



As far as the eye can see: soap bars, candles, scented water, and amulets conjuring visions of love, fame, fortune, and fertility. Under the counter, hidden from the light of day: contraband paraphernalia for the practice of voodoo and the darkest of magic.

These are the conductors of the free-floating hopes and fears pulsating through Mexico City's mercado of Sonora, the epicentre of the capital's curanderismo (folk magic) and witchcraft. Walking its maze is an entrancing experience that infuses the *sentipensar*¹ (feel-think) with syncretism: the exuberant, mongrel merging of ancestral spiritualities and religions, often creating new imaginaries with a life of their own. Conceptual coherence and purity, the totems of western mind and morals, seem of no concern in this sweltering, human, all-too-human place.

In Mexico, politics and magic can get enmeshed in fascinating but not so emancipatory ways, if these are scrutinised from a (western, progressive) high moral horse. Most of the mercado's ware celebrates (internalised) machismo, gender stereotypes and a toxic heteronormativity. Above its live market – a heart-wrenching display of sacrificial animals living in dire conditions – towers a sign:

'No to animal activists! Our live market is our livelihood!' Also, some of the country's most corrupt politicians and murderous drug lords are known to surround themselves with powerful sorcerers and witches for the enhancement of their personal prowess and protection.

I have kept this mercado and similar jarring material realities close to my chest while developing the two-year Studium Generale programme Wxtch Craft for the Royal Academy of the Arts in The Hague (KABK) together

*** with a wonderful team and conspiring co-curators. This programme, which consists of twenty-nine in-depth conversations with inspirators and elders, explores the contemporary momentum surrounding the reclaimed witch as a fertile node for personal, political, spiritual and/or artistic identification. The many-gendered wxtch, that we write with an x as a marker of inclusivity, appears as an intensity at the cusp of several lines of

¹ 'The ontological *sentipensar*, as a research method, requires the non-pretentious facticity of the encounter with others, listening next to the fire, learning with humility from the indigenous, the farmer, the taita, the grandfather, the popular wisdom, paying attention respectfully to their saying just as respectfully as we read a scientific paper, without despising, without that rude lust of he who believes he is the holder of the objective truth, of he who blindly believes that the whole truth is in the small scientific truth.' From: Juan Cepeda H., 'The Problem of Being in Latin America: Approaching the Latin American Ontological *sentipensar*', *Journal of World Philosophies* 2 (Summer 2017): 12–27.



inquiry running through our programme and many wxtch-themed exhibitions worldwide. These include the exhibition *The Milk of Dreams* at the 2022 Venice Biennale (especially the subsection *The Witch's Cradle*), *Witch Hunt* in the Hammer Museum (Los Angeles), and our own exhibition every moment a junction in *Nest* in The Hague. And last but certainly not least, melanie bonajo's work for the 2022 Venice Biennale *When the body says Yes*.

Ever since the Wicca movement emerged around the fin de siècle, this reclaiming of the witch, that for the sake of this article I will assign the pronouns they/ them, has experienced several iterations as a site of identification and even a title of honour. Most of the times they were associated with (eco)feminist movements and progressive politics. However, they are also occasionally appropriated by the extreme right that, for instance, projected onto their close communion with the land a *Blut und Boden* doctrine,² or onto the injustices they suffered a proof of its anti-systemic, con-spiritual theories.

On the other side of the spectrum, proponents of strong Enlightenment values, such as reason as the chief source and test of knowledge, accuse the wxtch of being an instigator of untethered irrationalism and uncritical groupthink (as the wxtch will often denounce the excesses of modern individualism while embracing community and the commons). Fortunately, a lot of the last century's critical thinking has been dedicated to the deconstruction of rationalism, individualism, and relativism, thereby providing potent counterarguments to the above-mentioned accusation. Not to mention spiritual traditions and indigenous ontologies from, for instance, Asia or Latin America, that depart from a completely different onto-epistemological foundation altogether.

However, there is a deep point to be made here.

Without a critical and

informed grounding in tradition and context, accompanied by a self-reflexive sense of how knowledge is produced and legitimised, the wxtch can once again become an empty signifier and therefore susceptible to the appropriation of just any kind of politics, including pussy-grabbing abusers who claim they are 'witch-hunted' by the so-called woke mob. It is interesting that no matter how much explanatory context or content is given – never mind

² See also the book *Hitler's Monsters: A Supernatural History of the Third Reich* in which Eric Kurlander describes the Nazis' interest in Germanic paganism, witchcraft, Luciferianism, and Eastern spirituality in their attempt to find a suitable Ario-Germanic alternative to Christianity.



the twenty-nine conversations of the Wxtch Craft programme – the figure of the witch still tends to function like a Rorschach inkblot for many, bringing out people’s deepest-held hopes and fears, longings and agendas, just like the soap bars of the Mercado de Sonora.



Today, the wxtch emerges as an intersectional, queer ecofeminist, pre-enacting a liberated world free of racism, classism, sexism, and ableism – a practice that goes way beyond a reductive view of witchcraft as herb-crafting and stargazing pagan lingering in the woods. This far more political wxtch speaks to the deep longing to re-establish a sensuous, re-enchanted intimacy with a more-than-human world. This desire in itself gathers momentum at a moment when toxic strong men (Trump, Bolsonaro, Putin, Duterte, the list goes on and on) are waging all kinds of multi-level wars and we, as humanity, are clearly incapable of acknowledging, let alone meeting the challenges of an unheard-of collision of crises and catastrophes of our own making. The global pandemic, which in many morbid ways has exacerbated many existing oppressions, divisions, and inequalities, has only added to this longing for connection and call to action. The wxtch not only offers a site for critical reflection and mourning over a damaged and disenchanted world, they also hold a space for replenishment and rest – the sine qua non for pre-enacting a liberated world after the end of the world as we know it.

It is important to point out here that the wxtch’s values and politics are explicitly embodied, meaning that thought, feelings, and actions are aligned while one tries to live up to one’s vision as best as one can. Also, it means that they are acutely aware of how centuries of colonial, patriarchal and white supremacist violence have been inscribed into their body that has been keeping the score. The wxtch applies their arts and crafts to heal this intergenerational trauma vis-à-vis a profoundly patriarchal, racist and ableist society and its institutions. These oppressive structures have only started to be addressed in some vanguard institutional environments, albeit often slowly, partially, and reluctantly.

And yet, back in the mercado, I am once again humbly reminded that it is impossible to collapse a progressive, emancipatory politics into a generic, essentialised category of ‘the witch’. This collapse denies the specific ways in which different cultures practise and relate to their own histories and traditions. ‘The’ witch doesn’t exist and Silvia



Federici’s seminal book *Caliban and the Witch*, one of the pillars of the contemporary reclaiming, is a very specific Marxist-materialist, feminist, and therefore contemporary interpretation of histories, that, we do know by now, cannot univocally represent ‘how things really were’ back then. Also, let’s not forget, paradoxical as it may sound, being able to reclaim the witch as an activist stance is a privilege in itself, as in many places, to be branded a witch is outright dangerous, and definitely not a brave and cool identification that finally is receiving some legitimacy in the mainstream. Silvia Federici herself wondered in our programme: why would you want to identify with



and thus potentially commodify such a blood-drenched history? Identifications and reclaimings open up worlds of possibility but can leave one again vulnerable and exposed in the eyes of a predominantly fixating, tokenising and ‘othering’ world. This leaves us with a couple of questions: Has also this wxtch become a comfortable narrative even as (or maybe because) it decentres master narratives and centres under-narrated her-x-stories, as a counterpoint to his-tories? If the practice of an embodied social justice doesn’t need

the figure of the wxtch, why should we want to use such a complex ‘Rorschach inkblot’ like the wxtch? Shouldn’t we try to transcend the wxtch, instead of reclaiming them, precisely because this would be a sign that society at large is finally catching on?

But then also, why would these syncretistic new imaginaries and critical fabulations surrounding the wxtch be a bad thing? If there is a place where we are free to experiment with these strategies, wouldn’t it be art? Isn’t the wxtch, as the artists show in the every moment a junction exhibition, at their most vibrant when they are continuously shape-shifting: fluid, multiple, switching from code to code, moving from form to form?

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