

The Awkward Impostor

Lili Reynaud-Dewar's work is a loaded, sometimes even sultry mix of cultural observations, larded with surprising personal stories. This spring she is presenting a large installation in Marres in Maastricht.

The work of Lili Reynaud-Dewar (b. 1975) consists of many different elements, including sculpture, performance, film and drawing and is so rich and heterogeneous that it is hard to define. There is almost always a performance, imbedded in a complex framework of images, video, costumes, installations and texts. She herself once described her exhibitions as 'environments for performances', which are often performed prior to the opening, with Reynaud-Dewar, her costume designer and her video assistant as the only spectators. For example, she gave a provocative homage to the oeuvre of the renowned designer Ettore Sottsass during the Berlin Biennale in 2008, by extensively citing his critical writings on design against a background of 1960s Sottsass furniture and mirrors (Reynaud-Dewar loves mirrors). In the Kunsthalle Basel in 2010, Sun Ra was the subject of a complex reconstruction, spread out over two rooms, of a visit by her parents to a Sun Ra concert in 1970 in Fondation Maeght in the South of France. Part of the reconstruction is a video of a performance by her mother, who partially recalls her visit to the concert. Reynaud-Dewar confronts her mother altogether with the recordings of the concert and with the impressive cultural heritage of the famous, visionary jazz musician. On the wall hang drawings of Sun Ra's pamphlets, which are copied on large cardboard panels. In 2010 they were exhibited in Witte de With in Rotterdam.

Chris Sharp:

Let me begin with a couple of characterizations by Céline Kopp in a short, but incisive text on your work that I find very illuminating. To wit: '[Reynaud-Dewar's] allegorical sculptures and theatrical fables are devoid of transparent maxims, yet polarities collide in a burlesque mise-en-scène of cultural assimilations and resistance.' Which I take to mean that for all its politically charged character, as demonstrated by its potentially explosive frame of reference, the work does not seek to illustrate a given stance or impart a specific message. Developing the

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question of colliding polarities, Kopp later writes: 'Drawing from aesthetic vocabularies that are unrelated to her own cultural background, Reynaud-Dewar assumes a fragmentation of her own voice to decentre the work's content towards foreign elements. This polyphony of voices questions cultural authenticity and the intrinsic representation of the author's own self in the creative process.'^[1]

What interests me in particular is the question of 'aesthetic background' and 'cultural authenticity'. You have been known to avail yourself of rather unwieldy, culturally-coded references, such as – to name some of the blunter examples – the Jamaican flag, Sun Ra, and even the downright taboo 'black face,' to which you, as a Caucasian French woman, would seem to have no natural cultural license. Yet the moment I state that, the tensile absurdity of such a system of prejudice becomes uncomfortably salient, even if still fundamentally unresolved.

On that note, when we recently spoke, you mentioned a growing interest in the impostor. What, for you, is an impostor? Are you an impostor?

Lili Reynaud-Dewar:

'I am very interested in the French writer Jean Genet's political writings. At some point in his life Genet stopped writing novels and theatre plays, and over the course of nearly twenty years committed himself to solely producing manifestos, speeches and interviews, to support the Black Panthers, the Palestinian cause, the working conditions of Maghreb emigrants in France, and the Red Army Faction. There is undeniably a connection between Genet's specific background as an adopted child, and his later imprisonment as a delinquent, as a thief, and the situation of black Americans and emigrants (deprived of civil and economic rights) or the Palestinians (deprived of territory). But Genet's plural poetic commitments also underline a complete dissolution of the concepts of race, identity, and nation. By giving equal attention to such a wide variety of conflicts, and above all, by creating a connection between himself, a white French intellectual, and his remote political companions,

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Genet rejects the identification of nation, race and phenotype. In a certain way, he acts as an impostor, intervening where he is not supposed or expected to be. He constructs an identity for himself, outside of those instruments of separation and definition.

My sphere of action is much more futile. I act within the context of contemporary art: a place for representations, signs, symbols, amongst other things. I am interested in disrupting the mechanisms of assimilation between an artist's production and his or her cultural identity, and the commodification of so-called "authenticity". More than hybridizing various cultural signs, which seems too much of a way to capitalize on an accumulation of possibilities and interpretations, I want to find productive ways of reversing those identification terms, subtilizing one with another, or mirroring them. I tuck between key figures of my own biography (when I work with my mother and my grandmother) and figures that are very remote from myself (like Sun Ra, who called himself an extra-terrestrial) as a way to define a place that resists assimilation and that allows, to a certain extent, a construction of the self through art (however old-fashioned this may sound). I am an awkward impostor. My construction is full of blind spots, mistakes, misappropriations, that I use in order to understand the complex histories of domination, marginality, and separation.'

Chris Sharp:

I must confess to loving the idea of you or even the artist in general as an awkward impostor. I can't help but see an elaborate link here between what you describe as a construction of the self through art, aspects of power, and a resistance to remaining within assigned roles, and not necessarily in that order. You previously described yourself as a conceptual artist, or somebody working in a conceptual tradition. But you don't look like a 'conceptual artist'...

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Lili Reynaud-Dewar:

'Do the members of General Idea look like conceptual artists? I don't know what a conceptual artist looks like. But I know that this idea of myself as a conceptual artist is not exempt from a certain duplicity. I am very aware that my work doesn't look like conceptual art. But, first of all, I am unsure whether conceptual art should be understood only within the constraints of its supposed neutrality and reductionism. Second, I can be suspicious of conceptual or minimal art aesthetics, now that they have been assimilated and capitalize on the appeal of a dominant administrative or media "look". Art & Language discuss this in a text published in *Art-Language* in 1976, in which they criticize the generalization of conceptual art via a certain formalism (i.e., the forms of the administrative or the text-image doxa), or maybe it is the opposite. In a rather aggressive manner, they discuss their switch to painting and ironize on "the *manières* of *sémiotiques*".

What I mean by saying I am a conceptual artist, is that, despite all its mistakes and misunderstandings, the work is devoid of innocence (but not of utopian aspirations). It is very interesting to me that you use this expression "to look like", because I tend to play with the idea that some objects, or persons, can convey complex concepts without looking like they are aiming for that.'

Chris Sharp:

You make a very valid and incisive point about the aesthetic expectations of conceptualism. One thing that often gets lost in the historical scramble to define that era is a kind of one-upmanship humour of 'This too is art!' Meaning that one of the goals was to not look like 'art' as much as possible, while nevertheless making art. Given the dominant aesthetics and heroic scale of the preceding era, a great deal of that one-upmanship reactively tended toward the small and immaterial.

All that said, I find your own conceptual qualification of 'the work being devoid of innocence' intriguing. Could you expand upon that a bit more?

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Lili Reynaud-Dewar:

'Dissimulation can be efficient in order to reach certain goals. But sometimes, dissimulation is a matter of being too conspicuous, as we know from Edgar Allan Poe's short story *The Purloined Letter*. The furniture produced by Memphis in the early eighties is an example of this kind of attitude: it looks like an exuberant and entertaining dressing table or book shelf, and it is convenient, even elegant, to use the product as such. Its other – and main – purpose is to be a critical tool for questioning the standardization of life by design, urban planning, architecture, and the place of singularities in the context of mass produced culture. I would dare to say – if it wasn't too much of an essentialist remark – that this duplicity, possibly convoluted, is a typical strategy of certain margins, or minorities (even if fantasized). It is the "symptom" of an impossibility to engage with the straightforwardness of dominant representations and of the urge to produce ambiguous material and discourses.

Let me close, if I may, with a quote from Donna Haraway's "A Cyborg Manifesto" from 1984: "The cyborg is resolutely committed to partiality, irony, intimacy, and perversity. It is oppositional, utopian, and completely without innocence.... The main trouble with cyborgs, of course, is that they are the illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism, not to mention state socialism. But illegitimate offspring are often exceedingly unfaithful to their origins. Their fathers, after all, are inessential."^[2]

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Madame Realism
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Notes

1. Céline Kopp, 'Lili Reynaud-Dewar', in: *Vitamin 3-D. New Perspectives in Sculpture and Installation* (Phaidon Press, 2009).
2. 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), p. 149 –181.