

Un deseo de forma / Orriak #3

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*Everything Before 1994 Was Meaningless*

Sands Murray-Wassink

## Everything Before 1994 Was Meaningless\*

Op ieder potje past een dekseltje. = There is somebody for everybody. I once, when I was a teenager in Topeka, had a photographic poster of two actual hippopotamuses "kissing" together in bright blue water and this phrase was there, "There is somebody for everybody". When I was growing up in Topeka I repeatedly got the message (and this was in the 80s and early 90s) that as a queer guy I would always be alone, life would be one long string of one-night stands, and a hetero male "friend" even said I could be his and his girlfriend's (one of my best friends, coincidentally also named Robin who loved the great perfume LouLou by Cacharel)...that I could be his and his girlfriend's "Uncle Fester" from the Addams Family, and live in their basement. Shocking, but no less shocking than what people have said to me over the years. A form for me is the way something feels, and feelings for me are facts. Once in the psychiatric hospital a woman, one of the 60 other patients I was hospitalized with in 2003 in the AMC Hospital here in Amsterdam, she saw Robin my husband /partner for the first time when he came to pick me up one day, and the next time I saw her, she said, to my face, "I didn't expect you to have such a good looking boyfriend."

I could go on and on. When Robin sleeps next to me at night and I lie awake thinking, I feel like my other half is asleep. Duman, our cat, who is now 7 and partially blind, has taken to climbing under the covers with us and sleeping happily, completely covered, for up to about 20 minutes. Incredibly sweet. I used to love sugar, although since I've been vegan the past few years I am more into salt. The ways that people treat each other are paramount, and I remember all the many, many wounds that have been psychologically inflicted. I am keeping score. My second cousin Eric, who is the son of my grandmother's sister on my mother's side, was a rather famous fringe figure in the New York City underground club world of the 90s. He was just old enough to appreciate the scenes there, and with family money and his own resulting sock designing business he had a lot of funds to work with and spent his life living glamorously. I watched videos he had made on Youtube yesterday from that period, grainy footage – what struck me the most, considering my own HIV+ status and awareness of mortality, was that whenever a gay male person came into focus on the video film, Eric had edited in their lifespan, which was often not much beyond 30 or 40 years. I cry for these gay men, these losses, their innocent search for pleasure and commitment and connection, I sit here crying at their disappearance, at the same time I think of all the strife in the world that was and is ongoing, how people are killed and tortured every single day somewhere. I think of all the boys and men killed by Jeffrey Dahmer and John Wayne Gacy, Jr. and Dennis Nilsen, etc. The horror that those people must have gone through. A parallel awareness of modern slavery hits me as tears dry on my face, collecting in my foggy glasses as I wake up now at 10:30 am in a room filled with perfume and jewelry and other expensive purchases. Money that could have gone to people who need it for food, rent, health insurance, etc. etc. And I wonder: How could I have gotten these funds to where they needed to go? Is it possible still to generate funds with the money that might be coming in my life? When I shit this morning there was blood when I wiped myself, and when I looked into the toilet before flushing there was a bright red

color mixed with the brown and yellow. Horrifying, I almost fainted from the prospect of cancer and colostomy. And then I thought of all the luck I've had, Eric's films depict people like Nina Hagen, and International Chrysis and David Spada and Sylvia Miles, all New York City fixtures or people passing through New York. David Spada died of AIDS: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David\\_Spada](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_Spada) He died when he was 34. I'm crying again, rocking back and forth as tears fall down my face. Listening to the same deep house song over and over again on my expensive speaker, sitting here in 3 bathrobes on top of one another because we leave the heating off during the day to save gas and money this winter. All these men that died, all these people that died, the innocence involved, the reckoning with God. I don't believe in God but in a sort of all-knowing Goddess. Linda Mary Montano the feminist performance artist and I were chatting yesterday on Facebook, right before I watched these ghostly videos of Eric's, and she sent me a Gif of a woman in a pink top and white pants and shoes dancing down a street in what looked like suburbia. I wrote back that this is what everyone who adds good energies to the world, maybe especially artists, could feel like. This is what she wrote back to me:

Linda Mary Montano:

"LoI. ITS ABOUT FEARLESSNESS. SHE IS OUT OF HER JUDGMENTAL MIND. NOT BECAUSE SHE HAS STUDIED MINDFULNESS. SHE IS NATURALLY AND UNTAUGHT FEARLESS AND SELF AFFIRMING. MOST OF US SPEND \$\$\$\$ In therapy and in spiritual workshops to get the way she is. Lol"

So I wrote back:

Sands Murray-Wassink:

"I see, I feel pretty fearless actually, at my core. It's come at a hard price of a lifelong of suffering and a tyrannical Freudian psychoanalyst grandfather on my mother's (Jewish) side. You see, your work resonates with me (among other things, many) b/c of my religious upbringing and history / family history. My husband of 26 years, Robin, helps make me feel fearless by showing me the power of love which is my spirituality (along with sex and perfume and art, in no particular order) heehee"

Linda then referred me to this author, saying how she loved this / my story and life, and that the Marion Woodman inside of her applauds: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marion\\_Woodman](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marion_Woodman)

I don't know why I exist inside such a "white western bubble" but I do. Even my interests and alliances with people of color feel like they are coming from a very particular perspective. I don't share the general sorrow people feel for people that died at the height of the AIDS crisis, especially not the men. As if a pandemic had never happened, and as if systemic execution and persecution had never happened. What was different was the direct connection to SEX. Always a deal maker or deal breaker, even for people who are not actively sexual. Sex is a life force and my genital is my soul, including everything between my legs, front and back. Blood coming out of a man's body has a different connotation. It cannot be menstrual. It suggests wounding and eventual death. I once had an hallucination of various

human bones floating over the Topeka, Kansas, landscape where I was born. Clean white bones. I have a lot of mental energy, still and always at the surviving age of 48, and I have an active and roving imagination. I think of Carolee Schneeman and Hannah Wilke. I think of Paul Thek. I think of Adrian Piper and her suggestion to introduce me to Frank Wagner, a German queer male curator whom I already knew and despised. Maybe Adrian despises or is pissed at me now for using her archiving tips given in 2012 by email to make a project saving my own work and thought from oblivion: [www.giftsciencearchive.net](http://www.giftsciencearchive.net).

The blood I saw this morning after I had shit was a reminder that my days are numbered, whatever the case may be. I feel things. That's shape. The impulse to write this came out of a cry for life over death, although I know full well that both are equal.

Linda Mary Montano's Theory of Art / Life:

"When I began, a performance artist was someone who had permission to explore dreams, fantasies, nightmares, traumas, illness, food, nothing from the culture or everything from the culture. (We) felt extremely comfortable not knowing anything and not being able to do anything, but to go into the liminal world of dream, imagination, and luminosity. I work extremely autobiographically. If I have something wrong with me, I make a video or a performance. If I have something right... with me, I make a video or a performance or write a book. Need completely drives me. I read about the neuro-plasticity of the brain and the research being done on creativity and meditation and the ability for a creative mind to fix things. I am fascinated by the miraculous powers of the brain and art to heal, to mend the broken. My art also celebrates the ecstatic. My process is to work. Art is my job, and it's also how I make a living."

I have to build on what came before me. I like words written out in plain text. When someone tries to explain how something works, to take a stand. I am drawn over and over again to the feminist art of the 1970s. A certain kind of essentialism. An essentialism of humanity. An essentialism of being human. I have said and done a lot over the years and I feel that it has barely been assimilated into culture of any kind. This means that I have to constantly repeat and re-prove myself, which is getting old. I am trying to leave some hang ups behind but old habits die hard. Even in the past six months I have been frozen by public responsibility which in turn drives me even harder back to the feminist art that came before me. I need to express from a cis-male body what it feels like to be alive and embodied. I feel like this is my way of giving back, both to the feminist art that came before me and to the world itself. I am preoccupied by my depressions. Stress causes me to feel incapable and bad about myself, and for nearly a year and a half now this text has eluded me and I have not felt like writing. Except for pithy little statements accompanying Horse Paintings of mine that I then photograph and place on Instagram. It's as though I've had my stream of consciousness phase and everything now comes in fragments. Gravity is dragging me down, at times. I question my embodiment and physicality / looks, only to get seduced into surrounding myself by beautiful things, harmonious things like perfume, jewelry, dresses etc. and come to think of it, these were the things I loved when I was a very young child and was told they were not for my gender. Effectively they were forbidden to me and it's a drag dealing with my past who

makes me who I am. All of the heartache and sidelining and bad treatment. I cannot forget it. It has taken on a shape inside of me. Not bitterness, per se, but a kind of specter – a dark, blackish shape that floats inside my consciousness. I find it interesting because it is so clear, even when ghostly. I am preoccupied by sex as a form of release, escape, distraction. It has been a red thread throughout all of my life, sex. My genitals are my soul, both front and back between my legs. They are where my creativity comes from and my inspiration. Driving forces. Connecting with the brain and hormones / testosterone, etc. / blood – nourishment / cells / pumping life mechanisms. My creativity drives me to want to help make the world a better place. By selectively adding where I feel things are missing. Trying to sit up straight although I feel like lying down and going to sleep, forever...

I am pushing myself and when I do that I often use the word "I" repeatedly because I fear I might disappear otherwise. My laziness makes me precise. Here is a list of keywords that fit with my logic and my psyche. Things flashing through my conscious mind, and my unconscious:

Being ignored, sidelined, marginal...

Why Adrian Piper is important to me, morals and ethics and interpersonal behaviors...holding people accountable for what they say and do.

Hannah Wilke spontaneity

Carolee Schneemann courage

Adrian Piper rigorousness

Feminist art and feminism are thankless areas of work where the most work is needed

Solidarity across intersectional "divides".....bipolarity and mental states

Money and earning money when actually working against capitalisms

Geographic focus and (frustrating) white bubbles

Being Jewish and the Holocaust etc. how Jews were treated, and the questions of Israeli settler colonialism and Zionism

Why music is important, deep house for painting etc.

Why very early work is important

SURVIVAL ACCEPTANCE ART

Friendship

Trust

Love

Life

Death

Andrea Dworkin

Anger

Joy

Perfume?

Mess?

Semantic mess, psychological mess, psychology, physical mess, philosophical mess

Reference / referential

Citational (yes it's a word)

Instrumentalization

Using one's own body, nothing I do with my own body is pornographic (?)

Shock value

Provocation

Narcissisms

Other artists

Evil members of the art worlds, naming names

Affinity / affinities

Persistence

Endurance

Aftereffects, what happens to art and art objects and art thought lineage when one dies

Afterlife, working for the afterlife / afterlives

Babylon

Gender

Sexuality

Gender fluidity

Sexual classicism

"Tradition"

Timelessness

Legendary status

Iconic status

Iconoclastic Status

Troublemakers

People that aren't easy to categorize or fit in boxes

Editing

Or not editing

Showing everything

Organic, smelly, leaking body

Sensuality

Sensation

Showing off

Fame

Prestige

Lineage without children

Queer family

CV / Biography

Clothes / Fashion

Weight

Culture

Own personal lived experience and stories

Non-linear histories

Oral Histories

Gossip

Meanness

Outrageousness

The concept of time

Femininities

Masculinities

Binaries

Water

Earth

Eco-Feminism

Air / Sky

Ocean

Life forms

Veganism (healthy or not? Etc.? Animal pain...)

Comfort

Collecting

Perfume

Wearing perfume

Jewelry

Possessions

Ownership, property

Nationality

Language!!

Brightness

Darkness

Enthusiasms

Intelligence

Ditziness

Smarts

Stupidity

Smart stupidity

Childlike behavior

Thoughts

Feelings

Emotions



Buzzwords

Kinship / kith + kin

Sun

Moon

Stars

Galaxies

Universe/s

Science

Truth

Liars

Center / Off Center / Margins

Popularity

Teflon (when things don't stick)

Models / stand-ins / vicarious pleasure, living, etc.

Celebrity

Release

Flying

Swimming

Walking

Fucking

Shitting / pissing

Cumming

Blood

Hormones

Family

Predilections

Exoticisms

Fruit

Food

Sustainability  
Arguments  
Duration  
Durability  
Strengths  
Weaknesses  
Writer's block  
Artist's block  
Friends  
Lovers  
Sex / Love divide (men / males etc.)  
Stereotypes  
Caricatures  
Power  
Domination  
Submission  
Rebellion  
Strategy  
Intuition  
Waking  
Sleep  
Phenomenology  
Dreams  
Psychology  
Therapy  
Medicines / pills etc.  
Apprehension  
Learning / Unlearning  
Regression

Growth

Seeds

Marijuana / "drugs"

Hate

Distrust

Change

Flux

Quotidian everyday existence

Hard

Easy

Inbetween

Ambivalence

Indecision

Confusion

Frustration

Challenge

Understanding / misunderstanding

Jealousy

Praise

Hunger

Nourishment

Plant life

Relatability (relate-ability)

Ability / ableisms

Hierarchies

Contingencies

Eva Hesse

Striving

Flow / the stream of life / Clarice Lispector

Capture

Free

Freedom

Tyranny

Rules

Breaking rules

Outlaws

"Crime"

Punishment

Incarceration

Capital Punishment

Death Penalty

Euthanasia

TV

Social media

Fury

Fierceness and just plain truths

Vulva / Penis / Intersex / Genitals / Anus

Influence

Study

School

Graduation

Degree

Heat

Cold

Freezing / cryogenics

Boiling

Killing / murder

Justice

Integrity

Night

Day

Community

Destabilizing

Modest

Humble

Simply? Whose simply?

Love Company?

Age / Ageing

I'm a unicorn

Unease

Form is a language / Language is figuration, a form / Form is content

Leaving things to the last minute

Purple glow

Purple diffuse spotlight

Experimental

Embodiment

Can you have a career in private?

Staying with unease

I NEED YOU

Some loose thoughts from previous notes: Carolee Schneemann was my teacher and this makes me different than Keith Boadwee who was taught by I think Charles Ray (lucky) and Paul McCarthy (luckier still). I am different because I am a gay cis-male but have been socialized and conditioned to relate to women artists intellectually, from my very earliest days when my great-grandmother Norma Isaacs would come to Topeka, Kansas where I grew up and talk with me about Marcus Aurelius in philosophy and color theory in painting. It's all about art, I am art and artist at the same time. I am art and artist at the same time. I am art and artist at the same time. Mind races. Mind races. God I write like a man. Genitals are great / delicious (and you can and should quote me on this). The whole world is full of bullies. All these people are dying of my parents' age (nearly 80) and younger, leaving me to pick up the artistic slack.

A quote from Andrea Dworkin in 1991:

"If your first priority is to live a painless life, you will not be able to help yourself of other women. What matters is to be a warrior. Having a sense of honor about political struggle is healing. Discipline is necessary. Actions against men who hurt women must be real. We need to win..."

This is a trailer quote from @andreadworkinmovie which has just come out recently. Nan Goldin is featured too in a documentary that just came out. She has lost all this weight and her life has been a rollercoaster. I wonder if I am like her...

I am convinced that I am part boy and part girl. In the center of part man part woman.

I always feel less than smart but this is the brain I've got to work with. Maybe my main intelligence is emotional...

I feel like there is a lot of empty rhetoric surrounding words like "feeling" and "care" (a whole slew of words: mourning, love, joy, togetherness etc. etc.) and maybe I am also full of shit. I personally certainly often feel like I am. And I see people who purport to have integrity doing things and working with people that I find incredibly dubious. And this is confusing. And it goes back to the shocking things that people have said to me. For instance, I contacted another artist to ask why she had not told me she would be in a show honoring Carolee Schneemann, who was my main guiding light and close friend for 25 years after being my teacher when I was 19 years old, and I also detailed how I thought it was interesting that Carolee is getting after her death accusations of being too white, too hetero, privileged in a cis-sense etc. And this tells me that women's accomplishments are often denigrated in a patriarchal attempt to silence their experimental genius. I have not seen any other feminist artist accused of the things Carolee is now being accused of. And she made herself vulnerable because what she did was so ephemeral and unfixed in ways, in motion, full of the flux of life itself. I think people are jealous and confused. I can't remember who said it, but someone had said that nothing pisses people off more than you just going about your business doing what needs to be done out of the spotlights. It's infuriating to the patriarchy when we are not dependent upon it. In any case, this artist that I contacted, who knew full well that she should have reached out to me instead of keeping silent, wrote back and sealed her fate / hung herself with her own rope, writing "I am not responsible for your career." Which is hilarious because if there are a handful of real artists working today and alive in the world who are and have been forced to have been and to be self-sufficient...I exist in that handful. My ideal audience is women artists and the patriarchy demands that we speak to and pander to it and also that art is for everyone and not a specialized activity. So it's a double bind or double whammy. But in an essentialist sense I believe that art is like science and has a research logic of it's own. It does not have to be accessible for everyone. It is a contested, controversial space where things can happen. And because I am queer I know how difficult it is to navigate in life, as I said at the beginning of this text. If death doesn't get you, patriarchy might. So to be inventive and transform experience into atmosphere is the way forward...Precisely this word atmosphere is crucial, because it is something extremely tangible and all forceful but at the same time invisible. You can feel things that you cannot see even if you are sighted. My whole life has been about

how I am not female. Meaning is slipping away. Sex is the answer (?). The only way to meet the feminist art challenge is to speak from a male perspective about all things possibly male. I can never be free because of my dark psychological background. But freedom comes in moments and is never / not constant. I spend money quickly because I think I don't deserve it. It's all about control with me and with many of us, someone once said to me that she felt that performance artists were control freaks. But aren't all artists performance artists?

I am smart and stupid at the same time. No small feat. Man and womxn. Boi and Grrrl. Penis and Passage. Vulvic space is everywhere. Like atmosphere. Feminist means good. Patriarchy means bad. Some things to think about.

Where do I get money? How do I make it? By making marks on surfaces. That's how I want to get money. Energy traces. Writing. Body Art. All funneled back into life and perfume. When I don't wear perfume daily I feel dragged down. Despondent. Absent of life. I once told someone that I collect and wear perfume because I am not female. My embodied form does not reflect my brain's thinking and identification. But I refuse to compromise. Refuse to alter. Refuse to comply. The most threatening thing I can do to patriarchy is to stay in this body and refer to myself as he / him. I am "they", of course, we all are. But I am genderfluid and my fluidity comes in the precision of my messiness. If form is about control then the form must be liquified and dematerialized. That's the direction we as a world might be headed in and I for one am all for it. Internet has provided new possibilities and humanity is slowly leveling itself out with other living species. Real form is sovereign acts of creativity which as Cassils states are themselves revolutionary acts. Repetition, dissonance, and fracture were Carolee Schneemann's main means of expression and we could all take a leaf from her book and lean into the difficulty of life, as much as and whenever possible. Unafraid and not forced or constructed. Never miss a chance to be creative and vibe / groove with the good energies of the cosmos. We are only as big as we make ourselves. And as I have stated above, the biggest form of enlightenment comes when we realize that in order to be saints we must once have been sinners and that benevolence, modesty, humility, and humbleness in the face of oblivion are assets of pure power and force.

\*1994 is the year I met Carolee Schneemann and had her as a teacher in Brooklyn at Pratt Institute

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Note from the Editor: This text has been written by invitation as part of the project Un deseo de forma [A Desire for Form] (2020-2023) developed by Aimar Arriola at Azkuna Zentroa Alhóndiga Bilbao as Associate Researcher. Prior to this, Sands Murray-Wassink presented the performance "Working Title: Shahzia Sikander Catalysis" in Bilbao, on November 18, 2021. The text has barely undergone editing and its publication on the Azkuna Zentroa website is scheduled for the end of February of 2023.