

*DIRECT*

*ACTION*



*A FILM BY GUILLAUME CAILLEAU + BEN RUSSELL*

Taking its title from the tactical  
protest strategy of the same name  
“an action that seeks to achieve an end  
directly and by the most effective means”

# *DIRECT ACTION*

documents the everyday lives of one of the most  
high-profile militant activist communities  
in France and asks whether the success of  
a radical protest movement can offer  
a path through the climate crisis.

This work springs forth from a much larger moment of climate anxiety, cultural struggle, political uncertainty, and increasingly dark optimism. By choosing the ZAD as our subject in the period after its struggle was victorious, it was our intention to bear witness to a viable artistic, intellectual, communal, civic and social path forward through the ecological crisis. Little did we know that a new ecological movement - “*Les Soulevements de la Terre*” - would bubble up from the surface of the ZAD during this time, exploding into the present and redefining what was to come.

*Ben Russell* had relocated to France from Los Angeles in 2019 and, given his long-standing inquiry into the utopian possibilities of collective living - as evidenced by his time amongst Saramaccan villagers, underground music scenes, and Baltic communes - he was quickly drawn to the ZAD as both a conceptual and physical site. He contacted his friend / collaborator / co- producer *Guillaume Cailleau*, a French filmmaker and producer based in Berlin, about collaborating on a film at the ZAD in Notre-Dame-des-Landes. Guillaume had grown up in the rural environment of Western France and had maintained a keen interest in examining systems of production and resistance - and his answer was a quick and resounding yes.

It was on our first visit to the ZAD that we found a diverse collection of political thinkers, utopian dreamers, militant hardliners, organic dairy farmers and kids of all ages spread across a swath of forest and farmland in the rough shape of an airport that was never built. While the occupied land of the ZAD is fairly modest as landscape, to be present at any point on the ZAD is to be physically aware of the alternative timeline

that development proposes: had the airport been realized, the collective bakery would be a gift shop, the dense birch and oak forest a runway. The wetland populations of great crested newts would no longer exist and the week- long symposium of radical bakers would never have taken place. In the context of this particular resistance movement, all minor points become major.

In order to gain access to this community of 10+ collectives and individuals, it was necessary to make bimonthly visits of 1-2 weeks over the course of a year. These visits involved eating and sleeping on-site and working alongside members of the ZAD as they cut wood, weed community gardens, destroy walls and bake bread. It was important to be present in the ZAD in order to feel the time of the ZAD and, given the ZAD’s critical relationship to media representation and its over-saturation during the peak moments of 2012 and 2018, it was essential to move slowly and deliberately in working alongside this diverse group.

As filmmakers, we have always understood that form and content are directly aligned and, because of this, it felt especially exciting to be working with a population for whom action and ideology are inextricable. Utopia is necessarily a common cause and cinema is one of the best places for it to be realized - a time that is always arriving, always present, always receding. For these reasons, cinema is the best vehicle for interrogating, presenting, and recreating the ZADist utopia into a model for living in-and-through the environmental uncertainty of *Right Now*.

*Guillaume Cailleau + Ben Russell*



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# *Situating the ZAD at Notre-Dame-des-Landes:*

Notre-Dame-des-Landes is a largely agricultural territory in north-western France that has been occupied by squatters since the early 2000s in protest of a planned €580 million regional airport project. Following two violent eviction attempts by the French state in 2012 and 2018, the creation of a temporary autonomous zone (!) and the subsequent cancellation of the airport project, this community of activists and farmers gained notoriety as the most successful instance of the anti-development “Zone to Defend” (ZAD) movement in France.

While the original airport project was initiated in the 1960s, it was rekindled by the French government in the 2000s; local multi-generational farmers responded by inviting activists to squat the territory in defense of both the farmland and the fragile marshlands ecosystem that would be destroyed if the project proceeded. The first eviction attempt by the state in 2012 was met by over 40,000 protestors who gathered in support of the ZADists. A 6-year stretch of functional autonomy followed and, after a long period of resistance, the airport plans were abruptly canceled by the Macron government on 17 January 2018 .

A 2<sup>nd</sup> large-scale and violent ten-day eviction operation to remove the ZADists from Notre-Dame-des-Landes immediately followed. Over 2500 police officers fired 11,000 projectiles at the roughly 700 residents and international protestors - but 150+ squatters remained and, four years later, over 20 collective groups

have achieved legal status in a situation described as «relaxed but without full mutual understanding.» The ZAD continued to serve as a hosting and organizational hub for inter/national activists and, in 2021, a new ecological protest movement called *les Soulevements de la Terre* (Earth Uprisings) emerged.

In 2022, some 200km to the south in the village of Sainte-Soline, *les Soulevements* organized a large protest against water privatization. Over 10,000 protestors were met in an open field by 3000 police officers who fired 5000+ tear gas and percussion grenades at them in the course of one hour, leaving 30 police officers and 200 protestors wounded and 2 protestors in a coma. The French government immediately responds by labeling the protestors as “eco-terrorists”, instituting a ban on *Soulevements* and arresting its presumed leadership. This is the context in which the final act of *DIRECT ACTION* takes place...



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## *Interview – Antoine Thirion*

### *When did you start going to the ZAD?*

**BR.** I've had a longstanding enthusiasm for collectives and ideas of utopia, for making portraits of spaces and groups of people. It wasn't until 2020 that I heard about an activist community in France that had won its battle against the state and created an autonomous zone in the process. I was very curious to see what this place looked like after victory.

**GC.** Since I'm based in Berlin, I followed their struggle from a distance - even though I studied nearby in Nantes until 2000. When Ben proposed to go, I asked a friend who had been to the ZAD regularly during the struggle against the airport to be our guide, and he opened the door for us.

### *How did you present the project and how did you manage to get integrated within the community?*

**BR.** A few people there already knew my work and others were simply interested in the idea of us being there. The ZAD is a place that has been overrepresented in French journalistic media but, to my knowledge, not many artists had been there to make work from that perspective. I think that the community was excited and a bit confused by our initial proposition - we never said that we want to meet with a farmer, a militant and a child, you know;

we just said, "We're going to first come for ten days and then we'll come back every two months until we're done."

We had a very clear methodology - we would show up, talk to people, work with them and then maybe ask if we could come back later to film. The ZAD is a place where nobody is photographed without explicit consent so we really had to take our time and move deliberately.

**GC.** In terms of trust, it was important that what we were doing was visible and that we screened our rushes every time we came back. People got used to our presence and understood what we were doing at the same speed that we began to understand them.

**BR.** Our early conceit was to make a portrait of the ZAD as a totality - but one that's the size of an international airport. We quickly found ourselves focusing on activities that were collective in one way or another. Focusing on individuals would have led us into the trap of having protagonists when we were making a film about a collective body.

**GC.** The ZAD is a really diverse place with over 150 people living permanently on site and many others who come and go, composed of different collectives and sensibilities. Focusing in on any one individual would have been detrimental to that diversity.



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*So you were basically living with them whenever you were there?*

**BR.** Yes, we stayed on site every time we visited. In the beginning, as a way of countering the really negative press that the ZAD was getting from the government, the ZADists decided to build a welcome center so that anybody who wanted to visit would feel welcome to do so. Anyone can come to the ZAD for however long they want, more or less. It's essential to the core idea of what that place is and it definitely helped us to make this film.

*Were there things you couldn't film?*

**GC.** We couldn't film the direct democracy meetings, for example. The possibility of repression is so high that even when you aren't do anything "illegal", you don't want to be recorded because any recording could be used against you.

**BR.** People are rightfully paranoid. There are at least 3,000 leftist activists in France who are « fichés S », meaning that they are placed on a terrorist list and under active surveillance. While we don't know who they are, this is why we chose to only use first names in the credits, why we filmed hands as much as faces and why we didn't identify some individuals in the film at all.

*The title can relate to many things, from a political theory to ways of making documentary cinema.*

**GC.** Direct action is generally defined as any situation where people organize to extend control over their own circumstances without recourse to capital or state. It is not just a confrontation with the police - it's about taking your destiny in your hands. This idea seemed to fit very well to what we were portraying. This is a film about the ZAD, but it's also about cinema: direct action applies to the way we are working, to the way we want to make films.

**BR.** What was clear from the very beginning was that this community was unlike any other we'd come across, that their function was to serve the struggle. All of the things that sprung up around them - sharing meals, working collectively, making bread for "prix libre" or forging their own tools - were in service to the struggle. In our conception of the film, direct action is a long term process.

Given our subject, we put a lot of energy into finding a radical form that could match our radical content. The deceptively simple one we arrived at involved putting a 16mm camera on a tripod, pointing it at a subject and watching an event happen - listening and understanding it by virtue of being there over time. We were of course influenced by filmmakers like Chantal Akerman, James Benning, Kevin Everson, Sharon Lockhart, Ulrike Ottinger and Frederick Wiseman - and in terms of sound and image, our approach felt like a very succinct definition of what direct cinema could be.



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*It's also a film about a place that is not hopeless. It's not a disaster in the making.*

**BR.** Right - this was our fundamental interest in being there, in recognizing that the anarchists won! Not only were they victorious but they effectively created an autonomous zone for six years in France - one which harkened back to the Zapatistas in Mexico. This hope allowed us the possibility to make a film that takes place in the present, one that is not looking at the history of what has happened but rather what is happening now and in the future.

*The second half of the film eventually leads to the Sainte-Soline events. What was it like to shoot in such a war-like environment?*

**BR.** It was both shocking and revelatory to us - shocking because the scale of violence was frightening and revelatory because this kind of police violence is something that the ZADists had experienced in both 2012 and 2018 in Notre-Dame-des-Landes. The degree of state repression and violence used against the protestors at Saint-Soline was not new; the people we spoke with were surprised by its scope but not its actuality. When I was filming the last sequence in that protest, I thought (for a variety of reasons) that there was really no way that we could ever use this material - and when a woman stopped in front of our camera to shout "This is not what you should be filming", I totally agreed. This moment remains in the film so as to direct the viewer away from the spectacle of violence - to point towards all that has transpired in the film previously, to frame all that is yet to come.



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## Biographies

*Guillaume Cailleau (France, 1978) is a Berlin-based artist, filmmaker and film producer whose interest lies in exploring new forms to address political and social issues. His films have been screened at film festivals (Berlin, NY, Rotterdam, Edinburgh) and his work has been exhibited in art institutions such as the Bangkok Art & Culture Centre, the Royal Ontario Museum, the Haus der Kulturen der Welt and the Centre Pompidou. In 2014, he won the Silver Bear Jury Prize at the Berlin International Film Festival for his short film Laborat. He produces films with his company CASKFILMS. Direct Action is his first feature-length film.*



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*Ben Russell (USA, 1976) is a Marseille-based artist, filmmaker and curator whose work lies at the intersection of ethnography and psychedelia. Russell was an exhibiting artist at documenta 14 (2017) and his work has been presented at the Centre Georges Pompidou, the Museum of Modern Art, the Tate Modern, the Museum of Modern Art Chicago, the Venice Film Festival and the Berlinale, among others. He is a recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship (2008), a FIPRESCI International Critics Prize (IFFR 2010, Gijón 2017), and premiered his second and third feature films at the Locarno Film Festival (2013, 2017). DIRECT ACTION is his 5th feature-length film.*





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# DIRECT ACTION

A film by *Guillaume Cailleau + Ben Russell*

(3h36 / 1:85:1 aspect ratio - color / Super16mm / 5:1 / French and Arabic with English subtitles / Germany / France - 2024)

Image by *Ben Russell*

Sound Recording by *Bruno Auzet*

Edit by *Guillaume Cailleau + Ben Russell*

Sound Design by *Rob Walker*

Add'l Sound Design by *Nicolas Becker*

Sound Mix by *Rob Walker*

Color Grading by *Sergi Sanchez*

Produced by *Guillaume Cailleau*

Co-Produced by *Michel Balagué*

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The book *DIRECT ACTION*, based on the testimonies of ZADists in connection with the film by *Guillaume Cailleau* and *Ben Russell*, will be published in a bilingual version (french-english) by *IRIS* in September 2024.