

# ON CULTURAL GUERRILLA WARFARE: THE ARTIST AND ACTIVISM

by

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(Under the Direction of JOEL DANA BLACK)

## ABSTRACT

Beginning with the question of when art is more than just representation, when it is action, this dissertation explores both the political and aesthetic aspects of art in relation to activism. In the first chapter I establish a political framework for the individual in opposition to a State and where potential sovereignty lies. Moving into aesthetics, I evaluate whether an artist has greater sovereignty than an average citizen. My term “cultural guerrilla warfare” is established and the origins of its development are explained. Three case studies round out the work of accessing the power of an Artist in relation to a respective State. The case studies are William T. Vollmann in the U.S., Ai Weiwei in China, and Pussy Riot in Russia. The Conclusion examines the Inter-State-hood of the artists giving examples of how each sees the states of the others.

INDEX WORDS: Cultural guerrilla warfare, the Artist, the State, Romanticism, the Enlightenment, Giorgio Agamben, homo sacer, bare life, bio-politics, sovereignty, Walter Benjamin, Michel Foucault, Frantz Fanon, symbolic action, suicide, terrorism, William T. Vollmann, Ai Weiwei, Pussy Riot

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DEDICATION

To my wife, Jessica, for all of her love and support.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

My research and dissertation topic involves what at the outset sounds like a very simple question, “when is art more than art, specifically, when is art action?” Early on in my graduate academic career—while completing a Masters degree in Religious Studies—I wrote a paper where I examined a concept under my own coinage, “cultural guerilla warfare.” If genocide can happen on a cultural level (with no lives lost), as established at the United Nations Genocide Convention of 1947, then other forms of cultural combat must exist. The paper wherein I developed cultural guerilla warfare used as a case study the phenomenon of the Virgin of Guadalupe in Mexican Catholicism and how it is through her that pre-conquest Aztec traditions are preserved and upheld within the mythos of the conqueror. The Virgin of Guadalupe represents a subversive cultural act against a dominant meta-narrative. Many years later, I realized that my interests could not escape the topic of cultural subversion in regards to countering a meta-narrative. This realization came while I wrote a paper about Guy Debord’s ideas of “spectacle” in order to assess what impact the Occupy Wall Street (OWS) movement had, if any at all. It began to appear clearly to me that there was a connection between protest as a performative act, protest art, and ultimately, art in general, and what I saw in the functionality of the Virgin of Guadalupe. The protests of Occupy Wall Street, described with Debord’s terms about little “s” spectacle being employed to counter big “S”



Spectacle in one paper aligned with my own terms of “cultural guerilla warfare” in use to counter a “meta-narrative.” Art in protest, art in the service of revolution, art with any real impact in the world should therefore in itself be applicable to this categorical classification of “cultural guerrilla warfare.” But when and how is art ever a form of action, when is it more than art? When is it Cultural Guerilla Warfare?

In the first chapter, after giving a glossary of terms developed in the rest of the chapter, I establish the two facets of my line of inquiry, the political and the aesthetic. For political theory, the ideas of sovereignty, as treated by contemporary Italian philosopher, Giorgio Agamben, after Carl Schmitt, Michel Foucault, and Walter Benjamin, establish the terrain in which to consider my question. To ask about when art is more than art, but action, is to look at the relationship between an artist and his or her respective state. With Agamben as inspiration, the sovereignty of the state and the potential power of a citizen artist is given parameters of discussion. The third section of the first chapter, in which the aesthetic component is considered, provides a place to look at how theorists have evaluated the role of the artist in modern society. Poet and essayist Charles Baudelaire, critical theorist Walter Benjamin, and novelist Henry Miller figure prominently in this second section in order to define the artist as the hero of the modern world. The fourth section is where my term “cultural guerrilla warfare” is explained in depth with examples as to how it was developed. The following section is where I am able to provide another example of cultural guerrilla warfare—the use of the term “Holocaust” in reference to Hitler’s Final Solution—in response to how Giorgio Agamben evaluates that term historically.

The next three chapters focus on three individual case studies of artists in relation to their respective states. All of the research I have done involving aesthetic theory, political theory, and deep reading into Romantic and Post-Colonial Literature will be used alongside the terms and concepts established in the first chapter to consider and assess the artists and their works in the three contemporary case studies. The three studies were chosen by how well they and their work illustrate very obvious situations of the artist in a problematic and critical relationship with their respective states. The decision to focus upon the Russian punk music performance art group, Pussy Riot; the Chinese mixed-media visual artist, Ai Weiwei; and American literary artist and journalist, William T. Vollmann was also based on current media coverage and popular appeal of these artists. There are millions of persecuted artists around the world, and yet these three, in their unique ways, have gained the spotlight of media attention about their situations and have promoted deep discussion in a wide range of forums. With connections drawn from protest art and a wide range of political movements over the last two hundred years I can consider the relation between each Artist and their respective state (Russia, China, the US), as well as their successful ability to speak back against the meta-narrative of their situations.

As these artists are all currently living and working, my research will involve newspapers, magazine articles, and documentary filmmaking more than just books of a scholarly or literary nature. I believe this project has real-world social and political relevance, helping to explain an ancient phenomenon of cultural power dynamics, and breaking down into the simplest and most practically applicable way the process of revolution, or subversion of a social meta-narrative, can be performed in regards to art.

This study will be useful for politicians, social scientists, politically engaged artists, followers of contemporary politics, and literary historians. I hope to promote understanding, as well as bring hope to many who might feel that their position in a social situation might be bleak and powerless. My work involves examining what power the smallest voice has and through what means that voice is able to speak loud enough to make social change.

In conclusion I will also look at aspects of “Inter-State-hood” among these three case studies as they each comment on the state of the others, occasionally referencing the actual other artists of the case studies. This will help make my work here more holistic.

In the chapter, “Threshold,” in the book *Homo Sacer* by Giorgio Agamben where he addresses his problems with the term, “Holocaust,” he gives some hope for Georges Bataille’s view of sovereignty when he closes with the line: “If today there is no longer any one clear figure of the sacred man, it is perhaps because we are all virtually *homines sacri*.”<sup>1</sup> The ominous quality of this sentiment harkens back to Walter Benjamin’s very famous line from his “Theses on the Philosophy of History”—which Agamben invokes in his work—about how the state of emergency we now live in is not an exception any longer, but the rule.<sup>2</sup> My three case studies, who have all been surveilled and detained by their respective states (some of whom have even been incarcerated), understand well the words of Benjamin and sentiment of Agamben. At Ai Weiwei’s 2014 Alcatraz site-specific installation, a colorful dragon flew overhead within a prison building bearing messages, one of which reads: “Everyone of us is a potential convict.” At a 2014 live

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<sup>1</sup> Agamben, 115.

<sup>2</sup> Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 257.

<sup>3</sup> Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 257.

<sup>4</sup> Burke, 5.

<sup>5</sup> Bourdieu, 166.

<sup>6</sup> Bourdieu, 170.

reading in Spokane, Washington, William T. Vollmann told the audience, “We are all potential terrorists.” In a letter from prison, Maria Alyokhina of Pussy Riot compared the penal system structure to that of the whole Russian state and added “You can be deemed a ‘malevolent’ for committing a dangerous violation, planning to commit, or ‘having a tendency’ to commit one (this is my favorite part). Dangerous violations [include] male homosexuality and lesbianism... I love Oscar Wilde, ancient Greeks, and Marina Tsvetaeva’s poetry. If I declaim their poetry, would that be seen as proof of a ‘tendency’? I’m sure it could.” It is also because of this harmonious sentiment that I have chosen these three subjects of focus in my study of Cultural Guerrilla Warfare.

## CHAPTER 2

### The State, The Artist, and Cultural Guerrilla Warfare

#### I. Glossary:

In the following chapter, several different artists and theoreticians will be cited, all of who employ a range of terms and concepts. My intention in this work is to weave together many different voices and traditions to describe a naturally occurring phenomenon of human history. Beginning my study, and in preparation of addressing individual case studies, it is best to establish the terms I will be using. A recent book on the history of the Dada movement, *Destruction Was My Beatrice* by Jed Rasula, claims the Dada movement, “amounted to a sort of cultural guerrilla warfare.”<sup>3</sup> So if that is an expression that might now be in the zeitgeist, then it is imperative for me to establish my own terms in print.

#### A. **The Artist** – *Storyteller, Poet, Author, Auteur, Composer, Maker, Shaman, Sorcerer, Hero*

All Artists are Individuals (Citizens under a Sovereign), but not all Individuals are Artists. All Individuals have the potential to be Artists. This can be achieved by producing Art. Art is the product produced by an Artist in service and fulfillment

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<sup>3</sup> Rasula, xii.

of his/her identity as an Artist. Whether or not consciously/intentionally an Artist, all Individuals are “cultural participants” and therefore have the capacity to be Artists, and even unintentionally engage in the manipulation of culture or Art. While tautological, in a world since the Dada movement, since Marcel Duchamp, Merce Cunningham, and John Cage; a world full of intellectualized concept art; the mere intention to be an Artist and designation of one’s craft as “Art” is enough.

**B. The Sovereign –**

*“S”pectacle, Meta-Narrative, The State, Body-Politic, Center, Emperor, King, The Prince, President, Dictator, Prime Minister*

The Sovereign controls the big “S” spectacle of Debord’s terminology. The Sovereign is possibly inseparable from Spectacle in Debord’s terminology. For Agamben and Carl Schmitt, it is the sovereign who decides the state of exception; standing outside the juridical order and still belonging to it. Generally the capital “S” Sovereign is considered the Head of State or the State itself, Rousseau referring to this as the “body-politic.” For Bataille there is a sovereignty to bare life (*zoe*) as if it has the ability to transgress the prohibition against killing; and also the Artist is a Sovereign over his/her artistic territory. Bataille’s sovereignty is often in polar opposite to Agamben/Schmitt’s.

**C. Cultural Guerrilla Warfare (CGW) —**

*Detournement, Protest Art, Insurrection, Subversion, Defiance, Resistance, Poetic Terrorism, Symbolic Action*

CGW is the intentional or unintentional subversive manipulation of a dominant narrative—or meta-narrative—supporting a power dynamic or social structure.

CGW is a tactic, a means, a method. It can be performed intentionally/actively by an Artist or unintentionally/passively by a mere Individual, as all humans are cultural participants. CGW is a—and possibly *the*—form of non-violent warfare.

The Artist substitutes violence with CGW. It is always guerrilla since it is always the underdog involved in subverting a dominant tradition.

#### **D. The Enlightenment —**

*The Modern, Modernity, Industrial/Post-Industrial Society, The Enlightenment Project, The West, Western Values, Spectacle, Colonial Power, Center,*

Enlightenment for Foucault is an event located at a certain point in the development of European values, mostly exalting rationality, and in tension with humanism. For Baudelaire, through Benjamin, Modernity is a place that could be symbolized by the crowd, where the artist is a hero and suicide is a heroic reaction. Modernity is marked by the entry of *zoe* into the *polis*. In Modernity the state of emergency is the rule, not the exception. For Debord, “Spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relationship mediated by images... the basic tautological character of the spectacle flows from the simple fact that its means are simultaneously its ends. It is the sun which never sets over the empire of

modern passivity... modern society has already invaded the social surface of each continent by means of the spectacle.”

## **II. The Question; and Its Politics**

The question of, “when is art more than art, when is art action,” is far from a simple question on close examination. It asks within itself several other questions, and it demands parameters and definitions to be set in order to lead to any concrete answer. Pursuing this line of inquiry leads into many splintered areas of study. Some of the main theoretical apparatus involved in this inquiry are less obvious than one would think. Other than the natural trajectory of aesthetic theory, on the front end of the question/s is the more obscure second end. What would art at a state more than itself entail, or as this involves action, what is action? Action would involve art “doing something,” “in the world;” or “having an impact” beyond “representation.” This trajectory of inquiry, the attempt to understand action—i.e. doing something, having an impact, making change, affecting the world, being a cause of effect in the world—is clearly an inquiry in the realm of political theory.

There is some overlapping terrain here with some recently departed theorists of the potential power of art that should be acknowledged. To literary scholar Kenneth Burke (1897-1993) man is the “symbol-using animal” and he questions whether we can ever “bring ourselves to realize...just how overwhelmingly much of what we mean by ‘reality’ has been built up for us through nothing but our symbol systems.”<sup>4</sup> He spends

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<sup>4</sup> Burke, 5.



his great study, *Language as Symbolic Action*, analyzing ways in which literary works can “actively” alter the physical world in which we live since that world is always mediated for us, and by us, through symbols. Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002), a scholar of sociology as much as language, writes about “symbolic power” as the “power of constructing reality.”<sup>5</sup> After further analysis on political power dynamics and how symbolic power correlates, Bourdieu synthesizes his concept by adding that symbolic power involves “a power of constituting the given through utterances, of making people see and believe, of confirming or transforming the vision of the world and, thereby, *action* on the world and thus the world itself, an almost magical power which enables one to obtain the equivalent of what is obtained through force (whether physical or economic).”<sup>6</sup> When I refer to “action” in regards to art I’m acknowledging the work of Burke and Bourdieu and how the action art performs is symbolic, it mediates the world through its representation. The way Bourdieu uses the word *action*—italicized by me for emphasis—here is almost banal in referring to humans “doing things” and yet grand in how it affects “the world itself.” Later when I address my titular term “cultural guerrilla warfare” I will point out how it is not physical, violent warfare, but since it occurs culturally, it stands in the place of violence, and while violence is a powerful force in bringing change in the world it carries within itself a negation of general social values.

My work here is fittingly part of a zeitgeist, as it is supported well by contemporary political theory. Asking about the potential of art to be action, however we seek to define and assess “action,” is also asking about the role of “the artist” in society, as it is he/she who produces the “art,” or commits this potential “action.” As I have just

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<sup>5</sup> Bourdieu, 166.

<sup>6</sup> Bourdieu, 170.

broadened the inquiry, the political nature of this endeavor comes more into relief. The artist is a member of society, who exists in a time and place, and is part of a political discourse as an individual before we even consider his/her role as “artist.” So before bringing aesthetic theory into this whole project, the question of action involves first asking if anyone can “do” anything. Where is the power and potentiality in the individual in relation to his/her society, or the world?

The contemporary political theory treating this trajectory is that which involves law, definitions of the state, critiques of the Enlightenment and Enlightenment ideals, post-colonialism, and a very specific term that cuts across many avenues of social and political theory, “biopolitics.” One of the main voices in the formation of biopolitics as a study was Michel Foucault (1926-1984), French philosopher of post-structuralism and cultural and social genealogies. The mantle of his biopolitical work has been picked up and carried further by contemporary Italian philosopher, Giorgio Agamben (born 1942). In 1995, Agamben published a seminal work, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, a work that has been much utilized and criticized by other scholars, and repeatedly returned to by Agamben himself. It is in this work that Agamben formulates terms like “sovereign power,” “bare life,” and “biopolitics” that are useful in my work in trying to understand the aspects of the artist as an individual in a society—in relation to Law or the State—and what potential that artist as an individual has towards truly acting, i.e. creating a work of art that is more than a work of art, but action itself.

The premise of *Homo Sacer*, and from where the title is derived, is an archaic Roman law written about in Pompeius Festus’s treatise *On the Significance of Words*. Festus is merely examining words, but he describes an old law, one from which scholars

have since tried to infer a great depth. Homo sacer, or “sacred man,” is “the one whom the people have judged on account of a crime. It is not permitted to sacrifice this man, yet he who kills him will not be condemned for homicide... This is why it is customary for a bad or impure man to be called sacred.”<sup>7</sup> The contradictions or possible paradoxes involved in this concept start a profound chain of thought for Agamben. This sacred man is defined by exclusion and yet still has a place of inclusion within the society. It is not forbidden to murder him, which is within anyone’s rights of the law, and yet he cannot be killed as part of a ritual sacrifice. The homo sacer is bad or impure, judged on account of a crime, and yet not expelled, he is still part of the society; his presence almost that of a non-presence, a “set-apart-ness.” Agamben introduces this concept briefly in his introduction and then it becomes the focus of Part II of the book, with an initial chapter devoted to the Festus citation and following chapters treating various points. In considering etymologies from scholars of religion he cites an essay that links sacer/sacred with taboo, “Sacer esto is in fact a curse; and homo sacer on whom this curse falls is an outcast, a banned man, tabooed, dangerous.” While another example on the same page stresses the double meaning of sacred/sacer expressly in the context of the homo sacer: “Sacer designates the person or the thing that one cannot touch without dirtying oneself or without dirtying; hence the double meaning of ‘sacred’ or ‘accursed’ (approximately). A guilty person whom one consecrates to the gods of the underworld is sacred.”<sup>8</sup>

There is nothing odd about religious and political law coming together in an ancient Roman context, but of course, this is material Agamben is using to examine and critique our present Western condition. However, this is the beauty of Agamben’s work,

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<sup>7</sup> Agamben, 71.

<sup>8</sup> Agamben, 79.

why it speaks to me, and why it is considered in the vein of his frequent points of inspiration, Michel Foucault and Walter Benjamin, it defies categorization and crosses disciplines. Agamben speaks to this at the end of the chapter wherein he defines sacred: “An assumed ambivalence of the generic religious category of the sacred cannot explain the juridico-political phenomenon to which the most ancient meaning of the term sacer refers. On the contrary, only an attentive and unprejudiced delimitation of the respective fields of the political and the religious will make it possible to understand the history of their intersection and complex relations.”<sup>9</sup> This becomes especially freeing in my work in comparing religious functionality, as in the case of the Virgin of Guadalupe, and the social political functionality of art. The delimitation of respective fields necessary in Agamben’s work provides an open framework for the intersections of cultural studies in my own work.

After Agamben’s defines the term homo sacer, he makes it more understandable by pairing it with another term on my list mentioned above, sovereignty. The initial definition of sovereignty he employs is from Carl Schmitt (1888-1985), a German jurist and devout Nazi, who provides profound commentary on power and its functions. He defines the sovereign as, “he who decides on the state of exception.”<sup>10</sup> Agamben points out though, that sovereignty also consists in a paradox, “the sovereign is, at the same time, outside and inside the juridical order. If the sovereign is truly the one to whom the juridical order grants the power of proclaiming a state of exception and, therefore, of suspending the order’s own validity, then ‘the sovereign stands outside the juridical order and, nevertheless, belongs to it, since it is up to him to decide if the constitution is to be

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 80.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 11.

suspended *in toto*.”<sup>11</sup> Like “homo sacer,” sovereignty is a term here that contains contradictory forces. The work of Agamben seeks to explain each by bringing them together. He notes that, “the sovereign and homo sacer present two symmetrical figures that have the same structure and are correlative: the sovereign is the one with respect to whom all men are potentially *homines sacri*, and homo sacer is the one with respect to whom all men act as sovereigns. The sovereign and the homo sacer are joined in the figure of an action that, excepting itself from both human and divine law... nevertheless delimits what is, in a certain sense, the first properly political space of the West distinct from both the religious and profane sphere, from both the natural order and the regular juridical order.”<sup>12</sup> The sovereign and the homo sacer are the highest and lowest in a juridical-political structure and at the same time, share an almost liminal or interstitial space involving inclusion and exclusion.

What place can we find for the artist in this? In the final chapter of Part II in *Homo Sacer*, the part devoted to the groundwork and definition of the term “homo sacer,” Agamben spends some time considering the ideas of George Bataille (1887-1962). A scholar encamped on the side of the poet, the transgressive, the iconoclast, and the outlaw, Bataille authored a study of various writers called *Literature and Evil*, a work dense with his own interpretation of sovereignty and the function and power of the artist in society. As a poet, as well as a scholar, it is understandable from where Bataille angles his perspective. Agamben writes, “If the originally political element is sacred life, it becomes understandable how Bataille could have sought the fulfilled figure of sovereignty in life experienced in the extreme dimension of death, eroticism, excess, and

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 84.

the sacred, and yet also how Bataille could have failed to consider the link that binds that life to sovereign power.”<sup>13</sup> Bataille is not a political theorist, he is a poet and literary critic, which must account for the failing Agamben finds in him. Since Bataille’s angle is from that of the artist we can understand Agamben’s criticism that, “Bataille immediately exchanges the political body of the sacred man, which can be killed but not sacrificed and which is inscribed in the logic of exception, for the prestige of the sacrificial body, which is defined instead by the logic of transgression.”<sup>14</sup> Bataille, a poet and artist, romanticizes transgression and the sacred to which Agamben adds, “If Bataille’s merit is to have brought to light the hidden link between bare life and sovereignty, albeit unknowingly, in his thought life still remains entirely bewitched in the ambiguous circle of the sacred.”<sup>15</sup>

This train of thought, “bewitched in the ambiguous circle of the sacred,” leads Agamben to point out his own problems with calling Hitler’s Final Solution “the Holocaust.” The term “Holocaust” is a “wish to lend a sacrificial aura to the extermination of the Jews” and from his perspective (Agamben’s perspective) it is an act of “irresponsible historiographical blindness.” By the definitions of homo sacer and sovereignty, and the reigning political structure of Nazi Germany, the Jews of the camp were a textbook example of Agamben’s thesis. He continues on the same page, in the same paragraph: “The truth—which is difficult for the victims to face, but which we must have the courage not to cover with sacrificial veils—is that the Jews were exterminated not in a mad and giant holocaust but exactly as Hitler had announced, ‘as lice,’ which is to say, as bare life. The dimension in which the extermination took place is neither

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<sup>13</sup> Agamben, 112.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 113.

religious nor law, but biopolitical.”<sup>16</sup> Despite his critique of Bataille’s neglect of the political concept of the sovereign, perhaps it is Agamben who is short sighted here, and it actually *is* the role of art and the artist to employ the power of narrative, and reclaim history, with the use of “sacrificial veils,” as the Jews have done religiously? Maybe art can appropriate sovereignty for the homo sacer, those of bare life, and can find a rightful place in the study of biopolitics?

As the second and third terms from my list have now been mentioned in passing by Agamben, let us next address the first one found in the Introduction to *Homo Sacer*. “Bare life” is a concept that originates in ancient Greek thought. Apparently the Greeks, as noted in Aristotle and other sources, believed that there were two ways of talking about life, “semantically and morphologically distinct: *zoe*, which expressed the simple fact of living common to all living beings (animals, men, or gods), and *bios*, which indicated the form or way of living proper to an individual or a group” and “to speak of a *zoe politike* of the citizens of Athens would have made no sense”<sup>17</sup> in that time. “Zoe” in Agamben’s terms translates as “bare life,” and he states that, “the entry of *zoe* into the sphere of the *polis*—the politicization of bare life as such—constitutes the decisive event of modernity and signals a radical transformation of the political-philosophical categories of classical thought. It is even likely that if politics today seems to be passing through a lasting eclipse, this is because politics has failed to reckon with this foundational event of modernity.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Agamben, 114.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 4.

Agamben even speculates that the politicization of bare life—while it might seem to be the decisive event in modernity, for it appears to be a cornerstone of modernity (or what Foucault might call “The Enlightenment Project”)—might “constitute the original... nucleus of sovereign power. It can even be said that the production of a biopolitical body is the original activity of sovereign power.”<sup>19</sup> At this point, Agamben is firmly in the territory of speaking about “biopolitics,” and it is understood that employing Agamben as a part of the theoretical apparatus of my study involves the interconnection of all of these terms. “Biopolitics” is developed following a train of thought from Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality*: “at the threshold of the modern era, natural life begins to be included in the mechanisms and calculations of State power, and politics turns into biopolitics.”<sup>20</sup> And directly quoting Foucault, as he makes a bridge between ancient Greek thought and the difference he sees in modernity, he notes: “For millennia... man remained what he was for Aristotle: a living animal with the additional capacity for political existence; modern man is an animal whose politics calls his existence as a living being into question.”<sup>21</sup> Though, of course, as it has been mentioned earlier, Agamben believes the biopolitical to be the root of social and sovereign power. Later in the text, in Part III, when Agamben focuses on defining and exploring the role of the biopolitical in his work, he cites Hannah Arendt and her work on totalitarianism and surmises that, “Only because politics in our age had been completely transformed into biopolitics was it possible for politics to be constructed as totalitarian politics to a degree hitherto unknown.” Referring back to Foucault and Arendt together he continues, “The concept of

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 3.



‘bare life’ or ‘the sacred’ is the focal lens through which we shall try to make their points of view converge.”<sup>22</sup>

Agamben is showing us that it is all a question of biopolitics. For my specific inquiry, to ask about action, or the potential of art, I am asking about biopolitics. What power does the artist, or mere individual, have in the world? How can one speak back against power, claim more ground in a power dynamic, make change, or do anything? These are questions regarding biopolitics. My venture examines what extra place the artist has in biopolitics, if any. Is the power of art always in some bourgeois middle of the power dynamic? Or is it available to even the homo sacer and the sovereign?

Considering the role of the artist, Agamben acknowledged the sacrificial veil employed by the victim, though he deemed it historically irresponsible and blind. It is possible he is missing the power the homo sacer might have, or those speaking on behalf of the homo sacer, to manipulate narrative, to speak back to power, to have a sense of sovereignty, as Bataille claims in his use of the term. This is one means for art to become more than art, to become action, for it to act in time and place. As I investigate those possibilities, the terms of Agamben and his study, provide a way to engage the setting in which the artist finds him/herself. It provides a framework of power dynamic by which to talk about reality and the place of the individual between the extremes of sovereignty and homo sacer, inclusion and exclusion. This will be addressed later in this chapter.

At the end of the Introduction to *Homo Sacer* Agamben says that, “The problem of sovereignty was reduced to the question of who within the political order was invested with certain powers, and the very threshold of the political order itself was never called

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 120.

into question. Today, now that the great state structures have entered into a process of dissolution and the emergency has, as Walter Benjamin foresaw, become the rule, the time is ripe to place the problem of the originary structure and limits of the form of the State in a new perspective.”<sup>23</sup> I believe that the best place for questioning the old structure and introducing the new would be in and through art. This is part of the zeitgeist, as I mentioned before, that my work falls into. Beginning the political theoretical apparatus of my project with Agamben and his current approach to biopolitics, I will continue to explore other similar voices backwards into modern history (even to the early modern) and laterally into contemporary theorists influenced by Foucault, Arendt, Benjamin, and Deleuze, as is Agamben.

### **III. The Aesthetic Component**

As established at the beginning of this Introduction, my line of inquiry into the nature of *art and when it is more than itself, i.e. action*, is a line of inquiry into aesthetic and literary theory along with the social and political. Beginning my survey in the era of the Enlightenment, or Modernity, two major movements, or literary traditions, present themselves as prime locations in which to base discourse. Romanticism and Post-Colonialism might seem disparate and incompatible to the student of either discipline exclusively, but to dip deeply from both wells is to taste a common flavor. They are both categories of literatures, or arts, in response and opposition to large overarching social movements. In some manifestations of Romanticism, a limited interpretation shows it as

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<sup>23</sup> Agamben, 12.

a literary tradition in response to “neo-classicism,” and yet in the widest view, Romanticism is a response, or counter, to Modernity. This object of “counter,” and super-structure necessitating a response, is shared by that other literary tradition, Post-Colonialism. As colonialism is inseparable from the history of the West in the modern world since the advent of “The Enlightenment,” post-colonialism is an inescapable place for critique. Moreover, in its most basic understanding—an analysis of a social power dynamic involving domination and oppression—post-colonialism is a theoretical apparatus that can be taken as far back into history as needed. The literary, or artistic, expressions of a post-colonial situation can be found in all time periods where we can find conquest. They are found in *The Epic of Gilgamesh* and texts further east, like *The Mahabharata*. However, limiting my inquiry to modernity, or generally the last three hundred years, post-colonialism can be understood as the most important critical apparatus for a world where globalism is a given and increasingly unavoidable. Capitalism, colonialism, and industrialism, are overlapping cornerstones of Modernity and for all the propounded social benefits and advancements of “Enlightenment ideals” (democracy, higher-standards of living, and material wealth), we have seen systematic exploitation, racism, and social alienation as other natural results.

In the words of Novalis, a German Romantic poet of the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, “poetry heals the wounds inflicted by reason,” thus stating the social and spiritual function of art in a common Romantic outlook. This social function, directed not only at reason, but other central characteristics of Modernity can be found in similar expressions throughout English, Irish, American, and French Romantics, as well as other Germans. As reason and modernity are often the enemy in Romantic literature and arts,

themes and forms applied in counter-attack are often mythological, religious, or of some metaphysical nature. When looking at work in this literary tradition, it might seem difficult initially to find a connection to the Post-Colonial tradition of literature or art. Post-Colonialism, this theme of expression of people in a struggle against colonialism (or in colonialism's aftermath), appears so obviously political, often without room for a metaphysical component. As I understand Romanticism, metaphysics is a rhetorical device employed in the service of opposition to a social situation, a situation that is often such a "meta-narrative" that it can only be reached and countered in most lofty or absolute terms. On close inspection of both Romanticism and Post-Colonialism, the function of the art form and direction of their respective critiques is the same. The differences seem to be mostly about form and style. Those differences might also signal towards differences of geography and class of these respective artists in each literary tradition.

As a form of expression, Post-Colonialism grows and expands in later stages of Modernity due to the flaws of colonialism itself becoming more and more apparent. At the same time, Romanticism also starts to show a more obviously social component. While the popular late nineteenth century movement, "Art for Art's Sake," was taking a stand against utility and the social function of art, it was followed, after the horrors of the First World War, by the Dada movement, which held pure nihilism at its core. Dada was brought more down to earth by its offshoot, Surrealism, which still retained a role of opposition to bourgeois society. What we see running through all three of these movements is a continuation of the very Romantic notion of the artist and his relation to society; and this politicization of the artist is often viewed heroically.

Walter Benjamin is a figure that sits between worlds or disciplines, particularly those involved in this study. Benjamin (1892-1940) was a German scholar, often considered a member of the Frankfurt School, but who wrote so widely that his work transcends discipline to the point that it helped spur a new form within the humanities and social sciences, “Critical Theory.” Literary theory, social theory, and religious studies are often conflated in Benjamin’s wide grasp of erudition and inquiry. For Benjamin everything human is political, as much as everything is also social and religious; this we see in his writing about art. In Benjamin’s essays on Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867) he formulates his own ideas about Modernity and the role of the artist through reading Baudelaire’s poetry and prose. “Baudelaire patterned his image of the artist after an image of the hero,”<sup>24</sup> Benjamin tells us, and continues to quote Baudelaire in that, “the poet enjoys the incomparable privilege of being himself and someone else, as he sees fit. Like the roving souls in search of a body, he enters another person whenever he wishes. For him alone, all is open.”<sup>25</sup> Benjamin follows this with his knowledge of Marx to be able to consider the poet and his production within the terms of commodities. The best of what he says and most resonant for me and my project is when he looks at the social role of the artist, or flaneur—Baudelaire’s term for the urban wanderer who observes, a role he finds necessary for the poet in the modern world—and considers the power of that role in light of Modernity. In another train of thought Benjamin follows Baudelaire’s metaphor of the fencer which “Baudelaire was fond of using...to present martial elements as artistic elements.”<sup>26</sup> As a part of Modernity—where the “state of

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<sup>24</sup> Benjamin, *The Writer of Modern Life*, 96.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

<sup>26</sup> Benjamin, *The Writer of Modern Life*, 97.

emergency in which we live is not the exception but the rule”<sup>27</sup> as Benjamin tells us in his “Thesis on the Philosophy of History”—he sees Baudelaire, from his own perspective as poet and aesthete, finding ways for the artist to counter it. Thinking through Baudelaire, Benjamin says, “In times of terror, when everyone is something of a conspirator, everyone will be in position of having to play detective. Flanerie gives the individual the best prospects of doing so. Baudelaire wrote: ‘An observer is a prince who is everywhere in possession of his incognito.’”<sup>28</sup> The flaneur, the detective, the artist, the hero are terms used interchangeably or at intersections of thought between Benjamin and Baudelaire and Benjamin clarifies, “The hero is the true subject of la modernite. In other words, it takes a heroic constitution to live modernity.”<sup>29</sup> He then weaves in mention of Balzac sharing these thoughts with Balzac on Modernity, references a novel by Balzac with a gladiator character, and then says: “What the wage-earner achieves through his daily labor is no less impressive than what helped a gladiator win applause and fame in ancient times... The resistance that modernity offers to the natural productive elan of an individual is out of all proportion to his strength. It is understandable if a person becomes exhausted and takes refuge in death. Modernity must stand under the sign of suicide, an act which seals a heroic will that makes no concessions to a mentality inimical toward this will.”<sup>30</sup>

These issues and connections brought up by Benjamin, with a background in Marxian political theory, in analyzing a poet to find utility out of aesthetics touches on so many intersections underlying my inquiry regarding when *art is potentially more than art, i.e. when is art action*. In the aforementioned selections from Benjamin the power of

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<sup>27</sup> Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 257.

<sup>28</sup> Benjamin, *The Writer of Modern Life*, 72.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

<sup>30</sup> Benjamin, *The Writer of Modern Life*, 103-104.

the individual is considered (“wage-earner... natural productive elan of the individual” and “everyone is something of a conspirator”), the potential of the artist to be sovereign (“an observer is a prince”), the potential of the artist to be of all walks of life (“in possession of his incognito”), and the nature of the artist as hero in the modern world, a situation where the hero is “the true subject... [for] it takes a heroic constitution to live modernity.”<sup>31</sup>

Benjamin’s essay, “Surrealism,” from 1929, is one of the most rich and dense sources to guide our process in this work. In it he refers to the Comte de Lautreamont’s satanic short novel, *Maldoror*, as a work of “insurrection,” and which he also likens to Rimbaud’s poetry and Dostoevsky’s novel, *The Possessed*, all as “infernal machines” of great anarchists. In looking at the work of the Surrealists, Benjamin concludes that they provided Europe with “a radical concept of freedom,” and “to win the energies of intoxication for the revolution—this is the project on which Surrealism focuses in all its books and enterprises... for them it is not enough that, as we know, an intoxicating component lives in every revolutionary act. This component is identical with the anarchic.”<sup>32</sup> As we see, Benjamin has my same fondness for militaristic terms in reference to art, a fondness common in his time (which he attributes to Baudelaire)<sup>33</sup>. What is particularly helpful about the essay on Surrealism is that it gives Benjamin a chance to flex the wide reach of his mind and associations. He not only establishes the social and political aspects of Romantic writers, but also due to the dream-like or mystical nature of Surrealism, is able to talk about “intoxication” and other

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 103.

<sup>32</sup> Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, 215-216.

<sup>33</sup> Benjamin, *The Writer of Modern Life*, 97.

characteristics shared between the artist, the revolutionary, and the mystic. He develops a theory of the “dialectic of intoxication” and allows it to include the secular within the expression, “profane illumination.” He notes, “The reader, the thinker, the loiterer, the *flâneur*, are types of illuminati just as much as the opium eater, the dreamer, the ecstatic. And more profane. Not to mention that most terrible drug—ourselves—which we take in solitude.”<sup>34</sup> Benjamin defines “profane illumination” as “a materialistic, anthropological inspiration, to which hashish, opium, or whatever else can give an introductory lesson;” and further reminds us “one need only take love seriously to recognize in it too...as ‘profane illumination.’”<sup>35</sup> And this brings us back to his line earlier in this paragraph, that “an intoxicating component lies in every revolutionary act;” be they personal, artistic, or outwardly political.

Mixing the aesthetics of the artist or poet with the social, religious, and mystical is an ancient practice and particularly well expressed by “Romantic” poets in the face of modernity. Arthur Rimbaud, a hero of the Surrealists (and this work), wrote in a letter at the age of sixteen that, “A Poet makes himself a visionary through long, boundless, and systematized disorganization of all the senses. All forms of love, of suffering, of madness; he searches himself, he exhausts within himself all poisons, and preserves their quintessences. Unspeakable torment, where he will need the greatest faith, a superhuman strength, where he becomes among all men the great invalid, the great criminal, the great accursed—and the Supreme Scientist...the poet therefore, is truly, the thief of fire...he is responsible for humanity, for animals even...This eternal art will be functional, since

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<sup>34</sup> Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, 216.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 209-210.



poets are citizens. Poetry will no longer give rhythm to action; it will be an advance.”<sup>36</sup>

Here we see not only “profane illumination,” but the artist as criminal and citizen and in that last phrase, art taking the lead, the “avant garde.” The visionary nature Rimbaud describes is similar to that of the shaman, “a man or woman who enters an altered state of consciousness—at will—to contact and utilize and ordinarily hidden reality in order to acquire knowledge, power, and to help other persons.”<sup>37</sup> It is likely passages such as this by Rimbaud were on Benjamin’s mind in writing about Surrealism, and many of his other works.

Henry Miller, the American novelist who first became famous as an ex-patriot in Paris in the 1930’s, wrote a devoted study about Rimbaud called *The Time of the Assassins*. Miller continues Rimbaud’s line of thought on the role of art stating, “Art is something which stir’s men’s passions, which gives vision, lucidity, courage and faith. Has any artist in words of recent years stirred the world as did Hitler? Has any poem shocked the world as did the atomic bomb recently... What weapons has the poet compared to these... The cult of art reaches its end when it exists for a precious handful of men and women. Then it is no longer art but the cipher language of a secret society for the propagation of meaningless individuality... I call that man poet who is capable of profoundly altering the world.”<sup>38</sup> He continues about how modernity has severed from the social the role of art: “Primitive peoples on the whole are poets of action, poets of life;” and whether this is anthropologically true or not it draws a contrast in what he sees in the modern and what he believes the role of art should be. Most importantly, Miller

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<sup>36</sup> Rimbaud, *Complete Works*, 116-117.

<sup>37</sup> Harner, *The Way of the Shaman*, 25.

<sup>38</sup> Miller, *The Time of the Assassins*, 38-39.

reminds us that: “In the poet the springs of action are hidden.”<sup>39</sup>

#### IV. Cultural Guerrilla Warfare

In the beginning of this chapter I mention how this whole project came together after noticing a corollary between two very different papers that I wrote: one on Guy Debord’s concept of “Spectacle” in regards to the Occupy Wall Street (OWS); and the other on the endurance of Aztec practices within Catholicism through the figure of the Virgin of Guadalupe (VoG).<sup>40</sup> The earlier paper on the VoG is where I developed my own concept of “cultural guerrilla warfare,” a Post-Colonial concept used to describe the gradual and unintentional movement of an indigenous cultural tradition up into the cultural body of the conqueror. It is an act of preservation and subversion. My paper on the VoG describes this apparently natural phenomenon of human history specifically for this one Meso-American tradition, but allows this concept to be applicable in description of any time this phenomenon occurs—which is as ancient as colonialism itself.

Written almost a decade later, the next paper doesn’t lead to any original terms on my part, but looks to the terminology of French philosopher and filmmaker, Guy Debord (1931-1994). In the paper, the OWS movement was just the most current and local example of protest involving protest art for me to consider. I agreed with its stances, and found the movement to be righteous, especially in its egalitarian structure and nonviolence. Debord himself was involved in the Paris student uprisings of 1968 as one of the leaders of the Situationist Movement and the year before involving himself in these

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>40</sup> Both papers follow in an Appendix.

protests, Debord published his seminal work, *Society of the Spectacle*. This book gives a critique of Modernity, bourgeois society, and the western nation state as illusory and manipulative through this characteristic. In an effort to understand and utilize Debord's concept of "spectacle" I divided it into big "S" Spectacle when referring to spectacle on the State level (a level of cultural dominance) and little "s" spectacle when referring to the efforts of individuals or small groups. For Debord, everything is spectacle, representation, a mediation of reality; and power involves controlling spectacle.

Another important concept I draw from Debord's work is that of "detournement," a method of narrative manipulation, or "a collage-like technique whereby preexisting elements were assembled into new creations,"<sup>41</sup> that Debord most likely took from his hero, Lautréamont. Detournement plays with what is present and makes changes towards subversion, as Lautréamont did in his work *Poesies* with quotations from venerable French writers (a plagiarism with a twist), and does with Marx and other political thinkers throughout *Society of the Spectacle*. I describe the OWS protesters as using a form of detournement, their protest art being a performance for journalists and television cameras, a means of mediating reality through spectacle in a different way than that which the government mediates with its Spectacle. Their mission, as Debord describes is, "installing truth in the world."<sup>42</sup> In the lineage of Walter Benjamin's thought, my paper on protest art and Spectacle was of a Romantic tradition, and certainly viewed art in the service of social change to be heroic.

Not long after I gave that paper, I realized that I had been continuing to work in the same territory as before with the VoG. The case of the OWS protesters—or any other

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<sup>41</sup> Jappe, 48.

<sup>42</sup> Debord, 221.

political protesters, practitioners of protest art, or artists who seek to serve society—with their detournement, their spectacle used to subvert Spectacle, were engaging in a methodology similar to the cultural guerrilla warfare I described in regards to a religious situation in colonial Mexico. Cultural Guerilla Warfare could be a wider term than I originally conceived, encompassing not only unintentional and passive subversion of a meta-narrative over time, but also intentional and active subversion of a meta-narrative happening quickly at the hands of an artist or artistic movement. Cultural Guerrilla Warfare (or CGW) is a phenomenon of the demi-monde occurring in that overlap between Romanticism and Post-Colonialism.

The VoG example is clear Post-Colonialism, a religious cultural product produced out of a political colonial situation. The use of CGW is seemingly accidental or unintentional as a means of talking back to power and subverting a meta-narrative (the culture of the conqueror), while preserving a cultural heritage. The OWS example shows the Romantic role of art in the service of revolution or social change, talking directly and intentionally back to power and employing artistic means to do so. Both of these examples incorporate the same means and tactics though one is intentional and immediate and the other can be unintentional and occur gradually over a longer time frame. The means and tactics for both are artistic and involve the manipulation of narrative. In Post-Colonial terminology in regards to the VoG, the Catholic Church (and Spain) is the “center,” and the Nahuas (language group the Aztec belong to) are the indigenous, or those of the “province.” The same terminology can be applied to the Romantic struggle in OWS (as well as other protest art): The US government is not only “sovereign,” but “center” with the protesting citizenry as “provincials.” The political and artistic

terminology for methods of action used in regards to protesters in the OWS essay can be used just as well in reference to the VoG; her story is an act of “detournement” and a small “s” “spectacle” that is able to manipulate the big “S” “Spectacle” of the Catholic Church, at least in the Central American region.

Again: CGW is the intentional or unintentional subversive manipulation of a dominant narrative—or meta-narrative—supporting a power dynamic or social structure. The supporters of the story of the Virgin of Guadalupe are as engaged in Cultural Guerrilla Warfare as are the protesters and performance artists on the streets of New York City involved in the Occupy Wall Street movement. Her narrative manipulation made the Catholic Church in Mexico a little more inclusive to the indigenous and allows indigenous traditions of the Nahuas to prevail veiled. The work of Wall Street Occupiers established economic disparity as an inescapable political argument in contemporary America and made terms like “1%,” “99%,” and “Occupy” as common parlance. Small victories is what Cultural Guerrilla Warfare is all about. Sneak attacks, covert operations, changes of wording to change whole conversations. Small actions that can change the world, one section of the world at a time.

### **V. Holocaust As CGW: A Response to Agamben**

As mentioned much earlier, Giorgio Agamben finds the term “Holocaust” to be a misnomer for what befell the Jewish people under Hitler’s Final Solution. Cultural actors, some of whom were most likely artists, started to use the term widely beginning in the 1960’s. Holocaust, originally an ancient Greek word for animal sacrifice, like the type

employed by the ancient Israelites, is now used more widely than the Hebrew word, Shoah (“calamity”), which is often preferred by many Jews. In his work, *Homo Sacer*, he writes, “Holocaust” is a “wish to lend a sacrificial aura to the extermination of the Jews” and “it is an act of irresponsible historiographical blindness.” By the definitions given of homo sacer and sovereignty, and the reigning political structure of Nazi Germany, the Jews of the camp were a textbook example of Agamben’s thesis. He is consistent and correct. “The privileged negative referent of the new biopolitical sovereignty,” is the “Jew living under Nazism” for him. And Agamben continues on the same page, in the same paragraph: “The truth—which is difficult for the victims to face, but which we must have the courage not to cover with sacrificial veils—is that the Jews were exterminated not in a mad and giant holocaust but exactly as Hitler had announced, ‘as lice,’ which is to say, as bare life. The dimension in which the extermination took place is neither religious nor law, but biopolitical.”<sup>43</sup>

Briefly in the chapter where he explains all of this he references Georges Bataille’s approach to sovereignty. Agamben announces his disagreement, and notes that sovereignty for Bataille, “has little to do with that of states.”<sup>44</sup> However, Bataille was “Unwittingly following the movement by which life as such comes to be what is at stake in modern political struggles, [he] attempted to propose the very same bare life as a sovereign figure.” Agamben also details how through Bataille’s interest in Romantic tropes (he was an artist) and sacrifice, he “exchanges the political body of the sacred man, which can be killed but not sacrificed and which is inscribed in the logic of

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<sup>43</sup> Agamben, 114.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 113.

exception, for the prestige of the sacrificial body, which is defined instead by the logic of transgression.”

This is the angle by which I come at sovereignty, for it is the angle that involves the power of the artist and cultural actors, who often employ the logic of transgression. CGW often involves this substitution for the logic of exception with the logic of transgression, to use Agamben’s terms. The artist or non-artist cultural actor aspires to, and even momentarily embodies, the sacred, the set apart in order to have that oppositional role to Agamben’s notion of sovereignty, and in an effort to achieve Bataille’s definition of sovereignty. Bataille believed deeply in the political power of art, and in an essay on William Blake he noted that, “Even if it wanted to, poetry could not construct: it destroys; it is only true when in revolt.”<sup>45</sup> This line is from a portion of the essay called “The sovereignty of poetry,” where he also declares: “Poetry alone, which denies and destroys the limitations of things, can return us to this absence of limitations – in short, the world is given to us when the image which we have within us is sacred, because all that is sacred is poetic and all that is poetic is sacred... For religion is nothing but the effect of poetic genius.”<sup>46</sup>

In the 1967 essay, “Cultural Criticism and Society,” by Theodor W. Adorno, we find the often quoted line, “Cultural criticism finds itself faced with the final stage of the dialectic of culture and barbarism. To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric,” and he continues thus: “And this corrodes even the knowledge of why it has become impossible to write poetry today. Absolute reification, which presupposed intellectual progress as one of its elements, is now preparing to absorb the mind entirely. Critical intelligence

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<sup>45</sup> Bataille, 67.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 65.

cannot be equal to this challenge as long as it confines itself to self-satisfied contemplation.”<sup>47</sup> I believe that in this last line he is calling for poetry and art to be socially engaged, not just “self-satisfied contemplation.” In Adorno’s book, *Aesthetic Theory*, he says something else that can give us insight to the role and potential he sees in art that is applicable to this topic at hand: “Art respects the masses by presenting itself to them as what they could be rather than by adapting to them in their degraded condition.”<sup>48</sup>

I believe that calling Hitler’s Final Solution by the name “Holocaust,” is itself a poetic act; and it was Agamben who led me to see this. Agamben says that “the dimension in which the extermination took place is neither religion nor law, but biopolitics;” and he might only be partially correct. Bataille in his esteem for poetry and art, an extreme lifted to the level of the religious, describes a power in the way humans employ art, and it is an application that falls under the umbrella of CGW. To Adorno’s line about “poetry after Auschwitz,” I see the use of the term “Holocaust” to be in the realm of art or poetry, and although there is no individual artist or specific group responsible, it still falls under the auspices of CGW. If as Adorno says, that art respects the masses by showing what they could be, it can also do this in relation to history, ie showing (*representing*) the extermination as a sacrifice. The word Holocaust is a poeticizing of historical narrative. It is a reclamation for the victims to take the narrative power of telling history out of the hands of the oppressor. It might be inaccurate according to Agamben, the reality of the situation and power dynamic that was, but it is generally called the Holocaust now, and even its detractors who say it never happened

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<sup>47</sup> Adorno, *Prisms*, 34.

<sup>48</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 240.



call it that. Hitler is dead, the Nazi regime is defeated, the Jewish people were not wiped from the face of the Earth, and beyond the logic of Agamben, the term Holocaust holds strong. This is a small victory for the Jewish people. Though easily viewed as “homo sacer” or “bare life” during the Nazi reign in Europe, they have dominated the narrative, performed an insurrection against the Nazi place in history, and proved the sovereign potential of the individual as cultural actor or artist.

## CHAPTER 3

## CASE STUDY: WILLIAM T. VOLLMANN

**I. Biography, Contextually**

*“Being an American, I believe that the rest of my life will be what I make of it, that liberty is mine to guard, which means that I need be intimidated by no authority, and that in my own hunt for happiness, whether or not I can hold what I catch, I’m free -- yes, free! -- to rove a rolling land of uncounted possibilities, which is, in my mind’s eye at least, the American West,”*

—William T. Vollmann, NY Times Op-Ed, “Lewis and Clark on the Edge,” November 20<sup>th</sup>, 2005

William T. Vollmann was born in Los Angeles, California, in 1959, where his father, Thomas E. Vollmann was a graduate student in Business. The story of his childhood into teen years follows shifts of location common to the family of an academic starting out. His father taught at Dartmouth College, his first job out of school. It was there in New Hampshire in 1968 that Vollmann’s six year old sister, Julie, drowned in a pond while he was supposed to be watching her. It was a moment in his life rife for the analysis of biographers and amateur psychologists and often seen as evidence when

inferring a “savior complex” in his work or actions, especially in relation to women. Next was Rhode Island where his father taught at Rhode Island University before a move to Bloomington, IN, a college town where Vollmann attended his last three years of high school. For college, Vollmann made his way to the elite and prestigious Deep Springs College for his first two years (it is only a two year program) and then finished his bachelor’s degree at Cornell. Deep Springs is located in the next valley over from Death Valley in California, and the all male student body must engage in labor at the school or its cattle ranch to offset a free tuition. Vollmann’s time at Deep Springs was “one of the great experiences” of his life where he learned that many people “will rise to the occasion given responsibility, respect and trust,” which helps him in his interactions with the homeless, and his student job slaughtering cattle taught him “prudence, competence, and humanness.” In his foreword for a recent biography on L.L. Nunn, the founder of Deep Springs College, Vollmann writes, “above all, Deep Springs taught me to prepare for a life of service.”<sup>49</sup> During his time at Cornell he took part in a protest at a nuclear facility in Seabrook, NH as part of an anti-nuclear affinity group.

After college, Vollmann was accepted into a doctoral program in Comparative Literature at UC Berkeley on a fellowship. He moved to San Francisco but deferred entry into the program for a year. Vollmann had been following the situation in Afghanistan since the Russian invasion and made a plan to join the Mujahedeen of Afghanistan in their fight against the Russians. After saving up enough money for the trip, in May of 1982 he flew to Pakistan where he made contacts and negotiated an illegal border crossing into Afghanistan to join the Mujahedeen. The whole trip lasted only six weeks

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<sup>49</sup> “Foreword,” *The Electric Edge of Academe*, xi-xii.

and in the most practical sense it was a great failure. This became the material for his memoir, *An Afghanistan Picture Show*, released in 1992, after the success of his first works of fiction. In the new preface to the 2013 reissue, Vollmann looked back on the work with the realization: “It continues to astonish me how easy it is to harm people and how difficult it is to help them. Most of my books deal with this issue, but never as so directly as here. I wanted to ‘help the Afghans.’ I assumed that goodwill and a degree of intrepidity would be enough. I believed, and still do, that every human being is my brother or sister, and therefore that we all of us are equally deserving of help. I love Afghanistan as much today as I did when I first crossed the border in 1982. The land is beautiful and the people were kind to me.”<sup>50</sup> As the original book itself was written years after the original experience, its story is told in first person reminiscing with the narrator detachedly referring to his younger self as the “Young Man.” The narrator of the 1992 edition displays a good amount of wisdom, wisdom we see in greater detail in the 2013 preface. Of particular note to my study is that within the 1992 text the narrator says, “if he had been a Soviet Young Man, he would have gone to Nicaragua,”<sup>51</sup> showing a level-headed understanding of the importance of Statehood and relativity of citizenship.

In this book, when the Young Man’s father asks him why he has to go on this trip he answers, “actually it was very simple. I just wanted to comprehend what had happened there. Then I would put myself at someone’s service. I meant to be good, and was prepared to do good.”<sup>52</sup> This experience in Afghanistan, which mostly taught a young Vollmann how difficult it is to help anyone, and how limited he is in his abilities—he

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<sup>50</sup> *An Afghanistan Picture Show*, xvii.

<sup>51</sup> *An Afghanistan Picture Show*, 13.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

didn't have money to help the Mujahedeen buy arms, he couldn't shoot and help them fight, and he was weak and needed them to care for him—which mostly amounted to writing and photography, was key in further shaping the sensitive and compassionate artist and journalist Vollmann became (and has continued to become) by the publication of his first book, the novel, *You Bright and Risen Angels* (1987).

With that first novel, which drew attention, critical praise, and comparisons to Thomas Pynchon and William S. Burroughs, Vollmann's career was up and running. Collections of short stories followed and in 1990 the first volume of his *Seven Dreams: A Book of North American Landscapes* series, *The Ice Shirt*, was published. *The Ice Shirt* is a retelling of the Vinland sagas and is the first in a series of books about the founding of the New World, with each volume focusing on a different clash between European settlers and indigenous Native Americans; all of which involve firsthand fieldwork in addition to in-depth historical study. In the late 1980's and further into the 90's, while he continued to publish fiction, Vollmann began honing his skills as a journalist. He called San Francisco home (and eventually Sacramento, as his wife is a radiation oncologist and got a job there), yet traveled the world for BBC radio and magazines like Rolling Stone, Spin, Gear, Harper's, and the New Yorker. This work took him to conflict zones and he was able to continue a thread of his work that was begun during his time in Afghanistan. In *An Afghanistan Picture Show* there is a moment near the end, where he illustrates what he told his father about his original hopes for the trip: "Seizing the charred stump of a rocket bomb, a Mujahid raised it high above his head and turned to face the Young Man, his eyes shining fiercely as if to say: This is why you came! Now look, look! Your business here is to see! See this, and understand it; never forget it! ...he stared back and

said to himself: whether or not I can do anything useful, at least I will remember... What a daunting thing RECOGNITION is.”<sup>53</sup> He is a reporter and a writer, he was there to see and then to write; and it was during that adventure that he began his two decade long project, *Rising Up and Rising Down*.

Published in 2003 by McSweeney’s, *Rising Up and Rising Down* is a seven volume, long essay on violence, asking when it is necessary if ever, and totally over 3,400 pages. The book aims to develop a moral calculus supported by readings from history and philosophy and “Studies in Consequence,” comprised of Vollmann’s travels and reportage. The book drew some attention, was nominated for some awards, and saw an abridged edition out the next year from Harper Collins/Ecco. The kind of scope and aim of such a work puts William T. Vollmann in a category of American writers with no peers. He produces masterfully written novels of aesthetic skill and still creates works of non-fiction with the intention of helping people, as he notes in the Preface to the Abridgement: “My sincere intention in writing it was to be helpful;”<sup>54</sup> and in the Preface to the Original Edition: “I offer it to you, my unknown reader, in the hope that it may someday save a life or comfort a seeking mind.”<sup>55</sup> This is part of who Vollmann is, as a citizen and as an artist. He is someone who wants to create his art and he wants to help; and some times they can be done simultaneously.

From an essay about George Orwell, Vollmann reveals a great deal about himself: “Orwell is one of my heroes. He not only thought bravely, but risked his life on behalf of the good. *Homage to Catalonia* had much to do with my decision to go to Afghanistan in

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<sup>53</sup> *An Afghanistan Picture Show*, 236-237.

<sup>54</sup> *Rising Up and Rising Down* (Abridged), xiii.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, xv.

1982. I wanted to fight my own good fight. Weakened by dysentery, ignorant (I was a sheltered twenty-three), and lacking in self-discipline, I accompanied the Mujahiden for a very short time, accomplishing nothing but self-education. I was the merest wanderer; Orwell a true soldier. My journey scarcely deserves comparison with his. But someone who tries to paint a portrait and fails may at least better appreciate the next successful oil painting he sees. And the little I saw, and the less I did, brought me closer to Orwell. I still strive to understand whatever he might be able to teach me.” He goes on to conclude the essay saying, “Perhaps I too will refrain from sacrificing myself. And very likely, whatever I do will be wrongheaded. But I hope to keep at least a trifle of faith with Orwell’s example. I would like to stare evil in the face and somehow be of service to others. What outcome can I expect? As Orwell beautifully says (and his words are rarely beautiful), to be human one must be ‘prepared in the end to be defeated and broken up by life, which is the inevitable price of fastening one’s love upon other human individuals.’”<sup>56</sup>

He is an author closer to an European tradition than an American one (though I will treat his domestic lineage in the next section), in style of his prose—he has many but he reveres and emulates Lautréamont often—and in his focus on other geographies and how his own country affects those geographies. Recently has stated that he “want[s] to be a world citizen and...have his personal archive of [photographic] negatives...become common property.”<sup>57</sup> When asked in a 2007 interview about his greatest hope, he responded, “I would like to continue to have the great life that I have, to be able to investigate the world and try to see and create beauty. And at the same time, I would like

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<sup>56</sup> Orwell Essay he mailed me.

<sup>57</sup> “Seeing Eye to Eye,” 10.

to do something of significant service for my fellow human beings. I don't feel that I've done nearly enough, and I don't know what that service would be. I have considered going back to Iraq. I very much admire the late Margaret Hassan [the British head of CARE's Iraq operation who was kidnapped and murdered in late 2004]. Maybe if enough people went over there and let themselves be decapitated or tortured or whatever, that would undo some of the evil things that are being done there. Maybe there is an easier and better way to act. I don't know. I want to live as much as anybody. I don't really want to go over there and put myself in harm's way. But I would consider it.”<sup>58</sup>

## II. Lineage

*“Americans almost without exception have a fear and hatred of any perpetuation of power—political, religious, or bureaucratic.”*

—John Steinbeck, *America and the Americans* (quoted by Vollmann in “My Life As A Terrorist” in Harper’s)

In scope, range, and vision, Herman Melville is the most obvious ancestor to Vollmann. He not only cites Melville often in his work and interviews, but also sticks up for Melville like a devoted and sympathetic heir. However, on the social front and in regards to society as an artist (literary artist), his most pronounced ancestral countrymen are Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862), Jack London (1876-1916), John Steinbeck (1902-1968), and William S. Burroughs (1914-1997).

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<sup>58</sup> Seaman, 53.



Vollmann himself summons up the ghost of Thoreau to help guide him in his work; once literally via Ouija board, as he describes in *Poor People*.<sup>59</sup> What Vollmann finds in Thoreau is a model of self-perception and self-reliance. In *Poor People*, Vollmann makes himself part of his focus group on wealth and defines himself as rich, noting that Thoreau did the same.<sup>60</sup> Henry David Thoreau wrote poetry, travel logs, and social criticism. He sought to understand his contemporary America through reading widely, particularly classical literature and the literature of the East becoming increasingly available to him. As an artist, Vollmann is Melvillian, and he frequently pays tribute to Melville and several of his works. As a citizen and artist in society, Thoreau lends more comparisons. In his most famous work, *Walden*, the reader is delivered lengthy criticism of capitalist consumption and consumerism, as well as that of 19<sup>th</sup> century America's use of nature and interaction with the environment. When Vollmann questions the use of "false consciousness" directed at his subjects in *Poor People*, he challenges Thoreau's great line from *Walden* (1854), "The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation."<sup>61</sup> And when Thoreau tells us of his intentions in moving to a small shack on Walden Pond, his desire "to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practice resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that

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<sup>59</sup> *Poor People*, 295.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 132.

<sup>61</sup> Thoreau, 329.

was not life;”<sup>62</sup> we see an inspiration for how to be an American for Vollmann. When he described the possibility of still getting “off the grid” for a magazine travel article, Vollmann says, “Were there such an animal as national character, then I might define an American as follows: longing for and half-expecting perfect freedom and happiness; disappointed by the authoritarian constraints of present necessity (which we’ll call ‘the grid’); unnerved by the conflict between aspiration and reality; uncertain whether to blame oneself or others for imperfection; ready to ‘reinvent’ oneself to achieve self-sufficiency, profit, or peace.”<sup>63</sup> Thoreau also had his own problems with the State involving social justice, as in 1846 when he was arrested and spends a night in jail for “not paying several years’ poll tax in protest against the role of the state in perpetuating slavery.”<sup>64</sup> After someone pays his tax the next day he is forcibly removed from jail and several friends and relatives continue to pay this tax the rest of his life to keep him out of jail.

References to and citations from Thoreau run through many of Vollmann’s works. They appear in *Riding Toward Everywhere*, but it is in that work that Vollmann pays tribute to Jack London and employs some of his now lesser known works. London’s novels covered a wide range of locations and themes, but his non-fiction mostly expressed a social consciousness and sought to expose his readership to the lives of the poor. In *People of the Abyss* (1903) London recorded his experiences in London’s East End living amongst the poor. His work, *The Road* (1904), finds its way into *Riding Toward Everywhere* because it is about hobos and fruit tramps and their travels across the

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<sup>62</sup> Thoreau, 330.

<sup>63</sup> “Let’s Get Lost,” 20.

<sup>64</sup> Thoreau, 1046.

United States, travels London also experienced himself. For all the fierce, rugged, wild wolf-like individualism that people read in Jack London's work, his stance as an artist and citizen was defined by feelings of social obligation. In his essay, "How I Became A Socialist," London details his life-arc from young individualist to, after experiences feeling solidarity with the poor, socially active socialist. He tells us that, "no lucid demonstration of the logic and inevitableness of Socialism affects me as profoundly and convincingly as I was affected on the day when I first saw the walls of the Social Pit rise around me and felt myself slipping down, down, into the shambles at the bottom."<sup>65</sup> For outlaw status, London was an oyster pirate in the Bay at age fifteen before switching sides and working for the California Fish Patrol.<sup>66</sup>

London's most personal work of fiction, *Martin Eden*, is a semi-autobiographical tale of a laborer who becomes a writer and is eventually done in by his own inability to deal with fame. Vollmann doesn't suffer fame in the same way, but he has cited this book as one of the best he's ever read.<sup>67</sup> It is a work that also paints a portrait of San Francisco and the Bay Area that London's laborer lived and worked among. For all of the landscapes captured in the work of Vollmann, California is clearly a beloved location. Even though *Imperial* is mostly focused on Imperial Valley, California and the border with Mexico, in it Vollmann sings rhapsodic about the idea of the state and along the way even rhapsodizes another American writer associated with California literature. John Steinbeck gets a whole chapter in *Imperial*, a chapter where Vollmann hails Steinbeck in the title as, "Most American of Us All." How does he support this declaration? Through

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<sup>65</sup> London, *The Portable Jack London*, 461.

<sup>66</sup> London, *Novels and Social Writing*, 991.

<sup>67</sup> "Something to Die For," 26.

all of Steinbeck's novels with their required-reading for school children social relevance and his non-fiction like *America and Americans* (1966) and *The Harvest Gypsies* (1936)—a collection of articles with people who inspired the characters of *The Grapes of Wrath*—Steinbeck always “had heart” and “actually hoped to accomplish something in his own time.”<sup>68</sup> These things along with his sincerity are reasons why Vollmann loves Steinbeck. He says of *The Grapes of Wrath*, “it was angry, unashamedly sexual and un-American. Being un-American, Steinbeck was the most American of us all.”<sup>69</sup> Clearly, Vollmann doesn't use un-American here like he does in the Harper's article about his FBI file. Here it is a point of pride that Steinbeck cared enough about his country to upset the status quo, to speak out against injustice and against authority.

Of this American lineage I've established for Vollmann, I have mentioned the most similar in social consciousness, a tradition of outspoken and caring rugged individualist. Thoreau, London, and Steinbeck are all writers whom Vollmann expresses inspiration from. The last piece in Vollmann's American lineage is a writer who Vollmann doesn't mention much himself, but whom others often bring comparison, and rightly so. William S. Burroughs was more familiar with the world of outcasts than any of the other writers already discussed. He was familiar with it personally and in various geographies (as a homosexual, junkie, and his most serious interaction with the State, when he accidentally fatally shoots his wife in the head in Mexico City). He was also a writer who committed to pushing the boundaries of art and language in his work, using the full sovereign power of the artist in political and aesthetic ways at once. Burroughs was always quick to invoke the assassin's creed of Hassan i Sabbah in his work. A

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<sup>68</sup> *Imperial*, 177.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 178.

similarity to Vollmann that we see with Burroughs that we didn't see with the other writers of this lineage is a dark, satirical bite. Vollmann has expressed a love of Edgar Allen Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and even H.P. Lovecraft and often employs the darkness he finds in them. They might not be writers of much social consciousness, but Burroughs also captures a similar American frontier darkness and directs it satirically against American closed-minded Puritanism, hypocrisy, corruption, and war-mongering. Through all of Burroughs' writing, which is mostly made up of experimental novels and essays on culture, one piece most resonates as an example of voice in harmony with that of William T. Vollmann, "Thanksgiving Prayer."

This prayer has become a common social media post in recent years and speaks to the unrest and disillusionment with the American Dream. Burroughs bitter satirical venom towards the actuality of American history in contrast to the beautiful ideals it was founded upon is wonderfully rendered. He dedicates the prayer to John Dillinger in hopes he is still alive: "Thanks for the wild turkey and the passenger pigeons, destined to be shat out through wholesome American guts. Thanks for a continent to despoil and poison. Thanks for Indians to provide a modicum of challenge and danger. Thanks for vast herds of bison to kill and skin leaving the carcasses to rot. Thanks for bounties on wolves and coyotes. Thanks for the American dream, to vulgarize and to falsify until the bare lies shine through. Thanks for the KKK. For nigger-killing lawmen, feeling their notches. For decent church-going women, with their mean, pinched, bitter, evil faces. Thanks for "Kill a Queer for Christ" stickers. Thanks for laboratory AIDS. Thanks for Prohibition and the war against drugs. Thanks for a country where nobody's allowed to mind their own business. Thanks for a nation of finks. Yes, thanks for all the memories-- all right let's see

your arms! You always were a headache and you always were a bore. Thanks for the last and greatest betrayal of the last and greatest of human dreams.”<sup>70</sup>

### III. The Moment of Mutually Acknowledged

#### Outlaw Identity

*“To your government a potential terrorist is a terrorist.”*

—A Russian gangster called “The Fog,” *Mission Impossible: Ghost Protocol*, 2011

In the September 2013 issue of Harper’s Magazine, William T. Vollmann published an article called, “Life As A Terrorist: Uncovering My FBI File,” where he exposed to the world the file the Federal Bureau of Investigation has had on him. He obtained this file through a Freedom of Information Act petition. In a way, this is one of the most important moments of his career as a writer, and as an Artist in relation to his State. The week the magazine was published Vollmann was invited on NPR’s program, “Morning Edition” (August 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2013), to speak to David Greene about the article, not to talk about one of his books. The fact that he was once a Unabomber suspect was the greatest revelation provided by the file for Vollmann. With that revelation also came a great degree of clarity around his many experiences being detained at US borders. His article for Harper’s is humorous while being quite critical and informative about the way “suspicion” works for the FBI and other US agencies.

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<sup>70</sup> Burroughs, 7.

The FBI file is 785 pages long but only 294 pages were allowed into Vollmann's possession. He doubts whether he'll ever see the whole thing. He also petitioned the NSA for its file on him—which is still pending—and the CIA, which responded: “the CIA can neither confirm nor deny the existence or nonexistence of records responsive to [Plaintiff's] request [because] the fact of the existence or nonexistence of [such] records is currently and properly classified.”<sup>71</sup> The article in Harper's focuses on the realizations Vollmann has about his political and legal run-ins over the last twenty years and along the way he provides a critique of the US government's encroachment on personal freedoms. He tells us that his “motives for writing this story are conventionally American. I value my freedom to be what others may not wish me to be... Although I sometimes write about politics, I do not consider myself political — or is it in fact political to hold some degree of disrespect for whichever fellow citizens have been set in power over me? In this, if Steinbeck is to be believed, I am very American: ‘Americans almost without exception have a fear and a hatred of any perpetuation of power — political, religious, or bureaucratic.’”<sup>72</sup> Vollmann offers his Harper's article up as an epilogue to John Steinbeck's essay collection, *America and Americans*. Moreover he makes clear his objective in the article; he aims to provide a description of “a semi-visible yet increasingly omnipresent class: the Unamericans.”<sup>73</sup>

For Vollmann, the Unamericans are those who stand in the way of the American ideal of freedom, who try to infringe upon personal freedoms. As he strikes out against them, and describes his various run-ins with them, we see in this published article the

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<sup>71</sup> “Life As A Terrorist,” 40.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 39.

moment of “mutually acknowledged outlaw identity.” Vollmann learns how he is seen by his State and now has a greater understanding of his relationship with that State. Of course, he could certainly understand to greater depths how he is seen if he could read the whole FBI file as well as the NSA file and the CIA file, which might exist or might not exist. In the United States there is a Constitution and a Bill of Rights establishing how one should be seen by the State. It is generally an equalizer of citizenship. This legally defined citizenship becomes limited once a person has earned a record of criminal activity or in Vollmann’s case, a record of criminal suspicion. How did he become a criminal suspect, enough to warrant an FBI file? A fellow citizen called an FBI hotline and basically said, I think this author might be the Unabomber.

Beyond the humorous content of the article where Vollmann describes the literary criticism the FBI agents had to perform in reading his novels and comparing them to letters from the Unabomber, the most important moments in this article are when Vollmann contemplates his relationship with the State and the actions that make its agents Unamerican. On an unsubstantiated hotline tip, based on Vollmann’s novels, the FBI combed through his life, alerted local offices that he was “armed and dangerous,” surveilled his home, and ultimately branded him a person of interest. To this day his international mail will arrive opened and resealed, his luggage will be slashed and searched, and he has had several stops and detainments at the border. Nonetheless, Vollmann is still able to brush it off with the tone of acceptance that these agents are just doing their jobs. “A spook’s appointed duty is to suspect. I was accused, secretly. I was



spied on. Very possibly I still am,”<sup>74</sup> his suspicion of this is based on the fact that he was only allowed to see less than half of the file.

Once the actual Unabomber was caught, Vollmann was next considered as an anthrax terror suspect, because once a suspect always a suspect. Reading this part of his file, he describes wryly, “So I had graduated from being a Unabomber suspect to being an anthrax suspect. The Amerithrax incidents occurred not long after the September 11 attacks. Five people died and seventeen grew ill. At that time one friend of mine worked himself into a near panic because the antidote, ciprofloxacin, was in short supply. He longed for a family-size bottle, just in case. I remember believing, as did my neighbors, that Al Qaeda must have sent these poisoned letters. Apparently I should have suspected myself.”<sup>75</sup> After the Harper’s article, Vollmann was asked to write about his thoughts on the surveillance state for Foreign Policy magazine. He is emphatic that he would “rather risk becoming a terrorist’s victim than live under such a system”<sup>76</sup> as a surveillance state. With the same wry tone as the Harper’s piece, showing dignity and levity, Vollmann ends the article thusly: “But what if every time I applied for a job the employer’s hired candidate-investigation service pulled up the information that I have been a terrorist suspect and that Homeland Security’s surveillance of me appears to be ongoing? Thank goodness I am a privileged native son! For what if my name were Mohammed? My file reveals that sometimes the FBI could not even spell my name right. What if they mixed up one Mohammed with another and nobody cared?” And he gives a Postscript to the

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<sup>74</sup> “Life As a Terrorist,” 47.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>76</sup> “Machines of Loving Grace,” 69.

article: “I feel honored to have been invited to express my thoughts here. The longer I live, the more I love our beautiful land and the ideals of our Constitution.”<sup>77</sup>

This commitment to the documents on which the United States is founded—this deep love of America as an idea, as well as his home—along with a sense of duty to hold the actual government accountable to those documents and the idea they describe characterizes Vollmann, the artist and citizen, as a fitting case study for my work. Though he has understandable grumpy moments in the face of abused authority, he has the rationality to concede in the Harper’s article, “Were I to be shown in accurate detail why it was necessary for me to be kept under surveillance, possibly for the rest of my life, I might be able to accept these invasions of my privacy for the collective good.”<sup>78</sup> And in the Foreign Policy article he opines, “an absolutely open society, in which we could watch each other at any time, might be beautiful in its own way, but it would certainly be alien to us.”<sup>79</sup> However, for all of this even-tempered bravado, his own awareness of his outlaw identity, an awareness that marks a moment of now mutual acknowledgement—for the State had acknowledged it since he became a person of interest—seems to have had an effect on him. In 2014, during an interview after a reading in Washington State, the interviewer asks, “At your reading in Spokane you said, ‘Each and every one of us is a potential terrorist,’ and the audience laughed. Have we come to terms with living in a surveillance state?” Vollmann responded, “I think we treat it too seriously [surveillance]. My FBI file is ridiculous, and very possibly so is yours. Without the Freedom of Information Act I would never know that. Yes, of course any of us can be

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<sup>77</sup> “Machines of Loving Grace,” 71.

<sup>78</sup> “Life As A Terrorist,” 47.

<sup>79</sup> “Machines of Loving Grace,” 70.

a terrorist...”<sup>80</sup> The following year during an interview in support of his most recent novel, *The Dying Grass* (2015), he was asked what he is working on next. One of the books is, “a novel relating to the extraordinary torture and rendition in the George W. Bush years. I want to focus on the effects they had on ordinary citizens.”<sup>81</sup>

It appears that Vollmann is striking back with the best means he has at his disposal, his art, for he isn’t an ordinary citizen, but someone who can write about them; and what it is like for them in opposition to a State. Vollmann finds this duty to be one of mere citizenship noting, “if the Unamericans continue to have their way we will never know how many innocent people they have imprisoned, tortured, and perhaps murdered. I would be abdicating my responsibility as a citizen were I to rely on the Unamericans to decide such questions.”<sup>82</sup>

David Sobel, the lawyer who sued the FBI and CIA on Vollmann’s behalf to get his file described it thusly:

Vollmann’s writing and professional associations were the sole reasons for the FBI’s interest in him, leading to the creation of a Bureau dossier that tells us a lot about the factors that often drive law enforcement and national security investigations. . . . While the documents released by the FBI indicate that its ensuing investigation of Vollmann was extensive, the full scope of the examination of his activities and relationships cannot be ascertained, as almost 500 pages . . . remain withheld in their entirety. . . .

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<sup>80</sup> Alasdair, 87-88.

<sup>81</sup> Pierleoni.

<sup>82</sup> “Life As A Terrorist,” 47.

In reviewing the released material, I found one of the clearest examples I've seen of how far we've come from the lessons of the mid-1970s, when the Church Committee investigation and the Watergate hearings provided stark examples of the danger to democracy posed by ideologically-driven surveillance of lawful activity. One of the key reforms of that era was the Privacy Act, passed in 1974 to rein in the investigative powers of federal agencies. One of the Act's key restrictions is its command that an agency may "maintain no record describing how any individual exercises rights guaranteed by the First Amendment." This restriction, however, is not absolute; it permits the collection of such information if it is "pertinent to and within the scope of an authorized law enforcement activity." As the Vollmann file demonstrates, that's a loophole that's easy to pass through when the "rights guaranteed by the First Amendment" are exercised by those deemed to "think like" or "write like" the wrong people.

Sobel believes that Vollmann was targeted, investigated, and suspected, beyond the original hot-line tip, because of who he is as a writer and thinker, and who he associates with (which in Vollmann's case, due to his work, is literally all walks of life). Regardless of whether Vollmann sees his duties to be those of the mere citizen, his position as an actively publishing writer, and public intellectual, give him greater abilities to speak, if not greater responsibilities.

In the Harper's article, William T. Vollmann compassionately and humbly admits that he has little reason to complain. He closes the article declaring, "to be sure, I am not a victim; my worries are not for me, but for the American Way of Life;" and he has never been incarcerated as a political dissident. His classification with the other two case

studies in this work is due to his expression of similar ideas and for the contrast he brings to their situations as Artists in relation to the State. There are several politically active artists in America who have seen worse treatment by their government, as well as there are political dissidents in China and Russia in far worse situations than Ai Weiwei and Pussy Riot. The context of my three case studies is that they are all three iconic, outspoken, and free enough to demonstrate to the public different levels of relationship between the Artist and the State. They have proudly taken on these positions and lucky are still alive and free. Vollmann does so in not just exercising his freedom to write about whatever he wants in fiction and journalism, but also by publically exposing his run-ins with the State, the contents of his FBI file, and his unabashed honesty about engaging in victimless crimes (examples of which are forthcoming).

#### **IV. Points of Contact**

*“I love America... I am a patriot... I’m proud that when I’m ashamed I can say so without being hauled off to a secret prison. I must love any government that allows me to excoriate it... To be sure, I am not a victim; my worries are not for me, but for the American Way of Life.”*

—William T. Vollmann, Harper’s Magazine, Sept 2013

William T. Vollmann's power is that of a writer—novelist and journalist—by career. He travels the world looking around him and sells those observations to commercial publications. He always retains the rights to publish those journalistic endeavors in book form, knowing that his words, and maybe even intentions, might be mangled by a magazine editor by the time they go to print. Those magazine articles have supported him in his career while literary fiction has not been as lucrative, regardless of his critical appeal. Not one to court media attention, Vollmann's ideas reach an audience through magazine articles, interviews, and essays published in journals beyond his books of fiction and non-fiction.

As far as fiction goes, one couldn't say that Vollmann is an overtly political writer. However, his plots and subject matters are often about power. He might have said in the Harper's article that he wasn't political, but in a 2002 speech about writing during wartime we get, "Whether or not you believe, as I do, that art is inherently and inescapably political is up to you."<sup>83</sup> Moreover, in his essay, "Art and Politics," he asks, "how can art not be political?" and answers: "any page of the *Iliad* says more about politics than any page of Mao's 'red book.'"<sup>84</sup> The intersections between art and politics are fleshed out while he criticizes Mao's limitations on art, criticizes Vladimir Nabokov's apolitical intentions (in spite of books with obvious political content), applauds particular books for being covertly political, and ultimately develops an artistic criterion that is aesthetics and social conscience.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Hemmingson, 143.

<sup>84</sup> "Art and Politics," 346.

<sup>85</sup> "The Artistic Criterion: 1. Form and content must marry harmoniously. 2. The form must have 'artistic power.' 3. The content must offer something in the sphere of politics.

Vollmann's first novel, *You Bright and Risen Angels*, is described in subtitle as "a cartoon" and often reviewed as an example of post-modern meta-fiction. However, Vollmann scholar Miles Liebttag finds it to be an important post-colonial work and key in understanding all of Vollmann's subsequent work. "You Bright and Risen Angels, begun as an attempt to 'right the balance' in the face of imperial aggression against the powerless, inaugurates a career-long interest in the ethics of resistance, the dynamics of political power, and the self-understanding of the marginalized and the oppressed,"<sup>86</sup> Liebttag tells us. On the surface the novel is the story of a war between insects (and their partisans) and the creators/controllers of electricity. The oppressed are literally the lowest of the low and the oppressors are literally those that control power. In his post-colonial estimation, Liebttag says, "The teleology of electricity is that of imperialism: endless war for endless expansion."<sup>87</sup> As most of the pertinent content in this work is transmitted via allegory, I will leave all of that interpretation to Liebttag (who does a fine job).

His three novels about prostitution—*Whores for Gloria*, *The Butterfly Stories*, and *The Royal Family*—are obviously social novels and deal with disenfranchised characters and societal outcasts; quite often "outlaws." This socially conscious writing of similar

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But there is a forth rule, a most important one: 4. 'Form,' 'content,' 'artistic power,' and 'politics' are to be defined by the artist and each individual in his audience. Consider Gaugin, that vain and pigheaded soul; he left his family high and dry, he boasted about taking thirteen-year-old girls to bed... an exemplary life? A politically progressive life? My God, yes! For look at his paintings! No doubt Mao would have shot *him*, too," 352.

<sup>86</sup> Coffman, 198.

<sup>87</sup> Coffman, 200.

themes and topics is also carried over into his short story collections: *The Rainbow Stories*, *Thirteen Stories and Thirteen Epitaphs*, and *The Atlas*. All three of these books include prostitute tales, pieces of non-fiction reportage (at times from war zones), and accounts of homeless people or other marginalized groups often the recipients of unbalanced power dynamics. Of course, all five of the already published novels of Vollmann's Seven Dreams series depict a conflict between European settlers to North America and an indigenous American Indian nation. The content of these novels is fundamentally political and post-colonial as Vollmann writes brilliant historical fiction that captures past ways of life and detailed nature descriptions. His least political work of fiction would be his most recent story collection, *Last Stories, and Other Stories*—a collection of macabre and supernatural tales—but of course, as he himself points out above in his essay, “Art and Politics,” the most human stories are still quite political.

As far as nonfiction, his canon is almost entirely political: *Uncentering the Earth*, *Riding Toward Everywhere*, *Afghanistan Picture Show*, *Poor People*, *Imperial*, and *Rising Up and Rising Down*. *Uncentering the Earth* explores Copernicus's greatest discovery and along the way his relationship with his State. *Riding* explores concepts of freedom in the US while illegally “catching out” (riding like a hobo in a boxcar train) and even has a “Legal Disclaimer” at the beginning stating: “I have never been caught riding on a freight train. So let's say I have never committed misdemeanor trespass. The stories in this book are all hearsay, and the photographs are really drawings done in steel-gray crayon. None of the individuals depicted are any more real than I. Moreover, trainhopping may harm or kill you. Finally, please consider yourself warned that the



activities described in this book are criminally American.”<sup>88</sup> *Afghanistan Picture Show* is a memoir of Vollmann’s attempt to help the Afghans after the Russian invasion in 1983. *Poor People* is a sociological and journalistic investigation into poverty around the world, its conditions and causes, many of which are political. *Imperial*, from 2009, is a long book that charts the history of the border between the United States and Mexico, mostly Imperial Valley, California, and involves the politics of delineation, border-jumpers, drug-traffickers, farming, and water rights. It is a wonderful book on those topics but generally doesn’t fit into this study of mine. Finally, *Rising Up and Rising Down*, which can’t be anything but political. His least political non-fiction work would be *Kissing the Mask*, a study of Japanese Noh Theater and performative femininity, while even his photographic memoir of his experience with cross-dressing, *The Book of Dolores*, includes very political discourse about personal identity and society.

So what can novelist and journalist William T. Vollmann offer my study about Cultural Guerrilla Warfare, with all of its components involving sovereignty (individual and that of authority), biopolitics, spectacle, the domain of outcasts, and the role of the artist? As he says in the Preface to *An Afghanistan Picture Show*: “I am not a diplomat or a strategist. My only gift as a political observer is my ability to see and state the obvious.”<sup>89</sup> Of course our hero is being literal, if not humble. He might not be a strategist or diplomat professionally, but the author of the 3,400 page *Rising Up and Rising Down* is a systematic thinker about many issues involved in my study.

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<sup>88</sup> It is followed by a Temporal Disclaimer: “This book was written at a time of extreme national politics. These circumstances shaped my thoughts about riding trains in specific ways described below. Accordingly, I have left all references to the current administration in the present tense. As the Russians would say, *he who has ears will hear.*”

<sup>89</sup> *An Afghanistan Picture Show*, xix.

### A) America, Spectacle, and State-Sovereignty

We have already examined the unique relationship between William T. Vollmann and his sovereign State, the United States of America. He always let's his reading audience know, however, that he is a patriot, he loves his country, and is often ready to say things like, "I have traveled to quite a few countries in my time, and I must say that the First Amendment alone makes me proud to be an American."<sup>90</sup> This does not stop him from being critical of his home country, though, and moreover he sees criticism as his duty. Under the schema of political theory I have established earlier in the theoretical apparatus of this work, Vollmann is very much like the other critics of Modernity and flawed Enlightenment ideals; his statements, though poetic and of his own voice, will often have the ring of Walter Benjamin, Hannah Arendt, Michel Foucault, or Giorgio Agamben. For Vollmann, those similar thoughts are directed most often at America, a country founded on brilliant Enlightenment ideas, but flawed implementation.

In 2007, the Los Angeles Times asked Vollmann to write an essay about California, and instead he wrote about the United States, as an expression some times used for California, "the Great Exception," more so applies to the whole country. It is a pretty scathing essay, and in it he refers to the "current administration of torturers," the unilateralism of Bush's "criminal" presidency, and shows what he means by "great exception" in a way akin to all of my cited theorists: "Being America the Perfect, we invented the doctrine, even before 9/11, that we could seize war criminals in any part of the globe and whisk them off to The Hague. Of course, we insisted that should we ever

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<sup>90</sup> "Foreword," *Literotica*, vii.

commit war crimes, we would remain immune to prosecution in that court. Well, after all, how could Americans do any wrong?”<sup>91</sup>

Vollmann’s thought on this subject go far beyond a topical rant for a newspaper. In *Rising Up and Rising Down*, the historical case studies are divided in topics or themes that violence might be employed in defense of. One of those is “authority,” and many of the other defenses depend on the legitimacy of this defense as they all weave and interconnect. In the section on “Defense of Authority,” he has a subset titled, “What is Legitimate Authority?” Here he establishes that, “Self defense of Authority thus comprises... the conscious, deliberate struggle on the part of an elite to maintain its power of domination, which is to say its capacity to overrule the sovereignty of any and all selves within the zone of subordination.”<sup>92</sup> But what is legitimate authority? He ends the chapter with a checklist for evaluating a government’s legitimacy, one point of which states: “Legitimate authority is constrained by, but not solely defined by, law.”<sup>93</sup> Laws must be voted on or agreed upon in some way, but he adds the caveat, “consensus means nothing when tainted by false consciousness,” and he then quotes Fanon in reference to “good natives” and “good Germans” who follow orders, and adds that “false consciousness becomes an unanswerable argument because it can never be disproven.”<sup>94</sup> His footnotes digress further about this, citing Fanon who “goes on in this passage to claim that capitalist societies are simply soft versions of colonial societies... There is a great deal of truth in Fanon’s argument.”<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> “The Great Exception.”

<sup>92</sup> *Rising Up and Rising Down*, Vol. II, 243.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 259.

<sup>94</sup> *Rising Up and Rising Down*, Vol. II, 260.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 520.

In looking for sources to understand power, authority, and sovereignty in the introductory sections of *Rising Up Rising Down*, Vollmann cites widely stating, “Clarence Darrow, for instance, writes that ‘the beginnings of the state can be traced back to the early history of the human race when the strongest savage seized the largest club and with this weapon enforced his rule upon the other members of the tribe.’” He compares this to a line in Marx and Engels and then says, “That paradigm has definitely been followed on occasion. But to say that it has always been is to ruthlessly overgeneralize. In the ancient Korean kingdom of Puyo, for instance, the king might be executed if his subjects suffered a poor harvest.”<sup>96</sup> Here we see an acknowledgment of the state of exception for a sovereign, a position of being within and outside the law at the same time.

The state of exception for an American state sovereign best expressed itself in recent decades under the presidency of George W. Bush (an exception with no exclusion). In 2014, Vollmann wrote an article for the magazine *Atlantic Monthly* about the “Assassin’s Creed” of Hassan I Sabbah, a near mythic figure of 12<sup>th</sup> century Persia beloved by Aleister Crowley and William S. Burroughs, which reads, “Nothing is true; all is permissible.” Vollmann expounds upon how important this creed can be for an artist aesthetically, but how dangerous it can be politically: “I think of George W. Bush with the Iraq War: no weapons of mass destruction, no link between Saddam Hussein and Al-Qaeda, nation building was another fraud, none of the proposed justifications were true. It was all bullshit. And how many thousands have we killed? So, we can say, he acted as if nothing was true, but all was permissible—including torture. That’s the definition of an

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<sup>96</sup> *Rising Up and Rising Down*, Vol. I, 227.

unjust war. If political leaders are applying ‘Nothing is true; all is permissible,’ we can be sure they’re going to be doing evil things. It’s the same thing as saying the ends justify the means.’<sup>97</sup>

That creed is representative of the extremes of sovereignty and as we will see later, important for the artist in personal and individual sovereignty. Ultimately, Vollmann believes that, “State authority stands the enemy of self-sovereignty”<sup>98</sup> and as he cites Gandhi, “No government can exist for a single moment without the cooperation of the people, . . . voluntary or forced.”<sup>99</sup> In America, which is not a police-state—as of yet—how is the populace forced or merely coerced into cooperating while it operates unilaterally and tramples the rights of it’s citizens? This is where we get into the territory of our theorist, Guy Debord; this is the overlap between Sovereignty and Spectacle.

Most of Vollmann’s fears and worries about the power of Spectacle are directed at it’s greatest tool of the last sixty years, the television. In an op-ed piece in the December/January, 2000/2001 issue of *Gear Magazine* titled, “Television Ate My Town,” Vollmann makes his argument against television explicit when reminiscing on talking about politics with his neighbors in Sacramento: “That was when I began to realize that in an argument against television, television usually wins. Television follows Hitler’s principle of the Big Lie: keep it simple, make it stupid, repeat it, and they’ll swallow it. . . I don’t blame my neighbors and acquaintances for [list of foreign policy atrocities]. I don’t even blame the U.S. government very much. We happen to be the strongest nation on earth right now, so of course we’re bullies. Compared to ancient

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<sup>97</sup> “Writers Can Do Anything.”

<sup>98</sup> *Rising Up and Rising Down*, Vol. I, 228.

<sup>99</sup> *Rising Up and Rising Down*, Vol. I, 230.

Assyria, imperial Spain, and the former Soviet Union, we're not so bad. So what if United States law now operates anywhere in the world that the United States says it does? We can kidnap a suspect from Pakistan, and fly him here to stand trial, and the people in my hometown don't see anything wrong with that. We can bomb Afghanistan and never disclose who we killed or whether we made a mistake; television will make that all right with the people in my hometown."<sup>100</sup> Here he is letting the sovereign off the hook a little in lieu of blaming Spectacle, but this was just at the beginning of the Bush administration.

He also continues by pointing out the great obfuscation of the power dynamic that Spectacle can be responsible for and the need for the written in fighting misinformation: "The people in my hometown are as conservative as the television wants them to be. Let's keep everybody on the straight and narrow. Let's make nobody responsible and everybody liable. Let's let Big Brother decide what's right and whom to arrest and whom to drop cruise missiles on. I guess that one of the things magazines are supposed to be for is to argue for a point of view which might not go over well in my hometown. You don't have to like the Serbs, guns, or naked women to consider that magazines such as Gear might actually fulfill a use."<sup>101</sup> The things listed in this last line were touched upon in the article as television can be employed to sway opinions about the "villains" of the Balkan Wars and gun control and that Gear Magazine often had scantily clad women on its cover.

Earlier in the same year, Vollmann wrote an essay for Forbes ASAP (a short lived magazine spin-off of Forbes) where he used a camera obscura as a literary device to

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<sup>100</sup> "Television Ate My Town," 118.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 119.

speak about perception and reality. Here he speaks of his sincere worries about the power of Spectacle saying, “In our country, the murder of reality has proceeded not without pleasure to the victims. We have spun the lens to so fast a velocity that only the most fluorescent patterns, and of only the greatest cruelty, can register on the gazer’s perception. Well, why not? People like bright colors. After the hydrogen bomb, perhaps the most dangerous American invention is television.”<sup>102</sup> I don’t believe that he meant this last line with hyperbole. This power of Spectacle is employed by Sovereignty, but ultimately has no borders as corporations have now become trans-national entities and cultural imperialism is more effective than physical colonialism. This is a worry Vollmann feels too as he continues on the same page: “An old lady in a Canadian Arctic town once told me what had happened on the day the television arrived: The children didn’t go out and play. People stopped visiting one another. While she exaggerated the case, it did make me sad to come in from the frozen ocean and see the blue glow coming from windows, and not see any people. I have seen that same blue glow in California and everywhere else in the world.”

These feelings are nothing new for Vollmann, as we can see in a literary essay he wrote in the *Review of Contemporary Fiction* in 1993, about his favorite books: “This time the Cassandras who talk about the death of the novel may be right, because the great enemy, television, is working to bring about the death of the book. Television is ideal for people with no memories. As an instrument of control it might be more effective than the Bible or Mao’s little red book. The strange and amazing thing is that television is not owned by any controllers, but only by a vague number of self-interest committees. That is

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<sup>102</sup> “Upside Down and Backward,” 154.

why it so rarely stands for anything (although it does so when needed as a propaganda tool, as when one drops bombs on Iraq). It never seems to be explaining or conveying, only grinning like Francis Bacon's *Idol of the Den*.”<sup>103</sup>

That blue glow of the television set is pleasurable and powerful and as an instrument of control from the American Sovereign (or any sovereign really) it keeps a population isolated, and therefore ignorant. Whether the actual intention of a government or state sovereign, the television ultimately does the State more harm as Vollmann notes in a book review about fiction set in war-torn Iraq: “When our soldiers are sent to Iraq or Afghanistan, about whose people and customs they know very little to begin with, that's got to make it worse. Our America-centered media and education system poorly prepare our children to grow up into informed instruments of American global power. Whatever your opinion may be of American global power, I hope you will agree that ignorance and isolation hardly facilitate achievement.”<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> “Something to Die For,” 25. Vollmann ends this essay, after the list of some of his favorite books by giving a prescription: “The beauty in these books would flourish more widely if the following social changes were made: 1. Abolish television, because it has no reverence for time. 2. Abolish the automobile, because it has no reverence for space. 3. Make citizenship contingent on literacy in every sense. Thus, politicians who do not write every word of their own speeches should be thrown out of office in disgrace. Writers who require editors to make their books ‘good’ should be depublished. 4. Teach reverence for all beauty, including that of the word.

<sup>104</sup> “Twists of Hate.”



Today the focus of this worry has shifted more towards his problems with the Internet. His problems with it are with “government surveillance” which he has “to reject... given [his] hatred of authority” and “corporate types” making money from him, “which involves surveillance and targeted ads.” Another thing that “creeps [him] out is the mutability of the so-called information... you go back to the website two or three years later... and the stuff isn’t there anymore. It’s like the memory holes of *1984*.” He thinks “that’s very insidious.”<sup>105</sup> Government control and corporate predatory consumerism go hand in hand in this new technology and in far greater ways than ever before with television. The most humorous part of his criticism of the American way of life and Spectacle is that he agrees with some of the Unabomber’s views (though never his means) and even says so in a footnote digression in *Rising Up and Rising Down*, published a decade before he ever found out he was a Unabomber suspect: “As for the Unabomber’s main point, that the citizens of the developed countries have become dull, swaddled slaves of consumerism, it is absolutely right. The life of the average office worker inflicts me with pity and horror. Unfortunately, the Unabomber leaves his definition of worthwhile goals unclear. As an artist, I consider the effort which I employ to write and paint to be the most rewarding action of my life. When I contemplate the achievements of great teachers, doctors, activists and lawgivers, I feel grateful to government, without which the leisure and safety to perform them would never have occurred. Are these accomplishments based on ‘real goals’ or not? And yes, most of the people I know are sad and desperate; their surrogate activities have few charms for me;

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<sup>105</sup> Gilson.

but I would have to say that the system which exploits them, deceives them and above all stupefies them is much, much better than no system at all.”<sup>106</sup>

## **B) Bio-Politics and the Extremes of Self-Sovereignty: Suicide and Terror**

As we see with his article in Harper’s about being a terror suspect, and the subsequent offers to speak about it on NPR and write about it and his thoughts on the surveillance state for Foreign Policy, Vollmann’s life had become politicized as a mere citizen. He had laid bare in those articles how the State saw him, how it monitored him, how it looked with suspicion into all of his actions, and his bare life. Bio-politics is about the interaction between life and politics to the extent that bare life itself is politicized. From this perspective, the range of power or control a Sovereign or State has over the bare life is in question and examined. This involves the power over life and death and is the terrain of conflicting notions of sovereignty, that of State or Sovereign and that of an individual and self-sovereignty. It involves the actuality of such abstracted terms like “freedom” and “liberty.” As an American citizen with a love of personal freedom and its abstracted form in the founding documents for the United States as a nation, Vollmann is constantly in pursuit of freedom and inquiring what rights he has as an individual and which limitations on his freedom are justified.

In *Rising Up and Rising Down*, Vollmann develops a philosophy of personal sovereignty establishing “the sovereign self’s four violent rights: self-defense, other-defense, self-destruction and euthanasia,”<sup>107</sup> which he also refers to as, “my four sovereign rights: self-defense, defense of another, self-destruction, and loving destruction

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<sup>106</sup> *Rising Up and Rising Down*, Vol. I, 318.

<sup>107</sup> *Rising Up and Rising Down*, Vol. I, 215.

of others.”<sup>108</sup> Of course the biggest question that the whole of that book is trying to tackle is when violence against others is justified, how far to extend that right of “self-defense.” However, to address that question, Vollmann does spend a great deal of time establishing this basis of self-sovereignty and its relationship to State sovereignty. As noted earlier, the State is an obstacle to self-sovereignty. He explains this thusly: “My argument against Plato so far has been one of restless self-assertion: I declare that I am sovereign over myself because I want to be; I refuse to be otherwise. There were times when I would rather die than be told I must do one thing and not the other. And if I feel so strongly about my own autonomy, how can I trample down the choices of others, except in the extreme cases (described in this book) when those cause unjustified suffering?”<sup>109</sup>

Foucault analyzed suicide as a true understanding of the reach and depth of State sovereignty and bio-politics so it is appropriate to look at it further in Vollmann’s thought since it is one of his “four sovereign rights of the self.” For Vollmann there is often a nobility to suicide, as he depicts in a scene in *An Afghanistan Picture Show*. He asks a Mujahid, in regards to weapons, “what will you do if you cannot get what you need?” To which the man responds, “Why, perhaps we will kill ourselves, but we will certainly never surrender.”<sup>110</sup> These were men he admired for their courage and bravery.

Vollmann ignores any kind of State control of the body in regards to suicide noting that, “The virtue of suicide is control... The point is that to be justified, suicide must be an act of assertion;”<sup>111</sup> “Undeniably there are times when suicide offers the only

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 217.

<sup>109</sup> *Rising Up and Rising Down* (Abridged), 93.

<sup>110</sup> *An Afghanistan Picture Show*, 252.

<sup>111</sup> *Rising Up and Rising Down*, Vol. I, 237.

way to freedom;”<sup>112</sup> and “Based on my presuppositions about the rights of the self, my moral calculus advocates that *suicide is permissible whenever uncoerced*.”<sup>113</sup> Not only does he believe that this right belongs to the sovereign individual, but the utility of suicide can be used counter to State authority, a small “s” spectacle counter to large “S” Spectacle.

Violence is quite often unjustified in *Rising Up and Rising Down*, more often than it actually is justified. Treating unjustified violence Vollmann spends some time on terrorism, to which his experience as an artist and student of aesthetics give a more thorough perspective. He notes that the impact of terror is not just physical: “In my opinion, the method chosen often hardly matters, because a victim of a given terrorist act are not only those that experience it directly—that is, those upon whose flesh it falls—but also those who hear about it when rumors or the media do their dirty work.”<sup>114</sup> He is also pointing out that the method is parasitic in a way I would describe as “negative cultural guerrilla warfare.” The act of terroristic violence appropriates means of communication as carriers like all of the non-violent acts of cultural guerrilla warfare. To this Vollmann does say, “terrorists... will have their day, because they use force. But ultimately they will be defeated by force, and it will be a force they do not know. Why? Precisely because they will not know the Other. As long as they do not know it, how can they guard against it?”<sup>115</sup> Here he seems to agree with me on the corrupting effects of violence; the blinding as part of the corruption.

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 241.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 243.

<sup>114</sup> *Rising Up and Rising Down* (Abridged), 67.

<sup>115</sup> “American Writing Today.”

When talking about an anarchist bomber responsible for much destruction, he says, “Di Giovanni writes to his fifteen year old mistress, with a sort of intoxicated incoherence: ‘Do I perhaps do evil? But is that my guide? In evil lies the highest affirmation of life.’ This is aesthetics, not politics. Aesthetics may easily justify suicide, even double suicide—but never murder.”<sup>116</sup> We’ll look further into this difference between aesthetics and politics later when confronting Vollmann’s thoughts on the role of the artist in society, but here is the utility of suicide—as a sovereign right—up against the aesthetic/spectacular component of terror. For Vollmann aesthetics only goes so far violently, and the limits are your own personal rights as a sovereign. Specifically for speech, since he is a writer, he declares, “violent defense of creed is also justified *when creed is simply speech, and the freedom to utter that speech is under imminent attack.* (Caveat: *Direct incitement to violence is action, not speech.*)”<sup>117</sup> This is a clear cut difference between speech or art (and potential cultural guerrilla warfare) and action that is violent, i.e. terroristic. Here he and I mince terms, as I believe that art has the potential to be “action” when it is the role of cultural guerrilla warfare, and in that role it is non-violent. In a personal moment, tucked away in a footnote to the chapter, “On the Aesthetics of Weapons,” in the introductory volume to *Rising Up and Rising Down*, Vollmann confesses, “As I read over *Rising Up and Rising Down*, I understand how some intellectuals can become terrorists. I am not one myself. I do not believe in their moral calculus and never really did: one suffering human being is one too many for me.”<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> *Rising Up and Rising Down*, Vol. I, 271.

<sup>117</sup> *Rising Up and Rising Down*, Vol. II, 464.

<sup>118</sup> *Rising Up and Rising Down*, Vol. I, 303.

Returning to general bio-politics, Vollmann can understandably be pretty cranky about the government trying to control his physical body. As he critiqued the surveillance state in *Foreign Policy* magazine he touches on a range of bio-political issues: “MY OLD FRIEND PAUL FOSTER, WHO IS AT LEAST as good an American as I, proposes the following definition: ‘Privacy is the right to do what you feel guilty about.’ ‘Guilty’ is not quite the word I would choose. But were I to expand on Paul’s formulation, I would say that whatever I do in the bathroom and bedroom ought to be my business alone. The second time the U.S. government detained me in Calexico (nearly seven hours), I eventually needed to urinate, so a uniformed functionary followed me to the lavatory and then watched through the doorway as I peed. I was not ashamed, only offended. I’ll bet he wouldn’t have liked it if I’d watched him pee.”<sup>119</sup> He handles this with balance and humor, but stands true to his beliefs on self-sovereignty and where a State should end its power.

### **C) Outlaws and Outcasts**

It is not a secret that William T. Vollmann is drawn to outlaws and social outcasts; many often find it to be the crux of his work. Where the marginalized are, he goes. Before he was a terror suspect (and certainly before he ever knew he was one), Vollmann was spending time with the disenfranchised and outcast to understand them to write about them and help them if he could. In the next section I will focus on what the role of the artist is for Vollmann. In all of his estimates there is a social component and he aims to help those who need help the most; it’s mere pragmatism. Above we read his

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<sup>119</sup> “Machines of Loving Grace,” 70.

words about the potential for any of us to be terror suspect and the compassion and empathy behind such a statement is indicative of that which runs through all of his work. His journey to Afghanistan was an effort to “do good” as the Afghans were people in need, on the opposite end of power. After the Russian invasion, these Mujahedeen became outlaws in their own lands and Vollmann was an outlaw along with them when he crossed the border illegally from Pakistan. From that early age Vollmann gained experiential knowledge of illegality and transitive legality. He crossed the borders of sovereignty and experienced a small taste of outlawry, with all of its freedoms and limitations.

With his proceeding writing career his material continued to come from spending time among outcasts. In understanding violence in *Rising Up and Rising Down*, we have seen him seek to understand all levels of sovereignty, and fittingly he even considers the extreme opposite end of the State sovereign, the outlaw. He tells a story from the Old Norse about outlawry and says, “He [the outlaw] and government now stand on equal footing on which he once stood in relation to every other atom when all lived separately among the bushes: *Anything that I want to do to you, I am free to do*—if I can. He retains his four rights of self-defense, other-defense, self-destruction, euthanasia; he’s free to kill government—and government is free to kill him. Government being the stronger, that mutual freedom will in all likelihood prove not only useless to the fugitive, but lethal.”<sup>120</sup> The outlaw in the Old Norse is often described like a wolf, a reference that Agamben also makes in *Home Sacer*. Much of Vollmann’s understand of the outlaw here is akin to Agamben’s, especially the oppositional power dynamic between government and outlaw.

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<sup>120</sup> *Rising Up and Rising Down*, Vol. I, 231.

The outlaw, as Vollmann describes, is more sovereign than he ever was as a citizen and is at “a Hobbesian state of nature,” as Agamben describes. At that state, all are sovereigns and all are at bare life and all are sacred; everyone has the ability to kill anyone with impunity.<sup>121</sup>

Vollmann addresses this further in regards to how this might happen in various legal minds across time, first with Cicero, who “supported by most of the other anxious senators, asserts that ‘a man who is a public enemy cannot possibly be regarded as a citizen at all.’” Then he continues with Hobbes, “All Punishments of Innocent subjects, be they great or little, are against the Law of Nature... But the Infliction of what evill soever, on an Innocent man, that is not a Subject, if it be for the benefit of the Commonwealth, and without violation of any former Covenant, is not a breach of the Law of Nature. For all men that are not Subjects, are either Enemies, or else they have ceased from being so, by some precedent convenience.”<sup>122</sup> After more about Cicero getting marshal law in his hands when the Senate declares a state of emergency and a reference to the Catalinarian conspiracy he says, “maybe Cicero was right, but pronouncements of outlawry cannot but be dangerous to order itself. *That social contract is unjust which can be unilaterally abrogated by the more powerful party.*”<sup>123</sup> The italicized sentence is something Vollmann deduces from the examples to apply to his “moral calculus.”

This is one of the dangers of branding a citizen an outlaw, or excluding them from citizenship, the arbitrariness of it all, to which Vollmann cites a Nazi document from 1944 which makes an alien out of anyone who doesn’t fit the racial minimum; they are

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<sup>121</sup> Agamben, 106-107.

<sup>122</sup> *Rising Up and Rising Down*, Vol. I, 232.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 233.



then excluded based on who they are regardless of past citizenship before the law. He follows this by mentioning Plato opposing outlawry on any kind and citing Thomas Jefferson and a bill he wrote about proportionality in punishment to ensure that after the citizen “would reenter the social commonwealth, being once again responsible to and cared for by it.”<sup>124</sup>

Closer to our own time, in an effort to reach a conclusion on outlawry, Vollmann quotes Clarence Darrow: “A criminal is always the man who we do not know or the man we hate—the man we see through the bitterness of our hearts.” To which Vollmann adds: “What could be a better definition of the outlaw? Society will not know him; society hates him.” After more on Cicero, exclusion and inclusion, and outlaw versus citizen, he summarizes further: “In short, the prospect of being blotted out of the social contract is terrifying, whether the government be good or bad, because even a bad government offers more protection than none—unless, of course, it constitutes utter despotism, and one finds oneself in the situation of a Jew in the Nazi-occupied Ukraine, which is to say as outlaw, struggling at night to crawl away from the bloody pit.”<sup>125</sup> Clearly, like Agamben, and so many scholars since the Second World War, the Holocaust is always in Vollmann’s mind. Without ever using the term *homo sacer*, that extreme of exclusion is clearly something Vollmann has thought about deeply.

In looking at the lowest of the low in a society, Vollmann is able to be most scathing against authority and its abuses. In a reference to Buchenwald and Kolyma, he says, “The fundamental purpose of both institutions remained the same: to convert human beings into objects living and nonliving, extracting ideological, psychological and

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> *Rising Up and Rising Down*, Vol. I, 234.

commercial profits along the way.”<sup>126</sup> The lowest of the low in this example are outcasted, but still enough with the system to be objectified and profited from. The ability to profit from the outcast might be something Agamben is missing. It seems that if the State can profit from the objectified, they are being sacrificed in some way and not entirely fitting the Roman legal definition of “homo sacer.”

In the sixth volume of *Rising Up and Rising Down*, Vollmann writes a final section titled “Perception and Irrationality.” Here he examines a group of people in Japan, the Buraku, who are arbitrarily marginalized. In investigating this phenomenon in a “closed society,” one overly conscious of shame, he is brought to say, “Freud made it clear long ago that when one cannot or will not talk about something, than one has a problem.”<sup>127</sup> As he questions people, many deny discrimination against the Buraku. As to who they are and the context for the discrimination, Vollmann explains, “the word ‘Burakumin’ (*Untouchable people* in Japanese) sounds like they are negatively looked down on, people who do dirty jobs of which no majority citizens voluntarily take.” This goes back to feudal times with jobs such as executioner, slaughterhouse worker, butcher, leatherworker, etc; mostly jobs that involve blood. Vollmann quotes Maurice Pinguet, that “Shinto has a horror of blood,”<sup>128</sup> which could be the religious root of this discrimination. In Vollmann’s interviews he learns that this designation of Buraku isn’t just applied to those who still perform those professions, but descendants of people who have had those jobs; it has become a hereditary caste. It is not rare for someone to hire a

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<sup>126</sup> *Rising Up and Rising Down* abridged, 36.

<sup>127</sup> *Rising Up and Rising Down*, Vol. VI, 596.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, 598.

private investigator to research a prospective marriage partner to find out if they have Buraku in their lineage.

A woman tells him about the Buraku, “the way that some Buraku people join the Yakuza is evidence of discrimination from society at large;” to which he replies, “I did not agree with her last remark. While it is true that many people do become criminals because society rejects them, I have also met a Raskolnikov or two who rejected society first... and if there was no violence [against them] then I did not see what the big deal was. What I had forgotten, of course, was that people may be punished mentally as well as physically.”<sup>129</sup> The Buraku are not relegated to the camp, like the Jews in Nazi Germany, the extreme example of homo sacer for Agamben, but they can still be excluded while remaining a part of society. They might be physically within, but treated mentally as if they are without, similar often to the homeless in my own country and the many other poor around the world who Vollmann encounters in his book *Poor People*.

In *Riding Toward Everywhere*, Vollmann’s trainhopping memoir/travel log, he spends a great deal of time contemplating authority and freedom, society and exile. Riding the rails is a way to escape society and experience freedom, and yet it is an illegal activity. He declares proudly and romantically about this illegality: “Every time I surrender, even necessarily, to authority which disregardingly or contemptuously violates me, so I violate myself. Every time I break an unnecessary law, doing so for my own joy and to the detriment of no other human being, so I regain myself, and become strong in the parts of me that the security man can never see.”<sup>130</sup> Vollmann has the freedom as a privileged able-bodied white male to visit this level of freedom and illegality often

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<sup>129</sup> *Rising Up and Rising Down*, Vol. VI, 597.

<sup>130</sup> *Riding Toward Everywhere*, 97.

associated with homelessness. In the book, his travel companion, Steve, refers to them as faux-bos, since they are pretending at being hobos. Vollmann gets to pretend to be “a Raskolnikov... who rejected society first” though not in the violent sense of the Dostoevskian character. The passage I cite is one of many where he sings rhapsodic about the great freedom of breaking a victimless law. Earlier, I noted how the publisher required a legal disclaimer for the book as it seems to encourage an outlaw existence.

Turning back to *Rising Up and Rising Down*, Vollmann still believes that there are duties for a citizen to perform to be a responsible member of a State, and as systematic as he is with all of his thinking, he even outlines: “A worthwhile ethical procedure for a citizen is: 1. To follow his own inner logic in order to postulate laws of conduct which seem to him good; 2. To follow those laws if they correspond to local norms, and reconsider them if they violate those norms; but 3. Above all, to choose the right regardless of local authority or custom, and then act accordingly.”

#### **D) The Fringes of Society and the Role of the Artist**

The world of social outcasts is one familiar to Vollmann. The novel *The Royal Family* is a key example of his understanding of this conceptual location. The book, “like it’s characters, [is] devoted to *Addiction, Addicts, Pushers, Prostitutes, and Pimps*.” And he adds an epigraph from the Marquise de Sade: “But seriousness commands us to recognize that it’s the multitude of laws that is responsible for this multitude of crimes;” a perfect example of the Marquise’s stance in opposition to the Enlightenment, as a product of that Enlightenment.

In much of Modernity and the Enlightenment experience, the world of the outcast is the where the artist lives, or often turns for his/her material. The artist is drawn to this shadow world for the tension it radiates due to its relationship with conventional civil society and Enlightenment ideals. This world is the place of conflict, for it is the place where the conflicted dwell. Any of us can pass through it, but for some it is where they are born and will always live unless the structure of State and authority is changed. It is a shadow world, and therefore nebulous and intangible. Physically it can take shape anywhere, though there are locations of a society that are “ghettoized” and demarcated as locations in opposition or on the margins of conventional society.

Vollmann, is a faux-bo, but also a journalist, scholar of humanity, and an artist, and accordingly with all classifications, he spends most of his time in the world of outcasts. It is also the world of the revolutionary and post-colonial, as his travels have illustrated; and it is also that of the poor, destitute, and outcast abroad and at home. He acknowledges this in his first person, almost “gonzo” non-fiction and reportage as well as in his fiction with such characters as “William the Blind” in the Seven Dreams novels and a momentary glimpse of his younger self at research for the novel *Whores For Gloria* that he inserts into *The Royal Family*.<sup>131</sup>

Not to minimize the terror that the colonized subject, or the oppressed African-American lives under (in a society that supported legal slavery, followed by segregation, and continued institutional racism), but the double-consciousness that they experience, as described by W.E.B. DuBois and Frantz Fanon, is experienced to some degree by all the marginalized. As such all experience the feeling of at once being within society at large,

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<sup>131</sup> *The Royal Family*, 66.

and separate from it. The extreme would be homo sacer (a condition found in the off-shore American prison, Guantanamo Bay) and then to lesser degrees for prisoners, ex-cons, terror suspects on the “no fly list,” other outlaws, homeless, and minorities of race, religion, sexual identity, and gender identity. All of the marginalized peoples and identities living in some state of tension with conventional society engage in defiance.

Vollmann has placed himself at a state of otherness to conventional society when he published a photography book about his experiences with cross-dressing. In it he declares: “Defiance is the continuum between submission and triumph. We might say that defiance is more noble to the extent that its object is more impossible, for the defiance of the strong by the weak must always be ignoble, whereas he who stands up to authority is, if nothing else, brave. I have always liked Gandhi’s admonition to treat the powerless with respect and the powerful with familiarity. The dichotomy between the pleasure principle and the reality principle underlies the normal losses, lacks and disappointments in any life. As a reader, writer, lover, artist and citizen who interests himself in character, on and off the printed page, I study what literary critics name ambiguity, Marxists call dialectic, Orwell pinpointed as doublethink, and Bildungsromans present as growth, maturation and decline. One of the points where all these entities overlap is defiance.”<sup>132</sup> In showing this part of his own identity to the world he subjects himself to ridicule and positions himself as an outcast more than as a journalist passing thorough or a middle class faux-bo riding the rails. Vollmann finds the outlaw and oppressed as noble, at least just for striving against the impossible. Defiance

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<sup>132</sup> *Book of Dolores*, 47.

is a trait that unifies many outcasts and in it there is a bravery to keep them all striving in opposition to a standard that excludes them.

As this terrain brings together many groups of people in defiance and opposition to a shared opposition, who are traditionally thought disparate, discussion of this shadowy terrain often takes traditionally disparate idioms and disciplines. Vollmann illustrated this in the citation from *Book of Dolores* bringing together literary criticism, Marxism, Orwell, and Bildungsromans. In a 2010 interview with a German magazine, he speaks through his thoughts on the world of outcasts and its locations, physically, philosophically, and psychologically: “I love the Jungian notion of the unconscious ‘shadow’ which represents the Other, the forbidden, the opposite, the evil, the erotic, the new. I made some use of it in *Europe Central*. Equally fascinating to me is the Marxist notion of a material substructure which allows the cultural superstructure to operate. Do you remember H. G. Wells’ *The Time Machine*? The subterranean Morlocks keep things running so the hedonistic Eloi can enjoy the sun and make love. In exchange, the Morlocks get to eat the Eloi. Whatever lies beneath the surface may indeed devour what is above, especially if it goes unrecognized. Secrecy is power. This paradigm is what makes the best work of Poe, de Sade, and Lovecraft so haunting. Secrecy is also power in Orwell’s *1984*, when Winston and Julia have their (so they believe) undiscovered love nest, where they can be soft and naked.”<sup>133</sup> By the end he is referencing Freud as well as Jung in the psychological terrain and with it concedes a power that the marginalized have in relation to sovereignty, the State, the status quo, or the colonizer. This power is derived from the fact that that dominant self cannot know the other. Earlier I cited Vollmann in

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<sup>133</sup> Chan, 65.

regards to terror, and those that employ it, for they also refuse to know the Other, and it will be their downfall.

This love he has for all outcast terrain creeps out in various writings. In a travel essay for BookForum magazine about going “Off the Grid,” Vollmann ties together physical horizons with less physical classifications and identity politics: “Even though Montana is no longer a territory (never mind that the Unabomber stayed off the grid there for some years) and most of California has long since been annexed by our gridmasters, other frontiers continue to be invented and discovered, as energies flower in new, un beholden, and hence ungridded directions. Psychedelic drugs, utopian communes, concrete poetry, militant survivalism, consensual sadomasochistic alliances—these all constitute travel to unregulated countries. Transgender people now give a new mode of public expression to the fine American notion of making oneself along one’s own lines.”<sup>134</sup> And over a decade earlier, in the foreword to an anthology of amateur erotic stories collected from a website he notes, “Each contributor to this anthology therefore finds himself or herself on the same side of the pedophiles, neo-Nazis, and other outcasts.”<sup>135</sup> For him they are outcasts in the same act of defiance.

The power of the artist, or social role of the artist, comes from the artist’s intentional ability to employ outcast-like secrecy and defiance. As his own best subject in regard to the role of artist, he says, “Defiance might justly be called a sort of fantasy, because until the defier has prevailed (if he ever does), the reality principle’s insistence that he cannot prevail appears true. Copernicus and Galileo were egomaniacal heretics, lying criminals in thrall to the pleasure principle, until reason and observation finally

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<sup>134</sup> “Let’s Get Lost,” 20.

<sup>135</sup> “Foreword,” *Literotica*, x.



proved otherwise. Life is itself a fantasy, which defies death but inevitably loses. Because I am myself a fantasist, in my capacity both as a fiction writer and as an empath, someone who considers it the duty of a world citizen to step into the other person's shoes, I discreetly defy preordained places and identities.”<sup>136</sup>

Earlier, when discussing State sovereignty I referenced a Vollmann article in *The Atlantic* about Hassan i Sabbah's assassin's creed. Politically, this creed is illegitimate and leads to abuses of sovereignty. However, as an artist's creed it is a much different story. The title of that article is “Writers Can Do Anything,” and in it Vollmann describes the great freedom the artist wields: “Does evil exist in an artistic context? In other words, should some things not be permissible in art? I would say no... But if a writer says that only some things are true—saying only these aesthetic rules are true, and these things are never permissible, for all time—then I'm inclined to say, screw you... I think that for an artist, certainly, it's good to remember that nothing is true for all time—and therefore, that all is permissible. You shouldn't get struck in any one truth. Every idea, every identity is doomed to die, just as we are. I think that's one reason I try so many different approaches in my books—I don't want to limit myself to one approach, one artistic self... When looked at this way, ‘nothing is true’ is a great, democratizing idea: If there is no objective truth, no person or entity should have the right to impose ideas on anyone else. In this sense, ‘nothing is true’ leads naturally to the conclusion that ‘all is permissible’—if all ideas have an equal right to exist, people should not be given more or

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<sup>136</sup> *Book of Dolores*, 52.

less freedom on the basis of their ideas.”<sup>137</sup> This true freedom within aesthetics is anarchistic and nonmoral.

Further on the subject of the nonmoral terrain within art, Vollmann once reviewed a book by W.G. Sebald in which Sebald contemplates the morality of the German writer, Alfred Andersch. Sebald claims, “When a morally compromised author claims the field of aesthetics as a value-free area it should make his readers stop and think.” But Vollmann cannot agree, saying, “I’d revise that sentence thus: When a morally compromised author, a saintly author, or any author at all claims the field of aesthetics as a value-free area, it should make his readers say to themselves: On that much, at least, we’re all in agreement. What is aesthetics if not value-free? What do Andersch’s *recherché* adjectives have to do with the way he treated his wife, or his reaction to National Socialism? Exactly nothing.”<sup>138</sup> This is the freedom within art, the freedom of aesthetics, but what about outside the work and the social context the work fits in?

When reviewing the work of early 20<sup>th</sup> century graphic novelist, Lynd Ward, Vollmann applauds him, saying, “More than ever we need artists like this: People who can draw (or carve), who pay some attention to history and politics, and who suffer for the sufferings of others. As it says in Johnny Tremain (and perhaps this is why Ward chose to illustrate it): ‘Hundreds would die, but not the thing they died for.’ A man can stand up.”<sup>139</sup> Vollmann respects heroes and the heroic—but who doesn’t—and quite often he finds them in the arts.

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<sup>137</sup> “Writers Can Do Anything.”

<sup>138</sup> “And Suppress the Unpleasant Things,” 7.

<sup>139</sup> “Emotion Picture Projector,” 19.

In his 1990 essay, “American Writing Today: Diagnosis of a Disease,” after he establishes the blindness of terrorists in regards to the Other, he posits how best to not be like them, how do we “understand without approving or hating,” how do we “empathize;” and the answer is through art.<sup>140</sup> Why is art so useful, because it “takes us inside other minds.” But not just any art, Vollmann asserts, “We need writing with a sense of purpose.”<sup>141</sup> He ends the essay by giving a break down of rules that will help writing have a sense of purpose and convey the Other without losing the Self.<sup>142</sup>

For the average citizen, whether artist or not, Vollmann also believes there are freedoms of speech that require duties, even if one of those duties is merely accepting the free speech of others. In *Rising Up and Rising Down* he tells us, “I’m resigned to my government’s attack on Iraq in my name; I’m resigned because I can’t do anything about it. But I will never give up my right to speak out against it. If I’m not allowed even that much, then I’ve not signed a social contract, I’ve become a moral slave. By all means

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<sup>140</sup> Vollmann gives his own footnote at the word, “art,” which reads: “Here one might argue that it would be more efficient simply to be GOD, or failing that, to join the CIA. However, the first is not within our power. As for the second, it has now been established that our spooks are wrong as often as our meteorologists.”

<sup>141</sup> “American Writing Today.”

<sup>142</sup> “THE RULES: 1. We should never write without feeling. 2. Unless we are much more interesting than we imagine we are, we should strive to feel not only about Self, but also about Other. Not the vacuum so often between Self and Other. Not the unworthiness of Other. Not the Other as a negation or eclipse of Self. Not even about the Other exclusive of Self, because that is but a trickster-egoist’s way of worshiping Self secretly. We must treat Self and Other as equal partners. (Of course I am suggesting nothing new. I do not mean to suggest anything new. Health is more important than novelty.) 3. We should portray important human problems. 4. We should seek for solutions to those problems. Whether or not we find them, the seeking will deepen the portrait. 5. We should know our subject, treating it with the respect with which Self must treat Other. We should know it in all senses, until our eyes are bleary from seeing it, our ears ring from listening to it, our muscles ache from embracing it, our gonads are raw from making love to it. (If this sounds pompous, it is perhaps because I wear thick spectacles.) 6. We should believe that truth exists. 7. We should aim to benefit others in addition to ourselves.

weave a common law, but that law should never be above debate... If we don't grant the self this paltry right, then our social contract is nothing more than a hypocritical or naked coercion. The logical consequences: We must allow hate speech and pornography, including violent pornography; we must allow dupes, thugs, pimps and traitors to have their say."<sup>143</sup>

Vollmann follows this with an "Addendum on Freedom of Speech": "*The self retains the inalienable right to express itself as it chooses, on any topic that it chooses, the right to empathize with friend or foe, to assent and to deny, to offend, to express its conscience and to express no conscience, to be offensive, vulgar, vicious, and even evil in the object and manner of its expression, at any and all times, with the sole caveat that direct incitement to violence is action, not speech, and may be considered illegitimate to the extent that the violence it incites is illegitimate.*"<sup>144</sup> The most important part of this for me—other than its beauty and sentiment—is the final caveat drawing a line between when speech, or art, might end and when action begins. For Vollmann here, as we saw earlier, "action" implies violence whereas for me it involves real world social change, disrupting a meta-narrative, or changing Spectacle through spectacle. Regardless, it is significant that speech/art should have a defined limit and that something cultural has the potential to become a matter of life and death, as in the violent implication for Vollmann.

### **E) Cultural Guerrilla Warfare**

The value-free zone within the creation of art, and aesthetics itself—as mentioned in the last section—is of peculiar interest to the State and authority. If art has a social

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<sup>143</sup> *Rising Up and Rising Down*, Vol. 1, 223.

<sup>144</sup> *Rising Up and Rising Down*, Vol. VI, 464.

role, as Vollmann believes, as well as a power to enact change, then the artist is a dangerous figure, especially for the fact that the artist is used to engaging in a practice in which the artist is a god, a complete sovereign, and at those times manipulates a value-free zone of total freedom. Every artist can therefore be viewed as competition for a State or sovereign.

When writing the foreword to a collection of erotic stories, Vollmann declares, “the publication of this anthology is a political act.”<sup>145</sup> Even those dwellers in the terrain of outcasts expressing their freedom of speech are an opposition to sovereignty by exerting their own. In the last section, while speaking about the assassin’s creed, he asks if some things shouldn’t be permissible in art. While he says no, he points out that some have contrary thoughts: “Plato thought certain kinds of music should be banned from the Republic because they were too effeminate, or voluptuous, or whatever, and would weaken the body politic. I prefer to think that all should be allowed in art. And that, in a way, comes down to my political belief about the right of the self. The First Amendment: What a great idea! Why not universalize that, and say we all have the right to express ourselves.”<sup>146</sup> Why not? Because that right is dangerous. Free expression will always run counter to any heterogeneous State meta-narrative or established Spectacle.

In his essay where he reviews a couple different books about the ethics of photography he talks about art in a way that supports my notion of cultural guerrilla warfare: “I respond deeply to the idea that a picture is valuable both for its inexhaustibility of interpretation and for the possibility it offers of showing us who needs help, in order that we may help one another. In our increasingly dark times, The Civil

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<sup>145</sup> “Foreword,” *Literotica*, vi.

<sup>146</sup> “Writers Can Do Anything.”

Contract of Photography remains excitingly optimistic, perhaps utopian...” And the way he talks about the use of photography continues into the work of cultural guerrilla warfare with: “But although I believe in the Golden Rule, without reading this book I would most likely never have formalized what my photography ought to strive for: ‘When a photograph turns into a grievance, whoever articulates it becomes its civic subject.’” His personal goals as an artist and photographer continue as he says, “I want to strive harder and more effectively to articulate the grievances I witness through my lens. The civil contract of photography may be, like the notion of human rights, a ‘necessary fiction,’ but for all that, it is noble, needful, and perhaps even practical.”<sup>147</sup>

The photographer, the artist of photography, like the writer, assumes a civil contract, a necessary fiction, like a counter narrative to injustices and human rights violations supported by a State sovereign. This is also captured in Vollmann’s constant drive to speak out against his own country, its abuses of personal freedoms and its illegal wars. We might be born into a situation under a State, immersed in coercive Spectacle, and in some way defined by those circumstances of culture and national identity, but it shouldn’t end fatalistically there. Cultural and social revolutions can be fought. When addressing the rights of the self in *Rising Up and Rising Down*, Vollmann touches on the notion of the social contract stating, “*involuntary attachments are not binding. Voluntary attachments may be withdrawn at any time.* Authority may be legitimate—that is, it may operate with the consent of the governed—or it may not be. Either way, authority must respect the Golden Rule to the same extent as any other moral entity, perhaps even more since authority enjoys supreme power to inflict violence. Should it fail to do so, why

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<sup>147</sup> “Seeing Eye to Eye,” 11.

then, *involuntary attachments are not binding*, and the more involuntary they are, the more likely it is that then authority which insists on them approaches illegitimacy.

*Voluntary attachments may be withdrawn at any times.*”<sup>148</sup> Our power is always one to say no, to withdraw, or to present other options other than just saying no.

He also reminds us by citing Gandhi, “No government can exist for a single moment without the cooperation of the people...voluntary or forced.”<sup>149</sup> If we choose to stay and fight, to say no loudly, we return to the duty of the writer and artist; we return to the application of cultural guerrilla warfare. In a speech from 2002 about “Some Thoughts on Writing During Wartime,” Vollmann concludes by giving advice to writers. The advice is about empathy and presenting the Other as a round character, speaking back to power by giving humanity to your country’s enemies. The most important part though is where Vollmann hints at the potential extra sovereignty the writer/artist might possess over the average citizen, that potential power that can make them enemies of the state, as his lawyer described for Vollmann’s own situation: “Remember, we writers are among the few who enjoy the privilege of presenting and standing by our own independent position to the world. We are beholden to no one.”<sup>150</sup>

## **F) Conclusion**

William T. Vollmann is an artist that believes, “of all the arts, although photography presents best, painting and music convey best, and sculpture looms best...literature articulates best.” This is why I have let him speak so much for himself

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<sup>148</sup> *Rising Up and Rising Down*, Vol I, 264.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, 230.

<sup>150</sup> Hemmingson, 153.

and why I have learned so much from him. Let's conclude his points of contact with my research topic with two personal statements of Vollmann's, the first one which reveals himself in a critique of contemporary America and the second which critiques America while giving a description of his personal social ideal:

“The overt emergence of transgender people is an exciting, indeed astounding, hallmark of American Ovidianism. I love it. And I sincerely believe that we are making measurable progress in transforming ourselves away from racism. The election of a black President, the increasing freedom of interracial couples to go where they please without nasty consequences—these are wonderful things. But it may be that, in general, the transformations encouraged by American individualism take place more in the symbolic, mental, cybernetic realms than in ‘physical reality.’ Social Security numbers, the Patriot Act, concern about legal liability, the decay of the cash economy, all these things make it more difficult to check into a hotel with a secret lover. And changing homesteads and professions, how big a deal is that when every state has similar fast-food chains, and when bank tellers, pharmacists, construction contractors, and so many others are for better or for worse less autonomous each year?”<sup>151</sup> (67) from 032c

And:

“For the record, I'd like to live in an America in which I could leave my door unlocked all the times; in which I could walk wherever I wanted at night; in which we all took each other on faith; in which there were fewer people and more trees, a wild America like Canada;

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<sup>151</sup> Chan, 67.



an America in which I could believe what the President said, in which women's bodies were their own business; in which electrical power consumption diminished every year, in which automobiles were banned from our cities and televisions and chain stores were banned everywhere; in which knowingly failing to help a stranger in an emergency would be punishable by death, in which people collected experiences instead of things; in which everyone died at home, not in a hospital, in which everything was sexual and nothing was pornographic, in which beautiful words were second in importance only to beautiful deeds and beautiful souls, in which we all made use of what we already had.

## CHAPTER 4

### CASE STUDY: AI WEIWEI

#### **I. Biography, Contextually**

*“I wouldn’t say I’ve become more radical; I was born radical,”*

—Ai Weiwei, exhibition catalog of Sunflowers Seeds show at Tate Museum, 2010.

Ai Weiwei’s life has always been one of art and its relation to the State. While it’s true that Ai Weiwei was born in 1957 in a courtyard house just outside the Forbidden City, because his father, Ai Qing (1910-1996), was a revered poet of the revolution and friend to Mao, all of that changed a year later. Ai Qing, like Mao, was from a wealthy landed family. He originally studied art in China and then in Paris before he became a poet. His poetry production began in 1932 when he was jailed by the Nationalists and needed to express himself. His poems were smuggled out of prison and became important for other revolutionaries of Chinese liberation, for the Communist Party, and for Chinese opposition to the Japanese during the war. Mao pursued a friendship with Ai Qing in 1941 and brought him to Yanan to a seminal forum on the arts that will be address in greater depth in the next section on Ai Weiwei’s lineage. Ai Qing eventually grew a skepticism about Mao and his relationship to power, and yet regardless of that

skepticism, when Mao instituted the Hundred Flowers Movement in 1956, encouraging people to speak their minds, Ai Qing actually spoke his mind about freedom of thought and expression. In 1958, Mao wrapped up his great anti-intellectual purge, and even the most famous poet in the country, Ai Qing, was punished. At first Ai Qing and his family were sent to live with a woodcutter to learn righteousness, then a couple more locations before the worst of all, to live in a literal hole in a tiny village in northeast China on the edge of the Gobi Desert. When asked by his friend Barnaby Martin to describe the hole, Ai Weiwei drew a picture and said, “This is the ground. They dig a hole, like this, and then actually you put some branches like this, you cover this with earth, so there... slip in anywhere for the door. So we live in there. Very warm. Whole of the earth for your walls.”<sup>152</sup> Ai Qing’s job was cleaning public toilets and for a white-collar poet in his sixties this was crippling work leading him to several suicide attempts. His young son built the stove and handled the “domestic” work when not at the village school learning to memorize the quotations of Chairman Mao. Ai Qing’s wife during this time was mostly in Beijing petitioning the government for her husband’s release. Ten years of Ai Weiwei’s childhood was spent like this. In 1975 Ai Qing and his family were allowed to move back to Beijing and Ai Qing was exonerated in 1978, two years after Mao’s death. In 1979 Ai Qing became vice-president of the Chinese Writers Association.

This is the man who was the first inspiration for Ai Weiwei, a man from whom Ai Weiwei gets his family name, and even that name is an act of art and political protest. Ai Qing was born Jiang Haicheng and changed it while in prison, hating that he shared a surname with Chiang (Jiang) Kai-shek. The story holds that he started to write the first

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<sup>152</sup> Martin, 209.

two movements then “X-ed” the rest out in disgust leaving the Chinese character for “Ai.” To complete the pen name he chose “Qing” which is a color “blue-green” described by the meaning of his original first name, which means “limpidity of the sea.”

Ai Weiwei learned a lot from his father, especially a commitment to art and social justice. About this influence and upbringing, Ai Weiwei said in a 2013 interview, “I became an artist only because I was oppressed by society. I was born into a very political society. When I was a child my father told me, as a joke, ‘You can be a politician.’ I was 10 years old. I didn’t understand it, because I already knew the politicians were the enemy, the ones who crushed him. But now I understand. I can be political.”<sup>153</sup>

Almost destined to be an artist, Ai Weiwei enrolled in the Beijing Film Academy in 1978, but really started to express himself as a founding member of the art group, “Stars.” This group took its name from the idea of returning the ego to the artist, that each artist was a star, a stance against the uniformity of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). Ai Weiwei as a painter showed his work in Stars’ first show on September 27<sup>th</sup> 1979 when members hung their work on a fence outside the China Art Gallery in Beijing. The show was deemed illegal and didn’t stay up long.

In 1981 Ai Weiwei left China for the United States following a girlfriend. He spent some time in Berkeley, California but mostly lived in New York City. He attended a year at Parson’s School of Design where acclaimed Irish painter Sean Scully was his teacher. In New York he also became friends with Allen Ginsburg, who was familiar with the poetry of Ai Qing. The most important influences that Ai received in the U.S. were other New York artists Andy Warhol (1928-1987), an icon of American art, and Marcel

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<sup>153</sup> Sheff, 64.

Duchamp (1887-1968), originally from France, but who lived most of his life in the U.S. Following the inspiration of Warhol, Ai did a series of paintings of Mao before giving up painting entirely. His only U.S. show from this time was at a small gallery in Soho in 1987, and Ai exhibited work that was so inspired by Duchamp, one of the pieces, “Hanging Man,” was a direct homage to Duchamp (a wire clothes hanger in the shape Duchamp’s profile). The show was only deemed a success by Ai himself, but the *Artspeak* newspaper review hailed Ai Weiwei as the heir to Dada and referenced both Warhol and Duchamp to the artist’s delight.

Ai really valued his time in New York. Remembering his arrival he once said, “Our airplane circled the city. The moment I saw New York City, I was so happy. All the propaganda from the Communists was about how bad and corrupt capitalism is. I saw New York and saw a river of light, and it was like moving in a dream.”<sup>154</sup> And in another interview he went further saying, “And there’s this kind of energy, this imagination, to see what kind of people created a place like this. So I was just completely in love. I think it’s the same kind of love that Warhol had when he left his hometown of Pittsburgh.”<sup>155</sup> He worked odd jobs and at one point shared an apartment with other Chinese artists, the violinist Tan Dun, and the filmmaker Chen Kaige (“Farewell My Concubine”). Beyond the big city lights and the bohemian artist experience, Ai also learned from New York on a deeper level noting once, “I saw a kind of basic social justice, how it applies, or in many cases doesn’t apply. I did so much thinking, and I was involved in the Tompkins

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<sup>154</sup> Sheff, 64-130.

<sup>155</sup> Bollen, 92.

Square Park riots or the AIDS demonstrations or even the anti-war demonstrations. I always say that I watched the Iran-contra hearings, every minute of that.”<sup>156</sup>

Ai Weiwei moved back to China in 1993, because his father was of failing health. While he was abroad, his parents were always active in the family business of dissent. One anecdote describes an aged Ai Qing in a wheelchair rolling about the protesting students in Tiananmen Square and Ai Weiwei’s mother serving the protesters steamed dumplings. The rest of the 1990’s and up until his 2003 show in Switzerland, Ai mostly earned money by trading in antiquities. He also studied architecture, setting up his design firm, FAKE Design, in 2003. Every subsequent year has seen at least one exhibit of Ai’s work or participation in a group show in some location around the world. The most important events in Ai’s life and work of the last decade are treated in other sections of this chapter, but in regards to biography, it should be noted that in a 2010 *New Yorker* interview, Ai Weiwei said, “I think my stance and my way of life is my most important art.”<sup>157</sup>

## II. Lineage

*“I will never leave China, unless I am forced to. Because China is mine. I will not leave something that belongs to me in the hands of people I do not trust.”*

—Ai Weiwei, Reuters Interview, 2012.<sup>158</sup>

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<sup>156</sup> Rohter, C2.

<sup>157</sup> *Weiwei-isms*, 25.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

As mentioned earlier, Ai Weiwei was raised in exile with a dissident father. Ai's place as a dissident artist in China is not only a family tradition but part of a long social tradition involving the arts and dissent as old as China itself. Looking at historical, cultural, and legal documents over the course of Chinese history we can chart points on a timeline that illustrate an awareness of the power of art that can be used to serve government and sovereignty or to threaten government and the social status quo.

To find the earliest recorded Chinese writings about the arts, we look to a book referred to as *Shang Shu*, or simply, *Shu (Book of History)*. This "book of documents" serves more as a manual of ethics and records court life and events to support a moral for conduct going all the way back to the Shang Dynasty (1760-1066 B.C.E.). Once attributed to Confucius (551-479 B.C.E.) himself, the assemblage of this collection of documents is now mostly attributed to Confucian scholars from the tail end of the East Zhou Dynasty (770-256 B.C.E.) and the Warring States period (475-221 B.C.E.). Regardless, Confucius cites some of the *Shu* in his *Analects*. In a section of the *Shu* called the "Book of Shang" there is a scene set during the Shang Dynasty in the court of King Taijia at his father's memorial service where the Chief Minister, Yi Yin, describes Taijia's father's accolades. King Shang Tang, who founded the dynasty bearing his name, established penal codes that also applied to people in official positions. This first noted prohibition in the arts here is directed at officials to avoid the dangers of intemperance and practices of the lower classes like "shamanism, in other words, to be obsessed with dancing and singing in the palaces and in private quarters."<sup>159</sup> This is followed by a list of

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<sup>159</sup> Fei, 4.

other actions representing intemperance and Yi Yin notes that if a ruler is afflicted by one of the evils listed the country itself will suffer.

Along with *Shu*, there are four other main Chinese Classics. The one known as *Liji*, or *Book of Rites*, which was also assembled by Confucian scholars, gives detailed descriptions of the social implications and applications of art in its section on music. The aesthetics of *Liji* support Confucian views and connect to that of the *Shu* casting a long shadow down through time. To have a “peaceful, safe, and stable world” great leaders knew to control a people through penal codes, government, rites (etiquette), and music. The reason it gives for the inclusion of music is that, “Melody in a peaceful land is tranquil, expressing contentment with the orderly and amiable nature of government policies. Melody in a chaotic world is full of grievances, manifesting resentment toward unpopular political measures.”<sup>160</sup> Of course this indicates that the arts can be an insightful barometer to use for evaluating a political climate and in turn a governing body also understands that to control the arts one can fool the people. One of the other Five Chinese Classics, *Shijing*, or Book of Odes, is a collection of 305 poems from around 600 B.C.E., and in it it is made clear that “The people are very easily led.”<sup>161</sup> This is referenced back in *Liji* in a piece of advice to rulers that “one should be careful about what one likes and dislikes. Subjects do what the monarch like... you can accomplish anything when you have veneration and harmony [in regards to music].”<sup>162</sup>

Confucianism has been the dominant mode of social and political thought for most of China since it’s founder’s own lifetime, but not long after his death it had a rival

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<sup>160</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid., 8.



in Mohism for several centuries. Mohism followed the thought of Mo Di, or Mo Zi (480-420 B.C.E.), a carpenter who studied Confucianism before breaking away with his own writings in opposition to Confucius. A hierarchical understanding of society was a cornerstone of Confucius' thought, thus making Confucianism a wonderful tool for emperors and those in power. In contrast, Mo Di spoke of equality and universal love in writings that could be described as radical populism for his time. The Mohist school of thought "represented the interest and desire of the working poor—farmers, craftsmen, and soldiers."<sup>163</sup> From this point of view it is understandable that Emperor Qin Shi Huang (260-210 B.C.E.) of the Qin Dynasty (221-207 B.C. E.) burned the books of Mo Di and the following Han Dynasties reasserted the place of Confucian thought.

Mo Di's prohibitions about the arts were utilitarian and populist. Though Mo Di is a figure with a political stance similar to that of Ai Weiwei, it would at first appear that his view of art was in direct contrast. For Mo Di, "The benevolent should think of the world, not of the pleasures for his own eyes, ears, mouth, and body." For Mo Di, the money spent on making musical instruments and the time spent performing that music could all be better spent on producing food and clothing for the people. For him it is wrong to make music because it serves only to please the wealthy in power. He sees it as decadent and notes that "If everybody loves and indulges in Music, neither the ruler and the nobles, nor the officials and scholars, nor the farmers and their wives, would be able to fulfill their duties."<sup>164</sup> An irony that Mo Di fails to notice is that his writings employ a very artistic rhetoric. He is using poetics to help the position of the working poor and attack those in power. In the language of 20<sup>th</sup> century western art, Mo Di is criticizing

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<sup>163</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>164</sup> Fei, 13.

“art for art’s sake” and any non-engaged art that isn’t in the service of the populace. Further down we will see some similarities to how Mao Tse-Tung sought to employ aesthetics on behalf of “the people.”

After Mo Di, in the next century, a Confucian thinker, Xun Kuang (c. 313-238 B.C.E.), helped describe the ways that the arts could be employed by a sovereign or ruling elite. Xun Kuang believed that culture and training were tools that could be used to fix the inherent lowness of humans. Xun Kuang spoke against Mo Di and in favor of the practical application of music to cultivate the good in people. For him the problem was that people engaged in heretical musical entertainments, but if music is applied to correct ritual then harmony can be created in a world of chaos. He wrote that “Music unites, while rituals differentiate; and through the union of rituals and music the human heart is reined!”<sup>165</sup> He speaks the same way about dance and performance and claims that this technique of rule goes back to ancestral Chinese kings.

During the West Han Dynasty (206-8 B.C.E.), a commentary on the *Shijing* (Book of Odes) was written that echoes some of Xun Kuang’s sentiments but in regards to poetry. The commentary states: “Our ancestral kings used [poetry] to enhance people’s marital harmony and filial love, to improve civility, and to change customs.” It is in that last example that a connection can be made to a lineage for how Ai Weiwei uses art. The commentary also states, “To show right from wrong, to shake heaven and earth, to move gods and ghosts, there is nothing more up to the mark than poetry.”<sup>166</sup>

In the Common Era we see various courts continuing in the Confucian line of looking askance at any art forms that can lead the populace away from respecting

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<sup>165</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid., 22.

authority and hierarchy. In the Sui Dynasty, in the court of Emperor Wendi (581-604), a court historian by the name of Liu Yu gave some pretty telling advice to his sovereign about the problems the arts can cause for social order. “Amid deafening drums and burning torches, humans don animal masks, men wear women’s clothes, actors and acrobats assume the most outlandish and bizarre expressions and postures. Obscenity and vulgarity are taken as entertainment and amusement... People spend all they have as if there were no time left,”<sup>167</sup> Liu Yi lectures. He continues with what he sees as the real danger with arts other than the distraction and frivolity, they threaten the social order: “Whole households show up, and there is no distinction between the noble and the lowly, between men and women, or between monks and laymen.” In a culture dominantly Confucian and therefore so concerned with hierarchy, the danger in the arts was that in their enjoyment the population was equalized. Sovereignty was threatened. We see this again with a harsher judicial stance during the Song Dynasty (906-1279). Chen Chun (1153-1217) a neo-Confucian made a recommendation to an imperial minister about the crisis he saw in his time caused by popular entertainment. He called for the theater performances of his day to actually be outlawed “so they don’t sway the people and make trouble for the righteous ones running the government... If this is done, the people’s minds will be stable, their property safe, their behavior proper, and their lawsuits fewer.”<sup>168</sup> Control the arts control the people.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century the most dominant sovereign voice in China on the arts was that of Mao Tse-Tung/Tsetung/Zedong (1893-1976). Mao was the Chairman of the Communist Party until his death, but before his power was solidified in 1949 the state of

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<sup>167</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>168</sup> Fei, 31-32.

China and the waning of its empire was a convoluted history of various parties and movements vying for power and influence. In 1943, Mao held a forum at Yenan on art and literature. His “Talks” from this forum provide a bedrock for Maoist aesthetics. Several quotations from his “Talks” appear in the section on “Art and Culture” in Mao’s “red book.” At Yenan he clearly established that, “[Our purpose is] to ensure that literature and art fit well into the whole revolutionary machine as a component part, that they operate as powerful weapons for uniting and educating the people and for attacking and destroying the enemy, and that they help the people fight the enemy with one heart and one mind... What we demand is the unity of politics and art, the unity of content and form.” A year later in an essay called, “The United Front in Cultural Work,” Mao again emphasizes the practical function of the arts: “An army without culture is a dull-witted army, and a dull-witted army cannot defeat the enemy.”<sup>169</sup>

Mao might be following in the theoretical footsteps of an early 20<sup>th</sup> century writer, Liang Qichao. In his essay, “Popular Literature in Relation to the Masses,” Liang argues that, “If you want to reform the citizens of the country, you must first reform the popular literature of the country. To reform ethical standards... religion... the political system... customs... learning and improving technology... people’s hearts and characters... you must reform the popular literature. Why? Because popular literature wields incredible influence over the way of the world.”<sup>170</sup> He was a reformer and a loyalist and very interested in modernizing China through western idea. The basis for Mao’s thought, Russian Marxism (Leninism), also comes from the west. Both Liang and

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<sup>169</sup> Mao, *Quotations from...*, 303.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

Mao were also following a long line of Chinese tradition and while Liang was speaking of popular literature, Mao spoke of all mediums together within his aesthetics.

Mao was also a poet of a very traditional style and worked as a librarian early in his adulthood. It is from these characteristics that we can imagine he understood the alchemy of art. Mao sought to convert the past into a tool for the future progress of his own worldview. At Yenan he stated: “We must take over all the fine artistic and literary legacy, critically assimilate from it whatever is beneficial to us and hold it up as an example when we try to work over the artistic and literary raw material derived from the people’s life of our own time and place.”<sup>171</sup>

With the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), Mao sought to further solidify all forms of culture to one agenda, serving the revolution and upholding the values and position of the Communist Party. This is the world Ai Weiwei grew up in and even after Mao’s death and the new “positive” reforms of Deng Xiaoping (1904-1997), art was still seen to be in service of the State, the Party.

Even though Ai claimed in a New York Times interview from 2009 that the Communists in power, “don’t believe in China before the Communists;” and for them, “There is only one simple, clear task: to protect their control, to maintain their governing;” what he doesn’t acknowledging here is that what they are doing is an ancient Chinese tradition. Of course in a different interview for CNN the following year, Ai described the role of history in helping build up the present in China. He said, “I try to encourage people to look at our past in a critical way because as our education [shows], we have a great, great history. But in reality we are poorest in ethics and philosophy, so I

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<sup>171</sup> Mao, *Anthology of...*, 253.

try to raise people’s consciousness on how we deal with our past.” As I pointed out earlier, Mao was also trying to do this. The great flaw in Mao’s aesthetics, consistent with his politics, was his desire to limit and control, to stymie artistic freedom, the true chaos of creation, by using it as a tool of the revolution and then the State. Both Ai and Mao believe that politics and art are inseparable, but it is here that he and Ai Weiwei truly split ways.

“Living in a system under the Communist ideology, an artist cannot avoid fighting for freedom of expression. You always have to be aware that art is not only a self-expression but a demonstration of human rights and dignity. To express yourself freely, a right as personal as it is, has always been difficult, given the political situation,”<sup>172</sup> Ai Weiwei said in a description of what art means to him in his society. This declaration stands in opposition to any State controlled art in China’s history.

### **III. The Moment of Mutually Acknowledged**

#### **Outlaw Identity**

*“So since then I never asked another question because basically in my mind I was kidnapped by the state.”*

—Ai Weiwei, *Interview Magazine* interview, 2013.<sup>173</sup>

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<sup>172</sup> Ai, *Weiwei-isms*, 10.

<sup>173</sup> Bollen, 95.

On April 3rd, 2011, Ai Weiwei was arrested at the Beijing airport on his way to Hong Kong and held for eighty-one days with no formal charges before being released on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of June. This was not Ai's first run-in with an opposition from Sovereignty, but it was in this episode that—where someone as public and seemingly “untouchable” as Ai Weiwei—he and the rest of the world became very aware of the outlaw identity Ai has in the eyes of the Chinese government. His first significant personal run-in with Chinese authority happened in 2008 in the city of Chengdou while Ai was investigating the Sichuan earthquake and actually ended with more physical injury than his eighty-one days of detention. The earthquake happened on May 2<sup>nd</sup> and twelve days later Ai ventured to the site to investigate what seemed to be a government cover-up involving bribery, corruption, and shoddily constructed buildings, resulting in the death of thousands of schoolchildren. In 2009 while still working on a list of the names of dead children—a task the government refused to address—Ai was beaten by Chengdou police. A month later, in September of 2009, while in Germany installing a show and still suffering from head pain Ai was checked into a hospital. The doctors in Munich diagnosed a cerebral hemorrhage and performed emergency brain surgery on the artist.

Before his arrest in April 2011, Ai was already internationally famous for his art and how he combined political advocacy with that art. Internationally, and in China, Ai's celebrity was solidified with his role in designing the “Bird's Nest” stadium for the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympics (an event he ultimately boycotted). This is what led people to assume an “untouchability” about Ai, this wide ranging fame and support. The public appeal and artistic success of Ai are also key in understanding both the treatment and charges involved in his detention. With the amount of political prisoners arrested,

incarcerated, or disappeared by the Chinese government, it is hard to discern how unique Ai's experience was, but as this episode involves such a gifted conceptual artist, used to creating from "readymades" (a term going back to artist Marcel Duchamp), the world now has a great deal of information about this one example of arrest and detention; this one example of how Chinese Sovereignty deals with an artist in opposition, an artist with the power of a loud voice, an artist who had made his life spectacle.

Part of the spectacle of Ai's life, and a factor in his international fame, is his propensity towards blogging and tweeting (sending out messages through Twitter). Ai began blogging in 2005 and tweeting in 2009 and although the government shut down his blog in 2009 it was unable to stymie his Twitter output (Ai uses a proxy server set up by a hacker friend). Of course, due to China's countrywide firewall and how difficult it makes things for even the average citizen who actually has Internet access, Ai Weiwei is mostly speaking to an audience abroad through social media. In late February of 2011, Ai tweeted in favor of the so-called "Arab Spring" protests he, like the rest of the world, was watching unfold in the Middle East, and insinuated that China needed such an event. It was this tweet that many believe was responsible for the Chinese government arresting Ai at the Beijing airport, putting a hood over his head, and taking him into custody.

His time of incarceration began at a facility that appeared to be a dingy hotel and there he was interviewed by plain-clothes police officers who claimed to not know who he was. When Ai said he was an artist he was told that wasn't allowed, but he could use the Maoist term, "art worker." He was informed at different times of different charges brought against him like tax evasion, indecency (due to nude photos of himself and others on his blog), bigamy (Ai is married, but has a child with a girlfriend), and inciting



subversion of state power. While Ai has always claimed that the charges of tax evasion were bogus, as well as the others according to Chinese law, his writings on Twitter and his blog would actually fall under the category of “inciting subversion,” and this worried him the most while he was incarcerated. Ai feared that he had been put into “an old machine. A machine that just processes people until the end.”<sup>174</sup> His interrogation was dead serious and yet still felt like a performance by the state, or as Ai describes, “Everything is so ridiculous. Everything is so real but at the same time so ironic.”<sup>175</sup> One of the most ironic things was how his captors began to soften over time. These officers seemed to Ai to have never questioned someone for political crimes before and were used to getting to the bottom of less theoretical offences. Eventually they stopped questioning him and chatted about quotidian things; Ai even lectured them on the best way to prepare noodles.

He was at this first location for fourteen days before being taken to a military site where he spent the remaining time of his captivity. This second location was a military detention site and the guards were in uniform. Ai was told that he could possibly be detained indefinitely and at another point that he could be in that very cell for ten years. At first he was extremely frightened by this change of situation but later he “found out it’s not so bad because everything is so regulated, so empty, so abstract.” His main interrogator here was an army police officer (Army Police Force), a man about his own age who dressed in plain-clothes. When this interrogator approached a charge about Ai’s art, that it was an over-priced scam, the interrogation eventually evolved into a conversation about aesthetics with emphasis on Dada and conceptual art. Ai continued in

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<sup>174</sup> Martin, 87.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid., 90.

this role of art educator throughout his whole incarcerated, even educating the guards, continuing the ironic situation begun at the previous location.

Ai had great sympathy for the soldiers who guarded him. A pair of two guards were with him in his cell twenty-four hours of the day, each guard rotating out on a three hour shift. To an interviewer about his experience he estimated their ages to be around nineteen or twenty years old, volunteer soldiers making less than forty dollars a month, from poor areas, and lured into this work by television propaganda. The guards had to sit up straight or stand 80 centimeters from Ai at all times and watch him. Two cameras in the room watched the guards and the prisoner. “You realize they are soldiers but they too are just like criminals. They are really being highly watched. Even when they come out of my room they are searched. There’s two other soldiers whose job it is to search them... They cannot talk to you. They cannot talk to each other... they are so desperate to escape the prison cell... they are almost as desperate as I am,” Ai noted.<sup>176</sup>

Of course, for him it was worse. Ai describes his experience in that cell as punishment, degradation, and psychological warfare. Other than the transport in between the two locations, Ai saw no light (there were no windows), no exercise time, and no moments alone. He had to sleep on his back with arms out like a cross so his hands were visible to the guards and cameras at all times. “I could not do anything. When I was sitting, I had to sit in one position, like this. [*sits erect with hands on thighs*] Before you make any move, you must report it to a soldier. If you need to scratch your head, you must ask. I must ask if I want to go to the table to have a sip of water... They brought

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<sup>176</sup> Martin, 111-113.

meals to me. The meals would never come with chopsticks. I had one plastic spoon,”<sup>177</sup> Ai told an interviewer in 2013. In another interview he described how when he had to urinate he had to raise his hand and say, “Sir I need to pee,” and the soldiers would have to respond “yes” before he could stand up. While urinating the soldiers accompanied him the whole way and stood beside him.<sup>178</sup> To an interviewer at *Newsweek*, Ai described the psychological experience: “You’re in total isolation. And you don’t know how long you’re going to be there, but you truly believe they can do anything to you. There’s no way to even question it. You’re not protected by anything. Why am I here? Your mind is very uncertain of time. You become like mad. It’s very hard for anyone. Even people who have strong beliefs.”<sup>179</sup>

For all the subtle torture, dialogues about aesthetics, and fear of uncertainty, there was some serious interrogation about Ai Weiwei’s position as an outspoken artist in relation to the Chinese government. To his friend, Barnaby Martin, who interviewed him just days after his release in 2011, Ai said, “The evidence that they produced was taken from my blog articles, which I wrote back in 2007 and 2008. They printed out many of the blogs and let me read them... and I realized that what I said was quite strong. Although I could not immediately recognize the writing because it was from so long ago, I think it must be mine because I am the only person who has spoken out in that way... I was a little shocked by what I had written because that is definitely a solid evidence, very solid evidence of subversion of state.”<sup>180</sup> He was questioned on the content of the blogs, asked to explain particular lines. Ai was never beaten and when asked why he thought

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<sup>177</sup> Sheff, 130.

<sup>178</sup> Martin, 112.

<sup>179</sup> *Weiwei-isms*, 97.

<sup>180</sup> Martin, 121.

this was so he said, “I have no idea why they didn’t beat me but I think that maybe the higher level told them not to touch me and so they are very nice to me, very courteous.

During his time in detention Ai Weiwei admitted the evidence in the blogs to be true, and he admitted this again to his friend Barnaby Martin after his release. For all the threats and mistreatment in prison he was ultimately let go. During those eighty-one days when no one knew where Ai was, not even his family, an outcry was voiced around the world, especially in Europe and the United States. It is uncertain whether the Chinese government caved to international pressure (which it hasn’t done with other incarcerated dissidents) or whether it did what it intended all along, give Ai Weiwei an eighty-one day warning of what it has the power to do to him. On June 22<sup>nd</sup> 2011, Ai Weiwei was released and he asked the officials present, “You never told me why you arrested me, and you never clearly told me why you are releasing me.” To which he was told, “Weiwei, we can always arrest you again, and we don’t ever have to release you. Just remember that.”<sup>181</sup>

His release came with probation conditions for a year in which he wasn’t allowed to use the internet, associate with activists, talk to journalists, talk about what happened in the detention center, or write articles. Ai quickly broke all of these conditions without any repercussions, even though he was under surveillance. After a year, Ai was technically under house arrest where he was free to move about the country and work (while surveilled) but not allowed use of his passport to leave China. His situation looked like a confusing form of legal limbo where he was allowed to work, tweet, post Instagram images, travel domestically under surveillance, and yet always worried that he could be

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<sup>181</sup> Bollen, 95.

detained again. All of that changed on July 22<sup>nd</sup> 2015 when the government returned Ai's passport. Since then Ai has left China to set up exhibits of work and is allowed to return to China at any time. At the end of 2015, he set up a studio on the Greek Island of Lesbos/Lesbos to assist in the situation of refugees crossing the Mediterranean and create art that draws attention to the refugee crisis.

For Ai, his detention was "something you can never erase." "It leaves a scar on you,"<sup>182</sup> he has said, but that scar is not physical, it is deeply emotional, psychological, and spiritual. "It's hard to recover. You become not so innocent. You become, in a way, more sophisticated, which I think you shouldn't. We should all have more simple happiness.... You become bitter,"<sup>183</sup> he told *The Guardian* in 2011. However, the treatment Ai received is quite unique, not just in comparison to how dissident artists fared under Mao during the Cultural Revolution, but even in comparison to his contemporaries who have been beaten, exiled, jailed for decades, or even disappeared.

"I often ask myself if I am afraid of being detained again. I love freedom as much as anybody else, maybe more than most. But it is a tragedy to live your life in fear. It is worse than actually losing your freedom," (100) Ai has said. It is this belief in freedom, a freedom of expression, that led to his arrest and it is freedom that he continues to exercise through his art and social media presence.

At the Venice Biennial in 2013, Ai displayed a set of six dioramas giving a half-sized scale of his experience in prison. His memory is very keen in regards to the experience since mentally recording everything that happened and what everything looked like was one of the few weapons he had against insanity and despair. The

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<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

dioramas together are titled “S.A.C.R.E.D.,” which is an acronym of each individual diorama title: Supper, Accusers, Cleansing, Ritual, Entropy, Doubt. The fiberglass boxes look like tall rectangular coffins but with a small door on one side and a viewing window at the top. In Supper, the little Ai Weiwei figure sits at the table eating from his meal boxes and the guards stand and look down at him. In Accusers, we see the interrogation from the plain-clothes Army policeman with another figure taking dictation on a laptop seated behind him. In Cleansing, a naked figure of Ai Weiwei showers while the guards stand by him in the tiny bathroom. In Ritual, the Ai figure is being walked into the central part of the room, possibly from the bathroom, in lock step with the guards on both sides. In Entropy, the scene is darker than the others and the Ai figure lies on his back asleep with the guards standing over the bed looking down on him. Finally, in Doubt, we see the Ai figure sitting on the toilet with his pants at his knees while the guards flank him, their heads bent down watching him. The boxes have electrical light and are fully detailed and colored vividly from Ai’s memory.

They are an amazing work by an artist at odds with his State who is attempting to reclaim the narrative of his arrest and detention for his own personal sovereignty. What the Chinese government on behalf of the Chinese Communist party did to Ai Weiwei has been done to millions before him and many since. He was treated like an object possessed by the state, bare life either to be discarded or used in a political strategy, a la biopolitics. Ai Weiwei has since turned that experience into something significant, six diorama boxes seen around the world (and by me at the Brooklyn Museum of Art in 2014) laying bare his experience as bare life.

Always the artist, even with words, Ai has noted, “During the days in detention, I thought most about the moon.”

#### IV. Points of Contact

*“Overturning police cars is a super intense workout. It’s probably the only sport I enjoy.”*

—Ai Weiwei, Tweet, June 15<sup>th</sup> 2009

Ai Weiwei’s career as an artist began with the Stars show in 1979, his work hanging from a fence along side those of his friends in defiance of the institutionalized art of the time. After that he has always been creating, and the transition of his work in New York was motivated around asking himself how to create and for what, saying to Barnaby Martin, “I called myself an artist but what kind of artist was I? I didn’t support myself through art and I didn’t have anywhere to exhibit... At that time I was already having trouble thinking about painting. It wasn’t really attractive to me any more. Painting had already stopped making sense.”<sup>184</sup> In New York he fell under the significant influence of Marcel Duchamp and Andy Warhol and the work he made and showed demonstrated this influence. “Conceptual art” is an expression that is most easily attached to what Ai produces, but there are many creations that are strictly sculpture or architecture. As in other forms of conceptual art, many of Ai’s pieces have either a performative quality to them or involvement of the audience. This can be said for Ai’s whole life. Art is

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<sup>184</sup> Martin, 221.

inseparable from his sense of self, as we've already seen earlier in the biographical section.

The influence of Duchamp and Warhol is constant in this regard. Ai has said, "It became like a symbolic thing, to be 'an artist.' After Duchamp, I realized that being an artist is more about a lifestyle and attitude than producing some product."<sup>185</sup> It would also be very difficult to describe much of Ai's work as non-political. A quote that emblazons much Ai Weiwei merchandise available in gift shops at an Ai Weiwei show is, "Everything is Art. Everything is Politics" (I have it on a mug and a slap-bracelet). Towards this summation, Ai has said, "My activism is a part of me. If my art has anything to do with me, then my activism is part of my life."<sup>186</sup>

Over his career, Ai has produced dozens of works (to count individual photographs, his oeuvre is over 100 pieces), some quite large. The largest in physical size would be the "Bird's Nest" Olympic stadium in Beijing. The largest in a temporal sense would be, "Fairytale." In 2007, for a show in Kassel, Germany (hometown of the Brothers Grimm) Ai gave the world a fairytale of his own. The whole art piece is documented in a film that is now often shown in Ai Weiwei retrospectives. "Fairytale" as a piece of conceptual art involved Ai Weiwei selecting 1,001 Chinese citizens of various ages, genders, and backgrounds and having them travel (after he arranged visas) to Kassel where each selected a Quing Dynasty (1644-1911) chair and brought it to the gallery hall where it was placed in representation of each person. The Chinese citizens slept in a dormitory and explored the city during the day with spending money for

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<sup>185</sup> *Weiwei-isms*, 30.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.



souvenirs. It was as if a dream, or fairytale for each participant, and most likely surreal for the German populace too. The total budget for “Fairytale” was 4.14 million dollars.

The description of “Renaissance man” sometimes directed at Ai Weiwei is incredibly apt. As an architect, he designs his own studios, and in these studios he also lives, eats, spends time with his family, and constantly creates. In 2013, he recorded his first single of music, “Dumbass,” about his time in prison, and a second that year called “Laoma Tihua,” about his experience of being surveilled; the video used documentary footage of him. Later that year he released a whole album, *The Divine Comedy*, currently available for free to stream at aiweiwei.com. Another discipline Ai has embraced for his holistic life/art harmony is that of literature. In 2011, a collection of his blog posts from 2006 to 2009 was published displaying what a gifted thinker Ai is and how deft at expressing himself he is in brief essays on art, the State, and current events from around the world. As it was the last medium added to his arsenal of weapons of expression, and one that carries his presence across the world with a digital immediatism, Ai has said about the newer advent of writing in his career: “Later I became very involved in writing. I really enjoyed that moment of writing. People would pass around my sentences. That was a feeling I never had before. It was like a bullet out of a gun.”<sup>187</sup>

Art is so intertwined in the life of Ai that it is hard to estimate where process begins and product ends. One of his most famous pieces, “Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn,” is a triptych of three photographs taken in 1995 of Ai standing by a brick wall and dropping an urn—holding in the first, mid-air in the second, and crashing on the ground in the third. The photographs were developed and conceived as an artwork in 2009. Not

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<sup>187</sup> *Weiwei-isms*, 92.

only is Ai building off of his own past in this 2009 piece of art, but building off China's past and his ability as an artist to repurpose the past and its objects. About this work, Ai has commented: "I think by shattering it we can create a new form, a new way to look at what is valuable—how we decide what is valuable."<sup>188</sup> For work in similar materials, Ai has also made "Coca-Cola Vase" (2007), which is a vase from the Neolithic age (5000-3000 B.C.E.) with the Coca-Cola name painted on it; and "Colored Vases" (2007-2010), which is comprised of sixteen Han Dynasty (206 B.C.E.-220 C.E.) vases dipped in various colors of industrial paint.

These works are an example of his approach to "readymades," a method of conceiving and creating art attributed to Marcel Duchamp. The most famous readymades by Duchamp are "Fountain" (1917), which is a urinal on which he wrote "R. Mutt 1917," and "L.H.O.O.Q.," which is a postcard of the "Mona Lisa" by Leonardo Da Vinci which Duchamp drew a mustache and goatee on and wrote the titular initials at the bottom. Readymades can also be equated with the "detournement" of Guy Debord and Lautréamont in which the texts they played with are the found objects to be altered for a new purpose. In the catalog for Ai's "Circle of Animals: Zodiac Heads," a set of sculptures reinterpreting animal heads from an 18<sup>th</sup> century zodiac fountain clock, the artist describes his stance on readymades in his process saying, "My work is always a readymade. It could be cultural, political, or social, and also it could be art—to make people re-look at what we have done, its original position, to create new possibilities. I always want people to be confused, to be shocked or realize something later. But at first it has to be appealing to people... Every readymade I touch becomes different, not exactly

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<sup>188</sup> Ibid., 37.

the same... I very much enjoy the game, because it plays with past and present and future, and it questions our own positions and our own judgment. That is very important to me. What I care about is how those things are carried forward, and how that plays an important role in our thinking.”<sup>189</sup>

Many of Ai’s works are overtly political and confrontational to authority, most often the Chinese State, of course. His photography series, “Studies in Perspective” (1995-) is ongoing and displays some of the most famous structures to nationalist power and statehood in a photograph with Ai’s middle finger in the foreground; structures include Tiananmen Square, The White House, the Eiffel Tower, and the Reichstag in Berlin. Humor is also involved in the confrontational criticism, like his marble sculpture, “Surveillance Camera” (2010), a representation of the cameras the government directed at his home. Where there is no humor in the politics of Ai’s work is where it comes to dealing with tragedy in his country that the government is responsible for. When the earthquake occurred in the Sichuan region in 2008 and the government seemed unable or unwilling to investigate Ai took part in a “Citizens’ Investigation.” It is estimated that about 90,000 people went missing or were killed in the earthquake, and since many of the buildings that collapsed were school, Ai gravitated to the most tragic victims, the children. The Citizens’ Investigation sought to track down the names of all the children killed in the quake. The first piece to come out of his efforts was called, “Remembering” (2009), and it was an installation at the Haus der Kunst in Munich. Ai had 9,000 backpacks constructed in the style that the school children used in five colors so when assembled on the outside of the museum it read in Chinese, “She lived happily for seven

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<sup>189</sup> *Circle of Animals: Zodiac Heads*, 48.

years in this world” (a quote from the mother of a victim). The results of the investigation, conducted over three years, became a piece of their own, simply called, “Names of the Student Earthquake Victims Found by the Citizens’ Investigation” (2008-2011). It bears over 5,200 names in black and white print in a giant grid and is reminiscent of the Vietnam Memorial in Washington D.C. The most abstract, yet still quite striking piece to come out of the tragedy is called “Wenchuan Steel Rebar” (2008-2012), which is made from actual rebar recovered from the rubble of the school buildings. The bars are laid on the ground in stacks, but with a great jagged, unconnected middle “reminiscent of both a great fissure and of a gulf between values.”<sup>190</sup>

In an interview included in the catalog of Ai’s “According to What?” retrospective show he tries to explain the relationship between his life, his art, and his criticism of Chinese society, and how it all fits into the holistic readymade quality of his existence: “The reasons for an artist to create are dependent on his understanding of the world at the time... To a large extent my work is dependent on reality. I don’t rely on it for self-expression, but I must connect to it to feel the desire to create. I realize a piece of art cannot change the political or the social conditions of the world directly. But I myself change when I participate in these conditions. I gain an understanding about my relationship between my art and society. It helps me feel grounded in the creative process. I am not seeking to create complete or great works. I am doing what I must do.” When Ai states that “art cannot change the political or social conditions of the world directly,” it seems that he has in mind the “symbolic action” art can achieve as it can cause the changing of a person’s mind and that changed mind can bring actual change

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<sup>190</sup> *According to What?*, 129.

into the world. He believes in the power of art but understands its limitations in a concrete world. I believe that he sees the greater power in this limited “change” to lie in how large an audience can be and therefore how many people can be changed through the art.

### **A) Communist China/Maoism, Spectacle, and State-Sovereignty**

When Ai Weiwei was a child the direct embodiment of the Chinese Communist Party and State Sovereignty was Mao Zedong. After Mao’s death in 1976, many of his ideas were carried on by Deng Xiaoping (1904-1997), who led the Communist Party under various titles until his retirement in 1992. Regardless of who is president of China, according to its constitution, the country is under the leadership of the Communist Party. When Ai is raging against “the government” it is often irrelevant where specifically he directs his attack, it all goes back to the Communist Party, and its ideology, upheld by Mao and every leader since, is what frames Chinese Sovereignty. Reading through interviews, tweets, and blog posts, we can see Ai switch back and forth between terms like, “the Communists,” “the government,” and simply, “China.”

Ai also jumps around in his description of the State as being a “dictatorship,” a “military-state,” a “police-state,” a “corrupt oligarchy,” and a “totalitarian regime.” All of these descriptors get at the heart of how un-democratic the situation is for the Chinese citizen and how limited freedoms are, especially freedoms of expression. Ai has pointed out that “The Communists who run China picture themselves as above the rest of society—as the best men, a superman society. They believe they are made of special materials. That is their own words. They’re elite. They tell you only what they want to

tell you. So of course you never get any clear answer about any event that happened in the past 60 years.”<sup>191</sup> These leaders are on top and most of the actual population is subject to them. It is a great divide between those in power and those who support the power, those who feel the expression of that power.

The Chinese State under the governance of the Communist Party is monarchic in its worldview and the identity it wishes for China. Individualism is frowned upon and often seen as a threat to “the revolution,” but the threat is actually only to State power. Ai described this in a 2013 interview, saying, “All my father asked for was to have a variety of expressions in literature and art. Rather than just one type of flower, he said there should be a whole garden. It’s so pitiful because every flower deserves it’s own identity and has its own beauty. That simple idea is seen as a threat to the Communist leadership, which is a military-police type of leadership. They want to take away any variety of expression.”<sup>192</sup> This expression of sovereignty can only exist as a totality and is constantly striving for it.

Ai also interprets the situation of Chinese sovereignty as quite possibly in decline. Not less totalitarian, but maybe a hollow shell going through the motions of power with no end game. During a 2011 interview he gave this critique: “The way to survive in this party is to hide yourself or to become a person who obeys orders from above. These are not people with new ideas who are bold. One generation chooses the next, and one is worse than the former. It’s like inbreeding. After so many generations it becomes weaker and weaker. You can see in the first generation—Chairman Mao’s generation, Castro’s generation—the first revolutionaries are strong characters, maybe crazy but a bit

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<sup>191</sup> Sheff, 62.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid.

romantic. Idealistic. Now you see nothing. They cannot even remember what their ancestors did.”<sup>193</sup> It was after his imprisonment that he said this, almost as if he saw inside the hollow shell.

His imprisonment also reinforced to him that there is no rule of law in China. Ai is constantly trying to remind people that if there is no rule of law in China then “there is no justice.”<sup>194</sup> This appears as a weakness in a sovereign that can’t maintain its own laws, but of course, it illustrates that this Sovereign is constantly dictating a state of exception. “We need clear rules to play the game. We need to have respect for the law. If you play a chess game but after two or three moves you can change the rules, how can people play with you? Of course you will win, but after 60 years you will still be a bad player because you never meet anyone who can challenge you. What kind of game is that? Is that interesting? This game is not right, but who is going to say, “Hey, let’s play fairly?”<sup>195</sup> Ai said to Time magazine in 2011 after his arrest. Ai is trying to be one of those people for his country, one who is constantly calling out the State on its unfairness.

How does the Chinese government hide the fact that it is unjust? How does it retain a monarchic worldview and enforce total control of culture and expression? By always having a masterful dominance of the art of Spectacle. Mao learned this from Lenin and the Soviet state and was able to develop his own Chinese Communist brand through Maoism that the Party continues to employ today. After he got out of prison he told his friend Barnaby Martin a story that gets at the heart of the Chinese propaganda machine. One day one of the guards came in looking sad and through their clandestine

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<sup>193</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>194</sup> *Weiwei-isms*, 44.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid., 48.

language Ai asked him what was wrong. The guard told him that the person he idolizes was killed. Then the guard told him his idol was Bin Laden and he was just killed by the Americans. Ai not was supposed to know anything about the outside world and yet this information came in. He asked how the guard, a poor farm kid, could idolize Bin Laden and he said it is because he also hates Americans. “They all say they hate Americans but they don’t really hate Americans. They love American songs, they love whatever Americans do but they’ve been told Americans are brutal, crazy, inhuman. But you can sense this military education.”<sup>196</sup> Spectacle in the hands of this Sovereign can convince a populace that the United States is such an enemy that Osama Bin Laden is therefore a hero while still manufacturing and purchasing “American” products.

“But censorship by itself doesn’t work. It is, as Mao said, about the pen and the gun,”<sup>197</sup> Ai reminds us about how Spectacle operates in China. You limit the populace’s access to information and culture but you replace it with another culture. You do this with the intimidation of a gun, but also the reward of ideology, being a part of the revolution. Mao’s cultural control was so complete that Ai grew up exposed to only a very limited vocabulary, an intentionally stymied language where Mao and the Party “only let in the words they wanted, the words that they were in control of”<sup>198</sup> and provided Mao’s own dictionary. Suffice it to say, Ai’s experience in the United States opened up his cultural and expressive development in so many ways. Ai came back an educated artist.

The State is afraid of art because it is a direct threat to Spectacle. Ai explained to Barnaby Martin, “They’re afraid of it partly because it’s about individualism. About the

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<sup>196</sup> Martin, 116.

<sup>197</sup> *Weiwei-isms*, 7.

<sup>198</sup> Martin, 215.



individual viewpoint. They want to unify people; they want propaganda. They want to brainwash people into thinking the same, into accepting one view of reality. That is the purpose;”<sup>199</sup> and further in their interviews he continued, “Like Stalin said, the writers and artists are the engineers of the human soul. But Mao wanted to be the engineer of human souls, only him, no one else was allowed.”<sup>200</sup>

Maybe it is the fact that there isn’t a romantic figure any more like Mao, providing Spectacular inspiration in the place of personal freedoms, that the State is weakening. Ai often reiterates how fragile the current government appears through its use of Spectacle and at those times he is given to speculate that it might be in decline. Analyzing the State he has blogged, “One inevitable psychological characteristic of authoritarian power is weakness. Because they are weak, authoritarian governments shun the public, forgo transparency, and evade clear explanations; because they are fragile, they discriminate against dissension and cultivate lackeys in order to project a false image of peace and prosperity.”<sup>201</sup>

The State is so insecure these days that when an earthquake proved the shoddy craftsmanship of buildings in the Sichuan region—most likely the result of corruption—nothing was done to investigate or even determine who the victims were. And even though this tragedy motivated Ai to lead his own citizens’ investigation, the conduct of the government didn’t really surprise him. “The Sichuan disaster is not the first nor the most wrongful,” he said in a Guardian article he wrote called, “Our Duty is to Remember

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<sup>199</sup> Martin, 182.

<sup>200</sup> Ibid., 211.

<sup>201</sup> *Ai Weiwei’s Blog*, 131.

Sichuan,” before adding, “Cover-ups and deception are the nature of this society. Without lies it won’t exist.”<sup>202</sup>

The greatest manipulation of Spectacle by the Chinese government that Ai has witnessed in his own lifetime—and actually contributed to, to some extent—was the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympics. The Olympics was a chance for China to be a part of the international community and stand equal to the developed and advanced nations of the world. Ai might have enjoyed the process of designing the stadium with the Swiss firm, Herzog and de Meuron, but he ultimately boycotted the games stating, “The 2008 Olympics has created an illusion of China to the public and to the outside world. It is so fantastic, so unreal, that the entire meaning of the games is being distorted.”<sup>203</sup> Ai understands that the failure of spectacle, even with employing something as grand as the Olympics, is that “No authority can lead people to believe that they are living in harmony and happiness,”<sup>204</sup> which he said in a *Spiegel* article he wrote in 2008 called, “The Olympics Are a Propaganda Show.” That year he also wrote an article for the *Guardian* called, “Happiness Can’t Be Faked,” wherein he said, “No matter how long our politicians order people to sing songs of praise, no matter how many fireworks they launch unto the heavens, and no matter how many foreign leaders they embrace, they cannot arouse a genuine mood of joy and celebration among the people.”<sup>205</sup> Spectacle is a distraction, a smoke screen, but it looks good broadcast on television.

In some ways, the authoritarian nature of the Chinese Sovereign has gotten worse through recent application of Spectacle. Evaluating the threat of terrorism, Ai speaks to

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<sup>202</sup> *Weiwei-isms*, 56.

<sup>203</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>204</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>205</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

both the abuses of power in his country and how “terror” is used by the State in manipulating the public. He has written, “As for the global ‘anti-terrorist’ measures, we’ve already matched those of the American imperialists, or even surpassed them. A police state built in the name of fighting terrorism has been the greatest threat to a harmonious civil society. Aside from the injury to life and other related costs that any terrorist victory in the world might cause, an even greater price is paid in the consequent threat to society’s collective psychology and the disruption to the peaceful nature of the common people’s lives. This is the real cruelty and backwardness.”<sup>206</sup>

## **B) Outcasts and Outlaws**

In the China of Mao and Mao’s legacy, the place of opposition is open to any who step outside the status quo dictated by ideals of the “revolution” and the Chinese Communist Party. If one is to work in any field that upholds the State and party policy then that person walks in the light; the shadow world is in opposition. It would be convenient to interpret the actuality with this duality, but of course, Ai Weiwei is always quick to point out how corrupt the government is and how its officials do not play by their own rules and laws of the land. With “defending the revolution” as the constant prerogative of government, it is easy for those in power to label anything they don’t agree with as counter-revolutionary and therefore criminal. In the terms of Benjamin, the state of emergency is very much the rule, and no longer an exception. And as we saw in the last section, in the terms of Agamben, the Sovereign, the Communist Party, is always ready to dictate the state of exclusion. To Ai, this is a very obvious tactic for how his

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<sup>206</sup> *Ai Weiwei’s Blog*, 157.

State governs, and he once said in a 2011 interview, “They have to have an enemy. They have to create you as their enemy in order for them to continue their existence. It’s very ironic.”<sup>207</sup>

Ai has committed his life and work—which of course are interchangeable and inseparable—to giving voice to the voiceless of his country. In recent years we have seen his efforts to serve the voiceless on an international scale, but most of his work has been for China. There is a great misfortune in the way that Ai’s work is perceived or marketed abroad, the elitist and esoteric stigma that conceptual art often engenders. Ai sees and intends his art as populist, once noting, “I always want to design a frame that’s open to everyone. I don’t see art as a secret code.”<sup>208</sup> He has been quite literal in his intentions, declaring in one interview, “I often think what I’m saying is the for people who never had a chance to be heard.”<sup>209</sup> He has also made declarations of devotion like this 2009 tweet: “If there is one who’s not free, then I am not free. If there is one who suffers, then I suffer.”<sup>210</sup> And that resilience stayed strong even after his arrest, as we can see in a November 2011 interview statement: “My voice is not for me. Every time I make a sentence I think how many people for how many generations had a voice that no one could hear. At most they will be remembered as numbers; in many cases, even numbers don’t exist.”<sup>211</sup>

For Ai’s country, there is an extreme duality between those with the party and those in the terrain of outcasts. He sees it in his city with the haves and have-nots:

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<sup>207</sup> *Weiwei-isms*, 45.

<sup>208</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>209</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

<sup>210</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>211</sup> *Weiwei-isms*, 13.

“Beijing is two cities. One is of power and money. People don’t care who their neighbors are; they don’t trust you. The other city is one of desperation. I see people on public buses, and I see their eyes, and I see they hold no hope. They can’t even imagine that they’ll be able to buy a house. They come from very poor villages where they’ve never seen electricity or toilet paper.”<sup>212</sup> This duality of location creates a feeling of being outcast and exists across the nation. Ai has described it thusly: “The population is in a constant state of enforced dislocation;”<sup>213</sup> and said further on the topic: “Not an inch of the land belongs to you, but every inch could easily imprison you.”<sup>214</sup> The potential to be an outlaw or outcast is constantly present. The state of emergency and state of exception are visibly obvious principals in the contemporary Chinese experience.

In a 2008 blog post about a criminal trial Ai describes how the man “was labeled a criminal even before his case was investigated;” and he goes on to ask, “Can people be born criminals? How many opportunities to become a criminal will arise in the life of any helpless or benign person imbued with a sense of justice?” He then takes the argument larger into the problem with the whole system asking, “Anyone confronting state power must be a criminal? What kind of logic is this? If that’s true, then the entire Communist Party before 1949 was filled with criminals, and the People’s Republic naturally became a nation of criminals... This is logic derived from a single power, and not from justice.”<sup>215</sup> The terrain of outcasts of Ai’s nation is people by those in opposition to the Sovereign. He is part of this terrain, the Sovereign has made this clear with his arrest and surveillance. We also saw from Ai’s arrest that anyone in his country, no matter how

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<sup>212</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>213</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>214</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>215</sup> *Ai Weiwei’s Blog*, 161.

famous and wealthy can potentially be treated as bare life. In a very impassioned blog, Ai once wrote, “Totalitarian violence is everywhere, life is just a number without flesh and blood.”<sup>216</sup>

### **C) Bio-Politics, Violence, and Suicide**

While it is very apparent that Ai Weiwei lives in an extremely biopolitical situation, he constantly seeks to fight the political shackles on his person and personhood. The political structure of China from the top down is totalitarian. Every aspect of life, including thought and culture has been ruled upon. This was proved to Ai during his time in prison where every aspect of his basic existence (*zoē*) was monitored by the State and all biological functions were performed under direct permission from the State. This was the most extreme expression of Chinese biopolitics, but Ai has also experienced other levels through house arrest and parole. He has witness and heard descriptions of far worse physical domination from the government upon other citizens.

Regardless of how official and total the biopolitical expression of the Chinese State is, Ai continues to question its legitimacy and hope for change towards the positive aspects of Western Enlightenment values. He is a product of his own political situation, born into this severe biopolitics and as an artist employs the mantra that “everything is politics. Everything is art.” From this point of view, Ai believes that “Citizens should bear the responsibility to act,”<sup>217</sup> and that born into the social contract of Communist China requires responsibilities of the people.

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<sup>216</sup> Ibid., 235.

<sup>217</sup> *Weiwei-isms*, 5.

In a blog post from November 22<sup>nd</sup> 2008, Ai questioned the necessity of violence with an essay called, “Why Violence?” which almost borders on a defense of terrorism; almost, while it is still critical of violence. Watching protests in his own country become violent, his reaction is similar to that of Frantz Fanon in *Wretched of the Earth*, viewing the violent reactions of colonial subjects as inevitable, if not necessary.<sup>218</sup> Since Communist China is not democratic and the State doesn’t even operate through its own “lawful channels” how can the oppressed be expected to obey the law? Ai begins the essay thusly: “Stone Age techniques have once again been put into extensive use. How dignified must people be and what kind of moral character must people have in order to hurl stones at a loaded machine gun?”<sup>219</sup> He is reacting to the demonization of the protestors in State media as “violent.” The protestors that he is judging as lacking in dignity or questionable moral character are victims of State oppression and marginalized to the point of bare life reacting in the only ways they can. Ai ends the impassioned, poetic essay saying, “Wherever there are tyrannous, fatuous, and self-indulgent leaders, there will be stone-throwers. This was true in the past, it is true now, and it will forever be this way, until the People are armless, or there are no stones left in the world... Against violence whose purpose is to dispel the opposition and resistance, there is no stone that can dispel state violence from armed police. Those people throwing stones are pitiful; to borrow a phrase from a friend on Sina.com [the blog hosting site], they definitely ‘don’t want to live.’”

In regards to self-sovereignty and its ultimate expression in suicide, Ai treats this in a very somber blog post from 2006: “The dignity of suicide comes from the fact that

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<sup>218</sup> Fanon, 20-21.

<sup>219</sup> *Ai Weiwei’s Blog*, 184.

suicide doesn't come from external suffering, but is the abandoning of the self. Murder lays responsibility on another, but suicide is just the opposite." This was written before he experienced his own despairing thoughts in prison—a situation where he was unable to kill himself, let alone use the toilet without permission, and then not alone—but by a man who once lived in a hole in the ground as a child and watched his poet father scrub public toilets and attempt suicide regularly.

#### **D) Self-Sovereignty and The Role of Artists**

We have seen many characteristics and practices that comprise the holistic way in which Ai Weiwei has developed his place in this world. His work expresses and supports a deep sense of individualism and it is something he proudly cultivates in his personal life in a society dictated by a State in opposition to individualism. Ai has lived in New York, and traveled freely around the world. These are things that the average Chinese citizen might not experience, but it has given Ai a taste of freedom that he wants all of his countrymen to taste. It is that taste that drives him, as he's said, "Once you've tasted freedom, it stays in your heart and no one can take it. Then, you can be more powerful than a whole country."<sup>220</sup>

The more the average citizen in China expresses their own self-sovereignty, the more the sovereignty of the State is threatened. It appears that Ai is trying to build the average citizen up as an individual and by doing so through strengthening their sovereignty against the State. The advice he gives to other citizens is about being better citizens. Through various mediums Ai has advised the listener: "Tips on surviving the

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<sup>220</sup> *Weiwei-isms*, 40.



regime: Respect yourself and speak for others. Do one small thing every day to prove the existence of justice;”<sup>221</sup> and, “The world is not changing if you don’t shoulder the burden of responsibility;”<sup>222</sup> and, “I call on people to be ‘obsessed citizens,’ forever questioning and asking for accountability. That’s the only chance we have today of a healthy and happy life.”<sup>223</sup> Moreover, he lets people know that this is a message for everyone: “If there is no freedom of expression, then the beauty of life is lost. Participation in a society is not an artistic choice, it’s a human need.”<sup>224</sup>

Ai grew up for his first year privileged because he was the child of an artist, and after over a decade of hardship he was returned to a better life than most citizens. He has great understanding and empathy due to his years of hardship and they have helped him to a greater understanding of the privilege that he has now in society as an artist. The State would want him to be an “art worker” but Ai defies that, following the western model of Artist with a direct inspiration from Duchamp and Warhol. The thinking and caring artist that he is, Ai believes that there is an extra responsibility and burden upon him as an artist beyond what he suggests for all citizens. “As an artist I am forced to say something,”<sup>225</sup> he said in a 2009 interview and in 2011 expounded upon this message: “I think it’s a responsibility for any artist to protect freedom of expression and to use any way to extend this power.”<sup>226</sup>

Art for art’s sake is actually unthinkable for Ai and he believes that no artist creates in a vacuum. His view on aesthetics is as holistic as all his other views: “I think

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<sup>221</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>222</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>223</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>224</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>225</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>226</sup> Ibid., 28.

all aesthetic judgments—all the aesthetic choices we are making—are moral choices. They cannot escape the moral dimension in the broader sense. It has to relate to the philosophical understanding of who we are and how so-called ‘art and culture’ functions in today’s world.”

Ai is a political artist and to him “to be political means you associate your work with a larger number of people’s living conditions, and that includes both mental and physical conditions. And you try to use your work to affect the situation.”<sup>227</sup> The role of the artist is to be a nexus of information that can help facilitate change. It is a constant struggle against a State that is unrelenting in its totalitarianism. To this he has said, “I see myself not as a leader but as somebody who initiates things or finds the problem or provokes discussion. You have to be always ready to engage, willing to participate. When events or history happen, you just have to be aware and respond.”<sup>228</sup>

Ai has often found himself in a difficult situation explaining his role as an artist in relation to the State. He knows his history and loves his people and his homeland but his national identity is hard to define. When asked by an interviewer in 2013 if he was still a patriot after his arrest and treatment by the State he said, “Even though maybe I am, I will never announce myself as a patriot. You’re not entitled to say you’re a patriot if you don’t have a nation... You have a nation when you share the nation itself, when it holds up your beliefs or your identified with it. If a country ignores your right to vote, you’re not a citizen. You cannot make any kind of decision. You cannot relate to other people because you cannot support each other. You cannot share joy because there’s no way to communicate freely. How can you call yourself a citizen? You don’t bear responsibility.

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<sup>227</sup> *Weiwei-isms*, 30.

<sup>228</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

Anything that happens is not because of you; it's because of the government. The nation is not the people; it's the party. It represents only the party's ideas. The party controls the army. It controls the judicial system. It controls the natural resources. It's a group of elites, maybe 500 families, maybe fewer."<sup>229</sup> By this view it seems that most of China is without country. Ai wants to unite these dispossessed and return the country to them, to make the nation the people. He wants citizenship to reflect the best of Modernity and Enlightenment ideals and as we've seen, and he believes it is the role of Artists like him to lead them in this.

### **E) Cultural Guerrilla Warfare**

In a blog post from 2008 titled, "The Space Between Reality and Ideals," Ai Weiwei formulates something very close to cultural guerrilla warfare. He says, "'Cultural terrorism,' like terrorism itself, is a defiance of and attack on power, politics, and the social order. This attack arises from its conflict with and distrust of power structures and their representations. Its effectiveness is demonstrated in the space for imagination that comes after the collapse of power and in the various unspeakable pleasures that accompany practical jokes."<sup>230</sup> He seems to be describing a specific kind of, or subset of, cultural guerrilla warfare, and clearly Ai understands the potential of art to enact change in the world, if not just change through altering the mindset of the audience to that art and thus being the change themselves.

"S.A.C.R.E.D." and "Names of Sichuan Earthquake Victims" are examples of CGW because they—especially Sichuan—fill in intentional gaps in the Chinese historical

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<sup>229</sup> Sheff, 131.

<sup>230</sup> *Ai Weiwei's Blog*, 146.

metanarrative. The “Names...” piece literally gives names to the victims that the State would rather ignore or treat as non-existent. “Names...” writes the names in a giant piece of art that is photographed and shown around the world and documented as providing missing history that the State wants to omit. Now that those names are recorded by Ai Weiwei in his work and the world sees them, the Chinese government is forced to acknowledge them. An example of the effectiveness of the “Names...” work can be found in 2011 when after a light rail train crash occurred the names of the victims were released and the government vowed to get to the bottom of the problem. It is a small achievement, but it shows the power of cultural guerrilla warfare to infiltrate and subvert a metanarrative.

Ai’s use of technology, his constant documentation and Internet-presence, runs counter to the State’s efforts to control information and its own narrative for the Chinese people. The continuous barrage of information that Ai employs to infiltrate State Spectacle will hopefully pay off in the long run. Ai lauds technology for its role in his constant assault on authority saying in a 2009 interview, “Only with the Internet can a peasant I have never met hear my voice and I can learn what’s on his mind. A fairy tale has come true;”<sup>231</sup> and again in a 2012 *Guardian* article he wrote titled, “China’s Censorship Can Never Defeat the Internet,” he said, “The Internet is uncontrollable. And if the Internet is uncontrollable, freedom will win. It’s as simple as that.”<sup>232</sup> In the context of China, which employs what Ai calls “The Great Firewall,” corporate social media sites for banal recreation in the West (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Vine, etc) become subversive tools if the firewall can be circumvented. Getting around that “Great Firewall”

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<sup>231</sup> *Weiwei-isms*, 70.

<sup>232</sup> *Ibid.*

itself holds a pleasure of its own while constituting a crime in the eyes of the State. “No outdoor sports can be more elegant than throwing stones at autocracy; no melees can be more exciting than those in cyberspace,<sup>233</sup>” Ai has said.

Calling the State firewall, “The Great Firewall,” is a joke almost reaching the level of detournement. The Great Wall of China was constructed to protect China from outside invaders and now a cyber wall has been constructed to keep the population from being able to connect with information from outside of China. The State claims to be protecting, but it is actually imprisoning to do so. Ai’s joke is akin to the overall subversive element of his work. By seeing Chinese history and the contemporary social and political situations as material to be used as readymades is working in a methodology that always has the potential to be cultural guerrilla warfare.

Ai looks back so he can look forward, telling his fellow countrymen, “We need to get out of the old language... The language of communication will always need to be renewed.”<sup>234</sup>

## **F) Conclusion**

There are times when despair can be read in Ai Weiwei’s words and tone in interviews, blog posts, and tweets, but it is easy to look past because he keeps talking, writing, making new art, and living. Of course all of these listed actions are from the same motivation for Ai. As a political and artistic being, Ai lives, creates, and challenges authority all at once, all the time. He continued this even at a state of bare life in prison, making connections with the guards and teaching them about art. He also showed the

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<sup>233</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>234</sup> Ibid., 78.

guards empathy, seeing them as victims of the same State as he, even while they held him against his will.

Ai ultimately has a sense of hope for the future of China and the possibility of freedom for the Chinese people. The forced dislocation he sees in the Chinese population might have a positive outcome, one in which he hopes “a totally new culture will come out of.”<sup>235</sup> He has made art by transforming the banal into the exquisite, employing readymades like Duchamp and Warhol. However, Ai has also made readymades out of artifacts and memories of great social tragedies and personal pains, a transformation that is emotional for an art audience to behold and dangerous for a State in trying to maintain power.

In an interview within the catalog for his retrospective, “According to What?,” which traveled the United States, Ai gives an artist statement displaying knowledge of the past, with an eye on how art can change the future: “Art is an action that transforms our thoughts. It is a process that turns nothing into something. As Confucius said in the *Analects*, ‘Thought without action is laziness; action without thought is labor lost.’ On one hand, if we merely think but take no action, there would be no progress. On the other, acting on thoughtless impulse is doomed to failure. Our ancestors understood this quite well. The relationship between thought and action is the most important source of human wisdom and joy. With both, the process of turning art into reality is the path to happiness. It’s like a game. Only through the process can we understand who we are. So the game will continue.”<sup>236</sup>

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<sup>235</sup> *Weiwei-isms*, 85.

<sup>236</sup> *According to What?*, 43.

## CHAPTER 5

## CASE STUDY: PUSSY RIOT

**I. Biographies, Contextually**

*“I believe I have not committed a crime. This is the joint position of all three of us. There is no split in Pussy Riot.”*

—Samutsevich, in her court appeal statement<sup>237</sup>

Pussy Riot is a collective with inexact and unverifiable membership records at any given time. Pussy Riot is an aesthetic, a means, and a state of mind, open to all women who would like to join and participate. Officially, the group was founded in autumn of 2011 by Tolokonnikova, Samutsevich, and a handful of others. Alyokhina joined the group later but in time for its most important performances. As Tolokonnikova, Alyokhina, and Samutsevich are the three public faces of Pussy Riot who stood trial it is best to focus on their individual biographies.

Nadezhda Tolokonnikova was born on November 7<sup>th</sup>, 1989 in Norilsk and was raised there by her mother, Katya, for most of her childhood. Her parents were often separate as her father, Andrei, took various jobs and after they divorced Tolokonnikova spent summers with him in Moscow. Tolokonnikova was precocious and the time with

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<sup>237</sup> Pussy Riot, 118.

her father fueled her learning on a range of subjects, mostly the arts. In a letter from prison she told Masha Gessen, “My father gave me the ability to receive all kinds of cultural production, from Rachmaninoff to the [ska punk] band Leningrad, from European art-house to Shrek.”<sup>238</sup> Throughout schooling she was a straight-A student and a voracious reader devouring philosophy and art theory. At the age of fifteen she submitted an article to the local daily paper in Norilsk that was accepted for publication. Titled “What Is the World Coming To?”, the article was a juvenile effort, but as it called her contemporaries out for being shallow and unmotivated, it was a quite telling sign of things to come. For college, Tolokonnikova attended the Moscow State University in the philosophy department with idealistic hopes for the experience. At first she was very disappointed with the program, mostly for the mediocrity and narrow-mindedness she found in fellow students, but in her second semester she met and started dating Petya Verzilov, a worldly fourth year student two years older than her. Verzilov helped enhance Tolokonnikova’s academic education and the couple got politically involved in protests.

By early 2007, Tolokonnikova and Verzilov and another couple had formed a performance art group called “Voina” (war, in Russian). The work of Voina became about staging public performance art pieces and often filming them. Although they found inspiration in an earlier movement of a Moscow group, The Conceptualists, Verzilov has said, “The Conceptualists pushed the boundaries of language and we pushed the boundaries of public space.”<sup>239</sup> The most controversial piece by Voina was 2008’s “Fuck for the Heir Puppy Bear,” and the title is a play on the last name of Dmitri Medvedev (born 1965), which is Russian for bear. Medvedev was Prime Minister and then Putin’s

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<sup>238</sup> Gessen, 17.

<sup>239</sup> Ibid., 39.



successor as President from 2008 to 2012 when Putin was forced by term limits to step down (Putin became Prime Minister for four years and then President again in 2012). For the performance art piece, or “action” as Voina called it, five couples were filmed having sex in the Moscow Biology Museum to mock Medvedev’s call to increase the Russian birthrate. Tolokonnikova was pregnant during the action and had the couple’s first child, Gera, four days later; she and Verzilov had been married since she turned eighteen. Voina split in late 2009 between the two main couples and those that went with Tolokonnikova and Verzilov in the split tried to continue staging actions under the Voina name briefly. By early 2011 the late-Voina group centered around her started creating some women-only actions. Tolokonnikova was immersing herself in feminist and queer theory studying writers like Julia Kristeva and Shulamith Firestone and groups like Bikini Kill and Guerrilla Girls, and this learning was spilling out into those around her.

Working with other women, a small film crew, and Verzilov as the organizer, Tolokonnikova led Pussy Riot to launch its blog with its first video on her twenty-second birthday, November 7th, 2011. The first song released in the video clip was called “Free the Cobblestones” and it was a call to arms for protest like that of the Arab Spring. In the video clip the public was introduced to the image of Pussy Riot, screaming punk women in colorful balaclavas—meant to make them anonymous but never black ones that might confuse them with terrorists or Russian special forces—and dresses and stockings of non-matching bright colors. They filmed in various public places like parks, train stations, and even once on top of an electric bus. Only a few members were trained musicians but the arrangements of songs were kept to simple punk tropes. Most members just screamed

along to the lyrics and danced. The first clip went viral quickly and was then a part of the cultural landscape.

Yekaterina Samutsevich, Kat, joined Voina and was an active member by summer of 2008. It was she that hatched the plans for Pussy Riot with Tolokonnikova, an outcome of their mutual enrapture with feminist and queer theory and the groups of Europe and the U.S. who set a standard for feminist performance art and music.

Samutsevich was born August 9<sup>th</sup>, 1982 in Moscow and raised in a relatively sheltered and conservative household. She was also a straight-A student and followed her father's path for college to study computer programming at the Moscow Institute for Power Engineering. After six years she left with a master's degree instead of continuing on for a doctorate and got a job with the Ministry of Defense. Samutsevich developed software for nuclear submarines but was ultimately dissatisfied with her choices. Without her overly protective father's knowledge, in 2007 she enrolled in the Rodchenko Moscow School for Photography and Multimedia focusing on photography. It was through this new portal of entry into the Moscow art world that she met Verzilov and Tolokonnikova, a fated meeting that led her to join Voina. After a life prescribed by parents, Samutsevich's first real act of rebellion set her on a path towards helping found Pussy Riot and being a defendant in one of the most famous trials in recent Russian history.

Maria Alyokhina was born on June 6<sup>th</sup> 1988 and raised by a single mother and her grandmother in a Moscow suburb. She was an intelligent child, good in school, and basically trusted to be left on her own. She spoke to Masha Gessen about her mother's parenting technique as one based in respect, recalling, "Probably the most important thing about my childhood is the absence of unmotivated prohibitions. If something was not

allowed in our family, the reason was always transparent. Independent opinions and actions were respected.”<sup>240</sup> As a teenager she supplemented the school reading with her own interests in literature and while working at a video rental store she explored the world of art films. She was drawn to the hippie and counter-cultural centers of Moscow and took into her life things she found along the way, like veganism, environmentalism, and the practice of writing poetry. When she was seventeen she started dating Nikita, a twenty-two-year-old backpacker, with whom she had a son, Philip, in May 2007. It was Nikita who first took Alyokhina to visit Utrish Forest, a protected area near the Black Sea coast that she fell in love with and became protective over when illegal clear-cutting threatened its existence. This became her first cause and after petitions and grassroots organizing she joined dozens of other activists to physically shield the trees themselves, and in her own words, “I did everything with my son in a sling.”<sup>241</sup>

College came after activism, and the young poet made the fortuitous decision to attend Moscow’s Institute of Journalism and Literature. In school she cultivated her craft and made vital connections with like-minded friends, minds closer to her own than Nikita and her mother. Alyokhina was introduced to Tolokonnikova, Samutsevich, and the other women of Pussy Riot through her friend “N” (as Gessen refers to her) who was also a friend of Tolokonnikova. The December 5<sup>th</sup> 2011 protests in Moscow energized a lot of would be activists and that climate brought Alyokhina in contact with this exciting group of women, people she could speak all night with about art and politics. She joined Pussy Riot just in time for the legendary Red Square performance of “Putin Has Pissed Himself.”

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<sup>240</sup> Gessen, 85.

<sup>241</sup> Ibid., 90.

## II. Lineage

*“Like Solzhenitsyn, I believe that in the end, words will break cement.”*

—Tolokonnikova, in her closing statement of the trial<sup>242</sup>

During her closing arguments of the trial, Tolokonnikova defends Pussy Riot on various fronts, one of which is historical. She asks, “Do you happen to remember why the young Dostoevsky was sentenced to death? He was guilty of having immersed himself in socialist theory.” Tolokonnikova describes the context of how Dostoevsky came to be arrested and quotes that one of his charges was “impudent statements against the Orthodox Church and the executive power.”<sup>243</sup> Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821-1881) was arrested in 1849 during the reign of Czar Nicholas I (ruled 1825-1855) and ultimately served four years of hard labor after being tortured with the last minute bluff of a firing squad. Tolokonnikova is reminding the court that even before the totalitarianism of Stalin and the continued post-Stalin Communist regime and the post-Communist regime of Putin, Russian history has shown a rough treatment towards dissent. Also, in his book *House of the Dead* (1862) about his time in prison, Dostoevsky observes, “The degree of civilization of a society can be judged by entering its prisons.”<sup>244</sup> We can wonder if Alyokhina knew she was paraphrasing Dostoevsky when she mentioned during her closing statements of the trial that “jail is Russia in miniature.”<sup>245</sup>

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<sup>242</sup> Gessen, 204.

<sup>243</sup> *Ibid.*, 205.

<sup>244</sup> Dostoevsky, 210.

<sup>245</sup> Gessen, 213.

Dostoevsky was writing at a time when Modernity and Enlightenment ideals were leading reform movements in Russia and he was imprisoned by a Czar acting out of fear that the revolutionary events across Europe of 1848 could rouse the Russian populace. Dostoevsky was far from an activist, but he was a critic of the State in his own way, as *House of the Dead* represents. For artist dissidents most in line with Pussy Riot we must look to the 20<sup>th</sup> century at the litany of those who opposed the Soviet State through art. Osip Mandelstam (1891-1938) is a classic example of the tragic, heroic artist martyred by Joseph Stalin (1878-1953) who ruled the Soviet Union as the General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party from 1922 until his death. Mandelstam was a Polish Jew born in Warsaw but his family relocated to St. Petersburg soon after his birth. He was a champion of the post-revolution literary scene but his deep belief in populism ran at odds with authority. A proud artist, he couldn't hold back criticism and in 1933 he wrote a short poem called "Stalin Epigram" which he recited for friends at dinner parties. Word got around though and on May 13<sup>th</sup> 1934 Mandelstam was arrested and soon he was actually brought before Stalin himself for a personal questioning. Stalin's mercy was impressive and Mandelstam and his wife were exiled to the Ural Mountains and after a few years he was allowed back home. In 1937 during the Great Purge he was labeled anti-Soviet again and sent to a gulag. Mandelstam died en route. His poem that started it all, "Stalin Epigram," is a work that Pussy Riot would be proud to call its own. Stalin is referred to as "the Kremlin highlander" and described thusly: "His thick fingers are fat like worms,/His words hit hard like heavy weights,/His cockroach's huge mustaches laugh,/And the tops of his boots shine brightly."<sup>246</sup>

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<sup>246</sup> Mandelstam, 13-14.

In the line of holy-fool aesthetics that Tolokonnikova claims Pussy Riot embraces we can see a connection to the poet Alexander Vvedensky (1904-1941) who wrote, “The inexplicable pleases us, and the incomprehensible is our friend.”<sup>247</sup> Tolokonnikova cites this line in her closing arguments of the trial. Vvedensky was a member of OBERIU (The Union of Real Art), which included arts of many mediums with futurist inclinations during the 1920s and 30s. He also suffered his own run-ins with the State for his art, being accused of “anti-Soviet” sentiments, and most humorously, some of these accusations came because of his nonsensical “sound poems.” They were too abstract for the Soviet concept of art with its social realist agenda. Like Mandelstam, Vvedensky was arrested and suffered a short exile before returning home and then being sentenced to a much longer and harsher penal situation. He also died in transit to his gulag.

Tolokonnikova herself cites inspiration from Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn (1918-2008) who won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1970 for producing a body of work—novels, poetry, and histories—about the Russian penal system based on his experience of several years incarcerated. He was a great critic of the Soviet Union and his work brought worldwide awareness to the conditions within the Soviet Gulags. He was exiled from his country in 1974 but returned in 1994 to a new, non-Soviet Russia. There is a slight sad irony in Tolokonnikova’s praise of Solzhenitsyn. After his death it came to media attention that in a final interview four months before his passing he praised Putin stating that under his rule “the nation was rediscovering what it means to be Russian.”<sup>248</sup> Of course, Solzhenitsyn had his own State to fight with his words that could break cement, and Pussy Riot has its own, they just don’t happen to be the same.

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<sup>247</sup> Gessen, 204.

<sup>248</sup> Harding.

### III. The Moment of Mutually Acknowledged Outlaw Identity

*“If anyone was offended by our performance at the Cathedral of Christ the Savior, then I am ready to admit that we made an ethical mistake... However, our ethical slip matches no article of the Criminal Code.”*

—Tolokonnikova, in her opening statement of the trial<sup>249</sup>

On July 30th 2012, the trial of Pussy Riot members Nadezhda Tolokonnikova (Nadya), Maria Alyokhina, and Yekaterina Samutsevich (Kat) began. The trial lasted eight days total giving the Russian prosecutor time to establish the case against Pussy Riot, complete with witness testimony. This was also ample time and the perfect setting for Pussy Riot to establish its case against the Russian government and judicial system. The charges against the three members of Pussy Riot were “hooliganism” specifically “hooliganism motivated by religious hatred” and this is a felony. The verdict of guilty was given on August 17, 2012 along with sentencing of two years in prison for the three women. The three women had already been in detention awaiting trial since their arrest on March 3<sup>rd</sup> (for Tolokonnikova and Alyokhina, March 16<sup>th</sup> for Samutsevich). At the sentencing the judge explained her decision saying, “In sum, and in light of the danger to society caused by the offense committed, as well as the circumstances of the crime and its goals and motives, the court believes that justice can be served and the defendants can be

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<sup>249</sup> Pussy Riot, 44.

reformed only if they are sentenced to time behind bars and ordered to actually serve this time.”<sup>250</sup>

So what did these three women do to be arrested and convicted of felony level hooliganism with such a severe sentence? On February 21, 2012, they and two other members of the all-female punk performance art group, Pussy Riot, entered the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in Moscow and staged a performance lasting less than a minute for their own film crew. The performance only included four women since Samutsevich was removed by a security guard as she tried to get the guitar from its case before the song began. The song was titled, “Virgin Mary, Mother of God, Get Rid of Putin (A Punk Prayer)” and the lyrics connect to the location of the performance to denounce the connections between Patriarch Kirill Gundyayev (born 1946) of the Orthodox Church and Russian President Vladimir Putin (born 1952). The connections involved the hypocrisy of the Patriarch in decadent lifestyle, his support for very “un-Christian” policies of Putin (many of them anti-women and anti-LGBTQ), and his public denouncement of protest demonstrations. The members of Pussy Riot saw the corruption of Putin’s government extending into the leadership of the Orthodox Church and so they sought to put light on this and metaphorically ask the Virgin Mary to help them with this. They were dressed in the costuming of Pussy Riot, brightly colored dresses and tights (but not coordinated) and brightly colored balaclavas (knit face masks with holes for eyes and mouth).

The lyrics of the song went:

Virgin Mary, Mother of God, chase Putin out,  
Chase Putin out, chase Putin out.

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<sup>250</sup> Gessen, 221-222.



Black rode, golden epaulets  
 All parishioners are crawling to bow  
 The phantom of liberty is up in heaven  
 Gay pride sent to Siberia in a chain gang

Head of the KGB, their chief saint,  
 Leads protesters to jail under guard  
 So as not to offend the deity,  
 Women must give birth and love

Shit, shit, holy shit!  
 Shit, shit, holy shit!

Virgin Mary, Mother of God, become a feminist  
 Become a feminist, become a feminist  
 The Church sings the praises of rotten dictators  
 Black limousines form the procession of the Cross  
 A missionary is coming to your school  
 Go to class and bring your money!

Patriarch Gundyayev believes in Putin  
 Bitch, better believe in God instead  
 The Virgin's Girdle can't replace the demos  
 The Virgin herself is with us in protest!

Virgin Mary, Mother of God, chase Putin out,  
 Chase Putin out, chase Putin out.

By seven o'clock that evening they had a rough video of their performance published on the Pussy Riot blog, about two minutes total to get the whole pre-recorded song. Since they were only in the Cathedral for a very short amount of time, as they had planned, earlier filming was conducted in the nearby Cathedral of the Apparition, an older Orthodox Church but with similar gilded opulence. The video was not of high quality and not to the members' liking but they had to release it along with a statement because news of their performance had spread through Twitter and media sources. While the piece of art was not up to these artists' standards, the arrest, trial, and incarceration provided an extended coda to the work far grander and more effective than they could ever have imagined.

In the trial, the Pussy Riot members were able to see how the State saw them and how the State wanted others to see them. The trial was a propagandistic show trial for the State. As the Orthodox Church was quite popular with the Russian people—it was something the former Soviet Union sought to deny the public—the prosecution for the government made sure the women were tried because of their offense to religion and the judge followed suit in her verdict and sentencing. The State supported media also followed suit reinforcing that the guilty verdict was for hooliganism motivated by religious hatred. The State won, the women were found guilty, and two of them served time in prison, but in staging the trial as a media event, a performance for show, the State unintentionally gave the members of Pussy Riot a chance to do what they do best: manipulate media through performance to spotlight failures of their State. On trial, without masks, costumes, or music, the three women were limited to only their words and the sincerity of their selves. Each of them spoke brilliantly during their respective opening statements, testimonies, and closing statements. Those words have been put into public record, transcribed for the media, and published in several books, as have the transcripts of the court, the prosecutor, and the “victims” of Pussy Riot’s hooliganism.

At the beginning of the trial, when Alyokhina said she didn’t understand the charges, the judge asked the prosecutor to read them again. He read, “The defendants are being charged with committing an act of hooliganism, which is a rude disruption of the social order showing a clear disregard for society, committed for reasons of religious hatred and enmity, for reasons of hatred toward a particular social group, committed by a group of people as a result of conspiracy.”<sup>251</sup> Alyokhina continued to press for a while

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<sup>251</sup> Gessen, 166.

insisting that the charges didn't make sense because they didn't account for motive, ideology, and the artistic component, all things that would stand contrary to a charge of hooliganism as it was just described—she had been studying the law in detention. The judge ignored her and accepted her plea of not guilty.

The defendants had three lawyers, all of whom represented demonstrators and were making their own show out of the trial, sometimes to the detriment of their clients. The prosecutor and the judge appeared to work as a team leading witnesses, the “victims” from the Cathedral in their testimonies. The defendants sat in a secure clear plastic box in the courtroom where they sweltered and dehydrated for extended court sessions all eight days while defending themselves the best they could. To read the transcripts from the court is to read bad farcical theater and to doubt the appearance of justice for anyone. In opening statements all three women attest that their actions in the church were politically motivated and that they meant no offense to any religious believers. They continued to say this throughout the trial, apologizing to any believer they offended.

The first victim was a devout fifty-two year old woman who worked at the Cathedral cleaning and lighting candles. She was offended by every aspect of the performance: the bare shoulders of the costumes, how high the women kicked when they danced, that they were women standing at the altar, that they used profanities, and even that the guitar they had was electric (though not actually plugged into an amplifier). The woman even offered the possibility that the women might have been possessed by the devil based on their movements in the Cathedral. Other pious victims followed, also very offended. Witnesses for the defense were admitted and all of the people testifying on the defendants' behalf concurred that the neither Tolokonnikova, Alyokhina, or Samutsevich

had any hostility against the Orthodox Church itself. Regardless, the trial went the way it went.

The stance of the court and Russian government was conveyed in the closing summation of the prosecutor: “The defendants’ claims that their action was politically motivated are specious. Not a single politician’s name was pronounced in the cathedral. An analysis of the song showed that the phrase ‘Mother of God, chase Putin out!’ was inserted artificially and the true purpose of the lyrics was to insult the feelings of Orthodox believers. Putin’s last name was included for the sole purpose of creating a pretext for publicizing the action as a protest against the authorities.”<sup>252</sup>

All three lawyers for the defense gave closing statements, one of whom listed over half a dozen Articles of the Constitution that were violated throughout the course of the trial, some of which guaranteed separation of church and state, ideological freedom of religion, and artistic freedom, as well as others that established that judges should be independent and trials should be impartial and balanced.

During the trial, Putin was abroad, and while the international media kept Pussy Riot on everyone’s mind, the Russian Prime Minister deigned to give a cavalier comment. “If those girls had defiled something in Israel, they’d have to deal with burly guys over there. They wouldn’t have gotten out of there alive. Or if they’d gone to the Caucasus, even closer to home. We wouldn’t have even had time to arrest them. But I still don’t think they should be judged too harshly. I hope that they draw their own conclusions,”<sup>253</sup> he said as if to sound benevolent while brushing off the whole situation. Most importantly though, Putin was towing the official legal stance that the Pussy Riot

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<sup>252</sup> Gessen, 193.

<sup>253</sup> Ibid., 189.

performance was an attack on religion, the actions of the band “defiled” the Orthodox religion. Putin was cavalier and confident because the women of Pussy Riot belonged to the State to ignore in the courtroom and punish as it saw fit, regardless of the Articles of the Constitution.

Alyokhina understood this very clearly, as she described in her closing statement, “This trial is not merely a grotesque evil mask: it is the face of the state as it addresses the individual in this country.”<sup>254</sup> There is much beautiful writing in the statements by these three women under duress, in a detention center, deprived of their freedom, but still standing up before this “grotesque evil mask.” They gave critiques of the State, its Sovereignty, its treatment of the lowest citizen, its manipulation of Spectacle, as well as the absurdity of the trial itself. “Rigidity is always the opposite of the search for the truth. And in this case, at this trial, we see people who are trying to find some sort of truth on one side and, on the other side, people who want to shackle those who speak the truth,” said Tolokonnikova in her closing statement. The trial itself was an act of absurdity on operatic levels, but the libretto makes for great literature and philosophy.

After sentencing, Samutsevich changed from the team of lawyers that she shared with the other women and her new lawyer was able to file a motion for an appeal based on the fact that Samutsevich wasn’t actually part of the performance, she was taken outside by a security guard before it started. The appeal was set for October 10th 2012 and on that day she was released. There was no appeal for Tolokonnikova and Alyokhina and they were sent off to different penal institutions far from Moscow and employed as labor working in harsh conditions for long hours. Both women, but Alyokhina most

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<sup>254</sup> Ibid., 209.

actively, launched appeals while incarcerated and those hearings gave the world more public statements of intelligence and cutting criticism of the Putin government and the judicial system. In preparation for the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi, Russia, Putin released both women as part of an amnesty program.

#### **IV. Points of Contact**

*“A Russian riot means we exist,”*

—Pussy Riot, from the song, Putin Has Pissed Himself

All of Pussy Riot’s work, musically and performative, is political and directed at authority, most often the Russian State. While the membership roster is constantly shifting, membership is open to any like-minded women, musical training is not a condition. For the very first song they worked on, “Kill the Sexists,” Tolokonnikova, Samutsevich, and others sang their own original lyrics over a song by the British punk group Cockney Rejects. To take that concept into actual live performance, the Pussy Riot member referred to as “N” by journalist Masha Gessen, arranged the appropriated music by Cockney Rejects and she and some members played the song on instruments and the rest sang along. This first song was practiced in public parks before the group committed to “Free the Cobblestones” for the November 7<sup>th</sup> 2011 blog launch.

With motives of radical populism, initiation of widespread protests, and performance as a way of waking up the populace and subverting the Spectacle of state-

run media, Pussy Riot not only performed in public, but intended those performances to ultimately be videos for greater dissemination. Tolokonnikova treated this tactic as part of her defense in her opening statements: “We believe that art should be accessible to the public, and for this reason we perform in a variety of venues.”<sup>255</sup> This also follows the lead of Viona, “pushing the boundaries of public space” with the added use of the Internet’s public space. Into that public space went a musical performance with lyrics like, “Egyptian air is good for the lungs/Turn Red Square into Tahrir/Spend a full day among strong women/Find an ice pick on your balcony and free the cobblestones... The feminist whip is good for Russia.”<sup>256</sup>

Pussy Riot is the music, the lyrics, as well as the image of the women in their costumes projecting their punk attitude. In Tolokonnikova’s closing statements she gives a quick manifesto-like description of the means and motives of Pussy Riot: “Pussy Riot does opposition art. In other words, it’s politics that uses forms created by artists. In any case, it’s civic activity that occurs in conditions where basic human rights, civil and political liberties are represented by a corporate system of state power... We are seeking true sincerity and simplicity and we found them in the holy-fool aesthetic of punk performance. Passion, openness, and naiveté exist on a higher ground than do hypocrisy, lying, and false piety used to mask crimes.”<sup>257</sup>

They are punks, buffoons, silly characters, trickster figures, and holy-fools shooting out for attention. They need to be heard and they will try almost anything to be so, and that is another factor in what comes off as so sincere and serious about what they

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<sup>255</sup> Gessen, 159.

<sup>256</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>257</sup> *Ibid.*, 196.

are saying. Speaking about the role of the balaclavas, the masks that Pussy Riot members wear, Tolokonnikova has said in a prison letter to Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek, “When you put on a mask, you leave your own time, you abandon the world in which a sincerity will be mocked, you move into the world of cartoon heroes, where Sailor Moon and Spiderman, those consummate modern role models, can be found... The masks that members of Pussy Riot wear hold, if any, a therapeutic function: yes, we belong to a generation raised on irony. We go out in the streets and speak plainly, without varnish, about the things that matter most.”<sup>258</sup> So now we can add the personae of cartoon superhero to what the members of Pussy Riot are trying to capture in their performances and interviews conducted in character.

The appeal was immediately effective in Moscow after the blog launch and interviews poured in. Three weeks after the release of “Free the Cobblestones” Pussy Riot staged a performance for the next video clip, “Kropotkin-Vodka.” The filming and performing locations were in various boutiques and department stores and the motives of this action were clear by the lyrics paired with the locations. Being about Putin’s obsession with luxury and making a nod to Russia’s anarchist prince, Peter Kropotkin (1842-1921), the song has lines like “Sleep it off, another day comes, time to subjugate again./Brass knuckles in your pocket, feminism sharpened./Take your bowl of soup to eastern Siberia/To make the riot really truly crude./Fuck the sexists fucking Putinists!”<sup>259</sup> The video of “Kropotkin-Vodka” aired on the Pussy Riot blog on December 1<sup>st</sup>.

The band was building up steam now and the zeitgeist was taking hold. After obviously rigged parliamentary elections on December 4<sup>th</sup> citizens came out in droves to

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<sup>258</sup> Tolokonnikova, 90.

<sup>259</sup> Gessen, 74.



protest on the 5<sup>th</sup>. Estimates put the protestors at about seven thousand people and mass arrests were made. The following day people were back in the streets protesting the arrests. Tolokonnikova and Samutsevich were there for all of it and planned to do something in support of the protestors. On Dec 14<sup>th</sup>, Tolokonnikova, Samutsevich, and one other member performed on a rooftop across from Special Detention Center Number One, which held several activists (including Tolokonnikova's husband Petya Verzilov), and performed the song, "Freedom to the Protests!" They played for the inmates and their cheers were ecstatic and encouraging, loving every minute of lyrics like "Time to learn to occupy squares/Power to the masses, fuck the leaders./ Direct action is the future of humankind./LGBT, feminists, stand up to the fatherland!/Death to the jails, freedom to the protests!"<sup>260</sup>

Fueled by the reception and spirit of protest infecting Moscow, the members of Pussy Riot worked on the planning for their next performance, and it had to be one to go straight to the seat of power. Red Square was chosen for its symbolic resonance and specifically a site called Lobnoye Mesto, a raised stone platform from where Czars used to address the populace, starting with Ivan the Terrible. Eight costumed members of Pussy Riot ascended the structure on January 20<sup>th</sup> 2012 and performed "Putin Has Pissed Himself" to an excited crowd in Red Square and their own crew of photographers and videographers. The police seized them but they talked their ways out of arrest. From this point on Pussy Riot was a household name in Moscow and throughout Russia and the band's image appeared on magazine covers while inside the women's words filled interviews and articles. Much was expected of them, but after Red Square they wondered

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<sup>260</sup> Ibid., 100.

where else they could go. As Putin campaigned throughout February in preparation of the March 4<sup>th</sup> election, the endorsements from Patriarch Kirill became hard to ignore.

Angered by support that seemed so un-Christian and clearly born out of corruption, the members of Pussy Riot made their plan for the February 21<sup>st</sup> performance of their punk prayer, “Virgin Mary, Chase Putin Out!”

Tolokonnikova and Alyokhina were released from prison on Monday December 23, 2013 as part of an amnesty program by Putin. Alyokhina said upon exit, “We didn’t ask for any pardon. I would have sat here until the end of my sentence because I don’t need mercy from Putin.” Tolokonnikova said of prison that the time wasn’t lost, she “acquired a unique experience.”<sup>261</sup> Both Alyokhina and Tolokonnikova used the press about their release to speak about a new project to aid incarcerated women called Zona Prava (which can mean Justice Zone, but Zona is also a slang term for jail).

The next media moment was when Tolokonnikova and Alyokhina were arrested for a day, most likely as a threat to not stage a protest, on February 18, 2014 in Sochi a week after the start of the Winter Olympics. On the next day they were joined by two others all in full Pussy Riot costuming and sung outside the Olympic grounds the new song called “Putin Will Teach You to Love the Motherland.” Live on multiple news media outlets around the world Pussy Riot was assailed by Cossack militiamen with whips and pepper spray. After the abuse they weren’t arrested but simply allowed to go free. Later that year on May 9, 2014, both Alyokhina and Tolokonnikova visited Cecily McMillan at Rikers Island detention center in New York. McMillan was arrested during Occupy Wall Street protests in New York City and the Pussy Riot members were

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<sup>261</sup> Mackey.

showing their support for someone they described as a hero and who was currently in a similar situation to that which they had experienced.

In February of 2015 Tolokonnikova and Alyokhina were even more publically visible in the United States when they released the first Pussy Riot song in English, “I Can’t Breathe.” The video for the song shows both women without masks and addresses police brutality in the United States, focusing on the death of Eric Garner, the Staten Island African-American man strangled to death by a police officer. The song is named for his last words and at the chorus the song refrains “It’s getting dark New York City/I need to catch my breath.”<sup>262</sup> Musicians from popular American bands lent instrumental support and Richard Hell (born 1949), punk musician and novelist, read out Garner’s last words as the song ends. That same month saw the release of the third season of the Netflix television show, “House of Cards.” Alyokhina and Tolokonnikova appeared as themselves in the third episode and stand up to a Putin-esque Russian president character at a White House state dinner. Later that year Pussy Riot recorded its first full-length album of music, “Wont Get Fooled Again,” and for it the band chose ten punk and hard rock classics, most of which were adapted in some way to target specific concerns for the band.

The most recent work from Pussy Riot was the song and video, “Chaika,” which came out in early February 2016. The song is directed at Russia’s prosecutor general, Yuri Y. Chaika who has been facing accusations for corruption for over a year. In the video, Tolokonnikova and other members of the band dress in various versions of Chaika’s uniform and torture and waterboard prisoners. They devour feasts of food

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<sup>262</sup> Ryzik.

gluttonously with their hands, throw money in the air, and sing lyrics that continue the dark satire of the imagery. “We’ll bury alive anyone you wish. We’ll find nice jobs in prison for anyone who’s too smart...I’m Russian, I’m a patriot... I choose to do business here, not in Europe where they got gay people,” are just some of the lyrics. It currently appears that Pussy Riot is mainly Tolokonnikova and Alyokhina, and costumes, balaclavas, and spontaneous public performance have given way to greater musicality and sophisticated video production. Regardless, Pussy Riot in this new form continues the same work with the same motives.

#### **A) State Sovereignty, Putin as Russia, Spectacle**

For Pussy Riot, the State, the Sovereign is Vladimir Putin. It is he personally as the man who has dominated the Russian political system for the whole 21<sup>st</sup> century as President and even briefly as Prime Minister. For Pussy Riot, Putin also represents the State and Sovereignty metaphorically as it is his position and seat of power that is connected between most transactions in Russia involving government and corporate interests, all of which marginalize the majority of the populace and continue to bolster the ruling elite with power and wealth. Alyokhina described this in her closing statements saying, “When we speak of Putin, we mean not so much Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin himself but the system he has created: a power vertical that requires the state to be managed personally at every level. And this vertical contains no mechanism whatsoever for considering the opinion of the masses.”<sup>263</sup> Tolokonnikova dissected this distribution of power in a prison letter to Žižek, saying, “Here I sit, in a country where the ten people

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<sup>263</sup> Gessen, 209.

who run and profit from the most important spheres of the economy are quite simply Vladimir Putin's oldest friends—buddies from school, the people he plays sports with, cronies from his KGB days. What could be more elitist, more deadening than that? What else to call it but feudalism?"<sup>264</sup>

Throughout the statements from the trial and various interviews and letters, the members of Pussy Riot explain this complicated way of understanding the government of Russia and how the power of Sovereignty is comprised, but the official works of the band Pussy Riot take a different tactic. The songs lyrics of Pussy Riot provide a profane and bombastic litany of offenses Putin has to his credit. Within the lyrics to such works as "Kropotkin-Vodka," "Putin Has Pissed Himself," and "Virgin Mary, Put Putin Away (Punk Prayer)" the attacks on Putin are expressive of their medium, punk provocation, holy-fool ecstatic ranting. Putin is a "rotten dictator"<sup>265</sup> and his "sexist regime" wants "censorship of dreams" while the "wild leadership" of his "culture of male hysteria...devours brains."<sup>266</sup>

Most shocking to the members of Pussy Riot is that the government of this new "democratic" Russia is not that far off from what was perpetrated under the Soviet rule. Tolokonnikova noted in her closing statements, "Here and now, we are being desecrated. Who would have thought that man and the state system he controls could commit utter, unmotivated evil over and over again. Who would have supposed that history, including the recent frightening experience of the Stalinist Great Terror, has taught us nothing."<sup>267</sup>

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<sup>264</sup> Tolokonnikova, 68.

<sup>265</sup> Pussy Riot, 14.

<sup>266</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>267</sup> Gessen, 201.

One of the new problems that Tolokonnikova sees with the Russian State is capitalism, which is on display in a rawer, more transparent form than in the West. In a prison letter to Zizek she wrote, “I insist that even the most developed capitalist formulation presupposes hierarchization, normalization, and exceptions... Antiquated techniques of discipline migrate to the Third World, into countries like mine, rich in raw materials.”<sup>268</sup> Tolokonnikova’s critique of capitalism also has a critique of globalism and flavors of post-colonial rhetoric. Upon her release from prison Tolokonnikova told the New York Times that she became more mature in prison and learned about the State from the inside. She “saw this little totalitarian machine, what it is like from the inside. Russia is really built on the model of the colony... The colony and the prison are the face of the country.”<sup>269</sup> The philosophical understanding of these holy-fool punk pranksters is the second punch in the combination after getting peoples’ attention with performances.

The Soviet Union was a master manipulator of propaganda during the revolution, after it under Stalin, and even still under his successors. Putin, like many others in his government were part of that former government and have never unlearned what was once commonplace. The current Russian federation has just altered the narrative to support the current government and maintain power. The new Russia under Putin is one of capitalism, growth, prosperity, traditional values, and motherland. Even the Russian Orthodox Church is part of this new return to true “Russianness.”

In Samutsevich’s closing statements she used her turn wisely in adding spectacle against Spectacle in the courtroom performance. Rather than reiterate anything her bandmates said, she goes right to the heart of their supposed crime, the relationship

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<sup>268</sup> Tolokonnikova, 66.

<sup>269</sup> Mackey.

between church and state. She says, “Ever since Vladimir Putin’s former colleague Kirill Gundyayev became head of the Russian Orthodox Church, most thinking people in the country have known that the Cathedral of Christ the Savior has been turned into an important symbol of political strategy.” And after, she points out that this came about during waning public appeal for Putin when “he needed to have more convincing, transcendental guarantees of staying in power in Russia for a long time... using the aesthetics of the Orthodox religion, with its historical connection to the best of times of the Russian empire, when authority was derived not from such earthly expressions as democratic elections and civil society but from God himself.” She has a quite brilliant understanding of how deep this manipulation of Spectacle was for the Russian people. Samutsevich describes that since the Orthodox religion was suppressed by the Soviet regime it made it part of “the culture of the opposition” and “the authorities decided to appropriate this historical sense of loss and present their new political project of restoring the lost spiritual values of Russia.” Her description breaks this all down into the fundamentals of Spectacle: “This political project... required a large amount of multi-ton professional lighting and video equipment, air time on the central television channel for live broadcasts lasting many hours, and, subsequently, many more hours of filming for news stories aimed at reinforcing the moral fabric by means of transmitting the patriarch’s seamless speeches, meant to help believers make the right choice at this difficult time in Putin’s life, before the election. The filming had to be ongoing, the necessary images had to be burned into memory and continuously renewed, creating the impression of something that is natural, permanent, and nonnegotiable.”<sup>270</sup>

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<sup>270</sup> Gessen, 218-219.

The members of Pussy Riot seem most perceptive when critiquing the use of Spectacle in Russia, and this is most likely since they are artists who are together in a group established on subverting that Spectacle with a spectacle of its own. They see the State Spectacle as being one with intentions of silencing the parts of humanity that could lead to seeing through propaganda. The band described this in an early interview speaking of its goals for society: “We must reform the judicial system first. Democracy is impossible without an independent judiciary. Education reform and cultural reform are also needed. Putin pays attention to anything but culture—museums, libraries, cultural centers are in awful condition.”<sup>271</sup> Alyokhina is able to expound on this further in her closing statements saying, “There is no such thing as personalized education. Culture is not taught, nor is philosophy or the most basic of information about civil society... As a result, contemporary art is marginalized, the impulse toward philosophical thought is repressed, gender is stereotyped, and civil opinion is swept under the rug. Contemporary educational institutions teach people to live on autopilot from the time they are children... A person learns to forget about his liberty starting at a young age.”<sup>272</sup>

However, the work of the State isn’t entirely masterful and that is why Spectacle is so important. To Alyokhina, “The regime is a show that conceals what in reality is chaos. What looks orderly and restrictive is in fact disorganized and inefficient.”<sup>273</sup> Moreover, whether it is chaos or marginalization, Spectacle is always as much an act of concealment as it is revelation. It projects an image, or illusion, to dazzle and distract in a routine of political “slight of hand” while anything can rage behind the scenes.

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<sup>271</sup> Ibid., 127.

<sup>272</sup> Ibid., 210.

<sup>273</sup> Ibid., 213.



Tolokonnikova's time in prison even illuminated her on how Spectacle can be employed in creating a state of exception. She touches on this in a prison letter to Žižek discussing the role of advertising saying, "So while I'm not calling for a rejection of advertising as a 'false mask,' I'm calling for us to remember that all advertising has something to keep silent about, something it must render absent."<sup>274</sup> (68)

The 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi, Russia provided a great example of how the State manages Spectacle. While Pussy Riot was there in protest Alyokhina was given an opportunity to write a New York Times Op-Ed article about it. She describes the buildup for the event thusly: "More than \$50 billion was sunk into the construction of Olympic venues—giant, meaningless, alien objects whose purpose is to feed the ego of the country's president, elevating him to the rank of pharaoh or emperor. The host city of Sochi has essentially become a closed military facility. Access to the city is restricted and will remain so for another month after the Olympics end." On how it is used as Spectacle she adds: "The face of the Olympics is deceptive, as is the entire authoritarian regime. At first, the authorities do not strike you directly. Rather, they systematically force you to adopt the only stance they deem proper, which is to move passively, apolitically, through the entire chain of post-Soviet institutions, from primary school to grave."<sup>275</sup> Part of the deep understanding the members of Pussy Riot have of spectacle is that Spectacle has attempted to include them for its own ends and they have allowed that to happen with the direct objective of subverting from within as the narrative of their trial shows.

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<sup>274</sup> Tolokonnikova, 68.

<sup>275</sup> Alyokhina.

## **B) Outcast Terrain, Biopolitics Laid Bare, and Bare Life**

Since the earliest activities of Pussy Riot the members have been concerned with those marginalized and even reduced to bare life in Russia. Moreover, from the point of view of Pussy Riot, since Russia is a corporate-influenced, authoritarian State, outcast terrain exists wherever there is opposition to Putin and those that support his regime. The song lyrics in “Freedom to the Protests!” call on the voiceless to take to the streets and endeavor to be heard with such lines as “The joyful science of occupying squares/the will to everyone’s power, without leaders... LGBT, feminists, defend the nation!”<sup>276</sup> In “Virgin Mary, Put Putin Away” Pussy Riot implores the Virgin Mary to be a feminist, to help the marginalized, in a way akin to liberation theology movements where religion is employed to help the oppressed. Sadly, for their physical suffering, but the members of Pussy Riot gained a deeper understand of this outcast terrain and what comprises the biopolitics of bare life in Russia through their arrest and subsequent detention and incarceration.

An over-arching insight that both women experienced at some point involved the social and political structure of Russia on the whole. In Alyokhina’s closing statement she explains, “I have been in jail for six months, and I have realized that jail is Russia in miniature... Just like in the country as a whole, in pretrial detention everything is done to dehumanize the individual, to turn him into a function, be it a function of an inmate or a guard.”<sup>277</sup> This is similar in a way to Agamben’s notion that the camp is a symbol of the modern. This relation is also observed by Tolokonnikova when she is at the penitentiary. She tells Masha Gessen, during a visit to see her, “You don’t think I have a good sense of

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<sup>276</sup> Pussy Riot, 27.

<sup>277</sup> Gessen, 213.

how this state works? I have intimate knowledge now, and I really understand how bureaucrats work... Their very concept of state power—they see it as a static structure that is unchangeable by its very nature. The same goes for the way the penal colony is constituted.”<sup>278</sup> There is the ruling elite of the State, Putin and his cronies, and there is the colony of the penal system. Everyone in between has the potentiality to be excluded from society by the State into the colony of the penal system. The trial of Pussy Riot illustrated this.

Alyokhina wrote in a letter about her instant feelings of solidarity while spending months in pre-trial detention, “I have always thought that all people are good and we need to separate their deeds (which are often not good) from the people themselves. To put it simply, everyone has a right to make mistakes. I know everything is not quite so simple and crude, but here, as I reiterate some basic things a hundred times over, I actually learn something.”<sup>279</sup> Differentiating between criminals of traditional crime and those labeled “criminal” by the State for something like dissent, Tolokonnikova wrote during her pre-trial detention, “we are not criminals. We are punk performers, activists, artists, and citizens. So we feel fine, even when we are here.”<sup>280</sup> By here she is referring to the fact that her pre-trial detention center was made up mostly of protesters. Further incarceration, especially her situation after the trial in an actual prison expanded the reach of her feelings of solidarity to all of those treated as bare life by the state.

The post-incarceration activities of Alyokhina and Tolokonnikova in founding Zona Prava shows the utter concern these women have for those reduced to bare life by

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<sup>278</sup> Ibid., 270.

<sup>279</sup> Ibid., 139.

<sup>280</sup> Ibid., 144.

the Russian State. Speaking about the group's goal of reforming prisoners' rights Tolokonnikova said in a 2014 letter to Žižek, "We're beginning with women's camps, since female prisoners are the ones most totally deprived of voice." To this she also added, "In due time, we and Zona Prava will have to answer an old question: can the—pardon me—subaltern speak?"<sup>281</sup> It is clear that even though she is asking this question, the intention of Alyokhina and Tolokonnikova in founding Zona Prava is to help this particular subaltern speak, to find that voice, nurture it, and help convey it to the public in an attempt to bend the will of authority. After being in prison, Tolokonnikova has spoken of the dangers of the prison mentality and oppression spreading into daily civic existence, the fear of the zona spreading past prison walls. On this she has declared hopefully, "The only thing we can offer up in opposition to the current transformation of our communities into a prison is an absurd, unfounded faith that another state of affairs is possible. We will be able to infect others with our dreams before we find ourselves again deprived of voice—returned perhaps to prison?"<sup>282</sup> This also elaborates how she and Alyokhina are also subalterns and will speak as they can while helping others to.

Both Alyokhina and Tolokonnikova participated in an acknowledgment of biopolitics when they performed hunger strikes in prison. They used their last resource of sovereignty, a power the State didn't want them to possess to help those they saw amongst them in an abject state of bare life. Tolokonnikova said in a 2013 letter after her announcement of hunger strike, "I will not remain silent, watching in resignation as my fellow prisoners collapse under slave-like conditions. I demand that human rights be observed at the prison. I demand that the law be obeyed in this Mordovian camp. I

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<sup>281</sup> Tolokonnikova, 86.

<sup>282</sup> Tolokonnikova, 87.

demand we be treated like human beings.”<sup>283</sup> The rest of her letter describes the harsh working conditions the prisoners face while producing garments for corporations with State contracts. The deep level of bio-political control inflicted on prisoners incorporated health and hygiene. “Sanitary conditions at the prison are calculated to make the prisoner feel like a disempowered, filthy animal,” Tolokonnikova noted in her letter which she ended: “I declare a hunger strike and refuse to be involved in the slave labor at the prison until the administration complies with the law and treats women convicts not like cattle banished from the legal realm for the needs of the garment industry, but like humans.”<sup>284</sup> After two weeks she was taken to a prison hospital and when her hunger strike was forcibly ended she was transferred to a different penal colony.

From prison, and her participation in its role in Russian industry, Tolokonnikova also gained insight into her and Russia’s place in a greater economic system. She wrote to Zizek in a prison letter, “You mention places where the legal rights that limit exploitation are suspended in the name of the world capitalist order. At this very moment, I write you from a Special Economic Zone. Seeing it in my eye, feeling it on my skin.”<sup>285</sup> In a later letter when she used this expression, Special Economic Zone, again she added, “the zones of institutionalized exploitation”<sup>286</sup> after it. She sees this kind of delineation happening “legally” throughout Russia in recent years mentioning that the government is introducing “language into the Constitution of the Russian Federation limiting free speech” as well as “laws that protect the ‘faithful’ from offense, while codifying

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<sup>283</sup> Gessen, 294.

<sup>284</sup> *Ibid.*, 304.

<sup>285</sup> Tolokonnikova, 53.

<sup>286</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

inequalities between those of ‘traditional’ and ‘non-traditional’ sexual orientation.”<sup>287</sup>

The music and actions of Pussy Riot have always sought to shed light on this for the citizens affected within Russia and to the rest of the world at large.

### **C) Self-Sovereignty, Citizenship, and the Role of Artists**

As Pussy Riot is a group created for a particular political purpose employing artistic methods, its view of the role of the artist in society, fighting the State, and in the subversion of Spectacle and meta-narrative is quite oblique. In a society where the outcast terrain is anywhere in opposition to State oppression citizenship is a constant struggle for self-sovereignty. As an art collective, Pussy Riot sees its role in a society such as this to intercede on behalf of citizens, to lead them in opposition after waking them up to their presence in a situation as potential outlaws.

The closing statements in court of the Pussy Riot defendants amount to as much manifesto and mission statement for the band as a legal defense. Tolokonnikova explained the socially relevant and reactionary nature of the band’s inception saying, “We staged our political punk performances because the Russian state system is so rigid, so closed, so caste-based, and its politics so subservient to narrow corporate interests, that it pains us to breathe the very air in this country. We cannot abide this at all, and it forces us to act and live politically.”<sup>288</sup> The connection between self-sovereignty and being a responsible citizen was well expressed by Alyokhina in her closing statement of the trial. She said, “When I was an environmental organizer, I came to think of inner freedom as

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<sup>287</sup> Ibid.

<sup>288</sup> Gessen, 196.

the foundation for all action. I also came to recognize the importance of action itself, action for the sake of action.”<sup>289</sup>

Tolokonnikova also believes that because of her and her band-mates’ move into this aesthetic purpose they have an extra power in society. In her closing statements she was able to declare to the court that “We have more freedom than the people who are sitting opposite us, on the side of the accusers, because we can say what we want and we do say what we want. Whereas the people over there [Tolokonnikova pointed at the prosecutor], they say only that which political censorship allows them to say. They cannot say the words “’Mother of God, chase Putin out,” a punk prayer,’ they cannot utter those lines in the punk prayer that have to do with the political system.”<sup>290</sup>

Is there a function that this particular artistic form follows for the members of Pussy Riot? Explaining the reason for the punk prankster image and attitude, which is also described as the “holy-fool,” Tolokonnikova wrote to Žižek, “Reasonable minds are at last seeing how truth can come from the mouths of innocents. It’s not in vain that [Russia] so esteems its holy fools, its mad ones... You need to know which way to point the map. ‘Humor, buffoonery, and irreverence’ might turn out to be modes of seeking the truth. Truth is multifaceted, its seekers many and varied.”<sup>291</sup> This defense of form gives cultural backing in support of what the State has tried to write off as mere “hooliganism.”

Tolokonnikova sees the role of the artist as one with a pre-established social context, not only for Russia with its “holy-fool” but one dating back to ancient Greece. She aligned her work in this tradition in a letter to Žižek writing: “Pussy Riot has wound

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<sup>289</sup> Ibid., 211.

<sup>290</sup> Ibid., 199.

<sup>291</sup> Tolokonnikova, 42-43.

up on the side of those who have heard the call to critique, to creation and to co-creation, to experimentation and the role of the unceasing provocateur. To put it in the terms of the opposition Nietzsche set up, we're the children of Dionysus floating by in a barrel, accepting nobody's authority. We're on the side of those who don't offer final answers of transcendental truths. Our mission, rather, is the asking of questions."<sup>292</sup>

Tolokonnikova also spoke to Gessen in more practical terms about the problems of form and genre while in the penitentiary. She said, "I am not interested in classical art forms, but it is they that can be used to explain things to people. So I am facing the task of using the mechanics of pop to create something that's mine." We have seen her and the rest of Pussy Riot confronting this challenge and use of "pop" head on since the release of her and Alyokhina. The 2015 Pussy Riot album, "Wont Get Fooled Again," is a collection of classic punk and hard rock anthems. In the hands of these brilliant women, the songs have all been adapted and repurposed for the Pussy Riot agenda. The songs are also in their original language of English, a global language for popular culture. This decision shows the intention of this current direction of Pussy Riot the band to take the holy-fool, punk prankster, children-of-Dionysus-spirit on a more global trajectory, as both Tolokonnikova and Alyokhina have become global celebrities.

#### **D) CGW**

During Samutsevich's closing statement when she spoke about the State Spectacle exploiting its union with the Church she referred to what Pussy Riot did when it performed in the Cathedral of Christ the Savior as a "media intrusion." The way she

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<sup>292</sup> Ibid., 39-40.



describes this media intrusion shows a fundamental understanding of the action as cultural guerrilla warfare, saying, “Our sudden musical appearance at the Cathedral of Christ the Savior with our song ‘Mother of God, Chase Putin Out’ disturbed the integrity of this media image, created by the authorities over time, and exposed its falsehood. Without securing the patriarch’s blessing, we dared in our performance to combine the visual images of Orthodox culture and the culture of protest, making intelligent people suspect that Orthodox culture may belong not only to the Russian Orthodox Church, the patriarch, and Putin: it can end up on the side of civil riot and the protest culture in Russia.”<sup>293</sup> This illustrates that cultural guerrilla warfare has been the objective all along with Pussy Riot. The goal of creating a media intrusion has always been a part of performing or publishing a video clip of the performance on a website. The intrusion into media would interrupt the story the media is telling and hopefully change the actual story for good.

It’s lovely how she literally described combining the dominant Orthodox culture with the culture of protest, which happens not only through the location of the performance, but also in calling upon Mary in the song, a song that is also described as a “prayer,” a “punk prayer.” The awareness of the power of symbolic action in the form of art couldn’t be more clear. The trial they stood proved this further and continued the infiltration of State Spectacle by Pussy Riot and its ideas.

Speaking in her own terms about cultural guerrilla warfare and what her aim is for it within Pussy Riot, Tolokonnikova said in her 2013 appeal of her denial for parole, “I know that our symbolic power, which grows out of conviction and courage, will

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<sup>293</sup> Gessen, 219.

eventually be converted to something grater. And that is when Putin and his cronies will lose state power.”<sup>294</sup> I believe that this conversion to something greater is when symbolic power stops being symbolic and when the symbolic nature of art stops being symbolic and literal action and change occur. The amount of reading that Tolokonnikova has performed of philosophy and critical theory it would be assumed that she has had a deep understanding of this before Pussy Riot began its activities, but the most important thing illustrating her depth of understanding is how Pussy Riot has employed her knowledge and the success it has achieved.

From statements on the role of the artist in society, it is clear that the members of Pussy Riot endorse protest, demonstrations, and the performative nature of art in the service of politics. The exciting thing about analyzing a group like Pussy Riot, is observing how its members understand their roles in a project built around principals of cultural guerrilla warfare. In the short history of the group before the incarceration of the two members who now represent it to most of the world, the members learned a great deal about activism and art. The early performances of Pussy Riot could be described in militaristic terms as “small skirmishes” with the State. For Tolokonnikova it is mere “sparring” as she described in a letter to Zizek. She wrote, “Sparring is how you build endurance, how you learn to be quick on your feet and develop a sense of humor. Unlike the old Left, we can’t just reject capitalism out of hand—we’ll get further by playing with it, teasing it till it’s perverted. Perverted, I mean, in the sense of being turned to face us, enlisted for our cause.”<sup>295</sup> Talking to a theorist like Zizek on the subject of global capitalism, Tolokonnikova sounds more like Debord than the average activist or punk

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<sup>294</sup> Gessen, 289-290.

<sup>295</sup> Tolokonnikova, 55.

musician. She understands that capitalism is at once a system of economics and social power but also Spectacle. She also understands the role of the artist employing cultural guerrilla warfare involves “teasing” and “perverting” that meta-narrative from within; and what could be a bigger meta-narrative than capitalism itself.

### **E) Conclusion**

The success of Pussy Riot is that the band has become a movement and an idea. Any woman can don a brightly colored balaclava and play along, shout along, and speak out as part of a voice for freedom. There was always hope in the joyous and raucous punk bombast of the early Pussy Riot performances and video clips and this hope can still be heard on the 2015 album of punk and hard rock covers, “Wont Get Fooled Again.”

Samutsevich might not be one of the two public faces of Pussy Riot any longer but she was there at the beginning and in court she illustrated how she already understood the victory won by Pussy Riot. At first the victory is a simple one, as she declared in her closing statement “we have won. The entire world can see now that the case against us is trumped up. The system cannot hide the repressive nature of the trial.”<sup>296</sup>

Tolokonnikova went further in her assessment of the victory in her closing statement, “I am observing a sort of crash of this system where the three Pussy Riot participants are concerned. Because the result for which the system was aiming has not come to pass, unfortunately for the system. With each day more and more people come to believe in us and to believe us and to think that we should be free and not behind bars...With every passing day people understand more and more clearly that if the

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<sup>296</sup> Gessen, 220.

political system turns all its might against three girls who spent a mere thirty seconds performing in the Cathedral of Christ the Savior, that means only that this political system is afraid of the truth, afraid of the sincerity and directness that we bring.”<sup>297</sup> The victory is in the amount of minds they have changed, the amount of questioning they have provoked, and the ridiculous lawless display they have caused the judicial system to give the world. Their honesty threw the dishonesty of the system into relief.

Tolokonnikova believes that the work of Pussy Riot is a calling and part of the zeitgeist. They are the holy-fools punk pranksters for their time and place. She addressed this in a prison letter to Zizek where she said, “When the World Spirit touches you, don’t think you can walk away unscathed... Intuition—and this is where your blind leading the blind comes in—is of stunning importance. The main thing is to realize that you yourself are as blind as can be. Once you get that, you can, for maybe the first time, doubt the natural place in the world to which your skin and bones have rooted you, the inherited condition that constantly threatens to spill over into feelings of terror.”<sup>298</sup> If the women of Pussy Riot can not only understand the brilliant writing that they have given the world in their letters, court statements, and interviews but can continue to turn such sentiments into good art and performative gestures against power they will certainly live up to the calling of the World Spirit.

That combining of understand with deeply felt action is what Tolokonnikova recommends for her own people when she wrote: “Sharing Pierre Bourdieu’s slogan ‘Pour un savoir engagé,’ I would like to see more combustion and personal, emotional

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<sup>297</sup> Ibid., 197-199.

<sup>298</sup> Tolokonnikova, 41.

involvement in the statements and gestures of those who today rise up against unfreedom, social corruption, humiliation, and lack of prospects for a decent life in Russia.”<sup>299</sup>

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<sup>299</sup> Ibid., 91.

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSION: INTER-STATE-HOOD

The three contemporary artist Case Studies were chosen based on their own relationships to their respective States and the popular appeal they have on the international stage, particularly from my vantage point in the United States. Nevertheless, while conducting research on each I have come across many connections between the three different subjects in regards to the three Statehoods. This shouldn't really be much of a surprise considering the three States of the three Case Studies are three of the largest in either landmass, population, or global influence. The United States, Russia, and China are three of the most important and dominant world powers culturally and economically and examining the cross influence and commentary that artists of each might have for the others is significant in understanding the artist and sovereign relationship.

#### **I. William T. Vollmann**

##### **1. Influence**

*“I think it’s pathetic that readers and writers today are as ignorant as they are, ignorant even of foreign writing... It’s really disturbing and it helps explain how people who are fundamentally good hearted and well meaning and sincere, as Americans are, could reelect a president who is a war criminal, who is a torturer, who has dragged and is dragging our name through the mud. And yet we can still find people who think that he’s*

*the greatest and it's because people here are so ignorant and so isolated. And I blame readers and writers for that,”*

—William T. Vollmann, Fanzine interview with Ben Bush, May 18<sup>th</sup>, 2006

Before William T. Vollmann was a world traveler researching a novel, writing journalism, or trying to help the Afghans, he was a world traveler through literature. We can detect an influence from both Russia and even China in reading and work starting at a young age. The first exposure to the terrain of Russia, then the Soviet Union, as a sovereign on the world stage might have actually come to Vollmann in a series Penguin Publishing put out in the 1970's of writers from Eastern Europe and the Soviet Block. When Danilo Kiš's novel, *A Tomb For Boris Davidovich*, a member of that Penguin series was rereleased in 2001, Vollmann wrote the Afterword. In it he reminisces, “The books in the ‘Writers from the Other Europe’ series were thrilling and shocking incitements not only to my political development but also to my creative purpose.”<sup>300</sup> He encountered this series in 1979 in a bookstore in Indiana just after graduating high school. In the Afterword he describes a few of his favorites, before devoting his words to the Kiš novel, and describes what he learned as: “By the shadow of Soviet repression and by the gravitational pull of Planet Auschwitz, these other Europeans are compelled to consider the most fundamental questions of human existence.”<sup>301</sup>

At Deep Springs College and Cornell, Vollmann studied literature on top of being a voracious reader since his youth. In his essay, “Something to Die For,” he lists some of the best books he's ever read and we see “the poems of Mandelstam... Tolstoy, *War and*

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<sup>300</sup> *A Tomb For Boris Davidovich*, 137.

<sup>301</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

*Peace... Vasily Grossman, Life and Fate*” as far as Russians go and several writers from the Penguin Eastern European series. Both Tolstoy and Dostoevsky are cited often in essays, as they are clearly two writers he admires for their aesthetics as well as moral seriousness, which they often base characters and plot structures around. The novel *The Royal Family* is often described as Dostoevskian, as it is long, seedy, and expresses the concept of holiness of the lowly and sufferers. Dostoevsky’s work is read by characters in that novel and epigraphed before some chapters. *Europe Central*, Vollmann’s next novel after *The Royal Family*, is about WWII Europe pitted between the two totalitarian powers of Germany and Russia/USSR. His love of many writers of both countries comes through in his historical character portraits, but maybe none so rhapsodic as the chapter about Anna Akhmatova (1889-1966). The chapter is called, “And I’d Dry My Salty Hair,” and told from the point of view of a nameless party-line Soviet man giving a history of her and her time. Akhmatova was a great poet and dissident, blacklisted but ultimately surviving. Vollmann’s Soviet character says of her, “When she was still young and beautiful enough to write that the past’s power can fail, she mourned unkissed lips. When our Revolution proved that the past can in fact be broken, what then? Unkissed lips returned to hang eternally over her in the yellow fog over Leningrad.”<sup>302</sup>

We don’t see much Chinese influence in Vollmann’s work until *Riding Toward Everywhere*. While that book is about the idea of freedom and the changing landscape for expressing that freedom in America—with references to Hemmingway, Thoreau, Mark Twain, Thomas Wolfe, Jack Kerouac, and Jack London—the Tang Dynasty Chinese poet, Cold Mountain, and his followers, is a huge influence. Cold Mountain was named

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<sup>302</sup> *Europe Central*, 110.



for the place he inhabited, a place he wrote about that was more concept than geographic location in his poems. The Cold Mountain of Cold Mountain's poems becomes a refrain for Vollmann, the spiritual wanderer invoking the old world pilgrim. We also see a quote from Sia-ma Xiang-ru, a second century BCE Chinese poet (Han Dynasty), when Vollmann encounters a feeling of the infinite in nature.

## 2. Commentary

*“I have been detained, intimidated, and menaced by officials in other countries, but my emotions in those situations, although they sometimes approached true fear, did not leave me with any lasting resentments, because in each case I was merely doing an assignment, doing something I knew to be dangerous and of limited duration, in a place that was not my place,”*

—William T. Vollmann, Harper's Magazine, September 2013.

As mentioned earlier, in 1982 at the age of twenty-two, William T. Vollmann flew to Pakistan with the goal of crossing the border and helping the Mujahedeen of Afghanistan in their fight against the invading Russian forces. He tells us that the Russian invasion of Afghanistan was “one of the clearest cut cases [he] had witnessed of good versus evil.” In *An Afghanistan Picture Show* he tries to compare the invasion to it's Afghan reaction and determines, “that the effects of the Soviet presence in Afghanistan

have been appallingly evil. Resistance is justified no matter where it comes from.”<sup>303</sup> The novel *Europe Central* is full of critique of the Soviet Union while applauding, and even exalting, some of that country’s artists and common citizens who tried to make their ways in the world under such an oppressive state. *Rising Up and Rising Down* has historical examples from Russia and the Soviet Union for various concepts violence is used in defense of.

In the book, *Poor People*, we see chapters focusing on the situation of the poor in Russia, as well as a chapter on the lingering influence of the Soviet state on another country. For the latter, Vollmann is in Kazakhstan speaking to people in the town of Atyrau affected by the boom of oil companies in the region. The citizens were locked into a new structure of economic dependency with oil companies while seeing adverse affects to their environment, health, and economic stability. Vollmann encountered several people who missed the Soviet state and claimed the desire to trade it back for this new capitalist situation. One old worker, the most evenhanded he speaks to, says, “Communism was worse in a way, I suppose, but at least it guaranteed our future. We didn’t have to hunt for a job all the time, gamble all the time. Communism and capitalism have both failed.”<sup>304</sup> The long chapter devoted to Russia is called, “Natalia’s Children,” and set in and around St. Petersburg with references to Chernobyl in Ukraine. It begins with Vollmann interviewing panhandlers, Natalia and the elderly Oksana, eventually getting to know their families too. He asks different people what they think about Marx and Lenin, as well as whether their lives were different or better under the Soviet state versus the present. Vollmann tries to be a good reporter and mostly just lets his subjects

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<sup>303</sup> *Afghanistan Picture Show*, 191.

<sup>304</sup> *Poor People*, 195.

speak, telling their stories. It is in his questions that we get his critique and commentary of Russia and the former Soviet state. Reading the stories from these people is to see the failure of the Soviet dream and the post-Soviet Russian state. Vollmann tells a man that used to work at Chernobyl that he always thought USSR was fair to workers, to which the man answers, “That is absolutely not true... Fairness to workers is only what they scream about in the newspapers. I have written a letter to Putin. The reply told me to contact the regional authorities who have already ignored me.”<sup>305</sup> It appears to Vollmann and the reader, that for the poor in Russia, changes of state have improved their lives little.

It is in this same book that we can find the longest writings by Vollmann on China; (though *Rising Up and Rising Down* has some historical examples from China along with citations from Sun Tzu, Mao Zedong, and other Chinese thinkers). The longest chapter about China is titled, “Everything You Should Do By Yourself,” and it appeared in the magazine *Time Asia* in a slightly different form in 2002 (Aug 19-26<sup>th</sup> issue) under the title, “To Get Rich Is Always Glorious.” Since the book is about poverty, we see similar issues discussed as in the Russian sections, but instead of contrasting the before and after of a change of state, we see a burgeoning capitalism within the same communist state that hasn’t changed much politically since the death of Mao and the slight revisions of Deng. Everyone Vollmann speaks to claim that things are getting better, there is new building and construction, signs of progress everywhere. One retired road-mender says, “Communists have helped the Chinese people to the right way. They

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<sup>305</sup> Ibid., 71.

help us better and better. I thank Chairman Mao and Deng Xiao Ping very much.”<sup>306</sup>

However, next Vollmann shifts his gaze to a dreary district of Nan Ning referred to as “Africa,” a place of rubble where seven hundred homes have been destroyed to make room for a new road and the homeowners have yet to be compensated. Still people claim that they are better off than they once were, that poverty was worse before the modernization. Similar to an important critique of Chinese progress that we saw in Ai Weiwei, one interviewee tells Vollmann, “they [the government/industry] want to develop but without spending a lot of money.”<sup>307</sup>

The critique of contemporary China that our intrepid journalist develops in this chapter of *Poor People* is that with all this capitalism, “who could have imagined the de-Communization of China meant the betrayal of poor people on *all* fronts, even in the most un-Communist sphere of all, private property? Surely the new capitalists ought to have upheld *that*.”<sup>308</sup> The scenes of dispossessed people picking through the rubble that was once their homes still haunted Vollmann as he wrote the book. It is representative of the kind of conscience, compassion, and nobility that runs through all of William T. Vollmann’s work, whether fiction or non, whether in context of America or as a world citizen.

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<sup>306</sup> Ibid., 86.

<sup>307</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>308</sup> Ibid., 90.

## II. Ai Weiwei

### 1. Influence

“*The world is a sphere, there is no East or West,*”

—Ai Weiwei, Interview in Portland Art, 2010<sup>309</sup>

When asked by the New York Times in 2013 how his years living in New York City shaped him as an artist, Ai Weiwei said, “They were extremely important. They gave me a chance to understand how art relates to real life and our attitudes and our lifestyle.”<sup>310</sup> It was there in New York where Ai encountered his two greatest influences, Andy Warhol, and Marcel Duchamp. Warhol was born in Pittsburgh but spent most of his life in New York, and while Duchamp was born in France, he moved to New York in 1915 and spent most of his life there, though he only officially became a citizen in 1955. It is no stretch of the truth to call Duchamp an American influence on Ai.

When interviewed by *Interview Magazine*, a magazine founded by Warhol, Ai was able to relate that the first book he read in New York was *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol (From A to B and Back Again)*; he was still learning English but he was in awe of an artist he found to be “so cool and just amazing... so sensitive and so uncertain... so contemporary and unique... a poet in the sense that there was no limit and no restrictions for him.”<sup>311</sup> Speaking to Barnaby Martin, Ai conveyed the magnitude of appreciation he had for Warhol in those years. Once when Ai had just completed a construction job and was walking home covered in dust with four hundred dollars in his pocket he passed a

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<sup>309</sup> Ai, *Weiwei-isms*, 81.

<sup>310</sup> Rohter, C2.

<sup>311</sup> Bollen, 92.

yard sale wherein he saw a print of Warhol's "Chairman Mao." It was four hundred dollars and he bought it with his last dollar. It hung on the wall in his apartment until he left to return to China.<sup>312</sup> There is a passage in Warhol's book of philosophy where he is poignant but with wry humor saying, "They always say that time changes things, but you actually have to change them yourself."<sup>313</sup> We can imagine this to be a passage from the book that got Ai particularly excited.

As for Duchamp, it is not him that not only readymades are attributed, but a wing of the Dada art movement, the New York wing. When Duchamp says something like, art is "always based on the two poles, the onlooker and the maker, and the spark that comes from that bipolar action gives birth to something—like electricity,"<sup>314</sup> we can understand the attraction for Ai. Barnaby Martin also describes how once when he and Ai spoke about art, Ai referred to Duchamp as his "master."<sup>315</sup>

Russian influence on Ai is present in the unconscious influence of Maoist thought on him, Maoism being a Chinese adaptation of Marxist-Leninist philosophy. However, the most direct positive influence on Ai's art from a Russian artist can be found in, "Fountain of Light" (2007) produced for the Tate Gallery in Liverpool. This work was a tilting spiral of steel and glass crystals on a wood base floating in the Liverpool Harbor. The direct inspiration for this work was a piece by Soviet Constructionist designer, Vladimir Tatlin, called, "Monument to the Third International." Tatlin's design was never built but it was to be a sort of spiral ziggurat building standing across the Neva River in St. Petersburg in which was supposed to be the seat of the new Soviet government. Ai's

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<sup>312</sup> Martin, 219.

<sup>313</sup> Warhol, 111.

<sup>314</sup> Tomkins, 31.

<sup>315</sup> Martin, 100.

“Fountain of Light” seems to at once invoke and mock Tatlin’s unrealized aspiration, hinting towards a falling Tower of Babel and a shimmering, ethereal dream.

## 2. Commentary

*“As for our friends in far away lands, we ought to look more deeply into their eyes, and  
much more often,”*

—Ai Weiwei, Blog Post, 2008<sup>316</sup>

One of Ai Weiwei’s greatest site-specific art installations, that was also able to critique both the US and Russia, was 2015’s “@Large: Ai Weiwei on Alcatraz.” As Ai’s passport was still in the hands of the Chinese government at this time, this work was planned remotely from China and installed by Ai’s employees. The location alone, America’s most famous and notorious prison, an island in the San Francisco Bay referred to as “The Rock,” signaled one obvious intention of the work from a man who understands incarceration first hand.

Ai begins the artist statement for this work saying, “The first word that comes to mind in relation to this project is FREEDOM.” He continues to say that in his research about Alcatraz he was “especially struck by events related to the Native Americans who once occupied the island to demand their rights to the land and to have their voices heard.”<sup>317</sup> Also included in the catalog for the show is a copy of the United Nations “Universal Declaration of Human Rights,” as well as related readings like Martin Luther King Jr.’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail” and “Proclamation and Letter Regarding the

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<sup>316</sup> *Ai Weiwei’s Blog*, 182.

<sup>317</sup> *@Large*, 18.

Native American Occupation on Alcatraz Island” by Adam Fortunate Eagle/Indians of All Tribes.

The show consisted of seven separate pieces. Set up in the New Industries Building, where prisoners once worked, were the pieces, “With Wind,” “Trace,” and “Refraction.” “With Wind” featured a colorful dragon hanging from the ceiling around a large room with handmade kites hanging in between the twists and coils of the dragon. The kites and dragon were all decorated with quotes from imprisoned or exiled activists, some current, some historic, like Edward Snowden, Nelson Mandela, and even Ai Weiwei. In the next great room was “Trace,” portraits of over 170 different exiles or prisoners of conscience made from Lego blocks and covering the floor. “Refraction” was down a level and could only be spied through broken windows from a catwalk that guards once prowled. “Refraction” looked like a giant metal bird, another reference to flight, and was made of reflected solar panels from Tibetan cookers.

The Hospital Wing and Psychiatric Observation Rooms contained two pieces, “Blossom” and “Illumination.” “Blossom” consisted of white porcelain flowers filling the bleak and dingy toilets and bathtubs of the hospital cells, a juxtaposed beauty. “Illumination” was a dual sound installation in back to back psychiatric observation rooms. In one could be heard chanting by Tibetan monks, a people marginalized by the Chinese State, seeking autonomy; and in the other could be heard Hopi chanting. Here Ai presented the chanting of two peoples marginalized by China and the United States respectively. The choice of chanting was because inmates treated for psychiatric issues would often chant to calm themselves.



In Cell Block A was a piece called “Stay Tuned.” Here visitors could sit in individual cells dedicated to different prisoners of conscience from the past or today and listen to their words or music while reading about that person’s experience.

Finally in the Dining Hall was “Yours Truly.” It was here that the visitors could choose a postcard already addressed to a political prisoner somewhere in the world and write a message to that person and put in a mailbox to be sent at the completion of the show. Profiles on each prisoner of conscience are provided for visitors.

The critique of Russia involved in @Large was demonstrated through the actual presence of Pussy Riot’s music there. In the section called, “Stay Tuned,” there were twelve prison cells. The cells were for such people as Martin Luther King Jr., the Tibetan singer Lolo, South African apartheid activists, the Robben Island Singers, and even Pussy Riot. Visitors could sit in the cell and listen to “Virgin Mary, Put Putin Away (Punk Prayer) by Pussy Riot. This moment here is at once an endorsement of Pussy Riot’s struggle and a criticism of Russia’s current government.

As was mentioned earlier, Ai protested alongside other Americans about issues with the U.S. government while living in New York. Critical comparisons between the governments of China and the United States also appear in his tweets, blogs, and interviews. He might not mention Russia, who actually does a good bit of business with China, but he sees his country and my own to be very connected. In a 2009 interview, Ai claimed, “Because of the economic crisis, China and the United States are bound together. This is a totally new phenomenon, and nobody will fight for ideology anymore. It’s all about business.”<sup>318</sup>

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<sup>318</sup> *Weiwei-isms*, 42.

In 2011 he took this connection further into more ominous territory: “It will take China to destroy the idea of the American Dream. It took a Chinese Dream to make a so-called American Dream come true.”<sup>319</sup>

### **III. Pussy Riot**

#### **1. Influence**

*“It is worth noting that punk feminist art is being produced in Russia today. Here is an example. The Pisya Riot collective works in a great variety of genres, including both visual and musical compositions.”*—Tolokonnikova, describing the fictitious group she and Samutsevich made up for a presentation<sup>320</sup>

There is a time just before the creation of the band Pussy Riot where Tolokonnikova and Samutsevich were overflowing with ideas, dreams, and goals for how to respond to the world they found themselves in, how to combat the narrow-minded sexism and oppressive bigotry of their country. They had newly left Voina and were clearly in a stage of regrouping and reassessing. Their concern followed that “world spirit” of their time and place, and so it was turned towards feminism, gender rights, and queer politics. Culturally Russia was behind the west in many ways, and the progressive agenda of inclusiveness was lacking in a substantially in Russian politics.

The first chance Tolokonnikova and Samutsevich had to share with others what knowledge they had been digesting and seeking to disseminate through some profound

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<sup>319</sup> Bollen, 124.

<sup>320</sup> Gessen, 65.

and loud artistic medium came in late September 2011 at a conference on art and activism. The two women gave a slide show presentation that put all of their influences on display. Though none were from any Chinese tradition or artists, the U.S. was well represented. For their blitzkrieg tour through feminist and queer theory, they began with Bikini Kill, which is often thought of as an obvious influence on Pussy Riot. Bikini Kill was an American feminist punk band that began in 1990 in Olympia, Washington and sparked a movement of aggressive feminist music still referred to as “riot grrrl.” Jumping backward in chronology they moved the presentation to feminist theory of the 70s and 80s to get to the Guerrilla Girls, an anonymous, gorilla-mask-wearing, all-female art collective that began in the mid 80s to speak out against racism and sexism in the visual art world. The Guerrilla Girls were mostly based in New York and invaded art spaces to put up posters commenting on the lack of representation of works by women artists and artists of color. In regards to influence, Pussy Riot can be understood as a product of a negotiated union between Bikini Kill and Guerrilla Girls, with its own Russian flavor, of course.

The women ended the lecture playing a song by the new feminist punk art and music group, “Pisya Riot” (not as specific as “pussy,” pisya is a kid’s word and can refer to genitals of either sex). The song they attributed to this fictional group was the earliest version of “Kill the Sexist” sung directly over the Cockney Rejects. This little mysterious joke to cap off the presentation ultimately seemed like a good idea that should become a reality.

## 2. Commentary

*“My idea’s pretty simple: I think it would be helpful for Western theorists to set aside their colonial Eurocentrism and consider global capitalism in its entirety, encompassing all regional variants.”*

—Tolokonnikova, in a 2013 letter to Slavoj Žižek<sup>321</sup>

As the trial and subsequent incarceration of Pussy Riot members made the band internationally famous, it also made the members the *cause celebre* of their time. Popular musical acts (like Madonna) and powerful politicians (like Hillary Clinton) voiced support for what Pussy Riot represented as well as the individual fates of Alyokhina and Tolokonnikova. When their freedom was granted they assumed their place on the world stage as global ambassadors for free speech and free expression. This global consciousness has always been there for Pussy Riot, as we can see in lyrics that exalt the Egyptian protests in Tahrir Square and the Occupy Wall Street movement in the U.S.

For an intellectual critique of issues in global politics we can look to Tolokonnikova’s prison correspondence with Žižek. A student of philosophy and critical theory, Tolokonnikova was experiencing State power first-hand and from the inside. Working in conditions akin to slave labor in various penal colonies to support Russian industries with State contracts her eyes trained upon the interconnectedness of global capitalism. Tolokonnikova learned what “developing” nations like her own and China must do to compete with “developed” countries like the U.S. At one point she describes the conditions by writing to Žižek: “Erratic behavior is not tolerated from here;

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<sup>321</sup> Tolokonnikova, 68.

homogeneity and stagnation rule. No wonder authoritarian China has emerged as a world economic leader.”<sup>322</sup>

Her impassioned writing is intellectually deft and encouraged by such an esteemed audience as Žižek. Tolokonnikova pulls no punches in her criticism of the western “developed” nations as well as her own and China: “In the so-called ‘developed’ world disciplinary power doesn’t disappear—but there are more bases of production and they’re spread farther apart, so that the implementation of disciplinary power can be softer, more yielding in the face of resistance... The ‘developed’ countries exhibit a conformist loyalty to governments that manhandle and suppress their citizens—a little rich for my taste. The US and Europe are glad to collaborate with a Russia where medieval laws have become the norm and jails swell with prisoners of conscience. They’re glad to collaborate with China, where things are happening that would make your hair stand on end... countries like Russia and China have been enfranchised as equal partners in the system of global capitalism.”<sup>323</sup>

In her final letter of correspondence with Žižek, a letter sent after her release from prison, Tolokonnikova replied to the many requests that she comment on Edward Snowden (born 1983), the NSA contractor who leaked to the media documents about the U.S. government’s surveillance programs. She acknowledged the strange situation Snowden was in having to hide from extradition in Russia, a country with an even worse record of surveillance of its own citizens. In regards to the United States, Tolokonnikova

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<sup>322</sup> Tolokonnikova, 54.

<sup>323</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

says, “There’s no doubt that his persecution is a drastic misstep by the US, which is keeping far too busy destroying the possibilities for true democracy around the world.”<sup>324</sup>

It’s also a very important statement that the first Pussy Riot song not in Russian was in English and directed at a specific case of police brutality in the U.S. When interviewed about the song “I Can’t Breathe,” Alyokhina said, “This song is for Eric and for all those from Russia to America and around the globe who suffer from state terror—killed, choked, perished because of war and state-sponsored violence of all kinds—for political prisoners and those on the streets fighting for change. We’ve known on our own skin what police brutality feels like and we can’t be silent on the issue.”<sup>325</sup> This statement emphasizes the greater empathy both women have now after their own lived experience at the hands of their respective State. In all of their world travels they look, listen, and feel. They can’t help but give voice to those in similar situations. They can’t help but create art for those in need and against those abusing power.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

There are far more differences in comparing these three case studies than similarities, but the similarities are striking and illustrative in my work towards further understanding how art can bring change in the world. Vollmann, Ai, and the women of Pussy Riot are fighting their own fights, creating their own work, and living their own lives, but are on the same front line in opposition to state authority and in service of freedoms of speech and expression. All three use their work to target specific injustices

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<sup>324</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>325</sup> Ryzik.

that they see in their respective states, and sometimes in each other's states. While Vollmann ponders and writes the most about these subjects addressed in my study, Ai creates a massive body at work constantly engaging the struggles of the world he sees, and Pussy Riot exists only to oppose through entertaining art spectacle. All three have an understanding of what I describe to be cultural guerrilla warfare and express that understanding in the content of their work. As I have shown, they even express it articulately in discussions about their work and the general social function of art. In their varying degrees, all three have performed the act of cultural guerrilla warfare and engaged with the Spectacle of their States, subverting the meta-narrative. The first chapter presented all of the theoretical work that is involved in how cultural guerrilla warfare might operate, but looking at three engaged artists who manipulate spectacle in the service of a greater understanding of justice brought all the theories to life.

Examining living artists who are continuing to produce and challenge authority is often difficult as their stories are open-ended, but from these three case studies we have at least gleaned a bit of how wide and powerful the domain of cultural guerrilla warfare might be. By "cultural" we have seen that it is non-violent and involves the use of "cultural means," but also that it is by the cultured of a citizenry. The way Vollmann, Ai, and the women of Pussy Riot expound about art, politics, and society is of an academic caliber. By "guerrilla" we have seen that it is always from the underdog, and of the terrain of the outcast, seeking to infiltrate the status quo often on behalf of the marginalized. And lastly by "warfare" this concept is about means and action.

## APPENDICES: SUPPORTING BACKGROUND

**A) Example #1****“Spectacle and Reality/Part 1: Spectacle and Occupy Wall Street”**

*(The following paper was written in October of 2012 for the SCLA Conference in Las Vegas for a panel on political methods)*

Guy Debord begins his seminal 1967 work, *The Society of the Spectacle*, with “In societies where modern conditions of production prevail, all of life presents itself as an immense accumulation of *spectacles*. Everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation.”<sup>326</sup> It is the first of 221 theses that comprise the work. This opening thesis might sound familiar regardless of one’s knowledge of Debord. It is actually based off the opening first line of *Capital* by Marx: “The wealth of these societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails, presents itself as an immense accumulation of commodities.”<sup>327</sup> Debord—depending on your translation of both—has only substituted one word, for “commodity” he instead uses “spectacle.” This is an example of *detournement*, a term for a concept that Debord gets from the Comte de Lautreamont, or Isidore Ducasse (1846-1870), employed by Lautreamont in his second and final work, *Poesies*. Roberto Calasso, in his work *Literature and the Gods*, describes the tactic in the

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<sup>326</sup> Debord, 2.

<sup>327</sup> Marx, 41.



*Poesies* by saying, “The method now is plagiarism—or, to be precise, plagiarism with inversion and a reversal of terms.”<sup>328</sup> Alexis Lykiard, in his “Introduction” to a 1994 edition of *Maldoror and the Complete Works of the Comte de Lautreamont*, continues by saying, “Plagiarism like collage was a device employed to make a point... in the *Poesies* they are linguistic ruses, efforts to break down the tyranny of language itself, ridiculing poetry and philosophic clichés, received ideas and outdated styles, and thereby trying to forge a new kind of language.”<sup>329</sup> Debordian critic and biographer, Anselm Jappe, simply describes *detournement* as “a collage-like technique whereby preexisting elements were assembled into new creations”<sup>330</sup> by the time Debord came to employ the concept.

In just this opening of *The Society of the Spectacle*, a mere two sentences for the first of two hundred and twenty-one theses, we get a profound taste of what Guy Debord was all about. In one breath of a sentence, Debord appropriates the first line of a canonical text for Marxist intelligencia and alters it towards his own concepts and agenda through the methodology of a truly radical French poet who in Calasso words, wrote “on the principal that *anything and everything* must be the object of sarcasm”<sup>331</sup> and who for Octavio Paz was “the poet who discovered the form in which to express psychic explosion.”<sup>332</sup> Karl Marx and Comte de Lautreamont, politics and art.

Born in Paris in 1931, Guy Debord grew up partly in Cannes where he attended high school. The environment in Cannes engendered his interest in film while an interest in politics was hard to avoid growing up during the Second World War and its aftermath.

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<sup>328</sup> Calasso, 95.

<sup>329</sup> Lykiard, 17.

<sup>330</sup> Jappe, 48.

<sup>331</sup> Calasso, 80.

<sup>332</sup> Lykiard, 6.

Jappe notes, “His models being Lautreamont, whom the Surrealists had deemed the supreme exemplar of the individual utterly at war with all bourgeois values, and the pre-Dadaist adventurer Arthur Cravan, Debord was hardly tempted to pursue either an artistic or a university career.”<sup>333</sup> It is his situation between worlds, or outside of society, that has always been so distinct about Debord, a distinction similar to that of Lautreamont and his work, constantly destroying or at least blurring the lines between forms and societal structures. Debord returned to Paris after high school and moved through circles of intellectuals and artists in the 1950’s from Surrealist and Marxist camps, temporarily joining the Letterist movement of Rumanian poet, Isidore Isou (1925-2007), a man desiring to “complete the self-destruction of artistic forms initiated by Baudelaire.”<sup>334</sup> As Debord moved in the direction of his own group based on his own ideas he engaged in some important collaborations with Danish artist Asger Jorn (1914-1973), most famously of the avante-garde COBRA movement. Jorn became one of the founding members of the Situationist International with Debord at its inception in 1957. The prime Situationist belief is that “politics, literature and art must go hand in hand: ‘The point is not to put poetry at the service of revolution, but to put revolution at the service of poetry.’”<sup>335</sup> And “Debord... asserted at the outset that ‘the problems of cultural creation can now be solved only in conjunction with a new advance in world revolution.’”<sup>336</sup>

As the Situationist International (SI) grew and built up momentum people like Scottish-Italian writer Alexander Trocchi and Belgian theorist Raoul Vaneigem got involved. Vaneigem’s book *The Revolution of Everyday Life* was published in 1967 along

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<sup>333</sup> Jappe, 47.

<sup>334</sup> Jappe, 47.

<sup>335</sup> Gallix.

<sup>336</sup> Jappe, 63.

with, and in counterpoint to, *The Society of the Spectacle*, the year of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first printing of Marx's *Capital*. These works marked a new peak in productivity and influence for the SI and that influence can be seen in the events of the next year, specifically the infamous Parisian student uprising and general strike of May 1968; events that brought the country to a stand still and almost brought down the de Gaulle government.

The climate and form of the May 1968 revolts, spurred on by the SI and its literature, is a historical and real world illustration of that germ of Debordian understanding we approached in looking at the first thesis of *The Society of the Spectacle*. Politics and Art, Karl Marx and the Comte de Lautreamont. It all comes together in that centrally Debordian concept and term, substituted in an act of *detournement* for the original Marxist term: "spectacle." I have not done a count of its frequency in the text of *The Society of the Spectacle*, but I can confirm that there is not a page where it is not present. So what does Debord mean by "spectacle," and how does it work for his purposes to substitute the Marxist term "commodity" (in regards to fetishization) with "spectacle?" Anselm Jappe sums up the whole text by saying that "the spectacle is the most highly developed form of a society based on commodity production and its corollary, the 'fetishism of commodities.'"<sup>337</sup> In describing the negative impact of this he approaches the subject of alienation and shows the connection of Debord's thought back through Lukacs, Marx, and Hegel: "Man is alienated when he becomes the attribute of an abstraction that he has himself posited but that he no longer recognizes as such and that

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<sup>337</sup> Jappe, 3.

thus appears to him to be a subject in its own right.”<sup>338</sup> With one more selection from Jappe’s study of Debord we can get a full picture of the term and its relation to Marx and contemporary society: “Debord substitutes the word ‘spectacle’ for the word ‘capital’ in another sentence borrowed from Marx: ‘The spectacle is not a collection of images, rather it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images’ (SS 4). According to Marx, money accumulated beyond a certain threshold is transformed into capital; according to Debord, capital accumulated beyond a certain threshold is transformed into images.”<sup>339</sup> And now a line directly from Debord, from thesis 49 of *The Society of the Spectacle*, “The spectacle is the other side of money: it is the general abstract equivalent of all commodities.”<sup>340</sup>

The May 1968 Paris student uprising was one of spectacle, in both service of and opposition to. The SI was not made of Marxists, socialists, or common unionists, but those who sought to bring about fundamental changes in society. “They were distinct from all the other leading figures in the May 1968 events in that they did not belong to the university as students... or as teachers,”<sup>341</sup> Jappe tells us. In this uprising, slogans directly from Debord’s book and even more so from Vaneigem’s *The Revolution of Everyday Life* began to fill the walls of Paris in the form of graffiti or posters. In opposition to the hegemonic authoritarian societal control of “spectacle” the SI and students uprising from its spirit employ “spectacle” to their ends in the form mentioned above, as “a social relationship between people that is mediated by images.” One brick

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<sup>338</sup> Jappe, 12.

<sup>339</sup> Jappe, 19.

<sup>340</sup> Debord, 50.

<sup>341</sup> Jappe, 84.

hurled at the police by a protester is far less impacting than the poster of that action with the words “Le Beaute est dans Le Rue” (The Beauty is in the Streets).

This “spectacle” (little “s”) to combat “Spectacle” (big “S”) seems to be where Debord was heading all along. Jappe explains, “In the broadest sense, Debord’s whole conception of society is founded on detournement: all the elements needed for a free life are already at hand, both culturally and technologically speaking, they have merely to be modified as to their meanings, and organized differently.”<sup>342</sup> Looking at this from the standpoint of literary scholarship, this is the natural progression of influence from Lautreamont, as Lykiard describes in his Introduction to the complete works when describing the *Poesies*: “Ducasse in one sense leads to the Orwell of *Politics and the English Language* and beyond, to Vaneigem and the Situationists who by shrewd use of collage and juxtaposition exposed both the poverty and richness of slogans, and the thinly veiled hypocrisy of a “spectacular” society which by not respecting words abuses people, and by insulting their intelligence creates a state of political cretinisation in which the many and various forms of authoritarian control may dominate.”<sup>343</sup>

What Debord had touched on in his thoughts of spectacle and its relation to real world action, art in the service of politics, politics in the service of art, was not especially unique for France and appears to be an almost global phenomenon for the year of 1968. In his book, *1968*, historian Mark Kurlansky says, “What was unique about 1968 was that people were rebelling over disparate issues and had in common only that desire to rebel, ideas about how to do it, a sense of alienation from the established order, and a profound

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<sup>342</sup> Jappe, 61.

<sup>343</sup> Lykiard, 18.

distaste for authoritarianism in any form.”<sup>344</sup> The book endeavors for a global reach in showing the common sense of rebellion and its expression. Specific to myself, you the audience, and the trajectory of this paper we can look at what was going on in the US that year. The most compatible event for comparison is the protest of the Democratic National Convention (DNC) in Chicago in August of 1968, only a couple months after the student and worker protests of Paris were quelled. Among the many literary artists there on the ground witnessing the event was Norman Mailer whose book, *Miami and the Siege of Chicago*, gives one of the most comprehensive and artistic forms of documentation of the event while it unfolded. The first printing of the book was two months later in October of 1968 and the paper back edition that I have was out by the end of the year. In this work, an example of New Journalism or the non-fiction novel, Mailer even refers to himself, the journalist covering the event, in the third person.

A description of spectacle becomes the actual goal of Mailer’s work here, at least in the “Siege of Chicago” section. The true event was not the convention. “The event was a convention which took place during a continuing five-day battle in the streets and parks of Chicago between some of the minions of the high established, and some of the nihilistic of the young,”<sup>345</sup> he tells us. And goes on to say, “The New Left was interested for the most part in altering society (and being conceivably altered themselves—they were nothing if not Romantic) by the activity of working for a new kind of life out in the ghettos, the campuses, and the anti-war movement.”<sup>346</sup> For a writer/artist like Mailer to wield this capital “R”--Romantic in description of activists protesting a convention gets at

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<sup>344</sup> Kurlansky, xvii.

<sup>345</sup> Mailer, 131.

<sup>346</sup> Mailer, 132.

the fundamentally artistic nature of the activist's means and purpose. The protesters are Romantic artists, not the decadents of art for art's sake, created and enjoyed in a vacuum detached from society. Kurlansky tells us, "In later hearings, Abbie Hoffman agreed with Mayor Daley that it was the television cameras that had brought the protesters to Chicago."<sup>347</sup> This might be one of few things, if not the only thing, that these two men ever agreed upon but it is revealing in regards to the relationship between little spectacle and big Spectacle and their tension. Hoffman is implying that an activist believes in the potential for a protest to effect change, for why else would they do it and welcome television cameras in broadcasting it on a large scale. The fact that the "cameras... brought the protesters" also reinforces the "show-like" quality of a protest, the orchestrated "spectacle" of activism. It is political art, art that serves no end without an audience.

Kurlansky reminds us "1968 was a terrible year and yet one for which many people have nostalgia... The thrilling thing about the year 1968 was that it was a time when significant segments of the population all over the globe refused to be silent about the many things that were wrong with the world. They could not be silenced. There were too many of them, and if they were given no other opportunity, they would stand in the street and shout about them."<sup>348</sup> That year might be the peak and end of the whole nostalgized concept of the 60's. In his 2012 novel of contemporary America, the America of its first black president, Steve Erickson has the protagonist of *These Dreams of You* reflect back to that decade and think, "Years afterword, the Sixties became a preposterous

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<sup>347</sup> Kurlansky, 286.

<sup>348</sup> Kurlansky, 380.

and unreasonable burden to everyone who followed.”<sup>349</sup> And though this novel came out in the beginning of 2012 it fails to consider the preceding year as one to come very close in comparison to 1968 and the spirit of the 60’s that it encapsulated.<sup>350</sup>

In 2011 we saw the birth of the Arab Spring with protests in Tunisia (which begun with a self-immolation in 2010), the continued Arab Spring in Egypt and other Arab nations, the Indignatos in Spain, and finally back home here in the United States, the birth of the Occupy movement. Occupy Wall Street began with a group of people meeting in Zuccotti Park in the south end of the island of Manhattan on September 17<sup>th</sup> 2011. The small group grew gradually into the thousands and after a few weeks Occupy protests sprang up far from Wall Street, in over one hundred cities across the country (finding a total number of people involved has proved very difficult, but we can get a better understanding by noting that 6,705 people across the country had been arrested by May 2012)<sup>351</sup>. The OWS, or simply Occupy, movement included Americans from a diverse array of backgrounds economically, racially, and even in regards to age. This was not just a continuation of the 60’s old guard of protest getting back out one more time (though those types were there), but a seemingly very new phenomenon. Their diversity is their unity, for they claim that they are, and they represent, the 99% of the United States that is not the top wealthiest citizens. Ultimately they stood in a park with signs and shouted slogans. Just like the Parisian students on ‘68 stood in the streets with signs and shouted slogans and the true event in Chicago in ’68 at the DNC happened outside the convention hall, with people standing in the streets with signs and shouting slogans.

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<sup>349</sup> Erickson, 259.

<sup>350</sup> I in no way bring this up as a failing of the novel, which is a very important work and does seem to capture the feelings of the country in the lead up to the Occupy movement.

<sup>351</sup> Chomsky, 10.



Television cameras and new media devices covered the Occupy events around the country like the cameras can show us Paris of '68, and the same cameras that brought the protesters to Chicago.

So why, and to what end, this standing in the street shouting and waving signs? New School Professor in the Department of Philosophy, Simon Critchley, is one of the theorists in support of the movement and to look at his work before 2011 we see that year's various events to be in line with his future predictions and praxis of ethics. His 2007 work, *Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance*, deals with his idea that philosophy begins with disappointment, and political disappointment can lead to nihilism, the "declaration of meaninglessness."<sup>352</sup> He posits two forms this nihilism can take, passive and active. The passive nihilist is an escapist where as the active nihilist "tries to destroy this world and bring another into being."<sup>353</sup> For the 20<sup>th</sup> Century he includes in this definition "Lenin's Bolshevism, Marinetti's Futurism, Maoism, Debord's Situationism, the Red Army Faction in Germany, the Red Brigades in Italy, the Angry Brigade in England, the Weather Underground in the USA,... the Symbionese Liberation Army," and continues "At the present time, however, the quintessence of active nihilism is al-Qaeda."<sup>354</sup> How then should one act politically in Critchley's view when ethics is infinitely demanding? He addresses this in the book in his final chapter, titled "Anarchic Metapolitics —political subjectivity and political action after Marx." With his process illustrated he comes to his definition of politics, as the "praxis in a situation that articulates an interstitial distance from the state and allows for

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<sup>352</sup> Critchley, 2.

<sup>353</sup> Critchley, 5.

<sup>354</sup> Critchley, 5. It is my belief that he would have also included The Tea Party if they were around at this time.

the emergence of new political subjects who exert a universal claim.”<sup>355</sup> Before OWS, the 1999 WTO protests serve as his prime example of what he sees as a non-nihilistic form of political action saying, “it is the carnivalesque humour of anarchist groups and their tactics of ‘non-violent warfare’ that have lead to the creation of a new language of civil disobedience and a recovery of the notion of direct democracy.”<sup>356</sup>

Although Critchley dismisses Debord’s Situationists as a movement, as active nihilists, he sounds a lot like Debord and Vaneigem when further in this chapter he says, “Perhaps it is at this intensely situational, indeed local level that the atomizing, expropriating force of neo-liberal globalization is to be met, contested, and resisted. That is, resistance begins by occupying and controlling the terrain upon which one stands, where one lives, works, acts, and thinks... Resistance can be intimate and can begin in small affinity groups. The art of politics consists in weaving such cells of resistance together into a common front, a shared political subjectivity.”<sup>357</sup> He might have opposed the ends of the Situationists but it seems as if he approves of their means to some extent. Further on, in discussing the new language of civil disobedience he reiterates, “Contemporary anarchists have created a new language of civil disobedience that combines street-theater, festival, performance art, and what might be described as forms of non-violent warfare.”<sup>358</sup> Andrei Codrescu reminds us in his essential work for living in our world, *The Posthuman Dada Guide*, “The great Christian carnivals... were mini-

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<sup>355</sup> Critchley, 92.

<sup>356</sup> Critchley, 93.

<sup>357</sup> Critchley, 114.

<sup>358</sup> Critchley, 123.

revolutions, separated by the real thing by the lack of weapons, discipline, and sobriety.”<sup>359</sup>

In the final section of his book, an appendix that deals with the Bush Administration’s political logic—which he refers to as “crypto-Schmittianism”—Critchley outright supports the guiding trajectory of this paper, “Politics is more than ever concerned with the spectacle and the control of the image, which is what makes the Situationism of Guy Debord more relevant than ever as a diagnostic tool in political analysis.”<sup>360</sup>

Most of the people involved in OWS, who took to the streets, to Zuccoti Park last September would not define themselves as “anarchists,” and of course that is what makes the OWS movement so important and powerful, that it is diverse and populist, not radical. What we can understand though from Critchley is that the methods of OWS and all those involved have taken inspiration from not only the purest and most basic form of direct democracy—taking to the streets—but with the new language of civil disobedience in a prominent position.

In fighting corporate greed and wrongdoing and a government that is either incapable or uninterested in economic and its related social justice, the OWS protesters are using the ways and means of the corrupt system in counter strike. Journalist and OWS-supporter, Chris Hedges, published a book in 2009 of criticism of the US up to and in the wake of the Wall Street catastrophe called *Empire of Illusion: The End of Literary and the Triumph of Spectacle*. Never once does he mention Debord or the Situationists, but at one point he cites contemporary political philosopher Sheldon S. Wolin who

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<sup>359</sup> Codrescu, 26.

<sup>360</sup> Critchley, 135.

describes the US as an inverted totalitarianism, a situation described in which, “consumer goods, and a comfortable standard of living, along with a vast entertainment industry that provides spectacles and appealing diversions, keep the citizenry politically passive.”<sup>361</sup>

Alexis de Toqueville called this “soft despotism” and the Ancient Romans simply referred to it as “bread and circuses.”

Against our inverted totalitarianism—or our specific big “S” Spectacle (we can let the terms overlap)—the OWS protesters are employing a form of Debordian detournement in their use of the carnivalesque new language of civil disobedience, their own small “s” spectacle, performed before the cameras of every news media outlet. They have appropriated mediums of “appealing diversions” in Wolins’ words to bring their message across and participate in direct democracy. Terms like “occupy” and “99%” became part of current parlance with viral speed. Even non-violence, a common technique of civil disobedience is employed in the service of this art, as a spectacle speaking back and against dominant Spectacle. One occupier describes this by saying, “Violence is what the police use. It is what the state uses... When I see New York City policemen pepper-spray already captive young women in the face I am disgusted... And the pepper-spraying incident, terrible that it was for the individuals did not succeed in any larger way. In fact, seen on YouTube (three quarters of a million times for one posted version), and widely disseminated, it helped make [OWS] visible and sympathetic to mainstream viewers.”<sup>362</sup>

In the conclusion to Critchley’s last chapter of *Infinitely Demanding* he tells us: “Politics is not the naked operation of power or an ethics-free agonism, it is an ethical

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<sup>361</sup> Hedges, 148.

<sup>362</sup> OCCUPY!, 147.

practice that is driven by response to situated injustices and wrongs... Politics requires subjective invention, imagination and endurance, not to mention tenacity and cunning.”<sup>363</sup> We can see that the majority of OWS protesters are living up to this political demand from news media coverage and from reading the wonderful oral history provided in *OCCUPY! Scenes from Occupied America*, produced by Verso in 2011. It is a demand that makes artists out of activists, as Art Papers magazine coverage in the May/June 2012 issue reads: “Art, it would seem, is the central language of this movement.”<sup>364</sup> The movement also has a large apparatus of support from writers of history, sociology, economics, politics, and philosophy; much of which can be read in *The Occupy Handbook*, from Back Bay books in 2012 and edited by Janet Byrne, and the super handy *Occupy* by Noam Chomsky, by the movement’s own Zuccotti Park Press in 2012.

A rallying cry from Debord that the Occupiers should look towards (and maybe some know it already) is from his final thesis in *Society of the Spectacle*: “The ‘historical mission of installing truth in the world’ can not be accomplished either by the isolated individual, or by the atomized crowd subjected to manipulation, but now as ever by the class that is able to effect the dissolution of all classes by bringing power into the delineating form of realized democracy, the Council, in which practical theory controls itself and sees its own action. This is possible only where individuals are “directly linked to universal history”; only where dialogue arms itself to make its own conditions victorious.”<sup>365</sup> Only time will tell, but let us hope that the Occupy movement will be directly linked to universal history!

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<sup>363</sup> Critchely, 132.

<sup>364</sup> Thompson, 18.

<sup>365</sup> Debord, 221.

**B) Example #2****“The Virgin Mary: The Virgin of Guadalupe, Colonialism, and Remaking the Master Narrative”**

*(This paper was written in November of 2004 for the First Annual International Gandhi Conference on Non-Violence in Memphis, TN.)*

Allow me to begin by giving the narrative context from which we have a conception of the Virgin Mary of Guadalupe, the revered spiritual figure for Catholic Mexico. I am sure we are all familiar with her image that graces candles, bodegas, car bumpers, and many other sites all over Mexico or Mexican areas of our own country. She is referred to as the Virgin, La Morena, La Morenita, La Criolla, Guadalupe, Our Mother, the Virgin of the Americas, Goddess of the Americas or sometimes even the Mexican Mary. To talk about the significance of this figure, especially in the peace studies of a particular region, it is necessary to clarify her origins.

Her story starts in 1531, when on the bright Saturday morning of December 9<sup>th</sup>, Juan Diego, an Indian peasant newly converted to Catholicism, was climbing the hill of Tepeyac north of Mexico City on his way to further religious instruction. Mexico City was then called Mexica and it was a district of New Spain. It had only been ten years since the conquest of Emperor Cuauhtemoc and the indigenous Aztecs by Hernando Cortes officially ended. In 1524 the missionary conquest of the region had begun by the Franciscans, followed by the Dominican and the Augustinian orders of the Catholic Church.

The location in which Juan Diego walked was the shrine of Tonantzin, the sacred ground of the Aztec Earth Mother Goddess. Tonantzin means, "Our Mother," and she is also known as Coatlalopeuh, which means "She who crushes the serpent's head." First, Juan Diego heard the singing of birds and the religion of his ancestors stirred within him causing him to wonder if this was the paradise of their lore. Then he heard a woman's voice and was faced with a blinding light, opening into a vertical nimbus surrounding a beautiful woman. The woman spoke to him in his own language, the language of the Aztec, Nahuatl, calling him by his name and asking him where he was going. Juan answered that he was going to religious study to learn more of her ways since he understood that she was divine. She then proceeded to announced herself as the Ever-Virgin Holy Mary, the Mother of the One and Only God, Mother of the One through Whom We live, Mother of the Creator of Persons, Mother of the Lord of What is Near and Far, Mother of the Lord of Heaven and Earth. She asked for a hermitage to be built in this place and stated that in it she will give her love, help, and protection to all people of the earth since she is the mother of all on earth and she is ready to remedy the miseries and sorrows of all. Then she told him to go to the bishop and relate all that she has said.

Though the importance of the hill of Tepeyac for the Aztec pantheon was common knowledge for Juan Diego, as it was for the other Indians, he believed the glowing woman who spoke to him, who she was and what she said, and went to find the Bishop in the city. Franciscan Friar Juan de Zumarraga was the first Bishop for Mexico City and greeted Juan Diego tolerantly, but with disbelief. So Juan Diego went, that very same day, back up to the hill of Tepeyac and was again faced with the same beautiful woman at the same spot and told her he was not believed and asked for her to employ

someone else, for he was just a piece of rope, a small ladder, the excrement of people, a leaf. To this, she told him that she was sure of her choice, he was her messenger and that he must deliver the message again. He said he would and that he would be back.

Again he went to the Bishop and again he was not believed; the Bishop required a sign, some proof. The next day Juan Diego was preoccupied because his uncle Juan Bernardino was dying of smallpox. Eventually he left the elderly relative to go get a priest to perform the last rites and particularly avoided the hill of Tepeyac so as to not be distracted on his mission, but the Glowing Woman appeared to him nonetheless as he went around the hill. She asked him where he was going and he told her about his uncle and that he was going to get a priest to which she responded that he should not worry about sickness or anxiety. "Am I not here, your mother?" she asked him, and proceeded to tell him not to worry about his uncle, he would not die of his present sickness. He trusted her and she commanded him to go back up the hill to where he once met her and to cut some of the flowers he found there and bring them to her. He did as commanded, and cut many of the different flowers there, all growing out of season, among rock and cactus, including Castilian roses, and put them in the hollow of his tilma (the Nahuatl word for a cape or cloak). He went back to her and she told him that the flowers were a sign for the Bishop and that he should take them to him, tell him everything, and to only the Bishop should he open his tilma.

At the bishop's, Juan Diego was made to wait a long time by rude servants. Eventually, the servants peeked at the flowers and in their amazement, went to tell the Bishop. Inside, Juan Diego told Bishop Zumarraga everything and then opened his tilma. The many flowers from Castile fell to the floor and in that very moment, the image of the



Virgin appeared on the tilma. With this the Bishop believed and took Juan Diego's tilma to hang in the oratory. The next day, the Bishop and Juan Diego went to the site and the Bishop began preparations for the building of the hermitage. With that settled, Juan Diego went home to visit his uncle, Juan Bernardino. He found his uncle in fine health and told him that the Queen of Heaven stopped him from getting a priest since she said that his uncle was cured. Uncle Juan Bernardino attested to this and said that after the nephew left she appeared to him, healed him, and told him that he too would go to the Bishop and tell what had happened and that the Bishop should call her the Ever-Virgin Holy Mary of Guadalupe. So Juan Diego and his uncle went back to the Bishop and revealed more of the Virgin's wishes. When construction on the hermitage or shrine at Tepeyac was complete, the tilma bearing her image was hung in it.

The first written account of this story was composed in 1648 in Spanish by the Oratorian priest Miguel Sanchez and titled *Imagen de la Virgen Maria, Madre de Dios de Guadalupe*. The following year, what is considered the definitive telling of the story was put to paper in Nahuatl by the vicar of Guadalupe, a priest named Luis Laso de la Vega, who titled his work a very long title<sup>1</sup> that is commonly called *Nican Mopohua* ("It is Narrated"). It is from this source that I have retold the narrative of the Virgin of Guadalupe<sup>2</sup>. In 1660, a Jesuit named Mateo de la Cruz wrote a pamphlet expanding on Sanchez's work adding spiritual exegesis and making the first record of dating the apparitions to December 9<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> specifically. The *Nican Mopohua* is written in very straightforward Nahuatl and employs very precise symbolic language that speaks

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<sup>1</sup> In English the title is "By a great miracle the Heavenly Queen, Saint Mary, our precious mother of Guadalupe, appeared here near the Great Altepétl of Mexico, in a place called Tepeyacac"

<sup>2</sup> With historical embellishments from Stafford Poole's work *Our Lady of Guadalupe*

directly to the Nahuas, a term used for the many people of this region who shared culture and religion but who were not all necessarily of the Aztec tribal affiliation. Having been written in the indigenous language also gives further importance to the *Nican Mopohua*, for it is understood that this is the language with which the Virgin spoke to Juan Diego. Observing language in regards to the Virgin of Guadalupe is important because most of the time one finds a blending of Nahuatl and Spanish, an occurrence demonstrating how uniquely placed this symbol is between traditions. Initially, the most striking linguistic characteristic is that she is called Guadalupe. The word itself is a place name in Spain, the “guada” half of the word meaning “river,” from the Arabic of the Moorish invaders who once made their way in Spain, and the second half, “lupe,” meaning “wolf,” from the Spanish. The “Wolf River” flows in the Extremadura region of Spain, and the city of the same name. The city has its own miraculous appearance story involving the Virgin and a peasant in 1326. The majority of the conquistadors, Spanish settlers, and clergy first in New Spain came from the region of Extremadura and were already familiar with the original appearance story. It is also believed that the Virgin in her appearance to Juan Bernardino called herself “Coatlalopeuh,” a Nahuatl word that was understood, reinterpreted, or changed by the Bishop or others down the line to the similar sounding “Guadalupe” which made more sense to them due to their own appearance story<sup>3</sup>.

Allow us now to look at other historical details since the miraculous appearance of the Virgin Mary of Guadalupe and what meaning it has had popularly for the Catholic Church in relation to Mexico and its people.

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<sup>3</sup> Castillo, *Goddess of the Americas*, xvi.

Juan Diego's original Aztec name was Cuauhtlatoatzin, which means "he who talks like an eagle," and he is now often remembered as Juan Diego Cuauhtlatoatzin. This is how Pope John Paul II referred to him during the homily at his canonization on July 31<sup>st</sup> 2002 (he was beatified in 1990). With the canonization, Juan Diego officially entered the Catholic Church canon at the highest level that a mortal can achieve. His place is with saints such as John the Baptist, Augustine of Hippo, and Jesus' very disciples. As he assumes this place in the canon, he brings with him his name, his story, and his traditions.

Right before the canonization, the Mexican primate, Cardinal Norberto Rivera Carrera released a new book titled, *Juan Diego, the Talking Eagle*. In this work, he takes a very traditional Catholic stance, and optimistically describes Juan Diego as a mediator and reconciler of Indian and European cultures. This easily explains a way of understanding the time period of post-colonization when Catholic missionaries aspired to convert anyone in their grasp. There was a gap of religion between the two parties and the missionaries were not merely looking to traverse this gap, but to bring the Indians over to their side. For the Catholic view, Juan Diego is the physical link for the indigenous people between their old pagan world-view and the new Christian one. It is as if through his miraculous experience with the Virgin he brokered the deal allowing for the conversion of his people *en masse*. After the final defeat of Cuauhtemoc and the destruction of his palace at Tenochtitlan, the indigenous people were in crisis. The Spanish missionaries, coming from a tradition of fiercely reclaiming their own country from the Muslim Moors, deepened the crisis of the Nahuas, beginning the work of conversion with the basic rationale that their gods failed them in battle because the Christian god is more powerful. Miraculously, within this spiritual crossroads appears the

glowing Virgin and she speaks to a man newly converted, yet old enough to be in touch with his pre-Christian roots. The experience that he relates to the bishop is in color and word an Aztec religious experience including: the location, the language, the theology, and the symbolism in the Virgin's actions and representation on the tilma.

Through the miraculous experience of Juan Diego, the Catholic Church has what it needs as far as traversing the gap on the road to conversion. However, an acceptance of Juan Diego and the Virgin of Guadalupe is an acceptance of the texts through which they are transmitted. The account that the Pope and his council went by in determining whether to canonize Juan Diego is from Vega's work as well as Sanchez's. It makes sense to wonder, in looking back at history, whether Juan Diego was having an Aztec religious experience, but with some of the new religious language of his conversion, instead of a purely Christian experience. It would then follow to wonder whether Bishop Zumarraga and the following writers of the story endorsed the event with the intention of establishing Juan Diego as an ambassador between the two cultures through his now shared religion. For them, the narrative of Juan Diego's experience speaks the language of the conquered under the motivation of endorsing Christianity. But for the people of Mexico, Juan Diego's experience retains a story and belief system they have had all along. He gives them back, within the colonizing faith, a mother, a savior, and a reborn Goddess, who is always there to protect them, her children.

I posit that after the conquest by Cortes was complete, a battle still raged on in Mexico, but on a cultural level. In 1947, in the horrific wake of the Second World War the United Nations held a Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of

Genocide. The first article of the Secretariat Draft<sup>4</sup> from the convention was to outline a definition of genocide, which is divided into three subsections: physical, biological, and cultural. Within the Ad Hoc Committee Draft<sup>5</sup> of the same convention, the third article expands further on what constitutes cultural genocide. Combining both drafts specific to cultural materials, cultural genocide can be an action such as and not restricted to: “...(e) systematic destruction of historical or religious monuments or their diversion to alien uses, destruction or dispersion of documents and objects of historical, artistic, or religious value and of objects used in religious worship. 2. Destroying or preventing the use of libraries, museums, schools, historical monuments, places of worship or other cultural institutions and objects of the group.”

Although looking at what occurred in sixteenth century Mexico under the tenets of modern international law is a bit of historical redaction, the culture clash that began with colonization of the Nahuas by the Spanish Catholics still endures today. The point is that war and violence are not limited to the battlefield and physical harm. Just because no shots ring out does not mean that an act of aggression is not taking place and that a struggle for liberation does not still go on. A cultural war is still a war and true peace is not achieved until people are truly free. Since the war for independence in Mexico ended in 1821, the country has been its own sovereign, no longer ruled by an outside body. The cultural world of the colonizers remained with the people of Mexico and a large part of that, religion, did answer to a greater body, the Roman Catholic Church. As the Spanish

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<sup>4</sup> Secretariat Draft, First Draft Genocide Convention. Prepared by the UN Secretariat, May 1947 [UN Doc. E/447]

<sup>5</sup> Ad Hoc Committee Draft, Second Draft Genocide Convention. Prepared by the Ad Hoc Committee of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), meeting between April 5, 1948 and May 10, 1948 [UN Doc. E/AC.25/SR.1 to 28]

conquistadors employed their every means to derive allegiance from the indigenous people in the sixteenth century, the missionaries used their own means to derive allegiance from the same people.

The Virgin of Guadalupe is a figure through which the indigenous people fought back against their colonizers and the religion of their colonizers, and continue to do so today, whether they are conscious of it or not. I would consider this technique to be “Cultural Guerrilla Warfare,” since violence and genocide can be committed culturally, guerrilla tactics can be employed in defense culturally. Mao Tse-tung, in his work, *On Guerrilla Warfare*, said, “in a war of revolutionary character, guerrilla operations are a necessary part. This is particularly true in a war waged for the emancipation of a people who inhabit a vast nation.” Of course, he saw guerrilla operations to be interdependent upon conventional methods of warfare and not a tactic to be employed alone. He saw them as just “one aspect of a struggle.”<sup>6</sup> In Mexico, the twentieth century began with a long revolution and throughout that century, there were various armed insurgencies. These moments of violence and protest had a very obvious nature, even when they employed combatant methods of guerrilla warfare. We can look further at the violent culture clashes between the Catholic Church in Mexico and Mexican citizens trying to retain or revive pre-colonial traditions, such as in the Cristero Wars of 1927 to 1929 where during the Revolution an intense push towards a separation of Church and State led to persecution of clergy and church institutions.

That is an example of conventional warfare on a cultural level. Cultural Guerrilla Warfare is more subtle. Mao Tse-tung describes how the basic guerrilla strategy is one

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<sup>6</sup> Mao, *On Guerrilla Warfare*, 41

that “must be adjusted to the enemy situation, the terrain, the existing lines of communication, the relative strengths, the weather, and the situation of the people.” As he goes further in characterizing guerrilla warfare and its differences from regular warfare he outlines certain responsibilities for guerrilla strategies, two of which are very fitting for seeing this in a cultural light, “to harass and weaken large forces” and “to attack enemy lines of communication.”<sup>7</sup>

Though nothing new to colonialism, the Cultural Guerrilla Warfare employed by the people of Mexico against the Catholic Church has proved very successful for maintaining indigenous beliefs through the language and the religious structure of a colonizing power. The figure of the Virgin of Guadalupe and the story that surrounds her is in many ways an attack against “enemy lines of communication,” and I have already shown how the Nahuatl language and the appearance narrative have become a part of the Catholic Church with Juan Diego’s canonization. Whether one wants to see the cult of the Virgin as a harassment of the Catholic Church or whether any argument could be made that it is weakening the Church, it does seem to have a life of its own within the Church.

The narrative of the Virgin and her pre-conquest attributes can be dissected in a plethora of ways, comparing the New World Tonantzin to the Old World Marian tradition, but here I will just give two. The hill of Tepeyac, overlooking the valley of Mexico, was a sacred location to visit, as were other hills “to stimulate the rain-giving mountains to release their water.” As a part of Aztec ceremonial life, practitioners would journey to Tepeyac to worship and look to the Goddess for earth-nurturing and life-

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 53

giving rain<sup>8</sup>. The hill of Tepeyac was a site of pilgrimage for the indigenous people long before the Virgin asked Juan Diego to build a hermitage there, but it makes sense that an Indian would convey this desire to those who could make it possible.

After the example of sacred space and pilgrimage there is a theological element to the narration that also endures now within the Catholic tradition. During the first apparition, the first things the Virgin says to Juan Diego are familiar to the 57-year-old man as they would be to any learned of his people. She is describing her child in the terms that the Aztec and others of that area had used to describe “the one supreme god, Ometeotl, a god of duality, complete with masculine and feminine aspects,” who was beyond physical representation<sup>9</sup>. This indigenous theology was known to the missionaries from their first contact with the peoples of the New World, but they had immediately tried to argue these ideas away from them<sup>10</sup>.

For these cases, as well as many others, the Church employed syncretism, emphasizing the similarities between both religious structures to ease conversion. However, even those earliest of missionaries had their doubts whether in overlapping practices and doctrines the Indians were not just paying lip service and secretly just continuing their old ways. Dominican Friar Diego Duran who lived from about 1537 to 1588 in New Spain, expressed these doubts in one of his many works. “The ancient beliefs are still so numerous, so complex, so similar to our own in many cases that one overlaps the other. Occasionally we suspect they are playing, adoring idols, casting lots regarding future events in our very presence—but we do not fully understand these

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<sup>8</sup> Carrasco, *Religions of Mesoamerica*, 137

<sup>9</sup> Rodriguez, “Guadalupe: The Feminine Face of God,” *Goddess of the Americas*, 31

<sup>10</sup> Johnson, *The Virgin of Guadalupe*, 32.



things. We believe they do (Christian) penance and practice certain abstentions. But (they) always had their own sacraments and a divine cult which in many ways coincides with our own religion.”<sup>11</sup> As the pre-conquest pagan world was destroyed and replaced with the Catholic Christian world view, to the chagrin of the earliest priests, the memories of statues and idols lingered behind altars.

Has any of this changed so much? Does not the memory of Tonatzin stand there upon her hill for her people that still seek her out? Did she not stand there behind Pope John Paul II while he delivered his homily at the canonization for Juan Diego in 2002? Some estimates say that fifteen to twenty million people visit the shrine every year. We can only wonder how many are there for Tonatzin and how many are there for Mary and for how many there is no longer a difference.

Lastly, we must remember what image graces the Mexican flag, the eagle devouring a snake. This image holds so much for the Mexican people, most specifically, the story of how the Aztecs settled the capital area and built Tenochtitlan. Their military migration ended when they came to a place of lakes and in one lake on an island, they found an eagle perched on a cactus devouring a snake. This was regarded as a sign that they had found a home, so they built a city and a temple to their gods which they shared with the other tribes of the region. Nearby stands the pyramids of Teotihuacan, and the Aztecs found them abandoned. They believed them to be where the gods were born. One of the greatest pyramids there is the Temple of Quetzalcoatl, dating back to the third century. Quetzalcoatl, or “the plumed serpent,” was an important ancient god of the

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<sup>11</sup> Ruiz de Alarcon, *Treatise on the Heathen Superstitions*, 16.

whole Mesoamerican region, found in some form of all indigenous languages<sup>12</sup>. This winged or feathered serpent is also present in the essence of the eagle and the snake. Now through the language of the Catholic Church it carries on, for as I have said above, another name the Virgin Tonatzin is Coatloapeuh, “she who crushes the serpents head,” and Juan Diego’s original name is Cuauhtlatoatzin, “he who talks like an eagle.”

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<sup>12</sup> Miller, *An Illustrated Dictionary of The Gods and Symbols of Ancient Mexico and the Maya*, 141-142

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