

Her Sound

The first thing I see when I visit Neeraja D's studio at The Foundry is that one of the walls is covered in paper: sheet after sheet of notebook paper thumbtacked to the wall. One word is written over and over in small handwriting: Muddupalani's name. Muddupalani, an 18th-century Telugu-speaking poet and devadasi known for her erotic narrative poem *Rādhikā-sāntvanam*. Muddupalani Muddupalani Muddupalani Muddupalani Muddupalani, I read over and over. Then, on the table, she flips through a notebook full of red, obsessive scribbles: Muddupalani Muddupalani Muddupalani. Like a purging. Repetition, which is present in all of D's many responses—film, poetry, prints—to Muddupalani, acts as the body for obsession, its materiality.

Obsession (what drives the work) → repetition (form).

Like any obsession, D's feels senseless yet urgent. If she fully understood her obsession, it would probably vanish.

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She projects her lips. They are enormous, taking up the entire wall. You can see pores you would never see with the naked eye. Her lips move but there's no sound. After looking at the lips for a while, they start to look like anything but lips. Just as a word loses its meaning when repeated too often and becomes merely strange sound. The lips compress and separate like a slug dragging its way across the floor. Every once in a while a tongue comes out and licks the chapped lips. Every once in a while she swallows the saliva collected inside her mouth, which is formed by saying something over and over again, something we can't

hear. We know it's the same word: the lips—which are no longer lips to me—keep moving in the same way. Muddupalani Muddupalani Muddupalani on and on in silence. I see the lips. Because I can't hear the lips, I'm cut off from the word's meaning.

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D tells me this story: she couldn't read eighteenth-century Telugu so she had her mother read it to her. "What does this mean?" she asks her mother via a call to India. "Why do you want to know?" asks her mother. There's a lot of sex to be translated. "Do I really have to read this?" Yes. D needs her mother to translate Muddupalani's work—there's a strange vulnerability in that need. And in turn, her mother is made uncomfortable by having to read it aloud. Their vulnerabilities speak back and forth to each other over the long-distance call.

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D's work exists "in between translation and violence" (D, poems). How can one body become another body and still retain its meaning? That's what translation attempts to do. D is interested in the opacity of Telugu, in her failure to understand.

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Embodiment: writing a name over and over until her hands are sore, saying the name over and over until her lips are sore. These pieces are about the repeated performance of an action as a means to arrive closer and closer to the obsession. D wants to say the name over and over: in the film, eventually she can't breathe. Involuntarily, she has to move her lips

away from the camera—the camera that has captured her lips for the last 40 minutes saying a name. Who/what is Muddupalani?

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What strikes me most about D's twenty-four-page poetic response to Muddupalani's work is that there's no explicit sex, but it's sexy. The language is charged with desire. There's one line that keeps repeating itself, the second line of every poem: "it is her body." The "it" refers back to the first line and simultaneously starts a new thought. But this word also gestures to itself in a strange way, because "it" doesn't grammatically follow the first line, neither does the third line follow smoothly from it. In the context of these poems, this word is immensely resonant:

"It" = the objectification of women.

"It" = the objectification of the body (especially female).

"It" = a gender-neutral pronoun.

Lips hovering without a body, a word silenced from the lips, the lips trying to sound and failing, while on the wall the name appears over and over as if transposed, as if we can only know one thing at a time, only a fragment of what something could mean if all the pieces could be assembled. Obsession, desire, yearning, not understanding why but experiencing "it"—that desire—in the body. This work doesn't explain or provide thoughts on itself, it performs it.

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