OPENINGS SPEECH BY RUBIAH BALSEM

Opening of the exhibition 'Er kraait geen haan naar' by Narges Mohammadi
12 September, Brutus, Rotterdam

Good evening everyone,
friends, husband of Narges, colleagues,
team Brutus, family, kin and all the other beautiful souls,

Before we begin, I would like to invite you all:
To think of a moment when you felt unseen.
Ignored, uninvited to your own life.
As if your story had no door to enter the room.
As if looked down upon, unwanted, invisible.

This exhibition begins there:
in that quiet, numbing space.
But it doesn't stay there.
It listens. It builds. It remembers.

The title 'Er kraait geen haan naar',
is not a conclusion,
it is a warning,
a mirror,
an echo.

Because this is not just an exhibition about poverty.
It is about what poverty reveals.
Not only what people endure,
but what systems erase.
What silence conceals.
What survives despite everything.

Narges Mohammadi doesn't ask for pity,
nor does she offer spectacle.
Instead, she gives form to what remains:
A landscape of familiar ruins made of flour, sand, alabaster, loam and sound.
She rebuilds what was lost from her childhood and others,
not in accuracy,
but in tenderness.

Step by step, a house emerges, piece by piece,
from memory that isn't hers.
sculpted in sand: a cushioned bench to rest,
a veiled doorway,
a window still alive and open to light.
All holding space for what once was.

A sewing machine becomes an echo of war.
A bread brick already crumbles from the inside.
And on the floor: eggs, full of promise,
sit suspended between hunger and hope.
Do we eat them to survive today,
or let it hatch for another tomorrow?
It is not a metaphor.
It is the kind of choice poverty demands, over and over again.

And quietly, somewhere in the same space,
white alabaster objects flicker like ghosts.
Empty shells that once held life.

A lamp, a doll, an egg.
Fragile, but not without strength.
They carry the trace of resilience in times of scarcity,
and the faint glimmer of what still endures.

That is what this work holds:
Inherited memories.
Second-hand grief.
Handed-down strength.
The shadows of doors that once opened.
The light behind windows that never quite closed.

As Sebald once wrote,
'Because memory, *even when it is not our own, it is still the shape of our world."*

It asks us not to look at the poor, but at the people inside them.
and at the architecture that holds them in place.

Poverty doesn't simply end when conditions change.
It lingers, not only in policy or empty pockets,
but in the body, the breath, the imagination.

The present shrinks. The future fades.
And what remains is a residue,
a kind of darkness that settles into the memory of the senses.

As Eduardo Galeano once wrote:
'History never really says goodbye. History says: see you later.'

Because poverty is not an individual failure.
It is *'The greatest lie told about the poor, that poverty is a matter of character.'*
As Zadie Smith reminds us.

And yet, we expect beauty.
Composure.
Resilience.

We ask people to survive what they never chose,
then critique the way they carry their pain.
That expectation is an oppression in itself.

What Narges builds here is not a monument.
It's a threshold.

But no structure is ever built alone.
And this one is no exception:
Narges called upon friends,
chosen family, her community.
Not just to help, but to hold.

Together they sifted, carried, shaped.
They gathered what had crumbled
and rebuilt from love.

If poverty isolates,
this was a different kind of architecture:
A soft structure built in solidarity.
Made of presence.
A shared act of healing.

So, in the end it we must ask ourselves:
Can we see without consuming?
Can we witness without explaining?
Can we care without condition?

Can we imagine a different kind of architecture?
one made not out of fear,
but of empathy.
Not of control,
but of care.

Because empathy and care are not a weakness,
it is our most radical and necessary act.
They hold what resistance alone cannot.
A place where people don't need to be perfect to be protected,
not exceptional to be remembered.
Just human.

As a reminder that humanity,
is an unspoken language that isn't written,
but felt.

A literacy of the soul.
A literacy of the heart.
It speaks where systems fall silent.
An that is why we need art,
and those who dare to make it.

So, let me close with the words of Dutch Poet Laureate, Babs Gons.
As a quiet reminder:
to turn toward one another,
and make space for the dimples we carry.

JUST RIGHT

Sometimes you just want to lay your head down
on the earth,
raise your fist to the sky,
let the tears fall and say:

Is it because I am black, white, female,
too tall, too small, too big,
too sweet, naughty,
because I'm ugly, honest,
direct, poetic, eloquent,
too visible, invisible,
vulnerable,
misunderstood, praised,
poor, proud,
unapologetic and confrontational?
That's why, right?

And the earth pushes you up
with her soft hands,
kisses you on the cheek and whispers:
It's because you are so very human.
Not too much, not too little, human enough.
Just as human as other human beings.
Just right.

Babs Gons

Thank you, Narges,
for making space for what is often left unsaid.
And thank you all for being here,
Enjoy the exhibition!