

FIRST DEGREE

Sue de Beer: Visitation Rites

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When, in *The Case of California* (1991), I tried excavating the psychology of adolescence between two coasts (from here to Germany) and thus sought to restore what appeared within Freud's collected corpus to be the missing chapter (and verse), Sue de Beer was a teenager. Now it's her turn to dig the Teen Age. Her video installation *Black Sun* (2004-05) introduces the viewer to favorite haunts of adolescence—and into the haunted house (with graveyard) both inside the video and around the double screen as installation. (The soundtrack immediately lowers the boom of thunder and lightning.) Reduced in scale and made out of flimsier materials, the installation house, like the props in and around the video, renders functional everyday life the way toys might—the way, originally, mortuary palaces and other death cult environs set up the dead within fragile, openly simulated flashbacks to their former lives.

That *Black Sun* is a "case" in pointing out ghosts is meticulously performed in or as the absence of a voice of one's own: all text in *Black Sun*, from title to footnote, is citation, at once séance summons and ventriloquizing possession. The title cites Julia Kristeva's 1987 study of mourning and melancholia (which doubled as her excavation or restoration of what was otherwise missing in the work of her mentor, Jacques Lacan). At this point, however, de Beer in fact redoubles Kristeva's title, which is also already a citation from "The Disinherited" (1853) by Gérard de Nerval. To follow a text of influence so closely can also bring about its point-by-point reversal as dis-inheritance.

Kristeva takes her departure from "Freudian theory," which "detects everywhere the same impossible mourning for the maternal object" (tr. Leon Roudiez, Columbia U.P., 1989: 9). Her momentum at takeoff, however, she owes to authors of new-and-improved psychoanalysis,



from Jung to Lacan. Kristeva conjugates the loss of the maternal object along the Oedipal lines Freud gave the primal father and his representatives: "Matricide is our vital necessity, the sine-qua-non condition of our individuation, provided"—and with this proviso Kristeva summarizes her understanding of healthy psychic development—"that it takes place under optimal circumstances and can be eroticized—whether the lost object is recovered as erotic

object" (the homosexual scenario, according to Kristeva) "or it is transposed by means of an unbelievable effort" (Kristeva refers here to the uphill struggle of heterosexual developments) "which eroticizes the other ... or transforms cultural constructs" (now we're talking sublimation) "into a 'sublime' erotic object" (27-28). Kristeva's lines of healthful development out of these choices (all of the above) are also the measure of what the melancholic, the



subject of her study, tries to refuse (or re-fuse): "the maternal object having been introjected, the depressive or melancholic putting to death of the self is what follows, instead of matricide" (28). Because a daughter is her mother's continuity shot, this process of internalization is even less confrontational or decisive and way more slow-mo in its release of the destruction. Although homosexuality was part of the health plan given above, now homosexuality

joins the disposition of melancholic daughters (though it appears that a female/male distinction is operative here): "The homosexual shares the same depressive economy" (29). In the cases of daughters comprising the clinical basis of *Black Sun*, the matricidal imperative postulated by Kristeva (a former Maoist) is admitted only as virtually imperceptible or, at best, as the construction of her analysis. It is clear, then, that in Kristeva's *Black Sun* case-by-case

differentiation occurs in the murky area displaced with regard to the theory itself—in the shadows at close quarters cast when, in consideration of sexual difference, Kristeva pulls the emergency brake on her otherwise monolithic theory. The matricidal frame that is the normal fare for circulation outside the psychoanalytic session nevertheless returns as the redemption value of the melancholic deposit—it's only a matter of change—which must be secured through or as forgiveness (at once illusory and imperative). "He who does not forgive is condemned to death.... The Resurrection appears as the supreme expression of forgiveness" (192). Forgive an author whose tendency to refer to missing mothers has prompted reviewers to confuse his psychoanalysis with that of Kristeva's *Black Sun*. Alone the distinction I draw between mournable and unmournable objects along a sliding scale of unmourning (the concept or condition to which I grant metapsychological precedence) disallows the assimilation of my readings to Kristeva's version of Jung's Electra Complex.

The closing section of Sue de Beer's *Black Sun* bears the title "The End," which is not given generically, but as echo or recording of lines heard earlier in the video (borrowed from Dennis Cooper's *Closer* [1989]): "The End. I like how in movies that phrase will suddenly appear at a certain point. Most children worship a statue of some guy nailed on a cross. I worship The End. It's a great concept." That The End appears only at a certain point means that it is not an absolute ending, but a marking of or in that living on that, while not limited to lifetime, is still immersed in finitude. The End, then, is the great concept of haunting, not to be confused with that of eternity, resurrection, or redemption. An amalgam of daughter and gay author thus catches the rays of another *Black Sun* that does not set the mourners against the unmourners.

In another passage through literature (Cooper's *Period* [2000]), which transmits via voiceover, we find de Beer's single textual intervention—the change of a

series of male pronouns into female ones: "She says I'm her. That I'm a reflection of her. She says where she lives, strange things go on all the time. Magic things, evil things. I guess I'm starting to believe what she says. Because she is so confident, and I'm always confused." It is via pronoun inversion that we can discern in the death-wish static of haunting's transmission what the spook has to say. The foreign body text shares with the host corpus "the same depressive economy" or erogenous zone in which the third-person pronoun can be pried loose from its antibody function, otherwise Dad-set against the melancholic's dyadic span of retention. That's why the fusion both *is* and remains a phantasm, a con. Listen to the fateful ambiguity of "alone" in the following lines de Beer selected from *Period* and placed on the voiceover track: "If you're here, I'm more myself, I think. It feels real, but I'm alone in believing it's you."

At the entry stage of her own early adolescence, Sue de Beer started dreaming up memories of the mother who died on her when she was three years old. An older sister, with whom she was always very close, was six at the time of their mother's passing. She could add her childhood memories to those of the baby. *Black Sun* is as much about the sibling bond (big sister's dear diary was used as the cover of the exhibition brochure) as it is about the missing mother. Inevitably the father and the new wife he married within a year of his first wife's death would have welcomed the opportunity of making the baby their own fruit of the loom of the time to come. It would, presumably, have been in everyone's interest to bring up baby in forgetfulness of a separation not in development but in death. But then there were the older siblings, ready and waiting, like wandering witnesses, to situate their testimony within the death cult of childhood even the youngest in their lineage found herself installing and stalling inside during adolescence.

Is it harder to come alive when you have a dead mother? Or is the added mission of keeping the missing body

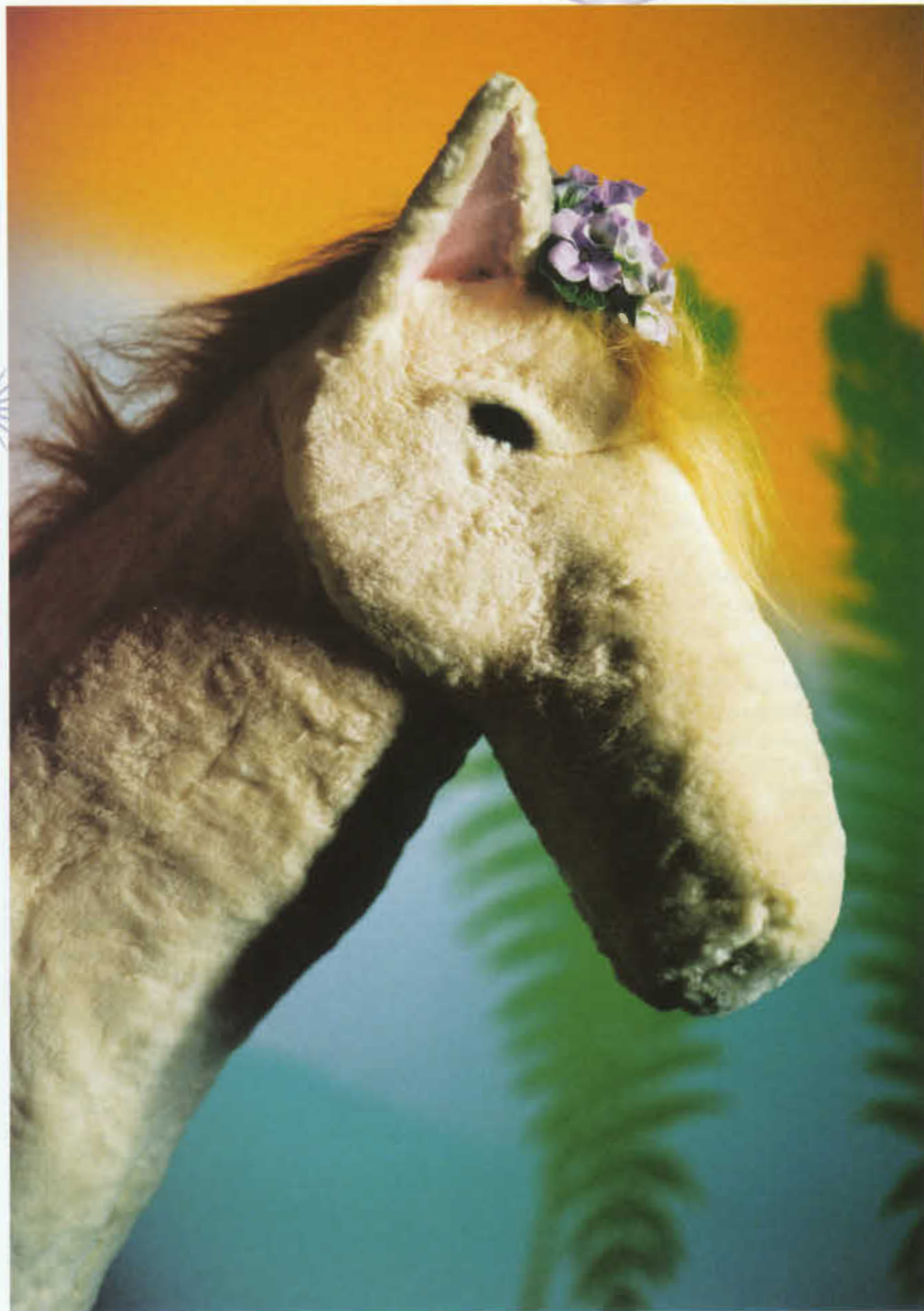
charged and animated within a force field of attraction, of being attractive, an extra turn-on? To have (and to hold) a dead mother requires an affirmation at once untenable and necessary. In *Black Sun* three actresses represent their respective age groups: young teen, young adult, sixty-year-old. A morphing interchangeability seems to loop

through the three actresses. Is it the skewering of *vanitas* imagery that is underway when the sixty-year-old's body slips into the place of the teenager? At the same time, one senses everywhere an affirmation of life's body. Thus the older actress is the age de Beer's mother would be, were she still alive. The mother is thus granted a flash for-



ward that is not the retrenchment in deep-frozen time associated with mummy phantasms. Each body is allowed to shift "from deadness to aliveness" (the title of the section in which the intermediate actress emerges as underwear ad from the friendly ghost costume she wore while partying down in the graveyard, the quintessential teen *danse macabre*). These all-

important metabolic shifts commence with the youngest actress's dance sequence, a genuine high point, in which even the totemic toy pony gets animated and together, both suddenly on one side of the two-channel projection, they join in dancing to "You Can't Hurry Love." Between the lines of a beloved song: "My Mama's dead. You can't bury love."



In "The End" we're back on the plane set, hovering somewhere over the unlikely resemblance between a teen girl's bedroom and a luxury coffin. But now the intermediate actress, the artist's representative in the real-time of making *Black Sun*, luxuriates in the in-flight rituals of identification: eating, drinking, reading, and sleeping. (The first time around she only prepared for rest and then looked like she was playing dead.) We end up in a space of sur-arrival. Not arrival, then, simply because she's still going. As the voiceover reads out loud: "There's something there, but it's not here" (*Period* again). But that she is still going also means that she has survived what can cross the mind in the high of the moment—the auto-destruct program secretly shared with an internal other on the self-same schedule of perfectibility. But we would be wishing ourselves the good mourning that certain ideologues prescribe (who, in their political projections of bad influence, confuse the undead with the gun dead) if we were to grant our passenger survivor status. Survival of what? Preparedness for death? Above or beyond arrival and survival (or substitution) she flies: somewhere over the reign below of chance, coincidence, crash. "If the plane went down, maybe it would be perfect," Sue de Beer writes in the email exchange with curator Shamim Momin reprinted in the exhibition brochure: "at that moment of feeling an end, having that be transformed into the physical expression of a ball of fire, or falling quickly, a panic, and that that could feel perfect—an exterior expression of an interior state."

SUE DE BEER's video installation, *Black Sun*, was exhibited at the Whitney Museum of American Art at Altria, New York from March 3 through June 17, 2005. Therapist and theorist **LAURENCE A. RICKELS** teaches at U.C. Santa Barbara, and currently resides between Los Angeles and Berlin. His latest book, *Devil Father Mine*, will be coming soon to a bookstore near you.