

Dear Victoria,

Berlin, 2 May 2022

I've finally gotten around to writing to you. To be honest, it's not easy for me to put anything meaningful about your exhibition *Love Needs Care* (2022) down on paper at the moment. The news of the war in Ukraine has left me feeling churned up inside for weeks now, and my mood is one of hopelessness. I am shaken by the suffering of the people there; it downright paralyzes me, making it hard to concentrate at times. It also takes a lot of energy to keep the omnipresent social affect of 'fear' at bay. Is it the same for you? The media, more than anyone, have been deliberately stoking anxiety ever since the beginning of the pandemic; it started with the fear of Covid, including that of 'long Covid' and/or a prolonged stay in intensive care. Recently, there's been talk of a 'killer strain' of the omicron virus that's supposed to reach us by autumn 2022 at the latest. And then, in the past few weeks, there's been this rising fear about the possibility of a nuclear or third world war. This kind of reporting – which is particularly conspicuous in *Spiegel Online* – puts its readers in a sort of constant state of panic. We get used to expecting the worst, which makes us more willing to accept the impacts of the pandemic and the war on our lives. Do you also find it hard to stay calm and keep stubbornly working away under these conditions? In facing the endless series of shocks that have come since Brexit and Trump, I've actually found it helpful to stick to my daily writing routine. At the same time, though, artistic and critical productions do not stand outside of world events. On the contrary: Maurizio Lazzarato recently wrote a text in which he claims that every form of production, including every scientific/artistic achievement, has been part of a war economy since the First World War.<sup>1</sup> The fact alone that we work and consume, he claims, makes us part of a targeted process of annihilation, whether this is a war economy or the destruction of the environment. And yet it's telling that Lazzarato doesn't say a single word about how the withdrawal from destruction he advocates affects his own production. Paradoxically, he apparently keeps on working, continuing to author texts like the one mentioned above. His equation of production with destruction also seems to me to be too schematic and simplistically totalising. Instead of declaring all production to be destructive, shouldn't we distinguish between different modes of production, and between the different forms destructive effects can take? Nonetheless, it might be entirely worthwhile to take inspiration from Lazzarato's reflections in sharpening our awareness of the destructive aspect of art.

Which takes me back to your works. With paintings like "Size 9 Petit Court Room" and "Followers in front of the Palace of Justice, Los Angeles 1971, Pucci Shirt" (both 2022), you've dedicated your attention to an undeniably destructive sect: the *Manson Family*, which committed numerous murders in the late 1960s. More specifically, it's the group's followers that interest you. Even when they were in jail, the women of the Manson family appeared confident, holding hands with each other and wearing short, colourful dresses, like models pacing a catwalk – a scene you capture in your painting "Size 9 Petit Court Room". Sketched out in bluish white, "Lime Lemmon" (2022) shows a group of Manson women absorbed in their work, lovingly embroidering a vest for their absent leader. These are no victims, and there isn't the slightest suspicion of co-dependency. Incidentally, the photograph that served as a template for the work is recalled by the bluish tone you've chosen for the women, and by their yellow-painted blonde hair. With this, photography is declared to be the truth of your painting.

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<sup>1</sup> Maurizio Lazzarato, *War, Capitalism, Ecology: Why Can't Bruno Latour Understand Anything About Them!* 4 April 2022. <https://illwill.com/war-capitalism-ecology>. Last accessed 29 September 2022.

In general, the figures who appear in your paintings are somewhat controversial – Marie Antoinette, for instance, widely considered to be extravagant and merciless, is commemorated in the impressionistic “Autre Chienne (White Marie Antoinette)” (2022). Without a face but elaborately coiffed, she sits at a lavishly furnished poker table. A Cupid hovers in the background, where a male figure also sits, seeming to slump in his seat. Most significant of all, though, is an erect, smoking phallus, painted in the manner of Philip Guston, which dominates the left half of the painting. It is as if, by flaunting the rituals of fashion and luxury, Antoinette were flouting the law of her father, represented by the smoking phallus – she ignores it despite its visual dominance. With “Twinkling Eyes ’89 (Christmas)” and “Martinez Picabia (Nude)” (both 2022), you also recently brought a new reference into play: the late Picabia of the 1930s and 1940s, a controversial figure within art history. Your rear view of a kneeling nude woman against a black background alludes to his pornographic works of the 1930s, which were supposedly sold to the proprietors of North African brothels. Progressive art historians continue to brand these paintings as “kitsch” – unfairly, in my opinion. For while Picabia’s porno works show a dangerous flirtation with the fascist aesthetics that were dominant at that time, they also prefigure some practices within Pop art, such as through their use of pornographic magazines as templates. The motif of the Christmas baubles in your work “Twinkling Eyes ’89 Christmas”, by contrast, communicates with Picabia’s final dot paintings, whose imagery was taken up (and enhanced) in the 1960s by artists like Sigmar Polke. While Picabia’s use of dots indicated a return to his Dadaist beginnings (painting against painting), you seem to be alluding to the decorative (and ritualistic) potential of the dot motif with your Christmas baubles.

I have also noticed that you depict the figures in your pictures – whether dots, Manson women or Marie Antoinette – in their relationships to others. This reminds me of Judith Butler’s critique of individualism.<sup>2</sup> For Butler, every self is part of other selves and “bound by a set of relations that can be as destructive, as they can be sustaining.”<sup>3</sup> To me, your pictures of the Manson women, above all, should be seen as a recognition of this ambivalent relationality of the self. The fact alone that these works are clearly based on photographs means they carry the stamp of the other (of reproduction through media). To some extent, they are bound to photography – painting always refers to another medium.

You also show the figure of Marie Antoinette interacting with others, as in “DecaDance (lila Marie Antoinette)” (2022). In this work, we see her sitting at the gaming table with her companions (she was supposedly a compulsive gambler), wearing extravagant earrings. While she may actually have been de jure dependent on her husband, Louis XVI, you stage her as a self-determined it girl in your paintings. The Manson women, too, you present as connected and related to one another through handicraft and fashion, although you occasionally seem to push their affinity for fashion over the top, such as when you dress one of them in a Pucci blouse. Furthermore, these women give the impression of mutual solidarity, even in a social framework of rivalry and competition. And yet they are committed to their leader Charles Manson (who is always absent from the images), a man who mercilessly abuses them. The message here seems to be that even an independent, self-determined woman can be a victim.

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<sup>2</sup> Judith Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence*, Verso, London, 2020.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

In this context, I find it telling that you choose to transform Picabia's late dot pictures (such as "Abstraction", from 1949) into opulently luminous and shiny Christmas baubles set against a black background. The baubles appear as a group, but they each have a different colour and pattern; while they stand apart, they are each set within in an ochre-painted colour field that unites them to a certain extent. In essence, it is the liberal ideal of independence that your exhibition reveals to be a fiction. In this respect, your work stands within the tradition of psychoanalysis, which understands humans as dependent creatures, embedded within familial and social relations. Dependencies appear in your works, too, whether it is the Manson women's dependency on their leader or Marie Antoinette's dependency on the goodwill of her husband and the French people. And yet in spite of all this dependency – as your pictures seem to say – a certain degree of independence and self-determined action is still possible. Fashion serves as the vehicle for this action – your pictures declare it to be the driving force behind an appearance of self-determination. Fashion makes it possible to overcome factual dependencies, at least for the moment of the staging. Artists, too, now find themselves confronted with a multitude of "radical dependencies" (Butler), from the pressures of the market to dependency on social media, since ignoring the latter can be tantamount to risking social death. Under these circumstances, there is no "free space". At most, we can *work through* the productive and destructive qualities of the dependencies in which we are entangled. It is precisely because social structures constrain our freedom in ways we can experience as destructive and conflict-ridden and/or enriching and motivating that we have to negotiate them – including artistically. To my mind, that is exactly what your paintings achieve!

Warmest regards,

Isabelle