

Irmgard Emmelhainz
**Self-
Destruction as
Insurrection, or,
How to Lift the
Earth Above All
That Has Died?**

e-flux journal #87 — december 2017 Irmgard Emmelhainz
Self-Destruction as Insurrection, or, How to Lift the Earth Above All That Has Died?

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We are no longer postcolonial creatures.
– Hamid Dabashi

Soon you'll raise your world over ours,
blazing a trail from our graveyards to a
satellite.
This is the Iron Age: distilled from a lump of
coal,
champagne bubbling for the mighty!
There are dead and there are colonies.
There are dead and there are bulldozers.
There are dead and there are hospitals.
There are dead and there are radar screens
to observe the dead
as they die more than once in this life,
screens to observe the dead who live on
after death
as well as those who die
to lift the earth above all that has died.
O white master, where are you taking my
people
and yours?
– Mahmoud Darwish, "Speech of the Red
Indian," trans. Sargon Boulous

L'umanità si sta suicidando.
Se vogliamo sopravvivere dobbiamo
guardare le cose con realismo: la razza
bianca reagisce al declino scatenando la
guerra civile globale.
Lo schiavismo domina il mondo.
La civiltà moderna finisce nel sangue e
nella merda.
Allontaniamoci dall'edificio che sta
crollando.
Espelliamo da ogni luogo di vita i traditori
della sinistra riformista.
Creiamo spazi di sopravvivenza autonoma.
– Franco "Bifo" Berardi

1. Apocalypse, or, the Highest Stage of Modernism

Modernism imagined itself to be beyond
eschatology, those primitive bedtime stories
about the end of the world, the last judgment, or
some final act that would settle things as they
ultimately should be. Modernism, however, in
imagining that it could overcome its Abrahamic
heritage, preserved it. Even as it claimed to
surrender the idea of a savior, sent from heaven
to redeem a fallen world, it relocated this figure
again and again in this or that individual, class,
or grouping – the enlightened monarch, the
universal proletariat, the creative entrepreneur.
The "revolutionary subject" is just another
messiah born without original sin, in whose



Francis Alÿs, *Modern Procession*, 2002. Two-channel video, 12'.

name the sinful and the fallen pursue their earthly redemption. In the absence of the savior, the image of the end of the world returns and the apocalypse reigns.

In this light, the actual legacy of modernism is not a horizon of worker-led emancipation but a biosphere on the brink of extinction, self-destructive societies, and a world in ruins. This results from colonialism – the blind spot of modernity¹ – which is not *just* a war machine designed to extract profit as quickly as possible, regardless of the consequences, but also an apparatus that employs cultural intervention and images of salvation and progress to obliterate the disruptive effects of the trauma it generates.

As the apocalypse has become central to the neoliberal imaginary, it is clear that the current relations of domination – and a corresponding redemptive horizon of emancipation – are no longer legible. What we are witnessing are intolerable forms of dependency. Instead of relationships of domination, there is systemic competition and destruction leading to self-destruction, even suicide. We are seeing the outcomes of displacement, dispossession, military and colonial occupation, the eradication of identity, and the cancellation and destruction of a world of moral belonging.

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In the late 1980s, Gilles Deleuze noted that political cinema was no longer constituted on the basis of the possibility of revolution (like classical cinema), but on the intolerable. The intolerable had become *the unknown*, what the media and hegemonic narratives were obscuring. This is why in various texts Deleuze wrote, “The people are missing” – meaning that the proletariat or a unified people would no longer seek to conquer power, thus situating counter-information as a political task.² Along with the third-world *guerrillero*, the working class and the main protagonists of political struggle and of the militant image of the twentieth century had disappeared. As Félix Guattari put it, militantism came to be impregnated by a rancid church smell that elicited a legitimate gesture of rejection.³ A new form of emancipation of the people of the third world had been foregrounded in the 1970s, leading to the replacement of politics by a new ethics of intervention. Third worldism or internationalism had been a universal cause giving a name to a political wrong: for the first time, the “wretched of the earth” emerged for a specifically historic period as a new figuration of “the people” in the political sense: the colonized were discursively transformed into political figures.⁴ Yet, a new ethical humanism (or humanitarianism) replaced revolutionary enthusiasm and political sympathy with pity and



Juan Manuel Sepúlveda, *The Ballad of Oppenheimer Park*, 2015. Courtesy of the artist.

moral indignation, transforming them into political emotions within the discourse of emergency. This led to new figures of alterity in the 1980s and '90s: the “suffering other” who needs to be rescued and the postcolonial “subaltern” demanding restitution, presupposing that visibility within a multicultural social fabric would lead to emancipation.

In the 1990s, the panorama of resistance opposed neoliberal reforms and fought for fair trade, sustainable development, human rights, and corporate accountability; the anti-globalization movement conceived itself as a social base to criticize corporate capitalism, globalization, and the fact that multinational corporations had acquired more and more unregulated political power exercised through trade agreements and deregulated financial markets. Anticapitalist politics in this context was characterized by interdisciplinarity, the adoption of an array of countercultural positions, and provisional political associations with the goal of creating autonomous zones, albeit symbolically. Counter-informative, didactic, and symbolic interventions against capitalism in the public sphere prevailed. In parallel, minorities continued to claim visibility and accountability under the depoliticized frame of human rights,

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as well as demanding inclusion within globalized democracy.⁵

But once neoliberal policies of deregulation, austerity, free markets, and privatization resulted in the decline of living standards and the loss of jobs, pensions, and the safety net that the state and society used to provide, social Darwinism became the rule. One of the implications of this is that the colonial division of the first and third world as well as the global – “postcolonial” – distinction between North/South and East/West has become irrelevant, as a new arrangement of the world is now visible: modernized pockets of privilege and cultural sophistication thrive and coexist with enclaves inhabited by “redundant populations.” This sector of the population has differential access – or no access at all – to education, health services, debt, and jobs, and is governed by various forms of state control that produce differential degrees of exclusion, dispossession, and coercion. These are communities whose commons and sustainable autonomous forms of life are being destroyed in the name of their well-being and development; yet, their destruction is de facto sustaining the lives of people living in modernized privileged enclaves. I am thinking of the destruction of entire communities and their



Clarisse Hahn, *Los desnudos*, 2012. 13'. Courtesy of the artist.

lands in the state of Michoacán, Mexico since the 1960s to provide Mexico City with much-needed water. Or of shale gas extraction in Québec in order to provide gas for home use.

It is clear that under capitalist absolutism it is more profitable to destroy lives and lands, rendering sectors of the population redundant, than to incorporate them into the system as consumers or exploited workers. In this panorama, the only categories that remain are winners and losers, exploiters and exploited, included and excluded. Neoliberal common sense preaches that either you are strong and smart, or you deserve your misery.⁶

In spite of the fact that the nineteenth-century political framework had been superseded by new forms of capitalist absolutism, myths like critique (or the principle that there can be an outside that can oppose the state of things, subverting it in the interest of something better), revolution, and democracy inflamed the uprisings of the early twenty-first century (Argentina in 2000, Mexico in 2006, and between 2011 and 2012 Occupy Wall Street, the Arab Spring, the Indignados in Spain, Syriza in Greece, etc.). These mobilizations fought against austerity measures and for better democracies, and demanded that states grant citizens rights. By now, however, it has become clear that struggles have lost their social base and their capacity for medium- or long-term political organizing. Moreover, the values underlying mobilization are increasingly neoliberal: they are focused on individual problems, private benefit, and consumer choices. Jodi Dean explains how the logic of neoliberalism itself has made collectivity undesirable, because in principle collectivity opposes individual responsibility and freedom, which are the main tenets of neoliberalism.⁷ Mobilizations become focused on the individual, and mass demonstrations become occasions for temporary coalitions, for recognizing and comforting each other, for finding transient affinities and concerns, for sharing indignation. Mass mobilizations may open up toward political subjectivity but they are not enough to ground or sustain it.

Uprisings are about collective emotions, social disorder, acts of insurrection in which antagonism or disagreement is expressed. The state either tolerates or represses these voices. The problem is that the aspiration of politics through social mobilization has become centered around achieving democracy, denying democracy's own limits and mechanics of exclusion, and the fact that in our current historical moment it serves to validate capitalist absolutism.⁸ For many thinkers, this is the reason why we live in a "post-political" era. Post-politics also implies the disavowal of the

fundamental antagonism conditioning politics, as equality has come to mean inclusion, respect, and entitlement. What we see proliferate are struggles directing action at small or private battles for the defense of rights, territory, or policy proposals. "Post-politics" therefore means consensual politics, the end of ideology, the neoliberal withering away of the state (which is at the same time strengthened strategically according to the interests of global capital), and the financialization of the economy.⁹ In other words, the Promethean frame of worker-led revolutionary resistance has been superseded by capitalist absolutism expressed as the imposition of neoliberal politics: centered on democracy, it cannot be uncoupled from free-market logic, which has become common sense. The unprecedented forms of state, social, and corporate violence brought about by capitalist absolutism are less tied to local than to abstract global processes, and yet resistance remains localized, isolated, ineffective. What does insurrection look like in this panorama?

2. Images of Insurrection are Images of Alterity

According to Serge Daney, Western universalism conceived an "abstract other."¹⁰ In the dominant imaginary of the twentieth century, images of this abstract other materialized in the "ethnographic image," the "militant image," and the "witness image." Ethnographic images were mostly registers of non-Western peoples who were disappearing or on the brink of extinction. Infused with documentary or indexical pretention, ethnographic images are based on a divide instituted by representational technology itself. That is to say, ethnographic images are always by people with different levels of access to the means of reproduction. "Militant images" are political and meant to announce and to bring forth the revolution against colonialism and imperialism. The need for the militant image gave intellectuals, artists, and filmmakers the task of accompanying peasants, workers, colonized peoples, and oppressed minorities and individuals in revolt. Following Nicole Brenez, these images embodied critique and followed the activist model of Eisenstein's *Strike* (1925).¹¹ The two main debates that militant images have provoked concern their capacity to raise consciousness, to mobilize the masses toward the constitution of the people; and whether their autonomy as aesthetic creations is subsumed by their propagandistic function. The "witness image," in turn, is ethical, and came to prevail in the aftermath of the Shoah, when oral testimony, documents, and documentary images were summoned not to prove facts, but as forms of memory to sustain the ethical imperative of

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collective remembering. Later on, witness images acquired a documentary function, providing proof of injustices and demanding a restitution of rights. These images put on the table debates on the (im)possibility of representing trauma or catastrophe, including whether attempts to represent catastrophe end up banalizing it.

These “ethnographic,” “militant,” and “witness” images are linked to an ethical and politicized notion of alterity derived from Western universalism. For Daney, the image is always a slot where, paraphrasing Lacan, “there is some other” to whom we are getting close by *imaging her* by way of an interplay of presence and absence, distance and proximity, and a series of operations to render the sayable visible and vice versa.¹² We must bear in mind, though, that the image is not a given, and this is why Daney draws a distinction between “image” and what he calls the “visual” or “imagery.” In contrast to the image, the visual is the optical verification of a procedure of power. It is composed of clichés and stereotypes. The visual is reality incessantly representing itself to itself. For Daney, the visual is the tautology of discourse that does not amount to an image but is simply a series of eyeless faces of the other. Taking up Daney’s distinction, Jacques Rancière in “The Future of the Image” ties his notion of

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“image” to an aesthetic operation that produces a material presence by way of dissemblance. Following Jean-Luc Godard’s famous aphorism and modernist montage credo “The image will come at the time of Resurrection,” Rancière links the image to Christian theology as a promise of the spirit made flesh. To distinguish the “genuine image” from its simulacrum, moreover, Rancière separates the operations of art from the technique of reproduction. In his account, there is a taxonomy of three forms of “imageness” that borrow from each other and that come to occupy different places in the regime of the sensible. The “naked” – or documentary – image is not art because it functions as proof or witness of historical events. The “ostensive” image is sheer presence without signification, that is, the presentation of presence as art, as a form of “facingness,” an address to the viewer. Finally, the “metaphorical” image is a singular rearrangement of the images circulating in the mass media that displaces and critiques these representations of imagery.¹³

My taxonomy of images of alterity from the twentieth century – ethnographic, militant, and witness – is not opposed but rather transversal to Rancière’s. What I am interested in, firstly, is tracking the kinds of discourses underlying images of Western alterity in the aftermath of the postcolonial critique of the ethnographic image,



Otolith Group, *Nervus Rerum*, 2008. 32'. Courtesy of the artists.

the demise of the third-worldist militant image, and the exposure of the limitations of the witness image, which often serves to perpetuate the figure of the “victim.” These visibilities have perhaps become the “visual” in Daney’s sense. Second, I wish to consider the possibility of an image of *soulèvement* – in the sense of an image of an other that could threaten Western imperialism and capitalist absolutism, a system this is consensually driven by the desire and need for visibility, and that legitimates social Darwinism through racism and misogynist speech in the public sphere.

Is such an image possible considering the changes in political struggle brought about by what Jodi Dean calls “communicative capitalism”? Dean has analyzed how the functioning of social media has taken over older platforms for revolution; therefore, opposition circulates in the networks of communicative capitalism such as Twitter and Facebook. Dean observes that these mediatized forms of struggle are not defensive struggles of a middle class facing austerity measures, inflation, unemployment, indebtedness, and foreclosure; nor are they geared toward building strong forms of organization. Rather, they are aimed at gaining visibility through a different logic – by using common images, tactics, hashtags, identity politics, and iconic events.¹⁴ The fact that these movements are focused on visibility makes their protests ambiguous, as the post-political and anti-political identities of struggles are so fluid that they can be channeled in any direction. Herein lies another reason behind the failure to construct concentrated, effective political forces with the capacity to confront and replace the capitalist mode of production.¹⁵ Therefore, in our post-political era, as communication and speech (the grounds for political action, in Hannah Arendt’s terms) have been transformed into codes, likes, shares, and retweets, the main objective of much of contemporary politicized images is to gain visibility for certain struggles and injustices. Based on the idea that images can provide a “common language,” social movements have become inseparable from art and culture, and contemporary politicized aesthetic practice has become a niche or genre called “sensible politics.” One of the problems that results is that people are now more interested in how social conflict and political processes are represented rather than in analyzing the underlying issues. Following Hito Steyerl, the way these issues tend to be framed is generic and tinted by ideological and commercial mandates.

Consider Shirin Neshat’s twenty-two large-scale color photographs of the Egyptian revolution exhibited in a New York gallery in

2014. For Iranian scholar Hamid Dabashi, these images convey a false, impossible effort to render the Levinasian face present, and in the process they embody the aggressive commodification of the Arab revolutions through “banal sympathy grounded on curatorial liberalism.”¹⁶ The images are far from the gestures of third-worldist solidarity from half-a-century ago, as for Dabashi they represent the disconnection between art, the artist, and the subject. At the same time, for Dabashi they commodify real suffering and struggle, proclaiming the Egyptian revolution as having succeeded (at a moment when its outcome was far from clear), in a world that wishes to see “stability.” In general, contemporary images of uprisings tend to be either romantic – trying to transmit the euphoria of revolutions without an awareness of the human cost – or represented as horrific, senseless events, where the figure of the people erupts in visceral, zombie-like rage, as in the Hollywood film *World War Z* (2013). It is clear that in general, neoliberal images of alterity (ethnographic, militant, and witness images) perpetuate the framework of global conflict and social Darwinism. Most current politicized images function to compensate for the ravages caused by neoliberal reforms. Insofar as museums, biennials, exhibitions, and film festivals are part of the global military industrial complex, neoliberalism is evidently a *pharmakon* that offers both the poisons of destitution and destruction along with the “cures” of democracy, development, human rights, social responsibility, and support for cultural and academic production. Perhaps *visibility* has become a problem.

It is not *what we see*, but what *cannot be shown* that is obscene. And what is it that tends not to be shown in contemporary images of struggle that conform to the old categories of ethnographic, militant, and witness images? That which it is difficult for us to see: the abjection in which redundant populations live across the world, in areas disconnected from the flows of global exchange.

For Serge Daney, *true* democracy means looking into the collective mirror of images and making a distinction between what can be done, what we know we must do, and what does not come cheap.¹⁷ And what is difficult for those in the gated enclaves of privilege to acknowledge is that for redundant populations, the kind of resistance and insurrection foregrounded by neoliberal democracy in corporatized urban public space is out of reach, a luxury. For instance, rural populations (like the Zapatistas) have traveled in *caravanas* to Mexico City in precarious conditions to voice their demands (which are rarely heard). Uprisings are premised

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on the failure of a preestablished set of structures to reflect or represent the popular will; but redundant populations are precisely those *excluded* from these democratic structures. At best, these populations can demand inclusion and recognition – which, again, is premised on visibility. Therefore, redundant populations resist not by rising up but by surviving, and whenever possible, by creating pockets of autonomy. What would a post-militant, postcolonial, post-ethnographic, and post-humanitarian image of redundant populations look like? What does the uprising of the “losers” of social Darwinism look like?

3. Images of Self-Destruction as Insurrection

Los desnudos (2012), a video by Clarisse Hahn, which is part of her series *Le Corps est un arme*, shows images of a protest by about four hundred members of a rural community from Veracruz, Mexico, who camped in Mexico City to demand that their stolen land be given back to them. After many years of unsuccessful struggle, they began to present their naked bodies twice a day in the streets, until their demands were partially met by the Mexican government. In her video, Hahn interviews a few of the protesters, mostly women, about what they were fighting for and about their relationship to their own bodies. What is made visible by Hahn is the precariousness of the conditions in which they survived in the streets of Mexico City. Their battle was not an uprising, but instead used bodily exposure as a defense against necrocapitalism – the creation of surplus value through the devouring of bare life. Precarious populations living in zones of sacrifice – such as Ciudad Juárez in Mexico; the tar sands of Alberta, Canada; and the Gaza Strip – are constantly exposed to destructive processes, which leads to self-destruction and the rending of the social fabric.

Another such precarious population is the Mwanza people surviving on the shores of Lake Victoria in Tanzania, who are portrayed in Hubert Sauper’s documentary film *Darwin’s Nightmare* (2006). Sauper’s post-*pornomiseria* film maps the global relationships and interests behind the misery in which native populations in Tanzania live. Using Darwin’s “survival of the fittest” concept as a metaphor, Sauper draws a parallel between the Nile perch – a fish that was introduced into Lake Victoria in the 1960s, causing a major mutation in the lake’s ecosystem – and the Mwanza people, who are no longer able to live off the lake with their pre-industrial fishing techniques. European transnational corporations have brought to the area industrial means of fishing, processing, packing, and

exporting the fish to Europe. Colonization and modernization have impoverished the indigenous population and ravaged their land to the extent that they are no longer able to live in their native environment. Instead, they survive off the entrails of the fish thrown out by the processing facilities. Devastated by AIDS and addiction to the intoxicating fumes given off by burning the polyethylene fish containers, the community is consumed by self-destruction. The devastation is further fueled by local wars fought with weapons flown in on the same planes that export the fish. In his film, Sauper clearly illustrates how the ideology of the survival of the fittest is the common sense behind neoliberal politics and globalization: the weak can only be saved by the compassionate actions of strong individuals, who are entitled to develop the economy according to their own interests. The reality, however, is that social Darwinism is the very cause of the crumbling of our civilization.

Redundant populations live in postapocalyptic conditions that resemble the aftermath of a failed revolution. The Otolith Group’s *Nervus Rerum* (2008) comes to mind here. In the film, the camera travels through the Jenin refugee camp, lingering to stare at dead commodities (TVs, refrigerators, a car), graffiti, and passers-by (mostly children), conveying through its floating, unstable gaze a dreamy perspective free of any human coordinates of vision. The camera is neither on a dolly nor on a shoulder, its movement a defamiliarizing rendering of inhuman, autonomous vision. What we see is an area that was originally a transitory zone in which refugees waited to return to their place of origin, but which ultimately became their permanent home. The camera shows us the poverty in which the refugees live, the lack of infrastructure, and their disconnection from global processes. The inexorable movement of the camera through the camp also conveys a sense of entrapment, as its movement indicates that there is nowhere to go. From there, we can only contemplate the unreachable horizon of the Mediterranean Sea, seen from a nearly broken aerial tramway. In the voice-over, we hear fragments from Fernando Pessoa’s *The Book of Disquiet* (1982) and from Jean Genet’s *Prisoner of Love* (1986) and *The Declared Enemy* (2004); these fragments speak of the negation of life, of the destruction of the relationship between “us” and life, of vanishing from the world. In another scene, Zacharia Zbeidi, a former resistance leader in the Second Intifada, says something to the camera (inaudible to the audience) while we see behind him a television showing images of Yasser Arafat. If the image of Yasser Arafat has survived his death, it is because it masks a reality, a silence, the absence of the image of

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Palestinians themselves. In *Nervus Rerum*, Palestinians appear not as presences (or absences), but as their own shadows, caught between nightmare and wakefulness, life and death.

Like the Palestinians, redundant populations all over the world seem to be living in the nightmarish aftermath of a disaster – the failure of revolutions and decolonization struggles, continuing neocolonialisms, humanitarian catastrophes. They face the impossibility and the senselessness of rising up. In 2006, in a desert area in Anapra, Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, along the border with the United States, Spanish artist Santiago Sierra had the word “*SUMISION*” (submission) excavated into the ground. Using the typeface Helvetica, the letters, which stretched fifteen meters high, were dug like graves and lined with concrete. Anapra is a shantytown in Ciudad Juárez at the crossroads between the Mexican state of Chihuahua and the US states of New Mexico and Texas. Its inhabitants work in sweatshops and other precarious industries; the area registers high levels of blood poisoning due to molten lead produced by the American Smelting and Refining company. As a result, deformities and pulmonary and related illnesses are not uncommon, and

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bodies of murdered women are regularly found in the area. In this context, Sierra’s gesture is politically ambiguous: Does the word “*SUMISION*” refer to the submission of Anapra’s inhabitants to the degrading conditions they endure? Sierra intended to fill the holes with gasoline and set them on fire, but the action was halted by the Mexican government. Does this mean that by forbidding the incineration of the word, the Mexican authorities are directly responsible for the population’s submission? The ambiguity inherent to the piece indicates precisely the lack of political horizon, the impossibility of organizing politically in the form of unions, strikes, and other labor-based struggles. This is because the inhabitants of Anapra, like many other populations around the world whose ways of life have been ruined by wars, environmental catastrophe, and resource extraction, survive in a postapocalyptic situation.

Lebanese theorist and visual artist Jalal Touffic has described these situations as “the withdrawal of tradition past a surpassing disaster.” In his view, the long-term effects of material and social destruction remain in the depths of the body and psyche as latent traumatic effects that become codified in the genes.¹⁸ Along similar lines, Winona LaDuke, an



Wael Noureddine, *Ça sera beau (From Beirut with Love)*, 2005. Courtesy of the artist.

Anishinaabekwe (Ojibwe) scholar and activist, explains how her people, after having endured colonization and abject living conditions for centuries, are now subject to corrupt leadership and an ongoing epidemic of PTSD due to intergenerational, historic trauma. For LaDuke, the global dependence on fossil fuels constitutes an ongoing disaster for her people, and links all the catastrophes happening around the world. Her community, which has one of the highest suicide rates in the US, is one of many across the world living with the genetic memory of catastrophe.¹⁹ According to Touffic, the collateral damage of the “surpassing” (or monumental) disaster implies the withdrawal of tradition. Therefore, resurrection is required. Modernism either willfully rejects tradition or is indifferent to it; only those who fully discern the withdrawal of tradition after the surpassing disaster have tried to resurrect it, since their history has been written by the victors.

Furthermore, in the case of populations living in the aftermath of a surpassing disaster, art may not show a hopeful horizon, but rather what remains. Wael Nouredine’s *Ça sera beau (From Beirut With Love)* (2005) is an experimental film-essay and postcard from a city torn apart after decades of internal conflict. Shot in a fast-paced style, the camera pans seemingly randomly through different zones of Beirut, showing the physical traces of the Civil War and ongoing conflict. There are sequences of people bleeding, burning cars, distracted soldiers, a threatening helicopter. Different religious and politically driven factions convey the senselessness of the violence unfolding before our eyes, a result of the failed efforts to resurrect the tradition of revolution. The destruction outside is mirrored in the self-destruction of the filmmaker and his friends, who drink and shoot heroin in a Beirut apartment. *Ça sera beau* paints a world in which submission cannot turn into revolt, but only into self-destruction as a way of regaining agency over one’s own body.

A further instance in which self-destruction becomes an act of insurrection is documented in *Prisons* (2012), another film from Clarisse Hahn’s series *Le Corps est un arme*. The filmmaker interviews two young women who used their bodies as a weapon of war, taking part in a hunger strike in a Turkish prison in 2000. The strike was violently repressed by the Turkish army and both women are now living with the consequences of the hunger strike in their own bodies, which has affected their cognitive abilities.

In these instances, people survive in situations in which not only the relationship between people and tradition has been obliterated, but also the relationship between

people and the world. Populations such as these are trapped in intolerable worlds, and the intolerable is no longer serious injustice, but daily banality.²⁰ *The Ballad of Oppenheimer Park* is a documentary film of sorts by Mexican filmmaker Juan Manuel Sepúlveda (2015). Shot in Oppenheimer Park in Vancouver, Canada, it is the result of the filmmaker’s two years of interaction with a group of First Nations people who spend most of their days in the park. Sepúlveda proposed to collaborate with them on the making of a Western film, and this is the loose narrative of the movie. The genre materializes in an array of props that the filmmaker places in the park and uses in encounters with the characters: Bear, Janet, and Harley. Cowboy hats, bows and arrows, and a burning wagon provoke the characters (who are always highly intoxicated) into rants about the theft of the land they are standing on, which used to be a First Nations burial site; about state housing and other forms of control they endure; about the lack of opportunities afforded to them; and about the epidemics of depression, suicide, and addiction destroying their community. A life-sized print of one of Edward Curtis’s ethnographic photographs of Native Americans from the turn of the twentieth century appears as a specter, opening a gap between Curtis’s “vanishing people” and the First Nations people of Oppenheimer Park a hundred years later, who defiantly embrace the cliché of “drunken Indians.” How can they reject the conditions in which they live? How can they choose a life worth living? How can they gather strength to rise up?

Franco Berardi has written that suicide has come to be increasingly perceived as the only effective action of the oppressed, the only means to dispel anxiety, depression, and impotence. In his view, suicide – whether by France Telecom workers, Hindu farmers, First Nations peoples across North America, CFE union members, or youth everywhere – is the final self-affirmation before accepting defeat.²¹ The pervasiveness of this situation recalls a recent manifesto written by young French activists: “[We are] expropriated from our own language by education, from our songs by reality-TV contests, from our flesh by mass pornography, from our city by the police, and from our friends by wage labor.”²²

Self-destruction has become a gesture of *reclamation*, as if bodies, words, homes, and communities were never owned in the first place. In this light, I wish to read Hamid Dabashi’s declaration “We are no longer postcolonial creatures” as a mandate to acknowledge that the modus operandi of modernism is colonial destruction, and that a neoliberal global cartography has been established in which everybody competes against everybody for

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“market success.” In this regard, the demise of tolerance and inclusivity, along with the rise of new identitarian essentialisms, operate as a justification for social Darwinism on a global scale. People who live in intolerable situations sustain the privileges of people living in modern, rich enclaves. By offering these redundant populations woefully inadequate tools of repair like relocation and “development,” we deny that anything was ever broken in the first place and that the legacy of modernity is a permanent war against life.

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