

# A is for Animism, Atlas, Absurdity

- Jonas Liveröd in conversation with himself.

*Discussed in this text: Split-personalities, money plants, burning out, seduction, porridge sculptures, Inuit toys, nightmares, misunderstandings, fakes, marble, palm trees, obscene language, growing older, the colour problem and of course - collecting.*

**Q: So, I would like to start where we last ended this conversation, in 2015 when the original idea for this book was born. It is an incredibly long time, possibly the longest project you have ever done. What happened during these years?**

A: Obviously lots of things happened in these years, I can't really use the space here to elaborate too much on that, but in brief I burned-out, I lived in Berlin and Paris but was continuously drawn to the countryside and in 2016 I bought a run-down but incredibly atmospheric water mill and some other houses and started to construct what I cheekily call Liverödland. Beyond that, I also made some art, had some shows and all that.

Like you mention, the idea for the book Grand Assembly was already there in 2015. I wrote intensely on the encyclopedic part during six months in Berlin but then because of a few different reasons I completely lost the geist and energy needed to finish and put it all in a drawer. I never totally left it, I kept on talking about this encyclopedia until people close to me started rolling their eyes. I usually work fast, so this is an unusual feeling, at times I felt it grew too big, I wanted to include everything. Then I was introduced to Andreas Friberg and LL'editions and things slowly started to come together. That was many years ago and now I am hopefully finally completing this.

**Q: So, this has been a long time coming, why was it so important for you to make an encyclopedia of sorts?**

A: There is the direct and very obvious answer, that I love the encyclopedic format. Lists, mind maps, unexpected patterns of phenomena and anecdotal telling. But it was also partly born out of frustration, that there was so much in the body of work that people missed. And maybe there were some folks out there who had questions as well, which I could answer in a more complete and multi-faceted way than in a straightforward text.

**Q: Right, but I would also like to bring in another dimension to it. It is your collector personality which is becoming more public and more involved in your artwork in the past few years. Isn't the encyclopedia a sort of collection of ideas, phenomena, objects and events?**

A: True, I haven't thought if it exactly in those terms, but it really is a very obvious connection. The aim with making this subjective dictionary was to present the reader to a personal belief system of sorts. To introduce those interested with a more complete picture of specific materials, concepts and generally all that make up the fabric of the work - big or small. Preferably made with a humorous twist, although we are not talking high comedy here.

I really miss all the background information in books on artists, I want to know what artists look at, what makes them tick and make what they do. The format is usually set to an essay or two, maybe one or two reference images and then nothing more.

**Q: How do you want people to use this dictionary?**

**You bring up varied subjects in this inventory, some I recognize as classic Liverödiana such as the Uncanny and L'Inconnue de la Seine but then there are other subject-matter that are new to me, for example Closure and Casa Malaparte. Could you elaborate a bit on how you chose the content of the dictionary?**

A: It was a long process of looking at my own work and finding out what could be named the essence, the parts of the puzzle that would give a complete picture. I think there is roughly 245 reference subjects in the dictionary and they range from material to concept, person and event. As I mentioned in the beginning, many of these were written already during a six month period in 2015, however I have edited, added and removed subjects throughout these years, so the final version is just completed now.

**Q: One thing that has really changed over the years is your use of colours.**

A: Yes, I am so much into colour these days. An old friend and collector said that I had become a colourist. Is it called colourist in English? I have to look that up. Back in the old days I worked in the dark spectrum, using mainly black and whites, then I realized it is much more interesting to talk of awkward subjects in seductive colours. It was a way of manipulating the viewers into letting their guard down and be open to the more uncomfortable aspects. But later on it evolved into being a way to face my own difficulties, for example the colour magenta which is basically the unholy mix of purple and pink, both

colours I really didn't like. So I started using magenta as a way of forcing a disturbing element into the work. But these days I think I'm just in love with colours. Not all - I am very specific about it, never use a basic colour. But I have a very painterly approach to working now. I love that element which combines the simplicity of using a colour to communicate certain states of mind on a non-verbal level with a certain objects own information.

**Q: Right, and a very important aspect of what you are doing these days is the evolution of your role as a collector and museum enthusiast. People are interested but a bit confused, how does the museum fit in with your work?**

A: It is funny, I was interviewed by a French magazine called Profane and they asked me if I viewed my role as artist as important as being a collector. It was a whole new angle of looking at myself, as if the collector side suddenly overshadowed my identity as an artist.

I am very fascinated by the mechanisms and psychology of collectors and being one myself it was only a matter of time before I would go all-in on these subjects. Both as a highly subjective collector as well as dealing with public collections of all kinds fascinate me and occupy a large part of my activities these days.

I had a conversation with the artist Joachim Koester when I had a studio at Fabrikken for Kunst & Design in Copenhagen, it was an interesting moment of coming full circle as Joachim really opened my eyes to how storytelling and research could be presented in a fascinating way within an artwork. Our output looks very different but there are subjects and ways of telling a story that really rubs of close.

Anyways, he mentioned Belgian artist Marcel Broodthaers Museum of Modern Art which he ran out of his home. Like James Ensor in our last conversation, Broodthaers took me a surprisingly long time to find. And this museum in his own home - an anarchistic, complex, funny and super fluid project I had completely missed out on. I have had Kurt Schwitters Merzbau in mind, also Dieter Roths Garten skulptur and a bunch of other things, but this was news. I am so delighted that there is still so much to discover in the world! By the way, did you know that when Schwitters was in internment camp during the second world war, he made sculptures from porridge?

**Q: I know of people making sculptures made of chewed bread but never heard of porridge sculptures. What were they like?**

A: Apparently the other interns complained because the ageing porridge reeked of bad smell. But I love how Schwitters couldn't stop himself from creating. I'm considering having a porridge sculpture competition at Luftslottet in Schwitters spirit.

**Q: What is Luftslottet?**

A: The name translates as castle made of air and is a Swedish expression for ideas that are built on fantasy and vision rather than a practically functional idea. This is the name of my little organisation that has its headquarters in the top floors of my mill building. Luftslottet runs a residency, creates eclectic events and aims to highlight subjects such as subcultures, outsider art, collections and visionary states. The organisation is based around my little museum, The Liverödska Wunderkammaren, which has its cramped space in the attic above Luftslottet.

Wunderkammer is a German word which I have "Sweedified", it means a room of wonders and fits very well to my main collection. I collect things I did not know existed and are hard to classify. This can include things such as Indonesian funeral robots, rastafari holy relics, Central American voodoo tools, homemade Inuit toys, jewellery made of human hair and all kinds of folk art and outsider art.

Basically Luftslottet acts in a "wunderkammer-way", meaning we love the uncategorisable and wondrous. We also run an annual prize, the Je suis une pipe prize, which is named after Rene Magrittes trickster pipe painting The Treachery of Images from 1929.

The prize is given to a person who has worked in the spirit of the truly free mind. The place I live at has grown to be a very important part of my work, both as a place of production but also as a physical manifestation of my vision and a meeting point for all kinds of people and events which I have initiated. It is great to be able to realise things on such a scale, yet keep it intimate and unpredictable. I used to do initiate all kinds of things in different locations, now I have a location to build into a complex and strong total environment. As a professional, I have agreed to follow some of the unwritten rules of the art world, but at my place other rules apply.

**Q: Could you tell me a bit about doubt, about growing older as a person and as an artist?**

A: In a way I think I am better as an artist now than ever before, but doubt and questioning is also a huge part of time moving on. I have had a career of sorts for 20 years now, it is a longer time than I thought I would be alive. Looking through my back catalogue of works and projects there is an insane production. But I become more critical towards the quality and

necessity of my art “products” these days. Right now I am considering if it is possible for me as a maker of things to stop producing objects. Can I make relevant art without making objects?

I think a lot about time of course, I think it comes naturally with this age. Possibly this has fuelled my fascination with death and got me building a death library and all kinds of other things related to mortality. Sounds like a bad case of self-therapy, haha!

In my dreams everyone is a bit younger, not young, just a bit younger than we are in the wake world. I suppose this in some way mirrors how I, just like most other folks passing into middle age find life - a sensation of not totally being up to date with your own age. By the way, I have noticed that when I dream, there are no mobile phones and no computers, which is strange as these are such an indecently big part of our everyday life. I asked others about this and no-one has seen them around. But maybe there are no tools in dreams? Or objects? There are cars, and I have seen baskets in dreams, but very unsure about the rest.

**Q: How has burning out mentally and physically - twice - affected your way of working?**

A: Well, as a start it was the original reason for my move to the countryside, a move which has influenced my work very much. I used to be hyper-urban and spent a lot of time in the nightlife of cities. I work just as intensely now but in a different way, I quite enjoy not being disturbed by too many people for days on end.

I have a very powerful drive to do things, and a mind that is constantly full-on, meaning I never really rest. It has a dark side of course, and this is not ideal when it comes to avoiding burn-outs.

But I tend to use the heavy manual labour that is necessary when you have an old place with lands as a sort of resting place for the mind. Basically becoming only body and muscle while chopping wood, digging, doing carpentry or clearing the brush. This is also where my love of the chainsaw really took off, through working on my lands. The chain-sawing as method and expression now has turned into quite a serious part of my sculptural work in wood. Also, the direct proximity and accessibility to my own wood has definitely influenced my artwork, making wooden objects are something I really still enjoy without the whole guilt trip of production.

**Q: Objects, that is an interesting topic in relation to your work, both found objects and created objects play a big part in your works. Your assistant asked me to ask you how you**

**choose your objects? She finds that you are extremely careful in your choice, yet very eclectic. She sometimes has a hard time understanding what makes an object or material wrong or right.**

A: Well, that is a big part of why I have wanted to make this book. So that those interested could get into the details of the work. For instance, you might wonder why that guy Liveröd is so occupied with hair, and why that particular type of hair, presented in those ways. Then you look up hair in the reference section and get a description of my use of this as a material and subject. Or mirrors, why mirrors again and again? It also has a section in the reference section.

**Q: Yes, but could you give a general idea of how you choose your objects and materials?**

A: Right, I am on a constant search for materials and objects that can be included in the work, when it comes to found objects I have an immediate sensation of when an object is interesting for art, even if I don't have a setting or role clear at the time. It may take years for an object to find its right context. When exhibition spaces request lists of materials it is often hard to say, I have to be the one looking for the particulars. In the case of the sculpture A brief history of modern art (the riddle of Wilhelm Tell), the whole sculpture grew out of a book on modern art I stumbled on, this book was nicely designed in the seventies and gave a strong sense of both being a trace of time as well as trying to catch elements of art and time. The other materials in the sculpture included a splashed paint bucket, a granite stone, a denim jacket and a few other things. The whole sculpture is a sort of stylized screwball ballet take on the history of modern art. Definitely it's ideas of materials and style appear from a typical male artist perspective. But the most difficult and important factor was the fake apple on top of the sculpture. It was necessary to make the sculpture vulnerable, exposed and not at all so in control as it pretends to be. I had to search long for that apple, it had to be the right one, that looked real enough to fool an audience, otherwise the whole sculpture would have become unbelievable in the wrong way.

Materials and objects carry stories and when they are juxtaposed this creates new and at times more complex relations between the different objects backgrounds, stories and looks.

For example when you put fake money and a crucifix together, they suddenly tell a whole new story. Ok, the fake money versus crucifix is a very obvious combination but it demonstrates how things work together. Sometimes I feel misunderstood, people think that you can just hand me a truckload of random second-hand stuff and I will immediately get off on this. But I am very careful in which objects I use, sometimes almost on an intuitive level.

**Q: Feeling misunderstood is a classic artist conception, you have had this in mind in recent years. What do you mean by that?**

A: Yeah, it feels ridiculous to say it out loud, but all the same I have had this recurring feeling of being partly misunderstood. Often when people compare me to other artists, it is on a superficial level of a material and a range of colours. Back in 2012 an art critic called me the “Alice Cooper of Swedish art”, it was supposed to be a compliment but I felt totally estranged, I had nothing to do with horror goth, metal etc. That was what made me stop working in the dark end of the colour spectrum. Sometimes people also try too hard to define what I am and what I do, so that they lose the complete picture. Once I suggested an artwork to an interested buyer, but they said it wasn't really a Jonas Liveröd, even though I had made it. It is what I would call the “delirium of interpretation”.

**Q: I remember that Alice Cooper moment, but isn't it a bit pompous to demand complete comprehension by other people? Both as a person and as an artist?**

A: Of course - in my past I thought I knew how people viewed me, but these days I'm pretty sure my version of me is not the same as what other people experience. I have an idea of what they see, but never sure how I come across. And I am not asking for complete understanding, there is no absolute truth and I also like the mystery, to keep a certain unclarity as a kind of magic dust on all of the work. But the encyclopaedia you are holding in your hand is a way of hopefully giving people a richer experience of the works. I want to communicate, and I want to be generous with ideas as much as the physical object.

**Q: It is impossible to do an interview with you and not bring up the uncanny, and in relation to that I would also like you to elaborate on objectum-animism as well.**

A: Yes, even though sometimes it feels too exploited, I really can't deny the strong importance of the concept of the uncanny on my work, both as a sensory dimension as well as on an intellectual level.

The uncanny is basically a term first coined by Ernst Jentsch in the early 20th century, it was later developed and popularised by Sigmund Freud. In German it is called Unheimlich and is directly translated as un-homely. It refers to when something feels very familiar and at the same time strange and “not right”. It creates a very disturbing sensation, typical examples are taxidermy animals and wax dolls. Both pretend to be alive but obviously are not. But I have recently found that architecture sometimes can feel uncanny and that as a kid

dreaming of my mum entering my room in a totally normal appearance but with red eyes (which was completely terrifying) are examples of this as well. The Frauenkirche in Dresden is an example of what I find is uncanny architecture. The city has re-created a near identical copy of the original church using the original stones, basically making a detailed but never the less meta-version of the original church, kind of a taxidermy version of a building. I keep coming back to the uncanny in so many different ways, both in artworks, lectures and in collecting.

Objectum-animism is a state of mind which is related to the broader term animism, where one believes that things have soul. In objectum-animism you feel an emotional bond with things, and at times experience that the thing feels too. I had this experience a lot as a kid and it gave me all kinds of OCD-patterns, but as an adult I have been able to embrace this and project "life" into the art objects I create. I feel them being alive, which is a great quality.

**Q: Collage is a term that has become a word with a wider meaning for you, could you describe your thoughts on this.**

A: I mentioned combining objects and materials earlier, this is a collagey technique. Assembling and combining disparate things or thoughts into new systems is a collage. I find my entire way of working an on-going collage of methods, places, situations, ideas etcetera. I have started thinking of this as a four-dimensional collage, meaning that beyond the spatial aspect of two and three dimensions, there is now a fourth dimension included which is time. Collecting is also very much a collage, putting together different components to make a whole (the collection). Once a journalist said I spoke like a collage – she had counted seven different subjects in the same sentence, haha!

I think of collage as a very extended field, I try to do it in text, thought, collagey events and so forth. Currently I really enjoy sculptural and textile collages.

**Q: Sculpture and textile have taken a central role in your work in recent years**

A: Yes, very much so. I love both these materials, actually textiles isn't one material, it is a whole universe of materials. I have always loved to explore new methods and materials, but I find that I feel the most free, and that my synapses work in their most interesting way when it comes to sculpture. I love to include and engage textile as a part of the sculptures as well, at times dressing them in a way. I'm very much influenced by how we as humans communicate through clothing, everything from the hats of Guatemalan folk saints, ritual uniforms of Vanuatu, 1800<sup>th</sup> century wigs to prisoners uniforms and subcultural expressions.



I love the immediacy of textile, its tactility, sensuousness, how it is instantly recognisable yet so easy to distort and transform.

**Q: A friend of yours wanted to know why you keep coming back to the vanitas concept?**

A: Right, the term vanitas has accompanied me for many years now. Vanitas has the same background as the word vanity. It usually describes an artwork that was very popular in the 17th century, in which gold, expensive textiles and other status objects mixed with dying flowers, rotting fish, human skulls and other symbols of decay. Basically the vanitas was there to remind its viewer that all things are temporary, that life is only vanity. I find this state of beauty and decay deeply fascinating, I am also slightly obsessed with all things surrounding death. Beyond this, the vanitas is a great way of dealing with emotions such as frustration and longing. I made a hopelessly difficult project some years ago called the Vanitas papers. It was a book on death culture but which I wanted to become a vanitas in itself. I developed a technique together with a chemist in Germany so that when the book was opened, a process of slow self-destruction began. Finally it was completely unreadable. In the end, I was so fed up with this project that I dug a hole behind my house and buried the few books I had managed to produce. It became a true vanitas, hahaha!

**Q: How do you feel about making art now as opposed to how you felt when you were in the beginning of your career?**

A: I really love making art, and I can still fall in love with my works. However, I recently spoke to an artist friend about the difficulty of believing in art as something important these days. Against my better knowledge, I used to believe that my art was important for the world around me. These are big words, but somehow this also made me survive some early times, when money and possibilities were scarce. I am much more in doubt these days thinking of if I really should be making more stuff.

Making and thinking about art seems a bit useless and vain now. Making art is no longer an act of resistance, we lost. I have the sense that for the rest of my life I will think of what I do as a 24-hour theatre play and all these things I collect and create will be props in this world, these props will be pretending to have meaning, magic and purpose. To call these dark times is a huge understatement.

However, on a more positive note, I do feel the importance of what I am doing with lectures, Luftslottet, museum collections and other things. These are now as big a part of my body of

work as the artworks are, so I do find that purpose has shifted focus. Ask me again in a few years and it might just as well have shifted back.

**Q: People often ask you how you find your information and how you choose your subjects of interest, could you elaborate a bit on that?**

A: Right, that is a question I often get, whether it has to do with my artworks, blog, lectures or just my general rambling on all types of subjects. I find it hard to tell -in an almost manic way I am constantly searching for new finds and threads. This morning I was reading about ritual obscenity in ancient Greece. Among women in Greece something called *aischrologia* which loosely translated means "foul language" was used as recurring ritual act to ventilate suppressed emotion. Basically a lot of obscene language and acting was performed and if a male happened to cross paths during the ritual there was a chance you could get castrated or even killed. Why am I interested in this? I guess there is the combination of unexpected elements, of the raw in the vulgar combined with the serene of the ritual, about us as humans historically and also how it is done loudly and actively by female groups who generally had a suppressed position within the community.

Recently I gave an interview where I introduced the concept of the corpse flower as a *vanitas* and the day before that I gave a lecture on the dark side of light where I made a trip through ideas and phenomena related to the terror of light. Now I am looking into the subject of Vietnamese sects and gymnastics equipment. In general I think I am interested in the element of surprise and wonder, just a classic *Wunderkammer* type of person.

**Q: OK, but you still haven't mentioned anything on how you find your subjects.**

A: This is different from time to time. In the case of the sculpture named *Kusken*, one of the few which has a purely Swedish title, it started by me getting hold of vintage gymnastics equipment. I just love the sculptural qualities of these. Out of this I developed a feverish *doppelgänger* sculpture which would ride the gymnastics buck. The individual elements of the sculpture all have their own strong presence, and I wanted to create a complex rider that associated to the carnevalesque, the nightmare, wild west mythology, religious fetishes and idols, to reference sex and violence, foolishness and uncontrolled energy. So I search and combine different objects that contain these elements for me.

**Q: One type of object that keeps returning is the plants. You use a lot of living plants in sculpture and installation – why is that, what do they add to the plot?**

A: Well, there are a number of different reasons for this. One of the first sculptures that involved plants in a really great way was the hanging sculpture Fata Morgana at Lothringer in München 2014. It consisted of very few elements; a plant called money plant or sometimes marble queen, lots of blond fake hair and some boat rope to tie it all up in a knot. It was the size of a person which together with the hair gave it that uncanny quality I love. I had anticipated the way the plant would grow during those three months the show was on, which gave it an anarchistic energy, I was no longer in control of it. A bonus was that the staff at the kunsthalle had to water the plant from time to time which caused a wet puddle underneath it, making it seem as if the sculpture had peed.

Plants have a sculptural quality and I really like that they are an element that is actually alive in the work. There is also the sensory experience and the nervousness when it comes to the risk that certain rare plants might die. You really have to nurture and care for the sculpture, which really adds an emotional effect. For a time I was pissed off at the artworks being seen as decoration by large parts of the market and audience. So I decided that I would go even further and turn the sculptures into a pedestal for presenting a plant. It was a way to humiliate the sculptures, telling them (and the audience) that they were only useful as plant stands. But I started to really like how the plant and sculpture interacted, so now I have taken this even further in incorporating the plant in a sculpture.

A final angle on the plant is of course my big love for classic museum environments. At Glyptoteket in Copenhagen there is a magnificent indoor garden where classic sculptures and plants share the same space. I love the feeling of palm trees and marble.

**Q: You often mention the trickster, it is an interesting figure that I know is very important to you?**

A: Right, the trickster is a mythological symbol which exists in most cultures. It is a being which exists in a constant sense of duality, between worlds I suppose. The trickster disobeys normal rules and conventional behaviour. Tricksters can be cunning or foolish or both; they are often funny yet unreliable. It is a figure that is ambiguous and hard to define and one that I identify with. Whether this is really the case or not I don't know, but I always keep the trickster in mind when creating works. The whole idea of the culturally unruly aspect of my organisation Luftslottet definitely has a trickster angle.

**Q: One thing which is interesting is the definition of fact and fiction in relation to work and method, how do you view that?**

A: This is a fun and very fluid subject. Who could possibly define if an artwork is real or not? By that I don't mean if it is a fake or made by a well-known artist. I mean if the artwork in itself is real.

I don't usually like to generalize around art but I will do it now. All art is an enactment, a staging. That can in itself become a reality, but it is still constructed. I have made a lot of artworks that deal with fake, forgery, imitation and such. But actually all works are fictitious. In storytelling and most certainly in collecting I also like to dance from side to side in the fields of what we call truth and fiction.

**Q: I asked some of your friends to add a question to this interview to give it some other angles. One person asked me to ask you "why are you so angry?"**

A: Funny, I saw an exhibition in Copenhagen called "Why are you so angry Paul Gauguin"? at Glyptoteket and I loved the title! I thought about it a lot afterwards. What does it mean to be angry? Not temporarily, but as an on-going state of mind? At times don't know if it is more frustration or if it should be called anger. I used to get angry very easily as a kid, I also was a super sweet kid, it could just change direction very quickly. In modern terms I'm sure there is a diagnose for it. Anyways, speaking professionally, I get angry at mediocrity and laziness in art. I tolerate and embrace weakness and confusion, but so much art is conceived and presented with such a safety net, simplified ideas and within the clear and defined boundaries of what is accepted as art.

Also a lot of art looks exactly like what you would expect from art, acts like art and generally acts as a well behaved pet. It really pisses me off. Also I generally get all worked up about the stupidity of our time, also based on laziness, a time when all information is immediately accessible for all within the western world there is no excuse for not being informed about the state of things.

**Q: So, how do you value what you have done up until now? Are you satisfied with your accomplishments?**

A: There is almost nothing I am satisfied with, which I have made and done in the past. I see it as a wonderful string of failures. It sounds negative but I don't mean it that way. It just means I still have a sense of urgency, that I can do better, that I have a hunger to go further

and a need for doing things the exactly right way. Hopefully I will never reach the ultimate piece, because what would there be left after that?

One thing is that I feel I haven't allowed the full complexity of the work, I have done a myriad of things but still kept myself in some sort of relation to a potential audience instead of going all the way. I hope and strive towards this totality - it really takes courage to go further, and I am not sure I have that but I do enjoy the pursuit.

I have a person I regularly respond to in this matter. It is the seventeen-year-old version of myself. That was the time when I started moving into the world of contemporary culture for real, taking my first steps into the world of art. In a sort of split-personality scenario I imagine telling this teenage kid what I did with his life and up until now I think he would be pretty impressed with what I have done. That is my mark of quality.

**Q: Anything else you would like to add to this conversation?**

A: Loads, lots! I could talk for hours, just getting started! But I want to finish off with a few words by Dieter Roth I regularly use to remind myself of what I should be aiming for.

Roth said 'When I was young I wanted to become a real artist. Then I started doing something I felt wasn't real art, and it was through this that I became a well-known artist.'

**Q: These are very liberating words.**

A: Yeah, I am grateful when I feel free enough to not think about it all as art.

*Jonas Liveröd - in conversation with himself  
from the forthcoming book Grand Assembly.*