

Pauline Gurnier Jardin

# Fat to Ashes



FAT TO ASHES  
WEBPAGE

<http://paulinecurnierjardin.com/fat-to-ashes-2021/>

Password: Fat2021

Press kit with texts by Jacqui Davies, Giovanna Zapperi and Ana Teixeira Pinto

Pauline Guerin Jardin

# Fat to Ashes

**PREIS DER  
NATIONALGALERIE**

**PREISTRÄGERIN**

13. April – 19. September 2021  
Hamburger Bahnhof –  
Museum für Gegenwart – Berlin



**Nationalgalerie**  
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# Fat to Ashes

13 April – 19 September 2021

**PREIS DER  
NATIONALGALERIE  
PREISTRÄGERIN**

**VISITOR ENTRANCE**

Invalidenstraße 50-51  
10557 Berlin

wheelchair accessible

S+U-Bahn, Tram und Bus: Hauptbahnhof

**OPENING TIMES**

Sun 11:00 - 18:00

Mon closed

Tue 10:00 - 18:00

Wed 10:00 - 18:00

Thu 10:00 - 18:00

Fri 10:00 - 18:00

Sat 11:00 - 18:00

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**Staatliche Museen zu Berlin**  
Preußischer Kulturbesitz

# Fat to Ashes

*Pauline Curnier Jardin*

Berlin, 31 March 2021

**Hamburger Bahnhof – Museum für Gegenwart – Berlin**  
**PREIS DER NATIONALGALERIE**

**Pauline Curnier Jardin. Fat to Ashes**  
from reopening – 19. September 2021

**TEXT BY JACQUI DAVIES**

**Pauline Curnier Jardin. Fat to Ashes**

The Arena has come to embody ideas of European civilization and achievement, a place of worship, democracy, community, athletic attainment, procession, entertainment and celebration. It has also acted as a site of brutal contest, authoritarianism, punishment, butchery and slaughter in a multitude of forms from ancient gladiators and slaves fighting to the death and public executions to contemporary bullfighting, from fascist rallies for the promotion of war, to public dissection of corpses in anatomical theatres.

For her solo exhibition, Pauline Curnier Jardin constructs her own arena, within the cavernous exhibition hall of the Hamburger Bahnhof. This arena, part cake, part stage or film set, becomes the site for spectacle and the presentation of a new immersive installation — depicting acts of ritual, devotion, adoration, procession, butchery and slaughter — “Fat to Ashes”.

In the film “Fat to Ashes“, we follow the procession of St. Agatha; a dazzling, heady, devotional procession and worship of the Patron Saint of the Sicilian city of Catania, which takes place every year from 3rd to the 5th of February. According to legend, the Roman prefect Quintianus had Agatha tortured and her breasts amputated because she refused his advances, hence her position as Patron Saint of rape victims, breast cancer patients, wet nurses, and bell founders and a protector to victims of fire. As we lose ourselves in the crowds and escalating atmosphere of the procession, we cut from Agatha’s festival to Cologne Carnival, this, a week of excess that runs from so-called “Fat Thursday” or “Giovedì grasso” and known as “Weiberfastnacht” or “Fettdonnerstag” in German, until Ash Wednesday which marks the beginning of Lent and a period of reflection according to the Christian calendar. And the film cuts back again to Agatha; and cuts to the ritual slaughter of a pig in an Italian mountain village, an event that is replicated in villages across Europe, a fattened up pig is killed outside, on a dark, cold morning (between 26th December and 15th January) demonstrating vividly how agriculture becomes culture as living flesh becomes meat. And then we are back again to Agatha, and again, cut, cut, cut, constantly returning to the celebration and reproduction of Agatha’s butchered body and the re-enactments of this symbolic narrative.

Butchers and bodies, candles and cakes, alcoholic and spiritual levity, trance-like ritual and re-performance that reveal deep layers of European identity and community: Agricultural traditions, Catholic rites with Pagan fervour, ancient and modern, beautiful and violent.

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Outside Curnier Jardin's makeshift arena, we step into familiar terrain. The Hamburger Bahnhof's steel colonnade, running the length of the vast hall, becomes a street, the long grey speakers attached to the columns resemble lampposts. From these speakers, cinematic production again evokes the narrative, place, atmosphere, in the form of a soundscape — the sound is the street, the sound is the night, and the lone walker. In this street we discover the related sculptures, the "Feel Good" works, arrangements of modest yet symbolic materials — candles, twine, drawings, wax and foam, assembled with the same informality and DIY-confidence as the arena itself, employing the iconography of home-made banners, advertising, memorials, shrines and flyers; and the aesthetics and language of informal employment, missing persons, and victims of accidents, street attacks, and sex for sale. The works appear to promise comfort, satisfaction or a memento — drawn from Europe's "oldest profession" and marginalised communities, ever-present on the side-lines and in the shadows of celebration and spectacle, behind closed doors, on dark streets and in the gutters.

The exhibition is a body of work in celebration of St. Agatha, this in a year where her devotees in Catania could not congregate to shout, sing and pray their dedication or vividly remember her scars, or beg for protection from violence (protection from Etna's destructive eruptions). It should be mentioned that Etna, in the absence of this vivid act of devotion, erupted 13 times in the 3 weeks from the festival's dates, with strong volcanic tremors, 13 powerful paroxysms and an ash plume 10km high. Volcanic activity that also causes the collapsing of the mountain's sides, revealing the strata of previous eruptions, the scars of 500,000 years of violence, like the scars to Agatha's mutilated breasts and body.

"Fat to Ashes" is also a vigil, not to a single person or concept, but rather, like the giant candles of the Catanian festival in her honour, a massive candle made up of many candles, Agatha, virgin, martyr, saint, and the male violence that connects her to women, targets and victims throughout history and still today, both agricultural and urban, Christian and Pagan, ancient and modern...

After over a year of isolation and fear, „Fat to Ashes“ catapults us back into a Europe of celebration, feasts, crowds, bodies, laughter, shouts, songs and prayers — and the searing beauty and brutality of religion, culture and life itself — both historical and contemporary.

Jacqui Davies, Berlin, March 31, 2021

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## BIOGRAPHY

**Pauline Curnier Jardin** (b. 1980, Marseille) is a Berlin- and Rome-based artist working across installation, performance, film, and drawing. She is the winner of the Preis der Nationalgalerie 2019, the 2021 Villa Romana Prize in Firenze, and recipient of the 2019–20 Villa Medici fellowship in Rome. Her work was included or commissioned over the last years in Steirischer Herbst Festival, Graz (2020), Manifesta 13, Marseille (2020), Palais de Tokyo, Paris (2020), the Bergen Assembly, Bergen Biennial (2019), International Film Festival, Rotterdam (2018), the 57th Venice Biennale (2017), Tate Modern, London (2017), Performa 15, New York (2015).

Curnier Jardin's upcoming solo exhibitions are Feature at Art Basel, Index - The Swedish Contemporary Art Foundation, Stockholm, Centraal Museum in Utrecht. In 2021 she will, among other, participate in group exhibitions at Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo, Turin, Galeria Municipal do Porto and Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin.

Pauline Curnier Jardin is represented by Ellen de Bruijne Projects, Amsterdam

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## LIST OF WORKS

### Exhibition installation “Fat to Ashes,” 2021

Arena-Installation, various media including steel scaffolding, wood panels, foam, fabric, and straw

### “Fat to Ashes,” 2021

HD video (transferred from 16 mm- and Super 8-film), colour,  
5.1 surround sound, 20:55 minutes

A film by Pauline Curnier Jardin, Producer Jacqui Davies / PRIMITIVE FILM,  
Editor: Benni Atria, Sound Design: Antonio Gianantonio.  
Filmed in Catania, Cologne and rural Italy.

The Cologne filming happened the morning after the Hanau mass shooting killed 11 and wounded 5, about 200 kilometres from the carnival. Edition 5 + 2 AP + Patrons Edition, Patrons Edition  
Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Nationalgalerie  
2021 acquired by the Freunde der Nationalgalerie e.V.

Courtesy the artist and Ellen de Bruijne Projects, Amsterdam

### “Feel Good,” 2021

Sound-installation, blessed candles, foam, ropes and works on paper,  
10 minutes

Sound design: Antonio Gianantonio

Drawings: Alexandra Lopez, Andrea, Alexandra Mapuchina, Gilda Star, Giuliana  
“Feel Good Cooperative” was born with a workshop made during the severe Italian lockdown of spring 2020. With the help of the photographer and sex worker Alexandra Lopez, architect and academic Serena Olcuire, Curnier Jardin invited a Rome-based, Columbian group of sex workers to draw their work and paid them at the equivalent cost for their labour, in order to produce the content of an exhibition. The project created a space of expression and financial compensation for these Roman workers whose daily life is linked to intimacy and to the foreign body. Proceeds from the sale of these works will be divided between members of the cooperative. “Feel Good Cooperative” members: Alexandra Lopez, Serena Olcuire, Pauline Curnier Jardin, Andrea, Alexandra Mapuchina, Gilda Star, Giuliana.

Courtesy the artist and Ellen de Bruijne Projects, Amsterdam

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**Breast is Best** (essay from the exhibition catalog)

Ana Teixeira Pinto

And yet a restless, always unsatisfied craving for the nudity of paganism [...] but that love, which is the highest joy, which is divine simplicity itself, is not for you moderns, you children of reason. It works only evil in you. As soon as you wish to be natural, you become common. To you nature seems something hostile; you have made devils out of the smiling gods of Greece, and out of me a demon. You can only exorcise and curse me, or slay yourselves in bacchantic madness before my altar. And if ever one of you has had the courage to kiss my red mouth, he makes a barefoot pilgrimage to Rome in penitential robes and expects flowers to grow from his withered staff, while under my feet roses, violets, and myrtles spring up every hour, but their fragrance does not agree with you. Stay among your northern fogs and Christian incense; let us pagans remain under the debris, beneath the lava; do not disinter us.<sup>1</sup>

— Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, *Venus in Furs*

The problem for Christianity is not (as it was in classical antiquity) penetration or domination but rather erection, which is to say desire itself.<sup>2</sup>

— Virginia Burrus, *The Sex Lives of Saints*

In “A Childhood Memory and Some Reflections on the Novel”,<sup>3</sup> Leopold von Sacher-Masoch recounts how, in his boyhood, he would enjoy reading about the tortures inflicted on early Christian saints and their martyrdom at the hands of pagan henchmen. “I would sit in a dark, secluded corner of my great-aunt’s house, devouring the legends of the saints; I was plunged

<sup>1</sup> Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, *Venus in Furs*, <https://www.huntingtontheatre.org/articles/venus-In-Fur/Gallery/Complete-Text-of-iVenus-In-Fursi-by-Leopold-von-Sacher-Masoch>.

<sup>2</sup> Virginia Burrus, *The Sex Lives of Saints* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 24.

<sup>3</sup> Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, “A Childhood Memory and Reflections on the Novel”, originally published in *Revue Bleu* (1888), republished in Gilles Deleuze, *Présentation de Sacher-Masoch* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1967), 274.

into a state of feverish excitement on reading about the torments suffered by the martyrs.” Severin, the protagonist of Sacher-Masoch’s novel, *Venus in Furs*, and in a way his alter ego, also experiences intense sexual stimulation by reading the lives of martyrs. It is usually said that Sacher-Masoch’s reading is twisted or depraved, that he reads martyrdom perversely, but it could perhaps be argued that, rather than perverting the correct reading, he simply recognized that hagiography is a pornographic genre.

In her work *Fat to Ashes* (2020), Pauline Curnier Jardin taps into what Sacher-Masoch called “the mysterious affinity between cruelty and lust”,<sup>4</sup> the symbolism of amputation, bodily mortification, and the way Christianity, in its early phase between the third and the sixth centuries, redefined the relation between the body, the Chthonic cosmos, and the social order.

Each year from 3rd to 5th February, the province of Catania celebrates the martyrdom of St Agatha of Sicily. According to Italian chronicler Jacobus de Voragine, Agatha was a fifteen-year-old from a noble family, who, due to her Christian faith, had sworn a vow of chastity. When Agatha rejected the advances of Roman prefect Quintianus, he had her imprisoned and tortured. Much to the delight of his reader, Voragine spares no detail of the agony inflicted on her young flesh, which is whipped, burned, and pierced by iron hooks. But the torment Agatha is most celebrated for is even more gruesome: consumed by spite and rancour, the Roman prefect had her breasts cut off with iron pincers. Agatha died in prison circa 250, presumably as a result of her injuries. One year later, on the anniversary of her martyrdom, the city is engulfed by a volcanic eruption. Terrified villagers take to Agatha’s tomb for protection, using her veil to shield them from the lava flows. Miraculously the white veil, now reddened in the infernal heat, stops the molten tide. Alongside St Agatha, the province of Catania also celebrates St Barbara. Martyred in 306, she is another virgin whose breasts were cut off. In a further parallel with St Agatha, St Barbara is credited with stopping the eruption of Mount Etna in 1780 – yet another involuntary emission.

The theology of the early Christian church was forged by martyrdom. And martyrdom assigned a new valence to sexuality, thereby redefining it. In the non-Christian world, sexuality, as Foucault argues, was relational; thus sexual relations could not be dissociated from social relations. For St Augustine however, to quote Richard Sennet, sexuality is not about a relationship to other people, but about “the problem of the relationship of oneself to

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

oneself, or, more precisely, the relationship between one's will and involuntary assertions".<sup>5</sup> The main question is not, as it was for pagan scholars, "the problem of penetration: it is the problem of erection".<sup>6</sup> By redefining sexuality as an index of self-abnegation, the church also began to efface the symbolic valence of the body and by extension of bodily functions and fluids.

The Mediterranean area is rich with myths that express creation and renewal through the metaphor of sexual reproduction. Milk, most often breast milk, is endowed with generative force. For the Greeks, the Milky Way squirted out of Hera's breasts while she was nursing Heracles. In Egyptian lore it was spilled bovine milk, deified as the fertility goddess Bat. After the unification of Lower and Upper Egypt, Bat was syncretized with the theriomorphic Hathor, the personification of the Eye of Ra or Sun Disk, attributes which were later taken on by Isis, often portrayed wearing the horned Sun Disk as a headdress. In the Hellenic world, Isis was conflated with Artemis, a deity with a dual character herself, who presided at once over chastity and fertility —both attributes that would later reappear in the iconography of the virgin and mother Madonna. In Ephesus, on the western coast of Asia Minor, Artemis is represented with animal ornaments such as lions, griffins, horses, bulls, and bees, as well as with numerous breast-like lumps adorning her midriff. This led to the designation "Artemis polymastia", or Diana polymastia,<sup>7</sup> a multi-breasted figure that appears as late as 1615 in *The Discovery of the Child Erichthonius* by Peter Paul Rubens. The Virgin Galaktotrophousa or Nursing Madonna is a Christian appropriation of Isis Lactans iconography, which was popular in the Mediterranean from 700 BCE until the fourth century CE; the Marian cult entered the Christian horizon rather late through the Copts in Egypt, and began to gain ground in the seventh century only. The Gospel does not mention the nursing mother. Rather, the erasure of the female principle, and of the functions of the female body, is articulated as a mutilation.<sup>8</sup> It is the body of the pagan goddesses Isis/Artemis/Hathor who is mutilated; Agatha's martyrdom is an exorcism.

<sup>5</sup> Michel Foucault and Richard Sennett, "Sexuality and Solitude", *London Review of Books* 3, no. 9 (May 1981).

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Some scholars have argued the lumps hanging in the statue's midriff are not breasts but bull's testes or eggs, offerings to the deity.

<sup>8</sup> See Salvatore D'Onofrio, *Les Fluides D'Aristote: Lait, Sang et Sperme dans L'Italie du Sud* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2014).

Unlike monotheism, which is a religion of the book, polytheistic or cult religions did not have a theological system. They evolved organically from the institutional and material conditions of society as a “system that is not just coextensive with culture but practically identical to it”.<sup>9</sup> Monotheism, however, is not coextensive with culture but antagonistic to it. For the religions of the book, “the truth to be proclaimed comes with an enemy to be fought. Only they know of heretics and pagans, false doctrine, sects, superstition, idolatry, magic, ignorance, unbelief, heresy, and whatever other terms have been coined to designate what they denounce, persecute and proscribe as manifestations of untruth.”<sup>10</sup>

The question of truth, in its new normative sense, and by extension untruth, is also the question of the two worlds or two cultures: the splitting of culture into official and unofficial, sacred and profane, canonical and folk, highbrow and lowbrow, pop culture and counterculture. This is what Theodor W. Adorno would much later call the “torn halves of an integral freedom, to which however they do not add up”.<sup>11</sup>

Whither the breast, when creation is brought under a regime of truth? Female fertility is a false fertility; it begets life but that life carries death within it. Purified life is freed from matter and mother. Flesh is made word. The question of Agatha’s body, and its mutilation or loss of integrity, is the question of the body politic and its reorganization by the church – and the violence that inheres in such *reorganization*, with organs, literally, put out of order – but also the question of the gendered body under a doctrine predicated on revelation and transcendence. One could say the festival celebrates the brutal repression of its former pagan festivities, but its splitting of the world, and by extension of experience, leads the subject to misrecognize her own mutilation as elevation, and to see in her subjection a form of emancipation.

Every border regime creates its own backdoor, however, and that which was evicted finds its way back into the room. St Agatha is often depicted holding her breasts on a platter.

Catholicism is duplicitous: it bears encrypted within itself the paganism it ostensibly rejects.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Jan Assmann, *The Price of Monotheism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), 2.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>11</sup> Theodor Adorno to Walter Benjamin, 2 August 1935, in *Letters to Walter Benjamin*, *New Left Review* 1, vol. 81 (Sept/Oct 1973), <https://newleftreview.org/issues/i81/articles/theodor-adorno-letters-to-walter-benjamin>.

<sup>12</sup> I am paraphrasing Jan Assmann’s, *The Price of Monotheism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), 111.

Broaching the border the church imposed, the mutilated breasts, unable to nurture, reacquire nutritional properties. Unfazed by their anatomically correct appearance, the Catania tourist information office proudly announces the province's breast-shaped ricotta and marzipan pastries, topped by a red cherry emulating the nipple. An edible reminder of Agatha's martyrdom, or a frenzied gourmandization of cannibalistic license, the *cassateddi di Sant'Aita* or *minni di Sant'Aita* are consumed abundantly. *Breast is best*. The Feast of St Agatha is a real *feast*. But it is also a muted utterance that says without saying that flesh is not word: it is womb, but also wound. Sanctified life is purified life, but you cannot purify life without killing the living.

The disturbing conflation of embodied and encultured experiences, which allows a mutilated breast to multiply into a myriad of edible breasts, is represented in Pauline Curnier Jardin's film *Fat to Ashes* as an explosion of vernacular energies, which overwhelms ecclesiastical pieties, turning Agatha's mortified flesh into a reaffirmation of the lactating breast potency. St Agatha's festival exhibits an exuberant quality, transubstantiating dearth into abundance, breast tissue into sugar, agony into gluttony, and horror into glee. Is the church licensing the carnivalesque festivities or deferring to their power? As if confirming the latter, the film leaps from Catania to Cologne. We are now at the carnival, the week-long street festival, taking place between Fat Thursday and Ash Wednesday, both referenced in the title. As if to emphasize the fact that the term "carnival" comes from *carnelevarium*, which means "the removal of meat", Curnier Jardin's camera directs our attention to a hog being bound for slaughter.

Carnival, according to Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin, is not a religious ritual, for it is free from mysticism and piety. Carnival also does not share the character of prayer or vernacular religion, for it does not command or ask for anything, and even parodies the Church's cult.<sup>13</sup> Carnival, Bakhtin argues, is neither religion nor art, but life itself – the second life of the people – shaped according to a certain pattern of play. Grotesque realism, the essence of carnival, degrades and lowers everything that is heavenly and upward, bringing it downward to the level of the body and the earth, an element that can bury and sow, that is able to deny and assert, simultaneously. The spirit of carnival, according to Bakhtin, is alien to nihilism: "it is always conceiving".<sup>14</sup> At this point in her film, Curnier Jardin enters a

<sup>13</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1984), 7.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

discussion that has been staged and restaged throughout modernity, concerning the ambivalent politics of carnivalesque festivities, under the individuating conditions imposed by bourgeois culture. Miriam Bratu Hansen's survey of what one could call the afterlife of the carnival within the cultural industries can perhaps illuminate how, no longer pregnant with regenerating force, carnivalesque registers turn into satire or pageantry. When only the negative element is preserved, the carnival becomes profoundly conservative, providing what Adorno and Horkheimer called a "medicinal bath of fun"<sup>15</sup> where the bathers are immersed in *Schadenfreude*, brutality and sadism.<sup>16</sup> By restaging the discussion between Benjamin and Adorno in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Bratu Hansen details the imbrication of entertainment and aggression, be it sexual or racial, palpable in the streets of Cologne. Teeming with cardinals and Prussian officers, soldiers and sailors, cat-women and peasant maids, the carnival affirms male dominance and female docility. There are revellers in feathered headdresses or keffiyeh; there is a big group wearing blackface. Laughter becomes indistinguishable from horror.

In his essay on laughter, *Le Rire: Essai sur la Signification du Comique* (1900), French philosopher Henri Bergson asks why white people find black faces comical, pointing to the dual function of comedy as a tool for othering while affirming group-identity, a form of affinity predicated on the absence of empathy. Central to this carnival is, as Walter Benjamin argues, "the cozy acceptance of bestiality and violence as inevitable concomitants of existence".<sup>17</sup> Though still associated with dissent or conflict with the social order, the carnivalesque desire to mock or subvert moral codes no longer has truck with a turbulent transgression emerging from below, but rather expresses a "defensive numbing of perception", which prevents the participants from recognizing the mechanisms that make them complicit in the stasis mass culture imposes, at once victims and agents of its diluted chauvinism and misogyny.<sup>18</sup> Resuming an "old tradition which is far from reassuring – the tradition inaugurated by the dancing hooligans to be found in medieval depictions of

<sup>15</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 110, quoted in Miriam Bratu Hansen, *Cinema and Experience: Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor W. Adorno*, 1st ed. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011), 168

<sup>16</sup> Miriam Bratu Hansen, *Cinema and Experience: Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor W. Adorno*, 1st ed. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011), 168.

<sup>17</sup> Walter Benjamin, "Micky Maus" fragment, quoted in Miriam Bratu Hansen, *Cinema and Experience: Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor W. Adorno*, 1st ed. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011), 168.

<sup>18</sup> Miriam Bratu Hansen, *Cinema and Experience: Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor W. Adorno*, 1st ed. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011), 168.

pogroms”,<sup>19</sup> carnivalesque attempts to refetishize social relations are always perched on the threshold to fascism.<sup>20</sup>

In its final minutes, the film *Fat to Ashes* reaches a fever pitch, juxtaposing unwittingly camp hagiographic scenes with a re-enactment of Agatha’s martyrdom as performed by six-year-old children – the moment when one wonders whether to laugh, cry, or call the hotline for child abuse – in a crescendo of lewdness and casual cruelty. As the hog is butchered, the image leaps to a small boy, struggling to wield pincers too heavy for him to lift to a little girl’s chest, her hands tied above her head, simulating Agatha’s torment. Her limp body is then thrown to the ground and removed by a group of male children.

In traditional societies, most saliently in the Mediterranean area, women are contested resources, subject to usurpation. In the absence of effective state bureaucracies, codes of honour and shame become central to the social order. Women are repositories of men’s honour but have no positive relation to it; the only impact a woman can have on honour is to destroy it. Any female misconduct upsets the social order. The investment in women’s virginity and chastity thus becomes the focus of common interest among the men of her family, and the centre around which male homosocial bonds are organized. As a result, men are socialized to commit violent acts to uphold it.

Socialized to bear part of this burden themselves, women see their own sexuality with suspicion. There is no contradiction between a virgin and a mother; they are just two sequential moments in the way honour organizes sexual and social life. But the figure of the whore mediates between the two: there is no other way for a virgin to become a mother. The pitfall of placing contradictory demands on women’s bodies is that the transition becomes slippery. If the invisible part of the triad becomes visible, the honour of the family is lost, and when honour is lost nothing can save you, not in this world. When honour is lost, the world breaks apart: hence the Etna eruptions, the thick ash clouds, the rivers of lava scorching everything in their wake. The end of social life is articulated in terms of a natural disaster, as the end of the world. Only a miracle can mend it.

<sup>19</sup> Walter Benjamin, “Micky Maus” fragment, quoted in Miriam Bratu Hansen, *Cinema and Experience: Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor W. Adorno*, 1st ed. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011), 168.

<sup>20</sup> Miriam Bratu Hansen, *Cinema and Experience: Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor W. Adorno*, 1st ed. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011), 182.

Vernacular religion and ritual, according to Ernesto de Martino,<sup>21</sup> are tied to the precariousness of life, the pressure exercised by uncontrollable forces, the dearth of forms of social assistance, the harshness of toil, and the immense power of the negative throughout an individual's lifetime. In a way all religion is an apotropaic ritual, an attempt to avert hurt, hardship, and hunger, or at least to assuage it.

In *The Accursed Share* (1949) Georges Bataille notes that preindustrial societies were characterized by the "unproductive consumption of the surplus".<sup>22</sup> Sacrifices to deities were conceptualized as symmetry, literally a form of debt repayment. Capitalism, the only economic system that redirects the surplus back into production, is in this sense an aberration, an economic anomaly. For capitalism too, nature is fertile but impotent; only stock has a generative force. In Curnier Jardin's video *Fat to Ashes*, the many breasts of Artemis reappear as bouquets of balloons, flanking the procession or hovering over the cavorting crowds. There are lions, horses, sharks, Dalmatians, princesses, Spidermen, and Spice Girls. Myth, made in Taiwan.

Capitalism could be construed as the negation of tragedy: a cargo cult announcing the imminence of copious blessings. Money is its tutelary deity. It provides protection from all things evil, even disease or despair, even the lack of fertility, via in vitro fertilization or surrogacy. Capitalism delivers what religion can only gesture toward: to be freed from want. A shopping centre is the land of Cockaigne, a promise of plenty. Nuns wear racy mesh underwear, roasted pigs wander about, and fountains spout milk. Every mother, virgin, or whore attends the same sex-positive workshops. Who needs Hathor if you have Nestlé! Don't the goddess's robes look like supermarket shelves, brimming with rows of canned meat, breakfast cereal, and avocado honey?

One could also say the term "capitalism" names the divorce of economic practices from their symbolic valences, and the dominance of "depersonalized, disaffected and asignificant" relations, which undergird a market economy".<sup>23</sup> Economic value is a function of libidinal investment, but market economies also tend to rework the subjective imaginary in such a way

<sup>21</sup> See Ernesto de Martino, *Magic: A Theory from the South*, trans. and annotated by Dorothy Louise Zinn (Chicago, IL: HAU Books, 2015).

<sup>22</sup> See Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy*, in the original French *La Part maudite* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1949).

<sup>23</sup> Jean Joseph Goux, *Symbolic Economies* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), 202.

that “the whole field of insolvent desires”, like sexual desires, is “resignified by solvent desires”.<sup>24</sup> *The American dream is not about having stuff, it is about having opportunities.* Breastfeeding is linked to higher IQs, because it provides ideal nutrition. Breastfeeding gives your child a competitive edge by boosting their immune system; breastfeeding changes the ordering of life’s outcomes to the child’s benefit. As a major element in the configuration of desire, the breast always finds its solvency. Aspirational yet nihilistic, capitalism resignifies the liminal by generalizing it. By articulating the grammar of the ritualized and the repressed, *Fat to Ashes* bypasses the complexities of the political economy via the shortcut of the libidinal. Cinema, a medium, which is both mechanical and spectral, becomes the site for *disorganization*, and the *reorganization* of both film and flesh, the site where polytheistic polysemy finds its image.

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.





**Giovanna Zapperi (essay from the exhibition catalogue)**  
**Excess and Devotion: Rituals of Masculinity in the Films of Pauline Curnier Jardin**

In the spring of 2020, Italy was under one of Europe's strictest lockdowns as the country was struck particularly badly by the Covid-19 pandemic. During this period, Pauline Curnier Jardin was living in Rome as a fellow of the Académie de France at the Villa Medici, where she had arrived to conduct research for her forthcoming video, provisionally entitled *Sebastiano Blu*. Needless to say, the stay-at-home order and the subsequent limitations on professional activities and personal interactions put a stop to the artist's investigations, just as she was preparing to film the processions that were going to take place during Holy Week in April 2020. Like other aspects of everyday life, the sphere of religion was strongly affected by the pandemic: the spectacular image of a solitary Pope Francis on a rainy day in Rome's St. Peter's Square epitomizes the lockdown's consequences for Catholic rituals. The lockdown had a huge impact on the collective ceremonies that contribute in such an important way to cementing the sense of belonging to a community.

Curnier Jardin's most recent endeavours combine a number of themes found in the artist's previous projects: her interest in rituals and processions, the carnivalesque, the conflation of magic and religion, the camp, the queer, and the grotesque body, and, more generally, what Ana Teixeira Pinto defines as the artist's ongoing "inquiry into what qualifies as deviance – artistically, as well as politically".<sup>1</sup> The gendered body undeniably plays a crucial role in Curnier Jardin's practice, be it by means of video, installation, or performance. In her recent works focusing on religious rituals in southern European societies, the artist considers these celebrations as important moments of collective corporeal expression. The body therefore emerges as a contradictory site in which gender performativity and identification often exceed the normative frame provided by religion.

Her most recent projects, *Sebastiano Blu* and the installation *Fat to Ashes*, experiment with a visual language that combines ethnography and experimental cinema, while at the same time conveying the intimacy of a home movie through the use of a Super 8 camera. However, the artist's distinctive fusion of heterogeneous filmic and aesthetic codes can hardly be subsumed under the rubric of "experimental ethnography", coined by film scholar Catherine Russell to describe the interplay between ethnographic and avant-garde film in the age of video.<sup>2</sup> Rather, Curnier Jardin's emphasis on the body and, more specifically, on performance in tandem with her interest in queer/feminist underground cinema, generates a visual vocabulary that transcends both ethnographic and experimental film practices. In her films, reality is dismantled in a non-linear succession of dreamlike sceneries in a way that recalls Ulrike Ottinger's cinema and her ability to embody the fantasy of a place one "has never seen, but has certainly imagined".<sup>3</sup> Drawing on Ottinger's suggestion of a "ticket of no return"<sup>4</sup> from heterosexist cinematic time and space, Curnier Jardin's videos open up the possibility of a kind of non-binary visual pleasure, in which the staging of hyperbolic (and often eroticized) gender performances is negotiated by a queer/feminist gaze. Indeed, in her work she often combines the documentary and the fictional; it sometimes starts as a performance before turning into a filmic material that can become part of an installation, a sculpture, or a live event.

While researching some of the rituals and processions disseminated throughout the Italian Peninsula in early 2020, Curnier Jardin, suddenly unable to travel, became interested in collecting found footage documenting religious rites celebrated via private screens (smartphone, computer, TV) and their intimacy. Her video *Le lente passioni* (Slow Passions) (2020) weaves together a number of scenes, mostly captured online, displaying images and songs related to the Catholic celebration of Easter. Since religious rituals are mediated via the screen in this time of a pandemic, the edited footage provides a moving account of the passions expressed through personal forms of devotion. Individual and collective modes of worship are conveyed via the video's emphasis on sound and, more specifically, on the songs and prayers that accompany these acts of piety. In particular, *Le lente passioni* highlights music, rhythm, and the voice as a direct reference to Curnier Jardin's interest in

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<sup>1</sup> Ana Teixeira Pinto, "The World Inside Out: Pauline Curnier Jardin according to Ana Teixeira Pinto", *Fondation d'Entreprise Pernod Ricard*, September 2018, <https://www.fondation-pernod-ricard.com/en/textwork/pauline-curnier-jardin-ana-teixeira-pinto>.

<sup>2</sup> Catherine Russell, *Experimental Ethnography: The Work of Film in the Age of Video* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997).

<sup>3</sup> See Elisabeth Lebovici, "'Never seen, but fully imagined': Delphine Seyrig's Part(s) in Ulrike Ottinger's Cinema" in *Defiant Muses: Delphine Seyrig and Feminist Video Collectives in France, 1970s–1980s*, ed. Nataša Petrešin-Bachelez and Giovanna Zapperi, exhibition catalogue (Madrid: Museo Reina Sofia, 2019), pp. 162–81.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

the work of Giovanna Marini, a prominent Italian ethnomusicologist and singer who has been instrumental in recovering traditional songs and music since the 1960s.<sup>5</sup>

Whereas Marini has been mostly interested in the intersecting traditions of southern Italian folklore and leftist protest songs, the significance of sound in Curnier Jardin's work points to the bodily dimension of religious rituals. This might seem somehow paradoxical as the "slow passions" collected by the artist can only express themselves via the screen's disembodied interposition. However, the emphasis on sound, and especially on the voice, refers to the somatic and sensorial components of religious rituals. As Italian philosopher Adriana Cavarero has pointed out, the voice is first and foremost sound, affect, and relation. Because it is constitutively connected to the field of emotions, the voice conveys bodily presence and intimacy, before turning into language with its claim to fix meaning.<sup>6</sup> *Explosion Ma Baby* (2016) significantly starts with the voice, a male voice calling upon the crowd gathered for the procession in honour of Saint Sebastian. This short video follows the exclusively male procession that takes place in a southern Italian town, which involves dedicating newborns (both male and female) to the patron saint and foreshadows the artist's ongoing project *Sebastiano Blu*. The babies are lifted naked, sometimes adorned with banknotes, towards the saint's statue, which is carried around the town by a select group of young men. Interestingly, Saint Sebastian is an icon of gay culture, with his arrow-pierced body becoming a sign of homoerotic desire, which is obviously condemned in Catholic societies. Curnier Jardin films this phallogocentric ceremony celebrating male fertility with her Super 8 camera in a way that produces a sort of phantasmagoria of the male body, as the camera's physical proximity echoes the erotic dimension of the whole ritual in which male bodies come close to each other. The video's title refers to the fireworks and the event's festive atmosphere, therefore blurring the line separating liturgy and the carnival, thus introducing its overtly sexual subject matter. The camera's insistence on the colourful explosions of the fireworks, in tandem with the contrast between ancient and new elements (the church's baroque façade and the shiny inflated balloons), also contributes to producing a narrative in which ritual and magic collide.

The entwinement of rituals and the body as a way of expressing emotions is crucial in Curnier Jardin's understanding of collective acts of devotion in which pre-modern practices and superstitions have been historically incorporated into Catholic rituals. Drawing on the work of Italian anthropologist Ernesto de Martino, the artist envisions the significance of archaic forms of devotion in contemporary European societies. Writing in the context of Italy's post-war "economic miracle", de Martino stressed that the persistence of magic in southern Italy's Catholicism was not just the wreckage of a lost society: rather, magic has become an integral part of contemporary religiosity, one that is able to constantly renew itself.<sup>7</sup> More importantly, according to the Italian anthropologist, rites connected to possession, exorcism, and bewitchment point to the open temporality of such folkloric-religious relics: poised halfway between the past and the present, simultaneously ancient and new, they are located outside of a history conceived in terms of the continuity connecting past, present, and future.

*Sebastiano Blu*, Curnier Jardin's ongoing film project, tells a story in which superstition and Catholicism are closely entwined. The film is set in the same town where the patron saint, Sebastian, is worshiped in relation to male fertility. This project, which expands on a previous performance and a short video,<sup>8</sup> centres on a young man called Giorgetto, who is haunted by the persistence of a latent matriarchal structure within a patriarchal society. Obsessed with his virility and sexuality, the video's protagonist is tormented by his anxiety about women, whose bodies are viewed as both desirable and monstrous in their ability to give birth. While dealing with male fertility and fatherhood, the video delves into the entwinement of gender, religion, and ritual. Both *Explosion Ma Baby* and *Sebastiano Blu*'s speculation on reproduction and masculinity recall Curnier Jardin's *Qu'un sang impur* (2019), a previous film and installation loosely based on Jean Genet's film *Un chant d'amour* (1950). In a tale of

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<sup>5</sup> The bulk of the material assembled in *Le lente passioni* was collected by the Riti e suoni di una settimana santa fuori dall'ordinario research group, coordinated by Antonella Talamonti. Talamonti is a scholar working closely with Giovanna Marini who has created an online archive featuring a variety of rites and sounds related to Holy Week. The material was made available to the artist, who herself participated in Marini's seminars during her time in Rome. A part of the footage used in the video was collected via social media.

<sup>6</sup> Adriana Cavarero, *For More than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression*, trans. Paul A. Kottman (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005).

<sup>7</sup> Ernesto de Martino, *Magic: A Theory from the South*, trans. Dorothy Louise Zinn (Chicago, IL: HAU Books, 2015).

<sup>8</sup> *Sebastiano Blu* (performance, 2018, based on the screenplay written and narrated by Pauline Curnier Jardin) and *Sebastiano Blu* (teaser, 2018).

voyeurism and transgression, Genet's rare experimentation with cinema depicts the erotic fantasies of two young male inmates and their prison guard. However, in Curnier Jardin's remake, the eroticized inmates have become post-menopausal women eventually enjoying their erotic power, free at last from reproductive labour and the attendant political economy of sex that was famously described by feminist anthropologist Gayle S. Rubin as "the traffic in women".<sup>9</sup> Needless to say, in patriarchal societies both old women and gay men are excluded from reproduction, and this is perhaps the reason why, in these different projects, sexuality and fertility convey an imaginary reversal between life and death. In *Qu'un sang impur*, the post-menopausal women actually menstruate but, instead of bearing life, they inflict death on the young men they encounter in their everyday lives. These older women, whose destructive power is exerted on men young enough to be their sons, embody what one could imagine to be Giorgetto's worse nightmare: the fantasy of a maternal body that is both destructive and caring, eroticized and abject. Indeed, as we learn from the film's script, Giorgetto's obsession with his own infertility transmutes into a fantasy of self-destruction, in which he identifies with Saint Sebastian's martyred and eroticized body.

Even though Curnier Jardin's films are evidently set in specific locations, such as southern Italy, these appear as rather unreal, as if seen in a reverie. The visual language's dream-like quality mirrors the artist's aim of envisioning the encounter between worlds and temporalities. In reactivating ancient myths about women's reproductive power, *Sebastiano Blu* lingers upon the dilemmas in which female bodies have been historically trapped. In both traditional and modern cultures, one could argue, women and their bodies are always seen as already transgressive, both dangerous and in danger; they embody the perils of the erotic spectacle, as well as the potential for a radical alternative to the patriarchal organization of life.<sup>10</sup> This is perhaps the fundamental ambivalence within which Pauline Curnier Jardin sets her visionary exploration of sexual difference, one in which ancient and modern rituals of masculinity are constitutively entangled with the imagined embodiment of the female Other. The syncretic temporality that constitutes the backdrop of the artist's engagement with rituals, gender, and devotion therefore allows for unseen and untold cultural structures to become apparent: not so much as a reality against which we continue to struggle, but as a phantasmagoria in which gender is endlessly unsettled in everyday rituals.

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<sup>9</sup> Gayle S. Rubin, "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the Political Economy of Sex" in *Deviations* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012).

<sup>10</sup> See Mary Russo, *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess and Modernity* (London: Routledge, 1994).