

Art and Social Death

January 29, 2018



by Blake Stimson

It's your turn now ... you have turned into the zombie.^[1]

Modern art has always had a going love affair with politics, of course, but rarely without dysfunction. Most recently it has been smitten with the performative networkism that was first brought to the fore as an image-driven global counter-ideal by the Zapatistas' anti-NAFTA protests in 1994, before blossoming into multiple offshoots with the Seattle WTO protest in 1999 and coming to a head with the 2011 Arab Spring, 15M, and Occupy movements. If art once pined for the People, control of the state, and the singular work of genius that might somehow get its form or feeling right, its star-crossed lover's gaze now refracts that old universal ideal into a rainbow-like array of fungible parts, each expressed by its own selfie jockeying for position in network with all the others. Instead of turning to principles of

enduring union like *solidarity* and *justice* and to sweet lovers' murmurings like "we the people" or "workers of the world unite" to draw out the promise of eternal love, we now opt for mechanical descriptions like *intersectionality* and *fugitivity* and favor the political equivalent of hooking up. What has enabled our new way with matters of the political heart is a fundamental shift in our most rudimentary sensibility: from love's finding lasting being in and through another life, to lust's experiencing that same social being in and through momentary and repeatable death.

The examples of this counter-ideal are myriad but two will suffice to give a sense of the range: The 2010 Facebook page devoted to a young Egyptian beaten to death in police custody that played a foundational role in the Arab Spring "We Are All Khaled Said," and this 1994 viral communique by the Zapatistas' Subcomandante Marcos:

"Yes, Marcos is gay. Marcos is gay in San Francisco, black in South Africa, an Asian in Europe, a Chicano in San Ysidro, an anarchist in Spain, a Palestinian in Israel, a Mayan Indian in the streets of San Cristobal, a Jew in Germany, a Gypsy in Poland, a Mohawk in Quebec, a pacifist in Bosnia, a single woman on the Metro at 10pm, a peasant without land, a gang member in the slums, an unemployed worker, an unhappy student and, of course, a Zapatista in the mountains. Marcos is all the exploited, marginalized, oppressed minorities resisting and saying "Enough." He is every minority who is now beginning to speak and every majority that must shut up and listen. He is every untolerated group searching for a way to speak. Everything that makes

power and the good consciences of those in power uncomfortable—this is Marcos.”^[2]

In other words, instead of reaching for transcendence by embodying or opposing the institutions of sovereignty—think of Vladimir Tatlin’s 1919 proposal for a monument to the Third International, say, or John Heartfield’s 1932 *Adolf Der Übermensch*—art today reaches for its transcendence through self-imagining and the vulnerability of extra-institutional life. Instead of assuming that the towering presence of party or state had to be its form and failure, our art looks to test itself in the bubbling cauldron of abstract equivalence.^[3] We sometimes now like to think this is a good thing and rebrand it as “pop-ups,” “actor-networks” and the like, but in the end it is really just the market even when—perhaps, particularly when—money is not immediately involved.^[4]

Like our old love affairs with state and party, however, this newer love of networks has waned too since we have gotten to know it better—or at least since the account of its infidelity given in Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello’s pivotal 1999 *Le nouvel esprit du capitalisme*. For example, young but nonetheless seasoned social movement participant-observer Zeynep Tufekci has recently offered this evaluation: whereas “between 1955 to 1964, the civil rights movement went through multiple major tactical innovations, from bus boycott to sit-ins to freedom-rides to community-wide protest campaigns and more,” the networked, anti-hierarchical movements of our epoch have been “unable to change tactics along the way”—unable to move beyond the

principles of spontaneity and leaderlessness and the governing principle of institutional critique that subtended them—and thus have been “unable to sustain and organize in the long term.”^[5] In 1968, Jesse Jackson offered this thumbnail of the relationship of changing tactics to changing articulation of need that once guided oppositional politics: “In Birmingham, the Southern Christian Leadership Council challenged America’s priorities in relationship to its *social* structure. In Selma, that challenge was extended to the *political* structure. Finally, [with the 1968 Poor People’s Campaign] the time came to raise the *economic* issues to the conscience of the nation.”^[6]

What has kept art’s love affair from working in our own time, Tufekci suggests, is the abstract equivalence of the horizontal network form itself: for all its vaunted fluidity it has become static, immobile, unresponsive, hidebound, incapable of adapting to the fickle reality of changing political need. She calls it “tactical freeze.”^[7]

My concern is similar to Tufekci’s but my argument is different. Her argument, wisely enough, calls for a dialectical appreciation of the “coevolution of power and protest,” of the ways that art’s DIY, anti-hierarchical actor-network fungible and fugitive self-image have been appropriated by the “manufactured structurelessness of the social media attention economy.” This has given us not only to the “algorithmic governance” of Facebook, Google and the like, she says, but also enabled the return to the old ways of brute despotism by the Putin and Erdoğan regimes and their ilk.^[8] My argument is that the problem lies not only with art’s development of new cultural tools for

the covert and overt power grabs of Facebook, Erdoğan, et al, but even more so with the ways in which that turn has made us into pliant political subjects unwilling and unable to adopt sufficient institutionalism—the institutionalism of party and state—to meaningfully challenge our own rapidly escalating economic exploitation and political subjugation. The only way in which our long epoch of institutional critique will ever serve as anything more than loyal opposition to the accelerating wealth extraction of the global elite will be when it comes to terms with a bare truth: that the grotesque parody of innocence given by our extra-institutional form makes it true when we say “*L’1%, c’est moi,*” regardless of the economic status of any one or more of us.^[9] It goes without saying that most everything we do in the name of a better world is brimming over with good intentions, but this does nothing to guard against the form that our intentions adopt from hollowing them out into nothing more than a zombie politics, a politics without the lifeblood of power.

I will take up this argument via five linked theses.

I. Art is a weak force haunted by its own violence. Its only power is to work with its own form, a form that bears the symptoms of that repressed violence.

Just to be clear about what has already been assumed about art, our understanding of it today is broad. Any craft-based definition, if it ever existed, was abandoned long ago and we have since been operating with two companion assumptions about what authorizes art’s special

status, one vaguely left and the other even more vaguely right: that of *artistic intention* (or, as Donald Judd put it in 1966, “If someone says his work is art, it’s art”), and that of *institutional validation* regardless of whether that validation takes the form of a curator’s stamp of approval or is measured in Facebook “likes.”^[10] This split or double value is sometimes called art’s “expanded field,” but this suggests it is newer than it is—in fact, it had already emerged at the beginning of the nineteenth century with the birth of the intentionality of the Romantic subject and the institutionality of the private art market. Hegel alluded to this shift at the time when he said “every form and every material is now at the service and command of the artist whose talent and genius is explicitly freed from the earlier limitation to one specific art-form.”^[11] Regardless of how much salience it may still have, the intentional/institutional couplet has long seemed limited by the way it imagines art’s social life, particularly if we are trying to reach for any notion of effective political art. As such, we might look to a more dynamic third definition and simply say that the concept of *aesthetic struggle*—of art as a site for the production of what we used to call “the Public”—gives us access to a principle of art limited not by the brute facticity of craft, intention, or institution, but instead finds its validation in the open dynamism of the more properly aesthetic question of struggle itself.^[12]



Figure 1. Women's March 2017 http://a.abcnews.com/images/Politics/GTY-womens-march-washington-4-jt-170121_12x5_1600.jpg

For example, we can look to two very recent cultural developments that serve as simple illustrations of what I have in mind for art in this more dynamic sense: the pink pussy hats inspired by Donald Trump's boorish comments and used as a rallying theme in the 2017 Women's March, and the thin blue lines painted between yellow highway stripes in small cities and towns around the United States as part of the "Blue Lives Matter" movement beginning in 2016. [Figure 1] In each case, pink pussy hats and thin blue lines are only one formal element among many in what amount to complex and elaborately staged creative productions that, for our purposes, we can think of as art.^[13] The thematic color element in both examples arose as copycat responses to the blackness of the 2013-present Black Lives Matter movement which itself draws on the expressive vitality of color deployed as a central organizing tactic and identitarian ideological ploy by the so-called "color revolution" movement beginning at least with Czechoslovakia's Velvet Revolution and China's Tiananmen Square protests of 1989 and

coming into its own with the Orange, Rose and Tulip revolutions in the former Soviet Union and the Balkans from 2003 to 2005.^[14] There is nothing essential about color but that has never kept it from being mapped onto the often essentializing categories of race, ethnicity, nationality and even life itself. Needless to say, the whiteness at play in the Alt Right movement and the astroturfing driving it is only the latest iteration of this formal artistic approach to anti-politics.^[15]

As good art appreciators, we will rightfully care about the meaning and effects of formal properties such as color. The theme that all these movements share, and thus the aesthetic burden for their artistic responses, is the struggle between life mattering and not (even for the pink pussy hats, if we allow that the violent disregard for the bodily autonomy of another human being is not too distant from the violent disregard for the embodied life of another). In this sense, color is asked to take on the status not only of difference but also the sensuousness of the universal biological condition of life itself, that is, of what we now sometimes call “bare life,” and its distance from the grey colorlessness of the hierarchical systems of sovereignty. This was epitomized in Václav Havel’s great 1978 rallying cry for the Velvet Revolution “the power of the powerless” with its goal to hold open “the abyss between the aims of system and the aims of life” that ideology would otherwise paper over.^[16]

More recently, defining the struggle as life against system is a theme affirmed in Ava DuVernay’s 2016 documentary *13th*. After a revealing and withering historical account of the political economy of slavery,

the violence, segregation and exploitation of Jim Crow, racism in the constitution and in prison industry profiteering, and after showing the historic photographs of Emmett Till before and after his murder and screening a number of the recent clips of police killings with the explicit permission of the families of those killed, the film concludes by turning to lawyer and author Van Jones and executive director of the Center for Media Justice Malkia Cyril to articulate the hope for a way forward offered by Black Lives Matter. “The opposite of criminalization is humanization,” is how Jones puts it, while Cyril says, “It’s about rehumanizing us as a people ... all of us.”^[17]

There is no question of the powerful ethical call of such appeals to the power of the powerless: appeals to the solidarity we can experience in the commonality of our vulnerable biological life when it is defined against criminalization, against systematicity, against the exercise of power, against the state. It goes without saying that struggle declared in the name of color and on behalf of the base condition of life or humanity matters in every conceivable way. But as good art appreciators with rigorous formal analytical skills we will also want to note that the turn to color displaces the greyer, more nuts-and-bolts demands given by slogans and struggles of the past—slogans like “civil rights,” say, or “equal pay,” or “suffrage,” or even “liberty.” While it may have been unwitting, this displacement from the idiom and practice of power on behalf of civil rights, equal pay and the like to the idiom and practice of the power of the powerless on behalf of bare life was undeniably violent.

We would be foolish to assume that art has any power beyond itself, that its efforts at moral fist-shaking, socially constructive doing-good, or cultural undermining of the status quo produce any significant political gains regardless of the ideal it courts. But we would be equally foolish to assume that its claim to power in the solidarity of powerlessness, fugitivity and fungibility is not itself violent. Art's only power is to recognize that it itself is, as Walter Benjamin famously put it, "a document of barbarism," and then figure out what it can do with that brutally simple fact to battle for its potential as a document of civilization. This is the site of art's aesthetic struggle, the site of its old love affair with the Public, and the only power available to it. It can battle for position in the network with raised fist, sense of hurt, or the latest app as much as it wants but in so doing will never be more than a laughing stock for those with banks, tanks or NSA code in their corner. In the end, as Nietzsche for one made clear long ago, there is no greater violence than making oneself—and, to the extent of influence such making has, one's readers, viewers, students and cultural heirs—powerless in the face of the violence of others. "Politics lies downstream of culture," is how Andrew Breitbart reportedly put it, presumably meaning in the sense of shit flowing downstream: just as the rise of his beloved Alt Right culture of white male righteousness has meant the progressive displacement of political means for resolving conflicts by the exercise of brute power, so the networkism that has been our *métier* has resulted more and more in the same.^[18] The difference between modern political life and modern network (or market) life is that one is about adjudicating the distribution of power

according to moral principles, received wisdom and established institutions, and the other is about network relations or what we have now come to call “the art of the deal.” If we don’t all fully realize who wins and who loses once culture has successfully done its business on politics, we will soon.

II. The political legacy of 1968 has failed by any reasonable measure.

We can look to another young but seasoned participant-observer, Micah White, to give us a measure of this struggle. Like Tufekci, he is concerned with a kind of “tactical freeze”—not so much because the network form of contemporary protest has been taken over and repurposed by the network form of contemporary capitalism, but instead more simply because protest has forgotten what politics means. As he put it recently,

“We have become obsessed with the spectacle of street protests, and we have started to ignore the reality that we are getting no closer to power. You would think that with the triumph of Trump there would be a fundamental reassessment among activists. But there hasn’t been.”^[19]

Protest politics, movement politics, network politics, the politics of color revolutions, color revolts and “rehumanizing us as a people,” he argues, have gradually but no less surely forgotten a fundamental fact: that politics is about taking control of governments and then governing. “Either we can march to the ballot box or the battleground,” he wrote in the Guardian the day before the 2017 women’s march,

“there is no third option.”^[20]

We can trace art’s opposition to both state and revolution back to many origins—ultimately we would have to track it back through the histories of anarchism, libertarianism and romanticism to the contradiction at the heart of liberalism itself—but for our purposes we might date its decisive turn to spring 1968. There were many pivotal events in those months, of course, but I have a particular one in mind: the birth of a new kind of slogan with the Poor People’s Campaign planned by Martin Luther King, Jr. but not launched until immediately following his assassination.



Figure 2. Jesse Jackson addressing a crowd on the Mall during the Poor People's Campaign,

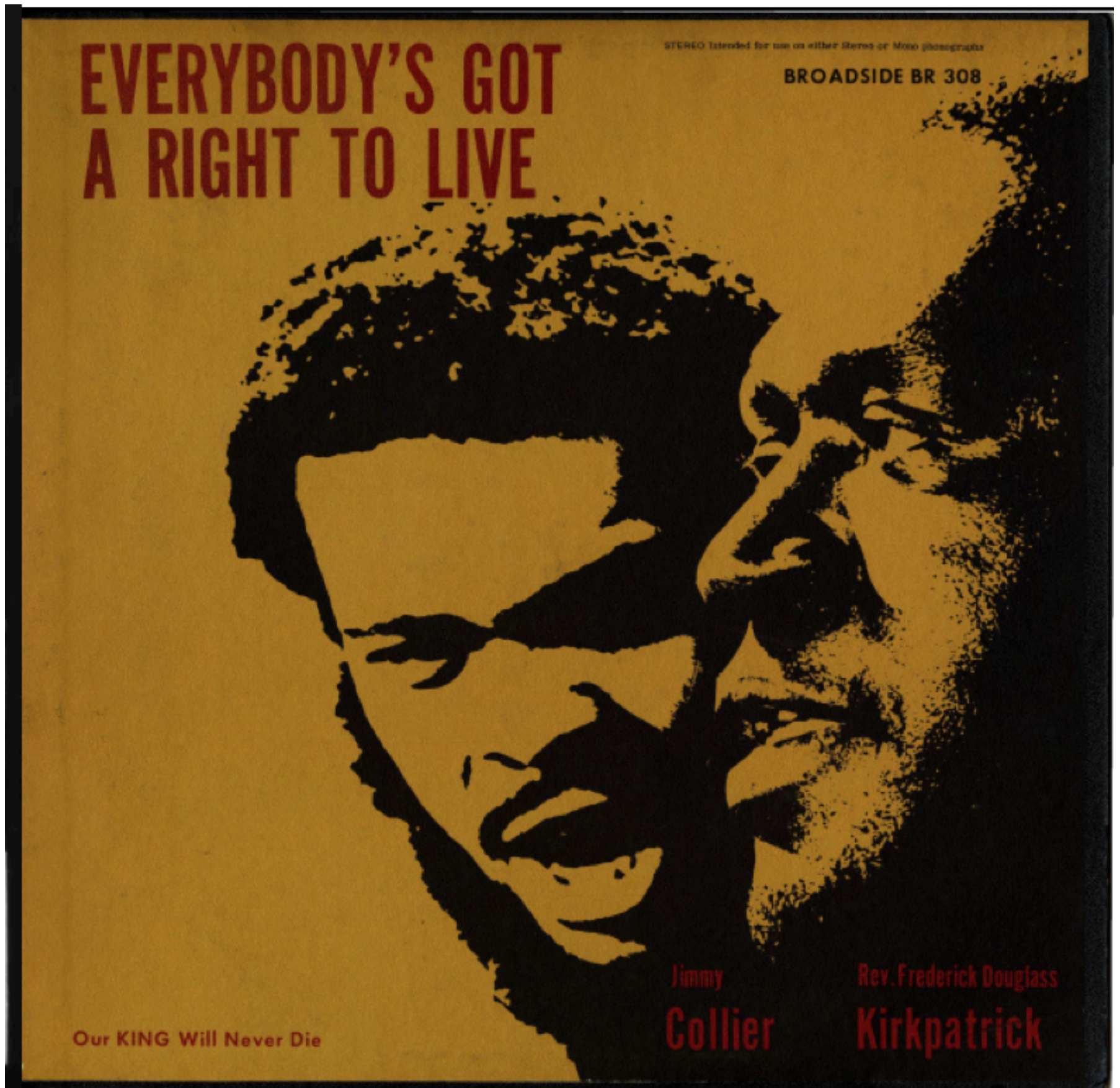


Figure 3. Jimmie Collier and Frederick Douglass Kirkpatrick, *Everybody's Got a Right to Live*, LP, 1968. http://media.smithsonianfolkways.org/liner_notes/folkways/FW05308.pdf

There were various versions but we can look to two that were particularly influential: the folk song “Everybody’s Got a Right to Live” written for the Campaign by Jimmy Collier and Frederick Douglass

Kirkpatrick and subsequently popularized by Pete Seeger, and Jesse Jackson's call-and-response refrain, introduced as a spirit-builder amidst the muddy mess of Resurrection City on the Washington Mall, "I am. Somebody." [Figures 2 and 3] By 1972, the refrain had come to go like this:

I am—

I am—

Somebody.

Somebody.

I may be poor.

I may be poor.

But I am—

But I am—

Somebody.

Somebody.

I may be uneducated.

I may be uneducated.

But I am—

But I am—

Somebody.

Somebody.

I may be unskilled.

I may be unskilled.

But I am—

But I am—

Somebody.

Somebody.

I may be on dope.

I may be on dope.

I may have lost hope.

I may have lost hope.

But I am ... somebody.

But I am ... somebody.

I am ... black ... beautiful ... proud ... I must be respected ... I must be protected.

I am ... black ... beautiful ... proud ... I must be respected ... I must be protected.

I am ... God's child.

I am ... God's child.

What time is it?

What time is it?

Nation time.

Nation time.^[21]

In Jackson's own later account, his "Black national anthem" sought "to give people a sense of somebody-ness who had nothing" and, as a model of political subjectivity, had "resonated across the world in this

last 40 years.”^[22]

This rhetorical turn to a politics of “everybody” and “somebody”—to a horizontal politics of bare, interchangeable life that had reduced its demands from state-licensed and church-sanctioned *civil* rights to self-asserted and culturally-ordained *human* rights—would contribute to Jackson’s rebranding his aims after he broke with the SCLC in 1971. Instead of taking the old hierarchical form of a “leadership council,” his new organizations—People United to Save Humanity (Operation PUSH), formed in 1971, and the National Rainbow Coalition in 1984—rested rhetorically on the principle of leaderless unity. Among other things, what was provided by this turn from the state-bound concept of civil rights to a stateless imaginary of human rights was a model for the color revolutions and cultural rebellions to come.^[23] [Figure 4]

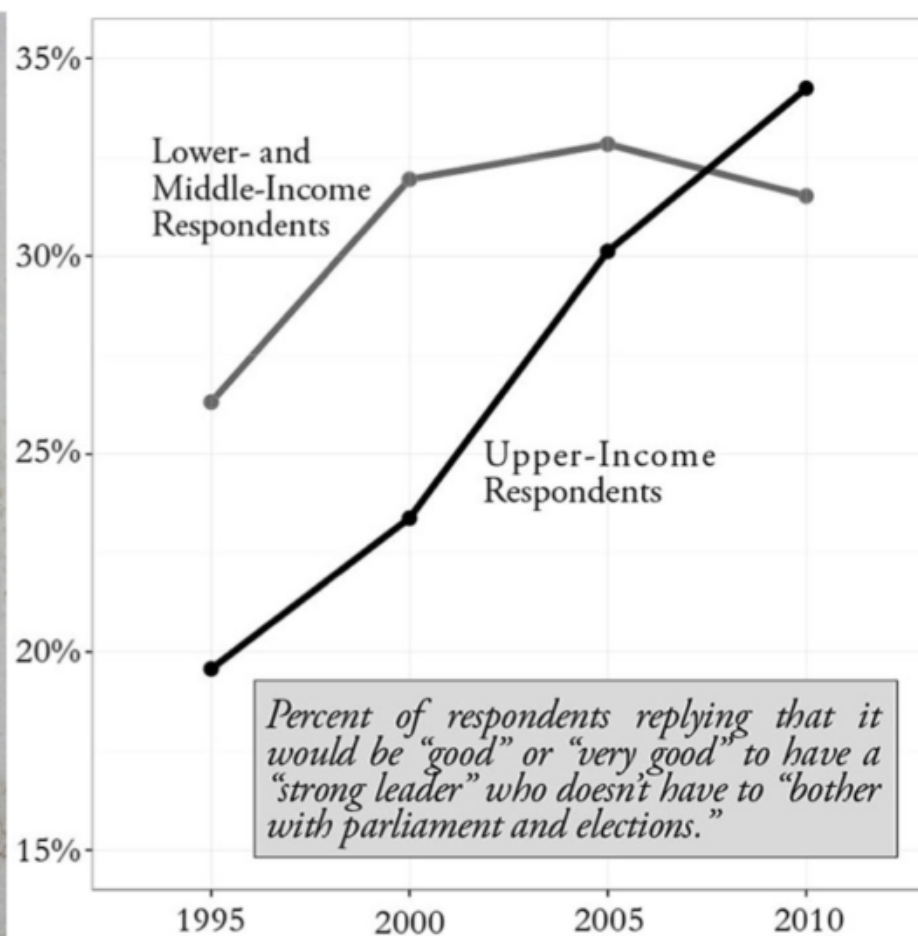
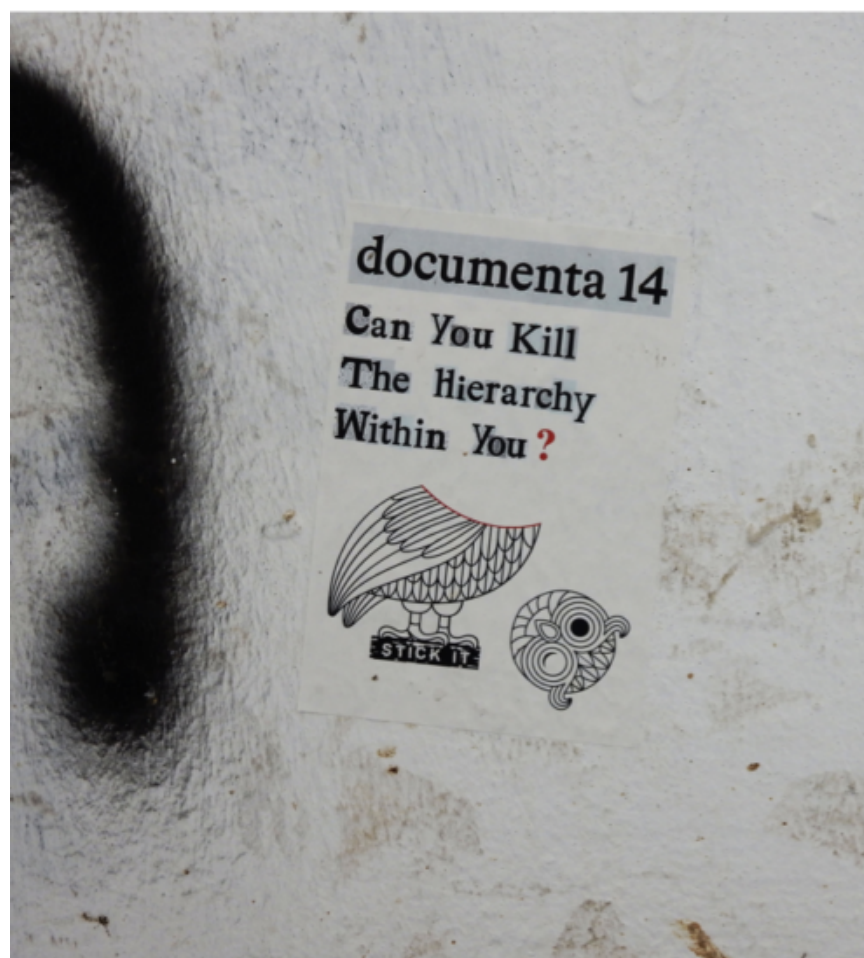


Figure 4. Sticker at the Athens School of Fine Arts, June 2017. <http://aestheticsofcrisis.org/2017/sincerely-the-indigenous/>

Figure 5. Support for Authoritarianism by Income in the U.S.: Roberto Stefan Foa and Yascha Mounk, “The Democratic Disconnect,” *Journal of Democracy*, Volume 27, Number 3, July 2016.

As Zeynep Tufekci and Micah White have already suggested for us, there are many ways to evaluate why the rights movements began to fail after 1968 but there is no question that they did. From our perspective now, we can see this failure registered both positively and negatively on the street, in our own lives, and in any of a number of statistical analyses of the changing distribution of wealth, health, sovereignty and political attitudes. [*Figure 5*] By all measures, race remains at the heart of these historic redistributions.

III. Why has the political legacy of 1968 failed? Art.

The story of how contemporary art came to draw its horizontal, network model of political subjectivity from changes in activism circa 1968 is a complex one but we can point to a couple of key junctures. Both pivot on race.

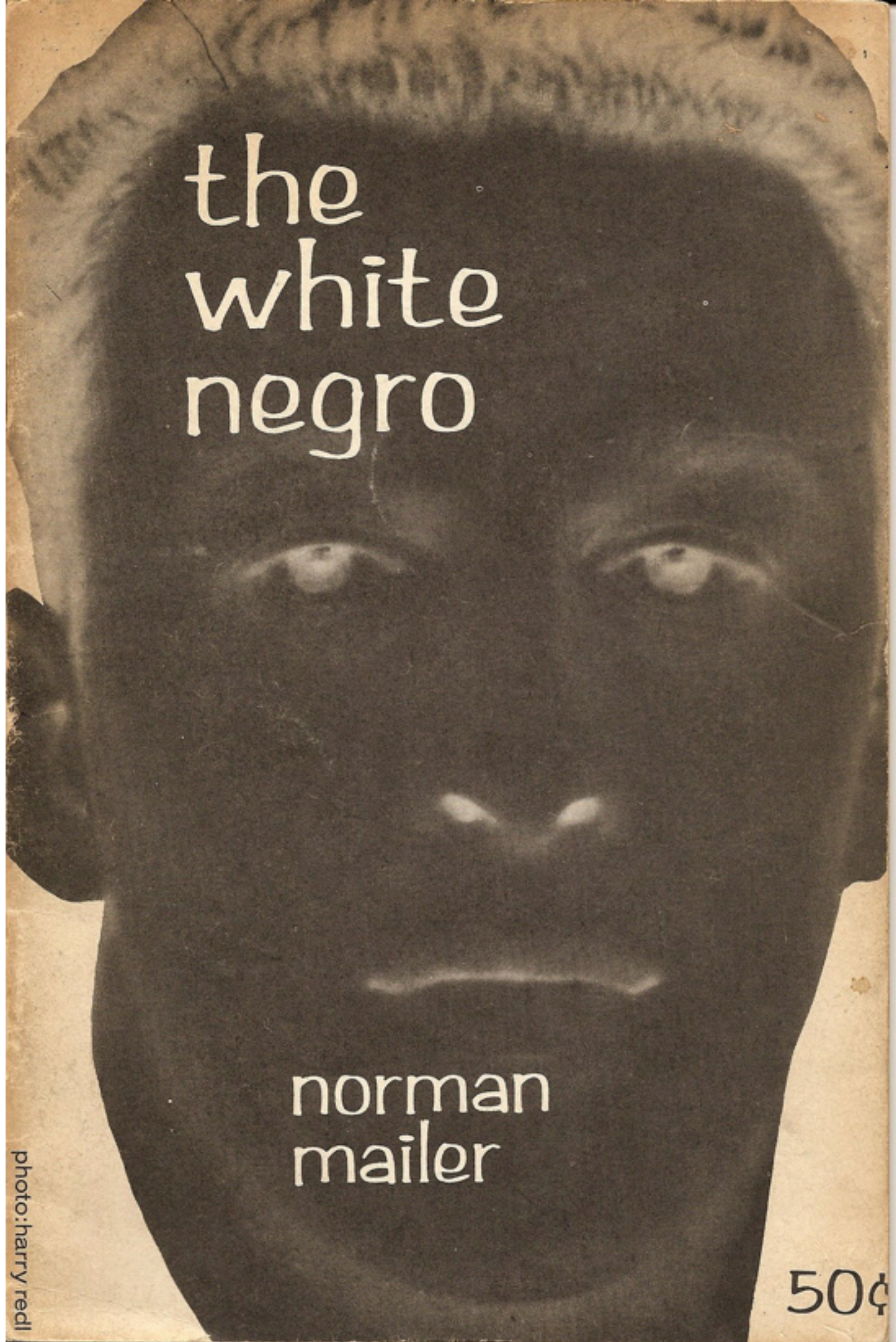


Figure 6. Norman Mailer, *The White Negro*, as published by City Lights Books, 1957
<https://images-na.ssl-images-amazon.com/images/I/91Gf8hb4LfL.jpg>



Figure 7. Robert Lapoujade, *Panique*, 1961 (as reproduced in “Robert Lapoujade: Peintures sur le thème des émeutes, triptyque sur la torture, Hiroshima,” exh cat, Galerie Pierre Domec, 1961)

The first turning point I have in mind is best marked by Norman Mailer’s wildly influential 1957 essay “The White Negro” and its foundational claim: that a new relationship between races was made possible by what he called a black “cultural dowry.”^[24] [*Figure 6*] Jazz was only its most obvious, epiphenomenal articulation—what was really on offer and what white culture picked up and ran with was a deeper “psychopathic brilliance” drawn from the synapses of black culture writ large. It is “no accident that the source of Hip is the Negro,” Mailer insisted, “for he has been living on the margin between totalitarianism and democracy for two centuries.” With the “psychic

havoc of the concentration camps and the atom bomb upon the unconscious mind of almost everyone alive in these years,” he ventured, black insight born of centuries of violence suddenly seemed available and desirable to express the violence suffered by whites too.

Of course it didn’t, because the comparison was false. But if there was no comparable categorical violence against whites there was a fear that the barbaric violation and humiliation which had afflicted blacks for centuries might leach into white life. By preemptively adopting the psychopathology of the terrorized, violated and humiliated black subject—the subject of capture, slavery, lynchings, redlining, prison industry profiteering, murderous policing and all the rest—the white negro attempted to vaccinate herself with prophylactic blackness. To be “cool” in the period jargon was to have faced one’s own objecthood; it was “to play it cool” in the face of a concrete threat: “To be cool is to be equipped, and if you are equipped it is more difficult for the next cat who comes along to put you down.”^[25] The turn from violence suffered by blacks to violence anticipated by whites made for a formal or abstract or hypothetical psychopathology at best—in a telling passage, Mailer branded the white hipster a “philosophical psychopath” or what might as well be called an “armchair psychopath.”

The second turning point I have in mind was even more influential and even more extreme. It arose from the French resistance to the Algerian war and took form through a triangle between Frantz Fanon, Jean-Paul Sartre and the *informel* painter Robert Lapoujade. As in Mailer’s

account, the idiom for all three was also psychopathology born of barbaric violence: “This repressed rage, never managing to explode, goes round in circles and wreaks havoc on the oppressed themselves,” is how Sartre described Fanon’s diagnosis in his 1961 preface to *The Wretched of the Earth*.^[26] And just like Mailer, black suffering represented a kind of white opportunity: “It’s your turn now,” Sartre said to his fellow Europeans about the confusion, rage, frustration and self-violation that Fanon describes at length, “Take advantage of it to discover your true self as an object.”^[27]

Universal objecthood is the ultimate condition of horizontality. If we are all objects without any one of us asserting our will, desire, anger, happiness etc. towards another, then we remain cool and free ourselves from “the next cat who comes along to put you down.” But we do so by subjecting ourselves to the abstract will of a larger, transcendental subject or organizing principle—for example, to that of the “rainbow coalition” or “people united.” That is, we make ourselves into philosophical psychopaths by abstracting power, by dispersing it into the ether of unending differentiation rather than figuring out better and better systems by which it might be organized, distributed and made dynamic by democratic means. Horizontality understood as a process—i.e. as *horizontalization*—is always democratizing, but when it is understood as a political form or ideal itself—say in the same way we might use a term like “socialism” or “communism” or “democracy,” i.e., when it becomes *horizontalism*—it invalidates the verticality that is the form of political being itself and thus is strictly an expression of powerlessness and violence.

Something like the violence of such armchair psychopathy is what Sartre found in Robert Lapoujade's exhibition titled "*Peintures sur le thème des émeutes, triptyque sur la torture, Hiroshima*" at Galerie Pierre Domec in 1961. [Figure 7] At least since 1940, Sartre had argued that we are wrong to assume that the seemingly abstract formal properties of paintings were merely sensuous and non-illustrative—instead those properties existed in a relation to each other that was itself representative of the rational, extra-empirical character of thought.^[28] By 1961, that schematic character at a remove from empirical testing and verification was no longer to bear the promise of thought and thus subjecthood and instead was reduced to mere objecthood. Lapoujade's paintings, Sartre wrote, express his "indeterminate and multiple adventure as an interchangeable man;" they give us "rigid ... unification of discrete particles," an expression of "teeming, stampeding masses as they cry out, fall silent, remain mysteriously suspended, and stubbornly dissolve into asphalt coloration." His choice of wording—"asphalt coloration"—was not innocent, of course. The artist may be admitted to the ranks of the crowd, the paintings are said to tell us, "only by stripping him bare" where he would "bear the weight of twenty or a hundred thousand other 'selves' only to return to his canvas, under the best possible circumstances, with violent but inchoate memories."^[29] Aesthetic experience, bare life and black life join in the ecstasy of violence and death.

As readers of Michael Fried's influential 1967 essay "Art and Objecthood" and his many critics will know, contemporary art begins

to court objecthood in the 1950s and 60s—just as, we might add, white popular culture of the period did in response to that of blacks brought to the fore by jazz, the civil rights movement and postcolonial struggles in Algeria and elsewhere.^[30] Artists had little power to intervene in any significant way politically but white artists could use their professional sensitivity to draw on black suffering as an emblem for their own inchoate fear of violence and humiliation brought on by the horrors of Stalinism, the holocaust, the bomb, and McCarthyism and identify with the material fact of violence and humiliation that had been faced by blacks for centuries. In William Pope.L's words, "black people did not invent pain but we made it popular ... we honed our lack into a creature that could be further enslaved by others. ... the blues don't belong to black people no more."^[31] In effect, this created a new cause for white art—"trauma," as it would come to be called—in the wake of the failure of its old struggle with "progress."

While the psychopathy at issue was rooted in the material existence of blacks and became immaterial or "philosophical" as it was adopted by whites, it is one of the ironies and perhaps tragedies of our recent history that its immaterial form would subsequently carry forward significantly in the name of blackness and the rainbow politics of multiculturalism. Art would play a leadership role in this development with exhibitions like the 1989 *Magiciens de la Terre* and the 1993 Whitney Biennial staking out a merger with protest from the art side while the protest movements that arose from the color revolutions moved more and more towards art from their side. In the end, both would find a meeting ground with commerce in the middle, leading the

way to the booming globalized and culturalized contemporary art economy and the failed global protest politics described by Zeynep Tufekci and Micah White.

IV. Art = social death

The critic that can best help us gain insight into the seemingly intractable problem we find ourselves in is Frank Wilderson. As an immigrant to South Africa at the end of the Apartheid era, former elected official in the African National Congress and member of its armed faction uMkhonto we Sizwe (Spear of the Nation) who would eventually be declared a threat to national security by Nelson Mandela, he comes to the question of political art and political engagement in a manner that is fully invested. As a black child growing up in largely white Minneapolis who later studied at Dartmouth and worked in New York as a stockbroker throughout the booming 1980s, he also comes to the question of race with a lot of ethnographic experience under his belt.

Wilderson's main insight, the one for which he claims the label "Afropessimist," is that the black dowry offered and taken in exchange for cultural recognition by whites has persuaded not through an invitation to new freedoms or an enlarged sense of equality but instead by an invitation to join "the dance of death." Black culture issues this invitation, he says, because "it wants the death of everyone else in the same way that we experience our death"—that is, as the death of persistent and intractable objecthood or social death. Social

death is the incapacity “to secure relational status through transindividual objects” such as land, labor power or cultural artifacts that secure mutual recognition such as a flag.^[32] Access to such transindividual objects is what constitutes human beings as subjects; lack of access produces constitutive objecthood and leaves the lack itself—i.e., social death—as the only available sanctuary. Toward very different ends than Wilderson’s, art historian Darby English describes the process by which death begins to dance: a “moral-racial minimum” makes a “necessity of renunciation of the self,” he says, but the “reward for this renunciation never arrives” and, thus, “renunciation turns into something that is a good in itself.”^[33] Black culture issues its invitation to whites to join the dance of death because it seeks justice in the only form available in an intractably racist world: mutual recognition at the lowest common denominator of universal objecthood, or the state where all people, regardless of race, operate equally as material and interchangeable objects.^[34] [Figure 8]



This invitation gained appeal over the course of the 1960s and 70s, in Wilderson’s analysis, “as White radicalism’s discourse and political common sense found authorization in the ethical dilemmas of embodied incapacity (the ontological status of Blacks as accumulated and fungible objects).” We can see it being adopted in the cool or disaffected antiaestheticism of the period art that Fried complained about—junk art, Fluxus, pop art, minimalism, conceptual art and the like, each outdoing the next in the effort to withdraw its affective investment from art’s old claim to universality—and its corresponding efforts to buffer itself against the critic or “the next cat who comes along to put you down.” “Conceptual art annexes the function of the critic,” Joseph Kosuth said in 1970; it “makes the middle-man unnecessary.”^[35]

By 1980, however, even as the appeal of objecthood became increasingly institutionalized by the succession of styles culminating in the dispersion of the old category of art into visual culture and identity politics, on the one hand, and the free play of signs, on the other, the underlying appeal for racial justice had already been quashed by what Wilderson calls “two stone-crushers:” on the one hand, the COINTELPRO war against the Black Panthers and other forms of force used by the racialized state; and, on the other, “liberal Humanist discourses such as ‘access to institutionality,’ ‘meritocracy,’ ‘multiculturalism,’ and ‘diversity’—discourses that proliferate exponentially across the political, academic, and [cultural]

landscapes.”^[36]

This bears on art not only for the direct role it has played for Wilderson’s second “stone-crusher” but also for the way it has taken black psychopathy and made it white by making its objecthood into the institutional condition of contemporary or postmodern or global art tout court. This was a process long ago described by Hannah Arendt:

If a Negro in a white community is considered a Negro and nothing else, he loses along with his right to equality that freedom of action which is specifically human; all his deeds are now explained as “necessary” consequences of some “Negro” qualities; he has become some specimen of an animal species, called man. Much the same thing happens to those who have lost all distinctive political qualities and have become human beings and nothing else.^[37]

The shift from black political objecthood as death to white market objecthood as identity at once enacts and denies its own violence. This is the death-cum-identity, politics-cum-market subject that art brings to activism and to the movement politics that have come to define our failure. We will not be successful until we accept that the slogan of bare life, like the old humanist slogan of bare humanity, is political suicide.

V. Art is a strong force haunted by its own violence. Its only power is to work with its own form, a form that bears the symptoms of the violence it has done to itself and others. If it hopes to achieve its aims

it has no choice but to exercise that power and knowingly risk the accompanying violence.

While we would be foolish to assume that art has any power beyond itself, that its efforts at moral fist-shaking, socially constructive doing-good, or cultural undermining of the status quo produce any significant political gains, we would be equally foolish to assume that its claim to find power in the solidarity of powerlessness, fugitivity and fungibility is not itself violent. Art's site of aesthetic struggle in the name of politics, in other words, is itself.

In the end, the struggle is about art defining itself as the expression of a strong force rather than a weak one. We constitute ourselves as social subjects through shared objects and in myriad ways those objects are ourselves. The horizontal powerlessness of objecthood is indeed a great equalizer when it is universal—at bottom, this is an economic fantasy of equality that is as old as capitalism itself—but as an artistic and political ideal it is a foundational mistake because it is itself ideological, it is itself the means of structural terror. In this judgment I deviate from Wilderson as much as I do from Mailer and Sartre, Jackson and Marcos, Occupy and the Arab Spring, and the many others who have come to define our postmodernism in both politics and art. If we are to be the beneficiaries of politics rather than its rubes we have no choice but to account for and, more importantly, exercise power and thereby engage openly and knowingly with the violence that is already there in everything we do. If we want to win the battle often presumed in the name of political art, then aesthetic

struggle cannot be reduced to the ideological struggle between powerlessness and power but instead must be raised to the level of that between the just exercise of power and the unjust.

We could call our charge “political political art” and phrase the question like this: “What matters—structures or character, institutions or virtue?”^[38] We might choose other, less individualizing terms than character and virtue but the point stands: shit flows downstream, cultural ideals like character and virtue or community and cultural self-determination or horizontality and networkism or fugitivity and fungibility dissolve democratic political institutions that are themselves the only real form of the “power of the powerless.” Indeed, in the end, the question is even simpler: What matters, we might ask ourselves, state or market? Whether we choose to admit it or not, our turn from one lover to another, from the People to the network hookup, from the realm of solidarity and justice to that of identities and things, long ago turned our political subjectivity into the objecthood of the market. As Walter Benn Michaels has put it, “The problem is that the whole idea of cultural identity is incoherent, and that the dramas of appropriation it makes possible provide an increasingly economically stratified society with a model of social justice that addresses everything except that economic stratification.”^[39] The consequences of this turn are now getting real—or they are now getting real for whites in ways that they have always been for blacks.

There are many examples we could point to of artists who have become politicians in the ultimate expression of “political political art” —

Marcelo Expósito in Spain, for example, or Edi Rama in Albania—but I’ll end just by briefly discussing two American artists who stop just short of the transition from art to politics. What they share (aside from being based in Chicago) is form of expression that does not pit the horizontality of life against the verticality of system but instead holds out for the promise of the reverse. Central to that promise is direct engagement with politics and politicians proper and thus with the administrative and juridical apparatus of the state.

The first example I have in mind is international art star and impresario Theaster Gates. *[Figure 10]* While his main artistic medium is real estate and urban redevelopment, his approach to working that medium—his artistic *style*, we might call it—is that of public-private partnership. “Theaster needs the Mayor. But the Mayor needs Theaster,” is how his studio manager put it about his work in Chicago with Mayor Rahm Emanuel, but something similar is the case for his work in other cities across the Rust Belt and elsewhere.^[40] As Gates himself recently described his project, the pivotal aesthetic question is “Where does real power come from? What does one do with power? And who’s really the poor race, and who really won?”^[41]



Figure 9. Artist Laurie Jo Reynolds, Governor Pat Quinn, and prison reform activist Reginald Berry Lloyd DeGrane after Governor Quinn's decision to close Tamms Correctional Center in 2012. Photo courtesy of Laurie Jo Reynolds.



Figure 10. Theaster Gates and Mayor Rahm Emmanuel. <http://mollyeach.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/mayor-storyagain.jpg>

The second example I have in mind is artist Laurie Jo Reynolds, who works in a medium that she herself calls “legislative art” and a palette of lobbying, volunteering, organizing and haranguing.^[42] [Figure 9] This has included a project that—in collaboration with prisoners, activists, state legislators and a governor—succeeded in shutting down an inhumane maximum security prison.

Art, it is sometimes said, has long addressed the world from the dreamland of structurelessness. As one influential definition of the historical avant-garde had it, for example, “the attack on the institution of art is the condition for the possible realization of a utopia in which art and life are united.”^[43] This misreading of the historical ambitions

of art has permeated our understanding for more than half a century. The main reason for its persistence is that its assumed theory of “life” has rarely been questioned.

The work of Gates and Reynolds throws our assumptions about where art stands and what it opposes into relief. Art on the side of life, on the side of humanity or color, on the side of horizontality, fungibility and fugitivity, on the side of operations and coalitions and occupations and networks, once seemed to promise freedom but has long now been the problem rather than the cure.^[44] The “life” that it offers is that of algorithmic governance and brute despotism, the life of a weak, psychopathological, political subject, a subject without the institutional resources to effectively stand up for justice. By contrast, what their foundationally different approach to art offers us, if we choose to hear it, is that model of autonomy that the Communist Manifesto predicted we would reach for once we have come to understand how we—by wittingly or not giving the power we derive from politics proper over to the market—are being hollowed out from the inside. It is a model that is almost too simple for words: that we would “win the battle of democracy” by using our “political supremacy to wrest, by degree,” power from the insidious zombie politics of institutional critique that will otherwise suck us willingly or otherwise into an evermore violent future.^[45]

^[1] Jean-Paul Sartre addressing Europeans, preface, *The Wretched of*

the Earth (New York: Grove Press, 1961), xlviii.

[2] Subcommandante Marcos from comunicado del 28 de mayo de 1994 of the Zapatistas: “El Viejo Antonio: ‘En la montaña nace la fuerza, pero no se ve hasta que llega abajo,’”

http://palabra.ezln.org.mx/comunicados/1994/1994_05_28.htm.

Quoted in Zeynep Tufekci, *Twitter and Teargas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 109.

[3] Something that Marcos himself seemingly has come to realize when he described his own mask-wearing persona as “a suit made for the media.”

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/26/world/americas/mexico-zapatista-subcommander-marcos.html>

[4] For the definitive account of how this plays out in recent art, see Lane Relyea’s tremendous *Your Everyday Art World* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013). Bruno Latour is the main proselytizer for actor-network theory and many accounts are available throughout his prolific writing. See his identification of his theory with Margaret Thatcher’s foundational statement “There is no such thing as society” and its implied continuation “there are only networks” in various places throughout his oeuvre, for example here: Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (London: Oxford University Press, 2005), 5.

[5] Tufecki, *Twitter and Teargas*, xiii.

[6] Rev. Jesse L. Jackson, “Resurrection City: The dream... The accomplishments,” *Ebony*, October 1968, 65. Italics in original.

[7] Tufecki, *Twitter and Teargas*, xvi. “I call ‘tactical freeze,’” she writes, “the inability of these movements to adjust tactics, negotiate demands, and push for tangible policy changes, something that grows out of the leaderless nature of these movements (‘horizontalism’) and the way digital technologies strengthen their ability to form without much early planning, dealing with issues only as they come up, and by people who show up (‘adhocracy’).”

Her argument is close to the widely discussed critique of “folk politics” in Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams, *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World Without Work* (London: Verso, 2015)—i.e., that it has “become out of joint with the actual mechanisms of power.” Folk politics, they continue,

typically remains reactive (responding to actions initiated by corporations and governments, rather than initiating actions); ignores long-term strategic goals in favour of tactics (mobilising around single-issue politics or emphasising process); prefers practices that are often inherently fleeting (such as occupations and temporary autonomous zones); chooses the familiarities of the past over the unknowns of the future (for instance, the repeated dreams of a return to ‘good’ Keynesian capitalism); and expresses itself as a predilection for the

voluntarist and spontaneous over the institutional (as in the romanticisation of rioting and insurrection).

[8] Tufekci, *Twitter and Teargas*, 272, 162

[9] Andrea Fraser, “L’1%, c’est moi,” *Texte zur Kunst* 83 (September 2011), 94-128.

[10] Donald Judd, exhibition statement, *Primary Structures: Younger American and British Sculptors* (Jewish Museum: New York, 1966)

[11] G.W.F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Arts*, volume I, trans. T.M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 606.

[12] Put in properly aesthetic terms, the question of struggle is really the same as that of judgment. That is, in Kant’s terminology, it is a matter of “heautonomy” or “free lawfulness” or the reconciliation of “the possibility of things in accordance with natural laws” and “that in accordance with laws of freedom.” Definitions that turn only on questions of craft, intention, institution and the like close down that dynamism by falling to one side or the other. [Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, ed. Paul Guyer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 5]

[13] For one account of the place of the pink pussy hats in the struggle at issue, see my short comment: <http://www.plot.online/plot/points/lean-in-the-statue/>

[14] For a brief overview of the use of the term “color revolution” and list of examples, see the Wikipedia entry:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Colour_revolution. Here is one report describing the mature form of this model of political change as it occurred in Ukraine in 2004:

With their websites and stickers, their pranks and slogans aimed at banishing widespread fear of a corrupt regime, the democracy guerrillas of the Ukrainian Pora youth movement have already notched up a famous victory. ... But while the gains of the orange-bedecked “chestnut revolution” are Ukraine’s, the campaign is an American creation, a sophisticated and brilliantly conceived exercise in western branding and mass marketing that, in four countries in four years, has been used to try to salvage rigged elections and topple unsavoury regimes. Funded and organised by the US government, deploying US consultancies, pollsters, diplomats, the two big American parties and US non-government organisations, the campaign was first used in Europe in Belgrade in 2000 to beat Slobodan Milosevic at the ballot box. ...

The operation – engineering democracy through the ballot box and civil disobedience – is now so slick that the methods have matured into a template for winning other people’s elections. ... The Democratic party’s National Democratic Institute, the Republican party’s International Republican Institute, the US state department and USAid are the main agencies involved in these grassroots campaigns as well as the Freedom House NGO and billionaire George Soros’s open

society institute. US pollsters and professional consultants are hired to organise focus groups and use psephological data to plot strategy. ... Officially, the US government spent \$41m (£21.7m) organising and funding the year-long operation to get rid of Milosevic from October 1999. In Ukraine, the figure is said to be around \$14m.

Ian Traynor, “US campaign behind the turmoil in Kiev,” *The Guardian* 11/25/2004.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2004/nov/26/ukraine.usa>.

[15] For one example of this contest, see Sarah E. Bond’s essay “Why We Need to Start Seeing the Classical World in Color” (<https://hyperallergic.com/383776/why-we-need-to-start-seeing-the-classical-world-in-color/>) and its response (<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2017/06/19/classicist-finds-herself-target-online-threats-after-article-ancient-statues>).

[16] Václav Havel, *The Power of the Powerless: Citizens Against the State in Central Eastern Europe* (New York: Routledge, 1985), 30.

[17] Ava DuVernay, *13th*, Netflix, 2016.

[18] Breitbart quoted in Alex Melamid, “Blame Donald Trump’s Rise on the Avant-Garde Movement,” *Time Magazine* (May 12, 2017), <http://time.com/4777118/avant-garde-koons-trump/>.

[19] Eric Westervelt, “Occupy Activist Micah White: Time To Move

Beyond Memes And Street Spectacles,” NPR, March 28, 2017, <http://www.npr.org/2017/03/28/520911740/occupy-activist-micah-white-time-to-move-beyond-memes-and-street-spectacles>

[20] Micah White, “Without a path from protest to power, the Women’s March will end up like Occupy,” *The Guardian*, January 19, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jan/19/womens-march-washington-occupy-protest>

[21] William Serrin, “Jesse Jackson: ‘I Am...’ Audience: ‘I Am...’ Jesse: ‘Somebody’ Audience: ‘Somebody,’” *The New York Times*, July 9, 1972, <http://www.nytimes.com/1972/07/09/archives/jesse-jackson-i-am-audience-i-am-jesse-somebody-audience-somebody.html>. For a recording of Jackson performing a slightly different version with a stadium audience at the 1972 Wattstax benefit concert organized by Stax Records to commemorate the seventh anniversary of the 1965 Watts riots, see the documentary Wattstax: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A_P6ZWUJIa0 starting at minute 16:00 and repeated at the film’s close at 1:36:20.

[22] Kathy Lohr, “Poor People’s Campaign: A Dream Unfulfilled,” NPR, June 19, 2008, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=91626373>.

[23] What is often taken to be the 1970 AfriCOBRA manifesto put the governing political theorem this way:

It's NATION TIME and we are searching. Our guidelines are our people—the whole family of African people, the African family tree. And in this spirit of familyhood, we have carefully examined our roots and searched our branches for those visual qualities that are more expressive of our people/art. ... *Color* color Color color that shines, color that is free of rules and regulations. ... We are a family of image-makers and each member of the family is free to relate to and to express our laws in her/his individual way. Dig the diversity in unity. We can be ourselves and be together, too.

Jeff R. Donaldson, “Ten in Search of a Nation” (1970) reprinted in *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art* 30 (Spring 2012), 80, 81, 83.

[24] Norman Mailer, “The White Negro,” *Dissent* (Fall 1957), https://www.dissentmagazine.org/online_articles/the-white-negro-fall-1957

[25] “Having been dehumanized at every level, African-Americans practiced cool through rituals of self-affirmation that Albert Murray once called ‘survival technology’. ... [T]he mythos of cool is simple: You don’t own me. You’ll never own me.” [Joel Dinerstein, *The Origins of Cool in Postwar America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), epub.] Dinerstein notes Erving Goffman’s 1950s sourcing of “playing it cool” with prisoners and other inmates of “total institutions” in his *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and other Inmates* (Chicago: Aldine, 1961), 64-66.

[26] Sartre, Preface, *Wretched of the Earth*, lii.

[27] Sartre, Preface, *Wretched of the Earth*, xlviii.

[28] Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Imaginary: A Phenomenological Psychology of the Imagination*, trans. Jonathan Webber, (London: Routledge, 2004), 98, 189-190, 15: “the painting should be conceived as a material thing visited from time to time (every time that the spectator takes the imaging attitude) by an irreality that is precisely the painted object. What deceives us here is the real and sensual pleasure given by certain real colours on the canvas. ... Rather, the image consciousness is a synthetic form that appears as a certain moment of a temporal synthesis and organizes itself with the other forms of consciousness.”

[29] Jean-Paul Sartre, “The Unprivileged Painter: Robert Lapoujade,” *Essays in Aesthetics* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1963), 73.

[30] As Fried put it, “What is at stake in this conflict is whether the paintings or objects in question are experienced as paintings or as objects”—that is, whether they were experienced as the intentional expressions of subjects. Michael Fried, “Art and Objecthood” in Fried, *Art and objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 151.

[31] William Pope.L, statement in conjunction with his 2012 work *Burying the Blues*, as recorded here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ynalyiULmfo>

[32] Frank B. Wilderson, III, “The Black Liberation Army and the Paradox of Political Engagement,” ILL WILL EDITIONS (2013), ill-will-editions.tumblr.com, 9.

[33] Darby English, *1971: A Year in the Life of Color* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 72.

[34] Frank B. Wilderson, III, Samira Spatzek, and Paula von Gleich, “‘The Inside-Outside of Civil Society’: An Interview with Frank B. Wilderson, III,” *Black Studies Papers* 2.1 (2016), 20.

See also Anne Monahan’s discussion of Faith Ringgold’s 1967 *Die* as visualizing the period experience of the 1967 riots “in terms that allowed [it] to speak differently to various constituencies.” Monahan explains the discrepancy between the reports of “black males in disadvantaged communities” committing property crimes with “white males involved as reporters or agents of the state—police, national guard, etc.,” and the generalized violence of Ringgold’s painting by exploring Ringgold’s professional circumstances caught between the interests of her white gallerists, established black male artists such as Romare Bearden and Hale Woodruff, and the emergent black nationalism associated with Amiri Baraka and others. Wilderson’s account of the dance of death allows us a different (but complementary) account of the “multiple address” that Monahan describes. (Anne Monahan, “Faith Ringgold’s *Die*: The Riot and Its Reception,” *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art* 36 (May 2015), 30, 33.

[35] Joseph Kosuth, “Introductory Note to Art-Language by the American Editor,” *Art-Language* 1, no. 2 (February 1970), reprinted in *Art After Philosophy and After: Collected Writings, 1966-1990* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 1993), 39. For sophisticated and differently opposing accounts of this development vis the work of Ad Reinhardt and his influence on Kosuth’s generation, see Fred Moten, “The Case of Blackness,” *Criticism*, Spring 2008, Vol. 50, No. 2, pp. 177–218; and Hilton Kramer, “Ad Reinhardt’s Quest,” *The New York Times* (September 10, 1967).

[36] Frank B. Wilderson, III, *Red, White and Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 30-31.

[37] Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, 1968), 301-302.

[38] Jeremy Waldron, *Political Political Theory: Essays on Institutions* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 3.

[39] Walter Benn Michaels, “The Myth of ‘Cultural Appropriation,’” *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (July 2, 2017).

[40] John Colapinto, “The Real-Estate Artist,” *The New Yorker*, January 20, 2014, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/01/20/the-real-estate-artist>

[41] Su Wu, “Theaster Gates: ‘I want to believe that there is power in my poverty,’” *The Guardian*, January 12, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2017/jan/12/theaster-gates-interview-poor-race-regen-projects-review>

[42] “Laurie Jo Reynolds,” Creative Time Summit 2013, <http://creativetime.org/summit/author/laurie-jo-reynolds/>

[43] Peter Bürger summarizing the argument he made in his 1973 *Theory of the Avant-Garde* in “Avant-Garde and Neo-Avant-Garde: An Attempt to Answer Certain Critics of *Theory of the Avant-Garde*,” *New Literary History* 41 (2010), 696.

[44] See my essay “The Crisis of Crisis” in Johan Hartle and Ursula Frohne, eds. *The Aesthetics of Crisis* (forthcoming from Spector Books, Leipzig)

[45] Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (London: Pluto Press, 2008), 40, 63.

See more articles tagged:

Fertile Ground

Power

More Articles Like This One

May 24, 2018

Histories of Activism in Chinatown



December 20, 2017

Where Are We and What Time Is It? On Beginning to Curate Suzanne Lacy



February 1, 2017

Artwashing, or, Between Social Practice and Social Reproduction

Become A Fellow

Our fellowship program partners with artists in leadership and community roles.

Apply Now

Donate

Support community-focused socially engaged art.

Donate Today

Stay Updated

Name

Email

Sign up

What's Happening

Fieldworks

[View All](#)

Discuss Forums

[Growing Dialogue](#)

[Fertile Ground](#)

[Reports from the Field](#)

[Lay of the Land](#)

Fellowship Program

[How to Apply](#)

[Meet Our Fellows](#)

Public Programs

[Aesthetics of Doing](#)

[Parallel Fields](#)

[Reports from the Field](#)

[Authors](#)

[Themes](#)

Get to Know Us

[Mission](#)

[Programs](#)

[Board & Staff](#)

Be a Part of it

[Support](#)

[Apply](#)

[Attend](#)

81 Prospect Street, Brooklyn, NY 11201 (646) 945-0860 info@abladeofgrass.org



© A Blade of Grass

Creative Brand and Web Development: Tsang Seymour