

## Two Imaginary Conversations with Sofia Goscinski

### 1 The incurable disease: Inspiration

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Since her graduation from the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna, Sofia Goscinski, has forged a distinctive path, mastering a manifold practice involving performance, photography, installation, and figurative and abstract sculpture. Her powerful works are present in private and public collections, including The Belvedere in Vienna. After graduating in 2005, she was offered residencies and invitations worldwide that saw her traveling to Nice to attend the École nationale supérieure d'Art at the Villa Arson, The Mountain School of Arts in Los Angeles, and then to Manila in the Philippines. In 2018, she was invited to Mexico for an exhibition, and an extended stay, which strongly impacted her work.

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Juxtaposing their thoughts, the polyphony of their accounts, deceptions, emotions, views, their wide-angle lens on life, it became clear that, for both artists, "the voyage" was a source of impressions that form the basis of future works. I imagined a conversation between them.

**Patti France 2016:**

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So, there was the initial mission, and then the tangent that led them onto an unexpected creative path. There's the realization of how the matter itself, the clay for the sculptor or the words for the poet, holds the secret of the work's finality—laced with the random impressions of the voyage.

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Both women withstood being alone in a huge metropole, a daunting embryonic experience, but nonetheless essential to the hatching of a text or an artwork.

In *Just Kids*, the city of New York is the backdrop to Patti Smith's early chapters as an artist.

At first homeless and hungry, sleeping rough in stone stairwells, and then finding the path that led up to her providential meeting with Robert Mapplethorpe. These memories reappear as silhouettes decades later, like Félix Vallotton paintings in book form.

**Patti New York 1971:**

"The city was a real city, shifty and sexual. I was lightly jostled by small herds of flushed young sailors looking for action on Forty-Second Street, with its rows of X-rated movie houses, brassy women, glittering souvenir shops, and hot-dog vendors. I wandered through kino parlors and peered through windows of magnificent sprawling Grants Raw Bar filled with men in black coats scooping up piles of fresh lobsters." (*Just Kids*, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019, page 34)

## **Sofia Mexico City 2016:**

"The Hotel they first booked me into was the exclusive Downtown Mexico. The vaulted rooms were like caves, which gave onto a cloister-like courtyard; there was a very mystical dreamlike mood. That was the luxury part of the trip, then I had to find an Airbnb, and it all got a bit tougher. I spent a lot of time alone in a society where there is practically no such thing. In Mexico, no one is alone, especially not women, at least not in public. It was depressing. To me, 'Rabbit Hunchback' (2016) embodies the loneliness I felt in that city. The seclusion and the doubts, because there was, of course, the pressure to produce something for the exhibition and my French colleagues were quite dominant in their demeanor and their works. I was the only woman in the show."

The only woman in the show— it seems that this test of loneliness, silence, and solo walking is essential. Just walking—as Pina Bausch taught, is the beginning of dance. Just walk, feel your back, be alone, be resourceful, then a “host of unrelated catalysts” take effect. This is the common credo that I see as vital to both these artists; seeking the emptiness to fill with words, seeking the emptiness to fill with art.

## **2 The Incurable disease: Freedom**

During these same months, I imagined another more difficult conversation between Sofia and the Martinican political philosopher, physician, and activist Frantz Fanon. His works have inspired liberation movements and radical political organizations around the globe for more than five decades. Knowing that he had been an inspiration for Sofia and that she'd done several portraits of him, I started reading *Black Skin, White Masks*. On 25 May, the shocking viral video of the brutal murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis at the hands (and knee) of a white police officer sent millions around the world spilling out of lockdown and onto the streets in protest. The movement, Black Lives Matter, became an international call for justice.

But Sofia's work hinging on Fanon dated back to three years earlier, and though not overtly political, it was edged on by injustice to people of color and Fanon's own blind spot—women.

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hatred toward him and all the others who oppressed and discriminated against women. The book was published in 1952, and you can feel the injustice in every word."

**Fanon Lyon 1952:**

"All these frenzied women of color, frantic for a white man, are waiting. And one of these days, they will catch themselves not wanting to look back while dreaming of "a wonderful night, a wonderful lover, a white man." Perhaps they too one day will realize that 'white men don't marry black women.' But that's the risk they have accepted; what they need is whiteness at any cost." (*Black Skin, White Masks* page 31)

Frenzied women, that's quite an image! They sound like raving Maenads poised to tear the prophet Fanon limb from limb. On the other hand, white women were like a litmus test for just how integrated the black man was, the white toe testing the waters of assimilation. There is Chapter Two: The Woman of Color and the White Man; Chapter Three: The Man of Color and the White Woman. In both the black man/ white woman experiment and the black woman/ white man experiment—"Lactification"—the woman is objectified.

"I want to be recognized not as *Black*, but as *White*. But—and this is a form of recognition that Hegel never described—who better than the white woman to bring this about? By loving me, she proves to me that I am worthy of a white love. I am loved like a white man. I am a white man." (*Black Skin, White Masks* page 57 )

By bringing Hegel into the conversation, Fanon evokes the “struggle for recognition” (*Kampf um Anerkennung*), the German philosopher's famous master-slave dialectic describing a life-and-death struggle whereby each (the slave and the master), in turn, seeks to confirm their existence and autonomy through negation or objectification of the other.

In Goscinski's work 'Peau blanche, masques noirs' (mask series, couple) 2017, two classical portrait format, silver gelatin prints, one is a masked white man standing naked with a black penis prosthesis strapped to him. The other figure, wearing the same mask, is feminine, fully dressed, and veiled. She is dominant while he is vulnerable—she is negating him; he is the slave. In Hegel's schema: the recognition given by the slave not being that of a free self-consciousness is null and void. Trapped in this impasse, the slave becomes the “proof” of the master's existence; paradoxically, the master becomes enslaved to the slave.

Goscinski's photo diptych is a dialectic, a relationship based on domination caught in a vicious spiral of recognition. Like this imaginary conversation with Fanon, the work is as unresolvable as it is absorbing. In hindsight, the gap was just as unbridgeable, between a young white woman artist in the 21st century and the historical figure Frantz Fanon, as it had been between Fanon and his contemporary Simone de Beauvoir who wrote: “humanity is male, man defines woman not in herself, but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being.” (*The Second Sex*, 1949)

Despite this paradox of a human rights movement, which forgets the other half of humanity, Sofia Goscinski sees a parallel between Frantz Fanon's fight for freedom and the artist's fight for freedom within the art world:

“I see the striving for freedom as a basic prerequisite to doing justice to art and as an absolute necessity. Even if it may seem different from the outside, artists are exposed to a high demand for performance, leading to uncertainty and fear and requires great courage. This is also where masks come into play. The courage to take off one's mask - break down barrier after barrier to arrive at the simplest and most immediate of oneself. If you persist in wanting to meet the needs of the audience, then you remain outward-oriented. For something valuable to emerge, however, you need an inward orientation. It requires a high degree of autonomy. One should not want anything from art. You shouldn't abuse it as a means to gain recognition. There are many examples in contemporary art - people endowed with intelligence and an aesthetic sensibility who see art as their stage on which they present themselves to the world, shine and compete for applause. Their works may be appealing, but they will never even come close to the best because they misunderstand the principle. You do not create art; art forms you. If you forget yourself, then you generate the precondition to really let art arise.”

Is it possible that you never forget yourself more fully than when delving entirely into the portrayal of someone else? If this has some truth, then it is likely that Sofia's affinity to Fanon found its fullest expression in the portrait.

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One of these portraits from 2017, spray-painted on concrete, evokes the writing on the wall, the scrawl of protest so resonant in Fanon's works. The black and white dialectic is translated into graffiti pinks and greens; his is the unsmiling mask of militance, peering out from the cement.

The conversation with Fanon is ongoing — the incurable disease —the fight for justice, it's spreading fast now and gaining power and volume in this dire moment for humanity. The conversation between Smith and Goscinski is a quieter one, one that could last for cups and cups. I can see them in the consecrated corner of the Café' Ino on Bedford Street, the cast iron radiator and the spinning ceiling fans, the afternoon light waning. Maybe when it all starts to move again, planes fly again—the incurable disease of inspiration will spread.

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