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AN ARMY OF DEAD GIRLS: ART'S AVANT- GARDE

Pero, Rosa es el nombre secreto de mi raza.

La tarde caía como si fuera un siglo. – Marosa di Giorgio

1. I like an avant-garde for its mobility, its viciousness, its knifiness, its hecticness, its impatience, thrown up into the air by a volt of present-tense urgency into an eternity-space made of outrageous spectacle—a gold-ornamented sky. I like an avant-garde that is vulnerable to art and ready to be transected and reanimated by art, like an army of Dead Girls, Marosa Di Giorgio's *Rosa raza*, an army that issues Anachronism, shakes centuries from the sky, runs on a paradox *and/or* logic: is spectacular *and/or* occult; frivolous *and/or* fatal; decomposing *and/or* indivisible.

2. Dolores Dorantes's furious *Estilo* (2011) hosts a phalanx of Dead Girls killed in the narco-violence along the US/Mexican border. Reanimated by the force of the poem, by Art, these girls rise up as an army. In Jen Hofer's translation, they form an implacable "We":

Esto no se va a detener hasta que te despiertes así que ríndete. Una racha de pájaros. Un puñado de nenas como flores. Estamos para tu preámbulo. Caminamos a ti. Unas llegamos tarde para colocarnos el bozal. Tenemos máscara de ti, de tus ojos cerrados. Alguien calculó cada rostro. Orfebrería aplicada con dolor sobre la piel del cielo. La mano de alguien dio forma a cada labio. Creó el labio y estimuló el labio. Lo creó como golpe. Alguien nos colocó en la máscara tu labio.

This is not going to stop until you wake up so give up. A gust of birds. A handful of girls like flowers. We're here for your preamble. We walk to you. Some of us arrive late to put on our muzzles. We have a mask of you, of your closed eyes. Someone calculated each face. Goldwork applied painfully onto the skin of sky. Someone's hand gave form to each lip. It created the lip and stimulated the lip. It created it like a blow. Someone placed on our mask your lip.

This avant-garde, this army of Dead Girls, shakes the sun from the sky and replaces it with ornament, "orfebrería," Art's insignia ("as Grecian goldsmiths make / Of hammered gold

and gold enamelling”?), stretching its own skin painfully up to replace the sky in counter-conquest. When Art’s army arrives, it immediately enacts a regime of Anachronism. With *and/or* logic, it insists both on a dream interval and a fatal interval: *this is not going to stop until you wake up so give up*. Art performs both massive and trivial transformations—the dead are reanimated (a massive change), while a series of lyric, decorative images are daisy chained to each other with a twist of Art’s, or syntax’s, hand: *pájaros* become *nenas como flores*. Thanks to Art’s friable power, every surface is touched, changed, made to host each other, to *and/or*. The odd word order of Jen Hofer’s translation of the final sentence conveys this denaturing of rank, privilege, order, even the separability of bodies. The uncertain doubling up of roles and agencies in the final sentence—“Someone placed on our mask your lip”—points to the forceful *and/or* of Art’s regime. In this violent remaking of the world, the Dead Girls are Art’s avant-garde:

Caminamos distantes y vacías antes de amenazar. Somos tus lobelias de piernas preferidas. Cada vez que agredimos es como darte un beso. Danos la presidencia o la dirección de los disparos. Somos los frutos frescos de la guerra.

We walk distant and empty before threatening. We are your lobelias with the legs you favor. Each time we attack it is like giving you a kiss. Give us the presidency or the direction of the gunshots. We are the fresh fruits of war.

3. With the sun knocked from the sky and replaced by ornament, Art’s interval thickens with Anachronism. Here I depart from the model of the avant-garde, for I cannot subscribe to its temporal sureties, its sense of time and human culture moving forward and of the avant-garde as the hasteners of this progressive motion. No part of my experience or understanding of human life on this planet supports the idea of progress. The notion of the Anthropocene, of the earth as an environment continuously, spectacularly decaying due to mankind’s depredations, is for me an apter model; our species is at best a parasite on this planet, one that will drop away as our host degrades.

When, on the other hand, we allow ourselves to be split from conventional notions of utility and progression, when we allow ourselves to be voltified, reanimated, and brought to life by Art in the name of Vengeance, then we are acting like a pack of Dead Girls, and we are an avant-garde. Thus Raúl Zurita’s indelible *Purgatorio* (1979), the opening act of a multi-decade revolutionary performance, begins with the burning of the author’s own cheek and the declaration: *Me llamo Raquel*.

**mis amigos creen que
estoy muy mala
porque quemé mi mejilla**

**my friends think
I’m a sick woman
because I burned my cheek**

The volume *Purgatorio* actually begins and rebegins many times, each apparent beginning (such as the verse I quote above *and/or* the statement “Me llamo Raquel” *and/or* the dedication to Diamela Eltit *and/or* the identity card photo of Zurita with burnt cheek *and/or* the opening stanzas of the poem) splitting open to admit another beginning. This is an avant-garde stuttering with advents and orifices like a heap of girls or the split apart body of a girl; this is the heaped up mutilated commingled multibody Zurita hymns when he hymns the mass graves of *Song for his Disappeared Love*. In *Purgatorio*, the split-apart Raquel with her defaced face—comparable to the defaced women in Dolores Dorantes’s *Estilo*— can announce herself as the site of naming, adventing, scarification, sanctification, and splitting-open:

DOMINGO EN LA MANANA SUNDAY MORNING

I

**Me amanezco
Se ha roto una columna**

Soy una santa digo

I

**I awake
A column has broken**

I am a sainted woman I say

To a tune by the degenerate Velvet Underground, the debased Raquel splits open time. Declaring “I awake,” she declares an anachronistic *now* which denatures the temporality of torture, imprisonment, and execution yet cannot be divorced from these because it made of vulnerability itself. Zurita and Raquel coexist in an impossible *and/or* from which conventionally preferred categories of maleness, bodily wholeness, rational self-preservation fall away. This *and/or* is not self-sustaining, but defined by a vulnerability to Art by which it is continually and changeably reanimated.

4. This is my avant-garde: burned, imprisoned, reanimated Dead Girls with dirty and mutilated faces. Assumed names and false identity cards, goldwork skies and degenerate pop sound tracks. Anachronisms which defy paternalistic, materialistic, imperialistic chronologies and hierarchies. You join the Dead Girls when you are wrecked and ruined and reanimated by Art. In fact, this seems to be the primary Vengeance this avant-garde seeks: to render a world full of holes where Art can enter and from which it spills, a continuous commingling across which impossible bolts of *and/or* can leap, emerging to spectacular effects, rending hierarchies to shreds. An avant-garde which rejects the implicit temporality, progress, and forward motion conventionally associated with this term and lifts instead the banners of anachronism, wounds, paradox, Art’s forcefulness, Art’s insignias, pop music, makeup, the Rose. With no health and no future but only white worms which can move through Art’s ether and cross-contaminate Art’s atmospheres with impure affects and effects.

5. In “The Road to Kimp’o Landfill” (2000) Kim Hyesoon’s speaker sings like a member of Dolores Dorantes’s “We” chorus, like Zurita’s “Raquel” chorine, or like Di Giorgio’s secret race of Rosas who bring the afternoon falling down like centuries. She sings, like Zurita, as from a mass grave, through denatured bodily functions: “I kissed in place where garbage came down like rain/I kissed where I vomited all night long / Every time I sang, vomit flew in.” This female body is mobilized, but not of her own volition; she appears from the title and from the conditions she relates to be post-dead, on her way to the landfill, a cast-off corpse, Dead Girl or *desaparecida*, yet she keeps emitting song as the Rose transmits Art. Art moves to and from her body in a variety of forms and from any hole, wound or orifice: as sperm, hair, vomit, gnats. As this emetic song continues, the Rose appears in the poem:

**A forest gave off a foul smell, carried contagious diseases
It burned of a fever during the night
A busboy at the brightly lit Motel Rose
threw out millions of sperm every night
From the forest, mosquitoes swarmed
and dug into my scrawny caved-in chest**

This poem hoists up Blake’s “Sick Rose” as a dead twin. Here the site of sickness and abasement is the site of superproduction, and the site of production is the site of waste. Everything produces its opposite and the linebreaks enact the virgule of the *and/or*, mobilizing the poem’s headlong momentum as a decay or decadence (from Latin, a falling)—a decadence, we know, that leads only to the landfill. This rejection of the project of progress, this insistence instead on the collapse, decay or fall, is underscored by the poem’s final enjambment, which punctures the seeming optimism of the penultimate line like a stiletto to the lung:

**Born in the 20th century, I was on my way
to die in the 21st century.**

This is a somewhat perplexing conclusion, since the speaker has seemed decomposed, dismembered and outside life since early in the poem. But such is the instability of Dead Girls; it is their function to be dead *and/or* alive, to be a conduit for Art’s prerogatives, to keep the engine of Art’s infernal overproduction running even as mankind’s supposedly life-preserving, progress-oriented logics barrel towards their Anthropocenic termini. And what of then, when human life on this planet is over, what song will come wafting out of Kimp’O Landfill, in the mouths of grave-fauna, to the tune of uranium ticking over, on the sigh of corpse-loving bacteria breathing its last gas? “Sunday Morning”? The *Song for His Disappeared Love*? Will we all be Dead Girls, then?

6. All the early 20th century avant-gardes are Dead Girls now, their manifestos having launched them into eternity even as the manifest moment elapsed like a collapsed lung, obsolete by the time the final signature was printed. In their founding manifesto, the (Italian) Futurists sing their extinguishment in the same breath as their inception, conjuring a furious dismemberment:

They will come against us, our successors, will come from far away, from every quarter, dancing to the winged cadence of their first songs, flexing the hooked claws of predators, sniffing doglike at the academy doors the strong odor of our decaying minds, which will have already been promised to the literary catacombs.

But we won't be there . . . At last they'll find us—one winter's night—in open country, beneath a sad roof drummed by a monotonous rain. They'll see us crouched beside our trembling airplanes. [...] They'll storm around us, panting with scorn and anguish, and all of them, exasperated by our proud daring, will hurtle to kill us, driven by hatred: the more implacable it is, the more their hearts will be drunk with love and admiration for us.

How easily we may now view Dolores Dorantes's "We," Zurita's "Raquel," Kim Hyesoon's speaker, Marosa Di Giorgio's Rosa rising en mass as this furious "they," this winged, be-clawed, doglike, non-individuated "all of them," an army of Dead Girls donning the Futurists' war-like masks, but also forcing their Futurist forebears to go as girls, that is, to be mass-murdered, killed as a 'we' and 'us,' crushed by their crushes, their killers 'drunk with love.' The masculinist Futurists may not have gotten the successors they envisioned, but this is saturation, contamination, commingling, not succession. The structure of succession cannot withstand a planetary collapse. Such is the perfection of Art's Vengeance. In the charnel mound, in the mass grave, in the landfill, on the bombing range, outside the airforce base, below the industrial farm, in the abandoned corporate headquarters, in the toxic delta, in clouds above the Rust Belt, all across the trashed planet awakes Art's army of Dead Girls. Her avant-garde.