

Our commons are free

This is a show about publishing and printing. It is about trying to effect change through a modest means, through a system that is open to criticism and an alternative to capitalism.

The San Francisco Diggers were an underground movement that came out of street theater. They began in 1966, were mostly anonymous, and were both the message as well as the medium through which their message was sent. They initiated spontaneous events, challenged authority, took drugs, and formed tribes of like-minded people. They also developed their own form of print culture.

Digger printing was cheap and immediate. They took Beat poetry to the street and their announcements let other Diggers know where free things were available, from food to happenings to various goods. As a news service, their street sheets tied together a young community that was coalescing in the San Francisco neighborhood of Haight-Ashbury. They were also looking for fun and searching for meaning outside of the culture of consumerism. The Diggers responded to this need by offering a culture of free: free food; free stores; free drugs; free medical help; free shelter; free news; free events; and a free bank.

Their printed material is what survives to document these efforts towards a free society. Ranging from different types of mimeography to offset printing, the documents have a touch, a design, and a typography specific to their time. For me, it is interesting to see what these sheets of paper looked like, how they were made, how they were printed, and how they were shared and distributed. What do they say? What do they reveal that was specific to their time? Can these writings speak to us now and support a new discourse, one which again seeks to establish values different from those dominant in our society?

Because of the extreme rarity and fragility of the Digger street sheets, most of the publications in this room are being exhibited in facsimile. I have made them from originals in the Diggers' archive in San Francisco with the help of Eric Noble, the Diggers' archivist and a former member of the Friends of Perfection. The rarity of these documents can't be overstated: it is estimated that only 50% of the street sheets survive, many of which are unique and only reside in the Diggers' own archive. Some of these have been reproduced for this exhibition.

The added benefit of showing facsimiles is that this enables you, the visitor, to handle the documents as you read them. It also allows *Our commons are free* to travel to smaller institutions, spaces which have modest operating budgets and where the exhibition can still be offered for free. At the end of each exhibition, the facsimiled documents in the exhibition, including the *Kaliflower Board*, are given to a local library that is open to the public and free of charge. (To date, this has already occurred twice: once in France and once in Italy.)

On the street

There is a street component to this exhibition. With a portable press (*Street press*), we will print and give away Eric Noble's *A short history of the San Francisco Diggers*, a 38-page illustrated essay written by Eric for *Our commons are free*. At the same time, we will hand out six different San Francisco Digger flyers from 1967 and a more recent flyer written by Billy Murcott, Eric Noble, and myself (first printed and distributed during the street activation of the project at the Diggers' Festival in Wigan, England, in 2023). When not on the street, *Street press* will be shown in the exhibition space along with video documentation of the street printing and distribution (to date, the *Street press* has been activated in four different cities).

A historical note

The original Diggers were radical pamphleteers in mid-17th century England who were trying to create equality through an agrarian community and a critique of capitalism. They were also participants in an important moment in

the history of print culture in England. Due to the Civil War, censorship had collapsed in England and radicals – such as the Diggers – began distributing their broadsides and pamphlets out on the street and to “conventicles,” secret gatherings of like-minded people that would later become important to Enlightenment thought. The Digger pamphlets argued for the common ownership of property and the abolition of money.

Many concerns were shared by the 17th century Diggers and the San Francisco Diggers. Both responded to the suffering and economic precarity of their community with a critique of capitalism and an effort to provide for people’s needs. They also depended upon and sought to protect their public spaces: in England, the commons were disappearing due to Acts of Enclosure, and in San Francisco, Golden Gate Park and the streets of Haight Ashbury were threatened by eminent domain and business interests. Although separated by more than 300 years, in both cases, local governments responded to the Diggers with police and military violence.

But there is also a similarity between their belief systems. The antinomians argued that each person should follow their “inner light,” even if this puts them at odds with existing authorities. (Etymology of antinomian: from the Greek “anti” = against + “nomos” = law.) The San Francisco Digger principle of “do your own thing” was a very similar belief. Each person was encouraged to achieve freedom through their own autonomy, even in the face of systemic repression. In the end, both groups were accused of being anarchists and dispersed after a few years. Despite their brevity, however, both are part of a continuing narrative of alternative practices and experimentation that critiques existing power structures through print and direct action.

My interest in the Diggers began as a student of American Studies and antinomianism in the early 1980s. Many years later, in 2002 at the California College of Arts, I was on a symposium with Peter Coyote about generosity and contemporary art. Although I recognized the name of the San Francisco Diggers from my childhood – it was something I associated with theater and free food – their ideas were very vague in my memory. Several years after the symposium, I began to encounter street flyers printed by the Communication Company in the rare book market. Their immediacy, experimentation, and call for a rethinking of society not only offered a new path forward, but redefined the mainstream society around them. Much to my surprise, these flyers also connected my childhood in Northern California to my study of 17th-century radical thought.

Many discoveries both personal and historical have occurred during *Our commons are free*. At numerous points in my research, the history of the San Francisco Diggers has folded into the story of my own family and, as I look at my childhood through an adult’s gaze, early experiences and old family friends change before me. My eyes have been opened in ways I never expected.

Ben Kinmont
Sebastopol
March 2023, updated April 2025