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Annette Messenger

Interview by Natasha Leoff

1995

Natasha Leoff: In an interview you did with Bernard Marcadet in 1989 for the catalogue of the Musée de Grenoble, you articulated an opposition which has become a cliché in relation to your work today. Once upon a time, in 1970, in the 14th arrondissement in Paris, a young woman identified herself as being at once artist and collector. At that time she had an apartment that consisted of a bedroom and a dining room. In the bedroom you were Annette Messenger the "collector" and in the dining room, Annette Messenger the "artist." Do you feel that we can still speak of this double personality today?

Annette Messenger: I think that this was a starting point that I had taken in order to enter into the role of the woman, in her room, in her dining-room, in the kitchen, and not just in a real studio space. This was a starting point, a basis for my work.

Leoff: What is interesting is that in all the subsequent articles over the years there is a need to continue defining these two distinct spheres: in the studio you devoted yourself to taxidermy and in the bedroom to photography. Do you feel that we can still speak about Annette Messenger's work today by using this opposition? Rather than a wall or door that separates these spheres, shouldn't we imagine a veil?

Messenger: Yes, but I think that both spheres have become one and that there is a need for others to function with these clichés. Often others stop looking at my work and only look at the clichés that have accompanied the work. Rather than talking about a veil that is something which floats, I would prefer to talk about a net (by the way my name is a homonym: "annette"), an object which is filled with holes, which is composed entirely of holes, and which at the same time imprisons and confines.

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Leoff: When was the first time you started using netting in your work?

Messenger: That is a difficult question. I worked with veils early on. I did a series called "Les Voiles" (Veils, 1980), small drawings on veils that were covered with several successive veils of color. I have always worked with things that are covered, half hidden, half revealed. In the series entitled "Les Piques" (Spikes, 1992), there are stockings, hose. I had started working with fishnet stockings because they were erotic: all those women who do striptease.

Leoff: Hidden and revealed at once?

Messenger: I always used black stockings. In the "Les Piques" series, I started using transparent things. I had bought fishnet stockings, but they had too much of a sexual connotation that I no longer desired. I wanted an opacity which conveyed terror, such as the masks that criminals pull over their faces, or policemen ... It was at this point that I started looking for nets.

Leoff: What about the net in relation to the dress? I am thinking about the description in Mary Shelley's Frankenstein of the mother's portrait hidden in the folds of a sleeping woman's dress ...

Messenger: The dresses I used had a lot of tulle, layers of tulle. The tulle is like a protective layer. My mother's dress had a kind of netting over it that covered the photos and the drawings. Obviously, I have also used spider webs since I have drawn spider webs in my "Chimères" (Chimaeras, 1984) directly on the wall and a web is a net, and a net is a trap.

Leoff: "What a tangled web we weave when first we practice to deceive." The trap as a trope for deception, a kind of filter, both container and strainer, perforated and completely encapsulating? It captures or filters the gaze and desire ...

Messenger: Stitches, netting, knitting, embroidery and meshes. They are all in my vocabulary. I have written on walls, these writings are difficult, if impossible to read; they are like knitted fabrics, meshes.

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Leoff: To knit: this brings us back to the domestic basis of your art work. You did a rewriting and illustration of the "Larousse ménagère," a sort of "Larousse Messagère," a guide for household chores for women, called "Ma vie pratique" (My Practical Life, 1974), a refiguring of the economy of domestic hysteria.

Messenger: Yes, but in the idea of home it is not necessarily the feminine domestic side that interests me. Rather it is the side of the home which is a microcosm, a world in reduction. Let's say that the image of a real home has an attic, all those things that are buried or repressed, like memory in the brain. There is also television, events that enter the home each day, that are interned. I think that what I make is, in fact, very linked to this encapsulation, this isolation.

I have always used materials that were in the home, colored crayons, cloth, stockings, nets, sewing material, newspaper clippings, everything that arrives into the home and stays.

When children are asked to draw their house, even if they live in an apartment, they will always draw a traditional house with an attic and a basement. When we ask a child to draw clothing, he will always draw a traditional piece of clothing. This is what I like, for example in what we call Art Brut, which is always outside of trend, of fashion. Obviously I come from a specific generation of artists, but let's say by using the kinds of timeless materials-cloth, paper, crayons-that are not directly linked to today's technologies, I am interested in transcending a certain temporality. I would love to work with video, but somehow I feel incapable of using that kind of material today. I would like to use video as easily as I use a pencil.

Leoff: Children are part of the model home. Freud said that toys were the child's first contact with artworks. Your dolls and birds and effigies have a very particular status. "Mes pensionnaires" (My Borders, 1972), your little stuffed birds with wool clothes or "Mes Petites effigies" (My Little Effigies, 1988), stuffed toys attached to the wall with texts, are not toys. You are not working in a nostalgic mode nor in a childlike world. I am looking at your sadomasochistic red vinyl dog jacket hanging here in the studio which you found in the "pet clothing section," at the Galleries Lafayette ...

Messenger: My father was an amateur artist and always gave my brother and me materials to work with. My brother never did much, but I spent my time making small drawings. He

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exposed me to art books constantly. There was paint everywhere, even on the plants in the garden. He showed me books on Bellmer when I was small. Those images are part of me. I am very close to Bellmer's doll universe.

Mike Kelley and I used the stuffed animal at the very same time. When you compare our work, even if we are using the same material, it does not at all have the same resonance. Mike Kelley will take the stuffed animal as is, and in this way he is very American, which is normal. He is more interested in a direct social reflection while I will place a photo or a word on the doll, a sentimental value which will give more of a charge. I invest the doll with another content, like African voodoo effigies, the kind of emotional charge people usually consider negative, a strong sentimental content. With "Mes petites effigies" ridiculous little dolls somehow become disturbing.

Paul McCarthy and Mike Kelley engage in child-games, what we call in French "pipi-caca."

In my work on the other hand, the colored crayon becomes a weapon, it is pointed. I stab with it; it keeps the formal aspect of the pretty colored pencil but is lethal, deadly.

Leoff: You seem to have strong affinities with Surrealism.

Message: I am not paying myself compliments when I make these distinctions. I know being a Surrealist is not in vogue in France today. However, I do see my work yes, as bric-a-brac, a surrealist hodgepodge. I love Man Ray photographs and the work of a relatively unknown Surrealist woman artist, Claude Cahun, who did remarkable photographs on her own body. Molinier is also very important for me and Boiffard who did big close-up shots.

Leoff: I noticed in the works you have prepared for your show in San Antonio, Texas at the Pace Roberts Foundation for Contemporary Art for this winter 1995, you have chosen objects bought in Mexican bodegas, fetishes like perfumes which make men more virile or women more seductive. These objects which have the appearance of fetishes, are integrated into your works and no longer have the same status.

Message: I think that when an artist sees an object, he sees an object that is loaded symbolically but he also sees it visually, formally. In those little bottles, what I am interested in is the bad quality of plastic, the small image with the drawing, the very bright colors. It is a

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mixture of this strong sentimental side and the visual side. In my work there are always these two elements, and I wonder if this is not opposed to minimalist American Art. I would never make a piece solely for its visual aspect. When Americans look at my work, they are interested in the formal aspects. This is very important. Unfortunately in France the formal aspect often goes overlooked, we are not visual enough, above all we seek out psychoanalytic reasons, literary sources ... which I also find to be a big problem.

In Europe we have the weight of the past on us, which makes us much less direct than Americans who seem to always produce a kind of "new art" without history. Just like with feminism, it is unable to be dogmatic and pure like in the United States, precisely because of this past ...

Leoff: Your work is based on the secretive, the private, the home as we have seen. There is a refusal of transparency, of total confession, of limpidity ...

Messenger: For me a work of art is directly linked to the secret. Art is like a secret, an epigraph. It is literally cut out of life. We must not try too show too much, to divulge everything, to unveil too much. We must give some small clues, even unnecessary clues. Art is a secret shared between the individual and the collective. In order to be touched by a work of art, it must first refer to the person who made it, a strong personality, and it must touch the collective, everyone must find something in this order.

Artaud is a good model for this. He made his drawings for himself only and we can all find ourselves in these portraits, his auto-portraits or his manifestos. It is precisely this back and forth between the individual, between the inside and the outside, the private and the public, which makes a work of art stand out, because it touches both worlds at the same time.

Leoff: You have referred to the heaviness of transparency in the United States.

Messenger: As I have said, everything must be exposed, everything must be said. This is not the case in France, although it is becoming more that way. In France artists still have a private life. In the States I feel a distinct form of exhibitionism ...

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Leoff: And yet you have been greatly influenced by American artists; what you call their visual acuity.

Message: Strangely enough, when I saw Sol LeWitt's wall drawings at MOMA, they really affected me: the simple means, a trace of pencil repeated on the walls ... His influence came out much later in my work. Just like Warhol's influence. What impressed me with LeWitt's work was the economy of means because what I usually respond badly to in American art is a surplus of materials, of means. What I look for is a domestic economy or in other terms, an economy of means.

Both American artists and German artists have greatly influenced me. A woman like Pina Bausch is very important, she is very violent, at once soft and strong. Warhol's serialism has obviously influenced my work in photography. All of his images of the quotidian, of consumerism ... I like Hanne Darboven's work immensely. She is locked into a great isolation, repetition and incantation. But she has a rigor that I do not have. Everything she does is orderly, framed, catalogued. I, on the contrary, am always excessive, overflowing onto the walls ...

Leoff: You are often referred to as the hysteric, the femme fatale, the witch or sorceress, the "cruel Annette" who is shameless and goes beyond the limits of decency. You were heavily criticized for your work called "Mes jalousies" (My Jealousies, 1972) where you prematurely aged beautiful women, or "Les enfants aux yeux rayés" (Children with their eyes scratched out, 1972), where you blacked out the eyes of children in family portraits. Your album, a collection of provocative proverbs ("Ma collection de proverbes, 1974") still resonates today "he who takes a wife takes a master, it is the woman who gives the devil grey hair, if woman was good by nature God would have a wife, one must fear women and thunder, everything comes from God except woman,, the happiest woman has no history, women are taught by nature, men by books ..."

Message: I remember the reaction I got when I said "Je pense donc je suce" (I think therefore I give head). People said, "Annette Message has gone mad." It is outrageous that the very same people who criticized this wordplay are those who turn on the television and are not shocked by the amount of violence there is in the world or the fact that teenagers are spray-painting "Fuck my mother" all over the place.

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I think it is very different to exist as a woman artist than as a male artist in France. Things are automatically stuck, grafted onto the woman because it is still not completely accepted to be a woman artist. We are always looking at her life, linking her work to her life. In late-nineteenth-century medical photography there was an expression, "women-clichés," referring to hysterics whose skin was so sensitive that it was possible to inscribe words or drawings on it. Often the nurses would brand the patient's back with the name of the doctor. These women found themselves doubly marked: by the illness and by the institution.

A woman artist's work is looked at through her cultural position and everything becomes mixed up. This is why I am particularly touched by Eva Hesse's biography. I identify with her completely. She is the best example of this link between Minimalism and Surrealism. She exposes her intimate life, her difficulty with living and her work and her body. All this is interwoven, formally and personally.

Leoff: You have often given yourself titles, labels, such as we have seen: Annette Messager the collector, Annette Messager the trickster, Annette Messager the handy-woman, Annette Messager the peddler, Annette Messager the liar ... Why all this role-playing? Are they alibis to protect you?

Messager: They are titles of nobility that I have earned. They protect me from the time that passes by, from the outside, from you. It is like a collection of titles. Collecting is a form of protection, a way of fighting against death ...

Leoff: You are in the process of preparing three retrospectives: for ARC(March 1995) here in Paris, for LACMA (June 1995), MOMA (October 1995). Have you suddenly become Annette Messager the collector of Annette Messager?

Messager: At this time, I am returning to the past because I am using the same forms as I did for the "Les Chimères" series. I think I am particularly perturbed by these three retrospectives. It is about accepting to be in the second half of my life, accepting a terrible immodesty, accepting that I have a past which is present, accepting that I am no longer a young artist, that I cannot send everything to hell and begin again from scratch. I am more

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troubled by the retrospective I am preparing in Paris because it is my home, my life and I know the space of the ARC too well, I am forced to look at all my old work ...

Leoff: Preparing the retrospectives in the States gives you a certain freedom.

Messenger: In any event, I think that the charm of being a stranger is that we are much freer, we apprehend things much faster visually. You are in between two worlds at all times and are not imprisoned by habits. When I am abroad, money means nothing to me, it is like play-money, in the same way words are like gibberish, so that I can speak, and because I speak English badly, I have all the right excuses. I say things I would never allow myself to say in France. I have a more acute visual sense when I am abroad.

My trips to the United States and my collaboration with American artists have been very important for my work. I exhibited my work in Paris with Laurie Anderson in the 70s who is someone I admire, precisely because of the familiar side of her work, the colloquial. At the beginning of the 80s I had a grant at PS. 1, and what I produced was very bad.

Leoff: Why "very bad"?

Messenger: I was not used to having my studio separate from my living quarters. As a result I retained nothing from that experience except the visual effects of the city itself. I find the light in New York very beautiful. New York is a nightmare and a paradise, the absolute image of what a city should be, magical. Everything is broken and modern at the same time, as if it were two cities in one.

But I could never work in New York because there are too many artists with too many stories. I imagine that in California, for example, artists have more freedom-here is the real risk of natural catastrophe, a richer experience than in SoHo . . .

I get totally demoralized when I go to Pearl Paints for example. There is actually a whole aisle devoted to Conceptual Art. It is terrifying, it doesn't even close on Sunday. The artists are producing all the time, with their assistants, like a factory. In my opinion assistants have destroyed American art because to delegate so much to an assistant, to never see the exhibition spaces, to let the assistant decide everything, seems impossible to me.

Leoff: You work entirely alone?

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Messenger: Sometimes I have a woman who comes over to sew. When she is in my home, I feel paralyzed by her presence and often it actually is positive because I work for my assistant. I think "this is it, I have an assistant, this is real work, I must pay her so I must find work for her to do." But for me, the words artist and professional still remain incompatible, you have to live with this fact. Preparing exhibits helps you against becoming mad, slumbering into the darkness, but at the same time exhibits are a difficult structure and make me suffer.

Leoff: In France, the government has been criticized for too much subsidizing, too much support for contemporary art. How do you feel this affects artistic production?

Messenger: Paradoxically, this allows for a certain kind of freedom. And, unlike in the US, politics do not become the subject of art. It is dangerous. It is not because you treat a subject like AIDS in your work that you are a good artist for example.

I think someone like Bruce Nauman has really transcended this kind of problem. I feel that he is probably the most important artist today. His images of self-torture reflect human torture in general. His tortured language gives us a sense of the intimate and the universal, simultaneously.

Regarding what impedes my art work, I feel that because there are more and more wars, diseases, broken homes, that everything in the world today is totally pathetic and vulnerable, I am no longer able to make a series of works. I have always worked in bits and pieces, ripping, cutting, and pasting, but today I can no longer consider working in series and this is a dramatic change for me.

Vulnerability is so much greater in the world than in any art work that it is impossible today to create anything that is more obscene than reality. Bosnia, Algeria . . . Algeria is our culture, there is not the same Islamic presence in the States as in Europe. It is the new ideology.

Leoff: Violence?

Messenger: Violence is more direct in the US, linked to madness or acting out. Here there is another form of violence, more covert, linked to religion.

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Leoff: Another element in today's culture that you seem to work from is pornography. You have often been accused of being a pornographer.

Messenger: Pornography is about images that are repeated, saturated. Images of the human body, not nature. What I find in pornography is precisely the repetition of the same: the clichés of pornography. There can be no real transgression, just an image that repeats itself. As if, as Lacan suggested, the sexual relationship does not exist.

Leoff: We are both coincidentally reading Louis Althusser's autobiography "L'avenir dure longtemps" (The Future Lasts A Long Time, 1992) in which Althusser describes the very act of strangling his wife. "Nul être au monde peut répondre à la demande d'angoisse: dis moi quelque chose." (No human being can respond to the cry borne from anxiety: tell me something.)

There is always a demand placed on the other: confessions, supplications . . .

Messenger: The couple is a mirror, a false mirror, which can, as we have seen, drive you to murder.

Leoff: Love?

Messenger: It is still one of the most essential things in life. It can be found in making little dresses for stuffed birds, or in a garden of tenderness like I have done ("Le jardin du tendre," 1988), mixing writing, photography and real spaces. There are all kinds of acts of love.

Leoff: Your forms of love are always based in a game between attraction and repulsion. I return to the net, which both retains certain elements and lets other elements slip through it . . .

Messenger: I have a side of me which is very modest and another side of me which is immodest. Shameful Annette Messenger, shameless Annette Messenger. As in each individual, there is the side that reveals, discloses things and a side that hides, conceals. I have always believed that somehow the less we reveal the more the other desires to see.

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