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The D.C. Masquerade

L.A. Kauffman

September 2001

I've been going to protests for twenty years, since I was radicalized as a teenager during the first year of Ronald Reagan's presidency. Big ones, little ones, effective and futile ones, ranging in character from silent vigils to full-scale riots, on every issue you can imagine: abortion rights, U.S. military intervention abroad, apartheid, nuclear weapons, racial justice, AIDS, homelessness, gay and lesbian liberation, environmental devastation, and many more.

But until the Seattle WTO protests in November 1999, I had never – not once – encountered tear gas, pepper spray, or rubber bullets at a demonstration. Not when black-clad anarchists smashed windows and set a police car on fire during a San Francisco march against the 1991 Gulf War. Not when infuriated New Yorkers threw rocks at storefronts and flipped automobiles upside down after the cops who beat Rodney King were acquitted in 1993. Not at dozens of actions where people blocked traffic, or besieged government offices, or took to the streets without legal permits. And never, certainly, when people simply gathered in public to express dissenting views.

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Now I wouldn't dream of going to a major demonstration without a gas mask. Looking toward this fall's protests against first the International Monetary Fund and World Bank (Washington, D.C, September 29-30) and later the World Trade Organization (New York and San Francisco, November 9-13), I've been pricing out shatterproof prescription goggles. I don't want to give in to a police-induced climate of fear, but I've also been pondering – in light of the head injuries folks have suffered from tear-gas canisters and rubber bullets at globalization protests of late – whether getting some kind of helmet might be a good idea.

At the extreme, there are even people who are acquiring flak jackets now, after a summer in which live ammunition was repeatedly used at anti-capitalist protests outside the United States. The shootings in Europe – first in Sweden and then in Genoa, Italy – received all the publicity. But Carlo Giuliani was far from the only young person killed while demonstrating for global justice in the last few months; people in the Global South, who bear the brunt of exploitative trade and lending policies, also take the greatest risks in speaking out against them. Add to the global movement's grim roster at least six deaths this summer at anti-IMF protests alone: Steven Kil, Peter Noki, Thomas Moruwo, and Mathew Paven in Papua New Guinea; Carlos Santillán and Oscar Barrios in Argentina.

Here in the privileged core of global empire, the dilemma of this moment in time is this: Attend a large-scale protest without any protective gear (as people in this country have done, unthinkingly, for decades), and you run a large risk of being poisoned with toxic gas, and a small but real risk of being injured by a police projectile. Outfit yourself with a gas mask or helmet, however, and you suddenly acquire an appearance of paramilitary menace, altogether too much like the thuggish police.

Violent repression succeeds when it frightens people out of attending protests. But it succeeds, too, when it hardens a movement and makes it off-putting.

After the Quebec City protests against the Free Trade Area of the Americas, where Canadian police barraged the crowd with 5000 canisters of tear gas, a few of us in New York got to talking. We were alarmed by how inadequately people were prepared for heavy gas exposure, which can have very serious long-term health effects. Vinegar-soaked bandannas (the standard activist protection) make it possible to endure a tear-gas attack, at least for a while, but they don't filter out the poisons, known to cause ongoing eye and respiratory problems, menstrual irregularities, lingering fatigue and more. So while it was admirable that so many people refused to back down in the face of police bombardment, it meant that thousands may have suffered enduring physical consequences for publicly voicing their outrage at the human and environmental devastation that drives the global economy.

My friends and I were bothered by something else, too: the way that the police repression was successfully undermining the visual diversity and exuberance of globalization protests. We weren't talking tactics. It's one thing to take militant actions, and quite another to be dreary and menacing in the process. With a hard-edged, street-tough atmosphere beginning to dominate the front lines, we felt that some attention to aesthetics was in order. In the fight against the most powerful forces on the planet, our movements can't afford to surrender some of their most powerful weapons: wit, theater, ridicule, flamboyance, imagination.

We had a brainstorm: We decided to distribute hundreds of free gas masks to folks who lack protection at the World Bank/IMF protests in D.C. But first we'd paint them in bold colors, like magenta, blue, and bright green; cover them with rhinestones, sequins, and glitter; transform them into marvelous emblems of the creative defiance at the core of the global justice fight.

We named ourselves the Masquerade Project, and we drafted a manifesto. "We want to make sure that our sisters and brothers have the protection they need – and we also think it's time for an aesthetic intervention on the front lines of the movement for global

justice,” we wrote. “Black may be timelessly chic. But we long for more color, more élan. We believe our movements should reflect the world we want to create. And for us, that’s a world with loads of color, sparkle, variety, and individual creativity.”

So in a departure from *Free Radical*’s usual essayistic style, I’m putting out a direct appeal:

If you are going to D.C. – even if you’re planning to be far from the front lines – please come prepared with a gas mask or paint respirator. Check out our website for advice on what to buy and where to buy it, including links to online sources of \$5 gas masks. You’ll also find the lowdown on what paints and other supplies work best for decorating, and many images of artfully transformed masks.

If you’re not going to D.C., please help protect the folks there by donating to The Masquerade Project, so we can purchase, decorate, and distribute as many gas masks as possible. Every \$5 you give will shield one person’s eyes, lungs, and skin from the damaging effects of chemical weapons. You can donate by credit card online, or mail checks and money orders to The Masquerade Project, P.O. Box 648, New York, NY 10009.

Of course, it’s possible that the D.C. police won’t use tear gas against the IMF/World Bank demonstrations – but given that they’ve been encouraging journalists from the corporate press to acquire gas masks and flak jackets, we need to be prepared.