

# The Art of Automutilation

by Theodore Dalrymple (May 2014)

On my way to lunch in Paris the other day I passed the Sciences Po, that is to say the *Institut d'études politiques de Paris*, France's foremost academic institution of its kind. I noticed that all the cars parked in the vicinity had been posted with a sheet of white paper, clearly not the usual type of advertisement for night clubs or other resorts of entertainment. At the head of the sheet of paper, in very large print, were the words:

L'ART EST UN MENSONGE

Here was something intellectual, so I took the sheet and read it.

It was written by Andrés Mediavilla, of whom I have been able to discover nothing except that he is Spanish; that he has attended universities in both Spain and France but without graduating because he believes that the important things are to be discovered by people rather than taught them; that he was once fined 3000 francs for distributing a tract he had written (I think with the modest title *The Earth Cannot Be Saved Except by Justice*) without *Dépôt légal*, that is to say without first registering it at the National Library of France, though he says on the internet that when he tried to do so he was told that it was not the kind of publication that required or was qualified for such registration, so that in effect he was fined for not registering what was not capable of being registered, a Kafka-esque situation if ever there was one; and that for quite a number of years he has distributed his little tracts, gratis, in the environs of the Sciences Po. Of course, it may be that their recipients, who seem to have no choice in the matter, might not want them, but if that constitutes aggression it is so minor that it hardly counts. How otherwise he keeps himself, finds food and lodging, I do not know, except that his parents supported him during his abortive university studies; but having discovered all the above about him, I cannot but feel that a world without Andrés Mediavilla would be a slightly poorer one. He is a kind of street-Nietzsche, who writes things such as 'Life is beautiful but it is in a complete mess. In fact, life is horrible.'

Art does not exist: Mr Mediavilla's latest thesis is even more radical than that art is whatever can be passed off as art, or whatever those who claim to be qualified to distinguish art from anything and everything else say is art. Our author says instead that 'That the human being can "create" nothing. In order to make something, it is necessary that it should already exist as a possibility.' He goes on to say that 'to make something come of nothing—such is the prerogative of a god. In taking himself for a "creator" a human being mistakes himself and his

nature.'

This seems to me merely a play on words. If to create means to bring something into being *ex nihilo*, then of course Man cannot be a creator (and philosophers might argue about whether a god, or God, could be one either). When someone says, perfectly legitimately, that Michelangelo created his *Pietà*, he does not mean that the sculptor made the marble, but that he fashioned the marble in a quite startling way that was unique to his imagination and capacity.

Our distributor of tracts continues, with neo-pagan certainty:

*It [to believe that a man can create something] falsifies his personality and all he does (his life, his society, his world). His 'divinity' prevents him from seeing himself—from knowing himself—as a simple instrument of the planet (and therefore of the universe of which he is ignorant of everything essential).*

This is surely rather odd. Man cannot create, but a universe can have a purpose or purposes that make an instrument of Man. Beliefs in impersonal teleologies, religious and secular, have often led men into the most brutal and terrifying acts of fanaticism, mistaking their own purposes for those of something much beyond themselves. Indeed, they continue to do so, and will do so as long as Men claim the universe as alibi.

'To admire, even adore, "works of art" represents the height of error and the humiliation of Man himself:' so continues the tract. 'However, present day Man still has a need of the religion of Art to make up for his impoverished life. Thus, he does not hesitate to sacrifice himself—personal dissociation, disequilibrium, with the overemployment of one capacity at the expense of others, recourse to artificial stimulants, etc.—to "create" so that he becomes a "creator", a "genius." This is absolutely immoral and what is more, inhuman. To go into raptures over, to kneel spiritually before, the sounds, colours, lines, words, bodily movements, stories, stones, etc., whatever the intelligence or other qualities that went into them, is completely ridiculous (as is to queue to get into an exhibition of painting or a museum of other "fine arts", or into a concert, as is to read a novel, or see a film, or indulge in "artistic" tourism, etc.).'

The author ends his tirade, his diatribe, against art as follows:

*It is certain that there is not, cannot be, any Art in the world. We are not, we cannot be, 'creators.' We are not, and there cannot be artists. Art is a lie. To believe in it is to*

*be mistaken. To need it is unworthy of a 'man.' It is the pleasure of gods (and of small minds). Art is incompatible with Man in his fullness (and the negation of truth and authenticity).*

This irritation with art, or rather with those who claim that art is the whole focus or purpose of their lives when we know perfectly well that the slightest practical inconvenience prostrates them with rage and frustration, is something that I understand and in part share. Nevertheless, there is looseness of thought and insincerity of its own in this little tract.

The author is a man with whom nothing that exists finds much favour, to put it no higher (or lower). For example, in previous tracts he has said that the Science Po is for him more a factory of ignorance than knowledge; and people there are taught not so much political science as politicking. He says of the Science Po:

*Those in charge do not accept their ignorance because of their personal dishonesty.*

*They hand out diplomas that certify the ignorance of those who receive them; to give positions to people on the basis of these diplomas is to decompose society. To do so 'maintains the people in the most degrading ignorance (and also impotence).'*

Just because he doesn't think much of the teachers at the Science Po doesn't mean that he is happy in his own skin. He says that negativity is forced upon him:

*I am for. I am not against. These people force me to show myself against.*

If it were not for 'these people,' then, he would be a kind of Dale Carnegie, Norman Vincent Peale or Napoleon Hill of philosophy.

His opinion of others, quite apart from the teachers at the Sciences Po, is not very high. Here are a few of his reflections on mankind:

*The problem is the minorities and the people. It is total. People do what they can while not doing what they could. The gap is the drama of humanity.*

*A change of personality is the basis of everything. The only solution.*

*My contemporaries all, all have a false personality.*

One suspects that he might be a little lonely:

*Man is an individual He is not a couple, a group, a crowd, even if he can pass through these stages.*

The question, though, is whether his loneliness is the result of his opinions, or his opinions the result of his loneliness?

From reflection on my own past, I know how easy it is to project one's personal dissatisfactions on to the universe (or some other vast entity) and then blame the universe (or that other vast entity) for them.

Although he seems to be an outsider, the author of these little tracts—which I much enjoyed reading, incidentally—captures quite a lot of the flavour of the times. His insistence that there is no such thing as art would be grateful to the ears of all kinds of relativists. If nothing is art, everything can partake of the kudos of art once only the connotation remains after the denotation has been removed. And if there is no art, there can—I think it follows—be no good and no bad art. Everything is the same, and we neither have to try very hard at anything nor make the painful discovery that we are not geniuses, that the achievements of, say, a Mozart or a Shakespeare are further removed from our own attempts than are our bank balances from those of Bill Gates.

Oddly enough, two days before my lunch near the Sciences Po I had visited the Mondial du Tatuage, a world convention of tattooists, held in the old Nineteenth Century abattoir of Paris, now an exhibition centre in the midst of a wasteland of French modern architecture (among the worst in the world, the architects ever in search of ways to out-Pyongyang Pyongyang). There were hundreds of tattooists exhibiting their work and thousands of visitors, who paid \$40 each for admission. If the French economy had grown as fast in the last ten years as the number of professional tattooists working in the country, it would by now be by far the richest country in the world: the number having grown by 1000 per cent in that time.

The tattooists of France are apparently divided into two opposing camps, those who think that they should be considered artisans and those who think they should be considered artists. Those in the latter camp do not base their claim on the argument that art is what you think it is or persuade other people into accepting it as being; rather they think that they are in succession to real, indisputable artists such as Velasquez or Chardin. Only the material on which they work—human skin—happens to be different.

This camp mistakes skill for art. It is undoubtedly true that tattooists often show astounding skill in, for example, indelibly dyeing someone's back with a realistic portrait of a celebrity (Elvis Presley by far the most commonly). But skill is not art, at least not in the sense meant, and skill exercised in the production of something that ought not to have been produced at all makes it the worse, indeed much worse, rather than the better. A skilled man who produces a monstrosity is worse than an incompetent one who does the same.

The French used to be relatively resistant to the vile fashion for tattoos, but they are now following it like sheep for the shearing. At one time I was sufficiently Francophile to believe that France's people were too intelligent and cultivated to follow blindly the wild Anglo-Saxons *outré-Manche* (across the Channel). Alas, I was mistaken: the vicious bad taste of the English has spread among them like smallpox. The French are now only a few years behind the British in popular stupidity.

There seems to be a dialectic between Sr. Mediavilla's opinions of art on the one hand and the vogue for tattooing on the other. If nothing is art, then everything, including tattooing, is art. Therefore people can prove either their artistic ability or their sensibility by doing and having tattoos. (Or both, of course, for most tattooists are themselves heavily tattooed. *Le patron automutile ici.*) And of course, the more people who do it, the lower the opinion of humanity that seems justified.

It is just possible, I suppose, that Sr. Mediavilla himself is tattooed. I hope not, though. I was impressed by how much food for thought he gave me on the way to lunch, and I like to think of him as a *résistant* to one of the brutalising fashions of our time.

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**Theodore Dalrymple's** latest book is