

Meliksetian MB Briggs

THE WHITE REVIEW



INTERVIEWER:
IZABELLA SCOTT

ONLINE EXCLUSIVE
September 2015

INTERVIEW WITH MARINE HUGONNIER

Like the figures found in a spread of Tarot cards, an artist can assume a variety of viewpoints and characters – a soldier or a pilgrim, a journalist or a madman – each position allowing for a new way of looking at the world. Marine Hugonnier trained as an anthropologist, and deploys the vagaries of perspective as the material of her work, in films, photographs, and sculptures that often unravel their process – what happens on set, small failures, and the mechanisms of observing and making. She has exhibited widely over the past 15 years, with recent solo shows at the Museum

Meliksetian MB Briggs

of Contemporary Arts, Seoul, at the BALTIC Centre, Gateshead, and Galeria Fortes Vilaca in Sao Paulo.

At the center of her practice is a set of films which approach the politics of looking: *ARIANA* (2003), set in Afghanistan, concerned with the strategic, military point of view; *THE LAST TOUR* (2004) with the tourist's gaze; and *TRAVELLING AMAZONIA* (2006) with the colonial map, and the cartographer's attempts to subjugate space. In the collage series, *ART FOR MODERN ARCHITECTURE* (2004-Ongoing), for which she is most widely known, Hugonnier performs surgery on the frontpages of newspapers marking the death of Kennedy or the fall of the Berlin Wall, transplanting the original pictures with coloured blocks. The obliterated images still loom, as if scored into collective consciousness.

When I request an interview, Hugonnier responds to my email almost immediately, and we meet in her modest studio just two days later. The small, high-ceilinged room has the aura of a decorous living room. A neat archive of her work covers one wall; an elegantly framed collage hangs opposite. Aged 46, Hugonnier is lean and beautiful, with a thick ponytail, and dressed in supple leather trousers and black mohair. She watches me carefully with ash-green eyes which are attentive, and a little cold.

I question Hugonnier, in what never develops into a fluent conversation, but one punctuated with pauses that my recorder breathes in. Although French is her native language, she is highly eloquent in English, and able to explain her work in both theoretical and magical terms. Composed at her desk, Hugonnier opens her *catalogue raisonne* and awaits my questions, patient and professional; her face lights up at the mention of her son, but otherwise remains unreadable. Throughout our conversation, she often deflects my observations, questioning my point of view in a way that matches her artistic project as a whole. As the observer observed, I sense the mechanisms of the interview are often at stake.

Q

THE WHITE REVIEW

— You often think about different points of view, or the frames through which we perceive the world. I'm thinking of *TOWARDS TOMORROW* (2001), where you photographed across the International Date Line in Alaska – so you're photographing something that can't really be captured, the future.

Q

THE WHITE REVIEW

— *TOWARDS TOMORROW* is about things you can't quite represent. It reminds me of the Marxist philosopher

A

MARINE HUGONNIER

— Yes, there is a discrepancy between what exactly you see on the photograph, and the cultural frame that transforms what you are actually looking at. So on the one hand, you have an image that stands for itself – a seascape. On the other hand, you have the cultural frame, which mediates your relationship to it.

A

MARINE HUGONNIER

— I'm often searching for images that have a quality which escapes the realms of representation. When an image does not

Meliksetian MB Briggs

Ernst Bloch's idea of utopia as the willful spirit of the 'not-yet', or the 'unbecome'. In another project, *ART FOR MODERN ARCHITECTURE*, you replace newspaper images with primary coloured blocks from the Kodak standard chart. They are the building blocks of colour, and suggest a latent image, a potential image, not yet become...

belong to the realms of representation, what are we really talking about? What brings together the *TOWARDS TOMORROW* series and the *ART FOR MODERN ARCHITECTURE* one is their relationship to time. In the *TOWARDS TOMORROW* series what I'm effectively doing is contradicting the medium of photography. When you make a photograph, its subject always belongs to the past. Photography is this magical thing, where you can bring the past back into the present. In *TOWARDS TOMORROW*, I'm doing the reverse. Its subject, the International Date Line that divides the Bering Strait and Russia, shows the future. Or the future how it was in the past. As for the *ART FOR MODERN ARCHITECTURE* series, the idea of a newspaper is that it shows actuality. To intervene into this actuality disturbs the wave of time. You're adding a layer that makes it step out from the continuum of time.

Q

THE WHITE REVIEW

— In your trilogy of films – *ARIANA*, *TRAVELLING AMAZONIA* and *THE LAST TOUR* – each work investigates a different types of gaze, but they also think about failure – the failure to represent.

A

MARINE HUGONNIER

— I have never been to film school, and because of that, the films I make are fragile things, they escape categories as they are the result of the way I walk through a landscape and the questions that come about as I do so. I hardly ever have their complete layout in mind before I make them – the films are always the result of an experience.

TRAVELLING AMAZONIA was shot in Brazil. I was searching for the famous highway, the Trans-Amaonia, which is 6,000 miles and was built by the Brazilian dictatorship in the 1970s. Brazil at the time wanted to create a road that would go from the west to the east coast, promising land titles in exchange for work. People came in mass to participate in the conquest of an unchartered territory, but ten years later, the construction of the highway was left unfinished. I had read that the Trans-

Meliksetian MB Briggs

Amazonia at a certain point hits the forest and disappears into it, and the film was a quest to look for this point of disappearance.

I hired people in the nearest village and asked them to build a travelling shot (so rails, wheels and a platform), using the same materials that had been used to build the road. This film had a very simple principle: we chose a location point on the Trans-Amazonia – the supposed point of disappearance into the forest – and we filmed characters that we met along the way until we reached that location. The film turned geography into a narrative: each stop on this road was a point on the map and a film sequence.

The end of the film is absurd. We reached the location point, the travelling shot is finally assembled but, by the time we are actually shooting it, night falls. The camera is on the dolly and literally runs into the darkness, into that point of disappearance of the Trans-Amazonia into the forest.

As for *ARIANA*, it tells the story of a film crew that sets out to visit the Pandjshêr Valley in Northern Afghanistan. The impenetrable nature of the valley and its lush landscape have set this place apart from the rest of the country and have encouraged resistance. As the film crew is unable to film the valley from a vantage point in the surrounding mountains, the film becomes the story of a failed project. It also prompts a reflection about the ‘panorama’, as a form of strategic overview.

Q

THE WHITE REVIEW

— *THE LAST TOUR* imagines a world where access to nature has been restricted, with certain sites closed to the public – like the Matterhorn. A tourist gets to see the mountain for the last time before it’s shut off.

A

MARINE HUGONNIER

— *THE LAST TOUR* is a completely different kind of film – it’s a science fiction short-movie. I’d read a book about the future of tourism. The last chapter of the book was set at the end of the age of spectacle, a time during which main tourist

Meliksetian MB Briggs

attractions would come to a complete closure. This had nothing to do with ecology; it was described as a fantasy. One of the main ideas of this book was to say: as there is nothing else to be ‘discovered’ on the surface of the earth, we are more likely to see things for the last time than the first one. I wanted to investigate the possibility of making a film without image. The viewer of the film embarks on a ‘last tour’, a hot air balloon ride around the Matterhorn. We rented a big air balloon and while we were filming, we got caught by really strong winds. We had to land in an extreme way. We were completely knocked out, and we had to be rescued by helicopters. So there’s also an element of failure in this film too, but in all three films, the failure wasn’t planned

Q

THE WHITE REVIEW

— The space is shut down, like a crumpled map... In all three films there is a tension between restricted sight and extended sight – so the camera’s ability to show more than the eye can see, but then also the failure to represent, or the shutting down of space.

Q

THE WHITE REVIEW

— I’m interested in the idea of holes. In *THE LAST TOUR*, the shut off space is called ‘a blank hole in the map’ – almost like the privatisation of space, where public access is denied. Holes are places shut off, where sight

A

MARINE HUGONNIER

— All these films are essays in which the lines between fiction and documentary are both questioned and blurred. They examine the cultural context of a particular place or subject and the politics of the imagery that I could be making. They want to investigate, question and deconstruct conventions representations. I see these films as tools for critical thinking. They are an attempt to define another kind of experience – an experience of images through the world rather than the world through images. What the work does almost on its own is to define a policy of the restriction of images, and at the same time, attempting to create a positive regime of them.

A

MARINE HUGONNIER

— What I was thinking about is more like: if you create the idea of a closed-off space, then it starts to escape the realm of representation. So what is in there? What is in the emptiness? Ultimately, representation is a communicating tool. My

Meliksetian MB Briggs

is restricted.

idea, which is stated at the end of the film – and which is complete speculation – is that this blank space would help to rebuild the kingdom of the imagination. I’m not interested in holes – but rather with gaps, failure, where categories start to dissolve. When I see Gerhard Richter’s paintings, a very figurative one next to a very abstract one, I’ve always feel that it’s not the piece on the right or the piece on the left that’s interesting, but exactly what stands in the middle – the confrontation between the two.

Q

THE WHITE REVIEW

— In *ARIANA* you show mountains in Afghanistan that aren’t named – they are unmapped in some way. Do you see this as another productive blank space on the map?

A

MARINE HUGONNIER

— In Afghanistan people do not name mountains as individual objects. What they would name is the paths that go from one place to another. So they would differentiate mountains from their shape, or name the path that runs through them. The will to charter the world is a colonialist and imperial one, and I’m interested in finding things escaping that policy.

Q

THE WHITE REVIEW

— So these holes are gaps in the landscape that have not yet been colonised by the mind.

A

MARINE HUGONNIER

— I would be more interested in taking a forensic approach to the idea of the hole, to understand how the hole happened. When I was shooting *TRAVELLING AMAZONIA* I was researching Florence, Italy, which was the centre of map-making in the 15th century. This industry was a political operation for the representation of power. In the film, there’s a moment where the camera goes into the forest, and you hear a man telling a tale about a spirit. There is a clear confrontation between this belief which only exists within the canopy, and the rational project – the drawing of a line through what is known as the land with no end, Amazonia. That confrontation was the discursive point of the film – faith starts when rationality fails. That is the point where it is possible for a system of belief to start.

Meliksetian MB Briggs

Q

THE WHITE REVIEW

— You worked with Eyal Weizman, who leads the Forensic Architecture research project, to make the films *TERRITORY I, II, III* (2004). Can you tell me about your collaboration?

A

MARINE HUGONNIER

— Eyal had invited me to an exhibition he was doing in Tel Aviv and Ramallah, called *TERRITORIES*. He had written extensively about the misuse of the idea of the Bauhaus in Tel Aviv, how it was a way to legitimate an avant-garde project of Zionism. For this exhibition, Eyal had organized a bus tour around the Occupied Territories. Architects, archaeologists and sociologists were part of that bus tour. They all stood up and one after the other made lectures about the landscape as we were physically travelling though. I thought that this was the best exhibition possible as these comments changed radically the way we were looking at the situation. I was lucky enough to film what happened.

Q

THE WHITE REVIEW

— Would you like to use the forensic gaze in your practice – the idea of objects giving testimony, or the object as a witness?

A

MARINE HUGONNIER

— It's a very interesting idea. One thing that really struck me was that I happened to be in Ramallah at the time that Yasser Arafat died. I made a film called *THE DEATH OF AN ICON* (2004), which is a portrait of the city just before his death was officially announced. So it's news without being news. It is out of frame news. I do like to think of artists as reporters. Maybe the artist/reporter makes different kinds of investigations...

Q

THE WHITE REVIEW

— So the artist as a witness?

A

MARINE HUGONNIER

— His account is treated in a different way than the account of 'news'. More and more I'm admitting, that I'm moving in this direction: the artist who would be a reporter... a war correspondent. Having been in Afghanistan and Palestine, I realized that war is a place where past, present and future collapse. When you are physically in a state of survival, you do not

Meliksetian MB Briggs

have the luxury of that scope of linear time; you are absolutely inscribed in the present moment. Wars makes social categories completely explode. So what's the difference between being a reporter, or an artist-reporter, or journalist? When you take part in a moment in history, where do you actually draw the line between these positions?

Q

THE WHITE REVIEW

— You have a forthcoming project to make a film with the French war correspondent Laurent van der Stockt, when he returns from a conflict zone.

A

MARINE HUGONNIER

— That is an idea I am still working on. *PORTRAIT OF A REPORTER* is a portrait of a war correspondent, which wants to show how the physical impact of a war on a journalist. I have a lot of ghost films like this one, which are films that I have made in my mind, but for various reasons, they do not exist. But these projects do act as strong points of articulation – which is why I have them in my catalogue raisonné... In 1990, I was an assistant on a show called *PASSAGES DE L'IMAGE*. I happened to be, for a couple of weeks, working next to Chris Marker. Chris Marker was not exactly a very giving person – he wouldn't discuss things with you. But it's almost as if he put a little implant in my head at the time, silently, without me knowing... Maybe this is why I do feel like a reporter/journalist who also wants to make investigations of another kind.

Q

THE WHITE REVIEW

— Although you trained as an anthropologist, ultimately you're working as an artist, with your subjectivity and your own viewpoint at the center of the films. Do you see a tension between artist and anthropologist?

A

MARINE HUGONNIER

— In the films I'm very much discussing and challenging the cultural frame that makes me look at things the way we do. I think this uncertainty and scrutiny is really important – I'm not sure that I hold any answers. My films are an attempt to make sense of the experience of seeing and representing.

Meliksetian MB Briggs

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTOR

MARINE HUGONNIER has recently been the subject of solo exhibitions at BALTIC Centre For Contemporary Art, Gateshead (2014); and the Museum of Modern Art and Contemporary Seoul, Korea (2014); and has been included in group shows including 'Counter-Production', Generali Foundation, Vienna (2012); 6th Biennale of images, Mechelen, Belgium (2013); and the Biennale of Cartagena, Colombia (2014). Her work is held in public collections at MOMA, New York, The Reina Sofia, Madrid, MACBA, Barcelona, and Le Louvre, Paris, among others.

IZABELLA SCOTT is a writer based in London.