

# Sylvia



*by* Sabrina Tarasoff

On August 24th, 1953, Sylvia Plath descends into the crawl-space beneath her mother's house, and is found two days later, a bright brooch in a soiled jewellery box, filled to the brim with sleeping pills. A decade later, her self-entombment brags in pithy verse: "I rocked shut // As a seashell. They had to call and call / And pick the worms off me like sticky pearls." These lines, from "Lady Lazarus," mark a poeticized self adorned in a glittery cape of detached language, starkly declaring the "I" as omnipotent in its very isolation – a "final" attempt, so to speak, to regain control over the emotions she felt exasperated by, and entirely through with. Her tone, particularly in *Ariel* (published posthumously in 1965) is spry with such confessions, as she hails herself as a subject shaped – and worn down by – society and its expectations, each poem confronting her multiple guises in absurd iterations. The political Plath; the woman, the mother; the poetess self-immersed in a cesspool of American romanticism, "self" paradoxically declared in an Emersonian voice<sup>1</sup> in order to move beyond (or "transcend") stifling social and cultural hypocrisies. In "Ariel," particularly, but also in earlier works, this self is split from the world in a hyperbolic, bipolar delusion (she writes, in her journal, in 1950: "Frustrated? Yes. Why? Because it's impossible for me to be God.") in which ideology is slowly shifted through pervasive repetitions of its own tropes, as though its mirror had been turned in on itself. Through this looking glass, Plath controls and manipulates her content, directing images of herself in verse like ghostly body-doubles pushed to perfection against the virtual boundaries of ideology, which in itself is then exhausted and emptied – and refilled, moreover, with counter-utopian fantasies, a traumatic overlay atop normative subjectivity to both highlight its processions and corrode them. Here, a sullied crawl-space becomes a Huismanian tomb; she an awkward performer of her own demise: "Dying /..." she reviews: "Is an art, like anything else. / I do it exceptionally well. // I do it so it feels like hell."

So, it is she who becomes the Nabokovian poster child for pain. Throughout "Ariel," the "I" is ornate and embellished in the proud garb of scars and a beating heart, which find their pleasure in public appearance. The entire symbolic procedure is one of the self cast into another's guise, trying on identity after identity – "what a million filaments. / The peanut-crunching crowd / Shoves in to see" – as a way to explore an alienated relationship to the outside world. Plath's mid-Atlantic parole tries on all kinds of dark accents for taste, acting out what Wayne Koestenbaum has called "performances of captivity,"<sup>3</sup> in which she repeats none other than the circus-like process of becoming, failing and erasing the self, again and again, to gain access to that eminent place of having suffered the most, suffered par excellence. But more precisely, Plath recites herself in order to navigate the boundaries of the systems and structures that shape "self" to begin with, particularly within the contextual framework of post-World War II America. Always dissonant, identity is a vague core blurred by abstract relations and, for Plath, can only be reified through writing, which is as much an estranged confrontation of herself in multiple subject positions, as it is a way to annihilate them. Engaging in a perverse game of dress-up, she drapes herself in the expectations of society in a desperate attempt to empty it of its presiding ideals. To the reader's gaze, Plath is, at times, a political subject, a social subject, an aesthetic subject. She is set going by love "like a fat gold watch" in the first poem of the volume, only to end up a dead metaphor at the bottom of a pool, where "fixed eyes, govern a life." In one moment, she surrenders to humiliating exposé, fragmented, knocked-out and offered up for public consump-

tion ("The big strip-tease. / ... // These are my hands / my knees,") only to overwhelm in the next stanza with a colossal voice, a Latinate poetic presence ("I am your opus, / I am your valuable.") She carries on, repeatedly giving in to these "life-giving gazes"<sup>4</sup> of capitalism, academia, marriage, motherhood and sex, though not without admonition: "Beware / Beware," she writes, self-mutilated into pure spirit, "Out of the ash / I rise with my red hair / And I eat men like air." In these last lines, Plath envisions her own immolation as procreant,<sup>5</sup> conjuring the dark energy of creation through the metaphorically ruined self. Sticky pearls and a purple heart are worn as regalia on the sleeve of dominant ideology, and this woman – perfected and transubstantiated in the isolation of her verse – has a theatrical comeback, a staged and directed reform.

Thirty-seven years later: a clearly distressed, dirt-smudged face peers into the black throat of an oven. The young man, clad in the soiled white scrubs of psychiatric patients, appears mesmerized by the dulcet strains of his companion. This other, a soothing (if not somewhat fascist) voice neatly tucked into dark slacks and cardigan buttoned all the way up, guides the deteriorating mind to a mindful abyss: "Can't you just imagine," he asks, "that the oven is a happy place? Can't you just imagine that it is the place of the mother you love so much?" The young man breaks out of this momentary fascination, his miserable garb mirroring the windowless, shabby apartment around him: "No! It is the oven that killed the Jews! It is the siren that drew Sylvia Plath to her – and her beautiful words stopped in that dead orifice!" The stable "friend" suggests that they go, in what is sure to become a Beckettian cul-de-sac. Refusing, the hysteric man says he cannot possibly leave the apartment as its enclosure is his end, "just as the oven was Sylvia Plath's end." The controlling voice, a calming authority, invites him to look in its void again:

Man 1: "Drink deep its atmosphere."

Man 2: "Ah, the perfumed oven-gases of Kandor produce strange flowers."

Man 1: "Yes, we are a pair of those sensitive orchids. Too weak for this harsh planet. Let's cross over to a gentler world: a world of beauty, intelligence, art, poetry."

Man 2: "Yes! ... Yes!! Sylvia Plath is there! I can see her! There she is—holding out her hand to me!"<sup>6</sup>

These closing moments of Mike Kelley's film *Extracurricular Activity Projective Reconstruction #1 (A Domestic Scene)* (2000)<sup>7</sup> seem to get at the root of Plath's confessional act by exaggerating it to the level of psychosocial drama. It's a perverse and playful appropriation of her image, no doubt, but also a way of poignantly appropriating her figure of resistance as one counter to ideologies that still stand. By hyperbolizing the already gaudy surface of her verse into the spirit of Poetry incarnate, Kelley ensures that she too be liberated of her inadvertent subservience to hegemonic thought,<sup>8</sup> by toying with "zero-degree instances of desubjectification,"<sup>9</sup> as Koestenbaum would have it. After all, Plath's legacy was mourned by Generation X, which romanticized her death and rendered her little more than a clichéd cover image held in the limp hands of disenfranchised girls on TV, all immersed in gloom and sitting alone as if to dot the "I" in desolation. Her "failure to cope with a cultural and conceptual order"<sup>10</sup> in life was, as such, levered in death as a tool for a marketed experience of alterity – which is to say, otherness itself appropriated as a culturally controllable state. In mainstream media, Plath transcends through the im-



Mike Kelley, still from *Superman Recites Selections from "The Bell Jar" and Other Works by Sylvia Plath*, 1999, 7:19 min.  
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plied borders of capital into the left imaginary, where any oppositions to dominant ideology can either just linger as fantasy or be co-opted into the system as such. This fantasy of the “outside” – the suspension of “revolutionary thought” on the surface of ideology – is what Merlin Carpenter called a “trance” state in a recent essay entitled “The Outside Can’t Go Outside” (2015).<sup>11</sup> Reminding readers of the non-existence of this realm, he writes: “there is an outside inside the body in the same imaginary way, but it would be more appropriate to call it a line of control within.”<sup>12</sup> The individual is always already a subject.<sup>13</sup> In *EAPR#I*, Kelley perverts this in creating a parody of the “outside” inside the oven (the “non-place” of death, transcendence of the social) and measuring it against the “inside,” i.e., that vague core of self, here magnified as a domestic environment representing a claustrophobic (and internalized) social reality. The “line of control” in Kelley’s films thus addresses the very pathos of participation, like a conspiracy theory about subjects that may have always already been individuals, yet cannot escape their hysteric socialization.

In *EAPR#I*, the characters proceed with the “sin of literalism,”<sup>14</sup> as John Miller notes in his book *Mike Kelley: Educational Complex* (2015), to evoke the subject as a readymade. Yet stuck in their own hysteric confines, he also amplifies these prescriptions to sheer absurdity. Imbued with a Duchampian sense of the doppelgänger, subjectivity then becomes the uncanny bid to refuse one’s “selfhood” and insert it into the realms of the fantasy: a “problem of replication”<sup>15</sup> represented by Plath, but recuperated in her insistence of poetic rebirth through its confines. This paradox, a double-image, is something Kelley had already begun to work with a year prior in a video entitled *Superman Recites Selections from "The Bell Jar" and Other Works by Sylvia Plath* (1999), in which the Man of

Steel dramatizes Plath’s roman-à-clef from a dark “non-place.” In front of him on a pedestal is the bell-jar city of Kandor — “a miniature, artificially preserved capital” – to which he directs his lamentations. Here, the bell jar is a symbol of his alienation and of the impossibility of recuperating the past, but it also creates a virtual border, which internalizes this reflection of self. The subject situated in its distorting lens folds life back into its body, where the self – like Kandor – can be preserved. In both *EAPR#I* and *Superman Recites*, Kelley presents Plath as a readymade sculpting herself against the boundaries of repressed cultural hypocrisies, suggesting that it is in this alienation that the self can be repurposed. “Touch it,” Superman channels, reciting from “A Life,” “It won’t shrink like an eyeball, / This egg-shaped bailiwick, clear as tear.”<sup>16</sup> Kelley poses the “sin of literalism” on the surface of ideology, allowing it to become its own body double: an absurd second self used to displace ideology and evade its cruel politics. Plath, in this sense, arguably became Kelley’s body double – an assumed guise, a pretension, an artificial voice set forth as diversionary critique.

Fast-forward four years: Plath’s stance has been somewhat paradoxically possessed by the waif-like face of Gwyneth Paltrow, stilled in a painting based on a found image from *Sylvia* (2003) – a recently produced biographical drama on the poetess’ years spent in Cambridge. This Merlin Carpenter piece, appropriately titled *Sylvia* (2004), is the result – as he writes in an essay published the same year – of a series of “digressions after digressions” following an attempt to write a wholly other text reviewing the work of Louis Althusser, which lead him to go “out and about to ask some famous rebels from history what to do.”<sup>17</sup> In a veritably Wordsworthian projection, Jean-Paul Gaultier, Eazy-E, Jesus and a number of other noteworthy individuals assume the voices of critical theorists, the self

cast into another's, to communicate some impossible gap. "Consciousness," says Plath, reciting Althusser on Freud: "on its own is incapable of furnishing a distinction between systems."<sup>18</sup> It's a convolution of identities falling through the rabbit hole of ideology: Paltrow guised as Plath reciting Althusser thinking about Freud in the mind of Carpenter. But, just as Althusser brings up the theoretical affinities between Marx and Freud to pinpoint how "the introduction of revolutionary forms of thought ... could either indicate the presence of a bewildering object, the unconscious, or come up against the ideology it forbade and the repression it aroused,"<sup>19</sup> so does Carpenter use his digressions to create a (bottomless) model of subjectification. Here's a sampling:

Aleister Crowley: ...you cannot allow yourself theoretical compromises, because you always pay extremely dearly for them. // ... // Jean-Paul Gaultier: The purpose or "ethic" is not to announce the revolution but to take the risk of thinking in full view of the public. That is not a risk that many revolutions have been prepared to take. // ... // Jesus: The regional theories that overlap with others, and the way they overlap, as well as the significance they take on as a result of the position conferred upon them in the new structure, must be thought with reference to the new structure, not the structure to which they belonged prior to or outside this articulation.<sup>20</sup>

Like Kelley's *EAPR* works, in attempting to fill in the blanks in the memory-based architectural models of the artist's past schools (seen in *Educational Complex* [1995]) Carpenter's use of prosopopoeia in the *General Theory of Previous Generation Terrorists*<sup>21</sup> creates a cohesive repartee based on filling in blanks between seemingly contradictory critical voices. These figures have no unity except for their conflicting relationship to one another ("bumpin' the box," as Eazy-E would have it) in what Freud would call the psychic apparatus; Marx, a topographical system. Paltrow/Plath is a schizoid model of this relationship, a way of pointing to the unconscious, that "empty centre" of ideology, or "vague core of self," whilst musing on how it fills itself with, and thereby also perpetuates, those same hegemonic beliefs. At the Bergen Kunsthall, where *Sylvia* was first shown in an exhibition entitled *Look What You Made Me Do* (2005), this was expressed in a series of images all petulantly casting the blame of their own interpellation on an unidentifiable other – "figures" alienating themselves within a group for a common, though unannounced, purpose. Attempting to trace a genealogy in Carpenter's thought, this network of images – consisting not only of *Sylvia*, but also cars, cut-out dolls ("Lolita"), a close-up of *The Cacodylic Eye* by Picabia, et cetera – creates a pathway to the conclusion explicated in the *Outside* piece last year: "I suggest that the new revolutionary subject might be new groups, forming inside existing groups."<sup>22</sup> Carpenter aptly reminds us that, just as Marx and Engels were the group (or Kandor, an isolated community; Picabia and Höch, co-producers; Plath, a fragmentary unit), the model of the "group" does not necessitate the inclusion of a majority, but rather simply involves the act of grouping, splitting or retracing as an alternate strategy.

This presents the maybe far-fetched ("speculative") option of considering the self as a poetic "meta-group," where the "I," diffused between poles of "madness" contra the social, could on its own provide a premise for ideological revision, such as a re-organization of the class system as Carpenter suggests, or more simply, reclamation of the self as a source of power. This proposition

seems to be underlined in Scott Benzel's *Desperate Living* / *Sylvia Plath* (2016), a screenprint featuring an image of Plath in Cambridge, England from 1956, placed above the opening credits of John Waters' *Desperate Living* (1977), in which the camera looms over a table set with an elegant dinner of rat. In a recent exchange, he mused that it was "an attempt to conflate [Sylvia Plath's] 'poetics of resistance and re-creation' with John Waters' satirical 'poetics of resistance and re-creation' through Mink Stole's 'mad' 'protagonist' and her self-re-creation in the 'intentional "desperate living" community' of the film."<sup>23</sup> Our satirical party grows: a Marxist-Lacanian Paltrow-Plath, now with an add(l)ed Peggy Gravel. Benzel's parallel between Plath's authorial voice and Waters' model of social construction seems to psychoanalyse the post-structural by making blatant the significance of individual or authorial experience in the crystallization of agency. The marginalized subjectivity, or "authorial fantasmatic," or as Kaja Silverman called it, "The Female Authorial Voice," allots the self to settle in fantasies not only structured in the psyche, but also in "object-choice, identity, and the subject's life as a whole."<sup>24</sup> The self, that is, folds felt experience into an allegorical framework superimposed on the "real." Stole's hysteria (as Peggy Gravel, screaming out of her broken window: "How about my life? Do you have enough allowance to pay for that?!") is case in point, reified by the counter-utopia of Mortville – a trailer-park Kandor structured in the somewhat coincidental splinter group of the socially alienated: murderers, conspirators and those dressed in the fantastical surplus of mental otherness. It's a perverted bildungsroman, in which Stole only manages to transcend her fragile and high-strung suburban mentality by becoming a fracture of society and succumbing to her "sickness." By metonymic association, (and arguably a blind eye to political correctness,) Benzel's Plath is imbued with that same inherent madness, a dark force, that leaves one imagining her as Waters' protagonist, screaming in this instance, "Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through," whilst running out of her domestic trappings to find asylum in negative self-knowledge, that mystical realm of symbols. The reciprocity between these two women, evoked in Plath's uncanny gaze over all that Peggy Gravel has on her grotesque plate, again raises the question of the doppelgänger, only, arguably sees it as unsuspecting partner-in-crime, in which history can re-assert itself – to borrow from John Miller again – through a somewhat paranoid reiteration of self.<sup>25</sup>

To get to this point of history remodelling itself (or transubstantiating!) Miller writes: "against ideology's seeming timelessness, clearly the hailing of a subject is an act that is never achieved once and for all; rather, it must unfold as an ongoing series of iterations." Plath seemed to augur this possibility for structural change in casting herself as an emanation, a ghostly body double dressed as literary device shaping subjectivity through metonymy. The self as a colossal, poetic entity; the self as a patriarchal construct, as a matrimonial tie; the self as an object skirting on the surface of value or as a conduit summoning through itself the values of an alienated society. Plath consumed them all as guises, and created, between them, an intricate script external in her verse. Like communicating with the supernatural via self-suggestion (or who knows, otherworldly contact) of a Ouija board, Plath sought to summon the repressed self in order to reveal, in broad day, the hypocrisies and contradictions of normative subjectivity. It seems Plath, in all her acerbic wit, foresaw the political inefficiency of addressing ideology as though from the outside. Instead, she understood herself an inextricable part of its topography, a hysteric "node" transmitting clustered

fantasies of elusive “I’s” to an (initially) uninterested audience (in Carpenter’s Bergen show, Paltrow/Plath too gazes at an adjacent painting that reads: “Not Very Interesting,” though arguably that could be about Paltrow’s performance.) At that, it was the performance of her own making, which led her to the discovery of a line of control within: an all-too-ensnared umbilical cord that she thought, in the end, could only be cut. Yet in the literary, poetic, critical co-optations of her image – which even Richard Prince is privy to in perpetuating her myth by holding her alleged last letter in his collection and prodding at the sensitivities of privileged “sad girls” – her voice is cast as a final epitaph, a corrosive agent folded over the illusion of criticality that pervades most reformist agendas (particularly within the “art world”). Disintegrating the virtual borders that separate self from ideology, in madness and grief and powerlessness, Plath prods at her very desubjectification, claiming the only control she can in verse. This isolation – modelled most clearly in Kelley’s domestic scene – is a dead-end, and one that erases and annihilates more than just decades in its most literal sense. Yet, symbolically, it flickers with awareness: not of the self actually actualized, but of the capacity to create temporary getaways, moments of zero-degree, where the means of exchange and creation can move against expected tropes. This private space, the temporarily descendent bell jar, is a moment of perverse retreat, which collapses context and instead forces only a consideration of the relationships that remain at surface. They refract and disperse into myriad selves; Superman recites: “She has one too many dimensions to enter. // Leave her alone now.”

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#### Endnotes

- 1 Adrienne Kalfopoulou, “Sylvia Plath’s Emersonian I/Eye,” in *Women’s Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 40:7, 890.
- 2 Sylvia Plath, *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*. Ed. Karen V. Kukil, 45.
- 3 Wayne Koestenbaum, *Humiliation*, 2011, 135.
- 4 John Mazzoni, “She Is A Product; Not Herself: Ideology, Subjectivity, and Gender in the Journals of Sylvia Plath,” *Modern Horizons*, July 2015, 2.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Mike Kelley. *Extracurricular Activity Projective Reconstruction #1 (A Domestic Scene) 2000*, 29:44 min, sound. To foreshorten the text, we will refer to this as EAPR#1 for short.
- 7 Mazzoni, 2.
- 8 Koestenbaum, 135.
- 9 Mazzoni, 2.
- 10 Merlin Carpenter, “The Outside Can’t Go Outside,” 2015.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. Trans. Ben Brewster. New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001.
- 13 John Miller, *Mike Kelley: Educational Complex*, MIT Press, 2015. pp. 40
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Merlin Carpenter, “The General Theory of Previous Generation Terrorists,” 2004.
- 16 Mike Kelley, *Superman Recites Selections from “The Bell Jar” and Other Works by Sylvia Plath*, 1999, 7:19 min, color, sound
- 17 Carpenter, “General Theory”, 2004.
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 Louis Althusser, “Writings on Psychoanalysis: Freud and Lacan,” 2013, 121.
- 20 Carpenter, “General Theory”, 2004.
- 21 Carpenter, “The Outside”, 2015.
- 22 Ibid.
- 23 Scott Benzel, in conversation with the author.
- 24 Walter Metz, “John Waters Goes to Hollywood: A Post-Structural Authorship Study,” in *Authorship and Film*, Routledge, 2003, 158.
- 25 John Miller, *Mike Kelley: Educational Complex*, MIT Press, 2015. 40.

Merlin Carpenter, *Sylvia*, 2004, oil on canvas, 205.5 × 152.5 cm.  
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