

POSSÉDÉES

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DÉVIANCE
PERFORMANCE
RÉSISTANCE

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DEVIANCE
PERFORMANCE
RESISTANCE

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ON THE USE
OF OCCULT,
MAGICAL AND
ALCHEMICAL
FORCES – OR
THE COUNTER-
WORLDS OF ART¹

Marianne Derrien

Hearts beating, minds churning, shivers run up and down bodies, everything is moving, changing, getting lost, distorting itself; here we are, plunged into the darkness at nightfall. As the ritual of possession begins and is tinted with nocturnal effects, between slivers of brightness and shadow, the following lines have been dictated by voices, quotes, visions and rituals filled with this art of power that is the occult. This is a short stroll in the arts through the magic of species and life forms that find a connection with one another through the joy of resistance.

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In answer to the convulsions provoked by disorders, whether they be economic, climatic, sanitary or the ecological beliefs of the early 21st century, always come those of the body. To state today's inversion, that of a revolt that does not stem from madness, but from an energy-filled vitality, at times mundane and always liberating. At the heart of the occult's powers, of that which is not seen, our bodies interconnect with other lives, open themselves up to new desires, unknown pleasures and the most intimate urges, all of which are rooted in age-long beliefs linked to shamanism, alchemy, magic and witchcraft. Having infiltrated contemporary fields of action and thought, the occult is perceived first and foremost as the dark side of rationalism and science. The occult circulates also among current events because it constantly falters between the history of secret societies and so-called minority groups, between contemporary upheavals and ancient myths, between the mundane and the historic, between the failure of utopias or modernist metanarratives and omens of the apocalypse. The 19th century saw the birth of so-called modern science and its privileging of a rationalist perspective, but it was also fascinated by the occult, spiritism and esotericism: symptoms and pillars of the turn-of-the-century's decadent culture that spun tables as well as the spirits of the Industrial Revolution around new, distant conquests whose mysteries were assumed.

*What is the use of moving
when one can travel
on a chair so magnificently?
[...] All the efforts
of modern science do but
confirm the discoveries
of the magic of other days.
Joris-Karl Huysmans*

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Related to these historical and societal changes are the links between art, sex and death. Psychoanalysis studied such links by recognising that another world existed, that of the unconscious, even though colonial powers showed disdain for shamanic, animist and voodoo practices. With the Nietzschean understanding that God is dead, the European avant-gardes moulded art into an instrument for fighting against conventionalism and official ideologies. Their aim was to ward off a time that was disturbed by wars and by the major technological inventions made possible by scientific, industrial and military progress. Artistic practices then subtly morphed into a weapon of emancipation, situated between symbolism, spiritual powers, and magical or incantatory processes. After the human tragedies, and the political and spiritual crises of the 20th century, art paves the way, in this fight for emancipation in a struggling world, to an imaginary in which the occult and everything that symbolically orchestrates the disorder of human existence have fused together in order to create an explosive elixir. Thus, thanks to the use of occult forces that tirelessly perform the alternative, critical aspects of the powers that be and their beliefs, a secret, underground and pulsating history of the arts is slowly written. How does the creative act emerge from the deprivation of knowledge, of stories and of inheritances at the heart of ideological mechanisms and systems of power? If artists invalidate the possibilities of change encapsulated in the signs and symbols of the mind's authority over body, how do the ghosts of History leave their marks in concealed, hidden and oppressed bodies?

*Let's enter the triangle
of white magic
and black magic²!*

This approach is para-scientific, mystical and fictional, and doesn't abide by a chronological order. It creates counter-worlds that art seeps into. Based on an artistic and historical exploration, the term "use of force", originally a military and police term, allows us through a semantic slip to operate a critical analysis of artistic processes with systems of thought, belief and sociability, in Europe and the United-States. By calling on several fields of research such as sociology, science, anthropology, theology and history, Foucault's theories directly referred to

our connection to institutions, authority and possession: bodies that are taken care of by medical, as well as by political and legal, powers who discipline and shape them.

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If today the occult still produces new visions of the world as an alternative to official knowledge, it is at the centre of a never-ending struggle that the “body-territory”, as defined by Italian academic and activist Silvia Federici, who has been based in the US since the 1960s, finds itself³. Drawing from the autonomous Marxist, feminist tradition, Federici deepens her research in line with Latin American activists who consider the body as “a territory to defend”, in other words, a place where one defends land and nature, political and social actions. In order to escape the processes of control and surveillance, the body is not just a metaphor of what is claimed: it *performs* these spaces of resistance and care, by joining other bodies, by protesting, partying, dancing, and celebrating its power faced with the dispossession of its goods, its lands and its dehumanisation, which were kept quiet for so long.

*Dance is unity of expression and
function, physically filled
with light, giving soul to form.
Without ecstasy, no dance!*
Mary Wigman

It's time to take flight of one's own body, the Witching Hour⁴ has rung with that of sorcerers, shamans, ghosts, zombies and other spectres who reveal themselves in full darkness. It's time to celebrate the reunion with bodies that are subversive, sacrificial, desiring, ritualised and ecstatic; deviant bodies that inspire a redefinition of femininity, masculinity, and of the performativity of belittled or exploited bodies. Identities oscillating between passions at times destructive and radical, they become clouded and transmute into alchemists, witches, shamans or *djinn*s⁵, because these are emancipatory figures that can see and perceive that which is invisible. Ghostly presences, fluid, scraggy or floating bodies bring normative hierarchies literally to the ground at the pace of frenzied dances such as the witch's⁶ or the Tarantella⁷. By communicating with the powers of nature, the dead and the divine, incantatory practices and rituals create a heritage, a memory that is passed through the transmission and even the transmutation of bodies – bodies made of

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3 Silvia Federici, *Beyond the Periphery of the Skin: Rethinking, Remaking, Reclaiming the Body in Contemporary Capitalism*, Oakland, CA, PM Press, 2020. 4 *L'heure des sorcières* [The Witching Hour], along with *Sorcières: pourchassées, assumées, puissantes, queer* [Witches: hunted, self-sufficient, powerful, queer] is the title of an exhibition by Anna Colin in 2012-2014. She led a curatorial research on the figure of the witch as a protofeminist whose ignored and repressed history tackles matters such as norms, alterity, margins, gender and power in art and society. 5 *Djinn* are supernatural creatures in early pre-Islamic Arabian and later Islamic mythology and theology. Usually, they are invisible and can shift in different shapes (vegetal, animal or human-like). They can spiritually and mentally influence humans (mind control, possession). Source: Wikipedia. 6 *Mary Wigman's Witch Dance* ("Hexentanz") was created in 1926. It can be considered as a manifesto for expressive dancing – an artistic, educational, political and feminist manifesto. (Isabelle Launay, "Une sorcière en cache une autre. Sur quelques usages d'un film en danse: de Hexentanz de Mary Wigman à Écran somnambule de Latifa Laâbissi", *Repères, cahier de danse*, 2012/2 (n°30), p.16). 7 The Tarantella is a dance and a chant, which was thought to be caused by a trance-inducing spider bite. It came from the Dionysian celebrations held by the Greek colony settled in the south of Italy during Antiquity. (Alessi dell'Umbria, *Tarantella! Possession et dépossession dans l'ex-royaume de Naples*, éditeur L'œil d'or, 2016). 8 Philippe Pignarre and Isabelle Stengers, *Capitalist Sorcery: Breaking the Spell*, Palgrave Macmillan (2011).

flesh or metal –, just like in alchemy. These bodies act as mediators between indistinct worlds: ghostly shapes, (anti)-religious symbols, sexual objects, markings on the flesh, spiritual and magical materials, such as bodily and animal fluids like milk, blood, beeswax, make it possible to play with such a codification of belonging or recognition.

Far from being a step backwards, these so-called “witch-like” physical and magical practices or disciplines decondition the dominant ideologies⁸ of a world created by the rejects of a long economic and ecological ruin, whose reality appears at the time of its destruction. Through these bodies that are free from the obligations of the moment and from economic performance, only the “non-productive expenditure”, so dear to Georges Bataille, transfigures everything it meets, shifting from one reality to another.

*Go and give birth in the
 night through a shameful coitus –
 the only one allowed
 by common moral standards,
 which are made for c...!
 What is it that you
 disapprove of in my work?
 That I'm being myself?
 Go on then, your
 conformism is killing you!
 You are but slaves!
 Pierre Molinier*

What the occult has to tell us about art is this very alliance of bodies and so-called “evil spirits”, born from counter-natural, ambiguous, at times obscene or poetical fantasies of metamorphosis. Occult patterns come back thanks to counterstrategies and they take various shapes, resisting the darkness of dogma. By de-rationalizing systems of belief, art asserts its power of creating stories and tales that revive its potential for insurrection. Through a discord that transgresses all the body’s boundaries, artistic practices that growl and suffocate between life and death, norms and transgression, become the repository of stories and languages that had been forgotten, hidden and lost. At the heart of the curse and the long-lost ordeals inflicted on desacralized bodies, burning and freezing, sometimes fugitive, are strange traces, intriguing and menacing, paradoxical, both spectral and made of lasting matter. These

are the traces of the occult we find in feminisms and social struggles as they experiment with rites and fight against the world as it is. Rules, norms and conveniences are exploded; trances and psychotropic substances enlarge our consciousness; the artistic practices that resort to the occult possess an anti-establishment scope never before seen. They can pave the way for passions, emotions, processions and celebrations that take the form of protests against the many oppressions and segregations that exist.

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*The density of History
determines none of my acts.
I am my own foundation.
And it is by going beyond
the historical and instrumental
given that I initiate
my cycle of freedom.
Frantz Fanon*

The historical conflict between the mind and the body dates back to the Middle Ages. It has fostered a programmed, long-lasting repression of desires and feelings, thanks to “social” control and the mechanization of bodies. However, as counterintuitive as it may seem, capitalist society gave birth to the individual. In her seminal work, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation*⁹, Silvia Federici confirms all the battles led by the Church and the state against the bodies of women and of the indigenous peoples of the New World.

*Here come the slaves,
they’ve raised from their graves.
W.I.T.C.H.
Women’s International Terrorist
Conspiracy from Hell*¹⁰

The witch is hunted, punished because she doesn’t play by the rules; she’s prone to debauchery. By extending the metaphor, she could be the artist’s double: a “proletarian body” shaped by her own supposed lack of productivity and her desire to wander in the land of plenty. It’s this “becoming-witch”¹¹ to which we owe the insurrection against the abusive links between knowledge, power and justice, and against the rationalization of the irrational and the obsessive conquest of bodies that led to their colonisation and criminalisation from birth to death.

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⁹ This text is an invitation to think about domination and exploitation, in light of the profound changes that took place at the end of the Middle Ages. A new world was born, in which common goods became private, changing gender and work relations. Witch-hunts and slavery paved the way to capitalism, and modernity became a matter of discipline. Discipline of female bodies, which were destined for breeding, burned on stakes like terror warnings, tortured to display their intimate mechanism, socially destroyed. Discipline of slave bodies, subjugated to the social body while all the resources from the New World were monopolized to enrich the Old World. (Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation*, Brooklyn, New York, autonomedia, 2014). ¹⁰ W.I.T.C.H. is the name of several related but independent feminist groups active in the United States as part of the women's liberation movement during the late 1960s. The first WITC group was established in New York City in October 1968. Source: Wikipedia. ¹¹ Olivier Marboeuf, "L'éméutier et la sorcière" [The rioter and the witch], in *Sorcières, pourchassées, assumées, puissantes, queer*, exhibition catalogue. Curator: Anna Colin, Maison Populaire, Édition B42, Paris, 2012, p. 66. ¹² *Lesprit français*, *Contre-cultures*, 1969-1989 [The French spirit, Counter-cultures, 1969-1989], exhibition leaflet, curators: Guillaume Désanges and François Piron, La Maison Rouge, 2017, p.10. ¹³ With his *Magick*, British writer Aleister Crowley (1875-1947) turns the world upside-down. With the Thelema, he created a new system of mystic thought and bodily practices, whose aim was to destroy the rational spirit, through trance and sexual rituals.

In these counter-worlds of art, Satanism crosses paths with decadence, disorder, religious and cultural struggles and revolutions, as well as collective utopias and activisms. These alternatives are more than contemporary heresies; they become spaces to reinvent the representation of the sacred and which reinvest art with its magical capacities. The occult and the practices derived from it are, on the one hand, tools for a necessary transgression: weapons of mass destruction against official and dominant knowledge. They also are the visible connection between artistic processes and counter-cultural movements, especially in post-war Europe and the United-States. A strange fusion of art and spirituality, cruelty and physical pleasure, reflects popular, alternative and anti-establishment practices. Political, social and aesthetic liberations have awakened consciousness and desires in order to place bodies back at the centre of uprisings¹² – be they feminist; anti-colonial; civil rights struggles with the Black Panthers movement; eco-social, led by indigenous peoples; or for LGBTQ+ rights, among others.

*We have to talk about
liberating minds as well
as liberating society.
[...] I am no longer accepting
the things I cannot
change. I am changing
the things I cannot accept.
Angela Davis*

The artistic descendants of 1960s and 1970s political activism have been able to propose a cultural analysis of the meeting-point between the visual arts, social sciences, occult spirituality, and critical thinking. This can be considered as a multitude of “profanations” of the moral order that has led across the “underground” and a call to subterranean and clandestine powers. Now, these visions of a world against itself nourish official narratives and our collective mythologies; and artists work with these to aggregate past and present into a semi-conscious raw material.

*Do what thou wilt
shall be the whole of
the Law [...] Love is the law,
love under will.
Aleister Crowley¹³*

Since the 1980s, in San Francisco, on the USA's West Coast, American neo-pagan witch, Starhawk, has developed a new form of activism, that sits between feminism and ecological responsibility, rooted in the anti-military and anti-nuclear movements. In *Dreaming the Dark: Magic, Sex, and Politics*, she tells about actions that she sees as rituals grounded in a creative yet celebratory science. To change oneself in order to change society; art as a means or power of transformation to unite the spiritual with the political.

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*Modern physic no longer speaks
of separate, discrete atoms
of dead matters, but of waves
of energy, probabilities, patterns
that change as they are observed,
and recognizes what shamans
and Witches have always known:
Matter and energy are not
separate forces, but different
forms of the same thing.
Starhawk*

Trance exorcised the trauma of domination. Now, it gives way to the emancipation of spirits for a community of bodies who have entered into resistance and who remember massacre, exclusion and domination. By experimenting with ritual and cultural memories condemned by historical and technical progress, magical, occult and alchemic practices in art make it possible to welcome new ways of being human and underline the weight of our normative systems¹⁴. We can thus build a history of dissent, an ever-changing organic matter, which forms the origin of today's countercultures and counterpowers.

*Cause I need freedom, too,
I break chains
all by myself, Won't let
my freedom rot in hell [...]
I'm a riot, I'm a riot
through your borders.
Beyoncé*

The near shamanic and magical dimension of art and its power create a barely tangible, clandestine parallel territory, which infiltrates the cracks in order to confront a world that sees itself on the verge of collapse. The survival of

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ancestral and folklore imaginaries operates a reassessment of scientific rationalities, in order to guard itself against discourses that obstruct, divert, trap, and manipulate. Because links are continuously forged between all beings in order to condemn the oppression of bodies that have been fetishized and colonised, to try and repair them through the reversal and overthrow of historical narratives.

*My silences had
not protected me.
Your silence
will not protect you.
Audre Lorde*

If we dream our life as though it were a long carnival¹⁵, it seems possible to believe in a pact with art, in order to welcome all kinds of bodies as antidotes to contemporary dominations, between self-expression, collective experience and creative resistance.