

The Underbelly

I looked around and found myself in a spacious studio of a friend that he occasionally turns into an exhibition space. The room was packed with the kind of crowd that always shows up at the openings of artists destined to be unknown.¹ I scanned the sea of leather jackets, hung up on bony bodies wearing loose jeans or tight flares, platformed by either generic black leather boots or worn down running shoes. I blended in perfectly. The pictures we all came for portrayed a lone zombie protagonist. Her inner monologue was vaguely outlined by subtitles accompanying the still images featuring urban wasteland and messy interiors. Her environment was filled with an orchestration of things, the monochrome light set her in a ghostly and down-beat atmosphere. A variety of shots and angles documented her messy room and her lone strolls through the cityscape. They revealed a sad, cynical, and humorous character, that was dwarfed by the surrounding buildings and wide spaces around her. At other times she would almost disappear as she sank into a gloomy background of indistinct objects and furniture. Her clothes were a Frankensteinian time-worn conglomerate of reworked denim and meshes of reanimated wool and human hair. As the camera followed the deathless protagonist, it witnessed a lack of belonging coupled with silly compensation gestures for feeling a little better.²

I was ripped out of my late daydream by a familiar sensation. I reached into my bag, where my phone already lit up the darkness with that rectangle of an incoming text. It was not the message I had been expecting, suppressing my anger I went to pour myself some wine in the corner that was turned into a bar area. They had run out of glasses, so I fished a printed cup from the sink and washed it. *Turn soft and lovely anytime you have a chance*³, it read. I drank a little, then filled the cup again and turned to a group of friends to lean into their chatter. When the group decided to move to one of those funny, miserable bars that would be the local go-to for a while, it was hard to find an excuse to leave. I decided to create one when I got there.

Hours later, I woke with the vanity of great dreaming. I felt delighted, even though I was sure I had shared too much the night before, I avoided recalling any details. The day was laying in front of me like a void, no need to get up yet. I thought about reading one of the books I had stacked close to my bed. As I was slowly reaching for one of them, the whole pile tipped over. Too tired to move, I started scanning my now scattered library, until I noticed a tiny face staring back at me. It came from a glossy piece of paper sticking out of an old book that had been a gift by an even older friend. It was a photograph. The small stranger and I greeted each other in complicit silence before I rolled over and quickly dozed off again.

I could have gone to any number of places for coffee, but I liked the bodega in my street. It was close, and the coffee was consistently bad, and I didn't have to confront anyone ordering an organic cinnamon roll or a Matcha Latte. No children with runny noses, no au pairs. No sterilized professionals, no people on dates. The air in there was heavy with the perfume of cleaning detergents and mildew. I could rely on the clouded freezer full of ice cream and popsicles. The yellowed Plexiglas compartments above the counter were filled

1 The two opening sentences are borrowed from Michèle Bernstein's *All the King's Horses* and slightly adapted

2 Steven Shaviro describes in "Contagious Allegories" in *The Cinematic Body* a zombie figure that is as horrifying as it is clownish, driven by an obsessive leitmotif of suspended and ungratified desire without any teleological focus

3 On the website of Turner Carroll Gallery, the following description of Jenny Holzer's truism can be found: "Turn soft and lovely any time you have a chance" can be understood in different ways. The phrase initially points as a reminder to navigate life with grace for yourself and others. Underlying this obvious interpretation lies the whispers of the collective memory of women who have, generation after generation, been inculturated to prioritize being mild and deferential over having strong voices. In this way, Jenny Holzer is creating a call to action: be kind, but also remember that your voice matters.

with gum and candy. Nothing ever changed: cigarettes in neat rows, rolls of scratch tickets, twelve different brands of Ice Tea, beer, a case of meat and cheese nobody ever bought, a tray of stale loaves of bread, a basket of fruit, a whole wall of magazines that I avoided. I did not want to read more than headlines,⁴ I was simply not interested in the details of local happenings. The man at the counter was cautiously observing me as I navigated the labyrinth of boxes that were stacked to shelves filled with Pringles and Doritos. I was not sure if it was worry or suspicion that ruled his facial expression. I knew I looked pitiful, I had given up on make-up and hairstyles a while ago as I decided to clear out my bathroom shelf, listening to a shortened self-help audio version of Marie Kondo's *Magic Cleaning*⁵.

Back at the counter, I maintained eye contact with the cashier's forehead, while he was robotically typing the prices of my breakfast ingredients into his little machine. I slowly let my arm sink into the box in front of me, keeping my eyes where they rested, my head steady, and grabbed a handful of lighters to cautiously let them slide into the deep furry pocket of my coat. Now they were mine. I never understood, how I could think the world owed me something, but I had the constant urge to make it even. On my way out, I inhaled the fresh, cold air through my nose. The painful tickling woke me up. I was feeling remarkably alone, which was always a comforting initial sensation. I decided not to work today, who would be interested in appropriation anyway if you could just go shoplifting. However, after breakfast, I felt a strong regret towards how little I was able to turn a whole day into something meaningful. Somehow, nothing ever happens. I took a pen and started taking notes.

I smiled. These were the things we would write on toilet walls. Problems belonged to the blackboard. I put the paper away, then grabbed it again and tore it apart. School days were over.⁶ Nobody would ever get to see this composition. The creation had used up all of my artistic potential for that day. At least my fears had dissolved. I opened the window wide, leaned against the rail, and contemplated the street, where nothing was happening. It sleeps, I thought. Sleep was something that had always fascinated me, it was not unproductive, nor was it reproductive. It was non-productive.⁷ Performative non-productivity was simply inspiring. I thought it was radical. Somehow, I felt I was too confused to be radical. I was too careful, had always been, worried I was destined for an accident, a misstep. The problem with keeping straight, when you're young is that you inevitably need to fill the void of experience, it's only a matter of when.⁸ –

4 The bodega scene is borrowed from Ottessa Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* and slightly adapted

5 The shortened self-help audio version of Marie Kondo's *Magic Cleaning* is available on all major podcast platforms, at the core of her technique lies the act of looking at an object and making a decision following the simple question "Does it spark joy?"

6 „Problems belonged to the blackboard“ and „school days were over“ are both taken from a scene of Michèle Bernstein's *All the King's Horses*

7 Here the character repeats what is originally said about Tracey Emin's relation to sleep, mentioned in the article „One Work: Tracey Emin - Everyone I Have Ever Slept With 1963-1995 (1995)“ in the Spike Art Magazine of Autumn 21 on Storytelling

8 The two closing sentences are borrowed from Stephanie LaCava's *The Superrationals*