

*Alongside the group exhibition 'In Your Touch, I Remain', curator Narges Mohammadi invited participating artists and their parents for a roundtable conversation. The talk arose from the exhibition's central theme; an exploration of the ways in which cultural heritage manifests itself within artists and their work. In this context, the main question that Narges posed was: why are the people closest to us, often so distanced from the world of art?*

*In search of answers, curious guests were invited to the exhibition space Omstand in Arnhem – a former electricity factory that nowadays functions as a space for contemporary art – to witness conversations between Suyoung Yang, Solenne Tadros, Emmeline de Mooij, Riun Jo, Narges Mohammadi and their parents, who were at the time scattered all over the world. The talk was moderated by playwright, actor and writer Nazmiye Oral, whose own work (specifically the play 'Niet Meer Zonder Jou') resonates questions of cultural heritage and the parent/artist relationship.*

*Below, the reader finds a written documentation of the event. The words are an attempt to capture the rare intimacy that followed from the openness, vulnerability and patience of the daughters, mothers and fathers on stage.*

## **Language as resistance**

In a former factory building in Arnhem, the world comes together. From east to west. From far away or nearby. The distance gauged by what you call home.

Home doesn't even have to be a place. It can be a person.

As we're nearing the end of the public programme of *In Your Touch, I Remain*, Narges touches her mother's hand, who sits by her side. She squeezes it gently, smiles, and starts speaking. In her native tongue. First carefully, velvety soft. And then, after a short while, Narges' voice flows deeper. As if she's singing.

Not too long before she switched to Farsi, Narges told the people gathered around her that she found it difficult. Speaking the language, she meant. Not because she can't master it. Rather, it feels as if the opposite is true.

Let's put it like this: when Narges speaks Farsi, the sounds flow from her mouth with warmth and strength. However, what's also tangible, is that there's a sense of emotional difficulty when she switches from Dutch and English, the languages she'd spoken in during most of the programme, to her native tongue.

This is understandable. Although Narges grew up with it, the Persian language is far from dominant in her work environment, like the one we're in right now. It's a means of communication that she usually just shares with her mother or other close family members. Not with people in the world of art, in the context of the Netherlands.

And that's something very intimate to show in the company of strangers.

### **Art's language**

Living in a world in which her inherited language is far from dominant, Narges has taught herself to communicate through different languages. To switch between varying cultural codes. When she explains this to the public, it's noticeable that the artists surrounding her nod in agreement. They know this story.

The story is about more than just the fact that artists are expected to adapt their way of communicating to the dominant, often English language. It's also about grasping the jargon, the language of art. Or, in other words, the way artists, gallery owners, curators, museum directors and art students and teachers communicate with each other in a shared language, which can be quite culturally specific. Like slang.

Art's language can pose a distance, Suyoung Yang, Solenne Tadros, Emmeline de Mooij, Riun Jo and Narges Mohammadi agree. Especially for people who've grown up with the tongue of 'the other', like most of these artists. Whether that may be Korean, Arabic or Farsi. This distance manifests itself in two directions: towards the other, and towards the self.

### **The outsider within**

Let's start by unpacking the first direction; the other. Imagine a Korean student at an international oriented art school, entering a classroom filled with Dutch pals, who sigh with displeasure as they switch their language to English. Thus far they conversed effortlessly in Dutch, but with the Korean student entering the room they are expected to speak English, so that the Korean student can follow. And everyone can contribute to the conversation.

This experience can be uncomfortable, unsafe even. At the same time, the Korean student can see that her Dutch pals are not used to adapting themselves to 'others'. Whereas she knows by experience that adapting can be the daily reality of someone with a foreign background.

In her 2004 essay, the feminist academic Patricia Hill Collins seeks to reconstruct such an ‘othered’ experience. Instead of approaching it as a flaw or disadvantage, she sees it as a strength: a special place in which outsiders “become different people, and their difference sensitizes them to patterns that may be more difficult for established sociological insiders to see.” This is what Hill Collins calls the notion of the ‘outsider within’, or the unique sensibility towards a dominant group or culture. Like a form of power.

To grasp this notion a little further, let’s zoom in on something that happened just before the start of the public programme of *In Your Touch, I Remain*. When it became clear that the talk wasn’t only in Dutch, some guests hesitated. With a sigh, they asked why the conversation could not be held in Dutch. To some extent, this reaction is understandable. We were, after all, in the Dutch city of Arnhem. The programme and exhibition took place in a Dutch art institution. Most of the public present was Dutch.

However, the artists contributing to the exhibition were from all over the world. From different continents, even. Moreover, to add another layer to this: their parents were invited. Through digital connections with Seoul, Amman and Toronto, we were able to listen to all of their stories. To hear ‘other’ perspectives on the matters discussed.

Hence, when some guests showed their hesitancy towards the talk’s means of communication, moderator Nazmiye Oral did the only thing she could. She invited the guests to open up. To experience the discomfort of listening to a language that is not native. A language that you might not even understand.

In other words, the Dutch speaking public was asked, for two hours, to try and experience what it is like to be a non-Dutch-speaker in the Netherlands. To be ‘the other’, the outsider within circumstances different from the known. To be uncomfortable in a way that sensitizes them to see the world and themselves differently.

### **Intimate revolutions**

Language’s ability to create distance is not just something that manifests itself between people. It can also alienate artists from their loved ones. And, as derivative, from themselves.

This comes to mind when, during the talk, Suyoung's father tells his daughter that he once dreamed of becoming a designer. However, he wasn't allowed to by his father, Suyoung's grandfather. As he's telling this story, Suyoung stays silent and carefully listens to every word that her father says. Until moderator Nazmiye asks if Suyoung knew this story. With a soft, endeared smile, Suyoung shakes her head. "I did not know," she says.

The extent to which artists talk to their parents about their craft, depends on so many things. Their childhood experiences, the support or absence of a family member. Their work being an ode or resistance to one's inherited culture.

During the artist's talk in Omstand, it becomes clear that language is also an element in this formula. Particularly when it comes to people growing up with 'other' tongues. How do you talk about art in a language that you weren't taught to talk about art in?

It's important to note that the video-conversation between Suyoung and her father was in Korean. It took one, and for some even two layers of translation before everyone in the room could understand what had just happened. Unexpectedly, we witnessed a daughter and father opening up to each other, seemingly getting closer together. Suddenly, the distance between Arnhem and Seoul felt very small.

## **Omstand**

Suyoung's experience with her father shows that speaking in an artist's native language about his or her work can create the circumstances in which individual change takes place. Looking at this, it seems only logical that we're in an artspace called Omstand, a reference to an old Dutch word that more or less means 'circumstances', or everything that's around a person and that explains his or her behavior. 'Omstand' influences the individual, and the other way around.

To explain, let's get back to Narges speaking Farsi. Although no one in the room understood what she was saying (or, almost no one: her younger brother is among the public as well), it was clear that we were witnessing something very personal. Like an intimate revolution. This was noticeable in the eyes of Narges' mother, listening to her daughter's words. It was also tangible in Narges' sounds, strong in her vulnerability.

Earlier, Narges explained that when she talks to her mother about her work, she usually does so in Dutch. She uses the words that both her and her mother have trained to express themselves in. But at a

certain point, Narges wondered why. Why does she switch to Dutch as the topic of conversation moves to her art, when Farsi is how they mostly communicate?

Consequently, out of curiosity, Narges decided to change the language. To see what would happen if she invited her mother to listen to her speak about her work in her inherited tongue. Like a performance with language, she created her own 'omstand'.

By doing so, the talk became an experiment in resistance for every artist and parent involved. Through deciding what languages are spoken and how, Narges, Suyoung, Riun, Emmeline and Solenne constructed their own space of communication and intimacy. They took the time to caress the cultural remnants that they knew by heart, and put it into use to bridge the gap between their craft and heritage. Their own and their parent's personal worlds.

That is how the world came together. From The Netherlands to Turkey, Jordan, Afghanistan, South-Korea and Canada. Across national and personal borders. By taking the time to translate the conversation from Dutch to English and Korean, and in the end even Farsi, the artists created their own narrative. Their own slang of art. And by doing that for two hours, in this building that once belonged to an electricity factory lighting up the houses of Arnhem, the artists lightened up the minds of the audience. Some might have even illuminated the hearts and minds of their own.

**By Melisa Can**

Melisa Can is a journalist, documentary filmmaker and writer. As a part of *In Your Touch, I Remain*, she wrote a reflective piece about the roundtable conversation. She has written for Vice, newspaper De Volkskrant and the Dutch news broadcast organisation NOS, among others platforms. At this moment, Melisa is working on the documentary *Momentum*, about three young women who fight for a seat in the Dutch parliament. In her practice, she focuses on themes such as youth culture, emancipation and identity.