

Parts Apart Read Together

“She sits allowing ‘the unconscious mind’ and all the other minds to fill. She allows it. She allows all its, all it’s, all itses and all of it.”(1)

Someone tells her a story about a woman and a snake. Then someone else tells her a story about a woman and a snake. The woman shoots the snake. She thought the woman was strong, but she’s more than ‘strong’, she’s caring and gracious; she’s not the woman she thought she was; she (HerSelf) has crossed an actual-invisible ever-changing bridge.(2)

She sees how she, herSelf, has become who she seems to be; it goes back a long way; her mother, her mother, her mother, her mother; summing-up from an inexhaustible diffusion, from an opening, a tiny crack, a single breath.

In a photocopy of a photograph a baby lays on its side on a pillow on the ground, in the backyard of a house. She has been brought into the light for the photograph; from a distance she looks like a small white wombat, helpless and still.

In another photograph there are two beautiful women in swimsuits from the 1950s. They would be elderly now, or perhaps already gone. Lives are worth knowing, they are histories – intricate, elaborate, and easily lost. Who, or how, are we when we look (out) at the world (from in here) and speak and write and make decisions, judgments, and art.

Brianna’s photographs are surreal, and in the tradition of the women Surrealists and Dadaists; their images are anti-narrative or multi-narrative, disruptive, ambiguous, and contrary. Dorothea Tanning’s paintings, Sophie Tauber-Arp’s costumes and marionettes, Hannah Hoch’s collages, Suzanne Duchamp’s paintings/collages, Claude Cahun’s photographs and writings. Cahun used make-up, masks and costumes in her staged-photographs. She was her subject, along with gender, self-identity and sexuality. In her book *Disavowals* (or, *Cancelled Confessions*; originally *Aveux non Avenus*), a book dedicated to ‘adventures’, a book of essay-poems, she writes:

“The invisible adventure.

The lens tracks the eyes, the mouth, the wrinkles skin deep ... the expression on the face is fierce, sometimes tragic. And then calm – a knowing calm, worked on, flashy. A professional smile – and voilà!

The hand-held mirror reappears, and the rouge and eye shadow. A beat. Full stop.

New paragraph.

I’ll start again.”(3)

There are veils or curtains, and they are painted or dyed or stained, layered, draped, hung, torn, joined; who gets (to be) hidden (and who is ‘it’); what lies behind or beneath or within; the mask is a mask, and then there’s another mask; the neutral is never neutral, it spreads out, eyeless. I step back, stand quiet, and see what’s *there*; she’s in the landscape; art is crammed with residual situations, responses, and collaborations that remain obscure.

Hannah Hoch’s famous photomontage ‘Cut with the Kitchen Knife, Dada through the last Weimar Beer Belly Cultural Epoch of Germany’ (1919-20) used fragments of images and texts cut from mass-media. Hoch said of her material: “I use it ... like colour, or how the poet uses the word.”(4) Composition entails cutting, gluing, and assembling. Brianna composes using ‘fragments’ from the inner world of her practice rather than from the outer world of media. Unlike Dada’s resistance to intuition and the unconscious, her images pay attention to the unlikely and the uncanny (as they arise in the process), allowing their appearances to play a part, or to play themselves out amongst the conscious acts of technique, desire and aesthetic disposition. The overall image is one of an intense almost-diaphanous disturbance that emanates from remote (myriad, escaping) memories, or confluences of experience/sensation (a baby on a pillow, a room with peeling wallpaper, a cave, a garden, sand-dunes, shell-fish – like Brechtian ruptures of protest, of banners and shouting that jolts you out of the unreal ‘theatre’.) The images are impractical, their agency suspended (or pending); they propose

freedom from 'intellectual' forms and habits; they have their own objective(s) of speculation, impression and humour (they've set-off from the shores of not-yet visible presences; they don't begin or finish in the frame).

Each photograph is a once-only (exclusive) scene (finely balanced, readily ruined). The intuition that might have triggered it, and the intuition that it might trigger, are both (if actual) momentary. "The effort to generate intuition is 'arduous' and cannot last. It occurs not so much through attention as through a leap into the movement of what is new, a leap outside the familiarity that intellect provides, into the unfamiliar, where one much seek out new means of apprehension. This is partly why, even with the effort of attention, intuition always begins with indeterminacy and vagueness and is shadowy in its origin."(5)

The images are made by 'hand', with direction, purpose, planning. They are not from the natural known-world; yet having been produced by living matter and mind are of-nature; the artist affects the world, the world affects the artist: bodies act oddly, the world acts oddly in reply – its past disputed, its memory tested. In dreams we engage in bizarre events, vivid or hazy landscapes, and constellations of people and things; the dream turns from the light, yet holds images from the light – encounters, colours, feelings; we inhabit this crafted, shaped and mobile otherworld as we sleep. Sense must be dreamed too, in the hope that *this dreaming* (of unheard-of-sense) will resist conclusions and prophecies; the image can then be its own territory of textiles, limbs, paints, objects. It's impossible to say if the images are after or before an event (are a glimpse, or evidence, of an entire life, for instance), or are, individually, the entire event, in which case, as witnesses, we'll discuss our scrutiny (our fossicking) with other witnesses. There's a story of a girl who runs away; she's caught up with thought and taken home. Empathy for the girl is still in the air; and empathy for her death as an old woman; and empathy for her ghost who stirs the surfaces (of skin, of fabric, of earth). There's no 'looking' in these images; the faces are kept away (held back) from our faces; we cannot look at the look of the face(s); we cannot see what we long to see – the eyes of others.

The separate, severed, isolated limbs appear willful, expressive, and alive to each other, as if they intimately know the between-spaces either side of the translucent screening. Limbs can suddenly swing out in anger or joy, or cross themselves protectively, or drop numbly and heavily in despair or illness (or fingers can tenderly clasp a toe, or hands can rest on legs like spiders, or pass each other through a hole). The mind manoeuvres them exactly, to kick a ball, to throw a stone, to dance and bend and fold and lift; into our limbs flow all our energies. In Hannah Hoch's 'Russian Dancer' (1928) an ear, a cap and a monocle are pasted onto a woman's head; from the chin two legs sprout; the foot of one leg is in a ballet slipper, 'en-pointe'; the other leg is lifted off the ground, its foot 'pointed' in a dark shoe; it has a crinkled, torn, thigh and a flower attached to its knee; the eyes of the large head calmly gaze at the viewer while the legs go about their business; each leg is trying-to-be the perfectly poised feminine 'part'.

There are the parts (in the images); the part though is a whole; a whole cloth, a whole foot, a whole knee, a whole arm: an arm is a deep (endless) idea/thing, it has unique dimensions, markings and temperature, it's built of various substances; it's a labyrinth, like a thought; it has an unconscious; and, as with all parts, it, and its body, love to hide in reason, and, in cahoots, invent its/their own myths – as shrouder, censor, hoarder, deceiver ... enchanter.

In Dorothea Tanning's painting 'Birthday', a self-portrait, her breasts are bare and she's looking at something (not me) while opening a door, behind which are infinite opening doors. She wears a ruffled purple shirt and a skirt made of tiny nude bodies, like green tendrils or dactyls(6). (Or maybe they are 'complexes', or drives, or instincts: "These complexes are 'the little people', who act like dactyls, doing the finger work in the primal clay of the imagination. They are like the gnomes who work at night, the underworld smiths and labyrinth makers, the artisan craftsmen who cannot cease from shaping, or, in Jung's language, the continual activity of psychic fantasy that makes what we call reality."(7)) On the floor near her feet, bare too, is a furry winged-creature, a daemon, a companion, also looking at 'something'. "... I had been struck, one day, by a fascinating array of doors ...

crowded together, soliciting my attention with their antic planes, light, shadows, imminent openings and shuttings. From there it was an easy leap to a dream of countless door.”(8) Everything is clearly *there*, in the picture, but everything is hidden.

Brianna’s images are staged-photographs; the body/bodies might be male or female; perhaps a metamorphosis is underway that requires display, ceremony, memorializing. The subject (the artist, let’s say) is sticking with her self; she’s not offering a version, or versions, but banking on herself to acquire her own intensity, concentration, and in time, home. The *herself* is the performance that is also, at the same time, quite unlike her-self, quite unlike the habits in-her-bones. Her/self sees (without us) the ‘theatre’ off-stage, that we are kindly shielded from by soft fragile material that is sculpturally formless, and sensual.(9) Makes you want to scream. Because. Doing-Femininity is “... about trips, crossings, trudges, abrupt and gradual awakenings, discoveries of a zone at one time timorous and soon to be forthright ...”, and impossible: “This morning in the museum, I was passing in front of the drawings, in the slight alarm of the reading which doesn’t know from where the blow will come, and I was looking, distracted, at these morsels of worry, these stuttered avowals of nothing, nothing clearly delivered. It was then that the blow came from whom I wasn’t expecting it at all. What is this moment called when we suddenly recognize what we have never seen? And which gives us a joy like a wound? This is the woman who did that to me: the Woman Ironing. This Woman Ironing hurts us. Because the drawing catches ‘the secret’ in its (contrary) enmeshed threads. ‘The thing,’ that sharp thing, ‘life’. We thought we were drawing a Woman Ironing. But it’s worse. This Woman Ironing is a tragedy. A needle blow right in the middle of eternity’s chest.”(10)

Impossible then, *there*.

Notes

1. Rachel Blau DuPlessis, *The Pink Guitar, Writing as Feminist Practice*, Routledge, NY, 1990, 116
2. Elizabeth Grosz, *The Nick of Time, Politics, Evolution and the Untimely*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2004, 185-190
3. Claude Cahun, extract from *Disavowals*, trans. Susan de Muth; accessed 22.02.19, <https://susandemuth.com/translations/disavowals-aveux-non-avenus-by-claude-cahun/>
4. Ruth Hemus, *Dada’s Women*, Yale University Press, New Haven & London, 2009, 99
5. Elizabeth Grosz, *ibid.*, 236 (The word ‘arduous’ comes from Henri Bergson, *Creative Mind*, 39.)
6. Dactyls: Greek mythological males connected to the ‘Great Mother’, spirit-men who were blacksmiths or healing magicians.
7. James Hillman, *The Dream and the Underworld*, Harper & Row, NY, 1979, 119: “Dreams are made by the persons in them, the personified complexes within each of us: these persons come out most freely in the night.”
8. Dorothea Tanning, in *Birthday*, The Lapis Press, 1986, 14 (dorotheatanning.org)
9. See: the soft materials in Tanning’s *The Guest Room* (1950-52); and *Witnesses* (1947), she also talks about ‘woven cloth’ in relation to this image at: dorotheatanning.org; and the thick creepy fabric in her installation *Hôtel du Pavot, Chambre 202* (1970-73)
10. Hélène Cixous, ‘Without End, no, State of drawingness, no, rather: The Executioner’s taking off’, trans. Catherine A.F. MacGillivray, in *Stigmata, Escaping Texts*, Routledge, London, 1998, 25: (The Woman Ironing is the drawing by Pablo Picasso: ‘Etude pour ‘La Repasseuse’, 1904); I was in two minds, as I had firstly used this quotation: “Almost everything is yet to be written by women about femininity: about their sexuality, that is, its infinite and mobile complexity, about their eroticization, sudden turn-ons of a certain minuscule-immense area of their bodies; not about destiny, but about the adventure of such and such a drive, about trips, crossings, trudges, abrupt and gradual awakenings, discoveries of a zone at one time timorous and soon to be forthright. A woman’s body, with its thousand and one thresholds of ardor – once, by smashing yokes and censors, she lets it articulate the profusion of meanings that run through it in every direction – will make the old single-grooved mother tongue reverberate with more than one language ... Women must write through their bodies, they must invent the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes, and rhetorics, regulations and codes, they must submerge, cut through, get beyond the ultimate reserve-discourse, including the one that laughs at the very idea of pronouncing the word ‘silence’, the one that aiming for the

impossible, stops short before the word 'impossible' and writes it as 'the end'." (Hélène Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', trans. Keith Cohen & Paula Cohen, in *The Portable Cixous*, ed. Marta Segarra, Columbia University Press, NY, 2010, 38)

Linda Marie Walker (February 2019)