

machete



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Margin of Utility

THE SPORTS COMPLEX

The great collective movements of our day, those capable of galvanizing energetic masses intent on supporting and defending a common cause, are rarely found in the political arena. With a dwindling anti-war movement as Obama escalates the second longest war in American history, a marginalized struggle for single-payer healthcare in the face of a corporatocracy that has just passed healthcare “reform,” and a placated centrist “progressivism” content on having “voted for change,” we need to look elsewhere for the causes capable of mobilizing the American people. And there is indeed at least one place where collective mobilization is stronger than ever, where passionate investment goes hand in hand with common causes, where no obstacles can keep the people at bay. This place, as the recent Olympic games in Vancouver helped remind us, is none other than the sports complex.



Arbitrary Fervor for the Service Industry

In no other place, in America today, is mass mobilization as feverish and dedicated as when it comes to supporting sports teams. What other public events will have people drop everything to cathartically participate in the well-rehearsed rituals of communal rivalry? And yet, what other events, we must ask, are more distant from political mobilization in the name of communal transformation? Indeed, the of sporting events is resolutely apolitical. Decisions concerning the structure and norms of communities do not matter; all that’s important is the team that you happen to be on or the team that you happen to support. And this is, ultimately, as arbitrary as it is normatively ungrounded. Playing for or supporting a particular team is usually simply the result of a contingent chain of events such as where you were born, what teams your family or friends supported, etc. However, the arbitrary nature of the root cause of this massive public outpouring doesn’t diminish in the least the fervor of its defense! Tunnel vision is essential to the American sports complex. The guiding imperative is ‘play ball!’ (or ‘watch other people play ball!’), not ‘ask questions about the games you are cajoled into playing!’

Yes! We Have No Biennials!

Philadelphia already shambles behind New York City, tripping over itself, breathing heavily. A Philadelphia biennial would only expose our flaccidity to a larger audience. Yet recently, there has been some whimpering about having one, both on the artblog and its heinous, feral offspring, the artblahg.

In “Home is Where the Art Is”, an article for the *Philadelphia Weekly* on March 10th, Roberta Fallon advocates a Philadelphia Biennial, in the vein of the Whitney’s. She wants to showcase regional talent in a big, institutionally-supported way. The arsenal—ICA, PAFA, the PMA—though dusty, can draw in large crowds, serious revenue, and ultimately garner interest in collecting. The exhibition would be an investment and a commitment to cultural awareness for the Philadelphia area. Her argument hinges on the supposedly lucrative culture market that exists here: the huge flocks that graze the Flower Show, the tents pitched the night before *Wicked*’s opening.

The artblahg, that unnamed individual (or individuals) who fires willy-nilly at everything in range, takes charge on Ms. Fallon in an open letter published on March 11th. Fallon’s proposed biennial is contested and torn apart, labeled as ‘clueless’, and replaced by an alternative anti-establishment model. This version of a biennial would be, from my interpretation, a cross between InLiquid’s Art for the Cash Poor show and a big group high five.

To be clear, the artblahg actually did not argue with Fallon. As is its wont, the blog (I’m sorry, the blahg) threw its hands in the air and declared a fight. Fallon’s and the artblahg’s ideas of a biennial are congruent modulo... everything. The two aren’t in the same ring, or even the same stratosphere. While I sympathize with the thoroughly DIY artblahg model, it is in no way an alternative to Fallon’s big idea.

As such, I am not interested in dissecting either side’s proposed biennial and comparing the problems and benefits with each. What I am interested in is the given presumption that the biennial model is worthwhile, particularly in Philadelphia. The biennial is simply a terrible way of exhibiting art. The intentions are good, perhaps even noble: the biennial is a much more flexible entity than its museum counterpart. It is (or it aspires to be) a post-institution: periodic, event-based, and temporary. Yet it doing so, it often eschews historicity, careful research, and contextualization. It presents a gaggle of artists, haphazardly linked through a curatorial concept or, more often than not, basic contemporaneity. In its effort to be everything that the museum is not (adaptable, current, liberal), the biennial also loses the content and the weight that are inherent with establishment exhibitions.

The biennial’s self-image is schizophrenic and unsatisfying. It attempts to walk a tightrope between independence and foundation. It strives for the uninhibited forward thinking of a gallery while it uses the marketing strategies of massive institutions (and the crowd-herding techniques of a seasoned ranchman). It occurs in specific locations, but offers no local engagement. Certainly, the Whitney, Manifesta, even our dearly beloved Philagrafika (which, I know, is not a biennial) happen all over the world. But they happen in white cubes all over the world. A Philadelphia biennial could exhibit regional artists or international ones, but that

selection is entirely immaterial if it’s just at the PMA. And while of course it could happen at a location with personality and weave itself into the fabric of the community, this would significantly reduce the size of the audience.

The biennial inherently forces these unpleasant choices because of its conflicted allegiances. It is simultaneously overly concerned with innovation and securing sponsorship. This is the biennial at its most seedy, as it attempts to merge widespread palatability with site-specific boldness. With a clear nod to its political and nationalistic roots, the biennial is an agent in a worldwide cultural competition. Or, as sociologist Pascal Gielen writes, ‘[the profusion of biennials] cannot be explained without the enthusiasm with which politicians, managers and other sponsors have embraced the event...it fits easily in a neoliberal city marketing strategy of so-called creative cities.’ This is not to naively suggest that art exhibitions should (or can) be free of profiteering. I mention it simply to highlight the unique quandary in which the contemporary biennial finds itself. It’s mobile but established. It’s local but disconnected. It must be opportunistic without being exploitative, political without being self-aggrandizing. The exhibition model holds tight to the Modernist notion that a good idea is a new idea. But how can a good idea realistically recur ever other year?

Of course, biennials will always hold an esteemed position in the art world. Some are actually good exhibitions, like the Poly/Graphic Triennial in San Juan and some, like the Whitney, just aren’t going anywhere. But the template as a whole is outdated, problematic, and supremely uninspiring. A recurring regional arts show in Philadelphia, establishment-endorsed or otherwise, is boring and indistinguishable from the hundreds of other exhibitions like it. It is not, as Roberta Fallon claims, an investment. It’s a gimmick. Better to channel the weight of Philadelphia’s institutions and (miserly) cultural funders to independent curators, gallerists, and critics with great ideas, or promote lasting regional engagement with contemporary artists. Philadelphia can highlight its makers, thinkers, and earnest independence to a mass audience without simply copying the withered biennial model.

¹ Except as the inevitable week-long event at Little Berlin for the self-loathing unselected artists, titled ‘we don’t need no institution’.

² Pascal Gielen, “The Biennale: A Post-Institution for Immaterial Labour”, Open 16

-Manya Scheps



From Indira Sylvia (I.S.) Belissop, *Journal Entries from a Philosopher in a Time of Revolt, 1968-1980*, ed.

by Avi Alpert

(This entry is republished with permission from Belissop, for the recent occasion of a lecture by Carolee Schneemann at the Slought Foundation in Philadelphia, March 2010.)

February, 1978

On Tuesday we¹ went to a private screening of *Fuses*.² I have heard of Schneemann, and heard described *Internal Scroll*.³ I never know what to do as I approach works like this. The audience I viewed as my own internal ambivalence. Some laughed; some looked away, or shook their heads. We were not conservatives, not reactionaries. We wanted to stand up and say, Yes! We wanted to believe that this was progressive – that this was progress. That there was a relation to sexuality which the film could capture and which could re awaken our own bodies. But this was what our generation had been taught not to do. Martin and Maurice asked what art *did*, not what it did for us. The work did not allow me this. It did not reveal the truth about sexuality; it seemed only to beckon me to have better sex. (Though, perhaps, this is the failure of my own imagination, seized as it is by the pangs of our revolutions.) Still, the film stayed with me, unnerved me, and I could not say why, only that it had something to do with sex. Or so I thought, and I thought this must be so because I had been so lonely, this decade of traveling, of hiding, of living under false names. I waited that night; I waited till everyone left, till it was just Hans and I.⁴ We stared at each other like children. That is to say, we did not make love, we did not touch, we just stared, we just... looked. It was a remarkable feeling, to sit there and look at him, not thinking about desire, not thinking about sex. Really, more than the sex, I realized that what had got me thinking about Carolee's film was the cat, was the banal presence of the cat, who did not care at all about the lovers. One year ago this month I wrote of my loss and

confusion. I took to pen to condemn thinking in the face of the brutality I saw after I met *mi tocayo*.⁵ In a world that had broken her soul I could only think to laugh and cry like a madwoman. To embrace and hug, to feel so... so goddamned *maternal*. *Fuses* taught me better. What is great about is the cat, the non-effrontery of the cat, the re-fusal of the cat. If one year ago all I wanted was to fuse, to feel the flesh of my flesh, to fold into the flesh of the world, what I want now is to let all that recede. Rather, now, to sit here and write, as I sat there and stared at Hans, as he sat there and stared at me.

¹ Belissop does not usually write with the royal we, and the entries from this time do not indicate who her companion may have been. She was likely to have been in Amsterdam at the time, but this may also have been written in New York.

² *Fuses* is short film by Carolee Schneemann (1965), noted for its editing and film technique as much as for its graphic depiction of sex, and the "shameless" presence of her cat throughout the scenes.

³ A 1975 performance piece where Schneemann, among other things during a multi-faceted performance, pulled a scroll out from her vagina.

⁴ Presumably a friend of Belissop's, though his identity remains unknown.

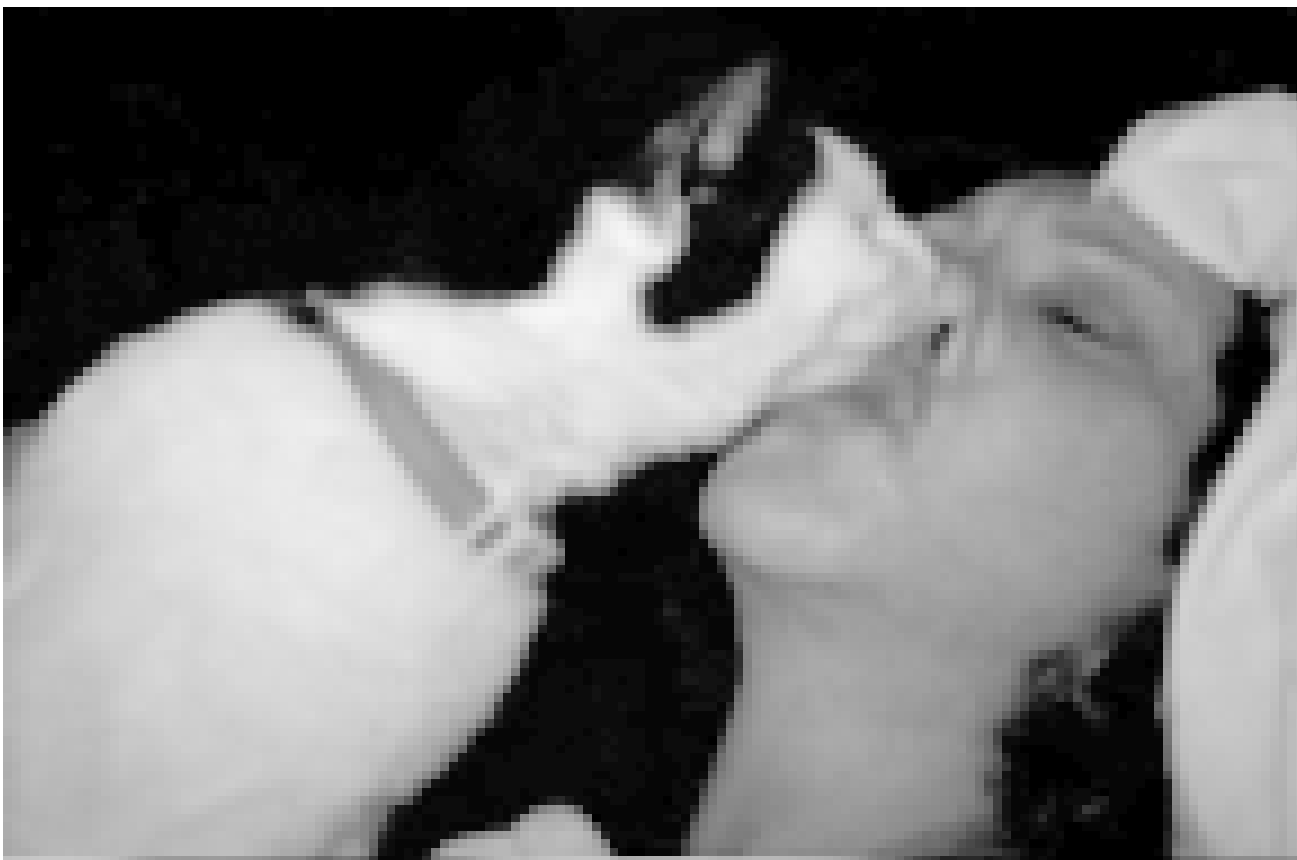
⁵ See entry from February, 1977 on Belissop's meeting with an activist known only as "Silvia."

At its beginnings, athletics emerged in continuity with politics, or at least with the defense of political communities. As competitions in physical prowess, dexterity and skilled execution, sporting events were public demonstrations of the most talented members of citizen-based armies. Indeed, javelin throwing, foot races, jousting, fencing and other early sports hardly concealed their military origin and orientation. With the industrialization of the modern world and the more recent emergence of the service industry, athletic activity has become more and more distant from its direct political and military origins. It has increasingly become a separate, specialized field of activity in at least two ways. On the one hand, whereas the working class of yesteryear generally had no need (or time) for supplementary physical activity, the desk jockeys of the service industry have made physical activity an addendum to one's day. On the other hand, the sports industry itself has increasingly become a specialized field of inflated human-like creatures dueling it out as pawns on a battlefield of corporate sponsorship.

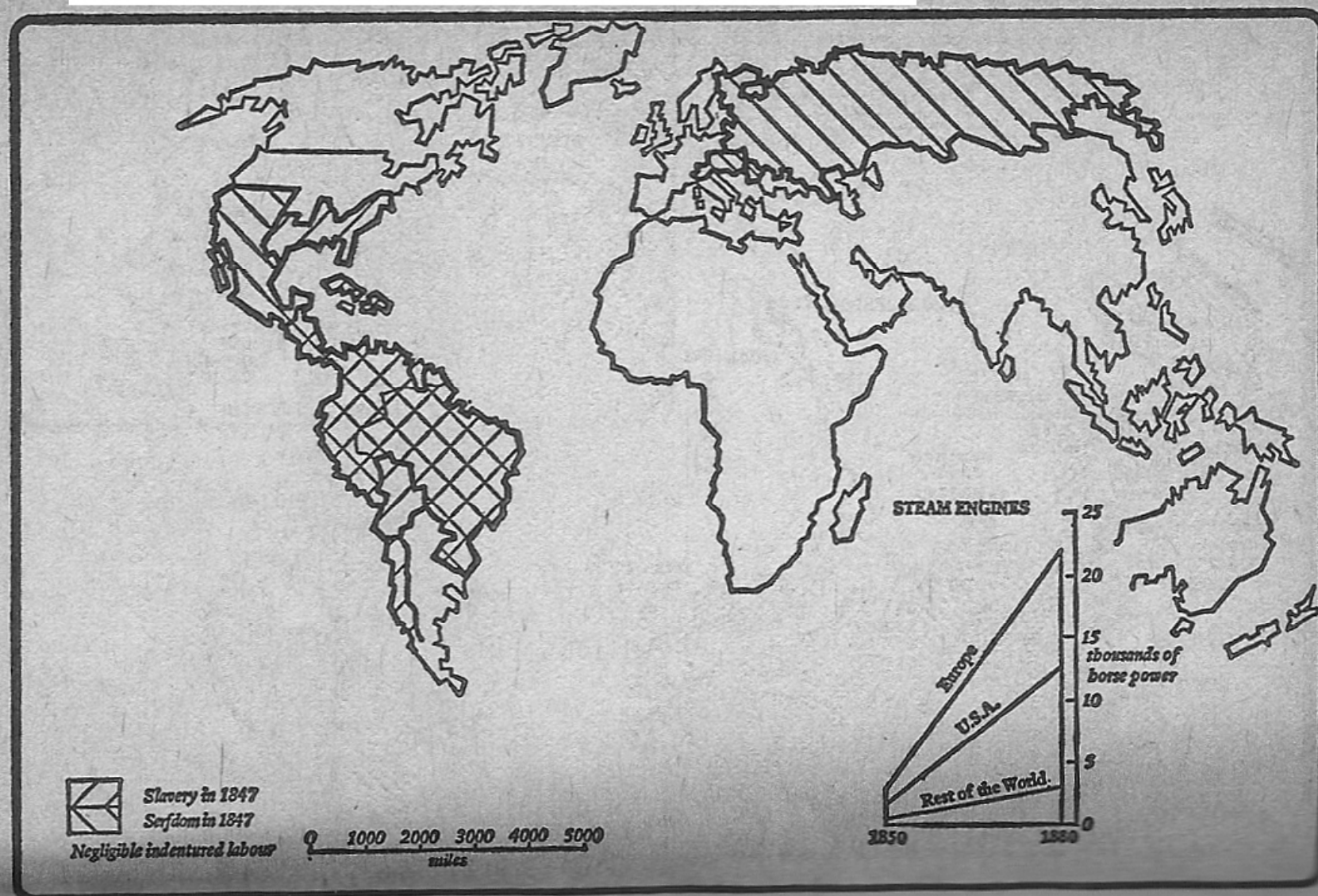


Star Complex

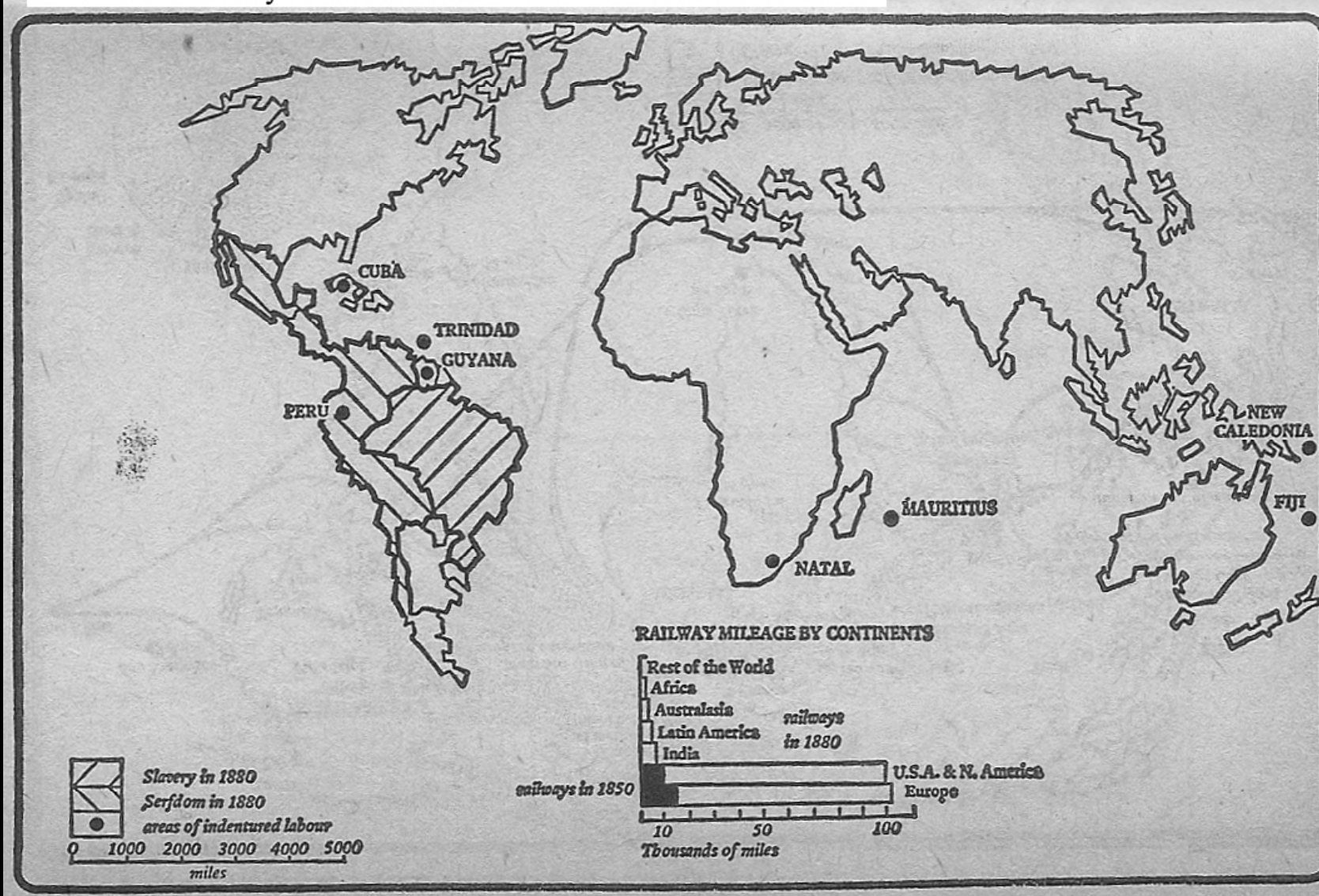
The divide between the corporatized world of professional sports and playground pick-up games has created a widespread social complex that repeatedly ruins the lives of young people. For the arbitrary public fervor around meaningless games has produced an overinflated illusion regarding successful gaming. While it is indeed true that we live in a culture whose values are such that if you happen to excel at a certain sport, you might be able to become a millionaire superstar, it is also true that for every Michael Jordan there are hundreds of thousands of young kids raised in the ideological haze that makes them hope that the inane process of throwing a ball into a hoop will save them from urban squalor or suburban mediocrity. Of course, the brute social reality is not only that the large majority of these kids will not "succeed," but that the star complex they contribute to actually helps preserve and intensify the massive inequalities opposing the icons of corporate sponsorship to the destitute 'want to bees.'



1847 Slavery and Serfdom in the Western World



1880 Slavery and Serfdom in the Western World



Border Crossings

The city of cinema is woven into a tapestry of raw aesthetic and political force at the hands of Pat O'Neill in *Horizontal Boundaries* (2008), currently on view at Screening (located in Vox Populi). O'Neill presents a field of visual and auditory confrontations in which a multi-layered soundtrack is delicately woven into a landscape of rhythmic, superimposed imagery to create a dense aesthetic fabric that is as captivating and mesmerizing as it is thought provoking.

The incessant imprint of the individual photogram is the most visible horizontal boundary in the video, the border of the singular image that is stitched into the temporal continuity of a film. This reflexive strategy of highlighting the constitutive elements of the medium has, at times, become a tiresomely weak 'modernist' reflex. However, at the hands of O'Neill, it serves as a syncopated reference point grounding a complex sensory rumination on dividing lines, frontiers and boundaries. The horizontal horizon of the photogram is seconded by the boundary between the image tracks that are lain over one another, producing a depth to the imagery as superimposed visions bleed into unique constellations of 'median images.' The frontiers of sight and sound function as a third series of horizons that are repeatedly crossed and re-crossed. Indeed, Pat O'Neill and George Lockwood illustrate in arabesque detail the intimate connections and conflicts between eye and ear, synchronizing their work into a veritable audiogram at one point in the video when the sound of a dog barking rhythmically alters amorphous, black forms on a white background that appear to write sound directly into celluloid. The texture of the soundtrack, which creates the same superimposed depth as the image track, provides a fourth field of boundaries and horizons as minimalist music, mechanized sounds and staged deliveries produce an auditory collage of rare quality. These are only some of the horizons explored in the video, which powerfully meditates on the dividing lines and tensions between positive and negative, light and dark, up and down, vertical and horizontal, inside and outside...

This extraordinary formal complexity of writing with sound and composing with images avoids the mundane drivel of naïve aestheticism. To begin with, the video itself carries with it the dull shadow of the film industry that haunts the city serving as its setting. The soundtrack contains the voices of apparent figures from film noir or detective stories. A terrified woman on the telephone, who also appears in O'Neill's masterful and much more explicit *Trouble in the Image* (1995), is reminiscent of the mid-century heroines of celluloid. The *horizontal boundaries* of the photogram, constantly reframing Los Angeles, are thus means to create a productive parallax between the constructed images of the city of cinema and counterpoint images that destabilize the frames of the industry, that unstitch the continuity of the film strip.

Much more interesting than this now well-worn trope of 'discontinuity editing,' which always runs the risk of reifying a stale opposition between the industry and its 'other,' is the way in which the formal boundaries worked on in the film are intertwined with a series of thematic borders. The frontier between nature and civilization is perhaps the central limit that O'Neill works on as he juxtaposes forests, mountains and oceans to the concrete jungle of the cityscape with its gas and oil refineries. At times, he seems to

foreground the austere 'natural' beauty of L.A. by night. At other times, he stages the awesome power of nature against the frail constructs of man. At still other times, he appears to simply juxtapose the destitute ecosystem of 'humanity' to the idyllic world of nature. Rather than reifying borders, he situates himself in the ambiguous meeting ground between man and world, as if he were one of the anonymous figures on the beach where people, stripped of most of their civilizational accoutrements, drift back into the primordial soup from which they came.

The complex counterpoint of *Horizontal Boundaries* not only serves as a methodological strategy for a unique meditation on the horizons of aesthetic form, the borders of cinematic history and the dividing lines between humanity and the natural world, it also acts as a refined tool for social and political critique. The aerial views of suburban sprawl, mixed with the sound of helicopters reminiscent of the aerial attacks in Vietnam, create the impression that O'Neill is reminding us—like Martha Rosler—of the imperialist agenda upon which American suburban culture has been built. At the same time, the sensation of 'choppers over L.A.' suggests that this city's future is as precarious as the bamboo shacks left in a haze of napalm by imperial aviation. Moreover, the wind in the trees and the synchronous blurring of the image appear as agents of uniformity recalling the ultimate precariousness of human life.



The rhythmic gestures of a Latino selling sneakers similarly stage, at one level, the stark political boundaries between citizens and immigrants. At the same time, his integration into the communal fabric of the city suggests that this lone individual character (the only one in the sea of anonymous figures populating the video) is part of the lifeblood of Los Angeles. Yet, this apparent integration is held in tension by the background, which seems to suggest that the price of integration is a new understanding of "freedom": the freedom to sell cheap shoes in the street... Like the juxtaposition between war and suburban tranquility (or leisurely beaches), O'Neill is not simply inscribing a borderline. Just as the horizon of the photogram is repeatedly crossed and re-crossed in the video itself, the artist traverses and re-traverses socio-political frontiers in order to reveal their complexity.

Fortunately, this video does not resolve itself in favor of a politics of ambiguity priding itself on the trend-setting, stultifying concepts of indistinction, indiscernability, etc. On the contrary, O'Neill's attempt to problematize borders is an invitation to think and rethink the horizons structuring our world, a unique and passionate summons to reconsider the aesthetic, ontological, social and political limits of our 'here and now.'

- Theodore Tucker



Fortunately for those whose gene pool has not arbitrarily predestined them to stardom in a world where putting a ball through a hoop is often more important than putting a meal on a plate, there are an increasing number of options. With a few regular shots of steroids (or perhaps genetic engineering in the very near future), you can sacrifice the size of your scrotum for larger biceps if you're a man, or sacrifice your relatively hairless physique for ripped abs if you're a woman. Who can forget how the "slowpoke" Ben Johnson tore the gold medal away from Carl Lewis in the 1988 Olympics (and broke the world record) with the help of a little extra juice? And yet, according to the film *Bigger, Stronger, Faster*, Carl Lewis was just as juiced as Ben Johnson. The only difference was—and this is where politics comes back in—the American administration went to bat for Carl to make sure that the drug tests were overlooked. So politics is still definitely involved in athletics, but it's the politics of sponsorship and nationalism, the politics of big money and worldwide competition. The Olympic games in Vancouver were a clear illustration of this as native lands were usurped to build sports arenas and any protesters were systematically sidelined. The contrast between the Olympic village and the destitute squalor of the Downtown Eastside—Canada's poorest postal code and the region with the highest HIV infection rate in North America—should have recalled the true logic of competition operative in the sports complex.



Apolitical National Pastimes

In the main, the sports complex of American culture functions as an apoliticizing mechanism that funnels people's affective, intellectual and physical energies into the arbitrary confines of a playing field. It is not only that the forces of collective investment

and mobilization are invested in games with no real social or political significance (or at least no positive social and political import). Given the dividing line between the professional world of sponsorship and the mundane world of “playing,” practicing sports tends to go hand in hand with watching sporting events, which means that the American sports complex serves to absorb people’s leisure time at two levels: practice and spectatorship. Furthermore, it is not only time that is taken, it is also mental space. One need only talk to a true sports fan to realize how much memory and thought can be dedicated to the infinite number of details concerning scores, teams, performances, stats, etc.

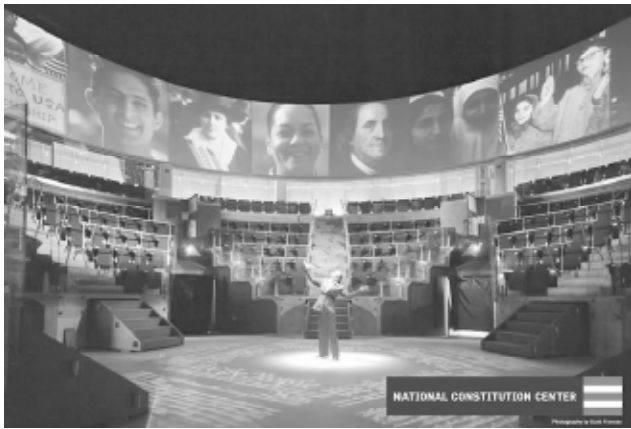


The overarching *ethos* of the American sports complex is one of competition. So while it is removed from the political domain proper, i.e. the field in which decisions are made about communal life and values, it nonetheless serves a socializing function by constantly reiterating one of the fundamental values of capitalism. The final result of the sports complex is to dedicate our collective energies to the meaningless cycles of endless competition while stealing from us the time that it would take to transform the world we live in.

- Etienne Dolet

Keeping the Bewildered Herd Bewildered: The American Constitution Center

“The most insidious and potent forms of censorship are not those enforced by an official ban, but those freely assumed by individuals and institutions. In “democratic” societies, such as the United States, whose bill of rights protects the abstract freedom of its citizens, the coercive power of the state does not simply reside within its annexation of the right to force, but within the capacity of its institutions, to paraphrase George Orwell’s famous preface to *Animal Farm*, to produce citizens that voluntarily silence unpopular ideas and obscure inconvenient facts. The most effective forms of social control do not derive from the imposition of external constraints (the police, the law, the military), but from those institutional mechanisms through which, as Walter Lippmann put it, consent is manufactured. The dominant function of cultural institutions, especially institutions as well funded as the American Constitution Center, despite their stated



aims, is not to produce a critical debate, dialogue, etc. concerning, in this case, the historical legacy of the constitution, but to actively shape its reception and interpretation. The center serves to affirm the dominant consensus concerning America’s image, providing a framework for “lively” debates that not only remain within, but help establish, the acceptable range of differing opinion within public discourse. Such institutions (whether public or private) thus serve the ideological, if not overtly propagandistic function, of shaping the American social imaginary by actively working to elide those damaging truths that threaten to puncture the armature of prevailing orthodoxy.

For all those in doubt as to whether the center’s central vocation is civic education or public relations, the multi-media presentation *Freedom Rising* quickly decides the matter. Serving to introduce visitors to the museum’s “vision of popular sovereignty embodied in the Constitution’s opening words, ‘We the People,’” the performance serves as a pep rally for the apathetic, its desperate enthusiasm an unconvincing ritual in the clichés of American self-congratulation. American history since the revolution is treated as the progressive unfolding of the idea of freedom. The motor of this development is none other than the constitution itself, which, as the voice of the people, singularly bestows the freedoms as if the intense social struggles that populate America’s material history were merely the occasional cause. Historical details that don’t fit the narrative of self-congratulation are either repressed or treated as minor hiccups. Injustices too glaring to be outrightly occluded, such as the extermination of the indigenous population and slavery, are treated as minor blemishes powerless to tarnish the upward tide of freedom’s march. The conception of history on offer is so patently idealist it would even make the most hackneyed of Hegelian wretch. The blind will to hold “popular sovereignty” above all forms of social antagonism would be less noxious if it did not end up equating civic liberty and the free exercise of political will with enjoyment. In the words of the narrator, “The common man was finally getting a say and enjoying every minute of

it.” The image of the common man put forward is certainly not that embodied by the Wobblies or the participants of the Haymarket riots. It is rather the image of Market Man. The sense of equality bestowed by the constitution, as the American Constitution Center would have it, amounts to a kind of “egalitarian dogmatism” that Alain Badiou has described as the “equality vis-à-vis the commodity.” The exercise of freedom in the contemporary democratic world and that the constitution now protects is quite simply that of consumption: “In principle, anybody and everybody is posited as being equal to everybody else, as being able to buy whatever is being sold as a matter of right.” Needless to say, this is not the vision of the citizen of the authors of the *Federalist*. At a minimum, they conceived of the citizen as a socially active agent guided by the universality of reason, not a passive consumer driven by its animal passions. One could perhaps argue that the interactive nature of the permanent exhibit tries to actively solicit the spectator to imagine him or herself within the various roles of the executive, judicial or legislative branches of government and thus stimulate an interest in the participatory process of government. Yet, the varied technologically sophisticated solicitations are calculated to generate the *feeling* of participation. The rather peculiar question that confronts museum goers towards the end of the exhibit—when do you feel free?—reveals the cynical and vile assumption underlying the exhibition. Contemporary democracy is a matter of psychopharmacology. It is not a question of *being* free, but *feeling* free.

The center’s attempt to simulate political participation reveals the truth of contemporary democracy as essentially an imaginary adventure, where the once potent and convulsive reality of a government by the people for the people now seems like a cruel hoax—a hoax that could hardly be sustained without the colossal efforts of institutions such as the Constitution Center which perpetuate the contemporary belief that politics is a matter managing the daily routine of consumption. Most interesting in this regard is the simulation of the presidential inauguration that enables exhibition visitors to imagine themselves president by having them act out the ritual of being inaugurated. Standing in front of a fake presidential podium, the voice of the chief justice begins the inaugural pledge. A digital camera in front of the podium records the scene and projects it upon a green screen behind the podium. The actor is digitally inserted into a virtual scene that includes the chief justice, the stage and the audience. However, the illusion is maintained only if you play out the roll to the end. One cannot both play president and view oneself as the president on the screen behind. The fantasy is thus chiefly for those who are spectating and not for the one who plays out the role of sovereign, establishing the separation between the people and the executive at the same time that it conceals it. To compensate for this clear deficiency of not being able to see oneself as president, the museum store offers a free market solution that restores the circuit of specular consumption that was momentarily short-circuited: the opportunity to purchase the digital image of oneself as president. It is hard not to cherish the irony that even one’s imaginary presidency has to be bought. For an institutions that dedicates itself to historical memory, it could learn much from the Brechtian maxim articulated by Walter Benjamin: “take your cue not from the good old things, but from the bad new ones.”

-Alexi Kukuljevic

WHITE PEOPLE DON'T CRY!

I KNOW YOU'VE BEEN GIVEN A HARD TIME OVER THE PAST FEW HUNDRED YEARS ABOUT EVERYTHING FROM SLAVERY RIGHT ON DOWN TO THE INACCURACY OF YOUR DOPPLER RADAR, BUT MOTHERFUCKERS DON'T SEEM TO KNOW HOW HARD IT IS RUNNING A PLANET. IT'S NOT LIKE PLANTING A SEED AND WATERING THAT BITCH AND BOOM, YOU HAVE SOME NICE FERNS. NO. BEING THE C.E.O. OF EARTH TAKES A LOT OF HARD ASS, THANKLESS WORK, AND HOLDING THE TORCH OF CIVILIZATION MAKES A MAN'S HAND HOT. WHITE PEOPLE, YOU GAVE DENIM TO THE WORLD, AND NO ONE THANKED YOU! YOU GAVE CONCRETE ROADS TO THE WORLD AND NO ONE THANKED YOU! YOU GAVE THE COMIC GENIUS OF RAYMOND ROMANO TO THE WORLD AND NO ONE THANKED YOU! YOU TURNED MANHATTAN ISLAND INTO THE CULTURAL CAPITAL OF THE PLANET WHERE AS IF THE INJUNS STILL HAD IT, THEY'D PROBABLY STILL BE SHITTING IN BUSHES, TALKING TO THEIR DEAD ANCESTORS AROUND A BONFIRE, AND HAVING SEX WITH HORSES. SO ON BEHALF OF ALL PEOPLE OF A DARKER HUE, I WISH TO THANK YOU, WHITE PEOPLE, FOR DOWNLOADABLE PORNOGRAPHY (WHO NEEDS A GIRLFRIEND), NANOTECHNOLOGY (WHEN CAN A NIGGA GET A ROBOT HAND?), THE HUBBLE SPACE TELESCOPE (AIM IT TOWARDS EARTH AND IT'S ALSO GOOD FOR ESPIONAGE) AND AIDS (C'MON WHITE PEOPLE, IT'S NO SECRET THAT AIDS WAS INVENTED IN JOINT EFFORT BY BILL GATES, YACUB THE EVIL SCIENTIST, AND HITLER'S DISEMBODIED BRAIN THAT ISSUES ITS COMMANDS VIA A FIREWIRE CABLE HOOKED UP TO A MACBOOK PRO, USING THAT PROGRAM THAT READS WORD DOCUMENTS IN THAT ANDROGYNOUS ROBOT VOICE THAT NOBODY CAN TAKE SERIOUSLY, SO BILL GATES IS ALWAYS LIKE "HEY HITLER, WHAT WAS THAT THING YOU WERE SAYING ABOUT THE JEWS, ABOUT HOW THEY'RE RUINING EVERYTHING, COULD YOU EXPLAIN THAT STUFF AGAIN?" SO HITLER STARTS TO EXPLICATE HIS IDEAS ABOUT THE JEWISH CONSPIRACY IN THAT FUNNY ROBOT VOICE AND BILL GATES AND YACUB START CRACKING UP, BUT HITLER DOESN'T GET WHAT'S SO FUNNY.) BUT I DIGRESS... GOT ANY COCAINE?



Machete Interview with Norman Finkelstein

First Installment

When Theory Meets Practice: All Palestine, All the Time

Machete: Your work is chiefly known for its critique of dominant ideological representations of both the Israel-Palestine conflict as well as of the Holocaust. How do you situate your work regarding these specific issues within the spectrum of dissident voices that have sought to resist the more barbaric effects of global capital and western imperialism?

Norman Finkelstein: Unfortunately, because I have devoted so much time to mastering the fine details of the Israel-Palestine conflict, I have to a large extent -- and I don't say it proudly -- lost sight of the bigger picture. As a young man I read quite widely and had a reasonable grasp on the many manifestations of global injustice. But now it's pretty much, All Palestine, all the time. It's just not possible to be effective unless you have a firm grasp on all the details because Israel and its supporters have created this huge apparatus devoted entirely to falsifying the historical record.



Machete: Given your virulent critique of what you coin the holocaust industry, and in particular the problematic function of culture in shaping the socio-political landscape, do you see culture as chiefly serving an ideological function? Or can it also serve to critically resist power and its attempts to obscure and falsify the historical record?

Norman Finkelstein: It's nearly impossible to make meaningful comprehensive statements about a subject as broad and abstract as "culture." Obviously, there are aspects of any culture that reinforce the status quo and the prevailing injustice, and aspects of any culture that subvert and undermine the status quo. There are commercials that promote the most egregious forms of material consumption and beautiful songs that resonate with the deepest human yearnings for justice and decency. I for one find great inspiration in the African-American spirituals and even from the Four Tops singing, "Reach out, I'll be there."

Machete: In books such as Image and Reality of the Israel-Palestine Conflict and The Holocaust

Industry, your work has sought to expose the ways in which history is constantly being shaped and even revised in extreme cases for the sake of various political ends. Do you see historical facts as always being embedded within ideology or do you see the work of the historian as standing outside such ideological forces? Secondly, do you think that historical facts stand on their own, so to speak, or are they always part of narrative constructions that weave them into a meaningful whole?

Norman Finkelstein: These are quite complicated questions of "theory" that never much interested me -- or, stopped interesting me when I stopped being a Maoist about thirty years ago. Truth is always -- as Sartre put it -- an "indefinite approximation." But once you have given up on trying to find truth, or once you start from the premise that you can't find truth, then in my opinion it's impossible to have a rational discussion. It degenerates into this meaningless claptrap about "narratives," each as valid as the next, and it gets you nowhere, except that it means that all political questions must ultimately be resolved by force.

Machete: In your recent work, your attention has turned to the life and work of Gandhi. How does this research fit into your larger project concerning the role of ideological critique, particularly as it relates to the function of imperialism and its construction of false historical narratives? Does countering the ideological image of Gandhi's practice as it was constructed in imperialist societies provide the basis for a deeper understanding of the relationship between anti-imperialist struggles and the fight to reclaim the past by wresting it from the stultifying grip of the "victors" of history?

Norman Finkelstein: The important thing about Gandhi is that you must read him. The



image projected of him has something, but not much, to do with the real person. There were many aspects of Gandhi that, frankly, were very unappealing. This fellow named Richard Grenier once wrote a long essay on Gandhi that made him out to be a monster and hypocrite. In fact Grenier's details were almost entirely accurate. But it just wasn't the real Gandhi. It was a caricature. Gandhi kept no secrets. He was an open book. He even publicly discussed all aspects of his sexual life. So, if he was really as Grenier depicted him, it would be strange that the Indian people revered him. In my opinion it's hard not to admire the real Gandhi who (1) devoted the whole of his life to what he called "public service," and (2) lived the austere values he preached.

This interview was conducted in March 2010 by Charles Prusik, Alexi Kukuljevic and Gabriel Rockhill.

NORMAN SAYS...



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