

Sylvère Lotringer, 1938-2021

David Morris

Sylvère Lotringer's life been celebrated as a 'total work' – a lived embodiment of the radical theories he did so much work to disseminate and promote. His commitment to an art of living, his embodiment and dissemination of thought, and his cultural experimentation have been widely affirmed – with the 'primary text' of his life often eclipsing his published work; as Gayatri Spivak put it: 'an example of how this kind of philosophy is also an act of the mind, of life, of how to actually live philosophically rather than simply think in a certain way'.¹ Semiotext(e) press is also celebrated as his great life's work – although the singular approach and sensibility that he instilled in it makes it impossible to understand as an individual creation. Like so much of his work, Semiotext(e) is a shared project, as Sylvère would often insist. This situation also allowed him to perform a kind of disappearing act on himself. The many tributes that have appeared following his death have shown his multiplicity, but his 'personal' writings and projects (about which he would no doubt have said that there is nothing 'personal') have to some extent disappeared from view. The 'total' lifework can obscure the work in which he was energetically engaged throughout his life.

The range and quantity of that which he authored and co-authored under his own name is extraordinary – despite occasional self-deprecations as lazy or unproductive – especially so, given the parallel work of editing, travel, teaching, etc. His writings and projects are many and scattered, spanning fictions, interviews, critical and historical essays and films, reworking themes and ideas through different moments in time – recurrent questions approached from different angles – a nomadic creative practice, without pause or end. *Mad Like Artaud* is one document of such an approach – Sylvère playing out a delirium of his own to produce a collage work that was published multiple times, in different forms, languages

and situations – each version a variation on the last.² So it may be understandable that his published works have not received the attention they deserve. There is a refusal of fixity that runs through them, a deferral of any final form or version, an ongoing reinvention, revision, rehearsal. To note this is not to try to pull the many lines of his life into a narrative, or worse yet, an individual biography – Sylvère already did a good job of evading this. But it is an attempt to find an alternative opening into his multiple life; to ask, in a different way, *what happened?*³

His early biography holds some clues as to the directions his life would take: born in Paris to Polish-Jewish migrants in 1938; his early life as a 'hidden child' during the Nazi occupation of France; his coming-of-age in the Marxist-Zionist youth movement Hashomer-Hatzair; his self-mimeographed magazines of writings and drawings that he would give to his comrades; his time as Sorbonne student president, producing literary publications, organising and demonstrating for Algerian independence; his work interviewing modernist writers in Britain and Ireland as English correspondent for *Les Lettres françaises* (edited by Louis Aragon); his work in French television; his doctoral thesis on Virginia Woolf, supervised by Roland Barthes and Lucien Goldmann.

While researching the 'Schizo-Culture' conference of 1975 and the beginnings of Semiotext(e), I wrote to him out of the blue. He replied that the conference's audio recordings had just been rediscovered, later inviting me to join him to realise what would become the *Schizo-Culture* publication, published in 2013. It continues to feel to me unfamiliar and unresolved. Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, Michel Foucault and Jean François Lyotard spoke there, as did William Burroughs, John Cage, Judith Clark, Ti-Grace Atkinson, R.D. Laing and others. Marcuse was invited but declined. It drew from the aesthetic fo-

ment of its time. The archive swirls with connections to Loft Jazz, No Wave, Patti Smith, the Last Poets, the Ontological-Hysteric Theater, Lincoln Detox and Martine Barrat's films in the Bronx. As a combination of disparate forces, it was bound to collapse, and the book explores the 'breakdown' that the event enacted. What might now be understood as a symptom of broader crises – a breakdown at the limits of white Western (un)reason – was also a moment of personal crisis for Sylvère; although, as he described it, this breakdown was also a breakthrough. His name sounded like *l'étranger* and at this point he was becoming that. *Semiotext(e)* journal became increasingly singular and adventurous, bringing an aesthetic sensibility that shifted across each edition (schizo-culture, polysexuality, Italian autonomism...).

Photo: Iris Klein



If Sylvère's writings and projects had a tendency to disappear, the reasons are various, a mixture of happenstance and intentionality. At some stage he was working on a collection – *Extrapolations* – but he cared deeply about his own writing, and could express reticence about publishing it. He published in a piecemeal way, sometimes in obscure places. His generosity of spirit, self-deprecating nature and disinterest in career-building all characterised how he approached his work. There is also the acutely uncomfortable, uncompromising, confrontational character that his own writing could take – in sharp contrast to his gentleness and good humour in person. It is as if his work was always moving deliberately towards the most unspeakable, unthinkable areas – his ongoing concern was with the 'enterprise of systematic dehumanization that is affecting the entire planet',⁴ and he sought theoretical and aesthetic means to understand and intervene on appalling and catastrophic conditions.

Sylvère's works – his books, writing, performances and films – may be understood as a series of practices that developed through different phases.

The interview, for example, is central and consistent: his recording of interactions goes back to the literary interviews he conducted in the 1960s. This was a tool he would use to gain access to something – a concept, a historical moment, an atmosphere. It became his way of relating to New York when he arrived in the 1970s; it was the basis of his collaborations with Paul Virilio and Jean Baudrillard. Much of his later work shared this framework, from the interviews with Artaud's doctors in 1983-85 out of which emerged *Mad Like Artaud*, the film *Voyage to Rodez* and the performance 'I Talked about God with Antonin Artaud' (both in collaboration with Chris Kraus); his mid-80s performance work where he interviewed himself; his book *Overexposed*; the book on David Wojnarowicz; many other published interviews in various *Semiotext(e)* publications; the interviews with his mother that informed his late autobiographical essays; and the many interviews he gave to others. Interviews were what he did, over and over again, into an art. These interviews fed different phases of his work, they entered into different aspects of it in different ways. They were one of several tools for combining things that don't go together.

Another consistent practice was *theory*. 'Doing theory' was how he described the active practice of *thought* that, for him, produced the most compelling moments in intellectual life, as contrasted with its deadening effects, particularly as it became institutionalised through the 1980s and 1990s. More particularly, literary theory was a consistent concern, from the structuralism that provided the focus of the earliest *Semiotext(e)* activities, including their first conference (on Saussure) and first journal editions. His doctoral thesis was a structural analysis of Virginia Woolf, with an initial part on the Fabians 'to please Lucien Goldmann': 'Virginia Woolf: de la mort des valeurs aux valeurs de la mort' ('From the death of values to the values of death').⁵ Woolf was not well known in France at the time, he told me, and it was through Nathalie Sarraute that he became aware of her work. His first publication was on *La Princesse de Clèves*, and he was hired at Columbia as a specialist in seventeenth-century French Literature.⁶ He also prepared a book-length 'Théorie du Roman', after Lukács

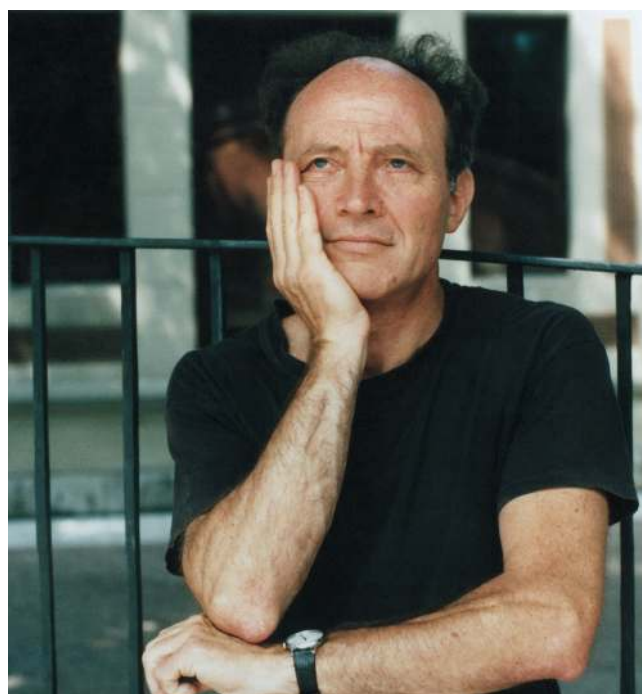
and Barthes – a structural analysis of various writers, from Homer to Alain Robbe-Grillet, with chapters on Chrestien de Troys, La Princesse de Cleves, Sade, Manon Lescaut, Balzac, Proust, and others. ‘This is a sunken world and no one has opened it yet. Rose...’⁷ The book was finished, but only published in pieces.⁸

Sylvère was already somewhere else and the sequence of Semiotext(e) journal editions gives a sense of the trajectory – ‘Alternatives in Semiotics’ and ‘The Two Saussures’ (1974); ‘Ego Traps’ and ‘Saussure’s Anagrams’ (1975); ‘George Bataille’ (1976); ‘Anti-Oedipus’ (1977); ‘Nietzsche’s Return’ and ‘Schizo-Culture’ (1978).⁹ It is interesting to read Sylvère’s own writings around this time – you can almost feel the structuralism loosening up, deterritorialising, becoming stranger. There is indeed something strange about these writings, which becomes more pronounced, especially in the texts he published in the pages of the Semiotext(e) journal (he was also publishing regularly in other journals such as *boundary 2* and *Diacritics* in the US, and *Critique, Literature* and *Poétique* in France). The intellectual orientations shift and the writing style itself becomes more compressed, telegraphic, enigmatic. Sylvère undertook another study ‘Analytical Fiction, Fiction of Analysis’.¹⁰ The study is introduced as an attempt to ‘turn literature against psychoanalytic interpretation’ – a counteranalysis, informed by Nietzsche, of Freud’s ‘Delusion and Dream in Jensen’s *Gradiva*’. The first part, ‘The Fiction of Analysis’, sets up the project – effectively an extrapolation of a brief remark in *Anti-Oedipus* that approvingly affirms the Freud of ‘Delusion and Dream’ and *Gradiva*, the Freud that went ‘too far’.¹¹ In ‘The Dance of Signs’ (1978), the second part of the study that was published, he continues along this line before abruptly embarking on a kind of experiment in reading:

I will, here and now, stop wanting the story to go somewhere. I will forget what I know feebly, in advance, in order to gather the whole complexity of forces at play in a text. I will learn to resist the melody of causal relations and the torpor of narrative accumulations in order to reinvent the intensity of risks, ceaselessly menacing and forever being reborn.¹²

He undertakes a re-reading of the *Gradiva* story without interpretation or narrative. This feels like an intensification or perversion of his role as a literary theorist; we watch as he drifts from the norms of his academic

training, breaks the fourth wall to destabilise his own position and the frameworks he relied upon until now. Cage, Merce Cunningham, Burroughs and Robert Wilson appear as guides to this new territory, along with Nietzsche and Deleuze and Guattari. The text concludes: ‘Why then should one insist on forcing dreams, texts, words, and actions to signify? Keep the dream-bursts apart; let them resound together without filling the intervals that allow them to coexist in all their richness within dissonance ... Forget meaning and with it the subject. Repression cannot resist the folly of winds. Beauty will be amnesiac or it will not be at all.’¹³



‘Schizo-Culture’ marks one or several breaks for Sylvère. The *Schizo-Culture* conference, and the edition of Semiotext(e) journal bearing the same name, were three years apart, and a lot happened during that time. The conference was untimely, and it took the journal a few years to catch up – you see it on the page, the *Schizo* edition introducing cartoon punk nihilism, No Wave aesthetics and cut-ups – and you see it in Sylvère’s shift into interviews, and the milieu he connects to, since it is here that his interviews first appear. Interviews were also, for him, a way to displace himself or to think with or through other people. At this point the typical activities of an academic literary theorist dissolve into all manner of speculative projects, connecting philosophy, art, film, performance and literature. It is as if he had absorbed the lessons of the artists he spoke to through the 1970s. He

would often reference the ‘philosopher-artist’ invoked by Nietzsche, and this was also part of the appeal for him of Baudrillard or Virilio, who embodied a certain attitude to thought that places high value on creative extrapolation. It was in 1978 that Sylvère would appear as a voiceover on Kathryn Bigelow’s student film *The Set-Up*; Bigelow in turn was part of the group who produced the *Schizo-Culture* issue; and it is in that issue that Sylvère’s interview with Jack Smith appears – an interview that has echoed through subsequent activities.¹⁴ Smith introduced him to the New York art world at that time – ‘a mixture of craziness and creativity, anarchism, paranoia, immediacy, flashing insights’ – and also warned him off a fixation on language as a barrier to thinking-doing: “‘If I could think of a thought that has never been thought of before, the language will fall into place in the most fantastic way, but the thought is what’s going to do it.’” For a semiotician, it was a rough lesson, but it worked.¹⁵

It wasn’t long before the compulsion to record expanded to video. This was in some respects a return to his work in television during the 1960s, producing programmes on literature and politics. The 1980s was a generative time, resulting in a number of films, such as: *Too Sensitive to Touch* (1981) with Michael Oblowitz; *How to Shoot a Crime* (1985) and *Voyage to Rodez* (1986) – and the performance ‘I Talked about God with Antonin Artaud’ (1985); and *Violent Femmes* (1998). Although he would habitually shoot video footage of interviews and events throughout his life, the 1980s would account for the majority of his published work in film, until *The Man Who Disappeared* in 2015.¹⁶ The way he approached working with film is hard to describe. Consider this reflection on the making of his unfinished film project *Second Hand Hitler* in Berlin in the mid-1980s: ‘It wasn’t planned, just happened, and then it snowballed into something that strived to be a film, and remains at least a strange and muddled experience. ... The emotional “torpor” that made it possible didn’t belong to anyone, not even me. The nightmare of history was still alive. And there was nothing one could do with it.’¹⁷ Rather than dictate or concern himself too much with ‘correct’ film-making – even though he had studied film-making, scriptwriting and acting – Sylvère seemed to follow an instinctive and improvisatory path that ignored the rules in pursuit of the line between chaos and complexity. His concerns were not those of a typical film-maker, and he did not

make typical films; the works are committed to an experiment, in the sense of a question for which one does not have the answer.

1981 offers another snapshot of several lives. This year saw a culmination of Sylvère’s academic work in semiotics with the publication of *Polyphonic Linguistics: the Many Voices of Emile Benveniste*, which Sylvère edited with Thomas Gora, published by specialist journal *Semiotica*. A different territory is mapped in ‘Defunkt Sex’, the text he published as part of the 1981 Semiotext(e) ‘Polysexuality’ issue, exploring sex as a sign in the United States – pointing towards his 1988 book *Overexposed* – the launch of which, at the Kitchen, caused a small scandal. It also saw the completion of *Too Sensitive to Touch*, a film collage he made with Michael Oblowitz, overlaying a discussion of sexual offenses with 1980s graphics, video effects and music (soundtrack by Human Sexual Response). The *Foreign Agents* book series was also in development at this moment.

It was around this time that ‘Shooting Death’ emerged, another of his unrealised projects. Death was a space of ongoing enquiry since at least his doctoral work on Woolf. There is footage from around this time of when Sylvère invited a crime scene photographer, George Diaz, to document him in his apartment, as if it were a crime scene. The camera pans slowly across the bookcase, a whole shelf of books about death – *Death: The Final Stage of Growth*, *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, *Psychosomatique et Cancer*, *Anthropologie de la Mort*, *Psychology of Funeral Service*, *The Denial of Death*, *On Death and Dying*, *Morgue* – before coming to Sylvère, motionless, face down on the bed. Following an Artaudian line that art produces death, the ‘Shooting Death’ project addressed ‘the current “return” of death in our society’, where ‘death is a fiction that has to be produced as a reality, invented anew through an artistic experience in order to become available again in its full emotional and cultural dimensions.’¹⁸ The archive from the project contains interviews with Diaz alongside the cast and crew of Wim Wenders’ *Lightning Over Water* (documenting the death of Nicholas Ray, a film which Virilio described as ‘the very first post-modern tragedy’). Death was a running concern of his work as part of a fierce commitment to the *live* – for him, thought is something that happens ‘live’, something that is lived, something that is itself alive.

This work would modulate into an increasingly com-

plex exploration of modernity and the Holocaust, which reappeared in various registers throughout his work. As he wrote in 'The Art of Evil' (a contribution to a student project in the mid-90s):

When such writers as Antonin Artaud, Georges Bataille, Céline, and Simone Weil embodied 'the passions and contradictions of European society', they imbibed the madness, violence, hatred and humiliation which were about to rock Western civilization, unleashing atrocities on an unprecedented scale.

None of these writers were even aware of the Nazi genocide. Yet from the mid 1920's until well into the war their work seems to anticipate the Holocaust, responding to it from a distance, 'like victims signaling through the flames.' (Artaud)¹⁹

Sylvère was drawn to those who made the unimaginable their subject matter, as 'modernist "vaccines" meant to build the immunities of the social body against the incoming threat.' Such vaccines could also be poisons, which he explored through various currents of nihilism, racism, fascism or anti-Semitism that run through these modernist figures (Cioran was another figure he hoped to finish a book on, later in his life). This phase inaugurated some of Sylvère's most powerful and affecting writing – one is drawn to imagine the book that might have been, and to consider how it couldn't be. 'The Anthropology of Unhappiness', an essay that was never published, engages with Antelme's *L'espèce humaine* and Duras's *La Douleur*,²⁰ in which he makes an argument for the 'fictionalisation' of Duras's account over the 'authentic' monumentalisation of Antelme's personal testimony: 'suffering, for her, just like writing or desire, wasn't something personal, something you could lock away or treat like a private possession, to the point of becoming its self-styled custodian. It was a force that invaded you from the outside, shaking your mind loose from all previous attachments, bringing chaos and disorder into your life, but also an acute sense of momentum to everything you did.'

As Sylvère reached the end of his life he increasingly returned to the beginning. In his writings from the 1990s onwards, he begins to explore and reconstruct aspects of his early life – biographical elements having remained largely absent from his interviews and work up to this time. He would appear as an interviewer, his way of becoming other people, or otherwise as a corpse (in *How to*

Shoot a Crime). This began to change with texts such as 'Never Any Ever After' (1994), an auto-fiction published as a small edition by Pataphysics Press in Melbourne, 'unraveling memories of his childhood as a hidden child during the Nazi occupation, a trip to Germany visiting a concentration camp with his clueless friends, weaving it to the present in New York';²¹ 'Pavilion in Time' (2003), a reflection on a photograph of his mother taken during the German occupation; or 'Étant Donnés' (2014), which recounts the story of his being given the identity of another schoolboy, as a strategy to evade the Nazis, and his attempt to find this person. He also emerged as a generous and prolific interviewee, and these have produced some fascinating documents of his life-work.²²

Like so much of Sylvère's work, his autobiographical writings were published piecemeal, without a plan for their future – a breadcrumb trail for only the most dedicated to follow and/or a move towards obscurity and oblivion. They expand the work on modernity and the Holocaust – some version of the imaginary opus *The Anthropology of Unhappiness*, described by Kraus in her novel *Torpor*, would incorporate them all together. One of the last things he was working on, 'The Man Who Slips', was a memoir of his time in the Jewish youth movement. These writings evoke a profound coming-to-terms with the unthinkable – and this was his way to come closer to it, and guard against it. Speaking in 2016, he observed: 'We've been told for a long time that fascism didn't have a chance, especially in America. Now, suddenly, fascism comes back fresh as a rose. It's at the door and knocking at six o'clock in the morning.'

In my notes for this obituary I copied out the following line at the top of the page: 'Giving one's own life away is the only present that cannot be reciprocated.' I can't now find the reference – I don't know if Sylvère said it, or if someone else did, and I don't think it matters. His life was a point of connection across continents of thought. It was something he constantly gave away, as he kept moving – he was always looking for escape routes and flight lines. His work was usually developed in relation – connecting, interviewing, editing, publishing. During his final days I had been listening to a recording of him speaking as part of a panel discussion, paying particular attention to the way his thought moved. I heard him oscillate between opposing positions – it was a group discussion, and he seemed to move in counterpoint to

those around him – his style of thought was anarchic and his positions could often move in ways that destabilised those around him. He was extremely agreeable but rarely in agreement, usually looking for points to which to apply pressure. (He described Baudrillard in this way, as someone who looks for a rickety idea-structure in order to give it a good shake.) In his writings, a favourite formulation was ‘more than’. Bataille was more Nietzschean than Nietzsche; Artaud was more Jewish than the Jews; Simone Weil, more Christian than the Christians. And himself, more American than the Americans. This ‘more than’ might be a way to understand him. Sylvère was always more than himself. Sylvère was a multiplicity, unique and dear to an enormous number of people. He set changes in motion that continue into the present, and that may take a lifetime or more to work themselves out.

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Notes

1. Carolina A. Miranda and Dorany Pineda, ‘Sylvère Lotringer, intellectual who infused U.S. art circles with French theory, dies at 83’, *Los Angeles Times*, 11 November 2021. Other notable tributes include: ‘Hedi El Kholi and Chris Kraus on Sylvère Lotringer’, *Artforum*, February 2022; McKenzie Wark, ‘Theory Daddy’, *NLR Sidecar*, 16 November 2021.
2. See Lotringer, *Mad Like Artaud* (Minneapolis: Univocal, 2015). Earlier versions of the book, with different contents, were published in French and Italian, and its materials formed the basis of a number of other creative projects.
3. Sylvère liked to reference F. Scott Fitzgerald’s short story ‘The Crack-Up’, as analysed by Deleuze and Guattari: ‘Different kinds of lines cross people’s lives, often unrecognised for what they are, capable of triggering irrevocable ruptures and transformations. Something happened that was never forgotten afterward, but what? Or whom? All we can ask is: *Whatever could have happened for things to come to this?*’ Sylvère Lotringer, ‘Forget Foucault’, *October* 126 (Fall 2008), 22.
4. Sylvère Lotringer, *The Miserables* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2014).
5. Correspondence with the author, 29 April 2018.
6. ‘La Structuration Romanesque’, *Critique* 26, 177 (1970), 498–529.
7. Correspondence with the author, 29 April 2018.
8. Sylvère Lotringer, ‘Le Roman Impossible’, *Poétique* 3 (1970), 297–321; ‘Vice de Forme’, *Critique* 27 (1971), 195–209; ‘Mesure

de la démesure’, *Poétique* 12 (1972), 486–94; ‘Artaud, Bataille, et le Matérialisme Dialectique’, *SubStance* 2:5/6, (1972–73), 207–225; ‘The Game of the Name’, *Diacritics*, 3:2 (1973), 2–9; ‘Argo-Notes: Roland Barthes Textual Trip’, *boundary 2* 2:3 (1974), 562–572; ‘Sade Incesticide’, *Literature* 30 (1978), 67–78; ‘Proust polymorphe’, *Poétique* 42 (1980), 170–176.

9. The journal continued into the 1980s with ‘Autonomia’ and ‘Loving Boys’ (1980); ‘Polysexuality’ (1981); ‘The German Issue’ (1982); ‘Oasis: Fourth World’ (1984).

10. I am unsure whether this was ever completed, but excerpts appear across a couple of issues. See ‘The Fiction of Analysis’, *Semiotext(e)* 2:3 (1977), 172–189; and ‘The Dance of Signs’, *Semiotext(e)* 3:1 (1978), 54–67.

11. Departing from Deleuze-Guattari’s remark that, ‘Never was Freud more adventurous than in *Gratidia*’, he develops the image of ‘a Freud who is fairly unexpected inasmuch as he is made in their image: bearded socio-libidinal philosopher, hirsute schizo-revolutionary militant merrily liberating-hallucinating continents and cultures.’ ‘The Fiction of Analysis’, 173.

12. ‘The Dance of Signs’, 58.

13. *Ibid.*, 188.

14. This conversation with Smith echoes through the later milestones of *Semiotext(e)*, providing the title to the 2002 anthology *Hatred of Capitalism* – Smith’s alternative proposal for the title of *Semiotext(e)* journal – and reproduced as a vinyl 7-inch picture disk as part of the featuring of *Semiotext(e)* at the Whitney Biennale in 2014.

15. ‘Interview with Sylvère Lotringer’, *Log* 15 (2002), <https://physicsroom.org.nz/archive/log/archive/15/lotringer/>.

16. The project was part of a series of events organised by Katherine Waugh (who co-produced the film) and a collaboration with three locally-based artist/filmmakers, Tom Flanagan, Maximilian Le Cain and Vivienne Dick. Artaud was played by Jeremy Hardingham. (I was fortunate to join for the trip – Sylvère had invited me along as an additional camera).

17. ‘The Making Of A Monster: Summertime For Hitler & Conversation With Cult German Actress Lotti Huber (Berlin, July 20, 1985)’, *Pataphysics Magazine* (2006), 113.

18. ‘Shooting Death’ outline document, ‘Sylvère Lotringer Papers and Semiotext(e) Archive, 1960–2004 (Bulk 1973–2000)’, Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU.

19. ‘The Art of Evil’, *FAT Magazine* 1:1 (2004), <https://www.thing.net/~fat/vol1no1/sylvere.htm>.

20. ‘Anthropology of Unhappiness’, unpublished manuscript, Fales Library and Special Collections, NYU; ‘The Person Who Tortures Is Me: Violence and the Sacred in the Work of Marguerite Duras’, *Paroles gelées* 18:2 (2000); *The Miserables* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2014).

21. Brigitte Engler, in ‘In Memoriam: A Tribute to Sylvère Lotringer’, ed. Donatien Grau, *The Brooklyn Rail* (March 2022).

22. Two book-length interviews have recently been published: *I Was More American than the Americans: Sylvère Lotringer in conversation with Donatien Grau* (Zürich: diaphenes, 2021); *Ce que Sylvère Lotringer n’écrivait pas*, ed. François Aubart and François Piron (Paris: Paraguay Press, 2022). See also the multi-part interview by Jonathan Thomas, <https://caligariypress.com/Part-1>.