

Interview by Jan Van Woensel (www.icpa.be)
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- How did you first started to travel around? When, and why, did you move from Brussels to Tokyo? Did you travel to Tokyo before or did you just go and stayed there? What is your interest in the elsewhere?

> First it is important to know that even if I like the word “travel” I would rather use the Spanish verb “vacilar”, for which John Steinbeck admitted, I forgot where, that he was unable to find a proper translation in English. If you say of someone that he’s *vacilando* it doesn’t mean he’s vacillating, but rather that even though he knows where he’s going, he doesn’t actually care reaching his destination, even if he knows the way.

I was born close to Albert Camus birthplace in Algeria the same year Bas Jan Ader disappeared, grew up in the neighborhood of Bastos in Yaoundé, my passport is Belgian, my name is Scandinavian, my family name is Dutch, my mother language is French and I am “mostly based” in Asia: if the travel starts somewhere, it’s among those facts. I like the *Invitations to travel* written by Jean Clair, but I prefer to be called an émigré: a sort of migrating fragile traveler that is half-way between exile, voyage, field-trip, and forced holiday.

I moved from Brussels to Japan because it was far: in that regard, I believe that one of the axioms of my practice is wanderlust (another hardly translatable word, at least in French). I also felt the need to learn a non-Indo-European language (in this case Japanese) as of a way to minimize myself linguistically (see Maurice Blanchot’s thoughts about the translator as a “sans langue propre”¹ in “L’Espace littéraire” I think).

I must have thought it was a good starting point.

I went to Tokyo on a scholarship to learn Japanese traditional calligraphy with Japanese master Hideaki Nagano. I arrived there with no language ability, and stayed for nearly two years on the Gakugei campus, and seldom came out. It was a definite hermitic retreat, and my isolation was nearly total. I could have been the last human on earth to speak French back then, it would have been the same. It is interesting to experience for some years in one’s flesh what experiences Marie Smith, the last surviving native speaker of the Eyak language in Alaska or for example the last Wymysöryś speakers in Silesia. In that regard I recommend the consultation of the *red book of endangered languages* published by the UNESCO, it’s compelling.

I realized afterwards that it must have been a way to reproduce the circumstances of my family “return” to Belgium from Cameroon: during my childhood, white among my black friends, I thought for a long time of myself as an albino. Or later, after seeing the exposed body of an African corpse slowly turning white, I thought of myself as a sort of black undead. In some sense “elsewhere” has always been part of me: it is only natural that I would feel tempted to address this in my practice as an artist.

Some 50 years ago still, it was a thread to be a “hybrid”, a “half” or a “foreigner” and stories of sufferance based on those notions abounds... but today more and more it seems to me that foreignness becomes inevitable. Obviously a direct consequence of Globalization, the number of those that have several passports, cross-continental mixed ancestries and must speak daily a language that isn’t their own is overwhelming the number of the others.

¹ "On ne voit pas pourquoi l'acte du traducteur ne serait pas apprécié comme l'acte littéraire par excellence" – Maurice Blanchot.

I therefore decided at one point to renounce having a studio and settle for some weeks at a time in a hotel room for example, or elsewhere in other intermediary spaces, in order to see what impact this would have on the work and how significantly that “absence” would infuse it, and become a revealing factor of what we’re becoming. If earlier last century Duchamp famously relabeled the spectator placed in the game of art a “regardeur”, meaning that the one that looks at the work is actively participating in making the work what it is and is not merely a passive eye, today I am interested in pondering the possibility of the “regardeur” becoming a *foreigner*. For unlike the artists exhibiting in the *Salon des Indépendants*, I today have nearly as much chances to have a Malayan, Chinese, Danish or Tasmanian viewer at an opening in Paris that they had to be French in 1900.

I think I understand why Michel Houellebecq stays in hotels and his last novel is called “*La Possibilité d'une île*”: today, a foreigner is inevitably growing inside us ... so there are no more strangers, or we are all foreigners, insular. I am tempted to question that.

- Do you often go to artist-in-residency places to make new works?

> It is not inappropriate that the number of residencies worldwide is exploding. Aren't artist suppose to be sorts of pathfinders? So I would describe myself as an artist-in-nomadency. I move from one residency to another compulsively in an effort to have the issue inhabit my body. Being jet-lagged as an artist makes sense to me; maybe the entire humanity is going toward a stage of jet-laggness, and I am not thinking of those who fly to Zanzibar for a four days safari, but rather to the large amount of populations that migrates today, out of fear, hunger or need. I am thinking that one could well find himself flash jet-lagged while drinking his coffee or smoking his water pipe one coming morning, just suddenly, without even noticing it.

My friend Hassan Sharif in Dubai told me last time I saw him that Deleuze wrote somewhere that people wrongly assumed that nomads were constantly moving. For the French philosopher, he said, nomads are a people who would go from the south of the Atlas Mountains to the north of Siberia just as someone goes from his bedroom to his bathroom upon waking up: they do not perceive their movement as such.

Nomads don't move, they stay in their home like anyone, all scales kept. I think I go to a residency in Bangalore or Manila the same way. I am not restless or escaping from some duty: I am making works in different corners of the atelier I found myself comfortable in, like anyone. People eventually think that being “able” to move is a question of money (a very tourist-like view though), but in fact the passport is the key. Europeans are unaware of how easy it is for them to move, just as a healthy person is unaware of its own good health, because a healthy body is a body one don't feel, and therefore forget about. I find an easy passport much more privileged than money today in fact: and my Belgian passport is among the easiest to wander with, along with this of Lichtenstein or such. So even if I recently came to think of myself as a “transnational Belgian” in regard to the fact that I do not think that my work is Belgian, being a Belgian allows me to move and work: this terrible thing... Having the right.

To answer your question: I often go to residencies, and I often do new works... but I don't go to residency to do new works.

- How do you adapt to all these new environments? Do you find that they are only superficial or do you feel that they really encourage a commitment with the local environment, the people, the community, the social situation?

> Technically I don't adapt to places I go because fundamentally they aren't "new". It is one wide space of continuous present, even if as Chris Marker has said in *Sunless* in 1981, if the 19th century was about the meeting of spaces, the 20th (and probably the 21st as well) is about the meeting of times. That is what Monsieur Mustapha told Jean Genet in Amman in 1967:

"Please excuse my French – I hope my Arabic is better. Could they have known in the fourteenth, fifteenth and sixteenth centuries – I still use your centuries, because your people colonized Time after they'd colonized Space, and because you tell me you're writing a book that's going to be read by Christians (...)" – Jean Genet, *Prisoner of love*, 1986. Wesleyan University Press, 1992, page 278.

It is an old misconception that to think that the world is a zoo where one reality stands next to the other and the only connection is the visitor... it is very imperialistic and old-fashioned, and the use of planes for even short travel today enhances that wrong feeling, that schizophrenia of the contemporary excursionist. If "Contemporary Art" is still a western institution also because *we* conquered time after space (political and geographic independence were granted to most former colonies, but they remain largely subject to our time-currency dominion): the Universal Time rests in London not very far from the Tate Modern where the Prime Meridian line marked with a green laser crosses the skyline. One could wonder if "Contemporary art" is ultimately destined to be *digested* as any other human "realm" has been to this date, from the Manding Empire of Sundiata Keita to this of Nintendo. Of course some could always oppose me saying that contemporary art isn't an institution but simply "the art of today", but it doesn't change a thing, for "today" is ours: and that can only but change.

To even go further I would say that much of what the "Art World" is based on seems far from realizing the peculiar decadence of its own system, considering New York or London as centers of "the arts" while the most contemporary *modus operandi* I am aware of is decentralization. It occurs in a great many contexts in engineering, management science, political science, political economy, sociology and economics... Law and science are already highly decentralized human practices; what about art?

I am therefore tempted to resist the CNN way of seeing the world through a (linguistic) key-hole as a wide safari of disasters and humanity as a cabinet of curiosities of esthetical differences and cultural chimeras. I am not a partisan of a crusade towards understanding the other, and most discourses aiming at "comprehending" or "meeting" the other at all somehow annoys me (would it be Belgians or Tutsis or Bamars). In that regard I feel closer to thinkers like Marguerite Duras or Borges for whom miscommunication is inevitable, and speech only present to fill in a disturbing silence. Mobility isn't a new thing, but it perhaps became non avoidable today and drifting from one place to another has maybe something to do with communicating vases. Instead of bringing the world to the atelier, like Picasso did with African art or Japanese with Western art, I am tempted to bring the atelier to the world.

-Do you feel that working as an artist without one fixed location is not beneficiary for developing an evolving oeuvre? Or is that an old paradigm?

> I am fixed. I am fixed in the world. Local and global are common denominators. What I am tempted to do now is to harmonize myself and what I do with time, and that is why I am in displacement in this world. Because there is a lot of time discrepancies around, from Tokyo to Sealand or Mombassa.

There are I think many people who move a lot more than I do, from backpackers to businessmen or artists... but they usually remain in a singular time frame. For instance if you get to a place for three days you can just glide through and never touch the ground, whereas if you stay three weeks (my personal favorite) you must engage. My calligraphy master used to tell me that each calligrapher should at one point realize which type of brush understands his/her hand.

Also, I am not an “art commuter” going back and forth between New-York, Basel and Venice... I am rather going from a meeting with the spiritual leader of the vestals of José Rizal in Mt. Banahaw north of Manila, on to researching about Karelianism in the Kola Peninsula in Finland, on to visiting one of the last young speaker of Ainu language in Asahikawa north of Hokkaido for a work, then creating an art platform using cell phones in a video game center in Tokyo before going to make workshops for the UNESCO with young artists in Jordan: meaning I inhabit time difference, and this is a tangible displacement.

By the way, did you know that according to the recent Index of Globalization calculated on a yearly basis for 122 countries by the Swiss Think tank *konjunkturforschungsstelle* (KOF)², which is based on measures of the three main dimensions of globalization (economic, social, and political) as well as sub-indices referring to actual economic flows, economic restrictions, data on personal contact, data on information flows, and data on cultural proximity the world's most globalized country is allegedly Belgium? I guess it legitimize what still needed to be.

-What do you think about the artist studio, a place where all created art works are kept? How do you deal with this issue of having to be mobile constantly, and thus being unable to conserve art works?

> Since Africa I know this which materialist societies (as well as contemporary art or “present time art”, which to some extent is unknowingly a colonizing western tool because it is synchronized on the western solar calendar and clock) tends to forget: all of it will die, and nothing can be kept despite their copy-pasted databases.

“What system, my friend? This of void. Never was I afraid of it, and I see in it nothing but consolation and simplicity” - Marquis de Sade, *dialogue between a priest and a moribund*, 1782

I like the idea of Nemo's Nautilus or Neo's Arch, but both implied lots of destruction, and I personally only collect for the sole purpose of losing my collections. An artist studio isn't different than a train station or a ladies bathroom... and the function the architecture shelters today will change tomorrow: Winfried Georg Sebald said beautiful things about that, and this feeling inhabited his writing. Nevertheless, one could argue that the website I created, half way between a blog, a spamming mailing list, a public notebook and an introspective catalogue is a virtual atelier. As you read these lines, Monarch butterflies are migrating from Canada to Central America near Mexico because of temperature change linked to global warming, and like them I move following rules I do not understand nor predict.

I am definitely not an Orientalist, but four years of practice of Japanese calligraphy taught me one thing about Asian mysticism, which is that mastery consists in following nature, be transparent and let the act flow through: the task is to be a consequence, not a cause of what is created.

² <http://globalization.kof.ethz.ch/>

As for conserving art works, in my case they stay here and there in gallery storages, in the cave of a relative, or in my suitcase. I thought recently I should rent a room in Schipol airport (because KLM-Airfrance is the broader airliner for now) that would be both a storage and an intermittent tax-free stateless studio, sort of an extension of the hotel rooms where I live. The cell phone-run transitory temporary exhibition platform I initiated with *Off the Record* can be seen as pondering this.

www.transcri.be/projects/offtherecord.html

-Where does your art live? Is it on the internet or on the moment you create it in a certain environment somewhere on the globe? Are the internet and the email communication a way to get in touch with people all over the globe (well... I know it is...) and does that generate a virtualization of the artist and his work?

> I think that the works I am tempted to do today falls under rules in all regards similar to those which applied to all art works past and future.

-Do you think that the artist who is constantly traveling loses his own central position and presentation? Do you think this generates a loss of concentration and depth?

> Well, as I said before, there are artists moving constantly who don't travel at all, and others who find themselves in a residency and are completely unable to connect to anything or even work. Personally I might fit the concept of nomadism in the sense that I don't think I am restless and without my own central position. I read recently, while in the house of a friend in the West Bank during the Lebanese war in 2006, a passage of Edward Said's *Reflexions on exile* (p185), where I found the following quote by Hugh of St-Victor, a twelve century mystic from Saxony:

"It is, therefore, a source of great virtue for the practiced mind to learn, bit by bit, first to change about invisible and transitory things, so that afterwards it may be able to leave them behind altogether. The man who finds his homeland sweet is still a tender beginner; he to whom every soil is as his native one is already strong; but he is perfect to whom the entire world is as a foreign land. The tender soul has fixed his love on one spot in the world; the strong man has extended his love to all places; the perfect man has extinguished his"

Erich Auerback, the great twentieth century literary scholar who spent the war years in exile in turkey has cited this passage as a model for anyone wishing to transcend national or provincial limits. My atelier isn't different; in fact, it is a depiction of my atelier. Like the priest in Sade's dialogue, you question the loss of exile... while I consider that same loss to be redemptory.

-Is there traveling artists always somewhere, yet always nowhere?

> "Always somewhere, always nowhere" is a definition of life. Believing otherwise is foolish. In that sense, you might want to consider me a romantic optimistic pragmatic nihilist.

-Does the internet as a mode of instant communication works as a reliable method? Is the internet a virtual field where competition and self-representation are more important than in real life?

> Good question.

-Share one of your most remarkable traveling experiences with me. This can be written in a narrative story-telling style. (for instance about your last project in the desert?)

> In Iran six month ago, a young woman and me were reciprocally attracted. She was wearing a black veil on her hair. She was looking at me with furious desire. We were always surrounded and couldn't find a way to touch each other. Then, before departing, she asked me to kiss her, in the street, knowing it impossible (or maybe even was it a self-destructive revolutionary wish). I then took my digital camera, took a picture of her beautiful face, and showing her the picture on the little screen zoomed several times on her mouth. The degree of sensuality we both reached at that moment was incredible. She then looked around to be sure no one was watching, and then removed part of the veil covering her hair, while looking me in straight in the eyes like only woman can do. I never saw her again.

-How do you relate to the main art events such as the Biennials or Documentas? Do you prefer to work in the ultimate periphery?

> It is easier for me to relate to biennial-type of exhibits rather than to galleries (or gallerists), given my non-materialistic approach. Consider it the market place of the past, where I, a trapper, would travel to sell the various results of weeks of hunt and wander. I need the market to live, and probably, the market needs the type of *game* I can offer. Actually I've been to the market in Douala, Cameroon, where populations from all over the continent gather to bargain their things, and in some sense it is very much alike what a -good- biennial should be.

-With all this in regard; what is your vision of the global art world. What are your priorities in your career as an artist?

> I'm not sure how to answer... I am a poet. I have no other priority than to poetry. The global art world is very epiphenomenal to me.

-How does your work relate to the traveling? Tell me more about the writing pieces and the notion of translation if relevant to your work.

I am answering this interview from Baguio City in the Northern Pilipino Cordillera, on my way to work with the elders of the Ibaloi of Kabayan, hoping to do a work involving the mummies of their burial caves... I guess it shows enough how traveling connects to my work or writing. Else, my activities probably relate to traveling at least by the fact that I attempt to teach myself to produce a work that has relevance globally, and not just locally, because I feel global. Much as some architect try to follow nature's rules to built, or the butterflies follow weather factors to fly, I feel I am following the forces of today's reality to work.

There is also the poetic of departure, which I feel is another important element of my *logos*, but maybe that is what they actually call wanderlust in English. This sends me to the spiritual or mystical dimension I am discovering in my practice: the spiritual journey. I recently came to think of my artistic endeavor as a kind of poetic mysticism. In that

regard, if a common theme in mysticism is that the mystic and all of reality are One, I realized that in some artist talks I came to say that “more than *represent* life, what I was trying to achieve through my work was to *reach* life”. Achieving communion with the divine (understood here as a metaphor for art, or poetry), through direct experience, intuition, or insight seems to me a relevant definition of what I am tempted to do. One could, in fact, argue that the mystical willing to achieve oneness with the world finds an interesting parallel in today’s *mundialization*: the increasing world unification (from *uno*, one in Italian).

I have therefore been tempted to do some pilgrimages as this of Santiago de Compostela in Galicia, Mount Saana in Enontekiö in Lapland or Kailash-Manasarovar in Western Tibet as of a way to see how, among “Buddhists”, “Jainists” and “Induists”, I could stand as an “artist” and legitimize my presence among them as a simple contemporary artistic willing for contemplation (communion with reality). The point - should I say the work - was to put that equation in perspective.

I have also pilgrimaged to nationalistic artistry sacred places as Mount Koli in North Karelia as a “foreigner”, as of a way to see whether the nationalist cultural relevance of the place (that lead last century to the independence of Finland) could in fact be more globally adequate, and not only Finish after all. And through all of this, reading books from various pilgrims, I came to notice how the recurrence of my own presence within the documentation seen on my website seemed in fact close to what pilgrims do when inscribing geographically their self into Reality (both the world at large and the unseen realm). That is probably something I will explore further in the coming years.

Last but not least, the colonization inherent to contemporary art is maybe, giving my background, something I feel the need to address. According to the myth, issues of translation exist since the collapse of the Babel tower, and are inherent to my work because I am a literary worker. I just can’t escape them, the *Metagram series* being my best effort to do so: one could argue that this series is somehow a wish to transcend limited identity and re-identify with the all that is: achieve that oneness in experience. (www.transcri.be/metagramAN.html)

-Thank you for these precisions.

Jan