

Guilty Landscapes

Episode 3: Homs

People sometimes ask me about the how and why of a work. But why to talk when my work is merely talking in images? Why to clear up when ambiguity is in the core of the work. I have decided to keep my mouth shut more often and to share texts that have inspired me in the creative process or that were written by journalists and writers after they visited the work. It is not to be read as an explanation but as thoughts existing at the periphery of the work.

For *Guilty Landscapes*, I invite you to read a text written by Dutch journalist and writer Dirk Vis.

Dries Verhoeven

SHARING THE PAIN OF AVATARS – Dirk Vis

Driving through North Africa on a road known for its robbers I was anxious about driving over a pothole, breaking the car's axle, that our passports would be stolen and my girlfriend raped, but nothing happened and I felt relieved when we drove back into Europe a week later. Relief, yes, but I also had the feeling we had stepped into a bell jar. At home in Amsterdam I bought a key but did not have it cut. A blank key was to serve as a reminder of how our lives are shielded from the dangers threatening most people in the world. You could imagine all kinds of reasons why a key would serve this purpose, a key that did not fit in any door mounted in any wall, but it was simply a coincidence that I was in the key shop when I thought of wanting a memento.

Imagine an invisible wall, with everyone who has a credit card and wireless internet and you and me on the one side. On the other side are the refugees, the children in sweatshops and all the people living in slums without a sewage system. Badr is also on the other side, a dentist from Damascus and a friend's uncle. I met him on a trip through Syria a year before the civil war broke out and we have communicated through Facebook since then. I ask him how it's going.

"Terrible."

Badr asks how I am doing. Good.

Straight after seeing the piece *Guilty Landscapes* by Dries Verhoeven I stood outside again, I walked through the shopping street and that which I first characterised as a bell jar came over me now like an invisible wall; invisible yet more impenetrable than the stone boundary between Israel and the West Bank and as wide as the distance from Badr's computer in Damascus all the way to mine. This wall, like a metaphysical membrane, separates the two sides. The organically formed, imaginary wall runs past the mass-produced objects in the shop windows, the backpacks of the passers-by and the face cream of the women sitting on the terraces. We have brought that dividing wall into our homes through our laptops, tablets and devices; it runs parallel to all our screens distorting, branching off and stretching as we move from one place to another. The border between you, me and everyone else is being redefined at every moment. You can communicate with someone from Syria, China or Japan wherever, whenever you want to. New forms of mass communication allow us not only to see others' misery, we can now also interact directly with the victims. The representations of people who are suffering, the profile pages, the avatars, they talk, they have irrevocably started moving and really look like the people behind them, yet they are still effigies, shadows and reflections that are all part of a false reality.

Badr is typing a message...

Facebooking with a victim of the conflict in Syria feels like something positive, as an action that counts, but that is simply not true. Susan Sontag wrote that the shock, the repugnance and the compassion you feel the first time you see a photo of someone posing proudly with five severed heads becomes dulled. It is not only dulled because you see these images multiple times, but mainly because no action arises from it. Feeling and expressing empathy by changing your profile photo by adding a transparent flag for example strongly suggests that you are doing something about the pain others feel and that as a privileged internetter you are actually doing some good for the distant victims, but it is all pretence. The increased interactivity has an illusionary effect as much as it deadens, because there are still no actual consequences. With all the digital resources we have for making contact, we are more alone than ever. The media encourages us to fear each other, to see public life as dangerous and troublesome, to communicate from confined spaces and to consume information through digital channels and not through and with each other. While we are connected we are becoming more isolated.

In an era of globalisation and mass communication, physical boundaries are becoming increasingly prominent and those walls obstruct migration streams but they do not stop them. More importantly the physical walls form a mental shield: they legitimise inequality. Inequality that is expressed to a lesser extent through reinforced concrete and barbed wire and more through political treaties, protocols and legislation – formed

by manifestations of public opinion – that effectively split the world in two. The immaterial wall exists in how we talk, tweet and text, in short, in the collective imagination. Its most important building blocks are the treaties that are entered into, the agreements that are made. Yet privatisation and individualisation have diminished public power. Everyone posts their own opinions, photos and thoughts on their timeline – which used to be called a ‘wall’ – yet they seldom form a collective and have few implications. Imagination has generally become a private matter; and therefore, innocuous.

I want a large wooden hammer, just like the one the god Thor had, a supernatural sledgehammer that can smash all the invisible dividing walls into smithereens. There is of course no ready-made solution, but the membrane that splits the world doesn’t exist either. That is the paradox. It does not have to be there. If you never have to experience what it means to stand on the other side, it is easy to desire a real wall with watch-towers. Things that enable you to feel the usually invisible partition force you to relate to the other side. Making the invisible wall tangible is a precondition to breaking through it. And that is what journalists do when they list the facts. And what the arts can do. I have never experienced the two sides of that wall better than right after seeing *Guilty Landscapes*. It seems improbable and it will perhaps not happen in my lifetime, but the roles could very easily be turned. We are exactly the same as those on the other side, the struggle for life and death plays out here too. The two sides keep each other going, even if we readily forget that.

Why make do with a passive role and with staring at screens and commenting, with the redefinition of citizens as consumers, with the shift from public actions to private Facebook posts? I want to invite Badr to come to Amsterdam and check mine and my friends’ teeth. I want to create a manifesto with Vietnamese factory workers, that they can hang up in the factory and I in the shopping centre, with the first line being: “For every digital action we create one act in the real world.”

Dirk Vis is a writer, contributing editor of Dutch literary magazine De Gids and tutor at the Royal Academy of Art in The Hague. Vis has published various essays, stories and e-poems in publications including De Groene Amsterdammer and De Correspondent. See: dirkvis.net

Further reading:

Regarding the Pain of Others (2003), Susan Sontag

A Paradise Built in Hell (2010), Rebecca Solnit

Signs & Wonders (2003), Marina Warner

<http://decorrespondent.nl/dickwittenberg>, Dick Wittenberg

Boulevard Theatre Festival presents the third episode of *Guilty Landscapes*. This episode is also part of Nuit Blanche in Brussels on 1 October. The fourth episode can be seen in MU Eindhoven during the Dutch Design Week (22 - 30 October).

concept Dries Verhoeven **production** Studio Dries Verhoeven **photography** Kevin McElvaney
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