

Free feasts, erotic play and the eruption of the marvelous

Looking back on the Gardeners Against the Work Ethic Association with Unruh Lee and M.K. Shibek

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Unruh Lee: In 1994, we started the Gardeners Against the Work Ethic Association (or GAWE) together. I later wrote in a 'zine with this name, that this project was an "anti-work experiment in self-sufficiency, creating a new way of life based on play. And much playful subversion of all that gets in the way." Really, it was a joke of a formal organization, that was part of an upsurge of Surrealist-oriented experimentation towards expanding the quality and quantity of our realm of play, no? The core of it was trying to seduce people to rip up their lawns with us and plant gardens for free feasts. But as I remember it, a lot of zany and erotic stuff, in private and public, was going on under the GAWE umbrella.

M.K. Shibek: GAWE definitely was a challenge to our surroundings as well as our physical and mental habits which tend to be bound by capital and character. Capital is the domination of our lives by measure while character is the internalized form of this censorious social relation—a defense against encounter. The trauma of socialization has us blocked from a dynamic inter-subjectivity. So while we can't claim we achieved the practical abolition of work for ourselves, we did move towards the realization of desire in an embrace of play, not as an isolated tactic but as a whole method. This was the undercurrent that inspired free feasts of gardened and dumpstered food which helped to create a community atmosphere. During this summer campaign, at our best, we embodied a feeling of the marvelous, which involved release from habitual constraint as an integral factor.

U.L.: Yes, you had written in *Tensor #1*: "I envision the emergence and rapid spread of creatures who will be living embodiments of the surreal, those who will stop the world and open up new possibilities for meeting our needs and relating to one another and the natural world in a more balanced and pleasurable way." This resonated with my situationist-inspired dreams perfectly. You were energetically pursuing a trajectory of Surrealist theory and action, within and outside of traditional media. It was a breath of fresh air to me. And when I came to visit you in Carbondale in '93, we had some adventures that really brought these ideas to life.

M.K.S.: That was the night we quickly drafted an agitational text which claimed part of 'the strip' would be torn up to make way for communal gardens, which would prefigure a contagious subversion of behavioral norms across the city. We took to the streets with sexy gender-defiant clothing and some instruments and passed this text out to anyone who was interested. We were ignored by some people and insulted by the drunk frat boys, but many more passers-by liked what we were doing. There's a time and place for a more casual approach—in terms of passing out leaflets—but our playful appearance was attractive, so we got rid of all the flyers in a short time period. Afterwards we disturbed a fashionable punk rock party and played footsies around the bonfire with a dozen or so people. The

high energy of this evening seeded our minds with the project that became GAWE. Maybe you could describe some of GAWE's literature?

U.L.: My flier promoting lawn rip-ups for free feast gardens had a comic strip with the following altered dialog inserted:

Formally dressed, stuffy Woman: "The urge to play has me discontent to stay within our playground fences."

Formally dressed, stuffy Man: "Yes, to hell with leisure as a separate sphere!"

Five such individuals in increasingly playful body positions:

"The pleasures we are allowed cannot compare..."

"...with those connected to-the rupture of social constraints..." "...and the free experimentation with space..."

"...and time."

"Our games are bound to overflow into a will to transform..." "...the whole of human activity."

"If we are to love as we might we must also be fierce." "Life is delightful!"

"Let us destroy all that prevents its full enjoyment!"

M.K.S.: In this light, why don't we touch upon some of the provocative actions we took?

U.L.: We promoted the ripping up of lawns for gardens through actions like going through town in lingerie and festive outfits, with a vacuum cleaner and a fake martini, handing out watermelon slices with our fliers. We also fought for turns with the Roto-tiller while ripping up a big lawn, while in costumes or underwear, to give a couple examples. Many people participated in this festive big garden initiation, and we helped with two other lawn rip-ups. It was gratifying that this included at least some people not in our immediate circle.

We episodically attempted to conjure up an insurgent festivity that overflowed any bounds, including the invasion of a mall for a group cuddling session, which of course got us kicked out. The best intervention we did, in terms of agit-prop, was putting up a city government poster all around town, which declared Wednesdays a holiday. The poster had the city's logo and was official-looking enough to justify an investigation for alleged forgery of an official, according to a newspaper article.

The text read in part:

"As administrator of the city Council it is my pleasure to make this special announcement to the public. We're sure all workers and students will appreciate the implementation of a new city ordinance declaring Wednesdays a day off from work and school...Studies by psychiatrists and sociologists indicate the effects of preparing for and complying with a five (or more) day work week is harmful to our mental and physical well-being. In fact, studies indicate that most popular forms of leisure contribute to the ill-health of our citizens as well. As a remedy we encourage you to engage in activities outside the confines of business transactions or the passive consumption of entertainment...Surveys show that playful and unusual activities are more enjoyable, and hence better for society as a whole, than well-planned and administered culture. We look forward to seeing how this new ordinance changes our hard-working citizens and encourages a more beautiful city. We also strongly suggest that citizens begin to think for themselves and act accordingly to realize their boldest desires despite years of repression and boredom."

I still revel in the memories of people's faces as they read this on business doors and telephone poles in the morning. Some actually exclaimed with joy, "Is this real?!"

M.K.S.: Clearly there was a lot of inspiration from Raoul Vaneigem in GAWE. Let's make a critical appraisal of this tendency.

U.L.: It may be true, as Ken Knabb wrote, that Vaneigem's post-situationist writings are "padded with inflated verbiage... attributing to worker struggles a Vaneigemist content that is neither justified nor necessary... declaring that this or that expression of dissatisfaction implies a total revolt". And the GAWE literature certainly partook of this pleasure-politics rhetoric. I'm sure there were people who dismissed us as "life-stylists" for that reason.

Vaneigem can be said to represent a high water mark of a whole current for which play is the crux of social revolution. When this current makes a caricature of itself, it does appear silly. I'm sure, to some extent, we partook in that, too.

But I still think Vaneigem and the revolutionary play current are often short-changed. Jean Barrot, for example, in *What is Situationism?* says, "Vaneigem was the weakest side of the SI, the one which reveals all its weaknesses. The positive utopia (which Vaneigem describes in *The Revolution of Everyday Life*) is revolutionary as demand, as tension, because it cannot be realized within this society: it becomes derisory when one tries to live it today." So he basically disses the situationists' idea of revolution as a fight for freedom "for us, here and now" as well as a larger, historical overturning of capitalist social relations. This Barrot says is utopian and especially faults Vaneigem for it. But isn't that basic challenge to try to do both of those things essential?

The pseudo-debates about lifestyle anarchism falter on the same false dichotomy. Each side of this "debate" has its points: trying to live freely without making revolution is a dead end, but trying to be a revolutionary without a breakthrough of free living invites the retort to "get a life." The whole host of dualisms associated with this dichotomy falls away, however, when superseded by a unitary approach that takes on the totality. No doubt there are thorny problems and tensions on this terrain. But there's no escape through dismissing one side of the coin in favor of the other side. Any effective anti-capitalist project will have to melt down the whole coin better and more creatively than anyone has to date.

So, down with the false choice between armed struggle (in the form of critical theory or otherwise) and "utopian" liberation! If one dares oneself to live true to one's boldest desires, in ways that are blocked by repressive forms of social organization, a confrontation with the forces of authoritarian order cannot be far off. Feral's piece that dosed the GAWE 'zine speaks well to this:

"...in the realms of the 'mind' that have become unconscious, our repressed passions and desires live—and these are amazing monsters. At times, these monsters, when brought to light, will fill us with terror—but they are not terrorists—they do not try to compel us to obey. The terror they evoke is ecstatic terror—terror that breaks us out of the normal flow and opens us to the marvelous. This terror is brought on by the opening up of all possibilities, the breaking forth of the total abandon of free play, the birth of anarchy."

Our efforts in this direction must indeed seem "utopian" in an escapist sense to the self-sacrificing militant. But is this due to a presumably superior revolutionary outlook, or to the simple fact that it is too intense for many would-be revolutionaries to be faced with the challenge of subverting oneself, of overcoming the pandemic fear of freedom, of an immediacy of real emotions and intense pleasure—of revolutionizing one's own life?

In this sense, a revolutionary strategy that eschews radical subjectivity is an un-strategic retreat. In the guise of responsibility, it is a running from the real responsibility of combating one's own force of habit and repressive armoring. Without a vital empowerment of the imagination, a jolt of courage for authentic nonconformist desire, how will we ever break the spell of consensus reality, which draws daily support from our own alienated powers to reify social processes into things. Radical subjectivity dissolves the impenetrable thing-ness of objective institutions, a first step toward overturning them.

M.K.S.: Let me clarify what I've elsewhere called 'uncritical Vaneigemism.' For me, it refers to an outlook that implies that hedonism in itself is revolutionary, so really that would be a vulgarization of Vaneigem. In *Revolution of Everyday Life* and "From Wildcat Strike to Total Self Management," he is well aware that personal liberation has to

be reciprocated by social transformation, or else it becomes something other than what the S.I. was calling for. If we as GAWÉ at times appeared to over-value hedonism—not that we actually did—that’s what I call into question. We could criticize ourselves for manic, youthful naivete we might have displayed, because we risked having the surface of our approach overshadow the substance of our critique, at worst. But I’m certainly not eschewing radical subjectivity. It’s not a question of advocating a restrictive dichotomy between the subjective and the objective either, as surrealism has been one current that works with both of these in such a way as to allow for a different conception of existence. I agree with you that subverting oneself has to be included in the process, or else we’d have our mouths full of corpses, as the saying goes! But whatever else one might get from reading Vaneigem, one should beware his problematic book on surrealism.

U.L.: Just one more thing on Vaneigem. He wrote in “Basic Banalities” that the S.I. had to define itself as a therapeutic. This strikes me as a really important strand of thought, too rarely picked up. Soma, the Reichian therapy created by the Brazilian anarchist Roberto Freire, is really interesting to me now in this respect. When I’ve read Freire, and gone to Soma workshops in Brazil and the U.S., it totally reminds me of things we did with GAWÉ!

I’ve heard anarchists recently rant about how “we don’t need healing, we need revolt!” Well, why can’t we have both? And, in fact, why not have a revolt that heals, and healing that empowers revolt?

M.K.S.: Yes, authoritarian character structures are a significant factor in perpetuating repressive political structures.

And vice versa. The world has changed a lot since Wilhelm Reich dealt with this in *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*. But far from being a thing of the past, the “emotional plague” lives on in new forms. The temporary dissolution of character armor, through the creation of environments that were kind of bourgeois-morality-free zones, where the pact of mediocrity could no longer be taken for granted, was central to GAWÉ.

In this vein, the communal exploration of the senses can be so profound as to be life-changing, whether or not it subverts the larger social fabric in any apparent manner. Our adventures involved not only gardening, critical interventions, improvised music, and various forms of trespassing during poetic wanderings, but also the way we tried to relate. Touch is the most direct way of relating to someone, and thus potentially, one of the most threatening.

To this end, we developed an approach that we hoped would inspire people to move beyond gender roles and other conditionings. Most of the playful zones we created encouraged people to take risks. At the best of times, it seemed we had a kind of ‘communist greed’ as The Right to Be Greedy might put it, where our personal desires were amplified amongst the collectivity. This was a kind of collective experience of individualism, which is one way that surrealism has been described. Reciprocal play beyond all bounds and self-censoring attitudes is still rather rare, and that we had generous amounts of this reciprocity, not only in touch and erotic situations, but in general, was one of the high points of the summer. How refreshing to see friends let their guard down, embracing sensuality and sexiness, and then play in the pounding rain the next day while taking a break from making flyers and stickers.

U.L.: Let’s speak of the erotic dimension of GAWÉ more fully. I wrote in “Notes on Eroplay,” in the GAWÉ ‘zine:

“...There have been episodic eruptions and steady flows that lasted for days. All unpredictable. But we have come to expect the unexpected, which seems to attract it to us. An influx of new people, including visitors from out of town, has continually energized and inspired us. And there has been a wide range of participation: from group massage and snuggling to fully turned on biting and licking; seven people with their arms around each other skipping down the street, to lingerie dress-up games where some people mostly watched; skinny dipping and huddling to keep warm to losing yourself in a writhing mass of ecstatic bodies, not knowing who you are caressing or being caressed by. Each time about seven people at most have been involved, but at least twenty-three have taken part in the last three months, and many more not directly involved have been affected.”

Frank Moore’s writings and concept of “eroplay” was an obsession for me. As he defined it, “eroplay is...intense physical playing and touching of oneself and others. And also the force of energy released as a result of such play.” It was a really big part of what I was aiming at in my life in those years, having dropped out of college to travel all over: expanding the space for eroplay in my life.

I remember one night when I first met you, you suggested we spend an hour without language, and we started to communicate only with non-verbal sounds, movement, and touch. It became very rhythmic with these elements, and we went into a deep trance. That was a watershed moment for me, flowing through the whole GAWWE experience, and into the best moments of my life to this day.

Herbert Marcuse's theory, an influence on both of us, fit nicely with the idea of eroplay. In *Eros and Civilization*, he emphasized the 'rediscovery of childhood "polymorphous perversity": that is, the use of the whole body as an instrument of pleasure, as a key to the creation of a non-repressive civilization. This is contrary to the "genital supremacy" that Freud saw as the mark of a normal and well-adjusted adult who accepts repression, and keeps pleasure as exclusive to rational, procreative, heterosexual intercourse. We delved deeply into hands-on explorations of this polymorphous nature, and I dare say we made some fine discoveries.

Unfortunately, the opportunities to share them are all too scarce. But I still see them as erotic time-bombs, floating with us down the river of the playful, unorthodox radical milieu. Kept alive by the poetic adventures of small groups like ours, these "eros effects" can sweep across the social body, partaking in the conflagration of massive upheavals and revolts in the right moment.

To quote from "Notes on Eroplay" again:

"...So far we have only been able to free ourselves [from the world of taboos] temporarily. To do so more permanently would entail doing away with the social structures from which they are indissociable. In other words, revolutionary change...I'd like to see our eroplaying evolve into a conscious 'subject group' engaging in a politics of freeing desire. Such a group could confront questions in a collective setting such as, 'how is the free flow of desire blocked in this or that specific setting?', 'Why is this or that taboo?', 'How are these prohibitions of delight related to the organization of work or the world designed for work?' From a broad situationist-inspired perspective, eroplay can be seen as one important way of 'creating situations' of insurgent play..."

M.K.S.: I've always enjoyed the Romanian Surrealists' WWII-era statement which called for 'the unlimited eroticization of the proletariat' as an insurrectional support.

U.L.: So how do we make a critical assessment of GAWWE now? I gave it a shot in the months that followed, writing in "The Carbondale Garden Story":

"...Looking back critically, our limitations are obvious but the experience still inspires. Perhaps if we had started earlier, been better prepared, and did a more sustained campaign of surreal propaganda street theater to promote the project, it could have really taken off. The prospect of many gardens and different circles of people, hopefully multi-ethnic, participating in festal mutual aid and feasting still whets the appetite. So the project may well reincarnate. We may not have done everything we talked about doing but we got a good taste of what sensuous collaborative comradeship and dynamic fluidity can make happen. So to those who would say the problem was "lack of organization," we say FUCK ORGANIZING, LET'S DANCE!"

M.K.S.: The only problem I have with this today is the very last phrase, which could suggest that things are necessarily polarized between pleasure and reified organizationalism. Granted that I would 'err' on the side of pleasure in any case—certainly the surrealist and situationist elements of our project can help us recognize where dancing and organization can be complimentary parts of a playful method and not opposite poles of experience in all cases.

Another thing is our options might have been greater in certain cities where more abundant radical milieus existed. People who were doing projects like guerilla gardening and squatting would have helped us immensely. So many around us in that Midwestern college town had not heard of modern surrealists, the SI, the anarchist and post-situationist currents in general, and while this allowed us to agitate against the atmosphere of student activism, it was also an obstacle.

U.L.: GAWWE was inept in terms of reaching a level of contestation that really rocked the social boat. But the modest nature of what we did is not in itself a cause for rejection. It might even be exemplary to attempt modest

but daring, holistic projects that challenge oneself and others, and strike a chord of solidarity. It's humbling, but still compelling. We engaged in a campaign of radical agitation, but it had humor, it had a therapeutic dimension, and at the same time it had the quality of a kind of Holy Grail quest, a demand for "Paradise Now."

I long for a renewal of some radical project that is that heartfelt, that is that holistic, that involves such a high pitch of emotional intensity, that involves that sense of joyous discovery and creative innovation, and that is perhaps more hard-hitting with a sharper radical edge without losing the dynamic playful energetics.

M.K.S.: I likewise continue to lust for such a challenge to the totality, in spite of the isolation and marginalization built into our current social context. And let's also realize where traces of these currents can be found today.

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