

Free Your Ass and Your Mind Will Follow

In this paper, through the examples of *Kussomaten* and Eija Liisa Ahtila's video work *If 6was 9*, I will share some of my observations and thoughts on how these two archives of female experience, psychological and physical, can be inserted into (and expand) a discourse on normalcy and the embodied specificity of the female. My two examples fit within the boundaries of what has been coined the *hetero-normative* or *cisgender* by the expanding field of queer theory. This is important, on two accounts: first of all I want to challenge what I find to be a provocatively unexamined and unmarked *norm*, against which the term *queer* is loosely defined. Secondly, it is my aim in this paper (but also, secretly outside of it) to have a go at gendering (Foucaultian) discourse. By this I do not mean a gendering rooted in gender-as-performance, but in what I will call *the gendered re-embodying of the interiority*. While the theory of interiority is supposedly gender-neutral, in praxis this 'genderless' void is male by default, as most of the theoretical, philosophical, and psychological discourse on it, is written by a chorus of male scholarly voices. It is into this chorus I want to bring my own, female, voice and experience.

Kussomaten:

Kussomaten is a travelling photo-booth, designed for women to take anonymous snapshots of their genitalia. Its cozy interior is somewhat reminiscent of a Victorian water closet: A comfy wooden chair, with a U-shaped hole cut out of the seat, is placed above a camera, mounted on the floor and facing upward. The simple instructions that are printed out and mounted in the gilded, golden frame above the "throne", read as follows:

1. Wipe down the seat with the sanitizer provided.
2. Pull down your pants/ pull up your skirt.
3. Sit back as far as you can on the seat.
4. Check that your clothing is not covering the lens of the camera.
5. Spread your legs as far as you can.
6. Smile and take a picture.

I was a bit puzzled by this last instruction, until my husband reminded me that the word *labia* really means *lip* –like *duh!*

I imagine my smiling genitalia would look a bit like *The Laugh of the Medusa*¹, as described in Helene Cixous' seminal essay of the same name:

"They riveted us between two horrifying myths: between the Medusa and the abyss. That would be enough to set half the world

¹Cixous, Helene: *The Laugh of the Medusa*, Signs, Volume 1, No.4, University of Chicago Press, 1976

laughing, except it's still going on. For the phallogocentric sublation is with us, and it's militant, regenerating the old patterns, anchored in the dogma of castration. They haven't changed a thing: they've theorized their desire for reality! Let the priests tremble, we are going to show them our sexts!

Too bad for them if they fall apart upon discovering that women aren't men, or that the mother doesn't have one. But isn't this fear convenient for them? Wouldn't the worst be, isn't the worst, in truth, that women aren't castrated, that they have only to start to stop listening to the Sirens (for the Sirens were men) for history to change its meaning? You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she's not deadly. She's beautiful and she's laughing."

The backstory that prompted the initiative of *Kussomaten*, is otherwise serious enough: when the team behind *Kvinde Kend Din Krop*² started the research for their revised 2013 edition, they went on the internet to search for usable photographs of female genitalia. To their dismay, they didn't find any!

According to their website, they initiated the photo archive, out of the following considerations:

"Way too many of the photos of female genitalia, that can be found on the Internet, are pornographic. The pornographic pussy

²The Danish equivalent to the American *Our Bodies Our Selves*

lives up to certain, specific ideals: It is totally symmetrical, with ultra-small labia –and off course it is hairless.

Many women think that they look wrong in this region, if they don't live up to the porno ideal. We would like to change that! We would like to build a collection of photographs, which show the multitude of pussies. They can be symmetrical, asymmetrical, have large or small labia and off course they can have varying covering of hair.”³

Since the debut of Kussomaten on March 8th (International Women's Day) of 2011 at the Goethe Institute in Copenhagen, the photo booth has toured various cultural, social and medical venues in Denmark; among others it has been featured at an old people's home in the province, a student club at the medical faculty of the University of Copenhagen, The Women's museum in Aarhus and at the Roskilde Festival⁴

In the media storm that (naturally) followed, the group behind Kussomaten have kept their cool, maintaining that, whatever other impulse may prompt viewers to take a look at the pictures, the purpose of the archive is informative, providing a database of

³ <http://kvindekenddinkrop.dk/>

⁴Denmark's biggest music festival, which pulled an audience of 130.000 visitors in 2011

what a 'normal' cunt looks like, and guess what: "*Happiness is knowing what is normal, and the normal has wide boundaries*"⁵.

Every time a new photo is added to the database (which counted 158 contributions on the opening night), the boundaries of normalcy are widened accordingly –nobody is turned down, nobody is edited out.

Gazing over the full, frontal *nakedness* of hundreds of vulvae, in the image gallery of Kussomaten, is an unusual experience, -which may make you want to avert your eyes, while the female genitalia on the screen remain unflinchingly present and undeniable *normal*.

Unsurprisingly, the main point of critique of these images is not that they are morally offensive. We are after all in Denmark in the 21st century, in which admitting to be morally offended would be to admit defeat. No, instead these images are accused of being... unappetizing!

Now, this is where I want to drop my pants, in gratitude!

Although the response I just referred to was written on a respectable debate website, by a very sympathetic gentleman who claims to "love pussy", he is still reaffirming the dogma, that a vulva's sole *raison d'être* is to be just that. By extorting this

⁵I am quoting the slogan of Danish sexologists and sex-education pioneers Anne and Steen Hegeler, from their sex advice column, which ran weekly in Ekstra Bladet (a major Danish tabloid paper) through the 60's and 70's.

reaction, Kussomaten has succeeded in validating it's own existence; namely to provide an alternative to the pornographic image that is the prevailing, if not exclusive, image of female genitalia on the internet today.

Moreover, with its participatory nature, Kussomaten has framed the discourse on "normalcy" in a multilateral, Foucaultian way.

As Allan Sekula points out in his text *The Body and the Archive*: "*Michel Foucault has argued, quite crucially, that it is a mistake to describe the new regulatory sciences directed at the body in the early nineteenth century as exercises in a wholly negative, repressive power. Rather, social power operates by virtue of a positive therapeutic or reformatory channeling of the body*⁶⁷."

Unlike the examples which Sekula mentions in his article, --the convicted criminals of Bertillon's photographic police records or Galton's ethnic specimens that made up his composite portraits of racial characteristics-- the women who contribute to Kussomaten's digital archive do so on a fully voluntary basis, -but moreover by participating in the archive they are also defining *it* and its definition of normalcy. In contrast to Bertillon's and Galton's archive, normalcy is thus not defined and contained from outside

⁶ Sekula, Allan: *The Body and the Archive*, October, Vol. 39, MIT Press 1986, pp. 7

⁷ See Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, New York, Pantheon, 1977, and, *History of Sexuality*, Introduction, New York, Pantheon, 1978.

and subsequently proposed to be preserved either by quarantine of unwanted elements after their deviation (Bertillon), or by selective breeding to avoid future deviations (Galton). Nor is it an attempt to typecast the "average pussy" via the social mathematics of Quetelet, whose composite character "the average man" was introduced in his 1835 treatise *Sur l'homme*. In it he argues that large aggregates of social data reveals a regularity that can only be taken as evidence of determinate social laws.

In Sekula's words "*this regularity had political and moral as well as epistemological implications.*" He quotes Quetelet as saying:

*"The greater the number of individuals observed, the more do individual peculiarities, whether physical or moral, become effaced, and leave in a prominent point of view the general facts, by virtue of which society exists and is preserved."*⁸

By refusing to efface these *individual peculiarities*, but choosing to emphasize or, in perhaps an antiquated feminist lingo, to *embrace* the differences, Kussomaten, insists on demonstrating that the normal indeed has wide, and flexible, boundaries.

⁸ Quetelet, Adolphe: *A Treatise of Man and the Development of His Faculties*, trans R. Knox, Edinburgh, Chambers, 1842, p.6

In doing so, it approximates the shaping of discourse described by Foucault in *The Archeology of Discourse*. Toward the end of part II, *The Discursive Regularities*, he describes how:

*"Behind the visible façade of the system, one posits the rich uncertainty of disorder; and beneath the thin surface of discourse, the whole mass of a largely silent development (devenir): a 'pre-systematic' that is not of the order of the system; a 'pre-discursive' that belongs to an essential silence. Discourse and system produce each other –and conjointly–only at the crest of this immense reserve. What are being analyzed here are certainly not the terminal states of discourse, they are the 'pre-terminal regularities' in relation to which the ultimate state, far from constituting the birthplace of a system, is defined by its variants."*⁹

In a similar way, Kussomaten's archive, in its ultimate state, is defined by its variants. But in different ways, Kussomaten also uncovers and addresses the *pre-discursive silence* in its genderedness.

In a recent lecture by Mika Hannula¹⁰ here at the SAIC, which can best be described as *philosophy in motion*, he demonstrated how

⁹ Foucault, Michel: *The Archeology of Knowledge And The Discourse on Language*, Tavistock publications Limited, New York 1972, p.76

¹⁰ Given in the context of Mary Jane Jacob's *Chicago Social* series.

the reflective, creative self, situates *itself* in the crux between art and life known as practice, and argued how spatial and social imagination makes and shapes the act of giving content to a localized concept.

As he points out in his text *Teaching Discourse*:

*"Discourses are not sitting on a shelf, they are actualized and situated. This implies our responsibility to participate. Rather than seek to pin down and conquer them, the task is to find ways to take part in the shaping and making of these discourses. It is not about having it right, but about getting into the groove."*¹¹

Following this logic, Kussomaten acts on this responsibility to participate and invites its users (on both sides of the lens) in the making and shaping of discourse. I am using the gender neutral term 'users' here, because while I am aware that the photo project is collecting snapshots of female genitalia only, Kussomaten is not a project made *by women for women*, but *by women for everybody*, -because the discourse about the desired 'normativity' of the female body(-parts), is shaped by men and women alike and as such both groups are its audience.

¹¹Hannula, Mika: *Teaching Discourse (reflection Heavy, Not Theory Light)*, From the anthology *Learning Mind: Experience into Art* by Mary Jane Jacob & Jacquelynn Baas, University Of California Press, Oakland, 2010

Although Kussomaten was never intended as an art project, and its initiators would perhaps prefer for it not to be viewed within this framework, I will argue that it's participatory yet reflective nature is implementing some of the strategies involved in the field of relational aesthetics, and opens it up to be interpreted as a successful example of *social sculpture*. In this context the term *social sculpture* should of course be interpreted quite literally, as Kussomaten aims to shape the social field into a collective broad-mindedness and a more accepting (self) image of the women who inhabit it. Through its inclusiveness Kussomaten channels what Sekula described as "*social power operat[ing] by virtue of a positive therapeutic or reformative channeling of the body*", and challenges our narrow definitions of a desirable normalcy of the female body. In other words: Kussomaten's particular way of "giving content (photographs) to a localized concept (the normal female body)" sparks the social imagination and provokes a reconsidering of the in- and exclusiveness of these definitions.

To return to Foucault for a moment, I am reminded of his testimony in this excerpt from an interview with Stephen Riggins from 1984:

S.R.: "Is there a special kinship between your kind of philosophy and the arts in general?" M.F.: "Well, I think I am not in a position to answer. You see, I hate to say it, but it's true that I am not a really good academic. For me intellectual work is

related to what you could call aestheticism, meaning transforming yourself...I am not interested in the academic status of what I am doing because my problem is my own transformation. That's the reason why, when people say 'Well, you thought this a few years ago and now you say something else,' my answer is, [Laughter] 'Well, do you think I have worked like that all those years to say the same thing and not be changed?' This transformation of one's self by one's own knowledge is, I think, something rather close to the aesthetic experience. Why should a painter work if he is not transformed by his own painting?"

In this line of thought, by entering your own snapshot into the archive of Kussomaten you not only help *define* and broaden the definition of *normalcy* to the outside world, but also toward yourself. The transgression of *baring your privates in public*, is counterbalanced by the projects anonymity making the line you cross not one between the private and the public, but between the private and the *social* domain, thus a transgression from an exclusive position toward inclusiveness. I could well imagine this move to be a more transformative experience to some than to others, but nevertheless, I feel that we would all be transformed by admitting to ourselves: *"I am normal, and don't I know it!"*

This insistence on normalcy and of ownership of your own body and its specific gendered interiority, is also the theme of Eija-Liisa Ahtila's video work,

If 6 was 9:

Consider this monologue delivered by *Elsa*:

"Here I sit with my legs apart, like a little girl who hasn't learned anything about sex, who has no idea that a woman must hide her private parts and lust. In fact I'm 38 years old, I have a woman's breast and labia that opens beautifully when aroused, and a very feminine way to disguise aggression."

After viewing and reviewing the piece several times for the purpose of this paper *Elsa* has come to stand out to me as the main protagonist. There is an obvious point of identification, of course, given my own advanced age, but let us not forget that this piece was made in 1996, when Ahtila herself was in fact 36 years old. And, I think that through revealing her age, *Elsa* also hands us the key to the title *If 6 was 9*.

In the video, *Elsa* blends in effortlessly with the young girls less than half her age. Her blonde bobbed hair, her white button down shirt and her short dress, reminiscent of a school uniform, are in tune with the piano prodigy she once was, but oddly dissonant with the vulgar directness with which she vents her frustration at the male dominance she faced as a grownup:

"I ended up playing the piano and I was damn good at it. But I wasn't satisfied. My man left me when I wanted more sex."

I wanted full pay for my work and the same recognition, which pushes men forward. I wanted all sorts of things. There was no end to it. They told me to be nice and that you have to earn it. But I had lost my belief. I thought high-school was over –and both in bed and in life I can get top grades just by doing things that are important to me.”

From Eija Liisa Ahtila’s own description of the work¹², we learn that:

“If 6 was 9 is a video installation and short film about teenage girls and sexuality. It is based on research and real events, but the story itself and the dialogues are a fictional combination of various elements.”

As is evident from this, the script is spliced together from a series of interviews and the actors are cast afterwards, –which is perhaps why they so boldly and assertively offer us these confessions?

As a group portrait the work is therefore not “socio-realistic”, but rather a composite-image (much like Galton’s) of a demographic group or a generation of girls or women: an archive of female voices, partaking in a gendered discourse.

¹² Ahtila, Eija-Liisa: *Fantasized persons and taped conversations*, Kiasma Museum of Contemporary Art, Helsinki & Tate Modern, London 2002

But if we examine the dialogue closer, the consistent use of the past tense and the tone, which is almost reminiscing, it sounds like these voices are carrying across a generational divide. Listen for instance to Anne's recollection of her sexual adventures:

"Guys thought I was a God's gift to them. Everybody wanted to be with me. Shy ones came to me stammering, trying to say something. Losers just stared and blushed as I noticed them. Older guys wanted me to notice their new bike or car. Even if they were with other girls, they stared at me behind their backs. I'm not boasting. That's just how it was. That's why girls didn't like me much. Flat-breasted bookworms wondered if I had too big a mouth – and artificial lashes... Tough girls called me a whore. And sapling feminists thought I was just stupid. Really?"

Really? Well, Really, I could imagine a teenage girl *doing* the things described here, but recollecting them and summarizing them in this manner seems odd for somebody who is at the *beginning* of her sexual career. I mean, really, how many 13 year olds would describe their contemporaries as *flatbreasted bookworms* and *sapling feminists*? Really?

It occurred to me that perhaps the characters in Ahtilla's *kamerspiel* are in fact *mutton dressed as lamb*, old women's voices disguised as young girls, because even more unpalatable than the young girls desire is the mature woman's lust.

(If we pause for a second to consider the pornographic pussy as described by the initiators of kussomaten, it is in fact a description of a sexually immature young girls hairless labia, -a pedophile ideal.)

As Ahtila explains:

"[The film] shows an ongoing metamorphosis from childhood to adulthood. The girls want to possess, to embrace it with their arms, legs, cheeks, tits and arses. Their hopes, memories and thoughts, and events in their lives form a non-chronological narrative fabric, and the installation space becomes a 'body' of separate parts, each moving at a different pace and rhythm."

In a sequence toward the end of the video, Tiina (whose voiceover we hear, describing 24 places in Helsinki to make love outdoors) is making collages. With a pair of scissors she is cutting up the porno magazines, which has been a reference to sexual maturity throughout the video, using the dismembered body-parts to cover up black and white portraits of innocent looking young girls.

With this gesture she seems to hint, that perhaps in contrast to what we are led to believe, the teens in the story are not *revealing* anything with their confessions, but rather *covering*.

The portraits used are in fact the casting portraits Eija-Liisa Ahtila made of the young girls featured in the video, as a preparation for the work¹³, yet here she reduces them to props.

This sequence is an elegant formal layering: through the collage work within the video frame she is literally inserting a model of the work within the work by making a reference to the *body of separate parts* from her description of the work. Likewise, by introducing her casting portraits into the work, she underscores its *non-chronology* and its intricate layers of fact and fiction.

Through this *non-chronological ongoing narrative fabric* Eija-Liisa Ahtila lets the dialogue flow both ways across the generational divide and let the girl and the woman, the face and the voice, behold and mirror each other and the very *normal* desire they both share. There is a mutual fascination and a reversal of roles, between the promiscuous teenage girl, being often perceived as an easy sexual *prey* and the mature woman being deserted by her husband for being sexually *predatory*: if you tried walking in my shoes, if I were you, if you were me, if 6 was 9.

As Cixous said to Foucault the other night¹⁴:

¹³ The *Casting Portraits*, are presented in the catalogue as autonomous work, and have also been presented as such in Gallery shows In Gallery Wallner in Copenhagen, among others, according to the CV in same catalogue.

¹⁴ Cixous Helene: *On Marguerite Duras, with Michel Foucault* (1975) from *White Ink, Interviews on Sex, Text and Politics*, Columbia Press, New York, 2008 (Authors note: No, I do not know what time of day this interview took place, but I like the pun!)

"She is fascinated, she is absolutely caught up by something –or in someone –so absolutely enigmatic that all else in the world just falls away. There is absolutely nothing left. [...] But what fascinates her, as we gradually discover –and, I think, she herself discovers, has us discover –is a mixture of eroticism bound up with female flesh (it really functions through what can be so overwhelming and beautiful in something indefinable in woman) and death. And it all blends into one. And so it gets lost once again. As if death enveloped life, beauty, with the terrible tenderness of love. As if death loved life."

This mutual, almost morbid, fascination between the Girl and The Woman, I think is also what prompts Taru Elfving to pose the question *"Who is the Girl?"* and answer it herself, beautifully:

"Due to her peculiar place in representation the Girl is easily passed unnoticed. I circled around the Girl as if she was a black hole, focusing instead on time and space as potentially radical aspects that challenge linear narrative in Eija-Liisa Ahtila's video installation works. Then she suddenly emerged as a crystallisation of all the questions I had been asking, but defying any attempts to define or locate her. Questions of difference, subjectivity, time and space, all were sucked into a whirl that is the girl."¹⁵

¹⁵ Elfving, Taru; *The Girl*, from Eija-Liisa Ahtila: *Fantasized persons and taped conversations*, Kiasma Museum of Contemporary Art, Helsinki & Tate Modern, London 2002

In her vivid pictorial language, describing the Girl as a black hole or a vortex, *a maelstrom of interiority*, Elfving reverberates with this awesome (as in literally awesome, as in beautiful-and-terrifying-to-behold) literary image which emerge, as Helene Cixous continues:

"And it's a kind of very black sun, with this woman in the center –the one who saps all the desires in all the books. In text after text there's an engulfing [ca s'engouffre], a gulf, an abyss. It's the body of a woman that doesn't know itself, but that knows something there, in the darkness, that knows darkness, that knows death. She's there, she's embodied and then once again there's this inside-out sun since all its rays are male and they come to graft themselves onto this abyss that she is, shine toward her."

(And then suddenly, in my minds eye, this image of the imploded black hole sun turns itself, once again, inside out and resembles... and egg! An egg being fertilized, and I snap, art-historically speaking, back out of it again and voila: here we have not the average, but the *ultimate cunt*, as immortalized in Courbet's *l'origin du monde*.)

These very deep and somewhat donut-shaped descriptions of the Girl that seems to correspond with the concaveness of her sexual organ are in sharp contrast to Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's description of the Girl as: *"an abstract line, a line of flight. Thus girls do not belong to an age group, sex, order*

or kingdom: they slip in everywhere, between orders, acts, ages, sexes."¹⁶

This may sound lyrically liberating, but of course this abstraction of the Girl is problematic, and ultimately, misogynistic: as we all know, lines do not have interiors!

In an attempt at explaining themselves they argue that:

"The question is ultimately that of the body – the body they steal from us in order to fabricate opposable organisms. This body is stolen from the Girl: ... The Girl's becoming is stolen first, in order to impose a history, or prehistory, upon her."

Elfvig's counter argument is that:

"Deleuze & Guittari refuse to consider the Girl in her embodied specificity, although they first place that very body at the heart of the question. Thus overlooking the specificity of embodied subjectivity runs the risk positioning the Girl again as an empty, blank playground for different forces. One can ask, if the Girl's body is stolen again, but for a slightly different purpose, by Deleuze and Guittari?"

¹⁶ Deleuze, Gilles & F Guattari: *A Thousand Plateaus, Capitalism & Schizophrenia*, The Athlone Press, London, 1988

I will argue, that Deleuze and Guittari come close to recognizing the particular amorphous *interiority* of the female in the following:

"It is not the girl who becomes a woman; it is becoming-woman that produces the universal girl. [...] The girl and the child do not become; it is becoming itself that is a child or a girl. The child does not become an adult any more than the girl becomes a woman: the girl is the becoming-woman of each sex, just as the child is the becoming-young of every age. Knowing how to age does not mean remaining young; it means extracting from one's age the particles, the speed and slowness, the flows that constitute the youth of that age. Knowing how to love does not mean remaining a man or a woman; it means extracting from ones sex the particles, the speeds and slowness, the flow that constitute the 'n' sexes that constitute the girl of that sexuality. It is Age itself that is a becoming-child, just as sexuality, any sexuality, is a becoming woman, in other words, a girl [...] Although all becomings are already molecular, including becoming-woman, it must be said that all becomings begin with and pass through the becoming-woman in other words a girl."

I will argue, too, that it is this molecular *becoming*, this metamorphous *interiority*, which has been stolen from us in a gender debate which is focused on the *performance of gender*, as defined by molar, binary opposites (man/woman, gay/straight,

queer/cis etc.) because as Deleuze & Guattari rightly points out:
"there is no becoming through imitation".

And I will argue, finally, that the women participating in Kussomaten's archive, as well as the females who are letting their voices be heard through Ahtilla's video works, are challenging this theft: through their emphasis on the psychological *and* physical *inclusively normal interiority* of the female, they utter an assertive: *"We are stealing it back!"*

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