

A Soul on the Table

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Brussels, early April 2020. Spring is coming, new leaves are sprouting, and flowers are emerging in full splendour: tulips, primroses, daffodils and daisies add colour to the walkway five floors beneath my window. In this avenue the train passes underground, making place for a stretch of park where people walk their dogs, play, and sunbathe. It is also a popular place for apéro. However, these days everyone is supposed to stay in: the virus is out for us.

This is Brussels! This is Belgium! It's April 2020 and the thermometer rises to a whopping 25 degrees. In April! In these corona times, no one seems to talk about global warming anymore. Peering through the window I see a girl in a sleeveless top jogging. Her ponytail bounces happily at the back of her head. This spring we live in Los Bruselas: the daisies shoot up like palm trees, the trains buzzing underground sound like ocean waves. STOP.

Ali Cabbar has lived in this city since 1995. He lives in the up-and-coming district of Forest and has an artist studio at the centre of Brussels, overlooking the canal. During this period of confinement, Cabbar is making masks. To protect, to encourage, to console, to hearten, all while looking pretty. His *Spring Masks* (2020) is a series of photographs that, in his own words, "emphasise the power of nature and human despair in the face of the coronavirus outbreak." In a time when we are urged to make our own protective masks, Cabbar designs them with the wildflowers (daisies, dandelions) that he collects during his daily walks through town (the Belgian government applauds exercising in the open air during our soft lockdown). Through this act, Cabbar playfully establishes a link between circumstances created by the virus and climate issues. PLAY!

These are historic days. "Nous sommes en guerre," the President of France Emmanuel Macron declares on national television on 16th March. On the radio station France Inter, the sociologist, anthropologist and philosopher Bruno Latour claims the opposite: "This isn't war because we're retreating instead of taking up arms and fighting back."¹

These are hysteric days. Leaders from countries all around the world preach strong opinions and "creative" remedies to counter this crisis. President of Belarus, Alexander Grigoryevich Lukashenko, recommends drinking vodka and playing ice hockey. Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro finds all the attention around the virus exaggerated and pleads for even more social interaction, damning social distancing. In Turkmenistan, President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow prohibits the use of the word Coronavirus. Now isn't that clever! And here we are worrying about keeping a meter and a half distance! STOP.

It pleases me that Cabbar dares to take a political stand with his masks. *Fake News Masks, US Edition #1* (2020) is, for example, a triptych of sepia-coloured photographs in which Cabbar wears a mask with an ironic picture of the US President Donald Trump, flanked by the text "Anybody that needs a test, gets a

test. And the tests are beautiful.”² On social media, he shares the design for the mask so that we can print it at home, fold on the dotted lines and wear it. And as usual, Cabbar himself poses wearing it on Facebook in his enthusiastically liked and shared series. CLOSING...

Blijf in uw kot! We have to stay inside, exclaims Maggie De Block on 3rd March in the Belgian parliament.³ Stay in your dorm! This “amusing” public health warning slogan is now posted on billboards all over the streets of Brussels. Advertisements of Gucci, washing products, cars, and candy bars are replaced with cautioning Covid-19 propaganda. Flesh and smiles have been exchanged with abstract diagrams in blue, grey, and a dash of white. #FlattenTheCurve. #StaySafe. #StayHome.

This is Belgium; communication amongst the various authorities is far from clear. But this was inevitable: after extremely long negotiations that led to nowhere, Belgium suddenly had itself a federal emergency government with emergency decision-making powers, 298 days (two hundred ninety-eight days!) after the elections. For the first time, we have a female prime minister (hooray!) with Sophie Wilmès. Yet, she does not appear in the media too often (ooh!). It is virologists like Marc Van Ranst (our new king!), Steven Van Gucht, or Katty Allaert (the substitute spokeswoman) who call the shots. They appear on the magazine covers, are present in “safely organised” talk shows and informing us on television programs meant for pure entertainment.

And what’s happening with art these days? Changes in budget and legislation affecting various communities have led to particularly complex structures.⁴ In Flanders, the northern part of the country where Dutch is spoken, a “bomb” exploded in the autumn of 2019. Jan Jambon, the Flemish Minister for Culture, among his other positions,⁵ slashed the cultural budget with a blunt axe. Cultural institutions faced an average of 6% cut in subsidies, while the subsidies for artists’ projects was cut by 60%! This also had major consequences for institutions and artists in Brussels who are dependent on Flemish money. It led to a ceaseless flux of protests and marches until the arrival of corona. And yet, there is some “good” news amidst this crisis: Jambon announces in April 2020 that the budget cuts will be partly reversed. There will be an additional four million for project grants. Hooray! REWIND!

At an opening in January 2019, I am introduced to Ali Cabbar. We immediately click. From there on, we see each other regularly. Cabbar comes to the openings of the exhibitions that I curate and organise, and to the events that I set up. A couple of weeks after our first meeting, I visit his studio. Although we are in the exploratory phase, a friendship is growing between us. As well as respect. I get to know him step by step as a character with many facets. He’s generous and smooth, smiling and amiable. Subcutaneously, however, there is something brewing, bubbling in restrained frustration. Anger perhaps. Cabbar seems tormented; he’s been through things that have scarred him for life. This man has been greatly wronged. He talks openly about his past. About his nonbelonging between Istanbul and Brussels, about the liberating effect of being out of place.

About finding freedom in exile. Cabbar talks openly, but laboriously. With few words. After all, Cabbar is a man of images.

Nevertheless, throughout his diverse output, Cabbar very often functions as the protagonist in his work. The use of his own body and face make it more real. On the one hand, Cabbar acts as a poseur, translating a message for the viewer, acting as a storyteller. Here, the principle of the self portrait functions outwards, prompting us recipients to raise questions about ourselves, about our surroundings and mundaneness. On the other hand—and often at the same time—Cabbar’s portraits are autobiographical. In his images, Cabbar looks at himself, or better still, in himself. He confronts his inner self, talks to himself. For the artist, his work functions partly as a self-healing process, revealing himself one hundred percent to the viewer. His soul is on the table. It attracts and repels at the same time. One could argue that these drawings etcetera take the opposite direction in what contemporary art since conceptualism has tried to do: there seems to be no challenge for the viewer here, no set of codes as necessary baggage to understand, no puzzle to be solved. Here, the message seems to be overall, in the open, clear and simple, in accordance with the style of the works. Fuelled with witty, often wry but always juicy humour, these works send a message of hope. And yet, there is a lot more going on when one scratches that surface. PLAY!

Yesterday, Easter Sunday, the weather was radiant, again... And no rain for the last ten days. I went for a 50 km cycling in and around Brussels. On the way, hundreds and thousands of people crossed my path. We are supposed to be acting responsibly, practicing social distancing, thus keeping a minimum of 1.5 metres distance. But that doesn’t always happen. Every now and then smombies practically run into me; at other times, the path is too narrow to keep a sufficient distance; and in any case, there are always certain people who completely throw the rules to the wind. “These measures go against the essence of the people of Brussels” I read in BRUZZ, the local weekly.⁶ Belgians are kind of punk. Chaos is cosy. Rules are there to be broken, to be circumvented. “Rules are only for those who can’t follow them,” my grandfather told me. He also taught me how to roll cigarettes when I was five years old. PAUSE.

Dieter Appelt, Bruce Nauman, René Magritte, Paul Delvaux, Andy Warhol, Yves Netzhammer. They flash through my head when I browse through Cabbar’s publications. PLAY!

I walk through the streets of Brussels. Giorgio Agamben’s, Achille Mbembe’s, and Carl Schmitt’s state of exception⁷ is still with us. A quarter of the people on the streets are wearing a face mask. As always, cartoon drawings decorate the side walls of buildings in the city centre. On my short stroll, I meet Bob & Bobette (Suske & Wiske), Blake & Mortimer, Gaston Lagaffe, some Smurfs, Lucky Luke and Tintin.⁸ In addition to these commercially famous heroes, Brussels also hosts “anti-comic strip walls” where often anonymous artists clandestinely paint controversial images of, for example, a penis, penetration, an anus, or a lynch mob.⁹ PAUSE.

Ali Cabbar's studio overlooks one of those walls. From his window, he witnesses a decapitation scene: a detail from Caravaggio's *Sacrifice of Isaac* (c. 1598 - 1603). I believe it suits him. But again, this city and the comic strip history and heritage of Belgium fit his work. Hergé, the spiritual father of, among others, Tintin and *Quick & Flupke* is documented as the founder of the *ligne claire*.¹⁰ This principle is very often used in Cabbar's work. In fact, his drawing style is completely indebted to it! He also refers to it literally. An example? On 15th April, Cabbar shares a post on social media: "Tintin in Quarantine."

Leaning on his graphic background,¹¹ Cabbar quit his job as art director in 2001 to become a full time artist. At that point, he was already 45, "an age where 'normal' artists have museum exhibitions," he confides in me with irony. Cabbar went back to school; at RHoK Etterbeek (Academy for Visual and Audio-visual Arts), he spent almost three years refining his techniques. Cabbar draws his compositions on the computer. He toggles with bits and figures as if playing with chess pieces, cutting, pasting, and composing. His technique, very much like his whole being and path, is a testament to Cabbar's non-belonging: apart from the Belgian *ligne claire*, it is also referential to the traditional Turkish shadow puppet theatre. In a completely idiosyncratic way, they come together in lively, challenging works that raise emotionally charged questions—sometimes appealing to loss, but always containing a strong message of hope for the future, sauced with savvy humour. FORWARD.

How will this city, country, Europe, and the world look after this crisis? Here, the government is starting to think about an exit plan. As is the Belgian way, we follow the discussions between the different parties that defend the converse, the obverse, and the contrary on the media every hour every day. Should we acquiesce, or refuse to wear a face mask when we eventually go back to work? Will the shops open by mid-May? How safe will that be? These discussions are tiring; especially because there is not a word about the art sector from this government nor from our specialists who partook in the decision making. So, what will be the role of the artist in the near future?

Reflecting on this, one of Ali Cabbar's projects from 2007 pops into my mind. At that time, he presented his work *Strawberry Fields* [ge.net.i.cal.ly mod.i.fied] near the Magritte Museum in the heart of Brussels. This monumental but playful installation consisted of 300 sculptures of wooden, hand painted strawberries that the artist hung up, one by one, in the trees. As always, direct, both playful and critical, the artist raised poignant questions about the role of genetically modified products in our lives. What I mostly remember about this piece is the magic. Passers-by, especially children, cried out in delight when they discovered the pink, green, and yellow toy-like strawberries on the plain trees. With this work, Cabbar played a major, though humble, role in public life, connecting us more symbolically with the streets and our daily surroundings, with places that normally go almost unnoticed. The work allowed us all to step into a dream world—even if it was just for a snap of a moment.

1. France Inter, 3 April 2020. Listen to the interview on Youtube.
2. In another version, in addition to the same image of Trump, we read "It's going to disappear one day like a miracle". Cabbar also supplied a Chinese variant with images of President Xi Jinping, as well as Turkish variations with quotes from mainstream Turkish newspapers: Musibetlere karşı dua vakti (Time for prayers against misfortune"), Avrupa'dan öndeyiz (We are ahead of Europe).
3. Maggie De Block is Belgium's Federal Minister of Social Affairs and Health, and of Asylum and Migration.
4. A general overview of cultural policy in Belgium (with information regarding Flanders, and the French and German-speaking communities) can be found in the Compendium for Cultural Policies and Trends in Europe. 3 April 2020. Retrieved from <http://www.culturalpolicies.net/web/belgium.php>
5. At the time this text was written, Jan Jambon was the Flemish Prime Minister, responsible for Culture, Foreign Policy and Development Cooperation, an unprecedented combination.
6. Retrieved from <https://www.bruzz.be/politiek/brusselse-regering-talmt-met-steunmaatregelen-voorcoronacrisis-2020-03-17>
7. For an introduction on the concept of the state of exception, see Wikipedia: A state of exception (German: Ausnahmezustand) is a concept in the legal theory of Carl Schmitt, similar to a state of emergency (martial law), but based in the sovereign's ability to transcend the rule of law in the name of the public good. This concept is developed in Giorgio Agamben's book State of Exception and Achille Mbembe's Necropolitics. 3 April 2020. Retrieved from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/State_of_exception
8. For an online comic book route, see <https://www.brussels.be/comic-book-route>
9. For a survey of these works plus an interactive map check out: <https://visit.brussels/en/article/Street-Art-in-Brussels>
10. Ligne claire is the name of a specific type of drawing style for comics that was originally used to denote the style of Hergé (best known for the comic The Adventures of Tintin) and his followers. The term was coined by Joost Swarte and first used on the occasion of the exhibition Tintin in Rotterdam in 1977. Other names that are also used are "Hergé style" and "Tintin style".
11. A child of the Turkish revolution and imprisoned for trying to topple the regime in the eighties, Cabbar left his home country and spent six years Down Under in Melbourne (where he bought his first car: a Toyota Corona!). Moving to Belgium in 1995, he became the art director of the Wall Street Journal Europe.