

# Autonome Schule Zürich

## Dialogue between Sadou Bah and Ludovica Parenti in Collaboration with Emilie Bruner

*The dialogue is interpreted after the interview with Claudia Cardinale held by Alberto Moravia in 1961 for Esquire Magazine.*

Dear Bah, I am going to interview you. But it will be a somewhat unusual interview. You must permit me to reduce you to an object.

I understand

Object in so far as opposite of subject. That is to say, not any kind of object at all, but specifically that object, which you yourself can be considered to be, indeed, are.

Any object?

That's right, just such an object. You see, I don't want to know your past, present or future. I'm not interested in your opinions on politics or nationality, art, women and men, on Switzerland, religion, administrative work and so forth. Nor does it interest me to learn how you live or with whom you live, what jobs you have worked to date or what your plans are for the coming month or the coming year. None of this apparently inevitable subject matter of interviews interests me.

May I say something concerning this point, that I have a hard time seeing myself as an object? An object for me is a fixed thing. It is not so for myself.

That is an important point. Let's work towards this together.

Good, I am curious.

I have neglected mentioned topics, because these matters are uncertain, changeable; they depend on your point of view, and they're a product of environment. They are impossible to verify exactly. Moreover, they're matters which do not single you out in any way; in fact, according to them you resemble millions of others.

For me every human being is unmistakable.

Surely, but what makes you an object distinct from every other object; in other words, your

appearance makes you distinctive. There are no two things exactly alike in nature: not one leaf of a tree perfectly resembles any other. Man alone can manufacture quantities of identical objects. Therefore, what distinguishes you from millions of others is your appearance as part of the natural world. Your physical features, yes; your clothes, no.

You will think this interview will lead towards a description of a passport or identity card. That might be, although more detailed and precise. But that's just it: wherever you go, your passport is the document by which you can be recognized among the billions of people who inhabit the earth. Perhaps you think that you would be recognizable if your tastes, ideas, opinions, past life and future projects were noted on your passport instead of your physical features? But no, you would find doubles everywhere and vanish into anonymity.

I enjoy this argument. As mentioned, in my opinion every human is unique. But let's take the school's development as an example. It stands in direct relation and not lastly with the exchange through various personalities.

Yes, therefore information is given on your website and many recent articles have been written over the ASZ since the move into the new premises here on Sihlquai 125. Imagine what it would be like to meet someone in New York and have to run through an entire alphabetization class in order to be recognized by the entry authorities.

That wouldn't be possible without the others.

Most likely. Hence, let's focus on clarities such as the small indentation on the bridge of your nose. But I don't want us to get ahead of ourselves. Let us go step by step. First tell me your measurements. How tall are you?

My height? I am 1.72 metres tall and weigh 69 kilograms.

Therefore, relatively average but rather thin for a grown man.

Yes.

Your waist measurements?

My waist? I really cannot tell you. Funny question. (laughs)

Definitely slim but not too slim.

Yes, very slim.

And your chest and hips?

Height and weight are the only known measurements to me. The rest doesn't interest me, hence I never gauged them.

Now these figures aren't all too significant in themselves and sufficient to define the space in which you move as a visible being. One would need to add a few more.

Honestly spoken, it's not that important to me. At most, I would only be able to add my shoe size.

What about the circumference of your head for example, the length of your neck, and of your arms and legs?

Everything in nature is a matter of measurements of the proportions of the parts.

(laughs) I don't know these numbers. They don't interest me.

Never mind; we'll proceed. Can you describe your hair?

Yes, I have black hair.

Black tells too little. I would say it is dense and from uniform brilliance. Moreover, they don't drop inanimately but evoke the impression of vividness and strength. What are the different ways you have worn it in your lifetime?

I wear it short mostly.

How short?

I would say a maximum of 10 cm. I don't like to wear it any longer. I've always worn it that length. No other way. I've never styled it. I cut it and that's all that happens to it.

Apparently you have found comfort in your appearance. What are your ears like?

(laughs) I think I have normal ears. Like all ears. I haven't noticed any peculiar features.

One could describe them as fully formed. As one visualizes a common ear.

Exactly, that's what I thought, unless you'd like to add anything?

Not at all. The ear shape supposedly reveals the most important traits of people. You are laughing now. How come?

I don't know. These are questions that I've never been asked before. For me, my ears were always ears.

Probably a sign of shyness. What can you tell me about your forehead?

(laughs out loud) What can I say about my forehead? I don't know.

Well, it's a large forehead, somewhat tenacious, obstinate and also childish looking. The forehead of a diligent, thoughtful personality.

And now for your eyes. Are they black too?

No, they are grey.

I might add that your gaze is very soft. And now, if you would be kind enough to laugh?

Yes. (laughs) That's the one thing I'm very good at. Often for no reason.

When you laugh, your eyes open up even a bit further. Especially when you laugh they sparkle, there's something placid, polite, patient, something intense to them. What else can you do with your eyes?

With them I can be very aware.

What are the most important moods you can express?

Happiness. I like to raise spirits. Obviously there are times when there's nothing to laugh about, I might add.

So when you are agitated, one can behold that from your eyes?

Yes, I would say that one can easily recognize the condition I find myself in.

Do your eyes weep often?

Not often but it can well happen that they shed tears.

In what situations?



Sometimes for instance, I don't even realize I'm crying. The tears just start running on their own without being triggered by emotions. On other occasions, I can't hold back my feelings and I truly start weeping, without being able to explain this emotional outburst. I remember this happening when I heard about the tsunami in Southeast Asia, or the attacks in Madrid and the United States.

Now for your nose.

I'm not even so sure about it.

Your nose is (straight) but distinctive. I would say it had a classical look, tempered, however, by modern sensuality. The spread nostrils are accentuated by your mouth with its gentle lineaments, ready for the next smile.

We can leave it at that.

Let's talk about your mouth then. How would you characterize its expression?

There's nothing special to note.

Even when a laugh emerges? Is there no movement?

Of course. That is interesting. My mouth expresses a fairly strong countenance, depending on the situation naturally, but it isn't necessary to elaborate on that.

In any case one can recognize a spirited, very open, irresistible laugh, in which your courtesy seems to explode and obtain air. One gets the impression that you laugh to communicate, to overcome your own diffidence. The laugh conducts your entire appearance. What would you say your teeth are like?

Oh. They are rotten. Unfortunately, they really make a bad impression.

And that has an impact on how you show your mouth?

Yes, sometimes it hinders me from laughing because I'm afraid that someone can see my broken teeth. (laughs out loud)

Your smile—or rather your laugh—leads us to the shape of your face which contains and surrounds it. What shape is your face?

Somewhat round.

With smooth transitions. This shape gives it a particular look, the aspect of an archaic, intrinsic, childlike face raised toward the light. All the more since it rests on the summit of a long, sturdy neck. By the way, we have not yet mentioned your colouring. What is your complexion like?

Well, let's say that I have black skin. Nothing special, simply black.

Black seems to be fairly inaccurate. As black we imagine your rain jacket, your jumper or my turtle-neck. Can you describe the colour more specifically?

My skin colour is somewhat dark, with a

bronze tone. I would say a dark bronze, not entirely black.

Now let's look at your hands. Will you be so kind to show them? These hands are comprehensible only if one realizes that your arms are long and slender and your wrists relatively delicate. But how would you describe your hands?

My hands are not the largest. I'm perpetually reminded that I'm not very handy. Sometimes I don't even know where I should put them.

The band-aid on your finger gives that away. Your gestures though are prudent. The palms are lighter than the back of the hand, fairly flat, the lines go very deep. These hands are, as you said, fine yet not outstanding, they remind one of a young man's hands. This brings us back to your body. What are your shoulders like?

I have small shoulders.

What can you tell me about your legs?

Interesting. Just recently I learned that, in comparison to other people, I have long legs.

How do you walk?

I was told that I have a very equalised walk.

After examining the parts, we should now try to define the whole. Tell me, then, how would you characterize your beauty? But, first, do you think you're beautiful?

Yes, I believe myself to be beautiful. It comes from the inside; I can't even imagine something ugly would emerge from there. I think it is fair to say that, without being able to elaborate on that.

What makes your notion on not being able to explain this further?

Because this has always been my understanding of it. I only know it this way.

Well. Understandably so. Generally, one could conclude, that your head is that of a young boy; your body instead, that of an established, clearly balanced man. Your head and your body express two contrasting things: your head, timidity, innocence, wit, curiosity; your body, serenity, tranquillity, maturity, and, above all, I think I see an appetite for life which is pure, spontaneous, and not only preoccupied with intellectual or moral complications. Correct me if I'm wrong.

I have nothing more to add to this.

Dear Bah, I quote Moravia: The first part of the interview served as the attempt to describe you as an object in space. Why as an object? Because I only had the indirect relation to you through the ASZ; so I sat down in front of you as I would in front of any other object, a glass, table or a chair, and you were merely an object of a certain shape, certain colours, contours and scale, a matter which filled the room, encom-

passed by my gaze. In short, I was the subject, you the object and between us the mere circumstance of your guise. Now, regarding your appearance in space has been described, let's devote ourselves to your disappearance. Since we made sense of how you emerge, I would like to examine the occurrence through which you vanish, namely your sleep. For things are visible by day, by night they vanish. The day is thus the time of objectivity, filled, yes, exuberant with, visible things that impose their presence on us; the night instead is the time of subjectivity: black and in absence of things, it is fed with our fantasies, our delusions, our misapprehensions, our dreams. By granting daylight entrance in the morning we create the things; by putting out the lamp in our room at evening time we abolish them. The object is present throughout the day, one can see, touch, measure it; at night it no longer exists, it is eliminated. However, there are various modes to disappearing, dependent on the object's substance. Commonly everything non-human disappears in a passive, yes, almost capitulating manner; only man has the desire to disappear. It is his will to dissolve, to no longer be there. And he does so every night by going to bed. He disappears into the darkness of his room initially and then, as soon as he falls asleep, into the obscurity of his consciousness. I now then would like to capture in what manner you, after you've stepped into appearance by day, withdraw at night.

In other words, I want to ask you how you go to bed.

Well. Ask me, I will try to answer.

Let's proceed one by one. At what time do you go to bed?

I try to do so as consistently as possible- usually I retire at eleven o'clock.

And for how many hours do you sleep?

Six. At least.

How come six?

Because I usually feel recovered then.

Your disappearance in space lasts for 6 hours.

That is less than the disappearance of the sun and the things generally which emerge with it; yet it is longer than the disappearance of someone who suffers from sleeplessness and only gets as little sleep as two or three hours per night.

Yes, of course, that is obviously true.

The obvious is noteworthy, too. The obvious is my sole interest. Maybe because no one else is concerned with it and it becomes mysterious through its neglect. Never mind though. I was talking about the person who suffers from sleeplessness. I think the insomniac's greatest sorrow is his inability to disappear for a sufficient amount of time. Not being able

to sleep means awareness of his existence, to know one is here. But let's return to you. So you go to sleep. What do you do when you go to sleep?

I dream a lot and vividly.

Let's take smaller steps. How do you go to bed?

I take off my clothes and lie down.

Let's just hold on at these two sentences. You take off your clothes and lie down. What does, to take off one's clothes, mean in your opinion?

It doesn't have a larger meaning to me. To me it is the preparation for a good night's sleep.

Maybe it has a further meaning. Have a look for a moment at this image of a Hatterman painting. What can you see?

If I am not mistaken, I can see a dark-skinned man sitting in a restaurant or bar with a beer in front of him.

What do you think? That this man, who lived 86 years ago, looks different to you once you have undressed?

Certainly.

So if this man would have undressed and were to stand beside you, as you too would be naked, do you think one would be able to recognize that this man lived almost a century ago whilst you are alive today?

No I wouldn't say so. We could probably encounter each other in these temporalities.

If you two were to stand beside each other without clothing, you would be insofar distinct as you are two individuals, but one wouldn't be able to allocate your respective time. In other words, you would be situated beyond time and history, thus eternity, that is to say what man calls eternity.

To sum up: when you undress to go to sleep in the evening, respectively to dissolve in space, then you quite naturally begin to dispose of everything that holds you in time, binds you to history, namely your clothes. To disappear in space, we firstly disappear from the world. The clothes are the world.

That makes sense.

Now of course one could easily say that it is more comfortable to sleep without dress. But beneath this supposed simplicity lies a complex matter of fact. Why do you think we get dressed?

Surely for a combination of conviction and concrete reaction to our surroundings. I think that we might want to protect ourselves. On the other hand, we dress on the assumption that we are better off that way.

And why, do you believe, you dress dissimilar to the sir in the Hatterman painting?

I believe we don't dress widely differently. He obviously appears to be very sharply dressed. I don't

always worry about being as elegant, I'd say I can recognize a difference there.

Hence a fashionable component. Is that an important aspect of culture to you?

Not really. I don't feel particularly drawn to fashion. It seems to be predominantly advertisement and plenty of drama to propel consumerism. Essentially fashion doesn't create many new visions but recycles the occurred with the pretence of being present and up to date.

As you undress, you acquit yourself of carrying this drama and presence whether emancipated or integrated—and so you withdraw from history and time. Can we agree?

Yes.

Let us then come to the facts. What do you wear when you enter the bedroom in the evening?

I often wear my underwear, unless it is too cold to do so, in which case I'm just dressed normally.

And what do you perceive during this disrobing?

It could occur that I feel chilly and want to rush under the covers.

So you take note of your surroundings. And in which order do take off your clothes? First your coat and then the underwear or vice versa?

Funny, I never paid it any attention. I don't have a specific procedure. Well, one garment at a time—from outside to the inner layers, naturally—sometimes the trousers before the shirt or vice versa.

Let's have a look at the image of the man in Nola Hatterman's painting once again. Under this hat and the waistcoat there must have been underwear surely?



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Yes, I suppose so.

But Hatterman wouldn't have dreamt of painting the man in his underwear. She painted him, as he presented himself to the world, the eyes of society. We have to make a first distinction accordingly.

Which do you have in mind?

Between the attire you wear to present your-self to society, and the one you wear to not present yourself to society.

To be more precise: between clothes and underwear.

I see.

The clothes affect your life in society, in culture, in history, in public; the underwear means your private life. In order to sleep, hence to disappear, you retire from the public to the private, from history to intimacy, which means you start out by disposing of your wardrobe which represent the public and then, in a second step, the underwear, which embodies personal life. Not the other way around. Let's return to you. When you go to bed, you disrobe and lie down. So far we have only talked of undressing. Now, let's presume you have unclothed already. So you then lie down in bed. What does that mean to you in the first place?

Recovery.

Let's have a look at what happens when you have laid down, when you have seized the most comfortable position to vanish.

I turn off the light. In this case apparently to no longer be present. I'm letting myself in for sleep.

To create darkness means to abolish light, which is the first requirement for existence of things. The day is full, the night is empty.

When you have shut the light, do you by any chance touch your arms, legs, chest to affirm your presence?

Yes, sometimes (laughs out loud).

In any case, you take hold of a specific posture, is that true? In order to fall asleep as quickly as possible.

Yes.

What posture do you take in exactly?

I usually begin lying on the right side, but I can be very erratic. I find it problematic laying calmly on one side. In sleep equally so, by the way.

When the body then manifests itself in space during wake time, so it disappears during sleep, and the positions in which it adjourns to help it to disappear.

I am not entirely clear on the 'disappearance'.

To disappear from consciousness; to disappear entirely. Once you have found the most comfortable

position to fall asleep, you will realize how your body is being enveloped by a kind of mist, empties and dissolves. Your limbs no longer for you exist, which means as much as that you no longer exist. You have fallen asleep.

I feel as if I were living a second life in sleep though. One I can just barely remember in the morning, but is completely vivid. I therefore exist in these dreams, it's absurd!

But the fact that you dream proves less that you exist, but the theoretical possibility of our existence. For dreams are suppositions, wishful thoughts of existing. Do you want to talk about a dream you've had?

Are you interested in that? I can tell you about my dream I had last night. I dreamt somehow that people with rifles were chasing the others. I was amongst the chased ones. At some point I managed to obtain a rifle myself—I do get those kind of nightmares, that is for sure.

Who are these 'others'?

There are plenty of strangers in my dreams.

Are these bodies dressed or naked?

It depends. It may happen that I myself am naked.

What do you feel during these nightmares?

Often I conceive fear, but in very varying manners.

Can you also recall other dreams?

Before that, I dreamt that I could fly for instance, or the notion of weightlessness generally.

When is it that you wake up?

Either when I get scared or I just happen to wake softly.

Do you dream while awake?

No.

What do these dreams have to do with whom you are during waking hours?

Almost nothing.

That is quite possible. For if these dreams stood in correlation with that, in which you are and wanted to be in an alert state, you wouldn't dream of it. But let's carry on. You went to bed at 11pm and fell asleep straight away. Whether you dream or not, what do you do at 12am?

At midnight? I'll be sleeping or might just be still awake.

And at 1am?

At 1 I will surely be sleeping.

At 2?

Also.

At 3?

Could be likely that I have to go to the loo.

At 4?

Sleeping.

At 5?

Sleeping.

At 6?

I wake up many a time.

At 7?

I wake up to begin the day.

Let's hold on here for a moment. You wake up, which means that you emerge again, firstly to yourself, then to the others. That needs to be clear by this point.

Yes, I would say so.

In what manner does this reappearance occur?

Firstly I try to understand where I am, the rest is to follow.

How long does this waking up take?

That happens very quickly. I remain in a doze for a moment after though.

And what do you do once you are awake?

I stand up and turn on the light.

After that you have breakfast?

Hardly ever.

Do you talk in the mornings?

Yes, it happens.

What about?

That can vary a lot. It is situation-dependent and obviously also according to the person I am with.

Who surrounds you at this point?

My wife or friends.

Do you look in the mirror in the morning?

Actually, I hardly ever do. But I have formed a habit of doing so more often now.

How come?

I don't automatically look into the mirror after a shower or such. I do this now to check my face. For instance, whether it is properly creamed and whether I can leave the house in that state.

How does that come about?

Well, it's self-evident, I am at mine with myself; my appearance doesn't matter here.

In which order do you get dressed?

Here too I don't have a strict method. When I think of it, I could say that I always put on my trousers first, then the rest.

How about your shoes?

They always come last!

Let's summarise: When you go to bed and fall asleep, you remove yourself, unwind step by step; when you wake up and rise, you reassemble equally stepwise, rebuild yourself; evenings you employ effort to disappear, mornings to re-emerge. Is that correct?

That is right.

In the evening you doff your clothes which are your connection to time, society, history, culture. Once vanished from time, by falling asleep, you also vanish within space in the morning you reappear in space by waking up and as you dress, in time. The awareness of your own body allows you to relocate yourself in your surroundings. Later, as soon as you are dressed, you find yourself again in the world, in your own manner.

What do you mean? I have no remark at this point.

As the founder of the ASZ, as a personality belonging to a specific society, as a family member and many more. But now I would like to ask you a few last questions if it doesn't tire you yet.

No, I'm still good!

First: what impression do you think your appearance creates? You are a personality existing in the public eye—within your students, colleagues and public.

Hm, very different! A friendly one with acquaintances. It can happen that people don't necessarily like, become frightened at or don't feel like seeing me. To students I probably offer assurance. I don't see myself as a person in the public eye, though. I could imagine that there are people who get vexed or think I am chaotic, but here, too, the situation varies. Obviously I like to be perceived positively, but I cannot guarantee that. Rather than placing value on how I come across to others, knowing and communicating what I want and what I am doing is more important to me.

Do you like your body?

Yes, and no. I am somewhat dissatisfied with my teeth. I'd rather have yours. (laughs out loud)

How nice, since one should note: the body is that what is; there is nothing else besides the body, as the body is a shape that entails everything; there is nothing outside of the body. You exist then, because you have a body and if you wouldn't like your body, you wouldn't be able to like yourself.

Which part of your body depicts what you are best?

Maybe my eyes.

Why is that?

Because, in my opinion, my eyes are the most versatile. With my eyes I can laugh without any further gestures by my mouth for instance.

And when are they dearest to you?

That is a difficult question. Most probably when I am making conversation with other people.

In the meantime, you might fear that I am trying to screen you, rout within your innermost?

No, I am not suspicious.

I said that for this conversation, you are merely an object, an apparition in the room. Because I do not have to examine your core, as there is no such thing as a core, not in you nor in anyone else. I didn't want to practice psychology, but describe in what manner you vanish and reappear. Hence you in fact don't have to be scared I could read your innermost. What is to be read in your innermost, is written on the person per se. Somewhat dim per-haps, but certainly decipherable if you listen and look. Well now, I think the interview comes to its end. Would you like to add anything?

Thank you.

Cordial thanks to you, Bah.

### Captions

1 Autonome Schule Zürich (ASZ), office.

Courtesy LP.

2 Nola Hatterman, *Op het terras / On the Terrace*, 1930, oil on canvas. Courtesy Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam. The man featured in this painting, Jimmy van der Lak, emigrated from Suriname to Amsterdam, where he found fame as boxer, barman, and cabaret artist. By including the newspaper open to advertisements of cabaret performances, Nola Hatterman indicates the role played by the subject in the city's nightlife. Hatterman painted in a style known as the New Objectivity, in which objects often disclose details of the subject's background. Hatterman was commissioned to paint the portrait by the Amstel Brewery, but the company did not consider the piece suitable for advertising their product. Raised in what was considered a 'colonial milieu', Hatterman said that she felt black on the inside. She settled in Suriname in 1953, where she founded an art school.

**Autonome Schule Zürich** (Zurich/CH) and the association Bildung für Alle (BfA), are autonomous, self-organized, and participatory education projects, assembled by people with and without permits to stay. The school functions on a horizontal basis, is inclusive, and aims to be communicative with clear and critical positions. Central to the ASZ' mission is the emancipation rather than 'integration' of participants. To facilitate exchange and understanding between all people stands at the heart of the ASZ' pursuit.

After numerous clearances, the ASZ moved into the former premises of the ZHdK at Sihlquai 125 in November 2015. The school accepts financial support to fund its activities as long as the maintenance of its independence is assured. [www.bildung-fuer-alle.ch](http://www.bildung-fuer-alle.ch)

**Sadou Bah** applied for Swiss asylum in 2002. Although the plea was denied promptly, he attended German lessons and found voluntary work throughout four years. After the 2008 Asylum Act tightening, he no longer was able to work and has been remitted to emergency relief. Ever since this imposed abeyance, he became involved with Bleiberecht and Solinetz Zürich, and most notably also helped the Autonome Schule Zürich (ASZ) come to life. Meanwhile Bah holds a residence permit and has been married to his Swiss wife since 2013. Furthermore, he is a board member of the City of Zurich's Office for Cross-Cultural Issues (Ausländerbeirat der Stadt Zürich) and Association of Minorities in Switzerland (Verein GMS).

**Emilie Bruner** (US) is a freelance curator based in Zurich where she is currently working towards her Master Thesis in Curating ZHdK and on a series of exhibitions with artist Ines Lechleitner. In 2003, she developed and built the contemporary art division of her father Marc Bruner's art collection. This collection consists of about 160 artworks, which have been shown in museums and galleries worldwide. In 2005, she founded the London project space 19 Weymouth, which served to show the contemporary art collection as well as an international platform for young artists to exhibit their work. The yearly program consisted of exhibitions, presentations, and performances. Together with the art historian Chantal Blatzheim, Emilie Bruner founded in 2012 a non-profit collectors club called t.a.c.t. (Travel and Collect Together). t.a.c.t. offered private and exclusive trips consisting of museum exhibitions, art fairs, biennials, studio visits, and private collections with VIP access.

With affection, **Ludovica Parenti** (b. 1992) currently resides in Zurich where she is a post-graduate student in Curating ZHdK and is co-running a project space in Zurich-Altstetten.