

The inner compass by Oscar van den Boogaard

'The creatures outside looked from pig to man, and from man to pig, and from pig to man again; but already it was impossible to say which was which.' – George Orwell, *Animal Farm*.

It is impossible for an artist to create something without talking about the times we live in. It is feeling, thinking and perceiving at the same time, and then ignoring that: it is the unconscious at work, the power of nature, existence itself.

In the works of Dutch artist Wieske Wester, I see the need to break away from everything that is unfree. Something that bursts open, right through the outside, and starts to flow. An existentialist eruption. It is no coincidence that in recent years she has been inspired by the dystopian work of George Orwell, the writer who has dealt pre-eminently with unfreedom, oppression and corrupting power.

I had to read 'Animal Farm' and '1984' for school during the Cold War. Every first Monday of the month at noon the alarm sounded. My father, who had fought for freedom as a soldier in the Second World War, said that my generation was only good at living out that freedom, but not at defending it. Every Sunday we listened to G.B.J. Hiltermann* on the radio discussing the state of the world and it was very bad. We learned then that a totalitarian regime was something that existed behind the iron curtain.

Wieske Wester was born in 1985, the year after '1984'. That the book would catch up with her and all of us is now self-evident. We are used to the existence of Big Brother and the algorithms that control our smartphones. We have learned to distinguish between fake news and news and prefer to let fact checkers find out because we cannot do it ourselves. But since the outbreak of the Covid pandemic, totalitarianism also seems to be a phenomenon among us. We live in a time of fear, mass psychosis and oppression. And a lot of propaganda.

* G.B.J. Hiltermann (1914-2000) was a Dutch journalist, jurist and editor who became nationally famous with his weekly radio commentaries on international politics which were aired from 1956 until 1999. He was noted for his pro-western viewpoints.

We too seem to be manipulated by a kind of Ministry of Truth. People who call themselves scientists or experts have been given political power. They make decisions that are much more damaging than they appear. The information they rely on is unclear and shaky. Journalists of mainstream media have become the spokespersons of the scientists, who arm themselves with unclear graphs that seem to be made to support the policy.

Before Covid you used to be allowed to go anywhere and not even notice that you could, but now you do, you show your green checkmark and you are admitted. That creates a bond with all those other people with green tick marks. The 'good citizens' are solidary, responsible and healthy. And the people who do not have a green tick? What is freedom and what is oppression? It is hallucinatory to see how the mainstream media have put freedom of expression under pressure in recent years. Are they a propaganda machine that wants to create fear and sell vaccines? Science is used again and again as the ultimate argument while in science not everyone agrees with each other. People in doubt have to navigate between extreme views and spirituality in their search for information. Everyone is thrown back upon themselves.

During the pandemic, Wieske Wester began her series of 'pigs', a direct reference to Animal Farm, in which pigs, as soon as they have power, begin to oppress and exploit other animals. Perhaps because people at first seemed to be treated like pigs, but she does not seem to want to pass judgement. She wants them to be vulnerable. It is about feeling, doubting, not knowing. In short: life itself. *'There is a duality here,'* says the artist herself: *'I painted them and named them Eric and Arthur- the first and middle names of Orwell's birth name. I painted them with the understanding that almost anyone can become a 'bad pig' if conditioned in a certain way and under a given set of circumstances.'*

I asked myself the question: What should you do as a non-knowing person in the midst of polarisation? Stay close to yourself. Be present between the opposites and listen to your inner compass. Keep listening and do not judge. De-polarise. Keeping possibilities open. Keeping meanings open. Not-knowing is an important state of being. In a creative process, it is often the moment before everything starts to flow.

My psychiatrist used to teach me the technique of consistent polarisation. You had to defend the opposite pole of every opinion, until the two poles became equally important. It was a way of rising above the polarity and of overseeing the whole from a higher third. He taught me to think: everything is allowed to exist.

Amidst all these doubts and sensitivities, Wieske Wester works in her studio surrounded by nature. Her tools are her brush and pencil. And she also likes to call her subjects tools. *'It might be a little insulting to say that Orwell is one of such 'tools', just like the bananas are in my earlier still life paintings. But I think that is true. These staged elements are the small percentage of rational thought present in my work. A much larger percentage is the direct and intuitive expression of energy, of the urge to exist, to create. An object, shape or form is subjected to that.'*

Wieske Wester has been reading, writing and thinking for the past few years. She has looked at man and the world around her with amazement and great interest. She started to study the basics of social and cognitive psychology and learned about mass hysteria, cognitive dissonance, group polarization, peer pressure and communication techniques for influencing behaviour. *'I learned about how humans tend to act in ambiguous situations; people look to each other for information about what to do in crisis. If there is no first person to do it the wise way, then the road to ruin is easily taken.'* Yet she does not see the state of being confused as something bad: *'maybe it's the most humble and sincere state to be in.'*

In his essay 'Politics and the English Language', Orwell says that political language is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind'. Wieske Wester, for whom language plays an important role in her work, is aware that thinking can corrupt language and the reverse as well. But the language of painting is a different one for her. She calls it *'an extension of where rational understanding ends (and magic begins). This conclusion often left me without words completely.'* (...) *'It allows for ambiguity, different layers of interpretation, elements that need to be discovered by reading between the lines, by looking through the facade.'*

I first met Wieske Wester in a military barracks. I was not a commander but an artistic director of the Higher Institute of Fine Arts in Ghent, Belgium and she was not a soldier but a painter in a studio. In my office I cherished a miniature atlas by Marcel Broodthaers. It was entitled 'La conquête de l'espace. Atlas à l'usage des artistes et des militaires.' It was 38 by 25 millimetres. Thirty-eight pages, thirty-four of which had countries on them. All countries were depicted equally large and, moreover, as black silhouettes; not a city, not a river, not a mountain could be recognised on it. It would not get a soldier very far. For me, this atlas by Marcel Broodthaers was a perfect instrument. Within the outlines of the thirty-four countries, there was room for all those places that have no place. Artists and soldiers have the same goal: the conquest of space.

While the artists were busy in their studios, the last soldiers left the barracks for good. The importance of defence did not seem to be a priority in free Europe. Since Russia invaded Ukraine last month, that is a different story. Our space is not free as a matter of course. After the Covid pandemic, we are again sucked into a story of polarisation.

Wieske Wester conquers space with every painting and drawing she makes. Between control (being able to understand) and surrender (to the matter). Between ratio and intuition. Between authenticity and stereotypes. In doing so, she looks existence straight in the face.

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Oscar van den Boogaard is a renowned writer of novels and plays. From 2011 to 2016 he was artistic director of the HISK in Ghent, Belgium. He was co-founder of the Brussels based gallery Mot & van den Boogaard. On his left shoulder is 'Tattoo (for Reflection)', a work by Douglas Gordon from 1997.