

# OLIVIA LAING'S STRANGE, SUBLIME BOOK ON THE BODY

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bodies are usually interrogated.*



**By Katy Waldman**

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*Olivia Laing's new work possesses a looseness, richness, and abundance of originality.* Photograph by Manuel Vazquez / Contour / Getty

Stashed in the first paragraph of “Everybody,” the new work of nonfiction by the English author Olivia Laing, is a somewhat unassimilable phrase. Laing comes across a flyer at her pharmacy that describes headaches in terms of “stuck energies from past traumas”; the ad prescribes, as a cure, “body psychotherapy.” I interpreted this to mean psychotherapy for the body, with its aches and pains, and stumbled. If the body had its own psyche, then what were *we*? At the same time, the reverse seemed possible: that the psyche might possess its own body, which could trip, as mine just had, on an unexpected phrase. A sentence into the book, I felt reduced to a pile of shards, or to the sleight of an unknown hand.

“Everybody”’s central character is the Viennese psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich, and perhaps it’s no accident that Laing presents him as a man in pieces. This is a formal description—fragments

of Reich's story are woven throughout—and a thematic one: the doctor, whom Laing praises as a “connector,” emerges as a teetering amalgam of brilliance, delusion, empathy, and prejudice. Born in 1897, Reich was one of Freud's most famous protégés. He treated mostly working-class patients and believed that they were “carrying their past experiences around in their bodies, storing their emotional pain as a kind of tension,” which he called “character armor.” Therapy could help, as could Marxism, but what was really needed, Reich thought, was a revolution in sex, the liberatory potential of which had been warped by an extractive economic system. Reich and Freud fell out over their differing views on repression and Hitler—Freud wanted to remain neutral, while Reich urged resistance—and after Reich fled to the United States, in 1939, he grew paranoid and grandiose. He invented the orgone accumulator, a freestanding closet designed to collect orgasmic energy, and the Cloudbuster, the better to wage war on the weather. He eventually died in prison, after the Food and Drug Administration ordered him to stop selling orgone accumulators. (He didn't.)

“Everybody” pulls liberally from Reich's biography, but the doctor belongs more to the book's form than to its content: his narrative provides the hard factual shell into which Laing can pour her ideas. “Everybody” is, per the title, an interrogation of bodies, but not in the sense that bodies are usually interrogated. The book skips over traditional sites of interest, such as health or appearance, to explore questions of force and constraint, and how, more abstractly, our physical forms can shove us into conceptual categories—Black, male—that then shape us further. (Laing, who started writing the book during the refugee crisis of 2015, notes that she was spurred on by COVID-19 and the movement for police reform; her subtitle is “A Book About Freedom.”) The book proceeds, via an almost dreamlike, permutative logic, from the body *as* prison to the body *in* prison to *masses* of bodies in prison to masses of bodies in *protest*. At the end, we are released on a note that is either utopian or dryly ironic. “The free body,” Laing writes. “What a beautiful idea.”

Here is a good place to mention that early reviews of “Everybody” have criticized it for lacking what the *Times's* Noor Qasim called “clarifying constraints.” The book is said to take on too much and cohere too little. There may be something to this, and yet I confess that Laing finds

me in a mood of mistrusting overly tidy nonfiction. “Everybody” possesses a looseness, richness, and abundance of originality. One does not expect a political study to perform such sharp close readings of art and literature, or to describe emotions so elegantly. Line by line and thought by thought, Laing writes with surgical discipline; if that precision is lacking on the level of her highest-order argument, the sense of unfinished business that lingers is its own pleasure. For me, then, the pieces add up, and the result has an inviting, if slightly unstable, shape.

One of Laing’s most magnetic essays relates to whether it makes sense to narrativize the body. The inquiry here is not whether bodies matter—they do—but whether they convey features of the consciousness within them. Laing, with her degree in “narrative medicine,” is of two minds. The first is represented by Kathy Acker, who died, at fifty, of a cancer she tried to treat herself via psychotherapeutic techniques. (Acker, who also lends her name to the protagonist of “Crudo,” Laing’s most recent novel, believed that her illness pointed to unresolved childhood trauma.) The second position is modelled by Susan Sontag, the patron saint of telling people to quit mythologizing disease. Sontag, who received her own cancer diagnosis, in 1975, pursued punishingly aggressive treatments, as though trying to will herself back to health. For her, de-narrativizing the body involved re-sanctifying the mind. Laing convincingly casts both writers as skeptical, in part, of the same intolerable thought: that everything that made them *them*—all their “perceptions, thoughts, stories, ideas”—might have been irrelevant to their material existence. Acker rejected this premise outright. (Her belief in a meaningful body proved “a far richer source of freedom than health itself,” Laing writes.) Sontag, meanwhile, tried to suppress the one fact of the body—it dies—and Laing discerns, in “Illness as Metaphor,” “a faint but squeak of panic: is it my fault, is it my fault?”

Even as she glides between subjects and themes, Laing remains anchored by the bond between the body and personhood. In a standout chapter, she claims that the harm of violence is not the work it does to transform subjects into objects, but the incompleteness of that work: the soul becomes a “ruin with a human face.” This insight leads Laing to the Marquis de Sade, who wrote of dark, violent sexual acts from a prison cell, and who showed readers how to make a prison of the body itself. The chapter at times evokes a hallucinatory courtroom, summoning

Andrea Dworkin and then Angela Carter to weigh in on Sade's legacy. Dworkin, whose husband beat her and chased her across the Netherlands, famously accused the Marquis of revelling in misogynist cruelty. Carter saw his project differently; Sade's grisly fantasies, she ventured, function to reveal the "obscene price" of liberty, how absolute freedom "depends on the servitude and abasement of others." (Laing notes that Carter's interpretation "attends, as very few people do, to the actual experience of reading Sade," which is "fundamentally untitillating.")

Sade's revelation was that the needs of the body—to move, eat, shit—could be weaponized, turned against it, by placing the body in a context that was unfree. One of Laing's strongest sections observes a broader weaponization, from the military and the police to the Ku Klux Klan. Laing cites the historian Stefan Jonsson's distinction between two types of human mass: the "block" and the "swarm." In a fascist vision of society, Jonsson claimed, the "drilled and disciplined" block represents male hierarchic order, whereas the feminized, contaminating swarm manifests that which must be controlled. Laing brings these shapes to bear on American racial politics, and specifically on the painter Philip Guston's images of Klansmen: any one of the anonymous "hoods," she writes, "automatically stands for the whole, just as a soldier, a stormtrooper or a National Guardsman is the metonymic embodiment of the entire force." Yet Guston also depicted his supremacists with cigarettes and beer bellies, as if to refute the "sinister glamor" of their interchangeability. There is no escaping embodiment, no replacing the needy flesh with steel or a robe. Guston's phobic, white-sheeted figures—sexless, formless, mouthless—reveal a link between fear of the other and fear of the body itself.

"Everybody" is densely textured with such threads—detours, you could say, although they also comprise the route—and I've plucked a few for this review almost at random. (Other sketches star the Cuban-American performance artist Ana Mendieta, who commented on sexual violence, and the abstract painter Agnes Martin.) In the end, I found myself wishing not for less but for more. Laing engages so richly with the body's confinement that the "freedom" part of her book feels under-theorized. Through Sontag and Guston, we confront a longing to escape physicality. But what about the drive to harness our bodies, to indulge and please them? Laing's discussion of protest movements, including Black Lives Matter, can feel gauzy and notional; one

wants a more rigorous look at the material self as a site of power, emancipation. Given the book's interest in a qualified freedom, I would have loved to see Laing extend her study of the fascist state to the democratic polity, to the ways in which our many small liberties are adjudicated to produce a collective one. While I was writing this, I took a break to get my second shot of the vaccine. It felt good to move my body, to know I was protecting myself and others, and to follow the bike lane to the West Side, like a dutiful blood cell in its artery. It was freeing to realize—now that it wasn't so painful to acknowledge, perhaps—how much I'd missed everybody.

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