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by Benjamin Shepard and Kelly Moore

In April 2000, 22 bicyclists, most of them regular participants in Critical Mass rode through Central Park in celebration of Earth Day. The police followed the group, stopped them, and ticketed them for obstructing traffic and for failing to have a permit for a “demonstration.” This treatment was not unusual in New York that spring. A month earlier, twelve activists with black bandanas over their faces were targeted, profiled and arrested for wearing masks in public.

Yet, bicyclists and anarchists were not the only groups feeling the squeeze of growing informal and formal regulation of New York’s public spaces. Squeegee guys, homeless people, cruisers, prostitutes, street vendors, and kids in baggy pants with their 40-bouncers were among the many on the long list of those thought to be emblematic of urban decay, as such threats to public order. They were targeted as part of a class cleansing **of the city’s** public streets. A crowd control policy which had begun by cordoning off “participants” from “spectators” during the city’s Halloween Parade/ carnival had found its darkest expression in the racial profiling of those occupying public spaces. Unarmed immigrant Amadou Diallo and off duty security guard Patrick Dorismond had been shot by police for no other reason than being black in public. It was in this political context that Critical Mass and Reclaim the Streets-New York City decided to join forces to create a liberatory space beyond the socially sanctioned activities of shopping, driving and going to and from work which seemed to constitute the only safe way to use public space that Fall.

At their best, Critical Mass bike rides and Reclaim the Streets Actions create brief autonomous zones (see Bey, 1991). Born in London in 1995, Reclaim the Streets was part of a worldwide movement with local branches throwing road parties as both a protest against the corporatization of public space and as a living, dancing as example of what public space could be. Reclaim the Streets New York was formed by members of the Lower East Side Collective, the Blackout Books Collective and Times UP! Its first action was an unsanctioned dance party on the corner of Broadway and Lafayette Streets in New York’s East Village. Unlike its ambitious counterparts across the ocean who had recently torn a McDonalds restaurants from its roots, RTS NYC focused more on public space issues around contested spaces such as community gardens or forming alliances with local labor groups, such as underpaid Green Grocers, than on hard core direct action related actions. But this was not enough to prevent RTS from being featured on **FBI Director** Louis Freeh’s list of domestic terrorist threats. While “Public Space for the Public! had been the group’s slogan, “God Bless Hysteria” became its mantra after its new notoriety.

(For more information on RTS/NYC, go to HYPERLINK "<http://www.rtsnyc.org>" www.rtsnyc.org and see Duncombe, 2002; for information on RTS international, visit HYPERLINK "<http://www.gn.apc.org/rts>" www.gn.apc.org/rts).

Although Critical Mass rides had taken place sporadically in New York over ten years, it was not until 1999 that the ride became a regular feature of the rough and tumble urban political landscape. Time's Up, a local activist environmental group, revived the ride by linking it to a burgeoning lower east side activism in which overlapping components of anti-gentrification, environmental, labor, queer and anti-police brutality activism began to mix the ingredients of what would become the basis for broader global justice movement which gained international recognition in 1999. In response to the new hyper-regulation of public space demanded by corporate globalization's hold on cities, a new generation of groups -- from Sex Panic!, to Right of Way, to Surveillance Camera Players and More Gardens! -- emerged to challenge the increasingly restricted parameters of public expression in the city. Public space was eroding, as were our rights to participate within these geographies of the public sphere (see Dunlap, 2000, Ferrell, 2001). Social spaces were becoming filled with omnipresent technologies of surveillance and control (see Hardt, 2000). Concurrent with these changes, the impulse to respond had become an imperative.

On any given last Friday of the month, New York Critical Mass rides are filled with a constituency of anarchists, village people, neighborhood wingnuts, vagabonds, commuters, kids, and art-and-revolution types, and the ubiquitous bike-messengers-with-attitude who made the ride famous in San Francisco. Every month the New York Critical Mass ride offers a different theme. One of the most popular and repeated rides is the Critical Mass for More Community Gardens, in which all the bikers decorate themselves and their bikes as the plants, whose very existence is under threat from zealous developers, thus publicizing the city's campaign to destroy community gardens created on abandoned lots throughout the city. "Dress scary" flyers implore for our Halloween Ride full of ghouls and goblins on wheels; each ride "theatricizing" possibilities for a more liberatory way of interacting in the city. A rejection of enforced monoculture, Critical Mass is about going from Q to E instead of A to Z, delightfully avoiding the linear functions of the every day. Critical Mass is a refusal to "submit to the magic" of the New York City Tourist Board's vision, in favor of plurality of urban storylines, multiple personalities, genders and hijinks in human interactions and public spaces. Substituting improvisation for hierarchies, rides have neither leaders, clear routes nor destinations.

In September 2000, Reclaim the Streets and Times Up!, two local public space groups, organized a Critical Mass action called "Reclaim the Streets for a World without Cars." We were there. It was blissful. Utterly blissful.

The idea was born at a brainstorming session during the regular Reclaim the Streets meeting outside the Charas Community Center in August of 2000. More Gardens! and Times UP!, helped drive the proposal, intersecting memberships between the groups

contributing to create the movement which is Lower East Side Activism. Ben and his comrades were thinking about what do about the million people driving around Avenues A and B on Friday and Saturday nights, clogging up the Lower East Side, and trying to figure out what to do to localize the global justice movement after the A-16 protests against the IMF in D.C. and a major May Day Action in Union Square. The idea was to create a campaign for a car free day in New York City.

What would make New York City a fantastic place for a day? A place where it would be easy for a plant to grow and for people to breathe, to have a conversation in public without feeling like you would be run over? Some skeptics thought that Critical Mass would be destroyed forever if riders showed up and were quickly engulfed by a RTS action and street party. Over the previous two years in NY, the police routinely intercepted protestors, street parties, and threatened to arrest Critical Mass riders. The message had been simple. If we were to stage an unpermitted party, we faced the scenario of mass arrests in which bicyclists would have their bikes taken away. In the end, a majority willing to challenge potential police repression were able to sway enough skeptics to find consensus, set a date and a theme for the action.

Ben: I donned my leopard skin jacket ready for anything the evening was going to give me. I had wanted to look like Prince (but couldn't really pull it off). I recall going out in drag in San Francisco, trying to look like Donna Summer. My friends said I looked like Howard Stern. There were the usual "lord have mercy" pre-action jitters on the subway ride to the action. A friend said he'd felt the same way: Before he leaves for political actions, he sometimes looks at his bed in the morning, wistfully thinking about when he's going to see that space again. Arrests in New York City usually involve 24 hours or more.

I couldn't have been more excited to see my comrades with green hair, pink jackets, crowns, hats, and the piñata at Union Square. As more groups converged on Union Square, the site where generations earlier activists fought the battle for the minimum wage, the energy was growing. - Our view was embodied within the drag anthem from Rocky Horror Picture Show, "Don't dream it, live it," envisioning a public open to a vast new world of scenarios, dramas, and plot twists, most of which are rarely presented by just going to and from work. So, of course we had to dress up in the way we would want the city to be: A place where work dress codes and official uniforms of sameness were left behind for the possibility of a street where social categories disappear.

Kelly: I have two notebooks at home, one called "I Love Bikes" and the other "I Hate Cars." In the bike notebook I write about all of the joyful moments on my bike, the ecstasy of seeing the world in a slower motion than most people ever see it, all of the different kinds of people and bikes I see, all the amazing things people can carry on their bikes, and the look of contentment on the faces of bicyclists. When I got back from the action, I wrote: "Could human experience get any better than this? Playful, festive, beautiful, expressive, and diverse." I dressed as a yellow and red sunflower, and so was my bike. No one would call me a "sunny" sort of person. It was great to ride eight miles down Broadway to Union Square feeling like I was lighting everything up. I was looking forward to a day when at least some people would stop abiding by rules that say be one kind of person, you are what you buy, disconnect from nature, art belongs in museums, faster is better, shut yourself off from strangers.

Our legal info warned Critical Mass bike riders, "Reclaim the Streets actions pose an arrest risk. Our style of festival is their style of disorderly conduct." What emerged from our union on the streets, and continues to do so, was a series of competing urban narratives.

"What's going on here? You need to disperse, this is an illegal gathering," one cerebrally challenged police officer ordered when we met up at Union Square, recalling Foucault's paranoid sounding, yet quite on the mark point that, "the prison begins well before its doors. It begins as soon as you leave your house" (quoted in Hardt, 2000). Nine of us were strategizing about how to coordinate the event, which had planned and unplanned aspects to it. "Why is it illegal?," Hank asked (names are changed). "Because of Parks Department rules," she explained (see City Record, 1999). "But look at the numbers," Hank responded. "What do numbers have to do with anything? Disperse!," the officer responded. "Look," Hank pointed at everyone, counting, "one, two, three," up to nine. "There are nine of us here. That's not an illegal gathering," Hank replied, referring to the absurd "over 20" rule, whereby no more than 20 people may gather in a park without a permit. The cop walked off. The numbers of participants at the action served as both signifiers for a threat to order and a way to organize us into one interchangeable category. Yet the question remained, which reality is more real, our public theater, or their vision of racially, sexually, and economically segregated, increasingly sterile urban environment? The subtext, a further series of questions about who can or cannot walk in which areas without being profiled by police. Without access to public space or freedom of assembly, "any kind of talk about democracy basically goes out the window," one observer recently noted (see Ferrell, 2001). The point is clear: if you can't walk or ride a bike in the street, how can you be considered a citizen? (see Ribey, 1998)

A sermon by Reverend Billy, whose Church of Stop Shopping had been battling Starbucks, Disney, the sins of consumer narcosis and a suburban vision of urban life more appropriate for SUV's than bicycles ushered us to the road. The Rev. exhorted his brothers and sisters to imagine a world where parking lots would be turned into gardens, where car payments, Armor-all, Turtle-wax, and automatic everything would no longer be an end

point of labor. Adrenaline oozing everywhere, the crowd lurched forward, ritually sacrificing our paper maché model car and the hegemonic evils it represented. Cars had transformed the goings-on of urban transportation into a series of fits, starts, headaches and conflict ridden, road rage inspiring gridlocks. Where once urban dwellers had walked, bused, jogged, and actually dealt with each other's differences, the automobile functioned as part and parcel of an urban milieu of private privileges and secret panaceas, xanax, and prozac; its oil fueling yet another **American** addiction. Bent on consumption, our dependence on petroleum seems to dictate the worst in American foreign policy, gulf wars and battles against terrorism. But we're getting ahead of ourselves. There was actually a bike ride aimed at detoxing us.

We took off, five hundred bikers joyously intermingling, delighting, culture jamming one street after another of a city, which at least for one night, was not dominated with cars. There were the usual wacky bikes, some with small wheels, others with puppets, the tricycles, the skateboarders, the requisite jogger who runs with us, the choppers, the low riders, the disco bikes with boom boxes taped in front, dance music, the beats flying everywhere. Some chanted; others blew whistles feeling the air brush through their faces. One rider turned up his horn to produce the opening notes of Thus Spoke Zarathustra. "BAAAHHH, BAAAHHHH, BBB BAAAAA!!!!" As we passed through Times Square a number of riders stopped, cars waiting at every corner of this intersection of the world, holding their bikes in mid-air, in homage to the possibilities of a temporary autonomous zone, liberated for just a moment. 2001 was right around the corner. We zoomed out of the once sterilized Times Square, reclogged with delights, possibilities, and spontaneity, our moving cavalcade zigging and zagging back to the East Village.

By the time we got to St. Mark's Church, where we were to meet to propel the RTS action, some ten paddy wagons and another 15 police cars were there to meet us. The feeling was we were entering the lion's den. After getting word that the marshal on the bike ride had been pulled over for running a red light, the RTS organizers at the Church were temporarily out of touch with the Critical Mass ride. Things looked a little bleak; butterflies setting in. But friends kept on coming to the Church, feeling the pulse of the early autumn night. Optimistic chit-chat contrasted with ominous forebodings in black and blue. We spread word of a quiet new destination for the action intersection point. Rumors about a "**sale**" down the street, we meandered throughout the East Village night, off to hit the "sale" at the Gap down the street on St. Marks where foot traffic is most pronounced. Instead of the usual **RTS** mass departure with horns accompanied by cops, two or three people left at a time. We looked for bargains, made conspiratorial winks, and the police, --only prepared for conflict-- hadn't noticed that most of us had left for a different meeting spot, without **cops** to crash the party.

Meanwhile, the larger Critical Mass ride did its thing, swinging and swaying up 6th Avenue, singing, meeting strangers, greeting tourists with "Join us, JOIN us!" **The "Less**

Cars!!! More Bikes!!!” chant echoing through the evening air. In answer to the usual “What’s this? queries from the sidewalks, we heard everything from “Living!” to “One kick ass bike ride!” to “The New World!” in response. The cops on minibikes laughed with, not at, the guy dressed as a huge pea pod and the woman dressed as a tree, but with a huge tree house perched at the top, filled with plants and miniature people. A cavalcade of bike riders and revelers careened through the streets, forming a critical mass, and led a crowd into our sound system and the dynamic process of spicing up bland, homogenous public space. Smack dab in the middle of 7th & A, our sound system, which had been sitting in the back of the an old pickup, transformed the scene with sound. And the crowd ditched their bikes, danced and boogied, people smiled, realizing their own power deep in the East Village night....

The real power of the Sept. 29 action was that we were not the things interfering with the movement of the automobiles that destroy the earth and keep people away from each other, we were not one bloc of "protestors," but people on foot, bikes, skates, and skateboards who moved together as a big amoeba of dazzling light, humor and joy.

Throughout the world, when people dance, significant bonds and important communities emerge and re-converge. Street parties and unsanctioned bike convergences result in a specter of difference, profoundly threatening to the caretakers of the status quo. The police sat scratching their heads, not really knowing what to do with the threshold of another kind of city. And there were no arrests.

We learn early that the public sphere is not designed for drag queens, people of color, those who look different, or decide to form circles outside corporate structures. By the time the Rodney King verdict came along back in 1992, there was nothing else I could do but feel the sickness of betrayal and block traffic. Growing up, we are taught to believe in human rights, basic public morality, a system of checks and balances, accountability, democracy and government. While we have been taught to pledge allegiance to a system of laws, the power of this social contract ultimately resides with the people. When it fails us, we have no other recourse than to follow Rousseau's call to challenge the current social contract. Democracy in America is indebted to the enlightened notion that citizens are capable of revolution. The city of LA burned during that week after the five police were acquitted for brutalizing Rodney King, now some ten years ago. That was years before I got to NYC where police hostility toward otherness has warranted a report on human rights violations by Amnesty International. Currently, a federal investigation of misconduct by the NYPD has put the city on the verge of the same federal oversight the LAPD is facing, in part as result of the riots which brought LA to its knees (see [HYPERLINK "http://www.web.amnesty.org/"](http://www.web.amnesty.org/) <http://www.web.amnesty.org/web/ar2000web.nsf/>). Between the Rodney King beating and the Amadou Diallo murder, a generation of activists was born. Reclaim the Streets, Critical Mass, and a burgeoning global justice movement aimed at a do-it-yourself reclaiming of public space were part of this response.

There is another way of being in the city, in which people are not profiled by race or class. It's a space where difference intermingles within that Broadway boogie woogie of bright colors, jazz, pastels, car horns, and the urban rhythms many would describe as participatory democracy at its best. That's what Critical Mass is about isn't it, democracy. You can find it taking off from Union Square the last Friday of every month. Join us.

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