

Lennart Lahuis
The Pain of the Country
By Luuk Hoogewerf

There are few things that have had a bigger impact on how people define their identity than the concept of nostalgia. Within European literature one of its first manifestations is in Homer's *Odyssey*, which tells about Odysseus' voyage back to Ithakha - his home that he longs for with a heart full of homesickness. But a person (or a group of people) doesn't need to be away from home for an extended period to get overwhelmed by feelings of homesickness. In several European countries people yearn for 'their' country that once was, and to get away from the 'evil' entity of Europe. The most pregnant example being a majority of people in the United Kingdom voting in a referendum on 23 June 2016 to leave the European Union, which led to the surreal-but-real concept of Brexit.

Brexit will have a powerful impact on Europe, yet its exact influence on the visual arts is unforeseeable. After almost 3 years of avoidance, repression, and silence, Europeans have to deal with this controversial issue that deeply divides the continent. Lennart Lahuis shows us, without specifically commenting on the situation, how from an artistic practice to deal with a complicated matter like this. Although he personally deems an exhibition not the appropriate platform to criticize European politics or even express an opinion on whatever issue, almost all of the works in his second solo exhibition at Dürst Britt & Mayhew can be related to Europe's current political situation.

I visit the artist in his studio in Brussels, the *de facto capital* of the European Union. National borders seem non-existent to him (both literally and symbolically). His girlfriend, with whom he shares his studio, works as a teaching professor in Germany and he himself travels a lot between France and The Netherlands. They decided to settle in the middle. The majority of his works are already packed for shipping. However, there is still plenty to see, for example, a large blue canvas that simply says: NO-Zeichen No No No No No No (etc.) Lahuis shows me installation-views of his recent solo exhibitions at the Fries Museum and Museum Princessehof in Leeuwarden and photos of works that have never met the public's eye. We talk about his work and overarching themes.

The blurring of (geographic) borders is the subject of the monumental clay tablets that Lahuis showed in the Princessehof National Museum of Ceramics. During the exhibition, a constant flow of water eroded the text that was printed in the clay. The ultimate effect of the process is being shown at Dürst Britt & Mayhew. The text is a handmade enlarged copy of an article from science magazine *Nature Communications* about

the geographic insularity of Britain from continental Europe. Britain was a peninsula before the breaching of the ridge that separated the marine embayments to the north (North Sea) and southwest (English Channel). Lahuis compares the geological separation of hundreds of thousand years ago to Brexit and talks about his interest in the national identity of the English in relation to the fact that it is now an island.

The text on the now fragile, dried tablets has almost become illegible, the English language in some parts being transformed into characters resembling Sumerian cuneiform. The tablets have become relics of a bygone age—even though the article has only been published in 2017. The urgency of current events and therefore the current political climate seems to shrink into insignificance compared to the geologic time scale.

Lahuis has a great affinity with Conceptual Art from the late 1960s and early 1970s. Like the Conceptualists, Lahuis gives special prominence to language and is very much interested in the concept of time and its function in works of art. However, contrary to the Conceptual artists who denied matter, Lahuis' work is very material based. Concept and matter are one. The clay tablets are, for instance, made of the same type of clay that can be found at the bottom of the Channel. Lahuis went to a quarry in Kent to collect the material. The creative process of his work is also very physical. The text is literally printed line by line in the clay, a practical reminiscent of typesetting. Lahuis even made the plastic letters of the alphabet himself.

The use of typesetting is also part of his most recent work. Since the typesetting of his clay tablets, he has been intrigued by pre-digital typeface specimens. In typography, a typeface is a set of one or more fonts each composed of glyphs that share common design features. Words on typeface specimens are usually meaningless: empty symbols judged by their physical characteristics. Lahuis uses text as an image. He looks for a cultural, political or emotional association that some of these words or phrases carry. The work 'NO-Zeichen' is an enlarged copy of an existing German broadsheet printed on denim and simply says: NO-Zeichen No No No No No No (etc.). No could mean numero but is more often interpreted as an expression of the negative. The no in a referendum or the no of a protest for example. The text is made visible by laser-cut wooden letters that Lahuis placed behind the denim. By sanding the raised parts, a white print is created, comparable to the wear of your jeans by, for example, the mobile phone in your pocket.

Maybe it's a coincidence, but 'NO-Zeichen' reminds me of the work of the Brussels-born artist Marcel Broodthaers. Broodthaers worked principally with assemblages of found objects and collage, often containing written texts. Lahuis has mixed feelings about this comparison, but he himself

draws a comparison between the texts he wrote in water and the film 'The Rain (Project for a Text)' by Broodthaers. This film shows Marcel Broodthaers trying to write while the rain constantly washes away the ink. In the final scene, during which the artist gives up and drops his pen, the inscription "Projet pour un texte" (Project for a text) appears. Both Lahuis and Broodthaers' texts are ephemeral. This temporary nature of a text is also part of Lahuis' work entitled '*Deeply Held Beliefs*'. While visiting the exhibition visitors are asked to wear a dry rubber stamp. The stamp is pressed onto the forearm such that the relief is transferred to the skin. The visitor leaves the gallery with a temporary tattoo. Over time, the text will disappear.

On the wall of his studio, a big yellow star can be seen. It is a test for a much larger work, 'Bedazzled'. In my opinion, it is the most critical, outspoken work that expresses, not with words, but through visual images Lahuis' European orientation. It depicts Europe's current political state as a knocked-out cartoon character with the twelve gold stars of the European flag spinning around its head. The figure could represent England or Europe, but it might also symbolize a general state of bedazzlement. And the stars stand for the ideals of unity, solidarity, and harmony among the peoples of Europe. The number of stars has nothing to do with the number of member countries. The image is transferred to the wall of the gallery through a technique devised by Lahuis. The image, printed on paper, is attached to the wall with wallpaper glue. Subsequently, the artist goes over it with spiked rubber rollers. The image seems to fall apart. When dry the paper pulp is hard as a rock and can be considered part of the wall.

Integration and disintegration play an important role in Lahuis' work. Both terms can be approached from a sociological and materialistic viewpoint. For example social integration as the process during which newcomers or minorities are incorporated into the social structure of the host society, and material disintegration as the decay of matter. Both these two specific examples are considered an essential aspect of the works entitled '*Castillo de Matrera*', that reflect on the history of Muslims in Spain. The Spanish occupation by the Moors began in 711 AD when an African army, under their leader Tariq ibn-Ziyad, crossed the Strait of Gibraltar from northern Africa and invaded the Iberian peninsula 'Andalus' (Spain under the Visigoths). Central to this work is a recently restored fortification built by the Moorish conquerors. The early Muslim conquests can be compared to the growing number of immigrants from the African continent that are reaching Europe via Spain and the western Mediterranean nowadays. The issue of immigration deeply divides Europe, and when it isn't tackled, it could spell the end of the European Union as we know it. A work that Lahuis already made in 2017 but has never dared to show is clearly related to this subject. It is an uncomfortable photo of a struggling man. When placed in its original

context of the newspaper article it turns out to be an immigrant at the border between Italy and France and the man who he is struggling with is a border patrol officer.

For both works, Lahuis deploys a process invented for restoring burned paper. The charred remains of the documents and photos are pressed into a new sheet of paper. In the photos, a past moment has been frozen and by presenting it later in an exhibition a connection is made between that moment from the past and the reality of the present. The aspect of time becomes ambiguous because the documents as objects are also subject to change. The documents and photos used by Lahuis are burned and become vague under the influence of time. Lahuis restored these documents and so the cycle started again.

Printing is the thread that runs through the entire exhibition. In fact, Lahuis uses a form of printing for every work in the show. The re-printing of certain motives, like typefaces and photos, and the use of reproductions of famous artworks are in line with the cyclical awareness of time. According to Lahuis, the past is not fixed and values and meaning are redefined within every new context.

In view of all the above and for the sake of clarity, I asked Lahuis at the end of our encounter about the poetic title of the exhibition ‘Le Mal du Pays’. He showed me a postcard that he bought from a Brussels museum. It shows René Magritte’s most emotionally honest painting entitled ‘Le Mal du Pays’—loosely translated by Lahuis as The Pain of the Country. A more precise translation would be ‘homesickness’, that painful and debilitating longing for a beloved place where you are not, but would like to be. As far as England is concerned, it is a nostalgia for something that will never return, namely The Empire. The title of the exhibition is a direct reference to Europe and Brexit but also to the British and their exceptionalism. Few countries have allowed their sense of exceptionalism to damage their interests in the way Britain is doing. Lennart Lahuis puts it all into perspective by reminding us of the impermanence of politics.

Luuk Hoogewerf is an independent curator of Modern and Contemporary Art. From 2015 until 2019 he was Project assistant at the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam. From 2017 to 2018 he was curator in training at Museum Boijmans van Beuningen, and curator of the new collection presentation of the KPN Telecom Art Collection in Rotterdam. He studied Art history at the University of Amsterdam. Since 2017 he has been the curator of ‘The Time & Causality Library’ that was initiated by Seth Siegelau in January 2001. The library now includes more than 740 publications on time and causality in physics. Luuk writes regularly for art magazines and exhibition catalogues.