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Gestures of Everyday Resistance

The Significance of Play and Desire in the Umsonst Politics of Collective Appropriation

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A certain politics of collective and visible appropriation has been gaining attention over the past years, most notably from networks of activists affiliated with the European and South American precarity and autonomy movements. This politics of collective appropriation is marked by the subversion of a capital-oriented exchange logic in favour of a concept of seizure predicated on desire and unhindered by financial constraint. Common to these gestures is a highly libertarian attitude, an exuberant and playful negation of the alienation and exclusion provoked through axiomatic consumeristic machinations, and a very clear social orientation that attempts to move beyond the paradigms of traditional political structures in both theory and practice.

In Germany one trajectory of this social politics was manifested by the Umsonst campaigns, which occurred most rigorously between 2003-2006. The campaigns consisted predominantly of gatherings composed of undefined activists and the public collectively, playfully and performatively engaging in illegal acts (trespassing and

theft) in the social realm. Initiated by members of the larger radical left Fels – Für eine linke Strömung (For a Left Current) movement, the Berlin faction was the first to emerge as a molecular campaign creating a "culture of everyday resistance" in response to the discourse of economic rationalism, privatisation and directives to "pull the belt tighter" issued by the Berlin state government.[1] Asking the question: "Why should we be denied 'luxuries' just because we don't have the financial resources required to take part?", each action proposed by the campaigners was formulated as a direct retaliation against the neo-liberal rhetoric of scarcity rampant in Germany. The wildly popular slogan for the campaign "*Alles für alle, und zwar Umsonst!*" ("Everything for everyone, and for free too!") infiltrated activist networks and the Umsonst format proliferated in other German cities such as Hamburg, Dresden and Cologne. This intra-national circulation of the Umsonst agenda helped to open discussions on social protest and appropriative political action within radical left movements, to both greater and lesser critical acclaim. Unlike many of the current German alternative movements, the Umsonst campaigns followed a socially directed methodology intent on discovering imbrications between public resentment against state imposed regulations and micropolitical often individual covert acts of appropriation based on anti-capitalist sentiment; such as illegally entering pools and public buildings, fare evasion, sneaking into cinemas, petty theft etc. According to the initiators, these individual tactics were politicised through a visible, collective presence in an attempt to establish everyday practices of resistance.

This format of collaborative appropriation was not unique to these campaigns, for, as one of the activists pointed out in a 2005 interview, there had been an ongoing tradition of this type of autonomous resistance in Germany throughout the 1980s, "[...]

and in Italy in the 1970s, where people collectively lowered their rent or bargained lower prices in the supermarket. So we just recovered and reinvented it, in the context of Berlin today."[2]

In these struggles "for the re-appropriation of social wealth produced by the working class but unpaid by capital", such collective tactics were designed to resituate the strategic sites of power beyond the depersonalised representation of an impotent democracy and back into the multitude.[3] The Umsonst campaigns took as influential these historical models of collective refusal, and while directly re-configuring some of the techniques, actively departed from the "party" organization format. This involved the creation of a more decentralised, flexible and diffuse political movement, and the core group of instigators made clear that the Umsonst network did not operate as a hermetic unit but came together primarily on the basis of certain campaigns which were open to everyone for participation, further discussion and re-appropriation. In this way, the actions were formed through attempts at integrative mechanisms (such as workshops, research groups, discussions) produced between activists and select members of the public (such as students, artists, minimum wage earners, internees etc.) that the accelerating processes of privatisation specifically made precarious. Workshops were also conducted in concurrence with networks of other autonomous groups targeting the areas that the individual campaigns attacked. This format arose in part as an experiment to move beyond prescriptive, abstracted or ideologically based assemblages, and intended to make more extensive the circle of applicability to sections of the Berlin population often estranged from the established activist milieu. Much focus was placed on connecting people with the implications of structural reforms in their everyday lives and mobilising them to self-present their opposition. It was argued that unified direct

action would make this dissent visible and it was hoped that such political visibility could also inspire pluralistic flights of self-determined organization to take place beyond the parameters of the recognised activist sphere.

While these calls for inclusivity flourished on a rhetorical level, it is important to outline some of the constraints encountered through their practical realisation. For instance, the actions were difficult to access by those with physical disabilities, and despite circulation of propaganda and workshops, more effort could have been made to create stronger and more sustainable alliances with those affected by the implemented policies. The conspicuous illegality of the actions and the deterrence this might have caused for participants was also an issue, specifically for those who could not afford to get caught for fear of retribution such as deportation or loss of work. These issues rendered it necessary to deal with the paradoxical rhetoric of immanent inclusivity, and as this was not resolvable at the time of inception, weight was placed on making the actions as open as possible despite such limitations. Certain issues tied up with illegality, namely apprehensions and corporal dangers, were directly attended to through the collective model. It was proposed that this format could help to alleviate some of the guilt and anxiety often associated with such acts when undertaken on an individual level. As such, care was taken to provide a platform whereby potential participants could feel more comfortable with their cooperation, and manoeuvres for this were advocated. This was of paramount concern during the Pinker Punkt (Pink Point – Ride for Free) objective of 2005, for example, in which the public were encouraged to travel on city transport without tickets in response to the re-structurization of the student discount cards and the increase in fares. The action was named as such to redefine the practice of "schwarzfahren" (riding black) by queering and

detourning its racist and criminal associations. In Berlin participation numbers fluctuated, from around 3 to over 50 people travelling together for free.[4] Each group travelling had experienced members with them who had practiced strategies to deal with any arising legal problems, and participants were repeatedly informed of their rights and were given instructions on what to do in order to minimize harm. Guests on the trains were also made immediately aware of the action, so as not to cause unease or panic if the activists were confronted by inspectors. After the actions had taken place, activists and associates planned a fundraising party to cover the costs of the 3 individual fines incurred for trespassing, so as to continue with this spirit of solidarity and community.[5]

Play

These attempts at integration and an ethics of public consideration characterised the social orientation of many of the Umsonst interventions. In correlation with the more "pragmatic" techniques sustaining this interaction were the affective tactics used to further enable a sense of collectivity within the event itself. By developing insurrections that were pleasurable and, importantly, timely, the political resistance became more desirable to a broader social sphere. Integral to this creation of desire for participation was the use of strategically playful elements to cultivate an air of fun and connectivity. What was useful about play to these interventions was primarily its indistinct and disruptive nature. Play has the amorphous characteristic of slipping into a paradoxical position between "real" and "not-real" in that it incorporates "real" words, gestures, hopes and intentions, that are framed as "unreal" through the playful context.

Gregory Bateson noted a complex kind of play in which the premise "this is play" is problematised into the question "is this play?" For Bateson this leads to the peculiar and ambiguous paradox of a "metaphor that is meant" in which play signifies something more then simply a fantastic, unreal realm. He posited that this double movement is present in art, amongst other states, within which events can be both true and false simultaneously.[6] I would like to further suggest that it is this uncertainty of play which can prompt a radical deterritorialisation of categories differentiating play from non-play, precisely the milieu in which the Umsonst actions took place. For while the actions were saturated with these fantasy elements they also opened up a moment for the aleatory encounter in which it becomes possible to conceive the play world as an emerging potential reality. Although the interventions appeared simply playful on a connotative level, they also exceeded classification in that they may denote something more, something which has significant implications for the different constructions of everyday life. This style of play, in this case a play which has a very serious political intention within a more non-serious format, shows how play demands "risks and promises rewards that may have consequences for our everyday lives."[7] It is exactly this sensibility which was recently articulated by members of Hamburg Umsonst, whose employment of techniques incorporating play, such as irritation, performance and carnival made "it possible, for a brief moment, to break through the normality of consumption and make the unthinkable thinkable: everything could be for free."[8]

Simultaneous to this line of flight into the possibilities of play opening up spaces for re-imaginings of the world, this mercurial slippage of context also has more practical consequences. Actions like those of Umsonst, where risk is high due to the overtly illegal

nature of the gestures, can utilise the uncertainty of playful anti-identification as a double strategy to avoid detainment and harm. In one campaign specifically, the MoMA Umsonst, which took place in April 2004, it was the ambiguity of the playful event and the non-specific identities of the activists that allowed for a civil protection and freedom often unattained in direct action protests. The event was created in retaliation to the admission prices into the exhibition and the queues, both of which caused general public inaccessibility, which was further compounded by the establishment of a VIP pass which privileged access based on economic stature. The campaign began two weeks before the action, with the dissemination of 2000 posters closely resembling the official MoMA advertisements, stating in German, Turkish and English that on the 17th of April, at 4pm, the MoMA exhibition would be free to the public. The campaign received citywide media coverage, and on the day between 400-500 people were in attendance. As the activists remained visually ambiguous, a media furore ensured as reporters were uncertain whom to target for interviews and commentary. This destabilisation of identity also displaced the force of state apparatuses, for it was unclear whom to charge for instigating the event. As one of the collaborators explained,

> "in Berlin at these large rallies, somehow the police are always managing to beat people up... fun makes it more difficult for them...You dance around and confuse the police, who can never be quite sure: is this a political action or a cultural action? It's good to break down these clear divisions."[9]

This contortion and shifting of categories, identities and protest terrains, afforded in this instance through the enigmatic nature of

play, can be seen to function on three beneficial levels within the methodology of the Umsonst interventions. Not only does it allude to the capacity for different modes of interaction within present conditions by dancing between the parameters of what constitutes "real" from "imagined", it also illuminates ways in which at least partly begin to overcome the alienation associated with the classic divisions between the activist and the public or non-activist. Play, and fun, can compel a desire for participation which helps in the creation of a spontaneous, albeit perhaps transitory, community. Through confusing the demarcations of the individual activist from the larger public body, this double strategy of a playful anti-identification praxis also confers a greater sense of protection for that community which is often difficult to attain in direct action protest situations. By rupturing expectations of delineation, the event that utilizes play is granted a certain freedom of movement in which to invigorate reciprocal interactions laterally traversing through diverse social groupings and affiliations.

Desire

Coinciding with the playful aspects of such performative activist praxes, the evocation of desire is of benefit to the configuration of the Umsonst event. It is useful to speak about desire here in relation to the writings of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, who notably diverged from projective conceptions of desire (which considered desire as signifying lack and passively limited to imagination and fantasy) and repositioned it as an excessive velocity capable of enabling and altering the compositions of bodies and states. Desiring machines, for Deleuze and Guattari, are ambivalent forces vital to all processes of production. They are a formative part of the social body invested in all social and technical machines; it is desire that produces reality.[10] This conception of desire is

interesting in the context of the Umsonst actions as it may help to discuss the ways in which the campaigns were propelled by desiring machines creating connections, transitions and dislocations which have the potential for producing myriad effects and resonances that can extend new ways of interacting. One such trajectory is in the connections forged between the socio-political desires of the activist and of the "non-activist". As mentioned, what was so compelling about the Umsonst interventions for orchestrating concatenations between the activist and everyday realms were their creative interventions in areas where public dissatisfaction was apparent. This was again demonstrated in an intervention conducted by Hamburg Umsonst protesters around EuroMayday in 2006. There had been much discussion about the precarity and exploitation of interns and immigrant workers in Europe; issues associated with these themes were at the forefront of the larger EuroMayday activities from which the action sprung. On the morning of the 28th of April 2006 in Hamburg, around 30 Umsonst activists responded to these conditions, and, dressed as superheros, invaded a "Frische Paradies" gourmet supermarket. The activists escaped with significant amounts of stolen champagne, luxury meats and other delicacies, which they then redistributed amongst local poorly paid or unpaid internees and other below minimum wage earners. As discussed in relation to the Berlin Umsonst actions, an element of communality and care was again present – not only in the later distribution of the goods, but also in the moment of the event – as the activists reassured employees with gifts and informed spectators with leaflets.[11]

Documented responses to the action were mixed, and made difficult to ascertain in hindsight due to the predominance of mass over alternative coverage. According to an article on the *Socialism Now* website, buttons with images of the superheros were

enthusiastically disseminated throughout the approximately 3000 people strong crowd at the official EuroMayday parade.[12] Within mass media reportage, responses were more ambivalent, with one *Guardian* article stressing that an employee was, contrary to intention, intimated. However the same article also referred to the action as "one of the most inventive - and possibly the funniest [...] raids in German criminal history".[13] This ambivalence was also apparent in a report in conservative German tabloid, the Hamburg *Bild*, who introduced a report with the oblique comment: "To just walk into the most expensive shop in the area and take what you want. Everyone dreams about this, but one small group of people actually do it as well."[14]

Although the tone of the article became more patronising throughout, it is this opening comment that is the most striking. For it infers the potential of such interventions to enrapture the public, to, in some way, locate a line of flight for a shared irreverent desire. To argue for the collective nature of this desire is not to negate its heterogeneity. It is to draw attention to those momentary crystallizations of dissatisfaction felt by a populace, which, when confronted with an image or mythic figure of resistance, finds itself in some way sympathetic towards, or affected by, the sensibility embodied within the gesture.

I would like to posit that, as such, this focus on a localised yet flexible flight of desire marked an avenue through which such actions become engorged with possibility. Guattari argued that in order for a desiring machine to be emancipatory and not recuperative or affirmative of structures of domination, it must be collective; it must spread throughout the entire social strata, from the schools to the prisons and the streets. For Guattari,

> "Liberated desire means that desire escapes the impasse of private fantasy: it is not a question of adapting it, socializing it, disciplining it, but of plugging it in in such a way that its process not be interrupted in the social body, and that its expression be collective [...]. It is not a question of directing, of totalising, but of plugging into the same plane of oscillation."[15]

The solicitation of a potential communal freedom, of a defiant position superseding the law in which, for a brief time, a different ethics is erected, followed by the return to the everyday state stimulates the feeling that this freedom could be within the grasp of the multitude, in that the potential for revolutionary insurgency may underlie each act of daily life. The Superhelden action connected particles of a collective desire, alluded to in media documentation, in the responses from EuroMayday participants, in the feedback received by the activists themselves, and in the ongoing rhetoric of appropriation and new forms of activism espoused by various alternative political initiatives.

This however, is not to suggest that the intervention does not require a more critical analysis in some ways. For, while the event did transgress conventional activist platforms to illustrate more everyday oriented tactics for collective resistance, the recourse to popularised images of defiance tended to paradoxically re-code resistance as something that occurs apart from the everyday "non-activist" identity or life, thus reducing the plurality of identity and perpetuating what constitutes the role of an activist from a non-activist. As with many of the Umsonst actions, despite that there was a clear intent to advance strategies for ongoing appropriation, there was not necessarily a sustainable directive for self-organization outside of the structure and support provided by the organising activist collective. Nonetheless, there was a concerted

effort made to, at the very least, frame the event and the tactics therein unconventionally, within spheres not classically associated with activist praxes and informed by social desires normally left invisible.

It is precisely through this making visible of those often unrepresented social desires and illegal actions that both play and desire return to again and again in the politics of collective appropriation actualised through the Umsonst campaigns. By adopting a non-prescriptive, rhizomatic and flexible political structure, in conjunction with creative techniques, a continuous dancing transversal between contexts and terrains is maintained. And it is, in part, within this movement of the Umsonst campaigns that it becomes possible to think about some ways in which new encounters and relations can be formed between activists, the public and everyday gestures of resistance.

A longer version of this text will be available in Grindon, Gavin (ed) "Aesthetics and Radical Politics," forthcoming, 2007.

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[1] Berlin Umsonst "For a pleasant life now!" in Berlin Umsonst pamphlet. Date unknown.

[2] Rob Eshelman "Everything for Everyone, and For Free, Too! A Conversation with Berlin Umsonst" on *Interactivist Info Exchange*. 2005. Available at: http://info.interactivist.net/article.pl?sid=05/08/18/1741232. An influence for the *Umsonst* movements in Germany can also be traced from the praxis and theory of other recent European appropriation movements such as those of Yomango (with whom Hamburg Umsonst undertook a

collaboration in 2005). In 2002 the Milan based Chainworkers movement and the Barcelona faction of Yomango ran two workshops at the European Social Forum in Florence, bringing together networks of European media and labour activists. As the Chainworker web site explains "They decide to give rise to *esa* (euro social activism), an entity networking official and wildcat strikes, forms of direct action and social, information guerrilla and image sabotage, all geared to create a veritably radical and unified euro political space." From 'Chainworkers Timeline 'on *Chainworkers* website. Available at http://www.ecn.org/chainworkers/dev/node/view/84

[3] Bruno Ramirez "The Working-Class Struggle Against the Crisis: Self-Reduction Of Prices in Italy" in *Zerowork* (February, 1975). Available at: http://www.geocities.com/cordobakaf/self_reduction.html

[4] This high participation however was an exception. According to one member of Berlin Umsonst, ventures to move beyond this one demonstration did not result successfully, with around 5-10 attempts made to establish a fixed group action drawing only minimal participation. From private correspondence with Berlin Umsonst member, 01.02.2007.

[5] From pamphlets distributed during the campaign, April 2005. Refer also to Eshelman (2005).

[6] Gregory Bateson "A Theory of Play and Fantasy" in *The Performance Studies Reader*. Ed. Henry Bial. (Routledge, London and New York: 2004). pp. 124-125.

[7] Henry Bial (Ed.) "Play" in *The Performance Studies Reader*. (Routledge, London and New York: 2004). p. 115.

[8] Hamburg Umsonst “Hier spielt das Leben” in *Arranca!: Aneignung Zwei* No. 29 (Spring, 2004). p. 31.

[9] Eshelman (2005).

[10] Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari “Balance-Sheet Program for Desiring Machines” trans. Robert Hurley, in Felix Guattari, *Chaosophy*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer (New York: Semiotext(e), 1995) p. 137-8.

[11] The text on the leaflets stated “Whether as a well-connected permanent internee, a call-center angel, migrant cleaner or a college drop-out with no clear job prospects: without the mutant skills of the Precarious Super Heros survival in the city of millionaires is impossible. Even though it us who produce the wealth of Hamburg City, we get none of it. That needn't remain the case. From the gourmet breakfasts at the Süllberg to boar's neck and champagne from “Frische Paradies”: the locations of wealth are as numerous as are the methods of reclaiming that wealth. Just one question remains: where will you be using you super powers?” from Spidermum “Euromayday HH: Superhelden im Frische Paradies” on *German Indymedia* website. 28.04.2006. Available at: http://de.indymedia.org/2006/04/145010.shtml

[12] Gaston Kirsche “Revolutionäre Mannschaften und Superhelden: Über Sinn und Unsinn militanter Aktionen” on *Socialism Now* website. Available at: http://www.sozialismus-jetzt.de/LinX-2006-12/Superhelden.html

[13] Luke Harding “A Merry Band” in *The Guardian UK* (17.05.2006) Available at: http://www.guardian.co.uk/g2/story/0,,1776357,00.html

[14] Kbr “Klau-Chaoten stürmen Hamburger Geschäfte” in *Bild* 08.05.2006. Available at: http://www.nadir.org//nadir/kampagnen/euromayday-hh/de/2006/04/452.shtml

[15] Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari “Capitalism: A Very Special Delirium” in Felix Guattari, *Chaosophy*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer (New York: Semiotext(e), 1995) Available at: http://www.generation-online.org/p/fpdeleuze7.htm