

Imaginary Self-Immolation

Alexandrine Capolla Beauregard

To some, death by fire is the ultimate negation of individual agency, a futile act of aggression against the self. But self-immolation inspires in others a belief that individual suffering can set in motion changes far greater than one horrifying death.¹

—Patrick Barkham



March 2012. The sun is about to set. I am sitting down barefoot with my legs crossed on a cold surface, wearing a thin jacket and jeans. I have a box of matches to my right and a three gallon container to my left. In front of me is a camera on a tripod which I have previously installed to document the subsequent events. I am in a state of concentration, attempting to gather my thoughts while my heart is pounding in my chest. Many have tried to discourage me from going through with this, but I want to do it. My father begged me to fill the container with water as it would look the same on video, but I wanted authenticity. It is filled with gasoline.

In the early spring of 2012, I was following very closely the few news reports on the unrest in Tibet. The cases of self-immolation in particular were shocking, and it was heartbreaking to see such desperate measures have such a small echo in the news worldwide. The lack of media coverage of these recurrent immolations, combined with the absence of change in the policies of the Chinese regime towards Tibet, were at times infuriating to me.

Alexandrine Capolla Beauregard is an inter-disciplinary artist based in Montreal, Canada. She graduated with distinction from Concordia University in 2015 in Fine Arts. She also did a minor in religion during which she focused on Buddhism in the Tibetan tradition. She has always been concerned with the historical and cultural impacts of the Chinese invasion of Tibet, and she has been interested in performance art since very young. Although she expresses herself through painting, sculpture, fibre, and electronic art, she prefers the medium of performance when it comes to political and social themes. Her performances, even though introspective and silent on the surface, are born from her profound desire to stir shock and to spark reflection. Many of her works about exile and women's issues are unspoken calls for change.

¹ Patrick Barkham, "Self-immolation: The Ultimate Symbol of Protest?"

Tibet was gradually invaded by the Chinese army throughout the 1950s, causing a large number of Tibetans to flee on foot towards India (but also to Nepal, Bhutan and other neighboring regions) where they were offered shelter and the chance to create the Tibetan Parliament-in-Exile in 1959.² Those who stayed behind suffered through what has often been called a “cultural genocide.” It is estimated that over 6000 monasteries have been destroyed or shut down, along with innumerable religious works of art.³ The many political measures put in place by the Chinese government hoping to gain control over the region have resulted in a systematic eradication of Tibetan religion and culture.⁴ According to the Central Tibetan Administration (run by the Tibetan Parliament-in-Exile),

China’s policy of occupation and oppression has resulted in no less than the destruction of Tibet’s national independence, culture and religion, environment and the universal human rights of its people. Time and time again, the infliction of this destruction sees China break international laws with impunity.⁵

The Chinese government continues to deny responsibility and maintains that it simply took back a region which had always belonged to it.

Yet, this 60 year-long cultural repression in Tibet has scarred the country and its people possibly beyond repair. For example, the NGO group for the Convention for the Rights of the Child, in its report “Genocide in Tibet—Children of Despair,” presented to the UN committee of the rights of the child in 1996, brings proofs and testimonies about birth control policies, sterilization and abortion forced upon Tibetan women by Chinese authorities.⁶ As a woman, I could not help but ask myself: when women lose control over their own bodies in such a primordial way, how can they maintain a will to go on? In

²This unofficial parliament, also called the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA) operates from Dharamsala, India. Its role is to represent people from Tibet and to offer education, health services and economic development projects for the Tibetan community in India. Although it was never recognized as a sovereign government by any nation, it receives financial contributions from many countries for its support to the Tibetan community in exile in India.

³The threats to Tibetan culture are extensive. The Tibetan language is being surpassed by Mandarin in Tibet, due to its marginalization in schools and sustained massive Chinese immigration. Chinese “reeducation teams” have been sent to the remaining monasteries in order to reorient monks and nuns in their political and religious beliefs. Anyone can even be thrown in jail simply for carrying a picture of the Dalai Lama.

⁴“Issues Facing Tibet Today.” Central Tibetan Administration.

⁵*Idem.*

⁶Paul Ingram, “Genocide in Tibet—Children of Despair.”

the face of such injustice committed over the years, how could the world remain in apparent indifference?

With this historical and political context in mind, I became increasingly outraged by the growing number of suicides by fire in Tibet. The first self-immolation took place in Delhi in 1998, when Thubten Ngodrup set himself on fire after the Indian police had broken up a Tibetan Youth Congress hunger strike.⁷ At that time it was difficult even for the Tibetans in exile to find ways to attract the world's attention to the situation happening in their home country. It was worse in the Tibet plateau where the population had been denied the right to protest or to peacefully express their opposition to the injustices perpetrated by the Chinese regime. In these hopeless conditions, one could imagine that the most powerful way left to make a statement for change was to burn alive in public.

There has been 143 self-immolations between February 2009 and 2015.⁸ Most of the immolated were strikingly young (monks, nuns, but also lay people), with an entire future ahead of them. A few of these immolations have been covered by Western media, but unfortunately the situation in Tibet hasn't changed, as practically no international measures have been taken against the Chinese government.

In March 2012, the latest self-immolation, reported by the International Campaign for Tibet, had been committed by a 19 year old female student, named Tsering Kyi.⁹ It made me reflect upon my own situation as a 20-something year old girl at the other end of the globe. What kind of personal dreams did this Tibetan girl willingly give up for the greater cause of political independence? What kind of career was she initially striving for? Was she in love? What kind of conditions can make people believe that their only chance at freedom is to burn themselves alive? Could this really be categorized as "suicide," or was this perspective too simplistic?

How come it took only one self-immolation in Tunisia to trigger the wave of change that became the Arab Spring?¹⁰ How come 143 self-immolations in Tibet are still not worthy of more of the world's attention and intervention?

⁷ "Self-immolations by Tibetans." International Campaign for Tibet.

⁸ *Idem*.

⁹ "Tibetan Student and Widowed Mother Self-immolate in Tibet." International Campaign for Tibet.

¹⁰ In December 2010 a street vendor of Ben Arous, Mohamed Bouazizi, set himself on fire to protest against the harassment he had been subjected to by a municipal official. His act of protest was followed by demonstrations and riots in the whole country, and led to what was called the Tunisian revolution.

These questions were floating in the back of my mind when I decided to perform an imaginary self-immolation.

For practical reasons, I wanted to do my performance outdoors but in a secluded place. Had I done it in a public space like a park or in the streets, I have no doubt someone would have called the emergency services, thus interrupting the performance. I chose the highest point I could find: the rooftop of a six-story building with controlled access, to which I had a key. I liked the isolation it provided while being open enough to see half the city, taking it as my imaginary audience. Those who set themselves on fire in the streets of Tibet had the intention of being seen by the entire world, despite the small amount of witnesses. I decided to symbolically perform self-immolation in the same mindset.

The idea of willingly setting fire to one's own body was disturbing and fascinating at the same time. There are many reasons that could explain such self-destructive behavior, but the cases I had been looking at appeared not to be the result of suicidal tendencies nor mental imbalance. As the Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh explains:

The monk who burns himself has lost neither courage nor hope; nor does he desire nonexistence. [...] He does not think that he is destroying himself; he believes in the good fruition of his act of self-sacrifice for the sake of others.¹¹

In this context, such a drastic act may not be perceived—especially in the Buddhist culture—as destructive, but as a means to create better conditions for others, and consequently as pure self-sacrifice.

Moreover, in his article “Self-Immolation: a Clutch at Freedom, and the End of History,” author Clive Bloom writes:

The self-murder of those who die for a cause is always brought about by a supreme decision to act now for future times. The suicide is no longer a victim of historical circumstances, but instead rises above those circumstances in order to command them for one final time.¹²

Those words had given me a lot to think about.

I take the box to my right and pull out a long wooden match. I break it in half, light up one piece, and then use it to ignite the other. I rest my wrists on my knees while a match is burning in each of my hands. I am making contact with fire, observing it, feeling it, imagining the flames growing and enveloping my body. When the fire finally dies, I throw the matches away and reach for the gasoline container next to me. I pause for a second, and proceed to pour the fuel all over my shoulders, chest and back. The liquid is quickly

¹¹ Thich Nhat Nanh. “In Search of the Enemy of Man (addressed to (the Rev.) Martin Luther King).” p. 15.

¹² Bloom, Clive. “Self-immolation: A Clutch at Freedom, and the End of History.”

penetrating all layers of my clothes and the smell is nauseating. I put the container down, take another match and close my eyes. After a minute of stillness, my irritated skin already feels on fire. With the unlit match in my hand, I continue to meditate in silence on Tsering Kyi and her puzzling sacrifice, on the injustice in Tibet which continues to push a desperate youth to set itself ablaze, on the imminent and real possibility of catching fire myself, on my own fear of death, and on the bravery or insanity of those who have embraced death this way.

This performance was, on the one hand, a small and personal attempt at understanding the act of self-immolation itself, the mindset it implies, the courage it requires, the sacrifice it represents, and the desperate hope it also carries. On the other hand, it is my own small contribution to the fight for freedom in Tibet, something I feel very concerned about. I also meant it as a supporting gesture, the closest to “self-immolation” I could get in my (entirely different) situation, without actually dying.



Pouring gasoline over my shoulders, chest and back.

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