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Jennifer A. Sandlin, Brian D. Schultz, Jake Burdick

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Bill Talen
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Parades, Sideways and Personal

BILL TALEN

No-one loves a parade. Not if it’s The Rose Parade or the Macy’s Day Parade anyway—they are widely loathed. No, let me rephrase that, children. Those two parades are consumed. They have become the emotional aesthetic of the media that covers them. They are commodified—they sell products only and have almost no discernible civic meaning. Just product-distraction. The smiling people gliding down the runway of public space, whether a sunny waving facsimile of a cowgirl with an eye-tuck or a balloon of Fred Flintstone, the two parades now cook the same potatoes on the same couch.

Most people around us are the victims of engineered surprise, or put it this way—Tourism. The result is starkly etched on our dazed faces: the world is no longer safe from Tourism and our neighborhoods and loved ones at home are not safe from Tourism either. Yes, if there is one thing we are sure of in our church, and we’ve said it for years—we must win The War On Tourism.

I do love a parade in which people don’t simply follow their smiles forward toward the street’s vanishing point. That’s how America ends up blithering into its colonial wars. The blind lead the blonde, the blonde lead the bland and off the cliff we go. What kind of parade do I love? I love a parade that can go sideways. I love a parade that can get personal, that causes consternation in its witnesses, and grand pronouncements and giggling—a range of responses not like a row of consumers on the curb. And so The Rose Bowl has its antidote, which is the Doo Dah Parade of Pasadena. And Macy’s in New York has the Mermaid Parade in Coney Island, and the Halloween Parade up 6th Avenue in the West Village. These counterpoints can be found everywhere in the USA. Like in Nevada, you could say that the parade of bombers testing their bombs on the desert is challenged by the Critical Tits parade at Burning Man.

I love parades that actually threaten to go sideways, like a whole church community whose wacky faith makes it possible to jaywalk together through traffic jams, talking to the motorists trapped in their bubbled radio ads. We’ve found that commuters give us the thumbs up, roll down their windows, accept information about climate change. Then off we go—snake-dancing and high-stepping like a gospel choir that got a new god…

The sideways parade. To plan such a parade, first, you must never have a permit. I refer you now to the only permit you need, the 1st Amendment, which guarantees the right of “peaceable assembly.” What follows is an E-post for a parade in New York City’s East Village, from the year 2000, which evolved into a moving Action, which went sideways with police chasing us off the parade route. At the end of our parade, we had assembled at the front doors of—and released
Reverend Billy’s Annual Permitless Parade

Sunday we’ll meet at the front of Charas-El Bohio Community Center at 9th and Avenue B at 3:00 PM and after Chino Garcia welcomes us, and the Radical Cheerleaders ROUSE us, and yes, a short sermon, we will dance our way West, led by Reclaim the Streets and The Hungry March Band, three avenues, to the Starbucks at 9th Street and Second Avenue. There we will declare a Starbucks Free Zone. This is the easternmost $bucks on the Lower East Side, and Williamsburg doesn’t have one yet.

We do insist on not entering the city’s permit process. In refusing to have this conversation with the police, we highlight THE PERMIT as a false border, a bit of fake faith. Across this border lies the world of marketized living. Retailers and the police mandate all the decisions in this world—and dare us to go to the courts and The Tombs if we have any objection. But we parade in a world that they regard as an unknown and a dangerous one: the world of our imagination, our portable community, our sex, our music.

If we are not in the market, if we refuse to define ourselves by our purchasing patterns, then we are Unknown. We must keep giving that unknown-ness its permit, children! Keep growing the unknown that surprises even us.

THE MARKET WILL CRAVE US IF WE CULTIVATE THE UNKNOWN. The market will consider us betrayers. They will send retailers, professionals, LOGO-COVERED RELATIVES, and police—with the promise of status, clear-skinned youth, getting laid or attaining that second AMERICA IN THE SKY if we buy a certain product (an offer made to us hundreds of times a day). Actually, the promise of some sort of bleached-teeth grinning happiness if we do capitulate to the market is offered simultaneously with the threat of social mockery and jail if we refuse. Law Enforcement and Consumption become the same thing at that moment.

But dance with our noise-makers beyond their horizon, children. Hello, we are from the Church of the Greater Unknown. We STOPPED SHOPPING!

So—Stop the Parade! What I mean is stop when you are laughing so hard that you can’t march. When you can’t march because you’re cuffed down on the ground. When you start cheering and cheering and cheering and that awful word cheering falls away, yes the marching has stopped and a woman stands in front of the Raven, a bookstore in Lawrence, Kansas, and when our parade put the pulpit at her front door and she pounded her fist on it and PREACHED and waved her fist at the Borders across the street—she stopped all of us. Everybody loves a parade!

—Reverend Billy