

REDFERN BARRETT / AA BRONSON / ANGUS CAMERON  
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LATIFA LAÂBISSI / OLIVIER MARBOEUF / VINCENT SIMON  
LW / MARINA WARNER

**WITCHES**  
**HUNTED**  
**APPROPRIATED**  
**EMPOWERED**  
**QUEERED**

“A witch is, actually, a successful (in the sense of surviving) deviant. You have a cultural, ideological, social, what-not pattern which is, for that society in question, normal (and, importantly, this is understood as a synonym for natural). Most people survive because they conform to these patterns —because they behave normally. Then suddenly you have someone not behaving ‘normally’, and usually they cannot survive, since having rejected the system and its support they go under, so to speak, and are referred to as ‘subnormal’, ‘maladjusted’, and other such terms which have a negative relation to the standard norm. But then suddenly you get a deviant which survives, and since it does not draw its support from the normal pattern—and since the normal people only consider themselves as natural—that deviant is understood as drawing its support from ‘unknown’, ‘supernatural’ sources.”

Maya Deren,  
*From the Notebook of Maya Deren* (1947).

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# INTRO- DUCTION

ANNA COLIN

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WITCHES

The witch is an equivocal figure, to the extent that at least three types exist: those who practice witchcraft, those who are characterised as witches (by courts, religious institutions or public opinion), and those who proclaim themselves witches but do not practice witchcraft. The latter two categories, which arise from a social construct and treat witchcraft as a metaphor, are the focus of this publication.

Witches are also paradoxical, as Angus Cameron suggests in his text “The Fool and the Witch”. Although in principle they present no tangible threat, it is nevertheless on this basis that they are attacked. Witches crystallise evil, making them what Roland Barthes called *Actant-éponges* [Sponge-actors]: black sheep onto which society “attaches illness”<sup>1</sup> and on which it projects fear, not only to strengthen its control, but also to divert attention from its deeper afflictions. The reality is that this figure symbolises insubordination and the transgression of normality, and she pays dearly for her alterity.



Hans Baldung, *Untitled* (1510), woodcut. © Trustees of the British Museum.

In Maya Deren's 1947 notebook, the filmmaker and theorist recorded her observations on the witch's relationship with the normal:

*[...] it is characteristic of the “normal” [...] that his way is the only possible way—and consequently the sheer existence of another order capable of sustaining life is a threat and a source, potentially, of destruction. They are afraid, for they think: if we cannot survive without our order, how can she survive in solitude? Hers must be indeed a very powerful order to exist so independently, without all the intercooperation and individual compromise, which we have to go through to survive. And if it is so powerful, then it could destroy us. We must try to destroy it first.*<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Roland Barthes, “Comment vivre ensemble”, lectures delivered at the Collège de France, 1977 [Audio recording]. Available from: [www.ubu.com/sound/barthes.html](http://www.ubu.com/sound/barthes.html) [accessed 11 September 2012]

<sup>2</sup> Maya Deren, “From the Notebook of Maya Deren, 1947”, *October*, Vol. 14 (Autumn 1980), 21–46, pp. 33–34.

Although Maya Deren apprehended the deviant nature of witches from a sociological perspective, her definitions can be transposed into a political context. This other order, which functions “without compromise”, “independently”, and draws its support “from ‘unknown’, ‘supernatural’ forces”<sup>3</sup>, can otherwise be understood as an autarkic order that is not aligned with the dominant system and is considered dangerous because it is alternative. In the interview featured in the following pages, historian Silvia Federici reminds us that women accused of witchcraft were not practicing members of pagan cults, but were in fact peasants who resisted the oppressive and impoverishing developments arising from capitalist domination. Consequently, Federici tells us, witch-hunts served as a regulating tool used to maintain a hegemonic political-economic system, where women’s bodies became “privileged sites for the deployment of power-techniques and power-relations”.<sup>4</sup> Making reference to the hunts that are currently rife in Africa, Federici explains further that when older generations and women feel a stronger attachment to their land than to non-nourishing resources—such as a farming vehicle or a bank loan—this is part of a power struggle against the values of globalisation being adopted by younger generations, and one which frequently factors in witchcraft accusations.

## IDENTIFICATIONS

Over the centuries and in different geographical contexts, holders of power have applied the signifier “witch” to women considered dangerous or troublesome. Artists, activists and other agitators, from choreographer Mary Wigman in the 1910s to contemporary activist and writer Starhawk, have directly taken up this designation to evoke a potential reversal of that very power.

Mary Wigman’s *Witch Dance* (the subject of an interview with choreographer Latifa Laâbissi in this volume), is one of the first feminist appropriations of the witch figure to be recorded and to thus become a part of history. Wigman’s adoption of the witch motif underscores her interest in mysticism, as well as her desire to shake up



Charlotte Rudolph, *Hexentanz II* (1926) by Mary Wigman. Courtesy Deutsches Tanzarchiv Köln. © Adagp, Paris 2012.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 33.

4 Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body, and Primitive Accumulation* (Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia, 2004), p. 15.

a male-dominated avant-garde. Wigman thus re-establishes the witch as an intrinsically feminine and alien figure: a figure that is both frightening and fascinating, and resolutely indomitable. Wigman later described her experience as one of possession. Consumed by her character, which she had not yet succeeded in incarnating, one evening she looks in a mirror:

*There she was—the witch—the earth-bound creature with her unrestrained, naked instincts, with her insatiable lust for life, beast and woman at one and the same time. I shuddered at my own image, at the exposure of this facet of my ego which I had never allowed to emerge in such unashamed nakedness. But after all, isn't a bit of a witch hidden in every hundred-per-cent female...?*<sup>5</sup>

Elusive, macabre, “toxic” and exceptionally rhythmical, *Witch Dance* liberates “the female dancing body” and serves as a vehicle for alterity, “claiming (if not always realising) [...] freedom to create new expressive vocabularies of movements”.<sup>6</sup>

The image of the witch as a liberated, rebellious figure is later found in the work of cabaret dancer Valeska Gert<sup>7</sup>, as well as in that of the female surrealists. Invoking this figure as a myth and incarnation of unbridled sexuality was far from insignificant in this predominantly male movement, which treated women as muses, as objects of desire or sometimes as objects of fear, and often as “man’s mediator with nature and the unconscious”.<sup>8</sup> This is how Leonor Fini, Leonora Carrington, Remedios Varo, Nelly Kaplan, Eileen Agar and others seized upon misogynistic mythical constructs and escalated the threat that women posed as sensual, sovereign individuals. Their compositions were permeated with allusions to dreams, she-monsters, ancient matriarchal societies and relationships of complicity between women and the natural world. Accordingly, woman’s feline nature appears as a motif in Leonor Fini’s paintings; *The Ideal Life* (1950) is the portrait of a wild, carefree young woman who, from her throne, reigns over a world of cats that are as determined as she to preserve this order. Again suggesting the idea of power, the figure painted by Dorothea Tanning for the set design of *The Witch*, a ballet by John Cranko (1950), seems to be subduing her mutant subjects from the top of her

<sup>5</sup> Mary Wigman quoted in Sally Banes, *Dancing Women: Female Bodies on Stage* (London: Routledge, 1998), p. 128.

<sup>6</sup> Sally Banes, *Dancing Women: Female Bodies on Stage* (London: Routledge, 1998), p. 124.

<sup>7</sup> In 1949, Gert opened the cabaret Hexenküche and in 1968 published her autobiography *Ich bin eine Hexe* [I Am a Witch].

<sup>8</sup> Mary Ann Caws, Rudolf E. Kuenzli & Gwen Raaberg (eds.), *Surrealism and Women* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1990), p. 2.

control tower with a certain glory. Midway between female genitalia and a ceremonial mask of uncertain origins, Eileen Agar's 1974 collage, *The Witch*, is itself disturbing because it oscillates between attraction and fear of the unknown, whether cultural or biological.<sup>9</sup>

The decisive revival of the figure of the witch took place in the 1970s, primarily in an activist context. It became a potent symbol of the feminist and gay struggles in Europe and the United States, leading a number of activists to investigate and rewrite the obscured history of the witch-hunts.<sup>10</sup> The group W.I.T.C.H. (Women's International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell), active in the United States from 1969 to 1970, recast the witch as "the original guerrilla and resistance fighter against oppression—particularly the oppression of women".<sup>11</sup> Decked out in pointy hats and brooms, group members organised theatrical confrontations in front of multinationals and other instruments of power that were assumed "to control and define human life"<sup>12</sup>, such as the Bridal Fair in New York. A few years later in France, the feminist cultural journal *Sorcières* (1975-1982) declared that "the witch is the personification of female revolt, which, in defiance of contempt, oppression and persecution, says yes to herself instead of to the world as it was and is and should not be".<sup>13</sup>

In her 1978 essay *The Contemporary Witch, the Historical Witch and the Witch Myth*, historian Silvia Bovenschen analysed the causes and effects of activists' appropriation of the mythology of this figure. She emphasised the unlimited potential that the image of the witch presented



Dorothea Tanning, set design for *The Witch*, a ballet by John Cranko (1950), oil on canvas, 18 x 24 in.  
© The Dorothea Tanning Foundation.



W.I.T.C.H. (Women's International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell) (c.1969).

<sup>9</sup> Thorough research on this subject remains to be conducted. It should also be noted that the recourse to witch imagery amongst women surrealists was not limited to a specific period, and that it continued to appear in much later works. A relevant example is that of Louise Bourgeois's collaboration with architect Peter Zumthor shortly before her death in 2010. Together they designed a memorial in honour of the ninety-one witches executed between 1598 and 1692 in Vardø, Norway. The memorial *Steilneset* was erected in 2011.

<sup>10</sup> See interview with Silvia Federici in this volume, 39–49.

<sup>11</sup> Robin Morgan (ed.), *Sisterhood is Powerful* (New York: Random House, 1970), p. 539.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 538.

<sup>13</sup> Xavière Gauthier, "Témoignage sur l'expérience de la revue *Sorcières*", in Christine Planté (ed.), *Sorcières et Sorcelleries* (Lyon: Université Lumière-Lyon 2, 2002), p. 100.

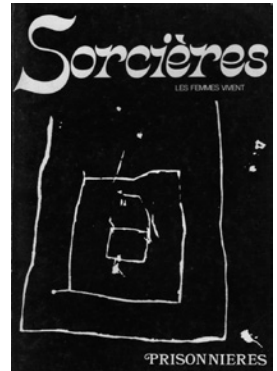


and the tendency to fictionalise and “fantasise” the gynocide perpetrated from the 15th to the 18th century:

*This experiential appropriation of the past differs qualitatively from that of the scholar in the archive—at least with respect to its everyday manifestation. It deals with something other than what traditional sources, data and commentary have to offer. In it are incorporated elements of historical and social fantasy which are sensitive to the underground existence of forbidden images; it is anarchical and rebellious in its rejection of chronology and historical accuracy.*<sup>14</sup>

References to the statistic that nine million so-called witches were executed during the three century-long hunts provide a good illustration of this tendency: this number found its way into a variety of texts written by budding historians, and would only be corrected in the late 1980s, reduced to the much less fantastical but no less tragic figure of around 100,000 martyrs. The distortion of history continued with the witch’s elevation to the rank of proto-feminist, a phenomenon that Bovenschen describes as one that made possible “a resistance which was denied to historical witches”.<sup>15</sup> Blurring the boundaries between myth, history and reality might help give contemporary women the possibility of symbolic emancipation and revenge against the torturers of old, but this is done at the risk of idealising or discrediting critical passages of history, as Marina Warner, Silvia Federici and LW remind us in their contributions.

In his article on *N.O.Body* (2008)—a film about the American bearded lady Annie Jones (1865-1902) directed by artists Pauline Boudry and Renate Lorenz—Mathias Danbolt looks back at the gay and lesbian liberation movements of the 1970s and the desire of so-called “sexual deviants” for acceptance by the broader community. He quotes cultural critic Christopher Nealon, who wrote that underlying this desire was the “overwhelming desire to *feel historical*”.<sup>16</sup> They therefore sought allies,



Cover reproduction of *Sorcières* (no. 6, 1976), featuring an artwork by Evelyne Ortlieb. Courtesy Xavière Gauthier (*Sorcières*).

<sup>14</sup> Silvia Bovenschen, “The Contemporary Witch, the Historical Witch and the Witch Myth”, *New German Critique*, no. 15 (Autumn 1978), 82–119, p. 84.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 87.

<sup>16</sup> Christopher Nealon quoted by Mathias Danbolt, “Disruptive anachronisms: feeling historical with *N.O. Body*”, in Pauline Boudry & Renate Lorenz (eds.), *Temporal Drag* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2011), p. 184.

particularly in pederast Ancient Greece, in order to “convert the harrowing privacy of the [pathological] inversion model [of homosexuality] into some more encompassing narrative of collective life”.<sup>17</sup> Despite the subversiveness and violence associated with her personality, the witch also evokes the roles of healer and botanist, engaged in an unmaterialistic relationship with nature and spirituality. These important facets of the witch figure, though cited since the beginning of its re-emergence, were not reinstated and celebrated until the late 1970s, once the tumult of the liberation movements and the need for more powerful symbols had passed. Since then, this vision of the witch has served as an inspiration to feminist and queer neo-pagan groups committed to uniting spirituality and politics, to questioning identity and to the art of living and taking action together.

In *Capitalist Sorcery* (2011), Philippe Pignarre and Isabelle Stengers provide an overview of the context and nature of the commitment of neo-pagan witches associated with the Reclaiming community and its co-founder Starhawk:

*The witches learned this art in the moment of greatest distress, during the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980. It is then that the mutation of a tradition, the Wicca tradition (re-)born in England and exported to California, was produced. It then became a field of experimentation, cultivating the art of rituals able to give the inheritors of feminist, non-violent, anti-imperialist, ecological struggles the strength to resist the ordeal. The recipes of the witches were thus reinvented in a political mode [...].*<sup>18</sup>

Pignarre, Stengers and Starhawk are not alone in seeing a potential political and social alternative in the use of the witch symbol. The neo-pagan witch community is steadily growing, and Starhawk is now a major figure of the pacifist, feminist, after-globalisation and ecological movements. Other examples of communities and initiatives arising from the neo-pagan tradition are The Radical Faeries (founded, like Reclaiming, in California in the late 1970s), Queer Pagan Camp in the UK and even the PantheaCon annual conference. Having a more local social and political scope, these communities resist heteronormativity and often identify with “queer spirituality”. They reach out to society’s outcasts, communicate with spirits,

<sup>17</sup> Mathias Danbolt, “Disruptive anachronisms: feeling historical with N.O. Body”, in Boudry & Lorenz (eds.), *op.cit.*, p. 185.

<sup>18</sup> Philippe Pignarre & Isabelle Stengers, *Capitalist Sorcery* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 136.

nature and divinities, and unite in an experience of sharing and reconstruction that involves initiation, healing and esotericism, or even the tracing of alternative genealogies.<sup>19</sup>

## EDITORIAL GUIDE

This book concludes an independent research project revolving around the themes raised above. The project began in 2010 with the help of a grant from the Montehermoso Cultural Centre in Vitoria-Gasteiz. It was made public in 2012 through a series of three exhibitions and events entitled “Plus ou moins sorcières” [Witches, more or less] at the Maison populaire art centre in Montreuil. This research, situated at the junctions between history, sociology, art and popular culture, was initially undertaken in an effort to combat oblivion, specifically in relation to a femicide that passed and has now returned in some parts of the world, but is hardly mentioned in history textbooks and receives little media attention. The feminist and queer co-option of this figure quickly asserted itself as a research theme, inspiring the orientation of the first two exhibitions and of this publication.

*Witches: hunted, appropriated, empowered, queered* is neither an exhibition catalogue nor an accurate, exhaustive reflection of the ideas and proposals generated during the project at Maison populaire. Conceived as an autonomous project, this publication contains a collection of texts and interviews by writers, researchers, activists and artists who participated in the project, or whose work and activities influenced its development.

The book begins with an interview with Silvia Federici, whose book *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body, and Primitive Accumulation* (2004) was a key inspiration for this project. Federici helps to place the historical and contemporary witch suspect in the context of the major changes induced by capitalism. Offering an oblique response to the theme of this book, Olivier Marboeuf then examines the practice of rioting and its clandestine, ritualising and startling qualities. In a hypothesis that is not without similarities to Maya Deren’s observations, the faceless rioter approximates the witch to the extent that she or he acts having severed all attachments to the “majority social body”. The book continues in a more literary mode

<sup>19</sup> Studies published on the subject include: Arthur Evans, *Witchcraft and the Gay Counterculture* (Boston: Fag Rag Books, 1978); Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999); Robert J. Wallis, *Shamans/Neo-Shamans: Ecstasies, Alternative Archaeologies and Contemporary*

*Pagans* (London: Routledge, 2003); Peter Hennen, *Faeries, Bears, and Leathermen: Men in Community Queering the Masculine* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008); and Chris Klassen, *Feminist Spirituality: The Next Generation* (Lexington: Lexington Books, 2009).

with “Monstrous Mothers” by Marina Warner, a lecture originally broadcast on BBC Radio 4 in 1994. Warner draws unexpected and humorous links between classical mythology, popular culture and current sociology, debunking the myth of the female monster and constructing a critique of the treatment reserved for women who regard themselves as “sovereign”. Finally, in his text “The Fool and the Witch”, Angus Cameron conducts a comparative study of these two characters, which have until now been separated in history and folklore, and have both been identified as subversive, particularly in relation to gender.

Next, the question of practices is considered, beginning with Latifa Laâbissi’s choreographic reinterpretation of *Witch Dance* by Mary Wigman. In this interview, the choreographer describes the experience of learning this dance of possession, discussing the simultaneous effects of retention and projection that characterise her body movements. Practices are then examined more directly with the involvement of witches, shamans and radical faeries. Revolving around the convergences between activism and “queer paganism”, the conversation between Redfern Barrett and LW, regular participants of Queer Pagan Camp, gives us a glimpse into the world of neo-pagan communities, which is broad-minded and conflictual in equal measure. Artist and radical faery Richard John Jones, in dialogue with various co-conspirators, presents an invocation of “effeminate spirits”, illustrated by psychedelic photographic collages. Taking on an interventionist and lightly humorous mode, “Sisters” is also imagined as echoing the “Invocations of Queer Spirits” by artist and shaman AA Bronson, whose contribution concludes this publication. In conversation with Vincent Simon, AA Bronson reflects on his relationship with sexuality, nature and shamanic practice, which he views as mediating between the worlds of the living and the dead. In an attempt to share some of the traces of the curatorial project presented at Maison populaire, the book further includes a visual section. This section is comprised of images of the exhibitions, art works, performances and films produced and/or presented in the three chapters of *Plus ou moins sorcières*, as well as of a series of diagrammes and a photo-collage conceived by the artists Victoria Halford et Steve Beard as an extension to their film *Voodoo Science Park*, which was projected in the exhibition’s final chapter.

*Witches: hunted, appropriated, empowered, queered* combines historical accounts, fictional literature, activist experiences, theoretical propositions and artistic reflections, constituting a multidisciplinary book that, without meaning to invalidate the authors’ competencies, claims some

measure of amateurism. Here the term “amateur” is understood in the sense in which it is used by artist and writer Claire Pentecost. In her manifesto on the researcher-artist (which could be partly applied to the researcher-curator, or even the researcher-activist), Pentecost uses the expression “public amateur” to designate those who serve “as conduit between specialised knowledge fields and other members of the public sphere”:

*Why amateur?*

[...]

*She/he approaches and ultimately appropriates the object of knowledge out of enthusiasm, curiosity or perhaps a personal need. She learns outside the circuits of professional normalisation and reward.*

[...]

*Why public?*

[...]

*In public this [learning] process has a chance to be collective, thereby deeper and finally more subversive.*

*In public the amateur stands to learn much more; there her efforts are ponderable to specialists and non-specialists, and amenable to contributed experience.<sup>20</sup>*

The participants in the series of exhibitions and the authors of this book are all engaged in practices designed to link disparate subjects, discourses and knowledge. Some of them partly or completely distance themselves from their field of specialisation, while others wear many hats (pointed or otherwise). Regardless of their mode of operation, what links these individuals is their way of reconceiving knowledge and power structures and suggesting alternative connections, narratives and languages. Just as the writings of the feminist and gay activists of the 1970s aimed to fill historical voids, the purpose of this book is to assemble and share several scholarly, amateur, activist, inquisitive, speculative and performative positions on gender, myth and alterity—forty years after the witch returned in a new radical guise in the activist imagination, and at a time when alleged witches are still persecuted in certain parts of the world.



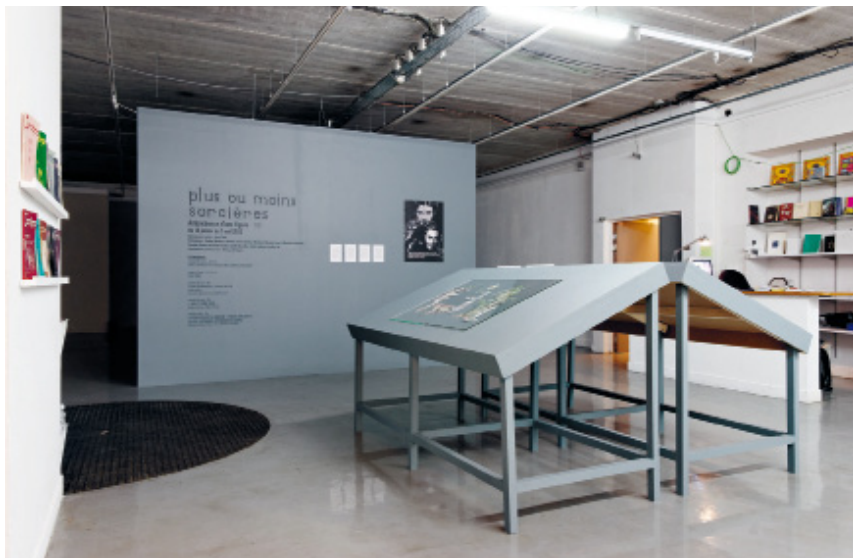
<sup>20</sup> Claire Pentecost, “Oh! The public amateur is not afraid to let on that she just figured it out”, *The Public Amateur* (blog) (2009).

Available from: [publicamateur.wordpress.com/about/](http://publicamateur.wordpress.com/about/) [accessed 10 September 2012].

# PLUS OU MOINS SORCIÈRES I

Activated by a cycle of performances, this first exhibition placed emphasis on practices engaged with questioning the legacy of the gender struggles and with dismantling the traditional hierarchical organisation of the sexes. This instalment further considered the extent to which identifying with marginal historical allies such as the witch, among other figures, constitutes a tool for resistance against the norm.

With: Pauline Boudry/Renate Lorenz, Caroline Darroux/Marie Preston, Vanessa Desclaux/Morgane Lory, Camille Ducellier, Latifa Laâbissi, Candice Lin.



Installation view.



*Hypnotiseurs et sorcières : pouvoir, marginalité et émancipation* [Hypnotists and witches: power, marginality and emancipation] (2012). Vanessa Desclaux, Morgane Lory, Matthieu Canaguier, Serge Ryschenkow, Nadège Sellier. © Nicole Massoni.



Pauline Boudry / Renate Lorenz, *Charming for the Revolution* (2009), 11 min, 16mm / DVD and 6 photos.  
Performance: Werner Hirsch.



Pauline Boudry / Renate Lorenz, *Charming for the Revolution* (2009), 11 min, 16mm / DVD and 6 photos.  
Performance: Werner Hirsch.



# PLUS OU MOINS SORCIÈRES II

The second part considered practices that employ ritual gestures —borrowing from mythology, folklore, witchcraft or shamanism—to assert the sovereignty of the body, to summon marginal histories or to propose alternative politics and ways of life. By creating a collective space where the body is reconsidered and given primacy, the participants of this chapter invoked the transformative power of spirituality and of the natural world.

With: AA Bronson, Mikala Dwyer, Joan Jonas,  
Birgit Jürgenssen, Sothean Nhieim,  
Olivia Plender/Patrick Staff.



Front: AA Bronson, *Flesh of Our Flesh* (2011).

Back: Olivia Plender/Patrick Staff, *Life in the Woods* (2011), installation multimedia.



AA Bronson, *Flesh of Our Flesh* (2011), 350 x 350 cm, floor painting made in collaboration with Elijah Berger (detail). Courtesy of the artists and Esther Schipper Gallery, Berlin.



Birgit Jürgenssen, *Sans Titre (Histoire Naturelle)* [Untitled (Natural History)] (1975), 38,5 x 29,5 cm, rayogramme. Courtesy Estate Birgit Jürgenssen, Vienna.

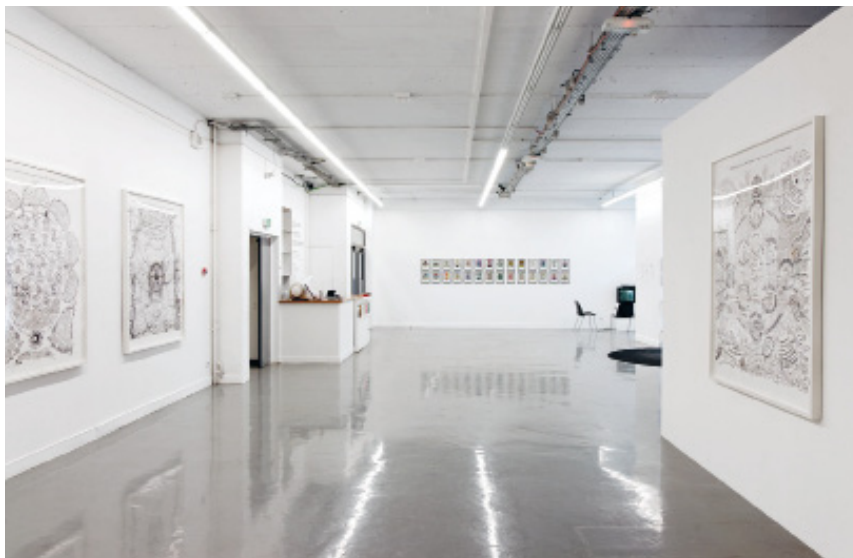


Mikala Dwyer, *The Collapzars* (2012), plastic, paint, papier mâché, fabric. Courtesy of the artist.

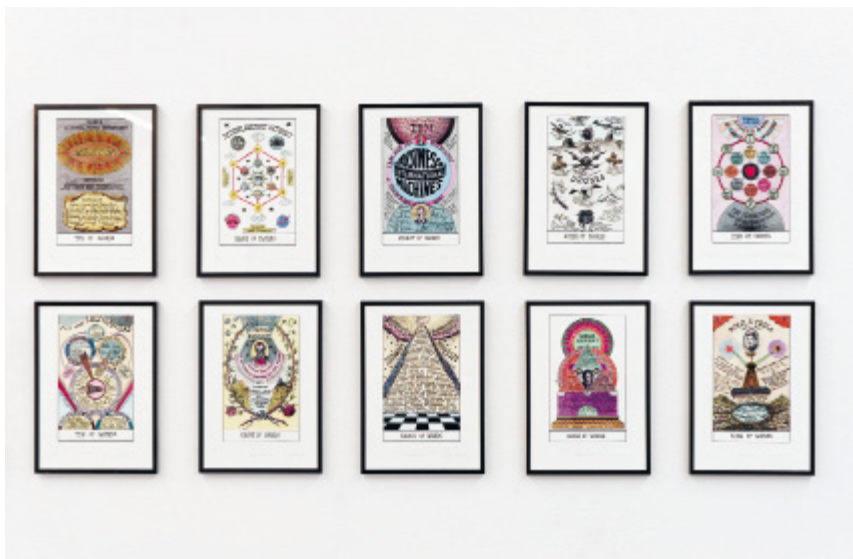
# PLUS OU MOINS SORCIÈRES III

The last instalment moved away from the project's dominant themes and addressed the witch-hunts transversally, that is to say by examining points of convergence between superstition and rationality, between capitalism and sorcery. The works presented investigated and speculated upon the influence that occult and para-scientific knowledge have had on supposedly atheistic fields such as defence, scientific research and politics.

With: Victoria Halford/Steve Beard, Silvia Maglioni/  
Graeme Thomson/Suzanne Treister.



Installation view.



Suzanne Tresister, *HEXEN 2.0 Tarot* (2009-11), 21 x 29,7 cm. Archival giclée print on Hahnemühle bamboo paper. Courtesy Annely Juda Fine Art, London.

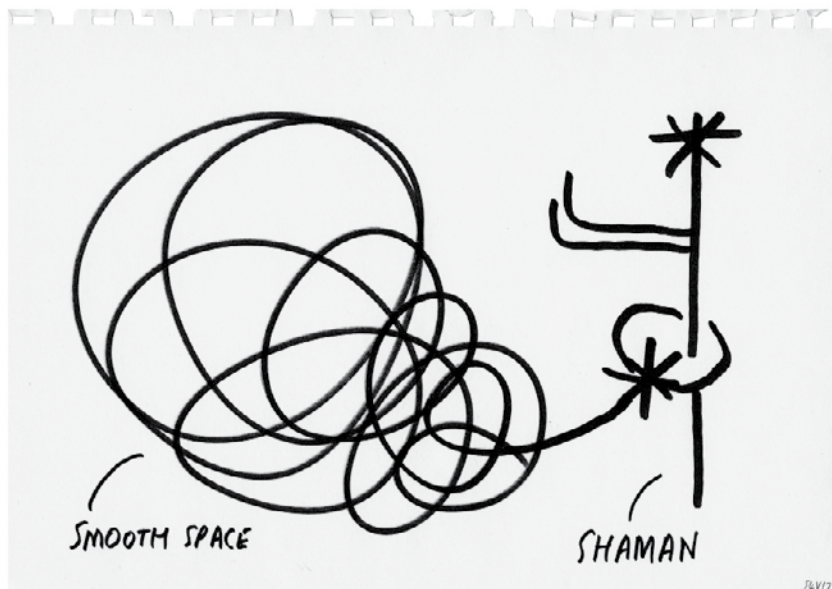


Victoria Halford/Steve Beard, *Voodoo Science Park* (2009), 25 min, DV PAL, 16/9. Courtesy of the artists.

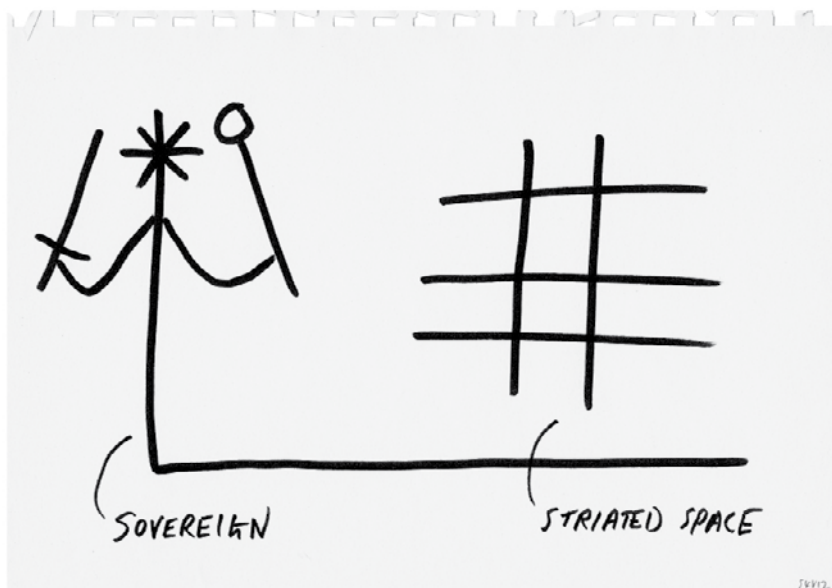


Suzanne Treister, *HEXEN 2.0* (2009-11), series, 122 x 152 cm. Rotring ink on paper. Courtesy Annely Juda Fine Art, London.

Presented in *Plus ou moins sorcières III*, Victoria Halford and Steve Beard's *Voodoo Science Park* (2009) is a film about the occult workings of the British state, dialectical history and Peak District psychogeography. Some of the entities in the film have such power that they could almost be invoked by casting their diagrammatic figures on the ground.

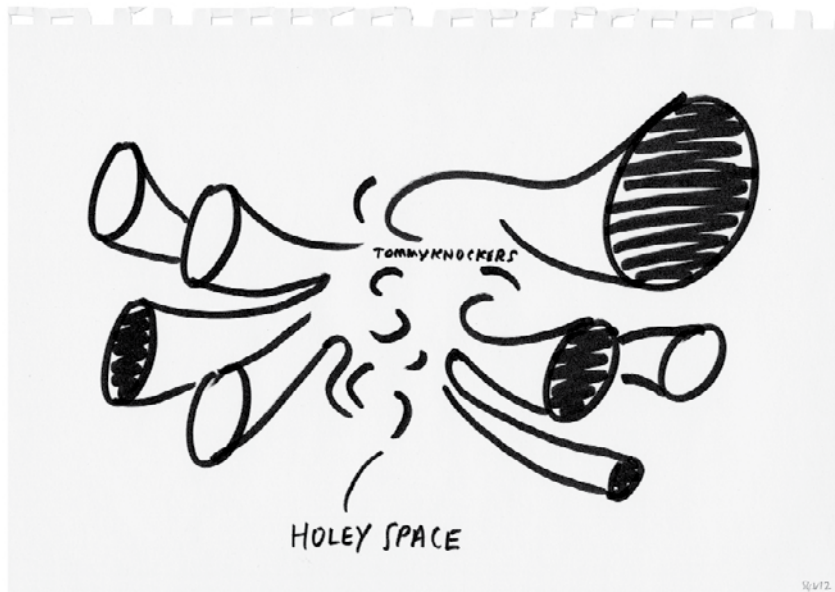


*Gogmagog Veve* (2012). Courtesy Victoria Halford/Steve Beard.

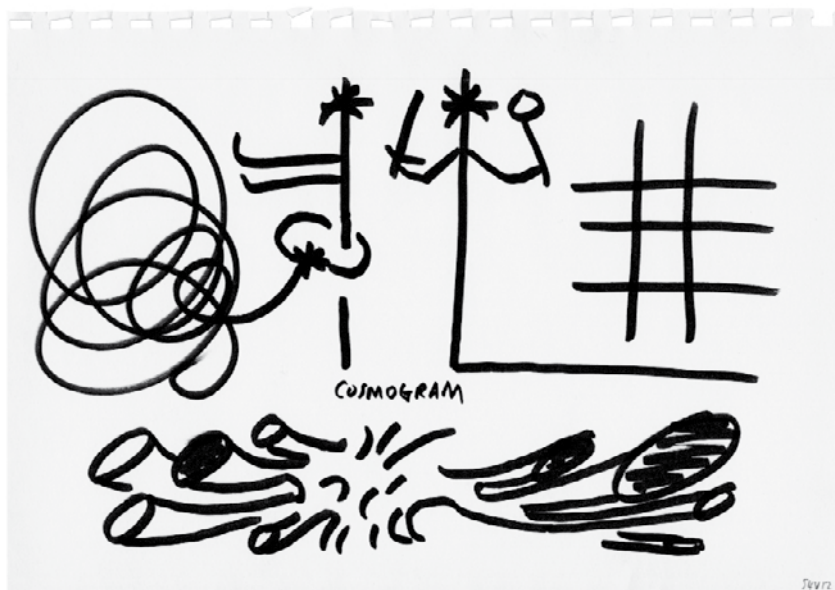


*Leviathan Veve* (2012). Courtesy Victoria Halford/Steve Beard.





*Tommyknockers Veve* (2012). Courtesy Victoria Halford/Steve Beard.



*Albion Cosmogram* (2012). Courtesy Victoria Halford/Steve Beard.



*Occult Buildings 1* (2012). Courtesy Victoria Halford/Steve Beard.

*PRIMITIVE  
ACCUMULA-  
TION  
AND WITCH-  
HUNTS:  
127 PAST  
AND  
PRESENT*

SILVIA FEDERICI  
interviewed by ANNA COLIN

In her book *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body, and Primitive Accumulation* (2004), Silvia Federici argued that the witch is “the embodiment of a world of female subjects that capitalism had to destroy: the heretic, the healer, the disobedient wife, the woman who dared to live alone, the obeah woman who poisoned the master’s food and inspired the slaves to revolt.”<sup>1</sup> Speaking from the perspective of an activist and a historian, in this interview Silvia Federici traces the trajectory of her long-term research into the relationship between witch-hunting and capitalism, both historically and today.

### 3 AUGUST 2012

**ANNA COLIN** To start with, could you give us an overview of your research over the years and tell us what first led you to investigate the figure of the witch and the witch-hunts?

**SILVIA FEDERICI** I began to study the question of witches and witch-hunting roughly speaking in the early 1970s, as part of a broader project of trying to understand the historical roots of gender-based discrimination. This project was directly inspired by the debates and politics of the feminist movement. At the time, a key issue for feminists was why women have less social power than men within capitalist society, and historically what have been the social and economic causes of their subordination to men. Many feminists saw this situation as a legacy of pre-capitalist cultural traditions; for instance, materialist feminists in France theorised the existence of an independent patriarchal system that preceded capitalism and, as such, was not reducible to it. But for me, given my understanding of contemporary political relations and of the history of capitalism, this explanation was not convincing. It seemed to me that capitalism, which has transformed the world in so many ways and revolutionised social relations, could not have allowed the survival of the network of patriarchal gender relations defining women’s position in the family and the process of reproduction—unless gender discrimination and the sexual division of labour were profitable and functional to the process of accumulation.

Starting with this hypothesis or theory that I shared with many other women, in particular those from the Wages For Housework movement,

<sup>1</sup> Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation*. Brooklyn, NY, Autonomedia, 2004, p. 11.

I began a study that brought me back to the origins of capitalist society. While revisiting the 13th and 14th centuries, I encountered the “great witch-hunt”. The feminist pamphlet *Witches, Midwives, and Nurses* (1973), written by Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English, was very important in my research process. It argued that the persecution of the so-called “witches” was deeply related to advancements in modern medicine and, in particular, the rise of the medical profession. But what struck me in this pamphlet was the chronology that it established. It showed unambiguously that the witch-hunts were coeval with several phenomena which have been identified as preconditions for the development of capitalism: the slave trade, the expulsion of the peasantry from common lands in various parts of Western Europe, and of course, prior to all, the colonisation of the Americas. This was a turning point for me—I realised that the witch-hunts had been a foundational event in the construction of modern capitalist society, and this led me to concentrate my study on this phenomenon.

The work I have done over the years has verified this initial hypothesis of a connection between the witch-hunts of the 16th and 17th centuries and the process of “primitive accumulation”. In this context, it is very significant that over the last two decades we have witnessed a return of witch-hunting, this time taking place in different parts of the former colonial world—Africa, India and Nepal—clearly in conjunction with the globalisation of economic relations. One of my projects in recent years has been precisely the study of these new witch-hunts. Without indulging in any form of anachronism, I have been interested in understanding how these two periods of persecution, although so distant in time and taking place under very different circumstances, can still throw light on each other and help us explain the phenomenon of witch-hunting as a particular historical form of persecution.

My decision in the 1970s to study the witch-hunts was also guided by the fact that the figure of the witch was being rediscovered by the feminist movement. “Tremble, tremble, the witches have come back” [*“Tremate, tremate, le streghe son tornate”*], a slogan chanted by women in Rome during a demonstration for abortion, was picked up by women across the country and beyond. The adoption of the witch as a symbol of the rebel woman happened throughout the feminist movement. Regardless of the historical accuracy of this image, this identification promoted a revival of studies in this area by many women, myself included, who went back to researching the witch-hunts in an attempt to understand whom these women were, why they were persecuted and how they relate to our struggle. Out of these studies, another

influential work for me was Carolyn Merchant's *The Death of Nature* (1980), which connected the witch-hunts to the development of modern science.

**AC** Besides those works instigated by feminist researchers, was there any other literary or historical material that informed your study? How useful to you was Jules Michelet's book *La Sorcière* (1862), for instance?

**SF** Although it is very romanticised, Jules Michelet's *La Sorcière* was useful, as it placed the witch in a context of class struggle, which he understood as a struggle against feudal power. This was invaluable, because many of the historical books that existed at the time, for instance Alan Macfarlane's *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England* (1970) or Keith Thomas's *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (1971), had more of a sociological perspective and, in a sense, de-politicised the issue. These authors, like other specialists who wrote about witchcraft, failed to place their object of study in the context of the world historical transformations that had taken place in the 16th and 17th centuries.

Besides the work of historians, that of some writers was also very important for my research, especially Shakespeare's plays. Many of his tragedies and comedies include references to witchcraft—take for instance *Macbeth*, *The Tempest* and, indirectly, *The Taming of the Shrew*. The shrew is not yet a witch, but her character reflects the misogyny and the will to discipline women that characterises the period in which the witch-hunts developed.

**AC** Out of the 1970s and 1980s generation of feminist researchers you have been referring to, you are the only one who has gone on to investigate the resurgence of witch-hunts in the postcolonial world. I am perplexed about their indifference and I also wonder why you find yourself in relative isolation (among scholars who do study this subject) when it comes to addressing the contemporary witch-hunts from a gendered and politico-economic perspective. Could you comment on this, and also give us some keys to comprehend the recent witch-hunts?

**SF** There is a lack of interest by feminists, I would say internationally, in the fact that witch-hunting has returned and that women are still being persecuted as witches. Then again, I have discussed my writing with a number of women, in particular with feminists from Africa, and some have told me that it is a topic that people do not like to discuss. Given the

portrayal of Africans—in racist, colonial literature—as incapable of rational discourse, there is a fear that if one puts the present witch-hunts in the spotlight, these racist stereotypes will be confirmed and potentially used to justify imperial agendas. I think, however, that it is a mistake not to speak about these new persecutions: once you consider the circumstances under which women are attacked as witches, you can see that this phenomenon has very little to do with African tradition. Instead, it has much to do with the social, economic and political environment that has been created by the economic policies connected with globalisation and the World Bank's structural adjustment programmes, which have destroyed the local economies, caused mass impoverishment and displacement, and are exacerbating local conflicts.

Moreover, globalisation has brought about a new land grab. This has not only undermined the main forms of subsistence of many rural populations, but also the communal land systems. Until the 1980s, in much of Africa you still had communal-based land property relations. Nowadays, these are under attack, because structural adjustment has opened the way to a sort of re-colonisation process whereby foreign companies now have rights—for example to acquire assets and repatriate profits—which they did not have in the post-independence period. The result, as I mentioned, has been mass impoverishment and the laceration of the social fabric.

The Pentecostal sects, which have descended on Africa (as well as on Latin America and other parts of the world) since the 1980s and that are financed by the most right-wing sectors of American politics, have played a more explicit role in the new witch-hunts. These have disseminated a virulent brand of Christianity that is in some ways refurbishing Calvinist beliefs, which claim richness is goodness and if you're poor it's your fault, or it's an indication that someone in your circle or family is plotting evil against you. Pentecostalism has re-injected the theme of the devil in religious discourse, contributing to a new fear of witchcraft among populations already traumatised by a relentless assault on their most basic means of subsistence.

Indeed, as soon as you start analysing the contemporary witch-hunts, you encounter very familiar faces like the World Bank, the IMF, and mining and agro-fuel companies, which are very interested in the great wealth that Africa has. Moreover, these people find it profitable to create situations in which villages are torn apart by these struggles: there is enough evidence to suggest that, in many cases, the charge of witchcraft is used to appropriate whatever wealth the accused possess and to annex communal lands. For

instance, discussing the witch-hunts that have been taking place in Zambia, historian Hugo Hinfelaar writes that witchcraft accusations are particularly frequent in areas that have been earmarked for commercial ventures like game ranching, tourism and so forth, and also that some chiefs profit from selling part of the communal lands to foreign investors. Keeping the villagers engaged with witchcraft accusations helps in the transactions.

**AC** We could also add the Nigerian and Ghanaian film industries to the list of agents contributing to a social climate where witch-hunting is made possible: both Nollywood and Ghallywood have been complicit in the promotion of stereotypes around African irrationality, and in making witches, zombies and the devil part of Africa's everyday cultural landscape and belief system.

**SF** Yes, there is not only complicity on the part of the cinema industry, but also, to some extent, on the part of the academic world. There have been some interesting studies by anthropologists, yet most have focused on the return of the occult and magical symbolism among the African ruling class, rather than on the attacks on women. They have not dealt with the fact that most of those accused of witchcraft are poor old women who have been insulted, attacked and in many cases pushed out of their villages or murdered. But a few documentaries on the African witch-hunts and the Northern Ghana witch camps have broken this silence; for instance, *The Witches of Gambaga* (2010) by the UK/Ghanaian journalist Yaba Badoe and *Witches in Exile* (2005) by the American filmmaker Allison Berg have been very useful, but neither of them place these new witch-hunts in the broader context of globalisation. However, they have shown in a very powerful way that these so-called "witches" are very normal elderly women who, in a lot of cases, have been thrown out of their families because they were an economic burden.

Today, there is a generational conflict that is played out, which is intensified by the economic hardships. This conflict is between what the new generations see as important for their future and what the elderly hold onto. Older women have their conception of economic security: you don't sell the trees, the lands or the cows, because this is life, and it is fundamental to people's survival. Whereas the younger generations, brought up under the influence of globalisation, believe that money is what gives access to wealth. This divergence makes older people often appear to be an obstacle to the prosperity of the new generation. There are songs in some African countries that say elderly people are afraid that the youth



will dispose of them because they do not want to sell their cows, but the youth wants to buy a tractor. Meanwhile, international institutions like the World Bank are promoting the idea that money is the only form of wealth, that the land has no value unless we take it to the bank to get some credit, and that people are poor because they see the land as the foundation for their subsistence. These, of course, are only some of the issues at stake. There are other factors promoting this new persecution against women—rivalry and competition for land within the polygamous family have been found to play a role and in some cases, witchcraft accusations have also been used to discipline younger women.

**AC** It is hard to find an adequate transition after such observations, but I would suggest we conclude by shortly going back to your experience in the 1970s, witnessing other feminists' appropriations of the witch symbol. I would be interested in knowing how you relate to neo-paganism, Wicca<sup>2</sup> and spiritual feminism today. What are your thoughts on the contemporary forms of identification with the figure of the witch, and what do you think they produce, especially against the backdrop of the current witchcraft accusations?

**SF** I find neo-paganism an interesting movement—in many ways similar to certain forms of eco-feminism—and I am familiar with the work of Starhawk, whom I have very much admired. The rituals practitioners of Wicca perform are part of a whole world of practices that try to reconnect people with nature. My only concern is that we don't lose sight of the actual historical dimension of the witch-hunts past and present. The danger of reading the past through the eyes of the Wicca movement today is to assume that those who were persecuted in the past were women practicing a particular pre-Christian religion, which is in fact what a number of Wicca followers have claimed. This, in my view, is a distortion of the historical reality. The risk is that we obliterate both the transformations that capitalism has brought about in daily life (and in the everyday institutions by which life is reproduced), and the struggle people have made against these very transformations. I'm insisting in my work that the women burnt at the stake as witches were persecuted not because they practiced particular cults, but rather because their demands, their activities, their resistance to the forms of expropriation taking place in their time had to

<sup>2</sup> Mouvement britannique du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle visant à faire renaître la sorcellerie en tant que religion.

be crushed. This is a crucial historical phenomenon whose implications are also very important for the present. Wicca, on the other hand, doesn't help us understand what is happening today in Africa, India, Nepal...

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