

MEETING

Mischa Andriessen



'Be specific. Car-Cadillac vegetable-onion flower-geranium.

Writing is a visual art.

ALLEN GINSBERG

MEETING

1.

In a moment the light will go on. Before you are going to see me, in a minute, I will tell you this: I am naked. Is that a warning? Maybe in the sense that I certainly don't want you to be shocked; I did not take off my clothes to shock you. Shortly, when I will stand before you, undisguised, this is by no means meant to provoke you, and neither do I expect that – when the light goes on shortly and we see each other – you, as a reaction, will do the same; feel free to keep on your clothes. However, for me, being naked is a necessity. We are again living in a blocked time, a time in which decisions are mainly taken behind closed doors, a time when someone can only feel free to express himself when typing and sending his opinion in the seclusion of his own home and using the safe protection of an anonymous alias; freeing his deepest or at least most primary feelings via his keyboard. If we were able to see him, he would appear completely different. So only imitate me if you truly want to, but what I would really like to break through is the secrecy, this communication on the sly. It's not even about setting the right example, but for that reason I will be naked when I appear before you in a moment.

2.

Besides naked, I will be wild, as if I have walked around for days in search of food, warmth and friendship, as if I have just been released from a prison or mental home, which is actually true in some way. I will laugh affably and initially give you the impression that I am slightly avoiding your questions, but when you look into my eyes you will observe more tenderness than madness, the lunacy is a veneer, a shell to hide my fragility; if I hadn't acted silly, you would not have noticed me, this conversation would have passed us by. The fact that I like to attract attention, does not mean that I have nothing to say.

Moreover, this lunacy forms part of me (maybe, I hope, also part of you). Lunacy evokes all sorts of things, not merely good issues, but also certainly not only bad issues. As long as this lunacy is real, it is also always sincere. This is what I have always looked for, both in my work and in people; the abnormal and the honesty. For instance, I have described how my mother was vomiting coldly and nakedly, whilst she let watery diarrhea run down

her; I have never avoided outrageousness, I even had to appear in court because of alleged obscenity, but I never wanted to rattle anyone, just wanted to find myself, in what I wrote and in how I wrote, being myself as much as possible and being open as much as possible, as a compensation for a society that is sealed up.

3.

Alright, here I am, a man with an unprecedented greediness. This does not stem from, at least not solely, character failing, but from a deeply rooted conviction. Well you see, my mother was crazy; she thought that she was eavesdropped on everywhere and always. To ease her mind, I turned the whole house upside down, showing her that there was no hidden equipment anywhere; that the cords, which she suspected to be everywhere, did not exist. I only did that to calm her down, and not to convince her that her impressions were untrue, that she was only imagining things. How could I have any objections against imagination? Anyone who lives as anxiously as my mother, does not live. So I have avoided that way of living, I penetrated far into the Amazon jungle because there I could find a drug that I had not yet tried out, travelled to India, where I arrived with a single dollar in my pocket. I was expelled from Cuba and Czechoslovakia due to improper behaviour. Several times, I have been arrested, taunted, attacked, also physically. Always and everywhere, I have lived without any restraints. First and foremost, my intemperance was a response to the life that my poor, frightened mother was leading, but it was also an agitation against the society of those days as this society resembled her so frightfully.

By the way, I myself have also been through periods of madness, partly because in many respects I was so different to the majority. From the moment that I started to study, I stopped to disguise what made me different. I became aware that the things in which I deviated, in essence determined who I was, and instead of hiding and undermining this, I resolutely decided to communicate my otherness openly and with full conviction. Everywhere, always. That was something which was not accepted in those days, no distinction was made between deviant behavior and lunacy. From this, I drew the ultimate consequence and started to explore many alternative life forms, also the most shameful ones. Thus, I for instance came in contact with a bunch of criminals; tender, intelligent young men and women, who abandoned themselves to dope and stole anything they could

get their hands on. That one night they stole an enormous amount of cameras and other equipment and an even larger pile of pornographic reading; the owner innocently had written his name in every book, so that I knew my friends obviously had ransacked the house of a high-ranking policeman. As an accomplice, I was sitting on the back seat of the car, with which we would bring the stolen goods and a number of my own compromising texts to a place of safety – well, I then started to panic and made so much noise there in the back, that the driver was distracted, missed the turning and drove straight towards a police car on patrol. Without thinking, he neglected the stop signal and shifted the car into reverse. In high speed we crashed into something and the next moment I found myself back on the street with a bleeding head and broken glasses, in search for my papers that were whirling through the air like the feathers of a caught swan. I had trouble finding the notes I was looking for, but despite everything my brain was clear enough to know that I had to make a run for it. I managed it and, like most of the others, I was soon back home again. Shortly after that, policemen were standing at the door, they had indeed found all my papers and on it they discovered my address; finally we were all arrested. My friends were thrown in jail and I – that's why I am telling this – was sent to a mental home.

The aim was that there I would be brought back on the rails. I had to stay there until I had become a normal person again, would be attracted to women and not to men, would work for my money and not hang around with petty thieves and drug users, would not take drugs anymore myself etcetera. I stayed there for a long time, in the end, for form's sake, I swore that I would do my best to mend my ways, and, obedient as I was, I actually tried; I started flirting with women and even more, sought and found a job, imagined having an everyday life with a steady income and a family, but all this only in a manageable time. The fact was that I had discovered something in the mental home: the so-called lunatics with whom I had been locked up for months, continually had the sort of visions that I and my writing friends were diligently in search for. One of them was a young guy, Carl Solomon, he wanted to do illegal things, just like me: he stole a peanut butter sandwich, took it to a police officer and told him what he had done. Instead of sending him to jail, they put him in a mental home. This Carl Solomon was one of the 'best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked'. He provided me with this sentence, the

sentence which made me immortal. It is at the beginning of the poem that made me world famous and I dedicated that poem to him. It was the least I could do as it is brimming with events from his life.

Back from the mental home, I decided, after a while, that I would embrace madness, that I would embrace truly everything of myself and my life, that I did not want to omit or obscure anything, that I would be completely myself, for the full one hundred percent, including all my weaknesses, incongruities, imperfections. Previously, I had incorporated the rhythm of jazz in my works, the spiritual cries from the blues, already I had discovered that blues and jazz represented a longing for life, for a life in full and in abundance; and now I discovered that I even had more in common with that music. They sometimes call jazz an imperfect art. That is because it is a human art, in that sense that every musician presents himself as he is, that he does not imitate, but seeks his own style and voice. A real jazz musician sounds like the person he is, with all that is good about him, and less good or even bad. Just like the way the jazz musician exposes himself in his solos and licks, henceforth I decided to appear in my poems completely naked as myself.

4.

All this had only one purpose: a meeting, coming across someone. Not one person, hundreds, thousands. From that moment on, when I recited my poems, I accompanied myself on a small Indian harmonium or another instrument; I started to improvise just like a jazz musician. In those days I only knew two chords, Bob Dylan was kind enough to teach me a third one, from that moment I could play blues, carry on endlessly, communicate directly. About sixty years ago, I recited *Howl*, my poem for Carl Solomon, for the first time, I was drunk when I had to go on stage, but while reading, I sobered up and put so much intensity into each sentence, that all those present were deeply touched. Michael McClure, a young poet who also recited that evening, later would say that my recital evoked the awareness in him that a boundary had been crossed, that a human voice and body had been hurled against the harsh wall of America. At that time, everything that was personal was also political. And now? For many years, I had been searching for a poetry from which a new point of view could be heard, and while I was reading my long, then not yet finished, poem for the first time, over there in San Francisco in that small converted garage that was

jam-packed, more and more I started to understand that I had found it. My poetry was not based on rules and regulations that had to form a bond due to its structure and order. No, quite the contrary, my poetry was all about the laws I was breaking *en masse*. I did not withhold anything anymore; sometimes I performed wearing just my underpants or in the nude, just to prove that I have nothing to hide. I had not planned it, one evening I spontaneously decided to do it, saw the effect and repeated it whenever I felt like it. I noticed that I could affect people with this way of working and acting. By being unveiled and reciting passionately, I managed to make real contact.

5.

When I said, just before, that it was not my intention to provoke and neither did I want to make an example of myself, I was less honest than I should have been. As this surprises me so much: how did we manage to revert to old habits again? Did we again permit the rules and regulations, which we had actually pushed aside at that time, and even invented some new ones? I did not drop the form principles without any reason, for me, a free form meant a free spirit. What McClure said about hurling a human voice against an unbending wall, might have been an exaggeration, but it is true; against all those rigid forms and systems I placed nothing more than myself, including all its contradictions and imperfections. By being pure and spontaneous, I hoped to be able to break through the rooted structures. This idea also emanated from jazz; people started to call me a 'beat poet,' but I preferred to picture myself as a 'bop poet.' Bebop has been of greater impact on my work than any possible poet; greater than the great visionary William Blake, greater than the great individualist Walt Whitman, and also greater than that great, free spirit in American literature William Carlos Williams, the man to whom I sent my early poems and who made the effort to read them and to say that he thought they were bad, who taught me that I was too formal and locked up in old forms, who observed that I freed myself and applauded that; and eventually wrote a rather muddled foreword for *Howl*. These are all indispensable influences on my work, and without their example I would never have made it, but the influence of jazz is nevertheless even more important. From jazz I adopted spontaneity, the idea that the first version is the most beautiful one, precisely because that one is not perfect. Because that understanding makes sure that you cannot make it easy for yourself, and have to do your level best for that first version.

You have to use every word in the way that a Japanese warrior uses his arrows, keep thinking that it might be your last one. Jazz also taught me that each line, every sentence, is different to the previous one. It might be a subtle difference, but every line or sentence has its own rhythm, own accents – hold on, now I am all of a sudden talking about techniques, whereas I didn't want to talk about making poems, but about their purpose, about what they might be able to achieve. At this moment, art is too much and too often approached as a trade. Of course, art is a trade, but it is certainly not only a trade and nor is it that in the first place. Without mentality, art that achieves something does not exist. The intentions of the artist skillfully have been removed from the art discourse, but without these intentions, without the Epiphany, without that moment of view, there will be no art at all. Do not compare art with building a kitchen cupboard, or baking bread; art is substantially different and by shifting the focus to its craftsmanship, you take away the essential quality of art. Moreover, you make the world of art much smaller, and that whilst the world of poetry, and also the world of jazz, and even that of art in general, has become diminutive, as in fact the whole world has become small and narrow-minded, in spite of what is often said. Again, McClure's wall is standing upright everywhere.

6

Let me get back to what my work induces, and what all forms of art should induce in my opinion. The basis is formed by believing in a world that does not exist, but that you create. Robert Duncan, a fellow poet, once said that I placed sparkling stars in the sky myself, and this was meant as an attack, but I consider it to be a compliment. Don't ask me about the best-before date and should that be an admission of weakness, then I accept that, but the moment of creating is essential. Indeed, that is also jazz; give yourself without reservations. You show yourself and let yourself be heard, but that is certainly not the main issue. Nothing exists without the creation, neither do you. Only during the process of making, call it creating if you like, you can become yourself. That's the idea of the tragic human, the person who chooses his own destiny (and perishes due to that). By definition, jazz is tragic and that is because, as the reed player Eric Dolphy expressed so beautifully: After the music is over, it is all gone in the air. You can never capture it again. My work is also tragic, while I was trying to get hold of everything, trying to be everywhere; was actually quite simply trying everything, while I was constantly busy living and storing that life in my poems, a

great part of it disappeared in front of my eyes. 'Music does not exist, at the very most it is an illusion,' as jazz pianist Misha Mengelberg once said, and sometimes I think that this also applies to life, but that is probably just as irrelevant. In 1963, the Hungarian writer Imre Kertész recorded in his diary that the tragic human being is disappearing, and is replaced by humans who adapt themselves. I am afraid he is right.

So, who am I? Let's start with the simplest part. My father and mother were both teachers, in addition, my father was a locally known poet, my mother had a talent for handling difficult children until she became prey to delusions and I had to witness her in the most humiliating circumstances. I was declared unfit for military service and could therefore start studying during the Second World War; I had been reading a bit, my experience of life was practically zero. At Columbia University I met Jack Kerouac, Williams Burroughs, Lucien Carr and many other brilliant and often bizarre spirits. I attended lectures given by well-known and competent men of letters, such as Lionel Trilling and Mark van Doren, I saw how they functioned and how they were set in their ways, they were so conservative that they would even have been able to function similarly in a police state; they had removed all the danger from poetry, by couching it in a solid form. I started to catch up, read everything possible, followed my friends in their often rather dubious adventures. I discovered that I had to give up security and safety, if I wanted to achieve something. I had to learn from experience. In those days, someone came up with William Butler Yeats, and in his work I found the term 'new vision.'

How that had to be fleshed out? That proved rather a question and I contorted myself into all sorts of shapes until I had the answer. Yet still I knew when I ran into that term 'new vision' that it was something essential. If I'm honest, I think at that time I thought that this new vision was something you could discover, like you can discover a piece of land or an animal somewhere that no one ever saw before, but in the end it proved to be something you had to make, to create. It meant rejecting the safe poetry of my teachers, it meant experimenting, learning, continually being open to everything and everybody, being Romantic from head to toe, idealistic, which means nothing less than believing a world is possible that deviates from the existing one. It proved to be about utopian thinking, emptying yourself, turning yourself inside out, exploring everything, going out there, going around

the world and talking about everything you saw and experienced, however shameful that often was.

It has been said that my friends and I lived in a haze. It has been said that our vision was impossible to maintain, just look at Kerouac, they said, who after all became a reactionary lush living with his mother where in a soaked state he reeled off all kinds of filthy language about Jews and women, just look at Neil Cassady, they said, the shameless Adonis who stood as a model for Dean Moriarty in Kerouac's *On The Road*, a book that with its undisguised quest for the profoundest and most sustained kick inspired many, that Cassady was one day found dead by the side of a railway line, half-naked, and, they said, he had already died much earlier, he had become listless much earlier, bored and devoid of all power of empathy, and you too Allen, they say, have not been able to continually maintain that haze, you have, they say, made a fool of yourself more than once and what's worse, your work went rapidly downhill, after your masterpieces *Howl* and *Kaddish* you never attained that level again.

That is true, I think, but I don't think it makes a difference. Even when I've failed (and of course I have, or at least in part) in all immodesty I see an important example in what I've done. You can look at the road I followed and say, there you took a wrong turning, there you went too far, there you wandered off, etcetera, but it's about the point of departure, about the conviction that on the way you can run into something that really matters. It's about disregarding advice, about being disobedient – here I disagree most emphatically with you when you say these are outmoded ideas. I don't believe in conforming, I refuse to see that as a quality to be admired. You're free to think I made a fool of myself – do I have to fill that in myself? Take the pantsuit, that rabbi beard, that removing my clothes anywhere and everywhere, getting drunk, tripping, chasing boys, even girls, the numerous fits of weeping and hysterical scenes and I could go on. Making a fool of yourself or at least thinking you did, is linked to forcedly observing yourself, wanting to stay in control, to maintain order, an overview, but order and overview exist exclusively in familiar situations and those I wanted to leave behind at all costs.

Why? Two reasons. In the first place because it had become an oppressive world, one that above all wanted to be safe and therefore tried to suppress

every inclination towards deviation. Communist witch-hunts, junkie jazz musicians being hunted, provoked and often locked up for years for minor offences, like everybody who was abnormal was locked up, given electric shock treatment, knocked out, put away. Secondly because I believe in what is so beautifully called enthusiasm, reason run riot, the mind gone adrift. I spent quite some time in a mental home in order to escape a prison sentence, but in that time I learnt a hell of a lot. Many there continuously had visions, including the kind I was looking for, so I decided that I too was allowed to be mad, that I never had to be ashamed of myself as long as I was honest and open, naive perhaps, and you can say what you want, but I helped to liberate poetry, I made it popular and influential, achievements that have both already been lost, I repaired the old link between poetry and music, saw how they can bring solidarity, call up a haze, push reason aside to give room to something that comes from within, that is indescribable, but essential, I allowed the spirit of jazz to run free in poems, returned Dionysus to poetry. Don't you understand that? Well then you don't understand that. It is not that I saw another world and then travelled there, I presumed it, and then followed my intuition. You could say that I did not find the world I saw in front of me in feverish hazy dreams, but you can never prove it doesn't exist.

7.

Now I am naked, I would wish you were standing before me.

MISCHA ANDRIESSEN, JANUARY 2016

This publication appears on the occasion of the symposium:

ENCOUNTERS

Mischa Andriessen: Poet; Mark Bain: Artist-researcher; Josephine Bosma: Journalist and critic; Pascal Gielen: Professor of sociology of art and politics; Xander Karskens: Curator of contemporary art Frans Hals Museum | De Hallen Haarlem; Reinbert de Leeuw: Pianist, conductor and composer; Liesbeth Levy: Director Lokaal Rotterdam; Thijs Lijster: Assistant professor in the philosophy of art and culture; K Schippers: Writer, poet and essayist

THURSDAY 11.02.2016

Location: Art Rotterdam

Text: Mischa Andriessen

Mischa Andriessen is a writer, translator and critic. He regularly publishes texts on music and the visual arts for publications including Trouw and het Financiële Dagblad. In 2008 he published his debut collection of poetry entitled *Uitzien met D* for which he won the C.Buddingh'-prize. For his second collection *Huisverraad*, he received the 2012 J.C. Bloem prize. In 2014 he was awarded with the Charlotte Koehler Stipendium, and in August 2016 a new volume called *Dwalmgasten* will be published.

Translation: Tiny Mulder

Printer: Oranje van Loon, Den Haag

Thanks: Gemeente Den Haag, Mondriaan Fund

Published by: West

Edition: 1000

ISBN: 978-90-79917-56-3

West

Groenewegje 136

2515 LR Den Haag

the Netherlands

+31 (0)70 392 53 59

www.westdenhaag.nl

info@westdenhaag.nl

