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Insomniac Lovers

*The beloved's innocence
brutalizes the lover.
As the singing of a mad person
Behind you on the train
enrages you.
...
As Helen
enrages history.¹*

Anne Carson

In your multiple bedrooms you lie long hours musing
about bodies; about female bodies – an infinite source of bewitchment, uncanniness, desire, repulsion... for historians.
Bodies, for centuries repressed and controlled, mistreated, exploited;
all those who needed a room of their own to have a history of their own.
Virginia Woolf said, if you want to write, you need some money and a room with a lock on the door –
in her times women had neither.²

That room, for her, was time and the lock - independence; for you –
a quiet bottomless space to sink into, drowning in soft bedding, where dreams melt with actualities in the
flight mode,
where flesh dissolves and gets suspended in a cloud of thought – that is your bedroom.
The bedroom, a workplace for writers, artists and for courtesans;
a space for rest, love, illness, and insomnia.
In their uncanny proximity, curled up in their cheap or luxurious, solitary, or maybe anonymous bedrooms,
sleepless bodies wait, work, nourish on blood, and make love.
You muse about them and their tropes, their avatars, about their vampires.
At night, fantasy, fear and desire enter the bedroom;
the feared and the beloved, our muses, hand in hand with our demons, come to work.

Insomnia, the daughter-term of *parasomnia* covers, as an umbrella:

- Nightmares – unpleasant *dreams* induced by fear, sadness, loneliness, anxiety or panic;
- Night terrors – most common among *young* children, who wake up screaming and in sweat, *not knowing what they dreamed*;
- Lucid dreams – skilled awareness of dreaming *while* dreaming, *with* an ability to take control;
- Sleep paralysis – horror of waking up, *fully conscious* but unable to move;
- Somnambulism – sleepwalking, in a state of *dissonance* where consciousness and the *motoric* are misaligned;
- Hallucinations – alterations of sense reality when awake, *common* when sleep-deprived;
- Ruminations – circulation of anxious thoughts that *keep one* awake.

They all have history.

They all have literature, films, sciences.

The still active Society founder Mr Myers was a good friend of Bram Stoker, the father of Dracula. *Dracula isn't just an infamous vampire: he is every parasomniac combined in the figure of a folkloric monster.*³

Vampires, ghosts and zombies, woken at night by the sleepless, tend to stand in a bedroom corner on a blurred line between here and elsewhere; the bedroom is the scene of haunting.

You used to sleep with a big brave man who could do a salto and ride a horse, drink a bottle of whiskey and recite Shakespeare. But at night he would weep on seeing demons in the corner of his room. Weeping, he would drink more whiskey, only nothing helped until the dawn came, and exhausted, he would fall asleep, only for two hours or so. Exhausted, he would wake up to perform more Shakespeare and more saltos. As an actor, he knew all about fictitious feelings, how to switch them on and off, yet the horror in the bedroom corner was material.

The experience of horror, of the object, Julia Kristeva thinks, is an embodied experience. Horror feeds on ontological insecurities which are depicted and symbolised through the body. Horror is the portrait of transgressiveness; it explores the borderline between humanity and *the other* – the demon, the spirit, the alien, the animal... The horror of losing the integral body of civilised behaviour, fills with it fear of madness and decay.⁴

In the depths of Christian folklore, which is the fundament of many still existing archetypes, lies Hell. It might be dark, cold, wet like the intestines of the Earth; full of mistreated bodies and exploitative labour. You visit hell in a small and distant mining town in Sweden where nothing makes sense for your research, until a lady, around forty-five, wearing something like an eighteenth-century miner's garment – a long pale linen skirt with an apron, accompanied by a shirt with puffed sleeves and an oversized hat – suddenly appears in front of you: *Would you like to see the mine?*

The Swedish town of Sala, located in Västmanland County northwest of Stockholm, hosts the oldest silver mine in Europe; nobody knows when the first excavations began. It's now inactive as its technology is outdated. Sala, the town itself, was built as a miners' settlement in the middle of nowhere; today it rests morbidly on its glorious silver past.

The only hotel in town is located in the territory of the former mine itself.





You wake up there to see, out of your window, three men in toyish excavators in clouds of dust and noise.
The soil is very toxic here, because of centuries of mining, the County wants to replace it with new healthy soil, so they have invested millions in this project,
the hotel receptionist explains proudly when you try to complain.
To sleep on a toxic construction site is the contemporary definition of hell, you want to reply.
Fifteen minutes later, you stand at the shaft entrance, and the eighteenth-century woman unlocks the door.
Wet moist dark grey stone exhales its cold breath.
You receive the instruction: *Before going down, say hello to the Lady of the Mine.*
Suddenly shivers run through your body; what would happen if you take the Lady for fiction? You bow respectfully.

With every step the temperature drops, the stone drips its wetness,
you are walking not across but deep inside the landscape, vertically.
There is nothing to see, only endless darkness and the cold slippery intestines of the stone.
The guide has been working in this costume her whole life.
She explains:
how they extracted silver hundreds of years ago,
how people who worked here – Swedish peasants, far away from home,
lived, worked and died in the dark, digging cold, wet stone, getting closer and closer to the devil.

The Germans, she continues, arrived to improve the mine because it regularly collapsed killing thousands of miners;
at the deepest point, these poor Christian men indeed believed they had reached hell.
There is an entire folklore of the mine – the guide explains,
but the Lady of the Mine was the most beloved character – she reminded every man of their mothers and wives,
*she was everybody's home.*⁵

On research trips you try to follow methods which can bring you closer to the unfamiliar;
you search for mindsets, spaces, characters unfamiliar, yet
as near to you as the car in the *blind spot* of the driver's mirror.
When driving, the blind spot is the area that cannot be seen, neither through the rear-view nor through the side mirrors when another car comes parallel to yours.
The invisible and, therefore, most dangerous things, are nearest to you.
Unfamiliar footsteps, smells, tastes, memories, or the absence of such can be sensed at this proximity.

You talk to people, write a little, take some pictures, record, film here and there.
Mostly you just listen and try to follow, allowing the unfamiliar to bring you where it will.
It looks like randomness; you feel the historian's gaze derisive behind your shoulder.

In some works of art you recognise the same methodology.
These works abandon home, their loved ones, only to be nowhere doing who knows what;
they distance themselves, follow the unfamiliar, work with absence.

A hotel room. Claudia von Alemann's film *Blind Spot* (1981); you watch it on the lunar eclipse of 28 October 2023.
You talk to friends after the screening,⁶
Apparently, most people, including yourself, had a terrible time that October,
not to mention the political and humanitarian catastrophe –
that October, solar and lunar eclipses happened just two weeks apart.

In *Blind Spot*, an odd translation from *Die Reise Nach Lyon*, a young German historian escapes her bourgeois family life to follow an historical character,
the nineteenth-century feminist anarchist writer Flora Tristan who lived in Lyon.⁷
To follow the footsteps, literally
to blindly roam the city
recording sounds at random
trying and failing to identify.
*Ich bewege mich und bin doch bewegungslos.*⁸

She seems to be going where the character had gone
but maybe she is just drifting.
She remains alien, unfamiliar, meanwhile erasing her life –
the sound of the voice of her child from the recorder –
just to record the sound of her own footsteps.

A marvellous scene – her conversation with a male historian, who asks derisively:

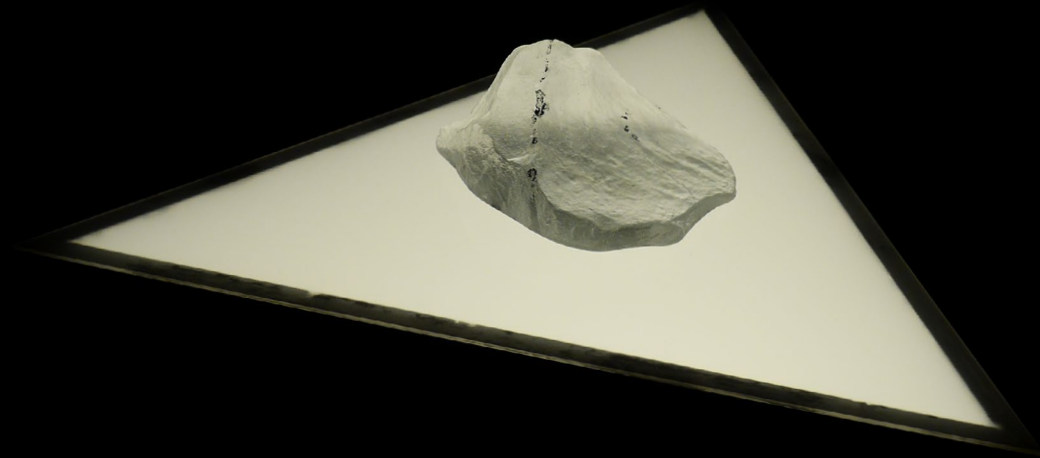
- *What is it supposed to mean?*
- *I recorded the footsteps that she might have heard. Even though I haven't got the same shoes.*
- *That seems difficult... But what does it have to do with history?*
- *Do you know her? You've heard of her?*
- *Flora Tristan, yes. But not much. It's not my area of research. What are you really looking for?*
- *To imagine what she heard and saw, what she smelled, the colours,*

sounds, all that, in this city, in Lyon where she stayed for so long. I'm repeating her journey. My library and archival research, the books that I read, aren't enough for me... How else might one remember?
– *One remembers by means of the documents of the past and its people. The historian's effort is to erase himself behind the people he finds letting them speak. Tracing their lives and not promoting himself. That's how one tries to find out exactly how they lived, died, ate, loved then.*
– *I wonder if identifying with the pain, the suffering, the emotions of women in the past can be transformed into action. Otherwise, it remains passive understanding.*⁹

A nameless woman trying to remember another woman;
Von Alemann draws a landscape of a historical condition and the seeming impossibility of escaping it.



You went to Sala, Västmanland County, northwest of Stockholm,
following the footsteps of a historical character who wanted nothing more than to escape it,
Ivan Aguéli, a Swedish man born there in 1869, and his controversial life.
Periodically living in France, Egypt, Sri Lanka, Italy, and India, he might be seen as anything



from a painter, religious scholar, art theorist, linguist, writer, or journalist, to an anarchist, Sufi and orientalist. Ivan dedicated his creative life to the philosophical quest of capturing the eternal light, through art and esoteric practices, while in his private correspondences, he comes across as a manipulative cynic exoticising the unfamiliar.

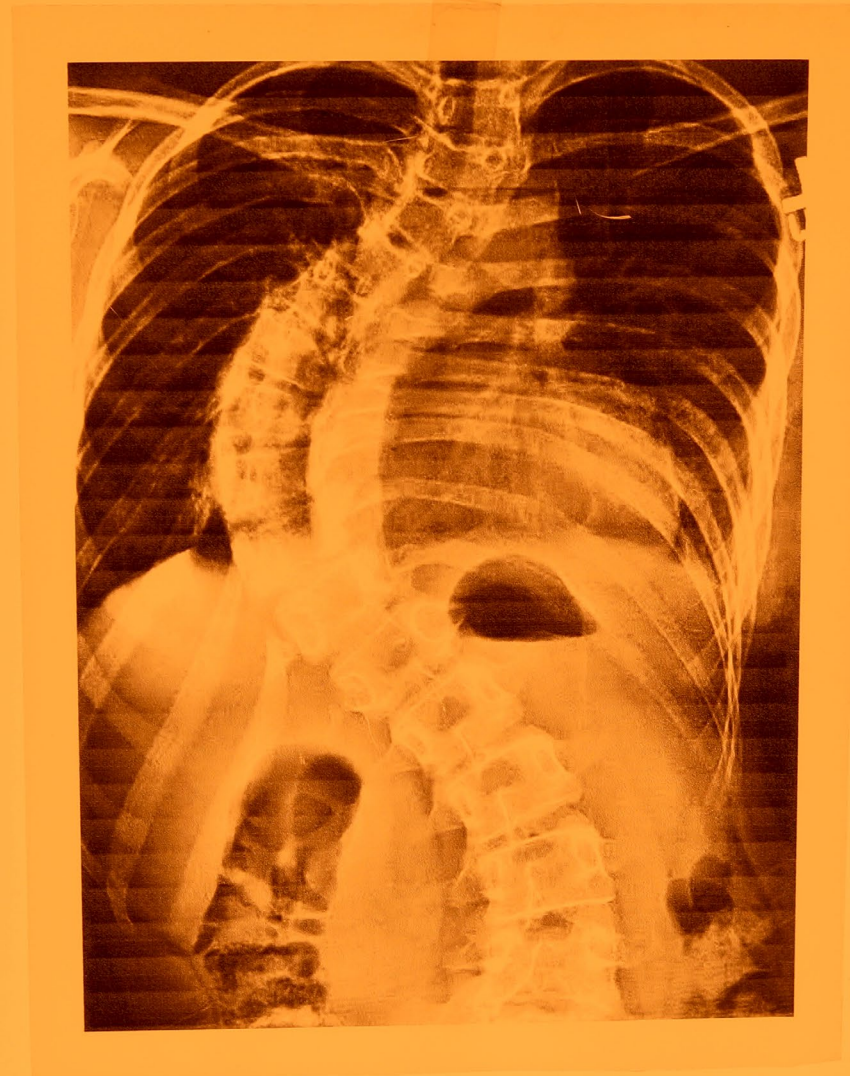
Aguéli paints radiant impressionistic landscapes in southern colours. He coins the term *islamophobia* and fights the phenomenon it represents in Europe. He masters Arabic, French, Italian, German, and studies other languages. He fires a shotgun at a matador as a gesture towards the need for animal rights in France. He becomes the first westerner to convert to Sufism and changes his name to ‘Abd al-Hādī al-‘Aqīlī. But even then, Ivan’s excitement about the *Orient* and Sufism might be seen as deriving from cultural exoticism, typical for Western intellectuals of the time and of the times to come.

You read twenty-two personal letters to his mother, his lover and friends.¹⁰ Enchanted and in love, you feel that understanding his nomadic darkness and his pathetic fetishes might help you understand your own.

You follow him and carry him with you for over two years. Like a glassmaker who places two sheets of transparent glass in the kiln at 800°C, you learn how to fuse your own desires, struggles and obsessions with his, to watch life through a fragmented semi opaque crystal.¹¹

When entering the underworld in Sala, you can see him, your Ivan, young, smart, polite and depressed, like all people you meet in this country, trapped, in the grip of a Christian horror he needs to escape, in order and in a need to escape it, to find his *personal sun*.¹²

An intimate encounter with your historical lover arouses you, you cannot fall asleep. Your back hurts more and more each night, your crooked spine worsens with age. Scoliosis usually manifests in adolescence, between the age of ten and eighteen. The spine is responsible for strength, uprightness and balance in life, including the artistic path. It is observed that scoliosis makes one question the awareness of one’s presence and stability. In other words, a serpentine-shaped spine can cause one’s decision to become an artist. A damaged nerve can lead to loss of hearing, slurred speech, and blurred vision, which means you may have to give up painting. Or, unclear vision might only allow you to distinguish dark from light. You’d kind of like it if shapes and details were to stop distracting your attention, leaving only light.



You might finally fall asleep and realise on waking that you wrote all the poems by Baudelaire.

This happened to Lisa Robertson, or to her character, Hazel Brown.

Charles Baudelaire, another controversial man from the nineteenth century, a poet glorified as the prophet of modernity,

was a decadent dandy and misogynist syphilitic.

In his diaries, Baudelaire describes women as monsters and sluts,

and makes his ghostly appearance into a feminist novel.

You open the book, which begins with a quote:

I have insupportable nervous troubles, exactly like women

You feel repulsed.

Slightly nauseated, you, a twenty-first-century woman, dive into the online abyss to find an extensive debate on whether feminists should read Baudelaire. There is no clear answer.¹³

You read Lisa further, looking for a feminist critique, but the poet's critique remains in poetry.

In *The Baudelaire Fractal* (2020), Lisa lends Baudelaire's oeuvre to a young unexperienced flaneuse, often losing Baudelaire in descriptions of tapestry, carpets (*It was Poe who said that the soul of an apartment is its carpet.*¹⁴), and kisses.

A hotel room – every chapter begins with a hotel room – to her, seems to be the opposite of what a bedroom is to you.

It is private but it has neither memory nor future.

It hosts floating, artificial smells of roses and light sadness.

There is no weight, no need, no judgement, no horror there.

*I stored my books and my wine in the wardrobe with my few clothes. I had a bottle of Youth-Dew perfume from Estée Lauder, a gift from my grandmother, and I still associate the room with the heavy, pungent scent of civet and rose and clove. She had sent it in a little string-tied parcel, wrapped protectively in fragments of tissue-paper sewing patterns ... Always now the thought of the perfume in its cheap fluted glass bottle with gold paper label brings me back to that shitty room, its darkness, the blue typewriter on the folding table, the bad linoleum, these traits a carapace camouflaging a small freedom that gently expanded inside me like a subtle new organ, an actual muscular organ born of my own desire for what I took to be an impossible and necessary language.*¹⁵

Descriptions of books and rooms in detail, of texts, textiles and textures, and of feelings;

descriptions are the most imperfect definitions, the only satisfactory proofs of memory.

What she wanted most from me, and she was hungry for, was description ... Nothing was too trivial.

*For my grandmother, in the last days of her living, description was a second life, a way of being in the world ... It was mortality's cosmetics.*¹⁶

Memory here is constituted by its materiality, and by history – enfleshed.

An old copy of *Les Fleurs du Mal*, too worn to read, can only be perceived as a *distribution of the ragged lines across brittle paper*

in order to *see the poems in their typographical arrangement on paper as kinds of portraits.*¹⁷

Time, a linguistic material in itself, appears on page 158 when Hazel realises:

*I was no avant-gardist; I had no interest in abolishing grammar. Rather, I studied it, in a casual way. I wanted to understand subordination.*¹⁸

And here it is –

in descriptions of intimacy

in histories of sentiments

in trivial moments

in a girl's pleasures

in long baths

in the lightness of drifting

in the careful journey through surfaces

in the time this attention takes

in the time it takes you to read it –

it is there that the feminist gaze subverts yet accommodates Baudelaire's, admiring, mistrusting, imagining, pitying him.

*I do think it was a kind of anachronistic hospitality that permitted the work's transmission, both my own acutely conditioned feminine hospitality, and the different but equivalent femininity of the Baudelairean oeuvre.*¹⁹

Critique needn't always be constructive, it can be intimate, it can host.

You decentre your gaze and look around the room you are in love with.

An empty space that opens where nothing really happens;

a thin layer of dust on the shelf visible only in the morning sunlight that floods it from the East, which you will always miss,

the sound of heating pipes, the warm breath of the house, its lungs filled with the water circulating in the heaters,

the landscape of the city through the window and the landscape of the sky above,

the white between the blue and grey stripes of the prime cotton sheets,

the space between the lines of a text message asking to be unfulfilled.

Your bedroom in the morning is quite different from what it is on sleepless nights; it is now a domestic space of stillness.

The difference between domesticity and *private interiority* might be of relevance, Lisa Robertson suggests in *Nilling* (2020),

her collection of prose essays on noise, pornography, the codex, melancholy, Lucretius, folds, cities, and related aporias.

The taking in and preparation of food; of erotic encounter; of various modes of work; of reproductive labour ... the domus is the place of rhythmic protection of the vulnerable body, while sleeping, in illness, age, and childhood, often while eating and washing, while resting, while talking and working. So the domestic space isn't private just as the body and its modes of conviviality, reproduction and care aren't private ... In terms of subjectivity and temporality, the domestic sphere emerges as an embodied vector that breaks open, floods the habitual containment of the public-private binary.²⁰

In the Dutch Golden Age, in paintings of interiors, we encounter similar definition of domesticity.

Nothing really happens to the anonymous characters in many of Vermeer's, de Hooch's, de Witte's interiors, except for the sensorial reference to domesticity carefully staged by the painters

- description of ambiance can be a painting methodology.

Domestic silence is objectified in painted relics of what might have been, and metaphors whose meaning we can only guess at.

These rooms are the rooms of history itself.

Kris Pint, in Refabulating Domesticity (2022) proposes a sensory reading of these paintings, a reparative instead of paranoid reading, following Sedgwick, looking beyond the symbolism, at the paintings for their intimate, contemplative representations of dwelling: The fact that nothing really happens in these interiors - at least, in comparison to historical tableaux, or religious paintings - makes them a place where one is literally and figuratively brought back to one's senses. The elements that constitute an interior reveal an intensity of being, a sensual materiality of existence that the intimate sphere of dwelling can open.²¹

Domestic imagery has the liberty of being staged -

my bedroom never shows its real face to my guest, even less so to my camera.



Yet, paradoxically, staging has no place in history because is seen as belonging to the world of fiction.
But isn't every image, that reaches us from the past, staged?

Scenography, the misunderstood art of staging time and space in front of a paint brush, camera or audience, a tragic fragile ephemeral practice, unique among the arts insofar as it is trashed after completion, existing only for the moment of cathartic success.

Microsoft Word doesn't even recognise the word *scenographer* and corrects to *stenographer*.

In Belgium, one understands scenography as an interior discipline – as a scenographer you design temporary interiors for exhibitions, fairs, displays.

In Lithuania one studies it as a monumental art

– a Soviet relic – the most valuable forms of art in the USSR were monumental, designed to represent the Soviet values in mosaic, stained glass and scenographies for theatre.

In the context of contemporary dance and performance, scenography can be a collaborative and spatial practice, research into *performativity*, another word Word does not recognise.

In one of your past lives, you were a scenographer for theatre.

Theatre, seen from inside,

has the capacity to eat you alive, perhaps because totalities, as in the sense of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, tend towards totalitarianisms.

Public promises of collectivity tend to fail.

Sometimes a *Gesamtkunstwerk* works best when parts are radically missing.

In Derek Jarman's *Wittgenstein* or *Caravaggio*,²²

the absence of scenography makes space for meaning.

Wittgenstein's anxiety unfolds in visually empty scenes, where all is alienated, emptied, decontextualised.

Frustrated, he is trying to explain his theory to a suspicious audience in Cambridge.

Trembling from his own annoyance he writes on a black board standing in a void, yelling:

A dog cannot lie, neither can he be sincere. A dog might be expecting his master to come. Why doesn't he expect him to come next Wednesday? Is it because he doesn't have language? If a lion could speak, we would not be able to understand what he said ... To imagine a language is to imagine a form of life. It's what we do and who we are that gives meaning to our words. I cannot understand the lion's language because I don't know what his world is like.²³

The world of *Wittgenstein* is like that black board with words and numbers, and these few persons appearing in oversaturated bright costumes, nearly blinding Wittgenstein, distressed, anxious, always misunderstood.

Orlando, by contrast, needs vivid, opulent, and sumptuous staging.

A timeless character, who finds themselves and switching gender over the course of 400 years, was born under the pen stroke of Virginia Woolf in 1928. Woolf drew inspiration for this novel from her turbulent love affair with Vita Sackville-West, a charming writer and aristocrat who was not able to inherit her family estate because she was a woman. The book is of enduring contemporary relevance, and, among other things, provides a description of the world in which law, wealth, recognition and opportunities shift depending on your sex.

Orlando later challenges Sally Potter, Paul B. Preciado, and others.²⁴

In Potter's adaptation, you watch the complexity of times unfold in every frame and every set.

Young Tilda Swinton plays Orlando, traversing time and place, and changing sex – one day Orlando wakes up to see that he has become a woman.

You wonder,

they're waking up as Vampires, writers or as creatures who've changed sex – is there a more powerful transgression than an awakening?

What strikes you in this film is its imagery: costumes, scenography, colours, lighting.

Voluptuous historicity with an ironic excess as opposite to lack;

exaggerated costumes melt within the sumptuous yet somehow porous and fragile sets.²⁵

Orlando, submerged under thick textiles and architectural wigs

emerges as a contemporary woman in a new light

and her anachronistic experience helps you, as you watch it in your early twenties, maturing as a woman too.

Anachronism is the time outside of its times.

Georges Didi-Huberman speaks of the *sovereignty of anachronism* – the fundament of art, an impure temporality or *extraordinary montage of heterogenous times forming anachronisms*.

Experiencing anachronism means getting closer to understanding history:

*it is fertile when the past proves to be insufficient, that is, forms an obstacle to the understanding of the past.*²⁶

Understanding the past would actually mean then not understanding it at all.

Thinking that photography is inseparable from scenography comforts you, assures you that time is material. Nathalie Léger in her novel *L'Exposition* (2008), the first part of a trilogy attempting to capture three tragic women, all dead,²⁷ follows the photographs of Countess Castiglione or Virginia Oldoini. You google her. She was the most photographed woman in the nineteenth century, an Italian aristocrat and an icon in Paris. Her portrait shows her in an enormous white dress, grotesque like a collage of images that fit poorly together. How could one move in such a surplus of fabric?



Imagine:
the metal cage underneath the crinoline,
her stare rather annoyed, she's still;
her exotic feather fan is frozen;
the front of her dress is composed of frills or rather Corinthian columns.
Pretentious as imperialist architecture, pure vanity;
she must have been awfully conservative.²⁸

L'Exposition alludes to the history of photography – the birth of the mirrored image as in a film exposed to light, but no less to the narcissistic urge to pose, the pleasure of being gazed at, marvelled at, the desire to exhibit oneself; and ultimately to the exposition of the author's own biography, a weaving of personal, analytical, poetic narratives, interiors, costumes, lighting and language.

The Countess, obsessed with her own image, with no other purpose than to capture it in the passage of time, for forty years, poses every week to the then unknown photographer Pierre-Louis Pierson. For hours, she stands frozen, her limbs numb, in a scenography of an interior attempting to convince technology.

Trying to understand Castiglione's obsession, Nathalie installs herself for such a posing in one sentence:

I return to my room, prepare the scene, seat myself comfortably, head in hand, elbow well supported on the table, and I freeze, mentally exhibiting my own image before me, rendering it luminous, vivid, and pensive mercilessly distinct, and so, barely breaking the silence, a first collapse occurs, it's not the immobilization of the body that is uncomfortable, but the immobility of the gaze, a fixity that defeats all poise, after eighty-six seconds, I lose my composure, everything blinks, not just my eyelids, my eyes burn, my face clouds over, my neck stiffens, two minutes twenty-five seconds, I am the blind torture victim described by Pierson when he spoke of the beginnings of portraiture: Even if the bony frame was mechanistically immobile, the eyelids blinked, the muscles of the face contracted, blood pooled in the faces of some, while others went pale, and instead of gracefully expressive, smiling portrait the sitter had hoped for, one ended with an image of a torture victim, nearly always a blind one.²⁹

This is the backstage description of the frozen face of history, of aged photographs in books, archaeological artefacts in museums, records in historical annals – they hide immobile gazes.

*Whatever it grants to vision and whatever its manner, a photograph is always invisible: it is not it that we see.*³⁰

Contracted muscles in old photographs also hide violent bloodshed, incurable diseases and fear of God; striving for immortality, they wish to freeze the arrogance of time.

When everything else in history is in motion, what can the stillness of a photograph enable?

History is hysterical: it is excluded from it. As a living soul, constituted only if we consider it, only if we look at it – and in order to look at it, we must be *I am the very contrary of History, I am what belies it, destroys it for the sake of my own history*³¹

– moans Barthes in *Camera Lucida* (1980), his last work published only two months before his death after being knocked down by a laundry van in Paris.

You admire the choice Barthes makes between h and H.

If we are contrary to History as living souls, it is in photographs that we encounter this contradiction. For Barthes, a photograph is made of two elements, *studium* and *punctum*: *studium* is what informs us, its social, cultural and historical context, what it refers to. Now *punctum* is what actually matters, it is *this element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me ... punctum is also: a sting, speck, cut, little hole and also a cast of the dice. A photograph's punctum is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me).*³²

A photograph pierces and a camera mortifies – one makes *another body* of oneself in posing,³³ creating a *mad image*, a *temporal hallucination*.³⁴

One can likewise make temporal hallucinations that slide, glide, stroke, pet, caress.

When you look at Gerda Paliušytė's photographs from her ongoing series *Guys*, you see male nudes becoming light, shadow, skin, hair, creases,

abstracted in daylight in brown-grey Vilnius interiors.³⁵

Her camera sometimes comes so close to his skin as to blur the focus, like when your head is resting in the armpit of your lover.

You think of *Guys* as post-erotic, as conjuring intimacy beyond or after desire, describing the reliance of one body upon another.

In *Lipstick* (2024), Gerda's solo show, some *Guys* are printed at a large enough scale for you to lose your sight inside the blackness of the subjects' chest hair.³⁶

The way Gerda maps freckles on skin inevitably alludes to her other photo series, *Blue Flowers*.



Guys

The artist's camera allows us to hallucinate on men's skin and on the texture of flower petals; on their materiality and the realness of their proximity.

The artificial flowers, painted blue, approximate human skin in their macro eccentricity.

Gerda wonders what conditions intimacy, sexuality, and what dissolves it.

Between the photographed body and the viewer as well as between the photographer and their subject, there is a fluid triangulation:

I want to let each situation interested in finding a more determine how close I can be to horizontal relationship between the photographed person. The myself and the other, without compositions became determined emphasising how we are related. by individual situations and the Gender, gender roles and sexuality time spent with them. Rather can also be fluid, dissolved.³⁷ than drawing distinctions, I am

What conditions your gaze stems partly from knowledge of the geopolitical context in which these photographs appear:

in present day Lithuania, with its image of masculinity – detached, success-driven, muscular, macho, a relic of the Soviet cult of a strong worker's body, combined with recent rich-sexy looks.

Fragility, empathy, shyness, gentleness, precarity, joy, horizontality, are not included in the representation of a man.

The Soviet oppression with its demands and censorship is long over, but Gerda's *Guys* are still rare in the urban landscape,

they stare melancholically through the windows of their bedrooms in communist block buildings under renovation, covered by scaffolding.

When you and Gerda were young girls, there were two kinds of noticeable guys, the *hooligans* and the *punks*.

Some punks cross-dressed as artists, rappers, or hippies,

but the relevant distinction was between a hooligan and non-hooligan.³⁸

A *hooligan*, in Lithuanian slang *marozas* or *forsas*, from the English *force*, was the mainstream archetype of masculinity.

Such men had shaved-heads and dressed in sportswear. They emphasised their muscles, their cars and the fights they engaged in,

the hooligan roamed the wild streets looking for trouble.

This was nothing original – already in renaissance Venice there roamed the violent *buli* who looked just the same.

Difference was not accepted by the bullies who represented the status quo, neither in appearance nor in taste.

How did the difference survive then? Did it?

In 1992, Virgilijus Šonta, one of the most interesting photographers of his generation, was found murdered in his studio in Vilnius.

His work consisted of nudes – of young men who appeared soft, charming, and vastly erotic in their doubleness; who were shy, hiding, somewhat innocent, yet flirtatious, sometimes posing,

other times captured accidentally by the photographer's careful and caring gaze.

Needless to say, these nudes were afforded no public place in Šonta's lifetime, quite the opposite – they constituted a serious crime.

To live a life sexually non-conforming to Soviet morality meant being in the perpetual threat of local militia and KGB blackmail, imprisonment or other, less visible but no less damaging forms of social and professional exclusion. These precarious life conditions shaped the covert gay network of chance sexual encounters (among men) behind the Iron Curtain... Until-recently unpublished photographs, found in Šonta's sheltered hard-to-access archive in Kaunas, suggest an artist whose work was, in huge part, dedicated to the precarious, prohibited, doubled lives, feelings and desires of gay men under the Soviet rule. He gave them a photographic form when simple representation was not an option.³⁹



The bill on gender-neutral partnership and recognition of LGBTQIA+ rights is still put on ice in Lithuania. How do we move the ice as cultural discourse agents, Now, when censorship is over? Society is comparably open, but the law and the support structures are not yet in place. Perhaps we could advance with ambitious and revealing projects:

An exhibition comprising over 300 works titled *We Don't Do This. Intimacy, Norms, and Fantasies in Baltic Art* in MO Museum in Vilnius, curated by Adomas Narkevičius, Inga Lāce, and Rebeka Pöldsam, looks at depictions of gender and sexuality in visual art of the Baltic region from the 1960s to the present. *Since Stalin, the USSR was famously anti-sexual: Sexuality-related content and discussions were widely censored from the public for decades. The exhibition asks why sex was so suppressed and what kind of love was allowed.*⁴⁰

Intimacy, sexuality, and closeness between lovers, parents and children, friends, is observed in this exhibition alongside violence, alcoholism, and depression – the geopolitical curse of being born in a wrong time and wrong place; the cold breeze of propagated estrangement from one's desire.

*In an atmosphere of stagnation and alienation, it is not surprising that sex in the Soviet era seemed more like a compulsion or a burden to prolong the lineage than an advertisable pleasure, and that the crumbs of emotional intimacy were scattered in another language.*⁴¹

Sometimes that other language felt like sudden wrongly-placed bursts of metaphorised desire, coming back at you like a recurring erotic nightmare.

A nightmare as though your voice had been sucked out by vampires who feed on their lovers' blood, quietly, at night, *when time is crowded in the corner.*

Elena Shvarts (1948–2010), who writes from the heart of the land of vampires, was a poet who described her own blood as *Judaic-Slavonic-Tatar-Gypsy*. Her work remained unpublished during the Soviet era.

This avant-garde mystic was aware of the price of the soul – here is a story about her: once, a Soviet censor offered her the opportunity to be published if she removed all references to the soul in her poems. She refused.⁴²

You read her poems in the night as it best suits them. *Remembrance of Strange Hospitality* reminds you that the soul is warm, sweet, liquid and frightening, like blood, like milk:

*Once I had a taste
Of a girlfriend's milk,
My sister's milk –
Not to quench my thirst
But to satisfy my soul.
Into a cup she squeezed
Milk from her left breast
And in that simple vessel
It gently frothed, rejoiced.
There was something birdlike in its odor,
Whiffs of sheep and wolf, and something older
Than the Milky Way, it was
Somehow warm and dense.
A daughter in the wilderness
Once let her aged father drink
From her breasts and thus became
His mother. By this act of grace
Her whiteness drove away the dark,
A cradle substituted for a tomb
From the duct next to your heart
You offered me a drink –
I'm not a vampire, am I? – Horror.
It frothed and tinkled, warm
And sweet, soft, everlasting,
Crowding time back into a corner.*⁴³

Occasionally, you raise a glass to the vampire who, along with other creatures of the night, is somewhere there, beyond the lake.⁴⁴

The beloved muse of the night, who brings us nightmares as salvation, is sick. Isn't a muse always sick with melancholy or hysteria, or eccentricity? Sickness is transferred through bodily fluids, through blood, saliva, semen and breast milk; a soggy swamp is found between her legs.

The Vampire has always been a loving character, an incarnation of evil beings, suicide victims and witches. Awakened, she first visits her lovers and children; once invited into a home she can come and go as she pleases. You were raised to show hospitality regardless of the guest's appearance and identity.



She enters your dark room which seems old and full of memories, and she approaches the bed, a small rectangular object with your body on it.

You seem rather dead. Her face is strong,

with a high bridge of a thin nose and unusually arched nostrils,

with eyebrows massive and bushy, mouth in a shape of a sharp knife

with thin red lips, her exceptionally long thick dark hair almost reaching her ankles; she is of unearthly beauty.

Hypnotized by your scent, she closes her eyes.

*Sweet it was in one sense, honey sweet, and it sent the same tingling through the nerves as her voice, but with a bitter underlying the sweet, a bitter offensiveness, as one smells in blood.*⁴⁵

She bends over and begins to peacefully penetrate your soft neck with her sharp teeth, slowly piercing through one layer after another

of skin, then fascia, a thin layer of fat, capillaries, reaching for the vein fountain.

Irresistibly, inescapably, your scents merge together, your blood squirts in streams.

You sigh, perhaps in pain, perhaps in satisfaction, and your exhalation can be heard as snoring, as you sink deeply into a dream,

of a black cat lying on your chest.

Carmilla tells you, a black cat in the dream means that a vampire paid you a visit at night.

Carmilla (1872), predates *Dracula* (1897) – a short novel by another Irishman, Sheridan Le Fanu.

Carmilla is an explicitly erotic lesbian love story between two young beautiful ladies, one of whom is a vampire. It is built not so much around spookiness and fear but rather around the joys and intimacy of their friendship.

Unfortunately, the story ends with two men defeating the vampire girl by beheading her and so restoring the modesty of the other.⁴⁶

As incarnations of evil spirit or even of the devil himself, vampires fear:

garlic

the cross

the rosary

sunrise

silver

holy water

the sanctified land of church and monastery...

It is important to acknowledge not always been mythological though that vampires have characters – for centuries

they were actual and tangible participants in the social fabric. There are multiple reports of mass hysteria caused by vampires – in police and court records, archives of cities and states.⁴⁷ Since the Modern era and the rise of scientific reason, there has been no lack of scientific study of the subject. So-called *demonology*, with *vampirology* as a subdiscipline, has been a respectable interdisciplinary field situated among theology, the social sciences, and the humanities.

You lay there more dead than alive;
the vampire lover fades away;
the night leaves only a thick colourless veil falling upon your dusty eyes,
you need sunglasses to cover the dark circles.
You stand up, barefoot in a T-shirt, go to the balcony and bend over.
The greenish canal water shimmers in the quiet morning sun, it's frosty –
you are in Venice.

Without running on in poetical fashion, without using hyperbolic figures of speech, which are all too clearly obvious lies, you might have turned your attention instead to praising Venice, the one and only miracle and wonder of nature. This high ruler of the sea, lofty virgin, inviolate and pure, without equivalent or peer in the world, this is what you should have praised, this gentle land, in which you were born, and where I, too, thank God, was born⁴⁸

The most glorious and the richest city of the Renaissance embodied in a figure of a woman: blonde locks, porcelain face, rosebud lips. She – Venice herself – looks you in the eye in the library of Giorgio Cini.⁴⁹ A woman who could be a virgin in the times of glory and a whore to blame in the times of plague.

Venetian iconography adapted whore, Virgin Mary and Eve, or, and burnished a common Western in Venice's self-representation, polarity in the representation between immaculate, pure, of women, the polarity between virtuous city and a luxury loving, angel and witch, virgin and bejewelled, voluptuous one.⁵⁰

Venetian accountant of love, entrepreneur of desire, expert of eros, master of word, Veronica Franco (1546–1591) known as a courtesan rather than poetess;



Cortigiana onesta, by definition an intellectual, well-read and elegantly dressed; *the* honoured courtesan.

*I will make you taste the delights of love
when they have been expertly learned;
And doing this, I could give you such pleasure
that you could say you were fully content,
and at once fall more deeply in love.
So sweet and delicious do I become,
when I am in bed with a man
who, I sense, loves and enjoys me,
that the pleasure I bring excels all delight
so the knot of love, however tight
it seemed before, is tied tighter still.*⁵¹

Courtesans – skilled artists, poets and musicians, entertained the early tourists and Venetian patricians. The Venetian Renaissance was a licentious time when a woman could feel liberated only if she existed at the margins of society engaged in clandestine activities. Even though living in precarity and danger, courtesans were the most educated, liberated, and influential women in Europe. Detested and persecuted by the Church, feared and admired by men, they also mastered the tricks of beauty: *Before even getting out of bed, they handled their dental care, without any brush or toothpaste, by simply rubbing their teeth with a strip of their sheets.*⁵²

Digging through ancient bedsheets, books and textile archives, you are looking for liaisons between the female body, courtesan culture, publishing and material heritage.

You study female sexuality, historically veiled, feared, controlled, fetishised, it negotiated space.

In the Italian *ridotto*, or salons, where semi-public encounters between artists, poets, intellectuals and their customers – high-class male aristocracy, rich merchants, politicians – would take place, the art scene flourished. The *ridotto* provided a semi-intimate forum for writers, publishers and patrons to gather and network. It was experimental, inclusive, and led by the liberated body and desire. Most meetings took place at night. In such salons Veronica read her poems out loud, and she was, in her readings, passionate, daring, erotic and critical, an absolute exception within the literature of the time.

Sixteenth-century Italy, in particular Venice, experiences a boom of the book publishing industry partly because of the sensual content of the publications. *Anatomical atlases* become popular – filled with engravings, they establish representational conventions that come to dominate the early modern perception of the body.

Were people fascinated by seeing what is under the skin or rather what is usually hidden under clothes?

In a male body, the focus is on skeleton and muscles;

in a female body, they offer an interior view – the pelvis as a jewel box;

scientific sensuality discloses the body's most intimate secrets.

The anatomical gaze is being modelled on the erotic gaze; the *atlases* borrow poses from pornographic prints.

Poetry contributes to the demand of female sensuality; that's why women suddenly have a chance to write.

*The commodification of female bodies in print in the apparatus of the mass-produced book was the common spur to the entrance of women into the literary and cultural scene.*⁵³

Literary *erotica*, then as now, knows few boundaries.

Provocative, carnal, violent, filled with threats and insults, the Venetian genre *alla bulesca* develops

– the literature of bullies or hooligans circulates as manuscripts and cheap pamphlets;

comedies, poems and dialogues written in dialect, featuring *Buli* as protagonist

named after armed guys roaming the streets of Venice, often hit-men for patricians, looking for trouble.

There, a courtesan is a character to abuse and ridicule:

*Since this whore, this trollop rejected by all,
Dares to amuse herself with me,
I'll beat her till her face is swollen,
If I find, one day, that her door is open.
And I'll pull her hair so hard
That she'll learn not to play tricks on me.
Syphilitic whore, who pierces men's insides,
This evening I'll get you back,
You great big slut, who has screwed bordellos full of men.*⁵⁴

Declarative aggression that stinks of testosterone has only in words, sometimes absolutely no excuse, yet, in acts, as a performance of virility.⁵⁵ Sedgwick thinks it can be clarified through the social context. To enter adulthood, a young man was expected to demonstrate an active, even aggressive sexual identity and dominance over the female sex, usually involve triangulation or show the forbidden desires of men for other men. A man who speaks violently to a woman,

conceals the possibility panic are heard in this register; of another man to desire. homophobia and misogyny Homophobia and homoerotic are directly interlinked.⁵⁶

What did it mean to call a woman a whore in sixteenth-century Venice?

Out of the city's 100,000 inhabitants, 11,654 were sex workers – more than ten percent.⁵⁷

In legal documents one finds three words: *puttana*, *meretrice*, and *cortigiana*, sometimes all classified as *cortigiana* of different degrees:

Cortigiana putana – courtesan-whore

Cortigiana da lume – courtesan by lamplight

Cortigiana de la candela – courtesan by candlelight

Onesta cortigiana – honest or honoured courtesan



The latter, a category to which Veronica belonged, described whores at the top of the hierarchy.⁵⁸ But even in this position, on top, adored and desired, Veronica's life wasn't easy.

In 1580, the Inquisition summons her for allegations of performing heretical incantations, exercising witchcraft and casting magical spells.

She defends herself with a feverish, dramatically composed speech, already for the second time.

Her patron, the patrician politician Domenico Venier, might have helped.

But after Domenico dies, Veronica also ages, becomes ill and impoverished, and dies at the age of forty-five, alone.⁵⁹

In her poems, her language can be as romantic as her thought is not.

There is no naiveté;

her texts are filled with both erotic and prosaic lived experience.

Veronica writes polemically, no doubt,

mastering elegy, poetic debate, love lyric, dialogic exchange, verse epistle;

she is performative, seductive, opinionated and sometimes didactic.

Veronica is in love with hyperbolic figures of speech, and you,

you are in love with her perhaps not for her verse but for her daring.

You embroider her poems on *Medusa's Baldaquin*.⁶⁰

Medusa, one of the monsters or Gorgons,

for Greeks symbolised feminine power, survival but also danger and abuse.

A rape victim had to carry Medusa's image or tattoo as a protection. It was Poseidon who raped Medusa in the goddess Athena's temple and remained unpunished. Instead,

Athena punished the victim for desecrating her sacred space by cursing

Medusa with a head full of snakes and a gaze capable of turning men into stone.

For nearly two millennia after, in Christian Europe, a rape of a courtesan could go unpunished.

The fragments of Veronica's poems, machine embroidered on translucent fabric, talk about the spheres and spaces of female labour –

embroidery has always been considered a feminine activity, just like prostitution;

writing, on the other hand, has not.

Four hundred years later, Grisélidis Réal (1929–2005), a Swiss-born writer and sex-workers’ rights activist, struggles still.

Sex work, one of the oldest professions in the world, requires mastery of intimacy.

It is stigmatised, precarious, and dangerous work.

Like ghostly Medusa’s head, this type of labour hovers above our limits of tolerance and conceptions of justice.

Trained as an artist, poverty-ridden and sick, young Grisélidis hits the streets.

From necessity the side-job becomes the passion, and she starts writing.

In the spirit of post-war post-existentialism, she is dramatic:

*Ma vie s’est déroulée
Comme un long serpent noir
La chair est consumée
Le souffle de la mort
A dispersé la cendre
Du feu qui m’a brûlée
Les murmures du sang
Se sont tus dans mes veines
La galaxie des vers
A tendu ses filets
Sur mon corps pétrifié
Et l’invisible faim
De ses milliers de bouches
Va dévorer mes restes⁶¹*

She wears heavy make-up, her hair black, her voice deep, she sings, she drinks, infatuating you with darkness, but even more with her radical care.

A social worker, rescuer, psychologist – she offers up her body to men who’ve been neglected, rendered incapable, invalid, depressed, or suicidal.

Her fees are flexible, depending on your income, her services adaptable.

She keeps a notebook with the preferences of each of her regulars, *suck at length, ass fuck delicately, fat and kind, fuck-talk, slap, embrace...*⁶²

She is an expert in care.

She performs for her clients,

writes and fights for her fellow sex-workers:

*It’s time for all the men who
came to us weary and burdened ...
who find in our arms and in our
vaginas the vital force that’s only
thwarted elsewhere, those we send
away with their balls light and* *sunshine in their hearts – to stop
hassling us, judging us, disowning
us, taxing us, beating us, locking
us up, taking our kids to put them
on Public Assistance, locking
up our lovers and boyfriends.*⁶³

will show you my heart
in my **BREAST**,
or che 7 vostro non mi celerete,
my delight will be to please you,
e sa Febo st grata mi tenete
for **COMPOSING** poems,
in **the WORKS** of love
you'll find me dearer
still to **VENUS**

In a closeup of her bed she observes those who thrive at night,
romanticising the misery of the nocturnal creatures, poor, exhausted, addicted, alien;
the night is as dark as at the bottom of the ocean.

When she's been fucked by seventeen men on the same night – enlightenment:

By the seventeenth, I had no strength left, and then I said to myself, well, where am I? Have I stopped existing? And then I saw that something marvellous had happened to me, you can collectivise your body. You stay yourself, but at the same time, *you belong to others. I was myself all the bodies of the other people who'd come here. I wasn't only their body, but their penis, their soul, their race, I became totally multiple. It's wonderful. You're like a piece of algae tangled up in other algae. It's an ocean.*⁶⁴

You can collectivise your body.

You've never seen sexuality this way but since she's shown you, you can see.

Dazzling in fake gold, jewels and ornaments like a renaissance courtesan,
Grisélidis always keeps death a hand's reach away.

She is a tragic artist, a metaphysical and radically lovingly one.

As an artist of the disappearing act, she instructs us in her last poem:

*Enterrez-moi droite
Sans argent sans vêtements
Sans bijoux sans fioritures
Sans fard sans ornement
Sans voile sans bague sans rien
Sans collier ni boucles d'or fin
Sans rouge à lèvres ni noir aux yeux*⁶⁵

Elfriede Jelinek once said *to live or to give themselves that women artists have to pay to this other space. And this with their lives. For men it is space is the laterna magica, possible to live and to be an artist, the space of disappearance.*⁶⁶ *while women have to decide*

Speaking in a personal voice, in literature, has long been seen as *feminine*;

male authors who did so were denounced as not masculine enough, as weak – St. Augustin, Oscar Wilde,

Proust...

Grisélidis Réal, Veronica Franco, Elena Shvarts, Roland Barthes, Nathalie Léger, Virginia Woolf, Lisa Robertson – all write in a voice stemming from their experience, body, from the self, simultaneously juggling references, manifesting critique, theorising.

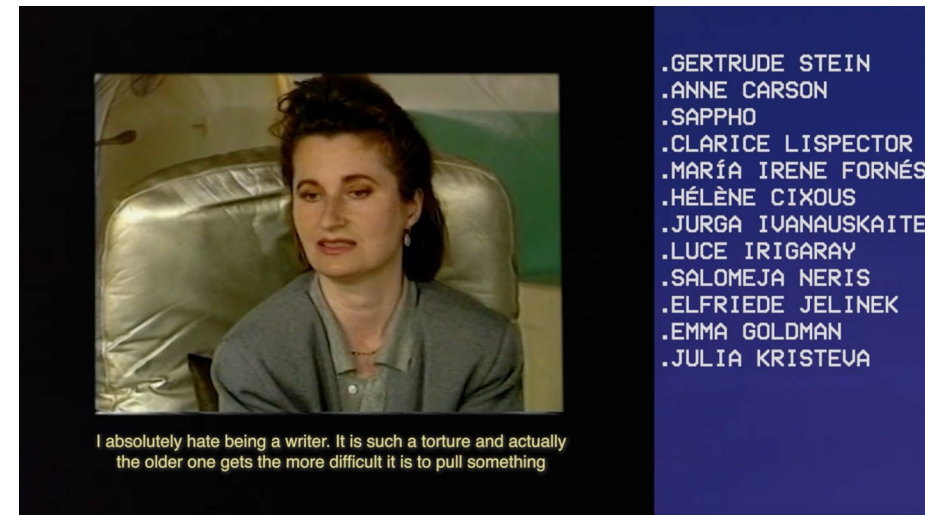
Autotheory is one of the new words which, even as it describes an alternative to the established shapes of knowledge, is becoming increasingly established itself.

It is the academic, theoretical, and personal critique of objectivity, a critique of neutrality.⁶⁷

*The autotheorist reads and chooses citations they identify with, or that resonate with their experience; they then propose a hypothesis or theory based on the evidence provided by their life. Both the auto and the theoretical allow them to process particular questions and ideas, whether personal or philosophical – or, most often, both at once. The artist's life becomes a kind of life-text to be cited alongside other citations.*⁶⁸

You've seen a lot of *auto-* as in *ego-* in the arts; you'd rather question authorship;

you'd rather think that the *auto-* is never and has never been alone but has always been made up of many voices; that the collective is encoded in artistic practice.



You'd rather think again of Lisa Robertson, who says:

The feeling of having an inner life, animated by a cold-hot point of identification called I, is a linguistic collaboration.

*We speak only through the others' mouths.*⁶⁹

Or of Roland Barthes who tied many knots already in *La mort de l'auteur* (1967); he thinks the *author* as a Modern character, a product of Imperialism, Rationalism, Positivism, later – Capitalism; they all set stakes high on individualism, but *writing is itself this special voice, consisting of several indiscernible voices, and literature is precisely the invention of this voice, to which we cannot assign a specific origin: literature is that neuter, that composite, that oblique into which every subject escapes, the trap where all identity is lost, beginning with the very identity of the body that writes.*⁷⁰ Writing is an existence of its own, a voice, he says.

You think, perhaps, that writing is a channelled voice, or just a *channel* for other voices, a multitude of them speaking through you, a conversation. And Barthes perhaps wouldn't disagree: *We know that a text does not consist of a line of words, releasing a single theological meaning (the message of the Author God), but is a space of many dimensions, in which are wedded and contested various kinds of writing, no one of which is original: the text is a tissue of citations, resulting from the thousand sources of culture.*⁷¹

Perhaps *polyphony* can be the word, from Greek *many sounds* and opposite to *monophony* which may be found in chant, in prayer; indeed, an artwork, film, performance or a literary text or theory differs from a prayer; music somehow always finds better words for thought, perhaps because it thinks in the absence of words.

Polyphony defined as the voice of an artist, thinker, writer is the multiplicity of voices within the work. Polyphony gives hope – even when we are creating on our own, we are not alone.

In bedrooms, in hotel rooms, horizontally positioned, undressed, with our eyes covered with a thick semi-opaque veil, like placenta from our early memories from inside of our mothers, where we could dream the world but not yet see, we wait for our vampires, lovers, brothers, friends, teachers, ancestors, ghosts, avatars, to come and work along with us.



No jewels, no frills
No make-up, no ornaments
No veil, no ring, no nothing
No necklace or fine gold earrings
No lipstick or black shade under my eyes

⁶⁶ Elfriede Jelinek, interview with Boris Manner, my translation, in *Der Fall Ingeborg Bachmann*, documentary directed by Boris Manner (Kuchenreuther Film GmbH, 1990).

⁶⁷ The origin of *autotheory* lays in *autohistoria-theoria* by Gloria Anzaldúa, a pioneer of feminist cultural theory thought, who in the 1980s used her place of birth and sexual identity as sources of theorising border and translation politics. A contemporary, increasingly popular version has taken hold with Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts* (2015).

⁶⁸ Lauren Fournier, "Autotheory as Feminist Practice" in *Art, Writing and Criticism* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2021), 149.

⁶⁹ Lisa Robertson, *The Baudelaire Fractal* (Toronto: Coach House Books, 2020), 160.

⁷⁰ Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 148.

⁷¹ Ibid. 146.

Image script



1. Research trip in Venice. Goda Palekaitė, 2022.



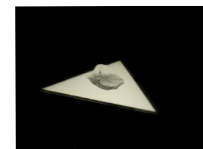
2. Research trip in Sweden: Sala silver mine. Goda Palekaitė, 2021.



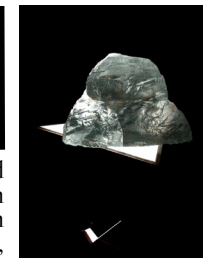
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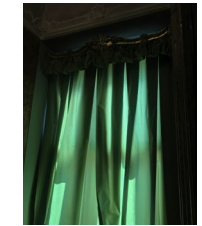
4. Still from the film *Blind Spot*. Claudia von Alemann, 1981.



5.-6. Glass and light sculptures in the solo exhibition *Serpentine Spine*, Västerås Art Museum. Goda Palekaitė, 2023.



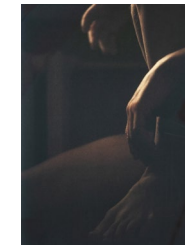
7. *The Spine* (photography, light box) in the solo exhibition *Serpentine Spine*, Västerås Art Museum. Goda Palekaitė, 2023.



8. Research trip in Venice. Goda Palekaitė, 2022.



9. Countess Castiglione photographed by Pierre Louis Pierson, 1863.



10. Photograph from the ongoing series *Guys and Blue Flower*. Gerda Paliušytė.



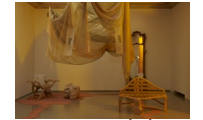
11. *Untitled*. Virgilijus Šonta, 1991. MO museum.



12. Research trip in Venice. Goda Palekaitė, 2022.



13. Research trip in Venice. Goda Palekaitė, 2022.



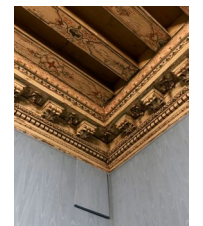
14. Exhibition view from the duo exhibition with Marija Puipaitė *Anatomy of the Fetish* at Vartai Gallery. Darius Petrulaitis, 2023.



15. Exhibition view from the duo exhibition with Marija Puipaitė *Anatomy of the Fetish* at Vartai Gallery. Darius Petrulaitis, 2023.



16. Still from my film *I Write While Disappearing*. Goda Palekaitė, 2021.



17. Research trip in Venice. Goda Palekaitė, 2022.

Projects developed alongside

Eye Dust: an adaptation of a novel to come

Solo show, 2023

Beursschouwburg, Brussels

Curated by Sofia Dati, with contributions by Adomas Palekas, Adrijana Gvozdenović and Paloma Bouhana

This exhibition was a prelude to a novel in the making where, in an uncanny bedroom, characters hailing from remote times and places form a ghostly alliance of unsung voices: a poet and courtesan from sixteenth-century Venice, an activist for sex workers' rights in the 1970s, a Khazar princess, Saints in ecstasy, and animals starring in a horror movie. Operating in the foggy space where dreams and reality fade into each other, *eye dust* is the sleepiness that lingers upon waking – compounding commonly used terms such as *eye crust* or *sleep dust*, the title alludes to the bodily relics of a dream. Blending speculative fiction and subjective realities into cinematic, spatial and sound narratives, the exhibition acted as a premonition of that which has yet to be written, simultaneously questioning the processes of writing fiction as well as history. On the night of the opening, three drinks, composed by Jonas Palekas were served to the audience: milk, blood and rheum. One had to choose one in order to know one's future as predicted by the Sleeping Princess.

Serpentine Spine

Solo show, 2023

Västerås Art Museum, Västerås

With contributions by Graham Kelly, Adomas Palekas and Paloma Bouhana

Following two years of wandering in Sweden, Paris, Brussels, and roaming through the personal letters of Ivan Aguéli (1869–1917), *Serpentine Spine* was envisioned as an intimate encounter between the historical character and myself. Through new works materialised as language, glass and light, I attempted to grasp the mystical landscape in which the work and life of a nomad artist unfolds, in the past as well as today. Ivan Aguéli, born Johan Gustaf Agelii and later also known as Abdalhadi Aqhili, was a Swedish artist, writer, traveller, religious scholar, art theorist, linguist, writer, anarchist, Sufi and orientalist. The title *Serpentine Spine* alludes to the medical condition of scoliosis, an abnormal curvature of the spine from which I suffered at a young age, but also to the backbone in the sense of willpower, strength, and balance in life. This exhibition was the outcome of my residency at Art Lab Gnesta in 2021–2022.

Anatomy of the Fetish

Two-person show in collaboration with Marija Puipaitė, 2023

Galerija Vartai, Vilnius

With contributions by Graham Kelly, Barbora Šulniūtė, Paloma Bouhana and Lina Šuminaitė

In this exhibition, we engaged with the historical meaning of fetish as the unknown, originating in the demonisation of women's practices, which itself later grew into the fetishisation of objects and, finally, of entire cultures. We began our research from the history of the Venetian Renaissance courtesan culture, where a woman could only feel liberated if she existed at the margins of society and engaged in clandestine activities. Although living in precarity and danger, courtesans were some of the most educated, liberated and influential women in all of Europe. Veronica Franco (1546–1591), a courtesan and a poetess famous for both professions in her time, has become an inspiration and a guide for our research in Venice at the Giorgio Cini Foundation. The space of the Vartai gallery in Vilnius, a commercial art venue with a high-ceilinged romantic interior, became an embodiment of an Italian *ridotto*, or salon, where semi-public encounters between courtesans, artists, poets, intellectuals and their customers – high-class male investors and politicians – would take place

Vampire Bedroom Stories

Performance lecture, 2022

Tranzit, Bucharest

Lectures on the Weather programme, curated by Anna Smolak

Through the figure of the female vampire, a contagious and eccentric muse of horror, erotica and folklore, I attempted to address the liminal stages of cultural and historical existence. Vampires have not always been mythological creatures – for centuries they were actual and tangible participants of our social fabric. Prosecuted by law, and by the superstitious, they suffered public executions and humiliations for millennia throughout civilisations – in ancient Mesopotamia, Greece, in the Americas, and later Central and Eastern Europe. The performance invited the audience on a boat circling Lake Snagov around the island where the Snagov monastery is located, also known as the place where Vlad Țepeș The Impaler (better known as Vlad Dracula) might be buried.

I Write while Disappearing

Film, 2021, 17'

I Write while Disappearing is based on found television interviews which served me in creating a fictional discussion between fourteen female writers and myself. French feminists find themselves in conversation with a Brazilian mystic, an Austrian dramatist, a Soviet-Lithuanian romantic, and a number of others, in an intimate sharing of what it means to be a woman and an artist. The film was created in collaboration with the editor Rui Calvo and composer Adomas Palekas. It is usually screened in an installation with furniture I designed especially for this purpose – a writer's desk and chairs in the shape of tongues.

This text is a culmination of years of reading, dreaming, desiring, listening, discussing, watching, tasting, writing, travelling, and getting lost. I wrote it as a chapter of the Ph.D. dissertation submitted to obtain the degree at Hasselt University in 2025. I titled it in a long manner: "Ode to Teachers: History as private Narratives, Lives Beyond Normativity, The Unclassifiable, The Ambiguous, The Borderline and Borderless, Overwhelming Existences, and intimate Experiences". The thesis was supervised by dr. Kris Pint, edited by Lizzie Homersham and designed by Julija Česnulaitytė.