

# THE SURVIVORS

a video installation by Lisa Matthys





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“CHILDHOOD IS NOT TRANSPARENT WITH  
INNOCENCE”

DENNIS POTTER



THE SURVIVORS,  
AN EXPLORATION AND DESIRE FOR  
MILDER VALUES IN SOCIETY.

In 2014 the Yezidi community (a Kurdish minority group) became victim of a genocide conducted by the Islamic State in Iraq. Part of the population fled to safer territories, but many of them were captured, the men were killed, women raped. The stories of the survivors are tremendously harsh.

In this video work I documented the testimonies of Yezidi children and how they endured these extreme circumstances. In a landscape (Kurdistan / Northern Iraq) that radiates an idyllic innocence the children tell their stories surrounded by wild flowers who show, just like childhood, the (thinkable) lightness of existence.

The testimonies are linked to "sandplay" sessions: a non-verbal therapy with forms in a box filled with sand.



# NOTE OF INTENTION

## BACKGROUND

Since I've been working with children, they became an important part of my artistic work. I noticed that children are able to create without inhibition, like an intuitive gesture, they are closer to something natural, rooted. Observing this, I was very interested in their process of playing and making things, very often unaware reflections and reenactments of what they live and see in society. Exactly what artists can do too.

Recently I finished my work PLAY! a video installation and ode to the free play of children in three different zones (rural-Iceland, urban-Brussels and conflict-Palestine). The particular, absurd world that children can create in their games, is very often a mirror that reflects the specific reality wherein they live. With the Palestinian children playing in their hometown Aida, a refugee camp in Bethlehem, right next to the separation wall, the installation became also a political work.

PLAY! is situated on the verge of documentary, poetry & research and crossing boundaries and questioning established conceptions as such. It is a very unusual video work. It is not a documentary, it's a play itself. I stepped with my camera into the imagination of the kids, and I became a part of their performances. The images are not objective, observational registrations of the games they're playing but a relational, subjective registration of the free play. This subjective registration opens an artistic visual language which captivate the theatrical, emotional and raw games of children. The visual language refers to Aldo Van Eyck's Amsterdam Playground, Johan Huizinga's Homo Ludens, Helen Levitt's photography and very subtle to the book Lord of the Flies.

The work was shown in various places; Bozar (Brussels), Visite Film Festival (Antwerp), Skjaldborg Film Festival (Iceland), to name a few. In art foundation LA FABBRICA DEL CIOCCOLATO, in Torre Switzerland, where PLAY! was further developed as an installation and where I met director Franco Marinotti. Since early 2000 Marinotti has been an art house film and video producer for several promising artists like Piero Golia, Frédéric Moser & Philippe Schwinger,.... This encounter was a key moment in my artistic career. As Mr. Marinotti is a supporter of my art work he will be my artistic mentor during the process of my new video installation and actively and extensively promote my work at other art institutions, curators and programmers with a view to future presentations.

Within my job as an educational and artistic collaborator at the "Fondation A Foundation" I realize workshops on visual culture for children in school context. An important source of inspiration is the work of the many photographers exhibiting their work (e.g. Nicholas Nixon, Lee Friedlander, Jo Ractliffe, ...) and in particular Georges Senga (1983-DRC) and his photo series "Kadogos". The subject of this series is Congolese child soldiers and how this emerges in the play of children as a possible bereavement process.

This concept raised my research question: namely how children interpret, experience and ultimately shape related traumatic experiences (war, conflict). Within the school environment - a set that I interpreted as a power structure, attributes are made that reinforce the game. This creates a situation and a simulation in which personal experiences, documentary and fictional elements intertwine. In this way complex concepts are processed through image, action and language to contribute to social, emotional and intellectual skills. The result of this experience, a series of photo's, raises awareness about children in war zones and the naive play of children 'playing war'.

My aim now is to elaborate an artistic research and documentation on children surviving extreme contexts and their perspectives on conflicts and to fill in an existing gap in documenting war experiences from the child's perspective and how it affects and influences the unconscious mind.





## THE INSTALLATION: MAIN IDEA

From my video triptych PLAY! and my recent documentary about Yezidi children in Iraq, I will develop a video installation.

During the recording of this documentary in April 2019, I met Jackleen, a Yezidi girl from Sinjar who spent years in IS imprisonment. I filmed her testimony in a landscape (Kurdistan / Northern Iraq) that radiates an idyllic innocence, in a surprisingly calm tone she tells about the atrocities that this imprisonment brought with it. Her verbal testimony was linked to a "sandplay" session: a non-verbal therapy with forms in a sandbox.

My ambition is to further expand the cinematic footage and the spatial dimension of the sand tray and landscape elements into an (interactive) multimedia installation.

I will extend the source material with new testimonials from Yezidi children in this natural landscape (Northern Iraq) and through sandplay sessions and explore how the installation can strengthen the video material.

Camera views; positioning and the movement conditioning of the spectator; sound (360 °) versus gaze (> 180 °); moving and still image; scent, staging and effect of reality are creatively questioned in this way.

### FLOWERS

Although the subject of the installation is tough and heavy, I want to focus on the consolation and the beauty in which we can find solace.

The landscape of this region in spring is remarkably beautiful, snowy mountains and green valleys, full of wild flowers, the contrast with the current political situation couldn't be any bigger.

While the children told their stories the flowers were not only surrounding them, they also became a support, a grip during the revelation of their testimonies. This way the images became sensuous, and also focused on the feel of things, textures, surfaces,...

The flower is a unique symbol connecting nature and culture. A question is, how we can – through art – create a space where not only economical, but also ecological and social values are at stake.

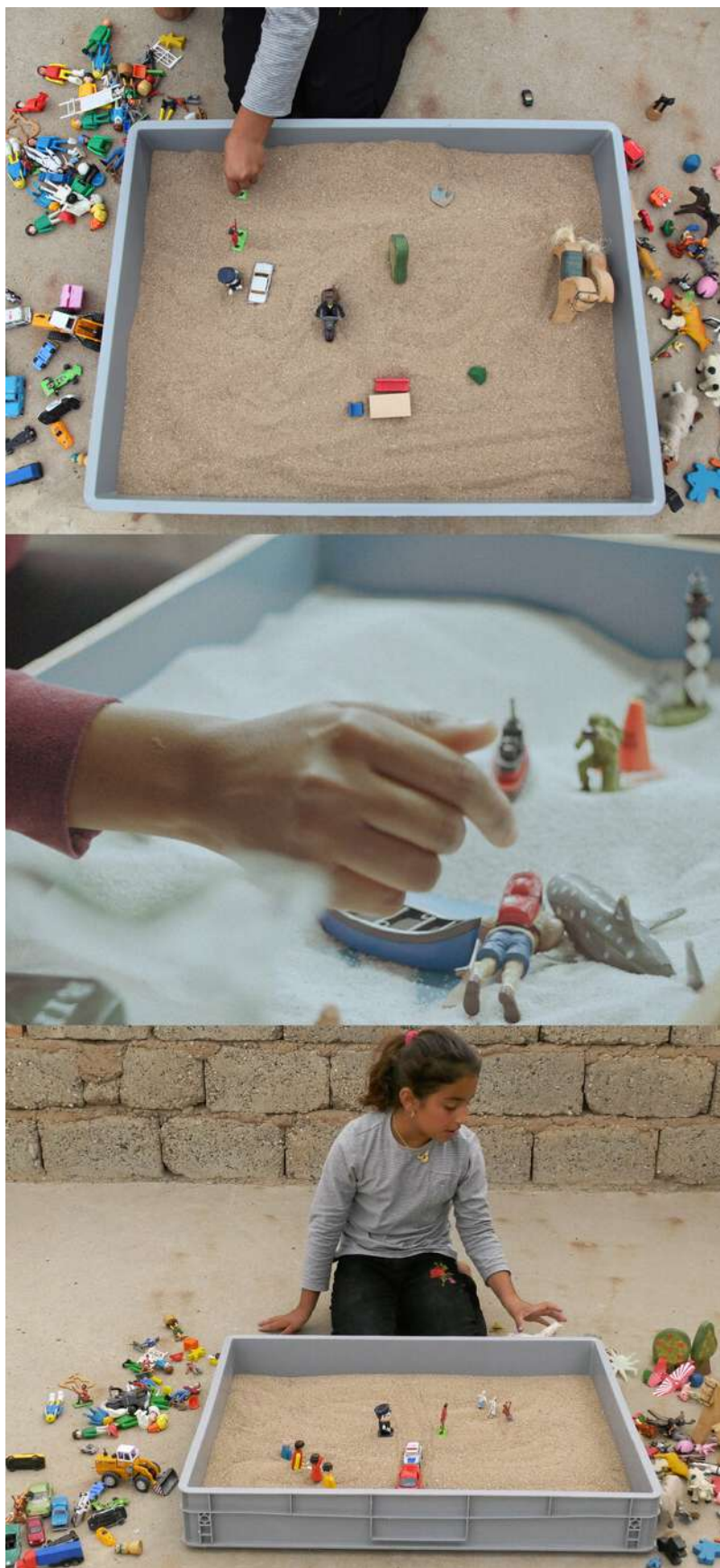
Simon Schama's Landscape and Memory was/is a great inspiration in my research on how landscape is a work of the mind and how nature will be part of this installation via sound and image.

Also Nan Sheperd's Living Mountain and her belief in what might be called "bodily thinking".

"We have come increasingly to forget that our minds are shaped by the bodily experience of being in the world - its spaces, textures, sounds, smells and habits - as well as by genetic traits we inherit and ideologies we absorb. We are, literally, losing touch. This is the innocence we have lost, she observes"

**Images of wild flowers will appear during the video testimonies of the children, closeups and medium shots will alternate with (extreme) long shots of the landscape.**





## SANDPLAY

I researched on how to approach and interview children about their story/trauma. Child psychologist Philippe Grisar brought me in touch with sandplay, a method in which children (or adults) give expression to non-verbalized emotional issues.

Play is the language of children and the sand tray provides a safe medium for expression, free from evaluation.

Nonverbal therapies like Sandplay are the most effective ways to access and release these “unconscious” feelings and experiences and bring them into consciousness, where they can be healed.

This method converges very well with my former work PLAY! as in its simplicity, it shows something very universal and multi-layered. Play is the work of children, they prefer to play their emotions out. It is authentic, theatrical and spontaneous.

*Play, even if it appears without sense, Contains a whole world therein; The world and its complete structure, Is nothing but a children's game (... Jacob Cats)*

## THE SCULPTURE / INSTALLATION

Because the sand play practice is a tactile method, I will further explore how the video installation can also be sensed as a tangible experience for the viewer. This will be an important aspect of the installation as sand has a sensory quality and the experience of touching and manipulating the sand can be therapeutic in and of itself.

The installation will exist out of a sculpture of a low wooden box/platform and its content consists of sand. It is a big tray the spectator can enter (without shoes) to approach the (television) screens.

The tray is large scaled and providing a place for expression within a safe container. The frame offers a regulating and protective factor throughout the process of expression.

The sides and bottom of the inside of the sand tray are colored light blue. By moving the sand aside, the blue coloration can be used to represent areas of water in the sandy landscape.

Sounds and fragrant of nature will fill the exhibition space and highlight its mystic consolation.



These three images, the children, the flowers/landscapes and the sandplay are forming the key elements of this installation:

The children will always be filmed from one point of view (no closeups will 'interrupt' the testimony). The focus lies in the story, the gestures of the children telling and the overwhelming nature which will be an important part of the framing.

The sounds of nature will run constantly and are dominating.

The 'sculpture' will consist of a low wooden box/platform filled with sand where in the televisions (screens) will be placed. The spectator can enter the box by taking off his/her shoes to sense the sand.







### Short scenario

Double screen installation.

00:00 - 01:02

Screen 1:

A girl (+/- 12y) is sitting on a stone in a rich natural landscape. It is spring. The grass is vividly green and the wild flowers blossom. The girl picks some flowers and her hands play with the leaves.

The sound is overwhelming, birds, buzzing insects, sounds of nature.

01:02 - 02:10

Screen 1:

Image changes to a boy (+/- 10y), he's also sitting in a landscape, it's a different setting but we can sense the same surroundings. He looks around, then into the camera, he feels not at ease.

01:50 - 03:30

Screen 2:

The other screen 'starts', it shows images of wildflowers, close ups and medium shots of the rich blossoming flowers. The colors are overwhelming, pure beauty.

02:10 - 04:54

Screen 1:

In the meanwhile, the other screen shows a third child (girl or boy) also sitting in a landscape (also same environment but different setting).

She starts to talk (Kurdish language, English subtitles). As the story unfolds, the spectator understands that this child is a survivor, that she testifies about the period of being imprisoned.

03:40 - 05:35

Screen 2:

The screen of the flowers expires, it shows another image. A low, wooden box filmed from above. Hands of a child touching the sand. Then the hands start to compose: little toy figures are set in the sand, the spectator notices that the same story the child is telling matches with the landscape that takes shape in the sandbox.

05:35 - 08:36

Screen 1:

The image goes back to the girl from the intro. She starts to talk, here as well, a story unfolds about fleeing ISIS and her time of imprisonment.

05:40 - 07:55

Screen 2:

Other hands appear in the sandbox, these are the hands of the girl. She reconstructs her story with little toy figures.

08:45 - 09:30

Screen 1:

Images of wild flowers

07:55 - 09:42

Screen 2:

Hands touching the sand, making figures in the sand.

09:31 - 12:42

Screen 1:

The boy tells his story.

09:43 - 12:42

Screen 2:

Other hands appear in the sandbox, these are the hands of the boy. He reconstructs his story with little toy figures.



## About me



### LISA MATTHYS

Lisa studied Fine Art at Sint Lucas Antwerp, UdK Berlin and film at Sint Lukas Brussels.

Her work primarily consists of video and photography, sometimes with elements of installation.

Her work points to precarious and absurd aspects within complex political situations mostly viewed from children's perspective.

In her latest video work PLAY! she researched how and what children play. The work is a poetic ode to the free play, the games children invent when they are on their own, when they feel free and create their own world. A world that often reflects their daily reality.

Her work looks at social relationships under different (political) contexts and is grounded in collaboration gestures. In her function as an educational assistant at Fondation A foundation in Brussels, she often works with neighborhood children. As most of them have a migration background, she tries to implement notions of their cultural legacy into the workshops. Not as a dominating element, but as something playful, a recognizable tool that communicates with them.

She exhibited her work at several places in Belgium and abroad and is selected for the art parcours "Coup de Ville", organized by Stef Van Bellingen in 2020.

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