

Toward a Ludic Counterpublic: Play, Creativity, and the New Street Activism

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<http://www.drainmag.com/ContentPLAY/Essay/Shepard.html> \l "_ftn1#_ftn1

Activism doesn't have to mean droning speeches, dull chants, and tired slogans. To sustain the growing anti-war movement over the long haul, we need humor, theater, music, flamboyance, irony, FUN.

Andrew Boyd on the Absurd Response to an Absurd War

For Johan Huizinga, "The *fun* of playing resists all analysis, all logical interpretation. As a concept, it cannot be reduced to any other mental category." HYPERLINK "<http://www.drainmag.com/ContentPLAY/Essay/Shepard.html>" \l "_ftn2#_ftn2" [2] Despite such foreboding, this study offers a preliminary exploratory attempt at presenting a history and analysis of the play element in social movement action over five decades of community organizing for social change.

In recent years, there has been an upsurge in creative protest. From the birth of the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) in 1987 through the rise of the Global Justice Movement in 1999, the largest day of protest in history on February 15, 2003, the Republican National Convention (RNC) protests of 2004, and the Immigrant Rights Protests 2006, the streets of cities around the world have been filled with a new theatrical model of protest. Elements of creative play are cornerstones of this new approach toward protest and community building. While some critics suggest protest is no longer useful for creating social change, HYPERLINK "<http://www.drainmag.com/ContentPLAY/Essay/Shepard.html>" \l "_ftn3#_ftn3" [3] advocates suggest the practice needs to be better understood and analyzed. HYPERLINK "<http://www.drainmag.com/ContentPLAY/Essay/Shepard.html>" \l "_ftn4#_ftn4" [4] Supporters note that some campaigns that utilized creativity achieved policy wins; HYPERLINK "<http://www.drainmag.com/ContentPLAY/Essay/Shepard.html>" \l "_ftn5#_ftn5" [5] other organizing campaigns resulted primarily in community building. Thus, the question emerges: Can social and creative play/organizing bridge these two streams of social change practice? In what ways does social, cultural, and creative play contribute to or undermine social change activism? Where does playfulness fit in? To answer these

questions, I interviewed organizers about their experience and practice with play and community organizing.

Lots of Playing

There are many forms of play. For anthropologist Johan Huizinga, play is anything but serious. [HYPERLINK "http://www.drainmag.com/ContentPLAY/Essay/Shepard.html"](http://www.drainmag.com/ContentPLAY/Essay/Shepard.html) \ \ "_ftn6#_ftn6" [6] It is a space for joy. For Richard Schechner, play involves doing something that is not exactly "real." It is looser; it is "double edged, ambiguous, moving in several directions simultaneously." [HYPERLINK "http://www.drainmag.com/ContentPLAY/Essay/Shepard.html"](http://www.drainmag.com/ContentPLAY/Essay/Shepard.html) \ \ "_ftn7#_ftn7" [7] The *Oxford English Dictionary* lists pages and pages of definitions and meanings for play as both a noun and a verb. As a verb, it is used to describe the state of being "busily engaged," to "leap for joy, rejoice." It involves "living being[s]" that "move about swiftly with a lively, irregular, or capricious motion, spring, sly, or dart to and fro, gambol, frisk, or flutter." The third definition suggests that to play is to "cause to bubble or roll about as in boiling liquid." The fourth suggests it is to "carry out or perform (an action), perform or execute (a movement), perform or practice (a trick, a joke, etc.) in the way of sport, deceit, etc." As a noun, play is understood as an "active bodily exercise, brisk and vigorous action of the body or limbs in fencing, dancing, or leaping." It can be thought of as "an action, activity, operation, working, esp. with rapid movement or change, or variety."

Play can also be thought of as a theatrical presentation. This theatrical spirit of playful performance supports social movements in countless ways. While some forms of political performance and guerilla theatre may not feel inherently playful, the struggle to create a space for this performance has everything to do with creating a space for play. In this sense, notions of serious play function as cornerstones of a struggle for public space and pluralistic democratic engagement.

Here, play is considered in the context of social movement activity encompassing a range of affects and outcomes, including joy, social eros, liberation, and policy change. For the purposes of this report, a few core assumptions are useful. The first is that play is near impossible to completely define. Instead it is useful to think of it as a spirit, which encompasses theatrical presentation as a construction, motion, and ethos. "It is a mood, an activity, an eruption, of liberty," Schrechner explains. [HYPERLINK "http://www.drainmag.com/ContentPLAY/Essay/Shepard.html"](http://www.drainmag.com/ContentPLAY/Essay/Shepard.html) \ \ "_ftn8#_ftn8" [8] But it is also paradoxical. [HYPERLINK "http://www.drainmag.com/ContentPLAY/Essay/Shepard.html"](http://www.drainmag.com/ContentPLAY/Essay/Shepard.html) \ \ "_ftn9#_ftn9" [9]. Sometimes, play is a formal commercial and competitive activity one participates in or enjoys; examples include a tennis match at the U.S. Open or an off-Broadway show. In its less formal incarnations, play includes a pick-up soccer game in Prospect Park, or at a meeting, or even in the streets. When social movement activity resembles this more spontaneous form of playful, liberatory group activity, it takes on a more subversive character, which the state (police) seek to regulate and control. Play can be seen as part of a continuum from work to leisure and games, as Stanley Aronowitz, Herbert Marcuse, and the Situationists consider. [HYPERLINK "http://www.drainmag.com/ContentPLAY/Essay/Shepard.html"](http://www.drainmag.com/ContentPLAY/Essay/Shepard.html) \ \ "_ftn10#_ftn10" [10] The paradoxical nature of play also extends into realms of human desire, imagination, and exploration, a place where social actors extend themselves beyond the struggle for the means of necessity toward a meaning. Many people have both orderly and playful sides, as Friedrich Nietzsche explores in his work on the conflict between the linear logic of Apollo and playful eros of Dionysus. [HYPERLINK](#)

["http://www.drainmag.com/ContentPLAY/Essay/Shepard.html"](http://www.drainmag.com/ContentPLAY/Essay/Shepard.html) \ " _ftn11#_ftn11" [11] Yet these sides are intimately connected. Here, play is best understood along a continuum of meanings, from a noun – a performance – towards those as verb – as a form of action.

A Working Definition of Play

While there are countless ways to conceptualize and define play, it is probably useful to begin with Huizinga, whose 1950 work *Homo Ludens: a Study of the Play Element in Culture* has inspired social movement players for decades. His definition encompasses many of the threads established in this opening discussion:

Summing up the formal characteristics of play we might call it a free activity standing quite consciously outside the ordinary life as being “not serious,” but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an actively connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner. It promises the formation of social groupings which tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress their difference from the common world by disguise or other means. HYPERLINK "<http://www.drainmag.com/ContentPLAY/Essay/Shepard.html>" \ " _ftn12#_ftn12" [12]

Roger Caillois offers a less restricted albeit less eloquent statement description. HYPERLINK "<http://www.drainmag.com/ContentPLAY/Essay/Shepard.html>" \ " _ftn13#_ftn13" [13] Here, play is understood as, “having its aim in itself and accompanied by a feeling of tension, joy, and consciousness that it is different from ordinary life.”

Playing in Public

In terms of social movement activity, this study builds on public sphere HYPERLINK "<http://www.drainmag.com/ContentPLAY/Essay/Shepard.html>" \ " _ftn14#_ftn14" [14] and narrative theories of social movements. HYPERLINK "<http://www.drainmag.com/ContentPLAY/Essay/Shepard.html>" \ " _ftn15#_ftn15" [15] Here the stories of various publics are viewed as a series of competing narratives. The study considers the ways different tribes within counter publics use play to interact and push their stories into larger public debate. HYPERLINK "<http://www.drainmag.com/ContentPLAY/Essay/Shepard.html>" \ " _ftn16#_ftn16" [16] For a study of social movements, public sphere theory is tremendously useful. For many, a primary component of social change involves the movement of movement narratives from counter public space into the larger public sphere of debate, discussion, and policy change. While civil society is thought to function as a place for citizens to meet to discuss problems and create solutions, there are countless barriers. Yet ideally it stands as an intermediary between the government and the market. When any one of these is lost, democracy in the U.S. is jeopardized. Public sphere theory assumes that a public sphere works as a form of civil society. Activists seek to inject different points of view, different voices from subaltern counter publics, into larger policy debates. Thus a thriving public sphere where diverse voices thrive becomes a harbinger for a successful democracy. Here debate over places to play function as contests over the nature of pluralistic democracy.

While the study made use of qualitative research approaches, HYPERLINK "[http://](http://www.drainmag.com/ContentPLAY/Essay/Shepard.html)

www.drainmag.com/ContentPLAY/Essay/Shepard.html" \l "_ftn17#_ftn17" [17] the play in social movement activity cannot be divorced from the historical context in which ludic activity takes place. Different eras involve differing degrees of tolerance for the “free activity standing quite consciously outside the ordinary life” that Huizinga understood as play.

Findings

For the Yippies, play involved the creative prank; for the gay liberationists, play was a code word for pleasure; for AIDS activists, safe play became the order of the day, while subversive humor, street theatrics, pranks, and zaps were used to move an agenda; for DIY activists, play was part of a prank tradition, now known as culture jamming, that originate with the Situationists. For gay liberationists, ACT UPpers, and members of SexPanic! play fostered creativity; creating spaces for play was respected as a legitimate movement aim, and defending civic space overlapped with struggles to create a different public sphere. For groups such as ACT UP and SexPanic!, play was more about sexiness and sexual energy than Yippy-like ludic activity, yet there were moments where their play overlapped into this realm. For public space activists, the imperative to act involved an effort to create and defend places to play with a burlesque of DIY protest. For global justice activists, play was part an effort to counter the privatization of public space, a way to help people build their own commons; for antiwar activists, play was part of an effort to offer a counternarrative to war. For many, play offers a life-affirming response to death and war. Here, play offers a counterbalance to disengagement; it is a way to stay engaged rather than fall into depression and personal alienation.

As Rebecca Solnit suggests, it is not always easy to know exactly what impact a social movement is having... [HYPERLINK "http://www.drainmag.com/ContentPLAY/Essay/Shepard.html" \l "_ftn18#_ftn18"](http://www.drainmag.com/ContentPLAY/Essay/Shepard.html) [18] It is not always so clear what effects are taking place. In the days after 9/11, many activists I knew started to talk about the notion of building communities of resistance and support. Countless interviewees suggested that these communities are the most important things they have. Sometimes the community impact leads to cultural changes that in turn change hearts and minds. [HYPERLINK "http://www.drainmag.com/ContentPLAY/Essay/Shepard.html" \l "_ftn19#_ftn19"](http://www.drainmag.com/ContentPLAY/Essay/Shepard.html) [19] In other cases, they keep people engaged in the struggle. In the following section, I highlight a few themes which interviewees said work and do not work about play in social movement action. There is a long list of strengths.

Strengths

As far as strengths, interviewees suggested that play is useful for social change movements because:

It feels good.

It animates culture.

It helps keep things light– even during dark times.

It prevents burnout; it helps people stay in the streets.

It fosters creativity.

This creativity can help achieve movement aims, while keeping police on their toes.

It recognizes pleasure.

It creates stories.

It expands the public commons and makes democracy more colorful.

It helps actors propel their culture tales into the larger public discourse.

It helps garner media attention to new narratives and calls for action.

It helps actors reinvent protest repertoires.

It reduces alienation.

It creates humor.

It creates hope.

It gets people to think.

It fosters networks and leadership.

As a low threshold activity, it brings people into organizing.

It helps cultivate social Eros.

It helps combat mechanisms that control the body and political activity.

It makes protest feel compelling and inviting, rather than boring.

When social actors organize in engaging, thoughtful ways, their work usually attracts followers. Through play, others are seduced to join. From the Yippies to ACT UP to Reclaim the Streets, when groups offered a low-threshold entry point that seemed fun, loads of activists joined. During Stephen Gendin's funeral, one of his former boyfriends said he never wanted to go to jail more than the day he saw Gendin getting busted at the 1987 March on Washington; he couldn't think of a more appealing place to be than a confined jail cell with this fellow activist. [HYPERLINK "http://www.drainmag.com/ContentPLAY/Essay/Shepard.html"](http://www.drainmag.com/ContentPLAY/Essay/Shepard.html) \l "_ftn20#_ftn20" [20] Sometimes attraction to a specific person can be an important part of the passion to build a better world for everyone. While Gendin and the other members of ACT UP were getting arrested in Washington in 1987, queer activists were waging a discursive struggle that changed hearts, minds, and the opinions of Supreme Court justices. [HYPERLINK "http://www.drainmag.com/ContentPLAY/Essay/Shepard.html"](http://www.drainmag.com/ContentPLAY/Essay/Shepard.html) \l "_ftn21#_ftn21" [21] Like the efforts of the Gay Activist Alliance (GAA) a generation before to get the American Psychiatric Association to redefine homosexuality as a healthy outlet rather than pathology, play and pleasure, policy and planning, accompanied these struggles. And they were certainly struggles. The GAA pleasure committee often clashed with its political

committee. HYPERLINK "<http://www.drainmag.com/ContentPLAY/Essay/Shepard.html>" \l "_ftn22#_ftn22" [22] There is always more to play than pure fun.

From Church Ladies to community garden activists to radical clowns, play has been viewed as a useful approach to diffuse power. It was thought of as a way to effectively present a point without engaging in violent conflict. When the Church Ladies performed in front of women's health clinics, they drew the ire of Operation Rescue, while the clients were able to access clinic services. When Wavy Gravy, the Yippee clown, played with police in 1976, people were able to laugh in 1976. Three decades later, when the Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army (CIRCA) included the police in their improvisational theater of the absurd during the 2005 G8 meetings in Scotland, the police backed away from a crackdown which other less engaging protesters wearing black received.

When the Critical Mass Bike ride in New York was being attacked in 2005, the presence of clowns at the ride provided a needed lift. An exchange from the New York Independent Media Center Web site offers a telling discussion of where play fits into a larger structure for movement engagement. On August 20, The New York City bike advocacy group TIME'S UP! posted a press release that stated: "Cyclists declare Tuesday, August 23, Bike Lane Liberation Day." That Tuesday, a group of bikers wearing clown costumes started a bike ride at St. Marks Church in the East Village and rode through the city giving cars parked in bike lanes fake tickets. Most drivers laughed and drove away; others engaged in a dialogue about cars in the city and the need for non-polluting transportation. When a few drivers screamed, the clowns generally honked their horns and rode away.

The following day, an activist photographer posted his photographs from the action on the Indymedia Web site. HYPERLINK "<http://www.drainmag.com/ContentPLAY/Essay/Shepard.html>" \l "_ftn23#_ftn23" [23] The photos inspired a wide range of responses discussing the role of play in relation to social movement activity. On August 24, a person identifying as "biker" posted the following observation of the Bike Lane Liberation Clowns:

I'm an NYC biker too but the nyc indymedia coverage of all things biking when there is a lot of shit going on in the world makes it come off as a ridiculous youth clique and totally irrelevant. Please report on, oh, I don't know THE WARS, not a group of tattooed twenty somethings irritating traffic. As soon as real 'bike liberation' tactics are used, I'll be interested. Ridiculous.

What "biker" was missing was that many of the bike clown found it a compliment to be called "ridiculous." Others responded that Indymedia is open for anyone to post news. Others responded that they loved the ride. "Branford and chesterfield" wrote that they felt that the ride was, "lovely! oh lovely and so much lovelier!" They suggested, "send in the clowns— never stop clowning around." Another poster, called "g," began with an Emma Goldman-like sentiment:

if fun is not part of the movement, it will die

if laughter is not part of the movement, it will die

if clowns are not part of the movement, than i want no part of it

From there, "g" reminded "biker" that those involved with New York bike activism had been

arrested in the hundreds and sued by the New York Police Department since the Republican National Convention the previous year. Thus, there was nothing wrong with blowing off a little steam. He explained:

your comments are valid, but i feel you need to chill out a little. we have been chased by cops armed with deadly vespas, helicopters, and a whole lot of intelligence and surveillance. It's been a year and we need to be able to have fun. Yes, the clown brigade had its tattooed youth, but over half of the ride was past the age of 30, and with no tattoos. morale is a little bit higher because of the clown brigade. thank you for your conversation. please join us, you can help steer this movement too. get involved and ride.

Such invitations are a core part of the politics of play.

Listening to the Crazies

While it is often misunderstood, supporters of playful activism appreciate its sheer silliness, its spirit of fun and freedom, its capacity to provide levity even during periods of repression, and finally, for its low-threshold approach to helping activists stay involved and reinvent repertoires so they can be active agents in the process of social change rather than passive spectators.

At its best, play is useful for instructive purposes. It helps activists get what they need to stay involved. Without some element of play, many people stop coming to protests. One interviewee, Gay Liberation organizer Eric Rofes, suggests it's like food. "I've often realized that most people who sustain themselves as organizers need to have fun and need to get social and cultural and pleasure needs met through organizing."

For many practitioners, play is a useful way to engage in thinking about another way of being in the world. While standing in line waiting to get inside the hearings on redevelopment of the Williamsburg Brooklyn waterfront, I spoke with Donald Gallagher of the Church of Stop Shopping and the Radical Faeries. "Do you think radical play makes us a richer democracy?" I asked. "I think so," he replied:

People are so stuck in images of what they are supposed to be, what they should be, how high the building should be. Like this should be a forty-story building instead of a neighborhood, just to break through that miasma that people are in, like they were hypnotized somehow. We should break right through into a place with fun. Be who you are. It's allowed, no matter how foolish or silly that may actually be. Those things kind of go together, don't they?

For many activists, the struggle involves breaking through a grand mystification, a one-dimensional element of our culture that reduces social actors to passive spectators. [HYPERLINK "http://www.drainmag.com/ContentPLAY/Essay/Shepard.html"](http://www.drainmag.com/ContentPLAY/Essay/Shepard.html) \l "_ftn24#_ftn24" [24] Actors are inhibited from action, from being connected with their bodies, their passions, or their capacities to act for change. [HYPERLINK "http://www.drainmag.com/ContentPLAY/Essay/Shepard.html"](http://www.drainmag.com/ContentPLAY/Essay/Shepard.html) \l "_ftn25#_ftn25" [25]

"Capital," John Jordan explains. "[I]t needs sadness, the social and individual sadness. The

tyrant needs sadness.” Therefore, Jordan’s activism has involved a core ambition: “Break sadness. Make people laugh and give pleasure, enable them to disobey the fundamental docile body.” For him, play and ritual overlap with a fundamental set of embodied experiences that combine head, hand, and heart, linking bio, psycho, and social functioning. “It’s fundamental to breaking the famine,” Jordan explained. Yet it is also about recognizing different aspects of knowledge, some of which come from the gut, others of which come from the peripheries of our experiences in the world. “And it’s also giving people the potential to see another way of being,” he adds. “And then to take that into other parts of their lives.” Here, individuals learn to listen to their own bodies and recognize this linkage with their minds, their lives, and their communities.

Bob Kohler first learned this lesson when he started meeting the street youth who would later ignite the Stonewall Riots. Kohler had changed careers and was spending a lot of time in the public spaces of his neighborhood in Greenwich Village. At Sheridan Square, he used to listen to the stories the youth told him about their experience. He had no idea that youth such as this experienced so much abuse at home – cigarette burns and such – from parents when they found out they were gay. And later those youth moved to the city, where it was safer to be homeless and hustling than remain at home. These were the street youth who rioted at Stonewall. Some thirty-five years after the riots, Kohler was invited to participate in an interview about the history of the gay liberation movement:

It’s like when I was interviewed by Spanish TV and they asked if I had any advice and I said, yes I do. Listen to the crazies. This is the kind of thing that Sylvia Rivera could bring to a riot. Marsha P. Johnson could bring to a riot. And we don’t have them now. And this is the problem. We don’t have these people.

The insights of “the crazies” into alternative ways of being in the world often provide the catalyst for creating a different kind of world. “I think we ought to do this more often,” Cleve Jones recalls a friend regaling while burning police cars during the White Night riots in San Francisco in 1979. [HYPERLINK "http://www.drainmag.com/ContentPLAY/Essay/Shepard.html"](http://www.drainmag.com/ContentPLAY/Essay/Shepard.html) \l "_ftn26#_ftn26" [26] Such personalities are often anything but polished. “You absolutely have to listen to the crazies,” Kirk Read concurred when I told him this story. For Read, this logic has to do with building a more authentic, less polished, less commercialized vision of queer life and community. The insights of the crazies offer a different kind of social knowledge, contributing to a non-assimilationist storyline for queer citizenship. Without this perspective, the world is far less interesting for Read:

It’s one of my frustrations when I watch TV and I see these gay spokespeople, or lefty spokespeople. It’s almost like they are parodying themselves. There’s no sense of surprise or danger. And I feel like that kind of space is every bit as controlled as the most doctrinaire Republican space. So I’m more interested in people who are willing to speak beyond the talking points, who are doing things that are so scary that whatever groups that are allied with them are nervous.

In contrast to professionalized models of social change practice, low-threshold models of organizing help create space where many– including the policy professionals and the crazies –can participate and feel included. Kate Crane explains:

Sometimes the protests I’ve been part of have not been the most organized, but they’ve

been fun and everybody's valued as an individual, even the wing-nuts, sometimes to a lesser degree. But everybody's welcome. And sometimes I find that there's always my deep-seated cultural assumptions about who's worthwhile and who isn't—at thirty years old and having been an activist all my life, I still have these middle-class notions about who's worthwhile and who isn't. And I'm constantly struggling with that. In these great fun actions that we do I'm like, oh my god, this person who I thought was a little nutty, they just brought all the colorful hats. Or they just showed up with food for all of us or they're singing loudest of all, or look at that crazy costume that everybody's taking pictures of and laughing at.

Here, less serious, playful approaches to organizing create a context that allows social actors to be seen and valued as full people. It allows them to bring all they have to contribute. Everyone has something they can pitch in. Play creates a space that brings more people into the process. It allows a diverse range of people to participate and to contribute. It allows a place for everyone in, even the crazies.

Thus, play opens up spaces for non-expert paradigms in organizing. Roughly translated, it helps organizers with different degrees of skill and professional training be part of the process of social change. James Tracey, who works as an organizer with the homeless in San Francisco and writes books of poetry, has done a great deal of work to integrate the two tasks. When working with homeless and non-homeless youth, poetry has helped build on an ongoing dialog. For Tracey, poetry is a way to raise different kinds of voices. It's a way to break down conflicts between analysis and imagination. It stimulates imagination and thinking, and encourages different kinds of questions and stories. And anyone who has access to a pen and a napkin can do it. For Tracey, no revolution would be complete without some poetry. What he shies away from is the notion that play and organizing are zero sum games. "It's not one or the other— all joy versus the necessary organizing stuff. Art and revolution were not invented in Seattle." Playful politics gets people out, Tracey suggests. "Culture is a really good tactic."

Play as Possibility

Of course, the use of culture in organizing is not a new idea. Poetry and music help people wake up and become attuned to the message of social change in ways other forms of organizing simply cannot do. The use of culture in organizing involves notions of cultural animation. Here, the organizer works to give life—to animate—a vital cultural resource in a community. [HYPERLINK "http://www.drainmag.com/ContentPLAY/Essay/Shepard.html"](http://www.drainmag.com/ContentPLAY/Essay/Shepard.html) \l "_ftn27#_ftn27" [27] It takes a savvy organizer to help recognize this bit of culture, animate it, and start to engage others in the process of social change. John Sellers, the founder of the Ruckus Society, offers an example:

One of my favorite things was working on the Anacostia River in Washington, which is usually considered to be either the first or second most polluted river in the country. The predominantly African American neighborhoods around it are some of the poorest in the United States. Clearcut environmental racism, right. The river is super polluted by toxic PCBs. The fish have been profoundly contaminated. They constitute like a one in a thousand cancer death risk when eaten. But lots of folks around the river are so poor that they are still harvesting the fish for food. So one of the things we did, was to hold a classic fish derby.

They are done all over the country. People love to fish.

Having recognized this cultural resource—this love of fishing—Sellers and his colleagues sought to animate it, to turn it into a resource for thinking about the environment. Sellers describes what happened next:

[O]ur derby was actually a 'Tumor Derby.' Rather than awarding prizes for the biggest catches, our prizes went to the fish with the most tumors and birth defects. It was a creative way to show the general public how crazy things had gotten in this river. I think one of the first things you learn in organizing 101 is to meet people where they are. I love creative actions that are anchored into mainstream cultural touchstones and then flipped on their heads and taken somewhere radical.

Most important, play keeps protest fresh. As Saul Alinsky once said, you gotta keep it fresh. If you keep doing the same thing over and over again, nobody cares. Mark Harrington of ACT UP and now TAG noted that after a while, people stopped caring as much when ACT UP members locked themselves up to the offices of pharmaceutical companies. They stopped being scared. "People get bored," he says. "The media gets bored," Andrew Boyd, the founder of the Billionaires for Bush, explained. "And your enemy, your target, figures out how to deal with it. You can't reinvent Seattle, you have to be doing something new." In organizing, sometimes the play approach works and sometimes it stops speaking to the public necessary to create change. ACT UP had a good understanding of the multiple publics activists could speak to create change. Other groups, such as New York's More Gardens, are able to use play as a tool to communicate to decision makers, in an unthreatening way.

The lesson that many of the playful activists have brought to the new generation of organizing is the understanding that pleasure counts. Wonderful things occasionally happen in the spaces where play and social change intermingle. Here instead of war or violence, people are sometimes assaulted with random acts of kindness. There is nothing wrong with people occasionally just enjoying themselves or acting like a child. Ask a childcare worker dealing with child abuse all day. One has to figure out ways to lighten things up from time to time. This is where the fun of play comes in. It is a free activity, involving hands, stories, moving back and forth between reality and fantasy, experiment and frivolity. "The fundamental feature of play is, that it is gratifying in itself, without serving any other purpose than that of instinctual gratification." [HYPERLINK "http://www.drainmag.com/ContentPLAY/Essay/Shepard.html"](http://www.drainmag.com/ContentPLAY/Essay/Shepard.html) \ " _ftn28#_ftn28" [28]. Without this space, many find it difficult to get back to the harder tasks of life. Groups that play well are able to stay together and get back to the larger task of organizing. They are better equipped to focus on the tasks at hand; they are better ready to deal with the work of organizing, the active effort of creating change, "to get from the outside world whatever is needed for self-preservation," writes Barbara Lantos. [HYPERLINK "http://www.drainmag.com/ContentPLAY/Essay/Shepard.html"](http://www.drainmag.com/ContentPLAY/Essay/Shepard.html) \ " _ftn29#_ftn29" [29].

It is useful for organizers to be clear about what play can and cannot do. Play helps actors convey a counterpublic message; it helps create situations; it engenders fun. It is not a substitute for a larger more coherent organizing strategy. As Boyd and Stevens point out, play is one of many tools in the activist toolbox. Marla Stevens explains, "Good organizing, the best organizing, the best organizers have the biggest tool boxes. You use them all to win." Here, play is part of a larger holistic framework for social change, which includes a clear

well-articulated proposal, an analysis, media advocacy, and an element of freshness and surprise, with a jigger of intelligence, play, and performance. "It's best to keep 'em guessing about what's going to happen next," Stevens explains. Performative activism works best when linked with a well researched, well defined campaign, as Boyd explains:

Boyd suggests this tactic is best used to contribute to a story about democracy.

Every social movement should be a microcosm of the human community, of all the things that we are, all the things that we aspire to and all that sort of stuff. It should have gravitas. It should have play in it. It should have mythology. It should have narrative. It should have love. It probably should have hate. It should have ID and it should have super ego. You know, it should have authority... It also has to have openness and democracy. I mean these are all dialectics and how they work together.

There's certain things play has to offer. It's humanizing. It does this thing where it can ramp down the violence and bring down the tension in the situation. It can make cops laugh. It can kind of empathize with a common humanity on either side of the picket line. In the same way that CD non-violence training that you are supposed to look the guy in the eyes, it makes it easier to dehumanize. It's an obvious media attractor. It's something that nurtures that makes everyone have a better time. It's a whole mode of communication unto itself. When you've got a super serious target, it's one way to take away the aura of authority.

For those involved with ludic play, radical ridicule is one of the essential tools. [HYPERLINK "http://www.drainmag.com/ContentPLAY/Essay/Shepard.html" \l "_ftn30#_ftn30"](http://www.drainmag.com/ContentPLAY/Essay/Shepard.html) [30] Boyd describes the idea:

It's like what Saul Alinski says, 'Ridiculousness is the most potent weapon we have. There is no defense against it.' But this was against the unsophisticated targets he was dealing with in the 1960's. Now everyone is a lot more sophisticated. Everyone is operating in this whole other rarified hipster symbolic media game. But in the 1960's, the targets were not that used to this and they would sort of respond in this kind of unimaginative organization man law and order kind of way. And if you were using humor against them, basically a cop beating up a clown looks really bad for the cop.

There are different kinds of policy stages for different kinds of performances. Subcomandante Marcos of the Zapatistas has actually re-envisioned their struggle as a theatrical play: The play is a problem. Those directing it are making a huge effort to convince the audience that it's already over. Not only is the public not leaving the premises, they're also insisting on getting up onto the stage. Here, play is intricately connected with a conversation about democracy. [HYPERLINK "http://www.drainmag.com/ContentPLAY/Essay/Shepard.html" \l "_ftn31#_ftn31"](http://www.drainmag.com/ContentPLAY/Essay/Shepard.html) [31]

Instead play is part of a new kind of organizing which links art with performance and pleasure and a struggle to create social change. While there is certainly nothing perfect or ideal about social movements that organize around play, many view them as an important alternative to traditional organizing models. Afterall, Starhawk explains, "Traditional models of organizing and politics really haven't gotten us very far. So we have to be willing to try other things."

The politics of play is very much about thinking of different ways to effect social change.

David Solnit explains:

I think it's actually essential to think in those frames. So much of how we are controlled is through the use of images, and communication that is below the surface... If we don't learn how to articulate feelings from the heart, feelings from the gut and learn to share them, we'll always be on the defensive. That's one level, another is people join movements that are fun and hopeful. People who are drawn to a dramatic quality, it dramatically shifts the quality.

For many, such as Solnit, the process begins with telling different kinds of community stories. Sometimes the most important step is thinking of an alternate ending for a group of people who tend to live in dead end stories. Kate Crane reflected on a conversation she had recently had about storytelling and activism.

I was talking with Sasha today, he is one of the cofounders [of the Icarus Project –an alternative mental health project]. [HYPERLINK "http://www.drainmag.com/ContentPLAY/Essay/Shepard.html"](http://www.drainmag.com/ContentPLAY/Essay/Shepard.html) \ | " _ftn32#_ftn32" [32] He said a lot of what the Icarus Project is about is telling stories about our world to ourselves every day. We have these stories. And those stories frame how we live our lives, what we do, what we don't do. He said a lot of what the Icarus Project is about is creating new stories. And I think that theater and creative protest are a really amazing way to tell stories and to create new stories. And that is ultimately at the very core of what this is all about—getting people to think of a new story about what our world is about.

Such an ethos echoes the aspirations of one of the foundational U.S. cultural movements, the 1950's Beat movement, which used poetry to shift the way people thought about their lives, censorship, and public life. “Not that you go to school and then you go to college and then you get a 9-to-5 job and you fit into this little template,” Crane reflects. The Beats suggested that there were other stories, other ways of being in a culture, rather than just fitting into a system of narratives that end up in the same dead ends. For many of the Beat Generation, the poetry of Allen Ginsberg was the first exposure they had had to the idea that they could fight to create something different rather than fit into a system which they did not believe in. There had to be other stories. “There are lots of other stories,” Crane reflects. “And so how do we get people to think about new stories? That's one of the major roles of creative protest and of theater. The politics of play, performance, and storytelling is about engaging people without hitting them over the head. “Just getting people to think that something else is possible,” Crane suggests, is a vital step.

The politics of play is ultimately about respecting both the audience and the group members. It is about communicating in ways that are engaging and thought-provoking, inviting, and not condescending. “It puts an idea in people's minds,” explains Amanda Hickman, who provides technology assistance for social service groups. Rather than giving a press release and just saying no to issues, Hickman explains, “Things like the Medicaid funeral highlight issues. It's accessible and engage able and sustainable.” If a political message is condescending, people really do not want to pay attention. If the process is not engaging or democratic, then people do not tend to want to stay involved. And that is not good for a group.

Limitations

Some limitations of play mentioned by interviewees include the following:

It does not consistently function as an effective response to political repression.

It can be easily misunderstood

It can become stale quickly.

Lack of resources limit its efficacy.

It does not work alone.

It is not a substitute for a clear policy proposal.

It is not a substitute for a holistic organizing strategy.

While interviewees were happy to talk about what worked about play, they were also eager to talk about what did not work. Many of the uses of play are for instructive purposes; these include humor, jokes, and group processes. For external purposes such as political messaging or protest, it is often useful to carefully consider the audience for this message. External ludic play works well when the expression is matched with the goal—such as the defense of a community space such as a community garden or a public bike ride or play space. And the style of the protest does not always match the end goal. Michael Shenker explains:

There was a style of things that came out after the gardens where you can't really go to a demonstration unless you give out the party toys. You know, I can't get with that. The mode of the expression and the tenor of the expression needs to be proportional to the injury being inflicted. So if a quarter million people have died, it's a little difficult to say we are going to go have a good time without paying some type of tribute through the collective expression which could actually create a deeper level of expression of the human experience. Some type of tribute needs to be made to the people who are suffering. There comes a time when we need to transcend ourselves and say we are not Americans or Iraqis, we're human beings.

ACT UP was quite useful at using clowning to pinch holes in social pretense or to highlight the flaws in a social policy. When the group staged the "Send in the Clowns" demo in Washington, DC, members used absurd play to mirror what they considered the lunacy of a reactive, moralistic policy analysis. While such an approach is thought to demonstrate public discontent, it is by no means the best approach for every political action.

Ludic play is not as well tailored for many heavy issues such as police brutality, to name just one. "It's hard to play when people are dying," ACT UP veteran Julie Davids explained. In many such cases, the use of ludic tactics can backfire, be misunderstood, or be seen as belittling a larger movement cause, unless they are extremely culturally specific. The ACT UP political funeral or New Orleans funeral marches are profoundly culturally specific. Without such a context, play can appear flippant or disrespectful. Thus, it is useful for actors to be aware of the strategic uses of creative play. Andrew Boyd ruminates on the concept in the context of the Billionaires:

What are we doing? We're part of this larger social movement. And we didn't try to over reach. We did at times. But we tried to check ourselves for what we are not good for. There's all these zillions of groups and there are all these coalitions closely networked movements

now. And so it's an ecology. In a funny way, in the same way in a global economy that every country has their own specialization. Every group has what they are good at and what they are not. We're good at getting a lot of media attention.

I asked John Jordan, a founder of CIRCA, about his experience with the conflict between community building play and real world policy changes. He explained:

I look at people and I think 'fuck' maybe it's time to build real external differences. The ideal is to built both. I'm always trying to do both. If you just create alternatives. you forget why you were creating the alternatives in the first place. You create alternatives to the system and then you get sucked into the system. You have to resist and create at the same time. It's really hard but they are both as important. Before I pop off this planet, I would love to be part of something that does both at the same time.

For Jordan, who helped create the RTS storyline that that expanded around the globe, the limitations of the play model are simple: "It was part of a transnational community. It's lined up with the poetic and the pragmatic and the symbolic." But, he explained, "It can become just symbolic, with no real policy or external changes." After a while, symbolic actions that fail to create immediate changes in the external environment become frustrating. Groups ranging from SexPanic! to the Lesbian Avengers to RTS experienced some of this frustration.

Yet, success or social change is not always easy to assess or measure. Jordan referred to Rebecca Solnit's work, *Hope in the Dark*. "It's so beautiful. It's extraordinary. Really extraordinary," Jordan explains. He suggested it was one of the best books he's read in a decade. For Jordan, the work is important because it "really challenges the way we see success, how we evaluate successes for change and comes to it from a really brilliant way. She's looking at the importance of the unexpected... not the social change in media kind of process."

In *Hope in the Dark*, Solnit writes:

The glum traditional left often seems intent upon finding the cloud around every silver lining. And joy is one of our weapons and one of our victories. Non-activists sometimes chide us for being joyous at demonstrations, for having fun while taking on the serious business of the world, but in a time when alienation, isolation, and powerlessness are among our principal afflictions, just being out in the streets *en masse* is not a demand for victory: it is a victory.

Jordan reflects on this work.

She looks at the way social change changes peoples lives. It helps build a movement. We've had victories if one looks at it in not a linear way, but in a very networked kind of way, how the Reclaim the Streets stuff helped build Seattle and created support for efforts in the global South. It's hard to see direct physical changes that have happened when you've prevented something. In lots of ways, we've kept capitalism at bay. We have to pat ourselves on the back that things get better and they get worse at the same time. There are lots of things we're stopped from happening but we still think things are getting worse... It helped build a movement that had victories.

In Sum

In the midst of a bloody civil war in El Salvador, a group of women organized three committees per refugee camp: one for education, another for construction/sanitation, and a third for joy—the comité de alegría. [HYPERLINK "http://www.drainmag.com/ContentPLAY/Essay/Shepard.html"](http://www.drainmag.com/ContentPLAY/Essay/Shepard.html) \ \ "_ftn33#_ftn33" [33] Joyful play finds itself in the strangest places and campaigns. This study has documented cases from ACT UP to the community garden struggle where play contributed to campaigns that utilized holistic approaches to organizing for social change. These include groups that worked for economic justice, education, health care, and basic needs, as well as pleasure—not one or the other.

Just as in the civil war in El Salvador, the committee for joy was not formed outside of the work of the committees for education and construction/sanitation. Yet, without the committee for joy, or the Lower East Side Collective's Ministry of Love, other work becomes more than people can bear. The limitations of play in politics are easy to understand. McKay writes that that DIY politics can easily fall into repeating anarchism's limitations: poor organization, a partial narrative, micro politics, naive utopianism, and preference for spectacle over long-term organizing strategy. [HYPERLINK "http://www.drainmag.com/ContentPLAY/Essay/Shepard.html"](http://www.drainmag.com/ContentPLAY/Essay/Shepard.html) \ \ "_ftn34#_ftn34" [34] Yet, with these limitations in mind, play can complement a larger organizing story; here, play can offer profound energy and resources to a campaign.

Play is useful in politics because:

It helps create community as well as bring new political actors into the arena.

It bridges gap between hearts and minds.

It helps validate different ways of knowing and working within the world.

It supports a holistic organizing strategy that includes research, mobilization, legal tactics, direct action, and a clear workable policy alternative.

The politics of play works as part of a coherent organizing strategy. Instead of just offering a “no,” play helps advocates articulate what they want the world to look like. Play speaks to both the rational and the irrational parts of participants and spectators alike. It can feel wildly exuberant and emotional to play in a public protest. It can also be a profoundly effective part of a larger plan of social action. Combined with an effective campaign, play is useful for inviting people into organizing, training them, and later disseminating knowledge and public education. Thus, play is useful for articulating a clear message of what a community group wants. As Aresh of More Gardens explains, it is part of being a “yes” group, a group that clearly knows what it wants. “I think we very much have to be able to articulate and embody what we're for, not just what we're against,” explains organizer David Solnit.

Social change activists could do worse than learn from the lessons and approaches of party groups, such as the Complacent Organization, [HYPERLINK "http://www.drainmag.com/ContentPLAY/Essay/Shepard.html"](http://www.drainmag.com/ContentPLAY/Essay/Shepard.html) \ \ "_ftn35#_ftn35" [35] which make use of cultural resources, strategies, and groups which play; here, activists could learn to be cultural as well as political leaders. Yet to be effective organizers must realize that there are different forms of expertise and knowledge. In an era of a dwindling welfare state, play can be a useful way to help expand social networks. But social actors must build on a rich appreciation for the complexity of play. This is certainly not a universally understood concept. Therefore, social actors must work in culturally specific and respectful ways with local leaders and stakeholders to animate culture, help people organize, socialize, and build connections

with those engaged in creating coalitions aimed at creating a better world today.

In 1831, Alexis de Tocqueville toured the United States. The result was his work, *Democracy in America*. [HYPERLINK "http://www.drainmag.com/ContentPLAY/Essay/Shepard.html"](http://www.drainmag.com/ContentPLAY/Essay/Shepard.html) ¶ [_ftn36#_ftn36" \[36\]](#) In it, he suggested that civil society, where people play, debate, and converge, was necessary for American democracy to thrive. Today, the struggles of public space activist groups can be viewed as battlefronts in a public/private debate. Many such groups use play to cultivate a counterpublic. In the era of globalization, there remains a need for a civil society in between the market and the government. The groups discussed here are part of a burgeoning movement of do-it-yourself activism aimed at preserving public space and civic culture. Through forms of radical creative play, new stories emerge.

Different groups form; different tribes build their own communities of pleasure and resistance. Some of them are book groups, such as a network Eric Rofes has been part of for the better part of a decade. Here social connection and intellectual stimulation, rather than play, is the focus. In other cases, play might involve bringing elements of performance and storytelling and the politics of pleasure into an open-mic night. Kirk Read describes one such space: "I organize a monthly open-mic in a gay men's STD clinic called Magnet. The space is very sort of Chelsea. I do it with Larry Bob Roberts from Holy Titclamps [Boys Club]. There's always a sense of fun." Sometimes the politics of play is about protest and other times it's about poetry readings, creative artistic direct action, live art, party groups which organize dance events, or the Church Ladies³/₄almost fifteen years and counting³/₄singing and chanting.

When Joe Tuba and the Hungry March Band traveled to Rome, they found a vast new network of political marching bands:

Well, since Rome we've kind of learned from that we didn't know before that this marching band, it's not restricted to wires or being in a club, it's not restricted to anything, it's kind of like this democratic thing where you can play for everybody for free as soon as you walk out the door. And you can have this whole other network of other bands that do that its use. It's amazing. People go crazy. They follow us everywhere.

And even among audience members, a network is built. People get to know each other, dance, and do political work together. People live for the sort of space created at the shows, the streets, the gardens, the public commons that emerges through the connection of bodies and politics which link at the carnivalesque shows and communities that emerge around such cultural play. Tuba continues:

Well, that's the thing. It's the same thing RTS was doing. That the gardens were really doing. You are creating a space. And it's like the commons that people are always talking about. It just doesn't exist in the mindset in the United States at all. In England there is a history of it. Here there is no recollection of that kind of thing. That's what this whole scenario is trying to remind people about and make people create.

Tuba broke out into laughing as we finished our conversation. The show and the interview were over. All the while gardens are growing; picnics are happening; kids are romping through public space and their parents are talking about ways to organize daycare collectives and getting together for additional play-dates.

Is play everything to a social movement? Certainly not. Yet it is better for people to form tribes to expand alienation-reducing social networks [HYPERLINK "http://www.drainmag.com/ContentPLAY/Essay/Shepard.html"](http://www.drainmag.com/ContentPLAY/Essay/Shepard.html) \ \ "_ftn37#_ftn37" [37] than for people to bowl alone [HYPERLINK "http://www.drainmag.com/ContentPLAY/Essay/Shepard.html"](http://www.drainmag.com/ContentPLAY/Essay/Shepard.html) \ \ "_ftn38#_ftn38" [38] or leave public life entirely. While our politics often mirrors the very power structures activists oppose, playful responses open up questions, stories, and spaces.

Endnotes

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