


Playing for Keeps: The Diggers, Life-Acting and Guerrilla Theater in San Francisco's Psychedelic '60s

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by Sean Steele

The Diggers, a subversive subset of the broader American counterculture in San Francisco in the 1960s, stood for a unique form of anarchist theater. They presented a form of performance art they referred to as life-acting the game of freedom which was itself a form of what they dubbed guerrilla theater. Drawing on Hakim Bey's concept of the temporary autonomous zone, Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque, and Victor Turner's idea of anti-structure, the essay examines the Diggers as a unique element within the American counterculture that deserves a critical reappraisal. Analysis of central Digger events and projects provides a view of their distinct perspective, one that critically engages with the politically motivated New Left (including the antiwar and Berkeley Free Speech movements) and spiritually motivated hippies (including unofficial leaders like Timothy Leary). The tactics of guerrilla theater were meant to reveal the contingency of social roles and encourage an anarchistic form of individual responsibility. Digger events provide strategies for subverting normative social structures while providing spaces for the exploration of alternate identities and community structures.

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What is a Digger Anyway?

- 1 It is commonly understood that the counterculture movement that emerged in the 1960s was largely the result of a confluence between what is called the New Left (including the free speech movement at Berkeley University and the Students for a Democratic Society or SDS) and the hippie movement centered in the Haight-Ashbury neighborhood of San Francisco. But any simplistic reduction of these turbulent years does an injustice to the complexity of those involved and the disparate views expressed in the music, theater, visual art and street performance of the era. The Diggers created a form of provocative and subversive street performance imbued with anarchistic ideals that offered an alternative to, and occupied a critical space between, the social activism of the university-based intellectual New Left and the psychedelic hippies of Haight-

Ashbury. The group took their name and their core philosophy of freedom from a seventeenth-century English agrarian movement which occupied and used royal land with the firm belief that land should always remain free (Grogan 237–38).

- 2 The essay presents a brief historical overview of the Diggers's main performance events and acts of community engagement to situate their practice of life-acting the game of freedom within the American counterculture of the 1960s. Drawing on Hakim Bey's theory of temporary autonomous zones, Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque, Victor Turner's anti-structure, and the Diggers's own statements, I attempt a reappraisal of the Diggers's social enactment of freedom. The Diggers performed freedom in ways that simultaneously challenged normative hegemonic forces of American culture, the hippies's search for alternative modes of living, and the politically motivated practices of the New Left. This group offered anarchistic alternatives to both culture and counterculture that retain their vitality and continue to be relevant today. The Diggers may not offer concrete alternatives, but their performance art and community projects provide a tool that might be used to challenge systems of power and control.

The Diggers's Approach: Life-Acting the Game of Freedom

- 3 The Diggers believed in a foundational idea that united their various exploits. The idea was to take the core acting element from live theater and apply it beyond the stage. They called it life-acting, and it was meant to expose the arbitrary nature of the various roles people played in society. Not only that, the Diggers's life-acts performed a life-play they referred to as "Free" (Doyle 80). The Diggers's concept of life-acting was meant to lead to a realization that each individual in society was an actor performing various roles in a theatrical play called culture. For the Diggers "acting was not merely the central art form but the key to spiritual, psychological and political salvation" (Perry 153). Life-acting gave people the freedom to change aspects of the play in any way they liked. As William Michael Doyle phrases it, "they attempted to remove all boundaries between art and life, between spectator and performer, and between public and private The Diggers' principal project was to enact 'Free,' a comprehensive utopian program that would function as a working model of an alternative society" (80). The Diggers advised anyone who sought to start actively performing their life-act of freedom to "[d]o your own thing. Be what you are. If you don't know what you are, find out. Fuck leaders" (Cavallo 97). As Digger Peter Coyote explains, "[w]e wanted to cut through the knot, and act, and an act explains itself. We tried not to have ideologies. That's why the Diggers could never be infiltrated . . . because there was no structure, there was no leader" (*The San Francisco Diggers* 8:59–9:18). Leaders only lead those who wish to be led, engendering or reinforcing social hierarchies of power and control. But the cultural life-act of freedom emphasized the extreme autonomy of the individual

to create her or his own life and to be her or his own leader.

- 4 Digger Emmett Grogan writes that “[m]ost of the life-roles people were cast in had been given to them – handed to or forced on them by one hierarchy or another, or by circumstance which seldom made them interesting, simply ‘types’” (299). To become involved in the Diggers world meant realizing the contingent nature of identity, a realization that left one free to alter or altogether abandon their life-role. Part of this radical sense of freedom of identity was based on a particularly American brand of individualism with roots in a kind of Emersonian self-reliance. In 1841 Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote that he was “ashamed to think how easily we capitulate to badges and names, to large societies and dead institutions” (213). In keeping with this spirit, the Digger program was “to go upright and vital, and speak the rude truth in all ways”(Emerson 213), thereby espousing a kind of libertarian insistence on the ability of each individual to act out the roles they genuinely wish to play. The fun and absurdity of participating in Digger events created a positive program of performing one’s own life-acts of freedom as one saw fit. Through their abrasive form of performance art and community engagement, the Diggers were not just criticizing those in positions of power and control in America. They also criticized groups within the counterculture that were otherwise seen as their closest allies. An examination of their performance events and community engagement projects will highlight this unique brand of social criticism.

The Diggers’s Performances

- 5 The first Digger event was advertised by an early pamphlet they produced which explained the rules of a game where pedestrians were encouraged to create a series of geometric patterns by simultaneously crossing the street at various angles. Referred to as “Any Fool on the Street” or “The Intersection Game,” it was a flagrant attempt to disrupt traffic and create a public disturbance. Staged on Halloween in 1966, the event was accompanied by the presence of large puppets operated by Digger members. When police arrived to clear the streets and stop the game from continuing—which by this time had drawn a sizable crowd and was in danger of becoming a demonstration—officers threatened to arrest the puppets instead of the people operating them, causing a comical scene involving law enforcement addressing the puppets and not the Diggers (Grogan 250–51; Perry 66–67). “The Death of Money/Birth of the Haight” staged in December of 1966 was the first Digger event that clearly demonstrated the life-acting theater of “Free.” Members wearing costumes and masks to look like large animals carried a coffin filled with large fake coins down a major street. The parade was accompanied by musicians and all manner of strangely dressed individuals, creating a bizarre scene as it moved through and beyond the hippie neighborhood (*The San Francisco Diggers* 15:37–16:15).



Fig. 1: “Death of Money/Birth of the Haight,” still from a news video, 1966, uploaded by ccarlson, CC-BY-NC-SA 3.0.

- 6 Perhaps most interesting of all was the “Invisible Circus.” In February of 1967, the Diggers rented a church and proceeded to build each room into a separate fantasy or idea of freedom. People came and went freely for an event that was planned to last for seventy-two consecutive hours. Even though church authorities shut the event down after twenty-four hours, the “Invisible Circus” remains one of the Diggers’s most ambitious performances of radical freedom. People walked around naked, took drugs, danced, made music, watched films, had sex, listened to music, painted, read poetry and generally acted out a series of exploratory personalities and roles (Grogan 280–86). Other one-off performances included the act of executing a horse to protest the execution of a prisoner at San Quentin prison, and the performative move of constantly swapping names whenever interviewed by the press (Gitlin, *The Sixties* 216). In 1968 as part of an effort to expand their vision beyond the Haight-Ashbury neighborhood of San Francisco, the Diggers gave up their name and became the Free City Collective. The Free City Collective held poetry readings on the steps of San Francisco City Hall, produced a publication called the *Free City Newsletter* that “included instructions on how to build a firebomb” (Perry 146), and staged other small events, but within a year the group had dissolved.

The Diggers and Community Engagement

- 7 Their first act of community engagement was to provide free lunch at the Panhandle of Golden Gate Park.



The Summer of Love Experience, [Youtube](#)

Every day, the Diggers would serve food to anyone who came. At the free lunch the Diggers installed a massive picture frame between the park and a busy street and painted it yellow ([Coyote](#)). People driving by (or stuck in traffic) would see the free lunch framed as if it were a pastoral painting. Not only that, but people who came to eat lunch were encouraged to first step through the object in order to change their frame of reference. Food for the lunches was supplied by donations from various shops and bakeries, bulk purchases from distributors, and theft (Grogan 245–48). The Diggers also started providing housing services in the form of Digger crash pads for the influx of young people arriving in San Francisco. These were usually apartments rented by Diggers or Digger supporters who offered their couches and floor space for anyone who needed a place to stay (Doyle 81).

- 8 The next Digger operation was to open a free store where anyone could shop around and take whatever they pleased. The original shop was in a converted garage, and was called The Free Frame of Reference. The large picture frame seen in the park stood at the entrance, and the garage was filled with all manner of goods floating in and out without monetary exchange (Perry 69). After several months the shop moved into a proper location on Frederick Street and was renamed The Free Store. This was to be one of the more provocative manifestations of the life-act of Free. In the words of Digger Peter Berg, “[o]nce a free store is assumed, human wanting and giving, needing and taking, become wide open improvisation” (*The San Francisco Diggers*). The Free Store offered a space to both expose the tacit assumptions of consumer culture (a store is a place where you go to buy things) and present a living alternative (this store featured a sign on the way out that read: No Stealing). If you wanted to stop by and take

everything that was there, you were free to do so (and this did happen at least once). If anyone asked who was in charge, someone would point at you and say “you are!” (Perry 69). This not only placed a radical autonomy akin to anarchism in the hands of the individual, but also prevented police from finding out exactly who was in charge.



Fig. 2: The Digger Free Store, photo by Jim Marshall, CC BY-NC-SA 3.0.

- 9 Nevertheless, The Free Store was eventually closed due to health board violations. A third and final free store opened in 1968 called “The Trip Without a Ticket,” but was relatively short-lived (Perry 171). In response to the issues plaguing the neighborhood, which had quickly become overcrowded due to the hundreds of American youth pouring into San Francisco, the Diggers, along with Dr. David E. Smith, opened the Haight-Ashbury Free Clinic (Grogan 289–91). This was a place where people could receive free medical assistance, particularly in light of the rampant sexually transmitted diseases that accompanied the free-love ethic of the neighborhood. The clinic existed for decades in its original location and continued to offer free medical help to the people of Haight-Ashbury until the summer of 2019.
- 10 Another important element in the varied exploits of the Diggers was their consistent dissemination of pamphlets and broadsides throughout Haight-Ashbury. These publications provided a source of news and information, advertised Diggers events and projects, and provided political rhetoric, absurdist humor, and cultural critique. Dubbed the Communications Company, or Com/Co, Digger publications document their various exploits, while also offering poetry, politics, literature, advertisement, satire and surrealism in equal measure (The Digger Archives). Eventually these were collected into periodic publications

called *The Digger Papers*, which were widely circulated and read in the Haight between 1965 and 1968. Digger publications remained anonymous, using pseudonyms and offering such statements as: “REGARDING INQUIRIES CONCERNED WITH THE IDENTITY AND WHEREABOUTS OF THE DIGGERS; HAPPY TO REPORT THE DIGGERS ARE NOT THAT” (The Digger Archives). This kind of irreverent and subversive behavior was spurned by their guiding principle of life-acting and their central practice of guerrilla theater.

The San Francisco Mime Troupe: Guerrilla Theater of the Streets

- 11 The precursor to the Diggers was the San Francisco Mime Troupe, a theater group founded by R. G. Davis in 1959. Fed up with the limitations of the indoor stage, in 1962 Davis and company began performing their political theater outdoors in public parks. The Mime Troupe drew heavily on the 16th century Italian *commedia dell'arte* style of mixing comedy, improvisation, exaggerated characters and gestures with controversial topical subject matters (Orenstein). Davis's Mime Troupe also took some of its cues from playwright Bertold Brecht, who believed “that all art served political purposes, whether implicitly or explicitly” (Doyle 74). According to a Mime Troupe member, “[w]e decided that this was an opportunity to have an anarchist theater university of the streets [and] if we could attack people's consciousness . . . they would take something of the experience that they'd had in the Haight-Asbury” (*The San Francisco Diggers*). The founding members of the Diggers met while part of the San Francisco Mime Troupe. In 1965 there was considerable overlap between Mime Troupe performances featuring people who referred to themselves as Diggers and Digger performances that featured members of the Mime Troupe. By 1966 the Diggers had branched off as a kind of radical arm of the Mime Troupe. *Commedia dell'arte* “is known for its stock characters in grotesque masks who improvise much of their dialogue while playing close to type” (Doyle 72), and the Diggers took this one step further by suggesting that every individual embody a stock character that reflected their authentic self to bring attention to the possibility of taking off the mask of the everyday. The Diggers dissolved the boundary between the stage and the audience. Everyone was free to participate in the improvisational life-play. At the center of this experience was what became known as guerrilla theater.
- 12 Coined by Berg and drafted by Davis in 1965, guerrilla theater became the core concept for the Diggers's unique brand of performance art (Doyle 73–74). It is a style of theater inspired by the tactics and strategies of guerrilla warfare; a style of combat in which a small focused army takes on a much larger force by strategically planning a series of hit-and-run attacks aimed at tiny points of weakness to avoid open confrontation. As Davis wrote in an article on guerrilla theater, “[n]ever engage the enemy head on. Choose your fighting ground; don't be forced into battle over the wrong issues. Guerrilla theater travels light and

makes friends of the populace” (132). From the beginning, “[g]uerrilla theater was not intended to be a call to arms, but a *cultural* revolt aimed at replacing discredited American values and norms” (Doyle 74; emphasis in the original). Allusions to guerrilla warfare were solely meant as a metaphor to draw attention to the sense of a small group of performers challenging the massive forces of hegemonic American society. Their provocative performances were meant to instigate genuine reflection on the contingency of existing social hierarchies and the distribution of power in the corporate capitalist system firmly taking root in 1960s America.

- 13 Acts of guerrilla theater were influenced by the Situationists, a group of politically motivated European artists who criticized modern urban life. According to Guy Debord, “[t]he goal of the situationists is immediate participation in a passionate abundance of life by means of deliberately arranged variations of ephemeral moments” (“Theses on Cultural Revolution” 53). Closely aligned with this goal, Digger events were meant to be a festive disruption of the normative order, offering a way to view both self and society outside perceived social roles and behavioral patterns. Through the tactics of guerrilla theater, the Diggers sought to create temporary ruptures of a social reality that otherwise might remain occluded by socialization and a normative sense of order. In the words of Richard Schechner, guerrilla theater is meant “[t]o make a swift action or image that gets to the heart of an issue or a feeling—to make people realize where they are living, and under what situation” (163). The massive brightly colored “frame of reference,” a yellow six by six feet structure, that people were encouraged to step through prior to receiving their free lunch is a striking image that is both humorous and thought provoking. Similarly, running a store with everything except money gives people the chance to see their socio-economic situation from a slightly skewed perspective. Guerrilla theater was meant to bring a heightened state of awareness regarding the contingency of a social system, reminding those present that the system could be disrupted or altered at any time.

Festive Revolutionary Theater: Temporary Zones of Anti-Structure

- 14 Inspired by tactics of guerrilla theater and through their invention of the life-act of freedom, the Diggers’s community engagement projects parallel the boundaries of what anarchist Hakim Bey called the temporary autonomous zone. A temporary autonomous zone represents an injection of chaos into the ordered world of everyday life by encouraging alternative relational dynamics between individuals through the shared experience of dis-order. Bey called for a “conspiracy of artists, anonymous as any mad bombers, but aimed toward an act of gratuitous generosity rather than violence . . . aimed at a *present moment* of aesthetic shock in the service of realization & liberation” (40; emphasis in the original), and the free lunches and The Free Store could both be seen as

attempting this kind of rupture. Paralleling Bey's insistence on the ephemeral nature of any given temporary autonomous zone, the Diggers's performances were clearly transitory, and their examples of community engagement were not meant to last.

- 15 The idea of challenging normative ideas about the exchange of money for clothes and food was meant to highlight the contingency of such systems, thereby providing people the opportunity to experiment and play within alternative situations. Bey insists that “[o]ne must prove (to oneself if no one else) an ability to overcome the rules of the herd, to make one’s own law & yet not fall prey to the rancor & resentment of inferior souls which define law & custom in ANY society” (86; emphasis in the original). Diggers consistently avoided the tendency for the group to solidify into a stable hierarchy. Through switching names, periodically declaring certain people to have been made up from the start, and giving people full control of essentials like food and clothing, the Diggers epitomized Bey’s anarchist ideals. By attempting to provide the people of Haight-Ashbury with tools of self-discovery and self-reliance, the Diggers were “interested in results, [by making] successful raids on consensus reality, [and] breakthroughs into more intense and more abundant life” (Bey 113).
- 16 Drawing upon the ethos of the Mime Troupe, the Digger performances can be understood as attempting to create an alternative space that Mikhail Bakhtin calls the carnivalesque. For Bakhtin “carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order” (34). A participatory event like the “Invisible Circus” created an alternative set of possibilities that subverted or inverted normative social hierarchy. Because the festival “does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators” (Bakhtin 31), the Invisible Circus can be viewed as an event that highlights the creation of a space liberated from normative patterns of behavior. In many ways the Diggers were attempting to create a rather similar “utopian realm of community, freedom, equality, and abundance” (Bakhtin 33) as the medieval carnivals analyzed by Bakhtin. Bakhtin continues by pointing out that “[t]his temporary suspension, both ideal and real, of hierarchical rank created during carnival time a special type of communication impossible in everyday life” (35), a form of communication wherein alternative social arrangements could be imagined, explored, and tried out for a period of time.
- 17 The Diggers’s free lunches and The Free Store provide alternative spaces for production and consumption. Their repetition of the slogan “IT’S FREE BECAUSE IT’S YOURS” (Perry 63) gives voice to an anarchistic spirit of open exchange that supports their message that becoming life-actors brings attention to the contingency of social roles, freeing up individuals to adopt performance practices of freedom. In 1959, Debord wrote that “[u]nitary urbanism acknowledges no boundaries; it aims to form an integrated human milieu in which separations such as work/leisure or public/private will finally be dissolved” (“Situationist Theses on Traffic” 69). Disrupting traffic patterns or

staging a parade to satirize the concept of money are attempts to enact this kind of unitary urbanism.

- 18 A temporary inversion of normative order is described by Victor Turner as a state of what he calls anti-structure. As the term suggests, it is a space and time set apart from a given social structure. Anti-structure is “not a structural reversal, a mirror-imaging of ‘profane’ workaday socioeconomic structure, or a fantasy-rejection of structural ‘necessities,’ but the liberation of human capacities of cognition, affect, volition, creativity, etc., from the normative constraints incumbent upon occupying a sequence of social statuses” (“Liminal to Liminoid” 75). The Diggers were not attempting to abandon social structures entirely. Instead, their community engagement projects temporarily seized control over the ways that goods are produced and consumed. A performance event such as “Any Fool on the Street” impacted the movement of people in ways that showed how they were following invisible rules. As Turner points out, “[t]he term ‘anti-structure’ is only negative in its connotation when seen from the vantage point or perspective of ‘structure’ [and is] no more ‘anti’ in its essence than the American ‘counter-culture’ is merely ‘counter’” (*Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors* 50). The autonomous carnivalesque spaces created by Digger performances and community projects were not meant to be purely oppositional, and to view the attempts of the group as primarily about critique takes away from the absurdity and fun of these events. The Diggers did not take anything seriously, besides their irreverent game of freedom, which, as a series of daily performative life-acts, was rather serious (and seriously fun) business.

Criticizing Both Sides: The “Death of Hippie/Birth of Free” Event

- 19 At the Human Be-In in January of 1967, the event that kick-started the Summer of Love, both hippies and members of the Students for a Democratic Society criticized what they viewed as dominant or mainstream culture.



The Summer of Love Experience, 14 Jan. 1967, Polo Fields, Golden Gate Park, WGBH Educational Foundation, 2007, [YouTube](#)

These groups shared a common desire to create alternatives to the ascending paradigm of corporate capitalism, but neither side could agree on the most effective social strategies. Both sides criticized the path taken by the other. Hippies derided the ineffectual nature of speeches made by New Left representatives, and students from nearby Berkeley largely derided the actions of hippies as ineffectual hedonism offered by smoking marijuana or taking LSD and dancing to the rock and roll music of bands like the Grateful Dead (Braunstein 250–53). The Diggers sat outside both of these intersecting social groups and criticized both in equal measure. Herbert Marcuse stated that “[t]he Left must find adequate means of breaking the conformist and corrupted universe of political language and political behavior . . . [and] must try to arouse the consciousness and conscience of the others, and [break] out of the language and behavior pattern of the corrupt political universe” (125). The Diggers criticized members of the New Left as remaining within the political language and behavioral patterns Marcuse urged them to break out of, a criticism shared by hippies who viewed their attempts at political reform as ultimately replicating patterns of hegemonic power.

- 20 In 1960 C. Wright Mills wrote that “[i]f there is to be a politics of a New Left, what needs to be analyzed is the structure of institutions, the foundations of policies” (Mills). For the Diggers this was a pathway to merely perpetrating structures of power. In this way the Diggers aligned with the hippies’s desire to escape the routines of everyday life through a series of ruptures. But the Diggers simultaneously turned around to criticize the approach of the hippies, seeing any form of escapism as being uncommitted to the project of creating spaces of social

and individual freedom in the present moment. According to Grogan, the Digger projects and publications were part of “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 [Timothy] Leary and [Richard] Alpert” (Grogan 238). Digger publications criticized the world renouncing path promoted by figures like Timothy Leary who advocated for the therapeutic uses of psychedelic drugs like LSD.

- 21 Through their performance events, community engagement, and pamphlets, the Diggers worked to provide “their alternative to foolhardy confrontation and cowardly acquiescence” (Grogan 242). They were critical of the confrontational style of protests and manifestos by New Left members because they viewed them as puritanical Marxist and academic revolutionaries who were heavily involved in the very political systems they were satirizing. The Diggers resisted the tendency of revolutions to solidify into post-revolutionary hierarchical structures just as rigid as those overthrown. At the same time, they viewed the hippies as cowards whose mode of dropping out was more about escape than commitment to cultural change. For members of “the counterculture, revolution centered on changing culture and not on immediately replacing existing political systems or institutions” (Michals 45), a statement that summarizes the hippies’s criticism of the New Left approach. The Diggers may have aligned more closely with this desire to change culture, but they remained critical of the hippie belief that political change would be “the natural by-product of a countercultural revolution” (Michals 45). As Roszak wrote in the 1960s, many young people in the counterculture “either turn political or drop out . . . they fluctuate between the two, restless, bewildered, hungry for better ideas . . . [and] improvising their own ideal of adulthood” (33). Seeing that “[o]n the one side, there is the mind-blown bohemianism of the . . . hippies [while] to the other, the hard-headed political activism of the student New Left” (Roszak 56), the Diggers situated themselves between the two approaches by simultaneously remaining entirely outside these groups and their tendencies to solidify into stable hierarchies.
- 22 The Diggers thrived in “the thin and fluid boundary between the New Left and the counterculture” (Gitlin, *The Whole World* 18) by attempting to bring attention to the fact that both sides were using different methods to achieve similar goals. The New Left envisioned freedom through protests, petitions and sustained political engagement. The counterculture envisioned freedom through spiritual self-discovery and the belief that this would ripple outward and turn the whole world on to their vision. The Diggers wanted people to realize that the assumption of freedom could already be realized without recourse either to spiritual tools such as LSD and meditation or conventional marches and protests. Instead of working toward changing the system from within, or assuming that change would inevitably follow a personal sense of enlightenment, the Diggers acted as if the revolution was underway and had, in many ways, already been won. Although the Diggers ran their Free Store and held their

events and free lunches among the hippies of Haight-Ashbury, they spoke out against spiritual leaders like Leary “who’re using the Haight-Ashbury as a marketplace to sell [their] cheap artifacts of the so-called New Consciousness” (Grogan 293). As Gitlin points out, the “counterculturalists were not persuaded to abandon the ways of the spirit for the ways of power But politicians did not abandon their efforts to fuse the technologies of personal transcendence with the passions of politics” (*The Sixties* 204). The Diggers sought a way out of this tension by criticizing both approaches. Performing the life-act of freedom and viewing society as a game rather than a struggle was based on the fact that “the material affluence of America was permitting many of the young people to live off of society’s surplus” (Grogan 259). Through practices of switching names and denouncing leaders, their acts were meant to resist the tendency to place leading figures (such as Timothy Leary) at the top of an alternative countercultural hierarchy.

- 23 In 1967, the Diggers delivered their “Death of Hippie/Birth of Free” event. This performance epitomized their double critical approach. It was advertised as a funeral:

Following massive press coverage of the so-called Summer of Love (Perry 107), Haight-Ashbury was overrun with a massive influx of people searching for alternative lifestyles. Predominantly including white middle-class youth raised in a suburban environment, this onrush of people into the Haight-Ashbury district of San Francisco represents an early instance of the media inadvertently advertising a place by broadcasting moral panic stories of transgressive behavior and thereby unintentionally giving these places and events the countercultural stamp of approval (Perry 164). During the 1967 Summer of Love the neighborhood became overrun with teenagers without money, jobs or homes. Businesses and housing could not keep up with the rapid change, and by 1969 the drugs had largely turned from psychedelics to heroin and cocaine and the neighborhood had ceased to be the epicenter of the countercultural movement (Perry 180).

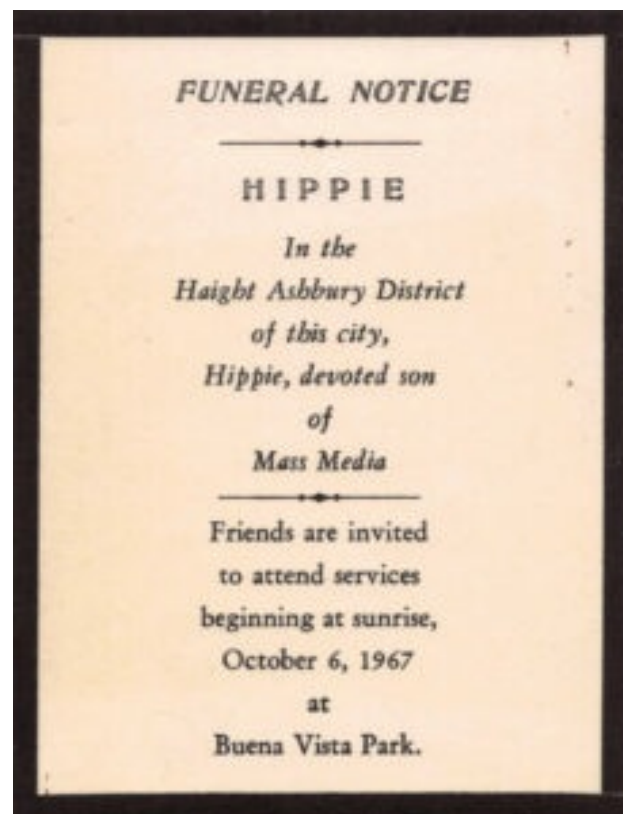


Fig. 4: Flyer for the “Death of Hippie/Birth of Free” event, Oct. 1967, uploaded by Grenachx at [en.wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org), PD-US-no notice

24 The Diggers staged their “Death of Hippie” event as a protest against the ways the media had destroyed what many were trying to do, whether through commodifying aspects of the counterculture, accidentally promoting forms of transgressive or subversive behavior as authentic to rebellious youth, or presenting an oversimplified image of the San Francisco hippie who has been encouraged to “turn on, tune in, [and] drop out” (Leary). The parade featured a coffin now filled with all manner of hippie paraphernalia, including beads, headbands and incense. The “Death of Hippie” event was not, however, a negative affair. Although “[t]he main purpose of the event was to persuade the media to go away” (Rorabaugh 147), the parade was subtitled “The Birth of Free.” This subtitle signified that the defeat of any cultural stereotypes—which, again, can be reduced to a series of roles one performs as an individualistic life-actor—means the emergence of perpetually new social interrelations impossible to properly codify and condense into a newspaper article or television broadcast. This was the last big performance event staged by the Diggers and serves as a kind of summation of their intention to continually confront people with the possibility of their own freedom as something born at each moment of everyday life.

It’s Free Because It’s Yours: The Influence of the Diggers

25 Many of the young Americans who flocked to San Francisco in the 1960s were seeking alternatives to the conservative social climate of America and their middle-class suburban upbringing. For many the overlapping communities in San Francisco answered a particular form of white, middle-class yearning. Some found these alternatives in the social practice of the New Left, while others found it in the drug-induced transcendental experiences offered by the hippies. The Diggers offered an alternative that was critical of both groups while remaining committed to many of the same social concerns. For the Diggers, “[t]heirs was a performance by determined, articulate, radical actors whose purpose was to kick away the modern props of an undemocratic, bureaucratic, materialistic culture. They offered a primitive alternative . . . to the sterile roles and the repetitive, uninspiring scripts of a settled, hierarchical twentieth-century society” (Cavallo 103).

26 But for all their provocative events and ideas, the Diggers shared the fate of the broader counterculture of the 1960s, breaking off into smaller groups and fading away as the 1970s rolled on, and “for the most part, and despite their many admirers in the Bay Area, Digger exhortations to act free were met with hostility, bewilderment or indifference” (Cavallo 123). The Diggers are a lesser known element of a well-known chapter in American history, but “[d]uring their twenty-one month tenure, the Diggers in effect improvised a play whose plot concerned how one community could be transformed root and branch into an alternative to the rest of American society” (Doyle 91). The group was not selling a program, nor advertising a way of life. They were helping to expose the

arbitrary essence of society and its organization. The Diggers infused anarchistic ideas into the 1960s counterculture by showing that any movement or group was in danger of solidifying into a hierarchical structure. Above all, the Diggers “connected their generation’s amorphous, powerful urges for autonomy, self-invention and independence to a medium compatible with radical expressions of American freedom: theatrical improvisation” (Cavallo 125).

- 27 The Diggers inspired other guerrilla theater groups, including the Yippies, founded by Abbie Hoffman and Jerry Rubin (originally called the New York Diggers), and they paved the way for American anarchist groups such as the Weather Underground and the provocatively named Up Against The Wall Motherfucker.



Up Against the Wall Motherfucker, “Garbage,” Feb. 1968, [YouTube](#)

Subsequent groups staging happenings and life-acts of freedom include San Francisco’s Suicide Club and the Cacophony Society. Cavallo believes the Diggers are important to an understanding of the broader counterculture “because of the method they used to protest American limitations on American freedom: theater and acting . . . us[ing] theatrical formats, especially the self-conscious acts of performance and improvisation, as metaphors for personal freedom and as practical means of enacting that freedom” (102). In the words of poet and Digger Leonore Kandel: “The idea was to show the way, and I was really very disappointed when I discovered that some people will simply sit there with their hands out waiting and they’ll never pick it up for themselves. They just want a leader. We didn’t want to be leaders. We just wanted to be pathfinders But some people just wanted to be told what to do” (*The San Francisco Diggers*). In the same interview, Kandel states that “all you can really leave, is seeds [*sic*].

And then they'll sprout and turn into something you would have never imagined, and better than you would have imagined I hope" (*The San Francisco Diggers*). The seeds planted by the Diggers and their brand of guerrilla theater may not have taken root in any substantial way, but their unique brand of festive anti-structure provides a model of what the principles of guerrilla theater and the concept of life-acting can do.

- 28 When considering subsequent social movements, such as the Occupy Wall Street movement of 2011, it would seem that seeds were indeed planted. But have these seeds taken root? Have they grown in ways that provide a space for guerrilla theater in today's social and political climate? And have seeds planted by the Diggers and their brand of guerrilla theater taken root in any substantial and lasting way? Were a new Digger-like movement to appear, what would it look like? How might a new Diggers group operate in an online space? In a culture sometimes described as apathetic, cynical, even defeatist, perhaps the absurd humor, silly provocation, community-oriented action, and inclusive participatory style of life-theater and performance art is all the more relevant. As Turner importantly points out, "[y]esterday's liminal becomes today's stabilized, today's peripheral becomes tomorrow's centered" (*Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors* 16). The 1960s counterculture became commoditized, packaged and sold as a look. One can buy a hippie Halloween costume as a kit, complete with peace necklace, headband, tie-dye shirt and sun glasses. Despite the perhaps inevitable commodification of protest, I maintain that if the life-acts of freedom performed by the Diggers were re-created today, they would remain peripheral and could retain a certain force for destabilization. What has been co-opted by the culture industry is a watered-down version of 1960s counterculture. As Fisher optimistically writes:

The very oppressive pervasiveness of capitalist realism means that even glimmers of alternative political and economic possibilities can have a disproportionately great effect. The tiniest event can tear a hole in the grey curtain of reaction which has marked the horizons of possibility under capitalist realism. From a situation in which nothing can happen, suddenly anything is possible again. (80–81)

- 29 The Diggers's brand of festive revolutionary theater meant to entice people to play the life-act of freedom may not have been widely enacted, but their performances and community engagement projects offer glimmers of alternative political and economic possibilities. If nothing else, the Diggers seemed committed to carrying out their ideas about life-acting the game of freedom and being your own leader. They believed it was "time to live in a world beyond scarcity" (Gitlin, *The Sixties* 216), and their guerrilla theater performances and forms of community engagement enacted this belief. After all, as Grogan pointed out, life is a game we play for keeps.

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