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Notes Whilst Walking on “How to Break the Heart of Empire”

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It’s a warm October day, perhaps a bit too warm to be called autumn anymore, one of those days when you wonder whether climate change will force us to give new names to the seasons. I’ve been asked to write a response to Marcelo Exposito’s film “Radical Imagination (Carnivals of Resistance)”[1] which focuses on the Carnival against Capitalism that took place on June the 18th, 1999 in London and across the world (to coincide with the meeting of the G8 in Köln). I decided to walk before writing, to place my feet back on those streets where we once set foot in a momentary Utopia, to place my body back into London’s financial district, the area that for most days of the year is filled with the hum of profit and plunder and that for a few hours on that historic day was echoing with the sounds of subversive play and pleasure.

June the 18th, or J18 as it became known, changed a lot of things: it radicalised thousands of individuals, it inspired the organisers in Seattle to believe that they could shut the World Trade Organisation summit down (which happened five months later and was perhaps the beginning of the end for the global neo-liberal project[2]), it strengthened a budding global network of resistance

(actions took place simultaneously in 40 countries that day) and it helped bring the "movement of movements" out of the shadows and into the public spotlight. It was one of those events that managed to hit a historical acupuncture point, a perfectly targeted action that transformed so much with so little.

But six years have passed, the group that initiated J18, "Reclaim the Streets"[3], no longer exists, having been torn apart by media criminalisation, state repression and internal divisions. The movement of movements against neo-liberalism that was to rise to prominence following J18 has had its peaks and troughs across the world, from the success of the occupied self-managed factories of Argentina to the state terror and bloodshed of Genoa, from the mass refusals of privatisation in Bolivia to the failure of the world's largest ever coordinated global demonstration on February 15th 2003 to stop the war in Iraq, from the enormous gatherings of rebels at the World Social Forums to the pervasive repression of dissent that took an absurd turn when the FBI added "carnival against capital" to their list of most wanted terrorist groups.[4] The sense of hope that emerged amongst the direct action movements during the last decade seems, to some extent, to have been replaced by apprehension as our world appears to edge towards biblical scenarios of apocalypse, with wars, riots, floods, earthquakes, mass extinctions, melting ice caps, an enormous pending energy crisis and a global pandemic on its way.

As I walked the streets of the city, I tried to imagine recreating that day—would it be possible to bring 10,000 masked rebels back here on a Friday afternoon? I walked past the London International Financial Futures Exchange (LIFFE) with its huge iron security gates—installed a few weeks after we had symbolically walled up one of its entrances with concrete and breeze blocks

while the other was being smashed up—I remembered the drunk punks disappearing into the buildings cavernous ventilation shafts, I looked up at the balcony from where the traders, in a wonderful "détournement" of Abbie Hoffman's infamous 1960's New York Stock Exchange action[5], had thrown ripped photocopies of £50 notes onto the heads of the disobedient crowds below and I realised with a sinking feeling that it now seemed completely impossible.

Today a call for Carnival against Capital in London would almost certainly fall on deaf ears, few people would dedicate another year of their life to organising it, only a handful of people would turn up and this time the police would be all over us before the ink on the leaflets had dried. Anyway occupying and causing property damage to a financial centre would never mean the same thing after that sunny September day when two aeroplanes were driven into the core of New York's very own financial district. To no longer believe (that it was) possible was a strange feeling, in some ways it felt like a defeat, a failure, because after all it was the very act of overcoming what "realists" thought was possible, of triumphing over the world of fact, of believing in the realities of our desires, of transforming our radical imaginings into radical action, that lay at the very root of this kind of carnivalesque protest. J18 prefigured our imagined future in the present and like all the best utopian visions, refused to escape from history into wishful futuristic thinking, but changed history itself by intervening in the present. The carnival was less about protesting, more about creating another kind of life, a poetry of life.

Encouraging Forgetfulness

London was the first city that was built so big that if you lived in its centre you could not walk to the edge and therefore to the countryside. For hundreds of years citizens of this city have been able to go about their daily lives forgetting that nature exists. It was perhaps the first modern metropolis which embodied in its stones and streets civilisation's great conjuring trick: the act of forgetting its dependence on the natural world, a trick which has caused the downfall of many an empire. From the Romans to ancient Mayans, Polynesian cultures of Easter Island to the Anasazi pueblo builders of the American South West, all were partly brought to their knees by over-reaching their ecological capacities.

J18 took place in the valley of the now buried river Walbrook, the small fast flowing river around which London was built. Buried in the 13th Century, this forgotten fluid foundation of the city, its ecological and mythic building block, was given a new lease of life when it was symbolically released during the carnival by opening a stand pipe and letting mains water burst twenty metres into the hot summer sky.

The seemingly simple act of "unearthing the Walbrook" brought together many elements of a successful aesthetic political gesture. [6] Its pragmatic task was to cool the hot dancing bodies, its rebellious role was to flood the nearby Futures Exchange, its aesthetic function was to be spectacular backdrop of gushing water symbolising chaos and liberation amongst the seemingly immutable concrete city buildings—and last but not least it worked as a way to remind us of the natural world enclosed in concrete beneath our feet. The roar of the water and the epic howl of mocking laughter that rose that day from the streets reminded us that our society is built on the brutal act of silencing the natural world and that its existence relies on promoting forgetting—forgetting acts of

resistance, forgetting our bonds to earth, plants, air, water, forgetting our fleshy fragile bodies, forgetting that everything changes, that everything dies and that nothing is stable or forever, not even the empire. And with all this forgetting, perhaps forget to hope for a better world.

Carnivals of resistance with their grotesque unbound bodies, their absolute refusal of hierarchies and spectatorship, their insistence on total participation, their unpredictable creative chaos, flowing crowds and lawlessness, bring us face to face, or rather arse to arse, with everything that our society abhors and needs to control. Everything capitalism wants us to forget. By their nature carnivals are transitory, and they mock all those that hide behind the facade of permanence and yet paradoxically I realised that I wanted future generations to remember this particular carnival, to remember that such acts of imaginative audacity are what provides élan to rebellious movements, to remember that radical imaginings can seep out of the mind, the notebook, the art gallery and into the streets.

J18 is slowly slipping into the quagmire of forgetting that this city is so good at generating. London is richly layered with histories of creative rebellions, many of which were visionary for their time. From the peasants revolt which called for the end of serfdom and the sharing of "all things in common" as early as the 12th century to the extraordinary civil war sects of the 17th century—such as the Ranters, whose orgiastic form of ecstatic community, drunkenly enacted in the city's taverns "the true house of God", created through "parity, equality and community" a space of "universal love, peace and perfect freedom" in the here and now[7]. From the militant suffragettes two hundred years later, who in their smart hats and long white dresses smiled as they hurled

stones through banks and shop windows, burnt down churches and MP's houses—to the events that partly inspired J18 itself, the "Stop the City" actions in the early 1980's that brought elements of the punk and peace movements together to target the financial district, a moment that is virtually lost to history now. In the same way that London's voracious metabolism pretends that nature no longer exists it also manages to make us believe in a homogenous history devoid of cracks, of fissures that open up the possibility of radical imaginations transforming themselves into actual acts of resistance.

London is rarely perceived as a revolutionary western city, like Paris, Prague, Barcelona. It is the city of tradition, of monarchs and immutability, of capital and empire. Walking around the financial district I tried to find traces of J18. The unauthorised carnival came and went. It lingers on in the memories of all who took part, it echoes with those in the movements who have read the little that has been written about it[8] and who have heard stories and anecdotes, but what remains in the actual fabric of this forgetful city? Will anything remain when the stories fade, the few books and videos are lost in the labyrinths of libraries and the dancing bodies who participated rotten and returned to earth. Of course there are no statues or plaques to mark acts that reversed the dominant narratives of history. Rebellions must not only be defeated by those in authority but those who rebel today are encouraged to forget yesterdays successes. The role of power is to constantly persuade us in the utter futility of our actions.

During J18 graffiti tarnished the clean and perfect facades of finance. For years afterwards one could see one tiny bit of graffiti left. But last year even that meagre relic disappeared. So I walked around the city scouring the walls for clues, searching for residues

of resistance—and on a rough brick wall next to the Futures Exchange I discerned a large light yellow stain, about a meter in diameter, in the shape of the classic anarchist symbol—the circle A.

The history of this popular symbol is little documented. Popularised by the punk movements of the late 70's its most probable origin is that it represents Proudhon's maxim that "Anarchy is order", thus the A in a big O. Representing the key classical Anarchist belief that chaos lies within government and that true order rest with a society of voluntary cooperation, where people would "naturally" respect each others freedom. Now the Circle A' with its echoes of ch@os, adorns everything from mobile phone backgrounds to T-shirts bought in high street chain stores. It seems to have migrated a long way from Proudhon's maxim. I have never liked political symbols, they are too reminiscent of brands. But this year I've taken to wearing a small badge that a friend made for me. It has a new yet similar symbol on it, one which has begun to crop up a lot recently—an A with the circle replaced by a heart. For me it is a much more fitting symbol for the new emerging political philosophies which J18 helped prefigure.

Replacing the O for order with a heart seems entirely appropriate for a symbol that perhaps reflects the new radicalism of the fluid network of global movements that has emerged during the last decade. The word Order has its roots in the Latin *ordo*, meaning "row, series, rank" somewhat irrelevant for a movement that thinks and acts in networks, that refuses to march in straight lines but prefers to dance and surge through the streets and that puts creativity and pleasure at the centre of its politics. The heart speaks of organic bodies, of feeling, of affective action, of desires—and perhaps of a movement that is trying to remember how to love.

Choosing Love

To speak of love within the tough political culture of radical movements or within the cool hip world of art is never a comfortable thing. But as Bell Hooks so beautifully illustrates in her essay—*Love as the Practice of Freedom*, "The absence of a sustained focus on love in progressive circles arises from a collective failure to acknowledge the needs of the spirit and the over determined emphasis on material concerns. Without love, our efforts to liberate ourselves and our world community from oppression and exploitation are doomed. As long as we refuse to address fully the place of love in struggles for liberation we will no be able to create a culture of conversion where there is a mass turning away from an ethic of domination".[9] The inclusive embrace of carnival with its passionate liberation of bodies and its collective socio-erotic spell celebrates a politics that sees qualitative desires as just as important as material needs, refusing to separate the need for material survival from the pleasures of living. But even within this political context those who speak of love are not taken seriously. And when I speak of love I am not speaking of the self-centred notions of romantic love, managed like a business deal, an *exchange* between two people—but love as a collective gift, an *extending* of the self to nurture the other, an embodied understanding that we are deeply entwined beings, connected to everything and everyone. To choose love is to go against the prevailing cultural values that see Hobbes' war of all against all around every corner, it is to refuse to see competition as the currency of human relationship.

Within a year of J18 happening, the group that had organised the event fell apart, partly due to internal strife. A little more love, a bit more space to acknowledge feelings, to speak of despair as well

as of our hopes and joys may have kept us together. Observing numerous radical groups since then, it has become clear to me that more groups and movements are destroyed by poor group dynamics and internal fights than any number of police. It is much more effective for the state to play with the cops in our own heads than to batter our heads with truncheons.

Radicals are often vulnerable souls. Most of us become politically active because we felt something profoundly such as injustice or ecological devastation. It is this emotion that triggers a change in our behaviour and gets us politicised. It is our ability to transform our feelings about the world into actions that propels us to radical struggle. But what seems to often happen, is that the more we learn about the issues that concern us, the more images of war we see, the more we experience climate chaos, poverty and the every day violence of capitalism, the more we seem to have to harden ourselves from feeling too much, because although feeling can lead to action we also know that feeling too much can lead to depression and paralysis. Combine this with the stress of repression and criminalisation by the state and many activists begin to grow a thick armour around themselves. Denying our feelings becomes a mechanism of survival.

In such a controlled state of being, it becomes difficult to be open, to listen to oneself and each other. Love becomes impossible. Often we cover up this loss with the illusion of bravery—we become fearless warriors for the planet. But a warrior who is unable to really feel and perceive what is around her/himself will soon end up dead and ineffective. Fearlessness comes from escaping our bodies, forgetting we are made of flesh and blood and living in the pure abstraction of a mind. By choosing love we begin to transform fearlessness into courage—a word that has its roots in the French word “cœur”, meaning heart. Courage is *feeling* fear and yet

deciding to overcome it because your heart tells you it is the right thing to do.

Embodying Carnival

During J18 the values of carnival erupted on the street—conviviality, creativity, spontaneity, love and surrender to the moment. However these are not values that are easily embedded in our behaviours and bodies in the everyday. It felt like a paradox that groups organising carnivalesque actions, where rebellious play and liberated bodies were released onto the streets, never seemed to include play and working with the body within their own creative/organising processes, in fact the process resembled any leftist meeting, a bunch of people sitting around talking. All head and little heart.

It was these understandings in 2003 that brought me to develop the practice of *Rebel Clowning*[10] working with a loose collective that became known as the Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army (CIRCA). Mixing the ancient art of clowning with contemporary forms of civil disobedience, we developed a practice that tried to provide tools for transforming and sustaining the inner emotional life of the activists as well as being an effective technique for taking direct action. It was a way of embodying the spirit of Carnival in our minds and muscles.

Rebel Clowning introduced play and games into the process of political organising, we developed a series of trainings that encouraged activists to re-programme their bodies, to develop their intuition and to "find their clown"—a childlike state of generosity and spontaneity. Rebel clown trainings attempted to peel off the

activist armour, to reveal the soft skin again, to find the vulnerable human being who once felt everything deeply.

The clown is a figure whose history can be traced back to some of the earliest forms of performance in the world. Linked to the role of the Shaman, the social healer and magician, the clown has in various guises throughout history been someone who was given the liberty to confront all the taboos and truths of a culture, to criticise the very core principles of society and yet get away with it. They are able to do this because they inhabit a special place, an in-between space, a weird social no man's land. The clown manages to be at the centre and the margins of society simultaneously. S/he is a popular archetype seen everywhere, from the circus to the corporate advert, the public street to the private children's party, and is recognised for speaking a certain wisdom despite a surface of folly. Yet at the same time, the clown is an outsider, a freak, an object of ridicule. This threshold space that the clown inhabits is powerful, it confuses the binary categories that the system imposes.

Clowning is a state of being rather than a technique. At its root, clowning is about letting go, learning to approach every situation with an openness and vulnerability that we all once had as children. It is a state where we begin to value the power of surrendering to experience and living without fixed expectation. It is a state of being that we all grew up with, and the one that society stamped on and imprisoned in fairgrounds, theatres and circuses. It is the state that learns about the world through play and knows that the difference between imagination and reality is only a matter of opinion.

Armed with mockery and love and using tactics of confusion rather than confrontation, CIRCA took small scale direct actions including occupying and shutting down army recruitment offices

(asking to join up), greeting president Bush to London with a pretzel firing cannon and fighting a mock march of "pro-capitalists" whilst unexpectedly disrupting the premiere of a Johnny Depp movie.

When the G8 announced they were to meet in Scotland in July 2005, we decided to greet them with a large army of clowns and toured the country on a ridiculous recruitment drive, training clowns in cities across the UK. From the side of a solar powered caravan set up in town squares and parks we announced our operation HAHAHAA (Helping the Authorities House Arrest Halfwitted Authoritarian Androids) where we explained that our aim was to help the authorities build the security fences higher to keep the G8 leaders and their entourage inside, thus protecting our world from dangerous violent men.

200 trained clowns converged on Scotland for the week of action which saw so many beautiful acts of rebel clowning. There was the clown drawing smiley faces on police riot shields with lipstick and then kissing them with her bright pink lips. There were the cops who had encircled the black bloc, unable to keep straight faces as a small group of clowns mockingly sang "one banana two banana three banana four" to them. There were the dozen bright coloured clowns moving in unison through the knee-high green barley as the fences were being pulled down. There was the moment of ecstatic joy as a large determined clown battalion marched straight through a line of smiling yet confused riot cops whilst chanting "love and respect" and ran onto the A9 motorway—and there was the moment when for a few seconds the police forgot which side they were on and played some of our training games with us, which ended in a bizarre clown-cop hug.

But a day after the actions against the G8, four very normal looking men slipped unnoticed into London's public transport system, carrying rucksacks filled with explosives. Within an hour they had blown their own bodies up, killed 56 other people and injured 700. London was completely paralysed. Everything we had worked on for over a year for the G8 actions seemed to be overshadowed, blown away with the blasts and the resulting rise in security, repression and further erosion of civil liberties. The issues of climate change, poverty, the dictatorship of the markets, everything the movements had worked to bring to public attention was overshadowed in those few moments.

The sister of one of the bombers had allegedly written an email to her brother encouraging him to go through with the action. "We all have to be firm and focused with reality as time is slipping away,"[11] she wrote, "and there is really no time to be weak and emotional." Meanwhile in the depths of the academy recent research in "neuro-economics" has shown that "people with certain brain lesions, which limited their capacity for emotion, felt less fear, took more risks, and made bigger profits than rivals in laboratory-based gambling game"[12]. According to the logic of the market and terror, success comes to those who have damaged their capacity to feel.

Remembering How to Feel

Social movements are like seasons, they have their springs and summers, their moments of expansion and uprising, but also their autumns and winters, times of contraction, of slowness and incubation. As activists we tend to want to act all the time, when we aren't acting we loose the very thing around which we build our identity. J18 was during a moment of intense global activity, we felt

that everything seemed possible. Now things feel very different. Our world is collapsing around us—should we focus on building lifeboats to get us through this crisis? Should we be resisting the state of permanent war? How are we going to cope with the social conflicts caused by Peak Oil? How do you act with infectious joy when it's easier to be paralysed by despair? The Tao Te Ching asks: "Do you have the patience to wait until your mud settles and the water is clear? Can you remain unmoving until the right action?" Perhaps it is during these strange muddy times that love is more important than ever, love as the practice of listening, of nurturing, of freedom.

As evening falls, the Thames tide rises and my walk drifts into the cold marble rooms of the Guildhall Art Gallery, I am surrounded by huge gold-framed paintings depicting moments of pomp and ceremony that have taken place within the city, and there in the middle is an image that reminds me more than anything of J18. It is a view from a roof top that looks down upon the city, encompassing the exact area where the carnival took place. The streets below are filled with people, horses and carriages, coal smoke rises from the chimneys. I remember sitting drinking in the courtyard of a pub on the opposite side of the river in the evening after the carnival, removing our disguises and celebrating the day while we watched smoke rise above the city from the few fires that had been started as the festive transmogrified into the riotous. Our bodies calmed and the adrenalin that had coursed through them all day began to dissipate, we felt invincible. But we could never have predicted the future, neither the enormous rise of global social movements that was to come, nor this strange moment where hope felt hard to rekindle.

The title of the painting is "The Heart of the Empire". J18 made that heart miss a few beats. But that unfeeling organ is strong,

made of stone rather than flesh, and its rhythms of endless war and competition continue to beat despite these tiny bursts of resistance that shake it momentarily. But what is sure is that when Niels Moeller Lund was finishing his painting in 1904, he had no idea that the British Empire he took for granted would one day be unrecognisable. He would never have predicted that one of its biggest cracks would begin fourteen years later when a small man, clown-like in his appearance his half naked body wrapped in home-spun cotton, bearing an extraordinarily radical imagination, began to seed unrest in India. Dedicated to disobedience against the Empire and a life of love, Gandhi's merging of creativity and resistance, the personal and the political, imagination and action, means and ends was famously summed up when he said "be the change you want to see". This challenge remains potentially the most radical thing we can do in these muddy times, it challenges us to banish despair because it demands that we act in the here and now, that we refuse to imagine another world in the future, which entails waiting and hope. I stare at the painting, and I know that this global empire will fall in the most unexpected way and probably due to many seemingly tiny acts converging. In my imagination I get a spray can out of my bag and graffiti on top of the canvas "Love will break your heart?" In reality I walk out of the gallery, back into the city and realise that perhaps I've returned to what Baudelaire called "a world where action is never the sister of dream".

The article is taken from a reader for the thematic project series "Spectacle, Pleasure Principle or the Carnivalesque" at the Shedhalle (www.shedhalle.ch). The reader will be published by bbooks Berlin in Winter 2007/08.

[1] See http://www.shedhalle.ch/eng/archiv/2005/karnevaleske/thematische_reihe/projekte/exposito/index.shtml, http://www.hamacaonline.net/obra.php?id=244

[2] Emmanuel Wallerstein sees the end of the post 1970's model of neo-liberalism occurring during the break down of talks at the Cancun WTO meetings in 2003. See his "Cancun: The Collapse of the Neo-Liberal Offensive", http://fbc.binghamton.edu/122en.htm

[3] For an early history of Reclaim the Streets see Jordan John, "The Art of Necessity" in "DIY Culture: Party and Protest in 90's Britain", ed. Mackay, George, London / New York: Verso 1997

[4] Despite the fact that "Carnival against Capital" it is not a group at but merely tactic used by numerous groups.

[5] In 1967 art activist prankster extraordinaire Abbie Hoffman and a band of soon to become Hippies dropped hundreds of dollars from the visitors gallery onto the floor of the New York Stock Exchange proclaiming the "death of money", causing a mad frenzied scramble for the notes by stock exchange employees.

[6] Studying ecosystems teaches us that in a complex system the most successful elements have numerous functions—a trees leaf captures energy and moisture, creates shade, fertiliser, wind protection, carbon dioxide to name but a few of its numerous functions. The most effective acts of creative resistance follow this pattern, what is called "stack functioning" in the radical design discipline known as Permaculture. During J18 many elements were designed with multiple functions, including the infamous 8000

masks which hid identities, were textual propaganda and choreographic tools to split and move a crowd.

[7] Clifford Harper, “Anarchy—a Graphic Guide”. London: Camden Press, 1987.

[8] See Notes From Nowhere (ed.), “We are Everywhere: the Irresistible Rise of Global Anticapitalism”, London / New York: Verso, 2003.

[9] Bell Hooks, “Outlaw Culture—Resisting Representations”, London: Routledge, 1994.

[10] For more on *Rebel Clowning* see www.clownarmy.org

[11] Reported on the BBC, 6th October 2005, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/4315896.stm

[12] “The Guardian”, October 3rd 2005, London—Neuro-economics, Briefing.