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Author/s:

Laird, T

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Holey (il)logic! Andrea Gardner's nonsensical sense.

Against a heraldic backdrop of red flowers, a pendulous velveteen shape leans stage left, drawn by its single, cyclopean eye. This fat red stem yields a boxed-in, monocular face made of the titular Amanita (named for the Amanita muscaria toadstool). Amanita is curious in both senses of the word: leaning in to look with its lone peeper, clearly something, or someone, has caught its attention. But it's also curious as in strange, odd, queer. Amanita evokes an endless stream of peculiar hybrids: Papacy meets Satanic cult, Moomintroll meets Caravaggio, Dada meets Siberian shamaness.

Andrea Gardner's *This is the Rabbit Hole* is not an invitation to enter into an altered state, as with The Beatles' psychedelic phrases: "Turn off your mind, relax and float downstream" or "Let me take you down, cause I'm going to Strawberry Fields". According to Gardner, no fall is required, because we are *already* in a space of inversion and paradox. This quotidian weirdness is analogous to the topsy-turvy world described in the Victorian children's books *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and *Through the Looking Glass* (1871). Gardner's strange, constructed worlds also suggest the eccentric irruptions of Dada and Surrealism, and the vivid vortices of psychedelic song, art and literature.

White Teeth, Red Lips has neither. Where is the artist? She hides behind some sort of yin-yang cardboard heraldic Vivian Lynn hair totem, a costume for the Cabaret Voltaire on one leg, the other having been sacrificed to war.

This psychedelic headspace is unmistakable in *Amanita* – in which the dangerous toadstool peeks out from the rectangular mask of a kaftan-wearing human. This boxy mask is restrictive, squeezing the human-mushroom's head like a vice. Is this some kind of experiment, where drugs are forced upon a subject? Or is shroomy consciousness the only way out of the box-like limitations of the world we inhabit? In *Alice's Adventures*, our young heroine meets a hookah-smoking Caterpillar sitting atop a mushroom. Eating one side of the mushroom makes you taller, the other smaller, (as immortalised in Jefferson Airplane's 1967 psychedelic anthem "White Rabbit"). When Alice accidentally overdoses on one side of the

mushroom, her neck shoots up “like a stalk out of a sea of green leaves” into the treetops.¹ One moment the little girl is becoming-plant, the next she is mistaken for a snake by a nesting pigeon, in other words, she is now becoming-reptile, in an unstable world where metamorphosis is the only constant. When Alice protests her identity, the pigeon uses a logician’s trick, stating that since both little girls and serpents eat eggs, Alice must therefore be a serpent. It goes without saying that this style of reasoning is alive and well today, and that in such a senseless world, Dada-style nonsense of the sort playfully enacted by Gardner can be a form of self-defence.

To Be a Gesticulating Bush evokes Shakespeare. The title starts with the most famous line of ontological ambivalence in theatre (Hamlet), and a bush made of combined human and arboreal limbs conjures Macbeth’s Burnham Wood, where an army mimics a forest and thus sneaks up on the hapless King of Scotland. No wonder Gardner chooses a tartan shawl for her personified shrub. But the bough she hides behind is not roughly ripped from a nearby oak – it’s a surrogate Christmas tree made of wire and plastic strips, buried at the bottom of a box and yanked out for annual service, twisted and abject. The satin-gloved hand suggests Lady Macbeth has found a glamorous solution to cover the bloodspot she can never wash out. The blond tresses peeking out from behind the twiggy mask announce that this is a drag show of the multispecies kind.

Charles Dodgson, AKA Lewis Carroll, wasn’t just an author of proto-surreal children’s fiction, but a mathematics scholar and logician. The Alice books are riddled with games of (il)logic that make nonsensical sense, and it is this potent combination of logic and nonsense that French philosopher Gilles Deleuze further complexifies in *The Logic of Sense* (1969), which uses the Alice books as portals into thinking and seeing otherwise. Deleuze describes Carroll’s inverted world as a “chaos-cosmos”, which, following James Joyce’s coinage, he truncates to chaosmos. For his part, Joyce used symbols from Dodgson’s mathematical logic in *Finnegans Wake*, a fathomless tome that maverick mystic Robert Anton Wilson refers to as “the good book”. Using an arcane fusion of numerology, I Ching, kabbalah, UFO sightings and genetic code, Wilson riffs on obscure connections in and around *Finnegans Wake*,

¹ Lewis Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, Minneapolis: Lerner Publishing Group, 2005, p. 47.

including rabbit imagery in Irish folklore. The *pookah* is a six-foot-tall, Gaelic speaking white rabbit, native to County Kerry, who accosts men on the way home from the pub late at night.² Unlike Carroll's White Rabbit who is desperately afraid of being late (the epitome of industrialised servitude to measured time), the *pookah* can stop clocks and warp time. Wilson recounts an Irish radio programme in which a Kerry farmer claims he doesn't believe in the *pookah*, and declares: "I doubt much that he believes in me either!"³ Wilson calls this "Kerry logic" or "Irish ontology", in which true and false are not oppositional but coexist, as they do in Wonderland as well as in Gardner's photographs.

A nun's habit has disappeared into a field of folds. But White is hardly the transcendent erotic ecstasy of St. Theresa: coat hanger wire, tape, and visible panties bring us back to earth with a comedic thud.

When Alice is falling down the rabbit hole, she wonders where she will end up, and suspects it may be somewhere she has heard adults talking about: The Antipathies. This creative malapropism is, of course, her detournement of The Antipodes. The word meaning *inversion* – the other side of the world – is replaced with *aversion* – the other side of sympathy (indeed, most of the characters take an instant dislike to her). She imagines she'll have to ask "Please, Ma'am, is this New Zealand or Australia?" For Gardner, who was raised in California, New Zealand is "the rabbit hole" – the other side of the world to the one she grew up in. People may not walk upside down, as Alice expected they would, but things are subtly, and sometimes not-so subtly, different. Despite being inversions, however, the worlds of Alice and Gardner still shadow European (mis)understandings, not the least of which is allegiance to the bunny metaphor. The rabbit is an introduced species in Aotearoa, and besides the song "Oma Rāpeti" being the only reo that many pākehā grew up with, or the obsession of sculptor Michael Parekowhai with rabbits (precisely because of their colonial baggage), the rabbit hole is a decidedly Northern Hemisphere trope. Gardner's rabbit hole does not denote a subterranean Underworld, however; neither Hades nor Rarohenga, these are neural passageways, tunnels and vortices in our thinking, where we go

² Robert Anton Wilson, "Coincidence", *Semiotext[e] USA*, New York: Semiotext[e], 1987, p. 160.

³ Ibid.

on bizarre tangents (as rabbits do when they run); or else get stuck indefinitely, chasing our own fluffy tails.⁴

Throat of a foxglove *leads us, not down the rabbit hole but down the gullet of a garden flower. The spots are multiplying – there are multicoloured spots on purple cardboard, which a figure like a ladybird (red pyjamas with black polka dots) holds as her carapace. The pebbly backdrop is a jellybean/Flintstones/butterfly-wing amalgam. The spots are spreading, there is nowhere they haven't touched – except, perhaps, the sensible socks, which are like two peeled bananas. (Roland Barthes' punctum, the surprise that unravels the intended meaning of the photograph, strikes again). Foxgloves, or Digitalis, may have been responsible for Van Gogh's jaundiced view of the world. In Van Gogh's time, Digitalis extracts were given to people with epilepsy, and side effects included yellow vision. This seemed to be confirmed by Van Gogh's portrait of Doctor Gachet with a spray of purple foxgloves, but has recently been refuted by medical professionals who say Van Gogh's style was a result of artistry, not illness.*⁵ Whether foxgloves and polka dots signify mental illness (think Yayoi Kusama), pattern and colour proliferate with a mind of their own, infecting Gardner's works like a virus...

Gardner was 15 when "White Rabbit" hit the charts, and growing up in the hills outside San Francisco, she was just old enough to visit Haight-Ashbury when Grace Slick was intoning "Go Ask Alice" over the airwaves and hippies were threatening to drop acid in the water supply.⁶ These psychedelic origins, as well as an ongoing preoccupation with Alice, are evident in Gardner's always-weirding work, including in the title of her recent sculptural collaboration with Brit Bunkley, *Through the Looking Glass*, in which a dog, defying logic, pokes its nose through a wooden table as though it were a sheet of water.

⁴ Wilson is wary, and weary, of psychoanalytic approaches to interpreting Carroll, in which the rabbit is a fertility symbol, the rabbit hole a vagina, and the Red Queen a symbol of menstruation. For Wilson, this is far too simplistic, and dull, a response to art. (Ibid, pp. 161-162).

⁵ Anna Gruener, "Vincent van Gogh's yellow vision", *British Journal of General Practice*, July 2013, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3693787/>

⁶ This was also the same era as the original series of *Star Trek*, which premiered in 1967, featuring various aliens including a bright green dancing girl. In *The colour of growing grass* the jade-coloured and jaded jade (woman of disrepute) has been abandoned on a planet the same colour as her skin. The moon in the green sky is made of parched earth, while her parched hands belie the verdant face, the tousled straw hair...

My Long, Dark Tail *features a ponytail, but the title is homophonic with a long, dark tale. Alice confuses tale and tail when listening to a mouse who says: "Mine is a long and sad tale"; she assumes the creature is talking about its tail. Gardner's Long, Dark Tail involves a carnivorous flower consuming a horse-like creature against a backdrop of twisted tree branches on a lava-red ground. These are like the veins in your eyes when you close them against the sun, and for a second, see inside yourself: a whole world of complexity. This is the rabbit hole.*

Alice encounters many paradoxes in Wonderland, and paradoxes, as Deleuze points out, are always in opposition to doxa, or commonly held beliefs.⁷ Doxa leads to orthodoxy, to dogma, the dictatorial, the doctrinal. The Alice books lampoon Victorian epistemologies including education, via the syllabus of the Mock Turtle, where Reading and Writing become Reeling and Writhing, and in the fine arts, Drawing, Sketching and Painting in Oils become "Drawling, Stretching and Fainting in Coils". Here, Carroll detourns the curriculum from semantic *meanings* to somatic *feelings*, deliberately confusing good or common sense with bodily senses.⁸ In stitching together nature and culture, Carroll refuses their opposition, creating what Donna Haraway calls naturecultures.⁹ Rabbits in waistcoats! Gardner's creatures are all paperbag-hotdog, box-bush, fabric-flower, undersea-stability ball hybrids.

Pink Forest: *a delicate paddling pool exists, incongruously, in a treetop; Pink Gravity: melting ice-cream menses, a blossom-gone-wrong in said treetop – see also Green Gravity for the vomit version; a flamingo is at the heart of Pink Bird, where a red cardboard shield, like one of Carroll's anthropomorphized playing cards, is cut with a window like an advent calendar, to reveal the pink bird's curvaceous beak (flamingos are used as croquet mallets in Wonderland); Child's Pose yields no human at all but a puckered sleeping bag proffering its*

⁷ Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1990, p. 75.

⁸ Akira Mizuta Lippit, *Electric animal: toward a rhetoric of wildlife*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000, p. 138.

⁹ Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: making kin in the Chthulucene*, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2016.

orifice-head in a yoga pose, like a tardigrade releasing its crown chakra, bringing to mind the final, impassioned command of the song “White Rabbit”, to “Feed your head!”¹⁰

Whether down the rabbit hole or through the looking glass, there is no doubt that the world Gardner reflects back at us is decidedly peculiar, and that “Looking in mirrors makes one wonder”.¹¹ But what, you may ask, is the purpose of wonder? Well, there is no pragmatic, Neo-Darwinist purpose, and that is precisely the point. Gardner’s photographs instead mobilise what Erin Manning has called a “pragmatics of the useless”, in other words, they *play* with materials and meanings and invite us to join the fun.¹² This, says Brian Massumi, is *What Animals Teach Us About Politics*. “There was never a child that did not become-animal in play,” he declares, adding that the project of animal politics is “to make it so that the same could be said of adults.”¹³

Two Humans: another box-head eyeballs a boxy-headed Picasso portrait of his lover, proving Cezanne’s theorem about nature being made of cones, spheres and cylinders (except for rucked Issey Miyake shawls!). Picasso’s sawn-up lover is a victim of analytic cubism, but Gardner’s works have more in common with synthetic cubism – the moment cut-outs of newspapers and wood grain were introduced onto the picture plane. It’s a construction, yes, but made of real parts! All of Gardner’s fakery is real! Picasso’s truthful lies are instead lying truths...or is that the same thing anyway?

When Massumi talks about the deadening tendency of anthropomorphism in relation to real live animal politics, he acknowledges that there are “fuzzy outlines” rather than hard and fast distinctions between the two. They are like palimpsests, decorative overlays, or layers of wallpaper, where sometimes we are “actively encouraged to confuse the painted figure for the wallpaper.”¹⁴ Gardner’s naturecultures exist in just such an indeterminate zone, where we confuse figure and ground, human and non- or more-than-human. In the

¹⁰ The lyric begins “Remember what the dormouse said”, but in Carroll’s text the dormouse never said: “Feed your head”. Slick, like Gardner, favours fabulation to accuracy.

¹¹ Joyce O. Lowrie, *Sightings: Mirrors in Texts – Texts in Mirrors*, Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2008, p. 1.

¹² Erin Manning, *For a Pragmatics of the Useless*, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2020.

¹³ Brian Massumi, *What Animals Teach Us About Politics*, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2014, p. 89.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 72.

fuzzy underland, or wonderland, of the rabbit hole, a propensity for delight and surprise is the only constant.