

Objects in the mirror are closer than they appear (more to follow)

by Jasmine Picot-Chapman

‘To be ashamed of being naked in front of a cat is a reflected shame, the mirror of shame ashamed of itself, a shame that is the same time speculation, unjustifiable, and unavowable.’

Jacques Derrida in **The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)**

Turn around and walk up the large staircase the public (you) enters to find the exhibition, **Objects in the mirror are closer than they appear**. Head towards the exit of this Ivory Tower. The sliding windows of an upmarket restaurant are open onto the street on this hot, mid-July day. Sharp suits* are breaking bread over a glass of wine. It sounds biblical but this is more primordial, as they test their vocal chords’ potential, trying their best to understand and be understood with approximate, verbal gestures. It is very sweet, a really touching scene.

Tourists* fly past your distracted line of vision, the flag of this fine institution reflects in the upstairs windows of the office block above the aforementioned culinary establishment. You are reminded that the zoo and the museum emerged at the same time in history, in Germany around 1800.

I am going to write about women* and animals*. It will be your task to resist drawing parallels between the two, or to read simile as metaphor, because I have not undertaken the labour of differentiating in writing.

In a poetry course during my undergraduate studies the professor stressed two things of equal weight: the artist is an outsider to society; and women are closer to nature than men. A classmate* told me that in a lesson I didn’t attend, the professor illustrated this point by sketching on a whiteboard. A stick figure in trousers on one side (male), besides a stick figure in a skirt (female) and finally, an octopus (nature).

I’m writing to you from North Dakota where there is oil and no phone signal. Something I often repeat but cannot fact check at this moment is that women gained the vote in some Swiss regional elections in 1991. The internet had happened, the Soviet Union had fallen apart... shocking, perhaps, only because we consider Switzerland neutral and fair, white, clean, European. When the world went to war Switzerland would not join them. When women went to the polls in the former USSR they found one candidate on the ballot to choose from. Women voted in Saudi Arabia for the first time in 2015, yet couldn’t drive to the polls until last month (4 June 2018).

The phrase ‘partial women’s liberation’ is one of the most important I learnt this year. Facts, figures, key issues such as -- suffrage, driving licences, gallery representation, major museum

retrospectives and female genital mutilation, #metoo -- direct the rational woman's attention to areas of inequality. The point of contention becomes what men can and what women cannot. Even if woman cannot afford to say no, or orgasm.

“It is a very inconvenient habit of kittens [...] that, whatever you say to them, they always purr. If they would only purr for "yes", and mew for "no", or any rule of that sort so that one could keep up a conversation! But how can you talk with a person if they always say the same thing?”

Alice in **Alice In Wonderland**

Animal psychology has progressed somewhat since the time of Lewis Carroll and we better understand that not being able to comprehend does not make someone inherently incomprehensible. Although the effect for the subject of our wish to dismiss or understand, when we are in a position of power, is often similar.

Many animals had to be stuffed for us to learn from their archived bodies. Baby monkeys died of loneliness so we humans could learn to pick up our young when they cry (see Harry Harlow's **Pit of Despair** experiment).

‘In any case, isn't Alice's credulity rather incredible? She seems, at this moment at least, to believe that one can in fact discern and decide between a human yes and no.’

Joan Didion

Simone Weil in **Analysis of Oppression** states that ‘those who most often have the occasion to feel that evil is being done to them are those who are least trained in the art of speech [...] what is first needed is a system of public education capable of providing it, so far as it is possible, with means of expression.’

The data-woman is not all women. In 1911, Princess Sophia Duleep Singh wrote across her census form: "No Vote, No Census. As women do not count they refuse to be counted, & I have a conscientious objection to filling up this form". The famous 1918 law, noted down in history books as the date of women's suffrage in England, allowed women over the age of 30 who occupied a house (or were married to someone who did) to vote. In 1920 black women* won the right to vote in the USA. Until 1967 they drank from different water fountains and occupied different schools from white women*. Notable feminist scholar* bell hooks began her studies in the racially segregated South USA. In 2010 Eileen Cooper RA became the first female keeper of the Royal Academy of Arts. This noted, we (women artists) are closer than we appear (more to follow).

‘To set up as a standard of public morality a notion which can neither be defined nor conceived is to open the door to every kind of tyranny. The notion of rights, which was

launched into the world in 1789, has proven unable, because of its intrinsic inadequacy, to fulfil the role assigned to it.'

Simone Weil

When I couldn't reach any kind of conclusive statement on the issue of women's representation in the arts for this text, I settled for something that would get you angry, indignant: "when (-wo)MEN went to the polls in the Soviet Union there was only one candidate on the ballot!" "Female genital mutilation and the lack of gallery representation for women artists are incomparable issues!" "Black (-wo)men were segregated!" "#(-wo)men too!" "All kinds of tyranny!"

'Marx finally came to understand that you cannot abolish oppression so long as the causes which make it inevitable remain, and that is these causes reside in the objective -- that is to say material -- conditions of the social system.'

Simone Weil

Patriarchy, like all other systems of oppression, is an infrastructure: ideas in function. We are trying to get from A to B, the side effect is sexism, racism, the oppression of others. We may be doing this by doing what others cannot do without question, or we may be hurting them.

This is how it is possible for people to be the unconscious instrument of values they would strenuously reject on a conscious level. (To paraphrase Joan Didion)

As Weil seeks to define rights, she says 'this profound and childlike and unchanging expectation of good in the heart is not what is unsolved when we agitate for our rights. The motive which prompts a little boy to watch jealously to see if his brother has a slightly larger piece of cake arises from a much more superficial level of the soul. The word justice means two very different things according to whether it refers to one or the other level. It is only the former one that matters.'

Every time that there arises from the depths of a human ear the childish cry which Christ himself could not restrain, "why am I being hurt?", then there is certainly injustice. For if, as often happens, it is only the result of a misunderstanding, then the injustice consists in the inadequacy of the explanation.

Those people who inflict the blows which provoke this cry are prompted by different motives according to temperament or occasion. There are some people who get a positive pleasure from the cry; and many others simply do not hear it. '[...] the second is only a weaker mode of the first.' (Weil, again.)

Now I will try to be polite because Sung reminds me you're always only two people away from your enemy*. Three away from your rapist*, I add.

It's now important to distinguish between terms, as Weil does often. The difference between an error (wrongness) and a problem (a task). When something is problematic it is to be resolved. That is what is happening here.

To write this text I've straightened out the press releases of a few New York galleries cluttering my backpack. Before I began to research, it was my aim to draw out the differences between pillars and columns (terms Sung and Débora use to describe the metal forest central to their exhibition). As well as to talk about the act of holding things up (institutions), something that this forest does not do (materially, and we can only hope, in theory). A column or pillar in architecture is an element that transmits, through compression, the weight of the structure above to other structural elements below. Above: 'The Royal Academy of Arts, located in the heart of London, is a place where art is made, exhibited and debated. Run by artists since 1768, we're celebrating 250 years by opening up like never before. Step inside a new home for art and ideas.' Below: [...]

Luckily... an alternative art history of poles:

Beginning with **Aloalo: Mahafaly Sculptures of the Efiambelos** at Perrotin Gallery. There's a spelling mistake on the third line of the press text:

'Efiambelo, Madagascan sculpture deceased in 2006, owned [should be owed] his knowledge to his great grandfather Soroboko. Today, only five members of the clan perpetuate this unique practice in the same style as their distinguished inspirer. [...]

Usually sculpted out of Mendorave wood, the Aloalo is a vertical sculpture that reaches about 2 meters height (6.5 feet) divided in two distinct parts. The base of the sculpture is a pole. It's upper middle part is carved into eight (the number of wholeness) successive geometric motifs painted in vivid colours. The first seven motifs are an alternating succession of diamond-like or half-moon-like figures that respectively represent, according to tradition, a Zebu's forehead and a sleeping dog. The last symbol of the pole is a full moon adorned with sun rays that evokes light, life and eternity. This pole is topped with a horizontal platter of varying dimensions, on which stands a figurative scene, sculpted in the round. Practiced by the Mahafaly in the great South of Madagascar since the 18th century, the Aloalo is typically sculpted in memory of the deceased while celebrating the living with prestige.'

Poles reoccur on my trip to Hiwa K's **Pre-Image (Blind as the Mother Tongue)** currently exhibited at the New Museum. The artist walks through the city observing through rear view mirrors on a pole. Like museums and zoos, both cinema and railway networks became popular habits around the same time. Thus emerged a new sense of time, scenes speeding past, a beginning and an end (I

forget which Frankfurt School scholar first made this point). If cinema provides a beginning and an end, the art exhibition is often a cliffhanger. Start in the middle, move on without conclusion.

By coincidence, Monika Szewczyk writes about this work for Vdrome:

‘It is strange to introduce a film by Hiwa K. The whole point seems to be an experience one is not primed for—one of disorientation (bodily, geographic, mnemonic)—and that sense of a very precarious balance between rather contradictory stimuli. However, maybe it makes sense to call the attention to what only cinema can offer, which is a non-linear experience of time. You may be thinking: **but the long filmstrip is the ultimate base and metaphor for linear time**. There is a beginning and there is ‘the end’, as so many films used to emphasize. But maybe they insisted too much on this, which should make us suspicious and make us see things from another angle; maybe from a few different angles at once, refracted from rear view mirrors, precariously but gracefully balanced on the head, that western locus of thinking.’

Back to London and **Objects in the mirror are closer than they appear**. The works on display here are replicas. (I feel the need to differentiate here between copy, replica and homage -- or coincidence -- but the words aren't coming out so DIY). Sung's Mark Rothkos and Débora's Barnett Newmans are pretty enough to follow the intentions of their (absent) forefathers. Contemplate something, anything. Never forget Rothko had a chapel. Abstract enough to give meaning to anything, religious. Yet Sung and Débora owe nothing to Mark and Barnett, instead they pay homage to the site effects. Made in Vietnam, Indonesia, China, Mexico, like their authors, the fabric of these works could ask you that while you follow the narratives of art history, stop, stare. “If you see something, say something.” One of the Ghostbusters in the recent remake makes the mistake of thinking she has coined this phrase for their paranormal extermination project. While instead of reports of ghosts, they receive calls about suspicious baggage. Objects in the mirror are closer than they appear (more to follow).

For Jacques Derrida in his transcribed ten-hour marathon lecture, **The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)**, the act of following and who follows who is really at question -- a question that will answer what is the animal that therefore [we] are.

Quickly Jacques becomes obsessed with the sentiment of his own nakedness. So, preoccupied with his cat, who cannot be naked, looking but not seeing his own naked body (only to himself in that instance), as he uses the bathroom in the mornings. (Try to be as forgiving as I am of Jacques for his over use of commas and ironic bracketing).

The nude is something hard to pry from the Genesis narrative, and women's traditional role in art history. Both conclude that being naked, being at all, is not a state but a state of mind. A presiding sentiment. A bad trip side effect (affect could be more appropriate as we're talking about feeling naked) of eating the forbidden fruit. Castrated from the tip of human spines: a tale as old as time --

To be naked without knowing it is not to be naked. He argues. Were (-wo)man or man, and animal ever on these same terms? He wonders.

It is irrelevant, I would agree.

Somehow, as Kelly Oliver argues, 'the binary opposition between human and animal is intimately linked to the binary opposition between man and woman.'

The question is not can non-humans feel (naked)? But can they make (war)?

'Discussing the traditional Indian ritual of sati in which widows throw themselves on the burning funeral pyres of their husbands, in her seminal essay **Can the Subaltern Speak**, literary theorist Gayatri Spivak shows the limitations of liberal notions of freedom, choice and agency when it comes to discussing subaltern women, or possibly women and oppressed peoples in general (1988). Spivak demonstrates how within the rhetoric of the traditionalists, these women are free agents who chose to burn themselves; but within the rhetoric of Western feminists, these women are the victims of repressive and deadly patriarchal customs of a "backward" culture. The double-bind in this situation is that, on the one hand, we don't want to perpetuate the stereotype that women are merely passive helpless victims who don't possess any agency of their own; but on the other hand, we don't want to embrace a practice that not only serves patriarchal inheritance laws but moreover kills women. So, which is it? Do these women jump on the burning pyres of their own free will, or does their culture push them, so to **speak?** (My italics, Kelly Oliver's words.)

For so long now, it is as if the cat has been recalling itself and recalling that, recalling me and reminding me of this awful tail of genius, without breathing a word. Who was born first before the names? Which one saw the other come to this place, so long ago? Who will have been the first occupant and therefore the master? Who the subject? Who has remained the desperate, for so long now?

We're (literally) dying to know.

Leave the building on the Piccadilly side. As you walk through these hallowed halls, to the right: the Great Plains Dinosaur Museum, Montana (at least for me, still no internet so I can only assume for you: The Summer Exhibition), a volunteer in the street makes eye contact, their T-shirt reads: "don't worry, I won't make you sign anything". Johnny Depp, Amber Heard's tormentor, (dis)graces the repetitive adverts for Dior's **Sauvage**, a cologne. "Who is the monster and who is the man?" sing the bells. Who is the non-human here, **really?** Thank you for attending (to) **Objects in the mirror are closer than they appear** (more to follow).

Notes

* = (perhaps you are one?)

References and thanks

bell hooks, **Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom**

Jacques Derrida, **The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)**

https://www.e-skop.com/images/UserFiles/Documents/Editor/derrida_cat.pdf

Simone Weil, **An Anthology**

Kelly Oliver, <http://www.spaziofilosofico.it/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/Oliver.pdf>

<http://www.vdrome.org/hiwa-k> and **Sexual Difference, Animal Difference: Derrida and Difference
‘Worthy of Its Name’**

Perhaps an unpaid intern,

https://static.perrotin.com/presse_expo/press_release_6554_0.pdf?v=1529608780

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EDT7Y1Mee24>

Hilary Mantel, **Eight Months on Ghazzah Street**

Joan Didion, **Slouching Towards Bethlehem**

Francesca Altamura

Jia Jia