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Role

Play

*The way
you bite : hacking
modes of perception
through play.*

A conversation
between
Camara O'Cart
and *Alicia
Reynolds.*

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Dear Tam, This summer, in collaboration with artist Tiz Creel, you designed and hosted *The way you bite*, a digital role-play workshop drawing on rituals of tarantism. Echoing Temple Magazine's focus on the idea of future(s), I would like to start by addressing how and why role-play, as a medium and practice, offers possibilities for building multiple identities and social worlds to inhabit, be it nostalgic settings, future dystopias or alternate contemporary realities.

TH Role-play has become a dominant lens through which I look at social and political structures, and I think this is because of its mutability as a medium. I first began incorporating role-play into my research when collaborating with artist Ed Fornieles and visual theorist Penny Rafferty in 2017, both of whom draw heavily on live-action role-play or larp in their practices. Larp can be defined as a mutually created fiction in which participants adopt characters authored by a larpwriter or game master (GM). Players contribute to improvised narratives by performing actions in character and become co-creators of their own realities. Researching the history of larp and getting to know its warm communities opened a new terrain of thought for me. Play became a methodology to rewrite rules, hack modes of perception and re-imagine social structures.

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Play can also be a tool for world building. Drawing on your experience within larp and role-play-based arts communities, can you expand on this methodology?

TH As Swedish larp designer Johanna Koljonen says, *role-playing is the dreaming of collective dreams*. If we are to collectively imagine alternative worlds, futures

and realities we desire to inhabit, we need tools to do so: role-play is one such tool. The identities and narratives co-created in-play allow us to step out of our own lived realities and deconstruct the architecture that surrounds us, to dream of alternate conventions and choreographies. As a medium, role-play facilitates a queering of perceptions; it teaches us to view societies as hackable. If we look at role-play as a tool for worldbuilding, it's important to view 'worlds' as playgrounds. When players enter a game, a framework is established to set the boundaries of play. This is what cultural theorist Johan Huizinga calls the magic circle, the boundary and rules that define a game in time and space. When players step into the magic circle, a new frame of reality exists. The magic circle becomes a temporary world, and role-play a form of world building. Players use symbols and dialogues to fabricate facts, constructing frames of reference for their realities. These dictate social norms, group dynamics and political structures. Frames of reference suggest that a 'world' does not simply exist; rather it is constructed through different modes of perception. The idea of role-play as a toolset for alternate perceptions is key here it allows us to build temporary worlds, while also exposing the mechanisms at play in our current social realities. In the role-play workshop Tiz Creel and I created, *The way you bite*, we built a temporary world in which our characters were suffering from an invisible illness and searching for ritual and community. This took place in our current temporal setting (2020) and in a digital Zoom space. After we developed our characters and built reference points for the reality we were to inhabit, we had a short break. Then we stepped into the magic circle of play and began to co-create our world together.

NEO-TARANTISM

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You also started designing this workshop during the quarantine in London and therefore in a moment of global crisis. In this respect, it seems only natural that the workshop focuses on finding healing rituals. In particular, it draws on tarantism, a phenomenon originating in 15th–17th century Southern Italy, in which the (supposed) bite of tarantulas would cause communities to engage in frenetic dancing rituals to free themselves of the spiders' venom. Can you tell me more about the specific intention(s) behind this research and, more broadly, behind the concept of 'neo-tarantism'?

TH This research began in a reading group for Silvia Federici's *The Caliban And The Witch: Women, the Body and Accumulation*. Federici's book looks at the displacement of women's roles in Europe during the transition from feudalism to capitalism. Curator and writer Kate Benedict mentioned that the book reminded her of the phenomenon of tarantism. According to myths, in the summer months of southern Italy, tarantulas would bite people (mostly women), causing a complex syndrome called tarantism. This was characterised by hysteria, delirium and convulsions, which could only be cured through dancing rituals. In *La terra del rimorso*, anthropologist Ernesto De Martino argues that the cult of tarantism was often the sole relief for those supposedly bitten by tarantulas, yet it was also a means to free them from alienation caused by poverty or social marginalisation. Through these healing rituals, women who felt oppressed, ignored or exploited in society could be protagonists within their own communities, allowing them to manifest their silenced pain. It

then occurred to us: *what if the bite they suffered from was in fact capitalism*? Within a crisis, many look to community and ritual as healing mechanisms. We each suffer, to varying degrees, from economic and political systems dominated by the pursuit of capital. In this context, 'neo-tarantism' proposes the use of healing rituals and community as cures for the bite of capitalism.

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It is important to note here that the phenomenon of tarantism is concomitant with the development of patriarchal capitalism, which contributed to subordinating women through categories related to health and illness, good and evil. Exorcism was then a popular way of curing hysterical, delirious, 'possessed' women. It is no surprise then that these communities were mainly made up of women. However, these healing rituals were allegedly not meant to point fingers, or to label participants as 'crazy'. On the contrary, tarantism might have allowed for marginalised individuals – mainly women in this context – to form a new community. From this perspective, the healing process was also a liberating one: a means of catharsis through community.

TH Exactly!

THE CAPITALIST BITE

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In *The way you bite*, you play on the image of the spider as an allegory for capitalism. Employing monstrous creatures to embody capitalism is a common trope and the spider in particular, exerting power over what is entangled in its

web, is a fitting metaphor. In the workshop, the 'spider within' – which is pinned down as capitalism – must be awoken to recover from the bites of that system. Can you tell me more about what you envisioned as a possible 'cure' during the workshop: how did you perform the capitalist bite and expel it through modes of play?

TH The main element of the workshop was a larp in which players enter a Zoom reading group in character. In the first phase of play, characters discuss a novel about a spider epidemic, each drinking a glass of water. In the second phase, certain characters spread conspiracy theories, while others confess that their friends have died from water contamination, revealing hidden anxieties and paranoia. The leader of the group announces that the government has poisoned their water, and the group falls into disarray, locating points of pain in their bodies, sharing their fears of alienation and searching for a cure. In the last phase, characters create a collective healing ritual that builds movement and energy to a point of catharsis – through shaking, dancing and chanting – in the hopes of expelling the poison. The 'bite' of capitalism in this case is the contaminated water, an insipid toxin that is unknowingly causing collective illness. The group must first come to terms with the venom in their bodies in order to expel it. The cure to this 'bite' is community, as this collective force counters the division of social relations and the hyper-individualism perpetuated by capitalist systems. The group uses role-play to create collective healing traditions, in order to both express their pain and recover from the destructive forces of capital.

TRANSFORMATIVE BLEED

AR Moving into the terrain of larp, the analogy between the

bite and the concept of bleed is intriguing. Bleed, in larp lingo, defines the porous border between the self and the performed identity, between reality and fiction. However, the whole point of larp, as it seems, is to acknowledge the fact that these different realms can never be considered in isolation from one another. That they constantly permeate one another. As for the bite, it is an act of crossing over, of entering and contaminating the skin, the flesh. In the vampire idiom, it is referred to *as the embrace*. An embrace is not about fusion. It is about addition. It is about the impossibility of oneness. This is where the bleed and the bite meet: in the acknowledgment that a gap intrinsically separates individuals whereas our selves are multiple and constantly evolving.

TH Beautifully said – *bleed* is a term inherited from the Nordic larp tradition, which occurs within the pores of the fictional and the real. This contact realm allows us to embody alternative social identities while drawing from and speaking to our own experiences. As a result, it can open sites for meta-reflection in which we critically reflect on our experiences and, at times, change our perspectives. Just as the bite is a form of contamination, of spilling over, so is the convergence of the 'self' in play. What this exposes is the notion that our identities are in a constant state of mutation, informed by the structures that surround us.

AR As you mentioned, play opens meta-dialogues surrounding the forms of social identity that are continually at play not only in temporary worlds, but also in our lived realities. Physical and psychological

boundaries are constantly re-negotiated, both in and out of game. From this perspective, and this is more of a meta-question, do you believe that play itself can function as a healing ritual?

TH I think play functions as a healing ritual in its creation of metacommunities. Within the ecology of role-play, meta-communities can be viewed as a set of mutually created fictional communities that link networks of interacting players and characters. A key element of these networks is the state of acceptance, purpose and belonging they afford their members. The heightened immersive and emotional states that role-play facilitates allows for games to become extremely meaningful and for intense communal bonds to form. During my first year in London, I remember feeling a greater sense of social belonging in larps than in any other setting. Stepping out of the magic circle, and leaving behind these temporary communities, felt like an emotional hangover. Yet, this also allowed for my actions in and out of play to acquire meaning and for me to shift my perception of the social architecture around me. Play can be healing in this sense; it provides the groundwork for players to create close-knit communities while also encouraging them to develop critical meta-perspectives. What if we played life as we play larp, and applied the techniques of these 'games' to our views of social reality?

This leads to the question: what is to be kept from these 'games' and brought to our lived realities, in order to start navigating our world(s) as playgrounds?

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