

Flash mobs

- visualized bricolage in the urban sphere

Kristine Sahlholt

Introduction:

MOB # 6:

In August 2003 a large crowd entered the Toys "R" Us flagship store at Times Square in New York City. In this store a life-size Tyrannosaurus Rex dinosaur roars and growls menacingly at customers. The mob of some 300 people gazed at the dinosaur, as if transfixed, then dropped to their knees screaming, moaning and waving their hands in the air. As store staff hurried to call security, the mob dispersed as quickly as it had gathered.ⁱ

The flash mob was the sixth in New York City and the phenomenon had already popped up several other places around the globe that year.

Frozen Grand Central:

In January 2008, at half past two in the afternoon, the world's largest train station came to a sudden halt. Over 200 people froze in place at the exact same second for five minutes in the Main Concourse of Grand Central Station. Over 500,000 people rush through Grand Central every day, but on the day of the flash mob intervention, things slowed down for a brief period of time.ⁱⁱ

The organizers of *Frozen Grand Central* (2008) deny on their website that any of their events can be regarded as flash mobs. In stead they regard themselves as performers.ⁱⁱⁱ They do admit that they have a lot of similarities with flash mobs, and because they communicate, behave and organize events in very similar ways to the original flash mob actions, I regard them as such and view them as a development of the phenomenon – and I will therefore use the term "flash mob" when describing *Frozen Grand Central* (2008).

Flash mobs in general:

The above described flash mobs are being used as analytical examples in this article. In general flash mobs can be defined as non-violent crowds organized by email, text messages or blogs, who turn up in unexpected places and make an intervention, which typically lasts about 5-10 minutes. Recipients

are invited to arrive at a certain place, at a certain time, and they typically receive instructions for a particular mobbing event shortly before it takes place.

The flash mob phenomenon occurred for the first time in New York City in 2003, and used avant-garde tactics (which I will define below) in order to catch attention from the public and the media. Especially the early flash mobbers declared – when asked by journalists – that their event did not imply anything. There was no meaning to be deduced other than absurdity.

Even though the self-proclaimed inventor of the phenomenon, the American editor of Harper's Magazine Bill Wasik, revealed his identity in 2006 and at the same time declared that the phenomenon was passé, flash mobs still occur today.

Theoretical framework – Debord, Bürger, Bourriaud and de Certeau:

In this article I assume, that catching the attention of urban people of the 21st century's society of the spectacle is quite hard. Today people living in cities and urban spheres are bombarded with pictures all the time.

In fact, every social relation is mediated by images, as the French theorist and Situationist Guy Debord wrote in 1967 in his book "Society of the Spectacle". – and because of this it is a society that has lost its unity and is characterized by isolation and alienation.^{iv}

By analyzing two different flash mob-events, it is my main objective to show that flash mobs can be regarded as an avant-garde phenomenon that opposes the society of the spectacle. Flash mobs have the potential of initiating critical reflections and kick starting debates about current urban ways of living, as well as questioning the hierarchical structures of our society.

I claim that flash mobs are able to shock spectators and provoke them to reflect upon how they spend their time in the urban environment – as well as how the urban environment is constructed. Therefore, the reception of the flash mob-phenomenon is linked theoretically to the German literary critic Peter Bürger and his book "Theory of the Avant-garde" from 1974. Particularly his definition of the avant-garde work is useful when describing flash mobs' effect on the audience:

The avant-garde work neither creates a total impression that would permit an interpretation of its meaning nor can whatever impression may be created be accounted

for by recourse to the individual parts, for they are no longer subordinated to a pervasive intent. This refusal to provide meaning is experienced as shock by the recipient. And this is the intention of the avant-garde artist, who hopes that such withdrawal of meaning will direct the reader's attention to the fact that the conduct of one's life is questionable and that it is necessary to change it. Shock is aimed for as a stimulus to change one's conduct of life; it is the means to break through aesthetic immanence and to usher in (initiate) a change in the recipient's life praxis. [...] The recipient's attention no longer turns to a meaning of the work that might be grasped by a reading of its constituent elements, but to the principle of construction.^v

I will furthermore postulate that flash mobs are deeply connected to the Situationists' ideas of psycho-geography - and I will argue, that the flash mob phenomenon can be regarded as relational art, as the French art critic Nicolas Bourriaud writes about.

Last, but not least, it is this article's claim, that Flash mobs make their interventions using the tactical methods that the French theorist Michel de Certeau defines in his book "The Practice of Everyday Life", and that will lead me to the conclusion, that Flash mob interventions can be regarded as visualized bricolage. Bricolage, according to de Certeau^{vi}, is the "“artisan-like inventiveness” of ordinary people or consumers who are “unrecognized producers, poets of their own acts, silent discoverers of their own paths in the jungle of functionalist rationality””.

Bricolage is closely connected to de Certeau's notion of "tactic", which is defined in the following quote:

I call a "tactic" [...], a calculus which cannot count on a "proper" (a spatial or institutional localization), nor thus on a borderline distinguishing the other as a visible totality. The place of a tactic belongs to the other. A tactic insinuates itself into the other's place, fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety, without being able to keep it at a distance. It has at its disposal no base where it can capitalize on its advantages, prepare its expansions, and secure independence with respect to circumstances. The "proper" is a victory of space over time. On the contrary, because it does not have a place, a tactic depends on time – it is always on the watch for opportunities that must be seized "on the wing". Whatever it wins, it does not keep. It must constantly manipulate events in order to turn them into "opportunities".^{vii}

Comparative analysis of Mob # 6 and Frozen Grand Central:

I have chosen to analyze *Mob # 6* (2003) and *Frozen Grand Central* (2008), because these two flash mob interventions actively try to impact and interfere with the social sphere in urban environments, which is typical for interventions that are inspired by psycho-geography. Both psycho-geographic and flash mob events use tactical methods in order to make their interventions. For a brief period of time the Situationists and the flash mobbers take over a place in the city and use it in an alternative way.

In my comparative analysis I want to emphasize two aspects of the flash mob phenomenon, which I consider the most important. And these are:

1. The implications of gathering a mob in the city
2. The ambiguity of the flash mob phenomenon

Ad. 1) The first aspect concerns the fact that the crowds of people actually define a city, because without the masses the city only exists as an empty shell.

The mob is a phenomenon with a long history of threatening the existing order and potentially transforming politics or other hierarchical structures in society. That is, the mob is a precondition for revolution – and revolutions – as history has shown several times – often begin in the city.

If you wish to change the society, you mobilize the masses in the streets of the city, because nothing is more symbolically powerful, than the united voice of a large crowd.

As Bourriaud mentions, the rise of the global urban culture – especially after World War II – has made a remarkable increase of social encounters possible.^{viii}

The city has provided a “regime of encounters” – and this regime has created corresponding artistic practices, that consider for instance “being together” or the collective creation of meaning, as central themes.^{ix}

Both *Mob # 6* (2003) and *Frozen Grand Central* (2008) have gathered several hundred people in public or semi-public spaces. I argue that the two interventions both took place inside buildings in order to question how these buildings are being used. The limited space in the buildings chosen also makes it easier to make the flash mob stand out – and thereby they make a greater impact on the spectators.

Mob # 6 (2003) can be regarded as miming a menacing crowd. The mob seems to do this in a satirical way, because of the moaning and uniform worship of the life-size plastic dinosaur. On the other hand their collective action is in a way frightening, because it shows the powers inherent in a mob, in which the individual participants perhaps do not question what they are doing. *Frozen Grand Central* (2008), on the other hand, does not use a threatening intervention method, and initially causes mostly smiles and astonishment in the spectators.

Ad. 2) The second aspect of my analysis concerns the ambiguity of the flash mob phenomenon.

– the postulated pointlessness or absurdity as a means of initiating dialogue, can be said to contain a critical potential. As the Danish researcher Marianne Ping Huang points out, in her article ”Tactic and utopia in Art and the Institution” from 2005, the ambiguity of relational art practices is a way of challenging the ruling ”discursive space”. The Flash mob-phenomenon’s refusal of providing easily understandable answers as explanations to why they make their interventions, can be seen as a means of opening up to a lot of interpretation possibilities. The resistance to providing only one meaning can for some people seem shocking and provoking.

In order to open up to the discursive space of the two flash mobs, I will now provide two possible interpretations. It is of course understood, that there are many other possible readings.

Mob # 6 (2003) can be said to criticize the consumer culture that exists in the urban sphere – especially the targeted toy store is symbolic of the way the capitalistic society teaches young children to become consumers. The flash mob visualized briefly how the capitalist society tries to make everybody slaves of the capital – but *Mob # 6* (2003) at the same time showed, that a lot of people are aware of this, and are able to resist the pressure, by mocking the consumer culture. The intervention can be said to underline the importance of being critical consumers. In a wider perspective, *Mob # 6* (2003) can be regarded as an intervention that among other things, asks the audiences why they want

to spend their time in commercial territories disguised as a childish, escapist worlds, but which are designed only to make them spend their money.

Frozen Grand Central (2008) can be said to criticize the way the capitalist society robs its citizens of their time. In the 21st Century people spend a great part of their day working behind for instance computer screens – and often they only communicate virtually with other people. The time they spend in public spaces is stressful, and even though Grand Central Station is a collective junction where a lot of people come and go – it is nevertheless a place that doesn't encourage much contact between its busy visitors.

The *Frozen Grand Central* (2008)-intervention made people stop and wonder what in the world was going on. Suddenly the spectators walked slower, they started talking to each other and from the video made by an undercover flash mobber, we witness the whole atmosphere in the station change radically, because the spectators acted and moved around differently from what they usually do and for once they actually seemed to enjoy the present moment.

One of the most important subjects that flash mobs touch upon is the relationship between people and the city. As Bourriaud writes, the most specific characteristics of current art forms are the fact that it "produces relations between individuals or groups, between the artist and the world, and in a transitive way, between the spectator and the world".^x

The several interpretations of flash mob interventions that spectators give expression to is interesting and important, because the dialogue between participants and the discussions of meanings of signs and images and their legitimacy is necessary to maintain in a society, which is flooded with images and spectacles. Keeping a critical attitude to the flow of pictures, we are presented to each and every day is a way of resisting the dominant structures of today's society.

Flash mobs and psycho-geography:

I will now continue by explaining the connection between flash mobs and psycho-geography.

As the Danish Art expert and researcher Mikkel Bolt writes in his book "The last Avant-Garde" from 2004 the Situationists wished to fuse art and politics together.^{xi}

By contrast, the flash mobs refuse to have a specific goal. This refusal is presumably rooted in the "death" of the great stories that happened after the breakdown of the East-West-blocs in the late

1980's. Avant-garde movements such as the Situationist were closely linked to Marxism and were therefore also linked to Communism's rigid ideologies. In the beginning of the 21st Century it no longer seems necessary to profess a political conviction – partly because the totalitarian ideologies and the connected naive visions for the future have tremendously failed^{xii} – and partly because the current society's political and avant-garde artistic movements are organized in a much more network-like way, which implies, that there exists several possible ways of defining truths.

Flash mobs have certain features in common with the psycho-geographic movement, whose prominent members Guy Debord and Asger Jorn were dedicated to *creating situations* in the urban sphere - situations that sought to evade commodification – just like the flash mob-interventions do.

As the British professor of Architectural and Urban Art History Simon Sadler explains, the Marxist Situationists dreamed of revolutionizing everyday life and releasing the ordinary citizen into a world of experiment, anarchy and play.^{xiii}

One of the best examples of their brilliant, inventive and investigative creations, is the fragmented map of Paris from 1957, called *The Naked City* (1957). This map that offered the reader completely alternative ways of experiencing the city.

As Simon Sadler points out, the Situationists tried to free themselves from the scientific, academic geography's understanding of the city as the immediately visible and readable world. Instead, the Situationists perceived the city as a socially produced space.^{xiv}

Even though projects such as *The Naked City* (1957) opened up to a wide range of ways of perceiving and experiencing the city, they never really freed themselves from the paper, so to speak - because their thoughts were written down and visualized only in magazines and other publications. And in that sense they were actually "restricted by paper", just as they criticized the academic geography of being.

Flash mobs can be said to differ from the experiments made by psycho-geography in the 1950's and 60's, because the flash mobs – by gathering large crowds of people in public spaces - try to *visualize* the idea of the socially constructed space *out in the real world*.

In a sense the flash mobs can be said to take psycho-geographic ideas a step further by realizing them in a more constructive manner, in order to reach a larger audience. By attracting media attention and then describing the phenomenon as an "inexplicable mob" that doesn't have a leader, is a-political and doesn't have a purpose – as for instance Wasik has done, flash mobs make people speculate and

in a broader sense make them consider how they live their lives - maybe even more than the psycho-geography was able to.

By experimenting with social relations in the city - the flash mobs visualize *possible* alternatives to the existing society – or to use Bourriaud’s word: relational artists invent new models of social life.^{xv}

Discussion:

When a phenomenon such as flash mobs gains popularity there is always the danger of recuperation. One of the most likely reasons that resulted in some people (including the inventor, Bill Wasik) declaring the flash mob interventions passé is the fact that the phenomenon rather quickly was recuperated by the commercial market. By using flash mob tactics in marketing strategies, enterprises such as Ford and Sony-Ericsson have gotten a lot of media attention and thereby free advertising. In that way, the flash mob phenomenon can be said to have lost some of its potential for criticizing the gentrification in urban spaces.

But flash mobs are not the only avant-garde groups that try to change urban everyday life.

To put the flash mob interventions into perspective, I want to refer briefly to other kinds of crowds or mobs that have a very different approach to showing their dissatisfaction with the existing urban society.

In 1929 the French Surrealist, André Breton, claimed that the true avant-garde work of art, would be a man who walked down a busy street – and then started shooting randomly into the crowd.^{xvi}

This is an early example of the violent and extremely radical thoughts that have always been a part of some of the avant-garde movements.

A current Danish example of a violent and destructive intervention is the event known as ”the Hyskenstræde action”, which took place in a street in the centre of Copenhagen in the beginning of May 2009^{xvii}. A group of activists organized a street party – but they used a name of a scheduled event, which was partly financed by the government. The “party” gathered a huge crowd of people in the street of Hyskenstræde and after a period of time the event turned into violent destruction of among other things the shops of the streets. The activists that participated called it a street party whereas the many critics of the action simply characterized it as vandalism.

Because of the destructive nature of the Hyskenstræde-action it never really initiated any constructive debates about the urban space – instead it resulted in an angry rhetoric that only made it easier for the politicians in power to brush aside the action as a criminal act.

Conclusion:

The two analyzed flash mob interventions can be regarded as attempts of realizing some of the psycho-geographic ideas in a current urban sphere. The flash mobs interventions re-introduce the psycho-geographic longing for a different way of using the space of the city – and the hope of being able to live in a more free way, than the capitalist society dictates.

Flash mobs propose constructive alternatives to the way public space can be used. For a short period of time, participants of the flash mobs use their surroundings in alternative ways, and thereby create discursive spaces, that are open to interpretation and differ from the ones that the ruling political system wants.

The discursive spaces that flash mobs create contain ambiguity, which in my opinion lacks in the destructive actions of the violent avant-garde interventions. By solely trying to force their own ideas through, the violent avant-garde interventions mime exactly what they criticize the ruling economical order of doing.

Even though the peaceful flash mobs are in danger of being recuperated, they by contrast, call for debates and dialogue – which could lead to constructive ways to re-invent and re-discover everyday life – and perhaps re-structure its normal course.^{xviii}

According to Bourriaud, these micro revolutions in ordinary, urban and suburban territories create micro communities, which for a moment subvert the individualized society – and this is exactly what flash mobs do, when they turn the streets, retail stores and other public areas into places full of playful human interaction, which for a brief period of time displace the intended, regulated use of the space.

The elusive flash mobs visualize the possibilities of acting tactically and inventively in everyday life and the urban sphere, where the domination of images is larger than ever before.

Flash mobs draw their audience's attention to the fact that everybody can resist the society of the spectacle and its hierarchies. The hierarchical structures can be resisted individually or collectively

by being conscious that bricolage is possible. In other words – flash mobs show that each and every one of us can use the space of the city in alternative ways.

Thereby I will finally conclude, that the flash mob phenomenon creates mental micro-revolutions in the minds of their spectators and micro-utopias in the urban sphere.

Bibliography:

- Flash mobs:
 - *Mob* # 6, New York City, 2003:
<http://www.satanslaundromat.com/sl/archives/000108.html>
 - *Frozen Grand Central*, New York City, 2008:
<http://improveverywhere.com/2008/01/31/frozen-grand-central/>
- Bolt, Mikkel: *Avant-Gardens selvmord*. København: Eks-skolens Trykkeri, 2009.
- Bourriaud, Nicolas: *Relationel Æstetik*. København: Det Kongelige Danske Kunstakademi. Buchs Grafiske, 2005 [1998].
- Bürger, Peter: *Theory of the Avant-Garde*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007 [1974].
- de Certeau, Michel: *The Practice of Everyday Life*. California: University of California Press, 1997 [1984].
- Debord, Guy: *Society of the Spectacle*. London: Rebel Press, 2002 [1967].
- Sadler, Simon: “Formulary for a New Urbanism: Rethinking the City”, p. 69-103 + p. 179-187 in *The Situationist City*. MIT Press, 2001.
- Wasik, Bill: “My Crowd – Or, Phase 5: A report from the inventor of the flash mob”, in *Harper’s Magazine*, p. 56-66. March 2006.

Notes:

- ⁱ Wasik (2006), p. 65-66
- ⁱⁱ <http://improveverywhere.com/2008/01/31/frozen-grand-central/>
- ⁱⁱⁱ <http://improveverywhere.com/faq/>
- ^{iv} Debord (1967), p. 7-17
- ^v Bürger (1974), p. 80-81
- ^{vi} De Certeau (1984), p. xviii
- ^{vii} De Certeau (1984), p. xix
- ^{viii} Bourriaud (1998), p. 14
- ^{ix} Bourriaud (1998), p. 14
- ^x Bourriaud (1998), p. 28
- ^{xi} Bolt (2004), p. 9
- ^{xii} Jf. Bourriaud (1998), p. 11
- ^{xiii} Sadler (2002), p. 69
- ^{xiv} Sadler (2002), p. 92
- ^{xv} Bourriaud in *Relational Aesthetics* (1998), p. 30
- ^{xvi} Bolt (2009), p. 32 in footnote
- ^{xvii} May 8th 2009
- ^{xviii} Jf. Bourriaud (1998), p. 13