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Breaking the Rules

*Artistic Expressions of
Transgression*

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BLACK MASK AND UP AGAINST THE WALL MOTHERFUCKER AN AVANT-GARDE'S REVOLUTIONARY LAST STAND (NEW YORK CITY, 1966-1969)

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In 1966, a small group of New York City artists informed by the avant-garde maxim of turning art into life came together as a performative, militant organization with a sharp, yet unattainable demand: total revolution. Black Mask, as the group called itself, published a magazine in which they outlined the elements of this demand as part of a wider art historical process that could be traced back, through Surrealism and Dada, to Futurism and its radical amalgamation of politics and aesthetics. With a view towards collective practice, the group evolved into what one of its members called a 'street gang with analysis', changing its name to Up Against the Wall Motherfucker and embracing the more violent aspects of the avant-garde's politicization of aesthetics. As their struggle developed, so did their understanding of art's function as antithesis to the conventionally political, and in the course of yet another transformation (this time into what they called the International Werewolf Conspiracy), the collective found new ways to deploy modernist, Romantic, and pop-cultural referents. Through analysis of a few select texts and images, this article gives an overview of how the group perceived the intersection of aesthetics and politics.

Against the backdrop of the post-war economic boom, various avant-gardes sprung to action in Western countries in a bid to change not only art, but

everything. Following a historical line that the 1960s French collective Situationist International (SI) drew from Futurism, Dada, and Surrealism all the way through to the 1950s and 1960s, many of these groups were deeply concerned with the modernist life/art divide. They saw it as coming to grips with the fact that every possible better world contained in art was being held back, even actively combated by all social orders. The SI, which continually engaged with libertarian political philosophy in an attempt to create a different world, is a good example of the disenchantment with both politics and the art world as experienced by avant-garde at large. As Futurists had done with fascism, and Berlin Dadaists and Surrealism with communism, several collectives from the 1960s which positioned themselves against the same historical background developed heterogeneous approaches to aesthetics and politics, dialectically bridging the gap between life and art by using unconventional methods. They envisioned themselves as fiercely committed to vanguardist principles, not as new avant-gardes but as the resulting synthesis of artistic and political theories put into practice by their predecessors. Groups like the SI and its affiliates, such as King Mob in the UK, Black Mask in the US, Drakabygget in Scandinavia, Gruppe SPUR in Germany, and others, located themselves within this art-political praxis as the next logical step in the Hegelian dialectic of history, developing a wide variety of texts and images that constitute what Stewart Home has called an ‘assault on culture’.¹ This generalized assault took different forms depending on the context, but what all of these collectives share in common is a re-evaluation of the history of the avant-garde and a reflection on their own position within it, thus defining their own place directly within the milieu of art as radical politics, whether on the left (Constructivism, Berlin Dada, Surrealism) or on the right (Futurism). The continuation and further evolution of the concept of the life/art divide by these vanguards and its application to specific forms of artistic and political activity led the philosopher Mario Perniola to call the SI ‘the last avant-garde’,² which reveals a set of historical assumptions shared not only with Peter Bürger’s theory of the vanguard but also with the artists themselves, in terms of a fundamental

1 Stewart Home, *The Assault on Culture: Utopian Currents from Lettrisme to Class War* (Stirling, UK: AK Press, 1991).

2 Mario Perniola, *Los Situacionistas: Historia crítica de la última vanguardia del siglo XX* (Madrid: Acuarela and A. Machado, 2008).

revolutionary conceptual core that anchors politics and aesthetics together in the interest of destroying the established order. In other words, what these writers and groups attribute to the avant-garde is a philosophical refusal that is not limited to the conventional field of artistic endeavours, but rather sees this field as opening a horizon of possibilities that overflow into the social, the economic, and the political.

With this background in mind, this article will focus on Black Mask and its subsequent transformations until 1970. It was formed in New York City in 1966, becoming Up Against the Wall Motherfucker (UAWMF) in late 1968 and then the International Werewolf Conspiracy (IWWC) by the end of 1969. I will attempt to articulate my focus around this avant-garde as a collectivity because I believe that a general overview of this evolving group grants deeper insights into its workings both as a movement and an organization. The mention of specific individuals works as a guideline into a wider history of these collectives, and not as an indication of key points for the interpretation of the groups' ideas and intents.

Black Mask's history can be mapped in a relatively straightforward manner against broader American events in this period: the Vietnam War and the Civil Rights Movement were in full swing, and the formation of the group corresponds to both the opposition to the war and the conflicts surrounding the status of black people and other minorities in the country. While Black Mask was small in both organizational capacity and membership, UAWMF became a much more concrete presence in New York's Lower East Side, traditionally a working-class immigrant neighbourhood. The IWWC however was a much looser grouping, arguably living up to its name by basically existing only in representations and images: the defeat of the 1968 movements and the inability to keep UAWMF's revolutionary rhetoric alive pushed the group into obscurity. In any case, the relationship between these collectives and their social context is primarily one of conflict, organized around opposition to the

Vietnam War and the societal elements that both permitted and encouraged it. This is connected to an essential opposition to inequality, expressed most clearly in the race and class divisions in the US, mostly attributed to the same social group, namely the bourgeoisie, which broadly encompasses elites and governments.³ Both Black Mask and UAWMF sought out alliances with other groups, finding them throughout the years in various artists and artist collectives (King Mob in the UK), the social milieu of thinkers like anarchist philosopher Murray Bookchin, or in more formal associations like the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), and even the Black Panthers.⁴

Until very recently, Black Mask/Up Against the Wall Motherfucker has not received significant consideration from scholars. However, there are some important contributions by Gavin Grindon, who has written articles on the topic. Furthermore, Boo-Hooray Gallery in New York hosted an exhibition in 2014 about the texts and images of this group. Therefore, the objective of this article is to contribute to the expansion of this growing corpus of knowledge by tracing the collective's transformations through analysis of selected works. By looking at how the group approximated aesthetics and politics, it provides an account of how the artistic avant-garde foundations of Black Mask and UAWMF produced a unique set of radical politics. Black Mask's praxis consciously pushed the collective far away from the art world into a social domain that made it incompatible with the twentieth century art historical canon, inasmuch as the canon represented a neutral vision of the avant-garde. Distinct from these historiographical concerns, however, comes yet another reason for the importance of the study of groups marginal to the art world such as Black Mask: contemporary social movements like Occupy Wall Street, in finding theoretical resonances with the past, have found themselves engaging with the SI, as evidenced in *Adbusters'* continuous references to it.⁵ Black Mask, although marginal to the SI, undertook the first occupation of Wall Street in the performance "Wall St. is War St." in 1966, with a Futurist program of a shared language between art and politics, making possible a

3 "The aesthetic revolution of today must be a part of the total revolution. A revolution which will bring about a society where the arts will be an integral part of life, as in primitive society, and not an appendage to wealth. [...] A society free of bureaucracy, both totalitarian and bourgeois". *Black Mask 2* (1966), Tamiment Library & Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives: PE.036.

4 Gavin Grindon, "Poetry Written in Gasoline: Black Mask and Up Against the Wall Motherfucker," *Art History* 38 (2015), 170-209.

5 Adbusters is a Canadian organization and magazine that formulated the initial concept and the publicity of Occupy Wall Street in 2011. For further reference on their contact with the Situationists, see Ken Knabb, "The Situationists and the Occupation Movements (1968/2011)," *Counterpunch*, 8 November 2011, accessed 11 August 2016, <http://www.counterpunch.org/2011/11/08/the-situationists-and-the-occupation-movements-19682011/>.

violent modification of any – and ultimately, all – environment(s), essentially treating the body politic as artwork.

This account is constructed chronologically, beginning with Black Mask (1966-1968), moving on to Up Against the Wall Motherfucker (1968-1969), and ending with the International Werewolf Conspiracy (1969-1970). Some images produced by each group are analysed as paradigmatic cases; their theoretical positions reflect upon their own practice, and enact an avant-garde program that intends to bring about a profound revolutionary moment of defiance. One last, important background aspect to underline is that the social composition of these groups, while varied throughout their existence, is characterized in racial and gender terms by the fact that both the founders and many of the members who produced images and texts were white and male. This is clearly problematic with regards to the adoption of Black Panther-styled rhetoric and the groups' use of the image of the Native American, as is explored below.

⁶ Birthdates are unknown. Ron Hahne and Ben Morea had been working in Group Center since 1962, when it was founded by New York artist Aldo Tambellini. Both had been practicing artists, but Morea had no formal education. Apparently, they were around 20 years old when they joined the collective. Ron Hahne had arrived to New York from Los Angeles. See Aldo Tambellini, "A Syracuse Rebel in New York," accessed 26 August 2016, <http://www.aldotambellini.com/rebel.html>; Johan Kugelberg (ed.), *Opposition: Black Mask, Ben Morea & UAWMF*, exhibition catalogue, 17 January-14 February 2014, Boo-Hooray, New York, 5; Grindon, "Poetry Written in Gasoline," 7.

BLACK MASK

In New York in 1966, two artists, Ron Hahne and Ben Morea,⁶ split from a multi-media arts collective called Group Center, a performance unit that was founded upon the avant-garde principle that constitutes a drive to bring art into life, and vice versa. One of the main concepts handled by Group Center was that of 'black':

[It] is [...] the beginning of everything [...]; black gets rid of historical definition. Black is a state of being blind and more aware. Black is oneness with birth. Black is within totality, the oneness of all [...]. Black will get rid of the separation of color at the end.⁷

⁷ Aldo Tambellini, interview by Anna Brodzky, *Arts Canada* 113 (1967), 9.

Aldo Tambellini (b. 1930), the group's founder, added: "I strongly believe in the word [*sic*] 'black power' as a powerful message, for it destroys the old

notion of western man, and by destroying that notion it also destroys the tradition of the art concept".⁸ In opposing 'the old notion of western man' to the colour black (and to black power), there is an implicit definition of subject positions that, given the context, parts from racial distinctions, black and white. The 'old notion' is, of course, white, and it implies a series of elemental associations that give the concept its meaning. In this particular case, where black is 'oneness', 'blindness and more aware', as well as being able to get rid of 'historical definition', the white and western male subject therefore poses fragmentation, perceptual illusions or deceptions, and metanarrative differentiation.⁹ Hence, for Group Center the colour black was a vitalist negativity that potentially reframes the entire world under a new life-filled darkness, free from ideology (as perceptual self-deception) and the 'tradition of the art concept' that subjugates creativity to a limited strain of activity, an art that continually affirms the status quo.

And what was, for collectives like Group Center and later Black Mask, the status quo? The decade 1960-1970 was one of considerable turmoil in the United States, the era of the Civil Rights Movement and significant opposition to the Vietnam War. These had not yet reached their most critical points when Black Mask began; however, they would be reflected in the modifications undergone by the group over the course of its evolution. This turmoil is reflected in much of the art of the decade, from conceptual art to Fluxus,¹⁰ but what differentiates Black Mask and its later forms from these movements is essentially twofold: first, their understanding of art as a fundamentally political practice, and second, their consequent re-evaluation of both the anarchist and the Marxist traditions of political philosophy. The first point is already forcefully put across on the cover of the first magazine they produced as a collective (*Black Mask*, November 1966), where the group states:

A new spirit is rising. Like the streets of Watts we burn with revolution.
We assault your Gods... We sing of your death. DESTROY THE

8 Ibid., 9.

9 Here, 'historical definition' is understood under the same associations: an individuation that marks certain subjects of history as special, as more worthy of consideration than others; in other words, history as the progressive history of white European men.

10 For more information on the generalized position of conceptual art regarding the war, see Lucy Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), xiii-xiv. About Fluxus' politics and position concerning the Cold War at large, see Cuahtémoc Medina, "The 'Kultur bolschewiken' I: Fluxus, the Abolition of Art, the Soviet Union, and 'Pure Amusement'," *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 48 (2005), 179-92.

MUSEUMS... our struggle cannot be hung on walls. Let the past fall under the blows of revolt. The guerilla [*sic*], the blacks, the men of the future, we are all at your heels.¹¹ (Fig. 1)

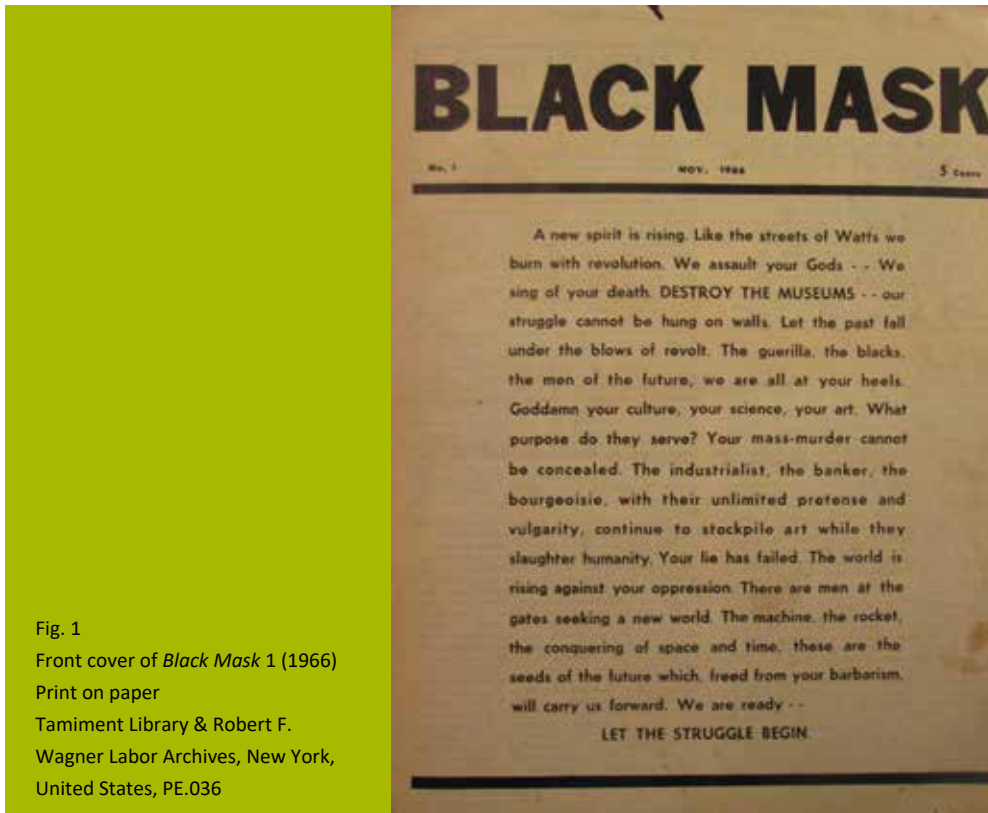


Fig. 1
Front cover of *Black Mask* 1 (1966)
Print on paper
Tamiment Library & Robert F.
Wagner Labor Archives, New York,
United States, PE.036

This quote establishes not only the tone of the group’s rhetoric but also its modernist articulation of critique, by connecting the 1965 Watts Riots in Los Angeles to the Futurist declaration of cultural war, an art that takes the form of a “struggle” that “cannot be hung on walls”. The second point – which will land the “blows of revolt” – is found throughout the texts produced by the group over the years, explained through the development of a Marxian praxis that makes the destruction of capitalism possible:

¹¹ *Black Mask* 1 (1966), Tamiment Library & Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives: PE.036.

In the brief history of the heights of proletarian struggles, the organization of workers' councils for workers' management of production have been the moments of revolutionary truth. [...] In the struggle between the power and the new proletariat, workers' and non-workers' councils will be the organs through which men rise to resolve political, social and economic questions [...]. The separation between these false categories, as the separation between work and leisure time, will eventually be dissolved.¹²

Their concern with organizational forms and the history of the Marxist and anarchist traditions, and the New Left's generalized critique of them in the 1960s, occurred simultaneously. The New Left critique began from a negative assessment of the Soviet Union as a driving force for progressivism, as well as a rejection of its most dogmatic tenets of revolutionary doctrine: in essence, a rejection of the Cold War metanarrative that divided the world into two distinct, immobile philosophies.¹³ In the history that starts with *Black Mask* and ends with the IWWC, the Marxist traditions laid the groundwork for the re-evaluation, and found in anarchism a powerful conceptual background for the performance of a revolutionary organization.

The language resulting from this challenge is violent and striking, and appropriates the rhetorical excesses of Futurism, Dada, and Surrealism. The group's engagement with the issues of the time, such as the internationalism that had a humanistic universalizing expression in the peace movement, acquires a distinctly belligerent bent that speaks rather of local race and class wars that find their most ominous embodiment in culture. The first two calls, published in the first two issues of their magazine – one to “destroy the museums” and the other to a “total revolution” – go hand-in-hand with the negation of the cultural order, and by extension all order, on one side and the creation of a new set of social relationships on the other. All their actions and the images they appropriated or produced revolve around this dialectic,

¹² *Black Mask* 7 (1967), Tamiment Library & Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives: PE.036.

¹³ On the origins of the New Left and its internationalist rejection of the Cold War divide, see Daniel Geary, “‘Becoming International Again’: C. Wright Mills and the Emergence of a Global New Left, 1956–1962,” *Journal of American History* 95 (2008), 710-36.

14 “We Are The Primitives of a New Era: An Interview with Aldo Tambellini (Part I),” by Ernesto Menéndez-Conde, accessed 6 December 2016, http://prod-images.exhibit-e.com/www_jamescohan_com/Art_Experience_NYC_Menndez_Conde_29_October_2013.pdf. This position reflects well Western post-war culture’s reformulated enthusiasm for technological development, at least when it comes to certain groups, including the French SI at its earliest stages. It is a position that even for fierce critics of the ideologies surrounding technology, such as Herbert Marcuse, remained attractive, inasmuch it also allowed for the utopian scenario of an ultimate liberation from work, and consequently, inequality. For more contextual information, see Robert M. Collins, *More: The Politics of Economic Growth in Postwar America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

15 See, for example, the flyer titled “BLACK ZERO, ‘EXPANDED CINEMA’ AT THE BRIDGE” (23 November 1965), Tamiment Library & Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives: TAM530, box 1, folder 5.

stated in terms of artistic declarations of war, modernist maxims turned into revolutionary statements, and images from wildly different sources geared towards a final, decisive conflict with ‘the system’. The use of this concept is meant to signal an allegiance not to the causes of conventional politics like the earning of a few rights, but to a revolutionary endeavour that would put an end to capitalism itself. Its objective is to destroy the kind of totality set up by the rule of law in order to establish an anarchist social organization: a true totality, a black totality. After all, Group Center portrayed the achievements of modernity as the horizon of a new age, a historical leap of faith that treats its makers as the “primitives of a new era”,¹⁴ upon whose shoulders is laid the responsibility of avoiding yet another original sin: black, not the stars, was to be the guide in mapping a history emancipated from itself by projecting the beginning, the unity of the void, into the future. The language they employed is not entirely new, but rather infused with the rhetoric of Futurism.¹⁵ Under the influence of this movement, understood as one of the first avant-gardes to integrate the military implications of such a discourse into its artistic endeavours, Ron Hahne and Ben Morea steered away from the direction Group Center had taken and started a more militant, aggressive collectivity dedicated to enacting a new primitivism not so much as a glimpse of progress, but as a demand for it to happen in the here and now.

Black Mask, by producing a monthly magazine in the tradition of various avant-gardes, including Surrealism, stepped beyond Group Center in its engagement with modernity as a mass phenomenon. Whereas Group Center sought to ‘primitivize’ the relationship between artists and audience as one primarily of work and progress – they reached out to the Lower East Side community of New York with classes and workshops – Black Mask configured it as an ideological battleground in which the dissemination of ideas opens the collectivity to anyone willing to embrace its image of the world, which it represents as being subjected to needless injustice. In other words, Black Mask presented itself, through its magazine, as an essentially activist, revolutionary Romantic project.

Following Marinetti’s assertion that the Futurist declaimer should declaim “as much with his legs as with his arms”,¹⁶ the group understood artistic practice as inherently political, performing the language of the artistic collective as a way to access change in a different way from contemporaneous approaches.

The first selected image (Fig. 2) discussed briefly here is the cover of *Black Mask #10*, where the claim “EVERYONE CAN BE A DADAIST” is placed alongside a photograph of the sculpture by the English artist Henry Moore (1898-1986) entitled *The Helmet* (1939). This is in turn underlined by the headline of “Lasime Tushinde Mbilashaka” (Swahili for “We shall conquer without a doubt”), a slogan from the black activist H. Rap Brown (b. 1943), who was the leader of a coalition between the Black Panther Party and a university students’ organization that opposed the war in Vietnam.

16 RoseLee Goldberg, *Performance: Live Art 1909 to the Present* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1979), 14.



Fig. 2
Front cover of *Black Mask* 10 (1968)
Print on paper
Tamiment Library & Robert F. Wagner
Labor Archives, New York, United
States, PE.036

About *The Helmet*, Henry Moore said that it was “a kind of protection thing [...] and it became a recording of things inside other things. The mystery of semiobscurity [*sic*] where one can only half distinguish something. In the helmet you do not quite know what is inside”.¹⁷ Black Mask states that to be a Dadaist is to participate in “every form of revolutionary subversion [...]: hysteria, madness, abuse, black humor [...]”.¹⁸ It is an activity that is driven from below, from the layers of emotional life that are covered up by what the German critical theorist Herbert Marcuse (1898-1979), who was popular among the politically engaged, urban, intellectual youth of the time, called one-dimensional Reason. It is a reason that ascribes meaning to everything within the reduced framework of a positivistic progress, and of an objectivity that deploys its material oppression as psychological repression. Pairing these distinct elements together, it could be said that Reason’s helmet protects the wearer from him or herself, from the animal that aches for release; however, if subverted, the helmet becomes Moore’s “mystery of semiobscurity”, a breakdown of communication in the face of political antagonism, the revolutionary’s (the animal’s) last resource to get through any battle alive. Subversion – originally a military term – is a fight from within, an overturning of common sense that, in the traditional image of class warfare, befits those who are not yet capable of open belligerence, those without mass support, perhaps even those without any support at all. It is in this sense, then, that Black Mask alludes, importantly, to the German Dadaist Johann Baader (1875-1955): “schizophrenic, [Baader] becomes the key figure of Berlin Dada. He is Tzara’s ‘Idiot’ transcended: the Idiot/Madman/Guerilla [*sic*] in life – the man without aim or prospects, the ‘lowest’ of all, the shit of America”.¹⁹

17 Henry Moore, “Moore on His Methods,” by Michael Chase, *Christian Science Monitor*, 24 March 1967, reprinted in Alan G. Wilkinson (ed.), *Henry Moore: Writings and Conversations* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002), 214.

18 *Black Mask* 10 (1968), Tamiment Library & Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives: PE.036.

19 *Ibid.*

Using the terms laid out in this composition, Baader no longer carries the helmet of Reason, and because of that he is sovereign: his repression dissolves since he no longer has an aim or prospects; because he is free of all concerns beyond the wish for a paradise on Earth he is one and every man (and woman), the lowest of the low. Ideologically speaking, this coincides with the view that

Native Americans and blacks are the lowest of the low in the United States at this point in history, belonging to the *Lumpenproletariat*, regardless of their economic status, systematically oppressed to keep them far from wealth and parity before the law. Accompanied by Rap Brown's letter, according to which "aggression is the order of the day",²⁰ subversion retakes its military origin and summarily deploys a violence that targets everything, as a Dadaist conquest that shall "rejoice in [America's] destruction and ruin".²¹ This is a rhetorical fulfilment of a declaration of war inscribed in the magazine cover's layout design: BLACK is Dada's impulse towards an absolute affirmation of nothingness, MASK is Moore's modernist sculpture as the inversion of reasonable argument, as Rap Brown's negation of government as "the enemy of Mankind".²² Thus the group's name finds its performative truth in the promise of a revolutionary future anchored in the aesthetics of politics and its avant-garde partner in crime, "the scent of apocalypse".²³

UP AGAINST THE WALL MOTHERFUCKER!

Early in 1968 members of Black Mask distributed a leaflet in the Lower East Side that said "you have noticed by now that BLACK MASK is no longer arriving [...] The reason is a direct result of our theory – The movement must be real or it will not be. Now the call is INTO THE STREETS...[emphasis original]".²⁴ Up Against the Wall Motherfucker was thus born, taking their name from the LeRoi Jones poem "Black People!" of late 1967.²⁵ The membership base for this new group was Black Mask, but its organizational principles now shifted towards something much less recognizably artistic than Black Mask. It was no longer a performance collective constantly in flux but a more solid organization primarily modelled on two kinds of counter-cultural social formation: the rural, self-sufficient, and loose relations of the hippie commune, and the urban, parasitical, pop-cultural, and closely knit relations of the street gang. There is a third element, the one that unites these last two, which is the idea of the tribe, rooted in more or less stereotypical images of Native Americans. Ben Morea,

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid.

24 Ben Morea and Ron Hahne, *Black Mask & Up Against the Wall Motherfucker: The Incomplete Works of Ben Morea, Ron Hahne, and the Black Mask Group* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2011), 86.

25 Grindon, "Poetry Written in Gasoline," 22.

founder of these groups, called this new entity “The Family”; this is a term that is not an ironic deployment but an appropriation, an artistic move that allows the group to take old material and destroy it to form something new, something that is, to them, true. Tracing a history of resistance movements in the US, Morea started to craft the identity of the Motherfucker as one rooted, first, on the loyalty of commitment to a group, second, on the group’s belonging to a certain land, and lastly, on the opposition to (social) fragmentation. Morea found in Native Americans the answer to the question of what it is to be an American radical: “socially and politically, I related to the Native American as the origin of the American identity”.²⁶

26 Kugelberg, *Opposition: Black Mask, Ben Morea & UAWMF*, 13.

27 Geronimo (b. 1829, Mexico, d. 1909, US) was an Apache leader who commanded bands of men for thirty years (from around 1851 to 1885) in a continuous war against the States of Mexico and the US. His military achievements and particular resilience when faced against forces deemed superior earned him a reputation for fierceness, even after his capture and status as a prisoner of war of the US after 1887. His persona was launched into celebrity in the US after he began to be paraded in fairs and expositions by the victorious US government in the early 1900s. See Charles Leland Sonnichsen, “From Savage to Saint: A New Image for Geronimo,” in *Geronimo and the End of the Apache Wars*, ed. Charles Leland Sonnichsen (Lincoln, NE and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1990).

Native Americans have been idealized in various ways by European authors ever since the conquest and colonization of the continent; the Enlightenment image of the noble savage is only one of the enduring examples of such appropriation. In the case of the Motherfuckers, taking the image of the legendary Geronimo²⁷ (Fig. 3) as the basis for rebellion completely overlooks the mostly institutionally based appeals of Native Americans in the twentieth century. Instead, it highlights the violent last-stand rhetoric associated with wartime occupation; recalling the nineteenth-century wars against indigenous peoples becomes a powerful political statement that also functions as an idealized representation of what a community should look like. Hence, Native Americans become in UAWMF a representation of organizational principles that are essentially primitivist, a modern anti-modern form of avant-garde assault on bourgeois ideologies. Geronimo’s appropriation of the European gun in that image is, in this sense, an analogical reference to the group’s re-signification of the family; usually accompanied by the idea of self-defence, it also presents a series of connected propositions articulated by classical anarchist ethics, insofar as the image of the Native American comprises a different set of injustices from that of the Civil Rights Movement. Under this light, it is a tight community of outsiders rejected and ridiculed for their way of life, which romantically refuses to stand down and goes to battle even against

impossible odds. The affinity group, which is the core organizational concept for UAWMF, is intuitively born from natural law (“[it] is a pre-organization force, it represents the drive out of which organization is formed”²⁸), and has a pre-modern history²⁹ that in its association with the resistant image of Geronimo and the Native American tribal aesthetic constitutes a primitivist idealism. In this idealization, the Native American has a deep relation to the land (close to the ‘ecological Indian’³⁰), to territory as a revolutionary-mythical point of congregation that differs from the idea of nation in its anthropological throwback to the federative constitution of pre-Columbian North Americans. The anthropology is simple: the first step is the individual, then the family unit, then the tribe, then the community, and, lastly, a people. Mixed with the Marxist narrative of the seeds of the new society being produced in the old, this view of the Native American attempts to establish, like many sci-fi novels of the time, a post-national and yet primitive vision of the future, except UAWMF was realizing it in the present. The group proposed an experimental mode of organization: a symbolic collectivity that by ridding itself of modern law would achieve an anarchic modification of space and time, in which territory stops being property and returns to nature, while time is extended infinitely in revolution instituted as a community-binding ritual.

28 *Up Against the Wall Motherfucker*, 1968, Tamiment Library & Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives: TAM530, box 1, folder 62.

29 “In so-called ‘primitive’ unitary societies the affinity group attempts to balance a complexity so thorough that it approaches totality. But the division of labour that arises from the struggle for survival causes a fragmentation & un-evenness in the distribution of material as well as psychological & cultural wealth”. Ibid.

30 Shepard Krech, *The Ecological Indian: Myth and History* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999).

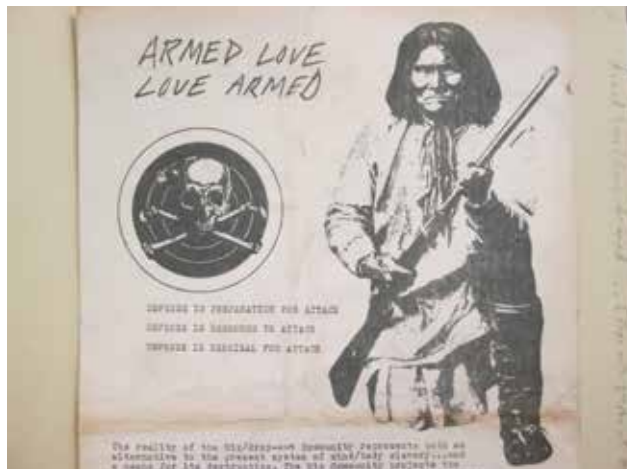


Fig. 3
Armed Love, Love Armed
Leaflet, 1969
Print on paper
Tamiment Library & Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York, United States, TAM.530, box 1, folder 40

31 “Ben Morea: An Interview,” by Iain McIntyre, 2006, accessed 31 August 2016, <https://libcom.org/history/against-wall-motherfucker-interview-ben-morea/>.

32 Osha Neumann, who was a member of the group, recalled: “Ben [Morea] was always vigilant in his search for weakness, and insistent in his demands for loyalty. The commitment he demanded, and that we were quick to demand of each other, knew no boundaries. We concealed our vulnerability. Ben rewarded us with the promise to protect us with his life”. This could be seen, in essence, as a warrior code, a Romantic, honourable pledge of allegiance. Osha Neumann, *Up Against the Wall Motherfucker: A Memoir of the '60s, With Notes for Next Time* (New York: Seven Stories, 2008), 59.

33 “The position of women in the Motherfuckers group left much to be desired”, decried a pamphlet by author G.A.N. in 1969, which offered a scathing analysis of UAWMF shortly after it ceased to be. G.A.N., *Untitled Critique*, 1969, Tamiment Library & Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives: TAM530, box 2, folder 5.

UAWMF produced a single magazine during its existence, but it reached out to various underground publications in New York to distribute their images and texts, a situation that lasted for two years, until the end of 1969. Called “a street gang with analysis” by one of its members, the Motherfuckers took control, however briefly, of a part of New York’s Lower East Side, ‘adopting’ all sorts of radicals into their idea of ‘the Family’ and instigating various riots and confrontations with the police. Eventually, they were able to establish legal services for the community, food banks, free stores, and other institutions outside of State control³¹ that sought to give concreteness to the idea of liberated territory and on-going war with capitalism. In turning towards modernist primitivism and the expansion of their membership through a system of honour,³² which is to say turning towards sources that made it possible to conceive alternative discourses of modernity, they re-developed the path first trodden by Dadaists and Surrealists that found in the trash products of progress a youthful subversive element. At this point, it is worth remembering that the main authors of the group were white and male, which presents a problem that, to these groups, was resolved in race and class consciousness. Black Mask and UAWMF were highly conscious of race and class matters, and their own position in the social landscape is made versatile by means of a populist logic that articulates distinct oppressions into a single front, without embracing single forms of protest. It is, indeed, a paradox ideologically resolved, and it is interesting to see that gender issues would be pointed out at the time in contemporary critiques of the groups by female peers.³³ In any case, this populist logic is what drives the appropriation of the negative images that the media had crafted of the dirty hippie, the beatnik, the criminal, the young gangster, the blacks, and so on: distinct subject positions that nonetheless present the possibility of sharing elements constitutive of each subjectivity. UAWMF attempted to synthesize this aesthetic terror of an upcoming end of civilization not by nuclear apocalypse but by cultural subsidence into a mythical threat, a monster literally embodied in the visages of the counter-cultural enemies of the US.



Fig. 4
 Untitled
Rat Subterranean News, insert, 1969
 The Fales Library & Special
 Collections, New York, United
 States, AP2.R36

This idea is well expressed in an image published in the magazine *Rat* in 1969 (Fig. 4), a montage of *The Incredible Hulk* panels, speech globes, drawings, and word interventions made by an anonymous author. It depicts the Hulk in a psychedelic struggle that flows from inside to outside, morphing his body into a near-disintegrating mass of flesh and particles that angrily rages against ideological deception (“the more I struggle – the tighter it wraps itself around me!!”) only to be partially consumed and reconstituted by pain and anger: the dramatic cry “can’t let leader murder all those innocent people!” is focused into the preparation for a great punch, “but the madder we motherfuckers get – the stronger we motherfuckers become!”. The outcome is the ultimate realization of such an expressionism of revolt: “now we will show you what power really is – !! – and it won’t fail me now!!” It is followed by the word

“NEVER” made into an onomatopoeia of the fist, the Great Refusal materialized into a bodily violence that breaks base matter, that breaks the page as it aims straight towards the viewer. The psychedelic consciousness of the Hulk, in its expansion and retraction as it struggles against its own conditioning and the despair of social rejection (“they made us outcasts”) comes into its final form as utter destruction of the Reality Principle, of the fourth wall that crumbles in the face of the subjectivity of the Motherfucker as both pop-cultural garbage and revolutionary monster. The struggle develops like a bad acid trip: everything collapses and alchemically joins together, only to clearly emerge when the Hulk shows sadness and then rage in extreme forms, neatly re-drawing his face and body for the viewer to see clearly before he cracks the page open with his fist. It is at that point that the Hulk character understands what “power really is”: a violent, terminal negation (“NEVER”), an apocalyptic war. And such a war, as an apocalyptic politics, can be thought of, at least in historical terms, through the prism of the sublime, or the lens of Romanticism as it deviated into the Gothic. As pressure from the authorities increased, the Motherfuckers became fewer, and they were eventually disintegrated by sheer force of arrests and closures of meeting places.

THE INTERNATIONAL WEREWOLF CONSPIRACY

In late 1969 UAWMF transitioned into a different collective, something darker, and yet humorous. The IWWC represents a further descent underground, an act of disappearance that nevertheless powers a haunting, ghostly form of organization that functions on the rhetorical force of the aggression of the unknown. It is no longer bound to a territory, and therefore to the politics-as-aesthetics implied in identity and the modification of everyday living according to the shared principles of a tribe or “Family”. Instead of the shared apartments of the Lower East Side and the community actions meant to defend that area of New York as part of a territorial claim, or the personal relationships held together by concepts such as honour and brotherhood, the

IWWC adopted an entirely different mode of existence no longer based on lived communality. This means that, detached and separated, the group relies entirely on representation; being in-formal, images become the basis of its existence, and therefore require an even more excessive rhetorical mode and a more violent tone, one that, driven by Gothicism, invites youths to become bitten by werewolves and eat their terrified parents.

The existence of the IWWC can be traced through the various images they produced from 1969 to 1970, and which they published through third-party magazines such as *Rat*. If Black Mask functioned like a performance unit, and UAWMF like an anarchist art collective, the IWWC was, as its name indicates, but a shadow of an organization. Since the police had been able to diminish the presence of the Motherfuckers in the Lower East Side by the end of 1969,³⁴ the IWWC had no centre of operations. Ben Morea, who had founded Black Mask, and who was the only person to be a member of all three groups, was by this time on the run from the New York authorities, which reflects the status of the IWWC as, primarily, a reaction to defeat. As a play on the name of the Industrial Workers of the World, the Conspiracy attempted to muster a parodist image of unionism as a Gothic vitalism, a juvenile appropriation of the internationalized threat of communism in the same manner in which UAWMF did for the image of the *Lumpenproletariat*.

Their manifesto “A Motherfucker Is a Werewolf” (Fig. 5) roars: “We are the ultimate Horror Show... Hideous Hair & Dangerous Drugs... Armed Love striking terror into the vacant hearts of the plastic Mother & pig-faced Father”.³⁵ This position takes the contemporaneous stereotypes – such as the hippie and his long hair, the criminal and his tattoos – to the extreme, attempting to exploit the conspiratorial image of communism in American pop culture to create the sense that all youths are, potentially, werewolves, that the enemy of society (the consumerist ‘fake’ mother and the authoritarian figure of the father) is right inside the home. The manifesto centres the question of revolution on an

34 Neumann, *Up Against the Wall Motherfucker*, 113.

35 “A Motherfucker Is a Werewolf,” *Rat Subterranean News* (1969), 13, The Fales Library & Special Collections: AP2.R36.

identity that is ambiguous only to those who do not know, to those in power: “Where do they come from?’ Who knows. ‘What do they want?’ They won’t say. But the moon knows. And the WEREWOLVES know. And the fat frightened giant gulps tranquilizers while his children grow hair and fangs and leave home to run with the wolves”.³⁶

36 Ibid.

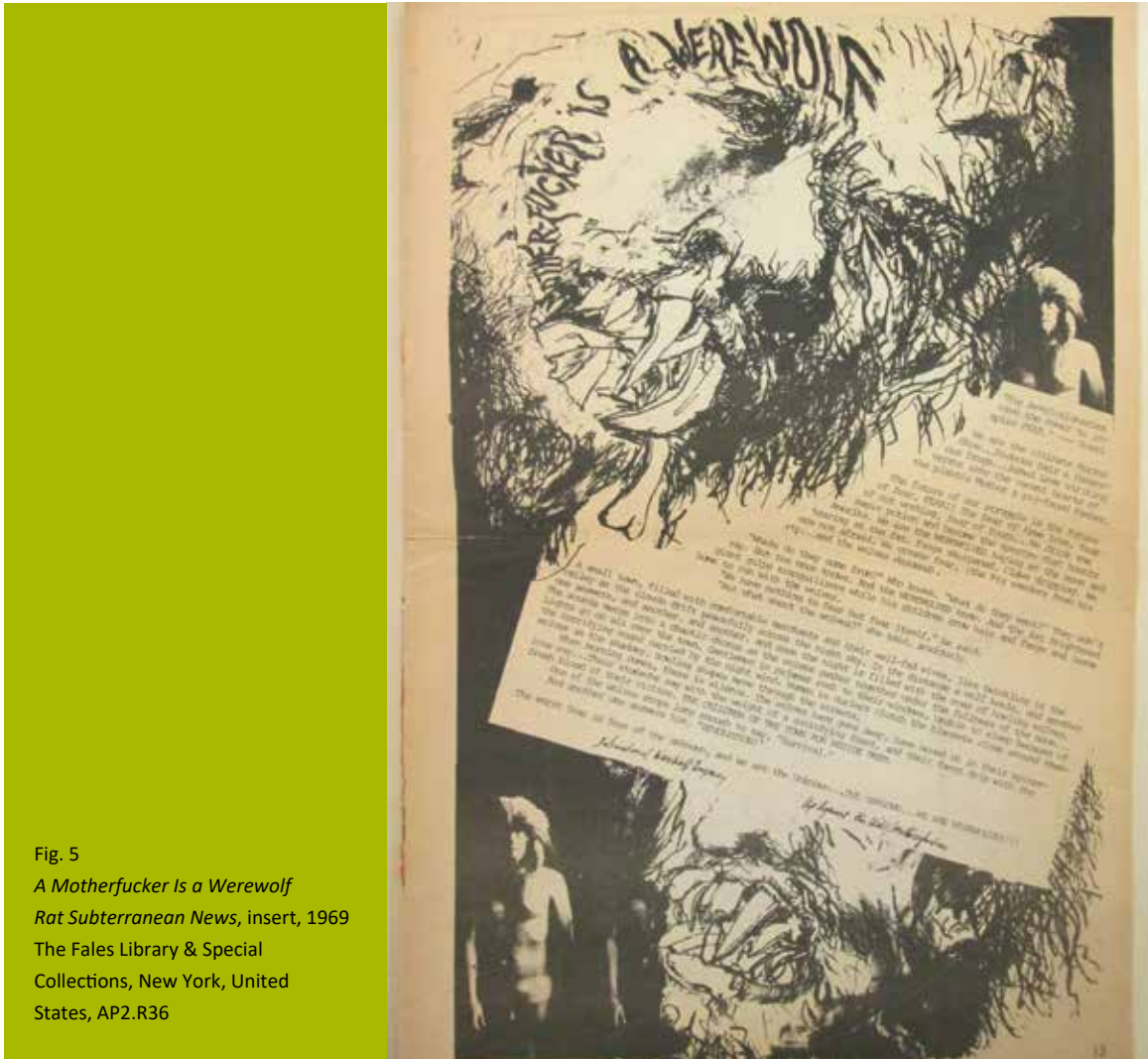


Fig. 5
A Motherfucker is a Werewolf
Rat Subterranean News, insert, 1969
The Fales Library & Special
Collections, New York, United
States, AP2.R36

CONCLUSION

These 1960s groups, who share a common point of origin in the works and writings of Black Mask, present a vanguardist approach to the question of aesthetics and politics that is arguably unique. While the philosophical underpinnings are similar to those of what Peter Bürger called the “historical avant-garde”, the group that started with Black Mask developed a praxis that, like the Futurism of the 1920s or the experiment of the surrealists against Fascism in the one-off journal *Contre-Attaque*, offers a brand of resistance defined by the erasure not only of the art/life divide but also that of politics/aesthetics. It is worth, however, revisiting these highly charged works to better comprehend the history of avant-garde movements as such, considering their social implications and what it means to create an art which definitively attempts to distance itself from the art-world. This short account of Black Mask and its transformations aims to open up new lines of research regarding these somewhat obscure moments of avant-garde history.

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Freedom Flowers Project
Manuel Salvisberg and Ai Weiwei
2014/15
Bomb and urn
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