Ben Morea: An Interview

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Ben Morea was interviewed by lain McIntyre in 2006.

Tell us about your background and how you came to find yourself involved in the radical scenes of New York during the 1960s.

Ben Morea: I was raised mostly around the Virginia/Maryland area and New York. When I was ten years old my mother remarried and moved to Manhattan. I was basically a ghetto kid and got involved in drug addictions as a teenager spending time in prison. At one point when I was in a prison hospital I started reading and developed an interest in art. When I was released I completely changed my persona. In order to break my addiction I made a complete break from the kids I grew up with and the life I knew.

In the late 1950s I went looking for the beatniks because they seemed to combine social awareness with art. I met the Living Theatre people and was highly influenced by their ideas despite never being theatrically oriented myself. Judith Malina and Julian Beck were anarchists and they were the first people to put a name to the way I was feeling and leaning philosophically.

I also met an Italian-American artist named Aldo Tambellini who was very radical in his thinking and who channelled all of that into his art rather than social activism. He would only hold shows in common areas like churchyards and hallways in order to bring art to the public. He influenced me a lot in seeing that having art in museums was a way of rarefying it and making it a tool of the ruling class.

I'm self educated and continued my pursuit of anarchism and art through reading and correspondence. I became aware of Dada and Surrealism and the radical wing of twentieth century art and sought out anyone who had information about it or who had been involved. I really felt comfortable with the wedding of social thought with aesthetic practice. I corresponded quite a bit with one of the living Dadaists Richard Huelsenbeck who was living in New York, but whom I never met.

At the same time I became friendly with the political wing of the anarchists meeting up with people who had fought in Spain, from the Durutti Brigade and other groups. They were all in their 60s and I was in my 20s.

I was also a practising artist working at my own art and aesthetic. I was mainly painting in an abstract, but naturalistic form as well as doing some sculpture. There was some influence from the American expressionists, but Zen was also an influence.

When did Black Mask come together as a group? How were you organised and who was involved?

Ben: It's hard to say whether we started in 1965 or 1966, but the magazine definitely started in 1966. Black Mask was really very small. It started off with just a few people. As anarchists, and not very doctrinaire ones, we had no leadership although I was the driving force in the group. Both Ron Hahne and I had already been working together with Aldo doing art shows in public to promote the idea of art as an integral part of everyday life, not an institutionalised thing. Ron and I became close friends and found that we had a more socially polemical view than Aldo in wanting to go closer to the political elements of Dada and Surrealism as well as to the growing unrest in Black America. We wanted to find a place where art and politics could coexist in a radical way. Once we started publishing Black Mask and holding actions other artists and people on a similar wavelength were attracted to what we were doing. I've always favoured an organic approach where you don't have meetings and people just associate informally rather than having a hierarchy and recruiting members.

Over time Ron became less interested in the political sphere and I became more interested in working with the people who were involved in fighting for civil rights and against the Vietnam war. I can

honestly say that in both Black Mask and then later The Family we never held a meeting where we consciously sat down to decide our direction or exactly how we would deal with a particular action or situation. It all developed as a very spontaneous, organic outgrowth of whatever we thought was appropriate at the time.

One of Black Mask's first actions was to shut down the Museum Of Modern Art (MOMA). Tell us about what happened and the group's approach to direct action in general.

Ben: We felt that art itself, the creative effort, was an obviously worthwhile, valuable and even spiritual experience. The Museum and gallery system separated art from that living interchange and had nothing to do with the vital, creative urge. Museums weren't a living house, they were just a repository. We were searching for ways to raise questions about how things were presented and closing down MOMA was just one of them.

The action was a success. We'd announced our plans in advance and they closed the museum in fear of what we might do. A lot of people stopped and talked with us about what we were doing and this action and others attracted radical artists to our fold.

At other times we disrupted exhibitions, galleries and lectures. Most of these actions were just thought up on the spot and a lot of what we did was part of a learning process. Things weren't completely thought out, but were a way for us to develop an understanding of our place in the ongoing struggle. A lot of political groups would have these big grandiose strategies and plans, but for us the actions were just a way of expressing ourselves and seeing how we could make a dent in society.

In 1966 the group also targeted the Loeb Centre at New York University (NYU). What happened with that action?

Ben: We had a strong sense of humour and of guerrilla theatre. I used to disrupt art lectures at NYU to raise issues other than those that the lecturers wanted to discuss. As a result I was challenged to a debate by some of the academics. I remember that particular event had such a pretentious approach that we had to do something. It was incredibly stratified and only meant for the elite and it seemed like they'd done everything possible to keep it away from the public at large. We handed out loads of leaflets advertising this free event with food and alcohol and they had to block off the streets all around because so many people showed up. We went down to the Bowery and handed out flyers so that all the drunks and street people would show up.

Black Mask clearly drew inspiration not only from the Dadaists, Surrealists and avant-garde movements of the past, but also from the contemporary black insurrections and youth movements of the 1960s. Tell us a little more about these influences and about your ideas and approach to politics and art in general.

Ben: From my perspective and that of the people I worked with we saw a need to change everything from the way we lived to the way we thought to the way we even ate. Total Revolution was our way of saying that we weren't going to settle for political or cultural change, but that we want it all, we want everything to change. Western society had reached a stalemate and needed a total overhaul. We knew that wasn't going to happen, but that was our demand, what we were about.

It also meant seeing that you need all types of people involved, not just political activists. Poets and artists are just as important. Revolution comes about as a cumulative effect and part of that is a change in consciousness, a new way of thinking.

How did Black Mask fit into the New York political and arts scenes because it seems as if you went out of your way to ridicule and challenge ideologues of all stripes?

Ben: A lot of political people questioned what we did saying we should only attack society on the political front and that we shouldn't care about art. However we felt it was best to take action in the place where you were and that as artists these issues were important to us.

Many of the hippies distrusted us and the politicos hated us because they couldn't control us or understand what we were doing. As for the people in the art world I'm sure most of them thought we were crazy.

Black Mask seems to have issued various challenges to the peace movement in criticising the moderates for their lack of militancy whilst also attacking the Left for its unconditional support of the National Liberation Front (NLF). Many radicals from the 1960s are now somewhat regretful or appear reticent to speak about their support for the North Vietnamese regime.

Ben: We supported the right of the Vietnamese people to resist American invasion, but were not going to support the North Vietnamese government's own oppressive behaviour. It was a subtle point and most of the left couldn't understand it. We knew the history of Spain where both the Francoists and Stalinists executed anarchists. We refused to support one side or the other.

I hated the knee jerk reaction of much of the Left who delighted in waving the NLF flag around. We didn't cheer the killing of American troops who were stuck over there as cannon fodder like some others did.

In a sense we didn't fit in anywhere and that meant we became a pole of attraction for all those other people who weren't interested in a dogmatic or pacifistic approach. Much of the later evolution of Black Mask into The Family came about through more and more of these people joining with us and affecting where we were going.

Black Mask and later The Family were some of the first groups to encourage the concept of affinity groups as a way of organising. One Family member famously defined an affinity group as a "street gang with analysis." How did this approach develop and the use of term come about?

Ben: Although we associated in similar circles with Murray Bookchin our group was always very different because we were very visceral and he was very literate. Murray was keen on using the Spanish term aficionado de vairos to describe these non-hierarchical groupings of people that were happening. We said "Oh my god, can you really imagine Americans calling themselves aficionado de vairos?" (laughter) "Use English, call them affinity groups."

Tell us about the *Black Mask* magazine you produced which ran from 1966 to 1968 and spanned ten issues.

Ben: Ron and I mainly put the magazine together, but there was a. wider group who helped produce, print and distribute it. We sold it for a nickel, which wasn't much money, but we figured if people had to pay for it then they would actually want and read it rather than just take one look and throw it in the trash.

We tended to sell it on the Lower East Side, which was the most fertile ground for us as there were many artists and activists. We occasionally went up town as well although that was more to stir the pot.

Black Mask was one of the first groups to take on countercultural figures like Timothy Leary and Allen Ginsberg for their timidity, orientation towards religion and status seeking, labelling them at one point "The New Establishment." From 1967 onwards it seems as if Black Mask moved a lot of its critique away from the arts establishment and towards the growing hippy movement and New Left.

Ben: Although we were critical of them I was close to Allen Ginsberg and became close to Timothy Leary years later. What we were trying to say at that moment was that they were allowing themselves

to be used as a safety valve. We wanted to attack the core of society and believed they weren't doing that. At the time we thought they were being used by the likes of Time and Life magazine although in hindsight Time and Life probably wish they had never covered them, especially Timothy.

We were always trying to shake things up, to push everyone else as well as ourselves. There was always a lot of interchange with all sorts of other radicals and sometimes there was fratricide in that we would strike out at people we otherwise liked just to make a point.

In 1966 Black Mask magazine cited the Situationist International as a group moving in a similar direction to yourselves calling as they were for "the revolution of everyday life" and the abolition of art as a separate, specialized activity. However in late 1967 the SI expelled three of its British members for having supported "a certain Ben Morea, publisher of the bulletin Black Mask." What was the source of friction between the groups and to what extent were you ever linked?

Ben: The Situationists and I never saw eye to eye. I thought that they were extremely doctrinaire and limited. The Situationists seemed to excommunicate more people than they kept. Theree was never really any connection between our groups and theirs.

What happened with the "assassination" of the poet Ken Koch in 1967?

Ben: Koch was a symbol to us of this totally bourgeois, dandy world. Myself, Dan Georgakas, Alan Van Newkirk and some of the other Black Mask people went to one of his readings. I think I came up with idea to shoot him with a blank pistol. Alan looked like the classic image of the bomb throwing anarchist. He was about six foot three, long and thin with a gaunt face and always dressed in black - the anarchist incarnate. So we decided "You're the one, you're going to shoot him." (laughter) We printed a leaflet and all it had on it was a picture of Leroi Jones with the words 'Poetry is revolution.' On the night when Alan shot the blank Koch fainted and everyone in the audience assumed he was dead and started screaming . Some people threw the leaflet from the balcony into the crowd and then we all left.

Reactions after the event were split between people who thought it was the greatest thing they'd ever heard and those that thought we were a bunch of sophomoric assholes. Which was great because so much of what Black Mask and The Family was about was pushing people to decide "Do I belong with this group of people or this one?" We were determined to be outrageous in order to force people to decide where they stood on things. We wanted to push people, force them to think. "Why shoot Koch? He's just a nice poet."

What was Black Mask's connection to Students for a Democratic Society?

Ben: We saw that SDS was becoming a real force for change and that all these traditional left groups and Maoists like Progressive Labor were trying to take it over and control its direction. We thought it was important for other kinds of people, like us, to get involved and show the students that there were many choices, many ways they could go.

I remember being at one of the SDS national conventions and people were getting into a heated debate about the differences between the Yankees, the East Coast based establishment, and the Cowboys, the Texan based establishment. I got up and said "This is all bullshit, I don't know about you guys, we're not the Yankees or the Cowboys- we're the Indians!" Another time a member of The Family ran for a position and got up with a waste paper basket and said "Here's my platform, throw all the position papers in here."

With both Black Mask and later The Family we used guerrilla theatre and actions to show that there was another approach on offer other than boring politics as usual and the more volatile elements of SDS resonated with that. Some of the people who went on to form [US armed struggle organisation] The Weathermen hung out with The Family and, although it has never really been credited, borrowed

a lot from our militant style and attitude. However once they melded with the more Leninist groups they took it all in a very different direction.

Tell us about Valerie Solanas, who you were close to and wrote a defence of following her murdoer attempt on Andy Warhol in 1968. There was a deafening silence in the underground press around her ideas and actions following the shooting. This seems a little odd given the fact that by this point the New Left had begun to increasingly glorify political violence.

Ben: Valerie used to stay with me quite a bit as she was fairly homeless and always on the move. There was a lot of parody and irony in her writing, but she was also, and I don't mean this in a bad sense, a fairly crazy person. She saw a need to raise a lot of issues around what happens to women and the SCUM Manifesto was the best way she could express herself. I always loved people who were loose cannons, who didn't fit the mould.

Sometime later when Black Mask had wrapped up and The Family had started we were involved in the occupation of Columbia University [1968]. Valerie came up there and found me and asked "What would happen if I shot somebody?" I said "It depends on two things - who you shoot and whether they die or not." A week later she shot Andy Warhol.

After she shot him I wrote a pamphlet supporting her. I may have been the only person who did that publicly. I went up to MOMA and handed it out there. Everybody I met was very negative about it, but, hey, I disliked Andy Warhol immensely and I loved Valerie. I felt she was right in her anger and that he was way more destructive than she was because he was helping to destroy the whole idea of creativity in art. Some people dislike the term, but I feel that creativity is a kind of spiritual act, a profound thing for people to do. Warhol was the exact opposite, he tried to deny and purge the core of creativity and put it on a commercial basis. As a person he was really despicable, as well, and that's why Valerie hated him. He used and manipulated people.

The attack on Andy was met with silence on the Left and I think that was because it raised issues that no one could deal with. This wasn't violence occurring in some far off place. Also Andy had become a star, almost an honoured image, and here she was striking at it. Even the people who liked her feminist approach couldn't deal with the fact that she would harm Andy. Black Mask and The Family drove the political people nuts because we didn't fit into any of their blueprints, because we were loose cannons, so you can imagine how they looked upon Valerie.

Black Mask continued as a magazine until mid-1968. What was the process by which the group began to evolve and change into what became known as Up Against the Wall Motherfucker?

Ben: The Family/Up Against The Wall Motherfucker and Black Mask were related in that one grew into the other, but in reality they were very separate groups in terms of the people involved and what they did. There was no decision to start a new group, no blueprint, it was just an evolutionary thing where one died away and the next thing came to be. It's hard even to say exactly at which point one ended and the next began.

The Family went over the edge, was extremely volatile and didn't have as much inclination toward the cultural sphere. It included a lot of artists, but also people from all persuasions who wanted to live a life more real, more visceral than what was offered. Something less limiting than just pursuing politics or art, something freer.

We weren't really hippies or politicos. We were separate from other groups even though we were part of the wider counterculture. Some people would have placed us as hippies. Those that knew something about the counterculture could sense that we were a much more guttural breed. But outwardly we did have the trappings of the hippies in terms of long hair and ethnic clothing. We also took a lot of

LSD. Even though we were also radicals no one would have mixed us up with the Young Communist League. (laughter)

What were some of the differences between Black Mask and The Family?

Ben: The Family was much bigger and more vital than Black Mask which was more of a esoteric group. We never called ourselves Up Against The Wall Motherfucker, although we signed our posters and leaflets UAW/MF which anyone in the group could produce, with that name. Amongst ourselves we were The Family, which might sound weird now because of the association of that name with Charles Manson with whom we had no connection and nothing in common with. Whereas I was the main figure in Black Mask The Family was quite different because it involved a large group of people who were all equal in strength and in determining the direction of the group. It was essentially a loose confederation of affinity groups living across a series of crash pads who shared a tribal outlook and lifestyle. Different people from the core group would gravitate to a particular address where a lot of young hippies and runaways would also stay.

The fact that we rejected the nuclear family model and lived collectively was never arrived at in a polemical fashion or laid out as a blueprint. We just had a sense that there were other roots to living other than what the West had to offer, whether it was from Native Americans, gypsies or Africa. The hippies had some of that too, but we really leaned heavily towards this tribal, ethnic outlook. We felt that there was some strength there that transcended the Western world. We tried to understand and incorporate some of these elements, both in our appearance and actual living style. Our whole lives were directed towards free flow, living organically.

Tell us about the actions The Family were involved in.

Ben: The first real action we did as The Family was to take garbage to the Lincoln Centre in February 1968. There was a garbage strike in New York and there was tons of refuse mounting up in the ghettos. The commercial and wealthier areas were able to hire private contractors to clean their streets so we decided to take some of the garbage from the Lower East Side up to the Lincoln Centre. One of our members proposed this as a cultural exchange - garbage for garbage (laughter). Although others tended to focus on our aggression and militancy we really had some beautifully witty people.

We put out a leaflet explaining why were doing this, but those of us involved realised that we weren't really Black Mask anymore and so we didn't want that name on it. There was a poem by Leroi Jones with the line "Up Against The Wall Mother Fucker" in it and I suggested we put that on there. Somehow it stuck and from then on in everyone referred to us as that. It wasn't a deliberate thing on our part. It would have been fairly pretentious to just name ourselves "The Motherfuckers". (laughter) Black Mask continued as a magazine for a little longer and then UAW/ MF started creating flyers and posters and doing things for papers like The Rat.

How were those broadsheets and statements put together?

Ben: They were part of our artistic politics and we enjoyed putting them together either individually or as a group. We wanted to do something that was creative and visually exciting, but which also made a statement. With The Rat two to six members of The Family would go up to their office each week and do our page. Whoever felt inspired would come along and we'd all collaborate. People who have reprinted our work, both at the time and since, often failed to appreciate our sense of humour. We believed in what we were doing, but we didn't want to be too serious. We could laugh at ourselves. The best influence we felt we could have was not just to inject militancy, but also joy and humour into the struggles of the time.

We had our own mimeograph machine so people were constantly running off leaflets and posters. A lot of the time I would see one on the street that I didn't even know had come out. The beauty of

our family was that it was multi-armed and had no central brain so people were often doing actions and producing things that the rest knew little about.

In the group's writings an affinity group was defined as a "street gang with analysis." How much of the traditional street gang mentality was a part of your outlook though?

Ben: Some members were more into the street thing than others. We weren't territorial or into dead end opposition however. We were "street tough" rather than street toughs. Osha Neumann who penned that particular definition (though I had coined the term Affinity Group) saw it as meaning that we had street smarts and an intense bond not that we were irrational bullies.

In 1968 students struck and occupied buildings at Columbia in a protest against the redevelopment of land earmarked for social housing and the university's links to weapons research. How were you guys involved?

Ben: There were five buildings occupied at Columbia and the one we were in was the only one the police didn't attack. We didn't put a call out, but everyone who was a fighter gravitated towards that building. We were so fortified and aggressive that having evicted all the others they decided to negotiate rather than force their way in.

We didn't operate from any plan, we just saw situations and took our chances. We were edge dwellers. During the anti-war protests at the Pentagon we saw the doors weren't heavily guarded so we went for it and broke them open. We'd gone along with all the other protesters, but pretty soon we attracted a core of a few 100 people who were like us. We saw an opportunity, made a move and they came along.

During 1968 and 1969 The Family were also involved in resisting police harassment and violence on the Lower East Side. How did you go about dealing with these problems?

Ben: Our response would include everything from peaceful protests to not peaceful battling depending on the situation. We were extremely volatile and it often depended on how hard we were pushed.

Eventually they decided that we had to be dealt with. One night we barricaded the streets to traffic and threw a party. The police came, but saw we had too many people and were too strong so they left us alone. However that was the beginning of the end. We'd become too cocky and uncontrollable and they began busting us for anything they could.

In October 1968 you personally faced trial on charges of attempted murder in Boston. What led up to this and your eventual acquittal?

Ben: While I was in New York we heard that young freaks, we never called ourselves hippies, were being harassed by this group of vigilantes in Boston. It was pretty bad and a few kids had been hospitalised so I suggested to some Family members that we should go there and look into it. We went up and stayed with the street kids and freaks and sure enough they were attacked while we were there. The attackers were repelled and I was charged by the police.

I was in jail for about two weeks before I raised ball. After I stood trial we heard that these vigilantes were still hurting people and decided to go back because we were concerned that we may have made things worse. The same guys turned up again, but this time they backed down and disappeared which was lucky for me because it wouldn't have done my cause any good.

I didn't get a lot of support for my case as the political community couldn't have cared less about the hippies whilst the hippies were for the most part non-violent. However various people helped out and the story got some coverage in the underground press. In the end I was acquitted, but the foreman told me that it was all down to one juror. On the first vote it was 11 to 1 in favour of convicting me,

but one guy managed to convince the others that there was enough doubt to let me go. I don't know who he was, but I owe that one guy my liberty.

Other than supporting people against the police and opening crash pads The Family also ran a free store and was involved in various other activities aimed at street level survival. Tell us about these activities.

Ben: We were always trying to connect the hippy part of the Lower East Side community with the street and homeless part. With the influx of thousands of runaways into the area during the late 1960s they were sometimes one and the same, but the two communities didn't always comfortably coexist. We set up a store front to give homeless people as well as ourselves a place to hang out. We had free clothes, doctors and lawyers on retainers, a mimeograph, information for people who wanted to dodge the draft and get fake ID, information on crash pads, etc. It was a general help centre. We did free food a couple of nights a week, but also held free food events in a hall or a church on the others where we would feed up to 300-400 people. We got some papers from a church saying we were a non-profit and that allowed us to get day old or incorrectly marked stuff from the produce markets and food outlets for free. Some people worked, others made donations and the same papers also helped us to hustle up grants from liberal churches to rent places, etc.

As with a lot of other countercultural groups at the time The Family drew a line between 'life drugs' and 'death drugs.' Tell us about that and the group's approach to illicit drugs in general.

Ben: We differentiated between hard drugs like cocaine and heroin and those like grass, hashish and psychedelics. We saw that LSD and grass were helping to break down the structures between suburban youth and helping them to rethink their place in the universe. Some of us had had problems with hard drugs and saw that they were destructive. Unlike Leary and others we didn't see psychedelics as a cure all, but they could and did make a positive contribution.

People would sometimes bring kids to me who were on bad trips. I would take LSD and try to go with them to the place where they were in trouble and help them come back. If you want to talk about putting yourself out there, that was it. You wouldn't see many Maoists doing that. (laughter)

In late 1968 The Family went head to head with rock promoter Bill Graham over the issue of community involvement in the Fillmore East venue. What were the origins of the dispute and how did it all pan out?

Ben: At root this was a clash between the grassroots and those who exploit them. We didn't want control of the Fillmore East or anything like that, but we wanted to have one free, non commercial night for the street people. Given the money they were making out of the community we figured that they could give something back.

At first Graham refused and during one meeting in his office he pulled out three silver bullets and lined them up saying "The Hells Angels made similar demands on me and sent me these three bullets and I didn't give in." I got up and said "There's one difference between us and the Angels, we're not giving you anything to put on your desk." That wasn't a literal threat, but a statement that one way or another we were going to get what we were demanding.

One night the Living Theatre people were performing at the Fillmore East and we arranged to come up on stage after them. I made a statement saying that they were finished, but we were going to stay on stage for as long as it would take to get what we wanted. It might take one night, two nights or two weeks, but we were going to stay. We occupied the stage and fights broke out through the night with Graham and his goons, but they lost and at about one or two in the morning he gave in and we got the Thursday night for free.

What sort of events happened on the free Thursdays?

Ben: A lot of rock bands including Canned Heat, the MC5 and Country Joe McDonald came and played for free and we gave out free dope and food. I've been told that the MC5 clashed with some sections of the crowd, but I remember staying at their place in Michigan some time later so I'm not sure what happened there. After three weeks Graham came to me with a letter from the police informing him that they were going to shut the whole venue down if these nights continued due to the free drugs policy. We accepted that that was it, but in the end it didn't matter that it had only lasted three weeks because we got to challenge the whole commercial world of rock n roll.

Woodstock provided us with another opportunity to challenge the music industry. These young kids said "You always say the music's free, well we're going to make it free." Like most of the things we did nothing was planned. We just went along and some of us thought it would be a good idea to cut the fences and let everyone in. When it began raining we found where the organisers were storing camping equipment for sale and liberated all the tents and sleeping bags. We cut a hole in the storage tent and just gave them out.

Did The Family interact much with groups from other parts of the country and world?

Ben: A tremendous number of people came through New York and spent time with us around the time that The Family began. They included some UK Situationists who became the King Mob group, members of the Zenga-Kuren from Japan, Jean Jacques Leibel who was one of the leaders in the '68 uprising in Paris and also some Provos from Holland. All of these groups overlapped with our approach in one way or another.

We were also doing a lot of travelling ourselves. I spent time with The Diggers in San Francisco. They were coming from a very similar place in terms of radicalism and the rejection of the entrepreneurs who were profiting from the counterculture, but our approaches were very different. There was a lot of support from the West Coast groups, even [LSD manufacturer] Owsley gave us some money. There were also small groups of people all over the country who identified with us and stayed with us.

What prompted the decision to leave the Lower East Side?

Ben: The police felt threatened by us. They began following us closely and engaging in constant harassment. Some of our people were also charged in the second wave of indictments that came out of the Chicago protests.

These things in themselves didn't drive us out, but we were evolving and exploring new directions. The tribal element became more strident and many of us began to wonder why we were stuck in the ghetto anyway. A lot of the young runaways were being preyed upon and we felt it would be safer to move them out. We took about twenty of them to California at one point and helped others find homes elsewhere.

The group didn't end all of a sudden, but dispersed with most of us getting involved in various land oriented projects and communes. I personally stopped writing and went into the mountains and didn't come out for five years. I became inspired by Wilhelm Reich's The Murder of Christ and its idea that you don't ignore the wider issues, but move on to tackle them one person at a time.

With the US government on a permanent war footing overseas whilst simultaneously cracking down on civil liberties and dissent at home it sometimes seems as if the left wing movements of the 1960s never existed. What do you see as the legacy of groups like Black Mask and the New Left in general?

Ben: Part of the reason I re-emerged [after more than 30 years of anonymity] to talk about what we did back in the 1960s is the fact that things have gotten so bad in the US. It's at a point where you can't ignore it, it's worse than ever.

I figured that I'd start letting people know about our history and then go from there. All I can tell people is that when it looked pretty dismal in the past we took action and it did have an effect. A lot was achieved and yet a few years beforehand no one would have expected that we could take on the behemoth of American capitalism. It's counter-productive to sit back and say "You can't do anything." It's not my place to tell people exactly what they should do, but there is always some way to respond and take action, just look around.

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