

THE RESISTANT OBJECT

THE OBJECTED AND THE OBJECTING DOIN' IT FOR THEMSELVES

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ArtEZ



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Declarations by Student

I, Lucia Kramárová, hereby certify that I have personally carried out the work depicted in the thesis entitled “THE RESISTANT OBJECT – THE OBJECTED AND THE OBJECTING DOIN’ IT FOR THEMSELVES”.

No part of this thesis has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma to this date.

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Go to those who have delicate lust,

Go to those whose delicate desires are thwarted,

Go like a blight upon the dullness of the world;

Go with your edge against this,

Strengthen the subtle cords,

Bring confidence upon the algae and the tentacles of the soul

...

Speak for the free kinship of the mind and spirit.

Go, against all forms of oppression.

- *Ezra Pound*

Introduction

The manuscript of *The 120 Days of Sodom* written by Marquis de Sade during his imprisonment survived the sacking of the Bastille placed inside a hollow wooden dildo hidden within the walls of the prison. As Paul B. Preciado concludes from the Sade episode ‘(...) any dildo can eventually contain a book but also [that] a book can operate like a dildo by becoming a technique for fabricating sexuality. Like a dildo, a book is a sexual body’s assisted cultural technology of modification.’ (Preciado, 2018). Similarly, the account of my research is written in captivity, in tiny tight script in hopes of it being recovered from within a crude prosthesis (literally filled by endless potentiality). A prosthesis born from my body that secretly penetrated that very entity and subsequently a hard prison wall, to serve as a technology of modification for the finder-keeper. As this versatile object and its transformative power is accessible to me and my body, I aim to make it accessible to my reader may she be so inclined as to rummage through the ruins of my prison and take herself what I have passionately taken.

Where Sade possessed the luxury to commission his dildo-depository from his wife Renée-Pélagie, I am relying on my own DIY sensibility to design both curiously blending objects – the dildo-depository and the dildo-writing to fuck myself with in confinement. Both objects are therefore composed with what is most accessible to me – materials and actions contained by my humble cell, including my own body. The incarceration I am referring to here is the oppressive state of my own assigned femininity. You might sprightly ask, why do I continue to sit within its walls, when I

know I have been put there unrightfully? The doors seem to be open. There are many people currently proclaiming their liberation from their assigned genders. Why don't I just walk through the door and leave my femininity behind? This is because the simple device of a door is of no use to me. Walking through it without consideration of what I am leaving behind and how I am doing so would take me nowhere. Even if I manage to dispose of my unfitting assignment and unfitting body with utmost care, even if I perform all the required spiritual and medical rituals and put my femininity to rest and then take the route of the door, my femininity would not cease to exist.

Akin to mortuary ritual or certain operations of romantic love, the assignment, and the body I am attempting to dispose of would not suddenly disappear upon carrying out the proper rituals (and even less likely without performing them). It would transform leaving behind various kinds of remains – tangible and intangible. Simply walking out would only mean designating my femininity as something different, other, and unwanted; dramatically leaving it unloved and unburied to haunt me forever in the form of an unrestful ghost. Thus, I remain with it, I listen to it and scrutinise it, attempting to re-appropriate and re-design it into an object holding the power to reconstruct sex and sexuality. Admitting to the constructed nature of sex and sexuality I am making myself a prosthesis – I am constructing new pleasures. In the hopes that my design plans can aid other prisoners in transforming their own prisons.

To put it plainly: this research aims to establish a base for sensual practices of resistance against sex and sexuality consolidation by claiming and reforming the state of objectification. The concrete aspects of objectification that this research aims to subvert is the demand for openness and accessibility, the demand for readiness to act

on command, the demand for upholding a standardised aesthetic form and the demand to be palatable. In establishing these sensual practices of resistance, the research works with two material forms, my body and puppet theatre. The research process (in both scholarly and artistic context) is mediated by the dildo/resistant object viewed and used as a technology of modification (geared towards disorganisation) in close connection with the operation of love and death, and the adjacent methods of queering and gothifying. The research is largely autoethnographic and autoerotic in nature, focusing on the senses and sensuality as entry points into a relational, process-oriented poetics. The sensual aspect of the work leads into establishing the research as a project of ethics-as-aesthetics, where aesthetic choices are positioned as transformative and political. My body as well as puppet theatre figure in this context as conjoined twin entities bound by their common arrest in objectification, which is extracted from their linear history and allowed to acquire bodies in the artistic work *THE MYSTERY OF LOVE*. The analysis of the composition and activation of this artistic work unveils these object-bodies and suggests their transformative potentiality in the wider context of understanding sex and sexuality.

Fantastic Holes and Where to Find Them

‘The dildo is an ontological hole within the binary logics of sexual and gender identities.’ (Preciado, 2018) Aligning itself with the dildo my research opposes the essentialist binary distinctions governing the normative understanding of sex and sexuality by situating itself in the very hole the dildo constitutes. This positioning is as paradoxical as the dildo itself. Simultaneously an assertive object associated with a clear vector and an aptitude for penetration and an open space of decided indifference a research-dildo disappears only to reappear invigorated and transformed. The hermeneutic circle of a dildo emerging from a hole to create a hole to plunge back into and emerge anew is the mode in which the entire research is conducted. As the research is immodest and inquisitive there is not one hole and one dildo but many. Opening a hole within the binary logic of sexual and gender identities implies at least two other openings, one in the clear distinction between nature and culture¹ and one in distinguishing between interiority and exteriority².

In interacting with these holes by being their constitutive element as well as dedicated connoisseur the dildo does not fill them – it perpetrates them and widens

¹ The dildo ‘is an operator of the body’s sexual plasticity and of the possible prosthetic modification of its contour and identity. Perhaps the dildo suggests that the organs we interpret as natural (male or female) have already suffered a similar process of plastic transformation.’ (Preciado, 2018)

² ‘The strap-on denies the truth of pleasure as something that would originate in me. The dildo is undecidable. It contradicts the evidence that pleasure takes place in an organ that belongs to the subject.’ (Preciado, 2018)

their scope and grip. It brings them satisfaction in acknowledging them, however counterintuitive and taboo they may seem. It is no surprise that Preciado in his *Countersexual Manifesto* dubs the countersexual revolutionary, the ally of the dildo as ‘an anus and an anal worker’ (Preciado, 2018). What is dubbed as a perversion by the dominant structures, Preciado rightly reclaims as labour. For what else but labour is it to dabble in the dark, counterintuitive spaces of the forbidden opening, without clear sanction or convention. This research therefore takes on the responsibility of becoming an anal worker and extends its love and attention towards other neglected and marginalised holes – bodily and discursive.

As my suggestive language indicates, the interaction with these holes in the context of this research is an affair of pleasure. I make it such, because I believe that one of the key aspects of the revolutionary potential of the dildo that is simultaneously a hole is in the literal interpretation of the dildo/hole death and resurrection hermeneutic circle as an act of self-pleasure. The feminine subject is historically constructed as one whose pleasure is dependent on the other and dedicated to the other. I take the capacity for pleasure the construct of the feminine is endowed with and through the emergence of the dildo render it self-sufficient and potentially endless. Using my body as material to design the dildo from and use on is the materialisation of this process.

By constructing the dildo from materialities and actions which are closely associated with my own gendered human body, or directly taken from it, I aim to further accentuate and transform the talent of the dildo for displacing and denaturalising the origins of sex, sexuality and associated pleasure. I believe that the

uncanniness and inherent campiness of using organic, living material to construct the dildo instead of plastics (in a broader sense), uncovers and untethers even more poignantly the techne and plasticity of the human body from the dominant structures.

Once the organic dildo asserts its separation from the natural body it confirms the body need not be sanctioned by the marker of natural, original or binary, and the plasticity and techne of the body and all its ravenousness can be released to roam. For this purpose, I take myself, as I have been known, apart, to recast my femininity as a dildo. I am the source material of my research and through admitting to this materiality as well as the materiality of the dildo, the research is as much about me as a candle is about wax³. The construction is a construction of the other for the other – a perpetual distancing from a singular subject in order to build and carefully maintain a multiplicity.

This research however, as any lover has its taste and preference for one source of materiality in particular and that is the rich cavity of the mouth. Sade claimed to have spent his time in the Bastille reading and writing, eating, and masturbating. These actions are all based on relational processes of exchange – of different materials

³ ‘Fire burns cotton. Full stop. That’s the only way fire encounters cotton. Cotton’s softness, its color, and scent—its price, and where it’s harvested: all this (and more) is lost on fire. Fire burns cotton but it does not exhaust it. It never gets to its depths. And, more to the point, it can’t. Nothing gets to anything else’s depths, ever. Each object always exceeds what it is to other objects, and to the extent that an object encounters another object, it does so by “alluding” to it—that is, by a kind of translation: fire reduces cotton to its flammability. Flame translates cotton into its tongue.’ (Munro, 2015)

entering and exiting the body, producing concrete pleasure and concrete waste or remains. Be it text, food, various sexual paraphernalia or performative aids and devices that enter the body, in all these actions the body is becoming more than by exposing its plasticity and porosity – by exposing the working of its holes. Reading and writing, eating, and masturbating all flirt with subject/object divide, titillate it, question it, and cross it – they are all in their own right technologies of modification. The actions that I busy myself with in my prison are actions of the mouth. I will take from Sade eating (in a broader sense, including an erotically charged and downright sexual interpretation), but I will add also other acts of voicing and mouthing such as singing and speaking. The capabilities of the mouth do not end here, but for now I keep my list brief.

Eating, singing, and speaking are perceived and positioned in this research as actions strongly associated with the senses and sensuality and as such well suited to be employed in the pursuit of pleasure. Such an alignment designates these actions as the squires of aesthetics, associated by definition with the sensitive, sentient, and pertaining to sense-perception. In agreement with the philosopher and pioneer of object-oriented ontology Graham Harman I view aesthetics as the first philosophy, giving it precedence over metaphysics. I claim aesthetics as the discipline devoted to providing insight about objects and their relations and therefore as my primary tool in designing and interacting with the dildo. I favour aesthetics for its anti-universality and its insistent connection to the ‘flesh which constitutes life.’ (MacCormack, 2017). This aesthetics of the sensitive flesh, which remains anti-universal and anti-singular concurrently tips over into a posthuman Spinozian ethical project, which requires ethics to be figural rather than dialectic. This ethics exists in a world which cannot

conceive ‘(...) no body without mind, no individuality without connection, no connection without another individuated life with its own concomitant reality, no affect without expression, will as appetite beyond consciousness and, perhaps most importantly, no thought or theory without materiality.’ (MacCormack, 2017) This sensual ethics-as-aesthetics finds its roots in the material conditions and actions of the body such as eating, speaking and singing and revels in using their design and poetics to establish itself as a sensual practice of resistance.

Tradition, Honour, Discipline, Excellence

As Preciado claims in the Countersexual manifesto, ‘It doesn’t start with a call for revolution, but with the realization that we are the revolution that is already taking place.’ (Preciado, 2018). Similarly, this research does not strive to create or present anything utterly new, but rather enable the revolutionary potential of the body to be released and strengthened, turning its confinement into its ultimate weapon. This can be only attempted by challenging the outlook on the history of the body that shaped the ways in which it has been incarcerated and subjected to discipline. This discipline is intimately linked to the western project of modernity, strongly associated with the emergence as well the death of man and his relations to nonhumans and hybrids. The project of modernity, however rigid and organised it may seem, was itself paradoxically infested with the ‘revolution already taking place’ since its complicated conception.

In the book *We Have Never Been Modern* Bruno Latour lays out how the western project of modernity failed itself in mismanaging its own expectations to create a worldview and world order, which serves man decisively separated from nature. A primary tool used in this somewhat maniacal and inefficient process of purification was linear history, trying to keep the past out of the present as intensely as it kept apart humans and nonhumans (with hybrids remaining unspoken or fetishized). This process of creating an orderly history was meant to delineate and separate a savage past defined by the fabric of reality being seamless and undecided from a decidedly modern future, which seized, organised, and distributed the fabric of

reality into clear hierarchies and functions with man in centre (be this in his cradle or on his deathbed).

‘Historians reconstitute the past, detail by detail, all the more inasmuch as it has been swallowed up ever. But are we as far removed from our past as we want to think we are? No, because modern temporality does not have much effect on the passage of time. The past remains, therefore, and even returns. Now this resurgence is incomprehensible to the moderns.’
(Latour, 1993)

Similarly to my description of simply walking through the door of the prison of my femininity the modern notion of walking through the door of the prison of the past fails to admit that after such a sloppy operation the past does not disappear or become orderly tucked away, dead and done, but remains as solid as ever, ever returning. The connection remains, though maimed and confused and is treated by the moderns as a toxic anomaly, which must be continually managed in fighting for the future. A ghost which must be banished.

‘I may use an electric drill, but I also use a hammer. The former is thirty-five years old, the latter hundreds of thousands. Will you see me as an expert contrasts' because I mix up gestures from different times? Would I be an ethnographic curiosity? On the contrary: show me an activity that is homogeneous from the point of view of the modern time.’ (Latour, 1993)

This opposition is utterly futile since as Latour points out that any behaviour, as simple as doing home repairs, consists of elements, which cannot be exoticized and neatly separated into those of past and future. Any human is as modern as they are savage since they subconsciously employ techniques heir to both past and present and both of these categories are equally fictitious. Analogously, viewing sex and sexuality in line with binary logic within leads to enforcing a separation which is as fictive as it is ineffective. Discerning purely for the sake of taxonomy what elements of home repairs are inherently male or inherently female, inherently gay or inherently straight is as absurd as trying to pinpoint whether doing home repairs belongs to the savage future or the modern past.

‘The moderns confused products with processes. They believed that the production of bureaucratic rationalization presupposed rational bureaucrats; that the production of universal science depended on universalist scientists; that the production of effective technologies led to the effectiveness of engineers; that the production of abstraction was itself abstract; that the production of formalism was itself formal. We might just as well say that a refinery produces oil in a refined manner, or that a dairy produces butter in a butterly way!’ (Latour, 1993)

As Latour elaborates this error in judgement stems from confusing products and processes. Therefore, it can be said that to presume that the process of bureaucratic rationalization presupposed rational bureaucrats is as absurd as saying that the process

of producing binary distinctions in sex and sexuality presupposes the existence of binarily distinct sexes and sexualities. Not willing to repeat the mistakes of the moderns this research is situated outside of linear history.

‘Posthuman bodies do not belong to linear history. They are of the past and future lived as present crisis. This present, this crisis does not glide smoothly along a one-dimensional timeline but erupts or coalesces non-locally across an only partially temporizable realm of meaning.’ (Halberstam and Livingston, 1995)

The research thus distances itself from the prevalent anxieties of creating a singular and pure narrative of history, as it is invested in hindering a singular and pure interpretation of the body. Instead it aims the labour of investigating and validating unprecedented holes in these pure and singular systems towards activating a simultaneity and intermingling of histories and bodies. In this research, history as well as the body is caringly pitted against itself, to be pleurably consumed and reborn as the dildo finds itself in the hole and the hole in the dildo. In this process of freeing of forms the sensually wielded and accepted embodiment materialised in the dildo serves as an admitted prosthetic.

‘Posthuman bodies are not slaves to master discourses but emerge at nodes where bodies, bodies of discourse, and discourses of bodies intersect to foreclose any easy distinction between actor and stage, between sender/receiver , channel, code, message, context. Posthuman embodiment like

Harraway's feminist embodiment then is not about a fixed location in a reified body female or otherwise, but about nodes in fields, inflections in orientations Embodiment is significant prosthesis' (Halberstam and Livingston, 1995)

If I am to construct and wield this prosthesis adequately and proceed to unfix my research from the confines of a linear history that lent itself to the narrow idea of progress, employing even narrower conditions of what it means to be human and what it means to succeed, I can hardly rely on the techniques of the alleged winners. The official means of success are marked too deeply with the disciplines of the dominant structures. Here I divert from Latour who deems such squeamishness to be the result of a naive antimodern bias. I will however indulge my bias, and the reason for this is twofold.

Firstly, I cannot maintain a clear conscience whilst attempting a full symmetry of neutrality and intellectual coolness. Even though the revolutionary potential of any human subject, whose condition is inherently defined by mixed proclivities to the past and the future, to the human as well as the nonhuman, I feel compelled to side with the subjects and objects situated on the margins. I have too often recognised that the attempt to simply rest in the revolutionary potential of mixed forms without an explicit action and admittance to the 'present crisis' is not enough and lies dangerously close to complying with the disciplines of the dominant structures. As a straight and cis passing subject, I can be easily mistaken for one of the winners and I find it highly irresponsible to hold a balanced position (however intellectually satisfying it may be) while many of my comrades cannot access this luxury. I therefore make the conscious

choice to accept and even highlight my difference, even though this difference is somewhat artificial and might prove at times counterproductive and conceptually inconsistent.

The second reason for indulging my antimodern bias is the simple fact that is an integral part of the material conditions of my body. If I am to use the material of my prison and my body in it to construct and wield the dildo, I cannot engage in the act of purifying it beforehand of tendencies that might be intellectually unsightly or even rationally unsound. I feel that it is my duty to identify these tensions but getting rid of them immediately seems wasteful. As I have set out to use what is available to me, then that is what I will do.

My antimodern bias might create an artificial binary distinction in a research dedicated to opposing them, but it simultaneously helps me zero in on my responsibilities related to the reimagining of the body. It reminds me that my imagination is also imperfect and at times unclear. It is not a pure force. I have lived twenty-five years in a world, which does not favour dissident sex and sexuality and as much I might try to rid myself of the imposed disciplines, I can never be sure that I am rid of all of them. My antimodern bias is a result of life under these conditions and as such is not currently dangerous. But should other biases emerge indicating I have reached the limits of my imagination in this research and I am facing the danger of imposing new oppressive structures on dissident sex and sexuality, I will admit to these limits and remove myself from this process prioritising care over conclusion. As Patricia MacCormack says ‘The ultimate ethics might be letting go of imagining and

saying: it is beyond my capacity to imagine. If you begin to imagine too strictly, you might begin evaluating.’ (MacCormack, 2019)

The Chance to Be Frivolous, Promiscuous, and Irrelevant

Aware of this danger I have employed specific methods to safeguard my research from the dominant disciplines. These methods can be summed up under the term weapons of the weak. ‘The concept of “weapons of the weak” can be used to recategorize what looks like inaction, passivity, and lack of resistance in terms of the practice of stalling the business of the dominant.’ (Halberstam, 2011) I employ these methods because I consider it far less likely to submit to the dangers of veering towards the normative and prescriptive, while using methods that are traditionally associated with failure. These methods are generally more complicated, less intuitive, and less straightforwardly rewarding to employ. In working towards activating them I am given more time to consider my actions and their implications; I cross more explicit boundaries, I am faced with more resistance, more friction. These methods, akin to inanimate objects, have a capacity to be very telling in their constantly maintained tension with the normative/human. They provide more material for reflection than methods providing easy access and manipulation with my subject matter. The dildo already falls into the definition of the weapons of the weak being traditionally associated with ‘disability and sickness, perversion, and impotence’ (Preciado, 2018) and therefore ‘writes sex under erasure.’ (Preciado, 2018) Its design and use also significantly works towards stalling the business of the dominant by eroding biases thought of as certainties, around sex and sexualities in the hetero-patriarchal structure. Another term for the dildo in my research is the eponymous resistant object.

‘(...) the object which seems to assert its muteness in the face of the subject who would desire it to sing. When faced with the implacable thereness of the resistant object, the subject is seduced into wishing for the object to drop its veil and yield up its inner-secret.’ (Whybray, 2018)

The resistant object/dildo are my initial answers to the traditional narratives of emancipation, the traditional escapes, if not from femininity as whole, then from that which deems it unworthy, improper, and inconvenient. These narratives commonly prompt the subject in search of emancipation to distance herself from the state of objectification, which has been historically imposed on her and to move past it into a future unencumbered by this state is a large active gesture. This logic is an eerie equivalent to the modernist tendencies described above. Strongly associated with narratives of progress and success they urge the subject to enhance and embolden its singular subjectivity and strive to become one of the winners. Subjects following these narratives can therefore be easily co-opted and instead of their own liberation aid the dominant structures in the forming of a new market.

To avoid this trajectory, I propose an alternative route. Not the route of the winner, but the route of the loser, the misfit and the submissive, hoping that such a trajectory remains too unattractive and unsatisfactory for the dominant structures and therefore will not become integrated into a hetero-patriarchal market. Therefore, in my methodological approach low theory and low practice in cahoots with popular knowledge and popular practice take centre stage.

‘Low theory tries to locate all the in-between spaces that save us from being snared by the hooks of hegemony and speared by the seductions of the gift shop. But it also makes its peace with the possibility that alternatives dwell in the murky waters of a counterintuitive, often impossibly dark and negative realm of critique and refusal.’ (Halberstam, 2011)

Critique and refusal, especially in connection with the realm of the dark and negative are perceived as threatening because of the environment of toxic positivity the dominant structures invest in maintaining. Since happiness and success are defined as positive values the dynamic powers of darkness and negativity become taboos overwrought with superstition questioning the social order. The methods that I have selected disturb the procreating and coping mechanisms of the dominant structures through their investiture as knights of modification, care, uncanniness, and failure.

The most significant duo of methods I employ are gothifying and queering as abstracted from the operations of gendered love and death. These two methods, such as love, and death always appear in close connection in the research. In loving death and dying love I find ‘the most natural and sexually attractive manifestation of a concept and an encounter (un)imaginable. (MacCormack, 2017) A sensual and uncanny disturbance of identification and possession through identification.

‘In death we find not simply the transgression of a taboo but also the transgression of free ownership of our lives and the delights to be found in the former flesh of others as a queer celebration beyond identity, beyond gender, beyond sexuality,

even beyond politics, certainly when the most useless object, the corpse, becomes useful, even desirable, we have spat in the eye of a social contract that both denies and conceals the very existence of the corpse.’ (MacCormack, 2017)

In my specific interpretation of these two methods admit heavily to my emotional upbringing, cultural heritage and artistic practice and take inspiration from the structures of the Slavic mortuary ritual, the strategies of theatre of actor and puppet as conceived in the 60s in Central Europe, the poetry of the French troubadours and the confines of European courtly love, sensibilities of dandyism and current pop culture. All these places of inspiration are connected by a prominent practice of object-making, aestheticizing love/death, and a strong sensual aspect.

Two separate honourable mentions belong to the ethics and aesthetics of BDSM and all manner of bad taste (kitsch, glitch, camp, noise, etc.). In both cases I am focusing in the ‘pedagogical realm of the masochistic educator’- (Faust, 2017). Looking at the instructive and highly charged, unrelenting force of the subject/object thought of as the mere recipient, an appendage of the sadist. ‘We are dealing instead with a victim in search of a torturer and who needs to educate, persuade and conclude an alliance with the torturer in order to realize the strangest of schemes.’ (Deleuze, 1991)

God, you make me so tired

Isn't this the vision that you wanted?

Guess I'll never understand you now

Love is more than telling me you want it

I don't need the words, I want the sound, sound, sound, sound, sound

- *Carly Rae Jepsen*

Lay All Your Love on Me

The artistic work where these thoughts and practices come into fruition is an interactive website called THE MYSTERY OF LOVE⁴. The website opens with a page that contains two buttons ‘Enter’ and ‘Terms of Service’. The Terms of Service button opens a new tab with black text on white background signed ‘XOXO /Yours Truthfully / Yours Ever / The Sirens’. In this text The Sirens introduce the she-died-of-love figure, designating themselves as the keepers and carriers of the remains of this figure in perpetual will and need to disseminate, what has remained of she-died-of-love further and further, through the plasticity of their bodies, aided by touch, making said remains more and more delicate and irrelevant, ‘Until there is nothing left to tell.’ The Sirens approach the user using a sensual and evocative, almost titillating language, announcing to them that ‘She is lost to us. Once you enter, she will be lost to you too.’ The fact of the she-died-of-love figure being dead and gone due to its complete devotion to its love, which lead it to dismantle itself for to the point of death is indisputable to The Sirens as is its undeniable allure leading them to serve it. The Sirens do not instruct the user on how they are to serve she-died-of-love – they lead by purely example and seduction. The Enter button leads directly to a random position on a page called Sexy Music For Strange People, where images of different size, buttons and thumbnails of videos overlap in a collage. It is possible to scroll through the page in all four directions. Some of the images at the edges of the page are cut off, alluding to

⁴ Accessible at: <https://mysteryoflove.hotglue.me/?Enter>

a space beyond the page. The images, buttons and video thumbnails do not overlap completely and the space in between them is left blank (white). An image with the text ‘I have no pronouns, please do not refer to me’ appears in various places on the page covered by other images to varying degree, otherwise the images appear only once. Most of the objects on the page are clickable (all the buttons, all of the video thumbnails and a good portion of the images). The links open into new pages, either directly or on a new tab. These pages lead either to similarly organised pages with images, buttons and video thumbnails or directly to videos on Youtube. Analogously to the Sexy Music For Strange People, most of the objects on these new pages are clickable. They respond by opening links, randomly changing position or providing the option for the user to upload their own image to their view of the page. The links on the pages are organised in a web – one image on the initial page does not have one closed chain of progression, these chains intermingle and refer back and forth to each other. The music from the videos on the pages plays simultaneously unless the user chooses to switch some of the videos off. The video thumbnails are so small that attempting to view the visual aspect of the video is rather complicated.

In title of the work MYSTERY OF LOVE Mystery and Love are bound by the genitive case ‘which par excellence indicates a dependence: it binds one object to another to define (limit) its scope’ & (Szymanska, 2018). This dependence goes both ways making Mystery the measure of Love and Love the measure of Mystery. Since Mystery and Love are both rather expansive (boundless even) the attempt to quantify Love by looking at Mystery and by the same token Mystery by Love leads to the expansion of one another’s territories. Rather than referring to each other in a strictly partitive way (Mystery delineating the limits of Love and vice versa), the possessive

qualities of the genitive create a marriage of vast expanses with the narrow passage of the preposition between them – through Mystery the reader falls into Love and by Love the reader falls into Mystery.

This type of dependence that opens one object into another is used as a compositional strategy in the entire work mirroring the relationship of the dildo to the hole. Where the title is composed of two words, the work creates webs. This strategy answers the demand for openness and legibility of the feminine subject by opening the frame of reference of a single questioned object so wide that legibility is challenged. If each object that should provide the measure for the other continues immeasuring – spilling out rather than containing, legibility equated with clear comprehension becomes impossible challenging the initial bias that an object can be known through its measure. In this change of perspective, the user is guided to resign their capacity to know and is urged to utilise other capacities. The demand to sense rather than comprehend doesn't however eliminate the possibility to read the work, the expanded grammatical structures remain functionally in place, the work does not collapse into nonsense, it simply demands a different type of reading, where singular, enclosed interpretation becomes so laborious as to become completely unreasonable.

The title of the work THE MYSTERY OF LOVE uses all capital letters and in the pages within THE MYSTERY OF LOVE all of the words in their titles begin with a capital letter. In the English language a capital letter denotes a clear hierarchy as it most commonly appears at the beginning of sentences or in proper nouns. A slightly different approach appears in German, where all nouns are written with a capital letter. In capitalising all of the first letters in all words these words become equal in

importance, their objectness is enhanced as well as all of them are gifted with the implication of beginning their own operation. With no punctuation in use these titles function as a series of beginnings accentuating the movement outward that the body of work carries – they aid in its dispersion. Each word is then a strong and pointed arrow shot in a specific direction. But rather than beaming outward they web, continuing to be bound by grammatical structure and mutual dependence. In this context the capitalisation of the title suggests a possible independence of each letter, alluding at an attempt to unbind language. This strategy of giving meaning, autonomy, and importance to just about anything is another device that shifts the perspective of the user.

The type of reading suggested is a reading which echoes back to the mouth and other fantastical holes. The she-died-of-love figure voluntarily subjects itself to the fate of Arachne and THE MYSTERY OF LOVE is the result of this process.

‘All of her other parts, entangled, knotted in one knot, disappeared inside her womb; hundreds of tiny fingers-legs rose from the sides of the spider womb, whence she vented a fine thread. All this happened at once. And ever since the spider, arakhne with no capital ‘a’, weaves her web: her organs growing or decaying in the womb are emerging from the orifice as the finest thread, and the thread is woven into a web – a home, an arm, a fate.’ (Manchev, 2015)

Through its relation of dependence on its object of desire she-died-of-love becomes immeasurable and monstrous. It collapses into one hole and secretes itself delicately through another.

‘Arachne swallows her own organs but she excretes them again as a weapon: as a technical device, as a thread, in order to swallow, to devour, to incorporate and absorb, metabolically, other living organs – wombs in the womb.’

(Manchev, 2015)

When the user confronts the composition of THE MYSTERY OF LOVE they are compelled to follow this process, to read by collapsing their body into the holes of the imagery / the holes the imagery suggests in their body and to weave themselves out again. The web of THE MYSTERY OF LOVE metamorphoses the user. In reading the user is consumed and themselves prompted to consume and metamorphose she-died-of-love in a reciprocal ritual of mouthing one another. This reading/eating exemplifies the nature of the dildo, base and technological at the same time, highly conceptual and recognisably DIY in resonance with Arachne ‘Her ‘revolution’ is technical and regressive at the same time.’ (Manchev, 2015)

Drowned in Living Waters

The resistant object/dildo is embodied in this work by the elusive protagonist – an artificial mythological figure beckoned into (non)existence by the phrase “she died of love” mentioned above. All that is additionally revealed about this figure remains in close relation to the three key assertions found in this initiating phrase: it is referred to as “she”, it is dead, and it arrived at death by means of love. The figure is consciously designed as one lacking a fixed identity or official history and is instead dedicated and distilled down to one process: that of dying of love. Akin to martyrs and one-hit-wonders it is known for and known through one great deed. Its alleged femininity is the only semblance of identity assigned to it, but it is closer in function to an attribute of a saint or epic hero – an iconic element aiding the recognition of the figure and its actions within a larger mythological set. In this sense the figure wears or wields femininity rather than being feminine.

Love as an operation is used in this work in dependence to the operation of death. This is exemplified in the constitutive phrase of the main protagonist she-died-of-love that conditions its very existence as dying through loving and not much else. If love is extracted, death is not achieved, if death is extracted, love is not achieved – the figure does not perform its passionate purpose and does not step into (non)existence. This figure never speaks of what it is, is merely states that it is. It discloses a process that established it, not any semblance of name (in a broader sense).

Its femininity serves as a marker of its patronage and its constructed heritage rather than its essence, which dwells its joyous, sensual, and terrifyingly abject sacrifice.

Paring love and death in such a way as to solely constitute this figure creates a hermeneutic cycle, which rips love/death out of the social order and by proxy protects the figure from falling into the neurotic process of identification, commodification and dedication to perpetrating sameness. A love of a feminine subject is generally something deeply coded and disciplined, but by sheathing this figure in death the dominant disciplines lose access. They are frightened away by the taboos and superstitions surrounding the love of and towards a corpse (be it love romantic or sexual). Similarly, the death of a feminine subject is something that often becomes hijacked to the systemic machine of violence, but clothing this death in consensual love, the machine cannot exercise its functions. Violent, prescribed death cannot reach a subject, which has shed and taken apart its subjectness as an act of love. She-died-of-love simply got to herself first and “gave” itself according to its own ideology. The figure is thus continually queered and gothified through uninterruptedly asserting its thereness that is in loving that is dying and dying that is loving.

Its thereness is consistently manifest as decidedly seductive and alluring. In this seduction however, the user can be thoroughly seduced, while the figure cannot. It is so completely lost in its love/death that it does not require anything and in fact cannot accept anything in any capacity. As The Sirens proclaim ‘She is done. She had no ambition besides her love, and she gave herself to it. She offered and continued to offer. Until she could no longer act in body and soul; so skilfully she has taken them apart. She is not only the bread; above all, she is the crumbs and jots, pinches, scrubs,

and slivers. And less. Better than done she is overdone. Deliciously ruined. She passed herself on.‘ The user can therefore „have“ she-died-of-love (or what remains of it), the figure has no need for its self as we know it, since it fulfilled its purpose – not having itself anymore and distributing itself to its love. But this “having” of she-died-of-love is inherently the “having” of remains – a relation simultaneously perfecting and failing due to the assertive presence of love/death. It is a having through becoming aware that the possession of the desired object is impossible. A relation consummated by embracing the absence of the object and the absence of governance over it. The resistant object/dildo of she-died-of-love achieves this resistant position by submitting and surrendering to love death, through a position, which is in a sense thoroughly passive and negative. It lets go so thoroughly that the conditions of how it can be accessed, touched, and viewed become entirely non-negotiable. Its loss of subjectivity is its ultimate gain of agency.

There is no mention of the love/death of she-died-of-love being reciprocated. There is no proof of the effectivity of its gestures in reaching its own object of desire and being recognised as gestures of love. In fact, if anything, the composition of THE MYSTERY OF LOVE suggests that its love was not reciprocated or noticed. But she-died-of-love is so effective precisely for its capacity to engage in acts of love/death frivolously and pointlessly in a slow drawn-out, indulgent process of mourning itself, with no visible human partner in sight to validate its efforts. She-died-of-love is a resistant object/dildo in my hands and body and according to the alchemist logic of ‘as above, so below’ its love/death in its hands and body is a resistant object/dildo. Moulded from its body and its sensual interaction with its world, detaching the notion of a fulfilled love from consorting with another human – questioning the disciplines

and limits of love that is deemed fulfilled only when consummated and contained in the partnership of two gendered human bodies.

She-died-of-love is the ultimate ecstatic loser, paying no heed to the norms and expectations of succeeding in love. On the contrary, she-died-of-love embraces its failure and uses it to expand its body and its pleasures. In untethering its love from one specific human subject the techne and plasticity of its body is released to roam the entire world. She-died-of-love thus completely bypasses pleasure consigned to the genitals and eradicates its association with procreation jumping straight into the cool pool of self-eradication through self-love. Since its desired object does not manifest physically and neither does it reply to its advances, anything can become sensual and sexual. She-died-of-love encompasses the entire world in a daring masturbatory fantasy, where everything that it touches become assigned with love/death. She-died-of-love is Persephone at once in the world of the living and the underworld. She delights in not knowing whether she is coming or going. The resistant object/dildo truly manifests as an ontological hole in this context, confirming decidedly that it is not an imitation of a subject or a phallus, but an autonomous technology of transforming sex and sexuality. In a relation, where anything can acquire body and anything can mediate pleasure, a binary distinction ~~of~~ sex and sexuality becomes immediately arbitrary.

The user of THE MYSTERY OF LOVE is therefore confronted with scattered remains of this expansive fantasy – liquids and all as well as the full weight of she-died-of-love's decision to love/die, which is non-negotiable, irreversible, fully coherent and infectious. What is suggested to the user as a mode of interaction is to

further the decision of she-died-of-love – deepen its love by furthering its goneness, by expanding the materialities it has touched and made its messengers, by expanding its realm of love/death and carrying it further into frivolous irrelevance it gladly embraces. The user is then led to assume the same position towards she-died-of-love as it does towards its desired object. It cannot be seen, touched, comprehended or matter-of-factly approached. But this in turn gives the user the same possible liberties as she-died-of-love possesses. She-died-of-love might be very assertive and seductive in its (non)existence, but unless the user acts upon it and actively interfaces with it, it will remain at rest, it will not act upon the user. This is not meant to simulate or imply an illusion of complete freedom of choice. It is rather that the balance of scarcity and excess, depthlessness and depth and concreteness and vagueness in THE MYSTERY OF LOVE is specifically geared towards prompting and enabling dispersion, disorganisation and opening up of space in the body and its relations. It is not a free-for-all. It is designed for this specific purpose, which contains a potentially endless set of interactions. She-died-of-love gives herself and therefore creates an expectation that the user gives themselves, but how they chose to perform this transaction is open for negotiation. Were THE MYSTERY OF LOVE truly free and completely open it would not achieve the restructuring of objectification.

Should this set of suggestions not resonate with the user, they nevertheless have no chance to effectively go against them. They are free to not act upon them, but dismantling the conditions imposed by she-died-of-love and admitting to their need to possess she-died-of-love in line with the normative dictate of gendered love. The demand of she-died-of-love, which can be summed up as ‘touch me, but don’t touch me’ or ‘touch me, but don’t prescribe me a body’ is so simple, that in the desire to

transgress against it clearly reveals the intention of the user. But she-died-of-love is safe against such attempt. The desire to transgress against the composition of she-died-of-love as a figure without a name (identity, history, psychology) cannot be successfully fulfilled. She-died-of-love cannot be recovered and forced into a body or a name for the figure is constituted by being gone, by being decisively scattered. Recovering it means explicitly denying it, constituting something other, something that it is not. She-died-of-love does not resist being likened to, associated to or otherwise aid in conjuring up a concrete human-adjacent image, but once this happens it is no longer there – it is layered with another image. More remains are added to its virtual burial grove/bedchamber.

Similarly, resisting the seduction of The Sirens or she-died-of-love itself implies merely that the user is unmoved by the remains, which is quite common. Not everyone is moved by every love/death and THE MYSTERY OF LOVE acknowledges it. For the tempted it becomes a labyrinth of potentially endless pleasures, for the untempted an eccentric mausoleum. THE MYSTERY OF LOVE is composed as to invite and cherish attendance but does not suffer if a user removes themselves from it. THE MYSTERY OF LOVE is content being left alone and is in this sense self-sufficient. It is free from the need of validation and categorisation. Free from a concrete goal or utility and defined in turn by a process of sensing, which is mediated by she-died-of-love even if no one else is in attendance it needs no further confirmations, assertions or assessments of its existence. In this regard, THE MYSTERY OF LOVE opposes the common pattern of audience attendance in theatre, which demands a unified audience to have a unified experience in a unified fashion at a unified time. In this tendency I have always felt the danger of denying the

particularities of the performed material or entity, the actor as well as the individual member of the audience. Unification in this context sits too close to uniformity and homogeneity.

Command Me to Be Well

Despite THE MYSTERY OF LOVE being an interactive website, which would intuitively fall under the category of new-media fine art, web art or even design, I consider it to be a work of puppet theatre. I situate it as a direct heir of the style of the ‘theatre of actor and puppet’ which emerged in central Europe in the 60s. In the theatre of actor and puppet both actor and puppet are present on the stage together as partners in dialogue as opposed to more traditional approaches where the manipulation mechanism of the puppet along with the actor is visually hidden (behind or inside a set piece, up in the rafters, etc.) or otherwise denied producing an illusion that the puppet moves „by itself“. Even though traditional forms of puppet theatre where the actor is fully exposed existed throughout history the relationship of the puppet and the actor in these forms adhered to the principle that the puppet is the spectacle and the actor is the operator. It can be therefore argued that the primary “invention” of the theatre of actor and puppet in the context of puppet theatre is the equal relation between the two bodies, the processual nature of which is continually emphasised. The theatre of actor and puppet does not initially presume and enforce a hierarchy between the body of the actor and the puppet. Each relation between these two bodies is ideally established based on the concrete conditions of both bodies and remains open for renegotiation. The stage character is in all cases created through the interaction of the actor and the puppet. But whereas in traditional forms of puppet theatre this interaction is the subject of an unspoken or hidden contract, in the theatre of actor and puppet this contract is written anew with each particular confrontation of the body of the actor and the body

of the puppet. It is not clear and simple “who is who” or who is in the lead. The actor and puppet are in a symbiotic rather than a parasitic relation. In the traditional forms the puppet is seen as feeding on the life force of the actor and the actor as feeding on the spectacular capacity of the puppet. In the theatre of actor and puppet both bodies are seen as bodily, both having a life force and both having a capacity for autonomy. They act together, in dialogue or in direct conflict, shaping each other’s physical and spiritual conditions.

In *THE MYSTERY OF LOVE* this approach is hybridised through the division of the puppet into a myriad of fragmentary objects and the actor into a myriad of potential users. This hybridisation is paradoxically inspired by techniques employed in tradition puppet theatre such as double interpretation (one actor animating the puppet, the other providing it with a voice) or the use of narrators and musicians standing outside the set, in earlier times. Not pairing one object with one human body results in multiplying the potential for varied expression of both entities and questions the singularity of a body. Be it the body of the object or the body of the human. The stage persona, in this case the she-died-of-love figure further complicates the perception of the common body of the object and human to be thought of as singular and whole through it asserting its presence as a scattered field of remains.

In the interaction with a website the word user is used commonly rather than viewer, which is more often associated with visual arts. This distinction is important in further understanding the position of the audience in this work. Naming the audience member as a user instead of a viewer marks them as someone who acts rather than someone who views. The object-multiplicity of *THE MYSTERY OF LOVE* does not

respond until it is interfaced with, acted upon, or acted with. Similarly, to a puppet which can be fully viewed in its autonomy but will not be prompted to “do” anything unless taken up into relation with an actor. This does not mean that the puppet has no life outside of its interaction with the actor, rather that faced with the demand to see action or see something happen it remains mute. It does not respond to commands and it sure does not answer questions. It does not particularly like, or dislike being acted with, but unless that is done, it acts solely through being physically present and asserting its thereness. Designating the audience member as a user/actor delineates a clear responsibility for the user/actor to act with THE MYSTERY OF LOVE and eliminates the need and space for an audience. Since all users are actors there is no one left to watch.

In a traditional Slavic mortuary ritual, which has been one of the inspirations for the conception of THE MYSTERY OF LOVE the corpse is in a similar position to the puppet described above, though even more unsettlingly observant, since the unburied corpse is traditionally believed to hear and see everything that is happening around it. This suggests that if THE MYSTERY OF LOVE were to have an audience it would most likely be the imagery/remains themselves. Until the corpse is acted upon, and assisted, considered equal to the live human actors in the ritual it will not be bothered to do anything besides remaining vigilant. Its physicality must be acknowledged, taken upon the shoulders of the live human actors, and activated through their labour. It is interesting to note that some of the rituals of care in Slavic mortuary ritual consist of making noise (singing, praying, reciting), playing (often erotically charged) games, feasting and performing other sensual activities in order to keep demons away from the soul of the deceased. Noise and sensuality are believed to

have a protective function, which is implemented in *THE MYSTERY OF LOVE* through the selection and composition of imagery in a loud collage, the simultaneity of the audio materials evoking a myriad of voices speaking at once, etc.

In the context of romantic love, it is similarly ungrounded to expect that the object of desire “makes something happen” unless the other acknowledges them as a partner and enters into a dialogue with them. The love of a feminine subject is however constituted as such. The feminine subject, once desired, should heed this call to action, approach oneself like dead weight, lift all of its thereness and itness and pretend that the movement happened by itself. Without asserting its agency, without admitting to any of the necessary labours and processes this operation is reminiscent of the amazing quantum move of lifting oneself by one’s own suspenders. This is very similar to the illusion produced by traditional puppet theatre, but where the puppet has one or two actors at least physically helping it to create this illusion, the feminine subject is forced to divide its own interpretation twofold and more and embark on creating this illusion self-sufficiently. This labour goes completely unacknowledged and unrewarded and the entire praise for this movement is attributed to the command of the one requesting that their desire be fulfilled.

The resistant object embodied as she-died-of-love in *THE MYSTERY OF LOVE* completely opposes and refutes this ridiculous agreement imposed on the traditional puppet and the feminine subject. It remains feminine and puppet-like, seductive and open “as agreed upon” but completely refuses to do anything unless properly assisted and supported. Additionally, even if this assistance is provided, she-died-of-love often acts like a bratty submissive and does not accept the task given to

her – it changes position, changes, form and otherwise “talks back”. This talking back is perhaps the biggest contribution of she-died-of-love. Because it does not talk back out of disrespect or disregard, it does not talk back to be dismissive, it talks back, because it trusts that both it and its dominant/user/actor will be able to handle its multiplicity. It talks back out of love. Unless the contract of relation is re-established according to its rules, unless the ‘contract becomes a stage for desire’ (Faust, 2017) there is not talking. There is only ‘muteness and implacable thereness’. In the talking back the impeccable surface of the resistant object cracks and answers the subject. The hand that responds to the hand that proposes.

Conclusion

When I first started conceptualising the artistic work THE MYSTERY OF LOVE, my external mentor identified that I want to put something to rest in this work and the pun was intended. It is a running joke among my friends and colleagues that if I personally do not die in my art pieces, someone else has to. „You just have to decide, what are you saying goodbye to and then it will click, “ she said. So, I find it more than fitting to style my conclusion as an account of what has been put to rest, what I have said goodbye to properly and what remains unrestful.

When I entered this research process two years ago my opening statement was that when we step on stage, the one we wish to speak to the most is never there. What I have on stage currently in the resistant object/dildo as she-died-of-love is something that is very much there and will not speak unless it trusts you. The process of transformation from the first notion to the current is in my mind the process of arriving at acceptance and balance in my relationship to absence as a possible constitutive element of performance. From anxiously looking for ways how to interrogate it, I have arrived at a composition, which allows it to acquire body and keep it. I have always desired multiplicity, but in this research, I have truly understood that multiplicity is something that must be made and maintained. I have finally felt and located the weight of the labour associated with trying to create but not contain, protect but not falsify, enjoy but not possess multiplicity.

What I see as a next step for this research, its continuing urgency and unrest is discovering methods how to take this understanding beyond my body and my work.

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