

INTERVIEW



A question of identity

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Olivier de Sagazan is many things, including a self-proclaimed performer, painter and sculptor; three disciplines he has proven to interchange and combine for the bigger part of his artistic practice. Born in Congo but a French citizen since the age of three, de Sagazan shows a wide variety of influences in his work, mixing together tribal art, philosophy and biology. Our editor Judith Vrancken talked with de Sagazan about the power of clay, deconstructing 'collective hallucinations' and the question of identity.

You have been invited to teach an extensive master class at Festival WhyNot this upcoming weekend. Can you talk a bit about what you are planning to do there?

Actually, this master class is not even that extensive. Usually they last a week! In Amsterdam I will be teaching the students the technique of how to use clay, the medium I mainly work with. I use this in all of my performances in order to transform myself quickly in real time, and to show that everything is instantly changeable and

debatable. It will take a while for the students to get used to this process, as people tend to be a bit careful and perhaps even scared to use it as excessively as I do. However, after a while they will realize that the material is an extension of their skin, and it's very striking to see how fast they can mould their shape and turn it into something completely different.

Clay as a performative medium is quite unusual. What made you choose this?

This clay is extraordinary. First of all, it's very good for the skin [laughs]. Secondly, when I let my students use it, I have them cover their eyes with it. This completely frees up your mind and allows it to go wherever you want. In your mind you could be a mad dog running through the forest, for all I care. You can fully transform yourself.

Looking at the nature of your work, it might be good to start at the beginning and how your practice took shape. Could you tell me about your background and what influences your work the most?

Well, I was born in Congo but left when I was young. Africa has always played a vital part in my work, which you can see through the influences of tribal art. It's not based on memory, but something else I can't really pinpoint. About twenty years ago I started to paint. It took me a very long time to break convention, to think in different ways. Just like Picasso at one point started to distort the human body and the face by not caring about the idea of what it was supposed to look like, it took me a long time to realize the canvas was supposed to be my own face, not the canvas itself.

I studied biology. Here you learn that we are exist of thousands and thousands of neurons. They all refer to an 'I'. This question of identity, of what this 'I' represents, is always present in biology and it seeped into my work. The clay is a means to ask this same question.

I read somewhere that you started performing by yourself in your own studio before performing in front of an audience. How does the audience affect your work?

The audience is very important. When I go on stage, the first thing I do is put the clay on my eyes. With that gesture I remove my sight and give it to the audience. I let them be my eyes. I get lost in a trance, it gives me that freedom. I've always been surprised that the people who come to my performances tend to be quite reserved in real life, and live according to the ideas of what I call are 'collective hallucinations': religion, love, relationships. In other words, structures in which they live according to certain rules and lose sight of the essential question: Who am I? In my performances I include the audience members and try to make them open up to this question.

Although your performances are very much about the body, the main focus is on the face. Why is that?

The face is the most visible interface between you and the world. During my performances I literally dig to find the foundation of the face and of who I am, who we are. For me, this is very much a political situation. When we put the clay on our face, we lose all of our ideologies, we literally can't see and don't know where to go. The face then becomes a political gesture. It's a means to activate and to destabilize, especially in this very interesting but very disturbing time in the world.

I was reading an article in Le Monde this morning about Hiroshima. This tragic occurrence erased an entire city, and an entire people in the time span of a second. The ontologically richest space, the face, is destroyed and changed in an instant. I take that with me throughout my work in order to actively ask questions about the world we live in today.

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