

Peter Voss-Knude  
*Peter & the Danish Defence*

17.06 – 06.08 2017



Peter Voss-Knude, *Peter & the Danish Defence*, 2017. Installation view

**OVERGADEN.**

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Design: Anni's

Sing to Me

By Dina Vester Feilberg

There is an invisible boundary around any community separating the initiated from the uninitiated: a dividing line between 'us' and 'them'. During a conversation with a close friend in 2007, Peter Voss-Knude encountered this kind of boundary. His childhood friend from the Copenhagen Royal Chapel Choir was a soldier, whose unit was about to be deployed overseas with the Danish Armed Forces. Their conversation was about understanding, and especially what limits it. Because how, as outsiders, can we understand the mechanisms of a community we are not part of ourselves? This question marked the beginning of the ongoing art project *Peter & the Danish Defence*, which operates at the intersection of pop music, political activism and contemporary art, and where Voss-Knude involves himself and opens up his art practice in an unconventional artistic and musical collaboration between himself, the armed forces, and soldiers from Slagelse Barracks. In the art project *Peter & the Danish Defence*, Voss-Knude strives to provide insight into a community civilians are necessarily excluded from in the hope of creating a basis for dialogue and understanding.

The exhibition centres around eleven large charcoal drawings in an installational formation. In one of them the words 'Sing to Me' stand out against a darkly shaded background. In another, we meet the iconic sculpture of Menelaus holding the dead body of Patroclus in his arms. Their story comes from Homer's *Iliad* – a giant of literary history and the first epic war poem – a reference that injects a historical horizon into Voss-Knude's cross-disciplinary project. But first and foremost the drawings depict the soldiers whose words and testimonies we encounter in the double pop album Voss-Knude has written and composed. The first musical chapter, *Vol. I*, consists of eleven songs and was issued in summer 2016, with a release concert in the Royal Danish Arsenal Museum's exhibition *A Distant War*. The second chapter, *Vol. II*, is released as the central element of Voss-Knude's exhibition at Overgaden Institute of Contemporary Art, and has eight songs as well as an interlude performed by one of the participating soldiers.

Both the drawings and song lyrics figure as small, isolated glimpses of the myriad of situations and memories generated by a war. We see a close-up of a soldier in a classic selfie pose – the face seen slightly from above, the right arm raised and protruding to the front left of the image, casting a shadow over the right side of the face. The gaze is insistent, direct. In another drawing we see a soldier in a full-length portrait sitting on the ground calmly writing with concentration in his notebook. Even though stylistically the drawings are classically figurative, they are far removed from any

classical representation of soldiers at war, where they are often depicted on specific operations or in landscapes that confirm time and place. The same is true of the song lyrics. These are isolated statements about duty, absence, trust, brotherhood, doubts and choices. There are clearly real individuals behind each text – each has their own style, temperament and rhythm – but at the same time both the drawings and words embody universality, because being so focused on a single, emotional situation, they can be seen to represent basic human conditions.

As a whole, the art project performs a conscious and consistent balancing act between the specific and the universal, which lies in the title *Peter & the Danish Defence* itself, where Voss-Knude's first name is juxtaposed with the institution of the Danish Armed Forces. This fine balance between the specific and the universal can be seen as being at the heart of the project, in which Voss-Knude strives to open the otherwise closed and often taboo-ridden realm of memory to the general public.

Both philosophy and psychology make distinctions between recollection and memory. The philosopher Kierkegaard relates memory to factual, universal elements like geographical location or time, whereas recollection is linked to the concrete and bodily experience of a situation. Memory therefore applies to the objective, and recollection to the subjective. But they are far from separate entities. Without recollection we would not possess the ability to link events or understand ourselves as the same person over time. It is recollection that creates continuity and establishes meaning between a series of events. This raises a complex issue, because recollection is thus both what connects us in an understanding of events – what gives historical depth and identity to our community – at the same time as being deeply personal and therefore what separates us in our understanding of life and each other.

Recollection is what Voss-Knude creates space for in *Peter & the Danish Defence*. The personal reflections of the soldiers and their self-representations are the starting point of the process. Voss-Knude makes a connection as an attentive listener, suggesting interpretations of the soldiers' recollections and reflections in music, images and words. His suggestions are open and negotiable, and the process is not complete until the soldiers can recognise their own stories in the artworks. At first glance it would therefore appear to make sense to see Voss-Knude's art practice in the trajectory of relational aesthetics, since in this context the artist creates a framework in which the relationships

between people and institutions are explored. But in a relational practice the artist does not define the content of the encounter, only its framework, so here Voss-Knude's approach can be seen as stretching any strictly relational approach. Because the content is defined in collaboration between the three participating soldiers, the musicians and himself, and he sees the group as an art collective or an expanded understanding of a group, where the origins of what is said cannot ultimately be located in a single individual. Enabling the encounters that fuel his art practice is not a goal in and of itself. It is an experimental, but focused approach, with the specific goal of establishing new conditions for a space of understanding through different channels of artistic creation. Voss-Knude is therefore explicitly present in the works as an interpretative, mediating layer with the conscious intention of underlining the functionality of art as a tool of curiosity to enter into critical dialogue on one of the most sensitive areas in the political landscape.

This approach is highly unusual in the context of artistic representations of soldiers, both in terms of the classical battle paintings of the 1800s, and modernist depictions of the consequences of war. In the former soldiers figure as extras to the significant moment – the crucial point at which the war is won – a territory captured, a general killed, an enemy routed. Here the soldiers are not important as individuals, but more as parts of the organism that makes victory possible. Their role is that of props in the visual depiction of a universal statement. After World War I, the Dadaists' depiction of soldiers prevailed. In the hands of artists like Otto Dix, Raoul Hausmann, Johannes Bargeeld and Georg Grosz, the soldiers became a symbol of the total collapse and meaninglessness of society, ceasing to be depicted as part of an organism or community. Despite the major contribution of the Dadaists to history, and their vast influence on 20<sup>th</sup>-century art, their works have also played a crucial role in the representation of soldiers. This had major consequences, driving a wedge between representations of war and the soldiers' own experience of themselves at war, something that has almost certainly contributed to the divisiveness and lack of understanding that exists between soldiers and civilian society today. And this has significant, existential consequences for the individual soldier and how, as a society, we relate to the field of peace and defence policy.

This is precisely where Voss-Knude's art project comes into play, as a diplomatic gesture that builds bridges between two horizons of understanding. Basically the project is about creating pictures and resonance that

can create an opening for understanding between two separate spheres. Both classical and modernist representations of war operate at universal level where the soldier is a symbol of something else, be it the victory of a nation or the breakdown of meaning. Voss-Knude, on the other hand, insists on the individual being seen and heard, and through the recollections of the soldiers themselves in unison he and they open an otherwise closed world, thereby giving their voices universal resonance.

*Dina Vester Feilberg, M.A. in Art History, is director of Kunsthallen Rønnebæksholm*

The album *Peter & the Danish Defence* can be streamed from various sites from June 12<sup>th</sup>, 2017.

## CV

Peter Voss-Knude (b. 1987) is an artist and singer with a BA in Fine Art & Art History from Goldsmiths, University of London. He has been an activist in the Russian artist group VOINA, and previously tried to become a special constable with The Metropolitan Police. Recently he has had a solo exhibition at Counter Space in Switzerland, and has also given concerts at Ideal Bar and the Royal Danish Arsenal Museum in Copenhagen.

## EVENT

Sunday 18 June, 2-3pm: TALK. This afternoon, the producer of the art podcast The Undergang Armchair, Andreas Olesen joins Peter Voss-Knude and Overgaden's director Merete Jankowski in a conversation about the ideas behind the exhibition. The event will be recorded live at Overgaden and the audience is welcome to participate.

## THANK YOU

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## UPCOMING EXHIBITIONS

Friday 25 August 2017 Overgaden presents exhibitions by Sophie Dupont and Jacob Kirkegaard & Niels Lyhne Løkkegaard. The exhibitions run through 22 October 2017.

This exhibition folder can be downloaded from: [overgaden.org](http://overgaden.org)

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