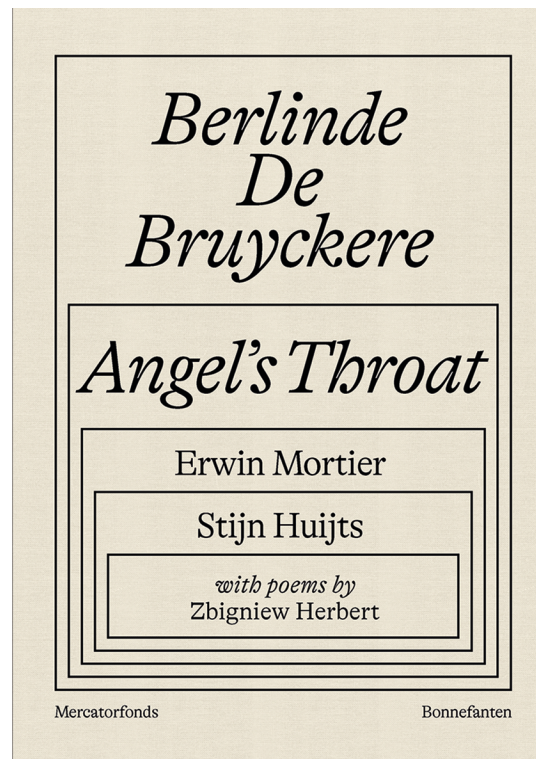


## Review

### **Berlinde De Bruyckere, Erwin Mortier & Stijn Huijts: *Angel's throat***

Brussels/Maastricht: Mercatorfonds/Bonnefanten, 2021. 144 p.  
ISBN 9780300257724

*Reviewed by Katarzyna Ruchel-Stockmans*



The book *Angel's throat* is a compelling assemblage of visual art, prose and poetry. A sequence of photographs of Berlinde De Bruyckere's sculptures is interspersed with short stories by Erwin Mortier and poems by Zbigniew Herbert. De Bruyckere's own essay and an art-historical contribution by Stijn Huijts complete

the volume which appeared as a catalogue to accompany the exhibition of the same name at the Bonnefanten Museum in Maastricht. The book explores – in words and images – the disparate meanings sedimented around the figure of an angel. It might seem risky to embark on the fraught theme of the immortal, celestial being as this could easily fall prey to hackneyed images and metaphors. The book manages to avoid that risk by using the figure of an angel as an opportunity to touch on and speak about its opposite, namely the materiality of things and the unavoidability of death.

The volume is not the first collaboration of De Bruyckere with a writer. In 2013, the Belgian artist published two books co-authored with J. M. Coetzee, of which the first, *Allen vleys* ('We are all flesh'), appeared with MER. Paper Kunsthal as an artist book (De Bruyckere & Coetzee 2013a). The second, *Cripplewood/Kreupelhout* is an exhibition catalogue of the Belgian Pavilion during the 55th edition of the Venice Biennale (De Bruyckere & Coetzee 2013b). The South African writer also served as the curator of the exhibition. The email correspondence between the artist and the writer, included in *Cripplewood/Kreupelhout*, attests to a close collaboration and an exchange of ideas between the two authors at all stages of the preparations for the exhibition and the book. This collaborative mode of the creative process is continued in *Angel's throat*. As De Bruyckere explains in a note towards the end of the volume, she invited the Belgian writer Erwin Mortier to engage with her work by, as she puts it, writing around it, rather than about it (141). The question of what primacy to accord the literature and art is of little relevance here. Mortier wrote his short stories specifically for De Bruyckere's angel series while they were still in the making. She continued working on the sculptures while reading the stories as they arrived one by one. Mortier's prose and De Bruyckere's visual art organically grew into one complex work.

It is again Coetzee, as De Bruyckere explains, who drew her attention to the poetry of Zbigniew Herbert (1924-1998). After *Cripplewood/Kreupelhout*, she made a sculpture of a satyr from the Greek mythology named Marsyas, inspired by Herbert's poem *Apollo and Marsyas*.<sup>1</sup> As it transpires, Mortier also shares this fascination for Herbert's work. Accordingly, the title of the book, *Angel's throat*, comes from the poem "Preliminary investigation of an angel" by Herbert which is also included in the volume (39-40).<sup>2</sup> Herbert's poetry, and especially his view of the world, seem crucial for this book. In extending the collaborative mode of work,

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<sup>1</sup> *Apollo i Marsjasz* ('Apollo and Marsyas') was published in 1961 in Herbert's collection of poems *Studium przedmiotu* ('Object study').

<sup>2</sup> The poem, included in *Angel's throat* in the English translation by Alissa Valles, originally appeared under the Polish title *Przesłuchanie aniola* in the 1969 volume *Napis* ('Inscription').

De Bruyckere's long-term engagement with material remnants of life reaches an intriguing new stage.

The book opens with a close-up of one of the angel's feet – dirty, with long, unkempt nails. This image is the first in the visual essay based on De Bruyckere's new series *Arcangelo* and *Sjemkel*, photographed by Mirjam Devriendt. The feet of *Arcangelo I* seem to levitate in the air, although it is difficult to determine exactly how as his body is covered with a blanket made of animal skin. Only his legs are partly visible. The subsequent photographs reveal a series of human-like figures of *Arcangelos* (*Arcangelo I, II* and *III*) and seemingly organic shapes of *Sjemkels* (*Sjemkel I, II, III* and *IV*). The photographs show details of the sculptures, views from the artist's studio, and occasionally give a glimpse of the creation process. A view of a pot on a little electric stove, two pairs of hands carefully sowing a piece of an old blanket or a nearly abstract picture of a splash of paint on an uneven surface add a sense of a painstaking and concentrated working process. The sculptures are made of wax and epoxy, which give the human figures an appearance of real flesh. In the case of the *Sjemkel* sculptures, which are made of blankets mounted on silicone molds, the presence of a living being is only suggested in the organic shape of the sculpture and the texture of the animal skins. The sculptures look like pieces of old coats and bedspreads which grew organically into a corpse of a living animal. This hesitation between a living being and a thing, or between something heavenly and something earthly, is equally manifest in the poetry of Herbert.

The two poems included in the book, "Preliminary investigation of an angel" and "Seventh angel," come from two different collections published by Herbert in 1969 and 1957 respectively. There are several other poems by the Polish author which deal with the theme of angels or, more broadly, with biblical subjects. The tone of these poems is almost always ironic and imbued with allusions to the present or recent past, namely the reality of socialist Poland and the memory of war and occupation. If there is something that connects the recurring motif of the angel, it is the variance and unorthodoxy with which the biblical figures are portrayed. In "Preliminary investigation," the angel appears to be an innocent victim subjected to brutal interrogation. In "Seventh angel," he is *Shemkel*, an imperfect, shadowy and nervous member of the angelic order and the one who was repeatedly "fined" for "illegal import of sinners" (44).

At the beginning of "Preliminary investigation," the angel is "still all composed of light" (39), but the violent blows inflicted on him by his oppressors pull him out of his heavenly being into a painfully material form. Tortured in this way, he is forced to plead guilty to an offence he did not commit, or in the words of Herbert, he is "incarnate into guilt" (39). The following is the passage in the poem from which the book's title is taken: "leather throat of an angel/ is full of

gluey agreement" (39). Not only does the throat of the angel become tangible, but his compliance, too, gains a physical quality.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, in "Seventh angel," *Shemkel's* nimbus is "old" and "threadbare" (45), evoking the quality of worn and shabby animal skins used by De Bruyckere.

To Herbert, Angels are not necessarily good and well-meaning creatures. The less than perfect *Shemkel* is castigated by the other, impeccable members of the angelic council. In another poem, not reprinted in this book, angels appear to be merciless guards segregating mothers from their children or even confiscating their favorite things after their death, because, apparently, salvation will take place individually.<sup>4</sup> Crucially, these diverse figures of angels are an opportunity to speak about other things. Often, these other subjects are a covert commentary on political matters of the time, while simultaneously they allow for a reflection on the nature of reality and the human agency within it. It is therefore particularly refreshing to reconsider Herbert's poems next to Erwin Mortier's prose. Of the four short stories included in the volume, only two mention angels. Mortier amplifies Herbert's unrestrained urge to variegated the images of angels, but his stories turn to folk tropes and personal memories linked to these celestial beings. In *Revelations speak in hiatuses* (9-11), angels are said by the older relatives to be the invisible artists painting with frost on the windows on a winter night. *Angel maker* (128-131) is a story of a retired midwife who used to help destitute girls to abort unwanted children. Those unborn children become, in the eyes of a group of local women ruminating about her, little angels.

It is in the reflection on the lives of things as well as on the nature of language and writing where Mortier really meets Herbert and De Bruyckere. In *Revelations*, he masterfully describes household objects remembered from his childhood as they manifest their indifference towards the mortal beings. Clothes hidden in the closet have the ability to remember their users: "coats still showed the bend in the arms of those who had worn them" (10). In *The Lillies*, language appears as a second skin (23) and in *Sometimes he comes to me* as a robe covering the fear of meaninglessness (106-107). When penetrated by death, the language will reveal to the author the muteness of all things (23).

Both Mortier and Herbert point at the tendency of seemingly immaterial entities – such as concepts and language – to stick to the material things. De Bruyckere's sculptures achieve the opposite. The ostensibly inanimate objects,

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<sup>3</sup> In the translation by Alissa Valles the angel's "agreement" becomes "gluey," but the Polish original ("*lepki*") could be translated as 'viscous.' Viscosity is, as Timothy Morton recently argued, that quality of reality by which things cannot be fully separated from each other or from the observer (Morton 2013, 27-37).

<sup>4</sup> I am referring here to the poem *U wrót doliny* ('At the gate of the valley') published in the collection *Hermes, pies i gwiazda* ('Hermes, dog and star') in 1957.

even when shown in the process of their manufacturing, acquire an aspect of living creatures. As such, *Angel's throat* is a remarkable instance of artistic and literary collaboration, in which things and words find each other in their contagious impurity.

## References

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## About the reviewer

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