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DADA ANTI-DOXA

QUEER AND ANTI-COLONIAL ACTIVISM HAVE AN at least century-long concurrence. In the last several years, Queers against Israeli Apartheid has emerged as a vibrant international political movement addressing the colonial subjugation of the Palestinian people, working in tandem with the Palestinian BDS Movement of boycotts, divestment, and sanctions. Today artists around the world make connections between cultural identity, colonial oppression, and the oppression of LGBT people, from Kara Walker to Hanif Kureishi to Tobaren Waxman. This essay focuses on two artists important to the history of queer anti-colonial activism, Hannah Höch and David Wojnarowicz. Höch's innovative and influential photomontages emerged with the advent of Berlin Dada directly after World War I. Wojnarowicz's multimedia montages revamped Dada methods and strategies for the late-twentieth century and beyond. Working in tandem with other Berlin Dadaists, Höch invented photomontage as a means to critique mass-mediated photography. Dada photomontage counters the supposed naturalness of the photographic image, the presumption that it provides direct access to the truth, with disturbing, composite images impossible to verify in visually perceived reality. In doing so, Dada provides a new language for political and anti-colonial critique, one that remains in practice to this day.

Mass media images of gender and sexuality work to instill commodity desire and to enforce social norms. Höch's photomontages make them speak otherwise. In her *Aus einem ethnographischen Museum* series, as well as in many later works, she renders ethnographic representations of colonial otherness irretrievably strange. In the late twentieth-century United States, Wojnarowicz's montages pursue a parallel agenda, albeit responsive to a different time and place. One of Wojnarowicz's concerns is the imperial overreach of the American empire, which comes across most simply in the self-explanatory title of one of his three-dimensional works, the 1990 *Globe of the United States*. Elsewhere, Wojnarowicz connects geography with dissident sexuality. As with Höch, the anti-

colonial aspects of his work are inseparable from an ongoing critique of an appropriative Western gaze that reduces bodies, foreign and domestic, to commodities. With Höch and Wojnarowicz, a “queer” avant-garde contests the exotic othering, prefabricated identity categories, and erotic norms on which the captivation of desire in commercial advertising and popular media—that motor of commodity culture—depends.

Postcolonial theories of hybridity do not offer adequate means to theorize the sites at which Western avant-garde art resists colonialism, for it is not a matter of how the colonized refunction the colonizer’s discourse; and it involves more than the question of how the colonizer’s discourse is contaminated by colonization, or the deconstructive gesture of upsetting bipolar dichotomies. Multicultural celebration is also insufficient. Pluralistic schemes that package ethnic and cultural differences as positives render them susceptible to commercial exploitation, something readily apparent in just about any advertisement for ‘exotic’ travel. As Alain Badiou argues in *Ethics*, the critical stance that “kicks up a big fuss about ‘cultural’ differences” is “in truth a tourist’s fascination for the diversity of morals, customs and beliefs.”¹ Such pluralism involves what Kevin Floyd terms “epistemological fetishizations of difference,” which serve capitalist atomization and fragmentation.² Against moral relativism’s intellectual paralysis, whether deconstructive or pluralist, Badiou advocates fidelity to “the event, which compels us to decide a *new* way of being.”³ In *Being and Event*, he posits that “a truth is always that which makes a hole in a knowledge,” allowing the event.⁴ The artworks of Höch and Wojnarowicz everywhere evidence the tearing open of received understandings, with what I would like to call the uncapturing of the dominant culture’s image-world.

At any given moment of modernity, including the present one, a doxa of the ever-same reiterates the failure of revolution and the triumph of the capitalist, (post)colonial marketplace. It tells us that radical change is not possible, that the current state of affairs is permanent. Yet because global capital can only triumph through its own perpetual revolution, in reifications not limited to the so-called ‘productive forces’ and their destruction of traditional economies, but also conducted through representation, capital must constantly reinvent its circular logic, otherwise known as advertising.⁵

There are important ways in which capitalist revolution liberates society, but as Marx and Engels argue in *The Communist Manifesto*, such emancipation has definite limits.⁶ Rosemary Hennessy explains in *Profit and Pleasure* that “innovation under capitalism may free people from fettered lives as peasants,” as well as, through wage-labor, from a sexuality

constrained to produce and reproduce family, “but because the forces of production [. . .] are concentrated in the hands of the few, capitalism can never truly revolutionize life by distributing social resources widely and equitably.”⁷ Capitalism pits the various social inequalities against each other—including inequalities of gender, sexuality, nation, and race—in order to keep its exploitative operations in play. Adversarial art cannot alone redistribute resources, but it can demystify the ideology normalizing and naturalizing unequal distribution. Adversarial art, of which Dada is the prototype, devises techniques that slice through the doxa in the historical chain of its articulation, including the mystified loops of commodity exchange and the global chainwork of colonial domination. In doing so, it opens the space in which it becomes possible to reimagine the entirety of human relations.

Androcentric theories of the avant-garde have not taken the photomontages of Hannah Höch as exemplary instances of Dada, but rather marginalized her as more personal and less political than her male contemporaries. Readings of David Wojnarowicz, often focusing on male homoerotic precursors and his crucial interventions in the AIDS crisis, have not placed his montages in the context of Höch’s. While I have found no evidence of a direct line of influence, both artists intervene in the image-making process at the heart of commodity capitalism. Reading Höch alongside Wojnarowicz, this essay begins to make a case for the continuing relevance of adversarial art, from Arthur Rimbaud and Dada to the contemporary.

DANCE OF THE OBELISK

Intent on interpreting David Wojnarowicz’s 1984 *A Painting to Replace the British Monument in Buenos Aires* [Fig. 1] as an allegory concerning the AIDS crisis, which had not yet become a defining part of the artist’s work, Tom Roach underplays the anti-imperialist reading for which the painting most obviously calls, even as he recognizes that the painting presents “a critique of capitalism and colonialism.”⁸ While Roach’s 2012 *Friendship as a Way of Life: Foucault, AIDS, and the Politics of Shared Estrangement* accurately outlines the political rage Wojnarowicz would soon express about America’s handling of the AIDS epidemic, his anachronism is symptomatic of the narrow focus on Wojnarowicz as gay artist and AIDS activist, which has lead critics and art historians to undervalue his critique of imperialism.⁹ Indeed, Roach is the rare critic even to mention it.

“The painting,” he writes, “depicts a man-monster burning from within, volcanic in its composition, barely held together, if at all, by a lava-like skin. With fiery, biblically apocalyptic horses racing beneath, the ogre glares with the eyes of empire (British and American flags).”¹⁰ Given that the montage was composed shortly after the 1982 Falklands War, it would seem to make more sense to elaborate how it comments on that political situation, rather than to take what Roach calls the risk “of reading AIDS ‘into’ this painting,” which is, “the risk of making all art by PWAs reveal something about AIDS.” This is an especially strong risk when the artist in question had not yet received his diagnosis. “I understand the work to be forging connections,” Roach says, “between AIDS activists and the mothers of those who disappeared during the Dirty War.”¹¹ Though it seems not unlikely that Wojnarowicz would have sympathized with the Madres de Plaza de Mayo, *A Painting to Replace the British Monument in Buenos Aires* presents no visual or textual allusion to them.

The Torre de los Ingleses [Tower of the English], an early twentieth-century gift from Buenos Aires’ British community, was renamed the Torre Monumental [Monument Tower] shortly after the Falklands War.¹² It is not the monument pictured in the painting. Wojnarowicz instead places an obelisk that looks somewhat like the Obelisco de Buenos Aires [Obelisk of Buenos Aires] at the focal point of the composition, to which both its burning racehorses and the monster’s recumbent hand lead. The Obelisco de Buenos Aires, erected in 1936, commemorates the fourth centenary of the founding of the city in 1536, as well as Argentina’s independence from Spain.¹³ Although it became, beginning in 1977, a meeting point for the mothers of the disappeared, it was not “placed over” some other monument by the mothers, as Roach asserts. He is, however, astute to observe that the monster looming over it “represents the violence of imperial power.”¹⁴

Arguably, it is not the obelisk, but the monster itself, that replaces the Torre de los Ingleses in the painting. Its “lava-like skin” suggests that the monster is made of the stuff of monuments in molten form. It threatens to bury Argentina’s independence, as symbolized by the obelisk. The monster and the flames on the horse’s backs are painted over what was originally an advertising poster (though what was advertised has not been determined, with too much of the text obscured): Wojnarowicz sabotages the advertisement in order to make a statement about imperial destruction. Given the obelisk’s phallic form, it is easy to read the violence as symbolic castration. That one of the monster’s eyes is an American flag, and the other British, would seem to reference the contemporaneous al-

liance between the governments of the two countries, which revamped the violent domination of Latin America that the U.S. has practiced since the Monroe Doctrine. The painting is not a statement about AIDS, but an advertisement against the monstrosity of imperial aggression.

Interestingly, on World AIDS Day in 2005, the Obelisco de Buenos Aires was covered with a giant pink condom, thus finally connecting it, in a playful manner, to AIDS activism, long after Wojnarowicz's untimely death.¹⁵

STRANGE BEAUTY

Hannah Höch's dynamic 1930 *Indische Tänzerin: Aus einem ethnographischen Museum* [Fig. 2] deploys popular culture, ethnography, and serving ware for cultural critique. In the pathbreaking 1993 *Cut with the Kitchen Knife: The Weimar Photomontages of Hannah Höch*, Maud Lavin says the photomontage "can be read as a human being adorned and partially calcified by a heavy-handed gender role."¹⁶ While Lavin praises Höch's feminism, she dismisses the possibility of anti-colonial critique:

Höch was not particularly critical of contemporary ethnographic attitudes; instead, she used images of tribal objects and the exhibition format in ethnographic museums almost exclusively to comment on contemporary European gender definitions. Höch never substantially or explicitly challenged contemporary racist or colonialist ideas, although her irony often functions as implicit criticism.¹⁷

I would like to argue that *Indische Tänzerin* leaves neither understandings of gender, nor "contemporary ethnographic attitudes," unchallenged. In *The Photomontages of Hannah Höch*, Maria Makela points out that this photomontage combines a still of Renée Falconetti from the film, *The Passion of Joan of Arc*; a dance mask from Cameroon; and knife and spoon cut-outs.¹⁸ The title of the photomontage imposes a gestalt, an overall meaning not readily derivable from its disparate parts. Half film star and half stone, the dancer's face is both unsettling and beautiful. Her serving ware tiara could be interpreted as undercutting the expressive seriousness of the rest of the image, suggesting as it does religious ecstasy. Although we could understand the tiara as a comment "on contemporary European gender definitions"—an ironic allusion to the religious enshrinement of female domesticity—making such an interpretation the exclusive one ends up domesticating the photomontage. There is something "uncanny" about the tiara, in the Freudian sense of the term:

“that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar.”¹⁹ A *frisson* of foreignness excites orientalizing desire, the strange tiara crowning the dancer’s fetishistic appeal. The knives and spoons, nonetheless, are totally mundane. What serves to exoticize Höch’s fetish image at the same time compromises its alterity, revealing that the exotic derives from the familiar, how we project from what we already know the image of otherness that captivates us. Höch’s presentation of the oriental fetish serves as its own critique.

Höch’s 1929 *Fremde Schönheit*, or *Strange Beauty*, from *Aus einem ethnographischen Museum*, sets out, as Lavin asserts, “to question contemporary norms of feminine beauty.”²⁰ The montage features a photo of a reclining white nude, with her legs closed and her arms stretched behind her back, so as to emphasize the breasts. The pose reproduces the traditional figure of the female nude from nineteenth-century academic painting, except that what we would expect to see above the neck has been replaced with something quite startling, a oversized stone head sporting a pair of thick glasses, which seem to operate as magnifying lenses. The figure looks back at us, as Édouard Manet’s *Olympia* does, but the scandal *Fremde Schönheit* would elicit is quite different: if Manet’s nude upset the French salon by returning the viewer’s gaze and thus brazenly refusing to comply with the conventional only-to-be-looked-at posing of the female model, the gaze of Höch’s figure is inscrutable. Lavin understands the magnifying eyeglasses to emphasize “the viewers’ own act of looking.”²¹ The photomontage is thus uncanny, giving us a hint of our own strangeness, like the elderly “intruder” Freud finds in his train compartment, who turns out to be, he writes, “nothing but my own reflection in the looking-glass of the open door.”²²

Henrick Stahr asserts that “when we ask about the tradition of racism in Germany, we must, in the shadow of the Holocaust, also become aware of the still too little observed German colonialism” that continued to influence German perceptions after the colonies were lost, through the Weimar period and into the Nazi era.²³ The Versailles Treaty ending World War I forced Germany to surrender all of its imperial colonies, including substantial holdings in Africa and Asia. The German colonial period was brief in comparison to that of other European powers, beginning in 1884 and ending conclusively in 1920. Stahr documents how exotic lands and their strange inhabitants remained a popular subject in the Weimar Republic’s illustrated magazines. Ordinary Germans, unable to afford world travel, found in the photo spreads what he terms a “travel surrogate.”²⁴ Höch engages a society saturated in colonial nostalgia, schooled for decades under the Kaiser by colonial advertising, and awash in appealing images of primitive otherness.

According to Volker K. Langbehn, in turn-of-the-century German advertising, “[t]he consumer participated in the stylized celebration of imperial spectacle, in which indigenous peoples functioned as frames for the commodity.”²⁵ Visual media “transformed the imaginary landscape [of the colonized world] by seducing the consumer to be part” of emerging commodity culture.²⁶ David Ciarlo argues that German colonial advertising used racist ideology to push product: “advertisers needed human figures that could be demeaned [. . .] and they adopted ‘race’ in order to [. . .] accomplish this.”²⁷ Advertising in Imperial Germany attempted to frame the colonial other so as to remove any threat she might pose, at the same time celebrating her picturesque qualities. She—or he, or they—would be rendered safely exotic—inviting, enticing, ultimately a product for consumption. This was not only true in commercial advertising: In Weimar-era Germany, feature sections of illustrated magazines drew on the pseudo-objectivity of ethnographic science to titillate viewers with supposed knowledge about colonized peoples. As Brett M. Van Hoesen argues, magazines like *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung* showcased ethnographic picture stories “as *photographic truths*.”²⁸ These lavish photo spreads fetishized racial otherness, all the while legitimizing the viewer’s prurient gaze—look at the naked Africans!—under the alibi of scientific curiosity and cross-cultural understanding.

More than offering her body for titillation, the reclining colonial nude often serves to push a commodity. Where a black woman’s body plays a clearly supporting and subordinate role in Manet’s painting, in advertising, as in modernist painting, that black body often becomes itself the focus of erotic attention. This is certainly the case with a 1908 advertisement for the Swakopmund Dresden cigar house, the central figure of which is designated in cursive script as “Hereromädchen,” or Herero girl.²⁹ Like *Fremde Schönheit*, the advertisement uses a featureless background in order to lead the viewer’s focus to the female figure in its center. While the Hereromädchen may be exotic or even naughty, there is nothing to frighten. The curvaceous black body is posed as equivalent to the cigar, both offering the implicitly white male heterosexual viewer effortless, relaxed pleasure. The image belies the actual relationship of German imperialism to the Hereros: between 1904 and 1907, what is widely considered the first genocide of the twentieth century took place in a colony named German South-West Africa, in which perhaps as many as 100,000 Herero were killed after they rebelled against German rule.

Höch’s 1931 *Liebe*, or *Love*, [Fig. 3] questions this attraction to the colonial other. The photomontage manages to be both sexy and alienating, entrancing and repulsive. Its two composite beings, who seem ready to embrace, are both decidedly female, but this lesbian significance is

about all that is easy to determine. The figure on the bottom reclines like a traditional female nude, yet her bluish-white legs are far too long for the small torso; and her bald African head fits uneasily on the pale body. She is composed of three different photographic images. Höch does not allow composite body images to coalesce into coherent subjects, instead emphasizing the points of suture in the feminine shapes. The other figure, hovering above her, displays a female backside, which may be nude, or perhaps covered with white legging. Instead of a human torso and head, her upper body is an insect's, with dragonfly wings and a beetle's head. It is unclear whether her purpose is to embrace or to devour.

A HUGE FAT CLOCKWORK OF CIVILIZATIONS

Liebe renders uncanny what we think we know about women's bodies, nature, otherness, and desire. For a retrospective given well after the Nazi era at The Hague, Höch writes, "I would like to wipe out the fixed borders, that we humans, with a stubborn self-assurance about everything that comes in our realm, have drawn."³⁰ The paradox of the eventual-site," Badiou insists, "is that it can only be recognized on the basis of what it does not present in the situation in which it is presented,"³¹ what has not yet arrived, not yet come together, what we cannot yet see or imagine. In *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration*, David Wojnarowicz shares Höch's disdain for "fixed borders":

I hate arriving at a destination. Transition is always a relief. Destination means death to me. If I could figure out a way to remain forever in transition, in the disconnected and unfamiliar, I would remain in a state of perpetual freedom. It's the preferable situation of arriving at a movie fifteen minutes late and departing twenty minutes later and retrieving an echo of real life as opposed to the tar pit of sensation.³²

What is important here is "the disconnected and unfamiliar," not a story line we are asked to follow. "There is really no difference," he claims, "between memory and sight, fantasy and actual vision."³³ The arrangement of these terms into a hierarchy that would pass for reality is part of "a preinvented existence."³⁴ Stock narratives work to plot our destinies in advance and to close the holes in knowledge through which something newly imaginable might appear. One of Wojnarowicz's last montages, a gelatin-silver print with silk-screened text, announces, "I'm a blank spot in a hectic civilization."³⁵

The essay, “Being Queer in America: A Journal of Disintegration,” like most in *Close to the Knives*, is not composed in linear fashion (though one of the many fragmented stories that it tells does progress, the death of Wojnarowicz’s unnamed mentor, Peter Hujar). There are twelve numbered sections, all dominated by complex visual images, their juxtaposition demanding to be read as a montage. The essay does not conventionally transition between its sections: the reader must make the leaps. Section “eight” begins, “I saw her in Mexico City.” “She” is a statue of the Aztec goddess, Coatlicue, unearthed in 1790, centuries after the Spanish Conquest that attempted to eradicate native religion and customs.³⁶

I saw her. She’s about eight feet tall and she has the twin feet of an enormous eagle and both her arms are large serpent’s heads with tongues tasting the wind and her head, they told me, had been cut off by her brother somewhere in the skies years ago in some struggle for power and now she carries her dry skull in the center of her massive belly and where her head had been were now two large serpents symbolizing the flowing of blood and around her hips she wore a skirt made entirely of snakes, dozens of them. Around her shoulders she wore a necklace of rope that was strung with human hearts and human hands and they told me she was the goddess of the earth and they told me she was the goddess of life and death and I was amazed at how seductive she was.³⁷

In a gesture of defamiliarization, Wojnarowicz names neither the goddess nor her statue. The reader must puzzle through the incantory description, experience her beautiful strangeness before receiving a stabilizing framework. She is not presented as a museum piece, though actually housed in Mexico’s National Museum of Anthropology.³⁸ Elsewhere *Close to the Knives* objects to how we place Native American artifacts and people behind glass, whether it is museum glass, or car windowpane.³⁹

Coatlicue resonates with many other image clusters in “Being Queer in America.” Section “two” presents AIDS without naming it, “something invisible and abstract and scary; some connect-the-dots version of hell only it’s not as simple as hell.”⁴⁰ Section “three” attempts to envision what was impossible in section “two”: “a huge fat clockwork of civilizations,” with “[w]ormlike tentacles thousands of feet long, [. . .] filled with bone and gristle and gearwheels and knives and bullets and animals rotting with skeletal remains and pistons and smokestacks pump-pumping cinders and lightning and shreds of flesh.”⁴¹ This is followed in “four”

by the image of a man (Peter Hujar) “propped up in the white sheets with all the inventions of his day leading in and out of his body in the form of tubes and generators and pumps and dials and hisses.”⁴² Section “six” is itself composed of juxtapositions between a variety of sexual encounters with unnamed men and the experience of watching a “badly transferred” gay porn video, thus blurring the distinction between sex as real-life experience and sex encountered as representation.⁴³

Wojnarowicz’s unfinished film, *A Fire in My Belly*, is also montage.⁴⁴ He took much of the footage in Mexico, including an image of the Coatlicue statue that flashes up repeatedly. Making an analogy between the Mexican Day of the Dead and life with AIDS, the film critiques the colonizing gaze that views Mexican squalor from a comfortable distance, the same colonizing gaze that turns people with AIDS in the USA into object foreign bodies. Wojnarowicz’s friend and biographer, Cynthia Carr, writes,

David was not insensitive about using a camera there. While he wrote nothing in his journal about the Day of the Dead, the circus, the wrestling match, or the mummies [all of which he filmed], he did reflect on his own voyeurism, and the fact it was a luxury he could now afford. “If I were penniless, I’d be just another person hustling for food there,” he wrote. “So in filming in Mexico I pushed voyeurism to the limit, always shooting through a zoom lens whenever possible, from car or bus windows; points of elevation, third story windows, stop balconies, cliffs, etc.”⁴⁵

Wojnarowicz’s exaggerated voyeurism prompts the viewer to reflect on his or her own desire to see these images. Like Höch, he refuses to frame them so as to make us comfortable.⁴⁶ The various Mexican spectacles are presenting in a quick and dizzying array, absent of narrative cohesion; and interspersed among them are ants crawling over money, a mouth being sown up with coarse thread, a sentient Christ with a crown of thorns, blood spilling out of a petri dish, a hand dropping coins, a bandaged hand collecting coins, a man undressing and masturbating, and a spinning eyeball. While it is clear that the eyeball references both the viewer and the globe, it is up to the viewer to puzzle out the connections between tourism and squalor, money and blood, religious iconography and sexual spectacle.

Carr asserts in the opening of her biography that *A Fire in My Belly* does not concern AIDS: “he had plenty to say about AIDS. But not in this film.”⁴⁷ The footage of the man masturbating, read with that of

blood spilling out of the petri dish, however, suggests HIV contamination. Such seems also the conclusion of the anonymous activist who posted a four-minute version of the film with a musical accompaniment, which became a YouTube sensation in 2010. Diamanda Galás' mass for people with AIDS, "This Is the Law of the Plague," was added as the soundtrack; and in spite of not having given permission for its use, Galás defended the connection between her composition and the film.⁴⁸ *A Fire in My Belly* was the sole artwork removed at the request of conservative politicians by the Smithsonian Institution, which presented its first-ever LGBTQ retrospective in 2010, timidly entitled, "Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture."⁴⁹ A direct response to the censorship, the tightly edited four-minute video has given Wojnarowicz's film a far larger audience than the National Portrait gallery could conceivably have provided. Wojnarowicz writes in *Close to the Knives*, "if I make something and leave it in public for any period of time, I can create an environment where that object or writing acts as a magnet and draws others with a similar frame of reference out of silence or invisibility."⁵⁰

Dan Cameron considers the 1983 *Untitled* [Sirloin Steaks] to be "the most elaborate and disturbing" of Wojnarowicz's stencil montages: "a running soldier with an open shirt is caught in mid-stride by a bullet to the midsection. Although the fusion of eroticism and death would occur again in Wojnarowicz's art, the work remains one of the most powerful illustrations of the rage he felt at how much more attention society gave to the killing of men than the loving of them."⁵¹ Even though the man's body is stenciled in cartoon style—the gunshot makes a gold star in the middle of his upper abdomen, and there is a larger gold star surrounding his camouflage-clad body—the image has erotic power. The soldier's shirt is open, with the muscles of his chest and abdomen clearly defined. A curve at the crotch is also visible. The running soldier is placed, along with an outline drawing of a dead cow's head above it, over Red Apple Supermarkets' stenciled advertisement for "U.S.D.A. CHOICE ♦ *FULL CUT SIRLOIN STEAKS*." [Fig. 4] The rectangular pane that encloses the soldier cuts his body off at the neck, with the cow's head appearing roughly where his own head would be, if far too large to be in proportion. The clear implication is that both kinds of meat, what anyone might buy at the supermarket and the soldier's flesh, are subject to violence and commodification.⁵² The price for the steaks on the poster is \$2.39 a pound. Implicitly, the soldier's flesh also has a price. In an interview, Barry Blinderman asks Wojnarowicz, "What about the pre-printed food posters?" He responds,

They're symbols of consumption. I would think, okay, what are images that we consume on a daily basis or that other people consume on a daily basis—people who live in places where there are wars or where's there's murder on the streets by government forces, and I try to figure out a way of using that surface in a subversive way to look at the structure behind it. What supports the society in which this food poster exists?⁵³

As with Berlin Dada, the recontextualization of commercial imagery functions to critique the commercial world and to expose what its ideology effaces—in this case, how military violence subtends the availability of cheap commodities.

THE SILENCE OF MARCEL DUCHAMP IS OVERRATED

Peter Bürger's still influential 1974 *Theory of the Avant-Garde* interprets Dada as a critique of the institutions that isolated works of art from modern life.⁵⁴ At the center of this critique, for Bürger, are Marcel Duchamp's readymades, including the famous 1917 *Fountain* by R. Mutt, which conflates an art object to contemplate in disinterest with a prefabricated receptacle for urine. *Fountain*, like Höch's Dada photomontages and Wojnarowicz's multi-media productions, disturbs received notions of art with visceral appeal. For Bürger, though, such efforts to reintegrate art into the everyday have failed. This is a judgment with which Duchamp has been seen as coming into agreement, considering how his production of art—or anti-art—virtually stopped after the readymades of the Dada period. Though Thomas Girst finds some evidence that Duchamp felt sympathy for later art movements, “his own attitude towards his heirs seemed to be, at best, one of aloofness [. . .] and, at worst, frustration.”⁵⁵

Bürger asserts that more recent movements seeking to follow the avant-garde of the early twentieth century, movements he calls the “neo-avant-garde,” are doomed to “inauthenticity,” for such repetitions can only serve to confirm the avant-garde's now co-opted status as institutionalized art.⁵⁶ Lost in this and other postmodern dismissals of the efficacy of Dada is what David Cunningham terms, “an interruptive *experience* of the non-identical within the cultural present,”⁵⁷ which goes under the name of “defamiliarization” in Viktor Shklovsky's “Art as Technique,”⁵⁸ “the uncanny” in the psychoanalysis of Sigmund Freud, and “the event” in the philosophy of Alain Badiou.

One of the photographs in Wojnarowicz's early *Arthur Rimbaud in New York* series [Fig. 5] displays graffiti that reiterates Joseph Beuys' famous statement, “THE SILENCE OF MARCEL DUCHAMP IS

OVERRATED.”⁵⁹ This slogan appears behind a model who has a blow-up of a photograph of Arthur Rimbaud’s face covering his own face. The flat reproduction of an old photograph represents one of Wojnarowicz’s innovations in photomontage, resisting photography’s pretention to authenticate objective reality. It shows Wojnarowicz positioning himself within an avant-garde tradition that spans from the French poet and Dada to the contemporary. Wojnarowicz aligns himself with those, like Beuys, who see a continuing function for adversarial art. Catherine Wood observes, Wojnarowicz’s “use of a photographic portrait as a mask simultaneously doubles (intimating soulful identification with the poet) and cancels out our access to the subject, embedding a camouflaged blind spot in the picture plane.”⁶⁰ This blind spot—that is precisely the interruptive *experience* of which Cunningham speaks—is the event, a hole in the ever-same, leaving space for what is not yet in history to emerge.

NOTES

1. Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, trans. Peter Halliward (New York: Verso, 2002), 26.

2. Kevin Floyd, *The Reification of Desire: Toward a Queer Marxism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 6.

3. Badiou, *Ethics*, 41.

4. Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham (New York: Continuum, 2007), 327.

5. This is said in contradistinction to Fredric Jameson’s equation of postmodernism with the logic of late capitalism. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991). For how such theoretical reification can lead to dismissive readings of postmodern art, see Marjorie Perloff, “Language Poetry and the Lyric Subject: Ron Silliman’s Albany, Susan Howe’s Buffalo,” in *The Electronic Poetry Center at SUNY Buffalo* (1998), under Marjorie Perloff, <http://wings.buffalo.edu/epc/authors/perloff/langpo.html> (accessed July 2, 2013).

6. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto: A Modern Edition*, intro. Eric Hobsbawm (New York: Verso, 2012).

7. Rosemary Hennessy, *Profit and Pleasure: Sexual Identities in Late Capitalism* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 30.

8. Tom Roach, *Friendship as a Way of Life: Foucault, AIDS, and the Politics of Shared Estrangement* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2012), 138.

9. For a fully detailed timeline of Wojnarowicz’s engagement with the AIDS crisis, see Cynthia Carr, *Fire in the Belly: The Life and Times of David Wojnarowicz* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2012).

10. Roach, *Friendship as a Way of Life*, 137.

11. *Ibid.*

12. “Torre Monumental,” *Wikipedia*, accessed July 1, 2013, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Torre_Monumental.

13. “Obelisco de Buenos Aires,” *Wikipedia*, accessed July 1, 2013, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Obelisco_de_Buenos_Aires. The gold oval at the top of Wojnarowicz’s obelisk poses an interpretive difficulty. Perhaps it slyly references the rotating

sign Isabel Martínez de Perón hung around the Obelisco de Buenos Aires in 1975, which offered the following motto: “El silencio es salud” (silence is health). Ostensibly, the motto advises against excessive noise, but many interpreted it as a political warning to keep quiet.

14. Roach, *Friendship as a Way of Life*, 138. My thanks to Julia Albarracin for her assistance with the geography of Buenos Aires.

15. “Obelisco,” *Wikipedia*.

16. Maud Lavin, *Cut with a Kitchen Knife: The Weimar Photomontages of Hannah Höch* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 179.

17. *Ibid.*, 160.

18. Maria Makela, “By Design: The Early Work of Hannah Höch in Context,” in *The Photomontages of Hannah Höch*, ed. Maria Makela, Peter Boswell, and Caroline Lanchner (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1997), 107.

19. Sigmund Freud, “The Uncanny” (1919), in Vol. 17 of *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey, ed. James Strachey, Anna Freud, and Angela Richards (London: Hogarth Press, 1966–74), 220.

20. Lavin, *Cut with a Kitchen Knife*, 166.

21. *Ibid.*

22. Freud, “The Uncanny,” 248, n. 1.

23. Henrick Stahr, *Fotjournalismus zwischen Exotismus und Rassismus: Darstellungen von Schwarzen und Indianern in Foto-Text-Articeln deutscher Wochenillustrierter, 1919–1939* (Hamburg: Verlag Dr. Kovač, 2004), 1. My translations.

24. *Ibid.*, 2.

25. Volker K. Langbehn, “Introduction: Picturing Race: Visuality and German Colonialism,” in *German Colonialism, Visual Culture, and Modern Memory*, ed. Volker K. Langbehn (New York: Routledge, 2010), 3.

26. *Ibid.*, 9.

27. David Ciarlo, “Advertising and the Optics of Colonial Power at the Fin de Siècle” in Langbehn, *German Colonialism*, 50.

28. Brett M. Van Hoeson, “Weimar’s Revisions of Germany’s Colonial Past: The Photomontages of Hannah Höch and László Moholy-Nagy,” in Langbehn, *German Colonialism*, 198.

29. The image appears in David Ciarlo, *Advertising Empire: Race and Visual Culture in Imperial Germany* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 275.

30. My translation. See Karoline Hille, “Der Faden, der durch alle Wirrnisse das Leben hielt,” in *Hannah Höch: Aller Anfang ist DADA!*, ed. Ralf Burmeister (Berlin: Berlinische Galerie, 2007): 84–107. Here is the German text: “Ich möchte die festen Grenzen auswischen, die wir Menschen mit einer eigensinnigen Sicherheit um alles, was in unserum Bereich kam, gezogen haben,” 93–94.

31. Badiou, *Being and Event*, 192.

32. David Wojnarowicz, *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration* (New York: Vintage, 1991), 62.

33. *Ibid.*, 26.

34. *Ibid.*, 37.

35. This untitled 1992 montage presents the image of two bandaged hands held up and open, as if begging for alms, or in supplication. That the statement reflects the position of a person who knows he is very soon to die from complications resulting from AIDS, however, does not reduce it to a simple statement of mortality.

36. “Coatlícué Statue,” *Wikipedia*, accessed July 10, 2013, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Coatlícué_statue.

37. Wojnarowicz, *Close to the Knives*, 77.
38. "Coatlilco Statue," *Wikipedia*.
39. Cf. Wojnarowicz, "In the Shadow of the American Dream: Soon All This Will Be Picturesque Ruins," in *Close to the Knives*, 24–63.
40. Wojnarowicz, *Close to the Knives*, 66.
41. *Ibid.*, 69.
42. *Ibid.*
43. *Ibid.*, 73.
44. *A Fire in My Belly* actually consists of two different edits, one 13 minutes; and other, seven. They share much of the same imagery, though the scene of the man masturbating is absent from the longer clip. I analyze the shorter, more cohesive clip.
45. Carr, *Fire in the Belly*, 342. Wojnarowicz had been a male prostitute, or 'street hustler,' in New York City during his childhood and adolescent years.
46. For more on the outrage that this film continues to evoke in U.S. conservatives, see Merrill Cole, "WikiLeaks and David Wojnarowicz: A Perspective from Berlin," *The Huffington Post*, January 11, 2011, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/merrill-cole/wikileaks-and-david-wojna_b_807509.html (accessed June 30, 2014). It is here that I first set out to compare Höch and Wojnarowicz.
47. Carr, *Fire in the Belly*, 2.
48. Diamanda Galás, "A letter from Diamanda Galas to the Twinkletoe Christians," *Homolandia*, December 4, 2010, <http://smaller555.tumblr.com/post/2092981879/a-letter-from-diamanda-galas-to-the-twinkletoe> (accessed July 15, 2013).
49. Cole, "WikiLeaks and David Wojnarowicz".
50. Wojnarowicz, *Close to the Knives*, 156.
51. Dan Cameron, "Passion in the Wilderness," in Cameron, *Fever: The Art of David Wojnarowicz* (New York: Rizzoli, 1999), 8.
52. Carr writes, "David explained years later that he'd used the food posters because they marked a specific time (with their prices) and represented consumption—moral, mental, psychic, and physical consumption. The supermarket ads represent the wallpaper of our lives, while the unspeakable surfaces in David's images of violence, repression, and desire" (*Fire in the Belly*, 231).
53. Barry Blinderman, "The Compression Of Time: An Interview With David Wojnarowicz," in *David Wojnarowicz: Tongues of Flame*, ed. Dan Cameron (Normal, IL: University Galleries of Illinois State University, 1991), 61.
54. Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1974), trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).
55. Thomas Girst, "(Ab)Using Marcel Duchamp: The Concept of the Readymade in Post-War and Contemporary American Art," *Tout-fait: The Marcel Duchamp Online Journal* 2.5 (April 2003). Accessed July 17, 2013.
56. Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 53.
57. David Cunningham, "Making an Example of Duchamp: History, Theory, and the Question of the Avant Garde," in *Dada Culture: Critical Texts on the Avant-Garde*, ed. Dafydd Jones (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006), 263.
58. Victor Shklovsky, "Art as Technique" (1916), in *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*, trans. Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis, ed. Paul A. Olson (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), 3–24.
59. "Das Schweigen von Marcel Duchamp wird überbewertet." This is the title of a performance piece Beuys presented in 1964.
60. Catherine Wood, "David Wojnarowicz," *Frieze Magazine* 100 (June–August 2006). Web. Accessed May 16, 2013.

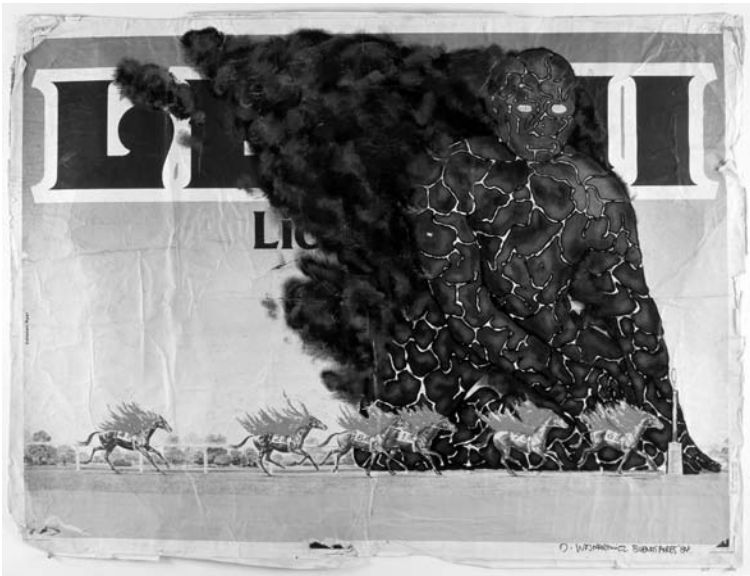


Figure 1. David Wojnarowicz, *A Painting to Replace the British Monument in Buenos Aires*, 1984, acrylic on street poster 45 x 58 inches. Courtesy of the Estate of David Wojnarowicz and P.P.O.W. Gallery, New York.



Figure 2. Hannah Höch, *Indische Tänzerin*, 1930. © 2014 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn.



Figure 3. Hannah Höch, *Liebe*, 1931. © 2014 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn.

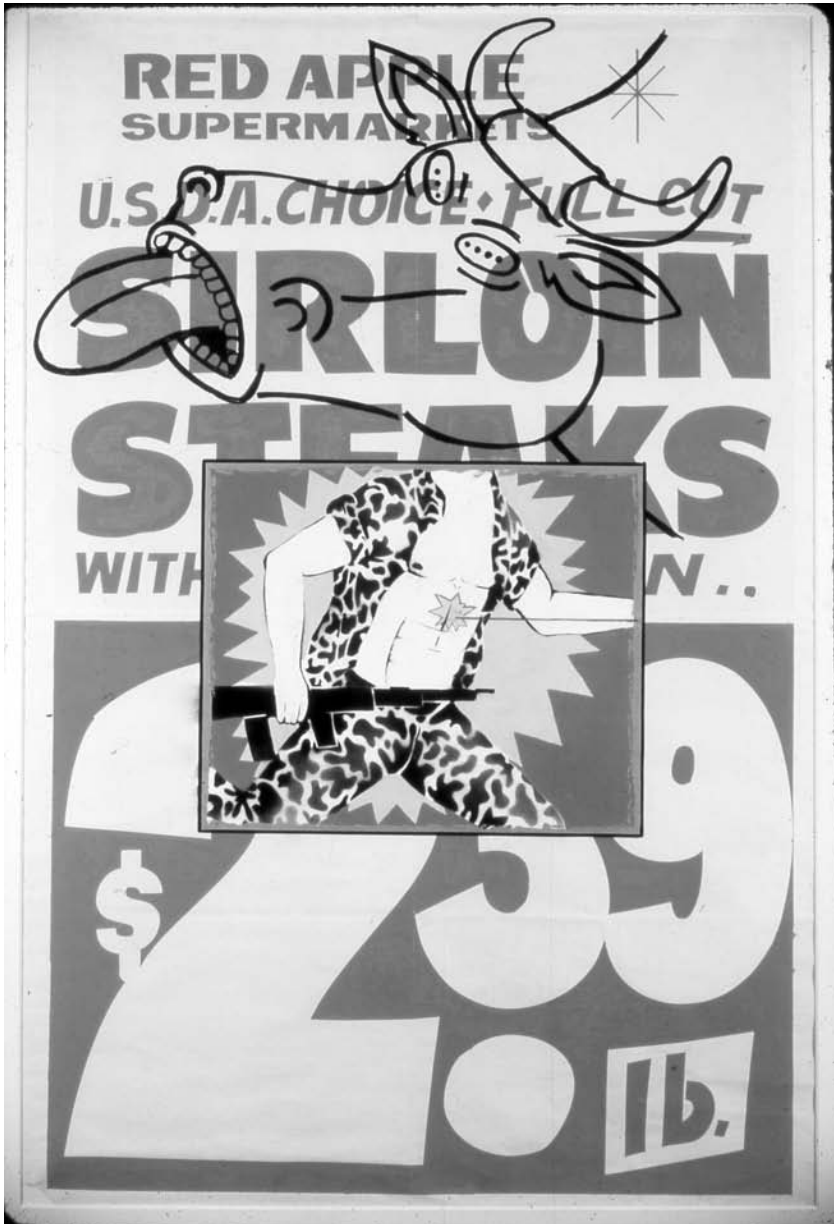


Figure 4. David Wojnarowicz, *Untitled (Sirloin Steaks)*, 1983. Acrylic on poster; 47 × 32 1/2 inches. Courtesy of the Estate of David Wojnarowicz and P.P.O.W. Gallery, New York. Private collection, courtesy Hal Bromm Gallery, New York.



Figure 5. David Wojnarowicz, *Arthur Rimbaud in New York (Duchamp)*, 1978–79. Gelatin-silver print, 8 × 10 inches. Courtesy of the Estate of David Wojnarowicz and P.P.O.W. Gallery, New York³.
