

Intimate revolt and the need to create dangerously

—Lieta Marziali

A two-part keynote lecture delivered at the Nuda Vita Conference during Munich Jewellery Week (Wed 12 March 2021 via Zoom live-stream)

INTRO

Hello everybody. It is a real pleasure to be here today. First of all, I wish to thank Ilaria for her double invitation: for asking me to write the opening essay to the Nuda Vita catalogue last year, and to present tonight at this conference. Thank you also for introducing me to Toktam [Nourkeyhani] and for creating yet another opportunity for discussion and exchange. And so, to the first part of my lecture.

PART ONE – BIOPOLITICS AND RESISTANCE

Much of the focus of this exhibition project is underpinned by the writings of Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben and the concept of biopolitics.

So – what is biopolitics?

Biopolitics is the shift from a politics that aims to manage the *polis* – i.e. the community/collective – to a politics that aims to manage the components/bodies that make up that *polis*/collective.

Historically, the expansion of communities has brought about the necessity to create structures and hierarchies. So we see the birth of the first control apparatuses in the form of governments (which, by their nature, cannot ever totally represent the interest of the collective). In turn, these develop other institutions to make their task more efficient. One of these easily identifiable instruments of control is, for example, the regulation of punishment through the development of policing forces and the prison system. Other, perhaps less identifiable examples, include the regulation of education and healthcare. And we can all see around the world how this immediately creates massive issues of access and inequality in the management of the bodies that make up the collective, that is which bodies can receive care and education and which can't, what type of care and education these bodies can receive, what selection process bodies have to submit to (regardless of their personal needs or the needs of collective) and so on.

These instruments of control – both those straddling the uncomfortable bridge between the protective and the oppressive, like the police and the prison, and those appearing to operate solely for the benefit of the community, like healthcare and education – are in fact more connected than we think. Examples of this are often hidden in the language associated with them. Think of the expression “keeping someone under observation”, and you soon realise that it is commonly used in both police and medical surveillance. Michel Foucault has of course written quite extensively about this.

But in fact, in a Western philosophical context, Aristotle was one of the first to theorise this shift in his *Politics*. In his writing, it is already evident how the change from politics to biopolitics is fraught with controversy arising from issues of power differentials, resulting in privilege and control on one side and discrimination and oppression on the other. And it is exactly while analysing these power differentials and the possibilities of revolution that Walter Benjamin “coins” the term *nuda vita*¹.

By the way, you will be able to find an extensive suggested reading list at the end of my essay in the catalogue for the exhibition. The catalogue is a phenomenal document, started in 2019 in the first edition of the Nuda Vita project and built so that you can add further documents to it, and I thoroughly encourage you to buy it and start collecting it.

***'NUDA VITA'* AND THE STATE OF EXCEPTION**

In Agamben we see that one of the most important instruments of control in biopolitics is the 'state of exception'². So what is this? A state of exception is the suspension of the rule of law by the state control apparatus (for example a government), that is, the apparatus controlling the exceptions to when/where/for whom the rule of law does not apply anymore. So, basically, those in control decide when they can suspend the application of accepted written laws for their own purposes.

This has, for example, been very evident in the political arena, with the rise of Trumpism and of the political right, and, of course, throughout the pandemic. Some recent examples of a state of exception declared in the context of the biopolitics of the pandemic can be:

– a government decides arbitrarily that it can create an exception by suspending the rule of competition for the awarding of

national contracts paid by tax money with the excuse that there is a health emergency; or

– a government decides that it can create an exception by suspending the right of free movement or to education under the umbrella of a national emergency. Please note that this is not about whether any of the measures are justifiable in this particular case, but about the ability for a government to execute such powers which, once in place, could be wielded in other situations, for example disallowing the right to congregate in order to stop protests and strikes.

In other more common examples, a political apparatus can decide to create an exception by suspending the punishment for an offence to protect itself from scrutiny. So, for example, parliamentary immunity laws and the system of pardon are part of the enactment of a state of exception. One of the clearest and most recent examples of this practice is the US Senate voting to acquit Donald Trump of his second impeachment charges.

Agamben, taking his inspiration from the aforementioned earlier essay on revolution by Walter Benjamin, calls the body who is subjected to a state of exception imposed by the apparatus that controls it '*nuda vita*' or 'bare life'³.

THE NUDA VITA II (2020) CATALOGUE ESSAY

In my catalogue essay, I argue that, very often, the very body components of the *polis* – so those who, at the whims of control apparatuses find themselves stripped to being just *nude vite* – appropriate, often in the name of personal or global progress, the methods of the control apparatus for their own gain. Historically, it has been argued that some of these methods are necessary evils for the good of the *polis*. The philosophy (or should I say ideology...) behind this being guided by the

perceived necessity for humanity to develop from a supposedly inferior animalistic state to that of an enlightened thinking critical being. This is of course in itself very presumptuous, not only in its implying human supremacy and privilege, but of course as it has been largely employed to justify superiority of some humans over others.

Over millennia, the subjects of the control apparatuses, appropriating their methods, have triggered inevitable mechanics of privilege resulting in some lives becoming even barer than others. This is very evident in all dynamics of exploitation and discrimination (race, class, sexual orientation, gender identity, belief, different ability, and so on); in the dynamics of wealth distribution; and, on a much bigger scale, the dynamics of resource exploitation (such as human over animal, human over land etc.). As the *polis* has become increasingly a global one, the dynamics of resource exploitation are to some extent the most pressing as, in the long run, they will affect even the most privileged of the bare lives, as grand anthropocentric individualism destroys the very environment which is necessary for basic survival.

INTIMATE REVOLT

And so, to jewellery and the exhibition project. In the catalogue essay, I propose how jewellery – and especially the jewellery in this exhibition – can be the catalyst for the body to reclaim for itself its own form of state of exception on its own terms, so to speak “suspending the suspension” determined by the control apparatus, and reclaiming its own critical and bodily freedom. For this I borrowed a term used in a psychoanalysis context by Julia Kristeva: ‘intimate revolt’⁴. If I may quote myself:

‘Makers and materials, objects and bodies co-hack the sanctioned superficial spectacle function of ornament to be

passively worn and viewed, and transform it into a personal and most intimate act of resistance for an inclusive and truly universal polis.'

Jewellery, through the union of animate and inanimate of body and materials, and through its activation of the dynamics of maker-wearer-viewer, allows for the carrying of a message that is not only visual, or not only political, not only individual, not only human and not only material. A single piece of jewellery, in fact, already wields the power for two bodies, that of the maker and that of the wearer, and for itself, to reclaim their agency.

Add even just a single viewer, and what you have is the seed of collective action.

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PART TWO – A JOURNEY THROUGH ALBERT CAMUS'S 'CREATE DANGEROUSLY'

When Ilaria contacted me while putting together this conference event for Nuda Vita for Munich Jewellery Week, I felt this enormous sense of serendipity. After choosing to spend about nine/ten months in complete academic sabbatical attending to everything that had been left behind in my life, over Christmas, still in total professional hibernation, I had finally started reading and researching again. Fast forward a couple of months and, just a few days before Ilaria's email, I had just finished reading a seminal text which, despite its age, is so incredibly (and very scarily so) current, not only in the description of contemporary times but also in its positioning of the artist and of the production of culture in contemporary life.

I found this text to be too strongly relevant to the Nuda Vita project to pass up the opportunity to explore it further in this context. And I thought that the best way to do so would

be to ask you to follow me on a journey alongside its lines, its questions and its arguments. What I have tried to do is to weave the threads of this text and my own. This means that it will be impossible to quote or unquote all the time [note: quotes are visible in this written version, but were not during the live lecture]. But really, I hope this might not even be necessary, and that you will feel encouraged to read the original text and my lecture yourselves after this.

WEAVING THROUGH THE TEXT

The text I am talking about is 'Create Dangerously' by Albert Camus⁵. This is in fact more precisely a speech, delivered by Camus in 1957 at the University of Uppsala in Sweden a few days after being awarded the Nobel Prize. Also known in other languages as 'The Artist and His Time', Camus wrote this in the aftermath of the radical political changes and the awakening of consciences brought about in the previous 40 years through the Russian Revolution, two World Wars, the rise and fall of several politically opposed/polarised totalitarian regimes, and the beginning of the Cold War with its related existential nuclear threat. He called this an 'interesting era', which 'forces us to take an interest in it': an era in which artists are 'criticized and attacked' if they speak up, but also an era in which they are 'vociferously blamed for their silence' if they choose to lower or avert their gaze. Artists are therefore caught on what Camus calls a 'contemporary slave galley' in which, or despite which, in the midst of new and different and yet no less threatening 'slave-drivers' [such as the capitalist system, or the control apparatuses that both Benjamin and Agamben talk about] and increased suffering, they 'must... go on living and creating'.

Over 50 years have passed since then, and yet these words could not feel more relevant for our contemporary times. So how can artists go on living and creating?

It they adapt to the whims and wants of society, they will only inevitably produce 'meaningless recreation'. If they 'take refuge in [their] dream[s]', their art will 'express nothing but negation'. In a highly capitalist society, measured as Camus says not even in actual physical fortunes but in the 'abstract symbols of money', what grounding can art provide in a reality no longer founded on experience – or 'carnal truth', as Camus interestingly calls it – but on artificial 'signs'? How can artists reclaim their creative freedom from this 'artificial society' where words like 'liberty' and 'equality' are so easily 'prostituted' to justify both prisons and the 'temples of finance'?

In an 'age that forgives nothing', Camus says that 'to create today is to create dangerously' and that 'for all those who cannot live without art and what it signifies... [the question] is merely to find out how, among the police forces of so many ideologies... the strange liberty of creation is possible'.

And so art cannot afford any longer to be 'for art's sake'. Camus says that society asked this of art at a time when it wished to deny its responsibility for the real and growing oppression following the Industrial Revolution, and therefore needed the idealism of artists to mask its own responsibility with an art that was 'mere entertainment', fashionable, artificial and 'fed on affectations' for a 'self-absorbed society'.

But artists born in a 'mercantile society' also cannot feel they can be great only if they decide to make a stand against society by standing against everything. This would mean looking at the same time for approval from a part of society and disapproval from another. But, as Camus says, a 'society, tired or indifferent [as it is] at present, applauds and hisses only at random.' An artist so cut off from reality can only create 'nothing but formal or abstract works, thrilling as experiences but devoid of..

fecundity' and incapable of being a call to unity.

However, artists cannot also be solely rooted in absolute realism itself. Nothing in fact is capable of representing the totality of reality at any one time, as this would require a god-like omnipresence and omniscience. That would mean a total and constant knowledge and representation of everything that is going on at any one time and of the infinite combinations of interrelations of every single factor at play. As this is physically impossible, striving for absolute realism the artist is only capable of 'exercising' a very small and unreliable 'selection'.

So what of the artists that choose to capitalise on this selection for what they believe is a worthy cause? What if they consciously concentrate their selection on expressing reality not as it is but as it could be? Camus says this art risks an inevitable fall into the traps of propaganda: a new form of idealism that, by striving to forcibly polarise and educate, becomes just as removed and absolutist in its aims as total realism. This is an art that simply chooses to serve, albeit a utopian one, what is only another master. As Camus puts it: 'It serves and, by serving, becomes a slave.'

Camus's argument in this particular context is one that might seem hard to accept at first. Using two examples nearer to his time – that of socialistic realism and of political realism, but that today we might perhaps, for the sake of argument, call something like “activist art” – he says that this 'sacrifices art for an end that is alien to art but that... may seem [my emphasis] to rank higher. In short, it suppresses art temporarily in order to establish justice first.' This brings us to the question of whether art can remain free and be a vehicle for activism. In what I think is one of the toughest arguments in the text, Camus basically is

asking us to consider whether allegiance to a just cause is more important as a driving force than allegiance to the production of art and culture in itself (and all of this while keeping in mind that he rejects the concept of art for art's sake as completely futile).

This is truly a hard question. If they attempt to denounce reality by portraying it as it is, artists lie as they are unable to portray and denounce all realities. And if they attempt to denounce reality choosing to portray an idealist utopia that shows how reality could be, they fall into another lie for renouncing the reality they know from experience. Does this mean, Camus asks, that whatever artists do is therefore by its nature a lie? As he puts it: 'How... could art get along without the real and... be subservient to it? ... Must we conclude that this lie is the very essence of art?'

But it is precisely in this constant 'state of ambiguity' that the artist must thrive. And the question must shift from what kind of reality one should represent to what 'precise dose' [my emphasis] of it. It is in this delicate 'equilibrium' that artists must exist: in the balance between 'reality and... rejection [of it]', between sharing their individual personal embodied experiences and 'the fate of all', between the pinpoint of the 'immediate event' and the immensity of history, between 'unbearable solitude and the exhausting crowd', between the personal and the universal.

'Art', says Camus, 'advances between two chasms, which are frivolity and propaganda. On the ridge where the great artist moves forward, every step is an adventure, an extreme risk. In that risk, however, and only there, lies the freedom of art.'

And so artists must pursue and develop their capacity of synthesis and create their own 'order'. The harder the task of

creating this order, the more difficult the risk that artists must take, and the greater the freedom they will assert. And this order must not be based on control, but on 'courage and [the] will to be lucid'. This lucidity, this risk, is what it means to create dangerously. Because, by trying to preserve justice by itself, freedom is not always guaranteed. But, with freedom, one will always be able to pursue justice.

CONCLUSION

And so to the Nuda Vita project. I believe that Nuda Vita, already in its second – and a half! – edition, is not only a testament to the strength of jewellery as a medium, and to the position of jewellery art in the field of contemporary culture production, but is also a great example of the refined capacity of synthesis and lucidity of will that art needs to strive for in order to uphold its freedom – before, and yet with the intrinsic aim of, pursuing collective justice.

Ilaria, as the curator, has channelled her own lucidity of thought by developing and steering the project as an experimental platform of research and artistic production. This is demonstrated in her intuition not only in building a space for both critical debate and expression in her choice of artists, but also in the modality of exhibition and documentation, themselves fundamental aspects of cultural production. And the artists, as we will now see, all demonstrate – and uphold! – their freedom through their own immense lucidity of will and clarity of execution. Camus says that artists, unlike prophets, cannot 'judge absolutely', as by doing that they would 'divide reality into good and evil and thus indulge in melodrama. The aim of art... [he says] is not to legislate or to reign supreme, but rather to understand first of all.'

And I can't imagine better words than these to now pass the baton to our own artists to present their own projects.

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FINAL REMARKS

Tonight, in this virtual bubble of souls united in spirit and also in our shared embodied knowledge and experience, we have talked about biopolitics and about the place of jewellery and the body in creating a space for resistance. But above all, in our journey through Camus's text and through the projects exhibited in Nuda Vita, we have delved into some issues that rise high above those of politics, and the role of jewellery, of materials and of the body. What we have delved into is the very nature of art, of its responsibility to stay focused and lucid in order to remain free, as it is only then that art can pursue justice. And, if you'll allow, it is with Camus's own final sentences in his exhortation to 'Create Dangerously' that I would like to conclude this evening:

"The freedom of art is not worth much when the only purpose is to assure the artist's comfort. ... If liberty has become dangerous, then it may cease to be prostituted. And I cannot agree, for example, with those who complain today of the decline of wisdom... [as] wisdom has never declined so much as when it involved no risks and belonged exclusively to a few humanists buried in libraries. But today, when at last it has to face real dangers, there is a chance that it may again stand up and be respected. ...

One may long, as I do, for a gentler flame, a respite, a pause for musing. But perhaps there is no other peace for the artist than what [they find] in the heat of combat. ...

Great ideas, it has been said, come into the world as gently as doves. Perhaps then, if we listen attentively, we shall hear, amid

the uproar of empires and nations, a faint flutter of wings, the gentle stirring of life and hope. Some will say that this hope lies in a nation; others, in a man. I believe rather that it is awakened, revived, nourished by millions of solitary individuals whose deeds and works every day negate frontiers and the crudest implications of history. As a result, there shines forth fleetingly the ever-threatened truth that each and every [person], on the foundation of [their] own sufferings and joys, builds for all.'

Thank you very much.

Lieta Marziali

NOTES

- 1 - Benjamin, W. 'Critique of Violence' in Selected Writings (Jennings, M. J. ed., 1996), Cambridge and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, pp.236-252. In my lecture I used the term 'coin' for the sake of brevity in the argument. Benjamin did not strictly himself "coin" the term *nuda vita* but carried the concept into a (bio) political context. What he uses in his text is the German expression *bloßes Leben*, translated in this edition as 'mere life' (pp.250-51). For an analysis of the development from Benjamin's 'mere life' to Agamben's 'bare life', and the introduction of the concept of nudity, see Salzani, C. 'From Benjamin's *bloßes Leben* to Agamben's *nuda vita*' in Moran, B. and Salzani, C. (eds., 2015) *Towards the Critique of Violence: Walter Benjamin and Giorgio Agamben*, London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- 2 - Agamben, G. (Heller-Roazen, D. transl., 1998) *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Stanford University Press. The term 'state of exception' is first mentioned in the first chapter 'The Paradox of Sovereignty' (p.17) and then throughout the book.
- 3 - Agamben's title was originally published in Italian (Einaudi, 1995) as *Homo sacer. Il potere sovrano e la nuda vita*. See also note 1.
- 4 - Kristeva, J. (2019) *Intimate Revolt: The Powers and Limits of Psychoanalysis*, Columbia University Press. Please note this was originally published by CUP in 2002, and not in 2001 as I specified in the suggested reading in my 2020 catalogue essay.
- 5 - Camus, A. (O'Brien transl., 2018) *Create Dangerously*, Penguin Books (pp.1-33). Quotations follow the progression of the original text.