

Recipes for Disaster

an anarchist cookbook
a moveable feast

CRIMETHINC. WORKERS' COLLECTIVE / OLYMPIA / 2004



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"... describes in lurid
detail how sensible,
law-abiding citizens can
be transformed into
mayhem-making mobs."
—Tom Ridge, Department
of Homeland Security



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the total transformation of Western civilization and life itself.*

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Disclaimer for Our Friends

"Plans are worthless, but planning is everything—keep yourself steeped in the character of the problem you are called on to solve."

—President Dwight D. Eisenhower, 1957

These are indeed recipes for disaster. Anyone with the slightest experience in the field knows that nothing ever goes as planned, especially not the first time. Inevitably, at that tense, trembling moment you call in the bomb threat, the receptionist will hang up on you before your recording device plays it—and you'll realize you only brought one clean quarter.

This book can serve as a source of information, but it is meant at least as much as a source of inspiration—it is an attempt to broaden the public toolbox, to encourage others to try out wild ideas of their own. It is indeed important that beginners around the world be armed with specific skills that are ubiquitous in some contexts but have never been applied in others, but the process of discovery and experimentation is always more valuable than the products thereof. Don't abide by any formula in here—improvise, improvise.

*Don't rely on
anything that
worked before—
nothing ever has.*

Many of the recipes we composed for this volume were test-driven in small towns. We selected such locations for our rigorous process of experimentation and analysis on the grounds that they were utterly unremarkable. Perhaps the importance of San Francisco and Barcelona in the struggle for freedom and adventure for all has been overestimated; not everyone can or should live in such places, and besides, many revolutionary strategies which are now impossible in these cities are still tremendously dangerous everywhere else. Why risk arrest in the financial district to put up graffiti that will only remain for a few hours, when there are a thousand ungarded stop signs in the suburbs waiting to sing your song? Quite a few of these recipes are designed especially for the Middles-of-Nowhere of our world, the nondescript margins of history where Nothing Ever Happens. As they say, the quickest way to the top is to turn the world upside down. Revolution is, among other things, a reversal: the first becomes the last, the margin becomes the mainstream, the nameless convict becomes Nestor Makhno, commander of the anarchist armies of the Ukraine. The anonymous, inexperienced teenagers who get their hands on this book in Missoula, Montana could be the ones to make hip New York, and this book itself, totally obsolete. If you're one of them—wherever you live, however old you are—for everyone's sake, don't underestimate your own strength.

One more subject bears comment—the countless recipes left out of this book, especially the ones you think we should have included. Those, my friend, are the first recipes in your book, which you had better start writing as soon as possible.

Yours for total destruction and recreation,
and wishing you many a sweet repast,

*CrimethInc. International Federation
of Food Service Industry Escapees*

"With work reduced to a few hours a week and other redundant rituals discarded, the substance of life shall be given over to the planning of gala celebrations and the anticipation of perfect meals."

—F.T. Marionetti, *Futurist Cookbook*

*In the meantime,
you can jot down
field notes in the
margins of this one.*

Reclaim the Streets

LOTS OF FUN PEOPLE

MATERIAL FOR ROADBLOCKS—e.g.,
*couches, junker cars, tripods and
experienced people to be on the tripods*

WELL-SCOUTED MEETING SPOT, ROUTE,
AND DESTINATION

HANDBILLS, POSTERS, AND OTHER
PUBLICITY ANNOUNCING THE EVENT

FLIERS TO PASS OUT TO PASSERSBY DURING
THE EVENT, INVITING THEM TO JOIN IN
AND EXPLAINING THE EVENT

BULLHORNS

BANNERS AND FLAGS BEARING MESSAGES

CHALK, SPRAY PAINT, STENCILS

MOBILE SOUND SYSTEM—*this could
range from a truck with a disc jockey
and sound system inside to a bike cart
with a boombox; remember, whatever
it is, it could be confiscated by the cops*

DECORATIVE PROPS—e.g., *inflatables,
puppets, flags, enormous metal
icosahedrons, large paper maché suns,
moons, and animals*

GAMES—e.g., *Twister, jump rope*

POLAROID CAMERA AND PHOTOS TO
GIVE AWAY—and *perhaps stickers to
put on them*

FREE FOOD, MESSAGES, ETC.

Ingredients

A Reclaim the Streets action hijacks public space to show some of the ways it can be used that are more creative, exciting, and community-oriented than mere commerce or traffic; essentially, it is a radical, do-it-yourself street carnival. It is not a protest confronting the authorities who inhibit such activities so much as it is a demonstration that sidesteps their control to provide a temporary example of what we're all missing. This can be an excellent way for a radical community to have a good time and practice

Instructions

reinterpreting and rearranging public life, while breeding new desires and an expanded sense of the possible in passersby.

The most basic element of such an action is a terrain to be reclaimed. Before you select a location, determine how much of a challenge you're ready to take on. There are many parks and sidewalks that deserve to have new life breathed into them, and it's wise not to overextend at first: if your city or town is devoid of social life, it's probably better to start out getting people together in a risk-free, low-key manner than it is to cut immediately to big confrontations with police. At the same time, if your community is ready, there's a lot to be said for highly visible, ambitious takeovers of areas that no one could imagine being used for anything other than the purposes to which capitalism has consigned them. One hundred people dancing, playing kickball, and picnicking in the middle of the freeway while everyone else sweats and swears in traffic certainly puts the conflict between the partisans of business and pleasure in clear terms. Such an occupation is bound to be frustrating for at least some of those who have cast their lot with the status quo; as a rule of thumb, it's generally best to go ahead and piss off the bosses and bureaucrats, while being careful to entertain and engage Joe and Jane Public instead of infuriating them.

Regardless of how disruptive you plan your event to be for business as usual, it should take place at a location where people naturally congregate, at a time when they will be most likely to stick around to see what's happening. Thus, if you've chosen a business district, the end of the Friday workday might be perfect, while a Saturday afternoon would be better for a downtown square. At their best, Reclaim the Streets actions are not invitation-only festivals of interference for an insider elite, but surprise parties with the public at large as the guests of honor. Think throughout the planning about how you will make strangers feel welcome participating in your event—if you do your work well, they will find themselves joining in before they've stopped to think about it.

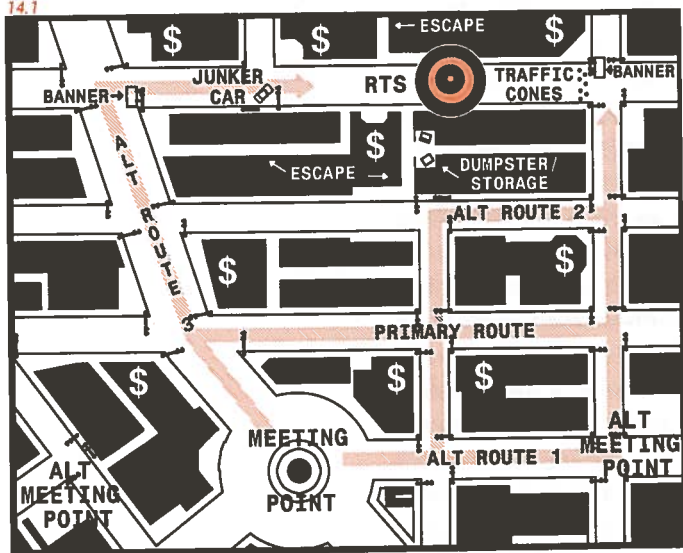
You can entertain everyone by putting
dishwashing detergent in public
fountains.

When it comes to promotion and publicity, a Reclaim the Streets action, like any unpermitted action, presents something of a double bind in that it needs to slip under the radar of the authorities while being conspicuous to everyone else. Even if you're planning an event in a public park, you'll find that the rules surrounding the use of both private property and public space are rigged to prevent people from getting together outside the circuitry of commerce and consumption. Applying for a permit will most likely only incur more official attention and consequent attempts to prevent your event from happening at all, unless you're really ready to go that route the whole way and have the requisite legal counsel, financial resources, free time, and privilege to be respected by the authorities. This means that the right to organize public events is reserved for those that most resemble corporations and government agencies, so it can be worth doing things without a permit just for the sake of setting a precedent in favor of free speech.

If you work without a permit, you had better have the advantage of surprise, so the police won't be ready to shut your event down immediately. If you only publicize your event through channels that won't reach the ears of the authorities, this can secure you that advantage, but it will also limit participation to an invite-only crowd plus passersby. Alternatively, you can keep the location of the event a secret until the moment it begins, or somehow attract so many more people or display so much more energy and cleverness than anyone expected that the police won't be prepared to stop you.

According to your plan, you will either need to advertise your event selectively and securely, or as widely as possible. One way to combine the two approaches is to advertise the event with a slew of different posters—"open drum circle to welcome spring," "join the radical drum corps," "art bike rally"—while spreading the word to everyone you trust that these events will all fuse into a Reclaim the Streets.

If you must keep your target area a secret, but you want to promote the event widely, advertise a meeting point alone. Everyone can gather there, then proceed to the secret



destination. If necessary, have the mass that assembles break up into many small groups, each led by someone in the know, so the police will be hard-pressed to keep up with them all; the groups can all converge suddenly at the same location and time, and the party begin. A bicycle parade (see *Bicycle Parades*, pg. 100) can also take place, to scout the area, keep police befuddled, and add to the festive atmosphere.

You may need to blockade the area you have selected (see *Blockades and Lockdowns*, pg. 162). It's generally better to reroute traffic than to stop it cold, both to maintain pleasant relations with other citizens and to make your event sustainable. Traffic signs and cones hunted and gathered from urban environments will give an official air to your barricade, while couches and easy chairs will emphasize the disjunction between work space and play space. You can buy old junker cars—paying in cash, leaving

no record of how they were acquired—and disable them in the middle of key intersections. Ambitious, large-scale Reclaim the Streets actions have used tall tripods with people atop them to secure space before; this is dangerous, of course, and should only be hazarded by those with a lot of experience. If you want to reserve an area usually filled by parked cars, park your own cars in all the spaces in advance, then move them all at once, leaving the spaces occupied by the materials unloaded from the cars for the event. Alternatively, a truck filled with such materials can drive by at the critical moment and be unloaded by the crowd. Materials can also be concealed in an alley nearby—in a dumpster, if need be, assuming you've done your homework on trash collection times!

That's the difficult stuff. Now think about all the fun, exciting things you can do in your liberated zone! Roll out the red carpet, set up a sandbox, tie ribbons around everything, drop banners (see *Banner Drops and Banner Hoists*, pg. 75), throw flowers (see *Dumpster Diving*, pg. 219), decorate every surface with sidewalk chalk—décor counts for a lot when it comes to reinventing a space and setting a new tone for what can happen in it. Stage theatrical weddings, puppet shows, poetry readings, games of limbo, satirical political speeches, drum circles, street theater. Set up tables with free food, fortune cookies, literature (see *Distribution, Tabling, and Infoshops*, pg. 210), massages, portraits (see *Portrait Exchange*, pg. 415), or palm reading. Lay down a mat for breakdancing. Bring stilt-walkers, DJs spinning danceable tracks, live musicians, guerrilla gardeners planting fruit trees and vigorous weeds, jugglers and clowns. Arrange performers throughout the space in such a way that they won't interfere with each other's acts. Broadcast pirate radio programs to inform and invite those nearby.

Electrical outlets are not hard to find in public areas—try lampposts or even stores. These will be useful for powering musical equipments, fans to blow up inflatables, projectors and lights, and other crazy machines.

To emphasize this once more: write walk-on roles into your street party! For example, you could paint a funny image on a wooden backdrop with holes cut into it, and give out free Polaroids to people who want to pose with their faces in the holes, slapping a sticker on each bearing the punch line for the image, information about the event, or the address of a relevant website. Also, have handouts ready for the crowd of onlookers, explaining the meaning of the event from the various perspectives of those involved.

Figure out ways to invite and involve people from every walk of life. For example, if you are teaching a class of kids, bring the class, with something for them to perform or do for the occasion. The presence of students may help to defuse the dangers posed by emotionally stunted law enforcement agents.

You can render PVC pipes almost unbreakable by filling them with spray can expanding insulation foam.

The police, once they arrive, will ask who is in charge. Make sure everyone involved knows to say they are just random passersby who happened to join in. The longer the authorities are confused and unsure of what to do, the longer your event can go on. At some point, once they've gotten oriented, they will close in to force people out of the area and perhaps make arrests. It's usually best to end things just before this happens, in order to come out ahead and ensure a positive experience for everyone—but remember, police will often try intimidation tactics before they do anything else, so it's good to develop an instinct for when they are bluffing. Make sure that everyone can disperse safely from the area, and that the police won't know which cars parked nearby belong to people attending the event. When it's time to go, precious materials can be secreted nearby and picked up later if need be.

Have a legal group ready to bail out anyone who is arrested, and if possible a lawyer to handle cases related to the event. At the beginning of the event, cards can be distributed with a number to call in case of arrest.

One more hint: during the preparation process, on top of everything else you have to do to get ready, let your collaborators know you will be bringing a special surprise to the event. Challenge them to reciprocate.

Account

In DC, we have had two Reclaim the Streets actions (and a few other actions that were not specifically billed as RTSSs, but fashioned similarly.) This is an account from the first DC Reclaim the Streets, which took place on Saturday, June 23, 2001.

A small group of us started planning for the action a couple of months before the action date. During the first two meetings we talked about our vision for the event and how to organize it. In the second meeting we broke into working groups: outreach, tactical (and blockading, which in this case meant cars), art, and fun and games. The groups met independently and shared information with the other groups on a need-to-know

basis. For example, I was in the core organizing group, but not in the tactical group, so I didn't know until the morning of the event what the final destination was—and only learned it then because I needed to drop off some supplies in advance. Others in the core groups did not know the location until we arrived. This was very important: for our plan to succeed, we needed the element of surprise so we could set up roadblocks without the police knowing what was happening.

The outreach group made hundreds of full-color posters and fliers. The front of the fliers read, "Street Party! Converge at Dupont Circle, 3 p.m., Saturday, June 23, Featuring: DJs [followed by the names of the five DJs], Free! Reclaim the Streets!" and featured our web address and a picture of people dancing. The back read, "Featuring live DJs, dancing, music, street theater & soccer. Bring chalk, toys (especially water toys and Frisbees), boomboxes, banners, signs, and costumes. Stepping off the sidewalks and into the streets brings us together and allows us to challenge the dehumanization of our lives. A street party is a liberated zone, where we can practice life as we'd like it to be—full of color, community, and mutual aid." We wanted the poster to be appealing to a broad range of people, from rave kids and activists to parents and children. We also made 11" x 17" posters and hung them on lampposts all over town using wheatpaste (see *Wheatpasting*, pg. 598).

The tactical group was in charge of deciding where to hold the event, what route to take to get there, and how to blockade the road so we could hold the area we wanted for as long as possible. In our larger group, we chose the meeting point for the action, Dupont Circle. This convergence point was publicly announced on the fliers. We chose Dupont because it was a public park where a large number of people could converge on a summer day without attracting too much attention, it was accessible by public transportation, and, as a number of roads departed from the circle, it would be difficult for the police to block our exit from it.

PVC pipe is breakable, structurally unsound, environmentally destructive, and inferior in countless other ways. You can use bamboo, wood, or metal pipe to do just about anything it can do, and better.

A subgroup of the tactical group was the car group, who were responsible for finding and getting old cars that could run enough to get a few miles but were such junkers that it would be no loss to leave them behind. They ended up paying a couple hundred dollars, in cash, for two cars. The previous owners signed over the titles to the cars to the fake names the buyers gave them; for a later action, we were able to get cars for free with a little more time and searching. It was also members of the car group who, on the morning of the action, drove the cars to the two ends of the street we were to reclaim, acted as if the cars had broken down in the middle of the street, and then pretended to look to see what was wrong with the cars while actually disabling them so they would be difficult to move. Later, their tires were slashed, too. Only the tactical group knew who was in the car group, since the car people were in a high-risk position.

The arts group spent the months leading up to the event making beautiful banners and flags, which were carried in the march to the RTS destination and hung over the broken-down cars and at the entrance to the party. They also made large paper maché props—including a huge sun, moon, and lightning bolt (the RTS symbols), which were carried in the parade and used to decorate the party.

The fun and games group gathered lots of games and props to be used during the party—including multiple games of Twister, hundreds of water balloons, chalk, spray paint, jump ropes, and noisemakers. This group also spent some time dumpstering couches, chairs, road cones, and general junk for decorating the site and helping to block the road.

We probably should have had a fundraising group, since we did shell out a good deal of money and fundraising did not end up happening in a very organized way. We were able to collect quite a bit of money, though, by walking around the RTS with large trashcans suggesting that people “throw their money away”!

A big problem with our organizing that we have tried to address since our first RTS is gender and experience divisions between the working groups. To illustrate, the tacti-

cal group was made up entirely of men who were experienced activists and friends, while the other groups were made up of women and many of the men who were less experienced in activism. This division, in which men do the “sexy” up-front work while women do the behind-the-scenes preparatory work, was fairly common in some of DC’s activist groups. Having experienced people who know each other do high-risk actions together can make sense, but it can also be an excuse to avoid sharing skills, diffusing power, or taking on more thankless jobs. Each action should be an opportunity for new people to learn new skills and new challenges, and to challenge gender, racial, and other barriers to taking on new roles.

On the day of the event, between one and two hundred people met at Dupont Circle and walked en masse to our destination. During the walk, one Starbucks coffee shop window was broken. Our destination was a busy street with lots of pedestrian traffic, in a moderate-income neighborhood with a diverse population that included many people of our own demographic (so we weren’t taking over someone else’s neighborhood). The three-block area we occupied had lots of independent businesses and some corporate ones, and would be great as a pedestrian walkway—so that’s what we created for one day. The ends of the street were blocked off with the cars, couches, and other “junk,” but we left one alley open through which we could escape or at least get the DJ equipment out if the police came in, and which cars that were “trapped” in the area could use to exit.

From most standpoints this RTS was a great success. Pirate radio people set up a broadcast simultaneous with the action to announce the events, encourage participation, and provide music for the walk to the end point. We had perfect weather, a mobile sound system and DJs, drum circles, free food from Food Not Bombs, Twister games, chalk and spray paint art, stilt walkers, propagandists, literature inviting onlookers to join, banners proclaiming “Free the City, Kill the Car, Reclaim the Streets,” skateboarders who used the old cars as ramps, children playing double-dutch, and more.



Of course, we also had some police nearby—but surprisingly, they did not break up the RTS or come inside our temporary autonomous zone. As this was the first RTS in DC, the police were totally confused by what was happening. I overheard some cops discussing the situation: “They must have a permit. I mean, they wouldn’t do this without a permit . . . would they?” It took them a couple of hours to figure out that yes, we would and were holding a street party without a permit. They then informed the crowd that we had to leave at six p.m. or they would arrest everyone. Since our purpose for this action was to have a day party and we were not prepared to hold the area longer than that, we agreed, but said that we would walk together (in the streets!) to a park about eight blocks away so people who wanted to could continue to hang out there. So, after four hours of reclaiming that space, we went mobile again, walked to the park, hung out, and then dispersed at our leisure from there.