

Lise Haller Baggesen

Dear,

You should never preach what you practice. You should strive for a more enlightened, better, brighter you. Just remember, when offered enlightenment, to ask yourself first: “Who is enlightened, by what, and why?”

You probably are a better, brighter me already. You are younger for sure. More symmetrical perhaps. In this day and age, people are surgically altered to look more like you and less like me.

When this is practiced in other parts of the world, we like to call it “female circumcision” or even “genital mutilation,” but when it happens here, we call it the Barbie.¹

I cannot tell you what to do, but remember it’s true: Symmetry is valuable, but pleasure is valuable too—ooooh—ooooooh:

We’re learning to live with somebody’s depression
And I don’t want to live with somebody’s depression!
But we’ll get by I suppose
It’s a very modern world
but nobody’s perfect
It’s a moving world...²

I’m wearing purple underpants these days—as if I can only connect to the cosmos through my root chakra, like a giant Kundalini Cobra up my butt, like Cicciolina last time I saw her.³

It was after the breakup with Jeff Koons and she was looking good. A little flustered, her cheeks a little hot, her cerulean gaze intransigent. As if she was facing the whole world, while at the same time fixating her audience, her audience of one, and saying:

’Sup, Jeff? How are you doing? I’m good, you know, I’ll get by, as you know, cause it’s a moving world, and I’ve got a giant snake up my butt, and you don’t!

Jeff, I imagine, had his head too far up his own butt to take notice, and so it is in general, I fear, with the art world and cosmology. Like a cobra in the butt, this particular enlightenment gets too weird, too deep, too uncomfortable, too soon. And so, the art world could not really fathom Cicciolina, although it embraced her for a while.

Of the many arenas she passes through—pop music, politics, and pornography to name but a few—she seems to walk in and out of them remarkably unscathed. Even when the photographs suggest that “work” (that overworked euphemism for plastic surgery) was done, you bet it was for her pleasure!⁴

In fact, Cicciolina, or Ilona Staller as is her “real” name, has turned her unorthodox pleasure principle into a provocative, personal and political strategy—from being the first woman to bare her breasts on Italian television, to campaigning naked on horseback in the streets of Rome for the Radical Party, to a five-year tenure in the Italian parliament (during which she used her va-va-voom to push a fairly serious liberal agenda including sex positivism, women’s liberation, and a radical environmentalism), to a court battle over her state pension as an elected official—which she received with the words: “I’ve earned it and I’m proud of it!”⁵

While in office, she publicly offered her sexual services to Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden in return for peace in the Middle East, defending her actions with the argument: “My breasts have never done any harm, while bin Laden’s war has caused thousands of victims.”⁶

If her CV has a recurrent theme of “Make Love Not War,” her divorce and subsequent custody battle with Jeff Koons was not so amicable.

The story begins in 1988 when, enchanted by a photo shoot of Cicciolina posing in a kitschy Eastern European fairy tale set for an Italian porn magazine, Jeff Koons sent Staller an invitation to be his co-star for a series of billboards he had been commissioned to do for the Whitney Museum of American Art.

In her Italianate English, she later told *Vanity Fair*:

One day I got the fax saying that Jeff Koons was a very important artist American who wants to meet Ilona Cicciolina ... I think maybe this is a very strange thing, maybe best [to say] no. I bring this fax and make trash. But my ex-manager [said], “No, no, no. We should respond because this artist might be doing good work.”⁷

Conceived on the set of Koon’s seminal body of work, **Made in Heaven**, a celestial romance blossomed, and soon wedding invites featuring a cute Annie Leibovitz portrait of the nude couple were sent out. They married in June of 1991 at a small reception with 40 close friends and family. Celebrity gossip would have it that the couple had already drifted apart, but that Koons needed the wedding—as a nod to traditional family values—to lend some credibility to his fictional persona and perhaps also just to drive home the point that sometimes reality *is* stranger than fiction.

Real feelings were nevertheless at stake, when out of this fantasy union came *a real boy!*

On October 29, 1992, at 8:30 in the morning, Ludwig Maximilian Koons was born at Mt. Sinai Hospital in New York. Koons, the proud father, recalls: “I was the first person to greet Ludwig and give him a kiss.”⁸

Already estranged, the couple separated soon after and Staller brought the child with her to Rome, under the guise of an emergency family matter. When she failed to return, Koons followed them abroad, to bring the child back to the US. With little Ludwig in his custody, he promptly filed for divorce upon his return. In a statement released by his New York office, he declared: “The differences between our cultural and social standings are too great.”⁹

What followed was a he said/she said wherein the couple repeatedly sued each other for child abduction, unpaid child support and unfit parenting. Ludwig has lived with Staller in Rome since 1993, when she sent his bodyguard (appointed to ensure that neither party could remove the child from the jurisdiction of the state of New York) out for a pack of cigarettes, and fled with the toddler while he was gone.

Shortly thereafter, Koons started **Celebration**—a series of paintings and high gloss sculptures of balloon animals and children’s toys, an imagined homecoming for the little prince, who did not return. As Koons said: “I was trying to communicate to my son, when he’s older, just how much I was thinking about him all the time.”¹⁰

The irony of this tragic fairy tale is that in reality Cicciolina was a match for Koons, and not the “human readymade” he imagined her to be. In the magic kingdom she inhabited she was never going to let him be king of the castle!

Meanwhile, the photos that started it all are as potent and as iconic as ever.

Cicciolina (or should I say, the iconography of Cicciolina, for I, like most, have never met Staller in the flesh) has a cosmology and a pagan poetry of her own. With a floral wreath in her peroxide blond hair, she is an orgy of one, a technicolor bacchanalia to outrival Caravaggio’s drab chiaroscuro.¹¹

With a cobra snake up her butt, she is the *Mother of Invention*.¹²

Her (and Koons’) cameo appearance in U2’s video “Even Better Than The Real Thing” illustrates the complexity and the

plasticity of Staller's carefully sculpted and re-imagined body as it conflates with the plastic image of Cicciolina's re-imagined persona. As the lyrics suggest, she is both the "Real Thing" and "Even Better Than The Real Thing" simultaneously.¹³

And yes, I know it is not so cool to reference U2, but this is how it happened: U2 and Cicciolina were contemporaries, and they *were* a match made in some ironic heaven. With that video U2 propelled themselves to a new level of super stardom—from a band known for "keeping it real" to a hyper-band "keeping it hyper-real."

Although on revision, at that moment in time—on the event horizon of the internet, on the brink of the oblivion that is the fate of everything happening before the invention of the world wide web—when we had only just started littering the virtual and not just the wild as hitherto, they all seem so frighteningly real: Bono in his vinyl-on-vinyl fetish-fashion pant suit combo, Prince before he became a symbol, MTV video jockey Simone Engelen in all her unphotoshopped denim-clad glory, and Staller and Koons' wedding video with the voiceover asking, "Is it art or is it pornography?"

The answer is yes.

While Bono's lyrics beg to let him "slide down the surface of things and ride on the waves that you bring," the visuals of the video suggests that this superficiality has a powerful gravitational pull of something much deeper from which you will not escape unscathed. Much like the gravitational pull of Cicciolina on the eyes of the world.

Although she seems entirely new and artificial in all her trashy plastic glory, she is entirely of, and connected to, this old world. She is for real. Like the giant Pacific Trash Vortex is for real, with a pull and a power of its own.¹⁴

To illustrate this power, consider Robert Sullivan's travelogue from an afternoon spent climbing the compacted trash of the garbage hills of New Jersey:

There had been rain the night before, so it wasn't long before I found a little leachate seep, a black ooze trickling down the slope of the hill, an espresso of refuse. In a few hours, this stream would find its way into the... groundwater of the Meadowlands; it would mingle with toxic streams... But in this moment, here at its birth, ... this little seep was pure pollution, a pristine stew of oil and grease, of cyanide and arsenic, of cadmium, chromium, copper, lead, nickel, silver, mercury, and zinc. I touched this fluid—my fingertip was a bluish caramel color—and it was warm and fresh.¹⁵

The list of piled up ingredients lends this passage a poetic potency, and pulls the experience of the "pure pollution" out of its ethical conundrum and into the aesthetic realm of the "pristine." Layered like the sludge of the landfills it describes, the language highlights the difference between archiving and composting that is at the heart of the matter, or rather—that *is* the throbbing heart of the inert matter that surrounds us. Where the archive is passive, the compost is active, and moves with an intrinsic agency, a power beyond our control.

In her book **Vibrant Matter**, Jane Bennett relates Sullivan's account to her own encounter with a pile of debris in a storm drain one morning in Baltimore:

Sullivan reminds us that a vital materiality can never really be thrown "away," for it continues its activities even as a discarded or unwanted commodity. For Sullivan that day, as for me on that June morning, thing-power rose from a pile of trash. Not Flower Power, or Black Power, or Girl Power, but Thing-Power: the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to produce effects dramatic and subtle.¹⁶

In similar dramatic and subtle ways, the Trash Vortex is not only out there in the Pacific Ocean—it swims within us.

Not only in the literal sense: that the plastic trash is ground down to miniscule plastic plankton that enters the food chain when it is eaten by the small fish that are in turn eaten by the big fish, that are in turn eaten by the giant Yellowfin Tuna, that is turned into

Maki rolls that are in turn eaten by us—until we are plasticized from the inside out.

In every sense: our language, our literature, our poetry, our songwriting is pervaded by this vibrant ever-present plasticity. As is this letter.

This may sound like sci-fi to you, but this is the sci-fi we live in now, and we might as well learn to ride on the waves that it brings, if we don't want to sink.

Kembra Pfahler suggests this strategy for navigating the plastic sea, in an interview with **The New York Times**:

I am an availabist, so I like just wandering about different neighborhoods looking around at how people are living, sort of like a minimalist extreme vacation. I like antinaturalism, finding beauty in odd urban decay, so there is plenty of that if that's your hobby.¹⁷

When asked what she is working on right now, Pfahler replies:

What's been at the forefront of my thoughts is "Future Feminism." I look around and wonder what I'm doing, what we are doing as artists in the year 2012. I ask myself, "Am I a feminist? Am I a woman of independence and high esteem? Am I getting sucked into the system of despair that tries to brainwash women into thinking they are this or that?" I want to perpetuate a positive paradigm of visibility for women, despite what feels like backsliding and a sort of crass alternative greed—the greed that makes us isolate, and think about art careers instead of art.¹⁸

The Future Feminism she refers to is a movement she instigated together with musician Antony Hegarty, who describes it as follows:

It's not a group that thinks women should just crawl towards economic equality in the way we have been engaged in since the 60s. That can't be the climax of feminism. It's like gay rights, as if gay marriage is the end point, as if we just want to be included in these business-as-usual institutions. That's not the point of being queer, just as mitigated reproductive rights aren't the point of being a woman. We want to move this forward. Do something great... overturn all these failed male structures of thinking, all this aggression in decision-making...¹⁹

There is a lot of power in these simple statements, a self-empowering license to take this vital matter into your own hands, a way of surfing the plastic wave instead of being sucked into the plastic maelstrom. And there is a lot of enlightenment to be found in the tip, rising like a giant Kundalini Cobra up the butt of consumer society.

Now, as your mother, I will absolutely not tell you to go and get a cobra up your butt!

But I want to say this to you:

I'm Sorry!

I'm sorry to be handing down the world to you in such a sordid state. I don't like thinking about the giant Trash Vortex any more than you do, and yet I keep feeding it, because it is insatiable.

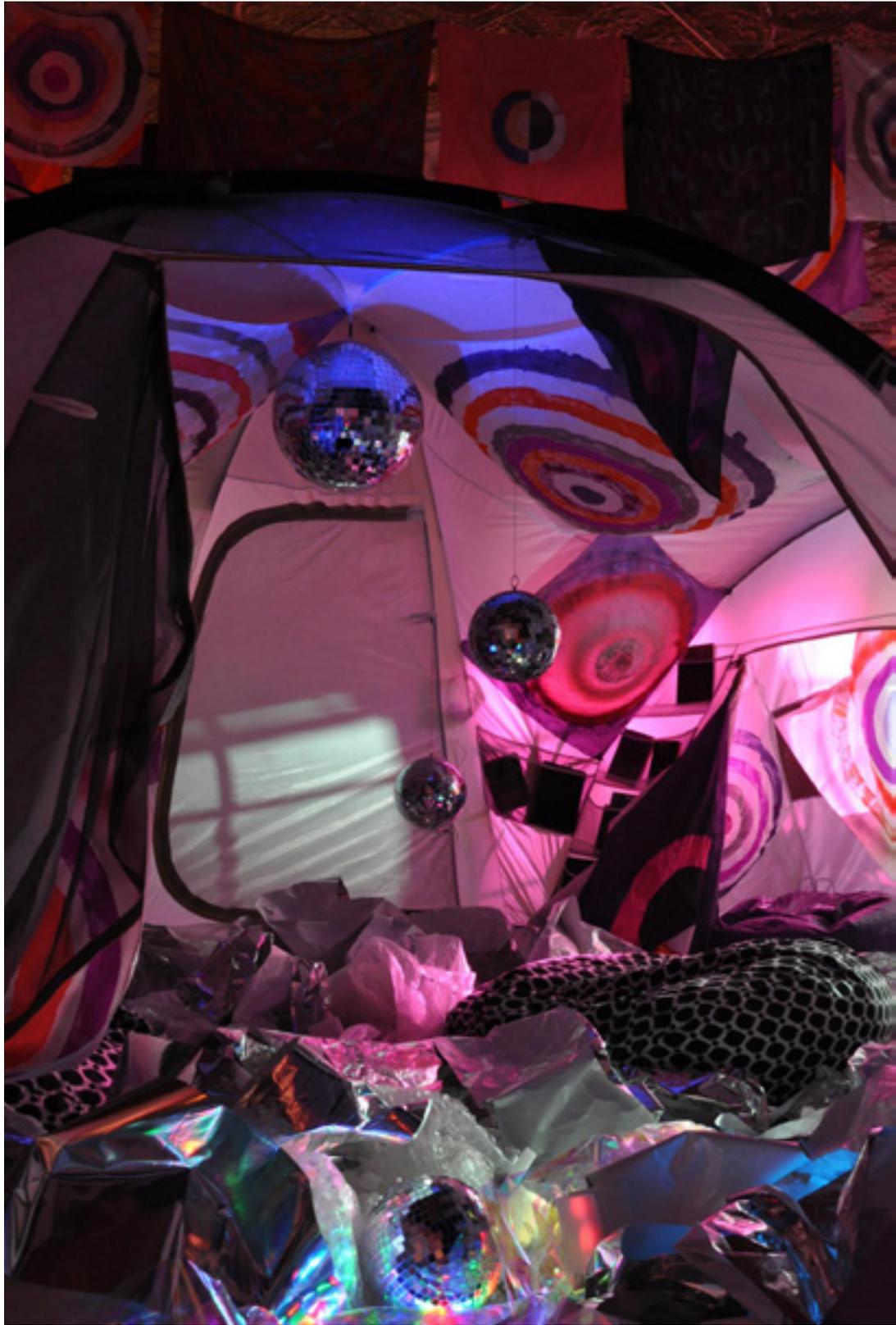
Like a washed out Koons retrospective it is filled with last year's consumer goods: vacuum cleaners, valentines, deflated inflatables, forgotten memorabilia, discarded trinkets, cuddly toys, and fleece baby blankets.

These are inanimate objects, but they are also compassionate objects. And they are passionate...²⁰

If you tune in, you can hear them humming, like that old Kiss song:

I was made for lovin' you baby
You were made for lovin' me
And I can't get enough of you baby
Can you get enough of me?²¹





But we just can't get enough, because we can't separate ourselves from the world, any more than we can separate our desires from our objects of desire: we not only love the world, we are loved by it. We not only live in the world, we are lived by it. We not only move in the world, we are moved by it.

I hope that you can find your own way and your own beauty in it, as I do. Because it is awesome. Literally.²²

And if you have to become plastic, to find your place in this plastic world, girl, don't go for the Barbie.

Go for *the Cicciolina*.

You go girl!

Love,
Mom

* "Mother of Invention" is excerpted from Lise Haller Baggesen's recently published **Motherism** (Chicago and Oak Park: Green Lantern Press/Poor Farm Press, 2014).

1
Dr. Red Alinsod, a Laguna Beach-based urogynecologist who invented the Barbie surgery, which amputates the entire icky Labia Minora, explains:

This results in a "clamshell" aesthetic: a smooth genital area, the outer labia appearing "sealed" together with no labia minora protrusion. Alinsod tells me he invented the Barbie in 2005. "I had been doing more conservative labiaplasties before then," he says. "But I kept getting patients who wanted almost all of it off. They would come in and say, I want a 'Barbie.' So I developed a procedure that would give them this comfortable, athletic, petite look, safely."

Katie J. M. Baker, "Unhappy With Your Gross vagina? Why Not Try 'The Barbie,'" **Jezebel**, January 18, 2013, <http://jezebel.com/5977025/unhappy-with-your-gross-vagina-why-not-try-the-barbie> (accessed April 2, 2014).

2
David Bowie, "Fantastic Voyage," **Lodger** (RCA, 1979).

3
I googled **Cicciolina + Cobra** to see if I could actually find this image, but ended up, via a bizarre shot of Brigitte Nielsen's cleavage, on a Spanish speaking site dedicated to **Great tits of the 80's...** so I'm sorry: if you live by the web, you die by the web—something to keep in mind!

4
As an example of how these spheres—political propaganda, pop music, and pornography—mesh in Cicciolina's universe, watch her sing "Political Woman" on **LIVE Rome**: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EuVG0F_oorM, (accessed March 28, 2014).

5
Palash Ghosh, "A Star is Porn: Whatever became of Italy's Cicciolina," **International Business Times**, February 27 2013: <http://www.ibtimes.com/star-porn-whatever-became-italys-cicciolina-1104912> (accessed March 30, 2014).

6
AP/AFP, "Bush and Saddam should Duel: Iraq's challenge," **AP/AFP smh.com.au** October 5, 2002: <http://www.smh.com.au/>

articles/2002/10/05/1033538810033.html (accessed March 30, 2014)

7
Ingrid Sischy, "Koons, High and Low," **Vanity Fair**, March 2001: <http://www.vanityfair.com/culture/features/2001/03/jeff-koons-200103> (accessed March 28 2014).

8
Ibid.

9
"Pop Artist Says Marriage To Ex-porn Queen Is Over," **Orlando Sentinel**, Feb 28th 1992: http://articles.orlandosentinel.com/1992-02-28/news/9202280604_1_cicciolina-art-ist-jeff-koons-married (accessed March 28, 2014).

10
Sischy, "Koons, High and Low."

11
I met Jeff Koons at the reception for his retrospective at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam. It must have been the fall of 1992, as I went there with my first and only Dutch boyfriend, a relationship that lasted all of four months. We traveled cross-country by train. I wore hot black hot pants with cherry Doc Marten's up to my knees, and Jeff autographed my arm with a Sharpie, which made me feel, briefly, voluptuous in a sculptural kind of way, but also, that Cicciolina's position is not as far out as you may think.

12
A premonition:

*You're highbrow, holy
With lots of soul melancholy shimmering
Serpentine sleekness was
always my weakness
Like a simple tune
But no dilettante filigree
fancy beats the plastic you
Career girl cover
Exposed and another
slips right into view
Oh looking for love in a
looking glass world
Is pretty hard for you...*

Roxy Music, "Mother of Pearl," **Stranded** (Polydor Records, 1973).

13
U2, "Even Better Than The Real Thing (Original Music Video)," 1992, **YouTube**, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yrch66gdjkk&feature=pb> (accessed March 28, 2014).

14
National Geographic,

"Great Pacific Garbage Patch (Pacific Trash Vortex)," encyclopedic entry, **National Geographic Education**, <http://education.nationalgeographic.com/education/encyclopedia/great-pacific-garbage-patch/> (accessed May 1, 2014).

15
Robert Sullivan, **The Meadowlands: Wilderness adventures on the Edge of a City** (New York: Random House, 1998), 96-97, quoted in Jane Bennett, **Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things** (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), p. 6.

16
Bennett, **Vibrant Matter**, p. 6

17
Io Tillett Wright, "The Lowdown on Kembra Pfahler," **T Magazine Blog**, June 20, 2012, <http://tmagazine.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/06/20/the-lowdown-kembra-pfahler/> (accessed March 28, 2014).

18
Ibid.

19
Tim Adams: "Antony Hegarty: We need more Oestrogen-based Thinking," **The Observer**, May 19, 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2012/may/20/antony-hegarty-interview-meltdown-gender> (accessed March 30, 2014).

20
More on compassionate objects can be found in Elaine Scarry's book, **The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World** (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).

21
KISS, "I was Made for Lovin' You," **Dynasty** (Casablanca, 1979).

22
The **Oxford** online dictionary defines awesome as follows: *1: Extremely impressive or daunting; inspiring great admiration, apprehension, or fear: "the awesome power of the atomic bomb"* *1.1: (informal) Extremely good; excellent: "the band is truly awesome!"* http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/awesome (accessed 28 March, 2014)

