



Myriam Van Imschoot

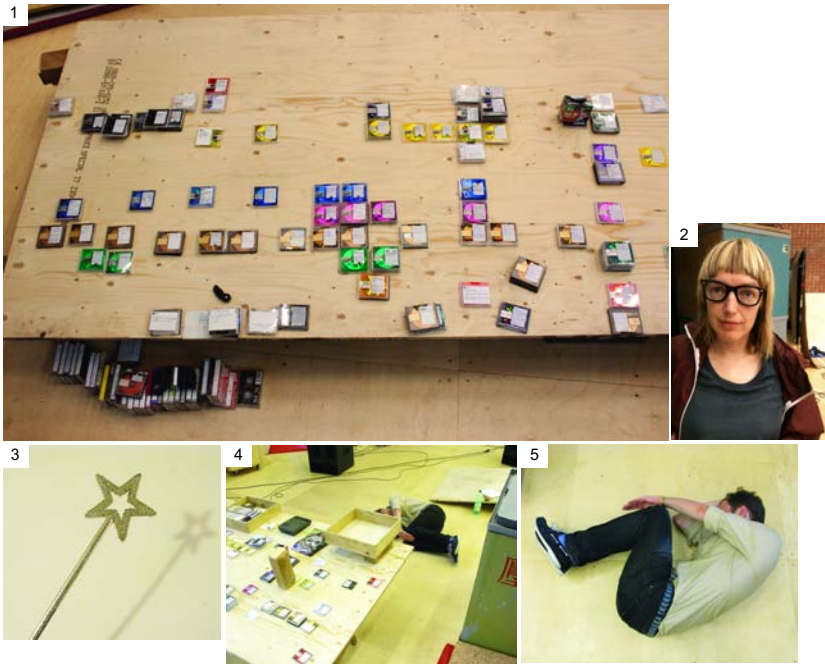
ORACULAR MACHINES

Since two years I have been employing my interview archive as the basis of documentary art works, such as the performance *Pick up Voices* (with Christine De Smedt, 2008), the sound installation *Can I be your witness* (with Kristien Van den Brande and Ayméric de Tapol, 2009) and the video *Fax Film* (with Pablo Castilla, 2008). These works address the role of orality, interview practice, memory and transmission of histories. Together they constitute a cycle that I'm still in and that has made me curious to look deeper into the trope of the archive itself, the need to accumulate traces of the past, both on a general cultural and personal plane. This was my project for SI; to readdress the archive, and use this experience in preparation of a solo that I will present in March 2011 in Kaaitheater, *Living Archive*.



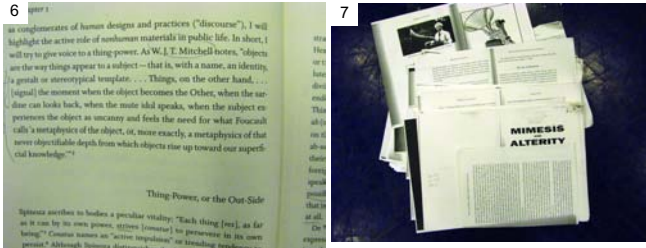
First action:

I make myself a workstation in the studio where SI is taking place. On a large self-made table I display the audio-archive that I have collected. It consists mostly of interviews that were conducted in different phases of my professional life. They are voice-traces, now canned in objects: cassettes, minidisks, CD's, mp3's, records, etc. Gradually the collection grows into a colourful mosaic of dead things. I speak to Vladimir about my weariness about the archive's opaque muteness. Every archive balances on a thin line, I say to him. On the one side of the line the objects are mere lifeless shells, on the other side they can become matters of concern, invigorated and meaningful. But what does it take to make them cross the line? Vladimir goes to the table and picks up a magical wand that I had taken with me from the atelier of les ballets C de la B and that lies amongst the materials on the table. He points the wand to the objects and shouts: "come to life, come to life". His action is childlike, but enchanting. He sinks to the floor and lies down, curled up, knees close to his chest. He imitates the form of a tape. He has crossed the line.



1: Set-up workstation, 2: Portrait Myriam Van Imschoot, 3: Magic wand, 4: Vladimir as tape in the archive, 5: Close-up of Vladimir as tape, 6: Photo from book Jane Bennett *Vibrant Matter* (2010), 7: Photocopies Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity* (1993)

Two books were decisive in my gradual realization that I want to divest the archive from its Enlightenment legacy in favour of new theories of ecology (Bennett) and older pre-modern approaches, such as divination, mimicry and sympathetic magic (Taussig). In *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (2010) Jane Bennett theorizes a *vital materiality* that runs through and across bodies, both human and non-human. I became interested in examining the implications of such vital materialism for



the archive, as a way to break away from conventional usages that cast the archive as a technology of knowledge production and information management, governed by rules of classification, control and preservation. I was wondering if one could see the archive as a more organic, evolving assemblage, where materials have some anthropomorphic quality, as they can be more or less dead, speak to us (or not), have their own cycles of decay and entropy (instead of being preserved). Would it still be an archive then?

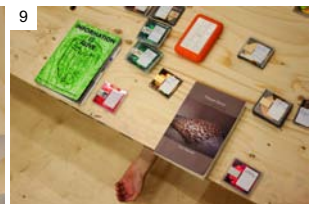
Michael Taussig's *Mimesis and Alterity. A particular history of the senses* (1993) is one of the many books that were lingering in the SI and landed on my table. Whereas Bennett takes pains at staying away from anthropomorphism, Taussig's anthropological approach does not shy away to link the *force of things* back to shamanistic rituals and *primitive cultures* where the signifier marvels with enigmatic hold. As opposed to the *arbitrary* signifier of De Saussure, he pleas for a reenchantment of signs, which can speak to us. Central in his book is the notion of mimesis, or all forms of imitation by way of which the mimicker tries to seize powers. With Benjamin, Taussig defends the thesis that the primitive resurfaces in modernity or the age of technological reproduction with the increase of mimetic possibilities (cinema, photography). According to Benjamin, optical reproduction machinery can give access to an optical unconscious and effect deeper layers and sensuous rapports. Wherever the mimetic rules, older and magic forces are at stake. I like to apply this thesis to my interview archive, itself



thriving on the ability to reproduce voices through the democratization of recording equipment (copies, recordings). If Benjamin speaks about the optical unconscious that may be unleashed through the cinematic apparatus, I am hoping for the auditory unconscious to unravel within the sonographic apparatus. The primitive resurgence may be this: to treat the archive as an oracular, babbling machine that does not give information, but sputters messages, the meaning of which must be seized in a different way than just through pure cognition. This is not a break away from interpretation, but rather it concerns a hyper-listening, bestowing every sign with the charm of a spell or a deeper meaning.

Second action:

I accept the table display as a surface for things to manifest; all sorts of things are gathering now: hair pins, cutlery, books, food rests, flies that are attracted by the latter. Together with Paul Brunner, a young photographer who documents SI, I photograph the table every day as a still life, nature morte, a diagram in progress. Meanwhile I am observing, perhaps like hunters do. As if the table were a trap, although I have no idea what it is supposed to capture. I think it is finally me who gets trapped. I start placing myself in continuity with the things, tinged by their tendency to conglomerate or form heterogeneous groupings. I imitate the things, become a thing, or behave as part of the furniture, carrying the surface of the table on my back, while on all fours. Rather than being the ultimate orchestrator and user of the archive, I am an actant within it, a peg in a far more complex machine with its own desires, affect. At the same time I start wondering how to host visitors in this assemblage.

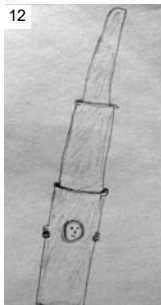


8: Hands and archive, 9: Arm and archive, 10: Becoming archive, 11: Minidisk with fly, 12: Becoming antenna (drawing Myriam Van Imschoot), 13: Ventriloquism

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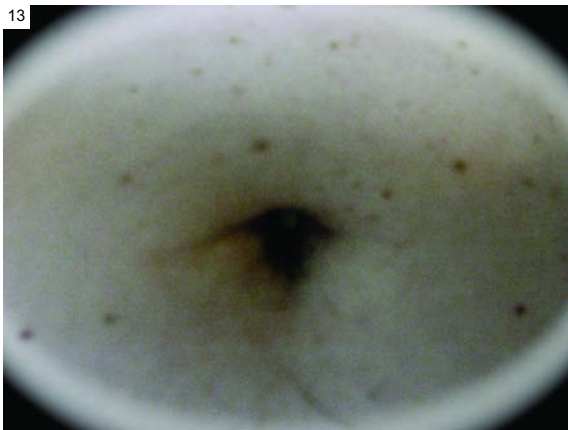


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The visitors (part 1). In line with Bennett and Taussig I thought of the *visitors* (myself included) as actants entering the assemblage and operating not as users but more as *triggers*, who could activate parts of the oracular archive or be acted upon. Several visits happened, more or less in line with this. The ones that worked the most for me were with the participants of *Matter-of-act* (project of Lenio Kaklea), at a day when I had gone over to them and performed a couple of reenactments of interviews from my archive as well as a belly speech act with my navel. After this performance, the participants paid visits to my archive one to one. A session would start with a specific concern the visitor expressed and to which I replied, every time, with selecting a tape from the archive. In the triangular situation of archive/me/visitor the messages seemed to speak more directly, like an appellation.

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Paranoia and the question demon. “Let me talk about paranoia, just for the fun of it. Euhm. (...) Paranoia was one kind of mental illness that Freud was interested in exploring. He found a book by a man named Schreber, which was produced while Schreber was in a mental institution to try to prove his sanity or competence to leave the institution and regain his life. He was a judge in Germany at the time.

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Freud analyzed the writing; never talked to the man, never investigated his background, so he took the writing more or less as it was and tried to analyze it. In doing so, he developed a theory of paranoia, which had to do with - in this case - with what he saw as a homosexual relationship of the child Schreber to his father. These feelings were put away and other feelings perhaps

substituted. Schreber talked not so much about his feelings to his father as about his relation to god, a problematic relation to god, or in fact to a couple of gods. He actually developed a couple of gods, exemplified by stars, which are in heaven. They did not so much act as gods than as kind of devils. One of them was thought of as more benign; another as a plague of questions. He would be constantly plagued by questions, unfinished questions like ‘how about...,’ ‘how about, what if then...?’. It would go constantly through his mind. Anyway, he recognized this as a problem, put himself in the institution as I understand it, then wrote the book later after several institutionalizations, to prove he was sane, and that’s the book Freud got hold of to analyze. Freud analyzed in that way and made paranoia essentially not only a closeted gay man acting out repressed feelings, but the closeting was really in a form of denial, really a denial, it wasn’t just a secret, it was a self-denying situation. This puts Schreber, in Freud’s view, in a very interesting position of somebody who has been driven by feelings that he will not acknowledge that he has. That’s what more or less causes paranoia. The paranoid element in Schreber’s awareness was these persisting questions and problems that he thought about, and the he couldn’t get rid of. That’s one element of the paranoia. Being besieged by something out there, he did not recognize it was himself asking those questions. He recognized

it was god or god's angels or gods' thoughts coming to him." (Fragment from an interview with Steve Paxton, 06/10/2001, in his house at Mad Brook Farm, Vermont, interview-archive)

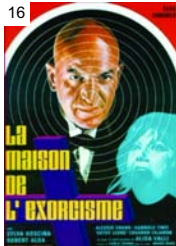
During SI I was watching a lot of films on exorcism, where a 'demon' destabilizes and threatens identity. In exorcism the possessed one (usually a she) enters a psychotic situation since the lines between her and the demon (usually it's a he) get blurred. Exorcist rituals, then, are aimed at segregating the two entities again. The main method of the exorcist ritual revolves around a *deep interrogation*, a sort of *radical interview*, where the exorcist needs to force the demon into a confession, more in particular, the demon is forced to reveal its identity in order for the exorcist to be able to expel it. One key-sentence in many exorcist films is when the exorcist (as a kind of super ego) demands: 'tell me your name, tell me your name'. Without a name, without an identity, the duel between the exorcist and the demon cannot be successfully conducted. The revelation of identity, the practice of naming, and exorcism are strongly connected. Now, in this excessive form one may see a parable of every interview as a particular genre that works with one function *questioning* and another *answering*. Although the interview in journalism is a late invention (late 19th century) it may be considered in line of a string of technologies of surveillance, such as the confession, interrogation, etc, that got interiorized into the construction of subjectivity. As a profane version the interview remains a highly codified process that relates to confession, naming, identifying (influences, origins, etc) and separating. Exorcisms brings back into mind the pre-modern forms of surveillance, before the democratization of opinion took place and the modes of questioning could become a public genre. Then, during one of the visits, I stumbled on the interview fragment of Steve Paxton, who talks about paranoia, a theme he was interested in during the early eighties and which resulted in a couple of theatre pieces at Dartington College. Paxton, too, speaks about a demon, but here it's the demon that has adopted the question mode. It's the demon that questions. The question becomes a compulsory *plague*, a never to be satisfied earworm running in one's inner mind. Is the interviewer a profane version of this question god, an accepted form of the pathetic mantra of the question? We live in the regime of the question, the times of the interview.



Another action:

We watch exorcist films one night, a fragment of *House of Exorcism* (1973) on the basis of Mario Bava's *Lisa and the Devil* and William Friedkin's *The Exorcist* (1973). I give an introduction, focusing on my interest in the *radical interrogation*, the dummy and the possessing voice. Sergio is filming our watching of the films (mimesis of mimesis), and as it turns out later a lot of exorcist energies will dwell in his reportage. The theme of the exorcist is unleashed. What do you expect? It must contaminate. Christine and I perform a spontaneous one minute reenactment from the film, the next day. Christine goes into spasm. Dmitry gives me a CD with occult voices and exorcism. The vocal performances on the CD are amazing, luring. I grunt, scream and rumble in a microphone, hoping to speak in tongues, the song of deep throat.

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15: Poster *The Exorcist* (1973), 16: Poster *The House of Exorcism* by Mario Bava (1973), 17: Shot from *The Exorcist* (1973), William Friedkin's iconic horror movie, 18: Transcription performance 19: Marlies Opsomer visits

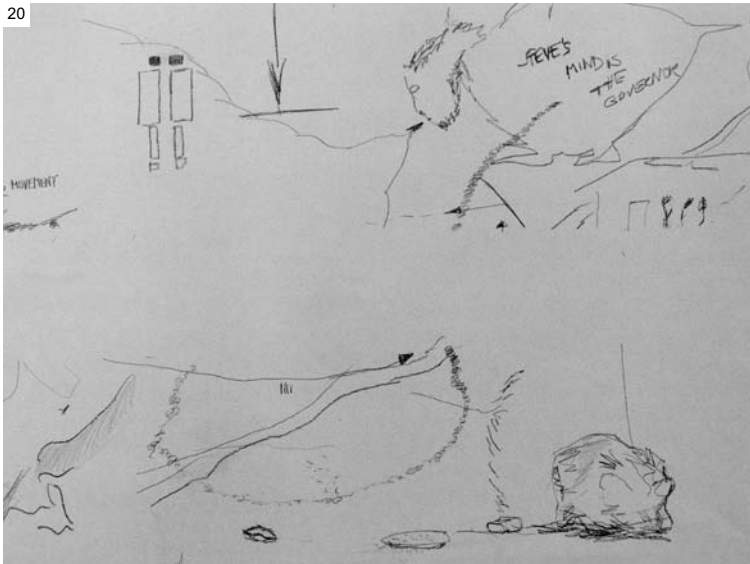
Visits (part 2). More visits to sum up. Marlies Opsomer, a young psychology student who was preparing a thesis on improvisation, came two nights to listen to tapes on improvisation. She sat there for hours on end. Hers was more a classical consultation. She needed something, she found it, she listened. I loved her intent presence. Then I organized



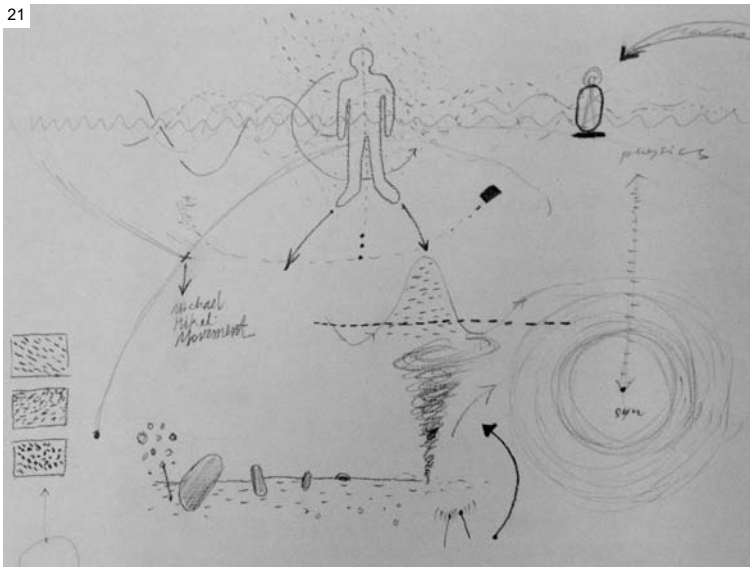
a group visit, during which five of us listened for an hour to a randomly chosen selection of sound-fragments from the archive. It did not work well. The result was too aleatory rather than hyperinterpretational. There was a 3 minute *performance* for a group, during which I transcribed a fragment of an interview with Steve Paxton on a performance that disappeared from the chronicles of dance history. In that performance he improvised a dance to a tape with his own voice. The typist who was with him on stage would transcribe the tape and stop Paxton's dance every time he could not keep up with the speed of speech. The dance thus stages transcription as a pivotal structural element, just as I decide to do in my short performance. There was the visit of my parents to SI. I overheard my father speaking to Dmitry about the cold war and his job at the time in the navy, and suddenly I realized there might be a connection between my fascination with sound, voices, and messages, and the background of my father in spy technologies. This last visit made me interested in breaking open my archive and start including tapes from my childhood as well as tapes that my father collected. It gets heated: the nexus contains now paranoia, military espionage, and the oracle.



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20: Detail drawing Myriam Van Imschoot to the interview with Daniel Lepkoff, 21: Detail drawing Nikolaus Gansterer to the interview with Daniel Lepkoff, 22: Nikolaus Gansterer and Myriam Van Imschoot, drawing session at Kaaitheater, 22 September 2010

Inflections. SI is not so much a space of reflection. It's a space of inflection. In the dictionary inflection is described as "a change in the form of a word (typically the ending) to express a grammatical function or attribute, such as tense, mood, number, case and gender. In SI our projects were like verbs. They would be inflected by the other

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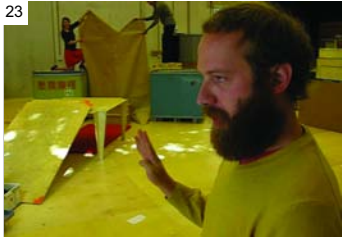
presences, words, ideas, etc. We all conjugated. SI was about the play of conjugation, of putting things in another tense, mood, number, etc, through the influence of one another. List of inflections: to get lost (thank you, Pieter), to get upset and become more articulate (thank

you, Pieter), Treibgut or the archive as the remains from a wreck on the sea shore (thank you, Dmitry), to be compassionate (thank you, Sergio), to think of reenactment as the ultimate gift without return (thank you, Lenio), to accept imitation as a method (thank you, Vladimir), the idiotic book of laughter (thank you, Lilia), the interview as self-portrait (thank you, Christine), Didi-Huberman's seminars on an image from Aby Warburg's archive, comparing image analysis with divination (thank you, Lou), drawing together to interviews (thank you, Nikolaus). These inflections do not restrict themselves to the period 16 – 28 August; they keep inf(lect)ing.

Action!!

Let me go back to the moment where I am on all fours, carrying a huge surface on my back, with all of my archive on it. Pieter is filming. Tell us a joke, Pieter requests me from behind the camera. But the joke is already being acted out. I am that joke, for there's something farcical in becoming an archive, being its supportive pedestal, its slave, a very literal embodiment. Absurdity, the joke, the idiotic, the childlike, the magical wand: all make up an antidote for the authority that usually clothes the archives. The idiot injects the archive with not-knowing, play. An echo of this occurs during the showing of Lilia's practice evolved from her piece *Moving you* on 27th August, where objects are linked to sound actions. For instance, whenever you pick up or handle a book you produce the sound of laughter. The gymnast mats are joined by a sound of a motor on a highway. The bottles of water are linked with yet another sound. Etc. The group choreography consists of all of us





23: Countdown for obstacle race, 24: Lenio Kaklea runs, 25: Myriam runs, 26: Jump, 27: Laughing books during Lilia Mestre's practice *Moving you*.

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entering or moving the zones of thingness with their sound allies. It's a mobile zone, where at some point one does not know anymore who and what triggers what and whom. I end up with a book, and as I page through it I produce modes of laughter: a chuckle, a grin, a louder outcry, until laughter produces me, takes over my body with trembles and convulsions. Pieter, Dmitry and Koen Augustijnen come and stand with me, also holding books and also laughing. The four of us – a chorus of book worms laughing. We stay for long time in this zone of laughter, its attraction probably arising from a performed paradox: book wisdom in tandem with idiocy makes a puzzle. And then, the very last action that I bring into this category of the absurd and affect, is happening the next day. Before cleaning up the space, I suggest to make with the objects a long obstacle race, leading into my archive-table as its desired finish, end point, line of flight. We build this. Then, one after one we run the race to the archive, supported by the cheer leaders at the side of the parcours who with their cries make us jump, crawl, dive, run with even more fervour. It's pure play. Lenio uses an electronic plug hanging on a cable as a virtual microphone, and gives the countdown for yet another athlete running the race: 4, 3, 2, 1, ACTION!!!! Run!!! Whenever I look at the films we made of these races to the archive, I burst out in laughter. If SI started with the weight of dead things requiring animation, the burden of carrying a load and history, the struggle of exorcist endeavours, the grotesque of navels talking and oracular machines spitting images, it ends up in this lightness, floating. Inflection in action.

Myriam Van Imschoot is a researcher, writer and performance artist. She lives and works in Brussels.

