

kitchen sink

for people who think too much

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by Rachel Swar

Big-Screen Jesus



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Staking a Claim in the Public Domain

by Josh Wilson

illustration by Damon Bellanger

IT was a lovely Valentine's Day afternoon on Haight Street in San Francisco, perfect weather for a Reclaim the Streets party, with a fresh breeze blowing off the Pacific.

Despite the flotilla of police motorcycle cruisers idling in a nearby supermarket parking lot, a crowd of several hundred art nerds, punks, indie-kids, sound-system gypsies and miscellaneous underground types had gathered at the end of Haight Street. They milled about on the easternmost lawn of Golden Gate

"Public space is degraded when it's turned into freeways, parking lots and malls, but those entities are still under the public trust ... They can be depaved, reconfigured, re-imagined."

—Anna Sojourner

Park, pondering the gendarmes astride their rumbling metal steeds, and girding for a little civil disobedience in defense of the Public Commons.

Since its origins in feudal England—where, in 1215, the Statute of Merton acknowledged the rights of the “commoners” to access certain lands for grazing livestock, collecting resources and the like—the concept of the Commons has been the subject of intense, and increasingly complex, political give-and-take.

Today, a new generation of cultural activists is defining the Commons broadly as the source of democratic enfranchisement, and the frontline in a wide-ranging battle for environmental health, social justice and civic well-being. Legal clashes over highway building, water privatization and FCC regulation of the electromagnetic spectrum are all concerned with control of the Commons. The grassroots Reclaim the Commons campaign (reclaimthecommons.net) even considers the genome itself to be public domain in its campaign against genetically modified agriculture.

Who Owns the Road?

Nowhere, however, does the battle for the Commons manifest in a more spectacular—and philosophically divisive—fashion than on city streets. The question is simple: Cars or people?

Reclaim the Streets parties emerged in England in 1991 as part of an anti-freeway citizens’ movement. The events blurred the line between pure celebration and direct-action protest, turning a politically charged street takeover into a radical landscaping party. Makeshift concrete fortifications were augmented by garden boxes, carpets of springy turf, furniture and flags, children’s sandboxes, booming loudspeakers and saplings transplanted into drilled-out asphalt.

Uniquely subversive, RTS transcended political protest to assault basic cultural assumptions about public space: What does it encompass? Why does the public have so little control over its use?

In September 1992, those same questions gave rise to a similar, and sweeping, public-space reclamation project, when the first Critical Mass bicycle ride—briefly known at the time as the Commuter Clot—took off from the foot of Market Street in the middle of San Francisco’s rush hour. Since then, cyclists have swamped streets in more than 200 cities around the world every month, effectively excluding automobiles, and transforming a simple bike commute home into a giddy act of social re-engineering that leaves bystanders dazzled (or enraged) by the sudden whirl of cheers, whoops, ringing bells and costume-party antics.

Protest or Party?

RTS and Critical Mass are distinct, and each

individual bike ride or street party is, in turn, a strictly local affair. There are no international headquarters, and even within specific communities a particular event can have divergent subgroups and intentions. Party? Protest? A safer commute home? Everyone has their own agenda, but many conscientious Massers and street-partying protestors are united in considering global warming, road rage, dead Iraqis and homicidal Islamic terrorists to be symptomatic of a skewed industrial culture that values automobiles and the petroleum economy over human beings.

“The travesty of the automobile is that it functions as a portable private sphere, externalizing the costs of that privacy (exhaust, noise, real danger) onto the rest of us,” notes Anna Sojourner, a San Francisco bicycle activist and a geologist for the state transportation agency Caltrans. “Public space is degraded when it’s turned into freeways, parking lots and malls, but those entities are still under the public trust ... They can be depaved, reconfigured, re-imagined.”

Back in San Francisco, the 2004 Haight Street Valentine’s Day Reclaim the Streets party finally got under way. With a brassy flourish, the milling crowd spilled off the front lawn of Golden Gate Park and onto the pavement, led by a marching band with majorettes and pom-pom girls. There was a pirate ship float, protest signs and a bass-heavy sound system thump-thumpin’ in the rear.

This was no ordinary protest march, however. Within minutes, the RTS crew had cordoned off a block of Haight from Ashbury to Masonic. Someone parked a beat-up red VW bus at a right angle across the traffic lines, with tires deflated. Soon the street was packed with marchers and passers-by alike.

Maybe they figured tear gas would be bad for business, but for whatever reason, the police left the party alone, and for one blissful hour there was no smog and no gunning engines on Haight Street. Just drums, basslines, costumes and a whole lot of socializing.

It was a party, yes, but it was also a radical appropriation of public space, a collective act of imagination and will that did, however briefly, change the world and the way we live in it.

“[The] Public Commons now is more about fighting the colonization of our lives as much as it is about the physical space,” said a Reclaim the Streets participant who calls himself Tomkat. “Meeting your neighbors is always a good start ... There has to be a starting point to turning this stuff around.” ★ ★ ★

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