

GAIL SCOTT

PERMANENT  
REVOLUTION

*Essays*

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foreword © 2021 by Zoe Whittall

afterword © 2021 by Margaret Christakos

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## EXCESS + THE FEMININE

As if a genie escaping the bottle, a wild, titillating, ineffable excess seeps from certain writing + visual art by women. It rustles mid the blossoms, lacy garlands, + round geometries of early 20th century Swedish Hilma af Klint's paintings. It draws me into the strangely everyday magnetism of Agnes Varda films. It glimmers between the phrases of the zanily accurate women in Jane Bowles' prose. It glitters from somewhere beyond the starry high street wires of Clarice Lispector's Brazilian tales. It lurks in the torqued + fractured terrain of Sheila Watson's prose, radiates off lesbians in a bar in Nicole Brossard's *Picture Theory*. But why—if excess defines the limit where all good art expresses—must one speak in particular of excess-in-the-feminine? Does code open here to what has not been said or is said but cannot yet be read; some indicible vibration signalling as unauthorized meaning, “a meaning to come, impossible,” wrote Kristeva. And can we even

term that elixir as feminine in an era when gender binary seems passé as concept?

Standing in the Guggenheim, looking at Hilma af Klint's largest paintings, all pastels, loops, curlicues, I thought: déjà vu, this overwrought, almost clichéd, femininity. Gazing harder, I, with my friend, + a whole row of viewers, were leaning bodies more + more forward, as if magnetized by something happening there, something almost religious, or cabalistic in that palette of pinks, lavenders, peaches, baby blues, with cursive scripted Swedish woven into the pretty round surfaces. We were drawn by what, precisely? *By the freshness, offering a critic, of symbolic associations with feminine iconography* [there was no elucidation regarding the meaning of 'feminine iconography']. Af Klint herself, who has just, a mere century later, been anointed the first Western abstract artist, knew these works were before their time, decreeing they not be shown till well after her death. Meanwhile, she paraded as respected landscape artist while quietly making extensive notes, cataloguing, designing a temple, no less, to house her real work. Which temple's three-level conical structure bore an eerie resemblance to the coiled shell of the Guggenheim, its winding corridor on which we spiralling our way upward. Excited. Then uneasy. The exhibition's curated insistence on af Klint's 'spiritualism' [her women's group of paranormal explorers] seemed to be obfuscating the brash—almost promiscuous—geometries hanging there, emanating something akin to an unusual perfume, some signal not yet named. One *could* call it 'feminine'. But again, why say 'feminine' for this work? Unless one says 'masculine' for Kandinsky's.

The West Village bistro's a four-storey, dark-panelled, pre-Civil War brick structure. You see riverboat men, perhaps coming in after work on the nearby Hudson. The door opening with a rush of salt sea air—in those less polluted days more tangy. And Walt Whitman sitting—maybe cruising—there among them. One can imagine such seductions, unspoken, wafting from between the lines of certain Whitman poems. But it is March 2019 + the poet Marjorie Welsh is sitting opposite. Also a visual artist, her poetry, for me, lies somewhere between disjunct text + signage. Lines like

*Never did I receive your/Public lettering<sup>1</sup>*

emitting a startling intensity from the spaces between words/lines on the page. You are confessing to her your initial impatience with af Klint's tender yet troubling surfaces, their slow release, in the viewing, of some brash female excess. If, indeed, whatever issues from them *might* reference the 'feminine'? Marjorie, also a superb art critic, is laughing, handing you two notebooks. One tiny, one larger. "I hope you give it to them," she teases.

What 'it' is, for me, is that which is not said, is mostly not described, that which seeps from the margins of the term + seems, of little consequence to the centre. It calls up the late Caribbean writer Édouard Glissant, saying as regards the creolization of language, that as the ideological discursive centre congeals, minority tongues get displaced to the periphery. They become creolized, but the dominant language is also unconsciously altered in the process. It is tempting to apply this notion in different degrees, + sometimes overlapping contexts, to what may be potentially coded female. Especially since, Glissant continues, what has been

lost in the scramble is the *content of oral tradition*.<sup>2</sup> He is speaking of something hidden deep in memory, tonal, a-syntactic. For purposes of recovering this elixir, he is clear that it takes not description but deep language excavation to reconnoitre the fundamentals of what has grown discontinuous, even schizophrenic, under the weight of the historic.

Might this reconnoitring process in any way be akin to af Klint's paranormal research, her group of women around a Ouija board, receiving messages from a so-called other world? Or Jane Bowles, sitting ecstatic in the Tangiers grain market, fascinated by lover Cherifa's knowledge of magic? Or Sheila Watson, gone silent to burnish the career of her poet husband, having written stories with titles like "My Brother's Name Is Oedipus." Or surrealist Leonora Carrington tripping through madness, imagining a paradise called "Down Below" where people live *very happily*. *To reach that paradise it was necessary to resort to mysterious means which I believed were the divination of the Whole Truth*.<sup>3</sup> A radical religious upbringing on one hand, + my grandfather's fortune-telling in the backroom of his small-town jewellery shop, fostered in me a confidence in the value of the suppressed or hidden, thus the desire to transgress the normal. I joined a left-wing group's arty surrealist phalange, spending hours weekly researching, via automatic writing + exquisite corpses, the illusive codes of what they called objective chance. I knew there was something else.

*I walk on. My special glasses see, in the window of a photo store, a picture of a girl and a soldier holding hands under a big tree. But the soldier is X'd out and underneath is written: Ecartez le soldat. In the next picture the soldier is effectivement écarté. There's just the girl. What I like is the anti-militarism of the sequence (for there's revolt in Portugal). Also,*

*the refusal to acknowledge the soldier's tragedy. Surrealism hates nostalgia, a key ingredient of war. (But where are you, my love, this minute? And why are you so angry?) Never mind that. I have to be prepared to take what comes. Letting each passing minute bear its fruit. A chance meeting of two lovers, as of two images in a poem, produces the greatest spark. Like André Breton who by chance met Nadja and took her as his génie libre. The better to see the world through the vision of her madness. Then he wrote a great novel. Except I don't like the way he used her. Oh, I'll have to test the guys in my surrealist group on the women's issue.*

*"Speaking of anomalies," I say (later, as we're sitting around the table in their apartment on St-Denis), "speaking of anomalies, what if you're going along a sunny street. And suddenly from a dark alley this jewelled hand comes out. In a black glove. And pulls you in. Then it's uh rape?" Looking at me with his red-spotted face (he has some nervous disease) and round John Lennon spectacles, R says, really embarrassed: "A person should probably know self-defence."<sup>4</sup>*