

# Nonviolence



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## Abstract

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*Nonviolence* resembles the aporetic structure and ambiguity of many works of art or our conceptualization of them. As a term of engagement in the arts, *nonviolence* is insightful as an operational and comparative concept: *operational* insofar as it unfolds performative strategies in the arts and *comparative* insofar as those strategies often resemble the aesthetics of political gestures, e.g., Mahatma Gandhi's nonviolent approach to political engagement and change. This essay examines the potential of the term *nonviolence* in three short case studies—three performances by Akira Takayama (*McDonald's Radio University*, 2017), Kandis Williams (*Eurydice, Orpheus, and the Maenads*, 2019) and Petr Pavlensky (*Lightning*, 2017).



There is no simple definition of *nonviolence*. *Nonviolence* must, rather, remain a complex and persistently disputable term, especially given the fact that *violence* itself has a complex conceptual history in addition to a complicated etymology (consider, for example, the German term *Gewalt*). As Judith Butler has recently argued, “[b]oth violence and nonviolence arrive in the fields of moral debate and political analysis already interpreted, worked over by prior usages.”<sup>1</sup> As a term of engagement in the arts, *nonviolence* ought to be insightful as an operational and comparative concept: *operational* insofar as it unfolds performative strategies in the arts and *comparative* insofar as those strategies often resemble the aesthetics of political gestures, e.g., Mahatma Gandhi’s nonviolent approach to political engagement and change.

As the negation of violence, *nonviolence*, too, is, of course, always politically motivated, although—and in distinction from violence—its performance does not necessarily adapt or imitate the goal-oriented structure of political activism. However, nonviolent acts are also not just passive or simple “peaceful” gestures; rather, they must be understood as *forces of nonviolence* or gestures that operate, as Butler puts it, always already in a “force field of violence.”<sup>2</sup> Different forms of violence—structural racism, violence against refugees, immigrants and

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1 Judith Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence: An Ethico-Political Bind* (London/New York: Verso, 2020), 7.

2 Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence*, 7.

homeless people, violence against women, the violence of exclusion in fascist and competitive capitalist societies—are here not confronted with structurally similar counterviolence nor with simple forms of protest, but with forces that are inherent to problems and histories of performance, theatricality and representation. I will examine these problems and their respective nonviolent proposals in three short case studies. Two are, I will argue, successful instances of *nonviolence*, whereas the third examines an artist who fails to perform a “destitution” of violence.<sup>3</sup>

In Akira Takayama’s “hidden theatre” *McDonald’s Radio University* (2017), clandestine knowledge is exposed to a wider audience and a different politics of studying. The Japanese performance artist and writer Takayama makes use of several situationist strategies of *détournement* and appropriation. With official permission from the McDonald’s corporation, he compiled a lecture program with so-called “professors”: refugees, immigrants or homeless people, mainly from the Middle East and Africa (Afghanistan, Syria, Pakistan, Ghana, Burkina Faso, Eritrea and Iran), who had sought shelter inside McDonald’s restaurants. The lectures were given inside the restaurants, ordered alongside a burger and coke, and broadcast on the radio. The nonviolent force of *McDonald’s Radio University* consists, first of all, in its *occupation* of an everyday (non-)space. McDonald’s restaurants are seen less as capitalist working spaces of exploitation than as sites where it is relatively easy to access basic human and social needs in a metropole (toilets, free WLAN, sockets, cheap food, heating). Takayama thereby profanes the neoliberal model of the “coworking space”, creating an absurd, but nevertheless communal, space for an unexpected common use. Secondly, *McDonald’s Radio University* profanes and parodies the institution of the University; an institution

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3 The term *nonviolence* can be outlined with the help of the concept of *destitution*. The term *destitution* is often exemplified with actions such as “studying”, “reading” or “playing” [*spielen*]. These are actions free of a constitutive moment, *means without end*, where no work or final goals are necessarily envisioned and established within the process. If a play [*Spiel*] ends, it is over, and thus playing ends. While these examples may provide, at first glance, minimal force for engagement or social change, it is nevertheless possible to conceive of *destitution* as a genuine political force. For an extensive theory of *destitution* see Giorgio Agamben, *The Use of the Bodies* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2018).

which for most of his “professors” is often not accessible to study or visit (e.g., the gated campuses of Tokyo universities). Since all of the refugees and immigrants have special competences (e.g., the refugee Fusein Franck, a former professional runner from Ghana, thus became a “professor” of Sport Science and the “Phenomenology of Running”), the legitimation and supremacy of institutional competences are questioned while the misery and the exclusion of certain members of society are protested in an overtly nonviolent way.

In Kandis Williams’ *Eurydice, Orpheus, and the Maenads* (2019), nonviolence traverses theatrical scenarios, silent gestures and a politics of racialized bodies. The politics of oppressed bodies in a metropole is experienced as a cinematographic scenario. A single black body dances from the late Baroque Spittelkolonnaden to the Artspace that commissioned the work. At one point, the audience, following the performance along the rainy highway of Leipziger Strasse in Berlin, sees the black body framed by the white Cube of “Julia Stoschek collection.” Inside the Artspace (named “Fragile”), nonviolent gestures of withdrawn aggression, such as the iconic biting of the fist or the covering up of tears, are performed in the midst of a mainly white (and seemingly indifferent) audience. The systemic violence of racism in a western metropole and, more specifically, inside a predominantly white artworld, is here confronted with an abstract yet clearly legible counterforce; Hannah Black aptly comments that Williams’ performance “traverses the real violence of social systematization.”<sup>4</sup> However, during these traverses through the latent aggressive atmosphere of an urban landscape, *nonviolence* is performed from within the force field of violence precisely as a form of resistance. *Nonviolence* may, in light of Williams’ performance, be characterized as a weak force; a force that does not attempt to constitute an equipollent counterviolence, but instead finds hope in the force of destitution and deconstruction.

In contrast to Takayama and Williams, it occurs to me that in the work of

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4 Hannah Black, “Openings: Kandis Williams,” *Artforum* (March 2020), <https://www.artforum.com/print/202003/hannah-black-on-kandis-williams-82222>.

Petr Pavlensky this idea of *nonviolence* as a *destitute* force fails, precisely because it lacks the consistency of a non-goal-oriented plot. While many of Pavlensky's actions (hunger strike, self-mutilation) do stand in the tradition of nonviolent political protest, his artistic interventions are, without doubt, also concerned with a final iconicity and a certain martyrlike heroism. If we consider the performance *Lightning* (2017), the effort of documentation clearly reveals that Pavlensky was setting fire to the Federal Security Services (FSB) in Moscow and the Bank of France at Place de la Bastille in Paris with the intention to pose in front of these burning buildings. In fact, Pavlensky seems most concerned with the finality of his performances, with one single documentary image, as well as with statements and, not least, with manifestos.<sup>5</sup> In this sense, Pavlensky's performances differ from the means-without-end performances of Takayama and Williams.

Since Walter Benjamin's highly influential essay *Critique of Violence* [*Kritik der Gewalt*]<sup>6</sup> and up until Judith Butler's extensive actualization of the problem, *forces of nonviolence* were mostly analyzed in light of political movements or the philosophy of law, but seldom paid attention to aesthetic gestures. The term *nonviolence* should, thus, be a useful key term undergirding a series of questions that art history and art criticism—in dialogue with other fields, of course—can pose, enfold and answer. Questions arise such as: Is there an aesthetics of *nonviolence*? Is there a political iconography of images of *nonviolence*?<sup>7</sup> Furthermore—and perhaps more importantly for the urgencies of our time—is there an ethics and politics of *nonviolence* that is carved out by or inscribed in the form, materiality, practice and performativity of art?

*Nonviolence* resembles the aporetic structure and ambiguity of many works

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5 See Petr Pavlensky, *Gefängnis des Alltäglichen: Gespräche* (Berlin: Matthes & Seitz, 2016) and his manifesto: Petr Pavlensky, *Der bürokratische Krampf und die neue Ökonomie politischer Kunst* (Berlin: Merve, 2016).

6 Walter Benjamin, *Toward the Critique of Violence: A Critical Edition*, ed. Peter Fenves and Julia Ng (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2021).

7 Towards such a political iconography of *nonviolence* see, as an example, the exhibition catalogue by Josef Helfenstein and Joseph N. Newland, ed. *Gandhi and Images of Nonviolence* (Houston: Menil Collection, 2014).

of art or our conceptualization of them.<sup>8</sup> In this sense, it could be especially insightful to think of *nonviolence* in the arts and in art history alongside a set of oxymoronic figures of thought: “rageful love, militant pacifism, aggressive nonviolence, radical persistence.”<sup>9</sup> The term *nonviolence* would thus point to forms of engagement wherein ethico-political aporias are sustained rather than resolved. Such an understanding of *nonviolence* would, above all, insist on the complex aporetic situation of engaging in a world full of violence via the weak forces of the arts and historical thinking.

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8 See Hans Blumenberg, “Die essentielle Vieldeutigkeit des ästhetischen Gegenstandes,” in *Kritik und Metaphysik, Festschrift für Heinz Heimsoeth zum achtzigsten Geburtstag*, ed. Friedrich Kaulbach and Joachim Ritter (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1966), 174–179; Toni Hildebrandt, “Vorahmung und Kosmotechnik,” / “Pré-mimésis et cosmotechnique,” *Regards croisés: Deutsch-Französische Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte, Literaturwissenschaft und Ästhetik/Revue franco-allemande d'histoire de l'art, d'esthétique et de littérature comparée* 9 (2019): 101–124.

9 Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence*, 203ff.

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