

On encountering the paintings and writings of Kathe Burkhart

By Arnisa Zeqo

It was in the middle of the Covid pandemic and grave isolation that I encountered the work of Kathe Burkhart in what can be described as real life. My friend and colleague Hendrik Folkerts had arranged an electronic introduction. I was making plans in an old-fashioned way. I imagined being a character from a 19th century novel, arranging for an introduction and a rendez vous. Those days spent in loss and isolation in their dystopian nature carried with them an element of Victorian imagery and pleasantries. There was a certain pleasure in the fact that hardly any touch was possible. Rigid rules dominated my daily movements and a desire for discipline had taken over my heart. I would go for solitary walks around the neighborhood, sometimes with a friend in a stretched floor gap. Entrepotdok was a favorite spot. Walking alongside the canal, friendly faces would appear also strolling near the water. We would say hello in a distance and exchange few polite words. I wouldn't dare open up in those encounters about the inner turbulence and loss I was experiencing in my life. Mourning for the loss of my father and my previous life had taken an unexpected turn. A penumbral loss of self and a vortex of uncontrolled and unarticulated desire to surrender my will had taken over me. Was it all a hallucination? Did it really happen?

That is why meeting Kathe, her paintings and her writings felt like a necessity. On a cold spring night Hendrik had helped organize a physical meeting at her studio for me and V. It was spring but what remained with me was the crisp air of deserted Amsterdam streets. I wore a transparent dark violet buttoned shirt and V wore an orange pullover. Most likely it was a Thursday.

With clinical masks on, we entered the studio on the Wittenburgergracht. Gap, Length, Orbit, Radius, Scope, Separation, Size, Span, Stretch, Width, Absence, Farness, Space. Break, Disconnection, Disengagement, Disjunction, Severance. Space. Safe. I repeat these words, synonyms of distance. They were important and present in many levels in the first visit to the studio on a cold evening in May 2021. Words were escaping. They would become a flux of scribbings, when I would try to articulate what I was experiencing in those months.

The door opened to a large space filled with large paintings and photographs. A vision. Another world to enter as if I was Alice in wonderland going into a universe of colors, Liz Taylor, painted words and photographs of the red-light district where I live. Many of the paintings are now present in the exhibition at the Rozenstraat. On the wall, there was the Coronawijf: from the Liz Taylor Series (Associated Press clipping) 2020, a large acrylic painting based on the experiences of Kathe and her incredible capacity to play with words in both English and Dutch. What does a *coronawijf* mean? A Dutch neologism that stands strong today it fully captured my feeling of being powerless in front of words. A timely confession of mixed feelings. The play is on *Kutwijf*, a common discriminatory word for women in colloquial Dutch and the name of the virus. An elegant woman with dark hair lies on a hospital bed. The green cover around her body resembles both a hospitalized atmosphere as well as a lavish luxurious green of party mantel. Is she dying? Is she a survival? Or just the pictogram, the signifier of something that still to be fully understood? My uneasiness with un-articulation could find a place of belonging among Kathe's characters and the painted words: Cut me a fucking break; Trut; Sick Puppy; Fucked, Pussy

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Wipped; Space. I want to scream these paintings. They touch my skin as if they were made of silk and leather. The paintings and the words help me reflect on how order and discipline are experienced as everything is about to disintegrate and change.

We had some red wine outside in the small garden. As it was slightly raining we set on small trunks and spoke about the paintings and Kathe's life between Amsterdam and New York in the last decades. I was high, on another plane of perception. Seeing the paintings filled me with hope. Hope for art, hope for life and love.

Few months later I am in an island I love. Me and Hendrik (the same one, who introduced me and Kathe) are taking a night stroll by the seaside. It is summer and we just had a special dinner. Pasta alle Vongole. It is August and a lot has happened in my inner and outer life since the studio visit in May. As we come close to our favorite bench I decide to sit down. I have the urge to read out – laud a text by Kathy to my friend and to the waves. It is dark outside. I think of her studio and how she read to me, also at night. I recall her dark lipstick as the words of her text roll through my mouth. The perfect gift to an art historian. A painter who is a writer, a writer who is a painter. I pick up my phone and open the email with the text *Five Fragments about Fucking* that Kathe had sent me few weeks prior: *You miserable little bohemian! You're nothing but a dilettante! You want to be a big rock star, but you don't have the balls for it. I can't even find them. Are they even under there? You don't know what discipline is.* Am I pathetic, imitating a film from an era I was not born in, in front of the sea, reading to a friend from the words of an artist we both admire? I go in and out of identification with characters and words as the reading ends:

Maybe I am simply a disgusting, an abject hole not even worth a goodbye.

Whatever...

I feel high again reading out-loud to my dear friend. I feel strong. There is a kind of humor in this text and there is a sense of clever humor in the works of Kathe Burkhart. I think it is a certain logical consistency that implies both play and beauty. In front of the sea, after a reading we talk about her ongoing series of the Liz Taylor paintings. Kathe started the series in 1982, a year after I was born. And the series still goes on. The series consists of large scale paintings that combine portraits of the actress Elizabeth Taylor (1931-2011) taken from different movie scenes or glamor magazines with profane language. The first fully realized canvas is now in the Art Institute of Chicago. It is there that my friend Hendrik encountered it for the first time. In a way this painting forms the genealogy of my encounters with Kathe's works, even if I have never seen from close by. It is titled 'Fuck you: from the Liz Taylor Series (after Bert Stern)' (1982) and displays a shot of Taylor as Cleopatra, taken by Bert Stern for Vogue Magazine. On a flat green background, an elegant woman rises with red lipstick and violet eye shadow. Her small breasts are outlined by an elegant snake metal harness. Just below her neck the words *fuck you*. Cleopatra, I tell Hendrik by the sea, is the main image that I have of Liz Taylor. We talk about the intergenerational shifts in what Liz Taylor might represent. Many young artists I speak to do now really know who Liz Taylor was. She means so many things to different generations. For my mother, she was one of the biggest movie stars who were not in her taste. For me, growing up in the 90s she was something of a passed era who one would encounter in tv moments. At the time of my childhood was an aids activist and I knew she had an innumerable number of marriages. A flat image where so much can be projected. What does it mean for Kathe Burkhart to continue painting the Liz Taylor series now as opposed to doing that in the 1980s and the 1990s? What does it mean to continue painting Liz Taylor for four decades? Like the

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mountain of Cezanne but then totally different, with another type of vitality, anger and pride. Me and Hendrik talk about how much we admire this rigor of repetition. It is a conceptual take, like the works of Hanne Darboven. And yet the paintings are translucent, camp, flat, filled with glitter and eruptions of anger.

In the publication, *The Liz Taylor series: the first 25 years 1982 – 2007*, Kathe Burkhart describes how she decided to work on an ongoing life project of paintings with the character of Liz Taylor as a protagonist. 'She is a token woman' Burkhart writes. For her, certainly in 2007, Liz Taylor offered a way to disturb the rigid range of identities for women. Her highlights as an actress was Hollywood of the 1950s. Later her image proliferates in a series of simulacrum, plain canvasses where to project other moments of western history and gender identifications and articulation. Having growing up in the 60s, middle lower class Virginia, Kathe was introduced to Liz Taylor as a role model via the television screens, rather than, the wide white screen. In this context, Liz Taylor becomes a vehicle for shattering and testing myths of gender and presence. 'The language photos and paintings in my work are used to represent the characters and dramas of Liz Taylor re-sieved psychologically and in a class context', Burkhart writes. Often Liz Taylor is represented as a perfect victim, an eternal temptress and a perfect sexual rebel. But in the paintings, the characters of Liz Taylor mixed with the profane language become a neologism of their own. '...You may or you or I may still be a victim, but unwillingly, angrily, vengefully and without a trace of masochism', Burkhart writes. Here lies the sense of transgression, the possibility of liberation and the feminist gestures of creating a spot for breathing, a space for re-
imagination: *To disrupt subliminal desires, I subvert the text of the appropriated image with curses: the language of angry resistance, the iconography of the Loud-Mouthed Bitch.*

In 2022, the paintings and writing of Kathe Burkhart speak of new articulations of gender and feminist positions. A loud -mouthed bitch saying *Cut me a fucking break; Trut; Sick Puppy; Fucked, Pussy Whipped. Space.* In Amsterdam, on the island, in the studio and in the exhibition space, a voice amid the distance that continues to speak and gives a sense of belonging.

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