



Lili Reynaud-Dewar

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by Alexis Vaillant
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Lili Reynaud Dewar, *Black Mariah*, 2009
Courtesy: Mary Mary, Glasgow and Centre d'art contemporain du Parc Saint Léger,
Pougues-les-Eaux.

SHE DANCES, SHE COOKS AND SHE COSMETICS & THINKS

Inspired by the way Sun Ra questioned African-American identity, Lili Reynaud Dewar expands on her own biography and integrates it into artistic projects, in the form of spaces where Afrofuturism encounters family memories of concerts in the Seventies. Reynaud Dewar talks to Alexis Vaillant about art that addresses politics—from the Black Panthers, to labor concepts applied to gender, explored through stenographers' typewriters from the past century...



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Alexis Vaillant - I heard you are working on a project with Sun Ra.
Lili Reynaud Dewar - It's a kind of autobiography starting from before I was born, far away from my place of birth. I have always wanted to be in conversation with Sun Ra, but I have decided to talk to my mother instead. My dad and her went to see a concert by Sun Ra in 1970 at the Fondation Maeght in Saint- Paul de Vence. In those years my dad was running a popular and jazz music corner in a vast record shop in the city of Poitiers, and in 1975 he opened his own independent record shop in La Rochelle. He called it La Grande Oreille [The Big Ear], which is funny because when he was born premature, he was somehow earless, I mean his ears were not completely formed yet, they grew after his birth. But getting back to Sun Ra, what interested me is my mother's experience of it: she actually doesn't remember the concert very well. So my work now is to confront her incomplete memories with the legacy of Sun Ra.

In what way?

To bring her memories back, I have imagined that she could perform her recalling of all this in front of a mirror, dressed up as Sun Ra. When Adam [Szymczyk] invited me to the Kunsthalle [Basel], we decided together to focus around Sun Ra's persona and musical production, because he has been a very productive model for my work so far. But of course, when you decide to work around such a specific figure, it raises a number of questions regarding your own legitimacy to do so. Sun Ra has always questioned the notion of "origin", by stating the mythical nature of the African American identity and claiming he was from Saturn. It is this very contradictory vision of the "self" inside a larger frame than the actual "facts" that somehow led me to use elements in my work that don't seem to belong to my personal history, and to use the work to expand my own identity beyond its strict factual definition. My dad was a white provincial man from the west coast of France, who would suffer from panic attacks when he had to travel anywhere, but he was also a Black Panther's Party supporter, and he met with Albert Ayler at this Sun Ra concert in 1970 and they remained friends (although I don't think my dad could speak English) until Ayler was found dead in the East River a few months later. So there is a sort of elasticity of space and time regarding anyone's personal story, I guess.

What's your project going to look like?

Primarily Sun Ra is a musician and a thinker. So the project won't be a "memorabilia" of the costumes, images, objects he also produced. Instead of showing objects authentically made by "the hand of Sun Ra", I rather think about "measuring" the distance between myself and Sun Ra's particular story as well as the way I can tell that story, and the way it is relevant to picture this distance. This will consist in a two spaces-connected experience with a fluid and physical impact. One space being the aspect of his legacy, through the recordings of the 1970's concert my mother saw, and some of his texts from 1950s. The other space being dedicated to the story of this concert as told by my mother.



Lili Reynaud-Dewar, *In Reality, Is The Sphinx an Annex of the Monument, or the Monument an Annex of the Sphinx?*, 2008

Courtesy: the artist and Mary Mary, Glasgow.

In what way would you admit eBay and Dick Hebdige's subcultural texts have influenced your work?

On eBay I found a specific kind of typewriters, for my ongoing project *The Power Structures, Rituals and Sexuality of the European Shorthand Typists*. The typewriters must have been produced at the same time as the first portable personal computers. This simultaneity of the two tools works as a sort of plate tectonics of technological devices. For sure, *The Meaning of Style* is an influence indeed.

Do you control anything?

"Who controls the past, controls the future", hears Kyle MacLachlan in the film *Dune*. My work involves lots of research. *The Power Structures, Rituals and Sexuality of the European Shorthand Typists*, deals with the notion of work and gender throughout the 20th century, and *Black Mariah* deals with notions of proto-cinema and filmed performance, through the examination of the Black Maria building: the first film production studio (1893). Edison's assistant Dickson created it in order to experiment further with the kinetoscope, and invited showmen and performers to produce basic parts of their performances on the stage of the Black Mariah. Both projects, *Black Mariah* and *The Power Structures*, revolve around the idea of technology and how new attitudes, new postures are generated by new technologies. For the preparation of *The Power Structures, Rituals and Sexuality of the European Shorthand Typists*, I read a study by French sociologist and historian Delphine Gardey, showing the progressive creation of a female class of workers through an analysis of the archives of the Renault Factories employees. It sounds geeky, but the result is more like a ritualistic experience where trained shorthand typists from the older generation teach their obsolete knowledge to young women today. av Do you remember the circumstances in which you got paid for the first time? lrd I prefer to remember the circumstances in which I paid someone for the first time. This was in 2005. I paid Mary Knox, my "main" performer. She impersonated Queen Mother Nanny of the Mountains, the leader of a maroon revolution in Jamaica during the early 19th century, a part historical - part mystical character, icon of the reggae culture. Mary Knox is a very attractive blond woman from Scotland. She was dressed as a semi-burlesque performer, standing next to a record by reggae band Culture, a Rastafarian monumental sculpture and a curtain I had made for the occasion.



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Do you usually take pictures of your shows (or ask for them) to make them last longer?

This is actually a ratio: the show lasts... say an average of two months and the performance is an average of 20 minutes. Many of my shows are an environment for a performance usually taking place during the opening. More recently, the shows have been an environment for a performance taking place before the opening. I am often the only spectator, along with the people involved in the making of the work, like Mathieu, the costume maker, and Sacha, who's helping me with the video recordings, and, of course, the performers. So that one can ask when does the show actually "begin"? By extension, the pictures of my shows may twist the aspects and the uses of the documentation of performance.



Lili Reynaud-Dewar, *En réalité, le sphinx est il une annexe du monument, ou le monument une annexe du sphinx?*, 2008
Courtesy: the artist and Mary Mary, Glasgow.

Would you map your recent Antiteater in this perspective?

The performance took place in a theater, a month before the show opened at Frac Champagne-Ardenne. Then, in the exhibition main space, the video documentation of the performance was projected on a large cinematic wall. The objects on the stage, the moves of the performers had been thought according to the camera frame, even more than according to the stage space. So there is a sort of "trafficking the trace" taking place. I always film the performance during a rehearsal, so that the video is actually not an "authentic" document of what happened in front of the audience. That work is ambiguously set between video and performance documentation, and the performers are very self-conscious of the presence of the camera.

It seems that you never do things twice. Do you sometimes visit exhibitions twice?

I visit every show twice. I walk one way and return. It is important to see things from the front and backwards. I also like when a show can be seen "from" its backwards, like a theater décor.

As asserted by Warhol, "the ultimate party - the one you're really dying to get invited to - is the one where the worst person to be there is you". How would you describe the "ultimate show"?

David Robbins wrote a fantastic essay, *The House of Deadpan*, in which are combined Andy Warhol and Phileas Barnum's visions of a "show". Robbins calls Barnum a "platformist", because the first shows Barnum toured America with consisted of simply placing someone just slightly unusual - in this case an old woman who claimed having been the nursemaid of George Washington - on a platform telling her story. No décor, no format, no scenario. Not even an exceptional personality. Which is about the same as Warhol's use of people passing through the Factory and let the camera record. Peter Berlin, a gay porn actor from the seventies (star and director of soft porn movie *That Boy*) describes the "ultimate" show as walking down a street in San Francisco, dressed up with a pair of extremely tight white panty hose (the ultimate cloth fabric according to him) trousers. He sees this simple action, taking place in the street at any time of day, as the most accomplished artistic proposition, although at the period he obsessively produced his films on his own, from the cast to the props to the acting. I like this idea of the best "show" being one simple action performed in a given context for an audience... Or no audience at all.



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