

Création Studio Théâtre National Wallonie-Bruxelles 2024-2025

Brûler

Jorge León

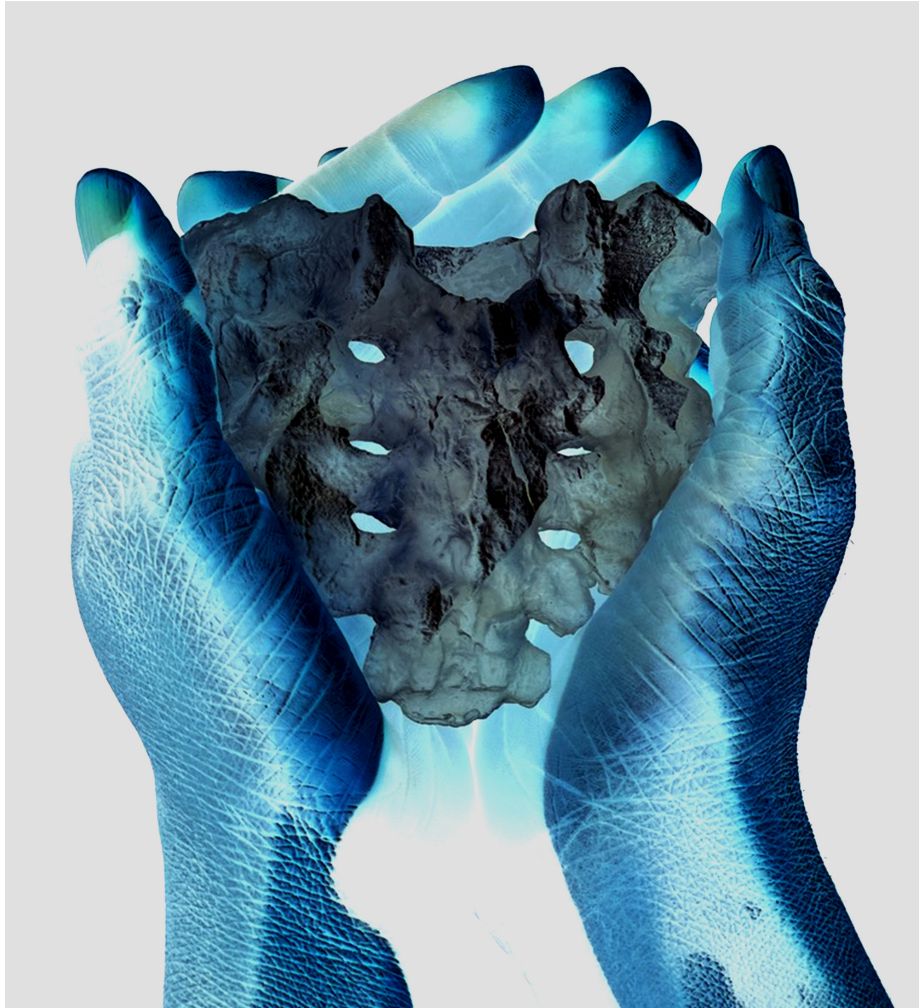
Simone

Aughterlony

Claton McFadden

Rokia Bamba





**How do works of art, be they
visual, literary or musical,
relate conceptually to
the question of finitude?**

The planet is burning. If Lucy – the 3,200,000-year-old *Australopithecus* discovered in the Ethiopian desert in 1974 – came back, what would she say? In *Brûler*, her voice – conveyed through artists – will come to life on a stage where master glassmakers are seen at work, using their breath and molten silica – to create anthropomorphic forms. 3D printers produce synthetic bones. Blocks of clay stand awaiting excavation. The stage is a vast evolutionary laboratory where the work gradually unfolds its aim: to summon the past in order to question the present, to light the flame of a future that is searching for itself in a world whose end is constantly being announced. Together, to burn with a new fire.

Genesis

The idea of *Brûler* came about during the *The End Of Death* conference at Bozar in 2019. I was invited there to share my experience as director of the film *Before We Go* (2018) created with artists and people at the end of life. I mentioned, among other things, the extent to which the Western narrative is driven by the question of the end. How are works of art, be they visual, literary or musical conceived in relation to the notion of finitude? It was there that I met Aubrey de Grey, an ideologue of transhumanism who basically told the audience: "The end of the end is only a matter of time. Death is just a disease that will eventually be cured. The human being who will live to be 400 years old has already been born. He may be among us, in the audience."

Beyond the scientific vision promoted by transhumanists, and which is ultimately just the umpteenth version of a regularly rehashed story, what particularly challenged me was the collision between the fantasy of immortal life and the alarming daily announcement warnings we receive about humanity's extinction. It is precisely this paradox that inspired my work. It has already generated a series of phases that I would like to now bring together in the context of the piece *Brûler*, starting with the figure of Lucy.

Admittedly, Lucy is but an incomplete skeleton, an architecture of fossil bones and air. But it is precisely this lack, the poetics of absence that allows us to give body and voice to Lucy. A way of also materializing the fantasy of our origins. A way to further question our own finitude that we share with all living beings. And above all, our desire to transcend it.

Collaborations

Here, I am deepening the close artistic collaboration begun with the African-American soprano **Claron McFadden** in the film and the performance *Mitra*, which premiered at the Kunstenfestivaldesarts in 2018. The artist lends her spoken and singing voice to Lucy, thus conjuring the story by imagining the one that the Ethiopians call Dinknesh – "you are wonderful". In today's world, what would she say? Who would she be?

Thinking of Lucy as a kind of little sister, Claron McFadden transforms the incomplete skeleton into a character, breathing new life into her. The questions raised by this distant ancestor, linked to the origins of our humanity, preoccupy her intimately. They refer her to her own origins but also to the existential questions that she experiences as a woman, an artist, being black and places them in a social and political genealogy that she shares with millions of other women.

These elements constitute the fertile ground for the original text that the writer **Caroline Lamarche** develops in collusion with Claron as the staging process evolves. The stage space is inhabited by performers, including **Simone Aughterlony**, a long-time close collaborator. I also plan to work with the collective of architects Traumnovelle for the overall scenographic approach.

Dramaturgical note

Disimmortalize

The relationship to immortality naturally led me to explore the context of the museum, a space that is both concrete and symbolic and in which the works and objects preserved are intended to survive us. The 52 bones belonging to Lucy spent time in museums before being withdrawn from public view for conservation reasons. Immortalizing a work, preserving it in museum spaces entails, paradoxically, freezing it in time. Museums are places where works are reified, where they acquire a symbolic value, become untouchable.

In *Brûler*, the main dramatic arc unfolds concretely on the stage. Between, on the one hand, a space on the ground covered with earth – both an excavation field from which materials and shapes are extracted and a workshop where Lucy's face and body are shaped. And on the other hand, a space with an immaculate floor, a white cube where the elements collected and manufactured in the first space are exhibited, where living bodies are also exhibited which disturb the reified and untouchable logic of the museum.

The public moves freely throughout the places where the activity is carried out. Gradually, the sanitized exhibition space is contaminated by the organic elements of the excavation field / workshop where the earth is probed in search of traces of origins but also of the riches to be extracted. And where, from sand and clay, we create new forms, both human and non-human.

The living experience of creation thus comes to deconstruct the immortality of "dead" museum objects, in the spirit of the "post-museum" proposed by Françoise Vergès in her book *Programme de désordre absolu: décoloniser le musée* (2023): no longer *the site* of a supposedly neutral and universal heritage but *a utopia*...

(...) which would awaken the senses, let the imagination and the dream unfold, where one could be inspired by collective or individual creations, rituals and gestures that offer other ways of apprehending the human and non-human world.

— Françoise Vergès, 2023

So I imagine a huge immersion space for the public. In other words, many actions unfold simultaneously on a stage that is open to people wandering about. Like a museum in a black box, there is no hierarchy, nor division between the space of the audience seating and the stage.

Lucy today

Brûler thus summons the figure – now mythical – of Lucy, the 3,200,000-year-old *Australopithecus* discovered by American and French researchers in 1974 in the Hadar desert in Ethiopia. Her figure interests me in that it seems to encapsulate current questions that I want to bring to the stage. Lucy is the kaleidoscopic mirror of our condition as humans today. She conveys a number of questions that are emblematic of the period we are going through. What is Lucy's gender? Some scientists today claim that she could be a man. Who are the "white" men involved in the excavations in this desert region of Ethiopian territory? The same people who were listening to *Lucy in the sky* by the Beatles on repeat at the time of the discovery of the 52 bones of the "creature". If the researchers had been female, would the story have been the same? What if the team of archaeologists had been Ethiopian?

I explore the figure of Lucy by imagining who she would be if she were 20 years old today, if she were engaged in the course of our world, inevitably addressing the movements *MeToo*, *Black Lives Matter*, the ravages of climate change, revolutions our civilization is undergoing.

My approach opens up the field of politics and contributes to making Lucy a character who is resistant to any form of allocation. Reduced to fossilized bones, she no longer possesses any identifiable DNA. If she seems to me to be the ideal figure to question our being in the world today, it is also because she somehow connects us to a form of animality from which transhumanist thought tries to disconnect us. Animality not to be confused with nostalgia for primitive savagery. Far from being a regressive figure, she leads us, on the contrary, to the subversive figure of the ape, as Paul B. Preciado describes it to

us in his text *Guenons de la République* which conjures at once the *King Kong* of Virginie Despentes, the *gorillas* of the *Guerilla Girls*, the *Monkey* of Basquiat, the *monster* of Donna Haraway, the *simian women* of Elly Strik and the *Watermelon Woman* of Cheryl Dunye – we could add the subversive *Chimpanzés* du futur of the Grenoble collective:

The monkey is not our other, but rather signals the horizon of democracy to come. It is no longer a question of claiming our belonging to humanity by denying the primate (...). We must embrace the animality to which we are constantly referred back (...) open all the cages and undo all the taxonomies to invent, together, a politics of monkeys.

— Un appartement sur Uranus, 2019

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imagining who she would be if
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Form(s)



Image, sound

Cinema and animated images occupy an important place onstage. And the sequences of the film that I am realizing in parallel with the performance, naturally find their place in course of this wandering. Singing self-evidently arises thanks to the presence of Claron for whom important stages of her life are often linked to particular songs and music. The musical register is therefore very wide, it extends from Gospel to pop music via Bach and Monteverdi. In order to support the eclectic dimension of the musical and sound spectrum encompassed by the performance, we work with the artist **DJ Rokia Bamba**. She accompanies us throughout the rehearsal process, she creates a singular sound environment while having the chance to deploy her talents as a DJ by serving up specific sets – for example, with pop music, in reference to the archaeologists who chose the name Lucy because they were listening to the Beatles song *Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds* on the radio.

Glass, the incandescence of forms

The long period of residency at the International Center for Research on Glass and Plastic Arts (CIRVA) – allowed me to work on the glass reproduction of Lucy's skeleton. The close collaboration with the master glassmakers gave rise to the creation of pieces with anthropomorphic connotations present onstage as well as the skeleton of Lucy identically reproduced in glass. The working process was filmed in detail. Images should have a place on stage as well. If the production allows it, I would like to invite two of the master glassmakers to display their know-how onstage live, to add the physical and symbolic power of fire and their breath to the creative dynamic at work onstage.

Other planned collaborations

I want to develop a specific approach to lighting and imagine moving luminous objects onstage. We contacted **Arnaud Eubelen**, an extremely talented young designer from Liège who works mainly with materials found in public spaces or in abandoned buildings. The materials he has gleaned constitute what he calls the material library. His relationship to a form of urban archeology resonates with the archaeological exploration of the researchers who discovered Lucy.

“If I Were” portrait — Jorge Leon

If I were an animal, I would be the Rose-ringed Parakeet
If I were a flower, I would be jasmine
If I were an element, I would be earth
If I were a precious stone, I would be galalith
If I were a season, I would be spring
If I were a time of day, I'd be the morning before 8 o'clock
If I were one of the five senses, I would be sight

If I were an island, I would be Tenerife
If I were a city, I would be Madrid
If I were a planet, I would be Uranus
If I were a landscape, I would be a volcanic landscape
If I were a room in the house, I would be the kitchen

If I were an everyday object, I would be the disco ball hanging
in the kitchen
If I were a vehicle, I would be a bicycle
If I were a garment, I would be a hoodie

If I were a music album, I would be Pablo Honey by Radiohead
(1993)

If I were a fictional character, I would be the mother in the film
What Have I Done to Deserve This by Pedro Almodóvar

If I were a word, I would be "become"

If I were a movie, I'd be *Blue* by Derek Jarman (1993)

If I were an actress, I would be Adèle Haenel

If I were an animated series, I would be *The Muppet Show*
(1976)

If I were a super power, I would be clairvoyance

If I were a mythical creature, I would be the unicorn

If I were a video game, I would be *Tetris* designed by Aleksei
Pajitnov

If I were a song, I would be *Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless
Child* by Odetta

If I were a style of music, I would be the electro style

If I were a photo, I would be the portrait of Susan Sontag by
Peter Hujar

If I were an art, I would be photography

If I were a historical event, I would be *#metoo*

If I were a dish, I would be wakame salad

If I were a dessert, I would be a red berry salad

If I were a candy, I would be a marshmallow

If I were a fruit, I would be a strawberry

If I were a drink, I would be iced tea

If I were a smell, I would be musk
If I were a sport, I would be swimming
If I were a party, I would be all the parties in the world

If I were a number, I would be 7

If I were a noise, I would be the ticking of the alarm clock

If I were a motto, I would be "know thyself"

If I were a hashtag I would be *#blacklivesmatter*

If I were a bad habit, I would be misplacing my passport

If I were a quality, I would be listening

If I were a dirty word, I'd be fuck off

If I were an emotion, I would be melancholy

If I were a pleasure, I would be an orgasm

If I were a desire, I would be two eyes that meet

If I were a dream, I would be a lucid dream

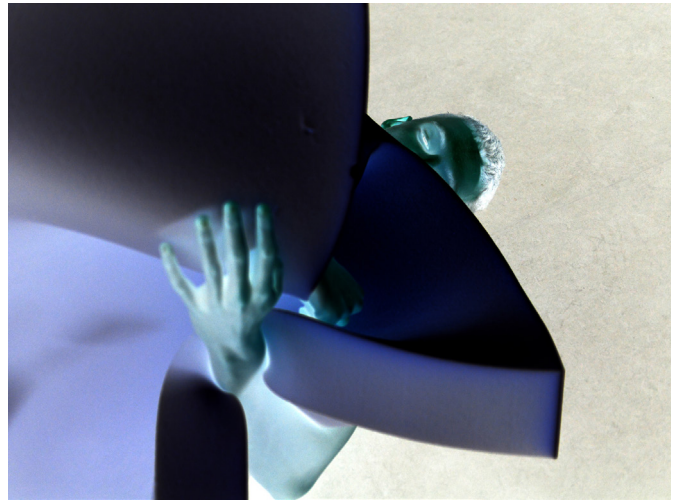
— Questionnaire by Sylvia Botella in May 2023

Jorge León

Jorge León studied film in Brussels (INSAS). Very early on, his interest focused on documentary cinema as a director and cinematographer. His practice intersects with that of many performing artists such as Meg Stuart, Benoît Lachambre, Simone Aughterlony, Claron McFadden and the Ictus ensemble. This has given rise to multiple artistic collaborations. Since 2003, he has been directing films: *De Sable et de Ciment* (2003); *Vous êtes Ici* (2006); *Between Two Chairs* (2007); *10 Min.* (2009); *Vous êtes Servis* (2010).

In 2012, he created the association Present Perfect whose aim is to "develop, produce and distribute artistic and cultural works and events which, by their form and their purpose, question our present". Since then, Present Perfect has been the starting point for Jorge León's projects and, depending on their nature – cinema, performing arts, photography or publications – passes the baton to other ad hoc structures that handle the production. Jorge León's projects have been supported and produced by the Collectif Dérives – founded by the Dardennes Brothers and directed by Julie Frère – Les Halles de Schaerbeek, La Monnaie, the Kunstenfestivaldesarts (Brussels), Charleroi danse – Centre chorégraphique de Wallonie-Bruxelles, the Théâtre de Liège – Scenic Center of the Wallonia-Brussels Federation, the HAU-Hebbel am Ufer Berlin, the Zürcher Theater Spektakel, the Theater Rotterdam Schouwburg, and the Theaterhaus Gessnerallee Zürich.

His films such as *Vous êtes Servis* or *Before We Go* and *Mitra* have been widely screened at international festivals and have won awards on various occasions. In parallel with the presentation of *Vous êtes Servis* at the opening of the 2010 kunstenfestivaldesarts in Brussels, he created his first theater production *Deserve* in collaboration with Simone Aughterlony. Whom he rejoins in *Uni * Form* (2015) and *Mitra* premiered at the Kunstefestivaldesarts in 2018. In 2019, Jorge was awarded the FRArt – Fonds de Recherche en Art grant. This allowed him to develop the stage project *Brûler*, the production of which is provided by the Théâtre National Wallonie-Bruxelles and the film *Incandescences* produced by Michigan Films. Glass, the incandescence of forms.



Calendar

12.09.2024 > 15.09.2024

BELGIUM – Bruxelles – Les Halles de Schaerbeek

08.11.2024 > 09.11.2024

BELGIUM – Charleroi – Charleroi Danses

14.11.2024 > 15.11.2024

BELGIUM – Anvers – De Singel

Brûler

Jorge León

Simone Augterlony

Claron McFadden

Rokia Bamba

Création Studio Théâtre National Wallonie-Bruxelles

Creation and direction **Jorge León**

In close collaboration with the performers **Claron McFadden, Simone Augterlony, Rokia Bamba, Milka Kongi** and the graduates of the Master Dance and Choreographic Practices – INSAS, the ENSAV – La Cambre and Charleroi Dance **Aimé Gaster, Vio Lacroix, Garance Maillot, Charly Molle-Cousin, Justine Richard, Caroline Roche, Lou Viallon, Loû Viret**

Assistance and dramaturgy **Isabelle Dumont**

Assistant direction **Brandon Kano Butare**

Writing **Caroline Lamarche**

Other texts **Elsa Dorlin, Laurence Vielle (in progress)**

Scenography **Traumnovelle**

Sound installation and musical composition **Rokia Bamba**

Lighting design **Arnaud Eubelen**

Video design **Aliocha Van der Avoort**

Costume design **Eugénie Poste**

Set construction and costume making **Ateliers du Théâtre National Wallonie-Bruxelles**

Visual artist **Arnaud Vasseux**

Mold making **Stéphanie Denoiseux**

Technical direction **Benøit Ausloos**

Stage management **Julian Fernandez, Dimitri Wauters**

Lighting management **Arthur Demaret**

Sound management **David Defour**

Video management **Ludovic Desclin**

A show of **Jorge León / Present Perfect asbl**

Production **Théâtre National Wallonie-Bruxelles**

Coproduction **Charleroi Danse, Halles de Schaerbeek, Muziektheater Transparant, La Coop asbl, Shelter Prod**

With the support of **la Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles – Service Général de la Création Artistique – Service des projets pluridisciplinaires et transversaux, du Centre des Arts Scéniques, du FRart, du Cirva, de Camargo Foundation, du CEREGE / Institut Pythéas / CNRS, Taxshelter.be, ING, du Taxshelter du gouvernement fédéral belge**

Photos : **Jorge León**

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