

TEXTE ZUR KUNST

KLANG KÖRPER

THE ANATOMIST, THE POET

By Maxi Wallenhorst

In an earlier contribution to "Texte zur Kunst," Maxi Wallenhorst noted that often, in writing that deals with trans lives, "the complexity of lived experience is reduced and romanticized to a site of exemplary and inherent transgressiveness, or even transcendence."¹ Accordingly, here, the writer tries to find a different way of thinking with the specificity of trans relations, taking cues from two aesthetic judgments often made about the social forms of these relations: "Too obvious!" and "Too abstract!" Following two allegorical figures, the anatomist and the poet, who navigate these critiques in their daily lives, Wallenhorst playfully outlines how a realism that starts from there could unfold.

THE ANATOMIST

"Too obvious," thinks the critic as he sees the anatomist's work. He's not wrong. The anatomist's aesthetic begins with the too obvious – with a single tear or too empty a blister pack of pills. The anatomist goes by the names of other professions as well: The OnlyFans Hegelian; the bad-enough noise musician. And anatomy might be a bad description of what she does, as it is precisely not just about anatomy; it's about everything reproducing it as destiny. She calls this set of things, however noncontiguous they may appear, *metabolism*. She did not become an anatomist because she comes from a family of doctors – or because her anatomy is more confessional than other people's anatomy – she becomes an anatomist where she has no choice but to treat metabolism as hers. The organs, on the one hand, and the outside they break down, on the other, which is to say everything cruelly splitting the difference. Just as anyone mad, the anatomist is a *mad scientist*. *White lab coat and leather gloves are optional.*²

So what does the anatomist do, exactly? She cleans the injection-site skin with a new alcohol swab and lets the skin air dry. She holds the skin around the injection site by pinching up a

section of tissue about an inch wide. (The portion of skin between her fingers will be the injection site.) She inserts the needle into the muscle at a 90-degree angle with one quick and firm motion. She performs a glandular function.

Organs pass for glands if what they synthesize, such as hormones, is released into the bloodstream ("secretion"). Organs pass for glands, too, if what they synthesize, such as hormones, is released into the anatomist's linen, her bedroom, or neighborhood and streets ("excretion"). The anatomist can turn a needle into a gland if it injects something capable of catapulting you into totality, e.g., 10–20 mg estradiol valerate. In her neighborhood and not only in Berlin, just months ago, most anatomists would have typically ordered 10 to 20 mg estradiol valerate from L., who now, however, had to leave all her supplies behind in Kyiv. The anatomist intimately knows the "supply chain issues," the "that's just life" – the scarcity shoving her from her neighborhood into all kinds of cut-offs, exceeding her metropolis or timeline.

This is why you will hardly ever encounter the anatomist alone. She knows: it's impossible to take care of metabolism on your own – since, for better or for worse, it's open to proteins and propped onto the proteins, desire. The Do-It-Yourself nature of the anatomist's science gravitates to the second person, flirty and fomenting. The anatomist is capable of rendering illegible the difference between medical play and making it through another week, or month, only in collaboration with other anatomists.

"Too literal!" – the critic repeats himself. A spooky psychoanalyst and a second-wave life coach join in the chant. "You are mistaking a gland for a gland. You are mistaking a gland for

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the truth. Where is the poetry in that? Where is the politics?" And yet, for the life of her, the anatomist cannot treat metabolism as a metaphor. She cannot escape the metabolism in which a gland's secretion has to contain, congealed, a form of realness. LIKE SNOT, MUCUS, CUM, SHIT, SWEAT – THE UNITING ELEMENTS THAT FORM THE BASIS OF REALITY.³ This is what the anatomist calls, perhaps tongue in cheek, realism. Hers is a realism of lusting after staying alive. A realism of the too real, like most social realisms, of the too obvious. This means, however, that the anatomist also mustn't mistake a constellation of glands for a set of self-explanatory needs. Neither is there something inherently queer or prehistorically bourgeois about any of their functions. The personal is political but not, to the anatomist, like that. The anatomist cautions us not to disregard the break, the profound reshaping [...] that breaks down food into its constituent parts and reassembles them into a completely different entity.⁴ What can be broken down – can obviously be broken down.

In this sense, at her best, the anatomist maps the too obvious in a system of breaking points: for her, a syringe doesn't point to just a substance or a consulting room but to a fantastic heat map of illegalized vial swaps. Or rather, even a heat map of failed hookups fermenting counterintuitively, a heat map of solidarity. She maps the rift, say, between gonad and tear duct (she calls it "her truth"). Or between gonad and burnout (or the "reproductive sphere"). The distance between burnout and nipple – a bottle passes for a nipple – and infant. She can sense the distance between gonad and leaving the house today. Between leaving the house today to go to work, leaving the house to go work a job in the service economy, the protest after. The distance between gonad and

Ausländerbehörde. The distance between metabolism's becoming social, if you will, and the conditions that provoke an irreparable rift in the interdependent process of social metabolism, a metabolism prescribed by the natural laws of life itself.⁵ At the risk of sounding like a mom, the anatomist turns to the too obvious: there is nothing essential to "life itself" except that everyone deserves to get better, in a sick sense of the word, not only at wanting it all.

THE POET

"Too allegorical!" thinks the critic as he reads the poet's work. "Too abstract, too!" says the papier-mâché member of the working class, freshly invented by a fake aristocrat. "Not everyone has a degree in abstraction!" And the poet herself is not free of these doubts. "Too online," she thinks to herself, or: "Too beautiful to be true." But it is true: the poet's aesthetic begins with the too abstract – with a world that seems irreparably out of reach; with silly words like world. She calls this cosmology of the too abstract alienation. Poetry might be the wrong word for what she does, as it can be hard to distinguish her work from a shitpost or a treatise, as it is neither about glamorizing nor repairing alienation. She did not become a poet by way of an MFA or because what others would summarize as her "marginalization" came with particularly visceral details. She becomes a poet where she has no choice but to break up alienation – too much her own – into relation.

How does her alienation appear to the outside world? She personifies it. "Clearly, the poet's alienation is an allegory of how decadent identity politics, irreparably, shatters the family form," the heterodox podcaster says as he encounters her abstraction. "No, she's an allegory of progress! This is about how we have to salvage our shared

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Elif Saydam, "Artists (Kotti)," 2020

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radical vulnerability from the fangs of the radical podcaster,” a centrist he/him replies. Both imagine the poet’s alienation to nest so concretely in a private disconnect between gonad and brain cell, or gonad and pronoun, an example of the exemplary. The poet, however, knows: the problem with her alienation is that it’s too abstract, not the other way around. The personal is political but not, to the poet, like that. That’s why she cannot just fix it by fleshing it out – on the contrary, she has to chew on it from many angles. Freud had put it like this (speaking here of the fetishists who, for our purposes, are poets): *their behaviour simultaneously expresses two contradictory premises. On the one hand they deny the very fact that they perceived – that they saw no penis in the female genitals – and on the other hand they acknowledge the female’s lack of a penis and draw the right conclusions from this. The two attitudes exist alongside one another for the whole of the individual’s life, without influencing one another. This is what we can call a splitting of the Ich.*⁶ In this sense, the poet cannot treat the too abstract as lacking either handicraft or acceptance. She cannot escape the way in which alienation exudes, eerily, a form of realness – precisely by mediating what isn’t. Having to deal with that is what she, too, calls realism. The poet’s is a realism of the unreal – a realism, like reality, of the irreconcilable. Needless to say: not all poets experience splitting; not all splitting gestures toward poetry. And yet: Certainly, if she can split her own ego to sustain a realism in which she exists, she can split many?

In this sense, as the poet unmaps the wording of the too abstract, she is coming at it from two sides: when the poet writes “allegory,” she also means gory; “marginal” hides, in plain sight, an arsenal. When the poet is forced to write “trans,” in the funding application, or in the questionnaire,

she’s trying to sneak back in the histories of poverty and fetishism that the word obscures. Histories, too, of sex work and noise. Can the post risk naming the dead, their exposure to the extraction of sentimental value? The dead – who are so concretely and casually lingering in the world, the group chats, her mind? It doesn’t always work.

This is partly why, as you must know by now, the poet feels out when to turn to allegory: she treats the local self-med group chat as the anatomists – the genuinely scientific gossip among the half-elves at the bar as the party line – a sense of disillusionment with “the community” as just the beginning. The poet dedicates such fan fiction and high philosophy to her friends and friends of friends to convey, at all costs, how they are being impossible – in both the thicket of austerity and the gay sense of the second person: “You’re being impossible!”

Precisely where she is virtuosically shifting gears between explicitness and vibe, recipients and dedicatees, she doesn’t conflate this or any one thing with the totality of what it is that is to be done. She theorizes an alienation whose abolition cannot happen in any one place⁷ – neither in the gonad nor in the abstract, nor at a single slapstick moment in-between. She practices the awkward timing in-between whispering “I want you” and chanting “expropriation without compensation” – the spacing of dedicating a poem to a loved one and a protester, detained on November 15th.⁸ Torn, the poet devises an openly secret language. She stretches the particular until it breaks, like a wave, a barricade, literally a police barricade. At the risk of being misunderstood, she maintains that every riddle needs to double as a slogan. Because everyone deserves a form of alienation less threateningly personal, unspeakably more fun.

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These allegories are indebted to, in particular, Jordy Rosenberg's essay "One Utopia, One Dystopia" in the groundbreaking volume *Transgender Marxism*, edited by Jules Joanne Gleeson and Elle O'Rourke; Jules Gill-Peterson's book *Histories of the Transgender Child*; and Emma Heaney's *The New Woman*. (Mostly, of course, they are indebted to the social world that these works are a part of; you know who you are.)

Notes

- 1 Maxi Wallenhorst, "Scaling Hotness to Life," *Texte zur Kunst*, July 3, 2020, <https://www.textezurkunst.de/en/articles/scaling-hotness-life/>.
- 2 Mira Bellwether, *Fucking Trans Women* no. 0 (self-published zine, 2010).
- 3 Juliana Huxtable, *Mucus in My Pineal Gland* (New York: Capricious and Wonder, 2017), 9.
- 4 Jean Laplanche, *Essays on Otherness*, ed. John Fletcher (London: Routledge, 1999) 160.
- 5 Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 3, *A Critique of Political Economy* (London: Penguin, 1991), 949.
- 6 Sigmund Freud, *An Outline of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Helena Ragg-Kirby (London: Penguin, 2003), 231.
- 7 Amy De'Ath, "Hidden Abodes and Inner Bonds: Literary Study and Marxist Feminism," in *After Marx: Literature, Theory, and Value in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Colleen Lye and Christopher Nealon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 239.
- 8 A 2019 work by Bassem Saad is titled *To my mother and to a protester detained on November 15th*. See the artist's website: <https://www.bassemsaad.com/sculpture>.