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Libidot: Journeys in the Performance of Sex Art

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I finally track down Marijs Boulogne. We find a cafe in Mechelen to sit down and chat. I am curious to see how her work is received by the Catholic Church in Belgium? Boulogne's actions and stories are based on fantasies that incorporate rebellious forms of spirituality. Important themes in this spirituality are an erotic fascination with the process of death and the suffering body, a mystical evocation of material deficiencies, and absurd forms of sacrifice often imposed on young and innocent members of society —beautiful children and babies. It is this aspect of Christian spirituality, often expressed by women and female sects as a longing for union with the body of Christ that was officially banned by the Catholic Church.

I notice again how quiet Belgians are. They stare at each other and utter an odd sentence here and there. Boulogne, on the other hand, has a loud and rolling mind, as she tells me the stories of her performance characters, and her experiences with art-making as ecstasy. In her performance pieces with the group *Buelens Paulina vzw*, she uses different language registers and performance mediums, as I understand from her written statement: "Through improvisation with theatre, performance, contemporary music, video art and elaboration we relate stories full of humor, tenderness, madness, cruelty and eroticism. The power of the stories lies in naivety, complex in their simplicity, blurring the boundaries between Flemish and Walloon, between children's art and adult's art, between madness and reality."ⁱ Boulogne displays a peculiar type of madness, of 'being possessed' in her tales by young female characters who aspire to find erotic contact with god through obsessive actions, awkward abstinence rituals, and strange physical desire to meet and marry the 'highest unknown.' She shows the process of ecstasy in her installation piece, *Fuck Me Dead*. This piece consist of a video which is shown in a foyer, showing the earth, a doll, fish, shells, and bones as elements manipulated by the hand of an invisible creator, who plays a game of life and death. After seeing this video the visitor enter a dark room where s/he can watch a doll's dress in a glass vitrine. Intense embroideries are marked on the dress as scars. Across from the dress is a slide-installation which focuses on the ecstatic landscape that is hidden in these scars.

Marijs Boulogne Interview. Mechelen, November 15, 2003

'AS JESUS, SHE HAD SEX WITH ALL THE OTHER NUNS'

Libidot: Can you explain the commotion in this festival? Have you experienced similar reactions to your work in Belgium?

Boulogne: I think the situation is quite pathetic here in Belgium, as we still have so many sexual taboos. I think that our mothers were focusing on other things

besides sexual liberation. I believe that because of their catholic roots, they want to sacrifice themselves. Apparently you become almighty by offering yourself and committing self-sacrifice, just like Jesus Christ did. I think that this is the crux of our culture, which isn't the case in other cultures. I believe that for example in Australia feminists have been moving faster because there is not such a strong catholic heritage, based on the figure of Jesus. The feminists in Belgium have only done half of their job as they sacrificed themselves for their children and their families. My mother founded a club *De Wandelende Wijven* (The Wandering Wives), a group of women who organize hikes with backpacks. On the one hand, they are very free, but on the other hand they are not free because they do all of the home-work. Our mothers have to sacrifice themselves utterly.

Similarly, my mother does not like the look or the style of some of my art works. Then she says that they are well made, but not beautiful. Or she will call my family and say: 'Don't go look at her work this time because next time she is going to make something beautiful.' My mother does not like the stories I tell. For instance my performance, *Endless Medication*, tells a story of a person who has a fantasy of innocence, like she wants to be a nurse and cure everybody's festering wounds and as a result she can transcend everything. Or she has to clean out clogged toilets with bare hands. Just going straight through all the shit, which is my mother's experience, so I do acknowledge these fantasies in myself.

Libidot: Can you tell me something about your video-installation 'Orgasmic Faces'—why do you record people's faces experiencing orgasms? Why do you zoom in on the face?

Boulogne: I want to depict the automatic movements of eyes and the mouth during orgasm. I also work with a sound track of snails making sounds when they come back to life after being deprived of water. It has been interesting for me to watch spectators in the gallery react to it as they are standing in the gallery and having a drink, just to see their faces and conversations change when the orgasm is happening on the video.

Libidot: Most of your performances and installations are based on hidden histories of medieval mysticism? Can you explain that a bit more?

Boulogne: I have been interested in mysticism for a long time. In the 11th Century there was a *Beweging Van de Vrije Geest* (Movement of the Free Ghost) where a lot of men stopped acknowledging the concept of original sin. They suddenly were allowed to fuck and to travel, and it became a very powerful movement. I think it was a bit like the Flower Power movement in the 1960s. The movement has been completely eradicated from history, as the 11th century saw a complete revival of Catholicism, as well as other sects. What came out was this movement of the Free Ghost was the 'Beguine' women's movements in Belgium, although of course some of the women were also burned at the stake. They were not witches but mystics, and some explored free love and explored the free spirit with

their bodies. And then they started to ask themselves 'What is god?' and 'How can I reach god?' They were trying to have a direct line of communication with god without having sacraments or without consulting priests. They would fast and flagellate themselves in order to obtain a state of ecstatic union.

For instance, there is Christina who used to starve herself, or she used to sit close to the stake when somebody was being hanged and was singing out loud. Or she was just sitting in a tree. I also read in a Ph.D. doctorate written in Italy that a female mystic wanted to marry Jesus and started to make extensive wedding preparations. All the other women were helping her out with these preparations, and she acted out the roles of 'priest,' 'Jesus' and herself. As 'Jesus,' she had sex with all the other nuns.

Libidot: So you see some similarities between these performances from the 11th century and your own ritual performances?

Boulogne: I believe in ecstasy without thinking of a god. I have had an interest in ecstasy for a while and felt a need to isolate myself and undergo physical experiences. This resulted also in the performance, *Endless Medication*, a piece about a girl who can never cry and wants to become a fakir.

She performs all kinds of actions, as she walks around in cemeteries and gathers plastic flowers and plants them inside her veins. She will look for insects and string them together on a thread and then she knits sweaters out of these threads. On another occasion she walks into a supermarket and punctures holes in cardboard soapboxes. She lies on the floor waiting for the powder to fall on her until she is entirely covered in white dust. Then she runs to the canal and jumps into the water. She foams and she feels like she is in heaven. She tries to taste her own orgasm and she realizes that orgasm tastes like all the things she likes eating. It tastes like tagliatella and strawberries and banana. At one point she tastes her orgasm and a big shit comes out of her mouth. She realizes that her bowels are constipated and that she is pregnant in her bowel. She wonders whose child this could be and realizes that it must be god because she is still a virgin. God descends from the sky and orders her to stop eating, as she does not want the child to be born in shit. She gets orders to only breathe air but she still craves other oral stimuli and her mouths starts bleeding. Her mouth is like a little variety theater, where the sad audience can see a red stop light that says 'stop, be happy'. She goes on and on and gets completely exhausted, telling god after three months that she needs to undergo labor prematurely. But God is not there and she commits abortion. After that she gets pregnant two more times from god. But then she gets taken to a mental hospital. The baby gets thrown out of the window.

Libidot: Was she trying to find a state of ecstasy in pleasure and orgasm?

Boulogne: No, it is a philosophy of suffering. Like, you have to stick poles inside your vaginas and stir them really well. Also, she is condemned to 'endless

medication' as she is charged with blasphemy, fundamentalism, false prophecies, innocence fantasies and endless pregnancies by God.

Libidot: How did you get interested in embroidery?

Boulogne: Yes. I myself, started to explore ecstasy through repetitive acts of embroidery. I decided to do embroidery for fourteen hours a day. The other hours I made love to my boyfriend, which meant that we made love about seven times a day. I was embroidering a funeral dress for a baby, as part of my installation 'Fuck me dead'. I wanted to focus on the experience rather than see this embroidery as a product.

It is amazing how you can start seeing the world if you look up from the work. It is complete chaos. In my installation 'Fuck Me Dead,' I present the macroscopic images of the stitches. I also show the making of the embroidery in a video-narrative. Then, in a second dark room, I show the actual dress.

The video portrays a doll that is in ecstasy and walking on a path of glass. She looks at the snails and picks one up and breaks its shell. Then it starts raining milk from the sky and she cries white tears. Then there are rotten fish coming out of the water. They don't recognize the boundaries between water and air. And the entire landscape is on fire. The branches of the tree are on fire, but the trunks remain untouched. And then the doll is buried.

This is like forever dying and forever living, and that represents my experience of ecstasy. I stopped eating and sleeping when I was embroidering, and started to have visions. I started to experience unusual physical effects. For example when I pricked my finger with a needle, it caused an electric shock.

Libidot: So you are trying to convey the obsessive state of mind that comes with embroidery? What does that really feel like?

Boulogne: You feel captured by something, like there is nothing else you could be doing. You don't want to do anything else anymore. Even smoking a cigarette is too much.

Libidot: Does it always work?

Boulogne: For me the process always works provided I take enough time to get into it. Then I can make a 'soft' journey through the world and start asking myself all the important questions, because I have seven hours a day to think about these questions.

Libidot: What are these questions?

Boulogne: For instance, I ask myself why exactly am I making this thing? Would it be an act of love? And then I conclude: No, it is not an act of love. Then you start trying to make sense of the world and intertwine these questioning with the threads of the embroidery. And that is your universe. At the end of the day you cannot walk anymore because your legs have gone numb.

Libidot: So you stop nurturing your body then?

Boulogne: Yes you stop nurturing your body and it starts feeling like custard, not a very nice feeling. Your lover says 'huh what is that?' because you are filled with colors and lines. So you start analyzing the embroidery in terms of lines and colors.

Boulogne: How were the reactions in Belgium to 'Fuck Me Dead'?

Libidot: People reacted very strongly and the critics understood what it was about. Generally my embroideries are not elegant. People do not want to recognize a skin with scabs and rotting skin with puss in a piece of embroidery. They rather see a bird sitting on a tree. Embroidery is generally so much associated with a female romantic-submissive attitude.

Libidot: When did you start doing embroidery?

Boulogne: Since I was a child. My grandmother was really into it as well. She saw my piece 'Fuck Me Dead' and thought it was fantastic. My boyfriend, on the other hand, sometimes had a hard time with it when I am doing it all day. I have friends who do embroidery for their kids, and they do understand my work better. They understand my wild style and recognize the different stitching styles and working with knots, whereas an outsider may think I am totally incompetent.

Libidot: Are you planning on working with other kinds of embroidery in the future?

Boulogne: I have recently been interested in looking at photographs of dead babies. It is enormous what kind of shock one receives when looking at the body of a dead baby, as it embodies 'the perfect imperfection.' I would like to talk to people about it and find out about their tactile experiences with bodies of dead babies.

Libidot: How do you want the audience to perceive your fantasies?

Boulogne: I want them to become mad and have a great wild time. They are voyeurs to my world and it often turns them on. I have a friend who is a psychiatric patient, and he is unable to sit through my performances. He would start shouting. I told him the stories one time, when we were sitting in a park, and that gave him a big erection. He experienced my performances very intuitively, and had a strong reaction. For him it was clear that the story was mainly erotic. Other people find

it hard-core pathology. During interviews, people ask strange questions like “Have you had an abortion? Have you been psychotic yourself? Do you masturbate?”

I want to make audiences wild and horny. I think that a lot of artists, dancers for instance, have this as a unconscious objective, but I think that I am just more conscious of it. People want to see the taboo that is why they sometimes scream and shout during our performances. When I do the performances in another language, it gets even a little ‘sexier’ as we always work with making mistakes in the language, and the audience grooves on that as well.

ⁱ **Kunstenfestival Des Arts, Brussels 2004, artist statement Buelens Paulina.**