

TO OUR SOLE DESIRES

By **Virginie Bobin**

ACT 1: TO OUR SOLE DESIRES

The scene takes place in the summer of 2018, in the tearoom of a Parisian hammam, close to the Seine. ARTEMISIA G. and LEA L. are lounging on divans, in dressing gowns, their long, damp hair wrapped in towels. At the time of this meeting, ARTEMISIA appears to be 27, the age at which she painted her second version of Judith Beheading Holofernes (1620), kept in the Uffizi Gallery in Florence. LEA, for her part, looks fifty-something, and has already completed Le Milieu du Tableau [The Center of the Painting], a series of four line drawings accompanied by a text, Espace perspectif et désirs interdits d'Artemisia G. [Perspectival Space and the Forbidden Desires of Artemisia G.], dated 1979.

Despite the slight moisture in the air, the walls are covered in a flesh-colored wallpaper with hand-drawn motifs: deformed, fragmented, decomposed, toxic bodies; cannibalistic bodies, cyborg bodies, protective, wet, desiring bodies. There are also drawings of plants, of cigarettes, a headdress in the form of a wolf's head with real fur: a whole repertory of witches, benevolent or not, of those items forbidden by international security norms, which one usually sees in the shape of black signs with red lines crossing through them, before one removes one's shoes and places one's electronic devices in the plastic trays at airport security.

There are no windows. An astonishing clock, whose hand jumps and dances in all directions, marks the century instead of the hour. Three steaming tea glasses rest on a small coffee table.

ARTEMISIA: She takes her time, doesn't she? And yet, she's spent the last four years under restoration.

LEA: You have to understand, she's exhausted from all those travels in Asia. She's no spring chicken.

ARTEMISIA: Speaking of globetrotting women, have you seen Mercedes lately?

LEA: She went to see my son last winter. They talked about me. She asked a bearded curator at the Buenos Aires Museum of Modern Art to do a revival of my performance *Dissolution dans l'eau, Point Marie* [Dissolution in Water, Pont Marie]. I've got the video, I'll send it to you.

ARTEMISIA, *laughing*: She's got a sense of humor, this kid! She came to see me too, or rather, see Judith, at the Uffizi. I saw her reflection in Holofernes' eyes and in the blade of the sword. She spent a long time sitting in front of the painting, blown away, like a young bashful lover on a long-awaited first date. I had a right old cramp in my right arm but I watched her out of the corner of my eye, she seemed to radiate physical and intellectual excitement...

LEA: I like these moments of grace, when a new intensity of knowledge is born from this sensual, cognitive desire...

THE LADY AND THE UNICORN, a terrycloth towel in her hair, makes her entrance in a riot of gold and flowers, a mirror in her hand.

ARTEMISIA: So, how's the treatment with medieval plants?

THE LADY, *settling gracefully on a divan*: Wonderful. I feel like it's taken four centuries off me. You were talking about desire? I'm all ears.

LEA, *stroking her hand to welcome her*: My Dear Sister... We were talking about the encounter between Mercedes and Artemisia, in Florence. Did you know she came across that painting thanks to me?

ARTEMISIA: Yes, she explains as much in the soundtrack to her forthcoming exhibition in Buenos Aires. She let me read the script in Google Drive, it was quite moving. I like the way she shares the source of her references, her notes, her obsessions, which reappear from one work to another, irrigating them. I too have tried to embody a reflection on the painting process in my artworks. What I mean is: painting as work, the effort of the whole body, not just The Hand. Under the shimmering of the silk, in the quivering flesh and tensing muscles, I want to show the economy of the productive body, the power to act in women's bodies, my body as a woman artist allied to the body of the servant woman in a shared labor. I believe Mercedes has grasped that. If I was her age in this century, I would do performances kitted out in Adidas armor too. I would have learned feminist self-defense techniques to kill Holofernes, instead of giving myself tendonitis with that enormous sword. Mind you, less might then have been written about the painting's sexual symbolism.

THE LADY, *blasé*: Don't say another word... We haven't all been lucky enough to receive a visit from Linda Nochlin. Furthermore, the arts of tapestry and embroidery are considered essentially feminine, she said so herself.¹ This reminds me of a scene in a recent documentary on "the greatest artist in South Africa." This imposing white man signs tapestries made exclusively by black women workers in the workshop he owns, managed by a white woman. *Ite, missa est*... In short, whenever a new aspiring medievalist approaches my tapestries and leers at my hand caressing the horn of this poor animal, my threads grow pale with apprehension. I dream of becoming unrepresentable. It isn't because I've been reincarnated, as you have, in novels, in paintings, in films, and having skimmed the history of art and gender studies departments around the world since the invention of the university. Covering my tracks, multiplying the skein of possible readings, sowing riddles and games of mirrors... Fortunately today's artists, like our young Mercedes, embrace research and reread the history of art with such irreverence. It's most rejuvenating.

¹ Linda Nochlin, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?," *ARTnews*, January 1971.

LEA: “As regards the painting, I want to talk about the screen, to raise the question of the projection screen, the traces, the images projected, inscribed, that freeze the image, the images that tell us stories, places where stories take place, which print the figures that freeze us. [...]. The viewer is supposed to be at the bedside of the victim on the other side of an invisible wall that contains the stage of representation. It is an invisible wall in a one-way mirror placed between the viewer and the painting, in the place of the complicit voyager on the stage, enjoying the act performed, perceived as the reflection in the mirror on the other side of the painting [...]. Desires and the rest of the unconscious processes triggered: punishment, castration complex, guilt, killing, transgressing the forbidden space, through the laying bare of a body to show the course of desire and the limits of a symbolic space that veils it, violates it, erases it.”²

ARTEMISIA: I still wonder whether there was a misprint in your text: “Complicit voyager”, shouldn’t that actually be “complicit voyeur”?

THE LADY: At the risk of sounding pedantic, I must remind you that the Latin etymology of the word desire, *de-siderare*, means “to cease contemplating (the stars.)” Then we enter the realm of fantasy, like you Lea when you redraw Holofernes in childbirth, returning our attention while at the same time returning his body and his sex. In Mercedes’s fantasies, we are heroic women, resilient, mothers, lovers, muses, but above all, friends. As true friends we disregard time, history and truths. We take body and voice through the bodies and voices that she summons, draws, films or collaborates with. We are affected forever, just as her work is affected, and thus we contaminate the gaze and the bodies of this century’s viewers.

LEA: By the way, I asked Alejandra to join us, but she divides her time between Argentina and the Netherlands at the moment, to haunt Mercedes during the preparations for her exhibition. When she found out we were meeting at the hammam, she sent me this poem:

L’obscurité des eaux

I hear the sound of the water falling in my sleep. The words fall like water as I myself fall. I draw in my eyes the shape of my eyes, I swim in my waters, I tell myself my silences. All night I wait for my language to configure me. And I think of the wind that comes to me, that dwells in me. All night, I walked in the unknown rain. I was given a silence full of forms and visions (you say.) And you run disconsolate like the only bird in the wind.³

ARTEMISIA, *raising her glass of tea*: To Alejandra!

LEA, *raising her glass*: To the bird-bodies!

² Lea Lublin, *Espace perspectif et désirs interdits d’Artemisia G.*, *Le carnet*, 1979.

³ Alejandra Pizarnik, in *L’enfer musical*, Ypsilon éditeur, 2012, p.49. Original title in French.

THE LADY, *smiling*: À nos seuls désirs!⁴

Blackout.

ACT 2: MERCEDES'S DREAM

The stage is plunged into darkness. A screen appears, on which vague, wobbly images scroll past, with no clear chronology. We see the blurred outline of Mercedes, her back to us, moving through different spaces, among which we may recognize the corridors of the Paris Metro, the streets of Buenos Aires or Rotterdam, and a series of rooms, lifts and staircases that could be those of the Uffizi Gallery in Florence. Spaces of transit, ambivalent places, governed by official rules or very specific unspoken ones to make it easier for bodies to live together and move together. The images swarm with bodies clinging on to their luminous tablet-prosthetics binding them to other spaces, other temporalities, through which Mercedes leaps like a little video game character, breathing in the steam, the sounds, the gestures of desire or aggression, the postures, the emotions that shake all these human or non-human bodies. There are bodies painted in luxurious chiaroscuro, fragmented bodies, feet squeezed into provocative leather pumps, female torsos larded with black fishnets, and even the memory of blue and black handprints on the walls of a cave... A great dance of crowd-bodies, piece-bodies, caught in the snares of synesthetic, trans-historical gazes. Mercedes dreams of sculptures, of latex, of leather, of tulle, of iridescent fabrics where these bodies and these spaces might find refuge, be imprinted, be translated. Certain archaeologists claim that the voices of ancient potters may be recorded in the grooves of terracotta. In this dream, Mercedes's works are like shards of earth, carrying the promise of voices from otherwise irreconcilable eras and places.

A soundtrack accompanies the images elsewhere. It is the voice of Marguerite Duras. In Mercedes's dream, Marguerite speaks Spanish with an Argentine accent. She reads an extract from Mercedes's own script, in a slightly sententious tone:

una escritora es un país extranjero
donde hay historias imposibles

⁴ This phrase, the translation of which is the title of the text and the first act, is a reference to a series of six tapestries from the late fifteenth century known as *La Dame à la Licorne* [The Lady and the Unicorn] which can be found in the Musée National du Moyen Âge in Paris. It is usually considered that the first five tapestries correspond to representations of the five senses. The interpretation of the sixth, in contrast, has been cause for much debate among specialists. As well as the noble woman, the lion and the unicorn who appear in all the pieces, in the sixth tapestry there is the addition of a chest and a tent, on the frontispiece of which can be read the polysemous phrase *à mon seul désir* [to my sole desire]. This phrase can be interpreted, among other variants, as a dedication to a loved one or to desire itself, and even as a declaration of sovereignty and power of desire, which in that case could be paraphrased as "according to my will." This last tapestry, reproduced on page xxx, is an important reference in Mercedes Azpilicueta's work, as can be seen in Laura Hakel's essay published in this book. (Editor's Note.)

ilegibles o prohibidas
y aunque se ordene las ideas
de la manera más calculada
siempre surge lo incontable
o lo irrepresentable⁵

When the film goes off, a strong smell of tomatoes, garlic and sardines invades the stage. Another anomaly of space and time. The author of this play writes in fact at the kitchen table of a French-Moroccan family, the night before Aïd-el-kebir. On WhatsApp, Mercedes has just sent her a message: “Eid Mubarak!”

Blackout.

ACT 3: THE TUMOR’S MONOLOGUE

The stage is empty, apart from a large, embroidered, glossy pink curtain and a microphone on a stand.

Enter THE TUMOR. She is wearing a crumpled latex costume, the color of decomposed flesh. Her body is enormous and bloated, her arms and legs barely peeking out, her head covered in a mask. Her movements are hindered, her eyes blinded. She wears a long blonde ponytail made from synthetic hair and speaks with the voice of Chavela Vargas, “the rough voice of tenderness.”

THE TUMOR *takes the mike and addresses the audience:* I can’t see you, but I know you’re there. Don’t be afraid, I won’t do you any harm. “Let me tell you a story. Because that’s all I have, a story. Story passed on from generation to generation, named Joy. Told for the joy it gives the storyteller and the listener. Joy inherent in the process of storytelling. Whoever understands it also understands that a story, as overwhelming as it can be in its joy, never takes anything away from anybody. Its name, remember, is Joy. Its double, Woe Sorrow **Show.**”

These are the first lines from Trinh T. Minh-ha’s *Grandma’s Story*. Yes, I’m one cultured tumor, as well as malignant, ha ha! I love quotations. I love to laugh. I love telling stories that survived their bodies, or which slipped away to join other bodies. Histories without heads or tails, ha ha! It’s a way of taking care of bodies: perpetuating their stories, even distorting them, betraying them. As long as they spread out, as long as they contaminate.

⁵ “a writer is a foreign country/ where there are impossible stories/ illegible or forbidden/ and although the ideas are ordered/ in the most calculated manner/ there always emerges the unsayable/ or the unrepresentable.”

I could tell you the story of five women, our Mercedes among them, who meet in a workshop for children, but no children have come because of bad scheduling. They decide to go ahead with the class anyway. They make animal noises, scratch each other, wriggle about. They sing in unison, their heads resting on their companions' backs, the hollows of their shoulders. They burst out laughing. Some wandering souls watch them through the open door but they do not care. These women are here in the capacity of Programmer, Guest Curator, Guest Artist, Guest Choreographer... A Contribution is expected of them. But now they are trumpeting like elephants, shrieking like monkeys. Now they wriggle out of the Invitation to become Joy.

I could tell you the story of a woman-house,⁶ where the womb would be the workshop. But Mercedes will be able to tell you better than I, one need only look at her drawings. Besides, I get tired sometimes. Don't think it's easy being a Tumor. It's a lot of work, for starters. You need cunning, sure, but also great physical strength, and willpower, an acute sense of maintenance art. It's very intimate work, too, full of emotions, a bit like the work of a care assistant, a nurse, a midwife... All these so-called female professions. I've found it hard to keep private life and professional life apart. And I don't count my hours, believe me! Many consider me a freak, although I'm reconciled to the idea ever since I read Renate Lorenz's book.

For instance, I'm very sensitive to what she writes about drag, when I'm standing here before you in drag, don't tell me you didn't notice: "drag' may refer to the productive connections of natural and artificial, animate and inanimate, to clothes, radios, hair, legs, all that which tends more to produce *connections* to others and to other things than to represent them. What becomes visible in this drag is not people, individuals, subjects or identities, but rather assemblages; indeed, those that do not work at any 'doing gender/sexuality/race' but instead at an 'undoing.' If 'I', as Judith Butler has written, am always constituted through norms that I myself have not produced, then drag is a way to understand how this constitution occurs, and to reconstruct it on one's own body. But at the same time, drag is a way to organize a set of effective, laborious, partially friendly and partially aggressive methods to produce distance to these norms."⁷

OK, that was a very long quotation, sorry. But you can see what I'm getting at, right? This is why I find myself in the way that Mercedes describes as or "dishonest researcher," or *chercheuse indigne*, pardon my accent. This dishonesty that she vindicates, I see that as a form of drag, exactly like the costumes she decks herself out in and attires her collaborators in.

To conclude, I would like to make sure that you have all understood one very important thing. We talk a lot about "giving a voice (back)." To unfairly unrecognized female artists, for example. But this would be to adopt once again a position of authority, from above, I know what I'm talking about, facing you right now from this stage, ha ha! What really matters is learning to lis-ten. We have to relearn the political potential of listening. My monologue is made up of multiple voices, interlaced with deep silences. Shh! Listen..."

Blackout

⁶ Reference to the work of Louise Bourgeois. (EN.)

⁷ Renate Lorenz, *Queer Art. A Freak Theory*. French text quotes from translation published by B42, Paris, 2018, p. 38.

ACT 4: RAGGAETON METRO

ARTEMISIA, LEA and THE LADY have formed a Chilean Reggaeton group. They busk illegally on the Paris Metro, a little for pleasure, a little for money, and a little to awaken the consciousness of the other Metro users:

"we feel intoxicated. our bodies feel intoxicated. our parisian bodies, tourist bodies, homeless bodies, european bodies, african bodies, foreign bodies, digital bodies, latino bodies, heteronormative bodies, old bodies, soft bodies, hard bodies, young bodies, queer bodies, worked-out bodies, fancy bodies, dirty bodies, sweaty bodies, all these different and individual bodies feel intoxicated. we start to vibrate. maybe not all of them do, but i want to imagine that all of them do. and they do. all kinds of different bodies down here are being shaken at the same time."⁸

SOME PLAIN CLOTHES POLICEMEN try to arrest them: Your documents, please!

But it's too late. The whole Metro is in a kind of trance. ARTEMISIA, LEA and THE LADY shout insults in phonetic Argentine Spanish: ye-gua-ye-ta-yu-taaaa!⁹

THE PASSENGERS: ye-gua-ye-ta-yu-taaaa!

All the bodies blend into a great, fluid magma. The three singers dissolve. There only remains Mercedes, sitting on a fold-up seat. She has filmed everything. But when she gets back to her studio, she realizes the memory card was full. We'll have to take her word for it.

August, 2018

⁸ Extract from Mercedes Azpilicueta's diary, *about hells, smells and shame*, Paris, April 2017.

⁹ Literally "mare" (in the sense of an insult aimed at a woman), "jinx" (someone who brings bad luck) and "pig" (in the sense of an insult aimed at the police). (Translator's Note.)