

You don't bring me flowers anymore 2009.

1 Rhododendron ponticum plant (detail of plant shown) stolen from Parque Los Alcornocales Spain and smuggled into the UK after being rescued and re-introduced into cultivation by Simon Starling, in 2000.



Roisin Byrne, *You Don't Bring me flowers anymore* 2009

We Are Parasites: On the Politics of Imposition

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The tactics of appropriation have been co-opted. Illegal action has become advertisement. Protest has become cliché. Revolt has become passé...Having accepted these failures to some degree, we can now attempt to define a parasitic tactical response. We need a practice that allows invisible subversion. We need to feed and grow inside existing communication systems while contributing nothing to their survival; we need to become parasites.

-Nathan M. Martin for the Carbon Defense League (2003)

There is, however, an advantage that woman can gain from her very inferiority. Since she is from the start less favored by fortune than man, she does not feel that she is to blame a priori for what befalls him; it is not her duty to make amends for social injustice, and she is not asked to do so.

-Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (1949:695)

IT'S NOT YOU, IT'S ME

The British artist Roisin Byrne, a breakout star of the BBC4 reality series *Goldsmiths: But Is It Art?*, has recently begun to make a name for herself in the art world by sabotaging work by more-established male artists. In June 2009, while still an art student, she began a correspondence with the Turner prize-winning, environmentally engaged artist Simon Starling, claiming admiration for his work, only to use the information she gained against him when she posed as a horticulturist, stole, and smuggled a rhododendron from his earnestly titled 2000 installation *Rescuing Rhododendrons* at the Parque Los Alcornocales in Spain back with her to the U.K. on a budget airline flight. Byrne exhibited their email correspondence in full, along with the plant, for her final student show at Goldsmiths in a piece she entitled *You Don't Bring Me Flowers Anymore*. This is one of a number of works for which Byrne has engaged powerful male artists through correspondence, using flattery to get what she wants from them. For another piece, *Look What You Made Me Do* from 2008, she enticed the artist Jochem Hendricks into an extended correspondence that resulted in her putting her own bank details on his financial form so that she could later receive his payment and use it to create a replica of one of his works.

In January 2011, I started to write about Byrne's artistic practice, fascinated by what I began to theorize as the *parasitism* of her provocative and ingenious artistic reversals of power and its potential for reinvigorating feminism. In his widely known, if still not fully contended with 1982 book *The Parasite (Le parasite)*, Michel Serres offers a study that describes the world as a system of parasitic relations wherein production gets exploited by a maintained order of interloping consumption, organized by one-way relations that are not reversed. He writes: "I call this semiconduction, this valve, this single arrow, this relation without a reversal of direction, 'parasitic'" (Serres 1982:5). "Precisely what is a parasite?" writes David Bell of Serres' book. "It is an operator that interrupts a system of exchange. The abusive guest partakes of the host's meal, consumes food, and gives only words, conversation in return. He does not pay in any material sense for what he takes" (Bell 1981:886). Byrne's art conceptualizes the creative reversal at the heart of the performance of parasitism. I argued in my dissertation proposal; it challenges artistic and feminist economies with its

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1. *New York Times* art critic Holland Cotter wrote in 2002, "Of the liberation movements for which the late 20th century will be remembered, few have been as disparaged as feminism, and that scorn extends to the women's art movement. Even presumably well-intentioned art-worldlings seem incapable of talking about it without condescension, as if it were some indiscreet adolescent episode best forgotten" (Cotter 2002).
2. The emails reproduced in this essay are excerpted.
3. Wendy Hui Kyong Chun asks what it would mean to "exhaust exhaustion" in her essay "Crisis, Crisis, Crisis, or the Temporality of Networks" forthcoming in the journal *Theory, Culture & Society*. I engaged this formulation in my dissertation proposal to initiate a different line of questioning.
4. I make this argument at length in a forthcoming essay for *TDR (The Drama Review)* called "Like a Girl's Name: The Adolescent Drag of Amber Hawk Swanson, Kate Gilmore, and Ann Liv Young."
5. Not only has the parasite been overwhelmingly deployed as a pejorative term "rooted" in the misogyny of the alien threat of femininity, a destructive and out-of-control dependence on an always already healthy patriarch, but it has consistently been invoked to articulate a fundamental problem for feminism and feminist theory, namely, women's constitution in relation to, and secondarily to, patriarchal structures as a result or redress of injury. Literary critic J. Hillis Miller notes the female gendering of the parasite in his famous essay "Criticism as Host," writing that the parasite "... suggests the image of 'the obvious or univocal reading' as the mighty, masculine oak or ash rooted in the solid ground, endangered by the insidious twining around it of ivy. English or maybe poison, somehow feminine, secondary, defective, or dependent, a clinging vine, able to live in no other way but by drawing the life sap of its host, cutting off its light and air" (Miller 1977:440, my emphasis). The misogyny associated with the parasite has been internalized by many canonical texts of Western feminist theory. An explicit disregard for the parasitic-female has been espoused by: Mary Wollstonecraft, Rosa Luxemburg, Catherine Mackinnon, Simone de Beauvoir, Germaine Greer, Gloria Steinem, and Avital Ronell, consistently offered as a figural metaphor for the failings of feminism.
6. In an interview published in a 1991 issue of *Re/Search*, Avital Ronell was asked: "What's 'wrong' with feminism today?" "It's dependent on what man does." Ronell responded, explaining:

compelling manipulation of normative approaches to the production of value and representational political etiquette. In my analysis, I read Byrne's practice through the conceptual lens of parasitism, a term I argued was compelling for rethinking the increasingly vexed states of both contemporary feminism and contemporary feminist art, sites that have become bogged down by accusations of cultural cliché and creative stagnation.[1] What might be possible for a notion of feminism unbounded by vague and idealistic objectives such as autonomy, dignity, and independence?, I asked.

While the curatorial and journalistic discourse surrounding Roisin Byrne's artistic practice has focused almost solely on questions about the ethics of stealing and forgery, I asked: what would it mean to consider her work as, rather than the sociopathic betrayals of one individual woman artist, performative actions that literalize and hyperbolize, in ways compelling and problematic, long-held notions of femininity as a bad copy of or vampiristic threat to masculinity? Byrne has said of her work: "I'm not interested in placing it in some kind of art discourse: I'm interested in a relationship to information and to ownership. The separation between you and that thing you desire is changing..." (Jones 2010). I argued that a symbolic reading of Byrne's conceptual practice demands that one question the ethics of stealing and forgery as *feminist tactics*, as it became evident that what Byrne calls "that thing you desire," that coveted object taken without permission, is not so much the fetishized commodity in a society based upon private property but more so, the very cultural and commercial capital possessed by the male artists that she targets. By exploiting conceptual art's institutional absorption as a recognized practice in the twenty-first century, I suggested that Byrne is an artist that has "latched on" to the deregulatory *zeitgeist* of the present contemporary art market, securing it as the "host"-guarantor to her "feminist" claim to that which would otherwise lie beyond her reach. Reading Byrne's practice as parasitic, as a self-conscious feminist performance of parasitism—I argued in my proposal—opens up a number of important questions: on what moralistic, taste-based, or otherwise normative evaluative terms has women's drive to acquire cultural and commercial capital—awards, renown, influence, financial success—been characterized historically as a parasitic imposition deemed unacceptable? How might we understand the discursive registers of "conceptual art" and "performance," in particular, as even further authorizing certain appropriative deregulation—and in so doing, of freeing up a set of experimental feminist tactics—that might be used to infest spaces that have been maintained by otherwise hollow or dogmatic impulses within feminist theory regarding ethics and etiquette? On the other hand, I wondered: what are the dangers of advocating a tactical parasitism for feminism? What are the threats of laying bear feminism's darker or more ambivalent drives (its complicity with forms of oppression, its death drive), and what might constitute the collateral damage of such a maneuver?

I shared my early writing about Roisin Byrne with a small group of fellow graduate students as a part of our biweekly research group. An early draft was uploaded onto our university-sponsored "wiki"—a collaborative online space for sharing files—to be shared with the group, workshopped, and revised for a dissertation chapter. When the group met, my readers were also intrigued and excited by Byrne's work. A few weeks later, I was surprised to find *myself* on the receiving end of a correspondence from Roisin Byrne. First a Facebook friend request and then a message. Our website had not been password protected, and the artist had gained access to my unpublished writing about her work by "Googling" herself. In our exchange, she praised my reading of her work and subsequently emailed me just a few weeks later to ask if she could have permission to "take some terms" of mine for her artist's statement for an upcoming show in Madrid:

Subject: Hello

April 17 at 6:17am

Hello Anna

I thought i would drop you a line to run something by you..i hope you don't mind.

I have a solo show coming up at the end of May at my gallery in Madrid and i would really like for the works to be positioned properly ...it's time!

...

Anyhows, i was wondering if i could ask you whether it might be possible to take some terms you use like sexually harassing patriarchy for example , exploit exploitation, capitalise on capitalism, skillful manipulation of authoritarian codes (im not sure if they are yours or someone else's?) for my blurb for my upcoming show??[2]

Faced with having my own ideas rendered unoriginal with no publication to cite, I found myself in an uncomfortable position at receiving her request to *parasite me*, being neither male, nor affluent, nor well established. Byrne had called the bluff on my own (at the time, predominantly enthusiastic) critical relationship to the parasite—as well as my own critical parasiting of her art practice—by asking if she could make me her host. How could I regard the notion of the parasite as generative in foreign, art context, if when faced with it in my own, material context, I turned away? What was it that made Byrne's former projects seem so compelling, so just and so funny, and this request seem rather unfair and serious? After careful deliberation, I responded:

Subject: Re: Hello

April 19 at 5:29pm

Hi Roisin,

"Feminism today has a *parasitical*, secondary territoriality, and if you respond to present conditions, you're subject to reactive, mimetic, and regressive posturings. So the problem is: *how can you free yourself?* How can you not be reactive to what already exists as powerful and dominating? How can you avoid a *resentimental* politics?" (Roniell 1991:127, my emphases).

7. J. L. Austin writes, "A performative utterance will, for example, be *in a peculiar way* hollow or void if said by an actor on the stage...Language is in such circumstances in special ways—intelligibly—used not seriously, but in ways *parasitic* upon its normal use—ways which fall under the doctrine of the *etiologicals* of language" (Austin 1955:22, his emphases).
8. In "Signature, Event, Context," Derrida writes, "Therefore, I ask the following question: is this general possibility necessarily that of a failure or a trap into which language might *fall*, or in which language might lose itself, as if in an abyss situated outside or in front of it? What about *parasitism*? In other words, does the generality of the risk admitted by Austin *surround* language like a kind of *ditch*, a place of external perdition into which location might never venture, that it might avoid by remaining at home, in itself, sheltered by its essence or *telos*? Or indeed is this risk, on the contrary, its internal and positive condition of possibility?...Is it that in excluding the general theory of this structural parasitism, Austin, who nevertheless pretends to describe the facts and events of ordinary language, makes us accept as ordinary a teleological and ethical determination (the univocality of the statement—which he recognizes elsewhere remains a philosophical 'ideal,' pp. 72-73—the self-presence of a total context, the transparency of intentions, the presence of meaning for the absolutely singular oneness of a speech act, etc.)? For, finally, is not what Austin excludes as anomalous, exceptional, 'non-serious,' that is, citation (on the stage, in a poem, or in a soliloquy), the determined modification of a general *citacionality*--or rather, a general iterability--without which there would not even be a 'successful' performative? Such that--a paradoxical, but inevitable consequence--a successful performative is necessarily an 'impure' performative, to use the word that Austin will employ later or when he recognizes that there is no 'pure' performative" (Derrida 1991:103, his emphases).
9. For Judith Butler, it is also in improvisational engagement with the tools of dominance that there emerges hope for negotiations of power. Butler referenced Foucault's theory of reverse discourse in her discussion of queer performativity in *Bodies that Matter* to ask about the resignificatory promise of performativity for political projects that have been overwhelmed by a sense of injury: "How is it that the apparently injurious effects of discourse become the painful resources by which a resignifying practice is wrought?...further, how is it that the abjected come to make their claim through and against the discourses that have sought their repudiation?" (Butler 1993:224).
10. At a January 2011 show for the American Realness festival of contemporary dance and performance at New York City's Delancey Lounge, Ann Liv Young mocked the pioneering gay activist Jim Fouratt, a member of the audience whom she did not recognize, about his age, only to have the emcee, the established downtown fixture Penny Arcade intervene to give the younger performance artist a piece of her mind, yelling "Pull off her head!" Young later said of the event that she was uninterested in "studying

I am honored that you are interested in my work. Would this be for a catalog essay? If so, I would be thrilled if you quoted me (I could provide you with a quote if so) and perhaps even better, I could write something about your work for it.

As a young female graduate student who is working to establish myself as a critic—just as you are as a young artist—it means a lot for my ideas to be acknowledged (and yes those are my phrasings).[3] Perhaps we could collaborate on something here.

Byrne replied:

Subject: Re: Hello

April 20 at 2:53am

Hi Anna

I am delighted I found your ideas! and i think it would be a good thing to do something together. You articulated things in my work in a way that no one else has which i am i have to say really happy about. A collaboration sounds like something i would be more than happy to do.

At this stage the gallery in Madrid won't be doing a catalogue, it would just be a press blurb positioning the work, do you think you would be interested in being credited on something like this? It's small fry but...

"Small fry or not..." I wrote back to her on April 26th, assuring her that I would indeed like to acknowledge and providing her the relevant information to do so. I did not hear back again.

On May 26th, I received a group email invitation from Byrne to her exhibition "It's Not You, It's Me" at The Goma in Madrid, Spain. In the body of the invitation—and, as I would later discover, in the press release for the exhibition—her artist's statement read (in part) as follows:

Roisin Byrne (Dublin, 1981) is concerned with how representation can end up taking the place of reality in such a heavily mediated world and engages with the way appropriationist... tactics have been co-opted by advertising and how rebelliousness, protest and illegal action are now accepted as yet another part of the fabric of our society. She posits an invisible subversion: to feed off and grow within the communication system without contributing to its survival, to become a parasite...

Not only does Byrne appropriate my reading of her work as parasitical without attribution, but she also lifts from Nathan M. Martin's 2003 article for the Carbon Defense League that appears as my epigraph above. Byrne had, of course, encountered this epigraph before, when she first read it in my draft. Either the conditions under which Byrne would parasite had changed between her earlier projects and 2011, her professional and economic situation becoming more precarious and therefore, necessitating an ethical slippage from seeking out powerful, well-known, male artists to a young, unestablished, female peer to play her host or Byrne's parasitism never, in fact, had a stable ethical dimension in the first place. Or perhaps we might recognize the parasite here as a far more shifting position than a stable one, as the linguistic shifters "you" and "me" in her exhibition title and, now, my essay heading, "It's Not You, It's Me," evidence as the artist and the critic take turns playing exploiter and exploited.

The figure of the parasite, as Byrne's oeuvre models it, indexes, above and beyond the ethics of stealing and forgery, questions of what forms of productivity are valued and what forms are deemed not of value within capitalism and how the giving and withholding of credit represents its own economy of power (as the parasitic drag of Simon Starling's proper name into her project was essential to its conceptual interest, while inclusion of my name offered the artist little reward). Ironically, in another turn of the screw of parasitism, had my name been acknowledged by Roisin Byrne, this essay would be without its introduction. The intriguing system of rewards for playing the role of weakened host, even momentarily, certainly complicates the picture of the economy of parasitism in ways that will require further attention in future work. The parasite's relationship to concepts of (de-)regulation and productivity betrays an internal paradox at work in the parasite's popular figuration: its use in common parlance to index the metaphorical *social leech* who exploits the law and lives off of the work of others (very often the woman who lives off the wealth and access of a man) and yet, in my reading, its use as a performative figure of manic or hyper-productivity. The parasitic, as I propose it here, seeks—as Byrne does—to *pervert* the mechanics of productivity, to bend and re-direct its normative meaning and value to its own benefit. Indeed, the concept of a parasitical feminism that I have proposed (and will elaborate further) renders explicit a process of perversion that I read as already apparent in Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection. Writes Kristeva: "The abject is perverse because it neither gives up nor assumes a prohibition, a rule, or a law; but turns them aside, misleads, corrupts; uses them, takes advantage of them, the better to deny them...[like] an artist who practices [her] art as a 'business.'" (Kristeva 1982:15-16, my emphasis).

My entanglement with Roisin Byrne illustrates that the parasite is a dangerous subject—a dangerous subject of study and a dangerous subject on which to base a feminist politics—and perhaps, for this very reason, an intriguing one. The parasite is both dangerous and generative precisely because it does away with the subject/object dichotomy and because there are no guarantees against its mechanisms. Byrne's particular modeling of a parasitic performance does not necessarily work *toward something*: a focused goal, an ethical logic. It *just works*—like an artist who practices her art as a business. The parasite threatens the integrity of the boundaries between the self and other but also in this case, between criticism and art, between a private draft and public persona, between

performance history or what other people have done" (a statement echoing that of Roisin Byrne).

11. In *The Communist Manifesto*, Karl Marx and Frederick Engels describe capital's logic as manic and unyielding: "Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify...The need of a constantly expanding market for its products chases the bourgeoisie over the whole surface of the globe. It must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connections everywhere" (Marx and Engels 2001:12).
12. In *Between Theater and Anthropology*, Richard Schechner described this as the simultaneous state of "not being and not not being" of performance (Schechner 1985:112).

my reading of Roisin Byrne and Roisin Byrne's performance of herself. The parasite is an unruly *agent provocateur* not simply because it often refuses to abide by the rules but rather because, by appropriating, indeed performing, the mechanisms of capitalism, it exposes that there *are few rules*, if any, in the economy of intellectual and artistic relations under capitalism. With this lesson in mind, this essay will further elucidate a model of parasitism for feminism not merely to promote it but to query the limitations of it as well.

ART OF THE WEAK

"What might a parasitical performativity actually achieve?" asks Rebecca Schneider in a passing remark in her recent book *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment* (Schneider 2011:125). In a moment when parasitism has become a way of life under the economy of relations conditioned by late capitalism, what would it mean to render such relations explicit and tactical? What would it mean to take seriously feminist tactics based on performative reversals that exploit exploitation or capitalize on capitalism? How might parasitism articulate itself not only as a contemporary feminist performance but also as a performative model for contemporary feminist politics? Named after the Greek (*parasitos*), parasites were once a standard character in ancient Greek comedy, complete with their own mask (Zimmer 2000:2). Byrne's work is but one example in a larger critical project that seeks to delimit an arsenal of artistic procedures by which a new generation of "feminist artists" have engaged the figure of the parasite to produce moments of ideological dissonance or majoritarian frustration: tactics that skillfully manipulate symbolization, that perform a sincere relation to, hyperbolize, and put on display authoritarian codes, that appear at first to adopt certain political poses only to attack them through rabid and exaggerated adoptions and reappropriations of such codes (Shukaitis 2010). Parasitism can be understood here as a corrosive queering move that challenges recent work in queer theory and performance studies that has privileged, under the opaque appellation "negativity," moves of cynical distancing, pure refusal, exit, and escape to argue instead for maneuvers of overintimacy, exaggerated mimicry, and excessive appropriation for feminist theory.

The turn to parasitism demands the question: Could the very logics of *imposition* provide the means for transforming increasing perceptions of Western feminism as a cultural imposition and lost cause and for figuring new and inventive models of feminism? Steve Pile has argued, "There is never one geography of authority and there is never one geography of resistance. Further, the map of resistance is not *simply* the underside of the map of domination—if only because each is a lie to the other, and each gives the lie to the other" (Pile 1997:23, my emphasis). What might it mean to pause on the intriguing ambiguity of this "simply" to ask if indeed a map of resistance *can* be drawn from reversing, flipping over, and dragging structures of domination, if only to dwarf or exaggerate the original image in scale and significance. What could it mean to *sexually harass* patriarchy, as the writer Chris Kraus does in her 1997 book *I Love Dick*, containing two-hundred letters stalking "Dick," the symbolic object of her desire? To *juvenilize* adolescence as artists such as Ann Liv Young, Amber Hawk Swanson, and Kate Gilmore appear to in the self-conscious performances of adolescent cliché that characterize their work.[4] To *exhaust* "women's work," as obsessive and proliferating task-based projects such Miranda July and Harrell Fletcher's *Learning to Love You More* (2002-09) and Barbara Campbell's *1001 Nights* (2005-08), projects that re-appropriate the daily ritual of feminized work, appear to do? Can performed, hyperbolic responses to or maniacal engagements with problematic figures be used to undermine their ideological effect?

How have long-held anxieties within feminist theory over the notion of the parasite[5]—a historically feminized metaphor for an intruder that is overly dependent, ungracious, and unwelcome—emerged as a tactical model for reinvesting contemporary feminism? In what ways and to what extent have certain strands of feminist theory "pre-scripted," and thus circumscribed feminists in, a set of compulsory performances oriented around a political subject represented as dignified, mature, and autonomous? Moreover, might performed reversals or inversions of these terms—tactical performances of *indignity*, *immaturity*, and *dependence*—be found to aid or further damage the feminist project? Parasitic performance "calls the bluff" on the derided figure of feminism, as well as derided figures within feminist theory, to query whether tactically and preemptively assuming the (im)position of such figures might take advantage of a cultural logic akin to double jeopardy whereby one cannot be charged with the same crime twice. Rather than evading, by overidentifying with, "dragging" the impositions, parodies, and caricatures said to represent it, by performing "itself" back to itself, a younger generation of feminist artists have already begun to re-image feminism—assimilating not only patriarchy's but also feminism's internalized ironies, awkwardness, and equivocality for its tactical gain, while at the same modeling an "impure" performance of inheritance and generational transmission. Taking seriously an influx of controversial, scholarly polemics on the crisis of contemporary feminism in recent years, from Angela McRobbie's *The Aftermath of Feminism* (2009), Janet Halley's *Split Decisions: How and Why To Take a Break from Feminism* (2006), Elisabeth Badinter's *Dead End Feminism* (2006), among others, I will argue that these books problematically posit closure (aftermath, breaks, ends) as the answer to what ails feminism, failing to see the "open wounds" and maniacal, recursive force of what Avital Ronell has characterized as contemporary feminism's "parasitical" *ressentiment* as instead, conditions of possibility.[6]

I, however, propose the parasite to be more than a figure of recursivity. To be sure, the vigor and insistence represented by parasitism offers a model of iterability that does not simply repeat a given form but that also *modifies* it,

taking the parasite as an exemplary figure for this generative iterability. To be sure, iteration (called citation, called performative utterance) has been named parasitical by not only J. Hillis Miller and J. L. Austin[7] but also by Derrida who “para-cites” Austin,[8] all of whom link the accumulative nature of language, and ultimately performativity, to a kind of parasitic chain.

Contemporary performance art has found a way to exploit a certain impurity and supplementarity trafficked in performativity to feminist ends.[9] Articulations of impure modes of iterability (what I oppose to modes of pure refusal) yoke together questions of parasitism with those of feminist *inheritance*, as young artists and feminists have increasingly claimed, as Byrne does, to be uninterested in how their practices relate to those who have become before them, at the same time that they engage in *hypercitational* practices. Artists like Roisin Byrne and Ann Liv Young parasitically *perform* historical ignorance or forgetting, as a tactical disidentification with images of feminism they would seek to rework. Young, a New York City-based artist who has become infamous in the downtown art scene for her performances of art historical disregard,[10] told me in an interview that “to be perfectly honest” she has never heard of pioneering performance artist Marina Abramović until “the other day” and has “never seen anything by” the now legendary Karen Finley despite having poured chocolate all over herself in her aptly titled piece *Solo* (2006). The feminist parasite engages performance as a way of derailing and rerouting patriarchal investments in reciprocity, generational gratitude, and the gift economy that have structured discourses of morality, as realized by way of compulsory constructions of femininity as congenial, gracious, and obliging, not to mention the project of feminism as one that would seek gender equality, rather than to posit an opposition that would seek to hyperbolize, and thus *outperform*, patriarchy. The parasite challenges the gift economy’s complicity with gender oppression, recalling Gayle Rubin’s brilliant elaboration of the historical exchange of women as historically constituting them as objects of exchange makes clear. A performance of parasitism demands to know: what does it mean to take, over and over, and not give anything in return? How might we read parasitical performance as a reflexive embodiment of the same fervor and voracity that Marx and Engels, and many since, have attributed to capitalism, as an unleashing of the same maniacal logic of shameless re-appropriation back on the structures found to host it most obligingly?[11]

Parasitical performance iterates female stereotypes at a level of mania, while simultaneously claiming—or rather *insisting* (“to be perfectly honest”)—that their performances bear some relationship to real life beyond the stage, effecting in this juxtaposition, a sense of disquietude or instability in the system.[12] Despite the often very apparent artificiality or hyperbole of their contrived spectacles, the artists’ refuse to break character, to let their “real meaning” be finally pinned down. There is an insisted-upon theatricalization of sincerity that enables the artists to stage their critique, or as Silvija Jestrovic as described it, “[to play] out the ambiguity between the performativity of the staged and the theatricality of the authentic” (Jestrovic 2008:160). Rather than ignore, deny, or contradict female stereotypes, these artists *hyperperform* them, pervert them, make them work, exhaust them. In this sense, they perform the parasite that feeds on and yet is seen as supplementary to a system that cannot fully come to terms with it. By performing parasites, the artists exploit the iterative and accumulative force of performativity for their own creative practices. In the force of accumulation, these artists insist on making something from the excesses of the system’s supplementary parts—whether it be kitsch, affect, contamination—that according to the logics of dominance, cannot be measured or incorporated because they have been deemed inadmissible. In this sense, the parasite previously feared by feminism as a presence threatening to create and sustain “fresh wounds” and newly dependent attachments gets reimagined as the condition of possibility by which these fresh wounds, posed by the strategic supplementarity of the parasite to its host, might perform a tactical feminist remapping of the structural dynamics of gendered territoriality as the parasite comes to overwhelm the terrain of its host.

A FIELD OF PARASITES

These contemporary articulations of feminism by a younger generation of performance artists (not only women) respond to the “anxiety of influence” of 1960s and ’70s feminist performance art, and second-wave feminism broadly, by modeling performances of parasitism that infest the more ambivalent strands of feminism. These performances tease out feminist anxieties registered by representations of liminality, relationality, and simulation, sites that have been historically denigrated by versions of feminism conditioned by logics of affirmation and positivism. The parasitic indexes sites that have proven challenging for feminisms grounded in a certain philosophical idealism: sustained by classical political and aesthetic values and based on the paradigm of sovereignty that privileges a conception of the liberal autonomous individual, all challenged by notions of the minor, the derivative, the relational.

Parasitical performance is offered here as one possible response to debates about what exactly feminism’s objective is at a juncture when concepts such as liberation and revolution appear increasingly inadequate for accounting for the fractured, intersectional, and relational experience of gender in postmodernity, as one’s ability to visualize, conceptualize, and escape the field of social violence in global late capitalism has become unthinkable. Whether it be Louis Althusser’s theory of interpellation, Antonio Gramsci’s theory of hegemony, or Michel Foucault’s theory of discipline, theorists concerned with questions of dominance have consistently articulated the impossibility of isolating the mechanisms of power within the constantly shifting ideological grid of postmodern space and time, an impossibility that has altered the very terms for politics historically compelled by goals such as exit or revolution.

Rather than flee, the parasite is a figure that “lives on” what it finds before it, for better or worse. As such, the parasite represents important questions for feminist theory about complicity. Parasitic performance, such as that of Roisin Byrne, makes explicit a certain double bind in contemporary feminist theory. That is: feminism’s dependence on the very structures of domination that it finds its *raison d’être* in critiquing. J. Hillis Miller writes, “The host feeds the parasite and makes its life possible, but at the same time is killed by it...Or can host and parasite live happily together...feeding each other or sharing the food?” (Hillis Miller 1977:439). I argue that feminism’s double bind, rather than being resolved, is even more deeply inscribed in its tactical recourse to parasiticism, taken up as a model of perverse appropriation that seeks to undermine the very thing that it depends on using in order to do so. As the parasite has been given by Michel Serres to be the figure of relationality *par excellence* (Serres 1982:79), a question that troubles my project, and I would argue troubles critical theories of resistance more broadly, is the question of precisely what forms of relation are tantamount to consent? Michel de Certeau, who characterizes the tactic as a kind of parasitical maneuver, gestures to the problem of complicity in the parasite’s willingness to “live with” that which might be understood to be oppositional to it. De Certeau writes, “A tactic insinuates itself into the other’s place, fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety, without being able to keep it at a distance” (De Certeau 2002:xix).

To be sure, a number of sticky philosophical and ideological questions emerge around the politics of the parasite: If the parasite has gained traction in ideological fields where radical critique has been suppressed by the stronghold of capitalism, as may be argued of the U.S. and Western European contexts where these artists emerge, what does it mean to regard a figure of complicity as politically generative? Does this turn to parasitism represent an inventive form of subversion or conversely, an elite retreat and “avant-garde” consensual agreement with forms of domination? If the move to a parasitical politics on the part of feminism can be read as a bargain made to move beyond the impasses of revolutionary or radical politics, does this bargain amount to consent to an economic, political, and ethical system without rules?

POSTSCRIPT

As the online text of this article was just beginning to be formatted by *Art & Education*, the editorial manager received an unexpected email. It was Roisin Byrne, who had somehow already discovered it and was inquiring how soon it would be published.

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