

Interview with Hakim Bey

Hakim Bey

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(by phone)

Q: [The first questions concern the book *Immediatism* (a.k.a. *Radio Sermonettes*) and readers' response to it]:

A: Of course it's meant as a discussion of what people do rather than what people *should* do. I'm not interested in preaching, and I don't think myself a guru in any sense. More than that, in this particular book I really meant to describe what I considered to be the revolutionary potential of everyday life, to put it in Situationist terms. The response has been pretty good – I mean I don't get hundreds of letters or anything, but I do get lots of letters, and I do get lots of response – and it seems to strike a chord especially with people in the arts, which is who it was meant for really. I mean, when I say people in the arts that could be anybody, not just professional artists; it could be anyone who feels a necessity for creative action in their life. My idea was to define a space which I feel exists (anyway), that's a private, even secret space, if you like... clandestine... in which the whole problem of commodification, the buying and selling of art, the turning of art into a commodity and the use of art to sell commodities, which is sort of a curse to the modern artist, is avoided, just plain avoided; just a withdrawal from that world and a reaffirmation of a creative power in everyday life, outside the life of commodity, the life of the market. After all, this is why all artists are artists, this is why one becomes an artist – not to sell your soul to the company store but to create.

Q: Is there a lot of media interest in what you do? – because somehow the Disappearing One could attract lots of attention, and the one who places a critique could become himself very interesting for the media. How would that circle work for you?

A: You're absolutely right, but it has not really worked that way. It's true that TAZ ["The Temporary Autonomous Zone"] was part of a book which caused a little bit of a stir in underground circles or whatever, there was some publicity involved in this, but in the first place I don't seek publicity for myself – I'm not interested in establishing some sort of personality cult. I really would like to be invisible. Actually, it was probably a mistake to use an exotic name to write this material. It does actually draw curiosity and attention instead of just being accepted as a pseudonym. So there was a little bit of media attention but not very much, and one reason for that is that in America nothing reaches the media unless it's commodification. This is all the

media is interested in, something which can sell products. And there's no product to be sold here other than a small cheap book or two. In Europe things are slightly different, there is perhaps one may say a remnant of a public intelligentsia – which we don't have here. We really do not have that here. We have some famous writers, who get published in all the journals, and then we have masses of people who are probably far more intelligent, far more creative, but who are not seen in the media and therefore are not seen to exist – sometimes even in their own eyes, and this is why I'm writing a book like *Immediatism*: to emphasize to the artist and the creative people that they do exist, they should exist in their own eyes, so what they do is important, even politically important; even though it happens outside the mass media in a sense is a blessing, not a curse. Things are slightly different in Europe perhaps for these reasons, but in America there's been very little crossover between my world and the world of media – and when I say that I don't even mean magazines and newspapers. I'm not even talking about television and advertising that are really mass media. I'm talking just about local newspapers. They're just not interested. There's no interest in political radicalism in intellectual circles in America, and I think it would be fair to say that – no interest whatsoever.

Q: In your text, you mentioned a certain psychic martial art and the return of the Paleolithic in the sense of a psychic technology which we forgot. Can you explain that?

A: Well, I'm really not trying to be so mysterious or to imply that there's a secret art which I know and which I'm not sharing. Why I called it a secret martial art is that it's simply secret because it's ignored or forgotten. What I mean to say is that living in the body, being aware of the positivity of the material bodily principle (to quote Bakhtin) is in fact a form of resistance, a martial art, if you will. In a world where the body is so degraded, so de-emphasized on the one hand by the empire of the image and on the other hand where the body is degraded by a kind of obsessive narcissism, athletics, fashion, and health, that somewhere in between these extremes to me is the ordinary body which, as the Zen masters would say, is the Zen body, to rephrase the saying that the ordinary mind is the Zen mind. To be conscious and aware of this is already to take a stance of resistance against the obliteration of the body in media or the pseudo-apotheosis of the body in modern sports, or fast food or all this kind of degradation of the body which occurs along with its erasure. So what would that art be I don't know exactly, I think it would be different for each person maybe, and certainly involve a kind of physical creativity that I discuss in the essays. Unfortunately, I haven't got it down to a science yet that could be taught in dojos and you get a black belt in it. It hasn't occurred yet, although perhaps some genius will come along and invent it.

Q: Do you get many invitations to parties that are strange for you or really come as a surprise because of who identifies with your stuff? Can you give examples?

A: I'll just give you one example. I was invited by a ceremonial magician who lives in a medieval castle in the south of France to come and see his museum of occult art. And this was simply as a result of reading my work and corresponding with me for a while. It was great. I won't give his address, though.

Q: There's a lot of frank non-pessimism in what you write, and there's one chapter in your book about laughter as either a weapon or medicine. I was wondering who the people who would communicate this sort of healing laughter might be?

A: First of all, there's an existential choice involved here. I've always thought that literature should be entertaining as well as instructive – a very old-fashioned idea but one that I adhere to. When I set out to write in this way – particularly in this way, a political way, if you want to

call it that – I intend to make a donation, to try to give something. There doesn't seem to me to be any point in giving more misery or exacerbating unhappiness through some kind of hyper-intellectual, pyrotechnical writing about unhappiness and the shit that we all find ourselves in. That's been done plenty. I think first of all that it doesn't need to be done any more and second of all there's a kind of reactionary aspect to it which is that the emphasizing of misery without any anti-pessimism, as you put it, would be simply seduction into inactivity and political despair. In other words, to do politics at all on any level, especially on a revolutionary or on an insurrectionary level, there has to be some anti-pessimism – I won't say optimism because that sounds so fatuous, futile; but anti-pessimism is a nice phrase. And there's a deliberate attempt at that in the writing. Then again it's a matter of my personality, I guess, inclined towards the notion of the healing laugh to some extent. We have an anarchist thinker in America, John Zerzan, who wrote an essay against humor which maybe is one of the things I was reacting against. Even if irony is counter-revolutionary which I think it might be to a certain extent I don't see any way in which you could say that laughter itself is counter-revolutionary. This doesn't make any sense to me unless you mean to get rid of language and thought altogether, which is just another form of nihilism. So as long as you're going to accept culture on some level you're certainly going to have to accept humor. And as long as you're going to have to accept humor you might as well see humor as potentially revolutionary. [...]

I'm actually not out to raise a lot of laughs. Humor can indeed become counter-revolutionary if it's simply exalted out of all proportion and made into the purpose or center of one's art. Well, this could perhaps be considered frivolity. Again, I would say that it's part of that natural martial art of the ordinary mind and body, it's just something that is, and therefore should be celebrated as part of existence.

Q: Palimpsest.

A: The whole idea behind palimpsest was to get over the fetish of the single original philosophy, the origin of single philosophies or the philosophy of single origins. I don't think that we should throw the idea of origins out the window, as for example is done in certain post-structuralist thinkers, or indeed really across the board in modern scientific discourse. In other words, origins are mythological, and comparative mythology still has a great deal to teach us, obviously. We still live in a world which generates mythology, even though people don't realize it. So origins are important, whether for positive or negative reasons, and my idea of the palimpsest was that it inscribes origins upon origins, and every origin that is potentially interesting should be added to the text, and although I don't literally write on top of writing – although it might be an interesting experiment – I do sort of encourage the readers to try to stack these origins or conceptual elements up in their minds as they read, and try to entertain them simultaneously. As the Red Queen told Alice in Wonderland, you have to entertain six impossible ideas before breakfast. This seem to me to be the best way to read. So there's that, but then on the other hand there's spontaneity, there's improvisation, there's the outflow of the moment, and so on, all of which are very important. But you know, I grew up in an era when improvisation really took over avantgarde art, especially theater and music and so forth, and I don't think the results were always very positive. When you improvise in a performance situation and you're not on, you're not brilliant, the results are totally disastrous, whereas at least if you had a plan, if you had some kind of structure that you're working with to begin with, you could at least turn it into a decent performance that would decently entertain everybody. So I tend to steer clear of improvisation as a principle, unless it's connected to really exalted consciousness in some department or an-

other. Perhaps personally I tend more towards the palimpsest than to improvisation. I wouldn't necessarily want to separate them as a body-mind split.

Noise might even be a better concept than improvisation.

(C. Loidl): Since I had the good fortune to meet you every now and then, I wonder what your mind is right now dwelling on. You always seem to be quite a bit ahead of your publications.

(H. Bey): I'm glad you asked. It's been over ten years since *TAZ* was written and about five years since I worked on those essays on immediatism and I think quite a lot has changed. I'm just now working on an essay "Millenium" to try to update some of my thinking. Basically, I've recently come to feel that the collapse of the Communist world between 1989 and 1991 really marks the end of the century, so to speak. Of course, these are artificial divisions in history, but it still makes a kind of convenient way of thinking of it. And it's really taken me five years personally to figure out the implications of that for my own thinking. And the way I would express it now is that in *TAZ* and the *Radio Sermonettes* I was really proposing a third position, a position that was neither Capitalism nor Communism. This is basically, you could say, something that all Anarchist philosophy does. In this period I was telling it in my own way. It's a neither/nor position. It's a third position. Now, however, when you come to think about it, there are not two worlds any more or two possibilities or two contending opposing forces. There is in fact only one world, and that's the world of global capital. The world order, the world market, too-late capitalism, whatever you wanna call it, is now alone and triumphant. It's determinedly triumphant. It knows it's the winner although really it's only the winner by default, I think. And it tends to transform the world in its image. And that image, of course, is a monoculture based on Hollywood, on Disney, on commodities, on the destruction of the environment in every sense, from trees to imaginations, and the turning of all that into commodity, the turning of all that into money and the turning of money itself into a gnostic phantom-like experience which exists outside the world somewhere in a mysterious sphere of its own where money circulates, never descends, never reaches you and me. So what we're looking at is one single world. Obviously this one single world is not going to go without its revolution, it's not going to go without its opposition, And in fact it's around the word revolution that my thoughts are circulating now, because it seems to me that anarchists and anti-authoritarians in general can no longer occupy this third position; because how can you occupy a third position when there is no longer a second position? We can't talk about the Third World any more for the one reason that there's no second world. So even this third world as it used to be is now simply just the slums of the one world. It's just the no-go zone of that one single unified world of Capital. Obviously the communists are not going to step back into the position of opposition. Political Communism has completely shot its load, it's made itself look bad, taste bad in the mouth of history. No-one is calling on authoritarian Marxism to step back into this position of opposition. So where is this opposition supposed to come from? In my mind, first of all, this implies that if we're no longer trying to occupy a third position outside of this dichotomy, then WE are the opposition. Whether we know it or like it or not, we are the opposition. Now, who is we? For me the important thing is the realization that I have a new relation to the word revolution, whereas before I was inclined to look on it as a historical phantom, as in fact the lie told by Communism as opposed to the lie told by Capitalism. And whereas before I was extremely distrustful of the leftist dogma of revolution as opposed to the uprising or the insurrection, I would now say that history forces me once again to have to consider the idea of revolution and of myself as revolutionary and of my theory as revolutionary theory, because the opposition to the one world is already quite real. There is no way in which

this triumph of capital can really & truly be a monolithic triumph excluding all difference from the world in the name of its sameness. And it looks to me like the revolutionary force in the single world of sameness has to be difference: revolutionary difference. And at the same time since the single world is involved, since the one world of capital is the world of separation, of alienation, that along with revolutionary difference it also has to be revolutionary presence (used to be called solidarity, although this is a word that presents some difficulties; I'd prefer simply the word "presence" as opposed to separation or absence.) So, I would say that the revolution of the present is a revolution for difference and for presence. It's opposed to sameness and separation. And as I look around the world to see where there might be arising a natural militant organisational form that speaks to this condition, the one shining example that I might be able to come up with would be the Zapatistas in Mexico, defending their right to be different, essentially. They want to be left alone in peace to be Mayan Indians, but they're not forcing anybody else to become Mayan Indians. They're not even suggesting it. They are different, but they're in solidarity with all those people around the world who have come to support them, because their message is very new, it's very fresh and it attracts a lot of people: the idea that one can be different and revolutionary, that one can fight for social justice without the shadow of Moscow continually poisoning every action, etc. This is something new in the world. *The New York Times* called it the first postmodern revolution, which was simply their sneering ironical way of trying to dismiss it, but in fact when you think about it, it is the first revolution of the 21st century in the terms that I began with, saying that we're already at the beginning of a new century, we're already if you like at the beginning of a millennium. And I expect to see many many more phenomena such as the Zapatistas. I would say that Bosnia potentially could have been such a phenomenon, not in the sense of an ethnic particularity like the Mayans, but in the sense of a pluralistic particularity: a small society where people were different but wanted to live together in peace. And this was seen to be perhaps even more dangerous than the Zapatista model, which is why in my view it was destroyed. It's possible that Bosnia may never be able to recreate itself again in the utopian way that it dreamed of in 1991. But that moment was there, and I think it has great significance for us. So, this to me is the line of the future. I think we have to reconsider all our priorities, we have to realize that militancy is once again a very important concept. This is not to say that I have any plan of march. I don't know what armies to join and am always suspicious of joining any army. But things have definitely changed. I'm embarrassed that it took me so long to figure it out. I don't think many people have really caught on to this yet. In fact, the fact that we still use words like "Third World" means that the popular language has not realized what happened in 1989-1991. So, the first goal is simply to try to raise consciousness about this and that's what I hope to do in the near future.

(D. Ender): Do you see any tangible effects of this lack of opposition in the USA?

(H. Bey): Oh yes, absolutely. The most tangible thing, and I think really the thing which gave me the clue to think about this, is precisely a psychic condition. One could point to lots of economic or social factors, but above all I feel a psychic malaise that is something quite new, and, well, a few years ago I began noticing in public speaking that there was a great deal less response on the part of audiences. You would get audiences that would sit there quite passively looking at you as if you were on television. And if questions came, they were very likely to be questions such as "Tell us what to do". You know when people ask you this sort of question they have no intention of actually taking your advice. What they're doing is trying to fill up some hole in themselves. So I thought, first of all it's just the influence of TV that's been around since 1947 or

whatever, but then I realized that that's not a sufficient explanation for this kind of strange passivity. And I began hearing about it from other people who are involved in public speaking and then finally I read a whole section about it in Noam Chomsky's latest book. He has exactly the same experience of audiences, and all of these experiences begin around 1989, 1991. What I think has happened to us is not just TV. TV is just a symptom. So, what's happening is a kind of cognitive collapse around this single world. When people no longer feel a possibility in the world, a possibility of another position, then they become consciously opposed to the one. And conscious opposition is extremely difficult in an atmosphere that's completely poisoned by media such that no oppositional voice is ever really heard. Unless you yourself make the effort to get down to the alternative media, where that voice is still feebly speaking, then you're left simply in this one world of sameness and separation. Sameness – everything is the same; separation – every individual is separated from every other individual; complete alienation, complete unity. And I think that on the unconscious level, on the level of images, on the mythological level, on the religious level if you wanna put it that way, this is what's happening, especially in America. I can't really speak of other places to the same degree. I've traveled in other countries, but one never has the sense of other countries the way one has the sense of one's own country. But I would imagine that it's a world-wide phenomenon – this kind of capitulation to the mono-culture on the deepest psychic level. So, yeah, it was in fact this sign which began to bother me to the point where I had to think my way through this problem of the one world, the two worlds, the three worlds and the revolutionary world. By no means have I finished thinking about it, but I recently had this – to me – this breakthrough about the word “revolution”. So I see that as the only way to break through this particular wall of glass, this screen, yeah, to break through the screen.

C.L.: Sounds like a conclusion almost.

H.B.: Well, if you wish.

C.L.: No, not that I wish... When you talk about one or two or three or opposition and so on, I get totally contrary images to that in my head, because Europe right now and the further you go East in the Old World Europe, you see how it all has collapsed into little, almost tribal, very chauvinistic entities of people trying frantically to survive – the mafia is the very model – from that point of view and also from your talking about Too-Late Capitalism, I'd like to have an image of yours for how Europe as the EC or EU, which we're sitting right inside of right now, presents itself from over there.

H.B.: Well, obviously, especially from the breakdown of Communism you're going to get this smashing up into many little pieces. But it's more than that. We have to realize that difference is the organic revolutionary response to sameness and all of these splinter societies that you speak of consciously or unconsciously are revolutionary. Now, in the case of the Zapatistas or the Bosnians, let's say, this is a positive kind of revolution that we could support perhaps. In the case of the Serbians, it's something else. It's a conservative revolution, perhaps even a fascistic revolution. It's not really “nationalism”, it's a form of ethnic imperialism. The point is that people are going to be emphasizing difference. Look at it this way: If you have your own culture, let's say it would be Bosnian Muslim or Finnish or Celtic or Ashanti or some tribal culture – this is going to become more and more precious to you as a source and a site of difference. This is where the difference is for you. It's in language, it's in cuisine, it's in art, it's in all of these things. The difference is that difference does not have to be hegemonistic or fascistic. And this is going to be extremely difficult for the old leftists to realize, because the old left itself had an ideal of a single world culture – secular, rationalistic, you know, totally illumined, no shadows, industry,

proletariat, forward into the future, basically extremely hegemonistic towards differences. Yes, they had their little Uzbeki folk-dancers, but this is simply a spectacle of difference, it's not true difference. And we have the same thing: we have 600 channels – choose one! There's a channel for everybody. Is this difference? No. This is not really difference. This is just sameness disguised as difference. But true organic integral difference is revolutionary, now. It has to be, because it's opposed to the single world, the mono-world, the mono-culture of capital. So, we have to choose and we have to influence other people's choices to go for an anti-hegemonistic particularity rather than a hegemonistic particularity. In other words, take the Zapatistas again as a model here. As I said, they are not asking other people to become Mayan Indians. They are simply saying, "This is our difference. This is revolutionary for us. We are defending it." So it seems to me that what's happening in Europe on the one hand is this shattering into all of these fragments, which is a situation where political consciousness becomes extremely difficult. On the other hand, you have things like the EEU, which is simply, in my mind, symptomatic of capitalist mono-culture. So I guess that would mean, although I would have to think about this very carefully, I would say that a revolutionary stance in Europe would be anti-EEU. I think it would have to be, because the thing that we have to preserve is an ecology, you know. An ecology of mind and body implies difference. It implies difference in a state of balance – balance which can even include conflict. If you look at tribal societies, they are not necessarily peaceful societies. But the idea of war to the extinction of all individual desire – this is the monopoly of triumphant capital. And I think that it behooves us – we have to rethink our position if we consider ourselves as leftists of some sort or part of the leftist tradition in some way. We have to really seriously re-think our view of what revolutionary difference is, what it really could be. So, this to me is all inevitable. What's going on in Eastern Europe is inevitable and is potentially revolutionary. If it gets bogged down into conservative revolution and neo-fascism, this would be the great tragedy of the 21st century, but I don't think it's strictly speaking necessary. There is such a thing as revolutionary particularity. And as far as Eastern Europe goes, I would mention not only Bosnia as a failure, but maybe some other small enclaves as possible successes, you know. The anarchists in Ljubljana, they seem to be doing quite interesting things. It's a small enough country where they could have some real influence. So, interesting times ahead, not doubt about it.

C.L.: Yeah. I wish I could share your outlook on that.

H.B.: Go ahead and argue with me, because–

C.L.: No, no. What I saw much more was the latter part of what you said – the conservative capitalist revival in all those countries like Lithuania and Romania and so on. There was sort of a resistance spirit there, while there were those authoritarian governments. And now that those collapsed, it's like the Dollar is the main authority for everyone and it's everyone against everyone, and it's very hard to see anything revolutionary in that. Except that it looks like something very self-defeating.

H.B.: I agree with you, but Eastern Europe is the ideological battleground where capital wants to parade its triumph, where capital is determined to convert everybody. And of course, there's no doubt about it that sixty years of Communism made everybody extremely exhausted.

C.L.: And left them backwards also mentally. People have just been deprived of all sorts of information.

H.B.: I know exhaustion, but at the same time when I meet bright people from Eastern Europe, young intellectuals, punks, anarchists and so forth, I get the feeling of a kind of freshness of approach that's lacking in Western Europeans and Americans; because they were out of the loop

for so long, because there is a certain perhaps even naive based on (laughter) ignorance. This can be turned into a kind of strength, too, in a paradoxical way. I mean, at conferences that I went to last year in Europe which mostly concerned the Internet and communication theory, always without exception the most interesting people were from Eastern Europe. They had the most to say, they had the most energy, the most creative ideas etc. etc. etc. So I don't think it's a totally grim and hopeless situation. I think that the power of international capital is very much focussed on that part of the world right now. So, resistance is extremely important. I think that it's a top priority for Americans and Western Europeans to show every kind of support for resistance in Eastern Europe. Whether it's going to work or not, who knows, you know. But what else have we got to do?

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