



BRILL

# Years of Untying Knots

## *Gee Vaucher and Collaging the Politics of the Family between Ernst and Laing*

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### Abstract

This article explores the work of Gee Vaucher. Vaucher is best known for her work with the band Crass but has an extensive range of work from the 1960s until the present. The article delves into Vaucher's relationship with surrealism, through her project *A Week of Knots* (2013–2022). In this project, Vaucher uses the psychoanalytic insights of R.D. Laing to rewrite Max Ernst's collage novel, *Une semaine de bonté*. Doing so provides a space for Vaucher to explore the nature of violence, power, and care, among many other aspects. What can we learn from Vaucher's collaging practice that combines influences from Ernst and Laing? And what can this way of using that backdrop as a kind of collective psychoanalytic tool tell us about the family's changing nature?

### Keywords

Gee Vaucher – activist art – collage – counterculture – punk

As an artist, Gee Vaucher occupies a paradoxical position. As a member of and designer for the legendary anarchist punk band Crass, her work is widely circulated and hugely influential.<sup>1</sup> Russ Bestley and Alex Ogg have described how,

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<sup>1</sup> Rimbaud estimated that Crass sold two million records during its years as a functioning band (Rimbaud, 1998: 277). This number will only have increased since then.

in the social explosion of punk, Vaucher's "arresting graphic style [...] became an overnight global brand, as much as part of punk's visual lingua franca as the safety pin, razor blade, Mohawk, or the marked 'X's on the backs of mosh pit hands" (Bestley and Ogg, 2012: 168). Despite its wide circulation and influence, there has been comparatively little attention paid to Vaucher's work, whether in terms of her work with Crass or the vast array of what she produced in the past five decades across the realms of painting, collage, printmaking, video, design, and performance art. While Jon Savage has rightly suggested that an entire book could be written about Crass's strategy of multimedia engagement and production, such a study is still not forthcoming (Savage, 2005 [1991]).<sup>2</sup> And there has not been anywhere near sufficient attention paid to Vaucher's much broader body of work, though slowly this is starting to develop.<sup>3</sup>

Vaucher's work plays another role, coming out of long-standing traditions of outsider art, of artists who work outside of traditional artistic spaces and forms. Her work connects closely to the lineage of antiauthoritarian artistic counter-cultures, from Dada to Pop art, that have repeatedly redefined the spaces where art is created and circulated and the nature of art itself.<sup>4</sup> Punk is often narrated as a kind of year zero, a total break with the past. But this is far from the case, and nowhere is that clearer than through Crass, where the connections with previous countercultures and radical arts, from the beats to the hippies, existentialism to surrealism, are quite clear.<sup>5</sup> The anarcho-punk subculture that was animated by Crass and other similar artists drew on these artistic traditions, developing their energies into a vibrant antiauthoritarian mix that in many ways ended up completely transforming anarchist politics in the UK and far beyond. As noted by Patricia Allmer, "whilst surrealist thought radically challenged hierarchies, it often remained blind to its own gender politics" (Allmer, 2009: 13).<sup>6</sup> Vaucher's work is interesting for how it engages closely with

2 Apparently, Savage had planned for another chapter on Crass and had interviewed them in preparation for this. More recently, there has been an increase, for better or worse, in academic research about punk and anarchism. See in particular Lowey and Prince, 2014; Bull and Dines, 2016; Dines and Worley, 2016; and Skov, 2023. The best and most comprehensive overview of Vaucher's work can be found in Binns, 2022.

3 For more on Vaucher's artistic work, see Vaucher, 1999; 2004; 2011; 2013; 2014; 2016; 2020a–d.

4 For more on the relationship between surrealism and counterculture, see King and Susik, 2022, and Mahon, 2005.

5 As Penny Rimbaud described it, punk "was not a beginning as much as a continuation. Before that there'd been the hippies, the beats, the bohemians, right back to the beginning of human consciousness. There's nothing new about social dissent, but unless it is willing to adapt to the times and to offer something radical and new in itself it can become as rigid as that which it claims to oppose" (Rimbaud, 2009: x).

6 See also Susik, 2021: chap. 2.

surrealism and gender politics yet resists being pigeonholed into the categories of feminism or surrealism. Vaucher constantly tries to escape all fixed definitions, all isms, precisely because of the way they limit and predefine what kind of engagements are possible through them. During the early 1970s, Vaucher was a member of Exit, a performance art project that took her artistic work outside of gallery spaces. Exit provides another link between countercultures, as their performance at the International Carnival of Experimental Sound (ICES) in 1972 cemented links between multiple currents of experimental arts, including with Fluxus artists, as well as people working across a wide range of experimental music.<sup>7</sup> This can be seen across the entire range of Vaucher's work, which draws freely from the aesthetic inheritance and styles that came before her and which continues to be passed on and recycled as other artists are influenced by her work.

Steve Lazarides has described Vaucher as a huge influence on outsider artists through her bringing together of surrealism and agitprop and as an artist "dealing with political subjects in a visceral manner whose medium was popular culture" (Lazarides, 2008: 194). Vaucher is not an outsider artist, but such a label evokes, at least in one capacity, the marginalization of her work. For over fifty years, Vaucher has lived at and worked from Dial House, a sixteenth-century cottage that Vaucher and her lifelong creative partner Penny Rimbaud turned into an open house for living and artistic experimentation in 1967. Among its previous residents was Primrose McConnell, author of *The Agricultural Notebook*.<sup>8</sup> The fact that Vaucher has worked from a rural farmhouse rather nicely illustrates the role that her work has played for decades now: It emerges from a space and practice of cultivating links between histories and growth of artistic dissent, searching for freedom in artistic form and self-expression. If McConnell wrote the standard text on agriculture, Vaucher's life and work could serve as an exceptional guide to the cultivation of a life of dissent and imagination without compromise.

Both Vaucher and Rimbaud have made careful efforts to distinguish Dial House as an open house rather than a commune. Its guiding ethos has been to create a space where people, in Rimbaud's phrasing, "could get together to work and live in a creative atmosphere rather than the stifling, inward-looking family environments in which we had all been brought up" (Rimbaud, 2009: 25). It is

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7 For more on ICES, see the feature published by *The Wire*: [www.thewire.co.uk/in-writing/the-portal/ices-72-and-harvey-matusow-portal](http://www.thewire.co.uk/in-writing/the-portal/ices-72-and-harvey-matusow-portal).

8 McConnell's work continues to be a standard reference in agricultural matters, remaining in print for well over a century. *The Agricultural Notebook*, like McConnell's other works, have had over twenty editions and printings.

from here that innumerable projects and collaborations have been launched, from artistic ventures to political campaigns, from the planning of the first free festivals during the 1970s to the Stop the City protests. Taken together, these interventions practically rewrote the aesthetic grammar of antiauthoritarian art and politics in the UK, feeding directly into later iterations of radical politics, such as the 1990s free party scenes, the anti-road movements, Reclaim the Streets, and the anti-globalization movement. The effects of ideas and practices developed at Dial House can be seen in the many tendrils of anarcho-punk politics, which can be many points around the world. Viewed this way, it is clear that Dial House exists then, not as a space to escape from the world, as a form of withdrawal, but as a space of calm where ideas and energies are gathered precisely to be able to engage the world more fully. Or, as viewed through the focus of this special issue, for example surrealism, it is both a space for the pursuit of the marvelous and the cultivation of an antiauthoritarian artistic practice and culture.

In discussion, Vaucher is very apt at emphasizing how important Dial House, and in particular its garden, has been for her.<sup>9</sup> They are the literal condition and perfect metaphor for her work, and as she has told me more than once, it is during gardening that she gets all her ideas. Gardening is both the literal foundation for her work as well as a fitting description for what her work does: Cross-fertilizing the connections between different artistic countercultures and practices, working between them. If Gee Vaucher is an outsider artist, her practice has not been one based on attempting to find its way into a supposedly preferable insider status but rather based on cultivating and making that outside all the more livable.

## 1 Working-Class Countercultures

It is all too easy to understand both the emergence of punk and 1960s counterculture as a clean break from and departure of that which came before it—as a negation of the past and working-class culture. But approaching Vaucher's work through its connection to Dial House shows how untenable this narrative is. Vaucher has drawn a comparison between Dial House's ethos of openness

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9 To quote Vaucher on this: “My roots are here [...] My heart is in this garden and in this place. It's where I think: This is where I belong.’ The roots image is apt. In the 40-year-old organic garden are scattered many ashes, and Vaucher's own mother came here in the final months of her life” (Mackay, 2014). For more on the importance of the garden at Dial House, see Wood, 2016.

with the culture of openness during her childhood in working-class Dagenham. And here we can see an interesting tension between the family as inward-looking and stifling and its potential to prefigure more open and vibrant forms of community. This tension is a theme constantly returned to in her work as she has drawn connections between the development of her artistic practice and the openness of working-class family life. She compares her disposition to that of her mother and father, constantly attempting to make something out of nothing.

My father was great at inventing and making toys from whatever was around, and my mother did the same with the clothes she made for us. I remember she made a dress which became the only one I would wear, she had made it from a suit she had been given by the man next door, grey with pinstripes, I loved it. Dad was always collecting stuff from the street if he thought it had potential. I still do the same.<sup>10</sup>

Vaucher has described a moment during the war when one of the family's chickens was nearly decapitated by shrapnel. During the war such chickens would have been extremely important for the family's diet, providing eggs that otherwise might have been difficult to obtain. When her father heard one of the neighbors calling out that one of his precious chickens had been injured, he ran into the yard shouting, "Anyone got a needle and thread to sew [*sic*] the chicken's neck up?" This was met with "What colour thread do you want?" Dark humor, indeed, but fitting to the dark times during and after the war and perhaps today. Vaucher has often described how this camaraderie, this sense of community that infused her childhood, also influenced her desire to seek out and create a similar convivial atmosphere, whether in Dagenham, living in New York City, or at Dial House. Perhaps this is the chicken that reappears on the cover of *The Feeding of the 5000* or the chickens that can be found wandering through the garden and in and out of Dial House.

But there is another aspect to this, both in terms of gardening and turning the meager scraps of consumerism into something marvelous, especially when viewed from the perspective of working-class life during Vaucher's childhood. Gardening and the improvisation of toys from rubbish were not just clever approaches to everyday life. They were motivated by sheer necessity.

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10 As described by Alex Burrows (2012), "Vaucher's upbringing in the bleak postwar rationing and poverty of working-class east London informed her enduring DIY aesthetic towards art. Creating something from nothing is wholly intrinsic to her art—almost as a philosophy or *raison d'être*."

The flip side of making something from nothing is that this was driven by the reality of there being nothing to make something out of. It is this world of working-class life that Richard Hoggart celebrated in his classic book *The Uses of Literacy* (1959) at a point when such a life was starting to fall apart as conditions of impoverishment receded, only to be replaced by mass media and consumerism. Likely both Hoggart and Vaucher would argue that, while necessity might have been the mother of these inventions, she was not the only member of the family. Working-class life also embodied convivial relationality and collective methods of fighting for and defending their dignity as a community.<sup>11</sup> Or as Hoggart would put it, the working classes are not “simply a power of passive resistance, but something which, though not articulate, is positive. The working classes have a strong natural ability to survive change by adapting or assimilating what they want and ignoring the rest” (Hoggart, 1959: 31).

This points to the continuities between a vast range of Vaucher’s work and a kind of working-class counterculture that takes the practices and approaches born in the necessities of daily life and brings them into politically focused arts and cultural products. Across all of her works, Vaucher can be seen to be patiently cultivating the outside, growing a garden from which she and others can draw sustenance and joy. Whether through setting up her own nihilist newspaper for the living, *International Anthem*, designing sleeve artwork and video montages, or setting up installations in temporary spaces, Vaucher has constantly refused to make any compromises in her work in order to make it more acceptable to the demands of corporatized cultural production. Rather, along with all the others she has collaborated with through the years, she has shown that it is precisely through working outside the music business and outside the gallery system that it is possible to make something truly wonderful without having to compromise. The way that Crass Records operated is a good illustration of this, functioning in a way that Rebecca Binns has described as being “professional in an area of DIY punk cultural production that was often characterized by amateurism” (Binns, 2022: 103). They set up a model for recording and distributing music outside of traditional channels not to profit from it but rather to share skills and knowledge with artists they worked with

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11 Joanna Bourke has discussed the rise of gardening in working-class areas and how it was more often done for the benefits of diet and survival rather than enjoyment. This is then followed with the strange claim that the “DIY revolution” did not flare until the 1950s, as apparently growing your own food, impelled by necessity or not, is not considered a DIY activity (Bourke, 1994). See also Holtzman, Hughes, and Van Meter, 2004. John Roberts has explored the ways in which the postwar period reshaped popular culture, particularly through music, in the process introducing modernist art movements such as surrealism and Dadaism into popular song and culture (Roberts, 2020).

who then went on to develop their own independent means of music production. In other words, their operation was formed around trying to undercut positioning themselves in anything like an authority position through the sharing of skills and knowledge. This is essential to the workings of any antiauthoritarian counterculture. In that sense, the garden at Dial House is not somewhere to escape from the world but a space from which entirely new worlds can be built, where free and vibrant lives have been, and continue to be, cultivated.

## 2 Years of Knots

One might get the impression that after the dissolution of Crass, Vaucher's work took a more personal, and by implication, less political turn. Vaucher herself has rejected this interpretation, suggesting instead that while her work is less overtly political, it is freer in expression. And more fundamentally, there is a continuity in the work in its focus on psychological dynamics: "[T]he sentiments are fundamentally the same, caring about people and the world that I live in. When I look at the body of my work, I am aware that I have always been concerned with the psychology of events and the interaction of people within them. In that respect, nothing has changed over all these years" (Reuland, 2007: 73).

Exploring the psychology of events, or a psychology of action,<sup>12</sup> is a useful way to understand key aspects of Vaucher's work. That is to say, it is not passing judgment as much as trying to understand or make sense of the present and to find that sense of community within and out of the often-confusing nature of the world. This might seem a strange way to describe her work, which so often has been pigeonholed as political art, coming with the assumption that it emerged from a set and worked-out political perspective whose goal was to be effectively communicated. Vaucher has constantly resisted being fixed in such a manner, whether in terms of belonging to a particular artistic or political movement. And her anarchism, if indeed one wants to paint her into that category, is based on constantly undercutting the apparently firm foundations of belief precisely to continue exploring a psychology of events, of freedom even, without being constrained within an already given framework.

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12 Quoting Vaucher on this, "Everything is to do with art. My work has always been about the psychology of action, or being—the way people go about things, or the way they solve problems—or the way they add to them because of the way they've tried to solve a problem" (Burrows, 2012).

If there is an artistic technique Vaucher is most associated with, it would have to be collage, although collage is only one aspect of her work. As Rebecca Binns has described it, Vaucher “adopted the raw cut ‘n’ paste style of early punk design and the underground press, and turned it into a sophisticated, painterly form of expression. Her photomontage works are often not collages at all, but intricately painted, photorealistic depictions of a skewed reality masquerading as collage” (Binns, 2022: 2). Perhaps there is something more fundamental about this association, one that goes beyond the details of an artistic technique and connects to a deeper sense of an artistic technique of life, precisely as an attempt to avoid being forced into fixed categories. Vaucher is indeed a collage artist but in a more fundamental sense. Donald Kuspit once suggested that the incongruous effect of collage is “based directly on its incompleteness, on the sense of perpetual becoming that animates it” (Kuspit, 1989: 43). One could suggest that it is this very sense of perpetual becoming, of being eternally incomplete and in development, that animates Vaucher’s work. The sense of incompleteness, then, is not a flaw but an eternal possibility, one that promises to renew itself, much like the garden at Dial House, moving through seasons and flourishing up new forms of growth, renewing the soil from which it grew. Or as framed by Elza Adamowicz, collage is a practice that “deliberately subverts traditional models of representation and bourgeois value systems”, which is an especially fitting description for how it is employed in Vaucher’s practice, ultimately functioning as a “mode of perception” (Adamowicz, 1998: 11 and 17). This can be seen across Vaucher’s body of work, for instance in “Domestic Violence” from *International Anthem* (Figure 1). It is this shifting in modes of representation and perception that is most valuable to the continued development of an antiauthoritarian counterculture.

For the rest of this article, I would like to focus on Vaucher’s project *A Week of Knots*, in which she brings together Max Ernst’s surrealist novel *Une semaine de bonté* with the insights of R.D. Laing’s poetic exploration of the impasses and complications in human relationships. As Vaucher states in the introduction to each of the seven volumes in the project, she explores the nature of “the family, of repetition and the knots with which each member of the family ties themselves and each other”, often with “suffocating results” (Vaucher, 2013). Similar to the way that the garden at Dial House provides a space for developing other forms of relationality, Vaucher, I want to suggest, is looking for tools to untie the kinds of negative dynamics of relationships we find ourselves in, that we have been conditioned into. As Rebecca Binns frames it, across Vaucher’s work there can be seen an exploration of “the negative impacts of social conditioning, instilled through the nuclear family and other social institutions, on children” (Binns, 2022: 10). This attention to the negative effects of social con-





FIGURE 1 Gee Vaucher, "Domestic Violence," 1979, mixed media, made for the newspaper *International Anthem 2*

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

ditioning is of course not unique to Vaucher's work, as it was a common focus of much of the countercultural currents that Vaucher circulated in during the 1960s and 1970s. Vaucher explores these dynamics not as something separate and different from the violence of war and the state but rather as the same dynamic playing out on different scales. In that sense, she would agree with

someone like Emma Goldman, who in her opposition to the draft argued that it “is organized violence at the top which creates individual violence at the bottom” (Quoted in Marshall, 2007: 404). This can be seen across a range of Vaucher’s works where images of military violence are counterposed with the petty tyrannies of domestic life, both animated by patriarchal power and violence but on different scales.

Before proceeding to further unpack this series, it would be useful to first start with the various sources that Vaucher draws on. First is the work of R.D. Laing, who is not just a key influence across much of Vaucher’s work but more broadly in the ethos informing Dial House itself. While in popular consciousness, Laing is widely associated with the “anti-psychiatry” movement, it would be more accurate to describe him as a psychiatrist whose work draws heavily on existential philosophy to challenge the orthodoxy of the time, which, during the 1950s and 1960s, commonly involved the use of electroshock and similar treatments. The formation of antiauthoritarian politics in the 1960s in the UK was greatly influenced by Laing’s work. Laing’s key insight is remarkably simple: What if, rather than treating patients as pathological beings who are spouting off nonsense and gibberish that needs to be contained and controlled, they are treated as full human beings and thus listened to rather than subjected to often dehumanizing treatments and methods? The overall ethos of Laing’s approach is based on this insight, serving to undercut the divide between doctors and patients. As Zbigniew Kotowicz framed it, by doing so, Laing “touched a raw nerve [...] he attempted to politicize and spiritualize, so to speak, the discourse of madness and in the process, in a truly anarchic fashion, he questioned, doubted, Laing sought passages between the so-called normal and the insane” (Kotowicz, 1997: 1). Given this, it is perhaps not surprising that such an approach resonated widely within radical artistic countercultures during the 1960s and 1970s and particularly so with the milieu around Dial House, where people were likewise drawing heavily on existential philosophy. Laing’s work served to question the dividing line between madness and normality, often times pointing out that behavior diagnosed as pathological could be understood as a sensible response to the pathological conditions of the world rather than the individual. Across his work, Laing often highlighted the psychological violence that occurs in families, arguing that “within the context of these families madness is quite intelligible” (Kotowicz, 1997: 3).

The second primary source Vaucher draws on in *A Week of Knots* is Max Ernst’s *Une semaine de bonté* [A week of kindness], which Ernst composed over several weeks in 1933. Ernst assembled it by drawing from a range of illustrations and materials from encyclopedias, magazines, and French serial novels. It was then published as five pamphlets, later being republished as a single

volume. Ernst's collage novels have often been compared to other surrealist narratives, including Breton's *Nadja* (1928) and Aragon's *Paysan de Paris* (1926). Overall, these publications include loosely composed tales where characters wander through the streets, or there are quick changes between imaginary locations or other mysterious events. While Ernst's earlier novels contained captions (which often contradicted or worked against the visual materials), this was not the case for *Une semaine de bonté*, though there are short quotations on the title pages. Ernst declared that he had a twofold goal as an artist, namely to "become a magician and to find the myth of his time", with perhaps the beginning of this process taking place in bringing together materials in these volumes (Ernst, 1948: 29). Perhaps this, along with the rather ambiguous nature of much of the imagery, explains why it is often passed over in the discussion of Ernst's work.<sup>13</sup> Today it might be easy to view it as an historical art relic primarily appreciated in relationship with understanding Max Ernst's trajectory; this perhaps was not always the case. As David Hopkins has teased out, Ernst's collage work influenced 1960s counterculture in a variety of ways in the UK, including appearances in magazines such as *Oz* and references in several important albums, performances, and artistic works (Hopkins, 2022: 190–206). Thus, when Vaucher goes back to Ernst's work, it is not something that she would have just come across through more traditionally artistic venues but rather through the ways that Ernst (as well as Laing) had become incorporated into the art and politics of the counterculture of the time.

It might be claimed that, given the nature of Ernst's collage novels, and in particular *Une semaine de bonté*, there is something futile in trying to interpret or analyze them. Rather, they should be encountered and experienced for what emotional effect might be produced. This is why, for the purposes of this article, I will not be focusing on attempting to interpret or unpack particular images. Instead, the focus will be more on how Vaucher uses the collision of Laing's and Ernst's work as a space of engagement. How this unfolds as a collective and interactive practice will become clearer in the latter part of the article. There is a particular, often overlooked aspect here that I think is important, especially in the way that this work is taken up and used in Vaucher's reworking of it. And that is Ernst's relationship with alchemy, which is explored by M.E. Warlick in her book *Max Ernst and Alchemy: A Magician in Search of Myth*. Warlick suggested that Ernst had a long-standing interest in alchemy and alchemical symbols; in *Une semaine de bonté* these come to play an increasingly central

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13 For instance, Elizabeth Legge (1989), in her exploration of psychoanalysis and Ernst, does not mention the collage novels at all, except for a very brief passing mention in a footnote.

role. Across the novel, some images mirror surrealist themes of violence, sexuality, and the struggles of individuals against constraints placed on personal freedom. This is how the making of a collage novel functions in an artistically alchemical way. As Warlick explained, while for the alchemist the goal is transmuting lead into gold, for Ernst what was being sought was something altogether different; alchemy becomes “a new image of transmutation and discovery. Yet traditionally, the production of gold was less important than the self-knowledge that resulted from engaging in the work. Likewise, the making of a work of art became the vehicle for an investigation and knowledge of his personal identity” (Warlick, 2001: 135).

In Warlick’s view, alchemy provided Ernst with a metaphor, and more than a purely poetic one, for a kind of creative process and self-discovery that could be experienced through the making of art. As Dawn Ades has put it, collage is the alchemy of the image, which makes it even more sensible that Ernst would be employing it in this manner (Ades, 1986). Thus, when Ernst continued to employ a series of alchemical images and androgynous figures across his works, it is notable that this was often done in a way that was intertwined with autobiographical references. While in Ernst’s work during the 1920s, alchemical symbols were conflated with his parents, in the 1930s this shifted to being used as personal symbols of his divided personality. Thus, we are left with the “transformational alchemical mechanism of collage” (Warlick, 2001: 135) that is wrestling with the experiences of a fragmented self, perhaps even the same riven identity that Laing would come to address in his 1960 book *The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness* (Laing, 2010). When Vaucher brings Laing and Ernst together through a collage practice, she is likewise employing something of an alchemical approach, I would argue, though in this case, the process has shifted from a metallurgical transformation process into primarily a psychoanalytic one.

Having introduced the two primary sources by Ernst and Laing that Vaucher draws upon in *A Week of Knots*, we can now discuss her work in more depth. Vaucher has described how both books, Ernst’s *Une semaine de bonté* and Laing’s *The Divided Self*, stayed with her and continued to influence her for many years. The project seeks to explore ways that Ernst’s and Laing’s work can speak with each other, and in what ways their ideas resonate with each other. Here she draws not so much from Laing’s ideas overall but rather from a book of poetry Laing wrote in 1970 entitled *Knots*. The poems in this volume explore the tangled weaves of repetitions and blockages that can be found within familial relationships: the knots in which the family often finds itself tied. In the introduction to each of the volumes of *A Week of Knots*, Vaucher describes how it “demands a great deal of patience to untangle Laing’s astute observations

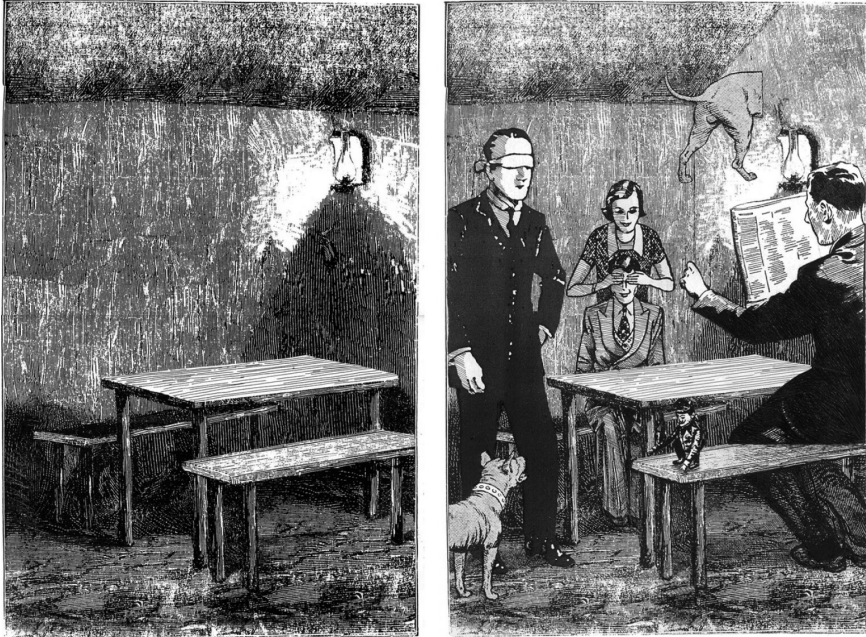


FIGURE 2 The “blank” and “rewritten” versions, illustration, from *A Week of Knots: Sunday—Father*, 2013 Collage. 330 mm x 230 mm  
COURTESY OF GEE VAUCHER

of the endless cycle of habitual thinking: the resulting knots appear to grow ever tighter.” While Ernst assembled *Une semaine de bonté* during a vacation in Italy, Vaucher spent thirteen years engaged in using Laing’s ideas to untie the knots. Vaucher uses Laing’s ideas to un-write, or perhaps more accurately, rewrite Ernst’s work. This untying of knots functions much like the alchemical transformation Warlick explored in Ernst’s work, though with Vaucher’s practice, we can see how it emerges from and feeds back into antiauthoritarian counterculture.

Vaucher takes the repurposed materials that Ernst used as representing suppressed relationships and dramas. In Laing’s terms, they are materials that are filled with their own knots and tensions, taken from their sources, and repurposed to serve a different end in Ernst’s work. Effectively, she un-writes parts of Ernst’s work, choosing to remove all the characters and figures from Ernst’s collages (Figure 2). Treated this way, *Une semaine de bonté* is rendered into a background, a backdrop, on which a new set of characters and figures can appear. In Vaucher’s framing, this is a process in which Ernst’s work is reconstructed, “thereby resetting the stage and dream about to unfold” (Vaucher, 2013). The stakes of this become clear for Vaucher in a poem she includes at

the beginning of each of the seven volumes, which describes the child as a flag bearer who carries the weight of the past into adulthood.

In Laing's terms, these are the knots of dysfunctional relationship dynamics that we are caught within. Laing described them as "delineated patterns of human bondage" (Vaucher, 2013). This project wants us to become attentive, more attuned, to these dynamics so that it might become possible to extricate ourselves from them. As Vaucher puts it, at best "we grow to understand and convert that world of inner turmoil into a world of magic and wonder" (Vaucher, 2013). What she is looking for is a space for the same kind of transformative process that Ernst was searching for through the metaphorical framing of alchemical symbols and processes. But here what is being transmuted is not lead into gold; rather it is turning the knotted patterns of relationality that we find ourselves in into communities and relationships that have been freed from those knots.

### 3 Oh America, Do Have a Lot of Knots to Untie

From November 2016 to February 2017, Firstsite in Colchester (England) hosted *Introspective*, the first major institutional retrospective of Vaucher's work. The exhibition was organized over several years, the process of which resulted in Vaucher receiving an honorary doctorate from the University of Essex. This is notable because, up until this point, Vaucher had declined all invitations for larger exhibitions and forms of institutional recognition of her work. For many years she consistently refused to sell her work to collectors, galleries, or institutional holdings. This was not because of some desire for self-marginalization but rather a result of the antiauthoritarian milieu that her work emerged from and fed back into. Thus, in the very few times Vaucher has had a solo exhibition, it was held not at a venue like the Tate Modern but rather at the Horse Hospital in London, an arts venue that focuses on countercultural histories and artistic practices.<sup>14</sup> The impetus of this show, and with it perhaps also the shift to being willing to work within a more institutional framework than previously, came from a desire to make better known the broader body of her work, beyond the work produced as part of Crass. The exhibition sought to position these better-known materials as part of an overall development of Vaucher's practice and work but not as the focus or as the main point of entry.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup> For more on the Horse Hospital, see [www.thehorsehospital.com](http://www.thehorsehospital.com).

<sup>15</sup> The same DIY antiauthoritarian spirit that informs Vaucher's work and its relationship

The lead image used in the promotion of the exhibition was a painting entitled *Oh America*. This piece had originally been done for the cover of the album *Friendly as a Hand Grenade* by the band Tackhead in 1989 and brings together several key features of Vaucher's work. It is visually striking and politically challenging but also ambiguous and open to interpretation. It is this latter aspect that is important in how this image was taken up in this context. Given the lead times involved in large exhibitions, this would have been decided weeks if not months earlier. Perhaps because of this, it should not have been surprising that, in the wake of Donald Trump's election victory, the image started to be virally circulated and shared, leading to it being used on the cover of the *Daily Mirror*. What is interesting about this circulation is the role the image played for people as an expression of shock, outrage, and sadness. Its circulation created a moment, or perhaps a space, in which people attempted to make sense of something that they had not expected and were anything but pleased by. Much like with Vaucher's work more broadly, this circulation occurred without much discussion or awareness of who produced the image or the context or reason for its production. Vaucher is well aware of this mutability of context, pointing out that while the image might seem negative, "it's not impossible to imagine another context where the statue might be having a giggle behind her hands" (Sherwin, 2017).

It is useful to consider the positioning of *A Week of Knots* in relationship with the overall exhibition. As people approached Firstsite, it was an image from the series that was one of the first images they would see on the sliding front doors. The placement and use of this suggests that it is not unreasonable to use the project as something of an entry point for considering Vaucher's work, again with the understanding that this is a different way into her work rather than approaching first through the Crass materials. Notably, the image used was not one from the published final version of the project but rather a sketch from the preparatory materials. Similar to the way that the format of collage itself tends to flag up the impermanency and changeable nature of reality and artistic practice, the use of a draft image as the entry to the exhibition suggests that even the format of the "retrospective" exhibition should be taken as contingent and open to reinterpretation rather than anything like the final word.

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with institutions likewise informs this article, perhaps necessarily so. While I am not formally trained as an art historian, I have at times ventured into activities that would reasonably be described as in those areas. Hopefully, any faux pas committed against disciplinary boundaries will be understood in relationship with this.



FIGURE 3 Gee Vaucher: *Introspective*. Retrospective exhibition, November 2016–February 2017. Firstsite, UK  
COURTESY OF GEE VAUCHER

A selection of Vaucher's reconstructed collages were hung on the walls of their own room in the exhibition, paired with vitrines containing Ernst's originals, which had been loaned (Figure 3). The walls and glass front of this particular room were adorned with quotes and materials from R.D. Laing's *Knots*, but what I found most interesting was how Vaucher attempted to develop the project into something quite unlike its original form. Four of the backgrounds that she had produced by removing Ernst's figures were provided as an invitation for people to take part in creating their own collages exploring the nature of the family. This Community Collage project greeted people as one of the first things they saw upon entering the gallery, given that it was situated in the front of the room. The two tables were regularly stocked with materials for people to make their own collages, including magazines, newspapers, and images to rip up and repurpose into something else (Figure 4).

During the three months of the exhibition, around 600 collages were created. These were then installed near the front of the exhibition and rotated at regular intervals as more were produced. One could attempt to analyze a range of the images produced through this process, which would be interesting. But as had been claimed about *Une semaine de bonté* itself, perhaps that is somewhat beside the point. What is important is not what one can make out of any particular collage produced or why someone has used or repur-





FIGURE 4 An example of six collages produced in the Community Collage space. *Gee Vaucher: Introspective*. Retrospective exhibition, November 2016–February 2017. Firstsite, UK  
COURTESY OF GEE VAUCHER

posed this or that particular image. What is more important is that Vaucher was using the project *A Week of Knots* but attempting to open it up so that it might serve to create a space for a reconsideration of people's relationship with family and what it means to them. Perhaps some of the participants experienced a moment of alchemical transformation while working on creating a collage. It is honestly hard to know for sure without individually asking everyone who participated. But this likewise might be beside the point. What it shows is something that can be found across Vaucher's work more generally, which is how it provides tools and approaches that could be used for untying the sticky knots of dysfunctional relationality and violence we find ourselves enmeshed in.

This is how we can see how Vaucher, across decades of her work, has produced aesthetic tools and methods that both emerge from and feed back into the continued development of an antiauthoritarian counterculture. With *A Week of Knots*, this can be seen as manifesting in a way that embodies the essence of what Vaucher has tried to do across her work. There is a diagno-

sis of a pathological situation, namely the messy and often complicated nature of family life. But Vaucher does not simply want to present that as a universal problem, following the Anna Karenina principle that all happy families are the same while every unhappy family is unhappy in its own unique way. Rather, she takes up a collection of images of tension and dysfunction borrowed from Max Ernst and then intervenes artistically to untie them, to undo the blockages found within them, drawing on R.D. Laing. This is the role that artistic production can play within an antiauthoritarian counterculture: It does not tell everyone what a problem's solution is in a didactic manner. That would be propaganda in the negative sense. Rather, it provides some ideas and resources that people can draw from if they choose to. Here we could recall the old Crass slogan, "There is no authority by itself", thinking through what that could mean when used at the level of shared artistic practice.

Toward the beginning of this article, I considered the paradoxical position that Vaucher inhabits as an artist, her style being widely influential and taken up around the world while she remains comparatively less well known. In a way that is not a problem at all but rather something that is an interesting feature of her work. It was never about cultivating a cult of personality around Vaucher as an artist or around any individual members of any of the various projects that she has participated in over the years. What is interesting is that what was produced could be taken up and reused to create another kind of space for different forms of relationships, of organizing, of life. This can be seen in the literally hundreds if not thousands of bands and artists who have taken inspiration from the music, design, and overall artistic productions that Vaucher has been enmeshed in creating. The important aspect is not whether the people drawing their inspiration from the work know all the details of its production, from the artists' names to any number of myriad details about this or that aspect of the work. What matters is that it resonates with them, it moves them, and they use that as an impetus and motivation to go and create something, whether artistically, socially, or really in any manner.

This for me is the key and most fundamental aspect of Vaucher's work: Not a particular technique or approach but rather a bringing together of an approach that can be repurposed into collective tools for exploring and creating new forms of living and relationships. This explains aspects of her work that might otherwise be quite confusing. For instance, why present a hyperrealistic and extremely skilled gouache painting in the form of something that at first glance is a collage? Because by appearing to be a collage work, this both highlights the impermanence of what is portrayed—that the situation depicted could (and often should) be otherwise—and also that the artistic process used to create it should not be understood as insurmountable either. This is the "anyone can

do it” spirit of opening spaces for creation that has animated the projects that Vaucher has worked on. What is produced is not a definite answer, a set solution, but rather a set of ideas, perhaps tools, that can be taken up by others to create their own spaces, to find their own ways of living and relating together. What is perhaps more striking is the realization that, while it is relatively easy to see that kind of inspirational DIY dynamic in Vaucher’s best-known works with Crass, a similar sort of spirit and approach can be found to infuse the range of Vaucher’s work, including much more traditionally understood forms of artistic production. The question, then, is ultimately not one of trying to fix the definite interpretation of Vaucher’s work, whether art historically, sociologically, or otherwise. Rather, it is a question of what we might do considering what she has done, what knots might be untied, and how might we be able to live differently having freed ourselves from them.

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