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Articulating Political Feelings

The Social Aesthetics in Feminist Antimilitarism
and Queer Environmentalism

ABSTRACT

This article introduces two local cases of political activism where performative methods were used: the 1987 demonstration by the feminist antimilitarists Women for Peace, and a campaign by Extinction Rebellion's queer environmentalists in 2021, both in Helsinki, Finland. The article argues that through diversity and complexity, collectives become fluid and adaptive and thus stay ahead of party politics while advancing social change in an effective manner. This requires aesthetic strategies explored in this text: how ambivalent feelings are formed into an aesthetics to communicate political feelings and demands. The artistic methods used in these actions are considered through Jacques Rancière's and Judith Butler's theorising on the relational and the communal, while José Esteban Muñoz's notions of queer temporality and the ephemeral apply to the acts as well. Through the framework of social aesthetics, as well as feminist and queer philosophy, I argue for the significance of aesthetics in collective agency building and social change.

Keywords: aesthetics, activism, performance, feelings, queer environmentalism, ecofeminism

IN THIS ARTICLE, I explore two Finnish peace- and climate activism campaigns separated by more than two decades – one from the 1980s women's peace movement and one from the queer climate activism of the 2020s – to show how they mobilised political feelings in imaginative ways.

I examine the way these feelings and affects take form through the actions undertaken by activists to awaken emotions and transfer a mobilising energy into those witnessing the actions or – in other words – to create agency. I bring to the fore historical feminist political action in the local context of Finland, where this history tends to lie dormant and unexplored in relation to current political activism. I explore the continuation of the feminist–political demands into queer environmentalism: that these demonstrations are not isolated cases of civil disobedience, but a part of a feminist–queer assemblage working towards societal change. The article shows the aesthetic practices shared by feminist peace campaigning of the 1980s and queer environmentalism of the 2020s and argues for the necessity of civil disobedience – the energy and agency created in collective action.

I focus on the performative political actions by the Finnish antimilitarist group *Naiset Rauhan Puolesta* (NRP) – referred to as *Women for Peace* in this article – highlighting their 1987 action at the Finnish parliament. Only a small portion of the history of the action can be found online, and I found myself affected by the materiality and aesthetic of the archival research. Not only because of the information I found in the archive, but because of the energy the material transferred, and this affirmed me of the impact an aesthetics and its materialisation can have on an individual. I draw a parallel between the aesthetic strategies of the historical women’s peace movement and those of the 2021 action by Queerkapina (Queer Rebellion) – a faction of the Elokapina ecosocial justice movement (Extinction Rebellion Finland). Elokapina is well represented and documented online, while documents of the women’s peace movement activities can be found in physical archives.

The two actions are far apart in time, yet both are local actions that took place in almost the same location. They belong to a larger context of political demands raised from outside the middle-class public sphere – from a position that is marginal: in other words, leftist, feminist and queer. They are part of the assemblage of feminism, consisting of heterogeneous strands of voices, collectives, manifestations, theories and methodologies. For the purpose of this article, I consider how a socially

formed aesthetics is capable of materialising an ambivalent *something* that now finds its form and agency in the public display of its politics.

To theoretically frame the aesthetic strategies used in feminist anti-militarism and queer environmentalism, I consider them in the light of Jacques Rancière's idea of aesthetics as "the distribution of the sensible" (Rancière 2013). Rancière (2013) considers aesthetics reaching beyond the sphere of art and into the political domain. This is not the same as the aestheticisation of politics: instead, aesthetic practices *intervene* in the established ways of "doing and making". Like Rancière, by considering what is common to the community and its forms of organisation (ibid.), I study the visibility in these acts of civil disobedience, their shared artistic methods and how their aesthetics materialise. The potential for social change, which is built through senses, connects with José Esteban Muñoz's notion on queer futurity and queer sociability: an engagement in "a collective temporal distortion" where we are to abandon "the rigid conceptualization that is a straight present" (Muñoz 2019, n.p.). Judith Butler's (2015) future-potent thinking on the significance of our social connectivity makes concrete connections with the sensate and the assembly. Through articulations of the performative and the visual, I consider the way immaterial affects gather in collectives (or assemblies), and how they contain the plurality within a common resistance that Butler speaks of. Rancière's, Muñoz's and Butler's thinking connects to the notion of social aesthetics and offers possibilities for a future-seeking worldmaking necessary in today's universal crisis – a thinking that reaches beyond technological solutions, hard science and facts, and calls for an overhaul of our societal values, while the examples of direct action represent concrete attempts towards such change.

A note on the methods

Apart from reviewing the literature, I have carried out interviews with the Women for Peace and Elokapina activists, and conducted archival research on the Women for Peace folders at the People's Archive in Helsinki. In addition to the documentation found online, Queer Rebellion provided me with a compiled document of their actions, which was prepared for the Finnish National Archives.

On the structure of the article

I begin by introducing the feminist antimilitarist campaigners Women for Peace and expand on the way the group used aesthetic strategies in their 1987 performative action in the Finnish parliament. Through this example, I convey the way feelings are articulated and find a form in activism, and how, in collective mobilising regarded as civil disobedience, they form into social aesthetics. I recognise the plurality that goes beyond identities in political assembling, and how aesthetic practices play a part in this as well. Elaborating on the relevance of feelings and their aesthetic formations in political struggle, I move from Rancière's thinking on the political and the aesthetic to Muñoz's notions of the ephemeral in relation to queer futurity. The section looks at the affective features of political action, calling attention to the senses, care and wellbeing, and how queer futurity corresponds to Butler's understanding of the "good life" and their call for a "sensate democracy".

I continue to unfold the theoretical frame by introducing Queer Rebellion's action during the Helsinki Pride Week of 2021, at the statue of the national war-hero Mannerheim. In this section I look at the way affects are materialised in the aesthetic practices of this activist group and how their action resonates with the "queer utopia" of Muñoz. I identify parallels between the aesthetics of the queer activists of the 2020s and those of Women for Peace in the 1980s, and expand on the affects and feelings generally associated with environmentalism. The shared ethos of my example cases can be found in feminist environmental philosophy that emerged as a philosophical position in the late 1980s and early to mid-1990s (Warren 2015). The scope of ecofeminism offers keys to the ongoing ecosocial crisis, as well as to the escalating rearmament that echoes the Cold War era and the nuclear threat. Queer ecology builds on ecofeminism's intersecting philosophy and does this by including converging aspects of sex and nature in order to develop politics with an understanding for the "ways in which sexual relations organize and influence both the material world of nature and our perceptions, experiences, and constitutions of that world" (Mortimer-Sandilands & Erickson 2010, 5). I conclude by arguing for the agile ways of grass-

roots political action: the way the urgency required for worldmaking is channelled through aesthetic practices and how these ephemeral actions organised collectively also help us to expand our understanding of “we”.

Against militarisation: Women for Peace

During the Cold War era, NATO and the USSR were stationing cruise missiles in strategic locations and the threat of a nuclear attack seemed imminent – a time eerily reminiscent of the present. This caused great anxiety in many people and out of this anxiety, and the lack of state initiatives towards stabilising peace instead of an arms race and militarisation, grew the Nordic women’s peace movement, established in 1980. Its Finnish branch, Naiset Rauhan Puolesta, NRP (Women for Peace) was founded to strive against militarism, nuclear weapons and nuclear power as an energy source. NRP campaigned by organising petitions, producing publications, raising awareness through children’s peace education initiatives, and organising peace walks and conferences. They also carried out performative actions that contained commentary on the militarist society and its values and attitudes. An example of the sexist attitudes rife in the Finnish society in 1986 is the way the Minister of Commerce, Seppo Lindblom, greeted the delegates handing over 60,000 signatures demanding the phasing out of nuclear power as an energy source in Finland: “Go home to have babies” (Rytkönen 2019).

To analyse the aesthetic strategies of the group, I look at their most well-known action carried out by a branch of the NRP called *Itkijänaiset* (Weeping Women). The name of the branch is a reference to the Karelian custom of employing professional mourners at funerals. The action utilised the power of crying – specifically women crying – and took place during the opening of the Finnish Parliament in the spring of 1987. Prior to their demonstration, the group camped – in a tent lent to them by the Finnish army – on the square outside the Finnish Defence Ministry building, where they collected anti-military statements from the public (Launokari 2022). The messages were written on handkerchiefs – an item chosen for its historical ceremonial use.¹ The Weeping Women focused their message specifically on the government’s initia-

tive to include women in military service. The group viewed the initiative as deception in the name of gender equality, arguing that women should play no part in the war machine that already engulfed men.

The fourteen women – all dressed in black – attended the parliamentary session, open to the general public. Shortly after the opening of the session, the activists stood up on the assembly room balcony and began to weep while dropping down the altogether over two hundred handkerchiefs containing messages from the public, which landed on the puzzled parliament members. By this carefully planned peaceful demonstrative action, the group attracted the media attention – both positive and negative – they had aimed for. It was in an era when most people would still watch the evening news on one of the three national TV channels at the same time each night. Since the action became headline news, the group received an enormous amount of feedback from all around the country:

I am deeply touched and thank you for the wonderful and unsettling demonstration. I cannot recall another where the content, the form and the participants have made such a coherent and unison impression. Of course, it is not primarily about the aesthetics, but it is important when aiming to influence people's opinions. The chosen location was naturally the only one possible.

The writer of this congratulatory letter (Naiset Rauhan Puolesta-archives) had not witnessed the action, but had constructed a mental image of it by reading about it and was clearly impressed by what he *imagined*; in 1987 cameras were not omnipresent and hardly any footage of the event exists. What is left of it is the archival ephemera: newspaper clippings, letters from the public and a couple of black and white images snapped directly before and after (see Figures 1a & 1b). There is no video that could have been edited and altered and uploaded on social media – a ubiquitous aspect of political campaigning nowadays. Print ephemera is part of the peace movement's visual aesthetics, just as video clips and social media postings are a part of the ecosocial activists'



*Figure 1a. Itkijänaiset (in black) a moment before their demonstration.
(Personal archives of Lea Launokari)*

aesthetics today.² Extinction Rebellion, on the other hand, has a visual identity created by a graphic designer and their print ephemera is easily recognised when coming across one of their posters (see Figure 2).

Civil disobedience: How feelings materialise into an aesthetics in collective action

A member of the Weeping Women, Anneli Pääkkönen, recalls the tense atmosphere amongst the activists right before the action: a blend of nerves, excitement and uncertainty of whether they could “pull it off” (Pääkkönen 2022). “Tears are more powerful than words”, Pääkkönen says, thinking back on the tranquil moment when the handkerchiefs floated down from the gallery and landed on the MPs. Another member of the group, Lea Launokari, says she cannot recall the moments afterwards, as the nervous excitement made her “black out” (Launokari 2022). Feelings of excitement and nervousness along with uncer-



Feministit yllättivät eilen eduskunnan.

Rauhannaiset mursivat eduskunnan turvajärjestelmän

Rauhannaiset mursivat ei-

Figure 1b. Headline on the tabloid paper: "Women of peace broke the parliament's security system". (NRP archives, Kansan arkisto/People's Archive)

tainty were entangled in the anticipation of the action – after which they morphed into high spirits of relief and elation.

In a successful action, the combination of the location, the emotions and the aesthetics result in release: a feeling of emancipation. It may be transient, but a moment of elation is what gives a movement its energy. Studying performance from a queer aspect, Muñoz suggests that despite its ephemerality, a live performance does not vanish but changes form and lives on like an energy, its “gesture and its aftermath, the ephemeral trace” mattering more than “many traditional modes of evidencing lives



Figure 2. *Elokapina* visuals from their Instagram account, <https://www.instagram.com/elokapina/>

and politics” (Muñoz 2019, n.p.). The same thing occurs amongst those who take part in political action, as the one described here, as evident from the interviews with Launokari and Pääkkönen. In one conversation, Anneli Pääkkönen noted how the underpinning motivation was not necessarily to bring about changes in policy or legislation, but to voice feelings and views not represented in the established discourse.

Civil disobedience can be considered a method in what Butler (2015, n.p.) calls “the politics of performativity” a social responsibility of voicing issues not raised in party politics, where focus is on opinion polls and the next election. As pensioner Maila Rantanen, one of the antimilitary activists taking part in the 1987 action, summarised it:

This has to be done in order to get your voice heard. ... A couple of years ago we [the NRP] collected a couple of million signatures to declare Nordic countries a nuclear arms free zone. Nobody reacted in any way. The foreign minister at the time, Pär Stenbäck, said to the delegates that those who signed the petition should not be allowed to dictate what politicians should do. This experience taught me that the only possibility is direct action.³

Rantanen notes how she really *was* crying during the action – there was no need for the onion half in her pocket:

You feel an out-of-body experience after such an event. Funny thing, you don't feel like you've done anything wrong.⁴

Rantanen's experience provides an example of the way in which an affective moment of a subjective experience is collectively backed up, people reassuring each other that it is OK to cry, to release (political) feelings of anger and frustration. The feelings people have towards the situation – the status quo, the ongoing crisis – begin to resonate within a wider group of people who may be of diverse backgrounds, but nonetheless *come together*. An aesthetics helps them find an objective within the abstract structures of social organisation (Ngai 2012). Within social movements that communicate demands through performative means, an aesthetic experience becomes mutual and the aesthetic becomes politicised through the relations people have with one another. The feminist antimilitarist assembling embodies a plurality that is intrinsically linked to historical as well as current political protest. As Butler (2015, n.p.) suggests, actions such as the public exercise of gender represent a plurality that expands identities into a social movement “that depends more strongly on the links between people than on any notion of individualism”. This materialises through aesthetic practices as “forms of visibility that disclose artistic practices, the place they occupy, what they ‘do’ or ‘make’ from the standpoint of what is common to the community” (Rancière 2013, n.p.).

From social aesthetics to sensate democracies

When considering collective movement, aesthetic practices are not only artistic, but indeed social, as they contain the political while intervening in “the general distribution of ways of doing and making as well as in the relationships they maintain to modes of being and forms of visibility” (Rancière 2013, n.p.). In the classic Platonic sense, as Rancière suggests, politics “plays itself out in the relationship between stage and

the audience”, the stage being “a locus of public activity and the exhibition-space for *fantasies*” which in this way “disturbs the clear partition of identities, activities, and spaces” (Ranci re 2013, n.p., italics original). And considering the pursuit of the good life as one of the fundamental philosophical questions, this, according to Butler, comes down to our social connections: we depend on others and we are transformed by our connections. Butler (2015) sees the acknowledgement of our need for each other as critical for the conditions of democratic life, as well as a part of the ongoing crisis.

The social connections that are formed out of feelings and political participation can also be about standing up for empathy and care, instead of just standing against that which causes frustration and anxiety. This idea is reflected in the way Extinction Rebellion takes into account the well-being and mental health of its members, offering support during and after their rebellions, where a number of different types of actions – often highly stressful for the participants – take place. Debriefing and mindfulness sessions for activists are announced in Extinction Rebellion Finland’s internal communication channels. The holistic concern for well-being, which has been lost in the governing of society, can be found in political assemblage on the fringes. It is present in Judith Butler’s call for a sensate, radical democracy enacted by a social movement that is “itself a social form” that may articulate “what it might mean to lead a good life in the sense of a livable life” (Butler 2015, n.p.). Livable life means a habitat that provides for the vulnerable and the interdependent – a life which is no longer the lone survival game of the individual in the market economy.

This is a politics in which performative action takes bodily and plural form, drawing critical attention to the conditions of bodily survival, persistence, and flourishing within the framework of radical democracy. (Butler 2015, n.p.)

The call for a sensate democracy is echoed in the daydreaming Mu oz sees as a method of working towards queer futurity, of “imaging another

life, another time, another place – a version of heaven on earth that is not simply denial or distraction but a communicative and collective mode of transport” (Muñoz 2019, n.p.). Muñoz imagines this taking us to a place where our sensuous lives are not restricted by society and its demands:

Daydreaming, like the ornament, represents a reactivation of the erotic imaginary that is not limited to sexual fantasies, though it includes them, but is more nearly about a fuller capacity for love and relationality, a capacity that is queer in its striking insistence on a great refusal. (Muñoz 2019, n.p.)

While reflecting on the acts by antimilitarist feminists and queer environmentalists, I imagine a transit that begins in Rancièrè’s distribution of the sensible via Butler’s politics of performativity that enables livable lives and finally lands us in the sensuous queer future of Muñoz.

I return to my examples in order to further open up how these philosophies emerge visually in the local acts of protest, highlighting the continuation of the movement, the assemblage, showing that they are not separate instances in time or emerge out of nowhere. The political protesters of today build on the knowledge and work, as well as on the errors and blind spots, of the activists that came before them. Taking these visualisations of political demands, I look at the way the aesthetic strategies are closely knitted despite the decades that separate the actions. While the digital is a predominant part of activism today, the manual and the physical approaches remain timeless, with the DIY aesthetics passed on from one generation of activists to another. Queer Rebellion’s action calling the public to dream, their decorative ornamentation of a military statue, and their call for a fair and ecological present to emerge, echo Muñoz’s daydreaming and visions of a queer future.

Queer Rebellion on top of the statue of a “war hero”

Like the antimilitarists weeping for peace in 1987, ecosocial activists put emotions on display to evoke feelings in passers-by. In their Utopia-kapina (Utopia Rebellion) action in the summer of 2022, Elokapina

(Extinction Rebellion Finland) turned the idea of utopia on its head by pointing out the utopianism of the consumer society and its ideology of growth, calling for “degrowth” instead (an idea known as the critique of the global capitalist system pursuing growth at all costs). The aim of Utopia Rebellion was to remind us of the consumerist utopia of constant growth we are currently living, but the reality of which we choose not to acknowledge. In their Utopia Rebellion statement, Elokapina makes reference to feelings: “Our aim is to show what feelings the current utopia triggers amongst us” (Elokapina 2022). The feeling of distress is harnessed into an energy and release, as a posting by Elokapina Helsinki on their Facebook page states: “Despair dies when the action begins”. The performative actions of Elokapina are carried out at locations such as shopping centres, where they interrupt the “business-as-usual”. They focus on form – the message is not necessarily made explicit – and speak in a different tone than a protest march would: they show but do not tell. Like art does, they also leave all consideration to the viewer, appealing to their sense of wonder. The message, information, and reasons for the protest are sometimes spelled out on a flyer and handed out during the performance. The actions use artistic means as an affective strategy for making something happen in the person witnessing the act: a feeling, or something less definable – an affect that lets a new understanding form from within.

As a prequel to the Utopia Rebellion, Queerkapina (Queer Rebellion, the queer faction of Elokapina) arranged an action at the Mannerheim statue during the Helsinki Pride Week of 2021. The aim, according to the group, was to create a party-like atmosphere and make “utopia concrete” by visual means, dressing the monument with plant-like decorations and laying flowers on the stone-surfaced location.⁵ A piece of cardboard on which people could write down their ideas about utopia was attached to the statue plinth. Ornamental handicraft aesthetics were present: the organisers coordinated their appearance by dressing in “earth tones” and in ways that represented “themselves or their queerness”, and covered their skin in body-paint illustrations of plants. The unisex and androgynous looks of the 1970s and 1980s are now non-binary and genderqueer – a

sharpened identity-political edge being one component of the aesthetics of the ecosocial justice movement. The aesthetic relates to Muñoz's queer sociability and its call for the "collective temporal distortion" (Muñoz 2019, n.p.). The participants of Queer Rebellion created a small island of utopia in the middle of Helsinki to escape, if just for a moment, the existing state of affairs. Muñoz studied the aesthetic strategies within art and politics that reach beyond the white, straight, middle-class consensus. Muñoz's enquiry focussed on the queer aesthetic, where he could find the "blueprints and schemata of a forward-dawning futurity" (ibid, n.p.). Utopia is a promise of something that is not yet here, something that is waiting in the future, and for Muñoz, queerness contained this promise, its aesthetics being the manifestation of the promise:

Both the ornamental and the quotidian can contain a map of the utopia that is queerness. Turning to the aesthetic in the case of queerness is nothing like an escape from the social realm, insofar as queer aesthetics map future social relations. (ibid., n.p.)

Queer Rebellion expressed their plea for a fairer and more environmentally sound society through an aesthetic that stood in stark contrast to the response and appearance of the Finnish police. Police in riot gear arrived to protect the dead monument from the peacefully protesting queer youths (see Figures 3a & 3b). Like the antimilitarist feminists demonstrating in the Finnish parliament in 1987, Queer Rebellion chose a symbol of power, across the street from the very building where the Weeping Women wept some thirty-four years earlier. Their non-violent performance protest was a call for another type of governance, an ecologically and socially fair governance, and this call was met with police-enforced state control.

Timeless hands-on aesthetics combined with conflicting feelings

Connecting present protest aesthetics to those of the past, Lea Launokari of Women for Peace recalls how the aesthetic aspects of their antimilita-



Figure 3a. Queerkapina and the Finnish riot police at the Mannerheim statue, Helsinki. (Image: Satu Söderholm)

rist protests were always carefully considered (Launokari 2022). On the peace walk from Helsinki to Minsk in 1982 – one of the long-distance protest marches organised by the Nordic Women’s Peace Movement – the women at the front wore loose-fitting light-blue dresses embroidered with flowers and carried richly decorated banderoles. Similar handmade aesthetics were employed at a protest parade in Helsinki on Women’s Day in 2022: the banderoles were made from floral print bed sheets embroidered with the message “Feminism is also Anti-Racist”. Handicrafts carry an aesthetic associated with femaleness: as well as a decorative element, they hold a reproductive quality of protective clothing that gives warmth and comfort. Crafts are not only the use of certain materials and artistic practises, but also a place of stillness, allowing time for contemplation for oneself in the midst of housework, as bell hooks (2009) has noted:

Women’s thoughts, feelings, their very lives were inextricably bound into the designs just as surely as the cloth layers were bound with thread. (hooks 2009, 117)



Figure 3b. Queerkapina on the Mannerheim statue. (Image: Kojootti)

According to Launokari, the decorative visuals, organic forms and bright colours stood out against the dark, muted colours and angular shapes of military figures. Singing was another element in the women's antimilitarist aesthetic. One of Launokari's archive folders is filled with

crumpled and annotated lyric sheets and notations of the many songs sung during the peace walks and protests. The social aesthetics of the antimilitarist campaigns are a practical demonstration of polyvocality, an illustration of the way in which a myriad of voices within a movement become one single, amplified voice.

The hands-on blends with the ephemeral to form the energy of these political protests; as Muñoz (2019) notes, ephemerality does not equal unmateriality. Anxiety, apathy, lethargy and irritation are some of the negative affects and feelings associated with environmental campaigning. The omnipresence of information creates an anxiousness that makes you want to protect yourself from the constant newsfeed causing apathy (see e.g., Norgaard 2011). We are confused by the conflicting messages and demands we face in our daily lives. There is a lot of *feeling* going on. We need a break from the demands of our everyday lives, from constantly feeling guilty about “not doing enough” or “not doing anything” – from the demands of efficiency and productivity as well as the moral demands placed upon us. Environmentalism has been seen as somewhat preachy, as having an air of eco-aesthetic earnestness, of sincerity, that can feel a bit embarrassing. Yet, in these examples of feminist antimilitarism and queer ecosocial activism, we find sincerity combined with humour – a combination that chips away at cynicism and lethargy. When witnessed by passers-by, the interventions, or their ephemera, may spark action or instil a sense of assurance that perhaps things will somehow turn out alright, eventually. This can be ascribed to the aesthetic the interventions contain, the energy left lingering, the sense of urgency the flyers evoke. Actions of civil disobedience are interventions that can put the lethargy of consumption and passivity on hold. For example, a funeral procession carrying an urn that “contains the reason of [Jacques] Chirac” (see Figure 4) is *dead funny* in the context of something so serious and sinister as the nuclear tests carried out by the French government in the Pacific from the 1960s to the 1990s (see e.g., BBC News 2021). The action in question was one of the many public protests Women for Peace carried out in Helsinki. The funeral procession action is a continuation of the social aesthetics of the Weep-



Figure 4. Itkijänaiset demonstrating against the French nuclear testing in the Pacific, late 1980s. (NRP archives, Kansan arkisto/People's Archive)

ing Women action in the Finnish parliament. The aesthetics of these actions is a mix of conflicting feelings and visuals – a strategy that is effective because of its complexity.

The ecofeminist footing and political aesthetics

Feminist antimilitarism and queer environmentalism are informed by the same ethos as ecofeminist philosophy in matters concerning our interconnectedness with nature and the structures of extraction. Like the queer ecosocial activists of today, the feminists of thirty years ago

campaigned against man-made social and environmental crises in the form of a looming nuclear disaster and arms race.⁶ Such threats materialized in the Chernobyl nuclear disaster of 1986 and the 2011 flooding of the Fukushima nuclear plant in Japan – a country renowned for its technological prowess – which caused a long-term environmental crisis (see e.g., McCurry 2014; Kan et al. 2017). Since 2022, the threat of further nuclear catastrophes casts its continuing shadow due to the war in Ukraine.

Ecofeminist theorist Greta Gaard points to how the feminist activism of the 1980s “offered an ecological and feminist perspective that linked militarism, corporatism, and unsustainable energy production by joining together the antinuclear protests and the peace movement” (Gaard 2011, 28). Ecofeminist thinking and practice defend communal ways of living, resonating with Butler’s calls to acknowledge our interconnectedness with everyone (and everything) around us.

Feminism being fluid and adaptive, its ethos underpins collectives, theories and philosophies that aim to transform social conditions. Feminism is not a mere label or category – it is omnipresent and pragmatic as well as ontological. Power structures are maintained by binaries: through the construction of subjects of domination. In order to move away from hierarchical violence, we must reconsider our artificial categories, starting with language. Donna Haraway refers to “nature-cultures” (Haraway 2003, 8) and the term “ecosocial” is used in much the same way here, underlining the synthesis of the ecological and the social. The western conception of nature as a passive object of scientific study and extraction is opposed by Haraway’s terminology that regards nature as an active agent.

Acknowledging the agency of the world in knowledge makes room for some unsettling possibilities, including a sense of the world’s independent sense of humour ... Feminist objectivity makes room for surprises and ironies at the heart of all knowledge production; we are not in charge of the world. (Haraway 1988, 593–594)

Ecofeminism critiques epistemological claims of objectivity, and Haraway, too, argues for “an alternative, pluralistic, context-dependent view of knowledge” (Warren 2000, 34) – situated knowledges, as Haraway has defined it (Haraway 1988). An ecofeminist standpoint within social aesthetics can be found in “the nondiscursive modes of political formulation” (Sartwell 2010, 4), though the attribution of an aesthetic feature involves language and culture: “the aesthetic features of a thing are features of it in a situation” (Sartwell 2010, 5–6). Philosopher Crispin Sartwell argues for the need to break down “the dichotomy between rhetoric as a craft of persuasion and poetics or aesthetics as a condition on identity for political systems” (2010, 3). Western philosophy has placed aesthetics on its fringes “where it recapitulates the paradoxes of metaphysics and epistemology,” as feminist philosopher Hilde Hein notes (Hein 1995, 456). Feminist and queer practices have managed to dissolve the dichotomy pointed out by Sartwell, embodying the potential of the aesthetic by combining corporeal politics and the affective, that is, the public and the private, as in the examples of feminist antimilitarist action and queer ecojustice campaigning.

Conclusion: The ephemeral in ecofeminist agency and queer futurity

In this article, I have approached the performative and the aesthetic in antimilitarist and ecosocial activism, in the introduced acts of civil disobedience through the thinking of Jacques Rancière, Judith Butler, and José Esteban Muñoz. Combining their ideas with the concepts of social aesthetics and ecofeminist philosophy, as well as queer ephemerality, I have pursued an argument for the shared historical strategies of political protest as well as the shared ethos that continues to gradually evolve as knowledges continue to widen over time. Intersectional feminism builds on ecofeminism, which has its foundations in non-Western and Indigenous knowledges. While carrying the ethos of feminist environmental philosophy and its understanding of our interdependency, queer ecology disrupts the “prevailing heterosexist discursive and institutional articulations of sexuality and nature” (Sandilands 2016), constructing a biosocial awareness based on nonlinear biology.

Feminist and queer positions are formed out of their challenging of the status quo, their shared perceptions, fury and a sense of urgency, and contain a myriad of voices. At the core of a polyvocal assembly is the struggle for “plural rights”, following Butler’s thinking on plurality not as “a struggle to which only some identities can belong” but rather as something that seeks to “expand what we mean when we say ‘we’” (Butler 2015, n.p.). This expansion of “we” into an assemblage of multiple standpoints, can be found in the social aesthetics of the actions I have discussed. The idea that an assemblage contains multiples like “the solid and fluid phases of matter” (DeLanda 2016, 18) relates to the queer theorising of Muñoz and the ephemerality of performative acts. For Muñoz, the ephemeral is distinctly material, though not always solid – ephemera being a mode of “producing arguments often worked by minoritarian culture and criticism makers” (Muñoz 1996, 10). By highlighting the ephemeral as a component in queer politics, as a part of its worldmaking, Muñoz’s thinking expands our understanding of materiality. This in turn is distilled into social aesthetics, as I have demonstrated in this article.

By associating ecofeminist and queer philosophy with the examples of antimilitary and ecosocial struggles, I have emphasised the social and political dimensions of the aesthetic – that it is more than an autonomous byproduct of the culture industry or an isolated feature in our experience of art. The aesthetic harnesses the emotional as well as the visceral, and our senses can set about a response that connects us to a larger cause, an assemblage. I propose that rather than through reason and factual argumentation, our political beingness is formed through our senses and by assembling, by coming together in collective movement. Grassroots political action, civil disobedience and direct action are ways of getting urgent demands across in more agile ways than the slow-moving party political and organisational work allows. The transformation that responds to our spontaneous beings comes back to Judith Butler’s thinking on assembling and the way the performative materialises in the aesthetic:

Actions that are performative are irreducible to technical applications, and they are differentiated from passive and transient forms of experience. Thus, when and where there is suffering or transience, it is there to be transformed into the life of action and thought, and that action and thought has to be performative in the illocutionary sense, modeled on aesthetic judgment, bringing something new into the world. (Butler 2015, n.p.)

Social aesthetics carry the transient forms of the resistance Butler speaks of. These materialise in public places in front of a public – by being encountered and experienced. Going beyond the rhetorical persuasion of a speech act, social aesthetics can be regarded as illocutionary, as they transmit the urgency and aim of a performative action. The collectives I have described in this article use the performative methods of crying, singing, chanting, dancing, decorating, or simply sitting on the ground. Their carefully considered visual displays of organic forms and vivid colours reflect their demands for demilitarisation and ecological and social soundness. Through performance, political feelings become *gestalt*: feelings of sadness, anger and fear, as well as more ambivalent affects such as uncertainty, irritation and frustration are articulated in an aesthetics, which also conveys care, intimacy and connectedness. The conflicting feelings are articulated through aesthetics which carry the worldmaking of queer and feminist philosophies to form a praxis, an assemblage of political life.

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NOTES

1. From the seventeenth century onwards, women used handkerchiefs to convey messages by dropping them onto the ground for men to pick up (NRP archives, Kansan arkisto, folder 1Fg NRP Ja.).
2. The very first action by Extinction Rebellion Finland took place at a seminar for private forest owners in March 2019. A video clip of the protest – captured on a hand-held mobile phone and post-produced into black and white with an ambient soundtrack on top – shows how during the seminar, the activists, all dressed in black, stand up in their seats and begin to move in slow motion around the auditorium. The seminar speaker stops his prepared talk to note, “It appears there is a dance performance prepared for us”. The action is carefully choreographed so that the group can manage to make an impact in the small window they have before security steps in to usher them out. In the end, the forest owners give the protesters a polite round of applause while two of the activists with deadpan expressions stand in the front of the auditorium holding a banner that reads CARBON SINK with the Extinction Rebellion hourglass logo. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KVjpcyt6cd8>. (Accessed 6.6.2023)

3. Tabloid Iltalehti, April 1987. (NRP archives, Kansan arkisto [People's Archive], folder 1Fg NRP Ja.)
4. Ibid.
5. From a document collated by Queer Rebellion for the Finnish National Museum archives.
6. Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp in the UK (1981–2000) perhaps being the most well-known of the Western feminist peace struggles.