

So what if our corpses aren't exquisite?!

*Elvira Højberg with Fanny Paul Clinton
Fanny Paul Clinton with Elvira Højberg*

"And, in my great expansion, I was on the desert. How can I make you understand? I was on the desert as I had never been before. It was a desert that called me like a monotonous, remote canticle calls. I was being seduced. And I went toward that enticing madness."

In the evening the electric light projects patterns that look like silvery cellulite. The reflection of the sculptures on the floor stands sharp. Everything is doubled, contorted, or drowning. The scene seems to mimic a mirage. Not a *fata morgana*, which leaves mountains, plates, or castles on the sea's horizon; but an *inferior mirage*, the one that scatters the desert with unreal bodies of water. Perhaps inferior means especially malicious. It is the mirage that promises cold wet in the driest dry, respite in dragging torment, a change where there is none. Still the feeling here, while overlooking the sculptures, is not mean but quiet – reminiscent. Like a memory of water cut into air. An empty pool. Decadent and ruined.

The problem with decadence is that there's so much about these days that it's becoming very hard to come by. The bigger the gap between the rich and the poor, the less it takes for a luxury to seem decadent and the more you have to try to distinguish your indulgences from all the others, which come to seem merely routine.

Everyone has a chaise-longue my darling.

The unforgiving light and mirror floor recall a high-end boutique, or maybe the dispossessed imitation of one in Topshop or some shopping centre – 'starkly lit so it resembles everything else available'. Everything under the same light means everything looks more or less the same, under one uniform logic, reduced to being commodities ... all much of a muchness. When everything is on offer and has a price, there's nothing special, nor particular. Decadence becomes faded around the edges; never quite debauched enough. Objects convey luxury without actually being luxurious. This is less a sign of moral decline and more the deep slumber that is the law of exchange, where difference is suspended to one system of value. There are changes in degree and proportion, but essentially they all stand in for the same idea. And remember it's not the use or the form of the things that makes them like everything else but their essence, their identity under the light she describes. Washed out by the intense whiteness, there are no markings, the displays looking the same in almost every city. A bit of everything and nothing special. That solidarity means the welt.

It means *Frau Welt*. It also means a fat fragile glove stuffed and bursting, blown-up dolphins, cracked whistling. It means a deer-rack, and a waffle iron specifically. A selection.

Welt means world. It means globe. It means public. The last meaning is slightly surprising, I think. Let's think about the public. The public is 'of or concerning the people as a whole'. In some rational sense then, public = world. In a practical sense, we seem to have forgotten that, especially the part about 'concerning'. We've been too occupied looking the other way. Deliberately blind and casual. **There's an air of DEAF**. Jung writes. (Maybe less so now. Some of us are quite concerned now.)

Mrs. Public. It's unnatural to imagine the public as a single person. The public swallows single persons. Just like We. Who is actually We? **When I say we I mean we and not we. I mean WE**. Are We the public? The Ancient Greeks understood the public in terms of friendship, *philia*, which makes the public sound like fewer people at a time. Like two or three or however many can fit around a dinner table. A conceivable gathering. Note that friendship to the Greeks wasn't sticky and intimate but open and sober. When Greeks say friendship, they really talk about dialogue. What they really say is that We are not a healthy public. A healthy public is human beings conversing with one another.

Hannah Arendt talks about something similar. She does not use the word 'healthy' but 'humane'. Her question is something like this: how to conceive a humane public in dark times? She answers:

"[T]he world is not humane just because it is made by human beings, and it does not become humane just because the human voices sound in it, but only when it has become the object of discourse."

The inhuman, she writes, remains that way unless it is "constantly talked about". Constantly talking is one way of describing Sophie on stage. She has a way of rendering information so that it sounds open, like negotiation. Like conflicting voices. I wonder: is this a way of being public humanely?

Frau Welt is not the world. She is particular, like a friend speaking to you.

I just don't know how to judge the sincerity of her words. Her friendliness might be coercion rather than whatever we mean when we say 'they are really genuine, you know'.

Certainly the lack of polish, the provisional nature of the objects suggests something spontaneous, honest and not too contrived. So too the bumbling nature of the talk. The awkward transitions between subject matter are artless, or perhaps they are so pretentious as they leap from hieratic to demotic, that they undermine their own seriousness.

Sincerity is generally conveyed by graveness of delivery. If someone is being earnest and solemn they come across as more honest - no messing around, just straightforward because that's what the important subject matter demands. Irony and comedy signal the duplicity of words, and that the speaker is focussed on literary persuasion rather than directness. Yet the opposite seems to be true in a Sophie Jung performance. The slipperiness of the words she speaks undermine her own authority, rather than allow her to be the grand manipulator in control of all she discusses. The bad jokes, the double entendres, indicate that she doesn't take herself too seriously, that she isn't seduced by her own position as performer. Nor is she able to prevent the literary fabric of the performance from showing through from time to time.

We don't fall in love with the fictional detective because she knows all the answers and always gets it right. We identify with her because she too is caught in signs, bungling interpretations of words or events, and only occasionally stumbling upon something like a workable meaning. If Jung were pretending not to perform, not to be delivering words for an audience, but just saying them straight and sincerely, in full confidence of their meaning, that would be the real con trick. Authenticity here is in acknowledging the pretence.

There is no one who would know this better than Sophie: her father is an actor, her mother is an actor, her sister is an actor, and she wanted to be an actor before she wanted to be a costume designer, a teacher, a photographer. Her first sculptures were a con. She was still taking photos when one time she had no photos to show during a residency, and so she started pulling stuff from lofts and streets and compose them into zany fusions. Have you heard about how Sophie arranges objects? It is not a con but a real mystery: there's a strict logic to the process, she says, though she cannot put it into words. When she says things like that, you get the sense that her work is definitely rigorous and spiritual and genius. Words sort of pushed themselves upon her, because visitors would ask questions about her improvised creations, and so she added text, afterwards, which she still does today. When does a pretence become real? Are detective novels about sorting out the real from the imaginary or from supposition? Who is the real criminal and what was their true motivation? Whilst these may be what we expect, so often in crime writing it is the state or the courts that are unfair or criminal. The detective is just as compromised as the miscreant they hunt. The crime may be the fault of classed, gendered and raced injustices, so where do we locate the responsibility, by which we mean the truth of the action? But now we're shifting

from *The Bigger Sleep* to *The Big Sleep* (1939), Raymond Chandler's detective fiction, containing the usual combination of lies and murder. Yet even death, that final fact, seems unreal when placed in genre writing where it is subject to mythic connections between intention and act. This is a strange world where we know what we are doing, are fully aware and certain of why we are doing it. Chandler's book doesn't exactly resist the narration of experience, or the detection of motives, but it does fail to deliver them conclusively and properly. *The Big Sleep* is notorious for leaving a lot of loose ends.

Sophie Jung might be the loose end artist. Her way of allowing things to hang is another way of keeping them dynamic, without resolution, not finishing an idea or a work. Her environments lie in wait for her presence to talk about or with them. But this suspension, or lack of resolution, is as much a purgatory and limbo as it is a way of keeping things alive and open. She has to repeat her act again and again, forced into the slavery of performing in which the work is never done, and her objects are never being in and of themselves. This suspension is the alienation of labour, the mediation of self through common language:

*Spiders march in
protest for better conditions us to accept the end as unavoidably
not ever here yet.
Hold on a minute
keep the line up
for all things worth the wait*

Procrastination is less a way to be free than it is a case of exchanging one prison sentence for another.

But is the aim to be free? Engaging with the work of Sophie Jung, that being her sculptures, performances, or texts, can give you the sense of being caught in a trip. It is wild, and strange, and there is a sort of infinity to it. As if endings only occur when a gallerist starts tapping on her watch, or Jung runs out of paper. The first time I went to see a performance of hers – *Producing my Credentials* at Kunstraum in London – was on a warm summer evening. The temperature is not unimportant, as I had to wait outside with a steadily growing queue of people. Whoever had made it inside for the first performance stayed in there, for hours, which for us, the latecomers, gave the act an air of mysticism, in the way of any closed-off gathering, and the situation a tinge of out of control, as if the gallery staff *had not known what they were in for.* Eventually we were told that no more shows would follow that night, so I left, only to come back some weeks later for the second round. This time, I made it inside, to a room with loose asphalt, sticks, and yellow; and a mind-boggling performance that lasted a staggering two and a half hours, though it felt like twenty minutes, or several days: as if time had been contorted or suspended. Suspension might be a useful word to think about how Jung moves through subject matter, and why she could do it forever. Suspension as in hanging, as in presented like clothes on a rope, frankly and informally, with no hierarchy or discernible order.

Both utopian and collapse – Frau Welt without order. She mentions 'endgame' and, of course, Samuel Beckett comes to mind, though the two are not at all alike except for the absurdism. I get annoyed when people describe her work as 'narrative' just because she uses words. Fiction, theatre and narrative are not synonyms. There's more to a play than a plot and other ways of representing or imagining the world than to organise it into a story. Sure there's the occasional anecdote thrown in there, but never expanded beyond the occasion that occasions it, the encounter with a particular object or form in the exhibition. The event of happening upon a sculpture doesn't necessarily extend outwards into a coherent account of a life, as if the artist – as if people in general – follow causality and don't change from one minute to the next. For the Basel show its something else entirely. The objects aren't stations in a text, but constellate around a figure, an atmosphere, left hanging like the writing and performer. She's gone from a fragmented performance, to a floating one.

In *Endgame* (1957), the characters Hamm, Clov, Nagg and Nell are all noted for their incapacities and their inability to move on,

but this doesn't necessarily make life totally unbearable for them. They forget, they lose themselves and repeat the same fights and stories with minor variations, enough to keep them going. Even if the performer has to engage in a long run, forced to act out the same again, they can't help but be aware that they will never get it right. Is it the repetition and forgetting that makes it bearable or the knowledge that it will never really repeat? It must be awful for the actor to try to put the messiness of the self on-hold and watch it bleed in every time. The lighting usually stays the same.

And how, in theory, exuberant to abandon clean perfection, wring out neurotic anxieties, untether, un-hold. "A schizophrenic out for a walk is a better model than a neurotic lying on the analyst's couch." Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari notably write in *Anti-Oedipus*, their critique of the Freudian unconscious—a symbolic plane pregnant with truth or meaning—in favour of a novel, materialist psychiatry, in which the unconscious is not a cipher of mental disorders but real and acting, and the schizo not a treatable derivative of mommy/daddy trauma, but our full, fragmented underlining. In presenting a paradigm where recognizing the self is the first step in losing it: a cogent, concluded, Lacanian "I" (*je*), they attenuate the conflict between sanity and alleged madness. Musings on selfhood: the interplay between an individual and the roles it inhabits, between coherence and storm-tossed multiplicities, between purity and corruption, lace through Sophie Jung's practice in its own allusive—and then sometimes literal—manner. The mirror stage, the original split between a scattered self and its unbroken image, besprinkles *A Bigger Sleep*. It is bracketed after *Is That All There Is?*, the title of a centre-sculpture – the rose couch bordered with tassels and flanked by smashed glass on which Jung languishes during her performance – and appears half-way through the text accompanying the exhibition, like this: *My mirror stage alas applause I am complete after all. Detached from myself and attached to everything. Completion as a movement that flees the I, as a thought, is bristling, as is "alas" and "applause," and the way they inconspicuously push up against each other; how softly an act of jubilation follows a miserable exclamation; how grief and joy sounds in a breath. Next to the rousing loss of constraint, there is also, and firstly, loss, just loss.* Antonin Artaud, the distinguished madman and school-book schizophrenic, felt this above everything else. He writes: "The real pain is to feel thought move within oneself." According to Susan Sontag, this deep, excruciating pain, spun from an intolerable paradox: acknowledging the irredeemable fragmentation of his self and still wanting to master. Partially, she explains, Artaud was a symptom of his time—though the most extreme, the meanest, of this kind—existing between the *anti-genres*, the *avant-gardes*, "work that is deliberately fragmentary or self-canceling"—of which Cocteau writes, "the only work which succeeds is that which fails"—and the romantic Total Book, still haunting the twenties, especially its quest for consciousness, and its author-figure: the modern literary hero, here as the suffering literary hero.

Sophie Jung has moved one step further: she is not a hero and her work is scarcely painful. She fails, falls, and fragments, but she does not dwell or suffer. Instead of decrying with wild screams and thousands of pages the failure of language, of art, of theatre, as Artaud did, in a desperate attempt to conquer, at least, the processual, the fugitive, schizophrenia, she acknowledges and moves on. Alas applause! Her practice nimbles under the suffocating gist of totalities, even the totality of there being none. It nears the temper of Hélène Cixous when she writes:

Let's leave it to the worriers, to masculine anxiety and its obsession with how to dominate the way things work—knowing "how it works" in order to "make it work." For us the point is not to take possession in order to internalize or manipulate, but rather to dash through and to 'fly'.

"The sole 'baggage,'" he says, "that helps us to conquer chronological time and to participate in the other, absolute time, is a bouquet of texts. ... Light baggage buzzing with words, which, ever since the world has been the world—and there are many legends that vouch for it—has ensured our passage, without let or hindrance, over onto the other bank."