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Agatha Wara
[Uten tittel]

MFA
Kunstakademiet 2018

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A quick note to the reader. This is part I of a two part of what I am calling the "self-profile". I am borrowing the format from the typical "profile" pieces written by that New Yorker magazine.

This idea has been a long process. With many starts. I have gone very deep into my experiments with the idea of profiling "myself" and ultimately I came back to my first. I struggled with two choices as I saw it - wanting to withhold an actual narrative, and wanting to create one. I tried many ways to withhold writing a grand narrative of myself but came running into the same problems and was not satisfied. It was too sarcastic, too ironic. And I want to play with those levels.

I now think that the biggest affront to my ambivalence to my own postmodern existential slippage is to write a narrative.

I wrote this piece as an imagined piece for Norwegian airlines magazine. And want to layout the final two part piece to look like it belongs in the magazine.

American in Scandinavia—I: Diplomatic passport

By Mike Sperlinger

One February morning, I deliberately arrive late at the Grünerløkka studio of artist Yngve Holen, where I am meeting Agatha Wara, the Oslo-based modern multi-hyphenate and editor of the eponymous magazine *Agatha*, and her best friend and curator Geir Haraldseth. I want to make sure I am not the first to arrive: I have never met Holen but his always cool, near-abstract, often-disassembled industrial objects make me feel cold and dissociative.

The state-of-the-art surfaces of his pieces rarely depict a human form, but conspicuous, nonetheless, remind me of a fraught, hollowed-out reformulation of the human body and its shifting relationship to the various prostheses of our age of mass digitization, 3D-printing and proto-bionic tools. A generation of young sculptors has begun responding to a recent crisis of the (post-) human body by attempting, in reactionary fashion, to refigure it in very literal, physical terms. The way that Holen's sculptures start, by contrast, at the iconoclastic end of the spectrum, seemingly beyond humanity, where the human is akin to a piece of gristle, an afterthought or an accident makes me feel cold.

This creepy fascination has made me instinctively feel that this is not a man I want to be alone with. I am late but the others are even later, and I am met at the door by Holen, an attractive tall, thin man with wild blonde curls and steely-blue eyes, who ushers me in welcomes me enthusiastically and asks me to sit at Humanscale Freedom Headrest Chair in white leather. The place is like an industrial designer's office with a touch of luxury auto parts showroom. There room is dotted with models for his new work at Neu galleri in Berlin—3D printed wooden car rims—as well as some older work like the fronts for Siemens-made CT-scanners, coated in the same ivory hue used for Berlin taxis. Huge rolls of bubble wrap line the entire back wall.

We chat and Holen starts telling me how he likes Oslo—having recently relocated here from Berlin—its calmness and connection to nature. His mother is Norwegian and he spent part of his teens here so he is partly reconnecting with the Scandi dream. Where the work reads as slick and distant, he is charming and engaging, joking around.

He says of Wara that she is unique among other editors he has known. "She is a starter of things, and has chameleon-like a bag of tricks. Others stick to their lane, she doesn't have *just* one."

Wara and Haraldseth arrive with a vague, unrepentant story about a distraught taxi-driver. Haraldseth is a man in his late thirties—an exuberant, handsome-type, who loves word-play. He is wearing the "I LOVE DICK" puffer jacket from the Bjarne Melgaard collection which we got at his "Purge" exhibition last year. Wara in a red puffer she made herself embroidered with the words "Feelings are Intense" in a vintage art nouveau font, and a high ponytail, betraying the fact that she is thirty-seven. "Mine is the knockoff version." She says. Both of them are very animated with Holen. The purpose of the visit is to talk to Holen about a collaborative piece he is contributing to the Fall issue of *Agatha* with fashion theorist and writer Ida Eritslund, who happens to be his girlfriend. It's a review of Maaemo the only three-Michelin-starred restaurant in Oslo, the couple at there and recorded an unplanned fight they had over dinner, which needs to get shaped into a piece. The next issue will focus on food and lifestyle, "Like Oprah's O magazine," says Wara. Haraldseth is on the magazine's board and has a regular column in the mag. This is

exemplar of how Wara likes to work, in her capacity, this time, as editor of a magazine, she is "genre fluid," mashing formats between entirely different fields or sectors, like food and art, astrology and finance. She likes to place people out of their normal zones. During the two hours it takes to talk about the piece, Holen has his assistant run out and get us coffees from Tim Wendelboe. The joshing and kidding continue as Wara and Haraldseth regard the 3D wood printed sculptures as fitting into the food piece, in a way that is aptly jarring. Wara Leafs through the first issue of *Agatha* and points out everything wrong with it, its internal jokeyness, no one can understand this! Who cares about writing about art, we write about food."

Agatha Wara is not Norwegian. Or entirely American, although hearing her accentuated 'r's and occasional vocal fry would have you thinking otherwise. "I think of myself as extra-American," she tells me, "I had to study it in order to become it. It was for survival."

She was born in Lima, Peru, while her we father was temporarily appointed vice-consulate for the Bolivian embassy. At just a few months old, her whole family moved back to La Paz, Bolivia. The 1980s for Bolivia was a time of severe economic crisis due to foreign debt of three-billion USD. In typical Latin American fashion, money was printed to cover government budget deficits leading to hyperinflation that increased prices by about 23,000 percent making the Bolivian peso was nearly worthless. "I remember people lugging around suitcases full of cash just to pay bills." It's details like this from her personal biography that Wara has shared with me over the year that we have been meeting for interviews, she has been unsparingly frank about herself. She has confessed to me her feelings of self-doubt and being disingenuous, she has told me stories of immigrant struggle, the shame of not belonging, and becoming a little fraud at age nine. Hoping, she tells me, to at the end, answer her most dreaded question, "why are you in Oslo?"

At present, we are in her studio, setup in a way of a job interview where she is interviewing me across her desk. I am seated across from her, which I presume she has set up this way on purpose, to play the role of executive. She is nursing a cup of tea with almond milk, and is telling me about her teenage-hood interest in the stock market. "I called up one of those TV-lawyers for some advice. I wanted to figure out if there was a way to get a *person* listed on the stock exchange." This was pre-internet around the early nineties. "There was this strong image in my mind that you could bet money on moods." Sounds difficult, I observe. "Even then I remember knowing that reality was malleable, and seeing lawyers as architects of what was possible—legally speaking of course." None of the lawyers she called were able to offer any advice, they were mostly perplexed she tells me. "It was fine, I had lots of strange ideas." Wara jokingly blames her parents for her precocious curiosity and disregard for the "given" realities. Especially her father. Currently a roofing contractor in Florida, like her, has donned a multitude of other guises in his life: the aforementioned diplomat, hotel manager, restaurant server, stockbroker, truck driver, dry-cleaner owner, car salesman, plumber, the list goes on. "It never crossed my mind that there was anything unusual about being lots of things." She tells me that his life has been way more interesting than her own and that one day she plans to write his biography. "He instilled in all of his children a curiosity to look at the minuscule—how is that leg attached to that table—to the big stuff—how the economy operates." I remember him showing me a crystal and telling me that it was also a life form. "So many fuzzy memories rush to mind of wild things he did, running away from police with [my sisters and I] in the car, almost rolling off a cliff after our car got hit head first by a truck and my crawling out of the back window, picking

the lock from prison cell, oh yeah, and sneaking his whole family to the USA illegally.

When she was nine her parents came home and told her and her three sisters that they would be moving to America. “There was a lot of movement the next couple of days, furniture was being sold, and suddenly we were saying goodbye to our whole family at the airport. It was a matter of days.” She says while looking at a distant point behind me. They would have no contact with the majority of her family again, in pre-internet 1989. At some point before they reached Miami Agatha remembers her mother telling her that her name was not “Agatha” it was “Gabriela” or whatever was written in the fake passport. My mother was asking me to lie. It made an impression.” Two nerve-wracking flights later with connection in Argentina, they were in America. It was a jarring change for the affluent family of a diplomat. They arrived to a small one-bedroom apartment, all six of them, and immediately had to adjust. Wara tells me a few stories ranging from sad to humorous to revolting, of having to stay indoors all the time because her parents were literally afraid of America; learning why you don’t take a curbside sofa home; and where her current phobia of roaches stems, it includes the words “cockroach nest.”

“My mother just told me that my father used to wear a full suit—tie and vest—to work at his first job in Miami as a plumber’s assistant. Having come from severe poverty as a child, for him a suit was a meaningful symbol of pride. “A suit, in the hellish Miami heat, to tool around with sinks and toilets. Eventually that stopped.”

For an already shy child, who would cry “almost daily” earning her the family nickname “La Llorona de Panama” (the name of a South American wrestler roughly translating to “The Crybaby of Panama”) the uprooting to American life was in her words “traumatic.” She says, “I totally checked out for many years. We all dealt in our own way.” Her father spoke English, but the rest of the family did not and her “terrifically stubborn” mother enrolled her in elementary school in one of the advanced programs, without being able to speak a word of English. Neither the students or the teacher spoke any Spanish. “On top of being hyper shy, I didn’t dare to try to say any English words—I was in a little cage all by myself.” Of course she eventually learned to speak the language but maintained a dislike of grammar and writing in general.

According to Wara this was a decisive point in Wara’s own social development, without any irony or distrust for a child’s memories she tells me, “it was “assimilate or die.” She recalls being bullied, and “pushed around” for being “weird.” She continues, “I couldn’t even pronounce my own name in the American accent.” At home, everyone was dealing with their own traumas “coping quietly and individually” no one asked how she was doing. These memories are what form Wara’s understanding of “personality” as a “manifestation of survival. I instinctively began to study people around me in their non-weird “Americanness.” All that stuff people ascribe to Americans, to be outgoing, casual, friendly, etc. I became very good at observing and mimicking. Who you are or how you feel inside didn’t matter. You can mold yourself to be anything.” She pauses. “Kids endure so much pain.”

Even today, Wara recognizes her own “fake-ness.” She tells me, “faking is a part me. And it’s partly lying. Maybe its a white lie, maybe not. But that doesn’t even matter, because it just gets blurry where you begin.” She pauses. “It’s my default and I treat it with ambivalence.”

She speaks a lot about what she describes as “backbreaking immigrant stubbornness” and ascribes a lot of the pickle situations she’s gotten herself into to this character trait. “With my very eyes I watched it, no matter what happens you have to make it work. But it also means that I can take a lot of abuse.”

Academically she did well in gifted program in high school called International Baccalaureate. Her fraught relationship with writing continued, with the added bonus of having to attend special tutoring called “comma detention” regularly during lunch break. But overall her grades were good, ranking her at twenty-seventh place in a class of over five-hundred. Sounds impressive, I think to myself, until she tells me that the IB program was a class of twenty-seven, “I was dead last, the slacker in the pool of overachievers,” she says. And I register some adolescent-like pride as she tells me about how she plagiarized her final thesis, remember pre-internet, and got caught.

Wara describes her teenage-hood in South Florida as “dead boring,” surrounded by nothing but strip malls and car dealerships. There was not much to do socially, “the most “cultural” thing we could do was go to the local “Barnes and Noble bookstore”” She says. “Other than that it was hanging out at parking lots or occasionally driving to the swamp to toss marshmallows in the alligators’ mouths.”

But on her own time, Wara was kind of a library geek. She found refuge at libraries and went to any library big enough to have archives. First it was looking through old fashion magazines, particularly obsessed with international designers like John Galliano (she took 2 hour bus to miami to the launch of his Bal Harbour store just to get a glimpse of him) then it was through the microfilm collections of Architectural digest from the 60’s and old Modern Painters magazines.

She had always been creative Wara began drawing at a young age. She was “the artist” of the family. But while creativity was welcome there was no push to develop it. In high school that changed, her art school teachers liked her and encouraged her. “I was one of those annoying students that started my own art club, and even took an unused hallway and turned it into a gallery. They got a plaque made for it an everything.” At seventeen she got a job making illustrations for a teen-edited section the Sun Sentinel newspaper, one of the biggest newspapers for South Florida, and even won “artist of the year” two years in a row.

After high school, Wara didn’t go to art school because of the usual story line, not enough money. “I would have wasted it just as bad as I wasted my first college attempt,” she tells me. What she “wasted” was going to University of Florida on scholarship for her academic scores. A six-hour drive from her parents house, in Gainesville, the university is basically a school of 50,000 dropped smack in the middle of rural North Florida. One of the best public schools in the U.S. it comes with all the trimmings typical of an American college: a football team—the Florida gators and a fraternity and sorority row. The art department was supposed to be a small safe enclave in the sea of “normies” but Wara did not fit in either way. She was confused by their approach to teaching contemporary art: “They used the language of “metaphors” to teach us about concepts, and asked us to make a painting of that metaphor—it was so literal to me, and did not fit my brain. Not to mention that I hated language at that time after all that tutoring and “coma detentions”. I felt totally inferior, my shyness crept up full-force and turned into crippling social anxiety. I stopped going to classes. For two years I didn’t go to classes, I got a job at a pizza place as “phone bitch” and took orders from frat boys until 4 in the morning, and lost all my scholarships. Then Sept. 11th happened and my

parents wanted me to move back home, which was fine by me because I wanted to get the fuck out of Gainesville.”

Eventually Wara finished school at a local college in Boca Raton near her parents’ home, in 3D computer animation. She did that in order to make her dad happy, it was a compromise of studying something practical but also creative. “We were “immigrants” you know, immigrants don’t study *art*,” she says. Around this time her younger sister tipped her off that their school’s art gallery was looking for an intern. She applied, got the internship which led to a proper job. Her boss, a man named Rod Faulds was the gallery director, “a proper silver-fox type surfer dude.” She respected him. “He would basically ask me to lie to anyone who asked for him, to say he was in a meeting, while he was out surfing.” He also terrified her, “with all his authority and newspaper clippings of his shows at the Guggenheim.” At twenty-one Wara learned what it takes to run a gallery, working with curators and international artists like Lucy Orta, and art dealers. At the same time, she began meeting artists from the neighboring Miami, starting to both curate small exhibitions in friends studios showing their artworks, and showing her own work. In 2003 Wara had her first proper exhibition with friend Nicole Gugliotti, titled “This Means War” at friend and artist Naomi Fisher’s space called Bas Fisher Invitational. The show was an installation with video and a performance, with Tomas Hirschorn-eque cardboard sculptures from stolen recycled palettes from Walmart used to re-create a life-size gas station, complete with a car, all the junk food in the store, even a cardboard ATM. Gugliotti and Wara both tended the gas station during the opening. Friends came to the show and organically began playing roles too, a bum parked himself on the curbside sipping a real beer, a guy pretending to pump gas, and “customers” buying their “fake” snacks, cigarettes, and tchotchkes.

In early aughts, the Miami art scene was undergoing a huge transformation with that the landing of the megalith art fair known as Art Basel Miami. The first art Basel Miami was slated to debut in 2001, but Sept. 11th was cancelled due to 9/11 and anthrax scares. In 2002 Art Basel Miami made its official debut, Wara was in attendance at the VIP previews and parties, witnessing the dealings of the international art market, and gaining an perspective of art as first and foremost a material good. “Art was a luxury commodity.”

While meeting all these international players Wara at twenty-three had still not travelled outside of the U.S. (apart from the emigration from Bolivia as a kid). Because of her in-limbo-status: she wasn’t exactly a “dreamer,” she tells me, she had a social security number but didn’t have any rights which made her situation precarious and could not leave the U.S. In 2004 her legal residency came through, and she could finally go abroad. Within six months, Wara was on a plane with a one-way ticket to Tokyo.

Desperate to get out of Florida Wara accepted a job teaching English in Japan for a year. “It never occurred to me that it was unusual to just pick up and go, leave everything you know.” A dealer she met while working at the university gallery, Sarah Gavlak, put her in contact with the *one* person she knew in Tokyo. A gallerist by the name of Tomio Koyama—of Tomio Koyama Gallery—one of the most powerful contemporary art galleries in Tokyo, and known for bringing up Takashi Murakami and representing Yoko Ono. “I pitched him the idea to curate a group show of drawings by a bunch of friends from Miami and to my surprise he said yes.” She recalls. “I packed a bunch of drawings in my suitcase and went.” The exhibition was titled “Think Warm” and included work by about ten artists including Naomi Fisher, Hernan Bas, and Diego Singh. She would spend four very formative years in Japan there and tells me that her memory of

that time is foggy, “some sort of post-traumatic blockage from prolonged contact with the Japanese.”

While curating the exhibition at Koyama gallery was exciting and a success, her paralyzing shyness came back the day she set foot at her new job. “They threw me into a classroom of my own the very first day - the first hour of being there. The idea of having to stand in front of grown businessmen every day and teach them English, aside from ironic, was mortifying. I also collided with the whole corporate Japanese culture in general.” She says. “Dominated by such strong hierarchy, rules, and strict dress codes.” But she stayed, exemplar of that stubborn-immigrant thing she described. She wanted to make the experience worthwhile.

“After about a year, I quit my job and had no safety net. My boyfriend at the time, a totally normal Japanese salary-man my age who I met while teaching English would give me a weekly allowance, basically because he felt bad for me, I had nothing else. I would spend it in 3 days or one night of drunken karaoke antics. I thought about becoming a hostess and knew a girl who was doing that, but I also heard that those girls—even foreign ones—get involved with the Yakuza and end up dead. It was too close for me, I don’t get thrills from stuff like that.” She tells me. She was living in total poverty, going to fabulous fashion parties for Bernhard Willhelm and Chanel, not finding her place in the the insular Tokyo art scene—not finding it that interesting anyway—and not really making any artwork apart from some drawings of street girls called “Yamabas.”

With no job, no money, and nowhere to go, she got the “absurd” idea to start an art fair. “My whole understanding of art was so informed by the art market I had closely followed in those first years of Miami Art Basel: the holy trinity of art was galleries, collectors, artworks. Museums in Miami were so enmeshed by market politics anyway that from my young perspective, public institutions didn’t even equate, museums who? The first time I went to a biennial exhibition in Europe it seemed to me exactly like an art fair, except without the after parties at strip clubs.”

Art fairs, many would say, are a necessary evil, the cauldron for value creation. With this strong impulse, Wara told her friend, gallerist, and common ex-pat, Julia Barnes she wanted to make an art fair. And just like that the two of them started to work on it. They invited two other friends to form the core team, got themselves a board, some sponsors, and a space—an old high school cafeteria in neighborhood called Akihabara. The fair was called 101Tokyo and Wara was the director. Being a foreigner, a woman, and also young was like the perfect rudeness trifecta to the homogenous and sexist business culture. Doing anything locally anything was a challenge. “Local galleries, yes, even the young cool ones, found the whole thing suspicious and formed a secret group to decide wether or not to join. They were leaning on not.” Things changed when her old friend Tomio Koyama got involved as a sponsor and participant. A total of twenty-eight galleries joined in the first year with 14 from outside of Japan. Some serious galleries came like the Swiss Galerie Peter Kilchmann and Neon Parc from Melbourne, wanting to explore the Japanese contemporary art market. Smaller artist-run spaces joined as well like lokal_30 from Warsaw and Willy Wonka from Oslo. But the initiative that started with a fierce can-do optimism soon became a monster for Wara. “Having had zilch experience in running a fair, or a huge budget, sponsors, a board, or a staff, needless to say I was fucking up left and right. My whole staff stopped talking to me the week leading up to the opening, can you imagine?” She says breaking into a laugh. “At the time, I was crushed.” When the numbers came in after the fair, she describes, they owed everyone money, the sponsors weren’t

happy, and eventually the board I had helped put together fired me. “It was my Steve Jobs moment.” She says still half smiling. “It was important for me to fail so greatly, something had to stop me from this “American-immigrant “if you dream it you can be it” backbreaking load I was carrying around.”

And the relationship with Tokyo ended as abruptly as it had begun when she learned of her firing via press release announcing a new director. Wara moved back to Florida in mid 2008, a little over four years of living in Tokyo, and the middle of the American financial crisis. Even though I had gained a lot “valuable work experience” she air bunnies, she found it impossible to get a relevant job in art. “I had been gone for four years, I didn’t know anyone in Miami anymore, I couldn’t even get a job gallery sitting. There were freezes on new hires, budgets were cut, and people held on to their jobs. I thought after the hell I had endured in Tokyo I had somehow paid my dues and would be able to slide into some chill arty job, but didn’t happen. It was a blow to my young self-esteem.” She tells me. “I ended up taking a job teaching little gangsters to silkscreen. It paid double any other irrelevant job.” The job was teaching silkscreen at Christian Church’s after school program for at-risk youths. She didn’t actually know how to silkscreen herself, but lied to the pastor that she did. “Teaching myself how silkscreen was the easy, dealing with those animals, that was the rub.”

Not at home as a teacher, Wara learned about a graduate program in curating at Bard College and applied. She got in and went, which she somewhat regards as a mistake, along with the whole discipline. The prestigious curating program was located in the countryside of upstate New York. Her application was a fictional exhibition titled “Friends and their Friends” after the Harald Szeeman exhibition, wanting to underscore the natural influencing that occurs among artist friends. Wara was puzzled that she was accepted, but glad it gave her an out from teaching. Though her experience there was not the safe haven she was hoping for, “I wanted a space to think, reflect on the work I had done to that point, and of course expand.” But instead, she found the program “divisive, performing the perceived invisible borders that exist between “critical thinking” and the “market interests.” Basically, no one wanted to talk about the art market in any interesting way.” She continues, “it was for self-serving lefties with a strong feminist agenda,” and “a finishing school for ambitious young ladies.” She pauses. “If I stayed any longer I would have been radicalized as alt-right.” She jokes.

There was a silver lining in spite of the curriculum and teachers. During her required internship in Berlin she met Estonian artist Katja Novitskova and American Timur Siquin. The three became close and the two artists’ work became the subject of Wara’s master’s exhibition and thesis essay. They bonded through philosophy—the kind that was not in the curriculum, mainly the interpretations of Deleuze and Guattari’s texts by “street philosopher” Manuel De Landa, and also Quentin Meillassoux. Ideologically, the exhibition had almost grandiose ambitions, aiming to “formulate a new notion of art”:

“In 2009, when discussing the current function and potentials for contemporary art criticism, theorist Diedrich Diederichsen argued for the voice of “emergent people,” the voice of those who have recently arrived “in an already finished world of objects.” Such a world is founded on distinctions between images, signs, and the real, a world in which nature and technology belong to separate realms. As “emergent” subjects, artists Katja Novitskova and Timur Siquin pursue their own desires in order to formulate a new notion of art — a notion that fundamentally rejects the separation between art and

reality, and instead argues for an evolutionary ontology that charts structural tendencies, patterns, and flows across disparate domains.”

It baffled the teachers and so did her dissertation “Young Fish, Old Fish” where she performed a critical reading of the two artists’ work through a neo-materialist lens. She began to write more, facing her fraught relationship to writing, and realizing that she is not a “horrible” writer.

CCS wrapped up and once again, without hesitation, Wara left America. She was hired as curatorial assistant by a newly launching triennial in Bergen and going to Norway seemed, again, like the most natural thing to do. When she learned that the curators were “post-marxists with no interest in anything else” Wara asked that she be used in a different capacity, “opting for the paper pushing to enduring more ideological torture. That’s how I became the project manager.”

Around this time two things were happening. One, she curated an exhibition called Shell-Reflexive in Miami, which would lead to a bigger exhibition titled DISown a year later curated together with the artist collective Dis. And two, it was becoming clear to her that she was not good at taking orders from Biennial curators or artists.

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Oslo represented a break. A break from the rat race of the American art hustle, a break from her own immigrant guilt, a break from the role she was being pigeonholed into as a “post-internet” poster-child curator. A hiding. A regroup. A rebrand. “Like Madonna.” She says.

At the official opening of Club Liar she spent the whole morning signing and kissing her magazine jewelry working on her nails... signed and signed while smiling and according to Haraldseth looking rather pleased with herself. When the job was finished he touched Haraldseth’s arm and said, “You know, I like taking my nails so seriously, it ruins my whole credibility.”

[Part II continues]