

A recovered Picasso forgery makes for powerful theatre

Theatre

The 'discovery' of a Picasso stolen from the Kunsthal made headlines around the world – but was staged for 'True Copy' by the theatre group Berlin. The fake and the real blend into one another completely. (●●●●●)

Joyce Roodnat - November 28, 2018 at 13:51



The Flemish theatre group Berlin operates on the border between theatre and reality. Real and not real, fake and authentic. It is both possible and not possible – with Berlin, the craziest things are true and the most mundane things are not. For 'True Copy', their latest performance, Berlin uses the reality of the Dutch art forger Geert Jan Jansen in a masterfully cunning way. A cult hero. A rascal. 'It doesn't matter whether something is real or not, as

long as it is of good quality', he says. His very first forgery, a 'Karel Appel', was recognized as genuine by Appel himself. Jansen is a master forger. 'Master, I like that word', he says. 'But I dislike the forger part.' Because what he makes is not fake; in his view, his paintings become 'authentic with time'.

In 'True Copy' he tells his story in front of a set made out of toppling artworks. The audience is introduced to the psychological warfare of the swindler. Who turns out to be charming and warm. Only when you look more closely are you able to see through it. But the point is that you don't want to see through it – and that's what this performance is about. The painter disappears into the set. Behind it is a studio, and we follow him via camera footage. We see him producing a Matisse in no time. Or not? Berlin challenges its audience to choose. Do I believe this? Is this real? And if not, does it matter?

Auction

The house lights come on. A large drawing is being auctioned, Jansen's portrait of Dora Maar by Picasso. It gets sold at 3,000 euro. Really? The man next to me, whose bid was just a bit too low, gets a *little* Jansen-'Picasso' as a consolation prize. He says that he 'really is not a part of the performance'. I choose to believe him.

Part of 'True Copy' was an attempt to reunite Picasso's drawing 'Tête d'un arlequin' with the Rotterdam Kunsthall from which it was stolen in 2012. Jansen made a forgery, the group hid it in a Romanian forest. Everything was filmed by a hidden camera attached to a tree. We see the images up to and including the triumphant cries of the finders: the Dutch Frank Westerman and Mira Feticu are now part of 'True Copy'.

They shared their 'find' with the elated world press. Things got out of hand, says Berlin member Yves Degryse afterwards. Or did they? This is what the art market conjures: a fatally exaggerated response. Exactly what a forger like Jansen bases his strategy on.

Joyce Roodnat, 28 November 2018, NRC. Original article in Dutch, translation by Nadine Malfait
<https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2018/11/28/echte-vondst-nep-picasso-wordt-theater-in-true-copy-a2773676>.