On not being afraid to make difficult art

Writer Elvia Wilk discusses community authorship, the industry around success and failure, and conveying complicated things in elegant ways.

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I think about generations as useful categories when framing art. I'm a Gen Xer. You're from the Millennial generation, a generation a lot of people seem tired of or totally want to avoid. I think it matters if a person can remember the broadcast TV with three networks, or 9/11 in real time as an adult, or life before the internet, or what it was like when Kurt Cobain and Tupac Shakur were alive. How're you thinking about generations these days?

[My novel] *Oval* is a world where people are not living with intergenerational ties. It's very much a description of Berlin now or Berlin when I was writing it in the 2010s, and to some extent how I live in New York today, although a lot of my friends are having children, so I think my landscape has changed simply because when people you love are having children, you have no choice but to think about the future very differently. Family systems come into play in a way that in my mid-20s, in Berlin, just felt completely foreign.

I do think it's possible to—and many people do—live without connections to young or old people. This becomes common even in an isolated urban environment, and by isolated I mean homogeneous, where your world is restricted to people sort of like you. Even when you do reproduce, you're reproducing your world, so you're not necessarily in touch with the different ways of life that previous generations' standards offered.

Oval centers on a lost parent and this inability to deal with grief because these twentysomethings are not even supposed to have parents. They're supposed to have emerged *sui generis* from their own creativity, to have self-invented. That offers a way of thinking about the foreclosed horizon of the future, which I deal with a lot in [my essay collection] *Death by Landscape*.

For instance, Who is allowed to speculate on the future? Is the future too dangerous to look at? Who owns the future? What happens if you come up with an idea for the future and it gets taken and somebody makes it come true? What happens when you try to collectively imagine the future instead of trying to own or control the future as an individual person—an individual author? How could the production of an imaginary future be something collective or something done in concert with other people rather than a single-author creative endeavor? Those questions are threaded through my new book in different ways. Can we think about the regeneration of life beyond "humans producing other humans"? Because that's tied to an idea of the family unit and is quite restrictive.

The essay that focuses most specifically on speculation as a practice is called "Future Looks." It's about the aesthetics of futurism and various genres or subgenres of science fiction: cyberpunk, steampunk, and this new emergent genre called solarpunk. I'm exploring this tension between the aesthetics of what we want the future to look like versus the politics that we want to create.

Art and politics are certainly on display in *Death by Landscape*—art that rejects patriarchy, that dismantles systems of oppression or reification and manages to wriggle out of cooption, absorption, the status quo. These are good goals, but I do worry about art that has a "point" or a "goal," art that replaces the pursuit of flexible attention with inflexible intention. The online ideologue who seeks to weaponize art is one of the more exhausting types of people.

***Death by Landscape* made me wonder: How do we manage to navigate a highly-online world without succumbing to dehumanization? I see it in things like the live-action roleplay (LARP) sections of the book, where in "A Book Explodes" you have people basically playact your novel and in another you attend a vampire LARP. It seems the path of flight is to seek out hybrid experiences, places that use the internet not as a portal, but as a bridge to real-life interactions. Is that close to accurate?**

When it comes to: Is there an art that can elude cooptation? I think, in general, no, probably not. My typical way of thinking about this is that complicity and critique are not opposites and that it's much more of a Venn diagram. When it comes to thinking about resistance or opposition versus complicity with systems of power, I can't imagine an "outside." So how entangled do we get? What kinds of relationships do we want to have with those nexus points of power? How do we want to appropriate what they offer, to twist and mangle their messages? Do we want to say back to them what they're saying to us?

When it comes to "punk" as an aesthetic, punk could be a historical genre, right? However, I quote Mark Fisher in the book, who says that, for him, punk wasn't exactly an aesthetic, it was of a mode of sharing and circulating material outside of mainstream channels. Punk was objects, artifacts, and ideas being made laterally, passed around, circulated, back-channeled.

This connects to my chapters on live-action roleplay (larp), which encompasses a multiplicity of practices and hybrid genres, as you say. One reason I'm interested in larp is the way that the groups that create these games, these roleplays, govern themselves in relationship to the games that they play, so that what happens in a game is not seen as incidental or irrelevant to the group that exists outside of the game; the work that is made is part and parcel of the politics of the society that makes it.

Then there is also this important aspect of it being communally authored, and the relationship between texts and roleplays—you can write the rules for a larp before it happens, but you're certainly not writing the ending to the story, so it's a different idea of what "authoring" a text means.

Across the essays in *Death in Landscape* I noticed the word "failure," or versions of that word, pop up often. You lived in and have written about Berlin. I remember Jessa Crispin (of *Bookslut*) writing about Berlin as a repository for failures/the "unsuccessful" around the release of her book *The Dead Ladies Project: Exiles, Expats, and Ex-Countries*. Something she heard said upon her arrival in Germany: "You're in Berlin because you feel like a failure…Everyone who moves to Berlin feels like a failure. That's why we're here. You'll have good company."

I don't know who said this originally, but the thing about infrastructure is that you only notice it when it fails. Infrastructure is meant to be invisible. You don't think about the electricity in your home until the light switch doesn't work. You don't think about the Wi-Fi until the router cuts out. Failure is the space where fiction comes in. Fiction comes in at the moment when the router light blinks off and you have no choice but to confront the systems at work because something has broken or short-circuited. You have to question the whole thing because something clearly had been failing all along.

That comes up a lot in my book: Look, these things have been failing all along! The language of crisis that we use to talk about environmental collapse or extinction, as if this is the momentary—no, these are slow processes. The "before and after" that's created by the language of crisis is useful for certain kinds of narratives, but it's extremely *un*-useful for thinking about intergenerational life, to return to that idea.

In terms of larps, there are different kinds of games, and the interesting ones to me don't rely on that oppositional winner-loser setup. I like when the game is about co-construction of the world rather than different

players within that world beating one another. That's a very utopian space. To make the roleplay fun, you might want to lose on purpose. What if we drive towards the negative ending? What if in losing the game there's some kind of redemptive or epiphanic moment? What if it's more fun to break the rules or break the system? Games (and narratives) can invert the value judgments that create the systems that winning and losing are based on.

I have one essay, "A Planet of Feeling," about Lars von Trier's movie *Melancholia* and Michelle Tea's book *Black Wave*, where I write about the violence of the idea of resilience within neoliberal capitalism, this belief that you should personally be able to bounce back from failure, that failure is temporary, failure can be recouped for value. "Fail better," "fail harder," "fail stronger," you see all over Instagram that any kind of failure you might encounter, you can simply recycle it into success. You learn your lesson and then cash in on it by writing a self-help book about the lesson you learned.

I take this as an example of how responsibility for failed infrastructures gets pushed onto the individual, and that pain is so individualized that we see it as a personal failure, but we might be suffering because of a very systemic failure that many people are suffering from, and it's not a psychological failure or a failure of personal strength.

In the essay "Funhole" you delve into Jonathan Lethem's novel *As She Climbed Across the Table*. You were just talking about failure and success, so let's think specifically of literary success, and frame it with the poles of Jonathan Franzen and Jonathan Lethem. It works similarly with Sally Rooney and Helen DeWitt. Sally Rooney is praised for the readability and digestibility of her books, whereas Helen Dewitt's masterwork, *The Last Samurai*, is multilingual, looks weird on the page, and presents a challenge, so much so that it fell out of print despite its best-book-of-the-last-however-many-years plaudits.

Franzen critiques novels that are overpraised for their difficulty, while Lethem was once given consolation about *Fortress of Solitude* by a person in the publishing industry who said, "I'm sorry that book wasn't a success." *Fortress of Solitude* is probably Lethem's most "canonical" novel, but what that person meant was: "Sorry your book didn't become Franzen's *The Corrections*. It didn't dominate discussion, win the National Book Award, get you on the cover of *Time* magazine and an HBO deal and sell a buttload of copies."

Lethem took solace because he knew his stuff was always a little too "weird" for the big crossover "success." And DeWitt's marginalization makes a nice counterpoint to the cult of Rooney. There's, of course, some degree of randomness in how writers' success plays out in their own lifetimes, and there's also the weird factor. What are your thoughts on literary success now having published a novel and an essay collection, both from a respected indie press in Soft Skull? As you're an expert on the "new weird," I figure you're the person to ask.

I'll stick with the obvious, which is that I *am* on the "weird" side of those dichotomies. The publishing machine probably reinforces those dichotomies more than authors themselves. There's more weirdness in Franzen than one would usually let on, and Rooney has some, too. If there wasn't some weirdness, it wouldn't be gripping. There's grit and traction to extremely, almost glossily, readable work. Otherwise it wouldn't hook you. It's not like Lethem and DeWitt are Velcro and Franzen and Rooney are a Slip 'N' Slide.

Certainly, I aim for readability. I desire to be accessible and rigorous, which aren't opposites. I don't intend to do either, be "popular" or be "weird," and I don't know if most writers start out intending to be readable or intending to be arcane. Probably the savvy ones start out intending to be readable because that's more marketable, but I think most writers start out intending to write what excites and interests them, or vexes them, or makes them feel like they're getting revenge on an unjust world, or what helps them come to terms with misery and loss, things that are very Velcro-y and that you don't slip right off of.

It's also true that I like challenging things. And I'm interested in challenging myself, which means that, therefore, the reader might also have to rise to the challenge. When I interviewed the author Marlon James recently, I asked, since he wrote from the POV of a woman narrator: "As a man, is it hard to write from a woman's perspective?" I specifically asked that because the narrator in his book said that men don't know anything about women's lives. And he said, you know, well, *people forget: all literature is supposed to be hard. Writing things is hard!*

We also talked about how his recent books are super challenging at the level of the page. They pass themselves off as fantasy novels, but they're really complicated, dense works of literature. Not that those things are oppositional, just that traditionally we think of a fantasy novel as highly consumable and quick, and these are not quick books. His ability to make genre difficult really helped me accept that literature is supposed to be hard, and let's not shy away from that.

Of course there is a difference between being hard and being alienating. "Alienating" writing is obtuse on purpose. Anyone who's read a lot of academic writing knows that there's a kind of writing that doesn't want to be understood. I hope mine is the kind of writing that really, really does want to be understood and wants to convey something that's really hard, and sometimes even beyond words. Lethem and DeWitt are two of my absolute heroes, and yes, I also love Franzen and Rooney. What I like is conveying incredibly complicated things in the most eloquent ways, and also the most funny, challenging, and bizarre ways possible.

Elvia Wilk Recommends:

Wendy comics by Walter Scott

"Springtime Again" by Sun Ra

The Hour of the Star by Clarice Lispector

Venomous Lumpsucker by Ned Beauman

Day of the Triffids by John Wyndham

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