

A USERS
GUIDE TO
~~BEYOND~~
THE
IMPOSSIBLE

This publication was written in a whirlwind of three days in December 2010, between the first and second days of action by UK students against the government cuts, and intended to reflect on the possibility of new creative forms of action in the current movements. It was distributed initially at the Long Weekend, an event in London to bring artists and activists together to plan and plot actions for the following days, including the teach-in disruption of the Turner Prize at Tate Britain, the collective manifesto write-in at the National Gallery and the UK's version of the book bloc.

“I don’t see art as having ever, in a real sense, affected the course of human affairs.”

Clement Greenberg

Art is useless, so they tell us, as soon as it truly affects the world it loses its status as art. (You never know, it might slide down the slippery slope, becoming instrumental, propaganda, or even worse craft!) The strange thing is that those who tell us this are often the same people who put art to the crudest instrumental use – the art market. Maybe what they mean is that - art is useless when its not ultimately used to make a profit. Perhaps it's the same logic as that which argues that education has no use outside slotting us into the mutilated world of work and consumption. This guide is for those of us who suspect that art has other uses and who are prepared to seek them.

“Art is not a notion but a motion. It’s not important what art is but what it does.”

Gilles Deleuze

“Art” has always been useful to someone. When it becomes a commodity-object, bound by the limits of the market it’s an aesthetic amplifier for the values of the status quo, when its “political art” safely enclosed in a museum it becomes a cool cultural mask over the catastrophe that is capitalism. But there is another story to art. One where it escapes the prisons of the art world, forgets its name, drops its starlit ego and becomes a collective movement of creativity applied to the material of everyday life. In such moments, art enters other relationships, other kinds of making take place. Liberated from the demands of the market it begins to remake the life that lies between us. Transforming the way we relate and make art, the way we refuse and rebel, the way we love and eat. When this is done in the cauldron of struggle, an occupation, a social movement, a protest – new friendships are woven, new forms of living become possible. This kind of culture brings us together rather than separates us, it allows us to find each other amongst the ruins. Such moments re-produce the feelings and excite the senses which used to bear the name “art”, and yet they build different desires and worlds, perhaps even ones that some people once dared to call impossible. This is the art that does not show the world to us, but changes it. This art of social movement has its own secret history of rebellious performances, subtle images, insurrectionary inventions and seductive sounds. Our challenge today is not only to remember (literally - put back together) this secret history of art, but to discover and create tendencies in the present which provide alternative paths out of the current crisis.

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

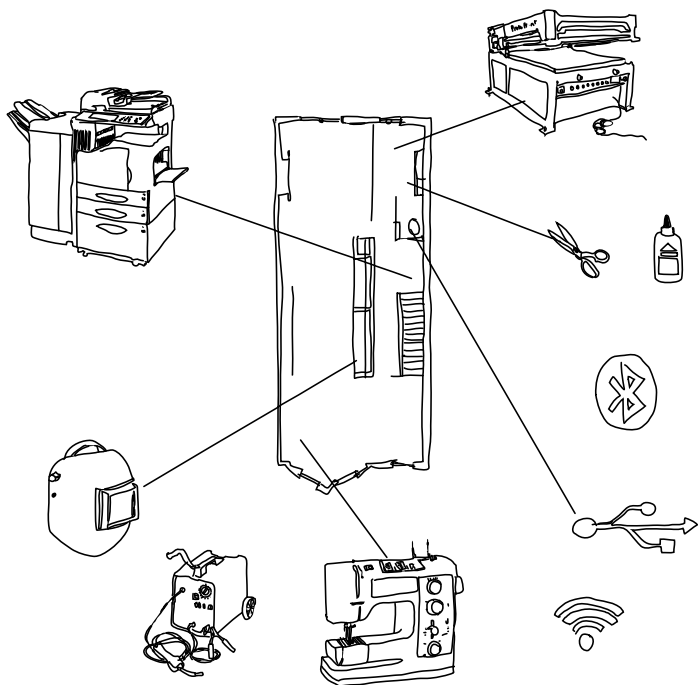


RIGHT HERE
RIGHT NOW

The greatest medium is the present. As Joseph Beuys said, “Don’t wait to begin, use what you have.” Start where you are at. Hell, you’ve already started. What are the tools and tendencies around you? Inside you, beside you? You could start with your own body. It’s the eco-system you know best, the source of most of your knowledge and dreams. The art of social movements has often begun with collective bodily performances as its first, most abundant resource.

When Sylvia Pankhurst gave up her degree at the Royal College of Art to apply her creativity to the Suffragettes movement, it was the performative potential of women’s bodies that fuelled her actions. She designed actions where bodies blocked and sabotaged the injustices of the system, the image of women in crinolines taking radical actions terrified the authorities, their performances told a new story uncomfortable to those in power.

But what else is at hand? Paint? Welders? Photocopy machines? What could you do with them? What *else* could you do with them? When during the 1968 rebellion art students occupied their colleges in Paris, they took over the screen print rooms and produced thousands of posters. Reclaiming the revolutionary art of poster making that had been lost in France, mostly due to laws banning flyposting, the students covered the walls of the city with simple iconic images, their creativity overran the law - as one of the posters said "il est interdit d'interdire" ("it is forbidden to forbid".)



PEEL YOUR
EYES
STRETCH
YOUR EARS

To dismantle and reinvent institutions or systems we have to start at the roots, with the culture that supports them. Culture is the material substratum of politics, the muddy foundations upon which it is built, but these foundations can't be changed in the same way that you can undo a law - they are transformed by infiltrating them at the molecular level, through the fault lines, pores and gaps, burrowing away like an old mole opening up millions of potential north-west passages. Luckily for you, that's where you are already.

Know your enemy - how it moves, reacts, changes shape, lies. Know your material – the people and movements around you, the places you occupy, the desires you keep. You will have looked at your material so hard that you can navigate it with your eyes closed. As mole says about the river in 'The Wind in the Willows', "I live in it, with it, by it" Take up residence in the thing you will transform, flow with it until your relationship becomes seamless. Feel its patterns and networks so deeply that they somehow become you.

Look around. We are in a space between certainties, a historic moment where society is more malleable than normal, where potential has power and forms of life can change rapidly. During the Paris Commune, the impressionists escaped the insurrectionary city to find quiet solace in the suburbs. However Gustave Courbet put down his paintbrushes and immersed himself in the Commune. "I am up to my neck in Politics" he wrote from a Paris that he described as being paradise without the police. With his courageous imagination, he planned the festival that was to bring down the Vendôme Column, the hated public monument to empire and hierarchy. Collective rebellion became his paint, the city his canvas.

DESERT

Once you know your material and place... it's time to escape. Everything begins with a leap. Not desertion as retreat, but as engagement. If you're opposed to the logic of turning art or education into a market, you are already opposed to yourself as defined by that logic: you are not the artist, student or worker that capital needs. This means you have already begun to abolish yourself . "The fact that I devour myself shows merely that I exist", the manifesto that accompanied Rodchenko's 1919 black on black paintings declared. This self-abolition, or refusing that part in your identity laid claim to by capital, means acting differently, behaving in ways that might not yet have a name. But without your identity you are free, what you do becomes more important than who you are, and what you do can be anything. You may be surprised how art that forgets its name can infiltrate unexpected places. Moving into other kinds of making, other ways of relating, means slipping at least partly out of the pages of art history and its institutions, But you wouldn't be the first spectre haunting the art school...

The radical negation of the Dadaists, refusing war, work, art, authority, seriousness, and rationality, when merged with the hardcore milieu of Weimar Berlin's antiwar and anticapitalist movements, catalysed creative forms of resistance unseen before. Dressing as Infantrymen they paraded through the streets baaing like sheep, as if led to the slaughter of World War 1. Founding 'Christ Ltd', they issued official certificates of Christhood to citizens who wished to be marked unsuitable for conscription. Antagonistic gifts were sent to soldiers on the front, "two shirt fronts, one white, the other flowered, a pair of cuffs, a dainty shoehorn, a set of bags of tea samples, which, according to hand-written labels, should arouse patience, sweet dreams, respect for authority and fidelity to the throne." Dada reminded us that wrapped around a loud NO could be a breathtaking YES, the compelling fun we can have whilst creating communities of refusal.

As art critique Brian Holmes acknowledges, a lot of the so-called "political art" in the art world only pretends to do politics. Most of it is "pictures politics", representations of political action. Stepping outside of the frame of representation within the art world

gets you in trouble. Last year the Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination (Labofii) was invited to hold workshops in art and activism at Tate Modern, they entitled it 'Disobedience makes history'. The Tate curators wanted the workshop to end with a public performance intervention. When the Laboffii was told, in an email, by the curators that no interventions could be made against the museums sponsors (which happen to be British Petroleum) the Labofii decided to use the email as the material for the workshop. Projecting it onto the wall they asked the participants whether the workshop should obey or disobey the curator's orders. Despite Tate staff trying to sabotage the discussion taking place, the participants ended up making an action against BP's sponsorship and afterwards set up a collective dedicated to liberating the Tate from its oil barons. A few months later the collective made global headlines when it poured hundreds of litres of black molasses inside and outside the Museum, during its party celebrating 20 years of BP sponsorship, held whilst oil gushed into the Gulf of Mexico.

The Labofii will obviously never be invited back to the Tate, but their desertion set them free to continue to take uncompromising actions as they will never have to depend on courting favour with the museum again.



REHEARSE
THE
FUTURE

“Be careful with the present that you create because it should look like the future that you dream.” the anarcho-feminist art collective, Mujeres Creando wrote in huge handwritten letters across an old wall in La Paz. They, like many art-activists, know that the future isn’t out there, waiting to arrive like an apocalyptic railroad train. It’s something we make now, in the present - and responsibility for the present is the only serious responsibility for the future.

A March from A to B with placards, repetitive slogans chanted with hoarse voices, protesters kettled in the cold for hours, crowds listening to a man with a beard giving a speech, boring banners hung from buildings, flyers filled with statistics of doom ... Do these acts resemble the future we want? How else could our demands and desires be manifested? How else could our actions look and feel?

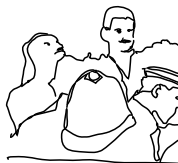
Imagining the art of the future, Allan Kaprow believed that “We may see the overall meaning of art change profoundly – from being an end to being a means, from holding out a promise of perfection in some other realm to demonstrating a way of living meaningfully in this one.” Propagator of Happenings, performances which eradicated the divisions between audience and creator in the 1960’s, he understood that art holds within it the potential to create images of the future that can be rehearsed in the here and now. The most successful political actions do the same. They don’t just demand or block something, they put our dreams on display, they don’t just say NO, but they show how else we could live.

Reclaim the Streets parties in the 1990’s did not simply free the streets from polluting traffic, more importantly they filled them with dancing bodies, music and a vision of the world where politics was about pleasure not sacrifice. It was about embodying change, not waiting for a revolution to bring it along. When students across the country occupy rooms in their universities and hold alternative forms of education in them, they are refusing and building at the same time. Some students from Goldsmith’s have recently even taken this “yes and no” spirit into unlikely spaces.

They started their own institution, the University of Strategic Optimism, and rather than accepting the marketisation of education, they began to educate the market, holding lectures which occupied and redefined spaces of consumption - the foyer of a bank, the aisles of a supermarket - as a place to convivially learn and discuss.

In the mid 1960s, San Francisco artists and actors in exile calling themselves the Diggers opened up a store front, 'The Free Store'. Goods could be left, exchanged or taken. Roles were exchangeable, too. A sign in the store read, "If someone asks to see the Manager, tell him he's the Manager." It became a place where Vietnam draft-dodgers could find a change of clothes and documents with 'official' stamps, leaving behind their army uniform on the rack. Free food was served to commuters from a giant yellow frame, free health-care clinics set up ... Everything could be free, they claimed, and showed how it could be done performing what they called "Life-acting", where the art was in way of life one led not the other way around. Despite the police closing down the store, their creative tactic spread across the US, and even recently a Non-Commercial House Free Store opened on Commercial Street in East London.

More information is not going to motivate us to act,
neither are representations or pictures of politics,
what makes us move is tasting dreams of what could
be, stepping into the cracks where another world is
coming into view.





CONSTRUCT
POST-CAPITALIST
MACHINES

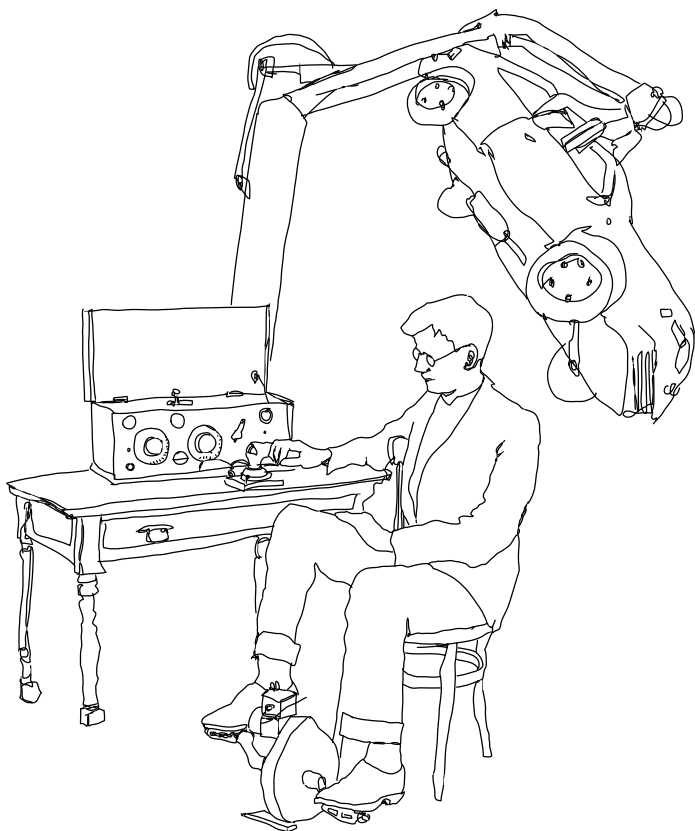
We can all be engineers of the imagination. Marx argued that our “general intellect”, all the collective knowledge and skills we use in making things, are taken away from us and embodied instead in the machines of our work. What would happen if we somehow re-engineered these machines if we did what Guy Debord argued and started, “producing ourselves... not the things that enslave us.”

What are the machines you work within? Street signs and billboards? The internet and social networks? The clothes on your back? High street shops? Mobile phones? Like the original “saboteur” who threw her wooden shoe, her “sabot” (clog in French), into the factory machine so that it would grind to a halt and produce free time for her rather than profits for her boss, we can reverse-engineer the world around us. In Buenos Aires, following an amnesty for the dictators who had made thousands “disappear,” the Grupo de Arte Callejero (Street Art Group) drew on the visual lessons of conceptual art and installed actual street signs and public maps that pointed out the location of the genocidal generals’ homes.

At the turn of the 21st century, Barcelona art activists named their group Yo-mango subverting the 'Mango' fashion brand and thus creating a pun that meant "I nick" in Spanish slang. Their aim was to reengineer shopping, "we should not renounce our desires for things but pinch them", they declared. They turned shoplifting into a social art form and a desirable brand in itself, the torn hole in the back of a pair of jeans where the anti-theft device had been ripped out, was promoted as being cooler than a Levis label. They offered workshops where they shared effective thieving techniques, made fashionable bags and clothing that disabled shop alarms or had giant pockets for hiding things in, and transformed what is normally an underhand activity into a carnivalesque performance questioning mass consumption. When one of their stolen dresses was displayed in Barcelona's Museum of Modern art, the city bureaucrats threw a fit.

In Berlin around the same time, Umsonst carried out an advertising campaign using official-looking posters and flyers, announcing free entry to a “public” art museum that had recently begun charging. In the US, the Centre for Tactical Magic brought an ice cream van and transformed it into a machine for distributing radical literature (in many flavours of course), gas masks, and tasty ice cream at protests.

What post-capitalist machine is waiting to be imagined inside your head?



DESIGN DISSSENT

During the first half of the twentieth century, some Russians gave up the name “artist” to describe themselves as constructivists or engineers. They tried to imagine and design objects which would foster emotions and social relations other to those of capitalism. “You who are bold and young...Wash off the touch of dominating authorities “ Kazimir Malevich announced, “clean, meet, and build the world in awareness of your day.” But the orthodox Marxist state authorities soon stamped out his and fellow free spirits’ creativity. Gulags and suicides followed, a melancholy art-historical footnote is all that remains. But the idea of redesigning the objects of dissent has not gone away.

For the 1999 global Carnival Against Capitalism which shook financial districts across the world, 8000 multi-functional masks were made for the London event. Combining instructions for spontaneously splitting the crowd to baffle police as well as protection from CCTV, the masks made the carnival both beautiful and effective. During recent demonstrations in Rome, students brought out shields to defend against police batons, with book covers painted onto them. Culture itself appeared to be resisting the cuts. During the 2007 Climate Camp protests in London, shields appeared with huge haunting photographic portraits of the faces of climate refugees upon them. The TV cameras caught the police striking these faces with their batons to contain the crowd. Such re-engineering can be directly functional as well as symbolically powerful. In mid-1990s London, Reclaim the Streets invented the “intelligent barricade.” Three scaffolding poles stood in a triangle, with a nimble protestor perched at the top, these human tripods closed roads to cars, but opened them to people.

Last winter, the Labofii working with Climate Camp, brought together artists, bike engineers, mechanics and philosophers to reimagine the (mis)uses of a bicycle for civil disobedience (they had initially been commissioned by The Copenhagen Contemporary Art Centre, but were dropped when it was clear that they really meant it when they said “civil disobedience”) Designs were made during open workshops at the Arnolfini Gallery in Bristol, then the project travelled to the Copenhagen Climate Summit where hundreds of the city’s abandoned bikes were transformed. Arranged into swarms, there were tall-bikes welded two-high and two-across to form carrying platforms for projectors, toilets and people; bikes with bullhorns screaming bizzare five-channel sound installations through a moving crowd, and bikes with small modifications that could be connected to form impromptu barricades.

The dull old rituals of protest are easy to contain, but a little imagination goes a long way when it's applied to designing dissent.





(MIS)PERFORM

Nobody knows what a body can do. And civil disobedience is exactly that: misperforming the identity of civilian. One of your biggest weapons is surprise and absurdity. So Act Up. In the early 1960s, the Provos (famous for inventing the precursor to what we now know as the Boris bike, their white painted bikes, left around the city and available for free) moved from art-happenings to political-happenings, beginning a trend for creative experimentation with the form of a mass demonstration; mill-ins, die-ins, kiss-ins, zaps, flashmobs, and more. Disobedient performances that refused to be framed by any stage.

What kind of relationships can you (re)perform in moments of courage? When Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on the bus for a white person she was (mis)performing her subjugated role of “coloured.” When Gregory Green put up a billboard with bombmaking instructions on it, (quickly pulled down by the police) he was (mis)performing the role of public artist. When the Yes Men faked their way into an international textile conference pretending to be representatives of the World Trade Organisation, their (mis)performances appeared “authentic” until they inflated a giant golden phallus whilst ironically celebrating the cruelty of sweat shops.

The “art activist” isn’t so different from the fool of a traditional carnival. Standing between worlds and identities, claiming legitimacy and being denied it, neither artist nor activist but both, simultaneously resisting and creating. The power of working on the threshold came to the fore when civil disobedience and the ancient art of clowning were combined by the Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army (C.I.R.C.A). Subverting the character of the clown separated from society by the circus ring and breaking away from the role of serious rational protester, C.I.R.C.A used mockery and confusion as a weapon. During the Iraq war, trained clowns in army fatigues marched into recruitment offices asking to join up, forcing them to close down with their stupidity and setting up their own shabby C.I.R.C.A recruitment stalls outside.

During a cold London Christmas at the end of the 1960’s a member of the King Mob collective dressed as Father Christmas and distributed “free” presents to children in Selfridges department store. It didn’t take long before Santa was arrested and the toys snatched away from bemused children by the police.

A decade later in an Italy on the verge of revolution, the Metropolitan Indians joined marches in an arrow formation with rubber tomahawks, using their costume to make ironic demands “more churches are fewer houses!!”. They would also carry out “autoreduction” actions, where, to resist austerity measures, they collectively decided what the price of goods should be with shoppers, and refused to pay normal shop prices.

More recently, on December 20th, 2002, on the first anniversary of Argentina’s popular rebellion, a Yo Mango Tango was announced in Barcelona. Smartly dressed couples began to dance the tango around a branch of Carrefour chain of stores in the midst of the Christmas shopping rush. With each stylised dip, they would grab a bottle of champagne and whisk it out of the store. Media activists filmed and projected the scene live onto the wall outside, whilst a crowd gathered. The next day, the champagne was taken along to branch of one of the banks responsible for the Argentinean crisis, for an impromptu messy champagne breakfast in their foyer.

There are things that your body wants to do, things that you know are right, and yet the social norms manage to shape our bodies into “good behaviour”, rigid and regimented. (Mis)performance is simply having the courage (from the French *coeur* meaning literally from the heart) to let our bodies do what they want to do.



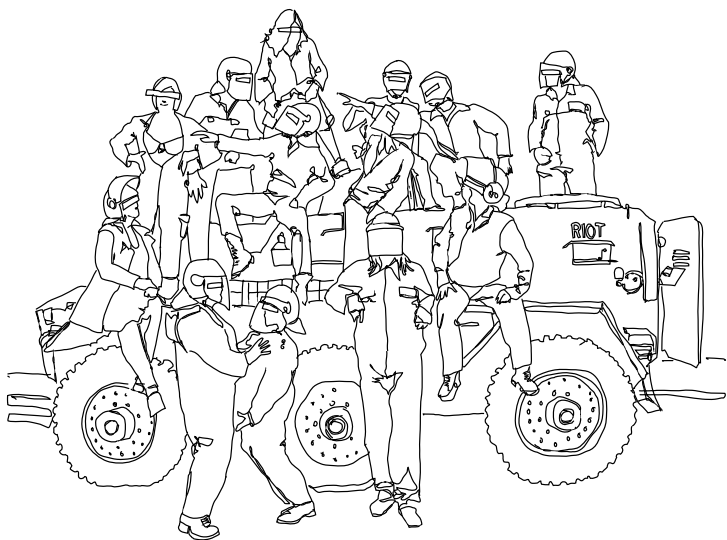
START
SMALL
THINK
BIG

It's easy to feel paralysed by the complexities of the world, to feel like nothing you do will ever make a difference. Those in authority want us to feel that way, even though they tend to be the ones in the minority. But when we look back at history we see that every movement, every single shift in society began with a small group of friends having an idea that seemed impossible at the time.

The idea of an abolition of slavery movement in the UK was dreamt up by a handful meeting in a tiny bookshop in the heart of the British Empire. Twenty five years later parliament passed a law against the trade, and within a couple of decades slavery was officially abolished, something that would have seemed Utopian when the friends sat around a table plotting. When a couple of dozen gay rights activists were beaten and arrested by police in Trafalgar Square in 1965, they had no idea that within their lifetime tens of thousands of people would pass that same square in a Gay Pride March, which would include MP's and openly gay police officers. One of the sparks that lit the powder keg of movements that brought down the Berlin Wall began with a gaggle of Polish artists, The Orange Alternative. One night under the influence of several mind altering substances, they decided to call for a "Gnome" gathering, to demand "Gnomes" rights. Protests were banned in Poland under the military regime, but when faced with thousands of young people wearing orange gnome hats, the soldiers did not know what to do, and the generals did not call the tanks in. For the first time since martial law was declared, a mass of people had taken public space back, had a great time doing it, and managed to spread a sense of confidence far and wide. Within a few years the whole of Eastern Europe was out in the streets.

Art Activists are good at finding the acupuncture points, those cracks in a system that can be wrenched open. As systems theorist Donella Meadows illustrates in her essay 'Leverage Points: Places to Intervene in a System', linear chains of cause and effect exist rarely in complex systems, but there are numerous levers where "small shift in one thing can produce big changes in everything". Of the twelve points listed she states that the three with of most leverage are the goal of a system, the paradigm used to design it and most importantly our power to transcend that paradigm. What she means is think utopian, present new sets of values and empower people with hope and confidence! Three things that are the stock strategies of art activism.

Starting small and taking one step at a time often means that we can learn from our mistakes. But once we gain confidence it's worth risking bigger things. For the protests against Europe's largest arms fair in London's docklands recently, The Space Hijackers, after a few beers, decided to buy a tank. Taking rebel artist Jean Jacques Lebel's motto "Revolution must be fun, even the planning of it" to heart, they set up stalls in trendy Brick Lane announcing "We Need A Tank" and selling T-shirts to raise money. Three months later at a press conference they told Sky news that they were tired of being pushed around by cops and that they would bring a tank to the anti arms fair demonstrations. Days later they took everyone by surprise by turning up with not just one but, two tanks - but that's a longer story...



BIRUSH
WITH THE
LAW

Everything we take for granted: the weekend, gay rights, contraception, women wearing trousers, the right to strike, to form a union, to print an independent zine. Every thing was won by disobedience, by people breaking laws that they felt were unjust. In his essay envisioning a future world without government where everyone was free to become an artist of their own life, Oscar Wilde suggested that "Disobedience, in the eyes of anyone who has read history, is man's (sic.) original virtue. It is through disobedience and rebellion that progress has been made." He knew that only by acting out his greatest desires, even if they could land him temporarily in jail, was he going to be really free.

When the police and media criminalise our disobedience, "we should never forget", as Martin Luther King Jr reminded us in a letter from his prison cell, "that everything Adolf Hitler did in Germany was 'legal'" and that most of the actions taken by freedom and resistance fighters were deemed "illegal". Artists have always bended and broken laws, not just the rules of art. In 1950, during the Easter day service in Paris' Notre Dame, two Lettrist poets disguised as priests climbed the pulpit and began to give a sermon to the packed cathedral. "God is dead" they declared before being nearly lynched by the crowd and incarcerated. A decade later poetic prankster Abbie Hoffman publishes a book entitled 'Steal this Book'.

Tens of thousands went to bookshops and did exactly that, getting hold what was to become a manual for the 1960's generation, listing creative actions and ways to live for free. The group Electronic Disturbance Theatre developed software in the late 1990's that enables "virtual sit-ins" to take place. Tens of thousands of web users, with no particular hacking skills, could, with a simple key command simultaneously log onto an offending web site and block access to its servers.

The best surprises occur when a law is broken so as to highlight an injustice and court acquits the "law breakers". In 1996 a group of women from the Ploughshares Movement, calmly walked into a military base and caused 10 million pounds worth of damage to a fighter jet that was due to be exported to Indonesia to bomb civilians in East Timor. Surrounded by flowers they had scattered around and leaving a video in the cockpit (evidence on the scene of the crime) documenting the use of the jets against villages, they waited to be arrested. When months later they appeared in court the jury acquitted them: their crime had prevented a greater crime (genocide) to be committed. Similar cases have occurred with climate activists shutting down coal fired power stations, and courts seeing these actions as stopping the greater crime of climate change. Don't fear the law, just know it and use it wisely, remembering that many of the things that are normal daily activities, were rights won by people who broke the rules of their time.



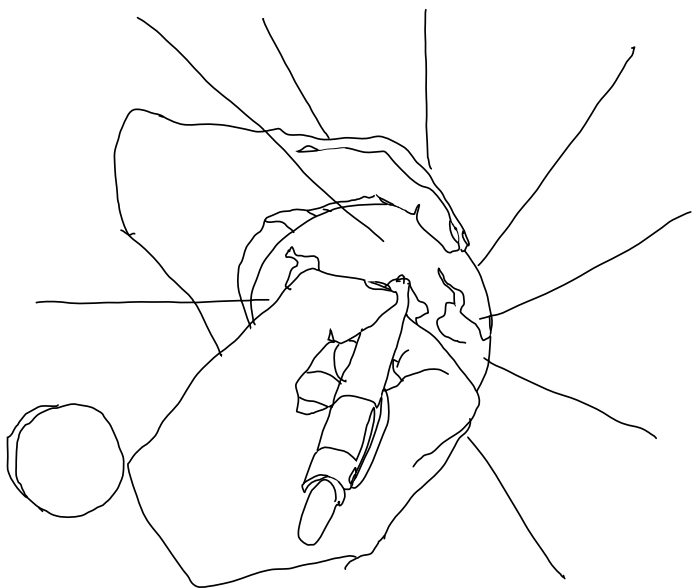
ITS A
BEAUTIFUL
THING

We might seem old fashioned taking sides, rejecting the cool detached cynical postures of postmodernism. Some might decry us as naïve romantics, utopian dreamers, but we know that to limit demands to what seems “realistic” is a guaranteed way of reducing what is possible. We also know that as the Freee Art Collective say, “Protest is Beautiful”. It’s beautiful because it breaks open the routines of space and time, to allow the unimaginable to flourish, it’s beautiful because at its heart is hope, hope that, as the Surrealists understood so deeply, dream and action can be reunited.

If aesthetics is about opening our senses, our bodies, our perceptions to the world, then it doesn’t take much to realise that this world doesn’t make sense. Capitalism has captured beauty and the imagination, we need to take it back, reclaim it for life not profit.

The beauty of protest is not simply about how it looks, the fun and pleasure it engenders in our bodies, but as importantly it's about its success.

Creative resistance is not simply about designing glitzy visual stunts that the media will pick up on, it's a lot more than that, it's about making things that work, fashioning situations that both disrupt the mechanisms of power and show us our own power, our own potential to connect and create. The beauty is in its efficient use, and nothing is more beautiful than winning.



The Font used was Calvert is by Margaret Calvert, designer of our road signs. When she designed the one of children crossing the road, she made a conscious effort to put the girl in front of the boy.

Thanks to all the crew of the occupied and soon to be occupied art schools who inspired us to get this out.

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