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Performing vs. the Insurmountable: Theatrics, Activism, and Social Movements

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In recent years, observers have come to describe street protest and theatrical activism as both ineffective and even counterproductive (Weissberg). "[T]he protests of the last week in New York were more than a silly, off-key exercise in irrelevant chest-puffing. It was a colossal waste of political energy," Matt Taibbi wrote shortly after the Republican National Convention in 2004. Taibbi was not alone in thinking this way. "It would be reasonable to observe this glaring lack of effect and conclude there's no use, one might as well stay home," Karen Loew wrote after Bush's second inauguration, a few months later. Others would suggest the methods used by street activists involve multiple meanings requiring closer scrutiny (Chvasta; Shepard, *Queer, Play*). Still others would suggest such theatrics require both distinct tactical application (Bogad, "Tactical," *Electoral*) as well as critical re-assessment (Duncombe, *Dream*). As Taibbi noted, the "fun" which takes place during demonstration is no longer considered, "to be a

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threat." Yet, rather than be concerned, today's movement activists seem fixated on the "play" of street theatrics, pranks, and demonstrations.

The following essay considers the pros and cons of the use of street theater and ludic antics in social movements. For many involved, play is viewed as a resource with many applications for movement activity. Yet, it is also an area requiring explanation. At its most basic level, play as political performance is about freedom—of the mind and the body—from any number of repressive forces, from the state to the super ego, the cop in the head. The meaning of play for social movement performance includes countless dimensions. On a very practical level, libratory play is recognized by many movement activists as a means to elude repression. It helps activists disarm and empower rather than engage in a street fight. It also draws audiences. In the face of duress, social movement activity is perhaps most useful in helping social actors cultivate and support communities of resistance. Here, new communities form, counterbalance and engage rather than cower in the face of often insurmountable political opponents. It is not a new phenomenon. Take the Diggers who took St. George's Hill in 1649. While they failed to hold their autonomous zone, "what these outcasts of Cromwell's New Model Army did hold dear was the community created in their act of resistance; it was a scale model of the universal brotherhood they demanded in the future," Steve Duncombe writes (*Cultural* 17). The authors of this essay have had similar experiences with social and cultural play and community building. To make sense of these experiences, we have employed an autoethnographic approach to writing this paper, integrating both participant observation and theoretical developments in order to cultivate an understanding of play and activist performance (Butters; Hume and Mulock; Juris; Lichterman; Tedlock).

There are many forms of play, including the famous Diggers' land occupation, drag, ACT UP zaps, the use of food and mariachi bands in the Latino community, dance dramaturgy, culture jamming, the carnival, and other forms of creative community-building activities. It is the exhilarating feeling of pleasure, the joy of building a more emancipatory, caring world. There are many ways of thinking about play. For Richard Schechner, play involves doing something that is not exactly "real." It is "double edged, ambiguous, moving in several directions simultaneously" (79).

While there are any number of ways to conceptualize play, most studies begin with Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens: a Study of the Play Element in Culture,* a work which has inspired social movement players for decades. His definition encompasses many of the threads established in this opening discussion. These include the conception of play as "a free activity standing

quite consciously outside the ordinary life as being 'not serious,' but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly." He continues that play "promises the formation of social groupings which tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress their difference from the common world by disguise or other means" (5). It is a space for "free activity." In this way, play is an ideal response to political repression.

Play is useful for social movements in countless ways. The following considers four ways play contributes to campaigns. (1) It offers a generally—but not always—non-violent way of engaging power, playing with power, rather than replicating oppression patterns or power dynamics. Here, play allows social actors to disarm opponents. The results are new forms of social relations. (2) It serves as a means for community building. For many, the aim of movement organizing is to create not only an external solution to problems, but to create communities of support and resistance. Herein, play takes on a prefigurative community-building dimension. (3) It effectively supports a coordinated organizing effort. At its most vital, play is at its most useful as part of an effort which includes many traditional components of an organizing campaign. Without such a integration, play is less useful; it becomes a form of repressive de-sublimation (Marcuse). (4) Yet, at its most vital, play invites people to participate. Between its use of culture and pleasure, it engages and intrigues. Through its low threshold means, it allows new participants into the game of social activism.

These four components can be easily integrated into overarching movement strategies. From here, play and political performance are understood as both affective tools and as instructive devices capable of allowing activists to generate an image of both what is wrong with the world and what a better world might look like. For example, Martin Luther King, Jr. was profoundly effective at using street theatrics and media to demonstrate what was wrong with apartheid in the U.S. Archival video of Civic Rights demonstrations includes images of those both enduring state sanctioned violence and dancing and singing (McAdam; Payne). Throughout such campaigns, social actors supported each other in taking on daunting targets and violent repression through earnest and occasionally silly renditions of traditional church hymns, with lyrics sometimes sardonically updated for the contemporary struggle (Reed). Perhaps more than anything, play and political performance create spaces where activists feel compelled to challenge seemingly insurmountable targets.

The following is divided into two parts: the first lays out the philosophical underpinnings for the use of performance and theatrics within the process of social change activism; the second half includes case

examples from AIDS, global justice, and environmental movements demonstrating the effective use of play and performance in social change activism. These case narratives illustrate ways activists borrow from a 'politics of play' to take on 'the insurmountable' over and over again.

Theoretically Speaking

There are countless ways to think about theatrical forms of protest. Over the last decade conversations about the implications of ludic organizing have expanded exponentially. Countless actors have chimed in about the relative meanings, possibilities, and limitations of playful and theatrical brands of activism (e.g., Bogad, "Tactical," *Electoral*; Duncombe, *Dream*; Ehrenreich; Shepard, "Play," "Joy," *Play*, *Queer*; Solnit). Much of this conversation builds on a generation of work among scholars and activists to create space for cultural influences within movement practices (Darnovsky et al; Duncombe, *Cultural*; Reed). Herein activists and scholars alike organized to support places for a range of affects, including feelings of pleasure, freedom, and lighter, more playful liberatory dynamics within movements practices and scholarship. The play and the process of movement activity began to gain recognition. Means and ends were no longer considered mutually exclusive terms.

Yet, questions about political efficacy were never far behind within such debates (Chvasta). Many wondered if there was anything valid about tactical frivolity in movement organizing. Some suggested approaches to activism that depart from redistribution of resources get in the way of real world organizing (Weissberg). After all, many of the newer culturally based approaches stood in stark contrast to dominant approaches to social movement scholarship which emphasize rational choices, collective behavior, and allocation of resources (McAdam et al). Well into the 1960s, studies of movements tended to focus on the dynamics of crowds, mobs, and riots (Le Bon). The frenzy of human collective life was generally viewed as a form of deviance. While meaning could be found in expressive behavior during street demonstrations, including aspects of ritual, dance, and the Dionysian frenzy (Ehrenreich), most crowd theorists argued such activities reflected a lack of rational thinking (Jasper). Instead critical consideration of the meanings of irrational acts remained within the providence of psychoanalysis, which found its way into Frankfurt School social theory (Marcuse). And social movement scholars took the dim view of crowd behavior. Of course there is a reason for this. Throughout the post-war era, many were profoundly influenced by awareness that dark

manifestations of collective behavior propelled the rise of the Third Reich and the Cold War (Goodwin). Critics would charge that more playful and theatrical approaches to social movement practice are frivolous, for they precluded the possibility for social and political transformation (Ebert). Critics would argue organizing approaches that include elements of spectacle, pleasure, play or theatrics are actually counterproductive (Weissberg). Yet, others disagree with this view.

The limitations of the rationalist view of social movements are many. In the first place, humans do not always behave in a rational fashion. "[A]ny game has its thrills," movement scholar Jasper notes (26). The joy of protest is often why people get involved. The rationalist view fails to acknowledge the motivations and pleasures many find in the chase to create a better world. "Those who would reduce social movements to instrumental actors engaged in power struggles on a battlefield called 'political opportunity structure' have made an ontological choice," Eyerman and Jamison argue (368). Such theorists have made a decision "to see the world in terms of structures and processes which exist outside the meanings actors attach to them. For them the world consists of causal connections between dependent and independent variables, not the struggles of real human beings" (368).

The most consistent criticism of play in movement building is that ludic activity is a class-bound form of engagement; this is something affluent middle-class youth have the leisure time to enjoy. The assumption seems to be that poor people do not want or need to play. Andrew Boyd, the founder of the Billionaires for Bush, Steve Duncombe, one of the founders of New York's chapter of Reclaim the Streets, and I (Shepard), had to confront a number of these sorts of questions after we all presented on activist performance, play, and fantasy during a conference in the fall of 2006. On the train back to New York, we reflected on this line of criticism. Andrew Boyd recalled a story from Paris 1968. "All power to the imagination" was the graffiti painted on the streets of Paris in 1968. Throughout that heady period many suggested this view betrayed the class struggle of the movement. "All power to the workers," a particularly class-minded radical insisted. Boyd recalled Paul Virilio responding to this myopic charge: "Comrade, are you saying the workers don't have an imagination?" Such give and take is nothing new.

Yet, even a cursory glimpse of the history of social movements indicates play is anything but a class-bound activity. Certainly, the Situationists, Yippies and early Gay Liberationists are famous for articulating a praxis involving both a theory and practice of play, using

humor, sex, culture, and fun to advance movement aims (Plant; Shepard, *Play*, *Queer*). Yet, this was by no means exclusive to these strains of the movement. Letters from civil rights workers who participated in the Freedom Summer of 1964, indicate social eros, dancing, drinking beer, singing, hooking up, and an unbridled sense of social connection among workers were just part of the "Freedom High" of the civil rights years. The struggle to break down racial, social, cultural, and sexual barriers included a great deal of play and sexual experimentation. The Freedom High was part of the rush of recognizing it was actually possible to build a path toward a more emancipatory framework for social relations (McAdam 72). It was part of the high octane pleasure of building a better world.

For many in these movements, play was part of what sustained the activism. Mickey Melendez of New York's Young Lords, a Latino liberationist direct action group which organized in one of the poorest congressional districts in the United States, recalls the music at the meetings, the dancing and performances by Tito Puente at fundraisers to raise money to pay for lawyers to keep activists out of jail.

Decades later, I (Shepard) worked in a syringe exchange program across the street from the Lincoln Hospital the Youngs Lords took over in 1970. Only three decades later, the neighborhood included the highest rates of homeless people coping with HIV and chemical dependency in the city. We used to play drums and read poetry during our tenant advisory meetings or memorials after one of our members had shuffled off this mortal coil. We knew we would make it through the moment of despair and grief when a chuckle or smile crept into the group. And members knew they had faced the negative, moved through it, and come out the other side. In this way, we accomplished the task that Hegel laid out as the challenge for modern life some two centuries ago. Marshall Berman explains, "if we can 'look the negative in the face and live with it,' then we can achieve a truly magical power" and "convert the negative into being" (29). Play sustains people even in the most difficult of circumstances.

In the midst of a bloody civil war in El Salvador a group of women organized three committees per refugee camp: one for education, another for construction/sanitation, and a third for joy—the *comité de alegría* (Duncombe, *Dream*). Joyful engagement takes place in the unlikeliest places.

For example, during Herodotus' *Persian Wars* the leaders devised an innovative approach to cope with famine. "The plan adopted during the famine was to engage in games one day so entirely as not to feel any craving for food," Herodotus explains, "and the next day to eat and abstain from games. In this way they passed eighteen years" (quoted in Csikszentmihalyi

ix). These devised games Greeks play to this day. While the account is fictional, the point is instructive. People "get immersed in game so deeply as to forget hunger and other problems," Csikszentmihalyi notes. "What power does play have that men relinquish basic needs for its sake?" (ix). Play functions as a striking tool for movement activity.

Yet, to date, no consensus has emerged. Writing about contemporary ludic performance groups such as the Billionaires for Bush and Ya Basta!, philosopher Simon Critchley explains:

> These comical tactics hide a serious political intent: they exemplify the effective forging of chains of equivalence or collective will formation across diverse and otherwise conflicting protest groups. Deploying a politics of subversion, contemporary anarchist practice exercises a satirical pressure on the state in order to show that other forms of life are possible. Picking up on my thoughts about humor, it is the exposed, self-ridiculing and self-undermining character of these forms of protest that I find most compelling as opposed to the pious humorlessness of most forms of vanguardist active nihilism and some forms of contemporary protest (I name no names). Groups like the Pink Bloc or Billionaires for Bush are performing their powerlessness in the face of power in a profoundly powerful way. Politically, humor is a powerless power that uses its position of weakness to expose those in power through forms of self-aware ridicule. This is why the strategy of non-violent warfare is so important. (124)

Critchley is not unique in suggesting that the anti-heroic aesthetics of ludic or theatrical activist practices are indeed appealing for those who have grown weary of the over-used rhetoric of the Left. Social critic Douglas Crimp found this aspect of ACT UP's organizational culture tremendously refreshing. It allowed him to stay engaged with the group for over five years, as the AIDS carnage ran rampant without a cure in sight (Shepard, *Queer*; Takemoto). And of course, it is just this recognition of the need for emotional sustenance which eludes the analysis of critics of ludic protest (Weissberg). For this reason, a brief elaboration of the political efficacy of ACT UP's ludic politics is included in this essay. The first case study does just this.

Case Narrative One: ACT UP and a Struggle Against the Insurmountable

A constant critique of playful radical street performance is that it "trivializes the issue." Yet, there is a long history of satirizing the powerful that spans all of human civilization. Sometimes you need to take a situation seriously enough to *make fun of it*. Yet, not everyone recognizes this point. Weissman (2005), for example, suggests that while the group the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) did good work, their use of strategic dramaturgy, media zaps, disruptions, and sexual politics was counterproductive. Others would argue that sexual politics was part of what helped the group remain vital (Shepard and Hayduck; Shepard, *Queer*, "Joy"; Takemoto). After all, two decades ago, the possibilities of a queer public sphere were profoundly restricted. The AIDS crisis seemed be growing exponentially while queers and other social outsiders were left to make do as political acceptance for their plight dwindled. The Supreme Court's 1986 *Bowers v. Hardwick* sodomy law decision further consigned queer sexuality to the realm of outlaw status. To sustain their fight against this ongoing attack, queers would look to civil society, to the public sexual sphere created during the gay liberation years. Movement tactics included playful queer aesthetics highlighting visibility (Berlant and Freeman).

"It wasn't like we were ending anything at first," Mark Harrington says, "but as we became more and more sophisticated with tactics, we began to

have an impact." The low-threshold, playful group approach helped members with no political experience find a distinctly queer entry point into a political struggle that otherwise might have felt insurmountable. "In the face of the death, it was extremely joyous and a release to feel that love with others," Harrington recalls. "Playfulness was an extreme part of it." This playfulness took countless forms: "If people were angry, they would plot a zap—sometimes even an unauthorized zap in the meeting, sometimes with others. In other cases, they'd wear drag in an office takeover." In difficult times, many activists have borrowed from and sustained themselves by incorporating ludic elements within their performances and campaigns. While sustained by the play of ACT UP, Harrington worked with Jim Eigo and other members of ACT UP's Treatment and Data Committee (T&D) to help advance some of ACT UP's greatest successes, including FDA revision of approval for drugs for those in critical need (Epstein, 1996). Harrington's T & D colleague Jim Eigo was one of the most articulate voices for the need to link AIDS advocacy and sexual politics (Shepard, *Queer*). Play became integral to creating a community of resistance.

For many years, a politics of play helped those dealing with the AIDS crisis first engage and then stay engaged within the struggle. In 1989, Tim Miller, a Los Angeles-based performance artist, found ACT UP's blend of anger and sexual energy a potent combination. Further, the group offered an outlet for passions which otherwise felt like they would be wasted. "[W]ho had time to worry about that eccentric uncle when all that made sense was ACT UP?," he wrote. "We focused our attention on trying to stop AIDS. We also saved quite a bit of energy for acting out" (Miller 203). For Miller, ACT UP seemed to channel a queer energy not witnessed since the days of Harvey Milk: "The kettles were boiling as a generation of good queer boys and girls got gnarly" (203). The energy of ACT UP was an ideal response to the isolation and panic that had characterized so much of the early response to the epidemic. "ACT UP mobilization was exactly what I had been waiting for," Miller recalled. "At last, my lefty programming and queer erotics had a social movement to saddle up with" (203). Before ACT UP, the fear of AIDS had been "paralyzing." Yet, with ACT UP, "suddenly, those scary worries inside were not alone. These feelings were able to come out, linked with other people who had also been crushed under the same fears" (203). The group offered an alternative set of outlets for what otherwise would have been a horrendous situation, a means to take on the insurmountable. Miller writes, "After many years of being so damn afraid, I felt great getting pissed off instead" (203).

Still, for many years, ACT UP's struggle felt like a battle against an almost unbeatable target. "Of course with any direct action activism, you are fighting against something which is really going to beat you," reflected queer activist Mattilda (2007), who has worked with a number of queer direct action groups. Faced with some of the largest activist targets of our era—AIDS, police brutality, gentrification—Mattilda has remained a committed activist for nearly two decades. In many ways, the carnivalesque spectacle of ACT UP and the ludic tradition in which it takes part invites social actors to challenge the insurmountable (Schechter).

"This insurmountable thing is where cynicism comes from," Circus Amok founder Jennifer Miller concedes. "It's insurmountable, we've got to become capitalists." Yet, the flip side of such thinking remains. The logic of play is that it defies conventional logic. It invites people to stay engaged within subjects that are far more serious than can be dealt with in an earnest fashion. Some issues are far too important to be dealt with a straight face. Rather, jokes, ridicule, and play may be the most post potent tools activists have, especially in the face of overwhelming obstacles. Such a spirit of defiance is sometimes all one can do; sometimes it is just enough. "That opens up space for activism," Miller reflects. It makes the predictable not so predictable for just a minute. "It makes working in the face of the insurmountable a reasonable choice [. . .] It's not the most efficient thing to do, but its the only thing we can do [. . .] there is so much joy in being able to shout in our anger together."

While many of those collective screams occasionally felt futile, the world felt their impact. Public opinion of queer people was vastly transformed during the years between ACT UP's formation in 1987 and the second Bush administration. In 2003, for example, a majority of the U.S. Supreme Court ruled against sodomy statutes with the *Lawrence v. Texas* decision, thereby overturning the 1986 *Bowers v. Hardwick* decision that so galvanized earlier queer activists. Certainly, the decision was not perfect. Queer activists were quick to recognize that the law only supported private—not public—behavior. Nevertheless, it was still a powerful victory. If ever there was a case that demonstrated the vitality of social movement work, this was it. In 1986, a far more progressive Supreme Court voted in favor of criminalizing homosexual acts in private spaces. Over the ensuing twenty years, the American public witnessed wave after wave of queer activism and visibility. Along the road, a counter-public message moved from the margins to the center of public debate. The counter-public narrative—that queer sexuality is a healthy part of the pursuit of happiness in a pluralistic democracy—became a winning script. In his majority

opinion in the *Lawrence* case, Reagan appointee Anthony Kennedy simply stated that he knew homosexuals and felt he could not rule that what they did at home constituted a criminal act. It all sounded very reasonable. But only seventeen years earlier, a similar court was not able to conclude that this was a legitimate position. The difference is, between 1986 and 2003, ACT UP had used every tool at their disposal, including radical play, to advance a less homophobic, more inclusive narrative of queer life. And they were not alone; radical queer groups, including Queer Nation, to liberal democratic organizations, including National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, worked in concert to change perceptions of gay people. For Mary Bernstein, the *Lawrence* decision was a discursive victory: Through nearly two decades of challenging public beliefs, the views of society were radically changed in profound and unexpected ways. "[T]heorists must understand not only a movement's political impact, but its mobilization and cultural effects, including the creation of an alternative discourse, community-building, and empowerment as well" (6). Sometimes social change is more than achieving an immediate policy goal within a desired time frame. As Bernstein explains, "Political campaigns are often as important for their effect on communities, organizations, and identities as they are for the laws they change" (6).

Limitations, Misunderstandings and Possibilities

Still, supporters of ludic or theatrical forms of protest are painfully aware of the inherent limitations of such tactics. "[H]istory is habitually written by people with the guns and sticks and one cannot expect to defeat them with mocking satire and feather busters" (Critchley 124). In her new work, *Dancing in the Streets: A History of Collective Joy*, Barbara Ehrenreich critically assesses the limitations of "collective joy" within movement activity. Such play cannot be consistently relied upon to stop tyrants as Victor Turner assures us, at least not in and of itself. And sometimes it merely releases a pressure value, creating a space for leisure, which allows the system to continue unchecked (Bogad, *Electoral*). Marcuse would call this repressive desublimation. While these critiques are familiar, they remain important. In order to best make use of ludic protest as a tool, it helps to understand the best practical applications of such work. "[W]hatever its shortcomings as a means to social change, protest movements keep reinventing carnival," Ehrenreich writes (259). "Almost every demonstration I have been to over the years—antiwar, feminist, or for economic justice—has featured some element of the carnivalesque: costumes, music, impromptu dancing, the

sharing of food and drink" (259). Such forms of play and civic direct action are a vital part of movement building, and organizers recognize it as a useful complement to an ongoing campaign. Without it, movements are often limited. Ehrenreich explains, "The media often derides the carnival spirit of such protests, as if it were a self-indulgent distraction from the serious political point. But seasoned organizers know that gratification cannot be deferred until after the 'revolution'" (259). So movements have aimed to put the right to party on the table. Such a strategy also increases means and motivation for long-term participation.

It is a point cultural theorist Stephen Duncombe (*Dream*) also maintains. Without some form of pleasure involved in organizing, people simply fail to stay involved over the long term. From 1998 through 2004, Duncombe helped organize New York City's Reclaim the Streets (RTS) group, which held street parties as political interventions. The parties were also used to communicate political messages through an "ethical spectacle." With RTS, the point of such acts of collective joy was twofold: to sustain the troops and speak to multiple publics. "People must find, in their movement, the immediate joy of solidarity, if only because, in the face of overwhelming state or corporate power, solidarity is their sole source of strength," Ehrenreich concurs (259). This is a point which critics continue to ignore.

For Duncombe, the point is simple: those who would argue that civic action and political performance are ineffective exhibit a shocking naiveté as to how politics, particularly politics within a democracy, actually work. Politicians and policymakers rarely make decisions and move into action simply because a logical and rational case is laid out before them by reasonable people. They most often act because of private or public pressure, that is, private rewards or punishment from interest groups (e.g., campaign contributions) or public displays of support or rejection by constituents and voters (public protests or polling data demonstrating public opinion). These "outside" forces, in turn, are not basing their support or censure of an issue or individual solely on reasoned estimation, but instead, on ideologies and interests, passions and desires. To believe that effective politics takes place outside the sphere of public performance and spectacle, desire and fantasy is, itself, a fantasy. Criticism of political performance also betrays an anti-democratic bias: that politicians and policymakers *should* make decisions uninfluenced by popular sentiment and support. There's a certain integrity to this argument when it is made by anti-democrats like Edmund Burke, the critic of the French Revolution, who

was haunted by the specter of the French hairdresser making political decisions (Burke 45), or the late Walter Lippmann who came to characterize the citizenry as a "bewildered herd" who were best relegated to being mere "spectators of action" (Lippmann 93).

But when such a criticism of "civic action" comes from thinkers who profess to believe in democracy then the argument is, to say the least, disingenuous.

Rather, politics must engage in the seemingly more ephemeral realms of desire and fantasy, spectacle and performance, if they are to take on *meaning* for people. A politics without meaning is a politics that mobilizes no one. But political meaning is empty, *unrealized*, unless expressed in policies and politics with material results. We need to think of political performance as not only reckoning back to a material real, but also moving forward as part of an overall plan to change not just the way people think, but the way they act, ultimately transforming the shape of material reality itself.

The play of movement building is most effective because it helps mobilize just such elements of the imagination. The importance of public performance dates back at least as far as the Greek city-states and probably back to the beginning of human society. A brief exploration of Aristotle's *Poetics* illustrates the point.

Aristotle wrote *Poetics* in a defensive posture. Plato had warned of the dangers of the theater as a corrupting imitative shadow of reality (itself already a mere shadow of the Ideal) in his perfect Republic. Aristotle responded, reclaiming theater as a civic therapeutic, an emotional regulator that, through identification with the tragic hero, and the resultant *catharsis*, would serve as a regulatory, emotional purgative to cleanse the civic body of unrest and antisocial attitudes and emotions. Aristotle cannily prescribed aesthetic-emotional manipulation to unify disparate individuals with conflicting interests into a conformist mass identity with a shared ideology and bounded behavioral matrix. Key elements of this dramaturgy were the idealization/identification of the noble with a tragic flaw (*hamartia*), that noble's recognition of his own flaw as the cause of his downfall (*anagnarosis*), and the audience's resultant acceptance of Fate as determined from above. In our time, Augusto Boal denounces Aristotelian drama as coercive, and notes that much of modern film, television, (and, I would add, corporate and state public performance) is based on this ancient Greek model. Clearly, the power of public performance, storytelling, and emotional manipulation has been a continuing theme in democratic theory, both for those who wish to use these elements to preserve hierarchy and social order, and for those who hope to deconstruct them, or *detourn* them

as tools for more egalitarian and liberatory purposes. Hence the imputus to play with forms of reality, transforming the public commons into a more democratic public theatre of the imagination. The subversive element of play involves its unscripted, highly improvisational nature.

Admittedly, there is a large jump from traditional theater to social movement performance. The latter occurs in bounded, sanctioned space and time, with a willing audience and closed storylines; the former involves mass creative action that contests public/private space, often happens in hostile territory, and interacts tactically and improvisationally with opponents, bystanders, and the court of public opinion. Nevertheless, that which we call *social movement dramaturgy* employs many of the same considerations as "proper" theater in its highly "improper" work, including compelling and/or outrageous characters, crafted plotlines with clear and exciting dramatic conflict, and timing, timing, timing.

One of the central arguments against radical street performance is that it 'preaches to the choir.' First, this argument ignores the countless creative actions that, far more than traditional theater, enter contested space and reach out to either disrupt, cajole, or convert the opposition and the uncommitted/neutral. More fundamental, creative performative dissent does valuable cultural work even among the 'converted.'

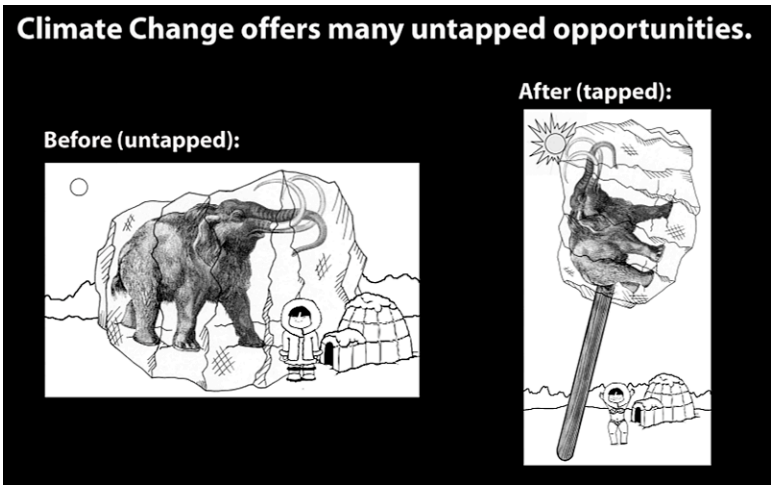
This kind of committed, bodily and even joyous group action can create denser and more engaged networks for future action. It enables activists to create visions of the world they want, and not just what they oppose. Social movements may need shared worldviews and agendas, but they thrive on shared stories and folklore. These often-outrageous events serve a purpose within movements—creating greater group cohesion through shared risks and absurd experiences, and increasing recruitment of new members by making activism joyous, creative, and participatory.

Nonviolent creative civil disobedience mixes Gandhi and Martin Luther King with Harpo and Groucho Marx. Slapstick has its role in the carnival. Even beyond 'converting' in the sense of creating frames of shared meanings/grievances for collective action, there is a meta-level at which creative civil disobedience can function, and that is at the level of *modeling citizenship*. On a nonverbal level, groups such as the Yes Men, ACT UP and the Oil Enforcement Agency demonstrate that citizenship can entail more than production, consumption, or even voting—indeed this performance demonstrates that it can be fulfilling, empowering and even enjoyable to throw one's decorated body into the gears of a war machine, to interrupt the *hegemonologue* of a corporation or regime (Bogad, "Place," "Upstaging"). The culture of apathy is sustained by a passive and paranoid culture of

fear—fear of "the Man," of sanction, fine, imprisonment, "getting on a list," and even—gasp—*ridicule*. These fears are sometimes justified, and, to be fair, some radical street performance confirms those fears; for others, that fear itself is ridiculed through visibly joyous, creative, disruptive defiance. Another world is possible—indeed another *mode of citizenship* is possible—and the latter makes the former possible. Mass performance can stretch the range of imaginable behavior in public space. In a world where de facto public space is increasingly privatized and regulated, this in itself is a valuable service.

Ironic street performance, in which the performers say one thing and mean another, calls on a deeper democratic concept: the potential of the polis to *create*, rather than simply consume. Is this realistic? Reactionaries believe that people are, well, *reactive* and easily manipulated, as was the mob during Mark Antony's oratory scene in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. However, ironic work calls on the unsuspecting passersby to decode, to engage, and to *get the joke* and maybe even banter back, rather than just consume.

Case Narrative Two: GEE-ATE



During the recent G8 conference in Germany, I (Bogad) worked with Aaron Gach of the Center for Tactical Magic on a performance about climate chaos/global warming. We set up an ice cream truck in downtown Davis, California, and announced that we were giving away free ice cream. As customers came up to the truck, I explained in corporate-huckster

costume/persona that we were employees of GEE-ATE (Global Economic Experiments-Advanced Thawing Techniques), and that we were giving away ice cream made from "guaranteed pure glacier ice—get it while it lasts!" Our handouts provided additional information about global warming and other topics, but also included our corporate slogans, "Climate Change is Sweet™" and "Go With the Floe™," and images of glaciers with bite-marks in them and the subtitle "YUM!" I called on the customers to think of the ice cream as "attitude adjustors" for global warming, and that the glacier ice melting in their mouths made their own bodies a microcosm of what was happening on the polar icecaps in a sort of climate-communion. While one woman disgustedly denounced our distribution of "saturated fat" as a horrible thing, others got in on the act, bantering with us. One man said: "You know what, I love to think that this is 50,000 years old and I'm sucking it all down." Others noted to a reporter that the satire was "tasty," "engaging and entertaining," and that "it forces you to look at the propaganda that people spew." Our favorite comment was: "I think it's a brilliant satire about modern consumption and depletion of resources, and how industry makes a positive out of negatives like global warming," (quoted in Burton 1).

Our goals were to playfully provoke conversation and thought about global warming amongst random downtown Davis passersby, and we did that with a fair number of people and received local coverage in the newspaper that detailed well enough what we did that readers could have "gotten" the joke and the point. A small, local performance engaged a general public. It invited people to participate, allowing new participants into the game of social activism.

This kind of *open* work—performance that *opens* public space rather than simply *occupying* it—can playfully *surprise*. This element of surprise is key in social movement performance, for tactical reasons, and more fundamentally in terms of personal connection, the breaking of stereotype, banality, cliché, and other mind-deadening habits of thought. The imagination must be stimulated and inspired in order to conceive of better worlds, to break paradigms. It is a show of respect for passersby when the pitch of your hustle is not obvious. Tactical carnival calls on the *polis*, or at least sections of it, to co-create the event, the shared meaning, the interpretation of "what is wrong and what must be done" (Bogad, "Tactical Carnival" 52-3).

Case Narrative Three: Cars vs. Bikes

Anthropologist Jeff Ferrell suggests that while the term hegemony is often overused, when one talks about influence of the automobile on U.S. political economy, energy, and urban policy, such a description does not feel unreasonable. Cars dominate urban space in countless ways. In spite of this, the environmental movement has aimed to challenge the very notion of a presumed right of cars to dominate public streets. The final case presented considers the ways environmental activists have made use of a politics of play and theatrics to engage others in the struggle for non-polluting transportation. The case narrative highlights the point that ludic activity offers a generally—but not always—non-violent way of engaging, playing with power, rather than replicating sources of oppression or violence.

For as many years as most New York activists can remember, Critical Mass rides have taken place in New York City (Shepard and Moore). Yet, in

the months after the 2004 Republican National Convention (RNC) in which a Friday procession of thousands of bikes seemed to catch the city off-guard, the New York Police Department started a wide spread campaign to crack down on Critical Mass. With each ride, the crackdown seemed to become more pronounced as police forces and arrests increased and activist participation dwindled into the winter months (Karmazin; Shepard, "Community"). The rides and the cat-and-mouse game between police and activists, cops and courts continued for over a year, even after a judge declared the rides could continue without a permit (Associated Press, "Judge").

In August 2005, I (Shepard) received a phone call from one of the activists who had been involved with the rides asking if I would be interested in participating in a new kind of ride organizing around clowning. I was immediately excited and somewhat scared about the specter of another clowning project. The previous summer, New York's ever-morphing chapter of Reclaim the Streets had organized a chapter of the Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army (Shepard, "Community"). One of the organizers for the group, L.M. Bogad, had helped form the group in London the previous year and would later make use of rebel clowning during the summer of 2005's G8 protests in Gleneagles, Scotland (Bogad, "Carnivals"). "It would take a lot of work and training to start another clown troop," I noted. After a pause my friend noted, "The ride is scheduled for this Tuesday. Grab your best wig."

On August 20, 2005, environmental group Time's Up! declared August 23 "Bike Lane Liberation Day" in New York City. That Tuesday, a group of bikers wearing clown costumes started a bike ride at St. Marks Church in the East Village and rode up Second Avenue. By St. Mark's Place and 7th Street, the clowns found their first culprit, a UPS delivery truck. The driver accepted his ticket in good cheer. The orange ticket placed on cars resembled an actual NYC parking ticket. It notified owners of illegally parked vehicles that "this could have been a real ticket," and listed driving rules for New York City which supported this claim. "Section 4-08(e): Stopping, standing, parking or otherwise obstructing bike lanes is prohibited. Subject to $115." From there, the clowns continued their ride through the city, giving cars parked in bike lanes fake tickets (Siegel, "Clowns"). Like the UPS driver, most drivers laughed and drove away; others engaged in a dialogue about cars in the city and the need for non-polluting transportation. When a few drivers screamed, the clowns generally honked their horns and rode away.

The following day, an activist photographer posted his photographs from the action on the Indymedia website (Askew). The photos inspired a wide range of responses discussing the role of play in relation to social movement activity. On August 24, 2005, a person identifying as a "biker" posted the following observation about the Bike Lane Liberation Clowns:

> I'm an NYC biker too but the NYC Indymedia coverage of all things biking when there is a lot of shit going on in the world makes it come off as a ridiculous youth clique and totally irrelevant. Please report on, oh, I don't know THE WARS, not a group of tattooed twenty-somethings irritating traffic. As soon as real "bike liberation" tactics are used, I'll be interested. Ridiculous.

What "biker" was missing was that many of the bike clowns found it a compliment to be called "ridiculous." Others responded that Indymedia is open for anyone to post news. Still others said that they loved the ride. "Branford and Chesterfield" wrote that they felt that the ride was, "Lovely! Oh lovely and so much lovelier!" They suggested, "Send in the clowns—never stop clowning around." Another poster, called "g," began with an Emma Goldman-like sentiment:

> If fun is not part of the movement, it will die.
> If laughter is not part of the movement, it will die.
>
> If clowns are not part of the movement, than I want no part of it.

From there, "g" reminded "biker" that those involved with New York bike activism had been arrested in the hundreds and sued by the NYPD since the RNC the previous year. Thus, there was nothing wrong with blowing off a little steam. He explained:

> Your comments are valid, but I feel you need to chill out a little. We have been chased by cops armed with deadly Vespas, helicopters, and a whole lot of intelligence and surveillance. It's been a year and we need to be able to have fun. Yes, the clown brigade had its tattooed youth, but over half of the ride was past the age of 30, and with no tattoos. Morale is a little bit higher because of the clown brigade. Thank you for your conversation. Please join us, you can help steer this movement too. Get involved and ride.

Such invitations are a core part of the politics of play. The point is of course to break down the divide between spectators and social actors. The politics of play aims to allow those facing difficult moments, such as the crackdown on Critical Mass, to stay involved.

The next morning, August 25, the debate about the "biker" post continued. In a message that began, "Great logic, biker," another poster, "asdfasdf," said: "I guess we should stop working against racism since the war is killing more people than lynchings, eh? Perhaps school lunches for the poor aren't important because global warming affects more people?" "[A]sdfasdf" followed with a call for "biker" to follow the DiY ethos and "*do* something instead of sitting at your computer being more-radical-than-thou." "[A]sdfasdf" then suggested that "biker" could always just join the Time's Up! contingent for the court hearing for bike activists who'd been arrested for riding in public in the last year. Later that day, a final clown supporter responded to "biker's" suggestions that riders get involved with something serious like antiwar activism. "[B]ent_rider" noted, "Maybe you have lost the connection between the wars and car usage, which the [Critical Mass] movement is countering. It's all connected." And "[b]ent_rider" reminded "biker" of the bike activist slogans: "No War for Oil! Ride a Bike" and "Bicycling: A Quiet Statement Against Oil Wars." Thus, as this stream of posts suggests, bike clowning is a generative embodiment of the politics of play.

At the time, bike lanes were on no one's agenda. Over the next two years, members of the Time's Up! Bike Lane Liberation Clown Block would put them there through dozens of rides. As the city shifted and convulsed, the Bike Lane Clowns commented on the scene. "Send in the Clowns: The Clown Bicycle Brigade prepares for possible transit strike by clearing cars from bike lanes," Barbara, aka Babbs the Clown, posted on the NYC Indymedia website before the December 2005 ride, slated to take place the same week as a NYC Transit Strike. "Nothing can shame a driver into moving out of the bike lane more than a pack of cheerful clowns [. . .] All drivers refusing to move will be ticketed for violating Section 4-08(e), which explicitly prohibits stopping in the bike lanes." That December night, the clowns encountered a Fed Ex truck parked in the bike lane on Broadway. After careening into the truck so rudely parked in our bike lane, we mocked the truck with the old expression, "Silly Truck, Bike Lanes are for Bikes." Some of us moved inside the double-parked vehicle and mockingly played with the gears, etc. On his return, the driver actually found it all funny. The clowns helped him unpack the boxes from the truck so he was able to move on. Much of the politics of play involves shifting debate about who

plays, on what terms, by whose rules, and on whose playing field (Schechner).

For many involved in the long stand-off between police and bike activists, the Bike Lane Liberation clowns helped bridge the space between the joy of riding free and possibilities for public-space environmental activism. Accompanied by a 'sound bike' blaring Freddie Mercury singing, "I want to ride my bicycle," the dancing Bike Lane Liberation rides brought a renewed spirit of fun to bike activism. With every new ride, the clowns better developed their moving theater, inviting more and more spectators into their performance. For the most part, the clowns operated within a 'you get more with sugar than salt' disposition. The majority of the cars were more than happy to move on. When the clowns, including this writer, started the rides, few in the city seemed to be paying attention to the need for increased bike lanes. Ever ready to play the wise fools, the Bike Lane Clowns declared they would make riding healthier and safer. The police almost never accompanied the ride, yet, this is not to say there were not a few bumps along the road.

In January 2006, the clowns scheduled yet another ride. Rather than the usual lighter fare, a darker Punch and Judy form of play manifested itself throughout the ride. A writer from the *Village Voice* accompanied us along the ride. "Most people don't even know it's illegal to park in a bike lane," the writer quoted me saying. "We want to inform people that it's really dangerous for bikers who are forced into heavy traffic. But our philosophy is to keep it playful and humorous, with the idea that you catch more flies with sugar than with salt," (quoted in Ferguson).

"But some drivers didn't find the antics funny at all," the author editorialized (Ferguson). It was true. While the clowns had talked about making use of the Monty Python, "run away fast" approach, when confronted with violence or grumpy cars, it was not always done. Instead, road rage took over both riders and clowns. Riding up Eighth Ave., the clowns attempted to move a car that wouldn't budge. When the agitated driver emerged, the clowns confronted him and offered him a ticket. "Are you serious?," he asked. Yes, we explained. "Well, I am an undercover cop. Get the fuck out of here!," he screamed in response. Shocked, a few of us fell into our Monty Python run away routine. Rather, we stumbled away in fear.

On that first ride in January 2006, most of the ride went as planned and yet, the *Village Voice* writer who had joined us remained skeptical. The writer had a long history as a tough journalist covering activism. The clowns worked in earnest to represent an authentic and compelling image of Bike

Lane Liberation Clowning. We ticketed a few cars, cajoled a few others to leave. Cheers were heard all around. As the ride careened down Fifth Ave, with Washington Square—our destination—in sight, trouble hit. A shopper double-parked outside Barnes & Noble refused to move, honking belligerently as the clowns finally rode off. "I'm just giving you a taste of your own medicine!," the *Village Voice* quoted him screaming. Further South on Fifth, the clowns the clowns careened into yet another car parked outside a rather pricey address with a view of the Washington Square arch. Unmoved by the clowns, the driver argued he had the right to impede the bike lane because he was waiting to pick up a friend. Finally his friend arrived and the clowns begged him to leave. His friend had brought the driver a cup of coffee and a cookie. The driver sat to take his time and enjoy his cookie and coffee, taunting, "Talk to the horn, baby!" One of the clowns retorted by honking his plastic baby horn in the driver's window. The driver grabbed the horn and broke it in half. Red nose and a cap resembling Mac the Knife from the *Three Penny Opera*, violence simmered in the air as Mac the Clown retaliated with a fist. Richard Schechner suggests "dark play" is a heavier kind of expression. Within this form of play, gestures that begin as forms of simple bravado, such as radical clowning, can descend into a violent form of theater as it breaks its own rules (107). And this exactly what took place on lower Fifth Avenue. The writer for the *Village Voice* was on hand to watch the whole scene. She wrote,

> [T]he driver snatched the horn and broke it, and the angry clown struck him in the face [. . .] The other clowns were horrified. "We're supposed to be peaceful gnome clowns and keep our sense of humor," groaned Monica Hunken, who had worked with New York's Absurd Response to an Absurd War as well as the Clandestine Rebel Clown Army, with her face fully pained and a traffic cone perched atop her head. "That's totally antithetical to what this ride is all about. Next time we're definitely going to have rules for bike clowns and maybe broadcast them from our sound truck before we leave" (quoted in Ferguson).

Hunken's reference to "peaceful gnomes" was inspired from her reading of L.M. Bogad's *Electoral Guerrilla Theatre,* which had been published the previous fall. Many of us had attended Bogad's book release party and reading at Bluestockings bookstore the previous fall. The work featured a case study from the 1960s Dutch anarchist group Provo, and the Kabouters, an offshoot of the group that formed in 1970, and borrowed from the friendly iconography of the gnomes in their run for vacant seats in Amsterdam's city council. The Provos' pranks have long inspired street activists. Recall their 1966 prank involving a group of young radicals giving

out pamphlets to passersby on the streets of Amsterdam without a permit, despite a Dutch law that requires police permission for the distribution of political leaflets. When the police moved in to confiscate the material, which turned out to be blank pieces of paper, the smiling Provos shouted: "Write your own manifestos!" (Bogad, "Upstaging").

Bike activists specifically look to the theatrics of the Provo and their masterful anti-capitalist, anti-establishment antics; the result often combined riots and laughter. While the immediate effect of the pranks was viewed as minimal, the group's "white bike program" aimed to decrease car traffic on the streets of Amsterdam in the long term by offering bikes painted white and free of charge as a transportation alternative. These playful pranks presented students and activists a vision of an alternate way of organizing urban life, while serving as an uncomfortable reminder of idealist dreams for the liberal government. For many, the aim of movement organizing is to create not only an external solution to problems, but to create a different kind of community of support and resistance. Play supports a prefigurative community building dimension in which activists seek to embody the image of the better world they hope to create. Inspired by the Provos' willingness to act on their views of political hypocrisy, a new wave of wildly imaginative political actors entered politics with an appetite for direct action and a distinctly rambunctious view of political hypocrisy. The prank political campaigns of the Provo, who ran for political office on a whim, produced a wide number of movement outcomes, the most strange of which was that a number were actually elected into office. Once there, some continued the antics. Others influenced the political discourse and public policy. The Dutch approach to drug use and security net provisions is one of the most extensive in the world (Bogad, *Electoral*; *History of the Netherlands*).

New York's Bike Lane Liberation Clowns borrowed a similar disposition to imagine an urban life in which cars made way for non-polluting sources of transportation, such as bikes. And like the Provo, the group was willing to use direct action to act on this vision, and the city started to take notice. Coverage of the clowns was slow—at first only a blog or two during the spring. "Clowns Take Back the Bike Lanes," a writer noted in the *Gothamist* (Chung). "Clowns Liberate Bike Lanes," Will noted on his website *NYTurf*. Later that August, a writer for *NYCstories* noticed a group of clowns attempting to push a truck out of a bike lane on Seventh Avenue on her way to work. "Despite a lot of pushing, the truck was just too big for them to move without help," she later noted in her blog ("Bicycle"). As always with these rides, the clown spectacle was most

effective when it provoked a discussion of unsafe riding conditions on New York Streets—which it usually did.

Yet, by the fall of 2006, attention to the clowns and bike lanes moved from the blogosphere into the mainstream media, and by extension, political debate. That fall, two articles on bike lines would be featured in the *New York Times* (Neuman; Schwartz). A former New York Department of Transportation assistant commissioner bemoaned not working harder to keep bike lanes in place during the 1970s in New York (Schwartz). And the *New Yorker* would highlight Times Up! for its advocacy for bike lanes and non-polluting transport in a long feature on the rise of the bike movement in New York City. "The movement hopes to save the planet by creating bike lanes and overthrowing car tyranny," (McGrath). Throughout the fall, debate about bike lanes was also featured within neighborhood papers (Vega).

In April of 2006, the City announced plans to fortify and extend the Eighth Avenue bike lane. Most of the Bike Lane Liberation rides had taken place along Eighth Avenue, so the clowns were clearly optimistic. News only got better when the NYC Department of Health issued a press release on September 12, 2006 declaring, "CITY ANNOUNCES UNPRECEDENTED CITYWIDE BICYCLE IMPROVEMENTS." The announcement specifically linked bike fatalities with lack of safety, including space on the roads for bikes. The city also issued a report, *Bicycle Fatalities and Serious Injuries in New York City 1996–2005*. In it, the city announced plans to add 200 miles of bike lanes within the city. On September 13, 2006, the *New York Times* reported, "City Hall Promises Major Increase in Bike Lanes on Streets" (Neuman).

Over the months, the rides brought a lighter tone to Times Up!, the group from which the clowns found their foundation. In difficult times, many activists have borrowed from and sustained themselves by incorporating ludic elements within their performances and campaigns. The clown rides helped support group moral in the middle of a long legal fight. This was profoundly important in the months before the city dropped its lawsuit against individual members of Times Up! in March 2007. "NYC Concedes Defeat and Drops Major Lawsuit against Times Up!," the group announced in a press release.

Spring 2007, even the *Village Voice* would change their tune about the clown rides. "Despite being led by clowns, Thursday evening's Bike Liberation Ride was a rousing success," a *Voice* writer reported in May 2007. "The group of a dozen or so riders nudged, cajoled, and teased drivers of

trucks, taxis, limos, and private cars out of dedicated bike lanes downtown," (quoted in Conaway).

On September 20, 2007 the NYC Department of Transportation announced plans for "New York City's first-ever physically separated bike lane, or 'cycle track,' on Ninth Avenue between Sixteenth and Twenty-Third Streets. The next day, the Bike Lane Liberation Clowns participated in a ride during Friday morning rush hour traffic. Yet, unlike others rides, this time there were no cars parked in bike lanes.

The Bike Lane Liberation Clowns celebrated the new Ninth Avenue bike lane in their final ride of 2007, calling for the city to fully realize their plans for more bike lanes: "Come ride with the Bicycle Clown Brigade as we clear the bike lane of motor vehicles illegally parked in our lanes."

The clown story highlights ways that play effectively supports a coordinated campaign, including those such as Transportation Alternatives and Times Up! who were making use of an inside-outside strategy to force the city to acknowledge the need for non-polluting transportation. With gas pricing increasing at astronomical rates, non-polling transportation is clearly an idea whose time has come. This is a theme that the city is increasingly recognizing.

Conclusion

The activist stage is in constant flux. As the case exemplars from the civil rights, anarchist, AIDS/queer, and environmental movements attest, savvy activists have utilized elements of play and political performance to comment on, and influence, the tragicomic dimensions of modern life. These urban actors have borrowed from a range of influences to cultivate a model of political engagement that has profoundly shifted both public discourse and policy. In order to do so, these actors have continued to reinforce the notion that political protest and street theatrics remain vital ingredients of effective organizing campaigns. Yet, such forms of political protest must constantly reinvent themselves in order to effectively mirror, comment on, and influence rapidly shifting urban geographies.

In difficult times, many activists have borrowed from and sustained themselves by incorporating ludic elements within their performances and campaigns. As a response to repression, play is useful in four distinct ways. The Bike Lane Clowns and ACT UP cases highlighted the ways play serves as an embodiment of an alternative way of being in the world, and a way of creating space and energy, thereby helping activists to stay engaged. The discussion of ACT UP and the Provos highlight the ways play offers a

generally non-violent way of engaging power, playing with power, rather than replicating sources of oppression or violence. Over and over again, the ludic, clowing trickster confuses hardened categories to foster new insights and challenge recalcitrant ways of thinking. For many, the aim of movement organizing is to create not only an external solution to problems, but to create a different kind of community of support and resistance. The Bike Lane Clown narrative also highlights the ways play serves as an effective compliment to a coordinated campaign. As the Clowns and GEE-ATE highlight, most important, play invites people to participate. Between its use of culture and pleasure, it engages and intrigues. Through its low threshold means, it allows new participants into the game of social activism.

In this essay, we have attempted to explore the relationship between the ludic and the political. Yet, if the case materials and theoretical discussion indicate anything, they suggest that if a new praxis of performance, play, and democratic world-making is emerging, it is in its infancy.

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