Defiant culture

George Monbiot finds beauty in the midst of rubble

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THE BAILIFFS brought a new tool to Claremont Road last week. It was a bladed hook about two foot long, cleverly designed to extract arms embedded in barrels of concrete without tearing too much flesh.

At first it was devastatingly effective, and people who had expected to spend three hours being dug out with pneumatic drills and angle grinders were freed in just five minutes. But as news of the device spread along the rooftops, the protestors started binding their arms with tape and plastic hosepipe, plugging the holes down which the arm extractor could be pushed.

This hindered the bailiffs but failed to stop them. Next time the protestors will have evolved a new tactic, and the Department of Transport will have to find other means with which to combat it. The Government has the technology, but the protesters have something which can never be definitively supressed: creativity.

With picks and shovels, hacksaws and hand drills, they created defences that took the most powerful and sophisticated demolition machines more than three days to demolish. Six of them managed to bury their arms in the road; the contractors spent three and a half hours digging them out. A rolling bridge between the rooftops and a tree house took the hydraulic hoists and chainsaws 40 minutes to dismantle. The 100-foot tower of greased and welded scaffolding kept the bailiffs busy for more than two days. They never did find the entrance to one of the bunkers.

But the creativity of Claremont Road extended far beyond the raw necessities of keeping the sherriff away. This little corner of east London was transformed into a baroque, apocalyptic pagan wonderland. If heirarchy contains creativity, then anarchy appears to unleash it. Split-level pixie tree houses festooned with tinsel, cartridge belts, High Court exclusion orders, gnarled metal and the amputated limbs of tailors' dummies overhung a road adorned with cars from whose torn bodywork fluorescent scaffolding poles and living plants erupted. At either end of the street, barricades of concrete-filled tyres sprawled with wild sculptures of mangled household appliances.

Two things place this among the most significant cultural phenomena of the decade: the first is its sense of purpose. The outrageous installations erf Claremont Road were manifestly functional. The tyre and washing machine sculptures held back the bulldozers while people consolidated their defences. The cars full of scaffolding proved to be excellent tank traps. The bits of metal nailed to the trunks of the trees had to be painstakingly extracted before the chainsaws could start work, while the amputated limbs were waiting to be dropped as memento mori at the bafliffs' feet.

The creative exuberance attending similar protests in Pollok Park in Glasgow and Solsbury Hill near Bath expose the self-referential emptiness into which so much of our fine art, performance and fashion has wandered. Behind the barricades, for the first time in decades, without the help of tutors, grants or critics, art and necessity were brought back together.

Secondly, and more importantly, creativity usually means a few people producing and everyone else simply paying to watch, but the creative impulse which erupted in Claremont Road was one in which everyone participated, rebuilding the world as it

suited them. Disposessed city youths knocked holes in walls between the houses and established tracks across the rooftops, building a communal space from the architecture of alienation.

Dressed absurdly in sombreros and shades, bike helmets and miners' lamps, dresses, braces and pixie hats, they re-asserted their culture in a world deprived of its initiative by the technology of convenience. They are sowing the seeds of cultural renewal that Britain so desperately needs.

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