

## **Thought Experiments with Léonie Guyer's Work<sup>1</sup>**

**November 27–December 7, 2018**

**11 days**

**by Naz Cuguoglu**

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<sup>1</sup> This is an attempt to understand what is going on between me and Léonie Guyer's works, exhibited at the CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts. I sent an e-mail to my long-term colleague, Mine Kaplangi, every day, keeping Léonie's works on my mind as a portal to look into the world. Following the suggestions of Léonie—various forms of thinking hidden in the exhibition space—I imagined these emails as an invitation for a dialogue rather than a monologue, manifesting the possibility of unlimited ways for love and care, in the format of sharing in this unique case.

November 27, 2018

Dear M,

Today I visited the San Francisco Public Library for the first time to get a library card, not only for myself but also for you so that you can keep watching the Kanopy documentaries that you very much like. Our sharing of otherwise unshareables makes me think about Hakim Bey's *The Temporary Autonomous Zone*. Maybe we do need to keep making little resistances here and there, and change our locations so that authorities cannot catch us. It makes me think about Léonie's suggestion to listen (for the first time for God's sake) rather than endlessly talk without even taking any breath—as we usually do in the art world.

At the library, I was conducting research for my article on Istanbul Queer Art Collective's piece when I saw a big piece of wooden furniture with too many drawers in the middle of the space. Out of curiosity, I started to open and close each and every drawer. I guess I spent an unnecessarily long time there, as a librarian came to me and asked: Is everything alright? He told me that the furniture was for index cards.

The librarian opened a random drawer—the drawer which shelters the cards on “GHOST”—of course. The Derridean *hauntology* keeps coming back to us in strange spaces—the meshing of the past, the present, and the future. *How many ghosts do we carry inside?* Léonie draws on hundreds-of-years-old paper with pencil. In one of her marble pieces, if you look really carefully, you could see the ghost of a previous drawing: blurry, and out of focus—the periphery, the leftover.

Apparently, they keep the musical syntax only for their “pretty” furniture. I was sad about the disappearance of the possibility of discovery in the library's spaces, and the librarian answered me: Do you know the word *serendipity*?

November 28, 2018

Dear M,

Today in Steve's class, we watched a talk by Jimmie Durham. He wrapped himself in some kind of colorful fabric during his talk. It seemed like a small but powerful flaw in the flow of everyday life. Léonie hides three small drawings in the exhibition space. I get super sad when I see visitors leaving the space without noticing them because they are in a rush. But this show is for the ones who can make the time to slow down. Slowing down can be a glitch in a world of rushing. The syndrome of Bartleby, the Scrivener: I prefer not to. But how do we make sure that our voice does not disappear in all of this noise?

November 29, 2018

Dear M,

Today Julie Lazar visited us for Dena's class. I listened to her in a weird state of lunacy as she explained to us the "serendipitous nature" of how she got to work with John Cage, for *Rolywholyover A Circus for Museum* by John Cage at LA MOCA. Cage thought museums were so boring that he decided to have some fun. It was a LIVING space—with Shaker-style cherry-wood seed cabinets, hosting chessboards and books from Cage's personal library.

Thinking about all the political turmoil, what is the point of doing any kind of programming at any type of institution nowadays? Are institutions there to complicate things or to create a space for solidarity? It is as if the world solely consists of two extreme binaries.

The word *rolywholyover* comes from James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*. In some parts of the book, Joyce does not make any sense in the way that he utilizes the language, and it is on purpose. It is a protest against the hierarchical structures of the language. When Léonie refers to her works, she talks about the concept of "pre-language." It is a world of symbols, body-gestures, and curious shapes. In this world, nobody can overwhelm the other by using language as their weapon—symbols belong to everyone; they are the exact opposite of inequality and inaccessibility.

Léonie's works are all about imperfection in a world of perfectionist spectacles. It is apparent in the asymmetrical cutting of the marble that she draws on, or the paper that she uses which carry the memories of their private users in their tired bodies. Their silence is a suggestion to take a break and to think about what goes unsaid, to look for the underscored, and to hold eye contact with the one whose voice otherwise goes unheard. Léonie complicates this moment, suggesting a space in which we—the leftovers of the spectacle—can come together to listen to each other's silence.

Visiting Léonie's show is like listening to Cage's *4'33"*.

November 30, 2018

Dear M,

Today we visited the Legion of Honor and de Young Museums. It was a day of complicated feelings—highlighted with the colonial gestures of collecting those objects from around the world and showcasing them as part of someone’s own narrative; a feeling of questionable superiority, a sudden emotional burnout, learned helplessness.

Somebody was offended by the mummy showcased at the de Young Museum. I remembered our visit to Museo Egizio in Turin—the excitement. I was not bothered by the presence of the mummy, but I also did not want to sound politically incorrect. Obviously, we do not have the consent of the mummified person to be shown, but at the same time, agreement to mummification carries the implicit understanding that your body could be a spectacle one day. It is a moment of pause in the historical narrative to think about the ones who were here before us, and to be curious about our ancestral memories that we share due just to being citizens of this world despite our generational differences of hundreds of years.

Léonie uses paper that is ages old to draw her prelinguistic shapes on. She called me the other day almost whispering, and asked me: Did you realize that the paper has been transforming due to the moisture in the space? And we looked closely together, standing there next to each other silently. Léonie put those papers on cardboard in a gentle way, without pushing them out of their unique existence but in line with their needs. They have been restlessly lying on that cardboard for the length of the exhibition, but recently decided to fold slowly to go back to their “real” existence—looking for their essence.

Léonie says, somebody should have put something on this paper almost two hundred years ago, somewhere around India.

As a result, four pieces of paper have been slowly moving—almost under the threshold of human perception—so that nobody recognizes them and decides to prevent them from finding their true selves.

Resistance as a utilization of soft power.

Imperfection as a way of thinking.

Finding undercommons.

December 1, 2018

Dear M,

My landlord Mary—who is almost 70 years old—invited me to her chorus concert at Calvary Presbyterian Church. I have been listening to her practicing, sitting here downstairs, as our walls are pretty thin. At the church, when they turned off the lights and started walking around the church with candles in their hands, singing gently, I cried—mourning for a past that never was, and with some kind of obscure nostalgia for a future that never will be—see, this is how *hauntology* haunts me.

Léonie showcases Shaker gift drawings as part of her show. These drawings come from meditation sessions of Shaker women in which they contact friendly ghosts—which later turn into various chorus songs.

Shaker women gift each other the knowledge and the insight that they gain as a result of these dialogues.

Gift economy as a counteraction.

December 2, 2018

Today nothing interesting happened, at least as far I can remember. Thinking in line with Léonie's suggested thought experiments—this means that I basically was not paying attention. I was not present, but lost in the problems of yesterday or tomorrow.

Take a pause, slow down.

December 3, 2018

Dear M,

Today I sent you a picture of one of Léonie's works on paper. You told me that it could be a mythological symbol for a phoenix or a ghost. It looked like it dated back to centuries ago, so you suggested that I look into symbols of infinity. You asked me: How would you describe an idea or a memory, making use of only one symbol?

Here is a word that I have been carrying around:

su·per·no·va

/,sōpər'nōvə/

noun ASTRONOMY

a star that suddenly increases greatly in brightness because of a catastrophic explosion that ejects most of its mass.

In Steve's class today, one of the students, David, showed me his architectural renderings, and explained how fruits could turn into buildings.

Léonie works for hours on one single drawing—she collects memories of symbols, window-shopping at museums. Those symbols turn into prelinguistic gestures; dark stains on clean white paper. The outcome and its various possible meanings keep transforming each other reciprocally.

Non-sense, on purpose.

December 4, 2018

Dear M, today is Rilke's birthday. If he was alive, he'd be 143 years old.

Did you know the story of Jeremy Bentham who mummified himself?

<https://www.cbc.ca/radio/asithappens/as-it-happens-tuesday-edition-1.4320308/why-philosopher-jeremy-bentham-s-severed-stolen-and-poorly-preserved-head-is-back-on-display-1.4320319>

I wonder whether Rilke would like that as well?

Today, I listened to Steve singing poems from his most recent book at City Lights Bookstore:

"She is singing. I get excited when she does that. You would too."

I wish Léonie was here.

December 5, 2018

I watched Trinh T. Minh-ha's *Reassemblage* at the library today. Her writing makes me excited in the way that she uses the vulnerable and the ambiguous as a methodology. In a world in which everything is rated in terms of its efficiency, inefficiency becomes the counterargument, a tempting possibility in the world of endless combinations.

*Reassemblage* problematizes the perspective of the ethnographer. Minh-ha acknowledges the subjectivity of the ethnographer and suggests a visual collage instead.

I think of Léonie's works as collages, made of a little bit of silence and some lines.

December 6, 2018

Today, I spent my day looking at Léonie's works at the Wattis for a superfluously long time.

What does it mean to open up space for others in the limited spaces that we are given?

There is something special about Léonie's gesture to show Terry Fox's *The Children's Tapes* (1974). It is a series of actions performed for the Foxes' young son in which objects are used to produce various transformations—"magic."

We are out of words, it is time to invite magic into the institutions.

Our protest is hidden in our gestures in which we utilize the resources of the system to enlarge strict definitions, to create allies, and to share territories by making silent invitations.

It is about finding the bugs of the system, and it can be in the form of a candle that burns magically, or as an invitation—if you like to believe in it.

December 7, 2018

“seasons invent themselves  
but we invent the underground”

Dear M, I have been thinking a lot about how Tongo Eisen-Martin reads his poems.

He memorizes them, like Bradbury’s characters from *Fahrenheit 451* memorize various books. Tongo reads them from his memory on stage, with his eyes shut. And his voice rises in pitch slowly but meticulously.

It reminds me of Léonie.

In the end, all I can hear is a silent scream, in which words do not matter anymore.