

A first communiqué from two uncitizens of Arterial Bloc

There have been many calls for Arterial Bloc to come forward and ‘justify’ their tactics during the G20 protests. The following statement is not a justification of specific actions; it is an exploration of politics. This statement has not been written for or on behalf of the Bloc; it has been written from within the Bloc. None of us can be leaders or spokespeople for each other.

We apologise for the delay. We were not able to head straight from the streets to the internet. We have been dealing with the consequences of achieving more than perhaps we thought we would, and the aftermath of repression. We have been caring for each other, talking to each other, trying to find out what happened to those arrested and injured; remembering to breathe and sleep and eat.

The demonising of Arterial Bloc by other sections of the Left (a demonising that only seems to have escalated in the last few days) has been cowardly, hysterical and, in the deepest sense, uncomradely. A willing eagerness to blame violence on “interstate” or “foreign” agitators is both false and xenophobic. Why must the militant protestor always be an other, both geographically and philosophically distanced from us? Why should struggle respect national or state borders? There has been a belief expressed not only by the corporate media but also by the Left that such actions as occurred at the G20 could not and *should not* be possible here in Australia. By extension, those involved are not “genuine” protestors but false provocateurs; or, if those involved were indeed “local”, their protest was immature and apolitical.

We did not come out of nowhere and we are not strangers. We do not have “contempt” for “ordinary protestors”; we *are* ordinary protestors. What was Arterial Bloc? It was a call-out, a costume, and an attempt at internal democracy and communication. It was joined and accompanied on the day by many people who chose, for that time, to work together. Arterial Bloc is not an organization or a party; it is not a homogenous group or a faceless, rootless mob. We are female, male and in between; workers, unemployed, students, union members. We have been on union picket lines; we have created squatted social centres; we have blockaded in forests and cities; we have cooked and distributed free meals; we have leafleted, rallied, called meetings; we have lived together and apart, and tried to love each other. We are ordinary: as scared and as alienated as everybody else. We do not have magical solutions; we have desire that will not be governed.

The fear displayed towards members of the Bloc seems grounded largely in the Bloc’s tactics of masking and disguise. Most criticism of the tactic centres on the idea that “disguise” is somehow sinister; that it leaves the movement open to infiltration by police and/or fascists, and that not knowing or *not recognising* fellow protestors is a bad thing.

Unpacking the semiotics of disguise is complicated. What follows is an attempt to do so.

Firstly, some history. Contrary to general belief, the G20 protests are not the first time that a “disguised” Bloc has appeared at an Australian protest. Orange Bloc pursued a similar tactic at the 2003 WTO protests in Homebush and the Sydney CBD; orange

boilersuits and bandanas were chosen for their visual resonance with the “war on terror” and the ensuing “state of emergency” across the globe, a state of emergency which, as Walter Benjamin once noted, is not an exception but the rule.

White overalls also have a particular historical resonance within the contemporary anti-capitalist movement, having been for many years the disguise of choice for the Tute Bianche, an autonomist group of largely Italian origin who began organising in 1994. Now is not the time or place for an extended discussion of the Tute Bianche, but a decent quote from one of their many documents (freely available on the internet) may help to illuminate the political arguments in favour of disguise:

“The white overalls are not a movement, they are a tool which was devised in the context of a broader movement (the social centers of the Charta of Milan) and made available to an even broader movement (the global one). Nowadays the white overalls exist in many countries. The white overalls are neither an institution nor a political current, nor are they to be strictly identified with Ya Basta! or the social centers of North-East Italy [...]

One of our soundbites is: "We're wearing the white overall so that other people wear it. We're wearing the white overall so that we can take it off someday".

The white overall is not a "uniform" [...] It hasn't got militaristic origins. Back in Autumn 1994 the Mayor of Milan evicted the Leoncavallo squatted centre and stated: "Squatters are nothing other than ghosts now!" His description was accepted ironically, and thousands of people dressed in white stormed the streets of the city and rioted for hour. That was the real debut of the white overalls [...]

After that debut, the imagery of the white overall was enriched by ironic references to the "blue overalls": nowadays labour has changed [...] "flexibility", part-time and precarious jobs have made exploitation less visible, there's a new "ghostly" working class.”

A white overall or similar disguise is a refusal to claim a space of “citizenship”, as the original Arterial Bloc call out (widely distributed) makes clear. Contemporary capitalism makes ghosts of us all, because it leeches us of our own precious and unique desires – and the *embodiment* of those desires – in favour of a homogenous “discipline” and “order”. We cease to be human beings; we are mere machinery and leftovers. For those of us who are ostensibly “free” there is the discipline of the workplace; of welfare, police and state surveillance (one must be the “grateful” and “well behaved” poor or be nothing); of educational institutions; and not least the discipline of the average protest. For those who face the brunt of state repression, there is the detention centre, the jail, the ghost prison of an unknown country. These forms of repression and enclosure are all connected: in solidarity with those who are refused citizenship and freedom of movement we also refuse citizenship; as a rebuttal to the fact that we are targeted and profiled on an everyday basis for visible difference – ethnicity, poverty and class, gender and sexuality – we choose to disguise that visibility. We will not “stand up and be counted” as citizens within this false democracy. Capitalism haunts us, and it makes us haunted; we will haunt it.

Socialist Alternative (among others) has claimed that the tactic of disguise “can only

be justified in situations of extreme state repression”, and that until such time, we must continue to be “ordinary”. The basic fact is that over the past five years, the “war on terror” has been used as the overarching excuse *for* extreme state repression, both in Australia and elsewhere. “Ordinary” people have been raided, beaten, locked up, charged with crimes that they never committed; it is time for us to *stop claiming* the space of “ordinary” and “innocent” as a space of safety. If those of us who attend rallies and public protests are only doing so “on behalf” of those who have been *denied* the presumption of innocence, what power and privileges are we thereby claiming for ourselves? If we as protestors are always “innocent”, who is “guilty”: rioters in Redfern, Iraqi insurgents, Guantanamo prisoners, Tongan youth?

Capitalism does not tolerate serious, revolutionary dissent; it never has and it never will. The state will do everything in its power to crush revolutionary movements, and it will not care to distinguish between the “innocent” and the “guilty”, between the “good” and the “bad” protestor. Are we revolutionaries, or not? If we are, then we are already enemies of the state. Let us not be afraid of being called so.

“The same people who are murdered slowly in the mechanized slaughterhouses of work are also arguing, singing, drinking, dancing, making love, holding the streets, picking up weapons and inventing a new poetry.”

(Raoul Vaneigem)

We reclaim the radical ordinary. We do not feel the need to pitch a “central message” through the filter of the corporate media to the mythical “ordinary person” who, apparently, can only comprehend or sympathise with managed dissent.

A false dichotomy is set up between the role of the “disciplined”, politically mature protestor and the inarticulate other. The other is positioned as a person or a group too worn out by oppression to resist tactically. This other is protested *for*, or on behalf of, but we must never indulge in their tactics. Both property damage and any spontaneous, emotional embodiment of resistance are seen as apolitical, as reactions to be left (pun intended) behind as we attain proper political maturity. “Oppressed others” (in Redfern, Macquarie Fields, Palm Island, Lakemba) who are perhaps never expected by those who call for disciplined protest to reach the requisite levels of political maturity have been rhetorically defended for their “justified” anger. But those who set Macquarie Fields on fire are never presumed to be part of a mass resistance to capitalism; and those who *are* presumed to be a part of “the movement” are therefore seen as outside of the system that produces such anger.

Property damage can be tactical, and as a tactic it has a long history. As peasant *saboteurs* and early industrial workers made clear, property damage was a direct disruption of capitalism’s machinery, and of its discipline of lives and bodies in the workplace:

“I am not going to attempt to justify sabotage on any moral ground. If the workers consider that sabotage is necessary, that in itself makes sabotage moral. Its necessity is its excuse for existence. And for us to discuss the morality of sabotage would be as absurd as to discuss the morality of the strike or the morality of the class struggle itself. In order to understand sabotage or to accept it at all it is necessary to accept the

concept of class struggle. If you believe that between the workers on the one side and their employers on the other there is peace, there is harmony such as exists between brothers, and that consequently whatever strikes and lockouts occur are simply family squabbles; if you believe that a point can be reached whereby the employer can get enough and the worker can get enough, a point of amicable adjustment of industrial warfare and economic distribution, then there is no justification and no explanation of sabotage intelligible to you.”

(Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, *Sabotage*, Cleveland, Ohio, 1916)

Almost 100 years later, sabotage and property damage can still be used to disrupt the efficient functioning and discipline of capitalism, not only in the workplace, but in each area of our lives where this discipline has reach, which is to say, all of our lives, every day. The machinery of war and of welfare; the militarisation of public space and the containment of protest within sanctioned zones – all these things need to be dismantled. When barricades are destroyed, streets are opened.

Beyond tactics and planning is the exhilaration of *embodying* refusal – even if only for a moment, and these moments are not without politics. Why should politics and protest be disciplined spaces, spaces without emotion and desire? To be caught up in the moment, in a collective energy, is a rare rupture of the alienation, isolation and powerlessness of our everyday lives. These moments show us what we are capable of; but we are capable of much more. We must preserve a movement of resistance to capitalism that is made up of many different acts of refusal and creation. However, we genuinely fail to understand how anyone who calls herself a revolutionary can fail to find at least some beauty in the sight of a smashed police van.

We can and will discuss tactics and their consequences; a more detailed response to specific events during the G20 protests is being prepared.

With love and solidarity,
From two people who will be known as Gertrude and Fuchsia.