

It has been almost a year*

Nika DUBROVSKY

Artist and writer

It has been almost a year since David died, and it is still hard to believe it.

For the last five months of his life, he had been ill and complained of several strange symptoms, but nothing significant or life-threatening had been found by the doctors he had been seeing about it.

The shock I felt when within hours of feeling ill that fateful afternoon, on the beach in Venice, on the Lido, where Luchino Visconti's *Death in Venice* was filmed, where I watched my husband collapse, still hasn't faded.

Before David's, I had never seen a corpse. My grandparents died, but for all sorts of reasons, I never saw their dead bodies. A childhood friend of mine died in a car accident, but when he was buried, I stood far away and tried not to look at his corpse.

So in that hospital in Venice, my husband's was the first corpse I had ever seen. To me, he looked as though he had just fallen asleep, calm and even smiling a little.

I remember how I met David, years ago, long before we married. It was in downtown New York. We went out for coffee at noon and walked the city around all day, talking for hours.

We were so different, he and I: I was born in the Soviet Union, and he was raised in the "enemy's heart" of New York City. But I immediately had the feeling upon meeting David that I had known this man all along, that despite the distance between us, he was now my brother, an old friend, a comrade. Many who knew David personally described him having made a similar impression. Most people usually don't open themselves up so fully and quickly to strangers. David almost always did.

When I lived for a time in Jerusalem, I was surprised to learn that what Jesus refers to as hell in the Gospels is not some underground S&M dungeon staffed by devils and full of horrors. Christ was instead referring to a very

* *With kind permission of Nika Dubrovsky, we publish an excerpt from her upcoming longer text about her late husband David Graeber [N.d.R].*



specific place known to all during his time in Jerusalem: the garbage dump, where the corpses of the poor, the homeless, and the criminals were burned and their bones left to be scavenged away by dogs and other animals. When Christ warned sinners, “you will burn in hell”, he was issuing to those who stray from the light a very specific warning: if you do not invest your life with the living, you will die unloved and your corpse will be abandoned, fed to wild dogs.

As an anthropologist, David knew that societies are largely defined by their relationship towards the dead. Our rituals of caring for the dead, the celebration of their life, and the management of grief that follows loss, this is culture, this is what makes us human.

David Graeber was my husband, but he was also an amateur guitar player, a lover of Japanese and Kurdish food, an anarchist, a science fiction enthusiast, a professor, a writer, and, in a seemingly impossible way, a kismet friend to hundreds if not thousands of people all over the world. Given the outpouring of condolences that I have received since his passing, I have never once in this past year feared that David was at risk of going to hell, of being left forgotten among the bodies of so many others. Not with him living on in the hearts and spirit of so many people.

Shortly after his death, my friend Simona Ferlini explained to me the etymology of the word “corpse”. It refers to a body of laws or a collection of works. That I would soon after our marriage find myself dealing with both David’s corpus as well as his actual corpse is, of course, a great personal tragedy. I have to go through and probably will have to spend the rest of my life experiencing the destruction of most of what was dear, familiar, and precious to me. Locked as I was for an entire year in a small studio in the middle of pandemic-stricken London, I spent most of my time going through David’s archives, the writings he did not have time to publish, his diaries, his correspondence. The effluvia of any great thinker like David.

And even here I can see he lives on, I find as I am continually unable to contain my admiration to David Graeber and my joy of looking through what had made him who he was, what he laughed at, what fueled his courage, and how curious and unexpected it all seems in aggregate, on this side of his death.

Actually, it is a perversely happy feeling.

David Graeber was what the French might have called a *homme de lettres*. He lived to share his ideas and experimented with as many ways of expressing them as he could. Much like other noted anarchist scholar, Noam Chomsky, David made himself available to those outside of the academy and would speak almost everywhere he was asked. He poured over his lectures

and was writing virtually all the time. Anyone who knew David, who understood what motivated him knew that this was not out of vanity. Rather, it was a project to change the world, as well as change himself and the others, through ideas, texts, lectures, and speeches.

I believe his project is quite a success. He indeed made our world a slightly better place.

After David's death, this process must continue. Especially today, when changing the world is not a matter of ideological design, but of direct survival for everyone on earth.

David left an enormous archive – more than 100 notebooks, many notes, letters, unpublished texts.

But how do I do this correctly in a digital age?

There are many different traditions of how to treat the corpse. Unfortunately we live in a late capitalism with its brutal structures of symbolic powers and dominations.

Partly it connected to the old catholic way of “caring” for their dead saints. Endless body: bones, fingers, and so on, would be dragged around to various churches and put on display. Like always with the church, money and profit get involved. In our time, all this could be briefly called dismemberment and privatization of corpses.

I truly hope that this can be avoided with David Graeber's body of work.

So I plan to split David's archive into two parts: a physical one and a virtual one. The physical documents, along with his symbolic academic capital, should be kept (and protected) by a meaningful academic institution. After all, David's life has always been very much connected to academia.

But there must yet be another part – the non-academic one. David and I have written several essays called *Art Communism*¹. In particular, it describes the concept of “culture and the reproduction of culture” introduced by Alexander Bogdanov, the founder of the “Proletkult”. “Proletkult” worked to create horizontal links, interdependent relationships between teachers and students, and most importantly, a new ways of knowledge production and reproduction. The future free humans would be understood not as romantic creators, not as professional-intellectuals, but as amateur (or DIY, *samodeyatelnostl* in Russian) proletariat. Much of what Bogdanov and his allies described was later realized in the best part of the Wikipedia project.

I am looking at David's texts – his archive – as a very generous framework that provides space for horizontal connections, with open questions, doubts, unexpected links to different thoughts, with entry points for the reader-commentator almost anywhere.

1. Cfr. www.e-flux.com/journal/102/284624/another-art-world-part-1-art-communism-and-artificial-scarcity/

I am thinking about creating a wiki environment for all who would be interested to join, including and above all non-academics, so that we can not just read his texts or look at scans of David's (very beautiful) diaries, but have a space to complete, rewrite, compose and develop his works, and thereby create our own.

In other words to set up some version of the "International Proletkult", using David's texts as a basis.

Perhaps this will continue the space of sharing content, creating conditions for working together that David was arranging all his life. Through his texts David's magical power to form direct emotional and intellectual connections with people, in person or through his texts, will make his legacy a living and constantly evolving project in which all of us, his readers, will be involved. By commenting, thinking about and developing his projects, his thoughts, we will constantly shift the boundaries of public and private using our own experiences, our bodies and minds.

I would like to believe this kind an open to collectivity body of David's work is most consistent with the type of care he would practice and approve.