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BERLIN JOURNAL

What: Mob Scene. Who: Strangers. Point: None.

By OTTO POHL

BERLIN, Aug. 3 — All at once at 6:01 on Friday evening, about 40 people in the middle of a crowded street pulled out their cellphones and started shouting "yes, yes!" Then they began clapping.

Margarethe Müller, emerging from a nearby department store, sensed that something was happening. She just wasn't sure what.

"Someone told me Jan Ullrich is here," the 66-year-old retiree said, straining to see if the Tour de France runner-up was on the scene. She spotted a man on a bicycle, decked out in the spandex peacock garb of serious cyclists, his cellphone in hand, and holding forth into a television camera.

"That's not Jan Ullrich," she said, disappointed. "Can you please tell me what is going on?"

Many people were asking the same question. The telephone-wielding crowd was the latest incarnation of something called flash mobs. Called into being on short notice by Web sites and e-mail distribution lists, flash mobs meet at an appointed time, engage in some organized spontaneity for a few minutes, then rapidly disperse. The activities are innocent, if mysterious, and tend to bring together loose groupings of surprisingly conventional looking young adults.

Brimming with such a lack of purpose, the fad has found a home in Berlin and across Germany. On Monday, at 5:05 p.m., mobbers have been called to gather at the washing machine display in a department store in the German city of Dortmund, eat a banana, and leave. But events have also been organized in Rome, Vienna and Zurich. Australia is planning one.

As might be suspected, New York is the acknowledged place where people first used the latest technology to gather and delight in pointlessness. In June, more than 100 people gathered in the rug department of Macy's, claiming to a bewildered clerk that they were looking for a "love rug" for their suburban commune. The concept quickly took on a life of its own, propelled by e-mail, cellphones and the Internet.

Typically, instructions include somewhat awkward reminders to avoid the press even while spreading the word, and to stay within the law. At the Friday nonprotest, a contingent of 11 policemen stood by, unsure what to do. "We are here to look for people breaking rules or criminal acts," explained Uwe Stellmacher, a policeman who clearly wasn't sure if he had witnessed either.

He admitted to feeling fairly superfluous. "If someone had stepped out on the street or something, we could have done something," he said.

The idea of using the Internet and mobile phones to organize groups quickly is not new. But until recently, it has been used for greater goals, or at least more practical ones. In Seattle, protesters used the Internet and cellphone messaging to help organize anti-globalization protests. In Britain, teenage girls alert each other to Prince William sightings.

The lack of apparent purpose only broadens the appeal of flash mobs. Still, woven among the cheerful inanity of like-minded Web sites like cheesebikini.com and flashmob.info is some discussion of their importance. Howard Rheingold, who has published a book entitled "Smart Mobs: The Next Social Revolution," thinks flash mobs are part of a larger trend. "Right now, it's just people wanting to do something silly and it's not hurting anybody, so what's the harm?" he says on smartmobs.com, a Web site that is dedicated to his book. "But it shouldn't come as a surprise when this becomes a major outlet of political activism soon as well," he says, perhaps

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Otto Pohl for the New York Times
Participants in a "flash mob" gathered on a Berlin street on Friday, shouted "yes, yes!" into their cellphones for one minute, then began to clap.

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hopefully.

Others only see proof of society's decay. "Do none of these people believe in anything that might be worth gathering for?" someone using the name YllabianBitPipe asked on slashdot.org.

On Saturday, a flash mob collected near the American Embassy in Berlin, and far from deriding Iraqi policies or some other momentous topic, they wore silly hats, waved flags and popped Champagne. "Here's to Natasha!" they toasted, before vanishing.

Tobias von Schönebeck, a tour guide, shook his head when he heard about how the phenomenon was traced back to Macy's. "This is just the sort of thing that happens when you forbid New York to smoke."



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