

To me, de Jong's paintings ferociously unearth the guts of existence, the contradictions of social assumption and both the beauty and ugliness in being unpleasant. In light of this and de Jong's work I am sharing an excerpt from a book I am in the process of writing which remembers a right-wing media storm I found myself in three years ago, something that I am still trying to navigate. I wanted to share this as a conversation within the context of what happens when female action is reduced to spectacle and all of the repulsion and enforced superficiality that can so easily disperse within it.

THE MEDIA STORM or HOW TO DESTROY A DOMINATRIX?

On the 30th of November 2018, The Daily Mail wrote an unsolicited and unexpected online article about me titled '*POLITICAL dominatrix who uses mind games to humiliate her submissives reveals how she focuses her unique skills on white, right-wing men in order to turn them into socialists*'.

The article was sourced from a very small interview I had done elsewhere and upon discovering it I had initially found humour in the camp nature of the right-wing rag sensationalising me. The Daily Mail is the most read online newspaper globally. Before the internet diversified the construction of media, tabloid amplification had always been one of my guilty pleasures, it is probably my favourite form of pornography. I had covered my teenage bedroom wall with cuttings from the most absurd tabloid headlines that declared abnormality as salacious entertainment and even wore a badge that said '*Hated by The Daily Mail*' which I wore with zeal. Now it seemed my life had come full circle and there was a glimmer of being proud of myself for irritating such a barbarian institution.

When I first began dominating it was exhilarating to realise that I had a momentary power over a man. I wanted to understand fully how far that could go and I still do. Often submissive men will tell their dominatrixes that they will do anything to make them happy, they will follow their orders. Following orders becomes a sexual activity. This fascinates me, especially when the submissive men I would meet would have fetishes and fantasies that had no correlation with their everyday politics. However it was not long into my time as a dominatrix when it soon became utterly insulting to meet a conservative man who wants to ejaculate over his fascination with 'strong women', a man who usually does not believe in the rights of the sex workers they employ or the other multitude of general labour of the inequalities he refuses to acknowledge yet benefits from. To circumvent this I would play with some of my submissive's politics and values when meeting them but all too often this became a hard limit for many of the men. I still find it incredibly funny and in my early twenties I was far more idealistic in my aims to change a submissive's views. Sex is about play and I want to play with politics too. Whether I truly believed I could or can change a man's politics isn't really the point- the point is that it entertains me both in how humorous it is and to momentarily lift me from the complications of the sex work dynamic. Fetish bends reality. This is much of what my novella Dining with Humpty Dumpty was about and the interview I had done that ignited this upcoming flurry of attention is what prompted it. I did not state this to be controversial or to gain attention for myself, instead it is simply a regular occurrence I have to face when dominating traditional men, it is a thought that fascinates me and in a way garners me some sort of escapism and control in a very nuanced dynamic.

The Daily Mail article was simultaneously simplified and dramatic but strangely not particularly biased. The journalist had seemed to write a list of quotes from the previous article but was seemingly opinionless, however it was through the structure of the tabloid's inescapable spectacle that augmented the story's scandalous appeal. Although the article was not factual and much of the information about me was skewed I found existing within

the newspaper very funny. Due to the mass circulation of the newspaper it wasn't long until this 'news' spread and The Sun newspaper went on to cover the story proclaiming '*MAN-IPULATOR 'Political dominatrix' uses mind games instead of whips and chains to humiliate white men and turn them into socialists*'. The rehashed story then went viral - the article was regurgitated widely, ranging from (to name a few) Poland to Mexico to Finland to Australia to France to Japan and then to various American news sites.

I began to receive emails from magazines, newspapers, blogs, podcasts, television and radio shows from all corners of the globe requesting interviews, all of which I ignored. Fox News contacted me about appearing on a talk show. When investigating the show's host in question it became apparent that he was close to Trump and had recently come under incredibly vague scrutiny for having an affair and leaving his wife, the mother of his children for another woman- disputing the family unit. Looking at his face online it resembles a brick in colour and shape with almost non-existent lips and teeth that uncomfortably blast out in contrast in their blankness. Upon reading that particular email all I felt was a giddy humour in how irrational this attention was.

However, soon the camp nature of the coverage wore thin on me and something more ominous began to emerge. I had to switch off my phone. I had in fact been made aware of the article after I received an email with threats of violence via email from an anonymous man who proclaimed his adoration for Trump because of the president's ability to 'fuck hot girls'. I have received threats of violence and aggression before, it seems to be relatively unspectacular when existing online but these communications had been sporadic and usually flimsy in construction, this however was very different.

My emotional state began to feel frantic, this was not because I felt outed in any capacity but instead because there was a new gravity of online cruelty which quickly became paralysing. It left me in a space of over-exposure, a new vulnerability I had not expected or planned where countless screens in all areas of the world abruptly became aware of my existence in a coating of cheap novelty and not of absolute focus for progression and a life truly lived.

I discovered a series of threads about me on alt-right, pro rifle rights, men's rights activism, boxing and bodybuilding forums. The members of these websites would fight over who could deconstruct each millimetre of my facial dimensions better to summarise that I was unrapable because I looked like an obese horse, almost as if they were competing with one another to declare the absolute depravity of my female condition. One man commented that I was so fat, that even my earlobes were fat. The article mentioned that I am mixed race which was strongly disregarded, apparently to these keyboards I was in fact not mixed at all and instead I am just a social justice warrior attention seeker. Others on these forums discussed how they would rather be *ripped apart by AIDS ridden lions in the African desert* than fuck me, even if I was the *last woman alive*. Other examples ranged from '*Prostitute trying to paint herself as something more than just a fleshlight*', or '*You could walk into any walmart in the country and have a chick like that on her knees for a pack of cigarettes.*' or '*3, she's a three, she right above people with Down's syndrome.*' A personal favourite comment was from a libertarian bisexual woman from the deep south who claimed she'd fuck me until I was screaming '*Taxation is theft*'.

There were also less creative descriptions of threats of direct violence which I received directly to my email account and ones that would unfortunately catch my attention littered over the internet. I began to worry for my family. I know that incels transgress out of the screen and will go out of their way to incite pain in person until their internet searches become tangible. My sister and mother can be easily traced online. I do not want my decisions to harm them. This acute anxiety did not and does not feel like an irrational concern.

Besides from my body, or to put it more bluntly my assumed fertility/sex appeal, my intelligence and standing lecturer position at a university were mocked with disbelief, Brexit voters claimed I should be immediately sacked for what they interpreted as me teaching leftist values on 'government money', brainwashing future generations into what they understood as communist rebellion, gendered misanthropy and outright racism. I was contacted by the university I teach at with concern but also with support. This was unexpected media coverage for the university and like almost everything else that had been written about me, the information about my teaching role was skewed by saying I teach political science when I actually teach critical thinking. My teaching practice involves working with my students to understand the political minutiae of the everyday. I do not sit around indoctrinating them into Marxist theory but instead I discuss how each student builds power, desire and influence with their work.

At one point an American man emailed me to ask me how the university had responded and I told him that I taught at an art school and not in America. It seemed he contacted me for his own amusement, to speculate how an institution would handle such a scandal and whether or not I had been fired.

A British white male artist named Simon Linke who had some success for making an entire practice from painting the covers of Artforum and the advertisements for other exhibitions within it in oil paints since the mid 80s wrote a disparaging Facebook post to his followers, all of whom seemed to be of a similar cultural capital to him about my lack of originality and talent.

It seemed that they were using me as a sort of quasi poster child for what was now 'wrong' with the art world, an orbit I hadn't planned on joining and one they perhaps had not kept up with. Hundreds of comments were left from men who all looked the same as him with broad black rimmed glasses or the occasional monotone urban beard. A few women joined in, some even warned the men of their impending misogynistic tones which they ignored.

One grey and pink man chipped in by saying; *I've known a few of these folks along the way, and in nearly every case they were self-loathing artists blaming artistic failure on other artists. Hate can be a powerful fuel for a variety of aspirations, politics particularly thriving on hate, but finally an oppositional state is unsustainable and debilitating. Sad to say, but this professor will probably not last long.* Then there were comments such as *I respect Reba's choice to make whatever art she wants. To voice whatever views she wants. I just don't like it. I also don't like art made from balls of wool shoved up your foof or straddling rooftops naked or running round with your tits out protesting people looking at your tits. Obviously I am over simplifying but I just want to shout 'stop fucking showing off'. Just pack it in!* Then there was *'She's pretty scary...'* Or more bluntly *'Oh fuck no'*.

I contacted the painter of ArtForum covers to meet me, asking him to discuss with me what he had elicited. He refused with a cowardice which he veiled pathetically. I asked him if his work had ever put him in danger and he never answered. Now, whenever I have a reading or art show I make an effort to invite him. I contacted his gallery asking him to read for me, saying that his risky work would add great layers to my practice. In these emails, I asked this man and his gallery to cultivate himself away from a screen. Unfortunately, I never received a response from his dealers. The painter responded saying he didn't want me to dominate him. I had never had any intention to do so or mentioned anything about it, but this is how he decided to read me.

At the other end of this spectrum came Tom Harwood, a white English gay boy in his early twenties who is a political commentator, a fervent campaigner for the Leave Europe campaign and adorer of Margaret Thatcher. He lambasted shocking comments about me to his online audience who all look almost entirely like him, a formation of white gay man who

appears relatively hetero in appearance except for the telling slightly plucked eyebrows, all born after 1993. Suits, jeans and t-shirts. Maybe Converse at the weekend. Masc for masc. These are the gay men with a depressing adoration for Britney Spears as a tragic woman, a better respect for Ariane Grande as a cute and opinion-less woman, and a superficial adoration of Drag Race as long as the drag queens sedate stereotypes rather than challenge them. Men with names like Josh, James, Connor, Michael, Sam and Daniel would leave comments such as *'The bar has been well and truly lowered if this fucking numbnuts is considered to be a lecturer what an utter waste of space'* or *'Deep down inside she craves making sandwiches for Chad'* or *'Most of these 'dommes' are actually submissive towards men -- hence the fact that they have to be paid in order to assume their dominant role because it doesn't come naturally to them'*. I also invited Tom Harwood to meet me which he agreed to but would always tell me he was too busy when I suggested a date. He now appears on prime-time news television shows advocating the rights point of view. During the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020 he wrote an article for The Telegraph describing it as 'toxic and nauseating' and that the UK was not built for 'hysterical extremes' and this was in fact an 'import' from the States. His fans are twinks who all seem to only have hair on their heads and eyebrows with skin the colour of overcooked salmon. Since my unpleasant introduction to him I have been following his career which unfortunately seems to be one of an undeniable wave to cruelly sanitised influence.

There were other websites where my politics were put to test, pages and pages on Reddit where people tried to challenge the authenticity of my socialism, some stating that if I was a real socialist I would work for free. On Twitter, a branch of painfully isolated white Americans accused me of being a socialite who used Marxism as fashion. I do not feel guilty for enjoying going to parties and I despise this culture of intellectual superiority disguised as fashionable and pleasureless nihilism. There were also comments that my work was unethical from the kink community and other people from the BDSM world contacting me with praise. Then there were those on the left who damned me for being a sex worker with success, who decided to judge me as if I had no care for other sex workers whose work is more physically and mentally gruelling. How and where the judgment that I do not care for these workers stems from, or that I believe my work is harder than theirs labels me in a way I cannot grasp and one that I find deeply upsetting.

Other conversations appeared where a decision was made by men online that I simply gave the right-wing men what they wanted and was therefore a stupid girl. Others would defend me but it all seemed too ridiculous when the context of my work had been so spectacularly lifted from my control into pure sensation. I was now being treated as if my entire humanity was exemplified by this arrangement of salacious sentences and vividly questionable photos of myself at various events found online or sexually suggestive ones I have taken myself. Instead of being a human I was an internet page regurgitated and cut up into endless typed opinions. Responding was out of the question or agreeing to an interview as this would have just created more backlash. I couldn't defend myself, a construct of myself had been made and only time would allow me to reassemble this. Abuse, critique and general negativity all blurred into an unadulterated mass, a digital organism of people's opinions that they would perhaps never utter out loud.

A new emotion unfurled within me. I wanted to disappear. The practice I had developed was now tarnished and I wondered whether I should discard it completely. I had been hollowed out and left with the remains of a thin shell gimmick. I was now considered a silly, immature and superficial girl. Not a person but rather a feminine accessory to real issues. What was being said about me online felt alien from when I looked in the mirror or spoke to a friend. Each random email or attempt of communication from this media storm felt as if I was looking over a cliff.

Being re-written as a gimmick took time for me to unravel and I doubt I will ever fully escape it. Initially I felt as if I had been burgled, as if all of the energy, attention and focus I had given myself was forced into dilapidation. My intelligence had been bereft from me, as if my work was not work at all but a joke or simply a frivolous side effect of the culture wars.

Simultaneously the gimmicking of myself felt as if I was working too hard but failing for my inadequate intellect and annoying confidence. As someone who owns nothing, my work is the only thing I feel is truly mine but now it didn't feel like it was really mine at all. A gimmick is profoundly limiting, it is the most instantaneous form of entertainment that is denied any further investigation, it is not allowed to grow and can only ever be defined within those simplified and instantly satisfactory walls. I was now cheap and superficial but for all the sensation and gossip that orbited me in the various headlines held an undeniable power to what had been garnered that I needed to understand. I needed to grasp this new space and there was no quick fix.

I have been left with a profound disturbance over how anyone could want to be famous, I cannot fathom how anyone could want this much attention. I do not want to be a celebrity or a superhero but a human who can relate to other humans. I wanted to hide, I wanted space in my brain that had been stolen from me but I also tried to rationalise that this could have been far worse and that many people have and do receive far more violence than I.

Apart from the drudge of male human vulgarity that I ended up wading through for months to come, there were thousands of positive and celebratory comments over what liberal and leftist social media deemed I do. However the sadness of this praise was that it was almost entirely one dimensional in comparison to the abyss of abuse from the right. *'I'd love to see her in a room with Trump'*, *'Not all heroes wear capes, some wear leather!'*, *'Goals!'* or *'She's a Queen'* were all friendly to read after discovering endless pages of intricate hate from incels however these words of optimism left me unmoved, as if this positivity was a reaction to a flat packed assemblage of my assumed life, a dusty pink digital box for the 'girlboss' generation to swallow with a virtual high five before scrolling down to the next mirage of social progression on their timelines. In fact these same statements seemed to be repeated over and over, as if individual opinion simply didn't exist outside of simplified statements out of fear of being 'outed' or 'cancelled', liberal and leftist language was now industrialised and therefore directionless. This is a time for no risk and therefore stagnation which only heightens my despair.

In an age of the commodification of feminism I had become a quirky story to window shop before briskly moving on to the next clickbait. With this flimsy leftist appraisal I saw how failed a majority of us were as a side, how lacking in intricacy or strategy we were and how shallow our intentions were where the right were the ones now deconstructing with the purpose of building back up.

I had entered a world of bodiless conflict that rotated me at a speed of furore unlike anything I could ever come close to understanding. This energy bore no answers and attacked my brain from every angle. I would speak to friends and family and the advice would also become vague. Some even said 'What did you expect with what you do?' My mother, although herself a staunch socialist didn't fully understand my agitation. There is a generational gap over how information is experienced and this has made politics impossible.

The media storm had symbolised an end of innocence. I was no longer navigating the world in my own way, instead there were new placeless violent judgements ominously ready to pounce at any given time and my work and life were seen by countless people as an obnoxious stunt. Violence is real and ever present but now these people have *details* about me. These men wanted me to be punished and silenced, I had stepped out too far of their confinements of illusory womanhood and I needed to be told off for this.

I experienced this upheaval alone, every new comment or article about me I saw singularly. This meant that what I experienced couldn't ever be properly articulated or shared. I didn't want to look at these words, but I would occasionally slip into an investigation and pull myself up when I felt my body freeze and my throat clam up. How could I look away? This was a thoroughly modern form of digitally induced loneliness. I would be advised by my loved ones that I should not read the comments but I knew that what was being said about me wasn't really me- it was about everything else and I want to understand contemporary hatred and fear and how these human exertions control freedom. There is a perversion to wanting to read these opinions, a sagging appetite to see the worst, to shock myself. At the same time, I didn't want to be myself, or whatever this accumulation was that was thought of to be me. I was sick of myself.

If some felt my work was a joke, what anxiety did this compress from those laughing at me? And what security did I give those congratulating me? Perhaps for a while I gave people someone to blame.

When reading this new abuse, my ego and vulnerability slumped into one another. Where does Mistress Rebecca begin and Reba Maybury end? Who were these people brandishing me with waves of endless negativity and do they even matter? It was friendship that pulled me through this.

Reba Maybury (1990) is an artist, writer and political dominatrix sometimes working under the name Mistress Rebecca. Her work explores the tension between her perceived strength as an object of transactional fantasy and how, through the reality of sex work, she turns this power into something tangible. Much of her art practice is physically created by her submissives through her direction as a way to further the complicated imbalances of labour under sex work and attempt to empower her further than the men's desires, leaving her with more than just a payment from them. Themes of capital, labour, sexuality, female perversion, bureaucracy as torture and corporate humiliation are essential themes to her practice. Recent shows include *Faster than an erection*, MACRO, Italy (2021); *Moralists at a Costume Party*, HKFD (2021) Denmark and *A-good-individual*, Luma Westbau, Switzerland (2019). Her first novella is named *Dining with Humpty Dumpty* (2017) and *Faster than an erection* is a new publication, a theory and methodology to her domination with a poem by Cassandra Troyan which was recently published by MACRO (2021).