

# A Frightful Leap into Darkness

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## Auto-Destructive Art and Extinction

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### Wildness

In a new book titled “Wild Things: Queer Theory After Nature,” I develop a new critical vocabulary to access different, transdisciplinary ways of thinking about race, sexuality, alternative political imaginaries and queer futurity and extinction. Wildness in no way signals the untamed frontier, or the absence of modernity, the barbarian, the animalistic or the opposite of civilization. Rather, in a post-colonial and even de-colonizing vein, it has emerged in the last few years as a marker of a desire to return queerness to the disorder of an unsorted field of desires and drives; to the disorienting and disquieting signifying functions it once named and held in place; and to a set of activist and even pedagogical strategies that depend upon chance, randomness, surprise, entropy and that seek to counter the organizing and bureaucratic logics of the state with potential sites of ungovernability and abjection.

Wildness signifies in my project in a number of different ways, but for the purpose of this presentation I want to use the framework of “abjection” to explain some of the appeal of wildness and a few of the ways in which it expresses relations between the unnamable, the excessive, horror and death. Later on, I will turn to a set of performances and art projects that are deliberately auto destructive and that collectively imagine the end of the human.

In *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Julia Kristeva describes abjection variously as a terrain beyond “the thinkable,” as a “dark revolt of being”; as an opposition to being launched within the self against the self; as an archaic sense of the uncanny that rise up within the subject but appears as “radically separate” and “loathsome.”<sup>1</sup> The abject for Kristeva, as it was for Mary Douglas, occupies the realm of disgust – it oozes in the wound as pus, solidifies in milk as a repulsive skin, it takes the form of shit, decay, the corpse. She writes of death: “the corpse seen without God and outside of science, is

the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life."<sup>2</sup> Here, Kristeva begins to elaborate a theory of abjection and the human as proximity to mortality and as a kind of wild relation to life and death. Kristeva also, implicitly, connects abjection to other forms of exclusion, to mechanisms of race and racism specifically, that are occasionally expressed in terms of a bodily disdain for the other.

Kristeva is in conversation with Freud, Lacan and Douglas but also less obviously with Foucault who laid out the fate of the human without God in *The Order of Things*, a book published 15 years before Kristeva's . Here, Foucault argued that, in a post-religious world, "Nature can no longer be good."<sup>3</sup> Foucault, like Kristeva, describes the modern episteme as a framework that takes shape around a core of unknowing and unbeing and while she applies the term abjection to this sense of unbeing, he uses the terminology of "the wild," and speculates that within a modern equation, life is forever in danger of "becoming wild once more."<sup>4</sup> Wildness for Foucault is an experience of finitude lived within what he calls "an untamed ontology."<sup>5</sup> The untamed or wild ontology is a form of being that lies, according to Foucault "on the other side of all the things that are" and "even beyond those that can be."<sup>6</sup> It is, in fact, *a disorder of things* that emerges and takes its ghastly shape in the shadows cast by the very project that discerns, desires and demands order in the first place.

I want to draw abjection into a conversation with wildness through the consideration of a strand of post WW2 avant-garde aesthetic production that gathers under the heading of "auto-destructive art," and that, in its attention to abjection, makes clear some of the stakes in an investment in wildness. I also use this tradition of violent and risky art practices in order to situate some recent queer work that also engages the abject project of undoing and unbecoming human.

## Auto-Destructive Art

Recent exhibitions, like *Damage Control: Art and Destruction since 1950* at the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington D.C. in 2013, and art events like The Serpentine's "Extinction Marathon" of 2014, have returned to ADA from the 1960's and have emphasized the links that were made then and continue to linger today between ADA and the ongoing environmental, health and military crises that define our own historical moment.<sup>7</sup>

This recent interest in ADA, however, attempts to draw out its productive and even positive function. And so, curators like Kerry Brougher of the Hirshhorn have built shows around the idea of ADA but have emphasized the possibility that spectacles of mass destruction can morph into "something positive." However, the spirit of the practice of ADA, which was born around the time of Adorno's pronouncements about the impossibility of poetry after Auschwitz, invites us to inhabit corrosion and abjection, to sit

with the deeply destructive tendency of the human and to see how the market exploits the contradictions between violence and art.

For the Hirshhorn show, *Damage Control, Art and Destruction Since 1950*, Brougher made a desperate attempt to market ADA to museum-going intelligentsia and, in the symposium that accompanied his show, he proposed that ADA is a way that “art could actually grab a hold of this destructive potential and use it in a positive way.”<sup>8</sup>

This positivity actually contradicts the original intention of ADA as we shall see. The term ADA was coined by Gustav Metzger in 1959 and named a set of practices – some aesthetic, some intellectual, some conceptual – that involved destroying the actual art work, removing the artist altogether from the scene of creativity and taking aim at concepts of human that depend upon clear and enabling relations between all three. If a liberal theory of art makes of it a vector for the free and individualistic expression of innovation and fantasy, ADA expresses art as a practice of breaking and brokenness, of noise and dissonance, of unbecoming, abjection and splintering in the process. Some theories of art presume an agent who channels a kind of transcendent aesthetic discourse. Others, particularly in relation to avant-garde aesthetic production (as theorized by someone like Clement Greenberg for example) understand the artist as an agent for a critique of market driven cultural production and an autonomous force for transformation. ADA rests upon a very different notion of the artist and therefore produces a wholly different, queer perhaps, understanding of art, the human, creativity and futurity. For the artist in ADA, the human – body, mind, concept, molecular flow – must be dismantled, taken apart and unhinged and art must be the tool and the force for this collapse.

Rather than using the framework offered by curators like Brougher, the framework of altruistic destruction, or destruction as a set up for conventional creativity, ADA offers no excuses, no apologies, no justifications for its violent content. But ADA also reframes and remaps violence so that we see it less as a riotous force of brutal confrontation or a militaristic operation and more as the evidence of the obliteration that accompanies human inscriptions upon the environment. Kristin Stiles, for example, one of ADA’s only historians, comments that the gathering of ADA artists at a symposium in London in 1966 revealed the political intentions of ADA artists. She writes:

Summoning destruction to mitigate the commercialization and fetishization of form that accompanied the loss of connection to social meaning in contemporary art of the period, DIAS artists examined and exposed contradictions in social and political practices. In this sense, DIAS artists wielded destruction against destruction as a means to deconstruct cultural assumptions about artistic creation.<sup>9</sup>

As Stiles shows in her survey of the movement, ADA drew a whole host of artists to this symposium including the Viennese Actionism group, a Dutch anarchist group called PROVO, Situationists and more. While they were mostly male, the ADA artists did include artists of color, like Raphael Montañez Ortiz, the Puerto Rican artist and founder of El Museo Del Barrio who destroyed a chair at the 1966 symposium, and has made the dissection and violent destruction of pianos a signature performance. Ortiz's performances of destruction are often commentaries on possession (he bought the chair in London before he destroyed it and displaced a white man who was sitting in it); on harmony (he makes a different kind of music while destroying the pianos), and social identity – he inhabits rather than disavows stereotypes of racialized violence. And indeed Ortiz brings out the racial critique that is implicit in Auto Destructive Art.

Auto Destructive Art, one should note, never found an audience, a following, a curatorial home and most of Metzger's attempts to (dis)organize this art movement ended with little or no impact. His manifestos were received but not acted upon; many of his actions were described but not performed; many of his performances were carried out but not recorded. Indeed, Metzger's output consists of a series of manifestos that now stand as promises that fail to materialize, declarations that miss their mark and calls to action that found no constituency. The very failure of ADA is latent within its conception – it cannot by definition be successful in that its completion requires its own dismantling – and as a concept, ADA relies upon and presumes its own failure to connect, communicate and create.

## Violence and Art

Auto Destructive Art took many forms. I survey a few examples below:

**Metzger:** For Metzger, ADA was a commentary both upon the experience of world war and upon racial genocide. Gustav Metzger was born in Germany in 1926 and he journeyed to England in 1939 with his brother on a “Kindertransport” through the efforts of the Refugee Children’s Movement, a collaboration between the Red Cross, the Quakers and a wealthy philanthropist named Nicholas Winton. Metzger, like most of the child refugees, never saw his parents again. Gustav Metzger’s work was profoundly influenced by his experience as child refugee from Nazi Germany. We could situate Metzger not only in relation to trauma as it has been theorized through memory and more recently as it has been situated in relation to the potential for repair but as an irresolvable, to use Kristeva’s term, “malady of the soul.”<sup>10</sup> In recent work, Kristeva identifies this term in the present with “the suspension of jouissance,” but also with sexual play and gender variance, and finally with a “need to believe” in a post-God period.<sup>11</sup>

Metzger’s artistic method, which involves engaging, mining and conjuring the void at the center of human existence and using it to counteract

the forces of Fascism, capitalism and global warming, could be situated easily within Kristeva's genealogy of contemporary malaise but also can be read in Winnicott's terms. As a child refugee, (precisely the category that Winnicott studies), Metzger, experienced the separation from his parents not as their abandonment of him, but as with many other kindertransport children, he experienced the guilt of his abandoning them to their fate. His art practice is almost an attempt to destroy the world within which such destruction is possible and real.

Metzger's philosophy of auto-destruction produces gestures that are all at once punk (Pete Townsend's famous guitar smashing performances are attributed to his connection with Metzger), queer (the obliteration of the grandiosity of the human has been the goal of at least one strand of queer theory), and anti-Fascist – he refuses the model of the genius artist committed to seductive beauty, and instead seems to position the artist as a figure who repeatedly puts himself in the way of violence and obliteration and who may or may not survive his own creativity. As Stiles puts it: *Destruction art bears witness to the tenuous conditionality of survival; it is the visual discourse of the survivor. It is the only attempt in the visual arts to grapple seriously with the technology and psycho-dynamics of actual and virtual extinction, one of the few cultural practices to redress the general absence of discussion about destruction in society.*<sup>12</sup>

Gustav Metzger's work involved decay, transformation, erosion and disintegration and it often made visible natural processes and highlighted industrial procedures all at once in ways that would now be considered part of what we are calling "new materialism." By linking industrial procedures to natural forms of decay, Metzger offers a critique of the notion of art as the work of genius, and proposes instead that we see art as a site for destruction, for planned obsolescence, for disappearance. One exhibition of his work in Tel Aviv referred to Metzger as a "humanist-anarchist,"<sup>13</sup> but his practice can be understood in a few different modes:

1. Aesthetic obliteration – this would describe the acid painting as well as his many works that were proposed but not made. The work resides in dismantling the creative process and refusing to highlight creativity over destruction in the formulation of the human.

2. Uncomfortable Proximity – in his acid painting, Metzger, much to his own dismay, had to wear a gas mask to avoid being contaminated by the fumes from the hydrochloric acid. This uncomfortable proximity is one he tries to reproduce for the viewer bringing us close, too close to the scene of obliteration, mass murder, environmental devastation. Being uncomfortably close to these scenes of destruction force the viewer into complicitous relation to the action of standing by, watching and condoning.

3. Self-Erasure and the erasure of art – in a late collaboration with London Fieldworks, Metzger, Gilchrist and Joelson tried to create a sculptural object

by recording the presence of nothing. In this work, titled *Null Object* from 2012, Metzger sat for sessions of 20 minutes trying to wipe his mind clean of thoughts. His brainwaves were then transmitted to a robot that was motored by the electronic messages to work upon a piece of stone. The resulting sculpture is a rendering of absence, human absence, and represents aesthetic activity as an undoing not a making, a form of unbeing not an extension of existence. The robot at the heart of *Null Object*, moreover, literally becomes the artist destroying both object and subject in the process.

Metzger, of course, was not the only artist to engage in a self-eliminating process as a mode of political critique. We can connect his work to other artists who also found an aesthetic in the practice of obscuring, reducing, damaging or canceling the self. For example, Bas Jan Ader was a Dutch artist who staged falling as an art practice. He was the child of Dutch Christians who believed it was their duty to hide Jews during the war. His father was executed for hiding Jews in 1942. In his early years as an artist, Ader would make drawings on a sheet of paper, erase them and draw again. This early performance of repeated erasure, like Metzger's work, plays out a number of reactions to survival, genocide and fascism and refuses the heroics of presence for the pathos of staged absence.

Later, in his performance practice, Bas Jan Ader staged falls and repeatedly set himself up against gravity in a futile struggle with the inevitability of failure and death. These falls, some of which he labeled as "organic," others as "geometric," involved Ader leaning, balancing, tumbling and hanging, plunging, stumbling, surviving. In this one, Ader draws not only on the image of the enemies of the state hung publically by Nazi's but also the longer shadow of lynching, the strange fruit hanging "organically" from trees in the American South. Ader's falls are feats of unbalancing and uncontrolling and they all frame the body as a site of collapse and the organic as a site of extreme violence. Unlike many of the masculinist works of self-harm that made up ADA in the 1960's, Ader's works are quietly self-erasing. They do not seek to heroically install the artist as a Christ figure, nor do they ostentatiously call attention to blood and guts as the Viennese school did. Rather, they are quiet works of abandon and loss.

Ader's final work in 1975 was titled "In Search of the Miraculous." Ader set sail in a 12-foot boat in an attempt to cross the Atlantic. His boat was found smashed off the coast of Ireland six months later.

**Viennese Actionism:** the Viennese Actionism group from the 1960's, used piss and shit self-abusing performances to make statements about post-war Austrian Fascism. Like writers such as Elfriede Jelinek and Thomas Bernhard, Günter Brus and the other Viennese Actionists saw Fascism as something embedded in Austrian culture and in Austrians or in people raised there. Brus's infamous acts of self-mutilation seek to perform evacuations: of taste from value, of matter from the body, of acceptance from abjection. In one

of Brus's famous walk-about - strolls he made out in the town dressed not to kill but as if he had already been killed, Brus resembles a well-dressed zombie. Metzger, who occasionally appeared on panels and at events with Brus, called this his "white dandy attire" and describes photograph of Brus's antics as "a frightful jump in darkness." Others from this group jumped into darkness in more frightening ways and so Otto Mühl, in later life, began an authoritarian cult with himself at the center and switched from a critique of capitalism to embracing it along with all manner of exploitative sexual practices. This example presses us to think more about the queer and feminist potential of ADA since it harbors within its form both anarchist and authoritarian projects.

**Valie Export:** Valie Export's work critiqued the masculinism of the Viennese Actionism group and perhaps spotted earlier than most that their violent performances had the potential to both critique and reproduce the savagery of Fascism. Here we come closest to a Kristevan notion of abjection. In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva shows how the horror of the feminine or more plainly the female body was embedded in what she terms "corporeal waste" or everything from "menstrual blood to nail parings." The fear and disgust provoked by such bodily fluids, she proposes, emerge out of the "objective frailty of the symbolic order" as captured by this particular form of abjection.

Valie Export's own auto destructive work such as "Remote, Remote" (1973) makes clear how auto destruction can offer a vital critique of normative values. In this work, she sits in front of a poster of two children who had been victims of sexual abuse by their parents and she pares her nails and cuticles with a box cutter, occasionally rinsing her bloody fingers in a bowl of milk. This performance, which is hard to watch, despite its calm and placid tone, brings milk and blood together in a violent collision making visible the brutality of both motherhood (milk) and biology (blood). Grooming her nails, Export transforms a beautifying ritual into a horrifying scene of dissection.

### **Queer ADA: Jumping into Darkness**

The spectacle of the white zombie with the black line drawn down his head as if to cleave him in half or cancel him out or draw a boundary through the body cannot help but to raise the question of transgression; and the use of the body to shock and repulse while offering critiques of the normative and the domestic raises the question of queerness as well – the queerness of the bifurcation of embodiment, the queerness of bodily transgression, the queerness of matter out of place. But, the risk and mutilation endured by the Wiener Aktionismus group was staged in an avowedly masculinist mode of engagement. Yoko Ono's "Cut Piece" was also part of the DIAS and she staged performances of unbecoming that can be recognized as part of a hetero-feminine form of masochistic submission. But let's consider a queer version of auto-destruction in terms of a scene within which the object, to quote Kristeva again, "is perverse." She writes: "The object is perverse



because it neither gives up nor assumes a prohibition, a rule or a law; but turns them aside, misleads, corrupts..."<sup>14</sup>

In a ferocious performance piece titled "Becoming an Image," body artist Cassils pounds a huge mound of clay in the dark. The piece was commission for an event at the ONE Archive in Los Angeles, an archive of LGBT materials. Cassils, in his piece, wanted to draw attention to all that is missing from the art archives that document art and political movements. Cassils' performance comments upon the dis-appearance of bodies and lives and the unmaking of some worlds through the process of documenting others. The piece is experienced in the dark with only the soundtrack of Cassils' monumental exertions filling the air and only the flash of an onsite photographer allows the audience to see, randomly, how Cassils' performance destroys the clay and the clay destroys Cassils. In the process of becoming an image, both the subject and the object are un/becoming, shattering, destroyed and destroying. What remains are two destroyed bodies and a scene of abjection – the ruination of the symbolic order if you like.

The smashed clay and its relation to the exhausted figure of Cassils flesh, returns us to Jane Bennett's "political ecology of things."<sup>15</sup> Bennett's description of lively and dynamic objects provides a context for understanding the staged confrontations between humans and things that make up auto-destructive art and that go part way to explaining this brutal collision between clay and sculptor in which the force of the clay meets the force of flesh and both are bruised and reshaped in the encounter. Bennett and Kristeva both see a world teeming with non-human life, life that parasitically feeds upon the human, life that teems within the human, life that proceeds without the human. As the corrosive presence of the human frays the edges of all other forms of life on earth, we begin to look harder and closer at the approaching catastrophe.

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<sup>1</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror : An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1982) : 1.

<sup>2</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Abjection*, p. 4.

<sup>3</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York and London, Routledge, 1970): 302.

<sup>4</sup> Foucault, *The Order of Things*: 302.

<sup>5</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*: 303.

<sup>6</sup> Foucault, *The Order of Things*: 303.

<sup>7</sup> See Kerry Brougher and Russell Ferguson, *Damage Control: Art and Destruction since 1950* (New York, NY: Prestel, 2013).

<sup>8</sup> See the video of the symposium:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4ZH2IUBwFu4>

<sup>9</sup> Kristine Stiles, « The Story of the Destruction in Art Symposium and the “DIAS affect » Published in Sabina Breitwieser, ed. *Gustav Metzger. Geschichte Geschichte* (Vienna & Ostfildern-Ruit: Generali Foundation and Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2005): 41-65.

<sup>10</sup> Julia Kristeva, *New Maladies of the Soul*, translated by Ross Guberman (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1997).

<sup>11</sup> See Julia Kristeva, “The Psychic Life: A Life in Time”:

<http://www.kristeva.fr/the-psychic-life-a-life-in-time.html>

<sup>12</sup> Kristine Stiles, Ph.D., “Selected Comments on Destruction Art,” *Book for Unstable Media* (V2\_Publishing, Hertogenbosch, Netherlands: V2-Organization, 1992).

<sup>13</sup> See Galia Yahav, “Nazism, Nukes and ‘Nam: The Art of ‘Perpetual Refugee’ Gustav Metzger in Haaretz, Feb. 18, 2014:

<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/culture/.premium-a-radical-artist-s-work-come-to-tel-aviv-1.5323267>

<sup>14</sup> Kristeva, *The Powers of Abjection*: p. 15.

<sup>15</sup> See Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009).