

fiction.

Adwait Singh

# Summons to the Witch: Hyperstition in the Age of Incredulity



Jordan Wolfson, *Female Figure*, 2014. Installation view at David Zwirner Gallery, New York, 6 March-19 April 2014. Copyright: Jordan Wolfson. Image courtesy: David Zwirner Gallery, New York and Sadie Coles HQ, London



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## Alex

*Witchcraft is home and Alex was never not in it. Be it in the sacred garden with sprinklings of forgotten lego-bricks and a semi-detumesced kiddie pool bidding goodbye to the last dregs of the bygone rain, or the devilish trails of Saint-Martin-Vésubie, the shaman was always at his craft — dancing to the wood-spirits or filching driftwood and earthworm-guano for the evening's ceremony.*

*Once upon a full-moon-sky, undisturbed save only by a few vagrant clouds scuttling along and the susurrations of a gently rolling Mediterranean, Alex and the party set out in search for the perfect cave. Their trail led past the shrine of the civet who appeared there self-punctually every evening, up the promontory overlooking the old penitentiary on the Île Sainte-Marguerite that once housed the notorious Man in the Iron Mask and across from the monastery at the Île Saint-Honorat — a communion of sinners and saints in the perambulating light from a distant lighthouse — and finally down a sharp set of stairs descending on to a gravelly beach.*

*The Sorceress turned a corner and confidently picked her way up and over the stacks and motioned to a little hollow, resounding with the leftover waves. This was the spot! The Shaman looked to her and finding confirmation in her eyes set about stripping down to his bare flesh and making arrangements for the circle. Alex entered the cave and a few brisk flashes later emerged wholly remade. The sorceress shed the remainder of her vestiges and they both let their dark forms languorously afloat, barely breaking the surface of the starry water whilst the passengers aboard the last train above rolled onwards, guileless and unaffected. — From The Three Magas, age unknown.*

In the end, even the naivest of Fantasy Fiction (FF) has augured this moment. Like wildfire that rages the mightiest for its end, the last of the petrocratic totalitarian regimes have unfurled their banners and left the world drunk and divided with its seductive power,

closely mirroring the 'dark times' that so many of these FF novels describe, except with petroleum as the dark-lord-reimagined at their head. The abstract and somewhat amorphous aspect of the figure of the dark lord, which may or may not resolve into an apprehensible anthropomorphic form, characterises most works of FF and only rarely takes on realistic dimensions that frame the scenarios of its cousin, Science Fiction (SF). In other words, while the figure of the dark lord is commonly understood to personify the quality of evil, the effects of which may well touch the commerce and ecology of the world, the evil itself, rarely has direct materialist or ecological ontology. This formula has been somewhat revised by the recent works in FF such as *The Mistborn Trilogy* by Brandon Sanderson<sup>1</sup>. Towards the middle of the novel, the protagonist Vin, deduces (albeit falsely) the primary antagonistic force called the 'deepness' to be the uncontrollable, though, ultimately natural phenomenon of the mists which threaten to smother all vegetation on the planet. The mist features as a live force throughout the novel and assumes various temperaments ranging from beneficent to malefic. However, in the climactic revelation that follows, the mists transpire to be both an effect (a salvaging measure to abate the attrition set off by a cosmological disaster) as well as an embodiment of the god of preservation (a limited part of the mists, i.e., the mist spirit is literally the remnant of Preservation); whilst its antithesis, Ruin single-mindedly attempts to recover its body which is in fact, the limited hoard of the most precious metal — Atium, a power-source that governs the economy of the world, to achieve its ultimate fulfilment i.e. utter devastation. Although, not sentient in and of itself, Atium serves as an important politico-economic *actant*, to borrow Jane Bennett's term, that drives the action in the novel<sup>2</sup> and one that threatens its world with utter destruction upon recovery by Ruin. This is significant because the trilogy, by featuring an economic entity i.e., Atium as a demonic force governing the action across its pages, comes very close to reflecting our current petro-political reality as seen from a "nethermost viewpoint", where oil emerges as a satanic force luring the various power players into its dark heart.<sup>3</sup> The present socio-political milieu is comparable to the 'dark times' scenario mobilised by FF, where the existing political order being compromised, has lost its credibility and the vulnerable humanity starts angling towards alternate sources of leadership and media; all the while, as the old order continues to deny its state of entropy and curbs opposition through tropes such as witch-branding, accelerating the general breakdown. Denial of the reality of climate change by the Trump administration and the shaky commitment to and at times downright reversals in the environmental policy by various super powers, all in



Hannah Mjølunes, Saewon Oh and Eric Kim with Miriam Hansen, *Nine Herbs Charm*, 2017. Installation view from the closing week at Louise Dany, Oslo. Image courtesy: The artists and Louise Dany.

the face of alarming news such as the one reporting the flooding of the Global Seed Vault due to the unfreezing of Arctic permafrost or the one announcing the death of the Great Barrier Reef, paints a picture of ‘the dark times’, as vivid as any painted by FF. During these times, the witch emerges as an antithesis of the ‘dark lord’, a hyperstitional figure at the forefront of occultures, that speaks for a perturbed planet rapidly cracking like an egg. She appears as a contingent formation across the web of time at the coordinates of intensification; an inverted scape-goat figure of sorts, reinforced with a dynamite vest; an expert channeller in touch with her own faculties<sup>4</sup> and limits; a mutation in response to vulnerable ecologies and potential disasters; and a balancing act configured to soothsaying, corrective conjuring and indemnifying magic. The witch offers direct resistance to the reigning order but more importantly a new horizon to the humanity — the promise of an alternate mode of existence. “To think is always to follow the witch’s flight,”<sup>5</sup> observed Deleuze. But why bring back the hags, the crones, and the harpies from the dead, one might ask? In her article “Reclaiming Animism” Isabella Stengers makes the case for a pragmatic reclamation (in the sense of reactivating as opposed to resurrecting) of the practice of witchcraft, espousing a recognition (what she calls “learning to smell the smoke in our nostrils”) of the co-existence of differently serviceable milieus (such as naturalism and neo-paganism) as well as their specific historical trajectories. She explains:

“...How can we accept regression, or conversion to supernatural beliefs? The point, however, is not to wonder whether we have to ‘accept’ the Goddess that contemporary witches invoke in their rituals. If we said to them, ‘But your Goddess is only a fiction,’ they would doubtless smile and ask us whether we are among those who believe that fiction is powerless.”<sup>6</sup>

My recent curatorial residency, awarded by Prameya Art Foundation in collaboration with La Napoule Art Foundation, brought me in the field of several new age witches. In addition to the interim exhibition ‘Synapse’ which unmasked the intricate cybernetic networks that implicate the human and the more-than-human components of the largest living assemblage — Gaia — by conjuring moments of immanence that reveal such linkages, my research also took me to different European countries where such encounters are being staged and progressively institutionalised — Norway being one of them.<sup>7</sup> Soon I received my first invitation to a coven in the form of *The Nine Herbs Charm*, a project comprising an unfolding colloquy over an evolving garden at Louise Dany cultivated by Hannah Mjølunes and Miriam Hansen. Taking as their starting point the eponymous charm (first recorded around the 1000 AD) that expounds the salubrious effects of the nine herbs used for treating ailments, the artists concocted a series of performative tea ceremonies and other interactive events around the growing garden, one herb at a time. Through a close reading of the old text, analysing the physical and subjective descriptions of the herbs, the artists were able to bring attention to the tone of intimate familiarity with these biological partners as well as its reciprocation by the succulents in the form of common co-occurrence with the human settlements with which they have honoured the social contract. This pointed to a revised sociological account, one that does not preclude flora from it. By tending to the herbs the artists claimed to be “producing personal relationships” with these agents and “the various aspects of body and psyche this might address” as was amply demonstrated during the ritualised tea ceremony to which I was party. The snug interiors of the house in Oslo enclosing the tête-à-tête revolving around herbology and neo-vitalism from the chilly exteriors, the ritual of ‘gift-giving’ (in this case, watering the plant in return for plucking a few leaves) and reciting the charm



Hannah Mjølunes, Saewon Oh and Eric Kim with Miriam Hansen, *Nine Herbs Charm*, 2017. Installation view from the first week at Louise Dany, Oslo. Image courtesy: The artists and Louise Dany.

as we waited for our Mugwort brew, idly speculating on its potency for inducing lucid-dreaming and my pending date — all of it was calculated to bringing about an inter-kingdom melding of consciousness. As I stood up to go, and before the cold dispelled the memory of the Mugwort tea, there was a moment of confusion when I couldn’t decide on my bearing — *Homo or Artemisia*. Hannah and Miriam have since introduced new herbs in their indoor garden and organised various exchanges, including a collective re-writing of the charm using anonymous internal HOHOL chat-room service and an opportunity for booking short stays with the herbs through Airbnb.

### Julia

*The oracle had a significant affinity to the two F’s — fractals and feline. Her ability to sniff out the most sacred of the Château corners, matched her gift of communicating with other worlds, which in turn matched the ease with which she captured and re-projected the auras of unsuspecting souls ensconced in the cybernetic recesses for unprotected surveillance footage. This gave her an overall schizophrenic aspect, disseminated along with little iridescent shards bearing her true name. Her only dejection was the middle-aged Maine Coon who marooned her in the arbour by the crypt, with nothing but waves for company.*

—From *Tales of the Agami*, ca. the year of Babalon.

Historically, cats and some other creatures like toads and rats are deemed to have qualities that render them especially favourable for witchcraft. Through the Medieval and the Early Modern periods, cats came gradually to be associated with witches and the ‘cunning folk’ as familiars (divinatory animals) that enabled links to the spiritual realm, in aid of magical practice. The celebrated French poet Charles Baudelaire, a cat lover, is said to have believed in familiar spirits disguising as cats when he wrote the following lines in *The Flowers of Evil* (1857):

“A familiar figure in the place,  
He presides, judges, inspires  
Everything within his province;  
Perhaps he is a fay, a god?”<sup>8</sup>

During the English Civil War (1642-51), the Royalist general Prince Rupert is purported to have ridden into his battles with a dog named Boye, greatly feared by the opposing Parliamentarians for its terrible preternatural powers, to ultimately be vanquished by a silver bullet. William Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* (1606)



Installation view of ‘Myths of the Marble’ at Henie Onstad Kunstsenter, Oslo, 3 February - 2 April 2017. Photo credit: Øystein Thorvaldsen

mentions Grimalkin the cat as a familiar summoned by one of the three witches for the purpose of foretelling the tragic hero’s fate. The 16th century French prophet Nostradamus allegedly had a cat, also named Grimalkin. These tutelary spirits were often christened and greeted with affectionate names. Grimalkin (or Greymalkin) itself has an interesting etymology — where ‘malkin’ can variously connote a cat, an honorific for a lady similar to Madam, a spiteful old woman, a weakling, a low-class woman and a mop — indexing a history of appropriation (magico-socio-political) of the figure of the feline (and other animals) for self-empowerment in the context of a distressed situation. The figure of the familiar appears to have heralded respite for a lot of these women (and some men) from sickness, dearth, bereavement, injustice and so on, by granting them compensatory magical powers<sup>9</sup>. The familiar thus, debuts on the scene as a fairy godmother transforming ordinary women into powerful *animagi*, uplifting them from the yawning banality of their existence, sometimes, however at the cost of stigma that saw them branded and burned at the stake.

Guillaume was the first cat I encountered in Oslo in an exhibition entitled ‘Myths of the Marble’ (Milena Høgsberg and Alex Klein curated) at the Henie Onstad Kunstsenter. The alter ego of the late artist Chris Marker, Guillaume-en-Egypte is the narrator and the animal guide in his work *Ouvroir. The Movie*. A flaneur in the virtual world of Second Life (launched in 2003), the feline avatar navigates the virtual spaces and collection of a museum located on the Ouvroir archipelago designed by Marker and his associate Max Moswitzer. The museum is populated by images from Marker’s own oeuvre as well as pop-cultural ephemera — modified photographs and iconic paintings, advertisements and stills from the silent-era cinema interspersed with cartoons and digitally-rendered features.



Chris Marker, *Ouvroir, the Film*, color animation, 29 min., 2010. Photo credit: Øystein Thorvaldsen / HOK. Image courtesy: Les Films du Jeudi.

Marker's work stands out in my memory as an encapsulation of all of the key concerns of the show. Punning on the word 'marble' that indicates both the iconic image of the Earth, the Blue Marble, captured by the Apollo 17 space mission (1972), as well as the classical sculptural material that has come to symbolise culture and civilisation, the show title suggests the various discursive, perceptual and epistemic shifts — both in the field of art as well as in how we view the planet and our position in it — attendant upon the changes in technology. By simulating a tour of a virtual museum inside a real museum, *Ouvroir* emphasises the interface between these two modes of experience as well as the way in which the studio and institutional practice within the art have evolved with the incorporation of digital and VR technologies. The tour mimics the traditional museum architecture, choreography, and codes such



Florian Meisenberg, *Of Defective Gods & Lucid Dreams (The Museum is Closed for Renovation)*, installation, carpet, live-render-interactive-fluid-simulation, 2 HTC VIVE VR stations, 4 paintings, 2017. Photo credit: Carsten Aniksdal / HOK. Image courtesy: The artist; Simone Subal Gallery, NYC; Wentrup Gallery, Berlin and Avlskarl Gallery, Copenhagen.

that the occasional departures from the rule serve only to put in relief the rehearsed aspect of these. Guillaume leads the spectator through gallery after gallery of deconstructed works from Marker's own oeuvre as well as those derived from the recognised pantheons of art history, all the while raising reflexivity to the institutional selection that determines the success and popularity of certain art works as well as a personal filtering that kicks in in the face of fulmination of a multitude of coercive, coaxing, and conniving media vying for the viewer's attention.<sup>10</sup> Watching the walls of the virtual world crumble all around him, the animated orange cat turns an all-too-knowing gaze upon the spectator, questioning our complicity in all this and responsibility as witnesses to a changing milieu. Florian Meisenberg's installation *Of Defective Gods & Lucid Dreams (The Museum is Closed for Renovation)* showcases similar concerns, about how art museums attempt to recreate the world around them in a certain image through the objects and artwork they choose for safekeeping and display. The viewer is invited to step onto a soft blue carpet and put on a pair of virtual reality glasses and proprioceptors. Thus, immersed in a skybox replete with objects hovering in sight, randomly selected from an open source library, the viewer can hold these up for examination before sending them spinning into the black blob looming on the limitless horizon, and growing with each object devoured until it threatens to smother the entire virtual space with its slithering mass. Similarly, Shahryar Nashat's video *Factor Green* (2011) features a chroma-key green cuboid (synonymous with green screen technology) as a prop with which the artist performs a series of actions that rupture the classical museum narratives, against the backdrop of large works by Tintoretto that were being restored at Gallerie dell'Accademia in Venice. Through the length of the video, the green cuboid goes through a series of stagings which see it being instated as an art object, stood upon as a piece of furniture, used as a pedestal for a sculpture and finally resolve into a magical-healing/conservation technology that mysteriously morphs into and tinctures *Saint Mark's Body Brought to Venice* (1562-66). Whereas the makeshift dystopic pylons and transmitters of Ignas Krunglevičius's as well as the intergalactic eros-fuelled spaceships of Jacolby Satterwhite take quick leaps of fantasy to operate in a parallel dimension. They each envisage moments of surreal technological-immanence, be it as antennae transmitting love-letters in the midst of an apocalyptic scamper for (as the artist suggests) "trashed nutrients, infotech, prosthetics and expired 'cognitals'," or as spaceships of carnality, driven by voguing, thrusting, gyrating bodies, feeding off the desire for a malleable queer universe.

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## Nina

*The enchantress peered down the window of her turret, trying to calculate the magnitude of passive aggression visited upon the Château by the sea and wondered why the abused mistress wouldn't pick up her bags and leave. On the sandy love child of this once passionate romance and now just a torn warzone between the resentful ex-lovers — the sliver of the beach below — the enchantress had once encountered an octopus lover, straight out of the spring pictures of Hokusai. Like Isolde, she had gathered its wan body into her arms and mused about being loved simultaneously by eight lovers, acting autonomously yet with a united intent<sup>11</sup>. Would he have engaged in a laissez-faire of desires or like the cactus-lover before him, proved recalcitrant, forcing her to impose her will. In the end, however she had made the cactus succumb to her ministrations, the same as the cephalopod washed out on the shore, and claimed their souls for herself.*

— From *The Dawn of the Blood Moon*, age unknown.

When I arrived at the Stedelijk Museum towards the conclusion of my trip to hear Donna Haraway



Aleksandra Ska, *Postulate* (video still), 2011. Image courtesy: The artist.

in conversation with Rosi Braidotti, an element of wrongness itched my field of vision; a hideous figure beckoning, almost daring me from a large billboard that divulged, 'Jordan Wolfson: Truth/ Love'. Bewitched, I made my way inside the exhibition and booked a slot for an audience with *her*. What I saw there was a disconcerting humanoid robot in diaphanous white, a modern-day Salome veiled by a grotesque viscid greenish mask, and performing a *Danse Macabre* to the tunes of Lady Gaga's *Applause*. The animatronic figure was well within the uncanny valley<sup>12</sup>. *She* looks at you in the mirror with those inhuman eyes, locking you in *her* wild intrusive sensor-controlled gaze, unfettering primal terrors lurking deep in the subconscious and weaponising a desire that is turned onto itself. An encounter with *her* hits one like a physical force, packing all the punch of a hyper-libidinal pop-cultural figment in drag, menacingly seductive in its ambivalence. It made me think of all the intransigent women tried as witches, and of witch-branding as a construct for colonising beauty and keeping certain bodies in check, as well as its persistence in modified forms such as slut-shaming and gendered objectification in the current times. Conversely, it also made me think about the body in rebellion, its ironic appropriation of stigmatising attributes and epithets for its own, cultivating pride in these, as per the precedent set by marginalised groups such as women during the various feminist movements or the LGBTQ folk during the Gay Rights Movement. Wolfson's *Female Figure* (2014) seems to me to be championing all these histories, in its defiant dance of the 'bad woman' and reversed violence of gaze. In a time where witchcraft has become "tame" and "polite"<sup>13</sup> and the power of the drag has been eclipsed somewhat, the *Female Figure* resurrects as Kali to recharge and reclaim the scene for alterity<sup>14</sup>. The computerised humanoid in its insurgency, reminded me of an exhibition entitled 'Bad Women' (curated by Krystyna Piotrowska that I had seen earlier in Poznań. The suffix 'zła' in the Polish title 'Zła Kobieta' has a double entendre and can



Jordan Wolfson, *Female Figure*, 2014. Installation view at David Zwirner Gallery, New York, 6 March-19 April 2014. Copyright: Jordan Wolfson. Image courtesy: David Zwirner Gallery, New York and Sadie Coles HQ, London

