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KOMPROMAT

Press release

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In 2006 when Bernadette Corporation premiered *Get Rid of Yourself* at the Kraft der Negation music festival in Cologne and Berlin, I remember one of the organizers, Diedrich Diederichsen, having minor issue with the way the word civilization was used in the video's voice-over. Conceived as a protest of anti-globalization protest culture in the early 00s and the moderate liberal-intellectual champions of that culture (figures like Antonio Negri and the French journal *Multitudes*, or Naomi Klein's *No Logo*), the video was made around and with a radicalized left French theory journal (*Tiqqun*) - and aligned itself with black bloc anarchists who'd branch off from peaceful social democrat protests and engage in running battles with riot police while smashing banks, looting convenience stores, making barricades with burning cars, and so on. This enraged the activist-organizers of the 2001 G8 countersummit protest in Genoa, who saw their carefully controlled and crafted message of social justice and equality disperse like a cloud of tear gas as the rioters burning and turning things up grabbed all the media headlines. They denounced it as the work of agent provocateurs from the police or Italian right-wing, according to their snitch logic of dialog with Power: a delusional, absurd claim. The numerous anarchist "crews" that took to the streets during those events intimately knew their membership and composition, no matter if masked and all dressed in black. Even an innocent bystander with average cognitive abilities would be able to spot a rightwing police infiltrator by the obvious difference between gangly youth and beefy fascist in terms of body language and morphology. Any single Nazi trying to infiltrate the black bloc would be resolutely attacked, and they knew that, so whenever the Italian forces of law and order decided to engage in a bit of costume-play disinformation theatrics, there would be a handful of what looked like construction workers in black hoodies, stomping around some aftermath and debris under the watchful eye of their nearby police brethren, long after the black bloc passed through and moved on. Besides, the sole fatality that July weekend was a 20 year old Italian anarchist killed by a police bullet. Liberal social democrat activists, with their inclination towards politically impotent messaging that did nothing to change the global situation and only assuaged consciences ("at least we did something, got involved, showed compassion and solidarity"), seemed to have no qualms with adopting a police mentality within the protest in order to go home feeling a little better about themselves. "It's like, I don't know, they need the idea of the police in order to exist," said one of the anonymous voices on the *Get Rid of Yourself* soundtrack.

My analysis of protest politics of more than a decade ago is a rather circuitous route to Diederichsen's qualms with civilization in *Get Rid*, which I believe were not policing and only a way of starting a conversation with the makers of a film he found interesting. They had to do with the apocalyptic tone of narrating a cultural and political situation steeped in a weariness with existing discursive forms that would prefer to tear everything down and start anew rather than engage and compromise. I recall Diedrich mentioning Oswald Spengler's *Decline of Western Civilization*, a book admired and adopted by the actual German Nazis, who propagandized cultural pessimism towards civilization in their war against the Weimar government, foreign powers, jews, communists, and decadent bohemians. He also noted that emerging European rightwing populist parties were evoking the same terms of loss and cultural ruin. At the time I was drunk, anxious about the level of conversing with an established German cultural critic, and probably made a self-deprecating joke in response. Today I would have to agree a little with what he said, but also add that the both the right and the left have historically evoked the same pessimism as a way of broadening their base and appealing to the disaffected. It sparked Christian millenarian peasant revolts in Medieval Europe and informed Walter Benjamin's particular take on Jewish Messianism, which was a more direct inspiration for *Tiqqun*. It could also be said that the same current runs through the radical conservatism of the Taliban or ISIL, and as well an alienated depressed teenager disgusted with suburban middle-class conformity discovering punk rock or

Situationism in the late 70s to early 80s. Adopting an apocalyptic mindset and maintaining a position vis-a-vis the death throes of a culture and civilization seem to me to be motivating forces for those who would rather attempt to save or rescue a society by desperate means, and not just stand by and let things decay. No matter how evil, extreme, narcissistic or impossible, these are proper revolutionary sentiments that go hand in hand with the material conditions - injustice, inequality, poverty - of revolutions.

Feeling morbid and fatalistic about civilization, while adopting a daily attitude and to-do list around that, is one thing; actually experiencing that death and decline, is something of an entirely different order. There's nothing to do but get caught up in the insanity of a lifespan ending, or the end of a world. To be a witness to a real death is messy and painful, an onslaught that carries an irreparable feeling of loss alongside an adrenalized instinct for survival, while citing the limits of an individual's existence, leading to scarring and trauma. Having being lulled by a false sense of incremental progress during the second Obama term, with gay marriage, the emergence of a possibility of a few voices questioning police racism and abuse of power, I thought I was seeing signs of wear and tear in the mainstream authoritarian grip on power. Maybe things weren't wholly awful, maybe there was a little hope in actually becoming a part of the fabric of society, instead of retreating to a subcultural pessimistic mindset while having your hands tied by New York City rents. I was wrong. Things were not only not O.K., but gallingly unfair.

The first queasy, sinking feeling registered around February 2016, right after the early Democratic primary upsets, before South Carolina, when the liberal media and the Clinton campaign were gleefully tearing apart Sanders. Something of the familiar monolithic American system I grew up under was showing its sharp, privileged teeth again, co-opting and corrupting every last of drop of goodness with fabrications of majority-based consensus to smother the opposition, and leaving it to Ivy-league enlightenment types to do the mop-up work of muting any literate autodidacts. Fast forward to the first Tuesday of last November when, like a chump, I lined up to vote for Hillary. Not exactly a fan, I was hoping to be part of a resounding message delivered at the feet of the cold, selfish, cruel Republicans. The next day, it became clear that the liberal elites had thrown Bernie Sanders under a bus like it was business as usual, thus insuring that power was just lying there unprotected for Bannon's white nationalists to grab. Rather than deal with class inequality, they fought the left wing to defend their privileges, and opted for the right wing.

Meanwhile, everyone around me in New York City became political, and I'm suspicious of that, because I've always been wary of self-consciously political art. Yes/no, for/against over-reliance on content and concern with appearances of being correctly aligned seem to cover up a lot of shoddy-thinking and formal short-cutting. In my opinion, this was as bad as celebrity-culture pop art derivations that craved popularity while drawing false-distinctions of high/low divisions, all the while offering the most inept regurgitations of popular idioms. Before the election, it was possible to mildly dislike the Whitney ISP, and keep dreaming of the possibility someday of the emergence of an alternative intellectual meeting point in New York City. Afterwards, it was as if a switch on a control board lit up somewhere, and legions that previously never gave a fuck about much beyond their potential careers and sex lives, are now mobilized out to be protesting and turning leftist. And if a black bloc anarchist smashes a bank or punches a smug white supremacist in the face during the inauguration? Agent-provocateur...

Too bad for middle-aged, mid-life crisis me who was beginning to see some of the weaknesses of my younger political, apocalyptic fantasies and beginning to wonder about art for arts sake. Whatever, or, I don't care. Subtlety or layered meanings always get stripped in the art world handling of meta-data. Brexit didn't freak me out that much, I guess, because I never cared much for the English, and much more liked France, and Mexicans. But now I understand the post-Brexit visceral feelings of fear, uncertainty, and sadness. For all its asshole tendencies, I've always had faith in the USA being able to produce something interesting and rather appreciated its Americans, but now it's dying for real, and the Trump death is shaping up to be a drawn-out, gruesome way to expire. No chance of morphine and a quiet hospice bed. Sad.