

Neža Kokol

Writing portfolio

An example of an article

After living in a new place for some time, you might start feeling misplaced. The excitement subsides, your sprint turns into a marathon and you suddenly find yourself able to look around. What do you see? Your roots have been cut, just like your umbilical cord so many years ago and it's time to scream, breathe on your own. You float in between what used to be and what is, questioning spaces, relations, and feelings only to find that no matter the context, your truly intimate space is always carried with you.

This extremely intact yet vulnerable part of you holds incredible power over your feelings, being, and relation to others. It forms a space within our subjective selves that cannot be measured or controlled; a kind of space Elon Musk would eventually like to get his hands on but so far he could not<sup>1</sup>. At its core, it is one of the rare places left uncontrolled by society (which doesn't mean it hasn't been impacted in many ways) and has, therefore, developed an almost mythical kind of attraction, another variant of a philosopher's stone<sup>2</sup> – for by gaining power over something this vulnerable, no doors would be left closed on our transhuman mission to immortality.<sup>3</sup>

Like anything else, intimacy did not escape typification, objectification, and similar attempts of control through understanding.<sup>4</sup> Yet it can only go so far, for there are parts of our intimate spaces that are inscrutable even for us,

you were never here  
and yet it is the same fog  
you once got lost in  
the same cold you felt  
cycling through the rain  
cursing

do you remember the wind  
you used to control  
as a child  
that almost blew you off the  
tree  
yet made you feel grounded

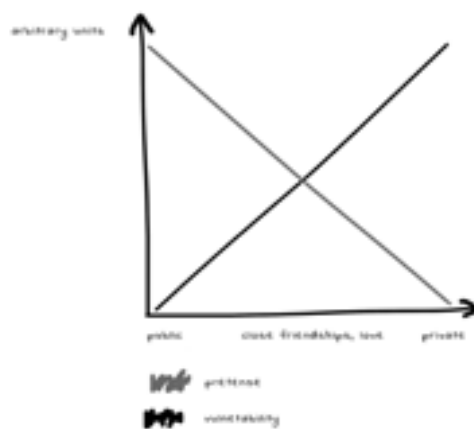
the world seemed to be endless  
the sky had no boundaries

the things now small  
were never high enough

and yet something  
stopped you from jumping  
that might not anymore

their carriers<sup>5</sup>, being so closely related to the subconscious we can hardly grasp them. Two weeks after moving back to Amsterdam, I went for a coffee with an old friend from high school who recently developed a passion for what she referred to as 'psychoanalytic linguistics'. The latest of her contemplations was on intimacy.

Intimacy, she noticed, works on multiple levels, equal in realness but different in the amount of vulnerability involved. The more vulnerable you can be in a certain environment, the closer you are to portraying yourself as a whole and the farther to the idea of yourself, created for the public.



A graph originally sketched on a napkin

Starting on the opposite side of the spectrum, public intimacy would be the kind that penetrates through the pre-established representation of oneself, created to avoid getting hurt. It is, nevertheless, limited in the amount of 'weaknesses' involved, and, due to its inherent contradiction, rarely applicable to reality. A person crying in public needs an adequate excuse. A guy calling his mom once per day can be caring but not lonely or lost. As an object, this would be represented by a photograph kept in a wallet or by books displayed on shelves.

Even deeper within us is situated the more protected one, the kind shared in close friendships and relationships. It is stronger due to the security of the environment where sharing your weaknesses does not result in devaluing your

strengths. This would be anything referred to as 'guilty pleasure'<sup>6</sup>.

The purest one in the sense of the most direct, real and without any embellishment is the one known only to its owner, fluctuating between our consciousness and unconsciousness. It is the one where you can feel sad as much as you want without the fear of affecting others. As an object, it would be represented by one's bed, pillow or plush toy.

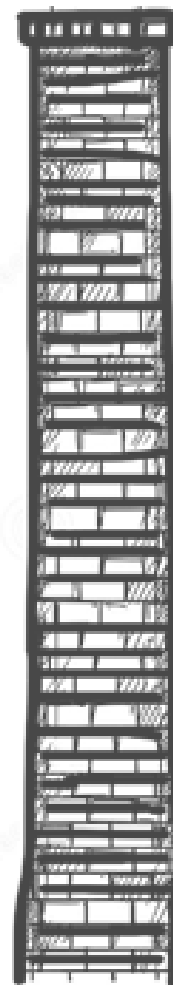
One of the conclusions I drew from our conversation was that intimacy is the world of no small talk, devoid of the 'comedy of greetings'<sup>7</sup>. It works through unpredictability, embracing misunderstandings and mistakes instead of eliminating them to confirm or refute the initial hypothesis. It comes with risk, that ultimately undesirable characteristic we tried to rid ourselves of for centuries yet have never succeeded. It presents that same uncertainty we tend to fight by turning the fear of the infinite into the comfort of the finite through the use of definitions even for things as subjective and evasive as aesthetic adjectives<sup>8</sup> or personal experiences. With labelling comes understanding, providing us with certainty, resulting in relief.

A → B → C → D

But how does this obsession influence one's personal space? In one chapter of *Hopscotch*, Cortázar briefly describes a kind of world, so often a topic of many dystopian writings – the perfectly functional world with no questions left unanswered, no unpleasantries to deal with:

*As far as everything else is concerned, one must be an imbecile, one must be a poet, one must have a harvest moon in order to spend more than five minutes on those nostalgias that can be handled so perfectly in just a moment. Every meeting of international tycoons, of men-of-science, each new artificial satellite, hormone, or atomic reactor crushes these false hopes a little more. The kingdom will be made out of plastic material, that is a fact. And the world will not have to be converted into an Orwellian or Huxleyan nightmare; it will be much worse, it will be a delightful world /.../ That is to say, a satisfactory world for reasonable people. And will any single person remain in it who is not reasonable?<sup>9</sup>*

Speaking of irrationality, another experience within the realm of intimacy is love. As much as it has been explored throughout the past in various forms of creative practices, its evasiveness rarely allowed for it to be ‘scientifically’ approached and for the case to be closed, files safely stored on a forgotten dusty shelf. Alain Badiou fearlessly dissected the modern kind of romance embodied in online dating apps where love is guaranteed but free of any risk, shielding one from undesired pain and disappointment.<sup>10</sup> Disregarding vulnerability as one of its integral parts, it wants to work as the kind of pain-free potion we know from fairytales, a one-way ticket to the world of happiness, excitement, and pleasure. It closely resembles what Kierkegaard saw as “the lowest kind of love” for it eliminates chance and selfishly provides us with what we ourselves lack from the other.<sup>11</sup> It is useful, efficient, practical, and most of all: safe. But are these truly the terms we would like to associate with something as intimate as love? Isn’t the surprise quality it possesses exactly the catalyst of excitement, shared intimacy, and an opportunity for new experience, personal growth? To me, this inadequate alternative sounds like watching the ocean on a big plasma screen instead of swimming in it. But at least you can’t drown.<sup>12</sup>



A few days ago I went looking for remote smokestacks detached from their initial function and misplaced in the fields. I cycled from Utrecht for two hours against tegenwind<sup>13</sup> which tossed me left and right, pushing me back with all its strength. I felt so present, like a child on top of a tree screaming into the wind, so powerful yet small in the presence of Life. I cycled by the main road, over the fields, in between the sheep, over the river towards the smokestack, peacefully standing on a small island, not minding the wind, not minding me.

What I find so beautiful in them is the way in which they represent a space in between our intimate (internal) and objective (external) reality, the conflict between something so innocent and human as stacking bricks and the other, its function, so industrial and depersonalized. Warm and greedy, emphatic and raw, they represent two sides of the humans in a constant fight. They embody an in-between space, making the intangible places conceived in the minds of the people into a physical, built and perceived environment. A kind of third space is created, embracing the existentialism of life and the absurdity of the mundane. And like a wild animal, it can never truly be grasped.

how curious you were

*agnes*

how innocent

when you tasted the shower with  
your tongue  
and it itched

when you drank grape juice out of  
a wine glass

hardly waiting to grow up  
even though

back then

the only thing you were afraid of  
was the darkness

you came so far

*inés*

why leaving now?

## Endnotes

- 1 Antonio Regalado, Elon Musk's Neuralink is neuroscience theater, MIT Press, 30. August 2020, <https://www.technologyreview.com/2020/08/30/1007786/elon-musks-neuralink-demo-update-neuroscience-theater/>
- 2 Philosopher's stone is a mythical alchemical substance capable of turning base metals such as mercury into gold and silver, with a goal of achieving immortality.
- 3 I acknowledge the act of generalisation behind this claim yet often a concept of much higher complexity and variety of goals can be narrowed down to a very simple quest wrapped in mysterious layers of "progress", and "improvement", deviating public focus from its main goal, often way less altruistic and democratic as presented. A slight exaggeration? Perhaps. But do ask yourself what Elon is doing on this beautiful morning.
- 4 Could an attempt of looking into someone else's intimacy be perceived as voyeuristic?
- 5 The word I initially wanted to use was "owners" but it made me question if something as evasive as intimacy can ever be truly owned, especially since the connotation of ownership is a particularly heavy one establishing a similar kind of control I criticized in text above.
- 6 The adverb guilty implies that one acknowledges the general disapproval regarding the activity in question and is, therefore, not fully comfortable with accepting it simply as pleasure, but is instead camouflaging it into a generally known concept in order to create some distance from it.
- 7 Julio Cortázar, *Hopscotch*, (New York: Random House, inc., 1966), 98
- 8 Some time ago I participated in a lecture by Isadora Stojanovič, on the empirical approach to aesthetic adjectives. During one part of the lecture she was discussing a difference between relative and absolute gradable adjectives (as the ones of scale mostly fall under this category), pointing out that while the latter's standard is given in advance (empty - full, open - closed), the former (long - short, big - small) require the context to provide one. Following this she tried to raise a question in which category would, then, aesthetic adjectives fit best? I found it immensely intriguing for it would never have crossed my mind to grade something this subjective or even intimate. But then again, I am just as baffled by the tendency of making psychology into an "objective science", eliminating exceptions by defining a finite number of "cases" and fitting individuals into them. Disapproving of psychoanalysis for not being scientific enough.
- 9 Julio Cortázar, *Hopscotch*, (New York: Random House, inc., 1966), 380
- 10 Alain Badiou; Nicolas Truong, *In Praise of Love*, (London: Serpent's Tail, 2012)
- 11 Søren Kierkegaard, *Kierkegaard's Writings, XVI, Volume 16: Works of Love*, (Princeton: Princeton Press, 1998)
- 12 in your emotions
- 13 Tegenwind, a type of headwind, is one of the first words I learned in Dutch and for which I believe there is no English translation for it must be felt in order to write about it and it is the kind only possible to experience in the plains of the Netherlands.



An example of an interview

*Øleg&Kaška is a polish duo identifying as an individual artist, a dreamy activist. They met at the University of the Arts Poznan (UAP) in the summer of 2018 and have been creating together ever since. Their work has been exhibited in places such as Brno, Prague, Warsaw, Wrocław, etc. in both solo and group exhibitions. As a part of their residency at Petrohranská Kolektiv, they will be working on their latest project, the Swamp, with which they will continue dealing with contemporary issues through their mythically activist approach. The second one of their two exhibitions at Jedna Dva Tři Gallery will be available for the audience until the 20th of August 2021.*

**Your work in this context is not a collaboration. How do you deal with the plurality and potential conflict of thoughts and impulses, desires and needs when it comes to creating?**

Øleg&Kaška: The person I created, which I call Øleg-and-Kaška, is like a performative stance. I put myself into a continuous performance by creating one artist figure who is like an imagined one. He or she is in a constant state of mind of creating art. The objects and the paintings this person is making are not the main things, they finalize after talking and thinking about stuff collaboratively. They are the final products of this process which is essentially the main part.

**You refer to yourself as a superorganism - the etymology of root “super” indicating something “above, over, on the top (of), beyond, besides, in addition to”.**

Øleg&Kaška: I wanted to create something that is a singular organism, I do not want to be competing with anyone. But it is also a statement - in the art industry competitiveness is very strong meaning the artists are constantly competing with each other. I wanted to create something of a collective with the two of us and make things together. It can be hard - when you are creating art, you sometimes need to give your personal data, not the identity you created, such as Øleg&Kaška. Identity is, therefore, also the topic I struggle with. Sometimes it can be hard with the agreements, contracts etc.

The adjective ‘super’ is used to emphasize a more collective approach. Making things together is crucial, that is why I use the word in the first place, to emphasize the collective and to create one person instead of two working together. It goes beyond collaboration.

***Somehow they don’t want to watch. Now in darkness, the world stops turning, ashes where their mind stops burning. So you children of the world, killing in the name of what? (Astralprayer, Ashes to Ashes, 2020)***

**In a lot of your projects, you work very hands-on, using media like painting, sculpture, and poetry to create an aesthetic that only amplifies the blurred line between reality and dreaming that is such a big part of your work. By playing with the expression often associated with that of a child (its prejudiced innocence etc.) in the context of deeply problematic issues, you create a contrast that makes the reflection on the issue not only urgent but stronger.**

Øleg&Kaška: The style and aesthetics I use came naturally. I consider myself a kind of 'dreamy activist'. It also has to do a lot with the characteristics of various generations - as I am in between the millennials and Generation Z, I noticed that in the latter escapism is really strong so I started using it as a tool. I am following the escapist way of thinking, mixing it with the surreal ... It is also strongly inspired by pop culture, especially the 80s and the 90s, tv-series and some kind of a melancholic quality which I thought was very strong among these generations.

A thing that might seem far from reality often turns out not to be. I am also dealing with contemporary issues and societal dilemmas but through the eyes of a child in a way, the dreamy ones.

**In works like IS IT TOO LATE NOW TO SAY SORRY?, Ashes to Ashes and The Smell of Eruption Project you are critically approaching the characteristics of a certain generation, mostly millennials concerning the responsibilities, the topics of identities etc. ... If your work is not meant to change, influence or direct in any way, what do you perceive as its aim? Is it self sufficient and if so, would you consider it narcissistic?**

Øleg&Kaška: I can imagine it being interpreted in a narcissistic way, but I think it is not about that at all. On the one hand, one could think that it is only about some kind of a strange emotionality, but I believe that this change can come through the immersive way of perceiving - when you dive deeply into these imaginary scenarios and environments. I also often use the word 'situations' because I create many different situations in which I place the viewers and at the first glance it can be something totally abstract while it is actually connected to a lot of stuff I have contemplated and most of the society has been dealing with. But I do not want it to be too serious either because I do not want to be perceived as the kind of artist who knows better. Mostly, I am asking questions to evoke a new way of thinking about reality and with it some artistic activism, of the 'dreamy activists' kind. So it might seem meaningless to some but I believe it has a lot of meaning, even simply as wishful thinking, placing wishes into this art. I do not want to be distant from the social dilemmas, quite the opposite, I am deeply engaged in them, but the way I express it is maybe a little bit different than what you would usually see.

**Similarly to What Slavoj Žižek's and Jean Baudrillard's theorized, you are reducing the distance we tend to establish from the disturbing reality by addressing it through the imaginary layer, be it dreams, myths, environments like a swamp.**

Øleg&Kaška: It started when I was living in Athens for six months. Because of the myths of the greek culture and their general approach to it, it felt like some kind of cemetery of old ideas, which had passed, yet people were still living with them. And it was a really strong experience for me. Afterwards, I started to work with myths and the past and *Ashes to Ashes* for example is a project that took place just after living in Athens - that is how I started to work with mythology. I am interested in how the myths are vanishing, how they appear in the first place, develop through time, and also what is their impact on contemporary societies. My current project, the Swamp, is kind of a mixture of Slavic and Japanese mythologies; I

was looking for some connections between these two seemingly faraway cultures. But looking closer, you can find a lot of similarities in them and I think that is the sense of the myth in general, that people are creating them to somehow understand the world better. Like your previous quote by Slavoj Žižek, I create fiction to understand something better. I found the same quality in myths, the old and the contemporary ones, so I started to develop them and use them as a tool to create our situations or environments.

**Would you say that the myth culture is still very active or is it more a thing of the past?**

Øleg&Kaška: It is definitely active, mostly because of the fake news which could be also perceived as mythological. It is really strong these days because it is also creating some kind of narration that often draws parallels with some kind of mythology. Because of the internet, it is very easy to access so many different narratives when it comes to reality, that fake news in a way falls under modern mythologies as well.

**The project you are working on as a part of your residency at Petrohradská Kolektiv is the Swamp. As a place, a swamp has a connotation of something that swallows, something mythical and dark, almost threatening. It is a place that also completely preserves whatever it chooses to host, mummifies it for eternity. Its stories, therefore, never truly disappear, they only accumulate throughout time.**

Øleg&Kaška: It is true - it is a symbol in itself but simultaneously also filled with symbolism from both the natural creations and the cultural ones deriving from those natural creations. It is interesting to perceive the swamp through time - I wanted to make mine timeless so it, as you said, mummifies some things that happen to fall into it, but also works like a living organism that decides what it wants to pull inside of itself ... The swamp which I am creating also has a lot of symbolism to it. I am also dealing with Christian folklore which is going to be mixed with the Japanese and Slavic ones. 'The bridge', for example, is a crucial part, which is somehow connected to the rest of the pieces which I created and just as well to the Japanese and Christian myths about the bridge which serves as the place in between. On the one hand, there is this physical world and on the other hand, it is more oneiric and abstract, full of ghosts and some kind of 'monsters'. In the Christian religion, the monster world is portrayed as Hell and the bridge plays an important role. There is a very popular image of two children, who are passing the bridge with an angel following, protecting them to walk safely over it from one world to another. It is very popular in Poland and every child gets one when they receive their communion.

**Considering spaces in between, the idea can be taken literally or more abstractly, even metaphorically. Your bridge is physical but in Japanese culture for example, such spaces are not graspable, not even necessarily perceivable. Is there a kind of a connection to that in your work as well?**

Øleg&Kaška: I was inspired by an old Japanese movie called Yabu no Naka no Kuroneko. It is taking place near a bridge as well and its main focus is on the revenge of two women brutally murdered by the passing soldiers. The women made a pact with the devil and

returned as Yūrei (similar to our ghosts) who started taking their revenge on soldiers. The heroines always appear near the bridge. The latter in Japanese culture is, as mentioned before, 'the place in between' and a lot of ghosts like Yōkai and Yūrei are emerging near them. It is kind of a symbolic way of appearing because they have to pass the bridge to enter the human world. Yōkais are the kind of spirits that have a special understanding of the world, natural disasters and so on. In ancient Japan, people did not know how to understand such things, so they invented some kind of ghosts that stood for various events. For example, there is Kappa, a combination of a human and a frog who lives both in the river and swamp and he is something similar to the Slavic vodyanoy, making people follow him into the water after which he drowns them.

**Speaking of artworks that approached seemingly inescapable regimes and world catastrophes from a fictional and mythical perspective, your work slightly resembles Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* and Jodorowsky's work but with less of a menacing and instead more playful undertone, like a lullaby. Do you draw any inspiration from other artists?**

Øleg&Kaśka: There are some artists in Poland, who are also working with these, let's say, narrative mythology strategies. For example, Aleksandra Waliszewska, a Polish painter strongly involved in Slavic mythology, and also Agnieszka Brzezańska who is mostly working with mythology from a feministic perspective. She is searching for the connection between feministic ideas in folklore and mythology, mostly Slavic because even though the current situation in Poland is very patriarchal, the mythology before Christianity was strongly connected to motherhood - mother, the 'creator of the world'. Christianity changed it, it took the Slavic myths and retold them for their own purpose - and so men became the ruling ones. Christian holidays, for example, are also often based on older Slavic stories, mostly determined by the seasons which is something I am researching now.

I would also like to mention Agnieszka Polska, who is making videos and films with a similarly dream-like approach. She is also using a lot of symbols and surreal language to talk about reality, politics, various issues and dilemmas.

**Going beyond the dreamy connotation, the title *The Sleep of Reason* project is also indicating the moment when reason is asleep, not paying attention, letting the irrational take over - is this a utopian or dystopian thought?**

Øleg&Kaśka: It is taken from Francisco de Goya, his aquatint with the same title, *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters*. I worked on it during the hard lockdown. Stuck in the flat, lacking creative ideas, everything was accumulating - I felt like being stuck in the mud. So it definitely has something dystopian to it but I also perceive it as an opportunity; to look forward and at the same time deep into yourself because, during the lockdown, I perceived home as a kind of a mirror. And from a, let's say psychoanalytic perspective [laughs], it might be a chance to deal with some stuff to make those monsters come out and face them. But it is not a thing that I would like to emphasize, it is only an interpretation.

**Despite it not being the main or most visible component of your work, humour still shines through in a very piercing and provoking way. In the self\_house\_residency project, you used the theme of the 58th Venice Biennial "May You Live In Interesting Times" in a context that, considering the world circumstances, makes the word "interesting" sound terribly naive and ignorant.**

Øleg&Kaśka: It is very important to me. It comes naturally as it is my way of perceiving things, taking distance from myself and art in general. Before I was talking about how to be instrumental as an artist - I do not want to be too serious with that so I use humour to provoke, some might perhaps think primarily to ignore. But in reality, I see it as a kind of an instrumental approach in a way that hopefully could pierce through. Everything is so dark nowadays - our thoughts and dreams are extremely dystopian so maybe humour is something we need.

**Stanisław Lem once wrote: "We don't know what to do with other worlds. This one is enough and we are already choking on it."**

**You are also referring to the Little Prince and astral elements as symbols of blind faith, the passive state of hope and consequent escapism. Still, as naive as the philosophy behind the Little Prince might seem, the focus there was not on escaping but on the necessity to see other planets to be able to truly see yours. For him, it was the only way to appreciate what used to be taken for granted - by subverting ignorance with comparison.**

Øleg&Kaśka: The little prince was mentioned by Daria Grabowska who wrote the text for the *Ashes to Ashes* exhibition. She used the figure of the Little Prince to create some kind of distance, a figure that could describe my approach in a way - searching for other planets to come back home. All these different narrations from fake news, to various strange stories, make me perceive the contemporary world as full of different myths ... what is also very important to me is to have hope - so looking at the stars, dreaming about them is in a way looking for hope and sharing it. It can be naive but nevertheless important. It is also not necessarily passive, it can be very active. Rebecca Solnit, the author of *Hope in the Dark*, was looking for positive narrations and perceiving hope as a tool to make changes. But hope is something lying deep in the dark and you have to first find it to be able to react.

This topic was also a big part of my exhibition in Gdansk - I created the Wishful Tree where the viewers could make a symbolic wish and hang it on it in the form of a ribbon. In this way it became active and it was interesting to give people the tool and opportunity to be a part of it, to enter this far away world, to somehow act. I am trying to include this more in the future, and find ways for them to act more. People were putting their hopes and wishes out there and especially after the lockdown, they truly needed it. It also tells something about my approach to art - I think of it as a kind of celebration to overcome certain issues but it is not too serious. Yet, on the other hand, it is very serious.

An example of a review

Alexandra Rose Howland  
Leave and Let Us Go  
FOAM, 17 September - 5 December 2021

An exhibition has recently opened at the FOAM museum in Amsterdam, which establishes a rather different attitude towards Iraq than we are used to through the often tragedy-oriented media. Artist Alexandra Rose Howland, who has been collaborating with publications such as National Geographic, The New York Times and Le Monde for almost a decade, provides an alternative approach to the usually militarily dominant depictions of conflict zones. By combining photographs and videos from more than fifty different perspectives on Iraq, she presents the country not only as a war zone but also as a place of diversity when it comes to people, mindsets and lifestyles in relation to the constant assertion of foreign desires and demands.

The exhibition begins on the wall by the stairs on the first floor of the gallery. With each step, it develops a story from one wall to another, like medieval tapestries, all the way to the door of the upper room, where the work explodes in eclectic sounds, colours and motifs. Right in front of the entrance, an excerpt from Aye Mansour's poem *I Dream of My Homeland* is written on a metal plate in words far removed from the reality of many of us, describing the dichotomy of boundless dreams and cruel reality that completely disarm the viewer in the next room. What is fiction to one person may be the reality to another.

As a connecting element of the exhibition, Alexandra used photographs, shot with the intention of documenting the route between the predominantly peaceful Erbil and Mosul, which was until recently considered as the ISIS caliphate in Iraq. The artist travelled a distance of 88 kilometres on the roof of a car, where she took a photo every 3 seconds and eventually assembled them together into a long panorama, a part of which (the end of the path with the Mosul mosque) is displayed on the gallery walls. For the exhibition, she then attached hundreds of photographs and videos collected from the archives of more than 50 Iraqis, thus showing their ways of living in a situation that asks for a constant redefinition of normal life. Through fragments of memories shines a new beginning, the reconstruction of the mosque in Mosul, which was demolished in an almost year-long struggle to take the city from the hands of the Islamic State.

The horrors of war are mixed with Snapchat videos, recordings of parties and selfies, which together with recognizable pop hits such as Nicky Jam and J. Balvin's X, create an extremely uncanny but oppressive atmosphere. The sound, which is constantly present in the background due to the videos, puts the situation in a new light because unlike the images we are used to through various media, it does not match what we already 'know'. Instead of the rational, it touches the viewer on an emotional level – and truly hits.

Alexandra, who moved to Iraq in 2017 to be able to portray and understand people in the zones of conflict firsthand, by including foreign and recent photographs presents a spectrum of views that together shape one image, further interpreted through the viewer's eyes. With it, she shows that the perception is not unequivocal and the answers are not one-sided. The narrative power is taken from the hands of foreign media and returned to the Iraqis, although in the end, the composition is still hers, as the author automatically directs and thus offers a



certain kind of interpretation through the selection of photographs and other excerpts for the exhibition. While a certain influence of hers is inevitable, Alexandra does not take it as an excuse, on the contrary – she gives the majority of the voice to the locals to show Iraq through the life they live, and not the way the spectacle-hungry audience would want it to seem.

In this context, it is important to mention the frequently noted (but often forgotten) essay *Against the Interpretation* of writer, philosopher, and activist Susan Sontag, which reminds us of the dangers of conclusions based on the fragments taken out of the context without acknowledging the bigger picture. Portraying ruins and soldiers as Iraq itself would certainly be a stereotype, even worse, it would confirm what we as viewers think we already know anyway. On the other hand, the depiction of the former as a part of the state as *also* or *one of*, represents reality without simultaneously reducing its complexity; which is why so many people decided to share their intimacy with thousands of (unknown) visitors – they wanted to show that Iraq is *more*.

The country has been at war for many generations yet still, we rarely consider that as an area of almost 440,000 km<sup>2</sup>, it varies in the amount of violence in different parts of the country and that people there, just like everywhere else, continue living their ‘normal’ everyday life. Videos from parties and selfies with filters tried to show exactly this; that reality consists of several aspects and it is important to give an equal voice also to the more ‘mundane’ ones that may not look spectacular but are just as big a part of the life of that culture.

Constant invasions, varying in names, beliefs and faces, but coinciding in the level of violence, unwaveringly undermine everything the inhabitants persistently build – over and over again, like a destructive wind you might expect but never know when exactly it will blow and with what force. Meantime, you live. And the exhibition *Live and Let Us Go* shows just that, while at the same time handing over the voice and the power from the hands of foreign media and photographers to the inhabitants to present their reality to us as they see (and live) it themselves.

One of the key parts of the exhibition is the title. *Leave and Let Us Go* expresses the fatigue and annoyance of the people whose country has been abducted by foreign policy, used as a testing ground for power and repeatedly opportunistically occupied in the name of ‘democracy’ (=thick, dark brown, flammable liquid) and then discarded when the interest in it was no longer there. Just like kindergarten children who choose friends based on their toys and after the initial excitement no longer care, politics here ignores morals, ethics, and promises, much less the horrific consequences it leaves behind. It doesn’t have to care because it knows it will do anything to keep those consequences from reaching it. Border, visa, wall.

The work is even more important in view of the recent withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan, Joe Biden's ‘end of the war’, which many people in the Middle East see as started by the same self-proclaimed saviours. Sweeping in front of your own door is the lesson of Alexandra's story; perhaps in the future, a travelling library could be included in army convoys, introducing home reading for the soldiers and their superiors, *The Little Prince* as a bedtime story; to better understand this basic humaneness, which we so often

(patronizingly) teach our children when we should train adults instead. Maybe then no one would want to 'help' anymore, at least not in the way America seems to understand it.

Due to the speed of light with which the news is spread and read, social networks, influencers and various biased media platforms have incredible power in shaping an individual's view of the world. Unfortunately, those who try to portray issues such as areas of conflict differently (from various perspectives, more broadly and by handing over the microphone to the affected party) do not have much room left for expression. This makes it all the more important that world-renowned and recognizable cultural institutions such as FOAM make it possible for artists to give voice to those who are otherwise deprived of it and to show what generally remains hidden. For Alexandra Rose Howland, art is thus not just an expression, but above all a tool of ethical and political action, and one of the general steps in the right direction.

An example of a press release

## STIGTER VAN DOESBURG

Press release

Melissa Gordon

Resistances

22. 1. 2022 - 26. 2. 2022

In her first solo exhibition at the Stigter van Doesburg Gallery, Melissa Gordon (Cambridge, MA, USA, 1981) continues with her *Female Readymade* series investigating the ambiguity and elusiveness of the concepts related to artworks and the voices and bodies behind them. *Resistances* as an exhibition is a continuation of her fascination with the notion of authorship and valuation looked at through the fascinating lens of feminist interruptions; women are not here to be muses, they're here to interrupt.

For many years the artist has been making paintings focusing on surfaces, exploring the stories, bodies, and context behind the perceptible work. With questions like 'What and who is left out of history and why?' or 'Who gets to speak?' she resumes her artistic investigation of gender, perspective, and feminism; the topics that, no matter how often discussed, are still not acknowledged enough, and the concepts that are, like Gordon's practice, inherently 'in progress'.

Within the fixed space of the gallery multiple walls are erected - be it a brick wall, a chain-link fence or a safety mesh, the artist silkscreens these physical borders onto the paintings. That way, the limits of actual spaces are brought into the conversation through the paintings and the elements that are a part of them. The viewer is placed in the middle of an ongoing investigation, finding clues in things like letters, hooks, handles, pieces of clothing, and mythological monsters, all used and applied in a different manner, referring to other gestures made in her previous work.

The common thread of the latest exhibition, resistance, can be a state of mind, an ability, an act, or a property. While it represents many different things, it is never passive. It's in its nature to speak (up) and, like Gordon's work, it questions, inspects, and explores. Resistance also isn't truly independent for it always consists of two: a resistor and the thing it is resisting, which indicates that it exists *in relation* to something. By combining various techniques such as silkscreen, photography, painting, and the use of (found) objects into a kind of 'forensic collages' the artist questions the seeming rock-solid state of history, knowledge, and the concept of canon, using the accidental and forgotten components to introduce different, perhaps less present angles the issues into the conversation. Everything existing has a network of factors influencing it and by bringing those to the front, Gordon gives space and voice to the forgotten, accidental, and marginalized.

Melissa Gordon is an artist born in Cambridge, US and currently based in Brussels. She received her BFA at the Rhode Island School of Design, continued her education at the Cooper Union School of Art in 2002 and completed her post-graduate studies at De Ateliers in Amsterdam in 2005. She has exhibited both in Europe and US with the most notable shows at the Towner Gallery, Eastbourne, Vleeshal, Middelburg, Wiels, Brussels, and the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam. She is currently a professor of painting at the Oslo National Academy of the Arts.