

404 Willis: Detroit's Autonomous Zone

Anarchy In Action

Sunfrog (Andy "Sunfrog" Smith)

In May 1992, 404 Willis will celebrate its first anniversary as a collectively-run community center and autonomous zone in Detroit's Cass Corridor. The evolution of 404 has been the combined effort of many individuals united in their desire to create a gathering place that is an alternative to the bars and spectacular culture as a whole—an all ages, Do-It-Yourself, volunteer-run, inclusive yet anti-authoritarian atmosphere for people to come to and create, share ideas or simply hang out.



—photo/Amy Morgan

We are attempting to forge a geographical reality, however small or fragile, that does not exist on the map of mass consumption and malaise. 404 is a place where we translate critique into action and explore prospects for real freedom through non-alienated daily interaction; a place where we go to live, if only for brief moments, as if the circle was not broken; a place where we can experience the fulfillment of mutual desire and imagine a life where our dreams are not colonized.

We are constantly reminded that we exist in a society that does not share our vision. Our attempts at creating free culture are repeatedly contaminated by the decaying social codes of capital; our efforts often seem thwarted before they begin. But we have to start somewhere, and for many activists in our community, 404 has become that somewhere to feel the new world blossoming in the shell of the old.

Every Monday, we host a poetry series of open floor and featured readers fueled by the conscious attempt to destroy the barrier between performer and audience.

The 404 Women's Collective, meeting every Wednesday, have been active in the struggle for health and reproductive freedom by educating themselves about alternatives to the phallographic medical establishment. The Women's Collective also hosts a festival of women's art and performance called Pandora's Box, the third weekend of every month.

Some Thursday nights have been devoted to teaching ourselves the history of anarchy. Every Sunday 404 engages in direct response to the war on the poor, so bitterly blatant here in the Cass Corridor, by distributing free coffee, clothes and vegetarian food. The community feast is open from noon to 3 pm and is immediately followed by the weekly collective meeting where decisions are made in a group setting and issues of conflict are debated and discussed.

One collective member, Rob, writes about Sundays: “The most exciting aspect of 404, for me at least, is the community outreach we’re doing with the vegan soup kitchen/warming center/free clothing station. Though I feel strongly affiliated with some of the punk ‘community’ and punk related projects, I find myself most involved with the soup kitchen.

“One of the things that has frustrated me for years is the anarchist community’s inability to reach out to the broader community. A lot of times I think we tend to immerse ourselves in the microcosm of punk, radical activism or whatever genre, forgetting that there is an entire world of people who are struggling every day, just for the bare necessities. With our outreach I feel we are breaking out of our microcosm and having an impact on other people’s lives.

“I think the atmosphere we’ve created at the Sunday soup kitchen is very important as well. Hungry people come in, eat (serve themselves if they choose), listen to all kinds of different music, and socialize with a bunch of crazy lookin’ pierced hippies and punks! There are no hierarchical or artificial barriers, no us and them.”

404 does participate in the “punk related projects” Rob spoke of by being a place to distribute alternative ‘zines and records as well as being a venue for a wide variety of shows by local and out-of-town bands. The music one can see on any given night is more diverse than any single category can capture. We run the spectrum from acoustic folk to noisy thrash and have featured cello solos and jazz piano as well. You won’t see any corporate clones and we don’t sell beer.

We are creating a context for anti-authoritarian activity at 404 and surprise even ourselves as it spontaneously emerges. An ex-GI, Gulf War vet and homeless man recently attended our Sunday gathering for a cup of our notoriously strong coffee and was struck by what he called our “positive attitude.” He returned the next night for poetry and took advantage of our open floor to make a statement against the U.S. government and military in which he had served. He proceeded to burn his honorable discharge papers to a chorus of approving cheers.

At 404 we reject the ideology which places its emphasis on waiting until “after the revolution” to create non-authoritarian community and relationships. We want free everything for everybody, and we want it now. We are moving from the site of our own oppression to create the situation, the untethered playscape, the precursor to any uprising and social upheaval.

We recognize the problems and pitfalls we face under the reign of capital’s regimented terror, but we refuse to lie dormant, waiting for the “revolutionary moment.” We are creating our autonomous zone not because we are certain of “winning” the revolution, but because we see the life of mutual aid and liberated desire as the only one worth living. We already know this society is a decrepit deathly shell, worthy only of our contempt.

fifth Estate

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