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**“EVERYBODY GET TOGETHER”:
THE SIXTIES COUNTERCULTURE AND PUBLIC SPACE, 1964-1967**

By

Jill Katherine Silos

B. S., The University of Connecticut, 1990

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Dissertation

Submitted to the University of New Hampshire

in Partial Fulfillment of

the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

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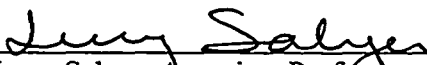
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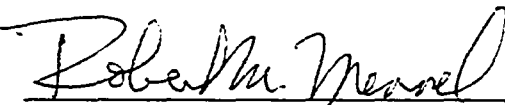
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Silos, my aunt Nancy Hauser and my grandmother Sarah Hauser. Generous, opinionated and lively, they make all my days an adventure. This work is dedicated to them, with love and gratitude.

PREFACE

Public discourse is the lifeblood of the democratic body politic. The successful practice of democracy depends upon the public expression of a nation's citizens in order to maintain a government that is both, in Abraham Lincoln's memorable phrase, "by the people and for the people." To express properly the great diversity of opinion that exists within its borders, a nation must provide forums for expression. In the United States, in addition to those outlets for speech, some highly regulated, provided by the media, the major arena for more unrestricted expression available to citizens has been the public spaces—streets, parks, and sidewalks. Such outlets are crucial, especially for those citizens—the majority—lacking the economic resources and power to obtain access to popular media such as television and radio.

From the colonial era to the present, Americans have continually made common the practice of publicly debating or demonstrating their political opinions. In his landmark interpretation of the American past, *A People's History of the United States*, Howard Zinn underscores the importance of public forums when he points out that mechanics of the ear of the American Revolution demanded "open-air meetings," that Equal Rights advocates held rallies in the parks in the 1830s, and that worker meetings took place in public parks in the 1870s.¹ The nation's streets, squares and parks have witnessed thousands of rallies and protests, ranging in purpose from electoral campaigns and labor strikes to the recently more common "pride" festivals, in which various sectors of the American people assert distinct cultural, social and political identities. The right to

¹ Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States, 1492- Present*. Revised and Updated Edition (New York: Harper Perennial, 1980, 1995), 62:219;238.

gather in public is written into the First Amendment to the Constitution, and all evidence suggests that most Americans hold this right very dear.

But Americans have also been unable to reach a consensus over what constitutes politically necessary or even tolerable speech, and the dramas of such divisions have manifested themselves in contests public space. This was especially true in the 1960s, when America's public spaces became a battleground of competing and even antagonistic ideas. American blacks continued the civil rights movement, begun in the 1950s, to challenge the strict segregation of public facilities in the United States; by the 1960s, marches, sit-ins and demonstrations sponsored by groups such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) brought an intense level of political activity to the nation's streets and parks. American blacks fought a public battle about the very laws and de facto social rules that governed public interactions and behavior.

Similarly, the antiwar crusade that gained momentum as the decade wore on also waged its battles in the nation's public spaces. Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), the Resistance, the Yippies and other opponents of the Vietnam war strategically used urban parks and streets as the field from which to oppose what they believed to be an immoral and unconstitutional war. They burned draft cards in public squares, confronted the Pentagon, and barricaded themselves on the streets of Chicago, assuming that American public spaces were not only *available* as forums for the expression of political opinion, but also as public property, *guaranteed* forums of expression.

The hippies of the 1960s resembled these other Americans in this sense. They believed that the public spaces of the United States—the parks, streets and sidewalks of its cities—were indeed “public”; that is were available to them for use in any activity or event they could create, inspire or conjure from the ephemeral materials of their imaginations and spirits, because they too were part of the “public.” Hippies occupied public spaces to hold rock concerts, parade, and made love because they believed that such space should be available and open as venues for virtually any human activity. This particular conclusion derived from a never fully articulated belief in individual freedom from the restrictions of centralized authority and an interpretation of the first amendment of the U.S. Constitution as the guarantor of the right to act on such beliefs. Their activities were both the expression of that belief and the practice of that belief.

Public space was therefore the territory in which and from which hippies displayed their communities and expressed their views. Hippie events therefore were political expressions regarding the nature of public activity, and American public space provided a forum for their political culture. This study explains the ideological and historical origins of the public political culture of American hippies as it developed during the counterculture’s growth from 1964 to 1967. It argues that hippies articulated a particular ethos about the rights of Americans to use public space for individual expression emerged in and by their growing use of public spaces from 1964 to 1967.

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**“EVERYBODY GET TOGETHER”:
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Jill Silos

University of New Hampshire, May 2003

Historians and cultural analysts have traditionally considered the sixties counterculture an apolitical phenomenon by historians and other analysts. Yet concentrated examination of the public activities of the counterculture in San Francisco from 1963 to 1967 reveals that they were engaged in the creation of a public political culture that challenged the power of civil authorities to regulate the uses of parks, streets and sidewalks. In doing so, the counterculture constituted a distinct community with a political agenda.

This thesis is demonstrated through an analysis of the development of an ethos toward public space in the Beat movement and Merry Prankster group, both cultural predecessors of the counterculture. A specific ideology about public space grew from such roots and was expanded by the San Francisco Mime Troupe and its legal battle with the city of San Francisco to use the parks for free performance venues. Growing from the Mime Troupe, the San Francisco Diggers forged a public counterculture in the Haight-Ashbury district of the city that presented a consistent challenge to the power of the state to limit or define public activities. Literature, legal documents, meeting minutes from

city committees, press accounts, the personal documents of participants, published contemporary observations and recent interviews have all been utilized to prove this thesis.

INTRODUCTION

THE POLITICAL CULTURE OF THE SIXTIES COUNTERCULTURE

I. "The Times They Are A Changin'"

Washington D.C. is the heart of the nation's political system and a center of international affairs. It is also a large American city where many Americans work, raise families, and look for safe and accessible sites of recreation. Its residents enjoy poignant memorials to American heroes and ideals amid meticulously maintained green spaces, public parks that are part of an urban design meant to highlight the city as the showpiece of American democracy. The great grass mall south of the White House, stretching between the Washington Monument and the steps of the capitol, is perhaps one of the best known of these national public spaces.

But the mall is not the only park in Washington D.C.¹ Many neighborhoods in the city boast less conspicuous but also lovely respites from the frenzied activity of automobile traffic and sidewalks. The park at Dupont Circle northwest of the White House is one of those places. It has always been one of the city's hubs of recreational activity. In the spring of 1963, a variety of neighborhood residents often found their way to the park at Dupont Circle, to enjoy the warm sun in leisurely walks and games. Around the fountain, young children played and older citizens concentrated on the more sedate game of chess. It was not unusual to see young people toting musical instruments around

¹ The mall has recently been designated as the location of a new World War II Veterans Memorial.

the park, especially since the start of park “hootenannys,” spontaneous Sunday performances of folk music. The hootenannys added a new element to the park and were enjoyed by a cross-section of residents. Though the local police precinct received no complaints about these events, the Park police who monitored them were not pleased.²

On May 19, police sent musicians and spectators home. A few days later, a twenty-five-year-old man named Eddie Hicks was arrested in the park for vagrancy after being questioned by Park officer James E. Thomas. The 1961 District of Columbia legal code defined a vagrant as “any person leading an immoral or profligate life who has no lawful employment and who has no lawful means of support realized from a lawful occupation or source.”³ Officer Thomas had earlier warned Hicks not to play his guitar while Hicks and a friend had been sitting in the park. This time, Hicks did have his guitar with him—in its case—but he was not necessarily a vagrant: when questioned, he admitted that he was indeed unemployed but was only a visitor to the city. He had at least twenty dollars cash in his possession, which he showed Thomas. Yet when Hicks came to trial on June 13, Judge Thomas C. Scalley listened to the testimony of both Hicks and arresting officer Thomas, and ruled that Hicks was indeed guilty of vagrancy. Scalley then suspended sentence and released Hicks on personal bond.⁴

Washington Post reporter Sterling Seagrave covered the protest that quickly emerged over the decision. Many residents of the Dupont Circle neighborhood found the ruling unacceptable, and on June 13, quickly arranged a public demonstration at the Circle. The residents pointed out that musicians had frequented the park for years and

² This account from Sterling Seagrave, “Guitarist Conviction Stirs Protest,” *The Washington Post*, June 14, 1963.

³ Eddie J. Hicks, Appellant, v. District of Columbia, Appellee. No 3340. District of Columbia Court of Appeals, 197 A.2d 154; 1964 D.C. App. Lexis 189.

⁴ Seagrave, “Guitarist Conviction Stirs Protest.”

that the court's decision was inconsistent with the reality of common park usage. As one participant observed, "if they are going to stick that boy with a vagrancy conviction just for playing a guitar, they're going to have to arrest several hundred of us. We've been playing guitars there for years." Seagrave interviewed several high-ranking officials in the federal government, who agreed with the crowd's general belief that the public parks should be open to public use without restriction. The director of the National Park Service could not recall a law against playing music in the public parks. Walter Pozen, assistant to Secretary of the Interior Stewart Udall, stated that the musicians should be encouraged and that "the parks are there for recreation and general use." Seagrave reported that the American Civil Liberties Union also objected to the outcome of the case. The ACLU agreed to appeal Hicks's case on the basis that the vagrancy statute was vague, discriminatory against the poor and unemployed, and in practice was used "by police as carte blanche to harass anyone they personally dislike."⁵

The appellate court turned down the ACLU's appeal of Judge Scalley's ruling against Eddie Hicks on February 5, 1964. The justices found no legal basis for an overturning of a federal statute by a local appellate court and, more importantly, argued that the vagrancy statute was a long-accepted legal code that did not discriminate: the rich as well as the poor could be considered to lead "immoral and dissolute" lives.⁶ The ACLU was reluctant to let the matter rest there, however, and applied for a writ of certiorari.

⁵ Seagrave, "Guitarist Conviction Stirs Protest."

⁶ *Eddie J. Hicks, Appellant, v. District of Columbia, Appellee*. No 3340. District of Columbia Court of Appeals, 197 A.2d 154; 1964 D.C. App. Lexis 189.

Such legal wrangling was in vain. On February 28, 1966 the United States Supreme Court denied the case a hearing. Three years after his initial arrest, Eddie Hicks lost his legal battle and was left with a record as a vagrant.

II. Sixties Politics, Public Space and Political Culture

The case of Eddie Hicks was minor, attracting brief attention in the Washington D.C. area. Yet it is a significant and interesting early example of a new political development in the 1960s, when young men and women began to lay claim to urban public space for the express purpose of demonstrating their alternative lifestyle choices and creating public festivity. In the sixties, “hippies” made their presence known as part of an emerging, often cohesive and vocal community in many of the nation’s largest cities. San Francisco, New York, Los Angeles and Chicago provided receptive conditions for the creation of such communities. The counterculture that emerged in the 1960s announced itself in public events large and small, planned and spontaneous, singular and frequent. These activities threw civil authorities into turmoil and encouraged a re-evaluation of laws and popular standards regarding public behavior. By the end of the era, a lone guitarist in a park would not necessarily be subject to arrest, as public standards and laws changed in the wake of the intense activities of the counterculture.

These activities also formed the basis of a political culture. “Politics” generally refers to the science of government, which can include a wide range of activities beyond the practice of governing in any society. Political scientist Claus Leggewie argues that “political culture is used to refer to the ‘soft’ factors in politics: political beliefs, attitudes and values characteristic of a society. It has to do with collective mentalities, which have

an emotional or intellectual basis and which are distinctive for the identity of a community.” Historian David Farber has pointed out that the term “political culture” has been experiencing a reemergence within historical study after a long period of disfavor, when historians focused more on the new schools of cultural analysis. He argues that these historians have emphasized “historically contingent practices and beliefs that give legitimacy to political structures and political authority to individuals and ‘interests’, and which, in turn, political actors use creatively to affect public policy or, more generally, public life.” He points to the work of cultural historian Lynn Hunt and of Keith Baker, who has written that political culture “sees politics as...the activity through which individuals and groups in any society articulate, negotiate, implement, and enforce the competing claims they make upon one another and upon the whole. Political culture is, in this sense, the set of discourses or symbolic practices by which these claims are made.” Therefore, Farber argues, “political culture...refers most generally to the historically contingent practices and beliefs that give legitimacy to political structures and political authority to individuals and ‘interests,’ and which, in turn, political actors use creatively to affect public policy or, more generally, public life.”⁷

In the context of this reconsidered definition of political culture, we can extend the definition of political activity beyond those considered traditional in American society, such as participation in electoral politics, forms of dissent such as boycotts and strikes, or the creation of formal organizations that lobby politicians and court constituencies, in order to consider the political nature of the counterculture. The counterculture was an amorphous and often intangible phenomenon and its definition has

⁷ Claus Leggewie, “Political Culture,” *Goethe Institut Inter Nationes*, 2003; online at <http://www.goethe.de/kug/ges/pok/ein/enindex.htm>; David Farber, “Political Culture and the Therapeutic Ideal,” *Reviews in American History*, 23.4 (1995), 681-686.

been controversial. On a purely sociological level, J. Milton Yinger has defined a counterculture as a term “appropriately used whenever the normative system of a group contains, as a primary element, a theme of conflict with the dominant values of society, where the tendencies, needs, and perceptions of the members of that group are directly involved in the development and maintenance of its values, and wherever its norms can be understood only by reference to the relationship of the group to the surrounding dominant society and its culture.” He further adds, “a counterculture movement is both behavioral and symbolic.”⁸

Of the sixties counterculture itself, historian Doug Rossinow argues that the very term “counterculture” is simply a “heuristic device” created out of convenience to discuss amorphous and discursive elements of the youth movement. “It has been used,” he wrote, “to group together values, visual styles, social practices, and institutions that were widely disparate but considered by most to be unified in their rebellion against the dominant culture of advanced industrial capitalism, or even against a broader regime that one champion of the counterculture dubbed ‘technocracy.’”⁹

Terry Anderson provides a more specific definition by underscoring the lack of specific defining parameters within the counterculture. Although he states that the counterculture needs to be “defined broadly,” he argues that it was not a political position but instead generally functioned as “a counter to the dominant cold war culture” and that there were “no requirements” to being a hippie. That is, “while some hippies might not be able to articulate their thoughts or define their existence, most would agree that being

⁸ J. Milton Yinger, Countercultures: The Promise and Peril of a World Turned Upside Down (New York: The Free Press, 1982).

⁹ Doug Rossinow, “The New Left in the Counterculture: Hypothesis and Evidence,” *Radical History Review* 67 (1997); 79.

part of the counterculture was a frame of mind, like being part of the movement.”

Further, he recognizes the great variety of hippie life by pointing out that “some dropped out and became as apolitical as possible, other participated in what they considered was a cultural revolution, but most rejected the values of the predominant culture and then developed and practiced different lifestyles.”¹⁰

Howard Brick defined the term counterculture as it was relevant in the 1960s as “the assumption of defiantly non-conformist attitudes, uninhibited behavior, and generalized dissent by large numbers of young people joined together by their shared enthusiasm for the new popular music of the time.” Brick stresses that it is important to recognize that the counterculture was not a static and absolute entity, and that “this milieu changed its shape and form considerably in the course of a decade.” Indeed the very term “counterculture” was not employed until the end of the decade; the term “new community” was most often used in the Haight-Ashbury, the earliest center of that alternative culture. About 3 million individuals were affiliated on some level with the counterculture of the 1960s, and they were known as “freaks” or “hippies,” an originally derisive term for younger members of the Beat hipster movement whose use has usually been attributed to San Francisco columnist Herb Caen.¹¹

For the purposes of this study, the term “counterculture” refers to the young men and women of the United States, largely white and of middle class origins, who rejected participation in mainstream society, “dropped out,” and embraced a lifestyle based on

¹⁰ Terry Anderson, The Movement and the Sixties: Protest in America from Greensboro to Wounded Knee (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); 241-244.

¹¹ Howard Brick, Age of Contradiction: American Thought and Culture in the 1960s (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1998), 113-115; For this approximate figure, see Dominick Cavallo, A Fiction of the Past: The Sixties in American History (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 3. Perry, The Haight-Ashbury: A History (New York: Vintage Books, 1985), 5. Perry explains that the term “hippie” originated as a dismissive Beat reference to younger “imitation bohemians.”

leisure, drug use, popular music, and more openly expressed sexuality. Often, these Americans gathered in urban areas or rural communes conducive to the practice of such a lifestyle. To practice their lifestyles, and express their rejection of mainstream values, they did not engage in traditional political activities such as marches, boycotts, sit-ins or petitioning. Such activities were not the *modus operandi* of the phenomenon known as the hippie counterculture of the 1960s. While individuals who identified themselves as “hippies” often participated in antiwar demonstrations or were involved in other aspects of the sixties social movements, no self-proclaimed “counterculture” claimed responsibility for demonstrations specifically targeted at political change in the United States. It was not “organized” in the manner of groups like Students for a Democratic Society or the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee. There were no formally constituted national or even local organizations; there were no “hippie” chapter meetings or calls for national “hippie” marches. Indeed, hippies were frequently disdainful of and hostile toward the creation of such organizations or of following traditional styles of political practice.

For these reasons, the counterculture has long been considered an “apolitical” phenomenon. As a result, it has held a place of lesser importance in studies of the movements of the 1960s. It has also often been portrayed as a detriment to the larger goals of the activists of the era. Yet to consider the counterculture “apolitical” because it did not champion active engagement in the traditional realms of American politics or create and utilize a traditional political culture is to misunderstand the shift in the definition of American political culture that occurred in the 1960s.

Some historians of the youth movement of the United States during the 1960s have argued that the phrase “prefigurative politics” best expresses the characteristics of those who agitated for social, political and cultural change in the 1960s. Wini Breines defined prefigurative politics as a term “used to designate an essentially anti-organizational politics” typical of the sixties, and argued that the New Left student movement, the antiwar movement, and the counterculture of the 1960s employed this alternative form of politics. Prefigurative politics eschewed political forms such as representative organization and institutional political bureaucracy in favor of a democratic project based on more direct participation and the creation of community. In this vision, politics is a means by which to recover the importance of the individual in the face of the modern corporate state; in other words, politics in the sixties was viewed as a means to achieve personal liberation. In a similar analysis, historian Alice Echols cited Tom Hayden’s call to create “free institutions” as an example of this kind of politics. The New Left sought to create new institutions based on the principles of prefigurative politics.¹²

The creation of such institutions is necessarily dependent upon the availability and creation of “free space” in American society and politics. In *Free Spaces: The Sources of Democratic Change*, Sara M. Evans and Harry C. Boyte argued that the source of real democratic activity throughout American history cannot be found in the actions of government institutions, but in community and voluntary associations which were “capable of appropriating, enriching, and experimenting with democratic traditions

¹² Alice Echols, “Nothing Distant About It: Women’s Liberation and Sixties Radicalism” in ed. David Farber, *The Sixties* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 160; Wini Breines, *Community and Organization in the New Left, 1962-1968: The Great Refusal* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1989).

and ideas.”¹³ This kind of activity emphasized a conception of “citizenship” that stressed grass roots civic and political participation. The use of free “social spaces” in between private life and public institutions was a vehicle through which groups like African-Americans, women, and industrial and agricultural workers achieved social changes beneficial to each, including progress toward greater political participation and authority and social and economic equality.

Evans and Boyte argue that this definition of democracy, based on an active and participatory citizenry, is the true source of democratic change. In the civil rights movement that began in the 1950s, the church provided one of those crucial “free spaces”; in the women’s rights movement of the nineteenth century, women traditionally turned their confinement to the traditional spheres of house, home and church to their advantage as they created groups like the Women’s Christian Temperance Union in the nineteenth century. Women similarly carved out niches in the civil rights movement and SDS Economic and Research Action Projects (ERAP), which transformed “women’s space” into a radical new form of civic participation for women. Finally, Evans and Boyte demonstrate that labor organizations in the early nineteenth century frequently originated within close communities of workers. Thus, “free spaces” that workers “owned,” such as union halls, local taverns, and clubs, became important organizing tools for labor.¹⁴ Similarly, ethnic communities were often the location of the kind of social spaces used to foster democratic organization. As the examples of African-Americans, women, and workers demonstrate, there is an important relationship between participation, citizenship, and the achievement of democracy. The arena within which

¹³ Sara M. Evans and Harry C. Boyte, Free Spaces: The Sources of Democratic Change (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986; 1992), 17.

¹⁴ *ibid.* 19.

such a dynamic conception of citizenship can help to achieve a more fully democratic society is in the “free spaces” provided by voluntary associations and institutions that exist in between private life and the public sphere of bureaucratic politics, and in many instances expand the public sphere. The New Left, in such endeavors as ERAPs, reconceived American politics by creating “free spaces” in which the practice of prefigurative politics could redefine American power relationships.

In his pioneering analysis of the social production of space, Henri Lefebvre explained the creation of the spaces of modern urban societies, including streets and public parks, as always subject to a contentious struggle for control between “abstract space,” space that is defined and controlled by bureaucratic authority, and the “concrete space” of daily life. Building upon Jurgen Habermas’ contention that one of the categories or characteristics of modern bourgeois society is the creation of a public sphere in which the mechanisms and tactics of political and social control are monitored and contested, Lefebvre’s theory underscores public space as a location of ideological conflict and struggles.¹⁵

For many participants of the movement of the 1960s, “free spaces” and public spaces were one and the same, and a struggle for control of the definition of public spaces between protestors and the civil authorities of American cities was evident throughout the decade. Street marches and protests relied on the First Amendment right to freedom of speech and assembly, but also were examples of different groups contesting authority for

¹⁵ Henri Lefebvre, The Production of Space. Translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1991); Jurgen Habermas, The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society. Translated by Thomas Burger (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1991); Eugene J. McCann, “Race, Protest, and Public Space: Contextualizing Lefebvre in the U.S. City,” *Antipode* 31:2 (1999), 168. McCann argues that there is a “dialectical relationship between identity and urban space” and that conflict results when different groups create “spaces of representation” that compete with each other for dominance.

for the control of public space and and attention within the political dialogue of American society.¹⁶ Every time the activists of the 1960s took to the streets or other public spaces, they were doing more than protesting a specific issue such as segregation or the war. They were also confronting the authorities of the United States and challenging their hegemony over public opinion, law and public space.

This reconfiguring of politics and political behavior enabled the American New Left to target not just the right as a political enemy, as did the Old Left, but also to target the established political dominance of corporate liberalism, because it relied on institutional authority and bureaucratic change instead of direct participation, and to criticize the right of civil authorities to regulate individual behavior. Theirs was “an alternative notion of politics” based on a vision of “a politics of community in action.” Such a vision cannot be judged along the lines of traditional measures of political success, because it entailed a relationship between “the political content of the cultural and personal revolt and the cultural and personal content of the political revolt.”¹⁷ This definition of politics united the student “participatory democracy” movement of the 1960s and was the source of its power and appeal. It is also the root of its actual success: the movement forever redefined the nature of politics in American society.

The counterculture provides a persuasive example of the relevance and importance of the creation of free spaces and the practice of prefigurative politics in the sixties that is no less important than that of the overtly political New Left. First, the counterculture possessed a decisively political goal: freedom from the restrictions of a

¹⁶ Susan G. Davis, Parades and Power: Street Theatre in Nineteenth Century Philadelphia (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 5-6. Davis argues that public events such as parades are ceremonies “are political acts...people use street theatre, like other rituals, as tools for building, maintaining and confronting power relations.”

¹⁷ Breines, Community and Organization in the New Left, 19-20.

centralized authority. “Freedom” was a political goal of the New Left, of the civil rights movement, and of the anti-war movement in the 1960s. It was a similarly important political goal of the counterculture. Democracy may have been “in the streets” to many New Left activists of the era, but to hippies, so was personal freedom. The drive for personal freedom, and for the creation of a society that enabled personal freedom, was the political agenda of the counterculture, and the counterculture expressed this in street parades, rock concerts in the parks, and sidewalk gatherings.

Second, the counterculture expressed and worked toward the achievement of personal freedom in even more non-traditional political discourse and activities than did the New Left. It was truly community-based, as it spurned any sort of organization beyond those manifested in specific festive moments and events. Its drive to achieve individual freedom was expressed by a vibrant political culture created in and through non-traditional sources of communication such as public gatherings, the underground press and rock music. Events such as rock concerts or love-ins and Be-ins in public spaces conformed to the many characteristics of festivity. They were often spontaneous, unorganized and seemingly “apolitical” events that expressed the particular popular enthusiasms of the moment for the counterculture. This festive element distinguishes them from the civil rights marches, sit-ins in public spaces, and anti-war marches that also characterized the move into the streets of the young protesters in the 1960s. Yet, despite a surface appearance as merely festive occasions, hippie events also carried within them the values and ideologies of the counterculture.

Finally, the political culture of the counterculture assumed that public space was “free space” in which hippies could express their lifestyle and its implicit political

critique of mainstream American values. Such an assumption was at the root of all hippie public activities and events. Closer examination of counterculture events reveals that the seemingly simple and self-gratifying emphasis on sex, drugs and rock and roll that so predominated the counterculture's festivities is merely the surface layer of a more complex political culture. The events at which such values and activities were expressed actually constituted the political discourse of the counterculture. Hippies took the term "free space" literally, though they did not create institutions. Instead, they created moments and events in which people came together to create a free space and claim power and authority as a community. As such, the topical emphasis on sex, drugs and rock and roll symbolized the ultimate goal of the counterculture, one which was decidedly political in its implications for social and political order: personal freedom. By creating events that promoted and assumed the achievement of that goal, the counterculture created its own political culture aimed at implementing and promoting personal freedom.

The emphasis on personal freedom suggests that the counterculture was certainly an example of cultural politics, an advance guard of those who would reshape traditionally personal concerns into political issues. This is characteristic of prefigurative politics. Yet the counterculture's version of prefigurative politics also occasionally necessitated the practice of traditional political activities and encounters. Hippies had to fight for their rights to publicly express their political agenda and put that agenda into practice. In several legal cases, hippies across the nation fought for a reassertion of First Amendment rights to assemble and express themselves in public.

The result was a unique blend of traditional and prefigurative politics that redefined American political culture. Hippies fought the power of urban authorities to restrict their public behavior and access to public spaces; they made their personal lifestyles into political issues and in doing so introduced public political events that would eventually be models for today's pride parades and festivals. The counterculture was thus indeed political, and it was a blend of many different political impulses. When Eddie Hicks sat with his guitar in Dupont Circle in Washington D.C. in 1963, he was not merely articulating the often-casual lifestyle of some young Americans of the time. His actions that day represented a significant new trend in the history of American public activity. Hicks, and other young Americans like him, helped elevate "hanging out in the park" into more than a leisure activity in the 1960s. Such activities were at the core of the political culture of the hippies, a culture expressed in public activities, legal battles, and in the public sphere they created within their own communities.

This study explains how the political culture of the hippies was created by, and manifested itself through, the counterculture's exercise of prefigurative politics, and how those activities incorporated some traditional political tools to create a wholly new form of political activity, from the origin of this dynamic in 1964 to the onset of the popularization of the hippie counterculture in the spring of 1967. After the spring of 1967, the hippie counterculture changes form and spreads throughout the United States. This dissertation focuses on the early years of the counterculture, and San Francisco as the locus of such activity, because that city was the location of the first, and therefore the model, urban "hippie" counterculture community. Examination of the Haight-Ashbury

counterculture and its use of urban public space can lead to a fuller understanding of the truly political nature of what heretofore has been considered an “apolitical” phenomenon.

III. Historiography: What was the “Counterculture”?

The history of the 1960s is as controversial a subject as the events that took place in that era of dreams, division and discord. The various movements of the 1960s have been recounted, analyzed, mythologized and disputed by a variety of participants, critics, politicians and historians. Most studies of the political events and the individuals involved have focused on traditional forms of political activity like public service, social protest or political organizing as exemplified by groups like SDS, SNCC and the various antiwar organizations.

These were not the only means through which influential young Americans began to articulate a changing political consciousness in the 1960s, yet confusion as to the exact nature of the counterculture’s political culture has ensured that the political aspects of the counterculture have not been well served by the existing historiography. In fact, to even suggest that the counterculture actually possessed a significant political culture is to revise a long-standing opinion about the nature and goals of this group. The seminal moments of the counterculture—Be-ins, love-ins, rock festivals, and even sidewalk groupings—have generally been dismissed as apolitical leisure activities deriving more from the hedonistic impulses of a privileged, “drop-out” minority than an expression of political position.

In reality, the political ideology and behavior of the counterculture was complex. Hippie events such as rock concerts, Be-ins and even just small gathering in local parks

and streets for the purpose of communal socializing were not merely cultural expressions. These public events were political displays of community consciousness. Street and park events in America's cities simultaneously identified a new community and articulated that community's political definition of American freedom. These activities also became traditionally political when negative mainstream and institutional responses to them forced participants into civic protest and legal battles in order to articulate and defend what they believed were their rights. Congregating in parks for a variety of activities, including rock concerts, Be-ins, and love-ins, became commonplace as the decade progressed. Such activities were hybrids of traditional political activities and the new cultural politics of the 1960s. These public events were the basis of the political culture of the youth phenomenon known as the counterculture.

In the 1960s, the nation's streets and parks became the most popular and frequently used forum for the expression of political positions. The marches and demonstrations of the civil rights movement, and the antiwar protests of the New Left all relied on the availability of public space as the forum for the expression of their views. The counterculture, no less than other aspects of the political, social and cultural phenomenon known as "the Movement" of the 1960s, participated in this use of American public spaces. It did, so, however, through the expression of a unique form of political culture that utilized leisure activity to manifest the presence of a new community of interests. In doing so, the counterculture created a new form of political culture.

The assessment of the counterculture as an apolitical movement has its origins in the very era in which it formed. Many Americans defined the counterculture through its pursuit of sex, drugs, and rock and roll. Spokespeople like LSD guru Timothy Leary

exhorted young Americans to “turn on, tune in, and drop out” into the new drug culture of the 1960s. “Hippies,” as such youth came to be called, were considered the epitome of spoiled American youth, the products of a dangerously permissive society, self-indulgent and interested only in self-gratification. That they publicly flaunted their outlandish behavior was considered evidence of their selfishness and lack of regard for the standards of mainstream America. Such conclusions were based on a misunderstanding of the counterculture’s political culture and project in alternative community, aspects centered on a more individualized style of political engagement.

The growth of the youth culture and the rise of political activity among young Americans were decisive characteristics of the early 1960s. The concurrent rise of the public’s awareness of the student left and of the counterculture confused the different political impulses of the two and created a situation in which the elevation of the political nature of the New Left as a more defined version of “politics” resulted in the de facto elimination of other possible interpretations and manifestations of political activity. Yet both the New Left and the counterculture proposed an equation between public activity and democratic freedom that formed the backbone of a new part of the youth movement. First called the “New Community” in San Francisco’s Haight-Ashbury district, the congregation of values, actions and styles of engagement utilized by hippies has since become known as the counterculture.

Thus, as students at the University of California at Berkeley established themselves as constituents on the campus, other young Americans began to embrace a new style of public political activity that established them as constituents within urban communities. Cultural politics, a politics rooted in lifestyle choice, became an expression

of traditional urban politics when it became the expression of community identity, much as ethnic communities in distinct neighborhoods have asserted cultural or ethnic identity as a potent political force in urban politics. As representatives of an emerging American community, hippies in America's cities staged cultural events that expressed their status as a new constituency. These events were, often, simultaneously very traditional political activities and new forms of activism that helped define cultural politics.

To understand the development of this kind of public political activity, it is important to understand that the adherents of the counterculture of the 1960s emphasized somewhat different political goals from their contemporaries in the New Left and civil rights movement. They wanted to create a society in which individuals were free to pursue their own visions of personal fulfillment outside the restrictions of mainstream American life. Hippies wanted a life beyond what sociologist Theodore Roszak called the *technocracy* of America. Roszak, who coined the term "counterculture" in his 1969 study *The Making of a Counterculture*, argued that technocracy was "the social form in which industrial society reaches the peak of its organizational integration," and that this was the defining characteristic of American development at that time.¹⁸ It was the technocracy that created what Roszak identified as "radical disaffiliation" of rebellious American youth from mainstream society.

Members of the counterculture of the 1960s, estimated to number as many as three million individuals, wanted to create alternatives to what they viewed as the oppressive constrictions of mainstream American life, including regular employment

¹⁸ Theodore Roszak, *The Making of a Counterculture* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc. 1969), 5.

under corporate capitalism, middle-class suburban culture, and the nuclear family.¹⁹ Certainly they wanted to “drop out” of that structure—but they also wanted to create a new one in its stead. They were less concerned with traditional politics than with, as Roszak states, “altering the total cultural context within which our daily politics takes place.”²⁰ The development of this kind of “cultural politics” distinguishes the counterculture from more traditional political groups of youth activists in New Left organizations such as Students for a Democratic Society and the Berkeley Free Speech Movement.

Obvious differences and tensions existed from the start between university-based radicals and hippie “drop-outs”. These differences often pitted two quite different forms of rebellion against each other, both in practice and in the perception of each group in the popular imagination, and had a decisive influence on both contemporary and subsequent analyses of these movements. The earnest attempts of SDS to engage the urban dispossessed in the politics of their communities in their Economic Research and Action Programs (ERAPS) of the mid-sixties was a relatively traditional political reform activity that, although originating within a more radical analysis of the relative power status of individuals within American society, ultimately emphasized broader civic participation in urban management. The attempt to broaden political participation and the franchise is a long-accepted component of reform movements that dates in the twentieth century back to the Progressive movement and before that in the antebellum reform era of the 1830s. The question of “who decides,” so central to the New Left in the early 1960s, arose as

¹⁹ Dominick Cavallo estimates that “as many as 3 million of the 45 million young people who turned 18 between 1960 and 1972 became involved with the counterculture to one degree or another, at one point or another.” See Cavallo, A Fiction of the Past, 3.

²⁰ Roszak, The Making of a Counterculture, 5.

part of a critique of the imbalance of power in American political representation and expressed the fervent belief that more widespread political empowerment would result in a more egalitarian society. Similarly, the Free Speech Movement, although often directly concerned with the control and use of designated public spaces on or adjacent to university campuses, also emphasized participation in the decision making-process of major institutions and the right to exercise political actions within a democracy.

This kind of political activity was very different from the politics practiced by the hippies, who generally disdained most forms of traditional political activities, such as electoral campaigning and voting, and who regarded all of the American political system as oppressive of individuality and true community. Roszak wrote that “youthful disaffiliation [is] a cultural phenomenon rather than a political movement” and argued that hippie alienation and the hippie desire to alter society arose from a profound mistrust of the political and social system.²¹ Hippies urged the creation of an alternate society in which human expression and communication were not limited by the strict codes of any political dogma. Hippies viewed New Left politics as an unnecessary intellectualization of human relationships, which were viewed as the real determinant of social power and authority. This position is in stark contrast to the New Left assumption that the democratic political system is essentially sound but in need of reform.

Ample evidence from the era suggests that hippies pointedly distinguished their cultural protest from the more overtly and traditional political activities of the New Left. Ken Kesey notoriously rejected New Left politics at the October 1965 Vietnam Day action at Berkeley, when he told the crowd “you’re not gonna stop this war with this

²¹ Roszak in Sheila Whitley, The Space Between the Notes: Rock and the Counterculture (London: Routledge, 1992), 2.

rally, by marching...that's what they do." The hippie creators of the seminal moment of the counterculture, the Human Be-in of January 14, 1967, were also aware of the differences between the two aspects of the youth movement and billed the event as a "Gathering of the Tribes," hoping that it would encourage "a union of love and activism previously separated by categorical dogma and label mongering."²²

Such statements articulated the countercultural view that New Left political ideology was of a piece with mainstream American political values and therefore hardly an indication of a new ideology. According to Peter Berg, a founder of the seminal countercultural group the Diggers recalled, "to a large extent the left ignored...things like self-expression, art, beauty, sexuality, morality, as being political as well. At the Drawing Boards SDS debacle, one of the things that was very clear to all of us that went there, the hippies, and the Diggers, was that they were an amazingly puritanical bunch of people. They were marching around this campsite as if though they... were little boy scouts and girl scouts...they did not have a sensibility about joy, rhythm, sex, and that was exactly what we were busy trying to explode...the walls around it."²³

Contemporary assessments of the counterculture accepted such proclamations about the differences between it and the New Left and failed to see the counterculture as a political phenomenon. Certainly the popular media of the era portrayed the emergent counterculture this way. Analysts have noted that television representation of the counterculture was often literally a cartoon image of immature but ultimately non-

²² Kesey quoted in Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (Toronto: Bantam Books, 1987), 209; "The Gathering of the Tribes," *San Francisco Oracle* #5, January 1967, 2.

²³ Peter Berg, interview with the author, May 24, 1999.

threatening, apolitical adolescents.²⁴ *Newsweek* described hippies as “seldom actively political.” *Ebony* declared in 1967 that a Be-in was different from other public events because “it’s a low pressure event all the way and no one stands to make a buck from it or to make a political point.”²⁵

The mainstream press was also quick to point out that hippies differed from the scrubbed and earnest co-eds who joined the Peace Corps or fought for civil rights and, in doing so, placed their faith in an ultimate triumph of the much-vaunted democratic values of American society. *Time* magazine, in a July 1967 cover story on the hippies, quoted a member of the National Student Association as describing the hippie approach as “an apolitical systemicide” and argued that Americans were “unsettled” by hippies because they were different from political activists: “by contrast with the rebels of every previous generation in the U.S.—from the ‘wobblies’ of 50 years ago to the New Left activists of the early 60s—the hippies have no desire to control the machinery of society or redirect it toward new goals.”²⁶

Published memoirs reinforced the apparent differences between these two aspects of the youth movement of the 1960s. In his 1972 autobiography *Ringolevio*, Digger Emmett Grogan recalled a street confrontation in Haight-Ashbury in which hippies urged fellow protesters from Berkeley to “go back to school where you belong.” Tom Hayden, Students for a Democratic Society founder and primary author of the Port Huron Statement, the founding document of SDS, has noted that even the U.S. government,

²⁴ Kenneth J. Bindas and Kenneth J. Heineman, “Image is Everything? Television and the Counterculture Message in the 1960s,” *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, v. 22, n.1. Spring 1994.

²⁵ “Life and Leisure: Dropout with a Mission,” *Newsweek*, February 6, 1967, 92; “*Ebony* Photo-Editorial,” *Ebony*, July 1967, 100. Although *Ebony* was unique in that its coverage of the counterculture was one of the very, very few that addressed the participation of blacks in the movement, it shared with other newsmagazines a similar interpretation of the counterculture as apolitical.

²⁶ “Youth,” *Time*, July 7, 1967, 20; 22.

although it regarded the whole of the youth movement as a threat to the national status quo, recognized differences between the New Left and the counterculture. He argues that the government selected for indictment in the trial of the Chicago 8 specific individuals who seemed representative of all the various manifestations of the leftist sixties rebellions, making a distinction between the political New Left and the counterculture.²⁷ Todd Gitlin, a former member of SDS whose narrative *The Sixties* is both a history and a memoir, emphasized the differences in the white youth movement by referring to “hippies” and “politicos.” According to Gitlin, the San Francisco counterculture consisted of “anti-political purists...political news was game-playing, a bad trip, a bring down, a bummer.”²⁸

By the end of the 1960s, academics regarded the counterculture as a prime subject for analysis. Sociologists and anthropologists joined the media as observers and critics. Sociological analyses generally confirmed that there were distinct differences between the New Left and the counterculture but, unlike the popular media, some analysts also recognized, either explicitly or implicitly, that there was a political component of hippie activism that demanded consideration. Delbert L. Earisman’s 1968 study *Hippies in Our Midst*, a cultural history focusing largely on the New York counterculture scene, argued that hippies were largely motivated by a religious desire for meaning that placed them within a long historical tradition that included the Greek Cynics and the New England Transcendentalists.²⁹

Earisman unwittingly underscored a particular contradiction in the counterculture’s alleged non-political stance and, in doing so, pointed out the centrality of

²⁷ Emmett Grogan, *Ringolevio: A Life Played for Keeps* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1972), 242.

²⁸ Gitlin, *The Sixties*, 208-209.

²⁹ Delbert L. Earisman, *Hippies in Our Midst* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1968).

public space as an arena of conflict between hippies and mainstream society. "Politics is perhaps most real to them," Earisman wrote, "in the presence of the policeman standing ready to tell them to move on or to stop their guitar-playing... These kids, then are not the protestors against Vietnam or against racial injustice... they probably don't know the names of their local senators and representatives." He then continued, "these kids in the Village are in many ways real drop-outs... they protest by refusing to belong... It's a silent, inchoate protest, and if you ask any of them if they feel they are rebelling or revolting against something, they look blank. But ultimately there is no form of protest so profound as simply saying 'No'."³⁰

Earisman complicated his contention that the hippies were not political with by an incomplete awareness of the changing definition of politics, a definition that was beginning to include lifestyle issues. Earisman was not the only critic whose analysis fell victim to the shifting definitions and categories of political behavior in the 1960s. In her study *The Underground Revolution: Hippies, Yippies and Others* (1970), Naomi Feigelson recognized the value of guerilla theatre demonstrations performed by groups such as the Mime Troupe and the Yippies. She argued, "the Underground revolution is a cultural rather than political one. While White revolutionaries have been criticized for not developing a political critique of society, what they have done is developed an alternative life-style." "The Underground revolutionaries," she continued, live their politics by acting them out either in their lives or in the streets. The issue, for instance, 'the streets belong to the people,' is not decided, they say, by voting, but by occupying the streets... Confrontation politics, which is an extension of participatory politics to its ultimate, is also the ultimate extension of the sit-in." Feigelson limited her definition of

³⁰ Earisman, *Hippies in Our Midst*, 14-15.

politics to traditional democratic processes such as voting, and in doing so limited any understanding of hippie actions such as street protests or sit-ins as political acts, and certainly discounted lifestyle as an expression of politics. She effectively eliminated hundreds of events from political consideration by utilizing a definition of politics that was out of step with the current shift in political behavior.³¹

Sherri Cavan and Helen Swick Perry provided two exceptions to prevailing contemporary view of hippies as apolitical. Cavan, a sociologist at San Francisco State College, was a resident of the Haight-Ashbury district and member of the Haight-Ashbury Neighborhood Committee (HANC) in the 1960s. She conducted a sociological analysis of the neighborhood and its new residents in order to ascertain the relationship between beliefs and practices among the hippies. Her 1972 study *Hippies of the Haight* traced the similarities, differences and conflicts between the older Haight community and the new residents and delved specifically into the ideologies of hippie life. She noted that hippies often employed specific ideological explanations, including mystical and socio-political explanations, of what was termed the “trouble” they occasionally experienced. She noted that “even hippies of the Haight who have no involvement in political action at all, and who insist that ‘politics is a bad trip,’ still invoke the socio-political school of explanation,” placing their understanding of conflict within an analysis of society as corrupt. To Cavan, this application of a political interpretation to social relationships indicated that hippies were not devoid of political consciousness, and she pointedly

³¹ Naomi Feigelson, *The Underground Revolution: Hippies, Yippies and Others* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1970), 171.

highlighted the hippies' application of the socio-political explanation to their conflicts with civil authorities over public events such as park happenings.³²

Helen Swick Perry extended this interpretation further than any other scholar at the time. Placing the hippies within the historical context of bohemian and transcendental movements in the United States, she argued against the popular contemporary conclusion that hippies were non-political because they were not trying to change society, a conclusion she called the "most prevalent myth" about the hippies of Haight-Ashbury. She argued instead that the hippies possessed a "central political objective—to find a way for mankind, all of it, to survive by directly reforming the ethical values of the society at a personal, family, and neighborhood level." To Perry, the counterculture was inherently political, of a piece with the civil rights movement and the New Left, because it questioned and challenged mainstream social practices and values, hoping to effect change through direct action. Perry recognized that, although the hippies did not practice "politics as usual," they were keenly aware of the political import of values and lifestyle and desired social change.³³

Yet, despite limited recognition of the political impulses of the hippies, a generalized definition of the hippie as the antithesis of the committed New Left revolutionary, more content to pursue individual gratification than social and political improvement, emerged by the mid-seventies. A combination of actual differences between the two aspects of the youth movement, the counter-culture's self-declared separation from the New Left, New Left critiques that stressed traditional forms of political commitment as the true measure of the difference between hippies and New Left

³² Sherri Cavan, Hippies of the Haight (St. Louis, Missouri: New Critics Press, Inc., 1972) 177-8.

³³ Helen Swick Perry, The Human Be-in (New York: Basic Books, 1970), 41.

activists, and contemporary media and sociological assessments, therefore effectively obscured discussions of the political import of the counterculture. Because it was often assumed that hippies believed in and stood for nothing beyond the simple, and short-termed, goal of self-gratification, the counterculture therefore quickly became a scapegoat for many of the failures of the sixties movement.

This interpretive paradigm was incorporated quickly into the earliest historical assessments of the counterculture. At first, two main analyses dominated this historiography. Historical assessments of the hippies were either uncritical accounts of a harmlessly genial pop phenomenon, such as Charles Perry's later entry *The Haight-Ashbury: A History*, a narrative tour through the days of psychedelia in San Francisco, or negative accounts of the role of the counterculture within the larger history of the political movements of the 1960s. These latter histories usually placed the counterculture within a "declension" thesis of the sixties movement, in which the glory days in the early 1960s of the New Left's participatory democracy and civil rights vision were gradually eroded by internal conflict and an expansion of the movement to include lifestyle issues. Carl Boggs notes that this analysis is incorporated within revisionist histories of the New Left that assert the "total break" thesis, "the notion that the popular struggles associated with the sixties came to an explosive and sudden halt somewhere between 1968 and 1970, when the more apocalyptic visions held by an out-of-control drug culture, rampant street fighting and Marxist-Leninist sectarianism." He continues, "this perspective is extremely distorted, confusing the collapse of the SDS with the broader legacy of both

the New Left and the counterculture rooted in some enduring oppositional processes at work in American society.”³⁴

Within this analytical framework, the counterculture is invariably regarded as a liability to the movement. Historian William L. O’Neill articulated this position even before the movement had fully played itself out. His 1971 study *Coming Apart: An Informal History of America in the 1960s*, proclaimed that the counterculture was “politically debilitating” to the radicals of the New Left, who nonetheless were susceptible to its charms as it “led radicals to adopt a style that most Americans loathed, thus adding to their already formidable difficulties” in achieving a serious political stature and effecting change.³⁵

This viewpoint is also evident throughout Todd Gitlin’s *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (1987). A participant in the 1960s student movement, Gitlin posits that the ultimate failure of the movement may have been due to the failure of the New Left and the counterculture to reconcile their various agendas. His analysis of the 1969 People’s Park debacle suggests that the ongoing tension within the movement was grounded in the competing but often overlapping goals of each aspect of the larger movement.³⁶ W. J. Rorabaugh’s 1989 study *Berkeley at War: The 1960s* also utilized People’s Park as emblematic of the distinction between hippies and New Left activists, arguing that it was only the fight over People’s Park that could “rally hippies to a political cause.”³⁷

³⁴ Carl Boggs, “Rethinking the Sixties Legacy” in ed. Stanford M. Lyman, *Social Movements: Critiques, Concepts, Case-Studies* (New York: New York University Press, 1995), 332-333.

³⁵ William L. O’Neill, *Coming Apart: An Informal History of America in the 1960s* (New York: Times Books, 1971), 305.

³⁶ Gitlin, *The Sixties*.

³⁷ W. J. Rorabaugh, *Berkeley at War: The 1960s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 156.

Historians David Chalmers and David Steigerwald maintained this interpretation. Chalmers argued that, because the counterculture did not adopt a standard of traditional political protest toward the Vietnam war, it was not political.³⁸ Similarly, David Steigerwald contended in *The Sixties and the End of Modern America* (1995), “where the quest for cultural radicalism was strongest, political commitment tended to be weakest.” He writes that “hippies” were the “fifth wing of the antiwar movement,” but nonetheless they “didn’t consciously make cultural statements” and that their political commitment was “weak” largely because they “confused cultural rebellion with political change.” His work is among those that continue to make a strong distinction between the New Left and the counterculture, and their respective political commitments, based on a traditional standard of political activity that devalues cultural politics.³⁹

Other historians, however, began to examine cultural politics more seriously as a valid component of the social movement of the 1960s. Such assessments had their roots in historical analyses of the political aspects of bohemianism throughout American history, or the cultural radicalism expressed in alternative lifestyles.⁴⁰ These scholars, who have addressed the tangled relationship between bohemian lifestyle and political commitment, have recognized that cultural radicalism is often a form of political activity. An early indication of this analytical turn is evident in Kenneth S. Lynn's 1974 article "The Rebels of Greenwich Village." Lynn presented the first substantial analysis of the myths surrounding the bohemian radicals of Greenwich Village in the early twentieth

³⁸ David Chalmers, “The Struggle for Social Change in 1960s America: A Bibliographic Essay,” *American Studies International* (April 1992) Vol. XXX, No. 1.

³⁹ David Steigerwald, *The Sixties and the End of Modern America* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1995), 183; 106; 186.

⁴⁰ Robert Rosenstone, *Romantic Revolutionary: A Biography of John Reed*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 100. Rosenstone notes that bohemia “implied a lifestyle adopted by choice, a conscious revolt against the seriousness and instrumentality of bourgeois civilization.

century. Many of his conclusions are relevant to any examination of cultural radicalism, especially his argument that, as it is the middle class that is the guardian of the "apparatus of the modern world" and enforces dominant values, it is the middle class that usually emerges as the target of bohemian criticism.⁴¹ This was certainly true of the Villagers and also is evident in the counterculture.

Marty Jezer similarly pointed out that the bohemian left was significant because it tended to support radical politics more than any other group in American society and recognized the relationship between the personal and political.⁴² Although Jezer concedes that the social and cultural revolutionary goals of bohemians (as opposed to the strictly economic and political ways in which non-bohemians view revolution) could be alienating to other radicals and the rest of society, he views their popularization of radical politics as an important contribution to the development of social change. The rebellion against the middle class and the relationship between cultural and political radicalism are both hallmarks of studies of cultural radicalism before the 1960s and were incorporated into many analyses of the 1960s counterculture itself.

Soon, historians began to integrate this understanding of cultural politics into their assessments of the upheaval of the 1960s, although they still did not fully recognize the political import of the counterculture. Stewart Burns, a former participant in sixties activism, recognized a significant connection between the counterculture and the New Left. In *Social Movements of the 1960s: Searching for Democracy* (1990), he noted that the counterculture grew from the New Left itself and that the lifestyle of many adherents

⁴¹ Kenneth S. Lynn, "The Rebels of Greenwich Village," in *The Air-Line to Seattle: Studies in Literary and Historical Writing About America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 65.

⁴² Marty Jezer, "The Problems and Promise of the Bohemian Left", *Z Magazine* (November 1989), 66.

of the New Left overlapped with that of the hippies, citing the use of drugs by the antiwar group The Resistance and the widely shared culture of rock and roll. He also argued that the two facets of the youth movement held in common certain “prefigurative efforts” evident in the public events of the hippies, events such as Be-ins and happenings, in which “hippies played with participatory democracy.” Even though, he argued, many hippies “had little political awareness (on an articulated level), he agreed with Theodore Roszak that their public events expressed the desire of hippies to counter the prevailing alienation of the times. Yet Burns is adamant that, despite such cultural similarities, the New Left was the “bona fide social movement” of white liberal activism of the 1960s, not the counterculture’s unorganized and more spontaneous activities. In his analysis, the form, structure and articulation of political goals elevates one movement over another.⁴³

In *The Sixties Experience: Hard Lessons About Modern America* (1991), Edward P. Morgan negatively defined the political aspects of the counterculture by pointing out its disengagement. He found a political component in the counterculture’s “Great Refusal” of mainstream standards and authority and recognized that the counterculture’s “rejection of politics was implicitly political.” Yet, although he conceded that the counterculture’s desire for community was a goal it shared with the New Left and other manifestations of prefigurative and personalist politics in the 1960s, he did not believe that the counterculture was actually political. Though an “extension” of the New Left, it did not have a “sufficient political consciousness” and as a result “lapsed into a politics of style easily co-opted by the market society.”⁴⁴

⁴³ Stewart Burns, *Social Movements of the 1960s: Searching for Democracy* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1990), 91-100.

⁴⁴ Edward P. Morgan, *The Sixties Experience: Hard Lessons about Modern America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), 170;168; 173; 177.

Terry H. Anderson agreed with this conclusion. In *The Movement and the Sixties* (1995), he argued that the counterculture and the New Left were distinct movements that, despite the bleeding of counterculture “style” into New Left culture in what he describes as the “second wave” of activism in the late 1960s, possessed one major point of departure: the New Left was political and the counterculture was not. As the decade wore on and the early spirit of activism declined in the face of persistent racial tension and an accelerating war, the counterculture’s “drop-out,” individualist ideology appealed more and more to increasingly alienated and disillusioned activists. For hippies, and for those who adopted the counterculture’s style by the end of the decade, “the political revolution shifted to an individual revolution.”⁴⁵

The idea that the counterculture represented the cultural revolution of the 1960s and created a shift from a more politicized rebellion in the early 1960s to an individualized one in the later years of the decade has been dominant in interpretations of the 1960s until even very recently. According to Doug Rossinow, the counterculture “was the loosely associated set of cultural rebellions among affluent white youth in the 1960s and 1970s” and that like the members of the contemporaneous New Left, its members “believed in the power of transgression, of crossing boundaries.” Rossinow argues in *The Politics of Authenticity: Liberalism, Christianity and the New Left in America* (1998), his study of the New Left in Austin, Texas, that the counterculture and the New Left were distinct movements united by “the common quest for authenticity, not in consistent political goals,” and that they were both part of a larger youth existential movement that hoped to replace the technocratic values of industrial society with more

⁴⁵ Anderson, *The Movement and the Sixties*, 289.

humanist ones.⁴⁶ It was the New Left, according to Rossinow, that brought politics to the counterculture; or, rather, brought the counterculture to politics by merging the New Left's institutional prefigurative politics with the cultural prefigurative politics of the counterculture. The counterculture in this analysis emerges as a component of political radicalism in the 1960s, but not of its own initiative. Without the New Left's immersion in the cultural style and values of the counterculture in the middle of the 1960s, the counterculture itself would not have constituted a radical force for change.⁴⁷

Finally, Dominick Cavallo reiterated the distinction between political and cultural radicalism by separating the New Left and the counterculture in *A Fiction of the Past: The Sixties in American History* (1999). Cavallo argues that the New Left and the counterculture's rebellion against modern American society were manifestations of persistent, long-standing pre-industrial values within American society. Though he concedes that the counterculture "served as the main vehicle of protest for young people who sought refuge from a society they saw as equal parts violent and boring," he also argues that it was distinct from the New Left, and that "categorizing radicals as cultural or political (while recognizing, as most scholars do, that individuals like Jerry Rubin and Abbie Hoffman had a foot in both camps, and that by the chaotic late sixties the boundaries between the two became increasingly blurred) is a useful, generally valid way of separating the two main strands of youth rebellion in the sixties."⁴⁸

This definition of "political" revolution that does not include cultural rebellion has recently been challenged by those who argue that the definition of the term "political"

⁴⁶ Doug Rossinow, *The Politics of Authenticity: Liberalism, Christianity, and the New Left in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 247-255.

⁴⁷ Doug Rossinow, "The New Left in the Counterculture: Hypothesis and Evidence," *Radical History Review* 67 (1997).

⁴⁸ Cavallo, *A Fiction of the Past*, 4; 186.

experienced a sea change in the 1960s, when a strand of political behavior that emphasized individual identity and choice, seen by many as a natural outgrowth of the identity politics of the era, became increasingly more visible on the American scene. These historians argue that the counterculture was political on the basis of this newer notion of “cultural” politics as legitimate political activity that extended beyond the sphere of lifestyle or culture. Rather than view the counterculture as a cultural movement with political implications, these analysts argue that the counterculture was, in itself, a political movement.

Sociologist Timothy Miller first articulated this position. He agreed with Herbert Marcuse, who thought that the hippies were “the only viable social revolution” of the era, because hippies created a “culture of opposition” which had its own ethos based on values counter to the mainstream: dope, sexual freedom, the primacy of rock and roll and the importance of building community. Miller argues that the counterculture had a far-reaching influence on American society, for the questioning of traditional values dramatically altered social behaviors. Human relationships, he argues, simply weren’t the same after the sixties, and this is due to the hippies who challenged and repudiated mainstream social values to such an extent that they truly had a radical impact on the United States. The cultural practices of the hippies reflected their values, and these values had a decidedly political import because they criticized and rejected the dominant culture and espoused new forms of social relationships.⁴⁹

Historian James J. Farrell incorporates this view in *The Spirit of the Sixties* (1997). “Cultural radicalism made the New Left and the counterculture the yin and yang

⁴⁹ Timothy Miller, *The Hippies and American Values* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1991).

of Sixties radicalism, organically intertwined, two movements of the same Movement.” They were connected in their shared desire to achieve political and social change through personalist politics, in which human development was championed over the impersonal and alienating power of social institutions. While the New Left fought against the power of social institutions, the counterculture did so through “a variety of experiments with communitarian anarchism and the beloved community.” Although the two aspects of the movement were conscious of their differences, “together, the oppositional politics of the New Left and the counterculture recovered the complex roots of the word ‘protest.’” Within this analysis, “culture” is more than politicized: it is itself a political force.⁵⁰

Michael Doyle, however, provided the most complete analysis of the political and often revolutionary goals of the counterculture in his dissertation “The Haight-Ashbury Diggers and the Cultural Politics of Utopia, 1965-1968.” In this analysis, Doyle provides the first thorough history of the group most often credited with bringing a political agenda to the hippies in the Haight-Ashbury. The Diggers, according to Doyle, best represent the political aspect of the counterculture and its enduring influence as the progenitors of alternative or counter-institutions that challenged those of mainstream American society and culture. Doyle’s recognition of the political aspects of the counterculture as evident in the activities of the Diggers was an important step toward the examination of the political import of the counterculture as a whole.⁵¹

⁵⁰ James J. Farrell, The Spirit of the Sixties: The Making of Postwar Radicalism (New York: Routledge, 1997), 204-231.

⁵¹ Michael Doyle, “The Haight-Ashbury Diggers and the Cultural Politics of Utopia, 1965-1968,” Ph.D. Dissertation, Cornell University, 1997.

IV. The Emergence of the Political Culture of the Counterculture

The political culture of the counterculture first emerged in the series of protests launched in the wake of the repression of the San Francisco Mime Troupe's free park performances in 1966. Scholars of reception analysis have shown that there is a wide gulf between the intent of performances and the lessons learned or meaning perceived from them by various audiences.⁵² These initial protests over the right to gather in public inspired in hippies the growth of a particular ethos about their right to use public spaces like parks and streets, an ethos based on a spirited interpretation and use of the U.S. Constitution and a definition of themselves as citizens protected by those laws.

This ethos was put into practice on an almost daily basis in cities such as San Francisco from 1966-1968, as throngs of young Americans claimed urban territory as their own and on occasion flooded the parks and streets of America. These American youth did not necessarily promote themselves as political protesters, nor were they consciously aware that their activities were in fact "political," though they constituted challenges to urban authorities that often earned the threat of harassment or jail. Yet these distinctly countercultural forms of public activity blended both traditional political activities and the emerging cultural politics of the era to create a new political culture. The counterculture, then, was indeed a truly politically engaged and active segment of the American people.

The hippie phenomenon was, like earlier experiments in alternative lifestyles, part of the constantly evolving re-evaluation of moral standards in American society throughout modern history, and as has been the case for many constituencies throughout

⁵² Janet Staiger, Interpreting Films: Studies in the Historical Reception of American Cinema (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992.)

American history, the public spaces of the nation were used by it as a public forum. The 1960s, like the early national reform era and the turn-of-the-century bohemian era, was a time when many were reconsidering fundamental social values. Like Margaret Sanger's challenges to the censorship of birth control literature and the bohemian "free love" movement of the Greenwich Village cultural radicals in the early twentieth century, and the Beat challenges to censorship, the revolution of the civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s, the Supreme Court's school prayer decision of 1962, and the steady breakdown of stringent standards of public speech all opened the door to critiques that would emerge in the 1960s. Criticisms of drug law hypocrisy, of segregation, and of the war were all products of a new willingness to question standards of morality and behavior. One of the issues that came up for debate was the regulation of public activity and behavior, and no group pushed this issue in the second half of the 1960s more than the hippies, whose long-haired, hard-rocking public parties in America's parks were born from the belief of those in the counterculture that they were, as American citizens, entitled to avail themselves of public space at will.

But public political activity rarely occurs without criticism or contest. This was especially true during the Cold War years of the 1950s and 1960s, when many Americans prized domestic stability and international security over all else. Senator Joseph McCarthy's communist witch hunts and the federal government's program to guarantee the "loyalty" of its employees dominated the political landscape and were, at least for a time, supported by a majority of Americans. The restrictive politics of the McCarthy era, when political radicals were persecuted in ways that circumscribed political speech on every level, helped to perpetuate an image of the 1950s as a time when all was right with

the world—especially the parts that the United States controlled. It was a golden age: the “American Century” had begun and, as the saying goes, the streets were safe.

They may have been safe, but they were also public forums, and already in the 1950s, when the United States began what was arguably one of its greatest periods of domestic unrest, the streets became a locus of activity. The civil rights movement spawned a reevaluation of American society, and in the 1960s, multiple attempts to create a better and more equitable system in the United States were espoused by many disparate groups: African Americans, women, Chicanos, Native Americans, the poor, the young. The civil rights movement’s pointed use of public demonstrations to illustrate and protest the racial inequities of American society brought a level of public political activity to the United States that was in stark contrast to the popular image of orderly American life that prevailed in the 1950s. The antiwar movement enacted similar public protests. The counterculture added its own variant of public political activity when it, too, took to the streets and parks of the nation’s cities in the middle of the 1960s.

This public presence of a distinct hippie counterculture first became evident in San Francisco. Both heralded and vilified in the 1960s, the tiny, 16-block Haight-Ashbury neighborhood, nestled against the hills just southeast of Golden Gate Park, became the center of a new community of youth. As David Farber has written, “the Haight-Ashbury in San Francisco wasn’t the only counterculture enclave, but it was the first and the biggest and the most photogenic. It did yeoman duty as image, as inspiration, and as horror show. It served as both a literal and, far more often, a figurative destination for millions of young people who found themselves in the midst of a national debate about the meaning of the American dream that just left most of them

confused.”⁵³ These young people made their presence known in the mid-sixties in parades, dance-concerts and just by hanging out in the streets of the neighborhood, where they could meet, talk and dance with other like-minded people. This study is the story of how the youth counterculture of San Francisco utilized both traditional political activities and new forms of cultural politics to create a political culture that asserted the goals of a distinct community fighting to bring its interests to the public spaces of the city.

Countercultural groups such as the Beats, the Merry Pranksters, the San Francisco Mime Troupe and the Diggers provided the genesis of a constantly developing ideology about the right to public space that soon became a specific political issue in the city. While groups like the Diggers may have spearheaded many of the activities of the Haight-Ashbury counterculture in its early years, examination of the uses of public space in the Haight-Ashbury the hippies there often exhibited their own political agenda in their public activities as well as expanded, elaborated and adapted the Digger events.

Chapter One, “On the Road to Freedom,” details the progenitors of the counterculture and their influence on the birth of the counterculture’s ethos about the right to use public spaces through a discussion of the idealization and use of the road as public space by the Beat writers, often considered a counterculture of the 1950s and the seedbed of 1960s cultural radicalism, and by the prototypical counterculture group, the Merry Pranksters. Chapter Two explains the source of the San Francisco Bay Area counterculture’s public and protest activity in the actions of the San Francisco Mime Troupe and its leader, Ronnie Davis. The third chapter analyzes the first cohesive actions of the emergent San Francisco counterculture through the activities of the San Francisco Diggers and explains how this group shaped the dialogue about the use of public space

⁵³ David Farber, The Age of Great Dreams: America in the 1960s (New York: Hill and Wang, 1994), 169.

for festivity. Chapter 4, "Everybody Get Together," is an examination of the solidification of the San Francisco counterculture and its fruition as a political community intent on exercising its rights to public space.

CHAPTER ONE

“ON THE ROAD” TO FREEDOM:

BEAT AND PRANKSTER USES OF PUBLIC SPACE

Young Americans with nonconformist tendencies have long felt welcome in San Francisco, the fog-shrouded city sitting on the peninsula separating San Francisco Bay from the Pacific Ocean. The city’s enduring reputation for the tolerance of social, cultural and political difference has been fostered by a history of receptivity to difference and experimentation. Beginning as a Spanish mission, San Francisco quickly became a central trading post during the Gold Rush, when the “49ers,” and other fortune seekers similarly characterized by a certain adventurousness, made it their home. A western port of entry to North America, it also attracted a diverse ethnic population that included immigrants from Asia as well as Europe. The city’s position as a stopping place for the world’s transients—gold prospectors, sailors, immigrants—helped San Francisco’s “Barbary Coast” develop a reputation for vice: prostitution, gambling and saloons were among its notorious attractions.

This was the beginning of what Brian J. Godfrey has called San Francisco’s “tradition of non-tradition.”¹ Though there was always a persistent racism and exclusionary practices against Asian immigrants, the city’s loose attitude toward lifestyle attracted those who felt restrained by the social codes of other more sedate towns and

¹ Brian J. Godfrey, Neighborhoods in Transition: The Making of San Francisco’s Ethnic and Nonconformist Communities (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988.)

cities in the United States. Artists, writers and adventurers were drawn to San Francisco to revel in and draw inspiration from stimulating encounters with those on the fringes of mainstream American society. There, they began to create that “tradition of non-tradition” that continued even after the great earthquake and fire of 1906 leveled their traditional haunts. In the twentieth century, the reputation of San Francisco as a haven for nonconformists continued to solidify after World War II, when gays and lesbians released or discharged from the military chose it as a congenial location to settle and, shortly after, when the city became an unofficial center of a literary avant-garde. According to historian Nancy J. Peters, the city’s “provincialism and distance from centers of national culture and political power have long made it an ideal place for nonconformist writers, artists and utopian dreamers.”²

San Francisco became the home base of diverse and even radical cultural groups that were less tolerated elsewhere in the mainstream, button-down world of the twentieth century. Two such groups, influential to the cultural history and development of the city, contributed to new understandings and uses of the city’s public space for cultural activities and are thus specifically important to an understanding of the development of the hippie counterculture of San Francisco. Though originating in New York City, the Beat writers made San Francisco their cultural home in the 1950s and were instrumental in the San Francisco Poetry Renaissance, which has been described as “a series of loosely organized readings, publications and meetings that has been read as a unified narrative of the literary and artistic life of the San Francisco Bay Area during the late 1950s and early

² Nancy J. Peters, “The Beat Generation and San Francisco’s Culture of Dissent,” in James Brook, Chris Carlsson and Nancy J. Peters, eds., Reclaiming San Francisco: History, Politics, Culture (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1998), p. 199. See also Godfrey, Neighborhoods in Transition.

1960s.”³ In addition, the prototypical hippie group, the Merry Pranksters, emerged directly from the area in the early 1960s. Both groups influenced the politics and lifestyle of the youth who would form the Bay area’s hippie counterculture by the mid-1960s, and the Pranksters would become a significant part of that counterculture.

The Beat writers were the most prominent members of the San Francisco Renaissance. They have been extensively discussed and analyzed by historians and critics, not only for their literary accomplishments, but also because, according to Michael Davidson, “exposure to the literary renaissance of the late 1950s and early 1960s involved an awareness of new social forms and practices.” Their “new poetics implied not only formal innovation but also discovery of alternative social forms.” “Because the literary movement was so closely linked to cultural change within society at large,” Davidson writes, “it offers us a particularly interesting example of literary bohemia as an aesthetic as well as social formation.” The movement, he argues, broke down the previously rarified world of poetry and created a self-conscious bohemia that fed on itself to create an even more distinct vision of a unified artistic and literary community.⁴ Gregory Stephenson echoes Davidson’s interpretation of the Beats as a literary phenomenon that sought a new model of community. “The literature of the Beat Generation,” he writes, “is a reassertion of the essential, archaic function of art as embodiment of the sacred and as vehicle of the communal myth and vision.”⁵

The Beats also established a set of behaviors and values that was adopted by the counterculture. Many have argued that the hippie counterculture emerged directly from

³ Michael Davidson, The San Francisco Renaissance: Poetics and Community at Mid-century (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989)

⁴ *ibid.*, x-xi.

⁵ Gregory Stephenson, The Daybreak Boys: Essays on the Literature of the Beat Generation (Carbondale; Southern Illinois Press, 1990.)

the beat movement. The influential behaviors and values of the Beats included a vociferous disdain for the Cold War paranoia and restrictive moralism of American society. The Beats criticized the culture of the Cold War, highlighting their suspicion of authority and rejecting the dominant social and cultural standards of the era. Their disregard for the mores established by mainstream authorities often translated into a challenge to mainstream standards: of literary worth, of artistic achievement, and of public behavior.⁶

The Beats laid the philosophical and behavioral foundations of a new ethos toward public behavior and the expression of cultural values in public. Emerging as part of the shift in popular mores that occurred at mid-century, the Beats contributed to the break down of restrictive artistic standards characteristic of the mid- and late-twentieth century and set an example to which the insurgent counterculture of the 1960s would frequently refer. They challenged prevailing censorship codes and public behavior through their work and lives. In Terry Anderson's words, the Beats "dented the chrome 1950s." This occurred most pointedly in the public furor over the publication of Allen Ginsberg's epic poem *Howl*, which was first performed in 1955 at the Gallery Six, a converted garage-cum-coffeehouse in San Francisco. *Howl* put the Beats on the American cultural map and was the subject of a controversial censorship trial.⁷

Their challenge to convention was on a par with other developments of this era, such as the rise in the late 1950s and early 1960s of a pointedly anti-establishment satirical view toward American culture. Irreverent publications such as *Mad* magazine,

⁶ Marty Jezer, *The Dark Ages: Life in the United States, 1945-1960* (Boston: South End Press, 1982), 256-257; Terry H. Anderson, *The Movement and the Sixties: Protest in America from Greensboro to Wounded Knee* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 35. Most analysts of the Beats have similar thoughts on the Beat condemnation of Cold War culture. See Stephenson, *The Daybreak Boys*.

⁷ Anderson, *The Movement and the Sixties*, 36.

an outlandish comic book-style missive that butchered the sacred cows of mainstream American culture. *Mad* left no one unscathed, including the beatnik movement that grew up around the Beat writers. It was aimed primarily toward an influential audience of adolescents but appealed to many with an offbeat, subversive or rebellious sensibility.⁸

A similar development was the emergence and underground popularity of the performers tagged as the “sick comics.” Cynical and abrasive, Mort Sahl and Lenny Bruce ridiculed American moral and political values.⁹ Bruce challenged the obscenity laws in more dramatic ways than even Ginsberg. A social critic emerging from the world of vaudeville and strip joints, Bruce was more than a comedian. His performances often drew laughter from his discomfited audience, confronted with painful truths about themselves and their society. Forces like the “sick comics” and the Beats contributed to the destruction of restrictive social codes in the 1950s and early 1960s. They provided a model of antiestablishment sentiment and boundary-breaking behavior in literature and the arts that would influence the counterculture.¹⁰

Moreover, the Beats influenced the growth of a youth counterculture in the 1960s in another crucial way: they idealized the road as a space of limitless freedom. Unlike the earlier radicals of the twentieth century, who used public spaces for traditional political activities like labor rallies and protests, the Beats took to the road and made it both a

⁸ *MAD About the Fifties*, by ‘The Usual Gang of Idiots’, a compilation of representative selections from the decade produced by The Quality Paperback Book Club by arrangement with EC Publications, Inc. (New York, 1997) provides a basic introduction to *Mad*’s influential style.

⁹ Such developments had tremendous influence on individual figures famous within the counterculture. Grace Slick refers to Bruce as a “soul mate” in her autobiography; Abbie Hoffman to Bruce in virtually all of his writings of the era. See Grace Slick with Andrea Cagan, *Somebody to Love: A Rock and Roll Memoir* (New York: Warner Books, 1998), 66.

¹⁰ Most histories of the 1960s, including biographies and autobiographies, discuss the extensive influence of antiestablishment humor on various aspects of the sixties movement, including the counterculture and the New Left, and new modernist authors of the era. In addition to those works referenced in the previous footnote, see Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (Toronto: Bantam Books, 1987); Howard Brick, *Age of Contradiction: American Thought and Culture in the 1960s* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1998); Anderson, *The Movement and the Sixties*.

conduit and destination on their spiritual journey. In doing so, they elevated the image of the road to iconic status. This deeply influenced future members of the counterculture. The Beat Generation of youthful followers, who grew their hair long, listened to jazz, smoked marijuana, and cohabited without the benefit of marriage, provided a training ground for many of the leaders of the early counterculture of the 1960s. Tom Hayden, a future founder of SDS who abandoned traditional leftist politics in favor of cultural politics in the late 1960s, traveled around the country in 1960 after reading *On the Road*.¹¹ Annie Gottlieb, in her mid-life assessment of the counterculture, recalled, “the nomadic urge that seized our generation may have been the most fabulous, fable-like, aspect of the Sixties. A long-haired kid with backpack, thumb out, on the road to Kabul or Boulder—or just On The Road—could be the emblem for the decade.”¹² Ed Sanders, proprietor of New York’s Peace Eye bookstore, publisher of *Fuck You, A Magazine of the Arts*, which challenged the censorship standards prevalent in the 1960s, founder of the counterculture rock group the Fugs and Yippie co-creator, was inspired by his reading of Allen Ginsberg’s *Howl* to leave Kansas and pursue an avant-garde, counterculture life elsewhere.¹³ The Beats thus inspired the expansion of both imagined and actual frontiers.

The road is the most public of American public spaces. Instantly and easily accessible by car and by foot, the road has often been employed as a literary device to signify a journey, and it has become the central symbol of a whole subgenre of American literature. Yet, in the fifties, writers, including the Beats, were not the only Americans

¹¹ James Miller, *Democracy is in the Streets: From Port Huron to the Siege of Chicago* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987) 45. Jack Kerouac, *On the Road* (New York: The Viking Press, 1957).

¹² Annie Gottlieb, *Do You Believe In Magic: The Second Coming of the Sixties Generation* (New York: Times Books, 1987), 83.

¹³ Naomi Feigelson, *The Underground Revolution: Hippie, Yippies and Others* (Funk & Wagnalls: New York, 1970), 78-79.

who cherished the road. The importance of the automobile and the highway to American culture in the post-war era cannot be overestimated. America's public roads grew exponentially following the institution of Eisenhower's Interstate Highway Act of 1955. Historian Kenneth T. Jackson has noted that the automobile was the single greatest factor behind the decline of the American central city and the concurrent suburbanization of the areas surrounding cities.¹⁴ Many other historians and social analysts have catalogued the effects of that development on American life, noting the influence of the automobile on work, the family, and courting and sexual habits. The automobile was a vivid symbol of American commercial might and of the faith in progress that many Americans cherished. By extension, the roads that carried the automobile became roads to a future of freedom and of possibility. The road provided the means to a better life. By taking to the road, one could move to a bigger town, a better job, a brighter future.

The Beats added their own twist to the definition of the road as a path toward a greater future. For the Beats, the road itself was both a concrete route to a better place and a spiritual destination in and of itself. A space of limited regulation, the road encouraged an emphasis on the present experience and the availability of individual choice. The road was limbo, a conduit from which they could alternately—or simultaneously—escape from the past and reach for the future. While on the road, one could live in the moment—a moment that was always both a beginning and an ending. Thus the road presented both infinite possibility and the chance to live within a consciousness of the existential life.

¹⁴ Kenneth T. Jackson, Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

In their own time, the Beats were a much a popular media subject, a much exploited and growingly self-conscious group of cultural radicals, and their popularity as subject matter of contemporary media furthered that self-consciousness. That most of the leading figures of the Beat Generation were still alive during the counter-culture's heyday in the sixties, and that some of them, like Allen Ginsberg and Neal Cassady, became active participants in the counterculture, only furthered the conviction that the Beat Generation was a historical precursor to the counterculture.

In many ways, the Beats can be considered a bridge between the first cultural radicals in the twentieth-century, those who formed the leftist core around the journal *The Masses*, centered in New York City's Greenwich Village, and the more recent counterculture of the 1960s. Like the leftist Village radicals who participated in labor strikes and the Russian Revolution and published stinging critiques of American capitalism, politics and society, the Beats published social criticism. However, unlike earlier bohemians, the Beats disdained active political participation in favor of the search for an end to their alienation through the discovery of a meaningful life—hence the suggestion that the term “beat” was a shortened version of “beatitude.” This aspect of the Beats provides the strongest connection to the counterculture, which transformed that personal search into a political issue about the promise of American freedom and the limits of civil authority.

The Beats were unlike the enclave of radicals that flourished in New York City's Greenwich Village before World War I, which was a salon-based and—to a certain extent—elite group of artists, writers and performers who were dedicated to socialism, psychology and modern art. Unlike those earlier cultural radicals, the Beats evidenced no

traditional political commitments: they were a group of cultural radicals characterized by a dynamic new literary style, a palpable sense of alienation from mainstream American values and society, and a reliance on the value of experience, particularly through the American mythology of the open road and its historical association with freedom. The Beats were mainly writers, including Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, William S. Burroughs, and Gregory Corso, but they also included those who gained fame as *characters*, both in literature and in life. Neal Cassady, though he experimented with writing, was mainly a friend of the Beat writers and was the model for Dean Moriarty in Kerouac's *On the Road*.

Though the Beats are now more renowned for creating a literary movement than a social one, various studies of the Beats emphasize the cultural significance of the Beats as models of cultural radicalism. William O'Neill's *Coming Apart: An Informal History of America in the Sixties* (1971), Todd Gitlin's *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (1987), Stephen J. Whitfield's study *The Culture of the Cold War* (1991), and Terry H. Anderson's *The Movement and the Sixties: Protest in America from Greensboro to Wounded Knee* (1995) all argue the thesis that the Beats were a radical group that reacted to the Cold War and provided an example of dissent for 1960s radicals. But the Beats provided more than style. They also provided an ideology and example of individual freedom.¹⁵

The alienation from mainstream society characteristic of the Beat movement was evident in the three primary figures of the Beats when they met in New York City in the 1940s. Allen Ginsberg, the son of poet Louis Ginsberg, was a bright and talented young

¹⁵ William L. O'Neill, *Coming Apart: An Informal History of America in the 1960s* (New York: Times Books, 1971); Gitlin, *The Sixties*; Anderson, *The Movement and the Sixties*.

man, once a prodigy of poet William Carlos Williams, but haunted by his mother's mental illness and gay at a time when homosexuality was persecuted as a crime. Jack Kerouac, though a high school football hero studying at Columbia University on an athletic scholarship, was from a poor immigrant family in the mill town of Lowell, Massachusetts and did not speak English for the first years of his life. He always felt himself an outsider. William S. Burroughs, heir to the Burroughs business-machine family's fortune, was a drug addict who prowled the fringes of urban society.¹⁶

The union of Ginsberg, Kerouac and Burroughs in the 1940s was both a meeting of similar minds and the germination of a new kind of bohemian movement. Rootless, seemingly connected permanently only to one another, they reached out to find their own dreams of America. And they wrote about their search. William Burroughs's *Junkie*, Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, and Allen Ginsberg's painful and exhilarating epic poem *Howl* each expressed, in both their subject matter and their dynamic new literary styles, the frustrations of modern life and the desire to break free from social constrictions. They were perhaps one of the earliest of the post-war literary movements to emphasize alternative lifestyles as literary subject matter, most notably in John Clellon Holmes's novel *Go* and Ginsberg's *Howl*.

Their notoriety was a much-exploited outgrowth of that emphasis. The growth of the Beats as a literary phenomenon in the 1950s was related to both a growing fascination with the role of the outsider in art and literature and to an increasing awareness of the failures of American life. In the 1950s, the prominence of the United States on the world stage was unquestioned and largely unchallenged at home. The Soviet Union, though a

¹⁶ For biographical information, see, for example, Bruce Cook, *The Beat Generation* (New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1971).

political rival, could hardly compete with the image of prosperity and opportunity presented by American abundance. That abundance, which was based on the material success of the individual, was, according to many critics, an empty success; it did not lend succor to the spiritual needs of modern man. The Beats, in their anguished howls of frustration and loneliness, underscored that failure of American life and offered an alternative: Americans should, in order to find their own state of beatitude, embrace and seek out experiences on the edge of mainstream society—experiences that pushed the limits of one's own endurance for pleasure, for pain, for love and hate, for life and death. The defining characteristic of the Beats was their quest for experience in any and all forms.

Such a desire, according to Norman Mailer, was part of the phenomenon known as "hip." In "The White Negro: Superficial Reflections on the Hipster", his 1958 analysis of the growth of the beatnik or "hipster," Mailer traced the development of the hipster, the modern existential hero of American society. Mailer referred to Beats as "philosophical psychopaths", which reinforced the increasingly popular notion that the Beats were fundamentally mentally ill because they rejected the ideology and behavioral norms of the dominant culture. Significantly, he placed the Beats within the culture of the Cold War as modern rebels against the terror of nuclear proliferation and totalitarianism. This became the accepted interpretation of the genesis of the Beats, and Mailer's thesis influenced studies of the Beats within the historical context of the Cold War.¹⁷

¹⁷ Norman Mailer, "The White Negro," in Voices of Dissent: A Collection of Articles from *Dissent Magazine* (New York: Grove Press, Inc, 1958).

In this article, Mailer infamously equated African-Americans, the model for the hipster, the “white Negro,” with psychopaths because of their profound, forced alienation from American society—and therefore unwittingly trivialized and to a certain extent romanticized the very real degradations inflicted upon African Americans. Yet his essay early recognized the importance of the experiential life to the new breed of cultural radicals. He wrote that Beats were “American existentialists” who confronted the horrors of modernity with “the rebellious imperatives of the self,” an impulse that he described, in a phrase often misconstrued as a criticism, as “the decision to encourage the psychopath in oneself.”¹⁸

The Beats sought “to set out on that uncharted journey into the rebellious imperatives of the self,” and this was the activity for which they became best known. It also provided the ideological roots of their use of the road, which would be their most significant influence on the counterculture. Their idealization of the road effectively linked alternative lifestyles with the nature of life on the road. The Beats publicized their use of the road as a distinct component of their alternative lifestyles in their literature, and though many Beats exhibited considerable literary talent and achievement, the Beats became icons of the restless desire for freedom from American conformity at the middle of the twentieth century.

In *Understanding the Beats* (1992), Edward Halsey Foster cites Beat writer John Clellon Holmes’s summary of the Beat’s endless quest and concludes that the Beat generation of writers, “believing that America, having lost its values, could cure its discontents only by going faster—a solution that in its obvious pointlessness only

¹⁸ Mailer, “The White Negro”; Marty Jezer argues that the media’s labeling of comics like Sahl and Bruce as “sick” and referring repeatedly to the Beats as “crazy” or mentally disturbed was a means of diffusing the revolutionary potential of the social criticism of these groups. Jezer, *The Dark Ages*, 287-88.

exposed further the underlying desperation” of society.¹⁹ The Beat writers spoke to this desperation, and it was from this desperation that a spirit of restlessness grew among their readers.

Jack Kerouac perhaps best spoke to this restlessness. His autobiographical *On the Road* (1955) became a definitive novel of youthful alienation and exemplified the Beat valuation of the road as a space of limitless freedom. “The road is life,” he wrote in *On the Road*. “We were all delighted, we all realized we were leaving confusion and nonsense behind and performing our one and noble function of the time, *move*.”²⁰ In his story of the cross-country travels of Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty, Kerouac described life on the road as an endless search for “kicks” and a never-ending quest for meaning. This emphasis on the road spawned a whole “beat generation,” a group of youthful followers characterized by that desire.

Certainly the concept of the road was familiar terrain for American writers. From Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn* and Jim, whose “road” was the great waterway of the Mississippi River, to John Steinbeck’s displaced Joad family, the onward journey down the road was a metaphor for the path to freedom. The Beats defined freedom as a spiritual need, and the travels of Paradise and Moriarty—actually Kerouac and Cassidy—were actual and metaphorical quests for freedom.

For Kerouac and the Beats, this shared desire for the experiential life was more significant than the black turtlenecks and berets that popular culture often suggested as the be-all and end-all of the Beat influence. John Arthur Maynard writes that this image fostered by the media influenced their image more than their own activities: “Among the

¹⁹ Edward Halsey Foster, *Understanding the Beats* (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1992), 21.

²⁰ Jack Kerouac, *On the Road* (New York: The Viking Press, 1957).

long term results of the beat mania, in turn, were the installation of the far-out artist as a durable and extremely influential fixture in 20th century popular culture—and of the drop-out life as an ever-present option for the younger members of the middle class... part of the significance of the Beat Generation was that it proved rebellion sells.”²¹

Though Maynard’s argument, that the ability of the media to sell the Beats is their true historical significance, is persuasive, it is an incomplete explanation of the counterculture’s enduring fascination with these writers. Certainly to mainstream, middle-class Americans in the staid 1950s, the Beats made good copy: their drug and sex-riddled literature shocked and titillated many. However, to those who would form the counterculture of the 1960s, Kerouac, Cassady, Ginsberg, and Burroughs became cultural icons that symbolized freedom and the revolt against the constrictions of middle-class society and culture, a revolt that the counter-culture of the 1960s embraced. When Allen Ginsberg participated in the Acid Tests of the Merry Pranksters, sat on the podium at the Human Be-in, and testified in the trial of the Chicago Seven, he did so as more than an expert in cultural rebellion—he did so as a countercultural role model. Raising the possibility of life as a spiritual quest, and positing that a life of movement, a life “on the road,” was the way to begin that quest, the Beats provided a new way of thinking about one of the most public of American spaces: the American highway.

In the 1950s, the Beats were the first harbingers of a new style of social and cultural revolt. Their attitudes and activities, including their interaction with and in public spaces, provided an example for the emergent counterculture. The root of their

²¹ John Arthur Maynard, Venice West: The Beat Generation in Southern California (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1991), p. 20.

decade-long transformation from literary sensations on the left of the American stage to countercultural icons is directly related to that example.

Yet the road was also a space of limited, and often controlled, contact with the outside world. The transitory nature of spatial engagement on the road meant that there was often a power vacuum of sorts: there was no sustained direct engagement with any controlling authorities over the use of that space. As such, the road could become a space that permitted and encouraged experiments in freedom. The idealization of the road as both a path toward and destination of spiritual quest was established by the Beats, but was soon expanded when the Merry Pranksters used the road as a venue from which to demonstrate and confront mainstream society with their alternative lifestyle. These experiments in confrontation provided the fertile ground from which a countercultural ethos about the right to use public space for cultural politics emerged.

The Merry Pranksters were arguably the prototypical hippie group. Social misfits and drop-outs who shared with the Beats an abiding alienation from American society, the Pranksters were committed to shocking mainstream America with their countercultural values and exhibited a seemingly boundless sense of adventure. They adored their “Chief,” the novelist Ken Kesey, whose novel *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* portrayed life in a mental ward as a metaphor for the struggle for individual freedom in a repressive society. The Pranksters believed in individualism; to put it simply, they believed that people should be able to “freak freely.”²² This desire was fueled by their experiments with psychedelic drugs. Psychedelics encouraged in the Pranksters behavior that stretched—and broke through—the boundaries of convention. The Pranksters

²² Charles Perry, *The Haight-Ashbury: A History* (New York: Vintage Books, 1984), 13; Gitlin, *The Sixties*, 207.

adopted the Beat practice of taking their values public and pressed it further—the brightly painted school bus they traveled in on their journeys had the word “Further” painted above the windshield, the space traditionally used to indicate destination, a symbol indicative not only of their ongoing physical journey across the United States, but also of their collective desire to push further the boundaries of the mind. On their journeys, the Pranksters brazenly flouted established conventions, “pranking” onlookers to advertise their psychedelic lifestyle. The Pranksters set an example that a growing number of alienated youth would emulate in the larger counterculture that emerged by the middle of the 1960s.

The Pranksters materialized as the importance of American youth was re-evaluated. In the 1950s, American youth increasingly came to be seen as a valuable but at the same time suspect and potentially threatening component of American society. In part because post-war wealth created a more elevated status for American youth as consumers, the fifties witnessed the growth of a distinctive new youth culture. The growth of a marketable youth culture for the baby boom cohort blossomed when the new affluence, the emphasis on the nuclear family, and permissive ideas about child rearing combined to elevate the social and economic status of the adolescent in American society. Catering to the teenage market became an industry unto itself and even, according to W.T. Lhamon, Jr., dominated all of American culture. “Taking occupation of the land,” Lhamon wrote, “youth culture became largely the main culture; it became the atmosphere of American life.”²³

²³ W. T. Lhamon, Jr. Deliberate Speed: The Origins of a Cultural Style in the American 1950s (Cambridge: Harvard University press, 1990, 2002), 8.

The result, some have argued, was the creation of a demographic cohort characterized by a desire for “the good life” offered by corporate, middle-American conformity. However, others believe that these youth exhibited a sense of entitlement that alienated them from their elders, who bore the markings of economic depression and war, and that relations between the two groups were more and more characterized by a growing “generation gap.” Yet another group of young Americans began to critique and reject mainstream culture as empty and unfulfilling. Many of these youth were attracted to Beat culture in the 1950s.²⁴

Thus, some Americans increasingly viewed youth culture as threatening evidence of the breakdown of the social fabric. Rock and roll music, pulp fiction, and B films further portrayed the fervent desires and often uncontrollable behavior—including drug and alcohol use—of fevered, alienated youth. This image of young people as juvenile delinquents and beatniks became a feature of American culture of the 1950s. Films like *The Wild One* and *Rebel Without A Cause* raised to iconic status both the image of isolated, unhappy and potentially violent young people as well as the actors who played those roles.²⁵ Such images of youth fed into an increasing suspicion of young people. Thus the 1950s and early 1960s witnessed an increasing emphasis on the value of a growing youth culture as well as the possible threats of such a culture.²⁶

²⁴ Douglas T. Miller and Marion Nowak, The Fifties: The Way We Really Were (New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1975).

²⁵ Though their interpretations of different aspects of American family life and youth culture in the 1950s may differ, scholars of the subject all agree that they were fundamental components of American society in that era. See Miller and Nowak, The Fifties; Marty Jezer, The Dark Ages; Arlene Skolnick, Embattled Paradise: The American Family in an Age of Uncertainty (New York: Basic Books, 1991); Stephanie Coontz, The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap (New York: Basic Books, 1992).

²⁶ Lhamon, Deliberate Speed, 8.

This image of American youth coexisted with an altogether different one in the early 1960s, when the dominance of the so-called “silent generation” of college students gave way to a new model of the American college student: politically active, dedicated to public service, and concerned with the future of the nation and the world. John F. Kennedy’s call to “ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country,” and the selfless sacrifices of moral leaders such as Martin Luther King, Jr., young Americans joined the newly-formed Peace Corps, fought for civil rights, and formed the New Left. In the early 1960s, it seemed that American youth represented both the progress of and threat to America’s future.

Influenced by the civil rights movement, the New Left student movement that emerged in the early part of the 1960s claimed that the only way to secure true social and political equality in the United States was through the implementation of participatory democracy, a society in which all Americans actively created and ran the organizations and institutions of government. Contrary to the paranoid politics of McCarthyism and the Cold War, which had dominated the 1950s and repressed any form of political activity that strayed from the norm or challenged the parameters of securely established institutions, New Left philosophy argued that, with the active participation of the American people, democracy could be more than a rarified and distant ideal. It could be practiced “in the streets.”

This was the proposition of the Port Huron Statement, the ideological founding document of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). It was also evident in the emergence of the Free Speech Movement at the University of California at Berkeley in 1964. Although several universities had seen challenges to the *in loco parentis* position

of the university in the early 1960s, and even in some cases fought for the removal of restrictions on campus speech that were instituted during the McCarthy era, the Free Speech Movement was the result of the clash between the established practices of a “multiversity” and the new political consciousness of some students created by the civil rights movement on the Berkeley campus. In the early years of the 1960s, youth became political.²⁷

But not all youth became political in the same way. The Merry Pranksters were the first flowering of the counterculture, of youth who practiced their alternative lifestyle as public cultural politics. In late 1959 and early 1960, Ken Kesey was a graduate student at Stanford University and lived on Perry Lane, the intellectual, bohemian enclave of the university. He volunteered as a paid subject at the Veteran’s Hospital at Menlo Park, which at the time was investigating “psychotomimetic drugs.” There he had his first experience with psychedelic drugs, including mescaline and lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD). To Kesey, LSD was a key to understanding and communing with those around him: his experiences taking the drug while on duty as a night attendant in the Veteran’s Hospital’s psychiatric ward gave him both the material and inspiration for *Cuckoo’s Nest*.²⁸

He brought the lessons of his LSD experience—and some LSD—back with him to Perry Lane. Soon, he became the center of a group of men and women determined to push their experiments with psychedelic drugs further in order to reach a fuller realization of consciousness. As Tom Wolfe wrote in his 1968 recreation of the Prankster adventure,

²⁷ Anderson, *The Movement and the Sixties*; Gitlin, *The Sixties*.

²⁸ Martin A. Lee and Bruce Shlain, *Acid Dreams: The Complete Social History of LSD: The CIA, The Sixties, and Beyond* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1985), p. 119-120. For a reconstruction of the origins of Kesey’s psychedelic crusade, see Tom Wolfe, *The Electric Kool Aid Acid Test* (New York: Bantam, 1968), p. 36-44.

The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test, Kesey's influence changed the tenor of the community on Perry Lane, because it added an even stranger connotation to a place already considered experimental and *avant garde*: "It was Walden Pond without any Thoreau misanthropes around...a community of intelligent, very open, out-front people...embarked on some kind of ...well, adventure in living ... right here...this amazing experiment in consciousness was going on, out on a frontier neither they nor anybody else ever heard of before."²⁹

The icon of the Beat Generation, Neal Cassady, was drawn to Kesey and to Perry Lane. He took up residence as a member of the group around Kesey sometime in 1961. Shortly thereafter, in February 1962, Kesey's novel *One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest* was published to critical acclaim. The proceeds from Kesey's success enabled him to purchase a ranch in La Honda, south of San Francisco, just in time to get out of Perry Lane before it was demolished to make way for new construction in 1963.

The seeds of the Prankster adventure were planted amid the redwood forests of Kesey's La Honda mountain retreat. Only those old Perry Lane associates who could amend their conceptions of reality enough to include the strange new scene stayed. This scene included a sound system throughout the house and the woods that was used to create a soundtrack for the psychedelic state of consciousness, improvisational and cooperative art objects, and the constant presence and pressure of Kesey's visions. Few could adapt, but the number of residents at Kesey's expanded gradually, as many who had never set foot in Perry Lane found their way to La Honda. This growing circle of adherents committed themselves to the realization of Kesey's visions. By 1964, the group had christened themselves the Merry Pranksters, reflecting their desire to take the

²⁹ Wolfe, *The Electric Kool Aid Acid Test*, 47-48

psychedelic experience outside their circle through what Tom Wolfe later termed "existential" pranks that pulled outsiders into their world.³⁰

The Merry Pranksters were the earliest manifestation of the 1960s counterculture. According to sociologist Daniel Foss, rebelling white middle class youth in the 1960s formed "affinity groups," whose function was "the living out of the subcultural conception of total freedom."³¹ Foss compared these affinity groups with similar ones in the African-American rebellions of the 1960s and noted that "both movements have their saints, prophets, seers, holy men, rebels who live for the moment and for the sheer joy of the struggle, mystics, and men who went down fighting or were otherwise martyred for living out the subcultural ideal to its fullest measure. The leader, then, is not so much a politician as a *metaphor*...The hero is a hero not so much because of any specific heroic deeds he may have performed, but because he dares to live out his lifestyle to the fullest extent, conveying the impression that he is "free", i.e., guided solely by the dictates of his own subjectivity, and daring to persistently invade and injure the environments of the cultural-political enemy despite all the obviously repressive sanctions at the enemy's command."³²

This analysis of subcultural affinity groups, though general, can be applied to the Pranksters in many ways. That they were, in fact, an affinity group is incontestable. They lived communally at La Honda, and Kesey was their hero and the nucleus of their affinity group. He was their hero because he dared, in Foss's words, "to live out his lifestyle to the fullest extent." The Pranksters called him "The Chief", an honorary title that was

³⁰ Again, for information on the genesis of the Pranksters, see Wolfe, *The Electric Kool Aid Acid Test*.

³¹ Daniel Foss, *Freak Culture: Lifestyle and Politics* (New York: E. P. Dutton and Co., Inc., 1972), 189.

³² *ibid.*, 189-190.

both a reference to Chief Broom, the schizophrenic but clear-sighted narrator of *Cuckoo's Nest*, and a reflection of the almost tribal ethic of the Pranksters. Chief Kesey took the bus cross-country and articulated for the emergent counterculture his philosophy that enlightenment could be achieved through the use of psychedelic drugs.

The Pranksters took this idea directly to the public on their cross-country road journeys. In the summer of 1964, the Pranksters took their prototypical countercultural affinity group on the road. They traveled the United States in their now legendary 1939 International Harvester school bus named "Further," a psychedelic miasma of sound and color revamped as a countercultural living space for the road. The bus was more than a mode of transportation. It provided the Pranksters with a metaphor for membership in their group through the motto "you're either on the bus or off the bus."³³ That motto underlines their particular exclusivity. It referred to the psychological and/or ideological commitment of individuals to the Prankster experiment as well as to the resultant participation of those individuals in the physical experience of the bus. Individuals either understood the experiment, were approved by and accepted into the group (metaphorically and physically let "on the bus"), or were not physically *allowed* on the bus at all.

The Prankster move into the public space of the road ensured that their particular community would set a standard of cultural experimentation. The plan was to travel to the World's Fair in New York and then be in the city for events surrounding the publication of Kesey's second novel, *Sometimes a Great Notion*. The great bus had been outfitted by its previous owner with bunks, a refrigerator and other conveniences, but the Pranksters augmented it with paraphernalia from the La Honda scene, including a sound

³³ Wolfe, The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test, 74.

system from which the Pranksters could both broadcast their message to onlookers and, using a microphone hooked up outside the bus, record the sounds of the road for broadcast *within* the bus. Appropriately, Neal Cassady, drove the bus.

The Pranksters were not Beats. For the Pranksters the road was not life; instead, as Tom Wolfe wrote, it was “an allegory of life,” a part of their great prank.³⁴ To the Pranksters, the open space of the road was a forum, a platform from which they could espouse through example the possibilities of their lifestyle. The Pranksters hoped that by taking the bus across the country they could demonstrate to mainstream Americans the possibilities of the LSD experience, which they equated with both spiritual freedom and freedom from society’s constraints. The bus journeys therefore provided the Pranksters with the opportunity to engage in a dialogue; as Wolfe wrote, “right away this wild-looking thing with the wild-looking people was great for stirring up consternation and vague befuddling resentment among the citizens. The Pranksters were now out among them, and it was exhilarating...there was going to be holy terror in the land. But there would also be people who would look up out of their poor work-a-daddy lives in some town...and see this bus and register...delight, or just pure open-invitation wonder. Either way, the Intrepid Travelers figured, there was hope for these people.”³⁵

This intention to proselytize what the Pranksters viewed as an essentially religious experience, as well as other aspects of the Prankster life, is characteristic of what sociologist Herbert Blumer termed, in his now classic explanation of the emergence and various forms of social movements, an *expressive* social movement. His analysis of religious movements is relevant to the Pranksters. Though not “religious” in the

³⁴ Wolfe, The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test, 65.

³⁵ *ibid.*, 61.

traditional sense, the Pranksters early demonstrated characteristics similar to those of such movements. For example, Blumer argued that religious movements constitute a distinct kind of social movement because, though they do not intend to alter the conditions of society, they do intend to influence individuals within society. In a metaphor especially appropriate to an analysis of the Pranksters, Blumer compared religious movements to “dancing crowds” that, unhappy and made restless by certain aspects of their lives, release tension in expressive behavior. Such movements, he argued, are characterized by the development of an *esprit de corps*, prophetic tendencies on the part of the leader, a pronounced set of beliefs, ritualistic behavior, and the desire to convert others.³⁶ All these characteristics were present in the Prankster dynamic.

The road similarly provided the Pranksters with a way to spread their gospel. As Henri Le Febvre has demonstrated, space is a social construction that derives meaning from the values and practices attributed to it. In modern western societies, the less regulated space of the road is especially subject to appropriation. The Pranksters used their road trips in just that way. In a sense, the road was their pulpit.³⁷

The Pranksters engaged in “expressive” politics to espouse their alternative views, and they succeeded in converting a number of participants through their pranks. Yet they did not directly challenge legal authorities. Though they frequently encountered police on their journeys, the less regulated nature of the road meant that such encounters, though often involving arrest, did not challenge the established order. This was primarily to the confusion of the police they encountered, who often simply did not know how to respond

³⁶ Herbert Blumer, “Social Movements,” reprinted in Stanford M. Lyman, ed. Social Movements: Critiques, Concepts, Case Studies (New York: New York University Press, 1995), 76-79.

³⁷ Henri Le Febvre, The Production of Space. Donald Nicholson-Smith, translation (Oxford, England: Blackwell Publishers 1991).

to a bus full of apparently crazed individuals who were nonetheless not doing anything patently illegal.

The Pranksters recreated this dynamic when they returned to La Honda and began to hold the Acid Tests, large parties focused on the ingestion of LSD and the experience that resulted among the Pranksters and their guests. The parties drew the watchful eyes of the La Honda police—especially after the Pranksters put up a large banner proclaiming “The Merry Pranksters Welcome the Hell’s Angels.” The neighbors were alarmed, but the police could not actually do anything about the parties except, as Tom Wolfe writes, “contain” them, because they occurred on private property. Well aware of this, Kesey and Cassady even taunted the police with this knowledge.³⁸ Participant Allen Ginsberg aptly captured this dynamic in his poem “First Party at Ken Kesey’s with Hells Angels.” He wrote, “dancing to the vibration thru the floor, a little weed in the bathroom...sweating dancing for hours, beer cans littering the yard...and 4 police cars parked outside the painted gate, red lights revolving in the trees.”³⁹

However successfully the La Honda Acid Tests flaunted the authority of the police and in uniting disparate elements of the burgeoning psychedelic community of the Bay Area, Kesey and the Pranksters soon decided that private parties were not enough. The Acid Test had to be brought to the people. Held on November 27, 1965 in Santa Cruz, the first public Acid Test publicized the slang term “acid” for LSD. A ritual designed to both indulge in and espouse the Prankster philosophy, these events were designed to convert those in attendance to the use of acid, the ability to “freak freely.”

³⁸ Wolfe, *Acid Test*, 149-161; Perry, *The Haight-Ashbury*, 14.

³⁹ Allen Ginsberg, “First Party at Ken Kesey’s with Hells Angels,” *Kesey’s Garage Sale* (New York: Viking Press, 1967), 213.

The history of the Acid Tests has been recounted numerous times. What is essential about the Acid Tests in the context of the counterculture and its use of public space is that the Acid Tests established public psychedelic festivity. The Acid Tests were a radically different method of proselytizing the use of acid as a spiritual aide. LSD's primary champion, Timothy Leary, advocated the use of acid in secure, carefully controlled environments and established the exclusive League for Spiritual Discovery to practice this. The Pranksters provided instead an open environment of large crowds, loud live music, and ritual in the hope that individuals would take this opportunity to create their own spiritual journey. Through such activities, the Pranksters became the first countercultural affinity group. Membership in that group placed one in the vanguard of the new society. Theirs was an experiment in the creation of a community of free individuals, and their example was their contribution to the growth of the counterculture. That they invited the public signified that the counterculture was beginning to lay claim to a larger venue than a backyard could provide: the city itself.

The Acid Tests occurred in privately owned venues, including rented dance halls, but they were open to the public. Alice Echols has argued, one of the fundamental results of the larger "Movement" of the 1960s was the recasting of politics to include aspects previously relegated to private life.⁴⁰ In this sense, the Pranksters evidence an early example of the participation of the counterculture in this project, for, although they did not directly challenge mainstream control of public spaces, they set a precedent in the

⁴⁰ Alice Echols, "Nothing Distant About It: Women's Liberation and Sixties Radicalism," in David Farber, ed., The Sixties: From Memory to History (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 151.

San Francisco Bay area for the public flaunting of an alternative lifestyle. The Pranksters hoped that their example would affect members of mainstream American society—a hope that would be realized in their influence on the burgeoning population of hippies in the Haight.

However, the venues in which they enacted their experiment, including both the road and the dance halls, were characterized by certain restrictions on their “public” nature—the road was generally a temporary location, and the dance halls were rented private property. The Pranksters provided the next step in the movement of the counterculture from underground to public space.

III.

The Beats and the Pranksters have not generally been viewed as politically engaged groups, and certainly assessments of the Beats have often relied on an unquestioned acceptance of what the Beats themselves often described as a consciously chosen anti-political nature. Yet the actual “apolitical” nature of the Beats and the Pranksters is questionable when the ideological precedents that they established regarding public space are examined. The failure to analyze seriously the meaning of non-engagement translates into a lack of regard for the historical significance of these two small subcultures except with respect to the example of the experiential life that they set for the counter-culture.

Yet it is possible that one of the most significant influences of the Beats and the Pranksters on the counterculture has gone unnoticed. These two groups idealized and used American public spaces as spaces of freedom. In doing so, the Beats and the Pranksters provided an example of free public behavior in staid mid-century America.

The counterculture would adopt such behavior as a signature element of its style, but in the counterculture that behavior would transcend the category of "style." Public displays of alternative lifestyles and culture, whether in the form of spontaneous street concerts, festivals and parades, became a form of political behavior as the counterculture both fought for the right to use public spaces for such activities and used those activities to further solidify the emergence of that community.

The development of the counterculture's ethos of public space as an instrument of public expression to be used toward the creation of a public community can be traced to the examples set by the Beats and the Merry Pranksters. Both groups evidenced a particular fascination for the road that is of particular importance in understanding the development of the counterculture's political understanding of public space as free space.

Though both groups contributed to the creation of a political public counterculture, they were not the only or final influence on the development of the counterculture's political conception of public space. Nor did these groups first directly challenge the authority of the city to regulate individual behavior in public space that was truly public, that is, space owned by the public. The first group to do that was a singular one in the city: a radical theatre organization called the San Francisco Mime Troupe. In a pointed example of the fluidity of cultural expression in San Francisco at the time, the Mime Troupe would adopt some of the forms of social gathering practiced by the Pranksters in order to support the form they themselves espoused: cultural activities in the city's parks. This marriage of the Mime Troupe's cultural politics and the goals and style of the emergent counterculture that supported the troupe gave birth to a singular

style of public cultural politics that would become a hallmark of the 1960s
counterculture.

CHAPTER TWO

“WE’LL SEE YOU IN THE PARKS”:

THE SAN FRANCISCO MIME TROUPE’S LIBERATION OF THE PARKS

“We’ll see you in the parks and in the courts!”¹ So Ronnie Davis, founder of the San Francisco Mime Troupe, promised the City of San Francisco Park Commission when the Troupe’s permit to perform free shows in the city’s parks was revoked at a meeting on August 4, 1965. At this special meeting, the Commission argued that the Troupe’s record of controversial performances, which often included profanity and political topics, was a violation of the provisional approval to perform it had granted earlier that summer. With this decision, the Commission denied the San Francisco Mime Troupe permission to legally perform in the city’s parks. The Mime Troupe protested that the Commission’s action was unconstitutional and Ronnie Davis vowed that the matter would be revisited.

Three days later, in San Francisco’s Lafayette Park, Davis made good on his promise to the Park Commission when the Mime Troupe purposely provoked a police bust of a performance. He was arrested for performing in the parks without a permit. This began a legal battle that challenged the authority of the Park Commission to regulate public behavior. Citing the constitutional protection of free speech, the San Francisco

¹ Ronnie Davis to author, letter of July 1999. In the author’s collection.

Mime Troupe argued that the Commission lacked the legal authority to regulate activity and speech in public parks. The Troupe raised money for its legal defense by holding dance-concert benefits, a long campaign that brought together the city's diverse cultural elements. This incident established a precedent for the practice of cultural politics in the city's parks and in doing so raised issues that would be central to the counterculture's attempt to assert a public, community identity, not only in San Francisco, but also throughout the nation.

Although the 1956 arrest of bookstore owner and Beat writer Lawrence Ferlinghetti for selling obscene literature, which resulted in the *Howl* trial, solidified the Bay Area as an arena of free artistic expression, and the Merry Pranksters' limited displays of the emergent counter-cultural lifestyle were in keeping with the alternative culture of San Francisco, the San Francisco Mime Troupe's fight with the Park Commission of the city was the first substantial challenge to the authority of the City of San Francisco to regulate public displays of alternative politics or lifestyles. A long-running experiment in alternative theatre that rejected the established arts community and its middle-class supporters, the Mime Troupe has been described as "the most consistently energetic and responsible element in the counterculture of the Bay Area."² In the early 1960s, the Troupe was dedicated to the creation of free, public, participatory theatre. The goal of the Mime Troupe was, as founder Ronnie Davis wrote, "not merely to entertain, rather to educate, not merely to educate, to be an example, not merely to be an example, to create an opposition, not merely to create an opposition, rather to change to a reproduction of

² Robert Scheer in R. G. Davis, The San Francisco Mime Troupe: The First Ten Years (Palo Alto, CA: Ramparts Press, 1975), 9.

self for more than the privileged.”³ Former member Peter Coyote has described the Mime Troupe as “uncompromising, fearless, rude, truthful, iconoclastic, and unswerving.” Its actions on August 7, 1965 validate that description.⁴

Ronnie Davis founded the Mime Troupe in 1959, while he was an assistant director of San Francisco’s prestigious Actor’s Workshop, a seven-year-old regional repertory theatre. Davis had been raised in Brooklyn, New York, in a family that prized the entertainment world. He was frequently exposed to all manner of theatrical productions, including the vaudeville and comedy shows his father took him to see, where he witnessed many of the Jewish comedians who traveled the so-called “Borscht-Belt” theatre circuit of New York’s Catskill Mountains. His older brother became a comedian, and Davis began studying dance, although he also maintained an interest in political issues. While studying dance at Ohio University, Davis became what he described as a “New Left activist” and continued his political activity there, in New Mexico, and later in New York City in the 1950s. In New York, where he studied with Martha Graham and other well-known modern dancers, he found that “modern dancers were the most communist left groups in New York in the arts scene, rejected by the party because, after all, all art was a silly idea and barefoot art was even worse. And besides, these were mostly women so therefore it was less than important. Yet they were more radical than the theatre people.”⁵

His developing political growth was deeply influenced by Marxist traditions, and he particularly admired Bertold Brecht and his assertion that all theatre was implicitly

³ Davis, *The San Francisco Mime Troupe*, 13. Davis uses the term “New Left” to describe his interest in egalitarian, participatory politics and his growing alliance with the civil rights movement, although that term had yet to come into common usage.

⁴ Peter Coyote, *Sleeping Where I Fall* (Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 1998), 15.

⁵ Ronald Davis, interview with the author, May 25, 1999.

political and thus potentially revolutionary. In 1957, a Fulbright grant let him travel to France to study mime at Etienne Decroux's studio, but he resisted the strict style proscriptions of the school, which did not encourage its students to delve beyond anything but the study of the master's technique. When he told the instructors there that he was going to put on his own show, the response from the staff was so negative he left the school. While in Paris, he immersed himself in the cultural activity of the city and embraced bohemian traditions, even living, briefly, in a garret in the Algerian quarter of the city just as tensions between the Algerians and the French government came to a boil.

Paris provided a unique setting for the development of his talent. Of this period, he later said, "I became an artist in Paris because it was possible to become an artist...I felt, 'oh, this is free—I'm free here!'"⁶ Always practicing his mime skills, he was also influenced by many of the avant-garde theatrical performances, including existentialist theatre, so readily available in the experimental atmosphere of Paris in the 1950s.⁷ He was most fascinated and influenced by the French tradition of street theatre, including puppet shows, street performers (which he had never seen in the U.S.) and the *clouchards*—street people whose performances consisted of political explanations of their sorry conditions and chastisements of the audience for contributing to that condition.

One day, while he was sitting in a café on the Left Bank, a friend confirmed the positive things Davis had read about the San Francisco Artists Workshop. Short of funds and no longer studying at the Decroux school, Davis decided that the Workshop was the perfect next step. He returned to the United States with his wife, and they drove their

⁶ Ronald G. Davis, interview with author, May 25, 1999.

⁷ *ibid.*

Volkswagen to California. On his arrival in 1958, Davis immediately became a member of the Workshop. He was particularly drawn to the Workshop's practice of discussing dramatic theories within the company, and he became committed to maintaining its reputation as a vibrant challenge to the dominance of established theatre practices based in New York. To Davis, "San Francisco was the oasis of dissent, experimentalism and art in this country's vast desert of half-hearted theatrical endeavors." He became a fixture in the city's cultural scene throughout the 1960s, broadcasting theatre criticism on the independent radical radio station KPFA and encouraging and participating in the development of alternative theatre activities.⁸

As part of the Workshop's activities, Davis created the R. G. Davis Mime Troupe, an exercise in alternative, theory-driven theatrical events. Using space in the Workshop's theatre, the Mime Troupe performed their free "11th Hour Mime Shows" at 11 p.m. on Sunday evenings, beginning in December 1960. Davis described these performances as "the avant-garde event of the season," and the Troupe became a well respected one; noted literary figure Kenneth Rexroth argued in the *San Francisco Examiner* that "very little hereabouts in show business, local or visiting, is half as interesting...we need a change, and these people are sure a change, and in the right direction."⁹

Despite the outlet the Mime Troupe provided for his alternative energies, Davis became increasingly unhappy with the Workshop's growing commitment to mainstream

⁸ Davis, *The San Francisco Mime Troupe*, 13; "The Ford 'Drive-In' Theatre," 1963. Mss. 131: The Ronald G. Davis Papers, Box 1 Folder 5; for information on KPFA, see John Downing's chapter on the station in *Radical Media: The Political Experience of Alternative Communication* (South End Press, 1984). KPFA, "the oldest listener supported independent station in the U. S." was radical because it refused commercial advertising and was continually subject to federal investigation for broadcasting members of the Communist Party U.S.A. Ironically, given Ronnie Davis' position on the Ford Foundation, at one time the station had accepted support from the Ford Foundation to maintain its existence.

⁹ Davis, *The San Francisco Mime Troupe*, 18; Kenneth Rexroth, "The Mime Troupe," *San Francisco Examiner*, Sunday, February 25, 1962. Mss. 131: The Ronald G. Davis Papers, Box 2, Folder 8.

success, evidenced by its acceptance of a Ford Foundation grant in 1960.¹⁰ In an article submitted to the *Tulane Drama Review* in 1963, just after he finally severed relations with the Workshop, Davis argued that the grant was a “Trojan gift” because the Workshop “became an Establishment” and that “there is nothing revolutionary in this organization despite its intense activity over the past ten years.”¹¹ Davis was skeptical of, and offended by, the idea that there could be a productive and truly *avant-garde* collaboration between alternative theatre and a mainstream institution like the Ford Foundation.

At about the same time, in a KPFA radio program broadcast, Davis criticized the city of San Francisco’s new practice of supplying funding for selected cultural organizations with a newly instituted hotel tax. Davis did not share the views of organizations that accepted and encouraged such funding.¹² To Davis, “the courting of the cultural events in the community by politicians and leaders of the community does not mean money for those who don’t fit in. The artist is allowed the freedom of being conscious of his society in private—freedom to think and say it, but not to act upon it or do it in public. Should the artist become publicly conscious, the forces of the society who do not allow for dissent and who are doling out the money in small sums...are not likely to give it to those artists.”¹³ His own political views were leading him toward a different, more protest-oriented form of theatre.

¹⁰ Davis, *The San Francisco Mime Troupe*, 16.

¹¹ Davis, “The Ford ‘Drive-In’ Theatre,” 1963. Mss. 131: The Ronald G. Davis Papers, Box 1 Folder 5.

¹² Mel Scott, “Partnership in the Arts: Public and Private Support of Cultural Activities in the San Francisco Bay Area” (1963) in Stanley Scott, ed. *The San Francisco Bay Area: Its Problems and Future* (Berkeley: Franklin K. Lane, 1966), 1-15. Such support is evident in this pamphlet published by the Institute of Government Studies at the University of California, Berkeley, which argued that this source of funding represented a vital commitment on the part of cities to cultural development and urged its adoption by other cities in the Bay Area.

¹³ Davis, KPFA broadcast script, November 8, 1963. Davis Papers, Box 1, Folder 11.

Davis' relationship with the Workshop was probably not helped by suggestions like that offered by Ralph J. Gleason of the *San Francisco Chronicle*, who argued "the last thing the Workshop did that was absolutely essential was the Ronnie Davis mime presentation at the Encore...let's turn the Actor's Workshop over to Ronnie Davis and the Mime Troupe."¹⁴ Clearly, the intellectual and theoretical cleavage between Davis and the Actor's Workshop was reaching a breaking point evident even to outsiders. In a letter to a colleague in the Workshop about his final break with the organization, Davis concluded with a summary of his position on the Workshop, the grant, and his own political leanings: "conformity can be bought but belief, imagination and guts have to be won."¹⁵ He left the Workshop to focus exclusively on his own productions.

Michael Doyle has written that Davis' theory of confrontational theatre, later articulated in the Troupe's practice of "guerilla theatre," crystallized during his "opposition" to developments within the Actor's Workshop.¹⁶ The emergence of the independent San Francisco Mime Troupe from the Davis Troupe in 1962, when Davis began to separate from the Workshop, and Davis' own explanation for leaving the Workshop, certainly show that it was based on differences over the political nature of theatre.¹⁷ To Davis, who had absorbed the theories of Brecht, theatre had always been an inherently political activity, one that involved an active engagement with and provocation of the audience. This position was also influenced by the growth of a more politically conscious theatre in the 1950s as the threat to artistic and political freedoms created by

¹⁴ Ralph J. Gleason, "2 Cents More or Less for the Actor's Workshop," *San Francisco Chronicle*, Wednesday, February 3, 1962 or 1963.

¹⁵ Ronnie Davis to Mr. Robert Symonds, n.d. (probably 1963). Mss. 131: The Ronald G. Davis Papers, Box 2, Folder 4.

¹⁶ Michael Doyle, "The Haight-Ashbury Diggers and the Cultural Politics of Utopia, 1965-1968," Ph.D. Dissertation: Cornell University, 1997), 52.

¹⁷"Advance Story-San Francisco Mime Troupe to Tour Northwest," 1969. Davis Papers, Box 3, Folder 12.

McCarthyism began to subside. Political theatre such as that of Julian Beck and Judith Malina's Living Theatre in New York City, reemerged.¹⁸ Davis's radio lectures and papers also reveal an early interest for the Living Theatre. However, his own intellectual development helped him answer his query about the relevance of theatre and led him to a theory of radical, activist theatre, relevant to people's daily lives.

Throughout the late 1950s and early 1960s, Davis did not differentiate the development of his craft and the promotion of his performances from his drive to answer the question "why theatre? What for?"¹⁹ Davis has himself pointed to the influence on his political beliefs--and his later application of these beliefs to his vision of alternative theatre --provided by his friendship in the early sixties with radicals Saul Landau and Nina Serrano, who had helped found the journal *Studies on the Left*.²⁰ His creation of a radical theatre organization and the emergence of a theory of "guerrilla theatre" were natural outgrowths of his own political and ideological development, making his eventual flight from conventional theatre predictable, if not inevitable.

The trajectory of Davis's developing ideology is evident in three distinct though related areas: his understanding of the social relevance and role of theatre; the political nature of his chosen mode of artistic expression, mime; and the dynamic relationship between performers and audience. Early in his growth as an artist, Davis made a distinction between "entertainment" and "art". Entertainment was merely a momentary, and passive, experience for the audience, while "in an art form the viewer has to know something about the art form and the artists (*sic*) knows something about his own art

¹⁸ Lewis MacAdams details the origins of the Living Theatre in *The Birth of the Cool: Beat, Bebop and the American Avant-Garde* (New York: The Free Press, 2001).

¹⁹ Script, KPFA broadcast script, August 27, 1964. Mss. 131: Davis Papers, Box 2, Folder 1.

²⁰ Doyle, *The Haight-Ashbury Diggers*, 55.

form, he works, digs and sweats and presents deeper insights that may hurt the paying customer, disturb, annoy, excite, interest—possibly make him think!”²¹ He had decided that “theatre must be *ou current* (sic), must fit into its milieu and supply the needs of the people at the present time...all the techniques that are available should be used...anything that gets to the audience, communicates, makes dramatic ideas that are positive and suggest action rather than cathartic experiences.”²² Well before Davis considered the theatre as a potentially political tool and prior to his conflict with the Workshop, he argued that the role of theatre was “to create new life in dead people”; for Davis this desire would translate into the creation of a *political* life for his audiences.²³

Second, for Davis, mime, which differed from pantomime because it incorporated props and spoken language as well as body movements, was an ideal art form because it involved social and political critique. As early as 1956 he revealed an interest in using mime to articulate an opposition to mainstream society; in his notes from that period on the subject matter of mime, leading the list was “free man vs. the constricting elements of society, culture, etc.”²⁴ “The mime,” he argued in a 1958 interview, “using abstractions—must say something, must do something. With gesture he makes a statement—about life’s idiocies or glories.”²⁵ Accordingly, by 1958, his mime was a protest more than a critique. He explained his artistic affiliations to an interviewer, saying that he preferred the

²¹ Davis, notes, c. 1958. Davis papers, Box 1, Folder 5.

²² Ronnie Davis, notes, December 29, 1958. Mss 131: Davis Papers, Box 1, Folder 6.

²³ Ronnie Davis, notes, 26 September 1959. Mss 131: Davis Papers, Box 1, Folder 6.

²⁴ Ronnie Davis, notes, July 2, 1956. Mss 131: Davis Papers. Box 1 Folder 6.

²⁵ Ronnie Davis in Rex Nevins, “Mimic Serious About It All,” *San Jose News*, Thursday, October 23, 1958. Mss. 131: Davis Papers, Box 1, Folder 1. Davis usually gives one example to explain this difference: Marcel Marceau is a pantomimist, Charlie Chaplin a mime.

Harlequin model of clowns because “Pierrot is so sad. Harlequin fights back. My act is more Harlequin.”²⁶

Finally, Davis had an acute sense of the importance of the relationship between the performers and the audience. In 1961, the Davis Troupe presented a series of productions rooted in improvisation, called “Events.” Perhaps indicative of the influence of Beat sensibility as well as his theory of mime, Davis argued that improvisation was a response to the uncertainty of the modern world in the nuclear age: “this is a shattering world,” he asserted, “total destruction debated and questioned, Civil Defense pamphlets at the Post Office, in your bills telling us ‘millions will die but try to live!’” Improvisation was necessary in theatre in order to fully represent, and be relevant among, the contingencies of modern life. But improvisational theatre, because it responded to the moment, also meant that “the wall is down, all of them, no fourth wall, no third, open stage, the whole place is a stage the audience is the performer, the performers are spectators.”²⁷

This perception of the role of the audience, which turned the “audience” into participants, was evident in a later radio broadcast in which Davis argued that sporting events were theatrical events because “the audience is important as the performers” and that the creation of such a dynamic in theatre would result in a more powerful experience.²⁸ This insight was closely related to Davis’s desire to educate and incite audiences out of what he thought of as a complacent and passive spectatorship. “We cannot honestly sit down and entertain you since you are so dull,” he argued, “we must

²⁶ Ronald Davis in Paine Knickerbocker, “Mime In Our Midst—Meet Ronald Davis,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, n.d. (1958). Mss. 131: Davis Papers, Box 1 Folder 1.

²⁷ R. G. Davis article to Mr. Knickerbocker, February 17, 1962. Mss 131: Davis Papers. Box 1 Folder 5.

²⁸ Davis, KPFA broadcast script, June 15, 1964. Box 2 Folder 1.

force you to think, bumb (*sic*) you jolt you make you admit to what really happens that you denie (*sic*). This in itself is the greatest shock.”²⁹

This relationship between performers and audience was the foundation of community-based theatre: “in this theatre there must be a breakthrough into the real life of people outside the theatre—theatre must become a part of something larger than itself- (the school) (maybe the community.)”³⁰ The ramifications of this oppositional, community-based vision were evident in Davis’s criticism of the Actor’s Workshop’s interest in the Ford grant, and again in 1964, when he criticized the decision of the University of California at Berkeley’s Theatre Workshop to hold scheduled performances in the midst of the Free Speech Movement strikes in December. “There are times,” he argued, “when not to act—for yourself, or for ‘them’—is the greatest contribution an artist can make to change the rotten conditions in our society.”³¹ “Let us say,” he later wrote, “that when the shooting starts (if ever), it may not be wise to keep singing one’s aria.”³²

For Davis, then, theatrical productions did not happen in a social, political or cultural vacuum. To be relevant, actors had to be acutely conscious of the nature of their own society. That meant taking into consideration both the choice of plays to perform and the personal political consciousness of the actor. “The play must be brought to contact with the immediate circumstances of country, place, people, conditions of mind, money and atmosphere,” Davis wrote in 1963. “Any play has a social, psychological

²⁹ Davis, notes, n.d. Box 4 Folder 3.

³⁰ Davis, notes. September 6, 1964. Mss 131: Davis papers. Box 1 Folder 6.

³¹ Davis, KPFA broadcast, December 17, 1964. Box 2, Folder 1.

³² R.G. Davis, R. G. Davis, “Radical, Independent, Chaotic, Anarchic Theatre vs. Institutional, University, Little, Commercial, Ford and Stock Theatres,” in *The San Francisco Mime Troupe, Guerilla Theatre Essays: 1* (San Francisco: The San Francisco Mime Troupe, Inc., 1970.)

place in the society—Historical plays done as museum pieces are of no consequence to us—what is important is to discover the intention and meaning of a play and make it do just that for our own period.”³³

It therefore became important within the Mime Troupe that its members—generally very well educated to begin with—also become politically educated, conscious of society’s current situations, in order to make theatre useful and vital.³⁴ The political nature of Mime Troupe membership was emphasized even in its earliest years. Audition forms from 1959-1963 frequently asked applicants to supply the “answer to the world’s problem (in one word or less)?” By 1966, applicants for the position of Theatrical Business Manager were informed that politics was central to the group’s ethos and the basis of its cooperation with the San Francisco branch of Students for A Democratic Society (SDS) and Berkeley’s Vietnam Day Committee. Davis also scrutinized applicants for the position of Business Manager with political commitment in mind; he made emphatic comments about the political positions of those interested in working with the Troupe, including negative assessments of one who claimed indifference to politics and another who was a member of the National Guard.³⁵

Membership in the Mime Troupe meant membership in a distinctly political organization, and a leftist radical one at that. In 1966, Davis instructed members that, “the political nature of this group is that is radical—that is we are socialist in intent—the

³³ Davis, notes, Sept. 20, 1963. Box 4, Folder 3.

³⁴ Davis, Company meeting notes, July 27 (no year—before Chorizos, after minstrel show began.); Davis, interview with the author, May 25, 1999.

³⁵ Ronnie Davis to Hal Halvorsen, February 28, 1966; Hal Halvorsen to Ronnie Davis, n.d. Davis has written the word “bad” next to Halvorsen’s statement “I don’t give a damn about politics one way or another,” and on a resume from Gary de Wayne Ferguson, Davis underlined the fact that Ferguson was a member of the National Guard and written “No” on his resume. Box 3, Folder 15.

system produces repression and curbs our theatrical activity and our theatrical creation.”³⁶ Putting this belief into practice, the San Francisco Mime Troupe, although occasionally benefiting from city funds, remained a non-profit organization. Performers generally received only five dollars a performance—which actors usually had to collect from the audience themselves because the Troupe did not charge admission or accept corporate sponsorship, but instead tried to rely on the support of its public.³⁷

Troupe members also had to be prepared to sacrifice more than the comforts of a regular paycheck. Working conditions reflected a high level of personal commitment; as *The Nation* noted, “any actor who will work under Mime Troupe conditions—dressing in privies or behind a truck, speaking over the noise of dogs, playgrounds and police sirens—has to be committed.”³⁸ Moreover, the Troupe taught classes in “Radical Theatre” as early as 1962, and by 1967 it was committed to an anti-Vietnam war position. Performances of the antiwar play *L’amant Militaire* included a puppet encouraging audience participation in chanting “hell no, we won’t go.”³⁹ Even the business card of the Mime Troupe reinforced its image as a cadre of political artists: it showed a male figure using a machine gun to paint a canvas.⁴⁰

Thus the emergence of the San Francisco Mime Troupe as a radical political theatre was the result of Ronnie Davis’ developing ideology of theatre, which prevented him from comfortably accepting the institutional drift of the Actor’s Workshop and resulted in the creation of a separate entity, the San Francisco Mime Troupe. The Troupe

³⁶ Davis, notes, March 1, 1966. Box 4, Folder 4.

³⁷ The apparent contradiction here of accepting money from the city is actually quite in keeping with the Troupe’s desire to be supported by the public that attended Mime Troupe shows—city money is public money.

³⁸ Robert F. Sayre, “Theatre,” *The Nation*, September 4, 1967, 189.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Flyer, “Radical Theatre Workshop” c. 1962 and 1969. Davis Papers, Box 3, folder 12; Business card, San Francisco Mime Troupe, Davis Papers, Box 3, Folder 11.

was created to be “the social conscience of society,” to enlighten *and* engage its patrons. Davis first combined his political activism with this view of the potential power of theatre to create a more forceful theatrical experience, and this developed into his belief that theatre should provide even more than that: it should itself be a force for change. This was the ideological foundation for the political and theatrical tactic for which the Troupe became most well known, “Guerilla Theater.”

Guerilla theatre, first named by Troupe playwright Peter Berg, was a concept of confrontational theatre that developed within the Troupe. It was the ultimate expression of Davis’ conception of the Troupe as an agent of change. As he forcefully stated in his 1965 essay ‘Guerilla Theatre,’

The motives, aspirations, and practice of U. S. theatre must be readapted in order to

- * teach
- * direct toward change
- * be an example of change

To teach, one must know something. It is necessary to direct toward change because ‘the system’ is debilitating, repressive and non-aesthetic. The Guerilla company must exemplify change as a group. The group formation—its cooperative relationships and corporate identity—must have a morality at its core. The corporate identity ordinarily has no morality. This must be the difference in a sea of savagery. There is to be no distinction between public behavior and private behavior. Do in public what you do in private, or stop doing it in private. For those who like their art pure of social issues, I must say-FUCK YOU! 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*.”⁴¹

In this essay, Davis declared the Troupe an agent of change, functioning like a guerilla band that emerges briefly for a strategic strike—in this case to educate, agitate and provoke its audience to action—and then retreats to regroup and start again:

⁴¹ R. G. Davis, “Guerilla Theatre,” in *The San Francisco Mime Troupe, Guerilla Theatre Essays: 1. Davis’ italics.*

“Guerilla theatre travels light and makes friends of the populace.”⁴² Clearly, the literature of the Mime Troupe, which was either written or heavily influenced by Ronnie Davis, reveals that, though the common understanding of the term “mime” suggests silence, the Troupe itself grew from the urge to engage its audience in a dialogue and finally to incite it to action. As he told the *San Francisco Chronicle* in 1965, “we’re not out to destroy you, we’re out to disturb you.”⁴³

According to Michael Doyle, this position had an important by-product: all of the Troupe’s political activity “ensured that culture and politics would not be as bifurcated in the Bay area as it may have been elsewhere.”⁴⁴ Claudia Orenstein, in her history of the Mime Troupe, has argued that such theatrical productions were a more modern manifestation of “a long historical tradition of theatres that use popular forms for political purposes”-- that it has, in effect, been intent on producing a “festive revolution.”⁴⁵ She argues that the Mime Troupe combined traditional “cyclical-festive” and “progressive-revolutionary” forms of popular theatre, both part of popular culture for centuries, to create a new “festive-revolutionary” form. “It is the way,” she argues, “popular forms combine their festive and revolutionary impulses that makes popular traditions useful for creating theatre for social change.” The Mime Troupe, in its blending of traditional theatrical devices and contemporary subject matter, became a tool for social and political protest. This position provided the ideological basis of the Mime Troupe’s 1965 fight for the right to perform in public.

⁴² R. G. Davis, “Guerilla Theatre,” in *The San Francisco Mime Troupe, Guerilla Theatre Essays: 1*.

⁴³ Ralph J. Gleason, “Lively Arts: Davis Wants Risk With His Mime,” *San Francisco Sunday Chronicle*, April 18, 1965. Davis Collection, Box 3, Folder 13.

⁴⁴ Doyle, “The Haight-Ashbury Diggers,” 59.

⁴⁵ Claudia Orenstein, *Festive Revolutions: The Politics of Popular Theatre and the San Francisco Mime Troupe* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1998), 125.

This uncompromising search for a truly political theatre led to the 1965 conflict between the Mime Troupe and the San Francisco Park Commission. Due to its commitment to a political and activist theatre, the Troupe performed for free. Davis had long been aware of the class-based nature of arts patronage, and in his radio broadcasts he had often discussed the problem of the exclusivity of the “high” arts. He even suggested that, to those interested in learning more about the lively arts, “sneaking in is an effective way of cultivating the theatre-going habit.”⁴⁶ Going one better than those who argued that the best way to introduce more people in the city to the opera was to hold a free night, he argued that “the Free night be the most gala, the most beautiful, the most spectacular...the Free night should of course be the Opening night!”⁴⁷ Davis and the Troupe believed that, in order to accomplish their goals of making theatre both accessible to a wide array of people and an agent of social and political change, they needed to perform in public spaces; in fact, the concept of guerilla theatre depended upon it. This was the genesis in 1962 of the San Francisco Mime Troupe’s free public shows, which were performed to general critical acclaim on a portable 12 x 12 foot stage in the Troupe’s venue of choice, the city’s parks. The Troupe performed under a banner proclaiming its creed: “Engagement, Commitment, and Fresh Air.”

Davis’ interest in creating theatrical events that involved the audience of the city in political dialogue was evident in the early performances of the Troupe. In 1964 they shared a bill with activist Robert Scheer, who lectured on the Vietnam War. The move toward radical political theatre was augmented by Davis’s discovery and implementation

⁴⁶ Davis, KPFA broadcast script, May 9, 1963. Box 1, Folder 11. It should be noted that this was long before Abbie Hoffman expressed similar advice in *Steal This Book* (New York: Grove Press, 1971). The genesis of and influences on that work will be discussed in a later chapter.

⁴⁷ Davis, KPFA broadcast script, December 3, 1964. Box 2, Folder 1.

of *commedia dell'arte*, a form of outdoor theatre that originated in Renaissance Italy, and one of the forms of theatre that, Claudia Orenstein argues, has always been a political tool.⁴⁸ Davis was attracted by “its working class viewpoint” and by its use of stereotypical characterizations, maintained through the use of ornate masks, to deploy social criticism.⁴⁹

Commedia productions incorporated singing, dancing, satire, class politics, and often, coarse, earthy language. The Mime Troupe soon began to produce such plays, and finally staged an original work written by Davis and Saul Landau, entitled “A Minstrel Show: Civil Rights in a Cracker Barrel” that focused on modern American racism by employing the *commedia* stereotyping technique within a genre already defined by stereotypes, the American minstrel show. Like the plays from the Renaissance that the Troupe produced, the “Minstrel Show” did not shy away from long-sensitive subjects and language. It was both graphic and controversial.

Historians are divided over the role of minstrelsy in American culture and society. Originating in the early nineteenth century, minstrel shows featuring both white and black performers in blackface and exaggerated costume were hugely popular entertainments that have been considered “the first truly national form of entertainment in the United States.”⁵⁰ Minstrel shows both showcased African-American performers and functioned as ideological conveyors that reinforced proslavery arguments before the Civil

⁴⁸ Orenstein, *Festive Revolutions*.

⁴⁹ Davis, *The San Francisco Mime Troupe*, 31-31.

⁵⁰ S.G.F. Spackman, “Passing for Colored: Meanings for Minstrelsy and Ragtime,” *Reviews in American History* 23.2 (1995), 237.

War, perpetuating stereotypes of African-Americans as carefree, ignorant children, and solidifying class and racial lines within American society.⁵¹

The Mime Troupe's *Minstrel Show* dealt with the history of American racism by blatantly employing the traditional stereotypes of the American minstrel show to overturn the preconceived expectations of its audience. Mixing black and white actors, the Troupe presented taboo subjects, such as interracial sexual relationships, through a stark illustration of racial inequality throughout American history. It also challenged the audience's attitudes, underscoring racial tension by presenting racial confusion. A film called "Watermelons," which dealt with similar issues, was usually screened with the performance.

Of the show, Davis has said that "we're addressing this hippie movement, this anti-establishment movement, the civil rights movement, all of those cultural things that burst open and that's who we were talking to...I'm addressing the lumpen, the runaways, the A.W.O.L. guys, the Chicanos who are brewing up, the blacks who are disaffected and the blacks who are in the organizations that are civil rights organizations."⁵² However, though aimed at a generally leftist audience, the *Minstrel Show* was not designed to pay lip service to already widely held views. The power of the show derived not only from the fact that two of its actors came straight out of the civil rights movement to join the

⁵¹ Mel Watkins, On the Real Side: Laughing, Lying and Signifying-The Underground Tradition of African-American Humor that Transformed American Culture, From Slavery to Richard Pryor (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994); Eric Lott, Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); W.T. Lhamon Jr. Raising Cain: Blackface Performance from Jim Crow to Hip Hop (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998); W.T. Lhamon, Jr. "Core is Less," *Reviews in American History* 27.4 (1999); S.G.F. Spackman, "Passing for Colored: Meanings for Minstrelsy and Ragtime."

⁵² Davis, interview with author, May 25, 1999.

Mime Troupe, but also from the fact that it strove to question the very basis of liberal support for the racial equality that it was trying to champion.⁵³

The *Minstrel Show* generally provoked a multitude of reactions from its audience. Like its predecessors, the *Minstrel Show* induced reactions ranging from ribald enjoyment to moral outrage, and it was not uncommon for viewers to walk out or call for the show's cancellation. A show at Merritt College in Oakland, California in September 1965 was typical in that regard, as evidenced by an editor of the school's newspaper.

Understanding the Mime Troupe's message, he wrote to his fellow students that "if you are one of the members of the audience who, after the performance, talked about how 'filthy and obscene' the cast acted, or if you were one of the students who left the proceedings before the Troupe had finished conveying its message, it is time for you to stop hiding from the truth of the world like slugs from the heel of man. It is time you woke up to the fact that one can't hide his thoughts and actions behind a façade of morality and hope that everyone else will follow these unnatural actions."⁵⁴

Clearly, commedia as practiced by the Troupe became an effective way to employ guerilla theatre. The *Minstrel Show* was a notable achievement in this regard: the Troupe was asked by the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party to perform in the south and later won an Obie award in New York, indicating that there was even some mainstream support for the Troupe.⁵⁵ As a member of the Troupe told the audience in Oakland,

⁵³ Jason Marc Alexander and Willie Hart were two African-American activists who performed in the *Minstrel Show*. Davis, *The San Francisco Mime Troupe*, 50.

⁵⁴ Doug Allen, "Editorial: Laying it on the Line," *Merritt College Reporter*, vol. 3, no. 2. September 29, 1965. Davis, Box 3, Folder 13.

⁵⁵ Joan Bazar, "Civil Rights Minstrel Skewers Racial Poses," *Berkeley Daily Gazette*, July 28, 1965. Davis, Box 3, Folder 13.

“unless we take the risk of living as public men, we run the greater risk of lifelong obscurity and impotence. This is our way of laying it on the line.”⁵⁶

In San Francisco, the public parks became the stage for that position. At the time, the city’s parks were a unique battleground for cultural and political struggle. San Francisco’s public park system has long enjoyed a reputation for beauty and accessibility and the city’s 215 parks and playgrounds have long been prized by San Franciscans, who have taken a proprietary interest in maintaining and preserving them.⁵⁷ In the 1960s, San Francisco residents blocked a proposed plan to build an interstate highway through Golden Gate Park.⁵⁸ Yet, although San Franciscans were certainly familiar with public political activity in the form of strikes and labor rallies in the twentieth century, including the longshoremen’s strike that shut down the city during the Great Depression, the Troupe still needed permits from the municipal authorities that regulated park usage in order to perform.

The Mime Troupe began to secure permits from the city’s Park Commission when it first performed in the parks in 1962. Davis liked the idea of plays in the parks, both because they provided a great platform for the presentation of alternative politics, and because they challenged him as a performer: “parks,” he wrote, “are brutally direct. People don’t pay so don’t have to stay.”⁵⁹ From the start, the audience was a crucial part of the dynamic of the park productions and the nature of Mime Troupe performances

⁵⁶ Doug Allen, “Editorial: Laying it on the Line,” *Merritt College Reporter*, vol. 3, no. 2. September 29, 1965. Davis, Box 3, Folder 13.

⁵⁷ William H. Wilson, *The City Beautiful Movement* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 293. Wilson reports that not only did the city’s need for rapid construction prevent any serious examination of plans for San Francisco submitted by prominent City Beautiful proponents Daniel Burnham and Edward Bennett, but even most of the copies of those plans were lost in the earthquake; Randolph Steven Delehanty, “San Francisco Parks and Playgrounds, 1839-1990: The History of a Public Good” (Harvard University: Ph. D. Dissertation, 1992), IV.

⁵⁸ Delehanty, “San Francisco Parks and Playgrounds.”

⁵⁹ Davis, *The San Francisco Mime Troupe*, 123.

drew concern and attempts at censorship. The political nature of the Troupe's performances were evident at the outset. While members set up the stage and warmed up, they sang traditional and political songs, often adapting lyrics to suit current situations, like the riots at Watts in 1965.⁶⁰ Such overt political content kept the watchful eye of city officials upon the Troupe. The police taped performances, and warned prospective backers about the Troupe's potentially controversial offerings.⁶¹

In fact, the arrest of Davis and other Troupe members on August 7, 1965 for performing without a permit was not unexpected. For three years, the Commissioners repeatedly evaluated the performances of the Troupe and updated assessments of the nature of their presentations and their appropriateness for public display. Often, the Troupe was accused of minor misdemeanors that revealed the city's level of scrutiny. For example, they were investigated by the police department in 1962 and cited for "blocking traffic" in the parks.⁶²

Of more lasting significance was the debate over the content of Mime Troupe performances. In August of 1963, San Francisco Recreation Superintendent James P. Lang became concerned that the Troupe's *commedia*, which members themselves described as "spicy," might not be appropriate for performance in a public park. Acting on information he received from what reporter Ron Fimrite described as several "horrified parents," Lang asked Park Commission President Walter A. Haas to define "spicy." Haas replied that, "the emphasis would be on sex." This outraged Troupe members, who argued with the commission that, when they used the word "spicy," they

⁶⁰ Davis, *The San Francisco Mime Troupe*, 37.

⁶¹ Lloyd Zimpel, "Theatre: Surprise in the Wings," *The Nation*, March 7, 1966.

⁶² Regina Spoor, Letter to the Editor, *San Francisco Chronicle* (March, 1962).

meant, in the words of Troupe publicist Al De La Rosa, “the full flavor of life.”⁶³ The Mime Troupe received some significant public support in this debate, as much of the counterculture later did, from *San Francisco Chronicle* columnist Ralph J. Gleason, who joined the chorus of generally favorable reviewers of the Troupe and argued that his own children enjoyed the performances.⁶⁴ Despite concern, the Mime Troupe was unanimously allowed to continue performing in the parks by the Park Commission, “with the provision,” as reporter Ron Fimrite stated, “that if spiciness ever drifted unhappily into sexiness,” the group would be refused further access to park permits.⁶⁵

Davis, in his own history of the Mime Troupe, claimed that the concern of the Park Commission was based on the Mime Troupe’s use of “a low, knock-about ‘dirty’ form” of theatre that did not employ recognized masterworks and performed for a mass public that was quite different from the city’s usual consumers of high-brow opera and symphony. He reported that “if the Park Commissioners got past the style they stopped at the content,” and that only his political connections assured the Troupe of easy access to the parks.⁶⁶

By the summer of 1965, content had clearly become the overriding concern of the Commission. The Troupe had not escaped criticism in the past, but the “Minstrel Show” production, despite enthusiastic praise, had also been a subject of concern due to its incorporation of foul language and topics considered “obscene.” Before granting permission for the Troupe to perform in the parks that summer, the Commission reviewed

⁶³ Ron Fimrite, “Mime Troupe’s Spicy Triumph,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, August 23, 1963, 41. Davis papers, Box 3, Folder 13.

⁶⁴ Ralph J. Gleason, “They All Loved The Mime Troupe,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, March 1962.

⁶⁵ Ron Fimrite, “Mime Troupe’s Spicy Triumph,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, August 23, 1963, 41. Davis papers, Box 3, Folder 13.

⁶⁶ Davis, *The San Francisco Mime Troupe*, 65.

the Troupe's record in the city at a meeting on June 24, 1965. Walter Haas, chairman of the board of the Levi Strauss Corporation and president of the Park Commission, noted that the Troupe had drawn both favorable and critical comments, and the Superintendent of Recreation, Edward McDevitt, added that "there had been complaints regarding undesirable language, and also, that the plays had been offensive to morals and religious beliefs." After securing a promise from Ronnie Davis that "the Troupe will do everything possible to present programs which will be generally acceptable," the Commission decided that the Troupe could perform sixteen dates at eight different parks throughout the city from July 17 through September 12, as long as the performances were reviewed by the committee and met with its final approval.⁶⁷

The Mime Troupe never got that approval. At the time, the Troupe was performing the 16th century play *Il Candelaio*, by Giordano Bruno, the passionate Dominican monk and philosopher who had been executed for heresy during the Italian Inquisition. Adapted for the Troupe by Peter Berg, it was advertised as a play about "antiquated standards of value and the means of their enforcement," and told of a society in which criminals became police and police became criminals.⁶⁸ After several members of the Park Commission reviewed the production, a special meeting was called on August 4, 1965, and the Troupe's permission to perform was revoked. The Commissioners gave several reasons for their action, but they were mainly centered on the issue of behavior deemed "unacceptable" for public consumption. June Harman, the Supervisor of Women's Athletics for the parks, declared that the play "was very dull and in poor taste,"

⁶⁷ "Minutes," San Francisco Park Commission meeting, June 24, 1965. San Francisco Recreation and Park Department McClaren Lodge Collection, 1965, 175.

⁶⁸ The San Francisco Mime Troupe, Handbill: "San Francisco Mime Troupe in *Il Candelaio*," 1965. Davis papers, Box 3, Folder 11. John L. Wasserman, "Mime Troupe's 'Candelaio,'" *San Francisco Chronicle*, August 3, 1965.

but that she could not comment on the appropriateness of the show for adults, while Edward Kelley, the Supervising Director of the parks—after highlighting the fact that the play was attended by a “majority of beatniks”—added that he too felt the play was suggestive. The strongest opinion was that of James P. Lang, the General Manager of the Parks, who said that the Troupe’s presentation was “a vulgar travesty and offensive to adults and incompatible with the minds of youth and small children.” Walter Haas concurred, as did two other members.⁶⁹

The Troupe was prepared for this criticism and had its defense at the ready. In addition to its regular attorney Marvin Stender, it had secured the services of Marshall Krause of the American Civil Liberties Union. The lawyers arrived at the meeting with favorable witnesses who would testify on the Troupe’s behalf and a petition signed by 322 people in favor of allowing the organization to continue performing in the public parks. At this special meeting, the Troupe made a connection between political speech and artistic freedom. Stender argued that the Commission had only a “ministerial duty” to grant permits to the Troupe and “had no right to censor its contents or to determine whether or not it was obscene,” citing the First Amendment and Supreme Court’s support of public freedom of speech. Stender argued that “there is no difference between granting a permit for a political rally and granting a permit for the type of production presented by the Mime Troupe; and that the Commission would not censor a political speech, and had no right to censor a theatrical production.”⁷⁰ Marshall Krause of the ACLU said that the Commission did not have jurisdiction over the content of the Troupe’s performances and that, if there was a concern about offensive material, it was “a

⁶⁹ “Minutes,” Special meeting of the San Francisco Park Commission, August 4, 1965. San Francisco Recreation and Park Department McClaren Lodge Collection, 1965, 190-191.

⁷⁰ “Minutes,” Special Meeting of the Recreation and Park Commission, August 4, 1965, 191-192.

police problem.” Several others, including Bill Graham, the Troupe’s manager, also spoke in favor of the Mime Troupe’s continued performances.⁷¹

Ronnie Davis made the most impassioned—and confrontational—statement. He argued that the Troupe had always cooperated with the Commission, but that the current attempt to “censor” their production was unacceptable: “the Commission has no right to censor the content of a rally presented in the parks or on a platform of City property; it would be an encroachment of free speech to do so.” He admitted that the Commission might find some of the Troupe’s material “offensive” to their sensibilities, but added that he in turn found the “frothy” entertainment generally available in the parks objectionable. Davis then claimed that the Commission, in addition to lacking the legal authority to judge the content of public performances, was unsuited to evaluate the Troupe’s performances as art. “Culturally speaking,” he said of the Commission, “they could not distinguish between Jean Genet and James Bond...when did the Commission receive the position of judge of taste or content?”

Davis then sought to align his fight for free artistic expression with issues traditionally considered “political.” He argued that there should be no distinction between artistic or cultural speech on the one hand and traditionally understood political speech on the other. “It is clear to me that bad art—commercial pap—is of a sociopolitical nature,” he said. “We can see that this Commission has no fear if the ears and eyes of its citizens is dulled by bad ballet, trite music, commercial musical comedy, and the like. We know that the Commission does not stop political rallies in the parks—admittedly, rallies which go against the general makeup of the Commission. For instance, 40 per cent of the nation

⁷¹ “Minutes,” Special Meeting of the Recreation and Park Commission, August 4, 1965, 191.

is for war in Viet Nam, 30 per cent confused and 30 per cent against troops in Viet Nam. The Viet Nam Day Committee asks permission to hold a rally on City property and it is granted, despite the fact that some people oppose the withdrawal of troops from Viet Nam.” He further added, “there are religious organizations that use Union Square for rallies and meetings, there are other organizations that are granted use of public property for the presentation of ideas, beliefs and protests. Thus, our entertainment should be considered in this light.” He concluded his speech with an impassioned indictment of the commission:

We have the right, as our Constitution states, to express our opinion in public without being censored. We have the right to protest mores, morals and attitudes of people on the society. If the Commission were to censor our performances and rescind its permission to use the grass of the City for a few hours and give our shows free to those who enjoy them in the open air—if the Commission were to refuse us permission to do so, we feel it would be an act of censorship, as political a maneuver as objecting to the Birchers or a civil rights demonstration on City property. We believe this would be censorship, an attempt to silence free speech, public assembly and dissent and, as such, unconstitutional, and we will defend our rights vigorously. If the Commission officially rescinds our permit to play in the parks, the Commission formally admits to being without culture—the greatest sin, without a true sense of freedom and free speech, and a group of immensely conservative, wealthy people engaged in suppression.⁷²

This speech—with its calculated comparison of the Troupe’s performances with activities from across the American political landscape— defined the Mime Troupe as a group of political artists and resonated with the ideology of “guerilla theatre.” Davis reiterated here his belief that mainstream society and culture was, as he wrote in the “Guerilla Theatre” essay, “debilitating, repressive and non-aesthetic.”⁷³ It further reinforced his criticism of corporate relationships and the power dynamic that often

⁷² Speech and remarks, Ron Davis, “Minutes,” Special meeting of the San Francisco Park Commission, August 4, 1965. San Francisco Recreation and Park Department McClaren Lodge Collection, 1965, 193-194.

⁷³ R. G. Davis, “Guerilla Theatre,” in *The San Francisco Mime Troupe, Guerilla Theatre Essays: 1*.

resulted from such relationships—and the fact that Walter Haas, the President of the Commission and member of the Board of Levi-Strauss, was a frequent financial contributor to the city’s parks budget suggests that Davis might not have been far off the mark in thinking that the corporate influence in the Commission was a factor in its policies.⁷⁴

Davis’s speech is an important statement of his belief that cultural activity was inherently political and therefore fell under the protection of free speech guaranteed in the Constitution. As Davis remembered, no one had challenged the Commission before: “nobody said to them, ‘well, maybe you’re not in charge. Maybe there’s another aspect here that’s called public trust, public democracy, civil rights’...any of those things. They had no idea about that. I mean, they talked as if they owned the joint.”⁷⁵

The Commission was not swayed by the Mime Troupe’s arguments, and in Resolution No. 6328, it revoked the provisional permission to perform that had been granted to the Troupe on June 24, then further denied the Troupe a permit to perform at all. As Ronnie Davis left the meeting, he loudly proclaimed his intention to pursue the issue.⁷⁶

Davis kept his word. On August 7, 1965, just three days after the Commission’s special meeting, the Troupe prepared to present *Il Candelaio* in Lafayette Park, fully aware that an arrest would result and with the intention to use that arrest to dramatize its constitutional argument. In this instance, the Mime Troupe employed guerilla theatre.

⁷⁴ “Gifts” section of the “Index to the 1966 Minutes” of the San Francisco Park Commission. San Francisco Recreation and Park Department McClaren Lodge Collection, 1966, 12. For the record: Davis has refused to wear Levis to this day. E-Mail transmission to the author, August, 1999.

⁷⁵ Ronnie Davis to the author, interview May 25, 1999.

⁷⁶ Ronnie Davis to author, letter of July 1999. In the author’s collection. The story of this meeting and Davis’ subsequent arrest can also be found in many histories of the Mime Troupe and the counterculture, including those by Doyle, Orenstein and Perry.

Planning to turn the arrest into political theatre, the Troupe made sure that Bill Graham had publicized the event and Marvin Stender was present to provide legal counsel. Mime Troupe performers, audience members, officers of the San Francisco police department and James Lang of the Park Commission all gathered in the park.

In his testimony during the later court case, Lang admitted that his reason for going to Lafayette Park that day “was to effect (sic) an arrest if the Mime Troupe play was presented.” At about 12:50, Lang told Davis that he would have him arrested for performing without a permit if he attempted to perform.⁷⁷ Davis and others from the Mime Troupe discussed the issue and addressed the audience, explaining their situation and informing everyone that they intended to proceed with the scheduled program.

For the performance, Davis had planned to take over the role of Brighella, the first character to appear in the play, knowing that the first person to step onto the stage would be arrested. However, when it became apparent that members would be stopped from even setting the stage up, the actors decided to proceed on the grass and began warming up for the performance. There, Ronnie Davis, dressed in theatrical costume, delivered a significantly altered version of the Mime Troupe’s traditional greeting to the audience, which in this instance underscored its political engagement with the San Francisco authorities: “*Signor, Signora, Signorini, Madame Monsieur, Mademoiselle, Ladies and Gentlemen, Il Troupe di Mimo di San Francisco* presents for your enjoyment this afternoon, AN ARREST!”

Upon this pronouncement, the police immediately took Davis into custody, along with Marvin Garson, reporter for the *Express Times*, who knocked a policeman’s cap off

⁷⁷ “Statement of the Facts,” *The People of the State of California vs. Ronald Davis, State of California Superior Court, Appellate Department No. 1177. December 27, 1966, 2.*

in the melee, and Skip Sweeney, a spectator who went to Garson's defense. After Davis was escorted from the park, the Troupe performed with the help of such Bay area cultural figures as Lawrence Ferlinghetti and Herbert Gold and received heavy donations from the audience. All present had played their parts perfectly, and the stage was now set for a legal confrontation between the San Francisco Mime Troupe and the city of San Francisco.⁷⁸

Davis was released after two hours at the police station, and on August 9, 1965, he was charged with violation of Section 116 of the San Francisco Park Code, which stated that "no person shall set up or maintain any exhibition, place of amusement, concert hall, moving picture, show, showstand, performance, concert, entertainment or amusement in any park, square, avenue, grounds or recreation center without first having obtained a permit to do so from the Park Commission."⁷⁹ Further Mime Troupe requests for permits were from that point denied, and later, referred to the City Attorney for handling.⁸⁰ On October 1, Davis pled not guilty and demanded a trial by jury.⁸¹

The trial began on October 27, and several witnesses testified about the incident, including the arresting officer James Egan, Parks General Manager James Lang, President of the Park Commission Walter Haas, and Ronald Davis. Davis's position was that the Commission's decision to revoke the Mime Troupe's permit was unconstitutional

⁷⁸ Davis, The San Francisco Mime Troupe, 68-67. It is difficult to resist the temptation to emulate Ronnie Davis' evocative account and tell the story of his arrest in theatrical metaphors—Michael Doyle has used similar ones and they are utilized here because they are an appropriate (if predictable) method of describing an incident of dramatic politics. For film footage of the incident, see "*Les Digger de San Francisco*," Celine Deransart and Alice Gaillard, dirs. (Paris, 1998). See also the account in Joel Selvin, Summer of Love: The Inside Story of LSD, Rock and Roll, Free Love and High Times in the Wild West (New York: Cooper Square Press, 1994), 12-13.

⁷⁹ "Argument," *The People of the State of California vs. Ronald Davis*, State of California Superior Court, Appellate Department No. 1177. December 27, 1966, 6.

⁸⁰ "Minutes," San Francisco Park and Recreation meeting, June 9, 1966. The request discussed this day was referred to the City Attorney.

⁸¹ "Statement of the Case," *The People of the State of California vs. Ronald Davis*, State of California Superior Court, Appellate Department No. 1177. December 27, 1966, 1.

and therefore his arrest invalid. On November 1, the jury, instructed by the judge to disregard the issue of the constitutionality of the Park Commission ordinance, found Davis guilty of performing in the parks without a permit, and Davis was sentenced to thirty days in jail, suspended, and one year of probation.

Davis filed an appeal on December 27, 1965, determined to fight for what he regarded as his First Amendment right to freedom of speech and assembly. District Attorney John Jay Ferdon, in his argument to the Appellate Department of the Superior Court, found that the Park Commission did not, in and of itself, have the authority to deny permits to any group based on the content of a program. But he also argued that the Commission's authority was not the subject of the trial—all that needed to be decided in court was whether or not Davis had performed without a permit, and that this had been the finding in the first trial. The argument presented on Davis' behalf by his attorneys, Marshall Krause of the ACLU and Nathan S. Smith, was based on the contention that Davis' arrest and conviction were based on an invalid law, Section 116 of the Park Code. They claimed that this section was vague and contained no proscriptions regarding the Commission's regulation of the content of activities in the park. Further, as the Commission only had regulatory power, it could not in fact deny permits at all, especially based on an issue of arbitrarily defined objections to content—a point that the D. A. had already conceded. Citing the United States Supreme Court decision in *Niemotko v. Maryland* (1951), in which the court argued that “in the absence of narrowly drawn, reasonable and definite standards for the officials to follow” regarding the regulation of public space, any restriction of that use must necessarily be “invalid.”

Further, Krause and Smith linked the Park Commission's abuse of their power to an abridgement of Ronnie Davis' right to utilize public space in order to exercise his First and Fourteen Amendment rights to freedom of speech. In this line of argument, they cited the precedent set by the Supreme Court in *Hague v. C.I.O.* (1939), in which the court had established that

Wherever the title of streets and parks may rest, they have immemorially been held in trust for the use of the public and, time out of mind, have been used for purposes of assembly, communicating thoughts between citizens, and discussing public questions. Such use of the streets and public places has, from ancient times, been a part of the privileges, immunities, rights and liberties of citizens. The privileges of a citizen of the United States to use the streets and parks for communication of views...must not, in the guise of regulation, be abridged or denied.⁸²

This argument was at the heart of the matter. Though Davis's attorneys argued that "obscenity was always a judicial issue" and that "since the Park Commission is not a judicial body, it is not qualified to determine what is or is not obscene," the content of the Mime Troupe's shows was not at issue.⁸³ Rather, the Mime Troupe's position demonstrated that they were most interested in challenging the authority of the Parks to regulate public space, in effect to determine who, and what, could be allowed in the parks. The point of the case, as far as the Troupe was concerned, was to establish their rights of access, as members of the public, to those urban areas deemed "public."

The Troupe's emphasis on self-determination was very much aligned with a similar emphasis within the New Left and civil rights movement of the 1960s. The previous year, during the Free Speech Movement at the University of California at Berkeley, students had been concerned with this same issue—the *in loco parentis*

⁸² "Appellant's Opening Brief," *People of the State of California vs. Ronald Davis*, No. 1177, July 15, 1966.

⁸³ *ibid.*

authority of the university as well as the right to free speech. In both instances, the quarrel was between individual rights in a democratic society and institutional regulation of individual behavior. In embracing this ideology, the San Francisco Mime Troupe in its fight against the city authorities helped to solidify a growing opposition to municipal authority in San Francisco and opened the door for further questioning of the regulation of public behavior. It also established a link between the growing counterculture's political position against the hegemony of the state over individual action and the New Left's concern with similar dynamics.

That questioning of authority was evident in the storm of controversy sparked in the city by Davis's arrest and subsequent trial. *San Francisco Chronicle* columnist Ralph Gleason, who had long championed the Troupe and written in 1962 that a Mime Troupe show in the park was "a natural event, not particularly surprising or in any way peculiar in the view of the strollers in the park who stopped to watch," wrote a column a few days after Davis' arrest that placed the Mime Troupe's battle within the context of other attempts at cultural censorship in America, from the arrests of Lenny Bruce, who was appearing in the city at the time, to the censorship of books by Henry Miller and the policing of Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters. He forcefully compared the Commission's banning of the Mime Troupe from the city's parks to totalitarianism. "If this society is so fragile that attacks on it by implication from artists and writers are such a threat," he argued, "then we're really in trouble. But the thing goes deeper than this, much deeper. It is really a fear of making waves. Don't start trouble. Never argue about religion or politics. Keep things as they are (meaning keep me as I am) and don't let anyone challenge anything. Yet if democracy is worth its salt, it not only will survive

criticism but must encourage it. The vendetta against the arts is a drive to suppress criticism in exactly the same way that the Nazis suppressed it in Germany. And as Ira Sandperl pointed out in an interview, the Nazis were good citizens... To stifle the Mime Troupe by the judgment of a commission to rescind its permit is petty bureaucracy, the kind we abhor when practiced by Stalin against poets."⁸⁴

The Mime Troupe galvanized for the lengthy legal battle that began with Davis' arrest. Gleason's column, along with another review and an article on the cancellation of the permit from the *San Francisco Examiner*, was mimeographed and handed out at Troupe performances. The broadside was titled "you-THE PUBLIC-be the judge" and carried the message "if you feel inclined to protest the city's authority to 'protect' your moral and aesthetic sensibilities after viewing the play, support us by: 1. Signing our Petition, 2. Writing to Mayor Shelley, 3. Writing to the *Chronicle*."⁸⁵ The Troupe's position probably gained more sympathizers when the State Parks Division cancelled a scheduled August 11 show at Mount Tamalpais in nearby Marin County.

The Troupe appealed to the pocketbooks as well as the political sensibilities of its audience. Within days of the verdict, Bill Graham organized a benefit dance-concert to be held at the Mime Troupe's studio, which the Troupe shared with Students for a Democratic Society, and secured the free services of several of the area's new psychedelic rock bands, including the Jefferson Airplane, which often rehearsed in the

⁸⁴ Ralph Gleason, "They All Loved the Mime Troupe," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 1962. Davis Collection Box 3 Folder 13; Ralph Gleason, "On The Town: Maybe We're Really in Trouble," *San Francisco Chronicle*, August 9, 1965. Box 3, Folder 13.

⁸⁵ Flyer: "You—THE PUBLIC—Be the judge." Davis Collection, Box 3, Folder 13. Includes Ralph Gleason, "On The Town: Maybe We're Really in Trouble," *San Francisco Chronicle*, August 9, 1965; John L. Wasserman, Mime Troupe's 'Candelaio'," *San Francisco Chronicle*, August 3, 1965; Harry Johanessen, "Park Show Cancelled: 'Offensive'," *San Francisco Examiner*, August 5, 1965.

studio. Many others, including folksinger Sandy Bull and veteran free speech advocates and Beat poets Allen Ginsberg and Peter Orlovsky, also agreed to appear.

Charles Perry, a chronicler of the development of the Haight-Ashbury counterculture, has noted that, although the Mime Troupe benefit on November 6, 1965 was not the first “bohemian gathering” of the era in the Bay area—it was preceded by the informal, private parties of the Merry Pranksters and two events held by the communal rock promotion organization the Family Dog—it was the largest to date and quite different from the others.⁸⁶ Michael Doyle argues that “the event introduced a sizable number of like-minded, free-spirited individuals to one another...by doing so it greatly enhanced the prospect that together they could and should create an insurgent community of opposition in the Bay area.”⁸⁷ Unlike the activities of the Pranksters and the rock concerts, which were held strictly for reasons of entertainment and personal fulfillment, the Mime Troupe’s benefit added an explicitly political component that linked the issue of lifestyle to political expression. The cause the Mime Troupe was fighting for held a particular resonance for the incipient counterculture, as evidenced by the way the second Appeal benefit was advertised.

Held on December 10, 1965, at the larger Fillmore Auditorium, the dance-concert was billed as an appeal “For Continued Artistic Freedom in the Parks.” Quoting a line from William Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, “the law’s delay, the insolence of office,” the announcement placed the Troupe within a heritage of artistic achievement: “you think *Hamlet* had problems? A nymphomaniac mother, an opportunistic stepfather, who was horny to boot, a neurotic girlfriend, and a father who was, lamentably, a ghost.

⁸⁶ Charles Perry, *The Haight-Ashbury: A History*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1985), 31-33.

⁸⁷ Doyle, “The Haight-Ashbury Diggers,” 69. For an evocative description of this event, see Perry, *The Haight-Ashbury*.

Problems? Forget it. Hamlet, at least, never had to contend with the addled morality of San Francisco park commissioners, nor the legal convolutions of the Municipal Courts.” The advertisement also explained that, “the troupe believes that these guardians of good taste have no right to impose their questionable standards on San Franciscans who use the parks. It believes the principle of free expression must be defended wherever it is jeopardized, and so it has engaged in a court battle which now appears to be a long one.” Finally, the ad stated that

The point of it all is to return some high spirits and freedom to the parks, and, unlike our solemn commissioners to have some fun along the way. Do you think, incidentally, that they would allow “Hamlet” to be performed in “their” pristine parks? This classic, which is required reading in freshman English, is about, among other things, incest, insanity, suicide, corruption, whores and murder—“carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts, accidental judgements, casual slaughters, and, in the upshot, purposes mistook fall’n on the investors’ heads.” Blow their minds.⁸⁸

Ronnie Davis confirms the assessment of the Mime Troupe benefits as events that united the community. He believed that Appeal II was “unbelievably joyous not only because of the music but also because it was a meeting of people concerned with pushing the establishment off their backs.”⁸⁹ The emphasis of the broadside on the desire “to return some high spirits and freedom to the parks and...to have some fun along the way,” also reflects a broader conception of a politics that incorporated cultural and lifestyle issues within an argument about individual rights. This argument, couched in terms of the constitutional rights that dominated the Mime Troupe’s legal battle, extended the ideas of individual rights and empowerment that was so central in the other political movements of the era and would be taken up by the counterculture during the rest of the

⁸⁸ Flyer, Davis Collection. Box 2, Folder 4.

⁸⁹ Davis, The San Francisco Mime Troupe, 69.

decade to form the ideological basis of the public celebratory nature of countercultural activity.

Despite the community support and legal arguments, Davis lost his appeal and declined to pursue the matter further, mainly because it was a moot point by the time the decision was issued. Though the Park Commission frequently denied the Troupe permits, it continued to perform without restriction in San Francisco for the rest of the year and indeed for the rest of the decade, despite its increasingly radical opposition to the Vietnam war.⁹⁰ This may have to do with a recognition on the part of the Park Commission that its policies were inconsistent. For example, the Commission did grant permits for some political activity in the park in 1965, including permission for Vietnam Day events. It is possible that the Commission realized that personal animosity may have played a role. In fact, in 1966, during the midst of its legal battle with the Troupe, the Park Commission conducted a wholesale re-evaluation of its permit application process. The Commission investigated the ways in which other cities dealt with this issue and found that “in the majority of instances as a result of court decisions precensorship is not pursued,” and “that those who do not use our parks for the purpose of creating civic discord offending the ethnic, religious, or moral values of people will always be recommended and that those who would do otherwise will bring upon the City and themselves problems that only the police and courts can solve.”⁹¹ The Commission decided to withhold comment on content, as evidenced not only by its refusal to further prosecute the Mime Troupe, but also by its eventual granting of permits to the Troupe and to other groups as varied as the American Nazi Party and the United Committee

⁹⁰ Davis, interview with the author, May 25, 1999.

⁹¹ “Minutes” of the Park Commission, November 10, 1966

against the War in Vietnam, both of which were easily granted permits to speak and rally in the Civic Center Plaza in 1966.⁹² The Mime Troupe seemed to have won its battle.

The Mime Troupe brought its fight for free public space across North America throughout 1966. In Los Angeles, it encountered familiar censorship issues when a performance of the Minstrel Show scheduled for May 9 at the University of California was cancelled because, as the *Los Angeles Free Press* reported, the Dean of Students had read that the show was “obscene and disgusting.”⁹³ Later that year, three members of the traveling Minstrel Show were arrested for “lewdness” in their performance in Denver. They were represented by Walter Gerash, with the support of the Colorado American Civil Liberties Union, and Gerash argued that “this case is important to free speech everywhere.”⁹⁴ When the three actors were acquitted, the result was less a judicial triumph than a cultural one. The Troupe had spread the concept of “guerilla theatre” beyond the borders of the Bay area. Further, when Ron Davis and two others were arrested in Calgary, Canada in 1967 for possession of a miniscule amount of marijuana, a third benefit concert was held at which it was clear that the line between a “political” issue of free speech had meshed with the countercultural emphasis on lifestyle. The benefit was a huge success, raising half the legal costs of the Troupe’s newest clash with the law. No one seemed to question the legitimacy of contributing to a drive for funds to support a case about drug use—especially when the preeminent bands of the emergent counterculture, including the Jefferson Airplane, the Grateful Dead, and Quicksilver Messenger Service, were playing.

⁹² “Minutes” of the Park Commission, June 23, 1966, July 14, 1966, November 10, 1966; Davis, San Francisco Mime Troupe; Davis, letter to author; Index to the 1966 Minutes, 5.

⁹³ Art Kunkin, “Troupe Wind Right to Mime On Grass After UCLA Cancellation of Show,” *Los Angeles Free Press*, vol. 4, no. 39 (Issue #114), September 30, 1966, 1.

⁹⁴ Walter L. Gerash to R. G. Davis, letter of December 16, 1966. Davis Collection, Box 4 Folder 9.

Despite Ronnie Davis's comment that, in San Francisco, the Mime Troupe "did not really confront the establishment in any property way" (referring to material-based Marxist political challenges), the influence of the Mime Troupe is evident in the loosening of restrictions on the use of public parks there in the 1960s.⁹⁵ Through its case against the Park Commission, the Mime Troupe demonstrated its political position and established a precedent for public cultural activity in the city, creating physically the metaphorical "free space" that historians Sara Evans and Harry Boyte have argued is necessary to social movements.⁹⁶ The source of real democratic activity throughout American history, Evans and Boyte argue, has been found not in the actions of the government institutions but in community and voluntary associations which were "capable of appropriating, enriching, and experimenting with democratic traditions and ideas."⁹⁷ This kind of activity emphasized a conception of "citizenship" that stressed civic and political participation. Therefore, the use of free "social spaces" in between private life and public institutions was a vehicle through which groups like African-Americans, women, and industrial and agricultural workers achieved social changes beneficial to each, including steps toward greater political participation and authority and social and economic equality.

By initiating a debate about the nature of public political dialogue in the city's parks, the Mime Troupe succeeded in creating first a physical free space in the parks that also enabled the creation of a less restricted space for dialogue in the city's public sphere. One of the ramifications of this was the growing visibility of the counterculture in the

⁹⁵ Davis, interview with the author, May 25, 1999.

⁹⁶ Sara Evans and Harry Boyte, Free Spaces: The Sources of Democratic Change in America (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986, 1992).

⁹⁷ *ibid.*, 117.

city. Partly through the efforts of the Mime Troupe, by the end of the decade San Franciscans would become familiar with the political uses of parks and streets by the counterculture in events that soon centered on the issue of lifestyle and the connection between cultural freedom on the one hand and social and political freedom on the other. Michael Doyle has written of the Mime Troupe's move into the parks that

The signal importance of this innovation is that it took theatre out of the playhouses and into the parks. There performers could mount plays replete with biting social commentary before new audiences who might not otherwise go to see theatre on a regular basis. The Mime Troupe appears to have been the first modern artistic company in a generation to reclaim the public parks as a performance venue. As such it prepared a site for countercultural entertainment and festivity that would soon be thronging with outdoor rock concerts and Be-ins, culminating at the end of the decade with Woodstock and People's Park.⁹⁸

However, the Mime Troupe's use of the parks in San Francisco did more than liberate physical territory for festivity. It provided the kind of audience development for which Davis had long hoped. In his review of the Mime Troupe's use of commedia and its stock characters in *The Nation*, Robert F. Sayre noted that outdoor performances politicized a segment of the population not usually the target of such activity:

To the park audiences—parents and kids and the drop-outs and rejects who have always been the inhabitants of city parks in America—Pantalone, Scaramouche and the lovely busty maidens mean a great deal more than the new night-club wit. A sophisticated theatergoer will see these stereotypes as remote and historical, while a park-goer simply recognizes the types—the cheating businessman, the loan shark, and wronged and angry girls. And the basis of such a recognition is the growing knowledge—of enormous political potential—that we are—that we are, and are surrounded by, *types*, of which the commedia ones are a good, popularly useable index. Commedia can thus flow into our public consciousness as an improved way of seeing.⁹⁹

⁹⁸ Doyle, "The Haight-Ashbury Diggers," 54-55.

⁹⁹ Robert F. Sayre, "Theatre," *The Nation*, September 4, 1967, 190. Sayre's italics.

Park performances were thus the perfect way to reach diverse audiences, and truly established the Troupe as a grass-roots political theatre. This development, gleefully advanced by the Troupe, wasn't viewed as positively by civil authorities: as Claudia Orenstein has remarked, it also "fostered the revolutionary dimension of their festive-revolutionary theatre, for in trying to secure the right to perform in outdoor venues the Troupe became involved in their first real political struggle."¹⁰⁰ This struggle, which brought the Troupe support from the area's growing counterculture, had an important result: the Troupe helped establish the hippie community as a recognized component of the city's constituency. Through the Troupe's battle with the city, the growing hippie population became familiar with and a part of a dialogue in the city about the use of public spaces like parks and streets. The use of those sites soon became part of a dynamic in which the countercultural community contested the power of city authorities to regulate its behavior. The increasing visibility of the counterculture as the decade progressed owes a great deal to the precedent for public cultural activity established—fought for—by the San Francisco Mime Troupe.

Thus, the San Francisco Mime Troupe was an important political force in the Bay area. In addition to providing an outlet for political culture, and providing training to a generation of activists, including Troupe member Luis Valdez, who left and formed *El Teatro Campesino*, the grape workers' political theatre. The Troupe's legal battles decisively shaped the counterculture of the Bay area in the middle of the 1960s by introducing a demand for less regulation of public parks and public activities, by creating both a support network within the city's rapidly growing alternative culture, and by

¹⁰⁰ Orenstein, Festive Revolutions, 129.

establishing a political precedent for the use of the city's public spaces for cultural activity.

That the Troupe relished its contribution to the politicization of the parks is clear in one of their advertisements. Upon its return to San Francisco from New York in October, 1966, the Troupe advertised itself as the "creator of all and anything from international tension to family hubbub. The squads of police that constantly accompany the Mime Troupe shows add color and politics to their wholesome family entertainment."¹⁰¹

The Mime Troupe's guerilla theatre and its legal fight for freedom of speech rallied the bohemian community, centered in the city's Haight-Ashbury district, around a political cause and introduced a dynamic of public festivity to that culture. The Troupe set a precedent for challenging San Francisco authorities over the use of public space and reiterated to the growing alternative culture of the city that public space usage had political ramifications. The San Francisco Mime Troupe was responsible for introducing a dialogue on the relationship between "cultural" activity and politics in the public sphere. This dialogue continued to shape a developing ethos toward public space for alternative activities that had begun when the Merry Pranksters took to the road.

This ethos flowered in the wake of the Mime Troupe's public legal battle with the city of San Francisco, as members of the Troupe expanded their activities outside of the strictly theatrical and took the concept of "guerilla theatre" further into society as "life acting." This outgrowth of the San Francisco Mime Troupe, an elusive group of anonymous Haight neighborhood activists named the Diggers, picked up where the Mime Troupe left off and, through specific events, solidified and asserted the counterculture's

¹⁰¹ "S.F. Mime Troupe," advertisement, *The Sunday Ramparts* (San Francisco). October 23, 1966, 6.

claim to public space in San Francisco in the 1960s. Through the activities of the Diggers, the counterculture's politicization of the city's public spaces was an accomplishment to which the growing hippie community in the Haight would expand and add its own variant on the nature of politics.

CHAPTER THREE

“I AM THE PUBLIC”:

THE DIGGERS AND THE LIBERATION OF THE COUNTERCULTURE

“Where is the public? Where are public streets at?” the mimeographed flyer asked the milling crowds of hippies in the Haight-Ashbury neighborhood of San Francisco in the fall of 1966. It was a pointed question. Long populated by students from nearby San Francisco State College, the neighborhood had recently become a haven for many young people who were alienated from mainstream American values and interested in the alternative lifestyle recently spawned by experimentation with legal psychedelic drugs such as LSD and by the new sexual freedom fostered by the availability of the birth control pill. Though North Beach was the old beatnik turf, and a few blocks of Pine Street were the locus of some alternative community activity, the Haight-Ashbury offered low-cost housing in large and elegant, if run-down, Victorian houses and easy proximity to Golden Gate Park and its adjacent spur, Panhandle Park. With the opening in January 1966 of the Psychedelic Shop on Haight Street, which proprietors Ron and Jay Thelin regarded as the center of a “Haight-Ashbury communications network,” the neighborhood drew increasingly more seekers.¹

At the time, sociologist Sherri Cavan noted that the Haight-Ashbury had been a “self-conscious community for many years,” a district with a “liberal and progressive

¹ Ron and Jay Thelin in Barney Hoskins, Beneath the Diamond Sky: Haight-Ashbury, 1965-1970 (New York: Simon and Schuster Editions, 1997), 87.

atmosphere,” proud of the its reputation “as one of San Francisco’s first successfully integrated neighborhoods, both in terms of race and economic and social position.” Like North Beach, the Haight-Ashbury district’s diverse working-class community was noted for its tolerance and community spirit.² The Haight district of San Francisco was uniquely open to the new residents. Previously a refuge for the city’s homosexual community, the neighborhood seemed more tolerant of difference, probably because it was not considered a particularly valuable area as it bordered the impoverished black Fillmore neighborhood. The low rents that followed the neighborhood’s decline during the Great Depression and World War II also appealed to poorer, socially dispossessed or more bohemian residents of the city, and in the 1950s the neighborhood had continued to be a haven of diversity.³

It also possessed a unique sense of neighborhood identity and solidarity. When Panhandle Park was threatened by a proposed freeway project, a neighborhood coalition called the Haight-Ashbury Neighborhood Council (HANC) formed “to aid and encourage the people of Haight-Ashbury neighborhood to work through democratic means and in a spirit of neighborliness toward improvement and enrichment of life and living conditions.” HANC was also determined to preserve the community of the Haight. Against all odds, HANC’s “Freeway Revolt” eventually defeated the proposed development in March 1966, through a reliance on neighborhood solidarity and strength

² Helen Swick Perry notes that there was a marked sense of community pride regarding the open-minded nature of the neighborhood. The Human Be-in (New York: Basic Books, 1970), 28; Sherri Cavan, Hippies of the Haight (St. Louis, Missouri: New Critics Press, Inc. 1972), 44.

³ Brian J. Godfrey, Neighborhoods in Transition: The Making of San Francisco’s Ethnic and Nonconformist Communities (Berkeley: University of California, 1988), 172-204.

to fight, and win, against City Hall.⁴ Such unity was another factor that contributed to the neighborhood's distinctive character and furthered its receptivity to new, non-traditional seekers.⁵

The district therefore possessed many favorable attributes for the young people it attracted in increasing numbers in the early 1960s: tolerance, low rents, and easy access to the pastoral fields of Golden Gate Park. It also possessed two beautiful smaller parks, the hilly Buena Vista and the long, flat Panhandle, located just one block north of Haight Street, running perpendicular to Golden Gate Park. During the early 1960s, such characteristics caused the neighborhood to attract more and more young people intent on dropping out of mainstream society to pursue other goals. Increasingly, the Haight-Ashbury district was regarded as the center of the new bohemia in the city. According to Charles Perry, who has written a history of the counterculture that flourished in the Haight during this era, found that new establishments like the Psychedelic Shop and a couple of all-night restaurants in the neighborhood offered residents appropriate places to "hang out in public."⁶

As a result, the hippies, including many who had taken part in the Prankster Acid Tests and rallied around the cause of the Mime Troupe and contributed to their Appeal benefits, were visible new residents of the area. The new youth community of the 1960s took advantage of the atmosphere created by these factors, and felt freer to indulge in

⁴ Godfrey, *Neighborhoods in Transition*, 186. Perry, *The Haight-Ashbury: A History* (New York: Vintage Books, 1985), 75-78. Perry also cites the first published recognition of the changing character of the neighborhood, the article "New Haven for Beatniks," *San Francisco Examiner*, September 6, 1965.

⁵ "Review of the Year 1965-1966," *HAIL: Haight-Ashbury Ink-Link*, n.d. "San Francisco Hippies" file, San Francisco Archives, San Francisco Public Library. This issue of HAIL, the newsletter of the Haight-Ashbury Neighborhood Council, in which this article appears, is not dated and is probably November 1966, but the disheveled and unorganized condition of the files in which it was found makes it impossible to be certain.

more open drug use and eccentric behavior. The young bohemians were particularly visible because of the popularity of outrageous costume, including Victorian and Edwardian clothing, employed because such second-hand clothing was much more affordable than department store wares, served as a commentary on the conformity of mainstream America, and provided an aid to mutual recognition among the drug users of the neighborhood.⁷ These young people lived together in the neighborhood and began to form a cohesive and visible new variation on its traditional bohemianism.

They were also not simply weekend participants in the developing scene. The new residents contributed to a revitalization of the neighborhood throughout 1965 and 1966. New businesses bloomed to cater to the psychedelic crowd, including health food, crafts and clothing stores like the Blushing Peony and a coffee house called the I/Thou. A group of former SNCC activists even began a settlement house to provide social services in the neighborhood in July 1966.⁸ Such activities drew more young people throughout the second half of the year: by the middle of 1966, 15,000 hippies were estimated to be living in the Haight-Ashbury.⁹ Those young people created a visible alternative cooperative community. Spencer Dryden, drummer for the Jefferson Airplane, a local band that helped to define the “psychedelic” rock sound that dominated the San Francisco musical renaissance of the 1960s, recalled that “the Haight was heaven for anybody with

⁶ Charles Perry, *The Haight-Ashbury: A History* (New York: Vintage Books, 1985), 76; See also Helen Swick Perry, *The Human Be-in* and Sherri Cavan, *Hippies of the Haight*, for a history of the neighborhood.

⁷ Naomi Feigelson quotes a hippie observation that typical hippie clothing was part of a recognition system for users, that is, drug users.” See *The Underground Revolution: Hippies, Yippies and Others* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1970), 2.

⁸ Perry, *The Haight-Ashbury*, 77.

⁹ Hoskins, *Beneath the Diamond Sky*, 87. The reader should bear in mind that any attempt to provide accurate estimates for the population for the Haight-Ashbury during the 1960s is an impossible task. The U.S. Census lists the total figure of residents in 1960 at 21, 519, and 20,080 in 1970, but these figures do not take into account the population of transient hippies who made the district their home during these years or the reluctance of many residents, often runaways or those in rebellion against the government, to

long hair. About eight hundred dyed-in-the-wool hippies and that's it. It was a family thing. No tourists. Everybody *did* live together and *did* help each other out.”¹⁰

The new Haight residents soon became visible as purveyors of unique recreational activities. The Trips Festival of the Merry Pranksters and the Mime Troupe's benefits spawned a flurry of activity among that population, and the neighborhood was close to the Fillmore and Avalon ballrooms where the new rock and roll dance-concerts were held. Bill Graham, manager of the Mime Troupe, was one of the first to see the potential for profit in such events, and he left the Troupe to manage the Fillmore Ballroom, a venue for the flourishing rock and roll scene in the Fillmore neighborhood bordering the Haight. Chet Helms, leader of the Family Dog commune and rock promotion organization, had recently assumed management of a new band, Big Brother and the Holding Company, and opened a new ballroom, the Avalon. According to Charles Perry, “throughout spring and summer of 1966 there were at least two rock dance concerts each weekend night” in which residents of the neighborhood participated.¹¹ Though these dance halls were private facilities that charged admission fees, and were policed by the city, the spirit of festivity began to spread. In fact, hip residents danced in the streets below when the Jefferson Airplane rehearsed in their Haight apartment.¹²

The emergent hippie community of the Haight defied city laws from its inception. The Pranksters had begun the tradition of defying the police over issues of public space when they ignored the police demands to shut down their dances at 2 AM to comply with

cooperate with a federal census. See “Table 16: Racial Composition of the Haight-Ashbury, 1940-1980” in Godfrey, Neighborhoods in Transition, 185.

¹⁰ Spencer Dryden in Hoskins, Beneath the Diamond Sky, 85-87.

¹¹ Perry, The Haight-Ashbury, 55.

¹² Joel Selvin, Summer of Love: The Inside Story of LSD, Rock and Roll, Free Love and High Times in the Wild West (New York: Cooper Square Press, 1994) 67.

a city ordinance.¹³ The dance concerts provide a whole new wrinkle on public space—the emergence of a distinct community. This new community had also been developing a vibrant street culture since 1965; indeed, this move into the streets of America by white middle class youth in the 1960s was a defining characteristic of this growing counterculture.¹⁴ Fueled by the success of the rock concert dances and the diffusion of a lifestyle based on the acid experience, residents began more and more to flaunt their way of life. By the fall of 1966, a fully developed public community of dissent from mainstream mores was flourishing in the Haight. Seemingly spontaneous parades, rock concerts and other events became common. As Charles Perry has noted, residents were “publicly outrageous. Nothing terrible had happened when the public gatherings began, and the proceedings had taken on an aura of destiny.”¹⁵

The flamboyant behavior of the Merry Pranksters had paved the way for such public display, and although San Francisco’s mainstream population could exhibit behavior as formal as that in any other city in 1960s America, the city also had a more tolerant attitude towards the unusual. The old Barbary Coast reputation, drawing upon the city’s gold rush and boom-town heritage, had established a cultural arena in which boundaries were often pushed to the limits of society’s standards and beyond. Throughout the 1950s, San Francisco became notorious for its topless entertainment, and, by the early 1960s, its beatnik scene had become one of the city’s cultural clichés.¹⁶ Groups like the San Francisco Mime Troupe, with its fight to establish the legal right to

¹³ Perry, The Haight-Ashbury, 43.

¹⁴ George Lipsitz, “Who’ll Stop the Rain: Youth Culture, Rock ‘n’ Roll, and Social Crisis,” in David Farber ed., The Sixties: From Memory to History (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1994.) Helen Swick Perry also notes the growth of a “street society” in the Haight-Ashbury. See The Human Be-
in, 9.

¹⁵ Perry, The Haight-Ashbury, 55.

¹⁶ Godfrey, Neighborhoods in Transition.

engage in cultural politics in the parks, not only had capitalized on that reputation, but also had further established San Francisco as a haven for the absurd, the outcasts, the people living on the edge. All combined to make San Francisco the center of a developing counterculture and sparked the growth of an ethos stressing free access to the city's public spaces for countercultural activities and expression. This ethos was, at bottom, a political one that would give the counterculture a more political nature than historians have assumed.

The established tolerance of the Haight-Ashbury provided a receptive arena for the activities of the younger bohemians, the "hippies," and an active and vocal group, the Diggers, emerged from this neighborhood to define the counterculture. The Diggers entered the scene directly from, and on, the streets. Their missives, were one of the first indications that the new political culture created in the wake of the Mime Troupe benefits was becoming more pervasive among the bohemian subculture. The evolving culture in the Haight in 1965 and 1966 was in part dependent on street communication. For information about community events, residents of the neighborhood had relied since 1965 on the circulation of colorful posters and notices, avidly collected by neighborhood residents, which heralded Mime Troupe Appeals or the latest rock-concert dances.¹⁷ There was a neighborhood newsletter, the *Haight-Ashbury Ink Link*, published by the Haight-Ashbury Neighborhood Council. The hippie community also had its own newspaper, the psychedelically inspired *San Francisco Oracle*, which had begun distribution on September 20, 1966 and contained a schedule of cultural events and

¹⁷ Perry, *The Haight-Ashbury*. Perry reports Bill Graham's difficulty in keeping his ads for concerts up in the Haight.

articles about relevant neighborhood issues.¹⁸ A sense of neighborhood identity and community was evident in these publications.

In early October 1966, these publications were joined by typewritten and even handwritten flyers, authored by a group of anonymous neighborhood activists who called themselves “the Diggers.” These mimeographed sheets appeared on the streets in the early evening once or twice a week and contained a potent mix of poetry and politics that expressed the Digger philosophy. Ronnie Davis even suggests that one of the key elements of the Diggers was their “literary idealism,” which was expressed in these flyers.¹⁹ Typically, Digger broadsides addressed issues that had first been raised in discussions among Diggers. According to Michael Doyle, “the focus of these conversations concerned how to infuse the incipient hip community in the Haight with a sense of larger purpose.”²⁰ The Diggers then raised these issues in public, aiming their literature at the burgeoning hippie counterculture. They did this, wrote Digger Emmett Grogan, “to get things real by challenging the street people with the conclusions they arrived at.”²¹

¹⁸ Allen Cohen, ed. *The San Francisco Oracle Facsimile Edition: The Psychedelic Newspaper of the Haight-Ashbury, 1966-1968* (Berkeley, California: Regent Press, 1991). The *Oracle* was preceded by *P.O. Frisco* (abbreviated version of “*Psychedelic Oracle*”), a newspaper published on September 2, 1966.

¹⁹ George Metevsky, “Delving the Diggers,” *Berkeley Barb*, October 21, 1966. The name “George Metevsky,” also mentioned in the Digger flyer “A-Political Or, Criminal Or Victim Or...” was probably a variation on George Metesky, New York City’s outlaw bomber. It was a frequent alias in the counterculture that was first used by the Diggers, many of whom had grown up in New York City. Abbie Hoffman later used it as well. The use of this name, and the same misspelling of the name, suggests that a Digger authored and submitted it to the *Barb*; R.G. Davis, *The San Francisco Mime Troupe The First Ten Years* (Palo Alto: Ramparts Press, 1975), 70. Davis also notes here that “Digger Papers...floated down Haight Street at least once a week during the high days of 1965-66,” but I believe he is referring to the 1965-66 *theatrical season*, which would include the winter and spring of 1966 when Grogan probably joined the Mime Troupe, and not to the calendar years 1965-66.

²⁰ Michael William Doyle, “The Haight-Ashbury Diggers and the Cultural Politics of Utopia, 1965-1968,” Ph.D. Dissertation: Cornell University, 1997.) Note: This echoes what Emmett Grogan and others have said.

²¹ Emmett Grogan, *Ringolevio: A Life Played For Keeps*, (New York: Citadel Press, 1990 [1972]), 236-7.

By the fall of 1966, the hippies of the Haight had become accustomed to these flyers, and with Digger questions about the nature of their community. For example, one flyer—ostensibly a justification for the construction known as the “Free Frame of Reference,” an interactive Digger monument in Pan Handle Park—questioned the nature of “the public,” asking,

Where in the street can two fingers touch
Where in the street can you get out of neighborhoods
Where in the street can you escape the economic net
Where in the street can you trip out your door and smile at sincere
Where in the street can you hitch a hike down the block
Where in the street can you take off your shoes and sing and
dance without disturbing the death called peace?²²

In this broadside, the elusive and intriguing Diggers had put their fingers on dominant concern of the Haight-Ashbury neighborhood. This broadside articulated the larger concern shared by the Diggers and the Haight’s hippie population about the right to assemble, a right that residents of the area believed they held as citizens of a democratic society. This belief was part of the reason the Diggers supported the Mime Troupe—they were concerned with any institutional threat to their freedom of movement in the city’s parks. Throughout the 1960s, hippies in San Francisco used the streets and parks freely as available space, perfect for street parties and festivals, rock concerts, demonstrations or just for hanging out—all activities that asserted their presence in the city as a distinct community.²³

This was a fiercely contested development. Like the San Francisco Mime Troupe’s goal of unregulated access to the parks, the new counterculture’s public activity

²² San Francisco Diggers, “Where is Public at,” in ed., Noble, *Digger Archives*, www.digger.org, 2003.

²³ Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry Into A Category of Bourgeois Society*. Thomas Burger, Frederick Lawrence, Translation (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1989.)

was often in conflict with the city's traditional standards of public behavior and regulation. Hippies were already confronted with constant police surveillance—and often harassment—in 1966.²⁴ The Digger question, “where in the street can you take off your shoes and sing and dance without disturbing the death called peace?” probably resonated with those in the Haight neighborhood that fall.

In most early histories of the 1960s, the Diggers emerge as a small, mostly unorganized and mythologized collection of street people, actors and others who were, as Digger Peter Coyote has recalled, “the conscience of the underground.” They practiced a form of activist cultural politics that emphasized the idea of “free”: free people, free food, free goods, free events.²⁵ Todd Gitlin called them “radical existentialists” who employed the “theater of outlaws,” William O’Neill echoed a contemporary assessment of them as a “hip version of the salvation army,” and Martin A. Lee and Bruce Shlain categorized them as both a “gangster performing troupe” and “the avant-garde of American anarchism.”²⁶ All these descriptions capture major facets of the Digger phenomenon. The Digger rebellion against mainstream society was evident in outlaw activities like thievery, and some Digger programs, including the distribution of free food to hungry hippies in San Francisco’s Panhandle Park, resembled social welfare voluntarism. And though the Diggers’ activities were often the result of a cynical view of mainstream

²⁴ The community’s newspaper, the *San Francisco Oracle*, contains many references to police harassment and several notices asking residents to report any incidents to the *Oracle*. In addition to the notices in the first several editions of the paper, see Allen Cohen, “Haight-Ashbury Meets Police,” *San Francisco Oracle* vol. 1, no. 1, p. 1.

²⁵ Peter Coyote, interview with Terry Gross on *Fresh Air*, National Public Radio, April 28, 1998.

²⁶ Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (Toronto: Bantam Books, 1987), 222-223; William L. O’Neill, *Coming Apart: An Informal History of America in the 1960s* (New York: Times Books, 1971), 252; Martin A. Lee and Bruce Shlain, *Acid Dreams: The CIA, LSD and the Sixties Rebellion* (New York: Grove Press, 1985), 170; 173; Doyle, “The Haight-Ashbury Diggers.”

society and frequently tinged with confusion—and occasionally carried a connotation of violence—the Diggers were, in many ways, idealists with utopian dreams.

Yet there is more to the Diggers than such descriptions suggest. Recent studies have delved into the intricate and often contradictory ideas and fantasies of the Diggers. Although they grew out of and worked within what is usually described as the “drop-out” counterculture in San Francisco, the Diggers were not merely outlaws or community volunteers, nor can they be considered true anarchists. A careful examination of the activities and literature of the San Francisco Diggers during their most productive period, in the late fall of 1966 and early 1967, reveals an attempt to formulate and create a new form of cooperative community that would promote personal freedom. Michael Doyle has argued that the Digger project was an example of “the cultural politics of utopia” and that the Diggers tried to politicize the hippies of the Haight with “a politics that was expressed in the arena of everyday life.”²⁷ What is most striking about this project is the extent to which this goal of individual freedom and cooperative community depended upon and even took for granted the need for public space to achieve it.

Asserting hegemony over the public space of city streets and parks in San Francisco became a focal issue for the Diggers. The streets and the parks were not just their forum, but a crucial element in their plans to create a viable alternative community—a counterculture—in San Francisco. Peter Berg, one of the original San Francisco Diggers, recalled that, at the time, he compared the Haight-Ashbury to the Paris Commune, when Republicans in Paris staged a coup against the French government

²⁷ Doyle, “The Haight-Ashbury Diggers,” 112.

in 1871. “We wanted,” he said, “to take the streets, take the parks...we were liberating territory.”²⁸

Thus the Diggers did not always feel the need to apply for permits. Rather, their assumption of their right to utilize the parks and streets of the city grew from their desire to “assume freedom” and “create the condition you describe.” The Diggers did not provoke a sensational media trial, as had Ronnie Davis and the San Francisco Mime Troupe, to establish their claim to the streets and parks of the city; rather, as Martin A. Lee and Bruce Shlain argued, “the Diggers went about their business as if utopia was already a social fact and everyone were free.”²⁹ Through their emphasis on personal autonomy, embodied in their philosophy of “life-acting,” the Diggers extended the Mime Troupe’s challenge to the city’s regulation of public space. They initiated spontaneous street festivals and games, gave free concerts in the parks and streets, instituted free food and store projects, and staged theatricals in the streets. The Diggers became catalysts for a whole new way of thinking about just exactly who “the public” was, and how that public would manifest itself in the streets of the nation. Implicit in their struggle to utilize public space to this end is the political nature of public display. The Diggers helped define the counterculture as an agent of social and political change in the 1960s by creating public representations of the counterculture in the streets and parks of San Francisco.

Although membership in the Diggers was anonymous at the time, their theatrical activity and emphasis on public events highlight an important aspect of their emergence: many of the core members of the group had been members of the San Francisco Mime

²⁸ Peter Berg, *interview with the author*, San Francisco, May 24, 1999.

²⁹ Lee Shlain, *Acid Dreams*, 172.

Troupe. These included founders Emmett (Eugene) Grogan, Peter “the Hun” Berg, Peter “Coyote” Cohon, Judy Goldhaft, Brooks Butcher, and Kent Minnault, who had all been performers and writers with the Troupe. Peter Berg had adapted *Il Candelaio*, the play that sparked the Mime Troupe’s legal battle with the San Francisco Park Commission, and Judy Goldhaft was with the Troupe as a principal player for several years. Peter Cohon managed the touring company of the Minstrel Show and was one of the Troupers arrested in Denver for violating public decency during their performance. Other Diggers were Bill Fritsch, Eileen “Sam” Ewing, Phyllis Wilner, Bill Murcott, Sienna “Natural Suzanne” Riffia and Nina Blasenheim. The Mime Troupe’s commitment to activist theatre through the implication of audience members in performances was a source of training and inspiration for these incipient founders of the hippie counterculture in 1965.³⁰ Peter Berg has said that the arrest of Davis on August 7, 1965, was the “liquid event” from which the Diggers took their inspiration and began to consider other ways of bringing guerilla theatre to the streets.³¹

An important facet of the Digger phenomenon was an emphasis on anonymity, so Digger communiqués were generally listed as being authored by “the Diggers” rather than by specific individuals. Similarly, Digger events in the Haight were often leaderless and decentralized. This practice is related to historic roots of the name “the Diggers.” As others have documented, the San Francisco Diggers took their name from the English Diggers, a group of seventeenth century radicals.³² Led by Gerrard Winstanley during

³⁰ Doyle, “The Haight-Ashbury Diggers”; Peter Berg and Judy Goldhaft, interview with the author; Peter Coyote, *Sleeping Where I Fall* (Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 1998); Grogan, *Ringolevio*; Peter Coyote, interview with the author.

³¹ Peter Berg, interview with the author, May 24, 1999.

³² Grogan, *Ringolevio*, 237; Coyote, Introduction to Grogan, *Ringolevio*, iii; Lee and Shlain, *Acid Dreams*, 170; Gitlin, *The Sixties*, 224.

the final years of the English Revolution in the late 1640s, the English Diggers promoted the free cultivation of public land and the abolition of wage labor; according to Christopher Hill, the English Diggers “advocated a communist programme.”³³ The San Francisco Diggers shared with the original Diggers a philosophy that criticized capitalism, emphasized cooperation and sharing, and claimed the right to public land.

First, the group name placed the San Francisco Diggers within a tradition of radicalism. Second, it provided for individual anonymity; publications and street actions were claimed by “the Diggers” rather than individuals because individual fame could destroy notions of community.³⁴ According to Emmett Grogan, “free meant not copping credit.”³⁵ Third, anonymity emphasized that the ultimate responsibility of building community rested on all members and not one leader. Finally, the Digger phenomenon, with its emphasis on community building, was meant to be an inclusive one. Those in the counter-culture who embraced and implemented Digger ideals were encouraged to call themselves Diggers; “if you think you’re a Digger,” they wrote in a 1967 advertisement in the *San Francisco Oracle*, “come and do your thing.”³⁶ An additional, and crucial, benefit to the group name was that it prevented any sort of individual legal accountability for public actions. Individual anonymity under the umbrella of the “Diggers” released

³³ Christopher Hill, *The Century of Revolution, 1603-1714* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1966), 132.

³⁴ Davis, *The San Francisco Mime Troupe*, 70.

³⁵ Grogan, *Ringolevio*, 411.

³⁶ As written in “The Diggers Re-Open,” *San Francisco Oracle* #6: *The Aquarian Age*, n.d. Underground Newspaper Collection (microfilm), Dartmouth University. Although the issue containing this article is undated in the microfilm collection, a very similar article, with the same title in the same issue and dated February 1967 can be seen in Allen Cohen, *The San Francisco Oracle Facsimile Edition: The Psychedelic Newspaper of the Haight-Ashbury, 1966-1968* (Berkeley, CA: Regent Press, 1991), a bound collection of the full run of the paper. The two articles are not the same, however. The article that appears in the bound collection of the *San Francisco Oracle* does not contain this sentence. This discrepancy can be accounted for by the fact, explained in the bound collection, that the *Oracle* was often published in several different editions, which often contained editorial variations.

restrictions on behavior. Personal anonymity was therefore one way to “assume freedom.”

A Dutch group called the Provos provided one of the initial inspirations for the Diggers. Short for “provocative happening,” Provos emerged in 1965 when one of the group led a protest against the famous *Lieverdje* statue in Amsterdam, because it was sponsored by a tobacco company. This one-man statement against exploitative capitalism evolved into a series of Saturday night protest gatherings at the statue, which, at their peak, attracted as many as a thousand of the city’s unemployed youth. The Provos included artists, writers, leftist political activists and disaffected youth, and they practiced what the *San Francisco Oracle* called “political artforms.” They first gained international notoriety when they disrupted a royal wedding in the Netherlands in 1966, and *Oracle* writer John Brownson suggested that the Provos provided a model for a new kind of ecological politics, one that could rejuvenate urban life in San Francisco. “What do we have to counteract the destructive tendencies in our own environment?” Brownson asked. “We fill the Bay with garbage, the air with carbon monoxide, and living space with strangulating asphalt ribbons. It will stop only when we begin to care and act active as the Provos weekly happenings demonstrate.” His suggestions for future action seem, in hindsight, like predictions. He suggested “Sit-downs in the middle of streets at rush hours, using the streets for the only thing that they’re good for—dancing. Rally around statues and parks they’re ours, spread green throughout the city, renew life in the cities, a human renewal.”³⁷

³⁷ John Brownson, “Anarchy 66 Provo,” *San Francisco Oracle*, September 20, 1966, 3. In Cohen, *The San Francisco Oracle Facsimile Edition*, 19. For discussion of the Provos and their influence on the Diggers, see Doyle, “The Haight-Ashbury Diggers,” 1967, 95-102.

Such suggestions were clearly the province of the alternative media—the mainstream media did not portray the Provos as the purveyors of such a lofty agenda. The *San Francisco Chronicle* included an article on the group on its front page on October 3, but in it the Provos emerge as a destructive and suspect force without much popular support or appeal: “those who have been provoked by Provos usually describe the breed as half-beatnik and half-anarchist,” author Ferris Hartman wrote.³⁸ Ferris also described the Provos by writing, “take a beatnik, give him a taste for violence, and you’ve got a provo. They are long on the hair that covers the scalp, but short on the brains that should be underneath.”³⁹

The Provos did not appeal to mainstream sensibilities for the same reason that they were embraced by the counterculture. The Provos wanted to subvert the mainstream. Digger founder Emmett Grogan wrote in his autobiography that the Provos were a powerful influence in his thinking that fall, and certainly the Digger actions that began to occur shortly after the publication of that article in the *Oracle* qualify as “political artforms,” pointedly designed to demonstrate their particular philosophies and goals.⁴⁰

All of these influences—the English Diggers, the Dutch Provos, the San Francisco Mime Troupe—are apparent in one of the most important of the Digger activities, the dissemination of broadsides to the Haight community. The papers were first distributed throughout the Haight beginning in the fall of 1966 and, later, reprinted in counterculture publications across the nation.⁴¹ Though some Digger broadsides were

³⁸ Ferris Hartman, “The Super-Beatnik Dutch ‘Provos’,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, October 3, 1966, 1.

³⁹ Captain Leo Vleing in Ferris Hartman, “The Super-Beatnik Dutch ‘Provos’,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, October 3, 1966, 1.

⁴⁰ Grogan, *Ringolevio*, 245.

⁴¹ Gitlin, *The Sixties*; Paul Krassner, *Confessions of a Raving Unconfined Nut: Misadventures in the Counterculture* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993).

instructions on how to participate in Digger events, most were philosophical position papers explaining their vision of, or demanding the creation of, an alternative community, or questioning established mores and standards. Like all seemingly ephemeral and spontaneous Digger activities, the handbills were designed to raise consciousness, and simultaneously exemplify alternatives to capitalism, both, in Digger philosophy, necessary to create a new community.

Digger handbills were, first, an articulation of the Digger critique of the culture of capitalism in America. According to the Diggers, capitalism oppressed the human spirit because of its emphasis on the production and consumption of material wealth, and American culture and society derived from capitalism. Peter Coyote has since written that, to the Diggers, "the enemy was not Communism but a culture based on the unimpeded demands of capital that rolled over personal eccentricities and predilections, obliterated personal power and authority the way Hitler rolled over Poland."⁴² At the time, in an article entitled "Trip Without A Ticket" Peter Berg argued that

our conflict is with job wardens and consumer-keepers of a permissive looney-bin. Property, credit, interest, insurance, installments, profits are stupid concepts. Millions of have-nots and drop-outs in the U.S. are living on an overflow of technologically produced fat. Middle-class living rooms are funeral parlors and only undertakers will stay in them.⁴³

Diggers would replace capitalist values and culture with an ideology of "free," rooted in the repudiation of money. Money, the Diggers believed, was at the center of acquisitive capitalist culture, blocked free human exchange, and restricted the creation of community necessary to the development of personal freedom. This facet of the Digger critique resembles aspects of traditional dissent against modern industrial society.

⁴² Coyote, "The Free-Fall Chronicles" in ed., Noble, Digger Archives.

⁴³ The San Francisco Diggers, excerpt from "Trip Without A Ticket," in Krassner, ed., *The Realist*, 4.

According to John Robert Howard and Mary Howard, the Diggers were visionaries who "repudiated the notion that the right of people to satisfy their basic needs must be mediated by money...they repudiated the cash nexus and sought to relate to people in terms of their needs."⁴⁴ To achieve their ideal community, the Diggers suggested the abolition of money:

Money Is An Unnecessary Evil

It is addicting.

It is a temptation to the weak (most of the violent crimes of our city in some way involve money).

It can be hoarded, blocking the free flow of energy and the giant energy-hoards of Montgomery Street will soon give rise to a sudden and thus explosive release of this trapped energy, causing much pain and chaos.

As part of the city's campaign to stem the causes of violence the San Francisco Diggers announce a 30 day period beginning now during which all responsible citizens are asked to turn in their money. No questions will be asked.

Bring money to your local Digger for free distribution to all. The Diggers will then liberate it's [sic] energy according to the style of whoever receives it⁴⁵

This handbill, which reads today like a parody of more recent urban gun collection programs, is more than just a comedic missive. The Diggers do not simply repudiate the use of money; they relate the abolition of money to the creation of a communal society. At the heart of this message is a correlation between the possession of money and the violence of the city: money is corrupting. This is certainly not an original observation: the idea that money corrupts can be found within both Christian

⁴⁴ John Robert Howard and Mary Howard, "The Flowering of the Hippies," in Joseph Boskin and Robert A. Rosenstone, Seasons of Rebellion: Protest and Radicalism in Recent America (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1980), 264.

⁴⁵ The San Francisco Diggers, "Money Is An Unnecessary Evil," in ed., Noble, Digger Archives.

theology and communist ideology. This aspect of the Digger critique therefore resembles aspects of traditional dissent against modern capitalist society.

However, the connection they draw between money and urban violence is more than a simple warning against the negative influence of money. It is also a statement about the role of the individual in modern society. By claiming a causal relationship between the values which undergird the life of the individual and the consequences of those values for the larger community, the Diggers suggested that the individual can break free from the culture of capitalism and the restrictive laws of society by repudiating the cash system, and therefore create new values in order to solve old problems. They appealed to the desire for peaceful, safe and free communities by suggesting that it was within the individual's power to accept or refuse values and structures that create violence and social disparity: hence the origin of the Digger maxim "do your own thing."⁴⁶ The idea that society rests upon the personal responsibility of each individual is central to Digger ideology, and is best summed up in the Digger commandment "Give up jobs. Be with people. Defend against property."⁴⁷

The other major component of Digger philosophy was the belief that the bureaucratic apparatus of government, including many of the laws which regulated daily life, worked in concert with the culture of capitalism to restrict human freedom. In another handbill, they wrote:

You're born a citizen of a nation.

A citizen of a nation with rulers who legislate rules commanding you to be free.

Free to be conditioned in school until you're sixteen.

Free to be a compulsory soldier.

Free to pay sixty percent of your taxes to the military budget.

⁴⁶ On the Diggers' coining of this phrase, see Michael Doyle, "The Haight-Ashbury Diggers," 106.

⁴⁷ *ibid.*

Free to get legally married.
Free to work for a minimum wage.
Free to vote when you're twenty-one.
Free to vote for the democratic or republican party of your choice.
Free to buy clothes, food, and property from the 200 corporations which account for 45% of the total U.S. manufacturing in 1966.
Free to obey arbitrary curfews.
Free to have your freedom regulated by officers who are your friends and who protect you.

PROTECT you from obscenity.
PROTECT you from loitering.
PROTECT you from nudity.
PROTECT you from sedition and subversion.
PROTECT you from marijuana, LSD, DURGS. [sic]
PROTECT you from gambling.
PROTECT you from homosexuality.
PROTECT you from statutory rape.
PROTECT you from common-law marriage.
PROTECT you from abortion.
PROTECT you from lonely you.
PROTECT you from demonstrations against your protectors.

So, don't worry about surface reality. Afterall (sic), Terrance O'Flaherty in today's Chronicle, says you're the average fool on the street and have no right to speak for yourself. So trust society. Trust the specialists. And trust the merchants, especially the associates of the Psychedelic Shop, the Artist's Liberation Front, and the I/Thou. They have a dialogue with the protectors, who cordially greeted you 8:15 Thursday night, *for your own safety* and their own private property. Police are your friends. But don't by all means, don't ask George Metevsky [sic]-his answer would be a medley of incoherent shouts of fury.⁴⁸

This handbill is representative of the Diggers' poetic style and anti-establishment beliefs. Their critique connects the regulatory laws of the state with the needs of capitalism. It defines a relationship between those laws and cultural values that repress individual freedom of choice in personal matters, evidenced by their focus on such issues as marriage, sexuality and drug use. It also expresses the Digger desire to liberate the

⁴⁸ The San Francisco Diggers, excerpt from "A-Political Or, Criminal Or Victim Or...", in ed., Noble, Digger Archives. George Metesky was infamous for a string of bombings in New York City targeting the telephone company in the 1960s; such outlaw behavior targeting a major corporation was inspirational to many in the counterculture.

territory of the city for unregulated use: it was probably issued as a protest against the Haight curfew of September 1966, when the Diggers first formed.

The Diggers thought that the regulation of public space was among the ways that laws restricted individual autonomy and prevented the development of a free community. Like the Mime Troupe, the diggers believed that public spaces such as parks and streets should be used for activities that could bring people together. The flyer in which they asked about the nature of the "public" exemplifies this idea:

where is PUBLIC at?
where are PUBLIC streets at?
therefore an erection in the panhandle

the PUBLIC parks – here you can pitch a tent anytime.
PUBLIC streets on riot with truckloads of arms protecting the private property of super-charging merchants.
the PUBLIC beaches--here you can paddy-cake any old time.
PUBLIC streets where fantasy laws justify the concepts of LOITERING & VAGRANCY.
the PUBLIC schools--here you can be conditioned to PUBLIC opinion in order to express yourself in the PUBLIC consensus.
PUBLIC streets where agents patrol, undercoverd in 'hip' costumes.
the PUBLIC transport system--here drivers black and white riders for free.
PUBLIC streets where parking meters tick off legality.
the PUBLIC hospitals--here you can born, healed, passed away away.
PUBLIC streets where exhausting autos pollute the air and mutilate the people.
the PUBLIC housing developments--here you can live a life now done.
PUBLIC streets where loneliness crowds silent, up-tight sidewalks.
the PUBLIC officers--here is the understanding of PUBLIC service.

Where in the street can two fingers touch
Where in the street can you get out of neighborhoods
Where in the street can you escape the economic net
Where in the street can you trip out your door and smile at sincere
Where in the street can you hitch a hike down the block
Where in the street can you take off your shoes and sing and
dance without disturbing the death called peace?⁴⁹

⁴⁹ The San Francisco Diggers, excerpt from "where is PUBLIC at?" ed., Noble, Digger Archives.

In this broadside, the Diggers directly raised several issues surrounding public space. Critical of the possibility of fulfillment in mainstream America, the Diggers sought to create a culture in which individuals were free to sing and dance, parade, or simply socialize without harassment, on the streets of the city—just as much as they were interested in educating the hippies about the oppressive nature of capitalism. In fact, the two ideals are inseparable to the Diggers. In their view, the end of capitalism and regulation would make such freedom possible. Thus the Diggers married culture, politics and economics. Peter Coyote has recalled that they were therefore self-consciously political—not in a programmatic way as in Marxism, but in the sense that they thought of culture as politics, and that if you changed society’s culture, you would change its political relationships.⁵⁰ Michael Doyle has described this political philosophy as “acid anarchism.” However, it may more clearly resemble the kind of “prefigurative politics” scholars have pointed to as the dominant political trend of the Movement of the 1960s than it does an anarchistic goal of eliminating political structures.⁵¹ It was a politics in which individuals were cognizant of the interrelated nature of lifestyle and political position and attempted to create a society in which the achievement of specific goals, such as economic equality, was already assumed. In embracing and defining this position for the counterculture, the Diggers contributed to the politicization of the hippies and helped usher in the era of “personal politics,” when the public display of lifestyle could be, in itself, a political demonstration.

The Diggers united philosophy and method to politicize lifestyles by using "guerrilla theater" tactics learned in the Mime Troupe. These tactics were best explained

⁵⁰ Peter Coyote, interview with the author, May 20, 1999.

⁵¹ Doyle, “The Haight-Ashbury Diggers,” 113.

in "Trip Without A Ticket," published well after the Diggers had become famous in the counter-culture for their street theater. Peter Berg, who had been a Beat poet and playwright, and, according to Ronnie Davis, first coined the term "guerilla theatre," authored this treatise.⁵² A manifesto of beliefs and a call for action, this article represents the Digger opinion of modern life as a numbing combination of conditioned behavior and "somnambulistic" non-participation. In it, it is possible to see how the Diggers hoped that their street activities and programs could encourage participation in both the critique of the old society and the creation of the new through the technique of "life-acting," which Michael Doyle described as the way that the Diggers "took theatre into the streets" and "attempted to remove all boundaries between art and life, between spectator and performer, and between public and private."⁵³ The Diggers themselves drew a connection between this technique and their desire to break down the restrictions of American society:

Trip Without A Ticket

Our authorized sanities are so many Nembutals. "Normal" citizens with store-dummy smiles stand apart from each other like cotton-packed capsules in a bottle. Perpetual mental outpatients. Maddeningly sterile jobs for strait-jackets, love scrubbed into an insipid "functional personal relationship" and Art as a fantasy pacifier. Everyone is kept inside while the outside is shown through windows: advertising and manicured news. And we all know this.⁵⁴

The Diggers pointed out that this situation could change:

No one can control the single circuit-breaking moment that charges some games with critical reality. If the glass is cut, if the cushioned distance of media is removed, the patients may never respond as normal again. They will become life-actors.

⁵² Grogan, *Ringolevio*, 300; Gitlin, *The Sixties*, 223. Davis, interview with author, May 25, 1999.

⁵³ Doyle, "The Haight-Ashbury Diggers," 128.

⁵⁴ The San Francisco Diggers, excerpt from "Trip Without a Ticket," in Krassner, ed., *The Realist*, 3-4.

Theater is territory. A space for existing outside padded walls. Setting down a stage declares a universal pardon for imagination. But what happens next must mean more than sanctuary or preserve. How would real wardens react to life-actors on liberated ground? How can the intrinsic freedom of theater illuminate walls and show the weak-spots where a breakout could occur?

Guerrilla theater intends to bring audiences to liberated territory to create life-actors. It remains light and exploitative of forms for the same reasons that it intends to remain free. It seeks audiences that are created by issues. It creates a cast of freed beings. It will become an issue itself.

This is theater of an underground that wants out. Its aim is to liberate ground held by consumer wardens and establish territory without walls. Its plays are glass cutters for empire windows.⁵⁵

Certainly guerrilla theater was a form of consciousness raising: Don McNeill of New York City's *Village Voice* wrote that the San Francisco Diggers "saw the power of the penny whistle" and "blew minds by breaking subtle mores."⁵⁶ It was also a demonstration of the Digger creed that public action, specifically participatory theater like street festivals and games, created community bonds. The Diggers believed that participation in the street theater of free food, free stores, and the burning of money would turn participants into life-actors able to break free from the restrictive ways of thinking in modern America and bring them to the liberated territory of the mind. Those people could then challenge the system and create new ways of living, an alternative culture. As Peter Coyote recalled, "freedom, from our point of view, meant personal liberation. Our hope was that if we were skillful enough in creating concrete examples of existence [sic] as free people, that the example would be infectious and produce real, self-directed (as opposed to coerced) social change."⁵⁷

⁵⁵ *ibid.*

⁵⁶ Don McNeill, *Moving Through Here* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970), 125.

⁵⁷ Coyote, "The Free Fall Chronicles" in ed., Noble, *Digger Archives*, 3.

The Diggers began articulating that goal in the fall of 1966, when the city was bursting with cultural activity that challenged established laws and mores.⁵⁸ Throughout that year, the city was bursting with experimental public cultural activity. That summer, the brilliant and obscene—and brilliantly obscene—comic Lenny Bruce had appeared in San Francisco on June 24 in what would be his last performance before his death. Beat writer Michael McClure produced *The Beard*, his one-act play about celebrity and sexuality, at The Committee nightclub in North Beach, and on August 6 the actors in the play were arrested for obscenity. The play had already been subject to several scheduling changes due to the cold feet of the Actor's Workshop—which Ronnie Davis had left in 1962 during the debate about accepting corporate funds. The Workshop initially sponsored the production but feared that the play's "frankness would scare away the corporate interests who were to support the company's next season."⁵⁹ Marshall Krause, who had represented the Mime Troupe in its conflict with the Park Commission, now represented McClure and the actors.⁶⁰

The Acid Tests of the Merry Pranksters and the Mime Troupe's Appeals had been joined by regular rock-concert dances at the Fillmore and Avalon Ballrooms, organized respectively by rival promoters Bill Graham and the communal Family Dog organization, as the city's musical scene consolidated around the psychedelic style that forged the oft-heralded musical "renaissance" of San Francisco in the 1960s. The premier rock and roll bands of the Haight had developed followings and begun to expand their reputations

⁵⁸ Digger archivist Eric Noble believes that the Diggers emerged during the formation of the Artists' Liberation Front. Michael Doyle concurs, adding that the Hunter's Point riot and response were a key moment in the emergence of the group.

⁵⁹ Lee Meyerzove, "San Francisco Police Close Play & Jail Actors," *Los Angeles Free Press*, vol. 3, no. 33 (Issue #109), August 19, 1966, 1.

⁶⁰ *ibid.*

beyond the city. Finally, the Haight-Ashbury Neighborhood Vietnam Committee began to perform agit/prop anti-war operas and ballets from the back of a truck. The Corner Truck theatre began to perform these plays because “they became tired of seeing and reaching only the same faces at their debates and discussions.” In the spirit of the Mime Troupe, the Truck theatre actors said “We’re putting the peace movement and theatre out on the streets where people can see it.”⁶¹ Not surprisingly, Nina Serrano Landau who, with her husband Saul Landau, had influenced Ronnie Davis’ political growth, advised the Truck theatre. The Park Street police captain, who oversaw the Haight, said to reporters, “the word is out that San Francisco is the place for the far-out crowd.”⁶²

Not all residents embraced such activity. Though Bill Graham and others had struggled with the city over the dance permits, San Francisco did not witness a crackdown on the newly visible youth culture similar to that on the Sunset Strip in Los Angeles that year. Yet criticism of and opposition to such new cultural endeavors in the city increased throughout 1966. The police constantly monitored the area and made many drug-related arrests. Beginning in September, the hippies responded by trying to establish direct communication with the police through community forums and meetings held between the Haight shop proprietors, neighborhood residents and the police. These meetings were designed to alleviate growing tensions between the various elements of the Haight community.

The activity of the civil rights movement of the previous years had awakened many Americans to the issue of public protest and also raised questions about the

⁶¹ Jack Osbourne, “San Francisco Neighborhood Group Performs Instant Anti-war Operas From Back of Truck,” *Los Angeles Free Press*, vol. 3, no. 41 (Issue 117), October 14, 1966, 1.

⁶² For information about cultural activity in the city and the Haight in particular at this time, the best source is still Perry, *The Haight-Ashbury*, 77.

restrictions surrounding public behavior. In the Haight, questions about the rules surrounding public behavior translated into a concern over the harassment of hippies by police of the Park District station, which oversaw the neighborhood and tried to maintain control over the rampant marijuana use there. In September 1966, the hostility between the hippies and the police grew, and many attempts were made to address the growing problem through community meetings and forums. The very first issue of the *Oracle* was dominated by a front-page account of a meeting between Haight residents and the Police Community Relations Unit, where a group called Citizens Alert presented information about the failure of the police to respond to complaints about police brutality. The *Oracle's* position was clear. Despite its emphasis on the cooperative attitude of the two participating officers, it reported that "the meeting continually stumbled into the same impasse of police prejudice and hostility against the new bohemians in the Haight-Ashbury, which has caused illegal, unjust, and often brutal search and seizure."⁶³ In the same issue, the *Oracle* also covered a Mime Troupe production called "Search and Seizure" and authored by Peter Berg. The play was an examination of police power during drug busts. Clearly, an uneasy relationship was developing between the police and the new hippie residents.

The new residents also encountered resistance from other urban organizations and institutions. Worried about losing trade, some Haight merchants also became interested in containing the increasingly larger number of youth who made the area's sidewalks their territory, and in September they proposed that the neighborhood's new residents join with

⁶³ For accounts of the meetings, see "Haight-Ashbury Report Police P.R. Detail." *P.O. Frisco*, September 2, 1966, 2 (Facsimile p. 4); Allen Cohen, "Haight-Ashbury Meets Police," *San Francisco Oracle*, September 20, 1966, vol. 1, no. 1, 1 (Facsimile 17).

the police by sharing meals with them, in an attempt to reduce tensions.⁶⁴ In May, the old neighborhood theatre, the Haight Theatre, had become the Straight Theatre.⁶⁵ The backers of the venture planned to feature a dance hall, a Performing Arts school, a dance troupe, and psychedelic light shows. The owners hoped that the theatre's purpose would be "one of enlightenment, drawing out the creative energies of the people in the neighborhood." But the city managed to postpone the opening of the theatre for months as a long battle between the Straight's owners on one side of the battle and the older members of the neighborhood, the police department and the fire department on the other over the establishment of such an institution in the neighborhood. The owners of the theatre refused to abandon their struggle and carried on with the goal of opening a cultural center for the new community.⁶⁶

In November, Jay Thelin, who with his brother Ron owned the Psychedelic Shop, was served with an eviction notice for the shop, despite having a year to go on the lease. The eviction notice cited as cause the fact that the Thelins "encouraged or tolerated excess numbers of persons, who are shabbily dressed, having an unkempt appearance, to linger in and about the front of the premises you occupy, the adjoining premises of the owner, and the premises of the neighbors, upon the sidewalk and in the dwelling in

⁶⁴ Michael Doyle claims that this proposal came from the Haight Independent Merchants (H.I.P) in September, two weeks before the riot and curfew. However, Charles Perry writes that Ron Thelin, owner of the Psychedelic Shop, first suggested the "Take A Cop to Dinner" gesture, but doesn't mention H.I.P. He later writes that H.I.P. wasn't formed until November. Doyle, "The Haight-Ashbury Diggers," 110; Perry, The Haight-Ashbury, 91;108.

⁶⁵ The name of the theatre was possibly a humorous reference to the fact that its owners were anything but straight as far as drug use went. It may also have been a play on the fact that, in one of its many incarnations before it became a hippie cultural center, the theatre at one point was what Charles Perry called "a homosexual movie house." Perry, The Haight-Ashbury, 82.

⁶⁶ Perry, The Haight-Ashbury.

excess numbers.”⁶⁷ The hippies of the Haight were aware that their actions provoked police response, and their attempts to deal with and monitor the police suggest that they were determined to create a community in keeping with their lifestyle.

They were not without allies. Despite the mutual antagonism that existed between police and hippies in the fall of 1966, San Francisco’s cultural climate, rooted in a tradition of innovation and dissent, and the city’s neighborhood-based style of urban development, provided an opportunity for the creation of a distinctly alternative youth community. Several factors furthered this development. The Mime Troupe remained an important presence throughout that year, and when a group called the Artists Liberation Front emerged from the Troupe, it would have an important influence on the growth of the counterculture. That year, the Mime Troupe was in the throes of intense political activity. Following the trial of Ronnie Davis in late 1965, which caused the loss of city funds, the Troupe gained an even stronger reputation as confrontational and revolutionary. On May 10, 1966, members of the Troupe, including Ronnie Davis, Peter Berg and Peter Cohon, joined with other actors, dancers, writers and artists in the Bay Area, including *Chronicle* columnist Ralph Gleason, former Mime Troupe manager and now rock promoter Bill Graham, writers Richard Brautigan and Tillie Olsen, and journalist Hunter Thompson, to challenge the institutional control of the city’s cultural life by forming the Artists’ Liberation Front (A.L.F.) The Haight-Ashbury’s representative in the City Assembly, Willie Brown, Jr., attended, as he remarked, “to register my concern and participate in some kind of cultural change in San Francisco.”⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Zapata, “In Search of A Frame,” *Berkeley Barb*, November 25, 1966, 6; “Is Love Obscene in S.F.,” *Los Angeles Free Press*, November 25, 1966, 5.

⁶⁸ Perry, *The Haight-Ashbury*, 82; “Attendance roster,” Artists’ Meeting, Tuesday May 10, 1966. Davis Papers, Box 2, Folder 6: Artists’ Liberation Front; Nancy Scott, “Comment: San Francisco’s artists

The creation of the Artists' Liberation Front was a definitive moment in the consolidation of the bohemian movement in the city. Michael Doyle, author of a detailed account of the emergence of the A.L.F. and its influence on the Diggers, noted that at the first A.L.F. meeting on May 10, 1966, "one can detect here a new community forming out of a group of people from different backgrounds who were brought together by their commitment to fuse social activism and the arts." Several future Diggers, including Berg, Goldhaft, and Minault, were present, and it was there that "A.L.F. fabricated a model that the Diggers and the Free City Collective would themselves adopt over the next two years: cultural activism aimed at redistributing public resources for decentralized, egalitarian purposes."⁶⁹ Reporter Nancy Scott noted that the creation of the group was a historic development in the city that "may also mark the moment when artists decided to link their work with the problems of the grass roots community."⁷⁰ The kinds of activity waged by the Dutch Provos would not have seemed out of place to incipient activists in the Haight.

Into this environment arrived two new radicals, Eugene Grogan and Billy Murcott. In early 1966 Grogan, following his discharge from the Army, joined the Mime Troupe and appeared in a few productions. Billy Murcott, an old friend of Grogan's from Brooklyn, joined shortly thereafter. According to Peter Coyote, "the San Francisco Diggers were initially assembled around the visionary acuity of Billy Murcott, a mysterious childhood friend of Grogan's, who believed that people had internalized material values and cultural premises about the sanctity of private property and capital so

organize," *People's World*, May 28, 1966. Davis Papers, Box 2, Folder 6: Artists' Liberation Front. Willie L. Brown, Jr. is now mayor of San Francisco.

⁶⁹ Michael Doyle, "The Haight-Ashbury Diggers," 80-88.

completely as to have become addicted to wealth and status.”⁷¹ Grogan and Murcott soon engaged in many discussions with others in the Mime Troupe and A.L.F. that, Grogan recalled, “dealt with the freedom being assumed by young people in Haight-Ashbury and throughout the world.” Further, “they agreed that the ultimate goal of the Haight community seemed to be freedom and a chance to do your thing,” but freedom could only be achieved if individuals were capable of “drawing the line and living outside the profit, private property, and power premises of Western culture.”⁷²

In his autobiography, Grogan recalls that he and Murcott then “decided to get things real by challenging the street people with the conclusions they arrived at during these sessions. These challenges came in the form of handbills, which the two distributed throughout the Haight because they viewed the neighborhood as the heart of the new, alternative community they hoped to build. Grogan noted that the handbills cost only about \$1.50 per thousand, and the low cost enabled these papers to be immediate responses to public events or issues, and how those events and issues could either express or repress the Digger philosophy and plans for the new community.

The Digger papers were the foundation of Digger activities. They were also an important indicator of a growing political power in the Haight. Historians have long recognized the community role of the popular press. American historians, for example, have pointed to the effect of the popular press from the period of its emergence in the 18th century.⁷³ In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, his study of the

⁷⁰Nancy Scott, “Comment: San Francisco’s artists organize,” *People’s World*, May 28, 1966. Davis Papers, Box 2, Folder 6: Artists’ Liberation Front.

⁷¹ Coyote, “The Free Fall Chronicles” in ed., Noble, *Digger Archives*, 3. A note about spelling: Murcott’s name appears in sources as both “Murcutt,” which Gitlin uses, while Coyote writes “Murcott.”

⁷² Grogan, *Ringolevio*, 236-7.

⁷³ See, for example, Richard D. Brown, *Knowledge is Power: The Diffusion of Information in Early America, 1700-1865* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

development of the popular press and the rise of the bourgeoisie in Europe, Jurgen Habermas argues that the expansion of democracy in Great Britain, France and Germany in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was dependent upon the creation of a public sphere in which a newly literate and participant bourgeois public engaged in a dialogue about current events and gave voice to emergent interests in society. This created, in effect, a more expansive public sphere that enabled greater democratic participation.⁷⁴

This principle is applicable to the emergent counterculture of the Haight-Ashbury in the 1960s. Striving to express alternative goals within a society in which a small number of corporations dominated the popular media, including newspapers, and radio and television stations, the counterculture actively and consciously created an alternative press. This alternative press, as was true for the other movements of the 1960s, challenged the hegemony of mainstream media sources and expanded society's dialogue to include their ideals and proposals. The Digger broadsides were their first public protests, and like the general output of the underground press in the 1960s, both exemplified and articulated their goal of creating an alternative society through an alternative politics.⁷⁵

Contrary to impressions of the Diggers as anarchic and improvisational, the fact their street tracts demonstrate that they often put a considerable amount of effort into theorizing—if not planning—their activities. All of their subsequent activities were concerned on some level with a public engagement of the Haight community and the forces that competed to govern it. Martin A. Lee and Bruce Shlain wrote that “the debate

⁷⁴ Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*; Trans. Thomas Berger (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991). German edition originally published in 1962; ed. Craig Calhoun, *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997).

over dropping out versus political engagement was a moot point to the Diggers,” and evidence suggests that while the Diggers were mainly interested in personal initiative outside the political process, they were hostile to the drop-out philosophy prominent exhibited by many within the counter-culture, primarily because they felt that it undermined the goal of a new community.⁷⁶

Emmett Grogan, for example, wrote that “the papers were an attempt to antagonize the street people into an awareness of the absolute bullshit implicit in the psychedelic transcendentalism promoted by the self-proclaimed, media-fabricated shamans who espoused the tune-in, turn-on, drop-out, jerk-off ideology of Leary and Alpert.”⁷⁷ One Digger told the *Berkeley Barb* that the flyers were meant to point out the “gap between psychedelica and radical political thought.”⁷⁸ Hardly apolitical, the Diggers sought to politicize the counter-culture. In fact, the Digger project was in many ways centered on and designed at claiming public space for new cultural activity of the new community. The very first manifestation of the Diggers in September 1966 emerged as a specific response to the restriction of public behavior and the regulation of public space.

This first Digger broadside addressed the issue of police control by criticizing the Haight merchants’ suggestion to “Take A Cop to Dinner.” Grogan and Murcott, who created this first flyer, saw the plan as a way for the merchants to secure their profits at the expense of the freedom of the youth. They equated the merchants’ suggestion with a payoff: Charles Perry wrote that the flyer “rudely equated the idea with an invitation to

⁷⁵ Abe Peck, Uncovering the Sixties: The Life and Times of the Underground Press (New York: Citadel Press, 1985, 1991).

⁷⁶ Lee and Shlain, Acid Dreams, 171.

⁷⁷ Grogan, Ringolevio, 238.

bribe the police and join in the general corruption of society.” Grogan and Murcott then stated that, if hippies took a police officer to dinner, they would merely “feed his power to judge, prosecute and brutalize the streets of your city.”⁷⁹ From the outset of their activities, the Diggers did not accept the police as an authority to which they owed deference in the Haight-Ashbury—or in any other parts of the city.

The first public activity of the mysterious “Diggers” other than the dissemination of handbills was similarly sparked by a conflict over public space. In September 1966, a policeman in the Hunter’s Point neighborhood shot sixteen-year-old African-American Matthew Johnson in the back as he was running from a suspected crime. Despite attempts to mediate discussion between the city and the community, on September 27 the outraged Hunter’s Point community erupted one of the race riots of the era that expressed the anger and frustration of America’s oppressed urban African American communities in the 1960s. During the two nights of rioting, Mayor John Shelley of San Francisco—who himself was almost injured by a thrown brick—declared a state of emergency, called in the National Guard, and established an 8 P.M. to 6 A.M. curfew for the Hunter’s Point, Fillmore and Haight-Ashbury districts of the city.⁸⁰

Residents of the Haight-Ashbury responded in diverse ways. Contrary to popular memory, Haight-Ashbury was not a fully unified or idyllic Hippie mecca during the 1960s.⁸¹ Its various groups and organizations often had conflicting philosophies and

⁷⁸ “Burocops Proboscis Probes Digger Bag,” *Berkeley Barb*, October 21, 1966.

⁷⁹ “Take A Cop To Dinner Cop A Dinner to Take a Cop Dinner Cop a Take,” reprinted in Grogan, *Ringolevio*, 238-239. See also Perry, *The Haight-Ashbury*, 91; Doyle, “The Haight-Ashbury Diggers,” 110.

⁸⁰ “Politics: The White Backlash, 1966,” *Newsweek*, October 10, 1966, 27-29; “Burocops Proboscis Probes Digger Bag,” *Berkeley Barb*, October 21, 1966. Emmett Grogan, *Ringolevio*, 240-244.

⁸¹ Lee and Shlain, *Acid Dreams*, 178. Tom Wolfe was an early witness to this contradiction of the oft-trumpeted unity of the Haight-Ashbury when he noted that the various groups in the Haight were generally into their own projects and plans and that these would occasionally run in conflict of one another, as

styles. The merchants of Haight Street and the *San Francisco Oracle* advised residents to stay off the streets during curfew hours for their own protection, while groups like Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) held demonstrations against the National Guard and urged people to occupy the streets and confront the police. In his memoir of the event, Grogan recalled that white Berkeley radicals who had been rebuffed by the black community then tried to influence the hippies of the Haight, marching up Haight Street and urging them to “Stay on the Avenue of Psychedelics after the curfew hour and confront the fascist police.”⁸²

Grogan and Murcott disagreed with these responses. Believing that freedom was dependent upon individual choice, they felt that people should not respond to the curfew in either specific way, and posted flyers—mimeographed at the offices shared by the Mime Troupe and the San Francisco office of SDS—all over the neighborhood exhorting residents to “simply ignore the curfew and do or not do whatever they wanted.”⁸³ The result was a literal confrontation in the streets of the Haight. As Grogan and Murcott posted their opinions, they met up with an *Oracle* contingent including Michael Bowen. Bowen was a follower of LSD guru John Star Cooke and the center of a group of acid proponents called the Psychedelic Rangers.⁸⁴ He was also affiliated with the *Oracle*, and he spent the evening of the riot posting *Oracle* flyers advising residents to stay inside. Grogan and Bowen spent the evening tearing down each other’s flyers and putting up

exemplified by the relationship between the Pranksters and the other representative groups. He said of the Haight at this time, “it’s a little like the socialist movement in New York after the first world war—the Revolution is immanent, as all know and agree, and yet, Christ, everybody and his brother has a manifesto...has his own typewriters and mimeograph machines and they’re all cranking away like mad and fumin over each other’s mistranslations of the Message...” See Wolfe, *Acid Test*, 337.

⁸² Grogan, *Ringolevio*, 241-242.

⁸³ Grogan, *Ringolevio*, 242; Also see the account of this event in “Burocops Proboscis Probes Digger Bag,” *Berkeley Barb*, October 21, 1966. Also, Doyle, “The Haight-Ashbury Diggers,” 108.

⁸⁴ Lee and Shlain, *Acid Dreams*, 157-158.

their own until they met at a telephone pole and fiercely debated the issue, while the riot raged and the National Guard moved into the streets.⁸⁵

Allen Cohen, founder of the *San Francisco Oracle*, claims that the Diggers' response to the curfew was their "first public act" beyond the circulation of flyers.⁸⁶ This response also included a mock funeral for Johnson held on the steps of City Hall, after the new group carried a black-draped empty casket to the building. A spontaneous political reaction that dramatized the divisions between the new community and the mainstream authorities, the use of guerilla theatre to address specific incidents in San Francisco would become a hallmark of Digger activities over the next year.⁸⁷

The Digger protest against the curfew was representative of a new feeling about the right to use public space in the city for festivity in the fall of 1966. At the same time that Digger flyers began to appear in the Haight, the first of the A.L.F.'s activities got under way. "Free Fairs" were held in four of the city's neighborhoods that fall, including the Haight and the Hunter's Point areas. The Free Fairs were an example of the A.L.F. desire to bring the experience of the arts—and the control of them—to the public, and utilized the city's parks to this end, with the permission of the Park Commission.⁸⁸

⁸⁵ For different versions of this conflict, see Grogan, *Ringolevio*, 240-43 and Cohen in ed. Ken Wachsberger, *Voices From The Underground: Insider Stories of the Vietnam Era Underground Press*, vol. I (Tempe, AZ: Mica's Press, 1993), 134. For a description of the attempts police made trying to enforce the curfew in the Haight, see "The Action," *San Francisco Oracle*, Vol. 1, No. 2, n.d., p. 3. Although the article contains no dates for the events discussed, it fits the timeline of the riot.

⁸⁶ Cohen in Wachsberger, *Voices From The Underground*, 134.

⁸⁷ For Doyle's account of the incident, see p. 110-113. It has also been noted that Matthew Johnson was not the only casualty that week: the riot was a great blow to Governor Edmund Brown's reelection campaign from which Republican challenger Ronald Reagan, a champion of a "law and order" platform, benefited.

⁸⁸ A.L.F. application to the Park Commission for fairs at Bay View Park on October 1 and 2 and for the Panhandle on October 15 and 16 was approved on September 8, 1966. "Minutes," San Francisco Park Commission, September 9, 1966. San Francisco Recreation and Park Department McClaren Lodge Collection, 1966, 215. Ronnie Davis did not represent the A.L.F. at this meeting, perhaps to separate the image of the A.L.F. from the Mime Troupe in the eyes of the Commission, which was already hostile to the Mime Troupe.

The A.L.F. fairs were not an unqualified success. The *Oracle* was critical of the fair in Hunter's Point, one of two largely African-American neighborhoods in the city, claiming that racial politics resulted in a lesser degree of organization and commitment to the Hunter's Point fair that was held the weekend of October 22 than to other similar events.⁸⁹ However, the *Oracle* declared that the fair in the Haight's Panhandle was a huge success, during which the new community in the neighborhood rallied to create a new cultural moment:

There was something psychedelic about it all. A Hell's Angel on harmonica accompanying poet Michael McClure singing a Blake poem, long haired and robed yin and yang mixing in large hoops and swirls and arcs of graceful flowing from shade to sun. Round people, tall people, tan, black, white, grey people holding hands in circles of moving smiles...there were enough straight people to remind you that there are people who drive those black lines to work every morning and night Monday thru Friday and probably think 'Liberation' is something that was settled with the 'Bill of Rights.'⁹⁰

However, though the individuals who formed the Diggers may have supported the idea of publicly controlled arts like the free fairs, they were a distinctly different force in the neighborhood. They had an agenda beyond festivity, although festivity was certainly an important component of this project; they were much more committed to using artistic activity as a way to enact a cultural politics that, they hoped, would reshape American society's corrupt social forms and values. They did not just articulate a protest against specific laws, but instead purveyed a wholesale critique of mainstream culture and a desire to create a new one. "We're not foiled anymore by the romantic trappings of the marketers of expanded consciousness," they wrote.

Love isn't a dance concert with a light show at \$3 a head. It isn't an Artist Liberation Front "Free" Fair with concessions for food and pseudo

⁸⁹ Ed Bullins, "Hunters (sic) Point Love Rock," *San Francisco Oracle*, vol. 1, no. 3, n.d., 1.

⁹⁰ Don Hutton, "ALF Happening," *San Francisco Oracle*, vol. 1, no. 2, n.d., 4.

psychedelia. It is the Mime Troupe performing Free Shows in the parks while it is being crushed by a furious \$15,000 debt. It is Arthur Lisch standing under a blue flag in Hunter's Point scraping rust off the tin-can memorial to Matthew Johnson from two to five everyday. It is free food in the Panhandle where anyone can do anything with the food they bring to each other. It is love.⁹¹

Such comparisons have provided an image of cultural activists like the Diggers and the other Haight hippies as less political than others—in fact, as apolitical—because they did not, like other groups, angrily confront the establishment. Activities like the Love Pageant Rally are political in the sense that they assert a public position by a concerned and unified group, and violence or anger does not need to be present for such a position to be taken. The later development of a militantly radical and often violent Left in the late 1960s has unfortunately obscured the political nature of less aggressive interactions between radicals and mainstream authorities.

Thus, although both the *Oracle* and the Diggers would focus on public festivity as a means toward community building, the conflict between Grogan and Bowen during the curfew highlights both the divisions within the new community of the Haight-Ashbury and the problems inherent in any attempt to build a community there. The Diggers and the *Oracle* organization began at about the same time and were often in conflict with one another.⁹² The *Oracle* was a powerful voice in the Haight. Journalist Peter Bart of the *New York Times* argued in 1966 that the blossoming underground press reflected “two phenomena: the expansion of liberal minded professional and Bohemian communities in several major cities and the determination of aspiring young newspaper publishers to

⁹¹ George Metesky, “The Ideology of Failure,” *Berkeley Barb*, November 18, 1966, 6. This article was written by Peter Berg under the pseudonym George Metesky.

⁹² Lee and Shlain note the differences between the two organizations, *Acid Dreams*, 174-5. Peter Coyote confirms that the Diggers “did not use or refer to the *Oracle*.” Correspondence with author, April 1, 1999. Author's collection.

challenge established conservative metropolitan newspapers.”⁹³ The *Oracle* fits this description, not only because it certainly aimed to challenge the mainstream, but also because it functioned as a unifying element within the counterculture in the Haight. The paper advertised activities like rock dances, plays and other performances, printed interviews with such prominent counterculture celebrities as Timothy Leary and Allen Ginsberg, and provided an outlet for the blossoming psychedelic art popular at the time. Also, despite Digger criticism of the *Oracle*, the paper consistently advertised Digger projects. The newspaper was also the principal organizing agent behind the first explicit public declaration that the residents of the Haight had formed a new political constituency in the city. The Love-Pageant Rally was both a cultural event and a political art-form.

Held on Thursday, October 6, 1966—a weekday afternoon when most of the population of the city would be at work—the Love-Pageant Rally constituted the first truly public event of the counterculture in San Francisco. It was a protest against the passage of the law that made LSD illegal in California, but it was different from a traditional political protest. Allen Cohen has recalled that it was first conceived as a way to combat the emergence in the Haight of a negative pattern of protests at the police station against the increasingly frequent drug busts in the neighborhood: “we saw the futility of this endless confrontation with authority and decided that we needed to invent a new mode of celebration that would energize change more than anger and hate engendering confrontation.”⁹⁴

⁹³ Peter Bart, “Bohemian Newspapers Spread Across Country,” *Los Angeles Free Press*, September 9, 1966, 13. Originally printed in the *New York Times*, 1966.

⁹⁴ Allen Cohen, “The San Francisco *Oracle*: A Brief History,” in Cohen, *The San Francisco Oracle Facsimile Edition*, xxvi. This essay has also been reprinted in Wachsberger, *Voices From the*

In addition, the rally signified a growing sense of community identity among the few thousand hippies who showed up for the event. In letters to the Parks and Recreation Department and Chief Cahill of the police department, the "Citizens for the Rally" announced their intentions, stating "we would like a permit for our gathering. There will be no food or wares sold. Our party will be a celebration of community awareness and joy in communion with an international fellowship of those interested in the exploration of consciousness."⁹⁵ The flyers advertising the rally further proclaimed that the event was meant to "affirm our identity, community, and innocence from influence of the fear addiction of the general public as symbolized in this law."⁹⁶ It was, unlike the dance-concerts, free and held outdoors, open to anyone.

Such declarations held political import. In a letter of invitation to District Assemblyman Willie Brown, the "Citizens for the Love-Pageant Rally" declared, "our love-pageant rally is intended to overcome the paranoia and separation with which the state wishes to divide and silence the increasing revolutionary sense of Californians."⁹⁷ The public announcement of the rally also contained "A Prophecy of a Declaration of Independence":

When in the flow of human events it becomes necessary for the people to cease to recognize the obsolete social patterns which have isolated man

Underground, 134. Charles Perry describes how the protests against the bust at 1090 Page Street functioned as a catalyst to create a new kind of protest in The Haight-Ashbury, 95-96.

⁹⁵ Though there is no record of the group's request in the index to the 1966 minutes of the Park Commission, see the letter to the Park Department reprinted in Gene Anthony, The Summer of Love: Haight-Ashbury at its Highest, 120, and the letter to Chief Cahill, dated September 26, 1966, in Box 3, "Letter to the San Francisco *Oracle*" Folder in the "Hippies" collection of the San Francisco History Center. The letter from the Parks Department assenting to the request can be found in the same file, dated September 30, 1966.

⁹⁶ Love-Pageant Rally announcement, n.d. MS 3159, Folder 5: Miscellaneous 10-6-1966 to 5-13-1968. North Baker Research Library, California State Historical Society, San Francisco. It can also be found on the back page of the *San Francisco Oracle*, September 20, 1966, vol. 1, no. 1.

⁹⁷ Letter to Willie Brown, Assemblyman, from Citizens for the Love-pageant Rally, September 27, 1966. Box 3, "Letter to the San Francisco *Oracle*" Folder in the "Hippies" collection of the San Francisco History Center.

from his consciousness and to create with the youthful energies of the world revolutionary communities of harmonious relations to which the two-billion year old life process entitles them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind should declare the causes which impel them to this creation. We hold these experiences to be self-evident, that all is equal, that the creation endows us with certain inalienable rights, that among these are: the freedom of the body, the pursuit of joy, and the expansion of consciousness and that to secure these rights, we the citizens of the earth declare our love and compassion for all conflicting hate-carrying men and women of the world. We declare the identity of flesh and consciousness; all reason and law must respect and protect this holy identity.⁹⁸

This self-conscious adaptation of the Declaration of Independence was meant to assert both a cultural and political community identity for the emergent counterculture in San Francisco. The members of the Haight counterculture proclaimed that experience was the basis of humanness, and that as humans they had natural rights to pursue that experience without restriction by law or other authority. The statement recognized that this was a political act, referring to the proposed rally was “the first translation of this prophesy into political action.”⁹⁹ The rally became the prototype of many countercultural events of the 1960s; though a self-consciously political event, it seemed more like a festival than a protest. As the *Berkeley Barb* sympathetically reported, “bright pennants, like good-guy battle flags, and crude signboards on sticks moved through the bright crowd, towing their turned-on bearers gently under them. All started dancing.”¹⁰⁰ Live bands, including the Grateful Dead (formerly the Warlocks, the Acid Test band), and Big

⁹⁸ Love-Pageant Rally announcement, n.d. MS 3159, Folder 5: Miscellaneous 10-6-1966 to 5-13-1968. North Baker Research Library, California State Historical Society, San Francisco. It can also be found on the back page of the *San Francisco Oracle*, September 20, 1966, vol. 1, no. 1. For other descriptions of the event, see Lee and Shlain, *Acid Dreams*; Perry, *The Haight-Ashbury*; Hoskins, *Beneath the Diamond Sky*.

⁹⁹ Allen Cohen, “The *San Francisco Oracle*: A Brief History,” in Cohen, *The San Francisco Oracle Facsimile Edition*, xxvi. This essay has also been reprinted in Wachsberger, *Voices From the Underground*, 134.

¹⁰⁰ Love-Pageant Rally announcement, n.d. MS 3159, Folder 5: Miscellaneous 10-6-1966 to 5-13-1968. North Baker Research Library, California State Historical Society, San Francisco. It can also be found on the back page of the *San Francisco Oracle*, September 20, 1966, vol. 1, no. 1.

Brother and the Holding Company played the new psychedelic rock for free to the approximately eight hundred participants, all of whom had been encouraged in the flyer to bring such items as flowers, flutes, beads, incense, and pictures of “heroes of the underground.”¹⁰¹ The Merry Pranksters also came in their merrily-painted bus, although the Chief, Ken Kesey, on the run from a recent drug bust, was not with them.¹⁰²

The organizers of the rally stressed its non-confrontational nature, in which the image of the peaceful flower child was heralded and began to represent the new community. This note was carried by the local press as well. The Pageant was an “orgy of eccentricity,” the *San Francisco Examiner* recorded, at which the police, in what would soon become a standard response to such public events, made no arrests despite their awareness of marijuana use among the crowd.¹⁰³ As one reporter noted:

There was no aggression in this protest rally, if indeed it was a protest. None whatever. They said they were doing it in the spirit of love and that’s the way it was done. If this movement ever catches on it could be the single most subversive influence on Western civilization since Gutenberg... And what a pleasant revolution, with Golden Gate Park for a battlefield, and bare feet and music and sunshine for weaponry.¹⁰⁴

The peaceful nature of the event was also evident at City Hall, where the Haight delegation that arrived—with gifts of morning glory seeds, mushrooms and other psychedelic symbols that they hoped would “turn on” the Mayor—met with another

¹⁰⁰ “Lovin’ Haight,” *Berkeley Barb*, October 14, 1966, 3.

¹⁰¹ *ibid.*

¹⁰² October 6 was the first time that Kesey’s return from Mexico was reported, on the front page of the *San Francisco Chronicle*. Reports on Kesey’s participation in the rally vary: Tom Wolfe reports that he was there, others deny this. The *Sunday Ramparts* reported the rumor that Kesey watched the festivities from an apartment near the park. “Love Pageant Rally held to ‘celebrate’ new LSD law,” *The Sunday Ramparts*, October 23, 1966, 6. The upshot of this is that while Kesey may or may not have been able to sneak through the variously costumed crowd, it was the kind of event he should have attended—to many there, he was a participant in spirit if not body.

¹⁰³ Jerry Belcher, “Happening in the Park-The LSD Revolution?” *San Francisco Examiner*, Friday, October 7, 1966, 4.

¹⁰⁴ “Love-Pageant-Rally held to ‘celebrate’ new LSD law,” *The Sunday Ramparts*, October 23, 1966, 6.

constituency vying for space on the city hall steps. A Black Power press conference had been called to declare plans to continue with a Black Power rally at UC Berkeley despite official opposition. Jerry Rubin of Students for Democratic Action, who spoke at the press conference, was described as a fire-breathing radical, and the contrast between “the cohorts of anger,” as the Black Power advocates were described, and the Haight hippies only underscored the peaceful nature of the participants of the Love Pageant Rally. While observing the event, a passing tourist remarked “why, you don’t see anything like this in Philadelphia.”¹⁰⁵

Clearly the Pageant was also an unusual event in a city known for an open attitude toward alternative communities.¹⁰⁶ But that attitude was generally restricted to those alternative communities that kept themselves out of the public eye—the Beat movement, with its poetry reading and folk music performances at coffeehouses and bookstores was, in a way, a source of pride to the establishment. The Beats may have been critics of society, who led alternative lifestyles, but they kept it quiet and were, after all, artists engaged in literary activity.¹⁰⁷ Alternative lifestyles have often been considered an inevitable accompaniment to the artistic life and a frequent feature of diverse cities.

However, to many people these new, younger bohemians of the Haight didn’t aspire to any sort of ultimate artistic achievement. To some, their activities could not be justified or explained away as the natural fallout of the artistic life but instead seemed to many to be aimless and—worse—a real threat to mainstream standards of behavior

¹⁰⁵ Michael Grieg, “Mixed Emotions: The Scene at City Hall,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, October 7, 1966. P. 1, 14.

¹⁰⁶ Joseph Clancy in Michael Grieg, “Mixed Emotions: The Scene at City Hall,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, October 7, 1966, 14. Irwin and Debi Unger have described the Love Pageant Rally as a “glittering and euphonic spectacle in *Turning Point: 1968* (New York, Charles Scriber’s Sons, 1988), 410.

¹⁰⁷ Brian J. Godfrey points out that the Beats had tremendous value as lures for tourists, which created revenue for the city. Godfrey, *Neighborhoods in Transition*.

simply because it was so public. On the same day as the Love Pageant Rally, the *Chronicle* featured on its front page a story about a young married couple who were arrested and spent the night in jail for kissing in public on a North Beach street corner (in an interesting juxtaposition, the paper ran this story adjacent to an article announcing Kesey's covert return to the city following his flight to Mexico.) The San Francisco Police Department called the kiss, during which the offenders lay down on the sidewalk, an example of "lewd and dissolute conduct exposed to the public view."

When the couple was examined by emergency room doctors at the request of the police, who brought them to the hospital for examination, it was found that they were not drunk but exhibited "an apparent loss of inhibitions." The *Chronicle* article called the incident "a clash between youthful exuberance and adult legality."¹⁰⁸ What is clear is that, if the city was prepared to arrest those engaged in such displays of "youthful exuberance" as a passionate but harmless public embrace, the Love Pageant Rally was definitely something new. Thus the A.L.F.'s Free Fairs and the Love Pageant were generally successful community gatherings that signified the emergence of a coherent new community in the city, one that did not conform to traditional standards of public behavior.

Yet some in the neighborhood were not satisfied with merely protesting a law or affirming community. From the start, the image of the passive flower child was not unanimously supported as the best approach to creating a new community. The Diggers soon began more actively to forge a working community network that would address some of the needs of the hippies. Allen Cohen himself recognized that, although the *Oracle* had demonstrated that it was an important influence on the community, "there

were two visible handles on the symbolic kettle of the Haight as it boiled its way into history. They were held by the Diggers and the *Oracle*.”¹⁰⁹ But the Diggers were the only ones to have their hands on the *actual* kettle of the Haight: the free food program was, in both philosophy and structure, a Digger project. According to Cohen, the Diggers began serving free food a week after the October 6, 1966 Love Pageant Rally.¹¹⁰

In perhaps their best-known activity, the Diggers distributed food, usually soup or stew and bread, at 4 P.M. every afternoon for over a year in Pan Handle Park.¹¹¹ Hundreds of people benefited from the project: the Diggers fed up to 200 people on weekends that fall.¹¹² In order to participate, people had to pass through a giant yellow wooden frame called the "free frame of reference," which the Diggers constructed as a "simple piece of mental technology."¹¹³ The frame was designed to create consciousness and bring people together into the "liberated territory" discussed in the "Trip Without A Ticket" essay. According to the *Berkeley Barb*, participants passed through the frame "as part of the general festivity and communality of things."¹¹⁴ The frame was also meant to exemplify John Cage's observation that, when something has a frame around it, it automatically becomes "art"—in this case, a political artform.¹¹⁵

At the site, soup was ladled from large steel milk cans and served with bread that had been baked in one-pound coffee cans. The coffee cans—recycled, free materials—

¹⁰⁸ "Prisoners of Love: Man, Wife Jailed for Public Kiss," *San Francisco Chronicle*, October 6, 1966, 1.

¹⁰⁹ Cohen, *The San Francisco Oracle Facsimile Edition* p. xxix; Cohen in Wachsberger, *Voices From The Underground*, 137.

¹¹⁰ Cohen in Wachsberger, *Voices From The Underground*, 134.

¹¹¹ *ibid.*, 222; Cohen in Wachsberger, *Voices From The Underground*, 134.

¹¹² "Diggers New Game: The Frame," *Berkeley Barb*, November 4, 1966.

¹¹³ *ibid.*, Coyote, "The Free Fall Chronicles" in ed., Noble, *Digger Archives*, 3; Lee and Shlain, *Acid Dreams*, 173.

¹¹⁴ "Diggers New Game: The Frame," *Berkeley Barb*, November 4, 1966.

¹¹⁵ Peter Berg has affirmed the accuracy of this connection, which is often cited in works on the Diggers. Interview with Peter Berg. San Francisco, May 24, 1999.

produced bread that blossomed out at the top, resembling the mushrooms that were so much a part of psychedelic culture.¹¹⁶ Free food in the Pan Handle was the most visible and successful of the Digger activities; it was frequently listed in the "Always Continuing" section of the "Trips" community schedule in the *San Francisco Oracle*.¹¹⁷ It combined the theatrical principles and activist agenda of the Mime Troupe with the Digger critique of capitalism to address and ameliorate the problems of the new community. It had a second important consequence. The Digger free food program brought people together in the parks in yet another venue in which a shared consciousness of community could be further developed.

The Diggers referred to free food as a "social art form" and "ticketless theater" because they saw it as a way to promote and create the new community.¹¹⁸ But the project had another, very important, consequence beyond ideological illustration. It gave the Diggers credibility as community organizers because it demonstrated that they didn't just talk about building community. They actually provided for the welfare of those in the community, if only for a short time. While free food was, as Ronnie Davis noted, "as electric as free shows," and an important expression of community involvement, it was fundamentally different from free concerts or theater in the parks because it addressed a real material need.¹¹⁹ The Diggers criticized the system that provided for the wealth of some and the poverty of others, but went beyond criticism to implement alternative

¹¹⁶ Grogan, *Ringolevio*, 246; Coyote in ed., Noble, *Digger Archives*, 3.

¹¹⁷ Advertisements appear in the "Trips" section of *The San Francisco Oracle* #5: *The Human Be-in* (January 1967) on p. 18 and *The San Francisco Oracle* #6: *The Aquarian Age* (February 1967) on p. 26. In addition, although the "Trips" section is no longer a feature of the paper, there is an advertisement for the free food program in *The San Francisco Oracle* #8: *The American Indian* (June 1967), 36. These advertisements can be seen in the bound collection of the *Oracle* on p. 106, 140 and 238, respectively, in Cohen, *The San Francisco Oracle Facsimile Edition*.

¹¹⁸ The San Francisco Diggers, "Trip Without A Ticket," in Krassner, ed., *The Realist*, 3.

¹¹⁹ Davis, *The San Francisco Mime Troupe*, 70.

programs. In this sense they demonstrate a kinship with the original intentions of New Left groups like Students For A Democratic Society, which attempted to empower poor urban neighborhoods in their Economic Research and Action Project on 1964-65.¹²⁰

This kinship also highlights an important difference between the Diggers and other forces of the new community in the Haight, like the Mime Troupe and the *Oracle*. Rather than remain mere ideologues or advertisers for the revolution, the Diggers created working components of their ideal community. Free food was a way to build a working community that provided for itself and attempted to solve some of the problems that plagued it, like hunger and homelessness. Lee and Shlain noted "the Diggers focused on the immediate nitty-gritty concerns of their own community."¹²¹

This observation contradicts Lee's and Shlain's previously mentioned assessment of the Diggers as apolitical; if anything, this kind of community organizing is of a piece with the participatory democratic ethics and "grass roots" organizing attempts that dominated the New Left and Civil Rights movement in the early 1960s. The community based health clinic and breakfast program for school children later offered by the Black Panthers were similar expressions of political ideology and political actions.¹²²

According to the Diggers, their activities were a way of enacting "proposals for a new society based on new consciousness, and then putting them into operation as an example, rather than waiting for pie in the sky, rather than waiting for pie in the future, rather than waiting for Utopia to come through revolution."¹²³ The fact that they simply began a

¹²⁰ For more information on Students for a Democratic Society, see James Miller, Democracy Is In The Streets: From Port Huron to the Siege of Chicago (New York: Simon and Schuster, Inc., 1987).

¹²¹ Lee and Shlain, Acid Dreams, 175.

¹²² Harvard Sitkoff, The Struggle For Black Equality, Revised Edition (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993), 204.

¹²³ The San Francisco Diggers, "A Speech: Dialectics of Liberation," in Krassner, ed., *The Realist*, 7.

park program without consulting the city or applying for a permit demonstrates that they were truly interested in creating an independent community. Grogan said "the San Francisco Diggers attempted to organize a solid, collective, comparative apparatus to provide resources sufficient for the people to set up an alternative power base, which wouldn't have to depend on either the state or the system for its sustenance."¹²⁴ The establishment of numerous "crash pads" by the Diggers to house stranded runaways was a similar activity.¹²⁵ Undoubtedly, the Diggers established a lasting reputation in Haight-Ashbury because they were themselves "life-actors."

The Diggers sealed their reputation as cultural activists when they were arrested for successfully bringing the Haight community together for a spontaneous street party on Halloween, 1966. The relationship between the new community of the Haight and the city's law enforcement officials had grown progressively tense throughout the year as the community began to assert itself and become more visible. The Love Pageant Rally was one response to the problem of police-community relations, but the Diggers had another. Rather than try to foster a positive relationship with what they viewed as oppressive institutions, the Diggers sponsored activities in the fall of 1966 designed to break down restrictions on public behavior and re-claim public space from regulatory laws. Such events as festivals and concerts held in the streets of Haight-Ashbury and the distribution of free food in the park were all deliberate attempts to claim public space to bring the community together. These events were part of the Digger effort to "assume freedom."¹²⁶

¹²⁴ Grogan, *Ringolevio*, 303; Lee and Shlain paraphrase Grogan in *Acid Dreams*, 173-4.

¹²⁵ Gitlin, *The Sixties*, 228; Lee and Shlain, *Acid Dreams*, 175.

¹²⁶ Peter Coyote, interview with the author, May 20, 1999; Peter Berg and Judy Goldhaft, interview with the author, May 24, 1999.

However, as the "Full Moon Public Celebration of Halloween" would show, this attitude meant confrontation with the established powers of the city.

Halloween of 1966 was an eventful day for the blossoming counterculture in San Francisco. The record heat wave may have contributed to a festive atmosphere and many activities were planned to mark the occasion.¹²⁷ A rock dance was held by the Family Dog promoters and headlined by the Quicksilver Messenger Service. Ken Kesey and the Franksters held their "Acid Test Graduation" ceremony that day. For their event, the Diggers distributed about 1500 flyers in the Haight and 500 in Berkeley, and attracted about 600 participants.¹²⁸ In the flyers, the Diggers declared that "the public is any fool in the street" and outlined instructions for something called "(Two) Square Events," to take place at 5:30 pm.¹²⁹ At about five in the afternoon, the Diggers set up the bright yellow Frame of Reference at the intersection of Haight and Ashbury streets, the heart of the neighborhood, and participants were encouraged to don necklaces with miniature yellow frames on them, to look through and provide an individual "frame of reference." At the appointed time, the (Two) Square Events began. They turned out to be something called the "Intersection Game," in which people were encouraged to run in different directions through street intersections in order to form as many polygons as possible. The goal of this game was disruption of the daily street routine.¹³⁰ A secondary, perhaps unplanned or even unconscious goal, was a declaration of the ownership of the streets by the hippie residents of the area.

¹²⁷ "Record S.F. Heat, More Due," *San Francisco Chronicle*, October 31, 1966, 1. The warm, clear day was certainly conducive to the outdoor activities planned by the Diggers.

¹²⁸ "Diggers New Game: The Frame," *Berkeley Barb*, November 4, 1966.

¹²⁹ The Diggers, "Public Nonsense Nuisance Public Essence Newsense Public News," broadside in ed., Noble, *Digger Archives*.

¹³⁰ Peter Berg and Judy Goldhaft, interview with the author, May 24, 1999.

The Diggers further demonstrated that public events were both a basic component of the Digger philosophy and the actual practice of that philosophy when they performed a puppet show written by Peter Berg. Called "Any Fool on the Street," players wore larger-than-life size puppet costumes—borrowed from the Mime Troupe—and acted out a dialogue on the difference between being "in" and "out" on the street: a puppet on one side of the Frame of Reference declared himself "in" while telling the other puppet that it was "out." They then exchanged places and continued the dialogue, encouraging bystanders to join in, all the while illustrating the importance and relevance of perspective.

Street theatre became guerilla theatre when one of the eight-foot puppets was threatened with arrest for "blocking a public thoroughfare." Around six o'clock, several police cars and a paddy wagon had arrived at the scene. To the great amusement of the crowd, a policeman was drawn into an exchange with one of the puppets. The policeman informed the puppet (and presumably the man underneath it) that it would be arrested for blocking a public thoroughfare. The puppet responded by first asking "who is the public?" and then stating "I declare myself public—I am a public. The streets are public—the streets are free."¹³¹ It was, in a different setting, the same argument Ronnie Davis had posed to the Park Commission in 1965. Residents of the city, the puppet seemed to argue, who compose "the public" of the city, have a right to utilize the public space of the city for any activities they desired.

This argument was as unsuccessful with the police as it had been with the Park Commission. Puppeteers Robert Morticello, Emmett Grogan, Peter Berg, and Kent

¹³¹ "Diggers New Game: The Frame," *Berkeley Barb*, November 4, 1966. See also Doyle, "The Haight-Ashbury Diggers," 131-133.

Minnault and Butcher Brooks, who had begun leading the crowd in a protest against the police intervention, were put under arrest, as was another man who told the police “these are our streets.” While the crowd outside the wagon chanted “Frame-up, Frame-up,” the Diggers in the van chanted back “Pub-lic, Pub-lic.” Many of the crowd remained to continue the Intersection game—and later to dance in the street to recorded music supplied by the Diggers—while the men were carried off by the police, brought to the Park Station house, and charged with violating penal code 370, creating a public nuisance. Though they could not raise the required \$625 bail, they were released without it through the assistance of the head of a V.I.S.T.A. program and an affidavit from Ronnie Davis testifying that they all had connections to San Francisco and were therefore not going to flee the charges.¹³²

The Diggers were charged with a misdemeanor, but, according to Emmett Grogan, the whole thing was a lark. He felt, like the others, “that it was a ‘fun bust’...this bust was just a goof...a misdemeanor punishable by a small fine, a reprimand, and/or a couple of days in the city jail, not a term behind bars in some penitentiary.”¹³³ However, there was a distinct possibility that they would face more severe punishment.

Tensions between the psychedelic community and the rest of the city, like those between the younger generations and civil authorities everywhere, were on the rise that fall. On November 15, the Psychedelic Shop was raided for selling poet Lenore Kandel’s collection of erotic poetry, *The Love Book*. This was widely interpreted as an attack against the new culture and lifestyle of the hippies of the Haight, especially since the

¹³² “Diggers New Game: The Frame,” *Berkeley Barb*, November 4, 1966; Grogan, *Ringolevio*, 250-251; Doyle, “The Haight-Ashbury Diggers,” 131-133.

owner of the shop was Ron Thelin, publisher of the *Oracle*, and the man arrested at the shop in connection with the raid was Allen Cohen, editor of the paper.¹³⁴ Kandel, soon to become a member of the inner core of the Diggers, joined another poet charged with violating obscenity laws, Michael McClure, in a public reading of and discussion about their work a week after the bust at San Francisco State College.¹³⁵ Then on November 17, the City Lights bookstore in North Beach owned by Lawrence Ferlinghetti was similarly busted for selling *The Love Book*—an event that must have seemed painfully familiar to Ferlinghetti, who had been arrested in the fifties for publishing and selling Allen Ginsberg's *Howl*.¹³⁶

Clearly, the public culture of the hippies, with its growing emphasis on experimentation with drugs, open sexuality, and breaking down restrictions on personal behavior, was not seen by all the residents of the city as a way to create a perfect society. Instead, some felt threatened by the hippies in the way that the Beat movement had threatened them before it became a selling point for the tourist industry. The hippies questioned and tested the limits of regulations on public speech and behavior. The increasing influence of conservative politics throughout the state was apparent in the recent electoral success of gubernatorial candidate Ronald Reagan, who in his campaign had often decried the permissiveness of Bay area youth.¹³⁷

This conservatism was evident on the federal level as well. On November 14, the Supreme Court in *Adderly v. Florida* had sent an important message to those engaging in

¹³³ Grogan, *Ringolevio*, 251.

¹³⁴ Perry, *The Haight-Ashbury*, 106-107. See also "S.F. Mayor Assails Sale of Sex Book," "Today's Latest Edition," *Los Angeles Herald Examiner* A-2.

¹³⁵ Perry, *The Haight-Ashbury*, 107-108.

¹³⁶ Perry, *The Haight-Ashbury*, 107.

¹³⁷ Ronald Reagan, "Cow Palace" speech, May 1966.

public activity for any reason when, in an apparent reversal of many years of supporting civil rights protest, it upheld the trespassing convictions of 32 students arrested on private property while protesting segregation. The decision suggested that public activity, no matter what the cause, had to be governed by procedures that privileged ownership over rights. Dissenting Justice William O. Douglas argued that laws against trespassing could now be used as “a blunderbuss to suppress civil rights.”¹³⁸ Clearly, the legal and legislative support from the federal government that had bolstered the progress of the civil rights movement was waning, perhaps as a result of a pervasive sense of exhaustion after years of public discord, but probably also because of the increasing growth of political conservatism in the United States.

Such changes suggest that the hippies of San Francisco, like the New Left activists on the Berkeley campus, might have to fight to establish themselves as legitimate members of the community, with the same political rights as any other. The hippies of the Haight entered the political scene at an interesting moment, after the heights of the fervor of the public protests of the civil rights movement had already been reached, but just before most of the protests against the Vietnam war had moved from the campuses to the nation’s streets. At this moment, a tug-of-war began to brew between American youth and the forces of law and order. Although confrontations between Haight hippies and city authorities never reached the levels of violent antagonism that existed between civil rights workers and southern authorities, or later between police and antiwar protesters, the relationship between the hippies and the city had never been good, as exemplified by the Love Pageant Rally’s goal of introducing a different dynamic

¹³⁸ *Adderly et al. v. Florida*, 385 U.S. 39; 87 S. Ct. 242; U.S. Lexis 238; 17L. Ed. 2nd 149; “Trend Reversed: Supreme Court Rules Against Rights Pickets,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, November 15, 1966, 1.

between the Haight and the police of the city. Thus, as “fun” as their own arrest seemed, the Diggers were savvy enough to take the issue seriously: they were represented by an attorney from the Lawyer’s Guild, a radical civil liberties group, and were prepared to fight the charges. They believed that the city “didn’t have a leg to stand on” constitutionally.¹³⁹ They were determined to assert their belief that the city streets also belonged to them.

They were spared any punishment when Municipal Court Judge Elton C. Lawless dropped the charges against them on November 29, as urged by Assistant District Attorney Arthur Schaffer, who argued that they should be dropped “in the interests of justice.”¹⁴⁰ After submitting to what Peter Berg recalls as paternalistic and patronizing comments from Judge Lawless, they were released.¹⁴¹ The five men registered their agreement with the court’s decision with an impromptu celebration and attracted the attention of *San Francisco Chronicle* photographer, who snapped the jubilant Diggers in characteristically irreverent poses on the courthouse steps.¹⁴²

The Diggers had every reason to be both jubilant and irreverent. They had now established their legal right to continue public festivity in the Haight. As Michael Doyle has noted, “to the Diggers it was a demonstration of their power to confound the authorities and stake their claim on the urban turf.”¹⁴³ More than a prize in a turf war, though, their political claim to the use of public space would be adapted and expanded upon by the community as a whole. The unique development of the Diggers brought the issue of public space to the community, and in doing so the Diggers further extended the

¹³⁹ Peter Berg, May 24, 1999. Interview with the author.

¹⁴⁰ “In the Clear,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, November 30, 1966, 1.

¹⁴¹ Peter Berg, May 24, 1999. Interview with the author.

¹⁴² Grogan, *Ringolevio*, 253; “In the Clear,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, November 30, 1966, 1.

growing political culture of the hippies in the Haight-Ashbury. Conscious of issues surrounding the use of public space, chanting back to the police, fighting arrest, instituting law suits, or simply defying public laws about loitering or commands to disperse, the hippies of the Haight responded to mainstream authorities from within the framework of a solidifying political position that grew from their public culture. The emergence of the counterculture as a national phenomenon would be fueled by a great frequency of this kind of public activity throughout the rest of 1966.

¹⁴³ Doyle, "The Haight-Ashbury Diggers," 133.

CHAPTER FOUR

“EVERYBODY GET TOGETHER”:

THE POLITICAL CULTURE OF THE HAIGHT-ASHBURY COUNERCULTURE

In the fall of 1966, a few hundred miles to the south of San Francisco, the youth of Los Angeles erupted in an open rebellion against the city's curfew and the authorities' crackdown on street gatherings on the famed Sunset Strip. The different demographic, spatial and political circumstances of Los Angeles, and the organized and collaborative attempts to curb public activities there, did not create a climate favorable for the creation of a cohesive a countercultural community similar to the one that flourished in San Francisco's Haight-Ashbury. The youth that gravitated to the scene on the Sunset Strip encountered resistance to their attempt to define themselves as a distinct community of interests.¹ Such resistance, combined with the differing geographical and logistical situations faced by the two youth communities, prevented the creation of a unified hippie political culture in Los Angeles.

By contrast, events in late 1966 and early 1967 further solidified the political style and influence of the Haight-Ashbury counterculture in San Francisco. Emboldened by the vindication of the Diggers arrested on Halloween, and impervious to the concerns of the police and other residents of the neighborhood, the hippies of the Haight asserted

¹ David McBride, "On the Fault Line of Mass Culture and Counterculture: A Social History of the Hippie Counterculture in 1960s Los Angeles," Ph.D. Dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles, 1998.

their claim to the public space of the city in even more flagrant demonstrations of their determination to create an alternative culture. Unlike the Los Angeles youth, Haight hippies had already established themselves as a distinct community before significantly rallying against civil authorities in contests over public space. The Death of Money/Birth of the Haight parade on December 17, 1966, the New Year's Wail on January 1, 1967, and finally the Human Be-in on January 14, 1967 challenged any effort to deny the rights of the hippies to gather in public. Hippies themselves defended their rights to hold these events in the language of the ideology of "free" as defined by the Diggers. The counterculture of the Haight insisted that the public space of the city—parks, streets and squares—was available for the exercise of their community rituals and celebrations. In this moment of prefigurative politics, San Francisco witnessed the crystallization of a unique political culture. By the Human Be-in of January 1967, a fully developed ideology regarding public space was in place.

The ramifications of these events were manifold. First, the public nature of hippie events, like those on the Sunset Strip, advertised to observers beyond the city that something was happening in the Haight-Ashbury district of San Francisco that defied convention. Mickey Hart, who would soon join the Grateful Dead as a percussionist, at the time owned a music shop in San Carlos, about 45 minutes outside the city. He remembered that the Haight-Ashbury quickly gained a reputation through the posters for the dance concerts that he put up in his shop windows. "The psychedelic posters became the totem," he recalled, "that was the call, you know, the call of the weird. They were just as much art as they were a clarion call...They were challenging. That sort of sent the smoke signals—from that poster art, you could almost hear the music or at least the

weirdness of the scene, it felt like there was some revelries going on in the city. It was very attractive, the poster art. The word was going up the peninsula.”² The posters for the dance concerts were followed by posters that advertised new events, as the freewheeling hedonism of the dance halls moved into the shops, streets, parks and press of the city. These posters were part of the hippie communication process.

The events these posters advertised, including most famously the Human Be-in, demonstrated a new willingness on the part of young people to publicly embrace activities once considered unacceptable. These public activities would dramatically alter the landscape of culturally acceptable behavior, and as part of the sexual revolution, contribute to changing standards of public behavior. More importantly, though, public events had political import. Through its public events, the counterculture created a sense of self-identification as a distinct constituency. With that consciousness established, the counterculture as a cohesive community mounted a challenge to the authority of the mainstream, market-driven ethos in America and the ability of the civil authorities to control public behavior and define the nature of public space. These were also the goals of the New Left, to which the counterculture has often been unfavorably compared as “apolitical.” The public activities of the counterculture helped both to forge a community consciousness expressed in its political culture and to implement that culture as a political weapon against further restrictions of public activities.

The Diggers spearheaded many of these challenges. Their legal victory in the Halloween arrest encouraged a widespread disregard of the city’s restrictions of the use of the streets. The hippie population of the neighborhood willingly and gleefully collaborated in the venture to create a new kind of “public.” Digger activities increased

² Mickey Hart, interview with the author. February 16, 2001.

and diversified throughout the remainder of the year and into 1967. On December 3, they opened a free store on Page Street, one block off Haight Street.³ The store was called the Free Frame of Reference, and was another clear example of the Diggers' hope to create an alternative to the culture of capitalism. Like the free food program, the free store was intended to help people in the community repudiate money and assume the ideology of "free." The store was stocked with household goods, toys, clothes and other donated goods, and was also a community-volunteering site: doctors donated their time to a free medical clinic, and legal services were offered through the store.⁴ The Diggers even planned to start sewing and baby-sitting circles to meet community needs.⁵

Like the free food program, the store operated under the Digger motto "it's free because it's yours."⁶ The Diggers hoped that making available goods at a "store" where everything was free, without cashiers, managers, or other obvious authorities would dramatize and illustrate their goal of a truly equal society. They opposed the commercialism of Haight merchants who hawked psychedelic wares because they believed that these operations exploited the growing Haight population of drop-outs, runaways and freedom-seekers. The new merchants of the Haight followed the lead of the Thelin brothers, Ron and Jay, who owned the Psychedelic Shop and backed the *Oracle*. Denied membership in the traditional Haight Merchants Association because they were considered purveyors of a threatening new lifestyle, the Thelins, along with other new merchants, created the Haight Independent Proprietors (HIP) on November 22,

³ Emmett Grogan, *Ringolevio: A Life Played for Keeps* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1972), 264-5; Digger advertisement, *The San Francisco Oracle* #5: *The Human Be-in*, p. 5. See also Allen Cohen, ed. *The San Francisco Oracle Facsimile Edition: The Psychedelic Newspaper of the Haight-Ashbury, 1966-1968* (Berkeley, California: Regent Press, 1991), 93.

⁴ Grogan, *Ringolevio*, 298.

⁵ "Diggers New Game: The Frame," *Berkeley Barb*, October 21, 1966. See also Grogan, *Ringolevio*.

⁶ The San Francisco Diggers in Krassner, ed., *The Realist*, 22; George Metevsky, "Delving the Diggers," *Berkeley Barb*, October 21, 1966.

1966.⁷ The Diggers, however, saw the HIP as an extension of the same repressive capitalism that had corrupted mainstream society. The Free Store was their alternative:

Diggers assume free stores to liberate human nature. First free the space, goods and services. Let theories of economics follow social facts. Once a free store is assumed, human wanting and giving, needing and taking, become wide open to improvisation...No owner, no Manager, no employees and no cash register. A salesman in a free store is a life actor. Anyone who will assume an answer to a question or accept a problem as a turn on...when materials are free imagination becomes currency for the spirit.⁸

Yet the Digger ideal was complicated by contradictory attitudes about money and leadership in the community. Diggers refused to purchase the goods they needed to run free programs, and informed one potential contributor to the free food program "if you have to buy it, the DIGGERS don't want it!"⁹ But the realities of trying to live without money in a cash-based society led to inconsistencies. The raw materials necessary for the flyers and the free food project, and rent for the free store, all cost money, so the Diggers often stole what they needed, "hustled" money and surplus goods from produce and farmers' markets, and solicited donations.¹⁰ In his autobiography, Emmett Grogan recalled being arrested for stealing meat as a less "fun" bust than the one on Halloween.¹¹

Interestingly, the combination of Digger thievery and their emphasis on community building led to their reputation as "Robin Hoods," which fostered their outlaw image.¹² Of course, this thievery also indicated a dependence on mainstream society and revealed that, like the Beats before them, their particular form of protest was often enabled by the general economic prosperity of the nation after World War II. That

⁷ Charles Perry, *The Haight-Ashbury: A History* (New York: Vintage Books, 1985) 108.

⁸ The San Francisco Diggers, "Trip Without A Ticket," in Krassner, ed. *The Realist*, 3.

⁹ George Metevsky, "Delving the Diggers," *Berkeley Barb*, October 21, 1966.

¹⁰ Grogan, *Ringolevio*, 249; 417.

¹¹ *ibid.* 265-266.

¹² Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (Toronto: Bantam Books, 1987, 222-223).

dependence was even more evident in the fact that the communal Digger living arrangements were frequently funded by welfare checks issued to Digger women.¹³ And the Diggers' outlaw image was further complicated by the fact that, for some of their programs, they worked with established authorities, including a church in the Haight neighborhood, that were also trying to provide for the hundreds of people coming to the Haight at the height of the counterculture.¹⁴ Still, the free store was clearly an attempt to raise consciousness about a new set of community values and generate the creation of those values through example.

The store also provided a venue through which the Diggers could enter the public sphere of the Haight. By engaging in the transfer of goods, they created a dialogue with others. The many functions of the store, including child and medical care, made it a de facto community center, a place of congregation and dialogue. As Michael Doyle wrote, the free store "provided the only institutionally unaffiliated and non-commercial gathering place indoors for people to meet and exchange goods, ideas and services. Because of this singular status, it constituted the nucleus of the alternative society the Diggers aspired to create out of the teeming Haight-Ashbury scene."¹⁵ The Digger store was a criticism of mainstream capitalism manifested in an alternative outlet for interaction and exchange.

In their zealous determination to create a new kind of community, the Diggers even aimed their critical attacks at some aspects of the counterculture itself. The Diggers targeted Leary and drugs, the trappings of hippiedom, and the motives of the

¹³ Peter Coyote, interview with Terry Gross on *Fresh Air*, National Public Radio. April 28, 1998.

¹⁴ Alex Forman, "San Francisco Style: The Diggers and the Love Revolution," *Anarchy* 77, vol. 7 no. 7, July 1967, in ed., Eric Noble, *The Digger Archives*; www.digger.org, 2003.; Grogan, *Ringolevio*, 288; 292.

¹⁵ Michael William Doyle, "The Haight-Ashbury Diggers and the Cultural Politics of Utopia, 1965-1968," Ph.D. Dissertation: Cornell University, 1997), 149.

neighborhood's rock bands, which had become the most prominent symbols of the new youth movement. The combination of electrified folk rock and psychedelic sounds and imagery in the music of San Francisco bands like the Charlatans, the Jefferson Airplane, Big Brother and the Holding Company, Quicksilver Messenger Service and the Grateful Dead, was central to this moment in American cultural history.

The rock and roll of the Haight-Ashbury counterculture—its lyrics, its employment as a tool of public consciousness, its role in commerce—all played a vital role in the public activity of the counterculture and formed a part of its political culture. In his history of the Haight-Ashbury, Charles Perry placed the activities of the rock bands at the center of his narrative. To many, the music of the era is the most important aspect of the counterculture and its most noteworthy contribution to American culture. Yet here, too, the cultural was political.

Rock and roll music became a powerful carrier of cultural, social and political change. In the 1950s, the popular music industry experienced a revolution with the discovery of the baby boom teenager as a profitable and extensive market. At first, the dominant sounds of rock included rock-a-billy and doo-wop, but these had been replaced by the mid-sixties by the more electrified rock music of British invasion groups like the Beatles, the Kinks and the Rolling Stones, as well as those of richly produced American groups like those on the Motown label. Though often musically different from the rock of the 1950s, this vibrant new form initially seemed similarly focused on traditional teenage concerns such as the triumphs and sorrows of young love. Records sold by the

millions, and individuals, such as Elvis Presley in the 1950s, and rock groups like the Beatles in the 1960s, were elevated to iconic status.¹⁶

The early sixties also witnessed a folk music revival that reintroduced the political minstrel to American music after years of political repression due to McCarthyism and anti-communist hysteria. By the mid-1960s, the preeminent practitioners of this musical style were Joan Baez and Bob Dylan. Baez combined her musical performances with political activism in support of civil rights, while Dylan wrote “message” folk songs in the manner of his idol Woody Guthrie. Folk music became a focus of public gathering; in fact, park hootenannies, like those held in Washington D.C.’s DuPont Circle in the early 1960s, were among many new venues for folk music.

By 1965, however, folk music began to wane as the music of choice for young people’s gatherings. The moment this development solidified is generally considered to be the Newport Folk Festival, when Bob Dylan appeared with an electric guitar at the traditionally acoustic event and seemingly abandoned political folk music in favor of a more personalized interpretation of rock and roll.¹⁷ His lyrics often spoke of the struggle for personal identity, expression and freedom in the modern world, and resonated with millions of American youth throughout the 1960s. Other bands soon picked up Dylan’s electrified folk sound, which contributed to the success of the Byrds in Los Angeles and to the explosion of the rock scene on the Sunset Strip. All of these developments influenced the evolution of rock as a truly hybrid musical style by the middle of the 1960s.

¹⁶ For a recent history of rock and roll, see James Miller, Flowers in the Dustbin: The Rise of Rock and Roll, 1947-1977 (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999).

¹⁷ For one of the most recent accounts of this event, see Lewis MacAdams, Birth of the Cool: Beat, Bebop, and the American Avant-Garde (New York: The Free Press, 2001).

Nowhere was this more evident than in San Francisco. A combination of folk, blues, and electric rock and roll first emerged in San Francisco at the Merry Prankster Acid Tests. This music of the Haight-Ashbury was a unique interpretation of traditional American musical genres. The Grateful Dead, originally the Warlocks, the band of the Acid Tests, drew upon the folk and blues traditions with which its members, including bluegrass master Jerry Garcia, were most familiar. Similarly, Big Brother and the Holding Company's lead singer Janis Joplin became known for her psychedelicized interpretations of blues standards like "Ball and Chain."

The Haight bands added a unique element to rock and roll by speaking directly to the concerns of the hippie community there. They augmented standard material with new, experimental sounds. Haight musicians, frequently under the influence of psychedelic drugs, adopted the improvisational style of jazz to rock and roll, a development that provided a musical structure that seemed more appropriate for the Haight's culture of drug use, and championed experiences far beyond the routine. The resulting sound was "intuitive and unpolished and rhapsodic and endless."¹⁸ As critic and supporter Ralph Gleason noted, it was honed by the live experience and not, like most popular music, studio-based. The "psychedelic" sound, also known as "acid rock," began its embryonic journey at the Acid Tests of the Merry Pranksters and evolved in reaction to audience response at the frequent dance concerts in San Francisco.¹⁹

Rock music has often been considered a cultural indicator or a particularly revealing kind of evidence about the values of various social groups. Roy Palmer argues

¹⁸ Myra Friedman in Hoskins, *Beneath the Diamond Sky*, 89.

¹⁹ Barney Hoskins, *Beneath the Diamond Sky: Haight-Ashbury, 1965-1970* (New York: Simon and Schuster Editions, 1997), 89-97. "Embryonic Journey" is the title of a composition by Jorma Kaukonen that appeared on Jefferson Airplane's *Surrealistic Pillow* recording (RCA, 1967), and it seems an especially apt phrase for describing this early phase of psychedelic rock.

in his study of European ballads, *The Sound of History: Songs and Social Comment*, that songs are part of the oral tradition of a culture. Robert G. Pielke argues that rock music has been a significant force for cultural revolution in the United States. Sheila Whiteley, in *The Space Between the Notes: Rock and the Counterculture*, analyzes the American and British music of the counterculture and places its actual structure within a concept of “psychedelic coding,” in which musical structure can be seen as analogous to the more traditional forms of communication that transmit cultural and social values. She argues that the psychedelic rock of the counterculture constituted a significant social force because music can express an “alternative, ‘progressive’ viewpoint” through both the actual structural composition of the music—the sound—and the social and cultural meanings derived from and ascribed to that sound.” In this case, the psychedelic style of music transmitted the values of the psychedelic world of hippies and LSD. ²⁰

In the counterculture’s music, according to Whitely, “its experimental nature mirrored concern for an alternative society...progressive rock, like all music, relied on communication and positive identification. As such, it had an intrinsically collective character which suggested that it was capable of transmitting the effective identities, attitudes and behavioral patterns of the group(s) identifying with it.”²¹ A later study by Michael Hicks similarly posited that the “freewheeling multi-leveled ornamentations of psychedelic music enable rock to explore its most primal impulse: to become like the

²⁰ Roy Palmer, *The Sound of History: Songs and Social Comment* (London: Pimlico, 1988); Robert G. Pielke, *You Say You Want A Revolution: Rock Music in American Culture* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1986); Sheila Whiteley, *The Space Between the Notes: Rock and the Counterculture* (London: Routledge, 1992).

²¹ Palmer, *The Sound of History*; Whiteley, *The Space Between the Notes*.

world Albert Hoffmann discovered, inhabited by objects that are ‘in constant motion, animated, as if driven by an inner restlessness’.²²

Improvisational, experimental, at turns melodic and aggressively dissonant, music was not the only new psychedelic component of the San Francisco sound. Lyrics dealt with the concerns of this new community and were of central importance. These bands did not sing mainstream rock songs about teenage dating dramas or even explicitly leftist political songs about injustice. These were songs about hippie ideals. Timothy Miller argues that rock lyrics both “reflected and shaped the counterculture’s values.”²³ Todd Gitlin notes that “for the first time, the normal culture of teenagers was becoming infiltrated by grander ideals: freedom, license, religiosity, loving community.”²⁴

Unlike the earnest and simple sounds of folk singers and their acoustic instruments, Haight bands preached their ideals through the amplified sounds of electric guitars. Their songs dealt with the psychedelic experience, flagrantly extolling the virtues of psychedelic drugs as tools for the achievement of enlightenment. The Jefferson Airplane’s soon-to-be notorious song “White Rabbit” advised listeners to “feed your head,” and the Grateful Dead’s “(That’s It For) The Other One” recounted the band’s psychedelic journey through the Acid Tests:

Skippin’ through the lily fields I came across an empty space
It trembled and exploded, left a bus stop in its place
The bus came by and I got on, that’s when it all began
There was cowboy Neal at the wheel of the bus to never ever land.²⁵

²² Michael Hicks, *Sixties Rock: Garage, Psychedelic, and Other Satisfactions* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999). Albert Hoffman was the inventor of LSD.

²³ Timothy Miller, *The Hippies and American Values* (Knoxville, University of Tennessee Press, 1991), 78.

²⁴ Gitlin, *The Sixties*, 205.

²⁵ Jefferson Airplane, “White Rabbit,” *Surrealistic Pillow* (RCA, 1967); Grateful Dead, “(That’s It For) The Other One,” *Anthem of the Sun* (Warner Bros, 1967). The “cowboy Neil” of the song is Neil Casady, beat icon and driver of the Prankster bus.

An equally important component of the content of the songs dealt with the experience of community in the Haight. The bands became acute observers and commentators on the world of the Haight and these songs chronicled the history and created the mythology of the community. For example, the Jefferson Airplane commented on the improvisational and experimental element of the counterculture in their song *Wild Tyme*: “It’s a wild tyme! I see people all around me changing faces; It’s a wild tyme! I’m doing things that haven’t got a name yet.”²⁶ They also sang about how psychedelics could free individuals and help them to open their hearts to community idealism. Marty Balin of the Jefferson Airplane sang “take me to a circus tent where I can easily pay my rent and all the other freaks will share my cares,” and the Grateful Dead urged listeners to immerse themselves in a familiar sight on Haight Street:

See that girl, barefootin’ along
Whistlin’ and singin’, she’s a carryin’ on.
There’s laughing in her eyes, dancing in her feet
She’s a neon-light diamond and she can live on the street.

Hey, hey, hey, come right away
Come and join the party every day.

Well everybody’s dancin’ in a ring around the sun
Nobody’s finished, we ain’t even begun.
So take of your shoes, child, and take off your hat
Try on your wings and find out where it’s at.²⁷

These songs were political messages of a new kind. They spoke of a new way of envisioning daily life and privileged concerns about spiritual enlightenment and community over purely individual experiences. They traveled throughout the nation’s

²⁶ Jefferson Airplane, “Wild Tyme,” *After Bathing at Baxter’s* (RCA, 1967).

²⁷ Marty Balin, “3/5 of a Mile in 10 Seconds,” *Surrealistic Pillow* (RCA, 1967); Grateful Dead, “The Golden Road to Unlimited Devotion,” *Grateful Dead* (Warner Bros., 1967). The sexism and often outright misogyny of some of these songs was in many instances a by-product of the “free love” ideal as interpreted by the largely male musicians and songwriters, and indicates that although freedom may have been on the hippie agenda, equality wasn’t necessarily part of that freedom. This topic needs further investigation.

hip communities to spread their messages, expanding the hippie presence in that way and contributing to the nation's public sphere. The rock music of the neighborhood became, first, the music of America's counterculture and, then, finally, of all American youth, spread through both concerts and radio and television broadcasts.

Like folk musicians, the bands of the Haight often shared many of their songs. This communal approach to artistic collaboration contributed to the community ideals and dynamic of the neighborhood. The history of the song "Get Together," the representative anthem of the Haight-Ashbury counterculture, is emblematic of this phenomenon. Written by folksinger Dino Valenti, "Get Together" was a staple of neighborhood concerts given by Valenti's band, Quicksilver Messenger Service, and by the Jefferson Airplane.²⁸ It was even featured on the Airplane's first album, issued in its early years before Grace Slick joined the band as lead singer. A version of "Get Together," sung by the Youngbloods, a Greenwich Village based folk-rock band, eventually made it into the top ten in 1969. But at the zenith of the Haight's countercultural unity, the song was both a political declaration of values and intent and a commandment based on the beliefs of the hippie community of the Haight-Ashbury. It urged people to "get together":

If you hear the song I'm singing
You will understand
You hold the key to love and fear
All in your trembling hand
One key unlocks them both you know
It's at your command

Hey people now, smile on your brother
Let me see you get together

²⁸ Valenti published the song under his given name, Chester Powers. Joel Selvin, Summer of Love: The Inside Story of LSD, Rock and Roll, Free Love and High Times in the Wild West (New York: Cooper Square Press, 1994), 195-196.

Love one another right now.²⁹

The implications of these lyrics are important. The song's call for universal brotherhood reflects the growing hippie ethos of universal love and understanding. This message, as has often been noted, resembles some aspects of traditional Judeo-Christian ideology. The song also issues a concrete call for action; it was, like other the songs of the new rock bands, a political critique of the traditional American way. But the music was more than a soundtrack for cultural rebellion: it was itself a form of rebellion, one that was featured not only on the radio but also in the streets and parks of the nation. The new experimental style of the music and the explicitly more culturally political content of many of the lyrics of this genre of rock and roll suggest that the music of the emergent counterculture was political in its implications.

Certainly the neighborhood did "get together," frequently. The music of the Haight helped forge the new community: "not only did the bands cause the gatherings, by providing the attraction of music," Charles Perry wrote, "but they were also singing songs about the psychedelic life. They were speaking of the Great Unspeakable of being stoned, like prophets emerging from the community to address its concerns."³⁰ An outgrowth of the culture of the Haight neighborhood, the music both reflected and shaped the needs and demands of the residents. Bands such as the Grateful Dead and the Jefferson Airplane, more than just playing for the community, lived communally in the

²⁹ Dino Valenti, "Get Together." Assigning credit for the lyrics of songs that were performed by many and have gone through many changes is often an interesting task. While Dino Valenti is considered the author of this song, these are the lyrics as sung by Jefferson Airplane on their first commercial recording, the LP *Jefferson Airplane Takes Off* (1966.) The more familiar, slower version by the Youngbloods released in 1968 contains minor lyric changes that are perhaps revealing of a shift in popular mood. Instead of the simple commandment "love one another right now," the Youngblood in 1968 instead sang "try to love one another right now. This may be a tacit recognition of how much dreams of brotherhood had deteriorated by the end of the decade.

³⁰ Perry, *The Haight-Ashbury*, 55.

neighborhood, and their houses became community centers (particularly the Grateful Dead's house at 710 Ashbury Street, which also housed the offices of the Haight-Ashbury Legal Organization.) Thus Valenti's song was also an important indication of the dominant ethos of the community.

The primary local venue for the bands of the Haight was the free concerts they performed in the neighborhood parks and streets. Joel Selvin's description of the San Francisco dance concerts as "tribal rites" can be applied equally to the outdoor concerts, and perhaps with even more validity. Whether the music was played within the cavernous spaces of the Fillmore and Avalon Ballrooms or under the canopy of trees in the Panhandle, it provided a means of community in the Haight.³¹ The increasing dominance of rock and roll over folk music changed the form of musical gathering. The "hootenanny" so popular among beatniks gave way to larger, more energized events. A variety of forces came together to create spontaneous live performances. Jorma Kaukonen, lead guitarist of the Jefferson Airplane, recalled that, for his band and the other bands in the Haight, "in the beginning most of use didn't even have records to sell so you couldn't claim that you were doing it for publicity. You were just doing it because you wanted to do it," and that "the main goal was to be able to play and interact with the audience."³²

To the Diggers, the rising fame of some of the local bands complicated the ideal of community. To provide an antidote to this particular manifestation of capitalist culture, the Diggers began anonymously to sponsor free concerts in Haight-Ashbury in 1967. Both the Diggers and the Haight bands came together in the fall of 1967 and

³¹ See Joel Selvin, "Introduction," Summer of Love.

³² Jorma Kaukonen, interview with the author. June 24, 2000.

created a new kind of public activity. The concerts took place in the Panhandle or on Haight Street, primarily because of the availability of sympathetic neighbors who let the bands use their electrical outlets for extension cords.³³ These locations were also established centers of Haight activities, and, true to form, the Diggers never got permits for them because, as Judy Goldhaft recalled, “we didn’t think we needed them.”³⁴ The Diggers assumed that, as the public, they could use the space the way they wanted.

The concerts were usually spontaneous, but they also required a minimal amount of organization, which the Diggers provided as part of their desire to create a free community. They arranged for the musicians to come down to the park and supplied them with flatbed trucks for use as improvised stages. Word was passed on the street, and soon dancers jumped and swayed to crudely amplified music under eucalyptus and palm trees.³⁵ At all of these parties, the bands could often be heard from the heights of Buena Vista Park at the southeastern edge of the Haight all the way to the rolling fields of Golden Gate Park on the western border of the neighborhood.³⁶

These concerts provided an opportunity for the residents of the neighborhood to come together and enjoy the music without enabling the profit system and without accepting the limits of city authority over public space. As such, the concerts were a successful way to bring Haight residents together into the Diggers' vision of the new "free" community and their goal to encourage people to “assume freedom.”³⁷ To the Diggers, the level of participation in their events was their yardstick of success. “You

³³ Dennis McNally, interview with the author via telephone, January 29, 2000.

³⁴ Judy Goldhaft, interview with the author, May 24, 1999. Jack Casady, bass player of the Jefferson Airplane, recalls that permits were often needed and frequently secured. Interview with the author, June 24, 2000.

³⁵ Peter Albin, interview with the author via telephone, January 31, 2000.

³⁶ Dan Wilson in Ed. Linda Kelly, Deadheads: Stories From Fellow Artists, Friends, and Followers of the Grateful Dead (New York: Citadel Underground Press, 1995), 55.

³⁷ Grogan, Ringolevio, 410-412.

succeed if people are involved."³⁸ Indeed, the Diggers, who originated the concerts, often did not instigate later ones; Jefferson Airplane guitarist Jorma Kaukonen remembers that he really didn't know much about the Diggers and some musicians recall that they often decided to hold concerts on their own, independent of the Diggers.³⁹

By late 1966, some of the community bands began to gain fame outside the neighborhood's borders and attracted the notice of the music industry. Songs praising the virtues of the hippie life began to be heard on the newly blossoming FM stations, spreading the gospel of love, peace and drugs. The Diggers were critical of this move. They believed that "the record industry, dance-hall promotion rackets and the artist-star-celebrity-hero roles they support and promote are fat man forms and are cramping the number."⁴⁰ They asked "when will the JEFFERSON AIRPLANE and all ROCK GROUPS quit trying to make it and LOVE?"⁴¹ They suggested that "name" groups should share their albums for free with unknown groups, send those groups on their own publicity trips, release albums without artwork and photos to reduce costs, and donate 1% of their royalties to free programs.⁴² These suggestions were pleas from the Diggers to musicians to join in their vision of the ideal cooperative community, the "free city."

The free concerts had multiple consequences. The atmosphere of celebration in the neighborhood contributed to the mystique of the Haight as a hippie enclave, but the influx of new residents drawn by these events added to the overcrowded and dangerous conditions developing in the district. But the concerts were more than parties—they were

³⁸ Peter Berg, interview with the author, May 24, 1999.

³⁹ Jorma Kaukonen, interview with the author, June 24, 2000.

⁴⁰ The San Francisco Diggers, "The Post-Competitive, Comparative Game of a Free City," in Krassner, ed., *The Realist*, 16

⁴¹ The San Francisco Diggers, excerpt from "Let Me Live In A World Pure," in ed., Noble, Digger Archives.

⁴² The San Francisco Diggers, excerpt from "The Post-Competitive, Comparative Game of a Free City," in Krassner, ed., *The Realist*, 17.

also demonstrations of cultural politics. While the bands gained fame and money, the Digger critique of the rock industry pointed out the influence of capitalism within the counter-culture and the free concerts they sponsored were attempts to replace capitalist culture. Don McNeill of the *East Village Other* suggested that the creation of the free store and the free concert was an answer to Allen Ginsberg's question "when can I go into the supermarket and buy what I need with my good looks?"⁴³

Historian Richard Miller has argued that music was "the art-axis of the Haight, and that "the bands were its central institution...The San Francisco bands embodied and articulated the changing values of the community and served as the community's focal point." Digger David Simpson said in retrospect that "it is very important to know how closely the alternative community of San Francisco identified with the music of specific musicians—the Grateful Dead, the Jefferson Airplane, the Messenger Service, and Big Brother and the Holding Company:

They were our bands, they were our musicians. Neither they nor we felt the distinction between the artists and the people, and it gave the music great strength. By 1968 nobody danced at rock concerts anymore, but in 1966 and 1967 nobody sat down. It was quite impossible. The concerts were a melee of bodies. It was a wonderful inspired sense of oneness."⁴⁴

The Diggers tried to preserve that dynamic by criticizing the increasing fame and what they considered the capitalist exploitation of the bands, trying to remind them that the culture that created and supported their musical style was not based on mainstream values. Another element that made the bands important to the cohesion of the community

⁴³Don McNeill, *Moving Through Here* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970), 123. McNeill is referring to the store set up by the New York City Diggers, but his observation is equally, if not more, applicable to the earlier store of the San Francisco Diggers. Also, McNeill claims that this is a line in the poem "Howl." Actually, it is a line from the poem "America" in Ginsberg's collection *Howl and Other Poems* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1959), 39.

⁴⁴Richard Miller, *Bohemia: The Protoculture Then and Now* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1977), 252-3. David Simpson in *Hoskins, Beneath the Diamond Sky*, 109-111.

was that when they performed, they turned their performance space into public space and public space into performance space. Of outdoor concerts, Todd Gitlin wrote, “what could be more appropriate, for wasn’t music part of nature, was there any purpose higher than the celebration of being young in the fullness of time, with no reason to be anywhere else in the world?”⁴⁵ Certainly youthful exuberance, and the counterculture’s declared intention to pursue freedom and joy, played a role in the concerts. But Gitlin, like other historians, did not recognize that the outdoor concerts were more than just parties. As much as street festivals of ethnic and religious communities, these events were a declaration of shared community and a public manifestation of a defined constituency. In many ways, they were an even more overt declaration, taking place as they did without reference to civil authority. Spontaneous dance parties held without benefit of permit were a declaration of independence from government authority.⁴⁶ The songs were a part of the outdoor parties, and the parties were the identity festivals of the Haight counterculture. Jefferson Airplane guitarist Jorma Kaukonen believes that the concerts “certainly reinforced the community spirit which was very powerful in those days.”⁴⁷

These declarations did not always go without opposition. In late 1966, the hippies of the Haight wanted to be able to create their community free of police interference. To this aim, some elements of the community tried to maintain an open dialogue with the police. The Love Pageant Rally of October was an early attempt to introduce a new dynamic different from protest, and in September the H.I.P merchants had urged residents to “Take A Cop to Dinner” to foster a more familiar, and, they hoped,

⁴⁵ Gitlin, *The Sixties*, 208.

⁴⁶ Susan G. Davis, *Parades and Power: Street Theatre in Nineteenth Century Philadelphia* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1988.)

⁴⁷ Jorma Kaukonen, interview with the author, June 24, 2000.

hopefully mutually forgiving relationship, between the hippies and the authorities. Jorma Kaukonen recalled that in the neighborhood “there was an odd symbiotic relationship with the police,” whose frequent opposition to the concerts “gave more cohesiveness to us.”⁴⁸ The crowds of hippies and musicians unified against the police opposition, which inadvertently politicized the events. By early 1967, the ambivalent relationship between the neighborhood’s hippies and the police had solidified into a general wariness that bordered on open defiance; though the Grateful Dead sang that “the heat came round and busted me for smilin’ on a cloudy day,” and the *Oracle* advertised more than once that it would put together reports of police harassment submitted by readers as a deterrence to constant surveillance, the public activities continued.⁴⁹ The Diggers also continued their activities, including the free food in the park, while ignoring the police and urging others to do the same. As one Digger told an *Oracle* reporter, “We’re gonna stage a street happening Saturday, carol singers, motorcycle gangs, the works...I mean what can they do, right? Two thousand people on the sidewalk, that’s what the sidewalk’s for, right?...Get outta my way!”⁵⁰

The attempts to breach the gulf between the diverging interests of the hippies and the police—and the Diggers’ refusal to do so—indicate that the counterculture of the neighborhood was fully cognizant of the political ramifications of their position and their actions and that, as in most communities, there were differences on how to achieve their goal. The result was that many Haight hippies flagrantly ignored or abused the law, and

⁴⁸ *ibid.*

⁴⁹ Grateful Dead, “(That’s It For) The Other One,” *Anthem of the Sun* (Warner Bros, 1967); Perry, *The Haight-Ashbury*, 113-114; *San Francisco Oracle*, January 1967, vol. 1, no. 5, p. 19 (Facsimile 107).

⁵⁰ Steve Lieper, “At the Handle of the Kettle,” *San Francisco Oracle*, vol. 1, no. 4, 10 (Facsimile 72.) The timing of this comment indicates that he was probably talking about the upcoming “Death of Money” parade.

most were determined to hold their ground as a distinctly alternative community while trying to maintain their core values.

The new boldness in the community was evident. Timothy Leary had arrived in the city in December, spreading his gospel of LSD as the path toward spiritual enlightenment, and that same month a new business, the Drogstore Café, opened on the corner of Haight and Masonic.⁵¹ Originally named The Drugstore, the owners were forced by the police to change the name, but the meaning was clear despite the vowel switch, and the store quickly became another local hippie hang-out.⁵² But the Diggers created the most flagrant events. As the Pied Pipers of the new community, drawing people into the streets with the power of music and celebration, they helped shape the contours of the emergent counterculture. They became the official spokespeople of the neighborhood when they declared the “Death of Money/Birth of the Haight” in a parade on Haight Street on December 17, 1966.⁵³

The Death of Money/Birth of the Haight parade, also called “Now Day,” combined Digger criticisms of Haight businesses with a declaration of the community vision of the Haight as a paradise of the psychedelic life. Before the event itself, the Diggers had promoted their vision of a money-free society in the Free Store, in their

⁵¹ Michael Doyle states that Timothy Leary made his first appearance in San Francisco at the Human Be-in of January 14, 1967, but Leary held a press conference in the city at the Hilton on December 12, 1966. *San Francisco Oracle*, vol. 1, no.4 (December 16, 1966), 1.

⁵² Perry, *The Haight-Ashbury*, 112.

⁵³ According to Charles Perry, the parade was originally scheduled for December 3, but was cancelled due to rain. This date would have coincided with the opening of the Free Store. However, Michael Doyle notes that the first date it was scheduled was December 10, and that it was supposed to be a Mime Troupe parade in North beach to honor Alfred Nobel with a “theme of peace.” Its subsequent removal to the Haight, Doyle argues, reflected the growing dominance of Diggers in the Troupe. Emmett Grogan gives credence to this argument when he comments in his autobiography of the “stone disapproval” of R.G. Davis, who “felt his company was being co-opted by the Diggers and their street activities.” To further muddy the narrative, Perry notes that the parade finally took place on the 16th—contrary to the calendar, as the 16th was a Friday and other reports have it taking place on Saturday. See Perry, *The Haight-Ashbury*, p. 110, 114; Michael Doyle, “The Haight-Ashbury Diggers,” n. 143, p. 152; Grogan, *Ringolveio*, 259.

broadsides, and in radio broadcasts. At about 4 o'clock on Saturday the 17th, the Hell's Angels, in full regalia for their first collaboration with the Diggers, paraded up Haight Street with "Now" signs strapped to the front of their bikes to announce the advent of the "Now Day." "Hairy" Henry Kot, a recent parolee of San Quentin, carried Digger Phyllis Wilne on the back of his bike, where she stood wearing a cape made from a bedsheet flying behind her and yelling "Freeeeeeee!" Members of the Mime Troupe and the Diggers began to distribute signs printed with the word "NOW!" in red ink on a white background to people on the street. They also passed around about two hundred car mirrors that had been taken from junkyard wrecks, incense, candles, penny whistles, flutes, fruit and lilies. While they did this, two groups of Mime Troupers, including members of the Gargoyle Singers of the Troupe, split up and began a call-and-response chant created by poet Michael McClure: walking up and down both sides of the street, one group chanted "Ooooh," to which the other would respond with "Aaaah." The first group then said "Ssssh," and the second group responded with "Be cool!" Back and forth, gradually increasing in volume, the chants were augmented by the penny whistles and participation of people on the street.

Finally, a funeral cortege appeared. Led by a black clad man swinging a lighted kerosene lamp, four pall-bearers wearing giant, bizarre puppet animal heads created by Robert La Moticella of the Mime Troupe and similar to the ones used on Halloween, carried a coffin draped in black fabric to announce the "Death of the old Haight." Just behind the puppet pall-bearers were three hooded figures carrying silver-painted dollar signs on large staffs. As they walked behind the coffin, they sang "Get Out My Life Why Don't You Babe"—the refrain of the Supremes' recent #1 hit "You Keep Me Hanging

On”—as a funeral dirge. Between one and two thousand people poured into the street, literally stopping traffic. A Muni bus driver and some of his passengers briefly joined the crowd on the street, shaking hands and dancing with the others. A chant was begun and taken up by the crowd in a rising crescendo: “the streets belong to the people! The Streets belong to the people!”⁵⁴

The parade was a colorful display that encouraged audience participation—in fact, as a political artform, it collapsed the lines between performers and audience, drawing everyone on the street into a collaborative effort. In a broadside re-capping the event, they wrote that there were “No more passers-by, Everybody’s together.” The parade was also, as the Diggers hoped, a disturbance in the daily routine: “Street events are rituals of release. Reclaiming of territory (sundown, traffic, public joy) through spirit. Possession. Public Newsense. Not street-theatre, the street is theatre.”⁵⁵ The parade declared that the Haight was now the territory of a new community.

The attempt to create a “new-sense” out of what had previously been considered a “nuisance” was lost on the police. They quickly stepped in to assert their control of the streets. Officers Michael Byrne and Karl Strom of the Park Station stopped Hairy Henry because carrying a standing passenger was a violation of traffic laws. While questioning Kot and Wilner in front of the Free Store, the police ran a check on Kot and discovered

⁵⁴ This description of the event draws upon several sources. See the Diggers, “Street event: Birth of Haight/Funeral for \$ NOW” broadside, n.d. in ed., Noble, Digger Archives; Grogan, Ringolevio, 259-261; Michael Doyle, “The Haight-Ashbury Diggers”, 152-157. Perry, The Haight-Ashbury, 114-116; Gene Anthony, The Summer of Love: Haight-Ashbury at its Highest, 133-142. Photographs of the event reveal the participation of such well-known Haight figures as Grace Slick of the Jefferson Airplane and Bob Weir of the Grateful Dead. Although none of the sources have mentioned the origin of the lines “get out my life why don’t you babe,” in the Supreme’s hit song “You Keep Me Hangin’ on,” the use of these lyrics indicate the fluidity of youth culture at the time. “You Keep Me Hangin On” hit number one on the R & B and Pop charts on October 12, 1966. Liner notes, *The Best of Diana Ross and the Supremes*, (Motown, 1995).

⁵⁵ Diggers, “Street event: Birth of Haight/Funeral for \$ NOW” broadside, n.d. in ed., Noble, Digger Archives.

that he was on parole. They decided to take Kot and Wilner in to the station. Feeling that his fellow Angel was being unfairly roused, Charles "Chocolate George" Hendricks argued with the police, and was himself arrested after he allegedly pulled a policeman from the paddy wagon, presumably in an attempt to free Kot from its confines. The direction of the parade then shifted to the Park Station. A crowd of 250 or so Angels and hippies, including poets Richard Brautigan and an auto-harp playing Michael McClure, gathered outside the station and chanted "We want George, We Want Henry. Free the Angels!"⁵⁶

It was at that point that the "Death of Money" parade ironically evolved into a bail collection party. The coffin was passed around to collect donations, and many present—including police officers who had been called out to protect the station from the influx of hippies—donated what they could. By that time, the police had already taken the Angels downtown, so the bail parade continued on to the Hall of Justice, where the bail was presented and Chocolate George was released, although Henry Kot was held because his arrest constituted a parole violation. The crowd returned to Haight Street for a spontaneous street dance, and by all accounts the day was considered a successful demonstration of community unity.

Despite the rousing of the two Angels, the police did not attempt to break up the parade as they had the Halloween puppet show. This suggests that the police had made an uneasy peace with themselves about activity in the Haight. Though aware of the potential for violence and chaos that can plague public events, the Haight events had been

⁵⁶ This description of the event draws upon several sources, including "Candlelight and Cops: Haight Angels Jailed," *San Francisco Examiner*, December 18, 1966, 1. See also Grogan, *Ringolevio*, 259-261; Michael Doyle, "The Haight-Ashbury Diggers," 152-157. Perry, *The Haight-Ashbury*, 114-116; Anthony, *The Summer of Love*, 133-142

peaceful and did not seem to cause excessive disturbance in the neighborhood, probably because most of the neighborhood's residents were complicit in them. While New Left activists like the Students for a Democratic Society had been agitating for years for the creation of neighborhood autonomy in their Economic Research and Action Programs, it seemed that the Haight hippies had achieved a certain hegemony over the streets of their neighborhood through the use of festivity rather than traditional political activities.

This dynamic was further demonstrated when the disparate elements of the community were again united by the "New Years' Wail" thank-you concert that the Hell's Angels threw a few weeks later on New Year's Day, near the Digger Free Food site. Offering free beer and the music of, among others, the Grateful Dead and Big Brother and the Holding Company, the Angels, who had first entered the psychedelic scene at Kesey's invitation to La Honda, expressed their appreciation for the community support for the Angels arrested on December 17. The Wail set a new standard for the Haight's outdoor concerts. At this event, in which the Diggers collaborated with the Angels, the formula was set for all subsequent Digger concerts: bands usually played from the backs of flatbed trucks, while appreciative listeners jumped and swayed under the canopy of eucalyptus and palm trees in the parks or in the glare of the sun and street lights of Haight Street. Sympathetic neighbors supplied power for the electrified instruments by allowing musicians to run extension cords into their homes.⁵⁷ The Diggers cleverly played on the name of the party by serving barbequed whale meat, surplus material from a Bay-area dog-food factory.⁵⁸ Emmet Grogan described the day

⁵⁷ Jack Casady, interview with the author, June 24, 2000; Mickey Hart, interview with the author, February 16, 2001; Chet Helms, interview with the author, April 1, 2000; Jorma Kaukonen, interview with the author, June 24, 2000.

⁵⁸ Michael Doyle, "The Haight-Ashbury Diggers," 158.

as “a great day and hell of a party—the first free rock-concert-party in any city park put on solely by the people for themselves.” “By late afternoon, he recalled,

By late afternoon everybody was high and happy. The cops came, saw the way everyone looked wasted, and split, muttering something about the absence of a park permit. The crowd shouted a goodbye after them: “*the parks belong to the people! The parks belong to the people!*”⁵⁹

The police were right: no one had bothered to secure a permit for the concert. Digger Judy Goldhaft has recalled that the Diggers never applied for permits except for events held in Golden Gate Park, and despite this refusal to bow to the authority of the city, the concerts, free food program and other street parties were not stopped by the police.⁶⁰ Even at the New Year’s Wail, with the heavy and sweet aroma of marijuana wafting from the crowd and the presence of the Hell’s Angels—the nemesis of California law enforcement in the 1960s—the police did not try to break up the party, though they did monitor it from their passing patrol cars. The only attempt to rein in the hippies came from a Park and Recreation Department representative, who told the bands to turn the loudspeakers off because they didn’t have a permit. The loudspeakers were turned off and the bands played on through their amplifiers. Such a minor request hardly dampened the spirit of the occasion for the estimated two thousand people who were gathered to celebrate the New Year.⁶¹

The Angels became fixtures in the Haight after Death of Money parade. The collaboration with seemingly apparent violent criminals like the Hell’s Angels signified the inclusiveness of the movement in the Haight. Michael Doyle argued that the Hell’s

⁵⁹ Grogan, *Ringolevio*, 263. Grogan’s italics.

⁶⁰ Judy Goldhaft, interview with the author, May 1999.

⁶¹ David Swanston, “Angels Join The Hippies For a Party,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, January 2, 1967, 1. For other descriptions of the Wail, see Barbara La Morticella, “New Year’s Day Wail Visualities,” *San Francisco Oracle*, vol. 1, no. 5 (January 1967), 5 (Facsimile 93); Perry, *The Haight-Ashbury*; Doyle, “the Haight-Ashbury Diggers.”

Angels shared with the hippies a resistance to authority and “a predilection for outrageous behavior in public.”⁶² And the hippies defended the Angels. Following Hairy Henry’s arrest, the *Oracle* urged community support for Kot. In a direct application of Jack Kerouac’s words in the Beat bible *On the Road*, the *Oracle* suggested that such support was warranted, “because Hairy Henry Kot is one of the only people. The mad ones, the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved, desirous of everything at the same time, the ones who never yawn or say a commonplace thing, but burn, burn, burn like fabulous roman candles exploding like spiders across the stars and in the middle you see the blue center light pop and everybody goes ‘awww!’”⁶³ At the Wail, one young man grabbed the microphone to state that “when the Angels do something bad, everybody knows and everybody remembers, but nobody remembers when they’ve done something right.”⁶⁴

The hippie affinity for the Angels is closely related to the community’s desire to take over the public space of the neighborhood. The Angels were admirable because they had set a precedent for taking over the public space of the road: when they rode, the streets belonged to them. This may have resonated with hippies also interested in laying claim to public spaces. The Angels were admired for their ability to exercise their freedom in that way. The tragedy of this misplaced admiration is that the Haight hippies failed to realize that the outrageousness of the Angels was based on rage as well as joy and was less innocent than the LSD-inspired visions of personal freedom that made many hippies want to dance and make love in the street. The Angels were a counterculture unto

⁶² Michael Doyle, “The Haight-Ashbury Diggers,” 156-158.

⁶³ Untitled article, *San Francisco Oracle*, vol. 1, no. 5 (January 1967), 19 (Facsimile107). The *Oracle* printed the names and addresses of Kot, his lawyer and the parole board. See also Jack Kerouac, *On the Road* (New York: Viking Press, 1957.)

⁶⁴ David Swanston, “Angels Join The Hippies For a Party,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, January 2, 1967, 1.

themselves, with decidedly different values from the hippie one. They used fear and intimidation, not love or a belief in democratic participation, to take over the streets.

This difference was apparent to outsiders who were not vested in creating a permissive environment in the Haight. In his report on the Wail, *Chronicle* reporter David Swanston noted the unusual pairing: “a hippie with shoulder-length hair and two civil-rights buttons pinned to his jacket chatted with an Angel with shoulder-length hair and a small Confederate flag on his sleeveless coat.” The desire to let people “do their own thing” is perhaps at the root of the contradictory nature of the Haight-Ashbury counterculture at this time: Haight hippies, in their goal of creating a tolerant and free society, tolerated those who would tramp on someone else’s freedom in order to secure their own. This paradox would haunt the counterculture in the occasional violent behavior of the Angels in the Haight, and most notoriously, in the violence at the Rolling Stones concert at Altamont in 1969. But at the Wail, at least, the Angels did not demonstrate their legendary capacity for violence; as the *Chronicle* reported, the New Year’s Wail was characterized by “wild attire, loud music and no trouble.” Along with the apparent “taming” of the wild Angels by peace-loving hippies, it was another event that supported the growing reputation of the Haight and its hippie residents as the new utopia.⁶⁵

The New Year’s Wail had another consequence. One of the participants was Chester Anderson, a visitor from New York. At the party, he met Claude Hayward, and a little over a week later the two formed the Communications Company, a press operation

⁶⁵All quotes in this paragraph are from David Swanston, “Angels Join The Hippies For a Party,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, January 2, 1967, 1.

that promised to print free materials for the Diggers.⁶⁶ The Communications Company, known by its shortened moniker, “com/co,” supported the Diggers and specialized in the up-to-the-minute printing of news that directly affected the Haight community.⁶⁷ In the first place a practical decision arising out of a similar economic position and experimental attitude, collaboration with the Communication Company allowed the Diggers to respond instantaneously to events in the Haight. Collaboration also demonstrated a commitment of the part of the Diggers to the open-minded nature of the district: the Communication Company was a Haight organization and the mutually supportive relationship between the Diggers and Company functioned to knit the Haight community together. With the growing collaboration between the disparate groups in the neighborhood, the increasing regularity of community events, and the creation of a truly grass-roots means of direct communication, in January 1967 it looked like the Haight hippies were achieving their goal of creating an alternative society. Through the Diggers’ free store, the concerts and the music of the Haight, and the uses of public space, it seemed that the Haight hippies had achieved the Diggers’s goal of “reclaiming territory.”

Having secured the use of the public spaces of the Haight, and by creating their own public sphere with the opening of stores and a press dedicated to disseminating the new community’s values, the counterculture began to branch out of the community. The frequency of public events in the Haight, the growing popularity of its music, and the mounting attention paid to the area by the police, all demonstrated that, by January 1,

⁶⁶ Michael Doyle, “The Haight-Ashbury Diggers,” 158-159.

⁶⁷ Grogan, Ringolevio, p. 236-239; Cohen in Wachsberger, Voices From The Underground, 144; Martin A. Lee and Bruce Shlain, Acid Dreams: The CIA, LSD and the Sixties Rebellion (New York: Grove Press, 1985), 176. The founding of the Communication Company has been explained in Doyle, Wachsberger, and other sources. Many Communications Company flyers can be found in ed., Noble, Digger Archives.

1967, the hippies of the neighborhood had unified around the core values of the psychedelic lifestyle. They embraced drug use, rock and roll, and the ideal of the cooperative community, and their public activity was a political manifestation of themselves as a distinct community.

The free-form style and drug-induced lyrics of the San Francisco sound helped to announce a new kind of youth culture to mainstream America in the spring of 1967. The bands began to get more widespread airplay on radio stations, which, following the lead of San Francisco's underground rock station WMPX, began to switch to FM and play longer album cuts. Moreover, now that the counterculture was established in the Haight, the organizers of the Love Pageant decided that it was time to reach out to the rest of the country. What better way to announce to the world the dawn of the new age than to hold a massive gathering in Golden Gate Park National Park, not just the city's most treasured public space, but also one of the most famous in all America?

The Human Be-in of January 14, 1967 heralded the advent of what hippies called the Aquarian Age, the new era of freedom, love and cooperation that they believed was hand. It has achieved a somewhat mythical status, a "Gathering of the Tribes" based on peaceful collaboration and mutual happiness among all elements of the youth and radical cultures of the Bay area. The Be-in was intended to unite the increasingly disparate elements of Bay area radicalism. At City Hall on October 6, 1966, hippie representatives of the Love Pageant had contrasted sharply with the Berkeley radicals. To the latter, the hippies were apolitical and apathetic, less interested in changing society than in ignoring it. That meeting underscored two very different approaches to social change, and the Be-in was meant to bring those different approaches together, a time when hippies and their

Beat, Angel and Prankster compatriots and the more traditionally political Berkeley activists could explore their similarities rather than highlight their differences.

The Be-in was spearheaded by the *Oracle* people, and was characterized from the beginning by careful institutional organization. It was not a spontaneous Digger event, nor did not follow common Haight practices. Martin A. Lee and Bruce Shlain argue that the real motive for the Be-in was propaganda. Michael Bowen's Psychedelic Rangers wanted to use the Be-in as an occasion to proselytize the use of LSD as a spiritual aid and to "psychedelicize the radical left." They also wanted, Lee and Shlain argue, to "send a message throughout the world that a new dawn was breaking and the time had come for all good men and women to abandon their exploitative posture toward the earth lest apocalypse spare them the task."⁶⁸ It is true that Bowen and Allen Cohen of the *Oracle* were among the primary organizers, but as historians and reception analysts have noted, participants in public events interpret experiences in such a variety of ways that the original intention of the creators is often lost.⁶⁹ The plentiful press coverage of the Be-in meant that people could take from the event what they wanted.

Unlike most Digger events, a permit secured the date and location of the Be-in. In December, the Park and Recreation Department received a request for permission to hold "a concert and dance ceremony" from the League for Spiritual Discovery, Timothy Leary's organization.⁷⁰ The date requested, January 14, 1967, was apparently approved,

⁶⁸ Lee and Shlain, *Acid Dreams*, 157-160.

⁶⁹ See reception analysis theory in Janet Staiger, *Interpreting Films: Studies in the Historical Reception of American Cinema* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992.) See also the classic work by E.P. Thompson, "The Political Economy of the Crowd." In these studies, Thompson argues that events like bread riots are the result of a clash between opposing cultural expectations and forces. Public events are therefore characterized by a multitude of different interpretive responses.

⁷⁰ "Minutes," San Francisco Park and Recreation Department, December 21, 1966, 316. In this entry, the request is referred to Commission Committee and Staff with the power to act, but there is no record in the minutes of a decision. The organizers may have made the location change, as the Music Concourse was a

but not the location. The Be-in took place on the Polo Grounds of Golden Gate Park, and not on the Music Concourse as proposed. As the permit indicates, the Be-in was a larger, more organized event than Digger events, which were held spontaneously and without deference to city procedures in order to demonstrate the Diggers' political ideology.⁷¹ The immediate goal of Digger activities was to build community based on the principles of individual autonomy. The goal of the Be-in was the celebration and expansion of an already established community.

In keeping with this goal, the Be-in was heavily promoted. A press conference was held on January 12. Representatives of the Haight counterculture, including Michael Bowen, Allen Cohen of the *Oracle*, poet Gary Snyder, and Jay Thelin of the Psychedelic Shop joined with Berkeley activists like Jerry Rubin to declare to the press their intention to unite the two communities. The cover of the January issue of the *San Francisco Oracle* was nothing less than an advertisement for the celebration. Drawn by Rick Griffin, one of the new psychedelic poster artists whose work was used to advertise concerts at the various rock venues, it pictured a picture an Indian-style mystic, complete with added-on third eye, and declared "Saturday, January 14, 1967. 1-5 pm. A Gathering of the Tribes for a Human Be-in. Bring food to share, bring flowers, beads, costumes, feathers, bells, cymbals, flags." On the next page, editor Allen Cohen wrote that

A union of love and activism previously separated by categorical dogma and label mongering will finally occur ecstatically when Berkeley political activists and hip community and San Francisco's spiritual generation and contingents from the emerging revolutionary generation all over California

limited area while the Polo Grounds, two and a quarter miles from Haight Street, well into the interior of the park, consisted of a huge open field.

⁷¹ Judy Goldhaft claims that the Diggers always got permits for events in Golden Gate Park because they were larger and involved music. Interview with the author, May 24, 1999. Though the Diggers claim that they applied for permits for events in Golden Gate Park, those events were infrequent compared to their neighborhood activities.

meet...now in the evolving generation of America's young the humanization of the American man and woman can begin in joy and embrace without fear, dogma, suspicion, or dialectical righteousness. A new concert of human relations being developed within the youthful underground must emerge, become conscious, and be shared so that a revolution of form can be filled with a Renaissance of compassion, awareness, and love in the Revelation of the unity of all mankind. The Human Be-in is the joyful, face-to-face beginning of the new epoch.⁷²

The intent of the Be-in was further captured in a poem, "A Psalm Upon the Gathering of All Tribes," written by Leland Meyerzove and published in the *Oracle*. The poem captures the counterculture's hope that the pursuit of human unity would create a utopian society without the terrors of the modern world that activist and hippie alike abhorred:

They shall come in ones, in two, in multitudes,
.....
And the tribes shall become one and be no more
.....
They come to battle away their shame
And lie down naked to rise and dance
And be one, even as they are many:
The tribes come, strangers and fellows,
Believers and doubters, they come to see,
To sing, to blow their trumpets and shout
Peace upon all, peace upon one—
.....
There are no chosen, there are no leaders,
There are only the names of tribes,
.....
Gather all tribes, gather and sing,
Gather and dance—gather and resolve,
That tribes and ye-self shall fear no more
—Or joy will be but temporal, and
That the rats shall eat your babies,
That the bombs will eat your homes,
That the radium will eat your bones,
And you will eat the heart of thy-self,
And no blood will flow unto another's heart—
Oh gather oh tribes of man-kind,
Gather and hold out a hand to strangers,

⁷² *San Francisco Oracle*, January 1967, vol. 1, no. 5. Cover and p. 2. (Facsimile, 89-90.)

To fellows, and to thyself...gather, yea
Gather, and war no more—break down
The babel of tongues, and dance to love.⁷³

The tribes gathered that Saturday, an unseasonably warm and dry day at a time of year. The day began with a Hindu ritual called *pradakshina*, a purifying circumambulation around the grounds of the Polo Field, led by dignitaries of the New Community, including Allen Ginsberg and Gary Snyder. The ritual was necessary, according to Charles Perry, to ensure the status of the event as a “pilgrimage gathering.” Scheduled to begin at 1 pm, the Be-in drew crowds all morning. Carrying banners, dressed casually in jeans and jackets or in the colorful accoutrements of the Haight, thousands of people streamed through the park toward the Polo Grounds, to declare themselves part of a new movement for peace and love. Speakers, including poets Ginsberg and Lenore Kandel, LSD guru Timothy Leary, and activist Jerry Rubin, broadcast their messages between sets by the rock bands. From that Haight, the Grateful Dead, the Jefferson Airplane, the Loading Zone and other bands played, as well as Country Joe and the Fish from Berkeley, a band traditionally aligned more with the Berkeley activists than the hippies.⁷⁴ The sound system was uneven and once lost power, until the Hell’s Angels took it into their care. Angel Chocolate George acted as nursemaid, reuniting frightened and lost children with their guardians.

Convinced by Gary Snyder’s argument that love could be demonstrated by a Be-in in the park as much as a free store, the Diggers distributed thousands of turkey sandwiches made from turkeys donated by acid chemist Owsley, who also supplied

⁷³ Leland Meyerzove, “A Psalm Upon The Gathering Of The Tribes,” *San Francisco Oracle*, vol. 1, no. 5, (January 1967), 7 (Facsimile 95).

⁷⁴ The immediate equation of the counterculture and the San Francisco bands is evident in the recurring assumption that Big Brother and the Holding Company, with their lead singer Janis Joplin, played at the Be-in. Peter Albin confirms that they did not. Albin, interview with the author, March 29, 2000.

plenty of “white lightning,” his new, extremely potent mixture.⁷⁵ A Zen monk, the Reverend Suzuki of the San Francisco Zen Temple, meditated on stage, and a parachutist descended into the crowd from the sky while the crowd gathered and enjoyed themselves as the real spectacle. As Charles Perry wrote, “as the Be-in had advertised by its very name, the event was the presence of the people itself.” The afternoon concluded with the ceremonial blowing of a conch shell by Gary Snyder and Buddhist chants led by Ginsberg. Many in the crowd stayed to clean up under Ginsberg’s direction, while others went back to Haight Street or to the beach at the far western end of the park to continue the comraderie. The only police present were two patrolmen on horseback, and although there were minor altercations between some black and Latino youth and hippies, those were quickly quashed. That day, the most dramatic intervention of the police was their towing of the many illegally parked cars in the Haight neighborhood.⁷⁶

Like the concerts and street games of the previous fall in the Haight, the Human Be-in was not politics as usual, to be sure. The world of the Berkeley activists consisted of meetings with university trustees, and a continual engagement with mainstream authorities that lent credibility to the notion that such people had authority over the individual. The Haight hippies wanted no part of that world, and the psychedelic proselytizing, the utopian rhetoric resonating with mysticism, and the millennial intent of the Be-in all betray an inclination away from the staid and straight-laced world of traditional politics. Not as intent on the complete restructuring of society as the Diggers,

⁷⁵ Grogan, *Ringolevio*, 267; Sandy Troy, *Captain Trips: A Biography of Jerry Garcia* (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 1994), 103; Doyle, “The Haight-Ashbury Diggers”.

⁷⁶ Many published accounts describe the Be-in. See Terry H. Anderson, *The Movement and the Sixties: Protest in America from Greensboro to Wounded Knee* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); Anthony, *Summer of Love*; Gitlin, *The Sixties*; Hoskins, *Beneath the Diamond Sky*; Lee and Shlain, *Acid Dreams*; Perry, *The Haight-Ashbury*; Selvin, *Summer of Love*.

the organizers of the Be-in and the *Oracle* thus were not aware of themselves as “political” in the traditional sense. They also recognized the differences between the two worlds of counterculture and New Left activist when they saw the need to hold an event to unify them. The Diggers, though they considered themselves to be political activists using culture as a tool to create change, also distinguished themselves from the straight-laced world of traditional activism, which in their eyes left out joy and passion.⁷⁷

Media coverage of the Be-in furthered these distinctions by characterizing it as apolitical. The Be-in was therefore a significant contribution to the development of the public identity of the counterculture; as Lee and Shlain note, it “marked the beginning of a concentrated media assault on the Haight-Ashbury.”⁷⁸ In press coverage, hippies emerged simply as drop-out drug freaks, bolstered in their wayward ways by the largess of a wealthy and indulgent society. For example, the *San Francisco Sunday Examiner and Chronicle* described the “bizarre union of love and activism” as the “first annual Feast of the Incongruous.”⁷⁹ Even participant Emmett Grogan later dismissed the Be-in as “one big fashion show.”⁸⁰ Such characterizations contributed to the perceived gulf between the political activists of the era and the hippies, who were practicing politics in their own way.

Historians at first accepted those distinctions. Todd Gitlin, a former SDS member whose book *The Sixties* has long been considered one of the definitive assessments of the decade, wrote that the leaders of the Haight counterculture were “antipolitical purists” for whom “all political systems were equal oppressors and power trippers.” Ken Kesey’s

⁷⁷ Peter Berg, interview with author, May 24, 1999.

⁷⁸ Lee and Shlain, *Acid Dreams*, 163.

⁷⁹ “Hippies’ Love and Activism: They Came...Saw...Stared,” *San Francisco Sunday Chronicle and Examiner*, January 15, 1967, 3.

⁸⁰ Grogan, *Ringolevio*, 275.

appearance at the October 1965 Berkeley antiwar teach-in, when he declared the futility of such demonstrations, is frequently cited as evidence of the counterculture's resistance to politics. The only connection, Gitlin further argues, between some of the Berkeley political radicals and the counterculture was a mutual fascination with drug use, which began to attract Berkeley radicals to the Haight Street scene and blur the lines between counterculture and political radicals. Lee and Shlain argue that the Be-in failed to achieve the much-vaunted unification of hippies and politicians because no one in the crowd seemed to pay attention to Jerry Rubin's speech on the Vietnam War. The lack of response, and the Be-in on the whole, "tended to underscore the differences between the two camps" and "the apolitical tone of the event was disconcerting to New Left activists, who became increasingly critical of the hippie stance that a change of mentality could spearhead a change of reality."⁸¹

But such an analysis fails to recognize the inherent political nature of cultural rebellion such as that being practiced by the counterculture in the Haight. Charles Perry wrote that at the Be-in "it was obvious that the real reason was simply to be-in—that is, to be in a public place declaring your right to be, just as civil rights demonstrators had been sitting-in at Southern lunch counters to declare their right to be seated."⁸² The Diggers had long considered and presented themselves as cultural rebels determined on social, political and economic change. The use of public space by hippies also belies the idea that the emergent counterculture was less political than the Berkeley activists, or even apolitical. The Be-in could not have happened without the chipping away of

⁸¹ Gitlin, *The Sixties*, 208-210; Lee and Shlain, *Acid Dreams*, 164-165.

⁸² Charles Perry in *I Want to Take You Higher: The Psychedelic Era 1965-1969*, eds. James Henke and Parke Puterbaugh, The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Museum and Sarah Lazin Books (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1997), 126.

regulations regarding public behavior by the Haight community. It was a natural development from the Haight's continual challenge to the regulation of public behavior and proof that certain barriers were being dismantled.

This is a political dynamic of social change. Ralph Gleason, always a champion of the Haight music scene, argued that the left misunderstood the dynamic in the Haight, which he called "political acts of a different kind, a kind that resulted in Hell's Angels being the guardians of lost children...."⁸³ Such activities were thus complete reversals of cultural expectations and social standards. The Human Be-in, like the street and park celebrations of the Diggers was an example of cultural politics, demonstrating how the counterculture used public space to announce itself as a community and how public events were a substantial part of counterculture's politics. The Be-in organizers further declared the existence of a community of interest between the two elements of the youth movement.⁸⁴ No less than the New Left, counterculture activists were working toward social change, a stated attempt to create the New Age. Proclaiming a tie at the Be-in between the various elements of the youth movement, the counterculture also established itself as a political entity.

⁸³ Ralph J. Gleason in Hoskins, Underneath the Diamond Sky, 118.

⁸⁴ Peter Berg, interview with the author, May 24, 1999.

CONCLUSION

THE POLITICAL CULTURE OF THE COUNTERCULTURE AFTER

JANUARY 1967

The counterculture that became the subject of the national imagination, drawing voyeuristic tourists as well as genuine seekers to the Haight over the next year, was the one that formed in 1966 and early 1967, but it would soon begin to change. Shortly after the Human Be-in on January 14, 1967, coverage of that event attracted thousands of young seekers to the Haight. A neighborhood that was small and cohesive became an increasingly crowded and crime-ridden one. Significant changes affecting the use of public space occurred that would alter the character of both the counterculture and its evolving political culture.

The new crowds threatened the precarious peace that had existed between the hippies and the police until January 1967. That relationship, though generally characterized by mutual animosity, had nonetheless so far been marked by restraint. The police had remained watchful of the community but had not cracked down heavily on the public activities, and the hippies had themselves remained watchful but also teasingly familiar with the police, sporting "Hello Officer Gerrans" pins. Members of the community participated in summit meetings with the police to discuss the neighborhood's problems and police-community relations. At one point, playwright

Michael McClure devised a dispersal mantra that hippies chanted to clear the streets of people when violence threatened.

Generally, the community was committed to nonviolence and the reduction of conflict with the police, but the crowd of new faces broke down the familiarity that had grown between residents of the neighborhood and the police. Greater numbers also caused logistical problems for the police and other civil authorities. For example, the night of the Be-in, there were mass arrests on Haight Street for the obstruction of traffic, and the San Francisco Park Commission soon passed a ban on sleeping in the parks meant to discourage the new pilgrims to the district.

The new residents pouring into the Haight following the Human Be-in were also markedly different from those who had created the original hippie community. The media increasingly portrayed the counterculture in a negative light, trumpeting the sexual freedom of the “love generation” of the Haight-Ashbury as well as the use of psychedelic drugs. On January 12, 1967, two days before the Be-in, a soon-to-be infamous episode of the popular national television show “Dragnet” aired. The episode, titled “The LSD Story” centered on the exploits of an acid dealer named “Blue Boy” and the attempts of the show’s protagonists, Joe Friday and Bill Gannon, to capture him. Soon many new residents, drawn to the neighborhood by such images, came to indulge in excessive behavior or prey upon the thousands who hoped to create a new community.¹ An influx of people interested only in the drug culture of the Haight-Ashbury created new crime,

¹ The most infamous of those who preyed on the hippies of the Haight was Charles Manson, who was drawn to the Haight-Ashbury in March 1967 following his release from prison. There, he began to assemble his “Family” from lost and confused street kids and Haight residents, including Susan Atkins and Robert “Bobby” Beausoleil, a former member of a band that played at some Digger events. Atkins and Beausoleil would later become notorious as members of Manson’s murderous commune. See Vincent Bugliosi with Curt Gentry, Helter Skelter: The True Story of the Manson Murders (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1974), 163-165.

drawing the attention of police who previously had often looked the other way when Haight residents smoked marijuana or displayed obvious signs of other forms of intoxication at public events. Informed by the negative media exposure of such things as the Dragnet episode and the increase in drug-related crime in the Haight-Ashbury and other counterculture centers contributed to the impression most Americans had of hippies as drug-addled drop-outs unconcerned with social change, and resulted in stricter policing of public events.

The destruction of the urban utopian community of the Haight-Ashbury was inconceivable to hippie residents of the neighborhood in December of 1966, but by the summer of 1967, profit, exploitation, and violence had become the hallmark of the district. This was an unfortunate by-product of the public nature of the hippie community and its dramatic growth in the spring of 1967. It was one which they protested: at the Death of Hippie event of October 6, 1967, the Diggers and other members of the committee staged a funeral parade in response to the excessive media attention garnered by the counterculture in the Haight, hoping to recast their dreams outside the now familiar image of the Haight as a hippie drug mecca. The dreams of urban community had been replaced by dreams of rural communes far removed from the public eye.

An understanding of this change should inform any further study of the counterculture and its claim to public space after January 1967. Media exploitation, the resultant increase in population, and the attendant problems such an increase created, altered the character of Haight-Ashbury. The cohesion that had characterized the community, and enabled public events such as those outlined in this study, gave way to a loss of community, alienation, and fear among the residents. When residents danced in

the streets in 1968 and after, they did so less within in the idealistic spirit of community-building but more out of the increasingly anarchic and hedonistic impulses of the later years of the era.

Despite this, it is important to recognize that the unified and localized youth culture of the Haight from 1965 to early 1967 entered the landscape of American public life and challenged mainstream restrictions on behavior and public activity. George Lipsitz has argued that “the counterculture rebels of the sixties were not as revolutionary as many of their spokespersons proclaimed nor as successful as their opponents alleged. Attempting to negotiate the contradictions of their time, they created a culture that was both a critique of their society and a symptom of its worst failings. But in their anarchistic impulses and erotic self-affirmation, in their egalitarian intentions and their spiritual strivings, they articulated an agenda that continues to be fought over today.”² James J. Farrell, however, argues that hippies, despite their political goals, differed in tactics from the New Left in one crucial respect: “unlike the sit-in and teach-in, which occupied the public spaces of mainstream America, the drop-out emptied the public square.”³

Both of these statements are contradicted by historical evidence. In its public events, the counterculture did more than articulate a divisive agenda. It also influenced where and how debates took place by bringing its form of prefigurative, personalist politics directly to the public spaces of the United States. The nation’s parks, streets and sidewalks were transformed by the colorful festivals, casual group activities and daily

² George Lipsitz, “Who’ll Stop the Rain? Youth Culture, Rock n’ Roll, and Social Crises” in ed. David Farber, *The Sixties: From Memory to History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 231.

³ James J. Farrell, *The Spirit of the Sixties: The Making of Postwar Radicalism* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 212.

usage that hippies fought to maintain, and as they did so public spaces became daily forums for the dialogue between mainstream authorities and the counterculture over the nature of authority and power in the United States. Thus, the counterculture's definition of politics was just as fluid as that of the New Left and its activity was so diverse that it often crossed the border between traditional politics and the new cultural politics of the 1960s. The counterculture is noteworthy not because it was an apolitical phenomenon, but because its political culture represents the plural trends of political activity and expression available to Americans in the 1960s.

This last point further underscores the importance of prefigurative politics to hippies. Criticisms of the counterculture as "apolitical," when made against a standard of politics that was not even practiced by the counterculture, is a mistake. Historians do hippies a disservice by trying to reconcile fully their political goals with those of the New Left and the antiwar movement. In fact, the founders of the counterculture and the primary adherents of its goal of political change through cultural transformation did not belong to SDS or other New Left organizations and were interested in other tactics and goals and articulated this through a distinct political style. Their events differed from those of SDS or the civil rights movement, as they were rooted in festivity. Yet that festivity held a political significance; the result was a unique blend of traditional and prefigurative politics that redefined American political culture. Hippies fought the power of urban authorities to restrict their public behavior and access to public spaces. They brought their personal lifestyles into the public as political issues and, in doing so, introduced public political events that would eventually be models for today's pride

parades and festivals. The counterculture was thus indeed political, and it was a blend of many different political impulses.

Historian Terry Anderson has written that the hippies, or “freaks” of the sixties, “live differently, outside of the mainstream, but of course freaks never could drop out completely. They drove the roads and adhered to highway laws, bought land and complied with local ordinances. They paid rent, bills and had to buy food and other goods. Some worked and paid taxes, others used social services, and some got drafted.”⁴ This observation, perhaps unwittingly, demonstrates the truly engaged nature of the counterculture. The counterculture was not a drop-out movement, but a form of active political rebellion. The earliest counterculture group, the Merry Pranksters, flouted highway laws, and Ken Kesey openly taunted the police from within the safe environs of his property. The Mime Troupe and the Diggers, the basis of the San Francisco counterculture, challenged the laws that regulated public behavior and the uses of the city’s public spaces.

Soon, hippies across the nation would adopt these examples and challenge the regulation of the streets, parks, sidewalks, city plazas and other public spaces in various parts of the country. From the beginning of 1967, it was clear that the ethos about public space developed by the hippies had emerged in other parts of the country. It informed almost every major subsequent public event of the era. In 1967, the Be-in in New York City’s Central Park and the countercultural activities at the Pentagon protest suggest that hippies on the east coast had adopted the Haight-Ashbury’s claims to public space for festivity in similarly political ways, and the “Festival of Life” planned by the Yippies for

⁴ Terry H. Anderson, The Movement and the Sixties: Protest in America From Greensboro to Wounded Knee (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995) 255.

the Chicago Democratic Convention of August 1969 also bear the hallmark of the countercultural ideology of festivity as a means of political culture. There is no better example, though, of the influence of countercultural ideas about the rights to public space for festivity than the People's Park movement in Berkeley in 1969. At People's Park, Berkeley students and residents claimed a piece of university property as their own and defied the University's demands to abandon their project of building a community park and gathering place. The counterculture expanded its claims over public space to include space officially "public," as it was the province of a tax-funded state university, but usually considered "private" because it was not held by the city.

In order to fully understand such public events, including the battle over People's Park in 1969, it must be seen in the context of the counterculture's emphasis on the use of public space as early as 1966. It is within this context that we may begin to understand the long-term influence of the counterculture. Historian Dominick Cavallo argued that although the counterculture may have been part of the movement that "raised basic questions about personal liberty, democracy, work, political power and community; it is hard to see what, if anything, came of it all."⁵ But in addition to raising such issues publicly, the Haight-Ashbury counterculture that flourished from 1964 to 1967 engaged in a political struggle with civil authorities, dancing into the public sphere as a distinct community, asserting its legal and civil rights as well as its desire for more control over their own community. In doing so, the Haight-Ashbury counterculture provided an example for the expansion of such challenges among the youth of the nation throughout

⁵ Dominick Cavallo, *A Fiction of the Past: The Sixties in American History* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 252.

the remainder of the 1960s, redefined the conception of politics to include festivity, and altered the use of public space in the United States.

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