

Liminalities.net/

### Book Review

*Electoral Guerilla Theatre: Radical Ridicule and Social Movements*. L. M. Bogad. New York: Routledge, 2005. 235 pages. Cloth \$97.00; paper \$33.95.

I'll never forget seeing drag king Murray Hill's concession speech after his campaign to unseat incumbent New York City mayor Rudolph Giuliani in 1997. Inside a lesbian bar the midst of the Giuliani crackdown on the city's public sexual culture, Hill's address felt starkly subversive and poignant.

At the time, it felt like public space itself was under attack, including venues such as Meow Mix, where the event was held. The owner of the now-defunct lesbian bar on the Lower East Side of Manhattan had actually been fined for advertising her events on billboards throughout the neighborhood. Hill's performance a fundraiser for SexPanic!, a group fighting the crackdown on public sex venues and other public spaces electrified the crowd, in a testament to the value of a thriving public sphere. He celebrated both the 341 write-in votes he'd earned, as well as the civil society his drag act helped bring together.

While democracy may not have felt optimistic on that dark night when Giuliani won his second term in office, the public commons of New York City felt alive and well, if even only on the margins. After the defeat, Hill was asked which political party he ran on. "The Murray Hill Party. And, as you can see, I've got a nice party going on here," he explained. "I didn't do so bad. I came in third place." Two years later, Hill [HYPERLINK "http://www.dyxploitation.nu/issue7/murray1.html"](http://www.dyxploitation.nu/issue7/murray1.html) \t "\_blank" [sought to upset](#) Hillary Clinton in her 2000 run for U.S. Senator.

While not was successful in terms of electoral politics, Hill's campaign did succeed in lighting up the cabaret culture across the city. The theatre in which Hill "the hardest working man in show business" performed represented just the sort of gathering thought to be essential to cultivate debate and democratic interaction. It also highlighted a distinct innovative form of political protest, called electoral guerilla theatre, the subject of L.M. Bogad's new book.

For Bogad, electoral guerilla theatre is best understood as an innovative new tool in the repertoire of social movement tactics of resistance. Its aim is to disrupt stultified, hierarchical forms of political representation. Instead of consultants and pollsters advising candidates to be a cowboy one day, a soccer fan the next, and a green-tea drinking baseball daddy after that next, electoral guerilla theatre campaigns are made up of outcasts, drag performers, musicians, stand-up comedians, and other pranksters whose aim is to turn electoral campaigns into an opportunity both to protest against politics as usual and to participate within the grand tradition of American democracy and its fiction of inclusion. The derision these candidates receive for daring to take part in a spectacle thought to be the province of the rich and powerful is, of course, part of the act.

One part performance artist, another part political theorist and scholar, and a contributor to direct action campaigns around the world, Bogad brings a distinct combination of experiences to this work. A veteran of activist groups ranging from Reclaim the Streets NYC and Billionaires for Bush to the Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army and the mock Oil Enforcement Agency, Bogad also teaches dance and theatre at the University of California at Davis. His praxis includes a rich juxtaposition of theatre history, practice, and performance, while his theoretical influences range from the political theory of Michel de Certeau and Jürgen Habermas to the satire of the Dead Kennedys and Monty Python. "A very interesting constituency is this," Bogad quotes Monty Python. "In addition to the official Silly Candidate, there is an unofficial Very Silly candidate. And he could very well split the silly vote."

Within such crosscurrents, *Electoral Guerilla Theatre* functions as a scholarly collection of case studies of an innovative form of political intervention for those with few other outlets available to them. Yet more than this, the work serves as a brief primer on the political possibilities of play. Through ludic engagement, prank candidates turn their candidacies into both protest and performance of a more democratic public sphere.

If another world is still being imagined, much of the fantasy process involves elements of creative play, humor, and irony. Part of this imagining involves playful political theatre, which combines a potent critique with a low-threshold organizing approach that allows countless players with various levels of expertise to participate. Take Billionaires for Bush, for example. The group's point, of course, is that there is too much money in politics and too much social and economic inequality in American life. Groups such as the Billionaires and electoral guerilla theatre campaigners such as drag queen Joan Jett Blakk, who ran for president on the Queer Nation ticket in 1992, have used humor to agitate against the serious flaws in U.S. politics, running for office on sarcastic, iconoclastic, and playful tickets aimed at creating more participatory models of political action than conventional liberal democratic models. Bogad considers these campaigns and many more, including a run for San Francisco mayor by a punk rock musician in 1979. "There's always room for Jello," Bogad quotes from the campaign materials of Dead Kennedys singer Jello Biafra. The silly slogan not only nibbled at the supposed dignity of the political process, it also disrupted the tedious spectacle of the press coverage (p. 34).

*Electoral Guerilla Theatre* explores the history and tradition of guerilla electoral politics and examines actors who have run such campaigns. Most interestingly, Bogad considers what happens when prank candidates are actually elected to office, as happened with the Dutch Kabouters ("gnomes") in 1970. "What can satirical candidates do in the unlikely event that they actually take power?" Bogad ponders (p. 39). The first case study in *Electoral Guerilla Theatre* seeks to answer this question as it traces the group's rise. Yet the Kabouters were not the first prank candidates to come to political power out of the Dutch praxis of the, taking advantage of, the proper part of the system that allowed

space for such peripheral voices. The Kabouters followed in the footsteps of the the Dutch Provos, a group of pranksters and provocateurs who campaigned on the slogans, "VOTE PROVO, FOR A LAUGH" and "VOTE PROVO: FOR BETTER WEATHER" (p.49). And it worked. Once in power in 1966, the Provos "belittled the fearsome and abusive police with merciless, playful humor," Bogad notes (p. 54). But the following year, police over-reaction to the group's provocations resulted in calls for the resignation of the Amsterdam chief of police and the city's mayor, both of whom stepped down (p. 55). Yet by far the greatest opposition to the tactics of the Provos came from the earnest, often tedious Old Left. "The theme of the "serious" Old Left acting as one of the strongest enemies of the ludic New Left would continue into the Kabouter period," Bogad explains (p. 56).

If there is anything essential about play, creativity, and community-building, it is that these sorts of interaction set the stage for democracy renewal. While the Billionaires have lampooned the role of money in the U.S. political process, countless actors over the past few decades from Jello Biafra to Joan Jett Blakk to Sister Boom Boom of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, who ran for San Francisco City Council in 1982 on the "Nun of the Above" Party have used elements of play, theatre, and performance in their campaigns for political office. Their aim was less about getting elected than about challenging institutional inequalities. Drag queens, anarchists, and other marginalized actors use the tools of camp, stand-up comedy, and agit-prop theatre to challenge the legitimacy of their opponents. Bogad considers this "serious play." At the core of this play-acting is a series of experiments in democracy, the aim of which are to expand the political dialogue between spectators and actors. "In play, there is something 'at play' which transcends the immediate needs of life and imparts meaning to the action," anthropologist Johan Huizinga explains. The subject in play, for Bogad, is the state of democracy.

Throughout *Electoral Guerilla Theatre*, Bogad lists examples of marginalized groups that have advanced their counter-public message through pranks and political performance. What unifies these groups is the use of subversive humor, intelligence, audacity, and "ridicule" to highlight the limitations of the electoral process, which bars many counter-public voices from formal participation. The point is to shift the terms of what is and is not permissible in political debate and democratic engagement. In this endeavor, both the campaigns he explores and Bogad's work itself represent significant contributions.

—Benjamin Shepard

INCLUDEPICTURE "http://liminalities.net/images/issn-2.png" \\*  
MERGEFORMATINET

..