

## Conversation with Bas Blaasse.

Bas Blaasse is a writer and makes films. His writing is frequently in response to other art forms, sometimes gravitating toward fiction or poetry, sometimes toward theory or philosophy. He studied photography in Breda and philosophy in Brussels, Berlin and Leuven and publishes regularly for art magazines such as *Metropolis M*, *HART* magazine, *Rekto:Verso* and *De Witte Raaf*.

**Bas Blaasse:** You experiment with how language can create visual and spatial stories. I'm particularly interested in this spatiality or spatial properties of language. Does language issue from your art's spatial dimensions, like objects or installations, or are your works themselves animated and imbued with meaning and stories by a language (your language perhaps)?

**Maud Gourdon:** In my practice, language and especially text are the material and a starting point for structuring the way I think about my artwork in terms of materiality and space. I like to use language as an underlying structure from which the different elements of my work emerge.

The material gathered to build this textual structure comes from multiple sources, fictional and non-fictional—such as novels, historical and scientific facts, poetry, pop songs, and weather forecasts—which I use without hierarchy. I select and tie these different threads together in order to make them communicate with each other differently. Each knot in this net contains a personal and intimate story, carefully wrapped and thus simultaneously protected and revealed by its structure. This way of linking is, for me, a model of thinking and storytelling.

When the net is sufficiently strong, the different elements of which it is composed enter in relation and start to interrogate each other. From these connections, new elements emerge, some of which pass through the net while others cling to it. These caught elements become the protagonists of my narrative and thus the physical elements of my installation. My installations, then, act as a spatial transcription of the connections from which the installation's visible elements have emerged.

I am interested in creating private lexicons, mixing texts, and in drawings and other media in ways that have an internal logic not necessarily discernible to those outside. My work, often presented in minimal and very precise installations, acts as a semiotic system that generates meanings via interaction.

**BB:** In a very general sense, you use existing material, be it words, signs, images or style, to find new meaning and forms of storytelling. How do you see the relationship between reproduction or appropriation and creating something new?

**MG:** In my work, the reproduction of existing materials is a way to communicate and understand something outside of myself and my space-time zone.

I always try to understand how this image, sign, or word relate to me and addresses me personally. The first phase of this process involves researching the context of production as well as the historical and current contexts that brought this material to me. The second phase involves a more playful approach, where I make my own personal connections to integrate them into my own narrative.

**BB:** In an interview about your residency with Chantal van Rijt at Cas-Co (in Leuven), you gave the example of seed as a pure and concentrated form of information because it carries all the instructions it needs to become a plant. But this information is also circumscribed to the seed itself and its development. To what extent can such highly enclosed information be communicated (leaving aside the fact that some things inevitably get lost in translation)?

**MG:** During the residency at Cas-Co, Chantal and I considered plants and animals as our linguistic equals as we searched for ways to translate their hidden and discarded languages. Chantal worked with traces left on a branch by woodworms, and I worked on dried seeds found in a park. Together, we tried to decipher these messages made of tunnels, holes and dots.

For doing so, we explored the concepts and actions of coding and decoding, and by extension that of translating: to carry/take something, somebody or oneself out of its usual context. We defined the act of translation as a back-and-forth movement of contraction and expansion, where it is crucial to go back to the root of a word and/or summon a list of synonyms to approach the specific meaning of it.

I connected the seed with Ursula Le Guin's short novel *The Author of Acacia Seeds and Other Extracts from the Journal of Therolinguistics*, where a seed is used by an ant as a container to transmit its last message, and to the "Bindu", the smallest "mark", "drop", "point" or "seed" of the universe in Hindu cosmogony. I was fascinated by the idea that a single "point" or "seed" could be considered both the starting point of all creation and its ultimate unity. It was like imagining that an entire language had been highly concentrated and had become a single point of extreme density. A "point" that would mark the beginning and the end of every possible sequence and would contain them all at the same time. A "point" that would also give rhythm and thus sets this language in motion.

**BB:** Your latest two projects, *A Flower is Speaking to a Dog*, and *Therolinguistic Tale*, both play with nonhuman forms of language. Tell me about language in a nonhuman world.

**MG:** *A Flower is Speaking to a Dog* was initially a publication, and then became an installation, resulting from my fascination with and study of DNA as a form within which a language can be built. The publication consists of thirteen poems in which the genetic sequence of DNA functions as a partiture for two characters: "Dog" and "Flower". In the rhythm of the texts, the two characters coincide irreducibly, embodying one another and, in extension, contaminate the objects, plants and human figures that surround them.

At the beginning of this project, I was influenced by British anthropologist Graham Townsley's descriptions of Shamanic languages as "twisted languages". The word "twisted" here refers to the particular structure (elliptical and multi-referential), rhythm (sequences and repetitions) and movement (double-movement of approaching and distancing) characteristic of these languages. This twisted mechanism seems to be particularly efficient in connecting the subject (local) with multiple realities (global).

This study led me to develop linkages between the twisted languages described by Townsley and the language of DNA, as along chain made up of two interwoven ribbons that encode and define all the unique variations of organic life.

After studying the “active” language of DNA, I became interested in languages now considered as “passive”. In *Therolinguistic Tale, a Verse of Wormdots and Seedlines*, Chantal and I attempted to decode two of the “smallest” and “passive” languages of our visible universe, that of a seed and a worm.

The decoding of these different languages undeniably puts me in relationship with the concepts of the infinitely large and infinitely small, and by extension with the notions of human and non-human, visible and invisible worlds. Furthermore, the action of translation induces the creation of a constellation of images, thoughts and feelings, linking the subject to the object—in this case, to plants and animals, and to the forces and mechanisms of the living. The ultimate result of translation is creating a communication pattern that allows for an equal relationship between the subject and the object.

**BB:** There is an element in *A Flower is Speaking to a Dog* that I find almost provocative. The verses in the booklet are generative texts, yet they speak to us in a poetic way. To me, it is both ironic and intimate. But most of all, it seemingly expresses a general truth that poetry holds about life: that it is too fragmented to be understood in the structure of regular syntax and semantics. What does *A Flower is Speaking to a Dog* tell you?

**MG:** I wanted this series of poems to convey the mechanisms of DNA creation and duplication, as well as the beauty and mystery that surround the questions of our origins.

The idea for the poems’ composition was to use the structure of the human genetic code, composed of 64 words (codons), linked to 22 different possible meanings (amino acids), as a score for selected words. The words were picked not for their individual qualities but for their potential to interact together in sequences. Used in various combinations, they contaminate each other and thus become each a textual pattern where ornaments are not beautiful but bear meanings.

To answer the other part of your question, it seems to me that a certain quality of language is required to address complex matters and concepts. This is the case, for example, with the use of language in poetry, which reveals its meanings only through circumlocutions. Whereas with the everyday use of language, the subject would have crashed into the object, poetry allows the subject to come close but not too close, and circle around the object. This double movement of approaching and distancing maintains the subject at a reasonable distance from the object, allowing him to understand the object in its various aspects.