

TODT: Negative Theologies

(draft, please do not circulate)

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Thirty years after its inception, the art collective TODT refuses to give up the ghost—not surprisingly, since phantasms inhabit the name of the collective itself. A nomenclature for the void, the great totality of nothing, (Todt is a homophone of *Tod*, the German for death, and *Tot*, the Catalan for everything) TODT is most significantly an appropriation of a proper name: Fritz Todt, a notorious engineer of the Third Reich’s deadly fantasy of absolute efficiency. *Organisation Todt* (OT) combined civil and military engineering under one banner. At OT, the banality of bureaucracy and the terror of the war machine produced a disturbing assemblage: an efficient fascist corporation that relied on forced labor.

With TODT, America’s corporate culture of consumption becomes the ominous bedmate of Fritz Todt Fascist engineering, in their shared dream of a machine cleansed of human residues. The collective TODT critically appropriates the suspension of individuation imposed by OT’s war machine to produce an impossible community. TODT is composed of siblings, male and female, that remain anonymous under the equalizing caption of sheer and deadly negativity. Yet their use of negativity cannot be simply equated with an obsession with death, for the latter always remains outside the picture, while the former becomes its index, a trace of its invisible totality. TODT, then, is not an art about or, for that matter, an art simply obsessed with death but rather an exploitation of death as the ultimate and macabre commodity in need of branding—TODT is the marketing of death as product, as thing.

TODT is a fraternal and sacrificial ecology of rigorous and machine-like production that echoes both conscripted labor and infantile games. In a symptomatic display of their blood ties, TODT’s childhood games contain as much emancipatory potential (the world unsupervised by the law of the father, or by the rules of the contemporary art world for that matter) as totalitarian ideas of violence and sacrifice (you will not be your own master, the structure of their militancy says). The individual gives

her/his blood for the dead father, for the empty name of a collective that is filled by a ruthless economy of production where anything and anyone can be used, whereby the individual is fuel, carnage, to the devouring machine: TODT. Authoritarianism casts a large shadow over TODT's bold gestures, midway between a childish hoax and the militancy of aesthetic immolation. Their perverse law, TODT as the name of the father, is only visible when it punishes.

TODT manages to function as a collective where the law of the father (signaled in their accented misappropriation of the German Todt), in the last instance always Oedipal, is simply inoperative. By fully embracing the negativity of that name rather than merely opposing it, TODT effectively manages to inoculate itself from the neurosis of guilt (which merely replicates the law by internalizing it) and inhabit a psychotic structure where the atavistic bindings of the uterine chamber remain uncut. The blood bindings of the corporate members of TODT, as organs of one single body, transfer the mechanics of utopian and fraternal equality onto a sinister structure that reveals a totalitarian core. In that sense, corporation TODT is a poignant index to the violent affects that structure a community.

Yet the potentialities of TODT's horizontal structure remain political. Nothing is individual in TODT. Like the Kafka of Deleuze and Guattari, their art exploits the condensation of a production machine where everything is collective and political at the same time. The aesthetic is the glue that allows the political and the collective to inhabit the same body in TODT. Because of this, TODT's perverse experiment in democratic socialization strikes an uncanny and timely cord in the cultural ecology of the global contemporary art world, where art collectives proliferate under the dubious banner of the utopian and the new. We may finally be ready for the politics of TODT's collaborative engine, for the alternative has failed for good, engulfed by the duopoly of individualism and the market. Yet TODT's politics are a complex network of alliances and antagonisms within the community—more Schmitt and Hobbes, and more Clausewitz, than one finds in other artists of their generation. TODT's hopeless avant-garde is particularly attuned to the totalitarian and archaic imperatives at the heart of democracy. Their political potential is certainly not auspicious yet remains ruthlessly honest in its violence. War is not an

extraordinary event but the permanent state of TODT's Hobbesian and uterine war machine.

In the manifesto/poem *Ecumenical Nocturne*, the members of TODT write with characteristic yet accurate hyperbolic undertones:

We are the first generation
Influenced by the pathological
Aesthetics of Fascism
No one has yet understood
As we do now
That what fascism is is a
Sentimental form of aesthetic dynamicism
Taken to its logical extremes*

* Evil must be pushed
To its logical extreme
In order to know
The extent of grace
If a state of grace
Is unattainable
Ignorance of the law
Is no excuse

How to talk about TODT's economy of production effectively then? Maybe by recounting a story of permutations and negativity. TODT art is a process of appropriation and collaboration, in an assemblage that restructures what was already there to show what a previous incarnation was masking—i.e. the sadism of the found imagery of children in pool safety billboards in *Drowning Boy* (2008). Throughout these codings and recodings, the impersonal always takes precedence. TODT's refusal to develop a recognizable style,

a signature that would humanize their economy of production and render it marketable, that would breathe life into a cold-blooded assemblage and a mechanical negativity is astonishingly consistent with the protocols of their procedure. The anonymity implicit in TODT's membership contract remains, after thirty years, unbroken—and let's not forget this contract is bound by familial blood. TODT is the name that prevents naming so it can strategically succeed in naming the unnamable, the atavism of blood binds, the uterine chamber, the Real, the place where individuation is always thwarted.

TODT is an art community for which there are no models: a collective assemblage tracing the absolute singularity of the Real, the immanence of naked life, an animal *bios* that has become unbounded. TODT's procedure, then, the reassembling of segments to rediscover an uncanny, poignant, and sinister dimension to the found objects and images they appropriate, amounts to an indexical realism of sorts. James K. Kettlewell's description of TODT as "direct art" could be rephrased as a "direct art of the drive." Rather than a re-mediation of the Real through art, one finds in TODT a return to a primal scene, a forced encounter with what was always already there, hidden by the clutter of the imaginary and the referential. TODT abandons the symbolical and the allegorical to better reach the world in its absolute materiality. The TODT artist, or rather worker, violently plunders the past in search of an encounter with a fragment of the Real, a remnant, that will be meticulously and industriously reassembled.

Their *Homo Faber* is a fascist, their *Homo Ludens*, a child gleefully dismantling the world as given because it experiences it as make-believe. If discipline is always authoritarian, games are not its reverse but their hidden truth, for they reveal a violent impulse to destroy. TODT is then a function of a disciplined dismantling of the world as given, as found object. A solitary society of fraternal orphans with no past or future, free of the laws of generations, where the Real reigns supreme and separation has been aborted. Yet TODT's painstaking tracing of the Real in the rubble, be it of the art historical past or of technological residues, requires a laborious, almost obsessive, technique, an inhuman drive to labor that will hold this inoperative community, TODT, in place.

By privileging technique over art, the latter becomes an irrational surplus, a residue, an excess that meticulous craft cannot account for—*Drawing Boy* embroidered

textures come to mind. Style becomes a gimmick of individuation, a signature of separation and as such is rejected by the law of the impersonal—TODT as a faceless collective, a factory. The aesthetic then becomes itself a cipher, a question mark that provokes discomfort, a sense of a premature affect one will pay dearly for, a dangerous proximity to the remainders of the human in an inhuman and mechanical display of humor and skill. It is a cleansing of the language of art through the matter-of-factness of technique, a logistical Dada. Metaphors are taken literally, with artlessness, so that they regain their poignancy, their capacity to pierce into meaning to inflict wounds that aggressively obliterate the distinction between body and machine, flesh and carnage, self and other, betrayal and homage.

TODT's militant criticism of art does not take a discursive form; there is no language proper to TODT's ventriloquist machine, but an indexical one: it is a signal, not a sign. And, more importantly, it is a negative sign, an index to an absence. TODT is a negative theology for an absent subject of art. Thus, the difficulty of pigeonholing the politics of TODT's strategic negativity, the discomfort their fascination with totalitarian efficiency never fails to arouse, the anxiety their absent subject triggers in the viewer, the cathexis their best work never fails to provoke. The raw material of TODT artifacts is always psychosexual, yet it is consumed and incorporated into a machine that turns flesh into carnage. The psychotic structures of TODT's assemblages are in touch with the obscenity of the Real; their poignancy is a direct effect of such closeness. TODT's negative theology of the subject makes the subject's absence all the more visible in its negativity. Yet it is the subject's conspicuous absence that makes their output so funny.

Take for instance the phobic militarism of *Ballista* (2006), the virtuoso execution of its engineering (that also sneaks a casual reference to Da Vinci's drawings for multi-barreled guns and is suggestive of a *mélange* of art history and the technologies of war) defies usage. *Ballista* cannot kill. Its malfunction is a comic trace of the human and its pathetic limitations. Yet in the same stroke, the thwarted desire to kill it signals is revealed in all in nakedness, and elevated to a drive. Framing violence and death through negativity, the death drive reigns supreme. The concept of the *drive* is central, for it signals the inhuman energy at the core of the human, as the irreducible machine that is hidden in human flesh, TODT's very own "clockwork orange" if you will. The use of the

medical and technological to cut and pierce the flesh of both the human and the animal, which is an aggressive, sadistic touching of the body, but a touching nonetheless, establishes a continuous line of contact between the spheres of the organic and inorganic, the human psychosexual and the mechanical rhythms of the drive. Neurosis, in this case the phobic appearance of *Ballista*, is always false impasse with TODT, a tongue-in-cheek cover for a much more unsettling psychotic structure where the laws of self and other, the human and the machine, have been obliterated.

Through TODT's permutations of the negative—that include consumption, ingestion and disposal—phenomenological existentialism and eschatology metamorphose into the trivial scatology of a capitalist surplus of dizzying entropy, TODT turns tragedy into comedy. Their comedy exposes the limitations and possibilities of human materiality through the humor of shifting scales, the birth pangs of the human in an inhuman world. The hilarious banality of *Birth Control* (1989) is set alongside the serialized pathos of animalization *Difficult Births* (1992) to produce an ironic enunciation that suspends tragic certainty in favor of a riotous perplexity. We are a step beyond the tragic paradigm of a modernist avant-garde that can only find solace in nihilism, and that throws laughter out of picture. With TODT, laughter is elevated to the singularly human procedure that allows us to come to terms with the world as given.

Affect, poignancy, is the residue left once the discharge of humor begins to die out. It is a cathexis in motion that never becomes cathartic because regressive emotional investment is never quite overcome—the uterine of *Womb Wars* comes immediately to mind. Think for instance of the, literally, crystallized uterine fluid of *INCUBUS*, an atavistic form of arrested development and a disturbing blurring of the human/animal divide; of the human teeth neatly arranged within the circular shape of a contraceptive pill box, in *Birth Control* (1984) or piled in a cereal bowl, *Breakfast Bowl* (1996). The deadpan delivery of TODT's work, its Keaton-like lack of affect, makes the sudden exploitation of pathos all the more effective—*Breakfast Bowl*, from a distance, looks like a funny and classic post-Duchampian object that, on a closer look, punches back to with terrifying pathos. Humor is almost always the antechamber to poignancy.

Paradoxically enough, the last expenditure of a TODT object is often affect, dislocated, primal, and unsettling. The human comes back with the vengeance of the

tactile, of what touches and, in touching, hurts. Thus the proliferation of fluids, flesh, skeletons, teeth, and the variety of organs, both animal and human, that populate TODT's installations, environment and objects, broken to pieces but still alive, because they still reach out to touch us.

With TODT, nothing is unrepresentable and that is in itself a source of terror. Art has nowhere to hide because there is no place or subject that is proper to it. The Situationist motto "anything can be used" also turns the subject of art into a being with nothing to lose, with no core and no structure, which, in the end, reveals itself as a non-subject acting "as if,"—borrowing, using, abusing, appropriating, exaggerating, and having a good laugh while at it. TODT's joyful dismantling of existing social, political, and psychosexual ecologies evokes a childlike and infectious pleasure in the destructive—children *love* to break, cut and stick stuff into their toys, and *Im-Pale-A* (2007) is happy sadistic fun.

Banality takes the place of the sublime, in fact revealing its closeness to it. Banality inhabits the core of the sublime, once the aesthetic has entered the marketplace of commodity. But the point is not to reiterate the avant-garde's failure but to figure out how to go on, once the end has already taken place. There is no transcendence in TODT's art, just as there is no sublime. For tragedy and its angst has been traded for the deadpan humor of the comedy of the marketplace. TODT's equalization of materials and references, their remapping of art historical alliances, allows for reorganization of the given. That banal gesture of appropriation contains the seeds of an emancipation from the economy of the new, the logic of art as a commodity. We have certainly seen that gesture before, yet TODT's execution of that gesture is singular in its uncompromising nature and layered structure—it encompasses not just the object but the subject of art as well.

TODT's banality ceases to be a threat of self-destruction to become a currency that crosses from one sphere to the other, often more effectively than the aesthetic—which cannot quite embrace banality without obliterating itself. The laws of the capitalist cultural marketplace have been appropriated to inoculate TODT artifacts, like a vaccine that metamorphoses poison into remedy. Banality also fuels the anxiety of productivity, the continuous surplus of commodities: teeth, plastic cutouts, and all manner of rejects.

TODT art is vintage Americana in its zeal over production. TODT's America however is a disassembled or condemned nation or a nation that they view from the perspective of the last judgment, a remnant of what is no more (or, one suspects, never was).

Theirs is also an art of the permanent hostage, of the already condemned without guilt but also without bail. The historical avant-garde could still fight a guerilla war because it was not yet over for art as a differentiated sphere; the geopolitical and cultural circumstances of the pre-war may still have felt historical, changeable. The ironic ahistoricism of TODT, where contemporaneity reigns supreme, amounts to a critical understanding of the historical as a bureaucratic trap and of the temporal as a defeat, whereby one is mechanically repeating the same gesture or arriving too late.

However, whereas History as the separation of past, present and future may be over for TODT, the clutter of history, its garbage, still covers the earth. The artist then becomes a rambling rat picker, plundering the past in search of an encounter with a fragment, a remnant, which may be reassembled through the collective task of TODT. Theirs is an experiment in negative theology, an attempt to produce an assemblage out of the banal anxiety of the end of history. In this sense, their work is not, to my mind, neither apocalyptic nor prophetic but rather ironic. Simultaneously humorous and poignant, it reminds us that the end came and went and that we are still having our cereals every morning. It is banality that is unbearable, not apocalyptic and existential angst.

TODT's seemingly ahistoric output signals a symptomatic discomfort with history as a temporal hierarchy, as a hypotactic relation. Its place is occupied with the disorder of an anarchic parataxis, a serialization— See *Eye Tower* (1993) or, even more so, the earlier *War Wombs* (1988) where repetition and lack of individuation become terrifying. Genealogy is spurned and is substituted by an even playing field, a system of equivalences and of lack of differentiation. Generations do not follow one another but rather inhabit the disturbing togetherness of a formless and all-encompassing present, where everything is ripe for appropriation and which amounts to a formidable disruption of art historical sequencing and genealogical order. TODT's psychotic machine does not submit to the laws of temporality.

Committing, via the contract of collectivity, to a negative and inhuman drive to produce like machines, to obey the inoperative law of the ominous and perverse name of

the father Fritz Todt, retroactively humanizes that drive, by borrowing the flesh and blood of the singularities and the proper names it sacrifices. TODT unmasks a consistently negative understanding of the social. Who is the slave and who is the master in the processes of this sinister and funny TODT machine? Well, slave and master take turns in an endless game of montage and assemblage. Where one would expect the human, the machine occupies its place, where one looks for technological efficiency one finds the human blunder of the absurd, of the flesh stuck between the parts of a machine that does not work flawlessly. The psychosexual is, in the end, a key part of TODT's all-encompassing war machine, it often becomes its organic fuel, a willing masochist community giving themselves up to the inhuman drive of TODT's production machine. There is no transcendence but immanence, no mediation but immediacy, no hierarchies but an association between equals that take turns at authoritarianism.

TODT's collective enunciation makes personal identification impossible, since the contractual nature of TODT creative processes is predicated on the elimination of the particular, of the proper. The charge of abstraction is both accurate and hostile. It points to the fact that one relates to TODT products at the animal/visceral or abstract/inhuman level. It is this contrast in scale, this skipping the human and particular standpoint altogether, which accounts for the anxious hilarity of the works. The rules that articulate the collective process of the works themselves inflect both their enunciation and their reception. We are in the world of comedy, albeit a macabre one, and exaggeration of both the animal and the inhuman becomes the key to its absurdity.

A final word on TODT's politics of reception: TODT does not produce for an audience, rather it calls an audience into being by embedding it into the emergence of their own economy of production; which, in turn, becomes the raw material for a minor apocalyptic event that may, in the end, take place or not. TODT's threat may be an announcement of the last judgment or simply one last macabre joke on the living.

Strictly speaking, TODT's conceptual subject is a non-subject. It is an empty shell of a subject, or a pretend subject, acting *as if* in a world of make-believe where the law has become undone. A negative theology of the subject: TODT, Tod, Tot.

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