Creating Change Through Spectacle:
Art, Life, and Politics in 1960s Guerrilla Theatre

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

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INTRODUCTION

> For those who like their art pure of social issues, I must say—F*** ***!
> buddy, theatre IS a social entity. It can dull the minds of the citizens, it can
> wipe out guilt, it can teach all to accept the Great Society and the
> Amaaaaarican way of life (just like the movies, Ma) or it can look to changing
> that society… and that's *political*.
>
> <div align="right">R. G. Davis, "Guerrilla Theatre", 1966 [1]</div>

In the 1960s and early 1970s, many Americans were deeply interested in the idea of changing their society through political engagement and protest. Following the example of the civil rights movement in the 1950s and 60s, which demonstrated the effectiveness of nonviolent protest and mass organizing, Americans who were critical of U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War gathered to express their views through public demonstrations and other organizing efforts. Although the conflict between Vietnam and the United States had been ongoing since the mid-1950s, popular support of the American role in the war decreased steadily through the 1960s, leading to widespread criticism of many aspects of American society through the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s. Dissenters accused the American establishment of hypocrisy, apathy, and immorality; meanwhile, smaller social movements arose to fight sexism, homophobia, and class issues. Thus the antiwar movement that formed out of these radical voices included both political and cultural critiques of the country's trajectory; it was a debate of morals and values, "a struggle for the nation's very soul."[2] From this atmosphere, in which radical activity grew out of cultural and moral discontent, guerrilla theatre emerged as one of many practices intended to foster societal change.

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[1] R. G. Davis, "Guerrilla Theatre," *The Tulane Drama Review: TDR* 10, no. 4 (1966), 131.
[2] Maurice Isserman and Michael Kazin, *America Divided: The Civil War of the 1960s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 4.

Guerrilla theatre was a form of political art that was uniquely suited to spread radical political ideas such as the ones at the heart of the antiwar movement. It differed from previous forms of political theatre both through its intense political engagement and its use of nontraditional performance spaces, usually public areas that were not intended as performance sites, in order to reach beyond a typical theatre-going audience. As Bradford D. Martin wrote in *The Theater is in the Street: Politics and Performance in Sixties America*, one of the core beliefs of protest theatre during this time was "the moral conviction that personal choices, lifestyles, and acts of artistic creation are infused with important political dimensions."[3] This led participants in guerrilla theatre to scrutinize "the relationship between politics and lifestyle" in order to attack complacency and materialism in upper- and middle-class Americans and condemn them for being complicit in the horrors of the Vietnam War. The particulars of each guerrilla theatre group's political agenda varied, though all were anti-government, critical of the war, opposed to the priorities of capitalism, and engaged with Marxist ideas about class.

In addition to its condemnation of the political status quo, guerrilla theatre rejected the conventions of traditional theatre, which guerrilla theatre participants viewed as being culturally elitist and excessively motivated by profit. This rejection of traditional theatre is most obvious in the use of atypical performance space in the practice of guerrilla theatre. Viewing traditional theaters and cultural sites as "bourgeois," stifling, or inaccessible to the people who would most benefit from their radical messages, and disliking the commercial aspirations of many theatre companies,

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[3] Bradford D. Martin, *The Theater is in the Street: Politics and Performance in Sixties America* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004), 19.

participants in guerrilla theatre sought to bypass those institutions by putting on unscheduled performances in public areas. This often meant performing on street corners or sidewalks, though some groups experimented with public spaces such as parks, government buildings, shopping malls, grocery stores, or university buildings. In addition, by gathering an "unintentional" audience—"an audience that did not pay or even gather to see (let alone participate in) a show"—they hoped to spread their radical ideas more broadly than if they had only performed for intentional audiences.[4] Because audiences were not used to receiving potent political messages from artistic performances, minimizing the awareness of an audience that they were about to view a show limited their ability to process it as art and therefore categorize it as separate from life; in essence, the audience members were not able to put up psychological barriers between the message of the performance and their real lives. Guerrilla theatre's departure from traditional theater spaces was a response to logistical and financial concerns, issues of political ideology, and a growing unease among radical artists regarding the artistic integrity of a capitalistic theatre institution. Thus the clear boundaries between art and politics, politics and lifestyle, and art and life were systematically broken down and reconsidered through the practice of guerrilla theatre.

While guerrilla theatre was first established as a practice several years before the antiwar movement reached its peak, it became associated with the movement as it developed; its engaging and visually oriented nature made it useful within antiwar activity. Guerrilla theatre troupes saw themselves as being the vanguard of radical belief in the 1960s, spreading their political ideas to new audiences by forming

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[4] Maggie Hutcheson, "Demechanizing Our Politics: Street Performance and Making Change," in *Wild Fire: Art as Activism* ed. Deborah Barndt (Toronto: Sumach Press, 2006), 81.

meaningful personal connections during their performances. As such, guerrilla theatre was particularly useful within the antiwar movement for creating spectacles at demonstrations or supplementing other public events. Troupes attended rallies, demonstrations, and protests against the war and other social issues from around 1965 to 1972, when the antiwar movement was most active. Troupes were also engaging in radical activity on their own time, however, staging scenes and skits independent of antiwar events.

In my examination of guerrilla theatre as a simultaneously political and artistic entity, particularly my investigation into how it functioned as a movement, a clear set of differences emerged between various guerrilla theatre troupes. Therefore, in order to better examine their goals and practices, I have broken them down into two categories: avant-garde guerrilla theatre groups and agitational guerrilla theatre groups. The avant-garde groups were those that formed first, born out of the art world and becoming increasingly radical through the early 1960s, adopting street theatre tactics in order to circumvent the many limitations of staged shows. The examples of avant-garde troupes given here—the San Francisco Mime Troupe, the Bread and Puppet Theater, and the Living Theatre—are defined by their commitment to guerrilla theatre as an artistic form, their goal of breaking down boundaries between art and life, and their cooperative but independent involvement with the antiwar movement. I have labeled them as "avant-garde" because they were the innovators of guerrilla theatre. The agitational groups, on the other hand—the examples here being the Wisconsin Draft Resistance Union Caravan, the NYU Guerrilla Theatre Coordinating Committee, and the Radical Arts Troupe of Berkeley—were comprised largely of student activists

and other volunteers who followed in the footsteps of the avant-garde groups; they adapted the artistic innovations of those groups for more direct political use. They operated from within established antiwar organizations as sub-committees rather than working independently of (but cooperatively with) these organizations. Thus they earn the label "agitational" because they used guerrilla theatre primarily to agitate—to generate public concern about antiwar issues and to urge political action in their audiences.

Because it emerged as a response to unique political, artistic, and cultural circumstances in America during this time, guerrilla theatre activity was contained within a rather limited temporal frame, from about 1959 to 1973—though it was at its height for an even shorter period, between 1965 and 1971. The agitational guerrilla theatre groups, as they were more closely connected to the antiwar movement, were most active in the late 60s and early 70s. The avant-garde groups formed independently of the antiwar movement, mostly coalescing when radical beliefs were becoming more widespread but dissenters had not yet organized a mass antiwar movement; however, the most prominent avant-garde groups share a similar timeframe for their development.

The chronology typical of avant-garde groups is perhaps best represented through the example of the San Francisco Mime Troupe, one of the most famous groups engaged in guerrilla theatre during the period. Founded in 1959 by R G Davis, a director with mime and dance experience, the Mime Troupe had its roots in the world of traditional, artistically "pure" theatre it would eventually come to oppose. As Davis and other company members developed increasingly radical political views, they perceived

an ever-growing distance between their socially isolated art and their socially engaged ideologies; as a result they became frustrated with theatre as an institution and sought alternative forms of engagement with the art form. The group re-formed as a radical theatre group in 1961, developing guerrilla theatre as a distinctive practice and gaining increased attention, both positive and negative, between 1961 and 1965. From 1965 to 1968, as the antiwar movement picked up momentum, the San Francisco Mime Troupe became well known in radical circles as they participated in demonstrations and staged their own antiwar plays. From 1968 to 1969, Davis began to redefine their goals, as they were no longer achieving success at the forefront of the now-highly-visible antiwar movement. The end of the 1960s marked a major change in the operation of the group and, although it persisted as a radical theatre company, the San Francisco Mime Troupe was no longer developing or practicing guerrilla theatre after this time. The other avant-garde groups discussed here, the Bread and Puppet Theater and The Living Theatre, formed and grew over slightly different time frames; for example, while Bread and Puppet was founded in 1963, by 1965 Bread and Puppet and the Mime Troupe were achieving similar visibility and success. The general trajectory was the same, if not the exact dates.

While the core ideas of guerrilla theatre were developed by multiple troupes independently, R G Davis was responsible for bringing the term "guerrilla theatre" into general use. Davis penned a speech entitled "Guerrilla Theatre" that he read to the San Francisco Mime Troupe sometime in the early sixties in order to explain his radical vision. Because this was the first documented use of the term, and the speech later found a wide audience through its 1966 publication in the *Tulane Drama Review*, Davis

is often given credit for the term. However, Davis himself attributes it to actor-playwright Peter Berg, who suggested it during a discussion with Davis in 1963.[5] Within the speech, Davis condemned the contemporaneous social and political climate within the United States, speaking out against the ongoing Vietnam War and the complacency of the people, noting: "no one feels any guilt, not even the poor fool dropping the bombs."[6] He then laid out his plan for the creation of a morally focused, anti-establishment, anti-capitalist theatre that could fight the apathy and immorality he perceived within the country as a whole. The "guerrilla theatre" he spoke about necessitated resourcefulness, community building, and non-traditional performance spaces, so as to separate itself from the moral failings of traditional theatre (defined by Davis as reliance on commercial success or critical recognition, thus catering to an affluent audience and maintaining cultural elitism). Davis clearly drew inspiration from Che Guevara's *Guerrilla Warfare*, which he quoted at the beginning of the speech:

> The guerrilla fighter needs full help from the people of the area…
> From the very beginning of the struggle he has the intention of
> destroying an unjust order and therefore an intention, more or less
> hidden, to replace the old with something new.[7]

While guerrilla fighters needed help from "the people of the area" to provide sanctuary and supplies necessary for an armed struggle, guerrilla theatre participants needed the eyes and ears of the American populace so that it could spread radical antiwar ideas far and wide. Troupes achieved this by staging public shows by donation rather than implementing ticket sales, creating content that was directly relevant to the places and

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5 "History," San Francisco Mime Troupe, accessed March 28, 2016,
http://www.sfmt.org/company/history.php.
6 Davis, "Guerrilla Theatre" in *TDR*, 130.
7 Davis, "Guerrilla Theatre" in *TDR*, 130.

times in which they performed in order to capture audience attention, and intentionally pursuing audiences beyond regular theatre-goers or art enthusiasts. Guerrilla theatre was intended to act as "peoples' art" by reaching lower-class individuals in order to establish popular support for radical ideas and change the system in their benefit. Davis saw his model of guerrilla theatre as not only a voice against the American establishment, meant to spread radical ideas to new audiences, but also as an experiment in replacing the status quo in theatre with a less hypocritical system. Despite the numerous differences between the Cuban Revolution and the American antiwar movement of the 1960s, the comparison of guerrilla theatre to guerrilla warfare was an apt one for several reasons.

In the first chapter of *Guerrilla Warfare*, Guevara introduced several key points that correlate well from guerrilla warfare to guerrilla theatre: first, the idea that popular forces can win against an army, and secondly, that it is not necessary to wait for favorable conditions for revolution because they can be created through deliberate work. The radical artists involved in guerrilla theatre were not, of course, opposing a traditional army, but they stood opposed to forces within both the theatrical institution and the political establishment that were much larger, better organized, and had far more resources; thus the comparison is a sound one. In addition to the ideological similarities, guerrilla theatre groups also displayed many logistical parallels with guerrilla fighters. Both favored small and compact units in order to ensure they maintained the tactical advantage, using stealth and speed to evade "the enemy" (understood for guerrilla theatre as those who enforce the status quo of Western society, such as the police). Guerrilla theatre casts were highly mobile, ready to pack up

and try again elsewhere if police arrived to shut down their performances. Although they lacked the structure and resources available to those supporting the establishment, the small size of groups allowed them to create person-to-person connections with audience members and reference local concerns or current events to engage their audience. Like a guerrilla war band, these theatre troupes did not believe they were going to achieve revolution through the completion of their own work alone; rather, they understood themselves as the "fighting vanguard of the people," gathering enough public support for revolution that masses would develop radical views and seek revolution as well. They were socially conscious and devoted to the creation of lasting societal change:

> Why does the guerrilla fighter fight? We must come to the inevitable conclusion that the guerrilla fighter is a social reformer, that he takes up arms responding to the angry protest of the people against the oppressors, and that he fights in order to change the social system that keeps all his unarmed brothers in ignominy and misery.[8]

Thus, when Davis and other radical artists began to understand themselves as operating within a hypocritical and damaging system, they sought to dismantle the harmful structures in their society. Guerrilla theatre, as a form of visual performance, was well suited for carrying revolutionary messages to new audiences and gaining increased exposure for radical ideas.

It is certainly notable that the men and women involved in guerrilla theatre engaged with such weighty political topics through an art form that was traditionally removed from the political realm: theatrical performance. However, it is clear that they sought specifically to bring theatre and art into political discussions in order to

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[8] Che Guevara, *Guerrilla Warfare* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1961), 6.

facilitate the breakdown—or, at least, the reimagining—of distinct boundaries between art, politics, and the 'real life' of Americans in the sixties. Thus guerrilla theatre was perhaps a moral response to the perceived immoralities of the war and the aspects of American culture that allowed the continuation of military engagement in Vietnam. Guerrilla theatre was an innovative practice of political art that was successful in its time and influential to public protest actions in America for the rest of the 20th century and arguably beyond; as such, I am most interested in how it functioned as political art and why it was well suited for the political, artistic, cultural, and moral goals of those who engaged in the practice. The primary aim of this thesis is to examine the efficacy of guerrilla theatre as both political action and artistic expression, by investigating the way these groups conceptualized their own work and gave advice to others interested in the practice, especially in regard to balancing the political and aesthetic elements of their work. Guerrilla theatre had unique power as an antiwar platform both in the messages it could send and how audiences received those messages; however, the process of synthesizing political and artistic elements came with its own drawbacks and complications.

There is relatively little scholarly writing about specifically, due to an abundance of other topics in American culture and counter-culture during the same timeframe. Because it was political art, is not a topic that can be adequately explored through an exclusively political or exclusively artistic lens. Separating the two aspects is not always possible, and overlaps and fluctuation between the two is inevitable. Most secondary scholarship that includes information about guerrilla theatre places it in the context of the broader antiwar movement, implicitly giving precedence to political motivations

and influences over artistic ones by examining it as part of a political phenomenon. Other monographs and articles write about guerrilla theatre as an intersection between the two realms, though usually by focusing on one prominent avant-garde troupe and not approaching guerrilla theatre as a wider practice. I aim to fill a gap in the existing scholarship by examining the complexity of guerrilla theatre rather than approaching it through an existing framework that prioritizes one aspect or another. I have also noticed in my research that writings on this topic rarely include details about the agitational groups, especially those organized by non-students or those within the Midwest. My conclusions about the phenomenon of guerrilla theatre will be strengthened by examination of multiple troupes from diverse backgrounds rather than the use of one group as an exemplary model.

None of the groups I discuss here maintained their involvement with guerrilla theatre beyond the late 1960s or early 1970s, particularly after the antiwar movement began its decline. The agitational groups disbanded or dropped out of sight, while the avant-garde groups underwent dramatic structural and artistic changes. However, within their brief period of activity, these theatre troupes shocked and thrilled audiences across the country, expanded the range of radical antiwar activity, and published their own creative material to gain wider attention for their work. The intersection of the unique political climate and artistic sensibilities in America during the period created a historical moment in which guerrilla theatre was effective as both political expression and artistic exploration.

The first chapter explains the rise of avant-garde guerrilla theatre. I introduce historical examples of political theatre in 20th century America, explain the political and

artistic climate in the 1950s and 1960s that allowed for the formation of guerrilla theatre, and introduce the major avant-garde troupes. In the second chapter, I introduce the agitational groups, exploring their connections to antiwar organizations and analyzing the creative and instructional material they published about themselves. The third chapter acts as a deeper exploration of guerrilla theatre as political art. I first identify several unique issues resulting from the intersection of political and artistic aspects of guerrilla theatre; later, I establish the differences in how agitational and avant-garde groups conceptualized political art, and how the avant-garde groups changed their engagement with guerrilla theatre at the end of the 1960s as the form began its decline.

CHAPTER 1: SETTING THE STAGE FOR GUERRILLA THEATRE

The avant-garde groups that made up the first wave of guerrilla theatre were not the first to attempt a blending of theatre and politics by any means. When the groups began to form in the late 1950s and early 1960s, they drew inspiration from a decades-long tradition of political theatre in America. During the Great Depression, for example, companies within the government-subsidized Federal Theatre Project staged 'Living Newspapers' that drew on local events in order to convey messages about wider social problems affecting the nation.[1] Political messages were not limited to government-funded groups, either, as similar themes guided the development of many actors and playwrights working independently of such programs, such as Clifford Odets. Though Odets had a long career writing plays and movie scripts, his biggest successes with political plays occurred through the 1930s, when he was involved with the theatre collective known as The Group.[2]

During the late 1940s and early 1950s, however, Odets and other theatre artists like him had a much harder time finding audiences willing to hear leftist political messages. A backlash against communist themes and a general rise in conservatism meant that it was no longer productive for artists to use their work as a political platform—and, in many cases, no longer safe. The House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) monitored and blacklisted various artists in order to eliminate communist influences, often forcing those who created political art to choose between

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[1] Barry Witham, *The Federal Theatre Project: A Case Study* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 78.
[2] Christopher J. Herr, *Clifford Odets and American Political Theatre* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003), 27.

expressing their beliefs and maintaining their livelihood. Because of this pressure, the majority of mainstream artists avoided mixing political messages into their work during this time, choosing instead to focus on exploration of form or other inoffensive innovations.[3]

Guerrilla theatre can therefore be understood as one particularly dazzling aspect of a broader resurgence of political theatre after a period of inactivity due to a hostile political climate. Through a combination of changes occurring in both American politics and American artistic movements, the late 1950s and early 1960s were suited to incubate radical street theatre as a form of protest. As open critiques of American society re-entered political discourse, artists were once again free to explore controversial themes and messages without fear of political or financial consequences. Meanwhile, traction gained by the civil rights movement began to bring renewed attention to other social issues of the time.[4] The large-scale antiwar movement was the most visible result of this increased attention, as more and more citizens expressed misgivings with U.S. foreign policy in Vietnam and surrounding areas such as Cambodia. Artistic forms like theatre were once again useful in the spread of political information to large audiences.

Guerrilla theatre would not have succeeded to the extent that it did if the goals of the movement had been purely political or purely aesthetic. However, each individual participant approached these issues differently, and each had his or her own priorities in terms of both form and content. The avant-garde groups were made up primarily of

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[3] Bradford D. Martin, *The Theater is in the Street: Politics and Performance in Sixties America* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004), 56.
[4] Maurice Isserman and Michael Kazin, *America Divided: The Civil War of the 1960s* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2000), 2.

theatre professionals or other full-time participants, influenced by 20th century experimental artistic movements in America and Europe, who saw their craft as a way to convey their beliefs in an increasingly political environment. It was only after 1965, widely understood as a turning point within the antiwar movement in which some grew more militant and radical, that agitational guerrilla theatre became more common in antiwar demonstrations and events.

This chapter introduces three prominent groups who were involved in the beginnings of guerrilla theatre in the 1960s. The Living Theatre, founded in 1947 by playwright Judith Malina and artist Julian Beck, began to experiment with venues outside of the theater around 1963.[5] The San Francisco Mime Troupe, founded and directed by actor R. G. Davis in 1959, was by 1963 facing legal trouble for their commedia dell'arte performances in public parks.[6] The Bread and Puppet Theatre, founded in 1963 by Peter Schumann, became well known for their colorful performances with papier-mâché puppets in the streets of New York.[7] Although they each had their own aesthetic styles and theatrical goals, I identify these theatre companies as existing within the same category of "avant-garde guerrilla theatre" because they share several important characteristics. First, they were all founded by professional artists and included many artists, actors, writers, poets, and directors who contributed both politically and artistically. Perhaps in part because they drew from

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[5] "History," The Living Theatre, accessed December 14, 2015, http://www.livingtheatre.org/#!history/c139r.

[6] "History," San Francisco Mime Troupe, accessed December 14, 2015, http://www.sfmt.org/company/history.php.

[7] "About Bread and Puppet," Bread and Puppet Theater, accessed December 14, 2015, http://breadandpuppet.org/about-bread-and-puppet.

such a broad pool of talent, they valued communal creation and artistic collaboration, rejecting the hierarchies of traditional theatre companies. They concerned themselves with commercial success only so far as it was necessary, usually framing their goals in moral or even spiritual terms rather than considering it a form of business. In addition, they all blended guerrilla theatre methods with radical performances in traditional theater venues, even after they began to experiment with nontraditional spaces.

In order to understand what led these groups away from traditional performance styles and toward the principles that defined guerrilla theatre, it is important to consider guerrilla theatre in context. The first section of this chapter explores the antecedents of guerrilla theatre in 20th century America, tracing important ideals of the guerrilla theatre movement through other examples of political theatre. The second section establishes how the political and cultural climate of the early 1960s created a hospitable environment for this sort of artistic exploration. The third and final section returns to the three groups mentioned above, examining their formation and development through the early 1960s and explaining their specific political and artistic goals.

Artistic Antecedents to Guerrilla Theatre

It can be difficult to discuss political theatre as a category without raising questions about what purely apolitical art would look like. In their introduction to *Staging Resistance: Essays on Political Theater*, Jeanne Colleran and Jenny S. Spencer argue that theatrical performances, and indeed all forms of cultural production, are by definition "impure acts" because they are "simultaneously socially implicated and

socially critical."[8] Because all art is created from within society, for an audience within society, and therefore contains implicit messages about that society, all art engages political ideas of some sort. However, the term is commonly applied only in certain ways; art that upholds the political and social status quo is not understood as "political art", whereas art that dissents is understood that way. Therefore, the meaning of the term relies heavily on cultural context to make sense. The following examples all qualify as political theatre in that they aimed to change the status quo, though their precise engagement with these goals varies from group to group. Some staged performances that contained overt social critiques in the plot or message, while others made a political stand through their structural choices as a company: challenging the understanding of theatre as commerce, for example, would be considered a political aim. Most of the theatre companies were in fact "political" for a variety of reasons, as their political ideas often affected their artistic performances as well as their activities offstage.

Although none of these predecessor groups could be understood as participating in guerrilla theatre, their developments contributed to the eventual rise of that practice, and the avant-garde guerrilla theatre artists could not have made the transition from stage to street without the foundation provided by these groups. History yields examples of political theatre from across the globe dating as far back as ancient Greece, but for the sake of clarity I have limited the scope of my research to early 20th century American examples. As political art is usually a response to particular events, relying on knowledge of politics and popular culture in order to be evaluated, drawing examples

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[8] Jeanne Colleran and Jenny S. Spencer, *Staging Resistance: Essays on Political Theater* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998), 1.

from a broader geographical or historical scope would necessitate lengthier explanations that are not relevant to my main arguments. In addition, I have specifically chosen examples that illuminate important aspects of guerrilla theatre philosophy, rather than creating an exhaustive list. Theatre historian Jan Cohen-Cruz, in her writings on the local theatre movement, includes a caveat before she begins outlining historical antecedents: she is not writing a "cause-and-effect history" or implying a linear progression from one group to the next, but rather explaining a "genealogy" through which key aspects of a later movement can be seen emerging, strengthening, or changing "for purposes including and exceeding the aesthetic."[9] This is a useful framework through which to approach the groups that influenced the formation of guerrilla theatre, as they were not directly contributing to guerrilla theatre ideas but rather providing examples for theatrical alternatives to established models.

American Pageantry, 1910s

At the turn of the century, large community performances known as pageants underwent a notable increase in popularity. These events centered on a theme rather than a narrative, including elements of prose, song, dance, and marches through public; they relied almost universally on local volunteers from the community rather than paid actors. Although the form had existed in Europe since the Middle Ages, its characteristic emphasis on community involvement and civic pride was well suited to transmit messages of patriotism during a time in which increased immigration was raising

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[9] Jan Cohen-Cruz, *Local Acts: Community-Based Performance in the United States* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 17.

questions about the identity of America as a whole.[10] A May 1914 publication by the American Pageant Association described the scope of their work as including "all dramatic and festival activities of a distinctly *community* character," emphasizing community involvement as fundamental to this style of performance.[11] Therefore, not only was reliance on volunteers useful for putting on large scale shows without incurring prohibitive cost, but it was also vital to what a pageant sought to achieve during this period: the strengthening of community through personal involvement in an emotional experience.

Another pamphlet about pageantry, also published in 1914, explained that the philosophy behind pageants lined up with a broader movement at the time: the rise in popularity of the form indicated "the awakening of the people to self-assertion in their recreations, just as they [were] rising to take business and politics into their own hands—to participate in their own entertainment, not merely pay to see professional actors."[12] Mass participation in these events, especially the participation of recent immigrants was both educational for the individual and politically useful for society as a whole, because pageants succeeded in forming personal connections that traditional theatrical performances could not achieve. Cohen-Cruz notes that the educational usefulness of the pageant form can be easily exploited in order to brainwash an audience, such as in the case of Nazi Nuremberg Party Rallies in the 1930s. While she is

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[10] Cohen-Cruz, *Local Acts*, 18.
[11] American Pageant Association, *"Who's Who" in Pageantry, issued by the American Pageant Association (Founded at Boston, 1913), in the Endeavor to Establish Uniform Standards for Pageants & Pageantry in America* (New York: American Pageant Association, 1914; Hathi Trust, 2015), http://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/000321406.
[12] Ralph Davol, *A Handbook of American Pageantry* (Taunton, Mass: Davol Publishing Company, 1914; Hathi Trust, 2015), http://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/001436811.

clear to point out that U.S. pageantry in the early 20th century was not performed for overtly sinister purposes, she criticizes its use of "sanitized images" in order to further political goals of integration and assimilation without addressing the hardships of immigrant life.[13]

However, just as those in power could use pageantry in order to teach or reinforce the status quo, those with oppositional voices could harness its power to change the status quo. The most prominent example of this can be found in the 1913 Paterson Strike Pageant. A group of silk mill workers from Paterson, New Jersey, organized a strike beginning in February 1913 in response to increasingly dangerous working conditions and the mistreatment of immigrant workers. On June 7th 1913, the union organization Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) brought together roughly a thousand strikers from nearby textile mills, who marched through the streets of New York and assembled in Madison Square Garden. There, strikers staged a theatrical recreation of the Paterson picket line for an audience of over 15,000. The program of the event outlined four main sections of the performance.[14] The first, titled "the mills alive—the workers dead," depicted workers preparing for another bleak day of work before realizing their collective power once the strike was called. The second, "the mills dead—the workers alive", culminated in a scuffle between protestors, scab characters, and police characters. The third took the form of a funeral procession for Vincenzo Modestino, a silk mill worker who had been accidentally killed by police during the strikes in Paterson; the organizers included the reading of speeches that had been made

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[13] Cohen-Cruz, *Local Acts*, 19.
[14] Martin Green, *New York 1913: the Armory Show and the Paterson Strike Pageant* (New York: Scribner, 1988), 201.

at his real funeral. The fourth and final scene featured the singing of songs that had grown out of the strike.

Pageant organizers aimed to engage viewers in the performance by directing the actors to march through the audience on their way to the stage. As the show continued, members of the audience reacted and expressed emotion along with the performers, and the event was considered a success by performers, audiences, and organizers alike. However, that success had a more lasting impact on the realm of political theatre than it did on the IWW agenda. Historian Martin Green writes that "the immediate responses to the event of June 7 can roughly be divided between those concerned with its artistic character, which were enthusiastic, and those concerned with its political effect, which were not."[15] For instance, *The Independent* was "very appreciative of the pageant's artistic effect" after the show, despite printing editorials a month earlier urging readers not to sympathize with the strikers. The pageant was praised for its effective artistic choices even as their IWW-directed political agenda was condemned for being too extreme.

The example of the Paterson Strike Pageant is significant because it involved the appropriation of a popular artistic form for clear political action, and it demonstrates that the political power of street performances was not a new idea in the 1960s; however, relevant developments in more traditional theatrical establishments were also occurring during this time. One such example is the Provincetown Players, a small theatre company in New England that came to have a huge impact on American theatre as a whole.

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[15] Green, *New York 1913*, 205.

Provincetown Players, 1916-1922

The Provincetown Players was a theatre group founded in 1916 by a number of artists and writers identified with the "Little Renaissance" of New York City. The Little Renaissance was defined by a rejection of 19th century, predominantly European forms of art in favor of an exploration of modern American themes and stories.[16] The Paterson strike was a direct influence on the creation of the Provincetown Players, as many of its performances used visual styles associated with patriotic pageants in order to make specific, socially critical points about immigrant experiences at the time. Although the group's performances were not as explicitly political as the Paterson Strike Pageant (as the group was comprised of artists and intellectuals rather than IWW organizers and laborers), its rejection of the prioritization of commercial concerns over aesthetic ones was politically charged and remained significant to the tradition of American theatre for decades to come.

The Provincetown Players established itself in its constitution as a democratic collective, allowing all members of the company to participate in decision-making. The company drew upon individuals with experience in different artistic fields, including many who would go on to gain widespread recognition for their work: playwrights like Eugene O'Neill, poets like Edna St. Vincent Millay, and painters such as Marguerite and William Zorach, among many others. Many of the individuals involved with the group identified as anarchists, though it is important to remember that the term did not necessarily bring connotations of radical violence or destruction. As Brenda Murphy points out in her writing on the Provincetown Players, the members of the group aimed

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[16] Brenda Murphy, *The Provincetown Players and the Culture of Modernity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 16.

for "a gradual change that would free the individual from what they thought were the oppressive laws and social constraints of the modern state" rather than a violent dismantling of the system of government.[17]

Perhaps most significant to my research, the Provincetown Players identified itself with the "little theatre movement" that was gaining traction across the country since around 1912.[18] The movement sought to establish a tradition of American theatre separate from the corporate structure of Broadway in the hopes of breaking down economic and geographic barriers that barred access to theatrical performances. The little theatre movement was itself responsible for a rise in political drama in the United States, "for it fused the aesthetic experimentation of European drama with American political leftism characterized by socialism, progressivism, and an opposition to 1920s Republican normalcy."[19] Although the Provincetown Players did not originate the movement, the group was one of its most prominent examples. Indeed, the group is recognized as "the major progenitor of experimental non-commercial theatre in America," often credited as the first in the country to reject conventional ideas about theatre as business in order to practice theatre as art.[20] The Provincetown Players was still a professional theatre company, aiming to earn their livelihood through their work, but the company was the first to achieve commercial success in a way that prioritized artistic and moral concerns over monetary goals.[21] As such, it served as a model to guerrilla theatre troupes fifty years later. Without a historical precedent of alternative

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[17] Murphy, *The Provincetown Players*, 31.
[18] Cohen-Cruz, *Local Acts*, 25.
[19] Herr, *Clifford Odets and American Political Theatre*, 16.
[20] Murphy, *The Provincetown Players*, 1.
[21] Herr, *Clifford Odets and American Political Theatre*, 16.

forms to commercial theatre, guerrilla theatre troupes would not have had the success that they did, as their rejection of commercial success facilitated the success of their political messages. Guerrilla theatre groups of any type or quality would not have been able to prioritize a political message, act autonomously as creative entities, or engage with other alternative theatrical or political goals if they had not been able to approach theatre in an explicitly non-commercial way.

Federal Theatre Project, 1930s

In many ways, the goals of the Federal Theatre Project were directly informed by the goals of the little theatre movement. Founded in a 1935 Act of Congress, as part of the Work Progress Administration (WPA), the Federal Theatre Project was designed to be a work-relief program in order to employ out-of-work theatre professionals during the Great Depression; the goal of such a project was to enable people to earn wages in the field with which they had experience.[22] Federal Theaters were opened in cities across the country, in accordance with one of the main goals of the program—the creation of "local theatre" as a way to tell the stories of a broader demographic while also increasing the physical accessibility of high-quality theatre to a larger audience. The Theatre Project expanded its audience geographically too, aiming at rural populations or working-class individuals who could not or did not attend other plays. Their attempts to include the experiences of underrepresented groups such as racial minorities or the working class led many Federal Theatre groups to develop strong political messages within their shows in order to spread their ideas about social reform.

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[22] Witham, *The Federal Theatre Project*, 2.

If the main artistic goal of the Federal Theatre Project was to create performances that would be relevant to larger portions of local populations, none of their projects were more successful than their Living Newspapers. By synthesizing eyewitness reports, newspaper articles, and other factual sources about a real-life event, playwrights with the Federal Theatre Project created productions about ongoing social issues that were specific to the time and place they were performed. For example, a 1937 production entitled *Power* focused on the privatization of electricity and the ramifications such business deals had on American citizens, raising questions about the commercialization of vital aspects of modern life by portraying private electric companies in a negative way. The end of the show was marked by the projection of a giant question mark onto the stage because events that had been dramatized for the performance had not yet come to an end in the real world, so there could be no satisfying ending without delving into fiction.[23]

Although the government subsidized the Federal Theatre Project in order to pay the company's wages, the groups were not awarded money for necessary expenses such as scenery, costumes, props, lighting, or publicity. Therefore, most of the theatres struggled continually to cover expenses and this influenced their performance lineup more and more as the years progressed. While putting on shows about contemporary social issues furthered the political and artistic goals of the Federal Theatre Project, putting on shows that were popular with affluent audiences covered the costs associated with a full-scale theatrical production. Thus the Federal Theatre Project's adherence to traditional artistic structures and theatrical conventions limited their

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[23] Witham, *The Federal Theatre Project*, 78.

ability to broadcast more political messages, as their financial survival was prioritized over their ideological goals.

Another example of performance venue acting as a constraining factor on the message of a performance can be found in the 1937 attempts of Edwin O'Connor, director of the Federal Theatre in Seattle at the time, to secure a location for his company's shows.[24] The building designated for their use had been slated for demolition, other local theaters could not accommodate the Federal Theatre's schedule needs, and local school principals had begun denying them access to rented auditorium space due to the project's reputation for including communist themes. Purchasing and maintaining another theater was not an economic possibility, so O'Connor began looking into nontraditional venues. He eventually came upon the idea of building a showboat, hoping that it would be able to support itself by traveling and bringing performances to new audiences without placing any outside limitations on the style or content of their performances. O'Connor was ultimately unsuccessful in this venture, due in large part to pressure from other local theaters who did not want to compete with a showboat as a rival, but regardless of this failure his efforts proved he was responding to pressures similar to those that affected guerrilla theatre artists several decades later. Faced with choosing between economic sustainability and ideological integrity, O'Connor attempted to negotiate a third option by exercising creativity and shifting away from traditional infrastructure.

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[24] Witham, *The Federal Theatre Project*, 7.

Clifford Odets and 'the Group', 1929-1940

While the Federal Theatre Project was subsidizing the wages of actors and playwrights during the Great Depression, other actors and playwrights struck out on their own. For example, the famous American playwright Clifford Odets began his career at around the same time as part of a theatre company known as "the Group." The Group formed as a reaction to the prominent Theatre Guild in the late 20s, as some members of the Guild sought to distance themselves from aspects of Guild philosophy they disagreed with: namely, reliance on European tradition rather than the encouragement of a new American style and an emphasis on commercial success. (Interestingly, the Theatre Guild was before 1919 known as the Washington Square Players, a contemporary of the Provincetown Players that relied on a largely European repertory while the Provincetown Players solicited more experimental American works.[25]) Actor and director Harold Clurman, founder of the Group, believed that theatre could be a revolutionary way for groups to build a sense of community and for individuals to find a deeper spiritual purpose; he opposed those who approached theatre first and foremost as a means of earning money. Clurman eventually talked Odets into breaking ties with the Guild and engaging with theatre as a moral force rather than a commercial one.[26]

Despite Clurman's high goals and Odets's skill, the Group eventually had to succumb to commercial pressures in order to extend its own survival, eventually dissolving as a result of arguments that arose from financial strain.[27] Much like the

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[25] Herr, *Clifford Odets and American Political Theatre*, 16.
[26] Ibid., 28.
[27] Ibid., 31.

Federal Theatre Project, the Group could not make enough money from tickets putting on the shows it wanted to perform. Christopher Herr, a theatre historian, argues that the trajectory of the Group raises broader questions about the artist's role in a commercial society:

> Because discussions of money and art invariably raise moral and political concerns, the possibility of a commercially viable art theatre questions the idea of artistic integrity in a market economy. It forces a reevaluation of the 'sellout' when the society is constructed around the practices of buying and selling... Nevertheless, the Group's experience makes clear the cultural underpinning of the 'starving artist cliché'—artists exist on the fringes of the marketplace.[28]

Despite the stereotype as artists existing outside of the commercial realm, Herr argues that artists still operate "on the fringes of the marketplace" because they live in commercial societies, thus it is impossible to achieve artistic integrity when integrity is defined by separation from monetary concerns (i.e. not being a "sellout"). Despite the fact that they prioritized the aesthetics and morals of their theatre company over their commercial success, the group ultimately found no way to escape the necessity of commercial activity because they did not and could not exist outside of American capitalism. Herr goes on to explain that, while art and commerce are often understood as being strict opposites, it is not always easy to tell where one begins and one ends. "There is negotiation, and there is a blurring of categories; Odets' career is evidence of such negotiation in American political theatre of the period."[29] Indeed, Odets struggled to find a place for his work as the political climate of World War II paused discussions of domestic social reform. He eventually went to Hollywood, despite well-recorded

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[28] Herr, *Clifford Odets and American Political Theatre*, 34.
[29] Ibid., 34.

reservations, in order to work as a screenwriter; by the early 1950s he was being investigated by the HUAC for his political sympathies during his time with the Group.

Many innovations occurred in American theatre from 1900 to 1950 that would prove significant to the emergence of the guerrilla theatre movement in the late 1950s. Perhaps the most significant is the repeated emphasis on the link between theatre and community. Pageants prioritized volunteer participation in order to involve the community in an emotional experience; the little theatre movement allowed theatre troupes to seek and maintain relationships with specific communities outside of typical commercial audiences, which created the potential for performances with new political relevance; the Group emphasized theatre as a tool for achieving healthy communities and promoting personal growth in participants. From the 1920s onward, these groups slowly began to reject traditional, commercially oriented forms of theatre. This opened up some opportunity for experimentation in the message of performances, as groups freed themselves of some (social and aesthetic) limitations while revealing the persistence of other (economic) limitations. More importantly, it allowed for experimentation in the very structure of a theatre group, as communal creation became more common and some groups began to expand ideas regarding acceptable performance spaces.

The four antecedents of guerrilla theatre listed above—the Paterson Strike Pageant, the Provincetown Players, the Federal Theatre Project, and the Group—can be understood as pieces of larger movements or evidence of broader themes, but they must also be understood as being unique to the conditions of their respective historical

moments. The innovative aspects of the work performed by these groups all arose as responses to specific political, cultural, economic, and aesthetic conditions that could not be recreated. Therefore, in order to understand guerrilla theatre itself, we must examine the specific conditions in the late 50s and early 60s that set up the appropriate 'moment' for guerrilla theatre to emerge and take root.

The Artistic / Political Atmosphere Leading Into the 1960s

Guerrilla theatre was certainly influenced by political shifts in American traditional theatre, but ultimately it distinguished itself from previous forms of political theatre because the political ramifications of their work were fundamentally inseparable from artistic aspects. Guerrilla theatre ultimately transcended these roots because of its consistent political engagement. Therefore, while it is important to examine political theatre as the "family tree" from which guerrilla theatre originated, the examination of the practice's origins cannot stop there. Any analysis of guerrilla theatre that treats the phenomenon as part of an artistic movement only is incomplete. It was the product of a specific series of artistic and political developments at the turn of the decade, meant to create change in both political and artistic realms.

Themes of social reform in theatre and art, quite prevalent during the 1930s, had by the 1950s dropped out of favor; the general atmosphere of the art world in the 1950s was decidedly apolitical. Julian Beck, co-founder of the Living Theatre along with Judith Malina, described in a 1969 interview his experiences as an abstract expressionist painter in the early 50s: "There was a peculiar kind of aesthetic law which dominated at least American art at that time... that you cannot mix art and political

thought, that one despoils the other."[30] This "aesthetic law" that Beck describes relegated political art to a sort of purgatory—too political to be considered high art, and too artistic to be politically relevant, it could be safely written off by audiences as unworthy of respect or attention from either realm. As a result, prominent artists had little incentive or ability to create politically charged art, even if they desired to do so.

The power of the House Committee on Un-American Activities (or HUAC) was certainly a contributing factor to the prevalence of apolitical art during this period. HUAC began in the late 1930s in order to identify political dissidents in America, particularly communists or communist sympathizers; by 1951 it was investigating a broad group of artists and writers as well as "teachers, professors, scientists, army officers, and government officials" suspected of holding or spreading subversive beliefs.[31] Public fears about subversive political influences in America rose dramatically in the aftermath of World War II, ushering in an era of concern over the 'red menace' at home. Authorities associated many artists with the Communist Party or other undesirable influences, but artists working with the film industry in Hollywood drew a disproportionate amount of attention as early as 1939.[32] While theatre actors and playwrights were never targeted in a comparative way, they were not unaffected by HUAC's relentless pursuit of communists:

> An artist who was blacklisted in Hollywood could often find work in New York, particularly in the nascent Off-Broadway theatre, but being branded a Red generally had a negative effect at the box office. Not surprisingly, the New York theatre retreated from dramatizing overt

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[30] Martin, *The Theater is in the Street,* 56.

[31] Herr, *Clifford Odets and American Political Theatre*, 118-119.

[32] John Joseph Gladchuk, *Hollywood and Anticommunism: HUAC and the Evolution of the Red Menace* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 1-3.

political and social questions between 1945 and 1960, creating instead what Arthur Miller has called "an era of gauze" in the intensely personal and psychological plays of Tennessee Williams, William Inge, Carson McCullers, Robert Anderson, and others. [33]

The stifling effects of HUAC's investigations were less direct in the commercial theatre industry than they were in the film industry, but they were nonetheless present. If theatre troupes hoped to avoid being targeted by authorities, they were largely unable to engage with charged topics such as political allegiances or social reform in their shows. Those who refused to abandon such themes were targeted, as in the case of Clifford Odets and many of his former colleagues in the Group.

Odets spent the majority of the 40s working in Hollywood after the economic viability of political theatre began its decline in the late 1930s. When some of his screenplays were accused of spreading communist propaganda in the late 1940s, he responded in a vitriolic open letter to the *New York Times*:

I get damn tired of hearing crackpots here and in Washington constantly ascribing anything really human in the films to Communists alone. Why do they keep giving the Devil all the good tunes?[34]

In Odets's own view, the social problems that he included in his work were evidence of its humanity and authenticity; to authorities that opposed him, those same themes were evidence of communist influence. Odets subsequently left Hollywood and returned to the New York theatre scene in 1948, but his choice to step back from screenwriting did not protect him from a HUAC summons in May 1952. During his testimony, he named several names and freely admitted to former involvement in the Communist Party

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[33] Brenda Murphy, *Congressional Theatre Dramatizing McCarthyism On Stage, Film, and Television* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 2.
[34] Herr, *Clifford Odets and American Political Theatre*, 117.

around the time of his involvement with the Group. He then argued that, although he no longer considered himself a communist, his liberalism and support of civil rights often overlapped with Communist Party views; his "sometimes defiant, sometimes conciliatory testimony" led to pity from some of his fellow playwrights, but others accused him of being a traitor to his former colleagues and allies. Either way, the experience of testifying had dire consequences on his personal, professional, and artistic trajectory.[35]

The House Un-American Activities Committee could not rid American theatre of political sentiment, but it stifled the creation and dissemination of new political works—whether directly, through hearings and charges, or indirectly, through the creation of a culture of fear. Yet despite this implicit limitation on "acceptable" artistic messages, the American art world in the 1950s was far from stagnant. Artists in every field experimented with pushing the boundaries of familiar forms, from music to painting to modern dance.[36] Beck and other abstract expressionist painters such as Jackson Pollock or Mark Rothko built up a distinct artistic movement out of the conscious rejection of previous European styles. Even though the American public sometimes considered these experimental forms to be bogged down in "conformity, subjectivity, and overseriousness," some abstract expressionist artists viewed negative reactions from the public as proof their work was achieving its goals.[37] If audiences had recognized something familiar or comfortable in the paintings, after all, the movement would not have been succeeding in its rejection of tradition. Guerrilla theatre was

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[35] Herr, *Clifford Odets and American Political Theatre*, 117-121.
[36] Frank A. Salamone, *Popular Culture in the Fifties* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2001), 175.
[37] Ibid., 119-123.

certainly influenced by these artistic experiments, as the avant-garde groups desired to break from traditional theatre and needed to innovate forms of theatre in order to do so. However, because the goals of movements like abstract expressionism involved changing ideas about high art rather than changing society, even the most brilliant successes did not have much impact outside of the art world. Although these experimentations with artistic form influenced guerrilla theatre when it emerged in the 1960s, guerrilla theatre's intense political engagement separated it quite clearly from earlier avant-garde development in the art world.

As the 1950s went on, the witch-hunts of HUAC declined, but American unease regarding communism continued. By the end of the decade, the ongoing Cold War and the impact of communism on American foreign policy were increasingly debated. Meanwhile, a series of big cultural changes were occurring domestically: the rise of 'white collar' work, the rise of the middle class, the continuation of racial segregation, and increasing social tension as opportunities improved for some and stayed the same for others. The economic success of the period led to hope that poverty and unemployment could be remedied once and for all, but despite domestic affluence, the threat of a devastating nuclear war weighed heavy on the minds of American people. As historian Maurice Isserman summarizes, "the backdrop to the '60s was thus a society perched between great optimism and great fear."[38]

The combination of optimism and fear must have been familiar to those involved in the civil rights movement at the end of the 1950s. The movement had been gaining slow momentum for over a decade, as more and more African Americans across the

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[38] Isserman and Kazin, *America Divided*, 7.

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country sought to change the status quo of segregation and racial discrimination that had been in place for years. Six months into 1960, after a series of lunch counter sit-ins, the movement gained national attention and contributed to an explosion of civil disobedience and nonviolent protesting.[39] Over the next few years, the movement solidified its political significance and mainstream visibility with a series of protests, demonstrations, and initiatives that drew attention to the burden of segregation on black Americans as well as the brutality that white Americans were willing to use in order to reinforce segregation.

Just as growing discontent with segregation during the 1940s built up into the civil rights movement during the 1950s and 1960s, the appearance of gospel music in black churches led to a performance style within 1960s protests that played a small but important part in the civil rights movement: freedom singing. Participants in marches, sit-ins and other events used both traditional tunes and ones that had been rewritten around specific issues in order to strengthen community ties within the ranks of the movement and reach out to others. Most freedom singers were quite talented, but despite the recognition they garnered for their skill, "artistic concerns remained secondary to their roles as activists in a mass democratic movement."[40] While freedom singers cannot be compared directly to other practitioners of political art in the decades leading up to this (because traditional political theatre was first and foremost an artistic endeavor, while freedom singing was clearly political at its heart), the political effectiveness of an artistic element within the civil rights movement was enough to show that the "aesthetic law" of separation that Julian Beck ascribed to the early 1950s

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[39] Isserman and Kazin, *America Divided,* 28-31.
[40] Martin, *The Theater is in the Street,* 21.

was no longer in effect. Freedom singing was appreciated as simultaneously aesthetically pleasing and politically powerful; neither element "despoiled" the other or rendered it less effective. Freedom singing played a minor but notable part in the success of the civil rights movement as a whole. Eventually, the success of the civil rights movement served as a catalyst for the birth of other social movements in the 1960s, such as feminism, gay rights, and the antiwar movement.[41]

While the civil rights movement provided a structural example for many aspects of the antiwar movement, the two drew their supporters from rather different demographics. The civil rights movement was comprised largely of African Americans who had been personally affected by segregation and institutional racism. It was particularly active in poor communities and the American South. Antiwar activists, on the other hand, grappled with societal problems that were not as visceral within their own lives (with the exception of veterans who protested the war) and thus drew support from more fragmentary groups within society. These included pacifists who were morally opposed to the war in Vietnam, radicals who saw the war as evidence for of America's imperial aggression, and the "New Left."[42] The New Left was a loosely associated group of young radicals and liberals, mostly white college students, which reached its height during the time of the antiwar movement.[43] The New Left had been gaining slow momentum since the 1950s, when it arose as the Old Left declined as a result of broad demographic shifts that began to erode traditional patterns of social

[41] Isserman and Kazin, *America Divided*, 22.
[42] George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: the United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975* (New York: Wiley, 1979), 171.
[43] Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (New York: Bantam Books, 1993), 4-5.

power.[44] Those who identified themselves within the New Left were concerned with social justice and social change, relying heavily on books about the experiences of the oppressed in order to form their arguments; they viewed the war as "a classic example of the way the American ruling class exploited helpless people to sustain a decadent capitalist system."[45] However, while this new wave of radicalism was instrumental in the rise of organization and activism around social causes such as ending the Vietnam War, it was still in many ways "a movement of, by, and for the educated middle classes" because it rarely reached the working classes or the urban poor.[46] Overall, those who argued against the war made up only a small percentage of the American population, but they enjoyed disproportionate visibility. The antiwar movement was not a centrally organized movement—it arose independently in many places at around the same time—so it is difficult to pinpoint the moment of conception. However, by the end of the decade, the movement had begun to gather noticeable support.

American troops in Vietnam experienced several major reverses through the course of 1963, leading more and more American citizens to question the reasons behind the war and the moral implications of U.S. conduct in the war. [47] The Vietnam War was unlike other military conflicts that America entered during the 20th century; it had no definitive start or end point, US political goals were not clearly defined, and the US troops were not well equipped to combat an enemy waging guerrilla warfare. Because there were no clear territorial objectives, it became a bloody and

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[44] Isserman and Kazin, *America Divided*, 56.
[45] Herring, *America's Longest War*, 171.
[46] Isserman and Kazin, *America Divided*, 125.
[47] Isserman and Kazin, *America Divided*, 85-87.

dehumanizing war of attrition where "the body count became the index of progress."[48] In addition, imagery of the war was newly accessible to American citizens through mass media such as television broadcasts, whereas in previous wars these kinds of images would have been less frequent. Therefore, the Vietnam War led to an unprecedented 'cultural crisis' domestically as more radical Americans began to question the core values of their own country as a result of questioning their role in international conflict. As Walter H Capps points out, the impact of such an identity crisis was not felt only by those who opposed the war: "the disillusionment and ambivalence was thorough, and was experienced by people on every side of the issue." [49]

From the very beginning, American motives within the Vietnam War were complex, often even directly contradictory. Because of its own history as a former British colony, political rhetoric in the U.S. encouraged nations seeking to emancipate themselves from colonial rule. This was despite the fact that the major colonial powers in the 19th and 20th centuries—Britain, France, Spain, and other western European countries—were the most significant political allies to the United States. As the Cold War escalated and Soviet forces gained power, however, the United States felt pressure to protect their own power as 'leader of the free world' and to preserve good relationships with their allies to maintain political cooperation within the 'free world'.[50] When Vietnam embraced communism as a means of resolving economic and social problems from their period under colonial rule, the United States prioritized the containment of communism and opposition of Soviet powers over supporting the

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[48] Herring, *America's Longest War*, 153.
[49] Walter H. Capps, *The Unfinished War: Vietnam and the American Conscience* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1982), 15.
[50] Capps, *The Unfinished War*, 50-51

independence of the former colony—despite the fact that communism in Vietnam bore little direct threat to the United States.[51] Because America's objectives within the war were not clearly defined, defenses of American involvement were inconsistent, leading to spreading dissatisfaction with the political status quo among the American people as the human cost of the war rose. By the mid-1960s, the antiwar movement had emerged and demonstrated its strength.

The Birth of Guerrilla Theatre: The Avant-Garde Groups

Many individuals dealt with their dissatisfaction with the government by involving themselves in antiwar activities, and guerrilla theatre was one such option for those who were artistically inclined. The stage (or the alternative performance space) was set for guerrilla theatre to succeed as a political and artistic action: increased American involvement in Vietnam sparked debate and disagreement about American values, the example of the civil rights movement proved that mass organization and public demonstrations were effective methods of drawing attention to social/political issues, and the creation of politically engaged art was no longer automatically unsafe and unprofitable. Because it was a visually striking way to convey political sentiment, guerrilla theatre became an important element of many antiwar demonstrations and protest events, but it is important to note that the antiwar movement did not engineer guerrilla theatre as a means to an end. Rather, guerrilla theatre developed as a result of the same factors that created the antiwar movement, percolating through the late 50s

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[51] Capps, *The Unfinished War*, 52

and early 60s and erupting as a force to be reckoned with by the mid 1960s. Artists who held antiwar sentiments as part of a wider set of radical views experimented with methods of conveying those views through art in order to add their voices to the cause. Thus the avant-garde guerrilla theatre groups began to solidify their philosophies and rise to prominence before the antiwar movement was at its peak.

The San Francisco Mime Troupe

The San Francisco Mime Troupe was founded in San Francisco in 1959 and is still active in the city to this day.[52] R G Davis, founder and director of the group, applied his experience with mime and dance in the group's first experimental pieces—silent performances, referred to as "movement events," that included music and visual art.[53] By 1961, the group had developed a style of performance drawn from a variety of theatrical forms, spoken rather than silent, in order to convey increasingly radical messages after Davis became frustrated with the cultural limitations of traditional theatre. In his view, traditional theatre was "bourgeois" and lacked the ability to create true social impact because it was too complicit in political and economic systems of power. The troupe staged performances in parks around San Francisco beginning in 1962, facing legal action for their use of the park space the year following; the resulting court case established the right of the group, and other artists, to perform in public parks. Despite setting this precedent, the group had various run-ins with law

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[52] Susan Vaneta Mason, introduction to *The San Francisco Mime Troupe Reader* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 2.
[53] "History," San Francisco Mime Troupe.

enforcement throughout the decade because of their frequent public outdoor performances.

Rather than performing in pantomime, the San Francisco Mime Troupe took their inspiration (and their name) from a style of mime performance that had been popular in Ancient Greece and Ancient Rome, defined by an exaggeration of everyday scenes and characters into ridiculous extremes.[54] The group also drew heavily from commedia dell'arte, a highly physical and often partially improvised form of street theatre that originated during the Italian Renaissance and relied on stock characters and masks. The Mime Troupe not only incorporated elements of older styles but often updated old plays to fit current events, such as their 1967 revival of Carlo Goldoni's *L'Amant Militaire* (written in 1751) that was reworked to satirize the Vietnam War.[55] This sort of play, based in a tradition of street theatre, did not call for elaborate sets or props, which suited both their mobility as a group and their financial limitations. As one reviewer noted in a column of the October 1968 edition of *The Fifth Estate*:

> [The SFMT's performance style] is theatre stripped to its bare essentials. It is clearly suited to the aims of a company which, in Davis' words, "wants to have the same relation to its audience as the guerrilla does to the community which aids him in his struggle."[56]

Davis was outspoken about guerrilla theatre as a distinct style and strategy, and he was credited with codifying the major values and goals of the movement.

Davis first used the term "guerrilla theatre" in a speech, written in the early 1960s and later published in 1968. One of his first arguments in the speech was that

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[54] Mason, introduction to *The San Francisco Mime Troupe Reader*, 1.
[55] Mason, introduction to *The San Francisco Mime Troupe Reader*, 4.
[56] "And Now, Ladies & Gentlemen The San Francisco Mime Troupe!" *Fifth Estate* 3, no. 11 (October 1968), 7.

most previous attempts at socially engaged theatre had been unsuccessful, largely because of the difficulties in balancing content and style; if the content of a political performance was too immediate, the art had no staying power once the events faded out of the public eye, but if the content was made too "devious, symbolic, or academically suggestive" in order to gain artistic credibility, the public would reject it.[57] With acerbic wit typical of his published writing, Davis then noted that even if one could balance aesthetic and political concerns, there were many other potential obstacles, such as landlords, police, or other authorities who could shut down shows at the slightest provocation. Despite this, Davis affirmed that mixing political sentiment into artistic performance could create results that were successful both politically and artistically.

Although much of the speech focused on how to use art in achieving political goals, defining the philosophy behind guerrilla theatre in largely political terms rather than aesthetic ones, it is important to recognize his intended audience—the speech was written to be read to the rest of his troupe, then published in the *Tulane Drama Review* (*TDR*), an established and respected theatre journal. Therefore, Davis could assume that those hearing or reading the speech did not need a lecture about how to achieve aesthetic success, because they were almost guaranteed to have a background in art and theatre, but he could not make assumptions about their levels of political knowledge or engagement. The fact that he sought out readers of the *TDR* in order to swell the ranks of guerrilla theatre, rather than reaching out to political groups, supports the distinction between the avant-garde groups and the agitational groups

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[57] Davis, "Guerrilla Theatre" in *TDR*, 131.

that would follow later. Avant-garde guerrilla theatre participants were artists hoping to incorporate political elements into their work rather than political activists trying to achieve the reverse. While he was being arrested for a public performance in 1965, Davis stated, "the job of the artist in politics is to take leaps the politicos never take."[58] Therefore in his own view, he was an artist primarily, though he believed artists had a place in politics and indeed a special ability to achieve things politically that no one else could or would.

Davis left the San Francisco Mime Troupe in 1969 when the company voted to become a collective rather than follow the direction of a singular leader, after which the group entered an experimental phase that steered it away from guerrilla theatre.[59] Despite this eventual break, the Mime Troupe was instrumental to the development and spread of guerrilla theatre during their ten years under Davis's direction, and their trajectory serves as an example of the development of major avant-garde groups. Davis moved from an apolitical to an outspokenly political style of performance between 1959 and 1961; the group experimented outside of traditional theatres during the early 1960s, gaining increased attention (both positive and negative) for their work between 1963 and 1965; they spent the years between 1965 and 1968 touring and gaining attention for themselves, for guerrilla theatre as a form, and for the antiwar movement as a whole; they survived through the end of the decade, but the period between 1968-1970 marked a noticeable change in the group's activities and goals. Despite the

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[58] Michael William Doyle, "Staging the Revolution: Guerrilla Theater as a Countercultural Practice, 1965-1968," in *Imagine Nation: The American Counterculture of the 1960s and '70s*, ed. Peter Braunstein and Michael William Doyle (New York: Routledge, 2002), 72.
[59] Mason, introduction to *The San Francisco Mime Troupe Reader*, 3.

changes it has undergone in the decades since, the San Francisco Mime Troupe is still

well known for their annual summer performances in San Francisco's parks.

The Bread and Puppet Theater

While Davis was navigating the 1963 court case involving the San Francisco

Mime Troupe's right to perform in parks, a young German immigrant named Peter

Schumann was in New York City founding what would become another influential

avant-garde guerrilla theatre group: the Bread and Puppet Theater. Schumann, a dancer

and puppeteer, founded the theatre with his wife Elka, who had a background in

political activism. The group set itself apart from similar street theatre groups through

their distinctive aesthetic, which included handmade and brightly painted papier-

mâché puppets, sometimes much larger than life; in addition, the group served

homemade bread at the end of each show, in order to emphasize "the utilitarian

function of an art practice synthesized with daily life." [60] Schumann's style of "rough

art," made of accessible materials and designed to have little monetary value as an

object, could be understood as an attack on "fine art" and the perceived separation

between art and everyday existence.

The Bread and Puppet Theater established itself within the antiwar movement

from its inception as a troupe, participating in some of the earliest demonstrations

against U.S. involvement in Vietnam. In addition, they staged large processions and

pageants in the poorest neighborhoods of New York City during the summers of 1965

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[60] "About B & P's 50 Year History," Bread and Puppet Board of Directors, accessed December 23, 2015, http://breadandpuppet.org/50th-anniversary-2/about-b-ps-50-year-history.

and 1966, through which they sought to address "urban political and social issues of the day."[61] In 1968 they achieved critical success within theatre circles through the debut of a play about the Vietnam War entitled *Fire*, which was staged in a traditional setting but drew upon many of the ideas and images they developed during their time demonstrating on the streets. The group continued under Schumann's direction, moving out of New York in 1970 and eventually establishing themselves on a former dairy farm in Vermont. From that location they created a puppet museum in a barn, staged an annual outdoor pageant known as *Our Domestic Resurrection Circus* through the 1980s and 1990s, and continue to perform radical shows to this day.

The inclusion of puppetry in their shows proved uniquely useful for staging a political performance, because although all theatre is quite visual in nature, puppetry relies more heavily on the analysis of images than other theatrical forms. Indeed, the success of Bread and Puppet may give insight into the power that political theatre had within the political realm more generally. As theatre historian and Bread and Puppet company member John Bell explains, rooting a political message in images rather than text "allows the presentation of strongly held convictions but does not insist on the audience taking them."[62] Because the viewer must analyze the performance in order to assign meaning to the images, the core messages did not come across as propagandistic, and the openness of images allowed individuals to personalize their conclusions. This "frisson of ambiguity," as Bell terms it, transforms the "blunt directness of puppets" into

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[61] "About B & P's 50 Year History," Bread and Puppet Board of Directors.
[62] John Bell, "Beyond the Cold War: Bread and Puppet Theater and the New World Order," in *Staging Resistance: Essays on Political Theater*, ed. Jeanne M. Colleran and Jenny S. Spencer (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998), 48.

a nuanced form well suited for disseminating messages with political or social significance.[63]

The Living Theatre

The Living Theatre began as an experimental theatre company in New York City in 1947, more than a decade before it engaged in anything resembling guerrilla theatre. Playwright Judith Malina and painter Julian Beck, both of whom had deep connections to the avant-garde scene in New York, chose the name "Living Theatre" to differentiate themselves from Broadway and other commercial ventures, which they viewed as either "momentary entertainment" or "moribund" and without the potential for growth or change.[64] Malina, "the German-born student of Erwin Piscator," cites her mentor and other German influences such as Brecht as her theatrical inspiration, placing herself within a tradition of innovative, politically engaged theatre and thus associating herself with the European art scene. Though Beck was a co-founder of the theatre and eventually instrumental to its artistic development, the company was Malina's brainchild.[65] By the mid-sixties members of the company were, in the group's own words, "living and working together toward the creation of a new form of nonfictional acting based on the actor's political and physical commitment to using the theater as a medium for furthering social change."[66] The group shared a framework of political ideas

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[63] Bell, "Beyond the Cold War," 47.
[64] John Tytell, preface to *The Living Theatre: Art, Exile, and Outrage* (New York: Grove Press, 1995), xi.
[65] "History," The Living Theatre, accessed March 28, 2016, http://www.livingtheatre.org/#!history/c139r.
[66] "History," The Living Theatre.

about pacifism and anarchism from their onset, although they were not identified strongly with a movement such as the antiwar movement during the 1960s.

In 1968, The Living Theatre debuted their experimental play *Paradise Now*, an ambitious and complicated show which biographer John Tytell considers "the defining experience of The Living Theatre."[67] The show was structured around nine sections (referred to as "rungs") that each contained a different "rite" and "vision" demonstrated by the cast, as well as an "action" that required audience participation; the performance of these subsequent steps was supposed to represent "a vertical ascent toward Permanent Revolution."[68] The first rung of the play involved a "Rite of Guerilla Theatre" where actors stood up on stage and repeatedly whispered, spoke, and screamed phrases such as "I don't know how to stop the wars," "I am not allowed to take my clothes off," and "you can't live if you don't have money," in order to emphasize the oppressive control of society over the individual.[69] The show was improvised each night, tailored to be specific to the place in which it was being performed in order to engage with an idea of revolution that felt personal and immediate to each distinct audience.[70] In the end, they led the audience out of the theatre and into the street in order to begin the "Beautiful Nonviolent Anarchist Revolution." The play was met with criticism as it was considered by some to be inaccessible, mystical, and politically unrealistic, but many other viewers were enthralled by the unique performance. The Living Theatre ran into legal trouble several times during their tour of the show, as "the

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[67] Tytell, *The Living Theatre,* 225.
[68] Living Theatre, Judith Malina and Julian Beck, *Paradise Now: Collective Creation of the Living Theatre* (New York: Random House, 1971), 5.
[69] Living Theatre, Malina and Beck, *Paradise Now*, 16-18.
[70] Martin, *The Theater is in the Street,* 77.

exiting actors, still in various states of undress, were met by the police who tried to stop them from streaming into the city."[71]

In 1970, when Bread and Puppet and the San Francisco Mime Troupe were seeking a creative alternative to antiwar guerrilla theatre, The Living Theatre made a declaration that they did not want to perform in theatre buildings any longer, as they viewed theaters as "an architectural trap" that only attracted the privileged elite.[72] The group subsequently began creating and performing *The Legacy of Cain*, a cycle of plays designed to be staged in non-traditional venues such as prisons, steel mills, schools, and slums in locations across the world.[73] One potential reason that their move away from traditional theater spaces was so late, given that they struggled through the 1960s to finance their theater and might have benefited from adopting alternative spaces sooner, lies in the fact that they were created and sustained within the community of artists and intellectuals of New York. They were not exposed to the wider range of people that a street theatre performer would encounter. In this regard, their political development was not comparable to the other avant-garde guerrilla theatre troupes.[74]

While the San Francisco Mime Troupe and Bread and Puppet Theatre shared many obvious similarities in chronology and development, the Living Theatre does not fit as neatly into the narrative of guerrilla theatre as a part of the antiwar movement. The troupe began much earlier, branched out into alternative performance spaces much later, and engaged with politics in a way that did not usually put them into contact with the broader antiwar movement. However, the Living Theatre is relevant to the study of

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[71] Tytell, *The Living Theatre*, 229.
[72] Martin, *The Theater is in the Street,* 77.
[73] "History," The Living Theatre.
[74] Martin, *The Theater is in the Street,* 77.

guerrilla theatre because it most closely resembles the historical precedents for traditional political theatre while still engaging with the ideas at the core of guerrilla theatre. Despite differences, this group shared the basic goals of the avant-garde troupes regarding artistic innovation, radical political messages, and the necessity of moral or spiritual reform in the theatre. The Living Theatre was not strictly a guerrilla theatre group—if only because they experimented with many other forms and goals— but they were certainly both influenced by and influential to guerrilla theatre as a practice. The group thus represents the "missing link" between traditional political theatre and guerrilla theatre.

Historical examples of 20th century American political theatre are significant to the study of guerrilla theatre because they provided sources of inspiration for the earliest guerrilla theatre groups, who were forging new artistic ground. Innovative groups like the Provincetown Players or the Federal Theatre Project stood as examples not only of political theatre, but also of successful theatrical alternatives to more traditional institutions. Avant-garde guerrilla theatre became, for those engaged in it, an alternative form of political engagement and artistic expression that allowed participants to make moral arguments about the state of the world and to propose solutions to those problems. While the avant-garde groups developed guerrilla theatre to function within their time and place, these examples from history served as a tradition from which they distilled their own practice.

This shared heritage of political theatre was not the only factor uniting the avant-garde groups into a distinct category. The participants of avant-garde groups

usually had training or experience in theatre, writing, or other art forms. These groups developed guerrilla theatre as a concept in the early 1960s, arising well before the antiwar movement gained peak political traction at the end of the decade. Avant-garde groups had much more contact with the theatre world and utilized a supplemented or updated repertory of historical plays more often. Perhaps most importantly, avant-garde groups understood themselves as moral reformers in the theatre world and the country as a whole, framing their political arguments in moral terms by criticizing hypocrisy and corruption. The same cannot be said for the contrasting category of guerrilla theatre groups: the agitational groups.

CHAPTER TWO: THE RISE OF AGITATIONAL GUERRILLA THEATRE TROUPES

In the summer of 1965, when the avant-garde groups had largely refined guerrilla theatre as a practice, the San Francisco Mime Troupe took on an intern by the name of Luís Valdez. Valdez was a young Mexican-American playwright and actor who had grown up in a family of migrant farmworkers; both his political views and his career as an artist were deeply connected to those roots. His internship with the Mime Troupe, along with a trip to Cuba the year prior where he learned about "the revolution in practice," were key experiences for his decision to found a guerrilla theatre troupe in the fall of 1965, to be known as el Teatro Campesino.[1] The group was first active staging outdoor shows for striking Mexican farmworkers who had unionized under César Chavez. While many critics suggest that Valdez was inspired by elements of commedia dell'arte as a result of his involvement with the San Francisco Mime Troupe, scholar Yolanda Broyles-Gonzalez instead argues that he drew more inspiration from the traditional Mexican *carpa*, or "tent show."[2] This form of comedic performance, which was intended for poor audiences and utilized elements of music and dance, had been "revived at periods of social upheaval and popular distress" by Mexicans and Mexican Americans since at least the eighteenth century. Through the 1960s, el Teatro Campesino developed a style of theatrical sketches that Valdez called *actos*—short, impromptu performances in which migrant Chicano workers "acted out the types of

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[1] Eugene van Erven, *Radical People's Theatre* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 43.
[2] Jan Cohen-Cruz, *Local Acts: Community-Based Performance in the United States* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 47.

exploitation they had suffered themselves" both to entertain the striking workers and to educate others about the strike.[3]

While el Teatro Campesino is not central to this body of research, because the troupe worked alongside the agenda of the Chicano workers' struggle rather than the antiwar movement, the rise of this group in 1965 is notable. In many ways this group can be understood as the first example of activist-oriented guerrilla theatre, intended for specific practical purposes within a movement rather than as a more general expression of radical political views. The avant-garde groups developed guerrilla theatre in the early 1960s, but peak participation in and visibility for the practice was not achieved until the late 1960s, when students and other volunteers began to create their own agitational troupes to perform at antiwar events. El Teatro Campesino had more in common with the avant-garde groups than the agitational groups described below, as the group was comprised of theatre artists and broke new artistic ground, but the group's creation foreshadowed the rise of agitational guerrilla at the end of the decade.

John Weisman, a radical theatre enthusiast, conducted an unofficial survey of guerrilla theatre groups across the United States in 1972, compiling his letters and transcripts into a published volume; in the introduction, dated to 1971, he noted that "three years ago there were no more than fifty guerrilla companies in America. Now there are closer to ten times that number."[4] This sudden jump in the popularity of guerrilla theatre between 1968 and 1971—from fifty distinct groups to over four

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[3] Van Erven, *Radical People's Theatre*, 43.
[4] John Weisman, *Guerrilla Theater: Scenarios for Revolution* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press, 1973), 5.

hundred—occurred alongside the peak of antiwar activity, which occurred between roughly 1965 and 1972.[5] Therefore, while the San Francisco Mime Troupe was already moving away from guerrilla theatre by 1970, many groups of students and activists were just hitting their theatrical stride at the turn of the decade.

The agitational guerrilla theatre groups differed from the avant-garde groups in several key ways. Rather than being comprised of radical artists, they were staffed by activists, students, and other volunteers. Because mostly amateurs produced it, agitational guerrilla theatre was more geographically spread out through the Midwest and other parts of the country than avant-garde groups, which were limited to cultural centers on either coast. Finally, agitational guerrilla theatre artists saw themselves primarily as organizers and activists within the antiwar movement. Some had official ties to antiwar organizations like Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), while others operated more independently, but all were identified closely with an antiwar agenda in a way that the avant-garde groups were not. The agitational groups clearly took their cute from the avant-garde groups in their development of guerrilla theatre as a form, although their use of the form was slightly more limited. When describing their influences, for example, professional groups overwhelmingly discuss experimental artists and playwrights from Europe, such as Brecht and Erwin Piscator in the case of The Living Theatre.[6] In contrast, when members of agitational groups describe their model of guerrilla theatre, they compare themselves to avant-garde groups such as the

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[5] Maurice Isserman and Michael Kazin, *America Divided: The Civil War of the 1960s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 306.
[6] "History," The Living Theatre, accessed December 14, 2015, http://www.livingtheatre.org/#!history/c139r.

San Francisco Mime Troupe.[7] This discrepancy between historical influences and recent inspirations indicates that groups such as the SFMT were establishing a theatrical tradition by synthesizing the work of other artists, whereas groups like the Caravan relied on the artistic innovations of those same professional groups.

In order to discuss the agitation groups that became active in the late 1960s, and to understand their place within guerrilla theatre and their role within the antiwar movement, I present three examples within this chapter: the NYU School of Arts Guerrilla Theatre Coordinating Committee, the Wisconsin Draft Resistance Union Caravan, and the SDS Radical Arts Troupe of Berkeley. While they share many similarities regarding their formation and activity, each group demonstrates a unique approach to guerrilla theatre, and together they form a sampling of guerrilla theatre activity from across a broad geographical range. Faculty and students of the New York University School of Arts organized the NYU Guerrilla Theatre Coordinating Committee in spring 1970; the group drew community recognition for their short, high-intensity performances in the streets of various New York neighborhoods, as well as a series of disruptive actions in Broadway theatres. In Wisconsin, eight members of the Wisconsin Draft Resistance Union (WDRU) formed a guerrilla theatre company in the summer of 1968, dubbing themselves 'the Caravan' and keeping detailed records of their months-long tour around the state. Meanwhile, the Radical Arts Troupe (RAT) at UC Berkeley served as a political and artistic example for other RAT groups across the country; the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) organized the Berkeley group and others in an

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[7] The Caravan, *What is Guerrilla Theatre, Anyway?* (Madison, WI: Wisconsin Draft Resistance Union, 1968), 3.

attempt to bring their messages to new audiences, publishing one of the Berkeley RAT's plays in 1969.

While Weisman's estimate of the number of guerrilla theatre groups suggests that agitational troupes far outnumbered the avant-garde participants by the early 1970s, agitational groups are a far more difficult topic to approach. Indeed, they have been largely ignored by most scholarship about guerrilla theatre, because they received very little publicity and failed to produce notable artists like Davis and Schumann. Their published work has been preserved in underground papers and radical newsletters from the period, but few groups were keeping their own records of personnel, meetings, finances, and other logistics. They were, after all, student groups or activist programs that relied more or less on anonymous volunteers.

The three example groups included in this chapter published material about themselves and their performances, which they did in hopes of increasing the number of active guerrilla theatre troupes in the world. While the main goal of agitational guerrilla theatre groups was to inspire antiwar sentiment and provoke action against the war, they also aimed to swell the ranks within their own corner of the movement. As a result of this evangelical streak, evidence about their activity and the way they conceptualized their own work has been preserved in an accessible form.

Agitational Groups Within the Antiwar Movement

Rather than establishing a theatrical tradition as the avant-garde groups did, agitational guerrilla theatre groups took the innovations of the avant-garde groups into

new places to fulfill direct political purposes. Because of this, the agitational groups had much stronger official ties to the antiwar movement through wide-reaching radical organizations. While the San Francisco Mime Troupe and Bread and Puppet Theater participated in many antiwar rallies and events, they did so independently, by collaborating with political organizers while retaining their autonomy as a theatre company. In contrast, the Wisconsin Draft Resistance Union Caravan arose as part of a summer offensive from within the ranks of the Wisconsin Draft Resistance Union (or WDRU)—a radical political organization devoted to ending the Vietnam War and stopping the draft—and strove above all else to communicate the organization's viewpoint to their audiences. According to the group themselves, the Caravan was specifically intended to "expand and promote the purposes and goals of the Summer Offensive" that the WDRU organized in the summer of 1968.[8] The WDRU publicized their Summer Offensive in a blurb printed in the underground publication *Counterpoint*, in which a WDRU representative identified the issues that the organization hoped to address through the Offensive: the war in Vietnam and the draft, as well as local issues such as housing, education, and authoritarian schools.[9]

The members of the Caravan emphasized their relationship with the WDRU, describing themselves as "responsible to" the organization, driven "not by individual inclinations but rather by the political needs of the DRU."[10] Through the course of their narrative account, the Caravan was clearly motivated by their allegiance to the Wisconsin Draft Resistance Union above all else, even passing up opportunities to

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[8] The Caravan, *What is Guerrilla Theatre, Anyway?*, 1.
[9] "Wisconsin: the Summer Offensive", *Counterpoint* 1, no. 6 (July 1968), 5.
[10] The Caravan, *What is Guerrilla Theatre, Anyway?*, 3.

perform in more exciting spaces because it was not politically salient for the WDRU as a whole. Despite the clear political allegiances of the Caravan, however, the usefulness of guerrilla theatre as art did not go unrecognized. The members of the Caravan chose to engage in guerrilla theatre rather than traditional political organizing or community outreach because "[guerrilla theatre] was seen to be a dynamic and dramatic way to communicate our political perspective to as many people around the state of Wisconsin as possible."[11] Guerrilla theatre, with its emphasis on building community support and engaging new audiences, fit their purposes more or less perfectly.

Like the WDRU Caravan, the Radical Arts Troupe at Berkeley saw itself as being guided by its politics first, saying that their plays were "designed primarily to spread SDS ideas and only secondarily to entertain."[12] SDS, or Students for a Democratic Society, was a nation-wide student group identified with the New Left, created in 1960 by college students energized by the rising civil rights movement; it grew slowly between 1960 and 1965, becoming recognizable as a political power around 1966 when its official membership grew to about 15,000. This was reportedly triple the membership of the year before.[13] The group focused on antiwar issues as well as racism, poverty, and other social issues of the time. Not only was guerrilla theatre accepted as a political tactic by those involved in the antiwar movement, it was strategically utilized and publicized by groups such as SDS—and it was not their only interaction with radical antiwar art. In early 1968, SDS began a new radical arts publication, a magazine called "*Caw!*" which included in its first three issues "material

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[11] The Caravan, *What is Guerrilla Theatre, Anyway?*, 1.
[12] Radical Arts Troupe of Berkeley, *Reserve Liberal Training Corps (a play) and Suggestions for Building a Guerrilla Theatre Group* (Boston, MA: Students for a Democratic Society, 1969), 3.
[13] Isserman and Kazin, *America Divided*, 168-172.

on guerrilla theatre, and works by Bertold Brecht [sic], Che Guevera, Vietnamese authors, and others".[14] Subscribers were sent a letter with the first issue of the magazine, in which the editors elaborated on their use of art as a political tool:

> *Caw*! as an artistic arm of the Movement will speak to the organizers and shock troops and intellectuals through an art that will break complacency and challenge deadening assumptions and habits of numbness… We do not want our experience to get lost in the dreary narcotic isolation of America.[15]

The choice of language in the letter emphasized the belief that art exercised power where other methods of communication had little effectiveness: art, not discourse or community organizing, was the tool that would "break complacency" and "challenge…habits of numbness" among the American people. Not only would it draw others into the radical conversation, it would strengthen community ties among people already involved. However, it was only one "arm" of a broader movement, because radical art could not accomplish wide-scale change without the support of those engaged in less romanticized aspects of protest, such as organizing and fundraising. *Caw!* highlighted guerrilla theatre in one of its first issues, emphasizing the visibility and efficacy of guerrilla theatre specifically among other forms of antiwar art.

The fundamental political goals furthered by agitational guerrilla theatre performances rarely originated from within the theatre troupes themselves; other activists and organizers involved in the antiwar movement but not involved in guerrilla theatre often provided the ideological framework for agitational artists. However, while the agitational groups lacked the aesthetic and political autonomy of the avant-garde

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[14] "IF YOU READ THE UNDERGROUND PRESS YOU KNOW," *Fifth Estate* 2, no. 21 (February 1-15 1968), 9.
[15] Mariann Vizard, "Caw! Caw Reviews," *The Rag* 2, no. 18 (March 1968).

groups, this did not necessarily mean that the agitational groups were controlled or curtailed by their connections to the organizations. Rather, they expressed strong allegiances to these organizations and committed themselves voluntarily to the agendas that the organizations provided. Even in the case of the NYU School of Arts Guerrilla Theatre Coordinating Committee, which was not directly involved in a larger activist organization like SDS or the WDRU, the benefit of aligning with a wider political agenda was clear. Richard Schechner, then a faculty member at NYU and one of the founders of the Guerrilla Theatre Coordinating Committee, wrote that the group got the idea to engage in guerrilla theatre in response to the Kent State shootings. When the US announced plans to send troops into Cambodia in May of 1970, students organized protests on college campuses across the country, even in less radical areas where antiwar activity had previously been minimal.[16] As Todd Gitlin writes, during one such protest at Kent State, Ohio National Guardsmen "responded to taunts and a few rocks by firing their M-1 rifles into a crowd of students, killing four, wounding nine others."[17] A massive wave of student protests, demonstrations, and strikes followed the shooting. At NYU, Schechner attended a rally urging students to denounce what had happened on the Kent State campus. For the purpose of generating outcry over the death of protesting students, guerrilla theatre seemed perfectly suited. In Schechner's words, the purpose of guerrilla theatre was "to make a swift action or image that gets to the heart of an issue or feeling – to make people realize where they are living, and under what

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[16] Isserman and Kazin, *America Divided*, 270.
[17] Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (New York: Bantam Books, 1993), 410.

situation."[18] As a result of the rally, a group of students and staff, including Schechner, recognized their ability to accomplish an unfulfilled need in the organizer's agenda by performing guerrilla theatre.

Outreach and recruitment was a vital part of the agenda of any antiwar organization. Without expending effort on spreading radical messages to new audiences and bringing new people into the movement, any other objectives became harder to fulfill. Guerrilla theatre was no exception to this rule, and the stakes were high: by recruiting others into their practice, guerrilla theatre participants could ensure the continued vitality of their theatrical form, and they could rest assured that the new groups would assist in their efforts to spread radical ideas further. These groups all reached new audiences by publishing information about their own work, including advice for new troupes and accounts of successful performances they had staged. This published material now serves as our window into the form and message of their shows.

Examples of Agitational Guerrilla Theatre Performance

Because guerrilla theatre performances were transitory by nature, being impromptu live performances with an emphasis on personal connection and immediate political relevance, these descriptions of performances are invaluable resources for determining how a guerrilla theatre group put it ideas into action. This material offers a clear picture of the political ideas most important to these groups as well as their

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[18] Richard Schechner, "Guerrilla Theatre: May 1970," in *The Drama Review: TDR* 14, no. 3 (1970), 163.

preferences in regards to location and audience; in addition, analysis of the way the performances were described in writing can demonstrate whether the groups felt their work had been successful or not, thus illuminating the nature of their goals.

The NYU group performed several scenes related to the Kent State shooting, which were recorded and published by NYU professor and guerrilla theatre participant Richard Schechner. According to Schechner, the group of about thirty activists split into three groups, each planning to infiltrate a different Broadway theater during a performance; each group was equipped with a portable cassette player and a taped recording of the father of Allison Krause, one of the students killed at Kent State, discussing her death. In the statement, the man tearfully questions whether dissent is possible in America, and why the National Guard members were permitted to carry live ammo into a student protest. The guerrilla groups hoped to interrupt the Broadway shows and play the tape of Allison's father in front of the audiences, in order to force those present to confront the Kent State shooting in a meaningful way—"not in the defended situation of their evening TV broadcasts at home."[19] The first group succeeded in taking the stage just as the lights went down for the second act, playing the tape in its entirety and distributing leaflets despite "a shouting match" between audience members regarding the interruption. The second group was not as successful, failing to play the tape as planned because the member carrying the recorder was barred entrance to the show; the other members did not know that their plan had been disrupted until part of the way through the second act. They distributed leaflets at the conclusion of the show, including a full transcript of the taped statement, but they were

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[19] Schechner, "Guerrilla Theatre: May 1970," 164.

not able to execute the disruption they intended. The third and final group was successful in creating a disruption at the beginning of the second act, although they were not permitted to finish their demonstration. Schechner, who was in the audience in the third theater, recalled it as follows:

> The tape takes about three minutes to play. The actors onstage—June Allyson and Tom Poston—froze as the demonstration began. They did not attempt to compete with it. Most of the audience was quiet. About halfway through the tape a woman said, "We didn't pay $8 to hear this kind of thing!" Another woman answered, "This is more important than this trivial play!" Some of the audience joined in the dispute… The stage manager, or maybe it was the house manager, came down the aisle and tried to seize the tape recorder. The demonstrators left the theatre peacefully—the last thing on the tape, the last thing heard, was Mr. Krause saying, "Is it a crime to dissent?"[20]

Despite the fact that the tape was not played in its entirety, the third group and the first group were able to create discussion among the crowd, therefore achieving their goal of drawing public attention toward the political issue that formed their message. The experience of the second group, in addition, demonstrates the hit-or-miss nature unique to guerrilla theatre; creating impromptu, unauthorized performances could result in powerful spectacles, but it could just as easily be deflated by unanticipated circumstances.

The 'Broadway Theatre Action', as Schechner titles it, was not the NYU Guerrilla Theatre Coordinating Committee's only action regarding the Kent State shootings. Two days prior, on May 5th 1970, the group staged a skit several times on the NYU campus and other locations throughout New York City.[21] The skit was meant to alarm and

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[20] Schechner, "Guerrilla Theatre: May 1970," 165.
[21] NYU School of Arts Guerrilla Theatre Coordinating Committee, "Guerrilla Theatre," in *National Strike Information Center Newsletter* no. 17. (Waltham, MA: Privately Published, 1970)

disturb the audience, shocking them into political involvement by demonstrating "the war was home" rather than educating them about the goals of the antiwar movement directly. It began with a group of students getting tied together into subgroups of four, while other students in army uniforms acted as guards. The students acting as guards insulted and beat the "prisoners" who had been tied up, marching them through the streets until a sufficient crowd had gathered; the guards then announced that the students were "communists, agitators, bums, and worthless people who care more for politics than for education" and mimed shooting them by pouring buckets of animal blood over them. The prisoners mimed dying by screaming and pulling concealed animal organs out of their clothes until everyone is covered in blood and viscera. Schechner noted several times that the skit made considerations for audience involvement—if audience members attempted to help the prisoners, they were chased away by the guards, and if they laughed, argued, or otherwise reacted they were forcibly pulled into the group and treated like the other prisoners.[22] Reportedly, when they performed the skit on 8th Street, many observers thought that the students had actually been shot and killed. When police arrived to break up the performance, they got into an argument with onlookers about the amount of blood that had been spilled on the sidewalk, which culminated in a moment almost too good to be true: "One of the police finally said, exasperated, 'People who mess up the public streets should be shot.' His remark was not well received."[23]

The NYU group was not as prolific as groups like the Caravan, but their performances were polished and well executed both artistically and politically. Their

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[22] Schechner, "Guerrilla Theatre: May 1970," 164.
[23] Ibid., 164.

aesthetic cohesion in particular is notable when they are considered among other non-professional groups, who were largely interested in achieving aesthetic quality solely to increase the efficacy of their political messages. However, their degree of skill is unsurprising when their connections to the NYU School of Art are considered. Schechner, one of the primary organizers of the group, was a professor of performance studies; many of the other participants probably had experience with traditional theatre, if not guerrilla theatre specifically. Their performance experience led to the creation of high-quality performances that were staged in relevant and visible locations: Broadway became a symbol of middle-class complacency, for example. Their performances exemplified guerrilla theatre when done well: immersive, with elements of audience participation and an emphasis on disrupting 'business as usual' in various locations; visceral, demonstrating the reality of war and death; politically charged, designed to be relevant to the time and space in which it was performed.

In contrast to Schechner's detailed descriptions of the NYU group, the only recorded example of performance material created by the Berkeley RAT was their short play *Reserve Liberal Training Corps*. Written out like a traditional script, with extensive dialogue and few creative uses of the performance space, members of the group clearly polished and formatted the play before distributing it. Although it may not be a useful window into the type of guerrilla theatre that the Berkeley RAT group was doing regularly, the play nevertheless reveals the group's political goals and those of their parent organization, SDS. The first half of the play focuses on attacking complacency within the liberal intellectual community, depicting the perceived ignorance and separation from reality of moderate liberals through a mockery of military traditions.

The plot centers around four "liberals" who are about to graduate from the Reserve Liberal Training Corps, or RLTC, a clear jab at the ROTC groups on campuses across the country.[24] The recruits discuss politics with their commanding liberal, going through a series of rhetorical exercises in order to prove their mastery of liberal politics—they "deplore the violence of both sides" when shown a violent altercation between a US bomber and a Vietnamese soldier, they practice statements such as "getting into Vietnam was certainly a mistake – BUT – getting out is no solution," they argue with a radical when he brings up exploitation of third-world countries, etc. When the liberals pass these exams, they are handed diplomas made of toilet paper and assigned roles in middle-class American life.

In scene two, the recently graduated liberals travel to a university, where radical students are attempting to remove ROTC from their campus because they viewed the organization as evidence of their university's complicity in the Vietnam War. The liberals attempt to placate the students through a variety of methods—the "liberal faculty" offers vague and unhelpful promises of change far in the future, while the "liberal hippie" attempts to distract students by offering to share his marijuana. The students are adamant, however, chasing away the liberals one by one and eliminating the chancellor of the school as well. The play ends with one radical student asking another if they had seen the last of the liberals, at which point the second student responds negatively, turns to the audience, and announces: "people, BEWARE, when last sighted, they were headed towards… Berkeley!"[25] The fact that the ending was tailored to be relevant locally indicates an attempt at harnessing the power of guerrilla

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[24] Radical Arts Troupe of Berkeley, *Reserve Liberal Training Corps (a play)*, 1.
[25] Ibid., 3

theatre, but the effect is somewhat dampened by the fact that the rest of the play would be applicable on almost any college campus during that time. The applicability of the play serves the interests of SDS, who intended it as a way of teaching members how to get into guerrilla theatre, though it lessens the ability of the RAT group to forge strong connections in any particular community. However, it is important to note that the broad appeal of the play applies only within radical circles, where issues such as the difference between radical and liberal philosophy would have been recognizable, as the play itself does not explicitly explain or define the tension between those categories. The Berkeley RAT did note that the *RLTC* script was criticized by some members of the group for seeming "sectarian" and "isolating" due to its themes, but "once it was performed, the audience understood and enjoyed it"—though they did not note where they performed it or the demographics or views of the audience.[26]

In the case of the WDRU Caravan, narrative examples of the group's work are plentiful, as the group kept careful notes of their experiences. In a pamphlet they later published under the title *What Is Guerrilla Theatre, Anyway?*, the group recorded the time and location of every performance, the atmosphere of the audience, the content of the action being performed, and how they felt the audience perceived the show. However, they admitted outright in the epilogue of the pamphlet that they used the term "guerrilla theatre" much too loosely. The Caravan argued that a large number of their performances did not qualify as true guerrilla theatre, because they "worked with a pretty fixed set of skits, and did not in general attempt to create new skits to focus on

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[26] Radical Arts Troupe of Berkeley, *Reserve Liberal Training Corps (a play)*, 3.

what was happening in specific locations."[27] Many of their performances were pre-arranged shows in radical coffee houses, due in part to the pressure the Caravan felt from their parent organization WDRU to pursue a young demographic, though the group also admits that tensions between members limited their creativity. In explaining the performance habits they developed over the course of the summer, the Caravan identified several examples of "true" guerrilla theatre that occurred along their tour. The first of these was a skit performed during a City Council meeting in Madison.

A few weeks before their experience in Madison, the group had written a piece that they called "an attempt to burlesque red-baiting and super-patriotism" that they could use to make a stir in conservative communities where typical antiwar rhetoric would be ignored—communities like Appleton, Wisconsin, the birthplace of McCarthy, or Waukegan, Illinois, the Caravan's next scheduled stop.[28] They invented a superhero character named "Sooper Commie Hunter" who ran in and out of a series of scenes. In one, a hippie character was beaten by a cop character for playing harmonica too loudly, and when the battered hippie crawled over to bite the cop on the ankle, Sooper Commie Hunter reappeared to punish the student for being a "dirty commie" and accuse him of attacking the policeman. The group used the character to equate anything remotely anti-establishment with communism, taking anti-communist rhetoric to an absurd extreme in order to highlight the way it was used to shut down other arguments. When the group found themselves in Madison as controversy arose in the city regarding a proposed appropriation of $8,000 for police riot control equipment, they created

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[27] The Caravan, *What is Guerrilla Theatre, Anyway?*, 19.
[28] The Caravan, *What is Guerrilla Theatre, Anyway?*, 19.

several other superhero characters and infiltrated a City Council meeting in order to stage a skit against the allocation of these funds:

> We went to the meeting with our costumes—painted T-shirts and capes—concealed under street clothes. Our spokesman registered as a witness in <u>favor</u> of the appropriation. When he was called he delivered an impassioned rap in support of more and bigger riot equipment. Finally stepping down from the podium he pledged his own assistance in the struggle and, pulling off shirt and jacket, revealed himself as Sooper Commie Hunter. This was followed by the rest of the cast uncovering as Sooper Kike Krasher, Sooper Black Basher, Sooper Morals Snooper, etc. and dancing and singing around the council room. We then exited amidst confused laughter and clapping by the council members.[29]

According to the Caravan, some council members were still uncertain the next day what side of the issue the Caravan members represented. The success of the group with this scene stemmed from their use of patriotic imagery to construct an argument against the establishment; their specific use of characters such as the "Sooper Black Basher" in a discussion about police funding was notable because it highlighted inconsistencies in arguments for the allocation that spoke about security and public safety. The city council meeting was intended as a community forum, and therefore was not a space in which the Caravan members were unauthorized to speak publically, but the audience would not have anticipated their use of artistic performance within the forum. Because they caught the audience unaware, they were able to force the audience to critically engage with the message of an unanticipated piece of art. Although the appropriation passed, which the group referred to as a "foregone conclusion", they considered the performance a success because it was well covered by the press in Madison and surrounding areas.

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[29]The Caravan, *What is Guerrilla Theatre, Anyway?*, 17.

The Caravan staged one of their most effective performances in late spring of 1968, before the group had even finished organizing their summer tour. The WDRU received a request from black students at Beloit College: "a black draft-resister was on campus, and members of the black student group wanted to dramatize his presence and raise questions concerning students and the draft."[30] The Caravan sent four members onto the campus, where they met with the resister and rehearsed the scene they would stage that night in one of the school's cafeterias. Dressed as army officers, the four actors marched in and 'arrested' the resister, escorting him through the halls and out of the building; a crowd of students gathered to follow the actors outside, at which point they revealed the nature of their performance and confronted the students with "a political discussion of the implications of what had just happened." Reportedly, almost everyone who witnessed the scene believed it to be real, and two students had almost initiated a confrontation with the 'army officers', one of them with a loaded gun. Although the Caravan discussed the impact of the Wisconsin Draft Resistance Union on their work many times, this performance marks the most obvious example of the group engaging in work directly related to their parent organization's political agenda.

About a month later, when the group stopped in Racine, Wisconsin, a few Caravan members staged another explicitly antiwar scene in a suburban shopping center. One actor dressed as a military officer and another as an enlisted man; the officer led the enlisted man around by a rope, beating him with a bamboo whip and shouting commands as they walked through a sidewalk sale together.[31] The pair then moved into a supermarket and the officer began to shop, forcing the enlisted man to

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[30] The Caravan, *What is Guerrilla Theatre, Anyway?*, 4.
[31] Ibid., 11.

carry the food but not allowing him to eat any of it. By displacing imagery of the war in Vietnam into a suburban supermarket in Wisconsin, the action forced other shoppers to consider the war in a more concrete way, as opposed to news reports and paper headlines. In addition, the Caravan criticized the relationship between high-ranking military officials and the young recruits and drafted men under their command. The Caravan members reported that the action received a generally good response, despite the fact that police were called to the scene just after the group left. Perhaps because they were not able to 'rap' with the audience about the implications of the skit after it was performed, they wrote that there were "no tangible results" of the performance, but the overall tone of the account was still positive.

The Caravan connected the success of their performances to their ability to discuss their performances with the audience in a thoughtful and constructive way. When they expressed disappointment about a certain stop on their tour, it was almost always because the audience was unreceptive or disengaged rather than because the theatrical performance was subpar in any way. Since they were primarily interested in spreading a political message, rather than pushing the boundaries of artistry, they did not write about issues such as polish or energy level within their skits as marks of a successful performance. During one coffee house performance in Wisconsin Dells in the middle of the summer, the group gave almost no information about the content of their performance, but they wrote extensively about the reaction: the audience was non-committal until a group of "southern racist Army reservists" who had been watching from the doorway began to make a scene. A priest who had been in the coffee house at the time invited the hostile group to come in and sit down, at which point there was "an

extensive political discussion" between the Caravan, the Army reservists, and the priests. As a result of this discussion, the Caravan reflected far more positively on the performance as a whole.[32]

Along with accounts of their performances, the WDRU Caravan, Berkeley RAT, and NYU guerrilla theatre group all published educational information about agitational guerrilla theatre, such as advice or how-to instructions, with the intention of inspiring others to start guerrilla theatre groups. Their own outreach efforts now serve as our window into their goals and practices.

How to Start an Agitational Guerrilla Theatre Troupe

Due to their position as the "vanguard of the movement," meant to draw attention to the cause and amass support like the guerrilla war bands from which they took their name, guerrilla theatre groups often exhibited evangelical tendencies when discussing their own practices and philosophies. Because one of the main goals of guerrilla theatre was to educate and build support within a community through person-to-person connection, offering assistance toward the formation of a new troupe was a way for existing troupes to achieve concrete success. Their performances were designed to spread antiwar ideas among the general public, while these documents were designed to spread guerrilla theatre among antiwar activists. This idea is true for both the avant-garde and the agitation groups, as groups in both categories published scripts, testimonies, and advice pieces. Because of their close ties to antiwar

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[32] The Caravan, *What is Guerrilla Theatre, Anyway?*, 16.

organizations and the publishing platforms they chose—the NYU group published a column in a radical newsletter, while the Berkeley RAT group distributed their pamphlet through SDS and the Caravan did so through WDRU—the writers in these agitational groups could safely assume that their readers would have a working knowledge of the antiwar movement and radical politics more generally.

The Berkeley RAT group chose to distribute their advice in a section after their *Reserve Liberal Training Corps* script, which served as a practical example for the kind of artistic material they were encouraging others to create.[33] The complete pamphlet was first published in 1969. SDS intended it as an educational source for less experienced RAT groups; an advertisement in the back of an unrelated SDS publication listed the Berkeley RAT pamphlet, which included the script and an advice section, as available for five cents.[34] The writers offered extensive theatrical guidelines and recommendations, including a small portion at the end about the differences between guerrilla theatre and traditional "bourgeois theatre." Most of the advice is oriented toward organization, explaining precisely how to form and maintain a company of people that will succeed with guerrilla theatre. For example, they advised new groups to keep performances limited to between seven and fifteen minutes and to shy away from excessive dialogue in favor of "good politics, simple jokes, and sight gags". They recommended groups of between half a dozen and a dozen people in order to maintain mobility, praising the effectiveness of collective creation and democratic structures within the group rather than reliance on one director. In addition, they offered an

[33] Radical Arts Troupe of Berkeley, *Reserve Liberal Training Corps (a play).*
[34] Students for a Democratic Society, *Who Are the Bombers? Often the Rulers!* (Boston, MA: SDS Lit, 1970).

incomplete list of suggestions for performance spaces and times, noting that guerrilla theatre could be effective "whenever and wherever a lot of people will gather to watch." Although the article focuses almost entirely on practical theatrical advice, the group stated outright that the political goals of the troupe should be the first priority over any concerns about artistry. Therefore the RAT writers must have neglected extensive political discussion because they assumed that interested individuals would be protestors first and artists second, knowledgeable about political activism but unfamiliar with theatre.

Because they distributed their advice through SDS, the Berkeley RAT could not make assumptions about whether readers had been exposed to guerrilla theatre before, or whether they had any kind of artistic background at all. Some of their instructions would read as obvious or perhaps even patronizing to anyone with theatre experience—such as the idea that "a run-through before each performance is important for ensuring RAT's success" or the suggestion that "the first production of a troupe is the toughest, so don't get discouraged." The reassuring tone of such advice indicated an expectation that their readers would be ignorant and even nervous regarding theatrical performance. This attitude is also apparent in a version of the *RLTC* play which the group contributed to a 1973 book about guerrilla theatre by Henry Lesnick; in place of the advice section at the end, the group explained the step-by-step process for making different kinds of masks, complete with small illustrations.[35] The fact that the Berkeley RAT included exhaustive instructions for papier-mâché, rather than simply noting to readers that papier-mâché masks are useful in guerrilla theatre, suggests that the group

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[35] Henry Lesnick, *Guerrilla-Street Theater* (New York: Liberation News Service, 1969), 68.

assumed their readers might have few other informational resources. Indeed, the Berkley RAT's thoroughness in giving advice demonstrated their stated belief that guerrilla theatre was "people's art" best used to serve oppressed groups instead of maintaining a cultural elite.[36] By including practical instructions and straightforward advice, the Berkeley RAT increased the accessibility of their document, because readers were not required to find supplementary instructional resources to make guerrilla theatre a reality in their lives.

The NYU School of Arts Guerrilla Theatre Coordinating Committee also distributed an advice piece concerned with conveying practical advice rather than political ideals; an excerpt from the group's handbook was published in a 1970 edition of the National Strike Information Center Newsletter.[37] Unlike in the RAT piece, however, these writers assumed that the audience has some theatre experience but no guerrilla theatre experience, as almost all the information included relates to the primary difference between traditional theatre and guerrilla theatre: location. This is fitting when the group's makeup is considered, as they drew membership primarily from the School of Arts and therefore must have been artistically knowledgeable. The excerpt defines three types of guerrilla theatre, distinct from one another in their goals: guerrilla theatre can make people aware that a problem exists by carrying messages into new areas, it can show the workings of a societal problem by performing it out of context in order to evoke critical thought, or it can show the solution to a societal problem by depicting or describing beneficial future action.

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[36] Radical Arts Troupe of Berkeley, *Reserve Liberal Training Corps (a play)*, 4.
[37] NYU School of Arts Guerrilla Theatre Coordinating Committee, "Guerrilla Theatre".

Most of the NYU group's advice relates directly to choosing and utilizing a performance space. They encouraged troupes to keep their numbers small in order to facilitate mobility, warning that the most interesting performance spaces (such as places where important events had recently occurred) came with an increased chance of danger and negative attention from authorities. They went on to categorize types of performance spaces based on the atmosphere: "friendly" spaces, where everyone would listen to a skit even if they did not agree with its message; "neutral" spaces, including most public areas, in which some people would listen and some would ignore or heckle performers; "unfriendly" spaces "where people who disagree with your politics and aesthetics are likely to be," in which violence was possible but unlikely; and "hostile" spaces, such as KKK meetings, in which the goal was "not to convince or change minds but simply to let these people know you have penetrated their security," where performers were at serious risk simply by being present. By breaking it down this way, the committee encouraged potential performers to think critically about aspects specific to guerrilla theatre, trusting that readers would have prior experience working in theatrical groups or that they could find that sort of logistical information elsewhere.

While the WDRU Caravan clearly intended their 28-page pamphlet to be instructional, the writers conveyed suggestions through narrative accounts of their own experiences rather than compiling a list of advice. Most of the pamphlet is reminiscent of a journal or a travel log, containing records of the group's geographical movement as well as comprehensive descriptions of all their skits and performances. However, the introduction and epilogue offered more space for discussion of guerrilla theatre as a practice, as well as the Caravan's ideas about their own successes and failures through

their tour. Within the introduction, they addressed their three biggest organizational problems as a series of questions: "What kind of people does the Caravan need? How do you effect a balance between the political and theatrical aspects of guerrilla theatre? How does the specific organizing function of the Caravan make it different from usual guerrilla theatre?"[38] Though it is clear that the Caravan struggled with these problems through the duration of their activity, even their explanations of their failures could serve as guidelines for other groups facing similar problems. For example, they discussed their interactions with various local organizers throughout the course of the summer, including several poor experiences where communication between the Caravan and the organizers was less than ideal. By reading these accounts, other guerrilla theatre groups who wanted to follow the Caravan's example in touring could avoid those same pitfalls. Overall, the pamphlet offers little concrete advice that would facilitate the formation of a new group, though the narrative format of their writing creates an engaging and exciting picture of guerrilla theatre as a practice; therefore, the Caravan pamphlet was best suited to assist new guerrilla theatre groups in troubleshooting obstacles, or to introduce the concept of guerrilla theatre to those who were totally unfamiliar.

A number of activist guerrilla theatre groups emerged several years after avant-garde guerrilla theatre troupes first began to experiment with guerrilla theatre in the late 1950s and early 60s. The agitational groups were not artistic trailblazers in the way that the San Francisco Mime Troupe or the Bread and Puppet Theatre had been, but

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[38] The Caravan, *What is Guerrilla Theatre, Anyway?*, 2.

they were an important part of the antiwar movement and they formed an important sub-section of guerrilla theatre despite the relative lack of scholarship devoted to them. Groups like the WDRU Caravan, the NYU School of Art Guerrilla Theatre Coordinating Committee, and the Berkeley RAT were drawn to guerrilla theatre for primarily political reasons, in order to further the existing agendas of the organizations or agendas that inspired their creation.

Interestingly, despite their clear bias toward the political aspects of guerrilla theatre over artistic aspects, the tension between aesthetic and political concerns was not eliminated within these groups. The Caravan in particular recounts their experiences attempting to reconcile an "artistic" faction and a "political" faction within their members, noting how difficult it was to produce and perform material when that rift was present. This tension between political efficacy and artistic excellence was inherent in guerrilla theatre as a medium for both avant-garde and agitational groups, and the topic constituted one of the most hotly debated topics among those engaged in the practice. The next chapter explores how different groups balanced political, aesthetic, and commercial aspects to create successful guerrilla theatre performances.

CHAPTER 3: POLITICAL & AESTHETIC INTERSECTIONS IN GUERRILLA THEATRE

While guerrilla theatre operated within or alongside the antiwar movement in many cases, participants always had an additional set of concerns beyond those of a political activist—namely, how to create a performance that would be effective both politically and aesthetically. Guerrilla theatre practitioners had to constantly evaluate their own work in order to avoid creating blatant propaganda, inaccessible high art, or an unintelligible spectacle. If the political message of a guerrilla theatre show was underdeveloped, the artistry would not be appreciated and the group would not achieve their goals; if the aesthetic quality of a performance was very low, the message could sound garbled or preachy—if the audience paid attention long enough to hear the message at all. Because their resources and manpower were limited, it was necessary for guerrilla theatre troupes to establish their artistic and political priorities in order to work effectively.

Anyone creating political art has to determine how to combine and balance politics and aesthetics—this was not a problem unique to the 1960s or to the practice of guerrilla theatre. However, guerrilla theatre participants had incentive to discuss this problem in a public format. Because guerrilla theatre participants intentionally cultivated increased radical activity, including increased involvement in guerrilla theatre, they often spoke or wrote with the intention of making themselves an example for potential participants or those with little experience of their own. Consequently, it was in their best interest to explain their approach to the intersection of politics and aesthetics in a deliberate and transparent way, rather than keeping the discussion more

private. Every troupe, regardless of size or prominence, had to engage with the intersection in order to perform guerrilla theatre. However, there was no one correct way to balance political and artistic concerns, and different groups found different routes to success. Examining the relationship between aesthetic and political concerns in the guerrilla theatre performance is vital to understanding why the practice arose during this time. Guerrilla theatre participants had many non-artistic opportunities to get involved in political activity during the period, but they chose a form of political art instead.

Conceptualizations about the relationship between the two elements break down fairly cleanly between categories of theatrical performance. Traditionally staged 'pure' theatre saw itself as being apolitical, prioritizing aesthetic excellence over all else. Traditionally staged political theatre also prioritized artistry, though it engaged with politics and hoped to have a social impact. Avant-garde guerrilla theatre groups viewed the two elements as being inextricably connected, because they were both vital to the execution of their goals. Agitational guerrilla theatre, in contrast, framed the discussion in binary terms and almost universally prioritized their politics over their artistry.

Guerrilla Theatre as Political Art

Because they intended guerrilla theatre to act as political art, distinct from both political action and artistic expression on their own, participants grappled with several issues resulting from the overlap of these two realms. These issues included elements that would have been familiar to traditional artists (e.g. maintaining artistic integrity) or traditional activists (e.g. communicating a political message clearly), but other

elements were unique to political art. In addition, audiences and critics encountered uncertainty regarding how guerrilla theatre should be evaluated or interpreted, given its position at an intersection of art and political action. The development, staging, and reception of guerrilla theatre during this time can be better understood through closer examination of some of these ideas; such an understanding is vital to making sense of the choices guerrilla theatre groups made. The first section approaches guerrilla theatre's self-identified moral purpose and the criticism produced by observers who did not understand such goals. The second section notes the parallel between guerrilla theatre's rejection of traditional staging and its radical politics. In the third section, I elaborate on two problems produced by interactions between artistic and political elements of guerrilla theatre: creating political art that would be appreciated in posterity and dismantling the perceived separation between artistic performance and political events.

Guerrilla Theatre as a Moral Alternative to Capitalist Structures

Guerrilla theatre had its critics; to some outside the practice, it appeared unnecessary, self-centered, or even politically inexpedient. This sentiment only grew as theatrical displays of radical activity became more commonplace, including and exceeding the contribution of guerrilla theatre groups. For example, a May 1970 submission to the *New Republic*, an established liberal magazine with less sympathy for radical ideas, criticized the role of theatrical elements in political workings at the time. The author of the piece, drama critic Robert Brunstein, wrote that "what may have been originally stimulated by a desire to dramatize a cause for the sake of curing an injustice

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now often seems like theatre for its own sake, destructive in its aim, negative in its effect, performed with no particular end in mind."[1] While this critique was not aimed against guerrilla theatre specifically, it contained the implicit argument that theatrical protest was spectacle for the sake of spectacle rather than being a politically beneficial protest action. Theatre professionals who adhered to more traditional ideas about their craft, such as Brunstein, often criticized guerrilla theatre for its heavy-handed messages and forceful methods. On the other hand, guerrilla theatre appeared excessively complicated or obscure to some political organizers and activists who were not artistically inclined. While writing about the intentional ambiguity of political symbolism in Bread and Puppet shows, theatre historian and Bread and Puppet member John Bell noted that the lack of explicit political rhetoric frustrated some within the antiwar movement:

> There is a kind of contradiction here, which often frustrated goal-oriented political activists who, one might think, would be the best audience for political theater. Such activists can object to the fact that Bread and Puppet's political theater does not 'preach' to its audience, but the fact that it doesn't saves its integrity as art.[2]

Because Bread and Puppet did not communicate the intended meaning of a symbol, instead allowing audiences to draw their own conclusions, some "goal-oriented political activists" understood guerrilla theatre as indulgent and self-serving rather than politically helpful. Those who were active in the antiwar scene without dabbling in political art were not accustomed to reckoning with the tension between message and

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[1] Robert Brustein, "Revolution as Theatre," *New Republic* 162, no. 11 (March 14, 1970): 15.
[2] John Bell, "Beyond the Cold War: Bread and Puppet Theater and the New World Order," in *Staging Resistance: Essays on Political Theater*, ed. Jeanne M. Colleran and Jenny S. Spencer (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998), 49.

form; therefore any sacrifices made for artistic integrity could be interpreted as self-interested choices. Although guerrilla theatre troupes pursued unselfish goals regarding community-building and social activism, and indeed sought to change the conception of art in American society to make it more egalitarian, guerrilla theatre was subject to misunderstandings and criticism from both the art world and the political realm. Some critics called into question whether political artists such as guerrilla theatre participants were actually achieving change through theatrical protest, or whether they were only serving their own interests by marrying radical politics and artistic practice.

For Davis and Schumann, at least, this criticism was somewhat absurd due to their vision of guerrilla theatre as a morally driven mode of performance and creation. Davis described the guiding "vision" of guerrilla theatre as being "to continue—I repeat—to continue presenting moral plays to confront hypocrisy in the society."[3] As a result, the fulfillment of personal interests within the group came through the achievement of public change, not at the expense of public change. Davis went on to write that American theatre as an institution needed to be "re-adapted in order to: teach, direct toward change, be an example of change" if it was to retain any relevance or power; the best way for a guerrilla theatre company to exemplify that change was to establish "a morality at its core."[4] Davis interpreted businessmen and corporate entities as having no moral drive, instead focusing their efforts on the attainment of financial gain. Guerrilla theatre therefore had to eschew commercial success in order to prioritize moral concerns that were ignored elsewhere. While Davis was clear that

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[3] R. G. Davis, "Guerrilla Theatre," *The Tulane Drama Review: TDR* 10, no. 4 (1966), 132.
[4] Davis, "Guerrilla Theatre," in *TDR*, 131.

avoiding the pursuit of financial gain was politically necessary for guerrilla theatre groups, he did not sugar-coat the difficulties of doing so: "the theatre as a moral force will, as does the single artist, have to live by its wits."[5]

If the goal of guerrilla theatre was to achieve moral excellence in order to draw attention to moral corruption elsewhere in American society, the moral or political development of individual troupe members ultimately served that underlying purpose. After all, without monetary incentive or the potential for personal recognition for their involvement, members of guerrilla theatre troupes had to be motivated by their own commitment to creating political and moral change: "No one works at these kinds of theatres because of money, because that's not enough. No one works for stardom, because there's no stardom. There's a great deal of anonymity. And you either work for the purpose of it or you don't work in it."[6]

Rejecting the Political Establishment, Rejecting the Theatrical Establishment

The subversive elements of guerrilla theatre were not limited to radical political messages about American society during the 1960s. The rejection of traditional performance spaces by guerrilla theatre groups was one (logistically useful) element of their work that demonstrated their rejection of the theatrical establishment; it represented a rejection of the political establishment as well. As contemporary activist/performer Maggie Hutcheson explains in "Demechanizing Our Politics: Street Performance and Making Change," any street performance simultaneously draws

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[5] R. G. Davis, "Guerrilla Theatre", in *Fifth Estate* 2, no. 25 (April 1-15, 1968), 5.
[6] The San Francisco Mime Troupe, *Radical Theater Festival, San Francisco State College, Sept. 1968* (San Francisco: The Troupe, 1969), 36.

attention to the status quo and the implicit rules of social conduct in public while it conveys its specific stated message:

> By engaging in excessive (i.e. abnormal) behavior, performances reveal the possibility of different ways of "being" in each space they occupy. Activist performances outside of the theatre have the potential to reveal the rules of society to be socially constructed (and therefore alterable) but they also expose the specific public spaces that they are performed in as socially constructed, carefully controlled and, most importantly, alterable.[7]

Any disruption in public areas drew attention to the presence and purpose of social constructs; because of this, the critiques of societal structures present in guerrilla theatre shows gained extra resonance because the very fact of their performance encouraged people to critically engage with things they were used to taking for granted. This was not a new idea or one unique to guerrilla theatre, but it is an important one for understanding the success of their performances.

Of course, traditional theatre was—and is—deeply entrenched in the political and economic establishment, a point which political playwright Jean Claude Van Itallie highlighted in a 1967 *New York Times* essay "Should the Artist be Political in His Art?": "The fact is that the theater, despite all our laments about it, is part of the system, a small part."[8] He went on to condemn the "whole socio-moral-educational-economic-psychological structure that man in the 20th century world has devised for himself to live in," emphasizing the theatre world's small part in creating and upholding that structure. Because traditional theatre was a part of the system criticized by guerrilla

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[7] Maggie Hutcheson, "Demechanizing Our Politics: Street Performance and Making Change," in *Wild Fire: Art As Activism*, ed. Deborah Barndt (Toronto: Sumach Press, 2006), 82.
[8] Jean-Claude Van Itallie, "Should the Artist Be Political in His Art?" *New York Times*, September 17 1967, Arts & Leisure, sec. D3.

theatre performances, finding ways to operate outside of that structure was explicitly necessary for the guerrilla theatre groups. Therefore, the choice of nontraditional performances represented a rejection of both the political and cultural establishment as well as what they viewed as bourgeois artistic traditions.

In 1967, the same year as Van Itallie's article was published, Richard Schechner wrote a short piece for the *Tulane Drama Review* that demonstrated a new trend within the theatre world: moving away from traditional theatre spaces and toward more experimental staging. Schechner, a senior editor of the *Review*, declared his commitment to writing about "environmental theatre," defined as any sort of theatre that took place outside the realm of "proscenium-thrust-open-area (any kind of) *staged* theatre" that had been practically ubiquitous before.[9] Unlike the avant-garde guerrilla theatre groups, who spoke out actively against traditional theatre for its complicity in maintaining the status quo, Schechner asserted that the repertory of traditional American theatre would never be overtaken by environmental theatre, but rather environmental theatre would be an innovative supplement to more traditional work. While non-traditional performances certainly challenged established traditions, in Schechner's view, they would never undermine those traditions completely. Despite his ties to guerrilla theatre through the NYU group, Schechner still had strong ties to the world of traditional theatre, and was writing to a theatrical audience rather than a political one.

Later in the article, he recounted a conversation he had with members of the SFMT about the future of political theatre in America, at which point he noted the

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[9] Richard Schechner, "The Journal of Environmental Theatre," *The Tulane Drama Review: TDR* 11, no. 3 (1967), 19.

connection between the aesthetic shift toward environmental theatre and the group's radical politics, for they both represent a rejection of tradition. To Schechner, at least, the artistic innovation of environmental theatre and the political disillusionment that resulted from the Vietnam War were clearly connected because "both bewilderments show a despair with institutional solutions, with fixed forms."[10] Guerrilla theatre, by taking its radical message into the streets and other public areas, stood against the theatrical establishment in a way that mirrored their radical activity aimed at breaking down the political establishment. To these groups, it was necessary to forge a path outside of the tradition set forward for them in order to critique the system and evaluate their own complicity as American citizens. The avant-garde groups identified this from the very beginning of their work, and the agitational groups followed suit.

Art/Life Separation and Artistic Longevity

Guerrilla theatre had unique political and artistic power due to its position at the intersection of both realms, but troupes had to avoid unique pitfalls as well. Guerrilla theatre troupes identified two problems in particular: if artistry was a high priority, the audience members could write off the performance as 'fine art' and fail to engage with the politics, while if political messages were prioritized the artistic longevity of the piece was endangered. These problems are both the result of conflicting means of evaluating political and artistic material, as these materials usually had very different goals.

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[10] Schechner, "The Journal of Environmental Theatre," 22.

Artistic performances engage with political ideas in a unique way, because they are often evaluated aesthetically before they are considered in political terms. Audiences sometimes disregarded art that includes themes with social or political resonance, as art was not seen as having real power. Within a certain cultural understanding of fine art, art could be rendered unrelated to real-life topics like politics; although it could be valued for its beauty, emotional power, or other qualities, many still understood as being isolated from everyday life. Artist and activist Alana Jelinek refers to this sort of view as limiting all art to being "artlike art" that is "assumed to be apolitical, because it is perceived as removed from the social arena."[11] In contrast, guerrilla theatre artists sought to create "lifelike art," which by Jelinek's definition was "assumed to carry, by its very nature, a revolutionary or democratic politics." Rather than accepting or exploiting the psychological cushion that viewers could place between a performance and their own lived experiences, guerrilla theatre artists aimed to minimize that distance as much as possible.

Guerrilla theatre was purposefully designed to eliminate as much separation between the artists, the audience, and the message of the performance; this is because guerrilla theatre artists hoped to create real-life change through their performances. Because it took place outside of areas designated for artistic performance, without logistical barriers such as tickets or set schedules, and to an audience that was usually unaware they were going to view a performance, guerrilla theatre by its nature forced observers to consider the performance differently than they were used to doing with

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[11] Alana Jelinek, *This is Not Art: Activism and Other 'Not-Art'* (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2013), 93.

high art. However, the fact that it was an artistic performance meant that this distance

could never be fully eradicated, as Davis explains in his Guerrilla Theatre speech:

> It is acceptable to criticize, to debate, to take issue with problems in society, as long as you are not effective... it has been our experience in local dealings with the police and commissioners of parks that when our social comment is clear and direct and not confused by 'art' or obfuscated by 'aesthetic distance', we have had trouble—arrest, harassment and loss of income.[12]

This passage almost certainly refers to the 1963 arrest of Davis and others when parks

authorities sought to shut down their public shows; the resulting court case set a legal

precedent for their right to perform in the parks, though it did not stop authorities from

continuing to give the group trouble. While Davis implied that "trouble" with

authorities could be avoided by relying on artistic obfuscation, he also established that

such obfuscation results in a political message that was "not effective." The San

Francisco Mime Troupe was not achieving their goals of spreading radical politics and

creating societal change if audiences were able to separate the artistic and political

aspects of their work enough to enjoy the artistic elements despite their political

implications.

However, while guerrilla theatre sought to avoid the creation of distance

between their performance and their audience, mainstream political theatre (that is,

theatre with socially relevant messages but without overt radical politics) actually

relied upon this distance in order to succeed commercially. Van Itallie described the

leeway given to artists in crafting controversial messages, explaining it as a side effect

of the view that artists were marginal figures in society: "the artist, the theater artist at

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[12] Davis, "Guerrilla Theatre" in *TDR*, 132.

least, is allowed his say, even applauded, and that which is meant to bite is accepted with a sensual ouch of titillation. And this is because the artist is unimportant."[13] Because the artist is "unimportant," the meaning of the performance can be abstracted, made purely "sensual," by emphasizing the distance perceived between artists and places of power in society. Van Itallie suggested that the artistic aspects of socially engaged theatre performances created a buffer that simultaneously permitted and trivialized the political implications of the shows; however, Davis and other guerrilla theatre artists explicitly refused that buffer, in part because they did not rely on it to reconcile their political messages and their commercial aspirations.

While making political art involved a variety of pitfalls that non-political artists or non-artistic activists did not have to concern themselves with, it is important to remember that political art also had unique powers and strengths as a result of the intersection of artistic and political ideas. Guerrilla theatre artists sought to minimize the distance between their art and real life, but it is undeniable that they sometimes benefited from this, if only by exchanging the success of their messages for their own legal or physical safety. Davis may have been unhappy that artistic performance created a cushion between his message and his audience, but integrating his politics into an artistic performance allowed him to reach audiences he would not otherwise have reached. In a different context, but undeniably related to this issue, Davis described the ability of guerrilla theatre to broach topics that everyone might know but no one is talking about: "thoughts, images, observations and discoveries that are not printed in newspapers nor made into movies: truth that may be shocking and honesty that is

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[13] Van Itallie, "Should the Artist Be Political in His Art?"

vulgar to the aesthete."[14] Theatre had access to its own specific kind of truth, guerrilla theatre an even more specific and specialized kind.

Political messages could potentially be declawed and distanced from real life if the performance was interpreted as high art, but the artistic integrity of a piece could just as easily be threatened by the inclusion of strong political themes. Davis outlines this problem best: if the message is "too immediate" and on-the-nose regarding a specific political idea, the art becomes "newsworthy and, like today's newspaper, will line tomorrow's garbage pail." If the artist makes "devious, symbolic, or academically suggestive" work in order to avoid being too on-the-nose, however, it might lead to alienation among the audience, because "their minds have been flattened by television and dull jobs."[15] Therefore, political themes limit the potential lifespan of a piece of art, because they make it more difficult to evaluate and appreciate the piece aesthetically once the political moment in which it was created has passed. The same thing that makes street theatre useful for political messages—the immediacy of writing a skit, as opposed to the long process of staging a play, for example—increased the threat of creating something that would never be appreciated in posterity. It was well established in the theatre world (and indeed visible in historical examples like Odets and the Group) that a playwright who introduce contemporary political themes into his work "does so at his peril, his *artistic* peril."[16]

This phenomenon was both detrimental and beneficial to guerrilla theatre artists, as it limited their potential audience while intensifying their connection with the

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[14] Davis, "Guerrilla Theatre", in *Fifth Estate*, 5.
[15] Davis, "Guerrilla Theatre," in *TDR*, 131
[16] Van Itallie, "Should the Artist Be Political in His Art?"

audience they did have. Guerrilla theatre was not well suited to create material that would be included in future repertories or that would remain relevant in a variety of temporal, geographical, and political environments. On the other hand, by limiting the applicability of their art they were able to tailor performances to the times and places in which they occurred, creating unique and immersive experiences for their audiences. In addition, they avoided critical attention from "the commercial apparatus of a bourgeois mass culture" in the form of traditional artistic criticism, which would have evaluated their work as though they sought to create high art.[17] It is abundantly clear that guerrilla theatre artists did not intend for their work to exist within that context. However, the matter of longevity concerned the agitational groups far less, as they had no reason to create art that would last beyond the political moment if their primary goals were political in nature.

Politics and Aesthetics in Agitational Groups

The agitational groups, composed as they were of volunteers and activists rather than self-identified artists, consistently held their political agendas as more significant than their artistic development. While they valued artistic skill and demonstrated an understanding of how the two elements affected one another, these groups often stated outright that they pursued political goals first. The Radical Arts Troupe at Berkeley, for example, offered this passage as one of their first suggestions for starting a guerrilla theatre troupe:

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[17] Eugene Van Erven, *Radical People's Theatre* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 2

> Politics is primary. This means that the political purposes of RAT are more important than the artistic; though the better the artistry, the clearer the politics will be to the audience. Our plays are designed primarily to spread SDS ideas and only secondarily to entertain.[18]

The Berkeley RAT stated explicitly that political purposes were more important to them, and even went on to say that artistic success was desirable because it aided in political success, rather than as its own achievement. The group then restated this idea by informing readers that the overall purpose of RAT was "to communicate the politics to the audience."[19] The WDRU Caravan also left little ambiguity about their choice to prioritize political goals over artistic ones; in the epilogue, while summarizing the aspects of their project that succeeded or failed, they admit that the needs of the WDRU limited their ability to stage experimental shows "in supermarkets, on beaches, at dances, and so forth" since impromptu performances at coffeehouses were more advantageous in reaching student audiences.[20] The WDRU achieved their biggest success at the time among young people, particularly students, so the Caravan did not experiment with more innovative performance spaces because they were "relating to these youthful constituencies, rather than to a generalized and fragmented public."[21] Their willingness to move away from more adventurous guerrilla theatre in order to achieve the goals of their parent organization proved that, despite their obvious personal interest in guerrilla theatre as an artistic form, it was a means to an end. Even for the NYU Guerrilla Theatre group, composed of students from the School of Arts and

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[18] Radical Arts Troupe of Berkeley, *Reserve Liberal Training Corps (a play) and Suggestions for Building a Guerrilla Theatre Group* (Boston, MA: Students for a Democratic Society, 1969), 3.
[19] Ibid., 3.
[20] Ibid., 19.
[21] Ibid., 20.

co-founded by a professor of performance studies, considered political goals to be their primary focus. Their artistic prowess was more visible in the polish of their performances rather than in their functioning as a troupe.

The fact that the Berkeley RAT could claim their politics were "more important" than their artistry, or that their shows were meant "primarily" as expressions of political sentiment and only "secondarily" as artistic performance, indicates that they framed the two elements as being distinct from one another. Indeed, for all the agitational groups, the relationship between political and aesthetic elements of guerrilla theatre was like a sliding scale on which one had to find a working balance—the discussions on the topic displayed a binary mode of thinking, where the artistic presentation and the political content of a show existed quite separately. For example, the WDRU Caravan wrote that the group developed "a political faction and an artistic faction" within their staff that inhibited their ability to produce work and perform; the divide was at times "vicious and personal" as arguments broke out frequently regarding whether they should spend time on theatrical rehearsal or political outreach.[22] The existence of a strong rivalry between the factions demonstrated their conceptualization of these elements as being totally distinct, while also reinforcing the importance of the issue for guerrilla theatre—when the Caravan could not create the right relationship in their performances, their ability to function was greatly impeded.

This approach to the relationship between form and message was unique to the agitational groups; it was certainly influenced by their involvement with antiwar organizations like SDS or the WDRU. Instead of being reliant upon aesthetic qualities,

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[22] The Caravan, *What is Guerrilla Theatre, Anyway?* (Madison, WI: Wisconsin Draft Resistance Union, 1968), 20

the success or failure of an agitational guerrilla theatre performance hinged on how well a political agenda was communicated to the audience. Guerrilla theatre allowed these groups to function as mouthpieces of sorts for bigger operations; the artistic or theatrical aspects were most useful because they granted access to an alternative mode of political engagement and different audiences. For avant-garde groups, however, the issue of politics and aesthetics was at once simpler and more complicated: they did not view political and aesthetic elements as belonging to distinct categories, as they were interrelated and both vital to political, artistic, and moral success.

Politics and Aesthetics Within Avant-Garde Groups

Knowledge of the distinctive styles practiced by each avant-garde guerrilla theatre troupe is vital to any understanding of their artistic philosophies. As R G Davis said regarding the San Francisco Mime Troupe, Bread and Puppet, and El Teatro Campesino: "we have differences about what we do, but I don't think we have any differences about what we want to see happen: the personalities are radical, the activity is radical and the content is radical."[23] The political views and goals of avant-garde groups—what they wanted to see happen, in Davis's own words—were largely similar, but their aesthetic styles showed vastly different influences and methods. While The Living Theatre is a useful example for understanding the rise of avant-garde guerrilla theatre, ultimately the San Francisco Mime Troupe and the Bread and Puppet Theater

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[23] The San Francisco Mime Troupe, *Radical Theater Festival,* 16.

are more useful examples for discussing guerrilla theatre as political art, because The Living Theatre did not adhere as strictly to the practice.

Peter Schumann's Bread and Puppet Theater

For the Bread and Puppet Theater, colorful papier-mâché puppets form the most recognizable element of their unique visual style. Founder Peter Schumann and the other members of the theatre company made all their distinctive puppets and masks by hand—and, some fifty years later, they continue to do so. First Schumann, trained as a sculptor, created the forms from "some alleged medieval German formula" of clay, straw, and beer. Once the clay had dried out, the sculptures were draped in thin plastic and then covered in torn butcher paper and glue. Schumann then painted all the resulting papier-mâché forms by hand.[24] The company has accumulated pieces ranging in size from small masks to fifteen-foot tall figures, all of which bear Schumann's highly skilled and intentionally rough aesthetic style. These puppets are colorful, sometimes grotesque, and represent an incredible array of forms: demons, angels, gods, washerwomen and garbage men, animals and mythical creatures, politicians, fools, jesters, and hundreds of vaguely formed 'population puppets' made en masse to fill space.

The highly visual nature of the company's work makes writing on their performances difficult, though the array of sights and sounds in a Bread and Puppet show can be imagined from narrative accounts. One such account, written by a

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[24] Ronald T. Simon, Marc Estrin, and the Bread and Puppet Theater, *Rehearsing with Gods: photographs and essays on the Bread and Puppet Theater* (White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green Publications, 2004), 12.

company member, describes the major characters that Schumann and his colleagues

used to protest the war in Vietnam:

> And, uh oh, anti-American puppets, too - Uncle Fatso, the ultimate capitalist, with his U.S. top hat rimmed with death's-heads… Skeletons with American flags, and, leading the contingent, Peter Schumann on eight-foot stilts, towering over everything and everybody as 'Uncle Sam' with long striped pants and skeletons on his hat, bowing, smiling, blowing two horns simultaneously, a figure familiar, yet ambiguous enough to be threatening.[25]

Perhaps because their performances included so many striking visual elements, the

group rarely relied upon heavy dialogue or long speeches, and in fact they came to

thrive by focusing on sight and nonverbal sound only. As historian Eugene Van Erven

writes about the group, the Bread and Puppet Theater benefited from being able to

convey meaning "beyond the contaminated channels of verbal communication" through

visuals which had to be interpreted by audience members themselves.[26] This quality,

along with the unique structure and timing of their performances that came as a result,

led R G Davis to describe Schumann's theatrical work as "anti-theater" in order to

emphasize the importance of non-traditional performances for the group.[27] The style

adopted by the Bread and Puppet Theater was well suited for putting on street

performances and grand outdoor pageants, due to the highly visual nature; passers-by

were more willing to stop and look at a spectacle than they were to stop and listen to a

monologue. Their style also allowed them to bypass some of the issues inherent in the

creation of political art, as theatre historian and Bread and Puppet company member

John Bell explains: the "bit of unclarity about what exactly an object represents" within

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[25] Simon et al., *Rehearsing with Gods*, 32.
[26] Van Erven, *Radical People's Theatre*, 62.
[27] The San Francisco Mime Troupe, *Radical Theater Festival*, 28.

a Bread and Puppet performance allows the group to create subtlety and room for interpretation even when their shows grappled with strong or contentious themes. The genre of puppetry, precisely because it is highly visual and its images can be ambiguous if no direct explanation is given, "allows the presentation of strongly held convictions but does not insist on the audience taking them as their own. Instead, it encourages contemplation."[28] In this case, Schumann was not grappling with the art/life separation Davis wrote about, but rather the difference between preaching a fixed political ideology to viewers and setting up questions that led viewers to their own political analysis of a production.

As is clear from the body of their work, the Bread and Puppet Theater was never short on strongly held convictions; Schumann reported in 1968 that most of the company had been motivated to join out of political inclinations, rather than because they were trained as actors or interested in acting experience.[29] The group identified themselves as a band of "rough puppeteers who make rough art for rough times" in a book of essays and photographs about their own work. That is, they intentionally created 'rough' pieces as opposed to pursuing the creation of fine art. It is through this line of thinking that Schumann developed the artistic philosophy he came to call "cheap art."[30]

The practice of cheap art emphasizes art as a vital element of community and spiritual wellness, arguing for its accessibility away from the capitalist structure that turned it into a measurable commodity. In Schumann's own words, cheap art is "sloppy,

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[28] Bell, "Beyond the Cold War," 47-48.
[29] The San Francisco Mime Troupe, *Radical Theater Festival*, 22.
[30] Simon et al., *Rehearsing with Gods*, 198.

unsightful, unframed, unmatted; non-valuable art, because of slap-dash execution with poor materials; ephemeral art with no eternal ambitions."[31] By setting out to make "non-valuable art" intentionally, one can emphasize its array of values and uses outside of a commercial context, without allowing commercial value to overshadow other things. Although the group did not circulate information about "cheap art" until the mid 1980s, at which point they created a series of passionate manifestoes on the subject, the ideas at the core of "cheap art" as a philosophy had been in use consistently from the group's beginnings in 1963. This is evident both in their creations—the puppets are well-crafted but not polished, formed out of butcher paper, chicken wire, glue, and paint—and in the process by which they created those objects. When recalling the resourcefulness that Schumann requested from the group, one former member wrote that they were taught to make pieces such as hinges rather than buying them, and that if they did not have enough hammers to construct something they would pick up rocks off the ground.[32]

During a 1995 WNYC radio interview, when Schumann was asked how he balanced "the arts and propaganda" in his company's work, Schumann answered, "I'm a baker. I don't care particularly for the fine arts. We call ours the rough arts or the sourdough arts, or the sour arts."[33] Schumann's response, emphasizing the radical nature of his style of art, implied that it was only difficult to balance political messages with certain kinds of artistic work; Schumann's 'rough arts' were therefore in opposition to the 'fine arts,' which were not suited for political messages. The 'rough

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[31] Ibid., 196.
[32] Simon et al., *Rehearsing with Gods*, 194.
[33] Bell, "Beyond the Cold War," 33.

arts' or 'cheap art' reflected Schumann's desire to replace the commodity value of art with moral and spiritual value.

Of course, as Schumann was quick to remind those who ask him about the political elements of his art, the distinction between artistic and political components breaks down very quickly under scrutiny. As he describes it, there is no way to create 'pure art' that does not reflect some kind of message:

> The arts are political, whether they like it or not. If they stay in their own realm, preoccupied with their proper problems, the arts support the status quo, which in itself is highly political. Or they scream and kick and participate in our own country's struggle for liberation in whatever haphazard way they can, probably at the expense of some of their sensitive craftsmanship, but definitely for their own soul's sake.[34]

Therefore in Schumann's view, while only radical or subversive art is labeled as such, all art contained meaning that supports an ideology and could be considered political even if it upheld the status quo. Schumann admitted that making art with radical political messages made "sensitive craftsmanship" more difficult to achieve, but this should not be understood as an assertion that the political aspects of their art were more significant to them than the artistic aspects. Schumann's radical approach to the production and usage of art left him "reconciled to the constant permeation of art into politics and vice versa," meaning that the binary discussions of the non-professional groups would never occur in the context of this group.[35]

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[34] Van Erven, epigraph of *Radical People's Theatre.*
[35] Bell, "Beyond the Cold War," 34.

R G Davis's San Francisco Mime Troupe

While Peter Schumann founded the Bread and Puppet Theater as a radical theatre company from the beginning, the San Francisco Mime Troupe actually had its roots in the theatre establishment it came to oppose so vehemently once it became more radical. In 1959, the early members of the group formed a "purely aesthetically oriented movement theatre performing for an elitist audience," drawing heavily upon Davis's mime and dance training to create silent shows emphasizing the range of human motion.[36] Davis became more politically conscious as a result of his experience staging such performances and eventually rejected the practices of bourgeois theatre altogether, viewing it as exclusionary to those outside the middle or upper class. As the group's performances and ideologies became increasingly radical through the first half of the 1960s, they were continually more engaged with elements of traditional theatre than other avant-garde guerrilla theatre groups, though they usually used these elements to make a point against traditional theatre. This engagement can be seen in both their use of historical playwrights and their implementation of long-established forms of theatre work.

The SFMT performed its first show in the commedia dell'arte style in 1961, and this style has served a vital role in the group's work through the present day.[37] Commedia dell'arte, recognized by its "broad gestures, easily recognizable stock characters, music, loud voices, farcical situations, and comic suspense," was an appropriate form for street performances or other outdoor shows—the exaggeration inherent in the style assured that the meaning of a scene could be understood even if

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[36] Van Erven, *Radical People's Theatre*, 26.
[37] The San Francisco Mime Troupe, *Radical Theater Festival*, 13.

some of the details were lost.[38] In addition, the comedic elements included in the theatrical style were useful for attracting and keeping an audience, which was a vital consideration for staging shows in public areas due to the many sights and sounds competing for a viewer's attention. The group was fond of using satire in particular, as Davis explained: "Our comedies were bound by real politics, thus satire was our forte, not slapstick. We always related our jokes to something tangible, rather than developing comedy from fantasy."[39] Indeed, their extensive use of satire allowed them to provide commentary on heavy or sensitive topics without alienating their audience— it enabled them to entertain while providing the radical education that formed the heart of their shows after the early 1960s.

The choice of commedia dell'arte as a model for the group aligned well with the group's political goals of transcending the middle-class theatrical establishment and reaching a broader audience. The form originated first among lower-class people in the streets and marketplaces of Renaissance Italy, as a way to make fun of elite members of society through satire and song. However, the subversive form eventually lost its political potency when it spread widely, becoming entertainment for the upper-class individuals it originally mocked. Conscious of this historical information, the Mime Troupe thus set out to "reinstate the commedia's working-class essence" by playing it in the streets and parks of San Francisco.[40] This was not the only example of the group's particular fondness for adopting historical traditions of theatre in ways that increased the resonance of their political messages. A similar idea can be seen at work in their

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[38] Van Erven, *Radical People's Theatre*, 26.
[39] R. G. Davis, *The San Francisco Mime Troupe: The First Ten Years* (Palo Alto: Ramparts Press, 1975), 28.
[40] Van Erven, *Radical People's Theatre*, 26.

1965 premiere of their original play "A Minstrel Show, or Civil Rights in a Cracker Barrel," which uses the blatantly racist format of a 19th century minstrel show in order to denounce racist attitudes in 20th century American society.[41]

The San Francisco Mime Troupe's use of material from the traditional theatre world resulted in "highly professional" and technically polished shows that demonstrated extensive artistic talent and knowledge.[42] However, this did not mean that they sought to maintain 'professionalism' as part of their performances, especially when it came to interactions with the audience. Traditions that were intended to maintain the fourth wall or separate performers from audience members, such as keeping performers out of sight when they were not on stage, were abandoned in the Mime Troupe's unique approach to artistic polish.[43] In this way, the SFMT demonstrated their ability to define good artistry for themselves as a group, picking and choosing components that worked with their political goals and leaving behind anything that was not useful to them.

Like Peter Schumann, Davis agreed that all theatre—and indeed all art—was inherently political because it either attacked the establishment or implicitly supported it.[44] Davis claimed that the technique of successful radical theatre required an "understanding of the political nature of reality," thus expanding the argument about what should be labeled as "political" even further.[45] When asked about his "theatrical premise" in 1968, he responded as follows: "WESTERN SOCIETY IS ROTTEN IN

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[41] The San Francisco Mime Troupe, *Radical Theater Festival*, 13.
[42] Van Erven, *Radical People's Theatre*, 31.
[43] Ibid., 27.
[44] Davis, "Guerrilla Theatre" in *TDR*, 131.
[45] The San Francisco Mime Troupe, *Radical Theater Festival*, 17.

GENERAL, CAPITALIST SOCIETY IN THE MAIN, AND U.S. SOCIETY IN THE PARTICULAR."[46] By responding with a political statement, rather than an explanation of his approach to artistry, Davis refused to allow the two themes to be separated.

From the very beginning, when he was developing the key principles of guerrilla theatre in a speech for the rest of his troupe in 1961, Davis observed that attempts to create radical political theatre had not been successful in America since the 1930s (with several exceptions, one of these being the Living Theatre).[47] He identified politically engaged art as "a risky business, both aesthetically and politically," and furthermore even groups who perfected a blend of those two elements were not safe from the whims of authorities or challenges from the establishment. Another challenge that Davis identified was that of conviction—in his view, the perfect balance of political message and aesthetic skill would still yield poor political theatre if the people behind the show were not motivated by their own authentic conviction in the ideas. As an example, he discusses what would happen if his troupe bought all the trappings of a show from the Bread and Puppet Theater and attempted to stage the show themselves; he concludes they could pull it off but only if they honestly believed in its message and performance, implying that personal conviction was more important to a show than visual style or technical skill.[48] In the same vein, someone who was artistically gifted but not secure in their political convictions would not be well equipped to put on a good show despite their artistic skill:

> In the Mime Troupe, when you get up on the stage you're saying radical-political, political-radical. You're saying something you were

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[46] Davis, "Guerrilla Theatre" in *Fifth Estate*, 5.
[47] Davis, "Guerrilla Theatre," in *TDR*, 131.
[48] The San Francisco Mime Troupe, *Radical Theater Festival*, 17.

> told to say, and you step off the stage and someone says, 'What do we do now?' When the actor cannot complete that thought offstage, he's not a good actor, not good enough.[49]

His emphasis on the necessity of personal conviction, both in artistic and political matters, leaves his conceptualization of how to balance political and artistic elements much closer to Schumann's view than to that of the non-professional groups—for him, as for all the avant-garde groups, differentiating between the two was impractical and unnecessary.

The End of Guerrilla Theatre? Avant-Garde Groups Re-Evaluate Their Relationship to the Movement

In the summer of 1968, a Radical Theater Festival was held in San Francisco; the three-day event was planned as a collaborative effort between the San Francisco Mime Troupe, the Bread and Puppet Theater, El Teatro Campesino, and various smaller groups. The prominent avant-garde companies met to exchange ideas and discuss the way their groups approached radical theatre and political art, enjoying an "extraordinary" sense of cooperation among themselves rather than a competitive atmosphere.[50] A pamphlet published after the event contains the full transcript of a panel between the three founders—Peter Schumann, R G Davis, and El Teatro Campesino's Luiz Valdes—in which they were each asked to describe their work, their view of the other groups, and what they intended to do going into the future.[51]

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[49] Ibid., 42.
[50] Van Erven, *Radical People's Theatre*, 25.
[51] The San Francisco Mime Troupe, *Radical Theater Festival*, 15.

When the discussion eventually arrived at their future plans, Davis explained

that he thought the role of major guerrilla theatre groups within the antiwar movement

was changing: "At this point I find myself trying to refuse to go to demonstrations… In

terms of political activity, demonstrations and protests, for me, are ended."[52] He

elaborated that the SFMT received phone calls regularly from organizers or participants

in demonstrations, asking the group to come out and provide entertainment, at which

point the Mime Troupe had to decide between obliging and going forward with a

scheduled rehearsal. Whereas several years before the group had been quite dedicated

to making appearances at antiwar events, by that point in time they needed to focus on

"creating that alternative and telling the politicos it's not enough to protest and show

the contradictions of the society." The "alternative" was vital by 1968, he argued,

because by that time everyone knew that American society was hypocritical and flawed,

but there were still very few people actively engaged in figuring out an alternative form

of society.[53] Schumann agreed with this sentiment, noting that the Bread and Puppet

Theater also went to protests and demonstrations less than they had even a year or two

before; Schumann tended "more and more" to reject invitations in order to focus on his

theatre's own creative vision. However, Schumann did note that they had not yet

decided that they were "finished with the demonstrations", because they were still able

to help with antiwar activity in New York.

What accounts for this shift in activity among the most prominent professional

guerrilla theatre groups? A quote from Judith Malina may illuminate this change. On the

occasion of The Living Theatre's return to the United States in 1968 from a cycle of

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[52] The San Francisco Mime Troupe, *Radical Theater Festival*, 30.
[53] Ibid., 30.

radical shows in Europe, Malina spoke about a change she perceived in the country: "six months ago our intention was to radicalize our audiences. This is no longer our intention. We are facing audiences that are already radicalized..."[54] Guerrilla theatre groups in the early 1960s aimed to act as the 'vanguard of the movement' by carrying radical ideas into unfamiliar audiences; thus it stands to reason that they would find this goal much harder in the later part of the decade, when the antiwar movement was at its peak visibility and rhetoric criticizing the war was nearly ubiquitous. All of the major avant-garde groups recognized a need to set new goals for themselves by 1968. However, this change does not represent a reprioritization of artistic elements over political elements, even though the groups began to turn down appearances at political events in order to rehearse their own shows; instead, it represents a shift in the political messages the groups were trying to convey, away from tearing down the establishment (which was already somewhat battered) and toward creating a new vision for themselves and their society.

Interestingly, Davis identifies the agitational troupes, which he refers to as "agitprop groups," as part of the reason that the avant-garde groups needed to alter their focus:

> In a sense, in a good way, the agitprop groups are replacing us and should do that. The agitprop groups are not actors, not permanent. They want to do one thing at the particular moment... The agitprop groups are now around to say – visually and dramatically – something about the issues at hand. I think the next step for us is to really get

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[54] David Callaghan, "Where have All the Protesters Gone? 1960s Radical Theatre and Contemporary Theatrical Responses to U.S. Military Involvement in Iraq," in *Theatre, War and Propaganda: 1930-2005*, ed. M. Scott Phillips (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2005), 105.

down to creating organizations committed to a 10 year thing with
people who are concerned with the details of administration.[55]

Because the less artistically sophisticated groups that followed in their footsteps were eager to attend demonstrations and drum up attention for their political agendas, the avant-garde groups were free to develop other ideas that were out of reach for the agitational groups, namely the pursuit of alternative visions for society. Up until this point, these groups produced material that opposed the political establishment, incited audiences to join the radical movement, and criticized various examples of immorality or corruption within American society. As this sort of negative rhetoric became more widespread outside of guerrilla theatre, however, the avant-garde groups moved toward developing and communicating potential alternatives to old systems rather than continuing to spread criticism. While this shift was consistent with the guiding principles of guerrilla theatre, ultimately the pursuit of alternative visions led these groups away from guerrilla theatre, because it was better suited to disruptive, critical messages.

The goals of guerrilla theatre groups differed dramatically from those of traditional theatre groups, as this chapter has established above—they conceptualized themselves as being morally driven as opposed to commercially motivated, they did not seek critical attention or personal renown from the public, and they did not often adhere to familiar artistic structures and rules. Therefore, evaluating their success or lack thereof is more difficult than simply examining their level of artistry or their

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[55] The San Francisco Mime Troupe, *Radical Theater Festival*, 34.

popular reception. In order to determine whether they were successful in any capacity, one must first understand the goals of guerrilla theatre as stated by those who were engaged in the practice.

For the avant-garde groups, there were always multiple goals. In the pursuit of a moral theatre that could stand in opposition to the predominant form of commercial theatre, guerrilla theatre was clearly successful at least for a time. They were similarly successful in spreading guerrilla theatre as a practice—this can be demonstrated by the existence of agitational groups, as well as John Weisman's claim that between 1968 and 1971 the number of active guerrilla theatre groups jumped from fifty to over four hundred.[56] The difficulty of speaking on their political success lies in our inability to measure the concrete results of their work, especially for the agitational groups, who were part of larger organizations and thus working with many individuals outside of guerrilla theatre. Obviously guerrilla theatre as a practice did not achieve major objectives such as societal overhaul, the end of capitalism, or the cessation of war. However, because they chose to speak on these goals through the format of artistic performance, non-traditional theatrical performance specifically, they undeniably added something unique to the wider conversation about these issues. As playwright Michael Kustow frames it in a piece he wrote in 1968, entitled "theatre/WAR/news/history/POLITICS/theatre":

> Not that a play will end a war, send an audience into the streets to wage a revolution, not even that it will give the Answer to an apparently insoluble problem: but if we can find the right form, the

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[56] John Weisman, *Guerrilla Theater: Scenarios for Revolution* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press, 1973), 5.

authentic tone of voice, our play may ask the right questions in the deepest way.[57]

These groups could not have expected wider-scale results given the small amount of resources at their disposal and their relative lack of influence beyond radical circles.

During the Radical Theatre Festival of 1968, when discussing where the groups intended to go in the future, the leaders of the prominent troupes eventually turned the conversation toward the idea of success. For Davis, success came "when we do something right and other people act, something happens to other people. Success is not a good review, but creating other alternatives."[58] This reflects the shift that major guerrilla theatre groups were already undergoing by the late 1960s away from direct political action and toward artistic explorations of political problems. They were correct to move away from guerrilla theatre when they did, as most of the agitational groups disbanded in the early 1970s—agitation-style performances began to decrease in efficacy, because the outspoken dissent that characterized American political discussions in the 1960s decreased as the war came to an end in 1975. Once this occurred, guerrilla theatre was no longer an appropriate format for tackling cultural problems. For the avant-garde groups, however, this did not spell the end. It was all part of the plan, as Davis demonstrated through his choice of Che Guevara quote in the original speech Davis published on guerrilla theatre: "From the very beginning of the struggle [the guerrilla fighter] has the intention of destroying an unjust order and

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[57] Michael Kustow, "theatre/WAR/news/history/POLITICS/theatre," *Yale – Theatre* 1, no. 2 (Summer 1968), 17-19.
[58] The San Francisco Mime Troupe, *Radical Theater Festival*, 36.

therefore an intention, more or less hidden, to replace the old with something new."[59] The beginning of discussion about this "more or less hidden" intention prove that the goals of major guerrilla theatre groups shifted in the years following 1968 precisely because their goal of destroying the unjust order of American society had been set in motion through broader awareness of the antiwar movement. When they were no longer needed to drum up attention and support for antiwar activities, they turned their focus toward the discovery and development of the "alternative" for what they viewed as a corrupt and immoral society.

Regardless of the particulars, the guerrilla theatre groups must be considered successful when part of their goal was to redefine the potential meaning of art. Their very existence becomes an achievement. The moderator of the Radical Theater Festival panel, when wrapping up the discussion, offered this statement:

> My concluding remark is that most questions about radical theater are answered before they're put – simply through the existence of the groups already, which is a fantastic achievement. Think about how they exist and why and you'll be answering your own questions and finding your own way of moving.[60]

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[59] Davis, "Guerrilla Theatre" in *TDR*, 130.
[60] The San Francisco Mime Troupe, *Radical Theater Festival*, 44.

The avant-garde groups were wise to seek alternatives to guerrilla theatre when they did, as the practice was beginning to lose its political and aesthetic potency by the early 1970s. Like many practices associated with America's antiwar movement, guerrilla theatre groups struggled to maintain relevance or visibility without the movement to support them. The discussion between Peter Schumann and R.G. Davis in the 1968 Radical Theater Festival panel, in which they admit their connections to the movement were changing even before 1970, stands as proof that these groups anticipated this problem and thus adopted altered creative forms in order to survive. Agitational groups filled the place of avant-garde guerrilla theatre within the antiwar movement, as R G Davis suggested they would, but only for a time—by 1975 virtually all guerrilla theatre performances had stopped. Although the war dragged on through 1975, the antiwar movement had begun fragmenting and falling apart long before that.[61] Antiwar activity was at its peak between 1968 and 1970; troops were gradually withdrawn from Vietnam from 1970 onward, which quieted the movement, though antiwar activity spiked again in the spring of 1971.[62] As the movement lost its momentum, the agitational guerrilla theatre groups disbanded, or at least lost their visibility once they lost the framework of collaboration with other radical activists and organizers. The avant-garde groups were not so unlucky, as they had their roots outside of the antiwar movement despite their engagement with it throughout the 1960s. The San Francisco Mime Troupe, the Bread and Puppet Theater, and The Living Theatre all

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[61] Maurice Isserman and Michael Kazin, *America Divided: The Civil War of the 1960s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 307.

[62] Ibid., 271.

survive in some form to the present day. However, all of these troupes underwent major structural and artistic changes in the 1970s, moving away from the politically charged public performances that differentiated guerrilla theatre from other forms.

R G Davis broke ties with the San Francisco Mime Troupe in 1970, at which point the company became a collective and experimented with various themes and forms of politically radical theatre.[63] Davis went on to write a book about his time with the Mime Troupe, which was published in 1975.[64] The Mime Troupe put on their first international show in Mexico City in 1974, staging various shows in parks and on traditional stages through the 1980s and 1990s. Their political ideology stayed consistent through their experimentations with form, however. Even in the 21st century, their primary political objectives involved critiquing corporate influences on American politics and highlighting the struggle of the working class.[65] Despite the fact that they continued to succeed at radical theatre after Davis left the group, his departure marked the end of their practice of guerrilla theatre. Even their performances in parks, controversial and innovative in 1960, by the 1980s became an artistic tradition for the group and thus lost their power as disruptive political spectacles.

The Bread and Puppet Theater maintained their personnel and structure more so than the San Francisco Mime Troupe, but they still underwent dramatic changes in operation. In 1970 they moved from New York City to a residency at Goddard College in

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[63] "History," San Francisco Mime Troupe, accessed March 28, 2016, http://www.sfmt.org/company/history.php.

[64] Ronald G. Davis, *The San Francisco Mime Troupe: The First Ten Years* (Palo Alto, California: Ramparts Press, 1975)

[65] "History," San Francisco Mime Troupe.

Vermont, then to "an old dairy farm" in Glover, Vermont in 1975.[66] While the group

continued to experiment with nontraditional performance spaces, their move out of the

big city and into farm country altered the political implications of their outdoor shows,

toning down their disruptive or confrontational edge considerably. Once in Vermont,

the group began an annual pageant "using the pastoral landscape to stage large scale

outdoor productions," which they dubbed *Our Domestic Resurrection Circus* in order to

celebrate the group's new home. By the 1990s these annual shows drew audiences in

the tens of thousands, bringing new logistical issues for Bread and Puppet regarding

food, parking, and camping accommodations as well as the widespread use of drugs and

alcohol among audiences. In 1998, the annual circuses were discontinued after an

audience member named Michael Sarazin died from a brain hemorrhage, the result a

drunken altercation with another audience member on the Bread and Puppet

farmland.[67] Since then, the group has staged smaller summer pageants and other shows

along the East Coast, emphasizing their continued commitment to "frugality and a huge

amount of volunteerism" rather than corporate or government funding. Their website

names them as "one of the oldest, nonprofit, self-supporting theatrical companies in the

country."[68]

Of all the avant-garde groups discussed above, the Living Theatre adhered most

closely to the ideas of guerrilla theatre through the 1970s, which is notable considering

their more limited engagement with the practice at its height. Unlike the Bread and

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[66] "About B & P's 50 Year History," Bread and Puppet Board of Directors, accessed March 28, 2016, http://breadandpuppet.org/50th-anniversary-2/about-b-ps-50-year-history.
[67] John Bell, "The End of Our Domestic Resurrection Circus: Bread and Puppet Theater and Counterculture Performance in the 1990s," *TDR* 43, no. 3 (1999): 74.
[68] "About Bread and Puppet," Bread and Puppet Theater, accessed March 28, 2016, http://breadandpuppet.org/about-bread-and-puppet.

Puppet Theater and the San Francisco Mime Troupe, who were always primarily active in the United States, the Living Theatre was already acting as a "nomadic touring ensemble" in Europe and South America as early as the mid 1960s.[69] The company began a cycle of plays entitled *The Legacy of Cain* during the 1970s, performing them "from the prisons of Brazil to the gates of the Pittsburgh steel mills, and from the slums of Palermo to the schools of New York City" in order to explore the unique implications of their revolutionary political messages in each place. The Living Theatre may have had more success with guerrilla theatre type performance through the 1970s as a result of their firm ties to the art world and their lack of specific political affiliations; their performances never had the political impact of those put on by the other avant-garde groups, but as a result The Living Theatre was not as affected by shifts in the political climate. In addition, their international travel undoubtedly assisted them in this endeavor, as they were still able to reach and radicalize new audiences after that became less feasible domestically. After the death of Julian Beck in 1985, Judith Malina and the group's new director, Hanon Reznikov, opened a performance space in Manhattan. The group has since moved several times within New York, all the while maintaining their connections to the European avant-garde art scene; they are still active, as an experimental theatre company, into the present day.

While the continuation of each of these theatre groups after the sixties is proof of their skill and commitment as theatre artists, the fact that they all underwent significant changes during the same time period demonstrates that guerrilla theatre ceased to be an effective form of political performance. Not one of these groups continued to stage

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[69] "History," The Living Theatre, accessed March 28, 2016, http://www.livingtheatre.org/#!history/c139r.

anti-establishment guerrilla theatre within the United States after the early seventies. This is because the political and social circumstances that led to the creation and spread of guerrilla theatre had changed entirely within that fifteen-year period. Cultural changes came very quickly after the 1960s, bringing a more conservative and individualistic culture that could not be incited to action through the now-familiar radical rhetoric that guerrilla theatre artists had set out to propagate. If guerrilla theatre lost its effectiveness both as an artistic form and as a political action so soon after the 1960s, what made it effective during that time frame? To answer this question, it is necessary to revisit the self-stated goals of guerrilla theatre practice and how the specifics of the form were suited for those goals.

Especially for the avant-garde groups, guerrilla theatre was a means of rejecting the artistic establishment, in order to separate themselves from what they viewed as the moral failings of the institution. To guerrilla theatre participants, traditional theatre in 1960s America was inert, elitist, separate from real life, apathetic to current events, and excessively focused on profit and stardom; thus they sought to create an alternative theatrical form that was lively, accessible, connected to real life, politically engaged, and focused on moral and spiritual growth. The communal nature of theatre, which relies upon human interaction both in performances and behind the scenes, was a logical choice to support their organizational goals regarding collective creation and morality. Guerrilla theatre artists hoped that the person-to-person contact created through street theatre performances made their political messages seem more applicable to the real lives of the audience members, especially compared to television coverage of the war and other impersonal methods of mass communication. Their use of non-traditional

performance spaces created disruptions in the society they sought to change, simultaneously calling implicit societal rules into question and revealing such rules to be arbitrary and changeable. Additionally, their pursuit of audiences that were fundamentally different from those of traditional bourgeois theatre—particularly the working class or other non-theatre-goers—contributed to both the legitimacy and the efficacy of their politics.

As a result of anti-capitalist ideas, and the prioritization of moral issues over monetary concerns, guerrilla theatre emphasized resourcefulness and did not expect participants to have large amounts of money or other materials; this made the form accessible to anyone who had time, energy, and commitment to the ideals, regardless of other circumstances. The non-traditional performance spaces eliminated logistical issues of finding and securing a venue and attracting a sufficient audience. This accessibility strengthened their arguments against the status quo of bourgeois art by demonstrating an alternative method of artistic production. Coupled with the evangelical streak of the movement—inspired by their preference for community self-advocacy and teaching over mere demonstration—the accessibility of guerrilla theatre as an artistic style led to an explosive increase in the creation of agitation groups, who carried on the work of the avant-garde groups even after those groups began to shift their goals at the end of the decade.

Just as it was intended to oppose the theatre world, guerrilla theatre was designed to fight complacency and corruption within the American political system. Guerrilla theatre artists hoped to speak out against society and expose aspects of hypocrisy, immorality, and indifference in the country's values, while simultaneously

aiming to offer alternatives for the corrupted system, most often using their own groups

as an example. They did not, however, expect to be able to implement widespread

societal changes on their own. Rather, as the "vanguard of the movement," guerrilla

theatre groups aimed to drum up public support and bring more people into the

struggle. In the case of guerrilla theatre, this meant sparking discussions and spreading

information about both the problems in society and their potential solutions. This filled

a necessary and beneficial role for the antiwar movement as a whole, leading to

increased visibility and support for guerrilla theatre activity among radicals. That role

is especially obvious for the agitation groups, who for the most part did not engage in

developing political philosophies but rather adopted those provided by their parent

organizations. In this regard, guerrilla theatre was ultimately successful regardless of

whether the antiwar movement achieved its goals, because it is undeniable that their

performances garnered attention—both positive and negative—for the ideas of the

movement.

Because these factors contributed to the success of guerrilla theatre in the

1960s, the practice was uniquely suited to the circumstances of its time; it would not

necessarily translate well into the present day. Despite the many comparisons drawn

between the Vietnam War in the 1970s and the Iraq War in the 2000s, for example,

theatre historian David Callaghan writes that theatrical responses to the Iraq War were

not comparable to the development of guerrilla theatre during the the Vietnam War.

The anti-Iraq War plays were "much less oppositional or even critical of U.S. policy,"

usually approaching the topic allegorically rather than through direct engagement. For

example, Callaghan discusses the relative lack of original work on the topic, instead

referencing performances of Shakespeare plays such as Othello or MacBeth that were tailored to convey anti-war themes.[70] Thus the theatrical response to the Iraq War was much more reminiscent of traditional political theatre than the direct political action of guerrilla theatre. While artists engaged with social and political themes, that engagement was somewhat limited, and occurred within the framework of commercial mainstream theatre. Callaghan uses The Living Theatre as an example in discussing what happened to radical protest theatre after the 1960s, asserting that radical artists like Julian Beck and Judith Malina: "have long concluded that confrontational tactics and forced audience participation are now dated in an age characterized by postmodern irony and sound bite-driven media communication."[71] Guerrilla theatre, with its "confrontational tactics and forced audience participation," was developed for a particular set of purposes rather than to be applicable in perpetuity. However, these groups have still informed radical performance practices, especially in regards to the use of disruptive performance as a form of protest. The work that guerrilla theatre participants did in re-conceptualizing formerly fixed categories—art and life, politics and art, culture and politics—expanded the potential for radical performance art to be understood as directly relevant to "real life" issues.

Indeed, guerrilla theatre may have achieved its most notable success in blurring the distinction between art and life in political action; the practice has had a deep impact on protests and demonstrations in America through the end of the 20th century and into the present day. The 1970s and early 1980s saw fewer examples of guerrilla

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[70] David Callaghan, "Where Have All the Protesters Gone? 1960s Radical Theatre and Contemporary Theatrical Responses to U.S. Military Involvement in Iraq," in *Theatre, War and Propaganda* ed. M. Scott Phillips (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2005), 105.
[71] Ibid., 114.

theatre-inspired protests, but by the late 1980s a "radical renewal" was taking place.

Activist and writer L. A. Kauffman explains this renewal as "the creation, in the decades

after the 1960s, of an effective, decentralized, multivocal radicalism based on direct

action."[72] Kauffman argues that the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power, known as ACT UP,

organized some of the most significant examples of direct action within the radical

renewal. Because AIDS activists were motivated to work quickly and effectively, due to

the urgency of the AIDS crisis and the clear human cost of inaction, ACT UP abandoned

many "stultifying" assumptions about how a radical protest movement needed to

function. The group "introduced a vibrancy and flair to street politics that the left had

lost" by organizing visually striking and disruptive events in order to further their

agenda; their work was a direct inspiration to many other radical activist movements in

the years to follow.[73] If the left had "lost" vibrancy and flair in their political

demonstrations by the 1980s, guerrilla theatre was responsible for inserting it in the

first place, through their efforts to blend artistic performance and political protest into

something larger than the sum of its parts.

According to Andrew Boyd, activist and protest organizer, the theatrical

elements introduced by guerrilla theatre and revived by groups like ACT UP have

become even more widespread through the 1990s and 2000s: "Protest has become an

extreme costume ball."[74] He presents as evidence the rise of a group known as the Art

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[72] L.A. Kauffman, "A Short History of Radical Renewal" in *From ACT UP to the WTO: Urban Protest and Community Building in the Era of Globalization* ed. Benjamin Shepard and Ronald Hayduk (New York: Verso, 2002), 35.
[73] Ibid., 36-38.
[74] Andrew Boyd, "Irony, Meme Warfare, and the Extreme Costume Ball" in *From ACT UP to the WTO: Urban Protest and Community Building in the Era of Globalization* ed. Benjamin Shepard and Ronald Hayduk (New York: Verso, 2002), 245.

and Revolution collective, which was responsible in the mid 90s for "pioneering a powerful fusion of direct action and Bread and Puppet-style street theater" throughout the western United States.[75] Boyd himself is another example; as part of a protest against the World Bank in 2000, he dressed as a "sinister loan shark", donning a suit and tie, affixing a large shark fin to his head, and "menacing" the police that were present at the scene. In his own words: "this brand of theatrical Do-It-Yourself (DIY) street politics represents a new kind of anti-corporate movement distinguished by creativity, self-organization, coalition building, and the will to take on global capitalism."[76] The distinguishing qualities offered by Boyd are almost identical to the guiding values of guerrilla theatre practice—artistry, anti-materialism, political and moral reform, and community. While more recent theatrical street protests cannot be classified as guerrilla theatre per se, the debt of gratitude that they owe to 1960s guerrilla theatre practice is undeniable. The specifics of the form itself were not necessarily applicable after the antiwar movement disintegrated, but the underlying radical political and artistic motivations that guided guerrilla theatre in its heyday are relevant and powerful even now.

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[75] Boyd, "Irony, Meme Warfare, and the Extreme Costume Ball," 247.
[76] Ibid., 245.

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"The first step may be dramatic: to walk away or drop out from middle class America (middle class America is all over the world). Yet the act of creating a life style that replaces most, if not all, middle class capitalistic assumptions with the life style that won't quit, is a full-time job of a full-time guerrilla.

Which of course is the only way to live."

- R. G. Davis, "guerrilla theatre" in *Fifth Estate*, 1968

"Bread and Puppet Theater: Greenwich Village (New York, NY) anti-war protest (1965)"

Robert Joyce papers, 1952-1973, Historical Collections and Labor Archives, Special Collections Library, University Libraries, Pennsylvania State University.