

# 404 Is Dead!

Long Live 404!

Sunfrog (Andy “Sunfrog” Smith)

1994

After 3 years of action, an anarchist center closes its doors, but a more ambitious project opens down the street. “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. Because the State is concerned primarily with Simulation rather than substance, the TAZ can “occupy” these areas clandestinely and carry on its festal purposes for quite a while in relative peace.”

—Hakim Bey,

## The Temporary Autonomous Zone

Three years ago a small anti-authoritarian collective, energized by fighting in the streets against Operation Desert Scam, took possession of a storefront at 404 West Willis in Detroit’s Cass Corridor. On April 1, the autonomous zone and community center closed its doors.

While many of the poets, punks, pissed off wimmin and anarchists who made up the 404 are intensely involved in the “elsewhere/elsewhen” project of the cooperatively owned Trumbull Theater, this moment of dissolution provides an appropriate time to reflect upon our success and failure at fostering genuine non-hierarchical community. Since 1991, a bootstrap fusion of itinerant fund-raising—from bake sales, donations from concerts and readings, and out-of-pocket sponsorship by dedicated collective members and our closest friends—offset the monthly \$400 overhead necessary to keep the 404 alive. Although we accomplished much over three years, inconsistent participation led to a rapid turnover of collective membership and an enormous burnout factor.

The Trumbull Theater, located in the Woodbridge neighborhood adjacent to the Cass Corridor, is more viable for long-term survival, since the project’s primary function is as a tenant-owned living space for collective members. While non-resident radicals are welcome to use the theater for a variety of projects, the final decisions and responsibilities remain in the hands of those who share in the daily collective life.

The 404’s goal to provide regular hours of operation for informal gathering, hanging out and the operation of a free store, never materialized. While at various times we kept semi-regular hours, it was the work of a handful of people.

The other essentials of operation which required donated hours were the less glorified grit of writing press releases, creating and distributing flyers, making soup and coffee, sweeping the floors, collecting empty beer bottles after a show to pass on to panhandlers, etc.

The maintenance of an internal organization often became an onerous task. An aversion to meetings, or the belabored intricacies of the consensus project when meetings were held, prevented both bureaucracy and solidarity.

By the time we finally decided to throw in the towel, we had been effectively renting 404 for the sole purpose of providing our Sunday afternoon community feast. Repeatedly having to scrape together hundreds of dollars to maintain a meager 12 to 15 hours of regular operation each month became more of monotonous chore falling on the shoulders of a handful of people, rather than the difficult yet exhilarating task of creating the revolutionary experiment we had originally set out to construct.

The 404's location in an ethnically diverse and economically depressed neighborhood emphasized both the need for such a space and the difficulty of keeping it. While we passionately avoided the patronizing stigma of garden-variety social service organizations in our distribution of free goods, we hardly achieved a genuinely alternative economy of the gift. We hoped the do-it-yourself ethic of the 404 would inspire our neighborhood friends to empower themselves to claim the community center as their own, but the disabling distinctions of race, class and social standing which upheld a provider/recipient dichotomy were not easily overcome.

## **A Face-to-Face Festival**

“We abolish the stage and the auditorium and replace them by a single site, without partition or barrier of any kind, which will become the theater of action.”

—Antonin Artaud, *The Theater of Cruelty*

Borrowing from the Situationist International the incendiary charge that “revolutions will be festivals or nothing,” the 404 collective self-consciously seized the challenge to transform the spectacle of performance (be its specific form a poetry reading, punk concert or an art opening) and transform that forum into a dreamlike destruction of hierarchical barriers.

Diverse examples remind us that our efforts (404 and other community spaces) are situated in the context of a great lusty lineage of like-minded projects. And, the transformation of the performance site by an ethic of participation and celebration is not a new idea.

It is not the newness of “punk” that ever made it more radical than “hippy,” or any other lifestyle(-ist) tag. Rather, it is our insistence on immediacy, direct communication and art as a tool for social transformation, that placed our project in a radical context. But ultimately the collective spirit unraveled, individual commitment dissipated, hotly contested internal gender wars flared, our code of tolerance was brutally attacked by racists, sexists and fag-bashers from the outside, and informal hierarchies emerged inside.

Because social factors beyond the sway of our insurrectionary intent always seemed to creep back into the fold, nobody was truly shocked by any developments which finally fostered our demise. We were discouraged but not broken. We have the learning experience of partaking in a bold and daring attempt to transform our neighborhood and liberate our desires.

While none of us expected the collective's self-conscious ranting and social defiance to usher in the revolution of a new social reality, we actually felt the potential of anarchy infect the fabric of our lives. It is certain that on some levels this project was doomed to fail from the onset, but the levels on which spontaneous freedom within the context of our festivals was intermittently achieved surprised even our optimistic outlook.

Our clubhouse/freestore/kitchen existed for three years without any formal organizational structure other than the desire of committed comrades and friends, and we never sought or needed any licenses, bank account, official non-profit tax-exempt status, or funding from traditional grant-giving organs. We made an angry noise but never “got busted.” We conducted events, planned and spontaneous. Members of our neighborhood were fed and clothed.

The remaining 404 radicals will refocus our energy at the Trumbull Theater. The “community center” movement is a viable seed for a long-lasting revolutionary social network. Projects such as the distribution of free vegetarian food, child-care and free-schools, info-centers and reading rooms, anti-racist action, feminism and queer liberation, continue to set the tone for transforming the terrain of our lives.

## **Announcement**

**Create the New World In the Shell of the Old!**

**Anti-Authoritarian Community Center Gathering**

**May 26–30**

Trumbull Theater

4210 Trumbull, Det., 48208

NETWORKING & CELEBRATING

@ Info-Shops & Centers

Workshops on free schools, starting a new space, gender/queer issues, food not bombs, dumpster diving, anti-racist work, community economics, vegan/vegetarianism & more. Call (313) 832-0114 or 832-4074

# fifth Estate

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