

# Wetterling Gallery

## OUTLAWRY A Tale of Kissin' Cousins

Ronald Jones

I'm a man of means by no means  
King of the road

Roger Miller

### I

Ever heard of "Outlawry?" As a practice, it emerged in Middle English between 1350 and 1400. Spelt then as "outlauerie," it may seem arcane today, yet still holds a place in our legal and social lexicons. Etymologically-speaking outlauerie stems directly from the German word *Vogelfrei*, literally meaning, "Free as a bird," or if recast in the higher cultural register familiar to our twenty-first century ears, it translates to something like: "unconstrained by convention and tradition;" with hindsight its definition could even be taken as a foreshadowing of the avant-garde. Gradually an interesting, if sardonic shift took place in the etymology of *Vogelfrei*, essentially displacing its meaning to *be free*, with *being banned*. And if that seems counter-intuitive take another moment to let it sink in. In essence, the meanings of *Vogelfrei* and outlauerie become intertwined as an ironic paradox; banned from one place, yet reasonably free to go anywhere else you desire until you are banned once more. Tracing through the *Bamberger Halsgerichtsordnung*, 1507 (the Bamberg Penal Code), the shift in meaning becomes transparent, and following on, entangled meanings between notions like "freedom" and "outlawed" become inevitable. Banned from the normative avenues of society gives you an alternative sort of freedom within the "outlawed community." There you may be said, with no small degree of irony, to be free as the animals in the wild. Article 241 from the *Bamberger Halsgerichtsordnung* reads: "As you have been lawfully judged and banished for murder, so I remove your body and good from the state of peace and rule them strifed and proclaim you free of any redemption and rights and I proclaim you as free as the birds in the air and the beasts in the forest and the fish in the water, and you shall not have peace nor company on any road or by any ruling of the emperor or king." Effortlessly you detect the confusion between the meaning of *Vogelfrei* then and now, because today, to *be free as a bird*, untethered to convention, is a state of unqualified aspirational independence. Or, as Roger Miller put it, singing his 1964 hit *King of the Road*,

Third boxcar, midnight train  
Destination... Bangor, Maine.  
Old worn out suits and shoes,  
I don't pay no union dues,  
I smoke old stogies I have found  
Short, but not too big around  
I'm a man of means by no means  
King of the road.

As Miller tells it, we can only ask, could there be a person more contented than The King of the Road? In 1507, however, to be King of the Road, to be free as a bird, meant to be free from the possibility of redemption, a state birds and animals and fish need never worry about really but we do, given our spiritually perishable souls. In effect, the King of the Road - in the *Halsgerichtsordnung* style - was a living paradox: admittedly one amongst the animals, the instinctual savage who is past redemption to be sure, but as well the Human-King; he whom has a certain providence over his own destiny.

So, *free as the birds (Vogelfrei)* implied, in certain 16<sup>th</sup> century circles, freedom from civil society and the church, and not least freedom from civil and holy redemption, and in their place, existence as the scorned, if not heroically out-sized, heathen/savage. Outlawry was a matter of being condemned to a life beyond the protection *and the redemption of the laws* of either church or state (to be, in other words, free as a bird). But freedom always comes with its price; in England it was often the case that a person condemned to outlawry would be killed on sight, because after all, he lived freely beyond the law and therefore one could reason, he too lived beyond society's guarantee of individual civil rights. The reverse of that coin is that women were "waived" out of outlawry by the state. Even if their deeds against society sat comfortably within the realm of the outlaw, it seems to have been that they were largely saved from being cast out from civil society or otherwise murdered by fellow citizens who were known to take matters into their own hands, settling moral scores by exercising *their own righteous civil duty in the name of their own state*. Outlawry then, defined as a human-bound threat to conventional and communal values, darted alongside the forward-most fringe of civil society, a safe haven of sorts but not always, because from time to time the reach of the law's righteousness caught up.

Culminating in the last century, not only did outlaws inhabit this fringe of social space, but shared it with certain notorious artists and writers who were circulating in and out of the same frontier flying the colors of the avant-garde. The quintessential summing up of this infamous periphery is *Pay for Your Pleasure*, 1988 where Mike Kelly included the portraits of notorious cultural figures from Sade to Bataille, along with their own signature quotes, each meant to trigger the scandalous and willfully transgress convention, if not civil law itself. And so Bataille's voice rises with a contradictory question: "The commitment to supreme evil is indeed connected with

the commitment of supreme good?" And from Sade: "Crime in itself has such an attraction that, independently of lust, it alone can inflame passions." Delinquency, he proposes, rivals sex for creating unbridled passions, . . . . and to think about it, . . . . I wouldn't at all be surprised. Furthermore, outlawry and avant-gardists like Bataille and Sade, if not sharing specific values, were aligned with a spiritedness thriving beyond convention, and as often as not, even somewhere beyond the frontiers. In the simplest of terms, the avant-garde and outlawry were kissin' cousins.

## II

Enter Linda Bäckström. If Mike Kelly tuned-in his art to the celebrities of fringe-culture - the Bonnies' and Clydes' - as popular and universal symbols, Bäckström flirts with the accessories of this same counterculture stream. Using a related but distinctly different frequency she tunes-in to the chattel standing in for the personalities, rather than the personalities themselves. Kelly inventories the persona, not least his own, along the bleeding edge, but Bäckström takes an archeological approach metaphorically unearthing desperado-accessories, the outlaw's steed, the stick-shift from the bandit's get-away car, and of course outlawed weaponry. Unlike Kelly, she never considers representing the anti-heroes themselves. Her exhibition therefore, possesses an intriguing "call and response" between her art and Kelly's *Pay for Your Pleasure*. He frames the personalities and she responds in-kind with the tools of the trade.

I would like to linger with Bäckström's *Saddle Tramp*, 2014 for a moment because it heaves with all the bravado of the quixotic renegade, the romantic outlaw. And yet it is equally, if oppositely true, that for all of that edgy verve vibrating from within the *chopper-culture* (*Easy Rider* the archetype) the vernacular but quintessential nomadic cowboy has notably abandoned his chopper's saddle in Bäckström's telling of the story. The outlaw is gone, and why? It is, as always with heroes, a story of emasculation. The American chopper, itself a motorized freak show is nearly the penultimate expression of masculine dominion, and yet here it is pitilessly emasculated, its engine and rear tire, the very ensemble designed to engage with the real world, in real time, dismembered. The engine - assigned to translating power into traction, and traction into action - has been severed from the rest of this once powerful machine, rendering the chopper even further disfigurement, which results - not in the restoration of its counterculture power - but instead a humbling impotence and enfeeblement. In this case outlawry has literally been separated from the engine of its rebellious derring-do.

But Bäckström's gifts also include a delicate and more poignant touch beyond the crude act of castration. Contentiously she has soft-landed us amidst the ruins of her framing of Bad Boy Culture, which is to be

sure a tricky piece of real estate to negotiate as we gather our bearings. This is after all a male protectorate, and yet, Bäckström's insights possess their own clear-throated voice. I am reminded of Camille Paglia's first essays where we were witness to both her deep honesty and howling criticism, but also the unpacking of open-handed and responsive solutions designed to bring society into further reform. Reform that would at least aspire to, if not insure impartiality and some version of parity between sex, class and race. Bäckström's attitude is in step with Paglia's early tactics to sound off in multiple quadrants of the world, from sex shows to board rooms, and with regards culture, both are associates to Roberta Smith's deft conclusions in her *New York Times* 2010 article titled "Swagger and Sideburns: Bad Boys in Galleries." Of another generation than Paglia and Smith, Bäckström helps in summing up where things seem to have gotten to; a camp version of "when attitudes become form" if you see what I mean.

To interpret Bäckström's exhibition by free association, because it demands this at certain crucial passages, I gravitate toward *Black Beauty*, and *Vanishing Point*, both from 2014. Respectively, Warrior Transports from the pre-modern and modern eras, the horse and hotrod have traditionally represented the business end of male aggression. We are invited to envision brutal speed converging on a vanishing point, and the viciousness of the First World War's tactic "charge attack" (also a tactic for video gamers) which was especially effective in close combat when the army fought from horseback.

Amidst all of this discussion of pitched ferociousness driven by bellicosity there is one thing worth to acknowledge which is as often as not overlooked when it comes to Bäckström's art, and that is its physical appearance. Let's face it, Backstrom's *Black Beauty* is a little pudgy to be the mount of an armored warlord, and rather appears more like Midnight Star stepping out of her dressing room on the set of *Manhattan Toy Groovy Girl Pets* (and ready for her close-up). And *Vanishing Point*? Well, constructed from thickish felt, "searingly streamlined" doesn't come to mind but rather a harmless chunky cartoon version of a roadster's powerhouse. Both beast and machine - under Bäckström's spell - are rendered innocent and blameless. You could imagine cuddling *Black Beauty* as easy as you could imagine coddling the drag racing engine. Now how about that for a surprise ending?

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