

Gracie's Birdcage: A Critical History

Commerce is kind of a smoke and mirrors sort of thing. Things aren't broken down into numbers like that. Sometimes you're just buying a lot of potatoes. And other times other people are buying a lot of potatoes. That's a lot more like how humans really are.

– Jon Van Oast, Personal interview 2002

What we learned out of our experience of Bohemia is that when you start giving gifts to one another it opens up this magnificent resource to people. Not only is it connective, not only does it generate cultural interaction, it is actually remarkably efficient in a lot of ways. In the Black Rock desert people undertake all these expressive projects, and they discover, after awhile when they get ambitious, that somebody always knows somebody who knows where you can get something for free. You get excited about an idea or what you're doing and that excitement is then communicated personally out through this ramifying network of acquaintances, and somebody you didn't know gets roped into it, and pretty soon they're your friend and they're involved in it, and not only are they spiritually connected to you, you actually have a new resource. It generates wealth that you didn't have, things that you couldn't afford if you'd depended only on money and your own individual buying power.

-- Larry Harvey, *La Vié Boheme*, 2000

Introduction

From 1998 to 2002, in Portland, Oregon, a group known as Gracie's Birdcage made a significant contribution to the region's thriving DIY community. In this essay, I will present a partial history of the group in connection with the West Coast subculture within which it operated and examine how the philosophy and activities of Gracie's reflected recent shifts and revisions in contemporary criticism on subculture and DIY. Furthermore, I will investigate how these activities, when examined within their peculiar local context, represent the contemporary manifestation of a movement toward effective, powerful strategies of grassroots revolution.

Given the scope of activities that bore the Gracie's name and its unbroken independence as a cultural entity, one cannot reasonably question whether or not it was a DIY organization. Gracie's originally operated out of a warehouse space that doubled as the apartment and office of Brady Clark, who founded Gracie's with his friend Jon Van Oast. Together they (and any of their friends that they could rope in) were responsible for the initial funding and construction of Gracie's, and its subsequent operation and evolution

was wholly supported by those who participated, either casually or seriously, in Gracie's. At all times a core group with variable but close membership, known generally as "the Gracie's People," dedicated a significant portion of their resources to the operation of Gracie's, but it was always understood by the majority of participants that the success of Gracie's Birdcage relied entirely on the voluntary, unregulated collaboration of all involved.

For about two years before I became one of the Gracie's People in October of 2000, and until the time I assisted in running it firmly into the ground in 2002, Gracie's Birdcage supported the extensive DIY culture in Portland by providing regular meals, movie screenings, unique public events, a full suite of computer and photocopying facilities (under the banner of Pinko's Commie Copy Center), on-site event support, and a well-attended activity space. While most of these resources were just as readily available in Portland as they were in any comparable American city, Gracie's service was unique in the fact that it was always free – perhaps the service was not as professional as elsewhere, but it came at an unbeatable price. That was enough to draw attention and fans, but Gracie's further distinguished itself in the community by quickly becoming a general-store of the less concrete – but absolutely necessary – resources on which grassroots and DIY cultures depend – personal favors, word of mouth, collaboration, dependable individuals, and the ability to gather groups of like-minded members of the local creative community. It was a store that stocked things you needed to build and maintain a community but couldn't buy, and they were always free.

A Need to Eat Breakfast

According to Van Oast, Gracie's began "because of the need to eat breakfast with our friends."¹ Though the explanation was offered half-seriously (as were most attempts to be critically accountable for Gracie's), the need for breakfast and friends was remarkably central to the philosophy and activities of Gracie's. In a very practical sense, the foundation of Gracie's Birdcage lay in the open-invitation, free brunches reliably served every Sunday – brunch was the most dependable and notorious event in a crowded and otherwise chaotic calendar. Just as the weekly brunches formed the center of the activity at Gracie's, the "Gracie's spirit" was centered in the ideas behind giving food away, spending time with friends, and making strangers feel welcome: generosity, knowingly non-commercial social activity, inclusive community, shared resources, and creative collaboration. These may not immediately appear to be subcultural values, but they conform well to Jock Young's exploration of Matza and Sykes's theories of "subterranean values," especially when the means of achieving the goals of these values are explicitly non-commercial and anarchic: "All members of society hold these subterranean values; certain groups, however, accentuate these values and disdain the workaday norms of formal society."² The "need" Van Oast talks about was not met

by the busy, expensive cafes which constituted the local status-quo of Sunday brunch. In this sense brunch, was a reaction to a prevailing cultural condition that might be referred to as “mainstream,” as were the other Gracie’s projects that followed, which addressed other needs identified by the Gracie’s People³. This is de rigueur in the DIY/subcultural world – creating an anarchic, non-public, non-private, non-commercial space oriented to subterranean values was Gracie’s way of becoming one of the “violations of the authorized codes through which the social world is organized” mentioned by Hebidge.⁴ So while the history and function of Gracie’s is inextricably tied to the conventional model of oppositional counterculture, the distinction I mean to make is that, simply, it did not stop there. Gracie’s, by design, was a success as long as it existed, we decided when to quit, and no one planned for it to last forever. While this is certainly a convenient way to look at things, it is significant to note and examine the nature of this self-proclaimed success and the very West-Coast, very Portland context within which Gracie’s operated.

Burning Man, Critical Mass, and Beyond

It is useful to examine Gracie’s in relation to two of the most successful enterprises to arise, and subsequently shape, the West Coast American subculture: Burning Man and Critical Mass.

If Gracie’s formed out of a need to eat breakfast with friends that was not being met by the available options, Burning Man formed out of a need to experience friendship, spontaneity, and community that was not being met by the available options. Burning Man began as a summer solstice festival among friends on a beach in San Francisco where co-founder Larry Harvey constructed a makeshift wooden effigy to burn on the final night. Perhaps the moment of genesis for the ideas that would later drive Burning Man to become a self-sustaining festival regularly drawing crowds of more than 25,000⁵ people to the Black Rock Desert in Nevada came when the crowd spontaneously doubled after they lit the “man.” Harvey explains that “with... Burning Man we aren’t creating art about society. It’s art that generates society, which, by a magical process, convenes society around itself.”⁶ The official mission statement of Burning Man⁷ elaborates:

The touchstone of value in our culture will always be immediacy: experience before theory, moral relationships before politics, survival before services, roles before jobs, embodied ritual before symbolism, work before vested interest, participant support before sponsorship. Finally, in order to accomplish these ends, Burning Man must endure as a self-supporting enterprise that is capable of sustaining the lives of those who dedicate themselves to its work.

The very structure of this statement exposes the mixture of defiance and self-reliance that characterizes the

self-aware “marginalization” central to the West Coast DIY culture out of which Gracie’s rose; they state their values in relation to opposing ones, but insist on the sustainable and closed nature of the organization. Burning Man occurs in a remote desert because few other places in North America would allow such a thing to happen, but the freedom, potency, and licentiousness of the festival that necessitates such a geographic marginalization also thrives on the remoteness – it is not so much marginalization as privacy. In his 2000 talk, *La Vie Boheme*, Harvey summarizes:

“So the punks, responding, perhaps, a little crudely at times, made it their first tenet that ‘we won’t sell out!’ And then they had another idea. The other idea was ‘make your own show.’ Never sell out, make your own show... These were outsiders, and the idea is that they were fiercely protecting their autonomy. They were, in a way, doing what Bohemians always do, and that’s trying to create a world by projecting their own inner vision onto the world.”⁸

The worldwide phenomenon of Critical Mass also originated in San Francisco, six years after the first “burn.” Though Critical Mass remains (purposely) without an official governing body, the original participants have gone on record⁹ by saying, in essence, that Critical Mass started because of a need to safely bike home from work with friends. Again, the existing infrastructure did not support this need and marginalized the participants – physically confining the bicyclists to an inadequate share of public streets. While abundantly aware of this marginalization, the original participants understood that they were not powerless and began to form groups of cyclists large enough that cars could not safely dominate the road while the group stayed together. Since then, large groups of bicyclists continue to congregate at a central location on the last Friday of every month in cities around the world, sometimes forming masses in the thousands. The largest online directory of Critical Mass rides¹⁰ offers in print the advice and theory that riders will find by word of mouth at any ride, taking care to remind riders to:

Remember that C[ritical] M[ass] is supposed to be a *celebration of cycling*, not your opportunity to see how much inconvenience you can cause to others. It’s about asserting *our* right to the road, not denying others *their* right to the road.

This respect of the “opposition’s” rights (cars in this case) diverges from classic models of understanding reactive subculture, either as “noise” in the signal of the mainstream⁴, or as “constructed through *privatized* patterns of consumption”¹¹ (emphasis mine) and follows directly from the importance of inclusivity in the philosophy behind Critical Mass. One of the most controversial aspects of Critical Mass, both among the participants and in its representation in the media¹², has been the opportunities it provides

to become confrontational and aggressive which are readily taken by some participants. Founding members have commented that if Critical Mass ever excludes anyone with a bike, it has failed, saying that it should be a safe place to which one can bring their kids or parents.⁹

Clark and Van Oast first got to know each other at a camp at Burning Man known for giving away food, and every subsequent Gracie's Person has at one point attended Burning Man. Before and during Gracie's, we all consistently participated in Critical Masses, but it is perhaps indicative of the Gracie's philosophy that we had all stopped going to Burning Man by the points at which each of us became involved in Gracie's. Gracie's clearly operated outside of mainstream culture and often extolled subversive ideals, but all the Gracie's People had, in one way or another, found most recognized forms of subculture to be as unfulfilling and limited as the "mainstream" which they claimed to oppose. Whether or not Burning Man has "sold out" is too complicated a question to entertain directly, but the complaints of Gracie's People and their friends aligned themselves with recognized processes of the appropriation of radical style, the movement from the margin to the center, and the functions of a recognizable group aesthetic. Hebdige established the process thus:

"As the subculture begins to strike its own eminently marketable pose, as its vocabulary (both visual and verbal) becomes more and more familiar, so the referential context to which it can be most conveniently assigned is made increasingly apparent. ... The media, as Stuart Hall (1977) has argued, not only record resistance, they situate it within the 'dominant framework of meanings' and those young people who choose to inhabit a spectacular youth culture are simultaneously *returned*, as they are represented on TV and in the newspapers, to the place where common sense would have them fit... it is through this continual process of recuperation that the fractured order is repaired and the subculture incorporated as a diverting spectacle within the dominant mythology from which it in part emanates: as 'folk devil,' as Other, as Enemy."⁴

The willful marginalization of Burning Man, the self-conscious identification by "burners" as deviants and "freaks," and its tendency to an organized group identity enforces – at least more than Critical Mass does – this centralized relationship of the "mainstream" and its attendant subculture. The view of the Gracie's People became more inclined to the views developing at CCCS in Birmingham during the 1990s. Peter Martin declares "... the collective concepts which came to constitute the orthodox discourse of sociology have increasingly been revealed as empirically and theoretically problematic."¹³ His examination of Weber's social theory further aligns with the strategies behind the activity of Gracie's and other groups within a similar context.

“...Weber began from an opposite starting point – the idea that the acting individual is the fundamental sociological reality.... Fundamental to Weber’s ‘social action’ perspective is the claim that ‘structural’ concepts – like ‘society,’ ‘culture’ or ‘subculture,’ do not describe real entities at all, but are useful, indeed essential, ways in which the social order may be conceptualized. However, to regard such ‘structural’ concepts as though they referred to real things entails the logical error of reification – treating an idea or a concept as if it were a real, tangible object. So it will be argued that the use of ‘collective’ concepts in sociology has brought with it a progressive realization of their inadequacies, and a gradually emerging consensus around the idea that social life must be understood as enacted by real individuals in real situations.”¹³

Zizek’s recent proposal for strategies to resist this kind of assimilation and conceptual restrictiveness aligns with formative views held by the Gracie’s People regarding the hegemonic attitudes of both recognized forms of subculture and the mainstream it supposedly opposes, and also regarding the problematic relationship therein.

“In these circumstances, one should be especially careful not to confuse the ruling ideology with the ideology with *seems* to dominate. More than ever, one should bear in mind Walter Benjamin’s reminder that it is not enough to ask how a certain theory (or art) declares itself with regard to social struggles – one should also ask how it effectively functions in these very struggles... I am therefore tempted to reverse Marx’s thesis 11: the first task today is precisely not to succumb to the temptation to act, to intervene directly and change things (which then inevitably ends in a cul-de-sac of debilitating impossibility: ‘What can one do against global Capital?’), but to question the hegemonic ideological coordinates. If, today, one follows a direct call to act, this act will not be performed in an empty space – it will be an act *within* the hegemonic ideological coordinates...”¹⁴

Not comfortable with the official ethos of either choice and recognizing the creative potential of filling the needs not met by the available options, the Gracie’s People situated their philosophy in a continuously-updated “free space” outside *any* group’s recognized norms, both as a method of opposition and of inclusivity. Van Oast explains:

“Because at Burning Man you had these kind of like pre-set expectations and rules that you followed while you were there, and we just thought ‘what if we just did this – somewhere else?’ Which, as sort of a side-note is just one of the reasons that we thought Burning Man kind of failed. Because they always *talked* about this idea of taking Burning Man outside of Burning Man, but it never really happened. That idea itself helped inspire us to do Gracie’s and a lot of the other things, like you know the whole Salvation Army stuff. It was just like, this *should* be done elsewhere. .. Even though they say it’s about affecting the outside world, it doesn’t really seem to do that, so we wanted to carry that out to the outside world. We saw people with all sorts

of different reactions, *even* at Burning Man. When you're at burning Man and you get people saying "I can't believe you're doing this" and "this is crazy" and "how does this work," you know you've hit on something. They're used to just all this madness, but they're still questioning what's going on."¹

Burning Man became large and established enough to develop a widely recognizable aesthetic and its own codified norms, at the expense, as many of the Gracie's People felt, of its inclusiveness and real-world influence. Shortly, Burning Man has a mission statement and a "look," while Critical Mass does not.

Perhaps the most exaggerated example of this illogical, ideological balancing act that Gracie's performed was the Naked Cocktail Party. In most parts of the civilized world, the options for public nudity are either negatively or positively regulated – clothing is enforced in the mainstream, and groups or areas that allow public nudity require you to abide by their rules – and often morals – while you are there. Portland is among one of the few American cities that allow public nudity, protecting it as free speech under Oregon's notoriously broad constitution. Beside the sexually-charged subcultures that involve social nudity that can be found elsewhere, Portland has a growing contingency of groups that enjoy the freedom and humor of not wearing any clothes in contexts where they are expected to. Relying on the filter of participant-supported self-sufficiency discussed previously but aspiring to inclusivity, Gracie's hosted a Naked Cocktail Party, hoping that it would not become sexualized. It was successful, as the guests were, essentially, wearing as much or as little as they wished.

The unlikely model behind the Naked Cocktail Party was not fundamentally different from any less-sensational example of the Gracie's approach, and it is the same model that can be seen in an increasing number of self-supported subcultural groups, especially in Portland and San Francisco. This is what's been happening: groups (frequently of youth, but just as often of mixed ages) form in response to a perceived need in their community, aware that neither establishment or anti-establishment means have met this need, and they collaboratively begin to address this need using unextraordinary resources. Aware of their marginalization *and* the expected behavior of marginalized groups, they advertise their accessible solution, and invite others to join – on their own terms. Lacking a governing body, an established aesthetic, or codified rules, the groups rely on the authentic enthusiasm and coöperation of their participants to accomplish anything. This gives the appearance of a spontaneous ordering – a city "magically" appearing in the middle of a desert; bicyclists suddenly displacing cars one Friday afternoon; forty people, friends and strangers, sharing food and ideas without the intrusion of commerce. The "Web 2.0" concept, also heavily influenced by West Coast culture, operates on similar principles¹⁵, and big business has begun to take notice¹⁶. "Viral" is the new buzzword among advertisers as they all look for the next word-of-mouth

phenomenon. This is one of the clearest indications that capitalist institutions are beginning to understand that the power of individuals to meet their own needs using available resources is as potent as, if not a threat to, their established system of using extraordinary resources to convince masses of people of their own desires. Offline, in Portland, one can get shelter, publish their ideas, get a *free* computer, repair one's bike, shop, dine (also for free), drink, and spectate at storefront institutions that operate on collective rather than capitalist models¹⁷. They have not bankrupted the big-box stores, but they have not gone out of business either and they continue to provide a way to live without the corporations. This is not impotent marginalization or protest, nor is it a way of moving from the margin to the center. It is a strategy of decentralized sustainability which relies on trust rather than transaction. Capitalism requires constant growth and consumption to sustain itself, while these operations require the (often voluntary) coöperation of local individuals to meet an existing need. The nature of phenomena is to be productive, because it breaks new ground as long as it exists. For a few years, Gracie's provided – and enjoyed – all of these services to one degree or another (except the shopping). It did not last forever, but it happened.

Notes

¹ Van Oast, personal interview, 2002.

² Young, *The Subterranean World of Play*, p. 71.

³ Including, but not limited to: the need for social spaces that could operate as both public and private, the need to access or distribute information, the need for affordable venues for activist or amateur groups, the need to fight the loneliness of a metropolitan environment, the need to sleep somewhere warm, and the need to feel accepted.

⁴ Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, p. 130-1.

⁵ Figures from http://www.burningman.com/whatisburningman/about_burningman/bm_timeline.html

⁶ Quoted in Sweetman, *Tourists and Travellers? 'Subcultures', Reflexive Identities and Neo-Tribal Sociality*, p. 89.

⁷ http://www.burningman.com/whatisburningman/about_burningman/mission.html

⁸ Harvey, *La Vie Boheme*, 2000.

⁹ White, *We Are Traffic*, 1999.

¹⁰ <http://critical-mass.info/howto/>

¹¹ Sweetman, *Tourists and Travellers? 'Subcultures', Reflexive Identities and Neo-Tribal Sociality*, p. 81.

¹² <http://critical-mass.info/about2.html>

¹³ Martin, *Culture, Subculture and Social Organization*, p. 22.

¹⁴ Zizek, *The Universal Exception*, p. 238.

¹⁵ "Access to consumer-generated content facilitated by Web 2.0 brings the web closer to Tim Berners-:ee's original concept of the web as a democratic, personal, and DIY medium of communications." From http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Web_2.0, 12/2006.

¹⁶ Most visibly in headline-purchases such as Google's recent \$1.3 billion acquisition of YouTube and Rupert Murdoch's purchase of MySpace, both sites that lacked income beyond conventional advertisements.

¹⁷ The Rebuilding Center sells affordable recycled building materials, relying on donations; the IPRC provides free desktop publishing facilities and a library of independent media; Free Geek provides recycled computer hardware, open-source software, and IT training; City Bikes is coöperatively owned and run; Sea Plane sells clothing by local independent fashion designers; Food Not Bombs provides free public meals, Red and Black café is worker owned and serves free-trade coffee and organic food and beer; The Know hosts an assortment of local and visiting events for little or no cover.

Appendix:

Supplemental CD:

GraciesTrailer.mpeg: Trailer for an unfinished Gracie's documentary

Jon Interview.mp3: audio interview of Jon Van Oast conducted for The Gracie's Book

KATUstory.ram: Clip from Gracie's one encounter with the mass media, featuring the author.

Index of Related Groups

The Salvation Army: Occasional Gracie's-centric groups such as Guerilla Cheese, the Ice Cream Socialists, and the Cafetistas, that gave away free cheese toasties, ice cream, or organic chai in public settings.

Bianca's: Legendary Burning Man camp where Van Oast and Clark became friends. First appeared 1996 as a real-world extension of bianca.com, one of the first online communities (founded 1994).

www.bianca.org

www.bianca.com

SITO: International collaborative art website founded and operated by Van Oast and Ed Statsny.

www.sito.org

Liberty Hall: Punk-run community center, founded by Gracie's Brunch regulars, inspired by their second location (a deconsecrated Baptist church).

www.liberty-hall.org

As mentioned in notes:

City Bikes:

<http://www.citybikes.coop/>

Food Not Bombs:

www.foodnotbombs.net

Free Geek:

www.freegeek.org

Independent Publishing Resource Center:

www.iprc.org

The Know:

www.theknow.info

Rebuilding Center:

www.rebuildingcenter.org

Red and Black Cafe:

www.redandblackcafe.com

Sea Plane:

<http://www.urbanhonking.com/seaplane/>

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Video

Ted White, *We Are Traffic* (San Francisco: Self-released, 1999).

Web

Larry Harvey, *La Vié Boheme* (http://www.burningman.com/whatisburningman/lectures/la_vie.html, 12/2006)

<http://www.bianca.org> , 12/2006.

http://www.burningman.com/whatisburningman/about_burningman/bm_timeline.html , 12/2006.

http://www.burningman.com/whatisburningman/about_burningman/mission.html , 12/2006.

<http://critical-mass.info/about2.html>, 12/2006.

<http://critical-mass.info/howto/> , 12/2006.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Web_2.0 , 12/2006.