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Modern Subjects, Chapter Zero

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“The only way of knowing a person is to love them without hope.”

Walter Benjamin

“To do good is but a question of time.”

Antoine Wiertz

Have you ever visited the Wiertz Museum? I hadn't either. I encountered this peculiar site one November morning, in 2019, while looking for a subject in Brussels (I often refer to local art histories in my exhibitions or Chapters, as I call them). The Wiertz Museum was like nothing I had ever seen, read or heard about. I was shocked — and so resolved to take it as the subject for this chapter, *Modern Subjects, Chapter Zero*.

It was almost an accident that I found out about the Wiertz Museum, nestled on a street next to the European Parliament. Hardly anyone I knew had ever heard of him or has ever visited. There is next to no serious writing on him. Marcel Broodthaers had heard of him though and probably took Wiertz's “theoretical inflation,” as he called it, as a critical model for his own artist's Museum. From my standpoint — that is, the shattering circumstances of 2020 and the landscape of failure implied therein — I am unable to summon fantasies of glory like Wiertz did in his time. Envisioning scenes

like gigantic women cracking iron canons over their knees, or like the statue of liberty holding a torch aloft as she rips a sword out of the defeated male sex. Well, maybe I can, but my point is, Wiertz's vision of the actual social circumstances in his time seems, now, eerily intact.

One painting in particular convinced me to pursue Wiertz as a subject. Hung high in a green wallpapered room under a skylight, *Hunger, Madness, Crime* (1853) depicts a seated young woman holding her head in her hands. Recalling Michelangelo's *Pieta*, we see a swaddled infant lying in her voluminous lap. Blood stains the folded fabric. On the floor to her left is a tax bill, and on the hearth to her right is an iron pot boiling... a little foot. I subsequently discovered that this painting was based on an actual event about which Wiertz had read in the news. He hoped, at the painting's unveiling, to raise awareness for the plight of working mothers. Profits from its exhibition would fund the construction of a day-care center for their children. This

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turned out not to be the only example of the ways Wiertz hoped his atelier museum could work towards the public good.

The problem seems to have been that the critics and connoisseurs found his pride shameless. He proselytized too much and couldn't take criticism. His painting skills, these critics might say, were insufficient in light of such troublesome characteristics. "He doesn't know how to draw, and his stupidity is as massive as his giants," Baudelaire is quoted as saying. To this and the other numerous insults that have been hurled at Wiertz I say: calm down your arrogant cringing. Don't look at Wiertz like you do at other painters. Resist the impulse

to attend discretely to individual paintings. Diffuse your attention outward past his roughly hand-painted frames and grasp the context of the museum as a whole, as it presents a panoramic expanse filled not only with every genre of painting, but also of sculpture, drawing, architecture, music, gardening, social activism, and philosophy. It seems appropriate now to recall this train wreck of history which barrels beside us into the always just-ahead tunnel of the future. Maybe it will turn out that Wiertz's revolt will succeed and that at the other end, a giantess awaits, ready to break our armaments in two over her sturdy knees.

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