

# **BUT YOU, SIR, YOU SHALL DIE. THAT IS WHAT IT IS ABOUT.**

**By Claus Carstensen**

The text has previously been published in the Danish newspaper Information March 17th-18th 2001. Although evolving around another genocide than the one discussed on the exhibition Pavilion Of The Naked (Galleri Tom Christoffersen 30.05.-28.06.2008), the text touches upon the same subject matters.

*At least fifty mostly decomposed cadavers covered the floor, wadded in clothing, their belongings strewn about and smashed. Macheded skulls had rolled here and there.*

*The dead looked like pictures of the dead. They did not smell. They did not buzz with flies. They had been killed thirteen months earlier, and they hadn't been moved.*

*The killers killed all day at Nyarubuye. At night they cut the Achilles tendons of survivors and went off to feast behind the church, roasting cattle looted from their victims in big fires, and drinking beer. (Bottled beer, banana beer - Rwandans may not drink more beer than other Africans, but they drink prodigious quantities of it around the clock.) And, in the morning, still drunk after whatever sleep they could find beneath the cries of their prey, the killers at Nyarubuye went back and killed again. Day after day, minute to minute, Tutsi by Tutsi: all across Rwanda, they worked like that.*

*The talk about Kibeho had started when Alexandre asked me if I had been to the church at Nyarubuye, to see the memorial there of the unburied dead from the genocide. I hadn't yet, and although when I did go I didn't regret it, I gave Alexandre what I thought - and still think - was a good argument against such places. I said that I was resistant to the very idea of leaving bodies like that, forever in their state of violation - on display as monuments to the crime against them, and to the armies that had stopped the killing, as much as to the lives they had lost. Such places contradicted the spirit of the popular Rwandan T-shirt: 'Genocide. Bury the dead, not the truth.'*

*- Philip Gourevitch, We wish to inform you that tomorrow we will be killed with our families - Stories from Rwanda.*

Unlike other animals, humans bury each other. We remove our cadavers from the

face of the earth, because in our minds, the cadavers remind us that we shall die. They mirror and precede our own individual destruction as a single, but effective creator of difference, which defines life as something before death.

And that, at once, turns the history of religion upside down: There is a life after birth, as the Situationists said, and not one after death. That is what it is about. That is what is implicated in the quote by Jacques Lacan, quoted in the above headline.

The formation of consciousness, *this theory of the mind*, takes its point of departure in language and representation and undauntedly produces time as a concept which subjectively is determined by and measures itself in relation to death. In our common consciousness time is measured historically and therefore, attempts to free oneself from timeliness are also attempts to end history and abolish death.

All revolutionary situations must be about annulling time in one great now. A form of *permanent presence* as a freedom from death and representation, and representation here should be understood as the ability to re-present or as a repeated presence - as in an in a dammed past *repeated presence*, to which there is tied a certain work of memory and mourning. This is also why, in this state of revolutionary presence, it does not seem necessary to bury the dead, as for instance in Kampuchea in the 70s or Rwanda in the 90s.

But this freedom from death is ecstatic and most of all resembles a frenzy of enthusiasm. In connection to hooliganism, the English use a concept such as *mobs out of control*, and to some extent, that term covers every revolutionary situation as an event being controlled by the affect and organised spontaneously. And, paradoxically enough, with great ambition: 'Even mobs and riots have a design, and great and sustained destruction requires great ambition'.

This situation is almost indistinguishable from that of excess or intoxication. And it often lasts only as long as it takes to sleep it off. Afterwards the hang over sets in as consciousness of timeliness and own death - and subsequently, a long term control and organisation of power: 'In discussions of us-against-them scenarios of popular violence, the fashion these days is to speak of mass hatred. But while hatred can be animating, it appeals to weakness. The "authors" of the genocide, as Rwandans call them, understood that in order to move huge numbers of weak people to do wrong, it is necessary to appeal to their desire for strength - and the gray force that really

drives people is power. Hatred and power are both, in their different ways, passions. The difference is that hatred is purely negative, while power is essentially positive: you surrender to hatred, but you aspire to power'.

This is also why certain images and knowledges are forbidden in totalitarian systems, because they represent difference in the form of a past and so reflect something other. As for instance in the blowing up of the ancient Buddha statues in Bamyán in present day Afghanistan.

That is what it is about: Revolutionary movements and avant-gardes always go through a totalitarian transformation, seeking to transcend time and end history in order to impose a permanent presence, where process, pulsation, past, difference and death are eliminated.

Although there is an unstoppable inner dynamic in the use and instrumentalization of knowledge of certain modes of research, this does not change the fact that, for instance, gene research has almost reached a point where it is capable of cloning humans at the same time as it withholds any real statement in discussions around permanence and presence. For what is cloning other than a *revolutionary 5. Internationale*, where in the name of freedom and equality time, death, difference and gendered reproduction are sought to be abolished.

It would be appropriate to ask the question: How does the subjectivity and consciousness disperse itself in cloned individuals? Whose is the memory? Where does it start and where does it end?

Maybe something like Nauman's endless video-loop *Clown Torture: Dark and Stormy Night with laughter*. 'It was a dark and stormy night. Three men were sitting around a campfire. One of the men said, "Tell us a story, Jack". And Jack said, "It was a dark and stormy night. Three men were sitting around a campfire. One of the men said, "Tell us a story, Jack". And Jack said, "It was a dark and stormy night ..."'.

Or maybe something like the member of the band *Repeat Repeat* who in the beginning of the 80s and probably under the influence of the omnipresent *No Future*-self stigmatization, assumed the pseudonym *Pete Repeat*.

Repetition, doubling, reproduction and replication enter as fundamental dynamic

elements in the development of consciousness and the ability to re-present, but in many ways they have also become a burden for culture in the race for segregation. Because that is what consciousness and the ability to re-present are about; repetition, creation of difference and segregation.

Reality is neither real nor nominal, but pulsating back and forth between the positions in indefinite condensations and displacements. We never receive the real thing. We are always simultaneously subjects and objects for each other. We are always represented. Surrounded by absence and traces as a result of timely displacements. But we remember and we imagine, make representation - and therefore we easily become sentimental at the thought of absence: 'If you forget I will remember it word by word'.

Strangely enough participants in reality TV shows such as *The Bar* and *Big Brother* always talk about making a difference when asked why they entered. But there is rarely any difference in place, since the principle of reality TV is that it is only supposed to function here and now and is therefore already outdated tomorrow. It lives in and from the now in the same way as the *endless summer of love* of the hippies or of dance culture or the cyber space of science fiction.

Art, then, is a lacuna. It is one of the last social areas that contributes to the critique of a productive order in the form of a prodigal, but cyclist economy that is not subordinated to the functionally directed instrumentalization that governs the rest of the social field where it is too often being called upon to solve socio-political problems with tools of cultural politics, all according to the motto: 'Realise your inner artist'.

Art, or maybe in particular the discipline and work ethic with which you set out to engage with art, has to do with existence, will and negation. It is a continuous confirmation of the existence of art as an *insistence upon singularity* understood as otherness. As will it *sets itself up against and forces something into a form*, and as a negation it is the *investment of will in definition*, the work of negating or backing out.

In the article *Art in the Age of Democracy* in the book *Semiotics of Drawing*, Boris Groys concerns himself with a special form of social graphic, which is about the lack of legitimacy and political representation in the relation between artistic avant-garde and parliamentary democracy. He points out that the imperative notion of art as that

which exceeds is today managed by the museums. The European museum has a built-in expansive logic, which demands that it continuously must expand and include everything. If this logic is paired with the demands of the artistic avant-garde, what you get is a *museological* avant-garde, defining the limits of the lack of legitimacy of parliamentary representation, which is a consequence of the complexity of contemporary society. A complexity which the parliament no longer is capable of representing and so leave to be represented by art institutions.

'It is obvious that the actual functioning of political institutions is not capable of reflecting this diversity and is therefore always suffering from lack of legitimacy. This lack of legitimacy is in modern society counterbalanced in culture, especially in art. In this way art archives the political function of representing all that which is no longer politically represented or has not yet become so - and maybe never will be'.

'It is a common assumption that there is an institutional "profit" of the breaking of borders, the affront of taboos and the revolt of the avant-garde. But it is more likely that the institutions themselves demand and initiate these breakings of borders and affronting of taboos, because the democratic universalistic principle of representation subsequently demands that everything, which can be represented also will be represented. The logic of the avant-garde is, as a starting point, an institutional logic. It reflects the at any time effective border between political representation and artistic representation'.

'However, travels and migrations across borders do not mean that it [the border between political and artistic institutions] disappears - on the contrary. It will even be defined anew again and again, at the same time as being reconsolidated and secured. And only the continuous existence of the border makes possible a further affronting of it. It even makes the affronting strategically necessary. But the affronting of borders is also meant to reconstruct and re-thematize the border, make it visible and possible to experience'.

This also means that the classical revolutionary movement and the classical avant-garde, who in their military rhetoric and self understanding orient themselves towards finality, paradoxically enough are transformed and come to orient themselves, instead, towards a sense of process, towards evolutionary dimensions which as such actually work quite well. At the same time, however, they adopt the otherness of art as a condition and make it visible as part of the process and then pass it on.

Therefore a part of this process is also about making visible and preserving traces. At the moment, the information carriers seem to become smaller and smaller and the information they carry increasingly virtual, something that is in principle anticipated by conceptual art's vision of the dematerialization of the art object.

Seen in this light, the revolution has triumphed itself to death. The permanent revolution has been replaced by the tyranny of permanent presence, the categorical imperative of which reads: At any price, avoid trace, past and preserving. Everything is reality. We are on here and now. And at the very same moment, already outdated.