

ARENA AND AGORA
A Diary About Art, Politics And Theatre

Michiel Westbeek

Foreword

The pages you are about to read were written by a young artist in January - April 2016. These were troubled times: the Second Interbellum was coming to an end and the First European Union was crumbling in the aftermath of the 2008 credit crisis. Refugees were pouring into Europe and the incompetent leadership of the time could not find a way to keep the situation contained. A wave of radical Islamic terror attacks on an unprecedented scale hit Paris, Brussels and, in 2017, Wijk bij Duurstede. President Putin (Russia) and Erdogan (Turkey) would in a few years establish their respective dictatorships. In France, Belgium, Germany, Austria, The Netherlands and many other countries in Europe neo-fascist parties would rise to power in the years following the writing of this document, just as president Trump (at this point still at least trying to appear outwardly as a democratic leader) in the United States. Many young artists were struggling with the question that is also at the heart of this diary: how, given the many challenges of the age, could they engage themselves and their audience politically through their work?

At the beginning of this diary, we find the young artist in his studio, where he describes his struggle with painting as an artistic and political medium. We find out that he is also a practising writer, and that he has the opportunity to write a libretto for an opera about German playwright and poet Bertolt Brecht. From the literary research for this libretto, the young artist draws new inspiration for his (visual) work. At the same time, he wonders what it is that he intuitively recognises in theatrical practices and forms that makes them, to his mind, a particularly well-equipped medium for political engagement. The young artist builds a theoretical frame of reference, in which he attempts to connect Sartre's existentialist thinking to Noam Chomsky's explanation of anarchism, to Brechtian theory and to the philosophy of theatre of Alain Badiou, which he uses as stepping stones towards formulating his own stance. By analysing his own work and that of artists he relates to (Bertolt Brecht and Christoph Schlingensiefel among others) in the end the young artist finds an answer to his question in the image of the arena and the agora: the spectacle on the one hand, and the political discussion on the other, which can be united in the theatrical experience.

This diary is a record of the journey made by the young artist. A journey that led him from a lot of questions to at least some answers, which is already a rare thing in life and art, and we slowly see a weight falling off his shoulders. We have no way of telling what happened to him after the writing of these pages.

Prof. Katrin Fierling
University of Halle, June 2016

15 January

I have been painting excessively for the past six weeks and have ended up more frustrated than I began. I am not sure that I am doing the right thing. I can't think straight. I feel the eyes of the institute upon me, and they seem to look at me as the problem child. Everybody else has some vague idea of the things they want to graduate with. They seem to have an idea of what they mean when they speak of their 'research'. To me, the word itself is becoming muddy. It is raining outside. The term research seems muddy to me, because people around me use it all the time, but never really clarify what they mean by it. For some artists, it seems to be a proper scientific or philosophical research, that guides a more intuitive process of making this research visual. For a lot of painters however, it seems to be more a trying out of certain visual elements on a canvas until something sticks. Can we use one and the same word for those two things? Is it really meaningful to do so, as to open our eyes to the varying shades of meaning a word like research can take, and possibly subliminally has? Or is it merely a convention that everybody should speak of their work in these terms? I need a fucking break.

18 January

I work during the day at a publishing house, and the evenings I spend in the studio. This rhythm I like; at the end of the workday I am tired, yes, but I still really want to go to the studio. However, what I don't like about going to the studio, is painting. At least at the moment. It seems that this whole year I started working with the question: 'What shall I paint?' I am not sure I should take the medium as a given so much. My head is very full.

Later: I decided to quit for the day, since I was becoming frustrated again. It all seems so random. I started watching documentaries on Youtube again. I am addicted to art documentaries. I saw stuff about Lucian Freud (two separate films), David Hockney (three), Oskar Kokoschka (two shorter ones), Egon Schiele (again two) and Degenerate Art in general. I feel drawn to the latter three. The interbellum is such an interesting time. It seems to be one of those rare crossroads in time where seeing, feeling and thinking are all important in the making of art. I think that is the direction I should be heading.



Scene from Het Oog Van Leonardo, by Egon Kracht and The Troupe

19 January

Watched a documentary about Bertolt Brecht. It was really interesting, although I didn't understand all of it, because it was in German. Brecht seems like a really fascinating character. He is socially conscious but quite antisocial. He is serious and

witty at the same time. And I gather he really made theatre modern, with abstract scenery and stuff. I like the fact that his theatre is political. That's what I have been struggling with in painting; how to engage with the current political situation through an image? In Brecht I seem to recognise a different way of treating these themes.

Later: I got drunk and texted the composer Egon Kracht that we should write a show about Brecht. I worked with him and his company The Troupe on a chamber opera about Da Vinci, which was pretty well-received (NRC *** Volkskrant **** and De Stentor *****). He's been asking me to come up with a new idea for a libretto. Maybe this is the one? I can't really put my finger on it. It's just a drunken hunch.

20 January

Received a text back from Egon. He thinks it's a funny idea. I should write a proposal. Drunken hunches are the best!

24 January

Haven't been in the studio these past days. After work I've been binge-watching documentaries and movies again. All about Brecht or theatre, or inspired by him (like *Dogville* by Lars von Trier). And I watched *Baal* in an adaptation by David Bowie, which I didn't like, because it was so remote from me as a viewer that it stopped being stimulating. To be honest; it kind of felt up its own ass, but that might be a prejudice I have against Bowie, who is now once again extremely popular due to his death – anyway, he played the young poet Baal not in an unconvincing way, but in an '*unengaging*' way. I also saw *Life of Galileo* in a movie adaptation. I had to watch it twice; I didn't get it the first time. At some point someone says to Galileo: 'Damned the country that has no heroes,' and Galileo replies: 'No. Damned the country that needs heroes.' I think that is very important to understanding the story: society should be organised in a way that needs no heroes to change it, or stand up for it. I found it an inspiring, wonderfully contrarian thought.

And I saw the black-and-white-film of the *Threepenny Opera* which I loved, and a nice one-hour documentary about a performance of *Mutter Courage und Ihre Kinder*, done by the National Theatre. It is at once a spectacle and funny, and a serious piece that appeals to our reason. It reminds me a bit of the distinction between the Dionysian (disorderly, contradictory, dark, spectacle and sacrifice) and the Appolonian (reasonable, clear, light, philosophical). Later: wrote the proposal and e-mailed it to Egon.

25 January

Got a text back from Egon in the morning! He is very enthusiastic and inspired about the whole thing. I am going to write a new show! On my own this time! This is seriously the biggest thing that has happened to me as a writer and an artist.

26 January

I am kind of stuck with my thesis. I have been reading a lot of Sartre, who is important to me. What I like about his thinking is that, because it is based on phenomenology, one can relate it to personal experience (the observation of phenomena). I don't have the feeling that there is an essence of me hidden somewhere inside. Being diagnosed as manic depressive, and later receiving medication for that, has changed me incredibly. I always was a fearful person, moody, very difficult for myself and others, and I have turned into the opposite. I have the feeling that I am only just now getting to know myself: my negative assumptions about my character are being challenged by my behaviour: I have stopped acting as a fearful and sombre person, so apparently those things, which made up about 90% of me in the past, have stopped belonging to my essence. This is very close to Sartre's theory, which states that one can only get to know oneself through one's actions. Whatever you think or say you are is irrelevant if your actions don't merit it. I have been reading and thinking a lot about these themes, but I don't want to limit my thesis research to them. I also want to talk about art and politics, and I don't know yet how to combine these things. For now I will just keep writing in my diary.

1 February

We're going to Berlin with the Frank Mohr Institute. Good! I really need to get out of here for a few days. I'll see to which extent I'll stick to the program. I feel like wandering through the city alone. And I want to visit some bookstores (I can pick up some works by Brecht, too) and café's so I can have some time and space to think. It will be so good to be away for a few days.

8 February

Morning: We got back from Berlin. I managed to do everything I wanted to and more. Also went to the museum Hamburger Bahnhof, which showed a lot of contemporary work. Some nice drawings by Raymond Pettibon, and a video-installation by Paul McCarthy. It was interesting, although not much more.

I managed to pick up the *Ausgewählte Werke* of Brecht, and a large biography in English. Also I bought Christoph Schlingensiefel's memoirs *Ich weiß Ich War's*. I like Schlingensiefel a lot.

I've been working on an idea for a first-person narrative that I want to try out today. I don't really know what it should be for. Not for the theatre production, I think. It's going to be a separate thing. We'll see.

Later: I've written a first version. It's called *Hakim Of The Border*. It is sort of based on some Brechtian and some Sartrean ideas. At night I drank beer with fellow student and friend Jan van Egmond and talked about performances. He liked the text, and we explored some ideas he has for a performance with text. Maybe I can do something of that nature with the monologue?

9 February

Started reading the biography *Brecht – A literary life*. It's a 700-page doorstop. In fine print and a large format. In regular print it would probably be a thousand pages. But it is completely enthralling. Brecht was a preposterous child. Always bossy and selfish, and extremely childish and a mother's boy. I would have hated his guts.

Finished the second draft of *Hakim*.

Hakim Of The Border

(Walks into view.) I believe you have very strong ideas about me. This is fine. I don't judge you for judging me. I don't judge anybody. I am just doing my job. Before the war, I sold animal skins and leather belts. This is the cold part of the world, you see? People need their animal skins against the storms, and everybody needs leather belts. Nobody wants their pants to drop and show their poop. *(Laughs. Then looks sternly into the camera.)* But the war changed all that. People don't have money now for clothes. They wear their old clothes, it's all fine. But you know, people can always find money. That is what I say to myself. I say: Hakim, people can always find money. And you are a person too. So you have to find money for yourself. That is why I became a salesman. I walked with my momma all along the border when I was a child. Up and down, up and down. I know every fox hole up until the north. My mother used to give me a cent a week, because she was a smart woman. She knew the value of money. And every week she said: Hakim, here is your cent for the week. But you must spend it wisely. You cannot spend any money until you have found something wise to spend it on. This made me feel very important, and I knew that I would never spend this money on something stupid. So one time we came into a town, my mother asked: Hakim, what do you want to spend your money on? I saw some lovely toys in the shop window over there. Do you want to spend your money on toys? And I said nothing. Toys are not wise, I knew that. And then my momma said: Or do you want to spend it on candy maybe? I saw some lovely candy over there. And again, I said nothing, and after a few seconds, my mother would laugh and say to God: See, You have given me a wise child! He knows how to handle money. And I would get a kiss, and we would walk further. My mother was also a saleswoman, but times were rough then as they are now, and we lived from selling whatever we could buy in the first place. Sometimes we were hungry, but every week I got my cent. This made me feel very important.

So one day, we came to a village. And I had now saved up my cents and had a whole crown. And I see in the shop window an advertisement. I could buy two animal skins for the price of one. And one animal skin was one crown. So I bought the animal skins, and my mother, she said nothing. And we went to the next village, and there I sold the animal skins for a crown each. So now I had two crowns. I had saved up for the first crown for a hundred weeks, and now within one week I had made a hundred percent profit. This was when I knew I was a merchant. I was eight years old and I had two crowns. I believe my mother was very proud of me.

So I became a salesman in animal skins and leather belts. But, as I said, the war started and people did not want animal skins anymore. Well, they wanted animal skins, but they couldn't buy them. Times were looking very rough for Hakim then. It was now five years ago, and I had nothing to eat. Sadly one cannot eat animal skins, of which I still had plenty, and I only had use for one leather belt for my own person, and every week I made a new hole in this belt, each time a little further than the last.

One day, I see some people walking in my direction. They are a family. They look very scared and tired. They say: We came from the east. They say: Hakim, can't you help us? I say: Help you? What can I do? I am but a small merchant of animal skins and leather belts. What role of importance could I have for you? And they say to me: They told us you were born near the border. And I say: Yes, everybody knows that is true, for they call me Hakim Of The Border. They say: So you know the border like nobody else? I say: It's correct. I know every fox hole and guard post from here up until the north. Why only up until the north, they ask, and I say: because the north is another border. And I am Hakim Of The Border, not Hakim Of The Borders. *(Laughs. Then drops a silence.)* They don't laugh either. The war broke their funny bone, you see? They will laugh again. But not on this side of the border. So I say to them: You want to know how to get across the border? And they say: Yes Hakim, yes, please tell us how to get across the border. And I say: I cannot do that. So they say: we offer you money. Now, since I am a merchant, I like the sound of that. So I say: how much money do you offer? And they say: we can offer you fifty crowns. I think for a while and then I say: that is not enough. For me to tell you how to get across the border costs you two-hundred crowns. It is a secret. They say: No Hakim, no! We don't have so much money. So I say: there is another option, that is cheaper. So now they are very interested. I say: for one-hundred crowns I can take you across the border myself. I have my cart, and I have my animal skins. You two; the children, you can lie under the animal skins in my cart. And you, the adults, you can hang under my cart. I can hang you from the bottom of my cart using some of these fine leather belts. They are very good belts. They will hold your weight. So now they think, and they say: Hakim, but we only have one-hundred crowns. We cannot give you so much. Then we don't have anything left. But I know they will take the offer, so I say nothing. And they take the offer. You see, this was very smart of me. Because if I would have told them how to get across the border, they could have shared this knowledge with other people. And soon, everybody would know how to get across the border, and poor Hakim would be sitting here with his animal skins and leather belts. My mother taught me to be smart.

You see, this here is the east. *(Points left.)* In the east is the war. And over there is the west. *(Points right.)* In the west there is peace. And this is the border. *(Points across the ground.)* I was born near the border. And you see, the people in the west say that if they had been born in the east, they would be fleeing from the war now too. But let me tell you something else that is true; if the people who were born in the east, who are fleeing from the war, were born here, near the border, they would have done the same as me. That is to say, if they were smart, like me. And if I, Hakim Of The Border, would have been Hakim Of The West, I would not have wanted all these people from the east to come to the west either, like the people who live in the west now. But I am Hakim Of The Border, and I practice my trade and I don't judge.

I fulfil a need for these people, but I did not create it. In fact, if you ask me, I think no person can be illegal. I am sure you will agree. That is why I have no problem helping people across the border. People should be allowed at all times to cross all borders, that is what I believe. So therefore I have five carts now, which are all transporting people. I have people driving the carts. I pay them half a crown a day, which is very generous of me. They are only drivers. Everybody can drive a cart. They are not smart like me. I stopped driving the cart myself, because it is getting too dangerous. You see, it is really getting dangerous now to try and cross the border. And lots of people now come to me every day asking for help. So I had to raise my prices a bit. The war has been going on for five years now, and every year I raised the price with one-hundred crowns. So it now costs five-hundred crowns to cross. And I tell everyone that the secret to crossing the border now costs five thousand crowns, so I am sure I will take it to the grave. You know, the secret is very important. That is why people come to me. Because I have the secret. Everybody knows I have the secret. But seeing as you are not from here, I can tell it to you. It is very simple. *(Drops a silence.)* You see, the secret is to buy a cart and some animal skins and leather belts. It will only cost you one-hundred crowns. *(Walks away.)*

11 February

Finished the first song for the theatre production. It's about Brecht's oldest son, Frank.

Ballade van de eerstgeboren zoon

Het leven gaat soms over lijken
 En zou volkomen onterecht
 Een ware helsevaring blijken
 Voor Frank Walter Otto Brecht

Want de moeder die hem baarde
Heeft hem nooit geaccepteerd
Ongewenst kwam hij ter aarde
En werd weggeadopteerd

Het leed begon zich op te hopen
En het kreeg een nare geur
Frank liet zijn ontlasting lopen
Zijn gat was een mismaakte scheur

De wereld is vaak onrechtvaardig
En velen hebben het hier slecht
Maar wat was het lot onaardig
Voor Frank Walter Otto Brecht

Hij wou voor dokter gaan studeren
Maar was niet intelligent
Toen dat niet kon, wou hij acteren
Maar daarvoor had hij geen talent

Maar toen Hitler aan de macht kwam
Bleek Frank niet te ongezond
Voor een baan die onverwacht kwam:
Hij kon naar het Russisch front

Zijn bestaan bleek telkenmale
Weer een ongelijk gevecht
Er viel op aarde niets te halen
Voor Frank Walter Otto Brecht

En hij werd geraakt door scherven
Van een antitankgranaat
Met vierentwintig zou hij sterven
Vierentwintig jaar te laat

Ondanks dit alles bleef de dader
Zonder wroeging, zonder schroom:
Zijn hele leven heeft Franks vader
Doorgeneukt zonder condoom

Nog steeds wordt Bertolt Brecht gelezen
Maar nooit iemand die wat zegt
Over het gedoemde wezen
Zoon Frank Walter Otto Brecht

Wat over Frank Brecht staat geschreven
Is krap twee paragrafen groot
Als voetveeg ging hij door het leven
En werd een voetnoot na zijn dood

(Ballad of the first-born son / Life is often a nasty business / And would be completely unjustly / A true experience of hell / For Frank Walter Otto Brecht / Because the mother who gave birth to him / Never accepted him / Unwanted he arrived on earth / And was adopted away / The misery accumulated / And it started to smell foul / Frank could not retain his faeces / His ass was a misshapen hole / The world is often unjust / And many people suffer here / But fate was even more

unpleasant / To Frank Walter Otto Brecht / He wanted to become a doctor / But he was not intelligent / When he couldn't, he wanted to act / But he missed the talent / But when Hitler rose to power / Frank turned out not to be too unhealthy / For a new and unexpected job: / He got stationed at the Russian front / His existence turned out every time / To be an uneven fight / There was nothing here on earth / For Frank Walter Otto Brecht / And he got hit by shrapnel / From an anti-tank-grenade / At twenty-four he would die / Twenty-four years too late / Despite all this the true culprit / Remained without remorse or shame: / All of his life Franks father / Kept on fucking without a condom / Bertolt Brecht is still widely read / But nobody ever speaks / About the doomed creature / Son Frank Walter Otto Brecht / What is written about Frank Brecht / Is hardly two paragraphs in size / As a doormat he went through life / And became a footnote after death)

What I like about song lyrics and theatre scripts is that you can puzzle until only the absolutely necessary remains. In fact, you have to leave a lot of things open, because the director, the actors and the set design will bring so much to it themselves. And in this case: the music. People who come to the shows of Egon and The Troupe come for the music. They are really very good musicians, and it is an honour and a pleasure to work with them, but my text then has to be very good also to even be noticed much.

With this ballad, I think I succeeded. Reading it back, I can't help but notice that I've gotten better at writing technique over the years. (I have been writing songs and poems since I was twelve, and for a few years had the idea of making a career out of performing them myself as a comedian. Several excruciatingly bad performances later, I know better.) In the *Ballad of the first-born son*, I can really see evidence of a developed writing technique, and a personal voice.

1. There is no word in there that isn't useful. I used to think that you shouldn't repeat information in a song, but of course in this one the first three verses that end with 'Frank Walter Otto Brecht' more or less give the same information: life was a bitch to Frank. But there are subtle differences. The first verse is merely an introduction, framing how we're going to look at the rest of the text; this is going to be a tale of woe. Then verse four comes right after the line of the misshapen asshole; the text definitely needed four lines of almost dead air here, in order for the listener to be able to process this quite shocking turn of events. In verse six Frank is sent to the front – and we feel that this is not going to end well, because so far in the song, nothing has – and in the seventh verse his life is described as an 'uneven fight' underlining once more that he is going to die in battle, which he promptly does in verse eight.
2. A song can never have one ending. The more the better. The ballad could have ended after his death but it goes on for three more verses. What's more important, is that all these verses could have been the end of the song, because they all have some plot twist or punch line in them. But if the song had ended earlier than it does, it would have felt unfinished. Not round enough. The real ending of a text has to be the strongest line in the text. Otherwise, people rightfully stop listening after the best line has been uttered in verse two. Also, the best line should never be repeated! It only has impact the first time, and milking it is the best way of making it appear not so special the third time round. Just say it once, and then people will want to hear the whole song more than one time. Bob Dylan sometimes uses this very well.
3. I read the text to Klaas Jonkman, fellow student and friend, and he says it's like a wall gradually coming towards you. I think I know what he means: that every four lines you seem to have learned the same amount of information. Every verse brings you further, and has a natural stop after four lines.
4. The way of writing, choosing words that come naturally, without using a rhyming dictionary, trying not to be too poetic or emotional by using heightened speech, but rather a certain slightly cynical matter-of-factness, bluntness even, that allows the spectator to determine his/her own feelings about the story. Is it funny, sad or both? As an example; I am really happy with the word 'gat' in the third verse, because on the one hand it is a euphemism for ass that mothers and kindergarten teachers would use ('Ho, je bent op je gat gevallen!' meaning 'Whoah, you fell on your butt!'), but it literally means 'hole', and is therefore quite a graphic description of what an anus actually is. So 'gat' is a very small word that a Dutch audience wouldn't even relate to the anus anymore than an English audience would do with 'butt', but because of the line 'Zijn gat was een mismaakte scheur', 'His (gat) was a misshapen tear', they have to. This is what I like so much about Dutch: you can say stuff in a small way, using only words that sound little, and have them carry a lot of meaning.

13 February

Enough about the show. Back to my visual work. Although, as I write this down, I have a nagging sense that I cannot divide the two as strictly as I thought. After all, *Hakim* is a product of the research into Brecht. Have to think about this further at some point. Enough for now.

After talking to Jan van Egmond I have decided to make a film of *Hakim*. I've worked a bit with film six years ago, in the beginning of my bachelor's and I watch tons of movies. However, I have the feeling that this is not going down without a fight. I think the core tutors Jacco Olivier and Margo Slomp will advise me strongly against it, because I suspect they think I should continue with painting now. I'll just not tell them for as long as I can, so they don't give me too much doubt. Doubt is the last thing I need now. I've been doubting all year. I first need to do it, then I can doubt afterwards.

15 February

Maybe this diary can actually evolve into the thesis. It makes sense. With my discovery of Brecht, I feel I have started a new journey. The thesis could be a diary of that journey.

18 February

Mustapha Belfahli is going to play Hakim! He is a friend I came to know through some people at the FMI. I'm really happy about this – he is perfect for the role. It helps that he needs the money.

19 February

Have advanced a great deal in the biography. I am now at page 400, and Brecht has grown up, made his *début*, had seven women and three children (not counting abortions), left Germany because of Hitler and is in constant trouble with the Third Communist International for not supporting Stalin. I think both the rise of Hitler and the dissent from the Communist Party should be extremely important events in the show – which can only bring me to decide that we will have to tell this story more or less in a chronological way, which I suspect Egon will not be enthusiastic about, because it is standard procedure. But the life of the ever political Brecht is so entwined with the history of the twentieth century that it is impossible for me to write a meaningful story about it that isn't chronological. Brecht is first an anti-fascist, then becomes a communist, Trotskyist, has to flee Nazi Germany, moves to America, then back to the GDR, and is growingly unwelcomed by all the parties concerned. This show has to be a story developing through time. History only went in one direction. I think I will shape it like a biography, so chronological, but not make one long text. Last time with the opera about Leonardo, for which I wrote about a quarter of the libretto, the show consisted of a lot of separate pieces. Because there was also no chronology, some of the audience members I spoke to couldn't always follow the story. In the show about Brecht I can still use a lot of different forms (separate songs, diary entries, dialogue, recitatives, choral singing) but by sticking to the chronology, allowing the audience to know where they are. I did like this eclectic approach with many verse forms, because Egon's music is also very eclectic - he incorporates many styles in the same opera.

I find it inspiring that Brecht for some time in the late twenties, early thirties made *Lehrstücke*: short didactical plays about the rise of Nazism in Europe, and the promises of socialism. Without knowing it, I think I have made a *Lehrstück* with *Hakim*. It is definitely a didactical play, and I can see how it would provoke some irritation in the viewer. "Why are you showing me this? What makes you the person to make this work?" The point is of course that I only have an answer to the first question: because I think you should see this. Who am I to make work about such important political subjects? I am nobody. I am not special, I don't know more than anybody else, and I certainly don't know as much about politics as Noam Chomsky. Well, maybe that is the point: that we all are allowed to talk about politics. Not even that we should; if you want to turn your back on the world, that's your decision. But that everybody is allowed to express their opinions, ideas and doubts. Had we had that mentality over the last twenty years, maybe the lower-educated wouldn't have felt so unheard by the political and cultural elite, and would not have been such an easy prey for right-wing populists. And if the Muslim population of the Netherlands would have been heard more, maybe we could have prevented at least part of this gigantic gap there is now. Yes, I think it is unbelievably important that everybody gets to have their say about politics.

I think as an artist the same applies; everybody should be allowed to incorporate political themes into their work. The only criterion is: can you find an interesting, original way to do it? It seems sometimes to me today that it is *à la mode* for engaged art to be very serious, and to rely mostly on practices of anthropological research, documentary-making, a hard-core theoretical approach and a very peculiar aesthetic that mixes minimalist modernism, (semi-)scientific imagery, documentary films and, for some reason, a lot of display tables. I like doing research and making political work, like I am now doing, but I would feel confined if I would *have to* follow these well-travelled paths. Imagination seems to be out of place in today's political art. At least that is my impression since the last Documenta. The pattern I described above applied to almost all of the work shown. For me, the positive exception was William Kentridge's installation *The Refusal Of Time* (2012), which also contemplated colonialism and industrial development, but did so in an intuitive way, playful, dark but humorous, serious but spectacular. It consisted of six or seven large animated projections on all the walls of a dark room,

and with a kinetic sculpture in the middle, suggesting sort of an engine room where quantum physics and political history were made. Come to think of it, it was very theatrical. Like walking into the stage-set of a spectacular play. Later on I saw the documentary *Anything Is Possible* about his work, and I learned that he also did a lot of stage design for opera's. I hope one day to be able to see one of them. Again this marriage between spectacle and discussion, darkness and relativity, intuition and reason. I would like to work this way also, and my work is also becoming more theatrical.

20 February

My political inclinations differ from Brecht's. Brecht was a socialist, and until the end of his life, was in favour of autocratic socialism, not believing that the people themselves could or would perform the task of organising and maintaining the revolutionary society. I, however, am an anarchist; I don't believe that the dismantling of capital is the only thing that is needed to create a fairer world. I also believe that we have to dismantle hierarchy wherever we can. This point is also made by Noam Chomsky. Chomsky was an MIT professor of linguistics and single-handedly developed a system known as transformational generative grammar. This is a grammar that applies to *all* languages. It is also unbelievably complicated. To parse a five word sentence you need at least two A4's and draw a scheme for two separate structures (*depth structure* and *surface structure*). The man is an absolute genius. And I hated him with I fiery passion when I was still studying Dutch. I had to do a course about his linguistics three times before I finally passed with a meagre 6/10. And Chomsky, this extremely intelligent man, is also one of the most (possibly the most) well-read and vocal political commentator alive in the world today. He lives in America and he is an anarchist. He reads seven international newspapers every day, and knows almost everything about political philosophy and global affairs. Chomsky (2013) explains anarchism as the conviction that the only real way for people to be equal is for all people to be autonomous; to be able to fill their life and their day the way they want, as long as they don't harm others. Therefore, the anarchist mistrusts hierarchical structures (whether the state or the company or the school). What is important, is that Chomsky does *not* say that all hierarchical structures are bad: if a parent forbids her child to play near the road after the child almost got run over by a car, that could very well be a valid hierarchical structure. Or if somebody is going to operate on your heart, you kind of want them to have had fifteen years of tough hierarchical study, rather than three months of interpretative dance. If someone commits murder, society should think about excluding this person from society, for some length of time, in one way or another. So in an anarchist society, there will still exist some hierarchical structures. The difference is that through direct democracy these structures are constantly open for question, change and improvement, and are forced to operate in an open way. And by constantly, I mean constantly. Now we choose a parliament that can do as it pleases for four years, we cannot choose our own president, we have no corrective referenda, there is no transparency into trade agreements like TTIP or the relation between politics and big capital in general. I believe that the only government for the people is self-government by the people.

Another large misunderstanding is that anarchists are against rules. They're not at all, if they are at least a bit well-read and their ideas at least a bit well-considered, which sadly is not always the case. Anarchism means: no rule, but it doesn't mean: no rules. This often confuses people, but of course it is perfectly possible to live in a society which is not governed by a (or some) ruler(s), and still have rules, such as rules of traffic, laws which prohibit violence, rape and murder et cetera. There could (and probably would) still even be taxes: it is just that these taxes are no longer paid to a state that can spend them however it wants, but that the process of tax-raising and -spending will be in the hands of the people. What I like about anarchism is that it does not propose a simple change, and then expects the world to be good, like socialism did. I can illustrate this with an example. A great inspiration for me was the Scott (2014), which analyses examples of anarchist thought in action. The examples he finds vary wildly in nature and scope, but together they seem to point in one direction. For instance, Scott defines 'vernacular order' versus 'official order' and gives the example of a vegetable garden in Western Africa that amazed the British colonisers: all types of plants were growing next to each other, there seemed to be no order. Convinced that the 'savages' did not know how to grow crops, the British redesigned the vegetable garden in the Western way: little areas in which one sort of plants would grow, arranged symmetrically and geometrically. Then the crops began producing less fruits, and eventually died. Today we know that monocultures often don't fare well; plants in nature don't grow in monocultures, and need other plants around them to provide them with certain chemicals. Back then, however, the colonisers were amazed: apparently the savage disorder of the vernacular garden was a carefully balanced order that was slowly created over ages, not by people who put the plants to scientific tests, but by farmers who over time realised that certain combinations of plants just 'worked' together. In more or less the same way, through a long and difficult process of trial and error, an anarchist society could slowly evolve into the just and free society that it aims at. However, it does not claim to know yet what that society should look like.

So my thinking is very different from Brecht's, but what we do share is a socialism: every anarchist is a socialist, but not all socialists are anarchists. By this I mean that I don't believe in private ownership of production capital, but that all capital

necessary for production should be owned collectively, either by trade unions, or by collective company. Because if a few people own the means of production, the autonomy of everyone else is impossible. We have seen socialism without freedom in the USSR and China, and we have seen freedom without socialism in America since Reagan. For a better world, I believe we need both. In this I fundamentally differ from Brecht.

However, just like Brecht, I am deeply worried by the constant threat of fascism rising up again. If you're opposed to the state, a fascist state is your greatest fear. Reminding the public of the Brecht show about the dangers of capitalism and fascism is going to be very important – because that way we can show that Brecht's work is still embarrassingly relevant today.

The last thing that I take from anarchist thought, is that one must view the system in its entirety. The system is everywhere and connects us all. It is not even made very consciously; it is a product of the (sometimes deeply conflicting) desires of the powerful. This is also why I feel I can write about someone like Hakim; because he is a miniature version of some aspects of the system with which we all – including me – comply. I am still trying to sell this stuff, right? Trying to become important? Still 'selling my own secret that does not exist'? (Which I think is as good a metaphor for the artist's business model as any.) It's not that the audience has to judge whether Hakim is good or bad, it is that I want them to ask themselves: am I really any better?

23 February

In 450 BC the Greek philosopher Leucippus imagined the atom. A-tom. 'A' means 'not' and 'tom' comes from 'témnein' which means 'to cut'. Therefore atom means an indivisible unit. The smallest particle possible in nature. The smallest particle possible in culture then would be the individual. In-dividual. 'In' means not and 'dividual' comes from 'dividere', which means 'to divide'. Therefore individual means an indivisible unit. In 1897 the physicist Thompson discovered the electron, the first subatomic particle. The indivisible atom turned out to be divisible. The nineteenth century saw a growing awareness that the individual also is not an indivisible, rational-thinking unit. Mankind recognised herself ever more as a torn creature, caught in contradictions. In the work of Bertolt Brecht nothing would be as important as the state of being torn. For his characters he coined the phrase dividual, which means the divided. He was convinced that society does not start with the individual, with what happens between people, but with the dividual, with our internal contradictions. By speaking to our torn nature in his plays, he believed he could actually change the world. 'Art is not a mirror that one holds up to reality, but a hammer with which to shape it.'

I am very lucky to have Mustapha as the actor, I think. Partly because I don't believe he can act, and I don't want him to. I think apart from being confident, he almost has to do nothing. But he is quite a character, and by just being himself, I think he will contribute greatly to the part of Hakim.. I believe Mustapha can make Hakim round. I am trying to think of every little aspect of the film that could go wrong, and strive to prevent it. I can't wait until Saturday.

Later: I believe political questions are existential questions expanded. Take existential questions as: what is the meaning of my life? Who am I? Who have I become? What happened with/to me? In essence these are questions about the realisation of the Self (why, how, what?). It appears as if existential questions only occur in the head of the subject, and lead to a bare confrontation between the subject and his existence. But the Self realises itself by definition in a world with other subjects. And if you think about it, the questions that follow often directly concern how the subject lives with others. For whom does my life have a meaning, apart from myself? Who gives my life meaning, apart from myself? Am I being seen? Have others damaged me? Have I damaged others? It's not possible to answer (or even ask) questions about the human condition on a purely individual level, since the human condition is at the same time 'inside' and 'outside'. So not just: 'how do I live with myself?' but also: 'how do I live with others?' and 'how do others live with me?', or more broadly: 'how do we live with each other?' Jean-Paul Sartre also says this when he states that we can only know ourselves through our actions, not by discovering a 'core' of Self inside us: 'existence precedes essence' (p. 22). And acting (as in 'performing actions') is something we by definition do in a world filled with others. I see a strong link between existentialism and anarchism in the value they both attach to a maximum of personal freedom, combined with a maximum of responsibility.

Furthermore, I have to hold myself to the same standards as others. Sartre explains this as follows: 'Certainly, many believe that their actions involve no one but themselves, and were we to ask them, "But what if everyone acted that way?" they would shrug their shoulders and reply, "But everyone does not act that way." In truth however, one should always ask oneself, "What would happen if everyone did what I am doing?" The only way to evade that disturbing thought is through some kind of bad faith.' (p. 25)

I cannot hold myself to lower standards than I hold all other people, but I cannot hold myself to higher standards of behaviour (trying to be a saint) because that is hypocritical. So even my subjective standards, my principles, my ethics, I

don't just develop by asking introspectively: how should I live? I should also ask: how do I think others should live, and the answers to these questions should be the same. When I find out that my standards are not achievable for me or others, I have to change my behaviour or my standards, or discuss with others about theirs. Seeing that these principles are to some extent subjective, discussing these is a social process in which neither I nor the other can try to exercise power. We have to talk together as autonomous people. This simple act of denying the other's place in the social hierarchy and to talk as equals, can already be politically meaningful – in some cases revolutionary. When this dialogue about principles is held on a larger scale, it is a political discussion. When this discussion leads to decisions of groups of people about which principles they want to uphold, it follows from the autonomy of all participants, that this process should be one of direct democracy, or better put: anarchism.

28 February

The filming of *Hakim* is done! I am feeling like I have run a mental marathon over the weekend. Checked yesterday's dailies today. Some good, a lot bad. Mispronunciations, misremembering of lines. It is madness, trying to make a ten-minute film in two days as a screenwriter who has never written a screenplay and a director who has never directed, featuring an actor who has never acted and having a budget of under two-hundred euro's. But I believe something good is going to come out of it.

10 March

Started working on a project with the Prins Claus Conservatorium, relating to the Oosterpoort neighbourhood in Groningen, which should end in a festival. Curious to find out what this will become.

11 March

Today I finished the editing of *Hakim Of The Border*. I am really happy with it. I feel now, seeing the whole thing complete, and having had more time to mull it over, that both the influence of Sartre and Brecht remains visible. I now view this as follows:

1. As I said earlier, the piece is almost a Brechtian *Lehrstück*; an educational play, containing a message about the dangers of capitalism. Humane free trade is only possible in peace time (and even then far from all free trade is humane). As soon as a crisis happens, free trade is no longer governed by supply and demand, but by supply and *need*. According to Marx one could view money as frozen time; the amount of money an activity is worth is a translation of the amount of time a skilled worker would take to perform this activity. In a free market for free traders, I would pay you to do something for me, so I don't have to spend time on it. Time is money. But, when there's a crisis (and larger and smaller crises happen all the time, also counting individual ones) I no longer have the option to invest my own time. I don't have a *demand* anymore, I have a *need*. Applying the rules of supply and demand to a situation of necessity is criminal in my view, and amounts to extortion. This is what Hakim embodies, and he's proud of it.
2. Hakim defines himself as being a salesman many times throughout the monologue. He is operating, in Sartrean terms, in 'bad faith'. He does not define himself as an individual who's free to do what he wants, and is completely responsible for his actions. He has stopped thinking about the morality of what he does, because he operates on the morality of a salesman – a salesman he has carved out of himself. This becomes clear when he doesn't believe in borders, or in declaring people illegal immigrants, but he does not resist making a lot of money off this. He is a modern-day neo-liberal, with an in-built double standard. In a strange sort of cognitive dissonance, he respects the sanctity of the individual over his oppressors, yet he does not see his own abuse of the individual's situation.
3. Very Brechtian is the unnaturalistic environment (we are clearly in some art school storage space, not anywhere near a border – as Brecht showed the theatre as it was – bare and with the back wall showing – I show my workspace; the art academy) and acting (luckily Mustapha needed no help to act unnaturalistically). The fast cutting and the strange and disrupted monologue, including many linguistic mistakes, make the audience never forget that they are watching a movie; an acting performance. It draws their attention into the narrative, and forces them out of it at the same time, allowing them, as Brecht found important, to stay critical of the events, rather than be swept up by them. I cannot state clearly enough that this piece is *not* Epic Theatre (the type of theatre Brecht invented, which lists a lot of standard practices they should be met) even though it uses some of its *Verfremdung*. *Verfremdung* is Brecht's way of 'making the familiar strange and the strange familiar' (his

phrasing). By using unnaturalistic acting, breaking the fourth wall, clear directorial interventions, Brecht created some distance between the audience and the main character, never allowing the audience to forget they are watching a play. In my case, I have tried to use Mustapha's untrained acting with his pauses to remember lines and his monotonous delivery and an editing style that has a hard cut after every sentence, and then goes into another camera position. At a lot of points it is clear that the shots don't match up; the story is fragmented, told in many separate instances. I'm trying to make the audience not forget they are watching an actor in a movie, just as Brecht would have done. (Similar to what Lars von Trier does in *Dogville*, where the village portrayed only exists in some white lines on a warehouse floor. We know it is a village, and we can see it is a village, but we cannot really forget that this is just a representation of a village.)

Furthermore, the very first line in *Hakim* already breaks the fourth wall. Just as the last lines by the way. I don't need to stress that the first and last lines of any story are the most important.

But, I have to say the character is not fully developed in a dialectic sense: Hakim is not caught between great contradictions – except for the cognitive dissonance stated in point 2 above. However, he is a semi-unreliable narrator, who holds himself to be a good guy, or at least definitely not a bad one, while the audience is allowed to come to its own conclusions about this. So we 'weep when he laughs', which was a demand Brecht put on his characters; the audience should not automatically always feel the same emotion as the character, but have a critical distance from them.



Hakim Of The Border, video, duration 9:17, 2016

15 March

Showed *Hakim* to my core tutors Jacco Olivier and Margo Slomp. I don't know why I anticipated them to be strongly against it. They were not at all. Jacco – admitting that he wasn't looking forward to a ten-minute film, which is usually not his thing – really liked the story, although he found it a bit too politically pronounced in the end. Margo on the other hand really picked up on the political questions. I am very happy with their opinions, because they embody both things that I want viewers to get from this; the experience of having heard an interesting story and some critical reflection on liberal capitalism in our troubled world.

And I wrote a new piece for the Brecht libretto, which is probably going to be the finale:

De zwarte hond

Een zwarte schaduw trekt door onze landen
Haar zwarte ogen schouwen naar ons op
Zo nu en dan ontbloot zij vast haar tanden
Als witte messen in een zwarte kop
Haar uiterlijk weet velen aan te spreken
Al heeft haar vacht iets viezigs en goedkoops
Zult u de tijd herkennen aan haar teken?
De teef die Hitler baarde is weer loops

Zij mag haar gruweldaden graag volbrengen
In gore nesten, liefst ver uit het zicht
Werpt zij onooglijk kroost, maar al die krenge
Wurmen uit zichzelf hun wegen naar het licht
Hun grommen stolt zich langzaam in leuzen
De roep zwelt aan, de zwarte roedel groeit
En met hun bovenmenselijke neuzen
Hebben zij het steevast door als er iets broeit

Steeds weer komen de honden uit hun hokken
Wanneer de zwarte schim blaft: Kom nu, kom!
Er worden steeds meer muren opgetrokken
Zij blaft zich schor en houdt de mensen dom
De zwarte hond speelt enkel voor de bühne
Zij voedt zich als vanouds met het verval
Met haat en nijd, met angst en met rancune
Denkt u écht dat ze nooit meer bijten zal?
Hoe lang nog, of de zwarte honden moorden
Weer samen alles uit wat weerloos is?
Gelooft u de leugenaars nog op hun woorden?
En hoe goed kent u uw geschiedenis?
Ruikt u de ziekte niet die ze verspreiden?
Denkt u nog dat u het wel overleeft?
Bewaart u soms uw angst voor banger tijden?
Denkt u dat u die nog niet nodig heeft?

Gelooft u dat het tij vanzelf zal keren?
Dat het te vroeg is om alarm te slaan?
En blijft u koste wat het kost beweren
Dat het hondenleger nooit meer op zal staan?

(The Black Dog: A black shadow is crossing our lands / Her black eyes look up to us / Every now and then she bares her teeth / Like white knives in a black head / Her appearance is appealing to the masses / Although her fur shines slightly dirty and cheap / Will you recognise the time by her sign? / The bitch that bore Hitler is on heat again / She aims to perform her horrible acts / In filthy nests, preferably out of sight / She gives birth to unsightly offspring, which / Claw their own paths up into the light / Their growling slowly freezes into slogans / The call becomes louder, the black pack grows / And with their superhuman noses / They always smell when something's burning / Time and again the dogs rise from their doghouses / When the black shadow barks: Come now, come! / Ever more walls are being built / She barks herself hoarse and keeps the people dumb / The black dog is playing only for the gallery / She feeds just as of old on our decay / On hatred and on fear and resentment / Do you really think she'll never bite again? / How long before the black dogs again murder / Together every last defenceless thing? / Do you still believe the words of liars? / And how well do you know your history? / Do you not smell the plague they're spreading? / Do you still think it will do you no harm? / Are you saving up your fear for more

frightful times? / Are you sure you are not needing it right now? / Do you believe the tide will turn? / That it's too early yet to raise alarm? / And will you, no matter what, continue saying / That the army of dogs will never rise again?)

Later: Margo said something that I keep hearing in the back of my mind, about *Hakim*. 'You're an artist, but I hesitate to call you a visual artist.' It irritates me!

I am not a writer, not a composer, not a comedian, not a poet, not a painter, not a filmmaker, not a fucking anything. God knows I have been trying to be all these things, separate, in turn or together my whole life. I hate being told that I don't belong anywhere. That I don't really have a place in any major tradition. That I don't do well in groups, again not belonging. I have always been looking for a place I can belong. In trying to get there I meet tons of interesting people and do tons of interesting experiments, but I've never actually been able to belong anywhere for any length of time. I always end up making myself impossible, either to people or within a medium... The result is that I've felt for so long not as someone with a few talents, but as someone who is almost talented in a lot of things. I think this is what has changed since January. I've been doing all these different things for years: writing, organising, painting, song writing, drawing, building stuff, discussing, but all this time I regarded these as belonging to different practices. If I'm funny that belongs to the domain of the comedian. If I'm writing serious stuff it should belong to literature. If it rhymes, poetry or song. Organising stuff and speaking about problems; something I do next to my work, just as a politically engaged person. As I said: I am not a writer, not a composer, not a comedian, not a poet, not a painter, not a filmmaker, but in trying to be all those things I learned to write a decent song or monologue, make people laugh, paint with some visible ability and enthusiasm, organise projects, get political discussions going, build large installations and even some furniture, and I can turn a camera on and off. Since January I think I have stopped trying to become anything, and just use all these things that I can do (or can't do, but do anyway) as elements of my artistic practice. All of the above can lead to art now. It feels like a major step! Like I have finally lost the fences in my head, and I now turn out to have a gigantic field of possibilities, if I can just make them work together. That is why I can hardly separate the libretto from the thesis, or from the conservatory project, or from my other 'visual' work. Because the separations between visual art, literature, theatre and film are not so important anymore! The important thing is that I can stay active, make material out of what I know, discover new things and use this in future projects in an artistically interesting way, which can lead me to find new knowledge, which then can be used in other future projects, et cetera. For the first time, I feel like I could do *anything*.

16 March

In relation to what I concluded yesterday, a piece I read today in Christoph Schlingensiefel's memoirs *Ich weiß, ich war's*:

'...man muss doch mal daran denken, dass wir auch Nachwuchs brauchen, der durchs Experiment kommt. Junge Leute, denen nicht von vornherein vorgeschrieben wird, was und wie sie es zu machen haben, die in sich selbst etwas Neues entdecken, neue Bilder, neue Gedanken, neue Fragestellungen, und die müssen dann auch sagen dürfen: Ich habe etwas anderes gesehen, oder: Ich habe eine neue Perspektive auf ein Problem – und das will ich euch zeigen.' (p. 87)

(One has to think about the fact that we also need descendants, which come through experimentation. Young people, who are not commanded up front what and how they have to make something, who discover something new in themselves, new images, new thoughts, new questions, and they have to be allowed then also to say: I have seen something different, or: I have a new perspective on a problem – and I want to show it to you." My translation)

I've been trying to play by the rules of so many disciplines and genres and never found *myself* in them. Maybe now I am finding myself, by forgetting about these disciplines and genres in the first place and just focus on what I can do, what I want to learn, what I have to say and how to make this interesting and to trust that I don't have to conform, that a lot of the material to work with is already there.

I saw Schlingensiefel's work for the first time in BAK in Utrecht in 2012. We went with the second year of our art academy, and I was absolutely blown away. The diversity of media, the sheer audacity of the whole thing: When you entered BAK, there was a giant wall built with a little hole you had to crawl through, then there was a total installation: rooms with sculptures and signs, and a crashed car, all very dark, like walking in a large stage-set. You would end up in a larger space where there was a rotating floor with couches on them where you could sit and watch video works, and you could go outside through the fire-escape to the second floor where his other films were shown.

It was only later that I saw the documentary of his piece *Bitte liebt Österreich* (2000) called *Ausländer Raus! Schlingensiefels Container* (2002) and was gobsmacked again. He made a theatrical intervention in public life, putting containers on a square, and letting refugees live in them for a week during the Wiener Festwoche, while Austria could, Big-brother style, vote inhabitants out of the house and out of the country. They were escorted out of the building every night at eight, covering their face with a magazine, while Austrian marching music was played. The whole thing was an extrapolation of the question what would happen with Austria, now (in 2000) Jörg Haiders far-right FPÖ had become part of the government. At first nothing happened, but as the intervention went on, thousands of people came to the square every day, and discussed, argued, laughed and protested.

I see more or less the same here as in the National Theatre's production of *Mutter Courage: the spectacular, the sacrifice, the (possibly sick) joke* on the one hand, and on the other an appeal to reason, reflection, discussion and political engagement. The more I think about it, the more I believe that this distinction is what interests me about the theatre, and is what gives it its power to engage the audience politically.

18 March

I want to look at some of the differences between the *Ballade* and *De Zwarte Hond*. Both texts are dark (although one can laugh about the misfortunes of Frank Brecht, and feel for him, it's not a happy song), but *De Zwarte Hond* is ten times darker.

I am personally of the opinion that the end, which just consists of ten (!) questions aimed directly at the audience, could very well succeed in getting through to them. Usually audiences don't feel like they can be directly addressed by people on stage. Even if the fourth wall is technically broken, the audience often, in my experience, mentally keeps it up. (Have you ever noticed that when a comedian is insulting (parts of) the audience, you might be tempted to half-consciously think: well, that goes for my neighbour, but not for me? If so, you're keeping yourself safe from being addressed directly.) Maybe ten very direct questions after each other, growing in pregnancy, could finally get through to the audience. If this show is preaching to a choir of highly-educated, left-wing, like-minded people, than at least let me preach as if hell is nigh, and drive the point they already knew home in an uncomfortable way!

A second difference: in the *Ballade* there is almost no use of imagery. Although there are some things that look like imagery. For instance: 'the misery (...) started to smell foul'. But then it turns out that he is actually shitting himself and the misery literally smells foul. So there is an image, but it's not real imagery. Also a sentence like: 'Als voetveeg ging hij door het leven / en werd een voetnoot na zijn dood' (As a doormat he went through life / And became a footnote after death). The 'voetveeg' is officially imagery, but it's been used so much that it is a cliché, and not proper imagery anymore. I don't think Dutch people even stop to think that a 'voetveeg' is a doormat. They just view it as a standard expression. (It would have been inexcusable for me to use such a cliché, if the link between 'voetveeg' and 'voetnoot' didn't make the lines poetic.) And the fact that he becomes a footnote is also not imagery, because he is literally a footnote in his father's biography.

De Zwarte Hond on the other hand is 75% imagery. To name a few: the black dog/shadow (fascism), white knives (teeth), her young (the extreme-right of today), finding their ways into the light (they find a public, usually by media), growling (separate, unorganised utterings) that become slogans, their dog noses smell when something is burning (they always jump on anything to get attention) and in the end the army of dogs, which is an extrapolation the black dog, in a (to me at least) frightening conclusion. If I read that sentence I really see an army of black dogs in the night standing in formation. Scares the shit out of me. I am not saying all these images are groundbreaking and original and new. Of course. A lot of them are quite obvious. I imagine I could get told off on this, for not being a real poet. For not finding new expressions to all the old things, as Proust has ordered us humble authors to do. And Proust is right. In his discipline. He could write (and has) the longest book on the planet. I have to get a thought across in a spectacular way (it's going to be the finale after all), in three minutes or so with tons of other stuff happening at the same time – music, set design, people on stage moving about, God knows what else – so I'd better be clear. All poetry I write is not meant to be read, it's meant to be heard. Preferably sung. I feel closer to the medieval bard than the novelist. There is a reason my first text for this show was a ballad... Coming to think of it, I write with performance in mind, generally. I know I said I failed at performing as a comedian but maybe I could perform these texts in another way...

Later: I keep hearing these days people in the media who say there is not a definition of fascism. That there's just a set of characteristics. Riemen (2010) lists a few: fascism is populist, xenophobe, resists all criticism, uses violence and is basically a non-ideology. It aims only to tear down. Personally I would define fascism as 'terror + xenophobia', and fascists as the people who are trying to advance a society based on these principles. Riemen however makes a whole case about our culture being in decline as the reason for fascism to rise:

'de logische politieke consequentie van een maatschappij waar wij allen verantwoordelijk voor zijn. Dit hedendaags fascisme is opnieuw het gevolg van politieke partijen die hun eigen gedachtegoed verloochenen, intellectuelen die een gemakzuchtig nihilisme cultiveren, universiteiten die deze naam niet waardig zijn, de geldzucht van de zakenwereld en de massamedia die liever de buikspreeker van dan een kritische spiegel voor het volk zijn. Dit zijn de gecorrumpeerde elites die de geestelijke leegte cultiveren waarin het fascisme weer groot kan worden.' (p. 59)

'...the logical political consequence of a society for which we are all responsible. This contemporary fascism is again the result of political parties who betray their own ideas, intellectuals who cultivate a lazy nihilism, universities who are not worthy of that name, the greed of corporations and the mass media who'd rather be the ventriloquist's dummy than a critical mirror for the people. These are the corrupted elites that cultivate a spiritual emptiness in which fascism can grow again.' (My translation)

Yeah, I know. Cultural pessimism isn't what it used to be. I agree with Riemen that all layers and components of our society are involved in a system, and that that system (in my view: *among many other things*) has a tendency to lead to fascism. I even agree with a lot of the things he lists in this example. How could I not? The greed of corporations became once again very clear in the recent crisis. The political left has lost a lot of its vigour in our transition from ideological politics to management politics. All of this is true. Yet I don't think universities are not worth their name any more (at least their students and teacher gave a good example in last year's protests). And I don't think that intellectual thought is generally nihilistic (especially not in my generation, which is very much seeking ways to both change the system and live with it). In my opinion, a very important part of the rise of fascism is forgotten: the fact that one needs a large part of the population to be dissatisfied with their place in society, and their minimal ability to be heard on political issues, and the proportional relationship between their wages and their effort. Riemen accuses the media of being a mouthpiece for the uneducated public, whereas I would say they are much more a mouthpiece for politics and corporate interests. The Western media to my mind make us white Westerners invariably appear like the good guys, and don't give a nuanced image. As for corporate interests, every commercial is not just a commercial for a product, but a propaganda message for the capitalist system. Every commercial implies that it is good to buy things, that we have so much choice (and therefore so much freedom) and just as politics feed on manufacturing and managing fear (merely look at the Bush administration about Saddam Hussein), corporations manufacture and manage fear of 'not fitting in'; not getting the boy- or girlfriend, not being successful, not being happy, thereby implicitly and sometimes explicitly urging the people at large to conform. So I would say the media are more the spokesperson for politics and corporate interest than for the poor huddled masses who have become enthralled by a fascist leader.

Nevertheless, I always get fucking angry when there's been another incident at an AZC (Centre for Asylum Seekers), like when some neo-fascist pieces of shit put up pig's heads near the entrance gate of one AZC in Enschede, and politicians and journalists manage to file this under 'the just concern of the public' ('terechte zorgen'). This is not an expression of just concern, this is just hateful and intimidating. Calling it just concern, is doing the wrong thing twice. Compare it to this: you lock up your daughter in the cupboard under the stairs for some years, then someone lets her out and she burns your house down, and then you call that 'just concern'. Why the hell did you lock her up in the first place? Because that is what our society has been doing to those lower down the food chain: limiting their freedoms, compared to us up here. To quote from the English Internationale: 'Freedom is just privilege expanded / Unless it's shared by one and all.' And then secondly; the politicians who call this type of hooliganism 'just concern', to my opinion, do so because they're terribly afraid that if they don't acknowledge these people now, they've lost them forever to the far-right. But they shouldn't voice their acknowledgement in such a way that it lends even the slightest credulity to this disgusting and hateful behaviour.

Fascism is rising again, and we need to talk about it. The fact that Brecht warned in many of his plays about the rise of Nazism, is a very good entry point for me to make this theatre production warn for the repetition of history's gravest mistakes.

24 March

Okay, so the project for the performance festival is becoming quite big. I am working on a song called *Het Lied Van Samenleven* (The Song Of Collective Life), which will be performed by a choir of some thirty people at the final concert of the performance festival which is thematically and geographically centered around the neighbourhood de Oosterpoortwijk in Groningen, in which by the way according to www.oozo.nl 0% Turkish people, 0% Moroccans and 1% Surinam and 1% people from the Antilles live. The song is about the idea of the neighbourhood as a device used by politicians to divide the

people up into small segments; this is a rich neighbourhood, this is a poor neighbourhood, this one is for the multi-ethnic folk. Mainly due to housing prices and the fact that social housing projects are always built as cheaply as possible, the neighbourhood as a device has become to be the dividing principle in Western nations. Everything is regulated by city planners, and by the time you are twelve and you have to make your CITO-examination, it is more or less decided in what type of neighbourhood you are going to live. The song is a critical appeal to the city planners of the Netherlands, claiming our right as Dutch citizens to an open and honest dialogue with each other, which can only come if we actually live together in more diverse communities. The choir consists of people who live and rehearse in the Oosterpoortwijk, the neighbourhood around the conservatory. While they are singing they are holding protest signs. I will make empty protest signs, and in a workshop on the day of the performance, I want to engage the members of the choir in a discussion about which slogans they want to put on the signs. These do not have to have anything to do with what they are singing about (in fact it might be better if they don't, so the image becomes more confusing). I want to ask them what they want to protest, or what they want to proclaim. Inspirational quotes from Facebook are allowed. I don't have to agree with any of it. The deal is; they univocally sing my words, and since this is a project about dialogue, their own words should be incorporated in it as well. Their words will be on the signs. Before they make these, they will have a two-hour workshop to learn the song. I wrote lyrics for it, and the people from the conservatoire are making an arrangement for piano and three voices. The choir will be there at two in the afternoon.

That is where I am. I am doing a theatrical, musical, partly autonomous, partly social-art project. I am quite far away from painting now. But I like working with theatre. Somehow I have the feeling that this project has an internal logic: conservatory and neighbourhood, inside and outside, it seems to mirror my idea of the double nature of theatre. I think I have found the words for it. Theatre, to me, is at once the arena and the agora. The space for spectacle, wonder and 'sacrifice' (the arena in Ancient Rome) and philosophy, discussion and education (the agora – the city square in Ancient Greece) at the same time. I think this is the double nature I have been talking about in this diary.

3 April

Tomorrow I have my seminar. The seminar is a presentation that every painting student has to make once a year, which goes as follows: you install your work in a space in school, then at 10:30 on a Monday morning, the other students discuss it and you take notes silently, and after that you give a presentation about your 'context', which has up until now invariably been a dreary Powerpoint presentation of some painters or other artists that one likes, and who equally invariably make way more interesting stuff than what one oneself has just presented. Not to say that my fellow students and me don't make interesting work, but in the presentation always at the very least mid-career artists are featured, and we're simply no match. I don't think this is the way the seminar is supposed to be, but it is the way it has been used this year. Naturally I'm going to do something different.

I will have the seminar in my studio, and moved it to Monday night at five. I told my fellow students that they could smoke and drink during the presentation (in fact I've bought five ashtrays to go around, plus plenty of beer for the people who didn't bring any), which actually has some significance: Brecht wanted his whole life that his audiences could drink and smoke during the performance of his plays, so that they would not get swept up in the story too much, but remained distant, in their seats, in their bodies, during the performance, because he hoped this would allow them to view the play with a critical distance. I have no idea whether this works, but I finally have a valid artistic and historical justification to allow students to drink and smoke during class, so I'll be damned if I don't take the opportunity. I haven't told the tutors about it, because they could block it (although I doubt they would). Just to be sure, I want to have everyone smoking and drinking by the time Margo and Jacco come in.

First, I will show them the video of *Hakim*, which I sadly did not have time to finish editing, and which I have to present on my laptop. I am sure there will be comments about that. And rightfully so. It's really stupid, presenting a movie on a laptop to around thirty people, but it has to be this way for now. Not because it is good, but because I have been directing all my attention to the second part of the presentation. Instead of the boring Powerpoint, I thought: well, the whole research that I am doing started with theatre, so I want to show my fellow students and tutors why theatre is important to me. And how better to show it than performing for them? I will read from my thesis (which because it is a diary is already narrative to some extent, and therefore a bit theatrical), and perform some poems (which I translated in English and present bilingually) and sing the songs for the libretto. I am really nervous about this. Slightly nauseated in fact. As I said earlier, I have had experiences performing. Not that I got booed away often, but mostly nothing really happened, which is equally terrible. The only thing you want to do on stage is to make something happen. You die if it doesn't. Maybe it was because I was trying to perform under the guise of comedy. Now I will just perform what I have. Fingers crossed.

What is important to know is that the seminar is *not* an evaluation. There's no consequences if it doesn't go as planned. If the reactions are very critical, there's no consequences for my graduation. Only the feedback sessions (three times a year) have consequences. However, I have my feedback session the day after tomorrow at nine 'o clock. So I do have a real stake in all of this.

5 April

The seminar and evaluation were satisfactory. My fellow students really picked up on the questions that I wanted to address with *Hakim*. There were also some critical remarks; mostly about the presentation on the laptop, but also about the cultural appropriation of the name Hakim and the Northern-African background of both Mustapha as an actor, and the main character. Am I, as a white Westerner allowed to project my imaginings upon another culture? It is an interesting question, although, as I've explained earlier, to my mind, the piece is not at all about Hakim's cultural background. But the fact that he has this background helps the piece to relate more directly to the people smugglers of today, who mostly operate from Northern Africa and Turkey. Raha Khademi, a first-year student from Iran and a friend, told me what the name Hakim means: 'he who knows'. I should have researched that myself, so I felt kind of caught. But it does work wonderfully with the story: in the closing lines, Hakim prides himself on having a secret, which makes people who want to cross the border come to him, so he really is 'the one who knows'. I just got lucky on this.

After that, I performed, and the reactions to that were almost exclusively positive. Even though I couldn't perform everything in English, and I had to hand out some prose translations of my poems, everybody really liked it, and said I should definitely continue doing live performance. Hooray!

8 April

Mosul

Vandaag: Amerikaanse bommen raakten
Een Irakese universiteit
Al was het plan nog zo goed voorbereid

Goed voorbereid of niet, de bommen maakten
Geen leden van een terroristencel
Maar tweehonderd studenten dood. Dat wel

Wie gaf de opdracht? Wie liet dit gebeuren?
Je zou die schoft op zijn weg naar de hel
Het vel wel van zijn lichaam willen scheuren

(MOSUL / Today: American bombers hit / An Iraqi university / Even though the plan was so well-prepared / Well-prepared or not, the bombs did not / Kill members of a terrorist cell / But two-hundred students / Who gave the assignment? Who let this happen? / You would like to tear that bastard on his road to hell / The skin off his body)

The Mosul bombing happened a couple of weeks ago, but for poetic reasons I start the poem with 'today'. It is a tiny artistic lie, but I am not a journalist, so I think I'll allow myself the liberty.

9 April

Studied *Mutter Courage* (1939) and *Die Heilige Johanna der Schlachthöfe* (1929-1931) by Brecht. By reading those two plays in this order, the reverse order, it became very clear to me how different they are, and how much Brecht learned as a writer. Where *Johanna* is very intellectual, very explanatory I mean, *Courage* is revealing. *Courage* does not underline its meaning, even though it contains a lot of food for thought. It confronts us with questions about war: What is war? Is it about power? Is it competition, so is it about profit? Who profits from it? Do we all? War is terrible, but do the poor fare better in peacetime? At least during the war they have regular meals and a roof over their head. Why can soldiers do things

in wartime that are forbidden in peace? Although all of these questions are raised by the play, none of them gets answered. If Courage is cursing the war in scene three, by scene four she could be saying the complete opposite.

There is a great difference between the voices Johanna and Courage. Courage (a nickname, her real name is Anna Fierling) is cynical. Her emotions only show when her children are affected. When her son Schweizerkas dies, she has to contain her emotions not to betray herself (otherwise she might also get arrested) and this tension between what we know she feels and how she has to behave ignorant, raises all the hairs on our bodies. When Kattrin (the mute daughter, whom I find positively the most endearing character I've ever read about) is disfigured, Courage finally cries out to let the fucking war end. (Although a few months later, she is again supporting the war, since her business is going well again.) After Kattrin Fierling dies in an attempt to save the city of Halle which is being beleaguered, Courage is at the end of her rope, and can only go on, as a hyena of the battlefields, to find her last living child, Eilif, who signed up for the army in the first scene, two hours ago. We know that Eilif is already long dead, sentenced after he raped a woman in peacetime and made her disappear. (He doesn't understand why doing in peacetime exactly that which was heralded during the war, is wrong.) And so Courage is not only a didactical figure, but a very real and tragic one. A didactical figure is purely there to prove a point ('war is bad' or 'war is good' for instance). With Courage, we get so much more. We get a character who is unable to learn. Who is at the core of her being contradictory; she loves the war and hates it. Who loses her children because of her own choices, but who remains opportunist. She speaks to all parts of us. That is why she is disconcerting. Because, for Brecht, we are all *dividuals*: forever torn between contradictions.

Johanna is different. She tries to be a saint to the poor workers in the stockyards, who suffer from bad conditions (some die, one gets accidentally made into bacon), diminishing wages and factories closing down. Johanna, as a sort of Salvation Army soldier, tries to lobby the magnates, as well as the socialist workers' movement, in order to change the plight of the poor, to no avail. However, she stays a very didactical character – she's just there to be an example of a theory the writer has, she herself having no personality whatsoever, except trying to be completely good (which is shallow) and ending up completely disillusioned (which is also shallow). In the middle of that the audience is pressed to take position.

Of course it would be foolish of me to think I could create something as powerful as Mother Courage (which is after all a two-hour play by one of the greatest writers of all time), in a nine minute monologue with Hakim. But it's interesting for me to compare the characters, since the idea for Hakim came from first reading Mother Courage.

First of all, Hakim is not a tragic character: he does not experience a downfall during the play. In fact, his 'luck' keeps getting better towards the end. He resembles Courage in that he profits from a war, and that his cynicism keeps him relatively untouched by it. He is not like Johanna in the sense that he spouts large paragraphs of rhetoric to make a point, but he is also flat; he is a merchant. He has the morals of a merchant, and everything he does is what a merchant would do. Just as anything Johanna does, is what a saint would do. It says something about our world that the saint falls from grace, and dies miserably in the gutter, misunderstood, and that the salesman ends up rich and safe.

Meanwhile at the conservatory, the people with whom I work together really liked my idea for *Het Lied Van Samenleven*, and then came up with a dozen related ideas of their own and tried to tie them all together. I had to say that wasn't an option. Of course they can organise whatever they want, even if it overlaps with my project a little or a lot. But I have to safeguard my work. Not because I am petty, but because their aim is to organise a festival and tie all the conceptual knots together, and my aim is to create a valid artwork within their festival. I don't have to do everything myself, I like working together and we discuss a lot, and I need them. But I cannot let my project dissolve into a million little things they want to do. I have to defend my autonomy here, because otherwise I risk the project becoming purely community art, or becoming an instrument for the Conservatory's purposes. (It would only be some feel-good social event, nice for their festival, but I would end up putting weeks of effort in, and then having no artwork to show for it in the end.) If that would be the case, I would have to pull back, because my autonomy as an artist is all I have. I am not some kind of voluntary social worker, nor am I a project planner for their festival. But, even though we didn't really understand each other in the beginning, we slowly seem to arrive on the same page, especially with the composer Sigute Zurauskaitė.

Het lied van samenleven

De helft van Nederland slaakt heden
Steeds zo'n negatief geluid
Bang en boos en ontevreden
Komt ons land hier nog wel uit?
Laten we de mens vergeven
Die zijn medemens vergat
Hij moet weer leren samenleven

En die macht ligt bij elke stad

Refrein:

Hoort ons aan, stadsplanologen!
Waarom scheidt u ons zo stug?
We voelen ons door u bedrogen
Geef ons het samenleven terug!

Waarom zijn de mooiste wijken
Met zo weinigen gedeeld?
De arme woont niet naast de rijke
Wit woont niet naast bruin of geel
Hoog- niet naast laagopgeleiden
Links woont niet naast rechts-extreem
Hoe lang blijft u ons nog scheiden
En ontkent u dit probleem?

Refrein

Wij hebben recht op dialoog
Of we 't nu eens zijn of juist niet
Hoe houd je elkaar in het oog
Als je elkaar maar zelden ziet?
Het gaat ons niet om integreren
Aanpassen of opgerot
Het gaat ons om communiceren
Ongeacht je geld of god

Refrein

(The Song Of Collective Life / Half of the Netherlands cries today / Such a negative sound / Fearful and angry and dissatisfied / Will our country get out of this? / Let's forgive the person / Who forgot his fellow man / He has to learn to live together again / And this power lies with every city / Listen to us, city-planners / Why do you divide us so sternly? / We feel betrayed by you / Give us back our collective life! / Why are the most beautiful neighbourhoods / Shared with so few / The poor man doesn't live next to the rich one / White does not live next to brown and yellow / Higher- not next to lower-educated / Left-wing not next to the far-right / How long will you keep separating us / And deny this problem / We have a right to dialogue / Whether we agree or not / How do you keep an eye out for each other / If you barely see one another? / We're not about integration / Adapt or get lost / We are about communication / With no regards for your money or God)

12 April

Went to check out the choir with Sigute, who will arrange and partly compose the song. Lovely people. They were all smiles. They were a bit nervous that we were listening in, because they were practicing a dance routine – which some of them clearly hate. They kept looking over their shoulder to us and say: 'We can do better than this'. Or just grimacing ironically every time they had to do the jazz hands. Still they had a lot of fun. It is very important they can have fun on my project as well.

I should pause for a moment and reflect upon what I actually want at this point in my research, what interests me about doing this. First of all, formally, I am looking for ways to connect all my activities (writing, art-making, theatre-practices, organising, discussing) in new projects. Secondly, I want to investigate the relationship between art and society. Not because I want all art to be useful for society; I absolutely abhor that thought. But I guess I want my art to be a tool to discuss society with, or at the very least, a trigger for people to engage in discussion. That is why I wanted to write *this* song in the context of the festival: the festival is all about the ties between the conservatory and the neighbourhood, and about how nice the neighbourhood is, and how people can come together doing community art and jam sessions and drum circles. All of this is great, and if the other members of the committee want to organise it, fine. To me it seems a waste of

time. Or at least; it would definitely be a waste of time if there was not, somewhere in those three days, one voice that would say: Yes, this is a very nice neighbourhood, and it is lovely celebrating it. But where are the Turks, and the Moroccans? Where are people from Surinam and the Antilles? Where are the lower-educated? Where is the diversity? The cacophony of widely varying opinions? Together, do we not make up a single cluster in a society of clusters? These are the things I want the audience to think about. Is segregation the only option? And if there are more options, is this the best, most honest, most functional? What are the consequences of this policy?

These are very serious problems, and I am without a doubt that all of this is connected. Maybe that is what I would like people to realise again for a second; that it is all connected. That these problems that seem far away, are also dependent on how we act here and now, in our own little lives and circles.

14 April

Had a very interesting talk with Ronald Ophuis, who came by as a guest teacher today. I got to know his work four years ago and was immediately very impressed by it. As far as being radical in your art goes, he is right up there. His ultra-violent canvases focus on acts of war, which are beforehand researched methodically in historical literature, or, as in the case of the bloodshed in Rwanda or Srebrenica, by actually going there and interviewing survivors. I see a link with my work in the theme of politics (or war, of internment camps, of refugees), basically an interest in what people are able to do unto each other. It turns out he's a real theatre-lover. He makes photos for his paintings by hiring actors and letting them act out scenes that he came upon in his research. He is a director, who paints after the actors are gone. He was very enthusiastic about *Hakim* and sent me some videos. One was of a performance he organised in De Balie in Amsterdam, which started by having an actor read from the works of Jean Amery, a Belgian philosopher who was tortured in WWII and describes and analyses what happened. At points the text was very explicit, but most of it was quite abstract. The author was convinced that torture was at the heart of national socialism in a different way than in Soviet socialism. Because, he reasons, socialism at least came from an ideal to create a better world. It was a hopeful idea that led to a regime of terror. But with the Nazis there had never been a hopeful ideal. They only wanted to take parts of people away. Jews, homosexuals and gypsies of course, but also the German people should be stripped of their complexities, their doubts, their personalities, and be cut in shape to fit in the mould of Nazism. The story of the torturer who breaks limbs, cuts off body parts and hits and slashes in order to reduce the victim to the shape the torturer desires, is the supreme example for this. The stage was designed to look like Ophuis's studio, with the actor sitting next to a table full of paint, and in between canvases and paint-smear towels. I thought it was very interesting, and a good choice by Ophuis to start a presentation and discussion of his own work in this way; it made extremely clear that his work does not spring from a morbid fascination with violence, but with a true fascination of what goes on in the minds of both the perpetrators and the victims of these atrocities.

Ronald also sent me a video by Michiel Voet, a Dutch photographer and set designer, who collaborated with the theatre group Orkater for a project called: *De Onzichtbare Man* (The Invisible Man). For a few years, Voet let an illegal immigrant called Karim Ramtani use his studio as a place to spend the night, even giving him his own key. After an incident where Voet encountered Ramtani sleeping in his studio and thought he was a burglar, leaving both of them very much ashamed, they decided to work together on a number of photo works. In these works, Ramtani is sewn into furniture, wrapped in foil or wearing masks of his own face. Voet presents these work to the public in a regular artist talk, which at the same time explains what he knows about Ramtani's life. After this event, which happens in Voet's studio, the audience moves on, through a side door, to a giant warehouse space behind the studio, where a stage-set and bleachers are built. There a theatre show by Orkater is played, with an actor playing Ramtani telling his side of the story. Michiel Voet's story was clear: this happened, then we did this, then Ramtani was away for a while, then he came back... Ramtani's version of the story however is much more complicated. For instance, he tells a lot of stories about his background which turn out not to be true, but are fabricated as the regular lies an illegal immigrant tells his Dutch benefactors in order to make them give him a bed, money or sex. But his story is also radically different from Michiel Voet's. In Ramtani's story the image of the well-willing Voet is questioned to the extreme. For what reason does this Dutch dreamer want to work with Ramtani? How did Ramtani perceive the curious incident in the night-time? Did Ramtani go to prison, if so: for what, and what could or should Michiel Voet have done? No answers are given, just alternative stories and doubtful explanations. I found it very impressive and unsettling. I could recognise myself in the well-willing white Dutch artist, who wants to help, or at least to talk about issues of unfairness, but of course has no first-hand experience. Is it hypocritical? Probably to some extent. But I think that artists who say: 'I don't want to make work about what is going on in the world now, because it doesn't affect me directly, so what do I have to say?' are also hypocritical. Is it not at least possibly the job of people who have a lot of time and a lot of autonomy to use part of those to try and stick up for the people who don't? Just because I am one of the winners this cynical birth lottery that we've created, have I lost the right (or possibly the duty) to complain about it?

20 April

Today I had a meeting with guest tutor Eleni Kamma, who has made the film *Oh, for some amusement* (2015), about the Karagöz tradition of shadow theatre in Turkey, which has historically always been the one outlet for free criticism of the government. In the video-essay she interviews people about this tradition, films them while they are making the puppets and putting on a show, and interviews people who were present at the protests in Istanbul in 2013. I thought her work was very interesting because it directly related theatre and politics in a way that was new to me. And the way the video was edited, showing bits of performance, next to news footage, next to street interviews was inspiring for me.

Eleni was interested in my work, although she also commented on *Hakim* that I was writing about someone far away, in a culture I know very little of. This of course is true, but I guess I had to start somewhere. As I said earlier, I tried to abstract Hakim by making him almost into a fairy-tale figure. I could imagine that at all times in history, on all borders, there have existed people like him, trying to make a buck selling stuff here and there, but also not afraid to smuggle something if necessary. He has in a way been a pariah, in relation to the people he is 'helping across the border'. And this video was mostly a thought-experiment in which I tried to update some of Brecht's questions and practices to the present situation. His character is related to that of Mother Courage, who also profits from the war by scrounging, selling bits and pieces to the soldiers, although she doesn't smuggle or extort people. Eleni advised me to read the philosopher Alain Badiou's *Rhapsody for the Theatre* (2008) about the relationship between theatre and politics.



Het Lied Van Samenleven, video, duration 5:57, 2016

23 April

Last Saturday *Het Lied Van Samenleven* was performed and recorded on video. I am happy that I undertook such a large project, which could only be executed with the help of some thirty-five people (eight people in the organisation, twenty-five choir members, a composer, a pianist, two camera operators), and everybody did quite a good job. What concerns me though is that it became such a sweet and naïve project. The signs that the choir made, of course, reflected the morals and values of the choir. And seeing as they are lovely, well-willing, mostly Christian middle-aged people, their signs reflected this: a black and a white stick figure holding hands, 'difference must be learned', 'don't just shout out stuff', 'music connects' and 'living together is living *together*'. But I promised in the beginning: these placards were the space in which they could express their own thoughts, not mine. And this project challenged me to work together with other artists and to

include the neighbourhood (as a small part of society) in a discussion *about* society: in this project, it's not just my voice being heard, but the voices of others as well. This was a necessary step.

And in the end, I am really rather fond of the video registration of the performance. Because the lyrics (with subtitles) are very clear and to my opinion raise the desired political questions quite directly. This makes for a notable contradiction with the choir itself; they are very endearing, as said a bit sweet and naïve, people of good will in the biblical sense, but also slightly amusing. To me this contradiction makes the five-minute video interesting enough to watch. It is also what connects the video to my idea of the arena and the agora: the choir singing is a spectacle, which makes the viewer into an audience member, but the way the text is written, I think, directly engages the viewer to 'talk back', as it were, to think about and express his/her own opinions.

Also, the festival offered me an unexpected chance to perform *De Ballade...* and *De Zwarte Hond* a couple of times. I received some really nice, positive reactions to both the texts and my performance.

25 April

I have read the article by Alain Badiou. In it he outlines his ideas about the relationship between theatre and politics. He starts by noting that all important theatre relies heavily on state subsidies, and is played in state-owned theatres and that the state historically has always had a vested interest in what was being performed on stage. He talks about the seven elements of theatre (place, text, director, actor, décor, costumes and public), and their dialectic (the state as a foundation for the situation in which the play is performed, the ethics of play as the provocation that is made by what is being represented and the spectator as someone who has to decide about the truth of the play). To me this is interesting, although to my mind Badiou closes off the possibilities of what theatre can be too rigidly. He is really only talking about theatrical plays as we know them. Theatrical practices (a dramatic situation, using or breaking a fourth wall, monologue, dialogue, song, recitative, dance etc) in themselves to him can never be theatre: they work as component parts which together can make theatre. In my visual work it's the practices that I put together in a new way to create a work, which is not necessarily a work of theatre, but an artwork related to theatre. I was hoping Badiou would talk more about the link between theatrical practices (so not only complete theatre productions) and politics, which I think is already interesting in itself.

Earlier in this diary I asked myself: why do I have the feeling I can work better with political subjects through the use of theatre in my work? I think the answer lies in the distinction I have slowly found during the writing of this diary. In the theatrical situation, two modes can come together. One the one hand there is the spectacle, the ritual, the sacrifice (also the sacrifice of a character), the dark, the violence. In short: the arena. On the other hand there is the philosophical, didactical, reasonable, light (or enlightened) discourse – the agora. Both in the arena and in the agora people are gathered; in the former they are the gathered masses who observe the spectacle, in the latter they are gathered as equals who can discuss reasonably about current affairs, and educate each other philosophically. I think this is very important: in a theatrical situation the viewer can be engaged in these two distinct ways at the same time.

To me, the spectacle is not just about fireworks or blood and gore. Seeing actors play or a choir sing is already spectacular compared to daily life. The speech in a theatrical performance can already easily be spectacular speech: it is more expressive than daily speech, it is a distillation of conflicts and contradictions. But the most important thing about the spectacle (the arena) is that it makes the viewer an audience member, a passive observer of something somewhat larger than life, with connotations of ritual and sacrifice. But theatre can be a great tool to engage the viewer politically if the theatrical work does not tell him or her what to think or which morality to choose. Then the viewer becomes not only a passive recipient, but an *autonomous* partner in the dialectics, taken seriously as an equal (the agora).

I see this clearly mirrored in the line of thinking of Badiou, who also bases himself on Brecht, and who makes a division between Theatre and "*theatre*". I shall try and forgive him this pompous spelling, and focus on my interpretation of what he means. He finds Theatre that which uses the theatrical elements to engage the audience in the dialectical participation described above (within a political situation a story about a certain morality is performed for the viewers, who get to make their own judgment about its truth), and "*theatre*" – that which uses all the theatrical elements but not realise dialectical participation. In my own words, a theatre that only invites us into the arena and not the agora loses its value. Brecht knew this extremely well; this is why *Mutter Courage* doesn't tell us what to think about war: it only fuels our own conflicting feelings about the subject. The agora is also very present in Brecht's desire not to let the audience be swept up in simple emotions of the protagonist, but to have a protagonist who is fundamentally torn, a dividual like the rest of us. And to keep the audience at a certain distance, always aware that they are watching a play, allowing them to use their reason to make judgments about the play; in short, what Brecht already called: the dialectics of theatre.

But this doesn't have to be the only way of putting to use this double nature of the theatre: Schlingensiefel in *Bitte Liebt Österreich* (2000) combines the arena and the agora by building a spectacle literally in a square. But in doing so, he activates the square: the square around his installation itself becomes the classic agora. This square was not generally a place for public discussion anymore, but Schlingensiefel activated it. And furthermore, the square in the end even became the arena. The debate became so heated that the square itself became the spectacle and the place for conflict. To achieve this inversion, to me, is a stroke of genius. The (verbally) fighting audience members became the actors in the spectacle, and it became their sacrifice, their cathartic ritual for Austria.

28 April

In my own work I can see traces of the arena and the agora being present. In watching *Hakim*, I feel I am at the same time a passive audience member and an actively thinking participant. The story doesn't tell me what to think, although it asks me to question what Hakim thinks about his own story. And at the very beginning and the very end, it breaks the fourth wall and addresses the viewer directly.

In *Het Lied Van Samenleven* there is surely some spectacle in seeing and hearing the choir sing. But the content of what they sing contrasts with the form. The song is formulated sharply and, even though I don't believe it tries to persuade me as a viewer to agree with it, its outspokenness does challenge me to form an opinion about the content. I feel that in this idea of the arena and the agora, the double nature of the theatrical experience, I have found an instrument to analyse my own work with. After graduation, I want to investigate this idea further, and see how I can use it more consciously in new works. One last thing that I gained from this research is that I should also be performing myself. I had sworn never to set foot on a stage again, but performing at the seminar, and later at the festival with the conservatory has given me the confidence to take it up again. I can start with these texts for the libretto. The most enthusiastic reactions I have had to my work this period were about these texts, and about my performance of them. So I have decided that I should also incorporate this in my presentation for the graduation show. I am thinking of building a large stage. I can perform my poems on it. It's going to be really great!

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