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## ZOMBI MANIFESTO

“The zombie is kind of unglamorous, as far as characters from cinema go. Bereft of consciousness, personality and ambition, the zombie is more of a tragic anti-hero; a repulsive parody on the ideal citizen, with no other connection to lived experience than the automatic repetitions of old socialization routines.

Yet in all its dogged determination to go after the living, one cannot help but feel sympathy for this marauding sleepwalker. Considering we live in a society where the meaning of 'freedom' is as elusive as quicksilver, it is not difficult to see the undead as a reincarnation of the old court jester, albeit in gory state of decay, holding up a mirror to our sense of humanity and citizenship.

How empowering it must feel, therefore, to walk in its shoes. To reject all meaning and purpose of life, to stop running and start lurching, moaning and gesticulating clumsily. To stumble through the comatose suburbs and haunt its shopping malls, embracing the consumerist promise of individual liberation.

If you have ever pinched yourself to see if you would wake up from this mundane dream called life, know then that you are not alone! Join us in a melancholic revolution without leaders, and sense of direction. Join us, as we take to the streets, and march towards a new dawn.”

**Stay inside. Close windows and doors.**

The above communiqué was issued in the days leading up to 19 April 2008 in Overvecht, a grey suburbs of high-rise buildings in Utrecht, the Netherlands. A few months later, again, but this time in Barakaldo, a satellite town in the metropolitan area of Bilbao in Basque Country. Both times, this sardonic 'call to arms' was all it took to summon up a crowd of people to voluntarily subject

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themselves to an elaborate collective fantasy, in the framework of the art project 'Stay inside. Close windows and doors.'

After what could be called an extreme makeover session, in which the participants turned themselves into the resemblances of rotting and bloodied corpses, they joined each other in a sinister yet merry parade that meandered through the neighbourhood. Onlookers stood in amazement as this unseemly mob of zombies lurched its way to the local shopping mall, where it proceeded to invade the shops and mingle with the startled customers.

What was the purpose of these collective manifestations of nonsense? Was their implicit and ambiguous criticism of consumer society some kind of vindication of the critical potential of the citizen? Or did the willingness of the public to submit themselves to a rather undignified pursuit of the trivial and the profane suggest the opposite?

Rem Koolhaas once said that "Shopping is perhaps the last remaining form of public activity". It's a somewhat dismissive verdict of the contemporary citizen, that certainly seems to ring true in the suburbs of our cities, where daily life has all but withdrawn behind the curtains of the private home. The only remaining site for the congregation of its inhabitants as a community appears to be in the shopping mall, where they take part in a ritual that unites us all: consumption, that complex ceremony in which need and desire are linked to lifestyle and brand identity.

In a sense, these indoor plazas are taking over the role of the public square as a point of encounter, simulating the liveliness of the traditional city centres. The atmosphere is pleasant and 'hanging around' is stimulated. However, it is also only tolerated for as long as it complies with the doctrine of consumption. Everything inside the space of the shopping mall is planned and preconceived, and any appropriation or adaptation of that space by passers-by is both unwanted and prohibited. One can't just sit on the ground, and holding a protest inside is absolutely out of the question. The mall does not belong to its public, and their presence is strictly regulated, supervised and under control.

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What started out as a surrogate for the city centre, is becoming globally ubiquitous. Not just because all shopping malls are alike, or because there are so many of them, but because it has turned into a model for the organization of other spaces. Publicly accessible areas such as train stations, airports or the entrances of large hospital complexes are progressively being privatized and commercially exploited, in answer to decreasing public expenditure. Even the original 'authentic' city centres are being remodelled according to the values of the mall: cleaned up and made safe, they retain only those quaint elements that reinforce the city's Brand Identity, in a scenery that is dominated by the logos of H&M, Zara and McDonald's.

The shopping mall is a caricature of the Greek agora, the classical space of democracy. It surrounds the citizens with an illusion of freedom of choice, while discouraging unpredictable behaviour, effectively turning them into passive consumers of their environment. Nevertheless, as other open and multifunctional spaces in the modern city are becoming obsolete, it may be the only site where public assembly still has a latent political significance.

In this context, the zombiewalk should be seen as an experiment in challenging the status quo, turning the mall into a conflict zone, an arena on which, for once, a different scenario is played out. As a form of direct action, it takes its cue from the 'happenings' organised in the Netherlands in the sixties by the Provo's, an anti-authoritarian movement that staged outrageous pranks to awaken society from social and political indifference. These playful 'happenings' fused artistic performance and political protest, using elements of parody and humour, such as the use of blank banners in reaction to a prohibition on inflammatory texts in demonstrations.

But the zombiewalk is also indebted to the practice of 'psychogeography', a term applied to a wide range of strategies for exploring the city in innovative and unpredictable ways, in order to bring about a new awareness of the urban landscape. A notable example of this is the 'dérive', a deliberately aimless wandering through the streets, guided only by coincidence and subjective impulses. Introduced by the Situationists, another group of artistic and political agitators from the

sixties, it has been articulated as a subversive response to the urban planning and functionalism of bureaucrats and entrepreneurs.

There is a fine line, however, between taking from the system, and being taken in by it. A few months after the zombiewalks in Overvecht and Barakaldo, there was another one in Sitges, organised by the fashion brand Eastpak. It effectively illustrates how potentially subversive narratives can be neutralized by their incorporation into a blatant celebration of a sponsor's brand identity. The Situationists in their time had already witnessed how ironic diversions of meaning could be turned back on themselves. They called it 'recuperation', the process by which radical ideas and images are turned into commodities and internalised by mainstream society.

But the complicity of counter-cultural initiatives with the prevailing social order goes beyond their vulnerability to recuperation. The *dérive*, for instance, is not unrelated to the tradition established by the *flâneur*, the “gentleman stroller of the streets” who emerged from the Parisian arcades of the 19th century. These arcades, narrow passageways lined with retail shops and covered with arching glass roofs, can be considered the conceptual predecessors of the department stores, and later, the indoor shopping mall. It would be fair to suggest, therefore, that today's stupefied window shopper and the disaffected 'psychogeographer' have descended from the same historical figure.

Any effort to challenge the definition of public space as provided by the shopping mall, should acknowledge that we are all implicated in its construction. Indeed, it may be one of the few remaining sites where daily experience and the abstract inner workings of modern society intersect. The aim, then, is not necessarily to abolish the mall, but to reinvent it as a testing ground for alternative interpretations of the role of the 'public'.

The parade of zombies through the shopping malls of Overvecht and Barakaldo could be seen as an ironic commentary on the deadly routine of shopping. But irony implies a kind of detachment from daily life, perpetuating the state of affairs by providing an alibi for conformism. To truly resurrect the *flâneur* as a figure of opposition to the alienating effects of consumer society, the zombiewalks

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depend instead on a total collapse of ironic distance. That is to say, they depend on the wholehearted and uninhibited surrender of their participants to the pleasure of the role-play itself.

In other words, 'Stay Inside. Close windows and doors.' is a seditious invitation to come out and play. Obscene, vulgar and free from moral constraints, the flâneur-zombie is a modern Jekyll and Hyde, a reminder that what ultimately separates the window shopper from the commodities on display is not glass, nor money, but social conditioning.