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Returning a Dislocated Child's Body to the Scene of a Crime

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The 'Event' considered here is my 'abduction' as a child by my parents out of the Netherlands as part of the post war European migration to Australia in the 1950s. The migrant exists in many
ways in-between cultures and this also holds for the migrant child. This event created a traumatic split in me as an eight year old boy. It was one that occurred to many children of migrants who left Europe post WWII. The migration in turn engaged with an unspoken racist complicity with Australia's 'White Australia Policy'. The 'white' Dutch were a good fit for this migration and thus the focus here applies to both 1950s Australia and the Netherlands. This article deals with how I expressed the two aspects of dislocation and racism made evident by this event through my art in a collaborative exhibition *The Unwanted Land* (see Figure 1). As this art is primarily visual, I have included a photo gallery of 28 images at the end of this text to reference and support this discussion.

Initiated by Dutch artist Rudi Struik and World Art Studies theorist Dr Kitty Zijlmans, the exhibition took place at the Museum Beelden Aan Zee in The Hague, Netherlands, from October 22, 2010 to February 13, 2011. The installation included a focus on child migration. For Zijlmans:

> Migration takes a variety of forms: in addition to the forced migration resulting from racism, war, famine and other disasters, there is also what we have dubbed the 'small migration' to describe the experiences of those people who, in search of a better life, decided to try their luck in another country, such as the many Dutch people who emigrated to Canada, Australia and New Zealand after the Second World War. The children of these migrants form a specific group within this spectrum (Zijlmans, 2010: 12).

As Struik also points out: 'Migration has many sides, one of which is the rarely discussed perspective of the child' (Struik, 2011: 84).

By physically returning to the 'scene of the crime' of my childhood abduction, long forgotten details re-surfaced. Chris Brewin's 'Situational Accessible Memory' is at work here. There was on my part a compunction to confront racist comic images that had been hard-wired into me through my pre-English boyhood comic readings. I wanted to bring back into view a 'first-world' complicity to the way race had influenced my Australian youth. There were also racist traces of this experience discernible in the 'charged' avatar of the Golliwog doll. Such uncovering of the past also speaks to the present, to who I am now and as written in my artists statement that accompanied my exhibition: 'I am interested in revealing the mechanics of denial and the superficiality of the corporate surfaces that are part of our current digital situation' (de Bruyn,
It was Sara Ahmed's mobile and multi-faceted functioning of 'home' (Ahmed 1999) that prompted me to perform at all these levels at once and to seek ways of connecting the local to the global.

Although I present my own experiences, arguments and artworks in this examination of childhood migration, it was the community of production, in its difficulties and triumphs, my relationships with my fellow contributors and the professional quality of their practice, where my narrative found dialogic expression. These collaborating artists were Tiong Ang (Indonesia/Amsterdam), David Bade (Curaçao/Zaandam), Sonja van Kerkhoff (New Zealand/Leiden), Renée Ridgway (United States/Amsterdam) and Rudi Struik (Canada/Leiden) who also had a curatorial role and had invited me in (see Figures 2 and 3). Apart from Struik the curatorial team were Kitty Zijlmans (Leiden University) Dineke Huizenga, interactive facilitator (Amsterdam), Dick van Broekhoven and Alessandra Laitempergher (Museum Beelden aan Zee, BAZ) with Carl van Laer (BAZ).

For Struik 'The Unwanted Land' is an interdisciplinary artistic and research project reflecting upon the issue of migration, and national and international identities (Struik, 2009). Zijlmans describes The Unwanted Land as a 'project exhibition' (Zijlmans, 2010: 10) influenced by 'An Architecture of Interaction' (Droge Wendell et al. 2006) to produce an 'interactive and dynamic exhibition environment' (Zijlmans 2010: 9) connecting Kraus's expanded field (Krauss, 1979) to the developments in multimedia and installation art. 'The core of this exhibition is a scaffolding structure. On, beneath and around this structure are a variety of installations that deal with awareness and impact of migration' (Zijlmans, 2010: 11) (see Figure 3). Reflecting The Unwanted Land exhibition's innovative interactive approach, the Museum Beelden Aan Zee won the prize for the best exhibition in the 'de Montblanc Museum Awards' for 2010.

The main area in which I worked was marked with a street sign 'de Verstoten Hoek' (see Figure 10) nominated as the rejected/marginal corner, which was a reaction to coming in from the outside with suitcase in hand; there was a need to adapt not only to the structures provided but to the ideas and environments the other artist had already staked out prior my arrival. This position struck me as another migration, with its small steps, small victories and small gestures as the lie of the land and the rules of engagement slowly emerged. There was also this immersive daily shifting between Dutch and English in thinking and speaking that tempered these collaborations and required a few weeks of practice. My position reproduced again the migrant's creativity, also part of the artist's toolbox, of 'making do', making the most of what I had, working things out,
changing on the run. This is the aspirant migrant's processing of wounds from liability to blessing. This DIY approach had me re-painting tables from a previous show, and ordering large glass sheets to keep my letters in place on these tables and making curtains out of caution tape (see Figures 11 and 28). The idea of a Verstoten Hoek (see Figure 10), a marginalised or rejected space, embraces my ambivalence, echoing locally some of the images conjured up by the more global ambiguity of an *Unwanted Land*. This ambiguity is also present in the exhibition's dirty scratched images, gleaned from my 16mm film *Boerdery* (10 minutes, 1985) that showed me both 'turning away' from the camera and hesitantly 'turning to' the landscape (see Figure 1).

My contribution returned to the Netherlands the Dutch language racist comics that had moulded my childhood view of race, a view that had proved a 'good fit' to the official Australian Government 'White Australia Policy' enabling my family's entry. I transformed images from these comics into children's toys (see Figures 19, 20, 21, 22, 23 and 28) blocks that the public could take out of their box, handle and re-arrange (see Figure 26). I wanted these interactive sculptures to ask: How does it feel to handle these racist ideas? By manufacturing such tactile moments I re-performed the mechanics by which these 'unethical' views had so 'naively' entered my 'pre-ethical' body. I had witnessed this ambivalent register imbued productively into the toys of Jan Svankmajer's animation films, particularly in his feature length Alice.

Numerous letters sent by my young ex-classmates in 1958-9 and a letter I sent back in 1959 were also presented, to express a child's view of his 'removal', placed on a series of tables draped with the red, white and blue of the Dutch flag, and viewable under glass. My own letter was a text, stating that all was well but that I now had few toys and that I had enjoyed my time on the boat more than my landing in Australia. This 'copy' that my mother still had was a draft of the final sent letter, with words crossed out and re-written under her guidance. She had steered me into putting a brave face on my homesickness, but my ambivalence remained evident in the crossed-out words and re-phrasings (see Figure 19).

The wooden 'puzzle' block sculptures that formed the installation's spine were titled 'White Australia Policy' (see Figure 16) to express the racist complicity between the land left and the land entered. Blackboards and chalk constructed the installation's dimmed cave walls, performing as the child's medium of expression and 'education', as mobile and ephemeral a graffiti medium as the prevalent contemporary digital screen.

The stereoscopic videos which played on three boxed screens on metal stands placed through the
installation (see Figures 23 and 24) looked like street signs. They gave homage to both the 'kykdoos' dioramas of childhood and the Peepshows and Tromp-L'Oeils of Samuel van Hoogstraten (Dordrecht, 1627-1678) -the 'new media' of the Dutch golden age. These were images that later found their way into my Telescope (75 minutes, 2012) and my short found footage videos Oz@1950 (9 minutes, 2011) and WAP (11 minutes 2013). The Golliwog was used in this installation as an avatar for the White Australia Policy, since related 'Victorian' colonial views of race had formed both this policy and this doll. The East Timorese Fretilin 'freedom fighter' doll (see Figure 17) was identified as an empowering 'rebranding' of the oppressive Golliwog similar to the Australian migrant's use of the term 'Wog' as a badge of honour. Collectively these objects document the research and critical deconstruction of the hard wiring process that produced these views in a young Dutch boy, and influenced his assimilation as a 'New Australian'.

A commemorative plaque marked my place of disappearance as Aden, in the Red Sea (see Figures 4 and 5):

Artist Dirk de Bruyn was 8 years old when he migrated with his parents to Australia. The confusion he felt is present in his art. A Copper commemorative plaque for example reads: here lies the ghost of Dico de Bruyn, disappeared 17 October 1958 from the Johan van Oldenbarnevelt. De Bruyn indicates here the ship which took him to Australia, and where the Dutch child made way for the Australian boy (Stoop, 2010).

Performance

A number of screenings and performances were also scheduled. This included a multimedia performance of LanterNfanten (3 screen 40 minutes 2009-2012) in which the films included images from Sjors en Sjimmie and TinTin comics. These were manipulated 'live' as if struggling with the trauma of their memory, as if trying to physically re-order this 'mental imagery' (see Figure 9). This was punctuated by the hurling of incomplete sentences part Dutch/ part English, a catatonic trance-like act occupying the migrant's traumatic liminal in-between space. As Rosa Ronsdorf describes: 'LanterNfanten is a performance with three projectors. With this De Bruyn creates an absorbing space in which time is disrupted and compressed as a kind of personal examination of bodily trauma and cultural expulsion' (Ronsdorf, 2011).
Such a confronting combination of sounds engaging with poetry and cries was also used in the performance 'Homunculus' (see Figure 8) on opening night on 22 October 2010 (see Figures 6, 7). In this performance I dressed in a bright orange suit as used in David Bade's sculptures, completely wrapped, intertwined, in police and caution tape. For Bade these suits were used to suggest the Guantanamo Bay Detention Camp, the most un-wanted land in the world. This performance was about invoking, bringing back a violated dislocated body to the 'scene of the crime', to shock the audience directly with the visceral impact of my childhood's split, its dislocation and disorientation. I was pushed around in a wheelchair yelling out half sentences and ended up writhing and moaning on the floor in 'De Verstoten Hoek' stuttering incomplete phrases. Martin Arnold describes stuttering as a condition in which 'a message that is in conflict with what is being said wants to be expressed' (in MacDonald, 1998: 362).

Golliwog

The Golliwog was a contentious and confronting part of my contribution. The Golliwogg (original spelling) was created in England by Florence Upton and was based on a 'Minstrel Doll' from her childhood in New York. Her children's book The Adventures of Two Dutch Dolls and a Golliwogg was published for Christmas 1895 (Upton & Upton, 1895). Out of Upton's hands the Golliwog became a more negative character, as Enid Blyton's stories demonstrate. The Golliwog's role is best introduced through the explanatory emails I sent to the other collaborators and two other responses (ccd to the group) to Sonja van Kerkhoff who initially found the use of Golliwogs to be offensive and uncomfortable. As this was a collaborative exhibition, it is important here to represent the nature of my communication with the group therefore presenting work in progress:

Email: 7 September 2010
'I am planning to hang up some Golliwogs (black dolls) inside the space near a sign that says -De Verstoten Hoek- and I mean hang with a noose. This can be contentious- for me it connects to the continual self-hanging that is still occurring amongst young Aboriginal men in police custody in Australia but it also connects to the 'White Australia Policy' aspects of my text. I also have some police/danger cording off tape that I wish to place near these 30cm hanging dolls, which further connects to a colonial racist history and also current issues around colour. For example it is illegal to sell Golliwog dolls in shops in Australia because of their
racist nature' (Dirk de Bruyn).

Email: 8 September 2010
'I must say it is this feeling of un-comfortableness that I am trying to reproduce and it is of value to me that even the idea of this can have a repressive effect' (Dirk de Bruyn).

Email: 9 September 2010
'You bring up a lot of relevant issues that are intertwined in this agitprop for me. I gamble a quick reply: my strategy is not to appropriate symbolism from aboriginal culture but from artefacts that relate to the White Australia Policy (which can also be considered a nineteenth century Anglo- Victorian invention) and the world I grew up in. I am interested in naming those traces and folding them back on themselves; this is very confronting and uncomfortable for me. I do not think of it as naïve- although I do think there is value in recognizing some kind of childish innocence embedded in all this- because it is about childhood for me and it is about the dolls of my childhood. The worry is that it is read as politically incorrect. I am walking on glass and your comments underline this. To contextualize further: A connection that I also want to make is that the 'do not enter' or 'caution' tape that is used to cordon off crime or accident scenes has the same candy stripes with black writing that recreates in textual and graphic form the same candy stripe golliwog or minstrel colour code. The fact that these graphics have been chosen to indicate 'danger' and 'keep out' I use as a fertile connection to comment on my culture's attitude to threat and repression…' (Dirk de Bruyn).

In the final exhibition I did not hang these golliwog dolls by a noose as planned but, instead, placed a number of them sticking out of an old discarded suitcase (see Figures 13 and 18) resting on a Kuifje (TinTin) comic-book 'Cokes in Voorraad', to highlight the implicit racism that was migrating with me to Australia. 'Cokes in Voorraad' translates as 'Blacks in the Hold', although the English version was actually named The Red Sea Sharks. This shift offered a further racist spin as the sharks signified the Arab Slave Traders, the villains of the piece, trading in African slaves. What is missing here is the long history of European complicity in the slave trade so integral to the American colonies. In terms of the installation's narrative this comic was released in 1958, the year of my own 'abduction', and situated itself in part in the Red Sea, the region
nominated on my funeral plaque as the place where 'Dico de Bruyn' disappeared, at Aden, while in transit to Australia.

The doll that was hung by a rope was a white rabbit with its pants pulled down around its legs (see Figure 10). The blackboard, along with other texts included an 'equation' relating paedophilia to slavery (see Figure 12). Although not hanging, one Golliwog in that suitcase had a noose around her neck (see Figure 18) and another was nailed to the blackboard, next to a Fretilin 'freedom fighter' doll, also nailed to the blackboard (see Figure 17). This Fretilin doll is a significant inclusion, demonstrating that a Golliwog could be rebranded as a gesture of empowerment, in the same way the word 'Wog' was taken up in Australia by migrants as a badge of ownership, honour and difference, in response to its original denigrating and stigmatizing function in 1950's Australia. The Timorese doll also suggests a tentative connection to Dutch East Indies colonialism from the 1600s on and the Surinamese migration to the Netherlands in the 60s. Marlou Schrover talks of the Suriname Immigrant reaction to the Zwarte Piet (Black Peter) part of St Nicholas celebrations in the 70s and 80s, which has since abated (Schrover, 2010: 42). This period also marks a shift in the Sjors en Sjimmie Comic, with Sjimmie becoming more pro-active, losing his stutter and skin colour morphing from black to brown.

Response from Critics

The critical issue brought to the exhibition was not only the pain of separation but also the complicity with a racist ideology of a White Australia Policy for which the racism in the Dutch Comics had groomed me, and in which the Golliwog had figured. This is about returning to its source - the racism that had been formed in me as a child, hard-wired views that I had to ethically process growing up in Australia. Related impacts of assimilation and the White Australia Policy on both migrant and indigenous communities in Australia have been discussed elsewhere (de Bruyn, 2011: 118; 2013). One critic recognised the pain but was silent on the racism, another situated the racism only in Australia and another ignored the Golliwog and comics to focus on the almost hidden commentary of St. Nicholas.

Jacob Hoekman identified the pain of my abduction but not the 50s racism: 'His departure from the Netherlands was a shock with the impact of a kidnapping. He shows that in his work. In a dimly lit room stands a suitcase, from which spring a child's relentless, painful sobbing, while fragmented bits of film with the sounds of war and destruction impart psychedelic effects. The suitcase with its belongings palpably delivers a child's defeated spirit, as the ground disappears
from beneath his feet. Boundaries dissolve completely as a child longs for certainty. All that can now be trusted are letters from his former classmates- 'I have been skating already', 'Is it also cold in Australia?' until this lifeline too dries up. De Bruyn's vision is clear; migration is not the feast some people think, and often does not lead to a better life' (Hoekman, 2010).

But this was not the only message this Rip Van Winkle wanted to return to his homeland 50 years on to a culture struggling with Geert Wilders' new racism.

Interestingly, the review in Kustbeeld that does pick up on the racism card gets it wrong (van Put, 2010). Roos van Put correctly points out that as a small boy I was scared of black people, that I was worried that they would put me in a pot and turn me into soup (see Figure 21). My argument presented in this installation is that these racist Dutch comics inculcated such attitudes in me, attitudes that I had to exorcise from my body as an adult. I had to dismantle them and name them for what they were and this art-making was part of that process. But van Put says that I migrated from Europe to Australia, and neatly avoids any Dutch complicity in such racist views. What is realised in such innocent or calculated (or somewhere in-between) misreading is that blinkered visceral act of denial also present in racism itself, in its everyday performance.

Although Sanneke Huisman wrote about the 'moving and vulnerable' (Huiszman, 2011) memories of my abduction from the Netherlands, she also found the use of the Saint Nicholas books clichéd: 'while logical, a bit too obvious'. This had been one reason I had sheltered such memorabilia more deeply inside the exhibition space so that the issues of a hard-wired racism performed on me were expressed more directly through the comic book pages of Suske en Wiske, TinTin, Sjors en Sjimmie and Flip en Flap. Huisman's commentary can be read as a deft denial, indicating a lack of ownership, the side-stepping of any recognition of the comic's racist traces that I had brought back with me to my and their place of origin in this installation. As clichéd and everyday the Saint Nicholas connection may be to daily life in the Netherlands, Huisman's response does not address the racist hard-wiring performed on an 8 year old boy by these comics and those children's songs about Black Peter, Saint Nicholas's helper, whose job it is to punish any naughty children with a stick.

Finally, my experiences of childhood migration remain in-between and viewed in different ways from an Australian or Dutch perspective. Certainly my Australian art has never focused on comic books and it is only recently that I have examined indigenous issues directly. The gap between childhood and adolescence that my migration straddled opened up a unique view on how
influences like comics on the pre-ethical child can have implications for the formation of racist views in adulthood.

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