

‘Do you know what a poem is, Esther?’

‘No, what?’ I would say.

‘A piece of dust.’

Then, just as he was smiling and starting to look proud, I would say, ‘So are the cadavers you cut up. So are the people you think you’re curing. They’re dust as dust as dust. I reckon a good poem lasts a whole lot longer than a hundred of those people put together.’

And of course Buddy wouldn’t have any answer to that, because what I said was true. People were made of nothing so much as dust, and I couldn’t see that doctoring all that dust was a bit better than writing poems people would remember and repeat to themselves when they were unhappy or sick or couldn’t sleep. 1

In times of personal struggle, pain or despair, we might mutter/whisper/whistle a verse of poetry or a tune of a song to ourselves. An image might flash up in front of our eyes, of a painting, a film, a sculpture we saw, which evoked emotions of comfort or companionship. What Plath describes is not to be understood as a counterpart to modern sciences. It is rather an alternative form of care, speaking to our psychological state rather than our physical one. Artistic practices can be strategies and means of political protest, forming alliances, helping to create and define the goals of communities. Their value lies in the variety of their carriers of meaning, their permeability and the possibility of an amplified intimate expression.

Ten small female figures besiege the gallery space along the walls in Birke Gorm’s exhibition titled *common crazies*. Their torsos are made of a single terracotta brick, their limbs of terracotta pebbles found on the beach. The small jugs, cups and pots on their heads make them appear like a little army of pregnant fighters, jute cushions shaping their bulky bellies. They are equipped with remnants of shiny metallic beverage cans, champagne corks and nails, which they carry like shields and riot gear. Contrary to the perception of pregnancy as a state of weakness that forces women into the domestic space, here, the pregnant belly is part of her combat equipment. The fighters are made from what is already there: things that were collected by Gorm over time. As reproductive beings they live in an economy of abundance instead of expediency; they are oriented towards giving instead of taking. Nevertheless, their approach to some kind of “origin” remains fictional: although the forms burnt from the red clay are reminiscent of primeval materials and objects, they are nowadays mass-produced goods. They are still wafting somewhere between an imagined natural or rough state (and thus an idea of origin), and a mechanized, highly efficient industry. Likewise, the collected metal waste on the one hand is part of the urban space, on the other, it’s carelessly thrown into the urban vicinity foreign bodies in their surroundings.

Five wall pieces made from burlap take up the symbolic attributions that poet and political activist Judy Grahn (\*1940 in Chicago) dedicates to the female protagonists in her *The Common Woman Poems* that were written in 1969. Tie linings are converted and appropriated as letters. The tie ‘skeletons’ are reminiscent of dusty relicts of an outdated symbol of power, of hierarchical order and male domination. The works are manufactured with the textile technique of crazy quilting, in which various scraps of fabric are joined together in coarse patches with highlighted seams. Originally the quality of quilts depended on their sites of production: in rural areas, they were mostly featuring coarse, functional textiles such as burlap, whereas in cities more noble fabrics, i.e. leftovers from silk ties or blouses were available.

*The Common Woman Poems* became a ‘coalitional voice’ for (gay) working class women in the U.S.: a voice, that combines personal with collective experience and reaches out to make alliances with other communities. Each poem portraits a specific character, but the ‘common woman’ can be any woman. ‘Common’ stands for ‘ordinary’, but also for ‘mutual/together’, and it is this sense of togetherness/commonality that Grahn provides a voice for. Herself coming from a working class background, she wrote especially for women coming from the lower social classes, in order to establish a greater visibility for those widely invisible and underrepresented in the feminist movements of the 1960s and 70s. The symbolic value of language develops an emancipatory potential and turns against the accusation that art and literature are elitist and inaccessible.

Through the use of Gorm’s body, the interwoven fabrics become an act of writing, or what Sadie Plant labelled an “active matrix”. Furthermore, her female fighters do not have superpowers, but are nevertheless combative subjects. Their weapons and tools are not constructed from other materials and thus extensions of their bodies in the sense of a heroic (male) undertaking, but are made of found and collected objects. They are reintegrated and utilised anew. Similarly, Grahn’s poetry can be understood as an immaterial collection of words that can be reassembled and made use of in the political, female consciousness. New forms of collectivity and care that are created through performative techniques of writing, collecting and temporarily merging different layers of meaning can create a social power that undermines the patriarchal economy by a poetry of the body, a poetic and artistic language.

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1 Sylvia Plath, The Bell Jar, 1963

2 In her 1998 book *Zeros and Ones*, Sadie Plant describes the “active matrix” as an indissoluble entanglement of pattern and structural concepts. Weaving and creating textiles always initiates processes of order and structuring. This is in contrast to the “passive matrix”, i.e. a painted canvas, to which the paint, i.e. the content, is applied in an additive, subsequent step.

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