A Sensuous Dramaturgy of Intervention – The Sun Chariot, Copenhagen, 1969–1983

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Abstract

During the 1970s and early '80s the Danish performance group Solvognen (The Sun Chariot) developed its own sensuous dramaturgy of actionist intervention. Based in the free community of Christiania and closely connected to contemporary activist theatre and hippie culture, Solvognen organised large-scale theatre actions with a magical and surrealist aesthetic and a clear political agenda. In 2006 Solvognen's action The Santa Claus Army (1974) was, ironically, listed among the ten works in the Danish Ministry of Culture's canon of theatre and performance. In particular, the careful orchestration of the press and media to support the broader impact of the actions anticipated the interventionist and relational practices found in the visual arts and performance theatre of the 1990s on.

During the United Nation’s Climate Change Conference (COP15) in Copenhagen in 2009, two activists from Greenpeace in evening dress succeeded in entering Queen Margrethe’s TV broadcast gala dinner and unfolding their banner with the slogan “Politicians Talk – Leaders Act” for a few seconds before being arrested by the police. The police and secret service were shocked. Greenpeace's activists had arrived undercover and presented their message strategically, according to the media coverage.

The meticulous timing and staging were reminiscent of the theatre group Solvognen's (The Sun Chariot) activist theatre from the 1970s, when the group disguised as NATO soldiers or Father Christmases provoked newspaper headlines and police effort. Like the Greenpeace activists, Solvognen's participants were non-violent. The forces of law and order alone were responsible for any resulting violence – and were afterwards strongly criticised for their violent conduct, both in the 1970s and in 2009. Solvognen and Greenpeace also had in common their skills in dealing with the media. Solvognen's happenings were carefully planned to coincide with international television broadcasts and newspaper deadlines.

Among the public at large, Solvognen became famous for its large-scale street happenings and action theatre, such as Wounded Knee (1973), NATO-hæren...
Solvognen’s Santa Claus Army in the Town Square in Copenhagen, December 1974.
Photograph Nils Vest.