We Are Parasites: On the Politics of Imposition
Anna Watkins Fisher

The tactics of appropriation have been co-opted. Illega...
compelling manipulation of normative approaches to the production of value and representational political etiquette. In my analysis, I read Byrne's practice through the conceptual lens of parasitism, a term I argued was compelling for rethinking the increasingly vexed states of both contemporary feminism and contemporary feminist art, sites that have become bogged down by accusations of cultural cliché and creative stagnation. What might be possible for a form of feminism unbounded by vague and idealistic objectives such as autonomy, dignity, and independence? I asked.

While the curatorial and journalistic discourse surrounding Roisin Byrne's artistic practice has focused almost solely on questions about the ethics of stealing and forgery, I asked: what would it mean to consider her work as, rather than the sociopolitical ends of an individual woman artist, performative acts that literalize and hyperbolize, in ways compelling and problematic, long-held notions of femininity as a bad copy or vampiristic threat to masculinity? Byrne has said of her work: "I'm not interested in placing it in some kind of art discourse: I'm interested in a relationship to information and to ownership. The separation between you and that thing you desire is changing..." (Jones 2010). I argued that a symbolic reading of Byrne's conceptual practice demands that one question the ethics of stealing and forgery as feminist tactics, as it became evident that what Byrne calls "that thing you desire," that coveted object taken without permission, is not so much the fetishized commodity in a society based upon private property but more so, the very cultural and commercial capital possessed by the male artists that she targets. By exploiting conceptual art's institutional absorption as a recognized practice in the twenty-first century, I suggested that Byrne is an artist that has "latched on" to the deregulatory zeitgeist of the present contemporary art market, securing it as the "host"-guarantor to her "feminist" claim to that which would otherwise lie beyond her reach. Reading Byrne's practice as parasitic, as a self-conscious feminist performance of parasitism—I argued in my proposal—opens up a number of important questions: on what moralistic, taste-based, otherwise normative evaluative terms has women's drive to acquire cultural and commercial capital—awards, renown, influence, financial success—been characterized historically as a parasitic imposition deemed unacceptable? How might we understand the discursive registers of "conceptual art" and "performance," in particular, as even further authorizing certain appropriate deregulation—and in so doing, of freeing up a set of experimental feminist tactics—that might be used to infest spaces that have been maintained by otherwise hollow or dogmatic impulses within feminist theory regarding ethics and etiquette? On the other hand, I wondered: what are the dangers of advocating a tactical parasitism for feminism? What are the threats of laying bear feminism's darker or more ambivalent drives (its complicity with forms of oppression, its death drive), and what might constitute the collateral damage of such a maneuver?

I shared my early writing about Roisin Byrne with a small group of fellow graduate students as a part of our biweekly research group. An early draft was uploaded onto our university-sponsored "viki"—a collaborative online space for sharing files—to be shared with the group, workshopped, and revised for a dissertation chapter. When the group met, my readers were also intrigued and excited by Byrne's work. A few weeks later, I was surprised to find myself on the receiving end of a communication from Roisin Byrne. First a Facebook friend request and then a message. Our website had not been password protected, and the artist had gained access to my unpublished writing about her work by "Googling" herself. In our exchange, she praised my reading of her work and received end of a correspondence from Roisin Byrne. First a Facebook friend... I shared my early writing about Roisin Byrne with a small group of fellow graduate students as a part of our biweekly research group. An early draft was uploaded onto our university-sponsored "viki"—a collaborative online space for sharing files—to be shared with the group, workshopped, and revised for a dissertation chapter. When the group met, my readers were also intrigued and excited by Byrne's work. A few weeks later, I was surprised to find myself on the receiving end of a correspondence from Roisin Byrne. First a Facebook friend request and then a message. Our website had not been password protected, and the artist had gained access to my unpublished writing about her work by "Googling" herself. In our exchange, she praised my reading of her work and received end of a correspondence from Roisin Byrne. First a Facebook friend...
I am engaged by the respect you are interested in my work. Would this be for a catalog essay? If so, I would be thrilled if you quoted me (I could provide you with a quote if so) and perhaps even better, I could write something about your work for it.

As a young female graduate student who is working to establish myself as a critic—just as you are as a young artist—it means a lot for my ideas to be acknowledged (and yes those are my phrasings). I would be interested to hear your thoughts about the artist you would like to collaborate with on something here.

Byrne replied:

Subject: Re: Hello
April 20 at 2:53am
Hi Anna

I am delighted I found your ideas! and I think it would be a good thing to do something together. You articulated things in my work in a way that no one else has which I am I have to say really happy about. A collaboration sounds like something I would be more than happy to do.

At this stage the gallery in Madrid won’t be doing a catalogue, it would just be a press blurb positioning the work, do you think you would be interested in being credited on something like this? It’s small fry but...

“Small fry or not…” I wrote back to her on April 26th, assuring her that I would indeed like to acknowledged and providing her the relevant information to do so. I did not hear back again.

On May 26th, I received a group email invitation from Byrne to her exhibition “It’s Not You, It’s Me” at The Goma in Madrid, Spain. In the body of the invitation—and, as I would later discover, in the press release for the exhibition—her artist’s statement read (in part) as follows:

Roisin Byrne (Dublin, 1981) is concerned with how representation can end up taking the place of reality in such a heavily mediated world and engages with the way appropriationist…tactics have been co-opted by advertising and how rebelliousness, protest and illegal action are now accepted as yet another part of the fabric of our society. She posits an invisible subversion: to feed off and grow within the communication system without contributing to its survival, to become a parasite...

Not only does Byrne appropriate my reading of her work as parasitical without attribution, but she also lifts from Nathan M. Martin’s 2003 article for the Carbon Defense League that appears as my epigraph above. Byrne had, of course, encountered this epigraph before, when she first read it in my draft. Either the conditions under which Byrne would parasite would have changed between her earlier projects and 2011, her professional and economic situation becoming more precarious and therefore, necessitating an ethical slippage from seeking out powerful, well-known, male artists to a young, unestablished, female peer to play her host or Byrne’s parasitism never, in fact, had a stable ethical dimension beyond the ethics of stealing and forgery, questions of what forms of productivity are valued and what forms are deemed not of value within capitalism and how the giving and withholding of credit represents its own economy of power (as the parasitic drag of Simon Starling’s ‘proper name’ into her project was essential to its conceptual interest, while inclusion of my name offered the artist little reward). Ironically, in another turn of the screw of parasitism, had my name been acknowledged (and yes those are my phrasings). I would be interested in collaborating on something here.

The figure of the parasite, as Byrne’s oeuvre models it, indexes, above and beyond the ethics of stealing and forgery, questions of what forms of productivity are valued and what forms are deemed not of value within capitalism and how the giving and withholding of credit represents its own economy of power (as the parasitic drag of Simon Starling’s ‘proper name’ into her project was essential to its conceptual interest, while inclusion of my name offered the artist little reward). Ironically, in another turn of the screw of parasitism, had my name been acknowledged by Roisin Byrne, this essay would be without its introduction. The intriguing system of rewards for playing the role of weakened host, even momentarily, certainly complicates the picture of the economy of parasitism in ways that will require further attention in future work. The parasite’s relationship to concepts of (de-)regulation and productivity betrays an internal paradox at work in the parasite’s popular figuration: its use in common parlance to index the metaphorical social leech who exploits the law and lives off of the work of others (very often the woman who lives off the wealth and access of a man) and yet, in my reading, its use as a performative figure of manic or hyper-productivity. The parasitic, as I propose it here, seeks—as Byrne does—to pervert the mechanics of productivity, to bend and re-direct its normative meaning and value to its own benefit. Indeed, the concept of a parasitical feminism that I have proposed (and will elaborate further) renders explicit a process of perversion that I read as already apparent in Julia Kristeva’s theory of abjection. Writes Kristeva: “The abject is perverse because it neither gives up nor assumes a prohibition, a rule, or a law; but turns them inside, misleads, corrupts; uses them, takes advantage of them, the better to deny them...[like] an artist who practices [her] art as a ‘business.’” (Kristeva 1982:15-16, my emphasis).

My entanglement with Roisin Byrne illustrates that the parasite is a dangerous subject—a dangerous subject of study and a dangerous subject on which to base a feminist politics—and perhaps, for this very reason, an intriguing one. The parasite is both dangerous and generative precisely because it does away with the subject/object dichotomy and because there are no guarantees against its mechanisms. Byrne’s particular modeling of a parasitic performance does not necessarily work toward something: a focused goal, an ethical logic. It just works—like an artist who practices her art as a business. The parasite threatens the integrity of the boundaries between the self and other but also in this case, between criticism and art, between a private draft and public persona, between performance history or what other people have done” (a statement echoing that of Roisin Byrne).

11. In The Communist Manifesto, Karl Marx and Frederick Engels describe capitalism’s logic as manic and unyielding: “Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify... The need of a constantly expanding market for its products chases the bourgeoisie over the whole surface of the globe. It must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connections everywhere” (Marx and Engels 2001:12).

12. In Between Theater and Anthropology, Richard Schechner described this as the simultaneous state of “not being and not not being” of performance (Schechner 1985:112).
my reading of Roisin Byrne and Roisin Byrne’s performance of herself. The parasite is an unruly agent provocateur not simply because it often refuses to abide by the rules but rather because, by appropriating, indeed performing, the mechanisms of intellectual and artistic relations under capitalism. With this lesson in mind, this essay will further elucidate a model of parasitism for feminism not merely to promote it but to query the limitations of it as well.

ART OF THE WEAK

“What might a parasitical performativity actually achieve?” asks Rebecca Schneider in a passing remark in her recent book Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment (Schneider 2011:125). In a moment when parasitism has become a way of life under the economy of relations conditioned by late capitalism, what would it mean to render such relations explicit and tactical? What would it mean to take seriously feminist tactics based on performative reversals that exploit exploitation or capitalize on capitalism? How might parasitism articulate itself not only as a contemporary feminist performance but also as a performative model for contemporary feminist politics? Named after the Greek (parasites), parasites were once a standard character in ancient Greek comedy, complete with their own mask (Zimmer 2000c). Byrne’s work is but one example in a larger critical project that seeks to delimit an arsenal of artistic procedures by which a new generation of “feminist artists” have engaged the figure of the parasite to produce moments of ideological dissonance or majoritarian frustration: tactics that skillfully manipulate symbolization, that perform a sincere relation to, hyperbolize, and put on display authoritarian codes, that appear at first to adopt certain political poses only to attack them through rabid and exaggerated adoptions and reappropriations of such codes (Shukaitis 2010). Parasitism can be understood here as a corrosive queering move that challenges recent work in queer theory and performance studies that has privileged, under the opaque appellation “negativity,” moves of cynical distancing, pure refusal, exit, and escape to argue instead for maneuvers of overintimacy, exaggerated mimicry, and excessive appropriation for feminist theory.

The turn to parasitism demands the question: Could the very logics of imposition provide the means for transforming increasing perceptions of Western feminism as a cultural imposition and lost cause and for figuring new and inventive models of feminism? Steve Pile has argued, “There is never one geography of authority and there is never one geography of resistance. Further, the map of resistance is not simply the underside of the map of domination—if only because each is a lie to the other, and each gives the lie to the other” (Pile 1997:23, my emphasis). What might it mean to pause on the intriguing ambiguity of this “simply” to ask if indeed a map of resistance can be drawn from reversing, flipping over, and dragging structures of domination, if only to dwarf or exaggerate the original image in scale and significance. What could it mean to sexually harass patriarchy, as the writer Chris Kraus does in her 1997 book Love Dick, containing two-hundred letters stalking “Dick,” the symbolic object of her desire? To juvenileize adolescence as artists such as Ann Liv Young, Amber Hawk Swanson, and Kate Gilmore appear to in the self-conscious performances of adolescent cliché that characterize their work.[4] To exhaust “women’s work,” as obsessive and proliferating task-based projects such as instead, conditions of possibility. How have long-held anxieties within feminist theory over the notion of the parasite[s]—a historically feminized metaphor for an intruder that is overly dependent, ungracious, and unwelcome—emerged as a tactical model for reinvesting contemporary feminism? In what ways and to what extent have certain strands of feminist theory “pre-scripted,” and thus circumscribed feminists in, a set of compulsory performances oriented around a political subject represented as dignified, mature, and autonomous? Moreover, might performed reversals or inversions of these terms—tactical performances of indignity, immaturity, and dependence—be found to aid or further damage the feminist project? Parasitic performance “calls the bluff” on the derided figure of feminism, as well as derided figures within feminist theory, to query whether tactically and preemptively assuming the (im)position of such figures might take advantage of a cultural logic akin to double jeopardy whereby one cannot be charged with the same crime twice. Rather than evading, by overidentifying with, “dragging” the impositions, parodies, and caricatures said to represent it, by performing “itself” back to itself, a younger generation of feminist artists have already begun to re-image feminism—assimilating not only patriarchy’s but also feminism’s internalized ironies, awkwardness, and equivocality for its tactical gain, while at the same modeling an “impure” performance of inheritance and generational transmission. Taking seriously an influx of controversial, scholarly polemics on the crisis of contemporary feminism in recent years, from Angela McRobbie’s The Aftermath of Feminism (2009), Janet Halley’s Split Decisions: How and Why To Take a Break from Feminism (2006), Elizabeth Badinter’s Dead End Feminism (2006), among others, I will argue that these books problematically posit closure (aftermath, breaks, ends) as the answer to what ails feminism, failing to see the “open wounds” and manic, recursive force of what Avital Ronell has characterized as contemporary feminism’s “parasitical” resentment as instead, conditions of possibility.[6] I, however, propose the parasite to be more than a figure of recursivity. To be sure, the vigor and insistence represented by parasitism offers a model of iterability that does not simply repeat a given form but that also modifies it,

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A FIELD OF PARASITES

These contemporary articulations of feminism by a younger generation of performance artists (not only women) respond to the “anxiety of influence” of 1960s and ‘70s feminist performance art, and second-wave feminism broadly, by modeling performances of parasitism that infest the more ambivalent strands of feminism. These performances tease out feminist anxieties registered by representations of liminality, relationality, and simulation, sites that have been historically denigrated by versions of feminism conditioned by logics of affirmation and positivism. The parasitic indexes sites that have proven challenging for feminisms grounded in a certain philosophical idealism; sustained by classical political and aesthetic values and based on the paradigm of sovereignty that privileges a conception of the liberal autonomous individual, all challenged by notions of the minor, the derivative, the relational.

Parasitical performance is offered here as one possible response to debates about what exactly feminism’s objective is at a juncture when concepts such as liberation and revolution appear increasingly inadequate for accounting for the fractured, intersectional, and relational experience of gender in postmodernity, as one’s ability to visualize, conceptualize, and escape the field of social violence in global late capitalism has become unthinkable. Whether it be Louis Althusser’s theory of interpellation, Antonio Gramsci’s theory of hegemony, or Michel Foucault’s theory of discipline, theorists concerned with questions of dominance have consistently articulated the impossibility of isolating the mechanisms of power within the constantly shifting ideological grid of postmodern space and time, an impossibility that has altered the very terms for politics historically compelled by goals such as exit or revolution.
Rather than flee, the parasite is a figure that "lives on" what it finds before it, for better or worse. As such, the parasite represents important questions for feminism theory about complicity. Parousic performance, such as that of Roisin Byrne, makes explicit a certain double bind in contemporary feminist theory. That is: feminism's dependence on the very structures of domination that it finds its raison d'etre in critiquing. J. Hillis Miller writes, "The host feeds the parasite and makes its life possible, but at the same time is killed by it...Or can host and parasite live happily together...feeding each other or sharing the food?" (Hillis Miller 1977:439). I argue that feminism's double bind, rather than being resolved, is even more deeply inscribed in its tactical recourse to parasiticism, taken up as a model of perverse appropriation that seeks to undermine the very thing that it depends on using in order to do so. As the parasite has been given by Michel Serres to be the figure of relationality par excellence (Serres 1982:79), a question that troubles my project, and I would argue troubles critical theories of resistance more broadly, is the question of precisely what forms of relation are tantamount to consent? Michel de Certeau, who characterizes the tactic as a kind of parasitical maneuver, gestures to the problem of complicity in the parasite's willingness to "live with" that which might be understood to be oppositional to it. De Certeau writes, "A tactic insinuates itself into the other's place, fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety, without being able to keep it at a distance" (De Certeau 2002:xix).

To be sure, a number of sticky philosophical and ideological questions emerge around the politics of the parasite: If the parasite has gained traction in ideological fields where radical critique has been suppressed by the stronghold of capitalism, as may be argued of the U.S. and Western European contexts where these artists emerge, what does it mean to regard a figure of complicity as politically generative? Does this turn to parasitism represent an inventive form of subversion or conversely, an elite retreat and "avant-garde" consensual agreement with forms of domination? If the move to a parasitical politics on the part of feminism can be read as a bargain made to move beyond the impasses of revolutionary or radical politics, does this bargain amount to consent to an economic, political, and ethical system without rules?

POSTSCRIPT

As the online text of this article was just beginning to be formatted by Art & Education, the editorial manager received an unexpected email. It was Roisin Byrne, who had somehow already discovered it and was inquiring how soon it would be published.

WORKS CITED


Schechner, Richard. 1985. Between Theater and Anthropology. University of
Pennsylvania Press.


The political party at the centre has an ideological agenda in making Hindi compulsory, but the state governments’ response to it has only made them party to the rightist plot. Utilising the Language of Federal Power-sharing. India took nearly five decades to move from quasi to a somewhat cooperative model of federalism, which seemed to be becoming a reality in the wake of coalition politics, with state governments becoming significant players in national politics. One of the greatest merits of the coalition government was its representation of diverse opinions based on India’s plural population. All about We Are Parasites: On the Politics of Imposition | Art & Education. LibraryThing is a cataloging and social networking site for booklovers. This site uses cookies to deliver our services, improve performance, for analytics, and (if not signed in) for advertising. By using LibraryThing you acknowledge that you have read and understand our Terms of Service and Privacy Policy. Your use of the site and services is subject to these policies and terms. Hide this. Results from Google Books. Click on a thumbnail to go to Google Books.