

FREE SERIES: *A short history of the San Francisco Diggers
(and the movement they spawned)* by Eric Noble

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A note on the FREE SERIES

Since 1997 and 1998, the Antinomian Press has published the majority of its works under the rubric of the *Project Series* or the *Student Series*, respectively. The *Project Series* was for those publications that were about my own projects or those of other artists. These included texts about Paula Hayes, Lee Lozano, Chris D’Arcangelo, and Ian Wilson. The *Student Series* was the heading for those publications that came out of my teaching practice, especially while at California College of Arts and during workshops at different École des Beaux-Arts in France. In the case of both series, the publications were initially given away for free and, later, once the initial distribution was over, they were sold to try and recoup their expense.

In this new series, *Free Series*, the publication will always be free. This will be true for its initial distribution as well as all future distributions. If you are having to pay (or have paid) for this publication, it is against my wishes and the purpose of the publication. This is both a nod to the Diggers, about whom this publication is written, as well as an extension of my earlier practice of generating what I called “the gift sculpture object” back in 1991.¹

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Ben Kinmont, May, 2022

Introduction

I don't normally write personal introductions, but this publication and project has become meaningful for me in a way that is more autobiographical than usual.

About one year ago I went with my mom and sister to attend a memorial for the artist William Wiley. Wiley had been an old friend of the family and I hadn't seen many of the people attending since my childhood. One of the people who spoke was Ron Davis, the founder of the San Francisco Mime Troupe. Afterwards, while we were all mingling and catching up, I introduced myself to Ron (I was friends with his ex-wife's son), and we talked about the SF Diggers and the Communication Company. Ten years earlier, I had met Peter Coyote, one of the members of the Diggers, during a symposium we had both participated in that was about generosity in contemporary art practices.² The Communication Company was the printing arm of the Diggers and when I met Ron, I had only just found out about them from a bookseller in London. I told Ron that I was very interested in the street flyers that the Diggers were issuing with the Communication Company: their design, origin, the content of their messages, and how they fit into what was going on in the Bay Area during the late 1960s. Although he didn't have much to say about the Communication Company, he shared a great deal about the art scene of the time and what the Mime Troupe was up to.

The SF Diggers took their name from the mid-17th century English Diggers, or True Levellers as they liked to refer to themselves. At that time, King Charles I was deeply in debt due to England's wars with Spain, and so he and his government decided to sell off the commons, shared outdoor properties throughout England that were owned by everyone. This privatization of public space ruined the lives of many, as those who were too poor to own property used the commons to raise crops and graze their livestock. The Diggers seized back some of these commons to set up a community of economic equality and were persecuted for it. (Not surprisingly, the Diggers are often discussed as one of the forebears of Communism.) They were also one of the Antinomian groups that I had focused on in the mid-1980s while studying pre-Enlightenment thought in England.

When I met Peter Coyote and spoke with Ron Davis, I was both astonished and excited to see the connection to this earlier period of radical political thought with what was occurring in the Bay Area in the late 1960s. During the 1960s I grew-up in Marin County in California. From 1966 to 1969 my dad was a student at the San Francisco Art Institute and while he was at class, my mom would take my sister and I to Golden Gate Park -- and sometimes over to Haight-Ashbury -- to hang out and spend the day until my dad was ready to go home. Although I have no memories of the SF Diggers, I do remember the tribal feeling of community, of a sense of "us" and "them." "Us" being those with homemade outfits and thrift clothes, long hair, moccasins, feathers, hairy armpits, and health food. "Them" being those with short hair, strict rules, fathers in Vietnam, neat houses, and baloney sandwiches at school (which I secretly coveted).

That time was somehow more specific. Normal was knowing by age six how to avoid the draft, the Grateful Dead were one degree of separation, mom was sitting zazen, Sly and the Family Stone lived down the street, the homeless Vietnam vets were often scary, and although drugs made many happy and easy, some were left damaged. But there was also music and theater everywhere, art events, and gatherings of students, artists, and teachers and packs of art kids. Lots of kids just left alone to do whatever they wanted.

Fast forward to New York City: I'm a young artist trying to see a path forward with project art and what archives can (and cannot) be. It's 1997 and PS1 puts together an exhibition of Jack Smith, showing his films and archive. At that time, I barely knew about his films, but the magic and content of what was contained in his archive, and its display, blows my mind (and I was not alone). Where was the author in this work and this presentation? What does it mean to get as excited, if not more excited, by the archival materials than the films? Could the archive be an escape from the problematics of discreet object making?

Then it's April 2022, and I'm emailing with Eric Nobel, the archivist for the SF Digger archives. I'm remembering my conversations with Ron Davis and Peter Coyote and I already know that Eric was a

member of the Sutter Street Commune (a.k.a. Kaliflower), where Hisbiscus from the Cockettes and Angels of Light used to live. I'm at the New York Book Fair, in my hotel room working on the Communication Company, when Eric writes me to say that Irving Rosenthal has just died. Rosenthal had been the editor of the Chicago Review when he was a young graduate student and had published the first excerpt of Burrough's *Naked lunch*. He was also a friend of Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg and the founder of Kaliflower, Eric's commune. What I didn't know was that Rosenthal had also acted in two of Smith's films, *Flaming creatures* and *No presidents*, and that he and Smith had argued over archiving practices. Again, I am swept away by this feeling of things circling back, of different times folding in on themselves. Eric then sends me a presentation he'd made on Rosenthal's life, one previously shared with the remaining members of Kaliflower during a Covid group zoom chat.

As I put this together, I think about histories, things saved and remembered, and the stories we tell, even when quiet. I'm trying to get this text together, that will appear in 50 copies only, printed outside in a park in a few days, and Eric calls to ask if I've gotten this morning's edits. He also tells me about how Irving always kept 5 copies of everything for his archive. I reply that I've found 3 to be enough.

So, to all of you who have come before, I thank you, and in the case of this publication, especially Eric Noble.

Ben Kinmont
11 May 2022

A note on the author

Eric has been tracking the Diggers since arriving in San Francisco in 1969, just as all the Hippies were leaving because of Edgar Cayce's prediction that a massive earthquake would spill California into the Pacific. He joined the Kaliflower commune in 1971 and was dubbed "the Digger archivist" by Peter Berg. The name stuck. Many years later, after hearing Tim Berners-Lee talk about his latest invention which he called the World Wide Web in 1993, Eric wrote code for the first iteration of the online Digger Archives. At the time, there were 500 websites worldwide. The rest as they say, is history. Ever since then, like the grizzled narrator in *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, he has gladly told his tale to anyone who would listen to this journey and take heed.

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Radical social movements can have their roots decades, and even centuries, in the past; likewise, they can leave their traces deep into the future. This is the story of the roots and traces of one such radical movement.

SF Mime Troupe: Praxis of Change

One of the most important influences on the San Francisco Diggers was R.G. “Ronnie” Davis, the founder and consummate theoretician of the San Francisco Mime Troupe. The experiences that many of the original Diggers took from their involvement with the Mime Troupe were the foundation for the idea of “life acting” in the service of social change. In his 1966 essay “Guerilla Theatre,” Davis called for theater collectives to “teach / direct toward change / be an example of change.” In a nutshell, this is the definition of “lifestyle as change agent” — the contribution of the Sixties Counterculture to social protest history. Later feminist theory would propose “the personal is the political” — a slight reformulation of Davis’ concept of guerrilla theatre.³



Ronnie Davis being arrested on August 7th, 1965, for the Mime Troupe performing in Golden Gate Park without a permit. Davis is the person in the center being held by a cop and a plain-clothed police man. Photo by Eric Weber.

Artists Liberation Front: Celebration as Community

The Mime Troupe was arrested at a publicly staged event in August 1965 after their permit to perform in the parks was revoked by the San Francisco Recreation and Parks Commission for alleged obscenity. The resulting events to support the troupe galvanized the new hip community of artists and social outcasts. At a symposium where Ronnie Davis lambasted the Establishment, longtime radical poet and gadfly Kenneth Rexroth gave a speech that would inspire the formation of the Artists Liberation Front, a group of working artists who planned a series of Free Fairs in the fall of 1966. The ideas behind the Free Fairs and the Artists Liberation Front (ALF) are significant. They represented the first stirrings of the neighborhood arts movement. Their influence on the San Francisco counterculture then emerging was profound. The Free Fairs became the first joyous outdoor communal celebrations, one of the most important symbols of Sixties' counterculture. The Free Fairs inspired the Love Pageant Rally in October 1966, which itself was the inspiration for the Human Be-In, in January 1967. The Be-In itself became the model for similar gatherings worldwide; the most famous of which occurred two years later at a farm in upstate New York near Woodstock.

Barbara Wohl, one of three people responsible for organizing the Free Fairs, described the Artists Liberation Front as "an extension, for the most part, of the very kind of loving tender attitude that people had toward each other then. I haven't seen it since. It was just that short bubble of time. If you weren't there, you don't even believe it happened ... I didn't articulate it to myself at the time, but what the point of the fairs was, was not to have artists displaying their works, finished products, but to have the supplies there so people could make their own art. ... That was the basic idea of the fairs. It is not someone coming to observe his picture, but where whoever happened to walk up and see the paints could become the artist and do his thing, make his own art, be a participant. This was meant to be, and is, a very political thing. It was the beginning of this burgeoning toward not passively allowing the government to go on with the war. ... This erasing of the difference between the performer and the performed upon was the real nitty gritty of that, the politics of the whole thing."⁴

The Digger Papers: Counterpoint to Ecstasy

In early Fall, 1966, two members of the Mime Troupe began mimeographing and distributing street sheets with messages for the new community that was coalescing in the Haight-Ashbury (months before any national attention hit America's newsstands). At the suggestion of a member of SDS, they adopted the name DIGGERS after the 17th-century English radicals who had protested the early stirrings of capitalism in the form of the enclosure movement by moving onto the nearby commons and planting their crops to be shared freely with all, abolishing money along with all buying and selling as part of their living utopia. Gerrard Winstanley, one of the 17th-century English Diggers, had written the group's manifestos which outlined their beliefs and principles: "This work to make the Earth a Common Treasury, was shewed us by Voice in Trance, and out of Trance, which words were these, Work together, Eat Bread together, Declare this all abroad. ... Know this, that we must neither buy nor sell; Money must not any longer (after our work of the Earth's community is advanced) be the great god, that hedges in some, and hedges out others."

These early street sheets, which were instantly dubbed "Digger Papers" in the underground press, called for a renewal of purpose. As an anonymous Digger told the *Berkeley Barb*, the message was aimed at "showing the gap between psychedelica and radical political thought." The Diggers had objected when the Artists Liberation Front debated allowing booths to sell food and other goods at the Free Fairs and ultimately all buying and selling was banned from these proto tribal gatherings. The early Digger Papers carry some of the themes that would become synonymous with the Digger message: rejecting Establishment norms; questioning all forms of authority and conformity; and a challenge to create new spheres of autonomy (personal and communal). In addition to these early broadsides, there are several notices and articles that appeared in the *Berkeley Barb* which document these nascent days.⁵

Hunter's Point Uprising: Community Under Siege

On Tuesday, September 27, 1966, a white policeman killed a Black teenager in the Hunter's Point neighborhood of San Francisco. Matthew "Peanut" Johnson was shot in the back after the officer suspected the car he was driving had been stolen. Within a few hours, crowds of young men gathered in the late afternoon and began confronting the police who were dressed in riot helmets and shotguns on the streets of the predominantly Black neighborhood. All night long, the crowds and the police were in pitched battles that involved throwing of bricks and Molotov cocktails, breaking of windows, setting of fires, and looting of stores. The police response was massive cordons of officers firing into the crowds. Dozens of arrests took place. The street confrontations between citizens and police spread into the Fillmore district across town, and Mayor Shelley ordered a curfew until 6 a.m. The next day, Governor Edmund Brown ordered the National Guard to patrol the streets of three of San Francisco's neighborhoods. The Haight-Ashbury, being conterminous with the Fillmore district, was included in the occupation order. Five hundred National Guardsmen patrolled the streets of the City for six days until the emergency abated. During this week, residents of the Haight-Ashbury differed in their responses. The merchants urged cooperation with the police. Students for a Democratic Society urged confrontation. The Diggers advised people to ignore the curfew and passed the word that free food would be served to all comers in the Panhandle, a sliver of Golden Gate Park adjacent to the Haight-Ashbury.⁶



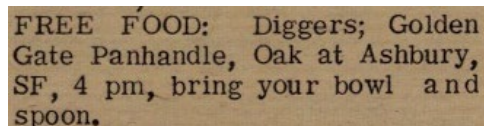
Newcombe and 3rd Street, September 28th, 1966. Photo Shaping SF Collection.

Free Food Daily: Bring Your Bowl and Spoon

The act of offering free food in the form of Digger stew every day at 4pm in Haight-Ashbury's version of the "English Commons" was an electrifying event in late September/early October 1966. Quickly, the movement snowballed. As one of the later Digger Papers put it:

And so, six months ago you watched two guys bring a milk can full of turkey stew into the panhandle and start the diggers. two weeks later free food in the panhandle at four o'clock was advertised in the Berkeley Barb and it never missed a day. somebody asked: Why free food? and anyone answered: free clothes. the first free store opened in a six car garage on page street and it was small and the crowd knew each other and someone had written Winstanley on the door and then the rains came and the roof fell in, the landlord was harassed by the police and said please ... and someone said it was nice while it lasted. And the diggers grew.⁷

The Panhandle is a strip eight-blocks long by one block wide filled with lush lawns, towering eucalyptus trees, open playgrounds and walking paths that forms the northern border of the Haight-Ashbury neighborhood. As soon as the Diggers started serving free meals daily at the corner of Oak and Ashbury in the fall of 1966, the Panhandle became the new community's gathering place similar to the central plaza of a Spanish pueblo or the Boston Commons during the American pre-revolutionary era. In the coming months, the Diggers would bring flatbed trucks to the Panhandle and set up the first outdoor music performances featuring the Grateful Dead and other neighborhood bands. Candle-lit poetry readings would take place protesting the war in Vietnam with a dual sense of the anger many young people felt but also the joy that this new counterculture embodied.



FREE FOOD: Diggers; Golden Gate Panhandle, Oak at Ashbury, SF, 4 pm, bring your bowl and spoon.

Berkeley Barb, Nov 4, 1966, p. 12.

Free Stores: It's Free Because It's Yours

Within weeks of the first Free Feeds in the Panhandle, the Diggers had rented a six-car garage a block away on Page Street. The garage contained dozens of picture frames, which inspired the Diggers to construct a twelve foot square frame of loose 2x4s. Painted bright orange, it became the first prop the Diggers used in their street theater agit-prop — all comers at the Free Feeds had to step through the “Free Frame of Reference” in order to partake of that day's stew. The name also stuck for the garage after the Diggers turned it into the first Free Store where all items were free for the taking. No buying, no selling.

After the City closed the Free Frame of Reference free store, the Diggers opened two more in the next year. The longest lasting incarnation was known as Trip Without A Ticket, located at Cole and Carl streets in the upper Haight. This was where street survival classes took place for new arrivals in the youth mecca. This was where the first free medical services were offered by local doctors and nurses who became enamored with the Digger ideal. This was where the first tie-dye lessons took place which transformed clothing styles for a generation. By the time this third Free Store closed its doors, dozens of communes had sprung up in the Bay Area, many of which replicated the free store concept with a communal room of their own open to anyone passing through. Decades later, Free Boxes outside natural foods and other stores continued to proliferate in counterculture niches from Santa Cruz, California to Burlington, Vermont. Full blown Free Stores continue to operate in the 2020s, especially in low-income areas across the country.

One of the best-known free stores was the Black People's Free Store that was started by Roy Ballard, a long-time Black civil rights activist in the Fillmore district. Roy collaborated with the Diggers in the early months of 1967 and opened the Free Store in June. It was an immediate success and continued for several years, eventually becoming host to a medical clinic and community center. Roy's vision of the role of free stores as reparations for the legacy of slavery is still an acute indictment of American society.⁸

Digger Event Cycle: Create the Condition You Describe

One of the early Digger Papers states, “The relationship between poetry and revolution has lost its ambiguity. Gregory Corso’s poem POWER was the sole reason behind the concept of the Diggers: autonomy. The issue is no longer the status of an American minority, but the status of America. The Diggers are a rebellion against commodities and the hierarchy of commodity values. ... Create alternatives. Turn people onto their own creative powers. The public is any fool on the street and power is standing on a street corner waiting for no one.” When someone asked who was in charge of the Free Store, they would be answered, “You’re in charge! You wanna see someone in charge? You be in charge!” This was an example of the Digger “concept of assuming freedom.” It extended to the planning of public events that the Diggers performed over the course of their two years on the stage of public awareness. Starting with The Intersection Game on Halloween, October 31, 1966 — barely a month since the first Free Feed — the working model for a Digger event was: “Life acts! Acts that can create the condition of life they describe!” The condition the Diggers were describing first and foremost was AUTONOMY.⁹ Later Anarchist theory would give a fancy name to this Digger idea — prefigurative politics, meaning that a group replicates the ultimate social ends they seek in their everyday practice. If you believe ultimately in a non-hierarchical society (as anarchists do), then you structure your current practice to reflect that in present relations.

Cycle of Digger events (1966-1968):

- The Intersection Game (October 31, 1966)
- Death of Money Parade (December 17, 1966)
- The Invisible Circus (February 24-26, 1967)¹⁰
- Gentleness in the Pursuit of Extremity (April 2, 1967)
- Summer of Love Solstice (June 21, 1967)
- Death of Hip / Birth of Free (October 6, 1967)
- End of the War (November 5, 1967)
- Noon Poetry Forever (Spring 1968, City Hall steps)¹¹
- Free City Convention (May 1, 1968)
- Summer Solstice 1968 (June 21, 1968)

Communication Company: Instant News Service

At the Death of Money Parade in December 1966, two Hells Angels happened upon the street event and joined in. After one of the Diggers rode on the back of an Angel motorcycle and stood waving a sign with the word "NOW" down Haight Street, the police arrested her and the two Hells Angels. The Diggers organized a march to the local police station where they proceeded to raise bail money. In appreciation, the San Francisco chapter of the Hells Angels decided to throw a party for the Diggers. The event was called "New Year's Wail" and it took place on January 1, 1967, in the Panhandle. From that moment on, there was a close relationship between the two groups. At the event, two recent arrivals on the scene took notice of the Digger ethos and became inspired to launch an instant news service for the Haight-Ashbury. They called it the Communication Company.



Los Angeles Free Press, 31 March 1967; picture by Art Kunkin.

The Communication Company

haight/ashbury

OUR POLICY

Love is communication.

OUR PLANS & HOPES

- + to provide quick & inexpensive printing service for the hip community.
- + to print anything the Diggers want printed.
- + to do lots of community service printing.
- + to supplement The Oracle with a more or less daily paper whenever Haight news justifies one, thereby maybe adding perspective to The Chronicle's fantasies.
- + to be outrageous pamphleteers.
- + to compete with the Establishment press for public opinion.
- + to revive The Underhound, old North Beach magazine of satire & commentary that was instrumental in ending a police harrassment routine very like the present one.
- + to function as a Haight/Ashbury propoganda ministry, free lance if needs be.
- + to publish literature originating within this new minority.
- + to produce occasional incredibilities out of an unnatural fondness for either outrage or profit, as the case may be.
- + to do what we damn well please.
- + to keep up the payments on

OUR MAGNIFICENT MACHINES

- * one brand-new Gestetner 366 silk-screen stencil duplicator.
- * one absolutely amazing Gestefax electronic stencil cutter.

WITH WHICH WE CAN

- + print up to 10,000 nearly lithographic quality copies of almost anything we can wrap around our scanning drum.
- + on any kind of paper up to 8½ by 14 inches (this being basically an office machine).
- * with any kind of art, including half-tones.
- * on both sides of the page.
- + in up to four colors with adequate registration (office machine).
- * with all manner of outrageous innovations.
- * all in a very few hours.

WE NEED ALL THE HELP WE CAN GET!

WE NEED

- + printing orders.
- + Haight Street reporters.
- * a whole lot of scripts for maybe publication.
- + writers for The Underhound.

claude & chester

626-2926

we deliver

The first street flyer issued by the Communication Company.

The collective members (there were a total of five) of the Communication Company fashioned themselves the publishing arm of the Diggers. As such, their record of broadsides, manifestos, leaflets and street sheets leaves us a rich slice of Digger praxis as it played out on the streets of the Haight-Ashbury during the spring and summer months of 1967. Many of the 700+ anonymous sheets came from the Diggers themselves; others had been penned by the elder statesman of the Communication Company collective, himself a Beat Movement survivor from North Beach and Greenwich Village who gravitated to the new scene in the Haight. Inspired by the Diggers and their Free philosophy, the Communication Company set up a printing operation with two Gestetner mimeograph machines that had been nefariously obtained through the offices of Ramparts magazine. Everything (or nearly so) was free of charge. If someone heard a rumor of a bust, or had a good lead on free food, or wanted to announce a poetry reading, the Communication Company had roving reporters on the street who could rush at a moment's notice back to the flat where the Gestetners were kept. Within a short time, a new street sheet would appear, distributed by the volunteers who used the street poles as their community bulletin board.¹²



The announcement for one of the Diggers' more (in)famous events, 24 February 1967.

Free Bakeries, Free Clinics: The Movement Expands

The thing about social movements is that they can take on the characteristic of an avalanche that starts with a snowball cascading down and picking up energy and mass from its gravity. That's what happened with the Digger Movement. One Saturday in June 1967, an engineer and his wife from Palo Alto brought 400 lbs. of whole wheat flour to the All Saints Church on Waller Street. The prelate of the church had become inspired by the Digger idea and gave over his office to a group of "street Diggers" who set themselves up as one wing of the growing movement. Installed in the kitchen of the church were two large ovens. The Palo Alto couple offered to teach the Diggers how to bake whole wheat bread. There were no baking trays so they innovated by using one- and two-pound coffee cans which became the trademark identity of Digger Bread. The bread makers were adamant about using ONLY whole wheat flour for the baking, and their passion for whole grains quickly found a receptive audience throughout the Haight and the larger counterculture (as evidenced by articles in underground newspapers of the time). Free bakeries sprung up during the coming years and decades wherever young people gathered. One of the most renowned was the God's Eye Bakery at Resurrection City in 1968 at Martin Luther King Jr.'s last crusade, the Poor People's Campaign in Washington, D.C.

Meanwhile, at the Trip Without A Ticket free store in the Upper Haight, a group of interns and doctors had come together to volunteer their services for the young people who were gravitating to the Haight. From this nexus emerged the Haight-Ashbury Free Medical Clinic founded by a doctor on staff at the University of California, San Francisco medical school. The Free Clinic became an instant success and longstanding institution. As the director of the Free Clinic noted, in the Digger world, "Health care is a right not a privilege" and that has become the working motto of Free Clinics since then.¹³

The Summer of Love: News Gets Out

Backing up a bit in terms of chronology, on Tuesday, November 15, 1966, San Francisco Police officers working the Vice Squad arrested the store clerk at the Psychedelic Shop on Haight Street for selling copies of a book of poetry by Lenore Kandel, a longtime member of North Beach bohemian society. The title of the poems was *The Love Book* and this event became known as *The Love Book Bust*. Subsequently, the police arrested the owner of the Psychedelic Shop as well as a store clerk at City Lights Bookstore on the grounds that *The Love Book* was obscene. The case became the longest running criminal trial in San Francisco history to that point. The new community that had migrated to the Haight-Ashbury was outraged by the ongoing harassment of the police and City Hall who, it seemed obvious, were determined to rid San Francisco of this fringe subculture before things really got out of hand. By this moment in late 1966, LSD usage had become common among the “new bohemians” (as some would continue to call them — the term “hippies” had only recently been used). Members of the new community called for a meeting to band together to resist this onslaught by the Establishment. The result was a meeting that included some of the new “hip” merchants, artists, publishers, writers and representatives of collective groups — including the Diggers — and some of the neighborhood rock groups like the Family Dog and the Grateful Dead. Using the eponymous title of Lenore Kandel's poetry book, this group of new leaders proclaimed the coming season to be the “Summer of Love” and set about inviting the world to their doorstep.

As soon as some of the members of the “Council for a Summer of Love” began predicting the imminent arrival of thousands of young people to the Haight-Ashbury, the Mayor and City Hall reacted in horror. The headline read: “Hippies Warn S.F. / Huge Invasion” in the March 22, 1967 S.F. Chronicle. A later edition changed the headline to read: “Police Chief Warns Hippies” and that began a sustained assault by the police and bureaucrats that continued daily and weekly throughout the summer, into the fall and winter and even into the next year until finally the Haight imploded on itself and became a burned-out shell of its former self. Nevertheless, the Summer of Love was a time of opening — opening of alternatives such as the Free

Bakery, the Free Clinic, the Switchboard, Digger crashpads, street takeovers, weekly free music gatherings in the Panhandle. All the while, Free Food and the Free Store continued serving up “Digger Do,” as the Diggers called their action-oriented ideology. Eventually, the combined pressure of the thousands of young people who made the pilgrimage to the Haight-Ashbury that Summer of Love — and at the same time, the relentless arrests and harassment of the Establishment — forced a retreat. Just as the Diggers had jumped off the stage of the Mime Troupe onto the streets to carry out their agit-prop theater, now there was a pulling inward. Hundreds of communes formed in the ensuing months and the action went indoors.



The free medical clinic was opened in June of 1967 in an old dentist's office on Clayton, just off Haight Street. Photo from UCSF Archives and Special Collections.

Free City: Blueprint for Collectivity

In the summer of 1967, the Diggers gave away their last, final, possession — their name. Henceforth, they called themselves Free City. One of the last events that the Diggers (under that name) created was the Death Of Hippie in October 1967, in an attempt to discard a word that had been invented by the mass media. The full name of the event was “Death of the Hippie and Birth of the Free.” The name “diggers” had become so widely used that it was like a ripple wave in a pond. People called themselves Diggers all over the map of the now widespread counterculture, in the same way that the Berkeley Provos had adopted the name of the Dutch anarchist group the previous fall.

The Digger vision, which had loosely been “Free Street” now expands into the vision of Free City, which included not just the Haight-Ashbury but many other of San Francisco’s unique neighborhoods: the Mission, Fillmore, Chinatown, Castro, Potrero Hill, and Noe Valley. The Free City Collective, ever life-actors looking to expand their performance art, brought their events to the stage of the larger urban context— the Free City Convention; the Free Poetry Readings on City Hall Steps; the Spring Equinox and Summer Solstice celebrations. These were the cycle of events that the Free City Collective created in 1968 to put forth a more inclusive, communal energy. Free Feeds in the Panhandle morphed into the “Free Food Home Delivery” service that brought scrounged fruits and vegetables from the Produce Market to the communes and households that formed the Free City network. One of the groups that ended up on the delivery route was the headquarters of the Black Panthers in Oakland. David Hilliard, the chief of staff of the Panthers, describes in his autobiography how the Diggers inspired the Panthers’ Free Food and Breakfast for the Children programs.¹⁴ The Free Food Home Delivery Service in turn inspired the formation of the first Food Conspiracy in the Bay Area which was a key moment in the genesis of the natural foods movement.

In late summer, 1967, some of the Diggers forcibly appropriated the Gestetner equipment that had been used to produce the Communication Company (Com/Co) bulletins. The Free City Collective used these machines to create the Free City News sheets, which sup-

planted the Com/Co operations. The hard-edge editorials and the black and white productions typical of Com/Co were replaced by a larger (8-1/2" x 14") format, colorful designs, and more poetic pronouncements. The final publication of the Free City Collective was the August 1968 issue of *The Realist* for which the Diggers were given 40,000 copies of a free edition titled "The Digger Papers"—an anthology of manifestos, street sheets and Free News items that had appeared in the previous eighteen months. Many saw this compilation as the final gift from an amazing collection of individuals and the blueprint for a future collectivity.¹⁵



"Free Huey. Feed Hungry Children. Free Breakfast." The FBI's violence against the Black Panther Party focused on community services such as the popular Free Breakfast Program. Above is the Los Angeles Chapter after being destroyed by the police. *The Black Panther Black Community News Service* 20 December 1967, p. 12.

THEY WERE IMMIGRANTS WHO HAD COME FROM TOO FAR OFF FOR THEIR LORD
TO BE TRACED AND WHO, SINCE THEIR SERFDOM COULD NOT BE PRESUMED, NECESSARILY
PASSED FOR FREE, ALTHOUGH BORN OF UNFREE PARENTS.
BUT THE FACT HAD TO BE TRANSFORMED INTO A RIGHT.

IT WAS ESSENTIAL THAT THE VILLEINS, WHO CAME TO SETTLE IN THE TOWNS
TO SEEK A NEW LIVELIHOOD, SHOULD FEEL SAFE AND SHOULD NOT HAVE TO FEAR
BEING TAKEN BACK BY FORCE TO THE MANORS FROM WHICH THEY HAD ESCAPED.

THEY MUST BE DELIVERED FROM LABOUR SERVICES AND FROM ALL THE HATED
DUES BY WHICH THE SERVILE POPULATION WAS BURDENED, SUCH AS THE OBLIGATION
TO MARRY ONLY A WOMAN OF THEIR OWN CLASS AND LEAVE TO THE LORD PART
OF THEIR INHERITANCE.



WILLY-NILLY, IN THE COURSE OF THE TWELFTH CENTURY THESE CLAIMS, BACKED
UP AS THEY OFTEN WERE BY DANGEROUS REVOLTS, HAD TO BE GRANTED.

THE MOST OBSTINATE CONSERVATIVES, SUCH AS GILBERT DE NOGENT, IN 1115,
WERE REDUCED TO A WORDY REVENGE, SPEAKING OF THOSE DETESTABLE COMMUNES
WHICH THE SERFS HAD SET UP TO ESCAPE FROM THEIR LORD'S AUTHORITY AND
TO DO AWAY WITH HIS MOST LAWFUL RIGHTS.

FREEDOM BECAME THE LEGAL STATUS OF THE BOURGEOISIE, SO MUCH SO THAT IT
WAS NO LONGER A PERSONAL PRIVILEGE ONLY, BUT A TERRITORIAL ONE, INHERENT
IN URBAN SOIL, JUST AS SERFDOM WAS IN MANORIAL SOIL.

IN ORDER TO OBTAIN IT, IT WAS ENOUGH TO HAVE RESIDED FOR A YEAR AND A
DAY WITHIN THE WALLS OF THE TOWN.

STADTLUFT MACHT FREI! ----- CITY AIR MAKES A MAN FREE

Free City News, second set, 1967-68.

Free Print Shop: Passing of the Dharma

Hundreds of communes in the San Francisco Bay Area sprang up starting in 1967. One among them, the Sutter Street Commune, consciously adopted the Digger Free philosophy. The Digger ethos had permeated the counterculture — communes invariably had a Free Box in the hallway, whole wheat bread in the communal kitchens, and tie-dyed shirts in the communal clothes rooms — but the Sutter Street Commune was dedicated to implementing the collective blueprint for action that had appeared in “The Digger Papers.”

Since the 1950s, tales of Buddhist enlightenment had permeated the counterculture with the Beat poets' interest in Zen. One of the concepts that gained popular renown was the idea of "passing of the dharma." This was the idea of sacred teachings being passed from teacher to student. A passing of the dharma between the Diggers and the Sutter Street Commune took place in the early months of 1968 at one of the daily Free City Noon Forever events at City Hall. The commune's founding member was convinced to bring his printshop (offset press, copy camera, light table, etc.) from the Lower East Side of Manhattan to San Francisco to start a free printing service. Just as the Communication Company had been inspired by the Diggers and set up their instant news service during the Summer of Love, so the Sutter Street Commune announced the opening of the Free Print Shop in August 1968. Over the next decade and beyond, they would provide free printing of all manner of publications for communes and collectives that were themselves providing free services to the community. The Free Print Shop collection contains a record of hundreds of such items, distinctive for their artistry and design.¹⁶



On the left: David working in the Free Print Shop. On the right: Alex and the all-night record machine in the Free Print Shop. Photos by Miriam Bobkoff.



“A Kaliflower Board, constructed of plywood for the back, clothespins at the top for holding the current issue, and bamboo tube at the bottom for holding scribbled messages. The first communes that received Kaliflower had these boards hanging in a communal area, such as the kitchen, library, or meeting room. The weekly arrival of Kaliflower was a special ritual, in which the Deliverers (fellow communards themselves) would hang the new issue on the clothespins and pick up any waiting messages to get printed in the next week’s edition.”

-- www.diggers.org/kaliflower/kf.htm

Kaliflower: Intercommunal Explosion

In the spring of 1969, the Sutter Street Commune, under the auspices of the Free Print Shop, began publishing a newspaper that was only distributed by hand to communes. The name they gave this free weekly publication was Kaliflower, a play on Kaliyuga, the Hindu name for the last and most violent Age of Humankind — the idea being a “flower growing out of the ashes of this current age of destruction.” For the next four years, the commune kept Kaliflower going, 113 weekly issues in all. At its end, there were close to three hundred communes receiving Kaliflower. The progeny became so well known that eventually it gave its name to the parent — the “Kaliflower Commune” was how many people knew the group that published the weekly intercommunal newspaper.

“Kaliflower Day” — the name by which Thursdays became known — was an intercommunal ritual. That was the day when Kaliflower got printed, hand bound, and distributed to all the other communes on the “routing list.” Members from other households would show up at the Sutter Street Commune and spend the morning hand binding the pages of the newspaper, using the Japanese side-stitch method which the commune had learned from their salvage stints in the old abandoned Victorian houses of San Francisco's Japantown and Western Addition neighborhoods. After deliverer had bound enough copies for their route (typically a dozen communes each), they would set out on the day's journey. It was not unusual for the Kaliflower deliverers to come back with stories from one commune to another and being feted at each in various fashions. At each stop, the deliverers would pick up announcements and ads (always Free Ads) that would appear in the next week's issue. Kaliflower, in the printed form, but even more so in its method of distribution, became a channel of communication among hundreds of communes — thus fulfilling the Digger maxim ‘create the condition you describe.’

Since the basis of the Sutter Street commune's vision was Digger Free, Kaliflower also became the vehicle that helped create a Free City among the hundreds of communes. Eventually, a core group of communes pooled all their food-buying resources and operated on a “from each according ability, to each according to need” basis. Among the Free Food Family of communes were the Angels of Light

Free Theatre Troupe; Hunga Dunga which coordinated food buying and delivery; the Free Medical Opera which provided health care services; Sutter Street which continued to operate the Free Print Shop and produce Kaliflower; and many others.¹⁷



The Sutter Street Commune. Irving Rosenthal (on the left in a white shirt and long black beard), the founder of the commune that would later be known by the name of its newspaper, Kaliflower, passed away recently aged 91. As an editor, he was first to publish *Naked lunch* by William S. Burroughs, was a friend of Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac, and was in Jack Smith's *Flaming creatures* and *No president*. For a time, the commune was also home to members of the Angels of Light and the Cockettes. Photo taken by Mirriam Bobkoff, a member of Kaliflower, in mid-1972 (several members are absent).

Decades On: Digger Resonance

In the decades after the 1960s, the ideas of the Digger Movement continued to suffuse radical social movements. Evidence of this comes from any issue of the hundreds of underground newspapers that proliferated in the era. For example, the weekly “Scenedrome/-Survival” section of the *Berkeley Barb* would list dozens of services from free food, free bakeries, free stores, free medical clinics, free lawyers, etc. A core group of the Diggers left the urban concentration to join the “back to the land” movement in the late 1960s and evolved a radical environmental approach they called Bioregionalism. Meanwhile, as the 1980s progressed, AIDS took its toll on the San Francisco gay counterculture, including many of the same communes that had comprised the Kaliflower network. The Anti-Nuclear and Central American Solidarity movements took up where the Anti-Vietnam War movement had left off after the end of the United States involvement in Vietnam in 1975. Aspects of the Digger ethos of autonomy were present in civil disobedience direct actions, especially the new form of affinity groups as the basis of collective non-hierarchical organizing.

In 2011, at the lower Manhattan location known as Zuccotti Park, an encampment of hundreds of tents and thousands of participants formed the Occupy Wall Street movement. As if drawn directly from the 1968 anthology of *The Digger Papers*, the Occupy encampment included a free store, a free kitchen, free library, free energy generation, as well all the tools of consensus decision making that the anti-nuclear movement had innovated. As Chris Carlsson, co-founder of *Shaping San Francisco*, suggested, even though few of the Occupy activists had heard of the Diggers, nevertheless, the Digger DNA had suffused radical social movements in the subsequent decades.¹⁸ Most recently, during the 2020 Pandemic, a group of activists in New York City came together to offer free food and supplies at local demonstrations and protests. They call themselves the Astoria Mutual Aid Network and their free service is *The People's Bodega* and they continue evolving Digger DNA even to the moment of this printing in 2022. Traces of the Digger Movement were now the roots of a new radical social movement.

Coda: Celebrate and Protect the Commons

Consider the importance of the Panhandle to the rise of the Haight-Ashbury. That eight-block long strip of green that defined the boundary of the Haight-Ashbury was for the San Francisco Diggers what St. George's Hill was for the 17th Century English Diggers. It was the Commons, the open space that all could enjoy no matter one's status in life. As the English Diggers moved onto St. George's Hill at the moment when English aristocracy was enclosing the Commons lands, so too the 20th Century Diggers turned to the Panhandle at a moment when it had barely escaped a similar fate. In March 1966, the San Francisco Board of Supervisors (the equivalent of City Councils elsewhere) had finally defeated a plan to build an eight-lane freeway through the Panhandle to connect with the Golden Gate Bridge. The plan had been brewing for two decades and would have destroyed this expanse of open space within a dense residential neighborhood.

A citizens' group based in the Haight-Ashbury had formed and vociferously opposed the Panhandle Freeway at every turn. Arrayed against big business, big labor, and the state highway engineers, the dedicated group of Haight-Ashbury citizens deserve — at the least — a plaque to commemorate their steadfastness. If the Board of Supervisors had approved the freeway in March 1966, the State would have fenced off the area, preventing the Digger Free Feeds and all subsequent gatherings. The Panhandle was where the new community first gathered in a free space, outside the confines of commercial venues. The Panhandle shows how parks and open spaces became the catalyst for the coming-together of numerous Sixties Counterculture outposts — the Polo Fields in Golden Gate Park (Human Be-In, January 1967), Sheep Meadow in Central Park (Easter Be-In, 1967), Tompkins Square Park (New York City's Lower East Side), Griffith Park in Los Angeles, Boston Commons, Berkeley's Provo Park and People's Park, Max Yasgur's Dairy Farm (Woodstock Music Festival, 1969). The Free Commons is where Sixties Counterculture first came together. Celebrate the Free Commons. But protect it like that group of citizens who saved the Panhandle from enclosure in 1966.



"A MOVING TARGET IS HARD TO HIT"

Whatever tribe I am the reincarnated member of, apparantly won, or lost, or survived, as Ishi's TRIBE, simply by fading away, dispersing, a whisp of fog no one can strike: "a moving target is hard to hit." This can be the reverse of cowardice, it takes great courage, at times, to back off from what is rightly your place to stand.

Therefore, this is not advice for all. Some of you are people who stand there and take it, as the poles did, the ones who did, attack the hordes of tanks on horseback, with futile swords. Beautiful, that is your shot. It is not mine.

When 200,000 folks from places like lima ohio and cleveland and lompop and visalia and amsterdam and london and moscow and lodz suddenly descend, as they will, on the haight-ashbury, the scene will be burnt down. Some will stay and fight. Some will prefer to leave. My brief remarks are for the latter. I will stay. At some distance. Available. But my advice for those who have a way or ways similar to mine: disperse.

Gather into TRIBES of 15 or less. Communal "families" of 5 adults (however divided into sexes) and the natural number of children thereby made, is ideal for nomadic tribal dispersal action.

More than 3/4 of the state of California is national forest, national park, or state forest or park. Take your truck or car and make your camp in the part of the state you like most. Most parks require that you move in two weeks. Some places require moving every two days. This is only fair. The idea is, no one has the right to hog one campsite for the summer.

Choose unfamous forests. Avoid yosemite. Work, honestly, with the forest ranger. Write the state of california for their booklet. I think the feds have a similar campsite guide.

Also, volunteer for summer fire fighting work. It's good work, well paid, and necessary. When the fire starts they come to your camp and take you to the scene of disaster.

Another thing, as I was once quoted: "sometimes you only have to step 3 feet to the left and the whole insane machine goes roaring by." Or something like that.

The point is, for those who have this kind of way, not out of cowardice, but as WAY, that sitting in the haight-ashbury in all that heat and the terrible crowd you cannot help anyway (maybe), is simple insanity.

Disperse. Gather into smaller tribes. Use the beautiful public land your state and national governments have already set up for you, free. If you want to.

Most Indians are nomads. The haight-ashbury is not where it's at--it's in your head and hands. Take it anywhere.

.... Lew Welch

CHURCH OF ONE
MARCH 29, 1967 SAN FRANCISCO
PLANET EARTH

Gestetnered by The Communication Company(UPS) 3/27/67

Postscript: Digger Ideology

“Ideology” is one of those words that triggers negative reactions. When people hear the word, they think of debates over political theory among radical groups on the Left or the Right — groups like the Progressive Labor Party arguing over the finer points of Marxist theory. But when you strip away the emotional connotations, “ideology” just means the ideas that motivate people to take action.

Every social movement has both intrinsic and extrinsic ideology. The extrinsic part are the actions that define the movement. In the case of the Diggers, these actions ranged from the free feeds in the Panhandle starting in late 1966 to the invention of free stores, the events to take back Haight street from the police, the gatherings in the park to celebrate community, and eventually a whole platform of Free City services organized by collectives and communes. “Digger Do” was the term for these activities, and the phrase “Do It” was the Digger answer to debates over revolutionary theory.

The intrinsic part of ideology is always more difficult to pinpoint. These are the motivating ideas that are often only found in street literature or obscure pamphlets. Yet, these ideas spread as if by osmosis. Physics describes the phenomenon of Brownian motion that explains how particles get diffused throughout a fluid. In an analogous process, ideas spread throughout a movement. Digger ideology eventually diffused throughout the Sixties counterculture.

The Diggers were acutely aware from the very beginning that their ideas were disruptive of the growing consensus in the new community that was coming together in the Haight-Ashbury. The first Digger Papers criticized the capitalist trappings of the psychedelic avant-garde, asking when the proponents of LSD will “use, look through, but not package the expansion of human consciousness?” In fact, among the early articles that the Diggers sent to the local underground press (always anonymously) was one which named the Digger philosophy as the Ideology of Failure.

And so, we stay dropped out. We won't, simply won't play the game any longer. We return to the prosperous consumer society and refuse to consume. And refuse to consume. And we do our thing for nothing. In truth, we live our protest. Everything we do is free because we are failures. We've got nothing to lose, so we've got nothing to lose. ... To show Love is to fail. To love to fail is the Ideology of Failure. Show Love. Do your thing. Do it for FREE. Do it for Love.

And so, the ideas that motivated the Diggers started with a rejection of the dominant capitalist perspective and an embrace of mutual aid, individual and collective autonomy, anonymity, art for art's sake, and the notion of creating a free society through life acts by individual actors in collective determination.¹⁹

See also: "The Ideology of Failure" (<https://diggers.org/diggers/digart1.html#Ideology>) [Interesting note: this is the first time the phrase "do your thing" appeared in print.]

Endnotes

¹ See the description for *Waffles for an opening* at <http://www.benkinmont.com/projects/waffles-for-an-opening>.

² *Generosity Projects, Strategies for Exchange in Contemporary Art*, CCAC Institute for Exhibitions and Public Programs, 2002.

³ See “Have You Heard of the SF Mime Troupe” at <https://diggers.org/sf-mime-troupe.htm> and “Guerrilla Theatre” at <https://diggers.org/guerrilla-theater.htm>.

⁴ See “The Artists Liberation Front and the Formation of the Sixties Counterculture” at <https://diggers.org/alf.htm>.

⁵ See “The (English) Digger Writings” at <https://diggers.org/digger-tracts.htm> and “The Early [San Francisco] Digger Papers” at <https://diggers.org/digger-sheets.htm>.

⁶ See “Burocops Proboscis Probes Digger Bag” (*Berkeley Barb*, Oct 21, 1966, p. 3) at <https://diggers.org/diggers/digart2.html>.

⁷ *about time we started doin' our own livin' and dyin'*, see https://www.diggers.org/images/cc032_1.gif.

⁸ See “Black People's Free Store” at <https://diggers.org/black-peoples-free-store.htm> and “Free Store (New York)” at https://diggers.org/free_store1.htm.

⁹ See “Free City Bloodlight” (Digger “life acting”) at <https://diggers.org/digpaps68/bloodlit.htm> and “Trip Without a Ticket” (Digger event cycle) at <https://diggers.org/digpaps68/twatdp.html>.

¹⁰ See <https://diggers.org/diggers/incircus.html>.

¹¹ See <https://diggers.org/newsreal.htm>.

¹² See “The Communication Company Archives” at <https://diggers.org/Communication-Company-Archives/index.html>.

¹³ See “Digger Bread and the First Free Bakery (ies)” at <https://diggers.org/diggers/digbread.html> and “The Story of God’s Eye Bakery” at <https://diggers.org/resurrection.htm>.

¹⁴ See a description of the collaboration between the Diggers and the Black Panthers at https://diggers.org/links.htm#African_American_Freedom.

¹⁵ See “The Free City Collective” at https://diggers.org/free_city.htm; “NEWSREAL” (filmed during the Free City event cycle) at <https://diggers.org/newsreal.htm>; and “The Digger Papers (1968)” at https://diggers.org/digger_papers.htm.

¹⁶ See “Deep Tried Frees” at <https://diggers.org/kaliflower/df.htm>.

¹⁷ See “Kaliflower, the Intercommunal Explosion” at <https://diggers.org/kaliflower/kf.htm> and “Mutants Commune” (Digger manifesto) at <https://www.diggers.org/mutants.html>.

¹⁸ Chris Carlsson was the author of *Hidden San Francisco, a guide to lost landscapes, unsung heroes, & radical histories*. For more on later Digger writings, see “Post-Competitive, Comparative Game of Free City” at <https://diggers.org/digpaps68/postcomp.html>.

¹⁹ See “The Ideology of Failure” at <https://diggers.org/diggers/digart1.html#Ideology>. Interesting note: this is the first time the phrase “do your thing” appeared in print.



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