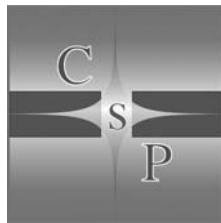


Aesthetics and Radical Politics

Aesthetics and Radical Politics

Edited by

Gavin Grindon



Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Aesthetics and Radical Politics, Edited by Gavin Grindon

This book first published 2008

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

12 Back Chapman Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2XX, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Copyright © 2008 by Gavin Grindon and contributors

All rights for this book reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright owner.

ISBN (10): 1-84718-979-2, ISBN (13): 9781847189790

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	
Gavin Grindon	vii
THE PRODUCTION OF DISRUPTION: THE SUBVERSIVE POTENTIAL OF PLAY AND DESIRE IN THE ACTIONS OF BERLIN AND HAMBURG UMSONST	
Anja Kanngieser	1
SIMPLE, MEANINGFUL GRAPHICS: DIGITAL GAMING COUNTER- MOBILISATIONS AND THE POLITICS OF GRAPHICS	
Daniel Ashton	26
BASIC INCOME BEYOND WAGE SLAVERY: IN SEARCH OF TRANSCENDING POLITICAL AESTHETICS	
Lasse Ekstrand and Monica Wallmon	42
SOMA: AN ANARCHIST EXPERIMENT	
Jorge Goia	56
ALEXANDER TROCCHI AND SITUATIONISM	
Michael Gardiner	63
SIGNS, IDEAS, WINDOWS: INTERPRETATION AND THE PROUDHONIAN SERIES	
Jesse Cohn	83
ABOLISHING BAKUNIN: TOWARDS AN ANARCHIST POLITICS OF THE TEXT	
Gareth Gordon	104
NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS	128
INDEX	130

INTRODUCTION

GAVIN GRINDON

It is difficult to find a book of radical theory published in the academy in recent years which does not attempt to ground itself in the contemporary swell of the global justice movement, even if it is by the most fleeting reference in its blurb to the events of Seattle at the turn of the century. However, amongst the many such publications, it is more difficult still to find a great deal of reference to the voluminous extra-academic ‘movement internal’ writing and publication of this movement itself. Behind the success of a breakthrough text such as Hardt and Negri’s *Empire* stands a wave of critical young scholars engaged with this movement whose work often stands at odds in one way or another with existing schools of thought on radical politics. Within the realm of aesthetics, the situation is particularly that – as the case studies presented by the articles in this volume demonstrate – this movement often seeks to aestheticise politics or rather, to treat the aesthetic as a directly political terrain, in a fashion which is dismissed out-of-hand by Western Marxist schools of thought, which have tended to dominate radical academic writing on politics and aesthetics. The conference from which these papers are drawn sought to redress this imbalance, by bringing together young scholars whose work more closely connects with the theoretical and critical perspectives emerging from the grassroots of the global justice movement. This connection was in each case the product of either participation in and reflections on groups adopting new approaches within that movement, or of an engagement with the historical precedents and origins of this movement’s theoretical perspectives. The conference itself was held at Manchester University on Saturday 3rd February 2007 and attended by about 120 people; academics, young students and activists, with attendees from Australia, Europe and the United States. There were bookstalls from AK Press, Autonomedia and the Basement,¹ Manchester’s local social centre, and the event carried an overarching atmosphere of lively, open conviviality and enthusiastic ferment, affective conditions

¹ See <http://thebasement.clearerchannel.org/new/>

which could not be separated from the content and purpose of the conference, as connections were quickly made and enthusiasms sparked in a vibrant area of common concern which has received too-little space for discussion within the academy. Anarchists have traditionally been justifiably wary of the academy, where its ideas and history have often been massively misrepresented, vilified and misunderstood. The conference was one attempt to bridge this gap, and its varied attendance, which stretched far beyond the mere participation of specialised academics, was a hopeful sign.

In relation to contemporary social movements, the perspectives of both the participants and the audience tended to be broadly orientated towards second-wave anarchism, autonomism and various ecological frameworks than towards the Marxian critical idiom. As such, the conference represented a generational political trend and marked one point of its increasing contact with the academy. This trend might be characterised as a 'directly political' or organisational turn in analyses of culture and society. Academic perspectives on culture and society within the academy have often taken the form of *critique* and concerned themselves primarily with the problem of ideology. Such perspectives have sought to employ criticism of culture in order to uncover, deconstruct or overturn misrepresentations, constructions, myths, ideology or false consciousness, with the political implication that this unveiling will have the social effect of new alternate values and concepts, and new forms of social organisation. The ideological veil having been rent aside, and truth exposed, people are compelled to act. However, such practices have not necessarily led to this result, and in the context of global, postfordist capitalism, the narrative of the recuperation of the radical perspectives of the '68 generation by capital for its own ends is a well known one. However, informed broadly by both the autonomist theoretical perspectives of the European struggles of the late 1970s and 1980s, and by the global anti-capitalist movement of the 1990s, more recent scholarship has taken a different approach. Rather than accepting a dialectic of refusal and recuperation, with an apparently inevitable endpoint in cynicism and failure, the body of writing represented here tends to turn towards culture as a directly political terrain, as a terrain of organisation. As such, there is often a turn towards a 'second wave' anarchism inflected by post-structural theory (Cohn, Gordon), or to the analysis of groups who attempt to treat culture as a realm of political action (Kanngeiser, Ashton). Thus the essays printed here attempt to both more fairly represent the tactics and ideas of the global justice movement in its own terms, and (informed by its

experiences) to develop new theoretical perspectives more appropriate to our times. As others have observed, such perspectives have their own theoretical lineages, though these have a life more vibrant outside of the English-language academy, as the editors of a recent volume with a similar orientation this conference have observed:

The American academy—or anyway the part that fancies itself to be the radical, critical, subversive branch of it—have for some preferred to endlessly recycling the same body of French theory: roughly, reading and reading a set of texts written between 1968 to 1983. There are all sorts of ironies here. Aside from the obvious one: that a group of people so obsessed with intellectual fashion do not seem to notice they are recycling ideas from thirty years ago—rather like music fans who felt they were still the quintessence of cool even though they listened exclusively to Classic Rock.²

By contrast, the works of radical theory which have tended to inspire the thought of activists in current social movements has been almost entirely neglected by the academy, which has tended to prioritise that body of French theory constructed in the melancholic wake of 1968. It is often through these former theories that the key connections have been made which have informed the thought of activists, organisers and theorists within the anti-globalisation movement. Activists may sometimes draw on the more canonical thought of Michel Foucault or Gilles Deleuze, but academic writing on, for example, Raoul Vaneigem, Cornelius Castoriadis, or even Felix Guattari, is far rarer. In addition to this divide, much radical writing exists in French and Italian which, holding a closer relation to social movements since 1968, has yet to be translated. Here, we might notionally point in the direction of the MAUSS group,³ Michel Onfray,⁴ Franco Berardi and Mario Tronti, amongst others.

Similarly, as social movements worldwide, particularly the movement against globalisation since the early 1990s, have tended to draw more on anarchist and autonomist theory, their theoretical perspectives have been neglected by the academy, steeped in New Left- or Post-Marxism.⁵ In Europe, particularly France and Italy, these ideas developed in a Marxian - rather than an anarchist - context, despite appearing as extra-parliamentary and anti-hierarchical. In both these countries Marxian thought dominated radical discourse, and radical discourse on aesthetics. To declare an

² (Graeber 2008) pp.14

³ See <http://www.revuedumauss.com/fr/>

⁴ (Onfray 1997)

⁵ The most notable intervention here being (Graeber 2002)

affinity between such approaches and anarchism would be as odd and unnatural a gesture as trying to link them to a classical tradition of syndicalism. In Germany, autonomism was closer to anarchist currents, and in American and Britain, such approaches were more readily understood through the lens of anarchist ideas, where the political role played by Marxism and Communism has been quite different. The current volume perhaps reflects this Anglo-American bias to some extent, with the exception of Kanngieser and Erkstrand and Wollman's articles.

In North America, these ideas which often developed in relation to Marxian thought, would be put in openly anarchist language by the North American theorists of Post-Left Anarchy. Since the mid-1980s, in magazines such as *Fifth Estate* and *Anarchy: A Journal of Desire Armed*, anarchists have developed a variety of Post-Left Anarchy, which attempts in various ways to break with Marxist problematics of ideology and recuperation (hence the avoidance of the term 'post-left anarchism'). The term 'Post-Left Anarchy,' coined by Bob Black,⁶ denotes a general (rather than a more academic close theoretical) engagement with postmodern and post-structuralist ideas on the part of anarchists who have maintained a commitment to direct action and radical social change, if not outright revolution. However, interestingly some of the more extreme forms of this attempted rupture with Leftism, such as the anti-civilisational anarcho-primitivism of John Zerzan,⁷ emerges directly from an engagement with Marxism. Zerzan's politics emerge directly, for example, from Marxist problematics of rupture and recuperation, and have little reference back to the body of classical anarchist thought.⁸ As a result Zerzan, (who concludes at various points that the only escape from the mediating grip of reification is to do away with civilisation, tools, language, art and symbolic thought itself), does write with real sincerity, but one might be forgiven for mistaking him for a pataphysical Adorno. Perhaps the single most influential figure in such movements, and in the countercultures they associated with, who emerges from this Post-Left anarchist milieu is Hakim Bey. Bey, *the nom de plume* of Peter Lamborn Wilson, entered the anarchist scene in New York writing often uncredited pieces for zines such as *Schiz-Flux*, which attempted to develop an anarchic sexual politics from

⁶ See (Black 1997). He first coins the term writing for *Anarchy*.

⁷ See, for example (Zerzan 1994) and (Zerzan 1988)

⁸ Spencer Sunshine offers an excellent and thorough analysis of this trajectory in his "The Marxist Origins of Primitivism," (unpublished manuscript). An audio recording of a lecture based on this paper is available from http://www.radio4all.net/index.php?op=download&program_id=10402&file_id=19035&nav=&

post-structuralist writing on desire, with particular reference to Deleuze. His later *Temporary Autonomous Zone*, which proposed the creation or spontaneous appearance of self-organised spaces of liberation from authority and capital, (which has resonances with Foucault's notional concept of heterotopia) had a massive influence both on anarchist groups internationally and the wider counterculture of the 1990s. Its most notable influences are on the forms of organisation adopted by groups such as Reclaim the Streets, as well as the by the annual Burning Man festival. Also, in Europe, and even more directly related to the emergence of the anti-globalisation movement, is Andrew X's "Give Up Activism," an article published as part of a collection of tactical and theoretical reflections on J18, one of the earliest global 'carnival against capital' days of action against capital. The essay proposes doing away with the specialised notion of the political actor as a reified notion, and was hugely influential on later forms of organisation, not least the cultural tactics accounted for by Anja Kanngeser and Daniel Ashton in their articles here.⁹ More recently, a closely related line of thought has emerged within the academy. Sympathetic to such theory, but much more academic in origin and intent, 'Post-anarchism' attempts an explicit and thorough synthesis of anarchism and post-structuralism.¹⁰ Though less closely related to social movements, these ideas have often offered a theoretically more rigorous engagement with the potential radical political legacy of post-structuralism, and have had their own influence on anarchist engagements with culture, often re-reading and critically engaging with classical anarchist texts in the light of this later theory, in order to propose an 'anarchism beyond anarchism.' In the present volume, Jesse Cohn's account of Proudhon, and Gareth Gordon's analysis of Bakunin fall squarely into this category.

A number of commentators have variously offered reasons for the antiauthoritarian character of the current wave of radical social movements, from the historical bankruptcy of movements based around hegemony¹¹ to the rise of decentralised networks of mass communications.¹² However, there has been less attention paid to the reasons for the 'cultural turn' of these social movements, as described above. In the late twentieth century, cultural and social life have taken on a

⁹ See (Andrew X 2000) and also (Kellstadt 2001)

¹⁰ The primary texts here are (May 1994), (Newman 2001), (Call 2002), (Critchley 2007).

¹¹ Day, Richard. *Gramsci Is Dead: Anarchist Currents in the Newest Social Movements*. London: Pluto, 2005.

¹² See (Chesters 2006) and (Dyer-Witford 1999)

new level of importance, in the West, within capital's circuits of production, as theories of the social factory¹³ and immaterial and affective labour¹⁴ have attempted to explain. That is, previously, culture was treated by radical critics as a realm of consumption, as a problem of a commodified, alienated culture which separated us from ourselves. But the tendency that these theories have sought to explain is that culture, and beyond cultural objects even the affective realm of everyday life, have also increasingly become areas of capitalist production. That is, capital has extended its domination to subsume greater areas of previously 'personal' life under its extraction of surplus value. As a result, culture and the aesthetic have tended not to be a realm of ideological battles of values, of representation, but of direct battles between surplus value and self-valorisation. Social movements, responding to this situation, have tended to directly engage with and re-appropriate these spaces of social production as a political tactic. Thus, for example, the common emphasis on the refusal of work amongst these convergent approaches, which drawn as much on the Surrealist and Dadaist avant-garde valorisation of play and the Romantic rejection of work à la Paul Lafargue,¹⁵ as it does upon Marxist critiques of new social relations under postfordist capitalism.¹⁶ Though broadly evident across the texts in this volume, especially in the analyses of cultural activism of Kanngieser and Ashton, Wallmon and Ekstrand's essay attempts to directly confront this issue in terms of political economy, drawing together the avant-gardism of Beuys and the critical perspectives of those proposing a society-wide 'basic income.' The search for a new cultural politics which these movements embody finds a critical outlet, in various forms, in the articles which follow. The articles have been organised, broadly, in thematic sections as they engage with particular aspects of the themes and currents described above.

The first articles in this collection take up the issue of cultural activism. Beginning with Andrew X's aforementioned article, "Give Up Activism", Kanngieser explores the way in which recent activist groups have looked to traverse the gap between 'politics' and 'everyday life' by employing play, humour and irony. She focuses in particular on two German groups, Hamburg and Berlin Umsonst, who gained notoriety for their spectacular actions, which included a Robin Hood raid on Frische Paradies, an

¹³ See, for example, (Tronti 1973)

¹⁴ See (Lazzarato 1997) and (Hardt 1999)

¹⁵ (Lafargue 2000)

¹⁶ See, for example, (Tronti 1972), (Black 1985) and the writing of the broadly autonomist-Marxist Zerowork group, some of which is available from <http://libcom.org/tags/zerowork>

exclusive supermarket in Hamburg, reported in the Guardian newspaper in the UK.¹⁷ Umsonst took the position that the supposed ‘luxuries’ of cultural and aesthetic life (their actions were variously directed at art galleries, swimming pools and exclusive supermarkets amongst other places) should not be denied those who cannot afford them and have an interest in them (that is, the mass of precarious workers in the West of the new global economy), and the struggle for them should be placed alongside the struggle for basic material necessities such as food and housing. They carried out mass, collective reappropriations of the luxury of culture, by appropriating space or taking commodities and redistributing them. Kanngieser examines their core values, which are often drawn from the realm of aesthetics rather than politics; collectivity; play; laughter; desire; networks; creativity. She assesses how far these values were embodied by the group, and how far they actually provide a useful critical paradigm for conceiving of cultural activism. As such, her article also provides an excellent general frame for the articles which follow. Ashton’s piece looks at cultural activism within the sphere on video games, where such emphases on collectivity, play and desire are radically recontextualised. Working with autonomist-Marxist theories of labour, he looks at the turn to simpler graphical styles carried out by groups who engage critically with the world of gaming in the face of an economy whose motive force is founded upon technological innovation. Parallel to groups in the streets such as Umsonst, these groups attempt to reappropriate the cultural space of game-playing. Rather than subverting mainstream games, as RTMark attempted to by placing gay, kissing soldiers in the military simulation SimCopter in 1996, the groups Ashton looks at create their own virally-distributed games such as The McDonalds videogame, which puts the player in the position of a manager who must exploit employees and resources for maximum profit, or the Tampatico game, an ironic tamagotchi-style game in which the player must manage the productivity of a precarious worker. Aston argues that, in Brechtian fashion, the return to simpler graphics in such games re-introduces social relations in contrast to an ‘immersive’ gaming experience, in a fashion which we might place alongside the ‘making strange’ of everyday life carried out by Umsonst in their own cultural activism. Erkstrand and Wallmon were in the end unable to attend the conference itself, but their paper, presented here, develops notions worked with in the previous articles in terms of one specific theoretical trajectory – that of ‘basic

¹⁷ Harding, Luke. “A Merry Band” *The Guardian*, Wed 17th May 2006. Available online at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2006/may/17/germany.lukeharding>

income’ – an unconditional wage for all members of society. Proposals for such a program are not new, but have sometimes been adopted by autonomists as the logical conclusion of their argument that all social and cultural activity now finds itself productive for surplus value for capital, even when it takes place outside of the traditional workplace. Erkstrand and Wallmon’s article attempts to move from aesthetics to politics by demonstrating the congruence between the avant-garde claim for art’s movement into everyday life – their chosen example is Joseph Beuys – and the basic income thesis, by treating both as a parallel critique of the notions of labour and creativity in modern society, which presently exist in compartmentalised form, whether as ‘art’ or ‘work.’ Once again, the notion of play, and its relation to political economy, is interrogated, but this time directly as a category of political economy.

Jorge Goia, a theorist and teacher of Soma, conducted an open workshop in two parts at the conference. Soma is an “anarchist therapy” which seeks to understand social behaviour by beginning with a group’s affective microsocial relations in the sphere of everyday life (and in this, is in many ways close to Guattari’s ‘molecular’ micropolitics of transversality). It was invented by Roberto Freire in the Brazil of the 1970s, in order to address the psychological effects upon activists of fighting against the military dictatorship of the country. It draws on a synthesis of the body-orientated Gestalt therapy pioneered by Wilhelm Reich and the Brazilian art of Capoeira Angola. It takes the form of group games and exercises which emphasise creativity, playfulness and spontaneity. As teachers such as Goia have exported Soma outside Brazil, it has been adopted by anarchist groups in various parts of Europe and the US. Goia’s contribution here takes the form of a brief essay on Soma, its history and theory. There has been very little written in English on Soma, and so Goia’s essay is a valuable and fascinating introduction to those who have not experienced it firsthand. Gardiner’s essay also presents an aspect of radical counterculture which has received little attention, and also in a non-English context. His article addresses the work of Alexander Trocchi. Gardiner addresses Trocchi as a connecting thread, who links together various countercultural and political groups of the 1950s and 60s in ways which are as surprising and provocative as they are unexpected. He follows the historical thread of the journal *Merlin*, which Trocchi edited, and through whose pages he links a range of contributors and allies, from Lettrists, Situationists and Surrealists like Paul Eluard, to Jean Genet, Jean-Paul Satre, Henry Miller, R.D. Laing, William Burroughs, Kenneth White and Gilles Deleuze.

This literary direction is continued in the final two contributions, which both come from literature scholars working with the ideas of post-anarchism. Cohn's piece presents a new reading of Joseph Proudhon's work, with a particular attention to his idiosyncratic notion of a 'serial dialectic.' He does so in order to contest the popular understanding of classical anarchism as having ever been positivistic or having relied on any fixed notion of 'human nature.' Rather, it is a matter of difference and relations, indeed in a fashion that anticipates Foucaultian and Deleuzian analyses of power. Gordon turns instead towards that anarchist usually vilified not for his crude rationalism, but for his supposed hysterical excess, Michael Bakunin. Gordon looks at how an anarchist critic might approach a text, how in particular to approach the controversial manner in which anarchists and their texts have been read and misread. He attempts to take the multiplicity and openness of the anarchic organisation of the global justice movement as an experimental reading practice, and offers a means to engage with the ambiguity and multiplicity inherent in Bakunin's writing, just as Cohn seeks a similar deterritorialisation of Proudhon's place in the history of political thought. Both these final texts conclude by focusing on openness and possibility, emphasising that the necessarily experimental, open (even playful?) politics addressed here are not those of a position of aggressive certainty, but that this is also not to be taken as a sign of utopianism or infantilism, but rather as a sign of their maturity and practical development. It is hoped that the texts presented here will contribute to the ongoing, open debates and theorisations in this area, and contribute to a substantive engagement with the ideas of a new movement within the academy.

I would like to extend my thanks to the AHRC Anarchist Studies Network, whose funding contributed to the event, and to the many individuals who offered accommodation, cooked food, provided the evening's entertainments and otherwise contributed to the vitality and effervescence of the day's events.



During the conference, this stencilled graffiti appeared nearby, which one of the participants captured on her mobile phone. (It puns on a piece of Situationist graffiti from May 1968: “Art is dead. Godard can’t change that.”)

Bibliography

- Andrew X. 2008. “Give Up Activism”. Do Or Die 2000 [cited June 2008]. Available from <http://www.eco-action.org/dod/no9/activism.htm>.
- Black, Bob. 1985. *The Abolition of Work and Other Essays*. Port Townsend: Loompanics Unlimited.
- . 1997. *Anarchy After Leftism*. Columbia, Montreal: Columbia Alternative Library Press.
- Call, Lewis. 2002. *Postmodern Anarchism*. Lexington: Lexington Books.
- Chesters, Graeme and Ian Welsh. 2006. *Complexity and Social Movements: Multitudes at the Edge of Chaos*. London: Routledge.
- Critchley, Simon. 2007. *Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance*. London, New York: Verso.
- Dyer-Witheford, Nick. 1999. *Cyber Marx: Cycles and Circuits of Struggle in High Technology Capitalism*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Graeber, David. 2002. “The New Anarchists”. *New Left Review* 13.

- Graeber, David and Stephen Shukaitis. 2008. "Introduction". In *Constituent Imagination: Militant Investigations, Collective Theorization*, edited by David Graeber and Stephen Shukaitis. Edinburgh: AK Press.
- Hardt, Micheal. 1999. "Affective Labour". *Boundary* 26 (2):89-100.
- Kellstadt, J. 2008. *The Necessity and Impossibility of 'Anti-Activism'* 2001 [cited June 2008]. Available from <http://www.infoshop.org/rants/antiactivism.html>.
- Lafargue, Paul. 2008. *The Right to be Lazy* (1883). trans. Charles Kerr 2000 [cited June 2008]. Available from <http://www.marxists.org/archive/lafargue/1883/lazy/index.htm>.
- Lazzarato, Maurizio. 2008. *Immaterial Labour* 1997 [cited May 2008]. Available from <http://www.generation-online.org/c/fcimmateriallabour3.htm>.
- May, Todd. 1994. *The Political Philosophy of Poststructuralist Anarchism*. Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania University Press.
- Newman, Saul. 2001. *From Bakunin to Lacan: Anti-Authoritarianism and the Dislocation of Power*. Lanham: Lexington Books.
- Onfray, Michel. 1997. *Politique du Rebelle : Traité de Résistance et d'Insoumission*. Paris: Grasset.
- Tronti, Mario. 1972. "Struggle Against Labour". *Radical America* 6 (3):22-25.
- . 1973. "Social Capital". *Telos* 17:98-122.
- Zerzan, John. 1988. *Elements of Refusal: Essays*. Seattle: Left Bank Books.
- . 1994. *Future Primitive and Other Essays*. New York: Autonomedia.

THE PRODUCTIVITY OF DISRUPTION: THE SUBVERSIVE POTENTIAL OF PLAY AND DESIRE IN THE ACTIONS OF BERLIN AND HAMBURG UMSONST

ANJA KANNGEISER

If politics is an everyday affair, political conversation has to be an everyday affair...But what we have instead is an image of political conversation that disconnects it from everyday life, makes political conversation seem to be a rare, scary activity that should happen only in special circumstances, that will disrupt meetings and rip friends apart and intimidate neighbours...and ruin good jokes and not do any good.¹

Over the past decade there have been numerous critical and experimental developments within political activist thought and praxis throughout Europe. These developments have taken a winding trajectory through a series of inquiries into the relationships between activism and public or everyday realms. One of the most polemical calls for the necessity of such analyses was the 1999 paper entitled “Give up Activism”. This text was included in a pamphlet created as an open access collection of reactions to the events surrounding the June 18th global day of action in London. As a critical response to some of the conditions and limitations associated with particular political activist institutions partaking in the events, the paper generated intensive debate, and was subsequently translated and re-printed in various national and international alternative publications. Of significant concern to the author, Andrew X, was a specific mentality he perceived to be manifested by some of the activists involved, which he argued resulted in their self-designated ‘role’

¹ Eliasoph, Nina “What If Good Citizens Etiquette Requires Silencing Political Conversation in Everyday Life? Notes from the Field”. Paper presented at conference on *The Transformation of Civic Life*, Middle Tennessee State University, Murfreesboro and Nashville, Tennessee (November 12–13, 1999).

as a specialist or “expert in social change”². According to X, this perpetuated an un-self reflexive hierarchical division between activists and the general public (or non-activists/ non-specialists). Alongside this criticism was the comment that in the quest for the “revolution”, and in the adoption of a militant self-sacrificial identity or role, activists had inadvertently driven people away through the perceived sterility, exclusivity and sombreness of the “cause”, which simultaneously acted to divorce it from everyday life. This not only had the impact of alienating the activist from the public and vice-versa, it also rendered the political work itself displeasurable, for, as X stated,

As an activist you have to deny your own desires because your political activity is defined such that these things do not count as ‘politics’. You put ‘politics’ in a separate box to the rest of your life.³

It is partly from this comment that I would like to transverse and open up space for conversation on some recent manifestations of alternative modes of activism. While X’s paper tends to slip occasionally into contentious, subjectivist, and perhaps hyperbolic lines of reasoning, his argument does raise some persistent and important questions. Of course it is reductive to insinuate that “activism” can in any way be identified outside of. There has been growing interest in the convergences between political engagement and the everyday realm in recent discourses in various disciplines and alternative political tendencies. Questions regarding this divorce between activists and “non-activists”, the collisions between political work and everyday struggle, as well as the negotiations between aesthetics and activism, and the attempts to coalesce conceptual forms and critical praxis, have all been hypothesised extensively in both contemporary and more historical literature. Most notable in Europe has been the work done by groups and individuals affiliated with such publications as the European Institute for Progressive Cultural Politics, Brumaria, and Multitudes, along with less institutionally oriented anarchist and environmentalist journals. This rethinking is, of course, not only confined to theoretical exploration. Politically concerned praxis and methodology (for instance the militant research of the Colectivo Situaciones) has also become far more hybrid, experimental and rhizomatic.

Some of these more experimental forms were detailed by German collective, the Autonome A.F.R.I.K.A Gruppe in their 2002 paper,

² X, Andrew “Give up Activism” in *Do or Die* 9, 2001. p. 160.

³ *Ibid.* p. 163.

“Communication Guerilla – Transversality in Everyday Life?” in which they outlined actions from the 1990s which they interpreted as acts of communication guerrilla or,

...political praxis forms...that traverse the old boundaries between political action and the everyday world, subjective anger and rational political action, art and politics, desire and work, theory and praxis.⁴

According to the group, communication guerrilla is a specific, almost aesthetic, style or method of political action that draws

...from the watchful view of the paradoxes and absurdities of power, turning these into the starting point for political interventions by playing with representations and identities, with alienation and over-identification.⁵

In recent types of activism adopting or illustrating this approach, which include various mediatised campaigns such as the German Deportation Class movement, one finds the recurrence of affective, performative techniques predicated upon play, humour, and desire.

This subversive potential of play and humour discussed by the Autonome A.F.R.I.K.A Gruppe is not a recent phenomenon, it had long been recognised and heralded as a productive tactic of dissidence throughout the past century by politico-aesthetic groups such as the Berlin Dadaists, the Surrealists and affiliates of the Situationist International. Through the provocation of fun, laughter and desire, play was considered a means by which to interrupt the perceived habitualised banality of the everyday through the force of the excessive, disruptive moment. For such groups their destabilisations of meaning and the interruption of the expected spatio-temporal order created a space through which to stimulate awareness in the public of socio-political and cultural alternatives. For the Situationists, play – due to its non-productive character – was also a rejection of the economic rationalism and commercial, profit driven state of accelerated capitalism.

Coming out of the German radical left movements, and loosely affiliated with the European and South American precarity networks including

⁴ Autonome A.F.R.I.K.A Gruppe “Communication Guerilla – Transversality in Everyday Life?” Trans. Aileen Derieg. *European Institute for Progressive Cultural Politics* website. Available from: <http://eicpc.net/transversal/1202/aag1/en>. Accessed 7th Jan 2007.

⁵ Ibid.

groups such as Yomango, two recent collectives; Berlin Umsonst (Berlin for free) and Hamburg Umsonst (Hamburg for free), have utilised play, laughter and desire in their campaigns in ways reminiscent of these historical movements in a bid to encourage a process of discourse and exchange with the public. In the spirit of calls for the de-specialisation of activism, the Umsonst campaigns were established non-exclusively, non-hierarchically and trans-ideologically. This was, in part, evident in their methodology, which both moved away from traditional activist organisational formats, and focused upon collectivising gestures or moments of anti-capitalist sentiment in social and everyday life. These moments were used as the basis for actions that reconceptualized the paradigms of consumeristic behaviour and attempted to open a terrain for a politics of cooperative appropriation; such as collectively and visibly riding public transport for free, sneaking into cinemas and pools, and the spectacular theft and redistribution of food.⁶

Through examining four of the actions undertaken by these related groups between 2003-2006, it becomes possible to illuminate some of the ways that laughter, play and shared desire can be used to address certain social, cultural and political issues without losing the rigorous, self-reflexive characteristics of more conventional forms of activism. I would like to suggest that by disrupting ritualised forms of political dissidence, such experimental types of activism offer interesting supplements to more conventional and tested methods of protest, and may help us to further the discussions on how to instigate and provoke interstices between activism, the public and the everyday sphere. This is necessary for, as the A.F.R.I.K.A Gruppe assert

Despite all the rhetoric, activism often still has a stance that is strangely separated from people's everyday life, even that of its own protagonists. The future of this global activism will depend on whether it succeeds in

⁶ An influence for the Umsonst movements in Germany can be traced from the praxis and theory of other recent European appropriation movements such as those of Yomango (with whom Hamburg Umsonst undertook a collaboration in 2005). In 2002 the Milan based Chainworkers movement and the Barcelona faction of Yomango ran two workshops at the European Social Forum in Florence, bringing together networks of European media and labour activists. As the Chainworker web site explains "They decide to give rise to *esa* (euro social activism), an entity networking official and wildcat strikes, forms of direct action and social, information guerrilla and image sabotage, all geared to create a veritably radical and unified euro political space." From "Chainworkers Timeline," *Chainworkers* website. Available at <http://www.ecn.org/chainworkers/dev/node/view/84>. Accessed 7th Jan 2007.

being capable of action at the local level, the level of everyday life, while continuing to develop its transversal, border-crossing character at the same time.⁷

Playful Interventions in the Everyday Realm: Creating a platform for an appropriative politics

One of the means by which experimental aesthetic activist forms, or acts of guerrilla communication?, have been actualised in campaigns such as those by Berlin and Hamburg Umsonst, is through collective playful interventions and appropriations which focus upon the everyday realm as their contextual frame.

To use such a specific yet nonetheless generalised notion of the everyday here is ambiguous in that it almost inadvertently denotes a mechanism for delineating “specialised” from “non-specialised” activity, or what would be understood as “everyday”. In his paper “Art, ideology, and everyday space: subversive tendencies from Dada to postmodernism”, cultural geographer Alistair Bonnett provides an interesting re-conceptualisation of Henri Lefebvre’s explanation of everyday life, or, that which “remains after one has eliminated all specialized activities”.⁸ Bonnett turns his attention to an aesthetically considerate understanding of “specialisation”, redefining it in relation to artistic creativity; a term he equates with “those activities commonly held to be responsible for the innovative, imaginative qualities attributed to literature, buildings, paintings, films and so on”.⁹ Everyday space, in Bonnett’s analysis, is that space in which creativity is conventionally absent, as the artist is thought to be a specialised practitioner working outside of the realm of the quotidian.

While this idea of everyday space as that which is not commonly associated with creative activity is, in some senses, contentious, it nonetheless offers an evocative platform for speaking about the subsequent resonances that some experimental activist praxes have evoked. It also allows us to continue to problematise the notions of specialisation and categorisation. For it is, in part, the confusion caused by the kinetic interchange between what is popularly distinguished as a specialised creative or political space, and what is understood as a

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Bonnett, Alistair “Art, ideology, and everyday space: subversive tendencies from Dada to postmodernism,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 10, 1992. 69-86. p. 69.

⁹ Ibid. p. 69.

specialised activist role, that allows for a certain significance to be generated from the libertarian practices undertaken by Berlin Umsonst between mid 2003 until late 2005, for instance.

Collectivity

Initiated by members of the larger radical left Fels – Für eine linke Strömung (For a Left Current) movement, the Berlin faction was the first to emerge as a molecular campaign creating a “culture of everyday resistance” in response to the discourse of economic rationalism, privatisation and directives to “pull the belt tighter” issued by the Berlin state government.¹⁰ Asking the question: “why should we be denied ‘luxuries’ just because we don’t have the financial resources required to take part?” each action proposed by the campaigners was formulated as a direct retaliation against the neo-liberal rhetoric of scarcity rampant in Germany. The wildly popular slogan for the campaign “Alles für alle, und zwar Umsonst!” (everything for everyone, and for free too!) infiltrated activist networks and the Umsonst format proliferated in other German cities such as Hamburg, Dresden and Cologne. This intra-national circulation of the Umsonst agenda helped to open discussions on social protest and appropriative political action within radical left movements, to both greater and lesser critical acclaim. Unlike many of the current German alternative movements, the Umsonst campaigns followed a socially directed methodology intent on discovering imbrications between public resentment against state imposed regulations and micropolitical, often individual, covert acts of appropriation based on anti-capitalist sentiment; such as illegally entering pools and public buildings, fare evasion, sneaking into cinemas, petty theft etc. According to the initiators, these individual tactics were politicised through a visible, collective presence in an attempt to establish everyday practices of resistance.

This format of collaborative appropriation was not unique to these campaigns, for, as one of the activists pointed out in a 2005 interview, there had been an ongoing tradition of this type of autonomous resistance in Germany throughout the 1980s,

...and in Italy in the 1970s, where people collectively lowered their rent or bargained lower prices in the supermarket. So we just recovered and reinvented it, in the context of Berlin today.¹¹

¹⁰ Berlin Umsonst “For a pleasant life now!” in Berlin Umsonst pamphlet. nd. (my translation)

¹¹ Eshelman, Rob “Everything for Everyone, and For Free, Too! A Conversation

In these struggles “for the re-appropriation of social wealth produced by the working class but unpaid by capital”, such collective tactics were designed to resituate the strategic sites of power beyond the depersonalised representation of an impotent democracy and back into the multitude.¹² The Umsonst campaigns were influenced by these historical models of collective refusal, and while directly re-configuring some of their techniques, actively departed from the “party” organization format. This involved the creation of a more decentralised, flexible and diffuse political movement, and the core group of instigators made clear that the Umsonst network did not operate as a hermetic unit but came together primarily on the basis of certain campaigns which were open to everyone for participation, further discussion and re-appropriation. In this way, the actions were formed through attempts at integrative mechanisms (such as workshops, research groups, discussions) produced between activists and select members of the public that the accelerating processes of privatisation specifically made precarious (such as students, artists, minimum wage earners, internees etc). Workshops were also conducted in concurrence with networks of other autonomous groups targeting the areas that the individual campaigns attacked. This format arose in part as an experiment to move beyond prescriptive, abstracted or ideologically based organisation?, and intended to extend the circle of applicability to sections of the Berlin population often estranged from the established activist milieu. Much focus was placed on connecting people with the implications of structural reforms in their everyday lives and mobilising them to self-present their dissatisfaction. It was argued that unified direct action would

with Berlin Umsonst,” *Interactivist Info Exchange* website. Available from: <http://info.interactivist.net/article.pl?sid=05/08/18/1741232>. Accessed 8th June 2005. An influence for the Umsonst movements in Germany can also be traced from the praxis and theory of other recent European appropriation movements such as those of Yomango (with whom Hamburg Umsonst undertook a collaboration in 2005). In 2002 the Milan based Chainworkers movement and the Barcelona faction of Yomango ran two workshops at the European Social Forum in Florence, bringing together networks of European media and labour activists. As the Chainworker web site explains “They decide to give rise to *esa* (euro social activism), an entity networking official and wildcat strikes, forms of direct action and social, information guerrilla and image sabotage, all geared to create a veritably radical and unified euro political space.” From “Chainworkers Timeline,” *Chainworkers* website. Available at <http://www.ecn.org/chainworkers/dev/node/view/84>. Accessed 7th Jan 2007.

¹² Ramirez, Bruno “The Working-Class Struggle Against the Crisis: Self-Reduction Of Prices in Italy,” *Zerowork*, February, 1975. Also available from: http://www.geocities.com/cordobakaf/self_reduction.html. Accessed 7th Jan 2007.

make this dissent visible and it was hoped that such political visibility could also inspire pluralistic flights of self-determined organization to take place beyond the parameters of the recognised activist sphere.

While these calls for inclusivity flourished on a rhetorical level, it is important to outline some of the constraints encountered through their practical realisation. For instance, the actions were difficult to access by those with physical disabilities, and despite circulation of propaganda and workshops, more effort could have been made to create stronger and more sustainable alliances with those affected by policies of increasing privatisation. The conspicuous illegality of the actions and the deterrence this might have caused for participants was also an issue, specifically for those who could not afford to get caught for fear of retribution such as deportation or loss of work. These issues rendered it necessary to deal with the paradoxical rhetoric of immanent inclusivity. This was not resolvable at the time of inception, and so a great weight was placed on making the actions as open as possible despite such limitations. Certain issues tied up with illegality, namely apprehension and physical danger, were directly attended to through the collective model. It was proposed that this format could help to alleviate some of the guilt and anxiety often associated with such acts when undertaken on an individual level. As such, care was taken to provide a platform whereby potential participants could feel more comfortable with their involvement, and various means to this end were discussed and advocated. This was of paramount concern during the Pinker Punkt (Pink Point – Ride for Free) offensive of 2005 for example, in which the public were encouraged to travel on city transport without tickets in response to the re-structurization of the student discount cards and the increase in fares. The action was named as such to redefine the practice of “schwarzfahren” (riding black) by queering and detouring its racist and criminal associations. In Berlin participation numbers fluctuated, from around 3 to over 50 people travelling together for free.¹³ Each group travelling had experienced members with them who had practiced strategies to deal with any arising legal problems, and participants were repeatedly informed of their rights and were given instructions on what to do in order to minimize harm. Guests on the trains were also made immediately aware of the action, so as not to cause unease or panic if the activists were confronted by inspectors. After the actions

¹³ This high participation however was an exception. According to one member of Berlin Umsonst, ventures to move beyond this one demonstration did not result successfully, with around 5-10 attempts made to establish a fixed group action drawing only minimal participation. From private correspondence with Berlin Umsonst member, 1st.Feb.2007.

had taken place, activists and associates planned a fundraising party to cover the costs of the 3 individual fines incurred for trespassing, so as to continue with this spirit of solidarity and community.¹⁴

Play

These attempts at integration and an ethics of public consideration characterised the social orientation of many of the Umsonst interventions. In correlation with the more “pragmatic” techniques sustaining this interaction were the affective tactics used to further enable a sense of collectivity within the event itself. By developing political engagements that were pleasurable and, importantly, timely, political resistance became more desirable in the broader social sphere. Integral to this creation of desire for participation was the use of strategically playful elements to cultivate an air of fun and connectivity. What was useful about play to these interventions was primarily its indistinct and disruptive nature. Play has the amorphous characteristic of slipping into a paradoxical position between “real” and “not-real” in that it incorporates “real” words, gestures, hopes and intentions, that are framed as “unreal” through the playful context.

Gregory Bateson has noted a complex kind of play in which the premise “this is play” is problematised into the question “is this play?” For Bateson this leads to the peculiar and ambiguous paradox of a “metaphor that is meant” in which play signifies something more than simply a fantastic, unreal realm. He posited that this double movement is present in art, amongst other states, within which events can be both true and false simultaneously.¹⁵ I would like to further suggest that it is this uncertainty of play, which can prompt a radical deterritorialisation of categories distinguishing play from non-play, which was precisely the milieu in which the Umsonst actions took place. For while the actions were saturated with fantasy elements they also opened up a moment for the aleatory encounter in which it becomes possible to conceive the play world as an emerging potential reality. By moving in and out of playful contexts and terrains it becomes possible to conceive of the ideas and imaginings constructed through the playful state as contributing to the virtual becomings of different ways of living. Although the interventions

¹⁴ From pamphlets distributed during the campaign, April 2005. Refer also to Eshelman (2005).

¹⁵ Bateson, Gregory “A Theory of Play and Fantasy.” In *The Performance Studies Reader*. Ed. Henry Bial. Routledge, London and New York: 2004. pp. 124-125.

appeared simply playful on a connotative level, they also exceeded classification in that they denote something more, something which has significant implications for different constructions of everyday life. This style of play, in this case a play which has a very serious political intention within a more non-serious format, shows how play demands “risks and promises rewards that may have consequences for our everyday lives.”¹⁶

Such a politicised consideration of play was also previously argued for by the Situationist International, who theorised a notion of play as a collective creation of “ludic ambiances” which could penetrate and transform everyday life. This idea of play was removed from issues of terminus, capitalistic production and spectacularisation, and argued that the only goal left for play should be to “provoke conditions favourable to direct living”.¹⁷

Like the Umsonst campaigns, the Situationists wanted to develop strategies to reclaim everyday experience from capitalist alienation. For the Situationists, play could be a means by which to achieve this revolt, as play could unfetter desires and arouse dynamic new ways of relating to the world. Following these readings, it becomes imperative that play be considered as a mechanism for furthering the imaginings of alternative ways of interacting with the present. It is exactly this sensibility which was recently articulated by members of Hamburg Umsonst, whose employment of techniques incorporating play, such as irritation, performance and carnival made “it possible, for a brief moment, to break through the normality of consumption and make the unthinkable thinkable: everything could be for free.”¹⁸

Simultaneously, this line of flight into the possibilities of play opening up spaces for re-imaginings of the world also has more practical consequences for the act of communications guerrilla. Actions like those of Umsonst, where risk is high due to the overtly illegal nature of the gestures, can utilise the uncertainty of playful anti-identification as a double strategy to avoid detainment and harm. In one specific campaign, the MoMA Umsonst, which took place in April 2004, it was the ambiguity of the playful event and the non-specific identities of the activists that allowed for a civil protection and freedom often unattainable

¹⁶ Henry Bial “Play.” In *The Performance Studies Reader*. Ed. Henry Bial. Routledge, London and New York: 2004. p. 115.

¹⁷ “Contribution to a Situationist Definition of Play,” *Internationale Situationniste* 1 (June, 1958) Trans. Reuben Keehan. *SI Online* website. Available from: <http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/play.html>. Accessed 7th Jan 2007.

¹⁸ Hamburg Umsonst “Hier spielt das Leben,” *Arranca!: Aneignung Zwei* 29, Spring, 2004. p. 31. (my translation)

in direct action protests. The event was created in response to the admission prices into the exhibition and the queues, both of which caused general public inaccessibility. Public accessibility was limited further by the establishment of a VIP pass which privileged access based on economic standing. The campaign began two weeks before the action, with the dissemination of 2000 posters closely resembling the official MoMA advertisements, stating in German, Turkish and English that on the 17th of April, at 4pm, the MoMA exhibition would be free to the public. The campaign received citywide media coverage, and on the day between 400-500 people were in attendance. As the activists remained visually ambiguous, a media furor ensued as reporters were uncertain whom to target for interviews and commentary. This destabilisation of identity also displaced the force of state apparatuses, for it was unclear whom to charge for instigating the event. As one of the collaborators explained,

In Berlin at these large rallies, somehow the police are always managing to beat people up...fun makes it more difficult for them...You dance around and confuse the police, who can never be quite sure: is this a political action or a cultural action? It's good to break down these clear divisions.¹⁹

This contortion and shifting of categories, identities and protest terrains, afforded in this instance through the enigmatic nature of play, can be seen to function on three beneficial levels within the methodology of the Umsonst interventions. Not only does it allude to the capacity for different modes of interaction within present conditions by dancing between the parameters of what constitutes “real” from “imagined”, it also illuminates ways in which to at least partly begin to overcome the alienation associated with the classic divisions between the activist and the public or non-activist. Play, and fun, can compel a desire for participation which helps in the creation of a spontaneous, albeit perhaps transitory, community. Through confusing the demarcations of the individual activist from the larger public body, this double strategy of a playful anti-identification also confers a greater sense of protection for that community which is often difficult to attain in direct action and protest situations. This is not to infer that such actions should be revered as sovereign over other established activist paradigms and praxes. However, by rupturing expectations of delineation, the event that utilizes play is granted a certain freedom of movement in which to invigorate reciprocal interactions laterally traversing through diverse social groupings and affiliations.

¹⁹ Eshelman (2005).

Fun and Laughter

In such speculation on the possibilities of play, fun is vital because as Johan Huizinga suggested, it is the “fun-element that characterises the essence of play”.²⁰ For the Umsonst campaigns, it was fun that had almost begun to represent the apotheosis of their agenda. For Huizinga mirth, too, is central to play. The entangled nature of play, fun and laughter were illustrated in an intervention which took place in late July 2003. A call to action was made in response to the privatisation and associated fee increases of public swimming pools in Berlin. Working in symbiosis with numerous bike demonstrations and picket protests, a group of activists decided to collectively appropriate a public amenity and seized the exclusive Kreuzberg Badeschiff, a swimming pool built within the Spree river in Berlin. Dressed as pirates and approaching the pool in inflatable boats, the participants negotiated into the venue from the Spree, as from this direction the pool was densely populated and unattended by employees. The boarding of the pool from the boats was accompanied by jubilant songs and chants of “alles für alle, wir wollen alles für alle” (everything for everyone, we want everything for everyone). Activists proceeded to hand out flyers and explained to the guests why they were illegally entering the venue before immersing themselves in the crowd. According to one activist, the group managed to move around the venue for approximately half an hour before departing. The immediate public reaction elicited was, for the most part, auspicious, and video and verbal documentation drew attention to spectator amusement, generosity and in some cases, even solidarity.²¹

The laughter provoked by the Badeschiff action, the revelry implied by the laughter of the activists and the reciprocity of laughter from the spectators, acts as a contagion for generating relationships. Laughter may create a platform for networks between activists and the public as it can act to prompt a feeling of reciprocity, of something shared. This spontaneous “shared-ness” can in turn invoke a certain sense of participation from “within” – an apprehension of the others laughter through the laughter of the self – helping to form a momentary community predicated upon a relational exchange of excitement.

Laughter, an excessive, emancipatory component of the assemblage of relations which we recognise as the phenomenon of play, operates in such

²⁰ Huizinga, Johan “The nature and significance of play,” In *The Performance Studies Reader*. Ed. Henry Bial. Routledge, London and New York: 2004. p. 118

²¹ Personal interview conducted with Berlin Umsonst member. Berlin, Germany 2006. Video footage from personal Berlin Umsonst video documentation.