

The World at Arm's Length (A Letter In Lockdown)

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Today I would have premiered a new performance-lecture for the opening of my solo show *All But War Is Simulation* in Berlin. The exhibition is still postponed indefinitely due to the current COVID-19 crisis. There is a lot of response already to the pandemic, some see this crisis as our second chance to rethink how we redistribute resources, wealth and how we inhabit this world, many more fear escalating social and political effects, others have already likened it to war.

The lecture I would have presented to you today would in many ways have been a synthesis of yearslong introspection, research and work on a subject that chose me far before I have had the ability to choose anything in life. This subject is called: war — a word synonymous with my coming into being in this world.

For as long as I can remember, our family always measured time by war: there was pre-wartime, wartime and post-wartime. For my grandparents this method of timekeeping had to itself be repeated three times during their lifetime, which meant they had a total of nine temporal realities (akin to something like the amount of lives cats are believed to have). For my parents it was tapered to the 1992-1995 Bosnian War which disrupted their lives with almost surgical precision; an event that would have them witness the dissolution of everything they were born into, an irrevocable foundering of the unity and brotherhood they were conditioned under in Yugoslavia. For many this country was a hard-fought socialist formation, for others it was a flawed system. However it was understood, it soon came crashing down at full speed. It became a world caved in by war, for us all.

My mother continues to live in this memory as a sort of unredeemed yet never lost image, with a curious ability to pause and play it at will, she can toggle it on and off, almost like a light switch.

That's how it always came across while I listened to my parents talk about war. There were very clear junctures of time that signified the beginning and end of war. To me, the weightiness of the words they'd utter always elicited the present as something much more unendurable than whatever bad things had happened to them in the past. At least, this was very much the case with my father.

People would go on to label this as nostalgia, but I believe it had more to do with a fickleness and fright of the here and now than a love for the past. Although I sometimes wonder if it was

indeed nostalgia that brought my father to an end in 2013. Unlike my mother, he never developed the same ability to switch things off.

I recall stories of people coming together, of life carrying on amidst a malefic collapse that eroded every fiber of civic life, igniting lasting nationalistic isolations, sudden border reconfigurations and the complete wipeout of a life they had shared and standards they knew. Hunger became prevalent and resources scarce yet solidarity was commonly practiced; care was distributed, and gatherings organized. Fear flourished, hatred bloomed, and demise never felt more definite, yet all this didn't halt people from convening. A testimony to this is perhaps the handful of childhood photographs I possess, apartments full of neighbours and birthday parties teeming with life. People continued coming together as everything around them was blown to bits. Life simply went on.

A defining feature of life under war was the realisation that every moment could potentially be the last, which paradoxically created a heightened sense of aliveness in many people. It gave way to a reality so condensed and honed one could level it through the eye of a needle, let alone the reticle of a rifle.

I know this not only from stories. I know it because I was there. I have witnessed it.

For someone who was born at the cusp of this conflict, there has never been a moment before war, hence war was for me always more of a spatial than temporal thing. Something that didn't have a beginning or ending, something that couldn't be switched on and off but boomed and burgeoned instead, continuing to occupy my life boundlessly after the 1995 Dayton peace agreement.

One particular sequence from wartime was not so much of a story as a lived experience that would come to define my life in many ways. During a rare commute from village to city I got pushed off a truck, landing on my head which resulted in internal bleeding: a brain hemorrhage, coma, surgery, partial paralysis and eventual recovery.

This was in 1994. I was four. I was the last patient the neurosurgeon, and colleague of my mother, would perform surgery on before fleeing to Sweden. It would take another year for my mother, sister and I to partake in such a journey, ending up as refugees in The Netherlands after I had fully recovered.



A RARE CHILDHOOD PICTURE

To this day I can easily switch this event off or on. I remember it well yet it never plays much of a role in my everyday life. It largely remains switched off, unless people point out the scar on the temple of my head, then the light switches back on for a second. For my mother, this event was the final blow in a barrage of tribulations that would catapult us into a completely new world. For her, this remains an incandescent tragedy. A lasting trauma.

I never believed much in tragedies or traumas. I always believed more in emergencies and crises. In action or inaction.

I say this, having very well experienced the dissociation and grief disbelief can bring. I continue living in a war that many around me seemed to never have noticed or cared much about. For those who got to know the world through dissolution, quivers of violence don't just disappear, they multiply. When they said war was over, it kept buzzing on in my ears. I can still hear it.

This lecture today would have been the culmination of many attempts to come closer to you. Not because I wanted you to understand. But because I needed you to participate. I still do. It often felt as if I lacked a body of words that could make you relate, so I learned your languages. I trained myself to effortlessly navigate the same cultures, systems and standards

that deemed my parents as failures. It was really easy. It became part of me. Though I never failed at anything throughout all this, there was always something that I felt was lacking. To this day, I never surrendered to the belief that my origins are a testimony of failure, that I come from a place where people failed to coexist, though many have tried to convince me of this. I always saw it more as an instance in which people didn't manage to come close enough to one another.

The initial lack I had experienced transformed into excess at some point, it became an abundance that couldn't be encompassed by customary containers of meaning and prompted other mappings. I built a practice around it. I made my life about it. It has taken me nearly 30 years to articulate a sensible stance on a subject that now finally feels like I have chosen it, instead of it choosing me and I would have presented that to you for the very first time today.

In this lecture I would have spoken to you about trauma. I wouldn't have used that word, but I'd be speaking about the same damn thing. I would have tried to explain to you that narrating war is an inherent contradiction: when it comes to war, it is always the ones who claim expertise that are more voluble the actual experience of war has volume, yet is very much mute. Maybe to you these words would have sounded vague. For me, this would only have elicited the cracks between us as something that simply cannot be sealed with language alone. I would have also made use of a few images today. Very few images -- three images, to be precise.

To me it was always clear that an image of war is not war. But in order to make this clear to you too, I have convinced myself I needed to make war a banality so that you might engage. In order to match your real with my real I needed to somehow bridge a vast vault of incredulity that lives between us.



A PICTURE OF WAR

In this lecture I would have cooked up a story about an invisible threat we are faced with these days. I'd position that which I wanted to convey into a wider discourse of technological globalization, image production, networked militarization and many more half-baked theories that eventually would even have made some sense. Chances are you wouldn't have listened.

In this lecture I would have tried to come closer to some sort of definition of war in yet another attempt to come closer to you. My strategy to get there was to try and rival conventional understandings that see war as an independent phenomenon in the hope you would feel more complicit. I wanted you to stop viewing war as something that did not belong to you just because it happened to me. It did not happen to me, it happened to many. It still does.

Instead of going along with this idea as a form of my own blindness I would have tried to convince you that we are all blind. I would have informed you that we live in a world blinded by artificial lights and that we are far from any redemptive dawn. I would have made clear to you that an image blinds more than it illuminates. I would have told you that whatever happens, there is always the sun.

Towards the end of this lecture I would have arrived at a definition of war as nothing less than the shifting of meaning: a state in which meaning is so rampantly reconfigured and remolded that it can hardly ever be communicated, captured, or contained.

By all accounts, we are now in one such state. Macron declared a state of war. Merkel dubbed the current situation the biggest exercise in solidarity since WWII. Reports from Italian and Dutch hospitals, emergency rooms and intensive care units across the globe recount scenes straight off a battlefield, as they continue to be stifled by the constant influx of patients.

But I don't think this is war. Things are not blown to bits. At least not yet, and may they not be anytime soon. The belief that the dissolution of the present will be as unified as the unification that capitalism wrongly and violently imposes upon the world is a razor's edge. I have to keep reminding myself of this too. I have felt the urgency to develop the lecture I would have presented to you today because the world I have been witnessing has systematically been turning into a world I once managed to escape from. Right now, it is frighteningly similar.

What seems to be apparent throughout all of this, is the prevailing emphasis on the invisible nature of this pandemic, the invisibility of the COVID-19 virus is what poses a big danger to humankind. Suddenly, the whole world agrees on the existence of an invisible threat, nobody needs to be convinced of this anymore. As if all at once a switch went on.

Today, I would have told you that we are all complicit in an invisible war and I would have likely failed to convince you. It could be that I was trying to state the obvious, or that my definitions were flawed. Either way, I would have ended this lecture by telling you there is an ongoing war festering in the darkness. I would have also told you that whatever happens, there is always the sun.



A PICTURE OF THE SUN

But all this is now riddled with contemplation as we hold our breath to see what world awaits us. From where I am standing now, there is only spring. Everything else is switched off. There is no sun. But let me tell you, freedom also means the ability to put things aside, to turn things off. I know this. I learned this from my mother. It is one of many truths she passed on to me.

My own sense of truthfulness has always been defined by the two things I felt most lacking at a certain point in my life: vision and movement. I believe this discernment dates back to an event from 1994. I invested my life energies running after, investigating, bolstering and relativizing these two senses. I thought that if I played off the veracity of sight against the velocity of movement I would be left with the truth about this world. Turns out, I still know nothing. But the current crisis has opened my eyes to something I seemed to have senselessly overlooked in the course of all these ongoing investigations - the sense of touch.

Maybe this is because one only realises the importance of things once they are gone or taken away. Maybe it's because our sense of touch is our most primordial sense that develops first in the womb. It arrives to us before we arrive into the world, before words, before wars. Certainly, before any ability to see.

You see, the thing about internal bleeding is that it is not visible from the outside, but it is highly pressing and lethal, and as you know, bleeding is not necessarily a tragedy, as much as it is an emergency.

There is one particular moment in my life I don't seem to remember very well, a sequence blanketed by blackness. I know it happened on August 31, 1994, and as I reflect on this moment right now, I realise that we don't have to see or understand things in order to take action. There is power to act in us regardless.

It was the fortuity of a local peasant passing by who picked me up and carried me home, placing me into my father's hands. It was my father who had a friend to reach out to in this high pressured situation. It was this friend who had a barrel of gasoline ready to fuel a car and drive us to the hospital. It was my father handing me over to my mother in the hospital in which she was stationed and on duty during the war. It was her arms that surrendered me to surgeons who eventually knew what to do with their fingers.

It wasn't the medical expertise that saved me. It was the immediacy of touch that gave me another chance.

Today, I would have spoken to you about war and I would have probably failed to make much sense. The distance between us would have simply been too big. I would have tried anyway. I was hoping you would have been there too. This would have been my most forthright attempt to come closer to you.

As things are, my show has been put on hold. I awoke again this morning into a world in which isolation has become a social norm, in which distance is a downright obligation. It is probably here to stay for the foreseeable future, and I cannot quite seem to make peace with that.

The imposed distance of 1,5 meters between us is only the approximation of an arm's length. It's probably even closer than we would have ever come before, yet all at once this feels like an insurmountable remoteness.

I anticipated telling you a story about war today. In this moment all I want to tell you is that beginnings and endings of wars will only be determined by time. But this could be our second chance. If we dared to come closer.

If one day we dared.

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This text was written in the first week of lockdown March Berlin 2020 with no intention to be published. It has found its way in a printed publication *Recipes For The Future*, published in 2020 by Onomatopoe and commissioned by the Embassy of the Kingdom of The Netherlands Berlin.