

Make Miniscule

Monsters

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Daphne Giannikopoulou

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Supervisors: Zoë Polluch, Josefine Wikström

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A very small introduction

If this is a text about transformation, then it only makes sense that I do not already know what its form or context is, right? Perhaps all I can do for now is begin with this kind of writing, whatever it might be called, and put my thoughts on the screen in front of me, to look back at me, with their specific shape and size. This may be the only specific thing in all the work I will do. And this is part of it, the non-specificity, or better yet, a specificity of another kind. Let me explain with a story.

A short story

When Dafne was a kid, she had a very vivid imagination. Her favorite games were those of the make-a scenario-up-and-follow-it kind. Anything from “the floor is lava” to dressing up with her grandmother’s old clothes which seemed to come from a completely different era (and they did) and making up characters and universes for them to inhabit. She didn’t mind if there were no other kids around, her imagination was so strong that at some point she had not one, but two imaginary friends. She also drew a lot-her mother has kept a babajillion drawings of unicorn-princesses-ballerinas, perhaps Dafne’s first hybrid creature. But imagination is a hungry thing, so Dafne had to feed it, and she did that with books.

One after another, Dafne visited worlds and met all sorts of beings. And as she grew up, all those places and beings were piling up inside her, boiling in a great big soup. Dafne realized that almost every night of her life, before she fell asleep, she would read from a book, and all hers and the world’s troubles would go away, simply because she would no longer be herself, or in the world we name “real”.

This realization locked perfectly with somatic practices Dafne had met in dance school, which worked a lot with imagination and visualization in order to reach into the body and explore different sensibilities. Imagination produced a very real experience in both worlds, the fictional and the “real” one. So Dafne worked a lot with that, very seriously, day after day, starting from sensing her body, and from this inside space growing new limbs and parts, making up fictional bodies to dance with/from, and even imaginary spaces that caused her to move in unexpected ways.

In the spring of 2020, a virus begun spreading among the human population, and it was so dangerous and spread so fast that it was declared a pandemic. Everyone was stuck at home to prevent further infections. So Dafne continued her education online, and kept on working with imagination, always from the inside out, and even more that before, alone. Strong bonds and friendships had been brutally cut by a reality that seemed to belong in one of Dafne's books, perhaps one with a post-apocalyptic storyline. But while this mess was taking place, Dafne found joy in an exploration of her imagination.

When next Autumn came, and while the pandemic was still there, Dafne was back to school and ready to start working on her degree project. When she met all her classmates again her joy was so huge, she felt she would burst. And then she realized she didn't want to work alone anymore, ever, if possible. What's more, she did not want to be serious anymore. She wanted to have fun, and be silly, and do things her way, even if that meant they were wrong in somebody else's way, or of no value in their eyes.

But what exactly was fun? It was not only about the laughs, really, it was about enjoyment. True moments of fun for Dafne were those that, after they were done, she felt as if her soul had been fed. Several things came to mind. One was the art of drag, which, like many others Dafne had been introduced to from the U.S reality TV show RuPaul's Drag Race. Another thing was voguing, a dance created by the African-American and Latino trans and gay communities in New York mostly in the 1980's, and which is still danced to this day.¹ This dance was fascinating to watch, but also to do. Dafne had gotten a small taste at school with Brazilian dancer Suelem de Oliveira da Silva during the fall of 2020. Suelem had introduced runways with imaginary clothes, attitude, the idea of telling a story with your movements, and doing all this while changing from one character or persona to the next. She would demonstrate how her face and body would change according to her imaginary clothes to show them off better. She would adopt a different attitude every time she would "speak" with moving her hands. Fun was reading a good book, and play pretend games.

¹For more on the voguing scene and the culture around drag balls *Paris is Burning*, Jennie Livingston's documentary is a great source.

During a class with Björn Säfsten a little later that same fall, while working on transformative loops,² it hit her. All the work on imagination, her hybrid bodies, her fictional worlds, drag and voguing, they were all about transformation in one way or another. Whether living a fantasy or traveling in another world, all these things crossed paths on that specific point.

And then even more things came together. Like how, for example, the Posthuman philosopher Rosi Braidotti, proposes a process of defamiliarization with the normative idea of the human as a unitary and closed subject that is placed at the center of all. Instead, she suggests beginning to perceive ourselves (and thus “human”) as “a relational subject constituted in and by multiplicity”³, ultimately reconceiving the planet and all life on it as interconnected and in relation. The human being then becomes not singular but multiple, “...relational in a complex manner that connects it to multiple others”⁴. Wouldn't this be easier through practicing the becoming someone or something else? And what better place to start than one's own body, the place of all experience? Seriousness and fun seemed to be going hand in hand, and Dafne started creating a world in her head of weird creatures, eco-friendly glitter, clowns, freaks, drag, environmental consciousness, sci-fi, mushrooms, dance, togetherness.

² Transformative loops in this context are referring to a practice by Swedish choreographer Björn Säfsten, in which one begins by looping a movement and follows it as it eventually changes and brings change to the entire bodily organization.

³ Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), 49.

⁴ Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 167.

Diary entries pt.I

1- a poemtext

All of it and none of it

You ask me

to explain

and describe,

make a

claim of clarity.

You ask me to find my own

as if I was

in anyway

a steady self. –consciousness made its appearance along with the initial enthusiasm. How can all of this come together? I know my drill by now, I can at least be honest with myself. I get all these great ideas, well, at least great for me, and then I make all these connections where everything seems to be made for my purpose, and then the moment I step in the studio I have no idea what to do, so I start moving around and then I get angry because I am “not doing anything”. And then I stop, and again I think very seriously about whatever thing it is that I am supposed to be working on and how can I research that with movement, and then start moving again, and then I go into it, and do it, and finally I stop overly excited and take notes but at the end everything is still quite abstract in a sense, and I am not any closer to anything I had in mind when I started.

Would hitting my head with my hand and saying “Think! Think!” like Winnie the Pooh work, my dear brain? No, ok, seriously now, I need to cheat my own code. I think I can break it if I just take tools from other people, right? Marie Fahlin, a Swedish dancer and choreographer, said to me last year to start from the material I was working with, and I ended up using books to distort my posture and that worked nicely. And I also have this note in one of my notebooks from last year when we were having classes with Jaamil Olawale-Kosoko, a Nigerian-American choreographer and

performance artist, which is again about starting from the material.⁵ I remember some people started from dressing up and then from there they created an entire scenario for their characters. And I said I wanted to try that in my note, so this whole thing with starting from material seems to be calling out to me. So, yeah, it is decided, let's go into the studio and play dress-up and do runways and dance. Maybe we build a creature for ourselves, with a specific shape and behavior, that comes from the clothes. Or we could also try to focus on the material of the clothes, if they are heavy or light, bright or dark-colored... see what that does. And then I will try to be more specific as we go, for now I want us to enjoy the process and laugh. (20/10/20)

2-a text

With every supervision and meeting comes more material. More references to other artists, more readings. And then even more come while I search on my own. I think a lot of our classes with Fabian Barba, a dancer and scholar from Ecuador. How at some point they said, "I am *x*, and I am not", and how we discussed curdle vs split separation. We were looking at a text by María Lugones, an Argentinian feminist philosopher, where she talks about how in organizing our perception of the world and society, we can follow a logic of purity, where everything is split-separated into clear units, or view things as intermeshed, meaning they are different and separate, but still bleed on each other, or stain each other, like when you fail in making mayonnaise and you end up with oily yolk and yolky oil.⁶ I can trace a similarity between that and what Braidotti writes, they both seem to describe open-ended ways of being. How about I take all those inspiring things and references and I just bring them together and make a weird mayonnaise, an imperfect reality where things resemble other things, never becoming exact, but rather transforming constantly along with us? (24/10/20)

⁵ My notes from 8/11/19 read: Jaamil talked again about material, in the sense of the "costumes" we used. S. mentioned how they got inspired from their costumes, how they started from there.

⁶ Lugones María, *Pilgrimages /Peregrinajes: Theorizing Coalition against Multiple Oppressions* (Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003). The mayonnaise metaphor comes from Fabian, however I do not know if it is theirs or Lugones'.

3-another text

I read in *The mushroom at the End of the World*,⁷ which despite its title is not a fiction book, that fungi kinda fall out of the Western taxonomy system and they do not conform with our idea of species⁸. There are many parts of this book that sparked up my interest in fungi, even though it took me forever to read the whole thing for some reason. There is this moment where it says, “Telling stories...requires getting to know the inhabitants of the landscape, human and not human”.⁹ It also suggests that “There are other ways of making worlds”, referring to telling stories without human protagonists.¹⁰ I think I was always fascinated by this idea of re-doing the world and us, and I want to see if we can do that starting from our own bodies and selves. I want to try out other humans and other creatures (I am thinking on a scale from Halloween cute-and-scary monsters to alien beings). Again, what Fabian said – I am x, and I am not. (28/10/20)

A News Report

Dum-dum-dum-dadadadada-dum-duuuuum (Breaking News intro music).

Hello to all our viewers, we are interrupting the flow of our program to bring you some breaking news. A most shocking discovery has been made on planet Dafne, as we have reported sightings of a previously unidentified species called Horror. Scientists seem to believe that it has been residing on the planet for an exceptionally long time but remained unnoticed by the local residents. It was only after a group of extraplanetary researchers came in, that light was shone on Horror for the first time. We will keep you informed on the story, good afternoon.

⁷ Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2015)

⁸ Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, 232.

⁹ Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, 159.

¹⁰ Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, 156.

Dumdumdumdum-di-dam-dam-dumdumDUUUUUUM (Evening News intro music).

Good evening, this is the News at 8. Our first story is a follow-up on the breaking news of sightings of a previously unnoticed creature called Horror, on planet Dafne. Our reporter A. is on-site to give us more information on the subject. A?

A- Hello R. very exciting discovery with interesting developments. The species appears threatening upon the first encounter; however, it is not truly harmful in anyway. Evidence shows that those who spent more time in Horror's company have experienced a range of emotions and are reporting having enjoyed themselves. All the evidence we have so far shows that the species has lived on the planet for a very long time, however it has stayed away from public social events, thus remaining in the shadows. Although more and more people come out and report previous sightings of Horror, it is only now that the species is stepping into the light and a debate has begun about including it in the planet's life.

[A fantasy freakshow \(24/11/20\).](#)

Some of the creatures that have appeared through dressing up so far and their experiences (meaning I took photos from our sessions when an interesting form appeared and, either alone or along with my collaborators came up with names and stories for them. Check Appendix for pictures):

-The punk Rapunzel: She refuses to brush her hair or take them away from her face. As a result, various colorations have taken place and rumor has it her hair is home to various kinds of life.

-The three-legged goth bird of paradise: The only one left from its species, it is very attracted to dancing people and flies around the planet looking for various places where it can hang out with them. Its voice sounds like that of a singer from a goth band.

-The three-bodied sisters: After all of Dr. Frankenstein's failed attempts, the discarded body parts gathered up and made these two sisters. Their heads, torsos, and legs come from different people, but they share one warm and bouncy heart.

-The two-legged silk pajama hound of Hell: It guards the doors of Hell, but since evil is very much alive and reigning our world, it has put on its pajamas and chills most of the time.

-Superman's chunky little sister: She felt like an outsider with the cool kids. They could all fly, but she was too uncoordinated to join them and she kept falling on her face. In the end her cape grew so big she couldn't even get 10cm from the ground.

-The kinky mask-wearing shoppers

When the textile industry grew, these creatures were typically seen inside small textile units, such as clothing stores. During the most active sale season, they fight for all they can grab. According to a great legend, the creatures come from several different families. For example, here we see one from the Warehouse family (right) and one from the Lappisiners (left).

Diary entries pt.II

1) A proper essay

i) Introduction

To clarify one's artistic interest is most of the time trickier than it sounds. An artistic practice is fed by so many different things, from inspiration to actual working methods, that it is often impossible to distinguish what is the core of someone's work and what goes around it. At the same time, this is where all interest and possibility lie, regardless of all frustrations that come along the way. What makes things even "shakier", is the fact that the entire process is not only one of clarification (I sense this would somehow imply that in one's work there is some kind of absolute truth one is striving towards), but a process of metamorphosis. I use this word referring to an open-ended process of changing, rather than transformation, which seems to have a specific end. Although they appear as synonyms in the dictionary, I intuitively perceive them as different -a thing transforms into another thing, but when a thing is morphing, it is always in process. In my case this plays a significant role.

Having been interested in (science)fiction, where all kinds of weird creatures exist, and coming from a very embodied experience of the world through dancing, I became very curious about the possibility to combine those two elements, which translated into dancing from and with imaginary bodies. In a sense, the question started as "How can I morph my experience of my body

and of dancing through inhabiting different bodies?” And even though that is not what I looked into after all, it was from that point, that I began the exploration.

ii)First steps

The first steps of the process began already outside the studio. What became essential for me was that I did not want to work alone, as I had before. Additionally, I did not want to be serious about this, I wanted to enjoy myself and have fun, while hopefully also creating a fun experience for my collaborators. Both these rose as necessities for the same reason. As I am writing these lines the human species is going through a worldwide pandemic, something that at least Western societies were arrogant enough to believe could not happen again. It has been a year since the breakout of the virus, in which reality and everyday life have transformed into something morbid and heavy. While I live in a place where I can still come and go mostly as I please, ¹¹I know this may not last. I also have the experience of the previous spring, where in a single day the university closed down, my friends with whom we spend every day in remarkably close bodily encounters went back to their home countries, and the rest of the semester was transferred online, where we all danced from our homes.

While I did not realize at the moment, the affect of this experience was much deeper than I thought. We were separated roughly and suddenly, and we were coping with an unheard-of reality that was all but fun. So while I do not want to make my work about the pandemic, it has been affected by it, because I have been affected by it. When we returned to school this semester, all I needed was to be with people in a space that would be a container for fun. We were lucky enough to still have that privilege, and on our last year together in school I would not let it go. All I had to do now, was see how these seemingly unrelated things could come together.

iii)Material/Inspiration/Concepts

A few things have informed me in this process, they have come in and clashed, merged, boiled in the same pot, becoming a soup.

¹¹ In most countries there is some sort of lockdown while in Sweden few rules apply, but strong recommendations have been issued.

One source of material has been Instagram, where I have found and followed accounts of drag artists, fashion designers, and craftspeople. One account that has been of particular interest is fashion-for-bank-robbers, which is basically a tube for headpieces and masks.¹² I have also included as material U.S. shows like RuPaul's Drag Race, Dragula, and Ash VS Evil Dead, and performance recordings of the pieces *Make Banana Cry* by Canadian artists Andrew Tray and Stephen Thompson,¹³ and *Shadows of Tomorrow* by Norwegian choreographer Ingri Fiksdal. I also watched a live online performance of *Transfiguration*, by French artist Olivier de Sagazan.¹⁴ Finally, the recording of a prank by Rémi Gaillard called *People are Strange*¹⁵, and the videoclip of *Mr. Krinkle*, by the band Primus.¹⁶

Where they all seemed to meet, was the point where they flirt with, or go directly in, the grotesque. In her introduction in *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess and Modernity*,¹⁷ U.S. professor of literature and critical theory Mary Russo suggests two categories of the grotesque, the comic, which is connected to carnival (a period of extensive metamorphoses and bending of rules, social codes, and “normality”), and the uncanny, which is connected to horror. The first is “a virile category associated with the active, civic world of the public. In contrast, the grotesque as uncanny moves inwards towards an individualized, interiorized space of fantasy and introspection, with the attendant risk of social inertia”¹⁸. Both comedy and horror are genres that I deeply enjoy, as is their combination,¹⁹ and the concept of the grotesque seemed to be the coin that has horror on the one side, and comedy on the other.

Going deeper into the rabbit hole, my interest began focusing on bringing to life grotesque bodies and creating a world for them. I got particularly inspired by Israeli scholar Sara Cohen

¹² https://instagram.com/fashion_for_bank_robbers?igshid=17116r48qq4do

¹³ Whom I deeply thank for sharing the material with me. I also thank Zoë Polluch for suggesting this performance and making contact to ask for the material.

¹⁴ A recording of the full performance can be found online. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4KyK6so3h0A>

¹⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7ZO8iwCrrCs>

¹⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T0do7dhvSwg>

¹⁷ Mary J. Russo, *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess and Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 2009).

¹⁸ Russo, *The Female Grotesque*, 8. Here Russo explains that the two categories derive from Bakhtin and Freud respectively.

¹⁹ Hence including Ash Vs Evil Dead as material. This is an ongoing series that takes up the new adventures of Ash, the main character from the 80s horror movies *The Evil Dead*. It's characterized by kitsch, explicitly low-budget, over-the-top gore, and ridiculous, badass one-liners.

Shabot and her article *Grotesque Bodies: A response to Disembodied Cyborgs*.²⁰ There, she argues in favor of the grotesque body as an alternative to the Cyborg figure, proposed by Donna Haraway in her legendary *Cyborg Manifesto*.²¹ While for both authors it is crucial to undo normative subjectivities within the Western canon, Shabot is craving for a "fleshy solution", describing grotesque bodies like this:

"Grotesque bodies are hybrid bodies...the grotesque has been recognized as a concept evoking monstrosity, irrational confusion, absurdity, and a deformed heterogeneity"

"The grotesque subject...is *unrepresentable* or *unknowable* by way of any normal system of knowledge or representation"

"The grotesque body is a body that defies clear definitions and borders and that occupies the middle ground between life and death, between subject and object, between one and many"

"The grotesque body is inherently ambiguous: it is not an isolated body, but at the same time it does not lose itself in the homogeneity of an undifferentiated wholeness... (it) is a *differentiated* body, but which at the same time, remains *intensively connected* to the world and to its others.

This *excessive* body which constantly outgrows itself and escapes from its own skin, constitutes a body that cannot be framed"²²

So what could those bodies be, and what would their world be like? How would they behave, how would they meet? And what would be a way of working with them when we are so specifically human and, especially as dance people, extremely connected to our specific bodies?

iv)Methods

The one and only method I had to suggest when we went to the studio for the first time was to gather a bunch of clothes and play dress-up. I had realized that my interest was laying in the potentiality of metamorphosis, its perpetual creativity, and putting on clothes seemed like a good start. It reminded me of how I played as a child and how much fun that was. It was also a tribute to all the fun times the art of drag performance had offered me.²³ Lastly, it was informed by our

²⁰Sara Cohen Shabot, "Grotesque Bodies: A Response to Disembodied Cyborgs," *Journal of Gender Studies* 15, no. 3 (2006): pp. 223-235, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09589230600862026>.

²¹ Donna Jeanne Haraway, *Cyborg Manifesto* (Victoria, British Columbia: Camas Books, 2018).

²² Cohen Shabot, "Grotesque Bodies", 229, emphasis in original.

²³ This was through the popular reality tv show RuPaul's Drag Race and further explorations it sparked.

voguing classes with Suelem D'Oliveira da Silva earlier this semester, which had been a source of fun for most of us. Even though I am not claiming to do drag or dance vogue or belong to either of those communities, I have been incredibly inspired by both artforms and hold them in deep appreciation. We started by putting on clothes we would either never wear because we did not like, or that we would not wear but secretly craved to. The idea was to open up different sides of ourselves and show them off by doing runways for each other. Gradually, I fixed several scores that started taking us to a more specific direction. Increasingly we went towards playing with becoming unrecognizable and bizarre, merging, changing shapes.

When it came to the time I am working on my own, I decided on this one rule I always had to follow. Whatever I did, I had to enjoy it, otherwise I stopped doing it. My research methods included various forms: I read books and articles, I scrolled Instagram, I watched performances online, I watched tv series, I worked out, I tap danced. All these are things I have fun doing, but all of them can be boring or feel like a struggle if it is not their time. By following my one rule, I have managed to do research, gather material and inspiration, and feed my work while always enjoying the process. Dropping one thing did not mean I stopped working, but that I simply changed my method. If I was struggling with reading, I could watch a series, and so on.

The idea of enjoyment does not only apply to me, of course. From the start I made clear to my collaborators that they should join the process only if they felt like, but if they wanted to do something else then they should follow that instead. It has also been important to create a space that morphs, following what is needed. When one of us was going through heartbreak, we dressed up and went for coffee instead of working in the studio. When I was completely lost with the process, I cancelled a session, both for mine and for the others' benefit-there was no enjoyment for either side to be found. Instead, I talked with some of my collaborators to gather information on what was not functional, and then worked on it. They helped me clarify the process, my interest, and my position as the one who comes with a proposal, and in those ways made the entire thing better. I need a process that is open and fluid, that questions and re-works fixed models of work, especially those that demand wearing oneself down physically or mentally for the sake of producing something.

v)Aesthetics

Much like the entire process, the aesthetics of it morphed as the time passed. There were a few things I had in mind from the start; I wanted colors, and I wanted clothes, so, colorful clothes were a good start. Gradually I discovered I was fascinated by distorted body figures and covered faces, and that adding light and shadow could help further with that. I am hoping for an atmosphere that will be packed with information so that people can chose what to follow and make up their own stories as they go. The songs I have worked with are related to each other only by theme (hinting towards horror) and not at all by genre, however they all strike high on my favorite songs list.

My intention has also been to work actively with awkwardness, and the borders of what is considered “good taste” in western contemporary dance, what ticks the boxes of quality. To make things light and funny, include silliness and haziness.

vi)Summing up

As I am writing these lines my mind is thinking the upcoming final working sessions and how the presentation will be shaped. Partly because what I am dealing with keeps changing. It is not by chance that I have not offered much information and details on the material I have used. I could describe the video clip content or go deeper into posthuman theory. I could include in this essay so much more, because so much more is part of this process. My brain and soul and body connect the most unrelated things, and make a dense map, which I try to put on paper, but it does not work. And even if it did, I would have to explain why I made those connections, and THAT would certainly not work. And whatever is added on the map, sometimes appears as the X that marks the treasure, as *the work*. But the work is *x*, and it is not.

In a conversation with dancer and dance maker pavleheidler a few days ago, they mentioned something that came as a relief to me. I am paraphrasing here, but it was something along these lines: At the end of the day, when you are writing about your work, you cannot put everything in, you will choose what is relevant according to who will read your text. And this is beautifully and simply, true. So what I would like to say about this work is that, at the very end, which is not here yet as I am writing, and which will never be here truly, what I wanted to do is

build a world to put all these things in. As this world developed and grew by the wonderful work of my friends, it changed into a world of weird monsters that can be kind of creepy and kind of cute, but they are definitely weird. And this is exactly what they should be, because this is a world to celebrate and cheer not for achievements like getting a job or getting married, but for the joy of being weird, out of tune, out of sync, but always together. It is an alternative, an unfinished (much as the grotesque is always unfinished) version of making the world, a work in progress, a trying-out of a different story for our reality. And since I cannot expand as much as I would like on that, or on any other of the theories, ideas, materials, moods, that have made this world what it is, I will not expand at all. At the end of the day it would not matter, because that would be my world and it would be finished. I want an open version made by all.

2)Epilogue

This must be the most bizarre text I have ever written. I wanted it to keep morphing, and there are things in the beginning that I would not include now. But I leave them there. This essay is supposed to reflect my process, so this is it, messy and fragmental, but hopefully making some sense. It is no more absurd than asking from someone to write about their artistic process before they even have it. I still owe all of you a research question, correct? What kind of world can we create when we take a step back from our everyday selves? Or something like that.

Appendix



1



2



3





4



5



6

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