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That Incurable Disturber of the Peace

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Entry Points

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“And what is the use of a book,” thought Alice, “without pictures or conversations?”

—Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*

When I was still a child, my maternal grandmother died of cancer. I remember the event chiefly because it meant my mother went away for a few weeks, “to take care of things,” as she put it. I was young enough that her absence was difficult. She brought some of her mother’s possessions back with her when she returned, and in one of the boxes I found a slender picture book called *Creative America*. I remember stealing away to lose myself in the book’s photographs—mind-voyaging in the way children do with picture books. I didn’t really understand what was being portrayed, but I remember that I loved the book. Over the years, it eventually migrated onto my own shelves, though I rarely opened it as an adult.

Creative America was published in 1962 by an organization called the National Cultural Center. It was designed to celebrate the arts and featured short essays by well-known American writers and pictures by Magnum photographers. In an introductory essay, John F. Kennedy praises the arts as incarnating social freedom. He distinguishes the United States’s artistic community from that of “totalitarian society” and welcomed “the free and unconfirmed search for new ways of expressing the experience of the present.”¹ Kennedy’s words seem haunting on a number of levels. Reading the book now is a rather disquieting exercise. To the adult’s eyes, this once beloved and familiar object seems like an unrecognizable relic of statecraft issued at the end of some distant, gilded age.

Despite its unseasonable air, parts of *Creative America* still have the power to startle. In a short essay titled “The Creative Process,” for instance, James Baldwin offers a pithy account of the artist’s primary distinction. According to Baldwin, the artist is charged with cultivating something that most people tend to avoid: the state of being alone. Most of us are not compelled nor inclined to linger with the state of aloneness.

1 John F. Kennedy, *Creative America*
(New York: National Cultural Center/
Ridge Press, 1962), p. 4.

Fifty years later, in the midst of our own so-called age of connectivity, the insight seems remarkably prescient. In Baldwin's mind, our aversion to aloneness has to do with the way the condition can paralyze action:

There are, forever, swamps to be drained, cities to be created, mines to be exploited, children to be fed. None of these things can be done alone. But the conquest of the physical world is not man's only duty. He is also enjoined to conquer the great wilderness of himself. The precise role of the artist, then, is to illuminate that darkness, blaze roads through that vast forest, so that we will not, in all our doing, lose sight of its purpose, which is, after all, to make the world a more human dwelling place.²

For Baldwin, the artist is a figure to be distinguished from all other responsible actors in society, an "incorrigible disturber of the peace," who trades chiefly in intimate knowledge of the human condition, which is to say, knowledge that most of us would rather not know. His essay presses uncomfortably on this point, on the fact that there is a great deal that we do not wish to know, and that the chief matter that we wish to remain ignorant of is knowledge of ourselves. He writes: "the barrier between oneself and one's knowledge of oneself is high indeed." Baldwin's argument here is that society itself creates a bulwark against this most intimate information. We are social creatures because facing the strangeness inside ourselves is simply too frightening. The artist, on the other hand, dares to tarry with these interior forces that menace our precarious security.

Baldwin's essay could be read as an old-fashioned grandiloquent portrait of the artist as a melancholy figure who is perpetually at odds with society. Contemporary readers might be suspicious of such a vision, in part, because we have rightly become skeptical of the *mythos* of individuality. Baldwin is not defending this particular *mythos*. But on

2 James Baldwin, "The Creative Process," originally printed in *Creative America* and reprinted in Baldwin, *Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York: The Library of America, 1998), p. 669. Contemporary readers who are attuned to the

debates about the "Anthropocene epoch" might find Baldwin's phrasing naïve. Rather than transform the world into a more "human dwelling place," we have, in fact, created a global climate crisis. As Claire Colebrook puts it: "the

human species is now recognizable as a being that for all its seeming diversity is nevertheless bound into a unity of destructive power." *Death of the Posthuman: Essays on Extinction*, Vol. 1 (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Open Humanities Press, 2014).

the face of it, even his definition of aloneness seems like a condition that falls outside the purview of politics proper. As Hannah Arendt often insisted, politics is based on the fact of human plurality. It arises in what lies *between* people, in the web of human relationships. Dwelling with the state of aloneness seems like the very opposite of the idea of the *demos*, the inverse of what Arendt described as the “the common public world.”³

But let’s linger with Baldwin’s argument for a moment longer. What if, as a fundamental fact of human subjectivity, each one of us was inhabited by a strange otherness? And what if the ability to tolerate this uncomfortable condition was a kind of necessary prerequisite upon which the common public world depended? And further, what if, in our current political epoch, so thoroughly dominated by neoliberal forms of rationality that find this incalculable otherness indigestible, the capacity for aloneness was more significant than ever before? However counterintuitive it might seem, Baldwin is proposing exactly this: tarrying with the state of being alone—and by extension, with those aspects of being human that most of us would rather not face—is what makes the artist among the most potent of political actors.

To cast this slightly differently, Baldwin is defining and defending something we might call *political interiority*. In another age, we might have simply called it the soul of the citizen. This is not a particularly fashionable topic today, but it is worth remembering that, once upon a time, every major political theory sought to address both aspects of human life: the external and the internal. Aristotle claimed, for instance, that in order for the *polis* to survive and thrive, it required that members of the city-state have adequate material goods, but also that it nurture the *psychē*. For a more recent example, consider Steve Biko, one of the leading political voices in South Africa during the apartheid years. Under the magnificent pseudonym Frank Talk, Biko articulated an “inward looking process” he called Black Consciousness. Its “first truth” was “to make black man come to himself; to pump life back into

3 Hannah Arendt uses the phrase frequently, including in her long essay, “Introduction into Politics,” in *The Promise of Politics*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2005), p. 122.

his empty shell; to infuse him with pride and dignity; to remind him of his complicity in the crime of allowing himself to be misused.”⁴

Civil resistance movements can be distinguished by this characteristic address to political interiority. Such appeals have the effect of exposing the gap between justice and the law. In his pivotal essay “On Civil Disobedience,” for instance, Henry David Thoreau reflects on “the foolishness of that institution which treated me as if I were mere flesh and blood and bones.”⁵ The State, as Thoreau called it, may have an exquisite repertoire of techniques to assault and discipline the body, but it always fails to address the human being’s inner “sense.”

Thoreau drew his reflections from a night spent in prison, and perhaps it is worth noting just how much of this tradition of political thought overlaps with the genre of prison literature. If the experience does not destroy the mind, the solitude that prison imposes can induce a dialogue with the self. Or in Baldwin’s terms, the imposition of aloneness can necessitate a tarrying with the great wilderness inside.⁶ Consider that other incorrigible disturber of the peace, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and the singular defense of human dignity that he managed to fashion in his “Letter from Birmingham City Jail.” As King himself concedes, the letter would have been much shorter had he been writing from a comfortable desk: “what else is there to do when you are alone for days in the dull monotony of a narrow jail cell other than write long letters, think strange thoughts, and pray long prayers?”⁷ There is a notable kinship between artists and the great political leaders on this point: both are able to wander in the great wilderness of the self, to eke out sustenance from the state of being alone.

4 Steve Biko, “We Blacks,” in *I Write What I Like: Selected Writings* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), p. 29.

5 Henry David Thoreau, “On Civil Disobedience,” in *On Civil Disobedience and Other Essays* (New York: Dover, 1993), p. 12.

6 It bears pointing out that Baldwin wrote scathingly about the prison system in his “Open Letter To My Sister, Miss Angela Davis”

(printed in the *New York Review of Books*, January 7, 1971). It also bears pointing out that the mass incarceration of people in the United States has increased by 500 percent in the past forty years. Some 2.2 million people are behind bars, many for nonviolent offenses such as drug possession. And over 840,000 of these prisoners—40% of the prison population—are African American men. Echoing Baldwin’s appeal, Jed S. Rakoff has recently called for more of us to speak out about this evil of

our time. See “Mass Incarceration: The Silence of the Judges,” *New York Review of Books*, May 21, 2015. See also Angela Y. Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (New York: Seven Stories Press/Open Media, 2003).

7 Martin Luther King, Jr., “Letter from Birmingham City Jail,” in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King Jr.*, ed. James M. Washington (New York: Harper, 1986), p. 302.

As you probably have surmised, I am making a case for the way Baldwin's essay offers a fresh set of entry points into the intersection of art and social justice. There is a more familiar set of philosophical debates about this particular crossroads (dominated by the Frankfurt School on the one hand and by a variety of interpretations of Kant's *Critique of Judgement* on the other).⁸ But these entrenched arguments have a way of predetermining the route that one takes through this particular terrain. Baldwin's nimble lead takes us to other, less-traveled paths, alternate routes that nevertheless have their own beacons blazing in the dark.

Let's call one of these routes "The Path of Two Worlds." In Baldwin's mind, a great part of the artist's responsibility is to never cease fighting with the society of which he or she is a part. Later he frames this as a lover's quarrel, but he initially suggests that the battle has to do with the fact that society, by its nature, can only acknowledge the manifest world: "Society must accept some things as real," he writes. "One cannot possibly build a school, teach a child, or drive a car without taking some things for granted." But the artist's primary responsibility lies elsewhere. He or she must nurture the belief that "visible reality hides a deeper one, and that all our action and achievement rest on things unseen."⁹ The artist is charged with this duty—for her own sake, but also for the sake of society—to tend this deeper reality, to nurture a vision of another world, a world that is sustained only by the imagination, one which the artist often cannot stop herself from creating.

The enclosed space of the studio often serves as the primary stage for this imaginary exercise. The studio is, of course, an enduring *topos* in the history of art. In her recent series *100 Days of Solitude*, the Palestinian

8 The Frankfurt School debates have several strands, one of which turns on the merits of politically committed art versus autonomous art. Several of the key texts are included in a volume called *Aesthetics and Politics*, ed. Fredric Jameson (London: Verso, 1980). A short list of the thinkers who returned to Kant's Third Critique include: Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, ed. Ronald Beiner (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982); Jean-François

Lyotard, *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime*, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994); Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (New York: Continuum, 2006).

9 Baldwin, "The Creative Process," p. 670.

artist Nidaa Badwan probed the extreme edges of the genre.¹⁰ Badwan has barely left her studio in Gaza in two years. It is a self-imposed isolation, but one that draws into sharp relief the devastating situation of the larger territory. Badwan's room is less than one hundred square feet; she has just one window and one light bulb. In this tiny space, she creates strikingly colorful photographic portraits that effectively screen out the grey desolation outside: the vast tracks of urban ruin caused by the ongoing air wars with Israel, the poverty and suffering imposed by the blockade, and the increasingly militant religious environment demanded by Hamas. As Badwan puts it: "I feel I'm not living here. The project made new windows for me."¹¹ The intimate photographic interiors have been compared to the Renaissance masters, but they are perhaps more reminiscent of Yinka Shonibare's playful engagements with character and identity—the way they hint at (if they don't quite provide) a narrative. Badwan's willingness to tarry with solitude epitomizes Baldwin's insight that blazing a trail through the wilderness of the self can, at times, be the only means to retain a vision of the world as a human dwelling place.

The staunchest of critics might dismiss such efforts as a consolatory retreat from a devastating reality. What effect does nurturing imaginary worlds have on the ordinary conditions of human existence? At its best, isn't this just a species of heroic optimism, and at its worst, wishful thinking?

The same charge could be levelled at social justice movements. Thoreau's aforementioned essay—a staple in political science curricula—ends with this unforgettable exercise in imagining:

I please myself with imagining a State at least which can afford to be just to all men, and to treat the individual with respect as a neighbor; which even would not think it inconsistent with its own repose if a few were to live aloof from it, not meddling with it, nor embraced by it, who fulfill all the duties of neighbors and fellow men. A State of

10 See Badwan's website for the complete series: <http://www.nidaabadwan.com>.

11 Jodi Rudoren, "A Gaza Artist Creates 100 Square Feet of Beauty and She's Not Budging,"

New York Times, February 27, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/28/world/middleeast/finding-gaza-unbearable-artist-creates-her-own-world-in-one-room.html>.

which bore this kind of fruit, and suffered it to drop off as fast as it ripened, would prepare the way for a still more perfect and glorious State, which I also have imagined, but not yet anywhere seen.¹²

Eve Arnold, *Non-Violence* (USA. Virginia. Petersburg. Civil strike, Core group. Training activist not to react when smoke is blown in her face), 1960

Thoreau is but one in a long list of thinkers whose political practice rests on nurturing a vision of an alternate reality. This is the principle that lies at the heart of civil resistance: a steely commitment to a deeper reality, an unshakable adherence to the idea that another, better world is possible.

This is one of the lessons that *Creative America* can still offer us, or at least this is the memory that the book retains for me: the idea that there is a delicate kinship between artistic and political practice, a kinship that rests on the quixotic fact that “the truth about us is always at variance with what we wish it to be,” as Baldwin sagely observes. “The human effort is to bring these two realities into a relationship resembling reconciliation.”¹³

Let me conclude with a series of images that epitomize, for me, the nature of this “human effort.” The photographs were made by Eve Arnold in 1960. The sequence did not make it into *Creative America*, although I am tempted, now, to make the case that they should have been included. The great majority of the images in the book are

¹² Thoreau, “On Civil Disobedience,” p. 18.

¹³ Baldwin, “The Creative Process,” p. 671.

Eve Arnold, *Non-Violence (USA. Virginia. Petersburg. Civil strike, Core group. Training activist not to react to provocation)*, 1960

attributed to Arnold, who joined Magnum in the 1950s. She frequently blurred the genres of documentary and portraiture, and she is perhaps best known for her unparalleled portraits of Marilyn Monroe (a body of work that puts pressure on the idea that the authorship of images belongs to their maker rather than their subject). But in 1960, she was in Petersburg, Virginia, covering civil resistance training. The young woman at the center of this series

is Priscilla Washington, a twenty-year-old biology major who was attending Virginia State College at the time. For Arnold, the training sessions must have seemed uncannily similar to the more familiar form of stagecraft that she often photographed. Here protestors act out a scene from a lunch-counter sit-in, complete with mock harassment from patrons.

There is so much to say about this remarkable sequence of photographs, but to my eyes, they stand as vivid reminders of the human effort—the sheer force of creativity—that is required to bring two realities into a relationship resembling reconciliation. The political actors are all too aware of the strange way in which their “very presence is said to be bad,” according to Jim Wood, Chairman of the Political Action Committee, who was the speaker at that meeting in Virginia in 1960. “The fact that you can’t eat at the lunch counter is a device, a reminder that you’re inferior,” he points out. “We have to find a device that will change these things.”

For Jim Wood, Priscilla Washington, and scores of others, the device of change is a form of political stagecraft known as civil resistance. Its lessons are worth remembering in our own troubled times. For Eve Arnold, Nidaa Badwan, and for many other artists, the device is photography. But whatever the tool, these incorrigible disturbers of the peace teach us, over and over, that our common public world is a manufactured one, that nothing under the sun is stable, least of all ourselves. Their courage to tarry with this disquieting fact makes for a more human dwelling place.