



**LEIGH TENNANT**

**CLINIQUE (OF LESS  
COMPROMISE)**

Prohibition has openly mutated to what both Freud and Lacan had revealed as its truth: a will to jouissance, a push to enjoy, to consume. Sublimation seems old fashioned, tedious, its eventual fruits, pale before the instant gratification we reap from staging ourselves for the network eye of others. We identify with our images, complete with the myriad technological avatars of drive-objects and with silicon enhancements. Globalization is the age of the market, but ‘addiction’ is the natural law of the market

-Veronique Voruz<sup>1</sup>

MUCH HAS BEEN SAID regarding the capitalist superego demanding happy consumption from its subjects in the contemporary western society. The failed attempt to meet super-egoic demands have produced a marked increase in depression, ‘addiction’, and the inability to sublimate at all, because sublimation is not always a happy process. Although art has been held up as a privileged route to sublimation by philosophy and psychoanalysis, we live in a society where art as non-instrumental activity is devalued but then simultaneously upheld as the pinnacle of enjoyment. Artistic practice is romanticized by the media but very hard to pursue because artistic practice does not reap instant material gratification and our culture is orientated around

this type of demand. Despite the common sense attitude that life in western capitalism is as good as it gets, many contemporary artists demonstrate discontent with our consumer culture and its push-to-enjoy. The essay will explore how we might move from a practice of ‘complaint’ or ‘discontent in enjoyment’ in contemporary art, to a practice that can anchor subjectivity in emptiness. Through this process we might be able to compromise less with a cultural super-ego demanding endless enjoyment.<sup>2</sup>

The oppressiveness of the super-ego and its push-to-enjoy inverts the power relations between the ‘subject’ and the ‘body’ that dominate in post-modern cultural theory. Take for example Julia Kristeva’s work on the semiotic and the symbolic, where the semiotic is the realm of the body and the symbolic is the subject. Kristeva celebrates the *semiotic* as a subversive force because affect was once constrained and limited by operative cultural conventions of church and state. For example, in her essay *Giotto’s Joy*, she celebrates emergent forms of ‘abstraction’ of the iconography of the Catholic church by blue colour fields.<sup>3</sup> In a simplistic sense this is a celebration of scopic pleasure over the ‘metaphoric’ world of the symbolic. A celebrated and unfettered libidinal experience over the differential system of language, its roles, rules, and positions. In our contemporary world dominated by capitalist discourse, the semiotic, the body, affect, jouissance—whatever you want to call it—is now privileged over the symbolic.<sup>4</sup> In our consumer culture, we are primarily encouraged to serve our own libidinal fulfillment rather than follow prescriptive cultural roles orientated around the sacrifice of individual pleasure. The pursuit of individual, libidinal gratification dissolves symbolic ties as demonstrated in and by the ‘abstraction’ inherent to *Giotto’s Joy*, and renders the linguistic subject vulnerable to invasive forms of jouissance: “just do it.” More and more, people complain about the excess inherent to a body symptom, and an inability to manage jouissance, particularly anxiety.

Despite the emphasis on 'happy-consumption' in our culture, we must discuss the concept of *jouissance* or enjoyment, and the contradictory satisfaction we take in suffering that goes beyond humanist assumptions that we strive inherently and unproblematically for our own and other's good. The ironic truth of psychoanalysis is that we are entropic creatures who are libidinally invested in loss and maintaining dissatisfaction more than we are happiness. Desire and enjoyment operate to maintain a distance from that what we desire, say the desire to be 'happy', so that we can go on desiring a privileged object, 'happiness'. That being said, desire is less attached to some specific object than it is a set of conditions or rather signifiers, that cause desire, and in doing so, maintain a field of enjoyment in repetition. For example, the lack, inferiority, dissatisfaction, frustration, and anger we might feel because we aren't 'happy'. Our culture with its injunctions to enjoy goes against the structure of desire, reducing desire and dissatisfaction to demand and easily accessible satisfaction, which is impossible.

Art is championed by psychoanalysis because as one of the three forms of sublimation (art, religion, science), art is said to come the closest to a conscious apprehension of the structure of desire. A central example within Lacanian psychoanalysis is the canon of courtly love. For example, the object of desire is the unattainable woman that the subject of desire, the knight or prince, has produced a genre of poetry around the 'act' of not having, but rather *desiring*. The subject of desire *enjoys* not having the object, producing a gap and or lack. The idea being that the sublimation of desire produces a privileged object, and this privileging act produces a void. If the desired object were to be encountered at the level of the flesh, it would give way to the 'reality' of the body with all of its blemishes and the subtractive void would disappear. Desire points toward the voided status of *das Ding*, the mythic primal lost-object of total satisfaction.<sup>5</sup> The important point being

that what is sought more than the realization of the ideal-object, is our singular mode of enjoyment of loss, of our lack of 'mythic' total satisfaction.

Sublimation produces an emptiness through the act of elevating an everyday object to the level of the thing.<sup>6</sup> You see this dynamic very clearly in the ready-made. An every-day object is subtracted from use and elevated to the 'thing' of art. The object becomes an enigma, and a void emerges where it once was, because it's something more than it-self. Otherness is produced where there was once only sameness. Even if this elevation is a critical gesture, a de-sublimation of art (how the ready-made was originally intended to function), there is an elevation of ordinary object to 'the thing' inherent to the aura of the gallery context. In not having our privileged object we re-stage the loss of the *thing* which is structural to subjectivity and we enjoy *not having*.<sup>7</sup> But through a sublimatory act we elevate some object to the level of a thing that could satisfy. This theory of sublimation orientates art around lack, emptiness and loss, rather than heroic fullness.

Another popular example Lacan sets in motion is Han's Holbein's *Ambassadors*, painted in 1533. What this painting presents is the relationship between desire and death. Desire is after a libidinal experience of presumed pleasure and more commonly enjoyment in suffering over 'not-having' the privileged object. This is inherent to the elevation of the 'object' to 'libidinal-thing' that we see in the production of an art-work. *Ambassadors* presents the anamorphic aspect of desire and death. To conscious apprehension, we desire the 'objects of the world' as demonstrated in the content of the painting, and yet the desire inherent to the gaze aspires after *jouissance*, demonstrated by the anamorphic skull. Symbolization has a limit in relation to the real of *jouissance* (death being the prime example), which is why the thing can never be symbolized fully. Desire is linked to death because if we achieved our total lost satisfaction in *jouissance* we

would annihilate the subject of language. Desire aims at subjective destitution and death. Addiction is a prime example here, the pursuit of pleasure beyond all limits, the extreme logical outcome is over-dose and death. To bring it back to Kristeva, the blue colour fields evidence the death of the linguistic, symbolic subject of a particular cultural order. The problem being that symbolization is also a form of death, it enacts the death of the thing for the sake of the symbol. Language brings a void into existence that cannot be eradicated, but between the two deaths of the symbolic and the semiotic, there is creation and life. Art is lodged between these two deaths.

Despite the myth of 'happiness', contemporary art is currently engaged in protest against the assumption that satisfaction or happiness is readily available within our larger cultural order. Discontent is expressed through the critical prerogatives of contemporary art. Although discontent is a much more honest and constitutive way of being, remaining stuck in a crisis of satisfaction is not particularly interesting either. The crisis of contemporary art is a crisis of our larger society defined by capitalist and scientific discourse. It's a crisis of modernity and the loss of most traditional forms of life, but it's also a crisis of desire reduced to demand.

Desire reduced to demand forgoes the production of a void, it prevents against emptiness, because it promises to fill our lack with 'whatever' object. Sublimation elevates an ordinary object to the level of the thing of 'art', with the object and the ideal standing in for the primordial lost 'thing'. Capitalist discourse reduces this structural lack (or loss) to demand because it claims to be able to satisfy desire with an actual 'ordinary' object and it exploits the limitless, void structure of our desire. The promise by capitalist discourse to eradicate loss and lack with ordinary objects keeps us buffered from our desire.

The question then becomes: how to make art in our world

of 'bare-life' where traditional forms of sublimation hold very little weight, without merely making cynical 'trash-art'?<sup>8</sup> How do we avoid the rampant cynicism inherent to contemporary art that is busy degrading the ideal while avoiding the easy turn to spiritualism (thereby re-invoking obsolete ideals)? Nostalgia for lost ideals, is central to the structure of desire and the various ways we mourn a fantasized lost wholeness. We also blame various 'others' for this loss and are envious of those we presume have avoided loss. Instead of recognizing loss and lack as structural to subjectivity, we dream up a world where we won't or supposedly didn't lack, and this can be a very dangerous promise. Art is intimately tied up in various ways with this primitivist myth of lost fullness.

Once a libidinal ideal no longer functions as an object of desire, it is degraded and rejected like shit or trash. Again, if the 'Woman' of courtly love were actually encountered, her ideality would be diminished. What psychoanalysis shows us is that all ideals are in some way destined for the landfill because of their inherent emptiness. They are empty because they are linguistic creations and, as mentioned before, we need to 'not-have' something for it to cause desire. Psychoanalysis can help us subjectify our enjoyment in order to recognize the insatiability of desire, and the singular way we suffer desire, without reducing it to demand. This is important because nothing great can be accomplished through the instant gratification of demands. Politics, art, science, and love require the longevity of desire.

This brings us back to the central question of this essay. Is it an artistic crisis to no longer 'enjoy' your art? Or is this an opportunity to express a critical or clinical relation to contemporary forms of enjoyment and sexuality? To enjoy one's art would be to enjoy what we don't have as artists; it would be to maintain the ideal of art without ever realizing it.

We loved what we supposed had knowledge, and now we

hate what we presume lacks knowledge. When art no longer functions as *subject supposed to know*, it means that the transference we once might have imposed on art—or ‘artists’ and ‘teachers’ when we presumed they knew something about enjoyment or had some kind of enjoyment we didn’t—has gone up in smoke. This is inevitable if we pursue our desire to be an artist. If we don’t pursue our desire to be an artist, we can maintain the ideal of the ‘artist’. The ideal will be prohibited by some necessity, for example, prohibited by the duties of middle-class identity. We can enjoy not being an artist, and ‘complain’ about how miserable life is because we *have* to live the way we do. But if we pursue art, we traverse and seek the ideal, the ideal will no longer oppress us because it will start to waver and give way to ‘lack’. This begs the question, why should one *enjoy* their art? So what if art no longer functions as an enigma, isn’t this merely a *de-phallicized practice*? The question is more about being able to work as an artist without phallic love, but with *ambivalence*. Is continuing to work without the phallic identification precisely an act of love?

What I mean by this is, a lot of artists go through different forms of artistic crisis because the ideal of art no longer functions to maintain desire. Contemporary artistic practice is possible and we can have it, and because of this, we don’t want it anymore. Artistic practice is not the idealized fantasy produced by a mythic structure of art history which has produced a cult around heroic artists and priceless objects. Artistic practice is the mostly banal but satisfying endeavor of a socialized and symbolized daily life punctuated by exciting but short-lived events. How do you maintain a practice that is not functioning phallically? By phallic I mean desired in the manner described above—as unattainable—but also in the sense that we only desire what we presume the Other desires.<sup>9</sup>

In order to maintain a de-phallicized practice we might have to work through Oedipal ambivalence. As Rob Weatherhill

points out, a subject will have to go through the frustration inherent to our attempts to *be* or *have* the phallus as an artist.<sup>10</sup> This means to be loved or desired by the other as the initial condition of artistic practice. A de-phallicized practice would transform our aspirations towards *having* and *being* recognized, desired, loved, and empowered. Desire to *have* or *be* could go unfulfilled without falling into crisis. The desire for symbolic recognition (rather than its achievement) can become motivating enough, and through this process we locate ‘autonomy’ from the gaze as a condition of our activity.

As artists working in a society where the libidinal ‘more’ of enjoyment has risen to the social zenith, we need to consider how this affects art, given that art was and is always positioned as ‘aesthetically’ exceptional. Our therapeutic culture celebrates art because of its possibilities for ‘affective’ discharge. However, it never considers why art is therapeutic and ultimately gets it backward. Art is therapeutic because it brings excessive, unsymbolized, affect, enjoyment, jouissance, the libidinal ‘thing’ towards symbolization. This can require a bracketing of our subjugation to the symbolic—but it requires a bringing back to symbolization as well, the ‘thing’ becomes the ‘word’. Consider this process in opposition to primitivist therapeutics that see a solution in affect alone because of our myths around the authenticity and reparative nature of emotions.

As I was saying in the beginning of this essay, the pursuit of individual libidinal gratification has trumped the pursuit of symbolic accomplishments and the linguistic subject. Despite the inversion of this dualism between the ‘body’ and the ‘subject’, we still have various forms of resistance to the ‘subject’. Another way of putting this is that the general tone of cultural theory still operates on the premises that the ‘subject’ oppresses the ‘body’, but contemporary symptomology would counter that it’s the ‘body’ that now ‘dominates’ over the subject (e.g. addiction is a primary

symptom of contemporary discourse). As Voruz details, our perennial risk as an object of discourse is to harbour an identification with the object of refuse. We have all felt like a shitty artist as we receive rejection after rejection in the gaze of the Other. The twist of psychoanalysis and its recognition of scientific truth is that our real enduring status as linguistic—biological—material life is best endured by becoming a ‘subject’.<sup>11</sup>

Which is why we must speak out our non-linguistic artistic acts, and why group *critique* (we could call it, *clinique*) is so important to artistic and subjective development. Critique and discontent are easy; it is much harder to stop complaining and blaming the ‘Other’ for failing to take care of us and to produce the social formations that we supposedly want instead. The wager of psychoanalysis is that by putting our *mute enjoyment* or libidinal enjoyment into words, we can enact subjective modification. We can go from the position of the hysteric who blames the ‘Other’, to the ‘whatever-singularity’ who works for their own satisfaction because they no longer believe in the ‘Other’s’ ability to give it to them. The *clinique* becomes the place to articulate our complaint and find a way past our discontented enjoyment through the ‘chat’ or ‘symbolic bath’ that art requires.<sup>12</sup> Moving from our subjection to a degraded and or phallic ideal to something new.

The goal of psychoanalysis is to identify with our enjoyment as our own. While many emerging artists suffer from *not having* any form of material and/or symbolic recognition as artists, Lacan would prompt us to consider how we might be invested in maintaining our loss, that is in ‘not-having’, rather than actually getting what it is we supposedly want. This way we can maintain our particular structure of desire and jouissance in relation to the law. We can suffer our complaint but maintain the purity of our ideals and the ‘beyond’ of lost satisfaction.

In recognition of this counterintuitive structure of desire and enjoyment, we can desire in less painful ways as we stop

identifying our enjoyment as something imposed on us. Generally, the transformation of desire as something we suffer, to that which propels us, occurs through gaining an identification with the symptom rather than the ‘complaint’. We can also gain the ability to have our ideals remain empty so as to retain an orientation to life that doesn’t reduce everything to instant gratification. We can partake in practices and sociality that are imperfect (not-phallic) for their own sake and sublimate independent of constant recognition. If we gain a degree of freedom from our symptom through identification, we can move from ‘discontent’ and our indebtedness to the ideals of art that no longer function (and never did) to something new. The point is to recognize our investment in our own dissatisfaction and our dependence on the ‘Other’s’ gaze. In so doing, we come to recognize how art can function as one massive demand for love and maintain a topos of suffering over ‘not-having’ it. The art object is different from the object of unlimited consumption and the push-to-enjoy, but only if it provides an avenue to knowledge and to subjective modification. Through this process the artist can find a stability for their singular subjectivity in the face of the limitless demands of the super-ego. From my perspective we need to move from the complaint that is expressing discontent in enjoyment to subjectification. Through this process one will no longer be made sick by the repression of the subject of the unconscious (i.e. our enjoyment/desire) by the ego of compromise. We will be able to compromise *less*. And therefore we will develop the ability to sublimate despite the lack of instrumental reward and re-encounter emptiness—in other words, we explore the other-side of our femininity: our status as perennially not-all.



## Notes

1. Véronique Voruz. "Psychoanalysis at the Time of the Posthuman: Insisting on the Outside-Sense," *Paragraph* 33, no. 3 (2010), 425
2. I take the idea of push-to-enjoy from Voruz, "Psychoanalysis at the Time of the Posthuman," 425. I take the concept that the interesting contemporary artist expresses 'discontent' in enjoyment from Gérard Wajcman, "Exposed Intimacy, Extorted Intimacy," *The Symptom* 13 (2007)
3. Julia Kristeva, Leon Samuel Roudiez, and Thomas Gora, "Giotto's Joy," in *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 210-36
4. Although Lacan's discourse of the capitalist is actually the fifth of four, discursive structures, there is debate as to whether it is in fact a true discourse. Discourse to Lacan institutes social bonds through the appeal of the speaker to an 'Other', whereas capitalist discourse is based on an anti-social relation to the libidinal object rather than the 'Other'. Capitalist discourse privileges the libidinal object a, over the subject, cultural theory has not (generally) yet caught up to this historic change
5. Jacques Lacan, Dennis Porter, and Jacques-Alain Miller, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959-1960* (London: Routledge, 2015)
6. Ibid. 112
7. Todd McGowan, *Enjoying What We Don't Have: the Political Project of Psychoanalysis* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2013)
8. Leigh Tennant, "Trashitas," *OOOOON* (January 2020)
9. Lacan keeps the term 'phallus' or 'phallic' to designate the realm of meaning and ideals in language. It also refers to a specific signifier, which involves the 'Other's' desire. Having the phallic signifier or being the phallic signifier were ways that Lacan spoke to an aspect of sexual difference. What Lacan calls men and or woman is a position in relation to the phallic signifier of desire and desirability. To have what is desired or to be what is desired.
10. Rob Weatherill, *The Anti-Oedipus Complex: Lacan, Postmodernism and Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2017)
11. Voruz, "Psychoanalysis at the Time of the Posthuman," 425
12. Wajcman quoted in Pierre-Gilles Guéguen, "How to Read Lacan," *Lacan.com*