

## **Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster**

**Since the late 1980's, French artist Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster has had a prolific output of film and video works. In recent years she has also become known for her architectural projects. The artist now divides her time between Paris and Rio de Janeiro and on the eve of the opening of the 27<sup>th</sup> São Paulo Biennial (7 October – 17 December 2006), met up with Tobi Maier for this conversation in Rio de Janeiro.**

**Tobi Maier: Dominique, can you talk a bit about how you got from Strasbourg (your city of birth) to Grenoble, the place where you attended art school and where you met fellow artist Philippe Parreno.**

Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster: Well it's very simple, my parents moved to Grenoble in 1968 when I was three years old. It was during the winter Olympic games and we moved to the newly built Olympic village, which was in the suburbs of Grenoble. I met Philippe Parreno at art school in 1985 and realized only later, when I spent several years teaching in Bordeaux, how special Grenoble was. It has a big modern campus, lots of foreigners and a lot of academic and scientific research is being carried out there. My work is informed and influenced by this modern context. In art school, our main influence was not art history but *ID* magazine, music and cinema. Then we started to invite scientists to the school, which continued to inform our practice. In 1988 I moved to Paris and we did this post-diploma program at the Institut des Hautes Études en Art Plastique run by Pontus Hulten and Daniel Buren. Philippe Parreno is still in Paris and we keep talking. Our latest idea is to write a science fiction novel, but we have trouble starting it. We are trying to find a system, like Richard Linklater in his films *A Scanner Darkly* and *Waking Life* where he uses a program to turn video footage into cartoon-like images. Like him, we need a program that turns recorded conversations into science fiction literature. It's our project for the next ten years. Science fiction is also connected to Grenoble somehow as it contains so much information and thus escapes any definition, and I think that most of the art of the future is already described in science fiction novels.

**That's right, it reminds me how in a previous interview, the French curator Stephanie Moisdon Trembley mentions your particular relation to science fiction and future fiction, which I think becomes apparent in *Malus* (2004) and also surfaces in *Gold* (2001). *Malus* starts out in a documentary style and is to some extent very political, something that often is subtler in your work. When in the film you are leaving Los Alamos and move towards Monument Valley, there is a moment where you switch between documentary and fiction ...**

The idea for *Malus* (2004) developed after we made the journey. The main reason for this trip to New Mexico and the Monument Valley was to see the White Sands desert and to make the film *Atomic Park* (2003). I had not been to the US in recent years and I really wanted to go to New Mexico. It's an incredible region: very ancient, with 2000-3000 year old Indian cities, with little population, the Mexican border, the story of the 2<sup>nd</sup> world war, and condensing a lot of the US problematic. When I came back to France, I made *Atomic Park* (2003) and together with Ange Leccia who was travelling with me we developed *Malus* (2004). It reflects our working relationship, that is a conversation which is sometimes problematic and also full of shifts and hesitations. We have been doing films together for ten years and have not managed to write one script or scenario together; it's a total failure.

Los Alamos is the site of the first atomic bomb, so the national laboratory based there is still doing all types of new research. And then in Monument Valley we met all these Navajo guys<sup>1</sup>, so we started to tell the story from their side. The result is a combination between

---

<sup>1</sup> *Malus* is constructed like an archival film mixing different sources of images (DV camera and Super 8), and which would have been directed by a Navajo Indian, witness and survivor of the accidental explosion of an experimental climatic weapon in New Mexico. From Los Alamos (laboratory city) to Monument Valley, the narrator reconstitutes the incredible event with found images and tells his experience in Navajo language.

reality and fiction and at the end it goes totally apocalyptic. I have met people who thought the whole work was a straightforward documentary. Perhaps the Navajo language lends a lot of authenticity to the story. So yes, we were really interested in that shift between the documentary and the fictional.

**Thinking of films like *Atomic Park* (2003) or places such as Los Alamos, I wonder what your fascination with atomic weapons is. Is that something you are worried about? The nuclear apocalypse?**

I am from this generation born in 1965 that was totally scared of the atomic bomb. The cold war was going on and as a child I would ask my parents to build an atomic shelter. I was reading too much science fiction... In Grenoble, scientists were working a lot on atomic science and during the 1970's there were also a lot of ecological protesters fighting the nuclear power station next to Grenoble. So I was very concerned. I've since been to Hiroshima and whenever I have nightmares nowadays it has to do with atomic bomb.

**Let's speak about another intriguing format in your work. The first part in *Malus* (2004) is shot in DV and when moving to Monument Valley you switched to Super8. You do gain distance to the viewer and perhaps impose a more nostalgic and melancholic feel. Can you say something about the choice of format and the reason why you are not being precious about showing your films in their original format?**

Well I have never trained in filmmaking; I discovered it with Ange, then bought a small Sony DV camera and jumped straight to 35 mm for *Riyo* (1999), the film in Kyoto, because I wanted everything in the picture. For me there was never any video-cinema conflict, it's just a matter of difference in quality, similar to that between vinyl and CD. I like these different textures and think it's great when they are juxtaposed. I like films to be for the cinema but also do think the TV set at home can be really great. That's one of the reasons why I wanted the DVD to come out.<sup>2</sup> For me the black box and the exhibition situation is not the most attractive, I like cinema and the home situation, though I have to say it's amazing how on any Biennial people get stuck in the dark rooms and pass by the rest. But I think it's never really the best way to show a video, except when it's on multiple screens perhaps. I am tired of loops and 16mm preciousness, but I respect it.

**In *Malus* (2004) the choice of sound seems very conscious – it feels like some secret agent is plugging into your conversation. In other works like *Ile de beauté* (1996), I am under the impression that the sound used is simply what was played on the radio at the time. How do you go about selecting sound for your films?**

*Ile de beauté* (1996) is very specific. Ange Leccia was our professor in Grenoble and I assisted him for Münster Sculpture Project in 1987. We started working together around that period and at that time we were joking about the French Top 50. It was a pop provocation, saying that one liked Stephanie de Monaco's *Ouragan* or stuff from the radio, and when we worked on *Ile de beauté*, some of the music was in the footage and some of it we used as text. Of course it's in French, so it would need some subtitling to be really clear. I was really into radio by then, I would tune in a lot and not make much of a difference between high and low culture. Now my taste has become a bit more specific and I am more interested in the border between sound and music. I have collaborated with Christian Manzutto for *Atomic Park* (2003) and for the three films *Riyo* (1999), *Central* (2001) and *Plage* (2001) with Katja Bonnenfant. Sound is very important to me. I have further worked with people like Alain Bashung or Christophe, who are famous in France since the 1960s, on their concert tours. So this relation to music you can listen to on the radio, music that everybody knows, is also very important to me.

---

<sup>2</sup> *Parc Central* features eleven short films by Dominique and was released by Anna Sanders, a production company founded by the artists Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, Pierre Huyghe, Charles de Meaux and Philippe Parreno in collaboration with Le Consortium, Dijon, in 1997.

**Which leads me to *Ipanema Theories* (1999) and the way you chose to show it on your journeys around the world and now at the São Paulo Biennale.**

*Ipanema Theories* (1999) was made for that "BAL JAUNE" party during FIAC in Paris and then I re-edited it. Ideally it should be an endless re-editing and reuse, always with this mirror effect. We showed it in many places all over the world with different DJ's, but I have liked to keep it outside of the gallery context. Arto Lindsay did a gig once in Italy and people became angry as they were more expecting a concert by him. I have seen it shown in many different atmospheres. I think it can be slowed down by ambient music and pulsed by some beat music. We are planning to do a small party at the Biennale in São Paulo now, in a video bar.

**When you work on projects like *Tropicale Modernité* (1999) at the Mies van der Rohe's Barcelona pavilion, do you think about how you could represent a situation encountered there in an installation afterwards (in this case in *Repulse Bay*, produced in the same year)?**

Which also has the towel situation<sup>3</sup> well ok, but I think I have never really made the connection between the two. *Repulse Bay* is a beach in Hong Kong, and while also referring to tropicality, the installation is an attempt to have an exterior/interior situation where it's hard to differentiate and negotiate your own position. This was also one of the concerns in the Mies van der Rohe's pavilion. You never know if you are inside or outside and the windows lend a certain opacity, quite abstract and without any domestic quality. What I was trying to do in Barcelona was not to follow the modern masterpiece, but instead to provoke and show a perhaps unconscious aspect of the building. Including the neon sign with Asian lettering went against the respect of this architectonic icon and when I placed the two white towels it was to suggest the idea of a sun bath and to encourage other possible uses like the pool house. When I use tropicalisation in my own terminology I do not only mean Tropicalia but also aim to connect an organic immature desire for life, something very teenage-like, so in my imagination there was this thing in the pavilion where people have a bath. And in *Repulse Bay* (1999) this is less precise, it is more an attempt to bring an outdoor situation inside the gallery. The work has an architectural moment, in the sense it is contained, and has this tropical concern.

**For the exhibition *Tropicalia*<sup>4</sup>, you made a new piece in collaboration with Brazilian musician Arto Lindsay. While the cinematic aspect of *Bahia Desorientada* (2005) shows waves of debris, like a vinyl record or plastic bottle settling on the beach, the simple wooden support structure reminds me of Lina Bo Bardi's architecture. How do you interpret the recent interest in Brazilian culture and Tropicalia in particular in Europe?**

My first idea was to make a film about the debris of tropicalism and to structure it like a song because Tropicalia has this strong relation to music. So there is a chorus, and together with Arto we decided to have sound only during the chorus, when you hear the waves. The visual quotes like the vinyl and CD reference the strong influence of music in the Tropicalia moment and the ropes look like they come from a work by Helio Oiticica. To make sure they wouldn't just show it on a small screen in a corner I made this very small

---

<sup>3</sup> Both works contain white towels neatly laid out on the floor.

<sup>4</sup> *Tropicália: a revolution in Brazilian culture, 1967-1972* was curated by Carlos Basualdo and toured the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, Barbican Gallery, London, Centro Cultural de Belém, Lisbon and The Bronx Museum of Arts, Bronx, New York (2006-2007)

theatre stage made of pink wood that you can find anywhere here in Brazil. So to some extent *Bahia Desorientada* (2005) is reminiscent of the SESC Pompeia in São Paulo<sup>5</sup> and of other projects Bo Bardi has done in Salvador or even the Teatro Oficina<sup>6</sup> in São Paulo. When I see a lot of people in Paris walking around with Brazil T-Shirts, I think Brazil has somehow replaced the US in the imaginary, as a place where people live together. There is a very strong need for this Dionysian feel: a more organic and mixed society and a less controlled environment. The more Europe is *Switzerlandized*, the more the fantasy for this out of control and high volume place will grow. Since the US have lost their role of catalyst and their place in our imagination, I think Brazil has managed to capture these voids, also because it has a strong drive and it is a non-imperialistic country. Although people are scared of violence – being there is very hard on a psychological level, it's like meeting a crazy person, it's a crazy country – there are also good things like ecology, the forest and animals. All this is interesting for me to study, and I slowly watch and listen.

**In your earlier works such as *Central* (2001) or *Riyo* (1999), the disrupted narratives played a very dominant role. For example, when you are shooting in Hong Kong the viewer is confronted with an early morning atmosphere stirred by the rain and tranquilized by expectation. Then you mention a planned encounter with your brother at the harbour there, something that remains unresolved. These very poignant elements seem to be disappearing from your work.**

Yes I think you are right, my work has become more abstract and I don't think I would now use these more emotional narratives, but it could come back.

**For the 27th São Paulo Biennale entitled *Como viver junto*, you have worked on an intervention in the modern architecture of the pavilion designed by Oscar Niemeyer and in the adjacent marquise. In what way do you feel this is a continuation of your concerns?**

I think *Tropicale Modernité* (1999) in Barcelona was really the beginning of these ideas, which ended two years ago with the show at de Singel in Antwerp, titled *Tropicalisation* (2004). Designed by a Belgian architect from the 1970s, the building seemed to quote Le Corbusier and Niemeyer, so I decided to make ten proposals on the scale of the building. The work went beyond dropping a few accessories and using the logic of the building: it spoke its language in a twisted way. My interest in the subject then reached a certain limit and I have used the last two years to think about what I am still concerned with: producing objects – no; working in galleries – no; museums – maybe if I have an idea of how to edit things. But one thing that has stayed with me is an interest in developing this dialogue with buildings and architecture. So I think for Münster<sup>7</sup> I will also work in that direction. For São Paulo, I worked with a replica of the omnipresent columns in Ibirapuera Parque. In the open space, the work encountered skaters, bikers and joggers and had no protection as such, whereas the other set was within the pavilion and people knew it was art. One of the ideas is to also make a film of both settings. This is how from Barcelona to de Singel, via Documenta 11 and some other projects, the desire has grown to producing sets and situations that are not only models but are on a full architectural scale.

This interview was first published in Spanish in *Exit Express*, Madrid, November 2006.

---

<sup>5</sup> Lina Bo Bardi transformed an old refrigerator factory in a leisure centre, the SESC Pompeia, which opened in 1982. Preserving the history and ambient of the industrial brick building, Bo Bardi allowed for ample open space, which allows for encounters of visitors coming for different activities to the multipurpose facility.

<sup>6</sup> Teatro Oficina was founded in 1958 by a group of students from the Escola Direito do Largo São Francisco in São Paulo. The first larger presentation happened in 1963 when José Celso Martinez Corrêa directed *Pequenos Bourgeses* by Górkí.

<sup>7</sup> For Münster Sculpture Project, 2007