

## UTOPIAN ACTS (SEPTEMBER 1, 2018)

Conference Report by Amy Butt

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***Utopian Acts 2018. Birkbeck, University of London, UK, 1<sup>st</sup> September 2018***

It is not every conference that closes with the conveners sincerely imploring the attendees to “go forth and establish new governments,” or words to that effect. Indeed, it hardly seems fair to call *Utopian Acts* a conference at all, a term which carries with it the implicit rules of academic engagement, replete with twenty-minute papers and rigid rows of seminar seating. Instead, *Utopian Acts*, organised by Katie Stone and Raphael Kabo (both Birkbeck, University of London, UK), described itself as a ‘festival’ and delivered a joyful mixture of events, opening up a variety of different modes of discussion and engagement. Insightful keynotes and conference papers were interwoven with workshops, film screenings, musical performances, and online activism, and were complimented by incidental acts of utopian kindness over cups of tea and party rings.

My day started early with a workshop on “The Art of Listening” by Tanaka Mhishi (Writer and Performer, UK) and Silke Grygier (Survivor Activist, UK), who aimed to help participants develop a personal code of best practice for navigating conversations about sexual abuse or harassment, based on a gentle and considerate approach to personal care and the generous assumption that we all want to support one another to the best of our ability. As well as carefully directing discussion, the workshop used freewriting exercises to establish a tone of openness and engagement which seemed to permeate the rest of the day.

This intimate space of disclosure was immediately broadened in the keynote talk by Davina Cooper (King’s College London, UK), “Why Conceptual Futures Matter (And How to Take Them Up).” Cooper discussed the possible futures of two critical concepts: ‘the state’ and ‘gender.’ Cooper questioned how these concepts themselves can be transformed like “objects which can be whittled and reformed,” but also how this transformation of meaning affects our conceptions of possible futures. By redrawing these concepts more widely – for example, by asking whether the state can be playful – Cooper argued for the utopian possibility inherent in unsettling and disorienting conceptual futures.

My subsequent role as chair for “Urban Utopianism,” meant that I unfortunately missed concurrent panels on “Past, Future, Utopia” with Rose Simpson (Aberystwyth University, UK), Michael Robertson (The College of New Jersey, USA), and Helena Esse (Birkbeck, University of London, UK), “Queer Utopia and its Discontents” with Tom Dillon (Birkbeck, University of London, UK), Linda Stupart (Artist and Writer, UK), Sasha Myerson (Birkbeck, University of London, UK), and Rebecca Moses (London Queer Writers, UK), and a workshop on “Bystander Intervention” by Molly Ackhurst (Activist, UK) and Hollaback! London.

Dani Loader (University of Oxford, UK) opened "Urban Utopianism" with an account of her work restoring a 130-year-old cargo ship and the ongoing effort to transform it into community housing and a social centre. Loader's report of these changes was delivered with affection and grace, revelling in the performative surrealism of encounters with bureaucracy which appeared to have only strengthened the resolve of the team of volunteers. Undoubtedly utopian in its intent and potentially transformative as a fragment of realised utopian potential, this project appeared to have adhered to its own principles of cooperation and support throughout its development. This concern for wider notions of public good was reflected in Martin Greenwood's (University of Manchester, UK) talk "Push the Button and Wait for the Future: The Utopian/Utopical Pedagogy of UK Pedestrian Crossing." Greenwood questioned whether the crossing might be seen as a micro-site of utopian practice, a space which disrupts the movement of the city and a public fracture in neoliberalism. In tracing the history of the crossing and its political interpretation, Green concluded that to "wait against the marshalled haste" of the city might be a moment of utopian oppositional practice. These themes of flows and moments of respite were picked up by Anna Kamyshan (Artist and Architect, Russia) in her talk on the Moscow River. Kamyshan traced the role of the river throughout the city's history to its current crisis as a space of political vision which is "invisible for usage" by the urban populace. In response, the Moscow River Friends aim to re-establish the river as a common space by opening up discussions about multiple complex uses and forms of inhabitation. Across the papers there was a common resolve to acknowledge the role of communal spaces and collective action in carving out utopian moments within the urban environment.

Over the lunch break, the queer feminist punk witches from four-piece band Dream Nails ran a Punk zine-making workshop. While I didn't have the chance to make a zine, the strains of music from the workshop which cut across the buffet lunch and home-made cakes helped ensure that the discussions maintained an intensity which had been cultivated in the morning sessions. In the corner an art installation by Patti Maciesz (Artist and Writer, USA) entitled "Bill the Patriarchy" asked participants to log their timesheets for domestic and emotional labour, and its underlying premise provided a critical locus for conversations about the work required in all forms of utopian action.

After lunch the packed programme meant that I was forced to miss sessions on "The Radical Imagination" with Joan Haran (Cardiff University, UK) and Ibtisam Ahmed (University of Nottingham, UK), "Utopianism Now" with Kate Meakin (University of Sussex, UK), Chase Ledin (University of Edinburgh, UK), and Nicole Froio (University of York, UK), "Utopian Speculation" with Céline Keller (Independent Scholar and Filmmaker, Germany), Louisa Beck (Music Composer and Producer, Germany), Chelsea Haith (University of Oxford, UK), and Erin Andrews (Northwestern University, USA), "Decolonizing Utopia" with Rehnuma Sazzad (SOAS, University of London, UK) and Jan Etienne (Birkbeck, University of London, UK), and "Eco-utopianism" with Sheryl Medlicott (Bath Spa University, UK) and Kavita Thanki (Ulster University, UK), as well as a film screening of *Indigo Zoom: The Awakening* by Ayesha Tan Jones (Artist and Musician, UK).

Llew Watkins (Artist and Writer, UK) opened the workshop "Building Utopia" with a talk on his artistic work which engages in a reciprocal writing and sculptural practices, mutually informing

one another to create a complex spatial narrative. In the work “Dressing up Bars” Watkins invited an audience to view the pieces in an underground bunker, where the act of walking allowed them to undertake a narrative journey and return. Through these linked works Watkins invited us to consider the co-creation of character and context, and the utopian potential this mutability offers. This reflection on the social creation of space led into the workshop I led on feminist utopian architecture. We split into three groups, each considering a short extract from a work of feminist utopian Science Fiction, which was then constructed and enacted using the materials within the seminar room. The act of making and inhabiting these spaces allowed us to reflect on the power structures they created and the impact that this had on the types of activity and discussion which were possible within them. In exploring alternative reconfigurations of space we became more aware of the limitations established by existing spatial arrangements, and our collective power to disrupt this, however fleetingly.

In the following session Susan Bruce’s (Keele University, UK) talk undertook a close reading of Thomas Moore’s *Utopia* (1516), asking whether aspects of the Brexit crisis were pre-figured in this text. Bruce opened with an overview of the derogatory use of the term ‘Utopia’ on both sides of the Brexit debate, before looking at the island of Utopia as an analogy for British nationalism and the “wish fulfilment of the isolationist,” against the first part of Moore’s text, which can be read as reflecting the complexity and chaos of the European state. Bruce argued that by focusing on Utopia the island rather than *Utopia* the book, we overlook the potential for open provisionality offered by this dialectic. Eva Giraud (Keele University, UK) continued this reflection on the role of utopian thought in contemporary politics, questioning whether the closure associated with the utopian proposition might be avoided by focusing on the futures ‘not’ chosen. Citing Thom van Dooren, Giraud argued the need to “take a stand for some possible worlds and not others” and used this to examine how we might be accountable or responsible for the exclusions inherent in utopian acts. These talks were complimented by a zine-making workshop led by Molly Drummond (Keele University, UK) which asked us to reflect on utopia as an ongoing conversation, prompting a group discussion about the personal nature of utopian imagination and directed choice.

The concluding keynote by Lynne Segal (Birkbeck, University of London, UK), “Resources for Hope: Moments of Collective Joy,” drew together the divergent strands of utopian thought and practice which had been developed over the course of the afternoon, with a carefully curated collage of historic moments of radical joy. Spanning from the Paris communes and May 1968 through to the more contemporary moments of the Arab Spring and Sisters Uncut, Segal celebrated the work of women radicals such as Ida B. Wells and Emma Goldman who embodied exuberance as a vital part of revolutionary action. Segal argued compellingly for the power of these acts of ‘public happiness’ which allow us to move outside personal concerns to engage collectively, made possible by refusing to disparage our collective interdependence. Recordings of both keynotes can be found on the Utopian Acts website at: [www.utopia.ac/utopian-acts-2018-keynotes](http://www.utopia.ac/utopian-acts-2018-keynotes).

Feeling suitably rallied, we moved on to the conference after-party, which provided a platform for alternative modes of utopian performance, with stand-up comedy from Dominica

Duckworth (Comedian, UK) and a live music by YaYa Bones. These performances provided a fitting conclusion to such a rich and varied day which offered an appropriately complex insight into the myriad ways that utopian thought can be transformed into utopian action.

The sheer variety of responses throughout the day, as well as the critical rigour which permeated all the sessions, meant that *Utopian Acts* was able to support and sustain a diverse group of practitioners and participants. It practised a utopian openness in form as well as content, generating new opportunities for encounter and engagement which will continue to be developed in the follow-on events planned by Kabo and Stone, details of which be found at: [www.utopia.ac](http://www.utopia.ac).

#### BIONOTE

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