

Marianna Simnett  
Maria Luigia Gioffrè  
Anna Carrapetta

Words, Model  
Photography, Words, Transcription  
Fashion Styling

*Marianna Simnett in conversation with  
Maria Luigia Gioffrè — Unfairytale.*  
Crossing the borders of arts







(↑) Prince of Wales Wool Flannel Blazer + Silk Crepe de Chine Turtleneck ASPESE

Marianna Simmet in conversation with Maria Luigia Grotto — Unitary tales. Crossing the borders of arts

MLG Your work is deeply involved with magic: characters undergo a process of transformation of their own matter, turning from one thing into another. Like an alchemical process, which sometimes involves technological transmutations of the body, such as in the works *Worst Gift* (2017) or *Blood* (2015), and in *Prayers for Roadkill* (2022) or *Hyena and Swan in the Midst of Sexual Congress* (2019), with the transfigurations of its human/non-human fantastic creatures. Imagining new fantastic languages and worlds is also at the core of the current Venice Biennale, where myth and fairy tales intertwine in both form and content of many showcased works. Do you think that, in our times, there is a collective, manifest urgency to produce magical narratives in art, society and so on?

MS I think my art speaks to a state of transmutability, where living and non-living beings are in states of instability and flux. My works often focus on one thing becoming another and another and another, an endless transformation. Fixed, rigid positions are crossed out in favor of metamorphosis and creatureliness – the interdependence and inseparability between species, humans, animals, and the world. That sense of magic, of wonder, of being able to become anything, is at the core of my work.

MLG You just mentioned the act of wondering: we can agree it has changed during history. Consider, for instance, the Medieval times: by then, an interesting link between wonder and art was offered by a relevant production of iconic images as a tool for mysticism and cosmologies. Then, the main function of imagination changed, becoming a tool to explore the unconscious, as in psychoanalysis. I think about Freud, Jung, and many others. Nowadays, what is the function of wondering? How do you frame or archive the production of wondered images?

MS It is about letting go of linear thinking and allowing for a constellation of images to start making sense or non-sense, generating new meanings or languages. Activating a new meaning, or a new language. As an artist, you are always inventing. You are an inventor of languages. Not languages that anyone else necessarily speaks, but a language that people can feel. That is my job: to somehow reach right into the recesses of the mind, the soul, the heart, and the organs that we all weirdly share. It unifies us in a way: it is a universal language. I think my work is deliberately unresolved. I don't want to make classical stories where the hero wins, you know? There is something messy, undone, untidy.

MLG Is there not a message to the story?

MS Not really. There is no loud message, no. In my latest work, there is more of an atmosphere rather than a message: a place to be rather than a place to get educated in. A place to inhabit, another world within which to be enveloped.

MLG Do your imagination and storytelling belong to any personal story or landscape? Do you have a favorite fairy tale, or a character you prefer or that you started from? I mean, especially at the beginning of your work, perhaps something or someone you kept with you since then.

MS I have always grappled with power and control. There has been a desire to overcome a threat, either physical or invisible, in my work. And then, my protagonists have ranged from female to animal to organ; even body parts can be heroes. Lately, the protagonist has been a piglet. My work is not strictly autobiographical, but it emerges from a primitive and instinctual way



of looking at the world. It starts with a gut feeling and a reaction to something, out of which I start to develop a huge body of research. Then it goes through a journey, from drawing to interviewing, writing scripts, making sculptures, music, meetings...

So, is your process very participatory in a way? MLG

Yes, I immerse myself... I pretended to be a cat because I had to meet a group of men who identify as puppies. I find myself in these strange situations completely on my own... I also do research on theory, films and literature, but there is nothing like 'just doing it' on the ground. MS

In the work *The Needle and The Larynx* (2016) you inject yourself with Botox. Medical tools and machinery are central in your work. Where does this interest in medicine begin from, and how do you think medical discoveries and body transformations intersect a post-human future determined, among other things, by medical technology? MLG

I am fascinated with surgery and medicine, the capabilities of medicine to transform the body. I think that it is probably used slightly as a cipher for institutions in my work, alongside a representation of a person in power, a patriarch. MS

What you just said reminds me of your work *Worst Gift* (2017), where there are these young boys receiving a male-reserved treatment for their voices, while the female character wants to receive it too. MLG

There is a definite bias toward gender, where women are not allowed access to certain operations. My work teases out the categories of gender that are especially rigid within western medicine. I am just exposing these thick boxes that we are all forced to sign up for in order to behave as living members of our society. I resist and I reject these boundaries. MS

The medium of voice is common also in other works of yours. *Faint with Light* (2016) is an installation involving hyperventilation and, as far as I know, you also play the flute. How did vocality become central to your work? Is there a *fil rouge*? What led you into this complex field of experimentation? MLG

The voice is the part of you that escapes, it is boundless. I think about the fluidity of gender in a similar way. I'm also thinking of the voice as something you can't hold, you can't grasp it, but yet it is such a signature – a signature property of you, your identity. It is you. Mothers instinctively recognize their child's cry. MS

Do you differentiate between voice and speaking? MLG

I'm not as interested in the words I speak, but I am particularly interested in breath and what that can communicate. With *Faint with Light* I am making a sound, but it is very ghostly. I'm producing it unconsciously, because it is this expulsion of air that comes out from my body when I am unconscious. There's this compression that stays in me and, when I fall unconscious, it all has to come out somewhere, so it makes this very weird loud groan. MS

Are birds in your work connected to this because they sing through their voice? MLG

Recently, I was listening to folk singer Sam Lee performing MS







(↑) Marianna Simnett's studio in Berlin.

Marianna Simnett in conversation with Maria Luígia Giffre — Unfairy tales. Crossing the borders of arts

extraordinary duets with a nightingale. Nightingales can harmonize: they respond to the human voice, and they actually sing back. It is incredible. I am fascinated by birds. The flute is my savior, in a way. I've played since I was a kid but, particularly in the last couple of years, during the pandemic, I played to breathe. It sounds simple, but playing really helps me breathe.

MLG Actually, this reminds me of a quote from Nietzsche. At some point, I don't remember where in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, he writes something along the lines of: *Sing! Speak no more! Do not all words lie to the light?*

MS Beautiful. There is also an interesting story by the philosopher Mladen Dolar: he wrote *A Voice and Nothing More*, a philosophical book about voice. He wrote about an Italian battlefield where a commander was ordering his men to shoot the enemy, but this one soldier couldn't shoot because of his commander's *bella voce*: the beauty of the commander's voice had frozen him to the point of inaction...

MLG Thinking about storytellers and fairy tales again, on the occasion of your 2018 exhibition at the Zabłudowicz Collection, London, writer and historian Marina Warner gave a talk titled *Bodies of Unknowing* where she differentiated fairy tales from myths by the fact that the latter never propose a happy ending and conditions for the transformation of the characters, as they are always kept in a tragic journey and not intended to resolve their own contradictions. She then added that, since many fairy tales have become objects of the most disparate remakes (such as cartoons for entertainment), they ended up defining a happy universe rather than the perturbing they have their origin in. Warner also suggests that artists' films, which are not supposed to be for entertainment in cinema, can, in a way, recover the most rooted nature of fairy tales. How far do you merge your work with her position? Have you ever considered this return to fairy tales inherent to your work?

MS Marina Warner is my bible. She studies how fairy tales have historically been spaces to explore violence and darkness at a safe distance – they let you experience it indirectly. Fairy tales and myths have always been about taboos: sexual abuse, incest, murder. A lot of people have found my work disturbing and troubling; they think that fairy tales shouldn't be sullied by these dark and immoral themes. But I've always felt, following Marina, that this is the perfect place to look dead-on at these uncomfortable truths. What's necessary is understanding the separation between the story and real life.

MLG So, you make a sharp separation between reality and fairy tales?

MS Yes. I think in defense of making troubling works, I would say that. In order to defend my position of being able to explore difficult themes.

MLG It is in a way the mechanism of theater: on a stage you can kill somebody or kiss them, but this does not affect the real, out-of-stage relationship with that person in front of you. Isn't it similar?

MS I suppose so. And about the division between audience and actors, you know, I don't think it actually exists anymore. We are all producers, we are all entertainers, we are all the audience. It's all an ouroboros.

MLG But between actors themselves, the fictional relationship looks

similar to that separation you mentioned about fairy tales.

Clearly. Exactly! MS

Paula Rego recently passed away. She was also in the Biennale. Moving through and beyond surrealism, her work also involves human and non-human imaginaries and, of course, fairy tales. Do you feel any proximity to her work? MLG

Yes. In the Venice Biennale, hers was my favorite room. I think it was just the day she died that I went to see her show at Victoria Miro in Venice. It was a tiny little show. There were paintings of angels with wings, and the Virgin Mary as a young schoolgirl. You don't necessarily read the biblical reference. Rego knew how to interpret the canon and show it anew. MS

Have you ever been inspired yourself by canonical figures, religious figures, Greek myths or main figures impressed massively into cultures? MLG

Athena is at the center of my next show. I cannot escape Christianity even though I am an atheist. Philomena, gods – a lot of gods – goddesses, martyrs, they've all made an impression upon me. I have been widely influenced by sacrificial stories and medieval stories. I love them. MS

Let's try to reach an end. You work mainly with film, installation, performance and... MLG

Sculpture and watercolor. My studio practice involves working through a different medium every day. I am working hard to debunk the myth of me as only a filmmaker. My studio practice is completely multidisciplinary. But it is true, I am always making films, there is always a film under way. I never am without a film. Film is a wonderfully hypnotic medium to tell stories. MS

And you always edit them by yourself! MLG

Always, and I also deal with all the animations. I do it even though it is very time-consuming, costly, and often unrewarding, because it is a difficult medium that people do want to see but they do not want to buy. A film is a captivating, gripping, unforgettable experience, if you do it well. It really has the power to transport you. MS

What is more urgent to you now? MLG

The whole point is that I can't choose. We talked about it. There's this type of fluidity you can't resist by being only one thing. I think this can be perceived through all of my answers, about voice, about the body, about metamorphosis. As an artist you're often told that you must do a certain thing, or belong to a certain category – no. In all my life, when somebody has told me 'you must go there', I have always turned in the opposite direction. MS