

Meliksetian MB Briggs

BOMB

Art: Interview

Oct 1, 2007

Marine Hugonnier and Manon de Boer

It was at the Frieze Art Fair of 2005 that I met Marine Hugonnier for the first time. Someone introduced us, and Marine said she liked my film *Sylvia Kristel—Paris*. We just spoke a few words, but I felt an immediate connection with her. After I had continued on my way, I realized that we had recently been included in the same show in Luzerne and that I had very much liked the film she had shown there, *Ariana*. I felt stupid not to have remembered this and not to have told her when we spoke.

The next day an elegant figure dressed in black trousers, a black jacket, and a black hat passed by on one of the bridges crossing the Thames and said hello. A few seconds later I realized it had been Marine.

Our works have been included together in other shows and festivals, and each time I saw her work I had a feeling of recognition, as if we share our own universe.

Meliksetian MB Briggs

This summer as I walked through the long hall of the Arsenale at the Venice Biennale, the figure with the black hat reappeared, looking calm, and concentrating on how to install her work. It was Marine again, and that's where we really started to speak.

This conversation took place over email between London and Brussels.

Marine Hugonnier I have seen two of your films (only two!), *Resonating Surfaces* and *Sylvia Kristel—Paris*. I have seen only two but I have seen them a few times, installed in different ways: in a cinema, in a gallery, and at an art fair. What made me stop and look at them again and again in those different settings was their curious juxtaposition of intimacy and public space. Watching both films I found myself forced to adopt a point of view that deported my sight into a space where I could not be: either between the 15th floors of two Brazilian modernist buildings or in the smoke of a cigarette, even while I am confronted with an extreme close-up of an anarchist or a sexually charged image of a once-erotic actress. I remember wondering: What lies behind the choice of those surfaces/interfaces (smoke and architecture)? What is it exactly that makes me feel like there is an incredible amount of vitality and hope in there?

One thing I'd like to discuss with you, which is rarely discussed in the art world, is the pleasure you may have doing films, fantasizing about them before you make them and while you are making them. Let's talk about the pleasure we have in doing what we do! What are the feelings you have when you are on set?

Manon de Boer In your work I sense an attitude of curiosity toward the world, and this is where the pleasure of working always starts for me: a feeling of curiosity toward the person I portray. When I met Sylvia Kristel at a friend's house here in Brussels, the light, ironic way in which she spoke

Meliksetian MB Briggs

about herself and the distance she maintained toward her own past didn't fit with the stereotype (media) image I had of her [as the star of the soft core film *Emmanuelle* (1974), which has shadowed her ever since]. This made me very curious to get to know her. When getting to know someone, he or she becomes a world, connected to other people and to history. This process of meeting people, getting to know them, and recording interviews (usually only sound recordings without camera) is one of the periods of big pleasure for me. Especially when it's a real "rencontre." With both Sylvia Kristel and the Brazilian psychoanalyst Suely Rolnik [*Resonating Surfaces*], a dialogue between us was already going on when I got the idea to record interviews and make a film.

I met Suely in São Paulo (also through a friend), and at that time I decided to film a more general portrait of São Paulo. Suely was one of the sources to learn more about all sorts of subjects that generally interested me with regard to Brazil, like people's relation to their body and a subjectivity based on creation and re-creation, the product of miscegenation and the capacity to allow oneself to be affected by the other. Suely wrote several essays on this continuous process of *becoming* in Brazil, which she describes as "anthropophagic subjectivity."

These meetings with Suely were in the framework of unexpected combinations of attitudes, lifestyles, and convictions. A world where opening up to and absorbing the other held a central place and in which different experiences were inserted and woven: for instance, the counter-cultural movement in Brazil in the '60s, which was distinguished by such artists as Caetano Veloso and Hélio Oiticica; Suely's period of exile in Paris during the '70s, when she was very connected to the Brazilian artist Lygia Clark and the French theorists Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, and Pierre Clastres; and her return to Brazil at the start of the '80s and the process of

Meliksetian MB Briggs

the democratization of the country with the birth of its collective movements.

This period after the dictatorship was when Suely closely collaborated with Guattari. In 1982 they traveled together for a month across Brazil. It was the time of the first elections, the birth of the workers' party, Lula, and of myriad liberation movements. The conversations they had during this trip form the basis of the book *Micropolitics: Cartographies of Desire*.

Besides her psychoanalytical practice and writings, Suely has often written about art and especially about Lygia Clark. Since 2001 she has been involved in an archival project concerning Clark's "event-works." From Suely's texts one senses how, in this last period of Clark's work, we encounter the political in the micropolitical, within the mobilization of sensitivity and one's capacity to be affected by the other.

I met Suely several times, we became friends, and in her personal stories I felt those subjects that interested me in Brazil, resonating. Then I decided it was more interesting to approach those subjects from an individual perspective and only use Suely's stories.

As for how I feel on the set, I suppose you mean the actual moment of filming. This really depends on whether it's me or a cameraman filming. In both cases there's this tense feeling of concentration, of being completely in the moment. And I like that intensity.

I love the period of editing. It's the moment when I really start to understand a kind of metalevel. For instance, while editing *Sylvia Kristel—Paris*, I realized how important it was that the act of remembrance, as an actualization of the past in the present—not as a recollection of a frozen story—be part of the spectator's experience. Sylvia had told me about a certain period in her life in 2001, and then told me about it again a year

Meliksetian MB Briggs

later, but the tale was slightly different that time. Both times she starts with “The first time I went to Paris it must have been 1972.” She describes how a producer from Paris invited her to come over to do a film test. It doesn’t work out and she goes back to Amsterdam. There she soon meets Hugo Claus, who becomes her next lover, and returns with him to Paris. They have a child and she lands her first breakthrough role in *Emmanuelle*. Her tale continues as she moves from film set to film set, from man to man, sometimes happy in love and successful in her career and sometimes depressed and in doubt. The two stories follow the same events, but the details are different in each story. Over the course of the montage, I decided not to show the stories in chronological order but rather to show the story recorded in 2002 first. I did this because the earlier story provides far fewer details, so by listening first to the story she told me in 2002, with its wealth of details, you tend to fill in the holes in the other one.

The first stage of my process is mostly a period of absorbing and collecting stories and images, and then while editing I start to relate the personal stories to themes that interest me. I then often re-film or re-record things. This opening up and seeing relations between the different elements sets the initial more intuitive feeling of curiosity toward a person or a subject in relation to the world; it gives the story form. But I must say that I always like the form to remain open and not fixate the person in one framework.

And now I’m curious what your feelings are on set.



Marine Hugonnier, *Art For Modern Architecture (Homage to Ellsworth Kelly)*, 2004, bits of Ellsworth Kelly's book *Line Form Color* on newspaper front pages. Images courtesy of the artist and Max Wigram Gallery, London.

Meliksetian MB Briggs

MH I have an immense amount of pleasure being on set: when waiting for the light to change to a desired intensity, for a silence to come about. But in the beginning a project is always an excuse for me to study specific topics, often involving the fields of anthropology and philosophy, which I studied before making the choice to work in art. For *Ariana* [a film shot in and above the Panjshir Valley in Afghanistan, long a stronghold of resistance to Afghan central governments and outside forces], I researched the notion of the panorama. The film became a process of questioning different interpretations of the panorama: as a cinematographic movement, as a strategic place in military terms, and as a 180-degree painting. With *The Last Tour* [which imagines a final hot-air balloon trip around the Matterhorn before the closing of the site to tourists], I was researching Lacan and postwar theory. The closure of the park evokes a black hole, which in turns symbolizes two important points that frame the cartography of postwar theory: the extension of the idea of space and its collapse when one thinks of the first space trips, and the notion of extimacy, which Lacan describes as “something strange to me although it is the heart of me.” Extimacy is the trouble imprinted on our Western psyche since the end of World War II. *The Last Tour* is a promenade in a world where I have more of a chance to see something for the last time than to discover anything new. It is also about this figure who would be the last one to see something, who would become the last man. And with *Travelling Amazonia* [a reflection on the Transamazonia highway, a feat of the Brazilian military dictatorship in the 1970s], I was focused for months on the invention of perspective in 15th-century Florence.

I guess *Ariana* is about the military gaze, *The Last Tour* about the tourist gaze, and *Travelling Amazonia* about what had inspired the gaze in the first place. All three raise questions about the very process of viewing. French cinema critic Serge Daney said, “Cinema teaches me to tirelessly touch

Meliksetian MB Briggs

with my gaze the distance from me at which the Other begins.” I guess he is talking about cinema as a way of assessing distances. The trilogy was a long walk that has helped me to approach these questions and apprehend those distances.

Once I find my subject, it usually comes with a set of questions, and very quickly a landscape comes to me as a desired place to wonder while these questions occur. My pleasure starts when I have found where I want to go next. Since last year I have been working on a film on the Niger River, which is a very evocative place when one comes from anthropology: Jean Rouch worked there all his life, first as an engineer—he was making roads and bridges for the French colonial government—then as an anthropologist and a filmmaker. He fell in love very early on with the country and particularly with the Songhay people who live along the Niger. To me that site was always the place for a particular cinema since his first film, *Les Maîtres Fous*. He shot it handheld (he had lost his tripod during the trip), which was a truly revolutionary way to approach reality, to abolish the distance between the camera and the other. *Les Maîtres Fous*, of course, influenced the Nouvelle Vague in France. The Niger River was therefore always part of my fantasies, not exactly because of the typography of the territory but because within this typography that way of telling stories became possible. It is a place that has seen the birth of a way to construct narratives where fiction would create a reality and vice versa, where the existence of imaginary realities became a way to represent the human psyche. I remained convinced for years that the landscape in Niger mirrored this in its physical form, and I can confirm that it does!

I usually have an assistant who loads the camera and so on, but most of the time I shoot the images. So when I grab the camera and make a frame, I hold my breath and wait for the perfect moment where all parameters will be harmoniously set among one another. This moment always erases

Meliksetian MB Briggs

distances between me and my subject: the camera and I become what is framed. I hear the stock going through the gate and everything comes to a single point in time where future and past are negated, a point that holds a promise of an eternal actuality. Very rightly you use the expression “being in the moment.” In those moments the feeling is an infinite present for which my eyes and ears are hardly enough. There is a reason why some people have compared directors to chameleons. You become invisible, take the color of what surrounds you.

I used to fly gliders and have had the same feelings while on set, as I would reach a high level of concentration or a state of heightened consciousness. This is what I find immensely pleasurable in what I do, to be immersed in the forgetfulness of time. That said, it takes months and months of hard work to be able to get to that moment. Long months when working is all about organizing, foreseeing, writing applications, trying to get funding together ... It is exactly the opposite from being on set! But I like that part of the work too, simply because I very much enjoy a challenge.

One other thing that is a small pleasure, *un petit plaisir* as we say in French, is that I work from home. I keep working while doing my laundry or cleaning dishes. I find it very challenging to confront my ideas with everyday life, as they immediately look much more humble.

Tell me how you organize your days. Where do you work? Do you manage to have time to have a walk during the week? What is your house like?

MDB I also work at home. The apartment I live in has three spacious rooms and is very light. Although, for me as well, it's a pleasure to feel no real separation between work and daily life, I did feel at a certain moment the need to have a space just for work, with doors that I can close to the

Meliksetian MB Briggs

rest of the apartment. In my workspace, two walls are from floor to ceiling covered with cupboards containing books, archive material, videotapes, papers.... Then there are two big tables with a computer and a small couch. Compared to the other spaces it is quite full. The other spaces just have some basic furniture. They're more colorful, though. There's a white table with red chairs, an electric blue couch, two soft green Moroccan rugs, and some plants.

I started to buy plants each time I came back from Brazil. I immensely enjoyed this omnipresent nature in Rio, this fast-growing tropical vegetation reigning over the rationality of the modernist architecture. And above all, the presence of the color green. Even in São Paulo, with its jungle of high-rise buildings, where at first the color gray seems to dominate, the green vegetation becomes more and more present once you get to know the city better. Slowly the green neighborhoods like Vila Madelena and parks like the Ibirapuera Park with the Niemeyer buildings seem to be the places where one finds oneself most when walking outside. The plants at home have of course nothing to do with this tropical abundance.

When I'm working and get stuck, I also do things like the laundry and the dishes, and the emptiness of the other spaces together with this household routine helps empty my head so I can think afresh about the problem. And if this doesn't help, I go outside. Often for something practical, to buy groceries or pick up something, but then I like to wander a bit in Brussels before I actually do what I intended to do.

Walking is a big pleasure for me. The steady rhythmic movement of the feet finds a parallel in the thoughts in my head, which often then take new directions. And I like that suddenly something can cross my path and I have to get out of this introverted state and react to the world. These for me are also moments when my ideas are challenged and I feel humble.

Meliksetian MB Briggs

I live near the Gare du Midi just within the “small ring” that designates the border of the center of Brussels. I don’t feel I belong to my neighborhood, but then I will never completely identify with any neighborhood in Brussels, because I’m not from Belgium. Being a stranger is for me a very positive feeling. Moving from Holland to Brussels gave me a feeling of being able to breathe again. I could suddenly float, take new directions, re-question my work, and there was even the need to question if I wanted to continue as an artist because life was much more complicated here outside the Dutch system.

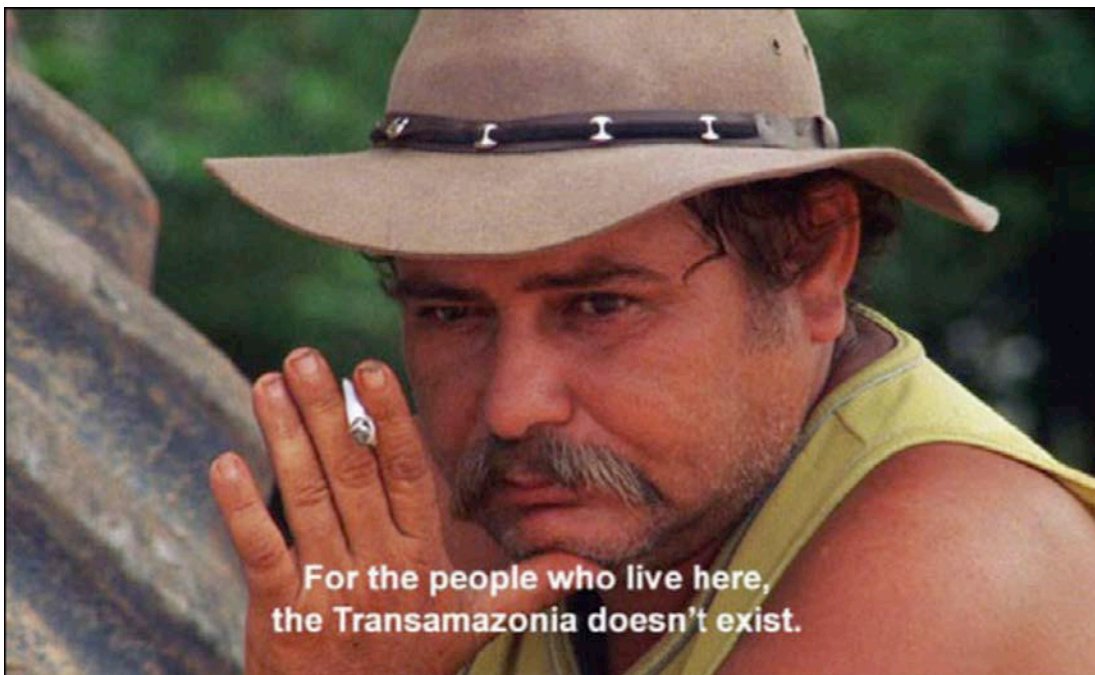
Now my question is, what is your apartment like and how do you relate to the outside, to London and living outside your home country?

MH I have lived in London since 1999. I very much enjoy being here, not because it is London particularly, but because it is a foreign country. Like you I had to move away. I left France to be away from all familiarities, from what people expected from me. I like being here because I am nobody here. As a child I grew up mainly in the US, then West Africa, and this feeling of being misplaced is where I belong.

Most of my friends in London also came from elsewhere—South Africa, the US, Russia—and it is incredibly stimulating to be surrounded by people who are culturally different. I live in the Barbican, which is in the East End. I moved to this estate about four years ago. The Barbican is one of the rare modernist buildings in London. It holds a glitter of utopia and this is precisely why I like it. I have a 10-meter window in the living room that gives onto the estate’s central garden. My studio is in the middle of the living room. There is also a sofa, and two gigantic bookshelves; one with books, the other with my archive.

Meliksetian MB Briggs

Are there any other places you would live than Bruxelles? What is the art scene like there?



Meliksetian MB Briggs



Marine Hugonnier, *Travelling Amazonia*, 2006, Super16mm film transferred to DVD with sound, 23 minutes 52 seconds.

Meliksetian MB Briggs

MDB Sometimes I would like to live in a bigger city than Brussels, like London, Paris, or Berlin, but I need to feel a necessity that is more than “it would be nice to live there” to move away. It’s very easy and fast to take the train to Paris, London, Amsterdam, Cologne. And I often do. Since I live so near the Gare du Midi, where all the international trains leave from, I sometimes feel it’s just like taking a metro to those cities, as if they are an extension of the Brussels network. And then my “living space” feels big enough to stay here.

The Brussels art scene is small but interesting. A lot of the artists I meet up with are from different countries, Spain, France, Ireland, Switzerland. In the art scene in Brussels you do feel a split between the French-speaking and the Flemish-speaking community. I initially thought that this was mainly a political thing. And it’s true that the politicians do everything they can to separate Flemish from Wallonian art and culture by their subsidy policy. The Brussels artists I speak with are always horrified by those politics, but it often strikes me that very often at venues you don’t hear any French at all, or at others no Flemish at all. Funnily enough the artists who frequent both communities are mostly the foreign artists.

This separation probably starts very early with people having to choose either Flemish- or French-speaking schools. It’s strange to live in the capital of Europe and see how this stupid language/community war dominates all cultural politics.

My work is represented by a gallery called Jan Mot here in Brussels. I have a real dialogue with Jan on my work and art. His gallery is for me a central point from which this dialogue expands, not just with visual artists but also with people from dance and theater. Maybe that’s the most interesting part about the Brussels art scene: that people from dance, theater, music, and

Meliksetian MB Briggs

visual art closely follow what happens in other scenes and they often collaborate on projects.

I worked with the composer/violinist George van Dam on the sound track of *Sylvia Kristel—Paris* and *Resonating Surfaces*. Our collaboration was actually the most beautiful period of working on the films. The sound track was in both cases the last part I worked on. The dialogue with George on the kind of sound and the spatiality of the sound track in relation to the image and text often made me better understand what was happening between the different layers and helped me to articulate this space between text, image, and sound more precisely. For instance, when I started to work on the sound track of *Resonating Surfaces* I realized that the real subject of the film was “the voice.” It is the timbre of the Portuguese language and not the meaning of the words in Suely Rolnik’s story that tears open the old wounds inflicted during the dictatorship.

This gave me the idea to use the voice as a structuring element in the film and as an almost autonomous layer of meaning. The film starts with the voice as a dying scream from Alban Berg’s operas *Lulu* and *Wozzeck*, and subsequently you hear a voice as sound/timbre without meaning; then it becomes a stream of incoherent words and, finally, a text. Without coinciding with Suely’s story, this evolution in the voice is an echo of it. During this evolution the voice also becomes more and more detached from the noises in the background of the sound track.

Do you work together with other people on your films? Or do you do everything yourself?

MH I have a sound engineer I work with, and I hire a camera assistant or a DOP when needed. I also have an editor with whom I spend very long hours! Otherwise I work on my own. But all my films are collaborations. I

Meliksetian MB Briggs

enjoy making them with others, through others, and for others. In fact, on set, I always submit my ideas and we discuss them. And the more we argue the better. Well, sometimes!

I have very few friends who are in the art world. Most of my friends do completely different things. So whenever I see a show, I go with one of them and enjoy walking through those spaces as if I were a tourist to the art world, just being there because I want to have a good time on a Sunday afternoon. I like to walk through art spaces with a genuine hope that I could see art from a completely different perspective. Being on the side of the viewer for a few hours. Being at the receptive end of it.

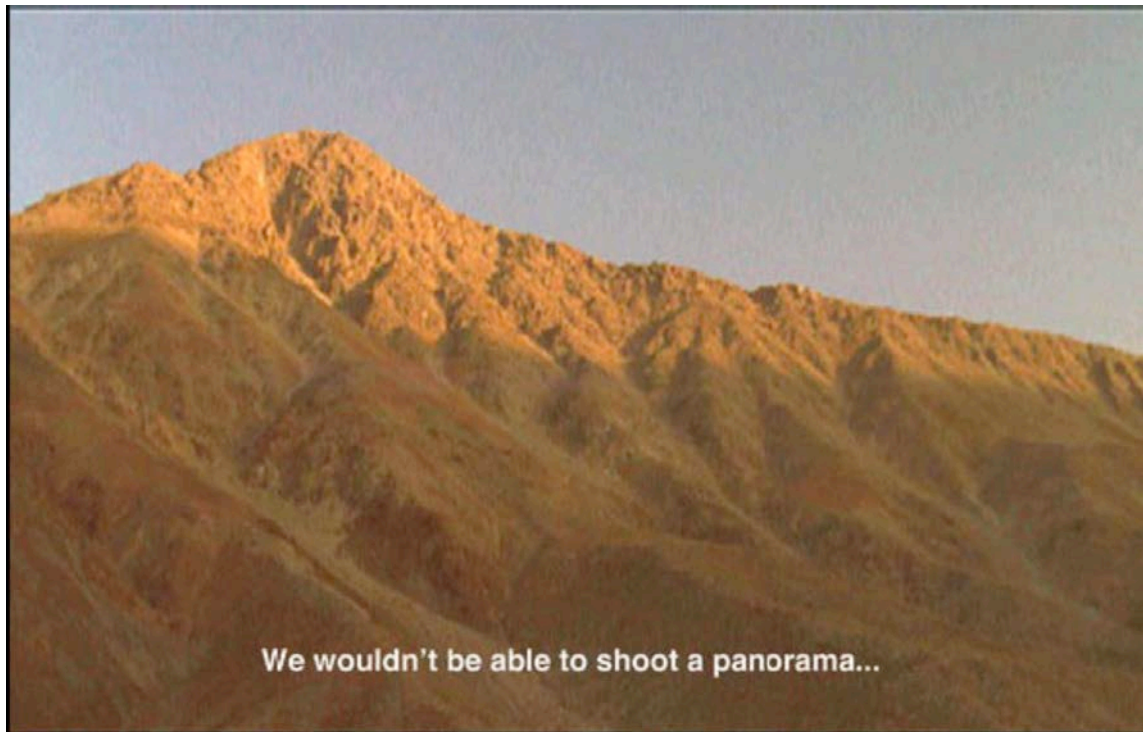
Tell me what is truly important for you in your experience of what is considered “Art”?

MDB I usually don't go to openings. What I find important in the experience of art is to be able to be completely open for reception and understanding of the work. At openings this seems quite impossible. I think that's true for most people. It struck me that almost all “professional” art people I spoke with who went to the openings of the Biennale in Venice, Documenta, and Münster thought none of the exhibitions was good. It boiled down to, “You don't even have to go,” which I think is very arrogant.

I like when a work has a strong metalevel reflecting a microlevel. For instance, in your film *Travelling Amazonia*, the construction of the Transamazonia highway in the '70s worked as a historical figure from which you question the present situation there and the whole process of filming, the construction of the dolly and the rails for the tracking shot one sees at the end of the film. I remember one of the people you filmed saying that the Transamazonia only exists on a map. This description of a landscape that is not real, the unfinished utopian nationalistic project of the

Meliksetian MB Briggs

construction of this highway, and the setup for the tracking shot are different levels that make one question the landscape one sees and landscape as a form of social construction. Could you say more about the importance of landscape in your work?



Meliksetian MB Briggs



Meliksetian MB Briggs



Marine Hugonnier, *Ariana*, 2003, Super16mm film transferred to DVD with sound, 18 minutes 36 seconds.

MH My work studies the conventions of landscape representation and also questions the tools that have helped establish them. Sometimes I see the work as a form of anthropology of images. I see landscape as a form of cultural mediation; it influences history, and vice versa. I have a strong attraction to landscape and a very sensual relationship with it probably because I grew up in such different environments: the US, West Africa, and the French countryside.

I am here sitting in the TGV heading to the French Alps. It is very early morning and being at speed in the landscape feels like I may have a chance to be faster than the day to come. I have seen such variation in the landscape since I have been sitting here that my eyes are sore, but I love it so much that I would not close them for a penny.

Meliksetian MB Briggs

I guess the history of modern art was to question the relationship between critical thinking and mystical thinking (*entre la pensee critique et la pensee mystique*). Modern art was a promise for social emancipation and throughout the century has tried to fulfill that goal. I appreciate art when it does take part in that dialogue, when it is fully conscious of that history. I grew up in a leftist family that has kept its dreams and hopes safe. And even today when the debate has nothing to do with left and right but much more with liberal or anti-liberal, they have a social consciousness that is my shelter. I understood art as a kid as a way for society to maintain sanity and hope, strength and vitality. This is where revolutionary buds will remain. I like it when it makes me courageous and adventurous. I like it when it makes me shiver and wonder. When it makes me want to work. But most of all I like it when, as [Robert] Filliou said, "Art is what makes Life look better than Art."

Let me know a bit more about your personal background.

MDB I also grew up in a leftist family with a strong social consciousness. My father was an anthropologist and sociologist and my mother studied French but later worked mostly on researching intercultural relations. They worked for seven years in development work in Hong Kong and India, where I was born. Later my father worked at the Institute of Social Studies in The Hague, where most students came from Latin America, Africa, and Asia. During my youth those students often came to our house. And through their personal stories of dictatorships they've fled from (two people from Chile) or poverty and civil wars (some people from Sudan and Ethiopia), those problems got a very human face. Those other cultures and people have been a very positive presence in my life.

What you say about art as a way to maintain sanity, hope, strength, and vitality is something that for me also has to do with the presence of the

Meliksetian MB Briggs

human and human relations in art. Making the human present on a micro level and taking it as a starting point to address the world or bigger issues reflects my own interest in portraying people. Although for me it's never just a portrait of that particular person. I like for instance when an element of doubt is introduced in a work, the uncertain feeling that you don't know or are not sure. In your work it's more about the effort and not the goal, and in that sense it speaks to me about the human desire to follow one's curiosity as the drive to understand things.

MH Since 1996 I have been adding notes to a book called *Counterproductive Work*. This notion has informed my practice in many ways. As you say, the goal is not the result, it's the walk. And while I am walking, the questions that arise usually put the work at stake. I like the way you treat duration precisely because after a while the certainty of what you depict begins to doubt itself.

The train is at full speed now, and I am about to get to my destination. Mont Blanc will soon be in my frame of vision. As if speed stimulates memory, I was remembering that we had a plan to have tea in London by the end of August. I am looking forward to seeing you and talking more. In the meantime I will keep imagining you in a bright northern light as it is in Bruxelles, with your colorful living room and strikingly green (almost phosphorescent green) plants from Brazil.

See you very soon.

BOMB 101, Fall 2007