

Anarchy and Obscurity

Ben Olson

2021

a review of

The Bricklayers by The Residents. Feral House 2018

In *The Bricklayers*, the recent novel by surrealist art and music collective The Residents, a freelance reporter—named Frank Blodgett leaves Los Angeles for Clinton, Missouri to investigate the mysterious death of an elderly man, Wilmer Graves, found on the side of a road with an oxygen tank. Compelled by the potential story, Frank tries to obtain information at the local police department and meets the secretary, Patty.

The story that Frank eventually uncovers involves Ted Hendricks, a tech screener (who happens to be a fan of The Residents), embarking on a crime spree with Graves. The two discover a militia called PAGWAG, an acronym for “Purity And Grace is Water And Guns.” The militia is led by a right-wing militant named Crawford Beasley, who is plotting to pollute the L.A. River with black tea to turn the residents’ teeth brown. Frank, Ted, and Patty eventually infiltrate the PAGWAG compound and attempt to stop Crawford’s plan.

PAGWAG has elements reminiscent of the U.S. right-wing Tea Party Movement. But, with the dumping of tea into water, it is oddly more reminiscent of the Boston Tea Party. The sort of nonsensical rearrangement of these symbolic elements makes PAGWAG more than just a straightforward parody of conservative extremism.

In an important flashback, the authors explain how one of the main characters, Wilmer Graves, came to be a robber, and the significance of the book’s title. Graves says that his first job was laying bricks. His boss was fond of explaining that while you can’t eat bricks, bricks help you eat because they make you money which you use to buy food. This capitalist realism rant revolted Wilmer and convinced him to take up sticking up stores for money.

Surrealist literature, with its indebtedness to the Dada movement, is relevant to anarchists today as a continuation of the incorporation of anarchist ideals into artistic expression. An important aspect of surrealism and Dadaism in this regard is a kind of nihilistic approach to aesthetic experience, indicating a lack of inherent linguistic meaning. *The Bricklayers* is a contemporary example.

This genre expresses nihilism insofar as it addresses an alienation from meaning. Indeed, Dadaism takes this alienation as its starting point. It may at times seem ambiguous whether such denial of objective linguistic cohesion is being celebrated or repudiated. This incoherence is at the heart of re-montage, which deals with such ambiguity by trying to make something out of meaninglessness.

Like absurdism, works in this tradition don’t communicate in the way we are used to. This results in an uncanny sensation of non-meaning, or near-meaning, where eerie, cryptic remnants of interpretation are pulled apart and rearranged in combinations that no longer point to an obvious explanation or reading. It’s close to parody, but perhaps better understood as subversion. It suggests a lack of inherent cohesion in linguistic communication or aesthetic experience. In the absence of conceptual continuity, the political anarchism that influenced such early Dadaists as Hugo Ball is retained as a spiritual anarchy. It is an anarchic aesthetic that isn’t itself necessarily reflective of anarchist political ideals.

The Residents are prime examples of this inheritance of aesthetic anarchy, even when their stated political ideals may reflect something different.

A premise of anarchism and Dada is an alienation from society. This alienation is not yet a political interpretation of society, but something closer to an instinctual repulsion from the construction of modernity. This construction is wrong, not only unjust but immediately, inherently wrong. The sense of intrinsic wrongness can be abstracted from political interpretations; it's a spiritual rejection.

Discussing the influence of anarchists on the Dada movement, researcher Daniela Padularosa observes that Dada art began with a strong revolutionary impetus directed not only towards the traditional forms of art, but towards society as a whole. She goes on to connect one of Dada's characteristic techniques—re-montage—to the ideas of Mikhail Bakunin.

Padularosa cites the relationship between Bakunin's anarchist idea that destruction is a form of creation and the aesthetic principle of Dadaist art practice, which was based on the destruction of the traditional work of art and the re-montage of a new one. This reassembling of old forms of art into something new was an expression of the aesthetic concept of anarchy in art.

The new work of art mocks the traditional art forms by flaunting a freeness in its ability and willingness to take apart and stitch back together disparate elements. The art that resulted from this technique attempted, perhaps paradoxically, to approximate something pure, uncorrupted by the institutions it destroyed and mockingly reassembled. The re-montage itself, in its uncanny resemblance to a traditional work of art, gestured towards a more spiritually whole sense of life, both by poking fun at the elements it rearranged, and by suggesting something deeper and purer could be found through such creative destruction of the old.

The anarchist thought influencing Dada and the spiritual freedom that resulted created a bond between political freedom and spiritual freedom within the language and expression of the art form.

The Residents make use of a creative anarchy characteristic of the Dada movement, even though the rare hints of the collective's politics may not lend themselves to any clear description of a political stance. This lack of an explicit political ideal seems in line with the group's theory of obscurity, that artists do their best work when they are obscure, unknown, anonymous, or unseen.

The Residents disrupt attempts to make sense of their work by concealing their identities and thus blurring the line between their personal lives and performance. Attempts to distinguish between their art and the beliefs of the people behind it, including political affiliations, cannot operate with full certainty. The stories and repeated imagery and characters that recur throughout their work cannot be understood as relating to their actual lives. Their output is never their own, it belongs to the characters through which they speak.

Avant-garde artists, and particularly Dadaists, also strove to re-integrate life into art by transferring ordinary experience and culture into the very inside of their works.

The Residents' work is a kind of reintegration of life into art. It is a closed narrative with no outside to their stories, since their work is not authored by them as individuals but by an anonymous collective. It is a breaking down and re-creating of their society, their world—a total work of art.

For anarchists, alienation from society is what is most relevant about Dada. *The Brickeaters* represents this alienation, playful and absurd but also unnerving and unpredictable, a cluster of rearranged political potential yet resolutely antipolitical in a way that matches the anti-art of the Dada movement. There's a sadistically repetitive silliness to some of the language—kisses are always referred to as "smackers," for example. This walks the line between sinister and goofy. Such ambiguity seems indicative of a tendency to destroy without recreating, without purpose, without an obvious intended rebuilding.

Going beyond simply not making sense, *The Brickeaters* toys with the expectation of consistency or rationality in art. In the PAGWAG militia's manifesto, for example, coherence is replaced by a strange approximation of meaning which is nevertheless held back by the fact that the meaning it approximates is confused by the equal possibility of conflicting meanings. This sometimes has the effect of urging one to give up searching for a direct explanation. Such nihilism—raw alienation from meaning—is conceptually close to the anarchist confrontation with existent societal meaning. But this alienation is only the starting point, and what distinguishes anarchism from a political nihilism is this bold attempt to create meaning from its very absence.

The Residents' anarchic (if not anarchist) art, evident in their DIY approach to writing and music-making, rejects anything resembling a traditionally overt political stance.

They remain in the ambiguity.

The wildness of Dadaist irrationalism is born of a confrontation with society, not with any political party. This kind of total opposition to politics is also an important element of anarchism. But in the latter's destruction or de-structuring of meaning is implied a spiritual sense of life that comes before any overtly political attempt to restructure. As aesthetic anarchy, rather than political anarchism, it remains in the movement of absence and creation rather than pushing this spiritual anarchy into explicitly crafted political conclusions.

The Bricklayers is a relevant read for anarchists today, as its Dadaist influences resonate not only with anti-art but with a non-traditional, anti-political stance, a spiritual anarchy.

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2021

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Fifth Estate #410, Fall, 2021

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