

## Chapter 9

# Laruelle Prefers Heresy to Revolution

## *Non-philosophy and Live Art*

Gary Anderson

AQ: Please check chapter subtitle 'Non-philosophy and Live Art' is not given in the TOC.

This essay is an experiment: to draw a parallel between Laruelle's thought and Live Art. Live Art (capitalized according to the tradition of the Live Art Development Agency<sup>1</sup>) is a periphery 'discipline' of theatre and fine arts – at least in academia. During a conversation with Lois Keidan, then, now former, director of the Live Art Development Agency<sup>2</sup> during the *Art Disarming Philosophy* symposium, Keidan claimed that if there was a parallel between Laruelle's thought and Live Art it was something to do with the refusal of a basic decision out of which all insights/practices/thoughts subsequently spring. Keidan called Live Art the 'non-method'. I will attempt to develop that thought with reference to key Live Artists from a specific branch of Live Art called art-activism.<sup>3</sup> I am focussing on art-activism because the way art-activists work seems to me to be curiously Laruellean, despite hardly a mention of his name in the art-activist worlds. Or more specifically, art-activists are more heretical than revolutionary. I am working with Laruelle's idea that revolutionary means replacing one dominant system with another, which becomes, eventually, just as dominant. Heresy might mean the constant chipping away from the side lines of that dominant system in the hope of exposure and eventual, cumulative insurrection<sup>4</sup> – like many art-activists do.

Despite Anthony Paul Smith and John (Mullarkey) O'Maoilearca's excellent account<sup>5</sup> I am working here with an unresolved personal confusion between Deleuze's thoughts on radical immanence and Laruelle's. I think Laruelle fits more squarely into a Deleuze-Spinozist tradition<sup>6</sup> of 'all thoughts are equal',<sup>7</sup> into 'the great system of anti-judgment'.<sup>8</sup> The more I encounter Deleuze's seminars on Spinoza from the early 1980s,<sup>9</sup> the more convinced I am of the similarities between Laruelle and Deleuze's positions on immanence. That said, I want to try to throw some potentially useful thoughts together for performance theory – all of which revolve around an invitation

to adopt radical immanence as a conceptual framework for art-activist work. I'm drawing from Laruelle and Deleuze's work on immanence to do that and creating an improbable dialogue between Laruelle and art-activist Bill Talen. Bill Talen's character 'Rev Billy' is a leading art-activist and someone who cultural theorist Nicola Kirkham once memorably called 'the archbishop of anticapitalism'.<sup>10</sup> Rev Billy, I argue, is perhaps the most useful personification of a Laruellean heretic in the arts. Ray Brassier's statement in his review in *Radical Philosophy* in 2003 is useful and forms part of the title of this essay: 'Laruelle prefers heresy to revolution'.<sup>11</sup>

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In bringing Laruelle and Rev Billy together I'll be making a series of what cultural theorist Malcolm Miles calls 'interested, but non-judgmental statements' (as opposed to Kantian 'disinterested judgments'<sup>12</sup> about art-activist work generally: a critical reflexivity with a nod to what I understand to be Laruelle's position on radical immanence. In other words, I'm conflating the praxis of a knowingly doomed critical reflexivity – doomed because it can never produce independent insight – with an invitation to encounter the Real. Or, how to hold reflexivity (a marxist trope – 'how to understand my own position in the processes of production'<sup>13</sup>) and immanence (a Laruellean notion which strips away the authority of the reflexive insight by including it alongside every other insight *as just as valid*) together. How to hold reflexivity and immanence together is an almost ubiquitous problem for art-activists.

As an art-activist formerly of the Institute for the Art and Practice of Dissent at Home,<sup>14</sup> the assumption I am working under is that calling for social revolution is the activist's given role, while heresy could be seen as 'messing about' at the margins of the system without replacing it. It might be a question of defeat on my part, but I am more or less convinced that revolution is not what it is cracked up to be, at least in the 'lefty' circles I am part of (trade union meetings, Corbyn-led Labour faction gatherings, other left splinter groups). I think I now realize that revolution is 'literally unthinkable' and it reminds me of what George Orwell said of the alternative to Ingsoc in his appendix to *Nineteen-Eighty Four*.<sup>15</sup> The powers of action we have as Live Artists and art-activists are best deployed in heresy – if what we mean by revolution is the overhaul of late capitalism as the dominant organizing system of planet earth to be replaced with another system equally dominating. It is the allergic reaction to authority that I find exciting in Laruelle and Live Art. I am not capable of worldwide solutions to global problems, but I am capable of heresy – we all are. Here, heresy is more than critique. Heresy goes beyond the safety of the position of looking at an object from a distance and saying what is wrong with it. Heresy, in Laruellean terms, to me, means the full commitment of a life lived in the production of alternative modes of expression which serve to undermine the dominance of late capitalism while

inviting others to invent further heresies. Ekin Erkan's review of Laruelle's 2018 book *A Biography of Ordinary Man* ends with: 'how to apply [Laruelle] is now within the reader's sphere'.<sup>16</sup>

With that in mind the intention here is to write a heretical essay which performatively demonstrates what I feel to be a useful meeting point or parallel between Laruellean thought and contemporary art-activist work, namely that heresy is more productive than revolution in creating what Laruelle calls 'an effective utopia'.<sup>17</sup> I am assuming that the art-activists under discussion are utopianists in the sense suggested by Malcolm Miles's 2011 book on Herbert Marcuse: heretics who bite the hand that feeds them in the name of creating utopia.

To do that, I think it is best to experiment not only with the paralleling of Laruellean thought and Live Art but also with the format of this essay. I do this to try to bring out the possibility of the affective connections between the various layers at work in this essay – most of which, from now on, will read as a dialogue between two people: Laruelle and Reverend Billy. Here are the layers as I see them:

1. *A very modest exploration of Laruelle's work on heresy and its relationship to radical immanence.*
2. *Live Art's penchant for the refusal of a foundational decision – or, in Lois Keidan's words the 'non-method' of Live Art – with a focus on art-activism.*
3. *Examples from art-activism accounted for via the 'archbishop of anti-capitalism' Reverend Billy – whose permission I have to 'put words in his mouth' for this essay.*<sup>18</sup>
4. *The heresy of putting words into Laruelle's mouth without permission in a book on Laruelle.*
5. *The fact that this essay is only what I'm capable of – placed adjacent to a core Laruellean notion that 'all thoughts are equal'.<sup>19</sup> (How we get through peer review with that in mind, I don't know. But that is further 'complicated and explicated'<sup>20</sup> by the embarrassing fact that I'm one of the editors of the book).*

The intention is that playing around with heresy in form and content is helpful in producing a 'heresy-affect'. That might help us to see something from the Real. I am trying to foster an understanding of those five layers immanently. The point of that is to try to see things for a moment (a little bit like a Lefevrean moment of liberation<sup>21</sup>) – *sub specie aeternitatis* – from the point of view of eternity. Only for a moment though, perhaps. I think this is partly what Laruelle is up to. He is a heretic in the long line of heretics who preach of an immanent cause. Deleuze's lectures on Spinoza trace a line of

AQ: Please check completeness of the following sentence: 'Only for a moment though...'

immanentists until ‘Spinoza arrives’. Interestingly, Deleuze describes these as ‘heresies’:

The idea of an immanent cause appears constantly in the history of philosophy, but as [something] held in check, kept at such-and-such a level of the sequence, not having value, and faced with being corrected by other moments of the sequence. [A]nd the accusation of immanentism was, *for every story of heresies*, the fundamental accusation: you confuse God and the creature. (My italics)<sup>22</sup>

‘Confusing God and the creature’ is the immanentists heresy, but also Reverend Billy’s as we shall see in the following dialogue. They know that:

‘[t]hat’s the fatal accusation. Therefore, the immanent cause was constantly there’, says Deleuze, ‘but it didn’t manage to gain a status [*statut*]. It had only a small place in the sequence of concepts’.<sup>23</sup>

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The immanent cause, as opposed to the emanative cause, states there is no hierarchy between ‘being’ and ‘the One’, no superiority of the cause over the effect. All being is equal and beings are not ‘beings’ as previously understood, but modes or manners of existence.<sup>24</sup>

The immanent cause in philosophy is better established it seems than in the theatre arts, despite the excellent work of Laura Cull O’Maoilearca,<sup>25</sup> Gavin Grindon<sup>26</sup> and others and despite it being so prevalent in Live Art. Deleuze goes on to say that eventually ‘Spinoza arrives’ and establishes, for the first time, a comprehensive ontological system which postulates an immanent cause. It is no wonder then that Spinoza was considered a heretic in his own lifetime and a ‘herem’ pronounced against him for his excommunication.<sup>27</sup> Laruelle fashions a science of immanentism, heretical to philosophy’s main prejudices (of being an authority on itself and other disciplines), in order to provide the possibility of a glance of things sub species aeternitatis. After all, what else would a believer in an immanent cause want to demonstrate?

AQ: Should ‘sub species aeternitatis’ be ‘sub specie aeternitatis’ in the sentence ‘If you can see the world sub specie aeternitatis it’s...’? Please check.

The following dialogue is between Laruelle and Reverend Billy. I have pieced it together from extracts of texts and emails they have written and what I have heard them say in public and to me when I met them on separate occasions.

### LARUELLE AND REVEREND BILLY ON HERESY AND REVOLUTION

*[The scene is Gary Anderson and Niamh Malone’s kitchen in North Liverpool, UK. A long table, with a coffee at each end, one for François*

*Laruelle, one for Reverend Billy. After polite introductions Laruelle opens the conversation]*

Laruelle: Gary tells me you're a heretic.

Rev Billy: There's a history of heresy that we've tapped into when making the work we've been making since the late 1990s. Our group are cultural heretics and refugees from the theatre.

Laruelle: Ah. Cursed be you by day and cursed be you by night; cursed be you when you lie down and cursed be you when you rise up.

Rev Billy: Cursed are we when we go out and cursed are we when we come in. The Lord will not spare us.

Laruelle: The Lord shall blot out your name from under heaven.

Rev Billy: No one should communicate with you neither in writing nor accord you any favour.

Laruelle: Nor stay with you under the same roof nor within four cubits in your vicinity! Despite the fact that we are seated at Gary's table, over coffee. But the table is more than four cubits long!

Rev Billy: (slurps his coffee) How long is a cubit?

Laruelle: I think it's about the length from the fingertip to the elbow.

Rev Billy: I'd say we were just about four cubits apart.

Laruelle: But under the same roof.

Rev Billy: Nor shall anyone read any treatise composed or written by you!

Laruelle: Ouch.

Rev Billy: I believe in curses. Spinoza's *herem* applies to all heretics, so it's an honour to have you declare it.<sup>28</sup>

Laruelle: Likewise.

Rev Billy: But more than us, the earth is cursed. The earth is cursed because its destruction is funded by JP Morgan Chase – the largest bank in the United States.<sup>29</sup>

Laruelle: We'll get to that. Tell me, where did you grow up?

Rev Billy: I grew up in small towns throughout Minnesota, South Dakota and Wisconsin. I left home at 16, moving east with Charles and Patricia Gaines, a writer and painter who encouraged me as an artist. I began to perform his poems and stories, hitch-hiking from Philadelphia to New York to San Francisco.

Laruelle: You're not a reverend?

Rev Billy: No, not in the institutionally ordained sense according to the major religious organizations of the United States, but my mentor Sidney Lanier was. And, now I help co-organize the Church of Stop Shopping of which I am a preacher and reverend.

Laruelle: I've heard of Sidney Lanier, the radical preacher from Hell's Kitchen, Manhattan? I read an obituary in the *New York Times* a few years ago.<sup>30</sup>

Rev Billy: My chief collaborator in developing the Reverend Billy character was the Reverend Sidney Lanier, vicar of St. Clements in the 1960s, an Episcopal Church. In an effort to increase attendance at St. Clement's, Lanier tore out the altar and pews, inviting actors to perform scenes from plays by his cousin Tennessee Williams and Terrence McNally. In doing so he founded the American Place Theater.<sup>31</sup> It was heretical of him. He gave up his collar soon afterwards and tried his hand at acting too, but always kept his heretical belief that church was a theatre and theatre a church, alive.

Laruelle: Cursed be the heretic when he rises up!

Rev Billy: With him I developed the character of Rev Billy in the 1990s. Lanier said I was 'more of a preacher with a gift for social prophecy than an actor'. In the early 1990s I moved with Lanier to New York City from the San Francisco Bay Area, branding this act as a 'new kind of American preacher'.<sup>32</sup>

Laruelle: Where did you first try out this heresy?

Rev Billy: The Reverend Billy character debuted on the sidewalk at Times Square in 1998, outside the Disney Store, where he proclaimed Mickey Mouse to be the anti-Christ. I was arrested multiple times outside the Disney Store, where I duct-taped Mickey Mouse to a cross.

Laruelle: Your sermons decry the evils of consumerism and the racism of sweatshop labour?

Rev Billy: Yes, but also what I saw as the loss of neighbourhood spirit in Giuliani's New York.

Laruelle: Are you a satyre – a satirist? Are you a parodist?

Rev Billy: The Reverend Billy character isn't so much a parody of a preacher, as a preacher motif used to blur the lines between performance and religious experience. It's a church service, but it's also a political rally.

Laruelle: And, it's theatre.

Rev Billy: It's all three and at the same time none of them. As Alisa Solomon from the Village Voice said, 'The collar is fake, the calling is real'. Along with the Church of Stop Shopping, we have been referred to by academics as 'performance activism', 'carnavalesque protest' and 'art-activists'.<sup>33</sup>

Laruelle: So cultural heretics in the sense that categorization is deliberately elusive?

Rev Billy: That's how it began. Bringing artists and activists together through the medium of a comic preacher. With Savitri D, now the director of the project, we developed the Church of Stop Shopping. Savitri has led direct action and organizing campaigns against corporations, institutions and injustice all over the world. She is the principal designer of the Church of Stop Shopping's visual materials and conceptualizes most of the actions with me and the Choir. She is a serious lover of the wild and devotes her life to working *for* the earth, not an employer, but for the earth.<sup>34</sup>

AQ: Please check spelling of 'satyre' in the sentence 'Are you a satyre – a satirist?'

Laruelle: They are the real heretics: those who work *for* the earth.

Rev Billy: The Church of Stop Shopping is a self-identified collection of misfits with a mission. It first formed between 1999 and 2003, some people joined from the street, others came in through the arts. People come and go all the time. Some stay. We specialize in the imperative – we sing because we have to. We are learning how to move through the world with integrity, alone and together. We are sinners.<sup>35</sup> The choir puts it like that, after more than a thousand actions, performances, sermons, songs and after maybe a hundred arrests and many nights spent in a police cell. Rev Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping is a project – it isn't just me, but I deliver the sermons. So, without talking on anybody else's behalf – and to keep Gary happy – I want to focus on that.

Laruelle: I've been a keen reader of them. I loved 'Freakstorm'<sup>36</sup> and your 2012 book *The End of the World*.

Rev Billy: That's where I realized that blurring the boundaries between 'Creative Resistance', 'Direct Action' and 'Spiritual Trespassing' could produce the heresy of Earth Action. That heresy is based on the refusal of an anthropocentric solution-based programme to reverse climate breakdown. It holds that we need to train ourselves to listen to the earth and respond accordingly. It's more like thinking like a forest. John Jordan and the Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination wrote a beautiful piece called 'Think like a forest, act like a meadow'.<sup>37</sup>

Laruelle: I know. I've read it.

Rev Billy: Back in 2009 it was at the apex of anti-globalization work from art-activists. John had grown up in Platform<sup>38</sup> and started off Reclaim the Streets,<sup>39</sup> the Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination<sup>40</sup> and Liberate Tate.<sup>41</sup>

Laruelle: I saw a clip of you exorcizing the Tate Modern from BP sponsorship. It worked. They backed off after that.

Rev Billy: Only after lots of other actions too and pressure coordinated by Liberate Tate.

Laruelle: I read *Artwash: Big Oil and the Arts* by Mel Evans.<sup>42</sup> An excellent publication. I also read something from John Jordan about quantum physics. I think he put it something like this: 'Quantum physics dramatically showed us that there are no discrete parts, just patterns in an inseparable web of relationships. Sometimes the closer we look the harder it is to understand the whole'.<sup>43</sup>

Rev Billy: Yes. Before taking action on the detail we should take a step back and observe the bigger picture.<sup>44</sup>

Laruelle: Knowing that the position of ourselves as observers is part of that picture. And in that sense it's a picture we can never properly describe, because we're already part of it. So, the language fails to equip us with words to do the double-work of having an idea and having an idea of the idea, and on it goes to having an idea of having an idea of the idea. Every

time you have an idea of the idea it is always possible to have an idea of having that idea. That's how we know we can never step out of what we are critiquing: we're always, however many places removed, inside the process. In other words, reflexivity is great, but necessarily limited.

Rev Billy: It is only then that we observe how the specifics of a system connect and interact with ourselves, what the shape of edges and overlaps are, and what the inherent cycles and patterns reveal. But I do feel that humans are hardwired to spot patterns; we were born 'network thinkers'.<sup>45</sup>

Laruelle: You sound like an analyst. Have you ever been employed by a university?

Rev Billy: Only as invited artist. John Jordan used to teach performance in Sheffield, if I remember correctly.

Laruelle: Ultimately, I see non-philosophers, or for the purposes of this conversation 'heretics', in several different ways. I see them, inevitably, as subjects of the university, as is required by worldly life, but above all as related to three fundamental human types. And I suggest you are somebody who embodies all three.

Rev Billy: What types?

Laruelle: They are related to the analyst and the political militant since heresy is close to psychoanalysis and Marxism – it transforms the subject by transforming instances of thought. But they are also related to what I would call the 'spiritual'. They are the great destroyers of the forces of philosophy and the state, which band together in the name of order and conformity. The spiritual haunt the margins of philosophy, gnosticism, mysticism and even of institutional religion and politics.

Rev Billy: The Church of Stop Shopping likes to hang out in the margins of the religious, declaring non-war with institutions but a blurring of the boundaries between the performance of religious experience, its sanctification and its political effectiveness. Billy Graham, the great conman, claimed the end of the world is nigh and he was right, but for him it's a Napoleonic Jesus who will come in judgement and separate the sheep from the goats. For the Church of Stop Shopping, it's the earth asking us to listen. It's the banks that doom us, not our impious souls.

Laruelle: The spiritual are not just abstract, quietist mystics; they are *for* the earth. Like you. Billy Graham and the doom-sayers who haunt the tv channels all over the world, asking sinners to send in money, are committed to abstraction. They only ever deal in the abstract until it comes to the actual phone number to pledge more dollars.

Rev Billy: This is why a quiet discipline is not sufficient, because man is implicated in the world as the presupposed that determines it.

Laruelle: Thus, heresy is also related to gnosticism and science-fiction; it answers their fundamental question – which is not at all philosophy's primary concern – 'Should humanity be saved? And how?'



Rev Billy: This is the question of art-activism and of Live Art in general. Not, what's the most sufficient form to communicate certain ideas, but 'what can save us?' The earth is asking us this question. It's like a chance for us. Otherwise, we're gone and earth will just carry on without us. I lay there sometimes, waiting, listening for the earth to speak to me. I lie on my back and wait until the earth speaks.

Laruelle: It is close to spiritual revolutionaries such as Muntzer and certain mystics who skirted heresy.

Rev Billy: Like who?

Laruelle: The Anabaptist leaders immediately after Muntzer, for example: Balthasar Hubmaier, Hans Denck, Hans Hut, Hans Römer, Melchior Rinck all involved in the German Peasants War of 1525. But from an historical perspective there are so many. And so many movements related to gnosticism, mysticism. Those who experimented with doctrine and in the words of Muntzer obeyed the spirit not the letter. Take an online search for those excommunicated by any religion and you'll find the heretics. Hundreds of them, thousands of them. They are to be venerated.

Rev Billy: Cursed be they by day and cursed be they by night.

Laruelle: Like your art-activism, heresy, and indeed non-philosophy is a practice, it is enacted, almost criminally performative, this is the only way of demonstrating it. I could say the same for your work – it has to be a practice across form and content and it must be demonstrated – or put into practice. It couldn't stay abstract. If it did, it wouldn't be heresy.

Rev Billy: I walked into the office of Platform<sup>46</sup> a number of years back. Hugely influential group. They used to be housed in Bermondsey, London on a street called Horselydown – where, a hundred years before, the horses used to lie down to rest before making another journey back to the markets. A poky little office that changed the face of art-activism for us all. On the wall was an embroidered picture of a formula. Sewn in colours and framed, simply, modestly. With a formula. So simple.

Laruelle: What was the formula?

Rev Billy: The sewing read: 'Form' 'plus' 'Content' 'equals' 'Communication'.<sup>47</sup> But it was written out like a sum.

Laruelle: That's very non-philosophy.

Rev Billy: For them it was sort of Bertolt Brecht meets Joseph Beuys, but yes, it refuses the abstract and insists on the criminally performative nature of the presence of something.

Laruelle: In other words, the immanence of it.

Rev Billy: When all is said and done, is heresy anything other than the chance for an effective utopia?<sup>48</sup> Are heresy and non-philosophy synonymous here?

Laruelle: I'd say heresy is a way of performing non-philosophy.

Rev Billy: Without it ever being abstract! That's what banks do: they make their operations abstract. The church of stop shopping tries to make them

concrete. The banks finance climate breakdown – while their ‘social licence to operate’<sup>49</sup> depends upon the population believing it’s all about high-speed numbers whizzing through computers and strange entities like hedge fund managers sitting in front of ticker tape (or modern equivalent) waiting for shares to rise or fall randomly. It couldn’t be more concrete in fact. The effect of what JP Morgan Chase, BP, Shell, Exxon Mobil do is literally all around us.

Laruelle: In some ways the problem of continental philosophy over the last 50 years has been about trying to convince people that abstract things are actually concrete things. If you can see the world *sub specie aeternitatis* it’s clear that there is nothing abstract – except the idea. Yes, most philosophical education continues in this way. Abstract ideas about abstract ideas. No, philosophy, and I share Deleuze’s concern here, is obviously concrete.<sup>50</sup> It creates a concept out of a specific problem. If there’s no problem, then there’s no need for another concept.

Rev Billy: What was the problem for you?

Laruelle: The arrogance of philosophy.

Rev Billy: Perhaps Live Art is a response to the arrogance of theatre, or more precisely its dislocation from the immediate. Theatre was too much about interpreting an object in order to make it relevant to a life lived. Live Art, very often, dispenses with representation and attempts to go straight at it – saying it as it is, in the location of its saying. We’ve suffered from ‘interpretosis’<sup>51</sup> for too long. If the Real is to intrude, then representation of the Real needs to be dispensed with because the representation of it gets in the way – it abstracts things. We see all history as being created through disobedience, from women wearing trousers, to the right to a weekend, to being part of a union; all these things happened because people disobeyed the laws. We think that art and activism together can create incredible new forms. We reject representation. Our work is organizing. It is not representing things; it is transforming things. The role of the artist is to transform things not represent them.<sup>52</sup>

Laruelle: So, what’s next for you? It’s been at least 20 years since you started flirting with the production of the affect of immanence in your work. I’ve noted how you seem to have taken a turn from anti-consumerism (I very much enjoyed that full length documentary about you and the choir *What Would Jesus Buy?*<sup>53</sup>) towards Earth Action. I applaud that. But I’m curious. Was that because of the lack of immanence in the topic of ‘stop shopping’?

Rev Billy: How do you mean?

Laruelle: Well, there’s only so far you can go with consumerism, despite that fact that it is literally destroying the world via a chain of finance, carbon emissions, racist sweatshop production, how it stupefies people with irrelevant things like ‘the latest . . .’, ‘the fastest . . .’, ‘the additional . . .’. Did you turn to Earth Action because it invited you to something limitless?

Rev Billy: Consumerism can involve everything, and there's as much immanence to it as anything else, by definition. But yes, I got tired of getting arrested outside Walmart and spending the night in a police cell. The payoff was minimal. A few heads turned, a few documentaries made, but I found out that I wasn't spending my time at the heart of things. I felt the preaching had to be at the white heat of things, not at the end of the supply chain. So I started preaching at Monsanto – the chemical multinational that supplies earth destroying products to the stores, JP Morgan Chase who actively fund climate breakdown via big oil and energy firms. The arrests increased, intensified and the threats of long-term imprisonment became real.<sup>54</sup> But I couldn't reach a final decision on how to proceed. We were all more involved in Standing Rock – the peace protest against the Dakota pipeline – who recently had a great victory,<sup>55</sup> and Earth Actions.

Laruelle: Ah, the immanence of it.

Rev Billy: That's generous of you. [pause] Apologies for asking but what do you mean exactly by immanence?

Laruelle: You said it yourself on so many occasions in your podcasts, your actions, your songs. Philosophically it sounds complicated, but it's a very common view outside of philosophy. Seeing *from* the Real, the One. I want to set out a pragmatics of thinking, rather than make a transcendent claim that what we need is a decisive insight. On the basis of that decisive insight we make the rest of our decisions about how the universe functions. Your work seems to ask us to experience that. We are in the middle of things, unable to break out. I like it that you tell us that in your work. That's what I mean by immanence: an endlessly effable, rather than ineffable, universe of equally valuable performances of thought.

Rev Billy: If that's the case, I'm pleased, but I have to say it doesn't feel like that for me. I'm not certain about anything I've done or said. There is a still moment sometimes to think about what the hell I'm doing. Thank you for your talking with me about this 20-year-old project. It is at a bit of a crossroads now as I try to reflect on what's next. I don't get much framing of it, discussing of it, in recent years. So, I'm grateful.

Laruelle: I suppose the intensity of the constant attempts to appreciate immanence, which keeps the question of the decision always open, is tiring?

Rev Billy: It comes in waves. Some ups and some downs, but recently in the disquiet of a down, I decided to go into my preaching more and more. I preach all day long. At dawn, and again at 1 p.m., I preach into the iPhone. Once a week I make a half-hour podcast/radio show, now spreading in the world.

Laruelle: Is that the Reverend Billy Radio podcast? I've been listening.<sup>56</sup>

Rev Billy: That's the centrepiece sermon, usually 10 minutes long. Every morning I lay on my back until my persuasive message for the day comes into me. Then I get up.

Laruelle: You don't know in advance?

Rev Billy: Yesterday morning it was 'Why is the phrase Climate Change so weak?' In the Democratic virtual convention the politicians repeated it like it was an annoyance. Black Lives Matter, Occupy Wall Street, Standing Rock – so much stronger. As the apocalypse engulfs us, today we have scores of California fires uncontrolled, the pandemic across the country is at 170,000 dead, and twin hurricanes are hitting the gulf like monstrous synchronized swimmers.

Laruelle: How can one describe it?

Rev Billy: There is no realistic language for all this, the public writing and talking doesn't face up to it, can't mention causes. It starts with the generic apologetic-sounding title of the whole thing. 'Climate Change' is about as gripping as 'Black Beans' on a can. Of course, this is perfect for the comic, fulminating preacher, who gets serious. The concept of our poisoning the atmosphere and the oceans . . . remains at a great distance from us.

AQ: Please check usage of ellipsis in the sentence 'The concept of our poisoning...'

Laruelle: Yes, it is kept far away by consumerism, the cultural arm of capitalism. The information that comes to us must be a profit-making product, and that enforcement is strict. That censorship by consumerized culture is hidden from us, cloaked in 'freedom' and 'democracy' and 'America'.

Rev Billy: I would very much like to dedicate myself to unveiling the ruse. That would be a good job for Rev.

Laruelle: But you're dedicated to *not* having all you do be a mission dependent on a decision, aren't you? Does it make sense to you to work under the banner of 'unveil the ruse'?

Rev Billy: It can't happen that way. There is no decision anymore. Only the pre-decision to listen to the earth and respond. I'm not infinitely open, and of course there are lots of pre-decisions, but Earth Action itself requires a certain lack of decision. We need to be able to listen without knowing how it will go.

Laruelle: How do you mean?

Rev Billy: It's a bit like being open to parody. Parody is possible because people know beforehand what you're going to do or say. That's what makes parody work. There's a recognition of a decision and its consequences. It's easy to parody a marxist or a feminist or an anarchist because they've already made all their decisions.<sup>57</sup> Their responses are predictable, even inevitable.

Laruelle: I don't think decisions are bad things in other areas outside philosophy, it's just that philosophy can't own up to the fact that the decisions have already been made. They go on endlessly about how they're exploring and discovering new knowledge, but the paradigms are already set out and clear, so the conclusions they reach are there, literally, from the beginning. I don't think it's bad to make a decision to be anti-capitalist, for example.

Rev Billy: I suppose it depends on what claim you are making. If I said I was pitching my performance tent in a completely new field, when really I was just doing a variation of what I've always done, then yes, I agree. But I feel that Earth Action needs new forms, new thoughts, new weapons. And at the base of that is listening and responding to the Earth.

Laruelle: So, what will this week's sermon be about?

Rev Billy: So, this week's sermon will be all about how words have meaning when the body's senses are engaged. To be a part of the dramatic evolution now underway, we would have to stand or dance in an eco-system and find out what the Earth is doing. Immersion in life, the sticky scary mystery of it, can give meaning to the words that we use to describe it.

Laruelle: Writing songs to carry the idea, preaching into a mic, building a group of faithful who talk about this in quiet circles? Not unlike Muntzer and the Peasant's War, except Muntzer lacked a microphone, but according to all accounts he could preach to a crowd.

Rev Billy: Yes, and making media out of all of it. The subject matter of our task seems obvious. The USA commercial media has been afraid of the subject, the censorship continues to this day.

Laruelle: Well, I guess you can't sell ads to carry the End of the World.

Rev Billy: And with our work, in the shifting liquid of the media – we don't have very much play, either, with or without the apocalypse.

Laruelle: Your media coverage is stronger than most. I'm not entirely sure the words of Spinoza's *herem* apply to you fully there.

Rev Billy: Well, this year we've gotten our pictures in lots of media, but the impact of that is elusive. We're not on the world stage like the old days when Rev Billy was a bit of an art star, albeit a fairly minor and anomalous one. We've never been attached to any industry. And in fact, my hero image is getting in the way, as the choir watches me struggle for a comeback. My last book, once again self-mythologizing, did not have the heroism to carry it. I flailed away at book stores, reading it, but national press was scanty, C-Span, or BookSpan – that was all. In NYC I could perform at the Public Theater with a jazz combo. But I was unable to generate a public conversation about it, which was the acceptance of Gaia, a comic shouting acceptance of the conscious living being – the Earth. Again and again I would go from the Earthalujah! to the quiet prayer directed at creation, sort of avoiding calling her 'her'. Never using the phrase 'Mother Earth'.

Laruelle: You seem prone to a certain sort of despair or fear or running out of ways to grab attention. As Deleuze said to me in a café near the Rue di Bizerte where he lived, as I sat with him and Anne-Françoise Schmid. I'd been asking him questions about radical immanence and the potential success of non-standard philosophy. He leaned over and said 'there is no need to for hope nor fear, only to look for new weapons'. Then congratulated me on finding one: non-philosophy. When I asked how on earth I could

- fly in the face of the institutions of knowledge and their privileges, he told me that the institutions were full of stupidity. That stupidity was infinite.
- Rev Billy: Infinite? That doesn't sound too helpful.
- Laruelle: Infinite yes, but reversible! He sipped his water – he'd given up drink by that time – 'yes, stupidity is infinite but reversible'.<sup>58</sup>
- Rev Billy: [drinking the last of his coffee] I take my over-cultured audiences part-way into the communing with the invisible, but that is enough, because I'm a fool and have no compunction, usually, unless I REALLY freeze up, like when I preached at Neil Young and Daryl Hannah's wedding.
- Laruelle: Not many art-activists could claim that!
- Rev Billy: No, but . . .
- Laruelle: But anyway it's all so useful. Rev Billy is infinitely useful.
- Rev Billy: I know that there is still a usefulness in the character Reverend Billy, that old axe of a 'weapon' Deleuze talked of. There still is, technically, some use – with or without the minor fame of yore. I'm willing to make shouting messages surrounded by cops . . .
- Laruelle: Is that how you'd like to be remembered?
- Rev Billy: Sometimes I feel a flash of 'how I will be remembered' (by people who are themselves barely remembered until we are all forgotten . . .) Mostly, the meaning that the idea of being remembered has is – how will my partner Savi and daughter Lena remember me? When 14 tsunamis rake across New York, perhaps they will remember that I tried . . . I tried hard for a long time.
- Laruelle: You've gone farther than anyone thought possible. You don't have the safety of fame, but you have the safety of loved ones and this secular church, an island of love in the city. I have Anne-Françoise and loved ones, and one or two admirers.
- Rev Billy: Yes, people who actively track each other. A depressed person is cared for, for example. In that environment my Reverend Billyness is fine, whatever the missteps. We sing the praises of the Earth inside the megapolis, surrounded by irony and over-education. The Earth people are missing in New York. We still have a bit of the old – 'If you can't make it here you're doomed to Palookaville'. But, in some way that I can't explain, I enjoy being in New York even as it dies as an international capital, and so does Savi. That old chauvinistic New York is doing something else now.
- Laruelle: But Black Lives Matter was amazing.
- Rev Billy: It was. It is! Savi and I are not culture meteors, in fact we can't even find any . . . Greta Thunberg? But we know how to risk arrest with a group of people from all over the world who sing as they get the hand-cuffs.
- Laruelle: In the presentation of Rev Billy, you are part of a family and this larger family of heretics across the world, and that may be the best place for the character of the preacher of immanence: in a little heretical family.
- Rev Billy: I can give a decent sermon and emerge as much as I deserve.

Laruelle: And then there is that moment when you're on the radio and I hear it in our car late at night, and I enter the romance of the lonely passionate preacher, that wailing voice on the radio in some American night while I sit and watch the clouds form over the back of my apartment not far from Rue de Bizerte where Deleuze dreamed.

[*Laruelle and Rev Billy stand up, shake hands and leave the kitchen table, mumbling something to each other. Just before they leave the house, where Niamh has agreed to take them to their hotels in Liverpool, she hears Rev Billy say*]:

Rev Billy: 'Dualysis' autocorrects to 'dialysis' in Microsoft word and on my iphone. I just tried it. If dialysis cleans the institution of its waste then let dualysis clean the body of the science of Christ – amen! Neither synthesis nor analysis. Dualysis-a-lujah!

[*Niamh returns home after having dropped Rev Billy and Laruelle off at The Adelphi Hotel, I pour her a glass of white wine as she sits at the table*]

Niamh: Jesus, the Adelphi is such a dump. I wanted to bring them back here to sleep. [*sips the wine*] Lois Keidan and the Live Art Development Agency have been going for 20 years, that's about the same amount of time as Rev Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping. Two decades of more or less thankless work, and more than double that for Laruelle. I'm starting to get a genuine sense of what heresy means: a life lived against the dominant, productive of hundreds of examples of how to fight back. Blessed be the heretics!

## NOTES

1. All online sources last accessed 20 December 2020 unless otherwise stated.  
"LADA: The Live Art Development Agency, which is the 'centre' of support for Live Art in the UK", <https://www.thisisliveart.co.uk/>
2. "Lois Keidan's statement of commitment to organisational change and racial equity from June 2020", <https://www.thisisliveart.co.uk/2020/06/23/lada-statement-of-commitment-on-organisational-change-and-racial-equity/>
3. 'Live Art practices are continually influencing new forms of creative resistance and are often found on the frontline of movements for social and environmental change. By disrupting borders, breaking rules, defying traditions, resisting definitions, and asking awkward questions, Live Art breaks the rules about who is making art, how they are making it, and who they are making it for'. 'Lois Keidan on Live Art', <https://www.thisisliveart.co.uk/about-lada/what-is-live-art/>
4. François Laruelle, *Decision to Heresy: Experiments in Non-Standard Thought*. (London: Urbanomic/Sequence, 2012).
5. John Mullarkey, Anthony Paul Smith. 'Introduction: The Non-Philosophical Invention: Laruelle's Knowledge Without Domination' in *Laruelle and Non-Philosophy*, edited by Mullarkey and Smith (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 1–18.

6. 'François Laruelle is engaged in one of the most interesting undertakings of contemporary philosophy. He invokes a One-All that he qualifies as "non-philosophical" and, oddly, as "scientific", on which the "philosophical decision" takes root. This One-All seems to be close to Spinoza'; Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* (London: Verso, 1994) n5, 220.

7. See John Ó Maoilearca, *All Thoughts Are Equal: Laruelle and Nonhuman Philosophy* (London: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).

8. "Deleuze's description of Spinoza's system of anti-judgment from his lecture series *Velocities of Thought*", <https://deleuze.cla.purdue.edu/index.php/seminars/spinoza-velocities-thought/lecture-03>

9. Deleuze, *Velocities of Thought*.

10. Nicola Kirkham in a private conversation with author (c. 2009).

11. 'Ray Brassier, Axiomatic heresy: The non-philosophy of François Laruelle', *Radical Philosophy*, 121 (Sep/Oct 2003), <https://www.radicalphilosophy.com/article/axiomatic-heresy>

12. Malcolm Miles, *Urban Avant-gardes: Art, Architecture and Change* (London: Routledge 2004), 109.

13. "Walter Benjamin's 1934 essay 'The Author as Producer'", [https://monoskop.org/images/9/93/Benjamin\\_Walter\\_1934\\_1999\\_The\\_Author\\_as\\_Producer.pdf](https://monoskop.org/images/9/93/Benjamin_Walter_1934_1999_The_Author_as_Producer.pdf)

14. "The Institute for the Art and Practice of Dissent at Home", <https://dissentatohome.org/>

15. "George Orwell on IngSoc", <http://www.telelib.com/authors/O/OrwellGeorge/prose/NineteenEightyFour/appendix.html>

16. "Ekin Erkan's review of Laruelle's *A Biography of Ordinary Man (2018)*", <http://www.cromrev.com/current/R05-Erkan.pdf>

17. François Laruelle, 'A New Presentation of Non-Philosophy', <https://onphi.org/corpus/32/a-new-presentation-of-non-philosophy>

18. Bill Talen in private emails to the author (2009–2020).

19. John Ó Maoilearca, *All Thoughts Are Equal: Laruelle and Nonhuman Philosophy*, (London: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).

20. "Deleuze on Plotinus and the linguistic doublet 'complicate, explicate'", <https://deleuze.cla.purdue.edu/seminars/spinoza-velocities-thought/lecture-01?keys=plotinus%20emanative%20cause>

21. '[Lefebvre] says, briefly, that moments, like flashes of liberating consciousness, occur within the banal and alienating routines of daily life. Such moments are revelatory, in an ordinary rather than transcendental sense'. Malcolm Miles, 'The End of Utopia: Imminent and Immanent Liberation', *Spaces of Utopia: An Electronic Journal* (online, 2006) 112. And online here: <https://www.scribd.com/document/54454050/The-End-of-Utopia-Imminent-and-Immanent-Liberation-Malcolm-Miles>

22. "Deleuze, Velocities of Thought", <https://deleuze.cla.purdue.edu/seminars/spinoza-velocities-thought/lecture-01>

23. "Deleuze, Velocities of Thought".

24. "Deleuze, Velocities of Thought".

25. Laura Cull Ó Maoilearca, *Theatres of Immanence: Deleuze and the Ethics of Performance* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).



26. “Gavin Grindon and John Jordan demanding the impossible”, <https://demandingimpossible.wordpress.com/> and “Gavin Grindon on Disobedient Objects” <https://www.vam.ac.uk/blog/disobedient-objects/art-and-activism-in-the-age-of-the-anthropocene>

27. Interestingly, in 2015 a conference took place to see if the ‘herem’ could be lifted. The chief Rabbi of the Portuguese Jews Pinchas Toledano said he had neither the authority nor the inclination to lift the ban, despite Spinoza’s books being sold in the community synagogue. Cnaan Liphshiz, ‘Centuries after excommunication, time to void ban on Spinoza?’, *Times of Israel*, December 12, 2015, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/centuries-after-excommunication-time-to-void-ban-on-spinoza/> and “The wording of the Herem”, <https://www.tau.ac.il/~kasher/pspin.htm>

28. “Herem”, <https://www.tau.ac.il/~kasher/pspin.htm>

29. John Vidal, ‘Rev Billy and JP Morgan Chase Toad Protest’, *The Guardian*, Nov. 25, 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2013/nov/25/reverend-billy-jpmorgan-chase-toad-protest-talen>

30. Paul Vitello, ‘Sidney Lanier dies aged 90’, *New York Times*, October 6, 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/06/theater/sidney-lanier-90-experimental-stage-producer-is-dead.html>

31. “Bill Talen Alpert Awards”, <http://previous.alpertawards.org/archive/winner10/thework/theatre/transformation.html> and “Rev Billy Biography” <https://revbilly.com/reverend-billy/>

32. “Rev Billy Biography”, <https://revbilly.com/reverend-billy/>

33. From private conversation with author (2020).

34. “Savitri D biography”, <https://revbilly.com/savitri-d/>

35. “Stop Shopping Choir Biography”, <https://revbilly.com/stopshopping-choir/>

36. “Laura Newman, *The End of the World* (Youtube video, 2012)”, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Oj1XByBvOTQ>

37. “John Jordan, Think like a Forest (2016)”, [http://field-journal.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/field\\_03\\_3\\_Think\\_Like\\_a\\_Forest.pdf](http://field-journal.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/field_03_3_Think_Like_a_Forest.pdf)

38. “Platform is different. We combine art, activism, education and research in one organisation. This approach enables us to create unique projects driven by the need for social and ecological justice”. <https://platformlondon.org/>

39. “Reclaim the Streets” <https://beautifultrouble.org/case/reclaim-the-streets/>

40. The Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination website is down, but a very good, and still active Facebook group can be accessed here: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/58916936705/>

41. “Liberate TATE”, <https://www.liberatetate.org.uk/>

42. Mel Evans, *Artwash: Big Oil and the Arts*, (London: Pluto Press, 2015).

43. “John Jordan”, [http://field-journal.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/field\\_03\\_3\\_Think\\_Like\\_a\\_Forest.pdf](http://field-journal.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/field_03_3_Think_Like_a_Forest.pdf)

44. “John Jordan”, [http://field-journal.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/field\\_03\\_3\\_Think\\_Like\\_a\\_Forest.pdf](http://field-journal.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/field_03_3_Think_Like_a_Forest.pdf)

45. Freely adapted from “John Jordan”, [http://field-journal.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/field\\_03\\_3\\_Think\\_Like\\_a\\_Forest.pdf](http://field-journal.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/field_03_3_Think_Like_a_Forest.pdf)

46. “Platform”, <https://platformlondon.org/>

47. Mel Evans, then of Platform, authored this work. Date unknown.
48. François Laruelle, 'A New Presentation of Non-Philosophy' (2004) <http://www.onphi.net/download/pdf/32> last accessed July 19, 2019.
49. A term I've taken from Platform's project the Carbon Web. See <https://platformlondon.org/about-us/platform-the-carbon-web/>
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51. Deleuze's satirical term for hermeneutics, wittily discussed by Laura Cull Ó Maoilearca in 'Deleuze's bodies, philosophical diseases and the thought of illness' (unpublished paper presented at *Philosophy on Stage 3*, 2011).
52. John Jordan, 'On Creative Activism' (ND), <https://www.robynhambrook.com/john-jordan.html>
53. Laura Kern, *New York Times*, November 16, 2007 'Review of *VanAlkemade, 'What Would Jesus Buy?'* (Warrior Poets, DVD, 2005)': <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/11/16/movies/16buy.html>
54. John Vidal, 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2013/nov/25/rev-erend-billy-jpmorgan-chase-toad-protest-talen>
55. Lisa Friedman, 'Standing Rock Sioux Tribe Wins a Victory in Dakota Access Pipeline Case' *New York Times*, March 25, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/25/climate/dakota-access-pipeline-sioux.html>
56. <https://cms.megaphone.fm/channel/revbilly>
57. François Laruelle, *Introduction to non-marxism* (London: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).
58. Anne-Françoise Schmid related this episode to the author and Niamh Malone while driving Schmid and Laruelle to Crosby beach, Liverpool, UK, in February 2018 after the Art Disarming Philosophy symposium closed.