

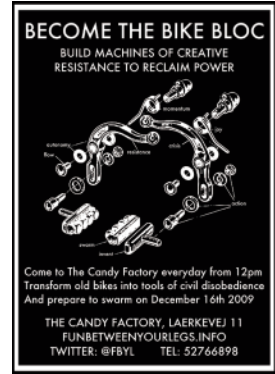
Bike Bloc Stories

The following are based on notes I took at the last debrief meeting of the Bike Bloc at The Candy Factory (BolsheFabriken) in Copenhagen. The Bike Bloc was an experiment put together by the Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination from the UK, with the Camp for Climate Action,¹ which aimed to draw on our own creativity and the history of the many forms of creative politics, from the Dutch Provos to Ya Basta, in order to engineer a new tool and practice of civil disobedience for the day of Climate Justice Action (CJA) at the COP15 Climate summit on 16th December 2009.² We'd use Copenhagen's most plentiful and recyclable resource, discarded bikes, and reverse engineer them into machines of creative resistance.

¹ See <http://www.labofii.net> and <http://www.climatecamp.org.uk>

² See the short video we made here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xZtUTk6Iz2E>

A large collective of bike hackers, welders, artists, activists, designers, mechanics, and general enthusiasts began working together for a week in Bristol, England and another week in Copenhagen to make this happen. The plan which came together was to have three parts.



1 The Swarm: a mass of bikes each with its own set of modular, activist modifications, working together to develop group dynamics and tactics that gave us new ways of thinking and moving so that we could work together a swarm, moving together like a flock or shoal.

2 The Double-Double Troubles (DDTs): These were two tall-bikes with bike frames welded sideways between them to form a high platform. Less mobile, but able to carry people, food and drink, sound systems, compost toilets, video cameras, projectors or whatever else would facilitate a protest.

3 The Machine: a super-secret mega-construction, lurking in a shipping container somewhere outside the city, which would keep the press and cops

Above: Poster for the Bike Bloc, 2009

3 For a video of the launch in Bristol, see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7iJUiPBtdgs>

guessing.³ It had already been rumoured in the media to be a siege tower, or a crane made of bikes that would lift protestors over fences.

After two weeks of extraordinary hard work, inventiveness, and cooperation, we were just about ready.⁴ However, the day before, the police raided the building. After pushing everyone out of the building, they took away the DDTs, leaving us with only the Swarm and the Machine.

On the day, it snowed heavily in the morning, and the march on the Bella Centre took three paths. A main march, the Blue Bloc, had been given permission to march towards the Bella Centre, where it intended to hold a peoples' assembly; the Green Bloc was an autonomous group which intended to take various routes towards the Centre outflanking the police; the Bike Bloc, meanwhile, would in various ways facilitate the CJA objective to non-violently flow over and through any obstacle in order to establish a people's summit. Each story is divided, roughly, by the names of the different flocks of affinity groups that made up the swarm.

⁴ Another video detailing our collective work in Copenhagen: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YqOmGZ7IzzE>

The Sound Swarm

We arrived late at our meeting point in a park, as the bikes proved a little slow and heavy with the sound equipment and we were stopped and searched (but let go) as we tried to cross all the bridges on the way. The idea of the Bike Bloc was that five bikes were each fitted with speakers made from loudhailers welded onto high poles fixed to the bike frames. These were, in turn, wired to MP3 players so that we could play a directional, five-part sound composition as we cycled as part of a bloc of fifteen bikes overall. The idea was for the sound to move around and amongst a crowd, something more mobile than a marching band and more improvisational than a sound system.

We had a report that the Blue Bloc had arrived near the Bella Centre and was being attacked by the police. We decided to try and divert as much of the police's resources from this as we could by swarming onto the motorway North of the Bella Centre. Hiding from the rain and snow in an underpass, we began blaring a cinematic, imperial-sounding marching band charge, and pedalled up onto the motorway in formation. After a little while, pedalling along, laughing at ourselves, feeling equal parts exhilarated, triumphant, and really quite ridiculous, police vans appeared, skidding on the ice, and blocked the way ahead. So we hopped over the reservation and carried on, on the wrong side. More vans appeared and slid more or less into place, doing a very good job of blocking the entire motorway in both directions for us. The track changed to an intense composition of angry jungle noises and animal calls, directed at high



volume at the police. Cords were pulled and officers accosted us. We were searched, but not arrested – apparently, bikes seemed more hassle than they were worth. At this point, as we were being led away from the scene, someone sneakily plugged their MP3 player back in, and a hip hop backbeat started up under a heavy female Bronx accent, “YOU CAN ARREST US IF YOU LIKE! OUR PIMPS WILL BAIL US OUT!” The crowd of cops tried not to look amused while the detaining officers scrambled for the off switch. Attempting to rejoin the Blue Bloc, we were herded away from the Bella Centre by the police, and responded by weaving into the crowd, which soon began emitting the noise of bleating sheep and braying cattle from various quarters as the police moved it along.

Chimps

We had an intricate assembly plan, which included disguising as commuters to get through outer police lines, passing friends with a nod and wink on the way, while quietly passing the occasional shop with slightly too many bikes outside it, even for Copenhagen. But even then



the area we'd picked to meet turned out to be swarming with cops. A cat and mouse chase between bikes and police vans ensued. We'd get stopped and searched, during which one of us was forced to spend quite some time explaining to an officer some notes in his pocket on Foucault and the concept of discipline.

Alternately attracting and escaping the cops led us on a kind of bike ride around parts of the city you don't get to see when you stick to roads or cycle paths. The first time, we escaped into a construction site, the second, we went onto a golf course, where the vans wouldn't follow us, and horse-mounted police were called in to chase us around – we discovered horses might discipline a crowd quite well, but bikes could easily outmanoeuvre them in open space. In getting away, we realised we'd strayed onto a shooting range at one point. Finally, back on the road and with fifteen vans in the area, some of the group decided the game was up and put the bikes together to make an impromptu barricade across the road to the West of the Blue Bloc, stopping police reinforcements arriving there. Another part of the group joined another swarm

Above: The Bike Bloc, courtesy of Robert Logan

and a coalition of foot mobiles and occupied two riot vans and a helicopter, holding one of the vans in its tracks by cycling in a circle formation around it.

Boris

More people than we expected turned up, with a group of sixteen bikes. At search stops, it was hard to explain the big plastic tubes on the bikes, though we tried everything from “We’re a work of art, you Philistine,” to “Yes officer, they’re rocket launchers.” These tubes helped bring parts of an bridge (made of inflatable mattresses tied together) which was laid across the moat around the Bella Centre. Some of us climbed onto it to get across. Crawling across to the last one, the air leaking out under my knees and the bridge slowly sinking into the freezing water, I looked to the police officer facing me on the other side, and his snarling dog. “Look, I’ll come onto the land, I won’t resist, and you can arrest me.” The cop shook his head, “You come on land, I set dog on you.” I tried again: “Let’s be gentlemen about this, you can arrest me. That’s your job.” “I’m going to set the dog on you.” We had a stand off, and I was caught between the dog and the deep grey moat. A friend sidled up to me from behind and offered encouragement. We were going to have to do this and we were going to have to be fast. So we pulled out our last secret weapon: the sausage belt. I ran onto the land throwing frankfurters to the dogs, who found them much more exciting than a soggy activist, and the police officer was left to arrest me with all the force he could get away with using. We were lined up in rows, hands cable-tied behind our backs, and put in the cage, the

makeshift open-air prison built in a hanger especially for the occasion. But what happened there is another story.

Food Swarm

We'd decided on facilitating the blue march in other practical ways, and the night before, we'd skipped bags of fruit, nuts and pastries and loaded them into crates fixed to our bikes. We drew a lot of searches from the police, but on joining the Blue Bloc we weren't allowed in and had to shout to the people on the other side of the police line, and throw fruit and Danish pastries over the heads of the police into the crowd. This actually proved pretty entertaining in itself for both sides and kept everyone's spirits up, but soon we worked our way in and could hand out nuts and dried fruit to people personally. We then joined the Blue Bloc for the push into the Bella Centre.

Scoobies / Bees Knees

We met up late, hanging around scrubland waiting for the Blue Bloc. We heard the Green Bloc had mostly been mass arrested and hadn't made it far. Another Bloc ran into us and we persuaded them to join us. We saw police vans coming West along the road North of the Bella Centre and took up positions in front of them, cycling very slowly, and held them up, only to find we'd attracted lots of press in front of *us* who were slowing things down even more. Another van arrived as backup and they got out to pull us off our bikes, so we cycled fast through the lines of press and escaped, leaving them to carry on our blockade. We blocked more vans to give the inflatable bridge time to be



assembled, and then did the domino effect—our name for the dropping a row of tangled bicycles as blockade. We discovered this wasn't the best tactic as a strong six foot something Danish cop could pretty easily throw the whole thing out of the way. However, we'd thrown one bike under a van, which drove over it, only to break down with a damaged engine, so cops were now carefully picking bikes from under vans if we slid them under. It took time to remove them, at which point someone else would throw a fresh one in front of the van. It'd either stop the van, or you'd get a working bike back, so it was a win-win situation... Either way, people then used their bodies to block the advance of the vans in traditional, direct action ways. At this point, we worked out that the swarm's emergent intelligence had blocked positions on the same close network of roads within 45 minutes of each other, and with reports back from the Blue Bloc, we calculated we'd already halved the police presence at the march. At one point, we had sixty bikes together blocking an entire motorway and its central reservation.

Frogs and Locusts

We found we could speed through motorbike blockades, as their only way of stopping you was to knock you off at high speed. Luckily for us, they decided was too dangerous or legally questionable to try. At one point we found ourselves being chased by a riot van, and as we turned down a street, we realised we were cycling down a dead end. The road was blocked off! We didn't want to stop and get caught, so we just kept cycling towards the end of the street, looking sideways at each other wonder-

Above: The Bloc swarms, courtesy of Robert Logan

ing what to do now, and starting to panic a little bit with the van closing up behind us. But as we got closer, we realised the street was only actually blocked with a series of huge stone bollards. On bikes, we swarmed right around and between them as the riot van screeched to a halt behind us. Another time, while being chased by a van, we just skidded and turned around to go back where we came. Too big to turn, the van stopped and the cops got out and tried just running after us! Later, on the motorway, the van got beside us as we were cycling, the side door opened and a cop tried to lunge out and grab us off our bikes as we were moving, like a cowboy trying to catch a wild horse. About then, we started to suspect that maybe they were having almost as much fun as we were. One of the Bike Bloc got through the police patrolling the forbidden zone, to the Bella Centre itself, and decided to drop his bike and make a run for it, sprinting across the grounds for the doors before he was tackled by several police officers in front of a crowd of delegates. Most of the rest of us had suicided our bikes and, leaving the Blue Bloc, we met a guy with a circular conference-bike. So we sat with him and rode back to town, only to be stopped when we got there by a crowd of journalists, who asked us, "Wait, please, tell us, is *THIS* the machine?"

Unbeknown to us, *inside* the Bella Centre plans had been found, somehow left on a desk in an empty office, which displayed technical designs for a twenty foot high tall bike adorned with flags and loudspeakers...