

RAPHAELA VOGEL

Mit der Vogel kannst Du mich jagen

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Apropos Nothing:

Raphaela Vogel's anatomical machines – On her work "Können und Müssen" ("Ability and Necessity")

"Darf ich, ich muss?" The children would ask the teacher in a reverent plea to his authority. For even where biological necessity is concerned, permission must be granted.

This was also the sentence by which we were taught the German modal verbs in my Danish Grundschule. In Danish, *må* means both to be allowed to and to have to—as ever, the arbitrary differences in language show up the likewise arbitrary nature of cultural convention. So outside of learning to understand the distinction between *dürfen* and *müssen* in asking permission to go to the bathroom, that question contained also a more general lesson in form and formality. In Denmark, a flat, secluded country of rather simple people with a rather simple language, nouns do not have genders, the verbs are not conjugated, everyone is *du*, teachers go by their first names, and when you must, you just go—so *ist das*. And so to learn German, in many ways, was to learn for the first time about structure and law. To discover civilisation in the declension of articles and the lists of prepositions that determine the dative or the accusative case. There it is: civilisation! How resistant I was, and still am. Who knew that so many things could be wrong?

There is no denying that much of what is understood to be sophisticated in the world has come from these oppressive structures. As Sigmund Freud wrote in a fascinating short article *On the universal tendency to debasement in the sphere of love* (1912), "the noblest cultural achievements" are brought into being by the "ever more extensive sublimation" of our "instinctual components". These instinctual components, of course, have much to do with sex, and sex much to do with various forms of *müssen*: both those associated with pleasure and with relief. This tendency, wrote Freud, "assumed its greatest importance with the ascetic monks, whose lives were almost entirely occupied with the struggle against libidinal temptation"—a struggle which found another avenue for sublimation in the immense labour invested by the Lutheran clergy in authorising German grammar.

When, with the title of the present work, Raphaela Vogel brings up *müssen* together with *können*, it is because the two are intimately linked. There can be no necessity without ability. The large anatomical model of a flaccid penis, drawn along by a group of giraffes, is sick. We can read on plaques about its many problems—genital warts and cancerous bulbs in the prostate and testicles—and even see them rendered in 3D and colour. Perhaps it is not able to control itself, as something like urine—a thin gold chain, shimmering in the light—issues from its urethral opening and attaches to the also sperm-like, white and hollow ungulates. Freud draws the above conclusion from another potential un-*können* of the penis: erectile dysfunction. Not only is this—discarding the many types of anxiety—the disorder with which people most often turn to the psychoanalyst for help, Freud went so far as to stress that “we cannot escape the conclusion that the behaviour in love of men in the civilised world today bears the stamp altogether of psychical impotence.” To parade an incapable penis around on a cart, then, is no insignificant matter, though what it signifies is not entirely clear.

The other side of capability is technical dexterity and the acquisition, through science, of knowledge. Of course the penis in Vogel’s work is no private, personal penis; it is no protagonist in the perpetually unfolding drama of our subconscious, and neither is it the subject of desire, or shame. Here, ostensibly, is the objective penis, the medical penis, the penis as seen in bright laboratorial lights and from a metaphorical distance. The definition of this type of *können* begins to slip, however, at the word virtuosity, which, though it also connotes the kind of perfect that takes practice—read: skill—soon meets the less steady concept of virtue. Is science virtuous because it aims at bettering our lives by producing facts and hardening them as best it can? Virtue has classically been associated with beauty, but what relation can science have to something as elusive as that? These questions are equally difficult when addressed to art, a field in which the devolvement of technical capacity known as de-skilling has long been a topic, but in which moral imperatives play an ever greater role. Is art virtuous? Is art beautiful? In Vogel’s case: no and no. Not exactly, anyway. And thank god. But what, then, of *können* and *müssen*?

One rare instance in which science was executed with a technical virtuosity so extraordinary its outcome came to approximate art was in the *Anatomical Machines* (Giuseppe Salerno, 1763-4), on view at Capella Sansevero in Naples. The body of a man and the body of a woman are stripped of their skins to reveal a wildly intricate net of veins and organs so accurate it has left scholars dumbfounded. How, in the 18th century, did they manage to reproduce human physiognomy so precisely? Capella Sansevero’s most famous treasure, the Cristo Velato, makes a strong case for art as a matter of capability. In this marble sculpture by Giuseppe Sanmartino from 1773 a veil as thin as a breath clings to the dead Christ like the surface of water does to its body. In such company, the mysterious anatomical machines, too, are more than scientific models: they join the Cristo Velato as miracles of artistic virtuosity.

For some time, it was thought that a quicksilver-based compound had been injected into two live servants to turn their blood into metal and preserve the circulatory system after death, upon which the skin could be peeled off. Now we know that the veins are made out of metal wire, coloured wax and silk. All the same, and apropos nothing, because so entirely strange and pointless, in the 1990s, a foetus complete with placenta and umbilical chord, which had lain at the foot of the female figure, was stolen. Why? Was this, the foetus, to finally fly too far in the face of the good lord, our maker; an act of Frankensteinian hubris? A random outburst of misogyny? An all too common upshot of the fear that surrounds the female reproductive organs? Or was it that it was too literal? As children like to take their medicine powdered and mixed with fruity yoghurt, do we prefer our own genital anatomy sublimated, formalised and held at bay by the strict Germanic grammar of science, or, alternatively, metaphorised (metabolised) by art? Either way, the nebulous status of the Anatomical Machines as both accurate presentations and *re*-presentations (that 're' containing all the uncertainty of fiction) has evidently been something of a bitter pill. Vogel's penis runs into a similar kind of problem. For what do we do with a penis that is expressly not a phallus, a phantasy, in a context—art—where no one has asked for the truth?

As a counter-image to the current one, Vogel's installation *Uterusland*, 2017, contains a similar large medical model, but of a woman's breast. From the nipple, a flow of white takes the shape of a horse in the same hollow viscous as the giraffes. Of course the horse is associated with power, and, typically, with masculine virility. In Federico Garcia Lorca's play *The House of Bernada Alba*, a pious matriarch and her daughters mourn the loss of their father, while a great stallion in their stable neighs aggressively at the moon throughout the night, giving form to the young women's sexual frustration, nearing a tipping-point. The women in Lorca are haunted by the horse as the forbidden object or force of their sexual drive, or, as Freud would say, the missing maternal phallus. By the same logic, in the story of the Little Hans who is afraid of horses, also as retold by Freud, the animal figures the boy's castration anxiety. As he wrote, citing Napoleon, "Anatomy is Destiny": because genitals serve an excremental as well as a sexual function, they "have not taken part in the development of the human body in the direction of beauty: they have remained animal, and thus love, too, has remained in essence just as animal as it ever was." In Vogel's work, animals abound. Not only horses and giraffes, but kittens, dogs, camels, lions—all flourish in uncultured banality, without rhyme or reason, beauty or grammar.

Julia Kristeva found that Freud's recourse to castration anxiety is both true, and not quite so. In her seminal book *Powers of Horror (Pouvoirs de L'horreur. Essai Sur L'abjection*, 1980), she interpreted Little Hans' fear of horses as a "phobic object-relation". Phobia, she wrote, "bears the mark of the frailty of the subject's signifying system"; it is "a metaphor that has mistaken its place, forsaken language for drive and sight." Language not only transforms our fears into fantasies and desires that become nameable as forms of fetish, but also into "condensations of symbolic activity"

that Kristeva calls phobic hallucinations, that is, a “hallucination of nothing: a metaphor that is the anaphora of nothing.” To Kristeva, writing, or art in general, can be understood as “the only „know-how“ where phobia is concerned”. Little Hans, she wrote, “has become the stage director for an opera house.” The reason for this is that the artist “never stops harking back to symbolization mechanisms in order to find, not in the object that it names or produces, but in a process of eternal return, the hollowing out of anguish in the face of nothing.” With thought to the present caravan of hollow giraffes I might say instead a procession of eternal return, but the point stands: what is at stake in Vogel’s work is not the objecthood of the sculptures, but what they tell us of the instability of object-relation as such. In that sense a phobic object, the sick penis—neither truth nor fantasy—does not seek treatment for the frailty of its signifying system, but represents some know-how as to what remains forever undecidable under the blanket of civilised language. That know-how, a type of *können* very different from the one found in the Capella Sansevero.

I am reminded of another dig at old Freud, what Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari wrote in *A Thousand Plateaus*, “that psychoanalysis has gone from a hysterical to an increasingly paranoid conception of the secret ... You will tell all, but in saying everything you will say nothing because all the „art“ of psychoanalysis is required in order to measure your contents against the pure form.” That is to say, in seeking to mine the unconscious of language for truth, language once again took over in the guise of its own strict and infinite absence, namely the secret. But, they wrote, “The news travels fast that the secret of men is nothing, in truth nothing at all.” And here is where I wonder if the “nothing” of the phobic hallucination and of Vogel’s penis and her hollow animals is not similar to the “nothing” of the secret? In fact, not nothing, but a something that has forsaken language for drive and sight. “Oedipus, the phallus, castration, „the splinter in the flesh“— that was the secret?” Deleuze and Guattari asked sardonically, “It is enough to make women, children, lunatics, and molecules laugh.” And to this list we can add: horses, giraffes, camels, kittens, and great white poodles.

Kristian Vistrup Madsen, 2021