

# Anohni on art, corporations, and the music industry

October 10, 2016 - Anohni released *Hopelessness* earlier this year. The album features production from Oneohtrix Point Never and Hudson Mohawke backing Anohni's lyrics about drone bombs, torture, surveillance, and Obama. Her art exhibition, "Anohni: My Truth," opened at Kunsthalle Bielefeld in Bielefeld, Germany this summer (and closes this week). It features Anohni's collage work and paintings, alongside curated photos by Peter Hujar, drawings and sculptures by James Elaine, and performance documentation from the Japanese Butoh dancer Kazuo Ohno.

As told to Brandon Stosuy, 3181 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Art](#), [Culture](#), [Adversity](#), [Anxiety](#), [Inspiration](#), [Politics](#).

**Do you see a connection between your music and visual art, or do you see them as separate modes of creative output?**

I do see them as quite separate. I'm addressing some of the same themes in both bodies of work, albeit in different ways. Singing always necessitates a performance. With visual work, the performance part of it is kind of erased, or at least it's more subtle. It feels more interior.

I think my music had a similar quality for me at one point, especially when no one else cared about it. I think I go to a visual practice for the same reasons that I used to go to music when I was in my teens or early 20s... to process things intuitively. Whereas music is a different beast for me now.

**Are you able to work on visual art while you're writing and working on music?**

Honestly I rarely write music. I usually do it in fits and bursts, on a project basis. So I probably do music in between my drawing practice rather than the other way round. Touring is time consuming, as is recording, of course. But in terms of just the raw creative processes, drawing takes up a lot more of my time.



Anohni, Paradise/Exodus (mixed media), 2016. Photo by: Philipp Ottendörfer. Courtesy Kunsthalle Bielefeld

**I guess drawing is more straightforward, and solitary, and has less baggage attached to it.**

Drawing and making visual things doesn't require that I negotiate a relationship with the rest of the world in order to engage in the process. Whereas recording music immediately plugs me into a public conversation and an economic conversation. Not to say that drawing doesn't eventually enter the same thoroughfare but it is a much more winding road... a slower reveal.

I'm probably more ambivalent about music at this point. Music is something I've offered up to the public over the years; it is something that I love and that I obviously have a long history with. But for me creativity shape shifts and right now my heart is drawing.

**The live shows for the recent tour were presented as conceptual, artistic events. Was this a way of bringing the two worlds together for you?**

Maybe in a way you are right. The act of publicly performing makes music so different from art-making. I've tried recently to find new ways of performing that are more interesting to me. While I am on stage, the feeling and the sense of agency can be exhilarating, but it can also be disruptive. Inevitably, especially in live performance, the body becomes the object of consumption as much as the sound coming out of it. I'm rarely comfortable with the outcome. When I make a drawing, I can decide exactly what it is that I want to give. Whereas, live performance sometimes entraps me, and binds my physical body to the music.

**With those last shows, you put the focus on the projections, so I'd wondered if that was partially to remove the spotlight from yourself and put it on a different aspect of the performance.**

I want to be able to design the work. My body in performance can feel slightly like a Rorschach—it isn't my design, and I don't feel compelled by it. Recently, I have started thinking "You know, I can choose the imagery that people associate with my music, I don't have to fulfill this expectation that my body is always fully exposed and front and center."

But, you know, it's pop at the end of the day. It's hard to maintain your composure and your dignity, often times. I honestly don't know what to say about it. I think it is an increasingly difficult system, the music thing. It's just gotten worse and worse over the last 15 years. The income streams of musicians have all been upstreamed into the pockets of computer corporations. Sound recordings are little more than free crackerjacks inside every computer or cellphone that you buy.

Musicians have been stripped of the ability to effectively sell our music as an object. Now we are being herded into all these shady situations. So, now, say the focus of your music is social justice—social justice becomes a big part of your "brand." You do some TV shows and get lots of followers on Twitter. As soon as you have enough followers, the corporations come knocking to rent out your brand, which they then turn around and use as a pheromone to sell their products. You use that money to make a music video and pay your recording costs.

But now your record has a logo for Nike or Apple on the back. Do we really want to front for these multinationals? It's been such an insidious transfer of our agency. Having diverted our income streams into their own pockets, they now siphon the "lucky" ones back a tiny lifeline of resources to keep us going. And by taking the bait, our credibility is conjoined with that corporation and their business practices. It's exhausting. You see artists hailed as a new generation of independents, only to be enlisted to leverage product. I'm as guilty as the next person in having signed up for this.

The "Drone Bomb Me" video was paid for by Apple. It was an experiment and a challenge for me. The record companies can't afford to advance the whole cost for making the record anymore, let alone pay for an ambitious video. So after a lot of hemming and hawing I agreed to work with Apple on the video. I wanted the video to have a wider reach, and only Apple could offer me the resources to do so.

No one got paid to do that video except the hairdresser. The whole thing was done basically for free, just to make a product that we were then obliged to rent exclusively to Apple for a fraction of what they would had to have paid for it if they had framed it as an advertisement, which is of course what it was, though I didn't want to admit it at the time.

My being bought as a politically outspoken artist is a more potent advertising tool for Apple than a 100 more explicit ads. It creates the false aura for Apple of being cutting edge, of being artist advocates, of being innovative mavericks, of being environmentally friendly, of caring about people and communities, instead of being the McDonalds of consumer high tech whose wealth was largely pilfered from what was once a biodiverse music industry.

How brilliant is that? All of us pitching in as if we were working for a charity, and Apple, one of the biggest companies in the world, walks with an ad. I felt like a house cat that had been declawed. Those are the terms of engagement now in the music industry. We really get what we deserve. I am sure we are already at a point where we are forfeiting important artistic voices as a consequence of this.

Think of Philip Morris sponsoring all the world's dance companies, companies that celebrate breath and healthfulness. Now think of Apple, Nike, Samsung and Google selling their products as the face of independence, creative freedom, and democracy.

All it took was one generation to forget. It's like, you clearcut a forest and a few years later the young ones never remember that there were ever any trees. They grew up playing on dead stumps and that's the new normal. It's the same thing with the kind of capitalism we're experiencing now. The trauma is so quickly erased, and the new terms for engagement are accepted as an inevitability.

Everyone is trying to look on the bright side... vinyl sales went up 3% this year, or whatever. But we have been played, it's just the truth. It's manifest destiny. And consumers have been conveniently deceived in thinking that paying musicians for their recordings is a scam. Everyone has literally bitten the Apple; no one is connecting the fact that they no longer spend any money on recordings with the fact that they give all their money to the companies making the machines that consumers use to steal the recordings. No one sits with that equation. If you even mention it you risk ostracism.

**People don't want to pay for music.**

There are kids out there that have had viral hits that didn't even make a month's rent. Not long ago, if a million people listened to your music, you would get compensated. There's a tiny clutch of people at the top who are still selling recordings, the ones with enough wealth and power to reinvent the wheel each time they release an album. But you can kiss the independent music industry goodbye. Consumers think they're swimming with the tide, but faster, with their computer purchases, when really all we are doing is shackling ourselves to further homogeny.





Anohni, 6 Souls with bullet paper (balsa wood, paper), 2016. Photo by: Philipp Ottendörfer. Courtesy Kunsthalle Bielefeld

**Is your visual practice a way to avoid this entire structure?**

I've been commissioned to do a couple of installations in public institutions in Germany and Denmark recently that I'm hoping people will have access to seeing. I recently installed a show at a museum in Bielefeld, Germany called "My Truth." Its an exhibition of my paintings and objects across five galleries, alongside an exhibition of works of Peter Hujar, James Elaine and Kazuo Ohno.

Recently I have been describing my whole creative output as a single artwork. I'm lucky that I was able to buy an apartment with money from record sales from one of my earlier records, *I Am a Bird Now*, before it all came to an end. I tour to pay for my infrastructure, to pay those who work with me, etc. So it's just a constant barrage of adrenaline from stage and radiation from airplanes. Maybe one day I'll do a bicycle tour. I'll just bike around and sing for whoever is at the library or something. Back to basics!

**I'm curious to see how things develop in the next few years. I was thinking about this the other day: Whenever there's a tragedy, or something happening in the news, and there's a video component, you need go sit through an often tone-deaf ad first. You'll press play to learn more about a shooting, and be stuck watching some "humorous" advertisement.**

It's just another little adrenaline spike to keep us going, to keep us hooked. Some little dopamine hit, as if you're going to do anything with that tragic story besides obsess on it for five seconds and then move on. We gobble up all this cheap, mass produced, dopamine spiked fodder... like, "has anything happened in the last three minutes?" It's just brilliant.

It's the colonization of the mind. Once we colonized other countries for profit and spoils, extracting foreign resources, and draining the value from the lives of others. Now corporations have colonized our heads. They are reorganizing the way that we think and rewiring our neural pathways so we can never get back to where we came from. Our consumption is our consent.

For the children coming up now, using interfaces designed by corporations is intuitive to them. This shit was not time tested, it's not like it's been developed according to the Iroquois law of seven generations. This is stuff invented by corporations, it's like pure white sugar. How could you ever fantasize that systems designed by corporations are ever going to have the best interest of a child's mind at heart?

Capitalism is not a system of morality. It's a system of economics based on wealth extraction, from the land and from people. Our minds are being formed to be dependent upon and addicted to corporate interfaces and systems. This is "for profit" technology. There is nothing free. It's that thing they say, "When a corporation offers you something for free it's because they are harvesting something from you that they think is even more valuable than your money."

You've already got a younger generation that's like "bring on the singularity." The idea of it used to be a dystopian nightmare. But the trauma has already been erased. I think we have to kick back against it but I don't even know how to. We all just suck it up and try to "swim with the tide but faster."

It would be fine if we had the luxury of time to dismantle all this crap, but we don't. Soon we're going to need a snorkel to get to the grocery store. What good will all this be if we are bobbing on the greenhouse tides in a dead ocean? It's my belief that the only conversation worth having in America now is the one about the interconnectedness between all these codependent faces of brokenness. It's like AIDS. There's this underlying systemic immune deficiency that enables the outbreak of any number of what they used to call "opportunistic infections."

I think of things like the subjugation of women, drone warfare, neoliberal capitalism, Christian and Islamic fundamentalism, racism, police brutality, mass incarceration, massive wealth

disparity, corporate sovereignty, the weapons industry, the fossil fuel industry, the chemical and pharmaceutical industries, population explosion, factory farming, and the destruction of wilderness as opportunist infections.

Unless we get to the root of the brokenness that has led us here, we will not change our trajectory as a species. The climax of all this is global warming, collapse of biodiversity, and the final breakdown of the body of the earth itself, at least as far as we have ever known it.

But in America, we don't connect the dots. We hate connecting the dots. People fantasize that the destruction of the American Dream is the fault of the poor, rather than the explicit and long term intention of the corporate class. Instead it's China, it's Mexican immigrants, it's lawlessness, it's that black boy on the street. Let's blame him.

We can have these conversations about discrimination and the persecution of minorities in this country just as long as we don't connect the dots back to 35 years of trickle down economics. As long as we don't connect it back to the economic structures that were designed to systematically undermine most working people, or to the Occupy movement that Obama shut down one day in a single federal sweep.

For a moment, the Occupy movement really threatened to draw back the curtain and reveal America to itself, and that posed a most powerful threat. Where would we be now if the Occupy conversation had been allowed to flourish in the media and in society for the last four years? For as long as Americans continue to fight amongst each other, we will be distracted from the superstructures in our society that have been specifically designed to screw us all.

#### **Anohni Recommends:**

The Jack Smith compilation, [Wait for Me at the Bottom of the Pool](#). I love that book.

[Diamanda Galás'](#) *The Singer* is beautiful.

[Buffy Sainte-Marie's](#) *Power in the Blood*.

[Jerry Mander](#) wrote this book called *In the Absence of the Sacred* that does a beautiful job of outlining 100 years of advertising in the United States. I read that a long time ago. It really impressed me. It changed the way I thought about things.

[Nomi Ruiz](#) and everything she touches.

[Kembra Pfahler](#) and her body of work.

The government and the media have made sure that Americans don't understand their relationship as American citizens with the rest of the world. We don't comprehend the terrible death that our country and its corporations have wreaked upon the Middle East, or the ways that the consequences of our wars for oil have provoked a refugee crisis and waves of nationalism that are now threatening to destabilize Europe.

We have not seen the images of the death that we paid for. We haven't seen the dead bodies. The government forbid the media from showing us what they were doing. Obama's administration imprisoned Chelsea Manning for 35 years for being the only one with the moral courage to expose images of our country's war crimes. She is the only one in jail. Not the politicians or military officers who actually committed those crimes.

Most American families are preoccupied with the fact that they now need both parents working full time in order to pay the mortgage and they still have no money for holidays. They have lost their retirement plans because they were fired from their union jobs and rehired as temps. Or perhaps mining industries came in and offered them the world, raped their land, and then abandoned them after all the wealth was extracted from their towns. Just sucked them dry of all their oil and then left. Perhaps they are 10 years out of college and still trying to pay off a mountain of student debt. Perhaps they are buried under debts from out-of-pocket medical expenses. Why does life seem to be getting harder? So someone must be to blame for this.

The Native American community is out there fighting the good fight. Few have been more dispossessed than Native Americans in this country. Yet what they're fighting for today in North Dakota is clean water for everyone, for the future, for a natural world that we are all still a part of, not a world that so many of us are desperately trying to transcend, or escape from, or annihilate. Talk about big picture. Indigenous communities are often among the only ones holding space for the big picture. They're the ones that somehow have retained this commitment to the empirical value of life. They're all out there saying "Water". And they don't mean Evian.

#### [Name](#)

Anohni

#### [Vocation](#)

Singer, Composer, Visual Artist

#### [Fact](#)

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Photo: Robert Schlotter