

Stephane Graff in conversation with Fatos Ustek about his work.

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FU. Who is professore? What is his field of work?

SG. Professore is the subject of my latest series of artworks. He is apparently a scientist of extraordinary genius. Naturally, there are few individuals that can actually understand him. He works in all fields relating to advancements in the understanding of the universe.

FU. What is Professore showing in Istanbul?

SG. Professore is not showing anything in Istanbul. Stephane Graff is showing a selection of works from the Professore series!

These include a plethora of alternative process photographs which record Professore's various experiments.

FU. The photographs that we see Professore making present an aftermath of a discovery that he has achieved and it feels as if he is displaying his findings on a scientific scale and writing a history of his own inventions.

SG. Yes, I felt it was important to treat the archetypal mad scientist with a degree of humor. So Professore's experiments are often quite absurd and self deprecating. I researched a lot of pictures of real scientists from the 50's who's experiments also appear ridiculous at times. But Einstein said that imagination is more important than knowledge. Some discoveries come about through trial and error or nonsensical action. Professore had to believe in himself and hope that his experiments would lead to some brilliant new discovery. In this respect, his work is not dissimilar to the practice of a contemporary artist.

FU. Is professore guided by social consciousness?

SG. Sure, in the sense that he wants the world to be a better place. One of my motives for creating this character was questioning the importance of science in our times. Responding to the feeling that science has taken over our lives, and questioning society's blind faith in science. I wonder if science and technology will save our world or ultimately be responsible for it's demise.

FU. How does professore evaluate/ position consciousness? As an ability humankind has acquired throughout evolution or as something that everything is part of?

SG. One of Professore's earliest experiments was to record and decode the voice of plants- (Advanced Techniques In Communication- Tell me if you're thirsty, 2007/8.) He certainly entertained the possibility of consciousness beyond the human dimension.

FU. Has professore exhibited in a hospital context before?

SG. No, but I am delighted to be showing in this context, especially since my work will be seen by a wide audience, including real professors from the hospital faculty. Furthermore, some of my pictures were taken at a psychiatric hospital, so the hospital context is most apt.

FU. What are the motives of Professore's interventions?

SG. Professore's interventions have taken different forms. The first series was an interaction with century old trees. I wanted to take Professore out of his laboratory and into nature. These photographs depict two different life forms -(the tree and Professore,) aging at different rates. Then there were the social interventions, the first being the Pharmacy series in Istanbul. I became intrigued when I noticed that all the pharmacists kept a picture of themselves on their shop wall, taken at the time of their diploma. The contrast between their youthful image and their present physical reality was extremely poignant. Photographing Professore alongside them was an experiment to somehow intervene or subvert this reality. In other works I filmed Professore in various scenarios, often with groups of complete strangers in coffee houses or kiraathane. He would set up his apparatus and appear to be conducting a scientific experiment in the middle of the cafe. Professore presents himself as a seemingly authoritative, highly educated and respectable figure and I was curious to see what he could get away with or how people would react around him.

FU. How does professore handle a survey? What does he search for and what does he find?

SG. I present Professore as the man of the moment. He appears to have an answer or a formula for every problem facing mankind. The question is, can he be trusted?

FU. There is some kind of authenticity and eccentricity about Professore. Through his looks and serious engagement with his objects and measures, one feels at ease to follow his remarks, and almost believe him wholeheartedly. Maybe it is also because he utilizes other human beings, which have been subjects for his scientific endeavours?

SG. Yes, from the beginning I was curious to see how the public would respond to this figure. Professore's unconventional science can range from the fantastic to the banal, but he always treats his experiments with equal reverence so that they come across as plausible. The use of other human beings brings into question serious ethical issues and makes Professore more controversial.

FU. Is professore under the influence of the surrealists?

SG. The style of these works has some things in common with the Dada movement and Surrealism, in the sense that Professore could be regarded to ridicule what he believes to be the meaninglessness of the modern world. I am aware that at one stage, Marcel Duchamp worked under the pseudonym Rose Sélavy and was photographed by Man Ray as this 'other' persona. However, I am not suggesting any specific reference here. Because of Professore's retro styling and the strictly monochrome photography, one could easily associate him as somebody from this period in history, but he has no specific manifesto, as did the surrealist group. One of my references was to the character Chancey Gardener in the book *Being There*, by Jerzy Kosinski. This simple gardener, who all his life had never set foot beyond his garden, was preconceived to be a total genius and by chance ended up as chief advisor to the president.

FU. Kosinski has been one of my guilty pleasures- an author that I secretly derive pleasure from reading but at the same time I am horrified by the cruelties one can embrace in his books. What about Professore, what are his guilty pleasures?

SG. I'd say his experiments on living beings. He feels guilty to have to put his subjects through these paces, but derives tremendous pleasure from the resulting data. But let's be clear that none

of Professore's subjects were ever under duress or experienced any physical harm. Of all the volunteers he worked with, only a few minor cases of mild trauma have been recorded, (but the likelihood is that these particular patients were not stable in the first place!)

FU. I would like to talk about your influences and the way in which you project upon science and art.

SG. I became passionate about photography from an early age. Photography is above all a science. I have always been drawn to 19th century photographs and mystified by their processes.

The Professore series addresses the physicality and chemistry of making images with alternative processes. Thus, addressing the theme of merging science and art was a natural step for me to take. For the Professore series, I imagined creating pictures that might appear natural in a science text book. It opened up the whole question of the aesthetics of science and the way we have faith in science.

FU. The way Professore is in his study reminds me more of the beginning of the 19th century. Not only his aesthetics but also the way in which he inaugurates his experimenting practice from measuring to calculations.

SG. I don't want to limit Professore to any particular period. I present him as an enigma or an eccentric. Perhaps he is one of our contemporaries, or a scientist from the 1950's or indeed a 19th century character. The global view was to present the works as a rediscovered archive that had been lost in time.

FU. What strikes me is the distance Professore establishes and makes visible between his themes and its invisible audience. The space of presentation is multiplied in the course of the documentation being made, especially when Professore himself is the subject of experiments. Professore's thorough investigation in rapid ego deflation, behaviour modification, assessing true potential, seem timely for modern society and for the survival of humankind and also to model an understanding of the universe.

SG. Sure, some of the topics are universal but many are addressing specific issues of our time. I think we need someone like Professore today, to wake us up and help guide us. Maybe we ought to find ways to satisfy our faith in mankind without relying so heavily on technology.

FU. When we talk about photography as science we refer to analog pictures rather than digital. The way in which the silver particles bind as exposed to light and the process of making pictures is always a risk taken into the unknown where taking control over production is impossible. In this line of thought, Professore documenting his inventions, and endeavours in photography is an interesting link. Do you think, he chooses to do so to follow the ecole of other scientists who have their portraits published in journals, art books? Or do you have an interest in the uncontrollable?

SG. I spend far more time in the darkroom than behind the camera. Photochemistry is a precise science and production should be highly controlled. I experiment with alternative processes and sometimes allow the space for spontaneous effects to occur. That's the most interesting area in creating unique prints and painting too for that matter. Science often relies on photography in order to assess results. This was partly my thinking when I made the series of pendulum pictures. Like the work of Muybridge or Edgerton, the timed exposure allows us to trace the motion of the pendulums in a way that we couldn't without a camera. So to an extent,

photography is able to contain the uncontrollable.

FU. I think, finding something forgotten in time has its mysticism: Something that brings a new influence to the picture. Recently, a new Italian painter got discovered when a wealthy businessman bought his house and unexpectedly found all his paintings stashed away. Apparently his works have high art historical value relating to the Italian Neo-Realist era. Sometimes these are everyday wonders and in a way it shows how fragile our history is.

SG. Yes, its a good tactic! I should remember to leave a few prints behind when I sell my house.

FU. Alter-ego is more of a commonality in England rather than in Turkey, if I was to make a broad comparison. I take on as an expansion of identity and as an outcome of the nature of identity as incoherent. I am wondering, if every single minute and every milisecond we are different, how could one sustain this differing state in an ego and alterego?

SG. As far as I am aware, there are no global statistics on the population of alter egos ! Yes, the nature of identity is fairly incoherent. As much as we want to believe in our own sense of identity, the chances are that we are deluding ourselves a lot of the time. There have been cases where an individual has Dissociative Identity Disorder and can display multiple distinct personalities or alter-egos from one second to the next. Each identity has its own pattern of perceiving and interacting with the environment.

In the case of Professore, I can switch him on like a method actor. But the question remains whether he is still lurking from within, even after I have switched him off!

In my series International Professore, 2009 we invariably see Professore in the distance wearing his white coat, walking in nature. These pictures were shot in the grounds of psychiatric hospitals and a deliberate question arises whether Professore is actually a doctor or a patient.

FU. When I made the comparison of alter egos, I referred to artistic productions where in Turkey it is rather invisible if an artist produces work through an alter ego. In other words, I have come across many artists in England who have elaborate alter egos and there is a wide spread literature, unlike Turkey.

SG. Yes, but don't forget that Professore was born in Taksim !

FU. It influences me the way in which the alter ego, as allowed, becomes the guide of the event or the project and this resignification of that persona approximates to self realisation. (not in a liberal sense but maybe more in line of the Frankfurt School.)

SG. Its as if the fiction becomes more real than the fact.

FU. Do you have any other alteregos?

SG. Isn't one enough ?

FU. That is the point where I am challenged, to be honest. Identity for me is a constant flux, like a jellyfish moving along waters. As you know, the movement is made possible by shifting pressures inside and outside of the jellyfish, hence it draws in water and moves ahead as it drains the water. And for me, identity is that continuously changing water. As the jellyfish is not 100% drained of the water and does not take in new quantities but is an accumulative

change of densities and pressures where some of the water molecules are kept in longer than others.

And in this respect, having one alter ego is not enough. Maybe as a channel to expand and explore? What is your take on this?

SG. The jellyfish is an interesting analogy. I agree that our identity is in a state of flux, but we have our core identity which is formed in childhood. When I say that one alter-ego is enough, its because Professore is indeed a very demanding character!

Regarding the alter-ego, I see three different scenarios. There is the constructed alter-ego, such as dear Professore, which for artistic purposes is not a real alter-ego in the Freudian sense. Then there is the true alter-ego, which can inadvertently occupy a subject, even against his or her free will and finally there is the case of the constructed alter-ego overriding the host's original personality. We have all seen Hitchcock's classic film Psycho, where the protagonist is eventually taken over by his alter-ego, (that of his mother.) In a nut shell, that's why I say one alter-ego is enough!

FU. How does professore allow you to further on your artistic practice?

SG. The central theme running through my work is identity. I was interested by the idea of working with someone else, a kind of auto-collaboration, albeit that the other was an alter-ego. It allowed me a different perspective or firing point. Professore opened up a whole other world. A picture within a picture that allowed me to carry forward the theme of identity.

FU. This is an influencing tautology, I think it is more Deleuzian than Levinasian, if we were to make a theoretical reference. Picture within a picture, does that refer to an infinitum?

SG. Yes, because the issue arises: which is the true identity, the artist or Professore? And can one exist without the other? That's to say is the man walking his dog, or is the dog taking the man for a walk?

FU. Could you please tell us about the other works you produce?

SG. I am currently working on a series of monochrome oil paintings. I also recently began exploring alternative methods of appropriation, in order to further ignite the identity theme.

FU. On your webpage, You also inform us that you have developed a new technique for printing photographs, Could you inform us on this innovation?

SG. Certainly. I recently invented a printing process called the Graffite print. The formula is partly based on graphite powder and gum arabic. I have adapted this technique for making large scale prints either directly onto prepared wood panels or paper. The process is very time consuming, but the finished print has a unique effect that can resemble a fine pencil drawing.