

mind of the accusers at least, they seemed to advocate that there is no universal truth, but only competing versions, or worse still, not even that but mere words on a page. As I see it, the postmodernists were the first writers—as a movement—who investigated the nature and extent of the systems that we are increasingly dependent on and which govern our everyday life. Such systems have long been part of human societies, but with the accelerating rise of technology they are taking an increasing and quite ominous role in human affairs. The postmodernists were writers who in their fiction and thinking took—even tangentially—a collective view of society. Today we seem to have gone full circle. The most prominent writers of our time have either retreated into 19th century realism with added cellphones and Twitter

accounts as accessories or, worse still, to the solipsistic project of autofiction. If a writer has a duty to fulfill today, I believe it is to leave the individual behind and examine the collective, our own societies, fractured and divided and imperfect as they are. We should look into the problems and the shortcomings and the strengths, our many defeats and as many victories. To find once more the common ground between our differing worldviews and build upon it. One way that this could be done—and there is a long but limited tradition, since it is technically more difficult to achieve on the page—is the polyphonic novel. Here I am thinking of novels like Karen Tei Yamashita's *I Hotel* which documents the Asian-American movement in San Francisco during the 1970s and Roberto Bolaño's *Savage Detectives*, which is

a fractured chronicle of a society of poets. There may be other ways to move in this direction in the future. Literature moves forward of its own accord. What I'm certain of is the attitude that will be needed by the writers who will embark on this project: Despite the fact that the writer is always looking back—despite the fact that all writing is a form of enhanced memory—the writer should not be in a state of nostalgia, a state of mourning or sadness or yearning for what has gone before, but always and ever they must aspire to a state of perfect rage at everything that is not right in the world, in society, in the life we share. Rage, rage, and endless fury.

Panagiotis Kehagias is a writer, editor, and translator based in Athens, Greece.

Goodnight Cinderella

Asa Horvitz

Carolina Bianchi's striking performance, *The Bride & The Good Night Cinderella*, premiered on July 6th, 2023, at the Festival d'Avignon. It is the first chapter of *Cadela Força* ("Bitch Strength"), a trilogy by the Brazilian theater-maker and performance artist and her company Cara de Cavallo ("Horse Head") on sexual violence and femicide. It has since toured major festivals across Europe and become among the most controversial and discussed performances of the season.

In Avignon the two-and-a-half-hour long performance took place on the floor of a former school gymnasium with proscenium seating for around 500 spectators. For the first hour, Bianchi was alone onstage and delivered a lecture on femicide focused on two artworks. First, the Italian performer Pippa Bacca's 2008 *Brides on Tour*, in which Bacca and Silvia Moro planned to hitchhike from Rome to Istanbul dressed in white. Their trip ended tragically when Bacca was raped and murdered outside Istanbul. Bianchi addressed *Brides on Tour* associatively, interweaving Bacca's story with references to art history and current events. Second, Bianchi quoted Regina Jose Galindo's 2016 *Siesta*, in which the Guatemalan artist took a date rape drug and passed out on a mattress in a gallery, inviting spectators to do with her as they wished. Bianchi described Galindo's artwork before taking a cocktail of sedatives and vodka. As her lecture continued, Bianchi became increasingly intoxicated before falling unconscious. In the second part of the performance, Bianchi remained unconscious onstage while the eight members of her company performed dances flirting with the edge of sexual consent and hallucinatory scenes of sexual violence (drawn from Roberto Bolaño's *2666* as well as the personal experiences of company members) set to a menacing soundtrack. Bianchi's monologue continued while she slept, projected at the back of the stage. In one especially piercing moment, lights reminiscent of EMDR or other forms of trauma therapy flashed while the text read "I want to wake up." In the penultimate scene, the women of the company performed a pelvic exam on the comatose Bianchi, while a live-feed video projected the inside of her body on a large screen. There was no narrative through line, only the sense that we as spectators were caught in a nightmare with Bianchi from which there was no exit.

I saw five versions of *Goodnight Cinderella* in various stages of development in Amsterdam, Brussels, and

Belgrade, starting in January 2021. A version at the Heartfact Pride Festival in Belgrade in September 2021 was particularly memorable. Spectators were crammed into the small gallery space of the Youth Initiative for Human Rights; Bianchi was less than a meter from

polarized responses to the work. Many found it moving and powerful, others rejected it outright, calling it self-exploitative. Some focused on whether or not Bianchi herself had experienced sexual trauma (which is implied but not explicitly discussed in her monologue),

painful collective topic, and the explicit nature of the work are among them.

However, my sense is that what gives *Goodnight Cinderella* its rare power is the way in which Bianchi refuses to give us answers. "Healing is impossible," she says, describing the "rage" she feels at "so-called safe spaces," which promise refuge that cannot truly exist (ironically confirmed on the second night in Avignon). The performance begins with a reference to Dante's descent into Hell, and the structure of the work leads from rational exploration into chaos and confusion. The ghosts of murdered artists and past artworks are brought to life and haunt spectators without any resolution.

What makes scenes like an assault in a car and the pelvic exam so overwhelming is the way in which they emerge out of and along with many messy, uncontrolled details that vary from night to night and are filled with unresolvable opposites that cannot be rationally understood: love and care, violence and trauma, text and voice, body and flesh. As spectators struggle to resolve these opposites, our imaginations are thrown into crisis. The result is the feeling that a huge dark wave is behind and underneath the visible surface of the work, pressing on us, creating a charged standstill which echoes the license plate of the car onstage: "FUCK CATHARSIS."

In contemporary performing arts, biography and identity are all-too-often centered as unquestionable truths. Even more unfortunately, artists today are often expected not only to expose personal trauma but to provide spectators with models of "healing" and "resistance." These trends reflect larger neoliberal paradigms that are deeply individualistic and isolating.

Early on in *Goodnight Cinderella*, Bianchi says, several times, "this is not about me." As the performance goes on, it becomes clear that spectators will not be able to comfort themselves with the idea that Bianchi will contain and transform trauma for them. Instead, Bianchi forces us to look directly at the fragmentation experienced by victims of sexual violence and to position ourselves towards it. The United Nations estimates that as of 2023, 736 million women worldwide have experienced violent sexual assault, while acknowledging that this is most likely a vast underestimate. *Goodnight Cinderella* asks us all what we will do about this.

Asa Horvitz is a performance maker and musician/composer based in Amsterdam.



Horse Lady by Sameena Sitabkhan. Mixed media collage 2023

many of us. As the sedatives took effect, her sweat, dizziness, and disorientation were plainly visible. As she fell unconscious on a mattress, a charged silence fell over the room, with many spectators not daring to move for several minutes. As one colleague observed, "people were forced to position themselves towards a body at risk." (By contrast, during a version at the Proximamente Festival in December 2021 in Brussels, on the large stage at KVS, some spectators couldn't tell whether or not Bianchi had really taken sedatives).

In Avignon, a large theater festival in which naturalistic representational conventions are still the norm, the performance was met with particularly strong reactions. At the premiere, one audience member fainted and had to be escorted out by medical personnel. Many others walked out. Dozens gave standing ovations while visibly weeping. On the second night in Avignon, a male French writer and critic walked onstage while Bianchi was alone and unconscious and took a sip of her drink, as if to "check" the sedatives, inciting a furious discussion about gender and safety.

As *Goodnight Cinderella* continued to tour I encountered many people who had

and if so what kind, as if this would legitimize the performance. (I wondered if they would ask this question about an artist from the Global North, or about a male artist). Others questioned whether Bianchi, as a Brazilian artist, was participating in colonial dynamics by referencing mostly artworks from European and North American art history (as if artists from the Global South should stick to "their" references). Still others doubted Bianchi's "sudden" success as an "unknown" artist, citing her graduation from the DAS Arts MA in 2022, and ignoring the fact that she has run an independent company in Brazil for more than 10 years and is nearly 40. A review in *The New York Times* framed Bianchi's taking of sedatives as simply reliving her own trauma onstage, omitting the fact that Bianchi was quoting Galindo's *Siesta*—and thereby situating herself in a lineage of empowered women artists.

There are many factors that make *Goodnight Cinderella* a resonant performance that elicits charged reactions (including the dubious biographical critiques outlined above). Bianchi's physical vulnerability, the way in which personal experience is used as a motor to charge a

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