On Beauty, War, and Artistic Innovation

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In the early 1930s, Albert Einstein wrote to Sigmund Freud in an attempt to better understand the destructive capabilities of humankind. Their correspondence became known as "Why War?" In it, Freud describes how the collective may combat the brute force of the tyrant by establishing law. He maintains, "…in order that the transition from violence to this new right or justice may be effected, one psychological condition must be fulfilled. The union of the majority must be a stable and lasting one…The recognition of a community of interests such as these leads to the growth of emotional ties between the members of a united group of people – communal feelings which are the true source of its strength." Freud concludes his response to Einstein by stating, "…we may rest on the assurance that whatever makes for cultural development is working also against war."[1]

If we look at human history, it is the cultural artifacts that remain, defining an era, time, or place more than anything else. We remember paintings, sculptures, architecture, songs, films, poems, and books. Works of art move us in ways we can't quite consciously comprehend. In "The Moses of Michelangelo," Freud states, "I may say at once that I am no connoisseur in art, but simply a layman….Nevertheless, works of art do exercise a powerful effect on me, especially those of literature and sculpture."[2] Freud tended to critique art in the way one would analyze a dream: by taking apart the various components of

1 Sigmund Freud, "Why War?," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (hereafter S.E.), ed. and trans. James Strachey et al. (London: Hogarth Press, 1953-1974), 22:199-215.
2 Freud, "The Moses of Michelangelo," S.E. 13:211.

the piece and making greater sense of the whole through the exploration of its parts. Freud felt that by applying the methods of psychoanalysis to art and literature, one might decipher the underlying meaning and intention of the creator much as one analyzes the manifest content of a dream to unearth the latent content at play beneath the surface.

I, however, am interested in the process of creation itself — the act of creation — and the potential of this act to subvert the dominant narrative that, up until this point, had been maintained as the status-quo; the power of art to work against tyranny and war, in the way Freud describes. Art has the capability to challenge narratives and systems of control and oppression by dislocating artist and audience alike from the expected. The artist resides in a transitional space:[3] the space of play, experimentation, sublimation, artistic creation, and psychoanalysis, where the usual rules need not apply. Because of this, artists are able to address matters in a way that many feel incapable of in their daily lives. By inhabiting a realm that is a liminal space of sorts – somewhere between dream and waking states, material and virtual reality[4] – artists are in a position to articulate what the masses remain hesitant to say. This ability to speak such truths fosters community, providing space for others to do the same, facilitating growth, and altering discourse. All art does this in some way, as the creation of a work of art in and of itself is fundamental to this act of separation from the dominant narrative – a cut in the form of a brushstroke, carving, action, photograph, the stroke of a pen or articulation of speech.

When developing his classic work *History of Beauty* (2004), Umberto Eco relied heavily on images of works of art to impart the ideas therein, "Because over the centuries it was artists, poets, and novelists who told us about the things that they considered beautiful, and they were the ones who left us examples."[5] What is it to be beautiful? Eco's

3 Donald W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (London: Routledge, 1971/2005).
4 Richard Frankel and Victor J. Krebs, *Human Virtuality and Digital Life: Philosophical and Psychoanalytic Investigations* (London: Routledge, 2021).
5 Umberto Eco, *History of Beauty* (New York: Rizzoli, 2004), 12.

volume illustrates that society's conceptualization of beauty has differed throughout the ages. One may say that beauty sparks desire in its beholder, providing inspiration. For some, beauty is something sacred to be placed upon a pedestal, sometimes literally; while others covet beauty, filling with envy, jealousy, and destructive impulses. "'Beautiful'…is an adjective that we often employ to indicate something that we like. In this sense, it seems that what is beautiful is the same as what is good, and in fact in various historical periods there was a close link between the Beautiful and the Good."[6]

But the experience of being human is not all beautiful or good. Following the publication of *History of Beauty*, Eco felt compelled to create a companion volume, *On Ugliness* (2007),[7] challenging the conventional notion that what is ugly is simply the opposite of that which is beautiful. *On Ugliness* is also filled with illustrations of artworks created throughout human history, as the arts and cultural spaces provide places where the multiplicity of human experience – with all of its beauty, ugliness, and ambivalence – may be confronted, explored, played with, and worked through. In the transitional space of the artistic realm, the interplay of cycles of creation and destruction may be traversed, inspected, and investigated in ways many otherwise find impossible.

Pioneering psychoanalyst, Sabina Spielrein, explored these aspects of creation and destruction in her seminal work "Destruction as the cause for coming into being" (1912),[8] in which she conceptualizes the inherently destructive side of sexuality in the drive to reproduce. Written at a time when psychoanalysis was attempting to root itself in biology, Spielrein's arguments focus on sexed reproduction, as well as mythical and religious themes. Throughout the development of the discipline of psychoanalysis, varying schools of thought have held differing views on the fundamental instincts or drives of human beings.

6 Ibid., 8.

7 Eco, *On Ugliness* (London: Maclehose Press, 2007).

8 Sabina Spielrein, "Destruction as the Cause of Coming into Being," *Journal of Analytical Psychology*, vol. 39 (1994), 155-186.

Some schools have maintained that sexuality and aggression are separate drives, opposites in competition with one another. Spielrein, however, described "opposed yet complimentary passions building vertiginously in a kind of drive-dialectic"[9] — a compelling argument. In this way, it may be useful to think of the sexual and aggressive drives as part and parcel of the same force, as there is a destructive component to sexuality — the ugly in the beautiful — and what both aggression and sexuality oppose is stagnation or inertia, which I consider to be the true death drive.

This destructive element in the creative is inherent in the methodologies of cut-ups, collage, and photomontage, wherein the artist cuts up, cuts out, displaces and rearranges forms, words, images, and content. It is no coincidence that such methodologies were developed during wartime, as the process itself reflects the fragmentation and displacement of the artists themselves as the world around them shattered and shifted. Industrialization took place en masse throughout the 19th century, overhauling the functioning of day-to-day life for individuals, as well as irrevocably altering the societal landscape. As time progresses, technology persists, dislocating the subject evermore. As technological innovation evolves, it is reflected in the artistic and literary movements of the times. The standards and means of production, philosophy, and practice of the arts and design are inextricably effected. Whereas some artists avoid confrontation with these new developments and the questions they raise, avant-garde movements such as Cubism, Futurism, and Dada had the impetus to confront them head on, finding new means of expression.

German artist Hannah Höch recognized the impact advances in technology and media had on the traditional arts and chose to intentionally incorporate such elements into her work. Developments in

9 Gavriel Reisner, "The Absent Feminine: Overlooking the Fusion of Love and Death in Sabina Spielrein's 'Destruction as the Cause of Coming into Being,'" in *Rendering Unconscious: Psychoanalytic Perspectives, Politics and Poetry*, ed. Vanessa Sinclair (Stockholm: Trapart Books, 2019), 23.

photography and film were widespread at the time and arguably more economical and efficient in many contexts. Höch noted, "The Dada photomonteur set out to give something entirely unreal to all the appearance of something real that had actually been photographed."[10] These techniques highlighted the constructed nature of much of our reality by re-contextualizing familiar images and objects, thereby repurposing the everyday. The titles Höch chose for her pieces often reflect the process inherent in the work itself; for example, Cut with the *Kitchen Knife Through the Last Weimar Beer-Belly Cultural Epoch in Germany* (1919-1920) mirrors the cut-up words, deconstructed images, and fragmented bodies present in her work, as well as the shifting cultural and political landscape and her own place within all of this.

Höch continued to work with collage and photomontage throughout her lifetime, incorporating an array of subject matter, including advertisements and photographs of politicians, machinery, technology, architecture, people, places, situations, and crowds. She often juxtaposed objects and texts with images of women — ranging from the conventionally beautiful models and ballerinas to housewives and athletes. These clippings would have been considered superficial and inappropriate for use as artistic material, as even photography itself was not yet considered an "appropriate" art form at the time.[11] Höch called this fodder photomatter.

In the history of the arts, with every new movement, innovation, or expression, there is a backlash from the conservative. Les fauves received their name when the term, meaning "the wild beasts," was used by an art critic to describe the artists upon first seeing their work in 1905 at the Salon d'Automne in Paris.[12] Upon encountering the art-

10 Lucy Lippard, *Dadas on Art: Tzara, Arp, Duchamp and Others* (New York: Dover Publications, 2007), 73.
11 Ruth Hemus, *Dada's Women* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 97.
12 "Art Term: Fauvism," *Tate*, https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/f/fauvism.

work at the first International Exhibition of Modern Art in New York (also known as the Armory Show) in 1913, Teddy Roosevelt declared: "This is not art!"[13] And when Futurist Luigi Russolo performed the first noise concert using his intonarumori or "noise intoners" in 1914, one critic claimed the work was a regression and did not have the merit of an artistic endeavor.[14]

Works of art are always reflective of their times, whether the artists consciously intend for this to be the case or not. The Pre-Raphaelites beckoned the dawn of the coming age of Modern art, retracting from the bleak, materialistic, and loud industrial expansion surrounding them into an inner sphere of narcissistic self-reflection. The romanticism engendered by the process of turning the gaze inwards was a break not only with the coal-smelling, soot-covered reality of the everyday, but also with the empirical view of the human being as strictly a quantifiable unit. Preceding the upcoming Impressionist and Symbolist movements, this group of mainly British artists and poets arrived on the scene in 1848 — the "Year of Revolution"[15] as it was known — the very same year *The Communist Manifesto* by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels was published. At this time, the Irish continued to flee the Great Hunger and the California Gold Rush had just begun. Led by William Holman Hunt, Dante Gabriel Rossetti and John Everett Millais, the Pre-Raphaelites chose their name out of admiration for what they considered to be "the fresh, natural approach of early Italian art." In other words, art before Raphael, who was at the time regarded by the Europeans as the world's greatest artist. However, "he was also the epitome of academic art, which, by the mid-19th century,

13 Theodore Roosevelt, "A Layman's Views of an Art Exhibition," Outlook, no. 103, reprinted in *The Call of the Wild: 1900-1916*, ed. Roderick Nash (New York: George Braziller, 1970), 719.
14 Luciano Chessa, Luigi Russolo, *Futurist: Noise, Visual Arts, and the Occult* (University of California Press, 2012), 133.
15 Ian Zaczek, *A Chronology of Art: A Timeline of Western Culture from Prehistory to the Present* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2018), 184-185.

had come to seem stale and conventional."[16] Where mechanical materialism itself was the main fuel in both the ruling Capitalism and the opposing budding Socialism/Communism, this artistic reaction became one of colorful poetry and romanticized timelessness. It is more in approach than style that makes the Pre-Raphaelites precursors of artistic Modernity, as their preferred style was highly and skillfully figurative and in this way may still be considered classically beautiful. Weaving in themes and vistas from a mythic view of history, the Pre-Raphaelites may easily be regarded as precursors of a figurative surrealist like Salvador Dalí – Dalí himself being an almost fanatical Freud enthusiast – while not as obviously foreshadowing a brutalist like Pablo Picasso.

The work of Norwegian artist Edvard Munch is exemplary of the artistic shift towards interiority and away from the outer realm and traditional figurative painting techniques. Initially primarily a painter, he soon expanded into working with a variety of media and methodologies, including etchings and woodcuts, creating prints and lithographs. Printmaking provided Munch the opportunity to create multiples of each artwork, allowing for variation in these reproductions, whether this be a slight shift of the lines or more overt changes in color, field, and form. At times Munch would invert, reverse, or overlay duplicates of the printed image, such modifications showcasing the powerful effect of repetition, displacement, and variation. His blending of violent Modernism with intuitive rather than scholarly psychological insights has made Munch perhaps the quintessential creative bridge from 19th to 20th-century art.[17] His most well-known and evocative image The Scream, of which there are four basic versions executed between the years 1893 and 1910, has perhaps more than any other artwork become associated with not only personal anxiety but also with general existential angst. Munch's original title of the image was the German *Der Schrei der Natur* meaning "The Scream of Nature," leaving the view-

16 Ibid., 187.

17 Ute Falck, *With Eyes Closed: Gauguin and Munch* (Oslo: Munch Museum, 2018), 9.

er with a question of ambiguous tension: is the artist referring to the scream of the outer or inner realm (or perhaps both)?

Working during a similar time period as Munch, French artist Paul Gauguin was known to say that he "closed his eyes in order to see."[18] Gauguin left a successful career as a businessman to pursue the arts later in life. Tired of systems and the social posturing of bourgeois Paris, he set off to remote islands of the South Pacific in pursuit of something else, something more beautiful. There, Gauguin began to paint the natural world around him and the indigenous peoples of these lands. He named his style Synthetism, promoting the notion that artists paint from memory, and in so doing, create a synthesis of outer reality and internal experience.

Both Gauguin and Munch created portraits of poet Stéphane Mallarmé who, with Paul Verlaine, Arthur Rimbaud, and their contemporaries, exquisitely developed the Symbolist aesthetic in literature throughout the latter portion of the 19th century. Abandoning traditional forms of poetry, they advocated for the exploration and expression of inner life through the written word "by elevating intuition, chance, and the 'suggestive magic' of words to the highest position."[19] The Symbolist literary movement had begun years earlier, with the release of the (in)famous *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1857) by Charles Baudelaire. This work is considered to be instrumental to both Symbolism and Modernism and was released to much controversy, leading Baudelaire to yet another day in court; his poetry deemed to be salacious and obscene.[20] "Baudelaire had invoked the essential modernist creed when he described 'pure art' as 'containing at once the object and the subject, the world external to the artist and the artist himself.' Only by giving free rein to subjective fantasies of the most extreme sort, he believed,

18 Ibid., 7.

19 Calvin Tomkins, *Duchamp: A Biography* (New York: Henry Holt & Co, 1996), 11.

20 "Charles Baudelaire," *The Poetry Foundation*, https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/charles-baudelaire.

could art convey the essential quality of modern life."[21]

Dutch painter Vincent van Gogh is one of the seminal figures in the development of Modern art, considered to be a pioneer of the post-Impressionist and Expressionist movements. Van Gogh dedicated himself to painting at the age of 28 and proceeded to work at such an intense pace that he created nearly 900 paintings before his death less than a decade later.[22] Van Gogh worked for such a relatively short period of time, documenting his work and process in his writings, often in the form of letters to his brother Theo,[23] which he wrote almost daily at times, as well as to friends and fellow artists, including Gauguin. It is a gift to receive the inner thoughts of a man who was fighting for his sanity and very survival through the medium of his art. Van Gogh embodies a prime example of the way in which the creation of art functions. As opposed to modern-day conceptual art, which is more of a thought-experiment emanating from the ego or conscious mind of the artist, van Gogh's work exemplifies a compulsive working-through of unconscious material.

Van Gogh's brushstrokes and use of color revolutionized painting as it had been known. The short, deliberate strokes and thick application of paint were unlike any seen before him or since. Fragments of paint, color, and texture come together, reflecting the light; although seemingly disjointed, they form a unique view of the scene at hand. Mixing impressions from the surrounding environment with internal expressions, emotions, and impulses, van Gogh's work may be seen as a prime example of the beautiful merging of inner and outer worlds. When standing before his artworks, one can almost feel the emotion and anxiety emanating from his pieces. It is clear from his letters that he felt compelled to express himself through the medium of his artwork

21 Tomkins, *Duchamp*, 11.
22 "Vincent van Gogh Paintings," Van Gogh Gallery, https://www.vangoghgallery.com/painting/.
23 "Vincent van Gogh: The Letters," Van Gogh Museum, http://vangoghletters.org/vg/letters.html.

and harbored a desire to be recognized by his contemporaries. The desire to impart personal experience and expression that pervades van Gogh's work is reflective of Freud's statement, "What grips us so powerfully can only be the artist's intention, in so far as he has succeeded in expressing it in his work and in getting us to understand it. I realize that this cannot be merely a matter of intellectual comprehension; what he aims at is to awaken in us the same emotional attitude, the same mental constellation as that which in him produced the impetus to create."[24]

Another artist who experimented with line and color as a mode of imparting his own internal experiences and emotions was Austrian painter and draughtsman Egon Schiele (1890-1918). Schiele broke boundaries by altering the framing of his subjects. Instead of keeping the figures neatly boxed within the boundaries of the canvas, he allowed his subject matter to stretch past the usual borders, often truncating limbs and even heads in the process. This was not something seen as acceptable or desirable in the art world at that time, at least not for the primary subject of a work. Often eliciting a feeling of discomfort in the viewer, Schiele's work seems to disregard the viewer by refusing to present "appropriate" subjects in an "appropriate" manner. Schiele often used himself as his own subject, sometimes masturbating or in uncomfortable poses, face grimacing, limbs truncated. Schiele pushed boundaries, painting sex workers — again masturbating at times — legs spread wide. He often placed his figures upon a monochrome background, unfixed and ungrounded, seemingly refusing to situate them in time, place, or specific situation. "Particularly when Schiele crops or, as it were, mutilates the body to a mere torso, we see how little his scrutiny and self-portrayal has to do with external, superficial appearances. His use of colour… the arresting highlights and the brusquely juxtaposed brushstrokes indicate vital energy."[25]

24 Freud, "The Moses of Michelangelo," S.E. 13:212.
25 Reinhard Steiner, *Egon Schiele 1890-1918: The Midnight Soul of the Artist* (Cologne: Taschen, 2017), 14.

These disruptions in color, frame, image, viewpoint, and/or methodology are moments when the artist deviates from the norm, refusing to stay within the bounds of narratives that have been accepted as "traditional" up until this point. These deviations in turn affect others — the audience, viewers, critics, colleagues, peers — becoming instigators of potential change, which may be experienced as unsettling or uncomfortable at times, especially at first. This discomfort may lead to defensiveness on the side of the recipient or even aggressiveness and retaliation aimed at the artist. Many artists revered today were initially shunned, put on trial, or exiled from their respective communities. Schiele, for example, was charged and jailed for producing "obscene" and "pornographic" artwork. Even if not actively persecuted, artists who push boundaries are often ostracized, ignored, or at the very least unappreciated, written off as "mad" or "deviant." Neither Gauguin nor van Gogh were successful during their lifetimes. Over time, however, once the initial defensiveness subsides, boundaries that were once pushed and broken eventually become the new norm, and the cycle of artists pushing the limits of self-expression and discovery continues.

In the realm of photography, Diane Arbus shifted society's perspective by pointing her camera at everyday people she saw on the street – those whom others may not have found to be traditionally attractive or ideal subjects; even photographing subjects was considered to be taboo. Arbus showed the beauty in character, faces, persona, and presentation, emphasizing inclusion and representation in her work. Arbus created multiple series of photographic portraits of circus performers, sex workers, swingers, and nudists, as well as those hospitalized for medical and mental illnesses. This, combined with Arbus' knack for graphically stressing the eerie idiosyncrasies of the so-called "average" New Yorkers she encountered, created a striking oeuvre — a curious tableau of the uncanny in the Freudian sense — which became a testament to her own unique and haunted vision.

Arbus is heralded for the shift in perception of what is considered to be "acceptable" and "appropriate" subject matter. This shift in perspective is a break from the traditional, overarching narrative. Arbus captured wonder in the everyday, illuminating the beauty in the

mundane. She found value and beauty in the people she passed on the street. She was conscientious and maintained consideration for her subjects, careful not to fetishize or objectify, but rather to distinguish. In this way, Arbus disrupted the conventional narrative that was traditionally provided and upheld until then — a conservative convention that the art world abided by without ever taking the time to consider or question – the demand that we focus on what is deemed to be beautiful, sacred, and vital, and disregard the rest. Like many inherited constructs, the conventional notion of beauty was accepted as truth without being challenged or called into question. Arbus moved away from this normative perspective, and in so doing allowed for a broader perception; changing the notion of accepted viewpoint permanently. As Arbus so poignantly stated, "Nothing is ever the same as they said it was. It's what I've never seen before that I recognize."[26]

The work of American artist Joel-Peter Witkin evokes the eeriness of Arbus' work combined with vanitas-type still-life motifs of high medieval painting. He creates surreal scenes from the morbid, disfigured, and unexpected, reminding the viewer of the fragility of life. His work is immediately recognizable, as Witkin creates haunting and beautiful imagery that once witnessed hardly leaves the mind of the viewer. Witkin states, "Inevitable death and our agony to attain Utopia have made existence a form of pathology… When the time arrives, when every moment is transcendent, then the images presented here will be seen as they truly were… photographs from a time resplendent in the atrocity we once called life."[27]

The process of the creation of artworks in any form of media is often a way to work with or through traumatic events that have occurred in one's life – with that which is often otherwise left unsymbol-

26 Diane Arbus, "Five Photographs by Diane Arbus," *Artforum*, no. 9 (May 1971).

27 Joel-Peter Witkin, ed., *Harm's Way: Lust & Madness, Murder & Mayhem* (Santa Fe: Twin Palms Publishers, 1994), 9.

ized. Italian artist Alberto Burri[28] worked through traumatic life events via his artistic practice. Raised in Umbria, his study of medicine was interrupted at the age of 19, as he was forced to join Mussolini's army in the invasion of Ethiopia. When he finally returned to his studies, graduating with a degree in medicine and surgery, he was called once again to the frontlines during the Second World War, this time as a surgeon. Captured and incarcerated in a U.S. internment camp for Italian Prisoners of War (POW) for three years, Burri began to practice art. When art supplies in the POW camp were scarce, he turned to salvaging burlap sacks, stretching them like canvas. "I painted every day. It was a way of not having to think about the war and everything around me" (Braun 2016, 30).

When he was released, Burri returned to his native Italy only to find his homeland completely destroyed; centuries-old cathedrals demolished, homes, streets, and squares in ruin. Burri maintained his artistic practice until his death. He continued to work with burlap, often incorporating found objects, earth, tar, pumice, sawdust, metals, and plastics, along with more traditional materials such as oil and polymer paints, enamel, wood, and paper. At times he would cut or burn the pieces, creating wounds in the works, which he would often suture with cord or twine. Uncanny, striking and surreal, these works seem to emulate the cut, torn, and burned flesh of the soldiers he worked on and with during the war: "Burri saw (and heard) the carnage of war, but he also felt the bodily trauma of others. Doctors in the field suffered their own kinds of stress brought on by the challenge of operating nonstop, the responsibility for evaluating mental fitness in others, and the moral imperative to save lives… They were exposed to seemingly endless streams of bloodied bodies for which the only possible response was pragmatic and merciful acts of repair."[29] In much of his work, it seems as if Burri attempted to recreate and then heal these wounds.

28 Emily Braun, *Alberto Burri: The Trauma of Painting* (New York: Guggenheim, 2016).
29 Ibid., 36.

Several pieces have material sown together, highlighting his careful surgeon's hand in what was clearly an overwhelming onslaught.

In *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil* (2000), Alain Badiou implores us to: "Do all you can to persevere in that which exceeds your perseverance. Persevere in the interruption. Seize in your being that which has seized and broken you."[30] This notion resonates in the work of Francis Bacon. A visit to his studio[31] (transported from London to his hometown of Dublin after his death) gives one a sense of the inner workings of this artist's mind, reflective of the canvases he created, strewn with rags, scraps, violent strokes of paint, and blurred faces. Bacon's work can hardly be described as conventionally beautiful, but it is resonant. Bacon discussed his artistic process in depth in *Interviews with Francis Bacon* (2019) by David Sylvester, describing his work as "… a kind of tightrope walk between what is called figurative painting and abstraction."[32]

Bacon recounted his lifelong endeavor of a continual attempt to harness the creative potential of chance as an inspirational tool, which he then worked from in a more intentional way. The more figurative aspects of Bacon's work were largely inspired by classical artists and artwork; for example, he used Diego Velázquez as an influence for his series of Popes. Bacon became obsessed with Velasquez's Pope Innocent X (1650) and collected together as many reproduced images of this specific work of art as he could find; photographs, postcards, and books were scattered about his studio – on tables, easels, and the floor – inevitably winding up covered with scratches, scrapes, folds, creases, and even shoe prints not found in the original work; these additional marks and disruptions then became shards of inspiration for Bacon

30 Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, trans. Peter Hallward (New York: Verso, 2013), 47.
31 John Edwards and Perry Ogden, *7 Reece Mews: Francis Bacon's Studio* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2001).
32 David Sylvester, *Interviews with Francis Bacon* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2019), 12.

and were integrated into his paintings. Bacon also drew upon the figures of Eadweard Muybridge when executing his figurative work; the tense, twisted bodies of the wrestlers in particular can be found in the forms of Bacon's lovers.

Bacon described the importance of art in conveying more than just the beautiful; a work of art must impart a more robust description of a subject than traditional figurative presentation could ever provide. In his work, he attempted to capture the essence of a person or experience, whether this be pain, confusion, elation, struggle, beauty, life, love, or death. Bacon claimed that he was at all times very aware of the excitement, beauty, and joy of life yet also at the same time of impending death. This tension comes through in his work. He expressed a desire to live life to the fullest in all its aspects – exalted, demeaning, decadent, luminous, painful, hilarious, grotesque, and beautiful – persistently attempting to pull back the veil a bit to reveal what he called the "true violence" of life: "When talking about the violence of paint, it's nothing to do with an attempt to remake the violence of war. It's to do with an attempt to remake the violence of reality itself."[33]

The work of German artist Kurt Schwitters is also a powerful reflection of this sentiment. Schwitters often worked with debris and discarded scraps he found on the street, turning garbage and waste into beautiful, poignant works of art. Schwitters often worked with collage and assemblage. His life's work culminated in the creation of his most ambitious project, *Merzbau* (1923-1937). What began as a single vertical column built of scraps of cardboard, newspaper, and various other items, eventually grew into a structure encompassing the entirety of Schwitters' living space and studio. Unfortunately, we'll never know exactly what this momentous work looked like, as it was destroyed, along with so much else, during the Second World War.[34]

Similarly, many of the earliest films have been lost or destroyed

33 Ibid., 94.

34 "Kurt Schwitters Artworks: German Painter, Collagist and Writer," The Art Story, https://www.theartstory.org/artist/schwitters-kurt/artworks/.

because of war. Experimental film-making evolved alongside conventional cinema since the beginning. Hans *Richter's Rhythmus 21: Film is Rhythm* (1921)[35] is one of the earliest experimental films that has survived. Richter's avant-garde film consists of a series of black and white squares, rectangles and bars, changing size and shape, morphing, and moving about on the screen on alternating black and white backgrounds in a hypnotizing fashion. This theme continues in his *Rhythmus 23* (1923) with the shapes morphing evermore into and out of one another. Richter also utilized a technique called direct animation, which is when the artist paints directly onto and/or scratches into the film stock itself. In 1927, Richter created a film called *Vormittagsspuk* ("Ghosts Before Breakfast"), which he described as a "rebellion of objects."[36] An amusing film, it includes a number of special effects: clocks ticking away, flying bowler hats, ties undoing themselves, faces and objects multiplying and becoming negatives of themselves, and the reversal of the fronts and backs of heads. The version of the film that remains to this day begins with the statement, "The Nazis destroyed the sound version of this film as 'degenerate art.' It shows that even objects revolt against regimentation."[37]

One of the first things tyrants do when invading a sovereign nation is to destroy cultural artifacts in an attempt to shatter the identity of the people they are attempting to subjugate. Because of this, we have lost so much beauty: countless numbers of precious artworks and artifacts, not to mention architecture and entire cities. Due to centuries of colonization, we have lost so much more: entire nations, peoples, communities, languages, and cultures have been obliterated. *For The Last Silent Movie* (2008), Susan Hiller compiled audio-clips of endangered and extinct languages, the voices sourced from university, online, and personal archives. The screen is stark black with white subtitles eluci-

35 *Rhythmus 21* (1921) in Hans Richter, dir., *Early Works* (France, 2008).
36 Pip Chodorov, dir., *Free Radicals: A History of Experimental Cinema* (United States, 2011).
37 Richter, dir., *Vormittagsspuk/Ghosts Before Breakfast* (1928), https://youtu.be/xUZ3HOkdV2c.

dating a soundscape comprised of adjoining yet distinct stories, memories, lists, and lullabies. Hiller was able to create an intimate atmosphere, extending the invitation to the audience to bear witness to this collective tragedy. The audience is provided with an opportunity to experience the beauty in various peoples and languages, which many have not heard before and may never hear again, while at the same time being confronted with the result of our own brutality and carelessness. In this work, Hiller attempted to capture something ethereal that is all but lost, as histories and cultures slip through our fingers like grains of sand. The first speaker in the piece, who is also the last known speaker of the K'ora language, begins: "Today you will get to know me through my tongue."[38]

As we find ourselves in perpetual wartime, I hope that we can look to our psychoanalytic, cultural, and creative ancestors as guides for how to navigate this terrain. Both psychoanalysis and the arts contribute to the development of culture and community, in theory and in practice, and may provide bulwarks against tyranny. During the period between the first two world wars, Freud and several early psychoanalysts encouraged the building of public clinics to provide psychoanalytic treatment to the general population, believing psychoanalytic insights relieve suffering. Psychoanalytic theories have greatly influenced not only our understanding of human psychology and motivations, but have also reached well beyond the consulting room to the arts, literature, philosophy, film theory, queer theory, gender studies, intersectionality, linguistics, critical theory, and more. Psychoanalysis may enhance our understanding of social relations, group psychology, and politics, including systemic violence and racism, and the creation of artworks and other cultural productions provide a space to work and play with these ideas, put them into action, and more immediately affect social change.

38 Massimiliano Gioni and Natalie Bell, ed., *The Keeper* (New York: The New Museum, 2016), 180.

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