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## Double Life. Illusion - Disillusion

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**Abstract:** In order to make my life and therefore my art more exciting I often imagine being someone else. While working on art projects, usually for several months, I have lived double lives as art historians and political scientists, but mostly as artists who should have been famous.

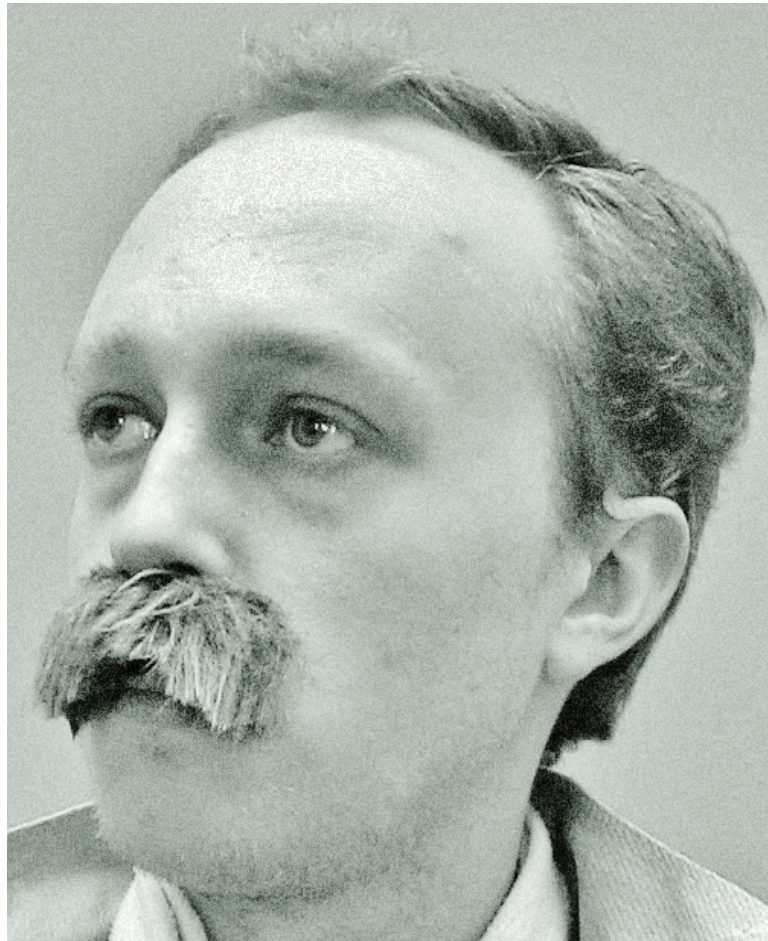
To trick my audience into believing the fantasy figures I fabricate are real, I use circumstantial evidence. But with the help of that same audience, the double lives I live become far more interesting. It is their imaginative power that really brings my alter egos to life.

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### CONRAD BOY, THE FIRST NEW FIGURATIVE PAINTER

In 2009, I created Conrad Boy, an American artist born in Brooklyn, New York in 1939.<sup>1</sup> At the time, I was focused on how information given by museums and in literature about art history is hardly ever questioned by the audience. In this project, I presented Conrad Boy as the first New Figurative Painter. Normally, this title is attributed to the artist David Hockney, but I had thought of a plan.

I described Conrad Boy as the son of German immigrants, and a child prodigy. Already at the age of fifteen, he attended the Institute of Fine Arts of the New York University. During an exchange program with the Bradford School of Arts in 1954 Boy meets David Hockney, or so I stated. This in order to make it plausible that David Hockney knew Conrad Boy's work. I then painted an impression of Hockney's work 'Doll Boy' that he made in 1960 and named it 'Womb Guy'. I dated it '1952' and claimed that Hockney copied Boy's work because the resemblance between the two paintings was



**Figure 1:** Conrad Boy

overwhelming and ‘Womb Guy’ dated years earlier than ‘Doll Boy’. The real New Figurative Painter would be Conrad Boy, not David Hockney.

The image of Conrad Boy was easily created by making a picture of myself wearing a big fake moustache. At the exhibition of Conrad Boy’s work in 2009 I was surprised about the fact that this picture was shown and that still nobody recognized me. I also overheard an interesting conversation.

“I never heard about this artist. Did you?”

“I have read about him.”

Impossible.

A local politician, interested in American art from the 1950s and 1960s, was *not amused* when he found out that Conrad Boy never existed. He angrily walked out of the gallery and made me realize that it is still possible to upset people with art.



**Figure 2:** Conrad Boy: Womb Guy v. Doll Boy (David Hockney)

### ULTRAPOPART, TAKING POPART TO THE NEXT LEVEL

Two years later, in 2011, I created the art movement Ultrapopart, founded in 1950 as a response to Popart.<sup>2</sup> I posed as all five members, Antony Chapman, Neil Vanderboom, Brad Thompson, Kurt Weissbach and Janice Falešný (falešný, Czech for fake) wearing different wigs, clothes and glasses.

The members of Ultrapopart were supposed to have been part of Andy Warhol's entourage, but were of the opinion that mass consumption was more glamorized than criticized by his group. They distanced themselves from Warhol and founded Ultrapopart.

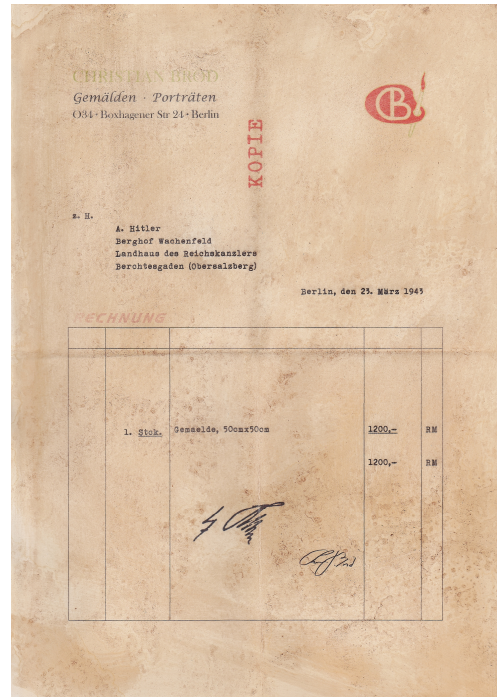
For this project, I described a fictitious group as if they were once well known but later forgotten. I researched who was important in the New York art world at the time and explained that James Johnson Sweeney, the second director of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum from 1952 to 1960, was a great admirer of Ultrapopart, and organized several of their exhibitions. He even wrote a book on the subject called *Ultrapopart, a strong belief in individuality*, which was published in 1964.

As with the 'Conrad Boy' project, my main focus was art history and how easy it is to claim that certain artists and their work are, or have been of great significance.





a. *Eva*



b. *Invoice*

**Figure 3:** Christian Brod

### CHRISTIAN BROD, THE ARTIST WHO PORTRAYED A NAKED EVA

In 2013, I created a German painter, Christian Brod, who painted a nude portrait of Eva Braun, which was commissioned by her lover, Adolf Hitler.<sup>3</sup> For this project, art history was of less importance to me than the reaction of the media and of politicians. But, first, I should make the story believable.

After Christian Brod died, in 2012, at the age of 95, his nephew Otto inherited his house in Berlin. In the attic of this house, Otto found a number of paintings, including Eva Braun's nude portrait. Excited, he told the story to Ron Jagers, a Dutch gallery owner, who would later exhibit the painting, as well as other works made by Brod, in Amersfoort, The Netherlands.

For this project, I created several alter egos. As the art critic, K. Nelissen, I wrote an essay entitled 'Christian Brod, Entartete Kunst commissioned by Hitler'. In this essay, I reflected on Brod's painting and specified that the paint used was made by I.G. Farben, a German company that was closed just after the Second World War. Therefore, I argued, the painting must have been made before 1945.

The story, supported by Nelissen and nephew Otto, seemed believable enough, as, soon after the press release about the upcoming exhibition, several media and politicians expressed their strong opinions.<sup>4</sup> As the exhibition took place in a building owned by the government, it was criticized as indecent.<sup>5</sup>





**Figure 4:** Christian Brod

Brod was described as a Nazi, and his work as the glorification of Nazism. Moreover, the style in which the painting was made was discussed in major Dutch newspapers like the *Algemeen Dagblad*.<sup>6</sup>

During the Nazi-regime, art was divided into *Entartet* (degenerate) and *Deutsch* (German), the latter meaning everything glorifying Germans and their history, the former, *Entartet*, referred to a notion derived from social darwinist theories about degenerate races. Art critic, K. Nelissen, addressed the rumour that Brod's painting could not be authentic because of fauvist elements in his style. Nelissen confirmed the fauvist traits and made it clear that they were exactly the reason why Hitler refused to display the painting. They did not automatically mean that the painting was a fake.<sup>7</sup>

To prove that the artist and the *Fuehrer* had an agreement, I made fake invoices sent to Hitler by Brod, that were signed by the dictator himself. So Hitler bought the painting. Yet he never put it up on the wall. I faked signatures of Hitler, Christian Brod and his nephew Otto, and also made a diary supposedly written by the German painter in which he describes his interactions with Hitler and Eva Braun. *Goedemorgen Nederland*, a very popular morning radio show, made an item about Christian Brod.<sup>8</sup> One of the commentators, a Dutch correspondent in Berlin, mentioned that Eva Braun liked to skinny dip, and that therefore the story made sense.<sup>9</sup>

While working on this project, I realized once again that I was not creating

these alter egos all by myself. The imagination, my audience's fantasy, helped the persona of artists like Christian Brod grow even bigger than I could ever imagine. I also learned that media and politicians are more interested in stories than in facts.<sup>10</sup>

### OVES INOBSEQUENTES, A FASCIST ART MOVEMENT

In 2014, I started working on a fascist art movement by the name of Oves Inobsequentes (Latin for 'Disobedient Sheep').<sup>11</sup> Founded in 1664, in remembrance of Carel Fabritius—the only student of Rembrandt to openly distance himself from his former teacher—it is the oldest art movement in existence. To its members, Fabritius was the first artist to declare himself to be autonomous by standing up to Rembrandt.



**Figure 5:** Oves Inobsequentes

The art movement claimed that the early death of Fabritius, following the explosion of the powder-house in Delft in 1654, was planned and carried out by Rembrandt and his following. This act of revenge by the world famous painter supposedly formed the justification for Oves Inobsequentes to set out as a fascist movement that enforced artists to remain, or become, autonomous. They were responsible for several attacks on institutions that were out to constrain the autonomy of the artist.

It somehow appeared to be impossible to link art to fascism or to make a plausible depiction of fascism that is based on an artistic idea. Although I openly claimed—this project was part of two reasonably large exhibitions—that Oves Inobsequentes was affiliated with the Nationaal Socialistische Beweging (the Dutch version of the Nazi-party, NSB), during the Second World War no one seemed to have a strong opinion about it. The thought of an artist being truly capable of perverting thoughts of power in relation to art seemed to be inconceivable, in practice.

In all, this project, which should have addressed the subject of art in relation to power, and vice versa, was not a great success. Since there was little response from the audience, the members of Oves Inobsequentes, these alter egos, remained a figment of my own imagination only.<sup>12</sup>

### NIZAR MOURABIT, BELOVED MOROCCAN-DUTCH COLUMNIST

Nizar Mourabit was the first character I created who was still alive, and who played an active role in social debates. All the other characters I created before were already deceased by the time their work was displayed. That way critics would not be able to contact my alter egos and find out that they did not exist. It was also the first time that my alter ego was not an artist as such, but a political scientist and a writer. I came up with the idea for this new alter ego because of my strong reservations about Geert Wilders and his political movement Partij voor de Vrijheid (Party for Freedom).

Wilders is awaiting trial for his rant about the Moroccan-Dutch community in The Netherlands. In March 2014, he asked a small crowd, that was instructed to respond with the word 'fewer', whether they wanted more or fewer Moroccans in their city and in The Netherlands.

In a way, Nizar Mourabit became proof of the fact that a considerably large population in The Netherlands did not really want fewer Moroccans, they may even have wanted more. Only two weeks on Twitter, in July 2014, Mourabit had had more than eleven thousand views.<sup>13</sup>

In the following twelve weeks, ten columns about inequality in The Netherlands, written by this political scientist, were published on popular op-ed websites, and in *Het Parool*, *Trouw* and *De Volkskrant*, three of the biggest Dutch newspapers. One of these columns, entitled 'Let us be Dutch among the Dutch', was translated into English for a global news website. (See fig. 6.)



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## Let us be Dutch among the Dutch

Tuesday 14 October 2014



**Having dual nationality has an alienating effect on young Moroccan Dutch, writes Nizar Mourabit.**

On September 15 I wrote a piece in the Parool newspaper in which I said that we Moroccan Dutch do not represent a special case and should not be treated any differently from other Dutch citizens born and bred here. I titled my column: 'I am Dutch, not Moroccan.'

I had to retract my words under an avalanche of criticism. The Moroccan Dutch do occupy a special place because the Moroccan nationality is automatically given to us at birth, my critics told me.

Moroccan Dutch often don't wish to be looked upon as Dutch and many other Dutch people don't consider them to be Dutch. This is grist to the mill for those who criticise the multi-cultural society and an effective defence for those who want to exempt themselves from the responsibilities and duties of being a...

Zie hoe het werkt

Probeer videoadvertenties

A

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Figure 6: Nizar Mourabit

The columns cover sixteen and a half pages in total. The reactions on the websites of the newspapers and op-ed websites cover three hundred pages, they were submitted by eleven hundred and fifty people. Mourabit also received many reactions on Twitter and over six hundred emails. He was invited several times to appear on radio and television.

It is hard to describe what it is like to create an alter ego that becomes more famous than you are yourself. His audience discussed important issues with Mourabit via Twitter, email, forums and in reactive columns. To them, it was Mourabit who truly existed; not me.

I started this art project to confirm my idea that the Moroccan-Dutch community was frequently and openly being discriminated in The Netherlands. By documenting people's reactions to the columns written by Mourabit, I planned to expose a hatred specifically directed towards Moroccan-Dutch citizens. Yet, also, something unexpected happened. Media were eager to publish almost anything Mourabit wrote. In just three months time, this alter ego's words were printed by three major Dutch newspapers. Was it just the significance of the words or also the fact that they were written by someone of Moroccan descent which made them so inspiring?

After I revealed myself as Mourabit's creator in October 2014, more than fifty articles and columns were written about this art project, in The Netherlands and Belgium.<sup>14</sup> Media that had published his work reacted by stating that they were not to blame: there was no way one could prevent liars to gain access to their platform. But not one editorial staff member that was

contacted by Mourabit had asked him about his background; whether he really was a political scientist; or had made a telephone call to assure that this person was real.



**Figure 7:** Ultrapopart, 1958

### ILLUSION—DISILLUSION

Art is just the imagination of reality, Plato grumpily said once. I personally am among those who believe that, instead, it is *truth* that is overrated. Illusion or wonder stimulates people to discover new grounds, and has always been essential to the evolution of societies and cultures. Artists can still play an important role, these days, by creating new worlds of ideas and using their power of imagination to inspire the audience.

But my art projects have two different phases. First, there is the phase of illusion, the periods in which I live my double life, which usually last several months. The second phase consists of unveiling myself as the person behind the alter ego, the phase of disillusion. From that moment on, the audience has to deal with the fact that they believed in someone who did not exist. Hopefully, this raises some existential questions.

Søren Kierkegaard, the Danish philosopher who wrote under various names, supposedly advised his readers not to criticize him for what his pseudonyms

claimed. As strange and perhaps arrogant as it may sound, this is also my view. There are, of course, certain elements of my own personality that I project onto my alter egos. But I do not necessarily agree with the content of their art work or what they have written.

For me personally, the phase of disillusion is a difficult one. In this phase, I have to decide to end the lives of the alter egos I created. This is no more painful for the audience than it is for me. After all, the double lives I live are a lot more interesting than real-life.

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### NOTES

1. For Conrad Boy, check this Youtube short: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OB0FFdTVQew>
2. For Ultrapopart, check this Youtube short: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PtNAR2mhkEo>, and see figure 7, 110.
3. For Christian Brod, check this Youtube short: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9UotOXolPLg>.
4. See Vreugdenhil 2013, and Redactie 2013.
5. Several Radio stations broadcast an item about Brod: *De Avonden*, VPRO: [http://www.vpro.nl/speel.WO\\_VPRO\\_059052.html](http://www.vpro.nl/speel.WO_VPRO_059052.html); and *Nieuws*, RTV Utrecht: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0a375P1SYr4>.
6. See Maassen 2012b, Maassen 2012a.
7. See also van Geel 2015.
8. *Goedemorgen Nederland*, KRO: <http://www.radio1.nl/item/86319>.
9. By the way, quite special: unbeknownst to me, Christian Brod is discussed in a recently published novel, *Ica*, by Eva Posthuma de Boer. The main character's father is an art historian, who is dealing centrally with Christian Brod and his nude portrait of Eva Braun. See van Geel 2015.
10. After Nelle Boer disclosed that it was he who painted the nude portrait of Eva Braun, writers discussed the lying of the artist, rather than what the effect of his lies were on media responses. See, for instance, de Valk 2013, Laning 2013, and Boonstra 2013.
11. For Oves Inobsequentes, check this Youtube short: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2qDVYfIJMi0>.
12. One of the leaders (Kunstbanheren) of Oves Inobsequentes was the filibuster, Jacob Campo Weyerman—at least, that is what I alleged on the website: <http://ovesinobsequentes.nl/18e-eeuw/>. “Stichting Jacob Campo Weyerman” responded with a short announcement on their own site: <http://www.weyerman.nl/7755>.
13. Stephan Sanders wrote about Mourabit's views: Sanders 2014, see <http://www.nrc.nl/handelsblad/van/2014/oktober/18/gedwongen-marokkaans-1429135>.
14. My disclosure was in *De Correspondent*. For the many responses, see here: <http://www.nelleboer.nl/artikelen-columns-over-het-kunstproject/>.

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