

***The Mummy and the Ventriloquist's Dummy* by Luuk Vulkers (2024)**

Here's the problem: you want some distance, separation, a buffer. You want to install crash barriers, bumpers and airbags, wear surgical scrubs and a motorbike helmet, and cover yourself in waterproof plasters. You want the separation between self and other to be maintained at all times. You want to preserve your physical integrity, or, better still, you want to survive as a metaphysical entity that absorbs only sensory impressions. 'Contact is crisis,' writes Anne Carson. 'Every touch is a modified blow.' But at the same time, you want humanity, physicality, lust, intercourse, transgression. You want to leave fingerprints behind and take them with you. You want to sweat because sweat is proof of surrender. You want to forget that, as well as a body, you also have a consciousness. 'That's the dream of sex, isn't it?' writes Olivia Laing. 'That you are freed from the prison of the body by the body itself, finally desired, its strange language understood.'

A visit to the solo exhibition *Yes, There Will Be Singing In Dark Times* leads me to believe that its creator, artist Lydia Schouten, understands the problem better than anyone else. Her 2024 installation *Please Touch* is centred around it. Laid out on a table, a ventriloquist's dummy persistently asks to be touched, while a black-and-white video (a recording of a performance the artist staged in the late 1970s) shows Schouten wrapping bandages around her head. Once it is completely covered, she draws a mouth on her bandaged face with lipstick.

What I find most terrifying about this work is not the self-mummification, but the dummy. It just lies there, alone on the right-hand side of a table covered in thick, dark blue fabric. The dummy is wearing a suit and a bow tie, its hands rest on its stomach and it is smiling... innocently? Manically? In torment? Against its better judgement? This little man could be the main character in a horror film, but also a corpse laid out for viewing. He could

be lying there ready for an operation, or for his weekly psychoanalysis, but maybe both amount to the same thing.

The dummy wants something; the human head doesn't. One is open, the other closed. One lies there looking pitiful and needy; the other puts on a little act – something we can only perceive as artificial. Put a gun to my chest and I still wouldn't know which one I'd rather be.

These two figures, a puppet-like figure and a mummy, also play a role in others of Schouten's works. Take, for example, her 1980 performance *I feel like boiled milk*, a video projected onto the floor of the exhibition. Prior to the performance, the mummy bought some sacks of flour and scattered it across the floor in a large elliptical shape, before gathering piles of earth and using them to carefully write a spiralling text in the flour. '*I feel like boiled milk with a skin on it. When someone tries to break that skin, I will run empty like a balloon and nothing will be left*'. The message is clear. But it was the puppet – this time in the guise of a naked woman, Schouten herself – who then rolled, crawled and writhed around in it, using her body to obliterate the neatly written text until only a mess remained. A liberating mess? I don't know. In the video coverage, what the puppet was doing also looked labour-intensive. Hard graft, sheer drudgery.

In her 1978 performance *How does it feel to be a sexobject*, Schouten simultaneously took on the roles of mummy and puppet. She was laced into a tight corset and tied with elastic to an iron frame: a kind of spider's web, in which the artist appears to be prey rather than spider. She had little room to move, and moreover, her head was also bandaged during this performance – as if the predator were still nearby and would soon return to wrap up the rest of the struggling body. That said, apart from the corset, Schouten was naked and holding a

whip with which she popped ink-filled balloons: a sign that the artist wanted to be seen and heard, to draw attention to herself, to make something clear to us.

What could that be? *'How does it feel to be a sex object'* is written on the wall under the balloons. The video recording – which is projected in the exhibition alongside the original props from the performance: the iron frame, the elastic cords and the corset – shows how this text gets harder and harder to read as the seconds tick by. *'How ... to ... a sex object'* is ultimately all that can be made out. While at the start of the viewing, I presumed Schouten wanted to make a point about the objectification of women, I gradually began to wonder whether she wasn't actually providing a manual for self-objectification. All the more because, at the end of the video recording, the artist manages to rid herself of the cobweb and the corset, before – panting from the physical exertion, yet looking far from dissatisfied – she unwinds the bandage from her head. She does this in front of the wall covered in ink stains, facing the viewer. 'Look,' she seems to be saying, 'perhaps I've been pulling the strings all along.'

Perhaps it is through precisely this ambiguity that Schouten answers her own question. What does it feel like to be a sex object? What does it feel like to dissolve the boundary between self and other? What does it feel like to be inextricably connected to the outside world, to be a body onto which others can project their expectations and desires? Sometimes it feels awful – like a balloon being popped or like the slimy film of milk left on the rim of an empty glass. As if you were a structure besieged on all sides by staring eyes. But sometimes it feels good too. As if you could make other people's staring eyes your own; as if you could use them to prop yourself up, to fortify yourself.

You want distance, detachment, a margin – and at the same time you want humanity, physicality, lust, intermingling and transgression. I think Lydia Schouten not only understands the problem better than anyone else but her artistry points us toward the solution.

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Be both the mummy and the puppet. Refuse to let yourself solidify: don't stop rolling and labouring through the flour, popping balloons, endlessly bandaging and unbandaging your body. Refuse, too, to let your artistic practice become fixed: keep drawing works from the past into the present; expand them, merge them or superimpose them. And – to quote the poem by Bertolt Brecht which Schouten alludes to in the title of her exhibition – never stop singing.

In the dark times, will there also be singing?

Yes, there will be singing.

About the dark times.

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