

Rusty love - a reflection on failed intimacies

In Marguerite Duras' film from 1979 *Le Navire Night*, a passionate relationship unfolds between two people, a man and a woman. The two never see each other. Sometimes they talk over the phone; they hear each other's voices. The viewer never sees the two together and only hears the female voice-over.

Instead of communicating a physical meeting, *Le Navire Night* is a series of panoramic meetings between textures, places and objects: the camera scanning interiors, cityscapes, fabrics, silhouettes in the shadows. One of the film's recurrent images is a red shirt covered with shiny stones on a hanger, looking like an explosion of blood, or a throbbing heart. To me, it acts the role of a hysterical materialisation of the film's absent bodies.

It makes me think about the materiality of love. I wonder if it is possible to remove the physical body from the act of being-in-love, and reenact intimacy through other things: objects, clothes, furniture, buildings, naturescapes: the way shadow or light play with your perception in a room; or, through strange bodies or voices, which have no immediate function in a personal space?

Or do those objects or bodies then become love-objects? Do we project our desire on to them? What is the materiality of love?

I asked myself some of these questions in 2010. My friend, artist and filmmaker Cecilia Aldarondo urged me on. Hassled by love gone bad, by too many doubts or unexpected longings, fucked up relationships, we decided to investigate love through the process of letter-writing – together.

Today I've asked Cecilia to join me and talk about the project that we called *THE LOVE LETTER PROJECT*. It was direct, tacky, unembarrassed. We set up a simple structure: We each invited nine people to be part of a group. We told them that we wanted them to write letters to another person who was living in another country. Each month, the group would meet and read aloud only the letters received.

We wrote to everyone:

With The Love Letter Project we wish to exceed the binary construction of the nature of intimacy. Can intimacy exist not just between two people but between a group? To enable us to explore this, it is important that everyone in the group is willing to take a risk, but at the same time trusts the others in the group and the unknown partner. This contract of both confidence and risk-taking will open the intimate space up and protect it from attack.

It is important that we continually ask questions about the project and dare to relinquish control. The more we all bring to the project, the less controlled it gets. Therefore, it is important that everyone, at each meeting, read a letter received up to its full length - not only passages of the letter. If you have received an item in the mail, you must show it, but you have a letter, it should be read aloud.

You are allowed to enclose objects in the mail. The premise is that everything is analog. That handwritten / typewritten letters, CDs, cassettes, etc., but at no point mails and downloads. The project is completely analogue because we want to maintain a materiality in the intimate space. In the analogue lies a temporality, a duration and a "making an effort" which is interesting in relation to the longing, expectation and perhaps manic and meticulous self-projection (and the destruction of this) located in writing letters to someone and waiting for letters from someone you've never met.

No one knows his partner's gender, age or occupation when the project starts.

One must still do everything – 'be yourself', construct a solid fiction, etc. You do not need to keep a single voice / fiction through all the letters, everything is free, everything can be changed and shifted. But in the contract with the unknown partner also lies that one should listen to the letter you receive. Your letters should be answers to the letters you receive. As far as possible.

We have a discretion agreement. 'First Rule of the Love Letter Project is that no one talks about the Love Letter Project'. You are allowed to tell others about the project, but you must not disclose details of the letters you have heard or read aloud at the meetings.

We set up rules and regulations. We wanted a structure to give resistance, and we wanted the unexpected, the dangerous.

The writing process was like throwing yourself into a space part fiction, part reality. The tacky space of the love letter, the page smelling of bad perfume and aftershave, shared a space with the reality show; like the Danish version of *Paradise Hotel*, where the two guys Martin and Stolle have an intense relationship. They want each other. Or: they want to watch each other while fucking their female partners. Martin gives spontaneous speeches to the other participants: *I'm a fucking great person*.

The participants know their act. They indulge in their own familiar personas, yet twist and enlarge them. They are captivating figures staged in a constructed universe.

Yet in the letters there was something more than a play with form, an sort of fictional realness going on.

There was an awkward graveness, a hysterical uncontrolled passion gone wrong:

The love letters didn't turn out to be quiet declarations of tenderness or Victorian longing. The letters shouted, accused and mourned. From the first page, they were embracing a narrative of break-up, loss, anger and desire.

Letter 1:

You make me so angry.

I feel like everything I want to tell you has no proper home. Your evasion serves to make me feel as if.....oh dear. I don't know. I am so angry, and yet so afraid of my anger falling into a hole. This is terribly put. What a mess of a letter, barely begun and here I am, unable to shut my fucking mouth.

If I knew better, if I had more self-respect, or a shred of pride left, I would stop myself from crafting this barrage of drivel. I would remember that you have little interest in receiving my words. I would recognize that I am in no emotional state to write anything of use to either of us, that I slip deeper with every plea for your response, that the words I am writing I will come to regret. These words are sinking me deeper (said that already, Christ – can't even rely on myself to produce new words – irony does not escape me).

Well, the small comfort of such an introduction is that there's no where from here but p. I'll change gears now. My pride, or lack of it, stops me from destroying the preceding paragraphs outright, but the same convolute impulses demand that I begin again. I WILL SALVAGE THIS LETTER IF NOT MYSELF.

The person receiving a letter weren't prepared for this. How do you react when someone completely unknown scorns you? Do you doubt your memories? Do you relive the experiences of a whole life's guilt? Do you begin to think 'I was actually me'? Does this artificial affect transform the self?

Writing, even if it was never directed at you, even in it's temporal distance, attacks you.

There is a degree to which we are always overtaken by the actions we perform. Bruno Latour writes: *I never act; I am always slightly surprised by what I do. That which acts through me is also surprised by what I do, by the chance to mutate, to change and to bifurcate.*

Perhaps this autonomous life in the action itself is also at play in the intimate document, when it vibrates with emotion. Letters interpellate, they arrest you. The intimate document, left in the wake of an event, messes with your subjectivity. Even in it's intimate nature, it has a voice louder than the screaming song of Diamanda Galas. Perhaps the intensity of the event that came before defines the strengt of the remnant. That's why Cecilia and I asked for a loss of control. That's why the letters ended up being about bad love and not tropical island weddings.

Letter 2:

Dear K,

It's hard not to read your letter as provocation. I write to you about silence, you respond to me with deluge. I feel buried.

Let me clarify. Let's start with the man on the bus. That is not a story about fright , or repression. I was not scared of that man. and I did not secretly desire him. That is a

story about what happens when someone's desire steamrollers right over another person. There was no space left for me.

That's how I feel when I read what you've written. I feel steamrollered and I feel tired. I am hungry, too, K. I want to feel understood; I want romance. I want good sex. But in my experience, those connections require – paradoxically – lots of quiet spaces and mystery. I think in my last letter I was asking for permission to be hungry like that. I won't do that anymore: I need quiet spaces in my story and I will insist on the right to those things. Which doesn't mean I won't listen to what you want. I'm just saying, for the record, that I find you more interesting when you think before you speak.

Love, M

But can you write about or with or to – intimacy, love? In Roland Barthes' *A Lovers Discourse*, love disrupts all logic.

To try to write love is to confront the muck of language: that region of hysteria, where language is both too much and too little, excessive (by the limitless expansion of the ego, by emotive submersion) and impoverished (by the codes on which love diminishes and levels it).

For Barthes, language can never be enough as long as you deceive yourself to think that the text has a higher purpose. It is not until you let go and accept the loss always already present in love that you begin to write.

Love equals loss – it is an impossibility; it creates a vast space between us; it is incompatible with understanding, because once you begin to understand someone, it means you possess the other, who can no longer be an object of desire.

Letter 3:

I want to talk about some fictional characters I know. First: A woman whose silence is so profound that people need to adjust to it when she enters a room. And: a couple who always says 'I miss you' to one another. Not over the phone, not in a letter. Right to each other's faces. Not when things are shitty, not in the middle of a fight. When they are strong and in love.

Now, I've felt a room struggle to adjust to me, and 'I miss you' may be the best description of a relationship I've heard. Am I being too melodramatic?

Hmm. Why do I tell you all this? As a disclaimer? A warning? A plea of some sort? I'm not sure, really, but I do know that when I really care for somebody, I get doubled, conflicting urges. I desperately want to hide these kinds of stories, and I desperately want to spill them all over the place. Explaining yourself is scary, K, when the stakes are high.

Very much
M

If we assume intimacy and love is something that could also grow from a collective body, then: Does everyone want to possess everyone? Is there an edge of this collective body?

Each month, when the two groups met, letters would be read aloud. Discussions would emerge. Certain dynamics overtook the project. In one of the groups, there was a resistance to the rules: Why analogue? Isn't it nostalgic? Why all these restrictions? A letter was seen as offensive. It wasn't understood and the writer left the group in anger.

In the other group, things were quieter. Letters were analysed, almost to respectfully, prudently. Questions slowly arose: how can writing hold authority? Do smileys in emails seem patronizing? Is the love letter as genre patronizing, burying the other in a word-flow, a possessive solipsism?

I secretly desired that someone from the group might feel jealous of someone else's letter. That letter is better than mine! Someone in the group, I sensed, desired me. I desired someone else. I felt slightly jealous of Cecilia's group, or at least curious, and awkward as the hostess of the private sessions in my tiny, rented flat.

Then somehow, either quietly, or with loud objection, the letters stopped coming. The project had nowhere to go; heartsick hands waiting for a reply had to wait in vain.

It took me a while to understand what people had struggled with; why this failed. I only sent one letter myself and never had to answer one.

I thought of people in love with objects: Wall Winther, the woman who desires the Berlin Wall, and who suffered after its demolition in 1989; it took her years to come to terms with her lovers scars.

I thought of the attraction to impossibility. I thought of Cecilia, who I only saw a few weeks every year, and who was one of the women in my life I had somehow wished was a man. A desire fuelled by this premise; her absence.

I thought of something private suddenly pulled out of its drawers and into the horrific public – like now, like me showing you these letters. And I thought of intimate documents in your hands being like that blood red shirt in Marguerite Duras' film, and I thought about a letter talking about murder:

Letter 4:

We enter the room, returning from some kind of outing. The room is as nondescript as to be expected; all is in order. Until we see that, in the middle of the floor, are the mangled, bloodied corpses of two women we do not know.

They are equally dead, equally bloody.

Works cited:

Letters from THE LOVE LETTER PROJECT courtesy the involved writers (anonymous).

Roland Barthes: A Lover's Discourse, Vintage Classics, 2002.

Bruno Latour: Pandora's Hope, Harvard University Press, 1999.

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Ida Marie Hede (b. 1980) is a Danish author, researcher and art historian based in Copenhagen. Her literary practice investigates correspondences between states of being and the experiment as a material, surreal event. Her first prose collection, *Seancer*, was published in 2010 by Anblik. In 2012, she collaborated with German artist Christian Mayer on the book *Gizmo*, published by Passagen Verlag in English and German. Latest publications are *Kollektive læseformer* and *Det kemiske bryllup* (*the chemical wedding*). Currently, she is working on several interdisciplinary projects reaching out towards the performing arts.



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Which doesn't mean I won't listen to what you want. I'm just saying for the record that I find you more interesting than you think before you speak.

"I read what feel steamrolled hungry too,

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"I read what feel steamrolled hungry too, too. Sex. But connections lots of quiet I think for asking for more: I my sleep right +

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...not escape me).

...interests you, I would
of it. I am starting to enjoy the
cheap prose of this letter, if only
may very well be annoying the shit
right now.

Right. THE DREAM. ~~XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX~~

My mother and I are in a hotel room.
middle-of-the-road (Mother reminds me
that it is 3 stars, only further under
its bland mediocrity) sort of place, the
terrible free breakfast, clean but sore
the small comfort of mini shampoo bottles.

We enter the room, returning from some
outing. The room is as nondescript as
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the middle of the floor, are the mangle
corpses of two women we do not know.

