

# HEY!



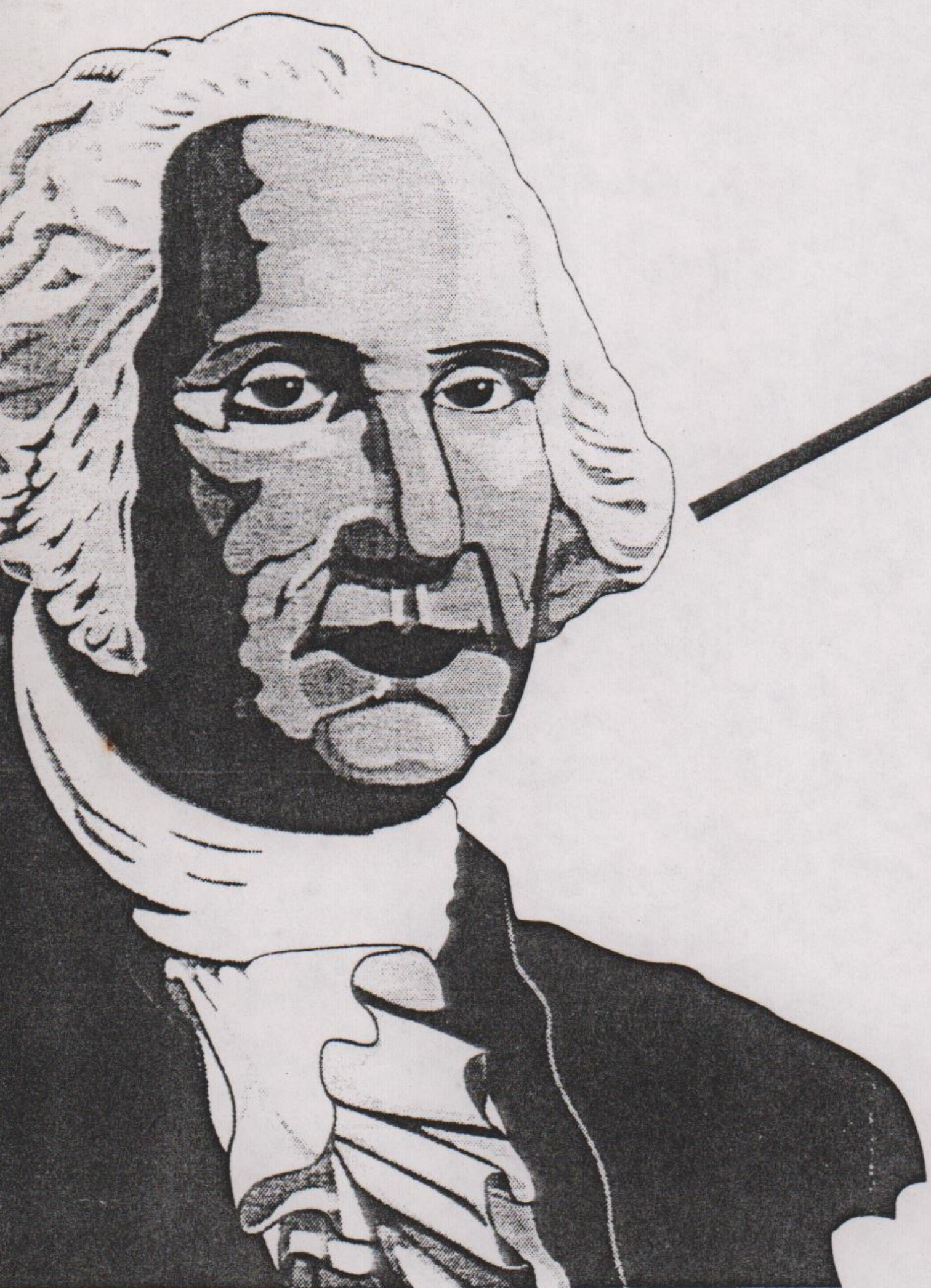
# GET OUT OF OUR WAY!



*Do-it-Yourself, Step-by-Step!*

# CRITICAL MASS: How To

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**HONK  
IF YOU  
LOVE  
BICYCLES!**



How to make a

# CRITICAL MASS

## Lessons and Ideas from the SF Bay Area Experience

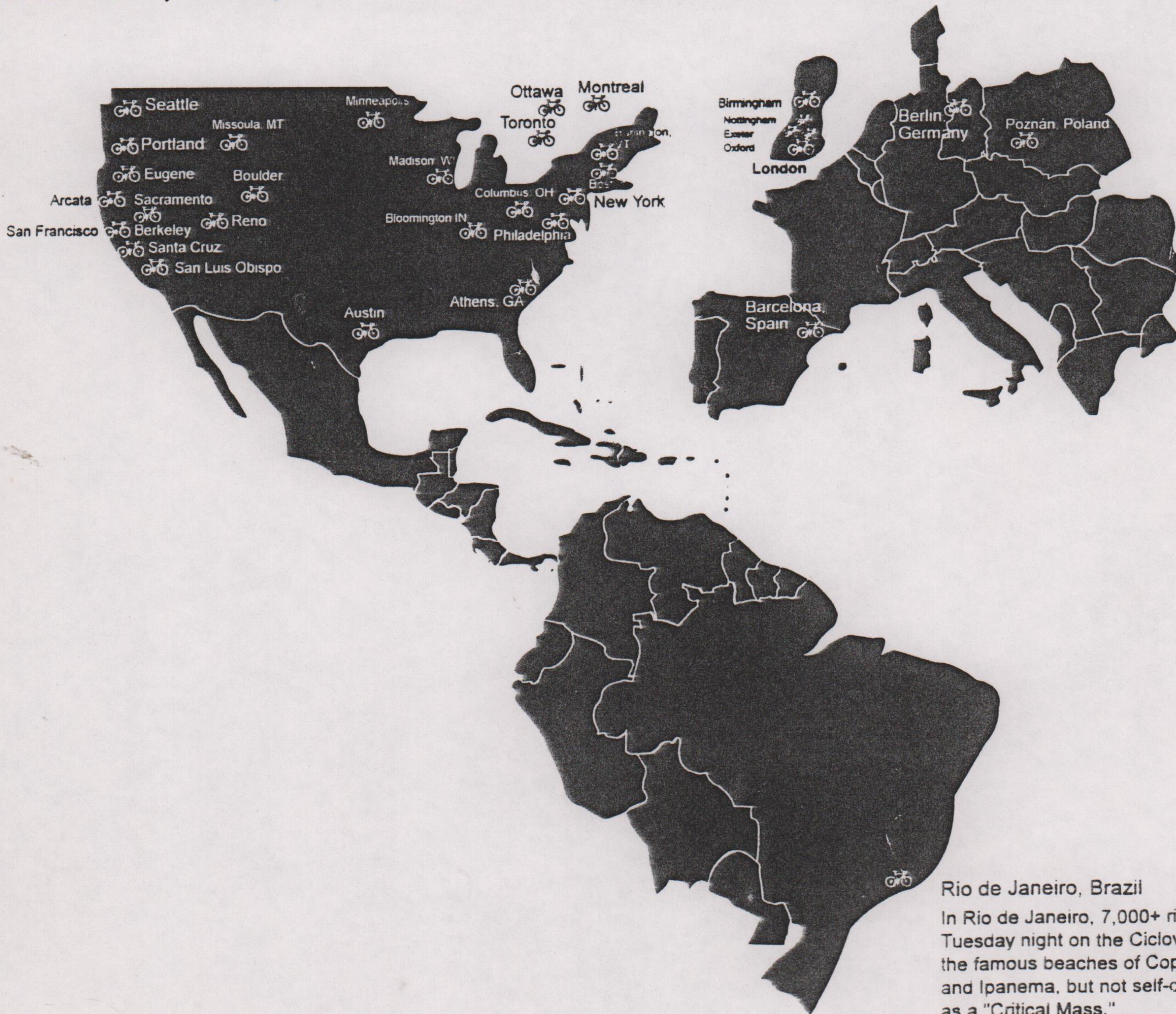
### INTRODUCTION

"What's this all about?" ask amused and bemused pedestrians on Market Street as hundreds of noisy, high-spirited bicyclists ride past, yelling and ringing their bells. There are a wide variety of answers: "It's about banning cars." "It's about having fun in the street." "It's about a more social way of life." "It's about asserting our right to the road". "It's about solidarity." Critical Mass is many things to many people, and while many concepts expressed may evoke memories of past political protests, Critical Mass is foremost a celebration, not a protest.

Critical Mass got started in September 1992 in San Francisco as a way to bring these various populations

together in a festive reclaiming of public space. The idea was initially conceived by one person, who bounced the idea off other cyclists (See *Inside Out*, p. 9). San Francisco's prominent bicycle messenger community was enlisted primarily through word of mouth, while commuters were reached by someone standing in the middle of the financial district passing out flyers.

The first ride drew a crowd of 60 cyclists, and these numbers doubled for several months following. Critical Mass has continued to grow in San Francisco, drawing about 400+ from month to month, with an October 1993 high of 1000+, and has spread to other cities as well. With independent rides springing up all over the place (see map),



Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

In Rio de Janeiro, 7,000+ ride every Tuesday night on the Ciclovía along the famous beaches of Copacabana and Ipanema, but not self-consciously as a "Critical Mass."



Critical Mass has begun to take on the character of a large scale, decentralized grassroots movement!

Ultimately, Critical Mass is just a bunch of cyclists riding around together, going from one point to another. Someone coined the descriptive phrase "organized coincidence.") But many important and interesting questions come up as we attempt this simple task. Why is there so little open space in our cities where people can relax and interact, free from the incessant buying and selling of ordinary life? Why are people compelled to organize their lives around having a car? What would an alternative future look like?

In writing this pamphlet, we have not set out to answer these questions. We are simply using our familiarity with two of the many Critical Mass rides (San Francisco and Berkeley) to help accelerate the spread of Critical Mass to other cities, and to share ideas, tactics, solutions, etc. We hope that a small, inexpensive, and easily reproduced pamphlet will go a long way toward providing interested parties with the information and materials they need to set up their own ride.

It is important to emphasize, however, that no two rides will be identical, and while Critical Mass may be a common approach to a common problem, different contexts will produce different dynamics, pressures, etc. This pamphlet, then, is in no way intended as an "official blueprint" or strict set of guidelines set forth by some all-knowing committee. Rather, it is simply the brainchild of a small handful of Critical Mass enthusiasts in the Bay Area, and it will inevitably reflect our experiences, prejudices and beliefs.

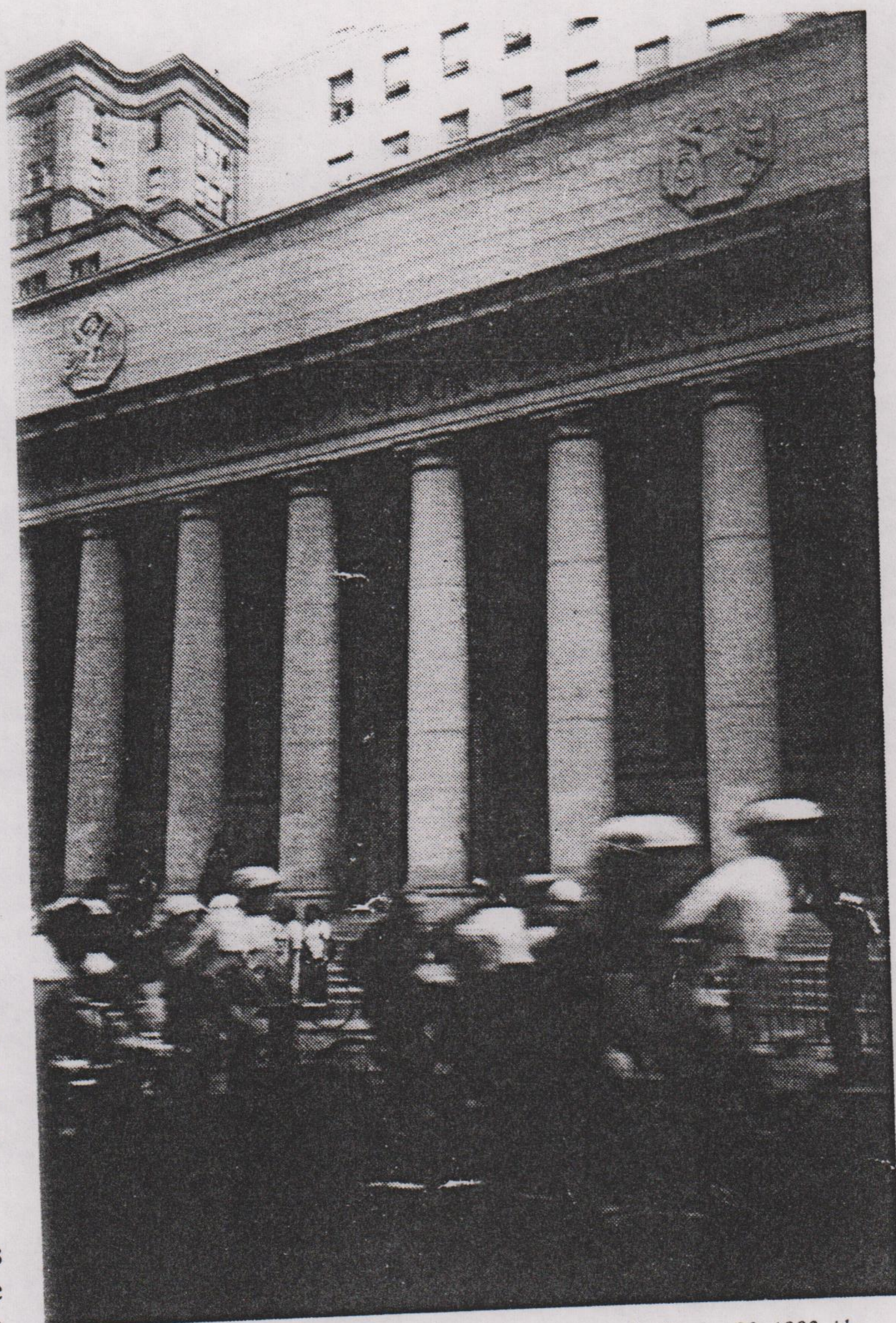
## PRE-RIDE PLANNING

It should be relatively easy to set up a Critical Mass ride. Every city has a population of bicyclists who are marginalized and threatened by the current transportation system, whether commuters, couriers, or people who ride just for the fun of it. Perhaps more importantly, these groups are just the tip of the iceberg. Poor air quality, environmental degradation and the general decay of living conditions due to motorized traffic are felt by everyone. There is a potential mass base for change in all these scattered, isolated groups, and a Critical Mass ride can serve as a rallying point to bring them together.

## WHERE AND WHEN TO START

The preliminary steps to setting up a ride are fairly straightforward: pick a time, place and route. Beginning the ride in some area downtown is obviously a good choice, since so many bicyclists and commuters are already there. A well-known public area, easily accessible to most bicyclists, where large numbers of people can congregate before the ride is perfect. (In San Francisco, Critical Mass leaves from a plaza adjacent to the financial district, which is conveniently located at the foot of the main traffic corridor.)

Choosing a time is even easier: you want to meet in the early evening, say 5:30, both in order to accommodate bicycle commuters who are on the streets anyway, and to gain visibility by making sure Critical Mass is part of rush hour traffic. Having Critical Mass fall on a Friday marks it as the beginning of the weekend, and contributes to the celebratory feel of the ride. And what better Friday for the event to



*Whizzing past San Francisco's Pacific Stock Exchange during the October 29, 1993 ride.*

take place than the last Friday of the month? If Critical Mass continues to spread, the day may come when, on the last Friday of the month, the sun is always setting on a Critical Mass ride!

It is important that the meeting time and place remain constant, so that it is easy for people to take part on a regular basis, and more people can join in as the rides continue.

## PLANNING A ROUTE

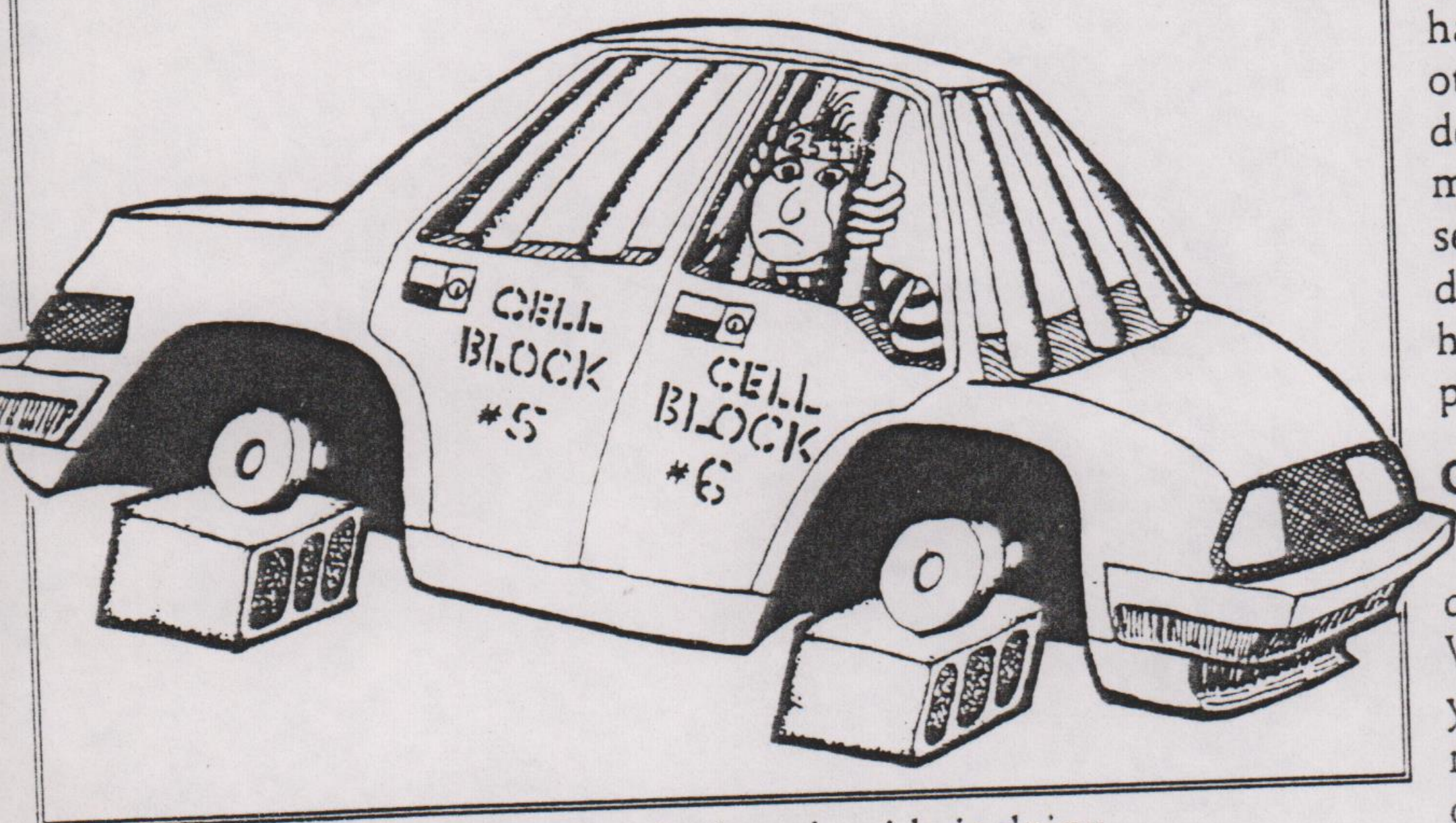
Picking a safe, entertaining route is integral to keeping Critical Mass novel and fun. There are several things to consider when planning a route:

### SAFETY

- Bicyclists of varying skills will be taking part; planning a ride with lots of difficult hills or a very long distance is not a good idea. Maintain a moderate pace.
- The streets chosen should be large enough to accommodate large numbers of cyclists. (One way streets are especially good.)
- Keep it simple. A complicated route that veers all over the place might look fun on paper, but will prove to be unworkable on the ride. People need to be able to read and easily memorize the route, so they know



# Escape n CARceration



where they're going and what the ride is doing.

## PLEASURE

- Varying the route from month to month makes each ride a bit of an adventure, and reaches a wider spectrum of people.
- The mood of the ride is influenced by the area cycled through. A ride through a downtown area, where whoops and hollers can echo off tall buildings, and there is a population of motorists and bystanders to interact with, will create a more festive mood than a ride through an industrial or suburban area. The latter two tend to quiet down the ride, which can be done to vary the mood. It's up to you.
- Have an end point, such as a park or bar, where there's the possibility for cyclists to socialize after the ride.

## XEROCRACY

In San Francisco the organization of the event has been as much a part of its success as anything else. Organizational politics, with official leaders, demands, etc., has been eschewed in favor of a more decentralized system. *There is no one in charge.* Ideas are spread, routes shared, and consensus sought through the ubiquitous copy machines on every job or at copy shops in every neighborhood—a "Xerocracy," in which anyone is free to make copies of their ideas and pass them around. Leaflets, flyers, stickers and 'zines all circulate madly before, during, and after the ride, rendering leaders unnecessary by ensuring that strategies and tactics are understood by as many people as possible.

Xerocracy promotes freedom and undercuts hierarchy because the mission is not set by a few in charge, but is broadly defined by its participants. The ride is not narrowly seen as an attempt to lobby for more bike lanes

(although that goal exists) or to protest this or that aspect of the social order (although such sentiments are often expressed). Instead, each person is free to invent his or her own reasons for participating and is also free to share those ideas with others. Some people are there to promote human powered transportation as a viable alternative, others seek the respect of motorists and city planners and some take part simply because they like riding bikes and feeling a sense of community with all the other cyclists on the Critical Mass rides.

This "organic system" doesn't lead to chaos, but rather a festive, celebratory atmosphere. Great pains have been taken to avoid the common pitfalls of other movements, with much Xerocratic space being devoted to arguments against moralizing attacks on motorists and other unproductive tendencies. By presenting bicycling as a fun, positive alternative to the dreary destructiveness of car culture, Critical Mass has staked out a visionary approach to urban transportation.

## GETTING THE WORD OUT

Getting the word out is the first step. Flyers are a quick, cheap way to reach a large number of people. With a few friends and a copy machine, you can have your area saturated with Critical Mass announcements within a few days. However, the public walls of most cities have already been plastered with so many announcements that alternative strategies are useful.

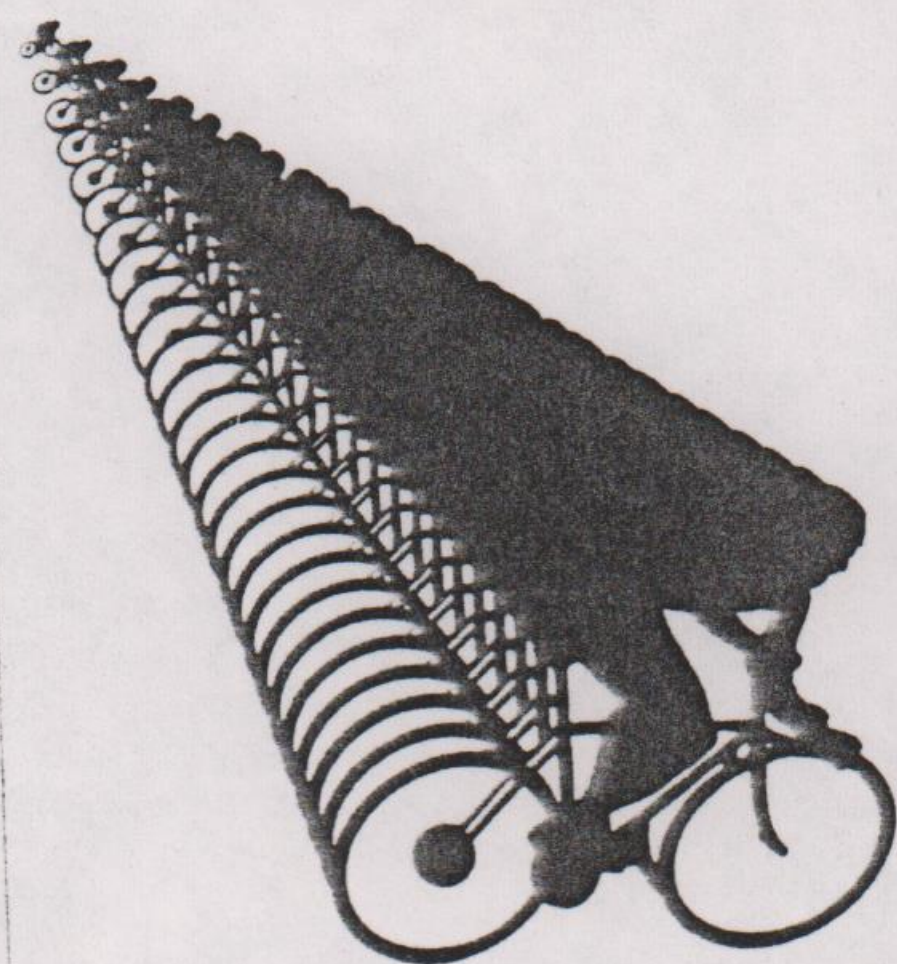
- Thin strips of xeroxed flyers can be attached to bicycles around town.
- Small stickers can be put on anything bicyclists lock their bikes to.
- Bicycle stores and bike-friendly businesses can be asked to put flyers in their windows.
- Word of mouth, announcements by friendly local radio DJs, on stage in clubs, local papers, etc.

## XEROCRATIC

**AESTHETICS: If you want to communicate, make it easy to read!**

Make sure the flyers passed out to participants are readable and tell people what they need to know about the ride. For instance, if there is a tricky intersection, or dangerous train tracks on the route, point it out on the map. Doing the route flyer on a computer can make things easier (if you're computer literate),

**CRITICAL  
MASS  
Power In  
Numbers!**



**San Francisco  
1993**



has the advantage of being easy to read and reproducible. The route sheet can also double as an informal bulletin/newsletter, with troubleshooting ideas, news from the last ride, and ideas for future rides.

As the San Francisco Critical Mass grew beyond the point where a single bicyclist could see both front and tail of the ride (about 300+), a xerographic publication, *Critical Mass Missives*, started to appear. It contains happenings on the previous ride, news of other rides around the world and discusses problems within or concerning the ride.

## FLYERS

As the ride goes along, people on the street, waiting at bus stops, or sitting in their cars will want to know what's going on. You won't be able to stop and talk with all of them, and you'd be hard pressed to fit it all into one sentence even if you could. So for anyone who is curious, it really helps to have a small flyer made out that lets people know what Critical Mass is and why we feel this action is necessary, and that invites them to the next ride.

These flyers can be made to fit three to an 8 1/2" sheet of paper so that they're inexpensive and can fit well in your back pocket. Pass them out at the beginning of the ride, making sure that anyone who is interested has a stack to give out, and watch as they get passed out to hundreds of people who otherwise would have never heard of Critical Mass!

Those who hand out flyers along the route are the real diplomats of the ride. Often the face-to-face contact by bicyclists and occasional rollerbladers has been helpful in defusing tense situations arising from angry car drivers who have been made to wait. A cyclist will roll up to these frustrated commuters and explain the ride while handing them a flyer. This shows people that you've thought of them a bit, and it buys some time for the ride to proceed as they digest the message.

Like the corks, flyer distributors lend an air of self-control to the ride for motorists and pedestrians. Corking and flyer distribution is usually done on an ad-hoc basis, by bicyclists who decide spontaneously to fill those needs.

## California Vehicle Code: Yes, dear, you do have rights!

Division 11, §21201

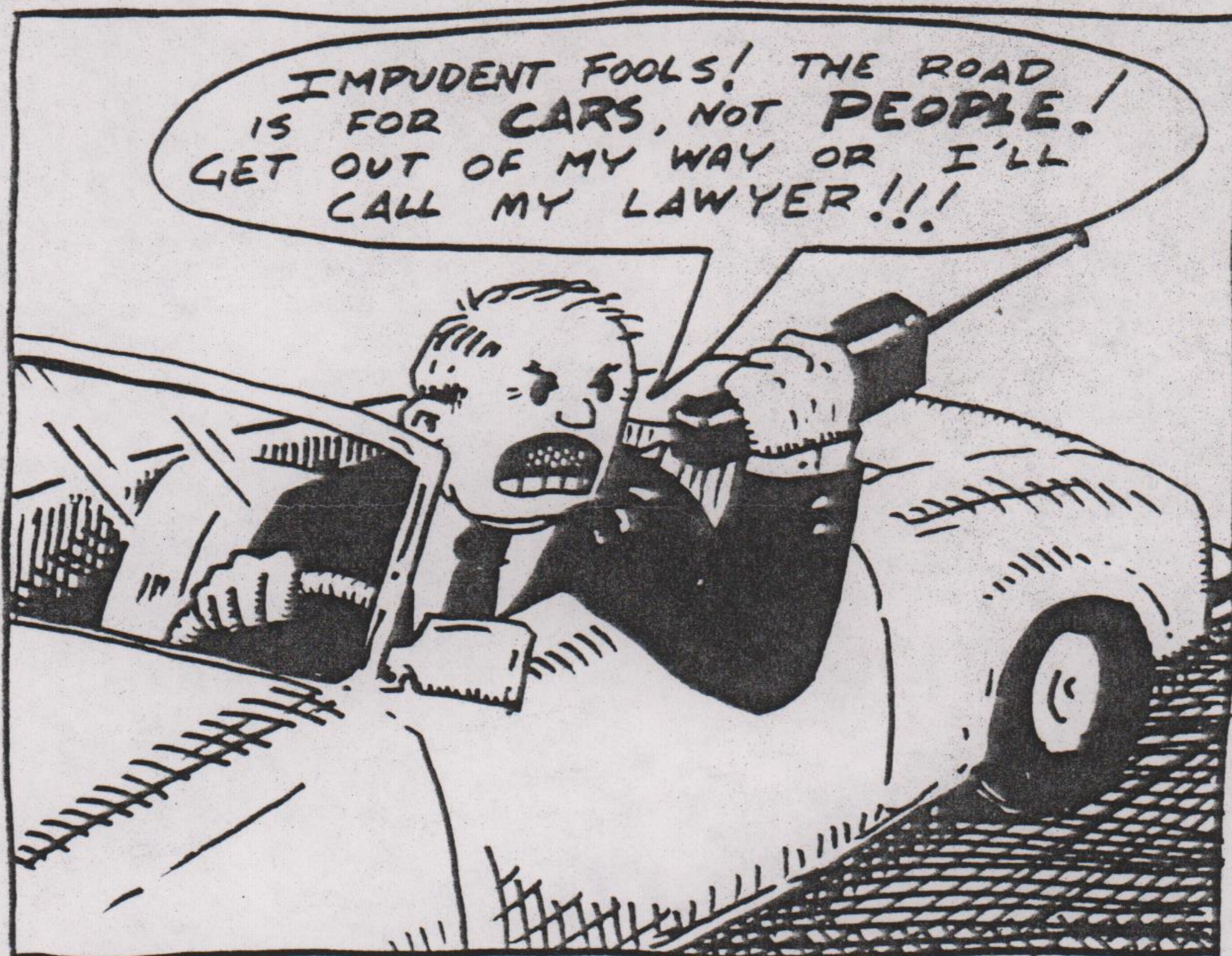
Article 4. Operation of Bicycles

21200. Every person riding a bicycle upon a highway has all the rights and is subject to all the provisions applicable to the driver of a vehicle...

Operation on Roadway

21202. (a) Any person operating a bicycle upon a roadway at a speed less than the normal speed of traffic moving in the same direction at such time shall ride as close as practicable to the right-hand curb or edge of the roadway except under any of the following situations:

- (1) When overtaking and passing another bicycle or vehicle proceeding in the same direction.
- (2) When preparing for a left turn at an intersection or into a private road or driveway.
- (3) When reasonably necessary to avoid conditions (including, but not limited to, parked or moving objects, vehicles, bicycles, pedestrians, animals, surface hazards, or substandard width lanes) that make it unsafe to continue along the right-hand curb or edge... For purposes of this section, a "substandard width lane" is a lane that is too narrow for a bicycle and a vehicle to travel safely side by side within the lane.



## TRAFFIC TACTICS

When bicyclists take to the streets en masse, there will be a certain percentage of motorists who are not amused. These motorists—a minority, to be sure—will have a hard time seeing a group of bicyclists as legitimate traffic, and may insist on forcing their way through the crowd. The interference of these frustrated individuals, trapped as they are in their cars, can be a big problem for Critical Mass, especially the smaller rides. Tactics have to be developed, understood, and implemented by as many people as possible in order to ensure that this problem does not become too much of a drag on an otherwise fun and good-natured ride. Here are the ones we've found that work:

### DENSITY—STAY TOGETHER!

Think of Critical Mass as a density. It works by forming a mass of bicyclists so dense and tight that it simply displaces cars. Anytime the ride begins to spread too thin, with areas large enough for a car to drive into, you have a potential trouble spot developing.

The simplest and easiest way to deal with this problem is to encourage people to be aware of what's going on around them, and to act when they see things go awry. If a gap large enough for a car develops, someone needs to ride into it and call over a friend. If the head of the ride moves too fast and the Mass becomes too thin, someone in front needs to call out for people to slow down, and for the ride to regroup. The same goes for those at the tail of the ride, who may be riding so slow that the ride, again, spreads too thin. Diagrams on the route sheet pointing out trouble areas and regrouping points are a great way to bring all this across.

Density is vital in ensuring safety and promoting an image of bicycling as practical, safe and fun for the ride's participants. When Critical Mass is still passing through an intersection after the light has turned red, in rush hour traffic, it is important to justify the long wait for cross traffic by maintaining a steady mass of bicyclists riding through the intersection.

### CORKS

Corks are the diplomats of the ride. Their title comes



om their function. Here's how they work: one or two cyclists block each lane of oncoming traffic as the ride goes through an intersection, making sure that even if a gap large enough for a car to drive through develops, cars are stopped where they are. This tactic is especially effective if the cork takes a friendly, non-antagonistic stance with motorists, even holding up signs that say "thanks for waiting" and "honk if you like bikes!" Corks need to protect the car of the ride, too, from cars turning into it. Of course, no one needs to be officially designated as a cork, and people will largely take on this role of their own initiative.

## RED LIGHTS

Should Critical Mass obey the same traffic laws that motorized traffic follows? Yes and no. For the most part, traffic laws were made for cars, as anyone who routinely cycles through stop signs can attest, and they certainly weren't written with large groups of bicyclists in mind. So the answer to this question is obvious: *Critical Mass should and or ignore existing traffic laws where the group's safety and effectiveness are served, and follow the law where it serves our interests and needs.*

Red lights are a perfect example of this principle. When the head of the ride reaches a red light, it only makes sense to stop. This way, a) no one endangers themselves by riding into oncoming traffic, b) we allow motorists the simple courtesy of their right of way, and c) we give ourselves an opportunity to stop, regroup, and form a solid Mass. But if, Critical Mass passes through an intersection, the light changes, it does not make sense to break into two groups, and the ride should just continue through the intersection, shielded from the waiting cars by corks.

## BREAKING MASS

When the Mass thins out too much to justify holding an intersection through a red light, it can be useful for someone to yell out "BREAK MASS!" The first section of Critical Mass would continue through the intersection and the second part would wait for the light to turn green. If all goes well, the two groups will be reunited at the next light. This tactic is most often used when the Mass gets larger and less cohesive.

## KNOW THE LAW

The above planning is the skeleton of what the Mass does in order to be as enjoyable and carefree as it is. However, other issues arise as soon as bicyclists, hundreds of cyclists, hit the streets. Traffic laws vary from state to state and city to city. Find out what the Vehicle Code says about bikes in your area. Know your rights; in California cyclists "enjoy" all the rights and responsibilities of motorists. Knowing the truth about what is in the book and being able to correct those who quote it wrongly empowers riders on Critical Mass. You can obtain a traffic rules and regulations book at a Department of Motor Vehicles office.

## TOSTERONE BRIGADE

What kind of approach do we take toward people who choose to drive, or who happen to be stuck in cars, maybe in a medical emergency, when the ride passes? Just as

## RADICAL PATIENCE

Many of us attracted to radical politics are very impatient—with the larger society, but also with ourselves and especially with people who don't see how much better life could be if our radical visions were pursued. This impatience with the slow development of organic human communities, communities that might really be able to construct a different logic to our daily lives, often leads to childish and simplistic confrontational stances. These postures are much more about reassuring ourselves that we are truly radical and willing to face danger than they are about contesting the organization of modern life.

If radical bicyclists are so hot to go on freeways, then instead of blocking traffic lanes why not wait for rush hour gridlock and then overwhelm the already stopped cars with dozens or hundreds of bicycles streaming through the traffic, departing the freeway at the next exit after a convincing demonstration of the ease, superiority and pleasure of bicycling? Imagine the surprise and support one might generate if such an intervention was carried out with courtesy and friendliness?

It is a terribly rash assumption that someone stuck in their car is necessarily a big supporter of the status quo. Consider instead the complexities of human choices and constraints and try to create openings in people's minds, rather than assuming that someone who hasn't adopted your choices about what to buy, how to get around, and lifestyles in general is your conscious enemy and deserves your moral condemnation, rage, or self-righteous taunting. It's not easy to proceed politically when we take seriously how difficult, deep and personal are the changes we seek. But pleasure, passion, and patience can bring real progress. Remember, the Americans you scorn today must be your allies tomorrow if you are serious about changing life!

important as devising strategies to deal with hostile motorists is the need to deal with those in the ride who may provoke them. For some bicyclists, Critical Mass is an opportunity to berate motorists, now that WE own the road for once.

Our society's over-reliance on motorized traffic is a





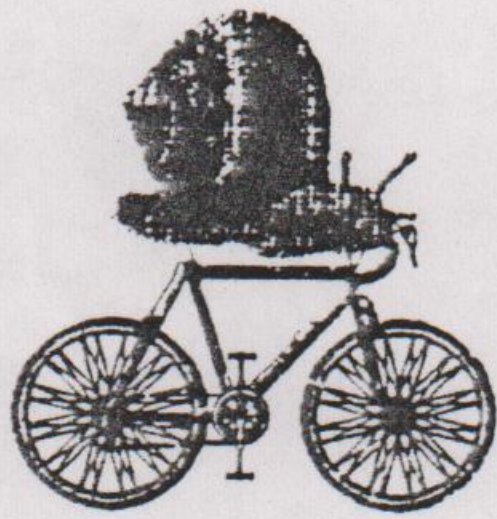
massive and overwhelming social problem, and it won't be changed through the use of bitchy, ineffective tactics by a small minority of pissed-off bicyclists. But a movement for change based on a reclaiming of public space and the building of human community, open to people from across the social and political spectrum, could contribute to a deeper and more fundamental change in the way our society operates.

### VANGUARDS

One of the important things to realize is that the Mass will tend to follow whoever is in front, whether they have a clear idea of where they're going or not.

"Vanguard" types, exploring their leadership potential, will generally sprint ahead of the ride, go through red lights when it isn't necessary, try to block as much traffic as possible, and attempt to lead the ride in a direction they see as "radical."

What happens then is that the head of the ride goes too fast, the ride spreads out, cars get in the



Gathering at San Francisco's Justin Herman Plaza at the east end of Market Street to begin another Critical Mass

middle of the ride, no one has any idea what is going on, dangerous situations occur pretty rapidly, and your Critical Mass becomes a *Critical Mess*.

The way to counter this is to get two or three friends at the head of the ride who have some idea of what the route is and, more importantly, are committed to staying in a group. If you all stick together as a clump, you can influence the course of the ride by riding slowly, speaking out where necessary, and trying to keep everyone together.

If you do this, you have to be prepared to take a certain amount of shit from people who may see you as trying to impose your ideas on everyone else. (A sense of humor helps: on one Berkeley ride, someone yelled "Follow that cop to the freeway!" after an obnoxious cyclist tried to lead the ride toward an onramp.) Speaking your mind and actively asserting your initiative is not akin to being authoritarian—in fact, it's the essence of democracy.

### SNAILS

Snails are a group of antagonistic bicyclists who poke slowly behind the rest of the mass. This dawdling causes the mass to thin out and angers car drivers who are waiting for the ride to progress through the intersection, or are behind the mass and impatient for the mass to get moving.

Again, make your opinion known and be comfortable with that type of interaction. Remember, these people are not out to create the best time for the greatest numbers. They are selfishly antagonizing motorists and destroying any positive association that the drivers might once have had when the rest of the jovial mass passed them.

### COPS

Public demonstrations tend to make the government look bad, since they show vividly that the government does not always represent the people or have their support. Naturally, the police are concerned about popular demon-

## SNAIL ALERT! SNAIL ALERT!

During the last couple of Critical Masses a small clot of 30-40 people have been falling behind. Sometimes it's unavoidable to fall back but other times it seems that some kind of "statement" is being made. Most cyclists here would readily agree that modern life is too rushed, and that we all ought to slow down a bit and enjoy ourselves. That's probably one of the commonest perspectives at a Critical Mass, and that's what we are doing while participating.

Nevertheless, excessive dawdling is hazardous.

Your friends are "corking" at intersections to enhance everyone's safety. If they are good at it, they engage the nearby motorists and generally contribute to a celebratory spirit. When a gap of 1/4 to 3/4 of a block opens up and the corks are left holding up traffic for two or three empty (i.e. no bicycles) minutes, the entire relationship is blown and that person's safety is jeopardized. There are psychotics out there, folks, often sitting alone in their automobiles. Why not stick close together, make our many points en masse, and help keep the ride tight, coherent, and safe?

Something to consider: If a group of riders falls "far enough" behind, the corks should BREAK THE MASS and let cross traffic flow on the green light. The Mass's front needs to stop occasionally anyway and let the density rebuild, so anyone left behind can catch up on the next pause. We are all going to feel really bad if someone gets hurt because the dawdling breaks up our strongest quality, our mass.



strations, and they generally take one of two approaches: either they attack the demonstration—exposing the forcefulness on which this society is based—or they attempt to portray themselves as the demonstration's sponsors and diligent protectors.

With the Bay Area Critical Mass rides, they have generally taken the second, paternalistic approach, allowing the ride to take place, blocking traffic for us and making sure that their presence is felt as an "escort." On one occasion they even went so far as to announce over a bullhorn before the ride, "Welcome to this event!"—an outsider might have surmised that the whole thing was planned and executed by the police themselves!

When police begin to arrest people or hassle riders, they are trying to provoke a confrontation which will justify a repressive crackdown—a confrontation in which their victory is almost guaranteed. It is important not to take them up on the offer. When the police demand that the ride move into the right lane, do it. Then, when the coast is clear, go back. After a few more attempts to control the ride, the police usually give in and realize, short of arresting everyone, there's little they can do except ride along and actually act like the public servants they professed to be in the beginning.

The best strategy is, avoid breaking any laws you don't have to, try to reason with those individuals on the ride who display a tendency to get out of hand and don't give the police an excuse to stop your ride or bust anybody. Be up front and aboveboard about the ride. After all, we're just riding home together in an organized coincidence, so give the cops the route sheet if they want one.

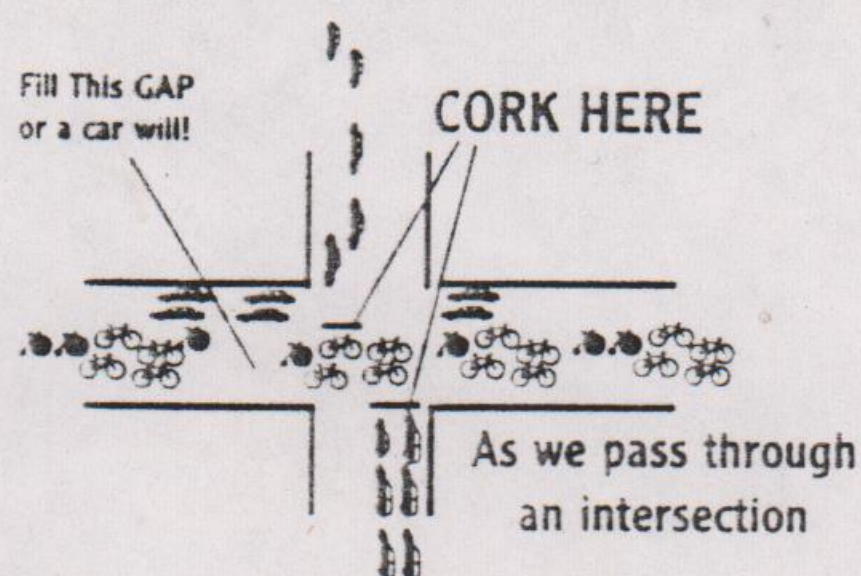
As much as the police may try to own or control the ride, Critical Mass is a popular movement that operates independently of government regulations, and as such, we don't have any business with the police (although they may have business with us). Within the anti-authoritarian culture of the bicyclist milieu, refusing the arbitrary commands of the police might make sense. But the best approach to the police presence at Critical Mass is not to engage in some pathetic, losing confrontation, or embrace them as our saviors and protectors. Rather, we should ignore them and get on with the business of trying to build a Mass.

## "CORKING"

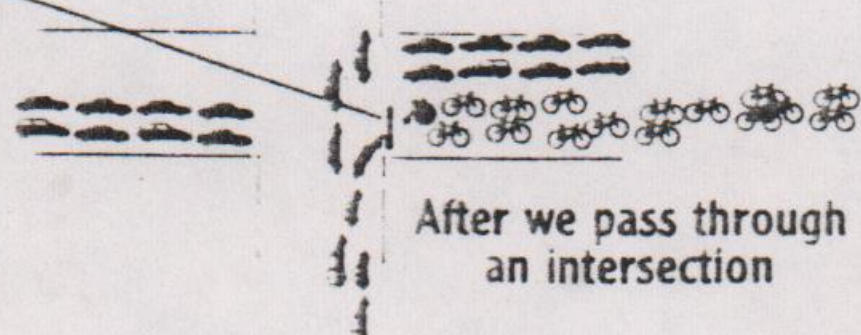
A "CORK" is ONE PERSON who stands in front of a line of oncoming cars WITH A FRIENDLY, NOT ANTAGONISTIC, DEMEANOR!



Proper Corking Etiquette for the Critical Mass!  
Remember, we are NOT A BLOCKADE!  
We are merely RIDING HOME TOGETHER!



CORK HERE



## Massive Critique

So much of our lives we are forced to accept situations which we have not chosen for ourselves. As consumers, as voters, as employees, we allow crucial decisions about our lives to be made by other, more powerful people. How sad it is then—and yet how predictable—that our movements for social change are so often cursed with this same problem. When we join a political party, or sign a petition, or take part in a rally, more often than not we are simply accepting someone else's opinion, chanting slogans we did not create, and endorsing laws we do not understand.

Critical Mass is, or should be, something different . . . A space where people do not have ideas or actions imposed on them, where people can take an active, rather than passive role in building a livable future, in however small a way.

Because no one is in charge on our monthly ride, and no specific ideology is set forth, participants are free to invent their own reasons for being here. The lively Xerocracy that has sprung up, the preponderance of flags and hand-painted signs—not to mention the fact that Critical Mass is spreading to other cities—these things are all signs that we are doing something right. Unfortunately, not everyone sees things this way.

### The Horse and the Rider

There are those who enjoy Critical Mass and regularly participate, but who criticize the ride for its formlessness and what is called its "apolitical" nature. For these people, the task at hand is to politicize the ride by setting up some sort of steering committee, complete with chants, bullhorns and official security (in day-glo jackets, no doubt). If you listen carefully, you can hear talk of "pulling in the reins," "harnessing" the energy of Critical Mass in order to attain some worthy, though predetermined, political goal.

But who is the rider here? And who the proverbial horse? Not only are such analogies absurd and repulsive, but the approach is counter-productive, as those who have been to or heard of the over-organized but sparsely attended Santa Cruz ride can attest.

### Tyranny of the Minority

Another group who would seek to impose the stamp of their political ambitions on Critical Mass, and who have been to some extent more successful, are those who advocate an aggressive, antagonistic stance for the ride. Tactics along these lines have included surrounding and harassing motorists who inch toward the Mass, baiting the police, and pedaling up to the front of the ride and abruptly turning off the agreed route in an attempt to "hijack" the ride.

The purpose is presumably to "radicalize" Critical Mass by pushing it in a more confrontational, even violent direction, an idea that recalls Chomsky's comment that tactics, in and of themselves, do not amount to radicalism.

What both of these approaches share is an impatience with the slow, painstaking task of educating others and organizing toward a future worth living. A truly radical approach to the social problems we face would be to build community and to offer an alternative—a fact that apparently eludes those who believe people have to be tricked or stampeded into creating a better world.

Obviously, no one should be barred from expressing themselves or sharing their thoughts or opinions. We all want to see Critical Mass be a space where diverse political strategies can be debated and experimented with. The point is that if you want to see Critical Mass go in this or that direction, make copies of your ideas and pass them around. Only cowards and authoritarians shrink from the challenge of persuasion!

It could be that all we're doing is riding from HERE to THERE on bikes. But what is so amazing is that in attempting such a simple task, so many important and provocative questions come up. For a moment, a window is opened onto a possible future: a future where no one is in charge and most people ride a bike!

—Reprinted from a handout distributed at the Nov. 12 East Bay Critical Mass



# Critical Mass From the Inside Out

Critical Mass began rather unassumingly, under a less catchy name, the Commute Clot. I went to a SF Bike Coalition meeting in August 1992 and suggested—since there were so many people on bikes downtown, and conditions were so infamously bad—that we gather once a month, make our presence felt to ourselves and the rest of the city, and ride home together. An enthusiastic response was followed within a few weeks by the SFBC's cautious disavowal of responsibility, but the idea caught on immediately. The first ride drew about 60 and after a full year it is drawing upwards of 600+ per ride.

The name Critical Mass came from Ted White's bike-umentary "Return of the Scorcher" wherein intersection crossing etiquette in China's big cities is discussed as a matter of Critical Mass: the cross traffic waits until it achieves critical mass and then pushes through, leaving the original stream of traffic to stop and build until it reaches its push-through point. Once a month we are a Critical Mass, filling 3-4 long blocks of San Francisco's Market Street at the tail end of rush hour, and pedaling in a free-expression zone temporarily free of engines and exhaust.

It was easy to organize CM because it's based on what people do already (bike commute along a main corridor), and its main declared purpose is to enjoy our presence and each other's company as we ride home together. It was also easy because without a specific agenda or organizational sponsor, no one had to actually agree with anything beyond a vague enthusiasm for bicycles, and that leaves room for a pretty wide range of people. Critical Mass has, in fact, brought a lot of new people into contact with each other. The basis for many other initiatives has already been laid, and the lived experience of a vibrant public life, at least for short times, has been tasted by thousands of people.

Participation in an event without the usual trappings of monitors and organizers doesn't mean that there can be no preparation or safety measures. In fact these issues are just as important as ever, since the nature of the ride means it's very possible for someone to get hurt in a fall or in the worst case, by an irate psychotic in a car. In San Francisco we developed a few useful devices that help defuse bad moments and keep the ride moving along comfortably. In fact, the vast majority of people we pass give us thumbs up and friendly waves as they marvel at our procession.

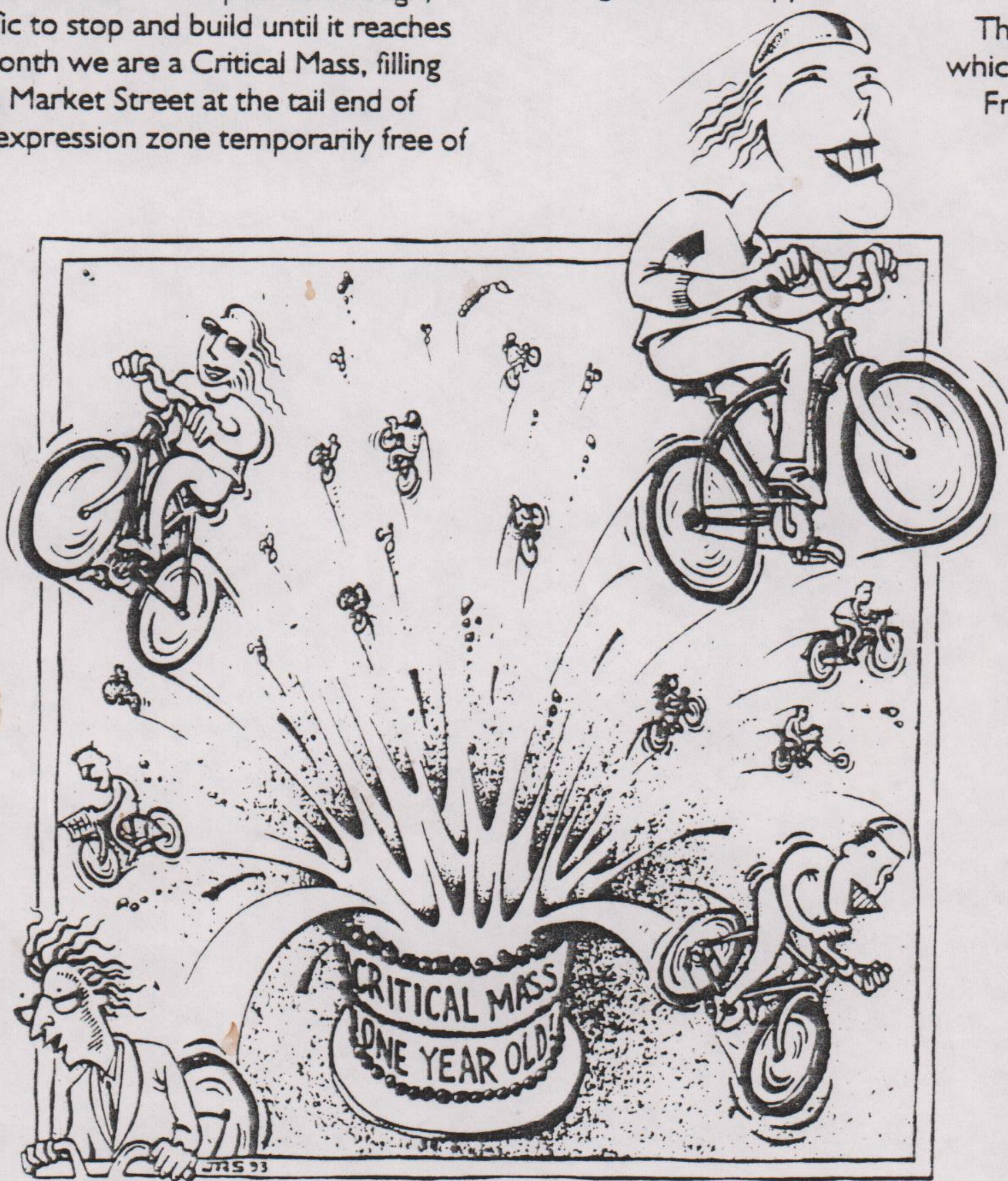
Of course there is the occasional pissed-off macho car driver who manages to get the attention of one or more spoiling-for-a-fight-been-run-over-three-times-this-week-bicyclists and before you know it things can get very out of hand. Luckily, cooler heads have always prevailed so far. On the April 1993 ride, a bad scene occurred at the back of the ride as it straggled up Market Street. Too few bicyclists were holding the intersections as the slowpokes made it through, after motorists had already been waiting for a while. An

impatient man in an Audi pushed his way into the bikes, knocking one guy over. He got up and out of the way with his bike, basically unhurt. Then the driver lunged forward suddenly and smashed into Rebecca Seybold—she went flying, her bike under the wheels. The driver freaked out and tried to drive away, but Rebecca's bicycle jammed his steering and he got stuck in a long futile U-turn ending on the southwestern corner of Guerrero and Market. Meanwhile, 20-30 bicyclists surrounded his car and as he drove away they began pounding on it with their locks, smashing a couple of windows. Rebecca's boyfriend John Kelly jumped through a broken window and grabbed the keys out of the ignition. The cops charged him with battery and Rebecca with malicious mischief, and characterized the motorist as the victim. On September 17, four months later, all the charges were dropped.

The East Bay Critical Mass ride, which takes place on the second Friday of each month, beginning at the downtown Berkeley BART station, took a somewhat different path. Without an obvious commute corridor like SF's Market Street, it

became an unpredictable ride, careening around the East Bay, ultimately visiting the

inside of a Safeway as well as a few McDonald'ses on its way to a rendezvous with the California Highway Patrol after a cruise down a couple of miles of Interstate 80 along the East Bay shore. Since the 63 arrests that day, a concerted effort has been made to calm the East Bay ride, and pursue a more long-term subversive strategy in the same vein as San Francisco's, downplaying the adolescent confrontations as much as possible. But the individual politics of the participants will always be heterogeneous, with militant punk anarchists and Clintonesque corporate workers riding



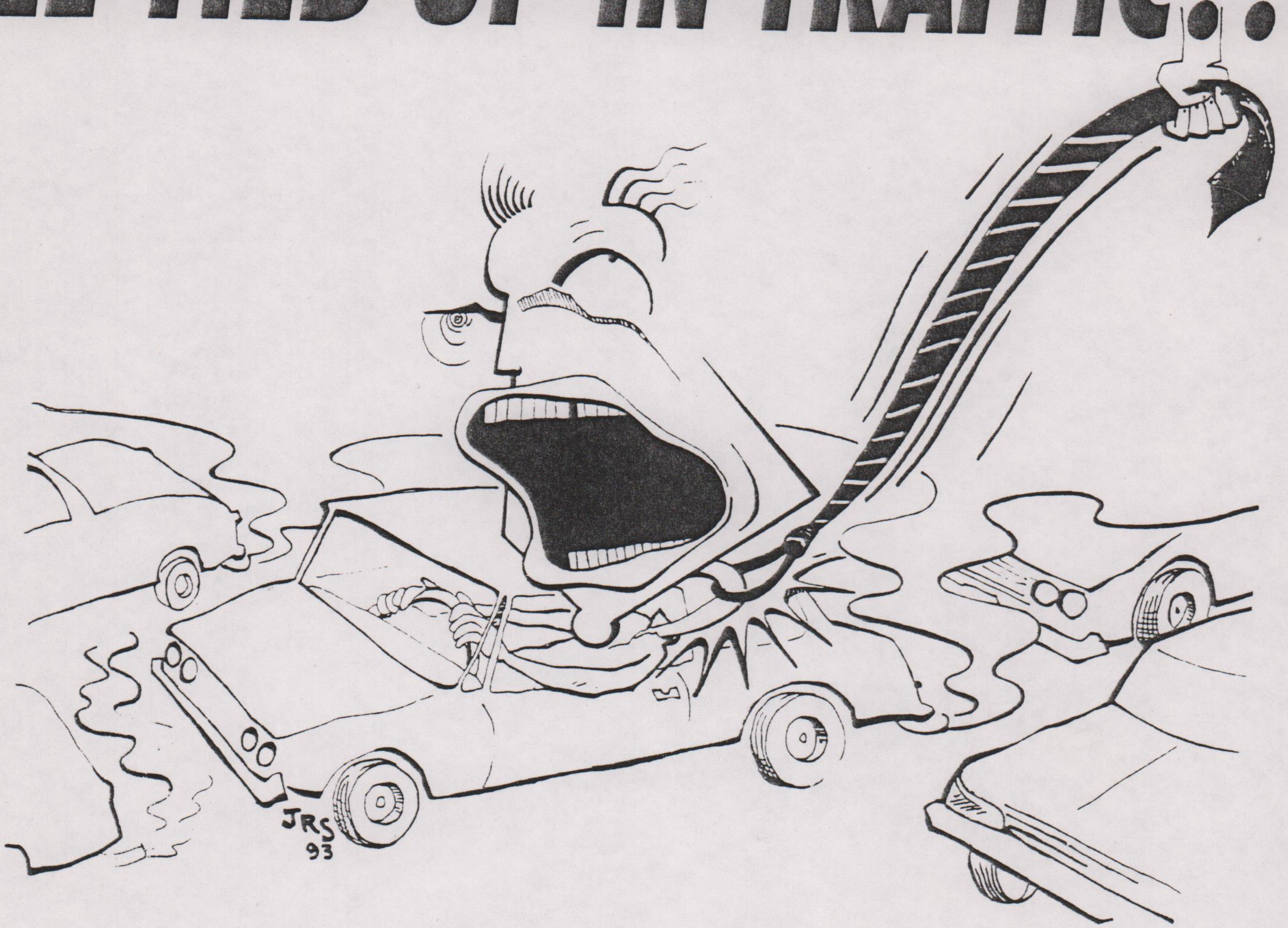
side by side.

Pat Buchanan invoked a "Culture War" during the last presidential campaign, and the past decades' confrontations between religious fundamentalism and secular liberal traditions is part of that. But the numerous alternative subcultures that flourish in San Francisco have their own agenda, outside of that war. When we ride along, several hundred strong, hooting and hollering, whistling, laughing and singing, past boutiques laden with furs and jewelry near Union Square, it feels like a coup, a clever tactical strike, in our kulturkampf. But our alternative culture has to go beyond mere moral guilt about excess consumption and really present a wholistic alternative involving the totality of daily life, from the work we do to how we get around and how we treat each other. Many of the pieces of that puzzle are already well developed but systematically thwarted by the way life is organized now. We know it can be very different, and when we're on the streets together we can feel it and see it.

—Chris Carlsson, August 1993



# ALL TIED UP IN TRAFFIC?!?



Whether driving alone in your car or squeezing in to overcrowded, delayed busses or trains, the transit nightmare is at YOUR EXPENSE! But there is an alternative to this madness, and it's not only faster and more fun, it's good for you and good for the local environment: RIDE A BICYCLE!

**JOIN THE CRITICAL MASS!**  
Last working Friday of each month, bicyclists of all persuasions meet and  
**RIDE HOME TOGETHER!**

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# CRITICAL MASS



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# WE'RE SORRY!

**We're sorry** you are stuck in your car in a traffic jam. Gridlock is more and more common these days... it'll probably go on getting worse, unless we do something.

**We're sorry** if we've contributed to your delay, but please recognize that we bicyclists are ignored, obstructed and physically threatened ALL THE TIME, EVERY DAY. This "Critical Mass" ride home is an organized coincidence that happens once a month, giving bicyclists of all persuasions the chance to see that we are not alone, and that we, too, have a right to the road.

**We're sorry** that absurd and mean-spirited decisions about how we live are made behind the closed doors of the corporate and government elite, leading to a suicidal dependence on the automobile and the oil industry, a cancer epidemic and general ecological catastrophe. We know there are better alternatives, and our monthly ride demonstrates one of them.

**We're sorry** that we all go on reproducing this silly and self-degrading way of life, instead of throwing it over and making a life worth living. Why should we do jobs which make our lives worse due to toxic waste or pollution? Why are our best intentions always corrupted by the need to "make a living"? These questions have complex and difficult answers, answers worth looking into. But for now...

**We're sorry** you're not already out here on your bicycle riding with us! But we heartily invite you to join us next time. Remember, every day is a good bicycling day! Meet at the foot of Market Street on the last working Friday of each month at 5:30 p.m.

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Critical Mass isn't  
BLOCKING traffic—  
**We ARE  
Traffic!!**

At the end of every workday, thousands of people pour into the streets, in what has become a central ritual of life in the late twentieth century —the daily commute.

For most people, however, getting off work is not cause for celebration, or even relief. The ride home promises frustrating gridlock, disgusting air, and for us bicyclists, **constant** threats to our safety and well-being.

But one day a month, the ritual is transformed. Hundreds of us get together and ride through the streets on bicycles, providing motorists, as well as ourselves, with a vision of how things could be different.

We know that you aren't responsible for the organization of our cities around motorized traffic, and if we have contributed to your delay, **WE'RE SORRY!** But maybe you can take this opportunity to reflect on what a world without cars would be like. Or better yet, join us next time!

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