

Geoffrey Pugen's *Sabara Sabara*: Auto-Destructive Art

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In Geoffrey Pugen's five-minute video *Sabara Sabara* (2009) a group of female vigilantes commit a series of crimes against the oil industry: they cut power to a gas station, vandalize cars in a parking lot, tie up a gas station attendant and chain up his pumps. Their misdeeds are committed swiftly and wordlessly, without any clear motive. They cruise city streets on bicycles with vengeful bravado. Among revolutionaries, these women are the utmost grassroots: we see one woman wield a simple hammer, while others use chains, duct tape and slingshots.

Following this montage of criminal activity, the group of vigilantes is seen at their headquarters: an RV parked in a forested area. They relax and tinker with homemade bombs in a secretive, cluttered setting littered with schematic diagrams, wires and circuitry. In the climactic scene, the encampment is raided by a team of operatives led by one of the vigilantes' former victims. The details of this character's past are ambiguous: he was earlier seen to emerge from a car overturned and destroyed by the vigilantes, who promptly bound his hands. Now he walks through the forest, leading muscled and armed assailants; we are unsure which side of the law they are on. The assailants force the vigilantes to the verge of surrender, until a heretofore hidden group member (played by performance artist Johanna Householder) throws a smoke bomb from the woods, allowing the women to fight back by hand and escape amid the confusion. The video's final shot tracks a lone vigilante as she flees the woods, her group infiltrated and dispersed.

Sabara Sabara is mostly shot with handheld cameras, employing quick cuts and desaturated colours. These visual conventions are commonly found in documentary films, music videos or television re-enactments to signify grittiness, immediacy and spontaneity. In *Sabara Sabara* these conventions are used to the same effect, but also, as we will see, often disrupted in order to distance the work from any claim at "realism." *Sabara Sabara* has no dialogue or music, only environmental sound replete with grunts and stock punching noises during the fight scenes, as well as periods of total silence. In exhibition contexts it is shown as a two-channel, looped projection. The action-packed nature of this video demands multiple viewings, upon which the deceptively simple plot reveals some of its subtleties, as well as its central theme: the representation and performance of rebellion.

In the two-channel installation version of *Sabara Sabara*, the doubling effects suggested by the work's title are enhanced. Across the screens images are shown both concurrently and mirrored; the interplay between wide and detail shots also gives it the appearance of surveillance video. Seen as a diptych, the video functions differently than it would as a linear narrative, thus making viewers more conscious of the representations and tropes they are being shown. This simple artistic strategy hints at our own double vision, as though the twin images we see on the screen reflect our own binocular gaze. It also serves to render the legitimacy of the vigilantes' motives particularly dubious, foregrounding instead their love of adrenaline and infamy. In one memorable shot – shown doubled, simultaneously, in slow motion – a young woman stands defiantly on the hood of a muscle

car after smashing its windshield, her head cropped from the frame. Pugen's aesthetic choices regularly rupture the linear flow of the narrative, reminding us that what we are being shown is a performance above all. In the case of the windshield-breaking shot, this vigilante's anti-oil motives are momentarily forgotten, making the image an erotically-charged revolt of woman against machine.¹

It is clear that the vigilantes in *Sabara Sabara* have little more than vague intentions and quick fixes for complex problems. The frenetic pace of the video itself seems to lead us to this conclusion; there is little respite from violence throughout. The vigilantes' constant manoeuvres recall the words of Red Army Faction member Ulrike Meinhof, herself a proponent of direct action: "Formulating long-term strategies or just getting on with smaller tasks etc. are only applicable to the Urban Guerrilla in the sense that he [sic] doesn't only talk about them – *he takes action*."²

The vigilantes take on Big Oil from the ground up. They destroy cars and gas stations – the most prevalent and publicly visible end-points of the fossil fuel industry. Many of Pugen's cast members are dancers who perform their violent acts with grace, running keys and black spray paint across pristine car bodies. They throw stacks of paperwork in a gas station in all directions, leaving a kind of chaotic confetti in their wake. They smash car windows with hammers, recalling Pipilotti Rist's video *Ever Is Over All* (1997), wherein a woman smashes the windows of parked cars with gleeful impunity. Rist's work – also a dual-channel projection – is accompanied by handheld shots of flower beds and the repetitive singing of a female voice. In Pugen's re-working of this image, Rist's contradictory depiction of femininity reaches a fever pitch. The vigilantes use brazen and creative means in their acts of destruction, with inanimate objects bearing the brunt of their outrage. Their violence is performed in a manner that is at once poised and impassioned.

The vigilantes' costumes speak volumes about their sociopolitical standing. They are militant-chic women clad in bandanas, combat boots and dark sunglasses. Elements of their uniforms are now more commonly found on mall punks than on the bodies of radical political activists. Though divested of meaning by marketers, these urban guerrilla costumes serve to dissociate the vigilantes from their quotidian selves, empowering them to act violently. In an especially poignant reversal, one character wears a Fidel Castro cap, re-appropriating the image of the Cuban communist leader from the grasp of mall fashion. The Fidel cap is a neutered symbol akin to the image of Che Guevara, who is characterized by Slavoj Žižek as the "quintessential postmodern icon' signifying both everything and nothing – in other words, signifying whatever one wants him to signify."³ In *Sabara Sabara* the signifiers of guerrilla militancy are returned to their primary roots with great irony. Pugen employs an "everything and nothing" approach toward the video itself: his use of pointed details leaves us unsure of the divisions between cliché and sincerity.

Though the women ride bicycles around the city, they make camp inside a gas-guzzling RV full of consumer products. Even they, who destroy cars and gas stations, are hardly less dependent on oil than the rest of us. This contradiction reflects the hypocritical and entangled nature of all protest movements, which often revolt against the very thing that they are a complicit part of. In the case of the vigilantes, their cause is especially futile: destroying cars and gas stations won't remedy our

addiction to oil. Their political worldview is, however, not the point: their lack of motive is less important than the means by which they perform their identities as subversive radicals.

The figure of the militant merits further consideration in light of its historical precedents. In his book *Philosophy for Militants* Alain Badiou questions that which eludes the capabilities of the human animal, citing heroism as a virtue that nears these limits. The French philosopher creates a distinction between two types of heroes from the collective imagination: the warrior and the soldier. The former existed before the French revolution; he was a Homeric hero, a lone aristocratic figure in search of personal glory. By contrast, the latter is an anonymous and nameless revolutionary, a Christ-like figure who sacrifices his own life to “transfigure humanity.”⁴ As Christ died for the sins of others, Badiou’s soldier dies for his cause and is thus immortalized in transcending his individuality. Badiou’s dialectic attempts to formulate a new language of heroism beyond that of soldier or warrior.

The representation of activism in *Sabara Sabara* evokes a set of incongruities that call for a re-evaluation of heroism for our contemporary context. Pugen’s militants are neither glorious individuals nor anonymous and nameless masses. Their bodies are politicized; their appearances, dress and actions heavily scrutinized. Products of a media-saturated world, they are in-between the universal and the particular; not a crowd, nor a lone actor. Though they are archetypal characters, they elude reductive or distilled definition. As a multitude, united only by their gender, they bear many similarities to contemporary protest movements, which reject leadership and maintain individual autonomy through direct democratic means.⁵ Within the clichéd representations are some real truths about political activism. Through their violent means, they entwine themselves in the difficult questions of direct action: what is just? Should my actions be condoned by society at large? To what degree does “the cause” merit violence and harm to others? Am I willing to die for the cause?

Sabara Sabara raises many of these questions about direct action in an ambiguous fashion, performing violence in an aestheticized manner, calling its representation into question. Without a word of dialogue, *Sabara Sabara* gives new life to the portrayal of militancy as performance.

¹ The use of eroticism in radical politics, which is latent in *Sabara Sabara*, is central to Bruce LaBruce’s 2004 feature film *The Raspberry Reich*, wherein spinoff Red Army Faction guerrillas are encouraged by a Meinhof-like leader to free themselves of the bonds of heterosexuality to properly join the revolution.

² Ulrike Meinhof, *The Urban Guerrilla Concept* p. 12 (author’s emphasis). First published by the Red Army Faction (1971). Retrieved from *The International Relations and Security Network: Primary Resources in International Affairs*. http://mercury.ethz.ch/serviceengine/Files/ISN/125407/ipublicationdocument_singledocument/0df8ce48-0992-46c1-9df8-17a1156702e2/en/2021_RAF_UrbanGuerrilla.pdf

³ Slavoj Žižek, *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce* p. 57. Verso, London, UK (2009).

⁴ Alain Badiou, *Philosophy for Militants* p. 52. Verso, London, UK (2012).

⁵ For instance, the use of hand signals in Occupy movements was a simple method to determine consensus and popular opinion. The brutal efficiency of the vigilantes in *Sabara Sabara* seems to suggest they reached a consensus long before they committed their crimes.