Jan Rosseel: Back-up

MEMORY & PSYCHE
MUSEUM DR. GUISLAIN

Essay (EN) Part 2/3

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Ghent (BE)

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FOREWORD

The documentary museum is dead. The art museum lives on. This may be an overly simplified interpretation of the analysis of the museum by art critic Boris Groys. However, it is an interesting train of thought that challenges us to take the road less travelled. What if an artist were to examine both documentary museums and art museums on the basis of something that unites them, namely memory?

Jan Rosseel's work focuses on traumatic events, on what is remembered (or not quite remembered) and on what is forgotten (or not quite forgotten). The presentation of his work is the crystallization of a long thought process, which is subject to change. Rosseel connects the three presentation venues with each other by selecting topics like the media, the psyche and politics, which serve as the medium for an artistic practice

of not-quite-forgetting. On the on hand, the fact that the Dr. Guislain Museum becomes the medium for the psyche speaks for itself. On the other hand, it does not. The problem starts with the meaning of the word 'psyche.' Does this mean the mind or the soul? Are we talking about things that can be rationalised or the metaphysical?

Brains, neurons, memory, recollection, forgetting, repressing... These words have a specific meaning in a specific context. In a museum about the history of psychiatry the meaning often becomes charged. The Dr. Guislain Museum is a place where stories are depicted and nuanced. As a result, the present is also called into question. The museum is not a memorial in the strictest sense. However, the history of psychiatry cannot be forgotten or repressed. Therefore, the museum seizes every opportunity to see this history translated in the work of contemporary artists. For a number of years, we have been making the museum's only 'white cube' available to artists who clearly refer to the rich archives on the history of psychiatry. The Dr. Guislain Museum has a great affinity for Rosseel's unpredictable working methods. As a place of memory, the meaning of any object can be transformed in an instant. With 'Back-up', Jan Rosseel focuses on that transformed memory of the half-forgotten and the half-remembered.

Bart Marius
Scientific collaborator
– Museum Dr. Guislain

Essay curator Joram Kraaijeveld

MEDITATIONS ON MEMORIES OF TERRORISM

In the run-up to the exhibition by Jan Rosseel in the Dr. Guislain Museum, I travelled from Amsterdam to Brussels and Ghent by train on several occasions. The long, seated journey was interrupted when I changed trains at Rotterdam and Antwerp. When the international train stopped at Rotterdam, two police officers were standing on the platform. At the train station in Antwerp soldiers were patrolling the various floors of the building in teams of two. The fact that the train stations are being monitored by these law enforcement officers is a counter-terrorism measure. The paradox of these visible measures is that I do not feel safer. On the contrary, I am reminded of previous terrorist attacks.

Counter-terrorism

In her book *Theater van de angst* ('Theatre of fear'), the historian and terrorism expert Beatrice de Graaf asserts that counter-terrorism measures strike a precarious balance between increasing and reducing the incidence of terrorism and the perceived threat. Her analysis of various measures during the 1970s in Germany, the Netherlands, Italy and the United States made it clear to her that counter-terrorism measures may have a contradictory influence on the actual terrorist threat. The way in which these measures are presented by the public and by terrorists also influences the incidence of radical violence.[1] In this respect, De Graaf indicates that social relationships can sometimes undergo far-reaching changes due to the reality depicted by the government.

War on terror

Perhaps the most disputed vision of reality in a government policy statement is the speech given by George W. Bush on 20 September 2001. Just over a week after the attacks on the Twin Towers, the American president did not just hold Al-Qaeda responsible but he also referred to an international network of thousands of fighters in over sixty countries. The centre of this network was in Afghanistan, which was ruled by the Taliban. The targets of this network were the

United States and the West and the attacks had marked the start of the *War on Freedom*. With this vision of reality in mind, Bush declared the *War on Terror* and promised the American people that this war would only end once all terrorist organisations with a global network had been defeated. Critics stated that by making this declaration, Bush was tarring all international terrorist organisations with the same brush. The contradictory result of his speech was that terrorist organisations started to collaborate.

De-escalation

The Dutch government's policy in the 1970s represents a completely different approach to counter-terrorism. Between 1969 and 1978 various attacks and hostage-takings were carried out by South Moluccan youth, members of the Red Youth and Palestinian commandos. In 1973 Prime Minister Biesheuvel presented the first Dutch counter-terrorism strategy to the House of Representatives. It included setting up a specialised police unit that could prevent or neutralise terrorist acts. These measures mainly focused on detection and law enforcement and did not examine ideological motives. The public was not mobilised and there was hardly any public discussion. The counter-terrorist policy was designed and implemented behind the

scenes and focused on de-escalation. The Dutch government requested national daily newspapers to pay as little attention as possible to the background of terrorist groups. For this reason, De Graaf states that the public and the political world did not merge the individual terrorist attacks in the Netherlands around 1970 into an all-encompassing, generalised threat.[2]

Media revolution

Since the development of social media platforms, it is impossible for governments to control the public's view of terrorism. In today's networked, globalised and media-driven society, the communication channels are so accessible that everyone can keep up to date in real time and they can contribute to the dissemination of images, sounds and opinions. De Graaf cites the example of the press conference held by the Dutch Minister of Justice Piet Hein Donner on the evening of 2 November 2004. Between the time of this government declaration and the murder of film-maker Theo van Gogh that morning, there was enough time for the perception to arise in the public discussion that the counter-terrorism services had failed to prevent this ideologically motivated murder.

Censorship

Nowadays, images of terrorist attacks are disseminated so quickly that the level of volume in the *theatre of fear* has increased. This raises the question whether de-escalation is still possible. According to Jérôme Fenoglio, editor-in-chief of the French newspaper *Le Monde*, it is increasingly difficult to combat the effects of terrorism in today's media landscape, which has been reshaped by the digital revolution. For this reason, he stated in July 2016 that his newspaper would no longer publish images of terrorism in order to prevent posthumous glorification. He also stated that public debate was necessary to identify ways to defeat terrorism without harming our free societies.[3] This self-imposed censorship is a way of resisting the hate strategy. However, it is also a form of looking the other way. Furthermore, images of terrorism will be disseminated via open channels. For example, the media campaigns by IS are difficult to counteract.

Processing trauma

So how should we deal with images of terrorism that might contribute to an all-encompassing, generalised threat? In his book *Als mijn geheugen me niet bedriegt* ('If memory serves'), the psychologist Douwe Draaisma discusses a number of

psychological techniques for dealing with painful memories. Since the 1980s the intervention technique known as debriefing has been used in the aftermath of traumatic events. After 9/11 around two thousand psychologists travelled to New York to help reduce the incidence of post-traumatic stress disorder by giving victims the opportunity to process their repressed stress shortly after the attacks. This technique leaves the memories of a traumatic event intact but reduces the psychological stress associated with the trauma. With regard to images of terrorism, these intervention techniques would evoke the images but reduce the emotional response to them.

Against forgetting

Draaisma also discussed other psychological interventions that focus on forgetting a traumatic event. A 'forgetting pill' could manipulate a disturbing memory and make it dissapear because 'erasing a memory is a biochemical process.'[4] The contradictory thing about erasing a traumatic memory is that it might be even more difficult to deal with having a gap in one's memory. Draaisma concludes his argument by stating that memories are fused with other memories, connected to images, sounds and smells. They are also interwoven in the stories we tell about ourselves. Memories form an organic whole that we use to understand ourselves.

Meditations

It seems there is no clear answer about how best to deal with images of terrorism that evoke painful memories. In this case, there seems to be a delicate balance between increasing and decreasing the trauma. However, according to Draaisma, it is important that the story we tell to understand ourselves be as complete as possible. In line with this, the psychologists Paul Verhaeghe and Dirk De Wachter state that it is important not to view terrorist attacks as isolated incidents.[5] They connect the recent attacks in Europe with the lies which Bush and Blair told about Iraq and even the Sykes-Picot Convention from 1916, under which the English and the French divided the Middle East between them. Jan Rosseel's exhibition invites visitors to connect various images of terrorism and to see things in the context of a greater history. Looking the other way is not an option. We need to gaze at the images and ponder on them.

NOTES

1 Beatrice de Graaf, *Theater van de angst*. Amsterdam: Boom, 2010. p. 135.
2 Beatrice de Graaf, *Theater van de angst*. Amsterdam: Boom, 2010. p. 45.
3 Jérôme Fenoglio, *'Résister à la stratégie de la haine'* in Le Monde, 27 July 2016.
4 Douwe Draaisma, *Als mijn geheugen me niet bedriegt*. Groningen: Historische Uitgeverij, 2016. p. 128.
5 Yves Desmet, 'Hoe ziek is België? Humo sprak met psychiater Dirk De Wachter & psychoanalyticus Paul Verhaeghe' in *HUMO*, 1 August 2016.

Jan Rosseel (1979) studied documentary photography at the Royal Academy of Art The Hague, photo journalism at the Danish School of Media and Journalism in Aarhus and Chinese Languages and Culture at Leiden University and Shandong University. He received various prizes and nominations for his first project *Belgian Autumn. A confabulated History* including the Prix Pictet, the Dutch Doc Photo Award and Foam Magazine Talent 2014. In 2015, he was the first Artist in Residence at the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Studies to receive a grant which he used to conduct research into the relationship between images and memory.

His work has been published by, among others, the NY Times, Huffington Post, De Standaard, de Volkskrant and Vrij Nederland. Rosseel has exhibited at FOAM Amsterdam, Photoville NY, RPS Gallery in Tokyo, 10b Gallery in Rome, FoMu Fotomuseum Antwerpen and the Nederlands Fotomuseum Rotterdam. Jan Rosseel is represented by The Ravestijn Gallery Amsterdam.

Joram Kraaijeveld (1984) is the guest curator for *Jan Rosseel: Back-up*. Kraaijeveld is a curator, lecturer and author. Kraaijeveld is Content Director at Platform BK. He studied fine art at the AKV | St. Joost in Breda and Philosophy and Cultural Analysis at the University of Amsterdam. In 2016 he was the curator-in-residence at Schloss Ringenberg. He has previously worked as an assistant curator at the Stedelijk Museum Bureau Amsterdam where he curated exhibits including *Antonis Pittas – hold on, Ruti Sela, Alexandra Navratil – This Formless Thing* and *Uli Westphal – Transplantation*. Kraaijeveld worked for the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven as a guest curator and researcher where he put together the exhibition *The View from Here*. He teaches art theory at the Gerrit Rietveld Academie in Amsterdam. He is also a member of the board of the Frankendael Foundation in Amsterdam. His articles have been published in, among other publications, Metropolis M, Kunstbeeld and Kunstlicht.

Drieluik

Jan Rosseel: Back-up is a co-production of Flemish Arts Centre De Brakke Grond, Stroom Den Haag and Museum Dr. Guislain. An exceptional exhibition process, involving Jan Rosseel creating new work which he then develops further over a period of a year and a half and then presents at three successive exhibitions, each one with a different focus:

De Brakke Grond, Amsterdam
10 Dec 2016 until 29 Jan 2017
Focus – Media

Museum Dr. Guislain, Gent
11 Mar 2017 until 23 May 2017
Focus – Psyche

Stroom Den Haag:
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Focus – Politics

Co-production

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