

# ESSAY

## Unsovereignty

*By Aria Dean*



Steven Parrino, *Spin-Out Vortex 2*, 2000, enamel on canvas, 182 x 182 cm

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Everywhere is under lockdown. Nobody knows how things will look on the other side, but for the foreseeable future the travelling circus of the international art world has closed up shop. So, time to think about what a new constitution of art might be like if we toss out established ideas about art's relationship to the political. Maybe then we can finally begin to imagine the eclipse of liberal values and tell the fable of our unsovereign lives.

There's no other way to begin but bluntly. Lately, I've been thinking about sovereignty.

Maybe it's an unwarranted leap over a practical, emotional response to the current COVID-19 lockdown and the surrounding aura of panic, but the whole situation of late – read: avoiding contact with strangers, sudden decrees that give off notes of authoritarianism, etc. – has me thinking about my own fixation on the subject and its borders in a different light, through the framework of sovereignty. The interlocking, at times wholly conflicting, sovereignty of nations amid a global health crisis and the economic one to follow; the sovereignty of individual states and regions, of metropolises like New York City; the sovereignty of the subjects blithely traversing them; and the sovereignty of subjects who purport to traverse them slightly less blithely: artists.

I had a phone call the other day with a journalist from an American magazine. She was asking me some questions about the work of another artist, and at one point she asked me

whether art – “especially in times like these” – shouldn't venture to affirm “liberal values”. I think I choked out a laugh and answered, “no”, which wasn't entirely what I wanted to convey.

I wish, instead, that I'd been able to recall this thing from Henri Bergson about how the role of philosophy is to ask whether we are asking the right questions in the first place. Bergson says that if the terms are improperly set out, you'll never be able to solve the problem. I think this basic premise can be extended to art; perhaps art's role is not always to ask if we're asking the right questions, but certainly if we keep asking the wrong ones, the whole ship is doomed to sink eventually. Especially in New York, where institutions, the commercial world, and the critical body alike seem content to premise the whole affair of art on these very wrong questions.

The writer's question tickled me, not because it was absurd – of course, many in and outside of the art world believe art's function to be some version of this – but because in a single instant,

I was confronted with the vast distance between my own beliefs and hers – a dramatic *Vertigo* zoom. I hadn't realised until this moment exactly how diametrically opposed to this concept I am, though I'd been working through this in writing and in my practice for at least a few years. But again, this is business as usual. As Brian Kuan Wood and Anton Vidokle wrote in 2012 in e-flux: “. . . contemporary art has merged increasingly with the sensibilities of actual, concrete political structures, which have discovered in contemporary art and culture a means of exhibiting liberal, enlightened, globally conscious moral values.”

2012 is close to a decade ago, but recent art-world happenings in Europe and the United States (at the very least) serve as evidence for the continuation and expansion of this trend. Its terms have certainly shifted, generally towards a language of leftism, but the art world is continually governed and undergirded by a basic adherence to classical liberal principles.

It's pretty difficult to argue, without sounding like a real asshole,

*“What is the relationship between politics and death in those systems that can function only in a state of emergency?”* Achille Mbembe

why these “liberal values”, or principles, are bankrupt. In *Necropolitics* (2011), philosopher Achille Mbembe does so in the gentlest of terms, writing that “contemporary experiences of human destruction suggest that it is possible to develop a reading of politics, sovereignty, and the subject different from the one we inherited from the philosophical discourse of modernity.” Here, Mbembe declares an alternative reading *possible*, but considering the degree of ongoing destruction – sometimes “terror” – wrought by humans upon one another and upon the environment, and, in turn, the environment’s indifference-turned-hostility to humanity, I would deem an alternative reading not just possible but *necessary*.

Thinking the mainstage of politics and philosophy, Mbembe makes the argument that modernity – and hence late modern thought – has improperly located the “truth of the subject” in “reason”. Europe has overprivileged and naturalised “normative theories of democracy and has made the concept of reason one of the most important elements of both the project of modernity and of the topos of sovereignty”. He continues: “From this perspective, the ultimate expression of sovereignty is the production of general norms by a body (the demos) made up of free and equal men and women. These men and women are posited as full subjects capable of self-understanding, self-consciousness, and self-representation.”

This vision of the sovereign individual subject is one of the givens on

which the art world constitutes itself, and also one of its aforementioned liberal principles – or “values”. The notion of the artist as a sovereign agent persists; however, much like the liberalism that it sits atop, its contours have been redrawn ever so slightly. The artist’s sovereignty may have at one point looked like self-determination in respect to the character and course of their practice. But in 2020, the artist as sovereign agent has more to do with their status as a sovereign subject and the exportation and reproduction of the liberal frameworks of western modernity and their neoliberal descendants than with actual freedom.

I return time and time again to the worn-out but instructive examples of the last two Whitney Biennials as exemplary of this frame and its failures. In both cases, 2017 and 2019, artists expressed their relative freedom in relation to the larger “demos” under the rubric of seeking self-knowledge or an exercise of self-expression. If their intentions were otherwise, outside of this frame, they were led by the elbow back into its clutches.

Alongside the painter Dana Schutz, in the ring in the 2017 art-world celebrity death match, was American artist Jordan Wolfson. His virtual reality work *Real Violence* (2017), in which the artist is imaged beating another man to death on a New York street, came under fire for its, duh, violence. I suppose that to many it was a gratuitous exercising of the artist’s will over another subject, such that it breached

the social contract of both liberal democracy and human decency in one fell swoop. When asked to account for the ethics of his work, Wolfson often says something like “I’m just a filter.” People seem to really hate this because it seems like he’s eschewing responsibility. In a recent *New Yorker* profile, Dana Goodyear wrote that she told the artist that she “perceived numbness in the work; perhaps the lack of a moral stance had become a limitation”. And then Wolfson replied: “If art is supposed to be celebratory and propose a better world, for me that’s decorative art. ... That’s fine. But you’re looking at my work from another genre.”

The possibility of distinguishing new genres of art production is compelling to me. Perhaps – and I say this as someone who is all too easily incensed by the art world’s bad-faith political discourse – a liberal framework for art and artists has a place as a *genre*, not as an overarching critical imperative. Perhaps we can set aside as “decorative” such curatorial conceits as the 2019 Whitney Biennial’s supposed rejection of “packaged identity” and persistent adherence to the framework of self-expression and self-knowledge. What does it look like to do art from a position radically opposed to “liberal values”, perhaps most importantly to the notion of sovereignty, at every level?

The porosity of our unsovereign lives is continually refused by art critical discourse, even when it stares us in the face. Events like the Whitney’s circuses – thinking specifically about Schutz and

“... *the flesh stands as both the cornerstone and potential ruin of the world of Man.*”  
Alexander Weheliye

Wolfson in 2017, and additionally about the Warren Kanders fiasco in 2019, the vice chairman of the Whitney whose company sold teargas to law enforcement – offer an opportunity to explore another version of discourse. However, either too exhausted or comforted by the familiar, trite battles over censorship, diversity, and privilege, we choose not to accept. Wolfson’s subjectively horrific video could have stoked a conversation around embodiment and the ethics of witnessing; around white, male neutrality and the transmission of otherness; around this very question of sovereignty.

Instead, we talk about privilege, which is commonly defined as “a special right, advantage, or immunity granted or available only to a particular person or group”. (Not to be dictionary guy!). We talk about people like Wolfson being marked by such special rights and how it distances them from the realities they venture to comment upon. Privilege rests its downy head on the same vector as sovereignty. Its logic hinges on a view of subjectivity descended from the very same liberal humanism, tied to the idea that any rights are natural. In actuality, the only part of privilege’s common definition that is operative is “immunity”: protection, exemption, “ability to resist toxin” (dictionary guy!). Exemption from what exactly?

In *Necropolitics*, after telling us why the story offered to us by modernity should not be the only operative account, Mbembe tells us that the truth of the subject might boil down to the simplest of elements: life and death.

Sovereignty, in his picture, is not the “supreme authority within a territory”, but it is the “right to kill”. Politics are “the work of death”. Privilege, then, is not a positively configured “special right or advantage”. It is nothing more or less than one’s degree of exemption or immunity from “conditions of life conferring upon [people] the status of living dead”.

In our present – like at this very moment amid the mounting hype of a global pandemic unlike anything most of us have experienced – our configuring of privilege has been capsized at the hand of a virus that literally could not give a single shit about family money, queerness, and so on. Of course, certain people – those with precarious housing, the uninsured, and so on – are more at risk, but more than anything, this is an example of Mbembe’s view of politics coming down to life and death. Most things now fall away, leaving us with our ability to outrun death’s lopsided pursuit, and the complex of geographic, economic, social, biological factors that determine our pace.

Art is sometimes discussed as the product of a campaign against death – usually as an individual’s narcissistic desire for immortality – but perhaps, just as often, it is a grappling with the harsh reality of exemption’s closing horizon. This art, if properly approached, might tell us a different story, one of constitution less than articulation, of the struggle to maintain the coherence of subjectivity while it’s being invaded and dissolved at every turn, to perform

the magic of turning unsovereignty into sovereignty, or at least its aspiration. Articulating the artist-subject as wholly unsovereign to begin with shifts the terms of engagement (à la Bergson); the artists may still fail their works and their audiences, but the discourse may be richer.

Such an alternate art-critical frame as this would draw heavily on black radical theories of “flesh” and “social death”, and Mbembe’s necropolitics, as I have done here, to approach (attack?) artistic production from a position outside of the sovereign subject, outside of the human-figuring position of “flesh” or “the living dead”, not as “an abject zone of exclusion that culminates in death but an alternate instantiation of humanity that does not rest on the mirage of western Man as the mirror image of human life as such” (Alexander Weheliye). Such a framing – a far-reaching and exhaustive project, no doubt – describes art and politics in a state of emergency such as our present – as cities like New York that once hung their hat on their “unparalleled” cultural and economic prowess buckle to crisis – but moreover describes the states of exception and scenes of subjection that are made marginal in the pages of art history, though normalised through ongoing and excessive violence: the camp, the colony, the plantation, the hood.

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