

Squatting in the Beginning

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Out of the anonymity of the city an address has appeared. At once the nameless building loses its inconspicuousness; the vacancy inside is recognized. And the decision is made. We're going to squat.

Then the heroes appear. They've already part of the other reality, to which we are still en route. They give us a hand as we cross. Their matter-of-fact D-I-Y attitude can be more closely read about in the guide, available at the squatters' consultation hour. We've been waiting for this for years.

The group, ready to step inside the shadow-reality once squatting, saw these figures appear in the form of the handymen. Every neighborhood had a few. They knew how to break open a door, install gas, water and electricity, barricade a building, what you had to say to a ranting muscleman or the lady next door, or what to do in case of club-waving flat hats. They brought out stories of unbelievably wild events from times long past. They had know-how, tools. They knew what could be done. The heroes didn't see squatting as a protest action, but taught you that a building should only be squatted for immediate use. After a few days they vanished again.

Sometimes nothing more happened after that; squatting ended in domesticity, lease, residence permit. But for the same money it could become a treacherous journey that cut straight through the curriculum vitae. Radical naivete, just do it, aggressive innocence, the future to the winds, topical indignation, not a care for the law, disbelief in their violence...Only like this could you really start exploring the space outside the existing order, whether of free will by placing yourself on the emergency phone tree, or »alarm list,« and being at the neighborhood meeting, or under pressure of circumstances: a gang of thugs sent by a property owner, court action, or a sudden en masse visit by squatters from your street.

In the middle of the city, amid the concrete shapes of the daily tedium, you stepped into a space of unlimited possibilities. The point was not to create something new, but to use the old to depart for somewhere else:

»Oscar, Wouter, Bear and I knew each other from the Stuttel Bar, where we spent the evening when we had nothing better to do. We were all looking for a place to live and squatting seemed like fun. Oscar had seen an empty house in the Spuistraat. That was nearby, so after an evening in the Stuttel we went to have a look. We looked at the corner building after I'd kicked in the door and were enthusiastic about the space. The next day we got hold of some mattresses and blankets. We slept in the building next door, which we'd also found empty when we entered this house on the roof via the window and gutter.

After further exploration over the roof, the four of us found out we had a gigantic complex at our disposal, with all kinds of weird-looking rooms where here and there the lights were still on. We intended to keep it among friends, so that you'd always meet people in the building who you knew and who had the same attitude - I mean we four thought living was something subordinate; that you have fun is much more important. We picked out the best rooms and bombarded the NRC into a general gaming den.« The former NRC Handelsblad building, now legalized, rent-paying and renovated, is still a landmark, and an empty section of it was resquatted in 1991 after sitting empty for too long.

That was the squat experience: that behind a kicked-open door an incredibly large complex could be found, with here and there »the lights still on.« Even stronger, it was the only thing the assembled squatters had in common. Squatting formed not a historical mission, but an extra-historic space with as fourth dimension the play. It offered sensory sensations. Entry into it was of a violence which could only be conjured up through a fixed series of actions.

It began with waiting for the address of an advance meeting point, the tools which were rounded up, the arrangements and instructions. The small crew which will break the building open leaves, then the rest, who feel that they stick out like sore thumbs on the way to the building. The din of a break-in with crowbar and hammer resounds through the street and puts you even more on show. Then the moment of the running, a spurt of 50 or 100 meters which, necessary or not, you always make: the door was the sucking-point through which you're pulled across the border into the other space. The violence against the door was the transgression of the law which gives life its fixed form. This primal violence came out of the fact that the door was suddenly no longer a symbolic division, but a concrete object. The daily reality and the other reality came into contact with each other in the door.

The first thing done after the squat was to repair the door, put in your own lock; a prefab cardboard renovation door was immediately replaced by its massive, solid wood predecessor. This replacement of the door was a consequence of the fact that breaking open the door was the only prosecutable action, but it was also the confirmation of the building's being put into use. The key to the new lock made the house, which initially had only been broken into, into your own home.

The door was in short not only part of a rite of passage, but also of the protection of your own existence. Even if the space to be squatted was full of drafty holes, if the window was open, the door was the magic point around which the squat proper organized itself. While the house often remained minimally furnished for weeks, the door was equipped with the most elaborate accessories, from builders' props to armorplate. Even if the building was legalized, a strict door ritual might be observed for years after. The door, which in open society was declared trash, was rediscovered, and even when squatters went breaking through walls and tearing down portals, they stayed friendly with the door. It did multifunctional service as tabletop, bed, back wall, barricade material, shield, or was put away for awhile in the meantime.

Everyone places the beginning and end of »the squat movement« somewhere else. This is because everyone stepped into the collective space at a different place. For one this happened with the breaking open of the door to his or her own flat, for the other while wandering around in the immeasurable emptinesses of the complexes which were squatted city-wide. Every squatter can point to the place where she or he personally crossed the threshold and stepped inside a collective space. Something happened which was qualitatively different from »standing up for your housing rights« or »resistance against the repression of the state,« something other too than the unleashing of the rage built up over the years over speculation and failing policy.

The space was not opened as the result of objective social circumstances. If the house got symbolic value, that happened almost by accident, in the course of the squat itself and not beforehand. It took the residents by surprise, left them wondering astonished how they could get out of it again. The longing for space can no better be explained with psychological drives; there is no reason why people who seek a community experience should exactly squat. Even as squatters sought the security of a self-designed life, it was continually disturbed by incidents from outside, from compulsory housemates to eviction notice. S/he who takes justice into her/his own hands lives as no other. But that's part of the pleasant side of the collective space; it is also an exemption from the prospect of having to lead one (ITAL.) existence of your own. How the space was left, days or years later, is mostly more diffuse: a trip to Africa, a rental house in Huizen, going off to study, a solidarity, an

overdose...Some drift further in other circuits, from Alpine meadows to cyberspace. Others just stayed. No one who has been inside the space can ever leave again; at night in your dreams you go back.

During squatting property rights were gradually forgotten, and the state monopoly on violence ignored. But simultaneously the »Western Civilized Shame« was parasitized, without anyone worrying too much about principles and ideals. »Being consistent is dead tedious.« There were materials enough; sleeping Holland was just switching over to the double waterbed with wooden frame, and the street was full of handy narrow bedsprings that could be tightly screwed into the window frame with rawls (size 7). The inner city streets were folkloristically surfaced besides, so that workmen's huts and other toolboxes were everywhere waiting to be used. Salary came from social services, telephone lines via the neighbors, energy from cut-open and later overturned electric company meters, information from the land registry and GDH archive, houses could be found everywhere, the tools streamed in via urban renewal and mail order, barricade material came from a building site, the delicatessen from the proletarian shop, liquor from behind falling glass, tiles from the doorstep, and police in case of a thug threat...The handymen taught besides that you could also just request telephone or electricity under a false name or someone else's. There was no talk of illegality; the existing rules and possibilities were just craftily used.

»Their legal order« was unable to captivate anyone much. You had »your« attorneys for that, who tried to arouse interest for their employ with slogans like »Justice is whoever can lie the best.« The squat groups became engrossed in the development of their own pro deo system. Attacks on it were paired with righteous indignation and justifiable rage: »I accuse the speculators, the city, the police and Justice all at once of: Blackmail, Swindling, Evasion of Housing Distribution Laws, Disturbing the Domestic Peace, Falsification of Documents, Attempted Manslaughter, Violation of Human Rights, Sexism, Adultery, Deception of the Public, Sedition, Undermining the Legal System, Inflicting Grave Personal Injury, the Destruction of Human Happiness, Perjury and Corruption. How dare a prosecutor subpoena us?« Your own game could flourish through a gay innocence towards the malice of the outside world. »What are they doing? They can't do that!«

Inside the space of squatting there was no talk of historical development; as it wandered it only cropped up in more and more places, to the strangest out-of-the-way corners of the city. After entry came the surprise that there were so many more people in the same place, just as crazy as you, just as radical, just as amateurish. Surprise over the cool pragmatism with which the most burning urge for action was carried out.

The space was to be found literally in and outside the »dominant system.« »The city is ours,« because it's assimilated into an inside topology with secret beacons: houses, cafes, leaders of the packs, bicycle routes, streets and bridges, symbols, signals, posters, style of dress and coiffure. The smell of clammy leather jackets and showerless houses, cat piss, plastic bags with car mirrors, ripped-loose traffic signs, meetings, demos, »manis,« advance meeting points, alarm lists and gangs of thugs, incomprehensible and long-winded phone calls, first names and alarm entry numbers. A spiderweb of back gardens, landings, coffee and drinking sessions, joints and trips, flyers, stolen books, press lists, radio and TV break-ins, helmets and clubs, breaking tiles, vans and wagon-bikes, posts and visits to the neighbors. But also the pathetic state of the TV news, of city council members and concerned critics (»They still don't understand.«). The swiftness with which you changed from student to rioter, from rioter to passerby, from passerby to brick-thrower and then braggart, nurse or lover.

It was the space of the continual metamorphosis. The forms assumed could be classic (and thus be parasitized) or different and never before seen (and thus experimental): someone who because of his »Labor Party face« managed to get inside a committee meeting went afterward to go find Breeze

blocks; today's heavy was tomorrow's super nerd. Standing there plastering, all thumbs, throw on a raincoat to go to a riot. Everyone unexpectedly turned out to be able to do or be anything, especially what or who you had never been. Your own life was made into fiction and instantly converted again into reality. You could assume any appearance without deriving an identity from it.

This was the freedom in which people who barely knew each other flung themselves into actions based on a blind mutual trust: tough, vague, friendly, disturbing, disturbed. It didn't matter that there were no plans for the middle distance; the journey counted, the expanding space of your own life rhythm - where it was going wasn't even of later concern (no future). An explosion, caused by the savory consumption of the here and now.

Historic conditions? Causes? Result? Just yell. »No one had a house and that was really mean!« Unused spaces were, through a small forgetfulness in the law, there for the using, without the owner being able to start anything with the law in hand against the anonymous users. Fortunate too was that owners and city planners, through their naive belief in property rights and authority, let their houses endlessly sit vacant, even when plenty had already been squatted: »Homes for the homeless!«

The first group, mostly students who grouped around the handymen, had originally taken a look around in leftist circles, but these turned out to speak a language you couldn't do anything with. Analyses of society, self-realization, future planning, changing the world and yourself, strategic debates, marching through institutions or lecture notes, social responsibility, conscious security, relationship discussions, ideals, big stories: it had become unbearable...

They couldn't find the energy anymore to wait any longer for the change in the other's mentality and the fruits of working on yourself. »The crisis of Marxism is not ours.« The taboo on the immediate realization of the democratized desires had created a discussion culture around emancipation and integration. University council work had become the training ground for the meeting culture in the institutions of the future. When you refused to march on any longer on this prescribed route, it was a question of logic that political business as a whole was written off. The aversion against the left, of whom something was still expected, became as great as that against the right, which you wanted nothing to do with anyway. The terms began to lose their meaning.

The handymen had another view of things. The ex-democrats among them saw from their political viewpoint the squat wave as an opposition to the vacancy law, which had to be averted or changed. That was their trip. A second group, unconscious Leninists, brought the banner down from the attic: »The worst of all are the rightists disguised as leftists. They're worse than the rest - avoid them like the plague.« That slogan too fell outside the space experience of the fresh squatters; every political current was, when push came to shove, part of »their« parliamentary democracy. Making social conflicts manageable wasn't our problem. No one dreamed of revolution or strove for the general good. One's own housing problem was much simpler to solve.

The term »politics« had been denied its monopoly on the public sphere by feminist criticism and since then penetrated to the most intimate places. Everything quickly became political and the word thereby lost its action-inspiring charm. The squat contribution to the waning political culture limited itself to screaming, smoke bombs, stolen documents and scale models set ablaze. The »primacy of politics« would be replaced by the robust term »power,« but by that time the squatters had already abandoned the intellectual atmosphere in order to explore, in place of French theory, their own space.

The idea of politics as goal-oriented action, as feasibility research, was also held at a distance. Social opponents were not addressed; there was no realistic ideal over which to negotiate. »Parking garages = war.« This anarchism born of practice fused with that narcissism that belongs to everyone who takes a place that cannot be found inside society. Without realizing it, the inalienable right to one's own local

experience was discovered. This anarchism, a combination of rage, self-pity and being right («They can tear down our house, but not our ideals») turned out to be the fuel with which local space travel could be driven.

Squatting's appeal was that it offered no alternative, no view of a better world that had to legitimize and argue itself. No one spoke for anyone. »We won't leave« was not a demand but an announcement. No consensus, no compromise, no discussion. Anyone could step into the noncommittal atmosphere to do their thing. You lived amid the remnants and ruins of an order that had become alien in one fell swoop. It was no accident that preference went to ramshackle houses, scrap autos, war-era leather jackets, furniture found on the street. Everything that had been cast off and thus ended up outside the traffic of society existed, as it were, by definition in the »outside system« to which the squats granted shelter. And everything which defined itself within respectable efficiency stood outside it.

No one thought in strategies, principles. Abstract theoretical terms were taboo. The ideas were not words but things: steel planking, rocks, actions. »They« were thought of in terms of interiors to dismantle, destroyable riot vans, outposts and whatever else came along. There was also no ideology. The question was how?(ITAL) and never why?(ITAL) »We've begun already to live how it's good, and let their laws disturb us as little as possible. And we fight against injustice. And that(ITAL) they don't like! It's okay to talk in the meantime. But living by the old Dutch saying, "Not words but deeds!" isn't allowed.«

It all had an expressionlessness that worked well with the neighbors. The need to tell the world what it was all about for you was not felt. This silence concealed no secret, there were no spokespeople, simply because there was nothing to state. It was limited to a flyer for the neighbors containing some hard info about the speculator and an invitation to come drink a cup of coffee. No paper culture, in which insiders' discussions were held, historic roots exposed and nice stories collected, took off. The experience was too fragile to capture in a consistent argument.

The land registry, the Chamber of Commerce, the files on the neighbors and the municipal archive were worked through to dig up the history of the building. There were always connections with mala fide real estate agents, dubious mortgage banks, martial arts academies, empty corporations, post office boxes on Aruba, underhanded arrangements with the city, laundered heroin money, weapons traffic. These were described in detail in the neighborhood papers and exercised a great fascination on squatters, while outsiders usually couldn't make heads or tails of it. The disconcerting stories the neighbors told about pre-war rent strikers, people in hiding during the war, divorces, cases of suicide and isolation, cults and illegal pensions remained reserved for internal use. The building became a case where the blues of oral history converged with globe-spanning conspiracies, adding a nice touch to the adventure you'd ended up smack in the middle of.

The space that was hereby created was the space of the experiment. Since unity had already been unmasked as a dictatorial conference trick for ironing over differences, the unity that was experienced during the action gained the mystical explosiveness of spontaneity. It was brought about with little trouble, but was observed with surprise or taken for granted. If the phenomenon appeared, if the meeting with the space-mates came into being, the experiment had been successful.

Prerequisite for any meeting is the distance between the individuals. Those who are permanently close to each other never run into each other. A secret rule for the organization of squatting was this absence of unity and identity, or even of regular contact. The different squat groups were at a distance from each other in their own neighborhood; squats were universes where the residents did what they felt like, without landlord, neighbors or fellow squatters having anything to say about it. You had geranium owners, teachers, dykes, »vague-os«, art-makers, punx, English, Zealanders, people from

IJmuiden. There was a collected mess of neighborhood groups who organised themselves at their own discretion depending on the characteristics of the developed area. It wasn't the vacancy that produced squatting; the vacancy only became visible if you looked at it, and then you discovered more and more of it, a habit you can never again break, just like fleetingly peeking into dumpsters full of household articles or building material. It was pure chance which neighborhood you ended up in; after the squat it was inconceivable how a building could have stood vacant for five years. Why no one had plunged into this adventure before now remained a mystery. Some neighborhoods were never squatted; it would be years before anyone hit on the idea to move into factories in the harbor district.

As far as an identity came into being, it developed apace, contingent on the interaction with the constructed surroundings. Breaking open a boarded-up block slated for demolition for a cooperative leads to a completely different squat group than the appropriation of majestic houses in an elegant area, or squatting second-rate condominiums one by one. Peaceful living on a street where rarely a riot police clearance happened led to unheard-of heavy or chaotic behavior at city-wide actions, but just as easily to total disinterest in them. Residents of beautiful canal houses were sometimes sooner inclined to negotiate with city officials than those who were camping in sagging jerry-rigs, but the reverse could just as well happen: being aware that you stood to lose a lot led then to a fundamental attitude. Characteristic was that someone who was nicely at home in one neighborhood was promptly way off target at neighborhood meetings elsewhere.

Inside differences between neighborhoods were stimulating so long as the unfamiliarity with each other was taken into account. If your own neighborhood was no longer invigorating, you could always move to another one and cross over from one identity to the other. Many a squat neighborhood arose besides when infighting in one of the disorganised squats in one neighborhood forced a number of residents to go live a street further. Precisely that distance between the insiders made it possible to drag out the craziest things in confrontations. Motivation and discipline are not necessary if no one asks you what business you have somewhere. As long as you don't know each other you may and can be anything. Anonymity among insiders prevents the forming of rigid scenes and social control. Everyone is welcome who knows the code. That code consisted not of a secret password but a certain sort of casualness. A recognition which opened doors that for others stayed shut. Reporters who offered speed as entrance fee were requested to come back with gold. But if you rang the bell of a heavily barricaded building and quickly said hello, you were let in right away. At action meetings you said which neighborhood you came from and then it was okay. There was no fear of spies. A group can protect its secret, and at the same time grow by leaps and bounds, by shaping its own normality which is open to everyone but leaves those with the wrong normality mercilessly out in the cold.

The big events which squatting was always equated with played themselves out at a remarkable distance from the individual squatters and neighborhoods. In squat space two levels could be distinguished: that of the neighborhood you yourself had ended up in through squatting, and alongside that, the city-wide level, which was where you ended up when squatting a large building or during a heavy riot, a mass outburst of hate or rage against the riot police as a symbol of the whole collection of authority figures. Someone who rioted along with the rest one morning could afterwards simply remain an office manager, just as squatting did not have to lead to losing yourself in shared space: it could always end afterwards. But it could also be an initiation into space travel, provided that afterward a material, less fleeting basis for crossing the border was found in the form of phone alarm list or squatted house. The other way around, the city-wide riots all too often meant departure from your own neighborhood, or even its complete disintegration. Adventurous exploration in squat space was then advanced on a city-wide scale or further left for what it was. The organization of the city-wide spectacles had to be set up incident-by-incident and was determined by the location of the building and the characteristics of the shell. The production was in the hands of the »individual residents,« and whoever happened to come along. The performance itself could then be

spontaneously taken over by the police, passersby or whoever else responded to the alarm. Squat space at its most expansive transformed the city into a circus, with bumbling cops, smoke production, running fires, scanner reports over the radio, tailings, drawn pistols, contagious skirmishes, boarded-up shop windows, broken-up streets and overturned site huts. Post-production facilities, like the arrestee support group, were courtesy of the city. From beginning to end the spectacle in no way resembled your own street. If you went after the riot in the city to squat a flat in your own neighborhood and the neighbors griped about »that senseless destruction,« the answer was that you had nothing to do with it, even if you'd been going around smashing in windowpanes for hours and brought back the model airplane from a travel agency as a trophy.

Such a pronouncement had a high truth content: you are where you are. Self-awareness was connected to the place where you found yourself, instead of to your »own« identity or the image the outside world has of you. The responsibility for your own actions was not derivative in the »change the world, begin with yourself« style; »think globally, act locally« does not do justice to the uniqueness of the events that are happening specifically to you in this place. The only necessary alertness consists, when you happen to be present in the place where something is about to happen, of your actually doing it, whether it's a frontal attack on the riot police, the freeing of arrestees or a conversation with passersby. This is not heroism or action of the will; you're only tuning in to the event and the place, in order to become part of squat space. That also determined the character of the legends that were told afterwards; it was not machismo which underlay this, but surprise that it had been us who had gone through this. That caused the chatter. »Did you expect this?«

The vacancy that housing seekers said they were fighting against was cherished by no one more than squatters. Squatters were artists because they moved into the empty space to play in it and on no account to »furnish« it. They transformed their own house into the rectum of the welfare state. As if by itself the house accumulated a collection of uncertain objects to which asylum was given. The house turned out to be a magnet for objects, where things were valued for their peculiarity, instead of being consumed. When it was squatted the house first had to be emptied, so it could then be propped full of junk that you found on the street yourself. Wooden ironing boards, ovens, sinks, a car door, flasher lights, bedsprings, fluorescent tube lights, mannequins, collapsed couches, bicycle halves, chests, amputated furniture, cabinets, TV sets, depth gauges, iron buckets, a leaden elevator motor...On the way to the squat collection was already in progress, because »the more junk, the less easily there can be a clearance.«

The rubbish was not recycled out of thriftiness, but for an indefinite time afforded peace outside social circulation, after which it was given back to the street. Since the things did not impose on anyone to be used, they posed no threat to the present emptiness. Just like the residents, they had, released from every social usefulness, enough in themselves. Insofar as there was talk here of culture, it was one of non-aesthetics. There was no urge to package oneself for display. Gray, disarming, uninteresting, not out for expression, difference or transmission of group codes, uninterested too, vacant, without fantasy, vague, inoffensive, asexual, hardly attractive: »People with taste must be able to appreciate this.« The company logo missed any clear line, had gone beyond the boundary inside which things can still be found pretty or ugly. The squatters' symbol of the circle and the broken arrow aimed at an upward slant possessed too that sloppy meaninglessness. It missed the transparency of pictogram language and derived its mystery from that.

The classic ideals attributed to rebellious youth, from angry young to clean-cut and cheerful, serious but fun, glanced off this unperceived, reassuring superficiality. They succeeded in shirking the obligation to conquer the world, or even to start up a subculture. This low culture profile with its simultaneous high action level guaranteed a perfect unfamiliarity with tradition, including your own. The mechanism which produces culture from a break with what came before, which people are

supposed to forcefully shun, could be avoided like this. Cultural consumption limited itself to borrowed arts like punk, new wave, political street theater and commotions. Artists in a squat always meant trouble. The expression of the I is difficult to combine with topical living.

Once squatting you found yourself confronted with the palette of nuances that the preceding decades had contributed to the state of the house. Not only the ten layers of paint, the three ceilings, the slabs of plastic foam, scrap iron and the cork on the mantelpiece, the whole miasma of stuffiness and failure pervaded the buildings. In the case that it was missing, on entry into offices and freshly produced luxury apartments, this was a sign of evil that was exorcised by immediately turning it into a dump. This was the end of the line for the buildings. Once sucked up by the vacuum behind the front door you landed in a time gap left behind by the history of the premises. The back-owed state you found the rooms in provided the building blocks for the new palace. Our squatters knew an ironic relationship with comfort. The semi-permanent rehousing of the doomed flesh brought a total package of temporary provisions along with it. Garden or fire hoses as water pipes, electrical wires hanging above the street, gas heaters with sagging lids, blankets acting as a door, a wooden framework under the sink...»Squatters are renovating the city here too.«

In this encampment the garbage question was permanent. Because the rigid functionality of the house blueprint had been abandoned, a state of continual rebuilding could establish itself. This metamorphosis of the space was further fostered when half the building was emptied in preparation for the house party, in order to be filled by nocturnal events. The open house, packed full of uninvited visitors, presented itself as general rehearsal for a threatening eviction, or a celebration if the threat was averted. Excessive consumption of beers and joints, combined with noisy dramas, a whining wall of sound, little scuffles, exhausted dogs, guaranteed that by about one o'clock the police would reunite the partygoers in the street. The whole route from garbage heap to lifestyle residence and back could thus be covered in 24 hours. The lines of building up the house and letting it go to pot crossed at the least excuse. The delightful transience of existence was ecstatically lived out with the clumsiness of the year zero.

The right to housing by which squatters legitimized themselves was their answer to the emptiness's invitation to move in. The emptiness opened itself as the field of tension between action and shiftlessness. It was alternately gaming den, exit base or breeding ground for the refusal to function in society. Until it suddenly found itself smack in the middle of history. There was violence in the air. The broken-open emptiness had to be protected again with barricade material. The house was becoming a growing collection of objects, acquaintances, phone numbers, addresses, the neighborhood an unsurveyable network of cafes, community centers, contacts with building workers, city-wide meetings, and the city an impenetrable tangle of actions, research collectives, press contacts, purchase groups, and sudden phone alarms. Time after time prehistory is surprised by spectacular events.