

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. Here, five young artists have congregated 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 a sentence meaningful in relation to their work: 'I wish everything was different'. Mallah's work, a series of paintings across a wall 5 meters long and tall as a person depicting Syria and Palestine, is a confrontation with images of the terrible everyday violence, genocide, shameless murder over there. Ahmed's works are soft and obscured. Images of people half-hidden 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 – because evil is not concentrated in one place alone, and this artist has been personally affected for a long time by this evil. I agree with Ahmad. I wish things were different too. I have been seeing images of violence 'over there' for a long time. Have been complicit, maybe, have been paying taxes. Years ago at a house party I asked an international where he was from, because I am a polite conversationalist like that. Iran, he said, and so I shared I had recently seen an Iranian movie, *There is no evil*. "About the death penalty, how people over there have to execute others as part of military service, or they won't get a passport." I talked about the plot, five short stories, one of them about a soldier who runs away because he cannot find it in him to kill another person. The guy from Iran says, "Yes, that's why I ran away!" Here I am, blabbing on about a movie, saying it was well-paced and had beautiful cinematography, when that movie is this guy's life. I did not dare ask whether I had offended him or misstepped. Maybe he was glad someone had an idea of what he had gone through. We didn't further discuss the matter. I directed him to someone I knew had ketamine when the guy said he'd always wanted to try the drug. My good deed for the night. I wish everything was different.

Karin Itturalde Nuremberg makes a daring approach at Schiphol airport, convincing border security staff if to travel-stamp a napkin alongside the passport page. The request is met with suspicion, as has every behavior at the airport since 9/11. When my parents sometimes talk about what airports were like before, I think of L.P. Hartley: 'The past is a foreign country: they do things differently over there.' Cecillie Fang's work displays salty water in a basin, though by the time I visited, there was no longer any water to be seen, only dry, crystallized salt. *Dry. Don't you know water isn't wet?* Fang's 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. Poortvliet's work is a documentary about people who kill animals, and their reasons for doing it, shown on a big wall in the bar of Kunsthuis SYB where a *bitterbal* or two may be consumed. 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 I mentioned earlier, of the goose's grassy innards. The video projection 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 the blood and gore very well.

There is a lot of violence in this exhibition today. Implied, explored, obscured. 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*

Ahmad writes on artahmadmallah.com that their paintings "creat[e] a space where the unbearable can be held in quiet contemplation. The series moves between reality and dream, searching for a visual language that captures the tenderness, fragility, and endurance of the human condition."

That they do. My visit to Kunsthuis SYB, my writing this text, has been an effort in quiet contemplation on contradiction and responsibility. I ponder how artists condense so many feelings into objects like paintings or videos, and manage to do it in observation, not judging. Ahmad paints a beautiful portrait of Assad. Poortvliet interviews animal-killers and goes on hunting trips with them. Why? "Tenderness, fragility and the endurance of the human condition." Attempting to understand those around us, to keep looking them in the eye, making life a little more bearable, comprehensible.

Every day I wonder 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? Are they really preparing for the impossible: peace?

"The impossible is the least that one can demand."
— James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*

I'm afraid they're not. I'm afraid we're stuck with this violence. I'm afraid that nobody cares. But when I see these paintings and documentaries in this crumbling house in Fryslân I think I care, and other people do too.

Oant sjen!

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