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WEAPONS OF THE WEAK

Twelve years ago, a collective of writers calling themselves Retort published a meditation on politics and image-power "in a new age of war," as they put it, borrowing their title, *Afflicted Powers*, from Milton's *Paradise Lost*. How was it, they asked, that the circulation of images and the management of image-crises had become so central to the operations of government—images of Twin Towers shattered and collapsing; of missiles blazing over Baghdad; of prisoners stripped and humiliated by their captors—while, at the same time, the image of public dissent—the scene of literal millions of protestors flooding the streets—proved impotent in halting the U.S. invasion of Iraq? How could images mean so much and yet count for so little?

These questions have returned to haunt us in the aftermath of the 2016 U.S. election, as the government now swings from meme to meme, and from one public-relations disaster to the next, its war room reduced to an embattled trolling operation. How did it come to this? For Retort, the answer has to do with the changing mechanism of democratic consent. At some point in the 1980s, they argue, the managers of the American electorate "[came] to need weak citizenship," a citizenry atomized and image-obsessed, its attention absorbed by the spectacle of CNN and Fox News (and now Politico, BuzzFeed, Twitter…) in place of the un-representable and never-newsworthy reality of capitalism and empire. The twentieth-century electorate, with its deep-seated institutional loyalties (to party, union, church, etc.), had proven unhelpfully hostile to the main ambitions of the American superpower; it had therefore to be transformed into a "thinned, unobstructed social texture, made up of loosely attached consumer subjects, each locked in its plastic work-station and nuclearized family of four." Such an electorate would be enjoined at intervals to participate in the electoral process. But since weak polities are prone to apathy, and even mutiny, the neoliberal voter would have to be cajoled all its waking hours, becoming "the object of the state's constant, anxious attention – an unstoppable barrage of idiot fashions and panics and image-motifs, all aimed at sewing the citizen back (unobtrusively, 'individually') into a deadly simulacrum of community."[1]

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It has become a commonplace to say that Nicole Eisenman's paintings of the past few years deal in the matter of intimacy and friendship, and,

too, that they confront the limits to intimacy in a society flush with screen-based addictions and distractions. Retort would be quick to identify this screen-world with the "deadly simulacrum of community," part and parcel of the machinery of weak citizenship; and on some level they would be right. But for Eisenman, the issue of community, and the question of weakness and strength, is less cut-and-dried. The touching realness of social life in the Facebook era is as much her subject as the alienating micro-torture of networked loneliness. In her tour de force of 2016, *Another Green World* [fig. 1], for example, the image of sociability is at once more and less prison-like than the "plasticized work-station and nuclear family of four" evoked in *Afflicted Powers*: The crowd in the apartment is a fam or a squad, not a congeries of Oedipal mass-men. Hooked into various sorts of media-making machines, from iPhones to the LP player, its social life nonetheless remains improvisatory and unscripted—a scene testing the language of friendship, its gestures pathetic but lovable. Most importantly, it is an image of the social from which violence has been erased, made impossible: Although sometimes grotesquely embodied, Eisenman's figures never seem able, much less motivated, to wound each other as humans most often do.[2] The friends gathered in *Another Green World* remain scrupulously, even hauntingly, individuated (the line separating human from ghost in Eisenman's world is thin; her figures are mainly apparitions—states of personhood given symbolic form), and while nothing prevents their embracing, whether out of desperate mutual need or in a performance of devil-may-care physicality, the act of touching never quite sparks off an interaction of forces—a testing of strength. Weakness is a virtue in *Another Green World*. In other pictures, it is more ambiguous: The passenger in the foreground of *Weeks on the Train* [fig. 2], her (or his?) bug-eye pushed up against the window, figures a more public state of anomie, in which isolation is at once blessing and curse. There is paradise in privacy; hell has not ceased to be other people.

fig. 1—*Another Green World*, 2016

fig. 2—*Weeks on the Train*, 2015

All of which is to throw into relief a pair of recent paintings, *Dark Light* [fig. 3] and *Heading Down River on the USS J-Bone of an Ass* [fig. 4], both of which were made after the 2016 U.S. election, and in response to its outcome. Importantly, we remain in the world of the weak. In *Dark Light*, three dudes lay somnolent in the flatbed of a

pickup truck (shades of the soldiers in Piero della Francesca's Resurrection), while a fourth, camo-shirted and orange-panted, points the way with a flashlight. The torchbearer's red cap is appropriately Trumpian, and the truck, also red, has been tricked out so as to "roll coal," belching unfiltered carbon from a smokestack exhaust pipe. We have gone over into the netherworld of Red-American atavism, but by way of the urban ultra-Right: the painting's title nods to the Deleuzian-turned-quasi-fascist Nick Land, whose essay of 2012, "The Dark Enlightenment," has claimed a following among self-styled neo-reactionaries. Per Eisenman's rendering, however, Land's troll army looks less fearsome than incompetent: the seated trio has either fallen asleep or else passed out, leaving their Homer Simpson leader to be smothered by the billowing engine-smoke—a vision of weak citizenship gone terribly (or is it comically?) wrong.

The scene imagined in *Heading Down River* is a shade or two more equivocal, although no less despairing in its idea of the national polity. We look out over a desolate riverine landscape, where a pair of mariners has rigged a tattered sail to a donkey's jawbone, led on toward a cataract by their pied-piper captain. In the distance, another ship of fools floats along the same way, its hull scarlet against the pollution-green waters, bearing abovedeck what might be a Malevich sculpture. That we are dealing in an allegory of ruin is hard to miss: the piper sends his mates to their watery graves, while nature is debased and degraded all around. The trees have been exfoliated. The stars recoil in horror. To take up Retort's analytic, *Heading Down River* indicates a world beyond citizenship, on the other side of the end of days. But it is also, in spite of itself, an image of unlikely coordination—a view of the weak trying, and failing, to make their own way in a dying world.

Heading Down River reminds me of another image from the recent past—another scene of ingenuity and doom. I have in mind a photograph taken in Oakland, California, on 28 January 2012 [fig. 6], a day when roughly two thousand antagonists of the ruling order tried, and failed, to occupy a vacant arena in the city's downtown. The picture shows a young protester—in the language of image-politics, we would call him 'Bearded White Guy'—arrayed alongside a group of demonstrators in an ad-hoc street barricade. The crowd is composed mainly of masked militants, who brandish garbage can tops in answer to the policeman's riot shield; but our Bearded White Guy looks to have joined the fray spontaneously, crouching behind a plush armchair dragged into the street from who knows where—poor protection against the coming beat-down.

Insofar as it is possible to read a photograph allegorically, I have always thought of the armchair street-fighter from January 28th as a figure from beyond the binary (the image-political analytic) of weakness and strength. What the photograph shows is a weak citizen's effort to hurtle over the limit of the possible, launching into another, more unfamiliar, space: that of politics-as-power. Manifestly our militants are in for an ass-whooping; the futility of their barricade, with its spray-can spectacle of peace signs and anarchy 'A's, speaks for itself—it is hardly the stuff of which good image-politics is made. But then, it is hard to see what other way the weak have to power. In a pinch, there is only the jawbone and the tattered sail. Somehow we must ride.

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*—My essay draws its title from anthropologist James C. Scott's

1—Retort [Iain Boal, T.J. Clark, Joseph Matthews, and Michael Watts], *Afflicted Powers: Capital and Spectacle in a New Age of War* (New York and London: Verso, 2005), 21.

2—Yet violence persists at the margin of the everyday: Punctuating Eisenman's 2016 exhibition at Anton Kern Gallery, which featured, among other paintings, *Another Green World* and *Weeks on the Train*, were two paintings titled *Shooters #1* and *#2*—hard-edged paintings in an ultra-modernist vein, each one depicting the close-cropped face of a man holding a gun at eye-level. Violence in the key of Greenberg: flatness = death.

fig. 3—*Dark Light*

fig. 4—*Going Down River on the USS J-Bone of an Ass*

fig. 6—Demonstration in Oakland, CA, 28 Jan 2012