

Editor's Introduction to the Final Issue of Inside Front

2000

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Confession and declaration of war

I am a wild animal.

No, I don't feel comfortable paying for food. It makes my skin crawl, my stomach clench up — it seems like a really alien, superstitious thing to do. It makes much more sense to me to hunt for it, to find it in dumpsters or free bins or take it by force or stealth from the ones who don't care about my welfare. I can't imagine signing a contract and paying rent to one of them, pretending I think that's a sensible way for people to interact; I would much rather travel constantly, or sleep on the couch where my friends have established a collective space, contributing what I can... or sleep on benches and rooftops, if it comes down to that. I can't sit still or act fake long enough to work at one of their jobs when there's so much out here in the real world to do. I can't lie to myself enough anymore to lie to anyone else by participating in the farce that is polite society under capitalism. What they call delayed gratification looks to me more like gratification abandoned.

I am a spoiled child.

I would rather starve to death, freeze to death, end lonely and incomprehensible to everyone than change myself. I know what I am is inconvenient for everyone, and frustrating, too, since I'm doing what many people would like to but feel they cannot; but there's nothing anyone can say that will persuade me I'm wrong in any way that matters. People talk at me about adapting, being reasonable, realistic, but none of it seems reasonable to me. I think that what I am and what I want is beautiful in a world that sorely needs beauty. I'm not crazy for wanting every moment to be wild and right and fair and honest. I won't let anyone tell me I need to stop listening to my heart. Even at my blackest moments, when it seems like I really have been abandoned by everyone and everything and I have jettisoned myself from the cosmos for no explicable reason, I would simply rather perish than compromise. Whether this is a good thing or not, it's how I feel and I won't back down.

I am a human being.

When I see people cleaning tables at restaurants or bellboys carrying heavy bags, my first impulse is to help them: my instincts, laziness aside, are to assume that what they're doing is of value to humanity and that they deserve assistance — even if they're really doing senseless paid make work, and it's "not my job" so I shouldn't worry about it. It's not easy for me to suspend my compassion when I meet homeless people or others in need. I even have a difficult time remembering that when a solicitor or a police officer talks to me, I can't trust them to respect my needs or have my best interest in mind — they do *seem* like human beings, after all, at least when the pigs aren't dressed in their star wars costumes. I can't make excuses or joke smugly about exploited labor, people being bombed or beaten or starved to death or raped, animals in slaughterhouses. I can't put my humanity on hold like everyone else seems to have learned to.

I am an experiment.

I know I can't survive too long in this world the way it is. If I am to live another twenty six years, I will have to evolve — devolve, that is, which I have sworn not to do — or else the world will have to. I have everything at stake in transforming this place... and so do you, unless you think that people like me deserve to die, unless you're ready to excise everything in yourself that resembles me.

Disclaimer for the hypercritical

I think in the seven year history of this 'zine, one of our greatest contributions to the hardcore community has been our emphasis on the subject of lifestyle: that how you eat, what you wear, where you live, how you spend the typical days of your life is more important than what you do on Friday night, or what musical taste or ideology you subscribe to. Of course, there have been people who have misunderstood our attempts to open up new possibilities to others by taking an extreme position for ourselves ("never work ever") as an attempt to legislate what is right for everyone else, who thought

we believed that we had the “one true way” that every cliquish, infighting radical group claims to have. That was never our intention. There is no one right way to revolution (or making the world a better place or what ever you want to call it), and there’s no best way to live in its service. We *all* have our roles in this society, which separate us from our potential allies and divert our energies into role-playing; the question is not which role to choose (professor, outlaw radical, etc.), but how to *subvert* your role in order to create volatile situations in which new, unpredictable, . wonderful things can happen.

That being the case, the only remaining question is which lifestyle would be the most personally fulfilling for you, and there are some great reasons to try the one we’ve embraced, I assure you. People always become defensive (myself included) when somebody is doing something they feel drawn to but have feared to try; nobody wants to admit that they’re not already doing what they want, or that someone else has a good idea they didn’t have. As for the questions of whether my lifestyle is responsible (“but when you’re sleeping on the couch somewhere, doesn’t somebody else have to pay the rent?”) or sustainable (“do you really think you can do this for the next thirty years?”)... it’s important to remember that everything is a compromise until the whole world changes, whether you’re depending on a little help from your friends who have different resources or participating in the economy of exploitation and destruction. To look for a “sustainable” life as a participant in an unsustainable global system is sheer madness; relying on the assistance of others to work towards a better world for everyone makes plenty of sense as long as you really are pledged to give your all. After all, the American ideal of the “self-sufficient” individual is just bullshit: everyone is totally dependent on everyone else in this society (for self-sufficiency you have to look to small farms outside the First World), and the ones who seem the most “responsible” for themselves are often simply the ones who have been the most *irresponsible* to others, taking from them to take care of themselves. Don’t tell me that’s not what a manager who makes twice the salary of his employees is doing, when they all have to work just as hard.

And another thing — work-free living isn’t something that just a few parasites can do until the excess that feeds them runs out. The more people who do it, the more possible it is to create really autonomous lives, with the shared resources and energies of everyone adding up to a sum greater than the parts. One work-free kid in a city can shoplift food and get new shoes from the trash on campus when the college semester is over. One hundred kids in the same town can start collectives or squats, start gardening instead of stealing, start organizing bigger projects. And one thousand kids could occupy and collectivize housing and schools and workspaces, start to really take social resources back into the hands of the people. We’re not just parasites. We could be the start of a new world.

Finally, after all those points, just remember this: this magazine, and all the other projects we’ve done with CrimethInc., would literally have been impossible without all the time and energy that we put into them instead of into working — even when that meant sometimes sleeping on the couch somewhere where others were paying rent. Imagine all the good things you, or your friends who still have to work, could do if more people took this approach to life, if more people were *able* to take this approach to life. While we are still at the mercy of their system, let’s put all the energy we can into building up the framework for work-free living (Food Not Bombs, the squatting movement, dumpstering, bicycle cooperatives, sharing resources...) so that this option will be more widely available, and we couchsurfing revolutionaries won’t always be occupying this no-man’s-land between generosity and dependence.

A snapshot from my life, the past four days

(as of Sunday, almost midnight, June 11, 2000)

I’ve been going back and forth between Chapel Hill (pretty, quiet college town where my lover and student activist friends live, where it’s easy to focus on writing and reading) and Greensboro (dirty, post-industrial dead end Southern city where some of my best friends and co-conspirators live, where I go to hatch plots and answer CrimethInc. mail) for the last few weeks, trying to catch up from being

gone on tour most of the last year. Last Thursday I caught a ride back to Greensboro to see a show at the new communal warehouse my friends had organized while we were gone.

It was Submission Hold, Antiproduct, and a band from Arkansas with a Native American name my ignorant tongue cannot pronounce (Tern Eyos Ki). They started the show (after a hilarious performance from a punk kid with an acoustic guitar and a maniacally rudimentary sense of humor) by introducing a song about holding on to the fantasies of your childhood through the crush of the “adult” world, and charged forward with so much enthusiasm that we all caught it — and suddenly punk was brand new again, perfect and beautiful and offering the whole world to all of us. We hung out outside after their set, eating from the free buffet of vegan food our hosts had shoplifted in mass quantities to celebrate their first show (when it started running low, some of them dashed off again to procure more!), or wandered around inside, dancing to the Black Flag over the speakers and admiring the handiwork of our friends, how much they had been able to build and create in this empty warehouse in just a month. Then we watched Antiproduct and Submission Hold, two bands also fronted by confident, tough women like the one from Tern Eyos Ki, and it was beautiful for me to see our community live up to its pretensions about fighting sexism and gender roles: the men present all listening, confident enough themselves, for once, to hear other perspectives, to share the space and power of our scene. After the show I went with Jon and Moe to Birch’s house, where we ate vegan apple pie that Mark had dumpstered, dreaming and scheming wildly into the dawn.

Friday evening, after answering a day’s worth of mail, I went to see a friend of mine from outside the punk community, a single mother who lives on welfare in order to spend her time assisting battered children and women suffering from spouse abuse or alcoholism (since there are almost no paid positions available doing that — another big argument against the bullshit “get a job” mentality, which assumes that it’s better to be paid for doing something useless or destructive than to spend your life working on positive things for free). It’s always wonderful to talk to her — she keeps me grounded in real life, telling me about the struggle to help individuals who are suffering from our fucked up status quo, when it’s so easy for me to get lost in the abstractions I’m always working in. After that, Jon and I climbed a series of ladders and steep shingled inclines to the top of a building on the university campus, to brainstorm for the new Harbinger in the windy exultation of 3 a.m. — and then when we got back to his apartment, he left to put up fliers for an event the next evening, which is what I *really* want to talk about.

The fliers read, simply, in huge letters, “U.S.A. IS A MONSTER 2:00 A.M.” Jon had been supposed to book a show for this noise band for months, and never got around to it, until a week before the date he’d promised them he realized he was in trouble and started trying to come up with a solution. He hit upon Zack, the devil-may-care graveyard shi(f)t worker at Handy Pantry, the all-night convenience store in this neighborhood.

Zack is one of those beautiful lumpenproletariat guys who knows who his enemies are and gets jobs just to fuck with his employers. I heard that when he was tired of his last job (night shift at U.P.S.), he took a package being shipped by a chewing gum company, set it down in front of a surveillance camera, opened it up, took out a piece of gum, and, looking straight into the camera, began chewing it. The next morning when the manager found the opened package still sitting there, he checked the tape and saw Zack staring him in the eye, smacking his gum.

Jon went to Zack and told him that he’d forgotten to book a show for a band that would be arriving on Saturday. Zack drawled “well, I’m working every night this week,” and it was arranged: U.S.A. Is A Monster would play at the Handy Pantry at 2 a.m. on Saturday night.

Now, Handy Pantry is not some out-of-the-way convenience store. It’s in the middle of the main drag by the college campus, a center of Greensboro night life (such as it is!), next to all the coffee shops and restaurants and sharing a parking lot with Kinko’s... and with the university police station. This last one is about two hundred feet away, and you can see it through the windows of the convenience store — so we weren’t even talking about a risky proposition, we were looking certain catastrophe in the eyes and offering it a formal invitation. I think that’s what appealed to us the most about this idea: more than any of the Reclaim the Streets or Critical Mass actions in the past year, more than the noise

parades or any of the nocturnal breaking, entering, and exploring we'd done, this was something crazy enough that the outcome couldn't be foreseen or even imagined. We had to do it just to thrust ourselves out into that dangerous space where *everything* is a surprise.

Word of the show spread long before Jon put up the fliers, and by last night every mouth was whispering about it. Jon and I went to a going-away party for Mark, who is off to spend the next month teaching art in another city, and then went to a show in nearby Winston Salem, at the collective warehouse there (which is four years old and much more developed than the one in Greensboro, really incredible and inspiring'), at which we were to meet U.S.A.I.A.M. themselves. They showed up around midnight, just when we were starting to worry, and we went out in the parking lot for a briefing.

They seemed like good kids — trying as hard as we were to act like this was a normal thing for them — but, to our surprise, there were *eight* of them, including two drummers with full sets, and a keyboard player with crazy electronic equipment. It wasn't going to be easy to run their stuff out the back door when the pigs came in. They followed us back to Greensboro in their van, and I spent the ride talking Jon out of his apprehensions: "This is our chance to put punk rock where it was never supposed to be, where it's still dangerous. This is payback for all the nights we've had to walk around watching this town do nothing, man — this is revenge for that flag they put on the moon!" When we arrived, he turned to me, reassured, and declared "we're going to make Greensboro history, man."

I agreed. For the sake of everyone in this little, dead end town, there is no choice but to make Greensboro, as we've all known and loathed it, *history*.

There were about sixty people from widely varied backgrounds (punks, art students, homeless people, a middle-aged professor "interviewing" people with a microphone that wasn't plugged into anything) lined up sitting on the curb as we loaded two drumsets, four amplifiers and speakers, a vocal amp and borrowed microphone, and assorted other instruments and equipment into the store. The drummers had forgotten sticks, or lost them at the other shows or something, so they ended up just beating on the drums with various junk foods (beef jerkies, soda cans and bottles, popsicles), grabbing a new one whenever one substitute stick broke or shattered. The first notes of soundcheck were so loud that I couldn't believe they were even going to get to play a minute.

Everyone pushed in, packed between the aisles, and the noise began. The band were leaping around, smashing things and falling over like they might have at a normal house show, but here it was totally new and dangerous, visceral, and music that could have been standard somewhere else was suddenly the fiercest, most vehement thing any of us had ever heard. At a normal show the band are the ones taking the risk, but here everyone was at risk, just by standing there in the store — and not just because of the threat of the police, either. There's no way I can describe what it felt like to step out of reality as it had been and into that space, to fuse two separate parts of my life (the passion of punk rock, the lifelessness of convenience stores) that were never supposed to meet... everything was electrified, tense and intense, ten thousand years of culture turned on it's head in an instant. Amazingly, the band finished one song, the members all switched instruments while the scream of feedback tore the air, and they shot into another one, knocking against the shelving, smashing into the drink coolers, pulling the cardboard display posters over their heads and banging into people — all of us looking nervously back and forth between them and the police station out the window. A couple civilians who had come up to buy cigarettes joined the crowd in total wonder. Some people were throwing junk food, candy, breaking things, wrecking the place (this was the most controversial topic afterwards, since the kids doing this were largely bourgeois children of the suburbs who had nothing at stake and weren't worried about Zack's welfare or anything else) — others, and this was much more beautiful to me, realizing that we owned the place for a moment and they could do whatever they wanted, were picking up candies and other commodities, looking at them, and then just dropping them, realizing just how valueless they all were at *any* price, especially compared with the lightning of what was actually happening. The band switched instruments again in the middle of the song, banging out random notes and screaming nonsensically — someone from the audience jumped behind one drumset, and started playing along as

natural as could be — others joined in — and then looks of terror spread through the room, as we all saw the flashing lights of an arriving police car.

And you know what? We got away with it. The pigs pulled up, paused, and drove off for some inexplicable reason, basically giving us the go-ahead to take the city over (if we can do this so easily, then what next?). “Should we get out of here?” shouted a band member, clutching a cymbal stand. “Naw, man, they’ve just headed off to get the Black Mariah,” drawled Zack — “keep playing.” The band played for another twenty minutes, until everyone was satisfied that we’d done what we came to do. Still spinning in a delirium of adrenaline, we hastily packed all their equipment out the back door and into the van, while the locals drifted slowly off into the night, exchanging grins of disbelief and delight.

In fact, just as I was writing this last paragraph, Zack stopped by Jon and Will’s apartment (where I’m staying tonight, while they drive to the airport up in New York to pick up Zegota’s new bassist, Ard, imported directly from Holland for their upcoming world tour without so much as an audition) to tell me that though the pigs prank called him at the store afterwards (“you’re in big trouble, son — some underage kids who were drinking at your store drove into a tree and died [total bullshit!]. You need to give us the store tapes. Don’t lie to us, boy...” and Zack replies: “I’ll lie to you as much as I want, officer — but I don’t know what you’re talking about...”), he just talked to his manager, who said: “no, you’re not fired, the store was clean this morning.” As I expected, they need us more than we need them — we will win.

Tonight I have a whole apartment to myself, despite not paying rent for the last sixteen months or working for over six years, and I sit here listening to my favorite vicious punk records, stuffing myself on dumpstered food, writing the introduction to our hardcore magazine on my beleaguered little laptop computer, the last surviving vestige of my bourgeois origins — quite conscious that I am enjoying a moment of heaven. Tomorrow Matt and I will drive out into the rural wilderness for Catharsis practice, then Zegota returns to show their new bassist around, who has never been to the U.S. before, and to screen fliers for the benefit our bands are supposed to play for the warehouse space. Then on Thursday night at midnight, we have a date to meet Liz and some of her friends, fifty year old middle class women whose children have grown up and left them, who feel invisible in society, who see themselves represented in the media as helpless and clutching, who have reasons of their own to find common cause with others seeking adventure and transformation, but did not know where to find them — until they met us. They are to bring the picnic snack, and us, the adventure: a 16-story building, abandoned and easy to break into, with a roof that looks out over the rest of the city. There, we’ll sit beneath the stars and build bonds between our different communities, talking of which resources each has to offer the other, of what the next step to revolution is — a revolution that is becoming more and more real for us, for all of us, every day.

The Last word (we can only hope!) on complaining about “the scene”

An interesting characteristic of communities is the way no one actually feels like a part of them, even the people in their center. Alexei and I had a disheartening experience in Brazil when we were both reading HeartattaCk: it seemed to us like there was all this awesome shit going on in the hardcore scene, but that we were totally left out of it. “I think it’s great that they have this community going on,” said Alexei, “but I don’t feel like a part of any community. If you put all my friends together in one place, they wouldn’t be able to get along or even understand each other.”

After I’d thought about it for a while, I realized that the hardcore community is actually nothing more than a bunch of people like Alexei and I and our friends, connected to each other in the loosest of ways. In fact if you were to pick two people who are undeniably close to the core of this thing called “hardcore” right now, it might well be him and me. So what’s going on here?

The truth is, nobody feels like any community could be big and deep enough to contain all that they are — and that's OK. But we have a disturbing tendency to project our own fears and insecurities onto our community: everyone feels comfortable in it but us, we are secret outsiders, the community is like a Frankenstein's monster with a will of its own, doing things *to* people rather than being a place where people do things... people talk about the scene as if it is a force separate from the humans involved in it, as if it could suck without our participation in that sucking, as if it could alienate us without our participation in that alienation. And so everyone complains ad nauseam about how the scene is getting worse, it's not like it used to be, it has all these flaws, etc. etc. etc.

At this point, that really is the *least* original, the least creative thing you could possibly do. Punk has always sucked, it's always been getting worse, that's been the . word ever since about 1977 — so seriously, what could possibly be the use of complaining more, except maybe to state for the record that it's not good enough for *you*, either?

I think it would be much more positive for us to admit that punk does whatever we do with it, that that's all it is, and to claim responsibility for it rather than blaming it as an outside force. As soon as we recognize that punk is simply a tool we can use as to do whatever we want, rather than worrying about whether it's cool enough for us.

These complaints have their roots in the old voter/spectator mentality, I think: you want to pick the style or scene that is the coolest, and assert your identity by passively swearing allegiance to it. At first, as a teenager, punk seems to be perfect, so you buy punk records and attend punk shows, calling yourself a punk just because you watch what people who are really involving themselves in punk are doing. Maybe at age 21 or 22 you get disillusioned with punk — it's lost the novelty it used to have, it doesn't seem as profound as it once did — so you move on to the rave scene or something. You call yourself a raver or an indie rocker, but it's all bullshit — you've just been a consumer, a spectator, all along.

I no longer expect to have my world changed just by buying a new punk record. I look to other styles of music to bring me inspiration, since I feel like I'm pretty much up to date with what punk has to offer (though if you're in a punk band, please surprise me!); but hardcore punk is my community, no matter what music I listen to — it is here that I get to do what really matters: *participate*. You're going to get jaded wherever you go, if you go as a spectator, but if you pick this community as a place where you can try out your own projects and live out your own adventures, you'll find it to be endlessly rewarding, no matter how many morons are involved in it.

I think I've had such a good experience in this community because I realized this about seven years ago, around when I started this 'zine. Since then I've found myself complaining less and less about the scene, even though I spend more time involved in it than just about anyone else I know. It's common sense — hardcore (*your* hardcore, the only one that matters) is what you make of it... so get going! It can take you around the world and back a hundred times, introduce you to the craziest, most beautiful people on this earth, thrust you into moments of adventure you'd never dreamed of — and no halfwit in a Madball or Blanks 77 shirt can interfere with that, unless you let them.

And now I'd like to take just a paragraph to celebrate briefly my love of punk rock. In this community, I can express every side of my character, I don't have to leave anything behind: I can scream and destroy and hate blindly with Gehenna, I can be articulate and idealistic with Trial or Zegota, I can revel in the simple pleasures of wreaking havoc with my friends as we wander the town late one night or I can indulge in sweet solitude reading a 'zine by myself. I can be intellectual as all fuck, debating post-Situationist social theory with a graduate student over the internet, or I can strike up a conversation about the Misfits with a teenager drinking on the job on third shift at a convenience store while I shoplift potato chips. I can enjoy a communal dinner with welcoming strangers on the other side of the world, or organize a demonstration with mohawked local activists here in North Carolina. I can travel and have a home anywhere; I can write, or dance, or even learn to juggle or speak French, and I would have awesome people to do it with. Here's to punk. Punk fucking rocks.

The end and the beginning, for Inside Front — and hardcore punk

This is the last issue of Inside Front we are going to do. There are already a hundred ‘zines that can take over from here — Slave, F.B.I., even Heartattack is quite good these days — and I feel like we’ve finally realized the potential of this project, finally made Inside Front what it should be. Rather than stop here and hit a plateau, trying to make this into some kind of periodical, I’d rather leave it as an example of what is possible, effectively collectivizing its legacy to be carried on by everyone else who thinks there’s something good about what it has done. I don’t want to risk ever getting stuck doing something that becomes boring or predictable or irrelevant, and there are so many more things we want to do from here — so don’t worry, you’ll still be hearing from us. After this issue of Inside Front, which should come out about the same time as the third Harbinger and our first book, *Days of War, Nights of Love*, we’ve got new records, new pamphlets and ‘zines and books and tours and actions planned... in just my own case, I can think of about a hundred projects I want to try, all just waiting for the space to materialize.

From here, whatever was worthwhile about Inside Front is in your hands. We’re not ending our work with the magazine in defeat or exhaustion — to the contrary, we’re more involved and active than ever — but because it has taken us as far as it needed to; now we find ourselves standing at a vista from which new horizons can be seen, and we have to make new vehicles to carry us to them. This isn’t the end of hardcore being relevant to our lives, or of life being relevant to hardcore, or of our contributions to either of those things. But Inside Front is now *yours*, yours to improve on, yours to apply and add to. I’m absolutely confident that from these seeds, a hundred greater forces will grow, and we who have nourished this project to this point must simply let go of the reins to let it become what it must now become — which *you* can see more clearly than us, I’m sure!

The Library of Unconventional Lives

Editor's Introduction to the Final Issue of Inside Front
2000

Inside Front: International Journal of Hardcore Punk and Anarchist Action, Issue #13:
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