

Queers, Crips, and Mermaids: Disruptive Bodies as Performative Objects

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This chapter attempts to analyse and unfold interlinked layers of a research-performance, in two interconnected site-specific *Acts*. First *Act* (Collision) happened in St. Moritz 2020 and the second *Act* was performed a year later in Bern 2021¹. By adopting the notion of “*cosmopolitics*”² as a method, this *Performance* attempts to speculate inter-relativity of human and non-human bodies within the capitalist matrix of species hierarchy. Through comparative analysis of different psycho-cultural/political narratives, this text attempts to map out interconnected traumas of transspecies; wounds and scars that are older than our bodies, older than ourselves.³ This text uses diffractive reading of these two *Acts* through the histories of the figure of *the mermaid* and *the witch*, In order to queer the hegemonic interpretations of both figures.

Act 1. Collision

The beginning part of this work was shaped in 2020 while I⁴ was collaborating with Legion Seven⁵ (a talented musician, singer, and artist), on an audio-visual performance as part of a public digital art festival in St. Moritz, a city seen as the 150-year-old synonym for excess⁶ and the epitome of *Capitalocene*⁷. St. Moritz is historically, considered to be one of the most “luxurious” and conservative cities in Switzerland. Even though the location of this



Image 1. Legion Seven & Kamran Behrouz, *Act 1. Collision*, St. Moritz, 2020

performance was arbitrary (or serendipitous if you will), soon it became clear that it is a point of entry to a whole new layer in this work, since whatever we put on that stage, would eventually become commodified by the nature of the space.

¹ First *Act*, *Collision*, link: <https://youtu.be/r6umHJL8kVY>

Second *Act*, *Gauche Caviar*, Link: <https://vimeo.com/568019473>

² “*Posthuman Glossary*”, Edited by Braidotti R., Hlavajova M., Bloomsbury publishing Plc, London: 2018, pp.93

³ Traumas such as racism, segregation, inherited anxiety and trans-homophobia, displacement, PTSD, and war, which can easily be triggered by the environment and reactivate certain bodily emotions — as we are interconnected entities.

⁴ www.kamranbehrouz.com

⁵ Link: <https://musicdirectory.ch/profiles/legion-seven/>

⁶ New York Times: “*Sybaritic St. Moritz*” by Sarah Wildman, 2006

⁷ “Age of Capital”—and the era of capitalism as a world-ecology of power, capital, and nature. The Capitalocene signifies capitalism as a way of organizing nature—as a multispecies, situated, capitalist world-ecology.”

— “*Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism*”, Ed. by Jason W. Moore, 2016: PM Press, p.6 (See also: Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Duke University Press, Durham, and London, 2016)

To me, the event itself, is not necessarily the main performance or the so-called the *product*, but rather the whole process of creating this work—from the collision of our works/lives as two individual artists, to the anxieties, miscommunications, and language usage of the organizers of this public event, as well as the subtexts of conversations and encounters around it— are all considered to be part of this Performance.

Microaggressions that each of our bodies (based on their identities) experienced as a token in this Euro-centric event, raised several questions.⁸ For instance, our physical presence— Me as a queer nonbinary Middle Eastern (born culturally Muslim) and Legion Seven as a queer nonbinary black Canadian (raised Christian)— in a predominantly white and excessive place like St. Moritz⁹, revealed “intersectional” or rather complex and interlinked forms of discrimination that each of our bodies must encounter daily, due to colorism, different shades of our skins, nationality, sexual orientation, gender identity, or cultural/political backgrounds. Those convergences made us question which bodies are being more verbally abused in this public sphere¹⁰ and which ones must face bureaucratic violence and institutional racism on a different level? Which invisible walls are designed for which bodies? Different unspoken privileges regarding opacity and visibility play a crucial role in the way that our bodies have been *directed*. And “*bodies are directed, and they take the shape of this direction*” (Ahmed: 2006)¹¹

Which shades of skin tone or forms of gender expressions can *direct* different non-white bodies to be seen and identified— in a first glance— as “white” or “hetero”, and can this help those bodies to refuge momentarily from the constant sharp and violent gaze of racism and patriarchy? What does it mean to inhabit a body which has no shelter—even momentarily— from the ferocious gaze of “*imperialist-white supremacist-capitalist patriarchy*”¹²?

In both performances in Bern and St. Moritz, performativity of my own body (as visual artist) was motionless and *glitch-like*. I was just sitting on the stage as a disruptive object, observing the spectators; My body as an “*out of place*” object, gazing and staring back at the audience.

⁸ For instance, even though, Me and Legion Seven were supposed to perform one piece together, however, each one of us have been received a different contract separately. In the contract that I received there was an additional article: “**Article 4. Statements: Politically radical statements, for example in the sense of left or right-wing radicals or contents defaming religious communities are prohibited. Likewise, sexist, racist content or content violating personal rights is prohibited.**” After complaining about this issue, I received another email from one of the organizers of the festival that added: “*The problem in your case is explicit visual representations that could be considered as pornographic. Such as this.*” Attached to this email there was an illustration that I made for a paper; *Rejected Bodies*. This paper was presented in the conference “[taking sides](#)” at [University of Konstanz 2018](#) and the image has been taken out of context, and it has no relation to the proposal and description of the work that we were submitted for the festival. One might argue that these 2 versions of contracts, including related conversations around it, were based on organizers’ pre-assumptions about our political backgrounds as well as gender/sexual expressions, which might unintentionally reveal the anxiety of the organizers of this predominantly white festival in confrontation with only non-white bodies that they were included in their program. What kind of bodily emotions such encounters perpetuate for us as performers? How does it shape the performance?

⁹ <https://www.swisscommunity.org/en/news-media/swiss-review/article/switzerlands-colonialism-without-colonies>

¹⁰ For instance, noticeable and frequent amount of white gaze on black bodies, in a predominantly white city like St. Moritz.

¹¹ Sara Ahmed, *Queer phenomenology: orientations, objects, others*, Duke university press, 2006, pp.16

¹² *bell hooks* argues about the inaccessibility of the language we created in the academia, and how we need to challenge it. For instance, instead of the word *intersectionality*, she uses the phrase “*Imperialist-white supremacist-capitalist-patriarchy*”. On a public conversation about “The personal is political” with Jill Soloway (writer and director of *Transparent*) at New School, Hooks elaborates: “One of the things that I realized is people respond so negatively to this phrase. Whereas when you talk about intersectionality, it has a kind of political neutrality”. Link <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fw6Fd87PhjU>



Image 2. Act 1. Collision, St. Moritz, 2020

“The moments when the body appears out of place are moments of political and personal trouble. It involves disorientation: people blink and then look again. The proximity of such bodies makes familiar spaces seem strange”¹³

Our first performance was marketed as a “concert”. The public stage, located next to the main train station of St. Moritz, was designed for a standard live audio-visual concert, however, instead of standing behind the audience in the control-cabin¹⁴ (a place where has been assigned to visual artists), I decided to sit on the stage next to Legion Seven, staring at the audience, or interrupt the speed of the visuals, while they were performing their songs— it was impossible for my body to be separated from those images. Visuals are byproducts of my misplaced body. My performance is not just a visual narrative, or a virtual motion-capture, but rather is an attempt to reconnect those visual narratives to the *body* that visualized them. My body as a cue to disrupt the pleasure of consumption and to destabilize the capitalist habit of consumerism.

The Echo of An Old (colonial) Hammer

One of the main songs that Legion Seven has written and performed in St. Moritz is called “Take This Hammer”. I reused this song later as part of the second motion-capture animation, *Gauche Caviar*¹⁵, which was shown a year later in a public collective performance in Bern. This song was referential to me, not only because it strengthens and connects to my visual narratives but also due to the way in which its history has been woven into what I call

¹³ Sara Ahmed, *Queer phenomenology: orientations, objects, others*, Duke university press, 2006, pp.135

¹⁴ Visuals were meant to be mapped and projected on a container and there was a table for visual artists behind the audience to help them control and manipulate the images. On the stage, in front of the container, there was a station with microphone and stands, which has been assigned to sound artists/singers.

¹⁵—Second Act, *Gauche Caviar*, Link: <https://vimeo.com/568019473>

Gauche Caviar is French equivalent of *champagne socialist*; a pejorative term for a person who claims to be involve in socialist values, who has a lifestyle deemed inconsistent with such beliefs, implying hypocrisy or lack of commitment.

*cosmopolitics*¹⁶ and displacement of racialized bodies in the capitalist market. In this sound piece, Legion Seven included some infamous stanzas from the lyrics of an old folk song. The original song of *take this hammer* is a prison, logging, and railroad work song. It refers to John Henry's hammer, who himself was the subject of many other folk songs, such as *John Henry blues*. The story is about John Henry, "a laborer in Big Ben tunnel in West Virginia"¹⁷ sometime in the late 1800s. In the process of blasting a tunnel through a mountain, holes were dug for the placement of dynamite charges. A new, steam-driven mechanical hole digger was being tested. A contest was arranged between the new device and the best of the steel drivers—the African American named John Henry. The livelihoods of countless manual laborers could depend on the outcome of this contest. John Henry bested the machine. But the superhuman exertion proved fatal, and he died very soon after his pyrrhic victory"¹⁸ "He died while on duty, this giving rise to the thought that work killed him. The one stanza which was written is repeated over and over by laborers who sing it" (Newman I. White: 1920)¹⁹

*"This old hammer killed John Henry,
But this old hammer won't kill me.
Take this hammer, take it to the captain.
Tell him I'm gone babe; tell him I'm gone.
If he asks you, was I runnin'
Tell him I was flyin'"*²⁰

In 1936, for the first time, "Take This Hammer" was performed by Jimmie Strothers and recorded for the Library of Congress and in 1940 Lead Belly's²¹ version of this song was issued on a commercial record.²² In Legion seven's version of this song, old verses are painstakingly woven into their own lyrics, which resulted in summoning the listeners to face the past and present structural racism in Switzerland and to call out their "racist grandma".

*"That what would cut your cord and bind you instead to a curse through generations.
A link disguised as heritage; it's yours to break"*²³

¹⁶ "Cosmopolitics points towards the reinvigoration of the planetary sphere of political theory and action in the age of ecological anxiety. It arises out of the realization that the triumphalist rhetoric of cosmopolitanism is out of place in a world in which the cultural and political assumptions on which it rested have been radically destabilized",

— "Posthuman Glossary", Edited by Braidotti R., Hlavajova M., Bloomsbury publishing Plc, London: 2018, pp.93

¹⁷ "Two researchers—Scott Nelson, an historian, and John Garst, a retired chemistry professor and longtime folk song scholar—found evidence for John Henry's story that placed the contest not at Big Bend Tunnel in West Virginia, but rather, at one of the following locations: 1. nearby Lewis Tunnel in Virginia in 1871, New Jersey—born John William Henry was sentenced to 10 years in prison in 1866 at Richmond, Virginia, and was leased to the C & O to work on the tunnel (Nelson's thesis) 2. near Dunnavant, Alabama, in 1887, at Oak Mountain Tunnel, during the construction of the Columbus & Western. John Henry was probably John Henry Dabney, born a slave to a Dabney family in Hinds County, Mississippi (Garst's thesis)" —Norm Cohen, "American folk song: a regional encyclopedia", Greenwood press, 2008, pp.330

¹⁸ Norm Cohen, American folk song: a regional encyclopedia, Greenwood Press, 2008, p.328

¹⁹ Newman Ivey White, "American Negro Folksongs", Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1925, p.261

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ Huddie William Ledbetter (January 23, 1888 – December 6, 1949) American folk blues singer, songwriter, and guitarist whose ability to perform a vast repertoire of songs in a variety of styles, in conjunction with his notoriously violent life, made him a legend. link: <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Leadbelly>

²² "Take This Hammer", performed by Jimmie Strothers, a blind African American singer, banjoist, and guitarist, who was recorded by John A. Lomax for the Library of Congress while an inmate at State Farm in Lynn, Virginia, in 1936. Link: <https://www.discogs.com/Various-Virginia-And-The-Piedmont-Minstrelsy-Work-Songs-And-Blues/release/3241317>

²³ "Take This Hammer", Legion Seven, 2020

Act 2. Gauche Caviar

I wrote the script of the second segment of this performance a couple of days after I left St. Moritz. *Gauche Caviar* is a recorded motion capture performance, which was shown as part of a collective and site-specific performance hosted by the installation²⁴ of Mirkan Deniz at Helvetiaplatz, Bern. Narrative of *Gauche Caviar* has been told by two motion capture mermaids that I designed based on our faces. “*Take this hammer*” has been sung by the face motion capture of Legion Seven (Mermaid I), appearing and disappearing throughout the animation. Their voice constantly fades into my altered voice (Mermaid II) which is telling a very personal story, parallel to stories of war-children, fish roe, inherited anxiety, displacement, and sturgeon; the source of caviar, one of the endangered species.

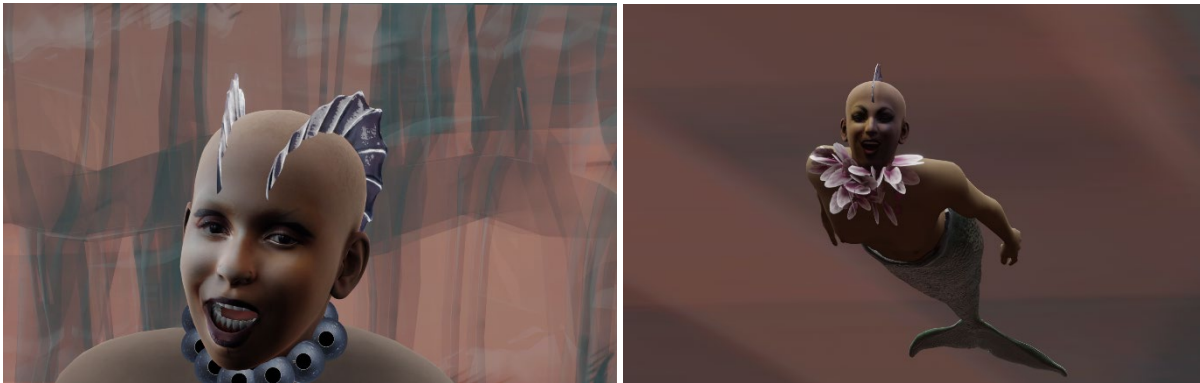


Image 3. Video still of *Gauche Caviar*, Mermaid (avatar) I & II, 2020-21

Two mythical (digital) mermaids sing and narrate a story. They *lure* the audience (co-performers) to face the past and present structural racism and to dis-engage from species-supremacy that the site has been offered.



Image 4. Act 2. *Gauche Caviar* at Mirkan Deniz installation, Bern, 2021

²⁴ “These military items are mainly being used in war zones as barricade (sangan). Due to their quick and practical set up/dismantle method, they are also popular amongst police and at the borders. These bunkers are being manufactured by a British company called HESCO, and in their own words: “They are the developer of the HESCO MIL Defensive Barrier to engineer products that inspire confidence in military, security and environmental applications.” And somehow these products are popular in the politically unstable regions, such as *Middle East*.

Cosmopolitics of Mermaids

Symbology of what we know as Mermaid today, is ancient and complex. Characteristics and stories related to this Human-fish hybrid creature changed and adapted drastically in various cultural repertoires. “Mermaid researchers say our first real mermaid; *Atargatis*, fertility goddess, came from Assyria (Syria)”²⁵

Knowledge, desire, and beauty as well as humans’ anxiety and fear of death are all associated with mermaids in different mythologies. Mermaids are often confronting humanity with their deepest desires and fears, and raise questions about what it is to be human or non-human and what lies beyond a human-centered world? I want to reflect on the iconography of mermaid and further my analysis on how this deity *directed* by colonial history and morphed into what we know as “*The Little Mermaid*” today. Amongst various tales and myths about mermaids, I would like to begin with two ancient accounts, **Oannes** and **Yemoja**, as a starting point.

Mermaids of Indigenous Waters

1. The myth of Oannes harks back to Mesopotamian culture (circa 4000 BCE). Oannes²⁶, an amphibious half-fish and half-man who taught mankind wisdom and was living in what is now the Persian Gulf. Oannes is fish shaped, but he also has features such as man’s head and feet and the ability to speak human language. In the daytime Oannes came up to the seashore and instructed mankind in writing, the arts, and the sciences.²⁷ “Because at nightfall Oannes plunged back into the waters of what is now the Persian Gulf, some see him as a solar deity. It is significant that Oannes educates humans: this resonates with the mythological understanding that, as also seen in the Sirens of the *Odyssey*, hybrid creatures associated with the sea are holders of knowledge.”²⁸

2. One of the other ancient accounts traces back to the earliest African societies and culture. It existed in African mythology for millennia. African water spirits often personify the sources of water in which they live and sometimes bear the same name as the river, for instance, Igbagho²⁹. One of the most widely known Yoruba river spirits is Oṣun³⁰. Oṣun, Oya, Oba, and Shango, along with many other siblings, are the children of Yemoja, whose name means “Mother of Fish.” When Yoruba peoples were captured during the transatlantic slave trade, they brought their worship of Yemoja with them. Today, she is a transnational water goddess,

²⁵ Skye Alexander, “*Mermaids: The Myths, Legends and Lore*”, Adams Media, 2012 (chapter 4: *Mermaids of the ancient world*)

²⁶ Oannes has related to the Mesopotamian god Dagon and the Syrian goddess Atargatis (1000 B.C.E)

²⁷ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Oannes>

²⁸ “*The Penguin Book of Mermaids*”, edited by Cristina Bacchilega, Marie Alohani Brown, Penguin Books, 2019

²⁹ “A river goddess whose mermaid servants are tasked with guarding her sacred river Igbagho also rules the underworld located beneath the water”

—Funmi Osoba, “*Benin folklore: (A collection of classic folktales and legends)*”, Hadad Books, London: 1993

³⁰ Oṣun’s sisters, Oya and Oba, are also river spirits, and all three are married to their brother Shango, a thunder god. Oṣun was offered human sacrifices “in times of need,” such as when Jebu warriors went up against the British forces in May 1892. She continues to be honored today, with an annual two-week-long festival dedicated to her.

known by the local transliteration of her Yoruba name.³¹ Wherever “Mami Wata” is worshipped, her devotees generally call her their linguistic equivalent of “Mother Water”³²

Yemoja (Mami Wata) is not the only indigenous goddess who is affected by the nature of colonialism. Many Greek deities have Roman counterparts. The Greeks and Romans carried back many myths, gods, and goddesses from each country they invaded, and forcefully adapted them into their own pantheons. “Characteristics of Assyria’s Atargatis, for example, can easily be seen in the Greek’s Aphrodite and the Roman’s Venus”³³

“The material and ideological forces of capitalism and colonialism, often in conjunction with sexist ideologies, may have caused localized and indigenous story streams across the world to dwindle and their currents to be diverted. Thus, mermaid and water spirit stories as a global phenomenon do not circulate in isolation from one another” (Bacchilega: 2019)³⁴

Monotheism: The Abjection of Mermaid

I remember once during a discussion in an academic seminar, a typically confident European (male) senior professor, was constantly interrupting me to use the word Siren³⁵ instead of Mermaid but funnily enough, unlike today’s popular belief that sees Greek “sirens” as equivalent to dangerously luring beautiful women as well as mermaids, “*the original Sirens weren’t mermaids at all. Rather, they combined the features of women and birds*”³⁶

Only after the rise of Christianity, were the Siren’s feathers replaced by serpent or fishtail. Alexander argues that “*some researchers speculate that this shift occurred because Christian art and literature associated wings with angels and the church fathers wanted to avoid confusion*”³⁷

One might argue that monotheism was the starting point of Mermaid’s journey into the whirlpool of *abjection* and *misogyny*. Siren with her genitalia being obscured under a serpent or fish tail, alongside her luring knowledge and ability to seduce Men (and only men) into her own underwater world or better say (hu)man’s death bed, reveals how female sexuality has been perceived in Christianity.

³¹ She is worshipped in Brazil (Yemoja, Lemanja, Janaina), Uruguay (Lemanja and Yemalla), the Dominican Republic (Lemanja and Yemalla), Haiti (La Sirène and Lasirène), Cuba (Yamaha, Yemoya, Yemoyah, Iemanja), and the United States (Yemalla, Yemana, Yemaja). Yemoja is sometimes associated with another notable transnational water goddess, Mami Wata or “Mother Water.”

³² “In her human-anaconda form, she is described as dreadful to behold. In her mermaid form, be it piscine or reptilian, Mami Wata dwells in the waters of the forests she protects, but just as often, she might pass you by in her human form as she walks down the street in high heels, dressed to the nines and wearing stylish sunglasses”
—Misty L. Bastian, “*Married in the Water: Spirit Kin and Other Afflictions of Modernity in Nigeria*”, *Journal of Religion of Africa* 27, no.2 (May 1997): 116-34, 123.

³³ Skye Alexander, “*Mermaids: The Myths, Legends and Lore*”, Adams Media, 2012

³⁴ “*The Penguin Book of Mermaids*”, edited by Cristina Bacchilega, Marie Alohani Brown, Penguin Books, 2019, eBook version, p.17

³⁵ The Sirens’ best-known role in ancient literature is in Homer’s epic poem *Odyssey*, where they attempt to lure the hero Odysseus to his death. However, Homer doesn’t describe these beautiful beasts as possessing aquatic characteristics.

³⁶ Skye Alexander, “*Mermaids: The Myths, Legends and Lore*”, Adams Media, 2012

³⁷ (Ibid)

Female (Mermaid) Sexuality

Islam, like its two parent monotheisms, Judaism and Christianity, all share similar sexual anxieties; however, their difference lies in distinct societal structures, which they've been practiced, as well as the way in which sexuality has been regulated within those structures. George Murdock believes "societies fall into two groups with respect to the manner in which they regulate the sexual instinct: one group enforces respect of sexual rules by a 'strong internalization of sexual prohibitions during the socialization process', the other enforces that respect by 'external precautionary safeguards such as avoidance rules'"³⁸, according to Murdock, Western [Christian] societies belong to the first group. In addition, Fatima Mernissi indicates that "the difference between the two kinds of societies [suggested by Murdock], resides not so much in their mechanisms of internalization as in their concept of [active or passive] female sexuality"³⁹

Mernissi argues that unlike Islamic doctrine⁴⁰, which was based on the assumption of an active female sexuality (a powerful force which needs to be contained and controlled, to prevent social chaos (*fitna*) and threatening men's civic and religious lives), Christianity and other Western philosophical traditions, including Freudian psychoanalysis, presumed a passive female sexuality.⁴¹ Perhaps, the shift in Siren's representation, from the bird-woman to a woman with fish or snake-like tail, harks back to the role of woman in 'the original sin' which perhaps led to obscure their sexual/reproductive organs. Sirens more than being the symbol of female sexuality, were symbolizing the concept of feminine seduction and evil that began with *Eve*.

The Geist (Spirit) of Misogyny

Unlike indigenous Mermaids or Sirens, who are the holders of knowledge, 'Man', the protagonist of the *myth of enlightenment*, considered to be the gate keeper and holder of the *Spirit*. Undine⁴² as well as the nameless little Mermaid are both lacking a soul, and this in fact becomes the main motivation for them to marry a man, as a savior, and to be united with the higher spirit through experiencing absolute loyalty and (sexual) sacrifice.

³⁸ George Peter Murdock, "Social Structure", New York, 1965, p.273

³⁹ Fatima Mernissi, "Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in a Modern Society", eBook edition, Saqi Books, 2011, p.20 (First published by Schenkman Publishing Company, Cambridge, 1975)

⁴⁰ In Persian [Islamic] tales of magic, the character of the mermaid as it appears in European folktales—that is, a being whose body is half human and half fish—does not exist. On the shores of the Persian Gulf, some people believe that there are beings in the sea whose body is completely identical to that of a human. Most of these characters are seen as evil and harmful. But some of them, particularly those whose physical features are close to those of the *Pari* (a beautiful, winged creature somewhat like the European fairy), are believed to help humans in need.

—Mohammad Jafari Qanavati, Center for the Great Islamic Encyclopedia, Iran. Translated by Ulrich Marzolph, independent scholar, Germany.

⁴¹ Afsaneh Najmabadi, "Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity", University of California Press, Berkeley, 2005. p.132

⁴² *A beautiful water nymph named Undine, who was adopted as a child by a fisherman and his wife, marries a knight named Huldbrand. She loves him, and after the wedding she reveals to him that she is really a water princess who, thanks to their marriage, now has a soul. Entranced by her beauty, Huldbrand accepts her somewhat extravagant behavior. Unfortunately, sometime later, Huldbrand's heart begins to turn from Undine to his fellow mortal Bertalda, whom Undine has been treating like a sister. After a number of twists and turns that include Undine's presumed death and the wedding of Huldbrand and Bertalda, the tale ends with Huldbrand's death and Undine's transformation into a body of water surrounding his grave.*

The concept of *Soul*, *Spirit*, or *Geist* (Holy Spirit or Heiliger Geist) is not only the core of Christianity but also the central point of continental philosophy. The spirit of Cosmopolitan enlightenment, and the Hegelian notion of *universalism*, “*which is substantial as well as subjective*”⁴³ in association with the higher stage of the Spiritual (*Geist*), are all playing a crucial role in forging the anthropocentrism and the notion of universal humanism that we know today. The sub-humanity of the mermaid is revealed in her desire to become a human, and to be human meant mainly; to retain a soul.

It is not a surprise that in Christian adaptations of this story—for instance the medieval tale of the fairy *Melusine*⁴⁴ and Friedrich de La Motte Fouqué’s German novella about *Undine*⁴⁵—Mermaids, in a search of spirit, abandoned their indigenous world to be part of the humanity, and only a (male) human partner can enable this: either through the institution of Marriage or *True Love*. Undine’s influence on Hans Christian Andersen’s Little Mermaid is clear and acknowledged. *The little Mermaid*, as the current most known version of this tale, gained remarkable popularity after Walt Disney’s⁴⁶ adaptation of the story in 1989 and somehow remained as the contemporary embodiment of heterosociality in the Capitalocene.

From this point on, Mermaids started to lose their ability of shapeshifting. “In both stories of The Little Mermaid and Undine, a beautiful mermaid is loyal to her human love object and inspired by the prospect of acquiring a soul. Genre, however, makes a difference in how the two stories approach the soulless mermaid’s desire to be human and be loved by one” (Bacchilega: 2019)

The shift from a loyal and powerful character like Undine to a “little” nameless subhuman, who cannot even speak and endure a constant chronic pain in her legs, just to be loved by a man reveals many layers of misogyny. “*A mermaid has not an immortal soul, nor can she obtain one unless she wins the love of a human being. On the power of another hangs her eternal destiny. But the daughters of the air, although they do not possess an immortal soul, can, by their good deeds, procure one for themselves*”⁴⁷

⁴³ G. W. F. Hegel, “*Phenomenology of the spirit*”, Trans. A. V. Miller, Oxford University Press, 1977

⁴⁴ Jean d’Arras produced the first literary version of Mélusine, or Melusina, at the end of the fourteenth century, and it remains one of the most well-known mermaid stories and became the darling of the French aristocracy. It begins when Raymond, the son of a bankrupt count, is adopted by Emmerick, a nobleman, who becomes his friend. In a hunting incident, Raymond accidentally kills Emmerick and wanders about in grief until he comes upon a fountain deep in the forest, where he meets three mysterious women, including one named Melusina with whom he falls in love. He asks her to marry him, and she agrees, with one condition: He must never see her on Saturday. After the couple wed Melusina gives birth to several deformed children. One Saturday night, Raymond spies on his wife in her bath—and sees that she has the tail of a snake. He blames her for defiling his family line and she leaves him because he broke his vow. According to legend, Melusina now flies about France heralding death and crying out when a tragedy is about to occur.

⁴⁵ Friedrich de La Motte Fouqué, “*Undine and Other Tales*”, trans. Fanny Elizabeth Bunnnett, Samson Low, Son and Marston, London: 1867

⁴⁶ While tracing heterosocial regimes of representation in this paper, Walt Disney’s flirtatious relationship with white supremacy needs to be acknowledged: Walt Disney never publicly condemned fascism and in 1938, a month after Kristallnacht, Disney personally welcomed Nazi director Leni Riefenstahl to his studios. Regarding visual representations, there is a famous *Three Little Pigs* scene, in which the wolf was portrayed as a Jewish peddler. This scene later has been reanimated. Disney is also blameworthy of anti-blackness and the usage of racial stereotypes in his movies from the 40s, for instance, *Dumbo*’s black crows; *Fantasia*’s black servant centaurette and most disturbingly; *Song of the South*, a movie so offensive that the Disney company will no longer let it be seen in public. On top of all, Walt Disney’s own behavior, including numerous racial slurs, that he used, in different occasions to describe some characters of his works, make these issues even more clear and concerning. In *Walt Disney: The Triumph of the American Imagination*, Neal Gabler states that “of the Jews who worked [at Disney], it was hard to find any who thought Walt was an anti-Semite”. That said, the organization he was a founding member of, The Motion Picture Alliance, allegedly had many privately anti-Semitic members. So, while there’s no proof that Disney himself was anti-Semitic, some argue that he was complicit based on the company he kept. additional Link: <https://www.vulture.com/2013/12/walt-disney-anti-semitism-racism-sexism-frozen-head.html>

⁴⁷ Andersen, Hans Christian, “*Fairy Tales of Hans Christian Andersen*”, The Floating Press, 2010, p.585

The Witch: Early Queer Symbols

The metamorphosis of the sea fairy, from the tale of *Undine* into the story of *The Little Mermaid* reflects the colonial shift in relation to female sexuality. The outspoken character of *Undine*, who continuously delivered significant speeches⁴⁸ throughout the story (even when she was accused of being a witch and having intercourse with evil spirits), suddenly shrank into the nameless character of *The Little Mermaid* in Andersen's tale. Andersen's emphasis on her being "little", as well as, not having the ability to shapeshift (as one of the core qualities of sea fairies for many Millennia), makes the character of *The Little Mermaid* distinct and more vulnerable compared to her indigenous mythical mothers.

The character of *The Witch*, and its peculiar history in Christianity, needs another lengthy essay, which is not my main concern in this paper. However, the emergence of *The Witch* in the tale of *The Little Mermaid*—which emerged as a proposition for *The Little Mermaid*'s inability to shapeshift—is crucial for my analysis.

The Witch, who lets the ugly fat, phallic, *water snakes crawl and sprawl about on her spongy bosom*, is hinting at *The Witch*'s acknowledged sexual desires and performativity.

The Little Mermaid's encounter with *The Witch* could well be seen as marking her sexual awakening and anxieties in confronting the terror of sexuality.

She gave up on her "*loveliest voice on earth*" and allowed *The Witch* to cut out her tongue in exchange for a potion that will give her legs. By drinking a drop of the potion, then her tail will disappear, and turn into legs. However, she must endure a constant great pain in her legs, perhaps as a reminder of this sexual repression. In *The Little Mermaid: Hans Christian Andersen's Feminine Identification*, Robert W. Meyers describes this as "the relinquishment of her right to be heard, the loss of her creativity and the wound of castration"⁴⁹

One might argue that these characters are directly linked to Andersen's own sexual anxieties. Andersen identified by many critics as homosexual or bisexual but whether he repressed his sexual feelings toward men, remains obscure⁵⁰. However, his repressed feelings of sexuality are very much projected on his fairytale characters or in Meyers' opinion "Andersen had a strong unconscious feminine identification which had to be repressed because his masculine identity would not tolerate it". The way Andersen made *The Little Mermaid* sacrifice her voice and sexuality, in order to attain a Spirit (which ended in her death) might sum up this repression. In fact, the role of *The Witch* in her attempt to achieve a spirit is way more significant than a confused prince.

The abusive and sexually active character of *The Witch* is in fact the personification of Andersen's own repressed homosexual desires; an early depiction of queerness based on Christian colonial (*gender*) binaries. This depiction is in fact close to what Jungian psychoanalysis marked as a *negative anima*. The anima (the female element in a male psyche) in Jungian psychoanalysis is often personified as a witch or a priestess — women who have links with "forces of darkness" and "the spirit world" (i.e., the unconscious).⁵¹

⁴⁸ See: *Undine's* speech while she reveals to Huldbrand that he married a water princess in search of a soul: Friedrich de La Motte Fouqué, "*Undine and Other Tales*", trans. Fanny E. Bunnett, London: Samson Low, Son and Marston, 1867, 45-50.

⁴⁹ Robert W. Meyers, "*The Little Mermaid: Hans Christian Andersen's Feminine Identification*", *Journal of Applied Psychoanalytic Studies*, 2001, p.153

⁵⁰ Jack Zipes, "*When Dreams Came True: Classical Fairy Tales and Their Tradition*", Routledge, New York: 2007, p.115

⁵¹ Carl G. Jung, "*Men and His Symbols*", Anchor Press, New York: 1988, p.177

Jung, in description of a 19th century painting of *a witches' sabbath*, states: "Medieval Europe's idea of "courtly love" was influenced by the worship of the Virgin Mary: Ladies to whom knights pledged love were believed to be as pure as the virgin. When the anima is projected on to an "official" personification, she tends to fall apart into a double aspect, such as Mary and witch".⁵²

In 1989, Walt Disney Pictures adapted and commodified *The Little Mermaid* which in my opinion is the epitome of heteronormativity in the Capitalocene. The success of this musical animation led to what is now known as "the Disney Renaissance". A commercial success, and a happy ending for *The Little Mermaid* who now has a name, *Ariel*.

Perhaps it is not easy to trace the footprints of Walt Disney's flirtatious relationship with fascism and white supremacy⁵³ in this animated musical film, however there are elements worthy of more attention. *The witch*, taken as the personification of Andersen's own repressed homosexual desires, is embodied in Disney's version as a vicious fat colored woman, named *Ursula*. Transformation of the fatness and especially fat female body into unthinkable, unlivable, and abject bodies, is very much evident in late-twentieth-century U.S. culture. "*In contemporary culture, the fat body generally becomes visible only at the margins, if at all, and only when written into a pathologizing narrative in which fat is a cause of ill health and a symptom of poor behavior*"⁵⁴

It is in fact not a coincidence nor a surprise that *Ursula* was inspired by drag queen legend and John Waters' muse Divine⁵⁵, who was known for her outrageous and subversive acts. Divine's collaboration with John Waters led to a crucial legacy of camp art such as *Female Trouble* (1974), *Hair Spray* (1988) and *Pink Flamingos* (1972). An anti-aesthetic Campy performance of Divine⁵⁶, was not only challenging the gender norms (Christian values), but also swapped the *abjection* from queerness/fatness and imposed it on heteropatriarchy. In fact, Andersen's repressed queer desires, which personified in the character of The Witch (as a negative anima), embraced by Divine and turned into a performative act to subvert the hegemonic regimes that produced those repressions in the first place. A bitter queer comedy to sabotage the power structures of "*imperialist-white supremacist-capitalist patriarchy*"⁵⁷

Villainization and abjection of queerness in creation of *Ursula* (inspired by Divine) is in fact, the continuation of Walt Disney's legacy of stereotyping, heteronormativity, and racism. However, re-signification of the character of *Ursula* in the last two decades (as a queer icon in pop-culture) is the continuation of queer activism and Divine's legacy, to subvert those regimes of representation.

⁵² Carl G. Jung, "*Men and His Symbols*", Anchor Press, New York: 1988, p.188

⁵³ See footnote no. 40

⁵⁴ Le'a Kent, "*Fighting Abjection: Representing Fat Women*," in *Bodies Out of Bounds: Fatness and Transgression*, ed. Jana Evans Braziel and Kathleen LeBesco (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), p. 132.

⁵⁵ Disney's *Moana* directors, John Musker and Ron Clements, in an interview with SBS' Maria Lewis have revealed that everyone's favorite sea witch is actually based on the very iconic drag queen, Divine. Musker revealed that one of *The Little Mermaid*'s writers, Howard Ashman, knew Divine and had Rob Menkoff - one of the film's principal animators - to do "some drawings that were based on Divine". "Even though it's sort of disguised, it's based on the character [of Divine]," Article 1: SBS, *Fun fact: Ursula is based on the iconic drag queen Divine*, by Stephanie Marie Anderson, 2016 Article 2: AV Club Magazine, *How Divine inspired Ursula the Sea Witch*, By Chris Dart, 2016

⁵⁶ Additional reading: Angela Stukator, "*It's not over until the fat lady sings: Comedy, the Carnavalesque, and Body Politics*", in *Bodies Out of Bounds: Fatness and Transgression*, ed. Jana Evans Braziel and Kathleen LeBesco (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001)

⁵⁷ See footnote no.8

Colonial Abjection of Indian Mermaids (Hijras)

As I already mentioned, *The Witch* as sexually active and ambiguous, symbolizes a queerness which is indeed introduced as malicious and dangerous in Christian societies. This might be even more visible in the anxiety of British colonial rules in relation to India's *Third Gender Community*⁵⁸, as well as the abjection of sexual fluidity of Persians in accounts of the European travelogues in 18th and 19th centuries.⁵⁹

There are many well-established sexual identities in India: for instance, *kinnar*, *aravani*, *hijra*, *kothi*, *jagappa*. These identity groups have long been historically embedded in local cultures (although often marginalized) and have been woven into local identitarian understandings. (Kannabiran: 2015)⁶⁰

Transformation of the symbol of sea fairy, from being the bearer of knowledge, to a voiceless "little" submissive woman (who is a loyal victim of a heteropatriarchal system), is hinting at the history of India's *Third Gender Community* as the subject of colonial ferocity.

Hijras [transgenders] played a famous role in the royal courts of the Islamic world, particularly in the Ottoman empires and the Mughal rule in the Medieval India.

From the 18th century, through the onset of colonial rule, the situation for Hijras in India changed drastically.

"In the second half of the 19th century, the British Colonial administration vigorously sought to criminalize Hijra community and to deny them the civil rights." Hijras were the subject of criminalization and considered to be separate caste or tribe in different parts of India by the colonial administration and faced legal discrimination according to The Criminal Tribes Act, 1871. This pre-partition history influences the vulnerable circumstances of hijra in this contemporary world.⁶¹

In *Holy Science*⁶² Banu Subramaniam traces, how the categories of "natural" and "unnatural" sex emerge in plant and human biology, in British colonial ideologies, and in Hindu nationalist discourses? And how these categories affect hijras to the present day.

"While the British deemed homosexuality and its oriental colonial subjects as sites of sexual otherness, Indian nationalists, in turn, relegated homosexual, indigenous, and Muslim Indians as their sexual "others."

⁵⁸ Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism recognized three genders. The Vedas (1500 BC - 500 BC) describe individuals as belonging to one of three separate categories, according to one's nature or prakrti. These are also spelled out in the Kama Sutra (c. 4th century AD) and elsewhere as pums-praktistri-prakrti (female-nature), and tritiya-prakrti (third-nature). Various texts suggest that third sex individuals were well known in pre-modern India and included male bodied or female-bodied people as well as intersexuals, and that they can often be recognized from childhood. The foundational work of Hindu law, the Manu Smriti (200 BC - 200 AD) explains the biological origins of the three sexes. Indian linguist Patanjali's work on Sanskrit grammar, the Mahabhyasa (200 BC), states that Sanskrit's three grammatical genders are derived from three natural genders. The earliest Tamil grammar, the Tolkappiyam (3rd century BC) also refers to hermaphrodites as a third "neuter" gender (in addition to a feminine category of unmasculine males).

—Michelraj M., "Historical Evolution of Transgender Community in India", Asian Review of Social Sciences, Vol. 4, No.1, 2015, p. 17-19, Link: <https://www.trp.org.in/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/ARSS-Vol.4-No.1-Jan-June-2015-pp.17-19.pdf>

⁵⁹ Afsaneh Najmabadi, "Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity", University of California Press, Berkeley, 2005 (p.32-79)

⁶⁰ Kannabiran, Kalpana, "The Complexities of the Genderscape in India." Seminar 672 (August. 2015): 46–50.

⁶¹ Preeti Sharma, "Historical Background and Legal Status of Third Gender in Indian society", IJRESS Volume 2, Issue 12, December 2012

⁶² Banu Subramaniam, "Holy Science: The Biopolitics of Hindu Nationalism", University of Washington Press, Seattle, 2019, p.77

Union of Queers, Crips, and Mermaids

“Accounts of early European travelers showed that they were *repulsed* by the sight of Hijras and could not comprehend why they were given so much respect in the royal courts and other institutions.” (Sharma: 2012)

This repulsion is similar to the abjection of fat bodies, for instance *Ursula* and Divine. Le’a Kent argues that “within mainstream representations of the body, the fat body functions as the abject: it takes up the burden of representing the horror of the body itself for the culture at large.”⁶³ The abject as something opposed to I.

According to Kristeva, the abject sets up the categories of self and not-self, but it is in fact a rejection of something internal to the self. Something not easy to be repressed, something persistent “like an inescapable boomerang, a vortex of summons and repulsion places the one haunted by it literally beside himself”⁶⁴.

The unescapable nature of abjection, reminds me of a commonly seen slogan at feminist protests “*We are the granddaughters of the witches you couldn’t burn*”, paraphrased from *The Witches of BlackBrook* (Thawer: 2015)

In fact, *fat, queer, trans* and *disabled bodies* have been pushed to the margins of society as *abject* bodies. Anthropocentric classifications and hierarchical placement of humans and non-humans, which is strongly rooted in patriarchy and Christianity, might be the reason why *Mermaids* degraded from *goddesses* of ancient waters, into the categories of subhuman and abjection. And perhaps not only their ambiguity, but also the abjection imposed on their bodies, turned them into a queer symbol in pop culture. Moreover, I would like to draw a parallel between this abjection and the contemporary history of Men’s anxiety in confrontation with trans feminine bodies (or even queer-feminine-boys).

In heterosocial societies both Mermaids and trans bodies are perceived “ambiguous”, and their genitalia, outrageously, have always been the center of public discussions, even in the discourse of biopolitics. For instance, until this date, “people once described as hermaphrodites and later as intersex people are routinely subject to so-called “normalizing” medical interventions, often in childhood. Limited transparency and lack of access to justice have helped to perpetuate forced interventions”⁶⁵

Mermaids, trans or intersex bodies have been turned into men’s objects of desire and the subjects of violence simultaneously. This paradox perhaps reflects on anthropocentrism and the notion of species-hierarchy: a common standard for ‘Man’ as the measure of all things.

The sturgeon fish is another victim of the species-hierarchy. Caviar as a colonial good, is an anti-environmental capitalist project within the framework of law. Ninety percent of the world’s caviar, used to come from the wild sturgeon in the Caspian Sea region. The nations bordering the Caspian Sea have already imposed a ban on fishing sturgeon, due to its *endangered* status, however, the trade of caviar never really stopped, and Switzerland⁶⁶ remained as one of the biggest importers of caviar in the world.

⁶³ Le’a Kent, “*Fighting Abjection: Representing Fat Women*”, in “*Bodies Out of Bounds: Fatness and Transgression*”, ed. Jana Evans Braziel and Kathleen LeBesco (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), p.135

⁶⁴ Kristeva, Julia, “*Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*”, Columbia University Press, New York: 1982, p.1

⁶⁵ Carpenter, M., “*The “Normalization” of Intersex Bodies and “Othering” of Intersex Identities in Australia*”, *Bioethical Inquiry* 15, 487–495 (2018). <https://doi.org/10.1007>

⁶⁶ <https://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/swiss-find-ways-to-survive-caviar-ban/4989222>

Fighting Abjection: Queer-Feminist Strategies

Some time ago during a presentation by Wiltrud Hackl⁶⁷ about her research on *the construction of Femininity in Connection with the Water*, I was introduced to a Polish horror musical film, directed by Agnieszka Smoczyńska. “*The Lure*” (2015)⁶⁸ is somehow a queer contemporary and counter-subject version of the story of *The Little Mermaid*. Mer-protagonists of the story share similar characteristics to *Nixies*⁶⁹: Shapeshifting water fairies living in the waterfalls of Germany and Poland.

The story begins with the encounter of two mermaids, *Golden* and *Silver*, with a Rock Band, who they join with to the nightclub they regularly perform. After a while they form their own show: *The Lure*. Their characters are not repressed as *The Little Mermaid*, they can shapeshift and hold the powerful knowledge of their indigenous mythical mothers. By their nature they are omnivorous, but they can also eat human flesh. The anti-humanism of *Golden* reflects in her mistrust in humanity and her thirst for blood. In contrast, *Silver* falls in love with a band member *Mietek*, who mainly sees her as a fish and not a woman, since both *Golden* and *Silver*, in their human forms, do not possess genitals nor anus.

A human vagina is at the center of *Mietek*’s *abject* relationship with *Silver*’s fish tail. She then has her tail surgically replaced with a pair of legs, which makes her lose her singing voice. The scene of surgery resembles medical intervention on trans and intersex bodies. The transition of *Silver* from an *abject* mermaid to an *abject* disabled body (mainly sitting on the wheelchair), manifests in a scene when she tries to have sex with *Mietek*, but he *repulsed* by the scars and the splash of blood on him. In a similar way to *The Little Mermaid*, if she falls in love and her lover marries someone else, she will turn into sea foam. In addition, the only solution for her to break the spell is to eat *Mietek*. However, *Silver* cannot bring herself to eat him, and turns into sea foam in his arms at his wedding ceremony. *Golden* furiously, tears *Mietek*’s throat out, in full view of the wedding party, thus marking the end of the patriarchy, which recurs throughout all the versions of Mermaids tales.

In the final scene of the film, *Golden* returns to the ocean, swimming back into the dark waters of unconscious, which might be interpreted as a proposition for a posthuman shift, a return to the indigenous roots. Braidotti describe this shift “*as an amazing opportunity to decide together what and who we are capable of becoming, to reinvent humanity affirmatively, through creativity and empowering ethical relations.*”⁷⁰ In fact, anti-racism must be the center of this posthuman shift, alongside “*a radical dis-engagement from the*

⁶⁷ Wiltrud Hackl, Wasser, Weiblichkeit, Verwertung - Konstruktionen von Weiblichkeit in Zusammenhang mit der Ressource Wasser. <https://www.ufg.at/Hackl-Wiltrud.17236.0.html?&id=17236>

⁶⁸ <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt5278832/>

⁶⁹ “The representation of mermaids’ bodies seems to have a stable history, but when we consider the etymology of “mermaid” we find that, even confining ourselves to the mythologies of northern Europe, “maidens of the sea” come as undines, selkies or seals, nixies, and sea nymphs in many shapes and forms, some of which are not even described”. — “*The Penguin Book of Mermaids*”, edited by Cristina Bacchilega, Marie Alohani Brown, Penguin Books, 2019, eBook version, p. 10

⁷⁰ Braidotti, Rosi, “*The Posthuman*”, Polity Press: 2013, p.195

dominant institutions and representations of femininity and masculinity”⁷¹, as well as deconstruction of species supremacy. “By empowering the sexualized and racialized human ‘others’ to emancipate themselves from the dialectics of master–slave relations, the crisis of anthropos abandons the demonic forces of the naturalized.”⁷²

Public Performance: Disruptive Bodies

Narrative of *Gauche caviar*⁷³ has been told by two motion capture mermaids telling the stories of war-children, fish roe, inherited anxiety, displacement, and sturgeon: the source of caviar, one of the endangered species. This was shown as part of a collective and site-specific performance hosted by the installation of Mirkan Deniz at Helvetia Platz, Bern.



Image 5. Act 2. *Gauche Caviar* at Mirkan Deniz installation, Bern, 2021
(Motion capture avatar of seven singing *Take This Hammer* song)

The bunker⁷⁴ was located in the middle of the diplomatic district of Bern; The federal capital of Switzerland, home of nearly 100 foreign embassies and consulates, including houses missions of autonomous regions like Palestine and Iraqi Kurdistan. The relation between the bunker⁷⁵ and Mikan’s queer-diasporic body, in contrast to this diplomatic district, as well as the erected building of the Natural History Museum next to it, turned the bunker into a *glitch-object*⁷⁶. The “*out of place*” orientation of the bunker, enables a perpetual disruptive

⁷¹ Braidotti, Rosi, “*The Posthuman*”, Polity Press: 2013, p.168

⁷² Ibid, p.66

⁷³ *Gauche Caviar*, Link: <https://vimeo.com/568019473>

⁷⁴ See footnote no.21

⁷⁵ Mirkan Deniz, *Walking Through barriers*, 2021 <https://www.grandpalais.ch/mirkan-deniz-i-feel-blue-untitled-walking-through-barriers/>

⁷⁶ A term that I use in my research, which refers to a performative object, that its “*out of place*” orientation, turned it into a form of glitch, which enables a perpetual disruptive performance just by being present.

performance just by being present in the public square. In fact, the installation itself has already subverted the notion of neutrality in public space and made a familiar square seem strange for everyday pedestrians.



Image 6. Act 2. *Gauche Caviar*, Kamran Behrouz, Bern, 2021

As I mentioned in the description of *Collision*, in both performances in Bern and St. Moritz, performativity of my own body (as visual artist) was motionless and glitch-like. I was just sitting there as a disruptive object, observing the spectators; My body as an “out of place” object, gazing and staring back at the audience. Here the White mask works like a bunker for my face, between my body and the audience(co-performers), underlying a critical whiteness that the animation itself offers.

A flinching moment of *personal as political*. By morphing into the myth of two singing mermaids, they *lure* the audience (co-performers) to dis-engage from species-supremacy that the site has been offered. My body is part of your narrative, and yours is part of mine. Your weapon industry is part of my historical body, and no amount of neutrality can conceal the responsibility, as we are interconnected.

While *Take This Hammer* song was echoing in the Helvetiaplatz.