Foam 3h

Jean–Vincent Simonet

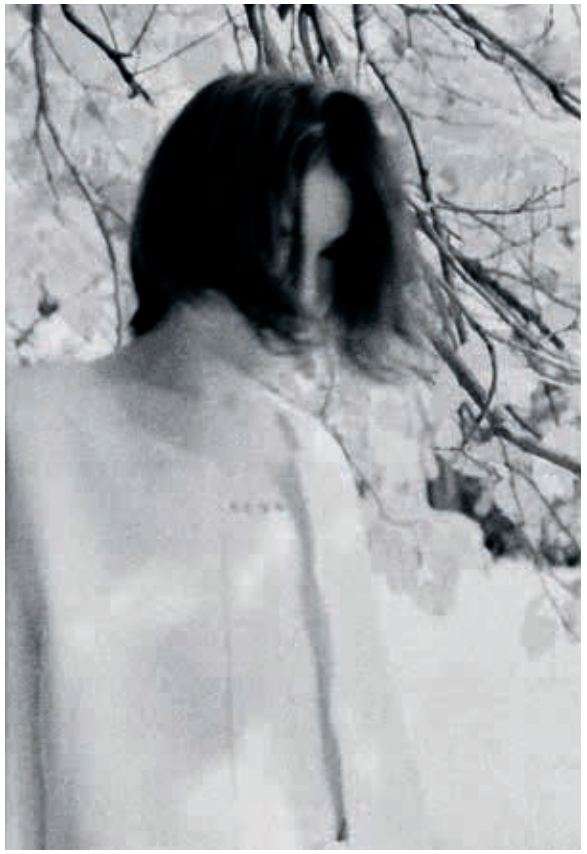
“Maldoror”

28.08.–25.10.15



“He dreams he is happy; that his corporeal nature has changed; or at least that he has flown off upon a purple cloud of another sphere peopled by beings of the same kind as himself. Alas! May his illusion last till dawn’s awakening! He dreams the flowers dance round him in a ring like immense demented garlands, and impregnate him with their balmy perfumes while he sings a hymn of love, locked in the arms of a magically beautiful human being. But it is merely twilight mist he embraces, and when he wakes their arms will no longer be entwined. Awaken not, hermaphrodite. Do not wake yet, I beg you. Why will you not believe me? Sleep … sleep forever. May your breast heave while pursuing the chimerical hope of happiness — that I allow you; but do not open your eyes. Ah! do not open your eyes.”

foam









"It is not right that everyone should read the pages which follow; only a few will be able to savour this bitter fruit with impunity. Consequently, shrinking soul, turn on your heels and go back before penetrating further into such uncharted, perilous wastelands. Listen well to what I say: turn on your heels and go back, not forward, [...]"













"One should let one's nails grow for a fortnight. O, how sweet it is to drag brutally from his bed a child with no hair on his upper lip and with wide open eyes, make as if to touch his forehead gently with one's hand and run one's fingers through his beautiful hair. Then suddenly, when he is least expecting it, to dig one's long nails into his soft breast, making sure, though, that one does not kill him; for if he died, one would not later be able to contemplate his agonies. Then one drinks his blood as one licks his wounds; and during this time, which ought to last for eternity, the child weeps."





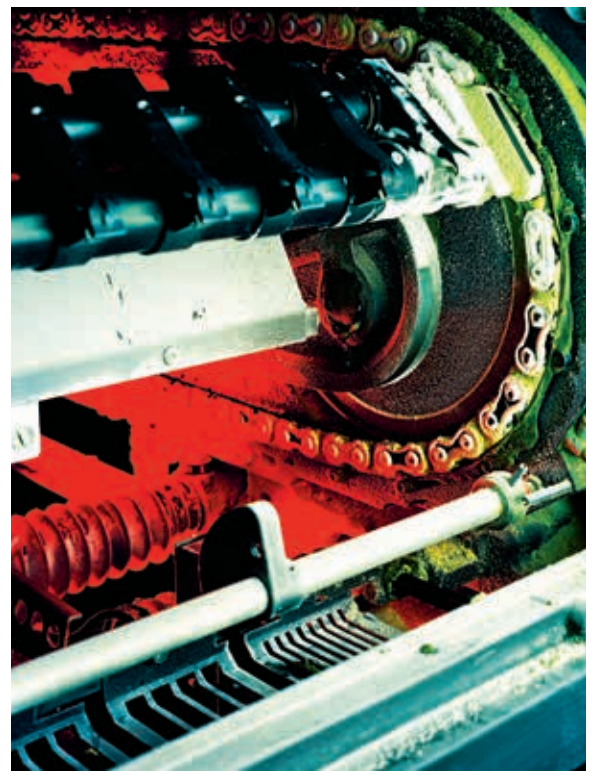
"One day, a glazed look in her eyes, my mother said to me: 'When you are in bed and you hear the barking of the dogs in the countryside, hide beneath your blanket, but do not deride what they do: they have an insatiable thirst for the infinite, as you, and I, and all other pale, long-faced human beings do.' Since that time, I have respected the dead woman's wish. Like those dogs I feel the need for the infinite. I cannot, cannot satisfy this need. I am the son of a man and a woman, from what I have been told. This astonishes me…I believed I was something more."

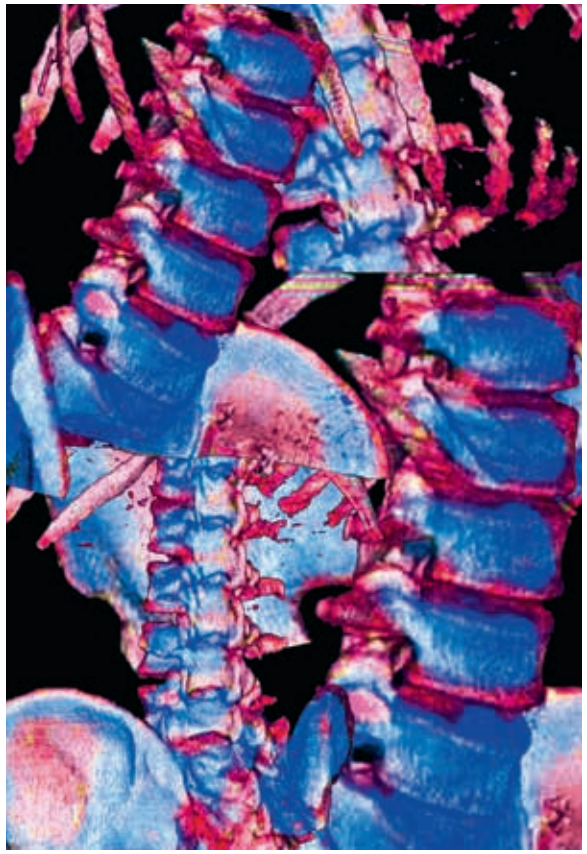












"To construct mechanically the brain of a somniferous tale, it is not enough to dissect nonsense and mightily stupefy the reader's intelligence with renowned doses, so as to paralyze his faculties for the rest of his life by the infallible law of fatigue; one must, besides, with good mesmeric fluid, make it somnambulistically impossible for him to move, against his nature forcing his eyes to cloud over at your own fixed stare."







A Contemporary Maldoror

By Kim Knoppers

Last January, during Plat(t)form, the international portfolio viewing at Museum Winterthur, I met the young French photographer Jean-Vincent Simonet. He told me he felt hugely attracted to the dark, theatrical and transgressive character of *Les Chants de Maldoror* (The Songs of Maldoror) by nineteenth-century writer and poet Comte de Lautréamont: 'I'm not really a literary guy. I don't read thousands of books like some do, but this one blew me away.'

In the book, which consists of six songs, a total of sixty verses of various lengths, Comte de Lautréamont crosses all the boundaries of decency. His central character, the pessimistic and blasphemous Maldoror, has dispensed with God and completely rejected all religion and morality. He is the personification of evil and he abandons himself to his perverse and sadistic instincts. In vividly written passages he leaps from glow worms as big as houses and an ode to the calm of the ocean, to a pact with prostitution and four masked men who attack a hermaphrodite. There is nothing resembling a linear narrative and the perspective is fluid. Sometimes Maldoror speaks to us directly, sometimes we are addressed in the third person by a narrator. Fortunately Lautréamont does feel some compassion for the reader, whom he warns at the start of his intense book: "May it please heaven that the reader, emboldened and having for the time being become as fierce as what he is reading, should, without being led astray, find his rugged and treacherous way across the desolate swamps of these sombre and poison-filled pages; for, unless he brings to his reading a rigorous logic and a tautness of mind equal at least to his wariness, the deadly emanations of this book will dissolve his soul as water does sugar. It is not right that everyone should savour this bitter fruit with impunity."

Comte de Lautréamont was the pseudonym of a diplomat's son, born in Montevideo, called Isidore Lucien Ducasse. All kinds of mysteries surrounded Ducasse when he died at the age of twenty-four, but life granted him enough time for *Les Chants de Maldoror* to establish his reputation. Nevertheless, he might easily have been completely forgotten after his death. The book was banned immediately because of its blasphemous character. We have the enthusiasm of the surrealist André Breton to thank for the fact that Lautréamont became a cult hero and a source of inspiration for a lot of artists and writers.

By the time Simonet began his dialogue with Lautréamont, a hundred and forty-five years had passed and he was the same age as the French misanthropist was when he wrote the book. Simonet is obviously no shy soul but an adventurous spirit. 'I discovered the book and I was really shocked by the power of the text. It immediately created a lot of mental pictures. I decided to make a rendition of the original book. I took the six cantos as a starting point for six booklets. Each of the six booklets offers a thematic approach related to the universe of *Les Chants de Maldoror*: Romanticism, Chaos, Bestiality, Science, Intimacy and Literacy.'

Simonet's photos don't literally follow the text, they are loosely based on the atmosphere it evokes. Like Lautréamont, Simonet does not shrink from theatricality. His photos of gothic angels are provided with dramatic blue photoshopped skies full of stars. Parts of the text have been laid out in gothic-looking calligraphed letters. Sometimes the letters run through the photos. Other times the images are placed right across the text. 'The photographs in Chant Cinquième are actually taken from my visual diary and are not derived from

Lautréamont's book in particular. He's always making references in the book to his own life and to the romantic and gothic era he lived in, so I thought it was legitimate to make references to my life as well.'

'The structure of the six chapters of *Les Chants de Maldoror* and Lautréamont's eclectic style gave me the opportunity to use a diversity of photographic techniques and layouts. Until a few years ago I was really a nerd in photography. I learnt all about cameras. In *Maldoror* I combined all my experience.' Simonet used iPhone pictures, 20×25 and large format. He works in both analogue and digital, in black-and-white and in colour. Many of the photographs are 35 mm. We find many multiple exposures, magnification experiments and photograms made in the darkroom. 'I like playing with digital as well. I don't know a lot about it, but I'm interested in glitching. It's really simple software and if you combine it with other stuff and don't overdo it, the effect is really interesting. Even with simple software you can get a long way without knowing a lot about coding or data-processing. I'm now starting some experiments with 3D printing.

Over the past year Simonet has cautiously begun studying the work of the Marquis de Sade, that other unique figure in the history of literature. It will undoubtedly provide an inspiring framework for an ode to the imagination within which Simonet can parade his image-fetishism without the slightest constraint.



Jean-Vincent Simonet (b. 1991, France) graduated with high honours from ECAL in 2014 before starting his career of mixing editorial, fashion and experimental photography. His personal work was exhibited at Pla(t)form 2015 in Fotomuseum Winterthur. He also won a Swiss Design Awards in Basel this year. He lives and works in Lausanne where he juggles between commissioned photography and personal explorations. Simonet was selected as one of the Foam Talents 2015.

Text by Kim Knoppers, Foam curator. (A longer version will be published in Foam Magazine #42: Talent Issue 2015.)

All images © Jean-Vincent Simonet

This booklet was designed by Marius Schwarz, graduate in graphic design of the Gerrit Rietveld Academie, Amsterdam.

The exhibition has been made possible by the Van Bijleveltstichting.

Foam is supported by the BankGiro Loterij, De Brauw Blackstone Westbroek, City of Amsterdam, Delta Lloyd, Olympus and the VandenEnde Foundation.

Print: robstolk©

Foam
Keizersgracht 609
1017 DS Amsterdam
www.foam.org
+31 20 5516500