

## *Reclaim The Streets!* From Local to Global Party Protest

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*If I can't dance it's not my revolution.*<sup>1</sup>

Over the years, we have become used to *experiencing* works of art instead of merely watching them. As spectators, we are asked to become participants in what are considered to be artistic 'situations'. The institutional and academic worlds propose terms such as 'relational art' or 'community art'.<sup>2</sup> A certain neo-situationist theoretical current introduces quotes of Guy Debord, Jean Baudrillard, Raoul Vaneigem and Michel de Certeau into the texts that deal with these practices. In considering these developments, Claire Bishop has spoken of a 'social turn' in contemporary art. However, in the introduction to her book *Artificial Hells* (2012), she states that this might actually be a *return*, and that such a return belongs to a certain tradition:

From a Western European perspective, the social turn in contemporary art can be contextualized by two previous historical moments, both synonymous with political upheaval and movements for social change: the historic avant-garde in Europe circa 1917, and the so-called 'neo' avant-garde leading to 1968. The conspicuous resurgence of participatory art in the 1990s leads me to posit the fall of communism in 1989 as a third point of transformation. Triangulated, these three dates form a narrative of the triumph, heroic last stand and collapse of a collectivist vision of society. Each phase has been accompanied by a utopian rethinking of art's relationship to the social and of its political potential – manifested in a reconsideration of the ways in which art is produced, consumed and debated.<sup>3</sup>

As had happened with previous explosions of participation in the art field, the renewed interest in participation of the 1990s cannot be fully understood without looking at what was happening at the same time in the field of activism. During these years a variety of social movements – both existing and new – start to join forces in what, at the end of the decade, the press would call the anti-globalization movement.

All political movements develop their own aesthetic strategies, and this new social agent explicitly reflects on its own visual forms from the beginning of the nineties. I want to introduce the idea that, in a sense, alongside the 'social turn' of art, there is also a certain 'artistic' or 'creative turn' of activism. Symbolic gestures, performative actions, visual language and aesthetic creativity have become a common trait of extra-parliamentary politics.

Theorists such as Nina Felshin use the term 'activist art',<sup>4</sup> while others refer to 'artivism'.<sup>5</sup> While it is certainly true that various artists and collectives show an 'artistic' consciousness in their activist practice, in most cases activists do not have an 'artistic' upbringing or dedication. So, if they are not artists, why do they behave as such? One explanation could be utilitarian: in a society where mass media play such an important role in the creation of meaning, activism becomes spectacular in order to reclaim attention.

However, as important as this 'media trigger' might be, things are not so simple. Activists are also moved by their purely creative and utopian urges. In this sense, outsider art provides a useful framework for understanding the creativity of non-artists. I would like to introduce the concept of a tradition of protest aesthetics, where practices are not *meant* to be perceived as art, but nevertheless

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use some of art's tools. All insurrectionary movements are intrinsically creative. Protest aesthetics is an expression of collective creativity, in the context of a political multitude.

In these situations, the building of communitarian space becomes particularly important. The concept of the Temporary Autonomous Zone (or TAZ), theorized by the anarchist writer Hakim Bey, was important to many activist groups of the nineties.<sup>6</sup> The TAZ is an environment of anarchy that does not seek permanence, but rather maintains its emancipatory purity by continually changing its location. The TAZ, according to Bey,

...can provide the quality of enhancement associated with the uprising without necessarily leading to violence and martyrdom. The TAZ is like an uprising which does not engage directly with the State, a guerilla operation which liberates an area (of land, of time, of imagination) and then dissolves itself to re-form elsewhere/elsewhen, before the State can crush it.<sup>7</sup>

An example often given is that of the North American Burning Man festival, where a group of people live together for seven days in an ephemeral city which they build in the Nevada desert. Here, as in other autonomous zones, music is one of the elements that holds the zone together.

For his part, the professor of cultural studies George McKay talks of DiY culture, or the culture of doing it yourself.<sup>8</sup> According to McKay, this has three forms of expression: direct action, the creation of alternative media (fanzines, video activism, use of the internet) and the construction of activist spaces (squatted houses, activist camps or any other attempt at a TAZ).<sup>9</sup> These enclaves sink their roots into the magma of the counterculture which has exploded since the 1960s.

Both the TAZ and the areas generated by DiY culture speak of a tendency to generate space that finds its place in the long tradition of civil disobedience and direct action. We could talk of *spatial disobedience*, or of *disobedient places*, where a series of desires that have normally been repressed are set in motion.

These notions have particular relevance to the practice of the British group Reclaim the Streets which, starting in the second half of the nineties, organized illegal raves of a political character. Its playful forms drew on the idea of generating a TAZ, of creating practical, utopian, paradoxical moments situated between social dreams and conflict. The group was to play a fundamental role in the reformulation of the aesthetics of protest that took place in the 1990s.

#### **HISTORY OF THE GROUP**

The British group Reclaim the Streets (RTS) is founded in 1991. During its first year of existence, the collective carries out small-scale ecologist actions: painting cycle lanes on the roads during the night and picketing an automobile industry fair. It declares emphatically that is: 'FOR walking, cycling and cheap, or free, public transport, and AGAINST cars, roads and the system that pushes them.'<sup>10</sup> On a spring day in 1992 the group brings traffic in part of London to a halt with a small illegal party in the street. The police evict them and they are filmed by cameras which register the prophetic warning of one of those detained: 'Protest is gonna get bigger: the car culture is growing constantly! This is just the first stage.'<sup>11</sup> A few months after this event, the group disbands.

Three years later Reclaim the Streets starts meeting again to plan new activities.<sup>12</sup> The group functions by assembly with open, interesting and chaotic meetings held every Tuesday. At this point there is an additional trigger for protest in the shape of an oppressive new law that came into force on 3 November 1994: the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act.<sup>13</sup>

This piece of legislation imposes a drastic reduction in civil liberties. It penalizes collective trespass on areas of private property, simultaneously affecting the tactics of the anti-road movement, the appropriation of buildings by the squatter movement, a long-standing tradition of free festivals and the lives of New Age travellers.<sup>14</sup> During the 1970s, these groups of countercultural nomads traversed the English countryside with their caravans and wagons, trying to go from festival to festival, setting up camp in country estates as if every spot were common land.<sup>15</sup> Their existence is now complicated by the removal of the obligation on local authorities to provide camp sites for gypsies and travellers: again, this restriction also affects the anti-road movement.

Rave parties, illegal gatherings where people dance to electronic music, are specifically attacked, with the criminalization of gatherings where more than ten people listen to ‘sounds wholly or predominantly characterized by the emission of a succession of repetitive beats’.<sup>16</sup> By means of the same legislation, behaviour linked both to English countercultural leisure and to political dissidence outside the party system is turned into a criminal offence. In the face of these practices, the police increase their powers to stop and search, are enabled to take samples of body fluids and make inferences from the silence of an accused person. All sources indicate that this new legislation has the effect of bringing together and politicizing different types of outsider, whose lifestyles are coming under threat.

### **A: THE ART OF THE RADICAL PARTY**

For Naomi Klein, the common demand of the various groups is to do with ‘the right to uncolonized space – for homes, for trees, for gathering, for dancing’.<sup>17</sup> In the middle of the 1990s forms of hybrid protest start to appear, where the party is radicalized and protests are converted into celebrations. Reclaim the Streets is going to channel these energies by ‘(dis)organizing’ the periodic invasion of the urban space with sudden and illegal raves which stop traffic and paralyze business. Between 1995 and 1999 dozens of such parties take place and, over the coming years, they grow, extend and evolve.

On 14 May 1995, two automobiles collide in the city of London. Their drivers, overcome by histrionic rage, get out of their vehicles and start to destroy them. In reality, it is all theatre. The cars, which are second-hand, have been bought especially for the occasion by members of Reclaim the Streets. Stuck in the middle of the road, their debris blocks motorized traffic, leaving crowded Camden High Street free of cars. The street fills with people and sound systems start to work, using electricity generated by the constant pedalling of bicycles. The ‘repetitive rhythms’ of rave can be heard and some three hundred people throw themselves into dancing in the first party.



Reclaim the Streets occupation, 14 May 1995, Camden High Street, London, UK, photo © Nick Cobbing

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Thus arises the modus operandi of occupying urban zones with spontaneous and illegal celebrations that appropriate the public space for a number of hours. Food is given away, toys are brought along for children and banners are arranged which proclaim the changes that have been brought about in the space: 'BREATHE', 'CAR FREE', 'RECLAIM THE STREETS!' Camden Town, an area of London largely dedicated to the commercialization of 'alternative' culture, is turned into a place of free leisure. This piece of the urban landscape temporarily changes its function in a carnivalesque inversion of social order. The absence of authority, the system where everything is free: the street becomes a place to play, eat, drink and dance – without money and without permission. If the car has become a symbol and celebration is a medium, this 'form' is more utopian than the conventional rally because it refers to other possible forms of organization.

The interruption of motorized traffic represents an act of collective civil disobedience against the city's traffic norms. On top of the aim of anti-road movement to prevent the construction of new motorways, RTS proposes a temporary blockade of those that already exist, trying to sketch out the vision of a city without cars. In the second party, tripods that can be dismantled only if the person who is at the top of them comes down are placed in the middle of the road. Thanks to this technique, some three thousand people dance in Upper Street in the London borough of Islington, without traffic, on 23 July 1995. In only two months, the number of people who took part in the first street event has increased tenfold.

This influx of participants is related to the strong rave scene in the Britain of the 1980s and 1990s, which the Criminal Justice Act tries to destroy. Reclaim the Streets' specific organizational methodology derives from the practice of raves: participants are invited to gather at an underground station and, once there, a small group leads them to the final destination, which has been kept secret. The RTS parties explicitly politicize the rave, taking place in a provocative form and throwing down a challenge to the authorities. The rhythms of techno and acid house are heard in an environment full of signs, and the triple incitement 'RECLAIM THE STREETS – FREE THE CITY – KILL THE CAR' is made famous.

Fundamental to this idea of subversive leisure is the tradition of free festivals, large countercultural celebrations that emerged in England in the 1970s. The RTS parties also want to create situations that are fitting for a better world. British artist John Jordan, one of the co-founders of the group, speaks of how the street celebration seeks to prefigure an 'imagined world'.<sup>18</sup> This would be 'a vision in which the streets of the city could be a system that prioritized people above profit and ecology above the economy'.<sup>19</sup> Significantly, in Upper Street Louis Armstrong's song *What a Wonderful World* sounds through the loudspeakers.

The experience of being during the party is different from life away from it: ordinary norms disappear and people express themselves by dancing, playing music or making artistic interventions on any available surface. The economic system of the celebration is abundance and generosity. For Jordan, it is the 'perfect propaganda for the possible'.<sup>20</sup> It is about thinking of the emergence of a world where things are free and where there is a celebrating community, a world of shared goods and freed space. The magazine *Do or Die* launches the idea that 'inherent within its praxis – its mix of desire, spontaneity and organization – lie some of the foundations on which to build a participatory politics for a liberated, ecological society'.<sup>21</sup> There is a willingness to explore potentialities that lie latent in the very interior of our society, but whose development has been hampered.

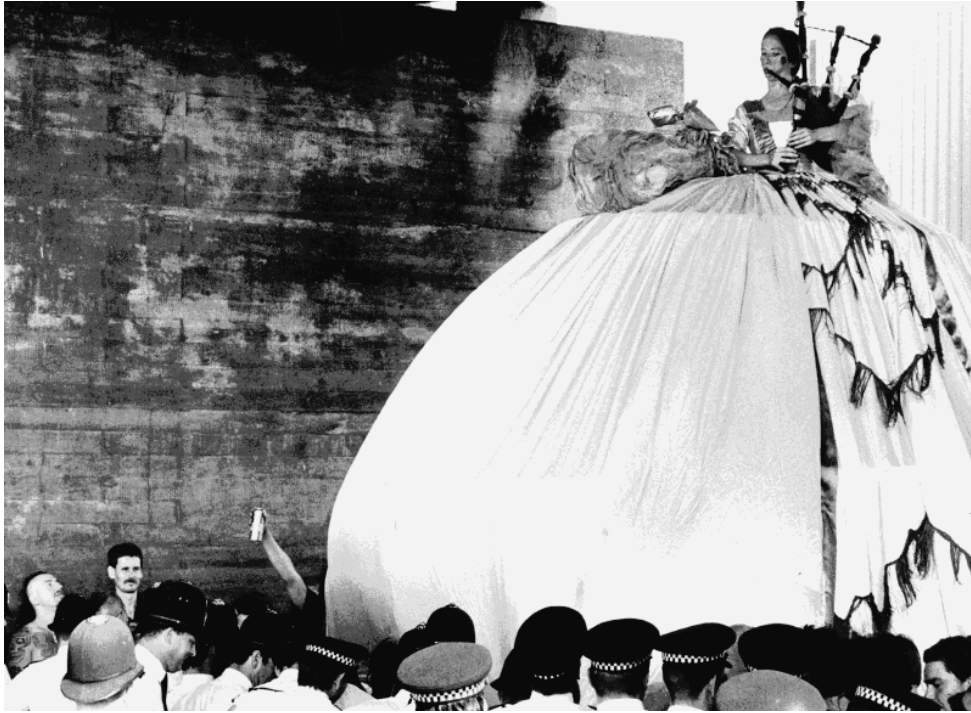
During the Upper Street party an iconic image of achieving the impossible appears. A lorry dumps forty tonnes of sand on the pavement, reversing the famous slogan of May 1968, 'underneath the paving stones, the beach'. On this occasion, the beach spreads out on top of the asphalt. This scene is recreated in one of the most famous celebrations, which takes place on 13 July 1996. In London, some eight thousand people dance for nine hours on the M41 motorway, after enjoying the rush of adrenaline that comes from collectively crossing a heavy police cordon.<sup>22</sup>

The images of this party show us a floral banner and a great cloth sun, reminiscent of hippy festivals. The New Age culture and the rave scene clearly show their connection to psychedelia and the hippy movement, even to the extent that 1988 and 1989 were declared 'the second summer of

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love'. Once again, the countercultural gathering produces a strong collective creativity, a kind of *art brut* of the party.

In this context, spectacle is combined with the empowering gestures of direct action. In the M41 action two stilt walkers wearing eighteenth-century costumes and wigs walk around. From above, the stilt walkers play bagpipes, dance and greet people.



Reclaim the Streets, M41 Party, 13 July 1996, stilt walker concealing members of the group drilling holes into the asphalt to plant trees, photo © Nick Cobbing

But beneath their enormous skirts are hidden various members of Reclaim the Streets, who drill into the asphalt and plant trees in the holes: the music and the general hubbub drown out the noise of the pneumatic drills. If the sand on the street had created a symbolic beach in the city, for Jordan this action of guerrilla gardening metaphorically turns a road into a wood. In this party on the M41 a pink and black pamphlet is distributed which refers to English common land and its enclosure, a recurring theme for Reclaim the Streets and for many other groups:

We are about taking back public space from the enclosed private arena. At its simplest this is an attack on cars as a principal agent of enclosure. It's about reclaiming the streets as public inclusive space from the private exclusive use of the car. But we believe in this as a broader principle, taking back those things which have been enclosed within capitalist circulation and returning them to collective use as a commons... Under the tarmac, the forest.<sup>23</sup>

It is about dancing on common land, to which the party tries to go back. Like many other countercultural groups, RTS dreams of returning to a natural environment. Planting trees in the road implies a metaphorical return of the natural, which comes back to invade the asphalt that has displaced it.

One effect of this road rave is that a group of dockers contacts Reclaim The Streets. The Mersey Docks and Harbour Company (MDHC), which owns and administers the buildings and facilities of the port of Liverpool on the river Mersey, has sacked them for supporting a picket by striking workers employed by the firm Torside. In spite of the ideological differences which separate them from the London-based group, the port workers are fascinated by the power of an image of poetic subversion.<sup>24</sup>

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On Saturday 28 September 1996 a joint event called Reclaim the Future takes place in Liverpool. The activists block the port and climb onto the roof of the offices of Mersey Docks and Harbour in a symbolic occupation that refers to an early action of the direct-action ecology group Earth First! in the same place.<sup>25</sup> In 1996, from the top of the headquarters of the company, a flag flies triumphantly: it bears the recently created insignia of Reclaim the Streets, which is making its first appearance.

The flag, an element of self-determination par excellence, emphasizes the idea of the Temporary Autonomous Zone. The diagonal composition can be seen as an adaptation of the classic red-and-black anarchist flag. The colours black, green and red respectively allude to the libertarian, ecologist and socialist roots of the movement. Like an ascending ray, the zigzag design evokes sudden and powerful bursts of electricity, explosions of social rebellion and rave.

On 12 April 1997, just before the general election, Reclaim the Streets makes an explicit call for abstention, inciting direct action. The name of the event, announced in posters and pamphlets, is 'Never Mind the Ballots, Reclaim the Streets'.<sup>26</sup> Thousands of people end up dancing in Trafalgar Square, filling one of the symbolic centres of London with banners and techno rhythms. The triumphant images seem to come from a revolutionary world, where the masses proclaim themselves owners of majestic squares and revel in their new role. Graffiti is painted onto one of the walls of the National Gallery, reclaiming culture as a common good: 'Art for everybody or for nobody'.

As with almost all activist events there are less joyful moments. The fierce conflicts with the forces of law and order situate celebration as insurrection, and vice versa. The party is turned into a disturbance with the collaboration of about a thousand police officers. That day marks a critical point in the criminalization of RTS events, as within a few hours a group of DJs is accused of attempted murder for driving their van near the police. This violent character is not really in contradiction with the original objectives of the group, which is not opposed to certain kinds of violence. The British collective seeks to produce a popular uprising through the party – or, rather, it seeks to create revolutionary parties. Its website carries a reflection on the relationship between each form of collective explosion:

The great moments of revolutionary history have all been enormous popular festivals – the storming of the Bastille, the uprisings of 1848, the Paris Commune, the revolutions of 1917–1919, Paris '68. Conversely, popular festivities have always been looked on by the authorities as a problem, whether they have banned, tolerated or semi-institutionalized them. Why does power fear free celebration? Could it be something to do with the utopian urges which seize a crowd becoming aware of its own power?<sup>27</sup>

Reclaim the Streets does not define itself as a non-violent group. The destruction of private property and defensive violence have a symbolic function for the collective. Indeed, the acronym RTS sounds similar to the word riots. Jordan believes in the power of an ambiguous image, sitting in between the organization of a party and the organization of disturbances.<sup>28</sup> Neither is going to stop growing.

#### ***B: THE GLOBAL DANCE***

From the very beginning, Reclaim The Streets seeks the expansion of the street raves, and proposes ten steps that anyone can adapt to their own party<sup>29</sup>. During the autumn and winter of 1995–1996 parties are self-organized independently of the originating collective. The name of the group comes to designate a practice that is accessible to everyone.

In 1997 parties to reclaim the streets start to take place in other countries. At the end of the decade this propagation gives way to ubiquity. Reclaim the Streets merges in 1998 with the recently formed Peoples' Global Action, an international co-ordinator of social movements. The horizontally functioning network starts to organize global anti-capitalist days of action.



Reclaim the Streets, 'Never Mind the Ballots' party, 1997, photo © Nick Cobbing

On 16 May 1998 the first global street party takes place under the slogan 'Our Resistance is as Transnational as Capital'. Local dissident groups organize collective dances in sixty countries across the globe. Through the party, anti-capitalist movements for the first time start to co-ordinate internationally in their demand for a change of system. The date chosen for the celebration/insurrection coincides with the first meeting of the leaders of the world's richest countries. Configured as G7+1, they meet in Birmingham shortly before the second conference of ministers of the recently created World Trade Organization, which takes place in Geneva.

The second global street party follows the same plan and takes place while the G8 gathers in Cologne on 18 June 1999. The strategy of making activist events coincide with meetings of the world's political elite will become a badge of identity for the alter-globalization movement. The Reclaim the Streets group organizes, collectively and through assemblies, the parties in London. They decide to '(dis)organize' the celebration in the City of London, the most powerful financial centre in Europe, and one of the places with most video surveillance in the world. Preparations take months: finally the Carnival Against Capital is launched as a call for an 'international day of action, protest, and carnival aimed at the heart of the global economy'.<sup>30</sup>

For the event, masks in green, black, red and gold are printed. Three of the colours are related to the ideological components of Reclaim the Streets as reflected in its flag. Gold refers to the environment in which the party is celebrated – on this occasion dancing in the headquarters of money. On the reverse side of the mask, one can read a text that is partly plagiarized from Subcomandante Marcos, who proclaimed self-determination in 1994 in the Mexican jungle of Chiapas, with his mythical black balaclava. This speaks about the hiding of identity:

Those in authority fear the mask for their power partly resides in identifying, stamping and cataloguing: in knowing who you are. But a Carnival needs masks, thousands of masks... Masking up releases our commonality, enables us to act together... During the last years the power of money has presented a new mask over its criminal face. Disregarding borders, with no importance given to race or colors, the power of money humiliates dignities, insults honesties and assassinates hopes.

On the signal follow your colour / Let the Carnival begin...<sup>31</sup>



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The meeting place for 18 June is the Liverpool Street underground station, where masks are distributed. Among the thousands of people who turn up are four giant-headed carnival figures, in now familiar colours: one is green, another is red, a third is black and the fourth is gold. Each one represents a social movement and corresponds with a colour of the masks of rebellion.

When music from the film *Mission: Impossible* starts to play, the crowd must divide itself according to mask colour and follow the corresponding giant-headed figure. When the moment arrives, the music cannot be heard above the general noise, so they use flags and launch a firework. The four groups form themselves in a somewhat chaotic fashion, mixing up their colours: each one follows a different route towards the same place. One of them gets lost and improvises its party in a different place. In spite of the changes to the original plans, this tactic seems to achieve its original objective of frustrating the system of police vigilance which is receiving contradictory information: 'They are going North', 'they're heading East', 'they're going South'... The security forces do not impede the demonstrators from reaching the secret final destination, the building of the London International Financial Futures and Options Exchange (LIFFE). The building is surrounded by a multitude that enjoys the impunity granted by carnival: many cover their faces against viewing by hundreds of surveillance cameras, which record their own video clips of this day of music. In fact, a large number of these devices are covered over at the start of the day, when a whole series of actions designed to shut down the City on a working Friday kicks off.

Along the way a number of branches of McDonald's are attacked and people dance inside various shops. This is accompanied by the now classic interruption of motorized traffic: that day some seven hundred cyclists from the Critical Mass group impede the progress of cars with their synchronized pedalling. In the City, activists get into the offices of various banks and other institutions, including Natwest Bank and auditors KPMG. Although once inside the LIFFE building the activists do not manage to get into the commercial areas, the building is completely evacuated for the day. While the demonstrators enter the seats of financial power, the street is left marked by various interventions that add new iconographic elements to the City, altering an aesthetic normally governed by the rhythms of stock market trading. Some of the actions have an iconoclastic character. Others are related to imagery of utopia and liberation. Already in the entrance to the Liverpool Street underground station, the Food not Bombs network gives out free food, an action that is consistent with the moments of abundance and freeness that represent the best tradition of RTS.<sup>32</sup>

Towards four pm a fire hydrant is opened, the idea being to symbolically unearth a river, the Walbrook, which runs silently beneath the City. While the revellers refresh themselves in the shower of water, there is a surge of images that display the explosion of liberty and the eroticism of wet bodies. A moment of a couple kissing in this jet of water becomes famous. Bringing to light something that flows beneath the earth evokes the emergence of the occult, the liberation of the repressed.

It is easy to assume that John Jordan is one of the people behind this constructed situation. In a way, it is a late echo of one of Jordan's artistic projects with the group Platform before he 'deserted the art world', a moment at which he explores the idea of making an art of the secret.<sup>33</sup> In 1992, the artistic group was proposing to unearth a subterranean river that flows invisibly and inaudibly beneath the English capital as part of the project Still Waters: Reimagining London's Rivers. When this idea is proposed at the RTS assembly, someone remarks that it seems like an environmental-art project and John Jordan feels he has been exposed. But nobody gives it much attention: to free the river is seen as an act of revolt, not as a work of art, and for that reason the idea can go ahead.

Beneath the aquatic torrent, the demo-dancers continue dancing. There is live samba and a dub-ska-punk concert. Furthermore the four giant figures have music systems inside them that belt out the electronic rhythms of illegal rave as they move among the crowd. There are moments of joyful and festive revolution, of a new world in microcosm.





'Carnival against Capitalism' by Reclaim the Streets and others, 18 June 1999, City of London; a fire hydrant is opened, photo © Nick Cobbing

The physical occupation is, here too, accompanied by ideological occupation. The environment of skyscrapers dedicated to financial activity is subverted not only by the dancing masses with their masks and disguises. There are also banners hung across the street between buildings, displaying messages such as: 'Road Rave not Road Rage', 'Global Ecology not Global Economy', 'Don't Speculate, Live!', 'The Earth is not the Casino of the Rich' and 'Life before Profit'. Ne Pas Plier, a French collective of designers which makes banners, posters and stickers that are later distributed in demonstrations, provides its exquisitely designed posters with the slogan 'RESISTENCE EXISTENCE'.

Numerous individuals paint graffiti with various slogans. Unlike the banners and posters, this last form of intervention seeks to appropriate the space and leave long-lasting marks on the walls. Creation and destruction go hand in hand in an act where the intention of generating an image or message and of attacking the walls of buildings that represent hated institutions co-exist.

Many interventions are forms of iconoclasm. One of the most powerful is the bricking up of the LIFFE building. Using cement and blocks of concrete that have been brought along specifically for the purpose, a wall one-and-a-half metres high blocks the main door. The entrance is left blocked up, producing an image that prefigures a world in which financial entities are obstructed. Symbolically, financial speculation is walled up.

A large number of acts of vandalism take place spontaneously, with windows, cars and street furniture broken. It is important to stress that these are acts of a fundamentally iconoclastic character, often directed against the symbols of state and financial power.

As often happens with iconoclasm, the power of these actions is largely symbolic: the broken windows of a McDonald's restaurant scarcely cause real damage to the multinational and its huge profits. This kind of practice produces images of capitalism under threat, making the political

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conflict visible in a crude way. On the other hand, it also serves to justify repression by the police. On the afternoon of 19 June the riot police arrive, including many mounted policemen.

A big battle with the police takes place in the City as the climax of the Carnival. Perhaps the battle with the forces of order is the ultimate iconoclastic act, given that the attack is against people who are living symbols of authority. That day police and demonstrators use violence and, according to an RTS press release, forty-six people end up in hospital.<sup>34</sup> Layered onto the iconic palimpsest are scenes that simultaneously evoke war, mutiny and revolution. The next day those photographs will appear in all the newspapers.

Thus, during the Carnival Against Capital, symbolic activity is situated between iconoclasm (crossing out, covering over) and creative addition (unearthing a river, hanging a banner). Between the destructive (breaking things, carrying out violent acts) and the creative (playing music, dancing, painting). It is estimated that some ten thousand people take part in RTS's biggest and most complex party, which takes place while people are simultaneously dancing in anti-capitalist celebrations in another sixty countries.<sup>35</sup> In London all the planned actions take place and with such success that one member of Reclaim the Streets laments that they did not go further:

We'd failed in our under-ambition... Unprepared, we never imagined we could get so close to occupying a trading floor in one of the City's major exchanges... But we'd stopped short of planning for full-scale occupation.<sup>36</sup>

Nonetheless, when the Carnival takes place, the police are already spying on Reclaim the Streets. Only ten people know the final destination of the LIFFE building and one of them is an undercover police officer. Jim Sutton – whose real name, it later transpires, is Jim Boyling – works for a Scotland Yard unit that specializes in the surveillance of activists.<sup>37</sup> His personal history, in which he gets married to a member of Reclaim the Streets, is particularly fascinating. His case reveals that the security forces knew in advance what was going to take place, how it would take place, and where it would take place. So why did they let it happen?

John Jordan thinks that the secret services wanted to observe the new actor on the political scene, and mentions a recording from a helicopter that was watching events from above. In this recording voices can be heard: one asks if they should intervene and the other says 'No' but to keep 'watching'.<sup>38</sup> The great performance of Reclaim the Streets is a spectacle that is followed with great interest by a flying audience. The gaze from above seeks signs of what is going to happen. By now, the great mobilization in Seattle against the World Trade Organization (WTO) has already been called, an action that will make the protests the centre of media attention. The Carnival Against Capital is one of the impulses for organizing this great party of resistance, which succeeds in paralysing the most important commercial meeting in the world.

Having started as a group, reclaiming the streets through subversive partying institutes itself as a form of taking over public space, contributing to a conscious renewal of that which we can call the aesthetics of protest. Activist David Solnit highlights the symbolic character of street protests: 'Everything is theatrical. Traditional protest – the march, the rally, the chants – is just bad theatre.'<sup>39</sup>

Politically, Reclaim the Streets is an important element in the formation of the anti-globalization movement, organizing co-ordinated global events such as the Global Street Party of 1998. Aesthetically, Reclaim the Streets will lend a certain 'style' to the anti-globalization movement. In 1999, the Seattle counter-summit was organized in the mode of the 'carnival protest'. Given the media coverage, authors such as Naomi Klein speak of the big coming-out party for the 'movement of movements' that had been creating itself since the Zapatistas organized the first 'Encuentro' ('Meeting') in 1994 in the Mexican Lacandon jungle. For some people, it is this new 'language' of protest that was the key to the anti-globalization movement's impact.<sup>40</sup>

The Reclaim the Streets London group disappears one year later, after a mass Guerrilla Gardening action on 1 May. What makes its events fascinating is that they occupy the ambiguous meeting space between aesthetic creativity, social imagination and political action. Their discourse

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and praxis borrow something from each of these three fields while simultaneously belonging to all of them.

- 1 Phrase attributed to Emma Goldman; it is in fact a summary of a passage from her book *Living My Life* (1931), Alfred Knopf, New York, 1934, p 56, republished by Da Capo Press, Massachusetts, in 1970.
- 2 See Nicholas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, Presses du Réel, Dijon, 2002
- 3 Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, Verso, London, New York, 2012, p 3
- 4 Nina Felshin, *But is it Art? The Spirit of Art as Activism*, Bay, Seattle, 1995. See also Suzanne Lacy, *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art*, Bay, Seattle, 1995, and Mary Jane Jacob, Michael Brenson and Eva M Olson, *Culture in Action: New Public Art in Chicago*, Bay, Seattle, 1995
- 5 See Stéphanie Lemoine and Samira Ouardi, *Artivisme*, Editions Alternatives, Paris, 2010.
- 6 Hakim Bey, *TAZ: The Temporary Autonomous Zone, Ontological Anarchy, Poetic Terrorism*, Autonomedia, New York, 1991
- 7 Ibid, p 99
- 8 George McKay, ed, *DiY Culture: Party and Protest in Nineties Britain*, Verso, London, 1998
- 9 Utopian studies theorist Lyman Tower Sargent inserts the TAZ, together with the spaces of DiY culture, into the field of utopian practice. See Lyman Tower Sargent, *Utopianism: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2010, p 48.
- 10 John Jordan, 'Reclaim the Streets', in Immanuel Ness, ed, *The International Encyclopedia of Revolution and Protest: 1500 to the present*, Wiley-Blackwell, Oxford, 2009, p 2807
- 11 Agustín de Quijano, *Reclaim the Streets: Anarchy on Our Streets?*, documentary, eighty-five minutes, Channel 4, 1999; broadcast 19 January 2000 on British television, available at [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bUL0C\\_T-Sqk](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bUL0C_T-Sqk), accessed 12 March 2012
- 12 In this new phase, the experience of the anti-road movement proves fundamental, above all the experience of street parties in the last phase of the campaign against the M11 motorway, in the squatters' street of Claremont Road. See Julia Ramírez Blanco, 'Utopías artísticas del mundo contemporáneo: el caso de Claremont Road' ('Artistic Utopias in the Contemporary World: The Case of Claremont Road'), presentation for Semana de la Ciencia (Science Week), Residencia de Estudiantes, Madrid, 7 November 2012.
- 13 This legislation can be consulted on the UK government's website; see *Criminal Justice and Public Order Act*, <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1994/33/contents>, accessed 25 November 2011.
- 14 George McKay, *Senseless Acts of Beauty: Cultures of Resistance Since the Sixties*, Verso, London and New York, 1996, pp 11–44
- 15 Ibid, pp 45–71
- 16 *Criminal Justice and Public Order Act*, op cit, section 63, subsection 1b
- 17 Naomi Klein, *No Logo*, Picador, New York, 2000, p 312
- 18 John Jordan, in the documentary by Marcelo Expósito, *Radical Imagination (Carnivals of Resistance)*, sixty minutes, 2004. See <http://marceloexposito.net/entresuenos/radicalimagination>, accessed 9 September 2013.
- 19 Jordan, 'Reclaim the Streets', op cit, p 2808
- 20 Jordan, cited by McKay in *Senseless Acts of Beauty*, op cit, p 146
- 21 Anonymous author, 'Reclaim the Streets!', *Do or Die* 6, 1997, pp 1–10. Available at <http://www.eco-action.org/dod/no6/rts.htm>, accessed 26 December 2011
- 22 Charlie Fourier, 'Reclaim the Streets: an arrow of hope', in Notes from Nowhere, eds, *We Are Everywhere: The Irresistible Rise of Global Anti-Capitalism*, Verso, London and New York, 2003, p 59. 'Charlie Fourier', like all the names of authors in this book, is a playful pseudonym.
- 23 John Jordan, personal interview with the author, 16 January 2012
- 24 John Jordan, personal interview with the author, 2 October 2011

### THIRD TEXT Critical Perspectives on Contemporary Art and Culture July 2013

25 Earth First! emerged in the USA in 1980. The British offshoot was formed in 1990, placing a greater emphasis on the social, from positions close to anarchism. On 4 and 5 December 1991, Earth First! occupied the port of Liverpool for two days to protest against the importation of tropical wood.

26 The name coincides with the album *Never Mind the Ballots* by the British anarchist group Chumbawamba (Agit Prop Records, 1987). The reference could be an explicit one in the context of British countercultural anarchism, particularly because Chumbawamba publicly approved the struggle of the dockers.

27 This appeared on the group's web site at <http://rts.gn.apc.org/prop14.htm>, no longer available, accessed 3 December 2012.

28 John Jordan in conversation with Marcelo Expósito, Dean Inkster, Alejandra Riera and Montse Romani, 'Activismo social y prácticas transdisciplinares' (Social activism and transdisciplinary practices), 8 August 1999, p 6. Spanish version available at:

[marceloexposito.net/pdf/johnjordan\\_radiotemporale\\_es.pdf](http://marceloexposito.net/pdf/johnjordan_radiotemporale_es.pdf), accessed 1 March 2012

29 See 'Direct Action: Street Reclaiming', in *Notes from Nowhere*, eds, op cit, p 61.

30 For an account of the process of preparation see 'Friday June 18th 1999: Confronting Capital and Smashing the State!', *Do or Die* 8, 1999, pp 1–12, available at <http://www.eco-action.org/dod/no8/index.html>, accessed 1 March 2012. The articles in this magazine are unsigned.

31 Cited in Brian Holmes, 'Do-it-Yourself Geopolitics: Cartographies of Art in the World', in Blake Stimson and Gregory Sholette, eds, *Collectivism after Modernism: The Art of Social Imagination After 1945*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2007, pp 275–276.

32 Food Not Bombs emerged in the USA in 1980, founded by antinuclear activists. Today it is a network of independent groups that shares vegan food for free, largely by reusing food that has been thrown away.

33 John Jordan, personal interview with the author, 10 February 2011

34 See the event web page at <http://bak.spc.org/j18/site/ukpr.html>, accessed 12 March 2012.

35 The internet proves key in co-ordinating and disseminating the actions. The web enables the showing in real time of the various protests against multinationals and banks that take place in different countries.

36 Wat Tyler, 'Dancing at the Edge of Chaos: A Spanner in the Works of Global Capitalism', in *Notes From Nowhere*, eds, op cit, p 194

37 See Paul Lewis and Rob Evans, 'Undercover Police and the Law: The Men Who Weren't There', *The Guardian*, 19 October 2011, available at

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2011/oct/19/undercover-police-law-men-there>, accessed 5 October 2012.

38 John Jordan, personal interview with the author, 7 May 2012

39 Solnit, quoted in Benjamin Shepard and Ronald Hayduk, *From ACT UP to WTO: Urban Protest and Community Building in the Era of Globalization*, Verso, London and New York, 2002, p 247, in turn cited in T V Reed, *The Art of Protest: Culture and Activism from the Civil Rights Movement to the Streets of Seattle*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis and London, 2005, p 255

40 See, for example, Pablo Iglesias Turrión, *Desobedientes: de Chiapas a Madrid (The Disobedient: From Chiapas to Madrid)*, Editorial Popular, Madrid, 2011, p 241.

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