

ON October 3rd, 2020, the anniversary of German reunification, around three-thousand people visited Berlin's Museumsinsel where its hoard of international art treasures are on display. People who had bought their tickets online were later contacted by police to ask if they had witnessed anything suspicious on that day in three of the most famous museums: the Pergamon, the Neues Museum and the Alte Nationalgalerie. It was not until the end of October that reports emerged that sixty-three art objects across the three museums had sustained, perhaps irreparable, damage in a bizarre attack that had taken place on October 3rd. Egyptian sarcophagi, classical sculptures and the frames of paintings (never the paintings themselves) were found to have been sprayed with what the police described as "an oily substance". In some cases the oil was not even visible until viewed under a special light. In other cases it had soaked into the stone leaving a greasy smear to which restorers desperately applied compresses as you might do to stem a wound. It seems that no one directly witnessed the attacks happening and CCTV has offered no concrete clues as to the attacker's identity or their motive. Samples of the substance were sent to a laboratory for analysis but the museums have refused to release any details of what they found. Museum officials have declined to hypothesise, and have made no official statement other than to confirm the attack took place, though they seem perturbed by its nature and it is estimated that repairing the damage will cost hundreds of thousands of euros. Speculation has landed on the idea that this was some form of ritual act, a covert consecration by someone who felt that

something unwanted and malicious was incarnated in these objects and needed to be sanctified in an act of unspecified unction.

The act of anointing people and objects to protect them from malicious influence is well documented in ancient cultures throughout Persia and Greece, where some of the objects originate. Magical practices of pre-Christian peoples made use of the fat of sacrificial animals (and humans) as it was believed, like blood, to be a conduit of life and therefore a powerful charm. In what is sometimes called contagious magic or the "weapon salve" there was a long held belief across an array of civilisations described by Francis Bacon in the 16th century "that the anointing of the weapon that taketh the wound will heal the wound itself". Specific to Germany there are multiple accounts of old folk magic that involve smearing knives and scissors that have cut people with fat, as the fat dries the wound heals. Grease is a sealant and a protective salve, and so has two directions of potential power. Was the Berlin attack intended to seal off demons escaping or a salve to treat a larger societal psychic wound perceived to be caused by the objects themselves?

Christian worship incorporated the practice of anointment using olive oil instead of animal fat, and uses for holy oil are found throughout Eastern and Oriental Orthodox, Catholic and Lutheran churches, where it is applied in a range of ceremonial rites from baptism, burial and the consecration of buildings to coronation and exorcism. This holy oil is referred to as chrism. The production of chrism is also bound up in elaborate ecclesiastical ritual. The Orthodox Patriarchate of

Constantinople consecrates a new batch about once every ten years using an ancient formula said to be passed down from the Jewish prophets that includes sixty-four ingredients. This process is overseen by the Lord Perfumer. In what must be a vestige of alchemical obsessions with transformation, the fire needed to boil the mixture during its preparation comes from burning old icons. Image into unction, icon into balm.

If this instance of necromantic vandalism is an act of ritual cleansing, then it speaks to the power that these objects still possess. Though they are so removed from their original context, cauterised in museums, and we cannot ever know how their makers felt about them, they still straddle the divide between the physical and the metaphysical worlds. They still ignite our fascination with and need for magical objects invested with an untold power that surpasses our understanding. We still harbour a collective yearning to be taken beyond the limitations of ourselves. They display transcendent indeterminacy, one that many conceptual artworks strive for; how to get the genie into the bottle, the flavour into the soup, how to raid the lost ark. But the nature of the attack also speaks to a current (and ancient) paranoia that we are ourselves influenced by forces outside of us over which we have no control. And our religions, and rituals, superstitions and folk beliefs are self-crafted weapons in the face of an existence that can feel haunted by cruel intentions. That this attack came in the middle of a global pandemic makes it seem, more than anything, a desperate strike in a war against an invisible enemy that emerged from an unidentifiable moment of divine mutation.

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boundary at any moment.

Malign influence is often collected under the image of the evil eye. It preys on all the forces of generation: pregnant bodies and their babies, fruit-bearing trees, milking animals and the sperm of men. The evil eye is the monocular embodiment of things you don't want to happen and there are a wide array of charms worn around necks and hung outside houses to protect against it. The power inherent in a tragedy is that it is a catastrophe that could have been avoided. Mechanisms of causation have always exuded from our fiction-shaped brains, infusing our experience with an intentionality. Paths are chosen, fate is a trap, roads fork, as we pursue a happily-ended future that forever lies just beyond the next peak. Tragedy-prevention involves physically deflecting evil away from yourself. Throwing salt over your left shoulder to hit the devil in the eye and thus distract Satan just long enough to divert his capricious attention onto some other unlucky soul. These small, day-to-day superstitious gestures that we perform... just in case. Because it is undeniably comforting to many of us to be able to resort to practical incantations or other jinx-shaped habits, small ordinary spells that offer a sense of spiritual agency and fend off that desolate feeling that we are caught up in an indifferent cloud of irreducible randomness.

It seems surprising when occult behaviour hits the headlines, but in these times of palpable uncertainty, billions are spent each year on so-called "mystical services" as we search for deliverance from the present mess. Capitalism with its whims and its whirring wheels and its winners and losers encourages a certain desperate need for luck, or winning tips from the cosmos on

where to place one's bets. We embrace the open platitudes of astrology as a contemporary form of therapy that makes excuses for all our bad habits: "it's because I'm a Gemini". When things stop cohering we cling to magical thinking as a source of hope. Our innately poetic imaginations are very susceptible to suggestion. Life can pivot on how you endure uncertainty, so we go in search of narrational strategies applied retroactively to the chaos of the present. It is not witchcraft to say that if you define a fiction as real then it can be real in its consequences.

Around a month after the incident in Berlin a mysterious three meter-high metal prism was found in the middle of the Utah desert by researchers conducting a helicopter survey of wild sheep. Its purpose and origins remain an enigma, it has become known simply as the Utah Monolith. People speculated it was an alien altar, or a work of conceptual art, or both. After a worldwide media frenzy and a tide of people arriving to see it, it was forcibly removed, in part to protect the 2,000 year-old tribal petroglyphs - depicting mysterious beings - nearby.

The burning question around evidence of extraterrestrial life is not just the domain of conspiracy theorists and internet forums. Italian-American physicist Enrico Fermi phrased the seeming contradiction between our failure to find any hint for the existence of extraterrestrial life versus the mathematical probability of life occurring elsewhere in the universe. Do we really think we are so special as to be the only ones? He gave his name to this conundrum which is known as the Fermi

paradox. One solution to which is that they are already here and we just haven't realised it. Or that they came and then left again. There is a vein of sci-fi mythology, well propagated amongst those inclined to believe in the "unknown" that the ancient Egyptians were themselves aliens. The sophistication of the pyramids is used as evidence, humans could not possibly have had the engineering know-how to construct such desert monoliths.

And around it goes; are our own little green men any different from the myths surrounding fairies, elves, demons and angels that date back to the beginning of human civilisation. Humans have claimed to come into contact with mysterious supernatural entities throughout history, or expressed in other terms, humans have long demonstrated a capacity to believe in such things and we are no different. Our imaginations define our world in powerful ways. This can have quite literal physical implications: the power of belief to heal is undisputed amongst medical researchers, they account for it in the placebo effect. Sometimes all you need is a sugar pill and an inalienable conviction that it holds the cure. Is there not something profoundly redemptive in this fact?

But what do our contemporary visions tell us about our own culture? Both the invisible desecration of a museum collection and the mysterious monolith carefully erected in the middle of the desert where no one would see it, undermine the dominance of modern display culture. Both refute the controlled forensics of the modern museum, where works are laid out as if in a

morgue. Both these anomalous acts destabilise our role as spectators, and with it our well-trained ways of relating to art objects in general, and this is a welcome liberation, would that there were more such moments of similarly seditious magic.

The monolith and the sarcophagi not only break open our subjectivity as spectators but transgress their own status as objects, neither just things nor just concepts but vibrating between thing-shaped ideas and idea-shaped things, it's transubstantiation by another name. Figures of thought that induce a state of wonder that leads to an act of wondering; where all things float unfixed in a state of plasticity and play, where articulation is a betrayal of the idea. These unsolved riddles create an aura around themselves, a reminder of our need for known unknowns. Pre-myth is a way to reclaim our sanity from post-truth. We draw meaning from mystery. We want to believe in forces at work because it really feels as though there are forces at work. We thrive on the productive uncertainties of such paradoxes. The snake eats its tail because it finds itself delicious.

As the transcendentalist poet Emily Dickinson scrawled on the back of an envelope some time in the 1880s "the absence of the witch does not invalidate the spell".