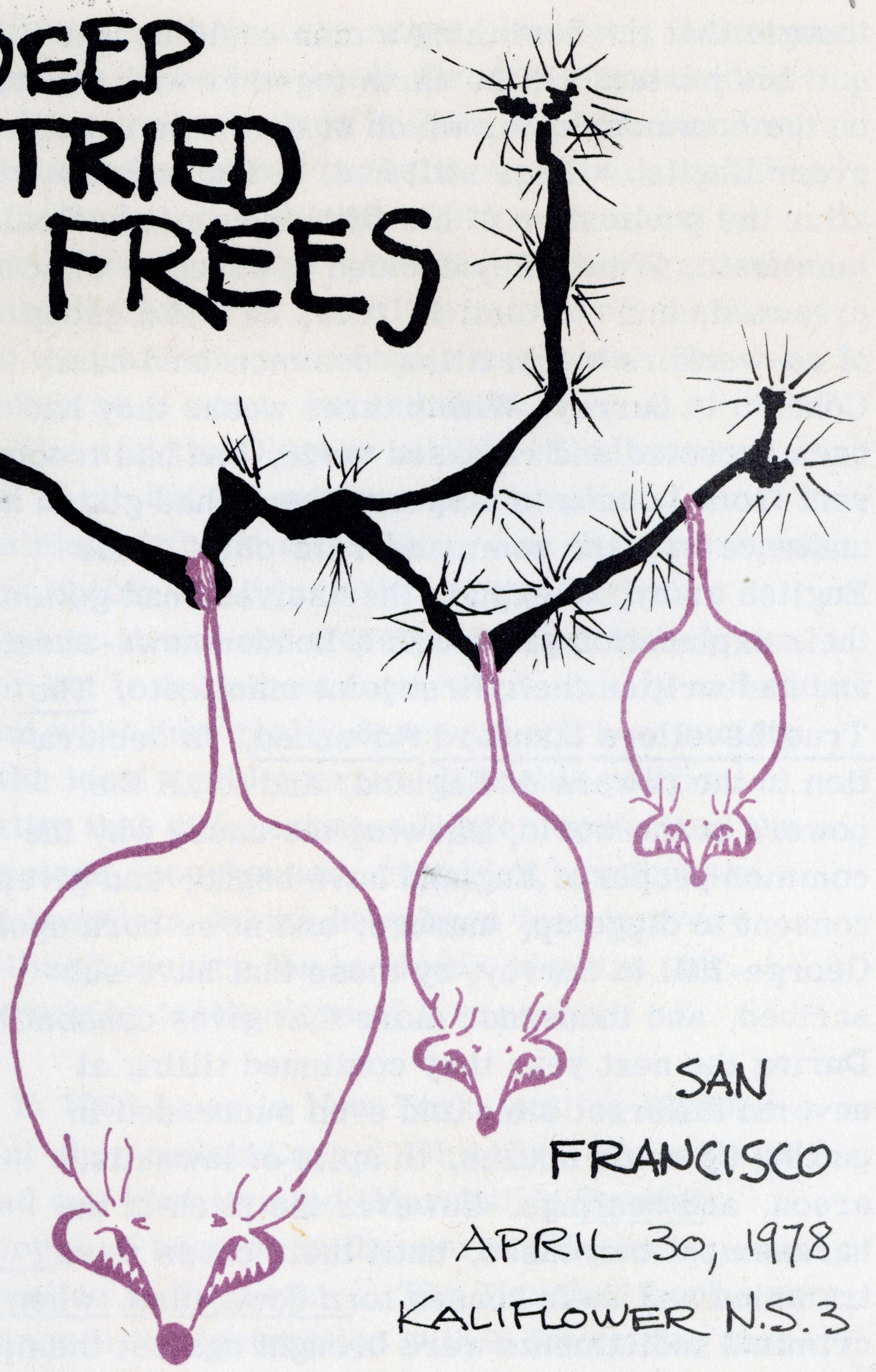
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DEEP TRIED FREES



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Three hundred thirty years ago, in England in the throes of the Puritan revolution, a mystic named Gerrard Winstanley began issuing manifestoes against the clerical and manorial establishments. He believed that God manifested directly in everyone, that knowledge of Him through Scriptures was second-hand, that the priesthood was superfluous and venal, that since all were equal in Godliness, none should oppress, tyrannize, or reduce others to poverty, that penal, corporal, and capital punishment should be abolished, that private property both tempted the poor to steal and killed them for doing it, that the Earth should be held in common by all who labor it, creating a common treasury from which all could draw according to need (including those incapable of working), that none should give hire or take hire, and that buying and selling should be abandoned, as it had become the art of thieving and oppressing fellow creatures. In a vision, Winstanley heard the words, "Worke together, Eat bread together, declare this all abroad." He

thought that the best thing a man could do was quit his job and till the earth together with others, on the common lands, which at that time nearly every English village still had. A few months after the publication of his fifth and most radical manifesto, Winstanley decided to practice what he preached, and on April 1, 1649, he and a group of co-workers began tilling common land near Cobham in Surrey. Within three weeks they had been arrested and released twice, had had troops sent from London to disperse them, had gotten an audience with the commander-in-chief of the English army, to explain themselves, had gotten their explanation printed in a London news-sheet, and had written their first joint manifesto, The True Levellers Standard Advanced, "a declaration to the powers of England, and to all the powers of the world, shewing the cause why the common people of England have begun, and gives consent to digge up, manure, and sowe corn upon George-Hill in Surrey; by those that have subscribed, and thousands more that gives consent." During the next year they continued tilling at several different sites and even succeeded in putting up some houses, in spite of lawsuits, arson, and beatings. However the pitch of the harassment increased, until their crops were trampled and their houses torn down, and, when criminal indictments were brought against them, the movement was effectively stopped. They called themselves "Diggers" or "True Levellers" (in contradistinction to a less radical and more popular party of the time called the "Levellers" —i.e., those who wanted to even out class differences).

Twelve years ago a handful of socially conscious actors, inspired by the work and ideas of the Surrey radicals, called themselves "Diggers," and (among other things) began giving out free hot meals in the Panhandle of Golden Gate Park. Besides chicken-neck soup, the latter-day Diggers provided or inspired others to provide free groceries, free clothes, free breakfasts, free crash pads, free medical services, and an assortment of free cultural events, from 1966 on. The Diggers' clients—if such a word can be used—were the growing hip population of San Francisco, and in particular the street people. The Diggers acted with wit and good humor, incredible speed and appropriateness. It is moot whether the times crystallized the Diggers or the Diggers catalyzed the times. They worked anonymously, had their own news-sheet and word-of-mouth communication methods, and lasted a year and a half, in a constantly

shifting, hallucinatory scene, involving thousands of people. The last event directly sponsored by the Diggers took place in June of 1968, but free events and services in the same spirit, including sporadic hot meals in the Park, continued for several years longer, even as hard drugs moved in and the focus of activities moved off the street into the various communal households. The street, as it were, burned down.

The soil the Diggers of 1966 tilled was not real earth but the garbage and surplus of a wasteful, affluent city. Otherwise their work was remarkably similar to that of the English Diggers: it was not merely an effort to help the poor but to free them from wage slavery and show them what they really deserved and how society in the ideal could operate. It is this political quality that differentiates Digger work from the missions, poorhouses, charities, madhouses, and hospitals, which have been free in every civilized country for hundreds of years, as begrudging institutions of last resort.

In 1966 I was in New York, putting together a print shop called Carp & Whitefish. By mid-1967 I had one book printed (Marshall's Transit Glory) and another in the works (Whalen's Invention of the Letter). The Marshall book was a fancy little contraption with a drawstring that pulled the pages up from a pocket. It was to sell for a dollar, and I was hoping to distribute fifty or a hundred copies to each of the half-dozen or so bookstores in New York City that specialized in modern poetry. As I was planning to move to San Francisco, either temporarily or permanently, I was eager to unload as many books as possible in the East before I left. But the first (supposedly hip) bookstore I approached placed so miniscule an order, that I resolved to sell the book on the streets myself, and bought a two-dollar City of New York Peddler's License. But I was too busy collating and binding the Whalen book to sell the Marshall book. A month after I got my license I was on my way to San Francisco with both editions.

I arrived in San Francisco in early October of 1967, and by late November had helped organize the commune I now live in. The commune grew rapidly, and early in 1968 the Diggers started delivering free produce to our door. In April, following a Digger rally on City Hall steps, Dave Simpson and Vinnie Rinaldi convinced me to send for my New York print shop and set it up in San Francisco as a free operation. The conversation ran something like this: "I hear you

have a print shop in New York." "Yeah." "We could sure use a free print shop in San Francisco." "How could I get it here?" (Vinnie:) "I'm willing to go to New York and bring it back." It seemed like a hyperbolic offer, and I doubted whether someone would actually go to that much trouble, but Vinnie did. I knew everything we printed would be free from then on, but thought I had contractual-type commitments with the authors to sell the two books I had brought from New York. In fact, authors' royalties had already been advanced, so that was no worry. In May Richard Brautigan pointed out to me that free was just as good a way to distribute a book as any other, and in reflecting on it, I realized that a book could be given away to its rightful audience in one fell swoop. On June 14, and with the author's blessings, commune members handed out 900 copies of the Whalen book into the audience of a big free poetry reading at Glide Church, just as Philip Whalen came to the podium. Free Wheelin' Frank's book 666 was handed out by the Diggers at the same reading. The Marshall book was given out later at a couple of early gay liberation events.

As early as August of 1967, the "Mutants Commune," a long poetic essay about American materialism corrected by Haight-Ashbury culture, including free, had appeared in the Berkeley Barb. It spoke of the new communal culture as having lasted only from September of 1966 to April of 1967, when it was done in by media, tourism, commercialism, hard drugs, and violence. Certainly by April of 1968 these factors had established themselves on Haight Street to the extent of taking away from the Diggers their main stage and auditorium. Even before then, looking for a Digger was like looking for an honest man: nearly everyone claimed to be one. The term was picked up by the media and little by little abandoned by those who had borrowed it from English history. This group, still rather small and tightly knit, began to think of themselves as the Free City Collective, and in fact their eyes were moving from the Haight to the City. In April the two main Free City projects were daily rallies on City Hall steps (a form of picketing) and the taking over of a Victorian doomed by the Redevelopment Agency, on Verona Street, in what is now the Yerba Buena Gobi. The daily rallies had the purpose of demanding that city-owned empty buildings be restored to the people for them to rehabilitate and live in freely, that surplus welfare food and materials be distrib-

uted free through ten autonomous neighborhood free stores rented by the city, that presses and trucks be made available for the dissemination of free news, that resources be provided for autonomous neighborhood celebrations, and that no permits be required for holding events in parks and other public spaces. City Hall ignored the Free City demands; and the building on Verona Street was demolished. On May Day a magnificent Free City Convention was held at the Carousel Ballroom—an all-night acid-bathed dance. Then, a few days after the Glide poetry reading, Free City sponsored its last event, the 1968 summer solstice celebration, which was to take place in parks all over the city but . . . just didn't. The Diggers had spearheaded free in San Francisco for a year and a half—and they were pooped out—or possibly not really interested in changing roles for the new play they found themselves in. They retired from the scene gracefully, leaving behind a tradition and expectation of free, which still lingers in San Francisco ten years later.

They also left behind a tangible summary of their ideals, the Digger Papers, a twenty-four-page collection of writings that came out in August of 1968 in two forms: No. 81 of The Realist and a free version that was handed out on the streets of San Francisco. Paul Krassner gave the Diggers 40,000 copies of the free version for the right to offprint it in The Realist. It is a mélange of original articles and material taken from street news-sheets—a double-barreled blast at American culture, with Free City as a prescription, sketched out as Free City Switchboard, Free Food and Distribution Center, Free City Garage and Mechanics, and so on, through eighteen departments, including one with the hair-raising title of "Free City Tinkers and Gunsmiths." (On the whole the Diggers were non-violent in practice but not in principle.) A few years after it had been distributed so plenteously, the Digger Papers vanished, perhaps because of its unpretty throwaway format. Few people now have even heard of this pamphlet, that for us was once a Bible.

To return to June of 1968, the New York print shop arrived by U-Haul trailer, and we set it up in the basement of the house the commune was renting on Sutter Street. We built the darkroom with plywood supplied by Dave Simpson. It was he who taught us how to hustle for materials. The Free Print Shop opened officially in August, and our first print

job was a flyer for a Hells Angels raffle of Dirty Dick's chopper, to benefit his widow. In those days we printed for any group or event that was non-profit and had reasonably good vibes. Later our position about free hardened, and we refused to print for any event or activity that was not completely free of charge or that did not state on its poster or flyer that no one would be turned away.

In April of 1969, a seventeen-year-old new member took on as a work project the editing of a free weekly newsletter for local communes —Kaliflower. It became the case of the daughter publication growing bigger than the mother print shop, which turned mainly into a production plant for Kaliflower. Kaliflower was issued weekly till the middle of 1972 with a regularity that amazed even us. During that period we wrote about free frequently and encouraged whatever free activities we could. We witnessed the founding of several free stores, a film series, the Angels of Light, a free bakery, the Medical Opera, and a Garbage Yoga service, from which you could order the household appliances you needed (its specialty was abandoned stoves and refrigerators). In addition, there was a free book store and a lot of individual items and services like blow jobs, piano tuning, and foot massages, offered through the ads in Kaliflower (I wonder if all the free Aquarius kittens ever got homes!). Probably the variety and quantity of free materials and activities offered during the Kaliflower years matched those offered during the Digger years—remembering that the "audiences" were different: street people in the earlier case and communal families in the later case.

We helped initiate the Free Food Conspiracy, whose member communes pooled their members' food stamps to buy food in bulk, which was then distributed to these communes according to need. In our mind it was a watershed operation because, if successful, it would have opened the road to pooling all resources and the possible buying of costly things like land in the country and houses in the city. The Free Food Family, as it later came to be called, the new name expressing homeyness and vague hopes for the future, lasted about a year. It failed because it satisfied neither those communes eager to communalize further, nor those communes unwilling to sacrifice imported cheese and health-food extravagances for a common diet. Simply put, most participating communes actually liked where they were at and felt no need to commit themselves more deeply. The Free Food Family

actually was a kind of watershed, in that it brought us to the absolute outside limit of intercommunal cooperation in 1972.

Both in 1649 and 1966, in the midst of a drastic social and religious upheaval, free was put forward as an ideal whose time had come—a way of feeding and caring for a swelling number of hungry and jobless people. But the three-year-old free of 1969 had a subtly different flavor, not only a different constituency. Among the Kaliflower communes, free was not absolutely necessary for survival (though it made life a lot easier). For us it grew into a way of expressing closeness. Nuclear family members don't usually buy and sell to each other, are in fact communistic, and we wanted nuclear family intimacy among the communes. We wanted a society of communes so unestranged that everyone felt like each other's brother or sister. This became the raison d' être of intercommunal free, and free became the communes' hallmark. So free was carried from 1969 forward, not strictly from hunger. It showed itself to be an ideal with more strings to play than one.

During the time I had edited the Chicago Review, I had slowly come to understand that my calling in life was art, and in those days—my late twenties—I took it for granted that one tried very hard to earn one's living by practicing one's calling. But in truth, only a small handful of all the artists I knew or knew of actually earned their livings by selling their art-work. I asked myself what a work of art was worth. What is a poem worth? When I edited the Review I inaugurated a policy of payment to contributors—$5, $10, $15, $25—token sums, that would, I hoped, make the recipients feel as though their work had value. But after I had written a book, and suffered the humility of seeing it treated by the publisher as a piece of meat, and after I had seen my Marshall books, each one strung with two beads, treated by a bookseller like Greenwich Village earrings, I came to the conclusion that works of art don't belong in the marketplace, being qualitatively different from pork chops and costume jewelry. They are emanations of the spirit and cannot be priced. For what price tag can be stuck on a Moby-Dick? —which has by now fed thousands of publishers, doctoral fellows, full professors, translators, grocers with book-racks, actors, and make-up persons, not to mention the spiritually hungry— as if it were the dining table of a king. When I came to San Francisco the last stone of this fence of reasoning fell into place. Let others keep an

eye on the market and dollar-up their art-work; as for me, mine was unpriceable—it was to be bestowed. Now this was not an ego trip, but a recognition that my art-work was not mine, but of a spirit seeping through me from the Great Behind. Or at times, it was less like a spirit and more like a river of fire I stumbled into, that would rush into my body, snapping up my arms and out my fingers like incandescent needles. Charge money for that? Rather rent the sky to seagulls.

The question of livelihood arises: When you give away the work you like to do, how do you earn a living?

Over the span of the industrial revolution, the phrase "earning a living" has gradually lost its meaning. If the technological complexity of our culture were suddenly whittled down to human scale—a hundredth the number of automobiles, no more skyscrapers, freeways, jet airplanes, redevelopment projects, or electric carving knives—there would be vast unemployment, because machines under electronic surveillance would be doing most of the work. (Only the lag between the growing spiral of superfluous technology and its automation keeps so many arms and legs employed.) In fact, there is a good, enlightened sentiment for abandoning the industrial revolution entirely and returning to labor-intensive production—just to keep people busy and happy. In other words, you are not really earning a living at all. You are doing meaningless work or busy-work, and you are paid for it in part to keep you from fomenting a revolution. Why not use the machines, junk the gadgets, and pay people just for being alive? That is a philosophical, perhaps aesthetic, question beyond the scope of today's lecture. The point here is that, on technological grounds, "earning a living" has lost the meaning it had to eighteenth-century farmers, bakers, millers, masons, cutlers, wainwrights, smiths, coopers, tailors, and all the rest of the artisans, which our antecedents were, in fact and in name. If earning a living is a sham, and not a righteous and honorable activity, why waste time doing it, if you can possibly survive some other way? And if you can survive some other way, why not become the skilled craftsperson you've always wanted to be, and give your wares away to whoever needs them?

Buddhists, particularly local ones, make a great fuss about right livelihood. But what does right livelihood mean in a capitalist-corporate-

multinational nexus of greed? Every aspect of our lives is tainted by excessive profit-making, real-estate speculation, stock-market manipulation, price-fixing, armament-making, hard-sell advertising, conspicuous consumption, unfair labor practices, automobile proliferation, urban "redevelopment," chemical pollution of food, air, and water, deforestation, strip mining, chicken farming, genus-cide of mammals for their skins, tusks, fur or meat—the list of et ceteras would fill a book. Even if you have become a simple craftsperson, it is impossible to rent your shop, buy raw materials, or accept payment for your products without implicitly supporting questionable businesses or business practices. Not once in my forty-seven years have I ever been asked, by some soulful shopkeeper, to provide a pedigree of the money with which I paid for something. In this society money protects, by hiding from view, any immoral activity used to gain it. If you really want to practice right livelihood, there are not many choices open to you. You can secede from society and set up an independent community with your friends, along the lines of the Farm in Tennessee (not to grant that they are totally clean either), with its own system of work and trade, or you can become an outlaw, so far as your survival income and work output are concerned, somewhat along the lines of Robin Hood. Being an outlaw means that the very method you use to gain your income and supplies, and the very method you use to give back to the world the products of your work, help subvert the economic system in force, while supplying the justice and compassion it lacks. It is not enough to subvert the economic system—a bank robber can do that—nor to tilt it in the direction of the small and human—as cottage industries and the Briarpatch Network seek to do. A small business may be excellent personal therapy for individuals trying to drop out of the rat race, but its effect on the economic order of things is dubious. There is no economic difference between a hip food store run by a former advertising executive and a straight food store run by a person who would take over Safeway if possible but lacks the know-how or capital. Multinational capitalism is merely small business grown big. All monsters look cute—and harmless—when they're kids. But without a deliberate, built-in dwarfing, kids tend to grow up. Right livelihood, down-homeness, simple living, and other such good intentions are not in themselves such a dwarfing. Free is.

Business is an addictive disease like alcoholism. Most cured alcoholics know it is better not to drink at all than to try to drink moderately. Reading the Briarpatch Review has always made me uncomfortable. It is like reading testimonials of a bunch of ex-lushes trying to convince themselves they know how to drink moderately. Or it is like reading sentimental confessions that buying and selling, supply and demand, and the whole system of money, market, and accumulation of capital are really not as bad as they've been made out to be, in fact, if you look at them the right way, they're even kind of cute.

Finally, for many of us in the arts, the guaranteed annual income has already arrived, in the form of foundation grants, CETA, CAC, NEA, or SSI—not to speak of Medi-Cal and food stamps. Some people say that artists are a special and atypical segment of society, but I believe along with Pindar(?), that "when the poets change their modes, the walls of the city tremble"—i.e. that artists are harbingers of what the rest of society will be doing presently. I remember food down to a half-box of rice on the shelf in New York—just seventeen years ago—and I am thankful for no current survival worries; and it strikes me as piggish for an artist with guaranteed subsistence to want, besides that, royalties, admission percentages, and so forth. (Every once in a while, a shiver of paranoia runs down the back of some artist I know, and he or she says, "What if our grants get cut off?" And I say, "What if they do? Then you'll go back to selling your ass, your time, or your art-work, just as you used to." "Won't we have forgotten how?" "Hunger will provide a one-day refresher course.")

Free is just as pertinent a stance as it was ten years ago. Greed and selfishness are plump and healthy, in their corporate and sleek new multinational mink coats. Of course now there are the People's Food System and other such "socialistic" enterprises—for those who like to see the "revolutionary" price of "revolutionary" Rice Krispies lit up on "revolutionary" cash registers.

How different free is from those dubious, dreary financial statements on the last page of the CoEvolution Quarterly, which purport to tell all, but which turn red or black, increase or diminish at the whim or interpretation of the editor. Why does he bother? Why does he want us to think there is really something there to

scrutinize? Can we audit his ledgers or alter his plans? (The CoEvolution Quarterly is a good example of what we may call reform capitalism. The idea is that if you seem up-front about your financial operations or set aside some of your profits for known worthy causes or set yourself up as a non-profit foundation, you are automatically absolved of responsibility for the economic system you swim so well in and support so faithfully.)

Free makes a shambles of the immutable laws of profit and loss. It makes the scoffers scratch their heads and say, "Somebody has to pay for it somewhere along the line." (The answer is, "You can sell your brand of economics back to the Harvard Business School but I wouldn't take it for free.") Free puts magic back into everyday life. It is the gratuitous act. It reminds us that humor and playful illogic are part of the human condition. Not a hundred New Games Tournaments, that the CoEvolution Quarterly could sponsor, would make up for one of its deadly, contrived financial pages. Free points out that money in our culture has become the end rather than the means, and that when you suddenly off it, people still have to get what they need from each other—where the focus should be.

Free sends a shiver down the spine of those who use the same green measuring stick to measure everything. And the idea that something may be available which they cannot buy frustrates and alarms them. As for the folksy "green energy" folk, those who conceive of money as a big cloud of potential goodness, somewhere away in outer space, moored beside psychic and nuclear, they don't know whether to consider free a friend, enemy, or another kind of energy.

Free strikes a chord in the hearts of the poor—the joy of being invited, rather than prevented, from doing something. Think of going to a movie you've always wanted to see—a good movie—and it's free—and you don't have to worry about whether you can afford it—or if you'll be caught sneaking in—and you tell all your friends—and even if you forget your wallet it won't matter—and there's no harpy standing over a donation box to make you feel guilty—in fact there's no donation box—it's really free—completely free.

Free would strike a chord in the hearts of the well-provided if they let it—the joy of "treating" everyone and showing them the same charming bourgeois manners usually reserved

for guests and relatives. "Ah, Mr. Street-person, one lump or two?"

Free gives poor people what they otherwise might not be able to afford or enjoy, and if the quality of the free work is good, teaches them what they deserve. (I cannot resist quoting Allen Ginsberg's answer to the question why he doesn't spend more of his time and energy working with humble people, the salt of the earth, rather than with college students and other middle-brow audiences: "But the salt of the earth don't need enlightenment. The most debased people need enlightenment, the matter-habit freaks of Middle Class.")

Free frees the artist from the need to trick, mock, or flatter paying customers, and so gives him or her a most dizzying freedom of expression. Free also removes any excuse to be slick, kitsch, or "professional," forcing the artist to be true. But you have to start out with a little on the ball, because if you are an out-of-touch artist turning out work that no one wants because it is bad or unclear, making it free doesn't help anything, in fact gives free a bad reputation. It is especially important for free art to be smashing, to overcome the common prejudice, that what is given away is inferior or ulteriorly motivated.

Free abolishes a lot of banking, bookkeeping, and bill-collecting, but even more important, it stunts the growth of your project and keeps it small and personal. Free is a built-in safe-guard. It keeps your project from developing a mass orientation with hundreds of employees and from accumulating profit to capitalize with; on the contrary, the more you give away, the more you lose. The more successful you are, the more you lose. So you stay small to stay open.

Free fits hand in glove with the two other best remedies for our over-industrialized culture—remedies that any citizen can practice, that you don't need a Red Army to put into effect: keeping small and keeping personal. For an artist, the three remedies together prescribe a few do's and don't's which many of us have been practicing in San Francisco for a decade quite happily. The list sounds strangely like religious advice, and perhaps that is no coincidence. Work anonymously, abstain from mass media, don't be a star, focus on your work and not on your professional identity, serve only the people you can talk to and talk to them, give up ambitions of wealth, fame, and reaching a mass audience.

For a long time I have recognized religious overtones in the work of "irreligious" artists, indeed in the work of ordinary school teachers, working people, café owners, and even officials of the Redevelopment Agency. Since it is almost universally recognized that religious instruction must be free and available freely at all levels of society (occasionally you find corrupted religious teachers fat as bedbugs, charging for their services, especially in New Age, Aquarian, holistic cults), it would seem logical for anyone whose work sends out these overtones to set it free. And even if you are unsure of yourself, and think there is only a possibility your work in the world may have a religious quality, why not give us all the benefit of the doubt and set it free?

Free may not be as ancient, hallowed, or exalted an ideal as some, but it carries its weight. It will "swell a scene" of ideals and help one get through hard times faute de mieux. In a pinch it can expand to be a project's sole ideal. I had a chuckle a year ago over a remark made by a member of a local free theater group. He said, apropos of a benefit they were thinking of giving for themselves, "Well, the world won't come to an end if we do a paid show." True, the world will keep on spinning as it always has before, but what would come to an end is this theater group, held aloft as they have been for several years now, solely by the ideal of free. An ideal for them or anyone, almost by definition, is a bit difficult to achieve, so you can expect to have problems with free. The main one is that it puts you out of step with the rest of the world, so busy tapping pocket calculators—but all good ideals do that. They put you out of step so everyone will look at what his or her own feet are doing—so don't fret, float.

It would be instructive—from a tactical point of view—to go over the list of those who oppose free the most strongly.

First of all, there are businesspersons who believe in what they're doing (happily a godawful lot don't). Argue with them if you think it will do some good, but if you want something from them —their usable garbage or a special discount— better pass yourself off as another sucking charity that vacuums up the dregs of their economic system, to keep their sidewalks clean.

Some ordinary working people are hostile to free because if they took it seriously, they would see their own lives as thrown away or worthless or themselves as fools—somewhat like the gold star mothers who supported the Vietnam War.

Then there are young entrepreneurs—hip people on the make. They have just come up from where they think you are, they know all your arguments, and it's going to be mighty hard to convince them to go back down to the floor they've just got up from. Sometimes they are as rabidly hostile as new converts. However sometimes, especially if they are dope dealers, just a mite guilty for living off the counter-culture, they may be of some help. Does anyone know how to get money out of Bill Graham?

A lot of artists who jumped on the bandwagon of free in the late sixties and early seventies, because it seemed the hippest thing to do, have abandoned it with disdain, now that it is no longer a fad—as if no principle was more important to them than being "in." Since, by making free chic, Kaliflower encouraged them to stuff their heads with it, I suppose they should be allowed to pull out the old fashions like straw and stuff in the new ones, without being made fun of—at least by us. (But it does tickle the spirit to see these mature men and women who once "loved Kaliflower" flaunting their new punk life-styles—who once wore patchouli now wearing razor blades—who once smiled mindlessly now sneering mindlessly.) As for those fleas of artists, who hop on free because they're not making it elsewhere, and hop off free at every possible gig, and argue about it besides—why don't they find some other old dog to live off and give us a break?

The word "free" has several different meanings. Some people cash in on the ambiguity and others use the word fraudulently. For example there are "free" schools and universities which charge tuition. There are "free" offers of things you must buy something else to get. There are "free" events at which "donations" are expected and practically extorted. It goes without saying that when you accept a "donation" for a "free" service, you are selling something, not giving it away.

Some counter-culture and hip non-profit groups are frightened by free. They more or less understand it and wouldn't bad-rap it, but they are cool and unhelpful; free threatens their own base of economic existence (invariably some form of petty capitalism beefed up by government subsidies direct and indirect). They put free down as ivory-tower idealism and see themselves as revolutionaries practicing economic realism (as a stage on the road to socialism). The tactic here is to make them understand that their realism is as hokey and concocted as anything the dreamers might have thought up. It is especially exasperating for them to insist that we relate to them on a pay-as-you-go basis, while at the same time they are ripping off all this free money from the government and elsewhere. Here I could list all the grant-supported dance and theater groups we have never been given free tickets to. The tactic is to persuade them that they are not the Bank of America (yet)—just a bunch of hippies groping their way through the cesspool of capitalism, that any course is bound to be filled with contradictions, and that they should strive to keep open, flexible, and generous, and that if somebody should insist on a free ride out of poverty or scruple, they should just let them get on without kvetching.

In general private foundations and government art councils are horrified by free. They are manned and womanned by gentlemen and ladies who believe in free (!) enterprise or have to look like they do. They like to think they are supplying seed money for a project to get on its feet with, and want the project's beneficiaries to support it. Truth is, the project doesn't really have to be self-supporting, just has to look like it's trying. It makes them feel better to think that a project is struggling to survive but can't quite make ends meet (without their help). They don't like parasites. That they and their families and their foundations are not self-supporting doesn't enter their minds. When applying for grants it would seem practical to play down the free aspects of your work.

Free is not the end-in-all of the universe—just a humble handy practice to set some things in it straight. It never really caught on except in Surrey and San Francisco, and for all I know may need a highly specialized environment to thrive. There are dozens of other remedies, of equal potency, for the world's various ills, and each remedy has its advantages and drawbacks. Use free where applicable. It would be a mistake to stick to it rigidly in a situation or place where it wouldn't work or be comprehended, just as it would be a mistake not to try it out, because of preconceptions about its practicality. For example, a free soup kitchen in Tangiers would probably get all the local soup kitchen proprietors upset and you busted. However a cheap soup kitchen that subtly lost money could probably fly. You can never ignore the local ecology, on the contrary, you have to know it well. You have to know what you can get away with and what strategy will be most effective, to right the wrongs you want to right.

You may decide that you have some overriding reason for addressing a (paying) mass audience—knowing you can hardly do so without debasing its cultural aspirations—for every mass address feeds the monolithic media and turns human beings into TV-magazine boobs without a real culture of their own. But nevertheless you may feel that what you have to say is of such overriding importance and must be transmitted so immediately that you are willing to turn a few more brains to mush to do it. Poet, that is a decision for you alone to make—in the company of your conscience (who is hopefully not just a stand-in for your ego). (I know that I myself have stopped reading certain poets in protest of the shoddy, disposable, machine-made quality of their books. It is a paradox of sorts, not reflecting well on the poets in question, that when they were poor and unknown, and glad to accept any publication offer, lovers of their work prepared beautiful, virtually handmade editions of their poetry [cheap, too!], but now that they are famous with a choice of publishers, those whom they have chosen make their books ugly, non-rebindable, uncomfortable to the hand, and inconsiderate of the reader.) But poet, if you do make that decision to blast away—take an afternoon off, take a walk into the sunny Mission, where avocado trees grow fifty feet tall; bring us a copy of your latest book inscribed in your own hand; make believe you wrote the whole tome just for us chickens; apologize for the garish dust jacket; let us know, while sipping a lemon phosphate made from home-carbonated well-water—while we are sipping a cup of artfully-acquired Jamaican Blue Mountain coffee—a drug we use only to write last paragraphs with—, that you are sorry not to have served the muse of free but grateful to have served a muse at all.

