

Occupying the Citadels of the Mind

A Review of Two Insurgent Documents from the Frontlines of Educational Revolt (2009–2012)

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a review of

After the Fall: Communiques from Occupied California by Aragorn! Edited by Little Black Cart Books, Berkeley, 2010. This free newsprint publication is presently out of print, but can be downloaded at afterthefallcommuniques.info.

One of the key essays, “We Are The Crisis,” appears in *Occupy Everything: Anarchists in the Occupy Movement*, 2009–2011 by Aragorn!, Little Black Cart Books, Berkeley, 2012, 258pp, \$15

A User's Guide To Demanding the Impossible by Gavin Grindon and John Jordan. Minor Compositions/Autonomea, London/Brooklyn, 2010, 64pp., \$8.

Two years before the Occupy Wall Street (OWS) movement came into being in September 2011, the notion of occupying physical space as an oppositional tactic was already in the air.

It had previously surfaced within the nexus of the sprawling California state educational complex in the Fall of 2009, and then the following year during the December 2010 uprising of UK students; in both cases amidst a backdrop of severe educational cutbacks and the governmental austerity measures of disaster capitalism.

And, like the subsequent “social strike” kicked off by Quebec student unrest in 2012, previous insurgent student actions in California and London were about far more than simply the economy.

Indeed, even one of the most potent and widely known slogans of OWS, “Occupy Everything/Demand Nothing,” had its origins in the militant acts and declarations of the 2009 California-based occupy movement. In turn, the California actions had in part been inspired by the occupation of the student center at the New School for Social Research in New York earlier that year. The more militant occupiers among the New School students had refused to settle for the reformist goal of ousting the university president, but had opted instead for the liberatory potential of creating a momentary opening in capitalist time and space free of demands for administrative concessions.

In *After The Fall's* “Occupation: A Do-It-Yourself Guide” the rationale for, and immediacy of, such a “no demands” strategy is explained in the exuberance of the California context:

We must reject all options on offer and demonstrate that without negotiations it is still possible to act. This is why we do not make demands. All demands assume the existence of a power capable of conceding them. Why go through the motions of negotiation when we know we will not win anything but paltry concessions. There is no power to which we can appeal except that which we have found in one another. This is why we reject the logic of representation. No representative, no matter how charismatic, can achieve anything of consequence, except to deprive us of our own agency. Having representatives reduces us, once again, to passive onlookers upon our own activity. We have to take matters into our own hands.

For an incredible moment, on the California campuses of UC Santa Cruz, UCLA, UC Berkeley, UC Davis, San Francisco State and CSU Fresno, the watchwords: “Strike/ Occupy/ Takeover,” burned almost as brightly as the flames of the previous year’s Greek insurrection. The scope of these California uprisings illuminated a flickering movement of insurrectional “communes” that were not seen merely as alternative spaces, but as nomadic war machines to be deployed in the ultimate destruction of capitalist society in accord with the anarchist and anti-state communist ideas of those who struck the match.

In this insurrectionary context, the “Communique From An Absent Future: On the Terminus of Student Life,” signed by Research and Destroy, can be appreciated as a poetic expression of this occupation strategy. In their words:

We demand not a free university but a free society. A free university in the midst of a capitalist society is like a reading room in a prison; it serves only as a distraction from the misery of daily life. Instead we seek to channel the anger of the dispossessed students and workers into a declaration of war... We must constantly expose the incoherence of the demands for democratization and transparency.

What good is it to have the right to see how intolerable things are, or to elect those who will screw us over? We must leave behind the culture of student activism, with its moralistic mantras of non-violence and its fixation on single-issue causes. All of our actions must push us towards communization; that is, the reorganization of society according to a logic of free giving and receiving.

This impassioned outcry was marked by the refusal of “social death,” the negation of the illusion of “social peace,” a strident call for “social rupture,” and an affinity with the dual strategy of “civil war” and “communization” promulgated by the Invisible Committee in their widely circulated book, *The Coming Insurrection*.

In this expansive sense, occupying a building is only a first step in overthrowing the system of social relations and structures upon which the capitalist state is built. Beyond vehement opposition to the specifics of costly new university capital projects undertaken at the expense of student learning needs, the university’s role as an already barricaded domain of class reproduction was challenged as a larger “anti-capital” project.

Not only were the coffers of the university bankrupt, but the whole idea of the university as a bastion of upward mobility and economic security had been replaced by the likelihood of a precarious economic future. Moreover, no longer could universities be conceived of as lively arenas of intellectual pursuit.

Rather, they had become professionalized, careerist, and corporate to the bone. Instead of inspiring free thinking, they had mainly become a machine for manufacturing compliant producers and consumers; offering most students only a one-way ticket on the down-bound train of debt slavery. Faced with the desolate prospects of university life and the doldrums of everyday reality, the occupation movement struck back, loudly proclaiming: “We Are the Crisis!”

Unlike the Berkeley student organizers of the Sixties, who fought under the banner of “Save The University,” these more contemporary Berkeley student radicals in the occupy movement equated the inadequacy of such a slogan with a call to “Save The Prisons.”

In fact, UC Berkeley students even uncovered a university contract with San Quentin to use prison labor for supplying the school with classroom furniture. In rejecting Mario Savio’s famous call for protesting Berkeley students in the Sixties to put their bodies on the “gears, wheels and levers” of the university apparatus to make it come to a grinding halt so that meaningful negotiations could take place; one of the Berkeley occupiers quoted in “Voices From Wheeler Hall,” a zine which is excerpted in *After The Fall*, explains:

I disagree; we must dismantle the machine, from top down, so that it never starts again. We will use what we need and take what we need. We will occupy, we will appropriate and, in turn, we will liberate.

Insurrectionary-minded occupiers contended that the idea of an occupation is to attract energy to the resistance, not to negotiate a settlement. As a student communique from occupied Kerr Hall eloquently proclaimed, “An occupation is a vortex, not a protest.”

In order to avoid cooptation, the Wheeler Hall students insisted that what was needed was “a displacement, not a fusion.” Occupiers were urged to eschew liberalism by a slogan lifted from the Invisible Committee’s pamphlet, *The Call*, and written on all the Wheeler Hall chalkboards: “Live communism, spread anarchy.”

Rather than being entrapped in the legalities of negotiations: adventure, imagination, spontaneity and unbri-dled direct action were the (mis)rule of the day. Student governance types, well-meaning but clueless faculty “ob-servers” and their conventional student activist counterparts, were all caught unawares by the uncompromising nature and seductive appeal of such a relentless strategy of “impossibility”.

Which brings us to the UK student upheaval of November/December 2010 and the second publication under review here, *A User's Guide to Demanding The Impossible*.

This book decidedly crosses out the word “demanding” in its title to make a “demand nothing” point. However, such a verbal maneuver may not be necessary since the act of demanding the impossible is by definition qualita-tively different from acting as if such demands can ever be satisfied within the rubric of “politics as the art of the possible” or enacted within the configuration of power known as the capitalist state or state capitalism.

In essence, then, to demand the impossible is to inevitably reveal the impoverished nature of what are considered to be possible demands within the confines of consensus reality. The desired outcome is not related to the idea that radical demands can be realized through the process of reform, but that demanding reform within university politics will pale by comparison to a resistance based upon the unimpeded flight of our desires.

To meaningfully address the blight of the corporate university, we must step outside of the anemic submission-inducing reach of “reasonable possibility” and into the radical realm of the impossible where the very existence of all social institutions is called into question. The point is to act on our desires without the reformist restraint of “reasonability” clouding the radical ferocity of our vision.

On December 9, 2010, the Surrealist London Action Group (SLAG) issued its “New Alexandria” tract in solidarity with the unruly UK students. It is a case in point of demanding the impossible. Defending learning while attacking the university at its core, it reads in part:

“Those of us who have worked and studied on these intellectual factory farms know that education in this country has been nothing short of a disaster. Children fed poetry that’s been reduced to the literary equivalent of Turkey Twizzlers; students told that politically flabby post-New Left bullshit is the way to make sense of ‘culture’; academics chasing ever-decreasing funding by publishing in elitist journals with ever-decreasing readerships...Defend that crap? Not on your life. Where in all of this is the beautiful savagery of the mind? Learning is no commodity: it’s an acid to burn money. It’s traced in golden words of fire that fall blazing from the page, flaring and dying as we read them, gone in an explosion of unknown suns.”

Curiously though, while the *User's Guide* does not neglect surrealism as one of the touchstones of revolt, this piercing SLAG tract goes unmentioned.

While the bulk of the book takes an “art activist” approach to the volatile political landscape of November/Decem-ber 2010, it does not fail to place such activism in the twentieth century historical context of art and revolution.

It is a history that understands that the radical romanticism of Surrealism was built upon the radical negation of Dada, embracing and then moving beyond it in the first half of that century. As the century continued to un-fold, the book moves from the Dutch Provos’ white bicycles and the Digger “free stores” of San Francisco to the Situationist-inspired salvos of King Mob in the UK, from the anarchic “gnome” gatherings of the Orange Alter-native in Poland to the disruptive anarchist public theatre of the Metropolitan Indians of Italian Autonomia, and onwards from the carnivalesque Reclaim the Streets dance-parties to the technologically savvy hacktivism of the Electronic Disturbance Theatre in the Nineties.

By the early part of the 21st century, widespread UK student unrest boiled over in opposition to proposed edu-cational cutbacks by an austerity-minded government in the face of a banking meltdown that, as many students were quick to point out, was not a crisis that they had caused.

Actions, including vehement protests and building occupations at a number of universities, were initially ig-nited by the November 10, 2010 trashing of 30 Millbank in Westminster, which houses the headquarters of the Conservative Party, involving serious property destruction and clashes with the police.

These events were followed by the November 24 Whitehall march against fees and cuts which involved a massive student walkout from all educational institutions and an attempted protest march from Trafalgar Square to the Houses of Parliament which the police largely blocked.

Later, on December 9, the date the aforementioned SLAG tract was circulated, students successfully marched from Bloomsbury to Parliament Square, opposite Parliament where they pushed over the metal barriers and oc-

cupied the central grassy area of the square. Several thousand demonstrators were kettled and beaten with truncheons by the police.

Elsewhere in Central London, masked rebels smashed all of the windows on the ground floor of Her Majesty's Treasury. On Regent Street, protesters attacked a limousine carrying Charles, the Prince of Wales, and Camilla, Duchess of Cornwall, catching the blue-blooded parasites by surprise on their way to the evening's Royal Variety Performance at the London Palladium.

It was in the December whirlwind of these Days of Action that the slim back-pocket-sized *User's Guide* was written by Gavin Grindon and John Jordan. In it, they specifically thank "the crew of the occupied and soon to be occupied art schools who inspired us to get this out."

Like *After The Fall*, it grew directly out of the struggle, but in the case of the *User's Guide*, it specifically showcased the new creative forms of "intervention art" developed by activist-oriented artists. The publication's aim was to introduce such interventionist practices to a larger community making them readily available to rebellious students for tactical discussion and possible inclusion in a direct action repertoire informed by both conflict and creativity. Accordingly, as was *After The Fall*, it too was initially distributed for free as an anti-copyright publication. Though it had its practical side, the book's intended purpose was not purely functional:

This guide is not a road map or instruction manual. It is a match struck in the dark, a homemade multi-tool to help you carve out your own path through the ruins of the present warmed by the stories and strategies of those who took Bertolt Brecht's words to heart: "Art is not a mirror held up to reality, but a hammer with which to shape it."

More than just a portable recipe book for art activism, the *User's Guide* does not shy away from questioning the pretense of the art world and seeks to locate a politically-engaged art beyond mere representation.

The book draws twenty-first century examples from the anarchy-feminist street art projects of Mujeres Creando in Bolivia, the escrache-based exposes of Grupo de Arte Callejero in Argentina, the zany anti-globalization provocations of the Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army, the Centre For Tactical Magic's Goldmanesque re-imagining of ice cream vans as vehicles for direct action dispensing not only ice cream but radical literature and gas masks, summit-hopping book blocs marching side by side with black blocs, Yo-mango's subversive assaults on consumer culture in Spain, the fabrication of shields by Climate Camp activists in London which were designed with huge haunting photographs of climate refugees emblazoned upon them so that the TV cameras would catch the police violently striking these faces with their batons, and the corrosively humorous pranks of the Yes Men everywhere.

Here is a book guaranteed to offer food for thought, inspiration and an open invitation to further elaboration.

One such example chronicled within the *User's Guide* emanates from the producers of the book project itself, the Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination (Labofii). In 2009, they were invited to hold a workshop on art and activism at the Tate Modern, entitled "Disobedience Makes History," and end with a public performance intervention.

However, unlike some practitioners of "intervention art" who are reluctant to directly take on the art world itself, Labofii did not cringe at biting the hand that feeds them. Once they had accepted the Tate's offer, they were duly informed by email that as a strictly enforced rule no artistic intervention could be made against the museum's sponsors, one of which happened to be British Petroleum.

However, Labofii decided instead to use the email as material for the workshop. Projecting it onto the wall, they asked workshop participants whether they should obey the curator's edict, and deciding not to do so, proceeded to set up an art activist collective with the aim of revealing the Tate's golden handshake deal with the oil barons as a death grip on artistic freedom.

A few months later, the newly established collective poured hundreds of liters of black molasses inside and outside the museum during its party in celebration of twenty years of BP sponsorship, which, as objective chance would have it, was being held while oil infamously gushed from the disastrous explosion in the Gulf of Mexico of an offshore BP oil rig.

As this intervention indicates, the *User's Guide* calls for a decommodified art beyond the self-congratulatory cynicism of the art world. In the authors' terms, what is needed is an art which allows us "to find each other amongst the ruins."

Rather than being a “political” art that is safely enclosed in a museum where it becomes “a cool cultural mask over the catastrophe that is capitalism” and “an aesthetic amplifier of the status quo,” they championed a disobedient “art that does not show the world to us, but changes it.”

The task of radical artists in this regard is to create such art in order to dismantle and reinvent daily life so as to “step into the cracks where another world is coming into view.” Beyond the now cliched bumper sticker slogan, “Another World is Possible,” lies the subversive power of impossibility. Or, as some California students so bluntly put it in *After The Future*, “Another world is not possible. It is necessary.”

Both artists and university occupiers (two categories that are not mutually exclusive) are urged by the authors to simultaneously refuse the dictates of capitalist state institutions and build places where the subversive power of the imagination can flourish. Ultimately, the goal is not only the abolition of the corporate university, but self-abolition.

As the *User's Guide* explains:

If you're opposed to the logic of turning art or education into a market, you are already opposed to yourself as defined by that logic: you are not the artist, student or worker that capital needs. This means you have already begun to abolish yourself.

The next step then becomes one of abolishing art itself as a specialized activity that can only be undertaken by university-credentialed art professionals endowed with a closely guarded investment in cultural capital. The burning question of how we bring to life Lautreamont's prescient watchwords: “Poetry must be made by all,” still hangs fire.

In this regard, we must be wary of formulating an unnecessarily heroic vision of the art activist as “engineer of the imagination.” In order to avoid the trap of elitism, perhaps it might be useful to envision the “reverse imagineering” practices of pirating, appropriating and recreating in a fluid bottom-up context.

If professionalism is rooted in the idea of monopoly, then the sharing of the stories, ideas and tactics of art activism in the manner of the *User's Guide*, is, at its heart, a de-professionalization project. As such, it was undertaken not to glamorize a new brand of activist art stars, but to freely disseminate the aesthetics and skills of politically-engaged art activism so that others might feel inspired to pick up the torch and run with it. Rather than the cultivation of celebrity and audience passivity, the assumption at work here is that creative participation is the key to opening the floodgates of the radical imagination.

In a closing note, written in an explicitly surrealist context, the authors expound upon the complex nature of “demanding the impossible” that is so crucial to their project. In doing so, they redefine hope in the non-messianic immediacy of not knowing what will happen next and echo the concerns of the California student occupation statements in *After The Fall*:

Some might decry us as naive romantics, utopian dreamers, but we know that to limit demands to what seems ‘realistic’ is a guaranteed way of reducing what is possible. Protest is beautiful because it breaks open the routines of space and time, to allow the unimaginable to flourish, it's beautiful because at its heart is hope, hope that, as the Surrealists understood so deeply, dream and action can be reunited.

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