



In April 2010, I made my mother, Mireille Rias, and Sun Ra the central figures and the living matter of my exhibition *Interpretation* at the Kunsthalle in Basel. I worked with my mother again in April 2011 when we introduced the symposium *The Life of an Artist* at the Piet Zwart Institute in Rotterdam with a joint reading of three texts that deal with the notions of origins, ascendants and descendants, reproduction and generation. The first was a text by my father, who was a poet. It is taken from his *memoirs*, which fill a total of nine pages:

"I was born a twin, two months premature. My brother died the following day. A Sunday morning, blue sky, the grape harvest. But I was due to die too. My mother watched over me as I lay between life and death: I was so tiny (950 grams: this was in 1936!) that I was put in a shoe box donated by my grandfather, who kept a shoe shop. I was thrust into this pre-coffin, or fragile cradle, padded with cotton wool. My grandmother, the woman who brought me up, would tell me, 'Your fingers were so small they looked like pins.' And grandfather would add, 'You weren't properly finished, you barely had a hole in your backside!' For a year and a half to two years, there was no telling if I would survive in that small provincial town [...]. The town breathed slow and stifling. The neighbours would glance up at my first floor window of a morning, and if it was open, they'd say, 'Well, Daniel isn't dead yet.'"¹

The second text was from Christopher Isherwood's *Lost years: a memoir 1945-1951*. Isherwood kept a diary almost his whole life, except for the period between 1941-1951, which he wrote about retrospectively. *Lost Years*, written between 1971 and 1977, is an almost daily record of the author's social, and above all sexual, activities, based on brief notes taken *at the time*; the writing is characterised by constant shifts between the first and third person singular:

"Early in January 1946, Christopher's penis trouble either got much worse or he got impatient with it—for he switched from Dr. Williams [...] to a surgeon named A. D. Gorfain. I remember Gorfain as being young and strikingly handsome, with a supermasculine manner. But Christopher evidently felt at ease in his presence—or was it merely defiant?—for he quite unnecessarily wrote 'homosexual' when filling out a medical questionnaire at Gorfain's office. Gorfain took this calmly enough. He merely asked, 'A strict homosexual?'—which made Christopher smile. Gorfain then diagnosed Christopher's trouble as a median bar at the top of the urethra, inside the bladder. He assured Christopher that this was nothing unusual and absolutely nonmalignant; it could be removed without difficulty. The date of the operation was set for January 12, at the Santa

Monica Hospital. [...] Christopher arrived at the Santa Monica Hospital on the 11th, and was given the usual tranquilizing drugs. He was already all doped up when Dr. Gorfain appeared, greeted him saying, 'Hi, skipper!' and then asked him, 'You aren't planning on becoming a parent, are you?' The reason for this question was as follows—it was Gorfain's practice to guard against infection during this operation by tying the patient's sperm tubes, thus making him sterile. Gorfain was about to ask Christopher's permission to do this. No doubt he explained the situation clearly enough, but Christopher was dopier than he realized. Christopher misunderstood Gorfain to say, 'You are not planning on becoming a parrot, are you?' The question seemed to him, in his condition, to be funny but not all strange. He replied, smiling, 'Well, Doctor, whether I planned it or not, I couldn't very well become one, could I?' Gorfain found Christopher's answer perfectly sensible—psychology was not his department, so he probably took it for granted that 'a strict homosexual' would be incapable of impregnating a woman, and that this was what Christopher meant by not being able to become a parent. Thus the misunderstanding was made mutual.

In Christopher's notebook, the approach of the operating room is described: 'The bed floated down the corridor and up the elevator like a boat in a water lock.' He had been given sodium pentothal as well as a local anaesthetic, and when he became conscious again, back in the ward, he was not only ecstatic but actually hallucinating. He saw a parrot flying around the room. He could also see Sudhira and Caskey standing beside the bed. It was clear to him that they were real and that the parrot wasn't—indeed, he could control its movements by his will. He demonstrated this to himself, with roars of laughter, making it perch on different objects [...].

Now that he had been sterilized, he could no longer ejaculate sperm—at least, not until several years later, when a few drops would, very occasionally, work their way through the tied tubes as the result of an exceptionally violent orgasm. Otherwise, his sensations were the same as usual."²

The third text was taken from an interview Hubert Fichte conducted with Jean Genet, in which Fichte exhorted Genet to explain his youthful fascination with violence and Hitler and asked him if it had "drained away" over time:

"Yes and no. It has drained away, but the space has not been occupied by anything else, it's a void. It's quite strange for someone who lives this void. What did it mean, this fascination for brutes or assassins or Hitler? In more direct and perhaps also simpler terms, I remind you that I was an orphan, I was raised by Public Welfare, I found out very early on that I wasn't French and that I didn't belong to the village—I was raised in the Massif Central. I found this out in a very stupid, silly way: the teacher asked us to write a little essay in which each student would describe his house. I described mine; it happened that the teacher thought my description was the prettiest. He read it out, and everyone made fun of me, saying, 'That's not his house, he's a foundling!' and then

1) Daniel Reynaud, *Ce qui est dit est dit, Œuvres complètes I*. Angoulême: Le Vert Sacré, 2005, pp. 262-63.

2) Christopher Isherwood, *Lost years: a memoir 1945-1951*. London: Chatto and Windus, New York: First Harper Collins, 2000, pp. 61-63.

there was such an emptiness, such a degradation. I immediately became such a stranger...oh! The word isn't too strong, to hate France is nothing, you have to do more than hate, more than loathe France, finally I...and...the fact that the French army, the most prestigious thing in the world thirty years ago, that they surrendered to the troops of an Austrian corporal, well, to me, that was absolutely thrilling. I was avenged. But I'm well aware that it wasn't me who wrought this vengeance, I am not the maker of my vengeance. It was brought about by others, by a whole system, and I'm aware, too, that it was a conflict within the white world that went far beyond me; but when it comes down to it, French society suffered a real blow, and I could only love someone who had dealt such a serious blow to French society. [...] On top of all this, I could only place myself among the oppressed people of color and among the oppressed revolting against the Whites. Perhaps I'm a Black whose color is white or pink, but a Black. I don't know my family.”³

I'm adding a fourth text here to the ones we read in Rotterdam. It's a declaration by Sun Ra about his *origins* (that he claims to be extra-terrestrial, systematically recounting the same narrative of genesis outside a *normal* reproductive system), quoted in John F. Szwed's biography:

“I'm not a human. I never called anybody *mother*. The woman who's supposed to be my mother I call *other momma*. I never call anybody *mother*. I never call anybody *father*. I never felt that way. I've separated myself from everything that in general you call life. I've concentrated entirely on the music, and I'm preoccupied with the planet. In my music I create experiences that are difficult to express, especially in words. I've abandoned the habitual, and my previous life is of no significance any more for me. I don't remember when I was born. I've never memorized it. And this is exactly what I want to teach everybody: that it is important to liberate oneself from the obligation to be born, because this experience doesn't help us at all. [...] Man has to rise above himself... transcend himself. Because the way he is, he can only follow reproductions of ideas, because he's just a reproduction himself... He did not come from the creative system, he came from the reproductive system. But if he evolves beyond himself, he will come up from the creative system. What I'm determined to do is to cause man to create himself beyond the reproductive system into the creative system.”⁴

I invited my mother to write me a letter describing her memories of a Sun Ra concert she went to in 1970 (five years before I was born) with my father (who was later to open his jazz record shop, La Grande Oreille, the year I was born). I translated her letter into English and asked her to learn it by heart and repeat it, repeat it, repeat it, repeat it in the space of the Kunsthalle. I also got her to listen to the recordings of the concert 40 years later, she danced a lot. By doing this I wanted to organise an encounter between the biological womb—the womb that generated me—and Sun Ra, who claimed not to be born of any human and/or reproductive womb.

Interpretation represents a turning point in my work in that the exhibition aimed to produce a simultaneous confrontation and trans-fusion between, on the one hand, *material* chosen precisely because it does not belong to me and because I have no particular claim to *taking* it (not even my love of Sun Ra's music, which I would describe as amateur in comparison with the more specialised approach of some aficionados) and, on the other hand, *material* that I would describe as *hyper-autobiographical* (although my mother went to the concert well before I was born). By material, I mean Sun Ra and my mother, obviously, using them for what they represent symbolically and for what they enable me to produce in terms of form, drawing on what they carry along with them (their physical appearance, ways of thinking, artistic production, and so on) to put together an aesthetic and political project.

Prior to this exhibition, my work was always based on narratives that were culturally removed, foreign, distant to my own. I did this deliberately as a way of exploring the notion of authorship, the relationship between the artist's personality (covering concepts that are, on the face of it, static—territory, race, gender, and class—and their displacement, a term which describes a dichotomy) and their output. To start this work, I had to *designate* what was not me and what on

the face of it would appear to have nothing in common with me—in other words, an *Other*. In fact, as bell hooks writes, “Often this speech about the *Other* is also a mask, an oppressive talk hiding gaps, absences [...]. Often this speech about the *Other* annihilates, erases [...] Re-writing you, I write myself anew. I am still author, authority. I am still the colonizer, the speaking subject. And you are now at the center of my talk. Stop.”⁵ I was thus able to define the *Other* as you might draw up a diagram of differences, inherited from divisions and taxonomies produced in turn by a simplistic, even authoritarian, mode of thought based on constraint and domination—a mode of thought that continually drags the stigmata of colonisation along behind it.

Yet I believe that this was necessary not only to think this narrative in the present, but also to initiate the premise of my argument within an artistic project that is marked in formal terms by its relationship to entertainment and spectacle, and at heart by issues of exploitation and alienation. I drew on these mechanisms to distance, even separate, myself from my own *identity* (to simplify somewhat, though I wish to use the term as sparingly as possible) as a means of implementing procedures for work and research that went against the logic of categorical, normative artistic production. But there is a constant risk of reproducing just such oppositions and categories. I therefore *exploited* symptomatic motifs from Afro-American history, Rastafarianism, Africa (meaning the general idea of Africa, which is very rough indeed), and male homosexuality. By drawing on so-called *minority* figures foreign to me, even exotic (a term chosen in full awareness of its ambiguity), likely to arouse attraction, I sought to transfer my own projections and desire for identification onto those viewing this work of exploitation and passage. I progressively built up links between all these figures, creating tangles, repetitions, echoes, imbrications. Producing forms based on these specific narratives and histories helped me to understand the extent to which the *subject* is mobile and unstable, the point at issue being precisely to create a system of relations which, rather than freezing and isolating such figures, postulates a mode of circulation between them: it may be unlikely or fragile, but it is constantly moving, of necessity. “The minority subject is not self-centered as is the straight subject. Its extension into space could be described as being like Pascal's circle, whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere”⁶ While in formal terms I was principally citing or handling symptoms and signs from specific visual cultures, the point of *Interpretation* was to work with forms that were not so anchored in the *visual* and *physical* materiality, and that were consequently less fixed: Sun Ra's music and texts and my mother's memories and narrative. Forms derived from the sparse, fluid fields of perception and memory, from which standpoint the acts of designating, categorising, naming, and separating appear less straightforward.

One way of escaping the tendency of separation and designation, apart from bringing the de-centering and instability of *minority* subjects into movement in my work, was to think about prolonging the rather restrictive question of *cultural identity* through the question of the *origin* in the biological / hereditary sense of the term, precisely for its propensity to be subject to upheaval or to lose relevance, without necessarily displaying or producing signs of such a loss; in other words, *the origin* as seen from an anti-essentialist, anti-determinist perspective. Not *the origin* considered from the anthropological point of view of myth and ritual (which often sets out to lend legitimacy to contemporary art forms by creating the—conservative—illusion of continuity between various cultures and contexts of creation), or from the point of view of biological determinism, but rather as a speculation and a *future* that is completely relocated in human terms. An *origin* able to produce a plurality of potentials and breaks. “Perhaps I'm a Black whose color is white or pink, but a Black. I don't know my family.”⁷

I read Monique Wittig: “However, now, race, exactly like sex, is taken as an *immediate given*, a *sensible given*, *physical features*, belonging to a natural order. But what we believe to be a physical and direct perception is only a sophisticated and mythic construction, an *imaginary formation*, which reinterprets physical features (in themselves as neutral as any others but marked by the social system) through the network of relationships in which they are perceived. (They are seen as black therefore they are black; they are seen as women, therefore, they are women. But before being seen that way, they first had to be made that way.)”⁸

And Donna Haraway: “In a sense, the cyborg has no origin story in the Western sense—a *final* irony since the cyborg is also the awful apocalyptic telos of the *West's* escalating dominations of abstract individuation, an ultimate self untied at last from all dependency, a man in space. An origin story in the *Western*, humanist sense depends on the myth of original unity, fullness, bliss and terror, represented by the phallic mother from whom all humans must separate, the task of individual development and of history, the twin potent myths inscribed most powerfully for us in psychoanalysis and Marxism. Hilary Klein has argued that both Marxism and psychoanalysis, in their concepts of labour and of individuation and gender formation, depend on the plot of original unity out of which difference must be produced and enlisted in a drama of escalating domination of woman/nature. The cyborg skips the step of original unity, of identification with nature in the Western sense. This is its illegitimate promise that might lead to subversion of its teleology as star wars.”⁹

What Wittig and Haraway profess with their own particular elegance—deliberately emphatic, ironic (or is it a parody?), demanding—is a rejection of nature as an agency for the legitimization of mechanisms of hierarchisation, domination, silence, and forgetting:

- 8) Monique Wittig, “One is not born a woman”, in op. cit., p. 11.
- 9) Donna Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century,” in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. New York: Routledge, 1991, pp. 151-52.
- 10) bell hooks, op. cit., p. 147.
- 11) bell hooks, op. cit., p. 151.
- 12) Sun Ra, op. cit.
- 13) Sun Ra, op. cit.
- 14) Daniel Reynaud, op. cit.

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“I have needed to remember, as part of a self-critical process where one pauses to reconsider choices and location.”¹⁰ The point made by these women is not to consider a *being* completely disconnected from any cultural, historical, political, or family environment—far from it. “Truly the mind that resists colonization struggles for freedom one longs for is lost. Truly the mind that resists colonization struggles for freedom of expression. The struggle may not even begin with the colonizer; it may begin within one's segregated, colonized community and family.”¹¹

This rejection of nature aims to create the conditions for an extreme, unfettered acuity as regards the subject's place in a world marked by a history of constraint, division, and exploitation and by the history of the men and women who employ various means, including those far outside language and its normative power, to seek to escape the grip of that very history. “I've concentrated entirely on the music, and I'm preoccupied with the planet. In my music I create experiences that are difficult to express, especially in words.”¹²

I placed my mother at the heart of a recreated situation that was anything but natural.

I asked her to write me a letter describing the concert, which she did once she had consulted some online archives, then I translated her letter into English. I asked her to learn the translation by heart, repeating, repeating, repeating, repeating, repeating, repeating it like a parrot, then to dress up in a Sun Ra-style costume, shimmering like budgerigar feathers, and recite it in front of a video camera and sound man in the august theatrical surroundings of the Oberlichtsaal in the Basel Kunsthalle. I asked her to recount an event that took place well before I was born, well before she knew that I was to exist, well before I knew that she existed and I existed and Sun Ra existed. The point of all this was to affirm that:

- 1 I am not definitively inscribed as a subject by my dates of birth and death—which, unless a particular set of circumstances arises, I will not know exactly. “I don't remember when I was born. I've never memorized it.”¹³ It is possible that birth and death form overlaps, echoes, symbolic anticipations. “I was thrust into this pre-coffin, or fragile cradle, padded with cotton wool.”¹⁴
- 2 I am not definitively inscribed by the territory where I was born, nor by my gender, nor by my race.
- 3 The origin reaches far further than questions of filiation and reproduction. It is historical, constructed, fantastical before it is *natural* and biological.
- 4 The biographical = the political.
- 5 My mother is a parrot
- 6 But that doesn't make me a bird
- 7 Rather a being capable of learning, understanding, speaking, writing, and translating parrot language.

3) Jean Genet, interview with Hubert Fichte, conducted December 19-21, 1975, in Paris for the German newspaper *Die Zeit*, reprinted in *The declared enemy: texts and interviews*, edited by Albert Dichy, translated by Jeff Fort. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004, pp. 125-26.

4) Sun Ra, quoted by John Szwed in *Space is The Place, The Lives and Times of Sun Ra*, Da Capo Press, 1998 (first publication; New York: Pantheon, 1997), pp. 6-7.

5) bell hooks, “Choosing the margin as a space of radical openness”, in *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics*. Boston: South End Press, 1990, p. 152.

6) Monique Wittig, “The point of view: Universal or particular?” in *The Straight Mind and other essays*. New York: Beacon Press, 1992, p. 62.

7) Jean Genet, op. cit.