

MOVING TARGETS:
POLITICAL THEATRE IN A POST-POLITICAL AGE

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Abstract

This thesis gauges the contemporary landscape of political theatre at a time in which everything, and consequently nothing, is political. That is, almost all theatres today proclaim a politics, and yet there is widespread resignation regarding the inevitability of capitalism. This thesis proposes a theory of political action via the theatre: radical theatre today must employ a strategy of “moving targets”. Theatrical actions must be adaptable and mobile to seek out the moving targets of capital and track down target audiences as they move through public space. In addition, political theatre must *become* a moving target to avoid amalgamation into the capitalist system of exchange.

I approached this topic through four case studies. Two of the case studies, Reverend Billy’s Church of Stop Shopping and the Critical Art Ensemble, are based in the United States. I studied their work via materials – books, essays, videos, websites, interviews, and more – but not in person. The other two case studies are lifted from my own experience with the Christchurch Free Theatre: an original production of *Christmas Shopping* and a devised production of Karl Kraus’ play *The Last Days of Mankind*. These latter two case studies served as laboratory experiments through which I was able to test ideas and problematics of political theatre that arose through my research.

These case studies led to the determination that creating aesthetic experiences and actions – as opposed to having explicitly political content – can be a strategy or foundation for a radical political theatre that resists, undermines, and at times transcends the seeming inevitability of consumer capitalism. In an age in which any political intervention is seen as senseless disruption, a form of pointless violence, this theatre has adopted the strategies of terrorist actions to have a disruptive effect without positing a specific alternative social structure.

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Chapter One

Introduction

Moving targets:

Political theatre in a post-political age

This thesis investigates the condition of political theatre in an arguably post-political age. By “post-political age” I mean that most members of my generation, including me, seem utterly unable to think politically or even *imagine* a society fundamentally different to the present one. This circumstance is not due to a lack of political theatre, actions, and ideas but rather to their omnipresence. Jean Baudrillard claims that, since 1968, everything has become political and therefore nothing is political (1990/1993, 9). Everyone, it seems, is doing and writing about political theatre or the politics of theatre. The question then becomes not “What is political theatre?” but “How does it work?” or “*How* is it political?” Baudrillard’s comment implies that “political” has become the norm, and therefore that political action itself has come to support the capitalist status quo. My own initial experiences of political theatre led to a supposition that creating or engaging in apparently un-political (by traditional criteria) aesthetic experiences might be a plausible strategy of radical political theatre – a way to open people’s political consciousness to include alternatives, or the possibility of alternatives, to contemporary capitalist society. This thesis explores that supposition.

I have chosen four case studies – all of which are action-based theatres that create experiences in public – that seem to accept that the ubiquity of the political has caused a *crisis* of the political. These theatres, I will argue, use aesthetic actions and experiences to investigate how a radical political theatre might work today. Two of these case studies are from the United States – Reverend Billy’s Church of Stop Shopping and the Critical Art Ensemble – and both claim and appear to be fundamentally radical and overt, challenging consumerism or capitalism on an apparently systemic level. On close analysis, I will show, it is conceivable that the source of their political power is in the realm of aesthetic experiences and actions rather than in their seemingly explicit political content. I have encountered these two models of political theatre through videos, websites, audio CDs, interviews, books and essays by and about them – but never in person. The other two case studies are from my own experiences with the Christchurch Free Theatre: *Christmas Shopping*

and *The Last Days of Mankind*. These performances, I will demonstrate, are similarly radical through the use of aesthetic actions and experiences. Since experience seems to be central to this approach of political theatre, I will analyse my own experience of participating in this theatre and the possible political effect of so doing. Where early models of political theatre often sought to realise social ideals like those of communism or anarchism that were widely considered viable, these four case studies apparently seek to rebuild belief in the possibility of an alternative society, create experiences for audiences and participants to recognise the crisis of the political, spark an audience's imagination and desire for other ways of being, or establish a new set of ideals.

In a sense, this thesis is all about capitalism. Using the theories of Baudrillard and Fredric Jameson, who also observes a crisis of the political, I will hypothesise the need for political theatre to be directed at the “moving targets” of capital and, in return, to become a “moving target” to avoid reprisal and incorporation into the system as a neutral commodity. This notion – that cultural acts such as theatre are, or quickly become, consistent with the status quo – partially explains why a certain type of adaptable aesthetic political theatre, attacking moving targets in public spaces, might be more radical than theatre that takes place in permanent theatre buildings, offers articulate political arguments, or seeks a fixed “solution” such as communism. In the 1970s, Richard Schechner, one of the major proponents of experimental political theatre, claimed that proscenium arch theatres are models of capitalism, and indicated his preference for alternatives such as “environmental” theatres with audience interaction (1973/1994; 1977/1988, 183). The case studies of this thesis arguably extend Schechner's ideas. Theatre *actions* seem even more pliable, able to target different topics as they arise and different sites where authority is located. Moreover, audiences are targeted as they unsuspectingly move through public spaces – and they themselves are moved, often physically as well as emotionally, in order to provoke political movement. In this theoretical framework, I will analyse the four examples of political theatre mentioned above and propose that creating aesthetic experiences and actions can be a strategy or foundation for a radical political theatre that resists, undermines, and at times transcends the seeming inevitability of consumer capitalism.

At the end of 1999, I was one semester away from finishing an Electrical Engineering degree from a university in my home state of Indiana, USA. I had done

an internship with the Lockheed-Martin Corporation, working at the F-16 assembly line plant in Fort Worth, Texas. The sensible thing to do was to finish my degree and take up an enviable full-time position at Lockheed with a starting salary well over \$50,000 a year. But something felt not quite right. As a distraction, I came to New Zealand at the beginning of 2000 to study abroad in the final semester of my degree. Unusually, I had already completed my core engineering requirements and needed only a handful of Arts points to finish my engineering degree. I enrolled exclusively in theatre, film, and media studies courses, thinking that they would be an interesting and undemanding diversion before I went back to America to start my career. That was six years ago. I have been living in New Zealand ever since. And I am still a student, now writing a thesis on political theatre.

That first year in New Zealand I tried to occupy myself by having fun: travelling, socialising, and drinking. But these distractions could not hide that something about my impending engineering career felt *wrong*, though I could not pinpoint what. I could not fathom what else I would rather do, until something about theatre began to feel *right*.

Near the end of that first year, I was invited to join the stage three theatre students in their end-of-year production called *The Last Days of Mankind*.¹ Rehearsals began with what was called “Boot Camp” week, which ran from 10am to 5pm every day. We students turned up at 10am Monday morning, not knowing what to expect, and were promptly ordered to go for a 45-minute run in the rain. Boot Camp continued much in this same fashion: we were treated like the stereotypical new recruits in the army, with a nasty drill sergeant snapping orders and spurring us on with the mantra “Pain is just weakness leaving the body”. Many of the exercises were strenuous and unpleasant, mentally as well as physically; others were nonsensical, such as facing a wall and repeating our own names out loud for 30 minutes. I was simultaneously apprehensive and excited. I found it oddly enjoyable spending long

¹ *The Last Days of Mankind* is a World War I era social satire by Karl Kraus that he began writing in 1915. It is more than 800 pages long and generally considered unstageable. Kraus himself acknowledged the difficulty, writing in the introduction: “The performance of this drama is intended for a theatre on Mars” (Kraus 1974, 3). The production I was involved in – performed from 9 to 11 November 2000, in association with the Free Theatre, and directed by Peter Falkenberg – used little of Kraus’ actual text and instead was a “devised” performance inspired by Kraus’ themes and aims.

hours doing something “senseless” and not having to justify or rationalise it. Part of me enjoyed following orders, especially orders to do ridiculous things that I would never have done of my own accord. I was being more daring and adventurous than I ever had been, by doing exactly what I was told.

I anticipated that the oddity of this process would end after Boot Camp week, when we would begin more traditional theatre rehearsals. But the strange methods continued for weeks and culminated in a performance unlike any theatre I had imagined. For three consecutive days, we set up encampments in public gathering places in downtown Christchurch – the Arts Centre (a tourist haven), Cathedral Square (the historical physical centre of the city), and the Bridge of Remembrance (a war memorial) – and performed for 12 straight hours from midday to midnight. Even our meals were taken in character, served as military rations. The performances were free and unadvertised, and they were often unwelcome. Much of the performance consisted of similarly absurd militaresque drills as those we had been doing during rehearsals – though they were now being done in public. As with the rehearsal process, this theatre engendered in me contradictory reactions of, on the one hand, terrible embarrassment and anxiety and, on the other hand, extreme feelings of liberation and joy. The source of both reactions was the same: I was publicly behaving in abnormal and improper ways.

Looking back on this experience five years later, it is astonishing to me that I underwent such a monumental process – a demanding, confrontational, and “inappropriate” performance – without once considering that it was somehow political. At the time, however, I knew only that something about *Last Days* was appealing to me, that participating in such theatre provided a sense of challenge, courage, and satisfaction that I had never before experienced. It was this theatrical experience, far more than anything else, that lured me to stay in New Zealand for, at that point, one more year – to do Honours-level study in theatre and film and further postpone my lucrative engineering career. My interest in what could be considered *political* theatre initiated in this aesthetic experience, without any particular political awareness or knowledge.

The following year, my most extensive task was a three-person group project in which we had to do a Brechtian interpretation and performance of Act Two of

Richard Wagner's opera *Siegfried*.² This undertaking was largely un-prescribed. We were given a short bibliography of the most relevant theoretical works by Brecht and a copy of the text of Wagner's opera – and that was it. Prior to any specific research, our only “knowledge” of Brecht was that he had been interested in socialism and Marxism, and wanted theatre to be highly political – and that our performance and interpretation of the libretto must therefore be political too. But our only comprehension of “political” came from our experience of politics in this society: being for or against student fees or public health care, or being a Labour or National supporter. Brecht's politics completely baffled us. We found the idea of socialism arcane. Two of us resolved to become Marxists, hoping that this would help unravel the mystery. We read *Capital*, tried to understand how Marx could be applicable, and remained as confused as ever. We read essays by and about Brecht to no avail. *Reading* was proving insufficient. But Brecht continued to intrigue us. What I found most alluring and perplexing was Brecht's obvious passion. Though we were unable to understand the intricacies of his politics, clearly this man felt very strongly about *something*. And that, as much as anything, was a foreign experience to us. We knew, or felt, that there was something important that was eluding us. We were sparked with a frenzied desire to understand Brecht, recognising on some abstract level that coming to understand Brecht might help us to understand ourselves.

One of our important realisations came while having a series of conversations about our parents, prompted because one of the key relationships in the opera is that between Siegfried and his adoptive father Mime, who exploits Siegfried for wealth and power. I told of the pressures I continued to feel to pursue an engineering career and be a “successful” middle class son. This pressure came not only from my parents, but seemingly from my entire society and even, or especially, from myself. My other two group members expressed – in different ways – similar feelings of not knowing what they wanted to do with their lives, but sensing that the expected career-path would never be fully satisfying. What we began to intuit, though not yet express, was that our personal stories and experiences were actually social problems common to

² This task was intentionally contradictory. Wagner is associated with the idea of the synthesised total work of art, a *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Brecht consciously opposed this synthesis and sought to separate the elements of opera. Our focus was on Wagner's text or narrative rather than his operatic form as such, but converting a story written for its emotive impact into a Brechtian political parable proved difficult.

people of our age and middle class upbringing. I truly believe that this may have been my first hint of political awareness: suspecting that my personal uncertainties were possibly not a private and solely individual affair. I finally began to verge on a political consciousness when I grounded it in my own experience – an experience that consisted predominantly of vague feelings of unease. I consider this realisation to be the second step in my political awakening. The first step, *Last Days*, secured my interest in political theatre via an aesthetic experience. This second step instigated my political consciousness through a reflection upon that, and other, aesthetic experiences.

At core, I think that our performance of *Siegfried* became about our own inabilities to think politically.³ We all felt that *something* about this society was not right and should change, but we had no options to offer nor justifications for our beliefs. So we simply shared what we saw as contradictions of our society (as Brecht would say) relating to a young man’s deciding what to do with his life. The focus of our performance became our own experiences, using the boy Siegfried as a stand-in: we demonstrated the way in which Siegfried’s future, his vocation, seemed preordained by his surroundings, how he wanted something “more” or “other” out of life but could not articulate what. As a piece of political theatre, our performance was a mediocre work-in-progress. But as a *process*, it was reasonably successful. Being left to figure Brecht out on our own prompted our first political realisations, which were meaningful, or *possible*, only because they were realisations about our own lives – far more influential than being taught about Marxist theory or socialism could have been. This Brecht experience once more solidified my interest in a certain concept of theatre as a place to explore oneself and expand one’s experiences – thereby expanding one’s political consciousness as well.

I find these two performances, both of which I entered into as if by accident, to be more or less equally foundational in my developing an ongoing interest in political theatre. It is rather interesting, then, that these two experiences were somewhat antithetical. With *Last Days*, it was the outrageousness of the experience

³ Our Brechtian class performance was actually untitled, but I have opted to call it *Siegfried* for simplicity’s sake. A couple of months later I acted in a public Free Theatre performance, directed by Michael Adams, actually titled *Siegfried*, which is largely unrelated and to which this thesis does not refer.

that I found engaging; with *Siegfried* a concerted effort to understand Brecht's politics opened the possibility that I might have a politics of my own. During *Last Days* I unquestioningly followed orders; for *Siegfried* we were given no orders and hardly any assistance. *Last Days* was unsafe: I felt vulnerable behaving in such strange ways before an often-hostile public that had been accosted by our performance. *Siegfried* took place in our small class theatre before an audience of our friends, peers, and teachers. But I felt vulnerable during *Siegfried* as well, because it was in large part about me and my own experiences. In judging the theatre, audiences were judging *me*. These are two markedly different experiences of political theatre. Yet they are similar in that they both fused politics and aesthetic experiences. Through experiential links, both projects led me to comprehend, or perhaps just *feel* or *sense*, that alternative paths to the mainstream were possible – and to desire the further pursuance of such paths. I commenced some vague sort of political awareness – though I may not have even recognised it as such – through aesthetic experiences.

Interestingly, *Last Days* provoked a range of reactions from the actors involved. Several actors were, like me, motivated to pursue more such experiences through continued work with the Free Theatre – a group whose name implies emancipation from conventions, both artistic and social. Other *Last Days* actors hated the experience and dedicated themselves to the mainstream theatre – or ran away from theatre entirely – as a result. This divergence, I think, is a sign that the experience was a political one. That which is political separates people; it cannot and will not appeal to everyone. But it is interesting that people's "political" reactions to their *Last Days* experiences were not grounded in political awareness but in rather indefinable "feelings". Something about doing *Last Days*, to me, felt "right". To others, something felt "wrong" – perhaps how the experience at Lockheed-Martin felt to me (which may, in fact, have been where the seeds of my political awareness were sown). Is it a conceivable hypothesis, from this, that seemingly arbitrary aesthetic experiences could be a strategy of political theatre, or that aesthetic judgments could be a political platform?

Even my encounter with Brecht, an established paradigm of political theatre, was untraditional. Socialism and Marxism, to the group of us, were utterly incomprehensible – not because the concepts were too difficult for us to grasp but because we truly could not fathom a non-capitalist society. Capitalism feels inevitable to the degree that I still have great difficulty even imagining an alternative. This

forces the question of whether direct political engagement is plausible for the young middle class today. Rather, via Brecht, I discovered the theatre as a place to explore myself and, through exploring myself alongside others, I discovered collective *experiences*. This linking of the political to personal experience led to an initial recognition that I, like others around me, was the product of social and historical forces. For two of us in the Brecht group, this realisation led to a desire better to understand our individual relationships to society – a desire that prompted us to continue work with the Free Theatre and, gradually, to become more conscious of our social and political surroundings and develop our own political opinions that are not based solely in aesthetics. An initial aesthetic experience, it seems, can lead to an understanding of the political as an aesthetic category, which in turn can perhaps lead to a moral concept of politics.

As with *Last Days* there was a political divide: the third group member, after this transitional experience, resolved to pursue a “normal” life: she left for a whirlwind tour of Europe before returning to “settle down” with her boyfriend, who soon became her fiancé. Prior to *Siegfried*, all three of us were unsure what we wanted out of life and were following paths that felt predetermined, imposed on us by some external and even internalised power. While the *Siegfried* experience clearly did not fill us with absolute certainty, it did instigate *desire*. For one member, that seemingly predetermined path then became her chosen path; the other two of us were kindled with desire to discover other social possibilities. Might others be like us? Could an aesthetic desire instigate political decisions? Might the dawning of a political consciousness often follow an encounter with one’s inability to conceive of alternative social structures?

Especially in the context of studying a Marxist with clear and strong political convictions, I suspected that the great trouble I had thinking politically was – and remains – one of the products of my social development. Having been just 11 years old when the Berlin Wall came down and 13 when the Soviet Union dissolved, I cannot meaningfully recall the Cold War and a time when there were alternative social systems vying for legitimacy. In this respect, the “post-political age” of my title – an age of people unable to think politically or imagine alternative social structures – might refer to those currently “aged” under 30 rather than to the present period as a whole. Being apparently unable to think politically, I can seemingly understand political issues, or the very category of “political”, only through *experience*. By this

rationale, I cannot analyse or understand a feminist politics, or racial politics, or politics of the poor, because I cannot *experience* it. Perhaps for my generation – as for others – political theatre must deal with experience.

I indicated that the two experiences above secured my interest in political theatre. This is true, but that interest coalesced into a more specific form near the end of my 2001 Honours year after the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Centre towers in New York City. This experience – for the event was so resounding and spectacular that everyone *experienced* it – made me feel as though there must be a whole hidden realm of politics that I did not comprehend. Somehow I had never felt a part of the world or of a particular society until pondering that drastic event. I was filled with an urgency to *know* all about global politics, to learn the history of different societies and their interactions, to make sense of these attacks that utterly surprised me – and to *create* political theatre. I wanted to be able to place my burgeoning self-awareness into a wider social and political context. After *Last Days* and *Siegfried* my focus remained on the *theatre* side of political theatre. The September 11 attacks tipped that balance towards the *political* side of political theatre.

What the September 11 attacks problematised for me, though I did not initially phrase it as such, was the difference between political *theatre* and political *action*. There is no denying the terrifying power of the material destruction of these two towers and the accompanying 3,000 deaths. Yet the attacks were certainly coordinated with *theatrical* awareness: they had apparently been “rehearsed” on simulators and choreographed for maximum impact and media exposure. Much of their power came from these theatrical elements. Slavoj Žižek wrote, “The ‘terrorists’ themselves did not do it primarily to provoke real material damage, but *for the spectacular effect of it*” (2002, 11). Without in any sense denying the physical destruction and death wrought by these attacks, the aspects that triggered a political desire in me (and apparently in many others) were aesthetic or theatrical. The theatrical elements, the symbolic destruction of the twin icons of capitalist power and the symbolic sacrificial deaths of the terrorists, were both unmistakable and unthinkable. This inconceivability is what provoked in me a political desire – a desire to expand my awareness in such a way that I might understand this event. Even direct political actions, that is, are perhaps effective because of their incorporation of theatrical elements. In reverse, perhaps political theatres like those analysed in this thesis are

effective by employing theatrical *actions* in a mode not unlike terrorist acts – and thereby resisting, weakening, or destabilising the seeming inevitability of capitalism.

This thesis addresses and investigates this strategy of political theatre that arguably induces the possibility of radical change via the execution of theatrical actions and aesthetic experiences. This exploration is divided into four chapters that each focus on a different case study. In Chapter Two, I will focus on the political theatre of Bill Talen, who has created – and is nearly inseparable from – a parodic Southern American evangelist character, Reverend Billy. A significant component of Rev. Billy’s performances is akin to conventional political protest: loud, intrusive, and corporeal. The Reverend occupies buildings, enters corporate chain stores, and preaches – both on the streets and in his “church” – against the sins of rampant consumerism. He opposes capitalism in the most direct and obvious way: through critiquing the essential capitalist practice of shopping. Rev. Billy’s “church”, the Church of Stop Shopping, now consists of a full choir and regular entourage of participants – through which the Reverend builds belief, establishes, and mobilises a resistant community to perform theatrical political actions.

Rev. Billy consistently promotes some sort of “authentic” life that has been perverted by consumer capitalism but is nonetheless possible to attain. An analysis of his performances, both in stores and in his “church”, offers a way of understanding how this idea of “authenticity” has become central to a considerable trend of political action and opposition. Of course, “authenticity” has a number of historical and political meanings perhaps beginning, as regards modern art, with Walter Benjamin’s “Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”. Benjamin theorised the irrelevance of the category *authenticity* with respect to art, and posited that, especially with film, the decline of interest in the cult value of the original, authentic artworks would shift interest onto the artworks’ political relevance (1936, 1970). The “death” of authenticity, however, appears to have had the opposite effect. Benjamin indirectly led the way for countless followers, from the Situationists to Baudrillard and Jameson, who make some variation of the argument that the importance of the image has eclipsed that of reality itself – not only with art but with our political lives. The crisis in authenticity, to them, entails a crisis of the political. Rev. Billy’s notion of anticonsumerist “authenticity”, to these theorists, is unfeasible.

I want to confront Rev. Billy particularly with the theories of Fredric Jameson. In Jameson’s model of postmodernism, the postmodern is necessarily apolitical.

Specifically, Jameson's theory posits the impossibility of parody, seeing it as necessarily neutralised into an apolitical form he calls pastiche. This claim is especially interesting since Rev. Billy seems on the surface to be a political parody. Through exploring this contradiction, I will analyse whether one can defend Rev. Billy's practice against these theories that imply his inability to challenge consumer capitalism.

In Chapter Three, I will examine the Free Theatre production of *Christmas Shopping*. This performance was a conscious attempt to explore and revise the tactics of Reverend Billy's store invasions to suit a Christchurch context, under the assumption that theatre actions cannot be thoroughly reflected upon through readings and videos but only through actions and experience. We formed a Christchurch analogue to Rev. Billy's Church of Stop Shopping by creating a mock Christian girls' school and giving "Christian" choir performances inside shopping malls in the weeks before Christmas. In this manner, we attempted to create a radical political theatre founded in Christian values.

An analysis of this performance will reveal the curious relationship between Christianity and capitalism. In large part, the dominant mode of capitalism today, exemplified by the American system under the leadership of George W. Bush, has merged Christian morality and capitalist success. That, and Christianity's typical (though not exclusive) association with political conservatism, make it a peculiar foundation for a radical political theatre. Where Rev. Billy uses a right-wing form to espouse a broadly left-wing anticonsumerism, *Christmas Shopping* uses a right-wing form to espouse right-wing morality. I will explore our attempt to use this widely accepted Christian morality to fuel a theatrical action that was fundamentally anti-capitalist: giving items back to stores in the spirit of Christmas.

Once again Jameson's theory of pastiche may challenge this approach that, like Rev. Billy's, appears to be parodic. I will explore particularly how theories of parody and irony, which generally refer to literature, may take on different significance when enacted via performance. In particular, theatrical *actions* may be able to embody contradictions without being reduced to a neutralised imitation as Jameson's theory of pastiche suggests of literature. Through exploring this tension, I will analyse whether one can use a legitimately Christian action as part of an anti-capitalist political theatre.

In Chapter Four, I will analyse the performance practice of the Critical Art Ensemble (CAE), a performance collective that seems fundamentally to oppose what it sees as an increasingly authoritarian State. This group focuses its performances against virtual and largely imperceptible realms of capitalist power such as the biotechnology industry and cyberspace. The Ensemble sees its performances as primarily pedagogical. Audiences frequently get hands-on experience of laboratory experiments, for instance, to diminish their fear of science and authority. CAE pushes audiences to recognise themselves as subjected to social and historical forces, to comprehend (or at least *sense*) their lack of political agency – and thereby possibly initiate their political consciousness.

The Ensemble consistently seeks autonomy from the capitalist system, for itself, for its art, and – through this pedagogical strategy – for its audiences and participants. This analysis of CAE's biotech performances will allow me to assess the pursuit of autonomy from the capitalist system as the foundation for a political theatre. Historically, autonomy has often been considered the product of Enlightenment thinking and the pursuit of rationality in all endeavours. It therefore seems contradictory for CAE to use the goal of autonomy to deflate the authority of science – which is generally viewed as a purely rational discipline. I will explore this opposition to assess whether CAE's platform of autonomy is a plausible basis for a radical political theatre.

Further, I will challenge CAE's practice with Jean Baudrillard's theory of hyperreality, which seems to preclude the possibility of both autonomy and pedagogical theatre. Specifically, Baudrillard posits a contemporary inability to access a genuine truth or reality behind the mainstream media images. Image and reality do not *combat* each other in Baudrillard's conception but rather dissolve into a separate image-reality or hyperreality. A radical pedagogical theatre, however, seems incompatible with this view. The radical pedagogical theory of Paulo Freire, whom CAE cites, is contingent upon belief in an external truth or reality behind the dominant lies – a truth that Baudrillard's theory would see as inaccessible. I will investigate this contradiction in order to analyse CAE's ability to attain and spread autonomy and thereby challenge capitalist power through a pedagogical political theatre.

In Chapter Five, I will look at the Free Theatre production of *The Last Days of Mankind* – already described above. This performance, though very different in its

approach, can be seen as pursuing a similar goal, or achieving a similar result, as the Critical Art Ensemble: to achieve and spread autonomy from capitalist logic. *Last Days* was an ongoing performance throughout the streets of Christchurch that carried on, intermittently, for more than two months. It had no obvious purpose or message, did not seem to be directed at audiences, and – being a free and public rather than profitable performance – was not understandable as a commodity either. Audiences were beset by this performance that possibly existed in its own logical universe and thereby deeply undermined the status quo.

Baudrillard's theory of hyperreality once again seems to challenge this possibility of an autonomous political theatre. But Baudrillard himself is (intentionally) contradictory: his theory of singularity suggests that the only form of political action available today is to oppose the system by absolute otherness – which seems plainly to be a particular notion of autonomy. I will intermingle *Last Days*' practice and Baudrillard's theory of singularity to investigate the possibility of a “singular” aesthetic action as the basis of a political theatre.

Throughout this thesis I will pursue the hypothesis, derived from my initial experiences of political theatre, that aesthetic actions and experiences – or relating politics to such experiences – might be more effective or politically mobilising than encounters with alternative ideologies. In the concluding chapter, I will take the arguments and explorations of this thesis to their logical conclusion. I will first explore in depth the terrorist attacks of September 11 particularly in terms of Baudrillard's theory of singularity. This analysis will investigate potential similarities between direct political action like that of terrorism and the theories and practices of political theatre pursued throughout this thesis. Despite obvious differences, both terrorism and the theatres investigated in this thesis create aesthetic actions and experiences.

I will then take absolutely seriously the proposal that aesthetic criteria could potentially provide the foundation for a radical political theatre by returning to the 200-year-old aesthetic theory of Friedrich Schiller. Shortly after the French Revolution miscarried, Schiller proposed that an aesthetic education – and development of a play impulse – was a necessary predecessor to political freedom. The analysis will explore whether and how the aesthetic actions of the political theatres explored in this thesis can be considered as “play”. Combining these two strands produces a theory of “terrorism as play” or “play as terrorism” – a seemingly

profane idea that nevertheless may encapsulate the strategies of radical political theatre explored in this thesis. This theatre could be seen as a type of “playful terrorism” that seeks fundamentally to resist, oppose, or destabilise the seemingly inevitable capitalist system, as terrorism does, only via aesthetic actions and experiences.

Apparently, this “post-political” state-of-affairs and these strategies of political theatre will necessitate a new perspective on the goals of a political theatre and on how to judge its success. It seems necessary to think of political theatre in terms of outcomes. This is problematic, because of course for most theatre – even political theatre – the outcome is a complete retention of the status quo, or even a strengthening of it. Certainly it is clear that simply having radical aims or controversial content is insufficient, since the capitalist system is so adept at incorporating opposition into commodity culture.

The term efficacy is often used with respect to political theatre, and seems to be an attempt to acknowledge not just the intent but the actual perceptible impact of a performance. Schechner proposes an efficacy-entertainment braid. All theatre, he says, necessarily has elements of both – and political theatre is but one variety of theatre in which efficacy would be predominant (1977/1988, 129-69). Schechner’s use of “efficacy” is generally derived from his studies of ritual behaviours (or performances) that are results-oriented and often religious: weddings, tribal dances to ward off enemies, sacrifices to the gods, and so on. An efficacious performance, to Schechner, is one in which the focus is on results rather than entertainment. Many of his experiments tried to create a stronger ritual basis for his theatre and thereby make theatre more socially efficacious. But he does not explain how one could measure the success of such efficacious performance. In the case of many rituals, the efficacy is in the doing of the ritual itself. For Catholic penance or a wedding ceremony, the results are achieved simply by the completion of the ritual. This certainly does not seem to be the case for political theatre. One of Schechner’s performances might have had efficacy – stopping the Vietnam War, say – as its primary aim, but the completion of the efficacious theatre-ritual in no way assured attainment of that desired result.

Baz Kershaw has more recently adapted the term, which he phrases “performance efficacy”, better to suit the assessment of political theatre. He defines performance efficacy as “the potential that theatre may have to make the immediate effects of performance influence, however minutely, the general historical evolution

of wider social and political realities” (1992, 1). He realises that this is a difficult concept to gauge, but the notion can possibly help one to conceive of the theatres explored in this thesis as being political. If a given performance played a small role in changing a few people’s opinions of the Vietnam War, then it could be said, in Kershaw’s concept, to have been somewhat efficacious. This concept, while still awkward, allows a subtler designation of what political theatre might achieve. Kershaw later defined another useful term, “radical” (and its counterpart “radicalism”) as “a way of avoiding factional association while reasserting the need for fundamental change” (1999, 18). “Radical”, then, will throughout this thesis signify deeply political aims to challenge the status quo but without necessitating dogmatic political ideals.

In recounting my initial experiences of theatre since arriving in Christchurch, I contended that I have had some sort of political transformation via the theatre. But it has been almost totally intangible. I cannot think of a single *palpable* effect that my supposed transformation has had on the “historical evolution of wider social and political realities”. Still, my experience of political theatre has helped me to understand myself as a political creature – as an individual whose experiences, frustrations, and dissatisfactions are often a product of my society shared by many others. Political theatre sparked in me an ongoing process of perceiving that many aspects of society that feel inevitable to me are not – even though I may not be able to imagine alternatives. It was political theatre that engendered in me a desire to contribute to the historical evolution of society and not passively accept it as is – though I have not (yet) actively tried to affect society except by being involved in more “political theatre”, which in itself may be seen to have had ambiguous effects.

I suppose there is no reason to limit Kershaw’s concept to *palpable* effects, and that I could consider theatre efficacious if it helps to spread such desire or raise political awareness. It seems necessary to me to have such a broad definition of efficacy. In societies in which alternative political structures have been eliminated and the notion of fundamental change has disappeared from view, it appears that the only achievable political results for theatre would be of the uncertain nature described above. Rev. Billy, CAE, and the Free Theatre performances I will analyse all seem to achieve such mostly intangible results. They may build belief in alternative social logic, reveal an unseen aspect of capitalist power, or generate an absurd and awkward situation that momentarily breaches the seeming inevitability of capitalism and

capitalist logic, allowing new thoughts and experiences to seep into the minds of audiences and participants.

Being such an inclusive method of determining political theatre's success, this definition of efficacy seems to skirt a scenario in which nearly all theatre could be deemed efficacious and therefore political. I therefore wish to trace a well-known view of theatre to clarify this condition. Most theatre, as is established, has generally been conservative, a celebration of the dominant culture. This is true from ancient Greek theatre through to the mainstream theatres of today – the Christchurch Court Theatre, Broadway in New York, and the West End in London – despite these theatres' not proclaiming any political intent. Theatre theorists and practitioners like Erwin Piscator, Bertolt Brecht, and Augusto Boal have proclaimed and analysed the conservative politics of this theatre that pretends to be "apolitical". They introduced or congealed the category of "political theatre" as that which is against this status quo – a classification that I wish to follow.

Boal wrote: "Those who try to separate theater from politics try to lead us into error – and this is a political attitude" (1974/2000, ix). He claims that Greek tragedy habitually followed a structure later recorded by Aristotle in his *Poetics*. In spite of Aristotle's declaration of the independence of dramatic poetry and politics, Boal contends that: "Aristotle constructs the first, extremely powerful poetic-political system for intimidation of the spectator, for elimination of the 'bad' or illegal tendencies of the audience" (xxvi). The aim of tragedy was *catharsis*: the purging of the audience's "bad" traits. Greek tragedy was, as a result, a celebration of the dominant order, conservative to the utmost – especially in light of citizens' obligatory attendance. Boal reveals a hidden politics where none was professed, but the discipline of "political theatre", as he and I wish to consider it, is an intentional practice.

Historically, there have been many examples of theatres that serve a similar function, and operate in a similar way, as Greek tragedy. Most obviously, perhaps, are the religious performances of the Middle Ages, exemplified for Boal by the medieval drama *Everyman*. Though the type of catharsis, as Boal reveals, is somewhat different to the Aristotelian, the conservative function remains – in this case reinforcing the importance of the church, faith, and repentance (Boal 1974/2000, 42). A similarly conservative function has arguably pervaded all mainstream theatres in all times, apart perhaps from a few popular forms such as the *Commedia dell'Arte*. It might

even be said that it is fascism that best recaptured – consciously – the ethos of ancient Greek tragedy. Mussolini’s Italy endeavoured to create a theatre for the masses able to accommodate 20,000 spectators, with the express aim of cultivating a nationalist spirit (Gaborik 2004). Hitler improved upon this conformist purpose by theatricalising – or aestheticising – politics itself, making grand State ceremonies that were intended to produce the same purgative effect as Greek tragedy. Walter Benjamin influentially criticised Fascism for introducing aesthetics into political life, contending that “all efforts to render politics aesthetic culminate in one thing: war” (1936/1970, 241). Though fascism intentionally and openly used theatre to further its political programme, this theatre was in service of the status quo and not against it – a fascist versus a radical sense of “political”.

Though attendance of theatre today is optional and voluntary, and though theatre is typically considered “independent” from politics, Aristotle’s *Poetics* remains the dominant system behind all conventional theatre. In fact, Boal sees this system as dominant in Western television and film as well: “movies, theater, and television united, through a common basis in Aristotelian poetics, for repression of the people” (xxvi). Boal’s contention regarding the conservative function of Greek tragedy can easily be transposed to make similar claims about mainstream theatre today, from Broadway musicals and West End theatre, to local professional and repertory theatres, to the amateur and school theatres that strive to emulate them. Though political in a very obvious sense, none of this theatre will be central to this thesis on political theatre.

The term itself – “political theatre” – is typically associated with the radical left, particularly Erwin Piscator’s 1929 book *The Political Theatre*, which detailed his efforts to create and sustain a theatre for the proletariat with the objective of replacing capitalism with a classless society (1929/1980). Piscator had picked up on the new form of agitprop (agitation and propaganda) theatre that originated almost simultaneously in the U.S.S.R. and Weimar Germany – a form that had been born with the immediate goal of communicating news to largely illiterate working class populations. C. D. Innes discusses the necessary aesthetic constraints of these theatres: the stage equipment had to be moveable and therefore makeshift, in order to avoid police; the scripts had to be easy to learn because the actors were typically amateurs, and the news changed daily; the characterisations had to be blunted for impact; and the content had to be striking, immediately relevant, and easy to

understand (Innes 1972). Agitprop aimed to rally the proletariat, often with simple slogans and emotional clichés, using Marxism or the Communist Party platform as foundational principles. In its original sense, then, “political theatre” is fundamentally opposed to the Aristotelian model by, among other things, being overtly political and propagandistic. The KPD (Communist Party) in Germany began sponsoring, and controlling, numerous agitprop troupes, and demanded a primitive aesthetic. Art, in their view, was subsidiary to politics. Piscator was a great aesthetic innovator, and tried repeatedly to establish stable theatres for the proletariat with lighting, film projection, mechanized sets, and more. Though the KPD scorned his aesthetic experiments, Piscator’s aims remained utilitarian: to influence voters, clarify left-wing policies, and help bring about a classless society.

Piscator and his sometime collaborator Bertolt Brecht are the two most influential figures to shape current connotations of the term “political theatre”. Brecht is perhaps best known for developing a body of technical and aesthetic techniques known as “epic theatre”, among which the “alienation effect” has become nearly synonymous with his name. This form was developed to distance spectators from the story, to reduce the empathy that is necessary for an Aristotelian catharsis to take place. Instead, said Brecht, the audience’s capacity for judgment and action should be aroused (B Brecht 1930/1978). Brecht also developed a quite different, didactic form called the *Lehrstück*, or learning-play – and there is clear evidence from the last year of his life that Brecht intended to discard his “epic theatre” in favour of a new innovation that he was starting to call “dialectical theatre” (Willett 1964, 281). But through all his innovations, and despite – like Piscator – an ambiguous relationship to the Communist Party, Brecht consistently aimed to create theatre to help realise a classless society. The most influential political theatres, of Brecht and Piscator, were contingent upon the existence of and belief in alternative social structures to capitalism – in this case socialism and Communism. These clear and tangible utilitarian aims seem impossible today in a society with no revolutionary context or belief in such alternative social ideals.

Augusto Boal consciously built on Brecht’s practice. He applauded Brecht’s anti-Aristotelian developments but criticised him for keeping spectators in their seats in a traditional theatre building. Boal set out to *move* spectators, to turn them into the creators of the theatre, labelling them “spect-actors” – protagonists of the dramatic action. Boal’s initial techniques were developed as a pedagogical tool to help poor

workers in the *barrios* of Brazil and Argentina to recognise their oppression and overcome it, once again with the aim of generating a classless society. Boal particularly applied the radical pedagogical theory of Paulo Freire, whose *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* declared the need for the oppressed to be the agents of their own education, and for political consciousness to be grounded in experience (1972, 28). Boal's use of action and audience participation – providing his spect-actors with experience – clearly informs the case studies chosen for scrutiny in this thesis, which often try to activate audiences in a similar way. (My Brechtian *Siegfried* task was an experiment in Freirian pedagogy, forcing us to be the agents of our own education.) Arguably these theatres seek to establish a revolutionary context and build belief in an alternative society. As Jean-Paul Sartre once said of French society in the 1950s (which may be truer today), “we” have to be more than critical because Brecht's audience is already “politicised” but ours is not (1976, 49). Boal's techniques of action and participation could be seen as expanding the function of political theatre for a society without a revolutionary context.

One further paradigmatic political theatre seems key to this discussion: the Living Theatre. In 1939, Piscator travelled to New York City and founded a drama school there as part of the New School for Social Research. In 1945, another German émigré, Judith Malina, began attending – to study theatre under Piscator. She was inspired by his conception of theatre as a political tool, but was committed to pacifism and anarchism. Two years later, she and Julian Beck co-founded the Living Theatre, which she still directs today, nearly 60 years later. Over the course of its existence, the Living Theatre has refashioned itself numerous times. But the most significant political period of its existence, the face of the Living Theatre that has most influenced successors and that probably most impacted society at the time, was its period in the '60s as an anarchist collective.

In 1964, the group went to Europe for what would end up a four-and-a-half year exile. This period in Europe put members in closer contact with the international youth protest culture of the time and influenced the group's theatrical and political goals in a major way. Ulrica Bell Perkins describes their return to America in 1968:

They had left with the desire and some practice in transforming the traditional actor-spectator relationship; they returned with a commitment to create, if possible, an anarchist society by a total esthetic assault on the audience leading first to spiritual and then political transformation. (1982, 145)

Among the performances that emerged from this period, it was undoubtedly *Paradise Now* that was the most influential and controversial – being the culmination of that highly politicised era. *Paradise Now* took the performance into the streets as an incitement to social change, and solidified the use of theatre as real-life action – as the case studies explored in this thesis do.

As with Piscator and Brecht, the historical context during which the Living Theatre was performing these pieces was important to their impact. Alongside the prevalent protest culture of the time, an ample belief in the plausibility of anarchism had built up. Anarchism was not just the political foundation for, but also the goal of, *Paradise Now*. Though the Living Theatre had experimented with Brecht's plays and theories (and Marxism), it was the theatrical ideals of Antonin Artaud that buttressed *Paradise*, which was intended as a therapeutic ritual through which the audience would be so *viscerally* affected that they would create paradise, *now* (Perkins 1982, 185). This paradise was nothing short of an anarchist utopia without governments, violence, or laws – inspired by the writings of Mikhail Bakunin. The final stage of the performance ended with the actors leading spectators into the street, with the intent of beginning the revolution in the real world. Like Piscator and Brecht, the Living Theatre provides a foundational model of political theatre that is overtly and directly political, and reliant upon the perceived viability of an alternative social structure – in this case anarchism.

While the techniques of these influential political theatres are relevant to the case studies investigated in this thesis, the political platforms of communism and anarchism may not be – at least not in their traditional guises. With no radical context or belief in alternative social ideals, political theatre today seems to have more ambiguous goals – hence the need for a broad notion of efficacy and radicalism as in Kershaw's definitions. The Living Theatre, still operating today, now lists as its primary mission: "To call into question / who we are to each other / in the social environment of the theater" (Living Theatre 2006). This mission is ostensibly more akin to my experience of *Siegfried* than to the Living Theatre's former anarchist aims, indicating an unavoidably subtle notion of what political theatre might accomplish. The political theatres discussed in this thesis strive for, and often achieve, largely intangible effects – a situation that does not necessarily indicate a lack of impact.

Postmodernism, in all its complexity, is clearly at the heart of this thesis. In seeing a need to expand ideas of what political theatre might achieve and locating efficacy in aesthetics rather than explicit political content, my hypothesis in this thesis is on some level plainly “postmodernist”. I wish briefly to distinguish the views of this thesis from some other prominent ideas of postmodernism. In large part I find that the theories of Fredric Jameson and Jean Baudrillard adequately capture my experience of contemporary society, in which consumer capitalism seems to be a fact of life rather than a topic for discussion and debate. Both Jameson and Baudrillard see nearly all art today as powerless to instigate political change because of an advanced mode of capitalism that they variously call late capitalism, multinational capitalism, the consumer society – or even refer to by the term “postmodernism” itself. In Jameson’s view, postmodernism indicates apolitical art because the cultural realm of which theatre is a part is inextricable from the economic and political realms. Baudrillard, though sometimes mistaken as “revelling in” this uncertainty for reasons I will discuss in a later chapter, similarly theorises a great difficulty in engendering social change – especially via the cultural realm. Both theorists, however, commit themselves to conceiving, in this problematical situation, how political opposition might be possible. It is their theories, often considered cynical about the plausibility of political art, that have been the strongest influence on my understanding of postmodernism and the role of culture in society.

Philip Auslander is possibly the most influential “postmodern” performance theorist. As with Kershaw, and the terms he defined to expand the notion of what political theatre might achieve, Auslander seeks to redefine “political”. In his book *Presence and Resistance*, which focuses on postmodern performance in the 1980s, he claims that the solo performance of Laurie Anderson and Spalding Gray, the stand-up comedy of Andy Kaufman, and the postmodern theatre of the Wooster Group, were political. As evidenced by his title, Auslander does not seek the clear political ideals of Piscator or the advancement of a particular alternative political structure but rather strategies of *resistance*. Auslander seeks ways in which contemporary theatre or performance might not wholly uphold dominant values. This notion of resistance is useful, as the case studies of this thesis often achieve similarly indistinct effects – destabilising capitalist inevitability, striving for autonomy, and so on.

Auslander consistently lauds his examples of postmodern performance for not claiming to stand outside of postmodernism, or presenting an alternative to it, but

rather fighting it “deconstructively, resistantly, from *within*” (1992, 51). His main thesis in *Presence and Resistance* is that these performers all in some sense reveal their own constructedness, or acknowledge their lack of reality, by using a “refusal of presence” – and in so doing launch critiques of mediatised culture (1992, 54-55). The process of mediatisation, Auslander says, is “mimed” in these performances and therefore brought to the forefront for consideration even as it occurs. These performers do not evade this dominant process of mediatisation, but reveal their awareness – and raise others’ awareness – of the process. With the possible exception of the Critical Art Ensemble, the case studies of this thesis are less embroiled in the process of mediatisation than the performers and theatres that Auslander discusses. Yet his notion of deconstructing presence and raising awareness of dominant processes still applies to these case studies.

In arguing that the postmodern aesthetics of Laurie Anderson, the Wooster Group, and others contain within them a sense of political resistance, Auslander embraces the possibility that overtly commodified art is potentially critical (1992, 3). He consistently maintains that these performers are political by maintaining ambiguity and frustrating expectations. He certainly seems correct in terms of their aesthetics, as in Andy Kaufman’s refusal to drop the “mask” of his character Tony Clifton or the Wooster Group’s ambiguous use of blackface. What Auslander may neglect to recognise is that, as overtly commodified art, the examples he cites paradoxically *fulfil* expectations by challenging them. These performances are, in that regard, perhaps similar to art films, which are expected to be quirky, or Hollywood’s psychological thrillers, which audiences expect to have an “unexpected” twist at the end.⁴ That is, the examples Auslander refers to are typically an affirmation for the contemplation of select audiences who come and leave with expectations intact. The theatre *actions* explored in this thesis arguably extend Auslander’s strategies by frequently assaulting unsuspecting audiences and consistently challenging or provoking the status quo. In most cases, they strive to frustrate both aesthetic and functional expectations – refusing to take on a role as a commodity. This argument does not entail that Auslander’s examples have no efficacy, but if the argument for

⁴ See Bordwell (2002) and Siska (1980) for discussions of the art film as a genre.

their political worth is that they frustrate expectations, then fulfilling expectations as a luxury or even mainstream commodity seems to undermine the argument.

My own relatively privileged status has undoubtedly shaped the concept of political with which I am interested. There are clearly many successful issue-based and identity-political theatres – to the point that, as Baudrillard suggested, “political” has become the norm. Theorising a politics rooted in experience, I acknowledge that these theatres would affect my interest more if I were female, or Maori, or anything other than a straight white male. I wish to set these political theatres aside, however, since analysing them would not allow me to examine the particular problematic of political theatre that this thesis explores. My experience – the crux of *my* identity – is of the apparent inevitability of capitalism.

I have titled this thesis “moving targets” because of this very problematic: there are specific traits of contemporary capitalism that complicate the prospect of radical political theatre and necessitate that opposition can never remain static. The traditional and widely recognised strategies of political theatre – employed by Piscator, Brecht, many troupes of the 1960s, Boal – have fallen into disrepute, or at least seas of doubt, in late capitalist society. These accepted paradigms of political theatre were all typically directed at a specific target audience, aimed against a particular target issue, and advocated a definite political programme – such as socialism – as a solution. In contemporary society, all three of these traditional platforms are undermined.

As discussed earlier, there is no class today that resembles the revolutionary proletariat necessary to Piscator and Brecht, or the extensive protest culture that nourished the Living Theatre and other groups of the ‘60s. These theatres were often directed *against* the bourgeoisie, another class that no longer exists as such. Instead, Western society seems to be peopled by a vast petit-bourgeoisie: people with a vested interest in following capitalist logic but victimised and limited by that very logic. The “oppressed” of this society, to use Freire’s and Boal’s term, are perhaps indistinguishable from the “oppressors”. If a “revolutionary” or threatening sub-class or sub-culture arises, it quickly becomes commodified and complicit in the capitalist system. Perhaps in this light, my personal experience – not connecting with any identity political theatre – is becoming more relevant rather than less: it seems that many or most people today only achieve a sense of identity through commodities, defining themselves by the clothes on their back or the tunes on their iPod.

Viable target issues are also difficult to find, as the political system is so dispersed and complicated that pinpointing with certainty the source of any societal problem is impossible. If a theatre today wished to combat poverty, for instance, it would not know where to aim its critique. It could target a failed welfare system, a floundering economy, a low minimum wage, an inadequate education system, expensive housing, and so on. The root of any problem, it seems, cannot be located, so one can only target the constantly changing symptoms – once again forcing *motion*.

This predicament is related to a lack of target solutions. Piscator's egalitarianism was substantiated by an active Communist Party and many workingmen's groups that helped to spread a belief in the possibility of such a society. The Living Theatre's anarchism was bolstered by the prevalent protest culture of the time. But the collapse of the Soviet Union and dismantling of the Berlin Wall seem to have been the final indicators that any political structure other than the present one is now considered utterly unreasonable. If a theatre as unambiguously radical as that of Piscator or the Living Theatre can exist in this society, it would undoubtedly be in a new form.

Even if such targets – audience, issues, and solutions – are discovered, they quickly move, through the amazing capacity of the capitalist system to avoid responsibility and co-opt potentially subversive elements, incorporating them into consumer society. Everything potentially threatening to dominant power, from theatre to political movements, can be disarmed into a capitalist product – and the speed at which this happens is constantly accelerating. The transgender traits – hair, clothes, etc. – of Laurie Anderson likely had oppositional potential originally. But the mainstream has expanded such that androgyny is a safe and even marketable image that appeals to a significant consumer population – as evidenced by Calvin Klein advertisements, among many others. The exceedingly slow paced, long duration, and largely non-narrative early works by Robert Wilson – with no dialogue at all (*Deafman Glance*), or conversations of gibberish (*Einstein on the Beach*) – made audiences uneasy and challenged notions of what theatre could be. Soon, however, Wilson became an elite commodity, creating hugely popular multi-million dollar theatre spectacles with high-class appeal (Holmberg 1996; S Brecht 1978/1994). It is as if his originality, which was the source of his threat, became commonplace after only a few productions. The mainstream expanded to absorb this new style, and

Wilson became a recognisable and exclusive brand. The capitalist mainstream is fuelled by constant surface or stylistic change, forcing opposition to keep up.

In this respect, political movements are equally susceptible. The anti-establishment and anti-consumerist views of punks were quickly disarmed by the mainstream amalgamation of their fashion, with many clothing outlets selling designer safety pins and pre-tattered clothing, marketing “the punk look” as an image not just devoid of subversive political intent but actually contributing to the capitalist system. The countercultural views of hippies similarly subsist today primarily as exclusive fashion. Even second-hand clothing stores in Christchurch capitalise on it, with a more expensive “retro” section; anything redolent of hippies costs twice as much. If a point of resistance or opposition arises, the mainstream quickly moves not to fight it but to amalgamate it. If one seeks more than superficial style changes, then, it seems that one must develop a strategy to avoid such amalgamation – which seems to demand *motion* and constantly evolving tactics. Political theatre – like the case studies of this thesis – must both seek out the moving targets of capital and *be* a moving target to avoid reclamation by capitalism.

This predicament is not entirely new. Such “movement” was already true of Piscator, Brecht, and the Living Theatre – and is a large part of their appeal. I do not wish to freeze them in a historical or aesthetic moment and set their strategy of that moment as a model, but rather to esteem their consistently radical aims and approaches. As indicated above, Brecht certainly adapted his theatrical strategies constantly, but his fundamental political goals endured throughout. He consistently wanted to revise and update his theatre for revolutionary purposes rather than sell it as a final product. This view of Brecht is not always accepted. He for instance has been strongly criticised for his lawsuit against the film adaptation of his *Threepenny Opera*, often being accused of hypocrisy and bourgeois exploitation (Giles 1997, 39-62). But it seems clear that Brecht’s primary concerns were political and artistic rather than financial – that he objected precisely to the conventional (aesthetic, filmic) treatment of a text that required experimentation to heighten its political significance. In this same vein, Brecht has been condemned for his later development of detailed models of how his plays ought to be performed. Critics have used this fact as evidence that Brecht was concerned with *ownership* rather than *experimentation*. It appears, however, that Brecht paradoxically felt pushed into the use of models to insure that his plays would be produced in his experimental style rather than in a conventional

manner. He states unambiguously that he was keen on continued development and adaptation even of the models, and that he welcomed creative variations (1949/1978, 212). He merely opposed the conventional style of theatre with its Aristotelian catharsis. A similar sort of experimentation was characteristic of Piscator, who had a reputation as a great aesthetic innovator, and the Living Theatre, which has thoroughly revised its political and theatrical goals numerous times while retaining its radicalism.

Though the strategy of moving targets does not seem new, the rate at which such motion must occur is perpetually accelerating. Paul Virilio theorised the disappearance of power into a vector of speed where any traditional notion of power – knowledge, wealth, or might – is eliminated and replaced by “moving-power” (1986). The fortress of capitalism remains impenetrable because, in fact, no fortress can ever be located. It seems possible, then, that the increase in speed at which capitalism seems to absorb conflict, disagreement, or even just impropriety, might mark a considerable change in the required approach to political theatre.

I wish briefly to trace the process of how I came to choose the particular case studies of Rev. Billy, the Critical Art Ensemble, *Christmas Shopping*, and *The Last Days of Mankind*. This chronicle is significant insofar as it helps to explain why I did not choose other equally plausible political theatres and how my view of these case studies now differs from when I first selected them. When I came to write this thesis, it was not long after the September 11 attacks, and I was avidly seeking blatantly political theatres like the ones described above – Piscator, Brecht, Boal, and the Living Theatre. When I started looking around for contemporary political theatres to investigate, I found very few that resembled these foundational models – none of which were in New Zealand. There are the remnants of the American radicalism of the ‘60s: the Living Theatre still operates, and the San Francisco Mime Troupe has been doing *Commedia*-like political street theatre since 1959. But so much has been written about them – and in many regards they are indeed “remnants” that reveal more about the past of political theatre than the present. In any case, both groups are making fewer calls for revolution recently, instead focussing on specific issues (Schechter 2003, 218). There was a recent surge of new avidly party political theatres critical of the Bush administration, but none of them seemed to have deeper political goals than lampooning the President. I could have focussed on the theatre actions of ACT UP (the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power), which spurred a renewal of political

activism worldwide and shares the blatant aesthetic techniques of agitprop. But I felt that such issue-based theatre generally did not match the sweeping goals of Piscator or the Living Theatre. And it seems clear that the peak of ACT UP's influence – at least theatrically – passed in the late '80s or early '90s. I discovered the agitational theatre of Utpal Dutt in India, which preaches violent revolution and the armed overthrow of the state (Gunawardana 2003). But I was interested in models that could apply here in New Zealand where I now live and where my interest in political theatre originated. Dutt's theatre for the vast peasant population of India seemed inappropriate for this comparatively wealthy middle class society, and I think that his calls for violent revolution would be off-putting for a generally apathetic (or complacent) audience. The same problem arises with El Teatro Campesino, which has been creating street theatre for poor Mexican farm workers for 40 years – but did not seem to apply in the West. And I balked similarly at Boal, whose *Theatre of the Oppressed* seems valuable for the *barrios* of Brazil and Argentina, but did not translate well into the First World.⁵

I was, of course, pursuing a contradiction. The initial experiences that secured my interest in political theatre were ones that already implicitly challenged conventional notions of the discipline. When I approached political theatre from a theoretical and academic side, however, I was excited by the often brash and blatantly political initial models and wished to recapture that radical energy. Yet when I found comparable theatres, like El Teatro Campesino or the Mime Troupe, I was already rejecting them on a gut level, based on the presumption that such class-based and propagandistic theatre was irrelevant in a society that, in my experience, was stubbornly middle class and capitalist – and possibly too sophisticated to be swayed by such shamelessly undisguised propaganda. Clearly, each of these theatres has an important place in its own social context, very particular and political for being so local – but somehow did not speak to me or my concerns.

Partly, no doubt, this view betrays a severe limitation in my experience. Between my white middle class upbringing in Midwestern American suburbia, a summer at a massively wealthy corporation in Texas, and a courageous move to a

⁵ Boal discusses the problems he encountered in bringing his theatre to the First World. See Boal (1981a/1990; 1995). Others have also chronicled reflections on their own use of Boal's techniques in the First World (Schutzman 1990; Schutzman and Cohen-Cruz 1994).

University niche in Christchurch, I have had shockingly little exposure to minority subcultures or anything resembling a working class. But it seems fair to conclude that, though there is far more economic or “class” disparity than what I have experienced, there is not a class consciousness like that which Piscator or Brecht exploited. In other words, my middle class concerns and problems are seemingly widespread in the West.

The vast majority of Westerners, it seems, consider themselves part of the “middle class”, which seems now to include people with incomes ranging from under \$30,000 to well over \$100,000 annually. Rather than referring specifically to economic status, then, the contemporary application of class seems to refer to a belief system or outlook. “Middle class” generally implies a modicum of financial stability and a belief in the mainstream myth that with hard work and determination anyone can raise their standard of living – and that this is of course desirable. Baudrillard calls this scenario “the parodic triumph of the classless society”: nearly everyone strives to be a successful capitalist regardless of his actual economic status (1992/1994, 52). The dominant “class” seems to be something approximating Marx’s (and later Brecht’s) “petty bourgeoisie”: a class of people that “renews itself as a supplementary part of bourgeois society”, helping to propagate bourgeois values but not benefiting from them (Marx and Engels 1848/1963). Whether or not one agrees with this entire proposition, it is fairly clear that the proletariat is no more – or at least no longer exists in the “West”. Slavoj Žižek identifies in Marx an “implicit distinction between ‘working class’ – a simple category of social Being – and ‘proletariat’ – a category of Truth, the revolutionary Subject proper” (2002, 81). Though labour unions still operate, and workers remain workers, no such revolutionary class is prominent in the West.

Coming back to my contradictory search, then, I was – without necessarily realising it – seeking theatres that were plainly and deeply radical like the original political theatres of the early 20th Century, but that had a new or different political foundation that was not rooted in an “obsolete” alternative system or in a class struggle. I was looking for attempts at generating a new political theatre for the masses, which, it seems, would necessarily be for the “middle class”. More appropriately, perhaps, this theatre would be *against* the middle class as agents of the status quo – theatre to help or to push me, and others like me, to acquire a political

consciousness, conceive of alternative social systems, or reject the inevitability of capitalist logic.

In Reverend Billy and the Critical Art Ensemble, I found two such theatres. These theatres appear and avow to be fundamentally and openly radical, apparently challenging the hypotheses drawn from my own aesthetic and accidental experiences of political theatre. They target *me* as an instrument of capitalist power. They engage in theatre *actions*. And they each base their radicalism in such a way that an existing revolutionary context, class struggle, or belief in alternative political structures does not seem necessary to sustain their theatre. That is, though they resemble the radicalism of Piscator or the Living Theatre, they endorse political views that are very different to the communism of Piscator or anarchism of the Living Theatre in the '60s.

Having chosen these theatres, it was apparent that I ought to reflect upon my own experience of theatrical actions. *Last Days*, as my initial experience of political theatre, was an obviously useful choice to reflect back upon – especially considering that it seems to have achieved an effect similar to that which the Critical Art Ensemble seeks. Having not had a comparable experience to Rev. Billy's strategies, it seemed imperative to create one. The Free Theatre members were willing, so we undertook the process that resulted in *Christmas Shopping*. These theatres, like those of Rev. Billy and CAE, base their radicalism on something other than traditional political ideals.

Rev. Billy's authenticity, *Christmas Shopping*'s Christianity, CAE's autonomy, and the aesthetic singularity of *Last Days* all seem to be attempts at fashioning a new concept of political in what may be called a post-political age. Moreover, each of these platforms is well suited to theatre *actions*. Authenticity, in Rev. Billy's conception, entails putting one's beliefs into action. The Christianity of *Christmas Shopping* was preached, but it became most radical when carried out via the Christian act of giving. CAE's autonomy entails not just thinking or existing outside of capitalist logic, but in having a pedagogical experience that allows one to *act* autonomously. And the singular aesthetic of *Last Days*, in being attained through free, public street theatre, was necessarily a singular *act*. Through their untraditional platforms and theatrical actions, the four case studies of this thesis seemingly attempt to establish new possibilities for political theatre.

My own ongoing inability to fathom the category of “political”, evident from my experience of *Last Days* and *Siegfried*, seems to be a reasonably common phenomenon – typical of what may be deemed a post-political age. This concept of course originated, for me, in my own ongoing struggle to grasp Brecht – and, through Brecht, somehow to come to understand my own inability to think and act politically. I thought and felt – I continue to think and feel – that Western civilisation is not quite right. It seems often unjust and fraught with inequality. Despite its exaltation of freedom, people’s daily actions seem highly restricted, especially by the need for money. I seem to desire political change. But I cannot even be certain of my *desire*, for if asked, “Change to what?” I am left speechless. I cannot truly fathom alternatives. The approaches of my four case studies, I will show, foreground the aesthetic – which seems in these cases to parallel a desire for radical change without the ability to articulate it in a coherent political argument.

Near the beginning of my research, I read Francis Fukuyama’s *The End of History and the Last Man*. I was angered and repulsed by its central premise that the ideals of liberal democracy and capitalism cannot be improved upon (1992). I was incensed not because I had alternatives in mind that Fukuyama was belittling, not because I hate this society and find it insufferable, but because his very thesis seemed to impinge on my freedom – to render my vague dissatisfactions and desire for change nothing more than whingeing. I was angered more because, despite the beauty I find in the visions of Marx, Bakunin, Herbert Marcuse, or even Aldous Huxley, I could not shake the feeling that Fukuyama might be right. Even when presented with alternatives, even after studying them in depth, I remain unable concretely to imagine a revolution or a fundamentally different society. While they are certainly contestable, the theatre actions of the four case studies examined in this thesis are attempts to navigate a new understanding of politics – to create political theatre for people, like me, of a post-political age.

Chapter Two
Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping
An Odd God:
Building belief in authenticity

In December 2000, a preacher – dressed all in black with a white tuxedo jacket and white preacher’s collar – approached the Disney Store in Times Square, New York City. He drew looks from fellow pedestrians, partly due to his outfit and high pompadour hair, and partly because he was being filmed by a German documentary crew. He entered the store with assurance, weaving his way through the shoppers and displays of *101 Dalmatians* and *Aladdin* figurines. One of the shoppers turned towards him as he approached and nodded meaningfully. The reverend proceeded to the back of the store, turned around, raised his hands, and began preaching in a loud, articulate, sing-song voice: “We are here today, children – praise be, do I have a witness? We are here today to discourage the purchase of these little neurotic Christmas tchotchkes”. As he spoke these words he gestured to the rows of stuffed animals and plastic replicas of animated Disney film characters. He slowly strolled through the store as he continued his sermon, condemning the poor working conditions of the Chinese factories where the toys are produced, at one point grabbing a hanging sweatshirt and shouting: “This is e-vil.” A Disney employee was following him through the store, addressing him by name: “It’s time to leave now, Bill.” But the Reverend was just getting warmed up. As he neared the centre of the store, his speech became more urgent and less stylised: “We have to start our own church that isn’t about the worship of the retail moment... We don’t need Disney to mediate between us and our own lives. I don’t need Peter Pan to fly through the air to have an imagination.” A crowd had gathered around him by then, as he stood in the focal point of the store. His speaking became more conversational in tone: “My life isn’t a Disney production. Isn’t that amazing? How about yours? Is your life a Disney production?” One shopper, now an audience member, shouted: “No way!” The reverend walked up to her and placed his hand on her forehead. She wobbled her head awkwardly and emitted an embarrassed wail. The reverend backed away, looked at her, and bellowed: “Hallelujah! She’s stopped shopping” (Talen 2000a).

This preacher’s name is Reverend Billy – a character created and performed by actor Bill Talen, though it is often difficult to distinguish the two. His outward

appearance is that of a zealous right-wing evangelist, but the content of his sermons and his actions in the store confirm a radical left-wing purpose. The Reverend seems to be a political parody. I want to assess this performance practice using the theory of Fredric Jameson, particularly his claim that, in late capitalist society, parody is impossible and has been replaced by an apolitical form he labels “pastiche”. I wish to gauge whether and how the politics of Rev. Billy’s performances can be defended against Jameson’s theory.

Rev. Billy’s primary goal, I will argue, is to advocate an “authentic” life in opposition to consumer capitalism. “Authenticity” is a multifaceted concept that can incorporate aesthetic, moralistic, cultural, spiritual, or political judgements. Rev. Billy integrates all of these aspects into his adaptable performance practice. The versatility of his “theology of authenticity” enables him to attack the moving targets of capital, modifying his performance to suit any topic, location, or audience. “Authenticity”, however, is a disputable basis for political theatre. Many theorists, Jameson among them, see authenticity as an irrelevant category, demolished by the advanced mechanisms of capitalism. Advocating authenticity, by Jameson’s theory, would be apolitical: a form of nostalgia or desire for an earlier, or pre-capitalist, society. In this chapter I will explore these contradictions to make the argument that Rev. Billy has profitably mobilised a community to take action against consumerism through his aesthetic, theatrical actions – using the term “profitably” in two possibly opposing senses, to indicate both the *political* and *financial* success of Rev. Billy’s anticconsumerism. I will begin by tracing Rev. Billy’s development in order to elaborate on his apparent parody, his concept of “authenticity”, and his strategy of confronting “moving targets”.

In 1997, Bill Talen was upset by the corporate gentrification of New York City, particularly the renovation of Times Square that saw the Disney Corporation coming to own most of the prime property there. Small businesses, independent vendors, the homeless, sex workers, and other “vagrants” were being hidden from view to make the hub of Manhattan “friendlier for tourists”. Of all the now-unwelcome groups it was chiefly the street preachers, in Talen’s view, who were able to survive. They did not rely on an income from their preaching, required no permit, usually broke no law, and were generally considered less threatening than prostitutes and the destitute. Plus, they were highly *mobile* – able to disappear if threatened and reappear again at will. Talen saw a possible way to voice his opposition to the

redevelopment. He donned a fake preacher's collar, grabbed a portable pulpit, and hit the streets as the evangelist Reverend Billy to preach against the Mayor Giuliani supported Disney takeover of Times Square.

Rev. Billy began by simply preaching in Times Square, but from the start he would have been distinguishable from other street preachers. He chose to imitate the well-known paradigm of a Southern televangelist similar to Jimmy Swaggart, with the high-class style and appearance described above. *Street* preachers are widely considered disreputable – or at least are not typically clean-cut, middle class, and articulate. Taking a “high-class”, formal preaching form into the dirty low-class space of Times Square seems to establish a sense of parody even before Rev. Billy begins to speak.

The Reverend's first performances were sermons on his opposition to the Times Square redevelopment. He picked a spot in the square and began preaching like all the rest. By his own account, his first week of preaching lacked impact, primarily because nobody – in the bustle of Times Square – stopped to listen. Talen tape-recorded his early performances, and describes them as being dreadful. His speech was too hesitant, quiet, and subtle, not at all like the grandiloquent preaching of Swaggart. As he was working to improve his preaching style, he says, he would spend nights listening to the recordings of his improvised ramblings, trying to solidify his “new theology” and glean the “meaning from [his] shtick” (2003, 47). He had vague misgivings about the redevelopment, and wished to instigate political change, but was unsure exactly what he hoped to achieve. He was figuring out his politics via his performances, apparently using the experience of theatre to develop his political consciousness.

Since his chosen spot in Times Square was in sight of “an orgy of all things Disney” (Talen 2003, 47), much of his theology referenced that vast corporation. He soon began to make theatrical developments beyond “conventional” preaching, primarily in order to grab attention. He would kneel in front of the Disney Store, loudly recite sardonic prayers he had written about “the almighty” Mickey Mouse, and directly address passers-by to join him. This was a step towards forcing audience engagement – presumably a prerequisite to political *efficacy* – and, as Talen claims, it “was a good method to bring people to a common ritual that was funny” (2003, 48). He addressed target audiences as they moved through the streets and, via a participatory ritual, perhaps moved them both physically and politically towards him.

Though a useful technique, Talen reflects upon these early rituals of mocking Mickey as something *Saturday Night Live* could do – which he sees as “a yardstick for lack of impact” (2003, 48). His Mickey prayers were almost universally appealing, failing to provoke a political split. He became more aggressive and began more impertinent sermons about the emptiness of a materialistic existence. Talen cites one of his early Times Square sermons, addressed to a happy family walking by: “Is that all it takes? Buy something and life is solved for a moment? I don’t think that does the trick, children” (2003, 46). He was often told to lighten up – or shut up. By becoming offensive to some, the Reverend provoked political reactions.

Rev. Billy started to convey his notion of the “authentic” life that was being spoiled by consumerism. He felt that the Disney-led “clean-up” of Times Square was ruining the character of the area. In his sermons, the Reverend mourns the disappearance of the homeless, prostitutes, and independent vendors to corporate gentrification. What he specifically laments is the loss of interesting stories: the experience of the unknown and bizarre, the filthy and dangerous, the commingling of all walks of life. In his book, Talen expresses the opposition between an independently owned neighbourhood eatery, shut down by Disney’s lawyers, and the Broadway theatre across the street that now plays the Disney musical *The Lion King*:

Mr. Hakim’s stage had lots of knife-dancing and playacting, bad words and worse smells, and maybe suburban kids shouldn’t be there after dark. But the mouse and the lion across the street, pushed up into the lights by their hundreds of underpaid supporting actors, are completely safe, predictable, and pretty. At Hakim’s it’s dangerous to be stupid; across the street you have to be. (2003, 70)

The features of Rev. Billy’s theology – his notion of “authenticity” – apparently originated as the antithesis of the Disney aesthetic and its implications.

The Reverend’s form still consisted, at this stage, solely of sermonising to pedestrians in the square and occasionally mock worshipping Mickey Mouse. He describes his first major performance evolution as mostly accidental. During a period of self-doubt, suspecting that the Reverend Billy “experiment” was a failure, Talen entered the Disney Store to buy a present for his niece. In a strange daze, he claims, he purchased a four-foot tall stuffed Mickey, then slowly raised it over his head and began to preach (Talen 2003, 65). The performance itself remained the same: a sermon on the hollowness of consumerism and the Disney Corporation’s ruining the personality of Times Square. But the location shift changed the Reverend’s

relationship to his audience. Rather than mostly disinterested pedestrians walking past him in the square, the Reverend was now preaching to employees and patrons of the Disney Store – the very people, it seems, whose behaviours he was hoping to change. His movement into the store allowed him to reach a target audience, though he was quickly thrown out of the store and arrested.

A new dimension entered the Reverend's preaching when he entered the Disney Store. After being faced with all of the Disney products, the rows and rows of smiling stuffed and plastic faces, he began to explore where all of these products originated. He researched the company and began including in his sermons criticisms of Disney's use of sweatshop labour, which soon expanded into a wider economic critique. The Reverend condemns Disney's exorbitant prices, CEO Michael Eisner's robust salary, and Disney's ownership of many media outlets and Broadway theatres.

The "Disneyfication" of Times Square was significant both politically and theatrically, provoking the theatre journal *TDR* to devote three essays to the subject.¹ John Bell argued that Disney's prominence in Times Square seemed to confirm a certain lack of (political) contention at the end of the 20th Century, that there is:

An apparent accord among all parties (or a weariness on the part of potential dissenters) that huge corporations are in the best position to determine the shape and parameters of public spaces and popular performance venues in those spaces. (1998b)

This lack of contention Bell describes seems to corroborate the notion of a post-political age in which capitalism feels inevitable and impenetrable. In contesting Disney, Rev. Billy was also contesting this "lack of contention". Rev. Billy's "authenticity" is thereby a challenge to the concept of a post-political age and an effort to discover a new political option.

It could be said that the primary mode of Disney's operation is one of *replication*. Its animated films often replicate existing stories, myths, and legends: *Beauty and the Beast*, *Aladdin*, and *Hercules*, for instance. The corporation then offers replicas of the films' characters – stuffed animals and plastic figurines – for sale. The Disney theme parks are the culmination of replication. Actors walk around in costumes, striving to replicate the behaviour and appearance of the animated characters (which were themselves often replicas). Moreover, Disney replicates entire

¹ See Sussman (1998) and Rossi (1998) as well as Bell (1998b) quoted below.

cities and nations. Disneyland offers “Main Street America” in three-quarter size, and diminutive reproductions of the countries of the world – their architecture, food, dancing, and more – all framed as commodities. There is no need to travel to Europe or have real experiences, Disney suggests, when you can purchase and experience the Disney replicas.

Rev. Billy’s “authenticity” is the converse. He scorns commodity-logic – proposing a church that does not worship the retail moment. He validates “genuine” human interaction and existence instead of replicas, proudly proclaiming that his life is not a Disney production. Where Disney offers the safe and commodified version of every experience, Rev. Billy upholds the real experience – even or especially if it involves danger, dirt, and a sense of the unknown. He moves beyond criticising Disney’s aesthetic of replication to scorn the process that sustains it: the Third World sweatshops, cutthroat corporate practices, and more. Ostensibly using the imitative form of parody to combat the imitative form of replication is both contradictory and provocative, as I will explore in this chapter.

Having fleshed out his “theology of authenticity” through assaults on Disney, Rev. Billy decided to try conducting a more extensive church service. Not coincidentally, Talen had been the house manager, throughout the development of the Rev. Billy character and theology, at a smallish church that was routinely hired out for the staging of plays. Consequently, it was quite easy for him to arrange a season of solo performance church services – for a small entry fee – inside an actual church. Details of the Reverend’s first season of such performances are scarce, but later seasons comprised many different Christian and evangelical elements, with hymns, a creed, a sermon, the canonising of saints, and faith healings. One such season of performances won the Reverend a 1999-2000 Obie Award for Off-Broadway performance (New York Theatre Wire 2000). Taking place in a real church, with audiences in pews and Rev. Billy at the altar, these imitative church services were very nearly “authentic”. His parody seems to be an homage, reverentially using the power of the preaching paradigm to build belief in his anticonsumerist “theology”.

These church services, with their participatory rituals, put Rev. Billy in contact with many people who had similar misgivings about the Times Square redevelopment and increasingly unavoidable materialistic society. Through this process, many people – activists, Christians, and otherwise – offered to “join” the Reverend’s church, which came to be known as the Church of Stop Shopping. His

Church soon had a full choir and a regular group of congregants and collaborators. Each of his church services now covers the breadth of his theology, but converges on a central issue. At the end of the service Rev. Billy leads the congregation in an organised act of civil disobedience related to that central issue. Group invasions of the Disney Store and Starbucks' coffee shops are common.

Rev. Billy's church service is a different kind of theatre action than his store invasions. These services seemingly target audiences from the theatre community and those who likely share the Reverend's left-wing politics. Like the participatory ritual of worshipping Mickey, only more complete, these church services offer audiences a way of *moving* towards Rev. Billy both physically and politically. Through reciting an anticonsumerist creed, for instance, the audience perhaps becomes a "congregation" – a group committed to the same ideals. Each church service ends, like the Living Theatre's *Paradise Now*, by taking the theatre into the streets to seek out the moving targets of capital. There is a moving in, the act of confirmation that is the church service, followed by a moving out, an attack on consumerism.

Having a group of congregants greatly expanded the theatrical and political possibilities of the Reverend's store invasions. He began leading group assaults: as the Reverend delivered his sermon, his parishioners would chant, shout Hallelujah, and distribute informative leaflets about Disney's or Starbucks' dubious corporate practices. The knowing nod during the invasion described above was from one of the Reverend's congregants, disguised as a shopper, waiting for the right moment to hand out fliers. Still, the Reverend was often forced to leave the store quickly, and was occasionally arrested as on his first invasion occasion. Disney and Starbucks employees soon knew him by name – and Starbucks circulated a corporate memo to all of its New York City stores telling employees how to respond if Reverend Billy entered the store. The memo provided a set response in case customers ask a Starbucks employee how the employee feels about Rev. Billy's comments. Every worker was instructed to say: "Each one of our stores has become a unique part of its neighborhood. Our stores are about people" (Starbucks 2000). In response to the Reverend's "authenticity", Starbucks employed a strategy of replication, trying to make each employee's response and behaviour identical. Via this memo, Starbucks ostensibly sought to neutralise and categorise Rev. Billy. The Reverend continued his store invasions, but would sporadically introduce new theatrical and political strategies – one of which I will discuss later – to preserve or rediscover a political

impact in the more volatile store settings. His strategies evolved, making him both a moving weapon against capitalist targets and a moving target against any reprisal.

By 2000, Rev. Billy had established a significant reputation with his church services and repeated Disney and Starbucks invasions. He was the subject of many newspaper articles – in the news, or theatre, or business sections of the paper. And he began to be called upon by activist groups and grass roots organisations to help in their causes. One major strand of his performances originated when New York University (NYU) announced that it was planning to demolish several buildings in Greenwich Village – a largely residential area known for its artistic, bohemian culture – to build a giant new Law School building. One of the buildings slated for demolition was a house where Edgar Allan Poe had lived, where he finished writing *The Raven*. The Reverend made it one of his pet causes to save “Poe House”. In Rev. Billy’s notion of “authenticity” there seem to be a couple of reasons for adopting this cause. Poe, Talen says, “was so gloriously Odd” (2003, 95). Poe’s fascination with the unknown, Talen implies, was a challenge to the logic of replication: *The Raven* is a sacred text in Rev. Billy’s church, and deserves its shrine. There was also the building itself: an old character home, to Rev. Billy, is more authentic than a high-end commodity Law School. His adaptable concept of authenticity enables him to move issues and locations in this manner, from attacking corporate stores to defending a dead poet’s home from the wrecking ball.

In September 2000, Rev. Billy, his congregants, and other interested actors and activists occupied the house. The Reverend shouted a sermon (through his bullhorn) from the rooftop, clarifying for those gathered on the street below what NYU’s plans were and why this group felt that it was important to preserve Poe’s house. People in the streets registered their approval by shouting Hallelujahs and Amens. The other actors wore raven costumes, danced on the rooftops, played instruments, and read out stanzas of *The Raven* for all to hear (Talen 2000c).

Three months later, the future of Poe House still uncertain, Rev. Billy led a church service, the focus of which was the effort to save the house. The service culminated in a march to Poe House – with a crowd of more than a hundred – to read in unison all 18 stanzas of *The Raven*. Preserving Poe House was an ongoing action that had many fronts of combat, with a fundraising operation, a media campaign, and a legal team all contributing towards the same goal. Rev. Billy’s performances were but one important part of the overall effort, consolidating public sentiment and

mobilising it into the streets. In the end, NYU agreed to keep the façade of Poe House and the poet's bedroom intact and allow public access to that portion of their new Law Building.

The Reverend now frequently works in conjunction with activist groups and other forms of organised resistance. Other causes he has supported include saving community gardens in New York City from destruction, trying to prevent the erection of billboards, advocating for the Madison Square Garden Street Vendors Association when vendors were being cast out of the stadium for the 2004 Republican National Convention, and much more. The Reverend has been featured in at least two documentary films, has done radio broadcasts, written a regular column in *The Ecologist*, and now spends much of his time doing national and international tours that comprise performances, workshops, and lectures. In the past few months, at the time of this writing, the Reverend and his choir have performed at Wal-Mart headquarters in Arkansas, the Mall of America in Minnesota, Disneyland in south Florida, and much more.

While Talen has constantly evolved as a performer, both devising and adopting theatrical forms, two particular forms have remained staples in his repertoire for years: the sermon and the creed. Both of these elements were developed in Talen's first year as Reverend Billy, and he routinely changes their content – to incorporate them into most performances – while preserving the basic form. My detailed analyses in this chapter will consequently focus on these two core elements. The creed in particular seems to be a useful “summary” of the core elements of Rev. Billy's “theology”.

I refer to this vital element of Rev. Billy's performances as a creed because it is always a statement of belief, similar to the Apostles' Creed common to many Protestant services. The earliest Christian creeds principally affirmed the belief that Jesus is Lord, the full revelation of God made incarnate. This doctrine was thought impossible and blasphemous by the established Jewish community from which Christianity splintered.² The creed form ought therefore to be seen as *originating* from a desire to mark a community – a new group of adherents to a new type of faith – as

² *Encyclopaedia Britannica Online*, s.vv. “Creed.” <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9109490?query=creed&ct=eb> (accessed May 29, 2005).

distinct from an accepted norm. The creation of a new creed therefore implies a political break from the current norm.

Unlike the Christian creeds, Rev. Billy's creed frequently changes to suit the immediate political concerns of its performance, at least adding a few specific lines relating to that day's action. Creeds historically pull together the core principles of a faith community to establish the criteria for belonging. Having a constantly adapting creed is significant, as it implies that the core values of Rev. Billy's "church" constantly change – an indication that he consistently applies a strategy of "moving targets". It is problematic to analyse Rev. Billy's creed as a fixed entity, then. However, the creed I will refer to throughout this chapter is a "generic" version from a CD that the Reverend and his choir recorded for distribution, with no specific target issue. As such it should reveal – as with the Christian creeds – what this "church" sees as the core principles that set its members apart from others. I will not quote the entire creed here, but introduce its basic premise.

This version begins as an apparent imitation of what the Reverend calls "Episcopalian sad-sack Christianity": sung in deep monotone, with three rising tones after the dash (Talen 2003, 24). The first four lines are sung by Rev. Billy alone, slowly and gravely, *a cappella*:

We believe we have to put the – odd back in God.

We believe in shopping the way that people who never shop – do their shopping.

We believe that 24-hour drive-through convenience – is not convenient.

We believe in the landscape of previously erased memories which opens before us like some forgotten Edenic utopia when we – stop buying tchotchkes. (Talen and choir 2004)

At this point in the recording, after Rev. Billy has solemnly chanted the fourth line, loud funky music begins – over top of which he shout-preaches:

Amen! Hallelujah! Children, we are drowning in the Bermuda Triangle of retail. (Talen and choir 2004)

The funk music abruptly stops and Rev. Billy resumes the solemn chanting, this time with a chorus of saintly voices rising to a crescendo in the background:

We believe in the voluntary withdrawal of Starbucks, Duane Reade, Staples, Disney, Gap, and Barnes and Noble from, if not New York, just – get out of my face. (Talen and choir 2004)

The creed continues in this manner, alternating between solemn recitations of “We believes” interspersed with lively outbursts that seem like an impersonation of black Baptist services, ending with the paradoxical:

We believe in the God that people who don’t believe in God believe in.
(Talen and choir 2004)

If the creed reveals the core principles of Rev. Billy’s “church”, it would seem that the church’s fundamental doctrine is a belief in anticonsumerism: not shopping (as most people shop), inconvenience, and the removal of corporate chain stores. More than that, however, is an idea of “authenticity”: valuing old memories, critiquing the aesthetic of replication (Bermuda Triangle of retail), and an odd God – the bizarre and unmarketable. Lastly, it would seem that a core value of this church is humour and having fun.

This overview of the Reverend’s development and core elements prompts a discussion of several important and related issues – which I will regularly test against Jameson’s theory of pastiche. First of all, his political platform or theology – the *content* or *message* of his performances – seems to be a variable notion of authenticity with only hints of deeper political rationale. He advocates the bizarre and dangerous from an apparently aesthetic stance. He condemns Disney and Starbucks often from an economic perspective. And with issues like the Poe House he moralises about the importance of retaining architectural and cultural heritage. It seems that his content itself is a pastiche, which would bring his potential political impact under scrutiny in Jameson’s estimation. I will examine this issue to reveal that the ambiguity of his authenticity may strangely be the source of his radicalism.

Secondly, I will analyse Rev. Billy’s *form*, particularly in terms of parody. After this overview, the Reverend’s relationship to his Christian models remains unclear: he seems clearly to parody Christianity and yet respect and even adhere to many of its formal and moral principles. His aim does not seem to be an indictment of Christianity. His performances are interesting since they all, on an individual level, seem to exist somewhere between the extremes of critical parody and serious spirituality. And the Reverend character as a whole, born (it would seem) in parody, is becoming more and more a serious civic leader. Moreover, Jameson’s theory of pastiche – which forces me to question the Reverend’s political impact – arose out of what he saw as the contemporary impossibility of parody. Parody, Jameson claims,

has been downgraded to the necessarily uncritical form of pastiche. I will analyse the Reverend's form and claim that it may in fact be his pastiche that enables him to achieve political results.

The third issue that I will explore is the apparent sense of community formed by the Reverend's church. Whether parodic or not, the creed is a communal ritual – and in Rev. Billy's case a fun and humorous ritual – that allows both dedicated congregants and first-time audience members to participate and possibly affirm their anticonsumerist commitment via a ceremony that avoids being grave. I wish to evaluate if and how Rev. Billy succeeds in *activating* and *moving* audiences via such participatory rituals and the group acts of civil disobedience he leads. Viewing the Reverend's practice with reference to two other theatre groups that strive to build community, and looking again at the origins of the Rev. Billy character, I will argue that building community may be a political end in itself.

Next, I will investigate why Bill Talen has chosen to pursue his political goals through theatrical performance. With so many close ties to activist groups, and with a performance practice that involves occupying buildings and other “activist” actions, Rev. Billy nevertheless remains a theatre practitioner. Especially since his aim seems to be to restore an authentic society, it is unclear why he would choose to accomplish this aim via an “inauthentic” form of performance that involves playing an artificial character instead of via a more authentic, “real-life” method. Through looking at recent major protest activity in America outside the 2004 Republican National Convention, I will show that the shift away from conventional actions and activism towards theatrical forms is a current trend. Further, I will relate the Reverend's use of theatre to his flexibility and strategy of “moving targets”.

The fifth and final topic for scrutiny is Rev. Billy's success and popularity. The “authenticity” of his apparently anticonsumerist political aims is sometimes questioned because of his financial success as an artist. Additionally, I will show that the staging of some of Rev. Billy's performances, and some of his writings and practices, can be seen as commodifying himself and making a successful Rev. Billy brand.

Rev. Billy's content, I indicated above, is possibly a pastiche of different arbitrary judgments – and as such susceptible to criticism via Jameson's theory. But the Reverend's diffuse concept of authenticity seems to be congruent with the need for a strategy of “moving targets”. There are two related strands to his critique of

consumerism: the emptiness of a materialistic existence and capitalism's destruction of authenticity. Both elements of his critique tend to be grounded in a whole range of judgments. The Disney overhaul of Times Square, with support of the mayor, was heralded on moralistic, aesthetic, and economic grounds: prostitution is wrong and the homeless are dangerous, Times Square will be cleaner, and more tourist money will enter the city. Rev. Billy's opposition is similarly moralistic, aesthetic, and economic, but from the opposite stance: gentrification is morally wrong, filth and danger are authentic, and chain stores exploit Third World economies.

This multifaceted anticonsumerism is a popular political conviction in contemporary society. Naomi Klein's *No Logo* (2000) and Kalle Lasn's *Culture Jam* (2000) are two popular and influential books that have contributed to an anticonsumerist *movement*. These books endorse anticonsumerism, as Rev. Billy does, from various angles – aesthetic, moral, and political. The main thrust or purpose behind this anticonsumerism, however, does not seem to be any specific political justification but rather a general sense that rampant consumer capitalism is “bad for us”. Rev. Billy might phrase it “bad for the soul”: turning this hazy anticonsumerism into a spiritual argument is rather simple. Lasn founded a magazine called *Adbusters* as a tool of the anticonsumerist movement – a magazine that, among other things, has no advertisements. *Adbusters* certainly contains political arguments against late capitalism – criticising it for being undemocratic, say – but the main focus of the journal is the “environment”, both physical and mental. Consumer capitalism is condemned primarily from an aesthetic and moralistic perspective for the ways in which it pollutes our psyches with an overabundance of advertisements and a homogenous aesthetic, and abuses the natural environment without regard for anything but profit. In other words, these anticonsumerists also seem to critique consumerism for being *inauthentic*. In its place, they cherish human interaction, growing one's own food, building one's own home, making rather than buying presents, and other similar practices. Authenticity, to this movement, seems to entail consciously putting one's beliefs into *action*. Capitalist society, by contrast, is criticised as being inauthentic for forcing unwanted outcomes from every decision and action: purchasing any product, to these anticonsumerists, unavoidably supports some dubious labour practices, killing of the natural environment, or unjust war. Authenticity is linked to *action*.

In this regard, Rev. Billy does have something of a political context for his theatrical actions, even though it is nowhere near as widespread or radical as the revolutionary context of Piscator's time or the '60s counterculture. Jameson's theory, however, is a challenge to the politics of authenticity. He suggests that original artistic styles are no longer available and all that is left for artists to do is blankly imitate previous forms: pastiche (1984, 65). This concept extends from the realm of art into our social and political lives. With the conflation of the political, economic, and cultural realms, every event is interpreted in terms of previous representations: think of the universal practice now of calling every political scandal *something-gate*. It seems that we in late capitalist societies cannot address even our political realities directly but only through layers of representations – the essence of pastiche. His implication is that a crisis in *aesthetic* authenticity generates a crisis in *political* authenticity, or that they are equivalent and simultaneous. By Jameson's theory, authenticity would seem to be an irrelevant concept, and a politics based in authenticity would therefore be inert like pastiche.

Rev. Billy's concept of authenticity – and in fact much of the anticonsumerist movement mentioned above – is arguably akin to nostalgia for a pre-capitalist, artisan society. Portions of the creed seem to be nostalgic, as in this line, humorously uttered by Rev. Billy in a single breath:

We believe in the return of the small bookstores, community gardens, ma and pa apothecaries, independent vendors, sex workers and stoops with open containers which have liquid content of all kinds where you might have to stop and weather the feeling that you are wasting time and find yourself telling a story or – being told something impossible which you might have to re-tell with your own adornments and expurgations. (Talen and choir 2004)

Clearly, the Reverend is nostalgic for the old Times Square: the beginning of the credo is even phrased “we believe *in the return of...*”. He desires to have things back as they used to be. “Small bookstores” are the counterpart to the earlier criticism of corporate chain stores; “*community* gardens” imply small group cooperation, once again contrasting gentrification; “ma and pa apothecaries” make explicit the preferred concept of independent ownership, which is reinforced by “independent vendors”. “Sex workers” seem to be seen as an independent (even subversive) profession – and one that was “disappeared” when Disney took over Times Square. Even the use of an archaic word like *apothecaries* pushes one towards a nostalgic interpretation.

To Jameson, nostalgia is a related phenomenon to pastiche, and also apolitical. He explores nostalgia predominantly through an analysis of film, identifying the “nostalgia film” as a prime example of pastiche. He cites the inaugural example, *American Graffiti*, which is a nostalgic rendering of a previous generation – based much less on the historical past than on cultural stereotypes about that past, boiling the past down to a *style*. In some versions of this argument, Jameson makes the “initially startling claim” that another Lucas film, *Star Wars*, should also be considered a nostalgia film (Jameson 1983, 116). Obviously not nostalgic for our own intergalactic past, this film he describes rather as a pastiche of an earlier cultural form: *Buck Rogers* type science fiction serials. Jameson apparently thinks that these films – ostensibly about the past and future, respectively – are more properly repressed fantasies about the present: longings for a naively simple contemporary life that can be imagined only through stereotypes of an earlier time-period or forms of art. It is necessary to note that this is not evidence of a deficiency on the part of George Lucas. Even such an imaginative genius is constrained to pastiche. Or another way of approaching it: the very concept of creative genius may have altered such that Lucas is considered a genius not *artistically* but *industrially*. Or, to adhere to a strict interpretation of Jameson’s postmodernism, the two have become synonymous: artistic genius *is* industrial genius; cultural success *is* financial success.

Granted, in Jameson’s examples above, nostalgia is manifested in the *style* of the film more than in the content or the vision of society the film expresses. It is through similarity to *Buck Rogers* that he deems *Star Wars* nostalgic. I have been discussing Rev. Billy’s content, which is often nostalgic, but his *form* is nostalgic as well: the evangelical paradigm, like *Star Wars*, sees the world in terms of good and bad. But his nostalgic content seems to conflict with his nostalgic form. His yearning for the old Times Square, content-wise, is a rejection of typical evangelical good and bad or even a reversal: moral conservatism and big business are bad and knife-wielding hot dog vendors are good. The *effect* of this contradiction cannot be gauged without reference to audience.

One thing Jameson does not do is focus on the issue of audience interpretation and reaction – partly, perhaps, because his theory was derived from literature. Pastiche and nostalgia, as he describes them, have strong tendencies towards conservatism, being neutralised into adhering to capitalist logic. But Rev. Billy seems to have used a nostalgic Christian form to mobilise a community around a conflicting

nostalgic concept of authenticity. One of the credos chosen for inclusion in the press release CD was: “We believe in the landscape of previously erased memories that opens before us like some forgotten Edenic utopia when we – stop buying tchotchkes” (Talen and choir 2004). This raises the issues of old memories or nostalgia as a core element of his church’s philosophy. The credo can be roughly deciphered “We believe that old memories return when we stop shopping” or, to quote one of the Reverend’s common Disney Store slogans “Disney tchotchkes cause memory loss in defenseless kids” (2003, 55). Our authentic memories have been replaced by Disney versions, he implies, but we can retrieve them if we stop shopping. Memory and nostalgia have become rallying points for Rev. Billy’s church. If audiences identify with such sentiments and it pushes them to join the Reverend’s actions, then promoting nostalgia would seem to achieve some sort of efficacy.

A section of Rev. Billy’s book (and previously a section of his website) shares what he calls “Godsightings” (Talen 2003, 81-92). Everybody is invited to write or e-mail the Reverend about “spiritual” experiences they have had, and he shares them or (previously) posts them on his website. Many or most of the stories that are posted on the site are either recollections of old memories or stories about some strange event that triggered an old, forgotten memory. The prevailing folklore, if not the actuality, surrounding these stories is that these childhood memories arise out of leading an authentic anticonsumerist life – or alternatively that truly valuing such memories will help people to begin leading authentic lives. The assumption seems to be – and there is likely truth in it – that people’s best and strongest memories from childhood relate to other people, human interaction, beautiful places, and other experiences that cannot be packaged and sold. Rev. Billy uses memory as a site of political contestation – advocating “authentic” memories over commodified, replicated ones.

Locating the political in the ambiguous realm of memory might be a manifestation or symptom of the need for political theatre both to confront the *moving targets* of capital and to remain a *moving target*. Socialism and communism appear to have been invalidated in the West, or lionised in capitalist style as in Ché Guevara’s ubiquitous appearance on expensive designer clothing. A political theatre based upon or advocating these or any static principles consequently risks similar outright rejection or cooptation into the capitalist market. That is to say, a diffuse concept of authenticity – which can ground aesthetic, moral, or political judgments, and be

directed against a corporation, physical building, memory, or imagination itself – might be harmonious with the need for a strategy of moving targets.

Theodor Adorno's *The Jargon of Authenticity* is a strong criticism of the popularisation of the existentialist ideal of (personal) authenticity. Focussed primarily against Martin Heidegger, Adorno's analysis claims that Heidegger "did not foresee that what he named authentic, once become word, would grow toward the same exchange-society anonymity against which *Sein und Zeit* rebelled" (1964/1973, 18). Once reified in jargon, Adorno implies, the distinction between authentic and inauthentic paradoxically becomes arbitrary – and authenticity therefore becomes a lost concept and ceases to be political. This can be seen today with terms such as *freedom* and *democracy*, which are used indiscriminately to endorse or condemn any people or actions. These words imply an authenticity: "fighting for freedom" is meant to connote genuineness, compassion, and justified violence. But the words have become meaningless jargon that can be applied at will to make what are essentially moral judgements. Adorno's suggestion that "once become word" authenticity is compromised implies that a *political* understanding of authenticity cannot allow itself to be fixed into jargon. Perhaps only that which refuses reification, that which remains a *moving target*, can remain truly authentic and thereby challenge the capitalist system. In this regard, it is conceivable that Rev. Billy's highly flexible concept of authenticity is an advantageous political programme.

"Authenticity" permits Rev. Billy to make traditional political arguments as well as his unconventional aesthetic ones. Many of the Reverend's sermons against corporate chain stores include elements of a global materialist critique – such as his lambasting of Starbucks for the shockingly low wages of the Third World workers who harvest the coffee beans. Talen's writings have the occasional term – *ideology* or *proletariat* – that hints at Marx. As part of Rev. Billy's touring, he conducts workshops and gives lectures on the political theatre of Augusto Boal, whose work is rooted in Marxist thought. These clues certainly indicate that Rev. Billy must be reasonably familiar with Marxism. But neither in his writings nor his performances does the Reverend explicitly refer to Marx, communism, or socialism. That is, Rev. Billy might have concluded that a weighty doctrine like Marxism is more likely to be neutralised by capital than a fleeting set of guidelines like his theology of authenticity.

In Jill Lane's *TDR* essay on Rev. Billy, she places at least some of Rev. Billy's performance work in the vein of Marxism. She claims that his shopping

invasions often reveal the “scripts” of consumerism, and draw the shopper’s awareness to the way in which the consumer knows and plays his part in the process. “It is a classic Marxist maneuver, worthy of the best materialist theatre makers, from Bertolt Brecht to Augusto Boal: to reveal the relations of production, and the conditions that make consumption possible” (2002, 69). The supposedly Marxist feat that Rev. Billy achieves through his shopping invasions could be seen as an instance of creating a Jamesonian “cognitive map”. An aesthetic of cognitive mapping is Jameson’s only discernible suggestion for a form that political art could take in late capitalist society, and builds on his belief in the continued relevance of Marxism. In the same essay in which he discussed pastiche, he posits “cognitive mapping” as a possible solution. He defines this aesthetic as “a pedagogical political culture which seeks to endow the individual subject with some new heightened sense of its place in the global system” (1984, 92). Though Lane does not refer to Jameson, her description of what Talen achieves seems to parallel this theory:

Talen is a postindustrial *flâneur*: one walking the city, actively trying to see in the new global order of things the diverse realities – lives, memories, bodies – that are rendered everyday more invisible as our forms of social space and public representation are reorganized by commercial culture. (2002, 74)

The Reverend literally walks the streets of his neighbourhood and, as Lane argues, arrests the normal behaviour there long enough to make ideology visible – to allow people to see a more genuine or authentic aspect of where they live (2002, 68). Sometimes this is achieved by performing an action that prompts Wal-Mart to announce over the loudspeaker “Anyone not shopping will be arrested” (Dee 2004). Other times the Reverend produces such a “map” by revealing the poor Third World working conditions in which Disney products are made.

This global perspective fits with Jameson’s understanding of cognitive mapping, as in an example he gives:

The truth of...experience no longer coincides with the place in which it takes place. The truth of that limited daily experience of London lies, rather, in India or Jamaica or Hong Kong; it is bound up with the whole colonial system of the British Empire that determines the very quality of the individual’s subjective life. Yet those structural coordinates are no longer accessible to immediate lived experience and are often not even conceptualizable for most people. (1991, 411)

Rev. Billy tries to force people to see such links – to, as he says, picture the poor Third World farmer every time one is thinking of ordering a five-dollar latte. In this regard, Rev. Billy seems to apply Jameson’s theoretical strategy for political action via the cultural realm.

The “place” that an aesthetic of cognitive mapping must seek to theorise and reveal seems to be physical *and* mental, local *and* global, aesthetic *and* political. As Lane reports, the Reverend told an anecdote during one of his sermons, from a performance focussed on endorsing the unionisation of local bodega workers. The anecdote was about a distended moment in which Rev. Billy was reaching for a can of coffee at a neighbourhood deli. In the anecdote, Lane recounts, the Reverend describes a sudden vision of the plantation where the beans were grown, “replete with underpaid growers and threatening goon squads and the rich children of the overseers flying to resort towns” (2002, 76). This vision made Rev. Billy abandon his pending purchase, since, he claims, he realised he was not alone: that underpaid worker was right there with him. In this anecdote, the Reverend links the local to the global, and the physical, material conditions of a Third World worker to the decision process of a would-be Western consumer. It seems to be these sorts of links that comprise Jameson’s notion of cognitive mapping. Consumerism has colonised even our psyches – and so raising awareness of mental processes and valuing memories and imagination can be plausible means to better understand our place in the global system, even by Jameson’s theory.

Rev. Billy seems here to achieve Jameson’s hypothetical “solution” for how to create political culture in late capitalist society – though in Jameson’s theory, authenticity is unattainable:

There comes into being, then, a situation in which we can say that if individual experience is authentic, then it cannot be true; and that if a scientific or cognitive model of the same content is true, then it escapes individual experience. (1991, 411)

In other words, Jameson thinks that if a local, individual experience is authentic, then it must be oversimplifying the complicated web of global interrelations that determine every moment of our late capitalist lives – and is consequently not “true”. Or, in reverse, if a cognitive map succeeds in plotting the whole network of global and local, physical and mental processes that characterise a given moment, then that truth exceeds the grasp of authentic individual experience.

This claim may well be accurate, but Rev. Billy presents authenticity as a moving goal to strive for rather than a fixed and attainable circumstance. There are two sides to his effort. The Reverend critiques contemporary society and tries to create a community of people who will strive to map each moment of their lives and live as authentically as possible. But, as Adorno famously claimed, “wrong life cannot be lived rightly” (1951/1978, 39); it is impossible, in late capitalist society, to live a completely authentic life. One cannot really “stop shopping”. The other half of Rev. Billy’s effort, then, or his utopian dream, is to engender the type of society in which it *would* be possible to live authentically. Such a society, however, is abstract and speculative – which may again explain the Reverend’s hodgepodge content. He cannot advocate some fixed ideal such as a socialist society, because such a society would not necessarily be authentic, either. He can only advocate the principles of authenticity, which necessarily move.

This analysis of Rev. Billy’s ambiguous content of authenticity has shown that his vague and by certain estimations apolitical arguments might be more radical than precise political arguments. By Jameson’s theory of pastiche, the Reverend’s authenticity is suspect. But by the notion of cognitive mapping, Jameson’s proposition to combat pastiche, Rev. Billy might have a cultural practice that successfully “maps” late capitalist society, exposing it in order to provoke political consciousness. This contradiction is unresolvable, but points to the fact that his political efficacy likely hinges more on his ambiguous authenticity than explicitly political content.

I wish to look now more closely at Rev. Billy’s *form* – in particular via a discussion of parody, with reference to Jameson’s theory of pastiche that I have yet to analyse in detail. Jameson contends that all art, including attempts at parody, is destined to be interpreted as, or to have the effect of, neutral or apolitical imitations of previous art forms. Rev. Billy arguably has just such a pastiche practice, mixing multiple aesthetics in an arbitrary way. He invokes the aesthetic of Christianity in his mock church services and sermons. An aesthetic of activism pervades his work when he occupies buildings slated for demolition, or stages group boycotts of Starbucks or Disney – with crowds of his followers chanting and holding placards. And he has other aesthetic practices, such as the one he calls “whirling”: a group of people enters a large corporate store such as Wal-Mart, each person grabs a shopping trolley, and they all start wandering slowly around the store with empty trolleys and vacant stares. Eventually they fall into a long line meandering through the store, then disperse and

leave. Such “whirling” seems to follow an aesthetic of “performance art” akin to the Happenings introduced by John Cage and Allan Kaprow. By Jameson’s theory, this mixed aesthetic would be apolitical pastiche, as opposed to the (dead) political form of parody.

Analysing whether Talen manages to create a successful parody, in contrast to Jameson’s theory of pastiche, implies that Talen *intends* to create a parody. But this is not certain. In his book, Talen describes his feelings from his first few days of preaching in Times Square: “I kept trying to pretend it was an art project, like a task. I would be the only self-conscious preacher. In fact, I was terrified because I knew it wasn’t art” (2003, 43). This statement reveals from the start an ambiguity in Talen’s relationship to his performance model, the preaching paradigm. Claiming that his preaching “wasn’t art” implies that it was straight, non-parodic preaching. But excerpts of his early sermons – calling Mickey Mouse the Antichrist, for instance – are blatantly parodic, whether Talen admits it or not. And the parody is heightened by his choice of the most conservative evangelical model to convey his ostensibly left-wing views – especially given his highly artificial performance style that apparently does not aim to create a believable character.

There are two ways to make sense of Talen’s claim that his preaching “wasn’t art”, then. One possible interpretation is that Talen saw himself as having serious political aims whereas art, as it normally exists, is merely playful and apolitical. Such a belief would make parody difficult since Talen would likely mistrust the political efficacy of art – which may involve performance and parody, the playing of a character whose views differ from Talen’s – and shift to the more serious form of straight preaching. Another, possibly concurrent, interpretation is that Talen was conveying his own personal beliefs, which blurred the boundary between actor and character. In this second case, it seems that Talen could easily get swept away expounding his genuine political beliefs and fall out of the parodic character. Both of these charges can be justly directed against at least some of Talen’s performances as Rev. Billy.

The answer, then, to whether Talen intends to create a parody seems to be both yes and no. It is abundantly clear that Talen imitates various Christian forms in artificial, comic ways and intends to subvert the typical political aims of the evangelical paradigm. He swaps between preaching styles of various Christian denominations. He performs mock exorcisms of credit cards and other incredible acts.

And shifting the evangelical model into uncommon venues highlights the fakery. The evangelist style might be acceptable or legitimate in a church or hall, but is more obviously phoney when used in conversation, on a subway, or in a Starbucks. In short, the Reverend clearly does not intend to create a realistic preacher character but a parody. But the *target* of his parodies is not the Christian form itself but something external to it: consumerism. So it is this particular type of parody, with an external target, that must be tested against Jameson's premise of pastiche.

Jameson's first definition of pastiche, and distinction from parody, comes via an analysis of literature. He identifies the "death of the individual subject" and its counterpart the "increasing unavailability of the personal style" as ushering in the near universality of pastiche:

In this situation, parody finds itself without a vocation; it has lived, and that strange new thing pastiche slowly comes to take its place. Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style, the wearing of a linguistic mask, speech in a dead language. But it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without any of parody's ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse, devoid of laughter and of any conviction that alongside the abnormal tongue you have momentarily borrowed, some healthy linguistic normality still exists. (1991, 17)

Lacking ulterior motives and a satiric edge, pastiche is inert – uncritical and apolitical. In general Jameson sees parody as a modernist phenomenon and pastiche as postmodernist. He stresses that there was not a sudden rupture but rather a sliding tendency: modernism "foreshadows" and "anticipated" postmodernism in Jameson's original essay on pastiche (1983); and their relationship is made even clearer at greater length in subsequent discussions (1984; 1988; 1991). Pastiche was certainly an element of modernist literature, common in the work of Thomas Mann and others. But, Jameson believes, it was one optional style among others, including parody. The shift to postmodernism occurs, says Jameson, when pastiche becomes the dominant characteristic and parody becomes impossible.

Jameson sees parody (in literature) as hinging on the concept of a linguistic norm. Parody is possible only if one can mock a given text against a style that is considered *normal*. But, he claims, no such norms are available today. Jameson suggests a possible norm that is helpful in understanding this concept: "the kind of clarity and communicative power celebrated by Orwell in his famous essay 'Politics and the English language', say" (1998, 4).

In this 1950 essay Orwell condemns the decline into meaninglessness of the English language, and suggests methods for its revitalisation. To be clear: Jameson's suggestion for a norm is not Orwell's essay itself but rather the vision of the English language that is expressed in it. Orwell pinpoints a distinctive connection between (conservative) politics and the defilement of language: "Orthodoxy, of whatever colour, seems to demand a lifeless, imitative style" (1950, 95). He pleads for the renewal of the English language in the form of *originality*. This plea is intended as a progressive political act, but it is contingent, it would seem, on modernism and the possibility of authenticity. Orwell's proposal is not a form of archaism or nostalgic longing for a previous state, nor does it call for the establishment of a standardised "normal" English. Rather, he is particularly concerned with "the scrapping of every word or idiom which has outworn its usefulness" (1950, 99). In effect, Orwell is asking for a constantly evolving language to maintain communicative and thus *political* power. Desiring in fact the opposite of a simplified language, Orwell clearly wants the perpetual freshness, unique metaphors, and vital energy of modernism! This desire of course contradicts Jameson's central suspicion that such fresh styles, unique words, and idioms have all been exhausted. With no such modernist norm available, parody becomes impossible – leaving only the neutral imitation called pastiche.

Jameson's suggestion that Orwell's essay indicates a (now unavailable) norm is consequently tautological, merely confirming his claim that parody was necessarily a modernist phenomenon. But it nevertheless helps to understand his distinction. To be useful for critical parody, a norm must not simply be a style, but a style that reflects – or helps one to express – a particular view of reality. Parody critiques what the language *stands for*. For some reason, however, Jameson does not consider the predominant "lifeless, imitative" English that Orwell condemns to be a norm – despite the fact that Orwell linked such language to "orthodoxy". This imitative language seems to be exactly what Jameson refers to in positing pastiche as the new cultural dominant and in viewing pastiche as confined by the logic of late capitalism. Refusing to consider such language as a norm, Jameson implies that late capitalist norms do not exhibit a view of reality in the same sense as modernist or pre-capitalist norms.

While there may appear to be certain norms in Western society – McDonald's or the Hollywood action genre, say – these late capitalist norms, to Jameson, would not indicate a view of reality. In order to flourish in the market, such norms must express a belief in nothing but profit. Or, from the opposite perspective, if such

contemporary norms have genuine values or beliefs, the capitalist system moves quickly to coopt them and make them equivalent to capitalist values, as discussed in Chapter One. This claim may seem peculiar given, for instance, the typical ideologies supported by action films: heterosexuality, family values, traditional gender roles, democracy, and freedom. These ideals appear to be an integral part of the popular genre. But any such values are subsidiary to turning a profit. Popular films such as *Fight Club* (Fincher 2000) show that anarchic anti-capitalism can be expressed by the genre as well, as long as it sells. In other words, capitalist norms are necessarily not *authentic*. This is precisely why the present contradiction arises: Rev. Billy's anticonsumerist content and actions seem to undermine or combat the *inauthenticity* of capitalism even as he apparently engages in an "inauthentic" pastiche aesthetic.

Dissecting Jameson's distinction between parody and pastiche, it becomes apparent that Rev. Billy does not easily fulfil either category. Jameson describes both parody and pastiche as "the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style, the wearing of a linguistic mask" (1991, 17). Certainly this much is true of Rev. Billy: he emulates the peculiar appearance, vocal intonations, and vernacular of a Southern televangelist. But pastiche, says Jameson, "is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without any of parody's ulterior motives" (1991, 17). Jameson seems to comprehend parody only as an imitation that seeks to critique or appraise the form that it imitates. By this criterion, perhaps Rev. Billy *is* a neutral mimicry. He certainly does not intend to ridicule Christianity. It is possible that one of Rev. Billy's intentions is to lampoon Christian evangelists as charlatans, but he does not generally succeed at that task. At no point while watching videos of Rev. Billy's performances have I thought "what a swindler that Jimmy Swaggart is", or "wow, this rhetorical trope of evangelism is really false". Quite the opposite is true: I have been repeatedly moved by the power of that performance paradigm – despite the Reverend's artifice. If lacking criticism of the form that one is imitating defines pastiche, then Rev. Billy may be a pastiche. But Jameson continues that pastiche is "amputated of the satiric impulse, devoid of laughter and of any conviction that alongside the abnormal tongue you have momentarily borrowed, some healthy linguistic normality still exists" (1991, 17). Here there is a disparity, for Rev. Billy's performances are not devoid of laughter. And he certainly intends at times to satirise consumer capitalism, for instance depicting – in the creed – tourists that are "suffering from consumer narcosis clutching Discover cards, searching for the Republican theme park they call New

York City” (Talen and choir 2004). Plainly he intends to ridicule the vice of excessive consumption, often from an aesthetic perspective. The target of Rev. Billy’s “parody” is external.

So one of the key differences between parody and pastiche, as Jameson understands it, is that pastiche lacks the satiric impulse of parody. But Jameson appears to identify parody as a form whose satiric impulse is directed at the object of its imitation rather than, like Rev. Billy, at some external target. At about the time that Jameson’s initial essay appeared introducing his premise of pastiche, Linda Hutcheon would have finished writing an entire book on parody (not published until the following year) that opposes some of Jameson’s arguments (but without reference to them). She seems to agree with Jameson that the target of parody is properly confined to the aesthetic model it mimics: “parody is an ‘intramural’ form with aesthetic norms, and satire’s ‘extramural’ norms are social or moral” (1985, 25). By this understanding, political theatre that seeks to criticise consumer society would have to do so via satire rather than parody as such. Hutcheon defines two relationships between parody and satire: satiric parody, a type of parody that is satiric and whose target is another artistic form, which Rev. Billy would be if his main intent were to criticise televangelists; and parodic satire, a type of satire that uses parody as a vehicle and whose target is external and often political, such as Brecht’s parody of the Bible in *Mahagonny* to satirise consumption (B Brecht 1927/1979). Rev. Billy ostensibly attempts to engage in this latter form, parodic satire. His parody of evangelism is simply the vessel used to transmit the social satire of consumerism. It is unclear whether Jameson’s theory of pastiche would sanction such a form as potentially political or if this form too would be subsumed by apolitical pastiche.

The parody versus pastiche issue cannot be resolved purely in terms of form, for the nature of the parodic form hinges on content. Examining portions of the creed in terms of parodic satire can help explore this issue. The first few lines – “We believe we have to put the – odd back in God / We believe in shopping the way that people who never shop – do their shopping / We believe that 24-hour drive-through convenience – is not convenient” – barely engage in social satire (Talen and choir 2004). Surely the clash between the sacred form and secular content suggests parody. But the “target” of the first line is rather unclear: it seems that the dominant understanding of God is being belittled but in a very gentle and vague manner, and

not at all linked to consumerism. When heard, the rhyming wordplay of “odd” and “God” stands out more than any meaning.

The second line is similarly ambiguous. The content is again playful, this time expressing a perfectly illogical metaphor – and it is explicitly secular. It can be interpreted as parodic satire, mocking a particular reality, shopping, using the religious form of the creed as a vehicle. But it is not strong satire: shopping, or a shopping-centred view of reality, is not being criticised for explicit reasons or shown to be ridiculous. Any criticism is implicit, simply through affirming the opposite stance. Even then, however, it is ambiguous what exactly is being affirmed.

This second credo begs an interpretation of the illogical simile – shopping like people who never shop do their shopping. It can be roughly translated into the more logical “we believe in never shopping”, but this neglects the breadth of connotations. The deliberate paradox of the wording hints at this anti-belief (the belief in never shopping) but also intimates something more profound that perhaps engages the imagination: how would people who never shop go shopping? At a long stretch, I might claim that this second line is trying to achieve some of the oddity or mystery – the *authenticity* – that reappears throughout Rev. Billy’s work. The mystical, religious form of the creed heightens this sense. A satire of consumerism, while present in a vague sense, seems secondary to the expression of a desire for the unknown and impossible.

The third line is very similar, employing illogical syntax (convenience is not convenient) in an apparent criticism of late capitalist society’s all-hours shopping. The satire of consumerism seems even weaker than previously since *convenience* is a more abstract notion of consumerism than the *shopping* of line two. And all three lines are potentially compatible with certain Christians’ beliefs that their churches are too entangled in secular affairs and should rediscover the mystery and awe of their earlier principles. In this interpretation, Rev. Billy’s creed would not be a parodic vessel to satirise consumerism, but would actually be Christian – perhaps of a new sect. (Some of Rev. Billy’s regular congregants are Christians who attend *his* church as well as their “normal” one.)

Other portions of the creed, however, such as images of tourists “becoming Stepford Wives suffering from consumer narcosis” and “jumping up and down on Diane Sawyer’s shoulder with a cardboard sign with [their] grandma in Utica’s name on it” are more obviously satires of excessive consumerism and in no sense could be

considered legitimately Christian expressions (Talen and choir 2004). “Stepford Wives” refers to the 1975 film by that title in which the perfect domestic middle class women in a small town turn out to be robots or replicants (Forbes 1975). The term “Stepford Wives” entered the common lexicon even of those who never saw the film, but to those who have seen it, the term might have a deeper resonance with Rev. Billy’s message. The film paints a sinister picture of conformity and technology. The antagonist of the film – who runs the town’s secretive men’s club and is responsible for creating subservient robot replicas of all of the wives – is nicknamed Diz, since he learned his replication skills as an employee of Disney. Of course this is not a connection that most audiences would make or one that strengthens the satire. The reference “jumping up and down on Diane Sawyer’s shoulder” will be missed by most non-Americans but perfectly understood by a New York City audience. Diane Sawyer is a former co-host of *Good Morning America*, an ABC programme broadcast live from New York City with large ground-floor windows facing the street. Crowds, generally of tourists, always gathered on the street in the hopes of being seen in the background on television. They often jumped and flailed to attract attention to themselves, and carried signs for friends and family back home to see. Talen is clearly mocking this sort of behaviour from an aesthetic perspective. In any case, this creed could not be mistaken as genuinely Christian.

It seems that Rev. Billy’s creed cannot be limited to having one single purpose. Clearly, satirising consumerism is only part of its intent. Perhaps the portions, such as the first three lines analysed above, that do not neatly fit an interpretation as satire, ought to be read in a more literal sense. That is, perhaps the Church of Stop Shopping followers mean nothing more nor less than the belief that “24-hour drive-through convenience is not convenient” – and that they desire to “put the odd back in God”. Rev. Billy seems intermittently to use the form of the Christian creed as a vehicle for social satire, and to use the same form as a vehicle for conveying genuine beliefs that are foundational enough to be considered “spiritual” or “religious”.

It is still unclear, however, how this combinatory approach by Rev. Billy relates to Jameson’s theory of pastiche. For, to Jameson, one need not intend a critical parody to end up as pastiche: pastiche is the stylistic dominant of *all* contemporary art, regardless of its intentions, whether it seeks to be political, parodic, religious, or anything else. In order to investigate how pastiche applies to Rev. Billy – and to

theatre in general – it is first necessary to explore the root cause that Jameson sees as leading to pastiche. He refers to the “disappearance of the individual subject” and the “increasing unavailability of the personal style” as giving rise to the dominance of pastiche (1984, 64). And he sees the cultural, political, and economic realms as entwined such that the political impact of any cultural product, such as theatre, must be doubted – supplementary, as it is, to the political and economic logic of late capitalism. Jameson explicitly links this scenario to the *quantity* of cultural products in contemporary society:

To argue that culture is today no longer endowed with the relative autonomy it once enjoyed...is not necessarily to imply its disappearance or extinction. On the contrary: we must go on to affirm that the dissolution of an autonomous sphere of culture is rather to be imagined in terms of an explosion: a prodigious expansion of culture throughout the social realm, to the point at which everything in our social life – from economic value and state power to practices and to the very structure of the psyche itself – can be said to have become ‘cultural’ in some original and as yet untheorized sense. (1984, 87)

Because of the sheer quantity of cultural output, it seems, everything in society has become cultural – by which Jameson seems to imply that everything is evaluated solely on the aesthetic plane and in terms of its entertainment or commodity value. Though Jameson does not focus on it, the issue of audience (or reader) interpretation seems significant to his theory. Critical parody is impossible, he implies, because *people* tend to interpret everything in their lives with reference to cultural practices rather than to their social or political realities.

Ziva Ben-Porat, one of Linda Hutcheon’s influences, makes an argument that can be used to clarify this view and apply it to the performances of Rev. Billy. Ben-Porat gives an example of a *MAD Magazine* comic that begins, in the first panel, as an overt criticism of specific “real-life” proposed changes to the US army. The comic continues in the form of parodies of well-known war films. Each parody comprises a panel representing a popular scene from the actual war film contrasted with a panel representing the war film if it adhered to the proposed new army policy. In no case is a war film being criticised or lampooned. The target of the parodies is clearly an aspect of reality itself – the proposed policy changes – and so the comics should be considered parodic satires: satires that use parody as a vehicle to hit their extramural target. But Ben-Porat notes that, if this method of war film parodies were sustained, the interpretive emphasis would likely shift from the satire of the policy changes to

the filmic parodies, and the whole sequence would become an “intramural” satiric parody instead of the “extramural” parodic satire (1979).³ This shift from extramural to intramural hinges, for Ben-Porat, on the role of the audience, and particularly the audience’s exposure to repeated imitations. Furthermore, the intramural parody is “neutral”, devoid of a satiric impulse directed against its war-film models.

It is the *quantity* of parodic satires in the *MAD Magazine* comic that causes the emphasis to shift to intramural parody. Expanding this reasoning to the whole culture industry, perhaps the cultural explosion referred to by Jameson has increased the number of imitations so much that audiences almost necessarily read *every* artwork in terms of similar, previous artworks. The emphasis of every artwork has possibly shifted from extramural satire to neutral intramural parody in this way – a different way of stating the shift Jameson marks between (satiric, political) parody and (neutral, un-satiric) pastiche. Consequently, it seems that even Rev. Billy’s form of parody, with an external satiric target, is *theoretically* destined to be neutralised into pastiche.

The cultural explosion that Jameson describes was, and continues to be, fuelled by increased technology and an economic boom. The quantitative growth has been most obvious in costly artistic realms that utilise the latest technology. Certainly the production of television, cinema, photography, music recordings, and literature – realms that employ mass reproduction – has become markedly faster, easier, and cheaper. It does not seem that theatre has had a quantitative explosion to the same degree. While some theatre certainly uses new technologies, at core live performance still relies on the same old rehearsal and performance processes as it ever did. It has become neither cheaper, nor faster, nor easier to produce a show. Certainly some live forms – such as stand-up comedy – have become popular through television, video, and CD recordings and have consequently experienced a quantitative boom. But theatrical performances are not often seen on television, and have not become as

³ Ben-Porat actually uses the terms “directly satirical parody” and “indirectly satirical parody”, which Hutcheon has ostensibly renamed “parodic satire” and “satiric parody”, respectively. In any case, they are similar in that the target of “directly satirical parody” or “parodic satire” is extramural and the target of “indirectly satirical parody” or “satiric parody” is intramural. I prefer Hutcheon’s terminology since it clearly expresses whether the emphasis is on the (intramural) parody or (extramural) satire.

universal as other artistic forms. Theatre might therefore be less likely to be interpreted – by audiences – in terms of previous theatrical forms.

Applying this concept to Rev. Billy's performances, however, it is not expressly an audience's familiarity of *theatrical* forms that would make or break pastiche – because Rev. Billy's theatrical model is evangelism. Specifically, Rev. Billy imitates the broadly familiar and mass-produced form of televangelism, a style that is certainly familiar to American audiences. It therefore seems theoretically likely that when audiences encounter the Reverend's performances, they would interpret him with emphasis on the intramural parody (pastiche) rather than any extramural, satiric aims. In practice, however, it seems that Rev. Billy's impact depends a great deal on the audience's perspective.

Specifically, there seems to be a great interpretive divide between those who are familiar with Rev. Billy as a political performer and those who are not. There is not much concrete evidence regarding audiences' first impressions of Rev. Billy, and these impressions often become public only when someone has strong opinions about his performance. Nevertheless, there is a much greater tendency for those encountering the Reverend's performances for the first time to interpret him as commenting upon Christianity – whereas people, such as myself, who were already somehow clued in to his political aims (from word-of-mouth, or reading articles and essays), do not tend to interpret him in this way. A documentary showing one of the Reverend's performances outside of a Starbucks with his choir reveals two displeased spectators, unfamiliar with Rev. Billy's work, saying that the performers “should be ashamed of themselves to represent the Lord like this” (Post 2002). There have been many letters and e-mails sent to Rev. Billy, occasionally posted on his website, that similarly accuse him of blasphemy. This interpretation seems to be fairly common amongst those who are unfamiliar with Rev. Billy's work: the intramural parody, or similarity to the Christian forms of the sermon, creed, and chorus, is more obvious than the social satire. To most of the Reverend's followers, and those who know his work, any sense of critiquing Christianity is totally absent – or at least ancillary to his anticonsumerist satire or to his sincere use of Christian forms to create a spiritual sense of anticonsumerism.

Even in the humorous creed, it seems that Rev. Billy is more often literal – expressing and trying to build belief in some strange theology – than satirical. The fifth credo, coming immediately after the first “funky break” of the creed, is explicitly

secular in content and is structured so as to highlight the humour, like a punch line: “We believe in the voluntary withdrawal of Starbucks, Duane Reade, Staples, Disney, Gap, and Barnes and Noble from, if not New York, just – get out of my face” (Talen and choir 2004). The “punch line” works because of the rude, colloquial slang of “get out of my face” being sung in beautiful harmony by saintly choral voices. Even after the fluctuating styles and comical content, the beautiful choir voices and reverential chanting still manage to create a spiritual ambience that somehow does not feel like a religious spoof. I find myself struggling to explain why this creed does not feel like a mocking parody of a Christian service, yet it does not. The creed, recall, is used primarily near the beginning of the Reverend’s complete church services, at which the majority of the audience – I think it safe to assume – has chosen to attend because they are aware of, and share, the social or political aims of the Church of Stop Shopping. With these common political aims, the creed becomes strangely earnest. Jonathan Dee wrote of Rev. Billy’s performances: “It sounds like a whole new frontier in sacrilege, but anyone who goes to a Reverend Billy service these days expecting a high dose of camp is in for a confrontation with a profoundly odd sincerity” (Dee 2004). Many of the congregants during the creed are genuinely “praying” or yearning wholeheartedly for the withdrawal of these corporations, despite the playfulness of both form and language.

Perhaps this scenario reveals another side of the pastiche argument. Jameson’s theory of pastiche seems to explain why Rev. Billy is rarely interpreted, by and large, as a critical parody of the preaching form. He is usually seen to be “neutral” or even respectful of Christianity. Even those who deride Rev. Billy for being blasphemous are not offended by what they perceive as his *intentional* mocking of Christianity (which a critical parody would be) but for using the Christian form for ulterior purposes. I, and Rev. Billy’s followers, and even those offended by him, do not or cannot decipher even something so blatantly irreverent as this creed as satirising Christianity. Perhaps, then, this apparent impossibility of critical parody facilitates *using* religious ritual to create a genuinely spiritual experience of anticonsumerism. Oddly, that is, the rise of pastiche might actually facilitate Rev. Billy’s political aims to build a spiritual belief in authenticity.

Jill Lane makes a similar observation that, for the Reverend, satirising consumerism is secondary to genuinely building belief in his politicised theology. “The obvious ground of satire does not fully account for the ways in which Talen’s

work actually advances certain spiritual notions of community development and social activism” (Lane 2002, 78-79). Lane makes an argument that appears quite similar to the suggestion just above that the unavoidability of pastiche might paradoxically assist Rev. Billy to create such a politicised spiritual community. Lane contends, with reference to Adorno, that Talen offers:

A theatrical and political equivalent to negative dialectics in their practice. If dialectics is the ‘consistent sense of non-identity,’ then Talen can’t afford a positive identity: the minute he offers a reconciliation, of any kind, of the social contradictions he seeks to reveal, the dialectical potential opened by his work disappears. (2002, 80)

It is the Reverend’s unresolvable blur between creating a real church and creating theatre that Lane locates as the source of his spiritual and political power. This blur is similar to the one between direct political action and political theatre: both relate to the distinction between theatre and real life.

In large part, I agree with Lane that it is Rev. Billy’s blend of genuine spirituality (church) and fakery (theatre) that makes him appealing. But Lane places too much importance on the need for Rev. Billy to avoid a positive identity. She claims:

When asked, point blank, are you a real preacher? The Reverend does not answer. At best he winks. I am certain that his unwillingness to answer, an unwillingness finally to commit to any form of a positive identity, is part of the answer. (2002, 79)

Regrettably, Lane is simply wrong on this point. Video footage of the Reverend before one of the large group readings of *The Raven* outside of Poe House in December 2000 shows him giving an interview to a news reporter. The Reverend talks a bit about NYU’s plans to demolish Poe House and the grass roots effort to save it. The camera operator asks the Reverend his name, and he replies: “My name’s Bill Talen. I do this character called Reverend Billy” (Talen 2000d). Another video of the Reverend, from a few months earlier, shows him with a group of observers and participants “praying” before a Disney Store invasion. One of the observers asks, point blank, “Are you really a priest?” Rev. Billy’s reply is explicit: “No, I’m a fake preacher” (Talen 2000b). I certainly do not mean to deny Lane’s (and my) belief that Rev. Billy is simultaneously a “fake” preacher and achieves real “spiritual” results. But the power of this strange mixture is not contingent on – and perhaps is incompatible with – maintaining a secret identity.

Despite admitting he is a fake preacher, *something* in his form or content allows Rev. Billy to be more than a fraud. Similarly, despite creating a genuinely spiritual experience of anticonsumerism, *something* in his form or content prevents him from being a conventional religious figure. Oddly, it is the Reverend's obvious fakery and role-playing that helps him to create a political community, more so than if he was a frank activist.

Rev. Billy is a special sort of *persona* of Bill Talen and, when playing the role of Rev. Billy, Talen occupies a transitional identity between himself and the Reverend. Richard Schechner, in his book *Between Theater and Anthropology*, identifies a different conception of “acting” in religious and ritual performances than in Western theatrical conventions. To Europeans and Americans, Schechner says, acting generally implies make-believe and even lying. But this is not always the case. Schechner gives an example of Brahman (Hindi) priests performing a religious ritual for the benefit of outside observers. Schechner claims:

It is not accurate to call them actors, and it is not accurate to not call them actors. They are between “not actors” and “not not actors,” a liminal realm of double negativity that precisely locates the process of theatrical characterization. (1985, 97)

Referencing his own attempts with The Performance Group to bring more aspects of ritual into Western theatre, Schechner proceeds to identify a similar “double negative” relationship between his actors and the roles they played. While portraying a character, each actor is “not himself”, but also “not not himself”. This is certainly true of Talen in relation to his Rev. Billy character, who usually seems to express Talen's political beliefs in a form that the “real” Talen would never use. The Reverend is “not Talen”, but also “not not Talen”.

Moreover, in fostering truly participatory rituals like the creed, Rev. Billy encourages audience members to perform as well. By perform, I mean not merely that audience members recite the specific text that is expected of them, but that they too get the opportunity to portray a character and create a “not not them”. Audience members are *moved* into the plane of performance. Most of the Reverend's followers have never shouted Hallelujah during a real church service, but during Rev. Billy's performances, they *can* shout Hallelujah – simultaneously meaning it and not. Rev. Billy describes the condition well when talking about the response to one of his sermons: “A congregation of ironists was shouting ‘Amen’ back, a knowing response

that contained both parody and the hope that we would soon transcend it” (2003, 103). Each congregant shouting Amen is both “not himself”, since he would not otherwise express himself in that form, and “not not himself”, since he shouts Amen genuinely to register his approval of the Reverend’s sermon.

One of the last lines of the creed sums up the problem of Rev. Billy as parody or pastiche: “It feels good to believe in something, doesn’t it children” (Talen and choir 2004)? The line could easily be attributed to a real preacher. But at this stage in the creed, few would doubt that Rev. Billy is a fake. The statement nonetheless can be – and likely *is* – read literally. The Reverend *is* ostensibly trying to build belief in something: the linked concepts of anticonsumerism and authenticity. Taken as a whole, the creed does not predominantly critique the Christian form but rather uses religious conventions as a vessel. There is certainly an aim at times to satirise consumption – which seems largely unsuccessful before audiences who are unfamiliar with the Reverend’s work and successful to those aware of it. But far more important than satire, Rev. Billy’s performances express a belief in something “positive”. He exploits religious forms primarily to create a spiritual experience of anticonsumerism.

Paradoxically, it seems that this expression of authentic beliefs (or this belief in authenticity) requires a self-consciously “inauthentic” or artificial performance form. It seems to be chiefly via unnatural performance that people, Rev. Billy included, feel comfortable admitting, expressing, and confirming their beliefs. Individuals in the audience perhaps avoid the vulnerability of belief by taking on an exaggerated character (a “not not them”) – as a member of the choir or congregation – and joining in the ritual. And it is actually the very root cause of pastiche – the commonality of the form – that insures that everyone is familiar with the performance expectations of this ritual. *Anyone* is able to join in. Talen seems to use a pastiche aesthetic – supposedly born out of the ashes of authenticity – to advocate an authentic life! He tries to build a sense of political community through redirecting a well-known aesthetic form. The key to attracting and activating his audiences seems to be the artificial *performance* or *role-playing* that Rev. Billy allows. He tries to locate the authentic via the “inauthentic” form of role-play.

I am not the first to pair these two terms. My proposal that Talen uses a self-consciously inauthentic performance form to access authenticity is similar to Auslander’s suggestion that David Bowie’s “authentic inauthenticity” actually reasserts the original meaning of authenticity while critiquing it (1999, 101). But there

are two major differences in these proposals. First of all, Auslander uses *authenticity* almost exclusively as an aesthetic category – referencing (with rock music) a perceived quality of sincerity and commitment as well as a musical assessment (1999, 66). He focuses on the generally accepted indicators or criteria of authenticity, compellingly arguing (in another text) that “the fact that the criteria for rock authenticity are imaginary has never prevented them from functioning in a very real way for rock fans” (1998, 3). His point is valid, but his argument reveals the frequent practice of creating an acceptable *image* of authenticity – which is in fact the antithesis of authenticity, which necessarily references some genuine truth. Though the distinction may not matter to most rock fans, it seems important to a political analysis: aesthetic authenticity is a constructed category to facilitate capitalist success. Talen may use a similar strategy but with an aim to recapture a political understanding of authenticity, to turn the aesthetic category into a political one. Secondly, Auslander claims that Bowie reasserts the original meaning of authenticity *while critiquing it*, but Rev. Billy shows no signs of *critiquing* the concept of authenticity, which is the core value and goal of his performances.

Certainly it seems to be a curious phenomenon that Rev. Billy genuinely asserts and advocates an authentic life, counter to consumer capitalism, by using a deliberately counterfeit character. I hinted just above that perhaps audiences find safety in such obvious fakery: they can express their authentic political beliefs without feeling that their genuine selves are made vulnerable. Perhaps this strategy is a tactical approach for a society in which appealing for fundamental political change seems like “mere perversity for its own sake” (Sim 1999, 60). It is conceivable that the only way to establish some sort of mass political movement today is through such pretending to pretend.

Another possible explanation is that sincerity seems very easily to develop into sentimentality. Sentimentality seems to be the dominant mood of mainstream dramas (theatre, film, television, or literature) and consequently has overtones of being “inauthentic”, acted, or exaggerated for effect. Perhaps, then, in wanting to avoid bland conventional sentimentality, Rev. Billy has to avoid sincerity as well. If most mainstream performance tries to hide its artifice and be interpreted as realistic and sincere, then perhaps sincerity has been poached by entertainment as a capitalistic category. A theatre seeking efficacy may need instead to avoid such sincerity and highlight its artifice. This argument is not far from being a contemporary discovery of

the Brechtian philosophy to emphasise the constructedness of theatre so that audiences do not get swept away by empathy. But there seems to be a key difference: Brecht's techniques – having visible lights and costume changes, and the demonstrative style of acting, say – were meant to distance the audience and push them to think critically about the outside world to which the theatre refers. Rev. Billy's artifice paradoxically seems to help audiences get swept away and “lose themselves” in playing a character, subsuming their individuality and critical thought to a sense of community.

This shifting nature of Brechtian techniques could be argued in terms of parody and pastiche. Ben-Porat makes a footnote comment about TV series that, if extended, is strikingly similar to Jameson's concept of pastiche:

Incidentally, the weekly reproduction of *exactly* the same deep structure may in itself function as a parodic procedure. Series writers are fully aware of this potential for auto-parody, and in recent years they often expose the mechanism. Even in a cartoon presented during a children's time-slot, a cartoonist makes a rabbit say to a dog: “You better quit now, according to the script I always have the upper hand at the end.” This is an illustration of a wider phenomenon, an important feature of modern art (literature and cinema in particular), namely the simultaneous appeal to the naïve and the sophisticated audiences. (1979, 245n1)

It is obvious that such auto-parody is purely intramural, and therefore would be pastiche to Jameson. Exposing the auto-parody, a “Brechtian” technique, is in this case fully complicit with late capitalist logic: it is a method through which a commonplace story and format can be superficially repackaged and sold as more sophisticated entertainment to a wider audience. The argument that Brechtian techniques may be commodified is not new, but the structure of the present argument perhaps indicates a new reason for this phenomenon – namely that sheer quantitative saturation of imitations has neutralised all techniques into a form of pastiche. Again following the idea of a cultural explosion, *all* artworks today are perhaps read by audiences in relation to many previous models that had the same “deep structure”. In other words, a Brechtian revealing of the artifice today might often take the form of admitting the archetype, as in the cartoon above, so that people can take pleasure in it – as the Reverend seems to do with his church services. In any case, this overall scrutiny of Rev. Billy with respect to parody has shown that he is not immune to pastiche but seems to *use* the supposedly apolitical form of pastiche to advocate authenticity, gain followers, and achieve political results.

This discussion leads nicely into the third major topic I wish to scrutinise, the communal experiences that Rev. Billy produces through his church. It seems to be a consensus among interpreters of Rev. Billy's work that the primary source of his efficacy is in the sense of community he engenders rather than in any specific "bottom-line" impact he is able to have on the corporations he targets. Looking back at the origins of the Rev. Billy character, it is plausible to conclude that creating such community is more than an important step towards building a political group movement. I will show that creating community is, in itself, part of the Reverend's political aim, and that the ambiguity of the previous two issues – the Reverend's content and form, roughly – contributes to this community building effect. Spectators become participants that *do* theatre and political actions rather than *watch* them.

The redevelopment of Times Square, as I have said, was an issue significant enough to feature in three essays in *TDR*. The most obvious reason that *TDR* would be interested in the Times Square redevelopment is that Times Square is home to the major Broadway theatres. As such, new Disney ownership of these theatres potentially marked a significant change in popular American theatre practices. John Bell's essay focuses on the changing position of "community" with respect to this redevelopment. In particular, Bell notes that Disney ownership of the historic New Amsterdam Theatre will make that theatre serve, "like theme-park performance, as a place where Disney consumers can participate in (consume) a Disney event with other Disney customers, helping to establish in person a temporary Disney consumer community" (1998a, 27). Bell's essay proceeds to discuss, with focus on Times Square, different potential relationships between theatre and the community. That is, the redevelopment of Times Square prompted a wider query into "the place and function of live performance (theatre, as it were) in late 20th-century United States culture" (1998a, 26). Clearly, then, Rev. Billy tapped into a significant issue for both politics and theatre.

Bell contrasts what he sees as the necessarily constrained function that a theatre under Disney ownership will serve with a very different vision articulated in the 1930s by Lee Simonson. Simonson, Bell reports, imagined Broadway as a place not purely for entertainment but for serious modern intellectuals. Theatre buildings, he envisioned, could act as the cultural centres for entire communities – a vision, Bell argues, that "is a modernist (even socialist) idea of planned community and planned culture" (1998a, 29). Rev. Billy seems to have similar community-building

aspirations for theatre. Granted, the often transient performances of Rev. Billy do not provide a community anchor – a central physical location – in the same sense that Simonson described. The Reverend’s community is less “planned” and more spontaneous and contradictory. But what remains is the importance of the local as opposed to the corporate and universal. Bell concludes his essay:

The theatre of a ‘local’ community can articulate a variety of sentiments and ideas from that community. The theatre of a corporate image network like Disney’s can express only the sentiments and ideas of that body and its owners. (1998a, 32)

Rev. Billy quite clearly aims to preserve a sense of local community and to reclaim it where it has already been lost. Consequently, the community that the Reverend creates is a political end in itself. This sense of community contests the restricted, necessarily consumerist views promoted by corporate capitalism – and opens the possibility for expanding one’s political consciousness.

This discussion will necessarily overlap with the first important issue I examined: the Reverend’s ambiguous platform of authenticity, which mixes aesthetic, moral, and political judgments. My instinct was to criticise this incoherent mixture as being an arbitrary and inadequate political foundation for his theatre, unlike the clearly articulated and unified goals of Piscator and other early agitprop practitioners. But if activating audiences and facilitating them to discover their own politics is the goal, then perhaps the Reverend’s nebulous political programme is a clever strategy, allowing a wide range of personal political beliefs to fit under his great umbrella of authenticity. This latter view is perhaps substantiated by the diversity found in Rev. Billy’s congregations: he has attracted former participants in the ‘60s counterculture, genuine Christians, disaffected youths, people who just miss the old neighbourhood, and more. It seems that, indeed, a broad assortment of personal political, religious, and aesthetic beliefs are compatible with – and activated by – the Reverend’s Church.

A couple of examples from the creed should indicate just such a diverse applicability. “We believe in the voluntary withdrawal of Starbucks, Duane Reade, Staples, Disney, Gap, and Barnes and Noble from, if not New York, just – get out of my face” (Talen and choir 2004). In this line, no reasons are given for desiring the withdrawal of these stores. Clearly (to an American audience) they are all major corporate chain stores. The request for their removal, however, could be grounded in an aesthetic critique, disliking the visual homogeneity caused by chain stores; or a

moral critique, as in a 1997 boycott of Disney by Southern Baptists (*not* inspired by Rev. Billy) for the corporation's support of gay rights;⁴ or a more properly political critique, such as condemning Disney's support of sweatshop labour. A wide range of political philosophies could nevertheless agree on this vague anti-corporate sentiment.

The subsequent credo could have similarly broad appeal, as it is roughly complementary to the credo above. "We believe in the return of the small bookstores, community gardens, ma and pa apothecaries, independent vendors, sex workers" and so on (Talen and choir 2004). Where the previous line expressed a desire for the withdrawal of corporate chain stores, this line specifies what should replace them: "small", "community", and "independent" shops. Once again, no explicit reasons are stated for the preferences and so the justification could once more encompass many varied beliefs. It seems that the creed expresses the broadest level of belief of the Church of Stop Shopping, and aims to be as inclusive as possible while remaining consistent with the Reverend's basic anticonsumerist authenticity.

In other aspects of the Reverend's performances, such as sermons in the street or during store invasions, he often gets more explicit with the justifications for his (and his Church's) beliefs – but always preserves a mixture of aesthetic, moral, and political reasons. During a performance both inside and directly outside of Starbucks, the Reverend will repeatedly quote the very low wages of Third World coffee farmers as a (political) reason not to support that corporation. He may condemn the fact that Starbucks has three stores at a single intersection and that the corporation has created a fake, ersatz café society (an aesthetic condemnation). And he has been known to criticise the use of bovine growth hormone in the Monsanto Corporation cows that provide milk for Starbucks (a specific, moralistic critique). The Reverend does not draw any distinction between the different rationalisations; they are all equal partners in his theology of authenticity.

Even when Rev. Billy initiates a chant of "Boycott Starbucks", it is unclear whether boycotting Starbucks is an end in itself or symbolic of more extreme political aims. Lane claims that the Reverend's boycott gestures are not his literal goal, but that

⁴ Many Southern Baptists objected to Disney's policy of giving health benefits to same-sex partners of employees, "Gay Days" at Disney theme parks, and the release by Disney and its subsidiaries of controversial "anti-Christian" and "anti-family" films like *Pulp Fiction* and *Kids* (CNN 1997).

he desires to interrupt the shopping “long enough to make the underlying psycho-social investments of the scene visible” and to “release [shoppers’] imaginations from the strictures of consumer practice” (2002, 68-69). She may be right about his goals, but quite possibly the boycott gesture could be different things to different people. Some of the Reverend’s followers may have no complaint with capitalism as such and would find limiting the spread of Starbucks and other chain stores to be a sufficient achievement. Some of his congregants might, for moral reasons, find the pursuance of wealth to be distasteful and consequently desire an indistinct notion of a more authentic, less capital driven society. Perhaps some Rev. Billy admirers believe in communism and would see a boycott of Starbucks as a desirable minor step towards the much more far-reaching goal of abolishing private property. Keeping his personal politics indistinct allows for a wide range of supporters and helps to create a sense of community.

Regardless of people’s specific private politics, Rev. Billy’s theatre tries to *activate* or *move* them. Each of his mock church services culminates in a public action in which audience members are encouraged to participate. Given the situation, with many regular followers joining in an action, new attendees may even feel *coerced* to participate. Many people’s first experience of organised political action has been a Rev. Billy event. The particular justifications for anticonsumerism are many and varied, but clearly less important to the Reverend than simply taking action. My description of the Reverend’s genesis tried to highlight that his “political programme” was created only via the act of performance: Rev. Billy would go out in Times Square and preach, and through preaching come to discover his budding beliefs. Despite his popularity and success, this method has persevered, and has developed from his personal, individual journey to a social and communal discovery. In a 2000 interview, the Reverend described himself as a “mouthpiece” for the beliefs of the community that are not being widely expressed because there are not vast amounts of money supporting them. He of course recognises that his little church is unlikely to stop the spread of chain stores, but defends his ambiguous methods with the claim that “there’s something we must do and don’t know how to do it yet” (Talen 2000f). That is, the group experience of indeterminate social action seems to be more valuable to the Reverend than the advancement of specific political aims. The theatre of the church services builds and mobilises the community for the actions in public – but

even the actions themselves might be more important for their community-building than for their immediate political effect.

Rev. Billy is of course not the first to use theatre as a means of creating a sense of community with political pretensions. On one level, a sense of community was the objective of Piscator's theatre and other agitprop variants. Performances often comprised oversimplified slogans and emotional clichés, or closed with a communal singing of the Internationale, in an effort to rally the masses. But this agitprop variant, seeking unification and conformity, is ostensibly different to Rev. Billy's aims to promote individual authenticity. Marshall Berman defines the *politics of authenticity* as "a dream of an ideal community in which individuality will not be subsumed and sacrificed, but fully developed and expressed" (1970, vii). This definition is a deliberate rewording of Marx and Engels' proposed society in which "the free development of each is the condition of the free development of all" (1848/1963). But, Berman says, the defeats of 1848-51 (failed revolutions in Berlin and Paris) wiped out the politics of authenticity for nearly a century. Over that time, both sides of the political spectrum aligned capitalism with individualism and radicalism with collectivism. The Frankfurt School and New Left of the 1950s and 1960s changed this view with the complaint that capitalism was repressive and not individualistic enough, thereby bringing radicalism back to its roots in Romanticism.⁵ These radicals viewed the struggle for personal authenticity as a political problem, which could be solved through fundamental political change. It is no surprise, then, that many of the radical theatre groups of the '60s sought to promote individual authenticity – often via the creation of an alternative participatory community wherein individuals felt free to share their authentic selves with others.

Two prominent examples of theatres with such an apparent aim are Welfare State International and the Bread and Puppet Theater. The manufacturing of authenticity seems to be a significant goal of these theatres. Welfare State International is known for its massive lantern ceremonies: as many as 10,000 people from a community will participate creatively, contributing their own individual

⁵ I think that Herbert Marcuse is perhaps the most "Romantic" of the Frankfurt School. His effort to synthesise Marxism and Freudian psychoanalysis in *Eros and Civilization* (1956) could perhaps be seen as an attempt to make a systemic politics out of authenticity.

authentic selves to a wider social and communal whole. Welfare State's website states:

We are seeking a culture which may well be less materially based but where more people will actively participate and gain power to celebrate moments that are wonderful and significant in their lives. We advocate a role for art that weaves it more fully into the fabric of our lives; that allows us to be collaborators rather than spectators. (Welfare State International 2005)⁶

The Bread and Puppet Theater is arguably quite similar. A documentary focussed on the theatre's annual *Domestic Resurrection Circus* shows the large-scale communal undertaking to construct and create the papier-mâché puppets and masks used in the pageant, and prepare each scene or sketch. Interviews with participants reveal a latent politics: many of the contributors discuss the political import of Bread and Puppet even though most of the political content and satire is quite general and subtle (Farber 1993). What I noticed particularly was that audiences in this video overwhelmingly expressed their appreciation and support, in interviews and through their applause and reactions to the performance, simply for the effort and work that goes into creating the pageant. It may sound like an oversimplification, but it could perhaps be said that these theatres seek to foster authenticity *directly*, by creating authentic spaces and situations in which people feel comfortable discovering and sharing their authentic selves.

Social changes since the '60s, however, have made authenticity a highly speculative matter – as evidenced by theories such as Jameson's. Perhaps reflecting these changes, Rev. Billy seeks to cultivate authenticity, in part, via a self-consciously *inauthentic* or artificial performance form – particularly by foregrounding the fakery. Contrary to the approach of Welfare State or Bread and Puppet, Rev. Billy's method suggests that people may be more likely to admit and express their authentic selves and beliefs through playing a role and taking on a character – that is, through an artificial performance. Rev. Billy's congregants and Bread and Puppet or Welfare State contributors both express their authentic selves by contributing to the overall performance. With Bread and Puppet and Welfare State, it seems that people communicate and interact authentically to *create* performances. With the Church of Stop Shopping, people do not exist outside of the performance: they communicate authentically only within the context of a performance.

⁶ See also Kershaw (1992, 206-42) and especially Coult and Kershaw (1983).

I made reference above to Schechner's "not not me", arguing that the Reverend enables audience members to create a "not not them". Congregants can voice their authentic beliefs and enact their authentic selves through the relative safety of this double negative. Schechner implies that this ritual circumstance is "simultaneously private and social". When someone is performing, Schechner contends, he can recover his own self only by entering a social field – the field of the rehearsal or in this case ritual process (1985, 112). During a ritual, a transitional or "liminal" space opens up. There is no stepping out of the prescribed role without destroying the ritual. The same seems true of Rev. Billy's church services, which are plainly ritualistic.

In the introduction I criticised Schechner's discussion of efficacy for not providing a way to evaluate the success of efficacious performance – meaning performance that places more emphasis on attaining results than on entertainment. With most rituals, the efficacy is contained in the performance of the ritual: the results are achieved if the ritual is successfully completed. I suggested that this was not true of political theatre, with reference to a hypothetical performance that had as its ultimate aim putting a stop to the Vietnam War. The completion of the theatrical performance clearly would not achieve the desired results. But it seems possible now, having analysed Rev. Billy's tactics and politics, that the efficacy of his theatre *is* simply in the doing. Perhaps the theatrical ritual of the Reverend's performances *is* an end in itself. Building belief in, and facilitating the expression of, authenticity – in opposition to consumer capitalism – might be efficacious in itself. Audiences are moved through the liminal phase of the ritual to a belief-community and then moved further to take public action. Perhaps the belief *becomes* a belief only in the action. That is, only via completing the theatrical ritual and accompanying act of civil disobedience does an audience member confirm his anticonsumerist beliefs and begin to discover his political rationale. Zizek makes a similar radical supposition about Muslim fundamentalists on a suicide mission:

What if, however, they are terribly unsure about their belief, and they use their suicidal act as a means of resolving this deadlock of doubt by asserting this belief: 'I don't know if I really believe – but, by killing myself for the Cause, I will proof [sic] *in actu* that I believe'? (2002, 72)

If belief is confirmed by the *act* and the communal building of belief is the site of the political, then perhaps the efficacy is in the performing of the action (of theatre or

terrorism). By completing the ritual performance, one enables the possibility of political change.

Regarding my experience during the *Last Days of Mankind* performance and process, I claimed that I was being more daring and adventurous – through doing this theatre – than I ever had been in “real life”. A similar claim could be made about Rev. Billy’s actions: the actions *themselves* are authentic; through participating in the theatre, people begin living authentic lives. Video footage of the Reverend’s September 2000 occupation of Poe House reveals one regular Rev. Billy collaborator, Tony Torn, with a beatific smile as he lay flat on the rooftop to avoid being seen from below. Tony was clearly enjoying the adventure: theatre, it seems, can provide more and better meaningful life experiences than “real life”. This analysis of the third major issue has shown that community, for Rev. Billy, is a political end in itself. Further, this promotion of community is aided by the ambiguity of the previous two issues, the Reverend’s form and content. His artificial style, pastiche aesthetic, and mixed content help to activate audiences and establish a political community.

This analysis already indicates a plausible answer to the fourth question I wish to ask of Rev. Billy: *Why theatre?* If his artificial theatrical style is the source of his ability to build community, that in itself would justify his choice of *theatre* over (or in addition to) direct political *action*. The Reverend’s artificial style is fun and entertaining. It seems that the fun of the creed, in large part, comes from the role-playing – from the self-conscious and exaggerated form of performance, the sing-song speech and shouting of Hallelujahs – that straight activism would not comprise. I will briefly analyse a few other recent theatrical actions to show that Rev. Billy is indicative of a current trend.

Clearly, Rev. Billy has adopted many pet causes as elements of his wider platform of authenticity. In so doing, he has worked in conjunction with many activist groups such as Reclaim the Streets, More Gardens!, and The Coalition to Save Poe House. Though it does not seem *necessary*, the tendency seems to be for activist groups to be focussed on a single issue or goal and have a clear manifesto. Rev. Billy, it seems, aims to provide or create an entire life-philosophy that transcends the manifesto form and must be able to be applied to many issues. This extensiveness seems more properly the domain of a church than an activist group – hence the church performance.

There seems to be a deeper reason, however, that relates to the apparent deficiency of traditional protest today. In the preface to one of his Starbucks invasion “scripts”, the Reverend wrote:

Whereas the traditional language of social change may be to get a hundred people to shout the same short declarative sentence at the same time, carrying signs, on a street – this image has been used so much in commercial productions, from Hollywood to fashion magazines to police training films, opposition in this form is pre-framed, a self-parody despite its intentions. (Talen 2004a, 5)

I participated in several marches in Christchurch in early 2003 in support of peace and in opposition to the invasion of Iraq. These marches were, without exception, embarrassing. Everybody was highly self-conscious, unenthusiastic, unwilling to participate if somebody attempted to start a chant, and seemingly there out of a sense of obligation. It felt as though we all knew that the marches were purposeless (a self-parody), but did not know what else to do. Such embarrassment is contagious: I felt no inclination to chant because I would stand out from the crowd that I wanted to blend into. Perhaps if we all could have played characters as in a Rev. Billy church service we would have been more likely to participate.

This conjecture is seemingly substantiated by other recent protest activity. Several lecturers at the University of Canterbury travelled to New York City in August 2004 to document the massive protests during the Republican National Convention (RNC). These protests were frequently focussed against the “unjust” war in Iraq; the RNC was primarily a converging point of such protests – also due to objections against what many saw as Bush’s exploitation of the September 11 attacks in New York. While millions protested in a relatively conventional (but vociferous) manner, marching and carrying placards, what was more striking was the vast number of performances and unconventional forms of protest.

A street theatre group called the Billionaires for Bush attended many of the protests and marches, and even pro-Bush rallies. The Billionaires would often turn up at rallies in nice cars and be driven through the crowd to the front lines, emerging in black tie attire, bearing champagne glasses and cigars. They would begin proclaiming their approval of Bush and were often met with welcome by Bush supporters and scorn by protestors. Then the Billionaires would unfurl signs and start chants: *Leave no billionaire behind!*; *More tax cuts for the rich!*; or *Corporations are people too!* From many accounts, these performances were often tense and erupted in debate

(Slack 2004; Billionaires 2004). A theatrical and fun portrayal seems to be more provocative – more likely to provoke political movement – than straight activism.

Greene Dragon organised a mass cycle ride through the streets of New York several days before the Republican National Convention. Dressed in colonial garb, the group parodied Paul Revere's famous ride, warning New Yorkers *The Republicans are coming! The Republicans are coming!* Considering the group's overall aims and variety of performances, and speeches accompanying the ride, this performance is more complicated than the silly parody it may appear (Greene Dragon 2004). Greene Dragon protests against what it sees as un-democratic practices, including heavy corporate influence in American politics. Their parody, like Rev. Billy's, is serious: they intend quite sincerely to mark "a return to the original ideal of our forefathers, a hopeful vision for a responsible and compassionate government of the people, by the people, and for the people" (Greene Dragon 2005). They use the American flag and founding hero myths in a very reverent manner, though they use them radically to oppose the existing government – very much, it seems, as Rev. Billy uses the Christian form and symbolism.

The Missile Dick Chicks primarily sang parodic songs while dressed in patriotic leotards with large missiles strapped between their legs. They updated the words of *Stop! In the name of love* (made famous by Diana Ross and the Supremes):

Shop! In the name of war / You need a whole lot more / Shop! In the name of war / You need a whole lot more / Think of it as your civic duty / Our SUVs need that oil booty / We'll now cut taxes on your consumer billions / Uncle Sam can afford to bomb civilians / So don't fear to grab your credit card and stay calm / That brand new car will buy us a lot of napalm / Don't think it over / Don't think it over. (Missile Dick Chicks 2004)

Rather than sincerely proclaim that American shopping habits tacitly support an unjust war that is causing civilian deaths, this group chose to communicate that same message via a ridiculous parody. These are just a few of the incredibly many examples of street theatre caught on tape during the convention – Rev. Billy among them – that preferred a practice incorporating parody or irony or some other "inauthentic" form. These events indicate a possibly widespread belief that highly artificial performance practices may be more efficacious than the sincerity of traditional protests. Direct political actions seem to be increasingly suspect or ineffective, not only at achieving "bottom-line" results but also in generating an authentic community (as many accounts of the '60s protest culture describe them as

achieving). The mixing of “artificial” political theatre and political action seems a repeated strategy of generating such an authentic community.

This notion of authenticity, and a politics based on community, is of course very far from the overt politics of agitprop or Piscator’s consistent aim to foster a classless society. The Reverend’s vague political platform, while probably calculated and intentional, and helpful in building a sense of community and employing a strategy of moving targets, also makes him susceptible to criticism as an ultimately capitalist style – which is the final issue I wish to scrutinise. I will show that the Reverend’s capitalistic practice severely undermines his theology of authenticity. The Reverend views his recent commercial practice as an ongoing part of his experimentation – but I will argue that late capitalist society may preclude that possibility.

The vast majority of articles and essays on Rev. Billy have been in papers and journals, or been written by authors, that are interested in the Reverend’s politics or theatrics (or both) and likely share his political views. An editorial by Jay Nordlinger in the more conservative Wall Street Journal is one of very few that has questioned the Reverend’s politics and authenticity (2004). The focus of the article is a protest by independent vendors who were cleared out of their regular haunt of Madison Square Garden when that venue was hosting the 2004 Republican National Convention. The protest, Nordlinger says, was rather subdued and modest – until Reverend Billy showed up. The Reverend stole the show: “He is a star, this fellow, with Hollywood hair and Don Johnson stubble” (Nordlinger 2004). Rev. Billy and his choir started chants and songs and made a spectacle for the media. The vendors, Nordlinger reports, seemed rather stunned by the “sudden circus around them”. To Nordlinger, the Reverend’s adaptability – his adoption of numerous causes – is a sign of *inauthenticity*: “Really he is whatever he wants to be, whenever he wants to be it. He seems a classic American type, the self-inventing hustler” (2004). By this account, Rev. Billy is a swindler, a closet capitalist who makes his fame and fortune by exploiting other people’s political causes.

This criticism is rather harsh, but there is truth in it. Promotional materials indicate that the Reverend’s activism is for sale. Rev. Billy can be hired to give a lecture and workshop for \$500. In the lecture he discusses a history of activist performance including the work of Augusto Boal, the Civil Rights Movement, the Yippies, and ACT UP – and examines the difficulties in staging his own work. For

\$1000 per day, the Reverend will take up residency at a host institution and, depending on the length of the residency, run workshops and assist in the creation of an activist performance involving the concerns of the surrounding community. For a fee of \$1500, the Reverend can be hired to give a one-off preaching performance. The publicity sheet describing this option lists the most popular elements that comprise a Rev. Billy preaching performance:

He will confer ‘Fabulous Sainthood’ on local activists, perform the Exorcism of the Credit Cards, the Reading of ‘The Word’ (Chomsky, Dr. King, Walt Whitman, Sojourner Truth, etc.), and the evening-length interactive play with sermon.

It seems that Rev. Billy has fashioned himself into a brand name, or a superstar with a list of “greatest hits”.⁷

Such “commodification” seems to be the first step towards Rev. Billy becoming a brand and franchiser like the corporate chain stores he rails against. The Reverend does not seem to think of himself in this way. During an interview with a documentary filmmaker, Rev. Billy condemned just such a branding process:

A part of our apolitical habit – our bad habit in America of being de-politicised – has to do with the ease with which we adopt labels for things... You might even say that we make things into products...by having names for them too easily. We neutralise that experience. (Talen 2000e)

The Reverend seems here to be summarising, in his own words, a process similar to Jameson’s theory of pastiche. Experiences are neutralised, he claims, by being labelled, known, and understood – effectively treating every experience as an imitation of previous experiences: pastiche. This quotation came in the context of Rev. Billy discussing his *refusal* of labels. He seems to acknowledge the need for, and see himself as attempting, a strategy of “moving targets”. In my analyses above with respect to his indistinct political programme and form, I have tended to see him as being rather successful in this strategy. But his “rent-an-activist” operation, the staging of some of his performances, and some of his writings seem very strongly to contradict such a “moving targets” strategy.

⁷ In a conversation with me, Greta Bond pointed out that local activists could, it seems, hire Rev. Billy to come and confer sainthood upon them. She saw this as akin to the Catholic purchasing of God’s favour – in the form of indulgences – that Calvin and Luther protested against. Interestingly, Bill Talen was raised by Dutch Calvinists and strongly reacted against it. Perhaps rejecting Calvinism led him back to the traditions of Catholicism!

In 2004, Starbucks took Rev. Billy to court for destruction of property and malicious mischief – for his “laying on of hands upon a cash register”, in the Reverend’s words. An e-mail sent out to the Church of Stop Shopping mailing list in late 2004 was titled “Reenact Reverend Billy’s Crime Against Starbucks!” and included a photo of a young woman outside a Starbucks doing her best Rev. Billy impersonation. The e-mail urged people to do the same: “Get some bad Elvis hair, a white collar, white jacket and enter a Starbucks store...” (Talen 2004b). Is recommending that people imitate him – his appearance and his actions – not very close to franchising himself? At the very least such a recommendation seems to oppose the Reverend’s theology of authenticity: surely imitating someone else, both politically and aesthetically, would be considered inauthentic.

While the Reverend is presumably available for hire year-round, politically dubious e-mails such as the one above are admittedly uncommon. But even the Reverend’s regular, “free”, and voluntary performances are frequently staged in such a way as to highlight the Reverend’s star persona – like a form of marketing. The vendor protest, Nordlinger proclaimed, became the Rev. Billy Show. A rally to save Poe House, coordinated by several activist groups, became a Rev. Billy church service. Another good and perhaps less obvious example of this branding phenomenon is one of the developments the Reverend made to his store invasions, called the “cell phone opera”.

The action had been planned and rehearsed, as much as possible, in advance. A group of plain-clothed actors, the Reverend among them in disguise, entered the Disney store as shoppers, each bearing a cheap toy cell phone. Every actor had a roughly prepared script to follow involving an imaginary partner on the phone, a young friend or relative for whom the actor was shopping, and a specific toy or Disney character. The actors gradually began to talk on their phones, pretending for instance to be debating with a spouse whether to buy a Hercules doll for a nephew. The conversations, spread throughout the store, gradually increased in volume and became more aggressive. Eventually all of the actors were shouting loud arguments into their phones, questioning their imaginary partners about the morality of Disney films, the ubiquity of its products, Disney’s use of sweatshop labour, other questionable corporate practices, and more criticisms of Disney in particular and consumerism in general. According to Talen, the Disney employees were confused (2003, 71-79). Something was obviously amiss but they could not distinguish what.

As the scene became chaotic and security personnel started threatening to throw customers out of the store (often confusing *real* customers with actors), Rev. Billy cast off his outer garments and hat – revealing his white tux jacket, preacher’s collar, and pompadour – and began preaching his anticonsumerist gospel as he had done before.

Certainly it is both possible and necessary to see this as a political development made to maximise both the number of shoppers exposed to criticisms of Disney and the time that Rev. Billy and others were able to remain in the store. But the particular theatricality of the Reverend revealing himself at the climactic moment can be criticised as a means of increasing his star persona and capitalist worth. The initial chaos of the cell phone conversations was not recognisable as theatre. Security personnel soon realised that something was amiss, but they could not identify it as a performance. By revealing himself – in full costume – at this climactic moment, the Reverend immediately marked the event as a performance, solving the mystery and insinuating himself as *providing* the solution in the form of spiritual or political salvation.

Despite his problematic practices, I personally do not doubt Rev. Billy’s anticonsumerist intent – but an ideological analysis of his “cell phone opera” may prove insightful. His saviour-like entrance could be interpreted as a method to promote himself as a star personality so that he can appear in newspaper articles and documentary films, and be hired to give guest lectures and performances. If the performance remained invisible, the Reverend could never take credit for it. Perhaps his dramatic appearance is a way of attracting followers. If audiences convert to Rev. Billy’s cause, or join his church, it may be from the allure of this well-dressed, charming, and funny leader rather than the cause itself.

It is probable that neither of the suggestions above was a conscious strategy, but that the Reverend’s appearance seemed the “natural” way to stage such an event. Rather than make a radical development and discard the Reverend persona in favour of anonymous collective action, Rev. Billy incorporated his previous practice into this new development – perhaps an unconscious manifestation of brand mentality. Even those who try to oppose consumer society have been moulded by its logic of competitive individualism. Doing a truly communal performance that is not attributed to an individual’s artistic talent feels strange, illogical, and purposeless (as I can attest from the performance of *Last Days*). Doing a performance for no credit would be

counterintuitive in a late capitalist society ruled by competition and marketing. It is feasible to see Rev. Billy's "flaws" as social phenomena rather than as consciously capitalistic practices. Even if they are unintentional, however, such blemishes do seem to call the Reverend's efficacy into question.

Boal, whom Rev. Billy lectures about and occasionally refers to in his writings, created a political performance tactic that he called "Invisible Theatre". The intent behind Boal's Invisible Theatre, which occurs unannounced in public spaces and never reveals the identity of the actors, is to activate unsuspecting audiences. The actors create and enact a "real-life" scenario that puts people in situations where they are compelled to participate and, in so doing, to determine their beliefs on a certain political issue. This theatre's primary aim is to turn spectators into "spect-actors", protagonists of the dramatic action. It is *imperative*, Boal maintains, that the theatre remains invisible so that spectators behave as if in a real life situation (1981b/1990, 28). It can never be revealed as theatre. The Reverend's cell phone opera arguably begins as Invisible Theatre but reveals itself in the end, revealing, at the same time, the apparent *solution* to the problem in the form of Rev. Billy. Admittedly the Reverend does not claim that this cell phone opera was intended as a Boalian exercise, so he cannot be accused of misapplying or misunderstanding Boal's theory, but the differences are perhaps revealing of Rev. Billy's drive to take credit for and build a reputation from his political theatre.

In another instance, the Reverend has openly altered Boal's approach. He wrote a script called *Death by Latte*, meant to be performed by plain-clothed actors disguised as Starbucks customers. In the preface to the script, Rev. Billy calls this particular approach "a variation on the pioneering work of Augusto Boal". The script is basically an outline for an improvisation in which three customers discuss and debate aesthetic, moral, and political condemnations of Starbucks – loud enough for other customers to overhear. In his ideal scenario, there would be 12 tables of three performing this action simultaneously in the same café. The Reverend gives tips on how to perform this improvisation and remain natural and believable, and why:

Because the consumer or customers that you've targeted as your audience – they simply can't know that you're political on purpose. There's the irony. You are bringing intentional language into the room, but you do it most powerfully by showing no intention at all. (2004a, 15)

This point seems accurate: people who would never listen to dubious facts about a corporation if they were presented as a political protest would nevertheless overhear and absorb some of the information if it were presented in the context of a legitimate conversation happening at the table next to them. This realisation makes it especially perplexing that the Reverend's script calls for a "final scene" that reveals the theatrical artifice. According to the script, an actor with a giant coffee cup stuck over his head enters the store at a signal from one of the actors inside and performs a melodramatic death scene. Someone then announces: "this has been today's performance of *The Death of Latte*, a tragedy" (2004a, 18). All of the tables of three conversers cheer, then stand up and distribute informational leaflets to customers. Would revealing the theatricality not "undo" whatever efficacy that hinged on the conversers not showing intention? The Reverend is plainly familiar with Boal; but I can think of no political justification for making the invisible theatre visible in the end.

I asked Talen about this and other problematic issues in a list of questions I e-mailed to him on 16 September 2004. He replied on the 19th that he would be happy to answer them. After several long delays and reminder e-mails from me, and multiple requests from Talen for me to re-send the list of questions that he had lost, he finally informed me that he would not answer my questions in an email of 17 January 2005. Perhaps he did not like the nature of my questions, which attempted to engage critically with his work rather than, as many of the articles and essays written about him, to assume that he achieves the political results he apparently desires. I am tempted to conclude – because of his questionable, possibly capitalistic practices discussed above – that if I were a journalist or filmmaker, somebody who could spread Rev. Billy's popularity, he would have answered the interview questions. He certainly seems at times to apply a capitalist logic within his supposedly anticonsumerist practice.

Rev. Billy's response to another recent e-mail, deriding him as capitalistic, reveals a misunderstanding of the late capitalist system the Reverend apparently seeks to oppose. This e-mail (attributed to "Suzanne"), which Rev. Billy posted on his website along with his response, urged the Reverend to think back on why he started, censuring his ever-expanding endeavour: "This is bullshit. This is a commercial enterprise. Rev. Billy where is your Tammy Fay Baker [sic]? Your evangelistic

hypocrisy is gross”.⁸ Suzanne even states that the Reverend’s many arrests have been used to boost his publicity. The Reverend’s response strives to place his commercial practices in line with all of his experimentation over the years – as simply one more approach or strategy that he is testing:

For so long we were a neighborhood political group, doing fundraisers for the greengrocer’s union or painting out billboards of offending transnationals. As we became better known (we are celebrating our 10th anniversary) – we were faced with a whole set of questions that we didn’t have when I was alone sidewalk preaching... We’re commercial in form sometimes, but its [sic] easy to see that we are not industrial celebrities, and are routinely refused by all the talk shows from Lettermen [sic] on down. But the idea of an anti-commercial message via the use of some of the systems [sic] own strategies is something that we have accepted and continue to explore.

Rev. Billy cites his inability to get on the *Late Show with David Letterman* as evidence of his continued authenticity (though does this not imply that he has *tried* to get on Letterman?). He admits using commercial channels, but claims that he will use any notoriety he achieves to help local activists.

It seems apparent, however, that any commercial notoriety, if not inherently undermining his political aims, at least philosophically undermines the Reverend’s theology of authenticity – which places strong emphasis on the need for being one’s authentic self not mediated by any outside interests or the needs of capital. During an appearance on WGN, a major television network based in Chicago, Rev. Billy was introduced as “a comedian”. In letting the media define his role as an entertainer, the Reverend seems to sacrifice his authenticity. In addition, it seems that late capitalism makes commercialisation a one-way street. All businesses must grow and expand, or expire. The Reverend indicates that his commercial venture is part of his experimentation, implying that if he finds it unsuccessful he can cast off his celebrity reputation and return to his charitable roots. But this is a flawed argument or an inadequate application of the “moving targets” thesis. Talen would, it seems, have to abandon the Reverend character altogether and move his practice entirely in order to avoid the implications of his current notoriety. This commercialisation, however, does not render this whole analysis irrelevant. Rev. Billy’s practice still supports the general argument that aesthetic actions, judgments, and pastiche can paradoxically be

⁸ Tammy Faye Bakker is the wife of famous televangelist Jim Bakker. Both of them were implicated in numerous financial embezzlement scandals – and Jim was involved in several sex scandals.

the foundation for a radical political theatre – but being vague and aesthetic in nature, such a practice seems highly vulnerable to commodification.

I wish finally to analyse a rather atypical Rev. Billy sermon in an effort to support my hypothesis by counterexample. My broad thesis has been that the key to Rev. Billy's ability to mobilise community around a platform of authenticity is paradoxically located in his artificial and inauthentic performance style and aesthetic. I wish to analyse an uncharacteristic sermon, delivered shortly after the September 11 attacks, in which the Reverend is unusually sincere. Through this analysis, I will show that Rev. Billy's power is typically located in his intentionally artificial character.

Most of his sermons are elaborate and humorous extensions of the creeds. One sermon script includes notes to himself on how to perform it: "After laughter, get Episcopalian quickly"; "Big apocalyptic preaching again, confident pauses, a long rising note"; or "Seething wrath, John Brown" (Lane 2002, 64-65). These stage directions once again indicate pastiche: the Reverend creates an entertaining mix of styles. The content of the sermons is more explicit, yet still centred on the largely aesthetic notion of authenticity. In a sermon Talen gave to his congregation before leading an invasion into the Disney Store, he said:

It is important that we go inside. Pull on those stainless steel Mickey Mouse silhouette doorknobs. It's like you are stepping into a tanning coffin full of smiling pom-poms. The first thing that you realize is that you are on a first name basis with each of these round pieces of fluff. And each of these little faces is smiling directly at you with an assumed air of knowledge about your personal life. Snow White whispers to you about your virginity; Simba knows about your ambition; Donald Duck wants to help you with your earnest clumsiness. You find yourself thanking these made-in-China totemic polyester smilers for the life you lived; you give it up; your life-events begin to reorganize to fit Disney's product delivery schedule; you self-induce a false childhood. (Lane 2002, 64-65)

This sermon, which is indicative of his typical sermons, continues the humorous and entertaining performance and largely aesthetic critique of consumerism – describing the Disney Store as a tanning coffin full of smiling pom-poms. Even the hints of a deeper political rationale, such as indicating that the toys are made in China, are ambiguous: "made-in-China" is often used as a criticism meaning cheap knick-knack – an aesthetic, more than political, criticism. Authenticity is still the focus, in this case attempting to reclaim authentic childhoods that have been replaced by Disney products. Talen once again uses the pastiche preacher and playful humour to access authenticity.

A sermon he delivered in Union Square, Manhattan, in the days after the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 is very different. The normal life of the city had been suspended by the attacks, and Union Square emerged as an impromptu gathering place where the displaced would come to discuss the events, pay their respects to the dead and families of the dead, hang “missing” posters, build memorials, and so on. Much of the conversation in these days, from numerous accounts, was centred upon making sense of the attacks and determining the appropriate response to them. Even many performance periodicals felt the need for a sudden and complete re-evaluation of the role of theatre in society after September 11. The attacks clearly prompted extensive introspection and self-criticism.⁹ While the long-term dominant consequence of September 11 has perhaps been an upsurge and strengthening of belief in the righteousness and inevitability of Western capitalist democracy, the short-term effect was seemingly to make many people vulnerable and more receptive to alternative ways of understanding the attacks (and by extension, of understanding the world).

Rev. Billy, in full costume, began by gravely instigating an already-familiar chant of “Our grief is not a cry for war” – a slogan displayed on many signs in Union Square. He then began his sermon, alone in public, with no choir or congregation:

For those of us who are old enough to remember other attempts at peace, there is a difference this time. You can’t really argue that we shouldn’t get Osama bin Laden. Of course we should. We have to get him. Jihad and holy war is a terrible perversion of Islamic teaching. Of course let’s go get him. (Talen 2001)

The Reverend here expresses a common Western philosophy of Islam: that jihad is not a true expression of the Muslim faith. Perhaps this is true, but the essence of this common claim is that Muslims who deride the West are not true Muslims, and that true Muslims hold the same core (Christian and capitalist) values as we do. But he soon distinguishes his view from this common denial of difference.

First, he expresses a vague anti-war sentiment, at a time when the US government was just starting to talk of war on Afghanistan:

But let’s not do our so-called precision bombing anywhere around. Let’s not kill innocent people this time. We’ve already done that in Iraq. We’ve already done that in Vietnam. El Salvador. Nicaragua. Chile. We have a long list of places where our bombing has not been very precise. (Talen 2001)

⁹ See for instance Román (2002) and Grinwis, Hanlon, et al. (2002).

Rev. Billy's view is obviously critical of the US's involvement in at least this handful of wars, but it is not yet clear whether his is a blanket pacifism, humanism, or a deeper political critique. So far his message could be summarised "We have been wronged, but let's not wrong others in revenge". This could easily be a Christian teaching – and many of those gathered in Union Square may have taken it for such as they listened to this presumable preacher who, for once, seemed a believable character.

The Reverend's talk seems to digress from pacifism as the notion of *authenticity* enters once again. He emphasises ideas hinted at in his creeds, that personal experiences, stories, and a sense of community are significant positive events:

We have emotions coming up that we wouldn't have allowed into, into public space, into the parks before. We don't *feel* the surveillance anymore. We're here. We're putting our own stories on the fences. We're confessing to each other. This is *re-humanised* public space. This is *re-narrated* public space. (Talen 2001)

The Reverend hints that, in the immediate aftermath of the attacks, people have stopped living consumer-centred lives and are spending more time simply talking to each other.

Continuing the sermon, Rev. Billy draws parallels between the current assembly and other activist movements:

And this is the place for it. I don't think it's happening at Union Square just because the borderline the first days after the bombing was 14th Street. I think this is holy space. This is where we won the eight-hour day, right here. Hallelujah! All as far as you can see was, was full of, of young women from sweatshops who were refusing to work. They re-humanised Union Square just as we are. Amen. (Talen 2001)

He hereby tries to align the current occasion with a workers' victory – an instance of traditional class politics – of many years prior. Still, it is unclear whether he is in favour of the eight-hour day as an end in itself, for moral (Christian) reasons, or as strides taken toward a more comprehensive political alternative such as socialism. He maintains his platform of authenticity that mixes Christianity, left-wing activism, and many other elements.

He soon spells out his theology in detail, and makes the link between his anticonsumerism and the attacks of September 11:

Now I am from the Church of Stop Shopping. The Church of Stop Shopping, my congregation, we were upset that the President of the United States and the Mayor of our city asked us as a measurement of our patriotism to start shopping again. Shopping is a sin, children. We're surrounded; we're in the Bermuda Triangle of retail here in Union Square. That's what makes it especially interesting that we have reclaimed this place. In our church we believe that if we start shopping again, we will bring back the very conditions that made the bombing somehow, in some wicked logic, necessary. Why is it that Americans are intruding and insinuating our reality into the families and tribes and nations in the Middle East? Why is that? It's because of our consumer culture. (Talen 2001)

Rev. Billy does something that the mainstream American press and politicians tried to avoid: he admits that there were reasons, a logic (albeit a wicked one), for the September 11 attacks. And he pinpoints those reasons as related to consumer culture and its need for expansion – the logic of late capitalism. In so doing, he acknowledges that Muslims (and others in the Middle East) have different values than we do – and treats those values as an acceptable alternative. Even if we as individuals do not wish it, he indicates, our cultural values are being pushed upon the Middle East by the logic of the capitalist system and our governments' "protection" of it.

Speaking this truth may be a subversive act in itself, if only due to its mainstream censorship and implicit acceptance of other social systems to capitalist democracy. In any case, it indicates that capitalist society is inauthentic: one's choices and decisions necessarily have unwanted and unintended effects. Rev. Billy's anticonsumerist conclusion, then, indicates how to recapture authenticity:

It seems to me that the bombing is a chance for us to reemploy a new kind of conscience where we look at the American way of life and start wondering do we really have to shop so much? Do we have to spend so... Do we have to have these *tchotchkes*? Is this happiness, surrounding myself with these goddamn *tchotchkes* all day long? These objects, this wealth, this pension plan, these junk bonds? And if I need it so much, is it really worth it to imprison and disempower people on the other side of the world? I don't think so. This is the realisation that I'm encouraging. Let's look at what we're doing with our money. Let's do the opposite of what the President and Mayor have asked us to do. Let's stop shopping, children. Hallelujah. Amen. Thank you, praise be. This is our new Hyde Park. This is like London. It's our new speakers' corner. Let's say it here. Who's next?

This proposition is subversive. In the wake of violent attacks, the Reverend asks the apparent victims to change *their* behaviour to prevent such violence in the future. He views the American way of life not as inevitable but as malleable, and encourages drastic changes. It becomes apparent that "stop shopping" is not a literal command

but a proposal to develop a political consciousness and be aware of the unintended effects of one's shopping habits in this inauthentic society.

I have largely put off a discussion of the Reverend's performance and the audience reaction. For the most part it seems that the speaker is, apart from the costume and two Hallelujahs, *Bill Talen* rather than *Rev. Billy*. He channels neither the sad-sack Episcopalian nor the energetic Baptist preacher. He stutters and takes long pauses, trying to find the right word. And this is the only time I recall him saying "God damn". He was not using the phrase in a heightened or ironic manner. I think he just slipped since he was already so close to talking as Bill Talen rather than as the Reverend. This seems to have been the expectation within that space: for days in Union Square, people got up and shared their thoughts and stories in acts of *authentic* communication. Whereas it generally requires the safety of the Reverend's artificial pastiche and role-playing to make such authentic expression acceptable, the attacks of September 11, I propose, had already created this authentic space such that the Reverend persona seemed unnecessary or even false. The audience was largely receptive to Talen's speech, joining in the chant, applauding several points, becoming very quiet and perhaps uncertain during the important and challenging bit on the need to stop shopping, but nonetheless applauding Talen's conclusion. His sincerity was well received.

This sincerity might seem to challenge my core hypothesis that artificial performance fosters authenticity. But most of the Reverend's sermons are more in the irreverent spirit of the creed, with less overt political content and more playful in terms of characterisation and the language used. This particular sermon reveals that there is a strong political, materialist foundation for Rev. Billy's theology of authenticity and encourages the conclusion that his typical playfulness and aesthetic criticisms are a conscious *strategy* rather than a lack. In the days after September 11, a breach had opened and people were already communicating authentically. In such a space, it became impossible to perform. Performance had become superfluous and even false. If this claim is accepted, then Talen's refusal to take on a character in this particular sermon inversely supports my argument that, under *normal* circumstances, his usual inauthentic preacher-character and vague platform of authenticity are what enable authentic communication.

It seems ultimately that his aesthetic acts are seen as necessary predecessors to direct political discussion. It is not that the Reverend does not have or desires not to

share his deeper political convictions, but that he sees it as generally necessary to couch these views in a humorous pastiche full of aesthetic judgments. Aesthetics is a prerequisite for politics. The second important conclusion to draw, which will reappear later in this thesis, is that the September 11 attacks in this case fulfilled the same basic function that Rev. Billy's aesthetics generally serve – to open up a space for authentic interaction.

I chose to analyse Rev. Billy in the first instance because of his ostensibly radical, overt, anti-capitalist aims. Like the work of Piscator and agitprop theatres, he struck me as loud and brash and inconvenient. But the overriding thrust of my analysis has dwelled on his ambiguous content and aesthetics. By aesthetics I mean two things. One, Rev. Billy's content often comprises aesthetic critiques and judgments that are more palatable to audiences than direct political content and therefore more likely to attract followers. Two, the actual aesthetic of the preaching paradigm – the participatory ritual of the creed, say – is in itself a central means of helping to create a sense of community, perhaps regardless of content, which is one of the Reverend's chief political aims. Jill Lane, in describing the origins of Rev. Billy, discusses the significance of the Times Square redevelopment. Describing Talen's conversion to Rev. Billy, she writes: "There, in Times Square itself, suddenly appeared Disney on Broadway. The force of the image radicalized Talen. With the help of a dinner jacket and a fake collar, Bill Talen became Reverend Billy" (2002, 67). If I take her literally, it was the *image* of Disney on Broadway that directly pushed Bill Talen to create the Rev. Billy character and, through the Rev. Billy character, to begin exploring his political convictions. An aesthetic experience or judgment led directly, over time, to a political consciousness.

Chapter Three
Christmas Shopping
Capitalism and Christianity:
Radicalising Christianity through action

The Free Theatre production of *Christmas Shopping* set out to test the political and theatrical strategies of Reverend Billy in the context of Christchurch. The targets in Christchurch are different to those in Manhattan. Accordingly, we had to relocate his tactics to target capital and capitalist logic here. Changing targets – in terms of target locations and target audiences – then dictated that we adapt his tactics the better to attack these targets. Our performance, in the end, bore clear similarities to Rev. Billy’s theatre, but also differed significantly: the performance was a hybrid. In this chapter I will consider this hybrid performance both in its own right and as a means of reflecting more fully upon the problematic of political theatre with which Rev. Billy grapples.¹

In the weeks before Christmas 2004, the Free Theatre members posed as a Christian school called Old Queen’s College – with a rector, a choirmaster, and a five-girl school choir – and gave “Christian” choir performances inside the major shopping malls of Christchurch. As with Rev. Billy’s work, a description of this performance makes it sound parodic and would warrant analysis in terms of Jameson’s theory of pastiche. But *Christmas Shopping* seemed to refuse parody or pastiche in a couple of ways. Where Rev. Billy was ostensibly parodic via a conflict between his right-wing form and his left-wing rhetoric, Old Queen’s College tried to take the content of Christianity seriously as well as use a Christian form. In other words, we tried to use “genuine” Christian morality as the basis for a radical political theatre. The aesthetic of this performance lifted it from the ironic parody it may appear to be into a potentially radical action that may have undermined the seeming inevitability of capitalism. This action was generally “misunderstood” – by myself as well as by audiences. It is conceivable, however, that the apparent failure of this action was a sign of its success – that in an arguably post-political age, political actions will not be recognised as such.

¹ I undertook this practical experiment from October through December 2004 with six other members of the Christchurch Free Theatre under the guidance of Free Theatre Artistic Director Peter Falkenberg.

I will begin by tracing the process of our performance's development. The most publicised aspect of Rev. Billy's performances, or the facet that has become his calling card, is the store invasion. The Free Theatre began with the simple paradigm of Rev. Billy entering Starbucks coffee shops and Disney Stores and preaching against the evils of these corporations and, by extension, the evils of unchecked capitalism as a whole – and we pondered how best to adapt this premise to suit the Christchurch context. The obvious features of the Reverend's store invasions are that they are present, physical, vocal, and disruptive. They are unwelcome. From the start, then, our emphasis was on the *action* side of Rev. Billy's performance work: we did not examine his church services in detail nor did we desire to replicate their aims. Rather, we tried to adapt and adjust his invasion actions to fit our different context.

The first step in this process was to understand Talen's own context. As discussed in Chapter Two, the character of Rev. Billy emerged in New York City as the Disney Corporation was taking over Times Square and making drastic changes. The Reverend's assault on Disney is both literal and highly symbolic, criticising specific Disney policies and practices but also taking Disney as emblematic of capitalism's destruction of authenticity. Similarly, there are hundreds of Starbucks stores in New York City and new ones are constantly appearing, buying out or underselling local competitors. Again, Rev. Billy's lambasting of Starbucks is both literal, criticising the particular practices of this corporation, and symbolic, taking Starbucks as an example of capitalism's destruction of neighbourhood and community and exploitation of workers. This tackling of global or systemic problems via action at the local level is clearly at the heart of Talen's anticonsumerism and we wished to retain it for *Christmas Shopping*.

In Christchurch, the first Starbucks opened just a few years ago. There are now four stores around the city. On the literal level, then, Starbucks in Christchurch is not (yet) generally thought of as destroying neighbourhoods and putting local competitors out of business. The symbolic criticisms may still apply, but to New Zealanders Starbucks primarily symbolises American capitalism (and cool). A performance against Starbucks would be read as an attack on America – and would still neglect to address the internal and local issues. Likewise, Christchurch has little direct experience of Disney's corporate practices, knowing the corporation primarily as an overseas provider of animated films. In short, to be true to Rev. Billy's aims of

criticising capitalism's destruction of community and authenticity through specific local examples, we had to modify his performances.

Much of the recent political action in New Zealand has been implicitly or explicitly directed against America. There were marches and protests against the war in Iraq and in opposition to the World Trade Organization when its leaders were meeting here – that took the form of criticisms of American-style capitalism. Even the resolutely national issue of rights and access to the foreshore and seabed, which prompted a series of marches and a rift primarily between Maori iwi and the Crown, took on international overtones. The primary fear expressed on both sides was that the “other guys” would sell the precious coast to overseas investors and the New Zealand public would lose access. There is a latent fear of rampant capitalism, but it is directed externally rather than internally. In short, many New Zealanders hold the view that late capitalism is an overseas phenomenon that can be shut out or welcomed at the gate, rather than a phenomenon that *will* arise, and is already arising, from New Zealand's internal (and internalised) capitalist logic. This tendency raised a problem for *Christmas Shopping*, namely how to oppose or undermine capitalism and make that opposition pertinent as a specifically New Zealand, or even Christchurch, concern.

We first had to discover the Christchurch equivalent to the Reverend's target emblems of consumerism. Obviously, Christchurch is far less urban than New York City. There is simply no single store that is as prevalent, and therefore as potentially threatening, as Starbucks in Manhattan. Rather, Christchurch is largely suburban: there has been discussion for years about how downtown is suffering. Suburban shopping malls, by contrast, are flourishing, with new ones having recently been built and several existing ones having undergone multi-million dollar expansions. We therefore adopted shopping malls as Christchurch's predominant literal and symbolic executor of the logic of late capitalism, and decided to mount our performances there. Shopping malls are at least recognised, by some, as threatening to local and independent commerce (like Starbucks in Manhattan) and as changing the nature of the city itself (like Disney in Times Square).

Next, we evaluated Talen's character choice of a Southern evangelical preacher. Once again, imitating this prevalent American model would not be context-specific so we contemplated the New Zealand – and specifically Christchurch – equivalent. We began with an analysis of Talen's reasons for his choice. In the first

place, we knew that Talen adopted the idea of street preachers for strategic reasons, due to their adaptability and general acceptance as harmless eccentrics in the face of extensive gentrification. But Christchurch has only the occasional street preacher in Cathedral Square; that paradigm is not recognised here. As for his specific choice of a Southern evangelist, which consciously deviates from the *street* preacher norm, there may be posited two main reasons. From a theatrical perspective, Southern evangelists are some of the most animated and entertaining preachers and therefore a suitable model for a performance context in which one will struggle to be heard and grab people's attention. From a political perspective, irony was most likely a factor, in that Southern evangelists have a reputation for overt support of Republican politicians and big business, and are influential figures in American politics. Employing such a model for a subversive anticonsumerist purpose is ironic – using a conservative paradigm for radical aims.

Adapting this model for a Christchurch context was difficult. It seemed necessary to retain the religious, Christian aspect of Rev. Billy's performances, but finding a suitably entertaining and ironic model proved complicated. Christchurch is a predominantly Anglican city. Though a few televangelists can be seen on television here in Christchurch, they are nowhere near as prominent as in the US. The only consistent New Zealand televangelist is Brian Tamaki, leader of Destiny Church. He and his church are highly controversial, generally viewed with a mixture of contempt and amusement outside of their small but devout following. In any case televangelism is not a widely accepted form here; imitating that model therefore seemed undesirable. An Anglican minister would perhaps be accepted, but there would have been a few drawbacks to adopting an Anglican model. The Anglican style of preaching is quite subdued and seemed unsuitable for the context of a shopping mall where we would have to combat excessive noise and distracted audiences. Plus, we would miss out on the heightened irony since there are other New Zealand sects – Destiny Church in particular – that are more closely aligned with material wealth and ultra-conservatism. This decision remained problematic for a long time.

During an early rehearsal session, the other Free Theatre members pretended to be shoppers in a mall and I played the role of an anticonsumerist preacher. I was unable to maintain any of the pretend shoppers' attention. The louder and more animated I became, the faster the shoppers mocked or avoided me. We quickly decided that this preaching style would be inappropriate for our Christchurch

audience. Partly this may have been a misunderstanding of Rev. Billy, whose store invasions do not typically generate dialogue with customers: he simply enters and starts shouting loud enough for all to hear. This also seemed to be a problem of venue: the Reverend can enter a small café, have a reasonably settled audience, and be heard by all – but a shopping mall does not provide such a fixed crowd. We pictured me standing in the hallway of the mall with people walking past ignoring me and shooting me dirty looks, much as Rev. Billy describes his early days in Times Square *before* he entered the stores. I could have entered a specific store, but we felt that our performance had to target the whole shopping mall phenomenon and not just individual stores. Formally, then, it seemed that we needed to develop some sort of strategy that could gather a moderately attentive audience in the common space of a mall.

A couple of the Free Theatre members had experience in high school of singing Christmas carols in the malls in December, which was coincidentally when we would be performing. Singing carols seemed a plausible way to attract an audience in this hostile setting. If we impersonated a Christian school, I could portray the school rector and deliver a sermon after the initial songs had attracted an audience. Due to the breakdown of our troupe, we decided to be a girls' school: the five women would portray high schoolers and the two men would depict the choirmaster and rector.

We created a high school, Old Queen's College, which we considered an appropriate Christchurch parallel to Rev. Billy's Church of Stop Shopping. Both creations are not parodies of their model, but rather *vessels* to build belief in authenticity, generate authentic interaction, and criticise consumerism. Talen's purpose is not to condemn churches and ours was not to mock Christian schools. Each group represents a generally accepted cultural paradigm. Evangelical churches are prevalent and tolerated (or welcomed) in New York City, as are parochial schools in Christchurch. As with Rev. Billy's church, Old Queen's College seemed sufficient from a performance standpoint: we were capable of loud and energetic performances suitable for difficult public spaces, and could be entertaining and ironic through the use of song. We chose to perform in Christchurch's clearest literal and symbolic icon of late capitalism, the shopping mall. Formally, then, we discovered an adequate Christchurch analogue to the Church of Stop Shopping store invasions.

The nature of our performance strategy – developed specifically to attack our target of shopping malls – necessitated several other adaptations to Rev. Billy’s tactics. We aimed to attract an audience via our songs so that the subsequent sermon would be heard without needing to be of the animated evangelistic style. This strategy meant that we would need to remain in the mall for a considerable amount of time. Consequently, we felt that it was vital to establish ourselves as a legitimate school choir to avoid getting kicked out of the mall. Our performance became more of a Boalian exercise in Invisible Theatre than an overtly anticonsumerist invasion: we strove to be believable.

One of the women in our troupe pretended to be the “school secretary” and phoned the malls to arrange days and times for the choir to come give a “Christmas performance”. In three of the four malls, she arranged specific, approved performance times – despite some curiosity about our high school, which nobody (obviously) had heard of. The fourth mall never returned our “secretary’s” calls, so we opted for a guerrilla performance. Feeling the need to pass as legitimate dictated our performance style as well: I could not be as animated and artificial as Rev. Billy or I would be “outed” as a performer. I felt the need to be more subdued and credible as a girls’ school rector.

Having found an appropriate form, we then had to find an analogue to the *content* – the political message – of the Reverend’s performances. In Chapter Two, I analysed Rev. Billy’s ambiguous “theology” of authenticity. My instinct was to criticise this platform for being too arbitrary – not systemic or clearly “political” enough to advocate radical change – which is an instinct that Jameson’s theory of pastiche seemed to corroborate. When the Free Theatre members discussed our views on shopping malls, however, it became apparent that none of us are socialist, communist, or even anti-capitalist as such. Many of us *enjoy* shopping but dislike the social system that encourages the consolidation of capital into sprawling characterless malls, encourages the proliferation of chain stores such that every shopping mall is virtually identical, harms locally-owned shops, and encourages sweatshop labour and other dubious corporate practices. If one wants to be a responsible consumer by supporting independent shops, fair trade, union labour, and so on, it is not always possible – and when possible, it costs a lot more. We discovered that, like Rev. Billy, we have no systemic challenge or alternative to consumer capitalism. Our criticisms of it blend aesthetic, moralistic, and political reasons just as Rev. Billy does.

A politics based in a concept of authenticity is certainly susceptible to theoretical criticism but, practically speaking, it quite accurately reflects many people's (including my own) attitudes towards the capitalist system in which they live – even here in Christchurch. Curiously enough, then, an imprecise platform of authenticity – even before I had written Chapter Two – seemed to us to be the most accurate representation of contemporary anticonsumerist beliefs. We concluded that this “authenticity” certainly does apply in New Zealand, and should be retained for our choir performance.

Once again, however, we were constrained by our formal decision to remain a believable Christian school. Our content, as well as our characterisations, needed to be plausible. My sermons became more credibly Christian than Rev. Billy's. His idea of authenticity, which we theoretically approved of, became narrower in focus in order to fit our “believable” school choir performance. Even when the schoolgirls and choirmaster introduced more extensive left-wing criticisms during their store invasions, they never fully left the plane of Christian morality.

Christmas has evidently become a capitalist phenomenon. In fact, there has been a general conflation of Christianity and capitalism, particularly evident in the present Bush administration in America, to which capitalist success is ostensibly a sign of moral superiority. This conflation is at least as old as the Calvinist implication that material wealth is a sign of God's favour. Max Weber and others have argued that Calvinism was a major influence in the development of capitalism in northern Europe (Weber 1930). The “Moral Majority” that came to prominence in the US in the 1980s is generally seen as derived from various neo-Calvinist ideas. As a result, Bush seems able to take any international action to protect or boost American economic dominance and justify the action on grounds of superior American morality. Capitalist success is equated with Christian values.

The main impetus of our performance became to highlight the contradiction between New Zealand's supposedly prevalent belief in Christian values and people's actual shopping habits around Christmastime. An *authentic* Christian, we proposed, would not shop at the mall. We aimed to use Christian values as the basis for a radical, activist intervention. This opposition between Christmas ideals and shopping is hardly new: many media sources in New Zealand give lip service to valuing family, friends, and non-material things over the exchange of presents. We suspected that this view would be more controversial if expressed and performed inside a shopping mall

where it would directly challenge people's immediate behaviour. That is, we thought that theatrical *actions* would be more radical than *words*.

I will analyse this performance using the same five main issues that I used to examine Rev. Billy. Since our performance ended up differing quite significantly from Rev. Billy's, these categories will not apply flawlessly, but the differences are as interesting as the similarities. The five issues, once again, are: the content or message, the form or style, the community- and belief-building, the "branding" or commodity status of the performance, and the question of why theatre as opposed to straight activism.² Through examining these five issues, I will re-encounter many of the same arguments that were raised in the previous chapter. This rather different performance will support, in its own way, many of the points made in Chapter Two, but two significant new concerns will be addressed. I will focus attention on the *experience* of *Christmas Shopping*, and locate the most tangibly efficacious aspect of the performance in that group experience. I will also reveal contradictory effects of our theatre's being "invisible". In striving to pass as legitimately Christian, the text and sermons of our performances forfeited the explicitly artificial and theatrical – and in so doing missed an important site of Rev. Billy's efficacy. However, this "invisibility" of the *actions* may have been more radical than Rev. Billy's performances – able, due to their invisibility, to avoid commodification. Perhaps invisibility is the zenith of motion. As Virilio said of dominant power, it *disappeared* into a vector of speed: movement equalled invisibility (1986). *Christmas Shopping* can be seen as pursuing the hypothesis that radical theatre actions must become invisible to keep up.

Before initiating the discussions of each concern, I will review the sequence of the performance. As discussed, three of the four performances were pre-arranged with mall management. At two malls, we had assigned performance spaces, and once had to check in with the mall's Events Organiser who escorted us to the allocated place. Significantly, our assigned place was on an upstairs balcony, "so as not to disturb shoppers". Even a genuine school choir was thought to be potentially disruptive to the process of consumption. At the other malls, we picked our own spot and began. The five women wore school uniforms: blue skirts, white button-down shirts with ties, knee-high socks, black shoes – and festive reindeer horns. The choirmaster wore a

² I have switched the order of the final two issues from that of Chapter Two, for reasons of emphasis.

suit and Santa hat as did I, the rector. The actresses were all in their early- to mid-twenties, but their outfits and behaviour enabled them to pass as high schoolers. I too was in my mid-twenties, so I grew a beard for the occasion and, with the suit, glasses, hat, and behaviour, could reasonably have been mistaken for a thirty-something rector. The actor playing the choirmaster was in his early-thirties and much taller, and would have been a believable teacher.

The performance itself began with the choirmaster directing the schoolgirls in one of the most traditional Christmas carols, *Silent Night*, with the first verse sung in the original German. Such a conventional carol was intended to draw an audience and establish the choir as genuine. The girls then proceeded straight into a very different song, Bertolt Brecht's *Ballade von angenehmen Leben (Ballad of Living in Style)*, from the *Threepenny Opera*. This song was intended as a counterpoint to *Silent Night*: entertaining, humorous, and ironic – with a blatantly anti-capitalistic message.

The song is divided into three verses, in between which I gave short speeches. The first verse was sung by the girls alone, *a capella*, as *Silent Night* had been:

We're taught that there are wise men to admire /
 Who live with books and nothing else to feed on /
 In hovels that the mice and rats have peed on /
 I'd gladly throw those madmen on the fire /
 The simple life is fine for simple fools /
 But as for me I've had it up to here /
 A sparrow couldn't last a single year /
 Attempting to survive those simple rules /
 You call it freedom. Do forgive the smile /
 It takes a lot of cash to live in style. (B Brecht 1928/1989)

The *explicit* message of the song is unequivocally capitalistic, belittling those who shun material wealth in favour of a simple life of books and wisdom. By emphasising the repeated phrase “lot of cash” in each verse, the schoolgirls sought to stress the *implicit* message, which is apparently the opposite. In my brief speech, I acknowledged the strange choice of “carol” and implored audiences to listen carefully since the girls had handpicked this particular song for our special Christmas performance in the mall.

During the second verse, the schoolgirls performed amusing choreographed actions that illustrated the text of the song. Throughout the performance, the women tried to play reasonably realistic characters, acting embarrassed at times, taking pleasure in the playful choreography, and so on. The choirmaster continued to count

out the beat, and I stood to the side, hands behind my back, trying to look mature and scholarly as the girls sang:

The daring ones who go on great adventures /
 And risk their necks fulfilling dreams of glory /
 Then gladly tell the waiting world their story /
 So stay at homes can sigh and suck their dentures /
 If you could see the frostbite on their hands /
 When with their chilly wives they climb in bed /
 With future explorations in their head /
 That no one else enjoys or understands /
 Their life's dramatic. Yes, but what a trial /
 No you need lots of cash to live in style. (B Brecht 1928/1989)

In light of Rev. Billy's "theology", this song could be seen as advocating *authenticity*. People that live simply with books and people that are daring adventurers would presumably be more "authentic" in Rev. Billy's estimation than those obsessed with comfort and cash. In my second brief speech, I discussed this message, asking audiences to ponder whether this "cash-loving" carol was more appropriate than *Silent Night* for a Christmas performance in the shopping mall – that is, whether, taken literally and not ironically, this song was an accurate representation of our Christmas values.

The final verse was sung solo by the "prefect" – identified by having the only striped tie – as the rest of us, choirmaster and rector included, made instrument noises with our voices. We all transmitted our enjoyment of the performance, striving to be fun and entertaining as the soloist sang:

When I was young I too had this reaction /
 I saw myself among those great achievers /
 But when I saw how life treats true believers /
 I thought I would forego the satisfaction /
 The poor have wisdom – but a bitter fate /
 The bold man gets the glory – and the strain /
 You're brave and wise and starving and in pain /
 And that concludes your dreams of being great /
 So what's the best way to make life worthwhile /
 Just have a lot of cash and live in style. (B Brecht 1928/1989)

At the time, I considered the intention of *Silent Night* to be to attract at least a small audience and for the subsequent Brecht song to raise – in a humorous and ironic way – the core issues of the performance. I was thinking of the Brecht song in relation to Rev. Billy's creed: both seem to introduce the principles of authenticity in a fun and entertaining way (although unlike the creed our song was not a participatory ritual).

What I neglected to understand at the time was the special ability of theatre to transcend mere meaning. As a *text*, the Brecht song is plainly ironic. But in his *theatre*, Brecht often pointed out contradictions via dialectical juxtapositions. The meaning or significance of such juxtapositions could not be contained in either the “thesis” or “antithesis” but only realised via the “synthesis”. Each contradictory premise retains its integrity (B Brecht 1960/1978, 279). Juxtaposing *Silent Night*, a traditional and clearly Christian carol, with the Brecht ballad revealed the stark contrast between Christianity and capitalism – a contrast that could not be reduced to a particular “meaning”. Performance and role-play allow the embodiment or experience of contradictions whereas texts seem to be reduced to a single voice.

My subsequent sermon consisted primarily of discussing the “true Christmas spirit” of giving: giving to those who need it most and expecting nothing in return, unlike the obligatory *exchange* of presents that Christmas demands. Though never explicitly mentioned, Christianity was clearly and repeatedly implied by the phrase “true Christmas spirit” and by the forms of carolling and sermonising. In light of this view of Christmas, I said, these girls and the choirmaster had brought items with them – things that they had purchased at the mall and now wished to give back. I stressed that they were not returning these items in *exchange* for their money, but giving them back as an unexpected gift. I called a few of the girls forward to explain what they were giving back and why. I then re-emphasised how these acts were in the true (Christian) spirit of Christmas, imparting gifts anonymously to people the girls had never met, and for which they would not receive gratitude.

The choirmaster was the final one to discuss his gift giving. He had, he explained, brought an old pair of sneakers with him that he recently discovered had probably been made in a factory where the workers toil for 14 hours a day and cannot even afford to buy the shoes that they make. Therefore, he announced, he wished to give these shoes back to the store in the hopes that they could be sent as a gift to the poor Vietnamese person that made them. At this point, the store invasions began: the choirmaster instructed the girls to follow him to his chosen shoe store. I circulated among the crowd, discussing the issues of the performance, answering questions, and urging people to follow the choirmaster and girls into the stores.

Inside the shoe store, the choirmaster demonstrated – for the girls, the observers that had followed them, and any shoppers in the store – how to “give back”. He approached a staff member and raised the issue of factory working conditions.

There was no proof, he admitted, that these shoes were fabricated in a sweatshop, but there was no guarantee that they had not been. If there are organisations that certify eggs have been laid by free-range chickens, he said (or implied), why is there not a similar guarantee that shoes have been made in adequate working conditions? As the public debate between choirmaster and staff continued, the choirmaster sent the girls away to perform similar acts in their chosen stores. I continued to “oversee” the proceedings, keeping an eye on the girls and engaging with audience members and shoppers.

Finally, we all met back at our original performance spot and summarised the store invasions for people who had not seen them. Any of us who felt the urge could speak up and describe our recent experience. This was our opportunity publicly to reflect upon the experience and the issues it raised. This testimonial phase signifies an important aspect of our performances and our politics: they continued to evolve as our experiences in the malls shaped our opinions. We built into the performance a way openly to discuss the new experiences we had during that particular mall invasion. In this way, we could remain a moving weapon and broach new issues and aspects as they arose, pursuing the moving targets of consumer capitalism with our theatrical actions. We finished the performance with a reprise of the final verse of the Brecht song, and left the mall.

I will focus firstly on the content or message of our performances (which of course was shaped by the form). While we accepted Rev. Billy’s “authenticity” as an honest political proposal, our perceived need to be a believable Christian school choir limited the expressions that authenticity could take. Consequently, Rev. Billy’s broad concept of authenticity became secondary to expounding a Christian morality as being anti-capitalist or as justification for what are generally seen as left-wing concerns.

Our content was consequently not a “pastiche” of justifications for anticonsumerism but a consistent Christian argument. Even the *Ballad of Living in Style* arguably became a Christian message in the context of our performance:

We’re taught that there are wise men to admire /
 Who live with books and nothing else to feed on / ...
 You call it freedom. Do forgive the smile /
 It takes a lot of cash to live in style. (B Brecht 1928/1989)

The message of this song could be consistent with the message of Rev. Billy’s creed. Like the Reverend’s “landscape of previously erased memories” that appears when

we stop buying knick-knacks, the *text* of this song seems to associate wisdom and goodness with simplicity and not shopping (through the use of irony). In Rev. Billy's case, such a message was clearly a part of his theology of authenticity in opposition to Disney replication and the "inauthenticity" of capitalism. In our case, however, it became a Christian value. Interpreting the text of the song in between each verse, I related the song's ironic message to the true (Christian) spirit of Christmas, and "deciphered" the irony from a Christian perspective – possibly undermining the dialectical potential of the juxtaposition.

In my sermons, I remained believably Christian throughout, but tried to make that Christianity active (relating to action) rather than inert. A sample text that I wrote as a guideline for the sermon that followed the Brecht song reads:

Our discontent comes out around Christmastime because we know somewhere inside us that Christmas is about loving and giving, not buying and selling. We have a problem here today: how do we capture the giving spirit of Christmas inside the shopping mall? We don't shop: we give back. We give things back to the stores! We give without expecting anything in return! That's the Christmas spirit right there, and we're bringing into the mall today.

I opposed the act of shopping with the "true" Christmas spirit of loving and giving. To capture this true spirit, I urged, we must give things back. "Give it back" became something of a slogan for our performances, perhaps like Rev. Billy's "stop shopping". Both mottoes fundamentally undermine the principles of capitalism, and both of them are *active*, specifying the need for action to fulfil the proclaimed values. Radical action, in our performance, became consistent with Christianity.

In the store invasions, the choirmaster and schoolgirls often raised more explicitly left-wing political issues such as the need for adequate working conditions and living wages – but these issues were presented within the Christian framework, as part of the true Christian, Christmas spirit of benevolence. One actress' chosen target was Glassons, a New Zealand owned clothing store that recently transferred the bulk of its production to China. The schoolgirl approached staff in the Glassons store and explained the nature of her (obligatory) Christmas project, to give back in the true spirit of Christmas. She used this Christian basis to raise left-wing labour issues inside the store, saying something resembling:

I've brought this jumper from Glassons that I want to give back to the store in the hopes that they can afford to give one of their poor Chinese factory workers a Christmas bonus or maybe even a holiday. The average wage in

China is only 23 cents per hour and they work 14 hours per day, so even just ten bucks would allow them a three-day holiday for Christmas.

Obviously, the form of a school choir is important to this approach: this girl's perceived schoolgirl naivety allowed her to make such an unreasonable assertion. Clearly, she elided several logical steps. Glassons does not directly employ Chinese factory workers or control their wages and holidays, but the character of the schoolgirl allowed her to express such a wish and thereby pointedly imply, even within the Glassons store itself, that Glassons supports sweatshop labour. The role-play of theatre and form of the Christian choir allowed the actress to raise issues that she herself possibly could not raise effectively.

Presumably traditional notions of protest, or Rev. Billy's strategy of shouting about sweatshop labour, would have gotten us immediately kicked out of the mall. The choirmaster, when he raised similar issues, was met with more hostility: it seems that, being an adult, his act was viewed as conscious protest whereas the girls' acts were viewed as legitimate deeds in the spirit of Christmas. In all cases, however, this materialist critique remained a subset of the notion of Christianity and the "true" Christmas spirit. This Christian value, when applied to corporate capitalism and sweatshop labour, coincides with a left-wing political stance. This strategy is different to Rev. Billy who uses a right-wing form with an often clearly opposing content – mourning the absence of prostitutes in Times Square, for instance. We aimed even for our "left-wing" content never to transcend or contradict our form – in order that our theatre could remain "invisible".

In focussing our efforts on using a believable Christian stance as justification for radical action, we necessarily abandoned most or all of the aesthetic criticisms of shopping malls that were central to our early discussions – and that Rev. Billy employs. The aesthetic arguments, however, are possibly the most honest. My (and other Free Theatre members') most tangible aversions to malls are aesthetic: I dislike the sprawling ugly buildings, the traffic problems they cause, the fluorescent lighting, the artificial indoor environment, and the *increasing* homogeneity. As Christchurch was experiencing, malls continue to grow and become the only places to shop. They come to be indistinguishable, all containing the same shops. The moralistic and materialistic arguments, which mostly relate to things that happen overseas in Third World sweatshops, are values that I would *like* to feel passionately about, but find great difficulty in it. Audiences and shop assistants apparently experienced a similar

difficulty or had a resistance to such arguments. It seems to be problematical, in an arguably post-political age, to base a strong political belief on something that people have not *experienced*. Aesthetic criticisms, however, *are* rooted in our experiences of malls. And I suspect that other shoppers and shop assistants would relate to an aesthetic criticism of not wanting to spend a nice summer's day in the artificial, indoor environment of the mall – because that would be a feeling that they, too, would have experienced.

This analysis of our content has revealed that all aspects of our message – the potential authenticity issue raised by the Brecht song, the materialist critique of the shopping invasions, and the plea to give things back – were subsidiary to Christian morality. Though the nature of our content differed somewhat to Rev. Billy, the purpose it served was intended to be similar. Both Rev. Billy and Old Queen's College justify radical political *action* in terms of generally acceptable criteria or content. The Reverend justifies his actions often in terms of an aesthetic concept of authenticity with which people broadly identify. Old Queen's College rationalised our radical anti-shopping actions on Christian terms that are widely believed (or at least tolerable) in Christchurch. Both strategies, that is, aimed to make otherwise inoffensive content controversial and challenging through relating it to *action*. Lastly, I defended my retrospective belief that aesthetic criticisms of shopping malls might have been more honest and better received (by audiences), as they are based in our and our audiences' *experiences*. Being “better received”, however, is not necessarily a sign of political success.

Analysing the form of *Christmas Shopping* necessarily comprises several different elements. The *action* aspect of the form was clearly central to our desired impact, but the form comprises the type of characterisation employed and the tone or style of the performance as well. I will show that our major formal decision, to remain a believable girls' school choir at all times – to keep the theatre “invisible” – limited our theatrical and political flexibility and may have reduced our efficacy. However, that same formal decision seemed to enable us to avoid the depoliticising mechanism of pastiche and lifted the “irony” – the realm of content or meaning – into an absurd situation or experience that may have breached the certainty of capitalist logic and enabled audiences and participants to expand or initiate a political consciousness.

Our major formal decision was prompted in the first instance by the context of the shopping mall, which we perceived as an even more hostile performance space

than the Disney Store or Starbucks cafes where Rev. Billy performs his actions. The main difficulty we anticipated and tried to solve was *communicating* to an audience that is engrossed in other activities, not remaining in one place, and distracted by the loud, echoing space and bustling activity. In this respect, as indicated above, a shopping mall is not unlike Times Square – where Rev. Billy had very limited impact. The initial decision to impersonate a girls’ school choir was made with the objective of attracting an audience who would then be reasonably attentive to the subsequent sermon. It seemed to be a mixture of strategy and fear that pushed us to continue the entire performance as believable characters.

During the initial Christmas carol, *Silent Night*, there would have been no obvious indication that we were anything but a legitimate school choir. Some audience members may have thought that the girls looked a bit old to be high schoolers, or that I looked a bit young to be a rector, but the performance itself strove to appear realistic. The following song, the *Ballad of Living in Style*, would possibly have undermined this believability. People who listened to this song, with its explicitly “capitalistic” message (or ironic humour) and indecorous text – such as “hovels that the mice and rats have peed on” – might have started to suspect that we were other than what we claimed to be. The content of the song, the playful choreography, and silly use of our voices as instruments were all potential clues that we were not a genuine Christian choir. My interjections between the verses, however, defended the choice of this song on Christian grounds and strove to contextualise it as a legitimate choir performance. The acting choices would have supported this legitimacy: the girls showed embarrassment and discomfort at performing in public in this way, the actor who played the choirmaster practiced regularly to appear valid, and I strove to appear mature and professional. Our formal and stylistic choices to be viewed as legitimate likely overpowered the uncertainty our peculiar content might have raised.

The style of my sermon changed many times. Some of this stylistic change was intentional: we decided to abandon my loud, evangelistic style of preaching fairly early in the rehearsal process in favour of a more amiable character. But some of the style change was the result of performance terror. In Chapter Two, I floated a potential criticism of Talen in interpreting his claim that Rev. Billy “wasn’t art”. I concluded that he occasionally mistrusts art and reverts to straight preaching, or that he gets carried away by his political convictions and falls out of character. After my

experience of performing, I would like to offer a third option: playing a character feels like lying, feels *inauthentic* in a situation where one's legitimate subversive political aim seems to be an issue. I felt conflicting urges: part of me wanted just to preach, sermonise, or protest like traditional activists, to let my identity be known, express my authentic beliefs, and reap the consequences – to *not* play a character. But a larger part of me was terrified of being unmasked as a *performer*, as something other than a real girls' school rector – so I played a character that nobody would know was a character, once again refusing to be known as a performer. This fear prevented me from pushing a political or theatrical boundary that would have cast my identity into doubt – or would have revealed my “true” identity as a performer and activist. This concern for being unmasked caused me to strive for sincerity in my sermon to “prove” my legitimacy and my genuine (authentic) political intent.

In some strange way I refused to “own up” to playing a role – not only in the context of the performance but to myself as well. Rather than taking pleasure in the role-play, I felt constrained by it. Bill Talen, I argued, explored his own political convictions in his early days through performing as his character Rev. Billy – and his congregants similarly achieve political *movement* through playing characters and becoming a “not not them”. Rather than use the role-play as an opportunity to explore and expand my personal experience and cause experiences for others, I tried to remain invisible – not just theatrically but actually. Not only did I adopt a reasonably friendly demeanour and otherwise believable style, but I also created a concise history of my character and of Old Queen's College so that I could answer any questions that people might ask of me without revealing that I was a performer and that Old Queen's was a counterfeit school. Creating a history for one's character is typical of realistic or naturalistic theories of acting that occur in conventional theatre buildings. It is not typical of theatrical *actions*.

This performed sincerity and congeniality was necessarily at odds with the intent of our performance, which was to criticise the dominant type of behaviour inside the shopping mall: shopping. In spite of the humorous Brecht song and silly gestures the girls choreographed, it seemed that our performance – and particularly my sermon – was off-putting, viewed as hostile by our audience, and not terribly entertaining. I am in no way meaning to suggest that universal acceptance of my message would have been preferable: that which is political is divisive – it cannot appeal to everybody. People did not seem to be rejecting the *content* of my message,

however, so much as being apathetic towards both the content and form. My seriousness was unengaging, particularly in the noisy and hectic shopping mall context – even though the choir songs had in most cases attracted small audiences. Oddly, that is, because of its artificiality and playfulness, Rev. Billy’s direct commands to shoppers to “Take your hand off that mouse!” and “Stop shopping!” seem curiously *less* hostile than my subdued earnestness. My preaching style became similar to the style of Rev. Billy’s Union Square sermon, which arguably was only well-received because of the unique context in New York City in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks. Sincerity, or the performance of sincerity, seems to be ineffective most of the time.

Looking back at some early sermons I wrote, they were much more playful and in the mood of Rev. Billy’s typical sermons. One sermon focussed on the idea of malls being our churches and shopping being our main religion:

When I first realised that *I* was a member, a supporter of the Church of the Stupefied Consumer, friends, I went into denial. *How can this be?* I asked. I didn’t *choose* to join this church. I never *studied* to memorise these logos, these sacred advertising slogans. And Lord knows I did *not*, I *do* not, want to have the God damn Warehouse jingle stuck in my head, Amen.

We have a choice! I want you to ask yourselves: do I *want* to belong to this church? Do I *like* having my head filled with logos? Do I *enjoy* fluorescent lighting on a nice summer’s day? If you answer NO, if you even *hesitate*, children, then I want you to follow me outside. I want you to *run* with me to the nearest *exit*, children. We’re not *allowed* to run in this church, but I’m not a member of this church today. Today, *this day*, *I am not a shopper!* Hallelujah! Run with me! Hallelujah! *Today I am not a shopper! Today I leave this church!*

On the one hand, the style of this sermon would have been much more aggressive than my later, subdued style – explicitly urging audiences to run with me out of the mall and implying that they are all “stupefied consumers”. On the other hand, the fun and entertaining playfulness of this approach seems more likely to appeal to some audiences. This playful style seems to go hand-in-hand with a simple aesthetic critique; it would be more difficult to deliver a playful sermon about sweatshop labour.

Of course, this style was prevented by our decision to be a consistently believable school choir – a decision, however, that may have been made as much out of fear as out of cunning. As the idea of performing this type of sermon inside a mall strengthened, this approach started to seem silly, an avoidance of the real political

issues – and I was afraid of making a scene. I started to reflect negatively on Rev. Billy’s performances, to think him too childish and vague – though perhaps I just wished to justify my desire not to perform in this way. It is only now, with more than a year’s distance since we performed, that I again see the merits of the Reverend’s style, and look back on my early, playful sermons longingly – at least insofar as they might appeal to audiences and move them, perhaps literally, to leave the consumerist church. Instead, we opted to use “genuine” Christianity to provoke a different sort of political movement.

In the next phase of the performance, the store invasions, the choirmaster and schoolgirls tried to expand our concept of the “true” Christmas spirit to incorporate more explicit political content. It was during this stage, when a “materialist” critique of shopping was being put forward, that I felt there was a weakness of our strategy of using Christianity to justify left-wing political action. This weakness, I thought, stemmed in part from our formal decisions – which prevented our political *content* from being successfully interpreted by audiences.

The situation we wished to oppose, or at least reveal as contradictory, was the prevalent paradoxical coexistence of Christian values and Christmas shopping that tacitly supports many un-Christian practices. The actress who entered Glassons, as an example, tried to expose this contradiction, implying that her shopping at Glassons (the item she brought to give back) had not been consistent with the “true” Christmas spirit. She may have revealed, but did not seem to *overcome* this contradiction. Most shop assistants *agreed* with the girl’s intentions and said it was a very nice and thoughtful idea to want to give a poor Chinese person a holiday. The retail workers for the most part did not think that their stores were being questioned or criticised in any way. Sweatshops, to them, are a (perhaps sad) fact of life, rather than a problem that can be overcome – or at least a problem that must be overcome elsewhere and is unrelated to our shopping practices or their store policies. Shopping malls and chain stores are inevitable to the degree that many people cannot *fathom* criticism of their existence. So there was little or no perceived contradiction between accepting a Christian, materialist value system and working in such a store. The actress’ performance of naivety, I thought, backfired here in that many of the shop assistants, schoolkids themselves, actually were as naïve as the performers feigned to be. Our critical content was not understood.

We were attempting, I felt, to relate our concept of the true Christmas spirit to the radical anticonsumerist action of giving items back to stores in the mall, and in so doing criticise conventional Christmas shopping habits. Rather than communicate this message directly – “True Christianity is incompatible with shopping at these bad corporate stores, you hypocrites!” – we tried to convey this message through what I saw as a type of irony, by attempting to give items back to stores and justify it in the spirit of Christmas. This would be a form of irony that, to be successful, requires an audience member to read a deeper or even opposing meaning than what is actually said or done. Wayne C. Booth argued, with respect to literature, that the interpretation of irony, which he broadly defines as saying one thing and meaning another, depends upon an audience’s understanding of the author (Booth 1974, 10; 49-52).

The irony of “giving back”, I felt, was not clear for two main reasons, formal and ideological. For audiences to have interpreted the schoolgirl’s “real” meaning as being deeply anticonsumerist and critical of that store in particular and the mall in general, they would seemingly have had to reject her identity as a genuinely naïve schoolgirl and presume that she was either a *crafty* schoolgirl or an actress. That is, they would have had to presume a radical *intention* on the part of her, the “author” of the irony. Reading such irony was made difficult by her realistic performance style: she sought to remain believable so as not to get kicked out of the mall. Our realistic form, I felt, dissuaded the interpretation of our content as ironic and consequently dissuaded a radical anticonsumerist message.

Moreover, as I indicated above, it seems that many people cannot even comprehend condemnation of shopping malls or stores such as Glassons. Speaking once again of literature, Linda Hutcheon repeated an established argument that the successful interpretation of irony “requires of its reader a triple competence: linguistic, rhetorical or generic, and ideological” (1985, 94). In what she calls *democratically* culturally sophisticated societies such as ours, the linguistic and generic strands likely cause few interpretive problems. Moreover, they apply only in the case of ironic *parodies* that provide linguistic or formal clues that they are not genuine. Our performance strove to remain genuine and “invisible” and therefore seemingly differed from parody. The problematic aspect – especially for a performance such as ours that provided no clues, linguistic or formal, that it was counterfeit – is the ideological interpretation. If the only accepted norm is consumer society itself then any reference to alternative ideologies, or any interpretation

contingent upon a criticism of this singular dominant ideology, would likely misfire – as we discovered. Interpreting a fundamental criticism of consumerism where it is not directly stated would require that that *possibility* exists in the minds of the interpreters. In a possibly post-political age (or to those in the post-political age group, like me and the young shop assistants), this ideological competence is uncommon and such irony was consequently not perceived. Once again, I felt that our formal choice to be believable damaged our potentially radical message.

This criticism was possibly another misunderstanding on my part. At the time of this performance, I still associated political theatre primarily with political *content*. I felt that we needed to pursue strategies – like Rev. Billy – somehow to introduce and sustain a subversive message in malls and stores. As with the Brecht song, however, I was misjudging the capacity of theatre and *aesthetics*. The act of giving back – the actual performance of the act – fundamentally subverts capitalist logic. It absolutely makes no sense. The theatrical juxtaposition – between giving and shopping – lifted the performance above ironic content to expose in a stark way the contradiction between Christianity and capitalism. Arguably, this strategy turned the constraints of a post-political age – people’s inability to conceive of alternative social structures or criticisms of consumerism – into the very point of the performance. Anything outside of the system, it seems, cannot be read *in* the system. *Exchange* is such an integral part of society that *giving* – true giving – becomes an absurd act. The attempts to give items back to stores in the mall were generally awkward and uncomfortable. And here, the earnestness that I criticised above perhaps helped to deepen the absurdity: think of a man sincerely trying to give his used sneakers to a chain store for them to be sent to a factory worker in Vietnam. The absurdity, perhaps, evidenced a breach of the certainty of capitalist logic. The act was unable to be read as fundamentally anti-capitalist – so instead it just turned into a vague sense that something was not quite right. Perhaps in that awkwardness was the possibility of the “political” – a brief opening in the seeming inevitability of capitalism. Maybe, then, the failure for our *giving* to be understood as a political act – by myself and others – was a sign of its success: as soon as an act can be read as political it can become commodified.

One of the actresses employed a different strategy to reveal the deep contradiction between Christianity and capitalism – by refusing to give back. Her chosen target was the Clinique brand of makeup and skincare products. She approached the Clinique kiosk in the mall and said something like:

I'm doing this school project and I'm supposed to give back my Clinique moisturiser and defence cream in the spirit of Christmas, but I really love Clinique because it protects my skin. And it's a good company because the owner Ron Lauder gives lots of the profits to the Zionist Foundation to help Israel protect itself from the Palestinian terrorists. So it feels really good to know that all the money I spend on my Clinique defence cream is going straight into protecting Israel by confiscating the Palestinians' land and aerial bombing their refugee camps.

This schoolgirl *defended* her shopping on moralistic grounds: that her shopping was virtuous because the profits made by Clinique help to fight Palestinian "terrorists". She conflated shopping and Christian values in an absurd way. This girl, having been studiously ignored by the Clinique staff, stood by the kiosk loudly explaining how much she loved Clinique and her (unsavoury) reasons why. This situation was uncomfortable: people did not know how to respond to a girl forcefully declaring her love of Clinique in this way. But the awkwardness was potentially political. One spectator overheard a Clinique worker say to another: "This is bad for the brand." Another spectator tentatively approached the schoolgirl as she was ranting and asked, "Is this a protest of some kind?" The actress remained in character, admitting nothing, but her approach – judging by the response of audiences and Clinique staff – opened the possibility of undermining Clinique and, by extension, revealing the contradiction between Christianity and capitalism to allow possible alternative thoughts.

The most *tangible* response occurred in the final phase of our final performance. The girl who had targeted Glassons was summarising her experience during that day's store invasion. Staff in the store had thought her gift giving was a nice idea, she reported, but they told her that she would have to contact the corporate office for help. It seems, she said, that the poor Chinese factory worker she hoped to help would not get a Christmas holiday after all. At that point, a mall security officer who was watching the performance jumped in and told the girl to stop. The girls all remained in character and came over to me and the choirmaster, who acted politely indignant since, we said, we had permission to perform, the girls had put such hard work into the show, and we were so close to the end. The security guard said:

I understand you're talking about trade aid and working on fair trade and all that. But, sweatshops, but... Definitely. But it's not an issue that should be brought up here. You know what I mean? You have to talk with manufacturers and all the rest. But not here, ok. Fair enough? (Free Theatre 2004)

The trigger that got us thrown out was the implication of a “sweatshop”, a charged word that is routinely associated with protests and campaigns against corporate chain stores. Being thrown out was flattering in that it meant we were perceived as a threat or at least a disruption to normal shopping practices. The quotation above could lead to the conclusion that the repressive nature of the malls was revealed, that certain topics are not allowed to be discussed there. But it was revealed in a half-whisper exclusively to us, the performers, who already theorised it and were trying to act against it.

Perhaps it can be concluded from this situation that explicit political content – the implication of sweatshops, for instance, allow an audience directly to accept or reject the performance. The security guard, in this case, decided immediately and with conviction that our performance was bad for the mall and should be stopped. Actions and experiences, however, cannot be categorised and neutralised so easily. It would have been unthinkable to kick a schoolgirl out for the *act* of trying to give a shirt back to Glassons in the spirit of Christmas.

This scrutiny of the form of *Christmas Shopping* has shown that our overriding formal decision to remain a believable choir may have hindered our political efficacy in several regards. The sincerity of my sermons was rather bland and un-entertaining, and my earnest appeals for people to change their shopping habits were received with a general lack of interest. The performance of sincerity, that is, seems ineffective – in terms of content. This analysis led me to ponder whether the strategy of my early sermons, like Rev. Billy’s strategy, would not have been preferable. A fun, entertaining, and blatantly artificial performance could have comprised aesthetic criteria that may have appealed to more audience members and would have been more enjoyable. Our believability also rendered successful interpretation of our content quite unlikely. In this case, our generally realistic acting style *hid* our radical content. However, these apparent drawbacks seem to have been counterbalanced by the radicalism of the *action*, which created awkward and absurd situations that may have temporarily suspended the security of capitalist logic and permitted transgressions of that logic: momentary glimpses of its absurdity.

The third major issue for discussion, the sense of community and building of belief, applies rather differently to *Christmas Shopping* than it did to Rev. Billy’s performances. Partly, this is because the Free Theatre’s focus was on adapting Rev. Billy’s theatrical *actions* – his store invasions – rather than on his church services,

which is where the sense of community originates. To some extent, however, the difference is due to the nature of my position relative to each performance. Rev. Billy I encountered only through materials – videos, books, essays, interviews, and CD recordings – but never through direct experience. *Christmas Shopping*, on the other hand, was a terrifying and enlightening *experience*, altering my personal beliefs and changing the nature of the Free Theatre membership. I will analyse this performance with respect to community and belief, and conclude that the most tangible efficacy was in the *experience* of performing.

The main source of Rev. Billy's creation of community is the participatory nature of his church services. This is particularly true of participatory rituals such as the creed, but even true during Rev. Billy's sermon, as his congregants still have a role to play and can shout Hallelujah and Amen and perform themselves as part of that community. *Christmas Shopping* had no such participatory aspects. It was interactive and engaged audiences at times, but not in a participatory manner. *Christmas Shopping* may have caused some people to question consumerist practices, especially around Christmastime, perhaps more than a newspaper article or genuine church sermon. That is, *enacting* the "true" spirit of Christmas is inherently more radical than just *declaring* it. The establishment of community or belief, however, does not appear to have been a significant outcome.

I tried to generate authentic communication by a performance of authenticity, by denying that I was a character and feigning to talk openly and honestly to my audience. This approach was mostly unsuccessful. In part, this lack of success was due to the adverse feelings towards sincerity in this society, as discussed above and in the previous chapter. In addition, my anxiety as a performer, being scared of revealing myself as an actor, severely limited my ability to engage audiences meaningfully. When I was circulating through the crowd, talking to people and answering questions, I was – in retrospect – overly cautious about raising the issues we wished to broach via our performance. I confined most of my comments to praising these "nice young girls" for their goodwill and answering questions about Old Queen's College and this particular performance – trying, that is, to maintain the ruse.

The most apparent sense of community that we shared with audiences had nothing whatsoever to do with the anti-capitalist aims of the performance. We rode the city bus to and from each of the suburban malls in which we performed. On the bus ride home from our third performance, a friendly driver asked the girls if they had

been singing carols in the mall. When the response was affirmative, he asked if they would sing some carols on the bus. They did, and the bus driver and several passengers with young children joined in the singing. One of the “schoolgirls” handed candy out to everyone on the bus – and the driver and several passengers thanked the girls repeatedly. It was a nice shared moment, but it did nothing to further the belief in anticonsumerism or anti-capitalism or establish an ongoing sense of resistant community. This sense of community seemed to adhere to the notion of Christianity as “niceness” – which is arguably the dominant Christian view that has permitted Christianity to become so embroiled in the capitalist system. Perhaps our performance precluded the generation of community with audiences, as we sought a truly radical impact – not by agreement over certain content or issues but by being inelegant and awkward, creating uncomfortable and divisive situations.

The clearest triumph for our performance was revealed when the Free Theatre members discussed our experiences. We all found it terrifying – and then incredibly liberating – to mount such a performance inside shopping malls. Having done such an “inappropriate” performance felt empowering and fuelled us with a sense of kinship that could actively resist corporate capitalism. We related stories of our individual experiences like they were war stories, and bonded over that shared experience of encountering a great obstacle and (mostly) overcoming it. I felt rebellious to a degree I had never before experienced. I had transgressed in the privately-controlled public space of a shopping mall, which was even more uplifting than *Last Days* had been for a couple of reasons. One, shopping malls are more repressive than the public spaces of Christchurch where *Last Days* had been performed. Two, I was merely following orders with *Last Days*; with *Christmas Shopping* I had helped to plan and even instigate the incursion. Other Free Theatre members expressed similarly uplifting feelings and a sense of camaraderie. The fear we all felt of performing in such a space confirmed how repressive and controlling that space really was. That is to say, the biggest achievement of communal feelings was the direct product of a group *experience* of political theatre amongst those of us who had plotted and executed an insurrectionary theatrical action.

Several of us expressed desire to keep that or a similar performance in our “repertoire” so that whenever we felt the urge we could mount an “attack” on one of the malls and continue to develop our techniques and strategies – or to create new and even more radical political theatre (which is, perhaps, in the works at the moment).

Amongst these Free Theatre members, there was perhaps a moving together as with Rev. Billy's church services: we moved together and were inspired to develop further strategies to attack the moving targets of capital. A couple of members, however, were a bit apprehensive. Being in the minority they were not as vocal, but it was apparent that those few would prefer to do more conventional, and less political, theatre. That is to say, the *experience* of *Christmas Shopping* was a political one: even the dedicated Free Theatre members were divided by it.

There is an interesting and intricate relationship between a politics based on *experience* and the establishment of a community – particularly, perhaps, a community that engages in theatrical actions. If the range of one's political consciousness, as seems to be the case, is limited by experience, then expanding the scope and type of one's experience consequently expands one's political perspective. The experience of transgressing inside a shopping mall is one that I would never have had the courage to attempt on my own. It required the relative safety and comfort of a small community to expand the variety of my experience in this way. This experience, in turn, further narrowed and strengthened our sense of community, which will proceed to generate new and different experiences on which to base our political awareness. As evidenced by the split in the group, such experiences can have radical or reactionary effects: some of us were pushed to desire more transgressive experiences while others desired more orthodox behaviour. Even if the direct effect is conservative, however, the experience has expanded these people's political awareness and opened the *possibility* that there are other plausible ways of being. One of the major issues that led me to ponder if we are in a post-political age is the utter lack of belief in alternative social structures. Even an experience that solidifies one's attachment to the mainstream opens one's awareness to the possibility of alternative social structures and therefore tacitly combats the post-political age. This analysis of the community- or belief-building aspect of *Christmas Shopping* has linked belief and community explicitly to experience. The experience for an audience was not one of community but one of unease.

The fourth main issue for scrutiny is, roughly speaking, the "branding" phenomenon: whether the politics of *Christmas Shopping* can be called into question due to any implicitly capitalistic practices. This is an issue on which the Free Theatre members were critical of Rev. Billy, and we consciously sought to improve upon his political rigour. In one major sense, avoiding commodification was much easier for

us, as there was no way we would become a popular anticonsumerist commodity in the space of four performances. Rev. Billy's intent can also be called into question because he often seems to use capitalist logic in his supposedly anticonsumerist performances, staging them so as to highlight his centrality, and then using his renown to try to appear in popular media channels. The Free Theatre tried to avoid any doubt by clearly not performing for popularity, money, or press coverage. Only a handful of friends and family were informed of the performances, and that was largely to get some critical feedback. Again, it would have been much easier for us to retain a relatively inconspicuous performance than for a reasonably popular performer such as Rev. Billy: the comparison cannot be on level pegging. (If I had analysed Rev. Billy after just four performances, he too would clearly have been under the capitalist radar.) In spite of our caution, however, our political "authenticity" was still called into doubt.

Of those who knew us and came along to a performance, several commented that our performance was insulting – that we were mocking people who "really" worked and knew the value of money whereas we were all sheltered students. Our political authenticity, that is, was questioned in a different sense: rather than condemn us for being too much a part of the capitalist system and logic, we were rejected on the basis of being *not sufficiently enough* a part of mainstream capitalist society. Merely by being not full-time workers (which in fact two of the Free Theatre members were), we were implicated as inauthentic, as not having the right to publicise our views on consumerism. This argument is necessarily conservative: students at a tertiary institution hardly avoid late capitalist logic, as these critics seem to suggest; and sanctioning only the views of people who do "real" (that is, mainstream) work precludes the possibility of change.

Whether legitimate or not, this view seems to be typical: one's political authenticity can be questioned no matter what. Arguably, this is quite similar to the "branding" phenomenon. Because of our oppositional views, we were categorised – and by being categorised we were neutralised, as with Jameson's theory of pastiche or Rev. Billy's comment on "labelling" quoted in the previous chapter. Jean Baudrillard made a statement that seems particularly suited to the present scenario:

By assigning Revolt to the Young ('Young = revolt'), two birds are killed with one stone: the revolt diffusely present throughout society is conjured away by allotting it to a particular category and that category is neutralized by confining it to a particular role – revolt. (1970/1998, 138)

In the case of *Christmas Shopping*, our critics apparently assigned “Student” to “Revolt” and consequently deactivated us, as far as they were concerned.

A similar categorisation and neutralisation occurred over the radio. The day of one of our mall performances, there was a radio station broadcasting live from the mall since they were conducting an on-air Christmas fundraiser for abused children. According to a friend of one of the Free Theatre performers, the radio announcers mentioned, and were ridiculing, some “grumpy girls wearing reindeer horns” and “an angry man in a cheap suit and Santa hat” who were, they said, ruining the Christmas spirit in the mall. This seems to be another form of categorisation, probably indicative of another common reaction: any sort of disruption or disagreement is chalked up to eminently controllable bad moods – grumpiness or anger – as opposed to political issues. If someone has a problem with mainstream society, and especially consumer capitalism, it is widely seen to be his *individual* problem rather than any sort of social or political issue. Boal recognised this and made it a goal of his theatre for audiences to recognise their individual experiences as social and political. For instance, he describes telling a woman in one of his *theatre of the oppressed* sessions that her personal problems with her husband were political, for marriage is an institution of society sanctioned by the government (1995, 4). The mainstream treatment of problems as individual and not social is a further element that might suggest the existence of a post-political age: I have been unable to think politically outside of my realm of immediate experience because I have picked up from society this principle that all problems are individual and treatable or controllable rather than political and indicating the need for social change. Taken literally, this radio announcer’s claim that we were ruining the Christmas spirit summarised the very scenario we were hoping to oppose: questioning shopping is seen as undermining the Christmas spirit itself. Christmas is unequivocally about shopping.

This strong tendency towards categorisation that neutralises the efficacy of any political theatre, action, or protest, seems to indicate once again a need for political theatre to remain a moving target, and to address the moving targets of capital. If the radio announcer had said that the “Free Theatre” is grumpy and against the spirit of Christmas, then his act of neutralisation could potentially have had long-term effects, swaying people’s views of any subsequent Free Theatre performances. Since we were mostly intangible and unidentifiable – a moving target eluding

categorisation – we were harder to neutralise. Only those who knew us, it seems, could fully categorise us and thereby reduce the effect that this or any future performance may have on them.

We also experienced the need to address the moving targets of capital. Throughout the four performances we were repeatedly told that we were targeting the wrong place. When mentioning poor factory working conditions, the choirmaster and schoolgirls were told that they would have to approach the factories themselves, or the store's corporate office, or the consumer public that buys indiscriminately. No doubt, if we targeted one of these other locales, we would have been told that we have to target the individual stores. The most effective political actions, it seems, would attack all of these fronts – perhaps like the action to save Poe House. Rev. Billy, it seems, targeted the general public's sentiments while lawyers targeted New York University, others targeted a heritage board, and so on.

Surely it was advantageous, and an important step, that nobody could reasonably foist capitalist logic upon us and claim – as with Rev. Billy's or Michael Moore's anticonsumerist art – that our anti-capitalist performance was done for money or fame. But our authenticity was questioned simply due to our having atypical or nonconforming views. Anyone that does not conform to capitalist logic can be dismissed as juvenile, impractical, or petulant. It is interesting, however, that the focus of these dismissals of *Christmas Shopping* was on our perceived attitude. Friends who came along said that we were “demeaning”, in other words that we took a superior and humourless stance. The radio announcer called us grumpy and angry, which again could be traced to an apparent seriousness. Perhaps this tendency towards categorisation and dismissal was due once again to our sincere and earnest approach. It is conceivable that a self-consciously artificial and playful performance like Rev. Billy's, making fun of our beliefs as we expressed them, might have alleviated this criticism that we were demeaning or grumpy. On the other hand, Rev. Billy has arguably become commodified, probably because of his entertaining playfulness. Our “sincerity”, by comparison, was ostensibly not commodifiable. Being rejected as grumpy seems preferable to being embraced as a commodity.

The fifth and final question to ask of *Christmas Shopping* is “Why theatre?” Perhaps, because of the compulsion to be a believable girls' school choir, I should phrase the question “Was it theatre?” The etymological origin of “theatre” is the Greek word *theaomai*, meaning, “to behold”. Theatre, by this understanding, is meant

to be beheld – to be a visible spectacle clearly distinct from everyday life. Depending on how that criterion is applied, this performance was both theatre and not theatre. This performance would have been viewed both as a performance *and* as everyday life.

A realistic or naturalistic acting style, performed inside a theatre building or an otherwise acknowledged act of performance, is still theatre. A similar realistic acting style, performed in a real-life space such as a mall, is possibly *not*. However, the naturalistic and “un-theatrical” characters – the schoolgirls, rector, and choirmaster – were occasionally performing. The singing of the Brecht song, for instance, was clearly theatre: the schoolgirls that were singing were clearly doing a rehearsed performance intended for an audience. The store invasions and debates, however, would likely have been seen as the genuine (though admittedly strange) acts and conversations of a choirmaster and five schoolgirls. The second layer of the performance was not revealed or apparent to the general public. Audiences did not see behind the masks of the choirmaster, rector, and schoolgirls to know that there were actors underneath.

Boal’s Invisible Theatre admittedly seems to be a challenge to this view. Invisible Theatre has the expressed goal of pushing spectators, who do not realise that they are spectators, into taking *action*. In Boal’s theorising, *not* knowing that it is theatre is key for the desired effect on spectators. Those who know it is theatre are merely the facilitators to help create the *experience* that will allow a spectator’s transformation. Typical Boalian Invisible Theatre often erupted into public debates of political issues (Boal 1981b/1990). In an arguably post-political age, political issues are no longer publicly debated in this way. Invisible Theatre would presumably have to adopt new aims that somehow reveal this lack of alternatives, the inaccessibility of the category “political” today. The awkward experiences that *Christmas Shopping* fostered were possibly moments during which the certainty of capitalist power was undermined – but to no clear and tangible ends.

Overall, this analysis of *Christmas Shopping* has expressed the great difficulty encountered in targeting a mainstream monolith such as a shopping mall. Plainly, the efficacy of such a performance will not be in tangible bottom-line results, negatively affecting store sales and mall attendance. Rather, I have shown that the primary efficacy of the performance seemed to be, as with Rev. Billy’s performances, in the building of belief and community and broadening of experience that the performance

provided. For the audience, the dominant experience may have been one of unease that opened the possibility of other ways of being. For the actors involved, the experience caused a political split, but primarily a moving together and confirmation of our desire to create more political theatre together.

Ultimately, this coming together of the Free Theatre members seemed to be the most tangibly efficacious aspect of the performances – the sense of resistant community it instilled in us, and the belief in alternative social relations. Of course, even here there is a possible problem: this communal feeling of accomplishment and empowerment arose even though we tangibly achieved nothing. The mall did not close, store incomes were not noticeably hampered, and customers did not leave the mall vowing never to shop there again (or even to shop less this Christmas). Perhaps we could continue doing such performances our entire lives, constantly congratulating ourselves, and feeling useful and happy with our place in capitalist society – while consistently achieving no concrete results. The politics of such theatre, it seems, cannot be certain.

Chapter Four

Critical Art Ensemble

Extending politics beyond everyday experience:

A radical pedagogical theatre for an age of hyperreality

The Critical Art Ensemble pursues and proclaims deeply radical aims through a number of different channels: books, art gallery exhibitions, theatre, and theatrical *actions*. In all of these realms, performance seems to be the group's underlying tactic. CAE operates as a collective, never taking individual credit for CAE work. The group has, for instance, published five books – attributed to Critical Art Ensemble – that are all freely available in full on their website, as the Ensemble is against copyright. In this regard, even the group's publications are a type of performance, flaunting the Ensemble's independence from the rules or logic of mainstream capitalist society. CAE members all work “straight jobs” to pay the rent so they do not rely on an income from their art. They constantly vary their tactics and targets – and by regularly impersonating different groups the Ensemble seems largely to avoid the “branding” phenomenon: CAE seeks out the moving targets of capital and remains a moving target against counterattacks. CAE strives for, and seems largely to attain, artistic autonomy from the capitalist status quo, without advocating any particular alternative social structure. Through its autonomous practice, the Ensemble aims to further the individual autonomy of its audience members from what it sees as an increasingly authoritarian State. In these respects, CAE appears to have created an overall performance practice or strategy that acknowledges, and tries to circumvent, the existence of a “post-political age”.

CAE, however, views its performance work as primarily pedagogical in nature, which possibly rejects the main thrust of this thesis that aesthetic experiences rather than explicit political values could form the basis of a political theatre. If people in this society are in, or of, a post-political age – an age in which they cannot fathom alternative social structures or fundamental change – then the very notion of a political pedagogy is suspect. Paulo Freire's radical pedagogical theory, mentioned in Chapter One, describes a political pedagogy based in “a critical intervention” (1972, 28). His theory fits the premise with which I began this thesis: that a political consciousness today may need to be grounded in *experience*. Freire's pedagogy, however, is clearly modernist in nature, rooted in Marxism – his is a politics for the

poor, to engender liberation and a society free of oppression (that is, a classless society). His political pedagogy, that is, is rooted in a situation that is foreign to dominant Western middle class *experience* – and therefore may not be relevant. CAE, I will argue, endeavours to extend its pedagogical practice beyond people's everyday experience while avoiding a modernist approach.

I will confront the Critical Art Ensemble's performance practice with Jean Baudrillard's radical thesis of hyperreality – a key theory that seems strongly to support the notion of a post-political age and which CAE seems to accept. To Baudrillard, all cultural practices, theatre among them, are absolutely implicated in the capitalist system and cannot step outside of it to comment upon it: a pedagogical theatre in an age of hyperreality seems contradictory since no external truth can be located. I will identify a contradictory two-pronged approach to CAE's pedagogical theatre: the Ensemble provides experiences that damage the notion of hyperreality and creates experiences that seemingly confirm it.

When Boal brought his theatre, based on Freirian pedagogy, to the West, he encountered the need for major adaptations. Boal's initial failures eventually led him to create "Cop in the Head" techniques, now called "Rainbow of Desire", based upon the notion that Westerners' oppressors have mostly been internalised (Boal 1981a/1990; 1995). Though the success of his (and others') attempts to adapt his initial techniques for use in the First World is still debated, there is a general recognition that these adaptations shifted his theatre towards group therapy. Mady Schutzman points out that, in the bourgeois environment of the West, "therapy apparently forfeits its potentially subversive edge and is reduced to a technique for coping – adapting oneself to the so-called 'demands' an affluent and privileged society makes upon an insatiable, capitalist individuality" (1990, 77). That is, pedagogical theatre possibly becomes a conservative process of therapy, altering the individual to adhere to society's demands rather than the converse. In this chapter I will show that CAE recaptures the radical politics of Freirian pedagogy through a strategy of "moving targets". Throughout its incredible variety of strategies, the collective has consistently navigated the territory of – or fluctuated between – pedagogy and hyperreality.

I will begin with an overview of CAE's practice and development. The name "Critical Art Ensemble" was first used in 1986 by students Steve Kurtz and Steve Barnes to credit all those who contributed to some videos that they produced. In 1987,

CAE transformed into a six-member artist and activist collective and mounted its first collective practices. As of today, CAE's books have been translated into thirteen languages (CAE Defense Fund 2004). Its work is included in the collections of major institutions such as The Whitney Museum (New York), The Museum of Modern Art (New York), and the Tate Gallery (London). Numerous articles and essays discussing the Ensemble's work have appeared in contemporary art journals and theatre journals. The group's approaches are heavily debated, but CAE is widely held to be one of the strongest and most consistent creators of radical dissent and *action*. Despite artistic success, the Critical Art Ensemble consistently remains both a moving weapon and a moving target against categorisation.

In 1993, CAE created a radio commercial called *Western Recliner*. It begins with an exaggerated spoof of a man coming home after a long day's work to his wife. The voice acting is overly animated and rather patronising, like that of a children's television show host. The wife encourages her husband to relax in his Western Recliner, take it easy, and watch some television: "It's time to recline". Then a sales-pitch voiceover emerges, saying in a fast, business-like tone: "That's right. The Cold War is over, the Berlin Wall is down, and the world is computer convenient. Get in on the comfort with the Western Civilisation Recliner, available in all First World capitalist economies" (CAE 1993). This bogus advertisement simultaneously reveals and mocks the very idea that Western Civilisation might be in a post-political age in which people can no longer fathom alternatives. Since the Cold War, the commercial implies, there are no more "threats" or viable alternative social structures. This advertisement seemingly tries to draw awareness to the lack of political thinking and options in the West – to push people to confront their own inability to think politically – but CAE had not yet linked this method to people's *experience*.

The next year, CAE created an insert for American Sunday newspapers titled *Useless Technology*. In the boasting retro style of 1950s advertisements excitedly trumpeting the technological wizardry that would make everyone's lives simpler, this insert exaggeratedly endorses – and satirises – all sorts of contemporary "conveniences", from nose hair trimmers to luxury cars to missile guidance systems. The ultimate example is the "ADI Space-based Laser: The center piece of Reagan's grand monument to the useless. Now you too can share in this maniacal form of excess. Available to you due to the lack of competition for Hegelian Mastery of the globe" (1994b). The belief behind this "Useless Technology" insert seems similar to

one of Rev. Billy's credos – that convenience is not actually convenient. The sentiment is linked to excessive capitalism and a sinister notion of the US as seeking “Mastery of the globe” – but the political efficacy of merely expressing such a sentiment, on paper, seems minimal. That is, CAE's ideas were not yet linked to theatrical *actions*.

These two projects both insinuate themselves into dominant mass media and try to subvert the system on its own ground. This is the primary strategy of “Culture Jammers”, a now international anticonsumerist phenomenon that has grown out of British Columbia, Canada, centred around *Adbusters* magazine and the writings of Kalle Lasn – as mentioned in Chapter Two with respect to Rev. Billy. Lasn invokes the Situationists to advocate detournements: the rerouting and subverting of spectacular images (2000, 102) – which seems to be the strategy of CAE's counterfeit advertisements. Similarities to this movement might suggest that CAE aims to promote authenticity like Rev. Billy and this anticonsumerist movement. The notion of authenticity and this mass-media strategy both strongly contradict Baudrillard's theories, which problematise the very concept of reality and disallow the possibility of twisting the dominant media for subversive ends – but CAE soon distances itself from such strategies and from the idea of authenticity, particularly when the Ensemble turns more explicitly towards performance.

Several years after the *Useless Technology* project, CAE created a “human-scale web presentation” called *Diseases of Consciousness*. This presentation, as with the bogus ads above, addressed the inability for Westerners – including CAE, it would seem – to think outside the constraints of consumer capitalism. This presentation was identified as the “Critical Art Ensemble's Medical Guide” and decorated with the medical symbol of a staff entwined by serpents. The presentation identifies maladies such as “Irritable Brain Syndrome” in which the patient “complains of a 30-year history of alienation, depression, and isolation”; a “Dysfunctional Reality Lobe” that causes the patient to feel disturbed at living in such a merciless world; and “Profound Emotional Paroxysm” marked by overwhelming feelings of sentimentality and nostalgia (CAE 1997). Throughout the ten psychological problems the presentation describes, the source of each problem is consistently implied to be society itself. This project strictly avoids providing a pedagogical “solution” – a way of overcoming these problems either by curing the patient or by changing society itself – and instead focuses on people's experiences of being unable to cope with the present system or

see alternatives to it. In this way, CAE avoids the conservative “therapeutic” tendencies often associated with Western adaptations of Boal and previous attempts to bring a Freire-based pedagogical theatre into the West. CAE’s pedagogy – if it can be called pedagogy at this stage – is entirely deconstructive, showing the problems caused by the dominant social system and its seeming inevitability but refusing to offer models of action. As such, CAE might be accused of *accepting* this inevitability and simply complaining about it – but the Ensemble soon began different types of theatrical *actions* to provide an experiential basis for its radical pedagogy.

In 2002, CAE fostered a “city tour” project called *Halifax Begs Your Pardon!* in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada. There were many facets to the creation of this tour. Participants, not solely CAE members, began by researching and choosing sites around the city that somehow, they felt, help sustain dominant power and erase alternatives. These sites include a monument to Halifax’s founding father (who in the 18th Century had mandated the scalping of First Nations Peoples); the World Trade Convention Centre (where peaceful protestors at a G7 finance ministers’ meeting had been teargassed); the site of the former Nova Scotia Arts Council (which had supported experimental art, but was shut down); Halifax Harbour (into which the ferries dump raw sewage); and many more. Once the sites were chosen, production of the tour experience began. The aim was to reveal the generally undisclosed aspects of these sites, bracketed above, that the mainstream truth or reality hides.

Some participants designed a pamphlet and map for “A Walking Tour of Halifax’s Most Embarrassing Cultural and Historic Sites”. At each site the word “Sorry” appeared – either carved into a brick that CAE planted in the ground or printed on a flag flying nearby. CAE members conducted a “Gizmology Workshop” in which they taught participants how to create small battery-operated LCD screens and programme messages into them. Several such LCD screens were later installed at tour sites. One installed on the ferry read “Sorry for dumping raw sewage into Halifax Harbor” (2002a). Another aspect of the project was the creation of a simple pirate radio station to run announcements about the tour and sandwich board advertisements to publicise the station. Once all the bricks, flags, and LCD panels were in place, tour guides hit the streets, wearing matching *Halifax Begs Your Pardon!* t-shirts, with pamphlets and maps to promote the alternative tour (CAE 2002a).

The (political) purpose of each of the separate elements could be apparent of its own accord. Someone seeing the LCD panel on the ferry, for instance, would

receive that alternative information without needing to know of the overall project. Someone seeing the map with all of the sites labelled and explained would possibly understand the subversive aims of the tour. But the key aspect that CAE tried to push, especially via the “tour guide” actors, was the *experience* of actually taking the tour, visiting the sites, and absorbing the alternative meanings. This operation addressed moving targets – both audiences and locations around the city. It targeted moving audiences via a radio station, pamphlets, tour guides, and the sites themselves. By following the map, audiences literally move themselves to the different sites that have been targeted. In an almost literal sense, CAE could be seen as providing part of a Jamesonian “cognitive map” of Halifax. The experience the Ensemble seeks to provide for tour-takers is in no sense a complete cognitive map of the global relations that comprise each stop along the tour – but nevertheless provides hidden fragments that contribute to such a map, through a strategy of “moving targets”.

In Sheffield, England, CAE impersonated – or *became* – the activist group *International Campaign for Free Alcohol and Tobacco for the Unemployed*. The venture was very simple. CAE located the space of a public pedestrian mall that, it claimed, had become a *de facto* space exclusively for consumption. No human interaction, unless focussed on shopping, took place there. The Ensemble put up a sign – “Unemployed? Get your free cigarettes and beer here!” – and began distributing free beer and cigarettes to the unemployed, many of whom, after overcoming their cautious disbelief, hung out in the mall and struck up conversations with each other and with the incognito CAE members (CAE 2000c). This project once again seems like it might be striving for similar aims as Rev. Billy’s work, the promotion of “authentic” human interaction and spaces that are not confined to capitalist or consumer logic. CAE’s political aims, however, differ from the Reverend’s.

This performance created an experience that opposed the typical mainstream use of public space and may consequently have expanded the participants’ political consciousness. But CAE, retrospectively at any rate, viewed this performance as being not sufficiently radical. Apparently, creating an authentic space and interaction is not CAE’s objective, which the Ensemble makes clear in its first book:

Throughout this book, the assumption is that extraction of power from the individual by the state is to be resisted. Resistance itself is the action which recovers or expands individual sovereignty, or conversely, it is those actions which weaken the state. Therefore, resistance can be viewed as a matter of

degree; a total system crash is not the only option, nor may it even be a viable one. This is not to soften the argument by opening the door for liberal reform, since that means relinquishing sovereignty in the name of social justice, rather than for the sake of social order. Liberal action is too often a matter of equal repression for all, in order to resist the conservative practice of repression for the marginalized and modest liberty for the privileged. Under the liberal rubric, the people united will always be defeated. The practice being advocated here is to recover what the state has taken, as well as what the reformers have so generously given (and are continuing to give). (1994a, 130)

CAE's primary aim is *autonomy* (or sovereignty) from the capitalist system – for the group itself, for its art, and for its audiences and participants. In this comprehensive paragraph, CAE argues that autonomy transcends the equally futile positions of conservative and liberal. Moreover, resistance can take the form either of expanding individual autonomy or simply weakening the State – it, like Rev. Billy's authenticity, is a very adaptable political programme, suitable for an age in which one must keep up with the moving targets of capital. From this perspective, CAE would approve of the result of the Beer and Tobacco event not out of a blanket moralistic humanism or a notion of authentic human interaction but rather insofar as the event revealed the general lack of that public space's autonomy – in practice – from late capitalist logic.

The insufficiency of the Beer and Tobacco campaign, to CAE, is that it was unable to explain how that space came to lack autonomy or how people might become more permanently autonomous. Reflecting on the action, CAE said: "A performance such as this one could not offer even a superficial critique of how this situation of commodity domination had come to pass, or explain the mechanisms through which the ideology of social space had been internalised" (2000c, 160). Partly, CAE sees this lack as a deficiency of street theatre, which the collective claims is unable to address issues outside the realm of everyday experience. The Ensemble, that is, seems to think that most people's political consciousness *is* limited to the extent of their experience. One aspect of CAE's performance practice tries to provide such experiences to expand people's political consciousness. Another aspect tries to circumvent this limitation and find ways of basing politics in something beyond experience.

The Critical Art Ensemble's primary focus in recent years has been fighting dominant power in the realm of biotechnology and in virtual spaces such as computer data networks. The biotech realm exists well outside of most people's everyday life

experiences, and the virtual realm, it seems, is actually inaccessible to direct experience – and that is precisely why these are the realms that CAE has chosen to target. Their inaccessibility to everyday experience makes them difficult realms in which to attain *autonomy*, or even to recognise the dominance of capitalist logic.

Autonomy has been a much-debated term particularly in philosophical discourse, and a politics based on autonomy is not necessarily new (though using theatre to achieve it may be). The Critical Art Ensemble, however, does not apply a conventional understanding of autonomy. Thomas May (2005), building on the work of John Macken (1990), reveals that the term “autonomy” was first employed by the ancient Greeks to denote certain rights of a *polis* to manage its own affairs even when dependent upon a mother-city or outside power. In the original sense, then, autonomy did not entail complete and total independence but a relative sovereignty or independence within certain limits – ostensibly less radical than the autonomy that CAE seeks. Being related to the workings of the *polis*, however, autonomy is inherently a political concept – even though it is far from specifying any particular political programme.

During the Enlightenment, May says, the term came to signify predominantly individual autonomy within the framework of the law. This Enlightenment concept of autonomy seems close to Rev. Billy’s authenticity, especially with the typical view – in philosophical discourse – of autonomy as “*autarkeia*” or self-sufficiency, allowing “purity of purpose” (May 2005, 304). Such “purity” seems to align with Rev. Billy’s goal, but this is not the only variety of autonomy. True, autonomy has often been considered the province of the Age of Reason, which glorified science. CAE, however, seeks an anti-rational autonomy, as evidenced among other things by its touting of Paul Feyerabend.¹ Feyerabend is primarily known, as a scientist, for arguing against universal reason and in favour of a science based on anarchistic epistemology – in books such as *Farewell to Reason* (1987). Mainstream science, he often asserted, makes truth claims beyond its actual capacities. CAE finds science, and particularly biotechnology, to be a realm in which it is both difficult and necessary to fight capital’s dominance. Debunking the absolute authority of science is

¹ In an e-mail CAE member Steve Kurtz sent in response to questions I had e-mailed him, he wrote: “We are epistemological anarchists (Feyerabend). That may make us pragmatists – whatever we think is going to work is what we believe/do in that moment” (2005).

important to the Ensemble's politics. The group in fact seeks autonomy from excessive reason, implying, contrary to the Enlightenment, that an excess of reason actually *robs* one of autonomy. The Critical Art Ensemble, then, does not subscribe to the Enlightenment concept of reason and its individual autonomy but rather tries to recover a social and political concept of autonomy in opposition to "reason" – which CAE claims has been dictated by capital. Perhaps CAE is following the logic of Walter Kaufmann, who pointed out that Immanuel Kant himself was troubled by how much tobacco to smoke in a day, as he had no rational criteria on which to justify such a decision (Agassi and Agassi 1985). His "reason" robbed him of the ability to act autonomously.

For the purposes of analysis, I will split CAE's pedagogical theatre into two sections. In the first section I will focus on the biotech projects and show that they aim to provide people with experiences of biotech procedures to expand their political consciousness into this otherwise uncontested realm. I will show that this achievement is due in large part to CAE's aesthetic or formal approach. This aspect provides a pedagogy that seems to combat Baudrillard's theory of hyperreality. In the second section I will reveal another aspect of CAE's pedagogy that seemingly attempts to seek the possibility of expanding political consciousness *outside* the realm of experience. This aspect apparently accepts the theory of hyperreality and paradoxically provides experience of it. This second section will concentrate on CAE's theoretical performance strategy to combat power in the virtual realm, which has been limited to hypothetical propositions for "virtual" actions such as computer hacking – with a particular theatrical focus. The first approach could perhaps be considered as using Freire *against* Baudrillard – creating a pedagogical theatre that is clearly based in the furnishing of "real" experience, contrary to Baudrillard's theory of hyperreality. The second approach might be seen as using Freire *plus* Baudrillard – creating a pedagogical theatre that paradoxically "teaches" that there is no such thing as real experience.

Baudrillard's twin concepts of simulation and hyperreality posit the inability to distinguish between image and reality. His concept arose, it seems, from a meditation on how media images, from television in particular, fuse with reality, creating a hybrid tele-reality. His paradigmatic example is the Persian Gulf War: the American military, he says, largely controlled the available news images of the war, creating the accepted reality via images (1991/1995). This is a commonplace claim,

but to Baudrillard it does not imply the existence of a different, external truth. For beyond the news media, the Americans fought the war mostly mediated by screens and images: soldiers pressed buttons to destroy virtual targets on digital maps. The reported “successes” were often based solely on digital data. More drastic than questioning this one war and the role of the media with respect to it, says Baudrillard, such a scenario necessitates a questioning of the very notion of truth. No longer can it be said that images *conceal* reality, but that they have become transposable. This scenario disallows such a thing as *what really happened*. To Baudrillard, all other potential interpretations or realities can only enter Western culture via the media as similar image-realities – where the potency of the interpretation does not hinge upon an external truth. His claim that “the Gulf War did not take place” does not mean that no shots were fired and nobody was killed, but that one cannot extract the “real” reality from media images (1991/1995). The theory of hyperreality does not preclude physical violence; it merely precludes the unambiguous truth of that violence. Positing a truth counter to the mainstream contradicts Baudrillard’s theory.

The first trend I will identify in CAE’s work seeks just such a truth, apparently desiring to damage Baudrillard’s theory. This aspect is rooted in experience and particularly evident in CAE’s focus on biotechnology, which has been the emphasis of six major projects. Applying Freire’s radical pedagogical theory to a realm in which people have no direct experience seems contradictory. Boal’s theatre, for instance, dealt with common social issues: all spectators could become spect-actors and participate in a theatrical “dialogue” about issues of family or employment, say, based upon their experience. If audiences have no experience of an issue, this method becomes problematic: an Image Theatre session on biotechnology would not work. CAE, then, obviously needs to *supply* the experience upon which its pedagogy is to be based, but then it risks becoming didactic. Through guiding the experience, CAE would dictate the meaning of that experience. Freire would find such a one-directional flow of information to be a conservative form of pedagogy – which he calls a “banking concept” of pedagogy in which the knowledgeable teacher deposits his superior information into the uninitiated (Freire 1972, 45-59). In an effort to avoid this conservatism CAE has developed an original take on Freire’s radical pedagogy.

CAE’s first major biotech work, *Flesh Machine*, was generally performed in contemporary art museums and galleries and publicised as CAE’s work. At first glance it seems, structurally, to employ exactly a banking concept form of pedagogy:

Flesh Machine begins with a multimedia lecture, followed by a hands-on laboratory portion that, one might expect, would confirm the claims made in the lecture. Rebecca Schneider asserts that the opening lecture is without overt irony, implying that CAE members are performing versions of themselves and presenting their sincere beliefs. Indeed, Steve Kurtz's reply to my question about CAE's acting style would seem to confirm this: "It's the John Wayne model when we are playing roles. We play the role as ourselves" (2005). There are hints, however, that the performance is not merely CAE members giving a lecture: CAE employs theatrical lighting, the performers wear lab coats, and the 30-minute lecture is interspersed with short sketches in which "emphasis is placed on the particular situation that many women face in regard to the political, social, and economic pressures to reproduce and raise children" (Schneider 2000, 120). Schneider claims that CAE members openly explain their own political position. Being an acknowledged CAE performance with theatrical elements, then, does not fundamentally change the nature of the conventional lecture and slideshow with a seemingly straightforward message about the highly normative tendencies of biotechnology.

The laboratory portion begins with audience members being invited to use computer stations to research commonly available biotech procedures. Each computer station runs a CD-ROM, now mirrored on CAE's website (1998b). The CD-ROM appears to be promotional material for a biotech company called BioCom. Here is perhaps where the conventional pedagogy is first challenged: people can learn about reproductive technology under their own direction. CAE and the audience both bear an ambiguous relationship to the information presented. To what degree is the proffered information the stance of CAE? What is CAE's relationship to this fictitious corporation? The uncertainty of identity seems to open up possible interpretations: an audience member does not know if he is "supposed" to agree with the facts presented or reject them. The opening lecture is retrospectively destabilised as well.

The interpretation of irony, as discussed in Chapter Three, depends upon an audience's understanding of the author (Booth 1974, 10; 49-52). Though the CD is framed as a BioCom product, audiences know that the Critical Art Ensemble is the author (or at least provider and contextualiser) of the text. Whether irony is interpreted would seem to depend upon an audience member's knowledge of CAE. In its writings, CAE is highly critical of the capitalist imperatives of biotechnology. CAE reveals that genetic mapping can gauge an individual's likelihood of developing

Alzheimer's well before any symptoms arise and sees this scientific "advance" as an instrument of capital: "Those who would benefit most from this information are insurance companies and the employer of the person likely to be afflicted with the ailment. Such information could be a tremendous cost-cutting device for both" (1998a, 67). In its "companion" book to this performance, *Flesh Machine: Cyborgs, Designer Babies, and New Eugenic Consciousness*, CAE makes a strong case for needing to oppose capital's dominance of the biotech industry. With the mapping of the human genome, says CAE, even human flesh itself has become commodified. Cloaked in utopian promises – the elimination of disease, longer life spans, and more intelligent children – this aspect of biotechnology has been deemed the second wave of eugenics by CAE:

Eugenics is a perfect complement to the capitalist political-economic imperative of authoritarian control through increased rationalization of culture. Why should the body or the gene pool be sacrosanct? Like a city, a factory, or any other construction of culture, these phenomena can be molded, enhanced, and directed to fit the dominant values of a culture, so that they might efficiently progress into the future. (1998a, 119)

This grim view is plainly an evolution of Horkheimer and Adorno's thesis in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* that the Enlightenment concept of Reason was a cause, rather than deterrent, of fascist eugenics and totalitarian regimes (1944/1972). It also reinforces CAE's anti-rational concept of autonomy discussed above.

If audience members do not know of CAE's books or radical aims, they would have few if any clues by which to interpret irony in the BioCom presentation. Even if they think they know the Ensemble's aims, however, they might struggle. Someone who has read the quotation above about the eugenic drive of biotechnology would likely expect the BioCom presentation to be an ironic satire of a biotech company. This person would perhaps prepare himself to interpret irony in the BioCom presentations. Most of the BioCom materials, however, construct a believable and at times persuasive argument in *favour* of biotechnology. It seems that a modicum of ironic satire is intended, but it is rather subtle. The front page of the website begins:

Philosophers may speculate on what it means to be a human being but today's geneticists will bring us a lot closer to the answer. Their studies yield important clues almost daily – about our intelligence and behavior, but especially about human diseases, from rare cancers to mental illness. It may take time, but science will develop reliable medical tests for detecting these genes early enough to intervene. (1998b)

Thus far, the site seems clearly to present genetic engineering (GE) – and therefore this BioCom Company – in a favourable manner. Any criticism is absent, *and* a convincing argument in approval of GE is presented: the elimination of disease. The page continues: “The researchers here at BioCom have two primary goals – to completely invade the flesh with vision and mapping technologies...and to develop the political and economic frontiers of flesh products and services” (1998b). This sentence could still reasonably be interpreted as a genuine corporate declaration designed to appeal to potential stockholders. It seems that irony was probably intended: the phrase “completely invade”, for instance, sounds more aggressive and unpleasant than a typical company would present itself. Most of the site is in fact even less obviously ironic than the above example.

The “BioCom Company” is open about its capitalist motivations in this CD-ROM, and presents its services as ways of fulfilling capitalist demands and being successful in terms of society’s standards. For instance, a page describing the “Reproductive Technologies” the corporation offers has an introductory paragraph that openly and strongly reveals the capitalist imperatives behind these services:

This way, reproduction better conforms to the capitalist necessity of efficiency: No useless activity occurs in the reproductive process, and less genetic material is wasted. Let BioCom demonstrate that a ‘better baby’ (one better adapted to the imperatives of pancapitalism) can be produced through rationalized intervention. (1998b)

Having read CAE’s texts on the need to combat the biotech’s realm contribution to capitalist power’s dominance, it seems safe to assume that CAE intends for audiences to be repulsed by the idea of engineering a more (capitalist) successful baby – that an audience would read this as ironic satire. The first sentence, eliminating useless activity in the reproductive process, is essentially science-speak for eliminating sex as a pleasurable activity!

Any hint of irony disappears throughout the rest of the page, however, which for instance provides information about In Vitro Fertilisation (IVF). The IVF material is introduced: “Over the years, the procedures to achieve IVF pregnancy have become increasingly simpler, safer and more successful” – and the presentation proceeds to list types of fertility problems that can be helped by IVF (1998b). The page goes on to provide apparently “straight”, non-ironic information about three other fertility procedures, their rates of success, and conditions under which they are optimal. Any sense of irony is lost, even with a supposed knowledge of CAE’s oppositional aims.

The way the IVF material is presented, it is very difficult to believe that CAE intended an audience to repudiate such a procedure. Another page of the CD-ROM titled *In the News* lists some major biotech advancements in recent years, such as isolating genes that cause dwarfism or have been linked to aggressive and violent behaviour. This generally positive portrait of biotech continues throughout the extensive presentation, though it is at times openly capitalistic.

The simplest and most obvious conclusion to make is that CAE presents both – or all – sides of the biotech debate. The group reveals the many benefits and advantages biotech research and procedures can bring, but continually insists that the main motivation behind the biotech industry is a raving reinforcement of capitalist values. This is perhaps the closest one can come to a “dialogic” Freirian pedagogy about a realm in which people have no experience: audiences seemingly must draw their own conclusions based on a presentation of contradictory information. This approach seems to be due to CAE’s concept of autonomy. Autonomy cannot be the product of a total rejection of capitalistic practices such as biotech – for then one’s position, beliefs, and actions are still fully defined (negatively) by the system. Only a complex understanding, a refusal to take sides for or against, can result in autonomy.

Flesh Machine, however, comprises more than simply contradictory content. Like *Christmas Shopping*, the form of the performance seems to create a dialectical juxtaposition: the same CAE members give a presentation on the normative, capitalistic tendencies of biotech procedures followed immediately by “becoming” the BioCom company and revealing the many benefits of biotechnology. Irony, in text, reduces to a single voice – as Booth implies. Based on knowledge of the author, one decides the “real” meaning of the text. With theatrical juxtapositions, both contradictory sides are preserved, creating a conflicting experience that audiences must resolve by making a political decision – or which may resist resolution and thereby destabilise the certainty of capitalist logic.

CAE’s refusal to take sides, as analysed so far, is akin to Baudrillard’s theory of hyperreality but ultimately opposes it. Baudrillard, as many before him, sees the dominant (capitalist) reality as false and oppressive. But while others have generally held that one ought to assert the real truth – an alternative reality – behind the dominant lies, Baudrillard sees all other truths or realities as equally constructed. The only truth, paradoxically, is that of hyperreality. Baudrillard consequently disparages

any form of direct opposition or the taking up of a contrary position. Contradicting the reality that has been constructed, he argues, paradoxically reinforces the system:

Any unitary system, if it wants to survive, must find a *binary regulation*. This does not change anything as regards monopoly, on the contrary, power is only absolute if it is able to diffract into various equivalents, if it knows how to divide in order to become stronger. This goes for detergent brands as much as for a ‘peaceful coexistence’. (1976/1993, 68-69)

This claim sounds similar to CAE’s assertion, in its description of autonomy, that it resists the (binary) options of conservative or liberal – a binary that, as Baudrillard indicates, seems to fortify the monopoly of capitalism. His illustration of detergent brands provides an insight into this extreme belief. Baudrillard implies that alternative realities or direct counter-arguments are the equivalent of capitalist competition.

While a second, oppositional detergent brand might damage the success of the first, it augments the market nonetheless. While a second, oppositional reality might damage the first, it still augments the *reality principle* – and within the realm of the reality principle, the hegemony of the system will always win out. CAE’s “autonomy” is remarkable: it transcends the binary moralistic judgments of biotechnology as either “good” or “bad” – but does so, it seems, by seeking the “real” truth. This pedagogical approach, then, runs counter to Baudrillard’s theory of hyperreality. Even so, it seems to be a successful evolution of Freire’s radical pedagogy, using an aesthetic ambiguity to avoid having a didactic, banking concept effect. CAE tries to spread autonomy even from itself, forcing audiences to make their own political decision about how to construe the information and issues presented.

Rev. Billy’s authenticity lends itself to judgements on moral and aesthetic grounds and would likely reject the biotechnology industry altogether – or would at least struggle to justify why biotech might be acceptable in some situations. CAE’s pursuit of autonomy is less equivocal and arbitrary, which actually seems to make it trickier as a basis for judgments: biotechnology could occasionally be useful and assist the feat of autonomy. CAE supports, for instance, the use of certain genetically modified bacteria to help clean up oil spills or decontaminate polluted rivers – arguing that biotechnology could here foster independence from the blunders of capitalist logic (2002b, 85). The pursuit of autonomy necessitates an informed estimation of benefits and risks – which, CAE says, does not happen when an industry is controlled by capital. There is a truth, CAE implies, that capital conceals.

The culmination of the BioCom presentation is a lengthy donor-screening test (abducted from a real clinic) that audience members are encouraged to take. The test asks a wide range of questions about living habits, family health history, physique, skills, intelligence, and appearance. Using the same formula as the clinic from which the test was taken, CAE members (as BioCom technicians) assess audience members' screening tests. Those that pass are asked to donate a blood sample for DNA extraction – which is performed by CAE members (BioCom technicians) at a portable on-site laboratory. With permission, cell samples are taken and cryogenically frozen, and donors' photos are taken for CAE's records. If there is indeed a eugenic compulsion behind biotech, perhaps it would be apparent from the photos of those who pass the test.

This portion of the performance could be seen as literally experimental: CAE tests its own hypothesis about the eugenic tendencies of the biotech industry – which may in fact get “disproved”. Audiences get hands-on experience of biotech procedures and see for themselves the criteria for judging donor fitness. The experience is partly a means of demystifying such scientific procedures by allowing people to perform and witness them first hand, to *experience* rather than *be told of* the supposedly embedded capitalist values being disseminated by the biotech industry. CAE (2001) cites Freire with regard to the importance of grounding education – the raising of critical consciousness – in the meaningful and experiential structures of people's lives. The uncertainty of identity – with CAE members intermittently and ambiguously incarnating BioCom technicians – and the complicated contradictory information are ways of problematising any unequivocal stance or message. Audiences must formulate their own beliefs about a controversial realm that they are probably only just discovering. The information itself is clearly important, but is subsidiary to the *way* in which the information is presented. The ambiguous form and participatory experiment are what converts otherwise didactic information into a radical pedagogical approach. Aesthetics are at the root of this political theatre.

In the final portion of the performance, CAE (or BioCom) presents to the audience a live video image of a frozen embryo “inherited from a couple who no longer needed their eggs” (Schneider 2000, 122). Technicians then take donations from the audience in order to pay the rent on the cryotank (about \$60). If not enough money is raised, the embryo will be evicted and “die”. This event can be seen as a more extreme way of obliging audiences to *experience* the capitalist motivations

behind biotech, to subject them to the amorality (not *immorality*, not in a judgmental way) of capitalism's dominion over biotech. Unsurprisingly, CAE was strongly criticised for this action. In Vienna, they "found themselves on national TV debating the ethical implications of 'embryo murder' with the Archbishop of Salzburg live via satellite" (Schneider 2000, 123). In actually carrying out the "embryo murder" CAE (as BioCom) does not necessarily condone it. If audiences are upset by the act, they may dislike CAE but will also then, presumably, take a stance against this common biotech procedure. If audiences defend the act, they will also be deciding their views on biotechnology. The *experience* is a political one that splits audiences, pushing them to discover their political consciousness.

This method is repeated in various iterations throughout CAE's work. It aims to provide audiences with some basic experience and knowledge of biotech procedures upon which a radical pedagogy can be built. It could be said that CAE pits Freire against Baudrillard in this performance (or rather against Baudrillard's theory of hyperreality, which may appeal to him as a theory but is objectionable to him as a state-of-affairs). The Ensemble attempts to spread autonomy from the capitalist dominance of biotechnology through this strange version of dialogic pedagogy. Despite biotech's pervasive presence, the general public has little tangible physical experience of its effects. CAE's pedagogical performances therefore aim to provide that experience. The group claims that, with biotech, it could not "use a method to tease out what they (audiences) already knew, but had yet to articulate" (2000a, 163). Instead, CAE itself tries to provide both sides of the dialogue and provide people with an initial *experience* of biotechnology.

The follow-up to *Flesh Machine* was a much simpler performance called the *Society for Reproductive Anachronisms* (SRA) that was once again predominantly deconstructive and destabilising, but in a different way. In this performance, CAE impersonates an activist organisation, the SRA, which it describes as a "performative counterfeit [that] consisted of a group of activists who spoke to people about the dangers of medical intervention in the reproductive process" (1998c). *SRA* was once again acknowledged as a CAE creation, but rather than impersonate a biotech company praising the benefits of biotechnology, here the Ensemble impersonated a group of traditional, modernist activists critical of the biotech industry. The formal simplicity of the performance was a necessity of adhering to the activist model: "In the tradition of activist groups, the public interface was designed around an

information table. The SRA had the usual pamphlets and fliers, but it also had computerized information” (CAE 1998c). Surely it is significant that CAE calls this a “performative counterfeit”. Members very clearly distinguish themselves from anti-biotech activists – which, in retrospect, further problematises a reading of their BioCom impersonation as straight ironic parody.

The *SRA* performance consists simply of an information table, pamphlets, fliers, computers running informative CD-ROMs, and activists eager to talk to people about their group’s goals “to combat the rationalization and instrumentalization of the reproductive process that is occurring in order to totally manage its service to the pancapitalist order” (1998c). It sounds as though the group’s aims are plainly to oppose the biotech realm’s intrusion into the reproductive process. CAE does not impersonate this, or any other group, in an exaggeratedly playful style: its performances, as Kurtz indicated, are always “as themselves”. The computerised SRA presentation, mirrored on CAE’s website, once more has no reference to CAE but claims and appears, aesthetically, to be the site of this genuine activist organisation (an appearance that the content may destabilise). The site features a clear ten-point manifesto covering the aims of the SRA, many or most of which relate to challenging the “commodification of the flesh” and the capitalist imperatives of biotech. The bulk of the site assembles a plethora of frequently incredible ways for the process of human reproduction to remain autonomous from the capitalist eugenic biotech industry – ways to increase sperm count, vary the gene pool, and increase fertility (1998c).

The content of the computer presentation is often implausible. One page is devoted to the endorsement of codpieces “as partial means to solve the problem of declining sperm counts”, and includes several contemporary designs that would be less obtrusive than protuberant Renaissance models. Another page promotes promiscuity as a way to resist capitalist eugenic practices – and includes travel maps for where women of various ethnicities should go to find the most genetically diverse partners. The site also gives information on *any* potential alternative fertility aids: herbal and dietary supplements, Christian saintly interventions, pagan fertility rituals, and so on. Though extreme by some accounts, the information is not fictional but based on actual historical and contemporary fertility practices. For instance, the use of raw egg whites instead of commercial lubricants – which the site advocates – is a practice corroborated by many practitioners of alternative medicine

(MotherNature.com 2005). Similarly, the SRA shares genuine ancient myths of St. George's ability to fertilise barren women – seeing a saintly intervention as a challenge to the capitalistic biotech industry. The aim does not seem to be for audiences to believe and apply everything on the site; nobody could. But neither is the net effect satiric: while perhaps ridiculous, the material on the site, and the performance itself, is neither a direct satire of activists nor an indirect satire of, say, alternative medicine or spiritual healing.

As with *Flesh Machine*, it would *seem* that an audience member's assumed knowledge of the Critical Art Ensemble would define his interpretation of the material presented. But the material is so implausible as to overwhelm anyone's assumed knowledge. An audience member that knows of CAE as a contentious political performance collective would nevertheless find it difficult to believe that CAE generally intends to advocate the use of codpieces. But if they do not mean *that*, surely they do not mean the opposite, either, that biotech fertility procedures are the solution. Knowing the group's aims does not necessarily assist in the interpretation of the performance.

CAE impersonates a traditional modernist activist group in such a way that it simultaneously *uses* the model to critique the capitalist, eugenic biotech industry and *questions* the model in terms of its applicability in the complicated age of hyperreality. It is tempting to see this performance in the vein of Reverend Billy's use of a playful and irreverent form to express his sincere beliefs, to make fun of his beliefs even as he speaks them. But, at least to his followers, Rev. Billy's "real" beliefs are apparent and widely shared. CAE's "real" beliefs are never clear – and the group does not provide rhetorical clues to indicate that its portrayal is parodic. It is perhaps conceivable that, in an effort to fight for autonomy from capitalist constraints, CAE would genuinely endorse *any* alternatives to the capitalistic biotech industry – including saintly interventions and the wearing of codpieces. But it seems equally plausible that audience members – even those that know of CAE – would find the SRA utterly ridiculous, and the performance could have the effect of damaging activist credibility and showing the poverty of this traditional approach.

Flesh Machine seemed to be an effort to force audience autonomy, as much as possible, even from the Critical Art Ensemble itself. Audiences were left to make their own interpretation of the material since CAE's real beliefs and identities were indefinite. The much more basic *SRA* performance could be seen in a similar light,

requiring audiences to navigate uncertain ground. It seems that the two performances themselves are a dialectical juxtaposition – a capitalistic biotech company next to an anti-biotech activist group. The synthesis of this dialectic is the autonomous ground between those two dominant binary positions. That is, the net effect of the two performances could once again be a sort of dialogic pedagogy, forcing audiences to negotiate between the two extremes of unwavering faith in the biotech industry and irrational total rejection of it. In this way, CAE remains a moving target against categorisation – even to those that think they know the group’s aims.

Remaining a moving target in this way seems to be a conscious strategy of the Critical Art Ensemble, particularly evident from the collective’s first book, *The Electronic Disturbance*, which seems in many regards to stem from a reinterpretation of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s ideas on “nomadology” as presented in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980/1988), although Deleuze and Guattari are not cited. CAE gives a historical account of the nomadic Scythians, a wandering horde with no fixed territory. Having no fixed territory, the horde could never be located, put on the defensive, and conquered. “They maintained their autonomy through movement” (1994a, 14). This view clearly echoes Deleuze and Guattari’s claim that such “nomadology” intrinsically opposes the territorial State power by its refusal to “play by the State’s rules” – to engage in direct combat. CAE proceeds to claim that capitalist power today has become increasingly “nomadic” itself, dispersing particularly into cyberspace, but also into other intangible realms like biotechnology. Resistance, CAE claims, must follow capitalist power into these realms.

While making an important point – similar to Virilio’s – about the speed and elusiveness of capitalist power, CAE’s labelling capitalist power “nomadic” seems either to be a mistake or a misunderstanding of Deleuze and Guattari. The “deterritorialised” power network in cyberspace nevertheless supports a substantiated, territorial State – which need not imply a traditional centralised power. Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of a multiplicity is useful to help understand this elusive yet cohesive State, and its difference from nomadism. Deleuze and Guattari draw a distinction between what they call *arborescent* and *rhizomatic* multiplicities, a distinction that allows for a complex conception of the State:

[The multiplicity] was created precisely in order to escape the abstract opposition between the multiple and the one, to escape dialectics, to succeed in conceiving the multiple in the pure state, to cease treating it as a numerical fragment of a lost Unity or Totality or as the organic element of a Unity or

Totality yet to come, and instead distinguish between different types of multiplicity. (1980/1988, 32)

They associate the State apparatus with an arborescent multiplicity, a multiplicity that is – like a tree – complicated, tangled, but ultimately unifiable, traceable to a root. Nomadism, by contrast, is associated with a rhizomatic multiplicity, a multiplicity whose elements constantly construct and dismantle themselves, never unifiable. Consequently, it seems that CAE’s description of power, dispersed and unstable throughout electronic networks, does not necessitate a fundamental revision of Deleuze and Guattari – calling the State nomadic – but rather fits it exactly. Even in cyberspace, State power is territorial, no matter how elusive and multiple that power may be. And nomadism, which seems to be a way of stating the need to remain both a moving weapon and a moving target, remains opposed to this State power.

Each of CAE’s biotech projects has similarly built on the previous project, deepening and questioning its meaning, contradicting it, and generally preventing any stability in one’s understanding of CAE. In its third biotech project, *Cult of the New Eve*, CAE impersonated a cult that finds salvation in the potential of biotech engineering, fully subscribing to the most ardent utopian and religious promises made by biotech with respect to curing disease and eliminating human dysfunctions. The performance again consists of a lecture, presentation, and slideshow. Much of the cult’s presentation (and website) is scientific, presenting medical advances in the form of news stories, presented in a detached journalistic manner. The cult reports on the successful cloning of a sheep, the ability to genetically engineer animals to produce human medicines, the discovery of a genetic cure for baldness, and much more. The “journalistic” style of the presentation and website mirrors the typical attitude towards biotechnology in contemporary society.

This typical scientific praise of biotech is juxtaposed with an elaborate cult aesthetic – with a complete iconography: images and recitations of worship, cult symbolism, and rituals. Cult members read excerpts from their “saints”, scientists who make lofty claims for biotech, such as: “I predict that human destiny is to elevate itself to the status of a god and beyond” (1999). The cult, dressed in matching red tracksuits and sunglasses, sings praises to the “New Eve” – the anonymous woman from Buffalo, New York, whose DNA served as the basis for the Human Genome Project that mapped human DNA (CAE 2000b). They take, and offer to audiences, a sacrament that consists in consuming beer that they created with transgenic bacteria

bearing the New Eve's DNA – literally consuming the body of their saviour.

This aesthetic juxtaposes the dominant “rational” presentation of biotech, both scientific and journalistic, with an “irrational” presentation – that of a rather “creepy” and elaborate cult. CAE describes the strategy: “to move the advertising rhetoric of science and its marketers from a context of maximum authority and legitimation (i.e., the authority of science) to a context with the least amount” (2000b). Once again there is a dialectical juxtaposition, contrasting the rational authority of a scientific argument with “illegitimate” and “dangerous” cult behaviour. The outcome of this dialectic is once more a middle ground in which biotech is neither fully moral nor wholly illegitimate.

Overall it seems that CAE attempts to use the ideological and theatrical ambiguity of its presentations to subvert the dominant moralistic “for-or-against” positions as regards biotechnology. CAE provides people with a limited experience of biotechnology, but does not guide the interpretation of that experience. In fact, CAE de-privileges itself by perpetually playing ambiguous roles and presenting ambiguous information. In this respect, CAE seems to apply a strategy similar to the one Auslander describes in *Presence and Resistance*. He claims that a “refusal of presence” was a major strategy by which certain performance artists of the ‘80s critiqued the society they were unavoidably a part of. He maintains that this postmodern strategy is a way of achieving a kind of Brechtian distance from the world we live in and thereby gaining a better understanding of it (1992, 6). Indeed, this seems to be what the Critical Art Ensemble achieves – always denying its own authority. The Wooster Group and Laurie Anderson, whom Auslander cites, may have repeatedly targeted the same audience and spaces and become a known commodity that fulfilled expectations. CAE, by mounting performances in art galleries, hospital lobbies, expos, and so on, constantly targets new audiences. And by perpetually changing its roles, information, and arguments, CAE refuses to fulfil expectations but consistently disconcerts, provokes, and questions the status quo.

In all of its biotech projects, CAE has created and embodied a fictitious group or organisation, and often seems to go to great lengths to legitimise the fiction. Yet the group always admits that the performances are CAE undertakings. This indeterminacy is characteristic of nearly all CAE projects. The collective accentuates the potential to be interpreted as something else – an official city tour (2002a), a biotech corporation (1998b), a cult (1999), an activist organisation (1998c) – but

simultaneously admits the nature and intent of the work. This openness does not appear to be a form of capitalist credit taking, since prestige and financial success seem clearly not to be of primary importance to CAE – which always aims to provoke. Rather, this candour contributes to CAE’s pedagogical aims. If CAE presented itself as a wholly legitimate biotech company, for instance, people would presumably take the information seriously and most people – apart from those with an interest already in biotech – would not come to a sincere lecture on In Vitro Fertilisation. Framing the same biotech lecture and experiment as a theatre action brings people who would not normally learn about biotech and, further, destabilises CAE’s identity – which becomes a strategy to achieve radical pedagogy that pushes audiences to formulate their own beliefs.

In this first section I have shown that CAE apparently finds Baudrillard’s theory of hyperreality to be an accurate but objectionable description of contemporary society. The Ensemble therefore apparently tries to damage hyperreal society through pedagogical theatre that seeks a genuine truth about a realm that exists beyond most people’s everyday experience. The Ensemble creates some peculiar version of dialogic pedagogy to “replace” an audience’s lack of biotech experience and knowledge. Even though the group shuns the dominant binary positions, it seems to use this approach to locate the actual truth or reality of biotech procedures – a truth that capital surely hides, but that the moralistic reaction against capital equally hides. It is through CAE’s theatrical actions that audience members are physically *moved* to participate in scientific experiments, the experience of which can form the basis of a political consciousness about this difficult and largely intangible realm of capitalist dominance. While the nature and type of information is an important aspect of this strategy, it is especially the form – CAE’s perpetually ambiguous identity – that is key to the radical pedagogical theatre.

Another side of CAE’s performances seems oddly to reveal the “truth” of hyperreality. This second tendency seems paradoxically to use a Freirian notion of radical pedagogy to demonstrate and clarify the existence of hyperreality – to challenge the very notion that there is such a thing as a genuine physical reality. Where the previous tendency was associated with biotech, this tendency is primarily associated with the virtual realm and seems to be a function of the inability to have a direct, physical experience of this realm.

CAE explains its perceived need to target the capitalist dominance of virtual

computer networks, making a case for cyberspace as a realm of almost uncontested capitalist power that robs individuals of autonomy. To demonstrate capital's dominance in this realm, CAE gives the example of a person seeking a bank loan. CAE discusses the typical "performance" this loan-seeker is expected to give: he will present himself as responsible and trustworthy, dress well, and give a prepared presentation on why he needs the loan. Even a flawless live performance, CAE claims, is insufficient to secure the loan:

All that P has accomplished by the performance is to successfully convince the loan officer to interview h/er electronic double. The loan officer calls up h/er credit history on the computer. It is this body, a body of data, that now controls the stage. It is, in fact, the *only* body which interests the loan officer. P's electronic double reveals that s/he has been late on credit payments in the past, and that she has been in a credit dispute with another bank. The loan is denied; end of performance. (1994a, 58-59)

This virtual data network, CAE shows, is a realm in which individuals do not have autonomy from capitalist power and logic. Not only do people lack autonomy in this realm, but this realm also helps to "steal" autonomy from the dominion of people's everyday physical realities. As in the example above, capital's dominance in the virtual realm asserts primacy over the live and present interview. The virtual stage is ontologically privileged.

To CAE (and countless others, including "the authorities"), one of the most potentially subversive activities is computer hacking. Jon McKenzie wrote an article about the political potential of computer hacking, drawing a distinction – following Deleuze and Guattari – between major and minor "interhacktivity". His theory is interesting and clearly reveals subversive potential in targeting the virtual realm in a theatrical way. Even in this virtual realm, however, McKenzie seems to understand the category of "political" as positing a counter-reality to the dominant reality. In this sense his theory does not fit with Baudrillard's theory of hyperreality, and seemingly misses the significance of Deleuze and Guattari's *minor*. McKenzie uses the term to indicate a direct opposition such as posting anti-nuclear messages onto the website of India's atomic research centre. But the whole point of "minor", the reason that Deleuze and Guattari saw the need to coin a new term, was to get away from this purely oppositional form to an associational, rhizomatic politics (McKenzie 1999; Deleuze and Guattari 1975/1986). The Critical Art Ensemble seems more radical, in line with Baudrillard's and Deleuze and Guattari's theories, positing a use of hacking

in the virtual realm – combined with performance – to destabilise the reality principle itself.

CAE provides a compelling hypothetical example of a way to challenge dominant power in, and by using, the virtual realm. A female hacker, the Ensemble proposes, begins a performance in a theatre in which an audience watches her access her police identification files and change the gender data to “male”. Then,

Dressed as a man from the waist down, and using “masculine” gesture codes, the performer walks down the street shirtless. S/he is stopped by the police. The appearance of h/er breasts contradicts the desired gender role performance. The police access the electronic information that validates the performer’s claim to be a man. The performer is released, since it is not illegal for a man to go shirtless. This performance could easily have gone the other way with the arrest of the performer, but that is extremely unlikely, because such action would require perception to override the data facts. (1994a, 63-64)

If it is impossible to isolate the process of simulation, to keep it distinct from reality, then it is similarly impossible to isolate, or prove, the real. The above performance seems to demonstrate this inability to prove reality, destroying the certainty even of such a generally stable sign as the female body. I tend to think that the performer *would* be arrested, that the police would trust their perception over the data – or provisionally arrest the performer due to their uncertainty, until stability is restored. Either way the performance reveals how image and reality, data and body, fuse to create the (hyper)reality we experience. The aim is not for the simulation to be unambiguously mistaken for reality – for the police really to believe the performer is a man – but to destabilise reality by the suspended preservation of hyperreality, to sustain the conflict between “image”, the computerised data listing her gender as male, and “reality”, her visible, tangible femininity. As long as the conflict remains unresolved, as long as the police are unsure, the performance remains an active emasculation of reality and the power that fosters it. This example forces a conflict between the unavoidable empirical reality of the woman’s breasts and the virtual network of official data. The audience watching the simulation would experience the susceptibility of dominant reality by witnessing hyperreality – the inability even for police to determine whether “image” or “reality” is real. Both image and reality dissolve into hyperreality. Through such a performance, CAE shows how it would be possible to oppose what it sees as an authoritarian State by revealing the “truth” or existence of hyperreality. This seems to be in line with one of Baudrillard’s

propositions – though one that he perhaps did not intend to be taken literally.

Baudrillard at one stage proposes, or at least ponders, the seemingly impossible. In an age in which simulation is the reigning mode of reality, in which every event is hyperreal, Baudrillard muses on the possibility of subverting power via a simulation:

It would be interesting to see whether the repressive apparatus would not react more violently to a simulated holdup than to a real holdup. Because the latter does nothing but disturb the order of things, the right to property, whereas the former attacks the reality principle itself. Transgression and violence are less serious because they only contest the *distribution* of the real. Simulation is infinitely more dangerous because it always leaves open to supposition that, above and beyond its object, *law and order themselves might be nothing but simulation*. (1981/1994, 20)

The clear assumption of this strategy is that law and order – and dominant power in general – can exist only within an illusion of true and false, the creation of a reality-effect. Any skilful simulation must be responded to by the system of law and order *as if* it were real – and consequently risks *becoming* real in its implications and contributing to the legitimacy of the reality principle. CAE seems to propose that a more self-conscious or acknowledged simulation, a *theatrical* simulation, could possibly be used as a pedagogical tool to reveal that law and order – our dominant reality – is constructed, contingent, and fallible.

The Critical Art Ensemble realises that simulacra have material effects. When Rebecca Schneider asserted that CAE seems to promote real experience against, perhaps, a Baudrillardian simulacra, CAE replied:

Well, here is where Baudrillard is undersold. He's too often misunderstood as claiming that simulacral culture does not have material effects. It's not just a cynical ploy on his part to say that we're lost in the hyperreal. (CAE 2000a, 142)

Schneider reads Baudrillard as accentuating the loss of authenticity, which he does, but not in the nostalgic manner that she implies. She praises CAE, above Baudrillard, for trying to provide an experience of hyperreality. Here, CAE would not be pitting Freire *against* hyperreality but using Freirian pedagogy to reveal the “truth” of hyperreality. CAE apparently agrees that this is what it tries to achieve: “Experiencing the material effects of the real hyperreal as a means to understand its politics in a lived way is at the heart of our performances” (2000a, 142). Schneider's praise seems warranted, but this approach by CAE is not a radical disjuncture from Baudrillard's

theory as she implies. The Ensemble uses Baudrillard's theory to found a pedagogical practice.

Baudrillard conceives of hyperreality as a fusion of image and reality, where image, to him, generally refers to mass media representations. It seems to be perfectly within Baudrillard's thinking to extend the notion of "image" to cover any representation – including digital data realms. Computerised police records or insurance company records are representations – or images – of individuals that, CAE contends, have power over the individuals. If an insurance company "image" calculates someone to be unhealthy, whether valid or not, that image affects the individual's material reality, forcing him to pay more or denying him insurance altogether. The image, in this case, fuses with reality and reinforces the best interests of capital. In fact, a genetic map is similar: it is a representation or image of an individual that can be altered to affect physical reality. CAE tends to focus on these other "images" or representations that often assert primacy over our organic beings. CAE aims for its audiences to experience – or witness firsthand – "the material effects of the real hyperreal" by revealing how these two realms, image and reality, interact.

In a discussion of the role of the virtual both in furthering dominant power and in resistance, CAE muses on the example of a fighter jet simulator as an advocate of the system. The goal of such a simulator "is not to prepare a person for life in the virtual, but to specify, regulate, and habituate he/r role in the material world" (1998a, 24). That is, the simulator is effective – in fact, is properly a simulator – if and only if actions in the virtual world intermingle with the material world. This seems to be a significant reason why a combination of technology and live performance has become standard for CAE projects: using technology can alter the virtual world or at least demystify power's domination of that realm while performance is a paradigm that puts one in physical contact with one's audience and can translate technological work into people's material reality. Hacking alone, such as the hypothetical woman changing her gender data to male, is not yet a "simulation" because it does not impact the material world. But when that virtual change is embodied or contradicted by the actress' performance in the street, confronting the material world, it becomes capable of subverting the very idea of reality by creating and sharing an experience of the hyperreal.

In a couple of respects this performance is reminiscent of the Living Theatre's *Paradise Now* and other '60s performances. Both performances involve public nudity

– which was certainly a controversial element of *Paradise Now*. Even more than that, however, the performances are similar in their apparent aim to destroy the comfortable boundary between art and life. Such similarities are not accidental. In its first book, CAE writes:

[The Living Theatre] collapsed the art and life distinction, which has been of tremendous help by establishing one of the first recombinant stages. After all, only by examining everyday life through the frame of a dramaturgical model can one witness the poverty of this performative matrix. The problem is that effective resistance will not come from the theatre of everyday life alone. Like the stage, the subelectronic – in this case the street, in its traditional architectural and sociological form – will have no effect on the privileged virtual stage. (1994a, 62)

CAE's claim, then, is that disintegrating the art and life distinction is useful but incomplete. Effective resistance must also disrupt the virtual stage – electronic data networks or other images and representations – and put that virtual stage in conflict with material reality.

Despite some surface similarities to the Living Theatre and other '60s theatres, CAE does not simply translate traditional resistant strategies into new realms of capital. Clearly, the pedagogical performances as described above are not intended to raise awareness of class oppression, promote systemic alternatives to capitalism, or push progress in a new direction based on an alternative to the dominant reality. Rather, CAE arguably tries to educate audiences on the elusive nature of contemporary power and the futility of such traditional class-based, direct, and systemic opposition. A more traditional (modernist) political use of new technology has regularly been employed by former CAE member Ricardo Dominguez with his new group, the Electronic Disturbance Theatre (EDT).

Dominguez was a founding member of CAE before leaving the group in 1995 to focus on EDT. EDT facilitates on-line protests: mass actions in cyberspace primarily in support of the Zapatistas in Mexico. Jill Lane claims that EDT “has placed the very notion of ‘embodiment’ under rigorous question, and sought to understand the specific possibilities for constituting *presence* in digital space that is both *collective* and *politicized*” (2003, 131). This method is clearly a translation of traditional mass protest into the realm of cyberspace. CAE's proposed hacking performance is arguably more radical and apt for a post-political age or society: instead of combating a dominant reality by direct opposition and the positing of an alternative reality, CAE's performance seems to reveal – even to those who are trying

to enforce dominant power – that dominant power is fallible.

This approach needs to be discussed in terms of efficacy. As with Rev. Billy's performances, this performance does not seem able to create significant tangible results. CAE might disagree, contending that such a strategy would introduce "inertia" into the system by wasting police officers' time and possibly prompting an expensive investigation. This concept of causing "inertia" – basically anything at all that hinders the smooth flow of capital and capitalist logic – features in one of CAE's later books (2002b). And it appears to be correct: anything that causes inefficiency in some small way does tangibly damage capitalist dominance. It would seem to take an absurd number of such incidents to cause any sort of perceptible impact, however. Rather, once again, the primary effect would be pedagogical. Audiences would experience the apparent truth of hyperreality – the inability even for the avatars of power, police, to discern image from reality. What happens then, when such a gap appears in dominant power, is ambiguous – but seems to allow the possibility for the opening of a political consciousness and acceptance of alternative ideas to the mainstream. I have shown that this second aspect of CAE's work appears to merge, in a seemingly paradoxical way, the radical pedagogical theory of Paulo Freire with Jean Baudrillard's notion of hyperreality. CAE uses a radical pedagogy to provide audiences with an experience of hyperreality that subverts dominant power.

This Freire plus Baudrillard "formula" is not entirely new and shocking. Baz Kershaw's *The Radical in Performance: Between Brecht and Baudrillard* pursues a similar idea, that "the greatest radical turbulence can be found in performance when modernist and post-modernist versions of the world collide" – that radical performance should exist on the "cusp of the paradigm shift" (1999, 7). Though Baudrillard features in Kershaw's subtitle, Kershaw uses his notion of hyperreality primarily to connote a state of great uncertainty regarding political action – even as generative of nihilism (Kershaw 1999, 21). This is not an uncommon reading of Baudrillard, the seeming result of the dark humour and wry wit with which he analyses and describes the exuberant late capitalist society. He is criticised for his "cynical acquiescence" (Norris 1992, 28) or even misunderstood to be an apolitical "postmodernist" – meaning, in this case, one who *revels in* the loss of meaning and reign of surfaces attributed to contemporary Western culture. Kershaw implies that Baudrillard's "nihilism" needs to be tempered by a positive, Brechtian model of political theatre. Due to my very different understanding of Baudrillard, seeing his

“cynicism” rather as a brutally honest pragmatism that necessitates the most radical theories of political action, the conflation of Freire and Baudrillard that I see in CAE’s work is very different to Kershaw’s idea. Rather than invoke Freire (like Kershaw invokes Brecht) as a counterbalance to Baudrillard, CAE seems to apply Freire while fully accepting Baudrillard’s portrait of contemporary society. Theatre can be used to provide audiences with an experience of the hyperreal.

Certainly the two separate trends in CAE’s work seem contradictory. This contradiction needs some explanation. CAE fluctuates between using Freirian pedagogy as a weapon *against* hyperreality and providing a pedagogical experience *of* hyperreality to oppose dominant power. Hyperreality is a state of affairs that renders radical political opposition terribly difficult, since it prevents the potential efficacy of directly oppositional and systemic approaches that rely on positing a reality or truth alternative to the dominant one. Fighting *against* hyperreality, trying to damage that state of affairs, can therefore be an effort to reassert the possibility of a radical political viewpoint. In CAE’s biotech projects, they strive to damage capital’s dominance of the biotech realm by reviving the possibility of informed opposition – and not merely moralistic rejection. But hyperreality, though the logical outcome of capitalist logic, is not identical with dominant power. Dominant power ultimately relies upon establishing a (false) reality-effect and coercing people to accept it. When CAE destabilises this reality-effect by asserting a condition of hyperreality, it damages capitalist dominance. In some remarkable sense, then, CAE’s political theatre seems to be against *both* hyperreality *and* reality (the prevailing reality-effect). Perhaps one could identify a dialectic between Freire and Baudrillard: the antagonism between them is preserved in their synthesis and the outcome is a pedagogy both against the depoliticising mechanisms of hyperreality and using hyperreality against the system.

Texts such as Deleuze and Guattari’s *A Thousand Plateaus* or Baudrillard’s *Simulations* – which CAE’s performance strategy seems to parallel – purport to be *both* pedagogical (the more thoroughly we understand these relations of power, the better we can decode them) *and* interventions that are political acts in themselves or, in Deleuze and Guattari’s terminology, that form a rhizome with the world. The translator’s forward by Brian Massumi says of *A Thousand Plateaus*: “The question is not: is it true? But: does it work? What new thoughts does it make it possible to think? What new emotions does it make it possible to feel? What new sensations and

perceptions does it open in the body” (Massumi 1988, xv)? CAE’s pedagogical performances are possibly similar: they invite new thoughts, sensations, and perceptions, geared towards recovering individual autonomy from the capitalist State – and they are firmly contemporary, focussed against the most recent advances of capitalist power in biotechnology and electronic networks. As Massumi describes Deleuze and Guattari’s text, the efficacy of the text is not in its direct applicability in a fight against an authoritarian power but rather simply in the act of reading – an act that possibly opens new perceptions and makes new experiences possible, thereby expanding one’s political consciousness. The radicality of Deleuze and Guattari’s well-known text is in its form, as suggested by the title *A Thousand Plateaus*, which references the formal layout of the text. Even the important terminology of the book, nomadology and rhizomes, are images or shapes, aesthetic ways of conceiving of dominant power and resistance. Again, CAE’s pedagogical performances are perhaps similar, but extend this approach into action by providing the personal experience in which such political consciousness must be based – or allowing pedagogy to extend beyond experience. In particular, it is the form or aesthetic of CAE’s performances – the consistently ambiguous identity – that forces a radical, political pedagogy. It even seems possible that CAE’s ideas could allow for a political theatre that extends beyond pedagogy actually to disrupt dominant power.

The hypothetical gender-switching example, as already indicated, could be seen as a pedagogical action against the dominant reality-effect in that audiences perceive the contingency and fragility of that reality-effect. But what of the police who may be uncertain whether it is a performance? It seems that this hypothetical example takes on a more directly political and disruptive aspect when viewed from the police’s perspective – more like Baudrillard’s simulated hold-up, which contests the reality principle itself. It may be necessary to distinguish simulation from mere faking: one can, for instance, fake an illness by staying in bed and telling people one is sick; but *simulating* an illness would actually produce in one some of the signs or symptoms of illness (Baudrillard 1981/1994, 3). The performer in CAE’s example does not merely fake being a man, nor does she imitate maleness as a strategy in itself. Rather, she began by “producing” the (electronic) symptom of maleness; therefore, this performance can perhaps be seen as a true Baudrillardian simulation, a fusion (or con-fusion) of image and reality. There seems to be a potential for performance to be more than a pedagogical tool and to participate directly in the

disruption of capitalist power.

CAE draws a distinction between pedagogical and directly political work. They maintain, says Schneider, that “direct political action today necessitates invisibility and non-locatability” (2000, 126). When CAE strives to have direct political – and not only pedagogical – influence, its suggested strategies shun the theatrical in favour of the invisible and arguably criminal. One such example of direct action is the corruption of insurance company data on HIV positive people – not merely teaching or revealing the virtual realm’s capitalistic dominance over our lives, but actively disrupting it. CAE sees such data as contributing to institutionalised discriminatory practices to assure more profit. CAE writes: “This is not a problem of early capital imperialism, but one of late capital information codes. All the picket lines, affinity groups, and drum corps that can be mustered will have little effect in this situation” (1994a, 139-40). Extending beyond pedagogy, this action introduces what CAE calls “inertia” into the system – actually tangibly impeding the spread of capital and capitalist logic. More obviously, perhaps, this would seem to be an action promoting identity politics. But it is directed explicitly against the capitalist profiteering behind such institutionalised discrimination. That is to say, this is a situation in which identity politics and political opposition to capitalism overlap. While it seems true that action in this virtual realm, hacking, is perhaps the most direct way to disrupt the system, it is not theatrical.

Many of CAE’s examples of direct action are focussed against the biotech realm. One of the chapters in their latest book describes what they call “fuzzy biological sabotage” (FBS), actions that blur the line between the legal and illegal in an effort to create inertia. Wanting to avoid the label of terrorism – which CAE sees as necessarily public, aiming to spread fear – CAE concludes that these actions must not be a public process: “CAE requests that those groups and individuals whose goal it is to spectacularize hacking and perform as activist pop stars do the movement(s) a favor and leave this method alone” (2002b, 102). Desiring to remain a moving weapon, CAE stresses that FBS cannot become public or it will be categorised and neutralised. The Ensemble fears, in today’s political climate, that being labelled as terroristic would preclude thought and critical reflection on one’s actions. The alternative, to them, is to become invisible and deny the theatrical.

One example of FBS is the release of mutated fruit flies in and near genetic or nuclear research facilities. As to the ethical concerns, the flies in question are

routinely used in high school biology laboratories in teaching basic genetics, and the mutations are always recessive, so there is no danger of a certain mutation overtaking the general fly population. The desired effect is simply to create inertia in the system. Anything that slows down, or calls into question, the spread of capitalism is useful:

A paranoid work force is an inefficient work force. This approach thus creates inertia in the system. In the best-case scenario, an investigation into the origins of the flies would be launched, which would burn more cash and waste even more employee time. In the worst-case scenario, the prankster would provide a topic of conversation at breaktime. (CAE 2002b, 104)

The aim is to achieve any effect whatsoever that palpably damages the efficiency and inevitability of capital.

CAE repeatedly argues that its fuzzy biological sabotage and electronic civil disobedience are neither criminal nor terroristic.² This stringent denial leads the Ensemble to reject the theatrical as well. Could it be concluded from this that political theatre *is* in fact – or could be – a form of terrorism? There are many similarities to terrorism in terms of production, intent, and reception – as I will explore in Chapter Six. Both would rehearse in private, reliant upon secrecy; both intend to damage or destabilise the dominant system in some way; and both are liable to be seen as futile or even insane: think of how people would respond to CAE’s hypothetical topless woman claiming to be a man! In fact, CAE member Steve Kurtz was arrested under suspicion of bioterrorism when police searched his house after the unexpected (natural) death of his wife – and found materials for a forthcoming CAE project (Kosal 2004). In any case it seems that political theatre of this nature can have undesirable results – even strengthening the capitalist power it seeks to undermine.

Judith and Joseph Agassi point out that the pros and cons of “autonomy” have long been debated. The primary concern, of philosophers at least, has been whether individual autonomy would in fact engender a preferable society: “The chief classical problem regarding autonomy is, will the autonomous not use his freedom to choose evil” (1985, 10)? Kant claimed that autonomy imposes goodness, but the very notion of such an imposition seems to restrain the freedom of the autonomous individual – an issue that Kant, to many, struggled to resolve. Jean-Paul Sartre, say the Agassis, concedes that autonomous individuals are capable of evil, but nevertheless calls an autonomous evildoer a saint, because of his accepting the burden of autonomy. The

² See especially CAE (2001a, Chapter Two) and (2002b, Chapter Five).

Critical Art Ensemble, however, seems to align more with Walter Kaufmann, who eschews this debate altogether. Kaufmann claims that nobody knows what is the right thing to do, and so even the attempt to do good must presuppose autonomy (Agassi and Agassi 1985, 10). There is no certainty that this political theatre succeeds in damaging the apparent inevitability of capitalist logic, but the alternative seems to be acquiescence.

Chapter Five

The Last Days of Mankind

A singular aesthetic experience:

Destabilising the system through absolute otherness

I introduced the Free Theatre production of *The Last Days of Mankind* in Chapter One, where I maintained that the aesthetic experience of *Last Days* provoked my interest in political theatre.¹ I now wish to reflect more fully on that aesthetic experience. Using Jean Baudrillard's notion of *singularity*, I will demonstrate that *Last Days* may have successfully undermined capitalist logic and power via a live theatre action that strove for autonomy from aesthetic and functional expectations – expectations that are manifestations of capitalist logic. To make this argument, I will describe the performance by mixing analyses of the event with observed and overheard audience responses in an effort to speculate how this performance assaulted its target audiences as they moved through the streets and public spaces of Christchurch. Through its radical autonomy, *Last Days* also remained a moving target against reprisals – eluding attempts to categorise or neutralise it.

Interestingly, the Critical Art Ensemble has a connection to *The Last Days of Mankind* that is particularly worth exploring: the Free Theatre production of *Last Days* seems to have attained autonomy – as CAE seeks to do via its performances – and the limitation CAE identifies with the play was ostensibly surmounted by the Free Theatre production. One of the Critical Art Ensemble's essays, published in *TDR* (2000c) and later appearing as the fifth chapter of its book *Digital Resistance* (2001), begins with an analysis of how what CAE calls a *digital* model has recently come to dominate the *analogue* model in nearly all realms of society. The digital, to CAE, does not refer exclusively to computerised and electronic gadgetry that relies upon digital technology but rather to a process and a way of thinking. The digital, taken literally, converts the analogue – a voice speaking into a telephone, say – into numeric code, which can then be perfectly copied, transmitted, and so on: the very concept of an original becomes obsolete. This “digital” way of thinking, however, applies across

¹ The production I was involved in – in association with the Free Theatre, and directed by Peter Falkenberg – culminated in a performance from 9 to 11 November 2000, but comprised many pre-performances throughout the preceding two months.

all realms of society – and is a very close parallel to Baudrillard’s idea of simulation as the reigning mode of contemporary society.

CAE provides a brief history of the digital. Henry Ford, the group claims, perhaps initiated the digital economy with the notion of an assembly line, demolishing the difference between originals and copies. Today this digital model dominates the market and people have come to expect identical commodities. The digital model came to dominate science, CAE says, with the 1953 discovery that the structure of DNA is digital: information is stored in the human body in a base four format through patterns of four different amino acids. All plants and animals, that is, are essentially products of numeric code and therefore perfectly reproducible. CAE sees Marcel Duchamp as the initiator of digital aesthetics, but claims that he was ahead of his time. It was not until Andy Warhol and others reintroduced the idea of the digital that it was widely accepted as having aesthetic value. Warhol mass produced images from popular culture as art, challenging the concept of originality.

Walter Benjamin plainly observed a similar shift already in 1936, as evidenced by his essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”. Benjamin argued, perhaps desperately, that the decline of the cult value of original artworks would, particularly in the case of cinema, shift interest onto the artworks’ political relevance. In fact, as Baudrillard’s, Jameson’s, and CAE’s theories indicate, it seems that the opposite has happened. The dominance of digital logic entails – as with Jameson’s theory of pastiche or Baudrillard’s simulation – that not only art but also politics itself has lost ties with reality. The truth, or original, of any social or political event is inaccessible, rendering conventional notions of political action obsolete. Though Benjamin’s main thesis may have been disproved by history, on one point he seems to remain correct: the logical result of Fascism, he argued, is the introduction of aesthetics into political life (1936/1970, 241). In our society, aesthetics arguably dominates political life – which could be both a cause and a symptom of what CAE, Baudrillard, and others view as an increasingly authoritarian or quasi-fascist society.

Rather than *deny* this shift to digital logic and preserve or try to recover the ideal of the individual artistic genius and original artworks, CAE claims that the digital must become a site of resistance. Partly, CAE intends this literally, seeing a need to target virtual networks of digital data – but digital logic in all its forms needs

to feed into strategies of opposition. Concerning the specific realm of theatre, the Ensemble wrote in its “history” of the digital:

Theatre, of course, has its visionary too. Karl Kraus (1874-1936) brought the digital model of theatre to the attention of the public. He understood that the implosion of fiction and nonfiction into hyperreality could be used for purposes other than perpetuating dominant ideology. He also understood plagiarism as a method for cultural production. These notions came together in Kraus’s critique of the European war machine in *The Last Days of Mankind* (1918/19).

Unfortunately, Kraus was unable to conceive of a way to stage the work. He could not think of a way to release it from hyperreality and loop it back into the physical world. Part of the problem was that *Last Days* relied too heavily on narrative structure, but most of the problem was that no looping mechanism had been constructed yet. To this day the construction of this loop is an ongoing and increasingly urgent process, given pancapital’s rapid deployment of the digital for its own perpetuation and profit. (CAE 2000c, 156)

CAE recognises Kraus’ play as perhaps the first attempt to use digital logic in the theatre, to use hyperreality as a strategy to disrupt dominant power. As with CAE’s hypothetical gender switching example, such a strategy has no impact until it encounters the material world in the body of the performer. CAE therefore criticises Kraus for writing an unrealisable text, a play that cannot reasonably enter material reality. It is generally held that the work is meant to be read – to be staged in the imagination of the reader. In this chapter I will explore the Free Theatre production of *Last Days* as an attempt to realise this play in the physical world.

Kraus’ play is primarily seen as a denunciation of war via a satire of Austrian society during World War I. The text comprises mostly “found” material: conversations that Kraus overheard on the streets and in cafes, and newspaper stories about the war. Kraus seems to have presaged Baudrillard with his view of the press (media) as “the instrument of life’s trivialization” (Ungar 1974, xiii). He considered the use of quotation as a devastating means of exposing the poverty of journalism. Significantly, Kraus blamed man for destroying imagination, arguing that, in a time in which things happen that could not be imagined, that which no longer can be imagined *must* happen (Ungar 1974, xvii). As the work proceeds, it expands from satire to an apocalyptic warning of a world-engulfing disaster. Certainly this was meant literally in terms of war, but also with respect to what Kraus saw as society’s spiritual and moral despair.

The limitation of the play, says CAE, is that it does not complete what the Ensemble calls its “feedback loop”. Kraus took material from everyday life and transformed it for the stage (or page), but that is where it remained. Applying CAE’s ideas, Kraus’ play would have been more efficacious if it could have fed back into, and transformed, material reality:

The loop begins with a real event that is abstracted into language (Kraus generally used newspapers and journals as a found resource for the latter portion of the loop). He would then recombine the articles into new texts; however, he was unable to complete the loop because he could not transform these texts back into a concrete social form. His only option was a traditional staging of his work, which would have taken approximately 10 evenings (assuming it could be staged at all). The alien nature of his “play” was noticed by Kraus when he stated in the book’s preface that the text was “intended for theater on Mars.” (CAE 2000c, 166)

Doing a quick Internet search one can find several recent productions of *Last Days*, all of which performed highly abridged versions of the text (the longest show being four hours) in a traditional theatre. Most productions, that is, still have not discovered a way – or more likely did not attempt – to loop the text back into the physical world.

The Free Theatre production of *Last Days* deviated almost completely from Kraus’ precise text, relinquishing narrative structure and instead devising a performance that preserved his themes and radical aims – and explicitly pushed them into everyday material reality via a highly unconventional staging. This performance, like Kraus’ text, consisted primarily of quotations – linguistically, through spoken dialogue and the scattering of leaflets, and aesthetically, through the incorporation of forms such as video games, children’s toys, tourist attractions, sporting events, and more. *Last Days* “quoted” the mainstream aestheticisation of war, thereby perhaps exposing it – as Kraus’ text does. Arguably, this performance was an attempt to make real that which can no longer be imagined – or an apocalyptic warning of the spiritual and moral despair wrought by a society unable to imagine. Baudrillard’s theory of singularity is useful, as it appears to seek a similar goal – the achievement of absolute otherness or originality in a society of digital logic.

The performance began with street theatre performances we called “Slow Walking” that happened roughly three days a week, for one to two hours a day, for more than two months. The performance culminated in a militaristic theatrical campaign through the streets of Christchurch that continued from midday to midnight for three consecutive days. Anyone seeing any portion of the production would

immediately recognise it as constructed and artificial behaviour – there is no way it could have been confused with everyday life – and yet people conceivably struggled to make immediate sense of it as theatre or performance, or looked away. It was clearly theatre, and yet inconceivable or illogical.

In this chapter, I will show that this production of *Last Days* seems in large part to have achieved autonomy from capitalist logic. By this I mean not merely that *Last Days* employed a distinctive formal and aesthetic approach, but that it was *functionally* autonomous. The performance had no recognisable clear purpose, was not apparently directed at audiences, plainly did not fulfil a capitalistic function, and flaunted this otherness – via a theatrical action – in such a way as to challenge dominant logic. This performance arguably actualised the potential CAE identified in Kraus’ work through similarities to Baudrillard’s concept of a *singularity*.

Baudrillard’s texts problematise the certainty of any political action in an age of hyperreality. But he also gives occasional hints and propositions of how to oppose this state of affairs. In recent years the term *singularity* has entered his lexicon, denoting an idea, event, or action that does not try to negate or criticise dominant power directly but rather exists independently of it in its own separate logical universe. Most or all of his earlier propositions for how to oppose capital’s dominance seem to fit in this recent category. Baudrillard had previously sought an “uncodeable absolute difference”, for instance, which seems to connote the same concept (1976/1993, 80).

This is of course a difficult objective: somehow to circumvent or transcend capitalist logic not in order to critique it but to destabilise it via absolute otherness. Baudrillard dismisses the value of countering one system with another – as discussed in the previous chapter – arguing that the system seems to have absorbed all negativity. This dismissal shatters any traditional concept of political intervention, through art, theatre, theory, or anything else. Yet Baudrillard, like Jameson, still tries to theorise strategies of opposition:

So there doesn’t seem to be anything that can come into play except a singularity, which doesn’t resist, but constitutes itself as another universe with another set of rules, which may conceivably get exterminated, but which, at a particular moment, represents an insuperable obstacle for the system itself. But this isn’t a head-on resistance. That doesn’t seem possible any more. (2001/2004, 71)

Rather than offer a specific replacement for consumer capitalism or condemnation of its particular features, then, Baudrillard recommends this notion of a *singularity* – an event or action that abides by a different set of rules to those prevailing and thereby defies dominant power without specifying an alternative. *Last Days* was arguably just such an event, achieving a state of “absolute otherness” from any existing interpretive or functional criteria.

The Slow Walking went as follows: at various days and times between four and 15 members of the Free Theatre group would dress in black business suits, ties, and black shoes, and hide on their person a plain white mask that had been made from a mould of the actor’s own face. The masks had eyeholes and nostril holes but a sealed mouth. Actors would separately make their way to a prearranged location – a parking garage or dark alley – where they would don their masks and begin walking a set route to another garage or alley where they would secretly remove their masks and scatter in separate directions. The walking was very slow and stylised. A six-block walk would endure for about 60 minutes. Only the lower body was meant to move, with the upper body coasting on top as if floating; eyes were wide open, unblinking, and focussed straight ahead; arms were unmoving, with hands half-clenched at the waist; and all turns were made at 90 degree angles. No talking was permitted. If people in the streets addressed us or asked questions, we were allowed to stop and stare at them but not respond in any other way.

In contemporary society, on the streets of Christchurch, walking has arguably become a capitalistic practice. People walk, often quickly, in the service or pursuit of capital: hurrying to jobs to earn money or to stores to spend money. Walking slowly for no obvious purpose was absurd in terms of the normal behaviour – yet had the possibility of being interpreted as natural or even beautiful in contrast to the fast-moving general public: making walking in itself a consequential act perhaps exposes the absurdity of this norm. Baudrillard describes a singularity as “another universe with another set of rules”, which indeed the Slow Walking seemed to be – introducing a contrasting pace as if in another world with different laws of gravity, as though Kraus’ “theatre on Mars” arrived on Earth. Capitalist power is not generally apparent on the streets of Christchurch: this theatre action arguably caused capitalism to move and materialise where it was otherwise invisible.

Reactions to this Slow Walking were many and varied. Interestingly, the vast majority of people ignored it – or tried to ignore it – as much as possible. Many

people seemed not even to look or notice, and many more would glance at us briefly and continue as if they had not seen us. Perhaps only one or two percent of the people we encountered in the streets would engage with the performance in some way, even if just to stop and watch for a few minutes. At the time, I often assumed that people were unsettled by the strangeness of the event and tried to ignore or avoid it – which I took to be a sign of its success. This judgment may have been unwarranted, however. I personally tend to avoid, when walking around town, anyone who I fear might engage me or draw attention to me: salesmen, drunks, activists, and even some street performers. I avoid people that may have ideas to share or objects to sell. On some level, then, avoidance (for me) indicates a desire not to be disrupted. But my act of avoidance does not indicate that the thing being avoided was in any way efficacious. If I avoid the animal rights activists circulating a petition in favour of free-range chickens, it may only serve to strengthen my resolve that the issue is of no concern.

Of those who stopped to watch the Slow Walking, however, the desire to interpret or ascribe meaning to the event seemed great. While walking, we often overheard observers pondering the meaning of the theatrical action. It seems that the longer people watched the Slow Walking, the harder it became to interpret. Busking of various sorts – performing on the streets for donations – is common in Christchurch and would probably be many people's first notion of what we were doing. This interpretation, if audiences stopped to watch, would quickly be rejected: the Slow Walking did not strive to be entertaining, was not apparently directed at an audience, and there was no mechanism for payment. The next notion would perhaps be to interpret the Slow Walking as some other type of theatre or performance. Observers not infrequently supposed that we were actors, but that interpretation was always insufficient, never explaining *why* we were walking in this stylised way. There was no advertising, no accompanying message, and no apparent purpose. Hypotheses the actors overheard would often get steadily more elaborate as people watched and discussed the performance with their friends. Someone supposed we were drama students doing an exercise to build discipline and confidence. Someone guessed that we were some sort of cult or religious fanatics. Someone theorised that we were advertising for a new menswear store. Someone even thought we were a sign of the apocalypse and was visibly agitated. But no interpretation was ever confirmed or ever seemed fully to satisfy an observer's curiosity. Observers would occasionally

speculate what we were doing or why, then watch for a few minutes, change their minds, and make a different guess. Few if any ever came to a conclusive decision.

For those who stopped to observe for any length of time, the experience seemed to be an unsettling one. People's inability satisfyingly to rationalise the action suggests that the action may have been a *singularity*. Slow Walking literally adhered to its own set of rules that was aesthetically and functionally autonomous from capitalist logic. Even so, this autonomy did not necessarily entail an interpretation of the event that countered capitalist logic. The proposal that we might be advertising suits was sincere, and sparked a conversation between two people about the marketing approach – and why there would have been women in men's suits as well. Even the theory that we were actors doing an exercise to build confidence is a capitalistic idea – that we were training to improve our marketable skills to become “successful” (paid) actors. Even an autonomous production such as this can be interpreted in such a way that it not only “fails” to undermine capitalist logic but actually extends capitalist logic into realms in which it did not previously exist. The capitalist mainstream is constantly moving and expanding. While certainly ambiguous, the uncertainty of the Slow Walking seemed to overwhelm most attempts to categorise the action.

Think of Baudrillard's simulated hold-up, mentioned in the previous chapter. Perhaps this could be seen as a strategy to achieve a singularity – an event that *cannot* be explained by the dominant logic of the system. For of course, how could the system understand a simulated robbery? A real robbery makes sense in terms of the capitalist system's logic – a risk taken in order to get more capital – and is punished as such. One could imagine, following Baudrillard, a more severe punishment for a simulated robbery: perhaps imprisonment for necessitating the mobilisation of police “for nothing” This is, in fact, a crime – known as “creating a false public emergency” – which the Critical Art Ensemble refers to as part of authoritarian power's tactic to suppress opposition:

Laws against ‘crimes,’ such as creating a false public emergency, are regularly used...by authoritarian agencies. These laws are designed specifically to make it easier to arrest political dissidents and to stifle determined attempts at open discourse. They are also a way of re-presenting ethical political protest as terrorist action, and are one of the state's best sleight-of-hand tricks. (CAE 2001, 112)

The simulation forces either a completely different logic to explain it, or the reassertion of traditional logic in a highly repressive and contradictory form, such as

imprisonment for a simulation – and once again indicates similarities between terrorism and political theatre, to be explored in Chapter Six.

The simulation is not *un*-interpretable but rather, as Baudrillard says in another context, “the interpretations are multiple and inexhaustible” (2001/2004, 29). This statement seems to be true of the Slow Walking as well. Our identities were unknown and difficult to fathom, but even more significant was the uncertainty regarding the *purpose* of our actions. Even if it had been discovered that we were actors, the rationale or logic of the performance would not have been apparent. No interpretation could be fully satisfying, because the “actual” truth of the situation – that we were voluntarily spending a hundred hours or more doing such Slow Walking – was inconceivable to most people and in terms of capitalist logic.

Those who engaged with the Slow Walking often ended up asking for – or demanding – an explanation of what we were doing. When we refused to reply, ignoring them and continuing our stylised walk, some people would get angry and stand in our way, or yell at us and threaten us. One evening walk was marked by several masked actors getting beer poured on their heads by patrons of a nearby pub. Several times a person or group would follow us for a long time, all the way to our arranged finishing point, in an effort to discover the truth of what we were doing. We would not complete the walk and remove our masks until everybody had made it to the finishing point and no observers were around. Sometimes this meant changing our prearranged route or walking for an extra hour until somebody who was following us finally gave up. Only once did somebody persist in following us, blocking our way for so long that we all unmasked in an alley with him present. But we offered no explanation, and he refrained from following any of us once we were unmasked.

These reactions and this persistence in demanding an explanation suggest that – for the relative few who engaged with the performance, anyway – the inability satisfyingly to explain this performance really did disrupt or destabilise these people’s realities on some level. In searching for some explanation for this spectacle that made no sense in terms of capitalist logic, people were implicitly (if not explicitly) questioning that logic or opening themselves up to expanded ideas of “sense”. Most people, that is, could not explain the experience because their understanding of the world is limited to capitalist logic. That is, the arguably post-political age and inability to imagine alternative social structures is what makes this act inconceivable

– and the inconceivability is therefore a challenge to the post-political age that may in some small way conjure up alternatives.

Kraus mourned the lack of imagination in his society. Heiner Müller once criticised the film *Fantasia* (Algar et al. 1940), a Disney production, for filling the imagination with clichés and thereby preventing *experiences*. He argued: “The political task of art today is the mobilization of imagination” (Müller 1984, 138). Imagination is seen as the key to experience, which itself is seen as a political goal. Today, creativity – the ability to use the imagination – has been channelled into “the creative industries”. (In applying for New Zealand residency, I receive “bonus points” on my application if I have a full-time job offer in this “creative industry” because it is an expanding field.) Creativity is arguably most prominent today in the realm of advertising, devising new and increasingly clever ways of selling products. That is, imagination is restricted to the dominion of capitalist logic. Kraus and others see the need to recapture a faculty of imagination outside of the dominant domain. Before the *Last Days* performance, the director met with the Arts Editor of the local paper, *The Press*, to explain the production. The intention was not to advertise or “sell” the performance by an article or notice in the paper of the upcoming production – but rather to have it reported on as an action or event that took place. The Arts Editor was apparently completely unable to understand why someone would not want to advertise a performance in advance: the Arts, ostensibly, are comprehensible only as capitalistic processes. The inconceivability of *Last Days* could be seen in this regard as expanding and enacting the imagination – outside the realm of advertising – as a political act.

Perhaps a few people eventually arrived at the opinion that the Slow Walking was an end in itself, that it was done “just because”, or was actually enjoyable and satisfying – but nobody *voiced* such complete acceptance. This lack of general approval is a sign of radicalism. If our action had been widely and immediately accepted as fulfilling in its own right, then it would not have provoked a crisis in people’s realities. It would not have been political, for the political is divisive. This aesthetic experience forced a split between those relative few who found it acceptable or understandable within their view of the world and the majority that found it baffling.

There seem to be surface similarities between this Slow Walking and the short-lived phenomenon of “flashmobbing”. Flashmobs involve a bunch of people

who sign up to an online or text messaging community. On very short notice, “mobbers” will be e-mailed or otherwise provided with instructions of a “nonsensical” series of actions to perform at a designated place and time. The first such (recorded) mob in the UK involved the following instructions:

Be at the Sofas UK shop by 6.30 pm precisely. At 6.33pm text a friend with the message ‘call me.’ When they call, tell them you are at the Flash Mob No1 in London. Look at a sofa, view it with the reverence and awe that one should have for soft furniture and speak the words ‘Oh wow, what a sofa.’ (BBC 2003)

A large group of people all performing this seemingly arbitrary and illogical act at the same time may seem to be akin to a singularity. However, even this bizarre aesthetic phenomenon is *functionally* understandable: there is a common recognition that flashmobs are meant to be *fun* to participate in. Flashmobs, though quirky, are perfectly explicable as a form of exclusive leisure or amusement. Those “elite” who can afford and understand the technology are able to participate in such frivolous fun.

The distinction between flashmobs and Slow Walking might indicate a few of the traits of *Last Days* that contribute to its inexplicability. Slow Walking was clearly not perceived as a leisure activity, otherwise it would seemingly have been perfectly explainable. Presumably the strict form, discipline, and long duration of the Slow Walking make it seem tedious to do. Where flashmobs have a very short duration and instant gratification, the Slow Walking clearly involves a much more dedicated and long-term commitment. Where flashmobs seem inane, Slow Walking seems serious, intense, and purposeful – although that purpose is not apparent.

Once again it seems pertinent to discuss the Wooster Group – as emblematic of one strand of postmodern political theatre – in order adequately to distinguish the present theory from the Wooster Group’s politics. Elizabeth LeCompte, the director of the Wooster Group, applauded fellow theatre-maker Robert Wilson’s declaration that art should have no connection whatsoever with politics (Savran 1986, 152) – which could be seen as an argument in favour of autonomy, like Baudrillard’s singularity. A major difference from the theory of singularity is that the theatre of Robert Wilson and the Wooster Group has become an exclusive commodity. Baudrillard’s concept of singularity entails not just having a unique or hard-to-interpret aesthetic practice, but defying dominant logic – late capitalist logic – altogether. It seems that being a popular commodity, regardless of one’s aesthetic practices, renders a performance *functionally* explicable in terms of existing capitalist

logic. If it frustrates aesthetic expectations, it might be judged as a “bad” commodity, as not fulfilling its end of the exchange, but it is still framed by the logic of a transaction. I do not mean by this to imply that all compensated theatre – theatre that charges audiences – is necessarily politically worthless. But if the argument for its political, oppositional worth is that it is autonomous from politics, then being a high-end commodity would seem to negate that merit.

Last Days, for me – and perhaps for an audience – really eluded “sense”. Had I been doing it for pay, and had audiences paid to see it, then it would not have been challenging in the same way. For me, it would have been employment; for audiences, it would have been entertainment. Granted, it might have been strange work or been poor, unsuccessful, or incomprehensible entertainment, but it would nevertheless have been shadowed by the logic of exchange.

It is interesting, though not necessarily surprising, that nobody (to my knowledge) speculated that the Slow Walking was intended as political theatre or a political protest of some sort. Our wearing of business suits could conceivably have prompted interpretations of the Slow Walking as some sort of parody or critique of big business. The slowness could easily have been interpreted as a criticism of the constant rush of capitalist society. But neither this nor any other political interpretation ever came to light. This widespread “failure” to interpret the political act, as with *Christmas Shopping*’s giving, may be a sign of its success. In fact, widespread “failure” to be interpreted successfully may be a condition of singularities: in the context of the shopping mall, *giving* became a singular act and therefore uninterpretable. If, as Baudrillard suggests, “political” has become the norm, then being classified as political – like the Wooster Group – may be a sign of commodification. This Slow Walking portion of *Last Days*, it seems, was received as a largely uninterpretable aesthetic experience. It looks as if an aesthetic event, unrecognisable as political theatre, may be more effective at provoking fundamental crises than an overt political protest or performance – for spectators as well as actors. In other words, radical political theatre may not even be recognised as such.

This paradox is not as counterintuitive as it may initially seem, and has even entered pop culture consciousness. Recent German film *The Edukators* (Weingartner 2004), one of the hits of the 2005 New Zealand International Film Festival, echoes this theory. The film follows three rebellious youth who wish to oppose the system of capitalist democracy but have great difficulty deciding what action they could take to

have a disruptive impact. Their primary strategy is to break into rich people's homes and rearrange their possessions *without stealing anything*. Implicit in this tactic is an understanding that such an inexplicable act – risking imprisonment for no apparent gain, to perform a strange and purposeless aesthetic act – would be far more unsettling than a conventional burglary, which is plainly understandable in capitalist terms.

An act that makes no sense in terms of capitalist logic might be *singular*. A singularity might move beyond pedagogy. It is not, or not merely, a way to “teach” people of – or help them to realise – the possibility of political alternatives or their subservience to capital. Rather a singularity seems to seek a shock effect, breaching the apparent inescapability of capitalist logic, to uncertain ends. Though Baudrillard gives many examples of singularities in his books – languages, cultures, and more – the simple *existence* of a singularity seems insufficient in terms of efficacy. Baudrillard clearly wishes to discover and theorise ways to rupture the seeming inevitability of consumer capitalism. To destabilise the dominant system, the aim of the singularity must be to *spread* the shock effect of its irreducibility. For this perhaps nothing is superior to a theatrical spectacle. Baudrillard discusses the September 11 attacks as a singularity that succeeded in spreading its shock effect because it was such a highly visible or even unavoidable spectacle – as will be explored more fully in the subsequent chapter.

By comparison to the 9/11 attacks, the Slow Walking is so minimal that one doubts its impact as a singularity. Only a tiny portion of the public engaged with, and was consequently affected by, the performance. The Slow Walking could potentially have been more disruptive if it was more visible – if we did it more often, or with a larger group of people. If we could have walked with such a frequency that nearly everybody who lived and worked in the central city had seen us several times, then we could potentially have (literally) had the whole city pondering explanations for the event, opening themselves to new ideas, like a miniature September 11 attack. Unlike the WTC attacks, the Slow Walking in no way *necessitates* an explanation. The vast majority of people seemed content to ignore our event while millions of people were unable to ignore the WTC attacks. However, the more visible and spectacular the event is, the more likely it is to be subject to mass media treatment and dominant reinscription. This balance between visibility and autonomy is difficult to gauge.

The Slow Walking, in several regards, applied a strategy of “moving targets” both to maintain autonomy and to increase its visibility. Obviously the performance itself moved through the city, changing routes day by day, targeting different parts of downtown. Sometimes it targeted the early morning crowd, sometimes those on lunch breaks, sometimes late-night partiers on the weekend. In addition, the technique of the walking evolved or moved. Over the course of the two months the Slow Walking was performed, new rules or principles were steadily introduced – all of which were associated with themes of *The Last Days of Mankind*. The actors all watched footage of shell shocked individuals returned home from World War I, and trained their bodies to dissociate – for the movement of one limb, say, to appear independent from that of the rest of the body. After several weeks an adaptation was added: during the course of a one to two hour walk, each actor would have one short spasm in which a limb or head would flail uncontrollably while the rest of the body maintained the discipline of the stylised Slow Walking movement. Gradually a few other movements were introduced: actors would step as high as they could, lift their eyes and arms to the sky as if expecting to be lifted away (trying to return to Mars, perhaps), and hold the position for as long as they could before falling back and resuming their walk. Or actors would fall forward, catch themselves with their hands, and place an ear down to the ground as though listening intently. These additions were made in slow stages. A new movement would be introduced perhaps once a fortnight, and always in a controlled and deliberate fashion.

The infrequency of the additional movements was key: spectators could watch for a few minutes and, just as they were coming to a point of acceptance or an understanding of our “rules”, those rules would apparently be broken by the uncontrolled thrashing of a single limb. This effect holds true for first-time observers, but would presumably have a greater impact if the same observers were repeatedly encountering the Slow Walking. The adaptations would possibly keep repeat audiences surprised and interested, and would also intimate that there was a deeper logic or intent behind the Slow Walking, that it was building towards some purpose. These modifications, that is, apparently helped the walkers themselves to remain moving targets, unable to be categorised or “captured” by the depoliticising mechanisms of capitalist logic.

One particular adaptation targeted those numerous spectators, mentioned above, who sought to ignore or avoid the performance. Before some of the walks, a

“leader” would be designated to initiate this adaptation. Once during the walk, the leader would pick a spectator, stop, stare, and menacingly point at him. At that signal, the other actors – often spread across an entire city block – would stop and point as well. The spectator, possibly wishing to avoid drawing attention to himself, hereby became the object of everyone’s attention. As this spectator moved, the pointing would follow him, forcing an engagement – on some level – with the performance. The adaptations, that is, also helped the theatre to target those audiences that would not otherwise have engaged with the performance.

Overall, the Slow Walking seems to have been an attempt to achieve autonomy, both aesthetic and functional, through a theatre action that employed a strategy of “moving targets”. As suggested above, it is possible that a purely aesthetic act such as this could have the opposite to the intended effects, actually spreading the domain of capitalist logic. This uncertainty is a necessary danger, according to Baudrillard. Intended as a radical *act*, a singularity nevertheless seems uncontrollable. Baudrillard writes:

These singularities are neither negative nor positive. They are not an alternative to the global order. They are on a different scale. No longer subject to value judgements, they can be either the best or the worst. The one absolute benefit they provide is to break the shackles of totality... They are the despair of every single-minded and dominating thought. However, they are not a single-minded counter-thought either. They invent their own rules of the game, and their most likely fate is the fate of heresies: that is, to be eradicated by global orthodoxy. (2003, 26-27)

Baudrillard is not overly hopeful that a singularity, such as this Slow Walking, would tangibly damage the capitalist system. But it would, at least temporarily, break the “shackles of totality”, the seeming inevitability of dominant logic – even if it soon gets neutralised by orthodoxy. In that interim period, audiences could presumably be moved to embrace other ways of thinking that may, in Kershaw’s words, contribute to the “evolution of wider social and political realities” (1992, 1).

The second phase of the performance was the military campaign, already mentioned in Chapter One. Though New Zealand is far from being a military power, World War I was significant in the progression of New Zealand from identifying as a British colony to the development of a national identity. The campaign was timed to coincide with Armistice Day, the celebration of the end of the Great War. An exhaustive analysis of the three-day campaign is nearly impossible. It comprised numerous simultaneous actions, improvisations, adjustments for the weather and other

environmental conditions, alterations because of equipment failures, and so on. It was, in that sense, akin to a military campaign or battle, always in flux. Theatre became a moving weapon to tackle the moving targets of capital. I will try to give a sense of the impression the event may have had – the *experience* it created for audiences – and provide analysis of a few major components. The bulk of the performers wore full military fatigues, with white acrylic paint coating their hair and white powdered faces. There was an obvious hierarchy of 14 “grunt” soldiers and two officers who barked commands. The whole event had the style of a military manoeuvre, but with more than a few oddities. The troops marched in procession to a prominent Christchurch location – Cathedral Square, the Bridge of Remembrance, the Arts Centre – rolling with us a large cannon-like contraption. At the chosen location, the troops met up with two truckloads of gear for the campaign and, upon the officers’ orders, began constructing an encampment – building tents and makeshift “stages” in a rectangular configuration thereby designating a performance area. Everything was done in an efficient militaristic manner, the result of two months of intensive physical and mental training. Yet it was very clearly some sort of performance and not a genuine military operation.

Though it was an imitation or representation, it was not a parody. As with the Living Theatre’s *The Brig*, the hierarchy was real as well as played (Tytell 1995, 180). Officers could inflict genuine punishment – either physical, forcing a soldier to do press ups, say, or psychological, for instance obliging one soldier to stand alone and sing a song solo while the others watched and laughed. As with *Christmas Shopping*, it seems that the *action* of the theatre lifted it out of parody and into a different realm. Perhaps this phase of the performance could be seen, in Baudrillard’s terms, as achieving singularity via simulation.

Each tent or zone in the encampment can be seen as its own interpretation of *The Last Days of Mankind*. Kraus criticised the press for reducing war to entertainment and mounted a critique via quotation. This performance similarly “quoted” society to present war as entertainment. One station contained lists of names of New Zealanders killed in wars, shell shock and other gruesome footage playing on small monitors, and photos from *Last Days* training and Slow Walking escapades. No explanation was provided, but this juxtaposition seemed to implicate *Last Days* itself as turning war into a form of entertainment, cheapening the severity of shell shock by rendering it aesthetic.

Another tent was split into two and hidden by a curtain. One at a time, audiences could enter one side of the tent, which contained dismembered plaster limbs spouting blood. A digital photo of their reaction was snapped and, when they entered the other side of the tent, they could view their reaction – aestheticising even the response to gore.

One tent contained a salesman peddling war figurines – plastic soldiers, tanks, and guns – chattering about the thrills of staging one’s own fierce battles and eliminating entire races. This was a form of quotation, referencing television advertisements common during children’s cartoons, trying to sell them the latest war games. The salesman was also watching, and selling, a video of buxom girls in bikinis firing automatic weapons. This video was “found” material, like that which Kraus used, that associates guns and war with the commodification of sex. Another station comprised a life-size painting of a dead soldier with the head cut out so that people could stick their faces through and get a Polaroid of themselves as dead soldiers. Using this common gimmick of tourist attractions, both war and the *Last Days* performance itself became such attractions.

One station was a live-action fighting game in which audience members pressed buttons to dictate the movements of two live actors beating each other up in the manner of a popular variety of video game. In fact, I built the console, putting my electrical engineering skills to use. The actors in this station each embodied a fantastical, exotic, or sexy character – as in the video games of this ilk – creating their own styles of fighting, catch phrases, and so on. A filmmaker created accompanying video “backdrops” to authenticate the aesthetic. The live actors simulated the style of the game with as much precision as possible. This live-action fighting station actualised the “virtual” – the pushing of electronic buttons controlled real people’s movements, physical contact, and occasionally pain.

These different “playstations” all treated war as an aesthetic category and were neither obviously satiric nor explicitly political. Audiences were able and encouraged to take pleasure in the different events. And quite a few did, genuinely getting excited about the fighting game or the Polaroid photo. In retrospect, it seems that much of this performance was a comment upon, or exploration of, hyperreality. *Last Days* treated image or entertainment as equivalent to reality, especially with respect to war. In this respect, the performance seemingly completed the feedback loop that CAE mourned Kraus’ inability to achieve – using the digital model as a method of contestation.

These different tents and stations enclosed a large central performance area that was active throughout with a steady flow of different performances. There were routines from the troops that decomposed from precise marching and the singing of patriotic war songs, into shell shock and the menacing hissing of songs, and finally into macabre death scenes and moaning. Drill sergeants conducted marching exercises, ordering the troops to perform all manners of degrading acts and impersonations – barking like dogs, singing while impersonating goldfish, and more. This drilling became gendered: the women changed costumes into gaudy “marching girl” attire – tall furry hats, yellow vests, and checked skirts. Marching girls seem to be a distinctly New Zealand phenomenon, a competitive sporting event. The women choreographed routines that combined grotesque war elements, for instance performing a “sexy” synchronised dance while crooning Brecht’s *Cannon Song* about mincing one’s enemies into steak tartar. This juxtaposition blended an iconic New Zealand event that aestheticises the military form of marching with Brecht’s grimmer portrait of war.

Maori performers carried out traditional rituals that had been adapted for the performance. On the final day of the performance, the bells of the giant Cathedral were ringing incessantly to commemorate Armistice Day while, in our little encampment down below, the Maori performers were conducting a *tangihanga*, or ceremony of mourning the dead. The juxtaposition of the large Anglican cathedral clanging bells in a square covered in grey stone with a shirtless, barefoot Maori warrior shouting a traditional ritual was striking. The colonisation of New Zealand was achieved through soldiers and Christianity – which were simultaneously being celebrated by the ringing of the Cathedral bells on Armistice Day. This celebration was starkly juxtaposed with a Maori ritual of mourning – the outcome, perhaps, of that colonisation

There were countless other incidents. Audience members were strapped into imaginative “torture” devices and wheeled around the square. A crowd of actors in animal masks bleated approval to a religious sermon and whispered quotations into the ears of audience members. Some of the aphorisms expressed familiar New Zealand concerns: “What do you think: is this good for tourism or bad for tourism?” Others perhaps posited a theory of hyperreality: “You use your face as a mask.” Several wandering clowns in military attire tried to persuade audience interaction and lure people into the space where they could explore the individual tents, test out the

torture devices, play cricket with dismembered limbs as bats, and generally *experience* rather than merely watch the proceedings.

As with Auslander's theory of resistance, *Last Days* did not claim to exist outside the dominant process of the aestheticisation of war to critique it from a privileged position, but critiqued itself in the process. A now-emptied flatbed truck served as a stage and was equipped with a loudspeaker. Throughout the performance various actors read text through the loudspeaker, some of which directly commented upon the central action but much of which undermined or contradicted it. Actors recited scenes from Kraus' text, read actual letters from New Zealand soldiers on the front, sang war songs, listed names of New Zealand soldiers killed at war, impersonated a wealthy bank manager who had sponsored the show, and generally made unambiguous interpretation of the event more difficult. Some of the text could be seen as commenting upon the aestheticisation of war. After the grotesque routine of shell shock and death, as the soldiers were lying in a pile in the middle of the encampment, an actor onstage began insulting the performance, improvising a spiteful speech that approximated: "When I want war, I want the real thing. I want to see *blood and guts* and maggots eating rotting flesh – not some namby-pamby theatrical, impressionistic *bullshit*. You make me *sick*." In short, interpretations of the performance were "multiple and inexhaustible" – yet critiqued society from within.

This description of the performance is far from exhaustive, but serves to highlight the significant issues, approaches, and radical aesthetic style of the performance. Despite my ability to reflect on the ways in which the show critiqued the aestheticisation of war, it is highly unlikely that any audience member explored the encampment and decided: "It's a comment upon the aestheticisation of war". This "meaning" was certainly available, but *Last Days* seemingly created its own universe and rules or logic. Engaging with the performance necessitated discovering, adopting, and adhering to this alternative logic. That is, despite an obvious interpretation, the event remained an overwhelming and singular aesthetic experience that was, for most people, inexplicable.

It seems significant in this context that Baudrillard has often cited, throughout his work, the playwright and poet Alfred Jarry. In particular, Baudrillard makes reference to "pataphysics", a term or discipline that Jarry invented and tried to apply in the theatre:

Pataphysics will examine the laws governing exceptions, and will explain the universe supplementary to this one; or, less ambitiously, will describe a universe which can be – and perhaps should be – envisaged in the place of the traditional one, since the laws that are supposed to have been discovered in the traditional universe are also correlations of exceptions. Albeit more frequent ones, but in any case accidental data which, reduced to the status of unexceptional exceptions, possess no longer even the virtue of originality. (Jarry 1898/1965, 192-93)

Pataphysics is a type of logic or way of thinking – contained in its own logical universe – that is in no sense traditionally political. Yet it clearly has a political dimension, interested, as it is, in absolutely avoiding the traditional. The “neo-scientific novel” from which pataphysics originates, *The Exploits and Opinions of Dr Faustroll, Pataphysician*, lacks any unity of plot, time and place, or character (as does Kraus’ work) – and is highly individualistic and autobiographical, containing many elements of the lives of Jarry and his friends. Any understanding of pataphysics is impossible without taking content, form, and *function* into account. One can only adequately explain what pataphysics is by explaining the “plot”, form, and purpose of this novel. As Roger Shattuck says of the novel, “terms in which to judge its success or failure scarcely exist outside its own pages” (1965, 19). The same could be said of the Free Theatre’s *Last Days*: one cannot evaluate the performance outside of the criteria it set for itself with its own internalised, autonomous logic. Jarry does not counter the society he scorns by contradicting it with direct opposition, but rather by being *autonomous* from it. The key element of pataphysics, from the quotation above, is *originality*. In the original French, the term Jarry used is *singularité*, which is in fact the very word that Baudrillard adopted 100 years later (Jarry 1948). The concept of singularity as a political phenomenon possibly has its origins in a man whose primary passion was seeking an “alternative universe” via theatre.

One aspect of *Last Days* could be seen as offering a political interpretation of the whole proceedings. Throughout the performance there was a fixed installation in the Christchurch Arts Centre attributed to the “Ministry of Change”. The installation was created by two local artists in conjunction with the Free Theatre performance. A dark basement room was the site of this fixed performance comprised of text, photos, and an audio collage. The main content of the written and recorded text was a quasi-fascist political manifesto, expounding utopian aspirations for vast social and political change. It explained that “we”, the Ministry of Change, were training and preparing to instigate a glorious future. Many of the photos were militaristic and redolent of the

Last Days performance. People were seemingly encouraged to interpret the whole *Last Days* event as a manifestation of this radical political group or faction called the Ministry for Change. Similar to CAE's biotech performances, however, an unambiguous reading is difficult. The performance itself alternately supported and undermined this interpretation – ultimately leaving audiences to decide for themselves. Where CAE's performances presented facts and information in contradictory forms, leaving audiences to negotiate the “truth” of those facts, *Last Days* presented no facts or information as such. There was just the action itself: it was the *purpose* of the action, rather than particular information, that was incomprehensible, and that audiences had to resolve – or leave unresolved, in which case the autonomous logic of the performance may have infused into society, poisoning the purity of capitalist logic.

Overall, this performance was intentionally geared to unsettle audiences and did not strive to be entertaining per se, although portions of it were presumably entertaining regardless. There is no doubt that some audience members, accustomed to performances that pander to them, interpreted this disquieting and atypical event simply as a *bad performance*. Such immediate rejection of anything aesthetically abnormal is a necessary risk, but one that seems to be far less prohibitive and common than, say, a rejection of Communist or quasi-fascist propaganda. That is, it was perhaps an advantage that *Last Days* resisted any evident political message or content that people could discard. Aesthetic or formal rejection, rejection as bad art or bad performance, is ostensibly less universal and less absolute.

Last Days was often viewed as a challenge. There were several tense face-offs between audience members and actors. A couple groups of teenagers tried to sabotage our electronic equipment. A group of Christians twice assembled late at night outside our encampment on the Bridge of Remembrance to pray. Apparently something about the performance struck them as misguided, sacrilegious, or even evil. I contend that these reactions were due to the performance's *singular* status. These people simply did not know how to decipher the performance, and that inability was in itself a devastating challenge. Since the performance served no recognisable purpose, many people seemed to decide that we were crazy, fanatical, and dangerous.

Overall it was this functional ambiguity that was the prevailing source of any “instability” caused by *Last Days*. There were obvious interpretations for the event – not necessarily coherent *meanings* for the performance but *justifications* for its

existence. But the performance likely transcended any attempt to explain it. The event was public and free. It was not advertising anything or trying to generate membership in some organisation. It clearly involved arduous physical work and very long hours for the performers, for no apparent gain. For audience members who truly engaged with the performance, it may have acted as a singularity, disrupting their concept of reality by its existence in another logic universe.

My main criticism of the performance is that shockingly few audience members really engaged with it. People did seem curious to discover what was going on. In Cathedral Square, say, many people sat down near the encampment area to watch. They seemed plainly to recognise *Last Days* as a performance and sat on the outskirts as if waiting to be entertained – or, if it was some sort of rally or protest, waiting for the message to become clear. No meaning or purpose became clear, and yet woefully few people entered the encampment and actively explored the proceedings – and most of those that did were friends and family of the performers. Despite the seeming uninterpretability of the performance, it cannot act as a singularity and destabilise capitalist logic if audiences do not engage with it.

It seems possible that the three-day campaign was, paradoxically, too organised and coherent. Even though it may have lacked any easy explanation, the *Last Days* encampment seems to have given off the impression of having a solid *internal* logic. I can understand how someone might observe such an event and feel that it did not *need* an explanation – perhaps in the manner that a city boy like me would encounter an A&P (Agricultural and Pastoral) show. I would be at a loss to understand the specifics of what was happening, but would accept it as having its own internal logic since it is clearly an established and organised event. If I could not make sense of something, I would assume that it was due to my own inadequacies or unfamiliarity with the event – and therefore may not even question it. The Slow Walking was comparatively vulnerable – perhaps both less threatening and more stimulating for audiences, which seemed less afraid to approach and engage with the Slow Walkers than the cacophony of the encampment.

Part of me feels that the performance could have impacted a wider audience by offering a more conventional and entertaining “entry point” into the event, something fun and recognisable to attract people into the space – which could then have been undermined by less interpretable material. But I have reservations about such an approach. A large part of the appeal of the *Last Days* performance was its

utter autonomy, its existence as an event independent even from audiences with no apparent effort made to be palatable. There was no introductory “Hello and welcome”. There was no flashy exploit directed externally. Everything seemed to be happening for its own sake (yet was open to audiences). For the minority of audience members that engaged with and were affected by the performance, I suspect that this *complete* strangeness was a key factor: the show did not at any point have the feel of an amusement created for audiences’ pleasure, which likely left people grasping for alternative explanations. Offering an entertaining entry point into the event might have attracted more audiences, but might have backfired by framing the whole production as an entertainment, which would render it explainable – even if it fails to entertain.

The need for theatre to remain a moving target against reprisal by, or amalgamation into, the capitalist system entails a difficult balance between being visible and inconvenient enough to have an impact and being so obvious that the media and other outlets activate to neutralise the event. Our three-day campaign felt like an incredibly grand undertaking – enduring for three 12-hour stretches, spanning three major sites in central Christchurch, and comprising a core 16-member theatre troupe plus a dozen or more outside contributors – and yet it seems still to have been insufficient to lure large and engaged audiences or make any stir in the media. From this perspective, a truly massive spectacle as imposing as the September 11 attacks might be necessary to shock people into an unavoidable awareness. But such a massive spectacle is immediately subjected to dominant reinscription. A production such as *Last Days* could perhaps have been a bit more prominent before turning up in the media, but not much. Perhaps, as suggested above, the magnitude of the event already deterred audiences from exploring it closely. It may already have been too substantial to challenge. It is possible that radical political theatre must be satisfied to have a small and localised impact, to affect only a few people in a mostly intangible way.

I am fascinated at the prospect of a dedicated group who would perform such “inexplicable” events on a continual basis, perhaps only affecting a few people with each event but persistently expanding the “psychological disturbance” and subversively expanding people’s political consciousness. When *Last Days* ended, I had a strong desire to continue with the Slow Walking or something like it, and wished the campaign could endure and steadily evolve. (In fact, it was at this point

that I decided to remain in New Zealand, when my intent all along had been to stay just for one year.) This idea could perhaps be thought of as a contemporary theatrical application of nomadism: an ongoing and indefinite campaign, or “wandering horde” like the nomadic Scythians discussed in the previous chapter. A nomadic political theatre could turn up anywhere at any time to hit the moving targets of capital or target moving audiences. Moving, here, is not purely a physical concept: audiences can be considered to move mentally or politically as well. If dominant audience beliefs change or move, a moving theatrical weapon must be able to change its content and strategies to keep up.

Clearly, Baudrillard sees the need for opposition to be “random and elusive”, like the notion of “moving targets”: resistance must be “irreducible” to the State or to dominant power (a term appearing both in *A Thousand Plateaus* and in Baudrillard’s writings on singularity). In fact, though the terms sound opposed, Baudrillard’s singularity is comparable to Deleuze and Guattari’s rhizomatic multiplicity: the appeal of the singularity is precisely that it launches multiple and inexhaustible interpretations that cannot be reduced to a root or State or system of logic. A singularity is nomadic, defying a sedentary or unified interpretation.

The theory of singularity is primarily a means of reviving the possibility of alternatives, of flaunting one’s inexplicability to prompt openness: a willingness to evaluate and seriously consider other possible ways of being. In an arguably post-political age, raising people’s political consciousness via such aesthetic acts may be the first step to generating social change. (Doesn’t every 12-step programme begin by acknowledging and understanding that one has a problem?) Following the notion of “moving targets”, this strategy might work best in conjunction with other approaches: Rev. Billy’s community- and belief-building, *Christmas Shopping’s* radical Christianity, and CAE’s pedagogical theatre are not mutually exclusive. Perpetual experimentation seems to be the paramount strategy of “moving targets” and the dedicated application of nomadism.

I have analysed *Last Days* as a singularity, which does not unambiguously declare a tangible impact, but opens a window through which a political consciousness may enter. Following Baudrillard, it seems that this performance could have breached the certainty of capitalist logic and allowed other possibilities. It is conceivable, though unlikely, that the performance had the opposite effect, helping to expand capitalist logic to cover previously autonomous realms. I have discussed a few

criteria by which the *Last Days* performance could perhaps have had greater impact but am unable to draw precise conclusions: clearly there cannot be absolutely specific criteria for generating singularities, for they would be, by nature, unrepeatably.

This final point highlights an unresolvable paradox of this strategy of political theatre. The pursuit of singularities seeks something unrepeatably or beyond representation. I have argued, following Baudrillard, that singularities only spread their shock effect when *performed* and *spectacular*, can in fact only be communicated via performance. With the WTC attacks, the efficacious moment was that of the *second* plane striking the towers: it was the repeated performance that paradoxically confirmed the event's singular status. The Slow Walking would similarly seem to become less interpretable and understandable the more times someone sees it. The *dedication* to an uninterpretable and "nonsensical" activity is singular, and that dedication is confirmed by repetition. The aim for a political theatre of this ilk then seems to be to live *within* this paradox, to be repeatable but unique, mundane (the stuff of every Hollywood blockbuster) and yet unthinkable. It is particularly via theatre *actions* that such a paradox or contradiction can be embodied.

In the introduction, I analysed my own drawn-out process of political awakening that was prompted via aesthetics – via, in the very first instance, my participation in *The Last Days of Mankind*. I can speculate a similar development for some of my peers: the radical aesthetic experience of *Last Days* initiated (or confirmed) an interest in experimental theatre. The pursuit of experimental theatre eventually instigated an interest in politics – at least partially from an understanding that radical aesthetic autonomy is not something one can take for granted. Justifying one's continued desire to do such aesthetic theatre, to put in long hours for little or no monetary reward, perpetually to be misapprehended, cannot help but take on a political dimension, eventually. Aesthetic experiences are a possible instigator of political consciousness and thereby open the possibility of social change.

My experience of *Last Days* was predominantly one of following orders. I was coerced, by the military structure and by the group aspect (not wanting to be the only one to "fail"), to perform radical acts that I would not otherwise have done. Though they were arbitrary or purely aesthetic to me at the time, they were actually very far from arbitrary, having been plotted and heavily considered by the director, Peter Falkenberg. The director did not reveal or explain his political and aesthetic intentions – but rather moved the actors to perform theatrical actions. My contention, then, is

that if the political intentions of the director are transmitted, they are done so via the creation of experiences. And since I, and seemingly most people of my “post-political age”, am unable to conceive of such experiences in directly political terms, this gives rise to a situation whereby political ideas, ideals, and alternatives are apparently transmitted via *aesthetic* experiences.

Chapter Six

Conclusion

Terrorism as play:

Samson Airline and aesthetics as the route to politics

In this final chapter, I wish to discuss the Free Theatre production *Samson Airline* with reference to two concepts that have been coursing beneath the surface of this thesis without fully emerging: terrorism and aesthetic theory. I do not consider this to be introducing entirely new paradigms in the final chapter of a thesis, but rather to be taking the arguments of this thesis to their logical *conclusion*: summarising the substance of this thesis by navigating a final set of examples. Certainly, in specifically pursuing theatre *actions*, this thesis has studied examples of political theatre that often push the boundary of the law and are even, at times, considered terroristic. Terrorism seems significant to this thesis from the theoretical side as well: Baudrillard's notion of singularity is important to my theatre analyses, and the most powerful example of singularity that Baudrillard cites is terrorism – specifically the September 11 attacks. The political theatre discussed in this thesis is clearly informed by the extra-theatrical realm of terrorism. As for aesthetic discourse, its relevance is perhaps more obvious. Throughout this thesis I have been pursuing ways in which aesthetic judgments, actions, and experiences seem to lead to political thinking or outcomes. This argument clearly echoes the 200-year-old aesthetic theory of Friedrich Schiller who, watching the failures of the French Revolution, concluded that Man must first develop an aesthetic sense by cultivating his “play impulse” before he will be ready for political liberty. Aesthetics and play, in Schiller's conception, were necessary prerequisites to radical political change. Combining these two ideas yields a seemingly contradictory and even profane concept: “terrorism as play” or “play as terrorism”. This irreverent idea could be a reasonable way of expressing the outcomes of the theatrical actions explored in this thesis.

The four case studies of this thesis have expanded the concept of “moving targets”. These theatres can target fixed locations of capitalist power such as chain stores, and move as new stores open or capitalism threatens to overtake a building, garden, or neighbourhood: the theatre can move to target the most urgent sites. Not only can this theatre move physically but also strategically and aesthetically, adapting techniques to make it the most effective weapon to hit its particular targets. The

targets of capital are not always physical either, but can flow through hidden realms and intangible networks of digital data. Sometimes it is the theatre itself that can cause capitalist power to move and coalesce where it was not apparent: these theatrical actions can reveal unseen targets. The target objectives of these theatres can vary greatly, moving to avoid stagnation and reclamation by capital. “Authenticity” can take infinitely varied forms, moving and adapting to suit any target of capitalism. By moving Christianity into action and transplanting it into a new context, it too can become a radical target objective that challenges capital. “Autonomy” constantly moves as capital does, always remaining its complement, aesthetically and functionally. And target audiences can be in perpetual motion, both physically and politically. These theatres can target audiences as they move through physical spaces, but can also cause the targets themselves to move, physically or psychologically – a moving together in a feeling of community or a moving apart provoked by a theatre action. In short, capitalism is a process rather than a fixture, and “politics” consequently does not stand still. A political theatre wishing in some way to undermine the logic of capitalism must therefore be fluid – able to move as the targets of capital move. Theatre must become a moving weapon.

Recently, terrorism has radicalised the idea of “moving targets”, using giant moving objects – aeroplanes – literally to hit the huge target symbols of Western capitalist power. Passengers on these planes became moving weapons and were forcefully moved, both from their desired destination to an undesirable one and from life to death. The “actors” of this theatre of terrorism also used their own lives as moving weapons and, via a theatrical awareness, insured that their moving action would be caught on camera. Through video and photographs, this action then moved through other domains of capitalism – the virtual image network of television and even people’s psyches – in an effort to move people to a political consciousness.

The similarities between political theatre and terrorism seem largely to be a product of a post-political age in which any political intervention is seen as senseless disruption – a form of pointless violence or terrorism. Many examples of political theatre attempt to *deny* these similarities to terrorism, to *deny* that they are pointless and irrelevant by (re)asserting a truth upon which they are based. Perhaps a more compelling approach, following Baudrillard, would be to exploit this irrelevance – for political theatre to use its inability to be understood to its advantage. Is this not precisely the domain of the singularity, which destabilises the reality principle by

existing *in its own logical universe*? I will show that recent terrorist practices appear to be geared as a form of political action against a society that cannot fathom fundamental change or difference. That is, terrorism, like the political theatre analysed in this thesis, has adopted strategies to engender change in an apparently post-political age. Apart from the physical violence and material destruction, terrorist acts, when effective, are highly theatrical. I will draw out these theatrical elements to analyse how and why terrorism can inform a political theatre practice.

An analysis of terrorist acts certainly seems to violate the boundaries of a discourse on the theatre – yet September 11 has been too central to this thesis to ignore. My own interest in creating political theatre was provoked by this act, which in that regard can be seen as efficacious in Kershaw’s terms – contributing to the “general historical evolution of wider social and political realities” (1992, 1) – and causing political *movement*. My analysis of Rev. Billy’s Union Square sermon indicated that this movement was not solely my personal experience: 9/11 triggered an authentic space, causing hundreds or thousands of people to move together into a square and openly and honestly discuss political issues and at least implicitly contemplate alternatives to consumer capitalism. This terrorist act, that is, operated in much the same manner as the theatre analysed in this thesis – and I have already mentioned that these attacks prompted some theatre journals to devote special issues to a post-9/11 reassessment of the role of theatre in society (Grinwis, Hanlon, et al 2002; Román 2002).

If the terrorism was like theatre, the theatre is also like terrorism: there has been a coming together. *Last Days* prompted a group of Christians to pray for (or against) us – possibly viewing us as evil. The performance itself acted as a singularity, as did the WTC strikes. Critical Art Ensemble founding member Steve Kurtz was visited by police after his wife died unexpectedly in May 2004. Kurtz’s home was searched and he was arrested under suspicion of *bio-terrorism*. His CAE biotech research and projects were confiscated, along with his computers, his books, and even his wife’s body. Though his wife’s death was quickly attributed to natural causes, Kurtz is still on trial, on reduced charges of wire and mail fraud – which still carry a maximum penalty of 20 years (Turner 2005).¹ Many, including Kurtz himself,

¹ At the time of this writing, Kurtz’s appeal to have the charges dismissed has just been turned down (Critical Art Ensemble Defense Fund 2006).

believe this to be a political arrest, an exploitation of anti-terrorist legislation to stifle political theatre. This may be true, but it could equally well have been – at least initially – a confusion: how were the police to know Kurtz’s home lab was for manufacturing “art” and not biological weapons or other implements of terror?

Think once more of Baudrillard’s simulated robbery. The authorities must respond to the robbery as if it were real, and the simulation therefore starts to have real effects – a policeman may really shoot somebody, a bank manager may actually pay a phoney ransom. In this scenario, Baudrillard says, when simulations are confused with reality, reality also becomes confused with a simulation: “If it is practically impossible to isolate the process of simulation..., the opposite is also true...: namely, it is *now impossible to isolate the process of the real*, or to prove the real” (1981/1994, 21). In an age of hyperreality and simulation, the “real” has simulated effects. Theatre becomes like terrorism, and terrorism becomes like theatre.

My original thesis proposal submitted in May 2002 (this was originally intended as a Masters thesis) mourned the apparent non-existence of any overt and radically political theatre in contemporary Western society – and especially, perhaps, New Zealand. My desire was:

To investigate whether it is possible in New Zealand to create an artwork that contests the aesthetic in the manner of Erwin Piscator, a theatre that is pre-postmodern, recognizably and undeniably Political – and what such theatre might mean to postmodern theatrical discourse and practice.
(Reynolds 2002)

After September 11, I was seeking a resuscitation of blatantly and undeniably political theatre, unlike the plethora of “postmodern” political theatres I was finding. The first key phase of my Masters research was an attempt to create such unambiguously political theatre. I and three other Free Theatre actors decided that *we would be political* – and we began open-ended training and rehearsals for what would end up being the very long and frustrating process of creating *Samson Airline*. This arduous process confirmed that a vague desire to be political was insufficient to insure success in such a venture. The four of us struggled to an almost absurd degree, and eventually had to bring in an external director, Peter Falkenberg, the senior supervisor of this thesis, to help us make political theatre.²

² *Samson Airline* was my Masters research project, in conjunction with the Free Theatre, directed by Peter Falkenberg with set design by Richard Till. There were eight performances in November 2002.

The four actors, working on our own as a collective prior to having a director, laboured for many months in an effort to create a piece of political theatre. We read piles of news from the Middle East, studied histories of the founding of Israel, read United Nations documents on the dividing up of Palestine after World War I, and tried to construct intelligent political arguments about this situation and the September 11 attacks. When we came to put these ideas into theatre, however, we failed repeatedly – ending up with either abstract physical theatre with no obvious politics or “talking head” theatre with politics and nothing else. Politics and theatre were like oil and water to us: we could not merge them. When Falkenberg consented to direct, he solved both problems at once by presenting a virtual enactment of the terrorist act – a simulation of September 11.

In a basement room our set designer built an aeroplane fuselage. Audience members were passengers on the plane. The actors, two men and two women, were the pilots and stewardesses, respectively. The performance was a simulated flight – using a flight simulator computer programme projected in the cockpit, which was open for audiences to see. The bulk of the show comprised typical elements of a flight: announcing the safety procedures, serving drinks, distributing hot towels, providing a small meal, selling duty-free goods, and providing in-flight entertainment. The in-flight entertainment comprised the crew telling and demonstrating the biblical story of Samson, using it to justify the conclusion of the flight: the simulated crashing of the plane into one of the World Trade Center towers.

The actors, that is, simulated the acts of the 9/11 terrorists – not as “crazed” Islamic fundamentalists but as ourselves, striving to see how we might justify such an act in our worldview. We used role-play and theatrical playing as a way of coming to understand an act that was – aesthetically and politically – unfathomable. The story of Samson was the foundation upon which we justified our actions. Samson can be seen as the first suicide terrorist: chained to two giant pillars of the Philistine temple, Samson pulled down the two pillars (like the WTC towers), causing the temple to collapse. Samson sacrificed himself to kill 3,000 Philistines – and became a Judeo-Christian hero. Suicide terrorism can be seen not merely as the province of Muslim fanatics but also as a Judeo-Christian ideal.

The performance began with audiences entering the plane, showing their boarding passes to the co-pilot and being shown their seats by the stewardesses. Once everyone was seated, the stewardesses conducted a parodic safety procedure

demonstration, pointing out our emergency exits (the theatre exits), showing how to use the inflatable flotation devices (balloons left in each seat-pocket), and more. Then the lights of the cabin were dimmed for takeoff: I, the pilot, controlling a flight simulator programme, conducted the takeoff procedures – starting the plane’s engines, taxiing to the runway, setting the flaps, and more. The simulation was as “real” as possible, like Baudrillard’s simulated robbery.

After takeoff, the stewardesses distributed hot cloths, scented with rosehip essential oil. This airline ritual became a ritual preparing our passengers to be sacrificed. The hostesses demonstrated a Muslim cleansing ritual, using the hot cloth – while over the aeroplane speakers the voice of the pilot chanted the ritual prayer that Mohammed Atta provided for the 9/11 hijackers, which the stewardesses repeated. The simulation, both of the airline rituals and the terrorist rituals, strove for “reality”.

As the stewardesses then served drinks, rolling carts up the aisles as in a real aeroplane, the pilots introduced and began to recite the story of Samson’s birth from the Book of Judges. The controls in the “cockpit” of the plane, beyond containing the flight simulator, included an audio effects console, CD player, and more. As the pilots narrated the story of Samson, speaking into headset microphones, we used the effects console to emphasise certain passages and create special voices for the characters – such as the reverberating voice of the Angel of the Lord that appeared to Samson’s barren mother.

In the next portion of the story, the Angel of the Lord instructed Samson’s father to make ready a burnt offering and offer it to the Lord. As the pilots performed (vocally) this portion of the story, the stewardesses prepared food at the back of the plane. The lights of the cabin were turned off as the hostesses used blowtorches to cook pork crackling, which sizzled and hissed, fragranced the plane, and burnt like the offering in the Book of Judges. The crew was illustrating the story of Samson through flight ritual actions.

The flight progressed in this manner, with an intricate layering of the story of Samson being narrated as the stewardesses performed flight rituals and illustrations of the story. Samson’s visiting of a Philistine woman, Delilah, was illustrated by the stewardesses putting themselves on display – contrasting the purity of Samson’s tribe with the lustfulness of the Philistine woman. Samson’s discovery of honey in the body of the lion coincided with handing out sweets to the passengers.

Osama bin Laden publicly linked the 9/11 attacks to the injustices – supported by America – being wrought in Palestine. And the story of Samson, of course, takes place in Palestine. We therefore included audio collages of Palestinians and Israelis discussing their experiences – particularly focussing on the notions of having one’s home taken away and having one’s faith taken away. We posited home and faith, like Samson’s legendary hair, as places where one’s strength lies. After the audio collages, the pilots began to tell their own (the actors’ own) stories relating to home and faith, trying to empathise with what it would feel like to lose one’s home and faith – and if that might drive a person to suicide terrorism.

I, for instance, told my true story of being an American here in New Zealand on a temporary visa that was soon to expire. My chosen home is New Zealand, but there is no guarantee that I can stay here. If for whatever reason New Zealand chooses not to renew my visa, then my home would be taken from me. The thought that this may happen, I said, is terrifying and upsetting: I would be torn from my friends and unable to continue my studies. Moreover, I said, my faith would be taken from me. While I have no religion per se, I was developing a devotion to theatre – particularly to the Christchurch Free Theatre and the director and actors with whom I was able to work. In America, I was an engineer: I know nobody that works in the theatre. If I lost my home in New Zealand and was forced to return to America, I would also lose the object of my faith: theatre. I would be unable, I said, to do what I most desire to do.

This story was a sincere and legitimate effort on my part to identify with a hypothetical Palestinian terrorist bomber by relating his life to my own *experience*. I was using role-play as a way of trying to understand. At the same time, my story was utterly ridiculous when juxtaposed with the stories of Palestinians having their homes demolished, children murdered, and more. I felt utterly foolish, afraid that I looked (or sounded) silly – and the audience probably agreed. My experience, it was apparent, was totally different to that of a Palestinian: my inability, and by extension the audience’s inability, to fathom the 9/11 attacks seemed to be the product of this divergent experience. The awkwardness and “looking silly” was part of the point.

As the audio collages and pilots’ stories were being broadcast in the aeroplane, the hostesses proceeded to the duty-free shopping portion of the flight. They wheeled their carts around the plane, displaying and advertising the goods they had for sale, which were mostly kitschy trinkets extracted from the story of Samson – in official Samson Airline packaging. They presented a line of “Samson” objects: honeycomb,

like that which he found in the body of the lion; combs for Samson's great hair; razor blades "like the one used to shave Samson's head", and eye patches like those Samson wore after having his eyes gouged out. There were other objects redolent of the story: handcuffs with which Samson was bound and flour from the prison mill where Samson was forced to labour (which at one point in the performance doubled as anthrax – a timely terrorist threat). They also offered a line of "Delilah" objects that she used to seduce Samson: eye shadow, lipstick, perfume, and a lacy g-string. Lastly was a model of a tiny plastic Samson standing between the two World Trade Center towers: at the push of a button, the towers collapse and then right themselves. The selling endured for a long time, throughout the pilots' stories and audio collages. The strange "reality" of the simulation, with the pilot-actors narrating their own stories, was juxtaposed with the logic of replication as exemplified by the cheap items for sale. Audiences, perhaps, had to make a political decision of sorts. To concentrate on the "political" audio collage, they had to reject or tune out the selling. Or, they could ignore the audio collage, as some audiences did, and focus on the toys and trinkets that were genuinely for sale. Politics and capitalism were mutually exclusive.

Intermittently during the selling, the stewardesses also engaged in role-play, impersonating a character from a song by country music star Steve Earle. Earle himself had controversially written a song, *John Walker's Blues*, about an American boy that moved to Afghanistan and joined the Taliban. The song was spoken in John Walker's voice: Earle, that is, played the role of John Walker in an effort to understand why this boy might have done such an act that was so widely condemned. Earle used theatrical role-play as a method to achieve political understanding – as we ourselves were attempting to do in *Samson Airline*. At set times, the pilots would cue the CD from the cockpit, and the stewardesses would sing along in John Walker's voice and impersonate him – using the combs and other items for sale in order to portray this "American boy".

I performed the final bit of text from the story of Samson, about the destruction of the Philistine temple, as the co-pilot stood up in the doorway of the cockpit and impersonated the blind staggering Samson, sapped of his strength, who performed one last desperate act of suicide terrorism. At the end of the story, as the co-pilot sat back down, the World Trade Center towers were just coming into view on the flight simulator. (This was a "real-time" simulation, and had to be timed perfectly.) I made one final flight announcement, finally fully revealing the

significance of the name “Samson Airline” – and revealing our intention to crash the plane. As the plane neared the towers, we started to pump smoke into the cabin, and the engine noise of the simulator – which had been quietly droning throughout the performance – was gradually turned up to full volume such that the whole plane vibrated. The lights went out in the plane: all that could be seen was the image of the two towers steadily approaching, which was quickly being blocked by the haze of smoke. I started chanting the full prayer provided by Mohammed Atta: “There is no God but God... There is no God but God, I being a sinner. We are of God and to God we return” (Atta 2001). The stewardesses began screaming piercingly and running up and down the aisles of the plane. As the plane struck the tower, ear-splitting sounds of crashing and broken glass pierced the air, followed, then, by total silence. The lights came back on and the small cabin, now full of theatre-smoke, was criss-crossed with rays of light coming from small holes in the material of the fuselage. It resembled, to me, a Hollywood depiction of Heaven or the afterlife. The actors all disappeared and audiences left the plane at their own volition as the Steve Earle song *Jerusalem* played, with its chorus: “I believe that one fine day all the children of Abraham / Will lay down their swords forever in Jerusalem” (Earle 2002).

In this theatrical simulation, theatre and terrorism – image and reality – united. Simulations, says Baudrillard, unavoidably have material effects as if they are real. A simulated terrorist act, by that thinking, will have some of the impact of the genuine terrorist act. In a society of simulations, terrorism becomes theatrical and theatre – in a case such as this – becomes terroristic. Audiences were moved not physically but virtually to become the moving weapons of our sacrificial ritual. It is conceivable, as with the 9/11 attacks or Schechner’s definition of efficacy, that the efficacy of the performance was contained in the completion of the ritual – that undergoing the experience of the ritual may have in some way breached the dominant, capitalistic explanation of 9/11 to open a space for transformation, however minor.

The main theoretical foundation for the previous two chapters has been the work of Baudrillard, who claims that nothing can interrupt the totality of the late capitalist system but a *singularity*. While there are or have been countless singularities – particular cultures, languages, and perhaps works of art – they are all being or have been swallowed by the universal of capitalist totality, he says. What he seeks, then, is not merely a singularity, something that exists outside of capitalist logic, but a singular *act* to explode this totality. Not all singularities would assist in political

opposition. Think of a unique island culture, untouched by the Western world; it could be singular, but would in no way help to oppose Western dominance. (Aldous Huxley's radical utopian island is contingent upon isolation and is eventually lost to Western "progress".) Certain explicitly performative singularities – theatre or terrorism – can mount a challenge, can flaunt their singular status and spread the shock effect of their irreducibility.

The only clear example Baudrillard provides is terrorism, specifically in response to the Manhattan attacks of September 11, 2001:

To a system whose very excess of power poses an insoluble challenge, the terrorists respond with a definitive act which is also not susceptible of exchange. Terrorism is the act that restores an irreducible singularity to the heart of a system of generalized exchange. All the singularities (species, individuals and cultures) that have paid with their deaths for the installation of a global circulation governed by a single power are taking their revenge today through this *terroristic situational transfer*. (2002, 9)

This theatrical terrorist act does not merely exist as a singularity, but at least briefly shatters the totality of the capitalist system by using its irrelevance – its inability to participate in the system of exchange – to its advantage. Contemporary terrorist practices are arguably targeted against a society that cannot imagine alternative social structures: rather than articulate explicit political opposition, terrorism seeks purely to destabilise the certainty of the system.

Following Baudrillard, Leonard Wilcox wrote of the World Trade Center attacks that "In the days following, the 'event strike' failed to reveal a hermeneutic core...and its media-disseminated meanings mutated constantly" (Wilcox 2002, 6). It was the inability to reduce this event to a clear and logical cause, to make unambiguous sense of it, that made it act as a singularity. Of course, it seems terribly ahistorical to call this event a singular or uninterpretable act, since it can and *should* be seen as at least arising from a desire to challenge the prevailing social system. It seems contradictory that such a plainly intentional act could be called *singular*.

A partial explanation of this contradiction can come in the form of Baudrillard and Žižek's claims that contemporary late capitalism is a totality, "the dialectical unity of itself and its other" (Žižek 2002, 51). These theorists do not consider 9/11 and Islamic fundamentalism in general to be part of a systemic opposition to capitalism but rather the complement of the West, the completion of capitalist totality. Žižek writes:

Is this not the truth behind the fact that Bin Laden and the Taliban emerged as part of the CIA-supported anti-Soviet guerrilla movement in Afghanistan, and behind the fact that Noriega in Panama was an ex-CIA agent? Is not the USA fighting its own excess in all these cases? And was the same not true already of Fascism? The liberal West had to join forces with Communism to destroy its own excessive outgrowth. (Zizek 2002, 27)

This argument possibly overcomes the problem, in calling this event singular, of treating it ahistorically and ignoring its seeming systemic origins. All political theatre and action today, by this logic, would necessarily have to be targeted against the status quo, and against ourselves as agents of that status quo. Even if these attacks are a part of the totality of the capitalist system, however, calling them uninterpretable seems contradictory.

With September 11 in particular, there is a clear symbolic significance of the attacks – a symbolism that is, precisely, interpretable and therefore (it would seem) prohibitive of singularity. Baudrillard himself stresses the importance of a symbolic reading of the attacks, even hinting that only a symbolic reading is political. Eventually concluding the event to be a singularity would seem to deny this symbolic political reading. On the one hand, much has been written about the symbolic significance of attacks on the US military headquarters and especially the twin icons of capitalist wealth and prestige. Baudrillard is unambiguous: “The architectural object [the World Trade Center] was destroyed, but it was the symbolic object which was targeted and which it was intended to demolish” (2002, 48). On the other hand, there has been a fervent reaction that discussing the event on a symbolic level belittles the tragedy and mocks innocent deaths – revealing a general unwillingness to consider the aesthetics of the September 11 event. Composer Karl-Heinz Stockhausen was met with shock and outrage when he publicly referred to the WTC attacks as “the greatest work of art there has ever been” (Bell 2003, 7). The uproar caused by his statement simultaneously exposed the dominant reluctance to view 9/11 as an aesthetic experience and the dominant view of art as something purely escapist and beautiful.

Baudrillard interprets this reluctance as a form of repression that actually confirms the symbolic resonance of the event:

The fact that we have dreamt of this event, that everyone without exception has dreamt of it – because no one can avoid dreaming of the destruction of any power that has become hegemonic to this degree – is unacceptable to the Western moral conscience. Yet it is a fact, and one which can indeed be

measured by the emotive violence of all that has been said and written in the effort to dispel it.

At a pinch, we can say that they *did it*, but we *wished for* it. If this is not taken into account, the event loses any symbolic dimension. It becomes a pure accident, a purely arbitrary act, the murderous phantasmagoria of a few fanatics, and all that would then remain would be to eliminate them. Now, we know very well that this is not how it is. (2002, 5)

Here the notion of symbolic goes beyond representational (or should I say *metonymic*: towers equal capitalism; Pentagon equals US military) to a more Jungian understanding of symbolic acts as something archetypal, present in the collective unconscious. Baudrillard writes that if Islam dominated, then terrorism would rise in opposition to Islam because it is the world itself that resists globalisation. This seems to be a fair analysis, one echoed by many others – most prominently Zizek, who wrote of the WTC strikes that “America got what it fantasized about”, that it is in fact impossible for great powers not to fantasise about their own destruction (2002, 16). These attacks, they agree, illustrate global capitalism at odds with itself.

Neither this Jungian symbolism nor even a metonymic symbolism of the September 11 events has been widely acknowledged. The dominant course has been a denial of symbolism, a treatment of the attacks as a “purely arbitrary act, the murderous phantasmagoria of a few fanatics” (Baudrillard 2002, 5). The most common “reason” given for the events by US President George W. Bush is that the terrorists hate American freedoms, not that they hate the military (Pentagon) or the impact of the economic system (WTC Towers). This “reasoning” denies even the metonymic symbolic significance of those sites – and replaces it with an apolitical jargon of authenticity (Adorno 1964/1973).

Yet the plane that crashed in a Pennsylvania field, lacking symbolic value as opposition, was reinscribed with American symbolic value: the heroic everyman Todd Beamer became an American icon for allegedly thwarting that attack, and doing so in true Hollywood style with his famous last words “Let’s roll”. The debate over what to build on the site of the former WTC Towers has hinged on symbolic significance as well, with some advocating a rebuilding of identical towers to prove (symbolically) that the terrorists are powerless to change things, and others opting for a taller and more magnificent structure (symbolically) to demonstrate that They only made Us stronger. In the end it seems the design was settled for a building to be called the *Freedom Tower*, whose spire will reach the height of 1,776 feet, marking the year of

America's declaration of independence, replacing the symbolic attacks with a hegemonic symbolism (Hampson 2005).

The vicious struggle in the symbolic realm that 9/11 unleashed is in some sense a fight over the theatrical interpretation of the event. It has been a struggle over meaning, but enacted in such a way that many have argued the very notion of politics in the West was and is at stake. Especially a Jungian but even a representational symbolic interpretation is political insofar as it consents that there were cultural, economic, and political motivations for the hijackings – motivations whose very admission challenges the dominant Western (and especially American) reality-effect, which hinges on the morality of capitalism.

In this regard, the Western denial of symbolic resonance should be viewed either as evidence of a post-political age and a general inability to conceive of other reality-effects, or as a conscious attempt to *depoliticise* the event, by which I mean to explain away the event as the ahistorical work of a few lunatics that requires no reassessment of the dominant reality. Most likely it is a blend of both. Baudrillard interprets America's subsequent bombing of Afghanistan as just such an active depoliticising manoeuvre:

And this is indeed its [the war's] *raison-d'être*: to substitute, for a real and formidable, unique and unforeseeable event, a repetitive, rehashed pseudo-event. The terrorist attack corresponded to a precedence of the event over all interpretive models; whereas this mindless military, technological war corresponds, conversely, to the model's precedence over the event, and hence to a conflict over phoney stakes, to a situation of 'no contest'. War as continuation of absence of politics by other means. (2002, 34)

This conventional response seems to be *both* evidence of a post-political age and actively depoliticising; that is to say, even without deliberate distortion most Westerners would be at a loss for how *else* to respond but war. It is clear from the quotation above that, to Baudrillard, it is the dominance of models – whether called simulation, pastiche, or the precedence of “rehashed pseudo events” – that determines the age of hyperreality in which overt political opposition is anachronous. To this logic, an event such as the WTC strikes that “resuscitated both images and events”, that like pataphysics refutes all models, would be the ultimate – or only – political act (Baudrillard 2002, 27).

It is still unclear why or how 9/11 managed to resuscitate both images and events. Even with such obvious symbolic interpretations, so hotly contested,

Baudrillard calls the attacks a precedence of event over all interpretive models. There seems to be a contradiction: he highlights the clear symbolic reading of the event yet claims that the event itself overpowered existing interpretive models, that it was generative of singularity. Binoy Kampmark points out this contradiction, claiming that it might show that Baudrillard had no answer to 9/11 (2003, 4). I have a different reading based on a belief that the contradiction is intentional.

Baudrillard fuses symbolism and spectacle. First, he claims “Violence in itself may be perfectly banal and inoffensive. Only symbolic violence is generative of singularity” (2002, 29). Shortly following, he writes “We try retrospectively to impose some kind of meaning on it, to find some kind of interpretation. But there is none. And it is the radicality of the spectacle, the brutality of the spectacle, which alone is original and irreducible” (2002, 30). That is, he argues that only symbolic violence is generative of singularity and then immediately implies that only a radical spectacle is singular. It becomes apparent that this conflation, though seemingly illogical, is intentional:

There is no possible distinction, at the level of images and information, between the spectacular and the symbolic, no possible distinction between the ‘crime’ and the crackdown. And it is this uncontrollable unleashing of reversibility that is terrorism’s true victory. (2002, 31)

The spectacular and the symbolic combine to explode the capitalist totality.

It is easy to forget that an airplane hit the Pentagon as well. Although the material destruction was far less there than in New York, the potential symbolic importance – a direct strike on the headquarters of the American military – was every bit as high as with the World Trade Center. Yet the Pentagon hit has been nearly forgotten: *September 11*, as terminology, has become synonymous with planes striking the towers. This identification is presumably due to the spectacular nature of the New York event and its endless reproduction in the media. The event becomes unthinkable paradoxically *because of* its visibility and theatricality. Perhaps it becomes unimaginable only once actualised! This makes sense: it is not impossible to imagine two planes striking two towers; what is unimaginable is people *actually doing it*. In an age of hyperreality, of a con-fusion of image and reality, something is not done unless it is seen to be done. So this act is paradoxically unimaginable – singular – only once it is widely seen. Its theatricality is crucial.

In this analysis, the symbolism – which is to say the representative *meaning* – of the event does not prevent its status as singularity. In fact, the opposite is true: the symbolism actually contributes to the generation of singularity. The spectacular destruction of the attacks rendered them unthinkable despite their obviousness, and it is specifically the preservation of this contradiction that engenders singularity. An essay published in *Baudrillard West of the Dateline* claims that “It [September 11] is an event that does not exclude meaning but *exceeds it spectacularly*. As such it may serve a variety of political ends, and this we must be wary of” (McMillan and Worth 2003, 132, italics added). The dominant denial of symbolic significance, treating the attacks as flukes or as pure evil, is an attempt to exclude meaning. A completely arbitrary act, if such a thing exists, would exclude meaning: a natural or accidental disaster, though catastrophic and spectacular, would not act as a singularity. After the Queens air crash in October 2001, TV stations kept up live coverage for four hours, hoping to broadcast a second attack live. Since no second attack came, Baudrillard says, nobody is sure whether that crash was accidental or an act of terrorism (2002, 46). But that ambiguity or uncertainty does *not* cause a singularity! It seems that an event can act as a singularity only if it is seen as human-induced and intentionally sacrificial.

The September 11 attacks have multiple and obvious political and symbolic meanings – but the event somehow has (or had) an *excess* of meaning that cannot be contained by these obvious interpretations. The event *feels* explainable, *should be* explainable, and yet it is not. It acts as a singularity precisely because of the clear and disruptive meaning that it exceeds. This seems to be a strategy somehow between or beyond overt political opposition and meaninglessness or arbitrariness – something that is clearly intentionally disruptive yet unexplainable. These traits seem not merely transferable to the realm of theatre, but the specific domain of theatrical actions.

I want to reiterate a definition of a singularity as something that “constitutes itself as another universe with another set of rules” (Baudrillard 2001/2004, 71). Though there are evident readings to be made of the WTC strikes, it is not so easy to rationalise, from the Western perspective, how or why the perpetrators could logically commit such an act. It does not make sense in Western capitalist logic: it was not an act of luxury thrill seeking, nor a daring act for financial gain, nor an advertising ploy. And though reasons for the attacks may be admitted, Westerners cannot fathom sacrificing themselves in this manner. It is particularly *sacrifice* or *suicide* that the

West finds intolerable because of its irrationality in terms of capitalist logic – like giving gifts to a store in the mall, or Slow Walking for months for no apparent gain.

In an early book, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, Baudrillard theorised that the power of capitalism is predicated on the offering of unreturnable gifts. The system offers jobs and social services to its citizens as gifts. It could be said that the paying of taxes is *exchanged* for these gifts, that they are therefore not gifts but equal trades. But the gifts cannot be refused; the exchange is one we are all forced to make. In other words, we are compelled to accept the system's logic, the reality of the system. Not accepting these gifts is (financially, socially) ruinous or even criminal. This prompts a theory of counterstrategy by Baudrillard:

If domination comes from the system's retention of the exclusivity of the gift without counter-gift – the gift of work which can only be responded to by destruction or sacrifice, if not in consumption...; a gift of media and messages to which, due to the monopoly of the code, nothing is allowed to retort; the gift, everywhere and at every instant, of the social, of the protection agency, security, gratification and the solicitation of the social from which nothing is any longer permitted to escape – then the only solution is to turn the principle of its power back against the system itself: the impossibility of responding or retorting. *To defy the system with a gift to which it cannot respond save by its own collapse and death...* The system must *itself commit suicide in response to the multiplied challenge of death and suicide*. (1976/1993, 36-37)

This counterstrategy is one routinely (and perhaps only) used by terrorists: the use of their own lives as unreturnable gifts that the system cannot decline. The system, says Baudrillard, is driven to suicide in return: “However infinitesimal in terms of relations of forces it might be, the colossal apparatus of power is eliminated in this situation where (the very excess of its) derision is turned back against itself” (1976/1993, 37). Though the effect may be mostly intangible, a sacrificial gift, says Baudrillard, momentarily eliminates capitalist power.

The Free Theatre's *Christmas Shopping* can be analysed as trying literally to employ the strategy of gift giving. The actors attempted to give items back, not *exchange* them, to stores in the mall. This gift giving is fundamentally anti-capitalist, revealing an absolute contradiction between Christian giving and capitalism. It is no surprise then that the stores declined the gifts, even said that they *were unable* to accept them. They had no protocol for accepting such gifts since gifts oppose the very logic of the stores' existence. The absurd conversations and situations caused by this act revealed the incompatibility of giving and capitalism.

Even when not directed against capitalist power, suicide is deemed a threat. It takes death into one's own control and away from the control of the system. A suicide in prison – which authorities try hard to prevent – subverts the power of the law over that person's life. On a more general level, Baudrillard sees contemporary late capitalism as “the most rigorous attempt to put an end to death” and death therefore as the greatest challenge to consumer logic.

Late capitalist society sees everything in terms of value and assets. It is fundamental to this view that life has economic value. Entire industries are founded on this principle, which suicide challenges. Euthanasia is illegal, suicides are prevented in prison, and insurance policies are void in cases of suicide – all because suicide undermines the system of exchange of value. One further example: the Thai government was heavily criticised in the West after the late 2004 tsunami for not having a better system of warning or prevention. By contrast, the United States and other Western nations bragged that such devastation and death could never be visited upon them since their governments had installed superior tsunami warning systems. Even death from natural disasters is not considered *natural* but rather as something that the capitalist system can and *should* control. Given this view, it is no surprise that Baudrillard frequently posits death, and particularly suicide, as undermining the logic upon which the system is founded

A week after the July 2005 bombings in London, a Reuters headline read “Suicide bombing feared in London attacks”. The article says evidence hints that the attacks were suicide bombings, which raises the level of threat. One expert is quoted as saying, “Suicide bombings are commonly accepted to be the most dangerous and difficult to thwart” (Holden 2005). Why does this evidence not elicit the opposite response: “Well, at least the terrorists killed themselves so they cannot attack again”? Their suicides make conventional retribution impossible. Who does the system enact its revenge on for attacks carried out by four dead men? And how can the system control people willing to sacrifice their own lives when the most extreme threat the State can provide is that of death?

Though any suicide destabilises this system of exchange to a degree, Baudrillard focuses on instances of terroristic suicide intentionally geared to disrupt the system. This terroristic counter-gift, it would seem, always aims to be visible and public to have a tangible impact on the system. That is to say the suicide must be *symbolic*. “Effective” terrorism, it seems, always has a theatrical aspect. This

realisation entails, perhaps, that the suicide need not be physical – that one could achieve the destabilising effect of terrorism via some sort of theatrical suicide.

Baudrillard seems to allow this possibility, while acknowledging its unlikelihood:

If every suicide becomes subversive in a highly integrated system, all subversion of and resistance to this system is reciprocally, by its very nature, suicidal. Those actions at least that strike at its vitals. For the majority of so-called ‘political’ or ‘revolutionary’ practices are content to exchange their survival with the system, that is, to convert their death into cash. There are rarely suicides that stand against the controlled production and exchange of death, against the *exchange-value of death*; not its use-value (for death is perhaps the only thing that has no use-value, which can never be referred back to need, and so can unquestionably be turned into a weapon) but its value as rupture, contagious dissolution and negation. (1976/1993, 176)

For a “suicidal” theatrical action or symbolic death fundamentally to oppose the system, it would have to be an unreturnable gift not exchangeable on capitalist terms. Such a theatrical action would have to, like suicide, lack use-value and defy the system of exchange. This defiance was literally true of the *Christmas Shopping* action.

The Slow Walking in *Last Days*, as another example, possibly undermined capitalist logic because of its absolute otherness, including what I called its *functional* otherness. This functional otherness seems precisely to be an apparent lack of use-value and exchange-value: the walking served no obvious purpose and the actors seemed to gain nothing by doing it – they were not exchanging their performance work for anything tangible. In this sense, that dedicated action, or the three consecutive 12-hour performances, can be seen as “somewhat” suicidal – sacrificing oneself or at least one’s capitalist worth for no “logical” reason – and therefore as fundamentally subverting the capitalist system of exchange.

Many have argued that terrorism is not revolutionary, that its primary aim is precisely to negotiate policy change and not instigate radical change. Leonard Wilcox writes:

Osama bin Laden’s appearance on videotape in the wake of September 11 as much as says: ‘now that I have your attention, I’ll explain my position’ – and he does this in relation to the larger issues of the Palestine-Israeli conflict, and the presence of American troops in Saudi Arabia, the death of as many as a million children as a result of U.N. Sanctions against Iraq. (2002, 13)

This is indeed an accurate summary of bin Laden’s first public message after the September 11 attacks, and does seem to support the policy-change argument (bin

Laden 2001). However, the broadcast of this message may not have been bin Laden's primary aim. It was September 15th when George W. Bush publicly named Osama bin Laden the prime suspect behind the strikes; by September 17th, Bush said he wanted Osama "dead or alive". A dominant reading of the evil, demented, terrorist mastermind was congealing, replacing people's openness and introspection in the initial aftermath of the attacks – which was evidenced by Rev. Billy's Union Square sermon. The singular act was being shaped and moulded to rebuild the shattered dominant reality. Capital was moving to reclaim the space it had temporarily lost. It is highly significant, then, that bin Laden's first videotaped broadcast after the attacks did not occur until October 7th, the day after the first US military strike in Afghanistan. Even more importantly, the video had been pre-recorded. It could clearly have been broadcast earlier, but bin Laden waited until the first military strike – that is, until the last traces of the event's uncertainty had been "resolved" – before making a public appearance that somewhat explained the strikes (though still not unambiguously claiming responsibility). That is, bin Laden seemingly tried to maximise the uncertainty of the event – its status as singularity, its revolutionary potential – and took a more traditional didactic approach only after a dominant interpretation had solidified.

There was a three-week period prior to bin Laden's overt political statement, during which the attacks acted primarily as an aesthetic experience. Bin Laden's delay in making a political statement could be seen as a strategy to remain a moving target and prevent categorisation. The attacks were effective at generating singularity, according to Baudrillard, opening possibilities and pushing many Americans (and Westerners in general) to evaluate the actions and way of life of themselves and their nations. But a dominant reading soon prevailed regardless. Perhaps the event was *too* monumental. The openness of the singularity was rapidly closed by a hegemonic interpretation. This reinscription is a necessary danger with which singularities in particular must contend; the opening up of interpretive possibilities allows that they may be closed again in any variety of readings. In this case, the sheer scale or spectacle of the event and the deaths it caused, though contributing to its potential efficacy, also disempowered individuals: the event was clearly a matter of national security and, as such, was left to the authorities to decide (or create) the "correct" interpretation.

It seems that a theatrical action like *Last Days*, without the massive scale or real deaths, could still be construed as a miniature terrorist attack: visible and theatrical, clearly not an everyday “real-life” occurrence; having an excess of meaning, simultaneously obvious and unthinkable; sacrificial in that it involves humans working for long hours, doing strenuous activities, and intentionally risking punishment for no obvious gain; and utterly lacking both use-value and exchange-value. Theatre actions, that is, could be informed by terrorism and achieve similarly efficacious results. Terrorism is often called a form of psychological disturbance – punching holes in people’s fuselages, as Baudrillard once wrote (1990/1993, 83). A political theatre that seeks simply to destabilise the seeming inevitability of consumer capitalism can be seen as a similar form of psychological disturbance.

In all these cases, theatrical and terroristic, the aesthetics has been either inseparable from or prerequisite to political impact. This scenario begs an analysis of early aesthetic discourse, especially the theories of Friedrich Schiller. In particular it is Schiller’s volume *On the Aesthetic Education of Man in a Series of Letters*, written in 1793 and first published in 1795, that is the most relevant, being an immediate “aesthetic” response to the failures of the French Revolution. Schiller had been highly supportive of the revolutionary ideals, and would have watched in horror as the Reign of Terror swept in. His *Letters* ought therefore to be seen as an attempt to explain why the revolution miscarried. The very basic argument is that the world was not yet ready for political liberty and that it was necessary for Man to prepare for that liberty by developing a sense of the Beautiful, via an aesthetic education. Aesthetics is deemed a necessary predecessor of political revolution.

The foundation of this argument is Kant’s philosophy, and the proposition that Man is defined by two basic and contrary impulses: the *sensuous* impulse, proceeding from the physical body and what it senses, ever changing through time; and the *formal* impulse, which proceeds from Man’s rational nature and tries “to maintain his person throughout every change of circumstance” (Schiller 1965, 64-67). Man is not yet ready for political liberty, Schiller said, because the individual will always be at odds with societal demands so long as Man’s sensuous and rational sides are not reconciled.

Schiller claims that political freedom can be attained only when Man is able to combine these two impulses and thereby reconcile the individual and society. But the impulses are, he claims, absolutely opposed, and can only be combined by

cancellation, or preserved by destruction in the dialectical sense.³ The outcome of this dialectic is a third character, which Schiller called *Beauty*, aligned with a third impulse, known as the *play impulse*. Schiller's aesthetic education entails developing this play impulse, cultivating an aesthetic sense as a means of opening oneself to the prospect of political freedom.

This proposition that aesthetics is a necessary prerequisite of politics seems to parallel one of the core arguments of this thesis. Perhaps this parallel should not be surprising because, oddly, the historical circumstances may be quite similar in one key regard. It seems apparent that the time of Schiller's writing, immediately following a failed revolution that dissolved into violence, would have been one in which all political ideals or alternative social structures were viewed with great scepticism or mistrust. This way of thinking seems to be true today, in an arguably post-political age in which any alternative to the capitalist system is discredited. Both circumstances give rise to theories (and practices) that place aesthetics first.

Schiller clearly means something quite precise with his notion of play as that which combines Man's sensuous and rational impulses. His choice of the word "play" is significant, however, seemingly inspired by a common impression of children at play – who largely fulfil the traits of Schiller's concept. The political theatres analysed in this thesis can all in various ways be seen as playing. Rev. Billy "plays" with the preaching paradigm and Christian form to create a fun community experience of anticonsumerism. *Christmas Shopping* "played" with the Christian act of giving to undermine the core principles of capitalism. CAE consistently "plays" at being scientists, activists, cult members, and more to achieve a radical pedagogical theatre. *Last Days' Slow Walking* could be seen as "play" – a game with specific autonomous rules that only the players know. And *Samson Airline* "played" with airline rituals and the ultimate terrorist act. In fact, Schiller was a "playwright" and had theatre in mind when constructing his theory. Though he did not necessarily conceive it as such, his theory of play seems best achieved by theatrical *actions* rather than theatre inside theatre buildings. Via participatory rituals, interaction, and confrontation, audiences become participants in the playing.

³ Translator Reginald Snell notes that Schiller may have been the first to use the German *aufgehoben* to imply a dialectical preservation – a usage that has had a long and influential history in political theory (Snell 1965, 88n1).

Like Baudrillard, Schiller here disparages direct political opposition and reform, advocating instead what seems to be the non-political action, akin to the singularity, of developing an aesthetic sense:

If, therefore, the principles I have laid down are correct, and experience confirms my description of the present time, we must continue to regard every attempt at reform as inopportune, and every hope based upon it as chimerical, until the division of inner Man has been done away with. (1965, 46)

Schiller's description of the "aesthetic sense" he seeks is strikingly similar to the theories and bases for political theatre explored in this thesis. He says: "Only insofar as it is *candid* (expressly renouncing all claim to reality), and only insofar as it is *self-dependent* (dispensing with all assistance from reality), is appearance aesthetic" (1965, 128). Does it not seem that Schiller's play impulse must exist in its own logical universe, like Baudrillard's singularity, and attain complete autonomy, as the Critical Art Ensemble desires? For Schiller, "Art must abandon actuality and soar with becoming boldness above necessity; for Art is the daughter of Freedom, and must receive her commission from the needs of spirits, not from the exigency of matter" (1965, 26) – and an artist must forge his own dignity and law and not look "downwards to fortune and to everyday needs" (1965, 52). Clearly, his aesthetic sense requires independence from issues of "fortune" and payment. In contemporary society, this perhaps requires relative autonomy from the capitalist market.

Given his concern for aesthetics, it is perhaps no surprise that Schiller seems to give preference to form over content:

In a truly beautiful work of art the content should do nothing, the form everything; for the wholeness of Man is affected by the form alone, and only individual powers by the content. (1965, 106)

It is apparently impossible to have a theatre totally devoid of content. Schiller therefore explained how one might make form the active ingredient:

The real artistic secret of the master consists in his *annihilating the material by means of the form*, and the more imposing, arrogant and alluring the material is in itself, the more autocratically it obtrudes itself in its operation, and the more inclined the beholder is to engage immediately with the material, the more triumphant is the art which forces back material and asserts its mastery over form. (1965, 106)

This clarification seems to parallel the analysis of September 11 as having an *excess* of meaning, rather than no meaning. To Schiller, the stronger the content or meaning

(material) of the work is, the more powerful the work will be if it succeeds in obliterating the content via the form. This is comparable to Baudrillard's analysis of the September 11 attacks as simultaneously undeniably symbolic (having an obvious meaning) and utterly uninterpretable. The form of the event overwhelmed even such blatant content.

This obliteration of the content by the form seems to be a common trait of theatrical *actions* as opposed to traditional narrative theatre in which the content often dominates. With the *Last Days Slow Walking*, as an example, it seems impossible to isolate what the "content" of that performance might be. Any proposition of content, such as walking, masks, or suits, or any proposition of meaning, such as "It's a comment on the fast pace of life" or "It's a strange cult ritual", is a function of the form as well. In actions, the content gets lifted (or obliterated) into a different realm. The *Christmas Shopping* content was Christian morality, but when realised in the action of giving back, it ceased to be mere content – an argument, say, that one could accept or deny – and became an experience. These actions can be considered aesthetic in Schiller's sense.

It is almost possible to interpret the September 11 attacks as a Beautiful work of Art, as Stockhausen did, but in Schillerian terms. Schiller's aesthetic sense, however, comprised an abhorrence of violence and death. Subtracting the violence and death would seem to leave theatrical actions. Certainly if discussing theatre as a form of terrorism the theories of Antonin Artaud are relevant. Though it seems incongruous to think of Schiller watching and approving of Artaudian theatre, their theories can be argued towards a similar conclusion. Artaud wanted theatre to be life: the notion of action, of viscerally affecting the spectator, is central to Artaud. In one of his last public appearances, Artaud explicitly revealed his frustration with words, claiming that "only bombs" could have his desired effect (Finter 1997). In the midst of his discussion of the September 11 attacks, Baudrillard comments: "This is *our* theatre of cruelty, the only one we have left" (2002, 30). Restricting political actions to the realm of bombs and terrorism seems unduly severe: with Baudrillard's theory of singularity, theatrical actions like those being discussed in this thesis seem able to achieve similar effects.

In Deleuze's *Logic of Sense*, he isolates the major problem with turning to any radical model or theory as a stimulus. He contemplates how one who desires to

provoke political change should react to “effective” models that, in Baudrillard’s terms, would be singular:

Well then, are we to speak always about Bousquet’s wound, about Fitzgerald’s and Lowry’s alcoholism, Nietzsche’s and Artaud’s madness while remaining on the shore? ... Or should we go a short way further to see for ourselves, be a little alcoholic, a little crazy, a little suicidal, a little of a guerrilla – just enough to extend the crack, but not enough to deepen it irremediably? ... Indeed, how are we to stay at the surface without staying on the shore? ... How is this *politics*, this full *guerrilla warfare* to be attained? (1969/1990, 157-58)

This major question coincides with Baudrillard’s major problematic, and is undeniably a central question regarding contemporary political theatre: How can one be inspired by an example without ruining it? How can one use a theory or practice as a “model” without reifying it? These “models” would include both the September 11 terrorist attack and Schiller’s aesthetic theory. I have tried to show in this thesis that perhaps, via theatre actions, one *can* be a “little suicidal” or a “little terroristic” – and can fundamentally destabilise the late capitalist totality through a radical aesthetic practice.

Schiller’s aesthetic sense – the “education” necessary before Man is ready for political liberty – similarly transgresses from the realm of art into the realm of life, so theatrical actions are appropriate. Schiller seems already to imply the nature of the relationship between the Beautiful work of art and its audience:

In our pleasure in Beauty...reflection is so completely intermingled with feeling that we believe ourselves to perceive form immediately. Beauty is therefore certainly an *object* for us, since reflection is the condition under which we have a sensation of it; but it is at the same time a *state of our personality*, since feeling is the condition under which we have a conception of it. It is then certainly form, because we contemplate it; but it is at the same time life, because we feel it. In a word, it is at once our state and our act. (1965, 122)

Not only does one perceive Beauty, then – one does not merely witness a play impulse in action – but one *becomes* Beautiful: one’s own play impulse is triggered. Though not necessarily what Schiller intended, this scenario seems most attainable via participatory, or potentially participatory, acts of art – which points primarily to theatrical actions. Schiller could be advocating what would amount to a theatrical state. There is no alienation in play; the individual and society, sensuous and rational impulses, are reconciled. Perhaps Schiller’s conception of Beauty as a state of our personality helps to explain how one might look to Jarry or Artaud – or indeed any

theory or practice today – for inspiration without destroying its radical force. Perhaps it is possible to adopt their inspiring traits as a state of our being. Keith Beaumont contends that pataphysics is, above all else, an attitude to life or spirit: “neither one of commitment nor refusal, of acceptance or rejection, but of a combination of each – a mixture of fascination and detachment akin to the amused playfulness of the child” (1984, 203). Indeed this could be an approach to all theory and practice in the theatre.

I began this thesis with anecdotes about my initial aesthetic experiences of political theatre. I am in no way claiming that after these aesthetic experiences I was immediately able to think and act politically. There have been countless steps and miniature epiphanies, many of which related to theatre. The birth and growth of my political consciousness has been and continues to be slow – often *painfully* slow throughout the course of this thesis. Either I am particularly dense or there is something bigger going on and I am part of a society, or at least generation, that can adequately be called a post-political age. The latter option seems to have significant support from this extended look at some recent political theatres. To those of this post-political age, it seems that theatrical *actions* and *experiences* may be one of the only ways to provoke a political consciousness.

I sketched above the arduous process of four actors setting out to create a piece of “undeniably political theatre”. It would be impossible to exaggerate our frustration and embarrassment throughout the process, and particularly at having to “give up” after *eight months* of training, research, and rehearsals – and beg for outside help. Our inability to create political theatre was certainly not for lack of trying or desire.

In one of our very early training sessions, we were already confused as to how to proceed, how best to prepare ourselves for political work. We began with some basic fitness training and standard theatre exercises, and ended up in a game of follow-the-leader. The game began in the theatre but soon took us out into the Christchurch Arts Centre. We chased and mimicked our leader, Marian, up Worcester Boulevard, following and imitating a middle-aged couple, who found us amusing and walked in circles to “play” with us. Dedicated to our game we spontaneously followed them, coincidentally, into the Court Theatre, Christchurch’s predominant mainstream theatre. We cut through the wine-drinking pre-show crowd and went out the back exit, stopping to stare at a man who was reading the paper – who looked back at us and asked: “Ah, yes, but is it *art*?” We circled back to the courtyard near

our theatre where, still following Marian, we slid in the wet grass and mud and emitted a few joyful yelps. Shortly, an Arts Centre security guard turned up and asked if it was we who had been yelling. Marian stared at him but did not speak, and the rest of us did the same. He immediately told us we had to leave Arts Centre property or he would call the police. We (following Marian) silently rose and returned to our theatre.

I felt nervous and mischievous, and happily helped – even urged – the group to decide not to play follow-the-leader again. Instead, we decided that we would stick to our designated task of creating unequivocally political theatre. In my focus and struggle to create theatre with obvious political content and intent, I had blinded myself to what had actually happened. Clearly, our simple game of follow-the-leader, with no political intent whatsoever – in fact the accidental consequence of being unsure *how* to be political – took on political significance when the rules of our game undermined social norms and established authority.

This of course strikes me as a funny coincidence now, more than three years later, that I am entertaining ways that aesthetics could be the foundation of a political theatre. I can vividly recall how terrified and embarrassed I was throughout that game, a 23-year-old devotedly playing follow-the-leader in public. In retrospect, I can perhaps maintain that I was scared of just how radical that silly game was, fundamentally challenging established authority by refusing to play by its rules. Instead, at the time, I was wishing to create brilliant intellectual political theatre, theatre in which I made a profound and overt argument about the September 11 attacks, Israel, and Palestine, theatre (in other words) that would get me liked and respected. I desired to create that which would be popular among my liberal academic friends, that would confirm our intellectual and political superiority to conservatives. In short, I was seeking exactly that pseudo political theatre that I have come to scorn. Its antithesis, our game of follow-the-leader, was accidental and far from eloquent, but is one of many examples of how a playful theatrical action can have a terroristic effect – of how, in an arguably post-political age, aesthetic actions and experiences can be the foundation of a political theatre.

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