

**THE LANGUAGE OF TERROR IS TERROR ITSELF
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Solo exhibition by the Peter Voss-Knude

A conversation between the artist and curator Solvej Helweg Ovesen

Solvej Helweg Ovesen:

Over the last few decades, war violence took on a new shape, with the use of death drone attacks and the rise of terrorism. Amongst civilians the fear of sudden terror or drone attacks, depending on where you are in the world, has increased. In your exhibition and art project

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you research the relation between media and military language and the instigation of this kind of violence. What inspired you to work on this project and the military in Denmark initially?

I had grown increasingly afraid of political discussions in which us-and-them rethorics short circuited any sort of progression in arguments. As a solution, I figured that the price I had to pay would be to position myself (my studio) within the body (the military), which I was critical towards. To somehow write and work from within the problem, with equal measures of respect, curiosity and questioning. So I sent a drawing and wrote a letter to the danish army, in which I explained why I wanted to write a music record based on conversations with their soldiers. They opened the gates to a barrack for me and in 2015 I went there to do my fieldwork. It was sort of a self organized residency, where I was walking around like a pigeon caught in a trench asking a lot of stupid questions. They gave me a studio next to the workshop where they were repairing the tanks that got back from Afghanistan. Eventually, I met three guys around my age, Thomas, Tobias and Nikolaj, who all had been deployed in Afghanistan and who agreed that I could listen to them and sing songs departing from their words. They were all very emotionally intelligent. This process

resulted in two music records and a series of concerts released under the title Peter & the Danish Defence¹.

What interests you about war narratives and their agents, the military staff involved?

The notion of 'defence' is intriguing to me: As a relic from the time when it was possible to form a binary world view between good and evil, where wars were played out between nation states and its territories, we name our armies as "defences". What is defined as self defence? I mean, even the pilot of Enola Gay, the B-29 bomber that dropped the bomb on Hiroshima, Paul Tibbets pressed the release button while thinking it was an act of defence.

But also: War narratives and gender! The army is a stronghold for the imagination of masculinity where archaic tropes are being propagated by the institution. A very central conviction that I like to challenge is that men are physically stronger than women and women are therefore less needed in an army. Like the German sociologist Klaus Theweliet argues in his two books 'Male Fantasies'(1987), the concurrent fear and fascination of the feminine is integral to the military system. A soldier once told me, that the heightened senses he would get in a combat situation, enabled him to look into the near future. That he had experienced the world in slow motion, for example bullets flying through the air. I believed him and realized that sensitivity, fine tuned senses and empathy are essential assets for a combat soldier. This is a clear subversion of what an idealised masculinity comprises of, which interests me.

In a way you are asking if there is a way for civilians and the military to be less terrorized - to find less terrorizing languages, is that so?

I believe that people who have experienced actual violence or survived severe oppression have a more proportionate relationship to their own mortality than those who usually make it to the powerful seats in society. The more property you own, the more you feel threatened that someone might rob you. I wouldn't want to tell anyone what to feel and what not to feel, but I think it is fair to say that we are all deeply manipulated by forces that we are not aware of, on what to be afraid of. For example between 2008 and 2016 , there were nearly twice as many terrorist attacks performed by right wing extremists than islamists in the US². However, deeply corrupt financial systems and mega companies of tax evaders that implode the lives of the lesser privileged, hide behind armies of lawyers while minority groups are scapegoated and stigmatized.

¹ Peter & the Danish Defence records available on Spotify here: [sptfy.com/8Q53](https://open.spotify.com/album/8Q53)

² <https://www.revealnews.org/article/home-is-where-the-hate-is/>

This exhibition departs from your own translation of the narrative of a government terror exercise: KRISØV2017 by writer Rasmus Dahlberg. In your opinion, why would the Danish military commission a novel about potential terror attacks in Denmark at this time?

KRISØV2017 ('Crisis Exercise 2017') is a narrative for an exercise organised by the Emergency Management Agency wherein Denmark is hit by a fictive multilateral terrorist attack. The development of the scenario is based on the security and intelligence agency's assessment of terrorist threats. The speculations in the story and its literary qualities is a unique mirror, perhaps even a Freudian slip, into the way terror is thought of and prepared for within a North European country. Furthermore, the commissioned writer published the narrative a year later as an erotic crime thriller with a clear underlying motif - the white man's jealousy and the great lengths he will go to tackle this unbearable feeling. The book wouldn't set itself apart from any mainstream pulp fictions, if it hadn't been for its unique connection to *reality*; the narrative was used as a literary tool to make the scenario feel more realistic for the planners of the exercise, who all hold important positions in different organs of society. The narrative was used to maximize a common consensus, so all enact the same game and follow the same rules. In a recent interview that I conducted with the writer, he disclosed that much of the storyline is copied from the American TV Series Homeland season 5, which is set here in Berlin - a production which has been widely critiqued for its bigotry and islamophobia³.

What are the different works in the exhibitions and how do they sprout from this translation individually ?

The works departing from my encounter with KRISØV are first of all my **translation of KRISØV**, a paperback version, for the visitor to take and read at their own convenience.

It is also a 1.1 ton **Rose Quartz terror barricade** that both physically and spiritually protects a body from an attack. It is placed on the sidewalk in front of the exhibition space.

Furthermore, on the wall there is a large scale **charcoal drawing** on paper of a collage inspired by Homeland season 5 and a **photogravure** of the contract between the Danish Emergency Management Agency and the author. The contract commissions him to write the narrative for the terror exercise.

My translation of the text explodes in different formats in the exhibition space, I create a wall drawing with word fragments of the exercise, which are also digitally printed on a three meters long silk chiffon veil that I use as a performative object.

In the exhibition a **demo song** I wrote in this context is playing in a loop. It is part of my upcoming anti-terror music record, which will be released in 2020 as part of my exhibition at The Museum of Contemporary Art, Denmark. In a separate room, I will present a **cell workshop space**. Here a

³ https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2014/10/02/homeland-is-the-most-bigoted-show-on-television/?utm_term=.d39c3c4c3801

series of appropriated Terror-Tarot Cards and articles from a workshop, “Pandora’s Cell,” that I conducted in Berlin in spring 2019, will be displayed. Here I also present an aquarel painting of the book cover of the erotic crime thriller , “Deadly Drones: A case for the Pandora Cell” (Turbine 2018) that was adapted from KRISØV. And finally **a poem by the poet CAConrad**, who is writing about images of violence and sexuality.

What is in your opinion the future perspective of these kinds of narratives - us and them - which also dominate Hollywood films? What could the role of fiction and language be in the context of the war prevention of the future?

As a person who belongs to a minority, whose narratives have been written out of history, I worry a lot about how a system can silence voices through lack of, or false representation. A future language of terror prevention should include an education towards what we are complicit in. That the drones we now worry will be used in attacks against us, have been terrorising countries for over a decade under the Obama administration. Here in Germany, these missions are carried out in silent acceptance from the Ramstein air base⁴ although the attacks are illegal under German legislation.⁵ I am convinced that the linear dramaturgy that we are being force fed by Hollywood deeply affects the way our governments imagine threats - KRISØV seems to be a literary proof of this both structural and unconscious bias.

You conducted a “crisis management workshop” in Berlin ahead of your show, dealing with the terror scenarios in the book - can you describe what happened and what role this exercise plays for the exhibition?

The workshop was an experiment on the basis of an academic paper⁶ that shows a relation between media attention in the New York Times and the amount of terror incidents that follow. It shows that if terrorists do not receive media attention, they will attack less. Inspired by a concept paper from the Danish Emergency Management Agency called *Pandora - the Forward Looking Cell*, we formed our own crisis management. The crisis we managed was this symbiotic relationship between media representation and terrorism, regarding the article in the physical newspaper as an attack itself. A main point in this discussion, was that just like in cases of suicide, there are specific ethics of how the press is allowed to write about this, because a spike of

⁴ <https://www.dw.com/en/ramstein-air-base-anti-drone-protests-the-germans-taking-on-the-us-military/a-40432117>

⁵ <https://www.dw.com/en/drone-use-raises-ethical-questions-in-germany/a-16823058>

⁶ Jetter, M. (2017) The effect of media attention on terrorism, *Journal of Public Economics*, vol. 153, issue C, p. 32-48, Elsevier

emulation suicides after a widely publicised suicide is known as “The Werther Effect” following Goethes novel “The Sorrows of Young Werter”.

If we now return to the beginning and the relation between death drones, terror and language - both highly destabilizing forms of violence often with civilians as their target: what is your approach to disarm language? Where would you begin? What do your musical texts suggest here?

Following the recent attacks in Christchurch (New Zealand, 15. March 2019) the premier minister Jacinda Ardern presented a progressive proposal to introduce a national ‘wellbeing budget’ to support mental well-being for youth, take action against child poverty and fight class divisions that can fuel radicalization. I see this as an amazingly inspiring approach because it challenges the normal zero sum logic of security investments and mutual deterrence that normally follows a national tragedy such as a terrorist attack. Driven by a rationality of femininities, I would like to see my work as working towards similar parameters, by encouraging emotional responses to a national disaster with a language of a War on Terror.