

The light gently grazes their relieved features, electrons digging in their hollowed wrinkles and dimples.

Honey drizzled from above, sinking in the gaps. Most of them were lying down, looking up at the expanded sky of Lunigiana when they were found. Now they are made to stand like soldiers waiting for an order. Some of them stand alone, others are arranged in lines that prevent them from looking at each other. Like actors on a stage, they look at more or less distracted visitors all day, most days. Well, I don't buy it. I don't think this is where whoever made them imagined they would end up, surely. These sculptures were not made to be looked at in the dimly lit, cavernous rooms of a former castle, now invaded by glass doors, safety signs and an excessive number of fire extinguishers. I really don't think this is the best way to come in contact with these mysterious sculptures, and I find it singular that anyone would go through the trouble of adapting a building to host them, religiously following all the rules and expectations about contemporary museology, to end up with a sterile display of many sad, lonely, barren soldiers. The cavernous rooms alternated with more white-cub-y

ones, undecided between a half-baked historical accuracy and pretentious neutrality.

The engraved sandstone slabs look ancient and, as it often happens with very old iconography, incredibly modern at the same time. Some of their heads have the shape of a hammerhead worm, others are round, and in some cases even missing. Half circles and barely traced curves are enough to suggest a human presence. Call it pareidolia (that irresistible tendency humans have to see themselves in every arrangement of two dots and a line:) or just representation, intended and concerted by their maker. What they were made for, why, and by whom, though, nobody knows for sure. While I am here, I am not allowed, unless I close my eyes and ears when I pass by the many screens and amplifiers in the museum, to imagine answers to these questions for myself. Somebody else has already done that for me and for all the other visitors.

They (the scientists, archeologists, and historians talking to me through leaflets, wall-texts, and all the educational material) call them

stelae: stone slabs shaped and chiseled to present different textures and various iconographic elements. In this case, anthropomorphic characters. Many locals had been recommending I visit this museum sitting at the very top of the hill in the Tuscan town of Pontremoli. They told me how proud they were of the permanent home of the famous stelae statues, and how glad they were that they finally found a place to be admired and preserved, instead of being used as building materials and disseminated around the region. Indeed, the stelae were found both in archeological sites, protected by strata of millenary dirt, as well as embedded in the walls of houses and dry-stone walls. They were part of the landscape, quietly resting and fulfilling an essential, earnest task. To ensure their survival, to be studied, and to be observed by civil society, they were moved to the theatrically illuminated halls of the castle. Now their role is to entertain and educate the visitors, as fragments of a treasurable as much as unknowable past. And that's where I encounter them too, persuaded by the locals' recommendations.

As for the first function they have ever had, the reason they were made in the first place, and why they look the way they look, we can only imagine. Experts have been studying and formulating hypotheses about the initial function of these stelae and their meaning mainly by analyzing the burial grounds in the area and by confronting the findings with other similar societies who left more numerous testimonies and artifacts in close-by regions. The factual information that they were able to extrapolate refers mainly to their age and geographical provenance. They were sculpted between the 3rd and the 1st millennium BC and were originally placed along neuralgic waterways, at the entrance of valleys, and the intersections of important paths. So maybe they were meant to protect the villages and their means of sustenance, populated by spirits in an animistic vision of reality. They had a religious, ritualistic function, especially the more recent ones. They might be particular members of the community as opposed to a general representation of a role or typology of a person or profession. They might have had names and a specific identity.

On some of them we do find names but whether that means they were a god, a person, a leader, a personification of a river... we can't tell. They might be gods just as likely as real people now defunct, celebrated, and immortalized through a funerary depiction.

Many of these guesses are just that, and they are presented in the museum, on the website, and in publications as conjectures. The texts are populated with words like "enigma" and "probable", and the stelae "might" or "could" be or do many things. One classification, the most prominent and frequently mentioned one - the notion that helps us differentiate, the one that is given as a no-brainer, the only light in the shadows - is based on an iconographic consideration. Not on chemical analysis, or the places they were found. It's not based on written sources (there is basically none) nor on x-rays. It's the fruit of the application of what we might call "common sense" and it might be stated like so: all stelae can be ascribed to one of two groups: they are either male or female. Obviously, visibly. The male ones hold a dagger, while the female ones have two protuberances

emerging from their chest: breasts. Therefore, they are all either a male/man or a female/woman. These attributes are the giveaway. This is how we distinguish them, how we know that some of them represent soldiers, and some represent, well... women.

Boobs and daggers; one is an anatomical feature, natural, genetically coded. The other is a man-made object, an artifact, a tool, a technology. It's made, created, earned. Women (really, we should say female-bodied people but, as it should be somewhat clear by now, sex and gender are conflated in these considerations) don't exercise conscious control over their capability of creating. They are unaware vessels with no agency. Men use their intellect and talent to make tools and use them and are considered an evolution of the natural-primordial-instinctual woman. After all, the museum's website does explicitly argue: *"Just as in the Neolithic period with the discovery of agriculture the female image had become established and widespread, in the Metal Age, within communities of merchant-nomads-warriors, the male figure assumed greater importance"*¹. The so-called

¹ <https://statuestele.org/>

male and female types were sculpted in all the different periods when stelae were made, and with various attributes like jewels, and sometimes also inscriptions. The gendered distinction is offered as an easy way to differentiate them and make some sense of their existence since gender and its univocal correspondence to biological sex are treated in most contexts as obvious axioms. It's so obvious, there is no need to establish this distinction and its motivations, no need to question it: as I said, "common sense". Progress is male. Technologies are male and take the form of useful objects: pointy if possible, often harmful, preferably phallic.

Another criterion used to distinguish the historical phases in which the stelae were made relates to the realism of their execution: the more realistic -> the more recent -> the more evolved and aware the society that conceived them. This realism is supposedly visible in the more defined body parts (namely hands and shoulders) in the latter specimens compared to the more indistinct ones that characterize the earlier examples. This realism is photographic in nature. It's the realism of film, a

very historically and culturally circumscribed attempt at mimicking what a camera lens does, and therefore an anachronistic aesthetic criterion that I find bizarre to attribute to the intentions of the sculptor of the stelae. An ideal line is imagined to bring us from the blurred, compact features of the ancient, to the limpid, sharp, evolved semblance of the "newer models". The pinnacle of a fictional intellectual progression, an evolution of skill and capability of abstraction and figuration that only we (our Western contemporary gaze) could ever see when looking in these constantly surprising and wonderful artifacts. The closer they are to an anachronistic Twentieth century's idea of "real", the more advanced their maker's society.

What the experts see in these stelae is themselves. Never doubting, just reflecting, they use them like mirrors: their present function is to bounce ourselves back at our intellect. How do we know what they meant to represent? How much do they adhere to their own looks or the ones of their divinities? Why do we use them as mirrors instead of telescopes? And what's wrong with saying "I don't know"?

What if they were a particular community within a civilization that didn't experience notions like gender in the same way we do? A separatist group of female-bodied individuals, perhaps, whose attributes are breasts AND daggers. What if their breasts are emphasized and represented, for example, to signify a particular moment in the life of people, like breastfeeding? And what if the daggers, which we know could have a ritualistic purpose, are tools belonging to a priestess or officiant of any gender? What are we projecting into the future? What are we leaving behind, or rather beyond? Whose mirrors will we become?

The victims of the eruption of mount Vesuvius in Pompeii, for decades thought to be members of nuclear, hetero-normative, monogamous families, are now being re-evaluated and reinterpreted thanks to DNA analysis² (which is also, of course, liable to misinterpretation). Their relations are reshuffled and reimagined not because of recent advances in genetic analysis, as much as thanks to the emergence of

less conservative and oppressive societal views in today's academic and scientific spheres. It is we who have changed, not the quantity of information, nor the physical reality of the burnt bodies and their embraces. What changed is our recently increasing freedom in imagining interpersonal relations and our idea of family and proximity, which was almost always more fluid and intricate than it is in our society. Similarly, after the recent discovery of a hunter's toolkit belonging to a female individual in a burial ground in Peru, the deep-rooted fabrication of a strict and gendered distinction of roles in hunter-gatherer society was shaken and partially refuted³. After all, mirrors stay the same: what changes is who is looking at them.

- - - what if the steles are the testimony of a civilization of only women*? What if they are concentrated in certain spots because that's where some communities of women* lived: isolated enclaves, similar to beguinages? - - -

² [https://www.cell.com/current-biology/abstract/S0960-9822\(24\)01361-7](https://www.cell.com/current-biology/abstract/S0960-9822(24)01361-7)

³ <https://www.eurekalert.org/news-releases/486052>

A letter from a possible sister to a possible sister.

Chère Sœur,

Please, make it so the researcher at the conference will have to blush from his pulpit. Yes, it is the document, the journal, and the lines you carve to commemorate it. But it's also the action itself, you know? Maybe more so, even.

I hear you say "What if they get it wrong anyway? What if everything I harvest today to feed my sister, what I dance to, whom I talk to, in what language and tone, gets all misunderstood and I end up looking like someone else anyway? I can't make sure they will get it, however conscious I am of their future gaze. When they come and dig us up and find all of our cups, pens, bones, arrows, and jewels, they might get it all wrong. Even if I did make sure I lived in truthfulness and never let them shush me when we were still walking this earth, what does it matter if they'll get it all wrong?" I can only reassure you by answering that I know they will.

They will get it wrong because there's only one way they can get it. It will happen, due to scarcity of options. And that's a certainty that comforts me. It means that us and them are different. Isn't that a desirable prospect? I also know, because it is happening now, that some other people - the ones who might find it arduous to end up in the position of speaking at that conference, the ones who had to climb steeper hills to get to that excavation, the ones who don't want to excavate because they have never severed themselves from their ancestors and don't need to rediscover themselves - they will doubt and fight to be doubtful and keep seeing uncertainty as a blessing, as sumptuous bounty.

We don't keep a record of our quarrels, we don't archive our boredom. The register of our breaths will never reach them just as some of our nightly sighs might not reach our sisters right now. Does that make them less sorrowful? Does it make our embraces in the morning less sincere?

So, it is worth writing about and living it to the fullest. It's worth screaming about it before, during, and after, and lending our voices anytime we can. If we have time, just to mess with them, let's give them something they can't recount.

Let's be as opaque as granite, let's not allow them to inhabit our reflection. Sure, let's fight it, if we have it in us, if it helps us feel like we belong to ourselves, that we are in control at least for now. Let's invent a new language that only we can decipher and that confuses and scares them. Let's also burn our diaries - why not - if we find it necessary. I am not opposed to radical tactics.

But we could also choose hope. Have faith that our being, and our saying, writing, and loving will be picked up by the ones who will know what to do with it. Because, sister: that's what you are doing, too.

-Ta Sœur

A fortuitous bibliography.

These texts, films, and exhibitions fell into my lap in the span of a very serendipitous couple of months. I take no credit for it, if not for having kept my ears and eyes open which should, I can admit, not to be taken for granted.

**I will use the term “women” in an extensive, political stance to mean people who are assigned female at birth, trans women, and FLINTA. Also, I will use the word “we” to mean women*, Western society, non-male individuals, feminists, and people in the margins. It’s up to you to add or subtract yourself from the “wes” you’ll encounter. That’s what we always do, anyways.*

The book that
the first spark
Viendra le
feu by Wendy
It functioned as
springboard
push me
e v e r y
the next
n e e d l e
the stitch to
forward: an
procedure. In
colony of women*
patriarchy and at the
dystopian, controlling
are forced to produce and reproduce, but in which they are
forbidden to read or write freely. The plot is told through the



started it all,
w a s
temps du
Delorme.
a
that would
higher after
connection, to
discovery. Like a
returning along
take the thread
i t e r a t i v e
the novel a
lives outside of
m a r g i n o f a
society in which people

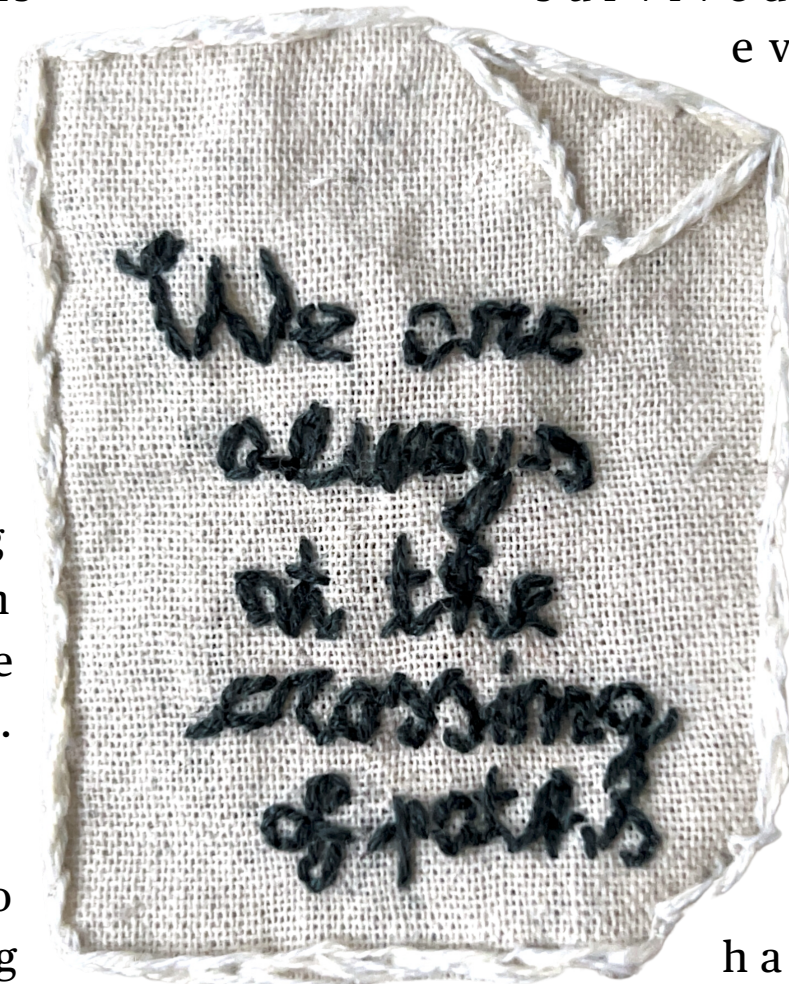
voices of multiple characters, some are sisters (people who were part of the separate society of women, a sisterhood of sorts) who fled or died in the extermination attempt that the authorities acted upon their community years before the time the story is set in.

Some sisters

survived and will
eventually

reunite.

Fire is in
the pages.
the rebels
people,
otherwise
confirming
as a
disruptive
protest.



the title and
It is used by
- trans
and
gender-non-
individuals -
effective and
mode of
Their

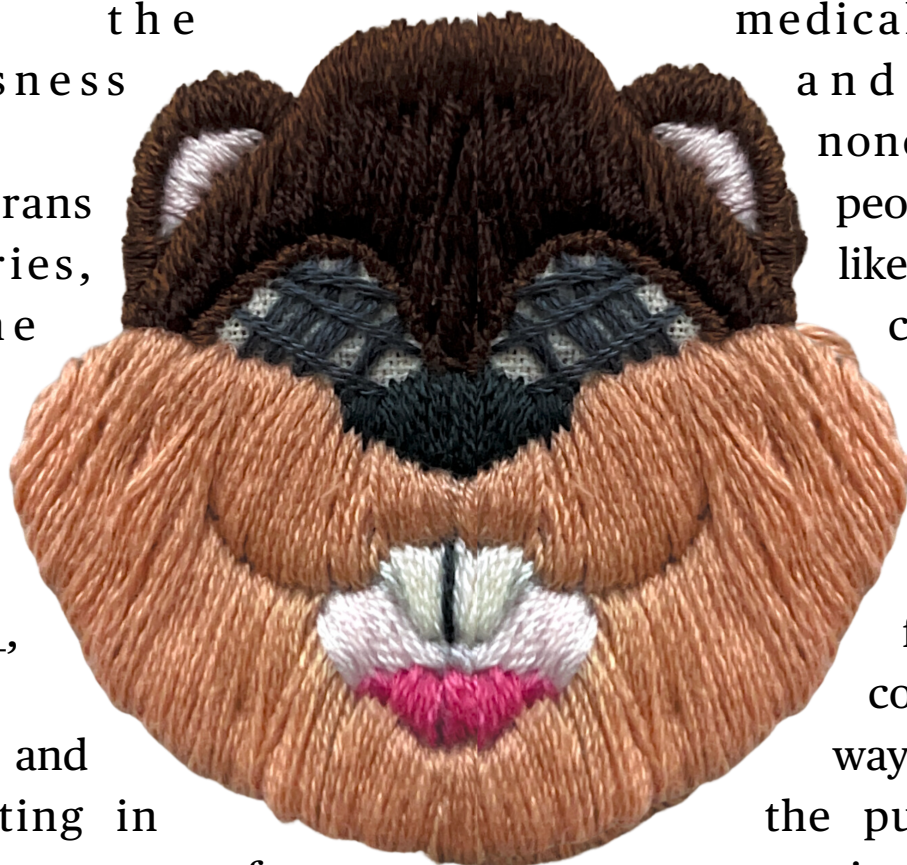
extends to
and writing
society

transgression
their reading
habits: in a

where all that is written and distributed is strictly controlled, they manage a clandestine library. They ultimately decide to burn down the institutions. Riots and rebellion: fire in the streets, the cathedral is burnt. The rest of the places of power follow shortly thereafter. The book ends with the physical destruction of the systems of oppression. - - - An epistemological revolution, another disruption, is evoked by Paul B. Preciado in his writings. A character in *Viendra le temps du feu* bears his same name and speaks his real-life words. We find here and there some *Lettres des*

Uraniens, inspired by his collection of essays *An Apartment on Uranus*. The revolution is enticed by the posters that Paul attaches in the streets, just like Preciado attaches posters to look for other Orlandos at the beginning of his film, *Orlando, ma biographie politique* (2023). - - - Uranus is a symbol for challenging gender, rebelling against heteronormative impositions, and the medicalization of transness and gender nonconformity.

The trans libraries, of the that other river, *l'effeu*,



intent and

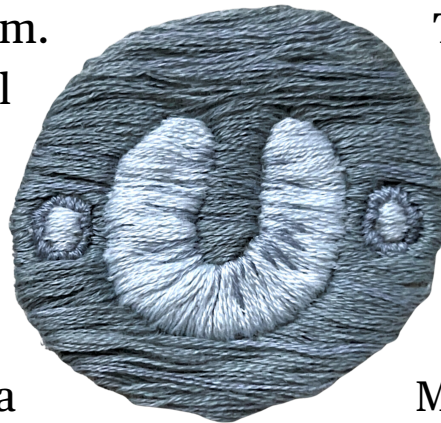
- Writing in

that's a way of

recounting yourself. That's what Rosa does in *Viendra le temps du feu*. The reader gets to feel close to the community of sisters, who have been exterminated and forgotten, through her own words. Writing about yourself can feel like a necessity, a duty towards yourself and your sisters. Otherwise, you risk someone else writing for you and misrepresenting you. - - - We are blind on both sides. The recounted people can't know how they will be misinterpreted, while the ones who read their remnants can't see anything but their own ideology in them. - - - The character of Louise wears a beaver mascot costume to promote the supermarket she works

for. From inside it, she can't clearly make out what surrounds her, while at the same time remaining concealed herself. We are all in a beaver costume: we can't trust others because we can't really see them, we are cursed by limited vision in both directions. - - - like a mirror: Mirrors are quite the uncanny object. It takes a lot of effort to make one. Your desire to see yourself must be unquenchable. Scrubbing metal until it not only shines but reflects. We were meant to see ourselves reflected in puddles and nothing more. The flatter and calmer the surface, the fewer the hooks, dips, waves, and smoother texture, the more we will see ourselves in them.

it is, the more we will the fog, and the will slowly become familiar. - - - In Language, Science, Manuscript by Anežka



The more mysterious force ourselves into more the images close to what is Mysterious Letters: and the Voynich

Minaříková & Marek

Nedelka is a book about one of the most mysterious documents in history. Many scientists, philologists, Internet sleuths, and artists have tried to decode the strange language it was written in and its bestiary-like illustration. In this book, which is more interested in the mystery itself than in any clever solution to it, Ian Hacking is cited to argue about how we see ourselves in mysterious artifacts and anything that doesn't speak our language. "In imagining ourselves to be attempting contact with the radically Other, we are merely looking in a mirror" - - - Virginia Woolf in A Room of One's Own uses mirrors to warn us about the inevitable bond that ties the cis-normative interactions of genders: "Women have served all these centuries as looking glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size." - - - Amaterasu who is told to have been

venerated in the - - - *Les Guérillères* by Monique Wittig (which is one of the explicit inspirations for *Viendra le temps du feu*) - - - is the sun goddess whose tale is told in the ancient religious and political Japanese text, the *Kojiki* (VIII century). She is so bothered and annoyed by her brother's behavior that she borrows herself in a cave, depriving the world of sunlight. To convince her to come out of hiding and restore the world as they know it, the rest of the divine progeny tricks her into thinking that a superior goddess has taken her place. One of them - called Ame no Uzume - starts dancing naked, surrounded by chanting voices and chaotic revelry.

to her

gone
her

i s

brought
her face,
persuading
that this other goddess (really
reflection) has taken her place.

Amaterasu leaves the entrance
cave ajar to take a peek,
worrying the world has
into shambles in
absence. A
mirror then

t o

h e r

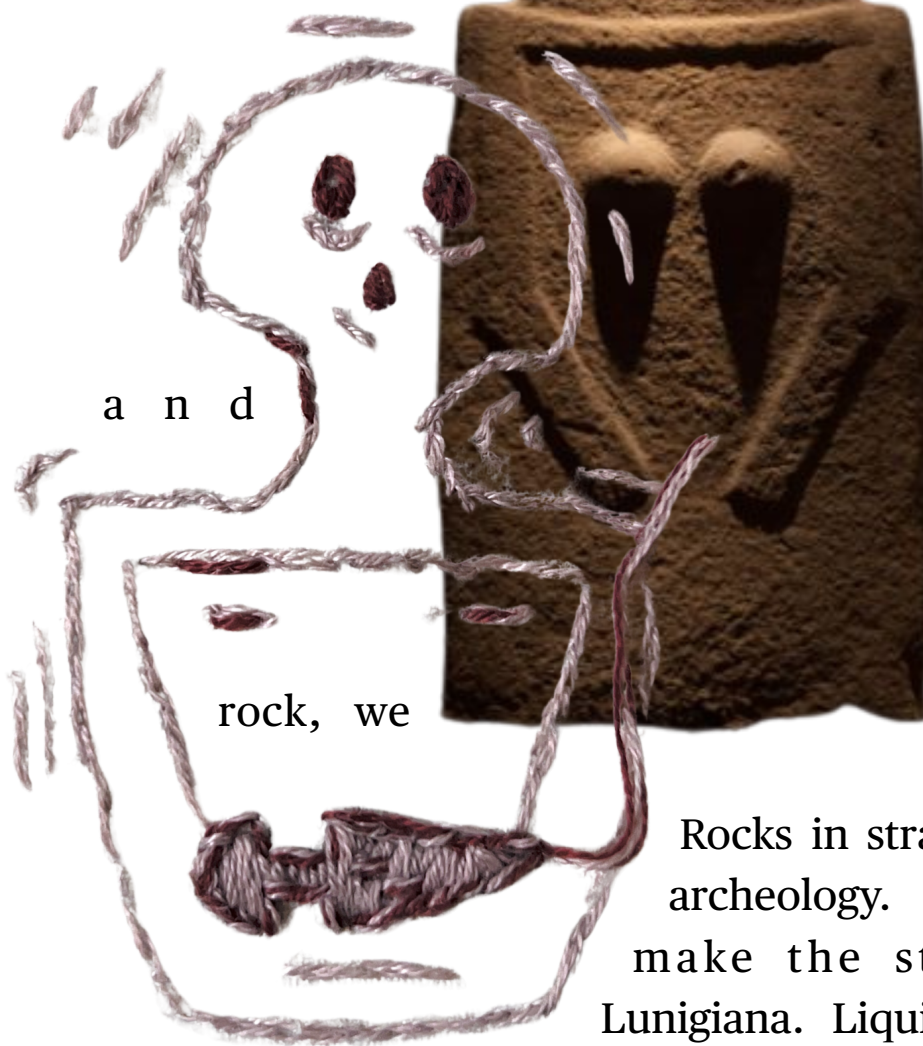
h e r

Concerned

and perhaps envious, she is lured outside of the cave and forced to make the sun shine again. - - - The sisters in *Les Guerilliers* would expose their genitals to the sun, and they would venerate Amaterasu as prisoners of the mirror. - - - That's also why we find many bronze mirrors in many burial sites in Japan. Amaterasu is thought of as one of the main divinities and ancient ancestors of



the Japanese people, and her main attribute is the mirror: a magical instrument. Mirrors are a crucial part of the autochthonous religion and in the political formation of centralized power in antiquity. The *Kojiki* was written, like many legends and epic poems, to tell a story of goddesses giving birth to men. The same men in power at the time of its writing. This is how humans find meaning and reinforce their convictions: by rewriting history or making it up to justify and cement the present. We dig find testimonies, we rediscover ourselves. We flip pages or flake off strata of dirt and lift the rocks that turned to dust - - -



puddle and solid at the same time, they are made of strata in metaphor and outside of it. Writing and recording in general is how we do it. In *Viendra le temps du feu* we can read the testimony of Rosa, but we also know that another character, Ève, burns her diaries. The reader had the chance of reading them before she had the chance to burn them, though.

Such is the magic of story telling. The reader is treated to a privilege that even the rest of the characters in the novel are denied. The sisters we are told about have different approaches to their writing and regarding who gets to be enlightened about it. Maybe we should do as Ève and leave nothing behind. It's too risky to be misrepresented. - - - In *Close to the Knives* David Wojnarowicz

prefaces the fragments of Dakota's letters with a similar concern. "In the following segments of letters received over the the guy named chose these because they the only surviving evidence that Dakota to his own about his animal grace, spirituality... I terrible in the the letter creates a histories. In entire identity his folks." Torn share a life



pages, I originally included I ' d years from Dakota... I letters were pieces of allowed speak on behalf humanity, his his own also believe the law is event of the death of writer, because it whitewash of personal the case of Dakota, his has been murdered by between the desire to described by who has lived it

and the fear of pushing it in front of an undeserving gaze, between a sense of duty to give a story justice and the compunction about desecrating a memory. How to respect his wish and his life. - - -

Choosing silence is also a message, after all. Like sewing our lips shut, like Wojnarowicz did in protest against silence itself and lies, which are the worst kind of silence. - - - like the lips projected by the artist Agnès Geoffray in her exhibition titled *Les Guérillères*, like Wittig's book. - - - Inspired by it. - - - I had no plan of visiting it, I found myself there together with another "Incendiaire", another igniter, like me, on one chill October afternoon. The words *elles*



*s o n t e n
m a r c h e* and
m a n y
o t h e r s
taken from
Wittig's text
projected
on photos
of lips,

heads, hands, eyes,
the sites of revolution.
- - - and maybe that's
why I chose sewing
and embroidering as a
way to elaborate what
I was seeing: to pay
tribute to the
connection itself and



not to its elements. To work as the sower and add the thread - - - Maria Lai would have done it, I know. She would embroider fables and folk stories - - - one of them is entitled *La capretta*, the little

goat. “The shepherd boy had the certainty that only the little goat could put those monsters to flight, he took to calling her all over the mountain, tuned the rhythm of the little bell to the beat of his desperate heart, until the dawn blazed and the little goat returned

multiplied from all horizons. The mountain

resounded with rhythms.

Poetry was born.” Maria

takes our hand while she

accompanies us to

t h e



m o u n t a i n

where we'll find the the

monsters. A goat enters a

i n t h e c o v e r o f h e r

embroidered book - - - is it the same cave that trapped the sisters

in Viendra le temps du feu? the cave from which they would extract

marble to exchange it for survival with the dystopian society on

the other side of the river? - - - Can we choose the thread and not

the mirror? - - -

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