

How to Kill Your Guardian of Grammar

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I dedicate this little text to the brilliant writer and my close friend, Kate Savage.

Many of the ideas were developed during conversations with Kate.

Table of Contents:

1. Title page
2. Committee members
3. Dedication
4. Thesis
5. Artist Statement
6. References

“You obey your pigs who exist; I’ll obey my god’s who do not.”

-Rene Char

Everywhere, from the schoolhouse, the office, the factory, and the grocery store, functions to guard our way of life. This might be the main purpose of our institutions, to create managers, a people invested in the management of others and of themselves, what I call, the Guardians of Grammar. This role as a Guardian of Grammar begins very early, in the seemingly innocuous temples of education that facilitate a cohesive and standardized form of communication—setting up the rules of our language, and continue as an internalized part of the mechanics of our social organization.

The grammar I mean is social grammar. The structure that articulates possible relationships between person to person, and between person to thing. All this functions, creates a collective, makes possibilities, makes nonsense nonsense, maintains life, stabilizes. It is a dynamic structure endlessly adaptable. It depends on a predetermined set of roles, providing a structure for the endless possibilities of the changing of the guard, the same parts played by different actors. But the father is not a necessary placeholder. These structures don’t preclude the possibility of new concepts of the sororal, or of a collective not yet formed. I’m borrowing heavily from Deleuze when I talk about a collective not yet formed. Deleuze describes this as a function of literature; it “invents a people”, “a possibility of life”, and is written for the “people who are missing,” an absent, not yet realized people (Deleuze 4). Deleuze’s own thoughts on the grammar of the family conceives of a family without predetermined roles. But this also has to do

with the creation of what he calls a foreign language inside a writer's native tongue (Deleuze 107). By straining language, pushing it to its limitation, a new structure can form, a new language that borrows and remakes the old language, that explodes the preconception creating new possibilities, new grammars, and makes possible a new collective.

Words and images are windows. Writers and artists get the chance to open windows at random and look inside the invisible interior, a living room. I see my living room and the reader has their living room. Each room reveals a new scene, a new stream to follow out of the lynch pin of the symbolic order, the social grammar.

Grammar creates gutters to move the run off into streams. Well-worn paths to make our articulations flow smoothly through the landscape, from person to person, and from person to thing. It works a structure that opens for words and thoughts. When those structures are presupposed, said to exist out of necessity, they begin to function as myth, appearing natural and unchanging. This is a nagging problem in postmodern theory, so concerned with the denaturalization of all identity, one knows the arbitrary and fictional basis of identity but continues to behave as if identity was stable.

One would almost give up poetry at times just to speak plainly to the politicians and news anchors. But that would mean adopting a language that with the shiny veneer of intelligence and rationality. A language that explains life, describing it efficiently, functionally, organizing it into the current conditions of power. I don't want to remain within the limitations of this severe language or

restrain language's expressive potential. Isn't this part of the problem of sociology, to obsess on the problem? To describe with such care that one is already entrenched in the sober language of hierarchy— there's so much danger of believing the fiction. I want to write unrestrained by the functionalist fiction of dividing poetry and facts. Joseph Beuys was right when he suggested that the Berlin wall be raised a few centimeters on aesthetic grounds so that it would have better proportions. The radicality is not in the politic practicality of his suggestion but in the levitation of real politics, the reminder that other conditions exist and other values are possible.

The search for meaning is irrelevant to the arts—the only thing that necessitates that they mean something is the brutality of our political condition, but to subject our play and our imaginations to the bone dry language of the politicized sound bite is to kill what lives in them, to condense life to the same structures of meaning and values that capital obsessed culture holds, locating everything on the same grid, flattening the arts to the inhuman. But life is a series of smells. We play games of teeth and domination, all with silent smiles, oblivious to the hypnotic throb of the hyper real hallucination.

I have tried hard to talk about pipes. The under ground kind that lead our shit to unknown places. But I have instead talked about assholes and vaginas. I meant the sewage but always there was someone snickering in the audience— thinking some nasty thought. I would say I wish to be a plumber. I would say, without good plumbing we would never get anything done and they would laugh and say with a plumber around we never get out of bed. I mean the sewage! I

would cry. They would laugh and say, So do we! What rotten thoughts fill a body. Can we never talk about sewage? I have tried hard to talk about the funk of the feet. But always they assumed I was talking about the abject. If I did it was only by accident. If I mentioned the gunk off a hagfish it was only to say let no one debase it or elevate themselves above it. Let no one preach its sin. Let no one refuse it. Let no one shun it or eradicate it.

In the Gospel of Mark there is a story about Jesus trying to cure a man from a wild and powerful demon who keeps breaking out of his chains. He asks the demon its name and it replies, "My name is Legion, for we are many." Jesus sends Legion into a herd of pigs that then drown themselves in a lake. That is all we hear about Legion. A demon who is a collective unto himself. An identity without an identity. A multi-voiced id, a grotesque, ambiguous character banished to die with the pigs. Legion is the image of a decentered identity, the power of a shape shifter, whose multitude is internal, a figure outside the mono of the monotheistic and monogamous. When Christians affirm the humble it is never for itself—they never see the abject as powerful in itself but only in relation to high God, adopting a patronizing attitude towards the low—never recognizing themselves, never both life affirming and abject. This is the attitude of a colonizer. An over calculating, moralizing voice maintains the norm. But this is my language too. I too have the impulse to symbolize over the impulse to observe, the impulse to moralize over the impulse to see, hear, feel. Water is not phenomena to Jesus but a heavily symbolic object tied to a political and religious tradition. Zen has caused less harm in the world.

Drawing is my impulsive habit. Drawing allows me to take seriously the unconscious ambiguities that come out of these impulses and half thought ideas. I don't fully anticipate the images. The drawing process does not foreclose on the purpose of the drawing. Drawing requires an interpretation, an interpretation that probably suggests other drawings, but also the possibility of translation into another medium. There is this potential for expansion in divergent mediums, that frees me from trying to make good drawings, instead facilitating the birth of an idea that makes new possibilities possible.

In my paper animations what is imperfect, even a mistake, in the process of making becomes an important part of the grain of my voice and the touch of my hand; my body and all it's subterraneous, crusty, gooey excess.¹ In the animation *World Wide Suicide* a double headed creature intones, "You've gotta pretend to be free, you've gotta know your disease..." This multi-faced character has become thematic of an internally fragmented, self-contradicting psychology. An army of children with rifles and Santa hats march in a stark black background. Featuring the song I made that inspired the title, *World Wide Suicide*, gives a glimpse of a bleak world scattered with stoic monsters and the armies that try to contain them. I use narrative as a structure that synthesizes my interests and the different aspects of my multi media practice including writing, acting, and drawing.

¹ "The 'grain' is the body in the voice as it sings, the hand as it writes, the limb as it performs... I am determined to listen to my relation with the body of the man or woman singing or playing and that relation is erotic..." writes Barthes in "the Grain of the Voice." I borrow the idea of the grain as the unaccountable residue of the body that performs, beyond cultural significance (but always, of course, culturally signifying this 'beyond significance').

In *AntiOedipus* Deleuze and Guattari quote extensively from literature: Beckett, Lawrence, Artaud, Miller, etc. It's in literature that the demon id prattles and lust is given its uncontrollable romp, not in the sober theories of the father shrinks. The description of *AntiOedipus* that Foucault's gives in the preface is also a good description of what I wish my own work to do: "The book often leads one to believe it is all fun and games, when something essential is taking place, something of extreme seriousness: the tracking down of all varieties of fascism, from the enormous ones that surround and crush us to the petty ones that constitute the tyrannical bitterness of our everyday lives." How do you study and write about psychology without the need for a personal transformation? I need to write about these things without words that explain them. Instead with words that accuse you and me and will not leave us alone without fights, without fits, without leaving us radicalized and shaken out of our identity.

My body won't conform to a rational desire and neither will my mind—it suffers a fecundity, a creative foreplay. Ideas are in cahoots. And in cahoots they proliferate fucking in an orgy of thought shapes. Producing and producing. I want a creative practice that floods life—that overwhelms it—that does not question its impulse. That is full of laughter and the great weight of suffering. I am interested in unaccountable, restless energy. Music that makes me move, that is robust and bright and full of jaundice.

My making comes out of restlessness, the somnambulist hand and agitated mind. These texts, these drawings, these songs are the floundering of a confused person pretending to be free in a charming prison. My question is how

do I affirm and celebrate life in a society that I do not believe in? A society that has proven itself over and over to be poison. To paraphrase Kristeva from her book *The Power of Horrors: Religion, Law, Morality* are "unfailingly oppressive." (Kristeva 16) But lust and the prattle of the demon id, these things can't help but say their "yes", a clandestine yes. The yes that is both a negation of the prevailing conditions and an affirmation of eroticized life.

When I decided to stand in front of the audience and speak desperation and nonsense. I had to organize my body differently, the body I use as a sign, coded in a complex social language. The body is inescapably a sign and means inside a constructed reality that extends in every direction internally and externally, in time and space beyond my intellectual and material grasp. That's the stage. The stakes changed when I stood up on it; they felt higher and closer, and that's why it felt necessary. The tangible, looming possibility of failure felt risky and the isolation felt visceral. I can be alone on a stage and live through that. Make my body a theatre where drawing changes into pantomime and spoken words.

There seems to be something essential about the theatre (I am weary of essences or anything that smacks of purity, but see the difference between essential aspects and a metaphysical core) and the presentation of art. It never escapes the artifice of theatrical tropes, it never escapes the frame of separation. Ranciere deconstructs this fear of separation and the narrative of purity that plagued the theatre, creating the extreme compulsion to eradicate theatre at the moment of its action, a intentionally self sabotaging, self negating discourse, that

is predicated on the inequality of actor and audience. As much as the pressures of the Avant-garde urge us to step outside of aesthetics, break the fourth wall, enact change without the mediation of aesthetics, style, distance. Jacques Ranciere reminds us of the persistence of the gap- a condition of language. Instead he cites those creators who make no claim to abolishing this distance, no claim to be anything but the falling short of art and language, a changing of the world obliquely, art that does not presume the incapacity of the audience. Instead, through what Deleuze describes as the creation of the “foreign language inside language” and the discovery of a minor language inside the major, a style emerges that disrupts the presumptions of grammar, logic, structure, and gives this community a form.

What the sober economists want is to calm the dancers as they dance. It's similar to the conservative, good intentioned white supremacist that told Martin Luther King segregation needed to happen slowly, fearing as they did the unmanageable impact of freedom, the potential leakage of money, the unfettered joy of breathing room. Deleuze and Guattari provide the example of a refusal to calm the dancers or to cut one conversation off from another. Instead they seek unaccountable proliferation. I want my writing to reflect a shaking joy at the diversity of life and I want my activity as an artist to simultaneously have multiple attitudes, multiple themes, and multiple tones.

In a series of drawings called “Wing Mite Steals the Show” the first panel shows a putti drawing back a red curtain to reveal a soldier child on the march. The next image narrows in on an angel with a cane, then a wing speckled with

little red mites, and then an isolated image of a wing mite. Setting up a narrative gives me the chance to divert them from expected narrative logic. Instead of following the central story on stage we zoom in on a stagehand, the angel. A divine messenger plagued with a very earthly problem, parasites. In the final image, we zoom again onto the microscopic surface of the mite, a growing abstraction that abruptly ends the series as the curtain closes. In both *Wing Mite Steals the Show* and *World Wide Suicide* is the image of a child soldier on the march. He is the blind charge of power inside the possibility of babies. But the soldiers also function as a maguffin, a term popularized by Alfred Hitchcock referring to an arbitrary plot device that drives a narrative, a diversion that allows me to explore the small wing mite and the dream happening at the edges of the political narrative.

Using a similar flocking technique the ongoing series of drawings *Mobile Metaphors* are made with powdered pigments and stencils, creating a chalky surface, like the surface of fuzzy mold. They are signs made of dust that show the fingerprints and physicality of their construction. These graphic symbols at first glance appear to communicate through the anonymous and familiar conventions of a universally readable sign, then reveal a more idiosyncratic collection of unplaceable, homeless symbols. I named them after a phrase of Nietzsche's in an essay called "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense." There Nietzsche asks, "What is truth?" And he answers, "A mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, and anthropomorphisms... Truths are illusions which we have forgotten are illusions..."

The seven six foot collages in the thesis show come from a body of work called *Always Never Now*. The self-negation in the phrase reflects the constantly delayed nowness of satisfaction, of freedom, of stability. Of time always almost opening, the never fulfilled promise of communism and capitalism, the never lasting feelings of personal ecstasy. The images are vivid depictions of a delirious crisis. In the middle drawing a car wreck is suspended in the moment of collision, a stream of letters and lines burst out of the mangled cars and out of the image. Multicolored lines flow out of a pipe and reign down on a crowd of people. Unifying the works is there large scale and their rich matte black backgrounds, causing the intense bright colors in the images to pop and sing.

Neitzsche, who famously announced the death of God, wrote, in *Twilight of the Idols*, "I fear we are not getting rid of God because we still believe in grammar..." (48). My goal is not to do away with illusions or grammar; of course we cannot get through life without a grammar, without a structure or myths or illusions, but when a mythology ossifies into a straight jacket, when an illusion becomes a monotone structure, it's necessary to resist it. Under these conditions art becomes useful as a tool for discovering misuse. Freedom is gained through the experimental exploration of a misuse, and it is the mythic structure of the social grammar that prevents the discovery of misuses and seeks to keep these discoveries occupied in a gallery or in a schoolhouse. As certified Guardians of Grammar we must unlearn how to guard and lower our defenses, manage less, and misuse more.

Artist Statement:

When I went to church with my family my mother would sit me down on the floor and I could look underneath the long row of pews and see all the peoples legs. My friends and I had different rules down there. We could draw and tell jokes and poke at the years of hardened gum stuck on the belly of the dry old wood. Occasionally one of us would feel daring enough to carefully untie a man's shoelaces, or, if we were lucky, one of our mom's might leave her purse open and we could pillage through it. Down there we could ignore the moral lessons being argued and the laborious analysis of sin our parents were so carefully engaged in. I sometimes think my art practice is an excuse to crawl back underneath the pews and play with the gum, lust over the panty hose lined legs, and rifle through a stranger's purse.

Although, I make lots of different things including music, stop motion animations, and sometimes theatrical performances, drawing is still central to my practice. I like to make things with my hands. I try to have all my cylinders firing at the same time, my capacity as a writer and storyteller, my ability as a crafter of images and colors, my sensitivity to materials and ideas. Recently the moment of a car wreck has become emblematic of the narratives I'm interested in telling. A moment that is destructive and liberating, celebratory and bleak.

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