

"I've been thinking a lot about place recently. About what it is, what it was, what it could be, and my relationship to it. [...]

I spend most of my time with people whose definition of community includes people all over the world with similar values. I can go to cities I've never been before and quickly find a house and group of people that feels almost as much like home as most of the thirteen places I've lived in San Francisco. In those moments I find joy, beauty, comfort and connection: but I also find a deep sadness in the knowledge that my ability to do this is a trade-off for not having the ability that every living thing had for thousands of years: to truly be a part of an integrated, systemic place."

' Here Or
Anywhere
Else '



“Territory should here be understood in relation to the distinction in geography between places, which are sites of meaning for participants, and space. Capitalism is premised on spaces which are not places, 'non-places' such as airports, hotels and supermarkets which resist being turned into local places. The reconstruction of local space creates which is sometimes termed 'homeplace', a type of place in which people feel emotionally secure

and at ease. The imposition of non-place also imposes generalised insecurity and anxiety. Place, or existential territory, exists in the dense indigenous relations to particular local ecosystems, the detailed spatial knowledge and sense of belonging to a locality of inner-city and banlieue rebels, even (in a mediated way) in the worker's relationship to the factory. The current phase of capitalism (and not necessarily earlier phases) seeks to replace the experience of place with a mixture of 'telepresence' (virtual images) and non-places in which people are controlled and equivalent. In this phase, the restoration of place can be a means to restore autonomy which has been lost by localities. Of course, caution is needed here to distinguish the autonomous construction of place from exclusionary and oppressive types of local identity (such as nationalism and racism), and from a purely defensive orientation to place (such as rural conservatism and working-class nostalgia). An autonomous relationship to space is a localising relationship but also an immanent relationship counterposed to the transcendence of any particular spatial imagining.”

– *The Future of Insurrection*

“Last night [18.01.22] a fire was lit in a janitorial closet in a building within the West-side Complex of Shadowbox (BlackHall) Studios. The fire caught onto the support beams and became an inferno.

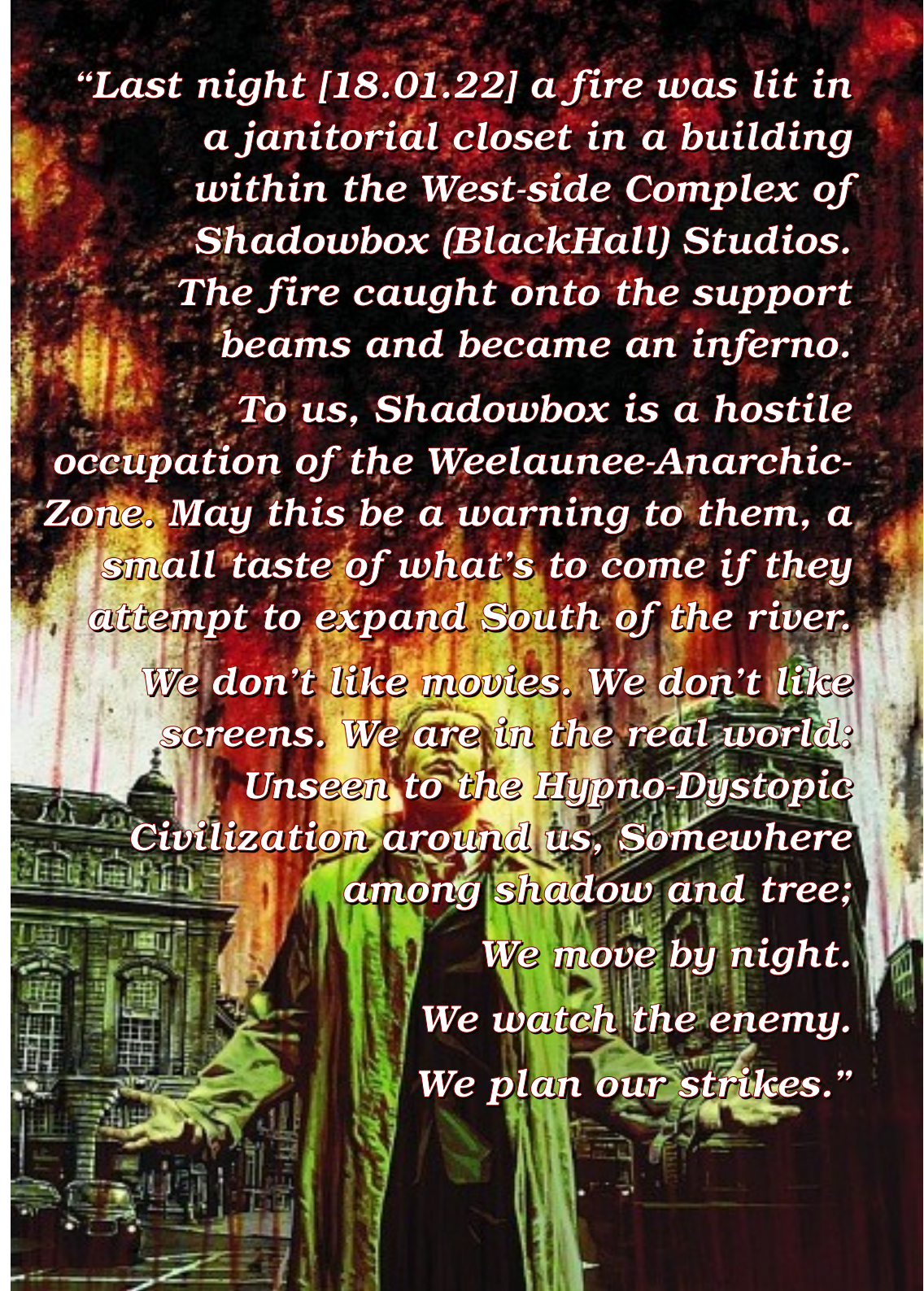
To us, Shadowbox is a hostile occupation of the Weelaunee-Anarchic-Zone. May this be a warning to them, a small taste of what's to come if they attempt to expand South of the river.

We don't like movies. We don't like screens. We are in the real world: Unseen to the Hypno-Dystopic Civilization around us, Somewhere among shadow and tree;

We move by night.

We watch the enemy.

We plan our strikes.”



Note from *Return Fire*: In 2006, the website audioanarchy.org hosted a series of recordings of anarchists discussing Guy Debord's classic text *The Society of the Spectacle*. This is a selection of those voices, transcribed, along with the original numbered aphorisms they'd selected from that book to base their reflections around. Having aborted our original intention for a seventh volume of *Return Fire* magazine – with its stated theme being how the Spectacle has changed since the 1960s,* in the same way that discussion of the relationship between anarchists and the Left ran through the sixth volume – much of our own editorial thought on both themes has ended up going not into pages of the magazine but into the *R.F.* book, *Instigations*, which we were writing until spring of 2020 (still years later being edited down for length, having taken a back-burner to the final releases of the magazine). This pamphlet you hold in your hands is just one spin-off of that process, as we thought it a nice work to keep in circulation beyond the still-accessible Audio Anarchy website, which has passed the last two decades without updates.

Certainly a lot has changed since the 1960s, and even since the 2000s: not least symbolised by Moxy Marlinspike, a figure behind Audio Anarchy, having gone on to fame in broader circles for designing a certain app called Signal. We have gone from being spectators, in Debord's sense, to spectator-producers, helplessly spinning our own hamster-wheels as we tap at screens and keyboards, churning out 'content' even in our resistance. Clearly – and relatedly – most of us are further than ever from living in a respectful relationship to place. Still, the below reflections speak to the same need and challenge to overcome that which lies before us.

– *R.F.*, March 2025

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* <https://returnfire.noblogs.org/post/2019/11/17/the-future-of-return-fire/>

solutions, based on the compatibility of capitalist growth and ecological sustainability – but also the capturing of imaginations founded on the erasure of the interconnectedness of natures, spaces and previous inhabitants (human and nonhuman) and the projection of new, artificial and mediated relations. This erasure and reconstruction of interconnection is a discursive and practical act of violence, which is being invisibilised by RWE's attempts to 'green' mining.

#165

Capitalist production has unified space, breaking down the boundaries between one society and the next. This unification is at the same time an extensive and intensive process of *banalization*. Just as the accumulation of commodities mass-produced for the abstract space of the market shattered all regional and legal barriers and all the Medieval guild restrictions that maintained the *quality* of craft production, it also undermined the autonomy and quality of *places*. This homogenizing power is the heavy artillery that has battered down all the walls of China.

#167

While eliminating geographical distance, this society produces a new internal distance in the form of spectacular separation.



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Ferrell, J. (2012). Anarchy, geography and drift. *Antipode*, 44, 1645-1666.

Igoe, J., Neves, K., & Brockington, D. (2010). A spectacular eco-tour around the historic Bloc. *Antipode*, 42(3), 486-512.

participation from locals and visitors as mining spectators. Now parties rage (occasionally) and beer glasses cling over electrical humming and grinding gears of mining operations, bundling the 'ecotourism-extraction nexus,' where extraction becomes integral to eco-touristic experiences, into one operation – mining tourism. The diversity of recreational opportunities and 'spectacular' mining tourism infrastructure around the Hambach mine help to invisibilise the violence required by the mine. RWE's projects help mediate and transcend the assumed contradiction between ecotourism and extractive industries by providing recreational services. *Sophienhöhe* and the extensive network of cycling and hiking paths appease people's love for forests, while *:terra nova* (and other recreational-educational sites) romanticises notions of coalmining, providing an outlet for fascination with huge machinery that epitomises industrial progress, modernity, and human mastery over nature. This accommodationist philosophy manufactures a 'win-win' for hikers, cyclists, conservationists and mechanical enthusiasts, establishing a self-reinforcing and inclusive approach that not only merges, but simultaneously articulates the ecotourism-extraction nexus.

The resort-style beach landscape is no coincidence. RWE's long-term management plans indicate that after the proposed mine closure in 2045, Europe's 'biggest hole' is meant to be turned into Germany's second largest lake by the end of the century. 'It is supposed to look like a shoreline,' explains RWE employee Guido Johnen. This attempt to turn the present mine into a future lake attempts to do just as their slogan proclaims: 'looking into the present and the future', creating a 'positive' landscape, not looking backwards, because 'looking backwards can be painful' – especially for those who experienced displacement because of the mine. The sunbeds and parasols, Melzer explains, 'are invitations to wait for the water.' RWE attempts to market the re-imagining of the future, constructing a win-win solution where coal mining leads to a better life and, importantly, 'better nature', with a new lake and commercialised recreational opportunities waiting at the end of the mining tunnel. These new infrastructures are intimately tied to RWE's greening efforts and claims of ecological sustainability, representing the neoliberal belief in consensus and seductive win-win



I've been thinking a lot about place recently. About what it is, what it was, what it could be, and my relationship to it. These days I'm learning about plants, so that's where my mind goes when I read this.

Places used to be distinguishable by what grew there. Differences in factors like climate, topography and soil composition led to differences in the plants of different places. These plants fed different animals, who evolved along with them in systemic relationships that – together – define places.

These places didn't have names, and they didn't always have clear borders. There was some fluidity and limited movement between places, as each element of the place (from micro-organisms to mega-fauna) had an impact on the other elements, and the system as a whole. The way I understand it, humans originated in one (or very few) of the places, and migrated over the course of thousands of years until almost all of the places on Earth.

For most of this history, humans assimilated into existing places, so that many different human cultures evolved from the same human ancestors. They ate different plants and animals, had different medicines, customs, taboos, social organisations, languages, religions and leisure activities that were place-specific.

Capitalism also originated in one or very few places, and spread throughout the world. But its logic dictates domination rather than assimilation. People following this model can't integrate into existing places (with vast differences in both ecosystems and cultural systems). Capitalism is a mold that is forced onto places out of which it didn't evolve, and within which it can't exist as a single element impacted by all other elements. It destroys the systemic relationships that define places, and imposes its own mandates, which are not as rich and varied.

The plants grown under capitalism are only plants that benefit humans in some way or make money; not even all of them benefit humans really. The most planted plant I think in the world are European grasses planted in

people's lawns, which don't seem to me to have any clear benefit (except to the people who sell them).

I'm an error in all of this. I grew up in rural Pennsylvania. I didn't understand the town I lived as a place. I didn't have any real relationship to the plants and animals around me. I didn't get my sustenance from my immediate surroundings. I didn't even know where my water came from. I didn't feel like an integral part of a cultural tradition.

At the time, I thought that most of the people in my town were ignorant hicks, and I couldn't relate to them. I didn't know what I wanted; but I knew that I didn't care about what the people around me cared about, and I wanted to get out. The various media I was exposed to showed me a world that seemed very different from mine. I thought my town lacked culture, and that I could go out into this world I saw on TV and find it.

Because place is so degraded I was able to leave easily. I left in a van I could buy gas for anywhere in the country, using my ATM card and my ability to speak English. I knew the traffic laws. I knew how to get food. I knew how to find an apartment and get a job. Migration is easier now than it was thousands of years ago. I felt freer than I ever had before.

I came to San Francisco seven years ago. In many ways, it's different from the small town where I grew up. I have more access to a broader range of ideas and people (and products too, on that side of things...). Through this, and through my experience of living in the world outside my small town – and noticing the differences between it and my expectations – I started to figure out what I want and what I care about. I've become more able to name my dissatisfaction.

San Francisco is no more of a place than Evansburg, Pennsylvania. I'm more comfortable here because I have the option of surrounding myself with people whose ideas and desires are more similar to mine. But I don't feel rooted here or anywhere else. I spend most of my time with people whose definition of community includes people all over the world with similar values. I can go to cities I've never been before and quickly find a house and group of people that feels almost as much like home as most of the thirteen places I've lived in San Francisco. In those moments I find joy,

which showcase RWE's recultivation work, coal mining and other 'extractive attractions.' On the *Straße der Energie* (energy route), a 'tourist route through the Rhinish lignite mining area', the visitor can witness RWE's mines, recultivation work, processing facilities and electricity production from lignite coal, wind and solar. These tours accompany numerous RWE publications outlining maps, regional information and trail suggestions, as well as general promotional material.

The most notable recreational infrastructure sponsored by RWE is *:terra nova* (New Earth). Co-financed by surrounding municipalities, *:terra nova* is a restaurant/bar and information centre modelled after a beach resort – complete with sunbeds, playground and outdoor gym – that sits on a terrace overlooking the Hambach mine. In addition, *:terra nova* hosts RWE's recultivation centre, a 'wedding-room' and a football-golf course. The building can be rented for events and is promoted as a 'meeting place' to 'bring people together.' Jim Igoe et al. (2010) application of Guy Debord's 'spectacle' to ecotourism becomes insightful here, where the spectacle of 'extractive attraction' works to further normalise the mining processes that are being militantly resisted. In Uganda, Cavanagh and Benjaminsen have shown, 'spectacularization' is fundamental in the production of carbon offsets that form a 'process of interrelated accumulation and naturalization by dispossession.' In the Rhineland, *:terra nova* attempts to do the same by solidifying a unifying message, justifying the operation and encouraging people to participate as spectators, while further commodifying and selling the mining experience. Said simply, *:terra nova* seeks not only to mobilise popular support but also to make profit in the process. Visitors from near and far, are invited to enjoy the view, drinks, food and games, and applaud the 200 plus-meter long diggers, the 'largest mobile machines of the world', invoking fantasies of huge play-grounds where soil is shifted and men have God-like control over both machinery and nature.

Through this kind of spectacle, RWE's *:terra nova* attempts to transform enormous machinery, holes and extractive routine into an acceptable practice by means of marketing and encouraging

APPENDIX:

from 'Normalising Corporate Counterinsurgency: engineering consent, managing resistance & greening destruction around the Hambach coal mine & beyond' (by Andrea Brock & Alexander Dunlap, 2018)

The most important compensation measure – and heart of the biodiversity management plan of the Hambach mine introduced above – is the newly restored natural area and artificial low mountain range called *Sophienhöhe* adjacent to the mine. Some of the former agricultural (and now reforested) areas are designated for future timber harvesting, while the area is also used for recreational purposes. The *Sophienhöhe* contains 150km of hiking and cycling trails leading to visitor points on top of the hills and different 'eye-catchers' including a Celtic tree circle. RWE offers regular guided tours and free maps to visit the area. Some trails are equipped with info-boards with QR codes, for smart phone equipped visitors – allowing people to learn via LCD screen about 'the new landscape and its flora and fauna'. This information technology-approach mediates the 'visitor's' relationship with their natural environment, but also with the company. Hiking paths through the *Sophienhöhe* are not only heavily signposted but delineated by bushes that keep the visitor on the path, resembling what Jeff Ferrell calls 'spatial environment[s] saturated with contemporary ideologies of containment and exclusion.' Policing takes place through signs, rules and 'natural grids', but also through visual clues that promote self-identification with the project and hiking regulations. Individual agency or exploration beyond the pre-planned trail is discouraged. *Sophienhöhe* thus becomes a highly regulated, predictable and enclosed environment – like city parks positioned to serve as PR.

[...] Pro-corporate ideologies are also fostered by investments into new recreational infrastructure, including a novel 'speedway' built on former coal train trails and a signposted network of cycling and hiking tours

beauty, comfort and connection: but I also find a deep sadness in the knowledge that my ability to do this is a trade-off for not having the ability that every living thing had for thousands of years: to truly be a part of an integrated, systemic place.

#169

The society that reshapes its entire surroundings has evolved its own special technique for molding its own territory, which constitutes the material underpinning for all the facets of this project. Urbanism – “city planning” – is capitalism’s method for taking over the natural and human environment. Following its logical development toward total domination, capitalism now can and must refashion the totality of space into *its own particular decor*.



The world-famous Sphere located in the Las Vegas strip, Paradise, USA, a multi-billion-dollar multi-media venue with 270 degrees of wrap-around visuals for its 18,600 seating capacity: perhaps its size is less significant than the fact that today the Spectacle fits into every pocket...



What immediately springs to my mind – and I guess this is probably a bit cliché – is Las Vegas.

I got dropped off hitch-hiking in Las Vegas, and decided I would try to spend the night there and see what that felt like; see what it was like for just a day.

I got dropped off right on the strip. And of course it's huge structure after huge structure after huge structure: and they're all the same, and they're all there for the same reason, and you do the same things inside them. But they're all supposed to be representing different cultures all over the world; they're all these larger-than-life, crasser representations of places you could buy airplane tickets to and go.

I was in Caesar's Palace. I was walking around, and there were these people walking near me who were speaking Italian. And I couldn't believe it: I couldn't believe that people would travel that distance and across an ocean to a different continent to go to this place that just cheapens everything from their culture and turns it into something entirely different.

And I thought about that for a while; and it wasn't until after I got away from the bright lights and all the noise that I realised that looking at the replica of the Trevi fountain in Caesar's Palace, I really didn't have that much of a different relationship to it than I did of the Trevi fountain when I was in Rome.



I started gardening and learning a lot about plants, including the wild and feral plants in the Bay Area. I'm trying to get more of my sustenance from my immediate surroundings. I learn where my water comes from.

Some friends and I restarted an abandoned four-and-a-half-acre urban farm. I'm trying to understand that four-and-a-half acres as a place, but finding a lot of obstacles to that. It's owned by the city department of Recreation & Parks, and the bureaucrats there don't let me forget that, for them, it isn't a place. It's a property, it's a liability, it's a political tool. It's pieces of paper on their desks.

I was there a few weeks ago with a friend, and four people showed up; people I'd never seen before and I didn't know were coming. They introduced themselves as architecture students in Berkeley. They're working on a project for their class; and their project is designing an urban farm.

It sounds exciting to me at first. I sit up and extended my hand in greeting. And the most talkative of these people recoiled from my dirty hand. I noticed his spotless white pants, and the shiniest white shoes I think I've ever seen.

He talked to me a little bit about his project, and he asked me about mine. He pointed to the fruit trees on the hills and was asking me about what fruit trees need to thrive. (That's not what he said though; he said “what do they need to produce more fruit?”)

I told him a little bit about it, including that they need adequate amounts of sunshine. He said to me, “so, if we put artificial light on the trees 24-hours-a-day, they'll produce more fruit?”

I didn't really know what to say. I realised that for him, this isn't a place either. That tree is not part of any specific location. It's not part of any system of anything that keeps it alive, that needs it, that it needs. I pictured it in a casino in a big pot; in a big-box retail store; some place with no

windows, lights on all the time. People can't tell the difference between day and night, and neither can the tree.

I tried not to vomit on his shiny white shoes.

#168

Tourism – human circulation packaged for consumption, a by-product of the circulation of commodities – is the opportunity to go and see what has been banalized. The economic organization of travel to different places already guarantees their *equivalence*. The modernization that has eliminated the time involved in travel has simultaneously eliminated any real space from it.



When I was a kid, in the town that I grew up in, there wasn't a lot of what I would call social space. Or rather, the social spaces that did exist were designed in very specific ways.

For instance, looking back I realised that the only place where friends my age could really meet up and spend time together was the mall. So this is where we would go; not at all because we intended to shop, but because this was the only place where spending time with friends was even a possibility.

Of course, thinking back I realise that if the only place where it is possible to spend social time with friends is a mall, that is going to dramatically affect the type and character of the social time that you spend with one another.

When I think about this now – and about how the shape of the environment continues to affect the shape of my life, it infuriates me. My environment really only leaves room for production or consumption. And that's not how I want my life to look.

The concept of individuals being *isolated together* really resonates with me as well. I feel like I am very isolated from my neighbours, and that they are likely isolated from each other as well. But it's interesting how well the isolation is masked by the images that we all receive and relate to.

For instance, things like going to the movies are supposed to be social experiences. I can't imagine anything more isolating than a bunch of people silently staring at a screen in a dark room. But that isolation is pretty well concealed by the common language that it gives everyone there. For instance, my neighbours and I have lives that don't even begin to overlap. And yet – even though we have almost never spoken to each other – we all have a common sense of what we *could* talk to each other about; since what's on TV, what sports team is winning, what movies are good, or what's being reported on around the world all serve to smooth over how fractured our lives really are.

#3

The spectacle presents itself simultaneously as society itself, as a part of society, and as a *means of unification*. As a part of society, it is the focal point of all vision and all consciousness. But due to the very fact that this sector is *separate*, it is in reality the domain of delusion and false consciousness: the unification it achieves is nothing but an official language of universal separation.

#4

The spectacle is not a collection of images; it is a social relation between people that is mediated by images.



Recently, some friends and I have been giving out free food on the street-corner outside. And to make it more interesting, we bring out jump-ropes, and a guitar, and other things out there with us.

Many people just walk by. Others stare for a little while and keep moving. And a small minority come and take food or play games with us.

Every once in a while, someone will stop and talk to us, and ask us what we are doing. I try to tell them that we are just friends, out here to have fun with others in the neighbourhood.

Usually, that only confuses them, and someone else will say, “we're Food Not Bombs.”

This usually satisfies the person, and they will go on their way.

What I dislike about that interaction, is when they hear Food Not Bombs they are at that point relating to the image of Food Not Bombs, and not to the people right in front of them.

This is what the Spectacle has created for us; a relationship with other people on the level of images, not as humans interacting.

At that point, I feel like we are just something to be consumed, not truly experienced.

#172

Urbanism is the modern method for solving the ongoing problem of safeguarding class power by atomizing the workers who have been dangerously *brought together* by the conditions of urban production. The constant struggle that has had to be waged against anything that might lead to such coming together has found urbanism to be its most effective field of operation. The efforts of all the established powers since the French Revolution to increase the means of maintaining law and order in the streets have finally culminated in the suppression of the street itself. Describing what he terms “a one-way system,” Lewis Mumford points out that “with the present means of long-distance mass communication, sprawling isolation has proved an even more effective method of keeping a population under control” (*The City in History*). But the general trend toward isolation, which is the underlying essence of urbanism, must also include a controlled reintegration of the workers based on the planned needs of production and consumption. This reintegration into the system means bringing isolated individuals together *as isolated individuals*. Factories, cultural centers, tourist resorts and housing developments are specifically designed to foster this type of pseudocommunity. The same collective isolation prevails even within the *family cell*, where the omnipresent receivers of spectacular messages fill the isolation with the ruling images – images that derive their full power precisely from that isolation.