

***Should the original have to consider its possible reproduction?
Artists Muda Mathis and Sus Zwick in conversation with Chris Regn***

What interests me in particular about your work is the function that language and the concepts that underpin your work serve, when you are writing your performances. Like for other artists such as John Cage, new forms of notation and the interpretation of events, written instructions and event scores become works in their own right. Here the idea of the uniqueness, experience, action, presence, the shared space and the non-illustrative aspect of the performance is confronted with basic guidelines. For me, my initial question is relevant to you both as an artistic pairing and to the various forms that your artistic output takes. Where do you get the inspiration for your installations, videos, performances, photography and music from?

Muda When you mentioned Cage, I immediately thought of Fluxus. This was a whole new approach to art for me, one that was not product-centric per se and did not prize off-putting values like virtuosity, talent or finesse. It suddenly became completely natural to create art using our rationale, by adopting a conceptual approach to it. That was a revelation to me. I began studying art in 1977 at the F+F in Zurich, which allowed me to explore entirely new fields. I found terms like behaviour, Spurensicherung (securing evidence), environment and action instantly accessible. My artistic output was grounded in rock-solid concepts, however I found it hard to grasp fully what they articulated. Subconsciously, I experienced and absorbed a lot, so much so that I couldn't manage this flow of information anymore. Ten years later, I embarked on a videomaking course in Basle, which opened up entirely new avenues for me. Suddenly, the aesthetic, the form, the media were more important. Precision became key. Of interest was not the fact that your artistic output has a demonstrable impact, but rather the type of impact it had. It wasn't simply about that I create art and how I do it, but more about what it generates. That helped me engage in my own work, equipping me to manage emotion, form and language, as well as to adopt an intentional approach to the creative process.

Sus I'm not from an artistic background. My roots and drive are in the women's movement and political activism. I threw myself into learning how to take, develop and enlarge photos through the "learning by doing" approach and mutual assistance, which was the customary way of doing things in women's groups. In 1980 I found myself, by pure chance, in a really male-dominated video association. Video was an entirely new medium for me. Although it involved complex, expensive and heavy equipment, this medium made it possible to record events quickly and project them almost instantaneously. This was great because I wanted to expose those things that were important to me. I also liked the fact that, besides letting me define my work, video allowed me always to be part of the work. I learned to use the equipment properly and familiarised myself with film-making and editing techniques. It wasn't until I reached the ripe old age of 35 that I started studying video properly. That was also my first exposure to art history. I was the only one in the class who, folding chair in hand, would visit art galleries with our lecturer, Mr. Jehle. Everyone else in my class had been there before. These classes really opened my eyes and I realised the incredible potential that video could offer me. As a result, I began to explore image. Besides content that had been so important in my work before, light, structure, processes suddenly began to play a greater role. I learned a great deal from the others in my class about sound, music and imagery / visual language.

What constitutes a work for you – what remains?

Muda For me, the ephemeral has the most elegance, even though it's fair to say that it tends not to be at the forefront in the visual arts tradition. I believe that material is no more important than the process it self, despite my roots in sculpture. Even then I was really fascinated by the exhibition space, especially because we didn't have to take it with us once the exhibition is over. We try not to put too much in storage.

Sus For me, elegance is when the material used to create the artwork can then be used for a practical purpose. For example, to mend a garden shed.

Where do your works exist?

Sus Works created as part of percent for-art projects endure and remain accessible, like the light/noise installation "Der Getränkeautomat lebt" (the soda machine is alive), which we created in 1999 for the Frasnacht waterworks on Lake Constance. Every first and third Friday evening of the month, the public can stand outside and view it (1).

Muda Also installations which are acquired by institutions. In the canton of Thurgau, the Kartause Ittingen owns our work "Das Paradies" (2).

Sus And videos, of course, which we keep in our archives and which we always convert to the newest video format. These can also be ordered online (3).

Yet, exhibitions, installations and stage appearances can be experienced and recounted.

Muda The concert programmes, which can be repeated, are not unlike products, as are the CDs and records by Les Reines Prochaines (4), catalogues, limited editions of video stills, light displays and postcards.

Sus Our documentation videos and websites are important and we constantly maintain and update them (*4). Our posters and photos are held in archives like *Bildwechsel* (5). Last not least, from all this work and our cooperative projects, relationships and friendships are forged and endure long after the work is finished.

It's often difficult to produce something, to withhold judgement on it and to show what you have done. How much of the creative process is difficult to take?

Muda Every second work must succeed ... while one quarter is locked away somewhere.

Sus Actually, every work has its moments of tension and conflict.

Muda Having said that, exasperation can also prove to be a turning point. The concentration, the transition from lots of ideas to the *chosen one*, channelling means leaving your emotional attachment behind. As the idea takes concrete shape, something is always lost in the process.

You've been working together since 1989, when you met at a videomaking course.

Both of you were already working artists: Muda as a performance and installation artist, Sus as a documentarist.

Sus Our first collaborative piece came after the video -making course was over. I was spending the summer in the mountains and Muda came to visit me, hoping to make a video. The tiny remote mountain cabin I was staying in had a washing machine, which was a bit weird because here was this modern machine plonked right in the middle of a traditional alpine cabin with its open fire and cheese kettle. The washing machine just stood there like some foreign body or futuristic feminist work of art.

Muda It was actually Sus that came up with that observation, but it was one that immediately struck a chord with me. All that was left for me to do was to film the machine in action, which was how our 1990 video "Der Washtag" (wash day) came about. (6)

Have you developed your own form of communication or codes, like a secret language?

Muda I don't think so, but we have developed our own methods we like to experiment with.

Sus Yes, we have an intuitive understanding of how to deal with one other.

Muda The verbal aspect of our work has a lot to do with story-telling and reporting, in the sense of collecting and bringing things together, identifying interests and ideas, depicting that which has been seen. However, we rarely develop individual images, contexts and even the entire structure of a work by talking about it. These tend to come about by experimenting with the material itself.

Sus We never make decisions on a purely conceptual basis. They're reached by trying things out directly, by looking at what it produces. We observe one another ... it's a sort of two-way process.

Was the Prix Meret Oppenheim, which you won in 2009, your first joint award?

Muda Yes. It led us to define ourselves much more clearly as an artistic partnership, to out ourselves, once and for all.

Sus We had already worked together before, but many didn't realise this, attributing much of our work to the "Muda Mathis" label.

Muda Indeed. In nearly all of our joint work, such as "Die Erfindung der Welt" (discovery of the world), "Das ideale Atelier" (the perfect artist's studio), and "Das Paradies", we make it quite clear that these are the product of a shared vision. (7)

Do your costumes constitute a sort of magic cloak that allows you to morph into different characters? Or do you see yourselves as abstract bodies, like many performers strive to be?

Muda Strangely, yes.

Sus I think so, because we don't always work together. Let's get something straight: we're an artist duo that enjoys an open and polygamous working relationship. But we always help each other out, even when we're working with someone else. We don't need joint authorship to confirm our status as a pair.

What is special about working as a pair? What do you find *interesting*?

Muda You're not alone. You've got four hands, two brains, four eyes and twenty fingers, only one feeling of doubt and twice as much courage.

Sus There's also greater continuity, which means that things always keep moving, the thread doesn't break, there's a never-ending dialogue.

Muda The major advantage of working as a couple is the fact that you can emerge as a *single* author: one work from one mouth, if you like. You're less prone to ego trips and less confined by the limitations of your own personality. It's different from a collective, which celebrates and prizes diversity.

Sus Also, even though you are a pair, each person in the pair remains an individual. You enjoy complete mutual trust and each one is responsible for and defines individual parts of a work. You're just two individuals with different capabilities.

Does love inform your work?

Muda Love informs our lives and life informs our work.

So, what's your day-to-day life like?

Sus We share a home in a really beautiful area of Alsace, which is always a great source of inspiration for us. We've a wonderful loft next door that offers us endless possibilities. It's not only a storage room but a place where we can experiment and try out different things. We have also been part of a community of artists, VIA, for twenty years now. This group of artists, female and male, share a studio and infrastructure. For example, there is

a recording studio where we can rehearse and record sounds, it has much of the equipment we need.

Muda I work at the Northwest Switzerland School of Art and Design (FHNW HGK) and I'm always being asked to sit on juries and committees.

Sus Nearly every weekend we get together with our band, *Les Reines Prochaines*, who have been around for a long time.

Muda Indeed. This is also a long-term project, just like the group of artists with whom we have written a manifesto. We now sit down together as a group to discuss, work and carry out projects under the name of *Tischgespräche* (table talks). (8) *Tischgespräche* is an ever-changing pro-active discussion group of artists and art promoters, who value the oral transmission of knowledge (around a table). We are involved in many collectives, which sometimes overlap. We like to take part in events and there's also the *Performance Chronik Basel* (9), an internet platform where users can actively contribute to documenting performance art in the Basle area or find out what's on.

You describe your relationship as a never-ending discussion, where neither of you shirk away from engaging with one another and from being undefinable. You refer to it as your studio practice. You also talk of reaching the point, the decision, which makes everything clear, framed and amenable. Have you always worked like this?

Muda No, this is something we learned ... that's what project work is all about, after all! It's also a form of organisation, a simplification that has also proved worthwhile for many people, for collectives. The "external" planning and a binding formal structure allow all participants to get their bearings and, ultimately, to immerse themselves in the "not-yet" of a collaborative project.

Sus A lot becomes possible when you have a clear frame of reference. To start with, we establish that it is a project with such and such conditions, possibilities and expectations, such as cooperation with curators/event organisers, context, medium, authorship, collaboration, the architectural space, time frames, financial resources...

Muda ... and then ... it all makes sense! Here is the empty ball room. Now we can embark on our uncertain adventure. Now it starts... hauling the invisible into the tangible.

Is it about drawing on the sum of your collective experiences? To begin with, trust, thinking about it together, the idea becomes sacred, the situational... then the emergence of a single idea – surprise, secrets, the tangible?

Muda Absolutely!

Does the gang pave the way to happiness?

Muda Yes. The gang can do more because it can accumulate and multiply ideas and actions. This means that we start creating larger boxes, which you might not do if you were on your own, perhaps because of a lack of energy, ability, know-how and courage. You're more daring when you're part of a group. As we all know, who dares wins.

Sus Many shared experiences create a basis of trust. That is why it is worthwhile investing in and sticking with a group. A well-functioning gang is a veritable power house.

Muda The high art of cooperation is not worried by the loss of self. Beginners often make a mistake when things become difficult, they say: "OK, then we'll run with your idea!" and renounce their own. Striking a balance between making a contribution, bidding your time, taking something back in order to win the ball again takes practice – it's not all sweetness and light. The best scenario is when everyone is 100% behind the idea.

Sus You have to trust somebody to surrender control. But that's easier said than done. It needs discipline, but it is also incredibly important because control deprives the creative process of its dynamic force.

Muda If there is a lack of trust, the motto is: remain cool, do not identify with the authorship of others, and take responsibility for your own ideas.

Sus Yes, indeed. And there are also rules that help. It should not be seen as a competition of ideas. Start acting as soon as possible. Do not set out to seek consensus! Ideas aren't discussed, everything's tried out and transformed. This makes change possible, change which is informed by shared experience, and which also does not cut off any sources of energy during the implementation of the project. When trust is there and functions well and you carry things together, then you get a lot back in return.

Muda It is the multiplicity of capabilities that produces something bigger, something new. The potential of the group, not just the abilities of each individual, is decisive. That's really satisfying. Groups are popular because they are an expression of the desire for togetherness. The group and the sharing of responsibility, as well as the action of each individual member can vary. The collective is subject to a great deal of demands, expectations and misunderstandings, which are counterproductive. The collective is also sometimes confused with direct democracy, and competition can become an issue.

What is your view of the unexpected, the third party involved in cooperation?

Sus That which no-one has done before generates added value.

Do female artists go into retirement once they hit forty? It's a provocative question that's raised in relation to cultural policy. What's your opinion, as famous yet often inconspicuous female artists?

Muda In my opinion, it's about human dignity in relation to the reality of artists. The demands are enormously high, both your own and those that come from the outside. Mediocrity in art is simply not something that's planned. That's why you feel that you need to have made a worldwide name for yourself by the age of forty. Or to put it a little less emotively, you have to have a gallery, collectors, be connected with other artists and art promoters, earn money from your art, exhibit in leading institutions, exhibit frequently, appear in museums, perhaps have a professorship or be exhibited in artist-run spaces. In actual fact, you have to juggle these demands with your own desires and the cold, harsh reality, eventually emerging somewhere in between. You do arrive in the professional art world, but it's definitely not covered in glory... it's just real. Dreams come to nothing. A bit perplexed, you dust yourself down and start taking responsibility for your own interests, taking time and energy for yourself and doing what you want in an ever more informed way.

In discussions on documentarism in art, the question arises as to the blueprints and utopias which transport such work. What does it mean to you?

Muda For us it's about professing and naming that which is desirable. We try to look and listen and to enhance that which is found through music and other realities. The "Babette" (10) video recounts a disaster, interposed with pleasing and beautiful images of a field full of flowers. We always endeavour to describe ambivalences and to take another look at what is possible.

You talk about the gaze that searches for what you look for...

Sus It's about getting closer to things which still aren't there. Work as a door opener, as a chance to encounter the world, that notion's been around since time immemorial. There are artists who reproduce the world as an attempt to understand it. We belong to those who create a world by postulating it. There is an underlying political motivation here, as well as a feminist imperative.

1 *Der Getränkeautomat lebt*, 1999, sound and light installation, Muda Mathis and Bernadette Johnson. Open-air exhibition: Every first and third Friday of the month: January, February, March, November, December 7–7.30 pm. April, May, August, September, October 9.30–10 pm. June, July 10–10.30 pm.

2 *Das Paradies*, 2001, 7-channel video and light installation, backlit green vylene, 12-min loop, Kunsthalle Winterthur, Loeffler Museum Kosice SL, Kunstmuseum des Kantons Thurgau, Kartause Ittingen

3 www.videoart.ch is an independent platform that sells video art. Founded in Zofingen in 2003, it sells and loans valuable video artwork.

4 www.mathiszwick.ch and www.reinesprochaines.ch are the two websites dedicated to the work and projects of Muda Mathis, Sus Zwick and their band from Basle, *Les Reines Prochaines*, who write and perform music-based concerts, performances, video, theatre and stage shows.

5 www.bildwechsel.org, an early fan of *Les Reines Prochaines*, is an organisation platform and above all an umbrella organisation for women in art, culture and the media (with branches in Berlin, Glasgow and Warsaw). It has over 7000 videos, a large library of material about the work of women artists as well as various other collections in its archives.

6 *Der Waschtag*, 1990, Lowband U-Matic video, 7 mins. The video showcases the different wash cycles in all their musical and dramatic diversity.

7 *Die Erfindung der Welt*, 1998, 6-channel video and light installation, 14-min loop, six light fixtures with sound, Kunsthalle Baden-Baden, Kunsthaus Palazzo Liestal, Kunstverein Konstanz

Das ideale Atelier, 2004, DV video, 16 mins by Sus Zwick, Muda Mathis and Fränzi Madörin. *Das Paradies*, 2001, 7-channel video and light installation, backlit vylene, 12-min loop, Kunsthalle Winterthur, Loeffler Museum Kosice SL, Kunstmuseum des Kantons Thurgau, Kartause Ittingen

8 www.xcult.org/erstes.manifest is a manifesto published in 1998 as part of the book “Visionen für eine neue Schweiz”. For each of the 17 items of their manifesto they seek a form of publicity, which should involve all areas of personal reflection.

9 www.xcult.org/performancechronik collects and produces written documents, as well as publishes a “map of performance art in Basle” and actively promotes the oral tradition.

10 *Babette*, 1996, U-Matic video, 15 mins, English/German. Subtitles: Fränzi Madörin, Muda Mathis, 6 Sus Zwick with Babette Zaugg. *Babette* is a collage of images, conversations, poems and music. Babette Zaugg talks about her experiences in the war zone.