

# EVERYTHING MUST BECOME LIKE WHAT IT WILL NEVER BE

Stijn Huijts (2004)

from: E\*V\*O\*L E\*Y\*E LAND\*S-END

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It's October 2001. Jennifer Tee and I are in a car on our way to Oxford, to pick up a work by Hélio Oiticica at the Oxford MOMA. The item is a 'box-bolide' from '65-'66, from the collection of the famous London author and art critic Guy Brett. We will have it on loan for Tee's solo exhibition IN AIR I PRESUME\*\*\* THE NON-LOGICAL HUNT FOR TOVERKNAL, which will be presented in the fall of that year in the Museum Het Domein in Sittard. I have to drive on the left side of the road – a prospect that I dreaded at first but which is working out fine in practice. Nirvana is playing on the stereo, a band that I've finally caught on to ten years after the date. I'm making a thorough study of their work, so I carry Charles Cross' Cobain biography *Heavier than heaven* in my bag and have fed all their albums in the car's CD player. Occasionally we join Kurt Cobain in a posthumous trio: "with the lights out/ it's less dangerous/ here we are now/ entertain us" and "I'm so happy/ 'cause today I found my friends/ they're in my head".

In between we talk at length. About preparations for the upcoming show of course, but most of all about our interests in art, our role models and our sources of inspiration. Preparing a project with Tee, one soon discovers how broad her bearings are in the world of art and culture. The conversation is often kaleidoscopic, a heady brew of unexpected connections and associations that assert themselves in rapid succession. Inevitably, each meeting leads to sizeable amount of homework, in the form of a list of literature to read, films to watch, music to check out, and so on.

One of the topics of conversation is the work of the Norwegian artist Bjarne Melgaard, another cultural omnivore of which we are both fans. For the most part, Melgaard's installations offer a complex accrochage of all kinds of objects made by him and others, regularly including sculptures or paintings that other people have made according to his instructions. It all comes together through the artist's personal 'handwriting', both literally, in the form of written texts, and metaphorically, in his distinctive drawings and paintings. Melgaard's work centres on an existential exploration of personal mythologies, in which the artist alternately identifies with a range of art-historical or (sub)cultural phenomena. His

mythological worlds are populated by a variety of protagonists, ranging from artists like Paul Gauguin, Ray Johnson and Guy Debord, to gay porn stars and Norwegian Black Metal singers.

Undoubtedly, this interest in personal mythologies is equally present in the work of Jennifer Tee. In her installation *down the chimney* (1999), a leading role is played by her family, who have been invited by the artist to re-enact their most primal fears and fantasies in a bizarre collection of personal footage. The installation *snowhere tee tee tee* unravels the sci-fi-delic past of *lullaillaco*, which was shown in 2000 in Amsterdam's Stedelijk Museum, involved the staging of a fictional expedition to the heights of the Peruvian Andes. Here Tee goes in search of the mummy Juanita, who turns out to bear a striking physical likeness to the artist herself. The idea of the voyage of discovery or the expedition will continue to prove a key metaphor in Tee's installations in the years ahead. A good example is the show she made for the Van Abbe Museum in Eindhoven, *nameless swirls*, an unfolding in presence. This project, made in collaboration with a designer and two other artists, was set up as a caravan trek through an imaginary desert to the mythical site of 'Kharkorum'.

When during our drive to Oxford Jennifer reveals the title of her upcoming show in Sittard, it again reflects the metaphorical wanderlust that is so characteristic of her work. In this exhibition, *in air i presume\*\*\** the non-logical hunt for *toverknaal*, the artist seeks to combine - in her inimitable way - the artistic digestion of her experiences during a stay in the northeast of Brazil (where the artist undertook a study of the Afro-Brazilian cult of Candomblé) with an imaginary meeting between the artists Öyvind Fahlström (1928-1976) and Hélio Oiticica (1937-1980). Although Fahlström and Oiticica both grew up in Brazil, and were active in the international art scene in more or less the same period, they apparently never met. In the artist's game of the imagination, however, such a meeting can take place. It acquires the same casualness as the legendary rendezvous between Henry Morton Stanley and David Livingstone in 1871 on the shores of Lake Tanganjika, an encounter that is echoed in the title of the exhibition.

Both Melgaard and Tee employ strategies in their work that are characteristic of certain kinds of (children's) games, in which reality is taken measure of in the setting of a fantasy world. In this world, the heroes can have all kinds of adventures, and, analogous to what takes place in art, the cognitive and the imaginary merge into a single experience. Discussing the relation between art and games, Kant wrote that he viewed the aesthetic communication as a game of imagination and reason, among other things. Johan Huizinga in *Homo Ludens* explicitly connects the game with (visual) art, when he deals with the "profound aesthetic quality of the game."

Another important element of the game's appeal as a visual strategy must be its fundamentally anarchic nature. Playing a game entails a sense of freedom, a momentary release from the strictures of daily life within a temporary activity with its own clearly defined purpose. Such notions can easily be brought in connection with Tee's preoccupation with the artistic possibilities of the concept of an event or festival, which she later worked out in her exhibition for the Van Abbe Museum. This preoccupation also explains her marked interest in Situationism, the artistic movement headed by one of Tee's heroes, Guy Debord (1931-1994). In a text dating from 1958, Debord explains that a "constructed situation" revolves around "a moment of life concretely and deliberately constructed by the collective organization of a unitary ambiance and a game of events."

We are nearing Oxford. Kurt Cobain sings, "Come as you are/ as you were/ like a friend/ like an old enemy". I suddenly realize that the theme of our trip to Oxford - like the exhibition planned in Sittard - is (re)discovery, the re-acquaintance with legendary figures from the world of art, literature, science and music. Idols that passed too soon, heroes of marginal culture. "Seja marginal, Seja hero" (Be marginal, be a hero) reads one of the banners that Hélio Oiticica produced in 1968, which could also be seen at Tee's show in Museum Het Domein. With an intense, almost child-like empathy, Tee engages herself with her subjects and with the related protagonists, and those collaborating with her are irrevocably sucked into this kaleidoscopic whirlwind of imagination. In the end, it comes down to doing things with love and dedication, so that something as mundane as retrieving a work in loan can suddenly become enveloped in ritual, a trip to Oxford can take on the feel of a pilgrimage, an artistic quest.

The 'holy grail' - the box-bolide we have to pick up - is part of the *Experiment Experiencia* show in Oxford's Museum of Modern Art. The show, an exhibition covering Brazilian art from 1958 to the present day, includes, besides Oiticica, a number of other well known artists like Lygia Clark and Lygia Pape, as well as the younger generation of people like Jose Damasceno and Ernesto Neto. In consultation with the owner and the museum it has been decided that we can pick up the piece on the last day of the exhibition, after closing time, a highly irregular procedure that is in keeping with Oiticica's anti-bureaucratic spirit. As the exhibition closes on Sunday at 5 pm and we arrive on Saturday afternoon, there's plenty of time for sightseeing and further conversation.

Sunday morning first brings a visit to the museum that sheds light on the history of the university - The Oxford Story. In this exhibition, you trundle through the show in a cart like in the haunted house at the fun fair. Afterwards we hurry off to the Oxford Museum of Natural History, in order to gaze upon the only surviving head and leg of the Dodo. Quite recently I finished David Quammen's magnum opus *The Song of the*

Dodo. Island Biogeography in an Age of Extinctions, so I am able to give a lecture on the creature before us. The Dodo, or 'Raphus cucullatus' was a flightless bird of convivial appearance that lived on the island of Mauritius but died out in the course of the 17th century. Its extinction can probably be attributed to the monkeys and pigs that were set loose in its habitat by Dutch and Portuguese sailors. These alien species, having no natural enemies on the island, multiplied exponentially, meanwhile feasting on the Dodo eggs and hatchlings. The Dodo population was soon wiped out. The Dodo reminds Jennifer of an original, nature-based culture in the sense implied by the ethnographer Lévi-Strauss, whose *Tristes Tropiques* (1955) she is currently reading. She is fascinated by his definition of an ideal society: ".a society that no longer exists, possibly never has existed, probably never will exist, but of which we should nonetheless have a clear conception, in order to be able to assess our current situation."

Naturally, Jennifer is also familiar with the Dodo from the world-famous children's book *Alice in Wonderland*. In the third chapter the bird instigates a circle race, a means of getting the animals dry after the wet-tening experience of Alice's lake of tears in the previous chapter. As the author of *Alice in Wonderland*, Lewis Carroll, is a famous Oxonian, the museum also offers a presentation dedicated to him and his legendary book from 1865. Lewis Carroll was the pen name of Charles Lutwidge Dodgson (1832-1898), mathematician, photographer and storyteller, who at the start of the 1860s entertained the schoolchildren of Oxford with fantastic riddles and stories. He did this during boat trips or visits to the Museum of Natural History, where he never failed to call the children's attention to the Dodo, apparently because Dodgson himself suffered from a pronounced stammer: Do-Do-Dodgson.

In one of the display cases we discover the white rabbit that entices Alice to enter *Wonderland* at the beginning of the story. "Look there's the artist," I say, pointing out the rabbit. I allude to the artist's role as someone who tempts people to 'disappear' from daily life, if only for a moment. The artist challenges the audience to lose itself in an archaeology of past, present and future, to wander like Alice in a parallel world. In this world, evanescent and imaginable reality can be refound in a heightened state of awareness, as in one of those rare moments in life that only become apparent in hindsight.

For her show in Museum Het Domein, Tee made a 'shed' that served as the only entrance to the exhibition, working as a kind of site de passage, like the seemingly bottomless pit that Alice plummets through when she follows the rabbit down the hole. Inside the shed, wax stalactites, a collection of egg-shaped lamps and various mysterious objects form a setting that allows the visitor to prepare himself for his journey to the parallel world of the artist.

We arrive at the Oxford MOMA at around 3 pm. We take our time viewing the exhibition, and ultimately find 'our' box-bolide in the section dealing with Hélio Oiticica. It's a small locker with the sides partially painted in primary colours – a kind of three-dimensional Mondrian - with a lid on one side that can open up. Within is an oblong transparent plastic bag that has been filled with pigment of an intense blue colour. The bag can be unfolded, allowing an imprint in golden letters to be read: "do meu sangue/ do meu suor/ este amor viverá" (through my blood/ through my sweat/ this love will live).

A separate room houses a dress rack with a number of remakes of Oiticica's 'parangolés': experimental items of clothing designed by the artist that help the wearer to undergo a sensory artistic experience. The visitor is explicitly invited to fit on one of the garments and see how it looks in one of the nearby mirrors. Without hesitation we both pull a parangolé over our heads. They are brilliantly coloured and are made of a variety of surprising materials. Some of the clothes also bear texts, like "da adversidade vivemos" (we live by hard luck), or "incorporo a revolta" (I embody the revolt). Jennifer parades around the exhibition space with a triumphant expression. I think I am getting more and more of an idea what she means when she refers to the creation of a moment of experience, a brief merging of art and individual. It is closely related to the ideas formulated by Oiticica in 1969, when discussing his project Eden: "It's a kind of mythical place for feelings, for actions, for making things and creating your own inner cosmos [...] For me all art revolves around this: the need for a supersensual meaning to life, the transformation of artistic processes into lived-through feelings." I try on another parangolé and read the nametag: Cape nr. 18, 'Nirvana'.

Three years on Jennifer Tee is creating her own Eden in São Paulo: [feasting on the] E\*V\*O\*L E\*Y\*E -LAND \*S\*-END an outburst of passion in limbo. The piece attempts to convey a moment of intensity, an instant in which many of the concepts outlined above merge with Oscar Niemeyer's architecture and the designs made by Roberto Burle Marx for the Ibirapuera Park. The presentation is conceived as a locus amoenus, a congenial environment. People, objects and space connect to the extent that one can experience a moment of liberation, a temporary intensification of life and consciousness. A situationistic transitional state between dream and reality, where everything is bathed in the light from 'un autre monde' - an enormous ceramic chandelier that forms one of the centerpieces of the installation. It is a place where various objects, like a gigantic sculpture whose shape is reminiscent of both the DNA double helix and a warm and swirling heart, give form to the chemistry between kindred spirits. A space where new heroes like Grandville and Lévi-Strauss are introduced, and island biogeography suddenly gains unexpected artistic meaning.