WEAPONS OF LAUGH DESTRUCTION

Geographical, Political and Theoretical Roots of Clowning Protests in Tokyo

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Tokyo Risk: Postwar Protest and Contemporary Action
HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

On December 5, 2010, “WAR is not the ANSWER! End the expansion of military bases in Okinawa!: Demonstration through the center of Shinjuku” marched through the central business district in the heart of Tokyo. Over 160 participants held handmade banners, printed placards, musical instruments, noisemakers, and costumes, but four clowns are particularly visible in the independent media coverage of the protest. The clown army were there as members of a travelling troupe of musicians and artists that built bicycles together and used them to travel from Berlin to Mongolia while giving theatrical circus performances in public places, mostly outdoors. Some of these performers eventually came to Japan as the Broken Zircus Monkey Band, where they connected with Japanese activists in Tokyo and participated in various actions together from November 2010 to January of 2011. It was this moment of convergence that was the birth of Clown Army Tokyo.

FIG 01: This photo from the “War is not the Answer!” action shows the rainbow-colored PACE flag, a globalized symbol of resistance that, like the clown army tactic, spread from Europe following the anti-Iraq war actions in the early 2000s.

FIG 02: “Broken Circus” in Japanese calligraphy

1. These actions are seldom carried on any mainstream media outlets. This one, in addition to various YouTube videos and blog posts covering this action, was documented by the independent media group OurPlanetTV: http://www.ourplanettv.org/?q=node/748

2. See Fig. 01

3. They travelled under the name 2wheels4change. http://twowheelsforchange.blogsport.de/

4. See Fig. 02
I. CLOWNING IN TOKYO: GEOGRAPHICAL AND POLITICAL ROOTS

“We are CLOWN ARMY in Japan. We fight the power with nonviolence. Our weapons are just love and laughter!”

Clown Army Tokyo’s blog description

Creative theatrical forms of protest, including clowning, have become visually and tactically prominent through the contemporary global justice movement. Takuro Higuchi, a sociologist and activist based in Tokyo, notes that there was a celebrated global activist network said to be tied to the 1999 “Battle in Seattle,” but this was missing substantial links beyond North America and Europe until the 2008 antiG8 protests in Hokkaido (2012). The G8 summits had brought together not only political elites, but grassroots global justice activists. Some Japanese activists participated in the actions against the G8 summit in Rostock, Germany in 2007, where the clown army helped maintain a festive antiauthoritarian tone at the heavily policed summit.

These provided some of the initial connections that brought this clown troupe from Berlin to Tokyo on their 6 month long bicycle tour. They stayed in Tokyo for two months, during which time Japanese activists learned the tactic and participated in actions as clowns together. When the German activists left, the tactic stayed. Clown Army Tokyo trained more troops as the antinuclear movement rapidly gained numbers in the months after 3.11. Like the German clown artists, they are not tied to single issue politics, and instead use this protest tactic to spread their antiauthoritarian message creatively in various venues. March 11, 2012 found them at Hibiya Park in front of TEPCO headquarters, furiously “cleaning” the ground with a deck brush as protesters departed from the protest, a performance reminiscent of High Red Center’s cleaning art action before the 1964 Tokyo Olympics. Here, it comments on the futility of the radiation cleanup efforts, the scrubbing away of truth by TEPCO, and the silencing of voices against government platitudes of safety and mourning.


II. CLOWNING AS PROTEST: A DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS OF PRACTICES AND THEORY

Clowning as a protest tactic is at first sight a nebulous phenomenon. The practice extends across the globe, with different groups protesting for various causes and even using divergent tactics. Nor does there exist a clowning umbrella organization. Rather, clowning is used as a mode of protest by groups ranging from the loosely collective, even impromptu, to the highly organized and meticulously theorized.

On the impromptu end of the spectrum we find, for example, a 2012 clowning at a KKK anti immigration rally in Charlotte, North Carolina. The clowns used squeaky toys, whistles, and noisemakers to “take over” the rally by drowning out the KKK’s hateful speeches. They wore red ball noses, multicolored wigs, and even banana costumes. Although the clowns at this rally used tactics more sophisticated than mere dress and noise (wordplay, for example: in response to chants of “White Power,” protesters sprinkled white flour, while others held signs reading “Wife Power”), the theoretical basis of the group’s chosen form of protest is flimsy. For one, the group’s main goal was just to drown out the speeches of the KKK, a goal that is not suited to clowning any better than, say, chanting or using loudspeakers. Moreover, the protesters proffered divergent reasons for using clowning as a tactic, muddling their motivations. While some protesters said they aimed to show that racism is ridiculous, others said they aimed to meet hate with love instead of meeting hate with hate. This is not to charge the group with inconsistency, but rather to point out the lack of a cohesive, cogent basis for the adoption of clowning for this protest. Indeed, one might wonder whether the actions of the Charlotte protesters constitute clowning in anything but a superficial sense.

At the other end of the spectrum we find groups such as the Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army (CIRCA). Whereas the group in the previous example essentially just dressed foolishly and met on site, CIRCA begins its machinations

watch?v=3h1CH0Vchv8
7. http://tinyurl.com/ah3n9d2
well prior to a given protest with a required two-day clown training camp8. Basic Rebel Clown Training, or BRCT, is appropriately regimented, consisting of five stages: “Finding the Inner Clown,” “Subversive Play,” “Civil Disobedience and Direct Action,” “Bouffon Manoeuvres,” and “Marching and Drilling.” CIRCA acknowledges that training may differ substantially depending on the recruitment officer, but the manifesto of one such officer, Sub Lieu Tenant Latte, who cites influences ranging from Chicago-style improv and political theater to actor/mime Jacques Lecoq and “master clown” Philippe Gaulier, provides a sense of the general tenor of BRCT training.9

The theory behind CIRCA’s unique brand of political activism is, moreover, precise, intelligent, and articulate. Like the Charlotte group and other more loosely theorized clowning protesters, ridicule is a key component of CIRCA’s ideology. In “Making War With Love,” the group’s quasimanifesto, Kolonel Klepto states that “Nothing undermines authority like holding it up to ridicule and one of the most efficient techniques of ridicule is mocking by imitation” (Klepto 404). But CIRCA extends its theory in two important respects:

First, CIRCA goes beyond viewing the site of protest as a mere physical space. In addition the street’s, or more generally the urban geography’s, being just a place in which protestive struggle takes place, it is also a place for the transformation and sustainment of “the inner emotional life of the activists.” While remaining true to the spirit of direct action protest, clowning eschews or rather, perhaps, tempers by adding a combative “us-versus-them” mentality: “CIRCA sees both the soul and the street as sites of struggle, realising that a destructive tendency within many activist movement is forgetting the inner work of personal transformation and healing” (Klepto 407). The second important theoretical respect in which clowning protest transcends mere “clowning around” gibes with the previous point: CIRCA maintains that when employed using clowning, protest is not a mode of confrontation. The point is surprising: confrontation, whether it be overt, as

10 http://tinyurl.com/oxntno9
with policeline street protests, or tacit, as with sitins, so often characterizes direct action protest as to seem to be an essential component of it.

When put to action, this bit of theory has equally surprising practical/tactical upshots. Kolonel Klepto writes that while police are “comfortable with confrontational resistance,” when “faced with the art of ridicule, they don’t know quite how to respond” (Klepto 406). The clowning approach to protest results in some further novel (and funny) tactics. Among them are the socalled “universal rebel clowning techniques,” core components common to every BRCT. These techniques include fishing, in which clowns move about together like a school of fish; socking, in which “[t]he gaggle of clowns moves forward and backward as if it is a sock being pulled inside out; and plain old marching.10

With each of these techniques, there is a conspicuous absence of any mention of police, much less engagement with them. That this observation is substantive is made evident by CIRCA’s sardonically absurd remark that marching is an important technique because it “looks cool and it is a key tactic.” Moreover, the blindness to confrontation in these techniques turns the clowning protester’s attention elsewhere: namely, to the geography of the site. These techniques and others (such as mockingly asking police what a “line” is) reveal clowning as a form of protest that engages urban space more so than do other forms of protest. This aspect of the nature of clowning protest is made even richer in virtue of clowning’s view of the site of protest as more than just a physical space.

FIG 02. Clown Army Tokyo’s version of the Japanese hinomaru national flag
III. CLOWNING’S TRANSFORMATION IN JAPAN

We are clowns because what else can one be in such a stupid world....Because buffoons always succeed in failing, always say yes, always hope and always feel things deeply. Because a clown can survive everything and get away with anything.

— CIRCA, Rostock, Germany 2007

The clowns have appeared at dozens of actions since the German troupe came to Tokyo in 2010, and they have in turn travelled to train new clowns in Jeju, South Korea and join them in their fight against military base expansion. However, recently, a different performance has become a more common sight, one deliberately more ominous than clowns of love and laughter. Now, they are zombies of all things bad. These are a strategic choice both for the basic logistic advantage that it requires no training, but only makeup and walking stiffly. Following the popularization of the zombie genre and zombie walks around the world, this shift in tactic keeps a friendly, welcoming, festive practice of resistance. Zombies are clearly “bad,” whereas police clowns are ambiguously positioned in the eye of the Japanese public. At these larger protests through Shinjuku and other visible areas, these activists understood that the message was often simply too confusing for passersby. To interpret the clowns as a commentary on authority requires the audience to embrace a critique of the role of police in society, one that is difficult to cultivate where there is a strong image of a friendly neighborhood policeman. The zombies allowed them a new, simplified way to creatively draw the attention of the public on the central issue of each protest instead of higher level analyses of state power.

Though their appearances have become less frequent as of late, Clown Army Tokyo lives on as a counternarrative to the notion that grassroots movements are limited to local or regional scales, and that meaningful global connections can only be made through the state. In addition, their focus away from a vanguard revolutionary desire to “win” political struggles helps us understand the success or failure of social movements outside of statist gains such as changes in policy. Instead, they seek to “change our world” by encouraging an embodied practice of play and disobedience (CIRCA, 2007), a message embraced in the DIY commitments of these Japanese activists, many of whom have been both clowns and zombies. Seen in this way, the zombie protests can be said to be an extension of this performative tactic of disruptive representation that has been adapted to the Japanese context to have a clear message.

11 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3h1CH0Vchv8
12. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3h1CH0Vchv8
PROJECTIVE COMPONENT

The Plan
Black Friday Protest. We wanted to develop a unique clowning technique to bring to the Black Friday Protest. In the same vein as “fishing,” “socking,” and “marching,” the technique we developed is called, “Stacking.” Stacking points out the absurdity of overenthusiastic shoppers where clowns stack boxes of consumer goods in their arms until they cannot carry anymore goods, the goods fall over, and the clowns fall over. This process repeats itself. Stacking can be modified with a group of clowns stacking goods in the arms of one clown. All clowns involved should chant, “Shopping!” and clap their hands. We imagine this would take place inside a WalMart where other shoppers would be running around as well.

The Reality
The clowning tactic is usually used not to host a rally or a march, but to join in someone else’s. This can be particularly delicate to navigate at smaller protests, of this was not something we had taken into consideration while developing the projective component of this project, though I feel they should be addressed because many questions came up during the protest.

A clown is a performer, an entertainer, and artist. But, a clown also brings humor into a situation to shed light on something that might be unseen to the naked eye. Consequently, the clown must be very careful as to what direction this humor is being pointed.

There are many considerations one must take into account when joining a protest. Many of the clowning protests we had witnessed were clowns in police shepherded marches where the targets were the police. In these instances, the clowns highlighted the absurdity of police intervention because, after all, the protests were about an ideology, a reformation, a revolution. The protests were not about citizen-police interaction, yet that is so often the outcome of a protest.

With respect to Black Friday the intended target was not only WalMart itself, it was the consumer one who was to willing to ignore the low worker wages and retaliations on store and warehouse workers for participating in strikes in the past. But, perhaps also because we were
not permitted to enter the store and instead were gathered on a sidewalk quite a distance away from the entrance the consumers we witnessed were not the frenzied Black Friday shoppers so often reported in the media. We witnessed families who stocked up on Pringles and soda.

The protest began with a rally on the street outside of the WalMart. The group of protesters stood close together, sharing umbrellas to shield from the rain, in front of a truck bed where the “program” took place. First there was a band, then WalMart workers and family members spoke about their struggles, and then community clergy members spoke representing the organization Clergy & Laity United for Economic Justice (CLUE). There were newscasters, but no police and no consumers. The MC’s reminded the crowd often of the rules, no staying past the time allotted and no entering WalMart.

After the rally was over, a small crowd meandered over to the store entrance where “Solidarity Forever” was being sung. This crowd waved red and black anarchosyndicalist flags, symbolizing the bringing together of anarchist and socialist ideals. While we did recognize some others from the university at the protest, we did not have a strong relationship with the organizers, and the cramped space, rain, and lack of police or security to stand next to and mock made it even less comfortable to engage in this action other than support the main work being done on the stage by holding prepared signs to appeal to people driving by.

So, we left without deploying a clown action.
ALTERNATIVES FOR FUTURE CLOWN ACTIONS

What happens when the target is unclear? The lack of a visible negative police presence put us in a situation reminiscent of the one the Japanese protesters found themselves in. To participate in a future action, it is important for us to have a better sense of what the protest will look like, who the organizers are, and what kind of civil disobedience is meant to be taken by the other protesters. There may have been a way that we could still have performed the clowning actions, perhaps at the edge of the protest to appeal to passersby, to break from the rest of the group and go into the store ourselves, or break away and stand by the security guards at the entrance. We did not because the information in emails beforehand warned of such actions, that these could lead to arrest for which there was no prepared legal support. We also have only learned the protest tactics on our own, not learning as Clown Army Tokyo did from an experienced group of clowns who could lead the way. Taking part in a protest, making ourselves visible by speaking and acting against social norms is a big step in itself, and adding clowning gear and buffoonery is to act against even the norms of protest. This is something we were not prepared to do at this action, but with better information, better support, and simply more experience, we envision being able to bring this to life at future actions.
WEAPONS OF LAUGH DESTRUCTION
Thick mapping Clown Protest Strategies in Tokyo

Clown Training highlights the reconceptualizes ways of moving through the city

Mocking the March highlights the absurdity of marching style and military tactics utilized by both sides of a protest

Interrogating the Line maps the questioning tactics deployed by clown protestors in which they drill police on the existence of the invisible line

Break the Stalemate: a diagram of marching choreography deployed in hard-drawn lines of protest

Weapons of Laugh Destruction
Mapping Clowning Protest Strategies in Tokyo

The use of clowning as a protest strategy originated in Western Europe as a response to the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. In less than 10 years, clowns could be seen participating in protests throughout the world, voicing concern about causes on a variety of scales, from the economic threats of globalization to cars double parked in bike lanes. More than just a collection of costumes, props and goofy actions, clowning as a protest typology holds the promise of destabilizing existing power structures in protest movements, rejuvenating tired actors by pointing out the inherent silliness and absurdity of the political status quo. Clowns do all this while having fun too!

In Tokyo, clowns have made multiple appearances at protests within the last five years. This map documents a march against the US military base in Okinawa that took place in December 2010. The protest brought attention back to one of the most visible and charged issues in Japan today, the presence of American military bases on Okinawa. Clowns employed various protest techniques at different points in the march, which have been identified here. These strategies represent a new approach to typical marching styles and have been utilized in other cities for other causes. This map is not an exact documentation of the day’s events, but rather a diagrammatic analysis of protest strategies and approaches that have been documented in other cities and contexts. The map was produced by Mandy Case, artist and organizer of local clowns who have been involved with clowning protests for over 5 years. The map was produced with the help of other clowns, including Jieyi (Japan), Fred the Clown (UK), and Nina the Clown (US), and was created for the Fall Seminar 2013 at the Urban Humanities Institute, UCLA.

In Tokyo, clowns have made multiple appearances at protests within the last five years. This map documents a march against the US military base in Okinawa that took place in December 2010. Over 160 protesters, including a handful of clowns, marched around the Shinjuku Train Station to draw attention to this cause.

The clowns employed various protest techniques at different points in the march, which have been identified here. These strategies represent a new approach to the typical march or protest, and have been utilized in other cities for other causes. This map is not an exact documentation of the day’s events, but rather a diagrammatic analysis of protest strategies and approaches that have been documented in other cities and contexts. The map was produced by Mandy Case, artist and organizer of local clowns who have been involved with clowning protests for over 5 years. The map was produced with the help of other clowns, including Jieyi (Japan), Fred the Clown (UK), and Nina the Clown (US), and was created for the Fall Seminar 2013 at the Urban Humanities Institute, UCLA.