DE GRUYTER
OPEN

Werkwinkel 10(1), 2015, pp. 13-32

Faculty of English, Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań, Poland
DOI: 10.1515/werk-2015-0002

An Unlikely Pair: Berlinde De Bruyckere and J.M. Coetzee

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Abstract: Despite J.M. Coetzee's ostensible interest in the issues of – largely speaking – visuality, the links between Coetzee's oeuvre and 'images' have not been sufficiently explored either by art or literary critics. The paper offers a detailed discussion of the cooperation between Coetzee and the Belgian artist Berlinde De Bruyckere which has so far resulted in one installation and two art books co-authored by Coetzee and De Bruyckere. Special attention will be paid to the piece "Cripplewood/Kreupelhout" shown in the Belgian Pavilion of the 2013 Venice Biennial and the catalogue published in its wake. Also, a number of questions related to the nature of Coetzee's contribution to both projects, the role of a curator and his relationship with the artist, as well as the catalogue's generic affiliation and its position in Coetzee's body of works are thoroughly addressed.

Keywords: Berlinde De Bruyckere; J.M. Coetzee; visuality; Venice Biennial

"How can my Muse want subject to invent,
While thou dost breathe, that pour'st into my verse
Thine own sweet argument?" (Shakespeare 2003: 64)

1. Introduction

If one is to believe the – often unreliable [1] – narrator of *Youth*, J.M. Coetzee's first encounter with contemporary art [2] took place in the early 1960s, while he was working in London. Only when he visits an exhibition of abstract expressionism [3] at the Tate Gallery, does he realise that neither the works of the so-called 'old masters,' the likes of Rembrandt van Rijn, nor the pieces by Vincent van Gogh have the power "to speak like beauty, imperiously" (Coetzee 2003: 92). An encounter with Robert Motherwell's "Elegy for the Spanish Republic 24" [4] leaves the protagonist of *Youth* "transfixed, […] shaken and weak-kneed" (Coetzee 2003: 92). This "menacing and mysterious […] elongated black bob on a white field," which is seen today as one of the first and, simultaneously, a classic piece of the avant-garde New York School, corresponds to the "indwelling shape in [Coetzee's] soul" and, in fact, "takes him over" (Coetzee 2003: 92).

Despite a number of ostensible references to 'images' (post World War II avant-garde paintings [5], movies [6] and photographs [7]), which can be found on the pages

[1] A number of available biographical facts have been ignored by the narrative, most notably Coetzee's marriage to Philippa Jubber and obtaining his master's degree from the University of Cape Town in 1963.

[2] However, Coetzee's interest in images can be traced back to his childhood. The main protagonist of *Boyhood* confesses to keeping "the book of drawings […] in heavy lead pencil coloured in wax crayons" (Coetzee 1998: 26) which clearly correspond to the childhood notebooks held in the "J.M. Coetzee Papers" collection at the Harry Ransom Center and, indeed, testify to the writer's life-long interest in images. What is more, Coetzee's father, Zacharias, appears to have been a very skilled draughtsman, which his excellent sketches of Rapallano and Siena made in 1944 clearly prove (also available in the "J.M. Coetzee Papers" collection). Investigation of the Coetzee archives in July and August of 2014 has been made possible by the support of the Dean of the Faculty of Philology of the Jagiellonian University in Kraków, Poland.

[3] Abstract expressionism was first displayed in London in 1956 when the Tate Gallery organised an exhibition entitled "Modern Art in the U.S." showing the paintings of Rothko, Pollock, Still and Motherwell. However, what the character of *Youth* most likely refers to is not an individual exhibition of abstract expressionism but the pieces already purchased by the Tate Gallery in the late 1950s and early 1960s and incorporated into the permanent collection.

[4] Interestingly, Coetzee remains indifferent to the works of Jackson Pollock: "For a quarter of an hour he stands before a Jackson Pollock, giving it a chance to penetrate him, trying to look judicious in case some suave Londoner has an eye on this provincial ignoramus. It does not help. The painting means nothing to him. There is something about it he does not get" (Coetzee 2003: 92).

[5] E.g. references in *Youth* (quoted above). In 2000 Coetzee collaborated with Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev and Dan Cameron on a monograph dedicated to William Kentridge, a South African draughtsman, printer and filmmaker which was published by the Phaidon Press in 1999. Coetzee contributed to the volume with a piece on the artist's animated film *History of the Main Complaint* from 1996. A year later, a catalogue entitled *Remarks on Colour: Works from South Africa 1985-1995* was published featuring the works by the English artist Roger Palmer. Coetzee wrote an introduction to this illustrated volume.

of Coetzee's vast body of works, neither literary critics nor experts in visual studies have, so far, shown substantial interest in the links between Coetzee's oeuvre and the issues of – largely speaking – visuality. With the exception of Herman Wittenberg's pioneering inquiry [8] into cinematic inspirations behind Coetzee's works, the achievements of *la nouvelle vague* in particular, the above-mentioned territory remains critically uncharted – surprisingly so, as Coetzee's explorations of the world of visual art have become more frequent and surely require some considerable investigation. Over the last few years, one artist has attracted Coetzee's attention in particular, namely Berlinde De Bruyckere, a Belgian artist specialising mainly in sculpture. Their cooperation has resulted in one project (the Belgian Pavilion during the 55th International Art Exhibition: the Venice Biennial) and two art books [9]: *We Are All Flesh* and *Cripplewood/Kreupelhout*, both of 2013. The former, published by MER. Paper Kunsthalle, is a rather typical artist(s)'s book offering an amalgam of Coetzee's texts [10] and photographs of De Bruyckere's sculptures [11] and taking its title from the artist's piece completed in 2012. The latter volume, however, is a more intriguing and complex work. Created as an exhibition catalogue, it does not only offer images of the piece "Cripplewood/Kreupelhout" shown in the Belgian Pavilion of the 2013 Venice Biennial and its critical appraisal by the critic Herman Parret, but it also documents the work's origin, i.e. a series of letters exchanged between De Bruyckere and Coetzee who has also agreed to become the Pavilion's curator. [12]

This seemingly unlikely collaboration surely appears to pose a number of questions pertinent for both art and literary critics. What was the nature of this

[6] E.g. Ingmar Bergmann and Michelangelo Antonioni (Coetzee 2003: 48-49), Andrzej Munk, Chris Marker, Jean-Luc Godard and Jean Cocteau (Attwell 1992: 60, 380).
[7] E.g. Paul Rayment's profession (*Slow Man*), "On being photographed" section in *Diary of a Bad Year* (Coetzee 2007: 201)
[8] Most notably "J.M. Coetzee's screenplay adaptation of *In the Heart of the Country*" (Wittenberg: forthcoming) and *J.M. Coetzee: Two Screenplays* published by the University of Cape Town Press in 2014. The authors are indebted to Hermann Wittenberg for sharing his essays with them. In this context, one should also note Lindiwe Dovey's and Teresa Dovey's essay "Coetzee on Film" (Dovey and Dovey 2010: 57-78).
[9] Also, De Bryckere's 2010 piece entitled "Lange Eenzame Man" was dedicated to J.M. Coetzee (De Bruyckere and Coetzee 2013b: 137).
[10] Excerpts from *Age of Iron*, *Boyhood*, *Disgrace*, *Youth*, *Elizabeth Costello*, "As a Woman Grows Older," *Slow Man*, *Diary of a Bad Year* and *Summertime*.
[11] The book includes images of "The Wound I," "Lingam II," "Amputeren zei je," "Actaeon II" and "Actaeon III," "Liggende I" and "Liggende II," "K36 (The Black Horse)," "We Are All Flesh," "Wezen," "Elie," "Femine Habitat," "Inside Me II," "Lost II" and "Lost III" as well as "Lange Eenzame Man."
[12] It is not the first time that Coetzee has been asked to become an exhibition curator. In 1995, he was approached by Pippa Skotnes and invited by the Works of Art Committee for the Centre for African Studies to curate an exhibition comprising of mostly ethnographic objects. The correspondence between Skotnes and Coetzee ("J.M. Coetzee Papers Collection") reveals that the former intended to create a display that would combine text and images in a new and startling way, similarly to the 1990 installation by Joseph Kosuth entitled "The Play of the Unmentionable" shown at the Brooklyn Museum.

professional relationship between Bruyckere (the artist) and Coetzee (the curator)? What kind of contribution did Coetzee make to the installation itself – especially as (e.g. on the cover of the catalogue) his name was put on a par with De Bruyckere's which unmistakably implies the piece's co-authorship? Did he only choose and contextualise the object(s) provided by De Bruyckere and thus offered a curatorial vision? Or, perhaps, he actually attempted to redefine the category of an exhibition curator and assumed a different set of tasks and responsibilities? And what about the catalogue and its generic affiliation? Is it a highly relevant addendum to Coetzee's diverse body of works, or a minor extravaganza by a writer who might have reached the limits of creative writing? What is its relation to Coetzee's canonical texts and what does it add to our knowledge about the novelist himself? By offering a critical discussion [13] of De Bruyckere's piece and the volume published in its wake, the present paper thus wishes to answer the above-listed questions.

2. A *papesse* and a literary giant

Among the producers and consumers of art, Berlinde De Bruyckere, who was born in Ghent in 1964, is neither a random nor an inconspicuous figure. On the contrary, she remains one of the better-known personages in the European circulation of art: a participant of numerous solo and group shows whose repute was established following a series of informed curatorial choices and regular cooperation with some of the most influential players in the European art world. [14] What is more, the visual language of De Bruyckere – who is represented by one of the most important world galleries, i.e. Hauser &

[13] The methodology which the present paper employs (i.e. a combination of visual and literary studies and its methods such as close reading, close watching, semiotics and formalist critique) is indebted to the notion of "polycentric aesthetics" first proposed by Ella Shohat and Robert Stam. In their article "Narrativizing Visual Culture: Towards a Polycentric Aesthetics" they argue that the visual is always "'contaminated' by the work of other senses (hearing, touch, smell), touched by other texts and discourses, and imbricated in a whole series of apparatuses – the museum, the academy, the art world, the publishing industry, even the nation state – which govern the production, dissemination, and legitimation of artistic productions" (Shohat and Stam 2010: 55). Alternatively, artistic cooperation between Coetzee and De Bruyckere as well as its products could be analysed in the context of intermediality.

[14] Some of the most important exhibitions of De Bruyckere's pieces organised in renowned institutions and galleries over the last few years include: "Berlinde De Bruyckere. In the Flesh" of 2013 (Kunsthaus, Graz) and "Mysterium Leib. Berlinde De Bruyckere im Dialog mit Cranach und Pasolini" of 2011 (Kunstmuseum, Bern) – both solo shows; as well as "Body Pressure. Sculpture since the 1960s" of 2013 (Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin) and "Les Papesses. Louise Bourgeois, Camille Claudel, Berlinde De Bruyckere, Kiki Smith, Jana Sterbak" of 2013 (Collection Lambert, Avignon) – both group shows, which position De Bruyckere's art in the context of a specific sculptural tradition of the 20th century (i.e. feminist and sensual).

Wirth [15] – is both highly idiosyncratic and idiomatic and, consequently, overtly recognisable as a distinctive idiolect on the contemporary art scene. The installation curated by Coetzee was not De Bruyckere's first encounter with the Venice Biennial – undoubtedly the greatest contemporary art exhibition which is organised once every two years. In 2003, she was invited to create a piece for the Italian Pavilion, which, in fact, played a crucial role in catapulting De Bruyckere into the artistic stratosphere and in gaining her international recognition.

It appears that the most discernible element of De Bruyckere's art (and the one which, simultaneously, intensely characterises her work) is the medium, or media that she most often resorts to, namely sculpture and artist's book. The tradition which De Bruyckere's formal language is heavily indebted to was adequately and convincingly identified by the Avignon-based group show [16] which juxtaposed her pieces with those by the most emblematic female sculptors of the 20th century, the titular *papesses*, i.e. the likes of Louise Bourgeois and Kiki Smith. This curatorial choice clearly emphasised not only the artists' identities, but their gender as well. Overt sensuousness, formal experimentation, rejection of traditional sculptural materials (i.e. metal and stone, especially bronze and marble) that were declared 'male' and 'masculinist' by the feminist critics in the second half of the 20th century (cf. Lippard 1971 and 1976, Chave 1993, Best 2011), as well as the aesthetics of fragmentation, corporality and, often, abject body, made it possible for the curators to situate De Bruyckere among the greatest innovators of contemporary sculpture; between the feminist art of Bourgeois which originates in surrealism and abjectual as well as corporal works by Smith. [17]

The abject, fragmentedness, corporality, affect, abandonment of hard and masculine materials in favour of warm and soft wax, horse's skin and hair, cotton and wood – those are indeed the elements that characterise the sculptural language of De Bruyckere. They are clearly 'visible' in the piece displayed in Venice, whose title, i.e. "Cripplewood/Kreupelhout," partly alludes to the above-listed features and draws one's attention to fragmentedness. Incompleteness and precariousness are combined with wood – delicate and organic; warm in comparison with metal or stone. A monumental mould covered with many layers of wax and flesh-coloured paint reveals other features characteristic of De Bruyckere's

[15] The gallery has its branches in Zürich, London, New York (two offices), Somerset and Los Angeles (as Hauser Wirth and Schimmel). It does not only represent several dozen contemporary artists but also controls the legacy of such 20th century thespians of art as Eva Hesse, Lee Lozano, and Allan Kaprow.
[16] "Les Papesses. Louise Bourgeois, Camille Claudel, Berlinde De Bruyckere, Kiki Smith, Jana Sterbak," Collection Lambert, Avignon, 2013.
[17] Needless to say, the works of Bourgeois, Smith or Sterbak by no means remain the only possible points of reference. De Bruyckere's pieces could well be places alongside the works by such icons of the 20th century sculpture as Eva Hesse, Alina Szapocznikow, Maria Bartuszova, Janine Antoni, or (taking into account corporality and sensuousness of the material used by the artist), the likes of Lygia Clark and Lygia Pape.

work: the effect of fleshiness, decay and decomposition, woundedness, of a dead and tortured body. The artist herself spoke about "Cripplewood/Kreupelhout" in the following manner:

> You enter the space and see an enormous tree. I've worked with trees before, but on a much smaller scale, and always in vitrines. I bought old vitrines and used the same encaustic technique. I start from the dead tree and make a mold. We begin with that negative, a silicone mold, and in that we paint the encaustic in many layers, with epoxy and iron at the center to make it stronger. Only when you take the wax out of the mold can you see the resulting surface. Then you put all the parts together […] and then paint it layer after layer – as many as 20 layers altogether. […] I use the same palette here as in the human bodies. So it looks really human. That is a subject of much of my other work, and in fact you can look at the tree as a huge, wounded body. It's as if it needs to be taken care of – as if nurses came by and bandaged it. (Hirsch 2013)

When looking at "Cripplewood/Kreupelhout," what particularly draws one's attention is the piece's spectacular form which attributes wood with fleshiness and, thus, combines two distinctive features in one object. Such an approach is well known in the European tradition of sculpture, just to mention a masterpiece of the Roman Baroque art, namely "Apollo and Daphne" (1622-1625) by Gianlorenzo Bernini, which shows the moment of transformation of a human body into a tree. However, despite some thematic correspondence between the pieces of Bernini and De Bruyckere [18], the sculptural means that were used by the two artists are considerably different. Bernini's piece which illustrates a transformation of a living human flesh into a tree was made of marble and, in this sense, it only represents the event which took place somewhere else. When touching the snow-white and cold faces of the god Apollo and the nymph Daphne (if only one were allowed to do so by the custodians in the Borghese Gallery in Rome), one realises that it is only a sculptural equivalent of the story. In "Cripplewood/Kreupelhout," however, due to the use of specific materials, the flesh-into-wood transformation happens before one's eyes: thus, the piece does not only represent the metamorphosis, but, in fact, it embodies or enacts it. When reporting on the Venice Biennial in the September issue of *Artforum*, Benjamin H.D. Buchloh paid special attention to this performative and embodied aspect of De Bruyckere's installation:

> Yet De Bruyckere's work equally destabilizes all recent *doxai* of sculpture, operating as a massive trompe l'oeil of a fragment from nature. A giant tree trunk lies in state in the (unnecessarily) darkened pavilion, like a fractured and bandaged prehistoric corpse, or medieval royalty entombed in

[18] They both thematise change and remain in dialogue (real or declarative only) with literature – Bernini with Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, while De Bruyckere with Coetzee's short story.

> a cathedral. *Kreupelhout*'s illusionistically deceptive wax-and-paint simulations of trunk, stems, bark, and branches, all ruptured and broken, and ostentatiously bandaged in places, are the embodiment of the spectacularized uncanny par excellence. (Buchloh 2013: 316)

Destabilisation of beliefs (*doxai*) which are applicable to the medium of sculpture does not limit itself to a simple annulment of binary opposition between sculpture (representation) and reality only. The "massive trompe l'oeil" and "horrors of mimetic realism bordering on the grotesque" (Buchloh 2013: 317) also thwart other common beliefs pertaining to sculpture and reality. Not only do they [i.e. destabilisations] reveal an emancipatory potential of the work (since they liberate us from the ingrained patterns of thinking), but become an intrinsic part of the piece as well. In this light, "Cripplewood/Kreupelhout" can be seen as a post-Cartesian installation since its constitutive dialectics is based on the annulment of binary opposition between *res extensa* and *res cogitans*. The formal means used by De Bruyckere undermine, or even abolish oppositions based on the Cartesian distinction, such as body vs. soul, body vs. flesh, subject vs. object [19], exterior vs. interior [20], living vs. non-living matter, human vs. nonhuman. [21]

Such an enumeration of some ontological consequences that stem from De Bruyckere's work is by no means tantamount to saying that "Cripplewood/Kreupelhout" addresses the issue of Cartesianism in contemporary world. On the contrary, its main aim was to answer the question which is usually formulated by the consumers of art and which concerns the meaning of a given piece. The formal analysis provided above appears to justify the following response: De Bruyckere's installation problematises (in a very general way) the place of man in the world and inquires about human responsibility for it; consequently, it becomes part of the discourse of ecology and posthumanism which has been powerfully present in the global production and circulation of visual art over the last few years. [22] However, this short discussion of "Cripplewood/Kreupelhout" had

[19] This pair is simultaneously supplemented and breached by the abject.
[20] One sees the mould of the tree's exteriority which, nevertheless, shows its fleshiness, i.e. its interiority. What is more, the tree inhabits an exhibition space.
[21] Annulment of this opposition is further emphasised by De Bruyckere's own comments on Saint Sebastian as well as Zbigniew Herbert's poem entitled "Apollo and Marsyas" included in the exhibition catalogue, which bring together the common motifs of body, flesh and tree (to which the Christian saint and mythological faun were both tied).
[22] So far, the biggest manifestation of artistic production concerned with posthumanism and natural environment was dOCUMENTA (13) curated by Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev and organised in Kassel in 2012. The theme of the 2012 edition of this second most important exhibition of contemporary art in the world (organised once every five years) was "Collapse and Recovery," while in its manifesto Christov-Bakargiev stated the following: "This vision is shared with, recognizes, the shapes and practices of knowing of all the animate and inanimate makers of the world, including people" (Funcke 2012: unnumbered). Traditionally, the Kassel-based exhibition does not only diagnose the current state of art, but also points to the themes and issues which will be present in the artistic production of the years to come.

another objective in mind as well: to prepare the ground for addressing an issue that lies at the very heart of this argument, namely the nature of J.M. Coetzee's participation in the project.

Questions about Coetzee's role (and motives) in curating and co-authoring the Belgian Pavilion were formulated immediately upon the announcement of his cooperation with De Bruyckere. Critics and lovers of art seemed to be rather confused about this – seemingly – unlikely pairing and remained sceptical about its success. For example, Jason Farago's report published in *New Republic* offered a typical amalgam of disbelief and jibe:

> Berlinde De Bruyckere, an artist known for her disturbing humanoid sculptures, announced last week that she wanted some outside assistance organizing her exhibition for the Belgian pavilion at this summer's Venice Biennale – but instead of tapping a professional curator, she's chosen a writer to help her mount the show. And not just any writer. She's tapped J.M. Coetzee: the South African-turned-Australian author of such austere, even pitiless novels as *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Disgrace*, the man who no-showed the Booker Prize ceremony both times he won and who, upon winning his inevitable Nobel, gave just a few interviews. Given that the Venice Biennale has metastasized in recent years into an all-out plutocratic orgy featuring Louboutin-shod scenesters pushing and shoving to get onto Roman Abramovich's yacht, 'J.M. Coetzee, curator' sounds at first like a joke from some art world *Onion* – as unbelievable as Thomas Pynchon appearing on 'Oprah' or Joan Didion doing a Reddit AMA. Coetzee may or may not be the greatest living writer in the English language, but he's certainly the gravest. And while sending Coetzee to Venice may result in a fish-out-of-water surprise hit, I wouldn't bet on it. (Farago 2013)

This playful, yet legitimate (though at the same time ideologically and rhetorically charged) critique juxtaposes the glitzy art world (further considered, after Bourdieuists, the system or economy of meaning production) with a figure of a serious an misanthropic literary giant. Nevertheless, the problem of this cooperation does not lie in sheer impossibility of a successful (both ethically and aesthetically) marriage of the art world and literary *Parnasse*. The fact that the system of art production and circulation remains profoundly corrupted [23] does not necessarily mean that it cannot generate some extraordinary works of art that would match the seriousness of the South African writer's novels. On the contrary, such pieces still appear even within this widely criticised system. However, the real concern

[23] I.e. closely linked to big business and its moguls, as exemplified by Farago's argument which points to a more general trend, namely art events such as the Venice Biennial, Art Basel, or Art Basel Miami becoming – primarily – the contemporary 'vanity fairs.' In a recent article written for *The Guardian*, Will Self argued alongside a similar vein when he accused the 'hyper-rich' for ruining London art scene (Self 2014).

pertaining to the cooperation of the writer Coetzee and the visual artist De Bruyckere is of a different nature and can be formulated in the following manner: what kind of place does Coetzee occupy in this system of meaning production and what does the status of the exhibition's curator and the book's co-author actually entail?

3. Who's the exhibition *auteur*?

So as to answer the above-posed question, it is necessary to turn to the second medium in which De Bruyckere works, namely the artist's book, which – despite its appearance as an ideal tool for experimental collaboration between visual artists and writers – is not thoroughly unproblematic. Like any other art medium (painting, sculpture, film, or performance), the artist's book boasts a set of genre-distinctive features which make it possible for one to differentiate it from books on art, or books made by the artists (i.e. art books). Art historians know that not every book which involves some form of cooperation of a visual artist is synonymous with the artist's book. Novels (experimental or conventional) written by a writer who also happens to be an artist do not – *ex vi termini* – belong to this genre. Nor do "the books with images," i.e. exhibition catalogues which contain photographs that document the works of art existing in a completely different medium (catalogues with reproductions of paintings, sculptures, etc.). Books that have been illustrated by artists also should not be instantaneously considered the artist(s)'s books. What is the artist's book then? Certainly, it is a book created by an artist – and often published in the limited collector's edition – which, in itself, is an independent work of art. In other words: both texts and images included in it are not reproductions of works that principally exist in a different medium. Conversely; texts and images that are used in the artist's book produce a fully autonomous entity and a new meaning which is available only through the very medium of the artist's book [24] (cf. Kotz 2007, Iversen 2010).

Such a definition (based on the economy of meaning production) can be easily applied to *We Are All Flesh*, a collaborative work between Coetzee and De Bruyckere of 2012. The book contains excerpts from Coetzee's fiction as well as images of De Bruyckere's pieces (fine-art photographs which are specifically shot). And even though Coetzee's texts and De Bruyckere's sculptures exist outside of the book (i.e. in different media), it cannot be denied that brought together for the purpose of *We Are All Flesh* they produce new meanings and are perceived in

[24] Some of the most successful examples of the artist's book include Ed Ruscha's *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* (1963), Jarosław Kozłowski's *Reality* (1972), Anselm Kiefer's *Rhine* (1981), Roman Signer's and Tumi Magnússon's *When You Travel in Iceland You See a Lot of Water: Ein Reisebuch/A Travel Book* (2010), Joanna Rajkowska's and Sebastian Cichocki's *Psy z Üsküdar* (2011), and Roni Horn's books such as *Index Cixous. Cix Pax* (2005) or *Another Water* (*The River Thames, for Example*) (2000).

a completely different way. The excerpts do not describe the images, while the images do not illustrate the excerpts (nor do they illustrate the sculptures!); they are not mutually referential. Their relation is highly idiosyncratic and a new quality is hoped to be born at the juncture of text and image. "Combining her images with his writings, [De Bruyckere] selected key passages from Coetzee's books and arranged them alongside photos of details from her sculptures. In this way, words are juxtaposed with images to suggest two parallel worlds that enrich but do not overtly illustrate each other" – the official website of the Belgian Pavilion states thus confirming the present diagnosis of the book's generic status (S.M.A.K. 2013). But in the very same message the Museum of Contemporary Art in Ghent assures the website visitors that the Venetian collaboration of Coetzee and De Bruyckere is, in fact, "a logical extension of a joint project." Does it mean that *Cripplewood/Kreupelhout* is another specimen of the artist's book? Another proof of the artists' collaboration? Though, similarly to the previous volume, *Cripplewood/Kreupelhout* also contains some stylised images of De Bruyckere's installation as well as, for example, Coetzee's previously unpublished story, it appears impossible to categorise it as the artist's book. Unlike *We Are All Flesh*, the volume refuses to generate any new (collaborative) value or meaning. The individual sections remain fully autonomous and, despite their singular referentiality, they do not engage in any sort of dialogue with one another; at best, they reproduce and comment on communication between Coetzee and De Bruyckere, which, as the following sections of the present paper are about to argue, is profoundly anti-dialogic. Already at the level of genre, the volume *Cripplewood/Kreupelhout* – not the artist's book but a catalogue – suggests an uneven distribution of roles and false cooperation between Coetzee and De Bruyckere.

Apart from translations of the contents into French and Dutch and photographs of the art work, the catalogue *Cripplewood/Kreupelhout* comprises of four distinctive parts: an introduction in the form of a letter to Berlinde De Bruyckere written by Philippe Van Cauteren, the artistic director of S.M.A.K. (the Museum of Contemporary Art in Ghent) [25]; a short story by J.M. Coetzee entitled "The Old Woman and the Cats" which features the writer's eponymous heroine Elizabeth Costello; a series of letters exchanged between J.M. Coetzee and Berlinde De Bruyckere over the period of seven months (from September 2012 to March 2013); and, finally, a post-script and critical reflection on Venice and its art by Herman Parret, the professor of philosophy from the Leuven

[25] This short piece draws the comparison between De Bruyckere's sculpture and Saint Sebastian (following De Bruyckere's own interpretation expressed in her letters to Coetzee, a tree trunk is seen as a body, a bark as skin) and explains the context of Venice; Van Cauteren claims that both artists "have embraced this city [i.e. Venice] and its inimitable history," while the Belgian Pavilion is considered "but a shell, a shelter for [their] work, which is moored like a fleet against the dark page of the city's history" (De Bruyckere and Coetzee 2013a: 5).

University. [26] However, since the major concern of the present paper is to investigate both the works of and cooperation between Coetzee and De Bruyckere, the following sections will prioritise and analyse only two parts of the volume, namely Coetzee's short story and the artists' correspondence.

To the best of our knowledge, "The Old Woman and the Cats" was read out for the first time at the Jaipur Literary Festival which Coetzee visited in April 2012. Due to the fact that it occupies the same diegesis (understood, after Genette, as "l'univers où advient cette histoire" [Genette 1982: 19]) as the pieces included in Coetzee's 2003 volume *Elizabeth Costello*, it can well be seen as the (missing) ninth 'lesson' [27] in which Elizabeth is "preparing [herself] for the next move [...]. The final move" (De Bruyckere and Coetzee 2013a: 10); in other words, the one that precedes her arrival "at the gate" (Coetzee 2004: 193) described in the penultimate section of the 2003 collection. Told from the point of view of her son John, i.e. the character first introduced in the volume's opening lesson entitled "Realism," the story narrates John's visit to his mother, a retired writer, who spends the last days of her life in the small Castilian village taking care of feral cats and a mentally retarded man called Pablo. To anyone acquainted with Coetzee's body of works, the piece offers a plethora of familiar tropes and intertextual [28] (as well as autobiographical) references; not to mention the writer's idiosyncratic sense of humour, often ignored by the critics. [29] With her 2003 incarnation (not to mention the Nobel Prize winner himself [30]), Elizabeth shares both "passion for exactitude" as well as vegetarianism and "obsession with animals" (De Bruyckere and Coetzee 2013a: 8, 21). Boasting a perspicacious mind able to identify fallacies, paradoxes and logical errors, she eagerly engages herself in long scholastic discussions on (Lévinasian-like) categories of face and soul [31] as

[26] Parret writes about "sebastianisation" of Venice, which is further classified as "the antipode of Florence" (Coetzee and De Bruyckere 2013a: 62) – an idea clearly borrowed from Georg Simmel's seminal essay "Venice" (Simmel 2006: 177-183). In his piece, which only infrequently alludes to the art work by De Bruyckere, Parret defines Venice as "diurnal" and "Apollonian," as an object of love (as opposed to an object of admiration), as a "site of study" for the flâneur where "the aesthetic and the erotic fuse in complete symbiosis" (De Bruyckere and Coetzee 2013a: 62-64).

[27] *Elizabeth Costello*'s subtitle is "Eight Lessons" (Coetzee 2004).

[28] Intertextuality of "The Old Woman and the Cats" is characterised by the self and other referentiality (e.g. Jospeh Conrad's *The Heart of Darkness*: "[H]e would say Kill them all, he would say Exterminate the brutes" [De Bruyckere and Coetzee 2013a: 21].

[29] Pablo gathers the clipping of John Paul II, by the time a dead pope, which, taking Pablo's sexual offences into account, John takes for erotic or pornographic pictures. John also mistakes Italian for Spanish (De Bruyckere and Coetzee 2013a: 26).

[30] Another autobiographical trace is that Elizabeth, just like J.M. Coetzee, is a parent of two: a boy and a girl. As noted before (e.g. Kusek 2014: 69), the name Costello bears some striking resemblance to Coetzee; the name Elizabeth echoes Elizabeth Curren of Coetzee's novel *Age of Iron*; the name of Elizabeth's son is Coetzee's own first name.

[31] Discussions which, one needs to admit, find no resolution. In this sense, "The Old Woman and the Cats" inhabits a typically Coetzeean epistemology characterised by Sue Kossew as "a 'neither yes or no,' a 'both/and' rather than an 'either/or'" (Kossew 2009: 62). "Does it make sense to him? Yes. No," John responds to his mothers incantations. And adds: "It is a Yes without a No" (De Bruyckere and Coetzee 2013a: 10, 25).

well as the feline ontology. Elizabeth also unmistakably prioritises the faculty of sympathy over reason, as in an episode in which she responds to the suffering of a female cat in the act of giving birth – the incident that bears some uncanny similarity to the "Ivanov" chapter from *The Master of Petersburg*[32]: "It came in a flash. It did not require any calculation, any weighing up of pluses against minuses. [...] [that] cat in the culvert made an appeal to me, and I responded. I responded without question, without referring to a moral calculus" (De Bruyckere and Coetzee 2013a: 22). Like Saint Luis of Toulouse, a Franciscan bishop famous for serving the poor and ignoring his own needs, and (it seems) a subtle point of reference for the text [33], Elizabeth unhesitantly responds to "the appeal of the suffering," sides "with the tribe of the hunted" and, simultaneously, in an act of Christian-like piety, refuses "to be an example" (De Bruyckere and Coetzee 2013a: 23, 22, 21).

Finally, one cannot ignore considerable indebtedness of the story included in *Cripplewood/Kreupelhout* to Coetzee's 1986 novel *Foe*. It is impossible not to look at Elizabeth as another version of Susan Barton who "turns [her] back on [her] own tribe" (De Bruyckere and Coetzee 2013a: 22) and becomes a guardian and protector [34] of "the *unexplained* [our emphasis] Pablo man" (De Bruyckere and Coetzee 2013a: 7). Similarly to Friday, Pablo occupies the margins of society [35] and can well be seen as another Coetzeean "agent of withholding" (Spivak 1991: 1990). The story of the old woman, her cats, and her man Pablo ends – unsurprisingly in light of the above – with a final reference to *Foe* whose narrator famously opens Friday's mouth from which "a slow stream, without breath, without interruption" comes (Coetzee 1987: 157). When on the last page of the story John leaves her mother, "Pablo rises to his feet, embraces him, gives him a kiss on each cheek. He can hear the little pop of saliva as Pablo parts his lips, smell the sweet foulness of his breath" (De Bruyckere and Coetzee 2013a: 28).

This thematic overview of "The Old Woman and the Cats" appears to be particularly pertinent for the present discussion (in fact, it is a necessary prerequisite) as the text was provided by J.M. Coetzee upon the request of Berlinde De Bruyckere, who in her letter of 26 September 2012 (i.e. after she was asked to

[32] Fyodor Dostoevsky is woken up by a howling of a dog; consequently, he responds "to the voice of the unexpected" and attends to the chained and terrified bitch whose "warm, wet tongue licks his face, his ears, licks the salt from his beard" (Coetzee 1999: 80, 81).

[33] The 18th century Franciscan mission to California "San Luis Obispo" was named after Saint Luis. The village in which Elizabeth resides is called San Juan Obispo (a real city in Antigua), which appears to be a play with the name of the saint and the mission (this feature, i.e. the playfulness of Coetzee's writing came particularly to prominence in *The Childhood of Jesus* [Kusek 2013: 20-26]). Needless to say, Toulouse remains one of Coetzee's favourite cycling destinations.

[34] "I look after him. I protect him," Elizabeth says (De Bruyckere and Coetzee 2013a: 9).

[35] He is an exhibitionist suffering from some mental retardation who, once estranged by his own family, was saved by Elizabeth from being put in an institution.

represent Belgium in the Venice Biennial) asked the former for "a parallel text," something she can "feed on, that [she] can digest for a while and spit out afterwards" (De Bruyckere and Coetzee 2013a: 29). "Something else, something new that you feel could be *related* [our emphasis] to my work. A text, a story, an essay maybe," she implored in the same missive [36] (De Bruyckere and Coetzee 2013a: 29). Hence, the question which inevitably needs to be posed is to what extent Coetzee's text which has just been briefly analysed did indeed give food for thought for the visual artist and did shape De Bruyckere's installation. To address the issue of the artists' cooperation and co-authorship of the piece, one should then turn to the letters exchanged between Coetzee and De Bruyckere, i.e. the third section of *Cripplewood/Kreupelhout*.

Correspondence, or the epistolarium [37] as Liz Stanley would prefer to call it (Stanley 2004: 201), is a unique genre which, like no other form of life writing, claims to testify to a relationship between individuals. [38] Moreover, as noted by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, letters can be further considered the "vehicles through which information is circulated, social roles enacted, relationships secured" (Smith and Watson 2010: 273). In this sense, a careful analysis of the epistolary dialogue between Coetzee and De Bruyckere may prove to be particularly helpful in answering the questions stipulated in the opening part of this essay.

Despite the fact that the correspondence section of *Cripplewood/Kreupelhout* does not include all the letters exchanged between Coetzee and De Bruyckere [39], one feels fully entitled to make some claims about the nature and technicalities of their cooperation. Already in the opening letter which invites Coetzee to join the project, De Bruyckere establishes an unorthodox model of artistic collaboration, in which Coetzee – despite being named a "curator" – is only to perform a role of a muse. "I cannot imagine a curator inspiring me so deeply and with whom I can consider this [i.e. the Belgian pavilion] delicate task," Bruyckere says. She further adds: "That is why I would like to ask you to be my curator. Not to assist

[36] The letter also reveals that originally the catalogue was to comprise exclusively of the photograph's of De Bruyckere work and Coetzee's text (De Bruyckere and Coetzee 2013a: 29).
[37] In her theory of the epistolarium, Liz Stanley distinguishes between three categories: an "epistolary record" (full number of someone's letters, archival record; letters that "remain for *post hoc* scrutiny"), a "collection" (the product of editorial activity) and the so-called "ur-letters" (i.e. "produced in transcribing, editing and publishing letters") (Stanley 2004: 218-223).
[38] Widely considered private and intimate pieces, letters are often syllogistically seen as most "truthful" and "authentic."
[39] For example, in one letter Coetzee is referring to a maquette of the art work which he was promised to receive (De Bruyckere and Coetzee 2013a: 42). However, none of De Bruyckere's missives included in the volume verbalises this kind of promise. This suggests that some parts of the correspondence have not entered the 'official' published collection. A complete overview of the correspondence will be made possible once the letters are donated by Coetzee to the Harry Ransom Center in Austin, Texas.

me during the working process or to help make any decisions, but as a *source of inspiration* [our emphasis]" (De Bruyckere and Coetzee 2013a: 29). In light of the modern paradigm of curatorship (cf. Greenberg, Ferguson and Nairne 2005), De Bruyckere's proposal (and Coetzee's acceptance of it) is highly problematic. On the one hand Coetzee is labelled the piece's curator, but on the other hand he is deprived of all the prerogatives (and obligations) which typically accompany this kind of appointment. [40] Crucially for the present analysis, he does not attain the status of the "exhibition *auteur*" (Heinich and Pollak 2005: 166), who enjoys autonomy and authority (due to his unquestionable competence) and who provides an exhibited piece with his individual 'signature.' [41]

The letters that follow offer a fascinating account of a struggle over the authorship of the piece-to-be between Coetzee and De Bruyckere. Despite her initial enthusiasm over the story submitted by Coetzee which she considers "the work of a soul mate, a parallel world" [42] (De Bruyckere and Coetzee 2013a: 30), it soon transpires that the specific plans concerning her Venetian installation had been made before she actually approached Coetzee with her partnership request. She admits that the idea of a fallen tree first occurred to her when in Burgundy, several years before, she found an enormous tree ripped to pieces by the storm, "a symbol of life, [...], the collapsed cathedral, the limitations of the human being" (De Bruyckere and Coetzee 2013a: 30). Though she claims that "the story of the old woman and the cats inspired me in a very personal and profound way" (De Bruyckere and Coetzee 2013a: 31), De Bruyckere's letters show that she has no intention to translate Coetzee's piece into her sculpture. In a letter of November 12, she provides her correspondent with a detailed description of the piece and the space where it is to be displayed, naming the story of Saint Sebastian, Venice and the Black Death as major sources of inspiration. Aware of Coetzee's non-presence, she anticipates the writer's potential concern in the following manner: "And where is J.M. Coetzee in this story? you might ask. Not in a direct relation to the work. There are no literal references to your story. It is merely the sense of finding a 'soul mate'" (De Bruyckere and Coetzee 2013a: 32). She further resorts to

[40] Duties such as "(1) acquiring work for the museum, (2) supervising its preservation in store, and (3) displaying it, putting it on exhibition." What is more, "the curator selects what he/she wants to present and calculates the feasibility of the project. Hence his function is one of input as he sorts out the massive information about the art around. When he puts on an exhibition his position changes: as the exhibition is visited it is assessed […]. Thus the curator is at the interface [of the institution that commissions a given exhibition] and the public as consumers" (Alloway 2005: 159).

[41] "This figure is as irreducible to the notion of a post (it is not the institution that defines the 'author' – and as it happens the latter is so defined in opposition to the former) as it is to that of function (to the extent that the mere accomplishment of a task does not make an author, rather it is the singularity of an author's production that does so)" (Heinich and Pollak 2005: 168).

[42] She also sees the piece as "a plea for the useless, the neglected" and praises its "simplicity," evocation of "loneliness" as well as creating "the ideal surroundings for answering confronting and unresolved questions" (De Bruyckere and Coetzee 2013a: 30).

listing some very abstract (and thus entirely meaningless) connections between her sculpture and Coetzee's text, namely their multi-layerdness, lack of closure, plurality of meanings and complexity (De Bruyckere and Coetzee 2013a: 32). Despite the fact that she could, in fact, unveil some more substantial links between her piece and Coetzee's short story such as critique of traditional humanism, anti-Cartesianism, distrust towards binary opposition (body vs. soul), fascination with the body.

Throughout the whole period, Coetzee makes several attempts to become an active "source of inspiration" for De Bruyckere's installation; he tries to unearth meanings (inter-cultural, textual, visual), where De Bruyckere simply imposes them. He ponders over the word "kreupelhout" and submits a lexicographic analysis of the term and its various meanings [43]; signals a more accurate association with cripplewood than Saint Sebastian, namely Bernini's "Daphne" who turns into a laurel tree and can be seen as a paradigm of metamorphosis ("I wonder whether there is not an opportunity of making use of this evocation, rather than treating it as an inconvenient, irrelevant association" [De Bruyckere and Coetzee 2013a: 42]); sends a poem by the Polish writer Zbigniew Herbert entitled "Apollo and Marsyas" so as to reflect on the idea of a tortured body (De Bruyckere and Coetzee 2013a: 46, 45, 48). Gradually, as De Bruyckere singlehandedly introduces a number of substantial changes to the project (e.g. she abandons cripplewood and substitutes it with an elm tree as well as pursues phallic readings of a tree trunk [44]), a reader of the letters gets the sense of Coetzee becoming more and more estranged from it. "I am not sure I understand," he says in a letter of February 19, "nor am I yet able to make the transition [from a cripplewood to an elm tree, from a tortured body to a fertile and ejaculating body]" (De Bruyckere and Coetzee 2013a: 47). "There is not much point in my commenting," he concludes elsewhere (De Bruyckere and Coetzee 2013a: 42). Regardless of De Bruyckere largely ignoring his points [45], of her reiterating ungrounded claims about the relevance of his short story to the installation itself [46] while simultaneously

[43] In his analysis, Coetzee resorts to his familiar tropes: uncleanliness, bodily deformation, "starving dogs in the streets" (De Bruyckere and Coetzee 2013a: 46).

[44] "The restrained force of the tree, which immediately reminded me of a huge phallus as well, will be extended in a bunch of frailer, dead trees: the ejaculation. Eros and Thanatos united" (De Bruyckere and Coetzee 2013a: 42).

[45] Out of five questions/comments formulated by Coetzee in a letter of February 19, De Bruyckere responds to only two of them. Needless to say, she totally ignores Herbert's poem and makes no reference to it.

[46] "I buried myself in your text [...]. it is a major element that I want to translate into my sculpture. Not visibly perhaps, but tangibly. For me this also summarises my commission to you, as my curator; with this text you have given me something to feed on, something inspiring that I will have to translate into my sculpture" (De Bruyckere and Coetzee 2013a: 48). De Bruyckere writes this at the point where all the decisions concerning the installation (including such elements as the "damp and blistered" walls and plinths and pedestals) have already been made.

rejecting his ideas [47], Coetzee, nevertheless, continues to share his feedback and give suggestions. His final letter, dated March 21, in which he writes about the love Japanese gardeners manifest towards the plants, remains, in fact, a final proof of Coetzee's commitment to the project – even if he has been denied an active role in creating it.

How should then one define the relationship between Coetzee and De Bruyckere? How to understand their co-authorship of the project? Though Philippe Van Cauteren assures the readers of the catalogue that De Bruyckere's collaboration with Coetzee "makes itself felt;" that the former is "someone who whispers words and sentences in [De Bruyckere's] ear; as if he supported 'Kreupelhout/Cripplewood' with tied bundles of text that hide in the hollows of the sculpture;" and, in a propensity for clichéd metaphors, that the two artists are "sewn together in thought and feeling, in a universal search for a probably meaning of life and death, beauty and loss" (De Bruyckere and Coetzee 2013a: 5), it is impossible – in light of the above-formulated claims – to look at the piece as an effect of creative and balanced partnership. [48] Coetzee is by no means the curator of the piece – consequently, an implicit pact between the viewers/audience and the author of the installation concerning the curator (his function and role) has certainly been breached. Nor is he a muse; at best, he can be considered a figure of a muse, a silent god(dess) whose voice has not been heard and whose "sweet argument" is not allowed to be "[poured] into [De Bryckere's] verse" (Shakespeare 2003: 64). She becomes Coetzee's very own Daniel Foe, the "patient spider who sits at the heart of his web waiting for his prey to come to him" (Coetzee 1987: 143) and who suppresses the contribution of Coetzee (or Susan Barton). In what we are tempted to call a relationship of exploitation (as it is clearly De Bruyckere who profits from being associated with the major voice of contemporary literature), it is De Bruyckere's and not Coetzee's 'story' that is to be heard. As it was indeed *her* [our emphasis] piece that was shown during the 2013 Venice Biennial.

4. Conclusions

In light of the claims formulated in the present paper (and alluded to in its very title), it seems hardly possible to deny that J.M. Coetzee and Berlinde De Bruyckere are, indeed, an unlikely pair. A detailed analysis of the correspondence

[47] She dismisses his concern about incompatibility of steel and flesh (fostered by images of death camps and bulldozers shoving dead, emaciated bodies which can be seen as another instance of Coetzee's "landscape of Holocaust postmemory" [Kaplan 2011]) and incorporates steel elements into her installation.

[48] This imbalance between Coetzee and De Bruyckere is visible even at the level of style and form (precise and short missives by Coetzee vs. profuse and elaborate messages by De Bruyckere).

between the two artists included in the catalogue *Cripplewood/Kreupelhout* clearly proves that Coetzee's contribution to the installation was negligible and, in fact, inconsequential. Despite being named the piece's curator, Coetzee did not perform any of the tasks that such a position conventionally entails: he had no role in selecting potential works of art, contextualising them, arranging them in an exhibition space, or writing critically about them; he did not even earn the status of De Bruyckere's muse as the present paper has shown. What is more, even though his name was put on the cover of the catalogue on a par with De Bruyckere's, he cannot be considered its co-author. Not being the artist's book, *Cripplewood/Kreupelhout* does not privilege the writer (and his creative collaboration with the visual artist) in any sense and simply places him among other voices of the volume, the likes of Philippe Van Cauteren and Herman Parett.

How should then one understand the nature of this collaboration? Why, despite her subsequent marginalisation of his role, did Berlinde De Bruyckere invite Coetzee to the project in the first place? [49] One might risk a statement that the consumers of art – be it the pieces by the old masters or contemporary artists – are more willing to appreciate the works which have already been thematised (and, in a sense, immortalised) by literature. Suffice it to mention such pieces as "View of Delft" (1658-1661) by Johannes Vermeer, described by Marcel Proust on the pages of *In Search of Lost Time*, the work "of a beauty that was sufficient in itself" (Proust 1993: 244) in whose presence the elderly critic Bergotte passes away; or "The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb" (1520-1522) by Hans Holbein the Younger, which horrified Fyodor Dostoevsky and which, according to Prince Myshkin in *The Idiot*, may be instrumental in losing one's faith (Dostoevsky 2008: 242). Consequently, the act of reading (the book but also the picture) is not a solitary experience but a collective undertaking in which a reader and a (great) writer become mutual companions and "fellow readers" (Kinross 1994). If James Elkins's diagnosis of contemporary art world in which an art critic has lost his authority and cannot any longer assist the viewers in recognising the true value of art is accurate (Elkins 2003), then any literary (or even semi-literary, as in the case of Coetzee's letters) act which valorises a given work of art may be considered inestimable.

Such an act of valorisation is deemed particularly valuable in the case of such pieces as "Cripplewood/Kreupelhout," which due to being time- and site-specific

[49] Another interesting question that could be posed here is why Coetzee agreed to join De Bruyckere's project. One could speculate that this cooperation – apart from the writer's life-long interest in visual arts – might have been triggered by Coetzee's desire to explore non-novelistic opportunities and to engage himself in an activity that transgresses the traditional borders and divisions of artistic production (and thus also to challenge the traditional notion of authorship). In this light, his attempt to contribute to De Bruyckere's installation is logically consistent with, for example, his decision to write a libretto for Nicholas Lens's opera *Slow Man* or publish his correspondence with Paul Auster.

are essentially accidental. De Bruyckere's installation was determined (and, in fact, constituted) by a specific space (the Belgian Pavilion in Venice) and time frame (the 55th International Art Exhibition). When dressed up as the artist's book and with Coetzee dressed up as a curator and co-author of the volume, De Bruyckere's time- and site-specific work has been offered a second, more permanent life. This gesture seems only to confirm the validity of an observation once made by Friedrich Hölderlin: "was bleibet aber stiften die Dichter" (Hölderlin 2003: 228).

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