

THE OTHER OF THE CONTEMPORARY ARTIST

Lieven Jonckheere

WARP
Eindhoven
10th August 2018

INTRODUCTION

Stef Van Bellingen asked me to talk to you about 'dialogue' – because in the days to come all of you will engage into a series of dialogues with us, who present ourselves, rather arrogantly, to you as 'commentators'

In order to have an interesting dialogue you should know the other, you should have an idea of the others with whom you have to deal, to dialogue, you should have an idea of us Artists sometimes believe, or are made to think that art is something that you have to make all by your self, in an attic or in some derelict building that you squat – which of course is a romantic or a neo-romantic myth – a naive and even dangerous myth, because it can turn out to be autodestructive

As an artist you cannot do without others

As an artist you cannot do without a permanent dialogue with several others, with us

SOME CLASSICAL FACES OF THE OTHER OF THE ARTIST AND A NEW ONE?

so first of all you have to ask yourself "who is my Other as an artist?"
which others are important to me as an artist?

- who can make me and break me, as an artist?
- who can support me and let me down, as an artist?
- who is interested in supporting me and in disqualifying me, as an artist?
- etc

the Other has many faces

- the typical faces of the Other you have to deal with as an artist, that you are subjected to, are well known, I suppose: in a quick review I have succeeded in identifying upto seven figures Others for you as an artist – no doubt there must be more of them, let me know if I forgot someone!
- But mind you! at the end I will introduce myself, as a new form of the Other for you, as an artist ...

1. the first Other you are subjected to as an artist, and with whom you have to deal or to dialogue with
is the mythical figure of the 'muse'
 - you could call that your intimate or personal Other
 - some typical examples
 - some artists have used the same female or male model over and over again
 - think of the inspiration Picasso took from the tormented expressions of Dora Maar
 - or the inspiration Lucian Freud took from the huge fleshy body of Lee Bowery
 - in the case of some artists you could also say that the father is their muse
 - in the sense that they always seem to find some form of paternal authority that they can fight, that they can kill
 - but you could also say that some artists are their own muses
 - because they are using their own image, and even their own body over and over again
 - think of Da Vinci's famous odd smile, in portraits of women and men alike
 - it is said that this would be his own smile – and even the Mona Lisa would be a self-portrait, or at least Da Vinci's face would shine through in hers
 - you could say that he explored the mystery his own smile was to him – part of the solution of this mystery is the hypothesis that his smile actually was copied from the smile of his mother
 - one could say that in doing so Da Vinci was already a contemporary artist
 - indeed, I think that today many artists are their own muses
 - many artists, especially female artists, explore the mystery their body is to themselves
 - and they do so by all means: photography but also all kinds of cutting devices, all too often flirting with the limit of automutilation
 - the big question of course is: how do you keep your muse as long as possible alive
 - be it a sexualised model, an authoritarian father or your own mysterious body
 - can you continue making art, once your model has committed suicide, once your father has been reduced to nothing, once your body has bled dry?
2. a second Other you have to deal and to dialogue with as an artist,
are the so-called 'curators'
 - 'curator' literally means 'caretaker' – the one who should take care of art and artists
 - any curators in the room??
 - these are the people who select art works for exhibitions, for museums and so on
 - these are the 'connoisseurs' who pretend to have an idea of which art is the real deal
 - or the real shit
 - in any case: these are the guys who decide which art should be seen by the public and bought by collectors
 - in short: these are the people you desperately want to visit you in your studio
 - how do you attract and convince these curators? How to seduce them in a post #metoo age?
 - I hope that I am not considered sacrilegious if I recall the case of our local 'art pope', in Flanders, I mean Jan Hoet, who at the end of past century, almost single-handedly decided what was art and what was not, without really being able to explain what were his criteria

3. the third Other you have to deal or to dialogue with as an artist is of course the general public
 - these are the people with the void/emptiness in their eyes and their hearts ...
... and their pockets
– a void which has to be filled, or widened, by your workt
 - these are the people who stare at your work
– and are only able to say “nice / not nice”, “like / do not like”
 - these are the fucking idiots who you do it all for!

My advice? always try to show some form of respect for the idiots who love your work!
Talk to them!
4. but in the meantime you should not forget about yet another Other who you have to deal with as an artist – and that’s the economical Other
 - this economical Other is one big tangle
 - On the one hand there are the shrewd collectors, investors and art-dealers
but also – do not forget about them – benevolent maecenasses (does this plural form exist?)
 - And on the other hand you have the gallerists and the musea
these are the people who ironically enough need much money in order to sell and to expose your work, in order to make money of your work
 - these are the people with dollar signs in their eyes or real euros in their pockets
 - I must confess that, as a complete outsider, staring in awe at this economical Other, I have no idea of the inner workings and relations in this big tangle
so I do not really know which advice to give to you, in your dialogue with this economic other
should you beware of this economical Other? Should you to play his game and try to be better it, according to the cynical device “If you can’t beat them, joint hem”? I do not know
5. the fifth Other consists of your critics
these are the people who look at your work from the university perspective of art history
 - critics like to compare your work with that of dead artists who always were “much better”
 - and it is also these critics who for instance decide that today in Flanders only four to five artists are worth talking about

the only thing you have to say to your critics is “encore! More!”! always encourage them: you never know that finally something interesting comes out ...
6. your fifth Other, as an artist, are your fellow artists
what are your relations with your fellow artists? How do you deal or dialogue with them?
 - do you love your equals or do you hate them? both at the same time probably ...
 - do you bond with your equals or do you shy away from them?
artists who recognize themselves in each other’s work form ‘schools’, ‘groups’, ‘mouvements’
today this seems to have become taboo, for one reason or another most artists freeze, get blocked when they see the work of a fellow artist
I would not say: “love each another”,
but in any case, do not be afraid of each other, of each other’s work!

7. another Other you should not forget about, as an artist, is the political Other, the State
- in former days the artist always was a kind of 'religious assistant' or accomplice
 - the church decided what was art, what art was about and who had to see art under which conditions
 - if you did not comply, as an artist, you were simply told to rot in hell!
 - nowadays, science having taken the place of religion, art has become a state affair
 - government commissions decide what is art, what art is about and who should see art under which conditions
 - if you do not comply, you will not receive any subventions or commissions and you will end up as a sponger, which is the contemporary version of the sinner, on welfare, which is the contemporary version of hell

how to remain subversive under these conditions? Maybe you should look at the strategies artists used at the time when the Catholic Church still ran the show ...

8. And last but not least there's also a kind of new Other for the artist, The Seventh Other – maybe ...

And that's me – and my colleague Philippe Grisar

indeed I think that we, as psychoanalysts can be a radically other Other for you as an artist

- I will not tell you what kind of Other we can be for you, as an artist
- I hope you will experience that, in the talks with us – how we will try to be another Other
 - not a mysterious muse, not your idiotic public, not a generous collector, not a clever connoisseur, not a loquacious university critic, not a bought over member of a state commission, not a fellow or rival artist ...

So far for the others that you as an artist have to deal and to dialogue with

Let me forget if I forgot someone

In any case, you as an artist, should not forget someone

EXAMPLES OF THE OTHER OF THE ARTIST

the Other of some living artist?

it is difficult to give convincing examples of living artists
and the way they actually deal with the Other, with all of their others

- the problem is that we do not have a clear view on how they deal with these others
 - we do not have access to their private lives and their relation with their muses
 - we do not know how they really think about their public, critics, collectors, maecenasses, commissions and so on
 - and if they do lobby with critics, collectors, commissions and so on, they do so in secret
- consequently everything we say about living artists, about their private lives and their lobbying, is liable to be gossip
never talk about living artists! too dangerous!

So, let me give you one short example of a Famous Dead Artist
– who's relations with others, as an artist, I have studied extensively
And that's the one and only Marcel Duchamp

the Other Of Marcel Duchamp

If Duchamp has become the mythical, influential artist you all know

- this is not only due to the 'quality' of his art, to its radical novelty or originality
- I think this also due to his very very carefull management of all of his dialogue with his others

1. First of all Duchamp's muse

Duchamp did not look far away for his muse – his lifelong muse was his younger sister Suzanne

it is well documented that he experienced the marriage of this sister as a kind of trauma

- In any case, immediately after that marriage Duchamp emigrated to the US
and there he would in no time become the important cubist painter we all know
– with paintings alluding to the marriage of his sister:
 - “Nude descending a staircase”
 - “Sad young man in a train”
- his Big Glass, “The Bride stripped bare by her bachelors, even”, can also be ‘read’ as a monumental testimony to what the famous Duchamp specialist, Robert Lebel, called Duchamp's incestuous love” for his sister Suzanne
- and this is even the case for his last work “Given: 1. The Waterfall, 2. The Illuminating Gas”

– even if, after his death, there erupted a catfight between his legal spouse and one of his lovers about the question who's body was the model for the reclining nude woman in that work

the real inspiration remains his sister

of course, in order to prove this bold claim, I should give more details

– unfortunately I cannot do this here, but you can always consult my publications on Duchamp

2. Let's jump tot Duchamp's economic other

- at the start of his artistic career he benefited from the financial support of his father
- but after that, all through his artistic career Duchamp, was cherished by female maecenasses – who collected his works
probably because these women smelled the delicate female touch in Duchamp's work
as a matter of fact Duchamp produced his ready-mades under a female alter ego, with the equivocal name Rrose Sélavy (éros, c'est la vie – eros is life)
this is a hint!
- As for Duchamps dealings with the other participants in the economical tangle that has formed itself around his work, gallerists and musea, collectors and art-dealers, we will see something of that coming forward in the most recent scandal surrounding his work

3. This scandal is also revealing for the way Duchamp dealt with his fellow artists

– and actually it is also revealing for the problem Duchamp even today, after 100 year, still embodies in the art world and art history in general

I am referring to the recent scandal surrounding the famous urinal called "Fountain"

as you may know this urinal is considered one of the "founding objects" of modern art in 2004 prominent artists and art historians voted it "the most influential artwork of the 20th century"

- Now you may have heard that in june 2018, in the aftermath of #metoo, it was revealed, once again!, that the urinal would not have been 'made' by Duchamp *même*, but by a female friend of his, dada artist Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven
- as a matter of fact it is rather probable that Duchamp asked her tot send in the urinal, as a provocation for the first show he himself had organized, with the newly founded Society of Independent Artists – in 1917 this was
it should be noted that at that time Duchamp himself was already producing ready-mades for some years, the invention of the ready-made dating back to 1915, with the snow shovel, inscribed as "in advance of the broken arm"
– as the first waste-product, immediately at the start of Duchamp's work on the Big Glass "The Bride stripped bare by her bachelors, even"
the rejection of the urinal, at this show, made Duchamp resign from the Board of this Society
but of course he first had made sure that the urinal, before being dumped, had been photographed by the famous photographer-gallerist Alfred Stieglitz
- Duchamp was immediately suspected of being the culprit – but at that time he did not flinch
it was only much later, in 1935, after the death of Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven (1927), that his friend, the pope of surrealism, André Breton, for whom Duchamp organized the famous surrealist shows, for the first time officially attributed the urinal to Duchamp – who once again did not flinch
finally Duchamp did claim himself the urinal, shortly before his death, in 1968, saying that he had bought the urinal (and not that he did send it in)
 - a case of 'false memory'?
 - or should we paraphrase what the painter Neil McWhistler once said about the writer Oscar Wilde: "Duchamp has the courage of the objects of others"!
- complicated!
in any case it's too complicated to simply call Duchamp a liar, as the media did this year

4. I will not dwell on Duchamp's complicated relationship with the political Other, with the State
 - the Frenchman Duchamp achieved his first real success in the US and later on he would become an American citizen – becoming a real American artist
 - In any case Duchamp never was a prophet in his own country, France – and he had to wait for many years after his death before a retrospective of his work was organized in Paris

What is the golden hint here? Go into exile? Leave your country and beloved ones behind?
5. and finally as for his relations with art critics and art connoisseurs, Duchamp simply took their place
 - he was the art critic par excellence
 - he advised modern art collectors such as Peggy Guggenheim

TWO FUNDAMENTAL TWISTS

a fundamental twist in the relation of the artist to this twisted Other

Which brings me to my final remark about the Other of the artist – today
It seems that a fundamental characteristic of the contemporary artist is his tendency to incorporate, or to embody all of his others himself – the contemporary artist plays all of his others himself, he takes or usurpates their places
You could say that contemporary artists have started to eat their others

I already suggested that contemporary artists are their own muses – as we see in the obsession of especially female artists (but also male) with the the mystery of their own body
But contemporary artists also become their own curators, their own critics, their own public, their own collectors, their own maecenasses, their own fellow artists (creating for instance artistic alter ego's for themselves), and even, in some cases their own psychoanalysts – all this of course as part of their being an artist, their artistic being, their artistic work

this has to do with an obscure event that is sometimes called “The Death of The Artist”
artists today no longer limit themselves to one discipline (be it literature, music or plastic arts), to one medium (be it paint or stone) and they no longer develop a continuous and coherent oeuvre
Contemporary artists merge disciplines, mix media and always try to start from scratch again

In this very line contemporary artists are no longer restricted to being an artist, but they also become their others: they become their own muses, critics, public, collectors, curators, fellow artists, and so on

As I have already indicated this twist in relation to the Other started with Duchamp
But the most telling example is certainly Marcel Broodthaers – who, as an artist, founded his own museum

This artistic strategy (if I may call it like this) poses several interesting problems

Incorporating a fundamentally twisted Other

To begin with Stef Van Bellingen kindly reminded me that these others – while being eaten by the artists – are also eating each other. This happens especially in the tangle of the economic Other. Critics become gallerists, collectors become museum-directors, and so on. Consequently the artist does not incorporate, does not play, does not eat pure others – he eats others who are in the process of eating other others.

new questions

another question of course is how all of these others are affected by their being incorporated or embodied by contemporary artists

What is the effect on the public, the critics, the curators, the collectors, the musea of their passage through the artist, of their being ‘recuperated’, their being eaten and digested by contemporary artists

Do they come out, at the other end, as a new and better public, better critics, better collectors, better musea, better maecenasses?

Or do they on the contrary completely loose their function? Are they reduced to nothing?

This is one of the issues I would like to discuss we you – in the talks we will have

But before we start this talks, one final piece of advice to all of you, Young Turks:

- become all of your others, as an artist ...
- ... but always keep in touch with all of these others, these each-other-eating-others in the real world too!