

— Letizia Chiappini

COLLECTIVE PLEASURE AGAINST PLATFORM DYSTOPIA

“Equal right to all the goods and pleasures of this world, the destruction of all authority, the negation of all moral restraints [...]”

— Parliamentary Inquest on the Paris Commune in Guy Debord, *The Society of Spectacle* (1967)

“In capitalism, sex can exist but only as a productive force at the service of procreation and the regeneration of the waged/male working and as a means of social appeasement and compensation for the misery of everyday existence.”

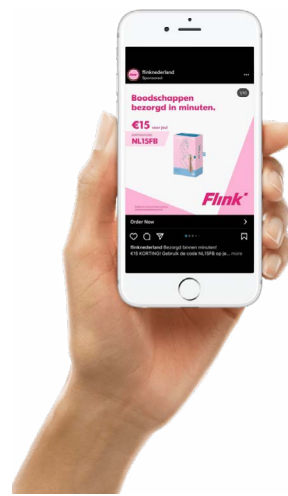
— Silvia Federici, *Witches, Witch-Hunting, and Woman* (2018)

THE PLATFORM IS MY LOVER!

Digital platforms are the quintessential techno-utopian commercial entities. Part of the so-called digital revolution. The techno-utopian dream is constantly promised; desires and fears elicited by content that never fulfills them. The platforms of dreams have turned into platforms of compulsion for users (like me) who tend to have a smartphone addiction also known as “nomophobia,” i.e., the fear of

being without a mobile phone...

On a lazy-rainy Sunday in my doomscrolling on Instagram, my feed surprised me with an advert for a grocery-delivery platform that promised to home-deliver a dildo in only ten minutes! I thought the advert was (at least in a formal sense) quite spot on in targeting a lone, hungover individual with the suggestion to buy a sex toy. What struck me was not so



much the fact that there was advertising of a dildo but more the collaboration of the two digital platforms seamlessly converging in their pretence to deliver instant self-care, sex, and pleasure. If the platform is my lover, where is the pleasure coming from? From the purchase of the dildo delivered in ten

minutes? Is it about living in Amsterdam, a

cosmopolitan techno-utopian hub where anything can be home-delivered? At that moment, it seemed to me that the commercial promise of pleasure was a hapless attempt to compensate for the misery of my hangover.

Self-care, emotional support, intimacy, romantic relationships, sex, and most importantly pleasure are all part of the social processes that produce labour power as a commodity. In her book on *Communal Luxury*, Kristen Ross states:

When labour time ceases to be the measure of work and work the measure of wealth, then wealth will no longer be measurable in terms of exchange value. Just as for each of these thinkers [William Morris, Elisée Reclus and Peter Kropotkin], true individualism was only possible under communism, which needs and values the contribution of each individual to the common good, so true luxury could only be a communal luxury.¹

It would have been interesting to read what Ross thinks about the digital revolution in relation to the concept of communal luxury. Ross conceptualises the work of the Paris Commune “as a set of dismantling acts directed at the state bureaucracy and performed by ordinary men and women.”² Following the legacy of Ross, this essay deliberately associates communal luxury and body pleasure as an act of collective resistance to dismantle the techno-utopian vision (which seems rather dystopian to me) and the triumph of individualism popularised by Silicon Valley’s aggressive ideology.

Platforms can exacerbate conditions of discrimination and oppression in the context of sexual, economic, cultural, and spatial subordination. My thinking about platforms and their impact is fed by personal experience and has the ambition to build a “theory in the flesh.” Such an approach is inspired by the black feminist movement and Afro-American poets, activists, and philosophers, such as Audre Lorde, Angela Davis, Adrienne Maree Brown, Gloria E. Anzaldúa. The radical tradition of their work

grapples with the roots of injustice and the material oppression of their diversity, starting in childhood, then puberty, and the transition to adult life in a hegemonic Anglo-American and white societal structure. One way for these feminist writers to come up with a transversal queer feminist theory is to embed theoretical work and practice in the material condition of everyday life, and from this reality try to collectively transform it. I certainly do not intend to compare my position to theirs, but nonetheless their approach and theories offer a methodological richness I haven’t found elsewhere.

COLLECTIVE PLEASURE

I had my first period in 2000, at the age of 13. As a teenager, I started to observe my genitals partly through the lens of pornography. My sexual socialisation has been a constant search for the right balance between pleasure and awareness: how to love my body more and be a better lover to my partners and myself. Unfortunately, the answers I could find were mostly shaped by considerations regarding reproductive functions and had little to do with knowing our bodies and how to love them. The perception of my body and other bodies has always been filtered through the eyes of a macho, patriarchal and paternalistic Italian society. The menstrual period, feminine pleasure, and the process of physical changes during puberty were still a taboo within education and schools. Back then, Catholic morality determined the role of women in Italian rural society’ modelling them on the figure of the *angelo del focolare*. This “angel of the home” is an expression coined by the Victorian poet Coventry Patmore meaning a “domestic woman, a woman who has no existence outside of the context of her home and whose sun window on the world is her husband.” Besides taking care of the children, the place of women is the home and the activities suitable for them are knitting and crocheting, preparing meals, running the household, and gardening. The study of piano or painting could probably be allowed but for the sole purpose of entertaining and delighting family members, not to cultivate personal ambitions. In other words, I grew up

within an ethos that was the exact opposite of the idea of producer-owned cooperatives (for example sewing workshops) that, according to Kristin Ross reverberated through the emerging political imaginary of the Paris Commune as a radical alternative to nationalist rhetoric and the bankrupt values of bourgeois society.



When I started studying literature and philosophy, I embraced feminism and anticapitalism as lenses through which to rethink education, labour, sex, as well as the future of social reproduction structures. Later, during my PhD, I critically analysed my socialisation to pleasure, both theoretically and practically. Feminist geographers helped me to grasp the relationship between gender and capitalism, touching upon the inequalities within both social reproduction systems and the conception of sex and pleasure. Silvia Federici, for instance, traces a direct link between expropriation of resources for the purpose of accumulation, and women's unpaid labour, including both reproductive work and other types, framing it as a historical prerequisite to the establishment of a capitalist economy based on wage labour. According to her, capitalism was built on the destruction of the commons and forms of what we might be able to call communal luxury. In fact, she places the institutionalisation of rape and prostitution at the heart of a deliberate disintegration of communal relations through the oppression and exploitation of women, heretic and witch trials, burnings and torture.³

AGAINST PLATFORM DYSTOPIA

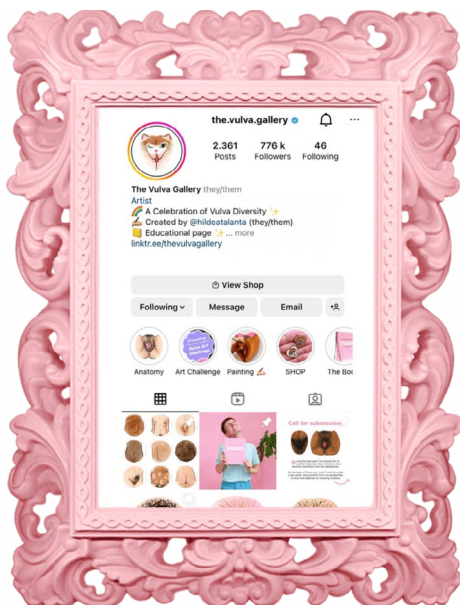
In the digital era, platforms can be seen as new institutional forces, or entities that co-exist with – and are to a certain extent replacing

– traditional social institutions of the city such as bars, cafés, saunas, public spaces where people used to meet, talk and sometimes hook up. One has to use dating platforms for intimate relationships, delivery platforms for sex toys, online porn platforms for pleasure; the list could go on and on. The question is: Who owns our bodies, their representations and subjectivities when we are (inter)acting on those platforms?⁴ Searching for a preliminary answer, I have the SlutWalk manifesto in mind.⁵ There is a famous YouTube video from the SlutWalk,⁶ a transnational movement calling for an end to rape culture, including victim blaming and slut-shaming of sexual assault victims. Participants protest against explaining or excusing rape by referring to any aspect of a woman's appearance. The rallies began on April 3, 2011, in Toronto, Canada, after a Toronto Police officer suggested that “women should avoid dressing like slut – as a precaution against sexual assault.” The protest takes the form of a march, mainly by young women, where some dress in clothes considered to be “slutty.” From the website: “There is a need to redefine the word ‘slut’ as someone who is in control of their own sexuality, to reclaim the word slut as a site of power.”⁷ So, in 2018 in the middle of my PhD, I started the collective Slutty Urbanism. It is a blog project and the result of the collaborative identity of different cyborg creatures in academia, under which we critically write about the future of our bodies and cities concerning different forms of urbanism. Our blog and collective can be inscribed as a form of communal luxury, as we state in the manifesto: “we shall speak to power, we shall promote ethical production and consumption, and we shall speculate promiscuously about more emancipatory alternatives imaginaries.”⁸

What Slutty Urbanism and similar initiatives do is try to luxuriate collectively in thought and bodily activity as a way of thwarting off the encroachment of platform dystopia. From my perspective, the spatial aspect is crucial here as there is an intense co-constitution between pleasure, space and platform. I do not refer specifically to place-making or re-claiming old

patriarchal spatial structures (like red-light districts, brothels, or dark rooms). Rather, I refer to the vision of a new kind of space where we can collectively experiment alternative social and cultural functions by developing new communal values and practices. Which brings me to the important issue of the design of pleasure as an alternative social spatial configuration, not as a replacement of the digital sphere but more as an extension.

As I write, Instagram makes me discover the illustrator Hilde Atlanta and the project about Celebration of Vulva Diversity. It is not only an Instagram page, but also a book and a gallery in Berlin. The initiative opens up a discussion on a subject still shrouded in shame and taboo. “We may change how we perceive our bodies by exhibiting diversity, educating ourselves on anatomy and sexual health, and being honest about our experiences and insecurities.”⁹ This is something I would like to associate with communal luxury. The alternative sexual imaginary is intended as generating new narratives about sex positivity. We need collective pleasure as a response to the individualism constantly proclaimed in neoliberal society and reinforced by its dystopian platforms. We need to emancipate the technology we use, by proposing counter-practices that nurture networks of care while using that very technology. What else can we do to stimulate the



emergence of imaginaries that can expand our consciousness towards new forms of communal luxury? I love the book by Adrienne Maree Brown *Pleasure Activism: The Politics of Feeling Good*. It is basically about building new narratives on how politics can feel good and how what feels good always has complex politics of its own. Our bodies are our future and we want to own them. If we own our bodies, our bodies do not become a political playground in which legislation reflects a patriarchal social system. It has to do with how we experience our bodies in our cities, and in particular how we reconfigure the digital geography which is co-mediated by the built environment of the city and platform dynamics. Lastly, it is also about the power of sexual education to pleasure and not only about biological reproduction. That pleasure should not be taken over by fem-tech apps, nor should it be reduced to the purchase of sex toys! How about looking at your vulva in the mirror and telling us how beautiful is it? How about feeling empowered after a sane conversation about sex with a group of friends? Certain digital platforms want you to stay home. The pandemic was their cradle. Think about Flink, the platform that I mentioned at the beginning: it comes to you with the promise of instant satisfaction by delivering a dildo in only ten minutes. What are their users if not the contemporary version of their “angels of the home,” their *angeli del focolare*. In Amsterdam, there are many dark stores where digital platforms store their products and manage the delivery (e.g. Flink; Getir; Gorillas), turning previously lively urban space into logistic darkrooms for the satisfaction of a pathological individualism that we all know is utterly unsustainable.¹⁰ How about new communal areas instead of these black holes of platform dystopia?

I would love to see more women or queer saunas spread through all neighbourhoods of my city. There is one in Amsterdam that I love called “Radical Self-Care.” And why not have spaces in which we can collectively practise orgasms in a safe environment that are not necessarily connected to clubbing or kink scenes. The politics of collective pleasure should be

the ultimate communal luxury...



The first Take Back the Night March in the US was held in San Francisco in 1978 to protest violence against women, particularly sexual assault, which was/is still very powerful.

6. See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lvMybUOWciM>.
7. See: <http://slutwalktoronto.com/>.
8. See: <https://sluttyurbanism.art/manifesto/>.
9. See: <https://www.hildeatalanta.com/a-celebration-of-vulva-diversity>.
10. Roele, Jesper (2022) "Darkstore Flink op Nassaukade in West Moet Sluiten van Rechter," *Het Parool*, 10 October: <https://www.parool.nl/amsterdam/darkstore-flink-op-nassaukade-in-west-moet-sluiten-van-rechter~be6169f9/?referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F>.

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1. I refer in particular to the book by the Mexican feminist and writer Anzaldúa, Gloria E. (2015) *Light in the Dark/Luz En lo Oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality*, Durham: Duke University Press.
2. Patmore, Coventry (1858) *The Angel of The House*, London Publisher.
3. Federici, Silvia (2018) *Witches, Witch-Hunting, and Woman*, Oakland: PM Press.
4. For a discussion on this, I refer to the writings about redefining language and the use of terms like "slut," "whore," by Mary Daly, an American radical feminist philosopher and theologian. Daly, Mary (1978) *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism*, Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
5. Prior to it, there are several significant previous movements and actions. For example, "Take Back the Night" event began in England in 1877 as women only protest against the violence and fear women encountered walking the streets at night.

LETIZIA CHIAPPINI

Letizia Chiappini is currently employed as Assistant Professor at the University of Twente (UT) within the Department of Technology, Policy, Society and the section Governance and Technology for Sustainability. She holds a PhD in Sociology and Urban Studies – Joint Doctorate between the University of Milan-Bicocca & University of Amsterdam. Her PhD research focused on digital platforms and inclusive urban development. She is the co-founder of the collective Slutty Urbanism that contributed to the Austrian Pavilion at the 2020/2021 Biennale Architettura in Venice.