In Conversation with Peter Lamborn Wilson

Peter Lamborn Wilson

2012

Prior to the opening reception of the writer/artist's new show at 1:1 gallery, (*Vanishing Art & Hoodoo Metaphysics*, Sept. 23 – October 20) a group of students from Phong Bui's class in the Art Criticism and Writing M.F.A. program at the School of Visual Arts drove upstate to meet with Peter Lamborn Wilson. Sitting in David Levi Strauss's personal library just outside New Paltz, they took the opportunity to ask Wilson about his new artworks, his career as a writer, and the political atmosphere of the world today.

Tyler Akers: What is the function of using separate names Peter Lamborn Wilson and Hakim Bey?

Peter Lamborn Wilson: I call it ambulatory schizophrenia. You know, foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of etcetera etcetera. I just needed several identities, and those aren't the only ones.

Akers: How did you come to work as the English language critic for the Shiraz Arts Festival, and what did you think of the work you saw there?

Wilson: Well, when I discovered that Iran was a place where you could actually make a living just by knowing English I just packed up and went. Once I got there I was asked whether I could translate English from French or type, and I couldn't do either, but I lied and said yes, and learnt how to do both on the job. In the first year the bulletin was actually hand type-set by a guy who did not know English, so every time he would correct a line of type he would make three new mistakes; I had absolutely no sleep for 11 days during that first festival. Luckily, they later switched to a linotype that was a little bit more modern and therefore easier. All of the sudden I was the English language critic, and I got to have people like Peter Brook and Robert Wilson hanging on my words because mine would be the first review they would see. I was very interested in avant-garde theater back then because I had seen oriental forms of theater and it seemed to me that Western theater should be able to recreate these magical forms in some way.

David Levi Strauss: What was Robert Wilson doing back then?

Wilson: The most ambitious production that Bob ever did was called *KA MOUNTAIN*,which was performed in Iran in 1972. They asked him, "We have all this money for you. What do you want to do?" He said, "I want to do a play that lasts for seven days and seven nights." And that was very important to me because a couple of years before, when I was in India, I'd actually had a dream about a theater that would do that—that would go on 24 hours a day, for day after day in which there would be no audience actually, but everybody who was involved in it would be doing the play the whole time so it would become coincident with life itself, and that's as close as

I ever saw anyone get to it. On the last night there was a dust storm and only six people showed up in the audience. There were like 30 people doing the play and six people in the audience. One of them was an old lady named Nina Carlweiss; she was like the grande dame of avant-garde theater—she would go anywhere to anything. She and I sat together in this howling sandstorm and watched them perform the most amazing thing I've ever seen in modern theater. They just tore their hearts out, especially Bob. He did one of his dance routines where he was wearing a tuxedo and covering himself with dust—amazing. In Iran, people used to get up and walk out in droves; they didn't understand why these people were moving so slowly! The key to Bob was always that he was a painter, and he wanted to bring his paintings to life, so everything he did is very flat like it's on a canvas.

Naomi Lev: Most of your work has been political in nature, and these Vanishing Artworks are your first foray into visual art; could you speak about the connections between art and activism?

Wilson: The problem with most politically driven art is that like wearing your heart on your sleeve, it's not subtle. On the other hand, there is politically committed art that is great, such as Goya, the Dada collagists, Philip Guston, just to name a few.

Lev: And as for your recent work?

Wilson: The collages are meant to document actions I undertook, the overall theme of which was the re-enchantment of the landscape, and that to me is a political act. There is a possibility, I believe, of combining magic and activism in the work of art, using consciousness to effect a change in the world that wouldn't normally happen. Now, you could say that all good art is going to do that in some way, but if the subject of the art is the question of the social or the environment, or something like that which is just as legitimate as love or color perception as a subject for art, then the possibility arises that you could have art which actually makes a difference. Now I am certainly not going to claim that I have done that, but that's my intention. I'm not going to be judged on my good intentions because I don't know that any work of art has ever really changed anything in the political world. One would hope so, although you know art for art's sake is also not such a bad idea. I can certainly relate to it from time to time.

Rabia Ashfaque: What are your views regarding the recent revolutions that have taken place across the Middle East and Egypt?

Wilson: We mustn't leave Iran out either. Everybody says "Arab Spring, Arab Spring" when the Iranians were a year ahead of them, actually. But I thought it was absolutely wonderful, it was like a big sigh of relief. I made a poster, which was my message to Tahrir Square, saying, "Why can't America be more like Egypt?" and then a year later we had Occupy, so we did have our Spring. But here it is, hardly a year later and already the promise is betrayed. The Islamists and the militarists have taken over again, and you just have to do it all over; that's pretty depressing and I wouldn't be surprised if people lost their impetus and weren't able to keep up the pressure. Now, having said how wonderful I thought it all was, I will point out that ideologically it was pretty much limited to a rather naive view of democracy, which as an anarchist I have a critique of: What they were saying was "the people can take it over," as in the idea of democracy. For anarchists, this always implies that there's going to be a tyranny of the majority, and that is unacceptable. That's why, for example, in Occupy everything has to be done by consensus. That's the only anarchist technique that really works, in which everyone agrees, and as you can see in Occupy, consensus works to a certain extent. But you know I am not going to blame the Iranians and the Arabs for wanting democracy because what they've got is so far beneath that in many

cases, you know, what with the dictatorships and militarism and Islamism, so it's not surprising that people have a nostalgia for a democracy that they have never actually experienced.

Ashfaque: I come from Pakistan and it's going through that phase again, with people saying "Is there going to be a revolution?" and some people are for it whereas others say nothing is going to change, so I feel like there was a significant movement going on, and then it sort of dissipated.

Wilson: The most important thing is that the people who are involved in this have the experience. That's my whole idea about the Temporary Autonomous Zone (T.A.Z.), as described, if not defined, in my eponymous 1991 book from Autonomedia: If you can't have a revolution at least you can have an uprising. And then there's this intense life that gets lived for usually no more than 18 months, or sometimes for just a few nights, but at least there can be this T.A.Z. where people live intensely and joyously in each other's presence: what I call conviviality, living together, which is not to be sneered at. So even in Pakistan such a thing could be imagined.

Carina Badalamenti: Can you think of any artists that carry out poetic terrorism as outlined in *T.A.Z.: The Temporary Autonomous Zone*?

Lamborn Wilson: I proposed certain thought experiments in that book, and I have a feeling that some of them were carried out and people just didn't tell me, which was very smart of them because it may have involved illegal or possibly even violent things. I envisioned an art that would be as dangerous as crime, although I'm certainly not claiming that that's what I'm doing now, don't get me wrong. I wouldn't make such a boast. I'm not breaking any laws with the stuff I do.

Candy Koh: Do you have any critiques of the Occupy movement?

Wilson: Pretty much the same critiques I just made of the Iranian and the Arab uprisings, although organizationally, I do find Occupy very interesting. The way they organized themselves is pure classical anarchism, and of course I appreciate that. I had a long talk with David Graeber about this and he was one of the founders, so the anarchist influence on the thing is very clear. That's on the one hand. On the other hand, are the masters of the universe just gonna have a change of consciousness and all retire to some beach in Costa Rica and say "okay we were wrong"? How are these goalless goals of Occupy Wall Street supposed to be accomplished if we can't use violence? Now, I'm not advocating violence, but are these Wall Street bankers just gonna say, "Oh, the will of the people, *gosh*, I guess we better give all our money to charity!" No, I don't think so. So do we have to hang them all from lamp posts with the guts of the last priests, or what? I don't think Occupy is facing these questions, and I think it's already lost some impetus as a result of the fact that this is an insoluble question; you can't use violence because violence is completely monopolized by the state. We live in a police state, in communities that are *occupied* by armed forces essentially made up of former high school bullies, the people who used to crucify frogs when they were in the third grade. Those are the police and we have welcomed them into our communities and it's okay to have these guys going around with guns and guard dogs because we've accepted it. So, where's the revolution? We're still waiting for the revolution, it's like waiting for Godot! But in the meantime, I know people who have been involved in Occupy who have had a wonderful experience, and I'm very glad. Every generation had better have something like this, or too bad. There really hasn't been much of anything between 1999 and Occupy. I was beginning to feel that there would never be another American uprising, that the energy was gone, and I have some reasons to think that might be true. I like to point out that the crime rate in America has been declining for a long time, and in my opinion it's because Americans don't even have enough gumption to commit crimes anymore: the creative aspect of

crime has fallen into decay. As for the uprising that takes a principled stand against violence, hats off to them, I admire the idealism, but I don't think it's going to accomplish much. I'm sorry to say that, but that is my feeling, despite all the brilliance that's gone into it.

Terence Trouillot: In an interview you did for the *Rail* in 2004 you described yourself as a Luddite, and discussed the way they smashed machines, which were taking their jobs, so I was curious how you use technology and how you feel about the way technology affects our lives?

Lamborn Wilson: I inherited a little money so I can afford to be selective. If I had to make a living I would have all the same gadgets that everybody else does, because I'd have to be in the job market, especially as a freelance writer. You're simply not going to get the job if you don't have a cell phone and the latest computerized equipment, whatever it is. So I want to emphasize that I've eliminated certain technologies from my life because I have the luxury to do so. It's not something I'm prescribing for other people. I don't have a TV, I don't have a computer, I don't have a car. I don't have a record player, I don't have a radio in my house. I'm like the Amish. I want it out of my house, but once I'm out of my house I'm probably willing to use these things. You can't simply cut yourself off completely.

Trouillot: And what about the Internet?

Wilson: Well, I have a thesis that the world actually came to an end in 1995—William Blake actually predicted it for 1997—so let's say 1997. My reasoning is this: Paul Virilio has this central and convincing idea, which is that with a global technology, you then have the possibility of a global accident. Well, I think this has already happened and it's the Internet. When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1989, the anarchists were ecstatic; we thought, oh goody, now's our chance! But what it turned out to be was the death of the historical movement of the social. It just came to an end. Like Margaret Thatcher said, there is no society; she was a few years too early, but her prediction turned out to be right. Human sociality just came to an end and by some strange coincidence it happened that the Internet emerged as a technology at that very same time. These things don't look like accidents when you look at them from the broad perspectives of a historian. They all seem to be connected. And so what Baudrillard predicted years ago would happen, has happened: there actually is no connection between human beings. Now, that doesn't mean we're not all together in this room talking to each other, but it does mean that we have no viable alternative economic institution that will help us live outside the monster of predatory capital. That doesn't exist. And it's the Internet, which has facilitated that transition, so I call it the end of the world. On my bad days I believe in it, but on my good days I still try to maintain that history has not really come to an end and that that the possibility still exists that people will wake up and achieve a critique of technology. What is so frigging hard about this? Why are people so hypnotized, why do people think it's a law of nature that technology has taken over the world to the extent that it has? It's not natural: It has historical roots, it has economic explanations, and these things can be worked on. They could be changed, but I don't see any will to it. I don't see one single Luddite institution. Nobody is working for this. If I were to defend violence I would defend machine smashing over all, which is a total heresy. Nobody smashes machines. They're sacred.

Jessica Holmes: Your show at 1:1 displays your arcane knowledge of New York State and its history. How did you choose the stories and sites associated with your artworks and how did you pursue your research?

Wilson: I was born in Baltimore but was brought up in northern New Jersey. My first memories are of the cracking towers of the New Jersey Turnpike, so I sort of belong to what I think of

as New Netherlands. Which is to say that I have been absorbing it all my life, and I'm a historian so that's what I do. Naturally, when I moved up here I decided to catalogue all of what I consider, holy sites: the pilgrimage sites, where interesting spiritual or political events took place which were connected to the Earth in some kind of telluric way. That work went on for about 10 years and then eventually what I decided to do with it was to make this art. People were like, "Oh, why don't you write a guide book?" and I thought, I don't want to share my secrets with just everyone. I worked hard to learn this material and I'm not going to just give it away! Why would I since I detest tourism? To me tourism is death. So instead I decided that it needed to be sublimated, to use the alchemical term, as art. And so that's what I did.

Sabrina Locks : Could you please tell us about the large altar piece in the middle of the gallery, which consists of all those religious icons, candles and tarot cards: what significance do all these objects hold for you? Do you practice tarot?

Wilson: No, I don't, but I have a friend, Rachel Pollock, who lives over in Rhinebeck who is one of the world's leading experts on tarot, so when I have questions about it I just ring her up and she tells me what to do. I wanted, for example, to have a display of tarot cards that would express the Hermetic spirit, the spirit of Hermes himself. She gave me those four cards that are combined with all the birds. The birds are from Cornelius Agrippa, the great Renaissance magician, who had a list of all the birds that were sacred to Mercury, to Hermes. So I combined those two things to make that collage. That's a typical way which I would do something. Some of it is completely personal imagery, but a lot of it comes from my background in the history of religions. When Gerard de Nerval, The great French poet, was criticized for not having any religion he said, "What? Me? No religions? Well I have at least 17!" A remark I always resonated with. You know I lived in India, I lived in Persia, I grew up as an Episcopalian, I don't throw away anything, everything stays, and all that's expressed in the work.

Locks: So would you consider your assemblages and collages of images a form of alchemy?

Wilson: I wouldn't say that I am a practitioner of alchemy, although I have met people over the years that practice it as it used to be practiced. What I practice is image magic, that's my branch of hermeticism. In this respect I am a disciple of Giordano Bruno. Years ago, I thought I would try to find something that I could study that would be absolutely meaningless, study for study's sake, just to enjoy the aesthetics of it. I had heard that there were many failed attempts in the Renaissance to translate Egyptian hieroglyphs, so I thought I'd study the hieroglyphs in the Renaissance, expecting it to be pure nonsense. So I started to study it, and I discovered that they intuited that the hieroglyphs were a magical form of writing, and said, "well, we could do that too," and invented their own magical form of writing with images. This led me to the study of the emblem books, such as the Hypnerotomachia Poliphili, Alciato's, and so forth. The study of the emblem books leads right to Ioan Culianu and his book *Eros and Magic in the Renaissance* as the key to understanding the manipulation of all human consciousness. As Bruno said, it's easier to entrance a million people with image magic than it is to make one person fall in love with you. In other words, to work on the masses through image magic is more effective than to work on an individual, either for love or hate. That lead into years and years of study and eventually I decided to make image magic my specialty within Hermetic studies.

Eric Sutphin: In the main altar piece you feature several glass bell jars with various objects inside, such as the green shoes covered in fish hooks, which seem to evoke the visual lexicon of the Victorian era, with its vogue for capturing nature and domesticating it for display within the

home—how does this relate to your professed intentions of "queering" and "re-enchanting" the landscape?

Wilson: Well, I was being slightly ironic I guess, but the Victorian approach to things actually has a very beautiful poetics, going back to the cabinet of curiosities. While on one level there was a kind of European alienation going on, on another it was a love of nature; being queer to nature, what's so bad about that? The one piece with the green shoes comes from a dream I had where I saw the green shoes with the fishhooks and I was told these were the shoes of the false messiah Jacob Frank. Frank was a very fascinating figure, a completely wild antinomian, and a spiritual anarchist. I had been reading a biography of him when I had this dream, so that was a lagniappe, a free gift from the gods. But the other works in the show are more labored and well thought out.

David Willis: The vanishing artworks were invisible to the public at large, and yet you have documented them in certain ways. Could you speak a little bit about the ways in which your art is mediated?

Wilson: I was trying to get rid of as much bad mediation as possible by making them vanish. The vanishing aspect was supposed to deal with that in some level, though I don't know if it did: it is for other people to say whether that worked or not, but that was my intention. I think that every artwork is striving to break down mediation. That was the problem for me with traditional theater, and why I was interested in avant-garde theater was the whole question of proscenium, the division between the audience and he performer. I've always said that the only solution is to get rid of the audience all together.

Matthew Farina: You mentioned earlier that you don't own a record player or a radio, so I was wondering, what role does music play in your life?

Wilson: I wanted to get rid of recorded music so that I could really appreciate live music when I heard it. My dictum is that every recording is the tombstone of a live performance. Tombstones are fascinating and you learn a lot from them, but they are about death. There's a reason why we call it live music: because you are actually there, and you're alive, and the music is being made for you. You can completely appropriate a live performance, whereas a recoding isn't made for anybody; there's nothing personal about it. It's a kind of tragic mediation going on. So after years of working on the radio and using lots of recorded music, I decided to take the step of eliminating it from my own house so that when I hear live music it really goes right to my heart and I pay full attention. I wouldn't want to have a record player because I think it cheapens music and turns it into sonic wallpaper. Musician friends of mine don't know what I'm talking about: when they play a record, they really listen to it, but most people don't, and then it just becomes background music for everybody's life movie.

Tara Stickley: What was it like to live with these objects while they were being constructed, and how do you feel about parting with them?

Wilson: If I had a big enough house I would keep them. I make these things because I like them, but unfortunately, I don't live in a big enough space where I can look at them all the time. I actually have very mixed feelings about selling them, as they are very personal things on some level. But you know, the Vanishing Artworks were costing me an awful amount of money! For instance, the first piece I did, which I wrote about in the pamphlet accompanying my show, was at this place called the Mombaccus creek, where two rivers come together, and there used to be a tree carved with the face of the bear god of the Algonquins back in the 16th century, and the Dutch saw it and called it Bacchus. So the place is called Mombaccus, which means the mask of Bacchus. I liked that identification of the two gods and I always considered that a sacred spot and

if you go there it's got fantastic Feng Shui, it's very alive. And so there, I decided to throw gold rings into the water. And since that's something that the ancient Druids used to do, I sent five dollars to the Universal Life Church in Modesto, California and had them appoint me a Druid for the artwork so I could be a Druid when I threw the gold rings in. I don't know what I expected exactly. I think I expected these sites to become pilgrimages or something. Of course they didn't, so I thought maybe I could have the same fun and actually come up with something that people might enjoy having on the walls of their home. And so I thought of these assemblages. They're indeed my offerings.

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https://brooklynrail.org/2012/10/art/peter-lamborn-wilson-with-tyler-akers-rabia-ashfaque-carina-badalamenti-matthew-farina-jessica-holmes-candy-koh-naomi-lev-david-levi-strauss-sabrina-locks-tara-stickley-erin-sutphin-terrence-trouillot-and-david-wi
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