

The Artist’s Questionnaire

Emmanuel Van der Auwera

What unexpected quirks and fantasies shape an artist’s world?
For each issue, we invite an artist to hand-pick from a set of playful and profound questions, pairing their answers with a visual contribution.

1
Q Who was your first art crush and why?

I think it might have been Johan Grimonprez’s *Dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y*. I saw it on a videocassette that one of my school friends gave me under his coat, like a ‘trauma film’. I watched it and thought, Is this even a film? It was so packed with complex ideas, thoughts and beautiful, sad visions that I became a bit obsessed with it.

2
Q Goldin is God, Bourgeois is Buddha, Rauch is Ra, you are…?

Auwera is Awful?

3
Q What work would you most like to be remembered for, and what’s its story?

Certainly a work I haven’t done yet. To be honest, when I throw myself into a project, I treat it like it’s the most important thing I’ve ever done. So I’m currently working on a video that I hope will be the one I’m most remembered for. The whole VideoSculpture series in itself is something I could see as my legacy, but what does that mean? I’m 42 and the question seems a bit premature.

4
Q Describe your studio in no more than five words.

Disorganized, inspiring, torturous stage.

5
Q Is there a routine or ritual you’ve developed while making art?

Not really. Making art is the routine. I wouldn’t call it a ritual either, since most of the time there’s a lot of mental wandering in the dark. Lots of lost hours, though you never know if an hour was really wasted or if you just laid the groundwork for something great later without realising it. It’s more like the constant training in professional sports — you’re always doing a little bit of it.

6
Q If you could collaborate with any artist (dead or alive) on a single piece, who would it be and what would you create?

I would very much like to collaborate with Harun Farocki. He passed away before the emergence of generative AI, so unfortunately he wasn’t able to give us his take on it. However, his work was uniquely prescient with regard to this uncanny evolution we’re witnessing.

7
Q Practical and financial considerations aside, in which city would you like to live and work?

It depends on whether we’re talking about cities that could inspire me or cities that I would feel happy in. Unfortunately, those are two very different things. I tend to be inspired by places that fascinate me without necessarily making me feel happy. In terms of inspiring places, I think Dubai embodies the spirit of the times quite well. But on a more serious note, I’m drawn to Hong Kong or Seoul, even though I’ve never been there. I like places that, like people, are full of contradictions.

8
Q If you could erase one piece of art from history, what would it be and why?

That’s tricky because erasing art seems like an odd concept to me. Time does that by itself, through bombing, political change, natural phenomena or the simple entropy of things. Actively erasing art feels a bit authoritarian to me. But I’ll give it a try. I would erase *The Birth of a Nation*. The film is infamous for its glorification of the KKK, blatant racism and historical revisionism, but it’s also celebrated as a seminal moment in the invention of modern filmmaking. It helped revive the KKK from obscurity and was even screened at the White House at the time. So the film was instrumental in a revisionist campaign that caused real, long-lasting suffering.

9
Q Can you remember the first time you felt awe in front of a work of art?

It must have been Caravaggio’s *Medusa*. I was a kid, and I saw it in Florence with my parents. I was so struck by it that they had to leave me in the room, staring at it for the rest of the visit. I think it was the extreme realism of the painting, its goriness, plus the fact that it’s a scale trompe-l’oeil, and that Medusa’s dead head is staring straight at you — that must have petrified me. Looking back, it strangely foreshadowed of a lot of themes I now recognise in my own art.

10
Q If your art could start a revolution, what cause would it champion?

The kind of revolutionary movement you see in *eXistenZ* by David Cronenberg, perhaps — some movement rejecting the fallacy of digital dystopia.

11
Q Is there a museum that you always return to?

Not really, although I must confess that I had the chance to go to Dallas several times, and every time I had to pay a visit to the George W. Bush presidential Library.

12
Q If you were to create a self-portrait without showing your face, how would you represent yourself?

I should give it a lot more thought, but the motif of the mise en abyme might be a good place to start. Another image comes to mind: a self-learning, AI-driven robotic arm that trains itself to manipulate a Bunraku puppet. The arm would bang and damage the puppet at random until, perhaps, it learns to handle it gracefully.

13
Q Which musician or band best mirrors your artistic practice?

Xiu Xiu. They create distorted, raw and emotional sounds. I’m not sure if that’s what comes to mind when looking at my own art. But if you look beyond the



EMMANUEL VAN DER AUWERA, *VideoSculpture XXX (The Gospel)*, 2024, courtesy the artist and Harlan Levy Projects

formal rigour of some pieces, you can catch a glimpse of that same energy. Visual art doesn’t operate according to the same logic as music, I feel. Music might be the most direct art form — its connection is instantaneous.

14
Q Imagine that your art is a superhero. What are its powers and its kryptonite?

Its power is opening portals. Its kryptonite, apathy.

15
Q Which work of art gives you comfort over and over again?

The manga series *Barefoot Gen* by Keiji Nakazawa.

16
Q If you could have any mythical creature as a studio assistant, what would it be and how would it help you?

Maybe Santa Claus. He’s a great builder. He has a team of assistants, and he seems excellent with storage and logistics.

17
Q Imagine you’re hosting a dinner party with three famous artists. Who are they, and what are you cooking?

Warhol, Caravaggio, Mike Kelley. I really suck at cooking, unfortunately, so we’ll collegially choose the style of food and order it online.

18
Q If your art could cure one human flaw or disease, what would you choose and why?

Cancer, because it’s so common and so miserable. But I’m not sure art can cure anything, and maybe its importance is not so easily measured on a scale of usefulness. Except for very wealthy artists — perhaps they can invest some of their fortune in research, on top of making art (looking at you, Hirst). But even vast wealth in art is incredibly small

compared to, say, the likes of Elon Musk, who might eventually be worth a trillion dollars — roughly a sixth of the total U.S. budget. That kind of wealth could change the world, without even the need to build a new one.

19
Q Imagine you’ve been commissioned to create a piece that can be seen from space. What would it be and where would you place it?

A ‘sick’ emoji, made of tens of thousands of windmills, offshore.

20
Q The art world collapses. What profession are you switching to?

I’ve never thought of it. I can picture myself developing indie games; I think that medium has a lot of creative potential.