

The Case of the Ridiculous Curator

Andrea Gorki in
Conversation with
Ludovik Vermeersch



I've met a young French poet here. I'm amazed and excited about the calm, objective, modest, and clear way he writes and thinks about art. He's very interested in my work and he will write about my drawings.¹ Ernst Ludwig Kirchner in a letter to Ernst Gosebruch on 21 January 1920²

How We Met

Ludovik Vermeersch: During the summer of 2017, Andrea Gorki approached me with a long and obsequious email containing a request to meet with me. She announced a plan to make a lecture performance about my work as a curator. 'I would be thrilled if you...' etc. A couple more e-mails followed, each less composed than the previous ones. 'Not sure if my e-mails are getting through', she wrote. What better signal than my silence could I have sent her to make it clear that I wasn't interested? She asked whether an interview over the phone would work if meeting in person was too difficult.

In her first letter, Gorki had introduced herself as a visual artist. I looked her up on the internet, but found no clues as to her artistic activities. A few weeks later I received another email, which came with a premature sketch of her lecture. This document shed some light on her intentions and showed that she was hoping to 'deconstruct' my work. Nothing in her writing particularly excited me, her explanation was sometimes difficult to follow. Her choice to target my person, apparent already from her working title, was based on the wrong premise. 'Which part of you is staged', she wanted to know, 'and which part is authentic?' She seemed more interested in the construction of my persona than the artistic position that my work represented.

I'm not opposed to criticism, but I don't feel obliged to assist every would-be critic of mine with extensive interviews. I thought it wiser to let Miss Gorki figure out my work as if I didn't exist. If my voice nonetheless features in the following conversation, I hope Gorki manages to reach the 'point where only language acts, "performs", and not "me"', as a French philosopher once wrote.³

Andrea Gorki: I first met Ludovik Vermeersch on 2 April 2017, after he had just given a lecture performance on

abstract art at me Collectors Room Berlin.⁴ Vermeersch had long grey hair, a ferocious beard, and impressive eyebrows. His charismatic stage presence contrasted with a surprising air of uncertainty in person. When I approached him to introduce myself, he was slightly evasive. He had earned himself a cigarette, he said, and he didn't invite me along as he hurried outside.

Vermeersch lectured with an intensity of expression unlike the cautious, academic attitude that curators nowadays display. But he managed to make the demanding content of his ninety-minute talk digestible—somewhat of a tour de force. Vermeersch's opening question was: Why is abstract painting still so popular in the twenty-first century? His answer: because of the audience's desire to indulge in some form of veneration. Let me try to summarize his argument.

Finding the roots of abstraction in ornament, Vermeersch identified 'dysfunctional referentiality' as the main ingredient of abstract art. By generating mystery, confusion, and ambiguity, abstract images could draw the viewer into a state of not-knowing. Leaning on the mystical theology of Pseudo-Dionysius, Vermeersch argued that the bewilderment experienced by the viewers would enhance their desire to be initiated into a higher level of knowing, to witness some form of revelation, thus creating the conditions for a cult of the image. To achieve this effect nowadays, however, the abstract painter could not rely purely on shapes and colours. To successfully draw the viewers into a 'puzzled involvement', the artist had to turn narrative into an accomplice of her subversion.

To demonstrate his theory, Vermeersch gave a detailed account of his collaboration with six young abstract artists in Berlin. Over the course of two years, he had coached them 'to move away from their obsession with formal abstraction and to concentrate on achieving a contextual abstraction'. The way Vermeersch prioritized his own theoretical agenda at the expense of the artists' personal investigations was questionable. And it was equally puzzling why the artists hadn't shown any signs of resistance.

Towards the end of the lecture, the suggestion was raised that one of the six artists, Jens Presser, was in fact

the architect of the project. Presser, it was insinuated, had invented the five other artists, as well as their work. By implication, Ludovik Vermeersch himself was just a character in Presser's scheme and the lecture was just a parody. But you couldn't be sure. Although Presser was present that evening, he didn't provide conclusive evidence in support of this thesis. After the performance, the artist participated in a conversation with Vermeersch and art historian Rahel Schrohe. The discussion was entirely scripted. Presser read his part from a paper, occasionally stumbling over a sentence, which made it hard to figure out what was actually going on—probably an intended effect of the 'contextual abstraction' Vermeersch sought to establish.

Several months passed and my confusion still lingered. I kept referring to this intriguing event in conversations. I bugged my artist friends with the tedious doubts that painters typically have about painting—doubts reawakened by Vermeersch's lecture. Feeling compelled to respond to this peculiar curator, I started working on a lecture performance of my own.

When I wrote Vermeersch, he immediately agreed to meet and to discuss the topics in his work that I found problematic. I gave my lecture the working title 'The Ridiculous Curator' in the spirit of what Vermeersch had termed 'pseudo-iconoclasm'. I think he enjoyed that subtle provocation. He gave constructive comments when I showed him a draft of my lecture performance, which was eventually presented in Antwerp and Berlin in the spring of 2018.⁵ Many people were intrigued. They asked, who on earth is this Ludovik Vermeersch?⁶ One reaction was surprising. 'The parts where you describe your interaction with Vermeersch sound a bit contrived, you mention too many details', a young man told me. I've since cut down on the details. I hope it's more convincing that way. Still, even if I invented my meetings with Vermeersch, they may nonetheless furnish our understanding of his persona and project. Imagining a person's reasoning, getting inside their head, putting oneself in their shoes can sometimes be more revealing than asking them to explain themselves.

The Charismatic Narcissist⁷

AG: Thank you for taking the time to talk with me. As you know, I saw your lecture performance *Personally, I'm Most Interested in the Shapes and Colours* in Berlin and it left me somewhat devastated. I felt that your method of 'transfigurative recontextualization' humiliated the artists you worked with. As an abstract painter, I was drawn to your talk because it was announced as a discussion of 'abstract art's continued potential as a disruptive practice'. But I don't think anyone who saw the lecture would have thought: 'Gee, I'm going to buy myself some brushes and start painting shapes and colours.' Quite the opposite. If I may be frank, there was something destructive in the way you approached the painters' creative process, something vicious that went way beyond simple irony.

LV: I see what you mean. I don't think it was vicious, though. I admit that it's a bit provocative to continuously remind the audience of painting's futility when you're introducing a group of painters. However, my point was that focusing only on the formal qualities of a painting is inconsequential if you want to create a disruptive experience for the viewer. You have to work with the narratives surrounding the works! Some form of destruction was necessary to make this point. Iconoclasm is part and parcel of all truly innovative projects. Even if some of my artists took a bit of time to digest my provocations, I'm sure they got something out of it. It's no use making art if you don't manage to develop an indestructible confidence in what you do.

AG: Have you spoken with the artists since the project's conclusion?

LV: Jens Presser is the only one I've regularly spoken with.

AG: Wouldn't it be interesting to follow up on their work?

LV: None of the others seemed too excited to stay in touch.

AG: Did your book and lecture benefit their careers in any way?

LV: I don't think so. Jens has accompanied me on a few presentations. He seemed to enjoy the project a lot.

AG: What if your attempts at innovation lead to a point where the destruction is beyond repair?

LV: You're overestimating my powers as a curator. The artists can take my suggestions or leave them. If someone doesn't agree, he'll move on. Also, there's nothing worse than an artist who doesn't believe in his own work. Whichever strategy you choose, you have to be dead serious about it.

AG: The philosopher Boris Groys defines the curator as an iconoclast, as an 'agent of art's profanation'.⁸ Comparing the curator's powers to those of the artist, he concludes: 'The independent curator is a radically secularized artist. But he is an artist who has lost the artist's aura, who no longer has magical transformative powers at his disposal, who cannot endow objects with artistic status.'⁹ Do Groys' ideas resonate with your experience as a curator? Do you consider yourself an artist?

LV: In a way, Groys perpetuates the structuralist idea that not only the writer but also the reader should be seen as an author. I share this belief, and it rightfully invalidates the conventional distinction between the artist as the one who creates, and the curator as the one who merely selects. Ever since Marcel Duchamp created his *Fountain* by pseudonymously signing a urinal, the act of selecting the right object is enough to turn you into an artist. But Groys wrongly assumes that this expanded definition of authorship is reflected 'de facto' in an expanded range of options from which the public chooses when they identify 'the author' of a work of art. He thinks it's an accomplished fact that nowadays we detect a collective authorship, where in the past, we would only have seen a traditional 'sovereign' author at work.¹⁰ That is wishful thinking. Sure, the notion of individual authorship is a myth. But that's no reason why we'd stop seeing it everywhere and believing in it. The illusion is way too appealing.

AG: I'm not sure I follow you. If I make a painting, I'm the author. Why would that be an illusion? It's not like I have a group of assistants working for me.

LV: I don't agree. We all have assistants. If you're a painter, it starts with the anonymous people who make your canvas, the company that produces your oil paints, the manufacturer of the camera you use to make the pictures you laboriously copy, with brushes that come from China. There's the nude model who may agree to pose for you, the teacher who tells you what can be improved, your fellow painters whose ideas you steal, the intern who writes the press release for the gallery that puts your name in its window, and so on. There's an endless chain of people who are never named but who are your co-authors. And I'm not even mentioning the accomplices you need in order to assert your authorship over the things you believe you created when you're on your way to becoming famous.

That all this is not already obvious to you shows how difficult it is to dismantle the illusion of the single author. So here's the twist: I'd be nothing but a bore if I kept trying to debunk that illusion. That's why I'm promoting another strategy, that is: to embrace the myth, along with the narcissism that underlies it. So, to answer your initial question: yes, I do consider myself a kind of artist, but I don't buy Groys' analysis. Of course, there are curators who fit his definition just fine. Think of the exhibitions that Anselm Franke stages at Haus der Kulturen der Welt here in Berlin. But I'm different, I keep striving for the transfiguration of the commonplace, to use Arthur Danto's words. I see myself as an enlightened mediator of art's magical powers. And in the project we're talking about, I even go beyond that role. I'm offering an aesthetic experience that the artists are unable to create by themselves.

AG: The question is whether the experience you create doesn't come at the expense of the artists' individual works.

LV: That is only worrisome if you truly believed in the fiction of individual authorship!

AG: But you've just said you decided to advocate this fiction.

LV: No, I said I advocate the idea that we should embrace this fiction, while being conscious of the fact that it is a fiction.

AG: Isn't that the same thing?

LV: Not at all. The latter option is the enlightened one. It's like the difference, say, between promoting God as a real entity and promoting Him as material for a good story, knowing that He doesn't exist. You see, here's an ambiguity that I haven't fully come to terms with myself: I don't mind destroying the nicely framed image of the single author to let the viewers know they're being fooled. But deep down, I'm too eager to stick my own head through the emptied frame and say, look here, I'm the authority!

AG: That's very candid. You said that narcissism underlies the fiction of the single author. Does that also apply to how you've just analyzed yourself? Can I compare your persona to Narcissus? Maybe to a Narcissus who is aware of his delusion, who knows he is looking at his own reflection, but is unable to break the spell?

LV: I've called myself a 'pseudo-iconoclast' on several occasions, exactly because I'm aware of the dialectics of iconophilia and iconoclasm.¹¹ The need to destroy images is mostly rooted in the strong conviction that they have a harmful effect. That they seduce you, for instance, to believe in the wrong God. So, the iconoclast acknowledges the power of the image at least as much as the iconophile. And when, eventually, the iconoclast starts putting the results of his destructive actions on display, he's just creating the icons of a new regime. That's also what Groys' 'profane' curators do. As far as narcissism goes... I'm just trying to avoid your question (*laughs*). No, I don't really have a problem admitting my narcissistic streak. But when I mentioned narcissism before, I meant it more metaphorically. I don't want to argue that all artists are narcissists. Although I'd have to admit that they often display the symptoms.

AG: Any examples?

LV: I don't know. Just look around. Or take the latest book by that journalist who travelled around the world asking famous artists: 'What is an artist?'¹² It's full of quotes about omnipotence, magical powers, the urge for unconditional love... In psychoanalysis, the artist is seen as a pathological narcissist by definition. Think of Otto Rank. Almost a hundred years ago, he thought it was a necessary condition for every artist of some importance to systematically overestimate his own powers and to withdraw into the delusional belief that his art was the highest of all.¹³ Of course, this is absurd, and this is not the point I want to make. It is possible, however, to apply this diagnosis to the social construction that is 'the artist'. You could argue that a structural narcissism is embedded in society's understanding of what it entails to be an artist. The way society celebrates the ultimate singularity of a select group of artists reflects the desires of a collective narcissistic libido. Unrestrained by rational considerations, inebriated with narcissistic lust, the collective gives in to the urge to adorn some of its members with a highly exceptional status. The bogus image of the successful artist kindles in certain young people the budding of an artistic calling. They lose their mind and choose to devote their life to art. A heroic gesture, you'd almost say.¹⁴ I'm exaggerating slightly (*laughs*). But you see my point. The desire to become an artist is grounded in the illusion of sovereign authorship.

AG: So even if you could, you wouldn't necessarily want to demythologize the special status of artistic creativity. You don't want to blow out the flame that keeps it going. You want to keep intact the idea of an undefinable quality that gives the 'outstanding' artist the power to transfigure objects into art.

LV: Very well put, Miss Gorki. Naturally, we all know it's the institution that anoints the artist, that grants him this supposed power. A power that turns out to be very fragile, by the way. Yet the illusion that the artist himself, or herself, is ultimately responsible for these transfigurations is an incredible source of uplifting energy for the self. And thus, why not

embrace this particular understanding of authorship? In the late seventies, Pierre Bourdieu called this the 'charismatic ideology'.¹⁵ Today, even with the advent of artistic research, this ideology still dominates the art world.¹⁶ How could you possibly counter that?

I tell [Jeff Koons] that I am fascinated by artists' personas. The author of an artwork is part of its meaning, is he not... I've asked you about your persona twice, I say, and you have evaded the question twice. Sarah Thornton¹⁷

The Extended Self

AG: In the closing chapter of your lecture performance, you showed a video that featured Jens Presser, the most 'playful' of your six artists. However, he was a different person from the Presser who had appeared in an earlier video. This Presser sounded much more authoritative. He claimed that the other artists had been his alter egos. It was as if a veil had been lifted and the truth was exposed. But you were quick to deny his statement. It had just been another layer in your narrative, staged to sow confusion. At the end, you put your own authority into question by suggesting that you might very well be a fictional character and that you were, after all, 'performing a script'. That suggestion was then played out in the conversation that followed: the text was read from a sheet of paper and you didn't say much anymore. The audience left the event wondering whether they had missed a crucial piece of information. Was the whole set-up of the lecture fake? What about the artworks? Were they merely props? Two decisive elements for the viewers' aesthetic judgement were thrown overboard: the attribution of authorship and the possibility of affirming the authenticity of what they had seen.

LV: All true. But what do you want me to say to that?

AG: There's a paradox in your project. Your lecture tried to criticize and hinder the audience's tendency to identify the author of an artwork. Yet, you've now made it clear that in your own position as an author or curator, you're unwilling

to give up that same self-centred perspective. It wouldn't be so hard to find more sincere ways of putting your critique of authorship into practice. I'm thinking of collaborative art projects or anonymous artist collectives like the Guerilla Girls. You're not taking that path, because you seem obsessed with what you're trying to criticize. You introduce the concept of the alter ego in order to play a game of hide and seek that may be enjoyable for whoever is pulling the strings, but that doesn't resolve the desire that underlies the 'charismatic ideology'.

LV: I never contradict a good paradox. This one draws us deeper into our discussion of narcissism. I'd have to return to Otto Rank. You may think I'm his biggest fan, but that's not the case. Have you read Dostoevsky's story *The Double*?

AG: I think I have.

LV: It's one of many stories from the nineteenth century that feature the phenomenon of the *Doppelgänger*. Rank wrote a book about this literary figure. You may laugh, but what did he find the double's emergence symptomatic of? Narcissistic fixation! The narratives always follow a similar pattern: a protagonist, characterized by a lack of *Liebesfähigkeit*, creates a second self that is much more charming, knowledgeable, and successful than his first self. In the beginning, the double appears as his benevolent accomplice, but soon he develops into his most intimate rival. The stories then usually end on a destructive note. The same goes for Dostoevsky's novel, where the main character, Yakov Petrovich Golyadkin, is eventually sent to an asylum. Dostoevsky serves you the story in a particularly powerful way, because as a reader, you're never sure if Golyadkin's confusion is the result of his imagination or if the double is actually real. His state of mind is transferred to us: we're uncertain of what exactly is going on. This leads us into the mental state of 'active discovery', as Monroe Beardsley termed it.

AG: So the mechanism of doubling doesn't actually offer a useful escape route, but it creates an interesting aesthetic experience?

LV: Precisely! As a solution to the narcissist's problem, the double is hilariously unhelpful: you're so fixated on yourself that the only way out of your obsession seems the creation of a second self. The second self may be less obsessed with himself, and possibly more concerned with the world. Unfortunately, the latter self only exists in your imagination! So, creating a double doesn't amount to a clever attempt at escape from the self. You might turn paranoid, just as Golyadkin did. However, as an artistic strategy—and here we move far away from the pathological—the double can become a very interesting device, especially when you want to challenge the public's tendency to confuse the author with his work and draw misguided conclusions. The funny thing here is, when you look at examples of artistic alter egos, you can sometimes see how the pathological dynamic of the double plays out in them. I've actually written an article on this subject.¹⁸

AG: I saw that, but it's in Dutch.

LV: A recent example is Joe Scanlan. His alter ego stirred up considerable debate. In the early 2000s, Scanlan created the persona of an African-American woman named Donelle Woolford. You'd almost think the white Ivy League professor Scanlan had designed her to cause himself trouble. But by the time her presence at the 2014 Whitney Biennial finally led his critics to accuse him of insensitivity to gender and race inequalities, this seemed to take him by surprise.¹⁹

Or take the poet Ern Malley. A very interesting case. In 1944, the Australian poets James McAuley and Harold Stewart concocted a scheme to ridicule their colleagues on the avant-garde spectrum of the scene, who didn't show much interest in their conventional poetry. One afternoon, the duo invented a poet who had died young and had left the world seventeen poems, one of which was unfinished. His name was Ern Malley. In a frenzy of vexed inspiration, the anti-modernist gentlemen created Malley's body of work in just a few hours, using the avant-garde methods of collage and *écriture automatique* that they despised.²⁰ They made the deceased poet's fictional sister send the poems, along with a sketch of the young man's tragic biography, to the

avant-garde poetry journal *Angry Penguins*. The editor of the journal, the poet Max Harris, immediately recognized in Malley an experimental genius, and devoted the next edition of the magazine to his discovery.

Shortly after the poems' publication, the hoax was revealed. Remarkably, Harris didn't budge. He remained convinced and defended the quality of Malley's work. Several modernist critics, among them Herbert Read, spoke up in defence of the poems. To every true avant-gardist, this story was proof of how effective surrealist and dadaist methods were, regardless of the author's actual intentions. The alter ego, sent on a mission to expose the innovators' useless criteria, had defected to the other side. Malley's post-humous oeuvre of seventeen poems eventually became more influential and more famous than the rest of McAuley's and Stewart's work. Half a century later, Harold Stewart felt the need to comment that 'perhaps neither McAuley nor I ever existed except in the imagination of Ern Malley'.²¹

AG: That's a great story.

LV: Isn't it? But my favourite one is that of the French writer Romain Gary. With Gary, a deep motivation becomes apparent. Deeper than the ocean's deepest waters. He played the game of the alter ego with extremely serious devotion. His case may sound pathological, but he managed to lift his subterfuge into the realm of art. You see, this man was famous. He had won the Prix Goncourt in 1956 with *Les racines du ciel* (*The Roots of Heaven*). He was a celebrity, he married the film star Jean Seberg in the sixties. But in the early seventies, his star began to wane. He felt trapped in the straitjacket of stereotypes the media had put him in. 'On m'avait fait une gueule', he would later write.²²

So what did he do? He decided to publish a novel under the pseudonym Émile Ajar, to see whether he could free himself from his image. The book, *Gros-Câlin*, appeared in 1974 and was an immediate success. Gary felt that journalists would request interviews with Ajar, so he employed his nephew Paul Pavlowitch to play the role of his alter ego, initially just as a voice on the phone. Their collaboration would go on for seven years and was only put to an end by

Gary's suicide. The dynamic between the author and the performer of his alter ego was exemplary of Rank's schema: it went from innocent complicity to mutual suspicion and rivalry.

Initially, Pavlowitch, who was a passionate reader, was eager to participate in what Gary called his 'roman total'.²³ But as their collaboration developed, and Gary finished the manuscript for Ajar's second novel, *La vie devant soi* (*The Life Before Us*), Pavlowitch started to put more and more of his own personality into the role. When the author decided that Ajar needed a public face, this produced a fundamental disagreement: Gary wanted Pavlowitch to use make-up and to disguise himself to avoid identification. But Pavlowitch, wanting to be more than just a pawn in his uncle's game, sent out a photograph in which he was clearly recognizable.²⁴

It didn't take long before a journalist tracked Pavlowitch down. As his family ties with Romain Gary were no secret, the true identity behind the pseudonym 'Ajar' was dangerously close to being revealed. Gary had to come up with a new strategy. He decided to fictionalize elements of Pavlowitch's real life to make it more convincing that the latter was indeed the author of Ajar's writings. Not only had his fictional alter ego taken on a recognizable face, it now also gained a body. Gary produced a book with the title *Pseudo*, which posed as Ajar's autobiography. It portrayed Pavlowitch/Ajar as mentally ill, and featured his struggles during psychiatric treatment in Copenhagen. This strategy appeared to work, it convinced the readers of Ajar's authenticity. The trope of the mad artist never fails! The real, perfectly sane Pavlowitch was deeply offended, but he continued to play his role, for which he earned a decent salary. Mind you, he was not doing it for free. Seven months after Romain Gary's suicide in December 1980, the truth was uncovered when Pavlowitch published his account of the charade and appeared on Bernard Pivot's famous TV talk show *Apostrophes*.

AG: You seem to have a special interest in projects of a distinctly deceptive nature. Don't you find that there are moral questions to be asked?

LV: Today, we might call Gary's insane endeavour a durational performance of great intricacy and see it as a beautiful example of what Carrie Lambert-Beatty has described as 'parafiction'.²⁵ Lambert-Beatty offered some obvious moral objections against the fooling of the audience. But she has also come up with some arguments in defence of it. One of her ideas is that the bewildering experience of being misled can turn us into more critical spectators. I agree with that, and I think projects like these can give us a lot to learn from. I would even go so far as to say that an aspect of deception is unavoidable when someone has a truly meaningful motivation for sending an alter ego into the world.

AG: An aspect of self-deception as well, maybe?

LV: Yes, I think so, although this brings us close to the problematic interpretation of such projects as pathological. You could argue that in most cases, the artist's driving force is the hope that his fiction might in some way have an impact on reality. In order to create an aesthetically convincing deception, you have to believe in it yourself, at least a tiny bit. If this Pygmalion-like desire is not present, the poor alter ego would risk appearing arbitrary and lifeless, and wouldn't have a leg to stand on.

AG: I got the sense that in your project, you do not use the alter ego only to question authorship. It's also a way for you to think about our experience of the self, and the notion of the self as a fiction.

LV: Certainly, but do go on.

AG: In his book *The Ego Tunnel*, philosopher Thomas Metzinger argues that our notion of the self is nothing but a 'phenomenal self-model'. The only way our brain can help us perceive the world around us is by offering us an inner representation of it. Metzinger calls our brain a 'reality engine' that provides a sort of interface between our organism and the world.²⁶ We can know the world only as a virtual reality experience. In that reality, the idea of the self or the ego is the central, but entirely fictional, element.²⁷

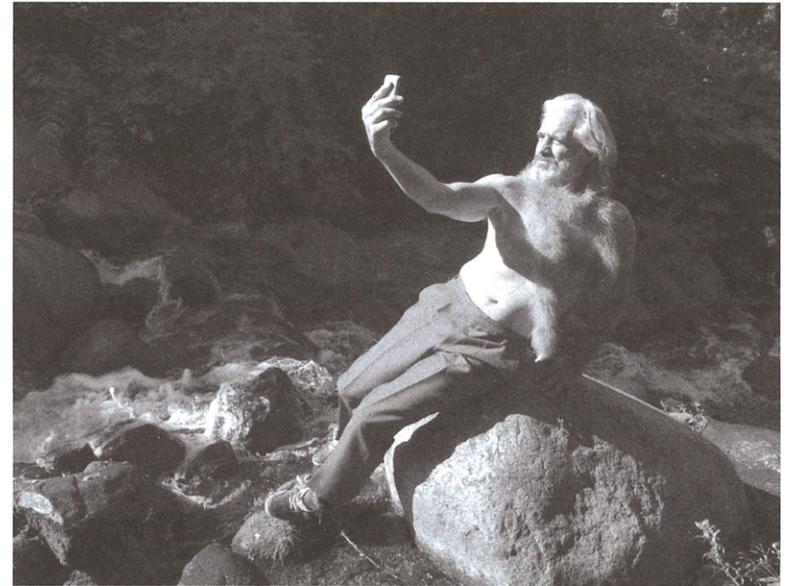
LV: Yes, our mind is constantly fooling us. We love being fooled!

AG: Furthermore, our talent for creating illusions seems to be the very thing that enabled us to advance as a species.

LV: How is that?

AG: Metzinger writes that humankind's ability to use increasingly complex tools depended on our ability to expand our 'self-model' with things external to it—the ability to integrate foreign elements into the self-model. So, this crucial step in our development was possible because we were incredibly agile in moulding the image of our bodily selves. We are masters in creating the illusion of an extended self to help us achieve our goals in life. We could use the idea of the extended self as another metaphor to think about the alter ego.

LV: Sounds interesting. That could open up a whole range of interpretations. Would you integrate that in your lecture about me? I'd be curious to see it.



Portrait Ludovik Vermeersch © Anna Ernst

[The] challenge is not only to be vigilantly skeptical... In the ocean of data we dip into to resolve both looming decisions and passing inquiries (and of course, to investigate parafictions themselves) the problem may be less how to remember to be skeptical, than how to decide when one has been sufficiently so... When does one decide that something is—in the epistemologists' phrase now codified as Wikipedia's primary criterion—*true enough*?

Carrie Lambert-Beatty²⁸

Notes

- 1 Quoted in Hyun Ae Lee, *Aber ich stelle doch nochmals einen neuen Kirchner auf: Ernst Ludwig Kirchners Davoser Spätwerk* (Münster: Waxman Verlag, 2008), p. 39. Author's translation.
- 2 Kirchner's high hopes came true: between 1920 and 1933 this 'French poet' (his name is Louis de Marsalle) was to write six articles on the artist's work. All of them enthusiastically sing Kirchner's praises. When too many friends and colleagues started expressing the desire to get to know his unconditional supporter, Kirchner declared him dead in 1933. He had run out of excuses to explain why his non-existent friend wasn't able to meet up. Surely, Kirchner was not the only one to ever use the deceit of the fake review as an instrument for self-promotion, but there's something sad and crooked about his scheme, particularly as it involved fooling his friends, colleagues and well-meaning patrons (museum director Ernst Gosebruch was already supportive of Kirchner's work and didn't actually need convincing).
- 3 Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', in *Image Music Text*, trans. by Stephan Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977), p. 143.
- 4 Vermeersch's lecture performance was programmed on the last day of the exhibition 'My Abstract World' at collector Thomas Olbricht's private museum. This exhibition featured a selection of abstract paintings from Olbricht's collection.
- 5 A first version of Gorki's lecture was presented in a seminar at ARIA, Antwerp, on 9 March 2018, under the title *The Case of the Ridiculous Curator or How Transfigurative Recontextualisations May Reveal Authentic Truths*. A second, more extended version was shown on 24 June 2018 during the festival '48 Stunden Neukölln' in Berlin. Adopting Vermeersch's own habit of resorting to the figure of the alter ego, Gorki performed both lectures under a pseudonym, using the name Toon Leën.
- 6 This question also features as the title of the introduction to Vermeersch's publication *Personally, I'm Most Interested in the Shapes and Colours*. See Zoë De Luca and Emily Doucet, 'Who is Ludovik Vermeersch: An Introduction' in idem (Ghent: MER Paper Kunsthalle, 2015), pp. 6–9.
- 7 The following conversation possibly took place in the first half of November 2017 in Berlin.
- 8 Boris Groys, *Art Power* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), pp. 50–51.
- 9 Ibid., p. 50.
- 10 Ibid., p. 96.
- 11 Ludovik Vermeersch, 'The Work and the Discontentment of Marc Bergson', in *Personally, I'm Most Interested in the Shapes and Colours*, pp. 183, 189.
- 12 Sarah Thornton, *33 Artists in 3 Acts* (London: Granta, 2015).
- 13 Otto Rank, *Der Künstler* (Leipzig/Vienna/Zurich: Internationaler Psychoanalytischer Verlag, 1925), p. 69.
- 14 See also: Catherine M. Soussloff, *The Absolute Artist: The Historiography of a Concept* (Minneapolis) and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), pp. 115–126.
- 15 What Pierre Bourdieu called the 'charismatic ideology' is essentially a variation on the concept of the personality cult, that emerges with the invention of the artist biography in the Renaissance. The prototype of this new genre was Giorgio Vasari's *Vite*, or *The Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects* (first published in 1550), in which the artists are praised to the skies and given a quasi-divine status. Later came the secularized format of the genius, and, in the twentieth century, the radical innovator, the avant-gardist, the troublemaker appeared on the scene. Bourdieu's notion of a charismatic ideology holds that the attention is directed to 'the apparent exclusive producer... the "author", suppressing the question of what authorizes the author, what creates the authority with which authors authorize'. This fiction is maintained by all those involved. The field of art is arranged such that everything is constantly in motion to emphasize, recognize, and celebrate the authorship and the originality of the individual artist. Because the emphasis on its uniqueness is what augments the economic value of the artwork, it is clear that the art market has an enormous stake in maintaining the belief in the charismatic ideology. See Pierre Bourdieu, 'La production de la croyance', *Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales* 13 (February 1977), pp. 3–43 and Ernst Kris, *Die ästhetische Illusion* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1977), p. 68.
- 16 In his 2016 lecture *The Ego Trip and the Research Pill*, Vermeersch argues that a narcissistic fixation pervades even the literature about the institutionalization of research in the arts. It is a common line of thinking among many advocates of this recent category that the arts should retain an exceptional position within academia. Artistic research is then defined by its subjective singularity and said to stand apart from all the other existing forms of research. A contrasting position is taken by Bert Taken and Jeroen Boomgaard in 'Art Education in a Mediatized World', in James Elkins, ed., *What Do Artists Know?* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012). They argue that 'the visual arts can no longer lay claim to a domain of their own' and the artist should adopt the role of 'specialist and stakeholder' in our contemporary visual culture (see pp. 131, 132). But once you have stripped bare artists of every remaining particle of romanticism and disrobed them of the charm of uniqueness, will there be anything left that is of interest to us?
- 17 Thornton, *33 Artists in 3 Acts*, p. 19. The quote is taken from a chapter on Jeff Koons.
- 18 Ludovik Vermeersch, 'De vergeefse ontsnapping uit het ik', *FORUM voor onderzoek en kunsten/for research and arts*, herfst 2016, pp. 8–18, <https://www.forum-online.be/nummers/november-2016/vergeefse-ontsnapping-uit-het-ik>.
- 19 Joe Scanlan initially invented Woolford's character to create a different context for a group of wooden collages that he thought didn't fit his own oeuvre very well. (See Jeremy Sigler's interview with Joe Scanlan in *Bomb Magazine* 112 [1 July 2010]). Woolford was designed as an African-American woman who was younger than Scanlan and had supposedly been his studio assistant. She was played by three different actresses at exhibition openings and various performances over the years. In 2014, Woolford was included in the Whitney Biennial with a reenactment of a 1977 stand-up routine by the black comedian Richard Pryor. The artist group Yams Collective withdrew their work from the exhibition in protest: the gesture of an established white male artist disguising as a black woman at an exhibition in which black artists were underrepresented, felt as an unacceptable form of cultural appropriation. They charged against his 'conceptual rape' of the black body. In the commotion on social media that quickly followed, Scanlan's strategy was often likened to the practice of blackface minstrelsy. A self-portrait from 2002, for which he posed with dirt on his face, often accompanied this accusation. His attempted escape from the self, if you will, had now directly led him to a renewed confrontation with his own face, muddied at that.
- 20 Martin Doll, *Fälschung und Fake: Zur diskurskritischen Dimension des Täuschens* (Berlin: Kulturverlag Kadmos, 2012), pp. 219–222.
- 21 Michael Heyward, *The Ern Malley Affair* (London: Faber and Faber, 2003 [1993]), XXIV.
- 22 Romain Gary, *Vie et mort d'Émile Ajar*, in *Légendes du je* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 2009), p. 1410. This sentence is hard to translate. Gary bemoans a loss of control over his own image, as it was increasingly being defined by the outside world.
- 23 Ibid., p. 1411.
- 24 Paul Pavlowitch, *L'homme que l'on croyait* (Paris: Fayard, 1981), pp. 106–109.
- 25 Carrie Lambert-Beatty, 'Make-Believe: Parafiction and Plausibility', *October* 129 (Summer 2009), pp. 51–84.
- 26 Thomas Metzinger, *Der Ego-Tunnel* (Munich: Piper Taschenbuch, 2014), p. 40.
- 27 Ibid., e.g., pp. 162, 179.
- 28 Lambert-Beatty, 'Make-Believe', pp. 77–78.
- 29 The authors wish to thank Carolin Nüser for an inspiring slip of the pen and Ying Sze Pek for her helpful comments. Any remaining falsities are entirely the authors' responsibility.