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Pharmacopornography: An Interview with Beatriz Preciado

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AT WORK

The student worker guarding the doors to Beatriz's (B.'s) roundtable discussion at NYU meant business. I had been late leaving a class several blocks over at the less austere New School, and for that he was sorry, but I wouldn't be able to fit in the room with B., José Muñoz, Avital Ronell, their cumulative brilliance, and about a hundred students who may or may have not been aware of the cultural master class that lay in store for them. "If someone leaves, you're next in," he assured me. I sat outside the lacquered double doors, deflated. Attending this discussion was my only chance to unpack, and from the horse's mouth, this dense theoretical/narrative text I had been reading in a silo all summer. My interview with B. was scheduled for the next day.

*Last July, when I first picked up the manuscript for what, in its final iteration, would be Beatriz Preciado's **Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs, and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era**, I was in the hills of Ecuador at a straight friend's wedding, far from anything remotely related to queer theory, pharmacological engineering, Foucaultian lineage, or writing, for that matter. B. toggles between a personal account of using topical testosterone, Testogel, as a kind of performative homage to a fallen queer friend, and a cultural analysis that investigates how pharmaceutical companies politicize the body— down to the molecule. The idea is that Testo Junkie picks up where Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* left off, a chronicle of sex in an ever increasingly consumerist and pornographically identified modernity. Its mix of personal*

narrative and theory softened my point of entry, but still, it was a lot to consider on my own.

So, I waited outside of those doors at NYU hoping to get in, and if I did, I prayed that the complexity of the pharmacopornographic dilemma would magically break down into a series of alphabet blocks: pointing to big business as the culprit and queer individuals taking hormones as the politicized bodies. Of course it was not so simple; when the student going to class or dinner or whatever left the auditorium, making room for me, I found through a series of revelatory slides and discussions that this issue is wide-reaching but fundamentally inherent in everything we do—all of us. And that was just the panel discussion.

When I sat down the next day with the calming but intellectually compelling B., B. laid out for me the universality of the pharmacopornographic regime, how all bodies have become biopolitical archives for the powers that be, but also how taking testosterone effects one's cognitive experience, how we romanticize substances like opium and writing, and how the pill is just a blip on the blueprint that is you.

What was the beginning of your academic research?

I went to the New School, for philosophy. I had come from Spain on a Fulbright scholarship, which was very different then. Continental philosophy was more of what I studied at the New School. But what was great for me was that in this context, I had the great chance of meeting Derrida, who became for me a mentor. He was my teacher in a seminar with Ágnes Heller, and I spoke French, so it was fantastic. He was the most generous professor I ever had. He invited me to teach a seminar. I then ended up living in Paris, and now I've been there for the last ten years.

He was teaching a seminar on forgiveness and the gift, but at that time, he was studying Saint Augustine's transformation in relationship to faith and becoming Catholic while at a point of personal transitioning. It was kind of like a story of transexuality. So, I went to France to speak about this. This was

just before coming back to the states to do a Ph.D. in architecture.

Last night, you compared the case for the pill to the architecture of a building.

I was trying to give you an idea of how I traced a larger cartography, basically where the book would be inscribed. I finished the book in 2007–2008, so it's been a while for me, but there is so much important information.

Did you want to add new chapters to *Testo Junkie* because of the amount of information you found after the fact?

Well, now I'm working on another book. It's a political history of the body. Some of the images you saw last night come from the same research. This book goes a bit beyond *Testo Junkie*, but for me, it stands in the same area. It is not only about a personal experience of taking testosterone. There is more political theory behind it.

Formally, why did you move between the two in *Testo Junkie*?

It wasn't an easy choice. Basically, I realized that, having been trained both in the European university and in the American university, there is this academic writing that is really dry, and for me, I knew from the very beginning that I didn't want to continue doing that. I couldn't do that. It's interesting that you come from a writing background, because for me philosophy is basically a writing discipline.

In terms of writing as a research tool, academic writing was not what I wanted to do. So, I brought some of my academic background to another place, which was much more toward activism and art—those are my fields. I was using activism as a research methodology. I put activism into some of my questioning from being a feminist in the gay and lesbian movement, in the AIDS movement, and then in the transgender

movement. I put those questions right on the table in the beginning as ways of producing knowledge.

The narrative of your Testogel rituals is very performative. Have you ever done performance art?

No, but it's interesting—more and more people think I do performance, but it's really not what I do. It's writing for me that is the performative device. My refusal to engage in performance art is also in part because sexuality and gender are reduced to representation and translated into visual objects. I refuse the theatricality of that. Though, in Europe, people are using the book to create performances.

Do you mind?

I don't mind if people choose to do that. Before this book, I wrote another called *Countersexual Manifesto* that is full of power contracts, sexual contracts that can be done like a score. It's almost a performance. Definitely, the writing that I do has a performative dimension.

What was it like taking testosterone during this time?

I actually continue taking it. What I think is interesting about any molecule, not just testosterone, is that everything is a question of dosage. With this same molecule, some of my friends have become something very close to what looks like a cis male. In my case, I take very low doses, so that I may continue the way that I am for a little bit, maybe not much longer. I don't know exactly what I'll do next. Some people ask me, Do you want a gender reassignment? I don't know—probably, if I keep taking testosterone, there will be a point where I will probably say yes, but that's not exactly my aim. I also thought about the project as a kind of collective adventure, in a sense, because I'm thinking about the body, not even just my own, as this kind of a living political fiction.

That's how I see the body, as a living political archive. You already have this archive. It's not like you choose things that are more or less outside of yourself to add onto it. You realize that

your body is really dense, stratified, and huge. There are connections and relationships that are already there. If you carefully look at it, you realize that your body archive is connected to the history of the city, the history of design, technologies, and goes back to the invention of agriculture like eighty thousand years ago. Your body is the body of the planet. When I add a few molecules of testosterone, in a huge living archive, well that's just a minor detail. It's a way of intensification in terms of a cognitive experience—suddenly you are intensifying processes that are already going on in your body.

How much of this added cognition is the testosterone, and how much of it is the experiment itself?

Once you refuse the legal and medical protocol and you decide to take testosterone, you immediately have to set up your own protocol for use. You have to decide on how much and when—then a whole discipline or counterdiscipline appears. This makes you become more aware of things that you are taking, not only on a psychological level, but you also immediately start asking yourself questions like, What is this testosterone that I am taking, where is this coming from, how is this being made, how has this been fabricated both in terms of molecules and in terms of signifiers? Suddenly you see this moment of self-intoxication, and not only with testosterone—suddenly everything else appears. You become resistant to the body techniques that are being constructed constantly around you. Every other technique has to be rearranged. With this perspective applied to too many things at once, you can end up with this kind of paranoid image of the world. It's interesting. You are then forced to produce your own knowledge, a knowledge that is not given to you. Any girl today who is around fourteen years old might go to the doctor and the doctor might immediately say, The pill, as if the female body would automatically be a reproductive body without any medical arrangements, without even knowing anything about the economy of fluids and organs in this person. They assume you are a cis female, so you are going to be taking the pill, or you're a gay Latino guy between twenty-one and thirty-five and you'll

be taking these anti-AIDS molecules. This knowledge production cannot be done alone.

There is an allure to the testosterone use in the book that feels a bit like an homage to opium.

Yes, there's always a temptation when reading *Testo Junkie* to think of me as a very romantic individual. But this could be the relationship we have with any one object, technology, image, and when I say any technologies it includes writing, which is the oldest technology of all. By collectively, I mean that of course you are always in relationships, whether institutionally or with doctors. Somebody has to give you the substance. You end up creating a new network in order to produce that knowledge. As soon as I started taking testosterone, I found tons of people around the world who are doing the same thing. I was able to ask them how much they were taking and how it is for them. There is no scientific knowledge about it, really—nobody knows what can really happen.

When I was researching testosterone, I found that testosterone hasn't been available for very long as a substance. It became available probably after the beginning of the twentieth century. Now in the U.S., if you are a cis male, you can buy it if you have a "deficiency," but there is always a potential deficiency of testosterone.

Right, because who is the *one* male who actually has the perfect amount of testosterone in him?

Exactly. It's very interesting, because it then means that testosterone is defined by masculinity and masculinity by testosterone, and we don't know exactly what either means.

I was surprised to see how not only testosterone was this marketed but unknown molecule, but also the pill, which is one of the most used substances in the history of humanity. Everybody is taking it and we don't know much about it.

Your research shows that the pill produces technical periods.

Honestly, when I was doing my research on the pill and read this, I couldn't believe it. We've been working with all of these theories of gender performativity for so long, the last ten years, and we have a lot of weird ideas, but when you see what was happening in the 1950s, you find that it was even worse than anything we ever imagined. It's what I refer to in the book as "biocamp," this kind of theatricality or mimesis being taken to the level of the production of the organic. In the 1950s, if you took the first pill consistently, you would stop because you wouldn't produce monthly bleedings any longer; your period would stop. The first pill was equally efficient in terms of preventing pregnancy, but the Food and Drug Administration entered into a type of epistemological crisis. Women wouldn't be women anymore if they were not being marked by the difference of bleeding every month. I started speaking about it last night—sometimes I like to present a blow down of information and then run away. But basically, the invention of the pill implies the end of disciplinary heterosexuality. Of course, we continue using that notion as if it isn't the end, but the heterosexuality we live with today is different. They decided at that point that it was necessary to go into research and find a way of reproducing the bleedings. You have to imagine—between 1960 and 1965, Enovid gained ten million consumers. It was a mass consumption.

I have these conversations with feminists from the seventies who of course see the pill as this instrument of sexual liberation—I'm not saying that it's not or that it can't be used as an emancipating technique, but I think we have to acknowledge the history behind it. It's a history that has to do with colonialism and racism, and technically reproducing gender differences. As soon as we acknowledge that, we might think that it's good to actually look for new techniques.

Do you think that the pill then is more politically charged than, say, the condom?

No, I think the condom is very charged. I think *all* technologies that actually interfere with the management of reproduction of sexuality are very politically charged. On the one side, the management of masculinity and sperm by the condom has

basically been used for millions of years. That information was amazing to me when I was working on AIDS projects. There were all these discussions going on in the eighties and nineties about condoms that reproduce the discussions that were going on in the seventeenth century. This was at the same time that new reproductive technologies were occurring—the possibility of in vitro fertilization and so on. The condom is a very interesting object and technique. The French called it “second skin.” I refer to it as the necropolitical body, the body that has been marked by its relationship to power techniques of giving death. That body, up until the beginning of anatomy as a technique to make the inner body visible, was mostly a plain surface or a skin. You have this masculine body that is at the center of political power for all these years, as a skin that contains a soul, and this soul is producing sperm. It was a kind of transcendental power. The skin thing is also interesting in relation to writing. All of these ancient technologies that function as necropolitical techniques of giving death work like writing technologies on the body. Preventing the circulation of sperm prevents in a way the expansion of male virility, divine power. I still see this sometimes in the debate about AIDS.

Can you talk about the AIDS preventative medication PEP and its relation to your pharmacopornographic theory?

For the very first time, pharmacological technologies will be addressed to the male body. It started with Viagra. If the pill was inventing these technical bleedings, Viagra was inventing technical virility. If you are male and not able to have an erection and ejaculate properly, then of course your core virility is being diminished. It's a pharmacological, theatrical fiction of virility. But what interested me about the question from last night was that I saw how drugs are being invented now around AIDS in relation to the pill. It is the same industry, the pharmacological industry and research groups. The pill is a preventive technique, preventative of something that could eventually happen. You take it and you haven't even done anything yet. It's funny, sometimes I'm talking to my straight friends who take the pill and they say, How useless is my life. I've taken the pill for five months, and I'm not even having any

sex. The pill is like a prosthetic machine to produce the future. You are taking it as a way of constructing time and a relationship to time. This also defines subjectivity and how temporality is being structured. The pill became a lifetime drug for women. What is happening with AIDS research is that they are also thinking of consumers who can become lifetime consumers. This is how the pharmacopornographic regime works. The disciplinary regime would basically tell you not to have sex outside of reproduction. They would say, Do not go out and have sex in that back room. The pharmacopornographic regime says, No, no, you can fuck as much as you want, but be sure you take your pill. The management of subjectivity and identity is not so related to the body and the movements of the body, but much more to the very materiality of the body. The level of control has been downgraded to a molecular level. Not having sex on the pill doesn't matter because the pill is also given to improve the quality of your skin, so it becomes cosmetic. Because of the disciplinary regime, in order for you to be properly subjectified, you had to go through these architectures. From the fifteenth century up until the mid-twentieth century, normalization processes of gender and race had to do with special segmentation—separate toilets, schools, even within the city there was a special type of segregation. It all had to do with placing the body within a space or an architecture. Now it is much more complex—the segregation is going on within the body itself. This implies that the identity politics we've been practicing the last few years might not be enough of a way of resisting the new technologies of producing subjectivity that are building us right now.

Do you think tools like Testogel and estrogen create more of a democracy in the hands of the marginalized?

We don't have to be afraid of questioning democracy, but I'm also very interested in disability, nonfunctional bodies, other forms of functionality and cognitive experiences. Democracy and the model of democracy is still too much about able bodies, masculine able bodies that have control over the body and the individual's choices, and have dialogues and communications in a type of parliament. We have to imagine politics that go beyond the parliament, otherwise how are we going to imagine politics

with nonhumans, or the planet? I am interested in the model of the body as subjectivity that is working within democracy, and then goes beyond that. Also, the global situation that we are in requires a revolution. There is no other option. We must manage to actually create some political alliance of minority bodies, to create a revolution together. Otherwise these necropolitical techniques will take the planet over. In this sense, I have a very utopian way of thinking, of rethinking new technologies of government and the body, creating new regimes of knowledge. The domain of politics has to be taken over by artists. Politics and philosophy both are our domains. The problem is that they have been expropriated and taken by other entities for the production of capital or just for the sake of power itself. That's the definition of revolution, when the political domain becomes art. We desperately need it.

What was the benefit to designing your own protocol, of being the lab rat in your experiments with testosterone?

It's interesting that you mention design. Design is at the center of the pharmacopornographic more than anything else, because design invents techniques of the body. Chairs and buildings are designed relative to the body, and body techniques define relationships between body, space and time, and the spaces that you can or cannot use. It's crucial that activists with the right questions permeate these fields. Designers are typically driven by the commercial. In terms of becoming a rat in your own laboratory, that's what happens when you write. Writing is becoming the rat in your own laboratory. Writing is the main technology of production of subjectivity that we invented a really long time ago. What I do in the book is underlying this, making it hyperbolic through the invention of the protocol. There are moments when you go beyond what is traditionally done, in research and within the academy, that you think you are losing your mind, but you have to give yourself a kind of reference of heroes, whoever it is, be it Freud or Foucault.

How did Freud influence *Testo Junkie*?

I was looking through all of these books for research when I was building up my protocol for testosterone. Freud learned that cocaine was being produced by pharmacological companies in Germany because of the war. At the end of the nineteenth century it was being used for barbarian soldiers. They would go to war exhausted, and were able to take these cocaine pills for energy. What was very funny was reading this text by Freud called *About Cocaine*. He wrote a letter to the company saying he was a psychologist and would like 500 grams of pure cocaine that would eventually be delivered to his house. As soon as he got the cocaine, he tried it and began his protocol. He immediately knew that this would change the psychological/psychiatric field. He thought it would be the substance of the century. He actually wrote letters to his future wife saying, “Dear Martha, I bought five hundred grams of cocaine. I have a project.” So, when I was there with my testosterone, I realized that this was the relationship I had to the book. I had this testosterone and I had a project. Nietzsche, Freud, and Benjamin used self-experimentation as a form of knowledge production. It does not only happen with molecules and substances, but it can also happen in other areas. Every crucial book—piece of literature—in a way, somehow, has a certain technique or technology attached to it.