

THE USE OF JOYFULNESS AS A COMMUNITY ORGANIZING STRATEGY

by Ben Shepard

In the last decade, there has been a resurgence in organizing for global peace and economic justice. Many of the innovative strategies propelling the new activism are borrowed from the activist project born between the birth of ACT UP and the protests at the Republican National Convention in 2004. A cornerstone of this approach is a rejection of the hair shirt, anti-pleasure Left. The result is a new generation of activist groups struggling to oppose war and corporate influence while offering a compelling image of the democracy which honors difference in its countless forms. A respect for the interrelations of joy, justice, pleasure, and a use of culture as an organizing tool is at the core of this approach. The new organizing offers fresh approaches to organizing diverse communities while struggling for justice for all. Three specific elements of the new community organizing—humor, culture, and carnival—are considered.

In recent years, there has been a resurgence in writing and organizing for social and economic justice.¹ Much of this writing finds its inspiration from the global peace and justice movement's ups and downs from the rise of ACT UP in 1987, through the Zapatista Rebellion in 1994, the Seattle WTO protests of 1999, the 9/11 backlash, and the worldwide mobilization against the war in Iraq, which resulted in the largest single day of protest in world history on February 15, 2003, with protests in cities around the world. This increase in organizing is accompanied by the emergence of elements of joy—smiles, hugs, camp, dancing in the streets, fun, humor, the use of arts, culture, as well as play—all used to create a message about a more equitable, vital, and democratic world that activists hope to create.

Much of the appeal of the global peace and justice movement stems from a broad overlapping emphasis on diversity, flexibility, and democracy renewal. These movements offer fresh approaches to organizing diverse communities. Three specific elements of the new community organizing are considered. These include

1. the use of humor as a community organizing strategy;
2. the use of culture as an organizing tool; and
3. protest as theater and carnival—
postmodern approaches to social change

A revitalizing sense of joy runs throughout these approaches. If alienation, social isolation, and a turn away from public life are what ail contemporary civil culture, joy cultivates the networks that allow community and democracy to thrive.² Space limitations preclude an elaborate discussion of community building and democracy renewal, yet the literature on these topics is extensive.³ While it may not be apparent in discussions of democracy renewal, a sense of equality and justice is necessary to create conditions for joy to thrive. Further, the use of new technologies has shifted the way organizing is conducted.⁴

The following article outlines the theoretical and practice-based applications of the deployment of humor, culture, and carnival as strategies for engaging citizens, organizing communities, and sustaining campaigns. Much of the new project in community organizing began with ACT UP and its theatrical approach towards social change.

FROM STONEWALL TO ACT UP

The AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) brought a sensibility—a sartorial splendor—to every action it did, and in so doing transformed the way activism was conducted. Born in 1987 after some six years of inaction by the Reagan administration in the face of an escalating AIDS epidemic in the United States and abroad, the group's first chapter started in New York. At its peak in the early 1990s, the group included chapters around the world. Today, ACT UP remains at the forefront of struggles for access to AIDS drugs abroad, while continuing to support local struggles over the inequalities in health access in local communities from Oakland to Philadelphia.⁵ The story of activism from 1987 to 1999 is very much a story about an activist landscape becoming radically revitalized. Much of this vitality can be located in ACT UP's work.

Throughout these years, ACT UP opened up the story lines for a cavalcade of struggles and ways of being in the world, reminding us of routes outside of imposed ideological structures and expectations about gender and culture, creating spaces for personal and social transformation, all the while placing sex and social justice at the center of the new global justice movements. The core point is that without justice there

can be no pleasure.⁶ While there was much darkness in ACT UP's story as it overlaps with the still death-saturated project of AIDS activism (which can not and will not be neglected), this essay seeks to emphasize the generative, life affirming, caring, and joyful motivations and workings of an activist project aimed at keeping people alive and in a world worth living in.⁷ "You cannot build a movement on anger," explained Keith Cylar, a leader in the international AIDS movement with ACT UP and later Housing Works.

Central to ACT UP's work was recognition of the political importance of camp⁸—an ethos which had long been a resource for gay liberationists. Many early gay liberationists—Marty Robinson, Vitto Russo, and others—brought this ethos of activism to the new group during ACT UP's early years.⁹ Few remained with the group for long. When the famously amiable Russo died in 1990, his funeral became an occasion for many to consider what it was about his life-affirming passion and gayness that had so inspired them. Douglas Crimp, who by that time had become a bard of sorts for the group, recalled then New York mayor David Dinkins' eulogy at Russo's funeral. The former mayor informed the hostile crowd that he had paid a hospital visit to Russo, who regaled him with stories, political philosophy, and even a quote from Edmond Burke. After Dinkins left, Russo's friend Arnie Kantrowitz informed the crowd that in case anyone was thinking they had found out something new about Russo—that he was an American history buff—everyone should know that the lines from Edmond Burke he'd recited to Dinkins were from the film version of the Broadway musical *1776*. Relief was discernable. In a way, the laughter brought back the Russo everyone had loved—a "ferce activist who was very funny and very queer, a very funny queer who knew and loved movies, who knew better than anybody how badly the movies treated queers, but still loved them."¹⁰ Crimp's story about Russo says a lot about a camp sensibility that served as a resiliency for many in ACT UP. "What is extravagant in an inconsistent or an unpassionate way is not camp," Susan Sontag explains, elaborating on the uncontainable, queer sensibility of this disposition. "Neither can anything be camp that does not seem to spring from an irrepressible, a virtually uncontrolled sensibility...."¹¹ It is not a stretch to link this sentiment with Vitto Russo's simultaneous passion for show tunes and the "irrepressible" anger that helped drive the early years of ACT UP/New York. Recall Russo's words at a demonstration at the Department of Health and Human Services, in Washington, D.C., October 10, 1988.

You know, for the last three years since I was diagnosed, my family thinks two things about my situation. One they think I am going to die, and two, they think that the government is doing absolutely everything in their power to stop that. They are wrong on both counts.... So, If I'm dying of anything, I'm dying of homophobia. If I'm dying from anything, I'm dying from racism. If I'm dying from anything, I'm dying from indifference and red tape, because these are the things that are preventing an end to this crisis.¹²

He concluded by situating himself and ACT UP within a struggle and a place in history.

AIDS is really a test of us as a people. When future generations ask what we did in this crisis, we're going to have to tell them that we were out here today ...

Someday the AIDS crisis will be over. Remember that. And when that day comes—when that day has come and gone, there'll be people alive on this earth—gay people and straight people, men and women, black and white, who will hear the story that there was once this terrible disease in this country and all over the world—and that a brave group of people stood up and fought, in some cases gave their lives, so that other people might live and be free.¹³

Russo's authentic regard and care was propelled by a pulsing sense of joy, love of culture, and even a fondness for old Judy Garland movies. Arnie Kantrowitz finished his story at Russo's funeral by summing up Russo's school of queer militancy: "In his house," Kantrowitz quipped, "either you respected Judy ... or you left."¹⁴

Russo was, of course, not the first gay man to find inspiration in her. Recall that Judy Garland's funeral took place the same day as a police raid on the Stonewall Inn in June of 1969, which is credited with sparking the Gay Liberation Movement. "If I had known that that Judy [Garland] died that night, we wouldn't have had the raid," Inspector Seymour Pine, former Deputy Inspector of Manhattan's First Division of Public Morals, explained at a talk at the New York Historical Society some 35 years later. Pine led the June 1969 raid on the Stonewall Inn.¹⁵

Even in the movement's genesis—a sense of camp was part of the resistance during the five nights of rioting in which street youth reset the terms for a queer struggle. When the Tactical Police Force (TPF)

rushed the youth during the first night, a small group linked arms around one another and kicked Rockettes style and sang their old reprise, with words updated for the occasion:

We are the Stonewall Girls,
We wear our hair in curls.
We wear no underwear:
We show our pubic hairs.¹⁶

The humorous kick line was used to stymie the police as they tried to regain control of the streets. Whenever the TPF moved forward, Bob Kohler recalled the youth taunting them with variations on their humorous routine, calling the police “the girls in blue” again and “Lily Law,” and they would get about as close to them as they should. Then they’d start to run.¹⁷ Another witness, Danny Garvin, observed: “It was the most amazing thing. What was more amazing was when the cops charged. That’s when I think the anger started ... the cops were used to some kind of camp coming from us.” Yet, the joyous kick line was something new. Garvin continued: “That kick line ... I guess was a spoof on their machismo, making fun of their authority. Yeah, I think that’s when I felt rage. Because ... people were getting smashed with bats. And for what? A kick line.”¹⁸ Jerry Hoose, another participant, summed up the experience of fighting back: “It was just, to me, more a feeling of joy ...”¹⁹

That camp and joy would become ingredients of the burgeoning Gay Liberation Movement. Implicit was the recognition of the possibilities in play when disenfranchised groups of previously isolated individuals converge on the streets, sometimes in righteous anger, sometimes just to connect, quite often to do both. Hank Wilson, an organizer with both Bay Area Gay Liberation in the 1970s and ACT UP in the 1980s and 1990s, recalled the interplay of the struggle for pleasure and opposition to injustice during an organizing campaign in the late 1970s:

If they [homophobes] did something against us, we got in their face. We marched. The call would go up and hundreds of thousands of people would turn out. And we turned out because we cruised at those events and we still do. It was very, very exciting.²⁰

The two notions—opposition to oppression and support for liberation—mutually reinforced each other. For gay liberationists, the right to meet

in public space without fear of homophobic violence, was tantamount to the most basic constitutionally protected demands for the right of public assembly and pursuit of happiness.

Much of the same ethos could be witnessed in ACT UP's meetings. "One of the first things we realized when we went to the ACT UP meetings was, 'There are a hell of a lot of cute boys here.' We said, 'There are a hell of a lot of cute boys here,'" Robert Vazquez-Pacheco, a former ACT UP/New York Coordinating Committee member, recalled.²¹ And much like the gay liberation years before, those "cute boys" were quite a draw. The recollections of Keith Cylar, another member of the Majority Action Committee, betray a similar sentiment at his first ACT UP meeting in 1989. He did not know there was a meeting that night, yet, when he saw "all these guys in black leather jackets," he decided to stay a while. "It was the lit[erature] that made me stop. It was the black leather jackets that pulled me into the room."²² Countless other lead organizers in ACT UP recalled being initially attracted to participate after they took a glimpse at the room full of the intelligent, attractive, and savvy activists participating in ACT UP's Monday night meetings.²³ By the late 1990s, much of this recognition of the political possibilities of the dual yearnings for connection and justice, joy and pleasure infused themselves into the emerging Global Justice Movement.

Sociologist Eddie Yuen suggests that new global justice activism borrows from the successful work of queer/AIDS activism in a number of these ways. The first includes "[t]he discovery of new ways to inhabit urban space. The intersection of carnival, potlatch, and jubilee, not the semiotics of supplication, into the architecture of power."²⁴ Sociologist Steve Duncombe, an activist who was involved during ACT UP/New York's peak years before helping organize the New York chapter of Reclaim the Streets, elaborates, "ACT UP never asked for permission to claim a street."²⁵ In addition, Yuen notes, the global justice movement builds on this joyful defiance through "[t]he use of music, dance, sexuality, and humor to de-commodify pleasure and liven up resistance."²⁶ ACT UP ignited activism by pumping the sexual energy into organizing. If anything, the group helped countless other groups recognize the significance of the political principal of pleasure.

While ACT UP rejected right-wing discourses linking social and sexual liberation with social decline, the core point of AIDS activism became that pleasure and creativity would be the only ways to halt the epidemic. For ACT UP, the most effective way to fight a culture of

sexual shame was through a “vision of sex as liberation and joy.”²⁷ ACT UP helped teach us that without pleasure, there can be no justice.²⁸

For ACT UP, the lesson involved creating a new sort of culture of life and activism that was inspired less by guilt than by fun and life-affirming joy and vitality.

Moises Agosto explains how ACT UP became a source of a sort of queer family for him when he moved to New York from Puerto Rico:

The beautiful thing about ACT UP, that I miss so much now, was that sense of camaraderie, not just in a political sense but in a community/personal side. We knew how to have fun with what we did, because our hearts were there 300 percent. But also there was no judgment, to be a naughty boy, or to have fun and go out dancing. Even I remember a couple of those fundraisers at the Pyramid. So in terms of social life, it gave me a very strong social structure in New York. So, if it wouldn't be for ACT UP, it would have taken me a long time to find a family of friends in New York. ACT UP gave me that in a very—it was not shallow way. It was a very, here, in your face, real life, and these are your friends, and these are your friends that are dying, these are your friends that are getting sick with you. And fun. It was fun. We would go out and do a demonstration, and then we would go out and party. Any kind of thing you could think of would happen. There was no judgment.²⁹

To a degree, there was a sort of social eros, a connection among souls as well as bodies, which propelled this culture of activism. Within Agosto's narrative, one can witness the interplay between the formation of a queer family of choice with the struggle for justice for ailing family members, and genuine care and revelry among those remaining. And the sexual charge was by no means only between men and men. What emerged in ACT UP were a series of blurred lines and boundaries, in which different kinds of queer-kinship networks took hold. “In the world of ACT UP, flirtations, love affairs, and simple fucking were fairly common between gay men and lesbians who had formed new, powerful relationships that came without rules of precedent,” Patrick Moore, another early member, recalls.³⁰ ACT UP was able to capture the life-affirming pulse witnessed among activists involved in the solidarity of a grand struggle, such as the American Civil Rights movement, aimed at changing the world.³¹

The ethos of an unrepentant, unapologetic pursuit of pleasure and justice is reminiscent of the life of and career of Russian anarchist Emma Goldman. Much of Goldman's philosophy was based on a broad faith in personal freedom. The famous adage, "If I can't dance, it's not my revolution," was attributed to Goldman after she was taken aside at a dance by a young revolutionary who told her that revolutionaries should not be seen dancing. Goldman later noted:

I insisted that our cause could not expect me to behave as a nun and that the movement should not be turned into a cloister. If it meant that, I did not want it. I want freedom, the right to self-expression, everybody's right to beautiful, radiant things.³²

For Goldman, joy and justice intermingled, neither able to exist without the other. Skipping a generation, Goldman's writing on personal freedom from the state lays the foundation for the anarcho-feminism and queer theory which propels the movement's emphasis on egalitarian, non-authoritarian political engagement. Her "if I can't dance" philosophy of play and revolution is a direct influence on the street party style of protest of Reclaim the Streets and the global justice movement's aim to create a far more colorful public sphere with joyful, rambunctious fun, and personal liberation.³³

The lesson that pleasure, sex, joy, and creativity overlap has influenced the global justice movement in countless ways. Radical historian and organizer L. A. Kauffman suggests that ACT UP played a primary role in the radical renewal witnessed in the years before the WTO protests in 1999. For Kauffman, Seattle was a culmination of a three-decade process of political reinvention. The result was the emergence of a well-coordinated, decentralized model of organizing based on direct action. Throughout this period of reinvention, lesbian organizers built the bridges between movements. For Kauffman, "The single most important organization, without question, was ACT UP, which introduced a vibrancy and flair to street politics that the Left had lost, and created a new ethos of activism that was at once profoundly radical and pragmatic." She explains:

The novelty of the current movement lies in its vitality, ambition, and breadth. Two pivotal developments in recent activist history prepared the way: the style and sensibility that ACT UP brought to American radicalism, beginning in the late 1980s; and the growing

interest, across the decade of the 1990s, in new kinds of collaboration between and among movements. It is difficult to overstate the influence or importance of ACT UP. From its inception in 1987, the AIDS activist movement pioneered a punk-inflected style of outrageous and mediagenic direct action, employing protest in highly targeted ways that led to consistent concrete victories.³⁴

Implicit was a gallows humor from which many thrived. “The group’s ferocious creativity had everything to do with the immediacy and immensity of the stakes: Illness and death were a constant presence in ACT UP,” Kauffman explains. “DESPERATE DYING HOPELESS PEOPLE WITH NOTHING TO LOSE ARE DANGEROUS AND UNPREDICTABLE,” declared one ACT UP T-shirt.³⁵ Throughout these years, ACT UP brought this heightened dramaturgical flair to much of its work. This flair set the standard for a new activism.

A central component of this new organizing is the view that when activism remains fresh and creative, it holds the possibilities to produce results in people’s lives. Thus, the lesson became that well-timed creative street theater could reshape power structures.³⁶ The dramaturgical lesson followed that street actions had to be good theater. In the years after Seattle, activists worked to build upon this insight. Theatrical protest has many detractors who see its goal not as political but as artistic. Still, ACT UP helped us learn that with good media work, research, and a coherent organized message, guerilla theater can play an effective role in promoting a political message. Scenes are staged so as to be media friendly; characters learn their sound bites around particular policies in question; and audiences gravitate to good performances. People want to write about and interview the cast members, regardless of whether they are stars or not. Everyone has his or her lines.³⁷

Among other things, the success of these approaches stems from their capacity to speak to the multiple publics necessary to create change. To achieve a given goal, campaigns for social change must speak to at least six specific publics, all of which are capable of accepting or rejecting a given message: 1) potential recruits, 2) those working within the movement, 3) potential coalition partners, 4) media outlets, 5) public opinion, and 6) policy makers.³⁸ Success and failure generally unfold within a group’s ability to communicate with these multiple constituencies. Some campaigns aim to generate media attention to a cause; others require direct contact with policy makers. Rarely is it possible to speak with multiple publics simultaneously.³⁹ Thus activists have to be savvy

about their appeal and approach. Three distinct approaches will be discussed in the following pages of this paper, beginning with joking.

1. NOT SO FUNNY: THE USE OF HUMOR AS A COMMUNITY ORGANIZING STRATEGY

“Tell us what to think!” activists screamed to a response of “Obey” during an ironic call and response bit of participatory guerilla theater during the protests against the Bush inauguration in 2001. Whenever this group of activists encountered Bush supporters, they screamed it again. “Tell us what to think—Obey!” Throughout the day, the chant disarmed most opposition as throes of the crowd vented their inauguration of a president for whom the majority of Americans had not voted.⁴⁰ “Power, money, persuasion, supplication, persecution—these can lift a colossal humbug—push it a little—weaken it a little, century by century; but only laughter can blow it to rags and atoms at a blast,” Mark Twain wrote. “Against the assault of laughter, nothing stands.”⁴¹ A couple of examples of the use of humor as a joyful approach toward organizing are useful.

It is 5:00 p.m., outside a political fundraiser in New York. “Four More Wars!!! Four More Wars!!!” a group called “Billionaires for Bush!” chants in anticipation of the appearance of President Bush’s top advisor, Karl Rove, on Wednesday, February 18, 2004. As affluent supporters walk in, the “Billionaires” chant, wave placards, and heckle opposing protest groups. “Buy Your Own President,” they scream at an environmental group deploying a more conventional approach. Police scratch their heads, not knowing if they are for or against the administration. At one point, a black car pulls up. “There is Karl Carl Rove,” many note, suggesting he is the evening’s speaker. Reporters, cameramen, and spectators swarm the man. The police push them back, lift the velvet rope to let him enter. But the would-be Rove walks over to the protestors and starts shaking hands. The *New York Times* noted, “finally, again, this was seen as a joke. It was not Mr. Rove, but an actor playing the part.”⁴² Yet within the satire, a potent critique about the influence of money on the democratic process finds national coverage.

A second example presents the playful use of humor, with pop culture and street theater, to break down a tense situation. It is 7:30 a.m. in front of an abortion clinic in Brooklyn, New York. On the one side, a group of pro-life activists stand holding rosaries and a replica of a dead bloody fetus on a cross dressed like Jesus; they offer diapers to

those willing to be turned away from clinic services. On the other side, the Church Ladies for Choice dress for a morning of street performance and diversion from the guilt mongering. While the Right frames its clinic appearances as religious revivals, generating a feeling of terror and the need to be saved, the Church Ladies juxtapose that energy with a display of irreverence and good humor, thus undermining the atmosphere. The Church Ladies have become a USO of clinic defense. “This Womb is My Womb,” sung to the tune of “This Land is My Land,” is a crowd pleaser. Most of their songs are riffs, some would say culture jams, of classic melodies rewritten as pro-choice anthems. “This Womb is My Womb” attests, “This womb is my womb, it is not your womb, and there is no womb, for Wandell Tewwy.” The Church Ladies shake their tambourines and a smile emanates from the crowd. As a pro-choice counterpart to right-to-lifers who blockade women’s health facilities, the Church Ladies’ aim is to deflect from the very real tension and harassment of those women using clinic services. Mostly gay men from ACT UP dressed in drag, the Church Ladies usually succeed in creating a spectacle.

Another crowd pleaser is “Christo-fasco-Nazi-nutso-psycho-right-wing-bull-shit,” written to the tune of Mary Poppins’ “Super-cali-fragilistic-expealidocious.”⁴³ The first verse opens:

Its Christo-fasco-Nazi-nutso-psycho-right-wing bullshit
 If you try to talk to them you’ll find they are full of shit!
 We will guard our clinics just in case they try to pull shit.
 Christo-fascist-Nazi-nutso-psycho-right-wing bullshit!⁴⁴

The second verse situates the current right-wing attack within a refreshingly enlightened re-reading of U.S. history:

This country’s values are Judeo/Christian, yesiree!
 And that requires a very special view of history:
 Importing slaves and killing Indians is not a sin,
 But give a boy a condom, oy, the trouble you’re in.⁴⁵

The third verse continues the narrative:

Young women in America, their fate must not decide.
 An aging pope in Italy is much more qualified.
 If you want an abortion, then you really must be sick:
 You can’t think for yourself because you haven’t got a dick.⁴⁶

The crowd screams with laughter diverted and attention is once again away from the women using the clinic. The New York chapter of the Church Ladies was formed by two members of WHAM! (Women's Health Action and Mobilization) who joined with two male ACT UPpers, impressed by the Church Ladies' ability to entertain and diffuse tension in other sites in 1992.⁴⁷ In the following years, the group continued clinic defense while making a point about the implicit links between women's health, reproductive rights, choice, and HIV prevention and activism. Yet, they did it with a sophisticated politics which linked the lessons of queer activism and feminism in a sex-positive way. This politics was translated through a simple series of jokes and jangles witnessed in the Church Ladies' pro-choice anthems.

Theoretically

The implications of humor can be understood on political, physical, psychological, and even epistemological terms. Authoritarians and bureaucrats usually resent all types of humor, especially the cutting jokes. Political humor's strength stems from its subversive character, which represents the world in a comic mirror, distorting the powers that be by turning them upside down. In so doing, these jokes elevate the bottom end of the social hierarchy while debasing the top. Along the road, this topsy-turvy lens offers a glimpse of the arbitrariness of business as usual.⁴⁸ "Accounting is always truthful," we're told even when major campaign contributors to the president cook their books while lecturing on "family values" and business ethics. The Enron scandal and the double morality it represented offered an unending series of jokes. Political jokes generally fall within "pie in the face" or "sad but true" groupings of humor. All societies have their touchy areas that everybody keeps quiet about; e.g., "Prozac is good, but marijuana is bad for kids." Humor does an end run around this subtle censorship.⁴⁹

The physiological benefits of joking are profound. Laughing causes secretion of endorphins which decrease pain, muscle tension, and blood pressure, allowing people to relax and feel better. Joking also increases respiratory activity, alertness, memory, and creativity. Further, by providing an emotional release that lightens up heavy moments, laughter serves as a coping mechanism for those with few other resources, increasing energy and confidence. And for those with difficult jobs, it reduces burnout by lightening up brutal reality, offering relief and space to breathe.⁵⁰

In terms of political efficacy and experimentation, laughter creates spaces for actors to reconsider intractable problems.⁵¹ Russian antiformalist critic Mikhail Bakhtin explains: “Laughter demolishes fear and piety before an object, before a world, making it an object of familiar contact and thus clearing the ground for an absolutely free investigation of it. Laughter is a vital factor in laying down that prerequisite for fearlessness.”⁵² Once one stops being afraid of a problem, one becomes free to assess and deconstruct it. From here, social problems lose their intransigent power. The freedom to experiment with alternate interpretations usually accompanies the space to joke about the serious.

Laughter suggests that the world does not have to be accepted at face value. By transforming intractable rules into manageable challenges, laughter creates fluidity where stark reality once loomed.⁵³ Social movements are born through just this sort of shift in the ways people consider social problems. When people start viewing negative circumstances as injustice instead of ill fate, they are taking the first steps toward shifting long-standing social problems into changeable entities. That’s when they start organizing. Laughter is a driving force in these shifts.⁵⁴

Humor can work as a surprisingly effective tool when engaging with public officials and media. Jesters carry no weapons; thus they apparently offer less of a threat to the powers and principalities. Along the road, those with these lighter handed approaches get the audience’s attention in ways “dangerous” political activists rarely accomplish. By serving as the comic, instead of as the lobbyist, jesters maintain face time when others have been shooed away. For advocates, humility is often more effective than self-righteousness. When gardeners converged on New York City Hall in their campaign to save community gardens from 1999 to 2002, the media delighted in the idea of lobbyists dressed as giant sunflowers and tomatoes. As the stories and public pressure mounted,⁵⁵ a usually obstinate mayor became willing to cut a deal. The result was a compromise. How could you resist the demands of an activist dressed like a giant papaya?

2. THE USE OF CULTURE AS AN ORGANIZING TOOL

Social change generally accompanies changing conditions within a culture, as social arrangements considered unchangeable or “just the way things are” become understood as both unjust and mutable.⁵⁶ Advocates have long recognized the importance of the role of culture in creating social change.⁵⁷ Unfortunately, cultural activism is regularly

considered a second thought, superseded by the daunting task of shifting material conditions in people's lives. While organizers emphasize a model of education that depends on analysis, challenging systems of power requires emotional as well as intellectual shifts in attitude. Cultural production, from music to poetry to storytelling, makes social breakthroughs possible.⁵⁸ Cultural anthropologist Victor Turner suggests public performance, dance, and ritual provide the transformative ingredients that unleash "cognitive liberation" necessary to view the world from alternate perspectives.⁵⁹ ACT UP presents a useful case study on the use of culture as an organizing tool.

Culture as an organizing strategy for ACT UP

The ACT UP "Silence = Death" logo, designed by arts collective Gran Fury,⁶⁰ found its genesis at an art show aimed at presenting the word about the epidemic at the New Museum in New York in 1987.⁶¹ In the following years, this simple slogan found its way into hearts and minds across the world. Yet, much of the message began with an intersection between art, activism, and cultural production. The idea of culture can be thought of as both a set of meanings, ideas, and ways of acting, as well as a product or performance, which first contains and communicates a message.⁶² The activist message, "Silence = Death," which first found its audience through the cultural production, the art world, became a constant in New York's streets during the late 1980s.

Richard Elovich was part of a group of AIDS activists who first created the "Silence = Death" logo as part of the arts collective Gran Fury. "Recognizing both the art world's powerful connections and its appetite for consuming controversy," he explains, "Gran Fury used sophisticated advertising strategies and art world connections to detonate political consciousness in spaces where demonstrations were not invited."⁶³ At the time, the use of advertising strategies and cultural capital to bring a political message was not usual. L. A. Kauffman explains:

Where the anti-nuclear and other movements of the seventies and early eighties had opted for a homespun aesthetic of hand-lettered signs that were intended to connote sincerity and authenticity, ACT UP was shamelessly slick, using sophisticated computer graphics and stage-managing their actions for maximum visual impact. ACT UP wanted—*needed*—results, the sooner the better; it had no

patience for the kind of radical purism that dismisses actual accomplishments as mere reformism.⁶⁴

The urgency of the moment inspired activists and cultural workers alike to rethink the relationship of cultural production and activism. Richard Elovich elaborates:

But if the question for those of us going to art school in the early seventies was thinking through what art was, in the AIDS era it has meant challenging the notion of what the artist is and art practice is, where she works, who she works with, and how cultural production happens in multiple use spaces rather than just in art spaces.⁶⁵

In its peak years, this spirit of cultural production was intimately entwined in ACT UP's work. It could be witnessed in its demonstrations, in the streets, the group's outreach materials, the stickers and posters found in bathroom stalls, the corners of sex clubs, fine arts galleries, and, most importantly, the streets. And the "Silence = Death" stickers (featured over an inverted version of the pink triangle symbol the Nazis forced homosexuals to wear) could be found in streets from New York to San Francisco, Paris to San Juan. "Stickers bearing the haunting image have been plastered on subways, payphones, billboards, even the backs of unsuspecting policemen's jackets; it has become as familiar and desirable a part of Manhattan's bombarding visual landscape as the similarly shaped Mercedes Benz emblem," Alicia Solomon recalls.⁶⁶ The "Silence = Death" stickers and posters were an instant draw for ACT UP's Monday meetings. Patrick Moore recalls a feeling of awe, being "forever changed by something as simple as a poster" when he first moved to New York. "In 1987 I began seeing a remarkable poster on the streets of downtown New York. The poster seemed to resonate with a new kind of energy, with its glossy black field interrupted by a single pink triangle." Small type at the bottom of the poster questioned: "Why is Reagan silent about AIDS? What is really going on at the CDC? Turn anger, fear, grief into action." The posters and stickers were instantly effective at speaking to and drawing gay men and lesbians to participate in ACT UP.⁶⁷ The stickers and posters proved so successful ACT UP members even used a Spanish-translated version of the stickers to help organize an ACT UP chapter in Puerto Rico. Moises Agosto explained:

We went with the “Silence = Death” sticker, the Spanish one. And you know, we would go with our ACT UP outfits—little short jeans and boots—and go to people, smile and put a sticker on their chest. They would go, “What’s this?” We would say, “Come to this meeting.” It was amazing because then the other people came—the other ACT UP members, other Latinos, and also the non-Latino members ... in some two weeks, we had a meeting of like 200 people.⁶⁸

In the years afterward, countless groups would borrow from this approach to organizing. Yet, no group ever recreated a striking cultural icon, like ACT UP’s “Silence = Death.” By the time the Global Justice Movement dovetailed with the antiwar sentiment after 9/11, simple, highly stylish stickers with a simple message proclaiming “The World Says No to War” below a date and Website address helped mobilize half a million people in Manhattan on February 15, 2003.⁶⁹ In the years between ACT UP and the Global Justice Movement, the use of culture would become a basic fixture of the new organizing.

Culture and the New Community Organizing

Throughout the last ten years, more and more new activists have begun to recognize that cultural work is a vital resource for themselves and their organizations. Take Kavita Rajanna, an organizer with Empty the Shelters and Project South in Atlanta. She was close to burnout before she brought the sustaining elements of her writing to her work. “I just started thinking about the things in my life that made it possible to do the work, and I realized that it was the cultural stuff I did outside of the group. It was the poetry I wrote ... the collages I made ... going to hear music.” Instead of compartmentalizing politics and culture as work and play, Rajanna successfully integrated them into her organization.⁷⁰

Culture often serves as a barometer. Organizer Andrew Boyd elaborates:

There was one sublime moment in Seattle when I realized that the wild yet focused energies in the streets could never be resolved into a folk song—we were now part of Hip-Hop Nation. The rhythms of the chants were rougher, more percussive. The energy was fierce

and playful.... Something deep had shifted. Somehow the movement had taken a Hegelian lurch forward...⁷¹

For Boyd, the '60s offered a thesis: "We can change the world," rejected by the '80s antithesis: "What good did it all do anyway?" Assured that everything was corrupt, activists felt bitter and distrusting. Yet, by the end of the 1990s, the streets of Seattle offered a "synthesis" as a new generation found a way to engage and joke simultaneously.

The marks of this shift can be traced in cultural reflections of the ways we look at the world. Sometimes culture creates the shift. Many have sought to describe this process. For example, Antonis Gramsci wrote that as the modern world produces for mass consumption, social control is increasingly exercised through the construction of consent. This includes education, media, and culture.⁷² Thus, as culture and information become larger and larger parts of the global economy, they become increasingly significant locations for activist engagement. After all, the culture industry, including DVDs, software, and graphic design, are primary exports. They feed global information markets and corporations. Debates about intellectual property rights—i.e., the economics of cultural production—are primary sources of discussion at world trade meetings and diplomatic relations between nations. Thus, culture can no longer be relegated to the periphery of the production and politics of capitalism. Rather, the culture industry increasingly functions as a form of political economy in its own right. Accordingly, activists have made culture a central target and tool.⁷³

One group in the new movements that makes use of cultural tools is Reclaim the Streets (RTS). Born in London in 1995, RTS is a worldwide movement that throws road parties as both a protest against the encroachment of public space and as a living example of what public space can be. Its mantra is "Public Space for the Public." It conveys this through street parties. The aim is to reimagine public space as a place for diverse groups to dance and play together to build a more colorful public commons. Rather than repeat the protest model of the traditional Left, RTS favors the Groucho Marxist approach of the Situationists and other pranksters.⁷⁴ The point is to use culture—music and performance—to involve people in joking and community organizing.

Culture serves as a focal point around which to build collegiality and connection. Further, cultural resistance often speaks in less shrill

tones than the often dour approaches to political organizing, making the entry point, “the stepping stone into political activity,” all that much easier.⁷⁵ Armed with ideas, tools, and colleagues, actors gain support to engage in more formal political work. RTS New York has involved itself in campaigns to save community gardens,⁷⁶ fight for undocumented workers,⁷⁷ and protest tuition increases at City University of New York. Thus cultural resistance helps actors to play with issues and reimagine political discourses. Players find the space for new approaches to organizing as actors develop new repertoires—collective action forms—for political action.⁷⁸

Another example presents a way of using cultural activism to actually build a better part of a world in which citizens can actually live. In the winter of 2003, a group of cultural activists, musicians, and punks successfully collaborated with a senior citizens group to develop a 13,000-square-foot complex of rehabbed row houses in Washington, D.C. The driving approach to the project was a cultural ethos used to create music and build community with whatever resources are available. “The do-it-yourself punk philosophy, which basically says, ‘Do what you can with what you’ve got’—that’s exactly what has happened historically in Shaw and with the seniors in the neighborhood,” explained Mark Andersen, an activist who spearheaded the Flemming Center project.⁷⁹ The can-do approach used to both create music and squat a rundown building with virtually no resources created a spirit of solution. Within this problem-solving spirit, coalition partners developed a “common ground” to conceive of and complete the building project. The do-it-yourself spirit of cooperation and direct action speaks to a resourcefulness that propels the new social movement work. More than anything, when cultural work becomes a part of political resistance, it expands ways to consider organizing for social change.⁸⁰

3. PROTEST AS THEATER AND CARNIVAL: POSTMODERN APPROACHES TO SOCIAL CHANGE

In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Irving Goffman writes that the essence of the presentation of self is to make a point. The same thing takes place within social protests.⁸¹ The gestures of one set of participants influence other participants. Some may be other movement players; others may be those whose opinion they seek to influence.⁸² Thus, social movements and protests are essentially constructions of countless

performances. To the degree that protest seeks to recreate or represent another view of reality or social problems, it becomes performance of democracy. If the protest is sterile, it gets bad reviews. The aim is to represent the idea that another world really is possible. Performative approaches to political theater play on postmodern narrative approaches to culture, challenging and disrupting many of the certainties and dichotomies of modernity.⁸³ With its emphasis on spontaneity and improvisation, protest as performance breaks through barriers to change public opinion and create change. The following discussion outlines the ingredients for the process.

One of the great traditions of political theater is the role of righteous protester confronting a police officer. Many demonstrations are actually designed and staged for arrests. In many cases, activists hope to be dragged away by the police. The point of the spectacle is to expose the opposition's position in order to win the attention of policy makers, generate media, and win support. (Yet a great deal is involved within the process.) Most political work involves basic ingredients of strategy building, research, and theatrics capable of making the news and shifting public opinion.

The group that is famous for combining successful use of civil rights era civil disobedience, guerilla theater, and well-targeted media work was ACT UP. The group's strategy was and still is to make themselves a news-attracting event: to "speak through, not to" the media. ACT UP's modus operandi was "to go to the furthest extreme in order to get the center to take notice."⁸⁴ For example, Richard Elovich recalls: "When a public bus company refused to allow Gran Fury's panel of 'Kissing Doesn't Kill, Corporate Greed and Indifference Do' on the sides of buses, the ensuing controversy provided sustained media coverage and public debate about discrimination."⁸⁵

ACT UP cofounder Eric Sawyer describes the group's dramaturgical roots:

We knew from the antiwar and civil rights movements that demonstrations that include peaceful civil disobedience actions that involve risking arrest receive far more media attention than simple street marches or political rallies. TV producers seem to think that pictures of police arresting demonstrators make interesting TV news. ... ACT UP tried to always include some action in our demonstrations that would get us arrested. We realized early in ACT UP the importance of street theater.⁸⁶

At its most vital, ACT UP turned every demonstration it organized into a form of theater. As Sawyer explains above, this included civil disobedience actions where, as Alicia Solomon explains, the group “stretched the form with unbridled theatrical flair.” Another of the group’s founders, Larry Kramer, elaborates, “Each action is like an enormous show. We’re divided into committees doing banners, logistics, media, just like a producer would hire people for scenery, costumes, publicity.”⁸⁷

In one example, activists dressed in drag as “Mario Antoinettes” with big wigs and dresses, throwing pieces of cake protesting New York Governor Cuomo, and chanting: “Mario Cuomo’s Policy is Let Them Eat Cake.” The point of the spectacle was to disarm the state of its power to withhold services. ACT UP built on the Industrial Workers of the World adage: “direct action gets the goods.”⁸⁸ When used in coordination with tight political, legal, and media messaging, the drama of civil disobedience often shakes up impasses. The process begins with the ritual and theatrics capable of breaking down entrenched power structures. ACT UP’s insight was the dramaturgical element of political action.⁸⁹ Irving Goffman put it simply: “When an individual appears in the presence of others, there will usually be some reason for him to mobilize his activity so that it will convey an impression to others which it is in his interests to convey.”⁹⁰ Sometimes it takes a suit or a theatrical presentation to establish the conditions to get to the negotiating table.

The process remains effective. Take post-9/11 New York, for example. When countless interest groups fought New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg’s austerity budget of Spring 2002, the best way for one grassroots interest group to stand out was with costumes, guerilla theater, and a focused message. The *New York Times* noticed:

The piercing whistle by an AIDS protester being arrested outside Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg’s famous bull pen-style office. Schoolchildren delivering boxes of letters to City Hall complaining about the loss of teachers and programs to budget cuts. A woman parading around in an ostrich suit, calling herself the Bloombird, asking the mayor to consider tax increases instead of some budget cuts. These are the sounds and sights at City Hall this spring.⁹¹

Even if an organization does have lobbyists at the table, media coverage is still essential. Thus aesthetics become a tool for the media-savvy

activist in need of press coverage to shift public opinion toward support for a program, service, or policy change. The activists above worked with a coalition of AIDS activists fighting for restorations for HIV-prevention services for communities of color where the epidemic is growing fastest in New York. After weeks of lobbying, supported by protests, arrests, and media, the New York City Council fully restored the \$5 million for HIV/AIDS services, everything activists asked for. The success of the actions involved the effective use of City Hall as a stage set for highly charged political theater.⁹² The budget protests were not an isolated example. By 2002, guerilla theater had become a staple of this playful anti-authoritarian model of organizing. In Seattle, one observer noted:

I watched a hundred sea turtles face down riot cops, a gang of Santas stumble through a cloud of tear gas, and a burly Teamster march shoulder to shoulder with a pair of Lesbian Avengers naked. ... Protest has become an extreme costume ball.⁹³

Beyond shutting down intersections, street theatrics have become a tool for translating global goals around political and economic shifts into local campaigns. In New York, RTS worked in coalition with a community labor group to speak up for the rights of undocumented workers. After years of standing at a picket line on street corners and fighting at the negotiating table, the coalition turned to street theater. From 1999 through 2001, union workers met global justice advocates at Union Square to march on May Day. For 2001, RTS and the Community Labor Coalition organized theatrical wrestling matches between Super Barrio Man, a cartoon character based on a Mexican folk hero, vs. Union Busters Large and Small. Super Barrio Man was played by the campaign's lead organizer. The groups took the match and the May Day march to the front of a number of the greengrocer stores where workers were being paid sweatshop wages, thus highlighting the plight of the workers and the campaign in a unique, edgy fashion.⁹⁴

In doing so, the organizers brought the case to the attention of the state attorney general. The day after the May 2001 protests and the wrestling matches, New York attorney general Elliot Spitzer filed claims against four grocers for all back wages due to employees, who were being paid an average of \$2.60 an hour. Joyfully peaking in character, Steve Duncombe, one of the primary organizers, questioned whether Spitzer would have acted without all of the protests and pickets. "It

sends a clear and loud message to other greengrocers about what happens to those who underpay their workers, block organizing, and hire thugs. Is it mere coincidence that these charges were filed a day after the appearance of Super Barrio, Champion of the People?"⁹⁵

Yet, it is essential to keep plot lines and the spectacle of such protest fresh. Street theater is a tool to do just that. George Lakey suggests activists create "dilemma demonstrations" placing the powers that be in the position of either allowing the demo to succeed or exposing their own moral bankruptcy by attacking a peaceful protest.⁹⁶ This is where Martin Luther King showed his keen knack for strategic dramaturgy. By successfully courting violence from police while restraining themselves, the SCLC framed confrontations during the Civil Rights movement as dramatic confrontations between a peaceful movement and a corrupt system.⁹⁷

Colorful street theatrics, full of hope for a better tomorrow, offer effective ways to meld alliances, garner media attention, and produce results. Yet, a number of other dynamics are involved. Before moving onto the final section of this paper, it is useful to consider a final form of postmodern political performance: the use of protest as carnival. The concept is a core component of Bakhtin's work. He uses it to consider issues of empowerment and social justice, knowledge construction for practice, and the embrace of justice.⁹⁸ This concept integrates all the themes outlined so far in this paper: the liberatory nature of humor, culture, and the possibility of theater. Further, by breaking down power hierarchies carnival helps actors dream of and act on a more equitable brand of democracy than standard forms of political participation:

Carnival is a sustained protest against the monologic misrule of officialdom and it means to transgress and transform canonical orders of truth, rupture established hegemonies.... Carnival is a nonviolent form of social transformation as it breaks and reverses established orders of power.⁹⁹

By dismantling power imbalances, the organizing models of the carnival offer alternate strategies for working with diverse communities, allowing everyday actors to become leaders by their mere participation. Instead of relying on speakers to preach to the converted (hey, hey, ho, ho), carnival creates a space for participants to design interactions of

their own invention and creation. It's a space where everyone involved communes in the carnival celebration of difference as diversity and democracy intermingle in an image of what our world could look like.¹⁰⁰ And in the process, the carnival attracts audiences.

Professional social advocates could do well to consider the performative aesthetics of social change. Perhaps, the best way to speak to McAdam's multiple publics is to cultivate a far more joyous brand of protest, one with a sense of happiness that could be seen on the faces of all those involved. We've all laughed during comedy shows or jokes. Everybody wants to be part of a party in which everyone is free to laugh. The point of joking is to punch holes in social pretensions. The liberating daring of satire, of release, is an effective part of organizing and movement work. The point of such a brand of protest is to link the optimism of protest with a feeling of possibility or rejuvenation. The festive atmosphere of a great action can be bridged with the transformative aspirations of the carnival. Beyond the status quo reinforcing ceremony of the usual protest, the carnival creates liminal in-between spaces, the communities generated within rituals capable of shifting power hierarchies.¹⁰¹ When protest integrates with the model of carnival, it merges the joyous spirit of exhilarating entertainment with a political agenda aimed toward progressive political change. Within this festive theater, progressive elements of political change are linked with notions of social renewal, moving spectators to join the fun, to become part of the concrete action of social change. Along the road, public spectacle becomes intimately linked with practical shifts in social and material conditions missing in people's lives.¹⁰² Party as protest thus becomes an invitation to a possibility. As actors embrace the model of protest as carnival, what emerges is an organizing model for freedom, abundance, equality, and redemption.¹⁰³

IN CONCLUSION

This article discussed three new dynamics of the global peace and justice movement of movements—the use of humor, culture, performative approaches to protest—to connect participants to organizing work. Joy permeates each approach. What has not been discussed are the times when joy is not a part of the work. The assumption is that the literature is chock-full of writing about the more serious dynamics of community organizing and the need for social change. There are ample spaces for

activists to speak to and write about the endless social problems of the current empire. One of the most effective approaches to political theater today is that of the “die in” used to theatericize the life-and-death stakes of a policy decision on the table. ACT UP has made use of the tactic for 18 years, “dying-in” in front of drug companies selling inordinately expensive AIDS drugs, trade talks debating access to medications, the United Nations, and countless other targets, including the Golden Gate Bridge. In so doing, the group helped propel a new ethos into countless movements for global peace and justice.

After returning from work in the northeastern war zone of Nicaragua in 1989, organizer Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz witnessed ACT UP drop its “Silence = Death” banner at the San Francisco opera.

ACT UP’s act gave me a needed boost, hope in a time of desperation. Sixteen months later when the United States went to war in the Gulf, ACT UP seized and closed the Golden Gate Bridge, spurring a militant war resistance movement in the San Francisco Bay Area that christened a new generation of peace-with-justice activists.¹⁰⁴

By the time the next Iraq war started, a clearly mobilized global justice movement, including countless ACT UP veterans, was already organized and on the ground. On March 27, 2003, antiwar activists, including a few ACT UPpers, engaged in a “die in” blocking the streets around Rockefeller Center during the war in Iraq. They chose Rockefeller Center to target corporate media they felt were not covering the war with a necessary critical distance. The theatrical image of dead bodies on the streets of New York City was chilling. Activists chanted “No War for Oil” and other requisite chants.

Most protest articulates what it is against as opposed to what it is for. With this in mind, this article has emphasized the importance of joy as an organizing model that presents a brief image of what activists would like the world to actually be more like. Joking is a serious endeavor capable of creating change in and of itself. Some tactics work at better times than others, given the short- and long-term goals at hand. The point of the discussion is to outline the importance of a series of new strategies which recognize the necessity of empirical testing, learning from past lessons, and being tactical. From this vantage point, community organizing tactics that create spaces for humor and fun allow activists to speak to McAdam’s six publics in compelling ways. While none are

perfect, activists will continue building communities and democracies with as many jokes and as much joy as possible.

If there is one point to consider as this essay ends, it's that while joy, culture, performance, pleasure, and social eros are not everything in organizing. Yet, without them, movements tend to lose their vitality. And it is difficult for a group to sustain itself. Weather Underground veteran Bill Ayers recalls being called a "liberal creep" for confessing his affection for Brecht's poetry in the months before he renounced non-violence in 1968. And it was a mistake he regretted for the rest of his life.¹⁰⁵ Looking back on her years with the Black Panthers, Kathleen Cleaver suggested that when the capacity for generativity, joy, poetry, culture, and other caring elements of life were replaced with paranoia and anger, the vitality of the Black Panther Party was lost for her.¹⁰⁶ When ACT UP Paris founder Didier Lestrade stopped finding joy in ACT UP in 2004, he left the group with which he'd spent the previous 15 years. His reasoning was simple. "Act Up is no longer even funny."¹⁰⁷ While these sentiments do not apply to every ACT UP chapter, they bode as a warning. When the joyful life-affirming elements of organizing recede, participants generally do not stick around.

By summer 2004, members of ACT UP New York and Philadelphia proved their chapters had not lost a sense of humor during the protests against the Republican National Convention in New York. The groups captured headlines around the world with an action on August 26, 2004, that led to the first arrests of the RNC protests. A dozen activists stopped traffic in front of Madison Square Garden and stripped naked, exposing that when it comes to AIDS, "the emperor has no clothes." Slogans were painted on their bodies that read "Drop The Dept" and "Stop AIDS Now." The following day's cover of the *New York Daily News* featured a photo of the naked protestors and their slogans from the backside accompanied by the headline: "A New York Welcome to the GOP. Well, This is the Naked City."¹⁰⁸ ACT UP was one of the most effective groups during the entire week of protests. When the jokes continue to remain, the work usually persists.

Looking back on the threats to police machismo of Rockette routines during the Stonewall Riots, ACT UP's near two decades of radical renewal, and its participation within a global peace and justice movement of movements, it is difficult to minimize the influence of an ethos of joy, camp, humor, pleasure, and fun on a generation of community organizing and movement activity.

NOTES

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1. For recent examples of this work, see Mike Prokosch and Laura Raymond, *The Global Activist's Manual: Local Ways to Change the World* (New York: Nation Books, 2002). Eddie Yuen, Daniel Burton-Rose, and George Katsiaficas, *The Battle of Seattle: The New Challenge to Capitalist Globalization* (Brooklyn: Soft Skull Press, 2002). Benjamin Shepard and Ron Hayduk, eds., *From ACT UP to the WTO: Urban Protest and Community Building in the Era of Globalization* (New York: Verso, 2002). Notes From Nowhere, *We Are Everywhere: The Irresistible Rise of Global Anti-Capitalism* (London and New York: Verso, 2003). Tom Mertes, ed. *The Movement of Movements: Is Another World Really Possible?* (London and New York: Verso, 2003). David Solnit, ed. *Globalize Liberation: How to Uproot the System and Build a Better World* (San Francisco: City Lights Press, 2004).

2. Matthew A. Crenson and Benjamin Ginsberg, *Downsizing Democracy: How America Sidelined Its Citizens and Privatized Its Public* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002).

3. Ron Hayduk and Kevin Mattson, eds., *Democracy's Moment: Reforming the American Political System for the 21st Century* (New York: Roman and Littlefield, 2002). For a reading of the ways notions of direct democracy translate into anarchist organizing principles, see Sean Ewald, *Anarchism in Action: Methods, Tactics, Skills, and Ideas* (2003). Second Edition (draft) <http://aia.mahost.org/> (accessed April 17, 2003).

4. Ricardo Dominguez, "Mayan Technologies and the Use of Electronic Civil Disobedience," in *From ACT UP to the WTO*. L. A. Kauffman, "How to Jam an Opponent's Fax Machine," in *Electronic Civil Disobedience*. www.nyu.edu/projects/wray/faxjam.html (accessed December 9, 2002); Rachel Konrad, "Activists Meet High-tech War with Digital-age Protests." *The Sacramento Bee/AP*. March 27, 2003, www.sacbee.com/24hour/special_reports/iraq/story/829088p-5847149c.html (accessed March 27, 2003); Jen Liu, "Media and the Death of the Author, Tactical Embarrassment," *Journal of Aesthetics and Protest*, 1 (October 2002): 50-57.

5. For a great story on ACT UP Philadelphia, perhaps the strongest ACT UP chapter today, see Susan Phillips, "Tough Act to Follow: For Two Decades, ACT UP Has Defined the Movement to Fight the Spread of AIDS. Nowhere Has the Battle Raged More Fiercely Than in Philadelphia," *Philadelphia Weekly*. August 1, 2001, <http://www.brainsoap.com/cover/> (accessed August 1, 2001).

6. This essay does not seek to represent a comprehensive history of ACT UP. For representative studies of the history of ACT UP, see Benjamin Shepard, "The AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power: A Brief Reconsideration," in *Teamsters and Turtles? Left Political Movements Today and Tomorrow*, ed. John Berg (New York: Roman and Littlefield, 2002); Douglas Crimp and Adam Rolston, *AIDS DEMOGRAPHICS* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1990); Joshua Gamson, "Silence, Death, and the Invisible Enemy: AIDS Activism and Social Movement 'Newness'," in *Ethnography Unbound: Power, Resistance in the Modern Metropolis*, ed. Buraway et al. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991); Steven Epstein, *Impure Science—AIDS, Activism, and the Politics of Knowledge* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996); The ACT UP/NY Women & AIDS Book Group, *Women, AIDS, & Activism* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1990); Patrick Moore, "ACT UP," Chapter 11 in *Beyond Shame: Reclaiming the Abandoned History of Radical Gay Sexuality* (Boston: Beacon, 2004); Eric Sawyer, "An ACT UP Founder 'Act's Up' for Africa's Access to AIDS and other essays/ interviews on ACT UP," in *From ACT UP to the WTO: Urban Protest and Community Building in the Era of Globalization*, ed. Benjamin Shepard and Ron Hayduck (New York: Verso Press, 2002). In addition, the ACT UP New York Web site (www.actupny.org) provides a wonderful list of resources on the history and theory of ACT UP. The ACT UP Oral History Project (www.actuporalhistory.org) provides oral histories of the ACT UP experience.

7. On a professional and personal level, the years from 2003 to 2004 have witnessed more AIDS deaths in any period of my career in AIDS work since the peak year of AIDS deaths in the United States in 1995. In 1996 after witnessing the final complete display of the U.S. Names Project's AIDS Memorial Quilt, I decided I could not cry about AIDS any more. The year 2004 witnessed the loss of countless participants in the syringe exchange where I work. Some died alone in their SRO hotel rooms; others withered and died after prolonged hospital stays. Some, such as Keith Cylar, a dear personal friend who passed in his sleep in the spring of 2004, died fighting and advocating with his every last precious breath (see Wolfgang Saxon, "Keith Cylar, 45; Found Homes for AIDS Patients," *New York Times*, April 8, 2004). Six weeks after Cylar's death, 100 of us carried posters and photos of him before being arrested on the steps of the U.S. Capitol Building during the march, "AIDS Will Not Defeat Us." If there was one activist who struggled his entire life to honor the need for pleasure and for justice simultaneously it was Cylar. See Keith Cylar, "Building a Caring Community from ACT UP to Housing Works: An Interview with Keith Cylar by Benjamin Shepard," interview by Benjamin Shepard, in *From ACT UP to the WTO*.

8. Camp can be understood broadly in the "so bad it's good" category of aesthetics. For an elaboration on this "mode of aestheticism," see Susan Sontag,

“Notes on Camp,” in *Come Out Fighting: A Century of Essential Writing on Gay & Lesbian Liberation*, ed. Chris Bull (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press/Nation Books, 2001). For a critical view of the use of camp aesthetics in contemporary activism, see the essays in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Protest*, 1 (2004).

9. Sara Schulman, “The Reproductive Rights Movement, ACT UP, and the Lesbian Avengers: An Interview with Sara Schulman,” interviewed by Benjamin Shepard in *From ACT UP to the WTO*.

10. Douglas Crimp, “Right On, Girlfriend!”, 301.

11. Susan Sontag, “Notes on Camp.”

12. Vitto Russo, “Why We Fight” (1988), www.actupny.org/documents/whfight.html (accessed September 26, 2004).

13. Ibid.

14. Douglas Crimp, “Right On, Girlfriend!”, 301. Judy Garland, the singer of “Somewhere Over the Rainbow,” was both a Broadway and queer icon. The interconnection between the sensibilities is what creates a highly charged playful view of culture and activism.

15. Benjamin Shepard, “Writing Stonewall as History or Myth?” *Lambda Book Report*, 13, January 13, 2004, 12–14.

16. David Carter, *Stonewall: The Riots that Sparked the Gay Revolution* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2004), 176–9. Descriptions of the Rockette kick line are also found in Martin Duberman, *Stonewall* (New York: Plume, 1993), 200–1.

17. Carter, *Stonewall*, 177.

18. Ibid., 178. A biting, satirical attack on the militaristic elements of conventional masculinity would be a cornerstone of the queer activism in the years to come. In his 1980 essay, “America’s True Perverts,” political philosopher and pornographer Boyd McDonald establishes a pointed, ironic queer critique. “Straight men can be used to be fun in bed but they are not worth paying attention to, their writing is not worth reading, their films not worth seeing ... their attempts at leadership ... are not to be followed.” He continues: “In their craving to express their virility—in war, greed, violence, hate, corruption—they have ruined the most promising nation and made America a nation you can’t trust. Inadequate use of their pricks had turned American into a nation of pricks.” In the future, he hoped, “someone who’s out of the competitive virility rat race—should take over. The men have bombed.” From Boyd McDonald, “America’s True Perverts,” in *Sex: True Homosexual Experiences from STH Writers*, ed. Boyd McDonald (San Francisco: Gay Sunshine Press, 1980).

19. Carter, *Stonewall*, 179.

20. Hank Wilson’s discussion of the campaign to defeat “The Briggs Initiative,” a California ballot proposition to keep homosexuals out of teaching

positions in the state's public schools. The Briggs Initiative was a reaction to gay rights initiatives that had become law across the country. Simultaneous with the Briggs initiative was a wave of political violence against homosexuals in public spaces in San Francisco. See Chapter Two, Benjamin Shepard, *White Nights and Ascending Shadows: An Oral History of the San Francisco AIDS Epidemic* (London: Cassell, 1997), p. 27–36. Also see: Randy Shilts, *The Mayor of Castro Street: The Life and Times of Harvey Milk* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982), p.156–57.

21. Robert Vazquez-Pacheco, oral history interview by Sara Schulman, December 14, 2002, ACT UP Oral History Archive, 29, www.actuporalhistory.org/interviews/images/vazquez.pdf. (accessed June 12, 2004).

22. From Paul Schindler, "Keith Cylar Is Dead at 45. Housing Works Founder Was Energetic Fighter Against AIDS, Discrimination," *Gay City News*, 3 (April 8–14). Cylar went from those guys with the leather jackets to cofounding Housing Works, the nation's most militant AIDS service organization.

23. G'Dali Braverman recalls a similar feeling at his first ACT UP meeting. See Shepard, *White Nights*, 113–14.

24. Eddie Yuen, "Introduction," in *Confronting Capitalism: Dispatches from a Global Movement*, ed. Eddie Yuen, Daniel Burton-Rose, and George Katsiaficas (Brooklyn: Soft Skull Press, 2004), XII.

25. Steven Duncombe, "The State of Activism Today" (remarks at a panel discussion of *From ACT UP to the WTO*, Verso/Labyrinth Books, 14, November 2002).

26. Yuen, *Confronting Capitalism*, XII.

27. For an elaboration of this point, see Douglas Crimp, "How to Have Promiscuity in an Epidemic," in *AIDS: Cultural Analysis Cultural Activism*, ed. Douglas Crimp (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988). For "Liberation and Joy," see Michael Bronski, "Forward," *Beyond Shame: Reclaiming the Abandoned History of Radical Gay Sexuality*, by Patrick Moore (Boston: Beacon, 2004).

28. Benjamin Shepard, *Teamsters and Turtles?* There is a long legacy of writing on the interplay between personal freedom and social transformation—from Henri Lefebvre to Herbert Marcuse to Normal O Brown. Much of their approach is indebted to Wilhelm Reich. One of the second generation of Freudian dissidents, Reich suggested that Freud's emphasis on the Ego and the Id neglected the driving force of human life—the libido—without which humans lost vitality and life and authenticity. His master work was *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*, a treatise which aimed to integrate Freudian and Marxist theory. In it, Reich explains, "Man's authoritative structure—this must be clearly established—is basically produced by the embedding of sexual inhibitions and

fear in the living substance of sexual impulses” (p. 30). Reich’s point was that antisex ideology prevents the masses from developing a consciousness about social conditions, from questioning dominant ideologies. Antisex ideology, “inhibits the will to freedom ... those forces that comply with authoritarian interests derive their energy from repressed sexuality” (p. 32). It’s a point that anticipates the lessons highlighted in queer theory.

29. Moises Agosto, oral history interview by Sara Schulman. December 14, 2002. ACT UP Oral History Archive, p. 32–3. www.actuporallhistory.org/interviews/images/agosto.pdf (accessed June 12, 2004).

30. Moore, *Beyond Shame*, p. 123.

31. Yet, unlike the American Civil Rights Movement, ACT UP never compartmentalized the need for sexual contact or expression, queer or otherwise. One of the Civil Rights Movement’s principal leaders, Bayard Rustin, who taught Martin Luther King the Ghandian repertoire of nonviolent civil disobedience, was forced to hide and apologize for his queer sexuality his entire career. This marginalization hurt both Rustin and the movement he supported. See John D’Emilio, *Lost Prophet: The Life and Times of Bayard Rustin* (New York: Free Press, 2003). Bayard Rustin, *Time on Two Crosses: The Collected Writings of Bayard Rustin*, eds. Devon W. Carbado and Donald Weise (San Francisco: Cleis Press, 2003).

32. Worker’s Solidarity Biography of Emma Goldman. www.geocities.com/Paris/2159/redemm.html. (accessed May 1, 2002).

33. For a comprehensive history of Reclaims the Streets in the UK, see John Jordan, “The Art of Necessity: The Subversive Imagination of Anti-road Protest and Reclaim the Streets,” in *DiY Culture: Party and Protest in Nineties Britain*, ed. George McKay. (London: Verso, 1998). For a history of Reclaim the Streets, NYC, see Steve Duncombe’s “Stepping off the Sidewalk: Reclaim the Streets/ NYC,” in *From ACT UP to the WTO*.

34. L. A. Kauffman, “A Short History of Radical Renewal,” in *From ACT UP to the WTO*.

35. *Ibid.*

36. This sentiment was certainly a component of New Left thinking. ACT UP helped reignite this ethos.

37. For an elaboration of this discussion in terms of the antiwar movement, see Benjamin Shepard, “Absurd Responses vs. Earnest Politics, Global Justice vs. Anti-War Movements, Guerilla Theater and Aesthetic Solutions,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Protest* 1, 2 (January 2003).

38. Doug McAdam, “The Framing Function of Movement Tactics: Strategic Dramaturgy in the American Civil Rights Movement,” in *Comparative*

Perspectives on Social Movements, eds. Doug McAdam, John D. McCarthy, and Mayer N. Zald (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 339–40.

39. George Lakey, “Mass Action Since Seattle: Seven Ways to Make Our Protests More Powerful,” in *The Battle of Seattle: The New Challenge to Capitalist Globalization*, eds. Eddie Yuen, Daniel Burton-Rose, and George Katsiaficas (New York: Soft Skull Press, 2001).

40. Jason Grote, “KNEEL BEFORE BUSH!: The Origin of Students for an Undemocratic Society,” in *From ACT UP to the WTO*.

41. Quoted in Barry Sanders, *Sudden Glory: Laughter as Subversive History* (Boston, MA: Beacon, 1995).

42. Michael Slackman and Colin Moynihan, “Now in Previews, Political Theatre in the Street,” *New York Times*, February 19, 2004.

43. Church Ladies, “Sing Along! with the Church Ladies at Dixon Place,” July 9, 2002. Lyrics also found in the Church Ladies Songbook, Collection of the author.

44. *Ibid.*

45. *Ibid.*

46. *Ibid.*

47. Jan Cohen-Cruz, “At Cross Purposes: The Church Ladies for Choice,” in *Radical Street Performance*, ed. Cohen-Cruz. (New York: Routledge, 1998).

48. Claudia Ornstein, *Festive Revolutions* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1998), 19.

49. Ulysses Bogata, “HUMOR, SUBVERSIVE AND OTHERWISE,” www.radio4all.org/anarchy/rant4.html (accessed April 13, 2003).

50. Pat Diffley, “The Power of Humor,” presented at “AALTP ... 25 Years”. Association of Activities Leisure Time Personnel Conference, West Point, New York, 2000.

51. *Ibid.*

52. Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, edited by Michael Holquist and translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1981), 23.

53. Sanders, *Sudden Glory*, 16.

54. David A Snow, E. Burke Rochford, Steven K. Worden, Robert D. Benford, “Frame Alignment Process, Micromobilization, and Movement Participation,” *American Sociological Review*, 51 (August 1986): 464–8.

55. Benjamin Shepard, “Community as a Source for Democratic Politics,” in *Democracy’s Moment*.

56. Frances Fox Piven and Richard A Cloward, *Poor People’s Movements: Why They Succeed and How They Fail* (New York: Vintage, 1977), 12.

57. For an elaboration on the use of culture as an organizing approach during the Settlement House Movement, see Jane Addams, *Twenty Years at Hull House* (New York: Penguin, 1910/1998) 238–55.

58. Si Kahn Community Organization, *Encyclopedia of Social Work*, 19th edn. (Washington, D.C.: National Association of Social Workers/NASW Press, 1995), 575.

59. Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago, IL: Aldine Publishing Company, 1969).

60. Gran Fury was an art collective of AIDS activists most famous for designing ACT UP's "Silence = Death" logo. Their poster "KISSING DOESN'T KILL: GREED AND INDIFFERENCE DO" was featured in the Whitney Museum exhibition "Media World." The group built on the culture jam ethos of taking apart advertising strategies and turning them into political messages. Their work was designed to inspire action in the fight against the AIDS crisis.

61. See Douglas Crimp, ed., *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism* (Boston: MIT Press, 1988).

62. See Steven Duncombe, "Introduction," *Cultural Resistance: A Reader*, ed. Steve Duncombe (Verso: New York, 2002).

63. Richard Elovich, "I'll Hold Your Story, I'll Be Your Mirror," *Artery—The AIDS Arts Forum*, www.artistswithaids.org/artery/symposium_symposium_eloovich.html (accessed August 2004).

64. Kauffman, *From ACT UP to the WTO*.

65. Elovich, "I'll Hold Your Story."

66. Alicia Solomon, "AIDS Crusaders ACT UP a Storm," in *Radical Street Performance*, 448–9.

67. Moore, *Beyond Shame*, 121–2.

68. Moises Agosto interview, p. 14–5.

69. For a story on the use of stickers as organizing tools in the days leading up to the February 15, 2003, "The World Says No to War" rally, in which a half a million people clogged the streets of New York City, see LA Kauffman interviewed by Benjamin Shepard, "A Short Personal History of the Global Justice Movement," in *Confronting Capitalism*, 375.

70. See Steven Duncombe. "Carnival Against Capitalism: Culture and Politics in Contemporary Activism," in *Pugwash*, 2004. 216.122.222.203/pugwash/duncombe_2004_1.asp (accessed May 23, 2005).

71. Andrew Boyd, "Irony, Meme, Warfare, and the Extreme Costume Ball," in *From ACT UP to the WTO*.

72. Barbara Epstein, *Political Protest and Cultural Revolution: Nonviolent Direct Action in the 1970's and 1980's* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

73. Steven Duncombe, "Carnival Against Capitalism." For a discussion of "the culture industry," see "The Culture Industry as Mass Enlightenment—Chapter 4," in Max Horkheimer and Theodore Adorno, *Dialectic of the Enlightenment, Philosophical Fragments* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2002), 94–137.

74. Robert Chrysler. The REAL Revolutionary Party: Reclaim the Streets! www.getunderground.com/underground/features/article.cfm?Article_ID=1139 (accessed June 8, 2003).

75. See Steven Duncombe, "Introduction," *Cultural Resistance: A Reader*, ed. Steve Duncombe (New York: Verso, 2002), 6.

76. For a review of this campaign, see Shepard, "Community as a Source for Democratic Politics," in *Democracy's Moment*.

77. Lawrence M. Bogad, "Facial Insufficiency: Political Street Performance in New York City," *TDR: The Drama Review*, 47 (Winter 2003) 4.

78. Steven Duncombe, *Cultural Resistance*, 5–6. For an elaboration on repertoire see Sean Chabot, "Transnational Diffusion and the African American Reinvention of the Gandhian Repertoire," in *Globalization and Resistance: Transnational Dimensions of Social Movements*, eds. Jackie Smith and Hank Johnson (Oxford: Roman and Littlefield). Charles Tilly, "Contentious Repertoires in Great Britain, 1758–1834," in *Repertoires and Cycles of Collective Action*, ed. Mark Traugott (Durham, NC: Duke University Press): 15–42.

79. Quoted in Monte Reel, "Seniors, Peaceniks, Punks Set to Share Turf in Shaw Center Targets Groups' Common Ground," *Washington Post*, February 22, 2003, p. B01.

80. Duncombe, *Cultural Resistance*, 6. For an overview of the DIY approach see George McKay, ed., *DIY Culture: Party and Protest in Modern Britain* (Verso: London, 1998); Craig O'hara, *The Philosophy of Punk: More than Noise* (San Francisco: AK Press, 1999), 153–86.

81. Irving E. Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Anchor Books, 1959), 15.

82. *Ibid.*, 15.

83. Allan Irving and Tom Young, "Paradigm for Pluralism: Mikhail Bakhtin and Social Work Practice," *Social Work*, 47, no. 1 (January 2002) 19.

84. Cohen-Cruz, *Radical Street Performance*, 1998.

85. Elovich, "I'll Hold Your Story."

86. Eric Sawyer, *From ACT UP to the WTO*.

87. For Kramer quote and more elaborate discussion of the dramaturgy of ACT UP, see Alicia Solomon, "AIDS Crusaders ACT UP a Storm," 45.

88. Jeff Ferrell, *Tearing Down the Streets: Adventures in Urban Anarchy* (New York: Palgrave, 2001) 28.

89. Shepard, *White Nights*, 117–8.
90. Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, 4.
91. M. Cooper, “What’s the Ostrich For? Politics,” *New York Times*, May 18, 2002, B1.
92. Benjamin Shepard, “AIDS Activism and Reagan’s Revenge,” *Radical Society: Review of Culture and Politics*, 29, no 3. (2002) p. 26–29.
93. Boyd, *From ACT UP to the WTO*.
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96. Lakey, *The Battle of Seattle*.
97. McAdam, *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements*, 343–49.
98. Irving and Young, “Paradigm for Pluralism,” 20.
99. Irving and Young, “Paradigm for Pluralism,” 25.
100. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1984), 122; Irving and Young, “Paradigm for Pluralism,” 25–27.
101. Turner, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*.
102. Ornstein, *Festive Revolutions*, xiv–xv, 6–9.
103. Irving and Young, “Paradigm for Pluralism,” 425.
104. Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, “Don’t Mourn, Organize: Joe Hill’s Children,” *Monthly Review*, 54, December, 2002.
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