

8. Henri Lefèbvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Oxford, 1999), 20.
9. Robert Campbell, as quoted by Dean Macris and George Williams in *San Francisco's Downtown Plan: Landmark Guidelines Shape City's Growth* (San Francisco Planning and Urban Research Association, <http://www.spur.org>).
10. Nicholson Baker, *The Mezzanine* (London: Granta Books, 1998), 124-5.
11. As quoted by Dick Pursel in "Viennese Art Guys Lift Shame to New Heights," *About Gelatin* (<http://listen.to/gelatin>).

CHAPTER 4

BLOWS AGAINST THE EMPIRE

Ted Purves

Welcome to the Machine

The Situationist strategy of *detournement* overlaid on the giving of unexpected and unsanctioned gifts creates a double transgression that rips through the fabric of what we have accepted to be a given, a tyrannical and pervasive market of the senses that gives nothing without taking something in return. A gift offered in the midst of the transgressive act not only destroys, it also creates. What it creates is the existence of something altogether different, a community and a bond that is not the bond of bondsman to master or of addict to dealer, but of the giver to the receiver, who then becomes kin and neighbor.

We live in a society more spectacular and pervasive than Situationists ever thought possible. Acts of resistance to, and dissent against, the monocultural, spreading waistlines of corporate control and capital economies either resound flatly and are lost in the din of the 24-hour media, or they are simply taken on as a style alternative by marketing firms and sold back to the populace as alternative culture. In this time of shrinking public space and growing oversight, the question of how to fight back pales behind the even more modest question of how one, one individual, one voice, responds to the bombardment of press releases, spins, media blitzes, and shrieking advertisements. Or failing that, how is it possible to armor up or walk away?

I would suggest that strategies for responding, and perhaps even fighting back (at least by striking a glancing blow), have come to light in the last few decades in the form of certain contemporary artworks that by choice and definition unfold themselves within the public sphere, rather than on stages and in galleries. Some of the most intriguing and effective of these have combined a complex parentage, which begins on one side with Situationism, and continues through the various quasi-heretical art movements that have followed in its wake (including Fluxus and happenings, body-art-life experiments, living theaters, political protest, punk rock, and other obscure cultural moments). On the other side one finds strains of anthropology and social reform with an abiding interest in alternative economies, gift systems, and precapitalist societies.

This essay neither intends to prove something, nor attempts to establish the primacy or originality of certain artistic acts. Its wish is to tell the stories of cer-

tain individuals and their decisions, decisions that have several common reference points, but none more so than their allegiance to the idea that they were in some way a manifestation of artmaking, in its broadest and most contemporary sense. These stories of decisive acts will hopefully form a set of working models with which to highlight certain ideas. These ideas are manifest either in the structure of their conception, in the intent behind them, or are implied by their delivery. It is important to remember that these works are not examples of anything larger, there is no genre of *gift-detournment* performance art. But they could be thought of as signposts or survey markers that describe a territory that is coming to light in the unfolding of this moment and the last few decades.

In the spirit of generosity and brevity, I will list the main points of construction, the axiomatic beginnings that provide a foundation for understanding the works and the context of their specific heresies. They are:

1. The strategy of detournment as a method of social confrontation is successful primarily because it creates a rupture between the expected and the unexpected, even in terms of dissent. When the expected is hijacked, the spectator is forced to confront not just the subject of the dissent, but also the structure that supports the world and worldview that contains both the dissent and the status quo.
2. The nature of gift transactions is fundamentally different from the nature of capital transactions, and where gift-based economies exist, societies utilize the gifting of objects and services to create and receive social bonds and to strengthen social ties. Gifts forge relationships between givers and receivers that are traditionally a part of the transaction of giving and receiving.¹
3. An act of detournment that incorporates the giving of gifts, or services, into its action structure rips through the fabric of the "spectacle," or of perceived reality conditions. It also holds out the prospect of weaving an alternative fabric, an instant or gradual community, through the inherent power of the gift's ability to create bonds between giver and receiver.
4. The dual practice of gifting goods and services within the context of heretical resistance is an occasional tool of value in the tradition of expanded art. This tool serves the underlying desire of radical art practices to expand and push forward the possibility of greater social and aesthetic freedoms.

Dimension 7

Throughout the writing of this essay, a couplet has gone through my brain endlessly, becoming a mantra as I have attempted to describe communities in resistance, artistic heresies and gift economics. Simple enough, it runs, "it's not the truth

I see, it's just a mockery."² Penned by an obscure but legendary punk rocker named Greg Sage in the early 1980s, when it is sung in his strangled voice, the final word is almost incomprehensible, drawn out to sound like "mock-a-ree." I have always found its combination of awkward rhyme and underlying sentiment embodies alienation in its simplest form—urgent, artless, and real.

Sage had a lot to be alienated about when he formed his band, The Wipers, in 1978, in the rainy town of Portland, Oregon. His lyrics found their source in his own queerness, and he wove the angry essence of his sexuality into songs that embody larger realms of frustration and exile. These realms were big enough for anyone to relate to; anyone alienated by their youth, by feelings of not belonging, by living far away from like-minded people, by their sexuality, by the constant sense that one is being lied to.

But running through Sage's lyrics is another thread—his absolute conviction in the existence of another world, another place, or society, a place more real, a place with fewer lies. "I'm straight over the edge" is the concluding line to the song that begins with the couplet quoted above. The qualities of this place shift across the body of his songs, but in general, it is a place where human relations are connected and harmonious rather than commodified and treacherous. What one finds when one goes over the edge is a place where "I could be a part of you,"³ an unscripted place of more direct, real relations, "a place deep inside that seems real."⁴ It is perhaps one of Sage's earliest songs that most simply outlines that place and the rage that might provide the fuel to carry one there: "Straight as an arrow, defect, defect, not straight, not so straight, reject, reject, going to leave this region, going to take me with them . . . Dimension 7."⁵

There are parallels here of relevance to the starting points of this essay. There is another world, or there used to be, and that world was the "real" one. What happened to it, and how we arrived at the world we currently occupy is succinctly articulated at the beginning of Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle*: "All that was once directly lived has become mere representation. Images detached from every aspect of life merge into a common stream and the former unity of life is lost forever. Apprehended in a partial way, reality unfolds in a new generality as a pseudo-world apart . . . The spectacle appears at once as society itself, as a part of society and a means of unification."⁶ In other words, it's just a mock-a-ree.

Throughout *The Society of the Spectacle*, Debord articulated clearly the roots of contemporary alienation, of the feeling that we are not living in the real world but inside its hollow representation, an illusion so complete that it veils the real world seamlessly. Because it exists so completely, it has actually replaced the real world that preceded it, and it can be penetrated only with difficulty. This state of society arises out of the combination of industrial modernity, capitalist economics, and mediated culture, and is in many ways the perfect articulation of these forces, the end point of their collusion and alliance.

It is possible that the real world, the one that was pulled out like a doormat from under our feet, still exists somewhere. This real world would have to be an

articulation of forces opposed to the ones listed above, an articulation of gift economies rather than of capital ones, a place where "I can be a part of you." For when I am a part of you, it implies that we are in a community, a bonded state, rather than a mediated one. And most of all, this world would be a place that contains larger freedoms than the freedom to choose between brands of soaps and careers. Dimension 7, indeed . . .

Return the Gift

President George W. Bush
1600 Pennsylvania Ave NW
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear Sir

11 June 2001

I joined the Marine Corps very optimistic about the opportunities the United States and I would have to make the world a better place.

After serving in Desert Storm and Desert Shield, I was less optimistic about what the United States and I could or would do to make the world a better place.

I am in awe of the responsibilities and opportunities you have to better the United States and the world. I hope you will succeed where others have failed and make real, positive change.

Please accept this bowl I have made as a gift.

Sincerely,

W. A. Ehren Tool

—W. A. Ehren Tool, text of a letter sent to President George W. Bush, 2001. (The same letter was sent to Vice President Dick Cheney, Secretary of State, Colin Powell, Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld, and Secretary of the Navy, Gordon England.)

The letters and gifts of Ehren Tool suggest themselves as starting points, for the shifts that accompany their dispersal as they pass from his studio out into the corridors of power and privilege also contain a lesson on the basic nature of gift economies. In a nutshell, "Tool mails gifts of handcrafted ceramic bowls and cups,

decorated with military insignia, toy soldiers cast in clay, and various weapons, to people with power. The ceramics are accompanied by letters connecting the artist's experiences as a Marine in the Gulf War with his present political and social concerns."⁷ In each letter, Tool is careful to explain that the bowl is a gift and always asks the recipient to accept it as such. It is this deliberate insistence on the gift status of the bowls that makes me wonder whether the introduction of the tangible gift creates unavoidable manifestations of reciprocal and unrequited debts.

The bowl sent along with the letter gives the message weight. If it were not present, perhaps the letter could be more easily discarded, like so many other public opinions. Once burdened with a gift, a thing, which serves in some ways as a token of the gesture and physicalization of the request and intention of the artist, the letter has to be accepted as well. You read a letter, but you accept a gift. Once accepted, another, different weight is placed on the receiver. What to do with the bowl? Does keeping the bowl imply sympathizing with the thoughts of the sender? Should the bowl be returned if the sentiments in the letter are found to be repellent?

The nature of gifts, both in traditional societies as well as in our personal lives, is to create social bonds, which cement ties between individuals and mark relationships. It is in the nature of a gift to keep moving, to demand from the receiver the action of moving the gift property along. If not the bowl itself, then something else, something equivalent or greater, and if not back to the original giver, then to someone else, someone next in line. Not to do so breaks all the rules about how gifts function. This is one of the clearest points that the anthropologist Marcel Mauss makes in the conclusion of *The Gift*, his landmark study of gift economies in precapitalist societies: "The unreciprocated gift still makes the person who has accepted it inferior, particularly when it has been accepted with no thought of returning it."⁸ Things we are given have different meanings from the things we buy.

I don't know what Colin Powell or Donald Rumsfeld think about their bowls. Perhaps they are sent letters of innocent yet explosive political concern every day, mysteriously accompanied by craft objects made by former-servicemen. Whatever they think about them and how they utilize them are issues beyond our concern. What matters is that they have returned the letter with a thank you note to Ehren Tool, effectively declaring acceptance of the gift to its giver. Thus they are now the receiver and the holder of gift property, which falls into its own uncomfortable and noncapitalist sphere of logic.

We are entering territory here most thoroughly examined by Mauss in the early part of the last century. One of the first things to be learned from gift economies is this: Gifts are not free, and neither are they the products of generosity. Gifts are offers. They produce bonds. They are a token through which social relationships are forged, managed and preserved. When we receive the gift we must automatically consider the giver of the gift, the person behind the token. If we accept the gift and do not do this, then a diminishment of the spirit, both our own and that of the community to which we are attached, occurs.

Meanwhile, Downtown . . .

It is said that a fool and his money are soon parted. In this instance, the fool in question might seem to be a young San Francisco artist named Josh Greene, who, among many other works of dispersal, handed out two hundred one-dollar bills to passersby in the city's downtown area. This gesture could be interpreted as staunch anticapitalism, a quixotic Franciscan desire for poverty, an act of minor philanthropy, or else, perhaps more cynically, as a publicity stunt seeking to turn short term loss into long-term gain through an accrual of notoriety. All of this could be true, the latter perhaps the most so. This temptation might always be strong when the artist is evaluated in place of the work, which is often the case when the artist's persona and actions are included in the conception and execution of the work. Temptation aside, we will learn more here from looking at the artwork itself, the actual action, if only because it helps us to look at the work through the eyes of its primary audience: those who received or refused Greene's handout.

The dispersal of money on the street was, like any public performance, carried out beyond the confines of the art world, and thus, from a spectator's point of view, had no art context. To passersby, Greene more possibly appeared as an enigma, or some sort of "reverse panhandler," or simply a fool. Of course the fool is often much smarter than we think. Clearheadedness is often seen as guileless wisdom, and in the case of Greene, the wisdom of the project of handing out money to strangers resides in how he went about it: simply and with an economical innocence. The space of interaction was short and to the point. People either took a dollar or they didn't, and nothing more was expected of them. If they wished to engage Greene in conversation, he would participate, but in no way was interaction beyond taking money required. When this is considered as a fundamental aspect of the piece, this passage from Lewis Hyde's *The Gift* springs to mind: "It is the cardinal difference between gift and commodity exchange that a gift establishes a feeling-bond between two people, while the sale of a commodity leaves no necessary connection . . . The disconnectedness is, in fact, a virtue of the commodity mode. We don't want to be bothered."⁹

What interests me about Green's gesture is how it contrasts with the basic notion of the gift as set forth by Mauss and articulated in the works of William Tool, while on the surface seeming to be about precisely the same thing, giving gifts. If the above assertion by Lewis Hyde is taken to be correct, then Greene's refusal to really engage with the recipients means that there is no real bond established or community forged. Rather, Greene's gesture continues to function in the way in which capitalist economies work, where the exchange of money (and thus the idea of a system of equivalent and transferable worth) necessitates no other action beyond the transaction itself. In this way, and contrary to surface appearances, Greene's distribution of the \$200 does not constitute itself as gift giving. It can be seen more as an act of pure and simple detournment, a rupture that creates a moment of anti-economics in the rush of lives that are dominated by

transactions. In this anti-economics, one gains a dollar as easily as one spends one. The flow of money is reversed, with few or no strings attached. If there is no real gift exchange present, and there is only a "detourned" capital transaction, then another way to describe the situation is that Greene paid people for the time it took to stop and take a dollar. A very economical wage structure for the working man or woman.

However, when the lucky, or daring, two hundred are next in an economic transaction, buying a cup of coffee or a newspaper, or paying the lot fee for the all-day car park, will they find one dollar more in their pocket? Will it be handy? Will they wonder about the circumstances that led it to becoming theirs rather than someone else's? All of this remains unknown. It is the price we pay for having an artwork set loose in the world without marking it as such. We can only speculate (itself an exercise in gambling) about the impact and possible endpoints of this action. We can think about it, of course, as a work of art, performance art to be precise, but we cannot be quite sure of its direct effects, since its status as an artwork was never circumscribed by informing its direct audience that they were in fact just that. No record of their reactions was ever made.

However, and this is a fairly big however, because of Josh Greene's interest in creating a gesture within the context of "art-making," this work, the fugitive performance, gains a stabilizing frame. While we don't know anything about the workings of the piece in terms of its primary audience, the work did not end at that point. Greene created a series of documentation panels (photographs and texts) that sought to present—or represent—this work to a new audience, a secondary audience. This is fairly standard in the practice of performance art, as the demands of making permanent objects, or at least permanent records of impermanent objects, are part and parcel of the system. Tool's letters and photographs of the bowls he sent are similar and are also displayed in such a way, as documents and evidence of the original, direct, fugitive act. Because these presentations are made in the style of documents and are written and coded in such a way that they refer to a primary (and inaccessible) point in time, they end up with a foot in two moments. One is permanently at a remove, the world of the original performed moment, and the other is permanently present, redirecting the secondary audience continuously back to the past.

Where to Eat Cheaply in San Francisco

Dig this:

Let me explain how we thought. Imagistically, a pedestal, a frame around a picture, or a stage can be regarded as the epitome of private property—space owned and controlled by the artist for their own purposes. A number of us [in the San Francisco Mime Troupe] became troubled by the tensions be-

tween our democratic intentions and our monopolization of the stage and dialogue. A dissident movement evolved within the Mime Troupe, seeking to erase the distinction, or more aptly, the imbalance of power between acting and audience, and elicit creative participation from everyone in what we hoped might be newly liberated public space. This internal subset of the Mime Troupe evolved into the Diggers, and led to an eventual fissure in the company . . .

In 1967, a displaced Brooklyn visionary named Billy Murcott and his charismatic friend Emmett Grogan began to preach a digger-like ethos in San Francisco. They papered the Haight Ashbury Neighborhood with cryptic handouts proclaiming, "It's free because it's yours," and criticizing city officials and "hippie" merchants for capitalizing on the new phenomena of the counter-culture without giving anything back. The two soon gravitated into the orbit of the Mime Troupe.

Under their influence, the dissidents in the Mime Troupe advanced their ideas until a spot in Golden Gate Park was established where free, hot food was delivered daily to the hordes of kids scrabbling to live on the streets . . . The Diggers visited the farmers market for donations of day old vegetables, cooked them in friends' kitchens, to produce a hearty stew which they delivered in steel milk containers, accompanied by small loaves of bread, shaped like mushrooms because of rising over the old one pound coffee cans in which they were baked.

At the food site, a yellow wooden frame, six feet by six feet, was assembled. One stepped through this free frame of reference and on the other side was handed a smaller version (about an inch by an inch) attached to cord for wearing. Then you were given free food. The extent of the coercion was the invitation to look at the world from another perspective—a free perspective; a point of view one could assemble oneself, without the intervention of ideologues, scribes, pundits or coercive behavior. It was after all, a free exchange. This free-food program was a great success, not because it was charity, but because by participating one created a world in which free food was "a fact."⁹

—Peter Coyote; excerpt from a speech, California College of Arts and Crafts, San Francisco, CA, February 8, 2002

What stands out for me now in the rereading of this passage is the idea of the free frame of reference. While I find myself quite sympathetic to its ideals, I am more interested in the fact that they actually made a thing, an object of symbolic intent, to accompany their actions and ideas. They could have simply talked about

the free frame of reference and the meaning of shifting one's world vision while they were doling out the stew to the hungry hordes. But they made an actual doorway that people had to cross over.

One aspect of the San Francisco Diggers' decision to construct the "free frame of reference" that is worth examining is the aesthetic deliberateness of it. In the midst of what has been largely characterized as a social activist/theater movement, something so sculptural, so architectural, is an interesting find, and possibly makes a case for the San Francisco Diggers to be seen in a more expansive light, even an art historical one. Their other "Free" projects, which included a free store (where anyone who entered could potentially ask to become the manager), free survival classes, and other undertakings, reveal a shrewd conceptual bent that would certainly brand the Diggers as "relational" artists, were they to undertake them in the context of the contemporary "art scene."

Of greatest interest is their creation of a doorway and the fact that the doorway had to be stepped through in order for the world to change . . .

Rather than ripping through the veil to find the world behind the world, to find a place where relationships are unmediated and free food is a fact, the Diggers built a door. Not only as a way across for them, but as an architectural structure to render the same service for others. This architectural solution is the first indication that there is community creation at work in the midst of the detournement (for what is more heretical than revealing to the assembled that commodities are not actually scarce at all?). The Diggers' free food and free frame of reference was a manifestation of a start-up gift economy. Through the distribution of free food and the invitation to view the world in another way, the Diggers began to assemble the basic ingredients of a counter economy based on dispersal of goods, and the redistribution of surplus and gifts to all who came forward to claim them. Dimension 7 indeed . . .

There are still doors and one finds a similar threshold today in San Francisco, twenty-five years and a mile away from the Diggers in the Golden Gate Park Panhandle. Any *Wednesday*, a project initiated by San Francisco artist Diana Mars, will see that you do not go hungry, at least once a week. Since 1993, Mars has made dinner available, free and without strings attached, every Wednesday at her apartment. She advertises discreetly, by word of mouth and through the distribution of handmade calling cards, as well as in mailings circulated through the networks that 'zines and comic books follow.

Nevertheless, after ten years, the circle of people in the loop has grown fairly large. I myself have been a part of it at different points in my life. Mars's calling cards, which serve as invitations, still say basically the same thing today that they have always said: "At home, Making Good Food, Wednesdays 7:00–10:00 pm."¹⁰ The rest is filled in by attending, getting to know the work directly, and then coming back and getting to know it again. It is in no way a "potluck," there is no requirement for people to bring food, though one finds that most often they do so anyway. It is an interesting quality of this work that even when something is

known to be free, like a free meal, people will very often bring food to share even though it is not asked of them.

The management of such a project in many ways becomes the “work” of art. How does one afford it? How does one account for how many will come? What happens if someone disruptive or simply annoying comes (and then comes back and back again)? Mars means for the structure of the dinners, the availability of food, and the matters of attendance to be self-governing. She rarely steps in to “take” control, either as author or authority, and instead maintains order by continuing to provide dinners as a work and a gift. It is this, in the end, that creates the framework for managing the uncertainties. Because this piece is a long-term project and because what Mars offers is a gift, it creates bonds with the recipients. As they become enmeshed in the work, they become part of a community and in many ways begin to co-create the piece anew. As members of community, with a “feeling-bond” between them, the responsibility for governance is shifted to many shoulders. And if it doesn’t work so well this week, they can come back and try again next week.

This is why people bring food to share even though they are not “required” to. Because they are not an audience for very long—they are a part of a community, and must participate as such. After all, the work has unfolded in Mars’s apartment. You cannot just show up and eat without interacting with the rest of the guests. The Diggers’ threshold allowed entry into a world (located just to the left of this one) where free food is a fact, and exit is possible when one has finished eating. In contrast, when one crosses the threshold into Diana Mars’s house on any Wednesday night, one enters into a world where a community has coalesced around a central idea and made an amorphous covenant. Yes it’s “free,” the food that is, but that is only the beginning. Your freedom to become a partner and responsible co-creator is also brought into play, the result of accepting the initial offer and stepping across the threshold to participate.

The Hot Tub and the People’s Park

Near to where I live, on an anonymous, dead end street on the Oakland side of Berkeley, there is a small red house with a gated backyard. On this gate is a fairly high-tech lock with a keypad, similar to the keypad that guards the sliding driveway gates of nearby Black Hawk estates and the mansions of Tiburon. This keypad protects access to a pleasant back yard filled with redwood trees and a very nice, quite warm hot tub. It’s simple. The hot tub is free, communal property. If you have a code (and you are supposed to be able to request one from the caretaker) then you can come in and use the facilities. Codes are passed around from friend to friend like tips for quiet vacations. I don’t know how many are circulating, but I would assume that there are more than many, since the hot tub has been operating as a social experiment since well before I arrived in the area in 1993. It

was instituted by a man who has since moved away, although he gives a caretaker free rent in exchange for the daily maintenance of the property and project. Behind the idyllic redwoods, the codes—how many times they are used—when they were used, are all being tracked by a dedicated computer. The flow of the codes is at the root of the experiment. One could document a whole history of hot tub use by analyzing them.

Inside the little changing/shower room are various messages and notes from the caretaker. In the dimly lit space you learn that there are rules (or, more properly, codes) for behavior. Do not talk, take a shower first, restrain excessive male [!] energy, maintain a meditative spirit, and most importantly perhaps, don’t give out your code to people you don’t trust. (The last time I was there, there was an addendum to this that recommended that women shouldn’t give out their codes to men, even if they are friends; they should only bring them as guests.) The penalty for bad hot-tub behavior is the removal of your code. This occurs when other users register a complaint. The time of the complaint is compared to the computer record, and the offender’s code is cancelled.

Another part of the posted message provides a reason for the oversight—wariness. After all, it says, the hot tub is a limited use space; it can’t be People’s Park.

For those readers unfamiliar with the iconic locations of Berkeley, California, People’s Park is a small piece of land that belongs to the University of California. It was claimed in the late sixties by squatters and hippies as a place for free assembly, in defiance of University plans to turn it into a parking lot, and it has become synonymous with the rights of the “people” to accessible, usable, and uncommodified public space. The University has made various attempts over the years to develop the land into dormitories, volleyball courts, sports complexes, or parking lots, but resistance has always been too fierce, and the park today still remains an open commons.

I decided to take a walk there this morning and it seemed the same as always—squatter kids with mohawks hanging around, the bushes filled with the campsites of homeless men and women. The current state of economics and social affairs has taken its toll. The loss of so much other public common space and the shrinking economic sphere have put too much stress on the park; too many people with no where else to go use it as bedroom, living room, and bathroom. There are no kids playing in the playground, no picnics, no soccer games, and no young dog-walkers.

In juxtaposing these two “facilities,” my point is not to elevate one above the other, but to point out that the aspirations of each to being free, public, communal property are undermined by tensions between each of those qualities. The hot tub must create a set of rules for self-policing that make it a privileged space, not too dissimilar from a boathouse on a private lake that is shared by several families. This is because in an effort to be communal, and to create a community (albeit one of relative strangers) around intimate space (people are naked after all),

one cannot be wholly public. The accountability that members of a community feel towards one another and their shared space is achieved precisely because there is a finite demarcation of who belongs and who doesn't. Conversely, People's Park cannot maintain its premise of being a free public commons by exclusion policies. For a commons to mean something there has to be open access. This makes it difficult to maintain the sort of intimate bonds that knit a community together and allow any thing other than minimum social values to flourish.

It is in the parable of the Hot Tub and the People's Park that we find an analogy to the free meals on offer in San Francisco. The public gestures of the Diggers soon broke under their own weight, moving from the ideal of a liberated and co-creative space, a manifestation of another world, to an overly popular spectacle that changed into a public charity operation and scene as the event became more publicized and popular. Like the People's Park, it has found its end point as another handout, a space that no one else is that interested in having. On *Any Wednesday*, however, those who know, who are somehow invited or in the know, sit down and eat together. Like the Hot Tub, in order to maintain a community, a functioning, respectful one, barriers are erected and/or rules are set in place to create mutually agreeable circumstances.

This is not to lay down a judgment, only to observe a fact. Both the Hot Tub and Diana Mars's apartment are only so big, only so accommodating. When one opens up a pocket, a free space inside or outside the spectacular society, then the weight of that society presses in upon it. Perhaps if there were twenty free hot tubs in Berkeley and several open apartment dinners on any given night, then the weight could be borne, but it is too much to expect any one act by an individual to support a public structure.

The dilemma here is not in the unworkable nature of gift economies (they work quite well in the total social systems that create them), but in the fixed nature of these social experiments. By locating themselves firmly in a place, whether a park or a street address, and attempting to persist over time, these experiments become fixed, and once fixed, they no longer function as detournments. They are too known, too institutional. They can be ignored, coopted or otherwise accounted for. For gift economies to keep functioning as heretical detournments, their emergence must be unheralded and their exit swift, with a reappearance elsewhere similarly unexpected. This is the essence of the Temporary Autonomous Zone (TAZ), a concept developed by the scholar Hakim Bey as a way to envision the contemporary possibilities for social resistance and freedom. Given that fixed utopias and free-society experiments are susceptible either to attack or incorporation by the larger, spectacular society, Bey speculates that spaces of freedom, or autonomy, must arise spontaneously in locations that present themselves in the moment, so that they cannot be predicted and undermined by the pressure of societal forces. While active, these spaces become areas of liberation, alternative economics, and social protest. When infiltrated or discovered, they are easily disassembled. They can re-emerge elsewhere when the conditions are right.

Power in the Darkness

After keeping us, the audience, waiting for more than an hour, the lights went off and the band took the stage. Or did they? No corresponding lights went up on the stage, and the drumming that began didn't seem to have a point of origin. I remember a strobe light and huge explosions as entire bricks of firecrackers were set off in the midst of the audience and suddenly there was light. Still not on the band or the stage but instead emanating from dozens of large wooden torches that were being carried into the milling crowd by almost naked men. The torches were not set up in any spot, since they were not part of a display concept. Rather, the torches were simply handed out to the audience, first come, first served. What the audience did with them varied—some danced, or fought, or held them aloft to illuminate the surrounding area, revealing a crowdscape of seething bodies in various stages of undress, dance, observation, or navigation. There was always more provided for the audience—more fire (the next time it was in the form of 50-gallon drums filled with burning, oil-soaked wood); more huge bags of wine, fruit, and honey; and most intriguingly, as a nervous management turned off the PA system and turned on the warehouse lights, the instruments themselves—drums, cymbals, and blocks. We, the audience, took up the instruments and continued to play for at least another hour until the security guards found a way to remove one thousand people.

The year was 1994, in the lower Mission district of San Francisco, and the band that I "saw" was Crash Worship. From inquiries I have made since that night, this was a fairly typical performance. Comprised of a core set of musicians and a rotating number of friends, instigators, and performers, Crash Worship was more of a concept than a rock band. What they sought to recreate, in the context of an industrial, apocalyptic, post-punk, and neopagan aesthetic, was a Dionysian space, where libido, carnival, and release were offered to the audience through the most economical of sources: themselves. Crash Worship's decision to turn over the means of spectacle to their audiences set them apart from a whole host of acts that sought to create the style and look of a bacchanalian celebration, by staging the spectacle for their audiences, who paid for the privilege of watching. The project of the band was to enlist the audience as active co-creators of the "work" that was the concert, and in so doing, many of the usual distinctions between the author and the audience became erased.

In many ways, the Crash Worship project fulfills many of the goals set forth by the dissidents in the San Francisco Mime Troupe, as articulated above by Peter Coyote, and in particular the creation of a situation to "elicit creative participation from everyone in what we hoped might be newly liberated public space." But Crash Worship also took that intention into private space, to a paid venue, not only challenging expectations of the role of the audience, but also creating a situation where the audience has to produce its own meaning and spectacle. Given the typical frame of mind and traditional roles in the context of attending

rock concerts, this is both a gift and a challenge. Crash Worship's gift to the audience is the provision of a riot of release, flesh, fire, and wine. However, the gift can only be redeemed by an acceptance of the responsibility of co-creation, by taking up the torch (literally) and deciding the best use to put it to.

In the early days of the punk rock explosion, the late 1970s and early 1980s, the U.S. adherents of the movement made and saw much of the concept of DIY (do-it-yourself). This simple acronym expressed both an attitude and a working method for taking responsibility of one's own potential role in the creation of culture and its local context. No punk bands playing in your area? Form one of your own. Don't have an instrument? Start a fanzine instead and send it out to contact magazines or rent out your local community hall and invite some bands to play, paying them from what you take at the door. In some cases, you could and would have to do all of these things yourself to manifest a local "scene," but why not? It was better than waiting around the mall or figuring out a way to move to a city on the coast where it was "happening." Right at the heart of DIY was this thought: why wait for them to give it to you? If you know what you want, or even have a hunch about it, why wait at all?

In part a reaction to the bloated corporate excess of seventies stadium rock and its megastar bands, and a reflection of punk's early ties to Situationist thought, DIY was essentially an optimistic mind-state/culture movement that believed that only money and force of habit keep people from seeing that culture is something you make rather than something you buy. It was based in the belief that creativity was widespread and omnipresent, something that everyone had, rather than an anointed few. All one needed was permission and a "little help from your friends" to make a cultural contribution, to make an act of authorship concrete and real, and to have a place where it could be received. There were contact lists waiting, 'zine's to be traded, phone lists of people in small towns across America to call who would put you up or find you a place to play if you wanted to tour your band. There were independent record stores that would take your 7-inch singles on consignment and cooperative distribution networks to send them to. Behind all of this lurks the presence of Situationist thought, mainly in the easily grasped concept that we have lost our power to the forces of capital and spectacle only because they made us believe that they already had it by constantly stating that it was true. When one can step away from that idea, it is possible to see it simply again as a veil pulled down over the truth, and that the power is there to be taken back, since we were the ones to give to them. This democratic mindset was steadily eroded over the course of the next ten years, as record companies and media outlets figured out how to carve themselves back into the social sculpture. Finding stars within this milieu, elevating them above their peers and their "scenes" through the mechanisms of record contracts and MTV videos, the corporate powers were able to reinsert themselves into the equation.

So by the time that Crash Worship appeared on the stage, the DIY ideals were in need of some fresh inspiration and perhaps higher and more defensible

ground. What Crash Worship offered was the creation of a space within the concert, within the performance, where people were not merely encouraged but actually instigated and tempted into doing it themselves. "It," in this case, was not the creation of a scene, a band, and an alternative economy (for these were too easily bought and stolen), but the control of a single night, the control of who watches and who performs in a space of co-creation.

The single night is certainly more defensible terrain than an independent record company. It is more mobile, discrete in time, and doesn't show up on the radar. And yet as a blow, as a defiant action it is perhaps, ultimately, just as effective, since in both cases there are possibilities for the creation of real communities based around the gift transaction.

What We Do Is Secret

Sometimes the work has to be kept under wraps. The very revelation of its existence acts as a special circumstance, a favor. A specific decision is made by the maker to release the idea to someone else. In a way it, and by "it," I mean the thing, the location of information transfer that we can call art, or the site of the art action, is like a germ, which moves surreptitiously and somewhat nomadically from host to host. Maybe in these cases it can only be a story or a rumor of an artwork.

The rumor, the germ, begins for me with an introduction to Johnny Spencer, an artist from the U.K. who has an interest in the process of art as an exchange of information. In June we had a short meeting in a library in Oakland with the specific purpose of him telling me about an undertaking that he called "site-seeing." I will tell you now what he told me.

Johnny was invited in 1997 to attend and partake in an outdoor Thai public art festival called *Chiang Mai Social Installation: Week of Cooperative Suffering*. Enchanted by the title, and with an interest in both subverting it and making it literal, Spencer conceived of an activity, surreptitious and unrecorded, that would serve as his contribution to the event. I should mention that while it was his contribution to the "exhibition," it was not publicized or made in anyway available to the viewing public of the event. Because he was interested in the idea of suffering in the context of artwork and because of an ongoing interest in art as a manifestation of the exchange of ideas, Johnny contacted a school for the blind. He inquired whether any of the students were interested in attending the festival with him. He found two young women willing to take part. For the next three days, they toured the city of Chiang Mai together, visiting the various art projects that were being erected, painted, and performed. With the two blind girls serving as a link/guide for Johnny (talking with him about the local context and their understanding of the town) and he in turn supplying the visual information that they used as a starting point to discuss the artwork being made, *Site-Seeing* unfolded.

At one point, one of the girls commented that, “to blind people, talking is art,” and this in many ways confirmed some of his initial instinctive thoughts about the work and what he wanted to accomplish with it. The most obvious of these was that he had long held a belief that conceptual works, being concerned with pure information transfer, do not need visual realizations. Circulating through a festival with two blind guides confirmed this. The least obvious was, perhaps, that if they were correct, then he might not actually be the only artist in the piece—the two blind girls had arrived there before him because of their nonvisual understanding of the possibilities of artistic practice.

Of the two confirmations, I am less sure of the truth of the latter. Spencer didn’t exactly tell me that it was so. I have woven it into the story from my own mind, but this is perhaps the risk and benefit of making works that aren’t works, but rumors. I do know that it should be true enough, because the one statement that Johnny made that has remained with me indelibly is: “with this work, there was no product, no show, not even any artist or any audience. It was not a performance piece, nor an opportunity to make documentation photos and texts to describe the piece. If the piece was anything,” Johnny confided, “it was a conceptual gesture, or an exchange.”¹¹ Co-creation again.

What does it mean to tell you this? Does the secret now disappear? This is the essential problem of fugitive work and fugitive practices, since the game is always up when someone like me spills the beans. My sense is that Johnny’s decision not to bring forth the piece as an “artwork,” or a set of photographs, or an artist’s statement, was because he wanted the original experience to remain the primary one, to not create a secondary experience through the mechanisms of the image and reproduction. Johnny didn’t want to trade what he had co-created for something that he would have to make himself, that would be only his. To not create something new was the only way for the work, the exchange itself, to remain intact as the primary creation.

It might slightly assuage my conscience to think that I am not the stool pigeon in this case because this description of the “piece” is only my own iteration, my own retelling of what was told to me. Make no mistake, this isn’t an artist’s text and there is still nothing to buy. In this way, I hold out the hope that the sanctity of the work, as Johnny intended it, has not been disrupted.

By ending my writing with a description of this work, I am perhaps setting out the possibility that I will subvert my whole premise. There was very little subversion and social protest involved in *Site-Seeing*, and Johnny’s reluctance to lend it a form that could be easily displayed or disseminated makes the possibility of a secondary impact also quite low. However, I do believe that for the three people directly involved, the experience was life changing. Not in the way that surviving a car accident is, but in the way that a fork in the road can be. You can go one way or the other, and by choosing a path and committing to it, you enter into an experience that cannot be undone. In this case, these three co-creators entered into a new space of their own devising. This space, by virtue of their commitment

to the process, contained a spirit of exchange and equality that perhaps can be seen as the hope of a gift in its truest form. Where the gift and the discharge of the debt that it brings on are brought forth simultaneously, there is no real cognizance of the intention and its attendant burden, only an experience of the community that has been formed. Johnny’s decision not to “report” on this work in the typical forms of art has also impacted the space they created, in that he did not trade it for something else. He did not circumscribe it as a work and did not seek to make his version of the story the “official” one. In this way, the space the three co-created still exists as it was, perhaps in the past now, and through my own retelling, certainly dimmer and more distant. But that original space is still intact and waiting, somewhere alongside the world.

By the way, the night after I met with Johnny in the library for our conversation, I had a dream that my wife and I went to Thailand. Perhaps you will, too.

Notes

1. In a gift economy, there is no concept of value-based exchange; only in reciprocity-based exchange. If one gives a feast, what one gets back might be a necklace or a son-in-law or a new social standing, but there is no underlying code that states that these things are equal in value (i.e., a feast is not worth the same thing as a son-in-law; they are not even thought of as being equivalent). This is because in reciprocal relations, the transfer of gifts produces returns and consequences, rather than value. This is what Lewis Hyde means when he says that gift economies create “feeling-bonds” (Lewis Hyde, *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property* [London: Vintage, 1979], p. 56). In a capital economy, an overarching system of absolute value (monetary systems) is assumed, so that exchanges have no left over relations when they are finished. If you get a donkey for a day’s work, it is because both of them were valued to be the same in monetary terms. The transaction is over, and you can move on to the next one. In a gift economy, transactions are never really over, because each one produces more reciprocal ties.

2. The Wipers, “Over the Edge,” *Over the Edge* (Seattle: Brain Eater Records, 1983).

3. Greg Sage, “Seems So Clear,” *Straight Ahead* (Torrance: Enigma Records, 1985).

4. The Wipers, “No One Wants an Alien,” *Over the Edge* (Seattle: Brain Eater Records, 1984).

5. The Wipers, “Dimension 7,” *Is This Real?* (Seattle: Park Avenue Records, 1979).

6. Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (New York: Zone Books, 1994), 12.

7. Susan Sobeloff, email correspondence with Ted Purves, 2002.

8. Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies* (New York: W.W. Norton, New York, 1990), 65.

9. Hyde, 56.

10. Diana Mars, invitation card, self-published, 1995.

11. Johnny Spencer, notes from a conversation, Oakland, 2002.

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