



Vincent Meessen
My Last life

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To be honest, perhaps the best weapon against the myth is the mystification of the myth, to produce an artificial myth: and the reconstructed myth will be a real mythology. If the myth steals language, why not steal the myth?

— Roland Barthes, *Le Mythe Aujourd'hui*

Vincent Meessen (° 1971, BE / U.S., lives and works in Brussels) is a visual artist. He is a member of the temporary alliance, *Potential Estate*. For the association *Normal* as well for other cultural institutions, he has regularly organised film programs and exhibitions, such as the recent *Hantologie des Colonies* at 12 cultural institutions in Paris and Ile de France 2011.

Roland Barthes (1915-1980) was a French author, which produced for the first time in Literature history a critical work presented as a Romanesque fiction. This work entails a character – the reader – that is invited by another character – the author – to ensure a future for him. The reader thus becomes a living actor for a swan song, the free rewriting of the author's oeuvre. In his exhibition Vincent Meessen responds in an indirect way to this invitation by Barthes. He makes a conceptual character of Barthes called, Herbé (read R.B.), which he applies to Barthes' ideas to illuminate a totally unknown aspect of his biography.

As its starting point, the exhibition *My Last life* uses the cover of *Paris Match*, issue 326, published in 1955, which depicts a cadet performing a military salute. The literary theorist and author Roland Barthes wrote about this cover in his *Mythologies*. Vincent Meessen borrows the French thinker's opened ended thread and he constructs a complex story of objects, films and archives that incorporate documentary, narrative and conceptual investigations.

In the exhibition Barthes becomes – despite being "the death of the author" as he announced in his notorious essay of 1968 –, placed in a scene as a character of his own work in a modern post-colonial situation. Thanks to a poetic and critical rereading of some of his texts, Meessen is also able to emphasise their conceptual and formal scope. Carried by the artworks (video, text, sculpture, photographs) "Herbé" is included in this ideology, escaping through the restrictions of truth that are imposed by the only critical discourse at hand.

Caméo

Roland Barthes is present, without being present. His spirit haunts throughout the exhibition. *Caméo* allows "the grain of his voice" to be heard, but it is also the voice of a character. The voice is an excerpt from a film by André Téchiné – played by Barthes, who was unaccredited. In an amazing way Barthes talks about the relationship between art and life: (...) *life is too short for art* (...). A sound device by the brand Barthe, mainly used in France for learning foreign languages, allows the spectator to listen to some words, to speak a few, have them recorded and then played back. In "Barthes's own way" the viewer is invited to make an unalterable trace within the exhibi-

tion by speaking and recoding their words, actually taking part in the story spun throughout the works.

Forgerie

Forgerie ('falsification'): announces that *This (everything) should be considered as spoken by a character (from a novel)*: it is a sculpture that mimics the writings of Barthes in the most accurate way. This work makes the visitor immediately think about the relationship of "signifier" to their "referent" and the logic of interpretation that precedes their (re) animation. The gesture, which interrupts the quotation, brings to light a certain unreliability, and creates a distance between the original text and the neon lights in contemporary art.

Cosmographe (Herbé)

Cosmographs are text images used as a tool in order to map out a plot. Their evaluative form is generated, put into space and optimally developed by an *open source* computer program used for genealogy. Each cosmographer spans a network of connections, sometimes disturbing and confusing, between people, characters, works and historical periods. The artworks have also been mapped out on the cosmograph, functioning as a virtual map of the exhibition.

Factitius

Every word of a language is the quote from an older language. *Factitius* – a series of realistic sculptures, placed on documents circulated in the gallery – refers to the Latin word *factitius* meaning "fabricated/ produced / created". The word is the origin of different words with different meanings such as "fact", "fiction" and "fetish".

Both powerful and paradoxical, the word *factitius* is presented here as a "mana word", a word that Barthes could apply to everything and which was always returning in the lexicon of the author, a buoyant "signifier" (for Barthes a cultural signifier or one with layered meanings). The recurring presence of this sculpture in the documents, part of an archive collected by Meessen, distorts the historical facts of the archive and examines their factual and fictional dimension.

Discours

Discours is derived from a monument erected by the former president and revolutionary, Thomas Sankara, in Ouagadougou (Burkina Faso) in remembrance of one of his anti-imperialist speeches. Formally, it refers implicitly to the adoption of the Russian Constructivism by an African elite. The sculpture takes over the gesture of Marcel Broodthaers, who crossed out the word "politics" on a world map in order to make it a "poetic" map. The sculpture commemorates thus not only the "discourse of political orientation" of Sankara but also proposes a different political arena, namely the discourse of poetic orientation. Through this connection between Barthes and Broodthaers, the artist produces a poetic-political memorial to mark the anniversary of the *Tierce forme (third form)* to be celebrated at a later date, namely the date on which Barthes has decided to be a "writer" and hence an "artist".

Corpus

Corpus shows part of the physical archive, in which Meessen has been bringing together various documents related to Barthes and *My Last Life* since 2006. Previously shown in open wood display cases as a composition of remains and forms, the archives are scattered against the walls of the exhibition space. Louis-Gustave Binger was Barthes' grandfather on the maternal side. Besides containing the publications that gloried Binger as a colonial hero, *Corpus* also contains another character: the white child, Bichon, who was born in Africa and a hero of Barthes' anti-colonial indictments that appeared in the *Mythologies*, *Bichon chez les Negres*. In search for Bichon, Meessen discovers him at a recent auction by Pierre Bergé and as a real character who was created by his own parents for *Paris-Match*, *National Geographic*, *Le Journal de Tintin*.

Prolepse

Prolepse (prolepsis) is a literary device that confuses the sentence construction, it is (according to the grammatical logic), the premature placing of a word or phrase. It indicates an anachronism by anticipation. Here the word is used for a collection of writings that is impossible to project: it is not a list of the books that were ultimately published by Barthes, but a long list of study projects or imaginary books by the author. From this list three books are selected and presented in the form of a full-size presentation model: *Psychoanalyse historique des imageries tronquées (Historical psychoanalysis of mutilated statues)*, *Theatrum Orbis Verborum (The world of the theatre of*

words) and *Mathesis Singular*, an imagined reference guide that creates for each study object its own science.

Fac Dissimile

Fac Dissimile proposes a massive distribution of *Paris Match* number 326, in which the artist rearranged the contents according to the colonial and the mythic level of the images. This new mounting of the journal works upon the readability of the document of that time and shows the possibility for an updated rereading.

Third Text

In the mid-70s, in the collection, *Ecrivain de toujours* where an author makes a portrait of a great classic, Barthes published *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*. Upon release of this book Barthes wielded a critical sleight of hand and wrote a critique of his own book. In the installation *Third Text* (Tierce forme / third form) Barthes' gesture is more important than the actual text. Meessen highlights this gesture in its own and figurative way. By diffraction, illuminated by a spectrum, the text is realised in its full conceptual dimension. The same text is reproduced three times in different languages and alphabets. Adopting this third form, touching upon a whiff of criticism, now proposes the question of his own critical reception.

Vita Nova

Vita Nova is the original title of a novel by Barthes that only exists in the form of preparatory notes. The book was never realised. Vincent Meessen repeats the title of this "future work" and through lack of substance; he adopts the dividing line between criticism and narrative. *Vita Nova* questions the realism – by pretending to be a documentary essay – as a story-discourse, where the mythology never ceases to torment the documentary's will towards truthfulness.

A cover of *Paris Match* from 1955, known by Barthes' *Mythologies* publication (1957), shows a cadet who salutes the flag of France. In *Vita Nova* this image is seen, a notorious icon of post-colonial criticism, to life, becoming an archive loaded with hidden meaning.

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