

Second-Wave Situationism

Gavin Grindon

2009

Last year saw, at least here in London, a plethora of commemorative events to mark the 40-year anniversary of the events of 1968, with pundits and talking heads emerging from everywhere to offer their accounts and experiences of that year, in which a multitude of movements remade and reclaimed the terrain of everyday life in a variety of ways from the jaws of capitalism.

These accounts often mentioned the Situationist International, and the many groups whose ideas—if not directly related—were often very close to them. The list of these groups, who attempted to fuse art and everyday life in a rejection of capitalism and the creation of autonomous spaces, will be familiar to most readers.

In New York, the Yippies and Black Mask, in California the Diggers, in Chicago the Rebel Worker Group, in the UK King Mob, in Amsterdam the Provos... But absent from most of this year's accounts of the importance of 1968 has been its inheritances and contemporary relevance for social movements. This summer marks another anniversary, the ten year anniversary of J18, the first global carnival against capital. In London, the financial district was taken over by thousands of revellers in carnival masks, the stock exchange was invaded and shut down, the dead financial heart of the city turned into a vibrant, beating whirl of real human social relations. The carnivalesque tactics employed (which of course owed much to the Situationists and the groups of the 1960s, but now deployed on a far larger scale) were a direct inspiration to the activists of Seattle later the same year, and the aesthetic and idea of a "festival of resistance" came to colour the movement against capitalism which exploded at the turn of the millennium.

Since this time people have tended to move away from planning such grand explosions of creativity and towards more micropolitical, everyday tactical engagements (albeit whilst keeping an eye on the extent to which such engagements compose themselves into a wider movement), but these have remained coloured by the aesthetic political language of 1968. Movements in Europe over the last eight years have repeatedly employed these tactics, synthesising the experiences of the autonomous European movements of the 1980s and 1990s, from *autonomia* in Italy to Reclaim the Streets in the UK. For example, many of these groups have drawn on the auto-reduction techniques introduced by autonomous movements (the refusal to pay for expensive goods, or the mass appropriation of goods for social use).

In Barcelona, Spain, the group Yo Mango ("I steal") has offered free fashion consultations and makeovers to passers by outside the Mango clothes store. After measuring up their volunteer, they dash into the store and collect a set of clothes for them, and then send them happily on their way down the street with a new wardrobe. On December 20, 2002, on the anniversary of Argentina's popular rebellion, they announced a "Yo Mango Tango." Smartly dressed couples began to dance the tango around a branch of Carrefour chain of stores in the midst of the Christmas shopping rush. With each stylised dip, they would grab a bottle of champagne and whisk it out of the store. Media activists filmed and projected the scene live onto the wall outside, whilst a crowd gathered. The next day, the champagne was taken along to a branch of one of the banks responsible for the Argentinian crisis, for an impromptu champagne breakfast which resulted in the closure of the branch. Meanwhile in Hamburg, Germany on April 28, 2006, a motley collection of costumed superheroes with names inspired by critiques of precarious labour

conditions such as Supermum, Multiflex and Operaistorix, swept into the gourmet supermarket Frische Paradies, and made off with trolleys full of luxury goods like Serrano hams and Valrhona chocolate. The Guardian newspaper recorded the shop owner's dismay: "They took a whole slab of Australian Wagyu Kobe beef. It cost 108 Euros... The cows had been specially massaged. We also have some very fine cheese here from Philippe Olivier. He's a very tough and famous cheesemaker. They took that too." Handing a flower to the cashier, they posed for photos with the loot and then disappeared into the streets. A helicopter and 14 police cars appeared on the scene ten minutes later, but after an extended search found only an empty plastic bag. This was one in a series of actions carried out by a group called Umsonst ("For Free") who then distributed the goods to the city's interns, assistants, temps and care workers who—of course—have to be superheroes to survive the precarious labour conditions imposed upon them. Besides their canny and sophisticated use of the mass media to tell their own stories, the actions of such groups trade economic value for aesthetic values.

Other groups have approached the politicisation of everyday life in terms of working on affect and emotion as a political terrain. The Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army (CIRCA) appeared in the UK in 2005 to meet the G8 Summit there, confronting the discipline of the police with playful behaviour, laughter and vulnerability. Taking on the role of the fool or the clown in a non-violent direct action situation, they present themselves as vulnerable and ridiculous subjects. The situation of policing them soon itself appears ridiculous, and draws the police in to CIRCA's politicised theatre of the absurd, and undoes the disciplinary role of the police, as well as CIRCA's own fixed role as activists. In doing so, they open possibilities for effective action and changed social relationships which a focus on militancy and grand victories often closes off. At the same time as breaking the psychological barriers which the police attempt to maintain between them and 'activists,' the clowns use their role as the fool to undo attempts to fix and discipline the activist body. When pushed by the police, the clowns often spin on the spot, looking like spinning tops. Quite apart from the fact that it's hard to order a crowd about if you can't keep a straight face, no cop wants his coworkers to see him repeatedly arresting a clown.

In London in 2007, to meet the Excel Arms Trade Fair which is held each year in the Docklands, a group called the Space Hijackers decided rather than be harassed by the police and marginalised with the other protestors, they'd get in on the action. So they bought a tank, and called a press conference to announce they intended to drive a tank to the arms fair and auction it to the highest bidder. If their buyer decided to drive it through the police lines and into the building, it wasn't their responsibility. They were just conducting legitimate business like the folks inside. Unfortunately, announcing that your anarchist group has a tank and intends to use it brings rather a lot of police attention, and the action became difficult as the group came under heavy police surveillance, their phonecalls were monitored, and the tank was stopped miles from the venue and surrounded by cops. At this point one of the crew climbed on top of the tank with a loudhailer, and after berating the police's restriction of legitimate protest, announced that there were free bikes for everyone, and that they should use them to cycle to the arms fair, where their secret second tank was now just arriving. Sadly, no one captured the expression on the cops' faces for posterity, but a comedic keystone cops chase to the exhibition ensued between a crowd on bikes and a lot of police cars. An auction then proceeded for the second tank, accompanied by its new sound system and a troupe of male and female burlesque dancers who emerged to show off the charms of its turrets and cannons to best effect.

This summer, similar art-political forms of organisation appeared when the third of the UK's climate camp protests took place at the Kingsnorth power station in Kent, with thousands camping for a weeklong festival/protest in an autonomous eco-village run on principles of consensus and direct democracy. On the day of mass action, while many marched overland towards the station, other groups had announced plans to take the site by air and sea. The top secret air attack met a huge, panicked police mobilisation with a series of kites, while the sea group handed treasure maps to about 30 pirate affinity groups, who hid out overnight in woods and fields and then launched onto the River Medway early the next morning with inflatable boats, home made rafts and a lot of eyepatches. This rebel raft regatta proved difficult for the police boats to deal with more than one at a time, and after something like an anarchist game of Takeshi's Castle, the coal intake jetty was reached and the station's operations disrupted. You also couldn't find a shop with a single bottle of rum left in it anywhere near the camp. As well as gaining their direct political effectiveness from the blurring of art and activism, the playful and symbolically accessible nature of such actions also function in ideological terms as a tactical engagement with the mass media, confounding exclusionary representations of 'protestors' as well as outmanoeuvring the standard police me-

dia strategy of isolating social movements by emphasising a threat of violence. Following the Kingsnorth climate camp, the *Guardian* ran the headline, “Those Kingsnorth Police Injuries in Full: Six Insect Bites and A Toothache. 5.9 Million Pounds police operation ‘a colossal waste of money.’” This line was echoed even by the right-wing press.

Inspiring as they might be, isolating these stories from the movements they were a part of can reify them and make them seem like stunts divorced from wider political engagements. But if we look at them historically, as a tendency within the wider movement against capital, we might see such aestheticised approaches as simply one end of a spectrum of liberated labour power. This labour-power rejects “work”—that is, the capitalist appropriation and enclosure of our creativity—in order to pursue the autonomous, everyday creation of other values: life-activity for other ends. “Art” has historically been the term Western societies have used for such autonomous creativity: like a festival, it has been the small space in which creativity and affect can let off steam in ways not normally allowed. So it is little wonder that as social movements became more autonomous (that is, directly re-appropriating social life, as an end in itself, rather than attempting to ideologically “wake up” society), they have tended to look at the freeing of their own labour power from the directives of capital in terms of the language of artistic experiments. It’s perhaps historically useful then to think of some of these aspects of our movements as reworking the grand claims of the Situationist International in micropolitical terms of composing movements using desire and affect, both on the ground and in their tactical engagements with the media, and as such representing something like a second-wave Situationism that owes as much to 1999 as to 1968.

fifth Estate

Gavin Grindon
Second-Wave Situationism
2009

<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/380-spring-2009/second-wave-situationism>
Fifth Estate #380, Spring 2009

fifthestate.anarchistlibraries.net