

THE ENDLESS LABOR OF ABOLITION

— by Daniela Zyman

After the atrocities of the Second World War, the model of the human in its white, cis, able-bodied, and bourgeois constitution — one that ontologically colonized the full range of humanness — was considered irreparable and a project of total deconstruction. Liberation from humanism and its abolition became a political, ideological, and artistic project directed against metaphysics, rationality, and normativity. The actionist work of Otto Mühl (hereafter referred to as “OM”) and the “social experiment” of the Friedrichshof Commune were considered for the longest time as an expression of the “anti-humanist consensus” that dominated academia and critical theory. My tentative intervention responds to Branslav Jakovljević’s careful analysis of OM’s *Oh Sensibility* asking in particular in what way the dismantling of the “dominant human” — as a socio-political and aesthetic project — led precisely to a reproduction of the dehumanization that OM allegedly sought to overcome. By inappropriately dichotomizing the “human” and the “body” as well as “human” and “animal” — rearticulating the modern distinction between that which is political and that which is bodily and, consequently, bio-material — OM’s project of action “liberation” ran the risk of reenacting the reactionary violence of phallocratic masculinity, obsessed by sexuality as power. In light of the ongoing revision of OM’s work and legacy, we need to reassess the claims underpinning his practice from its inception to shed light on later aberrations and offer theoretical frameworks that point the way for future debates. This work seems to me to be particularly pertinent in view of the recent resurrection of the superior man in populist rhetoric and beyond.

THE WORK BEFORE THE WORK

Today many of us, as artists, curators, and writers, are engaged in one way or another in projects of repair, reparation, undoing, unlearning, defamiliarizing, deciphering, etc. More recent and well-formulated

interventions have led to the public discussion, naming, and indictment of perpetuated forms of discrimination in society and the arts. Non-Western, black, BIPOC, queer, trans, fem and non-binary artists and thinkers raise the flag for abolishing a type of discursive and institutional normality associated with authoritarian patriarchy. Furthermore, other forms of political, cultural, and legal normalizations, along with their attendant systems of knowing and doing, which perpetuate and reproduce the mono-epistemic Western canon of rationality, political organization, and relationship to the world, are being scrutinized. This personal, institutional, coalitional, and political labor marks a commitment to “working through” that which is liberal, universalist, and narrowly humanist about our worldview and philosophical assumptions. And it must be put at the service of those who claim reparation and have experienced and are experiencing the trauma of subjugation and discrimination.

Many of us contributing to this publication have been part of OM’s history in one way or another. Some have been close to the commune, its actions, its arenas, and the discourses around it. I have, and I still am. As such, I can’t speak from a position of innocence; but rather from my frustration in ignoring to raise the right kinds of questions all along. Many of us are implicated in and complicit with the white male myth of the art world, art history, and theory. And because I am complicit, I know how the ideological discourses of supremacy and patriarchy work. I have seen how the unthinkable is normalized and reproduced and how the long arc of modernism’s heroic teleology has formed and disciplined our subjectivities, interrupted at times by occasional interventions and well-meant but ill-conceived negotiations of differences.

From my position as part of the art world, I want to question the terms we regularly use — and I quote from the invitation, which has triggered this text — the terms “criminal,” “freedom,” “justice,” and “autonomy” — to name a few. These terms each carry heavy baggage and I am not entirely sure we can use them lightly to frame our discussion. These terms are anchored in a scientific, legal, and aesthetic order, that is always already exclusionary, construed around a dominant aspect of humanity, otherwise referred to as “man”. Are we not still deploying the arsenal of modernity (the ballistic metaphor gestures at the destructive power it dissipates) to undo the flawed cosmology and *Weltbild* causing us such trouble? Are we not upholding the flat repetitions of “majority thinking?”

The conjunction between the call for justice, recognition, and accountability in the space of the political, which itself is already contaminated by a predetermined and pre-decided dominant social program, makes the task of emancipatory criticality particularly vulnerable. As for any claim — precisely the demand for justice — we must remain cognizant of its pitfalls and keep questioning justice/freedom/violence, on whose terms and under what conditions. Are we talking about (neoliberal) justice constructed as and based on laws and rights, a judiciary system that has only become more racist, exclusive, and power-driven in recent decades? Or are we talking about just versus legal, that is ethical justice versus the law? The first term, justice as justness, commands constant self-examination, the scrutinizing of ethical standards, and their multiple and systemic deviations. To become “just” might very well mean stepping outside of the law and coming to terms with the loss of universality and its *passe-partout* answer that served as a moral compass. Not because justness is without direction, but because it is specific, site, and time-specific. I would propose that OM’s work demands of us, over and over, to examine precisely the intersection between justice and law; our presumed ethical horizons and what they are built on; who is presumably included in the purview of justice and who is not; as well as the legitimations we constructed around the validity of such lofty concepts. For us involved in aesthetics, it orients us towards persistent looking to refuse to look away, consciously engaging with what Sylvia Wynter calls a deciphering practice. The problem, according to Wynter, is not what is not seen, what is kept hidden, but what is seen and how that seeing is done (Wynter 1994: 238-279). With due respect for our investment in criticality and pluralism, we are only beginning to recognize “the need to question ceaselessly one’s relation to the Other without relying on the didacticism of juridical authority or a set of universal principles.” (Jackson 2012: 79) We are only beginning to reckon with the incommensurability of the universal-as-man and the fraught projects of inclusivity and pluralism we have sought to build from this legacy—sadly, more often than not, without throwing into relief the very construct of “man-as-human” who engages in the reckoning.

“That expression, ‘work before the work,’” Joan Tronto wrote recently quoting Yaya Sumah, “captures this particular kind of burden very clearly, the most oppressed also must do the work of dealing with the

trauma they suffer by having constantly to try again to explain to both clueless and well-meaning people with privilege what it means. But I also imagine that not only is it the work before the work, it is also the work after the work, and the endless cycle of work to protect oneself that goes on and on, like daily care, never ending.” (Tronto 2020: 43) It is one of the paradoxes of the labor of abolition that it demands those victimized in the first place to constantly re-memorize their pain and, moreover, to perform the work of healing and remediation. I also want to remind us that abolition doesn't mean bombing things to the ground out of rage and disgust. It means attentively undoing exclusionary, sexist, and racist discourses, technologies, and infrastructures that serve to maintain a status quo in the name of the fittest, strongest, the power holders. Abolition's quest is for an interruption and the substitution of exclusion, isolation, and ruination — often the result of systemic injustice — with other possibilities of intervention, care, and repair.

BODIES AS MEAT

Jakovljević's close reading of OM's *Oh Sensibility* has led me to re-engage with Black studies, particularly the issues of dehumanization and animality, as well as the seminal poststructuralist literature on the subject. My intervention echoes Jakovljević's conclusion, namely the “catastrophic breakdowns” he so aptly describes as the inherent threat to avant-gardism to offer a framework on how to think sub-humanism and animality through race theory, and animal studies. Yet, my trajectory is not so much along the lines of ethics or explicit erotics but takes me along an examination of a specific repertoire of social, symbolic, patriarchal ordering derived from human exceptionalism and male suprematism; one profoundly confused about notions of pleasure, desire, the human, animal, body, and violence. This way I attempt to disentangle the statement “the human being is not seen as a human being, a person, but as a body with certain properties. material action extends reality” rather than interpreting OM's artistic or communal practice. This line summarizes quite succinctly the misconstrued ideological position from which OM derives the legitimization for his artistic agency.

For starters: Bodies not only convey “certain properties”, but are the carriers of the markers, which qualify a person at first sight as being part of the dominant form of humanity while disenfranchising those who would depart from this morphology. By conceptually divorcing the human from his/her/their body — thus essentializing or naturalizing the body — all the differences inscribed in bodies, such as gender, race, and dis/ability are being effaced. This could potentially be “liberatory,” however, as Fanon describes with such remarkable clarity, becoming a “neutral” body is not an option: “I am given no chance. I am overdetermined from without. I am the slave not of the ‘idea’ that others have of me but of my own appearance.” (Fanon 2008: 87) Well before any other factors come into play, appearance and morphology organize the corpus politicum, the normative body of politics. Being “a body with certain property” can only be experienced by someone aligned with the axis of normality, in fact, of supremacy, as it refers to being non-Black, non-trans, non-foreign, non-disabled etc. All other bodies experience themselves as negatively “overdetermined from without,” at risk of falling outside the political body and eventually into non-being. Beyond mere organic matter, bodies form the primary arena where the negations of personhood are performed and rehearsed.

Furthermore, the body conceived as material, passive, and malleable (ultimately as meat) amounts to reducing the human being to a “biological organism without necessarily having recourse to the recognition humans share with each other.” (Parker 2018: 439) By extracting it from the realm of the political, OM hastily resignifies the corporeal as artistic material and asserts his authority, as artist/performer, over the bodies, desires, and in the case of the goose, over the life of his collaborators. Instead of reducing the distance between art and life, which is the proclaimed concern of actionist and performance art, he widens the gap by conjuring up a state of exception, in which both ethics and the law are suspended. In the vexing conditions of “bare life,” the boundaries of power become precarious. Suggesting an uninhibited and rule-less situation free of the regulatory power of law, morality, and culture, the state of exception, predicated on the condition of bare life, doesn’t suspend order altogether. Instead, it sets the stage for the assumption of authority by the self-proclaimed authority figure(s), as I would argue in this case, by the artist.

THE QUESTION OF THE NONHUMAN

Not being “seen as a human being,” hence the suspension of “the recognition humans share with each other” is riskily proximate to de- or sub-humanization, a “cultural technology” aimed at subjugating others in their totality as human beings. Dehumanization stems from the dangerous psychological tendencies to essentialist, supremacist, and hierarchical thinking and sets in motion the dual mechanisms of devaluation/thingification/animalization on the one hand and satisfaction/control/violence on the other. In this equation, and according to established post-colonial theorizations, the “other” is pathologized, trivialized, or silenced as s/he/they challenge the ontological order on which Western epistemologies are predicated. It is precisely through the *ex negativo* assertion of the abject, aberrant, and nonhuman that Western modernity constitutes itself and with it “the human’s” colonial (and hetero-patriarchal) imposition as synonymous with all appearances of ‘human.’” (Jackson 2013: 681)

The capacity to strip a person or a group of their humanity, to degrade them so that they become animals in the eyes of the figure of authority, disinhibits those who assert authority from aggression (Smith 2021) Dehumanization, in fact, unleashes the entire gamut of violence available under certain social (and legal) conditions and well beyond. Violence can be linguistic, systemic, corporeal, sexual, or psychological and is a measure of the permissiveness of extant biopolitics and/or the disinhibition of the authority figure. Following Foucault’s work on the history of sexuality, it can be argued that sexuality is the dominant discourse of power in the West (and most certainly the one that runs through OM’s lifework.) By virtue of the economic, social, and symbolic importance that Western culture has invested in it, sexuality (and with it all gendered forms of reproductive labor) occupies a privileged role in the constitution of subjectivity and power relations. The category “women,” established as the preferential figure of otherness, became the matrix according to which hierarchical sub-categories of the human are organized.

So far, I have tried to show the perils and risks inherent in the self-mastery of the subject (the artist) based on the dehumanization and animalization of other human beings. Unfolding the potential intersections and associations within the discourse of animalization can furthermore show us why to attend specifically to the violence exerted against animals.

In “Eating Well,” Jacques Derrida explores the “limitless” consequences and implications of what he conceives of the misunderstanding of the “thou shalt not kill” commandment. “[I]n a world where sacrifice is possible and where it is not forbidden to make an attempt on life in general,” Derrida argues, animal sacrifice becomes the loophole through which violence and murder is “denegated.” (Derrida 1995: 278-281) The scene of the sacrifice institutes a symbolic economy and political order, which justifies the noncriminal putting to death of those being animalized (gendered and racialized), human and nonhuman alike. Sacrifice not only satisfies the “need, desire, authorization, the justification of putting to death,” (Derrida 1995: 278-281) but must be constantly reactualized to stabilize the superiority of the “human” (the phallogocentric man) over the “animalized” (the absent referent). Performing and repeatedly re-performing acts of superiority and finding ever new methods for reinforcing and reiterating the ideal carnophallogocentric subject — Derrida’s neologism to identify a subjectivity that is not only anthropocentric and phallogocentric but also carnivorous — becomes necessary to defend it against multiple fronts of contestations. The (repeated) acts of (symbolic or actual) killings of animals and those being animalized are thus part of the project of constructing a kind of subjectivity predicated on the violence against others, and in turn, on the forceful assertion of a supremacist, male-identified superior being, that derives its superiority (and satisfaction) not only from rationality and language but also from his right to sacrifice.

Drawing on the vast existing literature describing the links between animalization and the “subhuman,” and, as already discussed between sexuality and violence, allows us to comprehend better the sacrificial structure inscribed in human exceptionalism and white male supremacy (Adams 2015). Animalization creates (the absent referent) “meat” (standing here for “women”) and normalizes its visual and sexual consumption in Western and Westernized cultures. Never fully knowing where to perform the “cut,” according to Derrida, between the human and its other/s, the ostensible enactment of animality and animacy in OM’s actionist work (but also possibly beyond them) seem to produce and reenact the category of the “animal,” a performative dehumanization which is not leading to the alleged liberation and emancipation of the human (the discharge of desires and drives from bourgeois or biological normativity), but rather

to his/her sacrifice. Only one actor can be excluded with certainty: the one who holds authority over the sacrifice.

Following this argument, the sexualized sacrifice of the white goose in OM's film opens the possibility of enacting death and erasure (at least in the symbolic order) of all those deemed animals. I am implying that not only is the goose slaughtered, but the other co-actors are likewise animalized, at risk of being symbolically put to death. Postulated as a de-naturalization of the Darwinian and Freudian figure of the human (specifically the delinking of sexual normativity from reproduction and violence from survival), OM disinhibits and denegates violence (in the form of animal abuse and killing, exploitation, subjugation, inferiorization) in his actionist performances. With the claimed intention of setting free human animality/bestiality, he bestows an animal inhumanity over his collaborators. As in most settings of biopolitical violence, the hierarchization of intensities (of violence, marginalization, abuse) sorts out the affective regime in relation to the group: in the case of *Ob Sensitivity*¹, the male, female, and animal collaborators are being subjected to different degrees of violence and dehumanization, thereby securing group cohesiveness and obedience around an artistic power structure.

By way of conclusion, I want to make clear the purview and difficulties in challenging the epistemological authority and ontological imperialism of "man" and its imposition as the universal without falling into the trap of dehumanization. Equally precarious is the act of stepping outside of law without resorting to abuse and violence. Animalization as part of the repertoire of technologies of inferiorization and annihilation is neither liberatory, inventive, nor imaginative. Decentering the category "man" cannot come at the cost of devaluing the human, quite the opposite, it involves the resignification and revaluation of the later. The abolitionary work of resignification draws on the interrogation and critique of "man" by placing Western humanism in a broader field of gendered, sexual, racial, and colonial relations.

1 It is born from a toxic blend of resentment, fear, entitlement, and the inability to negotiate the complexities of our contemporary moment. Driver of this transformation is the Prometheus-like figure of "man", wielding quasi-unlimited power over both humans and nonhumans.

Notwithstanding the transformative politics of #metoo and BLM as the references which point to a radical reworking of current social and ideological conditions, I believe that we are living through a reactionary backlash. We witness the dismantling of civil society and its institutions and the reckless exploitation of our earth. The “space of appearance ... in which politics take place” (Arendt 1998: 199) is marked by the disinhibition of violence and the denegation of murder at the hands of the police, translated into violently aggressive political speech and populist communal action. The worldview in progress that majoritarian politics is reassembling from the remnants of old authoritarianism is exclusionary, hierarchical, white, and patriarchal. It is born from a toxic blend of resentment, fear, entitlement, and the inability to negotiate the complexities of our contemporary moment. Driver of this transformation is the Prometheus-like figure of “man”, wielding quasi-unlimited power over both humans and nonhumans. And it is precisely because of this uninhibited revenant, this return of the undead, that we must attend over and over to the work before the work, question ourselves, our lexica, our affiliations, and keep dismantling the operating system of white supremacy.

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