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→ Ninjas with agendas: Discovering The Agenda Behind
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→ Theater as Transformative Social & Political Action

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Ninjas With Agendas:

Discovering the agenda behind all the masks

by Justin Rubenstein

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26 April, 2006

Thus when Aristotle says that art imitates nature, we must understand that this statement, which can be found in any modern version of the Poetics, is due to a bad translation, which in turn stems from an isolated interpretation of the text.

--Augusto Boal, Theater of the Oppressed

I. Imitating nature

Throughout the three years of establishing and organizing the Knoxville performance group, Ninjas With Agendas (NWA), the term “street theater” always seemed to be a poor approximation of the group’s activity. We were not actors dislocated from a stage or actors seeking a stage in the street. The emphasis on location in the term seemed to just skip the question of why we were there. As we in the group sought a way to answer that question, we ended up gradually redefining our actions and ourselves. The very process of naming our action and of discovering its theoretical and practical applications have been synchronous throughout the group’s experience. During that search, our adamantly apolitical social experiment became an instrument of political intervention enmeshed in radical activist thought. Retracing the discovery of NWA’s necessary political role is a matter of rediscovering its names.

Flash Mob

“Flash Mob” is an internet based forum, on which ideas for usually ridiculous public spectacles are posted. The idea is then performed by a group that materializes spontaneously at

the time and place given in the post. The result of a successful post is a motley crowd of strangers doing something awfully absurd in an awfully public place. As far as a flash mob is concerned, get the impression that the response to an action is of little importance. For the mobbers, the action is a one-track social experiment in radically free expression, but mostly it's an inside joke. For example, the first action I was invited to participate in- it so happens I missed it- occurred at an upscale mall in Nashville. The plan was for a group to begin counting down at around one minute to two o'clock in the afternoon and then erupt in jubilation as if it were the New Year.

I thought the action was cute, but I wasn't particularly inspired by it. I was inspired by the ease and eagerness with which people, my peers in particular, connected and mobilized in order to create a new experience with each other. I felt the draw of a new trend, something that was connecting with a deeper need in our youth culture to experiment with the reality that we inherited, but that did so in an aloof and absurd manner that allowed us to avoid the discussion afterwards. In my idealized version of it, flash mobs made a game of unthreading the stiff social and economic fabric that locks our society into a pattern behavior and insulates us from the infinite spectrum of unexplored possibilities. I was excited to discover something that could embolden individuals to drastically divert from the coercive suggestion of a social median; liberate from their constant self-policing the impulse to play and be silly; and to do so not on a stage or in a gallery as artists, but as people in public life, or what gets credited as being "real life."

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It is important to note that at that time, these ideas were forming in the raw. Until I began researching for this project, I had never visited the "Flash Mob" website. What I discovered was

that I had taken a scathing experiment and critique of the *hipster* counter-culture, socially engineered by Bill Wasik, a Harper's Magazine editor, and formed an optimistic vision of what it might mean in my particular social and geographical context. While I saw the experiment as having the potential to unfold into a small cultural revolution (of fun!) in the quaint, southern, morally conservative stronghold of Knoxville, Tennessee; Wasik was using it to demonstrate the tendency towards *deindividuation* and fetishism in the huge, northern strongholds of the cultural avant-garde.

The deeply cynical, but poignant assumption behind the “Mob Project” was that the *scenesters*, who make up the front line of whatever is, at a given time, the cutting-edge aesthetic, are unwittingly galvanizing an “‘alternative’ culture more unanimous than the mainstream it ostensibly opposes.” If I was seeing an as an experiment in the “aesthetic of liberation” as Herbert Marcuse¹ might have intended, Wasik was seeing a “vacuous fad” of conformists, which at the height of popularity, would be quickly abandoned by “what critical impulse does exist among their number.” If this occurred, and indeed it did, it would prove this hypothesis, which had nothing to do with liberating and emboldening individuals:²

The basic hypothesis behind the Mob Project was as follows: seeing how all culture in New York was demonstrably commingled with scenesterism, the appeal of concerts and plays and readings and gallery shows deriving less from the work itself than from the social opportunities the work might engender, it should theoretically be possible to create an art project consisting of pure scene—meaning the scene would be the entire point of the work, and indeed would itself constitute

¹ see Reitz, pages 183-184. I am referring to Marcuse's idea of the Great Refusal, “the protest against unnecessary repression, the struggle for the ultimate form of freedom-‘to live without anxiety.’ But this idea could be formulated without punishment only in the language of art. In the more realistic context of political theory and even philosophy it was almost universally defamed as utopia.”

the work.³

Yet, even in the face of such bleak results, (largely due, I believe, to a decidedly jaded outlook)

Wasik did recognize this:

There was one successful element of politics in the flash mob- a vague and dark thing, a purely chaotic impulse... It could best be seen at the very moment that a mob came together: a sort of fundamental joy at seeing society overtaken, order stymied; at silently infiltrating this pseudopublic space, this corporate space, these chain stores and shopping malls, and then rising at once to overrun them.⁴

Perhaps this element, though truly vague and dark at the time, struck me as more necessary for Knoxville's youth in than it seemed to have been in Wasik's sample group, which came from places where progressive and radical lifestyles exist in the foreground and are even accorded preferred status. Perhaps I felt its deeper resonance as an impulsive response to the restrictive social code of the conservative southern mentality.

Ninjas With Agendas

The creation of Ninjas With Agendas came out of conversations with my friend and co-founder about how, as students at a large university, to ensure for ourselves a meaningful education. This can sometimes be difficult, because in order for an institution to provide a functional education to 30,000 students, it must habitualize and for most, prefabricate a learning experience that best fits an approximated standard. This means that only a few students are even aware of, let alone offered the opportunity to really freely explore and mold an education all their own. That's not to say that this renders meaningful education impossible, but still, despite the

² see Wasick. *My Crowd: Part 1* regarding quotes.

³ see Wasik, *Part 1*

most enthralling course loads, campus can sometimes feel like a factory farm. We hoped that by reclaiming time, space and imagination from the grinding stone of habit for a momentary spectacle, NWA might provide a quick boost for ourselves and others to get through those bleaker periods. That and we were both actors. This was our idea of a good time. We were thinking locally and acting locally. Fun was a simple process under that analysis.

The group's name had come easily. It was catchy, it rhymed and the word 'ninja' provided a ripe metaphor. Like ninjas, we planned to develop the arts of clandestinity and surprise. Our model being flash mob, we wanted our spectacles to vanish as fast as they materialized. As for our "agendas," I don't remember having any in the beginning, except that we wanted NWA to be an inclusive creative outlet in Knoxville. We wanted to avoid political or artistic motives, resolving instead to be a kind of performance *anti-art*, taking our place somewhere between the Situationists and Fluxus, leaving all the political rhetoric where they left it. In all actuality, we were in accord with most of their theories, but thought it pointless to try to reinvent the wheel or claim the responsibility of pushing it. Instead, our conceptual arrangement was not having one.

We invited anyone to participate, emphasizing that our eventual goal was for a non-hierarchic ninja network. Our chief concern was that everyone enjoy participating on both sides of the spectacle. Amusement for all would be impossible, of course, but with enough exposure or the right spectacle, we hoped that people would find a little mirth in the confusion. Whether the spectators smiled or not, we assumed that they would construct some kind of meaning out of their experience; likewise for the participants, who made their own conjectures about the substance of NWA's activity.

These came in handy when the local paper decided to cover the group. In one article, we

⁴ *ibid. Part 5*

described NWA as “the need to stretch. Like after you drive for 12 hours, you want to stand up, but your butt hurts and it’s numb. You’ve got to stretch your butt out.”⁵ In a later article, part of a series that sought an answer to the question “What is art?,” we offered thoughts about “‘acting out senseless ideas for the pure enjoyment of it’ and ‘using street theater to reclaim cognitive real estate;’” but we preferred to let our actions continue to speak, however abstract their symbols, for themselves. Because of this, the article emphasized a phenomenological, rather than critical, analysis. The perspective from the other side of an NWA “happening⁶,” to use Allan Kaprow’s term, was more than welcome. Until that time, we had merely speculated about the reactions we were evoking. The author’s account confirmed a number of our suspicions and suggested to us that we had underestimated the transformative possibilities of our actions. For him, it had “felt as if the Old City had been a giant prop, a stage peopled with actors performing entirely for [his] benefit... even the vagrants looked furtive, like maybe they were snickering at me.”⁷

“Art imitates nature” actually means: “Art re-creates the creative principle of created things.”
--Augusto Boal, Theater of the Oppressed

II. (Re-creating) the (creative principle of created things)

Despite efforts to stay aloof, we were eventually forced to reckon with our political nature.

⁵ see Gibson et al. “News of the (Intentionally) Weird.”

⁶ We usually call our actions “actions” or “Ninjas actions,” but for the sake of clarity via a common reference, I thought I would use “happenings.” Just to make sure, Allan Kaprow coined the term to describe his performance art of the late 50’s through 60’s, but the term became commonplace among performance artists everywhere including Fluxus.

⁷ see Gibson, “What is Art Part II.” The action is described in full by the article so it’s worth reading to get the full context.

During the summer of 2004, three politically charged forces became apparent in NWA:

Play. The ceremony required to be considered legitimate in society often takes precedence over the humanity in our encounters. In fact, I have watched some friends, aspiring politicians, visibly plug conversational pieces in as if they were variables in a logarithm. They had what they believed to be an equation for personal efficacy, which turned many of our conversations into disingenuous babble. No wonder it is so easy for those competitive souls in the political and economic spheres to ignore the moral choices that they are constantly confronted with. We are all expected to do this in some way, but through play we get a chance to shed our restrictive suits, to become momentarily undone from our static patterns and engage in ways that our modesty and maturity forbid. In sum, our society functions the way it does because we tend to obey a certain set of rules. Sometimes these rules become too much for us. So we play.

In order to play, one must invent a game. Ninjas With Agendas create “happenings.” I have compiled here some notes about gaming that I took while reading sociologist Erving Goffman’s book, Strategic Interaction. To illustrate what it felt like when I read his book, I will replace every word “game” with “happening.” What makes it a happening and not reality is that the rules are either entirely different or more commonly, they are arranged differently than those accepted as reality. The happening ‘frames’ its immediate events and determines what ‘sense’ will be due to them. The happening includes the players that act according to its rules, but it also involves participants, who are part of the whole encounter of the happening. Collectively, participants decide on the outcome of the happening. The participants in a happening tend toward “spontaneous involvement:” a state where participants confirm its reality, self-consciousness disintegrates and they experience solidarity, mutual respect and psychic closeness. Happenings cut us off from serious life by immersing us in a demonstration of its possibilities.

When we return to the world, we are ready to reduce life to its liveliest elements.⁸

2. Power. On the night that we orchestrated a “happening” in downtown Knoxville for the newspaper, an officer pulled me aside and cautioned me. He said that we need to stop now, because he wasn’t going to allow us to make him lose control of downtown. Control? Control what? Is it possible that police are now employed to make sure that *nothing* out of the ordinary happens? Granted, art that subverts social norms beckons disorder, but so do bars and nightclubs. I wondered which was worse. I wondered what or who it was that felt so threatened by our performance that necessitated protection from the police.

3. Community. Whether we started as strangers or friends, NWA formed around cooperative action and shared risk taking, confronting social boundaries in solidarity instead of solitude. The result of this was a sense that everyone had a place within the process and the establishment of a ready kinship among participants. Members could have all been pigeonholed as liberals, but even so, the spectrum swung from business majors to high-strung theater students to militant anarchists. Our spectacles attracted a range of personalities from the painfully shy to the loud and gregarious.

As our community congealed around the activities of NWA and a marching band and neighborhood game along with it, I was reading about the neighborhood assemblies in Argentina. They were formed, largely by people with no political background, in the aftermath of the economic collapse and resultant rebellion during which four governments were ousted in two weeks. The assemblies immediately took on the burden of improving their own communities' livelihood, having lost hope that any government was up to the task. Starting over

⁸ See Goffman. The entire description of game/happening comes from shorthand notes that I took as I read his book. I believe that I cited the correct book, but I haven’t had the chance to find the exact pages. I also feel I should add here another thing I read in that book that is really the most influential metaphor I have found in connection to

from the bottom, the assembly was "a laboratory where a new world is being built every day, where [members] learn to decide and participate, rather than delegating and obeying."⁹

The assemblies exercised a dormant political power sowed in the cooperative, creative impulse. As a response to the failings of capitalism, they demonstrated an alternative model to the kind of individualism that is lauded by that system, our system. As I continued to read about stories like this, of communities taking on the failings of their political systems, I began to reflect on the latent political possibilities of our own community.

Carnival

In the beginning the theater was the dithyrambic song: free people singing into the open air. The carnival. The feast.

--Augusto Boal, Theater of the Oppressed

In the summer of 2004 I attended the mobilization against the Republican National Convention in New York City. I was with around a dozen other Knoxvilleans who had formed a marching band for that purpose. The streets of the city had become flooded with color. At times, it seemed that the noise and the music would swallow the vacuous concrete canyons; that the blank glass facades would come raining down on us. At those moments, I would look to our right and to our left at the rows of riot police. I believe the media estimated they were ten thousand strong. They were our dark outline, making sure that we didn't color out of the lines, bleed into the business around us, which was straining to be usual. The center of 'free' commerce, the historic gateway to freedom for so many immigrants, the birthplace and deathbed

our activities. If all of this paper should turn out to be incomprehensible, this sums it up. Our actions are like a chessboard scratched into a prison wall.

of some of the greatest artistic adventures in the history had been turned upside down. In the week of the RNC, freedom was an excuse for war or a buzzword of the political and economic elite. Freedom was shut up in Madison Square Gardens. The 2,000 people that were arrested that week were an effective demonstration of who had the property rights to freedom and who was there to protect it. The world was upside down.

Eduardo Galeano asks: "If the world is upside-down the way it is now, wouldn't we have to turn it over to get it to stand up straight?"¹⁰ The answer in New York, and in Scotland and Paris as I discovered in my travels, was an emphatic "yes." I found myself drumming with pink and silver samba bands and running through the streets with clowns, putting our playful art at the front line of grassroots politics. In each instance, we ran up against stiff and violent resistance from police. Nearly half the samba band was arrested in Scotland and the clowns couldn't go one block without being stopped and searched by police thanks to new "anti-terrorism" procedures. In all of this I saw Ninjas With Agendas and our encounter with the police downtown. The question resurfaced: *Who are we threatening?*

Part of the answer is in the idea of *carnival*. I first read about the connection between carnival and activism in a book called We Are Everywhere, which among its perspectives on activism had offered this one on the role of carnival:

Throughout history carnival has been a time for inverting the social order, where the village fool dresses as the king and the king waits on the pauper, where men and women wear each others' clothing and perform each others' roles. This inversion exposes the power structures and illuminates the processes of maintaining hierarchies- seen from a new angle, the foundations of authority are

⁹ see We Are Everywhere. "Pots, Pans and Popular Power." 424

¹⁰ *ibid.* "Carnival." 176

shaken up and flipped around... It creates a new world by subverting all stereotypes, daring imaginations to expand their limits, turning the present world upside down.¹¹

I concluded then that perhaps NWA's political contribution was to turn an upside down world upside down again so that it could be right side up. Or at least seen that way for a moment. I wanted to take this idea back into NWA and see if we could make it more sustainable, remove it from the context of mass mobilization and direct it towards the role of the individual in our topsy-turvy system. I found an example in a species of activist theater called "identity correction."

Identity Correction

Later, the ruling classes took possession of the theater and built their dividing walls. First, they divided the people, separating actors from spectators: people who act and people who watch-the party is over! Secondly, among the actors, they separated the protagonists from the mass. The coercive indoctrination began!

--Augusto Boal, Theater of the Oppressed

"Identity correction" is a term coined by the group "the Yes Men." The idea is that speaking as the voice of, in their case the economic elite, they can be as honest as they please about their ethics and morals; or rather, ignore them entirely. This "corrects" the public identity that the economic elite, which tends to be of an undisputed protagonist or of being so much larger than life that they are beyond reprimand, rule or question.

The Yes Men have executed only a handful of such "identity corrections," but in every

¹¹ *ibid.* 175

case their antics have been extremely thought out and consequently significant. Their theater is performed most notably by two men, but their support system ranges from technology geeks to Herb Alpert of the Tijuana Brass. They started out by designing a mock website called "gatt.org" that resembled the home of the World Trade Organization (WTO), but was littered with links to activist websites that were critical of its policies. However, instead of exploring the site, some visitors made a beeline to the contact link. Among those visitors was CNBC, which invited the WTO (a.k.a. the Yes Men) to participate in a live debate between a well-known British anti-globalization activist and another proponent of free trade.

Yes Man Andy Bichlbaum was broadcast live as Granwyth Hulatberi, representative of the WTO. In the debate, he proposed the privatization of schools and a profitable market for "Justice Vouchers," which could be sold to countries that want to expand their record of human rights abuses by countries who don't. Before the sham was exposed, Andy was asked to represent the WTO again at a conference in Norway on the topic of "Textiles of the Future." There, he presented a compelling argument that against slavery on the basis that it was less profitable than simply outsourcing labor. He also unveiled a prototype for a new leisure suit fitted with a huge golden phallus that would hold a screen, through which company executives could monitor workers in their remote sweatshops.

In their experiments with the identities of economic leaders, the Yes Men found that no matter how outrageous and despicable the parodies were, they were hardly ever challenged. Except for a particularly offensive presentation at a university, most of their audiences were, if not wholly complicit, dimly receptive. Only when the media outed them did their satire receive some analysis. So they changed tactics. Instead of magnifying the negative qualities of their villains, they humanized them, projecting idealized versions. As a representative of Dow

Chemical, Andy made a public apology and a pledge of aid on BBC World TV for the 2001 Bhopal spill in India. The prank resulted in Dow's public avowal that it would not take responsibility for the spill. The Yes Men also sparked a media frenzy when, as WTO representatives again, they announced its dissolution on the basis that it was hurting developing countries more than helping them and that it planned to divert its resources towards humanitarian pursuits.¹²

By blending parody and realism, the Yes Men offer two chances at reflection. The first occurs within the experience of the prank. The identities they assume are of people in powerful positions; people whose opinions matter and who daily affect world affairs. Whether they exaggerate the positive possibilities or negative realities, they are returning important ethical questions to the media images of the powerful. The second chance for critical reflection occurs when the prank is discovered. As identities are re-corrected by the real parties, we get to see one story juxtaposed on another.

Then there is the subtle but important shift in our perception of power when we see infiltrators in something large and impenetrable. The act of impersonation discredits the lofty facade that accompanies economic power. When giants scramble to save face, they no longer seem very big. In this light, it is possible to imagine that we aren't as small, quiet and isolated as we thought.

Theater of the Oppressed

Now the oppressed people are liberated themselves and once more, are making theater their own. The walls must be torn down. First, the spectator starts acting again: invisible theater, forum theater, image theater, etc. Secondly,

¹² see The Yes Men

it is necessary to eliminate the private property of the characters by the individual actors.

-Augusto Boal, Theater of the Oppressed

The main objective of the *poetics of the oppressed*: "to change the people- 'spectators,' passive beings in the theatrical phenomenon- into subjects, into actors, transformers of the dramatic action,"¹³ is the emergent concept in our street theater agenda. If we are going to apply theater to a radical vision, if we are going to attempt to empower individuals to intervene in a politic that insistently muffles their voice and flouts their interests, then the theater we use must be radically different from the theater with which we are familiar. Our models of theater, regardless of their powerful role in social criticism, are forms of bourgeois or "finished theater." This is a theater that "already knows what the world is like, *their* world, and is able to present images of this complete, finished world." Even when this kind of theater instigates, it is presented as a finished spectacle, not in transformation, not to be experimented with and according to good manners, interjection is frowned upon.¹⁴

This was the hypocrisy in our own theater. We were imposing a predetermined spectacle into an environment that is closed to the reinterpretation of social rules, but we left little room for the reinterpretation of our own rules. Our actions were so quick and absurd, that our audience had no opportunity to contribute to the narrative. Quite possibly, they left feeling even more powerless than before. Instead of 'happenings,' with a little thought and planning, we could be building interactive narratives, opening not only the stage but the action as an unfinished event, thereby encouraging popular participation.

¹³ see Boal. 122

¹⁴ see Boal. 142

When the possibility of using NWA for organizing came up, theories of Boal were at the center of discussion. Our theater wasn't and could not be limited to the spectacle. It had to include the process as well. We had to form a link between popular participation in the theater and popular participation in the political process; "instead of taking something away from the spectator, evoke in him a desire to practice in reality the act he has rehearsed in the theater."¹⁵ For us as artists, the two are inseparable, but as organizers, politics is quantifiable. Boal's experiments in Peru had dealt with a similar challenge; of placing theater "at the service of the oppressed, so that they can express themselves and so that, by using this new language, they can also discover new concepts."¹⁶ The experiments and the concepts offered a very effective model and one incredibly powerful phrase.

Rehearsal for Revolution

Boal describes theater as if it was a just State: "It is not the place of the theater to show the correct path, but only to offer the means by which all possible paths may be examined."¹⁷ It would follow then that an unjust State might try and assert the correct path and leave little room for the examination of alternatives. Its 'theater' would be more or less 'finished.' The theatergoers would be expected to wait until appropriate times to ask questions, to offer new alternatives, no interruptions. They would, of course, have that luxury. But what of those who don't? What of the oppressed, of those left out of the action? They haven't the privilege to wait until it is appropriate, as good manners would dictate, to "try to enter into a dialogue with the actors, to interrupt the action, to ask for explanations." With a world that is being modeled out of a vision that is not their own, they do not have a finished spectacle to perform, but they can

¹⁵ *ibid.* 142

¹⁶ *ibid.* 121

begin rehearsing for a better one.¹⁸

When we reclaim space for use as a stage; when we juxtapose (absurd or metaphorical) spectacles upon the real one; we are practicing intervention in the process of building a social and political narrative. We may not present something cogent, but the experience of the theater itself- its subversion and its creative process- amounts to what Boal calls “a rehearsal for revolution” after which the participants are stimulated to act as boldly in reality.¹⁹

Errorism

Thus nature has certain ends in view, states of perfection toward which it tends - but sometimes nature fails. From this follows the purpose of art and science: by "re-creating the creative principle" of things, they correct nature where it has failed.

--Augusto Boal, Theater of the Oppressed

I came up with *errorism* on a bike ride as I was scouring my vocabulary for puns that might be relevant to NWA, so that we could drop *street theater* once the new name stuck. To my surprise, the entendres kept coming. First, there was the obvious play on terrorism. The structure of the group and the suddenness of our spectacles are similar for one. In addition, as an activist, it is becoming pretty common practice to be considered in the eyes of the law as terrorists. So, the name was a wink at the feds as well. But aside from being playful, calling our theater *errorism* unified the art and its political predisposition. Our spectacles are disruptions,

¹⁷ *ibid.* 141

¹⁸ *ibid.* 142

¹⁹ for a better understanding of “rehearsal for revolution” and the various forms of theater applied, see Boal, “Experiments with the People’s Theater in Peru.”

errors in the mathematics of the system²⁰, like stray variables. On the other hand, our errors, we hope will bring attention to bigger errors and, in our own way, help to correct them. I believe this is what consistent with what Boal described as the purpose of art.

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My friend's father died because of a flaw in the system. He was three weeks into a 150 day jail sentence. For three weeks he was refused his medication and after three weeks his mind and his body stopped trying. I went to pick him up with his son four months later, on the day he was supposed to be released, not long before Christmas.

On the way there we discussed how we would engage the guards. Several of the guards at the front desk would recognize my friend from the times he and his family had charged in demanding that their father be provided his medication, demanding his belongings, demanding accountability or some sign of humanity from the detention center officers. We decided to go in as if nothing had ever happened, making necessary adjustments if my friend was recognized.

The officer who greeted us at the front desk, it turns out, had been the principle antagonist in all the past interactions. He had called on security to detain my friend and his mother when their outrage had exceeded his taste. He did not recognize my friend at all, nor did he recognize the name of the father. We were overacting, chatting up a female officer as the aforementioned officer searched the database for my friend's father. The officer we were speaking to, we found out, was already a grandmother. She was going to be entertaining three generations at her house these holidays. My friend shared her excitement, having his father out in time to complete the family for the holidays.

²⁰ When I say 'system' here, I mean it in the same way as Boal defines nature, especially because the system, whatever its identity or context, is manmade and bound to be flawed. I could argue with Boal that nature- although a creative process- is not within our power to correct. But, a system, be it capitalist, communist or Linux-based, is

After a long process, the other officer found the father in the system, rather, he realized why the father was not in the system. He looked up at us desperately, then called his partner over for a discreet huddle. At that point, to avoid another meeting with front desk security, my friend offered his explanation. I don't want trouble. I just want you to know that while you all get to leave work and spend the holidays with your families; my father is not coming home to us. The grandmother looked emptied. The other officer stammered something but we were already leaving.

He caught us on the steps of the detention center. As he spoke, he looked impossible in his uniform. His words rattled him as they came out. He was so, so, sorry. Ever since that day [that he had denied the family the father's belongings] he had been miserable with guilt. He wished he could do it all differently. My friend was grieving, but he understood and he forgave and I don't remember if it was a handshake or a hug, but the two released an incomprehensible weight from each other in that moment of contact.

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The action at the detention center was technically a fiction. The reaction was completely real, but until the connections were made to historical truth about a real death due to real errors, we were inventing a story that directly conflicted with reality, perhaps even mocked it a little. It was a hard satire to be a part of, but it was my first personal contact with the raw potential of street theater not only as a political language, but as a transformative political process. Too late and limited in scope, we had still achieved the political act we had hoped for. The performance had brought the interaction between detention officer and inmate's son to a human place well out of reach of a system made of roles and relative power.

put in place by our own creative capabilities and it is a dynamic process subject to shifts and changes. If it claims to be closed, perfect, then it is probably only able to support its claim with aggression, intimidation and/or coercion.

The result was that the error in the system was corrected. The error being the complete dehumanization of the actors within that system; the correction occurred when the actor reconnected with his humanity, when the emotion of having made a moral choice overwhelmed the 'lack of choice' that the system offers to excuse him of personal responsibility. As errorists, the most important error that we aim to correct, that perhaps only art can correct, is the loss of humanity in a complex, hierarchic and competitive society. It is too easy for us to accept that failures in our system are not our own personal failures, and to attribute success in our system to some authority. In a way, we do this because this *is* our reality. We have created this reality for ourselves and we are constantly and consistently imitating it. So what happens when we become dissatisfied with this reality? We set to work re-creating it, even if it means starting with the creative processes themselves. If NWA is doing any of this, is it possible not to be political?

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Free Speech LLC, 2003.

Ninjas with Agendas

Mission Statement: We seek to effect social change, and thereby social justice, by building community and establishing forums for free and creative expression to empower young people to intervene in the political process.

Section I

We believe that social justice can only be accomplished by changing the social structures on which our society is built. We seek to change structures of discrimination that disempower marginalized groups such as (but not limited to) racial and ethnic minorities, lower classes and the poor, nonheterosexual persons, urban youth, religious minorities, and political dissenters.

Section II

Community is a network of participating individuals built around shared values, needs, and space that facilitates cooperative discussion and action as well as mutual encouragement and personal growth.

We build community by identifying people whose political needs are not being met by the larger society. When needed, we provide them with space in which to connect and organize. We foster meaningful relationships that are fulfilling on multiple levels by facilitating group discourse, identifying the issues that are important to the community, developing and organizing creative projects in which members can participate, and promoting responsibility to act on the issues that affect them.

“Free and creative expression” is intervening in public discourse in a playful and authentic way that exposes oppression and seeks to expiate it. This process involves responsible risks and is transformative for those who participate.

Drawing from the body of literature and our own experiences with political art and community building, we develop and facilitate activities such as (but not at all limited to!) street theatre, marching bands, film production and movie showings, web design, and direct action to offer opportunities for free and creative expression regarding issues of relevance to the community.

Section III

We empower young people ages 17-30 (OR ANYBODY!) by building sustainable community and engaging them in new forms of free and creative expression. Based on the needs and interests of the communities in which we organize, we promote intervention in the many aspects of the political process, including electoral politics, legislative campaigns, judicial process, media/communications,

holding leadership accountable, engaging special interest groups, consumer mobilization, and direct action.

"Interventions" are unexpected acts of free and creative expression in public spaces, often in physical spaces, but just as often in informational spaces such as newspapers and the Internet. These interventions may serve to purge an individual's anxiety about the world that we live in, and they may stimulate public discourse on issues a society has chosen to ignore. Hopefully they make the issue more salient to the society. And hopefully they make people laugh.

We especially encourage people whose voices have been marginalized or silenced to intervene in the political process, which has been hijacked and terrorized by the stupid white men who are running unchecked in all levels of government.