

## Reverend Billy: The Dialectics of Walking on Water

Tim Blunk, MFA

“The goal of this nameless art form—part vaudeville, part insurrection, part communal recreation—was to shatter the pretense of objectivity” (Hoffman, *Autobiography* 114).

“The major religions are not yet moribund, but when they are not already in bed with the economic and political powers that be, they tend to be so preoccupied with past problems and outmoded perspectives (e.g., pronatalism) that they are increasingly irrelevant (e.g., fundamentalism) or trivialized (e.g., television evangelism). The result is that up to now they have been unable to offer what is most needed, a meaningful challenge to the aggressive proselytizing of market capitalism, which has already become the most successful religion of all time, winning more converts more quickly than any previous belief system or value-system in human history.”

David R. Loy, “The Religion of the Market”, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 65, No. 2. (Summer, 1997), pp. 275-290.

“Sing this all on one note, with the high-pitched resolved anguish of the Episcopalian sad-sack Christianity. At the dash at the end of the line, take a breath, then sing the last part of the phrase also on that same note.

Ready?

We believe in the God that people who don't believe in God – believe in.

We believe in shopping the way that people who never shop – do their shopping.

We believe that Convenience – is not convenient.

We believe that supermodels are – state terrorism.

We believe that to stop crime you don't have to – kill your city.

We believe that you didn't have to squeeze me but you did, but you did – but you did.

We believe that if a sweatshop worker finds out that one morning of Michael Eisner's income would feed her family for ten lifetimes then Eisner is already closer than he realizes to being – forced to share.

Take one big breath and say it fast:

We believe in the return of the indie bookstore, mom-and-pop apothecaries, small vendors, sex workers, and stoops with open containers that have liquid content of all kinds and where you might have to stop and weather the feeling that you are wasting time and find yourself telling a story or – being told a howler that you might have to retell with your own adornments and expurgations.

The reader will be seated.

Children! Can you believe this?”

(Talen, *What Should I Do if Reverend Billy Comes to My Store?* pgs. 24-25)

Some people have a special talent for comprehending and then seizing a moment. Sometime in 1997, in the thick of the euphoric Clinton boom years, actor/playwright/storyteller Bill Talen donned the jacket of a leisure suit and a \$5.98 clerical collar from a religious goods supply house and transmogrified into Reverend Billy. He had something to say – about the growing power of the corporation and its hold on popular culture, about the seizure of public space, gentrification, and the transformation of citizens into consumers. He grasped the power of spectacle and had correctly analyzed the right-wing fundamentalist Christian movement as having tapped into something important quite aside from the particular vagaries of theology. Antonin Artaud believed that theater is everywhere and that its true value “lies in its excruciating, magical connections with reality and with danger.” (quoted in Raskin, 119). Talen saw theater in the ranks of the Holy Rollers, and like the Fluxus movement, he embraced Herbert Marshall McLuhan’s dictum that “the medium is the message.”

Or it might have been the hair. With a bottle of platinum blonde hair dye, Reverend Billy began to take on the aura of a Jimmy Swaggart, but with left-wing, anti-corporatist politics. Talen is a necessary performance artist for the new century in the tradition of Abbie Hoffman and Lenny Bruce, who acknowledges his ancestors from Fluxus and Dada. In adopting the trappings of the Christian fundamentalist in an age of competing fundamentalisms, Reverend Billy has flipped this particular dialectic and gave it legs to walk all over Giuliani’s new look Times Square.

In 1997, Reverend Billy began preaching, alone, with a megaphone on the sidewalk outside the Times Square Disney Store, eventually conducting "preach-ins" and political "actions" inside the store, which led to several arrests. From these humble, experimental

beginnings, Talen met his partner Savitri Durkee, and together they established the Church of Stop Shopping (during the height of the Iraq invasion it briefly was renamed the Church of Stop Bombing) and the Stop Shopping Gospel Choir. The Church has a regular home at St. Mark's in-the-Bowery, but more often than not, the Reverend, Savitri and the Choir can be found on the streets performing between "the tight proscenium arches that are in the subways, in the lobbies of buildings and in parks." (NY Times). The Stop Shopping Gospel Choir, composed of professional singers and musicians, quite frankly kicks ass. They are as good as any gospel choir you'll find, but the lyrics, composed by Talen, are utterly subversive messages against shopping, bombing, and fundamentalism. The Choir comes straight out of the tradition of SNCC and the Civil Rights Movement in understanding how important music is in reaching the soul and mitigating fear. Humor and *fun* are the critical components that have been added to the mixture.

Reverend Billy has become most famous (or infamous) for his store interventions or "exorcisms" at Starbucks, Wal-Mart, the Disney Store and other box stores. The Reverend, Choir and entourage (including the notified press and Church of Stop Shopping photographers and videographers) typically enter the stores and begin singing. Store security freaks out. Managers make various attempts to intervene before calling the cops. Meanwhile, Reverend Billy conducts a ritual laying on of hands on the cash register (in the case of Starbucks) and implores the customers to return to the mom and pop diners in their neighborhoods, and boycott coffee that isn't designated "Fair Trade". There is more singing, often with many of the customers joining in. Usually, everyone retreats in

time to avoid arrest, but there have been several. The Reverend has spent several days in the Tombs contemplating his transgressions of the law.

Starbucks's issued a national corporate memo to all of its locations under the title, "What Should I Do if Reverend Billy Comes to My Store?" This, naturally, became the title of his first book.

More recently, Reverend Billy has met with the kind of critical acclaim that political performance artists either could only dream of or would revile as a sure sign of selling out. He has been preaching 90-second sermons on National Public Radio's "Morning Edition" program and performing solo plays, directed by Tony Torn, David Ford and Vanessa Klimek, in small theaters in New York and New Jersey. Talen, Savitri, and the Choir have traveled extensively in Europe and to college campuses around the US. He is the subject of two forthcoming documentary films, and he just completed a new book, *What Would Jesus Buy? Fabulous Prayers in the Face of the Shopocalypse*.

With the Church's success, Bill admits that they are now constantly being hit with the "H"-card ("hypocrites") by journalists. But no one around the Church of Stop Shopping is getting rich, and the message only seems to become more pointed – and effective. Based largely upon the Church's efforts (led in large measure by an informative and activist website that, according to Talen has received over 1 million hits:

[www.revbilly.com](http://www.revbilly.com)) Starbucks has been forced to retreat from its efforts to prevent Ethiopian coffee farmers from trade-marking their Sidamo variety.

## **Fluxus, the Diggers and Night of the Iguana**

Born in Minnesota in 1950, Talen was brought up in a strict Dutch Calvinist tradition that he rejected at 16. After graduating from Franconia College in New Hampshire and occasionally taking part in antiwar and civil rights protests, he moved to San Francisco and became a performer, employing storytelling routines that incorporated music and poetry. The activist culture of that city was heavily influenced by the guerrilla theater San Francisco Mime Troupe as well as the Diggers with whom the Mime Troupe and Yippie activist Abbie Hoffman were associated. The Diggers espoused a communitarian anarchist philosophy based upon a gift economy. They operated “free stores” where anyone could come in and get free food or clothing. They staged regular happenings such as the Death of Money Parade that targeted the American drive for accumulation and consumer culture Talen acknowledges Abbie Hoffman as one of his performance artist ancestors. They have much in common in their use of humor to drive home a political message, their irreverence for all that the corporate powers worship as holy, and even in the use of religious ritual.

Hoffman’s most famous action took place during the October 1967 Mobilization Against the War in Washington, DC, where he and fellow organizer Jerry Rubin organized an alternative to the straight marching protest that was planned. Instead they led an attempted levitation of the Pentagon, asking people to come the site and with chants, prayers, dance, and music they would raise the building off of the ground, turn it orange,

make it vibrate, and in so doing, end the war in Vietnam. Some 50,000 of the 150,000 protestors who came to Washington went to the Pentagon; the action was heavily covered by the press.

Abbie Hoffman's other well-known protest exposes some of the roots of the Reverend Billy. In August 1967 he led members of the Yippie movement to the gallery of the New York Stock Exchange where they threw fistfuls of dollars down to the traders below. Some of them booed; others scrambled frantically to grab the money. Hoffman claimed to be pointing out that, metaphorically, that's what NYSE traders "were already doing". Hoffman attempted to recreate Bertolt Brecht's form theater: rather than settling for creating a moment of empathy or catharsis, his goal was to stimulate critical thinking, and more important, action: "The goal of this nameless art form—part vaudeville, part insurrection, part communal recreation—was to shatter the pretense of objectivity" (Hoffman, *Autobiography* 114). Objectivity implies distance and intellectual removal. Hoffman, like Brecht, wanted the audience *involved*.

Hoffman, a devotee of culture theorist Marshall McLuhan, was supremely conscious of the use of the media, of spectacle, and the need for humor in activism. For this he was often criticized by the straight Left for not being serious about revolutionary politics; others saw him as a self-aggrandizing clown. Only in hindsight, following his death (an apparent suicide, although disputed by many) has his impact on the American cultural landscape of the 60s become apparent. The Reverend Billy draws heavily on Abbie's calculated use of humor, audience participation, the requirement that activism be *fun*, and in the considered use of

available electronic media. Had he been levitating the Pentagon today, Abbie Hoffman would clearly have built a killer website. Reverend Billy might have been invited to preside.

When Bill Talen arrived in New York in 1994, he became an artist in residence at St. Clement's Church, where he began developing the Reverend Billy character under the guidance of Sidney Lanier. Mr. Lanier is the former vicar of St. Clement's, a cousin of Tennessee Williams and the model of the character T. Lawrence Shannon in Williams's play, "The Night of the Iguana." The play was later made into a movie directed by John Huston and starring Richard Burton as Shannon. Bill played a video version of the film's famous opening scene for me at his apartment, marveling at Burton "going native" (as Bill called it) on the uptight, upscale congregation.



As Bill Talen's most influential mentor, Sidney Lanier embodied the crucial elements of who Reverend Billy was to become. Sidney, according to Bill, as a young

pastor in New York City, had “gone native” on his own upscale Episcopal congregation. His punishment by the Diocese was to be cast out to St. Clement’s – at that time a derelict church for derelicts in Hell’s Kitchen. Responding to the challenge and embracing his own love of theater, Lanier aimed St. Clement’s mission at the nearby theater district, creating an experimental church with its own in-house American Place Theater. Lanier believed that the Episcopal liturgy was moribund, and that more could be taught through the theater of the absurd. St. Clement’s became a place where novelists Niccoli Tucci and Philip Roth experimented with drama. American Place also stage many new works by Albee, Lowell, and Lanier’s cousin, Tennessee Williams.

Sidney Lanier had also befriended an iconic humorist/radical/iconoclast of a previous era. Strangely enough, Lenny Bruce had also made use of a clerical collar and priests vestments. Lanier was a character witness at Lenny Bruce’s famous obscenity trial in Miami Beach, Florida. Billy refers to Bruce as a “Druidic verbal force.”



Perhaps Sidney Lanier saw Bill Talen as another fellow traveler, and set him on a path that strangely inverted his own life experience. The unconvinced priest became an actor who convinced an actor to become a priest.

## **Savitri Durkee and Fluxus**

Savitri Durkee is in every sense a partner in crime in the Church of Stop Shopping. She is surely not the “minister’s wife.” Savitri is the other principle architect of the interventions, she is the logistician, the PR person, and hers is the voice of reason when things start to go hairball at Starbucks. Her own roots in performance art are deep; her pedigree unassailable. She is the daughter of Steve and Barbara Durkee of the 1960s media collective, USCO (“the Company of Us”) based in an old church (here we go again) in Garnerville, New York. USCO identified itself with the Fluxus movement and included media artist and poet Gerd Stern, Robert Rauschenberg, and John Cage. They made art with the explicit intention of changing the consciousness of the audience. They toured museums and universities in the U.S. and abroad with their light shows, media productions and kinetic installations. Their work, which incorporated multiple slide projectors, film, channels of sound, strobos and oscilloscopes, helped define the psychedelic era. USCO was chosen from among artists including Andy Warhol to design and produce the media for the discotheque, “The World,” featured on the cover of Life Magazine. The collective later toured with Timothy Leary.

Savitri’s mother has become a Buddhist, while her father converted to Islam and is now an Imam. Her own trajectory took her to the theater but away from religion or “spirituality.” In my interview with her, Savitri said that they steer clear of loaded words like “spiritual” or “god”. “*God* is a word that you use when you don’t know what else to say.” Instead, at the center of the Church of Stop Shopping project is “the satisfaction of

life.” Everything changed for them, she said, when they gave up the idea of *careers*. In this respect, both Savitri and Bill identify strongly and consciously with the Dada movement.

“Art forms and artists themselves have become commoditized,” says Savitri. “Do these three things, and you can be an artist. Do these other three things, and you can be a *professional* artist. At that point, not only is your art reduced to a commodity, but you as an artist have become one as well - a brand. This is the opposite of being an artist.”

“Our direction has much in common with Dada,” said Bill. “They were survivors of World War I – they could have gone post-nihilistic. Instead, they incorporated into their work a *starting over*. This has a lot of resonance for us. We use it a lot. We think of these as End Times.”

### **Beyond Dada, and Way Past Ideology**

Reverend Billy and Savitri have embarked on a performance art project that has an unparalleled longevity. The key reason for this is the concept of their art is one that they live in their own lives. Bill Talen has not morphed into Reverend Billy (although Savitri reminds him of when he is going in and out of character). Rather, at the philosophical center of the Reverend Billy persona is an authentic, joyfully subversive way of life. In an era such as ours, where capitalism has become the new religion, the Market is God; the old fundamentalisms compete for smaller and smaller parcels of the ideological

terrain. The answer cannot lie in turning back the clock two thousand years or more in the hope that religion can make an ethical stand for humanity against capital. The genius of the Church of Stop Shopping is in the subversion of the trappings of Christian fundamentalism (the favored fundamentalism of the current ruling elite) while attacking the holiest of capitalism's tenets.

In the corporatization of America, the state itself is ever more privatized and corporate. As this is the case, then our relationship to the state is changing as well: We are no longer principally citizens, but consumers. Thus, as Reverend Billy pointed out in one of his sermons at St. Mark's, following the attacks on 9/11, the president of the United States exhorted us all to go shopping. According to this logic, the police have become corporate bouncers (the GATT demonstrations in Seattle) and our soldiers in Iraq are reduced to store security.

Reverend Billy challenges the diminishing of the human subject under capitalism in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. According to the corporatist logic, our worth as human beings is measured not by who we are, or even by what we possess. Rather it is measured in what we have the capacity to purchase within the next 10 minutes. This is the message on the most personal level of self-definition.

However, the Church of Stop Shopping does not stop there. Critical to the project is the store intervention. This performance art is not limited to galleries or theaters or event St. Mark's or Judson Memorial. Indeed, the power and glory of the coming of

Reverend Billy happens when he leads the flock into the sacred private spaces of the retail environment. It's Jesus, this time in drag, crashing the temple and turning over the tables of the money lenders. ("Call security...") In the post-9/11 environment, in fact, there has been a steady erosion of public space. The space that remains is increasingly surveilled and cordoned off. Concomitantly, private space becomes ever more sacred, ever more jealously guarded. When Reverend Billy and the Choir enter Starbucks, or Wal-Mart, or Victoria's Secret, the sense of corporate outrage is palpable in the air. It is as if a church or temple has been defiled. Such is the power of the trespass.

"I have done this before, political acting on the sloppy stage of someone else's property. I know it is not easy to do well. The trespassed space is so charged that once you go in it's hard to remember what you wanted to say, it's hard to say it if you remember it, and it's hard to hear it if you say it." (Talen, pg. 3)

There are elements here of Bertolt Brecht's theory of imposing a state of discomfort and self-consciousness upon the audience so as to reduce the distance between audience and performer. Yet when it is done with the trappings of a Christian revival, led by a Jimmy Swaggart look-alike, the tension is defused long enough for some of the legions of anaesthetized shoppers to do something that they are almost never called upon to do: think critically.

As part of the performance art experience, shoppers/viewers are also challenged/invited to join in. People who would never consider attending a regular church service, and many who do, find their way to St. Mark's or wherever else the Church of Stop Shopping is in session. Part of the lure is the music, and of course the

humor, the outrage of the transgression. Much of the attraction comes from being a participant for once, and not a mere spectator to the latest corporate spectacle. To attend the Church of Stop Shopping is to sing, stomp your feet, and shout, “Change-a-leuya!” There is also the sublimely satisfying feeling of watching our whole faux-“Christian”, Bushian oil-corporatist neo-con reality show anti-culture stood on its head. But it is not camp. It’s not rant or political diatribe. These services for those of us who “believe in the God that the people who don’t believe in God believe in”, are paradoxically infused with something real. Something powerful that you wouldn’t call spiritual. They ring with the truth. And in these times of relentless government spin, prevarication and outright deception, when everything is marketed, branded, logoed and super-modeled, that is worth shouting about.

Amen.

References:

Dee, Jonathan. "Reverend Billy's Unholy War." *New York Times Magazine*. March 23, 2007.

Durkee, Savitri and Talen, Bill. Unpublished interview with author. Brooklyn, New York. 2007.

France, Bruce. *From Guerrilla Theater to Media Warfare - Abbie Hoffman's Riotous Revolution in America: A Myth*. Masters Thesis. Louisiana State University. 1999.

Goldberg, RoseLee. *Performance: Live Art 1909 to the Present*. Henry N. Abrams, Inc. Publishers. New York. 1979.

Hoffman, Abbie. *The Autobiography of Abbie Hoffman*. New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 2000.

Hoffman, Abbie. *Revolution for the Hell of It*. New York: The Dial Press, 1968.

Jezer, Marty. *Abbie Hoffman: American Rebel*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1993

Kalb, Jonathan. "The Downtown Gospel According to Reverend Billy." *New York Times*. February 27, 2000.

Loy, David R. "The Religion of the Market", *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 65, No. 2. (Summer, 1997), pp. 275-290

Raskin, Jonah. *For the Hell of It: The Life and Times of Abbie Hoffman*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996.

Reverend Billy and the Stop Shopping Gospel Choir. DVD and CD. The Egge Company. New York. 2004.

Talen, Bill. *What Should I Do if Reverend Billy Is in My Store?* The New Press. New York. 2003.

Thompson, Nato and Sholette, Gregory, Editors. *The Interventionists*. Mass MoCA Publications. North Adams, Massachusetts. 2004.