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KATRIEN BOLLEN

Guerrilla Warriors on the Brooklyn Bridge: A Case Study of the Unbearables' Poetic Terrorism (1994-2000)

We are Unbearables. Witness us.
Susan Scutti, Unbearables Arts Festival, 2002

Abstract: On 13 September 1994, a loose collective of Downtown poets known as the Unbearables lined up on the Brooklyn Bridge pedestrian walkway, all the way from Manhattan to Brooklyn. During rush hour, they simultaneously ranted erotic poems in six-minute loops, so that, at least theoretically, “a few words from each reader would have reached each pedestrian’s ear, and the whole string of phrases would add up to a single ‘stochastic’ poem, a different version for each and every passerby” (Bey 1994, n.p.). The Unbearables’ thirty-minute performance was repeated in six consecutive years with only minor variations. The current article reconstructs the annual Brooklyn Bridge readings on the basis of previously unpublished sources that include personal interviews with the Unbearables and archival material from New York University’s Fales Library Downtown Collection and the SUNY of Buffalo Poetry Collection. On the basis of this reconstruction, the article analyzes the event as a poetic implementation of anarchist philosopher Hakim Bey’s theories on the Temporary Autonomous Zone, Poetic Terrorism and Artistic Disappearance.

1. An Introduction to the Unbearable Beatniks of Light/Life

The 1974 Loft Law enabled artists drawn to Downtown New York’s edgy reputation to live cheaply and develop a vibrant underground scene of painting, photography, video art, Punk and New Wave music, performance art and literature (see, for instance, M. Taylor 2006 and Stosuy 2006). All the arts developed alongside and inextricably intertwined with each other, yet a diachronic shift in emphasis was nevertheless discernable: the wave of renewal hit the music scene first, and impacted the visual arts in 1980, when the Times Square Show exhibited works by artists such as Jenny Holzer and Keith Haring in a former massage parlor. By the mid-eighties, AIDS, gentrification, and the commercialization of the arts scene had taken their toll, and cynics proclaimed that the Downtown heydays were over. Around the same time, however, the literary scene gathered momentum: a circuit of underground magazines such as *Between C and D*, *Red Tape*, *The Portable Lower East Side*, *Public Illumination Magazine* and *Appearances* provided a forum for non-mainstream authors and cradled the literary careers of Patrick McGrath,

Kathy Acker, Lynne Tillman, Dennis Cooper, and many others (see, for instance, Siegle 1989 and Lievens 2006).

Vital to the Downtown literary enterprise were the open-mike nights in venues such as Life Café, ABC No Rio, the Nuyorican Poets Café, and Bob Holman's Bowery Poetry Club. These readings continued and reinvigorated the Downtown oral tradition that can be traced back to the Beats in the fifties and the performances at Les Deux Mégots and Le Metro in the sixties (Kane 2003, xvi). In addition, they reinforced a conceptualization of Downtown poetry as a "public and collaborative" effort (Kane 2003, 206) and a community-organizing principle. The Poetry Project performances at St. Mark's Church, in particular, left a permanent mark on the social structuring of the Downtown literary scene. Established in 1966, the Poetry Project has always served as a meeting ground for poets with Beat, New York School and Black Mountain affinities (Kane 2003, xiii), so that it quickly established a reputation as the anti-establishment "alternative" to the "aesthetically more conservative reading series located uptown" (Kane 2003, 138). As a result, many of the non-mainstream stars of the seventies and eighties were first welcomed on stage at St. Mark's Church.

In 1985, a loose collective of St. Mark's Church poets and other Downtown stalwarts coalesced in the Tin Pan Alley Bar to "drink and talk about literature, and to bemoan the shitty state of American culture" (*Unbearables from A to Z* 2007, 1). The group was initially united by little more than alcohol and a shared sense of nostalgia for a romanticized Downtown neighborhood populated by Hell's Angels, prostitutes, junkies and artists – the latter not necessarily being a separate category. Soon, however, the poets and artists engaged in joint projects and labeled themselves "The Unbearable Beatniks of Life." This name was coined by Mike Golden, whose tongue-in-cheek reference to *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1984) was allegedly inspired by frustration with the fact that "for some unfathomable reason all the really groovy chicks were into Kundera" (Golden 1992, n.p.). Gradually, authors with greater and lesser literary talents joined the collective, which, lacking an official membership, was theoretically open to all. When the Beatnik label was eventually dropped, the Unbearables, also known as the Beer Mystics, were born. Next to participating in numerous poetry readings in Downtown Manhattan, the collective became infamous during the nineties for anarchist 'acts of Poetic Terrorism' that involved picketing the *New Yorker's* "anemic" poetry (1993-1994) (Feast 1996, n.p.), disturbing NYU's Kerouac conferences as well as the Beat exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art (1995), and creating Temporary Autonomous Zones on the Brooklyn Bridge (1994-2000).

2. Hakim Bey's Temporary Autonomous Zone

2.1 Temporary Enclaves of Total Liberty

Hakim Bey, officially known as Peter Lamborn Wilson, published his essay on the Temporary Autonomous Zone (henceforth TAZ) in 1985, but previous versions had already been circulating on flyers (Bey 2003, ix). The essay gained cult notoriety in the underground circuit, and as Bey deliberately refrained from defining the TAZ concept in great detail, it was easily assimilated into miscellaneous discourses. To name just a few, references to TAZs have been made in discussions on alternative media strategies developed by the Amsterdam-based ADILKNO collective (Lovink 1997), Russian religious movements (Eliason / Browning 2002), Foucault's heterotopia (Doron 2008), raves (Reynolds 2002), virtual realities (J. Taylor 1997) and the ConFest event in Australia (St John 2001). Also, and crucially, Bey's theories became central to the Brooklyn Bridge performances of the Unbearables. All the inherently transient manifestations of the TAZ represent alternative spaces beyond a specific set of rules – whether those of the mainstream media, monolithic religious organizations, or everyday life. In Bey's terms, TAZs of all kind function as transient “enclaves of total liberty” (Bey 2003, 114), because they liberate a certain space from “the State” – loosely defined as the stifling “apparatus of Control” (Bey 2003, 132). Exempt from the State's crushing strictures, the TAZ then enables “an intensification, a surplus, an excess, a potlatch, life spending itself in living rather than merely surviving” (Bey 2003, 110).

Hakim Bey discerns prototypical TAZs in the settlement of the New World and the Buccaneers' “enclaves of total liberty,” also referred to as “pirate utopias” (Bey 2003, 114 and 117). Typical of these utopian settlements from the past is that they tend to occupy empty spaces on the map, the *terra incognita* beyond the frontier. Bey's choice of prototype gives an oddly imperialist ring to the spatial liberation he proposes, given that Western expansion spawned some of the most unsavory excesses of colonialism and the extirpation of those who made the empty space on the map not quite so empty. Bey does not acknowledge this flip side of the New World enclaves; in fact, his frontier nostalgia even continues to reverberate in his description of contemporary TAZ manifestations. After remarking that “[o]urs is the first century without *terra incognita*, without a frontier” (Bey 2003, 100), Bey suggests that contemporary creators of TAZs should look for the cracks and fissures in “the Beast's Belly” (Bey 2003, x), the blind spots on the existing map. The implication is that TAZs are still beyond the frontier, albeit the metaphorical one between State-sanctioned activities and guerrilla actions carried out “clandestinely” and without detection (Bey 2003, 99). It is worth noting here that while Bey does not explicitly translate the contemporary TAZ to an urban context, the Unbearables' Brooklyn Bridge readings do. One could argue that in a world virtually lacking uncharted territory and areas beyond State control, the postmodern city has the greatest potential to accommodate TAZs. Indeed, the present-day metropolis serves as the contemporary version of the New World's *terra incognita* in the

sense that, in Baudrillardian terms, it is a system of self-referential signs and therefore ultimately unknowable. Put differently, the Old West beyond the frontier resonates with the postmodern city's (permanent) state of 'as-yet-to-be-discovered.'¹ This potential of the contemporary metropolis is eagerly exploited by the Unbearables.

2.2 Apolitical Resistance to the State

In his influential book on avant-garde performance, Günter Berghaus observes that in contemporary society, "fundamental changes in the cultural landscape of most Western countries make anarchical attacks on 'the establishment,' as promoted by the former avant-garde, an anachronism" (Berghaus 2005, 262). These changes – and the resulting lack of an easily identifiable enemy in particular – at least partly explain why Bey is more interested in the disruptive moment of liberation as such than in its social consequences. The simile that Bey uses to describe the TAZ is a case in point:

The TAZ is like an uprising which does not engage directly with the State, a guerilla [sic] operation which liberates an area (of land, of time, of imagination) and then dissolves itself to re-form elsewhere/elsewhen, before the State can crush it. Because the State is concerned primarily with Simulation rather than substance, the TAZ can "occupy" these areas clandestinely and carry on its festal purposes for quite a while in relative peace. (Bey 2003, 99)

Bey pits the TAZ against "the State," which, due to its nebulous definition, cannot be overthrown permanently in a dialectical struggle, but only disrupted by means of insurrectionary moments. Therefore, whereas the Unbearable, in using the theory of the TAZ, tap into the avant-garde tradition of using poetry as a weapon, their goal differs significantly from that of their predecessors. Indeed, the revolutionary aims that characterize Marinetti's "Futurist Reconstruction of the Universe" (Berghaus 2005, 31), the Situationist-inspired Paris revolts of May 1968, or the Guerrilla Girls' anti-sexist and anti-racist project (Guerrilla Girls 2003, 349), to name just a few, are conspicuously absent in the Unbearable rhetoric. Withdrawing from the political realm to wage a guerrilla war against external limitations, the collective advocates an alternative lifestyle – characterized by individual liberty and the pursuit of orgiastic moments – rather than social change.

This "social indifference" has led social anarchist Murray Bookchin to label the TAZ "[o]ne of the most unsavory examples of lifestyle anarchism" (Bookchin 1995, 22 and 25). Bey's type of anarchism, Bookchin argues, is not only utterly ineffectual in combating bourgeois institutions; it may in fact sublimate rebellion, as

¹ In this respect, it is highly significant that cultural critic Gil Doron includes the TAZ in his list of "empty zones at the edge of cities" – a phrase in which the frontier metaphor reverberates – together with terms such as wasteland, urban void, Foucault's heterotopia, and liminal space (Doron 2008, 203).

its post-modernist withdrawal into individualistic ‘autonomy,’ Foucauldian ‘limit experiences,’ and neo-Situationist ‘ecstasy,’ threate[n] to render the very word anarchism politically and socially harmless – a mere fad for the titillation of the petty bourgeois of all ages. [...] The bourgeoisie has nothing whatever to fear from such lifestyle declamations. With its aversion for institutions, mass-based organizations, its largely sub-cultural orientation, its moral decadence, its celebration of transience, and its rejection of programs, this kind of narcissistic anarchism is socially innocuous, often merely a safety valve for discontent toward the prevailing social order. (Bookchin 1995, 22 and 25)

Bookchin then goes on to show that the TAZ does not so much undermine the capitalist system it abhors as it caters to its needs. Ironically indeed, the creed of unbridled individual freedom and the word ‘anarchy’ itself have been assimilated into a marketing strategy for the “Ecstasy Industry” offering socially acceptable “peak experiences” to yuppies (Bookchin 1995, 4, 23 and 27). A supposedly anarchist moment of insurrection, Bookchin claims, the TAZ thus merely *simulates* revolt, and is therefore ultimately apolitical.²

3. The Unbearables’ Brooklyn Bridge Readings

Hakim Bey – or Boh’y, as some of the Unbearables call him – was a contributor to and co-editor of the first Unbearable anthology *Unbearables* (1995), and even though he eventually distanced himself from the collective, he remains on friendly terms with several Unbearables (Bey 2009, n.p.). In addition, Bey’s TAZ theories have always been the defining factor in the collective’s poetics. First of all, the Unbearables label themselves a “free-floating, in-your-face Temporary Autonomous Zone of black humorists, Immediatists, Neoists, and Beer Mystics” (Golden 1992, n.p.). More specifically, the collective is structured as a band, which, as Bey explains, is the alternative model of social relationships between TAZ denizens. In the band, affinity substitutes for blood, and hierarchy gives way to a semi-public, horizontal structure: “the band is open – not to everyone, of course, but to the affinity group, the initiates sworn to a bond of love. The band is not part of a larger hierarchy, but rather part of a horizontal pattern of custom, extended kinship, contract and alliance, [and] spiritual affinities” (Bey 2003, 102).³ Secondly, and crucially, Bey’s theories have played a vital role in shaping the Unbearables’ Brooklyn Bridge readings.

² One could also argue, however, that the supposedly apolitical nature of Bey’s TAZ in fact disguises a political act of complicity with the forces of institutional power. This would be in tune with similar criticisms leveled against Downtown writers and artists. In their highly influential article “The Fine Art of Gentrification,” Deutsche and Ryan point the finger at the Downtown scene(s) for contributing to the gentrification of the Lower East Side (Deutsche 1984); Christopher Mele develops a similar argument (Mele 2000).

³ The horizontal and semi-open make-up that Bey suggests for TAZ affinity groups such as the Unbearables is reminiscent of sociologist Michel Maffesoli’s neo-tribes. Bey does not explicitly refer to Maffesoli’s alternative, but the fact that “[n]eo-tribes gravitate toward topographically unique sites which can mutate into TAZs” (St John 2001, 62) suggests that, like bands, neo-tribes are the potential denizens of TAZs.

3.1 Poetic Terrorism on the Brooklyn Bridge

The Brooklyn Bridge performance of 1994 was documented in the *Unbearables Assembling Magazine*. Included in the magazine is Alfred Vitale's mock CIA document entitled "The Unbearables Manual For Establishing The Temporary Autonomous Zone at Brooklyn Bridge on 13 September, 1994." The manual was meant to guide the participants through the event, and breaks down the *coup d'état* in an alpha, beta, gamma, delta, and omega phase. The document is replete with war terminology, such as "assault," "hostile bicyclists" and "casualties," thereby firmly rooting the Brooklyn Bridge readings in the TAZ's guerrilla war rhetoric. Similarly, Bey's preface to the magazine explains how the Unbearables implement the TAZ principles by means of a strategy called Poetic Terrorism (henceforth PT), which are terrorist only in their "necessary elements of surprise, direct action, and randomness" (Bey 1994, n.p.). PT is thus not essentially destructive, but nevertheless still flirts with crime:

Avoid Recognizable art-categories, avoid politics, don't stick around to argue, don't be sentimental; be ruthless, take risks, vandalize only what must be defaced, do something children will remember all their lives – but don't be spontaneous unless the PT muse has possessed you. Dress up. Leave a false name. Be legendary. The best PT is against the law, but don't get caught. Art as crime; crime as art. (Bey 1994, n.p.)

In causing a moment of creative chaos, PT disentangles art from market forces and institutional frameworks to redefine it as an insurrectionary moment. This change is necessary, Bey argues, because art in its current configuration is systematically reduced to a representational commodity that inspires nothing but "almost universal glassy-eyed boredom" (Bey 2003, 128). In the context of a TAZ, by contrast, "art as a commodity will simply become impossible," as the ephemeral artistic experience cannot be bought (Bey 2003, 130). Therefore, the TAZ functions as the generative milieu for an art that is taken out of the museums and into the streets to become "a condition of life" (Bey 2003, 130).⁴ In this respect, the Brooklyn Bridge readings were only partly successful. As Bey puts it, "[w]e would like to imagine an 'art' so anonymous, viral, marvelous, insinuating, and widespread, that it might become one with everyday life – but an everyday life exalted and transformed. So far, no doubt, our imagination has failed us" (Bey 1994, n.p.). Nevertheless, the readings were effective in a number of ways, and the anonymity Bey hints at in the passage above is crucial in this respect.

⁴ Bey does not credit any sources of inspiration for his ideas on commodification and on the connection between art and life, but the Unbearable implementation of his principles clearly resonates with, for instance, the 1960s avant-garde practices of Happening organizer Jacques Lebel and Fluxus artist George Maciunas. Like their predecessors, the Unbearables attempt to overcome art's commodity status and integrate art into everyday life through ephemeral presence (Berghaus 2005, 87, 102 and 121). In addition, the Downtown poets' anarchic outdoor events couple the minimalist practice and provocative humor of Fluxus (Berghaus 2005, 120) with the hovering between premeditation and spontaneity that characterizes the American Happening in particular (Berghaus 2005, 87).

3.2 The Disappearance of the Artist

Bey translates the TAZ's guerrilla invisibility into literary terms as "the disappearance of the artist," an idea he claims to have borrowed from the Situationists (Bey 2003, 129):

The disappearance of the artist IS "the suppression and realization of art," in Situationist terms. But from where do we vanish? And are we ever seen or heard of again? We go to Croatan [an oblique reference to the mysterious disappearance of settlers in Sir Walter Raleigh's Roanoke Colony, here denoting the hidden world of unmediated creativity] – what's our fate? [...] We're not talking here about literally vanishing from the world and its future: [...] we can't build an aesthetics, even an aesthetics of disappearance, on the simple act of *never coming back*. By saying we're not an avant-garde and that there is no avant-garde, we've written our 'Gone to Croatan'." (Bey 2003, 129; emphasis in original)

In other words, cleverly avoiding what Susan Suleiman has called the "conceptual and terminological quagmire" of the avant-garde (Suleiman 1990, 11), Bey equates 'out in front' with 'out of sight,' avant-garde with invisibility.

From the perspective of artistic invisibility, the 1994 Brooklyn Bridge reading was an overwhelming success, for

the traffic noise roars and swamps the poets' voices (except for one or two *loud* comrades) and the random passersby hesitate to approach the (perhaps insane) performers too closely. Very few pay attention and enjoy the event. [...] The City submerges its would-be bards in its usual bath of bored inattention; even erotic praise fails to stimulate it. (Bey 1994, n.p.; emphasis in original)

This utter indifference towards the Unbearables was not unique to the first Brooklyn Bridge reading, nor, in fact, to the collective's other performances. As Unbearable poet, WFMU radio host, and yodeling expert bart plantenga humorously puts it, the bulk of Unbearable events was "[m]arked by underattendance, inebriation, [and] bad haircuts" (*Unbearables from A to Z* 2007, 23). Indeed, practicing one of the cultural "forms that are obscure and unlikely to be valorized by the market under any circumstances" (Lloyd 2006, 167), the Downtown poets are bound to attract only a limited number of spectators – if any at all. As a result, the Unbearable events are essentially oriented towards success in terms of symbolic capital received from peers. Their involuntary marginality eventually bled into habitus, which the Unbearables then legitimized by assimilating it into the avant-garde signifying system provided by Bey's TAZ theory and the dictate of artistic invisibility.

The Brooklyn Bridge performers tried to attract an audience by opting for erotic subject matter. Yet, they also deliberately aggravated the already unfavorable circumstances of their performance by reading simultaneously – an obvious reference to the Dadaist Cabaret Voltaire – and without microphones, so that individual voices were drowned out by both the din of rush-hour traffic and the rants of other poets. What is more, during the 1995 edition of the Brooklyn Bridge readings, the Unbearables hosted simultaneous performances in New York and in Chicago. As a result, the audience in each city had limited access to the per-

formance at home and no access at all to the reading in the other city; the poets' performance, in other words, was (partly) invisible.⁵

At the same time, however, the Unbearables also redefine Bey's principle of invisibility in the sense that, while the TAZ is "an insular event in which friends and comrades get together, the bridge event is targeted at including the public" (Feast 2009, n.p.). Indeed, Hakim Bey may very well argue for "the removal of all barriers between artists and 'users' of art" (Bey 2003, 130). Still, the TAZ exclusively addresses those who are in the know: its denizens, or, in Bey's terms, the band. For those outside the band, the TAZ should not even be visible. This invisibility is diametrically opposed to the Unbearables' attempt to include bystanders in their TAZ. During the Brooklyn Bridge readings, the integration of the unwitting audience took several forms. For one thing, the movement of the crowd created a "rotating museum of pedestrians" from the poets' point of view (Vitale 2009, n.p.). In other words, unprepared passersby were integrated into the performance in the sense that they, too, became objects of seeing, and hence fulfilled the role of both audience and performer. Secondly, the rush-hour crowd was involved in the generation of poetic meaning, because, as they walked past the simultaneously ranting poets, their pace determined which combination of words they had heard by the time they reached the other end of the Brooklyn Bridge pedestrian walkway. The Unbearable poems are thus transformed by means of performance and the chance element of the listener's pace.⁶

⁵ By implementing Bey's principles in the form of a poetry performance, the Unbearables conveniently couple the TAZ dictates of invisibility and transience with a genre that by its very nature resists reception due to its ephemerality. The problematic nature of reception is, however, not specific to spoken-word performances such as the Brooklyn Bridge readings. Dance scholar Lambert-Beatty, for instance, aptly describes how the quick succession of movements during a limited time-span complicates seeing dance (Lambert-Beatty 2008, 1). Once acknowledged, Lambert-Beatty argues, this predicament forces the artist to manipulate the degree of ephemerality – and thereby the degree to which the performance is available to the audience – by either decreasing or increasing it. Drawing on examples from the work of New York's Judson Dance Theater icon Yvonne Rainer, Lambert-Beatty illustrates how repetition may serve to make a performance "hyperavailable," as is the case in Rainer's *The Bells*, in which the dancers "repeated a short sequence of movements while facing in different directions," so that the performance virtually assumed the qualities of an "object" for visual consumption (Lambert-Beatty 2008, 1). Rainer's *Trio A*, by contrast, exaggerates the unavailability of the performance through "an elided continuum of unique movements" (Lambert-Beatty 2008, 1).

⁶ The way in which the Unbearables incorporate the audience into their performance warrants a comparison with previous American avant-garde practices. The integration of unsuspecting bystanders, for instance, is reminiscent of *Happenings*, which maintain the "distinction between performer and spectator," but nevertheless allow for the inclusion of unwitting passersby (Berghaus 2005, 87). Secondly, the arbitrary element of pace resonates with the "automorphism" of Fluxus events, where a work of art partly creates itself on the basis of chance (Berghaus 2005, 120).

4. Brooklyn Bridge is Falling Down: Unbearable Desublimations of a Poetic and Tourist Icon

4.1 Rewriting the Brooklyn Bridge

The Brooklyn Bridge has always been at once an artifact and a symbol shrouded in myth (Trachtenberg 1979, ix). Even before its completion, the bridge already appealed to the popular imagination, not in the least because its mysterious builder, German-born immigrant John Augustus Roebling, “crippled and perhaps insane, controlled the work, like a wizard, from a room overlooking the harbor in Brooklyn Heights” (Trachtenberg 1979, 95). When the Brooklyn Bridge was inaugurated on 24 May 1883, the official discourse claimed the then largest suspension bridge in the world to be a symbol of U.S. values as diverse as efficiency, man’s supremacy over nature, the reconciliation of labor and capital, and unity (Trachtenberg 1979, 117-8, 120 and 124-5). Celebrated as a Manifest Destiny trophy (Trachtenberg 1979, 10), the bridge thus served U.S. culture by embodying the country as it preferred to see itself: an emblem of (divinely ordained) progress and unity.

Echoes of this nineteenth-century discourse are still discernable in the initial Unbearable performance of 1994, where many poets recited lines about the bridge.⁷ Sparrow, for instance, recognizes the bridge’s symbolic value as “a Reconciliation of Opposites (Brooklyn and Manhattan)” (Sparrow 1994b, n.p.). In Dave Mandl’s Brooklyn Bridge diatribe, by contrast, the great expectations of 1883 contrast sharply with the bridge’s current function as an instrument of gentrification. With only a tinge of irony, Mandl sees no alternative but to “[s]mash the Brooklyn Bridge,” because the “massive waste of taxpayers’ money” has

made it all too easy for [Manhattanites] to bring their ridiculous haircuts, their pretentious experimental poetry, and their inedible pizza to Brooklyn, slowly contaminating our borough until the day when (they hope) it becomes indistinguishable from the roach-, tattoo-, designer drug -, decaf cappuccino-, and cowpie-infested cultural desert they came from. (Mandl 1994, n.p.)

Connecting Manhattan and Brooklyn to the detriment of the latter, Roebling’s architectural masterpiece becomes an Unbearable harbinger of urban decline.

A similar desublimating attitude characterizes the Unbearable poems that engage with predecessors such as Hart Crane, for whom the Brooklyn Bridge reveals a spiritual reality beyond the here and now. A great admirer of Roebling, the young Crane moved to the engineer’s old room at 110 Columbia Heights to write his magnum opus: “The Bridge” (1930) (Trachtenberg 1979, 97; see also Mariani 1999). In Crane’s famous lines, Roebling’s span is incorporated into a teleological project aimed at restoring wholeness through poetry. In a moment of “paroxysmal joyful celebration” (Versluys 1987, 218), Crane’s lyrical I walks past “the bound cable strands, the arching path / Upward, veering with light” (Crane 2006, 72) and

⁷ It should be noted here that only the 1994 performance was recorded in the *Unbearables Assembling Magazine*. Therefore, the current analysis of the Unbearables’ poetry pertains to these poems only.

catches a glimpse of a “transcendent reality” that is otherwise invisible in an urban context (Trachtenberg 1979, 144). The bridge thus becomes a symbol of timeless harmony, or, in Crane’s terms, “Everpresence, beyond time, / Like spears ensanguined of one tolling star / That bleeds infinity” (Crane 2006, 74). Crane’s transcendentalist concerns may seem an unlikely foil to the Unbearables’ anarchist poetics of sensuality and transience, yet Crane is in fact the only Brooklyn Bridge poet that the Unbearables explicitly engage with. At the basis of this seemingly unlikely match is plain geography: after-party host Tsauroh Litzky was a tenant in the exact same building where, as Hakim Bey puts it, “John A. Roebling lay sick in 1880-something, watching his design take shape, and where Hart Crane later composed ‘The Bridge’ and cruised for sailors” (Bey 1994, n.p.). Nevertheless, the poetics of Crane and the Unbearables only overlap in their focus on intense celebratory moments, as the Unbearables appropriate and desubliminate Crane’s “emblem of the eternal” (Trachtenberg 1979, 145) as the location for a thirty-minute orgiastic experience. As the ample-bearded Sparrow puts it,

[s]tanding, or walking, on the Bridge, one notices constantly that one is over water and undead. “I have not drowned yet,” one thinks, over and over. And one sees, from a distance, rising towers, the way a camel in a Desert spies a distant palm tree, which connotes, of, course, an Oasis. And within every oasis, one hopes, is a good Fuck. Thus did we, the Unbearables, muse, on a jubilant Tuesday in 1994. (Sparrow 1994b, n.p.)

Stripped of its glamour and near-mythical status, Crane’s once glorious bridge becomes a vehicle of Sparrow’s Unbearable irreverence.

Sparrow’s phrasing also illustrates how, in many Unbearable rants, the erotic experience is (partly) attached to the mainland, which is observed from the Brooklyn Bridge, imbued with erotic qualities, and therefore made to participate in the Unbearable TAZ. Elizabeth Morse makes the Statue of Liberty dance naked (Morse 1994, n.p.); Lorraine Schein watches the Watchtower become “orgasmic and voyeuristic” (Schein 1994, n.p.); Joe Maynard rides a subway “full of body heat and lusty anticipation” (Maynard 1994, n.p.); Sparrow lists all the buildings he has ever had sex in (seven, with four different women; Sparrow 1994a, n.p.); and in Ron Kolm’s poem “The Coldest Day of the Year,” the Chrysler building features as a phallic symbol that contrasts with the speaker’s momentary limpness:

You can see
The Chrysler Building
From where we lie
Under a down quilt
On the hardwood floor
Of a friend’s apartment.

It’s taken us years
To get here, and I’m
Limp with wonder.
“Relax, it’s ok,” you say
Filling a paper cup
With wine.

The quilt shifts
 Letting in the cold
 Which finally makes me hard
 But just at the crucial moment
 The wine gets kicked over
 And we both crack up like kids.
 (Kolm 1994, n.p.)

Appropriated by the Unbearables, the city observed from the Brooklyn Bridge no longer serves as the centerpiece of Federico García Lorca's dystopian Manhattan – a city like a “crocodile” where “[n]o one sleeps” at night (Lorca 2008, 63)⁸ – or Vladimir Mayakovsky's Communist utopian vision that “come[s] to life, erect” upon the bridge (Mayakovsky 2007, 61);⁹ instead, it eagerly participates in the Downtown collective's orgiastic moment.

However, the Unbearables' sensual approach toward, in Mayakovsky's terms, Roebling's “mile of steel” (Mayakovsky 2007, 61) does not (necessarily) make them any less sensitive to the span's aesthetic value. Instead, the poets complicate the bridge's status as an aesthetic icon by assimilating it into the TAZ logic of evanescence. In a poem that compares the curves of the Brooklyn Bridge to his wife's, Jim Feast couples the construction's sensuality with its aesthetic qualities by describing it as the artistic expression of a post-orgasmic moment: “I think, the artist, / Roebling, wanted to render a / single, purposely flattened moment, / that radius of circling / befuddlement that occurs / immediately after the swell of / sexual intimacy” (Feast 1994, n.p.). Like post-war poet Marianne Moore, Feast praises Roebling's ability to capture the ephemeral in a permanent structure, but whereas Moore sees the unfathomable grandeur of a “double rainbow” (Moore 2007, 46), Feast discerns sexual evanescence. The emphasis on transience is even more conspicuous in Bob Witz's interpretation of the Brooklyn Bridge, as he replaces the durable “granite and steel” praised by Moore and Crane¹⁰ with building material that is far less likely to withstand the ravages of time: “cheese / from Wisconsin”

⁸ Spanish Generation-of-'27 poet Federico García Lorca visited New York City as a tourist in the 1920s (Haw 2005, 59). In his poem “City without Sleep” (1930), the speaker stands on the bridge to look at a dystopian city where “[n]o one sleeps” at night (Lorca 2008, 63). The poet thus directs the reader's gaze away from the bridge towards Manhattan, which is described as “the still, incredible crocodile under the tender protest of the stars” (Lorca 2008, 63). Lorca's use of reptilian imagery suggests that in the poem's unsettling Manhattan, danger lurks around every corner, as “modernity has ripped mankind from its natural moorings. Business and technology have formed a twenty-four-hour-a-day nightmare” (Haw 2005, 59).

⁹ In “Brooklyn Bridge” (1925), Russian poet Vladimir Mayakovsky celebrates the bridge as part of his Futurist fascination with modernity. Gazing at New York from the bridge at night, the awe-struck speaker portrays a city that, although “heavy and stifling / till night,” assumes utopian qualities after sunset, when “New York [...] has forgotten its hardships / and height; / and only / the household ghosts / ascend / in the lucid glow of its windows” (Mayakovsky 2007, 58). Mayakovsky's overt admiration for Roebling's technological innovation is coupled with his Communist leanings, so that the night-time Brooklyn Bridge is portrayed as the realization of the poet's radical politics: “I am proud / of just this / mile of steel; / upon it / my visions come to life, erect - / [...] Brooklyn Bridge - / yes ... / That's quite a thing!” (Mayakovsky 2007, 61).

¹⁰ Marianne Moore's title “Granite and Steel” is a probable reference to Crane's use of the phrase in the section “Atlantis” of his famous poem (Crane 2006, 72).

(Witz 1994, n.p.). Perishable and stinking to high heaven, the Brooklyn Bridge is transformed into a not-quite-so-aesthetic and temporary urban landmark. As such, it quite literally assumes the qualities of the TAZ created underneath its gothic arches; it becomes transient, with a logic of its own. More than a platform and less than a work of art, the Brooklyn Bridge is appropriated by the Unbearable poets as a site of cultural resistance in the form of a TAZ.

4.2 Eroticizing Tourist Landmarks

Next to figuring prominently in literature and the arts, the Brooklyn Bridge is also one of the world's most renowned tourist icons. Consequently, the Unbearable TAZs engage with the monument's literary tradition as well as undermine the tourist conceptualization of space. Trachtenberg observes that "Brooklyn Bridge belongs first to the eye" (Trachtenberg 1979, 3), which makes the Brooklyn Bridge tourist first and foremost a spectator: in front of the monumental construction, vision dominates all other senses (Urry 1999, 79). Catering to the tourist needs, the tourist industry has reduced New York's landmarks (sites) to marketable, predigested images (sights) onto which a certain meaning must be projected, because it "is rarely self-evident that a location must be visited; thus, some significance must be assigned to it that invests it with importance (Fainstein / Judd 1999, 4). These stereotypical images for tourist consumption are then continually reproduced on T-shirts, bumper stickers, postcards, mugs, key rings and other tourist paraphernalia. Gradually, the image becomes detached from its original to such an extent that, for instance, tourists may be completely absorbed by street vendor art portraying the Brooklyn Bridge, while hardly paying attention to the actual bridge they are on. In that sense, Fainstein and Judd are right in pointing out that "New York City enters the mind's eye through decontextualized images of Times Square, Wall Street, and the Empire State Building" and that "the tourist gaze" reduces the city to "a collage of frozen images" (Fainstein / Judd 1999, 14).

This reductionist tourist gaze is what the Unbearables temporarily liberate the bridge and its surroundings from by appropriating the tourist icon as the site of an insurrectionary moment, or, in Bey's terms, a TAZ, predicated upon orgiastic experiences in the here and now. The Unbearable TAZ's orgiastic quality is reflected in the Unbearables' distinctly erotic interpretation of Bey's concept. The 1994 reading in particular explicitly aimed to "re-erotic[ize] the sadly slackened city" ("Erotic Intervention" 1996, n.p.) by means of "an erotic tour of New York City landmarks as seen from the Brooklyn Bridge" (Vitale 1994, n.p.). Moreover, sex remained the main theme in later editions as well. In 2000, for instance, the Unbearables used a magic marker to write dirty words on underwear that had been treated with resin by Unbearable and Fusion artist Shalom Neuman and was strung across the bridge (Finberg 2009, n.p.; Neuman 2009, n.p.).¹¹

¹¹ William Anthony's flyer for the event significantly reads "The Unbearables air their dirty laundry at their annual reading on the Brooklyn Bridge. [...] Everyone invited (especially

In Deleuze and Guattari's terms, the Unbearables engage in a spatial politics of de- and reterritorializing urban landmarks, and the Brooklyn Bridge in particular. The bridge is first and foremost a tourist site/sight and a commuter transit zone. In fact, one might even posit a metonymical, almost tautological, relationship between the span on the one hand and tourists and commuters on the other. In Puwar's terms, commuters and participants in the tourist industry are the "somatic norm" on Brooklyn Bridge (Puwar 2004, 8), a notion which is predicated upon

the connection between bodies and space, which is built, repeated and contested over time. While all can, in theory, enter, it is certain types of bodies that are tacitly designated as being the 'natural' occupants of specific positions. Some bodies are deemed as having the right to belong, while others are marked out as trespassers, who are [...] circumscribed as being 'out of place.' Not being the somatic norm, these are space invaders. (Puwar 2004, 8)¹²

As space invaders on Brooklyn Bridge, the Unbearables disorient passersby: the bridge becomes strange. This disorienting experience is reflected in the 1994 passersbys' reluctance to approach the poets, the bursts of surprised laughter (Vitale 2009, n.p.), and the occasional fight (Kolm 2009, n.p.).

5. Facing the Final Curtain? The End of the Brooklyn Bridge Readings

After the 1994 reading, the Unbearables hosted Brooklyn Bridge performances every September 13 for six consecutive years. These repetitions, however, were a bone of contention among the Unbearables. Some of the more anarchist members in particular aptly protested that the notion of repetition is incompatible with the Brooklyn Bridge TAZ's inherently transient nature. Alfred Vitale, who hatched the plan for the 1994 reading together with Sparrow and Jim Feast, but then moved to Philadelphia (Feast 2009, n.p.), phrases his objections as follows:

I didn't participate [in the succeeding readings]. I actually like the idea of short-lived actions [...]. I didn't think it needed to continue. When something like that recurs, it becomes populated with an inorganic mix of people who have *heard* about some revelry and hipness (i.e., it is mediated) and want to be part of it *because* they want to be identified as part of that. (Vitale 2009, n.p.; emphasis in original)

Vitale suggests that, ironically, the annual repetition of the Brooklyn Bridge TAZ contributes to its institutionalization and thereby undermines its effect. Indeed, inscribed into the conventional calendar logic, the Unbearables' TAZ becomes visible, predictable and therefore potentially containable by the State.

One could argue that the Brooklyn Bridge TAZ gradually assumed the qualities of a (conceptual) artwork, an object for consumption. Sparrow even goes as far as to say that even the TAZ denizens themselves – the Unbearables – are slowly be-

pomfleurs),” with the term ‘pomfleur’ referring to men with a “perverse obsession for feminine undergarments, particularly those of girls” (Anthony 2000, n.p.).

¹² It should be noted here that although Puwar's conceptual framework is useful in a wide range of contexts, her work specifically focuses on non-male and non-white bodies in white men's spaces.

coming “a work of conceptual art” (Sparrow 2008, n.p.). Jim Feast, by contrast, refutes interpretations of the event as a commodity and states that the event is not so much “a form of esoteric, individualized consumption” as a “group statement” (Feast 2009, n.p.). In addition, he points out that even though the readings were hosted annually, not all editions were the same:

There were times it went longer than an hour, i.e., when we waited for latecomers. [...] So you would stand in one place and watch the sun go down over the water, listening, as poet Kevin Riordan put it, to the world’s largest musical instrument, i.e., the swaying cables on the bridge. That could end up being very impressive. [...] One year, people wanted more of a true reading, so after a half hour, we gathered at the center and everyone read what they had been reading. Another year we were surprised as we walked over the bridge toward Tsaurah’s [apartment, where the after-party was held] to find another group of Unbearables, who had started on the Brooklyn side and strung themselves out there. One year there were little clusters. Another year pairs. In fact, it was a learning experience. The first year’s reading on your own was abandoned, and after that almost everyone paired up. (Feast 2009, n.p.)

Feast’s line of reasoning enables a conceptualization of the seven Brooklyn Bridge readings as one discontinuous TAZ rather than as one performance with six repetitions that undermine the TAZ ideology – a view that may very well redeem rather than revile the post-1994 Unbearables performances.

Whether one interprets the sequence of Brooklyn Bridge events as repetitive or discontinuous, it is clear that the performances became more visible in the course of the years. As visible TAZs are invariably assimilated into the State and therefore self-annihilating, the Brooklyn Bridge readings’ repetition inevitably undermined their anarchic effect.¹³ Ultimately, then, Bey’s dictate of artistic disappearance proved a double-edged sword for the Unbearables. On the one hand, it legitimizes their literary marginality as part of an anarchist aesthetics, which also makes the Unbearable books suitable for publication with the Semiotext(e)/Autonomea publishing group, a self-declared TAZ that publishes the radical work of Hakim Bey and others and prides itself on its low circulation figures.¹⁴ But on the other hand, participating in the creation of TAZs automatically condemns the Unbearables to a literary career outside of the (media) limelight, with little to no recognition outside of the band. Consequently, for authors joining the Unbearables to boost their own literary careers, a tension between anarchist and literary concerns is bound to arise. This tension may explain why, by 2001, the

¹³ Interesting in this respect is Peggy Phelan’s insight that visibility does not necessarily imply empowerment, because “[i]f representational visibility equals power, then almost-naked young white women should be running Western culture” (Phelan 1993, 10).

¹⁴ In 1995, the Unbearables published their first anthology, *Unbearables*, with Autonomea. The “Crimes of the Beats” readings (1993-1996), in which the Unbearables both killed their literary fathers for selling out and put them on a pedestal, paved the way for an anthology of the same name (1998), followed by *Help Yourself!* (2002) and *The Worst Book I Ever Read* (2009). In addition, Autonomea’s Unbearable Books Series features Bart Plantenga’s *Spermatogonia: The Isle of Man* (2004), Doug Nufer’s *Negativeland* (2000), Jim Feast and Ron Kolm’s *Neo Phobe* (2006), Carl Watson’s *The Hotel of Irrevocable Acts* (2007) and John Farris’ *The Ass’s Tale* (2010).

Unbearables' Brooklyn Bridge spark had petered out: many of the original Unbearables had left New York or settled down, and the newer members saw the Unbearables as a literary collective, not a TAZ. In addition, the aftermath of the World Trade Center terrorist attacks created a climate hostile to acts of terrorism, even if only poetic. As Alfred Vitale puts it: "it's because of 9/11... just try doing a public action like that in NYC after that... even the document I wrote about overtaking the bridge could, in the hands of dyslogic officers of homeland security, be reframed as a document of more than just 'poetic' terrorism" (Vitale 2009, n.p.). In that sense, September 11 and the uncanny ring it gave to the notion of Poetic Terrorism seem to have been the Brooklyn Bridge readings' final kiss of death;¹⁵ quite literally, the Unbearable band disappeared from the bridge.

6. Conclusion

On the basis of hitherto unpublished material, the current study has introduced the Unbearables to examine how the literary collective's annual Brooklyn Bridge readings implement Hakim Bey's TAZ synthesis of anarchist and avant-garde principles. While trivial in terms of the literary market or Bookchin's sociopolitical change, the Unbearables' orgiastic Brooklyn Bridge TAZs are significant in how they are created by and creative of urban space. Appropriating the bridge as a space of resistance to the anemic and restrictive urban experience, the Unbearables' thirty-minute rants redefine Roebing's mastodon as the generative milieu for collective moments of intensification that are always already gone. Furthermore, the band's symbolic *coup d'état* engages with the Brooklyn Bridge's rich poetic tradition to exploit the construction's remarkable "capacity for cultural and symbolic metamorphosis" (Haw 2005, 7). More specifically, the poets' terrorist appropriation – in spatial as well as literary terms – both parasitizes and transforms established representations of the Brooklyn Bridge as found in the work of poets such as Crane, Mayakovsky, Lorca and Moore. The Unbearables' erotic poems on and from the bridge both reflect and contribute to the creation of a modestly utopian moment in the form of a TAZ. The collective's terrorist appropriations thus use the transformative power of language and presence to temporarily produce a zone where the rules, if anything, are Unbearable.

¹⁵ This may explain why the bulk of the Unbearables' literary production postdates September 11: the need for community-building through anthologies and the documenting of otherwise ephemeral events arguably grew stronger as the Unbearables seemed on the brink of disappearance. Additional evidence for a sense of closure around the turn of the century is the fact that core member Ron Kolm sold his personal Unbearables collection to Fales Library director Marvin Taylor in 1996; he also donated a large amount of zines, flyers and Unbearable paraphernalia to SUNY of Buffalo Poetry Collection curator Michael Basinski around the same time.

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