

Generous Structures

We were sitting in a circle in a window-filled living room on a hill in Mt. Washington, holding barely-filled cups of mugwort tea. We'd distributed the tea sparingly. It had been made under the assumption that no more than 20 people would attend this workshop, called *Tactical Magic*. Now 32 of us were squeezed into the room, here six days before the 2017 presidential inauguration. "We're going to take our power back," said artist Eliza Swann at the workshop's start, simply setting the agenda. We would "build up to working on the government," she said, hopefully by year's end, using marginalized, spiritual, intuitive skill sets as a means of resisting formalized, mainstream authority. This didn't seem far-fetched. Isn't the undetermined anathema to the formal?

Saewon Oh, an herbalist and artist co-running this workshop with Swann, had made the tea and now guided us through our experience of it: we smelled it, introduced ourselves to it, slowly drank it, willed ourselves to be carried away by its qualities and then wrote about where our minds went. Mine went to a spare, sun-lit room. It vaguely resembled a lot of things, including a room I stayed in 100 miles north of Paris last summer, on a different kind of search for collective power.

For those who see art as a tool for living and probing, a commodity only circumstantially, the established art world has become an exhausting place. Galleries, academies, and museums seem in cahoots, together fueling the "hyper-professionalization"

that Daniel Palmer decried in *ARTNews* last year. Success means learning to participate in a system of scarcity, branding yourself to appeal to those with the power to pull you onto a gallery roster or award you in other ways (teaching positions, institutional acquisitions, etc.). The obfuscating conditions of elite capitalism seem to have soaked through everything. The fact that Steven Mnuchin, who keeps forgetting to disclose additional assets to the Senate on his way to becoming Trump's Secretary of Treasury, belonged to MOCA's board is indicative, not anomalous.

"In a moment of monotony and conformity, artists must reclaim their freedom," wrote Palmer.¹ Except, what good does it do to "reclaim" from a system indifferent to your unmarketable expressions? Instead, it seems, we need to build platforms for protecting, empowering, and sustaining one another's non-conformity—not just alt exhibition spaces; something more than that. Even if I don't know how to build them, exactly, I do know such platforms must have intellectual, emotional, and economic dimensions, and communities behind them ready to do the work. A desire for such communities led me to a conference in that small town in northern France.

The conference called *Elsewhere & Otherwise*—held at Paf, a cavernous former convent that, as of last year, is collectively owned by 50 people (artists, philosophers, writers, dancers)—started under dim lighting, with conversation aided by champagne. The more comfortable among us offered ideas for how the week could go; the organizers took notes.

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A casual misunderstanding shaped the second evening. The artist Eroca Nichols said she would be doing Pussy Readings in the Peacock Room (she meant she'd be giving tarot readings for people's astral pussies and intimate relational lives). But, artists Corazon del Sol and Milena Bonilla thought she meant it literally—and thought, well wouldn't that be worth while? To read vaginas as if reading palms or tea leaves? And then, somehow we were doing it, me going first because someone had to and because I trusted del Sol and Bonilla to be gentle as they made their first, semi-public foray into vagina-reading.

We wouldn't be the first to do this—feminists consciousness-raising groups, among others, experimented similarly in the 1970s—though for us it felt new and impulsive. The readers had been drinking, which made them less inhibited and maybe better at riffing about empowerment, hegemony, and vulnerability, collapsing space between the theoretical and personally sensual in a generous way. It took about 30 minutes for pussy reading to somehow become an electric thing, more women volunteering to sit on the shabby chic sofa with legs spread, more participating as readers.

I remember mixing vodka and lavender syrup in the kitchen with a group of men wondering if pussy reading excluded them—it wasn't meant to, and there was talk of the ethereal pussy and fluidity of the feminine, but no one with non-female genitals volunteered to be read.

Later, there would be a charged discussion about whether the performance had alienated members of the group, those without conventional anatomical pussies specifically, and this would be uncomfortable but worth navigating. It seemed fitting to start off in something of a tangle,

with theory, body, language, and sincerity blurred. None of us were experts in this tangle, and uncertainty helps if you really want to form something else.

"It is time for a more radical approach in which the knowledge that is already there can take enough time and space to be rehearsed, shared, articulated, transformed or even discarded," wrote co-organizers Valentine Desideri and Daniela Bersham in describing the conference.²

The word radical can sound clear and directed, but what we were doing was more like informed groping. With no designated moderator, the week, full and amorphous, would end up changing as attendees realized what they wanted to contribute. Our knowledge pooling would feel like an attempt to have something of a shared foundation. It worked as well as it did because the convent was an affordable space, untethered to anything bigger and more established. But part of why we need a "more radical approach" is so spaces like this can spread and persist in many elsewhere.

"I want to create a structure for life that is in revolt through its generosity," Eliza Swann said this past October, in an interview for *Vice's Creator's Project*,³ reminding me of a passage she introduced me to, from Monique Wittig's relentless novel about foraging feminists: "Every gesture, act, deed, is overthrow, reversal."⁴ How can we afford to make that true?

When I first met Swann, during consciousness-raising sessions held in a Silver Lake garage in 2014, she was half a year into running her school, The Golden Dome, and struggling with how to fund it. The school, in its aims, in some ways parallels the launch of Black Mountain College and Feminist Art Program—learning

1. Daniel Palmer, "Go Pro: The Hyper-professionalization of the Emerging Artist," *ARTNews*, March 9, 2016, <http://www.artnews.com/2016/03/09/go-pro-the-hyper-professionalization-of-the-emerging-artist/>.

2. E-mail to the author and others, January 19, 2016.

3. Tjana Laden, "A Modern Mystery School Unites Art and Soul in LA," *Vice Creator's Project*, October 28, 2016, http://thecreatorsproject.vice.com/en_au/blog/golden-dawn-mystery-school-los-angeles.

4. Monique Wittig, *Les Guerilleres* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), 5.

together differently in order to support each other and make art differently. It also exists to be non-hierarchical and thus collaborative. “A spiritual organization with a hierarchical structure can convey only the consciousness of estrangement,” says activist Starhawk, quoted on the school’s website.

The Golden Dome, which functions more like an artist-run residency than an actual school, meets twice annually, each session exploring the relationship between art, metaphysics, and spirituality. Swann plans to make it free, if she can. But building an autonomous, alternative platform has practical costs. Ten-day sessions can cost between \$450-650, for room and board (in the Mojave desert, or upstate New York). The Mail Order Mystery School costs \$125 for a year, relatively reasonable but still an investment for many artists.

The economic conundrum, present everywhere, has its own textures in the realm of art and artists. The art world is an exaggerated microcosm of the wealth gap, the one percent playing an outsized role in keeping institutions and galleries running. Few artists support themselves on their work; many gig, or adjunct, stretched thin. The fantasy that elusive gallery representation can save you from economic precarity is more widespread than makes sense, since many artists with galleries rarely sell enough to subsist. In the United States at least, where state support for artists barely exists, this fantasy probably represents just one more version of the capitalist American Dream, ingrained so deeply even if we know better.

There has been a fixation recently, in communities in which I traffic, on Italian-born, New York-based scholar Silvia Federici’s book

Caliban and the Witch, originally published in 2004 and based on research Federici began alongside her friend Leopoldina Fortunati in the 1980s. Sarah Williams, co-founder of the Women’s Center for Creative Work (another attempt at a sustainable something else), was reading it; an artist friend texted from a bar in Massachusetts that she’d started a *Caliban* book club; during *Elsewhere & Otherwise*, we discussed it; at the start of *Tactical Magic*, Swann paraphrased it; and more. This surge in interest does not make chronological sense—Federici’s book has not been reprinted, nor is it at all an easy read. But it isn’t accidental. I devoured it for the second time in the days after the November election, as if nothing could be more relevant.

Federici, in exquisitely well-researched detail, depicts the transition to capitalism in Europe, the Americas, and the colonies as coinciding with a slaughter of alternative sensibilities, particularly those deemed feminine. Women who led food revolts, held procreative knowledge, healed, or encouraged community co-dependence: all threatened reproductive and productive labor, and were particularly vulnerable when witch trials began in earnest. Federici aimed in writing *Caliban* “to revive among younger generations the memory of a long history of resistance that today is in danger of being erased.”⁵ Younger generations *are* listening, wanting communitarian models more desperately as nationalist and autocratic leaders rise in misguided response to the estrangements neoliberalism causes.

A week after Donald Trump became president-elect, I received a chain of emails from the group of artists I had met at Paf. The emails had urgency to them. They discussed

5. Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation* (New York: Autonomedia, 2004), 9.

6. E-mail chain forwarded to the author, November 12, 2016.

war against eroticism, intelligence, or any idea of self that defies capitalist drive, and using emotional resilience and spiritual power against hate. “Please let’s imagine and create all the tools we can in these next days,” wrote my friend, Corazon del Sol.⁶

It’s some sick joke that the new U.S. administration moved so quickly toward cutting NEA and NEH funding, potentially killing the little publicly available to support non-product-oriented thinking, making the arts even more dependent on the market. The reductive language of new regimes, here and in Europe, seems poised against historical memory and disinterested in nuance. Forming and preserving spaces for unmarketable experimentation, uncertainties, and close attention to past and present possibilities falls to those of us who believe that art and life bear on each other. This work is already happening, has been happening. But now, liberated from whatever comfort zones we thought we had left, we should be more primed to lean on and glean from each other—or impel ourselves to be primed.

1

Tarot class (2016). Image courtesy of The Golden Dome. Photo: Natalia Molina.

2

Tarot class (2016). Image courtesy of The Golden Dome. Photo: Natalia Molina.

3

Performance class. Image courtesy of The Golden Dome. Photo: Angel Lauren.

4

Grace Kredell as “She Who Must Be Obeyed,” Emperor Artist Intensive, Joshua Tree (2016). Image courtesy of The Golden Dome. Photo: Angel Lauren.