

GALERIE FONSWELTERS

You have to dig it to dig it, you dig?

Gabriel Lester

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Q&A with Gabriel Lester

In the exhibition *You have to dig it to dig it, you dig?* you show a new film, how did the idea for this film come about?

About 30 years ago I was asked by a film school student if I could help with the sound under her documentary. As a guide, I used the song *Pannonica* by one of my childhood heroes, the jazz composer Thelonious Monk. Monk wrote this song for his best friend and patron Pannonica "Nica" de Koenigswarter. I heard that song so many times at the time, it became a real earworm - a tune that stuck in my head indefinitely. The song has travelled with me everywhere since then and in a sense has become the soundtrack of my life. Many years later, in 2007, when I bought the book *Three Wishes* in a New York bookstore, I began to immerse myself into the person Pannonica and the relationship she had with Bebop Jazz and Thelonious Monk in particular. The book *Three Wishes* is a collection of wishes recorded by Pannonica from conversations with the jazz musicians she met over several decades. The book, which also includes many polaroid photographs of jazz musicians who visited Pannonica in her hotel room or at home, was compiled by her niece Nadine de Koenigswarter, with whom I had extensive contact during the research phase of the film. What moved and inspired me about the collection of wishes in the book, wishes of people I admire, was that in essence everyone wants little more than a healthy and happy life, in which you can do what you are passionate about. This simplicity, or obvious, universal human desires, was the impetus for the film I made. When the opportunity arose to submit a plan to both the Mondriaan Fund and the Dutch Film Fund for an experimental film, I decided to elaborate the film plan I had already started on, about Pannonica and Monk, their friendship and the song he composed for her. The film is like the last dream and wish of Thelonious Monk as his best friend sits by his bedside and reminisces about the years they spent together.

You call *Dig It* an essay film, can you tell something about this film form?

It's a narrative film, in a free form. I have always seen my previous films, which also brought together actors, scenery and certain visual inventions, as a form of sculptural cinema. These films had a visual plan, but no screenplay and arose largely in editing, often supported by sound, music and sometimes a narrative voice. With *Dig It* I wanted to further develop the idea of sculptural cinema and at the same time I wanted to make a more narrative film in which elements from my sculptural art and music compositions would come together. In *Dig It*, I couple typical film language with sampling techniques, animation, microscopic photography and computer regenerated images. The sum is an essay, poetic, contemplative and personal.

The film incorporates many elements of your practice over the past twenty years. A focus on music, experiments in and around the medium of film and even earlier work that figures into it for the observant viewer. How did it feel to make this film through the Mondriaan Fund and the Film Fund and combine all of that? Did you envision it that way or did you find out afterwards that it brings a lot together from your practice?

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The opportunity to make this film, which came about rather unexpectedly because money was suddenly available for experimental short films at the aforementioned funds, has brought me great pleasure and inspiration. It is perhaps one of the most autonomous projects I have made in recent years. When I started this project, there was no planned exhibition where it should land, no deadline or anyone waiting for it. That really made it a project I could lose myself in, immerse myself. And the budget was sufficient enough to include others, people who inspire me or have traits I don't have. All in all, making this film has been one of the most enjoyable periods in my artistic life. Like being back where I once started as an electronic musician and filmmaker. Not only because many of my interests, themes and inventions were able to find a place in it, but mostly because I was really able to do a lot myself. For example, the entire car chase scene through Manhattan was filmed on one of the conveyor belts that I initially used to make shadow projections as an art installation.

What people who inspire you or can do something you can't do yourself were involved in the film and how did they enrich it?

In a way, making a film is similar to putting together an exhibition. In art, one then speaks of bringing together works of art or artists, while in cinema one often speaks of bringing together talents. I find working with talents one of the most enjoyable and rewarding experiences. The interaction, the possibility of coming together to achieve more than the sum of the parts. The typical $1 + 1 = 3$ feeling.

For this film, I soon started talking to people who could do the post-processing, color corrections and sound. Then, of course, there are the musicians and the actors. Everyone contributed to make it a rich, multi-layered project. All the names of people who contributed are in the credits at the end of the film. The main people are those with whom I produced the film, those who arranged the music, those who filmed it and those who did the image editing.

Besides the conveyor belt in the film, the exhibition in the gallery includes new work, as well as existing work and even work by another artist. Can you tell me about that, about those other works and how they relate to the film?

In recent years, I have frequently curated exhibitions involving other artists or other talents. One such person is a good friend and artist, Melik Ohanian. I knew that his father was a photographer and in the 1960s created an intense and engaging portrait of Monk. With this portrait, Melik created a new work in 2014. The story therein complements the themes in my film and the exhibition in general. The work is about Melik's childhood memories of the red light in his father's darkroom, where portraits and events loomed. In the film *Dig It*, I tell in turn, in a subtle, personal way about my childhood memories and about my father and mother.

In addition to Monk's portrait, the exhibition features various works inspired by or derived from the film. For example, there is the series of film stills *Cinemas Synaesthesia*, which is partly printed in velvet, so they have a skin and can be stroked like you can stroke a cat. This creates a physical memory in addition to a visual memory. Another work is a slowly and dreamily rotating record player on which a butterfly, connected by a needle to the groove of the record, floats. The record is an on X-ray pressed sound recording, as was used for bootlegs in the Soviet Union. The whole, a display case sculpture, visualizes sound, as it were. Such synesthesia inspired the photographs, the sculpture, the images and the characters of the film. Monk's music and his state of mind,

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Pannonica's character, her life and endless love for cats, the coma dream in which Monk finds himself in my film, his last dream, everything has something ambivalent about it. As if several, not necessarily logical, elements have become fused. The film is about magical people with very ordinary wishes. This has been translated into the exhibition...

Synopsis *Dig It*

Baroness Pannonica de Koenigswarter-Rothschild (1913-1988) had a life that defies imagination. Her father was a British member of an international Jewish banking dynasty, an avid entomologist who named his daughter Pannonica after a species of butterfly. Nica obtained her pilot's license when she was still young. She joined the Free French Resistance during WWII. On the so-called North African Field Trips, she served as a courier for the Allied and was a coroner on the many battlefields. After the war, Nica moved to New York to follow her greatest passion: jazz music. Surrounded by more than a hundred cats and by just as many Hep Cats (a nickname for jazz musicians), Nica has been called the Jazz Baroness. She is the muse and patron of a whole generation of jazz greats. Night after night she drives from club to club in her Bentley. The night Charlie "Bird" Parker died in her hotel room and its aftermath is one of Nica's most traumatic experiences. Thelonious Monk, along with his wife Nelie and two children, lives in Nica's house for twenty years. Their close friendship is exceptionally strong and much discussed.

Thelonious Monk's *Pannonica*, Horace Silver's *Nica's Dream*, Gigi Gryces' *Nica's Tempo*, Sonny Clark's *My Dream Of Nica*, and others are among the two dozen pieces dedicated to Nica. In addition to numerous musical compositions, the Baroness has been the subject of biographies, films, essays, plays and documentaries.

One of Nica's favorite projects was to ask each of the (jazz) musicians she met what their wishes were. They received three wishes from her. One of the main inspirations and motivations for developing this video was a compilation of over 300 wishes released in 2008.

In *Dig It*, a tribute to both Pannonica and Monk, we experience Monks final dream, as Nica watches over him.