

pneumatic drills, stilts, effigies,
buckets of paint, paper, foam,
foil, wire mesh, puppets, hats,
black costumes, newspaper
boxes, windows, dumpsters,
hammers, teddy bears, poi,
wooden and wire poles, balls,
papier-mâché, backpacks,
rags, silver cardboard, banners,
inflatables, giant dresses,
juggling clubs, face paint,
sapling trees, bodies, carnival
**masks—On the Phenomenology
of Giant Puppets**

I begin with a simple observation. It's fair to say that if the average American knows just two things about the mass mobilizations of the anti-globalization movement, they are first, that they often involve people dressed in black who break windows, and second, that they involve colourful giant puppets.

I want to start by asking why these images in particular appear to have so struck the popular imagination. I also want to ask why it is that of the two, American police seem to hate the puppets more. As many activists have observed, the forces of order in the United States seem to have a profound aversion to giant puppets. Often police strategies aim to destroy or capture them before they can even appear on the streets. As a result, a major concern for those planning actions soon becomes how to hide the puppets so they will not be destroyed in pre-emptive attacks. What's more, for many individual officers at least, the objection to puppets appears to be not merely strategic, but personal, even visceral. Cops hate puppets. Activists are puzzled as to why.

If nothing else, these two observations mark a neat structural opposition. Anarchists in Black Bloc mean to render themselves anonymous and interchangeable, identifiable only by their political affinity, their willingness to engage in militant tactics and their solidarity with one another. Hence the uniform black costumes. The papier-mâché puppets used in actions are all unique and individual: they tend to be brightly painted, but otherwise they vary wildly in size, shape and conception. So on the one hand one has faceless, black anonymous figures, all roughly the same; on the other polychrome goddesses and birds and pigs and politicians. One is a mass, anonymous, destructive and deadly serious; the other is a multiplicity of spectacular displays of whimsical creativity.

If these paired images seem somehow powerful, I would suggest it is because their juxtaposition says something important about what direct action aims to achieve. Let me begin by considering property destruction. Such acts are anything but random. They tend to follow strict ethical guidelines: individual possessions are off-limits, for example, along with any commercial

property that is the basis of its owner's immediate livelihood. Every possible precaution is to be taken to avoid harming actual human beings. The targets – often carefully researched in advance – are corporate facades, banks and mass retail outlets, government buildings or other symbols of state power.

Their property destruction is an attempt to 'break the spell', to divert and redefine. Consider here the words of the famous communiqué of the N30 Seattle Black Bloc (N30: November 30, 1999 – the abbreviation became a naming convention after J18 – the June 18, 1999 Carnival Against Capital in London), from the section entitled 'On the Violence of Property':¹

When we smash a window, we aim to destroy the thin veneer of legitimacy that surrounds private property rights. At the same time, we exorcise that set of violent and destructive social relationships which has been imbued in almost everything around us. By 'destroying' private property, we convert its limited exchange value into an expanded use value. A storefront window becomes a vent to let some fresh air into the oppressive atmosphere of a retail outlet (at least until the police decide to tear-gas a nearby road blockade). A newspaper box becomes a tool for creating such vents or a small blockade for the reclamation of public space or an object to improve one's vantage point by standing on it. A dumpster becomes an obstruction to a phalanx of rioting cops and a source of heat and light. A building facade becomes a message board to record brainstorm ideas for a better world. After N30, many people will never see a shop window or a hammer the same way again. The potential uses of an entire cityscape have increased a thousand-fold. The number of broken windows pales in comparison to the number of broken spells – spells cast by a corporate hegemony to lull us into forgetfulness of all the violence committed in the name of private property rights and of all the potential of a society without them.²



Property destruction is a matter of taking an urban landscape full of endless corporate facades and flashing imagery that seems immutable, permanent and monumental and demonstrating just how fragile it really is. It is a literal shattering of illusions.

What then of puppets? Again, they seem the perfect complement. Giant papier-mâché puppets are created by taking the most ephemeral of materials – ideas, paper, wire mesh – and transforming them into something very like a monument, even if they are simultaneously somewhat ridiculous. A giant puppet is a mockery of the idea of a monument:³ its inapproachability, monochrome solemnity and, above all, its implication of permanence, the state's attempt (itself ultimately ridiculous) to turn its principle and history into eternal verities. If one is meant to shatter

the existing 'spectacle', the other, it seems to me, is intended to suggest the permanent capacity to create new ones. It is the process of production that is really the point. There are brainstorming sessions to come up with themes, the wire frames lie on floors surrounded by buckets of paint and construction materials, almost never alone, with small teams moulding, painting, smoking, eating, playing music, arguing, wandering in and out. Everything is designed to be communal, egalitarian, expressive. The objects themselves are not expected to last. They are for the most part made of delicate materials; few would withstand a heavy rainstorm; some are even self-consciously destroyed or set ablaze during actions. In the absence of permanent storage, they quickly fall apart.

Their images constitute a universe. Puppetistas aim for a rough balance between positive and negative images. On the one hand, one might have the Giant Pig that represents the World Bank; on the other, a Giant Liberation Puppet whose arms can block an entire highway. Many of the most famous images identify marchers and the things they wear or carry: for instance, a giant bird puppet at the A16 (16–22 April 2000) International Monetary Fund/World Bank protests in Washington DC was accompanied by hundreds of little birds on top of signs distributed to all and sundry.

Top Performance at Bread and Puppet Theater, Glover, Vermont, United States, 1991. An Iraqi woman holds a dead body. Behind her is the threatening figure of a 'butcher' – archetypal characters used by the Bread and Puppet Theater to represent white faceless bureaucrats, paraded in multiple anti-war marches.

Opposite Street performance in protest against a nuclear power plant in Caorso, Italy, 1983, using props designed by Piero Gilardi, who was a key figure in Arte Povera (Poor Art). From the late 1960s he created work for political street theatre and demonstrations.



The most striking images are often negative: the corporate control puppet at the 2000 Democratic Convention in Los Angeles, operating Bush and Gore like marionettes; a giant riot policeman who shoots out pepper spray; and endless ridiculous effigies. The mocking and destruction of effigies is, of course, one of the oldest and most familiar gestures of political protest, but the positive images are afforded little more respect.

Here is an extract from my early reflections, jotted down after time spent at the Philadelphia Puppet Warehouse before the Republican Convention of the same year:

The question I keep asking myself is: why are these things even called 'puppets'? Normally one thinks of 'puppets' as figures that move in response to the motions of some puppeteer. Most of these have few if any moving parts. These are more light moving statues, worn or carried. So in what sense are they 'puppets'?⁴

In fact, there's usually no clear line between puppets, costumes, banners and symbols, and simple props. Everything is designed to overlap and reinforce. Puppets tend to be surrounded by a much larger 'carnival bloc', replete with clowns, stilt-walkers, jugglers, fire-breathers, unicyclists, Radical Cheerleaders, costumed kick-lines or, often, entire marching bands.

Tony Blair's famous comment in 2001 that he was not about to be swayed by 'some travelling anarchist circus' was not taken, by many, as an

insult.⁵ The connection is significant; for now, the critical thing is that every action will normally have its circus fringe, a collection of flying squads that circulate through the large street blockades to lift spirits, perform street theatre, and also, critically, to try to defuse moments of tension or potential conflict. Here is a first-hand account:

They [the puppeteers] joined a group that was blockading the building in which talks were being held. 'People had linked arms,' Zimmerman says. 'The police had beaten and pepper-sprayed them already, and they threatened that they were coming back in five minutes to attack them again.' But the protesters held their line, linking arms and crying, blinded by the pepper spray. Burger, Zimmerman and their friends came along – on stilts, with clowns, a 40-foot puppet, and a belly dancer. They went up and down the line, leading the protesters in song. When the security van returned, they'd back the giant puppet up into its way. Somehow, this motley circus diffused the situation. 'They couldn't bring themselves to attack this bunch of people who were now singing songs.'⁶

For all the circus trappings, those making and deploying giant puppets argue they are deeply serious. 'Puppets are not cute,' insists Peter Schumann, director of Bread and Puppet Theater, the group historically most responsible for popularizing the use of papier-mâché figures in political protest since the 1960s. 'Puppets are effigies and gods and meaningful creatures.'⁷ Sometimes, they are literally so: as with the Mayan gods that came to greet delegates at the WTO summit meetings in Cancun in September 2003. Still, if giant puppets, generically, are gods, most are foolish, ridiculous gods. The process of producing and displaying puppets becomes a way to both seize the power to make gods, and to make fun of it.

The sacred here is the sheer power of creativity, the power to bring the imagination into reality. But it is also as if the democratization of the sacred can



only be accomplished through a kind of burlesque. The constant self-mockery is never meant to genuinely undercut the gravity of what's being asserted; instead it recognizes that gods, though human creations, are still gods, but that taking this fact too seriously might prove dangerous.

The N30 protests and actions in Seattle against the WTO were a turning point. They came as a surprise to most in the American government. The Seattle police were clearly unprepared for the sophisticated tactics adopted by the hundreds of affinity groups that surrounded the hotel and, at least for the first day, effectively shut down the

meetings. The initial impulse of many commanders appears to have been to respect the non-violence of the actions.⁸ It was only after 1pm on 30 November, after Madeleine Albright's call to the governor from her hotel demanding that he tell them to do whatever they had to do to break 'blockade 13', that police began a full-blown assault with tear gas, pepper spray and concussion grenades. Even then, many seemed to hesitate, while others, when they did enter the fray, descended into wild rampages, attacking and arresting scores of ordinary shoppers. In the end the governor was forced to call in the National Guard. While the media pitched in by representing police actions as a response to Black Bloc actions that actually began much later, having to bring in federal troops was an undeniable, spectacular, symbolic defeat. In the immediate aftermath, law enforcement officials – on a national and international level – seem to have begun a concerted effort to develop a new strategy. It seems their conclusion was that the police had not resorted to violence quickly or efficiently enough. The new strategy, however, appears to have been one of aggressive pre-emption. The problem was

Top A 20-ft/6.6-m articulated puppet of Chac, Mayan God of Rain, formed part of a demonstration by indigenous people protesting against the privatization of water during an anti-World Trade Organization mobilization, Cancun, Mexico, 2003.

Opposite Top Picasso's *Guernica* dances through the streets in pieces as part of a protest against the invasion of Iraq, New York, 2003.

Opposite Bottom Giant inflatable cobblestones, designed by Eclectic Electric Collective, were used during the General Strike, Barcelona, February 2012.

how to justify this against a movement that was overwhelmingly non-violent, engaged in actions that for the most part could not even be defined as criminal¹² and whose message appeared to have at least potentially strong public appeal.

If one looks at what happened during the months immediately following Seattle, the first thing one observes is a series of pre-emptive strikes, aimed at threats that never quite materialized. Here is one example among many: hours before the A15 (15 April 2000) protests in Washington DC against the IMF and the World Bank, police round up 600 marchers in a pre-emptive arrest and seize the protesters' convergence centre. Police chief Charles Ramsey loudly claims to have discovered a workshop for manufacturing Molotov cocktails and homemade pepper spray inside. Washington DC police later admit no such workshop existed (they'd actually found paint thinner used in art projects and peppers used for the manufacture of gazpacho). However, the convergence centre remains closed



and many of the puppets inside are appropriated. From this moment, a key issue in the weeks before any mobilization became how to hide and protect the puppets.

The police had adopted a very self-conscious media strategy. Their spokesmen would pepper each daily press conference with wild accusations, well aware that the crime-desk reporters assigned





to cover them (who usually relied on good working relations with police for their livelihood) would normally reproduce anything they said uncritically, and rarely considered that it merited a story if afterwards the claims turned out to be false. This same period began to see increasingly outlandish accounts of what had happened at Seattle. During the WTO protests themselves, I must emphasize, no one, including the Seattle police, had claimed that anarchists had done anything more militant than break windows. That was the end of November 1999. In March 2000, three months later, a story in the *Boston Herald* reported that, in the weeks before an upcoming biotech conference, officers from Seattle had come to brief the local police on how to deal with 'Seattle tactics', such as attacking

police with 'chunks of concrete, BB guns, wrist rockets and large capacity squirt guns loaded with bleach and urine'.¹⁰ In June, *New York Times* reporter Nicole Christian claimed that Seattle demonstrators had 'hurled Molotov cocktails, rocks and excrement at delegates and police officers'. On this occasion, after picketing at their offices, the *Times* ran a retraction, admitting that according to Seattle authorities no objects had been thrown at human beings.¹¹ Nonetheless, the account appears to have become canonical. Each time there is a new mobilization, stories invariably surface in local newspapers with the same list of 'Seattle tactics' – a list that also appears to have become enshrined in training manuals distributed to street cops. Before the third Summit of the Americas in Miami in 2003, for example, circulars distributed to local businessmen and civic groups listed the following 'Seattle tactics' as actions they should expect to see on the streets once the anarchists arrived: 'wrist rockets, Molotov cocktails (many were thrown in Seattle) ... crow bars, squirt guns (filled with acid or

Top Medieval Bloc Teddy Bear Catapult, Deconstructionist Institute for Surreal Topology, Anti-FTAA mobilizations, Quebec City, April 2001 (confiscated by police).

urine'.¹² Again, according to the local police force's own accounts, none of these weapons or tactics had been used in Seattle.

Predictably, by the time the first marches began, most of downtown Miami lay shuttered and abandoned. Here, too, puppets were singled out. In the months before the summit, the Miami city council actually attempted to pass a law making the display of puppets illegal on the grounds that they could be used to conceal bombs.¹³ It failed, but the message was out. The Black Bloc in Miami actually ended up spending most of its time and energy protecting the puppets. Miami also provides a vivid example of the peculiar personal animus many police seem to have against large figures made of papier-mâché. According to one eyewitness report, after police routed protesters from Seaside Plaza, forcing them to abandon their puppets, officers spent the next half hour or so systematically attacking and destroying them by shooting, kicking and ripping the remains. One even put a giant puppet in his squad car with the head sticking out and then drove so as to smash it against every sign and street post available.

It's easy to see how one of the main concerns in the wake of Seattle would be to ensure the reliability of one's troops. As commanders discovered in Seattle, officers who are used to considering themselves guardians of public safety frequently baulk, or at least waver, when given orders to make a baton charge against a collection of non-violent 16-year-old white girls. These are, after all, the very sort of people they are ordinarily expected to protect. At least some of the imagery, then, appears to be designed specifically to appeal to the sensibility of ordinary street cops. This would help to explain the otherwise peculiar emphasis on bodily fluids: the water pistols full of urine, for example. This appears to be very much a police obsession. Certainly it has next to nothing to do with anarchist sensibilities. When I've asked activists where they think such stories come from, most confess themselves deeply puzzled. None has ever heard of anyone actually transporting human waste to an action in order to hurl or shoot it at police, or

can suggest why anyone might want to. A brick, some point out, is unlikely to injure an officer in full riot gear, although it will certainly slow him down. But what would be the point of shooting urine at him? Yet images like this re-emerge almost every time police attempt to justify a pre-emptive strike. In press conferences, they have been known to actually produce jars of urine and bags of faeces that they claim to have discovered hidden in backpacks or at activist convergence sites.

It is hard to see these claims making sense except within the peculiar economy of personal honour, typical of any institution that, like the police, operates on an essentially military ethos. For police officers, the most legitimate justification for violence is an assault on one's personal dignity. To cover another person in effluent is obviously about as powerful an assault on one's personal dignity

as is possible. We also seem to be dealing here with a self-conscious allusion to the famous image of 1960s protesters 'spitting on soldiers in uniform' when they returned from Vietnam – one whose mythic power continues to resonate to this day, despite the fact that there's little evidence that it ever happened.¹⁴ It's almost as if someone decided to ratchet the image up a notch: 'If spitting on a uniform is such an insult, what would be even worse?'

Police are also regularly warned that puppets might be used to conceal bombs or weapons.¹⁵ If questioned on their attitudes towards puppets, this is how they are likely to respond. However, it's hard to imagine that this alone could explain the level of personal vindictiveness witnessed in Miami and other actions – especially since the police who hacked puppets to pieces must have been aware that there was nothing hidden inside them. The antipathy seems to run far deeper. Many activists have speculated on the reasons:

David Corston-Knowles's opinion: You have to bear in mind these are people who are trained to be paranoid. They really do have to ask themselves

'Human history began with an act of disobedience, and it is not unlikely that it will be terminated by an act of obedience.' Erich Fromm, *On Disobedience as a Psychological and Moral Problem*, 1963



whether something so big and inscrutable might contain explosives, however absurd that might seem from a non-violent protester's perspective. Police view their jobs not just as law enforcement, but also as maintaining order. And they take that job very personally. Giant demonstrations and giant puppets aren't orderly. They are about creating something – a different society, a different way of looking at things – and creativity is fundamentally at odds with the status quo.

Daniel Lang's opinion: One theory is that the cops just don't like being upstaged by someone putting on a bigger show. After all, normally they're the spectacle: they've got the blue uniforms, they've got the helicopters and horses and rows of shiny motorcycles. So maybe they just resent it when someone steals the show by coming up with something even bigger and even more visually striking. They want to take out the competition.

Yvonne Liu's opinion: It's because they're so big. Cops don't like things that tower over them. That's why they like to be on horses. Plus, puppets

are silly and round and misshapen. Notice how much cops always have to maintain straight lines? They stand in straight lines, they always try to make you stand in straight lines ... I think round, misshapen things somehow offend them.

Max Uhlenbeck's opinion: Obviously, they hate to be reminded that they're puppets themselves.

Let's return, then, to the notion of a 'puppet intervention'. In Philadelphia, on the evening of 1 August 2001, we organized a press conference at which one of the few puppetistas who had escaped arrest that morning was given centre stage. During the press conference and subsequent talks with the media, we all emphasized that the puppet crews were, effectively, our peacekeepers. One of their jobs was to intervene in, and defuse, situations of potential violence. If the police were really primarily concerned with maintaining public order, as they alleged, peacekeepers seemed a strange choice for a pre-emptive strike. But the manner in which puppets can be used to defuse situations

'Capital always dreams of a perpetual motion machine, work from energy without loss. But time is asymmetric: the future is not going to be like the past. Through our refusals, our insubordination, all the plans come to nothing, all the machines wear out, break down. Capital's contradiction is that the very agents that create the "fuck up" possess the energies it needs. Only we are in perpetual motion: eternally energetic, crafty, obedient, cowardly, insolent, revolting, but always in a motion that is the only source of work, development, surplus.'

George Caffentzis, *The Work/Energy Crisis and the Apocalypse*, 1980

of potential violence is completely different from that employed by, say, protest marshals. Police tend to appreciate the presence of marshals, since marshals are organized into a chain of command that police tend to treat as an extension of their own – and which, as a result, often effectively becomes just that. Unlike marshals, puppets cannot be used to convey orders. Rather, they transform and redefine situations of potential conflict.

It might be helpful here to reflect on the nature of the violence police represent. A former Los Angeles Police Department officer writing about the Rodney King case, in which four LAPD police were charged with excessively assaulting an African-American construction worker in 1991, pointed out that 'Cops don't beat up burglars.' If you want to cause the police to be violent, the surest way is to challenge their right to define the situation. This is not something a burglar is likely to do.¹⁶ This, of course, makes perfect sense if we

remember that police are, essentially, bureaucrats with guns. Bureaucratic procedures are all about

questions of definition. Or, to be more precise, the imposition of a narrow range of pre-established schema on to a social reality that is, usually, infinitely more complex: a crowd can be either orderly or disorderly; a citizen can be white, black, Hispanic, or an Asian/Pacific Islander; a petitioner is or is not in possession of a valid photo ID. Such simplistic rubrics can only be maintained in the absence of dialogue; hence, the quintessential form of bureaucratic violence is the wielding of the truncheon when somebody 'talks back'.

The details of this play of imagination against structural violence are endlessly complicated. For now I only want to emphasize two points. The first is that the line of riot police is precisely the point where structural violence turns into the real thing. Therefore, it functions as a kind of wall against imaginative identification. The second is that this juxtaposition of imagination and violence reflects a much larger conflict between two principles of political action. The first, a 'political ontology of violence', assumes that the ultimate reality is one of force. To be a 'realist' in international relations, for example, is about being willing to accept the realities of violence. The second could be described as a political ontology of the imagination. It's not so much a matter of giving 'power to the imagination' as recognizing that the imagination is the source of power in the first place. Anarchists level a systematic and continual challenge to the right of the authorities to define the situation. They do it by proposing endless alternative frameworks – or, more precisely, by insisting on the power to switch frameworks whenever they like. Puppets are the very embodiment of this power.

What this means in the streets is that activists are effectively trying to collapse the political, negotiating process into the structure of the action itself. To win the contest, as it were, by continually changing the definition of what is the field, what are the rules, what are the stakes – and to do so on the field itself. A situation that is sort of like non-violent warfare becomes a situation that is sort of like a theatrical performance or religious ritual, and might equally well slip back at any time.

Opposite Reclaim the Streets party, M41 motorway, London, June 1996. This is a very rare example of a puppet performance not just altering the mood of a protest, but also taking peaceful direct action. Under this stilt-walker's giant dress, camouflaged by loud sound systems, activists with pneumatic drills dug up the motorway and planted trees, which remained after the crowd dispersed.