

“DO WOMEN HAVE TO BE NAKED TO GET INTO THE MET. MUSEUM?” THE GUERRILLA GIRLS’ *ODALISQUE*: MODELS AND MEANINGS¹

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Resumo

“Do women have to be naked to get into the Metropolitan museum?” foi a questão colocada pelas Guerrilla Girls a todos os habitantes de Nova Iorque com o objetivo de abalar a consciência artística. Depois de um estudo sobre o tema chegaram à conclusão de que se apenas uma minoria de artistas mulheres estava representada nos museus, 85% dos nus eram femininos. Tendo o corpo da *Odalisca* de Ingres com uma cabeça de gorila como ponto de partida; uma história do nu feminino ao longo da história será analisada criticamente desde a pintura erótica, *Vénus* de Ticiano. O mesmo corpo perfeito do cânone clássico foi aqui usado com um fim completamente diferente. Enquanto um quer um lugar na sociedade por ser visto e a única maneira de ser visto é através da sua beleza, o outro procura um lugar na sociedade por todos os meios menos a beleza... nunca por usa o corpo perfeito. Enquanto para alguns isto pode parecer óbvio, o significado desta interpretação não deve ser subestimado. De facto, esta abordagem às inflexões únicas do significado do corpo e poder feminino, ao mesmo tempo que cita e evoca a arte clássica, ataca-a no coração distorcendo-a em termos de morfologia, iconografia, função e significado.

Abstract

“Do women have to be naked to get into the Metropolitan museum?” was the question put up by the Guerrilla Girls to all New York inhabitants seeking to shake art world consciousness. After making a study on the subject they have raised that even if a minority of women artists is represented in the museums, 85% of the nudes are female. Having the body of the *Odalisque* by Ingres with a gorilla head has a starting point; a story of the female nude throughout history will be criticized since the erotic painting of Venus by Titian. The same perfect body of the classical canon has been used for completely different ends. If one wants to get a place in society by being seen and the only way of being seen was using its beauty, the other demands a place in society by all means less beauty... never by using the perfect body. While to some this may seem obvious, the significance of this interpretation should not be underestimated. In fact, this assessment of the unique inflections of the body meaning and female power nowadays at the same time that quotes and evokes Antique art, attacks it in the heart by distorting it in terms of morphology, iconography, function and meaning.

Keywords: Guerrilla Girls; Venus; odalisque; nude; female.

Palavras-chave: Guerrilla Girls; Vénus; odalisca; nu; feminino.

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After the Guerrilla Art Action Group (GAAG) and the Art Workers' Coalition (AWC) in the late sixties, and the Women Artists in Revolution (WAR) in the early seventies, a new feminist group seeks to shake the art world's consciousness: the Guerrilla Girls group of women who uses satire as a political performance with feminist purposes. Although Whitney Chadwick places them in a context of political activism, the Guerrilla Girls try to avoid ideological and personal grandstanding and opt for more rational and objective factors such as statistics and data. In *Satiric Impersonations – From Aristophanes to the Guerrilla Girls* by Joel Schechter, the Guerrilla Girls' use of satire is considered a political performance as well as the performance of politics. They are renowned for having adopted since the beginning some guerrilla tactics and having played out some "actions" in the streets in gorilla drag, disguising themselves to avoid retaliation, at the same time that they satirize their hypocritical society where true identities might put them on danger. They also use code names of dead female artists or writers to be all equal and have an equal voice, keeping anonymous a diversified group of women of different ages, race, sexual orientation, and different levels of success in the art world.

In 1985, their first outdoors to appear in the Soho neighborhood in New York included a list of well-established male artists concluding that "they allow their work to be shown in galleries that show no more than 10% women artists or none at all" (VICENTE, 2000, p. 25). One year later they already concluded that "the Museum of Modern Art showed only 13 women of the 169 artists in their international survey of painting and sculpture show or that the Carnegie International [Pittsburgh] had only four out of 42 (...)" and they ironize this by saying that this was by chance, because "there was no sexism, conscious or unconscious, at work" (SALISBURY, 1986, s.p.). In 1987 the *New York Magazine* saw them as one of the promises in the art World and in 1988 the National Organization for Women presented them with the Susan B. Anthony Award, but in 1988 when the MOMA, organized an Exhibition dedicated to visual arts in the form of posters, the Guerrilla Girls once again weren't invited to participate (WITHERS, 1988, p. 285). This was a big mistake because their *Odalisque* poster became internationally renowned.

In fact, New York buses displayed some outdoors with a body of the *Odalisque* (1814) by Ingres with a gorilla head on a yellow background. "Do women have to be naked to get into the Metropolitan museum?" was the question put up by the Guerrilla

Girls to all New York inhabitants. After making a study on the subject they had come to the conclusion that if a minority of women artists is represented in the museums, 85% of the nudes are female. In 2004, the numbers were worse: 3% of women artists are represented in the Metropolitan Museum, but 83% of the nudes are female (MUSÉE INGRES et.al, 2008, pp. 172-173).

Having has a starting point the Guerrilla Girls' *Odalisque*, the aim of this study is to analyze the models for this nude and its meanings. How contemporary art has attacked high art and influenced the interpretations of past nudes and how the Guerrilla Girls, consciously or not, have also used and benefitted from the visual attraction of a beautiful female nude even when criticizing the abuse of the female body as a sight, are also some of the inter-related reflections of this article. [image 1]

Using Aby Warburg's methodology of the *Bildatlas Mnemosyne* (HAMBURG, 1927) and the techniques to our disposal, we have put on a digital blackboard more than a dozen of images of Venus since Antiquity until the Guerrilla Girls' *Odalisque*. With this atlas we expect to activate different and more accurate interpretations of the images in relation with each other than if we would analyze each image separately. Instead of the chronological sequence typical in Art History studies, the alternative *Mnemosyne* allows us to identify the survival of compositions, forms and meanings: in the case of a citation or a direct remission to an antique work of art or, even, an appropriation of the image as a *ready-made* or an *engram* (a reproduction somehow related with the original) and the way they metamorphose the original significance.

Chadwick says they “packaged their protests in provocative sexy bodies topped by gorilla masks” (CHADWICK, 1995, s.p.). In fact, the problem is more complex than this. In the poster the Guerrilla Girls use not only the memory of a female nude, but of a female slave, a “beautiful, vulnerable woman whose goal in life is to be sexually desired” (WEEKS, 1992-1993, p. 33). The Guerrilla Girls' *Odalisque* takes us through the relation between Women and the Arts, mostly between the uses of the female body by the art world in the particular sense of the erotic images, such as the *Odalisque* by Jean-Auguste Dominique Ingres (1780-1867).

Ingres came to Rome in 1806 to complete a fellowship at the Académie de France and stayed there until 1824. This painting was ordered by Napoleon's sister, Queen Caroline Murat of Naples (1782-1839) during that period, in 1813, and was probably a matching piece to another nude, *La Dormeuse de Naples*, destroyed in 1815. Concluded

in 1814 and delivered but not paid for, the *Odalisque* was recuperated by the artist and exhibited at the Salon in 1819. This painting was seen as Ingres' break from Neoclassicism and his master Jacques-Louis David (1748-1825) towards the exotic and historical branch of Romanticism that appealed to the artist's taste and allowed him to represent the refinement and luxury of these legendary female beauties. An odalisque was a female slave in the household of the sultan in the Ottoman Empire, ranked at the bottom of the social stratification of the harem, whose fortune would only change if she had a sexual encounter with the sultan and then became his concubine.

The reclining nude is depicted lying on her back but she turns her face to the beholder. The erotic charge is here immediately reinforced by the title and all the exotic decoration that involves her. The curtain behind the female head is not green as in Titian's *Venus*, or red as in Velázquez's *Venus*, but blue with a pattern that easily recalls oriental textiles. Again the textiles under her body use the blue and golden colors, but the white sheet is recuperated from Titian's *Venus*, while Velázquez has chosen a black one to put under *Venus* flesh.

When it was first presented at the Salon of 1819, the critics remarked the lack of anatomical realism and capacity of imitation – the head was too small, the back too long and the left arm shorter than the right arm. In fact, Amaury-Duval (AMAURY-DUVAL, 1924, pp. 281-282) has said in 1878 that this odalisque would have three vertebrae more, but further medical studies noticed that the *Odalisque* by Ingres had five vertebrae more than any real woman (MAIGNE et.al, 2004, pp. 342-344). The deliberated long lines favored sensuality and accentuated the idea of the woman as a sight. The *Odalisque* by Ingres is directly drawn from the *Portrait of Madame Récamier* (1800) by Jacques-Louis David and from the sculpture *Paolina Borghese en Vénus Victorieuse* by Antonio Canova (AGNORELLI et.al, 2008, 162-167), but it also recalls some Early Modern Paintings such as *Venus of Urbino* (1538) by Titian and the *Toilette of Venus* (1647-51) by Vélasquez.

In fact Ingres' *Odalisque* is regarded as a direct in *L'Artiste* (1855) "une Italienne déguisée." (RIBEIRO, 1999, p. 228) Her body is – unlike those of Ingres's bathers and his later odalisques – completely occidental, and her head and ornaments derive not from distant lands but from Renaissance beauties painted by Raphael and his contemporaries.

Indeed, I would argue that the Guerrilla Girls' *Odalisque* moves beyond the idea of the body as an object to interrogate misogyny and its relation with erotic images as a

process which takes place at the interstices of female reclined nudes since *Venus of Urbino*. A lot has already been written on this painting and just to recall some of the most distinguished positions we can evoke Erwin Panofsky, whose over interpretation of Titian's nudes as Neoplatonic images of the senses generated a reaction in authors such as Hans Ost in Germany and Charles Hope in England. For them, Titian's *Venus* can't be anything more than an erotic or even soft pornographic image, just as we evaluate “pin-ups” nowadays. Then, we have a series of authors such as Rona Goffen, David Rosand and Daniel Arasse, who offer complementary views, and whose interpretation of Titian's Venus is different from the previous ones. They see Titian's Venus as a sexually free woman, in a contemporary sense. These experts reject the overly positivist as a reductionist approach of scholars as Ost and Hope, but also of Panofsky. In the most recent book by Frederick Ilchman all these positions are accepted, as he says:

“whatever its social function or the status of its model, the image of the reclining female nude cannot but carry with it the resonance of classical mythology. The naked lady on the couch, whether intended as the goddess or seen as a posing courtesan, was susceptible to a full range of interpretations: she could represent the lowest level of the hierarchy of love, bestial lust, the highest, divine love, or an intermediate stage, the licit passion of marital love” (ILCHMAN, 2009, 176).

The critiques advertised by the Guerrilla Girls take us to the central question of the use (and abuse) of the female body in erotic paintings conceived to awake the sexuality of the beholder. In Titian's Venus, we are not faced with a body or, indeed, the likeness of any person, yet the questions of whom, and for what purpose, are all the more pressing for our critical judgment. “Who is she?” was the question wondered for many: Was she an ancient goddess or a modern courtesan?

Titian's painting, as T. J. Clark points out in *The Painting of Modern Life* (CLARK, 1985, pp. 93-94), was regarded in the nineteenth century as the portrait of a courtesan, although in fact it was possibly a wedding portrait from Guidobaldo della Rovere to his young bride Giulia Varano in 1534. Titian's Venus wasn't accompanied by any explanatory text, and there isn't any literary source, so the possibilities of interpretation are very ambiguous. Nevertheless, we can identify its visual sources: the

Sleeping Venus (1508-10) by Giorgione and the ancient *Venus Pudica* by Praxiteles. The problem is that Giorgione's *Venus* sleeps in a landscape and the *Venus Pudica* is naked but her attitude is quite modest trying to conceal her nudity. Titian's *Venus* is the opposite of all this: she is awake, looking at the beholder, and reclining on a bed in a setting where specific clues to its customary use are painted, such as the marriage chests, called *cassoni*. The landscape can evoke the Arcadian milieu where the goddess comes from, but not a room. This room evokes intercourse. Moreover, the nude's pose derives from the ancient *Venus Pudica*, but the fact that Titian has made her lie on a bed, has changed all the significance. The reclined body with its almost spiraling pose of fluid motion is anything but *pudica*.

Even if she has been described only as "the naked woman" by the Duke of Urbino Guidobaldo della Rovere (1514-1574) there is no doubt that the representation is of Venus because the figure is accompanied by her attributes, roses and pearls³. Malcolm Bull adds that "in later inventories the terms "naked woman" and *Venus* are almost interchangeable" (BULL, 2005, p. 211). Being the goddess, it is certain that Venus has an ambiguous connotation described in antique primary sources "as the symbol of the life of pleasure. Venus they explained either as the good things of life according to the Epicureans, or as the empty things of life according to the Stoics, for the Epicureans praise pleasure but the Stoics condemn it: the first cultivate license; the others want no part of it."⁴ In *Genealogia Deorum*, Giovanni Boccaccio goes even further and say that Venus is naked because this is the way people are when they intend to have sex, or because lust takes everything away from people being that the reason of her nudity. Anyway, as Malcolm Bull prompts, if the accusation was serious in moral terms, that erotic charge allowed Venus to elevate desire into cultural affairs (BULL, 2005, p. 211).

The association between the goddess and prostitution had a long history and it made it easier for people to see her naked. There are a lot of Renaissance texts on this significance because, unlike the other gods whose nudes are much more a consequence of their classical models, for Venus the nude is part of her identity. On the other hand, comparison with Antique nudes, created in pagan times, has to be accurate because the

³ "David Rosand and others have argued that she and the various related figures by Titian do represent the goddess Venus: these women have the attributes of that goddess, roses and pearls, for example, and they assume a variant of the "pudica" pose that is typical of her.", in Goffen, Rona. "Renaissance Dreams". *Renaissance Quarterly*. v. 40, nr 4, Winter 1987, p. 697.

⁴ Fulgentius, *Mythologi*, translated by L. G. Whitbread. <http://www.theoi.com/Text/FulgentiusMythologies2.html#1> consulted in 24.08.2011.

context is totally different. During Renaissance, there was a clear shame towards the body, appearance and sexuality [inflamed by Reform, Counter-Reform, Inquisition, having as a consequence the condemnation of lascivious pictures, as in Johannes Molanus' treatise untitled *De picturis et imaginibus sacris* (1570)], nevertheless, at the same time, we attested the rediscovery of the nude and the cult for its beauty.

Eroticism was “approved by theologians in one situation only, namely when a husband has withdrawn from his life before she has made her own emission, which was believed necessary for conception” (GOFFEN, 1987, p. 699), and, there is a remote possibility that the *cassoni* and the dog were included in this painting to elevate its morality in the context of marriage. But these two elements might be there just to compose the scenario. To offer visual pleasure to a misogynic audience is the main goal of this painting and other Renaissance nudes as Charles Hope pointed out in *Titian* (HOPE, 1980, p. 82).

There are a lot of nudes, of female nudes, that might be interpreted as truth in art, as search for beauty (though the conception of the beautiful woman as the archetypal image of beautiful art is already misogynic, as the Pygmalion's myth shows), but not these ones. Since Antiquity, artists wanted to represent beauty and nothing was so beautiful as *Venus*, but this association between *Venus* and the idea of beauty, brought some other associations that are not naïve. Nancy Etcoof argues in *The Survival of the Prettiest* that there is a certain ratio between the measures of a female body and a positive male response, which she classifies as an esthetical one. So, the image of *Venus* has regulated not only beauty in Western World, but also concepts of sexual pleasure.

These paintings were ordered by men, created by men and seen by men. Exhibited in the most private areas of their palaces, even in an academic context as we may see in the picture *Uffizzi's Tribune* (1772) by John Zoffany (c. 1733-1810), where a group of nobles especially appreciate especially two female nudes – *Venus Pudica* and *Venus of Urbino* – they were to be seen only by men. Sitting the paradigmatic female nudes within the space of the Uffizzi's gallery is an open door for us to interrogate the aim of such pleasurable aesthetics of female bodies' exhibition. Misogyny was not only the daily life in Renaissance Venice, but more a “pan-cultural” fact, as the anthropologist Sherry Ortner has argued.

Between 1647 and 1651, the Spanish painter of Philippe II, Diego Velázquez (1599-1660) painted a reclining Venus. He called it the *Toilette of Venus* but here, Venus'

toilette is just a title. *Venus* looks at the mirror sustained by Cupid, but there is neither a maid nor any object indicating the toilette. The goddess is no longer seated in front of a mirror, as it is typical in this kind of subject, but reclined on a bed, completely naked. On the other side, the red invades the picture and it almost gives the whole sense to the painting. *Venus* doesn't look at us, and we can't even see her face in the mirror. In fact, by effacing identity, by eliminating the face, Velázquez is giving us a much more misogynic work of art than Titian. This *Venus* is just an idealized body offered to men's voyeurism. **[Image 2]**

If Velázquez and Ingres had painted the back of Titian's *Venus*, she is directly recuperated at the same time she is criticized by Edouard Manet (1832-1883). The *Olympia* (1863) by Manet makes it clear that he understood Titian's *Venus* as a courtesan and that the painting asserts the presence of a male beholder who becomes a "paying costumer" in the *Olympia*. The space of the absent body is replaced by in-between dynamics. *Olympia* featuring a prostitute seeks a certain ambiguity and classical imperial echo thus her name derives from the Mount Olympus, being *Olympia*, Jupiter's consort. Manet replaces a goddess with a prostitute, being clear that Manet regarded the *Venus of Urbino* as a "pin-up" of Renaissance Venice. In fact, the *Majas* by Francisco de Goya (1746-1828) might be considered the first representations of a woman of free spirit. Goya refused the mythological context and an academic way of painting. When we compare it with Titian's *Venus* besides the reclined pose, nothing else is related. There's no more background, no modest gesture, no mythological allusion. It is not a goddess but a real woman that is offered to the beholder. Nevertheless, in Renaissance Venice, there was no space for a sensual and seductive woman, treated as equal (as some authors want to read Titian's *Venus*), and Goya still had problems with the Inquisition because of *Majas'* paintings, even if he was not depicting a prostitute.

Charles Bernheimer affirms that "the most scandalous representation of a prostitute in nineteenth-century painting, Manet's *Olympia*" (BERNHEIMER, 1989, pp. 255-256) met a lot of critiques when it was first seen at the 1865 salon, where it was first exhibited, and says "Olympia's scandalous modernity, [...], is due to its simultaneous activation and exposure of the dynamics of the production of woman as fetish object in patriarchal consumer society" (BERNHEIMER, 1989, p. 255). Clark demonstrated that even professional critics could not understand its modernity nor articulate a coherent and

intelligent discourse towards *Olympia* in terms of form, content, technique, sources or purpose (CLARK, 1985, pp. 93-94).

Nevertheless reclaiming an inaugural place in art history, *Olympia* owes a lot to Titian's *Venus*, to pornographic photographs in many of which the women stare out at the viewer (NEEDHAM, 1972, pp. 80-89) and to some Antique and Baroque works of art. *Olympia* has the same reclined position as the one Titian created for his *Venus* and maintains the hand covering the sex, just as it was in the *Venus Pudica*. The foreground composition recalls evidently Titian, not only because of the nude, but also through the representation of white sheets and a domestic animal at her feet – a cat in *Olympia* instead of a dog. The difference is that Manet effaces the background and turns explicit the role of the reclined nude by including a black maid that brings the flowers of a client (a solution already used by Rubens in his *Venus' Toilette* with the objective of exalting the white flesh and blond hair).

T. J. Clark remarks that Manet's *Olympia* has indelibly altered our view of the *Venus of Urbino*. The fortune of a work of art in Art History also depends on the amount of times it is rethought, recreated, and it becomes a model and an inspiration to many others works of art. Even when Larry Rivers (1923-2002), in 1970, creates something such as *I like the Olympia with black face*, eliminating the correspondence between a courtesan and white race and maidens with the black race, the memory of the original *Olympia* is very clear and we can also recognize the *engram* of Titian's *Venus*. These representations somehow evoke the male and androgynous critics towards *Olympia* already in 1865.

The same interpretation was put forward by Mel Ramos (b. 1935) in his *Manet's Olympia* (1973), where he has maintained the black maid with the bouquet of flowers, but replaces the cat by a monkey and the blond hair is set in Marilyn Monroe's style. The satire is taken even further when all of Manet's references are kept, but the prostitute is substituted by a male one, such as in Yasumasa Morimura's (b. 1951) *Portrait* (1988).

We can also point out some contemporary works of art such as *Plenti-Grand Odalisque* (1973) and *You get more salami with Modigliani* (1977) by Mel Ramos, *Situation-Citation or Orlan en Grande Odalisque d'Ingres* (1977) by Orlan, *The odalisque replaced by a black man* (1999) of Rima Jabbur, and a Japanese geisha entitled *Odalisque (after Ingres)* (1996) by Julien An that have been used to support feminist contestation and have associated pejorative connotations to the former *Odalisque* by

Ingres. Because history is a continuous process of retrieval and projection, this response to Ingres' painting generates a different set of questions about intentionality and reception of the 19th century work. Some artists, such as Lourdes Castro, have used it as a stylistic exercise, Broodthaers as a conceptual one, Souzouki and Lallemand as a corrosive one and others as a satirical one, as is the case of fat *Les Grandes Odalisques* (2004) by Jill Miller. How do these artists become themselves by remaking Ingres, and, of equal importance, how is Ingres remade through their intervention? Answering these questions will allow us to demonstrate the way the Guerrilla Girls came to be made through repetition and how Ingres was remade in that same act.

By putting the body of the *Odalisque* by Ingres in posters circulating on buses, high art has been vulgarized, and a private gender became public. The mutilation of the image by replacing the head – concept of beauty, symbol of distant thoughts – with a gorilla mask, has also underlined the pelvic area of the painting by Ingres. Oriental exoticism was a phenomenon of attraction and was transformed into a *topos* where women are diminished. Contemporary remakes of high art in movies, videos, magazines, advertisements and posters by bombarding us with pictures of bits and pieces of that same art take the risk of gracing dictionaries of erotica with Ingres' odalisques.

Finally, and returning to the poster by the Guerrilla Girls and their critiques towards the abuse of female nudes in painting, we want to argue that with this poster the Guerrilla Girls have also taken advantage of the visual pleasure and ability of a female nude to be appealing.

In *Venus [is] in exile*, Wendy Steiner said women came “from a supreme symbol of beauty to an object lesson in the need for aesthetic discipline” (STEINER, 2001, p. 72), but we can't deny that the paradigm is present. The Guerrilla Girls have used a body of a painting where the female nude is displayed invitingly to the spectator. Why haven't they used a painting such as *The Blue Room* (1923) by Suzanne Valadon (1865-1938), also inspired in Titian's Venus, but depicting a heavy, dressed and smoking... real woman⁵. Painted by a feminist and depicting a woman who is much more interested in herself than

⁵ Ann Owens Weekes, op. cit., p. 35. This author includes Venus in the category of odalisques: “The position is one of natural relaxation but also resembles in superficial, obvious ways the poses of provocative nude odalisques by earlier artists.”, in Ann Owens Weekes, “Students' Self-Image: Representations of Women in “High” Art and Popular Culture”, in *Woman's Art Journal*, vol. 13, nº 2 (Autumn, 1992 – Winter, 1993), p. 32.

in giving pleasure to others, *The Blue Room* has all the ingredients to be a Guerrilla Girls first choice. But it was not.

Is seduction completely absent in the Guerrilla Girls outdoor? Georges Bataille declares that “the erotic value of feminine forms is linked to the effacement of that natural heaviness” (BATAILLE, 1988, 158). Ann Owen Weeks has showed Suzanne Valadon’s representation to students and they said it “was fat and unfeminine.” (WEEKS, 1992-1993, p. 32) This made her think: “Why should women students be embarrassed by a representation of a woman they view as negative?”(WEEKS, 1992-1993, p. 32). In fact, the beauty paradigm is still present or as the author prompts it: “new traditionalism has won the imagination of many young women.”(WEEKS, 1992-1993, p. 32) And she adds that the frequency of this type of representation over centuries is an evidence of this idea as a model for women. Ann Owen concludes by saying “those who accept – even at the unconscious level – the concept of woman as a sight will respond positively to the Ingres and negatively to the Valadon.”(WEEKS, 1992-1993, p. 35).

In Carol Small’s review of the book *Confessions of the Guerrilla Girls*, to the question “Is the book a success?”, she answers that

“It may well meet the same fate as their other work: informative, humorous, entertaining, and collectible but with the significance of its very serious messages ignored, blurred by laughter and soon forgotten. Like so much of feminist activism the work of the Guerrilla Girls in not over yet” (SMALL, 1998-1999, p. 39)

As a group they became recognized at an international level and adopted strategies of the entertainment world, forgetting that the use of the female nude may have produced subversion on one level showing the foolishness or wickedness of an idea, while reinforcing the *status quo* on others.



[Image 1]



[Image 2]

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