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Feminist Affects

Let's face it: we were in shock after reading the infamous, collectively authored column – aka “Deneuve's text” – published in the French newspaper *Le Monde* last January, defending the (male) right to “disturb” as a way to dismiss women's struggles against sexual abuse.¹ As a response to the Weinstein affair and the emergence of the #MeToo movement, a group of one hundred women, mostly high-profile professionals from the fields of art and culture, argued in favor of the male “freedom to disturb” (in French *importuner*) as “indispensable for sexual freedom.” Such a virulent declaration of normative heterosexuality (one of its main subtexts reads, “We are not lesbians”) and its equally violent anti-feminism made us sick. Part of our reaction was due to the fact that we identified the rhetoric and claims that some of the signatories had already deployed in their anti-feminist campaigns elsewhere. Even more unpleasant was to discover that many women from the French art world had signed the text: curators, artists, art magazine directors, and writers. Others have already deconstructed the column's arguments.² Our aim is to critically examine its content as a symptom of a political conflict engaging large sectors of the French elite. Moreover, we are interested in the fact that this pernicious anti-feminism expresses the views of a certain cultural milieu, which is still attached to the bourgeois ideals of the (male) genius and his (sexual) freedom. This aspect seems to be the cornerstone of the reactionary arguments deployed by the text, as it is entwined with the defense of a white, heteropatriarchal order. The column's claim for a gender-exclusive type of freedom ironically resonates with the national rhetoric of “*droits de l'Homme*” (rights of Man), an expression coined during the French revolution still widely used to mean “human rights.”

This is why the two of us have decided to write together: despite our differences in terms of generation, sexual orientation, and language, we shared the same concerns and reaction with respect to the connections between the art field and such reactionary views. We know all too well that patriarchy likes to divide women. However, we feel the need to figure out what this unapologetic defense of male privilege actually means. In order to react to the letter, we wish to refer to the agitprop video intervention released in 1976 by a group of outspoken feminist artists under the collective name “Les Insoumuses,” or “Disobedient Muses” (Carole Roussopoulos, Delphine Seyrig, Ioana Wieder, and Nadja Ringart): *Maso and Miso Go Boating*. The video intervened directly – with shouts, sounds, images, and comments – into a taped TV

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Actors Delphine Seyrig and Maria Schneider during the shoot of *Sois belle et tais-toi*, 1976. Photo: Carole Roussopoulos.

program where Françoise Giroud, a well-known female journalist and writer and the French governmental officer assigned to the “woman’s condition” (that was the name!), behaved as a masochist and a misogynist.³ The show was a perfect example of how biased French TV was, since Giroud was put in the impossible situation of having to respond to a number of outspoken misogynists. However, instead of opposing them, she preferred to indulge in an atmosphere of pleasurable perversion and engage with men in sexist jokes.⁴ The video is particularly effective in enacting a form of parody and disturbance, in which the show’s misogynistic monologue is interrupted, exposed, and deconstructed. Moreover, *Maso and Miso* emphasizes the contradictions entrapping women as they accept to operate according to male rules of power. In its aspiration to support male power, the *Le Monde* article, like the official in charge of the French “woman’s condition,” also oscillates between masochism and misogyny.

As feminists we are aware that the #MeToo movement has to be understood in the context of a global uprising and recomposition of women’s struggles against both sexual violence and harassment. In an interview in which she responded to the *Le Monde* article, feminist historian Christine Bard underlined the significance of the #MeToo movement as part of an ongoing history of women in revolt: “Today we are witnessing the encounter between feminism, a minority movement, and these innumerable voices.”⁵ Because women’s movements such as Ni Una Menos in Latin America have named the connections between sexuality, power, and violence, it has been possible to uncover, more globally, the interrelated dimensions of subjectivity and social relations implied in sexual violence.

Normative Heterosexuality and National Identity

Since the Strauss-Kahn affair in 2011, a number of intellectuals and academics have strongly exalted a specific French code of honor, underlining what they call a “French singularity” when it comes to (hetero)sexual relations. A “French seduction theory”⁶ would operate against the suspicion of political correctness coupled to an alleged American radical feminism. In 1995, historian Mona Ozouf defended the idea that French women retain a form of counterpower linked to the “art of seduction” they exert over men as a compensation for political, social, and cultural inequalities between the sexes.⁷ The notion of a so-called feminism *à la Française* emerged already in 1989, as French women’s “civilizing” role was celebrated as a heritage of the Ancien

Régime and in opposition to the American model, where feminism was supposedly at the forefront of the most acrimonious democratic demands. In 2011, these arguments were reactivated by sociologist Irène Théry who, among others, expressed in *Le Monde* her indignation against the suspicion that French women would tolerate male misbehavior and violence.⁸ She claimed that feminism *à la Française* was part of a certain way of life, whose adherents reject the deadlocks of political correctness, operate under the general assumption of equal rights, but at the same time enjoy the “asymmetrical pleasures of seduction” and demand absolute respect of consent while also appreciating the “delightful surprise of the stolen kisses.”⁹ The recent article in *Le Monde* can be read as a continuation of the same cultural operation that reaffirms a fundamental difference between the sexes and the notion of a feminine specificity or nature. This line of reasoning, in turn, is reminiscent of the position expressed by a group of women around Antoinette Fouque and the publisher Editions des femmes in the 1970s against Simone de Beauvoir’s “egalitarianist” feminism.¹⁰ Such a notion of femininity “beyond feminism” later came to represent what has been called, in English, “French Feminism.”¹¹

With the nationalization of a type of feminism predicated on the idea of a fundamental difference between the sexes, what appears as “specifically French” – and, by the way, not francophone – is the imperative of seduction. In her deconstruction of the myth of a distinctive articulation between seduction and French culture, American historian Joan W. Scott has underlined that seduction here both naturalizes national identity and legitimizes gender violence and inequality. The “natural” difference between the sexes has thus become the foundation of the modern state: this “French seduction theory,” which encompasses sexuality and the personal sphere, is proposed as a model for social organization.¹² Seduction indeed emerges as a cultural structure for French national identity. Even when reconfigured as a “right to disturb” – which at least makes it clear that only men are entitled to it – what is at stake is, once again, the need to conflate male privilege and sovereign power. As Paul B. Preciado has written,

What characterizes men’s position in our technocratic heteronormative societies is that masculine sovereignty is defined by the legitimate use of techniques of violence ... We could say, reading Weber and Butler, that masculinity is to society what state is to nation: the legitimate owner and user of violence. Such violence expresses itself

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Carole Roussopoulos films the protest in support of the lip workers' strike, 26th of September 1973. Paul Roussopoulos holds the umbrella. Photo: Centre Audiovisuel Simone de Beauvoir, all rights reserved.

socially under the form of domination, economically under the form of privilege, sexually under the form of abuse and rape.¹³

Summarized by Preciado's words, this violence justifies all kinds of abuse of power in hierarchical relations between men and women, and can only be carried on if one refuses to question gender categories. To do so, as several feminist thinkers have shown (Gayle Rubin, Judith Butler, and Monique Wittig among others), is to challenge the binary structures and implicit hierarchies of the heterosexual social contract, as it is defined by sexual difference.

The representation of a compulsive and normative heterosexuality emerging from the *Le Monde* article goes hand in hand with the constitution of the national myth of seduction that has declined according to aristocratic chivalry cultural codes, and a construction in which consent is replaced by surrender. As feminist philosopher Geneviève Fraisse has pointed out, the narrative in which women are expected to capitulate can be traced back to French eighteenth-century erotic literature and authors such as Choderlos de Laclos and Jean-Jacques Rousseau.¹⁴ The idea of a supposedly French inclination towards eroticism (as opposed to the alleged American puritanism) plays a crucial role in opposing women's agency when it comes to equality. Within the framework of sexual difference "in the French way," it is thus possible to deny the reality of power relations in order to promote the idea that male sexuality is "naturally" based on desire (which is more or less "offensive" and "savage," as the *Le Monde* article implies), while women are invited to manage their bodies and sexuality. Needless to say, according to this logic, women that have access to a certain degree of power and privilege will be more keen in negotiating their sexuality in their favor. The national rhetoric of the "French exception," which encompasses the fields of sexuality and culture, is in fact gender exclusive, and "freedom" is its token word.

The Neoliberal Subject

The use of the notion of freedom to conceal a form of privilege, emerging from the *Le Monde* article, is perfectly adapted to both an idea of sexual difference based on inequality and to the neoliberal conception of individual agency. The idea of a "*séduction à la française*" emerging from the text is predicated on the erasure of the abuses of power in the workplace – precisely the target of the #MeToo revolt. In its negation of the realities of sexual harassment and unwanted attention, the text constructs the fiction of a sovereign subject that freely administers its

sexual capital independently from any social circumstance or hierarchical relation. In reality, women's careers and employment have often been dependent on an acceptance of harassment in various valences. In contrast, the *Le Monde* article's representation of the relations between the sexes conforms to the fiction of a conflictless world – or even worse, a world where conflicts are repressed and where success is considered a simple matter of individual aptitude. The text expresses a lack of solidarity predicated on a representation of individual freedom that never concerns social relations.

The *Le Monde* text is emblematic of a more general problem concerning France's elites and their ideas about the political issues raised by racial, religious, and sexual minorities. Within the specific framework of French republicanism, where differences are contained (and, more often than not, denied), women and other minorities have to extract themselves from universalism in order to be able to fight for their rights. Whereas republican values are relentlessly represented as universal, they have come to produce a notion of national belonging from which large sectors of French society are excluded. It should come as no surprise that the nation's narrative of universalism and equality is in fact widely experienced as a system sustaining racism and discrimination. So if we look beyond the veil of French universalism, what emerges from the article is the image of a white bourgeoisie defending its class privilege, which overlaps with an idea of sexual freedom that conceals abuses of power. These mechanisms have been underlined in the debates following the publication of the article. For example, a text signed by a number of feminist and queer collectives states that

These feminists don't tackle the places of power ... Their aim is not to overthrow the status quo in order to achieve equality. Deneuve & co. are just defending "their men" and privileges. This is why they can only express their contempt for the majority of the women living on this planet.¹⁵

As a matter of fact, as the *Le Monde* text explains: "During the same day, a woman can be in charge of a professional team and enjoy being a man's sexual object, without becoming a 'bitch' nor the patriarchy's accomplice." This passage indicates both the identifications at play in terms of class, race, and sexuality, and the idea that being part of the cultural elite entails the separation of the personal from the political. This self-representation also reiterates the old opposition between women's emancipation and

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Carole Roussopoulos filming with a Portapak video camera, date unknown.

the ideal of femininity, which can be traced back to Joan Riviere's "Womanliness as a Masquerade." In this 1929 article, the British psychoanalyst described a series of successfully professional women who strived to repair the potential damages caused by their success, through an exacerbated performance of what they perceived as a normative femininity.¹⁶ The eighty-nine-year-old text is revelatory of the patriarchal structures resurfacing today, as well as of the panic provoked by the possibility of being liberated from male oppression.

What emerges from the *Le Monde* article is a representation of sexual freedom for the exclusive use of those who have power. Accordingly, the very notion of freedom has been removed from the collective demands for sexual emancipation coming from especially feminist and LGBTQ movements, in Europe and beyond, of the 1960s–70s. These emancipatory struggles are reinterpreted from the point of view of the ruling class, and thus deprived of their political meaning. In this representation of a class struggle "from above," freedom is converted into a substance that one can possess (or not), while the demands emanating from those who have pointed out the constitutive relation between sexuality and power are wiped out. According to this understanding of freedom "without liberation," expressed in the article's idea of an "inner and unassailable freedom," there are no social relations or conflicts, and agency is a matter of individuals only. What remains of the 1960s–70s revolts is the idea that sexual liberation has turned into a social norm that plays a crucial role in preserving a heteropatriarchal order and in repressing conflicts involving gender, class, and race relations in contemporary France.

The Artist's Freedom

It is certainly not by chance that the *Le Monde* text proposes a parallel between creative and sexual freedom. The authors' elitist understanding of freedom is rooted in modernist ideas around art and the artist as disinterested, neutral, and yet universal. Scholars and artists informed by feminist and queer theory, Marxism, and psychoanalysis have deconstructed, for some decades now, the political implications of these ideas in the production and reproduction of ideology. The representation of creativity as an essence, or a possession (talent or genius), reflects the notion of the (male) artist's autonomy and ability to express himself beyond social relations. It might sound surprising that such a self-referential understanding of art is still so appealing to the high-profile cultural workers who authored the *Le Monde* text. Generally speaking, the cultural milieu, in

France, is still very attached to modernist notions such as art's universal value and the (white, male) artist's singularity and disinterestedness, and thus very hesitant to address its own entwinement with the politics of exclusion at play in French society.

Do we need to repeat that this notion of creative freedom is not gender neutral? In her groundbreaking "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" Linda Nochlin already pointed out, in 1971, that the "great artist" was inseparable from his masculinity, and that the whole system of "great artist-genius-free-autonomous" was at the heart of a patriarchal, white, and heteronormative history of art.¹⁷ In its institutional forms, culture has always been selective, not universal; and the selection is determined by a number of factors, including gender, race, class, and sexuality. Art history as we know it bears the signs of power as it speaks of the hierarchies and power relations structuring the world. In this respect, the task of critique is perhaps precisely to tackle the ways in which art participates in complex relations of power and resistance.

The authors of the *Le Monde* text are particularly vocal in condemning what they perceive as obstacles to the free expression of an artist's creativity. Interestingly, the artists (visual artists, film directors, and writers) they refer to are unequivocally male-gendered: Roman Polanski, Jean-Claude Brisseau,¹⁸ Egon Schiele, Balthus, Michelangelo Antonioni, Nicolas Poussin, Gauguin, John Ford, de Sade ... poor male artists that feminists would like to prosecute via censorship! Of course it's never about Birgit Jürgenssen, Zanele Muholi, Candice Lin, Suzanne Santoro ... or the innumerable other female voices from the margins who have been concretely marginalized during their careers, when their work wasn't censored or destroyed, as was the case for Muholi, whose apartment was robbed in 2012 and her work stolen or destroyed. Did any of the women who authored the *Le Monde* text, so eager to protect artistic freedom, even care?

Of course not. Because the stake here is not censorship, but the need to preserve the modernist notion that art's value lies beyond social relations. Let's take one example provided by the article: Balthus's painting *Thérèse rêvant* (1938), which represents an adolescent girl sitting with one of her legs lifted in a way that the beholder can see her underwear and pubic area. The painting is on display at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Recently, a woman who identifies as a feminist initiated a petition demanding, not the destruction of the painting (as some have said), but either its removal, or the addition of some sort of contextualization. The

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issue raised by this painting has nothing to do with aesthetic judgment, nor with its legitimacy in the history of art as it concerns the work of art in its ability to produce meaning and affects. Instead of celebrating the painting as the mere expression of the artist's freedom and creativity, would it be possible to look at it within the specific historical context in which it was painted, as well as in its resonances with the present, and question the ways in which a work of art deals with male sexuality, the gaze, the female body, the body of a child?

By deliberately confusing censorship and criticism, the *Le Monde* article also deliberately dismisses any attempt to question art in its multiple social and political meanings. Can one sustain the affirmation that to deconstruct, to analyze, to use critical tools unequivocally leads to censorship?

Whether criticism can actually perform censorship is more than questionable. Moreover, as French feminist historian Michèle Perrot recently foregrounded:

If [what the text refers to] means to reread the works of the past with our eyes today, then we do it all the time; the critical perspective induced by reflections on gender has led us to reread literature differently ... Such a critical reading is not only legitimate but necessary, as it allows one to understand which system we live in, and which representations we depend on.¹⁹

Therefore, the exercise of criticism cannot be confused with censorship. What is at stake is, in fact, a more complex statement: the idea that you can both enjoy considering works of art while, at the same time, deconstructing them critically, and specifically in terms of power imbalances. One could argue that the work of critique consists precisely in this capacity to make this ambivalence productive, for instance by imagining a new alliance between cinephilia and feminist deconstruction, which, at least in France, tend to be seen as mutually exclusive. Indeed, the role of art criticism is in no way akin to censorship, nor should it limit itself to the sole role of celebration, a function that it too often serves, especially in the current market-driven art world. In attempting to unveil the master narrative's implicit "underbellies," the excitement and pleasure you get from the artwork increases; you break out of the self-satisfactory, passive space that reflects the bourgeois ideal of freedom.

France as the Land of the Rights of Man, Squared

Can we say that, as we address the patriarchal

structures sustaining the cultural field, we are also participating in a larger critical movement of decolonizing the arts, the museum, and our minds? Don't all these movements confront and contest the same conception of freedom, which is nothing more than a form of privilege? The artist's freedom, when affirmed as a corollary of what the authors of the *Le Monde* article call the "freedom to disturb," comes at the price of a historical paradox that can be traced back to the French Revolution. As France constructed its identity and reputation upon being the nation that brought freedom to the world, especially via the 1789 *Declaration of the Rights of the Man and of the Citizen*, it was in fact setting up a number of exclusionary regimes. These were specifically addressed, albeit via different forms of exclusion, to women and the colonized, who were cut off from both the country of free men – of citizens – and from the borders of civilized Europe. The universalist stance of what the French language identifies as "the land of Man's Rights" (le "*pays des droits de l'homme*") is again at work in the *Le Monde* article's defense of the "freedom to disturb." It is time to take seriously, to the very letter, the label by which French republicanism still defines its bill of rights, and to reverse it, invert it, and subvert it once and for all.

x

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- 1
Catherine Denvenue, Ingrid Caven, Catherine Millet et al., "Nous défendons une liberté d'importuner, indispensable à la liberté sexuelle," *Le Monde*, September 9, 2018 https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2018/01/09/nous-defendons-une-liberte-d-importuner-indispensable-a-la-liberte-sexuelle_5239134_3232.html.
- 2
See, for example, Hourya Bentouhami, Isabelle Cambourakis, Aurélie Fillod-Chaubaud, Amandine Gay, Mélanie Gourarier, Sarah Mazouz, and Émilie Notéris, "Les féministes peuvent-elles parler?" *Médiapart*, January 11, 2018.
- 3
Secrétaire d'Etat à la condition féminine (1974–76).
- 4
See Stephanie Jeanjean, "Disobedient video in France in the 1970s: Video production by women's collectives," *Afterall* 27 (Summer 2011).
- 5
In *Le Monde*, January 11, 2018, interviewed by Faustine Vincent.
- 6
In the words of Joan W. Scott, *The Fantasy of Feminist History* (Duke University Press, 2011), chap. 5, "French Seduction Theory," 117–40.
- 7
Mona Ozouf, *Les mots des femmes: Essai sur la singularité française* (Fayard, 1995), 388–89.
- 8
Irène Théry, "Un féminisme à la française," *Le Monde*, May 28, 2011.
- 9
On the Dominique Strauss-Kahn affair, see Eric Fassin, "Au delà du consentement: pour une théorie féministe de la séduction," *Raisons Politiques* 2, no. 46 (2012): 47–66.
- 10
According to Psych et Po (Psychoanalysis and Politics, the group of women gathered around psychoanalyst Antoinette Fouque), Beauvoir's "egalitarianism" fought against the open field of difference, which stemmed from the model of sexual difference.
- 11
See Christine Delphy, "The invention of French Feminism: An Essential Move," *Yale French Studies* 97 (2000): 166–97.
- 12
Joan Scott, *Sex and Secularism* (Princeton University Press 2017), 18.
- 13
Paul B. Preciado, "Lettre d'un homme trans à l'ancien régime sexuel," *Libération*, January 15, 2018.
- 14
See Geneviève Fraisse's interview in *Bibliobs*, January 14, 2018.
- 15
"Que vivent les résistances des femmes pour une transformation radicale de la société!" *Médiapart*, January 16, 2018. <https://blogs.mediapart.fr/les-invites-de-mediapart/blog/160118/que-vivent-les-resistances-des-femmes-pour-une-transformation-radical-de-la-societe>. The text was signed by an array of queer and feminist groups, including afro-feminist collective Mwasi, Groupe de Réflexion Queer & Trans Révolutionnaire, Les Voix Décoloniales, and Femmes en Lutte 93.
- 16
Joan Riviere, "Womanliness as a Masquerade," *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 9 (1929): 303–13.
- 17
Linda Nochlin, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" *ARTnews*, January 1971.
- 18
This past winter Cinémathèque Française scheduled retrospectives of the films of Roman Polanski and Jean-Claude Brisseau, provoking widespread criticism, as both filmmakers have been sued (and condemned) for sexual assault and rape. Feminist protests were staged in front of the institution, prompting its director, Frédéric Bonnaud, to cancel Brisseau's retrospective. However, Bonnaud has relentlessly defended the legitimacy of his choice and strongly condemned the protesters, accusing them of censorship.
- 19
Nicolas Truong, "Michèle Perrot: 'L'absence de solidarité des femmes signataires de cette tribune me sidère,'" *Le Monde*, January 11, 2018.

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