

Nothing *dulce* or *decorum* about it

Tangents x SYB: Artists & Writers in Dialogue

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All roads lead to Beetsterzwaag in misty Fryslân, on a December afternoon. From all parts of the world (but mostly funnelled through Amsterdam) these young artists have congregated and put their work on show in a crumbling house. The artists' topics are as wide-ranging as their roots. Works about violence, murder, genocide are joined by works about etymology and having a cheeky laugh at an airport. Typing away next to a video documenting a goose's stomach being sliced open (not as gory as you might expect, much more grassy), this young writer feels the exhibition is hard to summarize.

What do these artists have in common? They are all based in the Netherlands, and I suppose that makes them part of the Dutch art scene. What do they have to say for themselves? Ahmad Mallah shares with us a sentence meaningful in relation to their work: *'I wish everything was different'*. Their work is about Syria, and Palestine, and confronting yourself with images of the terrible everyday goings-on over there. I agree. I wish things were different too. Ahmed's paintings are soft and obscured. Images of people half-obscured behind plants and flowers, airbrushed beyond recognition. A poppy, an olive branch. Yes, the work is about the ongoing genocide in Gaza, but there is also a portrait of Assad there, because evil is not concentrated in one place alone, and this artist has been personally affected for a long time by many different powerful people's decisions. Karin Itturalde Nuremberg makes a daring approach at Schiphol airport, asking border security staff if they can have some stamps on a napkin, the ones that are usually placed in a passport. The request is met with suspicion, as has every behavior at the airport since 9/11. When my parents sometimes talk about how airports were before, I think of L.P. Hartley: *'The past is a foreign country: they do things differently over there.'* Cecilie Fang's work displays salty water in a basin, though by the time I got here, there was no longer any water to be seen, only dry, crystallized salt. *Dry. Don't you know water isn't wet?* Their work is about how materials can change over the course of an exhibition, and how words have changed throughout history. Roman soldiers got paid in salt for their killings and rapings and pillagings all over Europe. Tony Soprano says in the first episode of *The Sopranos*: *'It's good to be in on something from the ground floor. I came in too late for that, I know. But lately I'm getting the feeling that I came in at the end.'*

The end of lucrative organized crime for Italians, the end of killings and rapings for pay, because all the CCTV just makes it too difficult for the Cosa Nostra to keep going. Of course, there is still lots of opportunity for aspiring salaried murderers, as Okkie Poortvliet informs us that there are 1.5 million animals killed in the Dutch food and science industry every single day. Their work is a documentary about people who kill animals, and their reasons for doing it. The work does not seem to feature any psychopaths, and in fact the most beloved character (who I learned the artist will be meeting again tomorrow for some goose-shooting) is a fowl (not foul) hunter and a cow farmer. Hence the video of the goose's grassy innards. The projected video is obscured by a cow's silhouette painted in red in the centre of the wall. The footage is filtered through this red, so we cannot distinguish much blood or gore. This obscuring happens too in the work of Charlène Dannancier, who made installations about the violence, femicide, assault and harassment the modern woman faces every day. There is no visible blood in the work, no graphic image, no nudity and no pornography because the work may be about violence but it is not about giving you more of it to jerk off to, instead showing you resistance thereagainst.

By now you've probably noticed that the common thread for me today was violence. It's on my mind a lot these days. Killing animals, murdering people. The other day my mom told me she drove by one of those trucks full of pigs, and that she thought to herself that while their suffering should be limited and their end should be humane, she is ultimately fine with the animals dying and us humans eating them, because it is natural. She has lately been hanging out with too many people in the military, and the book she laid down on the piano with the title *'Those who want peace must prepare for war'* frightens me. Who are *those* that want peace and who are *those* preparing for war? By train station Arnhem Centraal, on my way to my in-office-chair printing house job, I see young boys in tracksuits with camo print bags, saluting officers in camo uniforms. I want to yell at them; how stupid can you be? What are you imagining you'll find on that battlefield? Don't you know there is nothing *dulce* or *decorum* about dying for your country? Can we be sure it is peace those kids are preparing for, and not just war? Perhaps they're not looking for ardent glory. Maybe they have accepted that killings happen every day and that such violence is necessary to uphold the system we live in of meat-eating and the military-industrial complex and *dreams of eternal economic growth* and they feel they are taking up their natural role in this day and age as drone fodder. Maybe I am the naïve one, and the hypocritical one at that, because I have barely done anything to overthrow The System and when we have lunch at the printing house I often put salami on my *bolletje*. I haven't offloaded my shares in the suffering of the world and everyone in it, and I don't know how I'd be able to live, truly not contributing to it, being who I am, living where I do. Does the fact that I am more disgusted with myself about this fact, more torn up about it, change anything about all the violence in the world and my responsibility for it?

"I got the shotgun. You got the briefcase. It's all in the game though, right?"

— Omar Little, *The Wire*

This year I read Sartre's *Pathways to Freedom* trilogy. It is about many characters and their reaction to the looming Second World War, though they weren't calling it that yet. In the last book, the final chapter, we follow a soldier who is secretly communist and planning to turn the other inmates into comrades, while the uncertainty of the future bites away at his convictions. The chapter is tiresome. We already know how the war ended, when it ended. But those POWs did not, and every second of every day they had to cope with this lack of clarity. It is galling how they go back and forth with rumors and whispers they hear about when the Germans are coming, what they are planning, when they will be allowed to go home again. Silly them, didn't they take history class? The war ends May 1945, and most of them will be dead before then.

Every day I ask when the war in Ukraine and the genocide in Gaza will end, when an assassination plot against Putin and Netanyahu will succeed, when something or someone will actually, permanently and irreversibly change our world and end the horrible terrible everything that happens every day, everywhere. Are those who prepare for war ready not to wage it if some such thing did happen? Or will they be unable to let all that careful planning, all those bombs they've been producing, go to waste?

"The impossible is the least that one can demand."

— James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*

I go in maddening circles and achieve, change, nothing by it. But when I see these paintings and documentaries in this crumbling house in Fryslân I think at least some people are thinking about these things, too.

Oant sjen!

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