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JUNE-JULY-AUGUST 2015
AMY SHERLOCK

ABOVE & BELOW

Decoding **Maria Loboda**'s enigmatic archaeology *by Amy Sherlock*

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Maria Loboda is reading my tarot cards. She turns the last one over: death, the slender executioner, a skeleton with sunken cheeks and a toothless half-smile, like those that swarm around the living in Pieter Brueghel the Elder's *The Triumph of Death* (1562). I must look worried because she says, by way of reassurance: 'It doesn't mean death.' It symbolizes the end of something, something passing, a new beginning. Like all the cards: 'It's both good and bad.' Loboda is giving readings during an evening of cabaret performances as part of the exhibition 'The Violet Crab' at David Roberts Art Foundation in London. Neither performance nor tarot is part of the artist's usual repertoire, which normally takes the form of sculptures, installations and, occasionally, films. I might not believe that Loboda is reading my future – and she might not either – but her explanation of the cards in terms of a Dao- or Shiva-like interpenetration of good and evil, and her assertion that change is something inevitable and necessary, rather than something to be resisted or feared, reveal a worldview that remains consistent throughout her *oeuvre*. In Loboda's visual language, as with the cards, no object is ever innocent of symbolism, nor guilty of it either, but endlessly capable of taking on new and shifting meanings to tell different stories. Nothing lasts forever and nothing is ever quite as it first appears.

Take the artist's recent commission for the group show 'The Parliament of Things' at Firstsite, Colchester. *The Sentence in its Temporary Form as Bathrobes and Oysters* (2015) was produced during a five-week residency in the town, once the capital of Roman Britain. The invaders supposedly claimed that the famed Colchester Native oyster was the only good thing to come out of wretched little Britannia. For her installation, Loboda carefully composed piles of neatly tucked white terry-towelling bathrobes between which were layered calcareous, creamy-cupped oyster shells. The two elements – a one-size-fits-all, mass-manufactured luxury and a natural, native one – form the two symbolic terms in a cipher, originally devised by Francis Bacon in the early 17th century, to transmit secret messages. The cipher translates each letter of the alphabet into a binary sequence comprising five terms. (The letter 'A', for example, is represented by a fluffy stack of five bathrobes.) Loboda's composition, which spells out the title of the work, covered the floorspace of an entire side gallery, boxed off from the rest of the space by closed glass doors. The effect was a bit like looking into a fish tank – especially given the scattered marine debris and the intimation of bathing – or a perversely luxurious *fumoir*. But such suggestions of decadence are offset by the sombre rigidity of the composition and the precise balance between its two elements. There is an Eastern-inflected sense of ceremony to the bathrobes – maybe because they remind me of the *keikogi* uniforms of martial arts practice and funereal kimonos – even as the missing bodies that they gesture towards, in their sealed chamber, recall a specifically European absence. I think of clothes taken off before showers, of people made to submit to symbols, to become numbers, and of the horror of logic applied to unspeakable ends. (Perhaps all of this hints at the darker implications of the adage that is famously attributed to Bacon: 'Knowledge is power.')

Loboda has been using this binary system of translation in her work since 2011, each time using different objects as the two terms in the code. The beauty of the cipher is the possibility of infinite substitution: it is a material alphabet of limitless potential. These works convey something about the contingencies of language – what pliable symbols words are and how often we use them to conceal what we really mean.

At last year's Tapei Biennial, the artist's installation, *Tasks Abandoned before Completion* (2014), took the form of a private office. (The piece is an expanded iteration of a sculpture from 2010 with the same title – a reference to one of the cards from the tarot deck.) The workspace was not of the clinically light-and-bright, glass-sided kind that you might expect to find in a city whose most visible landmark is the imperious Taipei Financial Center skyscraper, but a quiet shrine to corporate existence. Dimly lit, with shadowy corners, its dark panelling evoked both the stern interiors of Adolf Loos's *Mitteleuropean* modernism and the *shōji* doors of traditional Japanese dwellings. On the walls were large-scale photographic prints from Loboda's series 'A Man of His Word' (2014), in which a pair of hands in black-leather gloves forms a sequence of *mudras* – sacred hand positions used in the iconography and meditative practices of Buddhism and Hinduism. There is something unsettling about these tenebrous, faceless images, cropped close to

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Witch's Ladder, 2014, sisal rope, Lady Amherst pheasant feathers, dimensions variable

1
The Sentence in its Temporary Form as Bathrobes and Oysters (detail), 2015, installation view at Firstsite

2
The Interrupted Pillar, 2014, installation view at Kunstverein Braunschweig

Courtesy Previous page & 2: Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York, Maisterravalbuena, Madrid, Schleicher/Lange, Berlin • 1 Firstsite, Colchester; photograph: Andy Keate

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reveal nothing more than gloves, shirt cuffs and a dark jacket. Are these the strangling hands of a Hollywood serial killer or of a businessman in an overcoat, offering *mudras* in place of a handshake to say: 'You can trust me,' or 'We understand one another'? (They remind me of the advertising campaign promoting HSBC as 'the world's local bank', the implicit message of which – that in a globalized economy the only things left to distinguish one culture from another are table manners – holds its own particular horror.) One reading of this installation – particularly within the context of newly industrialized Taiwan – is that nothing escapes the pincer grip of capitalism, which squeezes everything dry. There is no longer anything too sacred to be sold or used as a sales tool. A more optimistic reading might be that contemporary capitalism is not monotheistic and, however unlikely or contradictory it may seem, the god of money co-exists comfortably with belief systems of all kinds.

In *What Is Above Is Similar in Every Respect to What Is Below* (2015), Loboda's second installation at Firstsite, two monolithic free-standing walls, painted in Elephant's Breath and muted Stiffkey Blue – the signature colours of luxury British interiors brand Farrow & Ball – seem to balance on top of vitamin tablets. The walls strain skywards, suggesting the holistic lifestyle as a middle-class aspiration, but their precarious foundations are a reminder that everything we think of as secure, comfortable or normal could crumble. All empires collapse eventually; beliefs falter and walls fall. Balance and stability are usually illusory (Loboda's walls are actually elevated on hidden structures) and always temporary, because it is the nature of things to be in constant motion (as Lucretius noted in the first century BCE).

The work's enigmatic title is taken from the text supposedly inscribed on the Emerald Tablet attributed to the syncretic Hellenistic Eygptian deity Hermes Trismegistus, from whose name hermeticism derives. A version of the inscription first appears in an Arabic book from the 8th century, which claims the tablet was discovered in the clutches of a corpse entombed beneath a shrine to Hermes in Anatolia. Translated into Latin in the 12th century, it is one of the foundational texts of Western alchemy. 'What is above is similar in every respect to what is below' means that humans are made of the same stuff as the Earth and stars (something also pointed out by Lucretius). This realization is equally fundamental to the alchemical premise that the human body and spirit can attain perfection, becoming one with the divine, as it is to the contemporary idea that 'you are what you eat' – including vitamins and minerals. Our belief in

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essential nutrients has a firm scientific basis, of course, though ideas of what constitutes science or the authority of knowledge have themselves changed over time. Indeed, the phrasing of Loboda's title echoes Isaac Newton's translation of the Emerald Tablet – found amongst his unpublished alchemical papers, now in the library of King's College Cambridge – evidence of how the parameters of science and magic have shifted through the ages. ('Newton was not the first of the age of reason. He was the last of the magicians,' said John Maynard Keynes.[1])

Loboda's work has been described as performing a kind of archaeology, unearthing obscure and arcane histories and objects – such as the *Witch's Ladder* (2014) that greeted visitors to her recent exhibition at Mendes Wood in São Paulo. A length of rope knotted with feathers, shells, wood or other charms, a witch's ladder is used to incant spells, like a form of pagan rosary. The most famous example, now in the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford, was found around 1880 in the roof space of a house in Wellington, Somerset, with six brooms and an old chair. You can imagine the scene it must have conjured: the old hag in the attic, hunched over in her chair, waiting for the moonlight to make a flight by broomstick, or otherwise using the rope to descend covertly for crepuscular misadventures. In São Paulo, the 'ladder', suspended from the ceiling, served as a conduit towards the installation *Havoc in the Heavenly Kingdom* (2014) – partial walls seemingly made of stone, which mapped Howard Carter's famous passage into the tomb of Tutankhamun in 1922.

But archaeology – certainly Carter's kind of archeology – is concerned with explanations; it's an attempt to fix definitions and purposes, and to put pieces together. Loboda seems less interested in archaeological proofs or in the legitimizing functions of history (provenance, lineage). She is attracted to its imperfections and its meanderings – disproved systems, like alchemy; the glorious failures of man's attempts to explain the universe. Her work traces the wayward, lacunae-punctuated journeys that objects and stories take, and the double meanings they acquire on the way. (Think of the shifting significance of the tarot deck, whose origins are most probably in the ornate, elongated *nā'ib* gambling cards that Saracen mercenaries were said to have brought to Italy in the 1300s, and which owes its contemporary occult association to the fanciful 18th-century imagination of a Frenchman, Antoine Court de Gébelin, and his claim that it contained the hidden knowledge of the Ancient Egyptian Book of Thoth.)

Progress is not always linear and seldom without interruption. Another part of Loboda's contribution to the Taipei Biennial, *Interrupted Pillar* (2014) – a variation of a work exhibited at Kunstverein Braunschweig early last year – comprised a marble column divided into pieces with the middle section removed. The upper part was suspended within *Tasks Abandoned before Completion* while the other was installed outside and doused daily with acid, gradually corroding, a little bit of it disappearing with each passing day.

Loboda's is an art of highly ornate backstories hung off improbably minimal material supports. In this, perhaps, the artist takes her cue from the Russian novelist, Ivan Turgenev, who is reported to have said: 'I would rather, I think, have too little architecture [in fiction] than too much.' (Indeed, her 2011 exhibition, 'Dynamite Winter Palace', at Schleicher/Lange, Paris, was loosely based on the two protagonists of Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons*, 1862.) The first time I came across her work, in 2012, I walked right past it. Twenty potted cypress trees – of the slender, elegant kind that you can imagine flanking the pathways to Tuscan palazzi through the ages – were arranged in formation in Karlsaue Park, Kassel, as part of dOCUMENTA(13) (*This Work Is Dedicated to an Emperor*, 2012). Moved stealthily each night, according to strategies detailed in the fourth-century Roman military treatise *De Re Militari* (Concerning Military Matters), they also referenced Shakespeare's doomed Macbeth, hopeless in Dunsinane, while enemy foot soldiers, carrying branches to obscure their number, advanced around him in a green swell of foliage, as if the forest itself were closing in. At home amid the park's clipped lawns, the cypresses marched unnoticed towards the Orangerie.

Hiding in plain sight might be the guiding principal of Loboda's work. The backstories and the keys to its codes are there, but she wants you to have to look for them. The clues are sometimes scant, but then stories need space; some things don't need to be told.

1 John Maynard Keynes, 'Newton, the Man', lecture given at The Royal Society of London, July 1946. Printed in *The Royal Society Newton Tercentenary Celebrations 15–19 July 1946*, Cambridge University Press, 1947, p.27

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Born in Poland, Maria Loboda lives and works between New York, USA, and Berlin, Germany. In 2015, her work was included in 'The Parliament of Things' at Firstsite, Colchester, UK, and in the exhibition-event 'Granpalazzo', Zagarolo, Italy. Upcoming shows include 'Trouble in Paradise', Kunsthalle der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, Bonn, Germany, and 'Night Conquers Day', OpenArtProjects, Krakow and Zakopane, Poland. In 2016, she will have a solo show at Contemporary Art Centre, Vilnius, Lithuania.

1
The Egyptian Blue Coat (Veto), 2014, fine art print on Hahnemühle photo rag, 115 × 62 cm

2
This Work Is Dedicated to an Emperor, 2012, installation view at Karlsaue Park as part of dOCUMENTA(13)

All images courtesy Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York, Maisterravalbuena, Madrid, Schleicher/Lange, Berlin

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