

The reality of my desires

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Realizing the Impossible: Art Against Authority

Edited by Josh MacPhee & Erik Reuland
Oakland & Edinburgh: AK Press, 2007, 324 pp; £16

Do it Yourself: A Handbook for Changing our World

Edited by the Trapeze Collective
London & Ann Arbor: Pluto Press, 2007

Rebel Alliances: The Means and Ends of Contemporary British Anarchisms

Benjamin Franks
Oakland & Edinburgh: AK Press, 2006, 480 pp; £15



Two books, both purporting to encourage social change according to the tenets of anarchism, have been published recently. The first of these, *Realizing the Impossible: Art Against Authority*, advocates a role for creative practice in prompting questions about how society is constructed and providing alternative models. In contrast to this proactive approach to visual culture, *Do it Yourself: A Handbook for Changing our World* claims to be a step-by-step guide to changing our immediate surroundings, for developing new communities based on direct democracy and sustainability.

Realizing the Impossible asserts that, while Marxism constrains art to the prevailing economic conditions and capitalism harnesses it to the market system, “anarchism is not a singular political program so much as a thorough commitment to substantive equality and the potential for human liberation,”¹ thereby promoting artistic freedom. On this basis, some fairly tenuous attempts are made to link Modernist artists to anarchism, not least in Patricia Leighton’s unsubstantiated assertion that:

“In pre-World War I France, many modernists – including Pablo Picasso, Maurice Vlaminc and Kees van Dongen – thought anarchist politics to be inherent in the idea of an artistic avant-garde and created new languages of form [...] expressive of their desire to effect revolutionary changes in art and society. [...] Anarchism as a political philosophy was, without question, more influential on turn-of-the-century artists than socialism, in part because anarchist theory specifically called for the participation of artists in social transformation, and in part because anarchism at one end of its spectrum stood for absolute individualism fully compatible with a politicized bohemianism.”²

Elsewhere, claims are made that artists associated with anarchism include Pissarro, Tolstoy and Wilde, as well as those who turned to Communism – from Malevich to Picasso³ – while references are made to the “Situationist-inspired anarchist art movements like the Neoists,”⁴ an attribution with which former Neoist and persistent critic of

anarchism, Stewart Home, would no doubt take issue.⁵

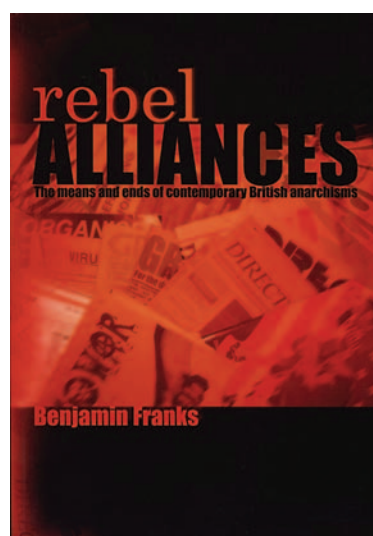
A transcribed discussion between contemporary printmakers in *Realizing the Impossible* gives a clue to its ethos and should be restaged by anyone entering arts education, posing questions such as: What do you think about art as a commodity? If you sell your work, how do you decide the price of a piece? What do you think is the role(s) of an artist in society? What role do you think art plays in social change? What roles do you think art plays in our lives?⁶ In another section, Cindy Millstein attempts to reconcile some contradictions, asking “Why is anarchist art so often a parody of itself, predictable and uninteresting?”⁷

At its most convincing, *Realizing the Impossible* ignores the market-driven contemporary art world; when it does engage, it does so uncritically. Gee Vaucher – who notoriously designed graphics for punk band Crass – goes on record with the misguided confession “I’ve shown in 96 Gillespie in London several times, and although it is a private gallery, it has the feel of a public space, probably due to the fact that is [sic] opposite the old Arsenal football ground and on home-weekends you’d have several thousands [sic] fans peering into the show. I’ve also had a good experience showing at Gavin Brown’s in New York. I’m liking the mixture of art worlds at the moment.”⁸ This *laissez faire* attitude to the commercial art world – a microcosm of capitalism and a pervasive influence on creativity – is repeated throughout the volume. This is consistent with co-editor Josh MacPhee’s defeatist stance: “Unfortunately, we live in a society where the dominant economic model is one where the value of things is defined by how much you can sell them for. This isn’t a good thing, but I’m not a purist. I sell art because I don’t know how else to survive while making it.”⁹

Two articles that stand out for further consideration are a lyrical account of the rise and fall of stencil art on the streets of Argentina, and a pragmatic treatment of the capitalist nature of much ostensibly anti-corporate activism. The first of these begins with a consideration of financial meltdown in Argentina in December 2001, during which the government’s IMF debt and adherence to free market neoliberalism caused capital flight (the large-scale withdrawal of international funds from banks for fear the country would default on its external debt) and the subsequent implementation of restrictions:

“...what was so remarkable about the protests in Argentina at that time was that upper and middle class people were active participants in the street protest and direct democracy. The *ahorristas*, or savers, were a movement of more or less affluent people who had lost their life’s savings to the government restrictions on money withdrawal from banks. Weekly protests of these upper class folks were black bloc protest-reels of smashed windows and spray-painted bank facades – only carried out in broad daylight without masks by men with suits and briefcases or women in heels.”¹⁰

In the austerity years that followed, neighbourhood committees met to discuss



practicalities such as the provision of basic healthcare, the production and distribution of alternative media and, on a more ideological level, the desire to end all political parties. This period also spawned a massive increase in street art in Buenos Aires, some of it political, some playful. Erick Lyle delivers a thoughtful portrait of his personal encounters with stencil artists, from the avowedly political Nico from Vomito Attack¹¹ – who has consistently refused to appear in stencil art exhibitions sponsored by the state, preferring to organise his own illegal events – to Cucusita,¹² the twenty-nine year old skateboarder who began stencilling before the crisis and confines his work to a suburban hospital car park.

When Nestor Kirchner was elected President on a low turnout and with a narrow majority in May 2003, he immediately defaulted on Argentina’s IMF loan, which has now been paid in full by Venezuela’s Hugo Chávez,¹³ and, while worker-owned and managed businesses still exist, the unprecedented neighbourhood assemblies have largely been dissolved. An interview with the members of Buenos Aires (BsAs) Stencil¹⁴ – who exhibited their work at the Centro Cultural Borges, took part in 2004 ArteBA contemporary art fair and happily discuss future prospects for commercial merchandise – prompts Lyle to consider:

“...in this new era, four years removed from the economic crisis that gave it birth, the stencil in

Buenos Aires is one step away from BECOMING advertising. If so, advertising for what? The “new freedom”? “The Revolution” [...] Stencils represented the participation people wanted, and pop culture images represented the products they will get. The stencil was the aesthetic of a new participation that had long faded.”¹⁵

The ill-considered nature of many supposedly subversive creative ventures into state- and corporate-controlled space is consolidated in the theoretical section which concludes the same anthology. Anne Elizabeth Moore delivers an incisive critique of culture jamming, based on a fundamental misunderstanding of the boycott and a misidentification of parody and satire with political change. To illustrate the point, Moore considers the tactics of the Reverend Billy from the Church of Stop Shopping, typically centred on ubiquitous branded coffee houses. Rather than launching attacks that prove damaging to the targeted corporation, Moore argues, these activities actually increase the brand recognition on which any successful company depends:

“...parody and satire, used to fight the meme war or as strategies in their own right, rely on representing the very subjects ridiculed. Culture jamming, adusting, and parody in general, not only reassert the icons they half-heartedly attempt to dismantle, they encourage their continued survival. [...] As a method of political action, culture jamming, because of its central reliance on parody and satire as politically effective strategies, has already failed. That is, because it reproduces the exact messages it claims to want to upend, culture jamming is necessarily ineffective.”¹⁶

By and large, then, culture jamming does

nothing to undermine the actual mechanisms of profit or the products being traded. Instead, Moore concludes, genuinely critical responses to consumer culture are needed, to end the tyranny of brands and the dogmas they represent and enable us to conceive of something uncontrolled.

The Handbook for Changing our World claims to enable us to actually achieve something uncontrolled on the basis that “the networks of people that are working for Earth and societal repair, linked by the internet and a million small agreements to work together, are emerging to form the world’s greatest, most important, new global superpower.”¹⁷ Predicated on imminent peak oil and environmental catastrophe, eighteen chapters provide information about the process of achieving individual and community-based change, including an illustrated guide to the appropriate hand gestures to make during meetings. Again, its principles “largely follow anarchist/autonomist thought. Anarchism, from the Greek ‘without government’, is a belief that people can organise society for themselves without formalised government. It argues that the best way to organise is through voluntary arrangements where people are likely to co-operate more.”¹⁸ This is entry-level activism, the kind of thing you could give to a benign aunt to introduce her to the widely-known horrors perpetrated by Nestlé and Dow Chemical. As such, it belongs in every community library, readily accessible to those wishing to try out the experiments detailed therein. For those already

familiar with its arguments, however, the *Handbook* conjures notions of a selective Arcadia, with the privileged echelons of society cultivating their own vegetables on reclaimed land and powering their houses with sustainable energy while the Morlocks of the malls are forced to abandon their fossil-fuelled livelihoods with no contingencies in place.

Interestingly, the *Handbook for Changing our World* also mentions Argentina in terms of a ‘popular uprising that is still going on today’, contrary to Erick Lyle’s first-hand experience of the era of mass participation having almost disappeared. It also dedicates a celebratory chapter to culture jamming, from the perspective of a recruit to the Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army (convened in time for the G8 protests at Gleneagles in 2005). Acknowledging media theorist Geert Lovink’s scepticism – that “... culture jamming is useless fun. That’s exactly why you should do it. Commit senseless acts of beauty. But don’t think they are effective, or subversive, for that matter. The real purpose of [a] corporation cannot be revealed by media activism. That can only be done by years [of] long, painstakingly slow, investigative journalism. Brand damage has never proven enough. What we need is research, thinking, brainstorming, and then action”¹⁹ – the book nonetheless embraces media activism as “crucially changing both idea space and public space from a corporate or party political monologue to a dialogue where people are speaking for themselves,”²⁰ offering uncritical

praise of the impotent activities of the Rev. Billy and the like. The one exception among the examples cited, according to the terms established by Anne Elizabeth Moore – having allegedly caused share prices to plummet – would seem to be the televised admission of liability made on behalf of Dow Chemical by a representative of the Yes Men.

One way of evaluating the relative successes of these two titles is to measure them according to the anarchist criteria against which they seek to be judged. A recent attempt by Benjamin Franks to formulate an ‘ideal type’ anarchist – *Rebel Alliances: The Means and Ends of Contemporary British Anarchisms* – is premised on a complete rejection of capitalism and state power, an egalitarian concern for the interests and freedoms of others and a recognition that means have to prefigure ends. In Franks’ schema, the revolutionary agent of change is the subject of oppression herself and, as oppression has more than one source, her identity is flexible and not confined to traditional Leninist definitions of the working class – which fits well with Lyle’s account of Argentina. Accordingly, Franks’ ideal type of class-struggle libertarians respond to their own oppression, without the need for vanguard intervention, and their actions are synecdochic – that is, part of a larger visualisation of societal change. This serves as a useful benchmark against which different approaches may be tested.

While neither *Realizing the Impossible* nor the *Handbook for Changing our World* attempts any definition of the particular branch of anarchism they claim to represent and as many stances are offered as there are authors, the former title veers dangerously close to what Franks dismisses as liberal, or lifestyle, anarchism, whereby “anarchists have a view of the individual which is fixed and conforms to the criteria of rational egoism associated with capitalism.”²¹ By advocating creative people as revolutionary subjects, it begs questions about the extent to which artists in the western world really are oppressed and, by offering hierarchical collectives such as the Bread and Puppet group²² as models, it undermines Franks’ ideal type. Further, the creative activities outlined largely rely on raising awareness of problems, rather than tackling them directly, and depend on mediation, rendering them examples of symbolic, as opposed to direct, action – a derided tactic according to anarchist logic.

By contrast, the *Handbook for Changing our World* would appear to adhere more closely to ideal type anarchism, encouraging local groups working together to improve their environments, on the basis that micro-political change will lead to something more substantial: “Alternatives to the current system of decision making in our society exist. We need to extend these spheres of free action and mutual aid until they make up most of society. It is the myriad of [sic] small groups organising for social change that will, when connected to each other, transform society.”²³ While the extent of these groups’ oppression would seem to rest on a notion of the majority being oppressed under capitalism, Franks also advocates *détournement* and culture jamming as consistent with the tactics employed by anarchists,



Over page and above: Graffiti in Buenos Aires.

Left: Graffiti in Buenos Aires, including the Headquarters of Bank Boston, on what the collapse of the financial system meant. Photographs by Dennis Rodgers.

inadvertently consolidating the ethos of the *Handbook for Changing our World*. Ultimately, both *Realizing the Impossible* and the *Handbook for Changing our World* are grounded in localist tactics and nationalist perspectives – from the US and the UK respectively – with any attempt to represent the creative dissent of other cultures (Argentina, Denmark) in the former being undertaken by US writers. Herein lays one of the main pitfalls of anarchist analysis, what Stewart Home refers to as a fetishisation of the state.²⁴ While Franks’ successful attempt to unravel the multifarious factions within British anarchism could serve as the historical basis for parodies of the fragmented Left, like Tariq Ali’s first novel, *Redemption* – and Franks’ glee in distinguishing anarchism from Leninism is palpable – capitalism benefits from an overwhelming consensus in every area of Anglo-American society, from the state and the media to the general populace, with no respect for national boundaries. Any further erosion of the (albeit capitalist) state during this final phase of advanced capitalism runs the risk of removing the last vestiges of corporate accountability and leaving the world and its citizens at the mercy of rampant neoliberalism. Rather than waiting for all those declaring themselves loyal to anarchism, or Leninism, or any faction of the Left – and all those joining the anti-capitalist movement but beholden to any specific ideology – to unite in the immediate task of developing strategies for the abolition of capitalism. It is only through wholesale change that we will be able to fully consider how future society will be constructed, which of the models being developed now will be sustainable and what the role of creativity will be.

With thanks to 100% Proof.

Notes

1. Josh MacPhee & Eric Reuland, ‘Introduction: Towards Anarchist Art Theories’, *Realizing the Impossible*, op. cit, p. 4.

2. Patricia Leighton, ‘Reveille Anarchiste: Salon Painting, Political Satire, Modernist Art’, *Realizing the Impossible*, op. cit, p. 27.

3. David Graeber, ‘The Twilight of Vanguardism’, *Realizing the Impossible*, op. cit, p. 252.

4. Kyle Harris, ‘Beyond Authenticity: Aesthetic Strategies and an Anarchist Media’, *Realizing the Impossible*, op. cit, p. 211.

5. See Stewart Home, ‘Bolt on Neoism for Psychogeographical Wanderers Everywhere, or The Return of Three-Sided Football Part IX’, *Bubonic Plagiarism: Stewart Home on Art, Politics and Appropriation*, (London: Sabotage Editions, 2005), pp. 24-33.

6. Meredith Stern, ‘Subversive Multiples: A Conversation between Contemporary Printmakers’, *Realizing the Impossible*, op. cit, pp. 104-119.

7. Cindy Millstein, ‘Reappropriate the Imagination’, *Realizing the Impossible*, op. cit, p. 297

8. Erik Reuland, ‘Gee Vaucher: Crass Art’, *Realizing the Impossible*, op. cit, p. 75.

9. Josh MacPhee cited in Stern, op. cit. p. 106.

10. Erick Lyle, ‘Shadows in the Streets: The Stencil Art of the New Argentina’, *Realizing the Impossible*, op. cit, p. 79. [Italics in original.]

11. www.vomitoattack.org

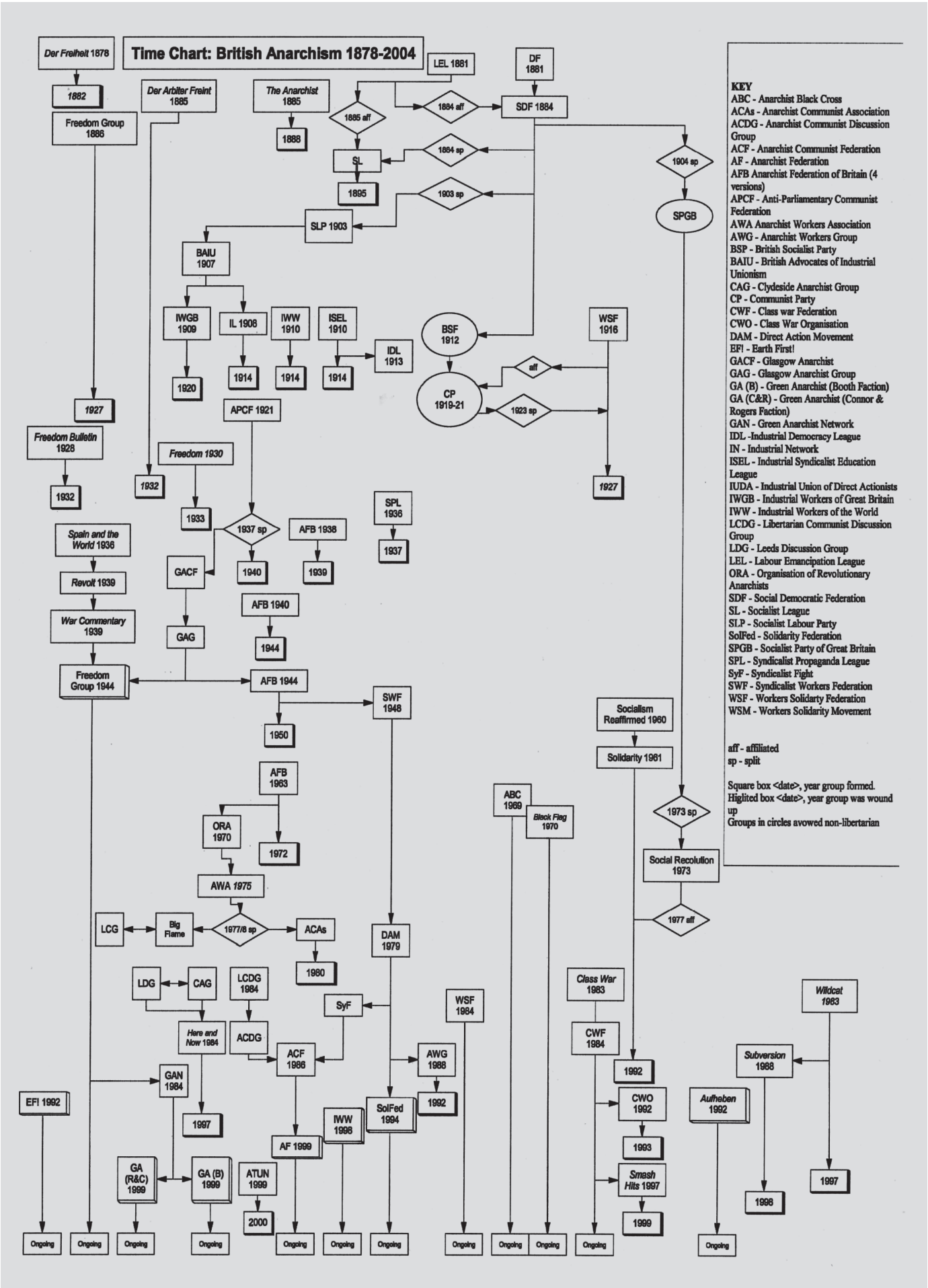
12. www.assholeco.com.ar

13. In December 1998, after a sustained period of civil unrest, former Air Force officer Hugo Chávez was elected president of his country and renamed it the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela. Inspired by the example of Simón Bolívar, who fought for independence from the Spanish Empire in the eighteenth century, Chávez reinstated calls for a federation of the Latin American countries against the new Empire of the United States.

14. www.bsasstencil.com.ar

15. Lyle, op. cit. p. 87.

16. Anne Elizabeth Moore, ‘Branding Anti-Consumerism: The Capitalist Nature of Anti-Corporate Activism’,



Realizing the Impossible, op. cit, pp. 292 & 294.

17. Andy Goldring, ‘Why we need holistic solutions for a world in crisis’, *Do it Yourself: A Handbook for Changing our World*, Edited by the Trapeze Collective, (London & Ann Arbor: Pluto Press, 2007), p. 26.

18. The Trapeze Collective, ‘Introduction’, *A Handbook for Changing our World*, op. cit, p. 4.

19. Jennifer Verson, ‘Why we need cultural activism’, *A Handbook for Changing our World*, op. cit, p. 178.

20. Ibid. p. 179.

21. Benjamin Franks, ‘Introduction’, *Rebel Alliances: The Means and Ends of Contemporary British Anarchisms*, (Oakland & Edinburgh: AK Press, 2006), p. 16.

22. Morgan Andrews, ‘When Magic Confronts Authority: The Rise of Protest Puppetry in N. America’, *Realizing the Impossible*, op. cit, pp. 180-209.

23. The Seeds for Change Collective, ‘Why do it without leaders?’ *A Handbook for Changing our World*, op. cit, p. 55.

24. See Stewart Home, ‘Anarchist Integralism: Aesthetics, Politics and the Après-Garde’, 1997 (<http://stewarthomesociety.org/ai.htm>)

‘Time Chart of Main British Anarchist Groups 1878–2004’, from *Rebel Alliances: The Means and Ends of Contemporary British Anarchisms*, Benjamin Franks.