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RECLAIM THE STREETS! FROM LOCAL TO GLOBAL PARTY PROTEST*

*On May 14, 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 the crowded *Camden High Street* free of cars. The street fills up 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 [Fig. 1].*

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

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that is dedicated largely 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.

The *interruption of motorized traffic* represents an act of collective civil disobedience against the city’s traffic norms. 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 London’s *Upper Street* in the borough of *Islington*, without traffic, on *July 23, 1995*. In only two months, the number of people who took part in the first street event has increased tenfold.

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. 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.

During the *Upper Street* party an iconic image of achieving the impossible appears. A lorry dumps 40 tons of sand on the pavement, reversing the famous phrase from May 1968, “underneath the paving stones, the beach.” On this occasion, the beach is situated on top of the asphalt. This scene is recreated in one of the most famous celebrations, which takes place on *July 13, 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 strong police cordon.

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 [Fig. 2]. 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, this action of guerrilla gardening metaphorically turns a road into a wood.

Appearing for the first time in 1996, the RTS flag, an element of *self-determination par excellence*, emphasizes the idea of the Temporary Autonomous Zone [Fig. 3]. 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.

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*. Some believe in the power of an ambiguous image, sitting in between the organization of fiestas and the organization of disturbances. Neither is going to stop growing [Fig. 4].

The Global Dance

From the very beginning, *Reclaim The Streets* seeks the expansion of the street *raves*, and proposes ten steps, which anyone can adapt to their own party. 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 coordinator of social movements. The horizontally functioning network starts to *organize global anti-capitalist days of action*.



Fig. 1

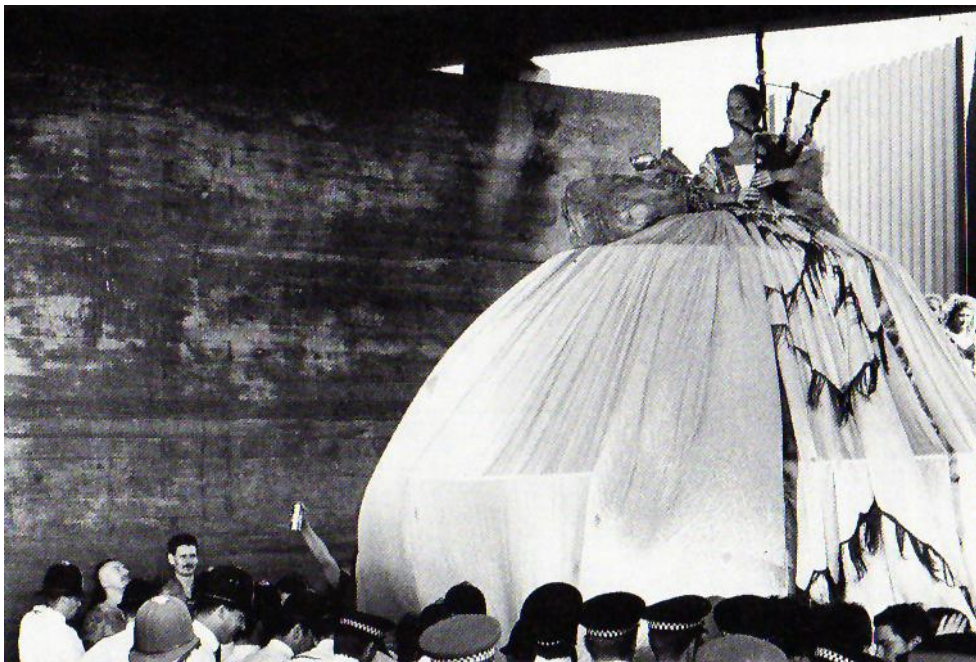


Fig. 2



Fig. 3



Fig. 4

On *May 16, 1998* the *first global street party* takes place under the slogan “Our Resistance is as Transnational as Capital”. 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 *June 18, 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* original group decides 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”.

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. The meeting place for June 18 is the *Liverpool Street* metro 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 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. This tactic seems to achieve its original objective of frustrating the system of police vigilance which is receiving contradictory



Fig. 5

information. 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)*. A large number of these surveillance cameras 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.

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 during the whole 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.

Towards 4pm 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 [Fig. 5]. 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 see activist artist John Jordan as someone who is behind this constructed situation. In a way, it is a late echo of one of Jordan's projects with the group *Platform* before he "deserted the art world", in a moment in which he explores the idea of making an art of the secret⁵. 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 in 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.

The physical *occupation* is 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".

Many interventions are related to *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 of one-and-a-half meters in height 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 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, 46 people end up in hospital⁶. Added to 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.

Nonetheless, when the *Carnival* takes place, the police are already spying on London's *Reclaim the Streets* group. 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 is Jim Boyling – works for a Scotland Yard unit that specializes in the surveillance of activists. His personal history, in which he ends up getting 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”. 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 paralyzing the most important commercial meeting in the world.

From being a group, reclaiming the streets through subversive partying institutes itself as a form of taking over the public space, contributing to a conscious renewal of that which we can call the aesthetics of *protest*. Reclaim the Streets contributes to the reformulation of activist narratives that is brought about by the anti-globalization movement, and that for many people is the key to its success. Imagining new modes of protest and proposing them at the same time is perhaps a precondition for making the enormous effort of dreaming that this other world is possible.