Review

The art of parasitical resistance

Anna Watkins Fisher

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[Our reviewer writes:] My name is Cassie Thornton and I am a member of Recovered Artistic Parasites (RAP). I say I am a member of this invisible fellowship because I believe there is an important difference between being a parasite and being a member of the invisible fellowship of recovered parasites. I need to remember that I am not how I eat.

Rarely does one find a theory book, much less an *art* theory book, that feels like a biography of your dysfunctional invisible community's collectively developed shadow. This was a surprise to me, as the invited reviewer. *The Play in the System: The Art of Parasitical Resistance* by Anna Watkins Fisher explores how a small group of artists act within an impossible set of economic and social conditions, in ways that expose their powerlessness and that also allow them to survive.

After years of social research, carefully following the career moves of more and less known artists, Fisher defines an archetype of artistic work that was never meant to be seen. This incalculable and hard to trace identity of which I am definitely a 'secret' part, was revelatory to me. Because she engages with so many artists who I have worked with or beside for so long, on projects that range from economics to feminism, with whom I identify so deeply, I used this theory book to help me excavate and re-evaluate my own practice:

[Cassie Thornton journals:] As a parasite, I could not stop performing my own powerlessness. I would attach myself to any institution who would have me and I would ask 'what does my position as a small white cis gendered female artist allow me to get away with?'. I often used whatever privilege I had to seek revenge on the institution for the silent white, masculine, straight power they held over me and all the other special weirdos, though I knew I would never be able to hurt my host in a meaningful way. Besides, if I upset them, would I still get my stipend?

Fisher carefully describes a certain type of artwork and its producer through a thorough overview of the (racist and techno-capitalist) socio-economic conditions

that produced them. She shows how the artists at once confront and reproduce pre-existing systems of power of their hosts as an act of parasitism within old patriarchal hierarchies of gender, property ownership, and membership in the state, as well as within shiny new psychic, social, and economic prisons like Amazon. One protagonist, Roisin Byrne, opens and shuts the book because she and the author find themselves in a mutually parasitic relationship thanks to Fisher's interest in and writing about Byrne. Byrne's best known work is *Look What You Made Me Do*, made while she was a masters-degree art student at Goldsmiths University London.

Look What You Made Me Do is a critique of a male artist named Jochem Hendricks, who was a visiting lecturer at Byrne's school at the time. In this work she rerouted his teaching payment to her account and used the funds to produce a different version of Hendrick's most notable work, *Tax*. His artwork consisted of gold bars that he purchased in the amount he owed in taxes, while her work involved gold bars of the same value alongside a copy of the invoice she used to reroute his funds as well as correspondence with Hendricks, in which he dismisses her work.

Early in the book, Fisher corrects our assumptions about the origin of the word parasite as coming from 'a social rather than a biological paradigm; scientists in the seventeenth century borrowed the term to describe forms of life that depend on others for survival, draining nutrients or gaining shelter at the expense of others. ... In its little-known earliest form, parasitism described a mode of social passing at the table of the host, whereby a figure of lower birth is welcomed as a special guest of those in power in return for simulating affection and deference' (p. 21). What leads to the moment when the parasite joins the dinner table? What does access to expensive food and power (purport to) make possible? How often are artists in this position? Are we brave enough to poison or otherwise bite the hand of our host, to hurt them the way their power hurts others, or does doing so take away the potential for us to get something better than vengeance? Another dinner? A small serving of acceptance, access, a tea cup of respect or power? This book of stories about performance, ambivalence, failure, self sabotage, ethics, and survival was a self help book for me, as a recovering parasite. I loved it. As I read it I thought, finally there is a word for the painful and inexpressible thing I have done with my life, and I am not alone.

Let me give an example of who might fit Fisher's model of a parasite. Imagine a real estate agent in San Francisco in 2018. This person started out as an artist but due to the immense and ever-growing cost of living could no longer afford to live in the city they called home. To survive financially, they spent money to be trained as a real estate agent. Now they are actively contributing to the inflated value of the properties that they are less and less able to afford. Imagine how interesting it would be to make one's eviction into potentially saleable artwork, which showed

how fraught and entangled art and real estate are, while changing nothing. The artists profiled by Fisher are parasites who prey in similar ways on a range of hosts including Amazon, the Spanish state, other well-established artists, and feminism itself.

[Cassie Thornton journals:] I couldn't stop latching onto powerful institutions or people, warming up to the board of directors because I wanted to punish them. Always clenching, always smiling, I was embarrassed by my lack of power and conviction. I was embarrassed of how hard I worked on the most invisibly small and precise critiques of the institution, for the institution. I was safe and at risk, because my work was so smart and subtle that no one could ever see or feel it, so it would never change anyone or anything for more than 2 hours. I made myself sick with fear that they wouldn't like how I sabotaged them, or that the sabotage wouldn't be felt. Yet I knew, as right as the sun would rise tomorrow, I would parasite again.

However, one insight in the book, which remains implicit and untheorized by Fisher herself, is that parasitical artists, who sabotage their hosts in ways that range from righteous to completely self-serving, work in ways that are only visible to the academic art world. This observation is maybe the most painful realization for a self-styled political artist like me, for even though many of us state bigger intentions and more revolutionary ambitions, we are often flaccid tools of the elite and wealthy. We are not psychically or financially able to leave the shadow of the powerful institutions that offer some sense of self-worth in a world without many options (in terms of employment, but also in terms of what it is to be alive in an economically driven and racist social world that wants to eat us and the planet). These artists, *we* artists, who have internalized how power works and who document how we reproduce it, must use it for our own financial gain—which, to be real, facilitates survival and not profit. We fail to change anything substantial because we can't mimic what we haven't seen, and we can't afford the attention or the time.

But are things that simple? Aren't artists supposed to be able to imagine what has not yet been seen? Isn't that our job, especially now, at the (most recent) end of the world? According to evolutionary biologists, parasites produce new worlds inside their hosts in ways that change the host and the parasite. Until recently, evolutionary biologists saw parasites as regressive, as taking away from the work of evolution. But 'today, we appreciate the great importance parasites have for the ecology, behaviour and evolution of free-living organisms, but also for biodiversity and ecosystem function' (Jackson, 2015, S1). There is an optimism in Fisher's writing that wants to see the problematic parasitic artist as fraught but not completely useless. And if recent evolutionary biologists are correct, and there are indeed more parasites than non-parasites, then we are never alone even if it feels that way. Our seemingly flaccid actions to critique or attack our hosts may not have

been in isolation. As Fisher's book shows, this web of messy sabotage was an intuitively coordinated and for far too long understudied attack all along.

Reference

Jackson, A.P. (2015) The evolution of parasite genomes and the origins of parasitism. *Parasitology* 142(Supplement 1): S1–S5. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031182014001516>.

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