Appendix 1: Interview with Martine Neddam, 20 February 2024

A conversation between Tom Jansen Klomp (TJK) and Martine Neddam (MN).

TJK: The first question I wanted to ask is about the climate in which Mouchette came to form, because I think it's an interesting and very specific moment. You came to Amsterdam, the city was a forerunner in technology and access to the internet at that point, and there was this net art scene, and also – at least compared to the current situation – the Dutch government was more open in handing out grands, in their financial support for artists.

MN: I wouldn't talk about technology, but more an openness of media or an advanced situation in media. You had Hack-Tic, for example, and XS4ALL, those were made with just a number of servers in a bedroom, not something very advanced technologically. This media openness already existed when I came to Amsterdam, as well as a political idea of media, this movement against mass media. You already had in Amsterdam free radio stations, maybe earlier the provo's… there was a larger atmosphere of Amsterdam as a democratic media city. And this political situation didn't just translate into something abstract, but people were personally involved. I'm not a technical person, and people came and installed by modem for the first time just out of generosity or an urge to share knowledge. And many conferences were held. There was not only an advanced atmosphere of democratic believe in media, that the media should be in the hands of the people, but also that personal generosity.

TJK: Do you think that personal generosity is also born out of the economic situation?

MN: Sure, of course. Earlier already, after the war, an idea of art came about. Grants were given to artists. Some people told me that the people that resisted during the Second World War were partly artists and printers that paid a hard price. And in a way those programs were a way to honor the artists and their free spirits.
When I came in, you had all these grants without them really knowing what you worked on. Then, people were proud to be artists… which maybe is not the case anymore, but it was certainly not the case in France then. Here, art was seen as something good for society.
TJK: When you came here, you were an artist already, but you were not yet a net artist. From what I understand, here in Amsterdam you came in contact with the computer and the internet. Before that you made works which played with language in public space. Of course

there is a connection between that work and Mouchette, that is inevitable when you make art, but could you maybe shed light on the relationship between those public works based on language and Mouchette?

MN: There's a connection on two levels. Then, I was busy and successful in my big public commissions. But it was a sort of work where more or less the creation ends when you have presented the project, after that it is just logistics. Which was sometimes very boring and annoying. Between the moment when a project won a competition and the moment the artwork was built could be three or four years. Art was becoming something very abstract and institutionalized for me, it was not in my hands anymore. By the time it was made, I often did not even know if I liked it anymore.

And that is also about the moment when the net came, around 1992 or 1993. I was already using the computer at that moment – one of the reason why I was successful in those competitions was because I taught myself Photoshop. It was more convincing to present those works on a photo.

So, I had a sort of private connection with my computer. I felt like I could redo the world with Photoshop. And also, it had this pleasure of craft which I had lost, I could find that again in doing Photoshop – it is really a craft, which you do with your hands actually, using a mouse and keyboard.

So it was me not being satisfied in producing art that was really within the institutions, which gave me no contact with the public, and me having that private relation with my computer. That, and the situation in Amsterdam we just discussed. I would go to lectures where people presented what MOO's were, which was something I always dreamt of: a written space where you can build worlds and where you can also exchange.

TJK: And this was also the space where Mouchette was born, right?

MN: Yes. One of the reasons why I picked that name was because there were rules that if a name was taken, you could not reuse it. So you would try all kinds of names, and this one wasn't taken. At the moment I chose it I had seen the film and I also already had something for young girl characters, for sure. But it could have been something else. Then of course I saw the film again…

There was a show in Great Britian at that moment which was called *Living in Your Head*, a saying which the British use somewhat derogatory, for people that dream a lot and don't

know what reality is. I was very much like this, living in my head. I was playing with characters. I was meeting people, but only at a big distance. It was a form of compensation for being lonely.

TJK: Artistically or on a private level?

MN: On a private level as well! I started living on my own, I was not with my previous partner anymore. And you also come to live in another country to create another self.

TJK: And this provided maybe the easiest way to experiment with that.

MN: Yes.

TJK: I was also interested in your experience at the *Institut des hautes études en arts plastiques*.

MN: That is a mystical place, actually.

TJK: Because it existed for a very short time right?

MN: Yes, for a very short time. It was the only art school I attended. I was already an artist, I was not young. I attended because I was missing something like a legitimization of being an artist. I did it to fight this feeling of being an imposter, to get a feeling of belonging. It was a very special school, I was in the first year. It was not a classic art school, you didn't have a studio and you were not supposed to make art. They thought of it like the old fashioned *Academia*, where you meet and discuss. Very French, that is. We had all kinds of musicians, scientists, personalities there, not all of them being known as artists.

TJK: How did your time there influence your practice afterwards?

MN: Well, belonging to a group and being with other artists that were looking for something helped me. The kind of people there, I would recognize myself as such. Pontus Hultén would call it a refuge, *le refuge de l'art contemporain*. His general idea was that the museum was a refuge for all art. Maybe that was also the influence of Sandberg, his mentor. It was a refuge –

perhaps that's a post-war idea – for all kind of innovations. That's why we for example had scientists there, like people working on AIDS at that time.

This was also the time of several important exhibitions at the Centre Pompidou. You had *Les Immatériaux*, Lyotard. And you had *Magiciens de la terre*, Jean-Hubert Martin. These all happened that year, so you can imagine how broad the idea of art was then!

In my own private education, as a teenager, I was a dadaist. I would have dada slogans hanging on the walls in my bedroom. I also believed in the idea that anything could be art, I would make art out of food with my brother, for example. So it was there in my youth, but more as a game or a private thing.

TJK: So maybe you could legitimize that through that institution?

MN: Yes. Also it was a moment where art was opening up into society. And these were not just ideas, these were realities. In *Les Immatériaux*, I can remember, you had wireless headphones – nobody had seen that before. The visit itself was a very special experience, it was not just something you could think of, these were things you could experience.

There were also computers and there were philosophers discussing with each other. That I found a disappointing addition. It was not something you could experience yourself, only those people could do that. It was an experiment, but the results of that experiment were not so interesting. I think the proposition was more interesting than the result. Were they the people that would make the best use of this possibility of talking together in real time? Apparently not.

TJK: I read an interview with Jan-Robert Leegte in which he stated that in the 90's he "hung out" with JODI and Debra Solomon and you. I was interested, very concretely, how were you socially in that group and how did that work with the anonymity that is part of the work. Did many people know that you were Mouchette, how did you go about that?

MN: Some people did know. But people accepted that it was a part of the art. It was like a parallel universe, the world of the net where anonymity is constructed. Meeting up with people was simple. They would just send you a mail and ask to meet up. That's how I would meet up with Peter Luining know and then.

There was a generosity, you were not competing, there was enough space for everyone. You would be happy and proud to share what you had – we would invite each other when we

made exhibitions and we had the possibility to do so. I think it's very similar to how some "techies" came and installed my modem and spent time with me to show me how it worked, we also had such a non-competitive and supportive spirit. Not only in the real, but also with people at a distance.

TJK: You mentioned Peter Luining. I think it is an art historical tendency to name and define groups. But I must admit I am wondering, in that moment, were there maybe other people that you spent much time with? Can you elaborate on the social situation then?

MN: We didn't spend much time with anyone because we were all nerds! We spent most of our time in front of our computers. We were all artists and we were all playing with that new medium and finding this space where you don't have to measure your work to what had been done before. But yes, I wouldn't say we hung out so much together, we hung out mostly on the net.
The physical art scene was very lively at that point. So sometimes we were asked to organize events and then we wanted our friends there, of course.

TJK: In the literature on net art, some mailing lists like Nettime and Rhizome are presented as crucial. From what I understand, both your work and identity were discussed often on Rhizome. And also, I think you at one point stated that the Nettime community supported you when you had the legal issues with Bresson's widow.

MN: No, that was not Nettime, but another community from Belgium, from Brussels. But anyway, yes, there were these mailing lists, these communities that came together online.

TJK: I was wondering, because obviously there's that relationship between Rhizome and Mouchette, but did you actively participate in discussions on those mailing lists? Did your artwork on a more conceptual level relate to the discourse there?

MN: Well, I was present and interested! But often more in the practical subjects than the theoretical subjects discussed there. People would exchange pages and explain how to do things, like how to hide links. And there were discussions on the latest features that came with, for example, the new Netscape – and then we were much earlier than companies with websites, because companies didn't have websites yet.

One of the first things I did was "hack" the front page of the Boijmans Museum when they had a website, but they themselves barely knew they had one.

TJK: I remember reading that you made this happen by communicating with just one person working there, a *stagiaire*, who was the only person that was actually running that website.

MN: Yes! She created this website and she had made a survey with checkboxes where people could leave feedback, and she taught me how to do that. So, some of the first interactive pages on Mouchette I learned how to make from this girl who was not even a technician at all. She told me she, in turn, learned that from her brother, but that she was more into poetry.

TJK: It is interesting that you say that the practical elements of what happened on those mailing lists inspired you more…

MN: than the political discussions or what not? But of course, this act of, for example, hiding links or using features not for what they were made for, like using check boxes to make drawings, these acts were political too! You could implement them and get immediate reactions, you could communicate directly, which had a certain power.
Of course, JODI were kings in that regard. They had so much imagination in how they messed around with code. And you could then borrow or use that code.
People had an attitude towards the browser then, this idea of "the browser is ours". There was a celebration in Paradiso when the code of the browser was made open source, can you believe it!

TJK: Something I found interesting is that in a recent interview you said that you found the term "the cloud" problematic. It is this abstracting term, but of course there are actually these physical servers. At multiple points you have, in interviews, deliberately pointed out the physicality of what the internet is: that it may seem to be a virtual, non-real world, but there actually are cables, there are computers and there are people using them. Do you feel that in Mouchette you also deal with this physicality of the internet?

MN: Enourmesly, yes. But first I want to say that this supposed dematerialization, like "the cloud", is a political attitude.

TJK: It's pure ideology.

MN: It's pure ideology. A way to remove control from the user. To make it as remote as possible for them. But yes, the physicality is very present in my work. The computer exists, the screen itself, even if it was as big as it used to be, within your emotional space. It is close to you physically. You can whisper to it and you can touch it. Whatever happens in that space belongs to your emotional sphere, that space where you would not let anyone who is not very intimate with you in.
I think that is very present in my net art. It was not only inside my head, but it was also between my arms! And there was this tactile thing, the mouse, of course. This element of physically and proximity of the receiver of your art was important to me, and the fact that I was physically present when making the art!

TJK: The website also invites the participants or the viewers to do this. You have this element of physicality between the user and the PC, but also I was thinking about the physicality of the point where the PC is connected to another PC.

MN: The art is in between![1]

TJK: Is that something that you think is represented in Mouchette as well?

MN: I often mention that this connection is like the surface… Something I did when I was in Lyon was working on theater sets. So a lot of my way of thinking comes from the stage, in fact. I could see the internet as a sort of theater, where you have a background, an actor, a text, an exchange. And the glass between us, the screen, is somewhat like what you would call the fourth wall in theater. All this context was present in me because of my previous experience.
I was also doing stage designs for directors who were mostly interested in text and not in realism, so I wouldn't produce realist stage sets or even evoke a space, but use an existing space, distributing the space. That was already present in my way of understanding art, and I think I could still explain how certain things are taking place that way.

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[1] Reference to an image, an early meme, that was often shared in net art circles.

TJK: You have named Pessoa and Romain Gary, and I think at some point you compared the emotionality of Mouchette to The Catcher in The Rye. Are there other influences like that, that maybe kind of lie outside of what traditionally would be thought of as net art influences?

MN: That has to do with their use of alternate persona's. Some of the first work done on Mouchette was related to an artist who was also doing alternate persona's, his name is Ben Schot. Also, I remember in my youth I was emotional about love stories happening through correspondence where people never meet. Those remote relations have to do with being an alternate persona – if you never meet up, it is not because you cannot travel, but because you want to be that particular person.

TJK: The one you write in the letter?

MN: Yes, the one who is writing the letter, who is not the same as the one who exists in the physical world. So, I think I was already sort of fascinated by that, and this was just an ideal situation to develop that further.
Those authors, like Romain Gary, are very important to me. I'm particularly fond of the books he wrote as his second character. Those are about people that are weird and that talk in a weird way. He could find in himself this weirdness and a broken language.

TJK: You read those before you made Mouchette?

MN: No, in fact, I had not read those before. I knew the story, but I hadn't read the books. While I was working on Mouchette I came across his book *Gros-câlin*, which really convinced me. It's about a weirdo-person that has a snake, a boa, as a pet which he calls "big hug". You see the world through the eyes of that weirdo. It is interesting how he finds these sort of weirdos inside of himself.

TJK: And a weird language, as well.

MN: Weird language, weird language construction, but also a weird perception of the world.

TJK: Now we can talk with some certainty about his biography, but he also tended to make up stories about himself.

MN: He made up stories, and wrote books about it. It is difficult to say why he killed himself, that he would rather die than admit… He wrote another very strange book, called *Pseudo*, where this character, which is his nephew, is critical and hateful towards his uncle. It is a weird novel not so much in the sense that it is a good novel, but it is a weird situation where these two personalities are fighting. It is very layered. He seemed to be dealing with such a huge struggle, a struggle that he could die of actually. It is weird, you wonder, is this a matter of life and death?

TJK: This playing with identity?

MN: Yes! But I did, when I sort of abandoned the anonymity, I did feel something on a certain level which was very depressing. I had a little bit of a grieving period. This magic character that was inside of me, I killed it.

TJK: Did it become more of an artwork at that point?

MN: Yeah, although I am not detached from it at all… I still hate to see my name next to the word "Mouchette". So, these mysterious strings are still active! I was not aware of course, but when I read Romain Gary I could in a way recognize that element of having created something that acts inside yourself. And of course, Pessoa is also a very strange character.

TJK: But also within the work itself there are these references to literature. Not only with the character being Mouchette, of course, but I also remember some time ago you created a video artwork in which the title references a Duras novel and film by Resnais, about Turkmenistan.

MN: *Turkmenbashi Mon Amour*. There I used Mouchette to voice a certain number of things I had experienced.

TJK: What do you think this referencing or intertextuality means for the artwork? It is something that you play with both in your statements about the artwork and in the artwork itself.

MN: Sometimes your social life has more to do with literature and cinema than with actual people. Some authors, for example, are part of your social life, they are present in you. Or, after reading a book or seeing a film, you have the feeling of having spent a great moment with a friend. So I am influenced by my social life, let's say, which goes through works of art, literature and cinema.

TJK: You just briefly touched upon you "coming out" as the creator of Mouchette. I was in Rotterdam at the REBOOT show at Nieuwe Instituut and I saw your presentation of *Visions of Mouchette*. I think it's very interesting that in multiple of the video's you can see Google Translate directly translating the text from English and French to Russian. I was wondering – and I mean this on multiple levels, for example like changes in internet culture, accessibility and you revealing yourself as the creator of Mouchette – do you feel like the language of Mouchette changed over time?

MN: No. The language of Mouchette doesn't change if it's Russian instead of English. What I would call the language of Mouchette is that combination of different mediums together. Like a picture, a color, a font, an animation. For me, this language of the net hasn't been formulized yet. That is why I still find it is precious and it is important to keep these examples of what a net language could be, a language where these elements conflate all of a sudden inside the page and asks for your reaction.

For me, what I like, is that this language is still understood. And I like to see these young people make it theirs. Although they develop different legends. There are myths going around that the website has a magical, scary effect.

There is a particular language of the web that was created at that moment that make some works very valuable to look at still. Now, for example, text and picture are separated! They still function, on many platforms, in different spaces. When they do function together, like in memes, it is in very specific ways, there are very hard rules for how text and image function together to create a certain language that people can understand very immediately.

In my mind, there is still a language of the web to be invented. And I think some of it I did invent in that moment. Mouchette moves all those languages around, like sound, animation, composition between image and text, and that is the language.

TJK: I think that is very interesting, to define the language of Mouchette in that way. But I was also thinking about something which you just explained, which I think is a crucial

element to Mouchette, is that people like those in the video's of *Visions of Mouchette*, also take Mouchette and then something new is created in this interaction between them and the website. I was wondering, did you see, in the responses on the website, changes? Are the early responses very different from the new ones?

MN: Twenty years is hard to compare! Of course the reactions have changed in many ways. For example, the suicide page had huge amounts of reactions in the first three or four years because it filled a hole, because people needed to talk about suicide and didn't have a space. Now you would find a safe space, but at that time you did not. And I hadn't mean it like that! I didn't mean it for the large public, in fact, it was created for a gallery show I held in the Galerie Tanya Rumpff in Haarlem. There I had pictures up, and the suicide page was a part of it, although I knew the people that would come to the gallery wouldn't be so interested. But for me it was part of the theme and I wanted to do a sort of online survey.
And, of course, there is a huge difference between the first answers I republished by hand by making HTML-pages compared to the one that happened after, let's say, 2001, when search engines became really prominent and people started using them to look for things like, for example, suicide. They came to my site looking for ways to commit suicide or the possibility to talk about it. There were two or three years where it was a very strange space that created also enormous reactions in me, I could cry reading those stories. This was before what they call Web2.0. Some people would also come just to publish funny stories, and other people would come to read those stories.

TJK: Specific stories by certain writers.

MN: Yes. So there were certain situations that came out of the ecology of the web. I was in a very special spot to observe those changes. Now, I would say those changes do not exist anymore in the same way – Mouchette is now studied in schools. Although that does not mean that the public does not have personal encounters, of course.
But yes, language. For example, these videos are Russian, they're not Chinese or European, because the website became a hit in certain Russian circles. Also, maybe, because the interface could accept all characters.

TJK: Which gave people the possibility to type in Cyrillic as well?

MN: Yes, and to read it. And I could, on my end, publish that again. So, this has changed since the web itself has become much more open to different kinds of character formats. The reason why Mouchette has become popular with a Russian audience is because it was published in famous lists on VK, the Russian Facebook. And then legends appeared.

TJK: I saw that one of the original videos had half a million views, the one of the two boys visiting the website.

MN: The reason is that they have a sort of web series, which must be famous. This Mouchette thing was one of their episodes, so I think those hits are not due to Mouchette. They keep coming actually, these videos! I just had three more translated, which were interesting enough. Apparently, one of them explains this very clearly, that the website has become a sort of rite of passage for online influencers. One starts their video by saying: "OK, this is what I promised you since before my birthday, and now I am going to do it!" They do it because it is dangerous, like "are you tough enough", can you withstand it and can your browser withstand it and not be blocked? You see this in the video, and then you realize that the person browsing is not personally interested, she just wants to show that she has done it.

TJK: It's like smoking your first cigarette or something?

MN: Something like that! Doing your first dangerous thing on the web, going all the way through. It is very bizarre.

TJK: I can imagine that there is this strange difference between when you started Mouchette, you were in the center of this community exploring what the culture of the web could be, and now Mouchette has become this thing in a web culture that isn't yours?

MN: I don't own Mouchette! That Mouchette is transformed into something else, that is the best thing that can happen to her. Something I often talk about is what I call *generative preservation*. Things can be preserved because they change, because they are regenerated. That Mouchette has the power of regeneration is very obvious, and this means that she is alive.
In this set of ideas I often mention that I did not invent Mouchette, in fact it comes from this film, and this film comes from a book, and that the film was a great inspiration for me in the

way it composes information towards the public. An element to generative preservation is that the web itself is a generative space, a space where things get generated, which we have forgotten because of the cloud, for example. But it is in the nature of a webpage to come from somewhere and then to be reintegrated by your browser. Think of Lullaby for a Death Fly – it's always a fly but it also always a new fly, it is alive until you kill it.

So these sort of works stay alive by getting modified, not only by the ecology of the web, in relation to which I try mostly to keep it the same, trying to keep it alive within a different ecology.

The last thing I wanted to say is that this transformation, this generative power of an art piece and the fact that it gets transformed by how it is taken up by a public and reworked, is exemplified very well by the story of Frankenstein. It became famous only when it was made, apparently, into theater plays, before films existed. The book itself was not a big literary hit. The character became famous through theater plays, and then kept changing. It is not possible to see the physicality of Frankenstein in any other way than the way he looks in that one particular film, now we won't be able to make films that make the monster look different than the one in that classic film. What I find fascinating is a major change in the circulation of that character, which is symbolic of many things, is that Frankenstein is not the name of the monster, but the name of the scientist! The monster is nameless, I think that is a point in the book.

TJK: The identity struggle of the monster.

MN: That's it! He doesn't know the world, he doesn't know what to do, he doesn't even have a name. And the public reception took it and made it something very different. They gave him the name of the scientists and has completely forgotten that namelessness characteristic.

TJK: And they have given him one look as well.

MN: Yes. It goes so far that now it is used as the symbolic characteristic of monstrosity. I once came across a cooking show called Frankenfood. That name makes it very understandable for the public. Frankenfood is a cooking show where contestants make a dish out of several meats. It is very stupid, but people understand it. In good cooking, combining meat is seen as quite monstrous and in general you're not supposed to eat meat anymore. And

of course it refers to building with corpses. That is just one point where *Frankenstein* ended up.

TJK: From a Mary Shelly book…

MN: From a Merry Shelly book to a cooking show where you mix different meats in a monstrous way. The reception makes the life of a work of art, that the reception is rich and dedicated. And reception of course escapes the intention of the author.

TJK: Do you think the internet is perhaps inviting for that kind of change?

MN: More than anything else, of course! But these works I am talking about, they also travelled through media, from a book to a theater play to a film to a cooking show. I started to think of these things because I was at some point invited to a certain roundtable discussion on reinterpretation. There the net was compared to performances that have a score or a trace in the form of a video for example, which can then be reinterpreted. You redo the score. There I had to intervene and bring up this idea of generative preservation, because there is not an original and a copy. In that way of reinterpreting you have an original and a copy, and I wanted to distance myself from that concept. In generative preservation you do not have an original and a copy, but you have an origin, and sometimes the relations are vague. So in case of Frankenstein, the story by Mary Shelly is not the original but it is the origin… and in my case, Mouchette has also travelled through mediums. You can see a line, of course, they're all sad stories about a little girl with many specific aspects to them.

TJK: Now it also the case that if you want to understand what Frankenstein means culturally, or what Mouchette means culturally, you will not understand that just by reading the Mary Shelly book or just by watching the Bresson film.

MN: It has to do with the fact that is taken and reworked inside the public. I think the net also introduces a way towards that in the fact that museums now allow and even encourage the public to take pictures. At some point they didn't allow it, because they wanted to sell their own pictures. Now they understand that all those bad pictures that get uploaded on Instagram, that that is how the artworks circulate in public. They're not bothered with the fact that they're completely deformed, because it ensures its circulation and its life in the public. A

sort of life that can be compared to plants and seeds. They also present a different idea of evolution, it's not an evolution of survival of the fittest, but it's about how errors become successful. This aliveness of works of art that comes from being taken over by a public, reread, understood, swallowed, chewed out, what not, that is part of that.

Appendix 2: Interview with Martine Neddam, 19 April 2024

A conversation between Tom Jansen Klomp (TJK) and Martine Neddam (MN).

TJK: This is something I feel you have brought up on multiple occasions in interviews about Mouchette, but I haven't found anyone asking further about it. I find it very interesting and I would like to delve deeper into it. This returning person Lucy Cortina, who kept commenting on *suicide kit*, and there were more people like that…

MN: In an early moment of the net, before or around 2000, you could experience its changes. Because you were at a moment in time where the changes happened to you and to your work. For me, the memory of this work, *suicide kit*, is that I remember it as a place where I experienced the most of such changes. Changes happening on the net were also happening to the work. This particular moment was before Web2.0, where people could communicate between themselves but there wasn't social media yet or anything, so they did that on my site. People came to write.

TJK: From what I've read back, not only did they come to write, but they also came there to create characters.

MN: Yes, to create side-characters. Somebody told me that this character, Lucy Cortina, came from some cartoon or something, but I never found it. Cortina was a grotesque invention talking about big breasts exploding. At first people came to write because they needed to vent, to talk about their unhappiness and to read the writing of others, and then these stories started to deviate from the personal stories because they were aware there were readers. That encouraged them to add more and to create sub-characters. It was a strange period, it was pre-Web2.0. I had something very few people had, which was a database system. First, when I created it, stories would come to my via email, and I would rewrite them into HTML-pages. Then I got this system, and then at some point I realized that the work was not just my work, or my expression, or Mouchette's expression, but also a stage for other people's expression. You could say that, maybe, that is a characteristic of any work of art, where you can recognize your own expression. You know, you exchange photos or pictures of works of art because it represents something which is inside of you which you never knew you had, it is

not because it represents somebody else. It represents you. So, any successful work of art happens to become a sort of stage for people's expression.

TJK: But Mouchette more than most other pieces of art makes it very easy for people to use it as a stage for expression.

MN: Well, at that time of course because nothing like it existed. You could, at that point, not just speak to everyone and leave your stories everywhere. And also it had a sort of freedom. I would publish silly things, and bad jokes about suicide. I was just careful not to publish real recipes, but when people made awful or cynic jokes, that was part of the publication. So there was a certain craziness, and also the visuals were crazy.

TJK: You had Lucy Cortina with her grotesque comments about breasts and plastic surgery, and there were other characters like this. That this happened to the *suicide kit*-page, that people started creating their characters on there, did that influence for you the creation of *mouchette.net*?

MN: Yes, of course, from the beginning I realized that people liked to pass for Mouchette or that Mouchette would bring them some freedom of expression. In the case of Lucy Cortina I suspect very much that it was not a woman but a man who wrote that. It seemed like a sort of gender theater. And this was before Judith Butler was so well known, you had maybe drag queens. I suspect it was a man because it had a certain over the top gender theatricality to it, kind of like drag.
This form of freedom, this maybe grotesque theatricality, is already somehow in Mouchette. It is grotesque about death, showing the feet of a corpse. A number of elements are like that. So this gives a certain freedom to shape your own speech. Besides, in many cultures suicide is a taboo subject. In many religions for example, it is something you shouldn't speak about.

TJK: Which is also why the anonymity works maybe?

MN: I was thinking about breaking open taboos, talking about everything you want also in a not very polite way. That taboo of suicide is still very heavy. Allowing yourself to talk like the subject of the *suicide kit*, to play suicide. Actually, I was, in a way, serious, because it is so common that children play death. You don't go crazy when kids pretend to shoot at each

other and one dies, but if you see children play suicide you would go crazy. I thought there was something strange about that, what do we allow around death? There were video games where you kill all the time, that was the point of the game, someone's death, but suicide? No.

TJK: It's quite hard often in video games to commit suicide.

MN: I think it's impossible.

TJK: You can only deliberately let yourself be murdered I think, that's the closest.

MN: That's the closest. Like death by cops. But yes, that puzzled me in a way, why is there such a big taboo on suicide when there is no taboo on killing?

TJK: And then, because you opened this space to express feelings or ideas or comments about this taboo, this grew into people creating characters, maybe because they were aware of there being an audience. At least in how I interpret Mouchette, that has become part of the whole artwork. I think a big part of Mouchette is taking on characters and playing with that and expressing things that you would not express if you were not taking on a character.

MN: That theatricality, yes.

TJK: Did what happened there with *suicide kit*, with those characters popping up, did that influence the theatricality of later Mouchette elements?

MN: It was already there. One of the first times I realized that Mouchette was interesting was when she got parodies, like people started making fake Mouchettes. I was proud that I was worth imitating and spoofing. I realized that that sort of contamination by personality, that they were developing the character.
I had already done *ihatemouchette.org*, where people could insult Mouchette. I was very aware that they were defining her by insulting her. They were painting her portrait, in a way, by insulting.

TJK: Was *ihatemouchette.org* also a response to the quite negative reactions you got in the beginning of Mouchette? A way to incorporate those negative responses within an artwork?

MN: Sure! With *suicide kit*, I sometimes became sensitive, especially when it was just on my email, an insult or desperate people would touch me. I wanted to have more distance, not to feel these things first hand. Martine, the author, would never come in the picture, but when I was reading these insults or reaction, sometimes I would have personal feelings. It would be Martine crying, not Mouchette. So that was the reason, to create that distance, so that it becomes art. Then you're not vulnerable anymore, they can insult as much as possible.

TJK: It's the artwork now.

MN: It's the artwork, Martine doesn't have to feel as personally attacked when she is insulted for having a bad smell or being French or all these kind of things.

TJK: Something else about those responses to *suicide kit*… I read an interview you did with Annet Dekker for her PhD, in 2012 I believe, where you said you expected those kind of responses to die out with the arrival of social media and blogs. But then, what happened, which I find interesting, is that reinterpretations of Mouchette appeared on those websites, like the Tumlbr-page *PrettyFly*.

MN: Yes, Mouchette kind of escaped into those. Yes, of course, people were free to publish their own Mouchette. So practically, at the beginning of social platforms, everybody did Mouchette. Sometimes they even asked me for permission. And then they could, of course. There was a Facebook Mouchette and a MySpace Mouchette. This was a much more active identification, making your own platform or recycling the work. That's also why I made *mouchette.net*, to give people a place and encourage that. And also, because, then it was clear to me that the success of a character comes from the fact that a lot of people recognize themselves in it, and it becomes their own expression.

TJK: I think the link you're making now between *mouchette.net* and those social media reinterpretations of Mouchette is very interesting, because I think there are similarities but also differences between those two…

MN: I understand what you mean. You could see it also more generally, as an identity framework. Stardom is really nothing but that, it is a framework for being yourself. In

stardom, you can put your feelings in the songs, and all that. I think, anyway, that identity is not something natural, something constructed. And we need things to become someone. The net also offered something very special for identity, which was a sort of disincarnated identity. The "nobody knows you're a dog"-thing.[2] Your body is present of course, but who you present yourself as to others doesn't have to have anything to do with what your body is. What was your question again?

TJK: Maybe very specifically, the differences between *mouchette.net*-additions and these social media reinterpretations.

MN: Of course, *mouchette.net* was my own framework and people were contributing. The idea of fan clubs existed already, that's why I mentioned stardom and the construction of identity. So, I think, that *mouchette.net* is more like a fan club for people who could write HTML-pages. It was not like a contribution where you could just drop a picture and it appears. It was very early, in 2002. It was before blogs and before Web2.0. People who already knew how to construct something, could publish there, I gave them a publishing environment. But they already had their own publishing skills. Whereas when all these social media platforms happened you didn't need anything, you could drop anything in there. There you could create your own fan club without asking permission of the star or the official page.

TJK: I guess the difference is about a difference in skill. Do you think that that difference, definitely at that beginning where it's based on a difference in knowledge, do you think that it makes for a different output as well?

MN: It's like the official page is hosted by the star, whereas all the unofficial pages can be opened by anyone. There they can publish without having the approval or permission. So that has effects.

TJK: I like that you already touched on *ihatemouchette.org*. Not long after, even in the same year, a page called *I Love Mouchette* appeared, but it wasn't made by you, but by a curator, right?

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[2] A reference to a New Yorker comic that was often shared online. One dog, sitting behind a computer, explains to another dog that "on the internet, nobody knows you're a dog."

MN: Yes. This was at a time where, even though some people did ask for my permission, they didn't even need my permission to make works as Mouchette. Once I had made *mouchette.net*, a lot of people could pass for the author of Mouchette, they did not need my permission. I got to know of a couple of them. One of my friends in Canada, in Toronto, asked to make a Mouchette-work. He made it completely on his own, although we did exchange a little bit. He created a sort of side-character. The one online now is a reconstruction by Nikos Voyiatzis, with whom I work. It was hosted on a sort of free site and it had disappeared, so it was lost, but Nikos had found it all again archived.

So it was really a project by Michael Alstad, a curator and friend. His idea was to construct a male pervert character who would stalk Mouchette. We had a talk about who this Mouchette of his could be, and I remember telling him that it does not have to look like the little picture of the girl, that it could be any person. I recommended that this Mouchette could maybe be a black girl. So he worked with a nice Haitian girl in Toronto, and he followed her, he organized this whole project. He used the personality of this author, a sort of obsessed male, who think he knows that this is Mouchette.

TJK: What I love about the whole story of *I Love Mouchette*, is that for a while it was gone and you created it with Nikos Voyiatzis, who also worked with you on *Visions of Mouchette*. What I like about it, and I wonder if you agree, that it kind of mirrors the story of the community saving the quiz. Now you saved the addition of someone else to Mouchette.

MN: It was even his idea, it was Nikos' idea. We had worked on other things together. He is a genius in finding things, and he came up with that and he did it all himself. It his creation more than mine, it was not my intention, I had given up on it.

TJK: Maybe that makes it even better. Because I think that the story of the quiz and the community keeping it alive is a good story to understand what this network of care entails, but there is also still this element to it where it is just this quiz you made and others are keeping it alive. Now, there is you and someone else keeping the addition of another person alive as part of Mouchette. I think that is even a better story of the network.

NM: Totally. A lot of it is about this network. Not only *mouchette.net*, but *ihatemouchette.org* is also about care. Hating is a certain form of care, because you're busy thing about it. It is

closer to love than indifference is, you give a part of your feelings to something. I have also experienced very early on that people had hacked to site to improve it. One day, for example, I found ants on my site and I didn't know where they came from! Other people had written scripts and put them inside my page to make it better. These are very early experiences, these sort of collaborative things, had a lot more positive aspects, much more than negative hacking and distraction.

And you could say, in a certain way, not everything of that has disappeared. There is still care. I see it when preserving Mouchette in that way, but I also see that open source practices haven't disappeared. And Wikipedia, in a way is also an example of that. One of the reasons why I wanted to keep the site is because it was not only a witness of care but it was also made out of care. When Nikos found these things, wanted to recreate a site, or finds these videos of kids in *Visions of Mouchette* with their screen videos. All that is really a network of care.

TJK: Something completely different I wanted to ask about is a show in Postmasters Gallery in New York. This was in 2003, a collaboration with Anakin Koenig. From what I know about it, there was a big plastic inflatable something, and people could go in there and discuss the identity of Mouchette. Was it always the same person in there?

NM: Yes, I had collaborated with someone and he was inside. He was also the person who built the bubble. It was a residency by Franklin Furnace. I could have a flat for some time in New York. It still exists, I think. I found out that a lot of people there knew my site! So I could collaborate with people, I had a very warm reception of actual people. I soon made the project on the spot. For a weekend I had Postmasters Gallery, when there were no exhibitions, and I met someone who had written a part of his PhD, but never finished it. He also worked with characters in his artistic output and he was a real party goer. He was building these inflatable things, and this one we built together. It was a nice space, very elaborate. So people would come and meet him inside. He pretended to be the Mouchette owner. The scenario was that people got a mail telling them that they could get the codes to the website. This was also the way I launched *mouchette.net*. It came down to something like "take over the website, come here and meet me and I will give you the codes, you can own the site." That was what happened in the bubble.

Mouchette was known for her mailing list then. So I had sent this mail to the whole mailing list when I was there. There was a whole queue of people coming to come and meet him in this mysterious and dark bubble. They made a video about it. Martha Wilson, the creator of

Franklin Furnace, was there. She had a video made of people interviewing visitors. I was hanging out like a fly on the wall, so nobody knew except a few people. I remember one person in an interview saying he drove five hours to get to this gallery because he was a Mouchette fan. And so people came, one by one, and they had their little moment with him.

TJK: That event and many events that you've organized around *mouchette.org* have to do with what you just explained, namely that what is interesting about the web and what you explore in *mouchette.org* is that on the one hand you have this identity that is different from your body but on the other hand you are always there as a body. I feel that is also what happens in the installation, it is about playing an identity but at the same time it is about the embodied experience of being in this plastic thing.

MN: People were very keen to meet, in the flesh, the author. I think the people that came to Postmasters were on the mailing list, not people from the street or anything. It did trigger a lot of people because there were legends and crazy things going around about the identity.

TJK: Not at all to reduce it to something, but could you say that that installation was a response to or you playing with these longer ongoing discussions about Mouchette's identity online, on mailing lists?

MN: Of course, I had staged several coming outs, and that was one of them.

TJK: The only reason you would stage a coming out is because this group of people were discussing who the author was. It was, in a way, a response to the network around Mouchette.

MN: Yes, totally. The real, physical existence never disappeared. There is still that tension between physical reality and the internet. It is something that has marked the web in itself, that you message with people and after a while you need to meet these people in real life. The situation is fake but your feelings are real. It is still at the heart of our use of internet that we get those real feelings and the only conformation of these feelings is meeting a real person.

TJK: Do you think that need for meeting a real person that also was at the core of these long discussions about the identity of Mouchette?

MN: It happened with literature too, like with Romain Gary or Emile Ajar. The reality of the author. If we take literature, the fact is that we can read that book because there is a human author that wrote it. That is still something that informs, in a very deep sense, our communication. When we talk about ChatGPT, when we have to accept that what we read may have not been meant by any human with a physicality, that is a scary situation. That it is not made by a human brain and body. A book with no author, or an author that has no existence, that would attract so much attention. I had already experienced many times that people were so attracted to the fact that the author was not available, that the author was hidden. That created an attraction to the work itself. I think that this feeling existed already. Not knowing who the author is can have people go crazy, which happened with Romain Gary – why is it so strong? Of course, if the books were not so good, it would not have attracted so much.

Something related to this happened to me once. I had won a price, in Slovenia I believe. I got the price in the form of a bronze sculpture for my website. Someone from the jury who happened to be Dutch brought me the price and told me this story. He said that when they realized that they could not know the name of the author, that they went completely crazy. They wondered how it was possible to give a price to someone that was anonymous. They discussed it so much that they looked at the work much better than that they looked at the other works.

TJK: Which made it win maybe?

MN: Which made it win, yes. So I was very aware that as soon as you remove that real person, that real body, suddenly all these fantasies appear. That is nothing new, it was already in literature.

TJK: This is maybe related to Romain Gary, we discussed this a bit last time too. There is this change over time, where Mouchette as an artwork started to get discussed in schools, it is written about in books, and academically. Next to that, at some point you presented yourself as the creator of Mouchette…

MN: I think that is kind of a different channel. Mouchette entered the academic channel, it got written about in books and it was taken up in physical exhibitions and catalogues and anthologies. It got a form of artistic legitimacy through the academic channels, but the nice

thing is that the non-academic interest still stayed the same! So, for example these young Russians in *Visions of Mouchette* have nothing to do with the universities or people placing the artwork within the map of an art scene or whatever. This is because of the artworks availability. You don't have to hear about Mouchette because of a teacher at school, you can also hear about Mouchette you fall upon it or Russian kids will tell you that it is very scary.

TJK: You find a link on a VK list or something…

MN: So that still existed. That is my privilege of being an internet artist who keeps the site alive. Not all of the artwork's existence belongs to artistic institutions. It still circulates through the distributed network, whereas the academic system is hierarchical and centralized.

TJK: I feel like if you watch *Visions*, the way these young Russian people are thinking about Mouchette is very different from earlier responses to the website. At the same time, it is also this continuation of a tradition which is the fact that people respond to Mouchette. And not only is it people responding to it, but it is also you taking up those responses and making it a part of Mouchette.

MN: Yes, everything that responds to Mouchette is Mouchette.

TJK: And you actively do that in a sense by exhibiting it and giving it its own page. That is, kind of, also you participating in generative preservation in the sense that you take up responses for people to respond to those again.

MN: Of course, absolutely. For me it was very easy to recognize these screen recordings as related to Mouchette because it follows a same pattern as *mouchette.org*, telling a sort of interactive story. Like the story of the fly that is squished and cries and then reintegrating the answers and making a new work of art with it. For me that is what defines it, this interactive narrative which feeds the reaction into the site to make new works. So this is, in a way, the same, except that I did not design the system that makes these children respond, the trigger here is the site itself. And then for me it is very natural to see these videos and think that this is also *mouchette.org*, because it is so similar to reintegrating the reactions and answers on my servers and putting them back on the website to create a new work. To me it is the same process.

Also, I am starting to understand what is going on with *Visions of Mouchette* and what the importance of visiting the website is. In the pages where I write an interactive scenario I try to be attractive enough so that people play into it. In this one, I did not invent what makes them find it interesting. *mouchette.org* is supposedly scary, it is on lists of scary sites. But what is scary about Mouchette? There are legends going around that at 2 o' clock it will curse you, or whatever, but what I think is scary is that *mouchette.org* is blocked, because it has words like "suicide" which get filtered. Especially in Russia, surfing on forbidden, blocked sites is a danger, because you might get on a list. It is not just that you will be blocked by a firewall or whatever blocks the site, but if you do it, you might get punished.

TJK: As a Russian citizen?

MN: As a Russian citizen. That is the danger in fact, it is not just the imagery, but there is a reality to the danger. I have found a video, one of these *Visions of Mouchette* that I have not published yet, where they show what happens when you go to the fly, and how you get blocked. They made a video about this. So, this is the real danger. When you get blocked, you are perhaps on a list. One of the latest, we found more, starts with someone saying "I promised you I would do it". It makes me wonder, why is she expected to make this video? It must be a certain rite of passage, not just a rite of passage based on visiting *mouchette.org* but also based on going to dangerous sites that are blocked. It is showing your courage to the rest, like climbing a mountain or going across an electrified fence. But I think that danger is not just imaginary, there is a sort of real danger in being blocked, and that is what triggers them, to show that they confronted that danger. So, I did not invent the scenario in that case, I think the Russian state made it.

TJK: Mouchette is this thing that gets reinterpreted again and again, and there is you continuously showcasing these reinterpretations so people can reinterpret those reinterpretation. You've said Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein* is an example of generative preservation. In a sense, in your case it is as if Mary Shelly was still saying which versions of Frankenstein she found interesting.

MN: Yeah! What would she think if she was alive... She would hate this ugly monster, maybe.

TJK: The difference is that you seem to like it.

MN: No, there might be things I hate. I might just like the fact that it exists, and that Mouchette created that. It might not be something I approve of or feel close too or recognize myself in. For me, from the beginning, that is the rule of the game. I don't have to recognize it, it has its own life.
They don't my job, they do their job. I often use these organic comparisons like seeds. Or evolution. When people talk about evolution they say evolution happens through survival of the fittest. But if you talk to any expert, they will say it is absolutely false, it is a legend. It actually happens by mistake. In DNA there is a mistake, and some mistakes will continue and some will not. But the original element of evolution is a mistake in the sequence, or a variation, a variation that can also be arbitrary. They can be successful because it corresponds to an environment, or maybe it is successful for no reason at all.

TJK: You see that in Mouchette too?

MN: No, it is responding to whether I would like a new interpretation or not. It is not on me to like it or dislike it. Of course, now I am still in the position to preserve and to qualify and approve of certain versions by reintegrating them in the site. So, I am in a position to choose.

TJK: To a certain degree. You can only choose from what others have done with it.

MN: I might not want to integrate something which I dislike particularly, but I do not have a memory of ever doing that. The only thing I can think of is when I don't let a real suicide recipe be published, because I think that is dangerous. Like Lucy Cortina, for example, I didn't recognize her humor at all. The only thing I enjoyed was that she was popular and people would visit the page for her. But her humor, I have nothing to do with her humor or the subjects she tackled! So that was really funny, I was really happy to see that the site had produced something where I didn't recognize myself, or my spirit, or my humor, and it had more success, at least for a while. More people came for Lucy Cortina than that people cared for Mouchette. So, the fact that it escapes you, that is the beauty of it, that your creation lives on within the mind of others, that is the beauty. But it might live on in a way that you might totally disagree with or hate or disapprove of.