

“The Universe Wants to Play”

Pleasures and Perils in the Ludic '90s

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Back in the salad days of the 1990s, the North American anarchist scene adopted play, not just as a personal tactic of freedom, but as a revolutionary strategy. Play was thought to be a way out of the dead-ends of civilization: work, hierarchical relationships, commodity culture, and even the old ways of making revolution that had failed again and again. It's tempting to say that we were naive, living in the calm before the storm. But even if the past forecloses some possibilities, a critical look back at our experiences can open up others.

Most of us learn how to “play well with others” in childhood. Playing tag, playing house, playing doctor. For me, growing up in the UK in the mid-to-late 1970s in an otherwise childless suburban enclave, play was solitary, guided by my own imagination rather than the social world. School, even on the playground, was a blatantly disciplinary institution with no room for the creative energy of children. Corporal punishment and humiliation were still the standard tools of discipline at the time. It may sound shocking, but at the age of eight, entering the US public school system was a taste of freedom to me. But, by that age, pure “play” wasn't something kids admitted to: most of our games were competitive, geared towards finding our places in the Darwinian social hierarchy of grade school.

We played military roles adopted from television, movies, and plastic figurines.

In the summer before college, a friend who'd been traveling the Rainbow Gathering circuit around the US handed me a book that altered the course of my life. Hakim Bey's *T.A.Z.* had just been published and was being passed from hand to hand, making anarchists out of people like me, people who had been more comfortable with Carlos Castaneda than Crass. One phrase from the book encapsulated its ontology: “The universe wants to play.” It made more sense than any of the metaphysical mumbo jumbo I had willed myself to believe up to that point. And looking back, it may have offered the hope of experiencing the childhood that I had missed out on.

Eternal childhood was becoming the utopian zeitgeist of the early 1990s. This generation's dropouts were sporting pacifiers in their mouths instead of flowers in their hair. Looking at the explosion of raves, festivals, and anarchism that was going on all around me, it seemed like a millennial culture of permanent play was just around the corner.

Strangely, I turned that corner in the course of my academic life. When I was looking for a good thesis topic related to subcultures and social change, an acquaintance (who had also had his brain scrambled by *T.A.Z.*) handed me a copy of *Dreamtime Talkingmail*, a 'zine published by Dreamtime a rural community in Wisconsin influenced by Bey's ideas. “People are actually trying to live this?” I wondered. If this was true, four years spent in college would be worth it for giving me an excuse to go and experience this other mode of life. I thought I could be a kind of double agent. Purportedly, I was to be a student sociologist writing about people on the lunatic fringe of society; in my own mind, I was running away to join the circus.

The months I spent there were as challenging as they were liberating. I became a kind of community project: an uptight, bourgeois, and inexperienced college kid who was willingly subjected to a kind of Pygmalion-in-reverse process. The residents all took different approaches. Some were confrontational about my role there, others just

teased the “anthropologist” in their midst. Most of them, I realized later, were acting as professors in a more challenging university: one of ideas, but also one of spontaneity and freedom. I was getting a PhD in play, the degree I had desired for so long.

Problematic Here-and-now-ness

Most intentional communities try to reduce the amount of labor its members need to contribute in order to survive, but preserve the dutiful clock-punching of the world outside. While there was plenty of work to do at Dreamtime Village, antecedents like Charles Fourier reminded us to make play the basis of our labor. When a task became boring, it was time to lay our shovels down and do something else.

When we weren’t working—which was most of the time—our days were kept lively by the guests who came from all over the country. There were workshops on practices like eroplay—blindfolded non-sexual touch—but even a dance party would become a kind of workshop on contact improvisation, making out, and acting out. My British childhood had taught me reserve and caution, and this called for the confidence of an improviser. Luckily, I had some music lessons which gave me the breakthrough I needed.

The couple who had founded the community had a freeform drums-and-saxophone duo which I was invited to join on electric bass. I’d taught myself scales and time signatures and thought that these ways of quantifying sound were the only way to understand music. The two of them played with such freedom that it was impossible to intellectualize what was happening and impossible to ignore how good it felt. One particular moment of improvisation remains burned into my memory: a feeling of total presence, an orgasmic here-and-now-ness that I recognized as the kind of peak experience that’s made possible only by play. If this felt so good in the relatively narrow confines of music-making, what would it feel like to play like that within the field of everyday life itself? This was the question being asked by many others in the anarchist milieu of the mid-90’s. The answers turned out to be “problematic,” as we used to say in our college papers.

The most radical approach—and therefore the most attractive—was to act as if the revolution had already happened. We already lived in a nomadic culture where everything was free and all boundaries had been dissolved. Inevitably, some members of the community weren’t quite ready to take that plunge. Every society is based on some kind of split, and this was the central fissure of our liberatory world. Sometimes, it assumed the form of a hierarchy, with those who played the best superior to those still trapped in quotidian reality. Sometimes it assumed the form of a division of labor, with the most playful skimping on the gardening, housework, and other chores that kept us all going. Sometimes, the split was the one that divides performer and audience.

I saw this dynamic most clearly while on a road-trip I took with a few other Dreamtime Villagers. An anarchist professor had invited us to crash his class on the first day of the semester. As he began an intentionally pedantic lecture, we staged a takeover of his class, recreating one of our freeform freak-outs, but this time in front of a roomful of nonplussed college students. One of our co-conspirators backed me up against the blackboard and pulled my shirt up, while another drew my outline with chalk. We spoke in tongues and rolled on the floor. This would have been a great play session in other circumstances, but having become a spectacle, the situation was more complicated. Our play was meant to be inspiring to these kids, inviting them to join us outside the strictures of polite society. Instead, it seemed to be showing them how unfree they were, compared to us. Its effect was at best baffling, if not alienating. “Is this what anarchism is about?” one of them asked me.

A few days after our guest-lecturer appearance, my friends and I arrived at an anarchist gathering in Ohio where I experienced another misapplication of play. One night, a game of “capture the black flag” had been (dis)organized on the sprawling college campus where we were holding our workshops. A short while into the game, players from each side formed a third team, stole the original teams’ flags, and declared themselves the winners. Despite some confusion and disappointment, nobody challenged this coup. It was an anarchist game, after all, which we all took to mean anything goes. But perhaps we had made a false analogy: the rules of a game are freely and temporarily adopted by the players in order to enjoy their time together, a perfect metaphor for anarchist practice. In treating the rules of a game like the rule of law, we wound up having less fun.

For a delirious few years in the late nineties, the tactics of play had found their way into all kinds of street theater and protests. Several times a year, no matter where I was living, I found myself participating in reclaim-the-streets style events with friends. Mud people, unlicensed parades, brass bands, pots and pans. Never with signs and demands, just presenting ourselves as positive proof of another way of living. Bystanders joined in gleefully, while police reacted with escalating violence. People in my community were taking beatings and going to court for these actions, but we felt confident that we were steadily chipping away at the old world. Then Seattle happened, and it seemed like a confirmation that playful protest had become a force to be reckoned with.

We couldn't know it at the time, but the moment was over nearly as soon as it had begun. Costumes, music, and dancing didn't seem like appropriate responses to the growing legions of riot cops that were being sent into the streets. After 9/11 and Iraq, these tactics seemed flippant, and gave way to the solemnity of candlelight vigils and earnest protest songs. Street theatre survived, but with the emphasis on creating moral outrage, not pleasure. Does anyone really enjoy themselves at a die-in?

Play still breaks the spell of the mundane often enough to remind me of its power. It's just that now, it seems to have shed its political aspirations and retreated to a cultural space, a zone of pure possibility where it waits and gathers its strength. At a basement noise show when people are suddenly taking their clothes off and throwing garbage at each other, at festivals, dance parties, and rituals that happen downtown or far off in the woods. These liberated spaces are special: they can't be predicted or controlled. They rely on face-to-face contact and a delicate balance of energy between people that politics as we know it can't sustain. Facing a future that looks increasingly bleak, sometimes I wonder how ludic energy can find its way back into history. Undoubtedly it will, but in ways we can't possibly guess.

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