

## **Raimundas Malašauskas talks to Donelle Woolford**

R: Are you Donelle Woolford?

D: [Laugh]. Is that really the first question? To answer, "Yes, I am Donelle Woolford."

R: Another first question could be "Who are you?"

One of the reasons I am asking this question is because of a project that Loris Greaud, a French artist, did for the Black Book of the IX Baltic Triennial, which was curated by Sofia Hernandez Chong Cuy, Alexis Vaillant and myself in 2005. At some point during our multiple email exchanges in preparation of the project I noticed that Alexis Vaillant was using two email addresses in the correspondence between the three of us. Not the most striking fact given the common practice of the same person using several different email addresses, but when a time came for artists to submit their contributions to the Black Book (which dealt with black markets, undercover strategies, shadow networks, fake identities, etc.), Loris Greaud sent us a wiretap of all our email correspondence, which he entered using the name of Alexis Vaillant and a specially created email address for that. So we suddenly faced a mirror of our own strategies and ended up publishing the wiretap in the publication including the parts that we've censored due to a number of obvious reasons. I think Loris Greaud did a really interesting project and it made me very much aware of the "shadow identities" one might encounter not only on Internet, but at the corner bodegas as well. How does it sound for you?

D: I am Donelle Woolford. But I do believe that we all have alter egos or shadow selves. I might define who I am differently from day to day.

R: Do you know why I contacted you?

D: I would guess that you want some answers from me, unless you are just feeling a little lonely over in London...

R: So who are you today? And weren't you part of the same Baltic Triennial one year ago? Can you tell me more about it?

D: Today I am Donelle Woolford because I choose to be (that's my daily mantra). It's nice to be able to don personalities like a wardrobe. But in the end "Puffy", "P. Diddy", "Diddy", or "Sean Combs"... doesn't really matter what people call you. A name is just a name, but it's how you put yourself out there that counts. I was a part of the Baltic Triennial a year ago. I can't believe it's been so long. That show was a great excitement. The idea of undercover systems and black markets was something I had been dealing with abstractly in my work for years, and am still toying with those ideas today. I have a fascination with authenticity or lack thereof. Who is really to say what is real or what's original? People are always hiding and revealing

different parts of themselves, consciously constructing their image from pieces of others.

R: "Multiple solitude" - this is how Deleuze was talking about Godard. Can you share some loneliness with me?

D: I would share my loneliness with you, but I prefer my solitude! It's interesting that you bring up Godard though. I always think of how he calls attention to the inherent plasticity and performative nature of things on display. It seems we are all on display now-a-days. We have taken Hollywood to heart and have begun to perform ourselves. Your next door neighbor could be the next American Idol! You begin to play roles, to construct your image. Life is getting so performative, full of escapism and disguise. The people we seem to admire most achieve greatness by embracing a level of reality lower than the average person. We know it and love it none the less.

R: „All of us invent ourselves, some of us just have more imagination than others“ claimed Cher. Do you agree? And do you invent other people (or help them to invent themselves)?

D: Quoting Cher eh? You are well versed! I do agree with her though. We all play a very active role in constructing our identities. I do dabble in the creation of identities, my own and others', but then again I work in advertising by day... I think it's fascinating how people can really feel connected to personas, even if they are clearly constructed. Madonna (or is it „Esther“ now?), Napoleon Dynamite, Superman... There are teams of people who work behind the scenes to construct these personalities; yet we enjoy their persona and performance so much that they become endearing to us in very real ways.

R: You work in advertising? Does it overlap with your artistic practice? Or is it a continuum?

D: It pays my bills.

R: So which stage of your formula of Do It (1. Get Rich. 2. Become an artist. 3. Get Rich.) are you at now?

D: There's a formula?! Things would have been so much easier if I knew that. Why don't they teach that in math instead of all those useless algorithms! Well, regardless, I don't think I'm fully at any stage of that equation.

R: Talking about the Baltic Triennial - Yes, it's been a long time indeed - exactly one year since we've received an email from Joe Scanlan, an artist whom we wanted to participate in the Baltic Triennial, introducing you as his

assistant and a very particular type of collaborator. He wrote (let me quote this big chunk of his email):

"For the past five years I have been developing an artist named Donelle Woolford. First was she was my studio assistant, then she did some editorial work for me, and finally she became my publicity officer. Many people correspond with her and she performed her tasks well.

Now she has left my employment and set out as an artist in her own right. Having heard that there was a very lively market for hot young artists in New York--especially recent Yale graduates--she has moved to there to try her hand with the rest. She is currently living in Clinton Hill and working as a graphic designer.

I mention her because she is, on many levels, a black market artist. First and most obviously, she is a black artist and she markets her work, ergo, she is functioning in a kind of "black market" that is, as you say, both obvious and indiscernible in the context of the contemporary art world.

Second, her work is a smart, satiric remake of classical cubism. That is, she is taking back for her people an aesthetic that was stolen from them almost 100 years ago. Rather than oil on canvas, however, her cubism is constructed out of found scraps of wood to have the approximate appearance of cubism. Thus her work is both real (made) and fake (counterfeit), just as the original cubists' works were both real (painted) and fake (bastardized African culture). Her works are mere shadows of the originals, outcasts lurking about the alleys of art history, waiting for their big score. Her works are stolen goods.

Third, I have been acting as a "front" for these works of hers, pawning them off as my own in the backrooms of my various galleries but never showing them in the light of day under my name. So far, I have sold every work she has made, and this has allowed her to work at her own pace, in private, like a ghost.

She has become tired of this arrangement, however, and both of us feel it is time for her to break out. I think the Triennial presents the perfect opportunity, and so I propose that my contribution to the Triennial be the involvement of Donelle Woolford as a young black artist. She would need to show work, travel, attend the opening and be publicized to the same extent as all other artists in the show. She would have her marginal bio published just as everyone else. And she would do her best to make her contribution to "Black Markets" (working title) to be as beautiful and subversive as possible."

R: Can you explain more about your relationship with Joe? Is he your collaborator or a mentor or a shadow self? What is your current role in Things that fall? And why do they fall?

D: I have known Joe for many years. He was my first sculpture teacher. I worked as his assistant for some time, biding my time and observing how things worked because I didn't really know how to insert myself into the art world. I was intimidated at first by the challenges I saw as not only an unknown, unconnected artist from the south, but also a black female in a white male dominated world. For a long time I decided I would just be invisible. Pawn my works off as someone else's, don a mask. After promoting my works under Joe I realized that being invisible was ridiculous. I appreciated all Joe's help, but it was time for Donelle Woolford to have her own voice, her own space, her own work. So here I am. As much as they try to keep the two worlds apart, art is politics; I just got tired of sitting on the sidelines.

Labels aren't so important to me, call me what you will: A collaborator, an image, an avatar. All I want is to achieve things that are beyond my perceived identity, beyond what my physical appearance in the art world will allow. I am a part of Things that fall—I take up some space on the site, and helped out for a bit. Everything falls really, is there any object on earth that ascends in perpetuity?

R: Why did you decide you wanted to insert yourself into the art world?

D: It's difficult to create work and not to want people to experience it at some point.

R: And why did you decide to become visible at some point?

D: It was more painful to watch from the sidelines and complain than I anticipated. I thought by not taking part in all the politics I could forget about it. But I love art and will always be around it so there was really no separating myself away from it.

R: Were you making works of different stripes under those different names or was it a more homogenous production?

D: I haven't released my works under many different names. I've stuck mainly to my wood works. But I could understand reaching a certain point where you feel locked into a style. People can be very inflexible and expect a certain work from you. In that scenario I could see creating and releasing a new genre of works under a different surname. It's like how celebrities put on hats and glasses to escape the paparazzi.

R: So if one day someone asks you to produce a work in someone else's style under someone else's name, properly paid, would you?

D: Yes, that's what I used to do for a living as an art assistant, use my hands as instruments of labor to create someone else's vision. I don't like it much.

R: What would you do if one day you saw a piece by Donelle Woolford that you've never seen before on Ebay?

D: That's a strange thought. I guess I would be flattered and outraged. People copy, you can't really stop that part of human nature. I do believe that when something is made by a person it carries a unique energy, and that can never be copied. If my works are so well liked that people are bootlegging them and pawning them off on E-bay I don't think I'd worry about the sale of one fake knock-off.

R: Would you ever consider producing an invisible work?

D: I have actually.

R: The above? Or something else? Tell me, I am really curious. Don't you think invisibility has become almost a matter of style, not only an ideological statement?

D: It was a different project to actually create an invisible piece... it was interesting, very freeing, I liked it a lot. I think the obscure and unknown have always been in vogue.

R: Do you have a blog? Where is your home? Thinking about home (or rather about a house) I remember John Waters who claimed that "My life is a reality show. Everybody has a great reality show if you go out, if you live a life. I think the only people who really love reality show don't go out of the house." Do you ever see your life as a reality show? Or a film? Or a funk song? I think it was Jill Scot who said that "You become what your sing about" - she was talking about funk. Is it true that the art-work you do can have a transformative power on your life?

D: I don't have a blog, my daily stream of consciousness is not for public consumption. My home is where I can breathe and create, right now somewhere between New Haven and Brooklyn. I often see my life as a film or at least an hour-long sitcom. In certain moments I can even hear the music cue up. I don't really think my art transforms me. I am not separate from my art. It is just an extension, an action, a part of me that reflects myself just like a best friend or an enemy would.

R: I think my home is writing, or maybe travelling. Kathy Acker was saying "travelling is just like having an endless orgasm. You just go and go and go." Do you know her work? I remembered her thinking about the way you re-appropriate Cubism - I think she did similar things with centrepieces of male writing like Don Quixote. Can you tell me more about your Cubist period? Did it come from Fauvism or Conceptualism or...?

D: I grew up with cubism. Jazz, scratching and breaking, even beat boxing with my sister. I grew up looking at African sculptures and masks and kente

cloth dolls. So when I went to school years later and saw the works of Klee, Mondrian and Picasso I was like... oh ok, I see where they are pulling from. Breaking things down to basic elements, flattening, refracting and re-combining to approximate life—and maybe even create a better vision of it—seemed very familiar to me and natural.

R: To envision life? Do you like to define what art means to you? And how does this definition change?

D: That sounds like a very philosophical question Rai. I say “envision life” because I think all pieces are made through their creator’s eye, from their vantage point. Life is consumed, filtered through our beings and regurgitated back into the world through various forms of creation. Art is just another form of communication. One that can reach you in ways that pure dialogue cannot. I like the freedom it allows for; to comment on, express, re-envision, or supplement life however you see fit.

R: I like what you say about freedom. To me art provides a possibility to be at both sides of the door at the same time.

D: And do you just stand there looking at yourself?

R: I look at myself fully aware that I become different in this act of looking. Almost-someone-else.

Have you ever appropriated Joe's work?

D: I have never purposefully appropriated Joe’s work, but I can't promise that I haven't been influenced by it or his thought. I’ve never been one to believe that copying is the highest form of flattery. To me it's much closer to plagiarism, criminal almost. But we are all guilty of it. It's impossible to see something and to not be affected by it and have it seep into you, but it still bothers me that it happens. What does new and original even mean? Without a trace of influence or origin? I do know and like Kathy Acker’s work. I always like thinking about how her intention was not to be a feminist voice per se but she wrote from a female point of view in a sexist world. People get so used to looking at things from a certain perspective it can be hard to flip it around and really see it from another vantage point.

R: So would you mind if I flip around and say that Joe Scanlan is a creation of Donelle Woolford and this is how the feminist machine works? Is it true that Joe is an actor performing the scripts you’ve created - I am sure you know the story of the buried coffin in Vilnius. Did he tell you any details about it when he returned to US?

(By the way, I really like the way Russian poet Joseph Brodski talked about the power of one’s creative practice to influence one’s everyday existence. He was saying that in artistic production he was trying to make things in a different way each time and thus to avoid clichés, and the same attitude

would move to his everyday life existence where he would try to avoid clichés of living.)

D: As intriguing as the idea is, Joe is definitely not my creation. And nothing against him, but I don't think a feminist machine would ever use Joe as its front! Unfortunately, I don't know much about what happened in Vilnius. Joe was travelling so much around that time I never got a full account. I wish I had been there to see it.

R: Well, I can tell you what happened: he arrived in Vilnius late at night in August and after a brief conversation went to the hotel. The next morning we had breakfast, and then Joe took a hammer and a drill and started to make a coffin out of IKEA standard parts designed for a book-shelf. To my surprise the coffin was ready in a few hours. We put a dark blue pillow inside, which looked like the whole family size, and at night attached the coffin to the roof of the car and brought it to a dark forest outside of Vilnius (almost 30 km off the town.) There, under the light of hand torches, we buried it deep in the ground. It asked for some real physical effort, so we had a serious dinner after the burial and the next morning Joe flew away. The whole action was filmed and shown on CAC TV. „Anyone who finds the coffin will win a trip for two to London for an opening of the 33 Hours Baltic Triennial at ICA“ announced our press-release which was distributed via TV, radio and newspapers. To my biggest surprise almost after one month when the coffin was buried suddenly two teen-age girls turned up in the corridors of CAC. They were holding a printed certificate that they had found... under the pillow in the coffin. It was signed by Joe. Still not many people believe that the whole story is true and the young goths found the coffin themselves. Well, this was the first time I saw them. And they were scared that we would reveal to their parents that they were not at friends' house as they said, but deep in the forest that night. Even if the opening of the Baltic Triennial in London was over, Elena and Gabija went to London. I did an interview with them afterwards. They said not many people in London believed that a found coffin in the forest was the reason they had come to the city.

Does Joe have a role in the sitcom of your life you were talking about?

D: Joe definitely has a role... he is kind of like Big Brother, or the man behind the camera, coaching, guiding, advising...

R: When we were burying the coffin Joe introduced himself in a rather Hitchcockian fashion as „the man who knew too much“ at the grave of the coffin. Would you agree? Is he following our conversation now?

D: That sounds like Joe. Sometimes he thinks he knows more than he does, though he is much smarter than he lets on. I do feel an inherent sadness for people that seem to 'know too much'. It seems to always come with a loss of innocence. Look over your shoulder and tell me if you see him.

R: Yes, I think it's him. I am just trying to decide whether he is a projection or a screen. Or both. Who are the other characters in this sitcom?

D: Well the usual cast. My very sexy romantic lead, best friend, my ex, my two sisters, mother and father, roommate.... they are a lively bunch. Love, lies, betrayal. I've been waiting for MTV to call me for my own reality TV show! Still waiting...

R: Would you like Madonna or P Diddy to have a cameo appearance in your reality show? Who else if not them?

D: Prince. Do you know how to get in contact with him?

R: Call him. By the way, why Prince?

D: He's one of the greatest artists I know and he dances better in heels than I do.

R: By the way, what are the materials and skills you are using in your current work? Would you like to tell more about what you do? And would you agree that you share some love for craftiness with Joe?

D: I use wood scraps and recently have begun integrating a layer of beautifully corrugated cardboard to the pieces. It gives them a wonderful new depth and texture. The pieces I make are cubists paintings, made out of wood scraps. My studio is on a giant reclaimed lumber factory. So there is a ton of free material there that just so happens to come from the Industrial Revolution. It's funny; part of cubism's original motivation was to re-inject an element of 'Primitivism' into industrialized modern life. So it's cool to be able to flip it a bit and re-inject industrialized modernism and physicality into our media-driven postmodern living. I really love working in a very physical way. I always have. As an adolescent I used to carve things out of wood, blow glass and melt metals. I like working with the elements. We don't labor much anymore in our society, there's something really sad about that.

R: Where did you find a place to blow glass and melt metals?

D: I was fortunate enough to have parents who supported my love of the arts so they put me in programs initially that had those classes and facilities. I really admire that because if I had a daughter who came to me at 14 saying she wanted a blow torch I can't say I'd so readily oblige.

R: What do your parents do? And where are they?

D: My mother works in real estate and my father is a lawyer. They still live in Atlanta.

R: And do you consider originality a sin as well?

D: I could never see true originality as a sin. I'm just not sure I've even witnessed such a thing.

R: A sin or originality?

D: Either.

R: By the way, do you ever go to Frank's Lounge in Fort Green in Brooklyn? It's very near Clinton's Hill where you live. A fantastic place to dance.

D: I used to go to Frank's all the time. It has a wonderfully unpretentious decor and crowd; and yes the music is fantastic. I feel like I've stepped into a vintage 70's flick when I walk through the door. Might I have seen you there?

R: Were you the woman whose nail I broke in the midst of a dance in the 2005? ??

D: So that was you. I knew there couldn't be too many Rai's out there. I'll never forget those pants you had on, I just knew you weren't from the States!!! Oh, and you still owe me a drink for that.

R: I cannot believe it was you, but I will definitely get you a drink at Frank's. Do you know Judi Wertheim, NYC artist? She once did a project in Brooklyn Museum where she would choose different artworks from their collection and would transplant them to the artificial nails women wear. So an abstract painting would become a miniature on the nail. Which artwork you would love to have on your nails?

D: Come on Rai, because I'm black I have to put pictures on my nails? I did hear about that exhibit though and really like the idea. If I could customize I would go all the way and 'graph' my nails! Now that I think about it, that would be really hot! [laugh].

R: What do you mean 'graph'?

D: Writing, graffiti...

R: There are definitely more pictures on nails than black people in Lithuania. Yet the most striking image to come to my mind if I think about nail paintings is from the States: a woman had an American flag painted on all her nails. I didn't count the stars, but I think she did really well with the stripes. So what about America? Do you subscribe to American identity?

D: I am definitely American.

R: I was told recently that the Black Panthers became active again in New Orleans after the Hurricane Katrina. Their members would come and restore a house for people who couldn't afford to do it and whose lives were

severely destroyed as much by natural as well as social disaster. Do you know anything about it?

D: I don't, but sounds like something they would do. Thank god someone is doing it!

R: Do you believe in God?

D: See above :-)