

***I've worked so hard to
be here this long, why
not enjoy the fruits of
my sick body's labor¹***

In conversation with the work of Caroline Schub.

Text by Alegría Gobeil

¹ Caroline Schub, 2023. From a forthcoming publication.

Caroline sends me a piece of a poem she is working on. It's my birthday, I've been drinking, I'm outside and smoking a cigarette to get out of what should be a celebration. I send her a message: I saw your email, I'll respond soon, today is my birthday and I've been stuck in a weird mood of feeling lucky (or surprised) to be alive + guilty of not feeling *grateful* for being alive. I tell Caroline about this thing I don't even want to tell my friends or my lovers, this strange guilt: each year more is a death that didn't happen and a possible death. I decide to read her poem anyway, just to interrupt this thought, to read it in a strange state of intoxication.

Caroline writes –

*When I lick my own blood, when I taste my own cum.
I can taste the amount of money it costs to keep me
alive.²*

I think of a project in which I kept track of the amount of money spent to keep me alive in the years following repeated violence. Not just the money, but the amount of substances, the weight of them, the countless hours of appointments. I was frantically accumulating numbers like one holds proof in their hand. There is a strength in seeing the similarities in these stories without taking away their subtleties – it's always about the medicine, the therapy, the jobs lost because we can't keep them, the medical appointments, the family.

It's always about negotiating guilt:

*blame my bloodline
the gloved hand
don't blame me³*

It's always about our share of blame.

² Caroline Schub, 2023. From a forthcoming publication

³ *Ibid.*, 2016. *Diagnosis*. Self-published zine.

And this perpetual and mortifying effort, that of keeping oneself alive.

After telling me about the taste of money that ensures survival,

*When I lick my own blood, when I taste my own cum.
I can taste the amount of money it costs to keep me
alive.⁴*

The poem asks a question –

Can you?

(That is: Can you taste the amount of money necessary to keep yourself alive, but, also, can you taste *me*?)

Caroline wanted the title of the exhibition to be: *THE SICK CUNT, YOUR LOVER*⁵. I wonder if we are, in one way or another, in a space she created to represent herself as a lover, *YOUR LOVER*. In reading another excerpt, I understand the plural aspect of this posture – if I had read in this sentence something like an opposition (the sick lover VS the healthy lover), it is through the circulation of a solution in her veins, through the taste of this solution that runs through her, that she acquires a carnal relationship with those who are also sick:

*I taste the saline in the back of my tongue.
I always thought it was only me who
experienced this. But my nurse
unwarranted said her other patients have
this too (...) It makes me feel connected to
them, like we have made out with the
same lover. I can feel the copulation of
man made liquids into my own.⁶*

⁴ *Ibid.*, 2023. From a forthcoming publication.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 2023. *THE SICK CUNT, YOUR LOVER*. Poem.

⁶ Notes from a personal journal, shared with the permission of the artist.

This sensation – this taste in her mouth – unfolds in what I identify as three axes:

First,

I can taste the amount of money it costs to keep me alive.

Then,

Can you?

Then,

Does it keep you going?

(That is to say: does it turn you on? But also, does it keep you alive to taste me?)

Does it keep you going?

(That is to say: the thousands of dollars, the insurance money, the poverty maintained (and forced) on those who are sick – do you have the money to keep yourself alive / if so, how much money do you need to live / and where does this money come from / who subsidizes your survival – the state, or mommy and daddy, your inherited wealth?)

Does it keep you going?

This is not just pointing to the accumulation of wealth or access to services, no, I feel like I'm reading a text that puts its fingers in my mouth, but with a smile on its face, that is – not like a doctor, but like a lover would.

As if the text was asking me, complicitly –

Do you know the pleasure of licking your own blood – the pleasure of feeling the taste of iron, to see this liquid flowing through and out of your veins, to take a picture of it while it is there, pouring outside of you?

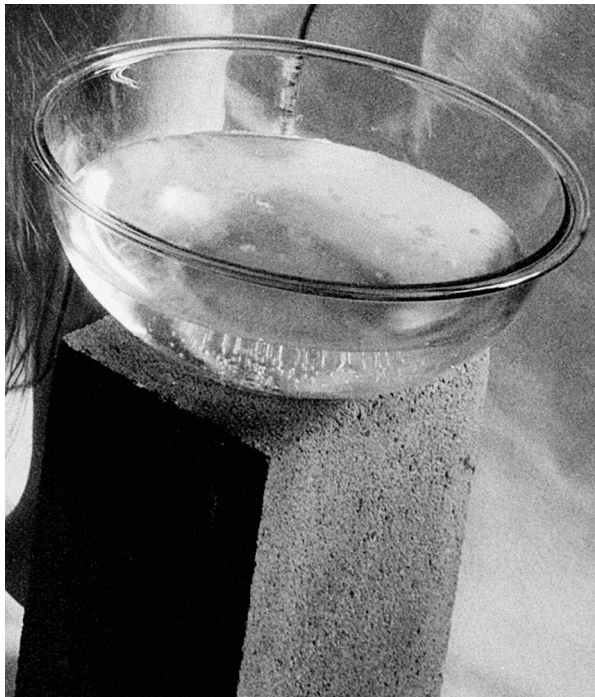
Do you know the pleasure of tasting your own sex – the pleasure of dipping your fingers to check its capacity to produce liquids, liquids that pass from fingers to mouth, this taste acting as a proof of your own survival?

But above all, in *Does it keep you going?*, I read:

Are you able to eroticize the capacity of my body to be, forever and still, perpetually, alive?

During our conversation, Caroline talks to me about desirability. The photograph she is holding in her hands, printed on fabric, is to me, inherently kinky and queer. It's like a wink: in it, I find a sort of game of recognition. Others could recognize in this image their own discomfort. I recognize there my own incapacity to feel *desiring* while being sick, to be both at the same time. I recognize my own inability to imagine myself as anything other than *undesired*, when being treated as, feeling like, or seen as sick. The game is played exactly there: the image makes me feel that it's challenging the viewer to be seduced. And this game is complicit – the staging is palpable, the image is made for us to look at, to look at Caroline. In doing so, I am there, I find myself there, in the image – not in the sense of seeing *myself* there, or being *represented* there (the only political tactic we are given at the moment by the neoliberal order), but perhaps I *find myself there*, like walking onto oneself, or finding yourself somewhere in a space, being there, in this form of life that is suggested to me, there, in the image Caroline made. I find myself as a lover, negotiating this posture within and through sickness.

The image is looking at me, that is to say that Caroline is looking at me while we are talking: she is holding the image of herself looking at me while telling me that she has a new idea for an image she wants to create.



We salivate a little while talking about the dildo she would wear: it is transparent, the light goes through it like a bag of saline. I tell her that her work makes me laugh, in fact. That it seems joyful to me: like this syringe frozen in a false water, like this false room she's planning to create at Espace Maurice, the fantasized room where her extended body can take place, in and beyond the devices that keep her alive. She tells me something along the line of: my work only makes sense when you are in it – to be in it, you need to have an analogous experience. I hear: for those who *find themselves here*, it can be joyful, yes.

There are the others – those who are not-yet-sick (those who forget this is about them too). But here, it is a question of being sick now, since always, and for all of one's life – of this foreign flesh that is ours, of these liquids, this skin, this history, this life palpated and monitored by the doctors. To have existed through their hands, their notes in the file, their word. Here, my desire becomes blurred: somewhere in our conversation I don't know if it is a question of being desired, desiring, or simply being left alone.

Caroline writes –

*Ideas of being handled, survival through fluids, consent. Moving past the trauma of the mechanical touch doctors give you.*⁷

Onto her work, I project the negotiation of a body to desire itself (alive). To desire the tools that maintain it while harming it, to desire this accumulation of medical waste, to desire the medicine that is also the poison that is the medicine.

To be sick is to resolutely and obstinately archive oneself. To keep all the traces of the fact that one is really there, to desire oneself beyond oneself, in one's blood, in one's saliva, in one's shit.

⁷ Notes from a personal journal, shared with the permission of the artist.

Caroline sends me an anecdote –

*I remember when my nephew was 2 years old and he took a shit and didn't want to flush it. He started crying uncontrollably "No it is mine, i don't want to let it go". He couldn't fathom letting go of something that his body produced.*⁸

The sick body watches itself being a sick body. The sick body looks at itself being alive. The sick lover loves. How can we make sure that we are doing anything other than simply accumulating evidence of our subsistence – and how is that different from archiving our capacity to desire? What kind of dissident practice is unfolding in front of us?

The anecdote ends with this question:

*What is the line of joy with disposal and cherishing?*⁹

And it remains unanswered, while the image of Caroline's body deteriorates in her own piss, in this *sick body's labor*.

⁸ Caroline Schub, 2023. From a forthcoming publication.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 2023. From a forthcoming publication.

CAROLINE SCHUB is a multi-media artist [b.1990] from the Hudson Valley, New York. After years of living with chronic illness starting from childhood, she began documenting herself as a form of self-preservation, ritual and survival. Her work is an unauthorized public record of a chronic illness.

She began her career by showing and performing work in DIY spaces throughout the East Coast of the United States. Caroline holds a MFA in poetry from the Warman School. Her work can be seen in her first book of self portraits *CAROLINE SCHUB 2010-2016*, published by Discipline Press, *BILE-* published by F.I.N.E Editions and *DIAGNOSIS*, a zine self published by the artist. She is a past performance resident of Otion Front and recipient of the NYFA Artists with Disabilities Grant.

ALEGRIA GOBEIL lives/works with practices considered symptomatic, accidental, contagious, unsafe, compulsive, collective. Self-injury, intoxication and the unwillingness to be alive have been part of their work. They seek to interrogate what types of lives are negotiated through so-called self-destructive behaviour. Their interdisciplinary practice has taken the form of performances, writing, protocols, actions, documents, images and altered objects. They live and work in Tio'tia:ke - Moonyiang (Montreal).

Their practice circulates in the visual and live arts milieu here (Le Lieu, Espace Maurice, Folie/Culture, OFFTA, Centre SKOL, FAPTR, Fonderie Darling) and, recently, elsewhere (Gruentaler9, Berlin). Their writings exist in printed form (*Moebius*, *Cigale*) and through readings (*Calliope*, *FPM*, *Le port de tête la nuit*). A holds a Master's degree in visual and media arts (UQAM) with support from the SSHRC; their research focused on developing an anti-psychiatric performance practice of self-injury based on the experience of psychiatric interrogation.



STERILE – Caroline Schub

Espace Maurice, June 2023

Curated by Marie Ségolène.