

Summer Thoughts is a long-term research project that began with an invitation by the magazine *A Prior* to react to documenta 13 in Kassel in 2012. Inspired by the tapestries woven by Norwegian artist Hannah Ryggen (1894-1970) that were on exhibit there, Sven Augustijnen's intervention took the form of a letter addressed to curator Marta Kuzma. A correspondence ensued through which the author defined the scope of his research and speculated on a number of issues, people, and places. Analogously to Ryggen's work, these became patiently and densely interwoven threads that brought together family histories and our general History, past events and the present day. A tapestry woven in 1935 that dealt with the rise of fascism became a way to address Europe's current state, the fragility of democracies, the resurgence of far-right movements, a past that hasn't passed (to paraphrase Henry Rousso). As the author indicates, the letters were written "out of a need to express myself and share, to try to understand and resist the rise of fascism around us."

Augustijnen's ambition of conducting investigations at several archive centers in Europe was thwarted first due to family reasons and then, to the constraints brought by the pandemic. This led him to focus his research on Belgium, mainly around the history of his grandparents, who lived through WWII. The use he made of his deceased father's personal library, interviews with members of his family, visits to the Dossin barracks in Malines and elsewhere, as well as a series of readings helped him clarify and concretize a series of narratives about the war and build on the associations with our current situation. Another area of his research focused on his consultation of *Time Magazine* at the Royal Library in Brussels. An intensive reading of the magazine's articles from the 1920s until the present day gave the artist a broad and detailed—although inevitably situated—overview of the emergence and growth of fascism, the variations in discourse around concentration and death camps, the representation of the Middle East, and other issues that Augustijnen has already incorporated into his artworks.

Although this research has not yet been publicly presented, due to the pandemic,

it will soon take the form of an exhibition, or a book. Anyway, the correspondence is ongoing.

(A/R) One of the main inspirations for this project appears to have been your discovery of Norwegian artist Hannah Ryggen's tapestries at documenta 13 in 2012. How have these textile works stimulated your research in these years?

(S.A.) It came about gradually. First came the invitation from the magazine *A Prior* to react to documenta, which took the form of a letter in which I mentioned the case of a tapestry by Hannah Ryggen, almost anecdotally. Bit by bit, through other invitations, and also because the problems I was addressing in my letters were becoming increasingly topical, this turned into a research project in and of itself. I had picked up on the scent of something. *Summer Thoughts* brought together several of my interests and concerns about the political situation we are currently living through, and which actually began at the time of my grandparents.

(A/R) I imagine that it didn't take long to see the similarities between the tapestry as a motif and this complex history that you yourself weave in words, using these dense and intricate historical and conceptual threads.

(S.A.) Yes, I think this was present in my work, and I've become more aware of it through my research. There is a kind of progressive densification.

(A/R) Aside from the formal analogy, Hannah Ryggen's textiles above all represent an interest and a source of a historical and political inquiry, especially the tapestry *Etiopia* (1935), which was exhibited at the 1937 Paris World's Fair and which was heavily censored. [The depiction of Mussolini's head pierced by a spear was apparently covered up.] This is one of the first threads that you wove...

(S.A.) Since documenta was the starting point, there was in fact a parallel with the Paris World's Fair: an exhibition is a place where a lot of things are put together within a limited amount of space, in all these pavilions.

There is also a parallel in terms of the act of exhibiting, of highlighting certain things, certain elements from the archives, certain ignored historical facts...

(A/R) Did your research into the tapestry itself and its censoring lead to any factual discoveries?

(S.A.) No, most of them remain hypothetical. It was my intention to research the Foreign Affairs archives in France, Italy and Norway, but due to family reasons, and then Covid, I had to find other strategies to research, for example through conversations, especially with Marit Paasche, who curated a number of retrospectives of Ryggen's work, or by consulting the *Time Magazine* archives, which reported extensively on the situation at that time, especially the war in Abyssinia. But I don't really have any new elements on the person who made the decision to censor this piece. My interest in writing these letters is to speculate freely, even if this is based on precise, historical elements. For example, one of my suppositions concerns the second European person depicted in the tapestry. As regards Mussolini, we are sure it's him, but for the other figure, one of Marit Paasche's hypotheses is that this is Laval, France's prime minister at the time, which is very interesting and likely, though not proven beyond all doubt. Especially the cross that Ryggen depicted doesn't seem to correspond with Laval's depiction, at least I haven't found any photographs of him like that. Starting with this question mark, I began to explore other possibilities. We thought it might be a combination of two figures, but that's not really Ryggen's style, as she most often depicted specific individuals; then there is the hypothesis by art historian Albert Steen that the image is a portrayal of the Italian ambassador to Ethiopia who had sworn his allegiance to Selassie just before Mussolini started to bombard the country; the raised hand, an oath of allegiance, confirms his theory, as well that the cross could be.

However, the image that I found of the ambassador in *Time Magazine*, Count Luigi Orazio Vinci-Gigliucci doesn't correspond. In any case, Ryggen's depiction resembles more general Badoglio who launched the chemical warfare in Ethiopia and was ennobled as the first Duke of Addis-Abeba, or even more King Victor-Emmanuel III who was declared by Mussolini the Emperor of Ethiopia. Then again, if I can contribute something in the way of a historical truth, that would be great, but that's not my role or my ambition even.

(A/R) However, in one letter, you say that the way that Mussolini was censured was different from what we thought, namely that the tapestry was folded rather than covered with a white sheet.

(S.A.) Yes. That said, I don't know how they did that. You can fold it, but not horizontally, without risking cutting off the other heads. So, it was either folded vertically or on the corner, which would have been surprising. It sounds good when you write it; the sentence has a good ring to it, but when you are a visual person, you wonder how that could be. Another theory I have is that Hannah Ryggen only learned of this censoring later on. It is possible that not many people knew of this incident, because there wasn't any sort of diplomatic dispute between Italy and Norway. It was more so the case between France, host of the exposition, and Italy. On these terms, the idea that it was Laval is very interesting, because he wanted to stay on good terms with Mussolini for a number of reasons.

(A/R) These initial speculations and discoveries took place between 2012 and 2018, the year when you exhibited an initial version of *Summer Thoughts* at the Jan Mot Gallery in Brussels. During the second research phase, with the support of FRArt, did you explore new avenues, visit new sites, or consider new topics to study?

(S.A.) I was forced to change my research program at the start of my FRArt research for family reasons. I barely traveled and I focused on local and personal archives. In particular, I went through my father's library and archive. He passed away nearly 15 years ago. In fact, I conduct research every time I go see my mother. These visits are always a little strange, because my father's library has remained as it was since the time of his death. Every time I take something, I put it back right where it was! It's very interesting, psychologically speaking. And there is a twist. My father was always interested in WWII. And my older brother studied history. So, when I was little, I was always in the middle between them, listening to their discussions. During this research, I listened to recordings that my brother had made of our maternal grandfather. He was sent to Germany to do forced labor during the war. I found out which factory he worked on. As part of this forced labor, it appears that he twice went to the concentration camps. So, this company also had a factory in Auschwitz, which is pretty interesting. That said, it is far more likely that he went to a camp close to Berlin, because he said he went and came back the same day, which would be impossible if it had been Auschwitz. My grandfather also talked about the bombings, Berlin burning, and being sent to the East. He jumped from the train and walked back under the cover of night. When he returned to Belgium, he had to surrender his belongings, which scandalized him. There were a lot of things about his story that

I found striking. I was able to collect a lot of historical and topographical elements. This information yields a more complex, more intricately woven view of what he lived through during the war.

(A/R) Did you visit other places tied to this family history?

(S.A.) I visited an uncle, one of my father's four brothers, who was much older than him, to ask him what he remembered about the war. Among other things, I asked him what he thought about a video that my brother had made in which our paternal grandmother (the widow of my grandfather whom I never knew) describes his internment in the camp at Breendonk and being interrogated by a German officer. She said that my grandfather was sent there because he was secretary of the village of Bonheiden, close to Malines, and that at a certain point, they suspected him of altering the information about young Belgians who were supposed to be sent to Germany to work in the camps and factories. My uncle didn't know this story. He thought that my grandfather had merely been interrogated at the Malines police commissioner's office. I asked my uncle if my grandfather talked about the war often. He told me that he often talked about WWI, in which he fought as a soldier, but never about WWII. This shed an interesting light on the problem of the postwar and on its testimony. My question now is, what happened after this experience at Breendonk? Did he then collaborate with the Germans by providing the correct names? That's somewhat of a gray area, because he may have been obliged to do so; otherwise, he would have remained at Breendonk. I was recently at the Dossin barracks [from where Jews were deported]. This remains a taboo subject in Malines because the entire city knew what was going on, but nothing was done to stop it. It's interesting to concretize these images, even if they remain verbal. With Auguste Orts we are curating the next Contour Biennale in Malines, and one of our inspirations is Chantal Akerman, whose mother passed through Dossin before being sent to Auschwitz—she was one of the few Belgian Jews sent to Auschwitz who survived.

(A/R) Your other line of research that you were able to do within Belgium concerns the case of Léon Degrelle, and more generally, fascism in the 30s and 40s and its current resurgence. How did you conduct your research on this?

(S.A.) I mainly expanded my collection of *Europe Magazine*, a far-right periodical published in Brussels during the postwar in which pro-Rexist beliefs abounded. Some of the editors were blatantly Rexist. I continued to buy and comb through all the issues I was able to find.

(A/R) So, was it possible to publish an openly Rexist periodical right after the war?

(S.A.) Yes. It should also be said that the magazine was Rexist and also Leopoldist (for Léopold III): extremely Catholic, colonialist, anticommunist, and capitalist. All the good things in life, all at once... That said, there was a lot of friction over each topic. The magazine often changed position as the geopolitical situation evolved. I was also very interested in the Spanish television show *La clave*, on which Degrelle was a guest. I remembered a Belgian television special on collaboration that my father watched in the 80s. So, I wasn't totally surprised by this testimony. But this magazine made me realize just how present Degrelle remained over time; he continued to be visible in the 1950s, 60s, and 70s. I used to think that he had hidden and become a public figure again at the end of his life, at the end of Franco's reign, when Spain began to change, but that's not what happened. It's not as if he stayed underground and then reappeared as the result of some sort of folk nostalgia.

(A/R) Was your research into your family histories and into Degrelle only written in form? Did you make photographic, audio, or video recordings of these consultations of family archives, the interview with your uncle, and everything else?

(S.A.) No, even though my uncle did show me things, photographs, he was mostly scandalized by the fact that my grandfather's WWI medals had been stolen by his other brother, who is still living. They had a falling out after my grandmother died, but that's another story.

(A/R) In your application, you referred to Adorno's ethical and esthetic admonitions as a way to justify the non-visual side of your project, or rather, its limitation to a minimal representation. And yet, knowing your past films, photographs, and installations, one might wonder whether you weren't tempted to extract forms and images from this research anyway.

(S.A.) At the show at Jan Mot, I had letters posted on the gallery walls and a table with books, a kind of installation. The "coffee table book" format is problematic but interesting, because it ties into *Europe Magazine*, which could be found on people's living room tables during the postwar period. I discussed this with Herman Daled, who remembered seeing this magazine in people's homes. This magazine collection is very visual, and I will use it in an installation. For that matter, in some of the variations of *Summer Thoughts*, I have exhibited documents in a vitrine, photos and books, depending on the exhibition format, the space, and other factors. Another visual aspect concerns the pages from *Time Magazine* I mentioned earlier.

(A/R) Was your consultation of the *Time Magazine* archives prompted by your research into *Etiopia*, Ryggen's piece?

(S.A.) Yes, during the lockdown, I began consulting these archives online. At first, I was mainly interested in finding out what they said about the war in Abyssinia. But I quickly began to reconstruct the period through the magazine's articles. There as well, the interpretation of history is very densely woven with its columns of texts and images, where everything became connected. It was fascinating. As a matter of fact, the war in Abyssinia was titled *The War*, which seamlessly transited in the Spanish Civil War, and then the Second World War. *Time Magazine* started publishing in 1923, so you can see how Mussolini and Hitler took power, the rise of Nazism in Germany, the war, and then, the postwar. Everything was documented and described very precisely. There are all the details of the concentration camps, the rising Jew-baiting, the murders, the decapitations by sword, guillotine and more. And you can see the differences in approach and writing over the decades. Basically, we can say that there was prewar, war, and postwar. For example, during the war, the writing became increasingly mushy and generic, always using the same phrases. And at the same time, in retrospect, when we see how journalists described before the war, it was as if during the conflict they knew what was going on, but couldn't say it. These contrasts evoke the very fundamental issues of what people did or didn't know. It's interesting, because the first major article on the concentration camps was published on the date of the deaths of Mussolini and Hitler. There was a very long article on the camps that the Americans had liberated. Other information trickled out after the Nuremberg trials, for example. You can see why it took until the 80s for Claude Lanzmann's films to come out. It was shocking to read that some prisoners of war were freed in the 50s and 60s, long before we knew anything... The appearance of advertising in *Time Magazine* during the war is also striking, with the importance of the rubber industry to the progress of the war machine, which corresponds to the fact that there was more to Auschwitz than the gas chambers; it was an industrial city that had a rubber factory that the Allies bombed at the end of the war, by the way. The 50s, 60s and more specifically the 70s, was also the Cold War as I have known during my childhood, during which Haile Selassie was overthrown by the military that espoused Marxist-Leninist ideologies. In my archives I found a *Paris Match* magazine with a picture of the emperor taken at the end of his reign driving in a Mercedes, which of course I couldn't help associate to my maternal grandfather's experiences in Berlin, and deportation to the East,

as well the images of Mussolini's state visits to Germany before the War.

(A/R) That led to the project on representations of the Middle East in this magazine. Would you call this a direct extension of *Summer Thoughts*, or rather a kind of outgrowth that resulted mainly from the discovery of the material in the *Time Magazine* archives?

(S.A.) I was triggered by *Time Magazine* reports of the hijacking by Palestinian revolutionaries related to the Rote Armee Fraction of a Lufthansa airplane that took off from Mallorca (at that time my grandfather and mother had an apartment in Mallorca where they spend their holidays), and ended in Mogadishu, 1977. News of the rescue of the hostages was followed by the deaths (and alleged suicides) of RAF members Andreas Baader, Gudrun Ensslin and Jan-Carl Raspe at the Stuttgart-Stammheim Prison on which I have been writing before. In any case, even though Zionism had been around for some time, the foundation of Israel was nevertheless closely linked to WWII and the concentration and death camps. And the conflict between Israel and Palestine led to my interest in the West's depiction of the Middle East at large.

(A/R) Did you only consult these archives online?

(S.A.) At first, yes. I did then photograph their printed versions at the Belgian Royal Library, and they were then printed and exhibited in Aarhus in Denmark. Unfortunately, I was unable to see this exhibition due to the lockdown.

(A/R) You had already used the medium of the letter and the dynamic of correspondence in an exhibition by your collective Auguste Orts at the MUHKA in Antwerp in 2010, which was titled *Correspondence*. What specifically makes these things important for you? And how do you use them in your research over the long term?

(S.A.) The letter as a form is obviously personal. It allows you to interweave private, historical, political, and other threads. It allows you to move between one and the other.

(A/R) Another advantage is that the letter is a form recorded in the present. A letter is signed and dated.

(S.A.) At first, I didn't know it would take up so much of my time and generate so much interest. I slowly realized that it was becoming a kind of archive of the present. It contains people dying, political events, the distances between continents, and so forth. I have always been interested in the issue of the date. This recording in time and in history is both concrete and conceptual.

(A/R) What is also interesting about this form is that it has addressed the unprecedented situation of the healthcare crisis and the lockdown. We could say that correspondence was the perfect response to the sense of time that the lockdown gave us (focusing on oneself, having the time to read and write), and that it also embodied our need to form bonds as a way of dispelling our isolation and worries.

(S.A.) Yes, there is that coincidence.

(A/R) Did the crisis change your general perspective on the project, aside from the material and temporal limits it imposed?

(S.A.) The project was admittedly ambitious. I wanted to travel across all of Europe! When I reread the first letters, I realize how much I was moving about. Travel is interesting because it creates connections and gives you the chance to talk about specific events. When you visit a place, you share something with other people that you can refer to. People have always traveled across the centuries, and it is essential to form other points of view, to encounter other geographies and topographies. But at the same time, it's also important to explore everything you experience or imagine in greater depth. Traveling through your memories and trying to visualize these recollections. So, in this sense, it was an interesting experience; without it, I would never have spent so much time at home combing through a century's worth of archives at *Time Magazine*.

(A/R) What forms of public presentation of your research are you contemplating?

(S.A.) I have planned several shows, but nothing concrete yet. I was supposed to participate in the Oslo Biennale, but it was cancelled because of a disagreement with the city on the budget. I had begun to discuss the project with the curator, Eva González-Sancho, and then everything fell through. But *Summer Thoughts* is about to be finalized in the form of a publication or exhibition—that much is sure. If only for the fact that I will continue the project at the University of Malmö as part of an artistic research program starting in January 2022. That will let me continue my work on Hannah Ryggen's archives, because she was born in Malmö.

CAPTIONS

- fig. 01 Interview opening page:
Time, November 16, 1970, 2021.
- fig. 02 *Summer Thoughts*, letter to Marta Kuzma,
April 6, 2020.
- fig. 03 Family library, 2021.