

# SUR VIVAL

## STRATEGIES:

GEARING UP FOR AUTARKIC COMMUNITIES  
OR  
THE POST-POLITICAL SOCIETY?

BY SUE SPAID



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On the one hand, a political vacuity of the institutions is evolving and, on the other hand, a non-institutional renaissance of the political.  
— Ulrich Beck<sup>1</sup>

## A SURVIVALIST ZEITGEIST

### 1958

With Paul Rudolph's Art and Architecture Building at Yale University, architects begin to build expensive reinforced-concrete museums, whose fortress-like qualities appear to protect art as an arena of freedom. Later examples of the Brutalist barrage include Marcel Breuer's Whitney Museum of Art of 1966, I. M. Pei's 1968 Everson Art Museum at Syracuse University, and Roche and Dinkerloo's Oakland Museum built in 1969. Because the structurally complex buildings of Deconstructivist architects Daniel Libeskind, Frank Gehry, Peter Eisenmann, and Zaha Hadid require sophisticated technology, these architects share Brutalism's fascination with overcoming technical hurdles to construct impressive structures. The jury is still out as to whether their millennial buildings will protect public space or guard private property, as Richard Meier's 1998 citadel on the hill, the Getty Museum, seems to do.

### 1972

Helen and Newton Harrison exhibit *Survival Piece #6 Portable Farm*, an ever-ready fish farm where fish feed on algal blooms, at London's Hayward Gallery. The Harrisons's "Survival Series" from 1970 to '73 experiments with growing food under lights in museum installations. They grow worms, strawberry patches on vertical struts, cucumbers, and beans in upright pastures, citrus and avocado trees in *Portable Orchard*, and greens and root plants in flat pastures. Realizing that farming under lights is too energy-expensive, they "began to think more directly about reclamation and restitution at whatever scale opportunity offered. . . ."

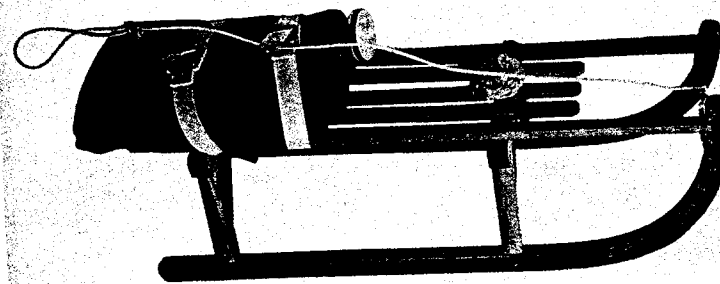
### 1972

*Womanhouse*, a massive collaborative installation created by California Institute for the Arts faculty and students, puts into practice the psychological self-discoveries obtained by the women's movement's consciousness-raising format.

THE NEW MILLENNIUM LAUNCHED PHYSICAL contest-television hits like CBS's "Survivor" and "Big Brother," ABC's "The Mole," and NBC's "Lost" and "Fear Factory," shows that blend drama and sport, in which seemingly ordinary people combat their environment and duke it out to become the lone survivor (and cash-prize winner). What makes these shows so popular? Reality-based programming has been standard since the early 1990s, so "real-TV" is hardly a new phenomenon. Reality television feigns intimacy by staging titillating, albeit voyeuristic, personal confessions. But after a tough decade during which twice as many better-paid and better-educated workers lost their jobs than workers in the 1980s<sup>2</sup> and outsourcing, multiple-job incomes, adjunct positions, employee insecurity, and fighting for a living wage became the norm, home viewers really relate to the struggles reality-show participants must endure and the strategies they employ to survive. Most relevant, unlike ordinary game-show contestants, savvy players can fast-track from worker to celebrity, and access the freedom to control their destiny that their new-found fame and exposure allow.

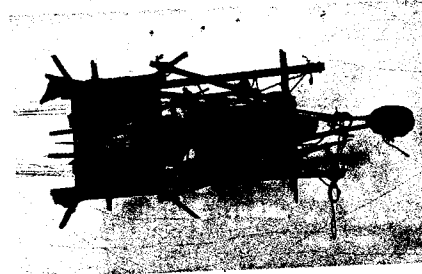
*Fin-de-siècle* street fashion captured the image of the lone survivor all too well. By 1998, club kids, dot-commers, and fashionistas appeared equipped for some mix of combat (camouflage patterns, all-over straps and buckles), wilderness hiking (backpacks, Polarfleece pullovers, and all-terrain shoes), safari (cargo pants and pocketed khaki vests), and cyberpunk espionage (wired headsets, strap-on computers, and Palm Pilots). One could toss it up as a Y2K-scary-inspired trend, and hopefully it was, but its impetus comes from much deeper roots. In the early '90s, a rising skepticism concerning the government's effectiveness inspired both increasingly low voter turnout and the rise of militia groups. This move away from a government by and for the people toward rugged individualism suggests either the emergence of autarkies—self-reliant local

JOSEPH BEUYS  
*Sled*, 1969. Mixed media, 35" long.



communities—or a transition to a post-political society: the total dismantling of democracy's political life, so the electoral process is rendered futile.

Evidently, a certain segment of the populace feels increasingly atomized, as if one must fight one's battles all alone, or worse, one might have to survive with whatever one can carry. Post Y2K, this survivalist zeitgeist continues, as fashionistas gear up for the dog-eat-dog world depicted in the 1981 film *Mad Max: Road Warrior II*. Witness a November 2000 *Vogue* headline: "Get ready to do battle in barbarian chic: a high-concept remix of the rough and the refined."



KIM JONES  
*A Cripple in the Right Way May Beat a Racer in the Wrong One* (detail), 1999.  
Mud, sticks, pencil, dimensions variable.

Images of self-reliance continue to dominate the scene, as current fashion trends reference the wild wild West, fur-clad barbarians, caricatured feather-and-leather Native Americans, and punk aggression. All of these fashion trends followed a decade in which life seemed unusually out of control. Not surprisingly, works of art foreshadowed this search for self-sufficiency and liberty.

### 1974

Joseph Beuys articulates his theory of social sculpture as art's political, evolutionary, and revolutionary power to free human kind from all oppression. His vision of radical democracy require everyone's participation in directing the destiny and protecting creative freedom.

### 1974

Kim Jones first performs the *Mudman*, his shaman-inspired persona, who reappears in later works. Caked in mud wearing only a loincloth, boots, a pan hose disguise, and a headdress made of foam rubber and bamboo, he carries a structure of sticks and mud strapped to his back. For his 1999 installation, *A Cripple in the Right Way May Beat a Racer in the Wrong One* at John Weber Galle Jones places jerry-rigged tricycles, toy trucks, and toy cars (strapped to wood armatures, wrapped in foam rubber a bound with wire, tape, and cord) on the wall and draws tread marks, so they appear to be racing around the room. Resembling a scenario out of *Mad Max* but inspired by a childhood disease that confined the artist for three years in a wheelchair and braces, the crippled a continuously repaired vehicles pose a poignant reminder of the medical procedures people often endure to stay in the race.

### 1977

Reacting to the expense and absurdity Walter de Maria's sinking a one-kilogram rod into the ground, Stuart Brisley digs a hole at Documenta, and performs *Survival in Alien Circumstance*, by living its bottom, amidst the mud and debris for two weeks.

### 1986

"Protect Me From What I Want," one of many urgent messages from Jenn Holzer's *Survival* series from 1983 to flashes on the electronic signboard at Times Square, New York.

### 1989

On the heels of the art market's call B. Wurtz mails hand-made cardboard invitations that proclaim "survival" double as multiples (edition 1045). His exhibition at Feature gallery in

# INDIVIDUALIZED POWER

ART PRODUCTION ITSELF IS A SURVIVAL GAME. The art world is not only super competitive, but art is a model for autonomy, since artists often travel through unknown territories alone. To realize something that only exists in one's imagination requires artists to overcome technical and intellectual hurdles. Dozens of works of art in the past century predicted our culture's current obsession with survivalism (see accompanying timeline). Such works present strategies for surviving scarce resources, powerlessness, personal neglect, illness, or the loss of social connections. While survival issues popped up periodically during the 1970s and '80s, they were most visible in the rough-and-tumble '90s.

Armed with the motto "creativity = capital" and sporting jeans, fisherman's vest, felt fedora, and fur coat, Joseph Beuys epitomized rugged individualism. A World War Two *luftwaffe* pilot who supposedly survived his plane being shot down, Beuys remains the art world's prime survivalist icon. As a life model, survivalist art essentially ekes out the freedom to overcome some oppressive force. The history of Modern and contemporary survival art also anticipates the transition from a public commitment to Beuys's notion of "radical democracy" to a skepticism concerning the significance of what Hannah Arendt termed the "political life," allowing Atelier van Lieshout (AVL) leader Joep van Lieshout to exclude politics from his supposedly autarkic art collective, AVL-Ville.

When asked about AVL-Ville's structure, van Lieshout seems pleased that he and his cohorts will run it like a business, not a democracy. Since only self-appointed AVL members will make decisions, it seems more like an old-fashioned club or oligarchy. Van Lieshout brags that "our work is based on piracy, not politics or policy."<sup>3</sup> How large will AVL-Ville have to grow before its members feel oppressed by the villains (derived from *villanus*, the Medieval

ATELIER VAN LIESHOUT  
Mercedes with 57mm Cannon, 1998. Mercedes pick-up, polyester, steel, two sections: 55" x 114" x 78 1/2" and 49" x 15 1/2" x 55".  
Photo by Derk-Jan Woudrik, courtesy of Tilton / Kustera Gallery.



Latin word for "feudal farmers") making decisions on their behalf? By projecting images of outlaws, no longer protected by law, or hoodlums taking the law into their own hands, AVL suggest that weapons, which are used as elements in many of their artworks, are "part and parcel of self-sufficiency in our modern middle ages."<sup>4</sup> If this experimental community succeeds, it will offer the political life as an outmoded symptom of our less free past. If it fails because dissatisfied AVL-Villians leave, mutiny, or strike, it will revitalize the political life and be truly autarkic.

In response to AVL's work, critic Dave Hickey summarized the message in Michel Foucault's posthumously published book *The Care of the Self*: "Take care of yourself! Survive by your own lights."<sup>5</sup> Like many survivalist artists, Foucault was refocusing his positive conception of power away from societal institutions toward individualized power, as predicated on the values of autonomy, reflexivity, and critique. In a more sociological view, individualization is a "logical extension of globalization, the hugely increased affluence, mobility, communications and independence" that are a necessary "transitional phase towards new forms of society in the second phase of modernity."<sup>6</sup>

1990

Following the 1990 nuclear accident in Mihama, Japan, Kenji Yanobe begins crafting protective suits like *Yellow Suit* and *Tanking Machine*, whose armored exteriors enclose nurturing interiors and offer "emotional and bodily comfort while fending off environmental ills."<sup>7</sup> Yanobe's suits often take their form from Manga characters like Osama Tezuka's boy-robot Tetsuwan Atom or the Japanese monster Godzilla. *Foot Soldier (Godzilla)* from 1991, part of Yanobe's *Weapons of Conquest* series begun after the Gulf War, is a vehicle that enables drivers to destroy anything in its path. Pushing his fantasy conquest machines one step further, Yanobe later wears his *Radiation Suit (Atom)* to measure Chernobyl's remaining radioactive rays.

1993

In collaboration with his partner Sheree Rose, self-proclaimed "supermasochist" Bob Flanagan keeps visiting hours at the New Museum (the work was originally presented at the Santa Monica Museum in 1992). Visitors speak freely with poet, stand-up comic, and performance artist Flanagan, who lay in bed, hooked up to an oxygen tank in a makeshift hospital room. At 41, Flanagan is at this time among the oldest living survivors of cystic fibrosis (he died in 1996), a lifelong degenerative genetic illness that contributed to his early fascination with pain and his high capacity to endure it. Intermittently, Flanagan is slowly hoisted upside-down, by harnesses attached to his ankles, above the hospital bed. This is one among many masochistic schemes that Flanagan experiences to survive his enduring pain.

1993

Lucy Orta produces survival kits that assemble diverse utensils, objects, reliquaries, texts, and photos depending on the precariousness of the circumstances for which the kits are intended. She has already collaborated with Jorge Orta to perform participatory actions and interventions that comment on the simultaneous need for shelter and protection in the face of natural, social, and political catastrophes. Clearly aware of Lygia Clark's *The House is the Body* series from the late 1960s, Lucy Orta conceives of her pieces as "corporeal architecture": wearable tents and sleeping bags, and inhabitable ponchos as refugee garments. More than clothes, they are survival vehicles that counter anonymity.

1993

Sisters of Survival (Jerri Allyn, Nancy Angelo, Anne Gauldin, Cheri Gaulke, and Sue Maberry) dress in colorful nuns' habits and perform *End of the Rainbow: S.O.S. for Avebury*.

1993

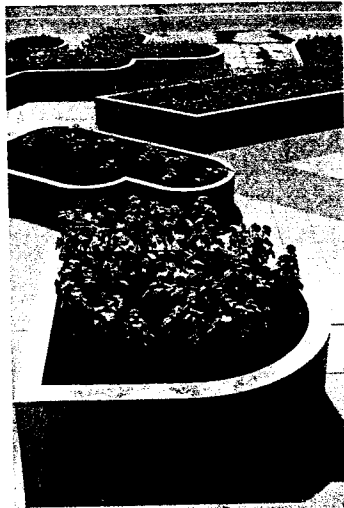
Carsten Höller's *Pest Patrol*, a vehicle seemingly positioned to combat an impending plague, resembles the classic Dakari Landrover, only it is loaded with chocolate candy, catching nets, and her lassos that ease the trapping of small children in metal cages. At first glance, it suggests an off-hand resistance to the social pressure to be a "breeder," but it also suggests the need to retrieve children, and thus protect them, from culture's polluting elements.

1994

Hannah Wilke's last exhibition, "Intra-Venus," which documents her harrowing battle with lymphoma, opens posthumously at Ronald Feldman Fine Arts. Wilke's quest for survival had not begun here. Not only did she document her mother's death a decade earlier, but her reputation for physical beauty motivated *S.O.S. Starification Object Series* from 1974 to 1982, which remarks on the suffering that women must endure at the mercy of beautification rituals.

1994

In an article, Terry R. Myers notes that what he calls "camp painting" "contains an explicit commentary on feats of 'survival' in a world dominated by the taste, interests and definitions of others. Throughout the '90s, Fred Tomaselli embeds enticing pills and drugs in his paintings' surfaces to make hallucinatory landscapes and geometric patterns. His paintings not only mesmerize viewers but they cross-reference the way drugs and art alike help us self-medicate, expand consciousness, locate comfort, overcome depression and anxiety, as well as supplement energy, intelligence, and memory deficiencies.



TOBIAS REHBERGER

*The Sun From Above* (detail), 2000. Photo by James Isberner, courtesy of Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago.

#### 1994

Atelier van Lieshout (AVL), the first collaborative to dedicate their oeuvre to survivalism, is formed. Prior to AVL, Joep van Lieshout's work explores survival strategies (or he-man antics) like hunting, slaughtering, and butchering animals, preparing sausages, retreating to isolation tanks, indulging sexual freedom, and living outdoors. AVL design roving guerrilla villas throughout the '90s such as *Modular House Mobile* and *Autocrat*, and functional 40-foot shipping containers like *AVL Hospital*, *Workshop for Alcohol and Medicine*, *Workshop for Weapons and Bombs with Sleep/Study Ball*, and *Pioneer Set*, an autarkic farming community replete with chickens and rabbits. AVL's *Autocrat* is a spartan living structure containing a rainwater collection unit, wood-burning stove, and slaughtering butcher blocks. Its name fully inscribes its user's preference for autonomy and self-reliance.

#### 1995

As a first-time mom, Marion Wilson begins to imagine intimidating bronze warrior babies, whose armor protects them from unforeseen dangers. Her project bears out as a naturally concerned parent's subconscious survival tactic. For the next few years, she produces and exhibits warrior babies. The premise of this work seems totally far flung, until the media starts focusing on young boys' violent capabilities because of crimes committed by minors.

## MODERNITY'S SECOND PHASE

BOTH THE SURVIVALIST AND FASHION ZEITGEISTS are symptomatic of peoples' need for sovereignty over themselves, in the wake of a seemingly ineffectual government. Do those who don't vote realize they have fostered a post-political society, however temporary? Oddly enough, the media never investigate why so few citizens participate in elections, though one could speculate. Voting seems redundant when people have access to everything they need (schools, property, jobs, legal rights, entertainment, food). One suspects that capitalism now intervenes as a political mechanism: purchases, not ballots, express an individual's power. Non-voters tacitly accept capitalism's replacing democracy, since they let lobbyists influence politicians more than themselves as constituents.

Perhaps non-voters prefer not to affirm undesirable candidates, sound-byte politics, irrelevant issues, or contradictory political parties. Voting has become the mechanism of last resort: most people only vote to change something that they desperately want changed. By contrast, if Beuys's "radical democracy" were realized, its model would be team sports, assembling diverse people with shared interests. In the absence of a political life, no wonder people feel increasingly atomized, disenfranchised, and ignored.

What's most bizarre is the way twentieth-century governments poached and twisted positive aspects of aesthetic philosophies. Stalinist Communism institutionalized the Russian avant-garde's predilection for innovation. The Nazis adapted Bauhaus design's utility and industrial mechanization even while condemning its originators as degenerates. People still wonder what the Reagan Revolution did. One explanation is that Ronald Reagan made a national policy of the hippies' dropping out and the punks' do-it-yourself ethos, by equating greater personal freedom with less government. In time, Regan's blatant abhorrence of government encouraged citizens' mistrust, resulting in a dismantled democracy, leaving ordinary people to begin to value purchasing power as a substitute for legal rights and political institutions.



JAN ESTEP

*Focus Bonnet for Nature Walk or Nature Run*, 1996. Helmet, wire, water resistant nylon, velcro, 14" x 18" x 10".

Paradoxically, the more government becomes removed from the electorate and the more people take responsibility for their rights, the stronger government becomes, as it moves to protect its interests and counter the perceived threat of anarchy. Did the Reaganites cleverly contrive this national policy to destabilize the whole system? Time will only tell whether Modernity's second phase will engender a post-political society, where capitalism is the law of the land; or an autarkic community, where people live simply and value self-reliance. The global resurgence of activism and a renewed sense of patriotism, in the wake of September's terrorist attack, suggest the post-political's reversal, but it remains to be seen whether people will get involved politically. To be effective survival strategies, activism and patriotism must continue to eke out freedom.

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<sup>1</sup> Ulrich Beck, "The Reinvention of Politics: Towards a Theory of Reflexive Modernization," in Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens, and Scott Lash, eds., *Reflexive Modernization, Politics, Tradition and Aesthetics in the Modern and Social Order* (Cambridge: Oxford University Press, 1994).

<sup>2</sup> "Downsizing Humbles White-Collar Workers," *San Francisco Chronicle*, March 3, 1996, A2.

<sup>3</sup> Joep van Lieshout, "Up the Organization," *Artforum*, April 2001, 106.

<sup>4</sup> Peter Hoefnagels, "The Good, the Bad and the Ugly," in *the good, the bad + the ugly* (Atelier van Lieshout catalogue), (Rotterdam: NAI Publishers, 1998), 45.

<sup>5</sup> Dave Hickey, "Joep van Lieshout Rebel Housing: Architecture as Rock and Roll," a supplement (Atelier van Lieshout catalogue) (Tampa: Contemporary Art Museum, University of South Florida, 1999), 17.

<sup>6</sup> Bart Lootsma, "The Good, the Bad and the Ugly or: Sympathy for the Devil," in *the good, the bad, + the ugly*, 113.

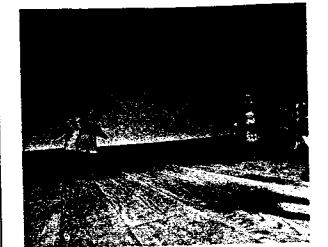
<sup>7</sup> Timeline

<sup>8</sup> Barbara Nemitz, ed., *Transplant* (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz Publishers, 2000), 68.

<sup>9</sup> Joseph Beuys's lecture at Cooper Union, VHS, 1974, courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Art.

<sup>10</sup> Sarah Bayliss, "Bubble boy," *World Art*, Issue 20, Volume 1, 1997, 17.

<sup>11</sup> Terry R. Myers, "Painting Camp: The Subculture of Painting, The Mainstream of Decoration," *Flesh Art*, November/December, 1994, 74.



MARION WILSON

*Boy and Memory Rags*, 1998. Bronze, dimensions

#### 1996

Jan Estep starts to design her own survival gear, in order to apprehend in subtle details, she wears a *Focus I for Nature Walk or Nature Run*, who reduced vista makes walking, let a running, dangerous, *Yellow Pack I* and *Portable Woodpile* (made in 19 enable large-scale camping gear to portable day packs).

#### 1999

Like a scene out of the film *Deliver* Stephen Shanabrook performs *Exit Paintings to Dead Boys*. With a nod Niki de Saint Phalle's 1961 "TIR" ings and the 1980s pseudo-survival paintball, Shanabrook sits in a rock chair, swigs beer, dons protective muffs, and shoots dangerously high paintballs at a distant wall, while a live Exit Art audience watches.

#### 2000

Passersby help themselves to stray broccoli, and an array of herbs gre Tobias Rehberger's public garden, *from Above*, placed outside the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago.

#### 2001

P.S. I Contemporary Art Center ex "Uniform: Order and Disorder," wuments a nearly opposite, but related phenomenon in fashion and art since 1945. In contrast to the survivalist zeitgeist, the "uniform" zeitgeist actually asserts power and threatens equality. In addition to featuring spe haute-couture garments inspired by forms and related fashion ephemera "Uniform" mostly presents works that employ uniforms—such as Chris I oversized police uniforms—or, the people wearing uniforms—like Jeff monumental staged-photograph of bloody Afghanistan battle: Maurizio Cattelan's *La Rivoluzione Siamo Noi*, portrait of the artist wearing a Beifelt suit; Vanessa Beecroft's Navy: inactive-duty performances; or Rik Dijkstra's photo-essay of a French Legionnaire's transformation from adorable boy to toughened warrior. Problematically, portraying people form articulates, if not corroborates uniform's implicit authority, even emphasizes the view that Western is approaching a police state.