Tangled Histories, Braided in the Present
on *Ghost of a girl* by Heidi Voet

The Atlantic Wall in Raversyde on the Belgian Coast is a well-preserved piece of Second World War architecture that was intended to protect Nazi-occupied Europe from an Allied invasion. This site consists of a network of tunnels and paths with bunkers and artillery emplacements partly hidden among the dunes. Now a museum, in most of the bunkers you can see seemingly realistic scenes with dummies dressed as German soldiers. The visitor route sheds light on the daily activities of the military personnel, their defence strategy and their weapons and munitions.

When visiting the site, Heidi Voet experienced this display of war as paternalistic and Eurocentric. She remarked that references to the wider international context are absent and that no attention is paid to the impact of war on the rest of the population. The artist interpreted the current presentation as a 'normative' account of a historic event that merely highlights the actions of men. Women only appear in pictorial roles as portraits and pin-ups on the walls in the dioramas. No information is provided on the role and position of women in the Second World War.

With the work *Ghost of a girl*, realized within the scope of the *Private Tag* group exhibition (18 September to 13 November 2016) at the Atlantic Wall Museum, Heidi Voet attempts to place the consequences of the Second World War in a global and contemporary context. She also shifts the focus away from the armed male soldier by introducing feminine elements to the dioramas, thus increasing the visibility of the other, overlooked half of the population.
In *Ghost of a girl*, Heidi Voet alters the appearance of fifteen of the German soldiers by removing their hats, an act that is traditionally seen as a sign of respect, and replacing them with blonde wigs. The artist thus makes subtle changes to an existing museum setting once intended to reinforce the experience of this historic place, thereby subverting its narrative. At the start of the visit, the visitor receives an explanation of the daily life and routine activities of German soldiers during the Second World War. Heidi Voet discreetly introduces a number of feminine wigs from the beginning and explicitly strengthens their presence further along the route building to a crescendo.

Each wig is based on a specific image of a woman whose biography is linked to recent armed conflict in countries such as Syria, Afghanistan and Nigeria. During the preparatory stage, Heidi Voet set off in search of women whose life had been drastically affected by a recent war. She collected biographies and photos of women active in those conflict areas and made a selection based on their geographical origin without taking into account any moral selection criteria. Therefore, the wigs refer to women associated with oppressive political systems, for instance Syrian actress Nadine Tahseen (born 1978, Damascus) and Dima Kandalaft (born 1979, Damascus), or to women who actively fought against such regimes, including Afghan judge and human rights activist Marzia Basel (born 1968, Kabul), who

clandestinely educated girls during the Taliban regime. Women who strive for independence of minority groups, such as an anonymous Kurdish fighter of the all-female resistance organisation the Women's Protection Units in Syria, and the Kurdish politician and women's right activist Sebahat Tuncel (born 1975, Yazihan), also served as a source of inspiration. There are also references to women who were forced to emigrate with their parents as a child and have developed into artists or musicians abroad, such as Helly Luv (born 1988, Urmia). Voet also pays attention to the many Nigerian women who fled the terror of Boko Haram.

Heidi Voet decided to paint a more complex image of war by referring to different angles in areas of armed conflict. By focusing attention on gender, she points out that even in the traumatic context of war, both men and women are expected to perform stereotypical roles, and are likewise portrayed in these same roles. War affects all participants in society, who can play either supportive or active roles.

In the context of the Second World War, *Ghost of a girl* questions how the role and position of women at that time have been historicized. After remaining underexposed for several decades, these aspects have received increased attention in recent years as a result of historical research and popular literature. For example, *The Unwomanly Face of War* by Belarusian author Svetlana Alexievich, a collection of stories about the one million Russian women who served in the Red Army, was awarded the 2015 Nobel Prize in Literature.

Hairstyles are powerful signifiers that address topics such as gender identity and ethnicity. How hair is worn is frequently determined by social and religious conventions all over the world and employed as signifiers to reinforce the connection within an ethnicity or to express an ideology, among other things. In many African communities, hair affirms somebody's identity or social status. African hair is therefore manipulated, braided, turned or modelled in a variety of ways depending on the kind of ethnic group the person belongs to. [1]

As one’s hair is associated with traditions and social patterns, changing hairstyle is often a means to resist conventions. The Flapper Girls or Garçonnes, for example, were a new generation of self-confident American and European women in the 1920s who wore bob cuts to protest the traditional role women were expected to hold. And later Angela Davis's Afro-bob was a demonstration of self-awareness, feminism and non-compliance with the social order.

Hair has a particularly strong symbolic function in Jewish culture, particularly relevant to the WWII context in which Voet's work intervenes. "Among Orthodox Jews, hairstyling and rituals serve as a means of social control and group identity as well as denote membership in a group and marital status. For married woman, hair is considered to be an alluring sexual attribute and must be covered as a part of following the customs concerning *tziniyoot* (modesty). Orthodox men submit to specific Talmudic injunctions against shaving the "four

corners of the face", which is why beards are the custom.'' Men and women alike follow strictures that control how hair is worn, cut and shown in public and private and in ''addition to these gender specific taboos, all Jews are enjoined of cutting their hair during mourning." [2]

Hair is a remarkable trait only shared by mammals. As Mary Douglas states in *Purity and Danger* (1966), hair is the part of the body that quickly evolves from an experience of beauty to repugnance if it is disorganized or not located on the place where we expect it to be. From the experience of the seductive, sexualized locks of a young woman changes dramatically when faced with hairs of strangers in a shower or on sheets in a hotel. These various characteristics mean hair becomes a particularly potent symbol that Voet employs to discuss the complex of gender, national, cultural and racial identity, and how it has been suppressed, oppressed and exploited. After all, we should not forget the ''Nazi's use of hair taking as an explicit form of dehumanization''[3] at Auschwitz. As Deborah Pergamont reveals ''hair was not only shorn from the heads of corpses immediately after their removal from the gas chambers, but also from prisoners selected for labor when they entered the camp. The loss of hair deprived prisoners, particularly women of their individual identity and worth and degraded them to the point that they were not capable of normal human reactions like resistance against tyranny or physical abuse.''(4) She also notes that the shorn hair was sold to wigmakers. By reversing this act and applying specific hairstyles to the Nazi soldiers depicted at Raversyde, Voet's work touches on these practices; her gesture humanizes, sexualizes, and alters their usual identities, thereby revealing how the museum display itself has to varying degrees been sanitized.

'Patterns of globalisation are also reflected in Voet's production of the work. The wigs used in *Ghost of a girl* were made in China where young girls sometimes sell their long hair for the purpose. The hair is then traded on markets in Chengdu, washed and colored in line with the desired identity of its future owner. Among the wigs are those braided by Parisian hairdresser Aline Tacite who created the traditional Nigerian hairstyles and is an active advocate of natural textured hair among women of black and mixed cultural identity. The creations are based on the work of photographer Okhai Ojeikere who documented hairstyles in his homeland of Nigeria for forty years. By referring to various authentic styles worn by Nigerian women, Heidi Voet demands attention for the rich cultural-historical context from which they originate, while creating a nuanced distinction between the modern and the traditional. Reality is once again shown to be more complex. Voet is aware of the precarious situation in which traditional African hairstyles find themselves. Colonial domination, modernity and Western ideals have resulted in the denial of African identity. Women straighten their curly hair by chemical and mechanical means or wear a straight-hair wig. Michelle Obama, for instance, adopted an increasingly brushed and sleek hairstyle when she was First Lady, thus conforming to the dominant beauty ideal. [5] By referring to traditional Nigerian hairstyles photographed by Okhai Ojeikere, Heidi Voet highlights both the experience of female refugees in Nigeria and Western ethnocentrism.

The surreal scenes of *Ghost of a girl* succeed in exposing complex connections between past and present armed conflicts. It is a powerful statement, revealing the balance of power in interhuman relations at the micro level, and makes the dominant structures and cyclical economic processes tangible within globalisation at a macro level. After all, several present-day conflicts in Africa, the Middle East and Asia are the result of the search for stability after the as yet unresolved process of decolonisation and the acquisition of independence that began following the Second World War.

But first and foremost, Heidi Voet employs *Ghost of a girl* to raise awareness about the way we view the Other, in other words: to raise ethnic and gender-related issues. Her intervention indirectly questions the privileges of one gender over the other as well as the superiority of one nation. It questions the Nazi ideology and in fact any ideology that formulates strict role patterns between men and women. During the Nazi regime, the gender roles were aimed at the creation of the so-called *Volksgemeinschaft*, or ''people's community''. Within this Aryan society, men had to be valiant and ready to defend their fatherland, while women had to give birth to as many children as possible and perform the role of mother and housekeeper. With her intervention, Heidi Voet criticizes these polarising ideas about gender and questions our tendency to understand the world on the basis of stereotypical patterns of thought and Western dualistic hierarchies.

The artist is aware of recent psychoanalytical research regarding gender identity that has been conducted in the footsteps of Lacan and the post-structuralists. Gender identity is dissociated from biological characteristics and it is stated that gender is a construction that is determined by generally accepted sociological patterns and cultural standards within society. Male and female identity are appropriated and repeated. American philosopher Judith Butler calls this process the performativity of gender. One of her preferred examples to demonstrate performativity is transvestism, as it questions the notion of true gender identity as something internal that is expressed. In the case of transvestism, the outward appearance does not match the biological sex and the internal essence often associated with it. On the one hand, transvestism is a parody of gender, but on the other hand it reveals what gender actually means: according to Butler, it demonstrates that all manifestations of gender, including “being a man/woman”, are in fact performances. [6]

The hybrid human figures created by Heidi Voet bear an outward resemblance to transvestism, but are essentially not related to it. The central question of *Ghost of a girl* is not in the least gender identity. Heidi Voet deconstructs male figures and constructs a new hybrid identity by adding feminine elements to these figures. However, she combines masculine and feminine elements as a kind of restorative act to the apparent gender imbalance portrayed in these dioramas mostly populated by men. Her work also points to how the pervading and on-going inequality is starkly polarized in times of conflict, while symbolically beginning to undo it.

In this work, Heidi Voet has transgressed certain boundaries, taking the risk of surpassing existing structures and thresholds. This transgression has resulted in a new hybrid identity, which makes us think beyond gender-related and racial differences. Just like transvestism makes use of disguises to undermine the distinction between external physical and internal psychological characteristics, Heidi Voet employs a form of caricature or parody in *Ghost of a girl* to exaggerate or magnify existing gender-related and racial elements of the history display. She does so in a playful, humorous rather than mocking manner, yet with great critical precision.

The radical inversion of reality or the depiction of contrasting components is a visual strategy often used by Heidi Voet. In her images, she combines seemingly incompatible elements in a surprising manner, which proves them to be interrelated. She allows contradictions to enter her images in order to neutralize or surpass them, using the paradoxes of everyday reality as a basis. In these ways, Heidi Voet's intervention dispels idealized images, illusions and ideologies.

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[1] Batulukisi, Niangi, ''Hair in African Art and Culture,'' in *Hair in African Art and culture*, Museum for African Art, New York, Prestel Verlag, Munchen, 2000

[2] Pergament, Deborah, 'It's Not Just Hair: Historical and Cultural Considerations for an Emerging Technology'' in *Chicago-Kent Law Review* vol. 75. Issue 1. , 1999, p 47. Available at: http://scholarship.kentlaw.iit.edu/cklawreview/vol75/iss1/4

[3] Ibid. p 49.

[4] Ibid

(5)Interview with Heidi Voet on 28 December 2016 in Ghent

[6] Judith Butler. *Genderturbulentie*. Samenstelling en redactie Annemie Halsema en Marije Wilmink, Boom, Parrèsia, Amsterdam, 2000, p.15.