Collage: Rebecca L. Smith

Epilogue:

Nonrational Strategies

At times, rumors about new technologies seem to overshadow the technology which actually exists. The juggernaut of hi-tech, bolstered by the sci-fi imagination and the potential of recombinant technology, expands out of the exterior world and penetrates the deepest anxieties and desires of the interior world. Such is the case with the Coca-Cola moon. Whether a satellite could be placed in orbit that could actually drag a giant sheet of mylar emblazoned with the Coca-Cola logo remains to be seen, but just the thought of such a possibility truly disrupts comfortable expectations. Just imagine this icon of perversity intruding into the heavens, rising in the East and slowly crossing the night sky, its mylar aglare with reflected light, until it finally sets in the West. The techno-prophet of the 19th century, Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, warned that techno-envelopment was our

fate as well as the sky's ("Celestial Lights," *Cruel Tales*), much as he foretold the appearance of cybernetic beings (*Tomorrow's Eve*). What is more interesting, he seemed to understand that as repulsive as such notions are, they are at the same time desirable. Perhaps pleasures and fears about the moon's mythology can be re-presented in the Coca-Cola logo. By appearing as a moon, perhaps it can pry open the unconscious and hardwire desire to Coke, thus creating a mystical bond between consumer and product that surpasses terrestrial spectacle and subliminal advertising.

In spite of its mania for rationalization, the military-corporate complex has continually manufactured strategies of desire that function as psychic explosions in the individuals who constitute target markets. How can any cultural resistance redirect these strategies back at the manufacturers? Too little time has been invested in trying to answer this key question. Instead, both the cultural and political left have attempted to fight rationalized oppression with a rationalized resistance. Indeed, such strategies are less risky, and they are produced more efficiently, but other alternatives should also be investigated. Riskier strategies are warranted, because authoritarian culture is on the verge of a crushing hegemony.

For the most part, resistant cultural and political procedures have been fairly standard: Search for weak points in the fortress, and concentrate all counter-attacks in that area. Perhaps in the name of perversity, the opposite tactic should be tried, meaning that resistors should develop nonrational means to attack the strong side. For example, one of the most profound psychic characteristics of the authoritarian persona is its near mania for duty. This

strength is also a weakness. The apocryphal story of the destruction of Cato in Roman politics illustrates this point. The Roman Senate, knowing that Cato's pride and spectacle was grounded in unbending duty to the empire, believed they could ruin him by playing on his stoic character. In order to remove Cato from Rome (the only space where a successful policy-making political practice could be enacted), under the guidance of his enemy Caesar, the senate schemed to send Cato to the imperial frontier, where he would be unable to conduct his political affairs with any efficacy. The senate publicly explained to Cato that the empire needed him at the frontier. Consequently, his mania left him with no choice but to accept the assignment, even though following this order meant political suicide.

To further develop this strategy, consider the examples offered by Catholic saints. Their mania for duty and repression grows so strong that duty turns to excess, and repression turns to autonomy. Saint Catherine of Siena is a perfect example. Catherine was known for conquering the senses—a type of selflessness usually rewarded by the Church. However, Catherine's duty to God and Church eventually went to the extreme. This attitude reached its height while she was tending a cancer patient, and became overwhelmed by the rancorous odor of the patient's rotting wound. Draining a ladle full of odoriferous pus from the festering sores, she proceeded to drink the viscous ooze. Through this intensely sensual act, Catherine overcame her repulsion. That evening, Catherine received a vision of Christ, who rewarded her dutiful actions by inviting her to drink from the wound on the side of his torso. From this time on, Catherine claimed that she no longer needed to eat, and

that Christ's blood would sustain her indefinitely. From that day forward she subsisted on small amounts of water and on the juices of bitter herbs which she would chew, spitting out the remaining fiber. These activities eventually brought a threat of punishment. Although her vampirism (nourishment of body and desire through blood and pus) was generally ignored, the Church became concerned that Catherine's refusal to take food was excessive. Some went so far as to say that Catherine was a witch who took her nourishment from the devil. To refute such arguments Catherine was forced to eat again, although she would promptly vomit afterwards, claiming that Christ's blood would allow no other food. Finally the Church stopped trying to control her; no confessor could rein her in, and because her sensual actions (vampiric and masochistic) were so closely tied to duty, her excesses could not be prosecuted. Catherine's actions no longer illustrated an institutional imperative, but were direct individualized autonomous actions. While the Church authorities knew this was a reason for worry, since her relationship with Christ was no longer mediated by church clergy and ecumenical ideology, they could not think of a strategy to stop her activities.

While Catherine's personal battle to express what in most social situations would be acts of radical deviance worthy of violent intervention is of great interest to students of autonomy, what she became is even of greater fascination. Catherine should have become obedient to Church doctrine, which in turn should have expressed itself as a militarized intervention into the lives of others. Under such a rubric, "selflessness" becomes a pernicious concern for the welfare of others in which they are coerced, gener-

ally through fear, into living a life of neutralized passion. Catherine instead rejected piety as a means to personal authority, and separated herself from the institutional authority of the Church. The means by which she rejected authority and held it at bay became a methodology that others (particularly women) used to resist authority. In her day, Catherine refused to be a role model on behalf of the institution. She did not care if others were like her, nor did she want to become a model to be imposed upon them. In the same way that she allowed herself to act on her own desires, she allowed others to do the same. Instead of a Jesuit zeal to bring "the weak" into line with the doctrine of goodness, Catherine developed an attitude of radical tolerance. She no longer concerned herself with what others were doing. She rejected any thought of intervention for the sake of imposition, ideological or otherwise. As by her own example, she only expected others to follow their own desires, and whether such a path led to Christ or not became irrelevant in her interaction with others. She was neither a proselytizer nor a confessor; rather she was an amoral free agent, content to surrender to difference.

There are two troubling points in this example. First, the power of the spectacle can never be underestimated. Catherine's life (being) eventually was consumed by her representation. Her image as a saint promotes everything that she wasn't: obedient, sexless, zealous, etc. In the end, the institution did overcome her, primarily through her canonization. The second problem is one of application. If Catherine's example points to a means by which duty can be turned to excess (repression turned to liberation), one must wonder if the specific conditions of Christian mysti-

cism were what made this transformation a possibility. Without the legitimized ambiguity of the mystical realm, could such an act of resistance have occurred at all? Conversely, can duty turn to excess in a secular situation? Although duty as the structure of subjectivity is better managed in secular situations, it cannot be totally controlled. Hence CAE believes that duty is a strength that can be exploited by the forces of liberation. In the same manner that an anarchist can be turned into a authoritarian (Bataille), an authoritarian can be turned into an anarchist (Catherine).

Consider the case of Daniel Ludwig. In 1967, this aging billionaire got the dutiful notion that the Brazilian rain forest should be tamed and brought under the yoke of the rationalized world by forcing it to produce solely for rational economy. The process began when Ludwig purchased 6,ooo square miles of land (an area slightly larger than the state of Connecticut) deep in the rain forest for three million dollars (75 cents an acre). His rational goal was to turn the vegetation of the area into pulp for the paper industry, and then to sustain the business by using the area as a tree farm, the product of which would also be processed into pulp. It became clear very early on in the process that the actions of this man—who led a life of sworn duty to capitalist economy—were being driven by a different impulse. The possibility of profit was simply not there. The signs of mania began to show themselves in 1978 when Ludwig commissioned a Japanese company to construct a pulp processing plant on a barge, which he then had towed 15,000 miles to Brazil and up the Amazon by tugboat, installing it deep in the rain forest. Having little knowledge of construction in the deep jungle, the architects of the project were faced

with one catastrophe after another. For example, the heavy jungle crushers used to plow down the forest also destroyed the top soil, which almost eliminated even the possibility of establishing a productive industrial tree farm. Even so, Ludwig refused to surrender. Fellow capitalists, seeing that the project was completely out of rational control, began to cover for Ludwig, claiming that the immense losses would be compensated when a soon-predicted paper shortage occurred. Needless to say the shortage never happened. The Brazilian government, also recognizing that the project was out of control, began throwing up every barrier imaginable to bring Ludwig's jungle fantasy under control. Finally in late 1981, with his health failing and his financial empire severely debilitated, Ludwig let the project go after 1 billion dollars' worth of investment, and turned the process of civilizing the jungle over to Brazil.

Ludwig was able to indulge in the highest of aristocratic pursuits—the mania for total uselessness. Although it cannot be stated with any certainty what made him entertain such a folly as to try to knock out the rain forest in a single round, the monumentality of such a task gives us a reasonable clue to his motivation. In a personal sense, monuments are a means to forsake being for representation, thereby allowing an individual to defy mortality. The same life limits that worried individuals in theocratic society motivated Ludwig. The only difference for him is that something worse than hell awaits; now he could only expect nothingness. The consumption of being by the infinitude of representation (monumentality) seemed to be the only recourse. Thus the hope of immortality can turn duty to excess.

The example of Ludwig illustrates both the good and the bad side of nonrational strategies. While the interruption of commerce as usual is always welcome, as is maniacal corporate suicide, there are always the unfortunate side effects: In this case, the destruction of a significant piece of rain forest. Once the rational is rejected, the comfort of predictability is lost, and risk increases. The second problem is that nonrational strategies can only be used against consciousness, and there is no guarantee whose consciousness will be disturbed or what effect a disturbance might have. In spite of such shortcomings, nonrational strategies, such as attacking a site of strength like duty, are means by which political and cultural resistance could be strengthened.

Nonrational strategies of resistance are not manifested solely in unusual and complex situations of transgression. Resistance through transgression happens every day in people's lives, although the intensity varies. Every time two or more people construct an autonomous space in which individual desires interact, authoritarian intention is thwarted. For example, one of the spectacular manifestations of authoritarian culture is the notion of "family values." The maintenance of such values is a panacea for all social ills. To be sure, kinship (which may or may not be based on genetic connection) is a manifestation of nonrational forces that can transcend the alienation of separation. For this reason, the true intention of authoritarian culture is the destruction of kinship. If such human bonds were allowed to exist, people could define themselves, and thereby find self-esteem, by means other than one's labor role, bureaucratic affiliation, and consumption process. Kinship loyalties, as with friendship, and other forms of affinity, could lead to an

inversion of the structure of duty. People would be loyal to other individuals rather than to institutions and offices. The authoritarian channeling of kinship into the nuclear family is the authoritarian answer to such a possibility. The intention is to reduce kinship to the specialized micro-role of the reproduction of the work force and of consumer markets. The meaning of "family values" is efficient reproduction that solely benefits the macro processes of production and consumption. The family has no value in and of itself; it has value only in relation to market forces. Whenever kinship escapes this rational order, powerful resistance through transgression has occurred.

In spite of the disappearance of the nonrational, its being as social necessity has not diminished. Excess, mania, uselessness, sacrifice, waste, abjectivity, and spontaneity are all around us; unfortunately we are socialized from youth forward to censor them from our perceptions of everyday life, and from our conceptions of political and economic structure. Through the nonrational we can reaffirm our humanity, and through these temporary moments when our vision is clear, the tactics necessary to actualize the strategies of the nonrational can be found right at our feet.