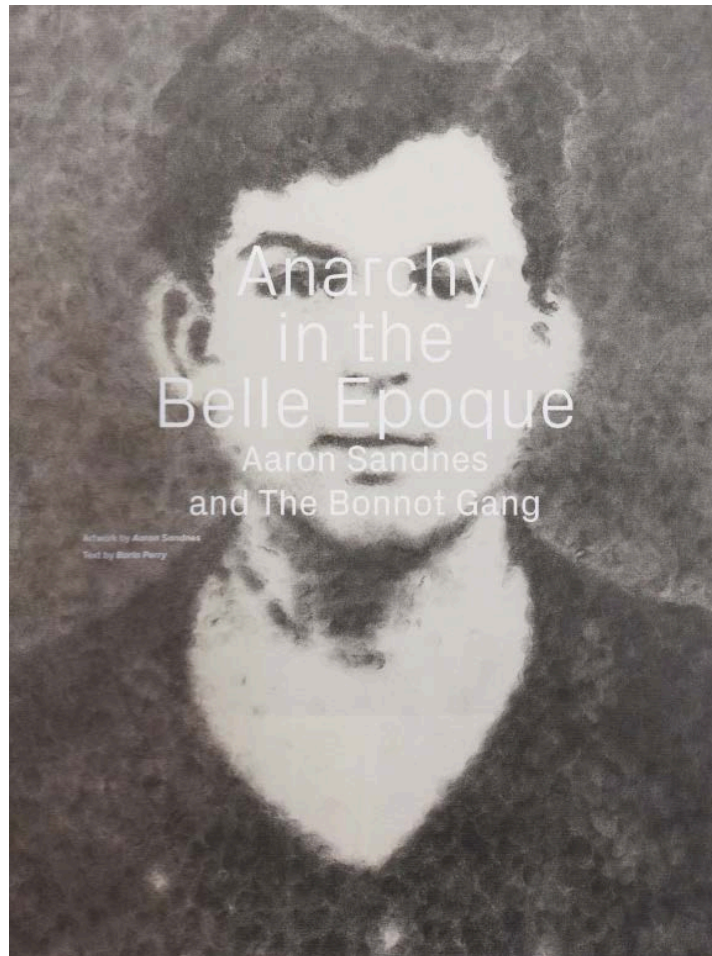


PARIS, LA



Anarchy in the Belle Epoque **Aaron Sandnes and The Bonnot Gang**

-Barlo Perry

The anarchistic impulse is not alien to France. In 1840 Pierre-Joseph Proudhon-the “father of anarchy” – announced that “property is theft,” and the movement was never so popular as in those decades leading up to the Paris Commune of 1871. The destruction that year of the Commune by the French Army marked the first time persons suspected of crimes were documented photographically. The decline of class- and movement- based anarchism following the fall of the Commune gave rise to a new strain of “individualist” anarchy based on the philosophy of “illegalism” – exemplary acts of “propaganda of the deed” meant to serve as invitations for others to revolt. Illegalism’s most famous proponents were the members of La Bande á Bonnot, a group which set off a wave of bourgeois pearl-clutching across northern France and Belgium in 1911 with their robbery of the bank of the Société Générale in Paris.

Memorialized in film, song, and literature – cinematic pop gangsters avant la letter – the group is still remembered today for a series of “firsts.” A keen interest in science and technology allowed them to remain two steps ahead of the authorities, goading them all the way. The Bonnot Gang were the first to escape the scene of a crime in a waiting, running motor vehicle. They were the first to shoot a repeating gun at pursuing authorities from said

vehicle. In a statement that foreshadowed any number of Black Panther scripts, gang spokesman Jules Bonnot declared, "We'll burn off our last round against the cops, and if they don't care to come, we certainly know how to find them." Ironically, following the killing or capture of most of the gang members by the end of 1912, the Bonnot Gang's brand of individualist illegalism was dismissed by most French anarchists as... bourgeois.

In March, 1912, gang founder Octave Garnier sent the French police a letter covered with his own fingerprints, knowing full well that, at the time, the law had neither the knowledge nor the means to identify or trace them. Using this as an aesthetic starting point, the artist Aaron Sandnes created *Desire Armed*, a series of Bonnot Gang portraits which were subsequently shown at LA>>ART. Based on mugshots and rendered with Sandnes' own fingerprints using print-dusting graphite on paper, these drawings recall Andy Warhol's little-seen 1964 series 13 Most Wanted Men. What Warhol's affinities were regarding his subjects, one can only guess. But in Sandnes' work we may read a message of empathy and shared alienation.

