

embrace what the left suppressed and allow the ghosts of past revolutions to guide us from our nightmarish slumbers. But the forces which have seen off the left have also fragmented our class. With the working class defeated and divided, recent struggles, particularly those referred to in this book, have attempted to develop class consciousness.

Our contribution to this book is a contribution towards that process of developing class consciousness, to be read by those who have engaged in these struggles and who seek to go beyond their limits. As such it may sit uneasily alongside some of the other articles. This is because the very category around which this book is compiled – DIY Culture – serves to obscure the connections and possibilities which our actions anticipate.²⁶ Culture is the hook with which journalists and academics are trying to recuperate our struggles.²⁷ There is a world of difference between attempts, whatever their limitations, of people involved in struggle to reflect on it, to theorise their practice, and the efforts of academics and journalists to write about such movements. Whether hostile or sympathetic, as expressions of the fundamental division of labour in capitalist society – that between mental and manual labour – these specialists in writing and in ideas are forcing a praxis that is escaping this division back into it. For those of us engaged in the collective project of getting out of this world and into the one we all feel and know is possible, a critique of the category of DIY Culture and the recuperative project which lies behind it is becoming imperative.

The art of necessity: the subversive imagination of anti-road protest and Reclaim the Streets

JOHN JORDAN

The new artist protests, he no longer paints; he creates directly . . . life and art make One.

Tristan Tzara, Dada manifesto 1919

Since the beginning of this century, avant-garde agitational artists¹ have tried to demolish the divisions between art and life² and introduce creativity, imagination, play and pleasure into the revolutionary project. My argument is that the DIY protest movement has taken these 'utopian' demands and made them real, given them a 'place'. Inspired by and following in the footsteps of the protest movements and countercultures of the sixties, seventies and eighties, the DIY protest movement is finally breaking down the barriers between art and protest. It seems that at the close of this century new forms of creative and poetic resistance have finally found their time.

With the ecological crisis leading to what some have called a 'biological meltdown'³ and a social crisis that is demolishing what little local democracy or equality that exists, it seems that only radically creative and *passionate* strategies that bring into question every aspect of our industrial society will avert catastrophe. Ecological issues have been looked at predominantly through a scientific frame, a frame whose language tends towards the objective and arcane. DIY protest is lending poetry to this language and impassioned engagement to the science. Unlike previous eras, where there was a sense that social change would arrive eventually as a natural historical process, things are now very different. Many predictions suggest that at some time around the year 2040 the

planet's ecosystems will have lost any ability to renew themselves; this leaves us a few decades to turn things around. It is increasingly clear that there is no time to be dispassionate, that there can be no limits to the subversive imagination.

I could have chosen any of the inspirational campaigns and actions of the nineties to illustrate my thesis: the breath-taking tunnels at Manchester Airport, the extraordinary Trolhiem fort at the A30 in Devon or the monumental tree house villages at the Newbury bypass, to name but a few. The reason I am concentrating on the No M11 Link Road campaign in London and Reclaim the Streets is because of my personal involvement with them. I don't pretend to be objective; in fact the whole gist of my argument is against the notion of objectivity and calls for a society where the personal and the political, the passionate and the pragmatic, art and everyday life, become one.

Separating art from politics and everyday life is a relatively recent historical phenomenon and one that has been very much located in societies that have taken on western cultural values – the same cultural values that are at the centre of the global ecological and social problems. American Earth First! activist, film maker and medievalist Christopher Manes believes that

the biological meltdown is most directly the result of values fundamental to what we have come to recognize as culture under the regime of technological society: economic growth, 'progress', property rights, consumerism, religious doctrines about humanity's domination over nature, technocratic notions about achieving an optimum human existence at the expense of all other life-forms.⁴

If the problem is one of values – a cultural problem – it therefore requires a cultural response. It is not simply a question of science but also one of art, the process of value finding and aesthetics. Interestingly enough, the Latin root of the word aesthetics – *aesthesis* – means *noticing* the world. It's not difficult to notice the state of this world, yet so many artists immured in their enclosures of studio, gallery, theatre or museum seem blind to it. Those who attempt to push the boundaries of the revolutionary project are rapidly recuperated, neutralised, their political ideas forgotten, their work turned into commodities. Even those with the most

revolutionary cultural agendas – the Dadaists, Surrealists and even the Situationists – have become impotent figures in an apolitical art history; all three movements' radical political dreams were destroyed because they still clung on, if half-heartedly, to the question of *art*: its arguments over definitions, its non-participatory relationship with audience and many of its traditional contexts.

Art has clearly failed historically as a means to bring imagination and creativity to movements of social change.⁵ Present political conditions require a shift away from such a category; indeed a movement away from all categories, be they art, politics or science. What makes DiY protest powerful is that it 'clearly embodies a rejection of the specialised sphere of old politics, as well as of art and everyday life'.⁶ Its insistence on creativity and yet the invisibility of art or artists in its midst, singles it out as a historical turning point in the current of creative resistance. By making the art completely invisible, DiY protest gives art back its original socially transformative power; as Dubuffet said: 'Art . . . loves to be incognito. Its best moments are when it forgets what it is called.'⁷

The poetics of direct action against the M11 Link Road

Poetry is an act which engenders new realities: it is the fulfilment of radical theory, the revolutionary act *par excellence*.

Raoul Vaneigem, *The Revolution of Everyday Life*⁸

The M11 Link Road will stretch from Wanstead to Hackney in east London. To build it the Department of Transport had to knock down 350 houses, displace several thousand people, cut through one of London's last ancient woodlands and devastate a community with a six-lane-wide stretch of tarmac – at a cost of £240 million, apparently to save six minutes on a car journey. It has now been officially admitted that when it opens it will already be full to capacity. Which suggests the need for another road.

For over thirty years the M11 Link Road had been opposed by conventional political means – demonstrations, planning inquiries, lobbying and petitions. Despite the dedication of local residents

the bulldozers arrived in the autumn of 1993. So it was time to develop new creative political methods, using direct action, performance art, sculpture and installation and armed with faxes, modems, computers and video cameras. A new breed of 'artist activist' emerged whose motto could well have been creativity, courage and cheek.⁹ Their art was not to be about representation but presence; their politics was not about deferring social change to the future but about change now, about immediacy, intuition and imagination. Within the imagination of such activism 'anything is possible': you can give an old chestnut tree a letter box and an address and make legal history by transforming it into the first tree dwelling to be recognised by the courts, thus conferring squatters' rights on its inhabitants;¹⁰ or you can climb on to the roof of the Houses of Parliament to make a statement about the Criminal Justice Bill,¹¹ and get on to the front pages of every national newspaper.

Theatre director and performance theorist Richard Schechner defines performance as 'behaviour heightened, if ever so slightly, and publicly displayed; twice-behaved behaviour'.¹² The No M11 campaign was a non-stop performance. Nearly every day, we were invading work-sites and using our bodies in direct action, as tools of resistance against the cold steel of pile-drivers, cranes and bulldozers; often these acts were accompanied by the sound of drums, penny whistles and singing.

Unlike the courageous yet futile aesthetic gestures of so many performance artists who have used their bodies in acts of endurance and danger – Chris Burden nailed to a car, Linda Montana handcuffed to her lover for three days, Stelarc hanging from a crane by hooks embedded in his skin – direct action is performance where the poetic and the pragmatic join hands. The sight of a fragile figure silhouetted against a blue sky, perched dangerously high on a crane that has to stop work for the day, is both beautiful and functional. Direct action is by nature deeply theatrical and fundamentally political. The performance of climbing a crane on a building site has many different functions – pragmatism, representation, theatricality and ritual coalesce in direct action.

The pragmatic political function is that it stops work on the road and holds up the contractors. This can cost vast amounts of money; it's rumoured that a whole day of work stopped on one of the

major sites can cost in the region of £50,000. The extra security needed to keep activists off the machinery adds to this cost, as does the policing bill. All of this leads to delays and hits the road-builders where it hurts, that is, in their pockets. Its representational function is that these acts provide powerful news images, images that have enormous audiences and can bring the issues to public consciousness. Its theatrical function is that it is enacted in front of an audience, not only the media, but for local passers-by, who are often awestruck by what they see and are thus brought into dialogue about the issues. Its ritual function is that the inherent risk, excitement and danger of the action creates a magically focused moment, a peak experience, where real time suddenly stands still and a certain shift in consciousness can occur. Many of us have felt incredibly empowered and have had our lives fundamentally radicalised and transformed by these feelings. Direct action is praxis, catharsis and image rolled into one.

Direct action introduces the concept of play into the straight, predictably grey world of politics. People being chased by a bunch of uncoordinated security guards through thigh-deep mud on a construction site; figures jumping on to the machinery, laughing, blowing kisses to the digger drivers and D-locking¹³ their neck to the digger arm; driving the security off a piece of land, re-squatting it, climbing to the top of a tree and singing at the top of your voice. It's all fundamentally playful, a fantastic game: a game of cat and mouse, or, rather, David and Goliath.

Anthropologist Victor Turner wrote that

Most definitions of play involve notions of disengagement, of free-wheeling, of being out of mesh with the serious 'bread-and-butter', let alone 'life-and-death' processes of production, social control, 'getting and spending', and raising the next generation. . . . Play can be everywhere and nowhere, imitate anything, yet be identified with nothing. . . . Yet although 'spinning loose' as it were, the wheel of play reveals to us the possibility of changing our goals and, therefore, the restructuring of what our culture states to be reality.¹⁴

The playfulness of direct action proposes an alternative reality but it also makes play real; it takes it out of western frameworks of childhood or make-believe – and throws it in the face of politicians

and policy makers. The state never knows where this type of playing ends or begins; it seeps from construction site into the television screen, from the company director's office to the roof of the Transport Minister's house. Its unsteadiness, slipperiness, porosity and riskiness erode the authority of those in power.

To engage in direct action you have to feel enough passion to put your values into practice; it is literally embodying your feelings, performing your politics. The body has been marginalised by our technocratic culture. This is dangerous: it further reveals a society completely out of touch with itself and its environment; a society which prefers to use the metaphor of the machine – hard, unconnected parts – rather than the body – interconnected, fluid and soft. Direct action makes visible the devastation of industrial culture's machinery and returns the body to the centre of politics, of cultural practice.

Direct action on the construction sites of the M11 put the vulnerable body of 'nature' and the powerful machinery of 'civilisation' together in conflict. Placing your body directly in the cogs of the machine, as a point of resistance in the flow of power, transforms your own body and forces industrial society to explain itself, to justify its actions.

But direct action is not just about theatrical expressions of high energy. During any typical action on the M11, there were many moments of calm. Often after site invasions when work had been stopped dialogue would occur between activists and people working on the site, issues would be discussed, feelings shared. At the same time as these face-to-face exchanges occurred, distant communication was taking place as politicians and others with vested interests in the road viewed the images of direct action on their TV screens – images which influence and affect their agendas. Direct action thus merges the intimate personal body of dialogue and the aggressive social body of action.

Many non-industrial societies use their bodies in ritual performances as symbolic analogues for thinking about personal and social issues. Direct action highlights the body's ability to signify both self and society. Direct action takes the alienated, lonely body of technocratic culture and transforms it into a connected, communicative body embedded in society. Taking part in direct action is a radical poetic gesture by which we can achieve meaningful change, both

personal and social. Direct action is the central strategy of creative resistance, a strategy that, unlike the rationality and objectivity of most politics, revokes the emphasis on words and reason and demands the acknowledgement of intuition and imagination.

Space invaders: the transformation of Claremont Road

Are we who live in the present doomed to never experience autonomy, never stand for one moment on a bit of land ruled only by freedom?

Hakim Bey, *TAZ*¹⁵

If the direct action on building sites was a transformation of the personal and social body, the mutation of Claremont Road into a phenomenally imaginative theatre of creative resistance¹⁶ was a transformation of personal and social space.

Claremont Road was a street of thirty-five terraced houses, directly in the path of the link road. Resisting the bulldozers with the campaigners on this street was 92-year-old Dolly, who had lived there for her entire life. Leaving Claremont Road was inconceivable to Dolly. In defiance of the Department of Transport she remained there till the final minute.¹⁷ In Claremont Road every house apart from Dolly's was taken over by the campaign. One of the first acts of resistance was to close the road off to traffic and open it up to the art of living. In a superb act of *détournement*,¹⁸ the road – normally a space dominated by the motor car, a space for passing not living, a dead duct between *a* and *b* – was reclaimed and turned into a vibrant space in which to live, eat, talk and sleep.

Furniture was moved out of the houses into the road, laundry was hung up to dry, chess games were played on a giant painted chess board, snooker tables were installed, fires were lit, a stage was built and parties were held. The 'road' had been turned into a 'street', a street like none other, a street which provided a rare glimpse of utopia, a kind of temporary microcosm of a truly liberated, ecological culture.¹⁹

Some of the most aesthetic aspects of Claremont Road were the barricades, built to resist eviction by the Department of Transport.

Sunk into the tarmac, large swirls of sculptural steel cabling were juxtaposed with the carcasses of transformed cars. One with 'RUST IN PEACE' meticulously painted on its side had grass growing all over it; another was turned into a zebra crossing by being painted black and white, cut in half, each half being placed on the kerbstone with a crossing painted between them. These were not just ephemeral monuments to the end of car culture but also beautiful and effective barricades.

Many of the barricades inside the houses echoed conceptual artists' installations of the past. Yet these creative constructions were not just site-specific sculptures which resonated with and reflected the architectural structures of the houses, they were creative social transformations, imagination rigorously applied to real situations, art embedded into everyday life. These houses were not only frames for art, they were homes, real places which could have been renovated and rehoused some of the thousands of homeless young people who end up on London's streets every year.

The 1970s saw artists like Gordon Matta Clarke cut a hole through the side of a house and Walter de la Maria fill a whole room with earth. More recently Turner Prize-winner Rachel Whiteread cast in concrete an abandoned terrace house, due for demolition in nearby Hackney. In Claremont Road a hole was cut in the connecting walls of the row of thirty-five houses to create a stunning tunnel that linked several homes: a strategy to evade the bailiffs, but also a metaphor for communal living; an intervention that cuts through the isolation of individual domestic units. In some houses rooms were filled with earth, often lit by the eerie brightness of a single hanging light bulb. These earth-filled rooms disguised entrances to bunkers which held activists during the eviction. Not knowing the whereabouts of the bunkers, the bailiffs when they arrived would be forced to search with shovels, instead of tearing through the houses with a bulldozer: a much more time-consuming activity, and, at £20,000 per hour for an eviction, expensive! Other houses were packed not with concrete but with rubbish, the detritus of urban decay: washing machines, old mattresses, broken furniture and, most symbolically, old tyres;²⁰ yet more ingenious engineerings of the imagination to slow down the eviction.

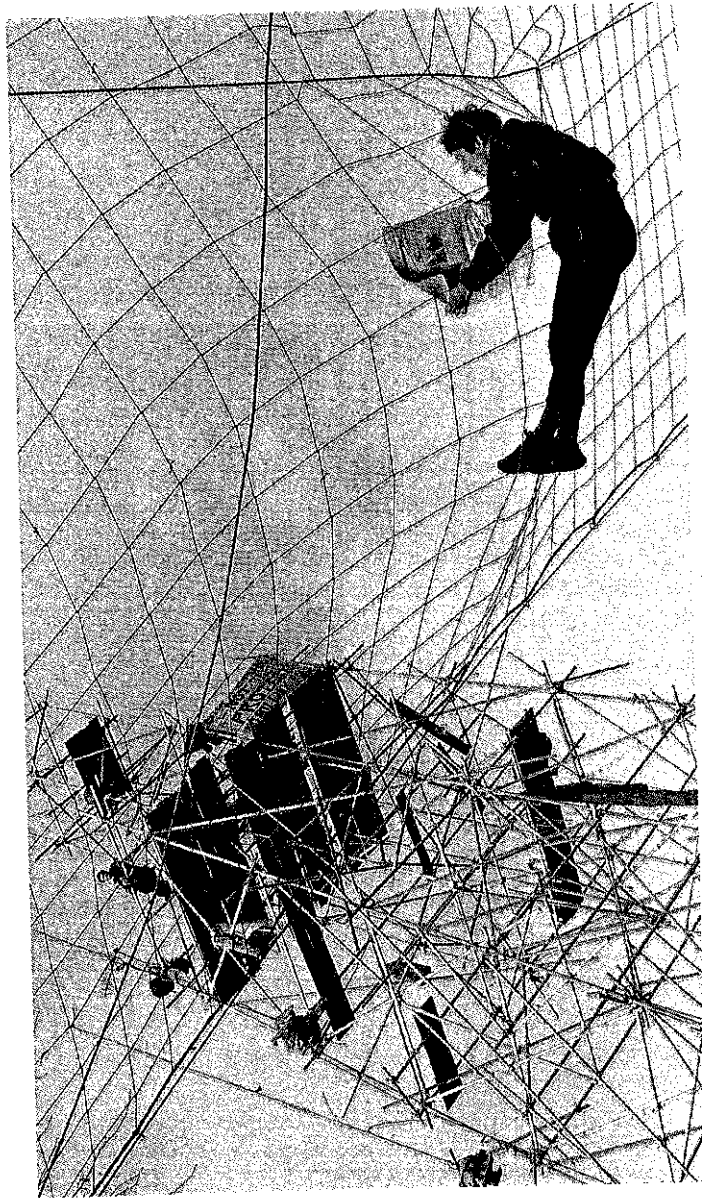
These barricades were accompanied by slogans hastily daubed in bright paint and colourful murals: horses galloping, a daisy chain

across the front of every house, a large spoof billboard proclaiming 'WELCOME TO CLAREMONT ROAD - IDEAL HOMES'. Hanging from the defended trees were shop dummies, ribbons, old televisions - a fusion of found objects each hung purposefully as symbolic statement and obstacle for the tree surgeons. A whole house was turned into 'the art house' and more traditional 'artists' filled every nook and cranny with representative images that critiqued car culture.²¹ Two cafés were opened up and in the middle of the terrace a stark banner asked passers-by to: 'IMAGINE THIS PLACE, AS A HOME, A WOOD OR THE M11 LINK ROAD.'

A final symbol of contempt for the DoT's plans to evict Claremont was the extraordinary 100-foot scaffolding tower²² nicknamed Dolly, which broke through the roof of one of the houses. Made from hundreds of 'found' lengths of scaffolding, joined together in a complex and chaotic lattice-work and looking like a cross between Tatlin's monument to the Third International and a NASA launch pad, the tower could be seen from miles away. For its short life Dolly became a local landmark which competed with the Babylon blandness of Canary Wharf on the horizon. This insane piece of crazed, brightly painted and greased scaffolding not only provided the most effective defence against the bailiffs, but also became the most powerful image for the final showdown.

For four cold days in November 1994 Claremont Road and the quarter of a mile of sealed-off streets became the site for a final operatic battle. To the sounds of rave music²³ blasting from the top of the tower, 1300 riot policemen and bailiffs trooped in and out of the area as if in a fine choreographed routine. Activists were hanging in nets suspended across the road, locked into the tarmac and on to chimney pots, sitting on the roofs, buried in the bunkers and welded into a cage at the top of the tower. Enormous 'cherry-pickers' completely surrounded by dozens of security guards moved their aerial platforms through the air like mechanical dinosaurs attempting to extract the wriggling activists from their stupendous backdrop. At night bright arc lights illuminated the enclave and an eerie silence fell. Suddenly the place felt like the film set of an apocalyptic movie. Every now and then a firework would shoot out of the tower, and a chorus of 'Power to the tower!' would ascend from the street below.

This was theatre like you'd never seen it; theatre on a scale that



'Dolly', the scaffolding tower, and an activist relaxing in the nets above Claremont Road. Photograph by Gideon Mendell

would not fit in any opera house. It was a spectacle that cost the government over £2 million to enact; a spectacle in which we were in control, for which we had set the stage, provided the actors and invited the state to be in our play; to play our game. Eighty-eight hours later the last person left was plucked off the tower; all that was left to do was destroy the street and with it not only a hundred years of local history but also an extraordinary site of creative resistance.

No sign, relic or trace of Claremont Road remains. We always knew that one day all this would be rubble, and this awareness of impermanence gave us immense strength – the impossibility of failure – the strength to move this Temporary Autonomous Zone on to somewhere else. Our festival of resistance could never be evicted. We would continue to transgress the distinction between art and everyday life. We would continue to make every political act a moment of poetry. If we could no longer reclaim Claremont Road, we would reclaim the streets of London.²⁴

Reclaiming the streets from E11 to WC1

If you want to change the city – you have to control the streets.

Reclaim the Streets, poster for first street party, May 1995

Claremont Road had provided us with a taste of a free society. Tasting such fruit is dangerous, because it leaves a craving to repeat the exhilarating experience. Within three months we re-formed the group Reclaim the Streets²⁵ and began planning the first street party.

The idea of the street party was to take over major roads in London and transform them into ephemeral festivals of resistance. The street party itself was a form 'reclaimed from the inanities of royal jubilees and state "celebrations"'.²⁶ Turning to proactive, instead of defensive, direct action enabled us to expand our remit into a wider cultural critique. Activist Paul Morozzo from Reclaim the Streets and the M11 campaign clarifies this expansion:

We are basically about taking back public space from the enclosed private arena. At its simplest it is an attack on cars as a principal agent

of enclosure. It's about reclaiming the streets as public inclusive space from the private exclusive use of the car. But we believe in this as a broader principle, taking back those things which have been enclosed within capitalist circulation and returning them to collective use as a commons.²⁷

The M11 campaign had already placed the anti-road and ecological arguments of Twyford Down in an urban, social context. This merging of social and ecological principles into a wider cultural critique was to become key in Reclaim the Streets' later alliances with striking public transport and dock workers.²⁸ For Reclaim the Streets, just getting rid of cars from the streets was not enough. Activist Del Bailie explains:

Won't the streets be better without cars? Not if all that replaces them are aisles of pedestrianised consumption or shopping 'villages' safely protected from the elements. To be against the car for its own sake is inane; claiming one piece as the whole jigsaw. The struggle for car-free space must not be separated from the struggle against global capitalism for in truth the former is encapsulated in the latter. The streets are as full of capitalism as of cars and the pollution of capitalism is much more insidious.²⁹

The first stages of uprisings have often been theatrical and carnivalesque, 'a revelatory and sensuous explosion outside the "normal pattern of politics"'.³⁰ The street party would become a revolutionary carnival in the spirit of

great moments of revolutionary history, the enormous popular festivals of the Bastille, the Paris Commune, Paris '68. From the middle ages onwards the carnival has offered glimpses of the world turned upside down, a topsy turvy universe free of toil, suffering and inequality. Carnival celebrates temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and the established order; it marks the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions.³¹

Raoul Vaneigem wrote that 'revolutionary moments are carnivals in which the individual life celebrates its unification with a regenerated society'. But

the Street Party can be read as a situ-*esque* reversal of this assertion; as an attempt to make Carnival *the* revolutionary moment. Placing 'what could be' in the path of 'what is' and celebrating the 'here and now' in the road of the rush for 'there and later', it hopes to re-energise the possibility of radical change. . . . It is an expansive desire; for freedom, for creativity; to truly live.³²

Imagine a busy high street, Saturday afternoon. Shoppers mingle on the thin strip of pavement that separates the shops from the busy road. Suddenly two cars career into each other and block the road: the drivers get out and begin to argue. One of the drivers brandishes a hammer and starts to smash up the other driver's car. Passers-by are astonished; time stands still. Then people surge out of the anonymous shopping crowd and start to jump on top of the cars, multicoloured paint is thrown everywhere. An enormous banner is unfurled from the roofs of the two destroyed vehicles – 'RECLAIM THE STREETS – FREE THE CITY / KILL THE CAR,' it proclaims. Five hundred people are now surging out of the tube station and take over the street. As the Surrealists might have said, everyday life has been penetrated by the marvellous.

Thus began street party number 1, in Camden High Street in May 1995. All afternoon 500 people danced to the sound of the mobile bicycle-powered Rinky-Dink sound system. Free food was served up from long trestle-tables that stretched down the middle of the road and children played on a climbing frame placed in the middle of a now liberated crossroad junction. As evening fell and people drifted off, riot police moved in and tried to reassert their authority, having spent the entire day without it!

Once again we were introducing play into politics, challenging official culture's claims to authority, stability, sobriety, immutability and immortality by cheekily taking over a main traffic artery. The road became a stage for a participatory ritual theatre: ritual because it is efficacious, it produces real effects by means of symbolic causes; participatory because the street party has no division between performer and audience, it is created by and for everyone, it avoids all mediation, it is experienced in the immediate moment by all, in a spirit of face-to-face subversive comradeship. The street party when it is in full swing – when thousands of people have reclaimed a major road and declared it a 'street now open'; when music,

laughter and song have replaced the roar of engines; when road rage becomes road rave, and tarmac grey is smothered by the living colour of a festival³³ – fulfils Lautréamont's desire that 'Poetry must be made by all. Not by one.'³⁴

Two months later and the street party reappeared,³⁵ this time with 3000 people dancing to two sound systems in the middle of Upper Street, Islington.

Imagine: it's a hot summer's day, four lanes of traffic move sluggishly through the grey stinking city haze, an airhorn pierces the drone of cars. Suddenly several groups of people appear running out from side streets carrying 20-foot-long scaffolding poles. In a perfectly choreographed acrobatic drill, the scaffolding poles are erected bang in the middle of the road in the form of tripods³⁶ and people climb to the top, balancing gracefully 20 feet above the tarmac. The road is now blocked to traffic but open to pedestrians. Then that spine-tingling peak experience occurs. Drifting across this extraordinary scene is Louis Armstrong's voice singing 'What a Wonderful World' – this wondrous sound is coming from an armoured personnel carrier which is now standing in the car-free street. Within minutes thousands of people have filled the road. Huge colourful banners are stretched from lampposts; some are in support of the striking London Underground workers, others just say 'BREATHE' or 'STREET NOW OPEN'; one that simply says 'CAR FREE' is made of numerous strips which stretch down to the tarmac, like tendrils, creating a soft fabric curtain across the road. During the party these tendrils are tied together to create huge bouncing swings for people to play on. Soon the street is a riot of colour; a band turns a bus stop into a stage and plays folk music; people dance; a choir sings; and a ton of sand is poured on to the tarmac, turning it into an instant beach for children.³⁷

Official festivals, displays and entertainments³⁸ are arranged in neat rectangles and straight lines: trooping the colour or a traditional march, for example. The street party, however, is vortexed, whirling; people dance on anything, climb lampposts, move in every direction: an uncontrollable state of creative chaos. The street party breaks a cultural obsession with linearity, order and tidiness, epitomised by roads and cars; as a flyer for the Upper Street party declared 'CARS CANNOT DANCE: When they move they are violent and brutish, they lack sensitivity and rhythm. CARS

CANNOT PLAY: When they diverge from the straight and narrow, they kill. CARS CANNOT SOCIALISE: They privatise, separate, isolate and alienate.' Schechner writes that

to allow people to assemble in the streets is always to flirt with the possibility of improvisation – and the unexpected might happen. . . . Official culture wants its festivals to be entertaining and ordered. When entertainment is really free, when it gets out of hand, when there is no fixed calendrical conclusion to the celebration, then the authorities get nervous. Such festivals reverberate through the population in unforeseen ways.³⁹

Later that evening the authorities did get nervous. Riot police appeared on the scene, and this time they closed off both ends of the road, closed down the tube station and aggressively pushed people down side streets. When asked why they had sealed off all exits a policeman replied, 'Because we want people to disperse.'⁴⁰ And people did, but not in the way the state expected; by the time London Reclaim the Streets threw its third party in July 1996, nine more street parties had taken place across the country, each one different, each one rooted in its locality and transforming the traffic-filled space into pleasure-filled place. All over the country people were enjoying taking to the streets and celebrating life's fertile possibilities.

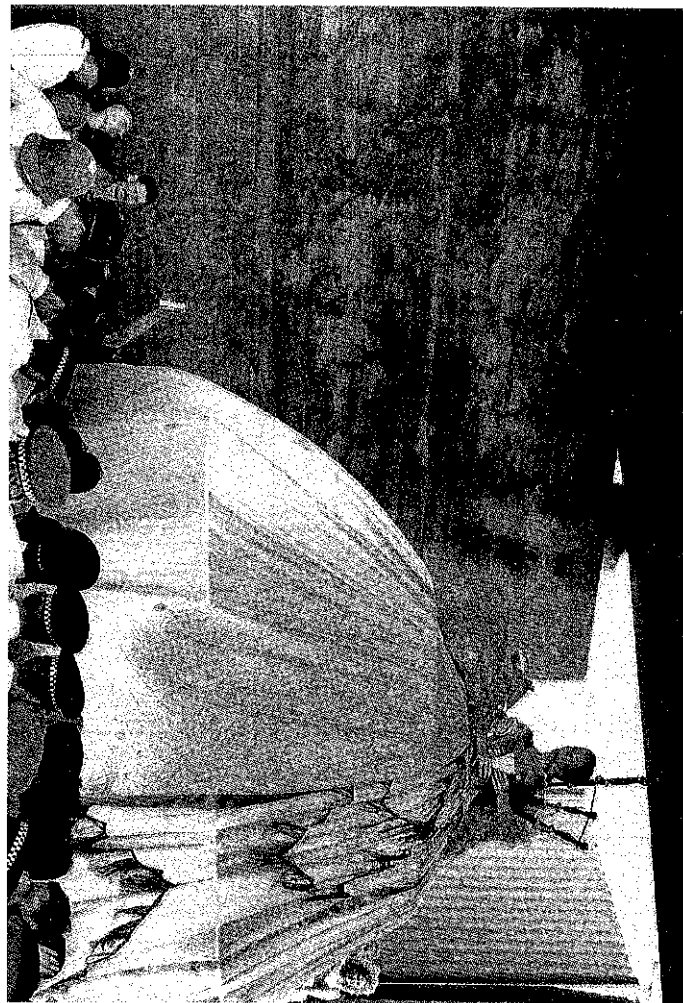
The street party had caught on, and the next one in London would be difficult to organise due to increased police surveillance. For the few days running up to the party activists were constantly followed and the Reclaim the Streets office was closely monitored from a house opposite. When the day came on Saturday 13 July 1996, and we saw thousands of people arriving at the meeting point, we just prayed that the location had not been found out by the police. Ten west-bound Central Line tube trains filled with people sped off into the unknown, and we waited with baited breath.

Imagine: thousands of people emerge from Shepherd's Bush tube station, no-one knows where they are going – the mystery and excitement of it all is electrifying. Shepherd's Bush Green comes to a standstill as people pour on to it; up ahead a line of police has already sealed off the roundabout and blocked the way. A man

takes off all his clothes and starts to dance on the roof of a stationary car. The crowd knows this is not the place: where is the sound system, the tripods? Then, as if by some miracle of collective telepathy, everyone turns back and disappears around the corner; a winding journey through backstreets, under railway bridges and then up over a barrier and suddenly they are on an enormous motorway and right *behind* the police lines. People run into the fast lane yelping with joy; up ahead they can see the sound system and tripods surrounded by police. The police line at the end of the motorway is completely confused; they turn around and start to chase after everyone. Their line, their order and control, has been broken. For a few interminable seconds it looks like the thin line between festival and riot is about to be transgressed – but thousands of people are now pouring on to the six lanes of baking hot tarmac, hundreds of white frisbees start to fly in the air. The police try to regroup but everyone is just breaking through their attempts at blocking the way. The ecstatic crowd gravitates towards the truck carrying the sound system which is parked on the hard shoulder. People start banging on the side of the police van guarding it. The truck is now swarming with people. The police van decides it has lost control of the situation and starts to drive off; as it does so the sides of the truck are lifted and the gut-shaking thump of techno blasts out of the sound system. The crowd roars – we've liberated a motorway through sheer numbers, through people power!

Until early the next morning the M41, Britain's shortest stretch of motorway, played host to the largest festival of resistance yet. Ten thousand people danced, chat, ate, met friends and made new ones. The hard shoulder was taken over by stalls and a café, the central reservation became a picnic site and a stage for fire jugglers and performers, and the fast lane another children's sandpit. Stretching across the six lanes were huge, vivid banners: a giant yellow sun, a burst of Matisse-inspired 10-foot-high flowers, 'SUPPORT THE TUBE WORKERS', 'DESTROY POWER' and the Situationists' 'THE SOCIETY THAT ABOLISHES EVERY ADVENTURE MAKES ITS OWN ABOLITION THE ONLY POSSIBLE ADVENTURE.' The unbounded creativity was so catching that even a scrap-metal yard that overlooked the motorway decided to hang up a wrecked van using its crane, a creative gesture to join in the carnivalesque spirit of fun, irony and subversion.

The M41 festival of resistance, July 1996. Photograph by Julia Guest



Some of the most striking images were the two huge carnival figures, 30 feet high with 10-foot-wide hooped skirts, with bagpipe players wearing Restoration wigs installed at the top of them. These seemingly innocent figures were wheeled up and down the motorway all day and night, but hidden under the skirts, away from the eyes of the police, and drowned out by the sound of techno, people were busy drilling into the tarmac with Kanga hammers and planting saplings rescued from the path of the M11 link road, which was still in the process of being built.⁴¹ The next morning, finding tarmac pock-marked with freshly planted saplings, the Highways Agency was forced to close the motorway for several days and resurface it.

Schechner writes that 'the difference between temporary and permanent change distinguishes carnival from revolution',⁴² yet in this act of insurrectionary imagination carnival became revolution, real trees were planted, real transformations occurred. Real people, in a real space, in real time (that is, not framed by a calendrical festive date), underwent real change as they developed a new sense of confidence and an awareness of their individual and collective power; for a rare moment they had experienced the breath of the possible touching them – they had transformed the world. They had had experiences that would remain with them permanently.

This street party was the perfect propaganda of the possible – it was a day full of those priceless moments where everything slips away and immense cracks appear in the façades of authority and power. Ten thousand people had enjoyed collectively committing the offence of obstructing the public highway, held an illegal party in contravention of the Criminal Justice Act and caused substantial creative criminal damage. To quote Abbie Hoffman, 'Revolution is anything you can get away with.'

Green and red make black

Who are these lunatics?

Specialist car magazine article about Reclaim the Streets

The M41 street party was to be a difficult act to follow. A few weeks later the Reclaim the Streets offices were raided, computers

impounded and an arrest made for conspiracy to cause criminal damage, to a motorway.

Yet integration of social and ecological issues which began on the M11 was further developed after the M41. Following an action in support of the striking tube workers, one of the 500 sacked Liverpool dockers contacted us and asked us to help them in their campaign for reinstatement.⁴³ This provided us with a priceless opportunity to bring greens, socialists and anarchists together.

In Liverpool for three days in October 1996, hundreds of dockers, their families, DIY activists, environmentalists and trade unionists took part in a moving street party/carnival, a mass picket and the occupation and closing down of the port, where the Reclaim the Streets' black, red and green 'lightning bolt' flag made its first public appearance, as it fluttered defiantly from the rooftop of the occupied Merseyside Docks and Harbour Companies offices. Despite extreme over-reaction, intimidation, assaults and arrests by the police's Operational Support Division threateningly dressed in Darth Vader-like gear, the three days marked a historic meeting point of ecological and social action. It was a powerful confirmation that the 'separation and presentation of the ecological crisis as unconnected to other forms of exploitation only serves the interests of business and state, and needs to be overcome if society is to survive'.⁴⁴

Things can only get better⁴⁵

Don't be a cog in the machine – be a spanner in the works!

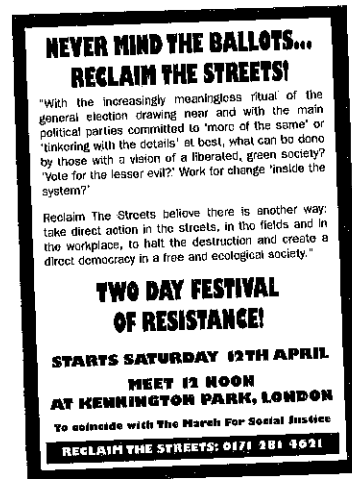
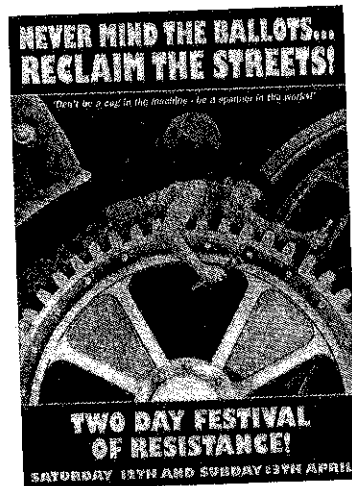
Never Mind the Ballots poster, March 1997

As general election media mania was hitting fever pitch in March 1997, posters showing an image of Charlie Chaplin lying on an enormous cog, spanner in hand (a scene from the film *Modern Times*), and proclaiming 'NEVER MIND THE BALLOTS,⁴⁶ RECLAIM THE STREETS' started to appear around London. Reclaim the Streets had linked up with the dockers, the Hillingdon hospital and Magnet strikers to create a special event that was to coincide with the March for Social Justice, which had been called for 12 April.

This march, three weeks before the general election on 1 May, was called to signify the need for radical social change.

For Reclaim the Streets this was a chance to highlight direct action as a positive, direct democratic strategy, an alternative to the disempowering ritual of making a cross on a piece of paper, and voting for someone you have never met to 'represent' you, every five years. As one of the flyers for the event put it, 'RTS believe that ... change will be brought about, not through the mediation of professional politicians, but by individual and collective participation in social affairs. In short - by direct action.'

The plan of action was as follows: rush hour Friday, the eve of the march, 10,000 copies of a spoof of the London newspaper the *Evening Standard*, entitled *Evading Standards*, with the headline 'GENERAL ELECTION CANCELLED', and with articles celebrating radical ecological and social alternatives to representative democracy, are handed out free to commuters. Saturday 1 p.m., Kennington Park, the march sets off towards Westminster; 10,000 more *Evading Standards* are handed to marchers. Lambeth Bridge, 2 p.m., fireworks are heard in the near distance, flares shoot into the air ahead of the crowd - following a mass of a hundred RTS flags, people break off from the designated route of the march and run down Horseferry Road. They turn a corner and there in front of



them is the Department of the Environment; hanging from one of its three colossal towers an enormous banner reads 'RECLAIM YOUR ENVIRONMENT'. The crowd rushes towards the tower, which is half-empty due to the relocation of the department the following year, the main doors fly open, people rush inside and occupy the building - the Department of the Environment has been squatted. A two-day festival of resistance is held - workshops take place, music is played, an Internet facility sends images of the event around the world, and Tree FM⁴⁷ sets up its pirate antenna on the roof and broadcasts from the 'REAL Department of Environment'. That was the plan!

On the eve of the event, minutes after the 20,000 copies of the spoof *Evening Standard* had been delivered to the central distribution point, the police swooped in, impounded every single copy and arrested three of us for 'incitement to cause affray and incitement to cause obstruction of the public highway'.⁴⁸ This was before they had even read the paper! During our interviews, which were held conveniently during the march so we could be kept off the streets, we were told that phrases such as 'direct action encompasses a whole range of activities, from organising co-ops to engaging in resistance to authority' were inciting people to affray; riot in other words. Two weeks later we managed to reprint the paper and distributed 20,000 to amused and confused commuters, without any police intervention.

On the Saturday 20,000 people met in the park and the march set off in celebratory spirit, but when it reached Lambeth Bridge row upon row of riot police made sure the march never deviated from its straight and narrow path. Plan B was set in action: a full-scale street party had to take place in Trafalgar Square instead.

As the march passed the gates of Downing Street, red smoke bombs were thrown and someone climbed up into an open window of the Foreign Office and appeared seconds later throwing hundreds of documents out on to the crowd below - an astounding filmic image, reminiscent of some archetypal revolutionary movie. Eventually the crowd reached Trafalgar Square, ringed by tooled-up riot police, and listened to the speeches of the Rally for Social Justice. At 3 p.m. the official rally began to disperse, but everyone knew that something was going to happen. Reclaim the Streets was determined to have its day.

Suddenly a commotion occurred at one of the entrances to the square. A truck carrying the sound system was steaming towards the police lines in an attempt to get into the square. The line gave way and the sound system was in; the crowd surrounded it and protected it as it made its way to its eventual position outside the National Gallery. Up went a banner proclaiming 'NEVER MIND THE BALLOTS, RECLAIM THE STREETS', accompanied by a massive cheer almost instantly drowned by a shuddering kick drum emanating from the sound system – the party could begin. What followed was a hybrid of party and riot: as police fought protesters with baton charges at one end of the square, others danced the afternoon away under the neo-classical columns of the National Gallery.

Reclaim the Streets saw the event as a bit of a failure, not the creative development of the street party form that we had hoped. Front-page headlines in the mainstream media saw the event as 'RIOT FRENZY – ANARCHIST THUGS BRING TERROR TO LONDON', or 'RALLYING CRY OF MOB ATTACK ON DOWNING STREET – DON'T VOTE, MAKE TROUBLE'.⁴⁹ The rave scene, meanwhile, saw it as 'the best illegal rave or dance music party in history',⁵⁰ and 'one of the most remarkable free parties since Castlemorton in 1992'.⁵¹

The Latin root of the term 'art' is *ars*, meaning to join, to fit, to put together. The 'Never Mind the Ballots' event certainly did this. It brought together dockers and ravers, environmentalists and trade unionists, anarchists and socialists. It joined the celebratory spirit of a party with the rebellious release of a riot. It juxtaposed the living, thumping beat of a sound system with the cold classicism of the National Gallery. And it placed two bits of graffiti on the wall of the National Gallery: 'FUCK THE ELECTION' and 'ART FOR ALL OR NONE AT ALL'.

This final street party left Reclaim the Streets dazed and confused, unsure of its next step. The summer of 1997 passed without a big London event and we are searching for a way to develop the idea of the street party, to root events more in community, to build on the budding international street party movement and to bring carnival and revolution one step closer together.

But outside London successful street parties are popping up all over the place – since the first Camden party in 1995 there have been thirty separate street parties. From Hull to Sheffield, from Oxford to Leeds, from Brighton to Manchester, from Amsterdam

to Helsinki, from Freiburg to Sydney, the street party is applying radical poetry to radical politics. The party, which, unlike most political parties, does not encourage the endless deferral of the revolutionary moment, is spreading.

The subversive imaginations of the M11 campaign and Reclaim the Streets have succeeded in creating acts of resistance which are both powerful poetic gestures and effective political strategies. Art, politics and everyday life have merged into a fluid, shifting and surging spirit of imagination – an imagination which undermines the bland, linear development of corporate capitalist culture – a spirit which, as written on countless walls during the M11 campaign, 'will become more powerful than you can possibly imagine'.

Ernst Fischer began his book *The Necessity of Art* with Jean Cocteau's paradoxical epigram: 'Poetry is indispensable – if I only knew what for.'⁵² To me it seems the DIY protest movement knows exactly what for: to 'visualise industrial collapse'.⁵³ Perhaps this movement has sown the seeds of new forms of struggle for the twenty-first century. Perhaps the twenty-first century will see the end of industrial capitalism and the return of some sort of social and ecological balance. Perhaps, as Mondrian said, 'Art will disappear as life gains more equilibrium.'⁵⁴ Perhaps even the art of necessity will no longer be necessary.