

THE REBEL SELF

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We could not be made of stars and muscle for capitalism to take root and spread across the globe like a deadly virus. There was an epistemological crisis of self and philosophy responded.

“Descartes’ doctrines had double aims, to deny that human behavior can be influenced by external factors (such as the stars, or celestial intelligences), and to free the soul from any bodily conditioning thus making it capable of exercising an unlimited sovereignty over the body,” writes Federici in her generative Marxist and magical classic *Caliban and The Witch*. The soul could not be sensual, it had to be made practical. The rebel body had to be contained. To summarize (oh so briefly): for the transition from feudalism to capitalism to occur, magic had to die.

Magic is anti-capitalist: it sees the earth as an animate collaborator. Wage labor alienates: the body from itself, the soul from the sensual, the self from the other, humans from plants, animals and the earth herself. “The revival of magical beliefs is possible today because it no longer represents a social threat.” Magic has been commodified so deeply, as any avid crystal consumer can attest. In its commodification, magic has been made unthreatening. Yet we must make it a threat. Whereas agrarian and industrial capitalism rendered the body as the machine, we now live in a time where our personality is our brand. As artists, we dance a dangerous neoliberal tango between self and commodity. Where does one end and the other begin? Similarly, the artist/healer must promote themselves as special to carve out a living in a shit economy. Gigs and jigs. The self as brand, as documented by wordsmith magician Naomi Klein, is what got us into this mess with Donald Trump. How can magic help? How can we render the body rebellious and free the personality from its cult?

Johanna Breiding constructs a narrative around an absence and the unknowable. What is unknown cannot be contained. *THE REBEL BODY* (taking its name from the Federici’s chapter “The Great Caliban, The Struggle Against The Rebel Body”) is made in collaboration with Shoghig Halajian and begins with a search for Anna Göldi, the last European witch to be executed (1782) in Switzerland. Their film is about looking and longing, but through its nonlinear assemblage we feel what we cannot know. The figurative absence of Göldi structures the exhibition. The absence is felt as a full void, a gendered feminine operation indeed. Here, we are able to commune with a deep well, with all of its mixed up connotations of violence, life, and longing that the queer body of the witch points us to. The works orbit around this, forming various constellations. Can the social body be remade of matter and stardust? *Slippage/Spillage* is both a title and a methodology.

While the exhibition as a whole orbits around Göldi, *Slippage/Spillage* orbits around the artist. It as if she is looking for herself in multiple directions, simultaneously. She looks to the past at Göldi as a queer ancestor. She looks at the sky, following her traces, her relationships and encounters. The story of the witch hunt throws darts at a shifting target: “otherness.” But what we see in Breiding’s work, and what we must insist upon, is telling the story of identity in a more nuanced way than the oppressors. Difference spills *and* slips. It is not fixed in time or space. It can be persecuted: but it cannot be destroyed. In her work, the presence of landscape reminds us (again and again), memory is transmitted through human and nonhuman contact. It is imprinted through the queer magic of touch. It is dormant in the land and it transmutes through translation and time. We open back up to the stars when we let it run unruly and free.

How, if at all, is erasure a useful narrative device in the genealogy of the witch hunt? Breiding addresses this question within and between the works *Demonstrative Score* and *Slippage/Spillage*. In *Slippage/Spillage*, she presents an erasure of Descartes’ face in a textbook reproduction of his portrait by Frans Hals. The photograph shows the pink and grey debris of the eraser around his face and in the margins of the book. In the two-channel video *Demonstrative Score*, we see a collection of found footage. On one side, we are shown monuments to violence being pulled down; on the other, taisha paggett creates a choreography based on this footage with the absence of a figure. In these works, Breiding gives us erasure anchored in the materiality. We see the eraser dust, and we see the faces of the men finally being kicked off their pedestals. The gestures become about the bodies performing them. The absence of our queer ancestors—whose stories we cannot know—structures new narratives. The erasure of dominant stories is not about forgetting, but rather a performative act that pries open a space to contemplate what it is not there.

How can we expand the self to avoid the claws of capitalism without erasing it?

In another of Breiding’s photos, the heads of two donkeys blur together to create a single entity. It is an ephemeral trace, a formal choice, and the magic of photography that gives us a glimpse at the alchemy of contact. For magic to pose a threat to capitalism today it cannot be contained in the performance of self. The show itself models this expansion through its deeply collaborative nature. The work is about history and the present, but importantly, not the future. It is an exploration of the multifaceted nature of the capitalist present, an increasingly challenging endeavor as our attentions are exponentially divided by screen-mediated chaos. Presence can be nonlinear and transtemporal, but it is also grounded. We are stars and muscle. We must work with what’s in front of us and transmute it with all our might.