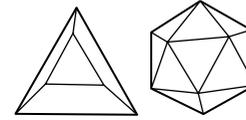


## A Breath of Fresh Air An Interview with Laure Murat

Johanna Braun



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## A Breath of Fresh Air

### An Interview with Laure Murat

Johanna Braun

Johanna Braun met Laure Murat in Los Angeles to have an extensive talk about the art and politics of madness, its historical as well as cultural significance. Murat, a cultural historian who specializes in the history of literature, psychiatry, and gender studies, also has a background as an art critic and is passionately transgressing disciplines, while showing unconventional and furthermore inspiring approaches to what it means to be a contemporary academic.

Johanna Braun      We meet right in the middle of the heated debates of the US presidential elections. The theme of madness seems to overshadow the media coverage of the political events. Your book *The Man Who Thought He Was Napoleon*. Towards a Political History of Madness (2011/2014)\* – which won the prestigious Prix Femina Essai nonfiction prize – showed in depth that this phenomenon is nothing new but that politics and mental illness are more intertwined than one would think. While your book focused on the 18th to late 19<sup>th</sup> centuries in France I think your findings are also very relevant for a US American setting. How would you describe the similarities and differences of handling the mentally-ill in praxis and “insanity” as a point of reference during political debates?

Laure Murat      Last summer, the American Psychiatric Association issued a warning about “wild diagnoses” concerning Donald Trump, whom some doctors publicly considered a serious “sociopath”. Jeffrey Flier, former Harvard Medical School Dean even tweeted: “Narcissistic personality disorder. Trump doesn’t just have

it, he defines it.” Although it may be true, it is problematic and unethical to make this kind of statement without any examination and without being granted authorization. More importantly, I think it is counter-productive: the more you resort to madness, the less you are analyzing the political and intellectual dangers at stake. “Madness” is often a way to get rid of a bigger problem. Better decipher the danger than jump to a conclusion and claim for a “disorder.” It works for terrorism as well. We have to be very careful with words when it comes to madness. “Sociopath,” “crazy,” “insane,” are mostly used in a familiar sense that doesn’t necessarily reflect a true condition. Trump is certainly dangerous. And he definitely has “crazy hair.” Ted Cruz had a “normal” haircut but was at least as “insane” and dangerous as Trump – a problem very few commentators pointed out. Public opinion, blogs, op-eds, statements in journals or newspapers during elections are interesting for that reason among others: it shows how the concept of “madness” is, first and foremost, ideological and based on prejudice. It is usually a judgmental category that leads to confusion. What worries me the most, now, is that the actual political situation is barely “under control.” Trump unleashed a kind of violence and hatred in public discourse that, I am afraid, is going to last and to severely disrupt the social climate.

JB What I find also very interesting during the current presidential elections is the discussion of the „Insider“ versus the „Outsider,“ (the German word “Quereinsteiger\_in” would be a better description) and the strong belief that the “Outsider” is the one who can change a corrupted system. Without wanting to compare apples with oranges: I love the story of how you found your passion for teaching while you were a Visiting professor at the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts of Paris (1997–1998), which led to your decision to undertake yourself an academic training. Your unconventional career path that led you from a comfortable life as a successful art critic in Paris to a new beginning in Los Angeles is

inspiring. Could you tell us how it came to this life changing decision?

LM It was a long process. I have always been a very mediocre pupil at school. My obsession was to leave home and to enter into working life. At 19, I was lucky enough to get an internship in an art journal that finally hired me. That is how it started. Ten years later, I was invited at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris to teach the “theory of art criticism.” Here is the weird thing: I hated school but I discovered I loved teaching. Once on the other side of the desk, it was a completely different story. I could explain, share, discuss freely. It was such a great experience. I realized that most of the teaching is a failure because it lacks desire. I discovered that I had this desire, related to what the Ancients call *libido sciendi*. No matter what teaching or learning means, the issue is about excitement regarding knowledge. Unfortunately, I couldn’t stay at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts. Not only was it a “visiting professorship” for 6 months non-renewable, but I didn’t have any credentials to apply for a “real” job – no diplomas of any kind. I didn’t have the courage to go back to the university (or rather to “go” to the university, given I’ve never been to). A few years went by. I published two books in the meantime, which got some public and critical recognition. At that time, a friend of mine told me that people with my unusual profile could enroll in a specific program at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales that gives way to a PhD program. I wrote the equivalent of a master thesis and got into the PhD program. But when I was about to enter the PhD program and enroll in my first classes ever, I was invited to the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton. Of course, I accepted the invitation and wrote my dissertation there. The same year, I was invited to apply to UCLA. And I got the job. I went back to Paris, defended my dissertation, got my visa, and flew to Los Angeles.

The result was that, in January 2007, I was in front of a class of young American students while I haven’t been taught myself

ever, although I got a PhD. I had to invent something. I thought: what would keep me awake? To make an audience alert is a very complex task. It is a performance. But it is not so difficult. You only have to make clear the following: what is the question? What happens when someone is reading a text? One likes it or not, can summarize the plot, can talk about psychology of the characters. But no one, usually, is able to tell: what is the problem at stake? The use of the Internet has worsened this issue. The web provides answers, a flow of answers. But it doesn't trigger questions. That is my role. Ask the students: what is the question? What is your question?

Being an „outsider“ or a „newcomer“ helps. I was not trained. I was not in the system. I will never be, in a way. There is a very popular program on American radio called “Fresh air.” I would like, ideally, to be the “fresh air.” Academia, although less in America than in Europe, sounds too often in automatic pilot. The outsider is not necessarily the good one. She or he allows another point of view. To go back to your comparison: Trump is not an „outsider.“ He is the mainstream businessman who threatens Washington. Corruption against corruption. Private against public. I don't view myself in this kind of battle. What I would like is to bridge the gap between disciplines and, mostly, between the University and a larger audience. I would like to make the academic language “audible.”

JB This is a great analogy, because the way you write does very much feel “fresh” and “refreshing.” Your writing is very inviting and narrative and therefore expands the often narrow readership of the academic community. The widespread media attention, as well as the critical praise, you receive for your work speak for themselves. How would you describe your position within academic discourse on one hand and your position as a public intellectual on the other? Do you follow specific principles or school of thoughts?

LM For a French citizen, the distinction between an “academic” or “university professor” and a “public intellectual” is not com-

pletely relevant. Whatever his/her job is, the French will always be the one who will ask: “That works well in practice, but how does it work in theory?” Every week, literature, philosophy, social sciences are on the headlines of the newspapers. It is part of everyday life and conversation. We have a whole radio station dedicated to intellectual issues, called *France-Culture*.

This way of thinking is also contaminating other media. A good example is that we don't have any real distinction between “university presses” and “trade presses” like in the US. The major presses (Gallimard, Le Seuil, Fayard, Flammarion, et cetera.) are welcoming professors and public intellectuals who have something to say, in an audible way. That's it. There are also specific publishing houses, devoted to purely academic and more specialized work, but it is quite marginal.

I never feel I belong to an “academic community” that would be separated from public debate. For instance, every month, I give an op-ed to the daily newspaper *Libération*, where I write about anything that crosses my mind: the destruction of Palmyra, contemporary feminism, but also the fashion of “talkative t-shirts.”

JB Although, you are so open to any relevant topic of the moment and its cultural impact, your long-lasting interest in art history and the artist as a figure of cultural significance prevails. The themes of madness and its close relationship to the arts are persistent throughout your work. Already in the biography *La Maison du docteur Blanche* (2001) – which won France's prestigious Goncourt Prize for Biography and the French Academy's Critique's Prize – you followed the father and son Esprit and Emile Blanche who treated famous 19<sup>th</sup> century artists who „lost their minds.“ Your current research Project *Women as Symptoms, or Madness at Work* – for which you received a Guggenheim fellowship – also focuses on the triangle of the artist, the artistic work and the contagious madness that the work produces. Why do you think the artist has this special affiliation to the mentally-ill – or should I rather say gets

painted as having this connection – and why is the artist a recurring figure in the development of the mental institution?

LM It is a very complicated issue that it is not possible to address in a few lines. But let me say a few things. First, madness doesn't make you an artist (otherwise, all asylums would be overcrowded with Van Goghs), exactly as LSD doesn't make you a poet. Second, if some artists proved to be insane, it shows that "mentally-ills" can be artists as well as artists can be mentally-ill. It goes both ways. It is always dangerous to "romanticize" madness. Finally, one can say that there is a comparable "structure" between aesthetic creation and the effort of "re-construction" of the psychotic patient. It has to do with an archaic mode of representation – before the famous "mirror stage" and the constitution of the ego. The goals are not the same: the artist is looking for aesthetic pleasure; the psychotic patient for a kind of reparation.

JB In your brand new book *Ceci n'est pas une ville* (Flammarion, 2016), the table seems to have turned: you are haunted by the question if one can fall passionately in love with a city. In your case the love interest is the city of Los Angeles. With the ongoing academic and public interest in *objectophilia*, it is striking that with examples as Eija-Riitta Berliner-Mauer, Erika Eiffel and Amanda Liberty, it seems that there is an intense and almost uncanny connection between women and urban places. Here, a different kind of "madness" comes into play: It is interesting how especially women go "crazy" over their love of public spaces. Could you tell us more about your new book and would you go as far as to describe yourself as being madly in love with L.A.?

LM After ten years living in Los Angeles, I realized that I had a special relationship to the city. But I don't think I fetishize it, as it is the case in *objectophilia*. On the contrary. For me, L.A. is more like an imaginary, versatile, flexible space. Women usually have issues

talking about their experience in public urban places, as if they had internalized their social assignment to the private sphere. I tried to address this issue, in analyzing the erotic tension one can feel in a city and why. One of the answers I found is that Los Angeles provides me a sense of freedom. In L.A., a horizontal and never ending city, without center nor monuments, you always have a perspective, both in the literal and figurative sense. Your body never feels "confined" or blocked in any way. The horizon is always open as is the future.

**Laure Murat** (\*1967), is professor in the Department of French and Francophone Studies, the Director of the Center for European and Russian Studies and in addition also serves as faculty advisor for the LGBT Studies program at the University of California, Los Angeles. She is the author of the critically well received book *The Man Who Thought He Was Napoleon. Towards a Political History of Madness* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2014)\* and her last book is entitled: *Ceci n'est pas une ville* (Flammarion, 2016).

**Johanna Braun**, (\*1987) ist seit dem Diplomstudium der Bildenden Kunst (2004–2008) und dem Doktoratsstudium der Philosophie (2012–2015) an der Akademie der bildenden Künste Wien international als freischaffende Künstlerin, Kuratorin und Kulturwissenschaftlerin tätig. Sie forscht sowohl wissenschaftlich als auch künstlerisch zu den Schwerpunkten Medienphilosophie, Genrefilm und Intermedialität.

**Anmerkung**

1 Originally published in French. Laure Murat. *L'Homme qui se prenait pour Napoléon. Pour une histoire politique de la folie*, (Paris: Gallimard, 2011; Paperback edition: Gallimard, "Folio", 2014). Translated into English by Deke Dusinberre under the title: *The Man Who Thought He Was Napoleon. Towards a Political History of Madness* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2014).