it is relentlessly marketed to us thusly. Or a skateboarder deliberately seeks it out to grind on it precisely because that is what a counter-cultural ethos demands. An objects’ function then is often transcended by functionality. Baudrillard (1996 [1968]: 67) argues that “an objects’ functionality is the very thing that enables it to transcend its main ‘function’ in the direction of a secondary one, to play a part, to become a combining element, an adjustable item, within a universe of signs”. This ‘secondary’ function is the system (city, capitalism, society, religion etc.) of functionality that directs usage in a particular way, one that will contribute to the continual replication of that system through a ‘universe of signs’. Moreover, Baudrillard (*ibid.*: 69) is adamant that this is “a system of disavowal, lack and camouflage”, masking the functions of an object, restricting it to a singular and predictable use. Therefore, we can say that (at least more confidently in relation to contemporary Western-liberal and consumerist societies), the functionality of an object (suppresses or even sometimes oppresses) all possible functions from being realised other than that which directs usage towards a system of signs. Functionalities – be they formed top-down or bottom-up – ‘lock down’ a singular usage of objects.

Realising alternative functions of an object that do not conform to any functionality is how we can begin to think of creativity subversively. Because by using an object in a way that realises a new function, the functionality is brought into question. In this perhaps single, quotidian, unplanned and/or serendipitous act, the system of signs to which the objects’ functionality is a part is highlighted and exposed. In other words, their mechanics come into focus precisely because they are overcome. Once a bench is not used for sitting on or as part of a choreographed performance, its functionality is brought into focus precisely because it is not being performed in this way. Using a bench as a podium from which to shout political slogans from as opposed to sitting on it, using it as a prop to sleep against as opposed to vaulting over it as part of a parkour film, children pretending it’s a castle as part of vividly imagined spontaneous play as opposed grinding a skateboard on it; there are infinite ways in which it can be used that ignore a broader set of functionalities. As such, a fundamental part of subversive creativity is to realise functions of objects from the infinite universe of possibilities. To do so in isolation is the ‘spark’ of subversive creativity and has the *potential* to emancipate as yet, unrealised subjectivities (Mann, 2015).

But as has been discussed above, the subversive creativity literature thus far has focused on the how it is the human that initiates this spark. The object is relegated and its agency underplayed. It is to say that only through *our* use of an object in a different way can we force the spark, and the release of alternative functions. But such a view is to negate the forcefulness of objects as agents of political action in their own right. Hence in order to fully articulate the subversive potential within the ‘spark’ and to help it spread, there needs to be a focus on the object.

**Spread: The Durable Agency of Objects**

Object-orientated philosophies, as related to geographical inquiry (see Shaw, 2012; Shaw and Meehan, 2013; Ash and Simpson, 2016, McCormack, 2017) have steered analysis towards an ontological appraisal of the agency of objects. A key kernel of thought that has driven such an appraisal has been the (re)turn to the work of Heidegger and Badiou, particularly the latter’s theoretical postulation on ‘world-building’. Shaw (2012) argues that change in (my, your, our, the, being-of-a-) world comes about via objects’ affective capacity to influence other objects, and to reorder them to create newness; “a new world is made from the ashes of an old one” (*ibid.*: 622). The creation of a new world is not possible without the forceful agency of objects; they are therefore *creative* in that they have the capacity to realise entirely new modes of being-of-a-world[[3]](#footnote-3). Objects therefore have the innate ability to create ‘breaks’ and alternative articulations of the systems (or indeed, functionalities) they find themselves a part of. All that is needed from humans is to connect with the objects’ *already existing* agency to affect and ‘estrange’ our own behaviours. The subversive potential of all those invisible functions needs to spread between objects and humans.

It is this ‘strangeness’ of things that is lost in the routinized encounters of contemporary urban life. By allowing the object to estrange our world as human users, the power of the object switches from one that locks down a singular use, to one that opens up infinite horizons of possible functions. That potentiality becomes infectious, it can spread to human users. Bennett (2009: 1) ascribes objects a ‘material recalcitrance’ that allows objects to radically redefine human subjectivity with a ‘resistive form’ all of their own. Such recalcitrance makes the creation of functionality all the more problematic as objects are not used in a singularised, formal, ordered and predictable way. Indeed, Bennett (2009) argues that an objects’ materiality has a highly productive, perhaps seductive force on human subjectivity. Indeed this echoes Baudrillard (1990 [1983]: 111) who argued “it’s no longer the subject which desires, it’s the object which seduces”. Both Baudrillard and Bennett (and object-orientated philosophies more broadly) concentrate agency onto the object as the driver of social change in the world (see McCormack, 2017).

Such material agency combines with, and alters human neurological pathways, and has affective capacity to create strange emotional reactions (Shaw, 2012). Hence, Bennett (2009) argues that thing-power “refuses to dissolve completely into the milieu of human knowledge” (Bennett, 2009: 3). As such, things have a ‘moment of independence’, and they “affect other bodies, enhancing or weakening their power” (*ibid)*. Their inherent desire not to be pinned down by any particular functionality is inherently infectious – it spreads.

Things therefore have a ‘seductive’ agency that is potent in its ability to radically alter human affect and behaviour. Crucially, such agency is contagious, pervasive and *durable*. Durable in the sense that by recognising the potentially infinite seductive thing-power (because there is infinite ways objective function can be ‘released’), the creation of a functionality that is “a system of disavowal, lack and camouflage” (Baudrillard, 1996 [1968]: 69) is made all the more difficult because singularised, predictable and abstract use is refused.

Additionally, objects have more resources in maintaining this subversive creativity. This is because objects have a ‘cryptic reserve’ of agency within, and it is this resource, not human desire, that is the potential for change in a world (Shaw, 2010; 2012). However, as we have already discussed, the durability of an objects’ subversive agency is curtailed by the socialised encounters they have with humans.

If someone able-bodied comes across the Camden Bench (and happen to be tired and needing a rest), they will no doubt sit upon it without recognising the socio-cultural histories that are also present in our encounter with the bench. Due to an intensely present functionality of branding, marketing, neoliberal urban aesthetics, our own social condition and cultural position (and so on), we use the Bench unaware of its infinite functional possibilities, we are denying the pure agency of the Bench to enact alternative uses or subjectivities; we are in effect complicit in the repressing of alternative functions from ever being realised. Through the socio-economic histories and conditions that engulf us as urbanites and the bench itself as a highly technical and engineered object, we use the bench in a pre-determined way (i.e. by its functionality), refusing to relate with any alternative function it may present to us. However as we now know, the Camden Bench can indeed be used for functions other than ‘contemporary street seating needs’. The skaters who skated it (see Figure 2), the late-night reveller who used it to dance on, the children who play on/with it, or the street artist who used it as a canvas; they all allowed the Bench’s infinite function to estrange their encounter with it. The Bench, for them, arrived into their world in a very different way than as something to sit on. The universe (or ‘cryptic reserve’ (Shaw, 2010)) of agency and affective capability that objects present to our world when we encounter them, is therefore an infinite resource of subversive potential precisely because there are potentially infinite functions ready to be ‘released’; and is why objects can be more durable agents in subversive creativity.



**Figure 2: A skateboarder grinds the ‘anti-skateboarding’ Camden Bench (Source: Perraudin and Quinn, 2014)**

So the creative reuse of an urban object for any particular moment, at any particular time, for any particular reason is the *spark* of subversive creativity (and is something which the subversive creative geographies literature has thus far analysed vehemently, but corporeally). But maintaining such subversion and thereby enacting a creative urban politics requires allowing the objects to continue to affect human subjectivities – so subversion can *spread*. In other words, there is a need to make use of the ‘dense scaffolding of things’ (Ash and Simpson, 2016) and the vast reserve of subversive potential that is imbued within them. However to do so as humans requires our own resource; our own ethical of interaction with objects.

**Ethics: Fidelity to Subversion**

Political action as conceived in much of the activist geographical scholarship is predicated upon the ‘coming-into-existence’ of previously unseen and unheard people and subjects. The work of Badiou has been useful here, particularly in his articulation of ‘events’. For Badiou (2001, 2005, 2008) events are unforeseen ‘ruptures’ in the existing world. They make visible all impossibilities and infinite potential, if only for a fleeting moment. In political realms, those in power look to shut these ‘events’ down so as to stop revolutionary subjects being formulated. In most instances, they are successful (every time a protest is kettled, a student occupation is cleared, a squat is evicted), in others, they are not and go on to produce entirely new modes of political organisation (the French, Chinese and Cuban Revolutions are Badiou’s go-to examples). Which path is taken after a rupturing event (whether the status quo is quickly restored or a full-on revolution is staged and everything in between) depends upon the fidelity of subjects: people – and things – need to be *faithful* to the event and continually enact the truth that was revealed by the event.

The reuse of the Camden Bench, however radical, triumphant, mediated or celebrated is unlikely to lead to a full-on revolution precisely because it is ‘linked’ into the assemblages of functionality that the capitalist structures designate. Shaw and Meehan (2013) argue that objects infect other objects in maintaining the status quo. They argue that “once an object is infected, it too mediates other objects to produce an overall homeostasis, a logic of appearance that has totalising tendencies” (*ibid.*: 220). As such, the capitalist city that has been created holds all objects together in a totalising functionality (to use Baudrillard’s language), and nonhuman agency flows through the city to maintain their – and our – behaviour in a way that benefits the existing system. As such, the urban topology can be thought of as a stable multiple of the spatially physical manifestation of those with the power to create the city.

Staggered metal railings that impede the mobility of cyclists, knobbing of concrete surfaces to deter skateboarders, pedestrian flow systems; anti-terrorist benches; the urban terrain is a multiple of networked physical controls, each object tied into a power-laden functionality that defines the situation of the city (Farías, 2010, 2011). Yet Harman (2011) has argued that objects, when they communicate and interject with each other, produce only a partial rendition, each object is never fully ‘present’ in each encounter. This produces a kind of independence; a reserve of agency that does not go toward producing this totalising structure (or functionality). Instead it is stored up, invisible, perhaps concealed by the functionalities that exist within and upon it; and can seduce others (both human and nonhuman) into creating a spark of subversive function.

Each time the Camden Bench encounters a weary shopper, the torn flesh of a parkour performer’s hand, a skateboarder’s wooden board, coloured vaporised paint particles, a drop of rain; a ‘caricature’ is produced (Bogost, 2012; Ash and Simpson, 2016). That is, only a few select properties of the bench are brought forward in the encounter, while others are held back producing only a partial understanding of the object’s universe of possible functions. This means, as Shaw (2012: 620) has noted, each object has an irruptive power imbued within it, arguing there is “great deal of contingency located within the molten core of an object itself”. The emancipatory potential of each object is absent in the same way in which the functionality is powerfully present. It is therefore in this absence that the political potential of objects is found. Every object in the city around us therefore has a multiplicity of functions that are repressed, created a reserve of potential political agency. As Shaw and Meehan (2013: 220) note;

“In this ‘reserve’ we find the space of political possibilities and contingency: the space of objects-in-themselves, the unlockable forces that are never fully revealed.”

With the spontaneous subversive (re)use of an urban object such absence is made present. A protester who instinctively uses a road sign as a shield against a police baton, an urban explorer who uses an overhead electricity cable to descend down a disused sewer tunnel, a child who swings off a cycle park railing, and the whole universe of ‘sparks’ of subversiveness we witness around us; they all make other functions of objects visible. By connecting with objects and letting their agency affect our own, the latent ‘reserve’ of political potential is realised. Furthermore, it can enact a contagion *through* the connections that objects have with each other and with humans. And if it gains *intensity* of subversion in the urban terrain, then more of the inexistences are ‘exposed’, and the more destabilised functionality becomes.

And it is here that the work of Badiou can help. Because for him, a continual fidelity to an original event, or spark of subversion, is needed to maintain it’s political implications. Maintaining subversive behaviour that is faithful to the original politics of the event, helps the politics of that spark to spread, eschew existing functionalities and the create potentiality revolutionary subjectivities that can effect radical political change.

But whether or not such fidelity manifests in new or potentially new revolutionary subjects (and objects) is dependent upon the ability to maintain that *intensity* of the spread of subversive sparks; and this requires facilitation, less it succumbs to the original functionality, or some reconfigured ‘innovation’ of it. So to engage in subversion, to constantly allow for objects to estrange the encounter requires another resource, namely an *ethics*. Not ethics in a way that is currently understood within mainstream neoliberal development discourses (ethical consumption or the fight for human rights for example – see Donnelly, 2013)), but an ethics that that helps to enact a fidelity to an event.

“A crisis of fidelity is always what puts to the test, following the collapse of an image, the sole maxim of consistency (and thus ethics): ‘Keep going!’ Keep going when you have lost the thread, when you no longer feel ‘caught up’ in the process, when the event itself has become obscure, when its name is lost or when it seems that it may have named a mistake, if not simulacrum.”

(Badiou, 2001: 79)

Ethics then, simply put are those affects, practices, things and people that enable us (both humans and nonhumans) to ‘keep going’ and maintain fidelity to the event, and aid in the construction of new political subjects. Because, an event can draw on the ‘reserve’ of nonhuman agency (Shaw, 2012) and produce entirely new languages, subjectivities, existences and becomings that ‘mean nothing’ to established knowledge (and hence cannot be appropriated or co-opted). They are hence radically subversive. And by adhering faithfully to those new things is how new horizons of possibilities beyond the status quo of urban capitalism can be realised.

So, the initial rupture or spark of an event is all encompassing and completely changes the ‘state of play’ in the situation. Being *ethical* therefore, for Badiou, is being faithful to the initial politics of an event. It is hence reflexive, and temporally and spatially dependent. There is no universal ethics to be adhered to, no universal global version of ‘rights’ that should be defended violently if needed. Such a version of ethics, Badiou argues masks neoliberal and/or imperialistic hegemonies (Hallward, 2004). Rather ethics should be a suite of resources that are at hand to things and people (and their intermingling) that need help to remain faithful to an event, to overcome any reactions, functionalities and barriers to fidelity.

To return to the humble, yet stubbornly example of the Camden Bench, its use by skaters – their continual attempts to subvert the dominant functionality of ‘contemporary street seating needs’ is their attempt at being faithful to initial ‘spark’ (event) of subversive creativity. They of course are replacing this with another set of rules and norms, a functionality of skateboarding. But by continuing to be faithful to the subversive agency of the Bench, skaters can continue to subvert those functionalities too. By letting the Bench (and the other urban objects they encounter subsequently) estrange their behaviour, there is a greater propensity to subvert functionalities altogether, and continually produce new encounters, new ways of not sitting on the bench.

A Badiouian ethics would therefore be the encouragement, emanating from a human-nonhuman collective. In this case, the solidarity of a skateboarding subculture (that includes people and the objects they use) to continually to perform tricks and grinds on the Bench and other objects in the face of continued attempts to stop them, to resist attempts by the subculture to create its own hegemonic functionality, as well as to challenge the ever-present threat of appropriation by capitalist narratives[[4]](#footnote-4). It would be the maintenance of an attitude of creative subversion, and resisting temptations of spectacle, co-option or egotistical mechanisms. Such as an ethics encourages persistence in the face of exhaustion or disillusionment. For Badiou then, ethics is a way of remaining *truthful* in the face of (internal and external) adversity. It is to shun subjectification, as Badiou (2001: 80) argues that “I must betray the becoming-subject in myself”.

In betraying becoming subject, and therefore engaging in objectification, it is important to realise that also the ‘I’, or the Freudian ‘ego’ must be shunned in favour of collective action that includes nonhumans. Indeed, as Bennett (2009: 31) has noted;

“There was never a time when human agency was anything other than an interfolding network of humanity and nonhumanity; today this mingling has become harder to ignore”.

And in shunning subjectification, we can enact an *object*ification – a process of relating to objects ethically, realising more and more alternative functions and connecting with them to realise new political horizons beyond the status quo. By acting ethically in this way, an object-orientated politics of subversive creativity comes into focus. Moreover, when utilised within the discourse of urbanisation, the utilisation of objects beyond prescribed functionalities opens up new ways of thinking the city politically.

**Conclusion: A subversive politics of urban creativity**

This paper has attempted to utilise an object-orientated approach to provide a more nuanced definition of subversive creativity, one that sees nonhuman objects as critical actors alongside their human counterparts. It has done this with a three-stage approach – spark, spread and ethics. First, there is a need to realise new functions of urban objects, but secondly, this requires allowing the object’s agency to estrange our own being-of-a-world. Thirdly, there is a need to *maintain* this approach without succumbing to an alternative functionality that requires an ethical resource. This consists of a suite of affectivities that propels subversion in search of evermore functions and navigates attempts at appropriation by a system of signs. This paper therefore posits that this very process is *becoming* creative subversively. The very act of creation is in realising new functions of objects, but also allowing them to continue to destabilise functionalities (both top-down and bottom-up), develop new subjectivities and critique, contest and resist the prevailing normalising narratives of neoliberal urbanisation.

Taking such a view, traditional creative practices (i.e. those most readily articulated under the mainstream paradigms of the creative city, the creative economy, the creative class and so on) are therefore evidently not at all creative in this light, as they are maintaining, extending and replicating the dominant (most socio-economically significant) metanarrative with the urban, namely neoliberal capitalism (see Peck, 2005; Mould, 2018). This paper therefore has argued that subversive creativity is about making other functions of urban objects visible, helping that spread, and being ethical to maintain a fidelity to that function. It is about not using the Camden Bench to sit on, but also *continually finding new ways of not sitting on it.*

This paper has shown how we can theoretically account for such a view of creativity, but what does this mean for urban politics more broadly? More than simply debunking the creative city (Chatterton, 2000; Mould, 2015) and admonishing a neoliberal interpretation of creativity (Peck, 2005, McLean, 2017, 2018), it shows how creative practices of reappropration and urban interventionism can be thought as encompassing more than embodied practices of socio-artistic critique (Campbell, 2013; Garrett, 2013; Martson and De Leeuw, 2013; Pinder, 2005). It shows that they can espouse a city-making process that is less prescriptive and accepsting of normalising and opaque functionalities, and more proactive. And via an ethics to subversive understandings of objects within quotidian urban politics, it encourages all urban objects and the urbanites that use them to engage in these alternative forms of creativity. Crucially, this paper has shown that objects have a critical role in this articulation of creativity as they themselves have agency in the destabilisation of functionality[[5]](#footnote-5). Through using object-orientated philosophies (notably Badiou (2005), Baudrillard (1990, 1996), Bennett (2009) and Shaw (2010, 2012)) this paper has articulated a theoretical thread that gives objects an emboldened agency in subversive creativity. As Hodder (2012: 68, my emphasis) notes, “things do have primacy agency, not because they have intentionality but because they are *vibrant* and have lives of their own”. Such vibrancy of objects comes from their ‘molten core’ (Shaw, 2012) of potentiality, and as such, effects humans’ actions directly. Hodder (*ibid.*: 216) goes on to suggest, “materials and the forces that flow through them afford humans certain potentials and constraints”. This emancipation of an object’s alternative function over its functionality creates potentiality for its human users to create new subjectivities and modes of expression.

Therefore objects have a great deal of political agency in the urban process and indeed should *politicize* the creative process; they can direct emancipatory and critical creative actions just as much as they can direct us to behave in particular technocratic ways within the city. It is however by enacting a subversive creativity as detailed in this paper that such emancipatory potentiality can be maintained. The multiplicity of urban objects that make up the ‘system of signs’ via their functionalities can be a powerful force to draw objects ‘back in’ to a technocratic system (i.e. the neoliberal city). This is why, to realise further creative potential it is important to be ethical; to have fidelity to the original subversion of functionality, moreover to propagate it by allowing objects to continually challenge our own behaviour in the city. It is only then can alternative subjectivities come into existence; in other words, it is how we can be political. To think creativity politically therefore requires not only human-object collective agency to subvert existing functionalities, but it requires collective and collaborative agency to help maintain subversion and to help push it through times of uncertainty and times when it is succumbing to functionality. In order to become active and creative urban citizens requires listening to objects, letting them in some way, lead us away from the existing city into an entirely new one.

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1. This is despite an engagement in the art world with ‘objecthood’, most readily articulated by Fried (1998) in which he adopts an object-orientated approach that parallels many phenomenological narratives. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. To be sure, Baudrillard’s wider philosophical remit stretches this function/functionality maxim into ontologies of simulacra, simulation and hyper-realities, all of which have their place in geographical inquiry (most notably Smith, 1997; 2003; Smith and Doel, 2001). While an important juncture, this paper eschews such a conceptual journey in favour of focusing on the function/functionality discourse. By bracketing off Baudrillard’s initial concept could be to deny its philosophical underpinnings, however, I prefer to view this as utilising an important conceptual idiom to ground my own conceptual architecture of object-orientated creativity. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. De Landa (2000: 16) has argued that matter itself has an inherent creativity in that it has the potential for “spontaneous structural generation”. He goes on to argue that while matter self-organises into predictable complex systems (such as the wave patters of the ocean, light particles in a laser and so on), it also produces unexpected breaks and ‘innovations’ in these systems. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The importance of objects as ‘recalibrating’ politics is a sentiment that has been voiced by Latour (2005b). In his essay ‘Making Things Public’, he argues that “our notion of politics has been thwarted for too long by an absurdly unrealistic epistemology [of matter-of-fact-ness]” (*ibid.*: 21), Therefore in looking at the ‘assemblies of assembleges’, he is championing objects as foci of shared political actions – an object-orientated democracy. The continued focus on objects as sites of contestation, division and debate could therefore be thought of as another ‘ethic’ of subversive creativity. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Indeed there was an entire V&A exhibition devoted to this ‘destabilization’ in 2014 called ‘Disobedient Objects’. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)