Peter Lamborn Wilson
Living Under Sick Machines
In Conversation with Jarrett Earnest
2014

Retrieved Oct 2022 from https://brooklynrail.org/2014/06/art/hakim-bey-with-jarrett-earnest
See source for illustrations

theanarchistlibrary.org

Living Under Sick Machines

In Conversation with Jarrett Earnest

Peter Lamborn Wilson

2014

Peter Lamborn Wilson, also known as Hakim Bey, is a subcultural monument—authoring countless books, tracts, and slogans that weave political resistance with poetry. He is perhaps most famous for his ideas about *Temporary Autonomous Zones (TAZ)* and *Ontological Anarchy*. In connection with this month's guest editorial focus on the unconscious in contemporary art, and on the occasion of his recent book *riverpeople*, published by Autonomedia, he met with Jarrett Earnest to discuss the possibilities of liberation in our new century.

Jarrett Earnest (Rail): Given your resistance to certain forms of technology—you don't have a computer or cell phone for instance—it is almost ironic how the techno-anarchist and cypherpunk communities have taken up some of your ideas.

Peter Lamborn Wilson: That happened right away. In the 1980s I cut more slack for modern communication technologies than I should have. What I thought was a possibility turned out not to be a possibility, and over the years I've become more of an ideological luddite. It became pretty apparent around 1995—I mention that year because it was "the

year of the Internet"—that the whole thing was just an adjunct to capitalism and it had been from the very start. One should have been alerted by the fact that the Internet was a military-industrial-technology development. That we were headed to what I now call technopathocracy, "the rule of sick machines," which is to say "money." They are pretty much identical. They both fall in a malignant way under the sign of Hermes—the god of communication and also the failure of communication; he's also the god of money and of occult realization, which would transcend money—so he has the dark and the light side, and it seems like we've moved totally into the shadow portion. I don't think we are headed for some kind of Techno-Utopia. The more you have the possibility of knowing everything, the less you know. The more you can just take your phone out of your pocket and ask it anything, the less you are actually going to ask because you just assume it's all there and that you can ask anytime you want to. These are all stupid simple things but they have tremendous implications for culture.

Rail: What is the place of the unconscious in a machine-run society?

Wilson: This is an extremely complex question which I could begin talking about by citing *Eros and Magic in the Renaissance* (1987) by Ioan P. Culianu—a discussion of Giordano Bruno's image-magic. Bruno famously says it would be easier to ensorcel millions than to make one person fall in love with you using image-magic, meaning image-magic is something that works on a mass level. In other words if I send you a valentine you aren't necessarily going to fall in love with me, but if I construct a really brilliant advertisement and put it in the media I can actually change consciousness. If I am a propagandist, if I'm a spin doctor, a public relations expert, an educator, I can manipulate images in order to manipulate consciousness. This is not a conscious process, you don't look at an advertisement and say "Pepsi is better, I'll buy that one!"—it's not happening on a conscious level. It's like pressing an erotic button. I prefer

the term subconscious, because unconscious means you can never gain access to it, whereas subconscious, the older pre-Freudian term, means you actually do have access to it. The role of this image-magic is not something supernatural in the crude way that that term is usually understood, and it's not something purely psychological. It's neither Freud nor Jung, but it's both; it's neither magic nor religion, but it's both. We are in a realm of intense paradox here but that is what makes it work. I would say also, by the way, that serious art works the same way, it's just that the purpose of the artists, we presume, is the *liberation* of the people they are communicating with, rather than the *enchainment,* as Bruno put it—he talked about bonds and binding, an ancient concept of magic, to bind people to your will. The artist does that too—but to elevate, enlighten, and illuminate, rather than to endarken, enslave, and stupefy. The same techniques are at work. They are not to be transmitted in a merely rationalistic way. You cannot go to school to learn how to do this; you can learn a lot, but you can't, for example, really be taught art. You can be *educated*, led forth by a great teacher to discover what is in yourself.

Rail: Who have been important teachers for you and in what ways was working with them an educational experience?

Wilson: It wasn't college, I can tell you that. I dropped out after a year and a half because I wasn't getting any education. At the time I wanted to become a street hippie and sell LSD. I thought that real life would be more educative than formal education. Subsequently I read Ivan Illich's book *Deschooling Society* (1971) and I realized what had been going on: when you propose a monopoly on a certain good, let's call it "education," and you institutionalize that monopoly, what you get is a paradoxical counter-productivity, so that what was meant to educate now stupefies. In medicine, what was meant to heal you actually sickens you. You can look at any institution and see that when it achieves a certain overwhelming power it begins to counter-produce. When you ask who my good teach-

ers were, there were a few decent ones in school but that was because they desperately needed to make a living and that is where they ended up. In a decent world they wouldn't have had to do that, they could have educated outside of an institution, where their brilliance wasn't being turned against the goals of liberation and illumination. No matter how brilliant you are, if you are working for Harvard you are on the wrong side of the struggle. No matter how nice you are, if you are working for Morgan Stanley you're on the wrong side, because no matter how much money you personally might give to beggars, you are involved in institutionalized theft and philosophical greed. It's not a question of individuals for me as much as situations—one can learn from anybody. Like the Sufis say, "If you don't have a master, learn from the cat."

Rail: You were involved for many years with the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics at Naropa University. What do you think are the possibilities of alternative art schools?

Wilson: I went to Naropa because it was fun, but I never could figure out what I was doing there. I don't understand the idea of teaching poetry or writing, it just doesn't seem to me like something you can do. I went there because there were a lot of nice people and they paid me to do what I wanted to do, which is talk. I could say whatever I wanted and I didn't have to have formal classes. I was just reading that there are 8,000 M.F.A. programs in America now and the employment record for graduates of these programs, presumably in jobs that relate to what they supposedly have been learning is one percent—which basically means it's a huge fucking scam. Naropa is not in that category; obviously it was a very special place. It's quite clear though that late capitalism has a surplus of non-producing consumers and you have to store them somewhere, especially when they are young, otherwise they will make trouble. Education is no longer the social factory; it's the social warehouse, it is where you put people to keep

you would have to revive the sexual revolutionary positions of the ’60s and ’70s in order to re-kickstart the revolutionary moment; beginning with the ideas that: a) sex needs to be liberated; and b) that sex is liberatory. Neither of these ideas is accepted any more. The first is not accepted because everyone thinks it’s over—they think it’s liberated because all you have to do is turn on a TV or a computer and that is all you see, “sex.” The image is universal—therefore the revolution is over. The other part, that sex is liberatory, well that is nonsense and everybody knows it. I know that this is an idea that is not shared by many people now. But it seems to me concomitant with the technopathocracy that this should be so: you cannot have genuine sexual liberation and a rule of sick machines at the same time. Ergo, we must have a problem with sexuality and I believe we do. It’s difficult to see and it’s even more difficult to discuss, and that’s where I think I should stop discussing it, because it’s dangerous actually.

them off the job market. Basically these M.F.A. programs are training people how to not get jobs.

Rail: It’s far more insidious because at the same time they are getting M.F.A.s my generation is becoming indebted with student loans, so it’s a deeper form of binding.

Wilson: That is right. It’s a situation where there is more consumption than production, which is what late capitalism looks like in America: you have a surplus of consumers and how are they supposed to make money to buy the shit? Well, they don’t have to—they can become debt slaves, debt peonage. It’s not a new discovery, the ancient Sumerians knew about it. The origin of civilization itself is debt peonage. I told David Graeber the only thing I didn’t like about his book *Debt: The First 5,000 Years* (2011) is that it should have been 6,000 years—civilization appears about 6,000 years ago in Sumer and then shortly afterward in Egypt, and there for the first time you find humanity’s natural and bastardly impulses are given free reign to divide society into the rulers and ruled, slave owners and slaves, through debt and military conquest.

Rail: Not to press the issue—I really do believe that higher education in our country is criminal—but there is an important aspect to like-minded people coming together to have conversations about things that are important to them. That is in essence what a school is.

Wilson: Yes, at an earlier stage of civilization, before things were so corrupt, schools tended to take that form: non-coercive salon-like situations, like the Islamic Madrasas or the Athenians which were the early model for Western universities—but like Illich says, the more institutional the more counterproductive.

Rail: I want to know if you have any glimmer of how to approach organizations of younger artists or poets who are trying to figure out stuff outside of the context of an institution—or how you could create a space for a new, non-destructive school.

Wilson: Young people I know are trying to do this—meeting in each other's living rooms to read books and study things together because it's becoming crushingly obvious that they're not getting what they want from the institution, except for a place to stay warm and cozy when they are not on the job market, if they're lucky and willing to go into debt. I support the idea of the home school model for young people as well as adults. You don't need institutions, especially if we are talking about studying something like English. I could understand going to a school to study nuclear physics, when you get into high technology, like for a science lab—that is why we have institutions, because we are enslaved to technology. But if we are talking about art, what do you need an institution for? What I would like to see more of is co-operative movements; you don't have to have a revolution to have co-ops, which oddly enough are not illegal yet. The whole tendency of capitalism works against the idea of co-ops—the essence of capitalism is not sharing. In other words, everyone must have the whole set of gadgets for themselves in order for the market to keep expanding. When there is a new gadget you must have one, you can't share it with your lover, much less 12 people you happen to know, otherwise you're being a bad consumer. And they make it easy and they make it cheap. It is cheaper to do this than to cooperate; it costs effort and energy, which is expressed in terms of money. Food co-ops actually end up costing the customer more, but they could be more fulfilling and actually nutritive in a metaphorical sense as well as in an actual sense. Let's not even talk about producer's co-ops which used to be a reality in America, like all the dairy farmers organizing to fight monopolies and fix the prices of the railroad. That was going on just a hundred years ago in this country, but we've forgotten. The idea that there could be a radicalized working class is gone, even though we are working—and we are working more now than ever before. John Maynard Keynes predicted 80 years ago that by now

not what they meant; what Luddites didn't like was the mechanized loom that put them out of work and destroyed their way of life, and turned them into proletarian slaves. Similarly, what the Amish don't like are technologies that would destroy their social cohesion. I see the beauty of that, I admire it—you could easily do the same thing without the religion; you could say what was valuable to you was community therefore you would do without internal combustion and electricity, which are technologies that enable, or even cause, the breakdown in community; they may have even been developed in order to destroy it. When you look at the effect of the automobile on modern life it looks as though it was done on purpose—there was a real conspiracy to destroy public transportation in our country and replace it with the automobile so that everyone would have to buy one. And we have now reached that marvelous utopian state: every fucking American now owns a car. I think the figure is 3.1 cars per family. That means every American is totally enclosed in several tons of steel, zooming around at speeds that make it impossible to smell the flowers or feel the breeze, which can and do remove them from any sense of communal struggle or communal resistance. I know these words like "community" are worn out, and I would like to think of some term we can use instead—perhaps Paul Goodman's term *communitas* from Latin, to indicate that we are not talking about "the law enforcement community" or community the way advertisers use the word. The trouble with all these ideas that we take seriously is that they can be immediately commodified and turned into shit through the reverse alchemy of image-magic, capitalism can take any gold and turn it into dung.

Rail: Part of this relates to the legacy of "sexual liberation"—how has that as possibility changed?

Wilson: It's over isn't it, and we won? We have the pill and gay marriage, so the struggle is over. Sex has been completely absorbed into the image, and as far as I can make out is pretty much missing from real life. Seriously, I believe that

ments when people bring to you their interpretations of *TAZ* that you are horrified by?

Wilson: Of course, that has been going on ever since I launched the concept. I remember at one point *Time* magazine did a story on the magazine *Mondo 2000*, and there was a box on my work for that article in which they said the *TAZ* was something that was in cyberspace—exactly the opposite of what I meant—and I thought "thank heavens *they* didn't understand me." If *Time* magazine had understood what I was talking about I'd have to change the whole program. Of course it is annoying to be so often misunderstood, but when you are misunderstood by your enemies it's kind of reassuring.

Rail: As an artist is it part of one's responsibility to structure or manage these tiers of understanding or misunderstanding as the work move out into the world?

Wilson: Generally speaking you have to be responsible for everything you do or think, so to the extent I can I've tried to correct those misunderstandings, but if you publish an article in an ephemeral zine, you may not reach people and there is nothing I can do about that. If people are not interested in paying attention—and increasingly they are not—then I cannot take responsibility for that. It's not my fault if people cannot concentrate for more than two minutes at a time now. It's the fault of capitalist technology that wants it to be that way and is training children to think that way. Childhood has been completely absorbed by the screen. You would need a movement to deal with that. I think about the Amish a lot, not because I like their religion or even their way of life, but it's very interesting what they've done with technology. They are not against technology as such, they are against technologies which are destructive of their community—which is exactly what the Luddites said: that they were against machines that were hurtful of the commonality. This vulgar use of luddite to mean someone who doesn't get how marvelous technology is, or is too stupid, is a reactionary, or doesn't like the modern world, is

the problem would be what to do with all our leisure because people wouldn't need to work more than two hours a day to make enough to live a comfortable lifestyle—that there would be a crisis of leisure! How wrong can you get? And he was a brilliant economist, right about so many things—although in my view he was an evil bastard. So why didn't we end up with a crisis of leisure? There are so many reasons, one of which is that the system didn't want it to happen. When you have a free market it doesn't mean that you're free or that I'm free, it means that money is free to do what *it* wants—so now that we have the triumph of capitalism, now that there is not even the ghost of the social in some hideous, monstrous Stalinoid form to be the bugaboo that scares everybody from under the bed at night, now that everything is perfect, it turns out that we have to work 10 times more than we did in 1950 in order to go into debt to have all these gadgets that we need—and you do need them if you are going to make a living—it's a circularity, it's a routine, it's a big con, a big Ponzi scheme.

Rail: One thing that strikes me about your work—in your commitment to hermeticism and your willingness to engage bizarre conspiracy theories that are quasi-plausible and immensely revealing—I see this as a gesture against the strictures on our ways of knowing. When you look now there are very clear ways a performance of "scholarship" is increasingly codified and limited. I think of the larger efforts of your work as keeping our intellectual channels wide open.

Wilson: I'm not as interested in conspiracy theory now as I once was. When you take the idea of a conspiracy seriously rather than metaphorically—and you can't help but do that when you are reading and thinking about it—then what you are doing is reifying the whole idea of oppression: if we can only identify the Illuminati then all our problems would be over. I still get a couple of conspiracy zines and the level of dialogue is way low, though every once in a while you come across someone pushing something that has some resonance.

As a metaphor of the state, conspiracy theories have a certain aesthetic appeal, but the tumble into reification is what bothers me. I would like to think that I am thinking in a less constricted vein now than I was in the 1980s—the '80s were the golden age of conspiracy theories. I think it had something to do with social paranoia due to an approaching future object, an object coming towards us from the future, which turned out to be triumphant capitalism; it was not the Illuminati, not the people from outer space, not the Rothschilds, not the Zionists, not the anti-Zionists—it was none of those things but you couldn't tell then what it was because it was still coming at you, from a distance, from the future. Now here it is. I was friends with Robert Anton Wilson and I loved his whole worldview, the way he used "conspiracy" in a light-hearted satirical vein to make very serious points about social oppression and possibilities of liberation. He never took any of those ideals literally, though a lot of his readers did, and it's interesting that his work was forgotten so quickly. He used to be a big presence; there were whole bookshelves in stores devoted to his work. I think it's because people don't need conspiracy because they know what is going on, they actually secretly do know and it's so banal, so unexciting. The science fiction writer who came the closest to predicting our present was J.G. Ballard: the eternal infinite shopping mall. The reason why so many people are fascinated by the end of the world—either as stupid Christian evangelists or stupid yuppies with their harmonic resonance and 2012 Mayan prophecy—is because anything would be better than what we all know is really going on, which is that this is going to go on forever: there isn't going to be any closure. Nothing is going to happen to satisfy everyone's desire for a dramatic ending. There also isn't going to be a day when we all wake up as fully-realized beings—on what basis could that possibly happen? So I am being deliberately extreme here but I think it has to be said that these ideas from the 1980s lack resonance now because it's happened. It happened in 1989, 1990, 1991, the end

for us, and a decisive, mentally and spiritually shaping event for my generation, and that would have been impossible without LSD and so forth. That is probably overstated and open to all kinds of revision but that really is what I believe. For example, I would not have been able to grasp what was going on in the emblems without a background in hallucination.

Rail: Can you explain the centrality of poetry, of yourself as a poet, within your larger writing?

Wilson: I do consider myself a poet, by and large everything I've done has been some variation on poetry. Another thing that happened in the 1980s was I thought that poetry was not communicating, that there was a communication crisis, and a friend of mine and I decided to experiment with taking our poetry and putting it in prose form and seeing if anyone would actually read it. It worked once for me with the *Temporary Autonomous Zone* (*TAZ*). After that I started leaning too heavily toward prose, so when I left the city in 1999 I decided to "go back to poetry," which revealed that that's what I'd been doing all along. All the history, all the comparative religion, all the political essays, the art, is all an extension of poetry, but I'm not taken very seriously because I've spread myself too thin across all these different things which to me seem perfectly normal, and logically related, but to a world based on specialization it doesn't compute.

Rail: You've written so many books but by and large *TAZ* has had a life of its own; how do you account for its popularity?

Wilson: The result of the *TAZ* being an original idea is that the term has floated free of me, people use the term now and they don't even know where it comes from—it's just out there. You can't just do that when you want to do it, something about *TAZ* hit the spot.

Rail: When you were talking about Robert Anton Wilson, you said maybe some of the people reading him took the conspiracy idea more seriously than he himself did. Are there mo-

instead bouncing off each other on many levels, opening vista after vista. The great emblems of the 17th century are usually alchemical because they are trying to do that consciously. This is a result of the fact that they couldn't figure out Egyptian hieroglyphs; they made a mistake in thinking that the picture was equal to the meaning, although we know the picture is actually used to make a sound and then sometimes the picture also makes a meaning. But as a formal study it was out the window and replaced by other art historical criteria that seemed more important. So a fortuitous misunderstanding of the hieroglyphs by the Renaissance artists actually led to discovery of a technique of reaching the so-called unconscious through form, the basic insights that animate advertising. In a nutshell that is the tragedy of the image, and why I am interested in "the critique of the image." It's not that you have to destroy the image—that would be iconoclasm and that doesn't work—if there is a liberation from the image it has to take place through the image. If you are trying to free yourself from the image of universal debt, for example, then you have to do it through another image. Say, the image of Occupy Wall Street—that was an image and it was in fact not much more than that, but it was a powerful image while it lasted. That is the kind of thing we need to come up with more of: emblematic and heraldic forms of resistance.

Rail: In what ways have your dreaming life or hallucinogenic experiences influenced your ideas?

Wilson: Well none of these things would have come about without the reappearance of *fantastica* in the '60s. That made the difference for everyone in my generation who managed to do anything. Without that we would have gone on being angry existential black-beret-wearing beatniks. The plants allowed us to experience a cheerful form of Existentialism, one that felt change was possible. We actually believed in 1968 that there would be a revolution—it's hard to understand looking back at it that anybody could have been that dumb, but it was very real

of history as we knew it; the end of history as a struggle of the social against civilization, an eternal resistance—the idea that, yes, civilization is oppressive but we know that there is an alternative and we are struggling for it. There was such a collapse of this feeling in the 1990s it really does seem as if something has come to an end and we are living in the air-conditioned ruins of this eternal shopping mall, and from now on there is no end because we've had it. On my bad days this is the way I look at things. On my good days I think "well, human beings are still human, we can pull out of it; history will kickstart itself up again, perhaps it already has; the idea of resistance could come back, there could be in the future genuine revolutionary situations" but right now I just don't see it. On my bad days I think it's never going to happen—we've had it, that's it. This postmodern condition where anything seems as valid as anything else will just go on forever.

Let's look at that in the art world, because now that there are several billion more human beings naturally there are a lot of smart people out there, and talented artists, and there is a lot of great art being made—to what end? In aid of what, precisely? Is there really still a *telos*, a goal, or has that been obviated to the point that a goal is something to be sneered at in an ironic vein—"let's just get on with making art and see if we can get fabulously rich." I know this is not true of a lot of artists, that they in themselves feel the struggle against an oppressive reality, but I don't see any sort of cohesion. The avant-garde is dead. You could say historically that the avant-garde began its modern form in the Romantic period as a reaction against the industrial revolution and the emergence of the final form of capital, and it went on until the 1980s when it fizzled out. Maybe Situationism was the last avant-garde. Now we don't have an avant-garde and the idea of an avant-garde is distasteful to many people, it's a joke, they think that it would be oppressive. They think that this lack of a goal, this lack of cohesion, this ability to find anything—that's their idea of freedom.

Rail: What seems nice about that cultural leveling is that in theory it is non-hierarchal—

Wilson: The whole idea of the avant-garde is that everyone must be an artist—that was Beuys's slogan, that was the Situationist slogan, that was the Romantic slogan. The avant-garde was very much about egalitarianism in that sense, the struggle to overcome separation. Ananda Coomaraswamy once said that in our abnormal society an artist is a special kind of person, but in a normal society—say a tribal society—every person would be a special kind of artist. This was the goal of the avant-garde in my view.

Rail: How, within that leveling, can important things be coalesced and pulled out without re-assuming an oppressive hierarchal structure?

Wilson: Well, let's face it: the oppressive hierarchal structure is capitalism and we've got it—that's it. Anything that could set itself in a dialectical opposition to that would be liberating—not hierarchal, even if it looked like an elite. There is no dogma or ideology that we can take seriously any more, but we could at least in a loosey goosey way take that dialectic seriously—that we could oppose something. I know a lot of people bristle at that idea, they find it exclusionary and elitist, but fuck 'em.

Rail: When you were talking about Bruno and image-magic, where the role of the artist is to be one who doesn't enslave—who sets free—have there been moments when you see specific aspects of form, either in visual or literary art, that embody that call to liberation?

Wilson: That would be very hard to say. On the one hand, anything I said would simply show my limitations—I think on a formal level it would be unwise to shut off any possibilities. On the other hand, the idea that anything goes is somehow distasteful to me—the idea that everything is equally valid and valuable, from this point of view I tend toward a sentimentality about form. For example I don't like Flarf poetry, and I don't

like the stupid appropriation poetry that is going on—I think it's people who have just resigned from the struggle. In the painting world, I don't know—I don't think about that as much as I think about writing. It seems to me there are a lot of brilliant painters out there, but each one is doing something totally different.

Rail: Your thoughts about form relate to your understanding of heraldry and emblems—how does that intersect discussions about aesthetics?

Wilson: Well you see, around about 1984 I decided I didn't know what was going on so I needed to devote a number of years of serious study to things I'd never studied before, including economics, which I had no talent for whatsoever. After failing to read Samuelson over and over I finally realized the only way for me to approach economics was through the history of money as physical object, as an art object: "the imagery of economics." I was reading anthropology, history, pop-science, sociology, and political theory for about 20 years. Every once in a while I wanted to take a mental vacation and one day I heard about hieroglyphs in the Renaissance—that there had been all these Renaissance thinkers who had spent immense amounts of time trying to decode Egyptian hieroglyphs and failed. I thought, "Here is something completely meaningless that I could study that will be really relaxing. It would be dusty, obscure, stupid, but also kind of elegant." So I started looking into it and it turned out to be the key to the 20-year project of trying to figure out what the fuck was going on because it led me into the idea of image magic and to hermeticism. The idea of the emblems as hieroglyphs and image magic—how does it work? You have the image and the caption; the image hits the unconscious directly and the caption then tells you how to think about what you are experiencing. The effect of the emblem could be allegorical, but really powerful emblems are the ones that are not merely allegorical, that do not have a one-to-one relation to the caption—the emblem and the caption are