

# Deviant Practice

research programme  
2018-19

VAN  
ABBE  
MUSEUM  
EINDHOVEN

# CONTENTS

page 4

**Introduction**

Nick Aikens

page 16

**The Van Abbemuseum under  
Fascist influences. Exhibitions  
and daily life 1940-1944**

Evelien Scheltinga

page 46

**Exhibiting *USSR in Construction*:  
From Aestheticized Politics to  
Politicized Aesthetics**

Michelle de Wit

page 82

**Further through the Gate:  
The Gate Foundation Archive**

Jessica de Abreu &

Michael Karabinos

page 96

**Recoding Art:  
Van Abbemuseum collection**

Bruno Moreschi & Gabriel Pereira

page 134

**Meaningful Matter: Testing Feminist  
Pedagogies in the Exhibition Space**

Ana S González Rueda

page 154

**Negotiating Jeopardy: Use Value,  
the Body and Political Dissent:  
The Autonomy Project Revisited**

John Byrne

page 178

**The Department of Sexual  
Revolution Studies**

Eimear Walshe

page 204

**'Vagevuur'**

Sam Ashby

page 232

**Hardcore Eindhoven**

Anthea Black & Mikiki

page 258

**Contributors' Biographies**

page 262

**Colophon**



# Introduction

Nick Aikens

It is a great pleasure to introduce the second e-publication of the Deviant Practice research programme. The nine contributions that follow stem from projects carried out over the past two years by artists, archivists, art historians, curators and academics at the Van Abbemuseum, following an open call issued in 2017.

In the introduction to the first e-publication, I attempted to outline some of the motivations for initiating the research programme which began in 2016. At the heart of this, I explained, was the wish to think through different options for meaning-making within the context of a European modern art museum. The museum's long established processes for generating, classifying and presenting knowledge needed to be tested and put under pressure. Established in a cultural, political and ideological context markedly different from today, they often feel ill-equipped to address the complex and urgent questions of our time. On a methodological level, this meant turning away from the tried and tested formulas of exhibitions and public programming as the vehicles used to broadcast knowledge to the public. Instead, the impulse was to create a space whereby inquiries could be led by practice and without having a pre-defined outcome, and where the possibility of failure could be seen as a potential to experiment and critically reflect rather than something to be avoided at all costs. However, this approach runs counter to its DNA for institutions that are project-based and are subject to funding applications and reporting processes. At a more fundamental level, however, the framing of Deviant Practice was conceived as a means to think through what types of knowledge it wanted to produce



and for whom, what I described drawing on Gayatri Spivak as its processes for 'reading and writing'. In this regard, a first step was to question – and where possible deviate from – the deeply-entrenched paths inside the history of the modern art museum itself, instead casting a light on those parts of its history – or its current formation – that remained obscured. These 'modern' paths lead back to the Enlightenment, rising out of a colonial and patriarchal view of the world with Europe at its centre; a perception that privileges mind and eye over body and senses, and that has a linear and forward facing conception of history. Such paths fail – often violently – to address the complexities of the contemporary world and the way in which people inhabit and make sense of it. At the same time, it was clear that, in order to understand how a research programme premised on 'Deviant Practice' might genuinely push the museum away from these entrenched paths, it was vital to open up the archives, building and context of the museum. Simply put, the museum needed to facilitate the research practices that it could not do itself.

The Deviant Practice programme and nine contributions in this publication are not an attempt to dismiss 'modern' paths. Rather, they put forward a constellation of histories and approaches that might form part of a 'demodernising' programme. The notion of the demodern that the Van Abbemuseum has been putting forward over the past few years offers a means to move past the colonial, patriarchal systems of the passing modern period and, through the space of art and its institutions, to concurrently test and prepare the ground for the type of world we want to inhabit. Read collectively, these contributions offer possibilities to deviate from the tools, methods and histories that shaped the modern art museum – and, following decolonial thinking, to think through and embody other options or variations. And whilst this museum – and others – have sought to question and think beyond its modern genealogy in terms of the types of stories it

tells, the works it collects and its methods for engaging with constituents, it still needs to undertake substantial structural changes if it is to operationalise 'demodern' forms of meaning-making. If we are to take the task of troubling embedded histories and protocols seriously while simultaneously offering new models for the future, we need to correspondingly question not only what stories are told, but the methods and voices we adopt to do so. Across the nine contributions, the reader will find a combination of detailed and highly-specific historical and archival analysis, theoretical speculations and different forms of collective and embodied research methods. The coming together of these histories and experiences perhaps offers the most compelling insight into what deviant practice might mean for a demodernising programme.

The first set of papers sheds light on overlooked histories within the context of the Van Abbemuseum and its archive. Opening the e-publication is curator Evelien Scheltinga's detailed research into the history of exhibitions held at the Van Abbemuseum during the Second World War, when the Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven and the Netherlands were under the control of the German occupying forces following the bombing of Rotterdam in May 1940. Scheltinga's text begins by acknowledging that, due to the lack of archival material, the museum knows little about this period of its history. Subsequently, the series of exhibitions that took place between 1940-45 do not appear in any of the narratives of the museum. Drawing on material from the Dutch Institute for War and Genocide studies (NIOD), the Eindhoven city archive RHC-E, newspaper articles and the museum's own archives, Scheltinga's vital research details the exhibitions that took place 'under fascist influence'. Alongside Scheltinga's detailed research into the exhibits themselves, the paper also reveals some of the more surprising legacies of that chapter in Dutch history, such as the foundation of the Dutch Chamber of Culture. The organisation, which supported



artists by funding materials and a stipend, was only opened to non-Jews. Culture in the Second World War – as arguably today – was seen as a contribution to the state’s vision of itself, all the while not being available to all.

One of the primary objectives of the research programme was to encourage researchers to work with archival material in the Van Abbemuseum that (we felt) had been under-researched or overlooked. The focus of art historian Michelle de Wit’s research is the LS collection, which was bequeathed to the Van Abbemuseum in 2012 by Albert Lemmens and Serge Stommels. It consists of nearly 16.000 magazines, publications and children’s books from the Russian avant-garde and includes the complete collection of *USSR Under Construction* published between 1930-1941, ostensibly a propaganda tool to promote the rapid industrialisation of the USSR under Stalin to readers at home and abroad. De Witt concentrates on the 12th issue of the magazine produced by Alexander Rodchenko, and that includes images of White Sea Baltic Canal, a forced labour project. De Wit’s essay spotlights the way in which Rodchenko managed to ‘coincide modernist experimentations with government dictates’, viewing his formal experimentations and propagandist drive as interwoven. De Wit concludes with an invitation to the Van Abbemuseum, offering the opportunity to consider the ways in which this material is viewed and contextualised for future audiences.

Archive practitioner Michael Karabinos and anthropologist and co-founder of the Black Archives Jessica de Abreu spent over a year working with the archive of the Gate Foundation. Following Susan Pui San Lok’s research ‘through the gate / an(g)chivery’, which reflected on the ‘systems of classification, orders of identifications, as well as the misidentifications, disorders, omissions, ill-fitting categories, and the

slippages’ inside what was then a collection of unordered material in boxes on the history of the Gate Foundation (Pui San Lok, 2018). The archive arrived at the Van Abbemuseum in 2006 following the Gate’s rapid closure due to funding cuts. The arduous work of De Abreu and Karabinos consisted in making the archive legible and useable, ordering the 70-odd boxes, video tapes, slides and floppy discs. Through the archive, one can now distinguish the evolving scope and remit of the Gate, from the extensive documentation into the geographically framed surveys foundations of ‘Indonesian Modern Art’ (1993) under founding director Els van der Plat to a more patch-worked history of shows featuring non-Dutch artists working in the Netherlands such as the touring ‘Short History of Dutch Video Art’ (2005) under the directorship of Sebastian Lopez. The significance of the work carried out by de Abreu and Karabinos lies not only in overturning the relative neglect the archive has suffered since arriving at the museum by making it available for researchers and publics to use, but also forces us to consider the biography and genealogy of an archive and how such material is constantly shaped and re-shaped by those who interact with it. At the centre of this claim is the belief in the fluidity and subjective nature of the archive itself and a call to work with – rather than resist – such porosity.

The next series of papers shift from the archives of the museum in a move to consider how knowledge is classified and mediated through different digital and physical spaces. If Karabino and de Abreu’s paper reflects on the manner in which archives are shaped by the people who interact with it, the research of Bruno Morsechi and Gabriel Pereira examines the way in which automated mechanisms for ordering and naming the world affects the way in which art is understood. Having created software that can aggregate the results from different search engines, Morsechi and Pereira looked at the way in which works from the



collection of the Van Abbemuseum currently on display were classified and described. The results are intriguing, revealing the manner in which automated search engines echo prejudices around sex and identity in society at large, as well as the pervasive force of capitalism on our perception of objects and images. Interestingly, Moreschi and Pereira see their work in line with some of the central tenets of institutional critique – namely they wish to expose the structures and systems that give shape to knowledge production, extending (as they say) the critique from the physical space of the museum to consider its relationship with ‘digital layers’.

Ana S González Rueda similarly turns to the collection display and invites us to consider how knowledge is mediated within the museum, this time through the format of the exhibition. Focusing on ‘The Way Beyond Art’, González Rueda turned to new feminist materialist pedagogies as a means to unsettle what she terms ‘the androcentric canon of knowledge production’, which is central to the modernist paradigm of how we encounter art. Drawing on the theories and practices of theorist Karen Barad and their relevance to museum studies, González Rueda’s concern lies in exploring the ‘the intra-active relationship between works, visitors, building, text, furniture, guards, and how everyone and everything mutually affects each other’. Taking the exhibition design of Can and Asli Altay as a starting point, itself premised on upsetting the neutrality of the modernist white cube format and questioning the centrality of the eye and the mind, González Rueda conducted a series of workshops in the exhibition spaces that were aimed at proposing a more speculative, performative approach to exhibition mediation where objects, people and building find new means through which to ‘intra-act’.

If we are to genuinely embark on a project of ‘demodernising’ art and its infrastructures, we will have

to consider not only how art is presented, categorised and mediated, but perhaps more fundamentally how we understand its use-value in society. Over the last ten years, academic John Byrne has been in dialogue with the Van Abbemuseum and many of its partners about precisely this. His essay looks back to the beginnings of these discussions via the symposium ‘The Autonomy Project’ which took place at the Van Abbemuseum in 2011. At the core of Byrne’s position, we find the need to ‘repurpose our evaluation of art in terms of its use-value’ and subsequent necessity to think through the profound implications this has for the museum and the manner in which it engages with its constituents. Significantly, Byrne recognises that ‘the available tools for repurposing our evaluation of art in terms of its use value reside outside the common purview of a western epistemology of art.’ Turning instead to ‘activist reimagining of the social and political body’ Byrne’s text calls for a wholesale re-thinking of art’s political and emancipatory potential through the lens of use.

A key part of Byrne’s thinking trajectory is re-imagining the ways in which the museum’s hardware – including its building, collection, but also its publics – can exchange in different ways. Eimear Walshe’s ‘Department of Sexual Revolution Studies’ points to an approach to artworks both as carriers of singular histories and as tools to work through ideas with others. Beginning from Gerard Byrne’s *New Sexual Lifestyles* (2003) currently in the museum’s collection display, Walshe’s project was apprehended as an ‘extra-institutional body’, simultaneously pedagogical platform, series of workshops, and space to collectively create and reflect on knowledge. The department operated between the Dutch Design Academy and the Van Abbemuseum via a series of sessions with students and constituents of the museum. Building on the reading groups Walshe initiated as part of the project ‘Separatist Epistemologies’ (2016-17) the department



looked at the way in which ‘deviant sexualities’ resonate in different forms of our culture and politics. How for example, are forms of cuckolding ‘stimulated by white supremacy’ or what might the points of contact be between the Communist manifesto and Ellen coming out on Oprah? It is Walshe’s ability to move between artworks, institutional frameworks and its constituents, and to broach such varied elements of our contemporary society that offers such a compelling model for ‘para-institutionalism’.

It is perhaps possible to trace a set of moves whereby meaning is generated and slowly slides between the archives of the museum, its forms of presentation, in and out of databases and between different constituents through the different research projects. Recognising that it is no longer possible to find the single ‘source’ of an idea that is transmitted to a receiver, knowledge itself emerges across and through this complex network of objects, bodies and spaces. This process raises significant questions around where and how meaning is generated and authored. As part of this journey, the original focus of inquiry can change – or certainly radically alter – by asking us to take up new positions in relation to a new set of considerations. Artist Sam Ashby’s research into the history of Eindhoven’s gay fetish club ‘Vagevuur’, which closed its doors in 2008, offers a fascinating frame to think through how we come to know a history, a set of ideas and feelings. The journey of Ashby’s project, initiated under the premise of exploring gay rural communities, evolved into a rich navigation through personal encounters, public archives and sprawling book collections. It traverses meetings with those who were deeply connected to Vagevuur – described as the ‘dirtiest sex club in the world’ – to a sprawling constellation of references, archives and personal reflections. However, what emerges through the text is a deeply personal journey where Ashby is pushed to question (as he says) ‘what to do with a story that

doesn’t not want to be told’ and the emotional and intellectual implications for those involved.

Closing the e-pub is a text and visual essay by artists, activists and educators Anthea Black and Mikiki. Their research project ‘hardcore Eindhoven’ delved into the gabber music scene that was born in the Netherlands in the 1990s. Black and Mikiki’s project shifted between the library and spaces of the Van Abbe to clubs throughout the Netherlands and explored the knotty links between gabber, issues of whiteness in the Dutch context and the different protocols and temporalities that govern dance culture and the museum. Within the framework of the Deviant Practice research project, Black and Miki’s research invites us to consider the many connections and disparities between so-called objective, critically informed knowledge and lived experience. At the culmination of their project, while they sat on the balcony of the Van Abbemuseum’s collection building at dawn, their research manifests itself in an encounter between the different time-worlds of the museum and the club.

Whilst many of the tales that had hitherto been hidden in the shadows – such as Karabinos’ research into the source of Karel 1’s tobacco in the first research programme, or Scheltinga’s vital work into understanding the Van Abbemuseum ‘under fascist influence’ – are now part of this museum’s narrative, a more complicated question is how so-called ‘deviant practices’ might find ways to exist within museum structures. Equally, important questions about the redistributive potential of such a programme need to be addressed. How, for example, might the histories and practices developed within a programme feed back into the communities and contexts with which they engage? I would argue that, underlying all this is the need to understand the Deviant Practice programme and the histories and practices that it allows the museum to encounter, not as momentary aberrations, but as part of



a sustained and sincere project to leave the restrictive elements of the modern project behind. In its place – and as the nine projects in this publication attest – myriad options and variations emerge.





# The Van Abbemuseum under Fascist influences Exhibitions and daily life 1940-44

Evelien Scheltinga



When considering the Second World War, art, museums and exhibitions are not the first elements to come to mind. And if they do, they are usually connected to *Entartete Kunst*, looting, or fascist propaganda. What actually happened in museums during the Second World War is not well researched. In the Netherlands, most museums chose to move their collections to a shelter but remained open during the occupation.

Due to the fact that there is no archival material of this period kept in the institution, the Van Abbemuseum knows little about its own history. Focusing on the period 1940-1945 through the exhibitions organized during the German occupation of the Netherlands, this paper reconstructs this history through archives and newspaper articles. The research is mainly based on archival material kept in the Dutch Institute for War and Genocide studies (NIOD), the Eindhoven city archive RHC-E, newspaper articles, and the museum archives.

To understand this period, it is important to go back to the founding of the museum. As a relatively young institution, the Van Abbemuseum was not one of the big players in the cultural arena. When the museum opened in 1936, Wouter Visser was hired as director. For this 2 days-per-week position, he was paid f1.000, - per year, about a fourth of his counterparts in other museums. The only other member of staff was Piet van Stipdonk, who was hired as concierge, porter and guard. Before the occupation, Visser organized a wide range of exhibitions in modern and contemporary art,

selling exhibitions from artist societies but also 16th and 17th century art exhibitions. Some artworks, including the nude portraits in the exhibition *Contemporary Belgian painting and sculpture (1937)*, were perceived as immoral and had to be removed, since Visser had to consider the Catholic stronghold pervasive in the south of the Netherlands.<sup>2</sup> Around 1940, the collection of the museum encompassed 60 artworks as well as loans from private collections presented in the museum.<sup>3</sup> As an institution, The Van Abbemuseum wasn't taken very seriously by the municipality. In 1938, the public authorities decided to close the museum for a six-months period while the city hall was being redesigned. Once it reopened in April 1939, Visser encountered difficulties managing the museum. Resultantly from the outbreak of the Second World War on 3 September 1939, some pieces of the collection and loans were moved to the building's basement. The collection of the Museum Kempenland was moved to the Van Abbemuseum when their building was used for distribution purposes. The collection comprising archaeological finds, guilds, farmers clothing and other local historical objects was on display in one of the galleries. Moreover, Visser received an official letter from Mayor Verdijk advising him that the Air Protection Services had received permission to install their office in the basement of the museum as soon as the air protection mobilization was announced. Visser was requested to install a double wooden door to access the basement and to protect all the cellar windows with sandbags. Additionally, the museum's glass roof was to be painted with a matt dark paint and – Verdijk wrote<sup>4</sup> – that the municipality would cover the costs of these changes. That August, Visser sent a letter saying that 'even though he granted the director of the Air Protection Service permission to use his director's room, this should not mean that, in the future, the museum would make more allowances in the galleries, storage, administration stock and others for them.'<sup>5</sup>

In May 1940, after the devastating bombing of Rotterdam, the Netherlands was invaded and the museum closed between 10 May - when the German army started The Battle of The Netherlands - and 1 June 1940. On 20 June, the first exhibition held during the occupation opened, the Bredasche kunstkring, Breda's artist society, held a selling exhibition. In 1940, six exhibitions were presented at the museum. Four were organized by artist societies, one commemorated the museum founder Henri van Abbe who passed away on 18 November, and one show focused on landscape architecture. In total, 3.721 people came to the museum, the lowest number of visitors in the museum's history. This also stemmed from the closure of the museum and beginning of the occupation.<sup>6</sup> In 1941, Visser managed to put together eight exhibitions, five from artist societies and two solo shows – one for J.H. Jurrens and the other for Betsy Westendorp-Osieck, which was organized by the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam and travelled to various institutions.<sup>7</sup> The other two exhibitions were organized to inspire the population to learn drawing. Most of the 12.630 people visiting the museum came to see the collection of drawings in *Jong Eindhoven Teekent (Young Eindhoven Draws)*.<sup>8</sup> This ambitious exhibition presented the results of a yearly drawing competition organized by Theo Eftting. Around 5.000 drawings were sent to the museum. A selection committee awarded 160 drawings out of 1000. For lack of space, 500 drawings were shown the first week of the exhibition, the other 500 in the second week. Visser hoped that the exhibition would draw children to the museum, and asked the municipality to lower its entrance fees for school classes and teachers.<sup>9</sup> Newspapers wrote positive reviews about the drawing competition and the exhibition, underlining the 'innocent, genius and pure' drawings that the children created.<sup>10</sup> The Polygoon cinema news team attended the award ceremony (fig. 1). However, the drawing competition was put on hold during the occupation.





fig. 1 Polygoon Cinema News 1941 week 51. Report about Jong Eindhoven Teekent. Video: Beeld en Geluid.

fig. 2 Installation of Dr. H.A. Pulles as Mayor of Eindhoven at the Van Abbemuseum. Photo: Foto Onno. Copyright, RHC Eindhoven.

fig. 3 NSB and WA members await the newly installed mayor in front of the museum. Source: [www.gemeentepolitieeindhoven.nl](http://www.gemeentepolitieeindhoven.nl).

In November 1940, the Department for Propaganda and Arts (DVK) and the Department of Education, Science and Cultural Protection were founded. These two new branches were set up to replace the Department of Education, Arts and Sciences and were steered by Tobie Goedewaagen, a member of the NSB, the Dutch National Socialist Movement. Drawn to the ideas of the SS and animated by his belief that The Netherlands should be part of the Great-Germany, Goedewaagen supported the Nazi notion of 'new order', going against the ideals of the NSB. According to Goedewaagen, artists should regain their position in society and reflect the people through their art. He founded the *Nederlandsche Kultuurkamer* (Dutch Chamber of Culture), which officially opened in February 1942. Henceforth, only artists who were registered at the Kultuurkamer were allowed to practice their profession, buy materials, participate in exhibitions and sell artworks. Needless to say, Jews were not allowed to enroll. Moreover, many artists were registered by their artist society without making the decision themselves. After 1941, the effects of the German occupation became blatantly obvious in the museum. In Eindhoven, the NSB gained more power and Mayor Verdijk was arrested on 15 October 1941 for supporting Jews. On 21 February 1942, active NSB member Hub Pulles was appointed. *Algemeen Handelsblad* reports: 'The ceremony took place at the municipal Van Abbe-Museum, which has for some time been used as a location for official meetings, as there is currently no representative city hall.' (fig. 2)<sup>11</sup> Other newspapers report that the museum was 'elaborately decorated with flowers and flags. The NSB flag, Prince's Flag, Swastika flag and the NSB emblem hung alongside portraits of Adolf Hitler and Mussert.'<sup>12</sup> But it was not just the inside of the museum that was decorated, its facade was covered with the emblems of Eindhoven, Noord-Brabant, the Prince's Flag, the NSB-flag and the Nazi-German – or Swastika – flag.<sup>13</sup> The room was filled with high-ranking personalities, including the *Ortskommandant* of

Eindhoven, the *beauftragte des Reichskommissars* in Noord-Brabant, Dr. Thiel, de *Gruppenführer der N.S.D.A.P.*, and the district leader of the NSB. Loudspeakers were set up outside on the museum tower to enable the crowds to hear the speeches. Members of the NSB and the WA – the paramilitary division of the NSB – awaited the newly appointed mayor (fig. 3). Pulles clearly stated that henceforth, Eindhoven would be under national socialist governance. He spoke about the *Blut und Boden* theory and the position of the Netherlands in the German Reich, emphasizing that Jews were not part of the Germanic race. To conclude this ‘celebratory’ afternoon, the WA, Dutch SS and the National Youth Storm paraded through the streets of Eindhoven. As city mayor, Pulles was given a position in the museum’s advisory board and, on 20 February, Visser wrote his resignation letter to Mayor Pulles, proclaiming that he did not want to take part in national socialist propaganda exhibitions in the museum.

On 1 April 1942, drawing teacher Peeters was appointed director of the museum, marking the beginning of the national socialist narrative inside the museum. On the same day, newspapers started writing about the *Huisvlijttentoonstelling* (applied objects exhibition), which opened on 20 May. It is very likely that Visser resigned because he was forced to host this exhibition. *Huisvlijttentoonstelling* was the result of a call for projects launched in November 1941 by the *Vreugde en Arbeid* (‘joy and labour’) society, which was part of the National Socialist trade union ‘*Het Nederlands Arbeidsfonds*’ (Dutch Labour Fund). The initial ambition of the *Huisvlijttactie* was to organize an exhibition of objects homemade by children and housewives at Amsterdam’s Stedelijk Museum. However, it is probable that Stedelijk director David Roëll was able to refuse the exhibition due to the museum’s full schedule. *Huisvlijttentoonstelling* follows a National Socialist rhetoric including the promotion of DIY culture and the creative innocence of youth. Due to the war, some

materials and services weren’t available, and the NSB and other National Socialist organizations encouraged national self-sufficiency. *Huisvlijt* was seen as an enjoyable activity to occupy youth, teaching the latter about the creation and quality of art. *Algemeen protestantsch dagblad* reported that the activity entitled ‘*Neerlands Jeugd aan het Werk*’ (Dutch Youth working) should motivate children to produce *huisvlijt*. As youth criminality thrived, these associations considered that *huisvlijt* was extremely important. This activity could help keep young people busy and would provide recreation. One of the goals of ‘Joy and Labour’ as they organized the exhibition consisted in motivating children to produce handicrafts. In their opinion, mass production ‘threatened good taste’ and the Department for Propaganda and Arts and the Department for Education, Sciences and Cultural Protection stepped in to help financially. The exhibition was conceived to travel from Leeuwarden to Assen, Arnhem, Eindhoven, Utrecht, and Den Haag, but the tour didn’t go as planned. Before stopping in Eindhoven, the *Huisvlijttentoonstelling* exhibition was only shown in Arnhem from 4 to 10 May. In Eindhoven, the project drew wide media attention through newspaper advertisements, and children and housewives were asked to send in their *huisvlijt* to be shown in the exhibition. To motivate participation of the people, prizes sponsored by companies in and around Eindhoven were to be won.

In his opening speech, NSB Mayor Pulles said that the urge to create – *Schepplingsdrang* – is alive in every human being, although some are more gifted than others.<sup>14</sup> One of the talented children whose work was specifically mentioned was 18-years old Piet Segers. Today, he is a renowned Dutch sculptor with works in many public collections. The *Polygoonjournaal* filmed a report of the exhibition that was shown in cinemas around the country (fig. 5). The clip clearly shows that the works exhibited were more than quickly made handicrafts. Some of the pieces, such as the working



fig. 4 Exhibition poster *Huisvlijttentoonstelling*. Image: Van Abbemuseum

train or ship models, must have taken years to create. Unusually for exhibitions at the Van Abbemuseum, local and national newspapers published photographs of the setting-up and opening of the exhibition. The fact that a national socialist institute organized the exhibition, rather than a museum with small funds, secured wide media attention.

On 29 May, the museum was closed to the public when the institution was visited by NSB leader Anton Mussert within the framework of his day-trip in Eindhoven, during which he visited the city hall, the local water company, the Van Abbemuseum, textile factories, and a sock factory. Piet Peeters guided him around the exhibition and although his visit is reported in every newspaper, it is not known what he thought or said about the *Huisvlijttentoonstelling* (fig. 6 & 7). His visit ended with a general assembly of the NSB at the Philips factory. Overall, the exhibition enjoyed a lot of attention and visits and, in this respect, was deemed a success.

*Volkstentoonstelling Nederlandsche Kunst van de provincies Brabant en Zeeland* (Folk exhibition of the provinces Brabant and Zeeland) opened on 6 June 1942, a week after the *Huisvlijttentoonstelling* ended. Organized by the *Kultuurkamer*, this exhibition gave every Dutch artist the opportunity to exhibit their work as part of the Chamber of Culture's policy, as explained in *Nieuwe Tilburgsche Courant*. 'The DVK and the *Kultuurkamer* will actively support artists. One of the means of support is a big exhibition of Dutch art at the Rijksmuseum. An acquisition budget of f50.000,- (roughly €330.000,-) is made available by the *National Sozialistische Volkswohlfahrt* (National Socialist People's Welfare)'.<sup>15</sup> Every region had their own exhibition, and the Van Abbe's was the first. On 28 April 1942, the DVK communicated with Mayor Pulles on the organization of the exhibition.<sup>16</sup> This letter clearly outlines that Eduard Gerdes, head of the visual arts





fig. 5 Overview of the *Huisvljttentoonstelling*. Screenshot taken from Polygoon Cinema News 1942 week 22. Report about the *Huisvljttentoonstelling*. Video: Beeld en Geluid.

department at the *Kultuurkamer*, visited Mayor Pulles and that together, they discussed the possibility of this exhibition. The purpose of the show consisted in promoting and selling the works of local artists to create a connection between art and the community. Genuine artists should be aware of their position in society, which was one of the core missions of the DVK. The *Nederlandsche Volksdienst* (NVD), a society founded in 1941 mimicking the German *National Sozialistische Volkswohlfahrt*, was in charge of the practical organization of the exhibition. This marks the first time that an organization focusing on people's welfare financially supports artists. Before that, financially-challenged artists needed to be supported through the sale of special postage stamps. However, this new aid was structural and available to all artists. *Dagblad van het Zuiden* reported that interested artists could ask Van Abbemuseum director Peeters for a registration form.<sup>17</sup> Any artist registered at the *Kultuurkamer* could send their work to the exhibition for selection by a jury with representatives from DVK, NSV and the *Kultuurkamer*.<sup>18</sup> In a letter from the DVK, it becomes clear that the *Kultuurkamer* also sent a list of all the region's artists registered with the *Kultuurkamer* to ensure their registration. However, it is unclear that this list was ever sent, as it is not available in the archive. This could also be due to the fact that the administration of registered artists at the *Kultuurkamer* was very shambolic.<sup>19</sup> Peeters inquired if the works by Herman van der Avoort could be shown as the artist lived in Belgium. Seeing as the painter was Dutch and a member of the NSB, the response was positive.<sup>20</sup> The exhibition drew the attention of national socialists in The Netherlands, and several deputies attended the opening. In his inaugural speech, deputy head of visual arts at the *Kultuurkamer* Dr. J.A. Stellwag spoke about this exhibition as the first to represent the values of the *Kultuurkamer*. The exhibition recognized the work of artists in and for society, Stellwag said.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, he stressed that, with this exhibition,





fig. 6 & 7 Mussert visits the exhibition *Huisvlijttentoonstelling* at the Van Abbemuseum. Image: Beeldbank WO2 - NIOD

the *Kultuurkamer* positioned itself as an institution supporting artists and bringing artists closer to society.<sup>22</sup> The Head of architecture at the *Kultuurkamer*, Van Anrooij, said that ‘true’ artists would be employees of the community,<sup>23</sup> taking the opportunity to expose the new governmental system of support for artists, focusing on creating a fair market, building a bridge between artists and all layers of society, and fighting against ‘kitsch’.<sup>24</sup> When J. Creyghton discussed the exhibition in *Dagblad van het Zuiden*, he was generally positive about the pieces shown, such as the work of Henriëtte Pessers, who already enjoyed local renown before the occupation. In his review, he names most of the artists and artworks on display, but also criticizes the fact that some of the artists active before the occupation are missing.<sup>25</sup> In fact, the latter probably decided not to take part in a government funded exhibition, since this could be perceived as condoning the newly-installed government and their national socialist policy. *Eindhovens Dagblad* reported that the exhibition enjoyed many visitors and that sales surpassed expectations.<sup>26</sup> The great number of visitors ensured that the exhibition was prolonged until 30 June. Its great success was also due to a low entrance fee allowing many people a visit to the museum. Works that remained unsold travelled to Amsterdam where the DVK organized the exhibition *Hulpwerk Beeldende Kunst* at the Rijksmuseum, where 900 works from artists registered at the *Kultuurkamer* from every region were presented.<sup>27</sup>

In *Dagblad van het Zuiden*, Peeters reflected that, in 1942, the museum had 10.059 visitors and a total of eight exhibitions, three by artist societies, one organized by the museum with Albert Neuhuys’ collection, three by external national socialist societies, the two mentioned above and *Hulpwerk Beeldende Kunst*.<sup>28</sup> The *Bredasche Kunstkring* exhibition was cancelled, and after 1941 they only exhibited in Breda. In a long newspaper interview,





fig. 8 Charles Vos, Edele Brabant, Were Di, 1942. Relief. Collection Van Abbemuseum

Peeters also gave some details about the other activities in the museum and mentioned the fact that less lectures took place in the institution and that those organized were prepared by Goedewaagen and the Dutch German Culture society.<sup>29</sup> The museum acquired a work by J.H. Eversen. To emphasize the regional appeal of the museum, Peeters proposed to replace the Ouroboros freemasonry symbol – a serpent eating its tail – with a relief of the weapon of Brabant and the motto “Edele Brabant were di” (fig 8).<sup>30</sup> He asked Charles Vos to design and produce the relief, which was presented at the opening of *Hulpwerk Beeldende Kunst*. To set more roots in the local art network, Peeters planned to organize a yearly festival introducing local artists and presenting plays, music and sport activities.<sup>31</sup> Peeters reports that 80 artworks loaned to the museum were sent back to their lenders, of which 88 artworks from the Amsterdam tradesmen S.F. Selderbeek whose collection was on loan since 1939.<sup>32</sup> He also notes that contemporary artworks don’t have much content and fail to convey a message.<sup>33</sup> Peeters prefers artworks ‘that depicts what the people are engaged in’, which links to the ideas of the *Kultuurkamer*.<sup>34</sup> In the meantime, the war took its toll in Eindhoven. On 6 December 1942, the RAF tried to bomb the Philips factories where Radio shows for the German occupier were produced. The Philips factories were located in the centre, at the Emmasingel. As the bombing took place on a Sunday, the workshops were empty, but the shells hit houses, churches, shops and a hospital. In all, 135 people died.<sup>35</sup> After this devastating event, Suze Robertson’s solo exhibition planned for early 1943 was cancelled, since lenders did not want to take the risk to lend their artworks to the museum. However, Peeters continued organising exhibitions but focused less on showing artworks.







fig. 9 Poster *Huisvlijttentoonstelling*.  
Collection NIOD via [www.geheugenvannederland.nl](http://www.geheugenvannederland.nl)

At the end of 1942, the *Het Nationale Dagblad* revealed the *Huisvrouwen worden vindingrijk* exhibition (fig. 9). Clearly aimed at women, the article underlines that the exhibition shows how women can reuse old clothes and objects to make new and useful things.<sup>36</sup> The exhibition was shown in Groningen's 'Tehuis', a building that had served as a Christian clubhouse since 1936. The free-of-charge exhibition was opened every day. Women of the *NS Frauenschaft* – the women's wing of the NSDAP who organized the exhibition – were on-site to provide information to the visiting women.<sup>37</sup> The aim of the exhibition consisted in motivating women to use old clothes and objects to create something new, which proved particularly useful in wartime.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, the exhibition championed a national socialist narrative and DIY culture. In the column 'Frauen unter sich' (Women amongst themselves) published in *Deutsche Zeitung in den Niederlande*, the author writes that once the exhibition has been shown in Groningen, it will travel to Hengelo and Eindhoven.<sup>39</sup> The Van Abbemuseum is the first and only museum to host this exhibition. On the occasion of the opening of the North-Brabant region *Kreisleiter*, Zimmerman spoke about the important position of women in wartime. The exhibition helps women to create a 'rich and happy' environment. *Kreisleiterin Frau Hertzog* stressed the fact that no objects were bought for the exhibition, that everything was made by women and nothing was for sale as they were their private household projects.<sup>40</sup> Clearly astonished by the skills and resourcefulness of women with materials in times of scarcity, *Dagblad van Noord-Brabant* called the exhibition 'curious'.<sup>41</sup> The *NS Frauenschaft* describes the exhibition as a revelation of the secrets and house-keeping of women and an opportunity for others to learn.<sup>42</sup> Learning by doing as opposed to learn by observing, *Dagblad van het Zuiden* writes that a course on house-slippers making will soon follow.<sup>43</sup> The content of the exhibition in Eindhoven was very practical. Women were asked to bring old clothes and



scraps of fabric that would be cut into pattern pieces by women of the *NS Frauenshaft*, followed by advice about to use these pieces. Demonstrations on food, natural products and how to use threads from old stockings to create new garments were held,<sup>44</sup> marking a clear difference with the *Huisvlijt-tentoonstelling*, where objects were simply exhibited. *Huisvrouwen worden Vindingrijk* is more practical and betrays an active, concrete propaganda. Newspapers wrote reports on the exhibition from very a patriarchal perspective, even more than the *Huisvlijttentoonstelling*. Newspapers praised women's work, resourcefulness and inventive solutions. The *Dagblad van het Zuiden* reports that the visitors' numbers of the exhibition are high, and that on Sunday 14 March 1.000 visitors attended the exhibition. The *Deutsche Zeitung in den Niederlanden* reports that 4.600 people visited the exhibition during its 13 days' opening and that many women registered for the house-slippers making course.<sup>45</sup> This is the first exhibition with a continuous physical presence of National Socialists in the museum. Sometime during or after the exhibition, Peeters stepped down as director for health reasons and fascist and active NSB member Louis Vrijdag was appointed as director after having held a senior position at the municipality since August 1942.<sup>46</sup> On 15 March 1943, he was officially appointed director of the Van Abbe-museum, working two days a week for a yearly salary of f1.104,-. This salary went up in January 1944 to f1.581, f581,- more than Visser earned.<sup>47</sup> Having grown up in Eindhoven, Vrijdag became acquainted with fascism when he studied in Amsterdam at the age of 17. In the late twenties, he took an active part in the Youth Fascist Movement and sold fascist weekly *De Bezem* on the streets of Amsterdam.<sup>48</sup> When he moved back to Eindhoven, he opened a branch of the Youth Fascist Movement that boasted around 20 members.<sup>49</sup> He was amongst the first 1.000 members of the NSB and registered in the party in December 1932. Consequently, he took his job as director very seriously and

re-activated the advisory board with the alderman of culture Hermens.

The *Huisvrouwen worden vindingrijk* show was soon followed by another traveling exhibition, *Herlevend Nederland* (Reviving Netherlands), an NSB propaganda exhibition first shown in August 1942 in Utrecht, where the NSB headquarters were located. Based on the collection of Schuilenburg – an active member who kept all memorabilia of the NSB since its foundation – the exhibition championed the idea of a national socialist museum. Before the exhibition moved to the Van Abbemuseum, it had already travelled for almost a year and attracted around 53.000 visitors. In Rotterdam alone, 20.000 visitors visited the show in just 14 days.<sup>50</sup> Schuilenburg himself was on site almost every day to record visitors, although his registration system is sometimes questioned.<sup>51</sup> Newspapers do not report precisely what was shown in Eindhoven, although the exhibition probably included the same pieces displayed in other venues: death masks of those who died during the battle for national socialism<sup>52</sup>, political propaganda before and by the NSB, the battle against non-democratic movements, around 1.200 communist books and brochures demonstrating the inexhaustible source of money the communists used to disseminate their propaganda, and the limited financial resources of the fascist movements.<sup>53</sup> The second venue, the Rijksmuseum, sold postcards reproducing *De Nieuwe Mensch*, which is considered the most fascist painting produced in the Netherlands by a respected contemporary artist. Some new quotes and mottos were added to the Eindhoven exhibition, including 'De Nederlandsche Kultuurkamer zorgt voor den Nederlandschen Kunstenaar' (The Dutch Kultuurkamer takes care of Dutch artists), 'De Nederlandsche Kultuurkamer behartigt de sociale, economische en vakkundige belangen van alle Nederlandsche kunstenaars' (The Dutch Kultuurkamer serves the social, economic and expertise interest of all Dutch



artists).<sup>54</sup> During the opening, NSB district leader Stoetzer encouraged visitors to motivate their friends and families to visit the exhibition, hoping that after the 50.000th visitor of the exhibition in Rotterdam, Eindhoven would welcome the 60.000th guest. Unfortunately, the exhibition did not prove very successful in Eindhoven. On 30 March, the RAF bombed the Philips Eindhoven factories for the second time and 25 people were killed. This led to tensions in the city and within the NSB. Indeed, the latter failed to organize propaganda for the exhibition in Eindhoven as they were expecting the national department to take care of this task. The lack of local advertisement ensued in a low turnout at the exhibition.<sup>55</sup> It would seem that even the municipality worked against the exhibition's propaganda and it was reported that signs and posters publicising the exhibition were removed. Could this be a sign of resistance? When Schuilenburg filed a report, the municipality said it was a misunderstanding.<sup>56</sup> Although local newspapers wrote positive reviews on the exhibition, the effect was not felt in the city. The local NSB department did not get new applications for membership during the exhibition.<sup>57</sup>

In 1943, a total of nine exhibitions were scheduled, four of which were cancelled. People were hesitant to move artworks after the second RAF bombings on the Philips factories on 30 March 1943. Besides *Huisvrouwen worden vindingrijk* and *Herlevend Nederland*, there was a solo show of Otto Hanrath's work, an exhibition of the Kunstkring Nederland and a Christmas exhibition. Vrijdag acquired two artworks, [Maasdorp](#) by Wim Paes and Pie Schmidt's *Najaar*. Although Vrijdag made every effort to organise exhibitions, the war situation made this task impossible. Yet, it becomes blatantly obvious that as fascist narratives enter the museum, less art is being shown.

Some rather obscure exhibitions take place in 1944. Vrijdag hosted the traveling exhibition *Wat aarde*

*bewaarde* (What earth preserved) that encompassed archaeological finds connected with the Germanic history of The Netherlands. The exhibition was followed by another show focusing on fascist-distorted historical facts, *Wie en wat waren onze voorouders?* (How and what where our ancestors?), organised by the Dutch Society of Genealogy, an organisation of the era boasting strong national socialist ideology. Vrijdag also organised a competition and exhibition for local artists: *Kempenland van Nederlandsche Beeldende Kunst*. As he was putting up the exhibition, Vrijdag was warned that he wasn't allowed to organise a competition for artists without permission of the DVK. This was settled with a letter and the DVK recommended staff members to be part of the jury<sup>58</sup> made up of Eduard Gerdes of the DVK, Colnot of the Kultuurkamer, Wouters of the Kultuurkamer and Peschar of the DVK.<sup>59</sup> At the opening of the exhibition, Alderman for Culture Hermens announced plans for an art academy in Eindhoven.<sup>60</sup> Yet reviewers were left unhappy with the content of the exhibition, as they noted that works by good artists were not shown.<sup>61</sup> In fact, these artists had probably decided not to take part in this type of state-supported exhibition. Since the 1942 *Volkstentoonstelling*, the influence and consequences of the Kultuurkamer had become clear. *Zoo Leeft Eindhoven* (This is how Eindhoven lives) was an exhibition about the growth and development of Eindhoven since the annexation of the surrounding villages in 1920 (fig 10). Local newspapers were most enthusiastic about the exhibition and felt that, at last the museum focused on crucial local issues. The exhibition integrated a selection of 2.500 photographs of Eindhoven from the Philips-factories collection as well as a large selection of maps.<sup>62</sup> The show also comprised a sketched reconstruction by (architect) Wolters of the Demer, Eindhoven's main shopping street that was severely bombed on 6 December 1942, and copies of the drawing were on sale at the conciergerie.<sup>63</sup> Paintings and drawings depicting historical views of



fig. 10. Poster *Zoo leeft Eindhoven*, 1944. Collection Van Abbemuseum.

Eindhoven where presented, some dating back to the 19th century, although most were contemporary. Encouraged by the exhibition, local citizens donated their private collections of artefacts on Eindhoven to the city archive.<sup>64</sup> On 5 August, the *Dagblad van het Zuiden* reports that the exhibition welcomed 25.000 paying visitors, which was considered a vast number of attendees, considering that a mere 3.721 visitors had come to the museum in 1940.<sup>65</sup> The success of this exhibition ensured its prolongation until 15 August 1944.<sup>66</sup>

Vrijdag's last exhibitions at the museum was a solo show of Jan Wingen's work and the traveling exhibition *Wansmaak en gezonde kunst* (Bad taste and healthy art). Then aged 70, Jan Wingen had been a painter for his whole life, but had only started to actively and successfully show and sell his works in 1943.<sup>67</sup> On the day after Mad Tuesday, Creighton reviewed Jan Wingen's show presenting 47 artworks in *Dagblad van het Zuiden*. Creighton praised Wingen's way of capturing light in his landscapes and writes 'Wingen excels in impressions of moods in his landscapes'.<sup>68</sup> He recognises that some works are painted in a rush, not all of them have worked out well, but, the majority are excellent. During the occupation, Wingen was a very active painter who exhibited his work in The Netherlands and in Germany, where we have found reviews about his exhibitions in Dutch and German. The exhibition was organised in collaboration with Wingen, who wrote a letter on 30 July 1944 to Vrijdag about the exhibition that was to open on 26 August 1944. He asked if he could visit the museum to discuss some details with Vrijdag. This letter indicates that Jan Wingen could very well have proposed the exhibition to the museum himself. In the summer, he sent photographs of his work to the Van Abbemuseum, which are kept in the city archive to this day. The titles of the works are too vague to identify which were shown in the museum. After the liberation of Eindhoven,





fig. 11 Exhibition overview *Wansmaak en gezonde kunst* at Kunsthuis Amsterdam. The exhibition shows good and bad examples of art alongside each other. Small signs indicate whether the objects is 'good' or 'bad'. From *De Schouw*, 15 May 1943, p. 262.

Wingen sent a message to the Van Abbemuseum via the Red Cross to find out whether his 'lifework, 54 paintings' are all right'. This issue was solved by postwar museum director Edy de Wilde. *Wansmaak en gezonde kunst* showed examples of art, defined by the DVK as Kitsch, or, as *Het Vaderland* called the objects, 'worthless and tasteless products'.<sup>69</sup> One of the key purposes of De Rantiz was no other than the extinction of *Kitsch* and he initiated this exhibition to educate the people. The show first opened in Amsterdam's newly installed Kunsthuis on 10 April 1943 before travelling on to smaller venues. The Van Abbemuseum was the first museum to host the exhibition. At the opening, Eduard Gerdes, artist and head of the department of architecture and visual arts at the DVK, said that before the occupation, the government had not shared much information about art. According to Gerdes, this enabled factories with bigger profits to advertise their products. Anything could be sold as long as the advertisement was good.<sup>70</sup> With this exhibition, DVK clearly indicates that they would like to restrict the freedom of artists and galleries and the show provides the guidelines on good art.<sup>71</sup> In *De Schouw*, Eduard Rijff writes about the Kunsthuis exhibition in Amsterdam and the accompanying images clearly indicate the way in which the placement of the work casts a judging eye on the quality of the works, such as a painting with a sign probing the value of the work (fig 11). The canvas is worth 0,15, the mass produced frame is worth f 0,90. A total of f 1,05. The selling price of the artwork, as the newspaper reports, was f 35,-, but worth f 0,-, which, as is concluded in the simple calculation, overpriced with f 33,95.<sup>72</sup> The working hours of the artist, studio rental price or even the paint and/or other material used besides the canvas are not taken in consideration. As the quality of the picture didn't match the *Kultuurkamer's* ideas on art, the painting wasn't worth its price. The exhibition is reminiscent of the *Entartete Kunst* exhibitions organised in Germany since 1937. The *Limburger Koerier* calls the exhibition an example

of degenerate art, before correcting this statement the following day in an article entitled 'Not degenerate art, but mainly rubbish'.<sup>73</sup> It seems that the term degenerate was too dangerous to use in The Netherlands. When *De Telegraaf* art critic Kasper Niehaus reviews the exhibition, he sees kitsch as remote from art and therefore worse than degenerate art. 'I cannot imagine that there are people who appreciate these things, but I've been told that these paintings are sold quickly.'<sup>74</sup> According to Niehaus, the exhibition offers good guidance on how to recognise healthy art. *Storm*, the weekly journal of Storm SS, gives examples on what they consider kitsch: 'flowerpots with fake plants, fake gnomes in gardens, a teapot in the shape of a white elephant painted in colours and will never be used to pour tea, a silver cake server with a reproduction of the *Nachtwacht*'.<sup>75</sup> The author identifies objects hovering on the border between kitsch and art, or kitsch and folk. Their definition for art is set: true, honest and pure. Kitsch, on the other hand, has none of these qualities. In *Het Nationale Dagblad*, Eduard Rijff writes that Kitsch is one of the remnants of the former demo-liberal system. In *Storm*, kitsch is described as elitist, the result of the capitalist system. The people had to find a new type of art, enter kitsch.<sup>76</sup> In *Storm*, *De Telegraaf* and *Het Nationale Dagblad*, the authors describe the artworks in the exhibition as failed reproductions, paintings made with no knowledge of, or love for art and as mass production. Rijff is very clear in his review: he hopes Kitsch will very soon vanish, if not through this exhibition, then because of the scarcity of materials. It might look as if the Kultuurkamer or DVK had an influence on Kitsch, or in marking an end to Kitsch. However, this is not the case. All the artists exhibiting at this period were registered at the Kultuurkamer and allowed to make art. Since the only admission requirement of the Kultuurkamer was the Ariërverklaring, there was no selection on the quality and content of the artworks. It is even possible that some of the artists received

materials and subsidies from the DVK to make their 'kitsch' works.

It takes some speculation and suppositions to reconstruct the exhibition in Eindhoven. Supposed to open 23 August, the exhibition was postponed to 2 September, due to the extension of *Zoo leeft Eindhoven*.<sup>77</sup> *Dagblad van het Zuiden* announced that Eduard Gerdes would be present at the opening.<sup>78</sup> According to *De Zuid-Willemsvaart*, Gerdes gave a small tour after his opening speech, during which he stressed that good art does not have to be expensive, and that buying kitsch is always a bad choice. There are no further reports about the exhibition. It is probable that very few people visited the show as this period marks a turning point of war in Eindhoven, when the Allied were getting stronger and approaching the city. From 2 September, the Germans started fleeing the city. On 3 September, the German airport *Fliegerhorst* in Eindhoven was severely bombed. It is said that the smoke from the bombing was so disruptive that the sun was completely blocked on that day. From this day onwards, German troops started to move northwards, fleeing the Allied forces.<sup>79</sup> On 4 and 5 September, heavy explosions targeted the airport to destroy the ammunition storage. The few days before the liberation of Eindhoven were marked by unrest. While the National Socialists and German troops fled, people either stayed in the city or in their houses or went to the countryside to find some food and wait for the liberation. Government-controlled newspaper *Dagblad van het Zuiden* published its last copy on 7 September and Eindhoven was liberated on 18 September 1944. Understandably, journalists focused on different issues than art exhibitions... We can only assume that the content and tour presentation of *Wansmaak en gezonde kunst* didn't change much and that few visitors attended the show. What happened to the works presented in the exhibition *Wansmaak en gezonde kunst* after the liberation of Eindhoven remains unclear.



## NOTES

- 1 René Pingen, *Dat museum is een mijnheer. De geschiedenis van het Van Abbemuseum 1936-2003*, Van Abbemuseum/Artimo Amsterdam 2005, p. 18.
- 2 '1936-1946: W.J.A. VISSER' <<https://vanabbemuseum.nl/over-het-museum/gebouw-en-historie/1936-1946-wja-visser/>>, visited 15 February 2019.
- 3 Pingen 2005, p. 40.
- 4 Letter Verdijk to Visser, 22 November 1939. VAM Beheersarchief 060
- 5 Letter Visser to Verdijk, 1 August 1940. VAM Beheersarchief 063.
- 6 Anon., 'Het Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum. Met den Directeur, den heer P. Peeters', *Dagblad van het Zuiden*, 13 January 1943.
- 7 The exhibition also travelled to Centraal Museum in Utrecht (15 March-15 April 1941).
- 8 Anon., 'Het Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum. Met den Directeur, den heer P. Peeters', *Dagblad van het Zuiden*, 13 January 1943.
- 9 Advies-nota, 5 August 1941. RHC-E 10491-1144
- 10 H. v. Reuth, 'Tentoonstelling "Jong Eindhoven Teekent", geopend', *Dagblad van het Zuiden*, 24 November 1941.
- 11 Anon., 'Eindhovens burgemeester geïnstalleerd', *Algemeen Handelsblad*, 23 February 1942.
- 12 Anon., 'De nieuwe burgemeester van Eindhoven', *Provinciale Overijsselsche en Zwolsche courant*, 23 February 1942.
- 13 Anon., 'Installatie-plechtigheid Burgemeester Dr. H.A. Pulles te Eindhoven.' *Dagblad van het Zuiden*, 23 February 1942.
- 14 Anon., 'Huisvljttentoonstelling in het Van AbbeMuseum geopend.', *Dagblad van het Zuiden* 21 May 1942.
- 15 Anon., 'De National Sozialistische Volkswohlfahrt zal voor f50.000 aankopen voor de "Heime" in Nederland', *Dagblad van Rotterdam*, 30 May 1942.
- 16 Letter from Eduard Gerdes to Hub Pulles, 28 April 1942. RHC-E 10491-1144.
- 17 Anon., 'Tentoonstelling van schilderijen en beeldhouwkunst in het Van Abbe Museum te Eindhoven in de maand Juni 1942', *Dagblad van het Zuiden*, 22 May 1942.
- 18 Anon., 'Tentoonstelling van Schilder- en Beeldhouwkunst', *Dagblad van Noordbrabant en Zeeland*, 22 May 1942.
- 19 Claartje Wesselink, *Kunstenars van de Kulturkamer: Geschiedenis en herinnering*, Prometheus Bert Bakker Amsterdam 2014, pp. 72-74.
- 20 Letter Eduard Gerdes to Piet Peeters, 13 May 1942. RHC-E 10491-1144.
- 21 Anon., 'Volkstentoonstelling van Nederlandsche Kunst in het Van Abbe-Museum', *Dagblad van het Zuiden*, 8 June 1942.
- 22 Ibid. 'Volkstentoonstelling van Nederlandsche Kunst in het Van Abbe-Museum', *Dagblad van het Zuiden*, 8 June 1942.
- 23 Anon., 'Volkstentoonstelling van beeldende kunst', *Dagblad van Noord-Brabant*, 8 June 1942.
- 24 Anon., 'Volkstentoonstelling van Ned. kunst te Eindhoven', *Het nationale dagblad* 8 June 1942.
- 25 Creyghton, 'Brabantsche en Zeeuwsche schilderij', *Dagblad van het Zuiden*, 11 June 1942.
- 26 Anon., 'De volkstentoonstelling van Nederlandsche kunst', *Eindhovens Dagblad*, 26 June 1942.
- 27 Jetje Baruch, Liesbeth van der Horst, *Het Rijksmuseum in oorlogstijd*, Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, 1985, pp. 39-40.
- 28 Anon., 'Het Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum. Met den Directeur, den heer P. Peeters', *Dagblad van het Zuiden*, 13 January 1943.
- 29 Anon., 'Het Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum. Met den Directeur, den heer P. Peeters', *Dagblad van het Zuiden*, 14 January 1943.
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- 31 Anon., 'Het Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum. Met den Directeur, den heer P. Peters', *Dagblad van het Zuiden*, 14 January 1943.
- 32 Pingen, p. 40.
- 33 P. Peeters quoted in: Anon., 'Het Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum. Met den Directeur, den heer P. Peters', *Dagblad van het Zuiden*, 13 January 1943.
- 34 Anon., 'Het Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum. Met den Directeur, den heer P. Peters', *Dagblad van het Zuiden*, 13 January 1943.
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- 39 X.Y.Z. 'Goldene Worte', *Deutsche Zeitung in den Niederlande*, 9 January 1943.
- 40 Anon., 'Huisvrouwen worden vindingrijk', *Dagblad van Noord-Brabant*, 5 March 1943.
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- 42 Anon., 'Huisvrouwen worden vindingrijk', *Dagblad van Noord-Brabant*, 5 March 1943.
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- 44 Anon., 'Huisvrouwen worden vindingrijk', *Dagblad van het Zuiden*, 10 March 1943.
- 45 Anon., '4600 Besucher wurden gezählt'. *Deutsche Zeitung in den Niederlanden*, 17 March 1943.
- 46 In his contract is stated 'Schrijver 1e klasse ter gemeentesecretarie' Contract Vrijdag in persoonsdossier L. Vrijdag. RHCE 10491-5359.
- 47 Persoonsdossier L. Vrijdag. RHCE 10491-5359.
- 48 Frans Dekker, *B&W rond de Tweede Wereldoorlog in Groot-Eindhoven*, In de knipscheer Amsterdam 1992, p. 41.
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- 50 Anon., 'Herlevend Nederland', *Dagblad van Noord-Brabant*, 9 March 1943; Anon., 'Herlevend Nederland', *Het Vaderland* 26 August 1942.
- 51 Anna Lamberts, 'Herlevend Nederland' *Een propagandatentoonstelling van de Nationaal Socialistische Beweging, 1942-1943*, Masterscriptie UvA 2013, pp. 49-50.
- 52 Lamberts, p. 37.
- 53 Anon., 'Een rondwandeling op de tentoonstelling "Herlevend Nederland"', *Dagblad van het Zuiden*, 27 March 1943.
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- 56 Lamberts. pp. 58-59.
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- 60 Anon., 'Een academie voor beeldende kunsten in Brabant', *Het nationale dagblad*, 2 June 1944.
- 61 A.J.D. van Oosten, 'Tentoonstelling "Kempenland"', *De Zuid-Willemsvaart*, 3 June 1944.
- 62 Anon., 'Zoo leeft Eindhoven', *Dagblad van het Zuiden*, 10 June 1944.
- 63 Creyghton, 'Zoo leeft Eindhoven', *Dagblad van het Zuiden*, 11 June 1944.
- 64 Anon., 'Zoo leeft Eindhoven', *Dagblad van het Zuiden*, 14 July 1944.
- 65 Anon., 'Tentoonstelling "Zoo leeft Eindhoven"', *Dagblad van het Zuiden*, 5 August 1944.
- 66 Anon., 'Zoo leeft Eindhoven', *Dagblad van het Zuiden*, 8 august 1944.
- 67 Anon., 'Anton Deering huldigt Jan Wingen', *Delftsche Courant*, 30 May 1944.
- 68 Creyghton, 'Schilderijen van Jan Wingen', in *Dagblad van het Zuiden*, 5 September 1944
- 69 Anon., 'Wansmaak en gezonde kunst', *Het Vaderland*, 13 April 1943.
- 70 Anon., 'Wansmaak en gezonde kunst', *Het Nationale Dagblad*, 12 April 1943.
- 71 Anon., 'Beeldende Kunst "Wansmaak en gezonde kunst"', *De Gooi- en Eemlander*, 12 April 1943.
- 72 Eduard Rijff., 'Wansmaak en gezonde kunst', *De Schouw*, 15 May 1943.
- 73 Anon., 'Nederlandsche Kulturkamer in Limburg', *Limburger Koerier*, 15 November 1943. Anon., 'Tentoonstelling in het Dinghuis. Geen 'ontaarde' kunst doch voornamelijk prullen', *Limburger Koerier*, 16 November 1943.
- 74 Niehaus, 'Wansmaak en gezonde kunst', *De Telegraaf*, 28 April 1943.
- 75 Anon., 'Wankunst', *Storm* 3 (1943) 6, p.9.
- 76 Ibid.
- 77 Anon., 'Wansmaak en gezonde kunst', *Dagblad van het Zuiden*, 23 August 1944.
- 78 Anon., 'Wansmaak en gezonde kunst', *Dagblad van het Zuiden*, 1 September 1944.
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# Exhibiting *USSR in Construction* From Aestheticized Politics to Politicized Aesthetics

Michelle de Wit



In 1930, the journal *USSR in Construction* (SSSR na Stroike) opened with the following words:

‘The State Publishing House has chosen photography as a method to illustrate socialist construction, for the photo speaks much more convincingly in many cases than even the most brilliantly written article.’<sup>1</sup>

The magazine was published from 1930-1941 and in 1949. It informed its national and international audience on the rapid industrialization of the Soviet Union through photographs and photomontages. Esteemed artists such as John Heartfield, Aleksandr Rodchenko, Varvara Stepanova, El Lissitzky and Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers created some of its best-known issues. While modernist in form, the magazine was Stalinist in content.

In 2012, the LS Collection, which contains all issues of the magazine in various languages, was donated to the Van Abbemuseum. The LS collection was created by Albert Lemmens and Serge Stommels and consists of a broad variety of Russian and Soviet artists’ books. The complete collection of *USSR in Construction* is one of the collection’s gems, as it is rare to find a complete set. The LS Collection is often on display at the Van Abbemuseum and in museums all over the world. In 2016, Lemmens and Stommels curated the exhibition *Rood! Heilstaatvisioenen uit de Sovjet Unie (Red! Utopian Visions from the Soviet Union)* for Museum de Fundatie Zwolle and the Van Abbemuseum. It prominently included *USSR in Construction*. The way in which *USSR in Construction* was presented, not only here but in various other exhibitions as well, attracted criticism.<sup>2</sup> The critics – almost always historians – criticised museum curators – almost always art historians – on their lack of historical awareness



when exhibiting *USSR in Construction*. They were accused of displaying the images for their innovative designs alone, and by ignoring the horrors of Stalinism they concealed.<sup>3</sup> The exhibition *Red!* is particularly interesting, since the curators clarified (especially in the catalogue, slightly less in the exhibition itself) what the images represented.

What emerged from the critiques on *Red!*, was the critics and curators' varying understanding of the relation between art and propaganda. Critics envisioned art and propaganda as two different entities, where 'art' was 'good' and 'propaganda' was 'bad'. Conversely, Stommels and Lemmens viewed art and propaganda as inseparable. In their eyes, a great work of art could simultaneously serve as propaganda: 'look at the works Michelangelo made for the Catholic Church, that was great art *and* clever propaganda.'<sup>4</sup> Along with this discrepancy in the understanding of the relation between art and propaganda, it is interesting to note that many art historical studies on Rodchenko's images for *USSR in Construction* show a tendency to downplay the propagandistic aspects of his work.<sup>5</sup> The modernist forms he created are analysed separately from their political and Stalinist content, with which these forms entertained a constant dialogue.

This essay will explore how *USSR in Construction* can be analysed in a way where form and content are seen as reinforcing, rather than opposing, each other. In other words, it will explore how modernist form and Stalinist content can be seen as one. I will particularly focus on the 12th issue of 1934 of *USSR in Construction*, which was created by Rodchenko. This issue shows us the construction of the White Sea Baltic Canal, a forced labour project. The way in which the artists of *USSR in Construction*, particularly Rodchenko, managed to coincide modernist experimentations with government dictates about industrialization and propaganda is not often addressed in studies broaching these images.

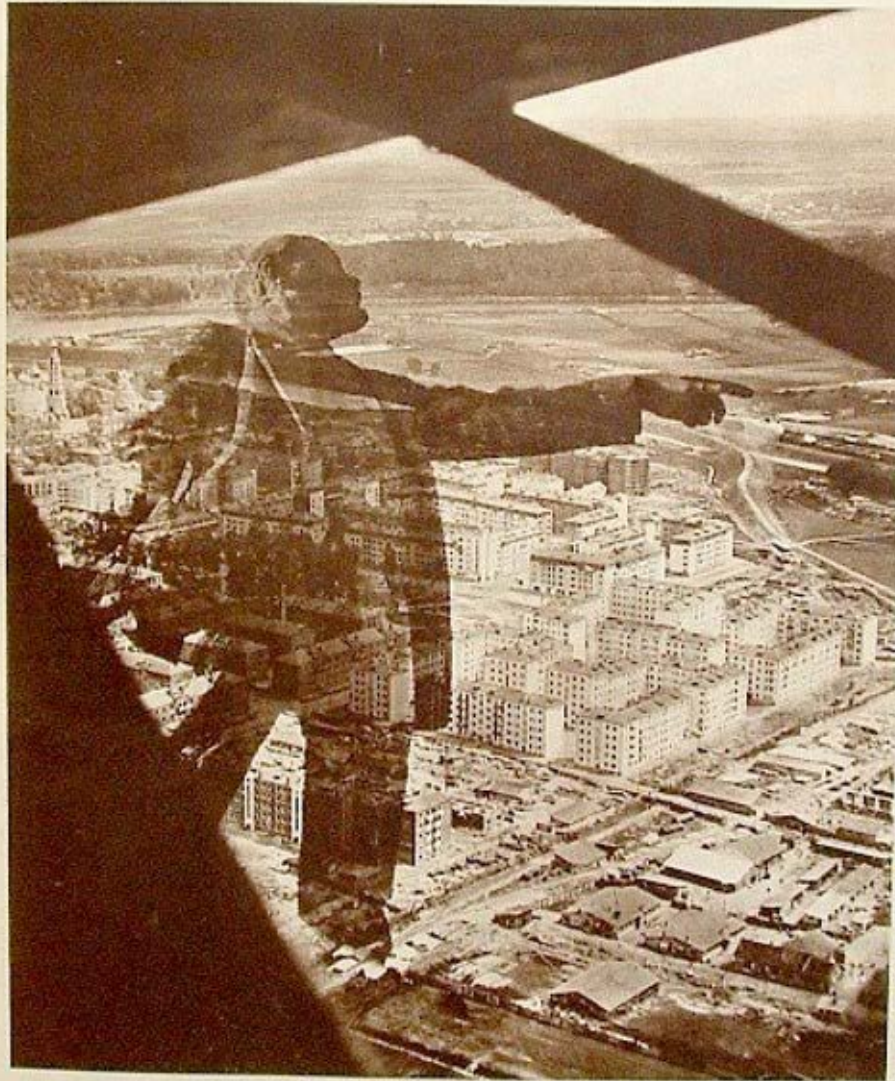
Besides this particular issue, the journal itself will be discussed to decipher its visual language. The essay will conclude with a suggestion to the Van Abbemuseum on the way in which this magazine could be exhibited in the future.

### 'WORKERS AROUND THE WORLD, UNITE!'

On the first page of each issue of *USSR in Construction*, in the upper corner, one can read the lines: 'Communists around the world, unite!' This phrase underscores that the audience of the magazine was not just Soviet, but came from the four corners of the globe. Thus, the magazine was not only published in Russian, but also in German, English, French, and in Spanish after 1938. In 1949, the journal was no longer published in German. The average print-run per issue per year ranged between 30.000 – 100.000 copies for the Russian edition, and between 2.000 – 11.000 copies for other languages.<sup>6</sup> It could be bought in selected bookstores in North and South America, the Middle East, Asia, and Western and Eastern Europe. The writer Maxim Gorky was one its best-known editors until his sudden death in 1936.<sup>7</sup> In the Soviet Union, the journal was distributed amongst high-ranking party members.<sup>8</sup> Abroad, the magazine could be bought in selected bookstores and was distributed amongst subscribers who were not only people interested in socialism, but could also be important relations to the Soviet state. Many were not so much interested in communism than in industrialization. To name just one example, one of the American subscribers was Edsel Ford. In a letter to the editors, he wrote: 'I was very interested by the photographs and information contained in your magazine. I will be glad if you will continue to send me the magazine, which provides us the possibility to be up to date on the progress of your construction program.'<sup>9</sup>



# URSS EN CONSTRUCTION



1931

Montage photographique de John Heartfield (Moscou).

N° 9

Fig 1. John Heartfield, cover *USSR in Construction*, no 9, 1931.

## THE PHOTO ESSAY

The first issues of *USSR in Construction* were not that exciting visually. They lacked a central theme or coherent visual narrative and displayed photographs of various construction sites that, according to Gorky, 'are dull, some sort of talent-less bureaucrats made them'.<sup>10</sup> This changed when John Heartfield was invited to design an issue for the magazine on the transformation of Moscow, in 1931 (fig. 1). Heartfield focused on just one specific construction site, rather than several, and used photomontage differently than was then customary amongst the photographers of *USSR in Construction*.<sup>11</sup> He closely integrated text and image, thereby creating a cohesive narrative framework that seamlessly took the viewer through spectacular sites of transformation.

Photomontage left room for artistic experimentation, but also had to be combined with government dictates. In the early 1930s, debates on how photomontage could be used as propaganda affected the designs of the artists of *USSR in Construction*. In 1931, the Central Committee placed the production of political posters under the control of Izogiz, the State Fine Arts Press. Concerns were rising about the dubious content and regulation of mass-agitation art. Photomontage played a crucial role in these discussions. There were heated debates that photomontage was too visually incoherent to be understood by the Soviet people.<sup>12</sup> In particular, the work of Gustav Klucis was presented as too fragmented and a bad example. The work of Klucis was contrasted with the work of Heartfield, who was praised for his clarity and simplicity. These debates led to the rejection of more fragmented posters and photomontages and a drive towards smooth visual narratives better suited to depict the 'Stalinist world of life and labour'. This became known as the 'photo-essay' (fotoocherk).<sup>13</sup> The photo-essay had a smooth, visual narrative, but also an ideological



purpose as it showed the socio-political context of industrialization. These debates certainly had a great effect on *USSR in Construction*. Heartfield's smooth visual compositions became the dominant design for the magazine and artists like Lissitzky and Rodchenko, who already had established careers as state propaganda artists, adopted this new line. This did not mean their work suddenly lost its quality.<sup>14</sup>

## ES AND EL LISSITZKY

El Lissitzky became instrumental in developing the visual strategies of *USSR in Construction*, based on the idea of the photo-essay. He was the first designer mentioned as 'artist' in the magazine's colophon. The issues he designed with his partner Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers (as Es and El Lissitzky) make the reader flow through the stories. Es and El Lissitzky constantly used extreme contrasts and juxtapositions. As if in a film, they showed great detail to gestures and the body language of those portrayed.

The theme of transformation was important to the issues of *USSR in Construction*. In the issue on Dnieprostroy – a huge dam on the Dnepr – Lissitzky shows us the process of transformation in all its forms, while simultaneously pushing the use of contrasts and juxtapositions. The issue depicts the transformation from old backward Russia into the industrial Soviet Union in two ways. On the one hand, the landscape is transformed into a huge dam. On the other hand, it focused on how these socialist construction sites, through their work, turned backward peasants into politically-aware industrial workers. This is where we find the specific socialist ideological idea behind the construction sites, which had to set them apart from capitalist ones. It proffered that construction sites did not only improve the country, but were also highly beneficial for its people. In the issue on Magnitostroi,

it was phrased as follows: 'A new man makes his appearance on the arena of history. Socialist construction creates this new man.'

Together, Es and El Lissitzky would design fourteen issues for *USSR in Construction*. El Lissitzky created five on his own. In 1933, they were joined by Aleksandr Rodchenko and Varvara Stepanova. Rodchenko and Stepanova designed eleven issues. Rodchenko created one by himself, the 12th issue of 1933, although he enjoyed the assistance of Stepanova. The word *designed* needs to be emphasized here, because the artists didn't take the photographs themselves. There is one exception, which is the first issue Rodchenko created for *USSR in Construction*, the 12th issue of 1933, on the construction of the White Sea Canal. This would become the most notorious project he undertook during his career, and the gloomiest issue of the magazine. It is also the only issue in which he signed his photomontages.<sup>15</sup>

## THE ENGINEER OF SOCIAL LIFE

The material of the artists of the Russian avant-garde was the world, or more specifically: creating a new one. The role of the artist was to organize this new world visually and socially. Rodchenko described this as the engineering will of the artist.<sup>16</sup> He described his works as 'experiments for the future'.<sup>17</sup> After the October Revolution, the avant-garde sided with the revolution, although not necessarily with the Bolshevik party.<sup>18</sup> Rodchenko was one of the most politically-active artists. He tried to join the party, but was refused entry due to his lack of education.<sup>19</sup> Rodchenko was greatly concerned with the question on how to be an artist in the new Soviet Union and worked with a variety of mediums. After 1921, his main concern was mass media and its effective communication, which led him to work in advertisement, propaganda, and photojournalism.





Fig 2. Aleksandr Rodchenko, Varvara Stepanova. *Soviet Paratroopers*. USSR in Construction: no 12, 1935.

Rodchenko was constantly rethinking his relation to and use of mass media, a position that put him in perpetual dialogue with the authorities.

Rodchenko thus saw himself not so much as an artist, but as an engineer of social life. He claimed that, through the use of photography, people could transform the way in which they saw the world. His aim was to shape the viewer's consciousness and revolutionize visual thinking. The way in which Rodchenko and Stepanova worked with the notion of 'seeing' can be found in a compelling way in their issue on Soviet paratroopers (fig. 2), which combines the personal narratives of young people wanting to become paratroopers with graphs on the advancements of Soviet paratroopers along with Stalin's blessing on these courageous men and women. It is all cleverly put together into a cohesive visual narrative. From the juxtapositions of images to the ways in which some of the paper is folded: it all directs our gaze to the core of the narrative. However, this is not done passively. The folded paper constantly invites the viewer to actively discover the story, which opens up like a parachute.

### THEORIZING 'SHOWING SEEING'

To offer a well-grounded analysis of Rodchenko's images of the White Sea – Baltic Canal, I will not specifically refer to art historical studies, but rather look to the field of visual studies, a field that developed with the aim of moving beyond an exclusive focus on the artistic quality of images. Instead, visual studies considers the entire domain of images and the whole spectrum of the visual experience as well as practices of looking. Visual studies operate to understand the historical and social criteria according to which value is ascribed to images.<sup>20</sup> According to William Mitchell, visual studies offers 'a more nuanced and balanced approach located in the equivocation between the



visual image as instrument and agency: the image as a tool for manipulation on the one hand, and as an apparently autonomous source of its own purposes and meanings on the other.<sup>21</sup> Besides Mitchell, the work of Ariella Azoulay and Georges Didi-Huberman is of interest here. They foreground a focus on the power relations between photographer/artist, photographed subject, and viewer, helping us question the ethical position of the artist. This helps us to question already known assumptions and look at the images with fresh eyes. Mitchell has captured this approach within a 'Showing Seeing' exercise, which I will carry out when analysing Rodchenko's work on the White Sea Canal.

In order to discuss Rodchenko's images of the White Sea Canal as instrument and agent, I will refer to Ariella Azoulay's notion of the photograph as event, a concept she developed within her study of images of regime-made disaster.<sup>22</sup> Azoulay argues to rethink the assumption photography can only be discussed from the point of view of its product. She claims photography needs to be seen as the product resulting from the actions of many agents. The photograph is only a sample of the relations between people and cannot be reduced to the object of artistic imagination.<sup>23</sup> By considering the photograph as an event, the gaze of the spectator is invited to wander beyond the frame of the image, engaging individuals to show interest and responsibility for what they see.<sup>24</sup> Although the spectator might treat it this way, the photograph does not seal the event of photography.<sup>25</sup> Azoulay expressly focused on the dynamic between aesthetics and violence within the process of meaning-making. This makes her study particularly interesting, as Rodchenko's images concerned the destruction and rebuilding of the Karelian landscape and the destruction and rebuilding of people.

## THE WHITE SEA-BALTIC CANAL

Where all issues of *USSR in Construction* suppressed the knowledge of forced labour, the issue on the construction of the White Sea – Baltic Canal proved the exception. It celebrated the use of forced labour as a progressive way of transforming the minds of political criminals into true soviet citizens. The construction of this canal was carried out by the Main Administration of Camps, better known by its acronym, The Gulag. As historian Anne Applebaum puts it, the construction of the White Sea Canal was 'the first, last, and only Gulag project ever exposed to the full light of Soviet propaganda, both at home and abroad.'<sup>26</sup> Starting in 1931, the construction took 20 months. The canal opened on 2 August 1933. There was no heavy machinery available. All tools were made by hand, with few exceptions. Prisoners were not seen as humans, but as 'units of labour', which transformed *them* into the machinery. Working shifts could last up to 24 hours during the summer months, when there was continuous daylight. Food was scarce. The landscape was mostly made up of granite. According to the official numbers of the secret police, approximately 11.000 people died of hunger, accidents, the cold, or executions. Many more disappeared. In his book *The Gulag Archipelago*, Solzhenitsyn speaks of 25.000 deaths.<sup>27</sup> Rodchenko willingly visited Belomor three times for a total period of three months.<sup>28</sup> He stayed with the highest camp commanders and had his own dark room at the camp. He took over 2.000 negatives, of which many are currently still unknown.

*USSR in Construction* was not the only propaganda publication on the White Sea Canal in which Rodchenko's images appeared. There was also a book written by a collective of 36 writers led by Maxim Gorky, which is also part of the LS Collection: *The Stalin White Sea Canal: being an account of the construction of the new canal between the White Sea and the Baltic*



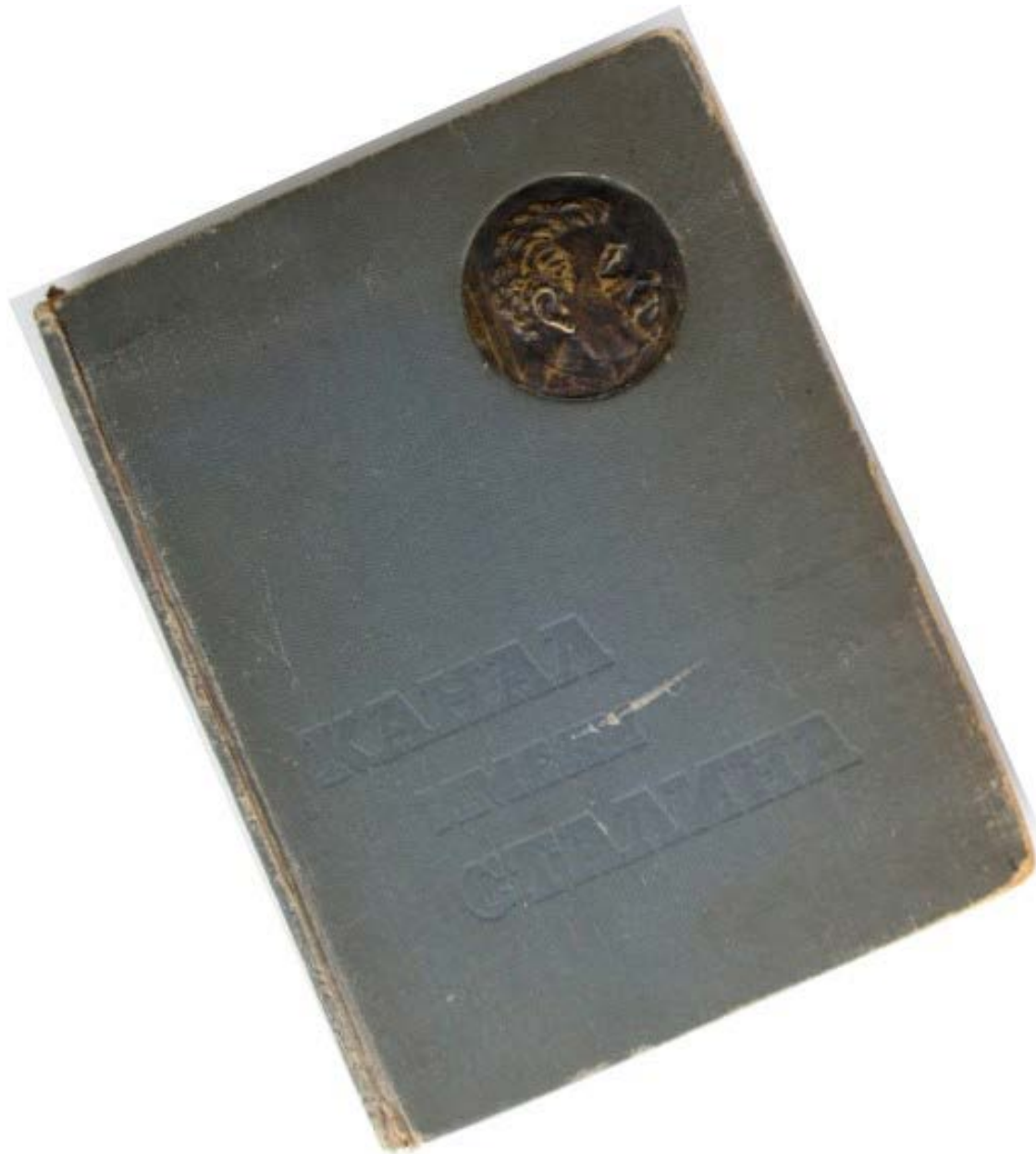


Fig 3. Cover of: Gorky, Maxim [ed.] [transl.: Amabel Williams-Ellis] (1934). *The Stalin White Sea Canal: being an account of the construction of the new canal between the White Sea and the Baltic Sea*. Moscow: Istorija Fabrik i zavodov. Source: LS Collection van Abbemuseum Eindhoven.

Sea (hereafter: *The White Sea Canal*). The book doesn't disguise the use of forced labour either (fig. 3). The introduction to the English edition reads: 'What happens to political prisoners in the USSR: does a Soviet labour camp differ from a concentration camp in, say, Nazi Germany?' (...) *The White Sea Canal* tells the fate of the political prisoners.' The publications celebrated the use of forced labour as a progressive way of transforming the minds of political criminals into true soviet citizens. Several stories of guards and high-ranking secret police officers are included as well. We learn about some of them, including Semyon Firin, Naftalny Frenkel, Jacob Rappoport, Genrikh Yagoda, and Lazar Kogan. As almost the entire staff and prisoners of Belomor had been executed during the Great Purges (1936-1938), the book had to be destroyed by the end of the 1930s in the Soviet Union. Owning images of 'enemies of the people' could mean imprisonment.

What is interesting about Rodchenko's images is the way in which the process of transformation the prisoners underwent – known as *Perekovka* – was described extensively. This term *perekovka* can best be translated into 're-forging', or even 're-hammering'. The word 'forge' can be understood both as a noun and a verb: it refers to the fire that melts the metal and the process of melting itself. The word has a strong industrial connotation and illustrates the violence to which the prisoners were subject to re-make their selfhood. Rodchenko took pictures of prisoners working, as well as of prisoners engaging in cultural activities during which, for example, the prisoners had to create performances of their own process of transformation. The official propagandistic rhetoric claimed that capitalist countries imprisoned their criminals, but the Soviet Union offered them the opportunity to change their lives for the better. The fact that the working conditions were described as harsh and that the photographs captured the prisoners quite 'realistically', only served to confirm this message.





Fig 4. Aleksandr Rodchenko. *Brass Band at the White Sea Canal construction site*. 1933. Copyright: Estate of Aleksandr Rodchenko.

The book includes short interviews with prisoners, where they tell their reader how lucky they are to be given this opportunity to change. The prisoners are first referred to as ‘wreckers’, ‘saboteurs’, ‘enemies’ or ‘units of labour’. The Ukrainian prisoners, the so-called Kulaks, were referred to as ‘half-animals, not even worthy of the word animal’.<sup>29</sup> Once the canal was completed, the book teaches us, the prisoners that were released were at last deemed worthy of the title ‘human’. The book describes how, as the ‘criminals’ started to transform into ‘Soviet men’, the relation between guards and prisoners became more humane.

### AN EXERCISE IN ‘SHOWING SEEING’

An example of one of Rodchenko’s White Sea Canal photographs that is often discussed for both its political and aesthetic quality, is *Brass Band at the White Sea Canal construction site* (fig. 4) (hereafter: *Brass Band*).<sup>30</sup> The photograph consists of three layers, structured as levels and fixed by two means: the use of a strong diagonal from the lower left to the right corner, and the standing point of the camera. Breaking up the photograph into different levels makes it possible to analyse the different sections into greater detail, shifting away from the strong aesthetics that overshadow the photographed subjects.

On the lowest level, we see a group of male prisoners building a wooden base on the bottom of the canal with some small tools and a wheelbarrow. They don’t seem aware of the presence of the camera. On the second level, we can see another group of prisoners. They are playing in a brass band. They seem elevated compared to their fellow prisoners, for they are situated on a higher level and are allowed to play musical instruments. The third level, the point of view where the photographer has positioned his camera, creates this specific photographic encounter. The camera is positioned over the



prisoners, focusing on their backs or on the top of their heads. No faces are visible, making identification with the portrayed persons impossible. This separation between prisoners and camera conveys the idea that the camera occupies the position of a watcher guarding the spectacle underneath it.

The presence of the brass band gives the construction site a strange, almost cultured aspect, as though the orchestra accompanied the performance of human reconstruction. However, it also refers to colonial slave labour practices during which the presence of a brass band was used to hasten the pace of the workforce.

*Brass band* portrays a clear hierarchy between the photographer and the photographed subjects. Through this particular point of view, the spectator becomes complicit within the image as well – the viewer of the photograph takes on the position of a bystander. *The White Sea Canal* emphasized this. Prisoners (especially political prisoners) were described as ‘enemies of the people’ or ‘units of labour’; Ukrainian kulaks were referred to as ‘half-animals’.<sup>31</sup> These people were not considered full citizens of the Soviet Union. The point of view from above and behind is significant. Rodchenko’s placement of the body of the spectator looking down on the bodies of the prisoners not only denies the prisoners any form of individuality, it also hierarchically elevates the body of the spectator above the scene. The viewer is forced to reflect on its own position: the position of a full citizen.

## USSR IN CONSTRUCTION

In *USSR in Construction*, images were not used to illustrate text as we see in *The White Sea Canal*. Rather, it was the other way around. We see a twofold integration of text and image: as an integral part of the composition (through the use of photographs

containing banners, signs, and slogans), and as additional informative blocks of text for the viewer, often placed in the corner of the image.

The visual narrative of the construction of the White Sea Canal starts with the cover of the magazine, which emphasizes the importance of the new waterway in contrast to the old route (fig. 5). The map is placed against the background of a photograph of one of the locks, suggesting the industrial progress of the new Soviet state. When opening the magazine, the canal’s importance in the eyes of Stalin is made clear. We see his portrait placed against the backdrop of lights flickering on the water. The photomontages that follow start by portraying the rough landscape of Karelia that needed to be transformed, before describing the people that came to transform it: criminals who thought their lives were over, but were given a second change. Several spreads ensue, portraying the work by emphasizing the use of local materials and the strength of the people who turned the rough landscape into an industrial project. There is also a spread presenting the camp commanders. In the end, the opening of the canal is celebrated and Groky’s approval of the work is shown. This visual narrative clearly guides the viewer through a particular reading of the construction site: the successful transformation of landscape and people resolving into a single plot: men and nature can be tamed through the willpower of their leader.

One of the photomontages illustrating the transformation of the prisoners in relation to the viewer is accompanied by the words: ‘For the first time in the world, wood was used here on a large scale as the chief building material in the construction work. Most of the spillways and dams are wooden.’ (fig. 6). This spread consists of two separate photomontages. On the left, one of the locks is visible. We are standing on one side, watching over the water. This position is framed by the shadow of the photographer, that is





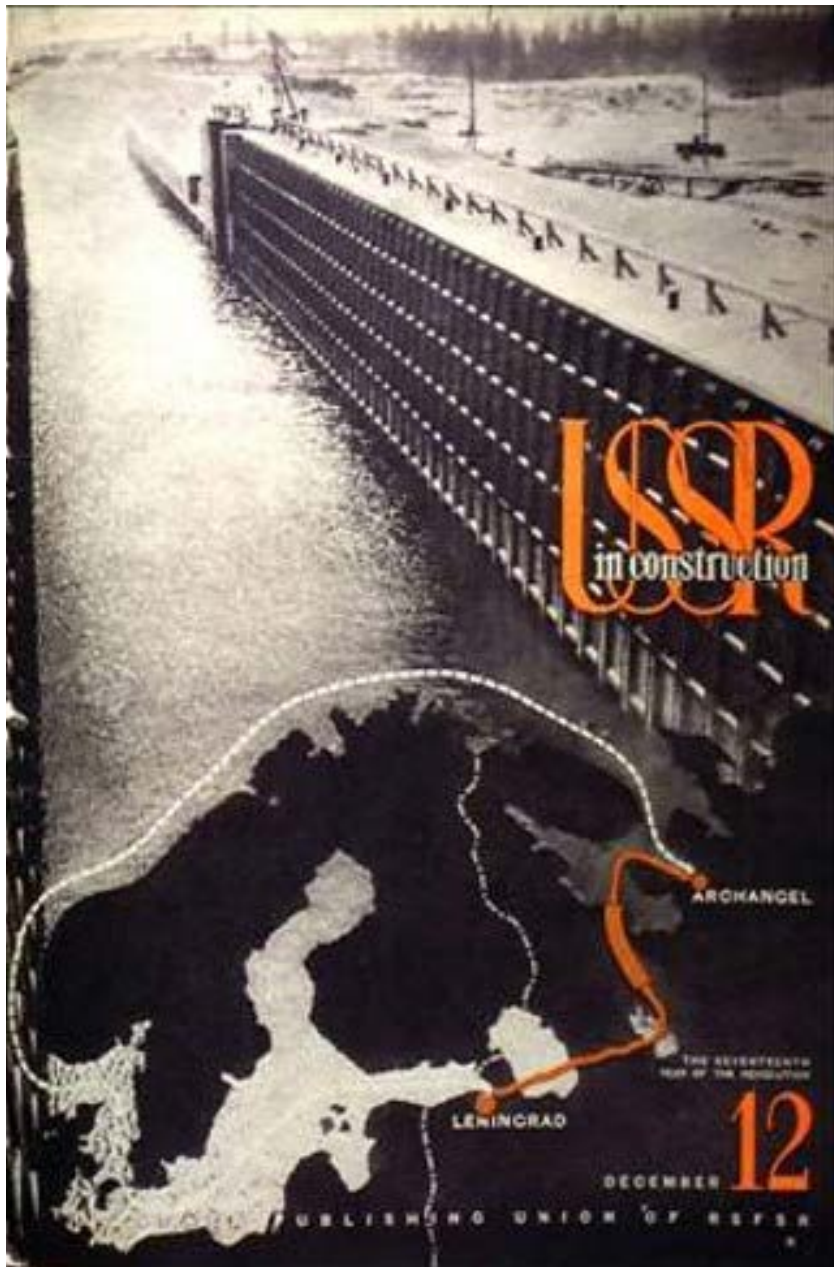


Fig 5. Aleksandr Rodchenko. Cover *USSR in Construction*. Photomontage. *USSR in Construction*: issue 12, 1933. 39.5 x 30 cm. Source: LS Collection van Abbemuseum Eindhoven.

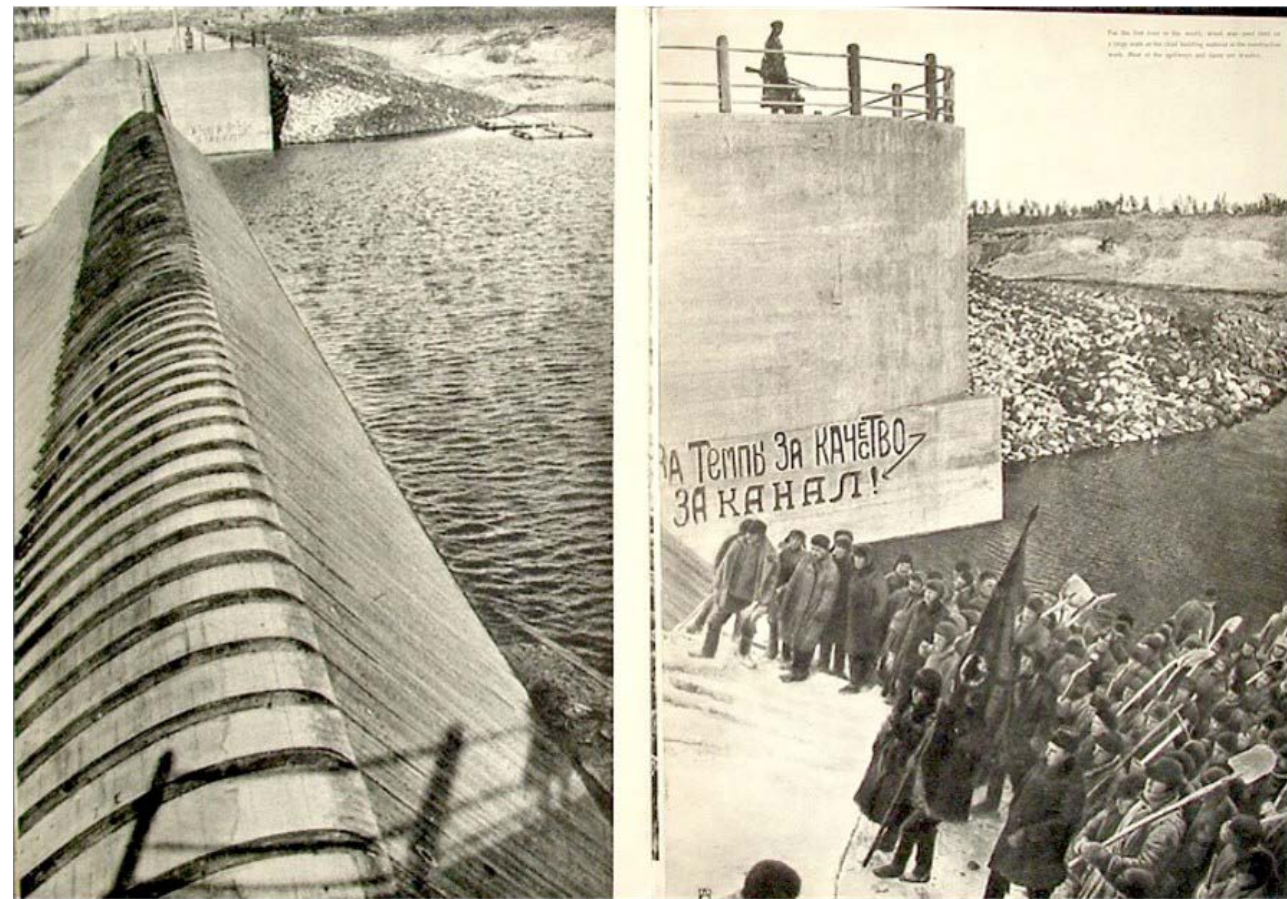


Fig 6. Aleksandr Rodchenko. 'For the first time in the world, wood was used here on a large scale as the chief building material in the construction work. Most of the spillways and dams are wooden.' Photo montage. Published in *USSR in Construction*: issue 12, 1933. 39.5 x 30 cm. Source: LS Collection van Abbemuseum Eindhoven.



Fig 7. Aleksandr Rodchenko. *'The canal is ready. Start on another canal! These fine workers of Belomorstroy have gone to build another stupendous canal from Moscow to the Volga. Writers go on a visit to their heroes the shock workers of the construction of the Volga-Moscow Canal. On the platform is Maxim Gorky. Never had the words of the great proletarian writer, "Man - How proud it sounds" been so plainly carried into reality.'* Photomontage. Published in *USSR in Construction*: issue 12, 1933. 39.5 x 30 cm. Source: LS Collection van Abbemuseum Eindhoven.

clearly visible. On the other side in the distance, a guard is discernible. A barely readable slogan is written underneath him. The image on the right portrays a group of workers standing on the drags of the canal while listening to someone we can't see. Behind them, the same slogan is visible that could be seen underneath the guard on the left page. The slogan propagates the speed and enthusiasm shown by the prisoners working on the construction and their own process of transformation. Above the slogan, we recognize the guard from the picture on the left. He is clearly carrying a rifle. Rodchenko again places us on the same level as the guard, above the prisoners, as watchers to the spectacle underneath us. In the lower right corner, Rodchenko signed the photomontage.

The last two photomontages form a spread informing us of the completion of the White Sea Canal (fig. 7). The left page of the spread consists of two images splitting the page in two. On the bottom half, journalists and writers are gathered in a circle listening to a speech as guards stand behind them. The picture is taken from a point slightly higher than the people pictured. On the right, we see a picture of Gorky giving a speech. The viewpoint of the camera is placed slightly below Gorky, forcing the viewer to look up to him. This creates an interaction between both images: while Gorky is looking down on the crowd, they are looking up to him. The camera is placed in between. The title of the spread can be read above Gorky's photograph. The last line of the caption is particularly interesting: 'Never had the words of the great proletarian writer, "Man - How proud it sounds" been so plainly carried into reality.'

Together, the photomontages of the White Sea Canal create an account of the transformation of men through labour and culture. On a broader level, the photomontages and the book were supposed to transform the artists that worked on them as well. This can be read in various accounts of writers that worked on the

book, as well as in Rodchenko's letters. The extent to which these confessions were actually genuine, is good to keep in mind. Rodchenko clearly portrayed prisoners as simple-minded criminals, and bequeathed the Gulag the position of a benefactor. This power structure creates a possibility to see the prisoners as not yet full Soviet citizens and is further emphasized by Rodchenko's framing of the gaze of the spectator. When looking beyond this idealistic story of transformation and self-improvement through labour, it becomes clear that the visual narrative portrayed by Rodchenko is nothing more than an illusion. History is reconfigured here. The documentary character of the photomontages offers an aura of reality, since form is structured in such a way that it serves content. Combined with his montage technique, Rodchenko's unconventional angles and use of colour create an image that draws the spectator in. At the same time, Rodchenko strongly frames the direction of the gaze to a camp commander looking down on the not yet full Soviet citizens, thereby offering the viewer a privileged point of view of governance. When unravelling this construction of the gaze, this hierarchy becomes clear.

A historical context is therefore not sufficient to understand these images. I aimed to demonstrate here that the reconfiguration of history constructed by Rodchenko cannot be countered by historical context alone. Awareness of the construction of one's gaze is essential to understand how this reconfiguration of history actually took place and how the bystander position of the viewer relates to this process.

## RECONSTRUCTION OF THE ARTIST

This model for the construction of Soviet selfhood was not solely limited to prisoners. As mentioned earlier, Rodchenko, as well as other artists, applied it to himself, when, in 1936, he had to defend his position as a

soviet artist. Referring to the work he carried out at the White Sea Canal, he described how witnessing the prisoners' work on their own transformation enabled him to become a true soviet artist:

'This was a war of man with untamed nature. Man came and conquered, conquered and reconstructed himself. He arrived downcast, penalized, and angry, and left with head held proudly high, a medal on his chest, and a ticket to life. And life opened to him in all the beauty and genuinely heroic creative labour.'

The stigma of 'enemy of the people' was difficult to shake off. Gorky's account of the construction of the White Sea Canal offered a model for psychological transformation. It created an image of the Gulag as a place for personal salvation, even enlightenment.<sup>32</sup> According to this model, released prisoners would acknowledge their crimes and would then go on describing how the Gulag had changed their lives for the better. *The White Sea Canal* offered prisoners a way to make sense of their life within the regime's own rhetoric by making an appeal on the notion of transformation and self-improvement – something we see in Rodchenko's essay 'The Reconstruction of the Artist'.

However, some tried to expose the concept of the construction of the White Sea Canal as nothing more than a deception. In 1973, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn laid bare the horrors and deceptions of the Gulag in *The Gulag Archipelago: 1918-1956*, a three-volume book. Solzhenitsyn wrote over forty pages describing the propagandistic character of *The White Sea Canal*. He depicted it as the Holy Gospels of the Gulag, with a portrait of Stalin as a demigod engraved on its cover.<sup>33</sup> The book was an attempt to explain the Gulag as a good and necessary institution. It was an attempt to rewrite history, Solzhenitsyn argued, at the costs of thousands of people. Solzhenitsyn condemned Gorky,



his writers and artists' brigades for glorifying the Gulag staff – in particular Yagoda and Frenkel, who were among the most brutal of the secret police. Solzhenitsyn exposed the brutal reality that took place underneath the book's shiny cover. His words make clear how deep the impact of the White Sea Canal propaganda was in covering up and justifying the Gulag. 'My Lord! What canal is there deep enough for us to drown *that* pass in?' are the words used by Solzhenitsyn to conclude his chapter on the construction of the White Sea Canal.<sup>34</sup>

## HOW TO SHOW SEEING?

Capturing the essence of The White Sea Canal might best be done by referring to a short line from Andrei Platonov's satirical novel *The Foundation Pit*:

'Man puts up a building – and falls apart himself.  
Who'll be left to live then?'

Platonov finished this critique on Stalin's domestic policies in 1930, three years *before* publications on the construction of the White Sea Canal were available. The novel tells the story of a young machine operator, who, in a search for truth, joins a group of workers digging the foundation pit for a gigantic house for the people. Every day, they work harder, digging deeper towards a utopian future. As their work progresses and the foundation pit becomes bigger, the machine operator begins to understand the real meaning of his work. The pit that is being dug is not the foundation for a house, but rather an immense mass grave that sucks out all energy.

I wanted to refer to this line from Platonov's novel as it captures the essence of *USSR in Construction*, and specifically the issue on the Construction of the White Sea Canal, in several ways. It created the illusion of a progressive project that would transform criminals into soviet citizens, but was, in reality, a place of suffering

and despair. This was the case for many of the industrial projects addressed in *USSR in Construction*. The photomontages of *USSR in Construction* present this suffering as a necessary step for prisoners to transform themselves for the better. Therefore, the magazine does not completely disguise the truth.

*USSR in Construction* forces us to look at the Soviet Union through an ideological veil. In presenting the magazine within a museum space, it is therefore not enough to explain the historical context of the industrial projects seen on the glossy pages. *USSR in Construction* not only shows us idealized industrial projects: it also showcases ideological ideas on the transformation of its citizens. Understanding the ideological concepts presented in the magazine becomes much clearer when we focus on how the artists that created the magazine *make us see* the Soviet Union. Through such a focus on the practice of seeing, we can understand the power structures that are so inherently present in both form and content. *USSR in Construction* was not just about showcasing the Soviet Union, it was also about how the Soviet Union wanted that process of construction to be seen.

Rodchenko, Lissitzky, and many other artists of *USSR in Construction* created those powerful images despite the strict formal limitations imposed on them by the Soviet state. Without their radical camera angles, foreshortenings, and unconventional lighting, the magazine would have been inept as a propaganda tool. Without these artistic innovations, the magazine would have been a dull collection of concrete, gramophones, cotton fields, guns, and bureaucrats. In *USSR in Construction*, the form is the message. When presenting *USSR in Construction*, it is crucial to realize that the meaning of the magazine is its form. This is not the most radical realization, but within the current discussion on the magazine, it is important nonetheless. It is a reminder that formal liberty and innovation are no less important



to freedom of expression than uncensored content. The ideology embodied in formal conventions operates even in societies where freedom of expression is protected by law and in images showing uncontroversial, mundane subjects. A century later, as we are bombarded by tabloid images, photojournalistic scenes of war, and hallucinatory ads, we confront a visual universe that is no less manipulated and no less ideological than the world of socialist content we see in *USSR in Construction*.

When displaying *USSR in Construction*, a focus on the way in which form can guide its viewer into ideological ideas is needed. This can be achieved in various ways. From simply emphasizing this importance more strongly within exhibitions itself, to contrasting the magazine with contemporary artists that make us see the magazine in a different light. Emphasizing the importance of form within an exhibition could be strengthened by creating a replica or facsimile of one (or several) of the issues. The forms used in the images and the way in which the paper was folded strongly contributed to the way in which the reader of the magazine discovered its content. Making it possible for museum visitors to actually touch and unfold the magazine would make its visual language much clearer than by placing it behind glass.

While this approach focuses more on *USSR in Construction* itself, it is also interesting to address the artists that created it. Their position is highly interesting, as they constantly had to balance their own artistic ideals with a repressive state. Reflections by contemporary artists offer an interesting approach for addressing this matter. I would briefly like to point out an example, even though this is an example of a collector and researcher on Soviet books: David King. King was fascinated by not only the designs of Soviet artists, but also by the distortions their images endured over the years. In the 1970s, he obtained Rodchenko's

personal copy of *10 Years Uzbekistan*. Created by Rodchenko and Stepanova in 1934, the book shows us the progresses and leaders of Uzbekistan in a beautifully designed manner. But what was fascinating about this particular copy was not so much the original design, but what Rodchenko had done to it during the late 1930s. Because many of the people portrayed in the book were prosecuted and killed shortly after its publication, Rodchenko was forced to ink out their faces (fig. 8), resulting in almost ghost-like images. King extensively researched the book, retrieving back the names of the inked-out men. From this material, he created a new artist book that illuminates the conditions in which Rodchenko operated and the brutality of the leaders for whom he worked.

A contemporary artist that sparked my attention in relation to Rodchenko's work on the White Sea Canal was Anton Ginzburg. Ginzburg is not the only artist that reflects on the history of the Gulag, and in particular the construction of the White Sea Canal. Ginzburg confronts the utopian ideals and the horrific history of the White Sea Canal. During the Soviet period, a massive topographical area seemed to be bound together by a shared ideological commitment. Rodchenko's enthusiasm for taking part in visualising this ideology and the creation of its new Soviet people can be interpreted in light of the beginning and coming of age of this ideology. In three films and photographic series, Ginzburg explores these ruins through the use of mythologies guiding him through landscapes once dedicated to utopian dreams. He explores the way in which utopian aspirations alter the form of natural landscapes.

The series *Hyperborea, White Sea* refers to a mythical, utopian 'Northern Atlantis', or Hyperborea, found in Ancient Greek legends. Many have claimed to have found its location, or asserted some sort of moral superiority over it. Ginzburg set out to document



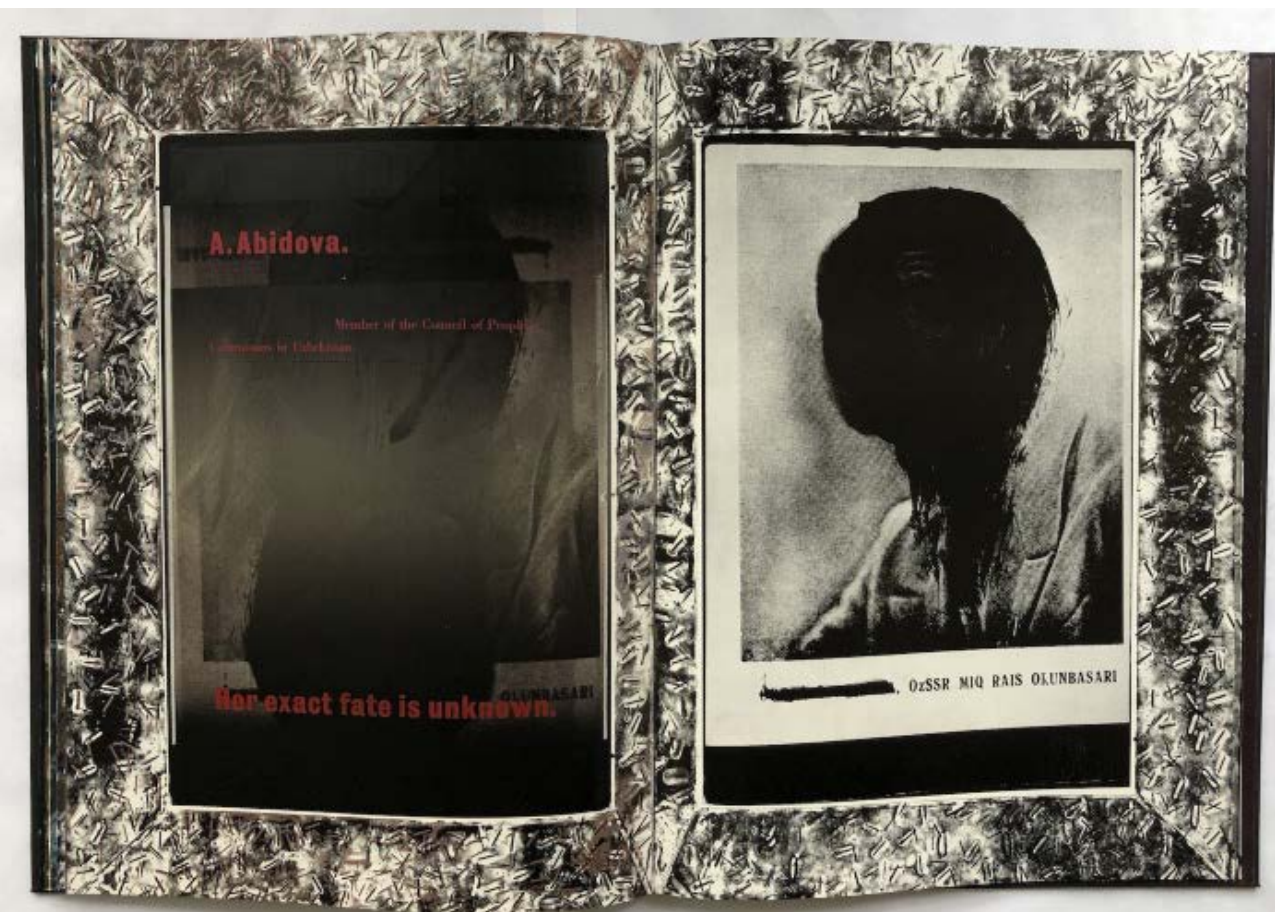


Fig 8. David King, *A Abidova. Her exact fate is unknown.* In: *Ten Years of Uzbekistan: A Commemoration.* 2014. Source: Tate Modern.



Fig 9. Anton Ginzburg, *Hyperborea serie #40, White Sea, Russia.* 2011 50.8 x 68 cm, archival inkjet print.



various locations subject to such claims.<sup>35</sup> A weighty emptiness captured in long shots of snow-filled landscapes is most distinct in his photographs and film. The notion of 'utopia' seems illusory; the eternal snow is a blank canvas for its construction. Ginzburg released bursts of red-coloured smoke against this white background, polluting the seemingly untouched landscape. The post-Soviet world can no longer tolerate the idea of a utopia free of suffering, he argues.<sup>36</sup> One of the hypothetical locations for Hyperborea was where Ginzburg encountered the ruins of the Gulag camps near the White Sea (fig. 9). Ginzburg sees these Soviet remnants that once embodied utopian ideals as metaphorical shifts capturing the ruins of what was once the ideal of the avant-garde. The locations were stages for ideology and visions for a future, a future that we, spectators, have now reached. Ginzburg asks us to question these utopian claims of power. Placing them within their own timeline, he seems to challenge the temporality of these seemingly-eternal ideas.

Through the fictional narrative of *Hyperborea*, Ginzburg encounters the non-fictional narrative of the Gulag at the White Sea, building the narrative of the camp within the broader search for a utopian world. His clouds of red smoke disrupt the white landscape dotted with architectural ruins. Though this act, he shows us the beauty and scars of the abandoned landscape. By emphasizing these ruins through beauty, Ginzburg makes us question what we consider beautiful or aesthetic. The aesthetics in which he captures his fictional journeys show us the objects left behind once intended to achieve an impossible idealized world.

Ginzburg's work and approach reminded me of Rodchenko's position. He witnessed historical cataclysms, which created inside him the drive to create and the conflict of conscious premises. His art could literally be used to alter people's perception of the world, but the costs were atrocious. Ginzburg lays bare

these utopian ideals and the ruins of horror they caused. It is essential to present both these sides of the work of Rodchenko and the artists of *USSR in Construction*, as they are both so inherently intertwined in the magazine.

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## NOTES

- 1 'From the Editors', *USSR in Construction*, 1930, no. I.
- 2 These exhibitions were: *Aleksandr Rodchenko*, Foam (2009-2010), *Rood! Heilstaatvisioenen uit de Sovjet Unie*, the Van Abbemuseum and Museum de Fundatie (2016), *The Power of Pictures*, Jewish Historical Museum Amsterdam (2016). International critics made themselves heard as well, especially with regard to the exhibition *Revolution! Russian Art 1917-1932*, held at the Royal Academy (2017).
- 3 *Volkskrant* 07-08-2016; *NRC* 11-12-2009, 04-08-2015, 09-03-2016; *Raam op Rusland* 12-02-2017; *Meduza* 04-08-2015; *The Guardian*, 01-02-2017. *Fout in de Koude Oorlog*
- 4 Stommels, Serge, Albert Lemmens. E-mail conversation on *Red!*. 22 June 2017.
- 5 We find this, for example, in the work of Olga Sviblova, who is a curator at the Moscow House of Photography. See: Sviblova, Olga (2008). *Alexander Rodchenko: revolution in photography* [exhibition catalogue]. Moscow: Moscow House of Photography; Lavrent'ev, Alexandr, Olga Sviblova (2006). *Alexander Rodchenko: photography is an art*. Moscow: Interros publishing program.
- 6 Wolf 2000: 75.
- 7 The relation of Maxim Gorky towards the magazine and the Soviet Union in general is very interesting as well. With regard to the issue on the White Sea Canal, it is interesting to note that he considered Khulaks (middle class peasants, at this particular site mainly Ukrainian), as an inferior race. Rosenthal, Bernice (2002). *New myth, new world: from Nietzsche to Stalinism*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press.
- 8 Wolf 2000: 63. There are photographs of ordinary people reading the magazine, but those were created for propaganda purposes.
- 9 Wolf 2000: 65. That Ford was interested in the industrialization of the Soviet Union is not surprising, as he had signed a deal worth millions of dollars with the Soviet authorities to deliver heavy machinery.
- 10 Wolf 2006: 13.
- 11 For more information on Soviet collage, see: Petrova, Yevgenia (2005) [ed.]. *Russian and Soviet collages: 1920s-1990s*. Saint Petersburg: The State Russian Museum.
- 12 For more information about these debates, see: Wolf, Erika (2006). 'SSSR na stroike: From Constructivist Visions to Construction Sites'. In: Osterlund, Peter [ed.] (2006). *USSR in Construction: An Illustrated Exhibitions Magazine*. Sundsvall: Fotomuseet Sundsvall.
- 13 Gassner 1992: 256-289. For a more extensive explanation on the development of the photo-essay, see: Wolf, Erika (2011). 'As at the Filippovs: The Foreign Origins of the Soviet Narrative Photographic Essay'. In: Jorge Ribalta [ed] (2011). *The Worker Photography Movement, 1926-1939: Essays and Documents*. Madrid: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia. 124-130.





- 14 Scheijen 2019: 476. This is emphasised by Sjeng Scheijen, who, in his most recent book on the Russian avant-garde, discusses how Lissitzky and Rodchenko managed to keep working as artists because they coincided the high quality of their work with state dictates, making them exceptionally good.
- 15 There is one other photomontage that bears his signature, which is a profile cut-out of the futurist poet Vladimir Mayakovsky, featured in the 7th issue of 1940.
- 16 Groys 1992: 18-19.
- 17 Rodchenko, Aleksandr (1920). 'Everything is Experiment'. In: Lavrent'ev 2005: 108-111.
- 18 Scheijen 2019: 170.
- 19 Scheijen 2019: 181.
- 20 Somaini 2012: 25.
- 21 Mitchell 2005: 351.
- 22 Azoulay, Ariella [transl. Louise Bethlehem] (2012) *Civil Imagination: A Political Ontology of Photography*. London: Verso.
- 23 Azoulay 2012: 52. One needs to keep in mind here that Azoulay refers to aestheticized photographs of regime made disaster, in her case the Israel – Palestine conflict.
- 24 Azoulay 2012: 107.
- 25 Azoulay 2012: 225.
- 26 Applebaum 2004: 67
- 27 Applebaum 2004: 58-72.
- 28 There are some different stances on how Rodchenko ended up at the White Sea Canal. Buchloh argued that Rodchenko had no other choice than to accept the commission if he wanted to remain a respected artist. Lavrent'ev stated that Rodchenko simply followed his contract with the publishing house Izogiz. According to Wolf, Rodchenko was not coerced by the state. She argued that Rodchenko had a contract with Izogiz, the state publishing house responsible for *USSR in Construction*. It is presumed that Izogiz ordered Rodchenko to go to The White Sea Canal, but no contract or letters specifically referring to this event have been found. However, Rodchenko was not exclusively working for Izogiz. In 1933, he started worked for *Worker's International Relief (Internationale Arbeiter Hilfe – hereafter IAH)*, a German press agency that collected materials on Soviet construction sites for publication in Germany. These photographs were always published anonymously. With IAH, Rodchenko made an agreement. This founding by Wolf would prove that Rodchenko was not sent to The White Sea Canal by the Soviet state or a Soviet organization. Disappointed that IAH would publish his photographs anonymously, while at the same time realizing the potential of the project he was working on, Rodchenko wrote to Stepanova to sell his photographs to other newspapers and magazines, particularly Izogiz.
- 29 Applebaum 2003: 66.
- 30 'The shot *Working with an orchestra* reflects the hidden conflict between the authorities and the convicts who were building the canal.' Lavrent'ev 2006: 436.
- 31 Gorky 1935: 341.
- 32 In Krushchev's *Cold Summer: Gulag Returnees, Crime, and the Fate of Reform after Stalin*, Miriam Dobson discussed the use of Belomor as a 'tool-kit' for prisoners in order to erect a compelling life narrative that could lead to their release.
- 33 Solzhenitsyn 1973: 81.
- 34 Solzhenitsyn 1973: 120
- 35 Ginzburg 2011. [http://antonginzburg.com/works\\_/hyperborea-portfolio/](http://antonginzburg.com/works_/hyperborea-portfolio/)
- 36 Goff 2016. <http://calvertjournal.com/features/show/6142>



# Further through the Gate: The Gate Foundation Archive

Jessica de Abreu  
Michael Karabinos



For our contribution to this e-pub, we did not only write this paper, but offer you a link to our newly-created inventory and finding aid to the Gate Foundation archive. What better way to show the results of our research into the foundation's archive than to let you see the archive's content? The inventory, however, should not be read as an end result. This inventory is part of a much larger process that begins in Amsterdam in 1988 with the founding of the Gate Foundation by Els van der Plas (originally as a platform for art from Asia in the Netherlands, later to shift focus to artists of colour living in the Netherlands) and that continues through the 1990s until its closure in 2006. The process then moved down to Eindhoven when the Van Abbemuseum accepted the donation of the foundation's archive. Over the next ten years, the archive would be used a few times in exhibitions, primarily in the museum's library, but it was never completely catalogued. In 2017, it then became the central focus of artist susan pui san lok's Deviant Practice research project. In 2018, we were invited to finally make this archive accessible by organizing, cataloguing, and inventorying it.

An archive is never static. Organizing – archiving – is not an end. It is the starting point for new actions. The Gate Foundation archive can now be used and activated and artists, art historians, curators and others can now find their way through what was, for over a decade, unorganized and unlabelled boxes in a museum basement hallway. When making our inventory, we also wanted to add human history to the archive, encompassing the archivists and researchers who came before us and the stamps they put on the structure of the archive. And, if possible, we wanted to allow future users to access history that could record the experiences and interactions within the



The unorganized archive inside a moving box, photo Michael Karabinos.

archive that would occur once our project was finalised.

When we launched on our project, the disorganized state of the Gate Foundation archive meant that rebuilding the original order by organizing based on creator (staff member in the foundation, perhaps) was impossible. We would attempt to follow it as much as possible but would focus on organizing it in a way that was logical from the standpoint of the user. There was no putting it back the way it once was, so we had the freedom to organize it as we saw fit.

While there are clues as to the relationship between certain documents inside the archive, much of what we would do to reconstruct it would be educated guesswork and would be as much a creation by ourselves as by the staff of the Gate Foundation. We do not suggest that it is organized in the same manner as it was held by the Gate Foundation, but instead, we attempt to reflect the unique histories of the collection: those of the creators, the archivists, the researchers, the subjects, and the archive itself. We can start with what we do know, and how we came about to know it.

Documents within the Gate Foundation archive dating back to various eras of its history describe the *informatiecentrum* (information centre), *bibliotheek* (library), and *kunstenarsarchief* (artists archive), as well as passing references to a *videotheek* (video library). The *kunstenarsarchief* was unique in the Netherlands. Depending on the source, it showcased the work of somewhere between 700-1000 artists (Susan Pui San Lok attributes these disparities to 'differing criteria for creating and maintaining an artists' file... or indeed human error and hyperbole'<sup>1</sup>) born outside yet living in the Netherlands, born in the Netherlands of a 'foreign' background, or living and working outside the Netherlands. The *bibliotheek* was a library of books and catalogues relating to art from



Asia, Africa and Latin America, as well as artists in the Netherlands from various cultural backgrounds.

We were provided with a short description and given information in terms of how each department was structured. However, no inventory or list of any repository could be found. Furthermore, there was mention of flood damage, but no specific details. Beyond that, we also had some artist information forms. We assumed that these were just membership forms, and it was unclear whether each artist then became part of the *kunstenaarsarchief*. Finally, we had the institutional archive. The records created by the Gate Foundation in the course of their work included: correspondence with museums, galleries and other cultural institutions; catalogue and book exchanges with other art institutions to expand the Gate library; correspondence with artists (both for exhibitions and artists interested in being added to their archive); subsidy requests from private and public funds; interoffice communications; and numerous press releases and invitations to openings. Based on the explanation of the Gate *informatiecentrum*, it was unlikely that this material was ever made accessible to researchers.

For the period after the donation of the archive to the Van Abbemuseum in 2006–2007, we enjoyed a stronger understanding of what happened. When books were added to the museum library, at least a part of the *kunstenaarsarchief* was folded into the museum's *knipselarchief* (clipping archive; the museum's *kunstenaararchief* being reserved for artists in their collection or who have exhibited at the museum). However, Susan Pui San Lok's research also points out that the 'number of artists' files integrated into the VAM [Van Abbemuseum] is around half the Gate's estimation'.<sup>2</sup> So, again, our knowledge of what once was remains slim. We were also told that the numerous archivists who made a preliminary processing of the archive by putting the majority of the paper records

into archival boxes, and giving each box an access number within the Eindhoven city archival collection while placing the records into folders with some respect to subject matter. There was also the matter of the 17 moving boxes, which were unorganized papers, videos, DVDs, and photographs...

The *ad hoc* nature of the archive is not at all surprising when we discovered the condition of the archive when it reached the museum. Entire desks filled with documents were sent, papers were dumped into boxes, apparently, without structure or method. This is due to the sudden severance of funding for the Gate Foundation and its need to quickly vacate its premises and ship its archives away for safe preservation.

Given this, 'reconstructing' the Gate Foundation archive seemed counterintuitive. Pamphlets sit next to letters – were they received together? Is there some connection that is not easily obtained in the content? Documents from 1993 are filed next to those from 1998. Was this someone using the older document as a reference point for the new one, or simply a mistake? Obviously, our own organizational structure was indispensable if we wanted to make the archive accessible to researchers and curators.

While we were free to (re)organize the archive, we searched for clues as to how the archive appeared while functioning as part of the foundation. Exhibitions such as *The Archives 0001: Into the Index* (1998) and *Reading Room* (2000) highlighted the Gate Foundation's archive and *informatiecentrum* and how they were used. Press releases, internal and external reports on the foundation and press coverage ranging across the Gate's history also make a point of referencing the uniqueness of the archive and the special role it played in the Amsterdam and Netherlands art scene. However, the question still remains as to how the Gate Foundation organized and managed its archive. The





The Gate Foundation archive as it appeared prior to our project, photo Michael Karabinos.

first archival exhibition is subtitled 'Into the Index', but did the foundation have an index of its artist's archive? If it did, it is not with the rest of the archive in the Van Abbemuseum. How was the administrative archive organized and used? This question is also not readily answerable through the archive. It is clear that when Els van der Plas left in 1997, she did not take (all) her papers with her, since many administrative records are from this era. There are also a small number of records from Van der Plas pre-dating the Gate Foundation that then became part of the Gate Foundation archive and remained after her departure. How relevant were the records from her directorship (1988–1997) to the staff during the tenure of Sebastian Lopez (1997–2004)? Were they used or were they simply kept?

We know that in the post-donation period (many? most?) of the artist archive files were placed into the museum's *knipselarchief*. But in the files of such artists as Keith Piper and Leila Melliani, the correspondence with the Gate Foundation is also included. Tiong Ang's artist file was placed not in the *knipselarchief*, but in the museum's *kunstenarsarchief*, as he is the only Gate artist to also be part of the museum's permanent collection. Given the uniqueness of its content, the decision to integrate the Gate artists archive into the existing museum archives was taken to make it publicly accessible as quickly as possible. Most of the institutional archive was given a preliminary organization and placed into folders and archival boxes, while A/V material stayed in the moving boxes. Obviously, this is a general statement, since floppy discs, slides, photographic prints, and negatives were found in the archival boxes, while the administrative papers related to exhibitions and other activities were in moving boxes. susan pui san lok's research project was another crucial event in the archive's history. Given that the archive was already destroyed to a point, susan was free to renumber the moving boxes and browse through the unorganized archive. Her research was also the





Ilse Chin, international project coordinator; Tiong Ang, artist; Sebastián López, director

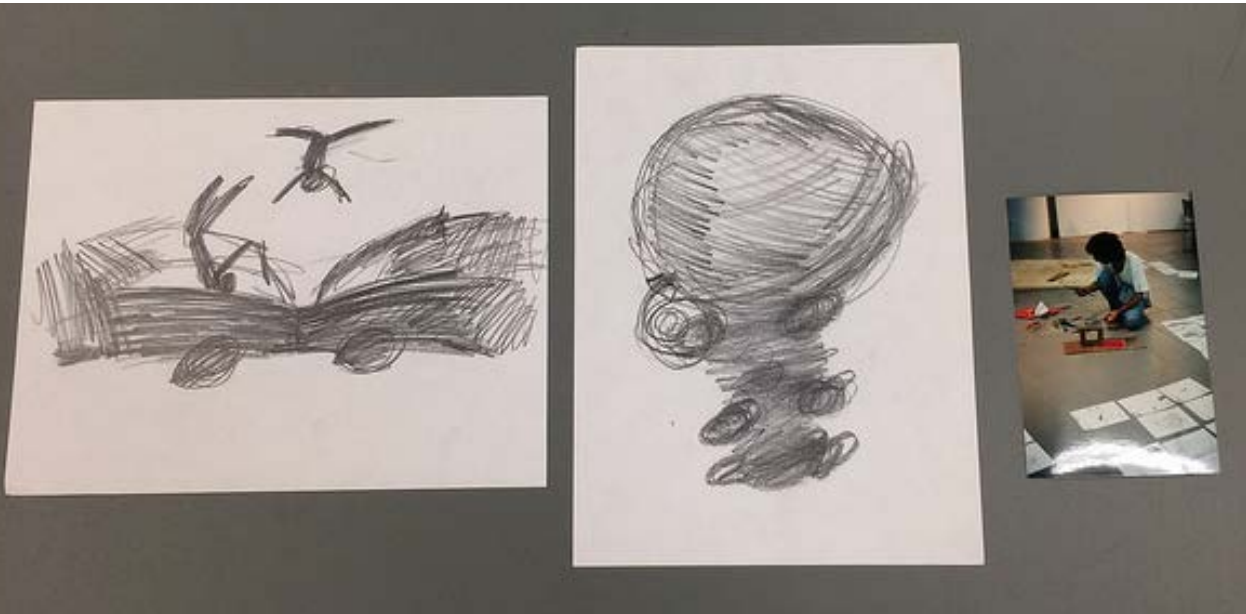
starting point for the creation of new records.

There are two folders from the Gate Foundation archive in the thematic section of the Van Abbe's *knipselarchief*: 'China' and 'Suriname'. No Indonesia, no Vietnam, or any other countries and regions on which the Gate Foundation focused. No other keywords were used to organize the archive of press releases, news clippings, and exhibition reviews. The material kept in these two folders is also quite similar to that found elsewhere in the Gate Foundation archive related to 'non-Gate' artists but concerning aspects of the art world followed and recorded by Gate. The existence of two folders leads to the question of whether or not more thematic archiving took place, and whether such a system was destroyed in the moving process.

Identifying the people at the heart of this archive is more straightforward than identifying these questions, though all help give context to the records. These people include the Gate Foundation staff, the artists, staff at institutions engaging in correspondence, the Gate employees who managed the records, the people who packed and transported the archive to Eindhoven, the staff of the Van Abbemuseum, the curators who built exhibitions using the Gate Foundation archive, the researchers who browsed its papers, and now us in our capacity as archivists/researchers. Each of us has had a dynamic influence on this archive, thereby impacting the next user.

Subscribing to the idea that each user recreates an archive with each use, bringing in their personal biases, viewpoints, and ideas, we also wanted to leave a door open to future interventions, since people are bound to recontextualize archives, both by interacting with them and by creating something new from it obviously in a literal manner to renumbering/recontextualizing the boxes, to the creation of her essay on remembering, forgetting, obscuring and highlighting the artists





Drawings from Bandung workshop; photograph Bandung workshop, Gate Foundation archive box 30.

of the Gate archive and reimagining its function and scope. As the archive becomes organized and catalogued, such interactions will only increase.

During one of the first days spent looking through the semi-organized archival boxes, we opened archival box 11, folder 42. Amidst photocopies of articles on Ghana, China, and Senegal, research on museums, a report on a UNESCO World Heritage convention and files on a 1990 meeting on Dutch relations with 'Third World Museums' were two folders containing hundreds of pencil drawings. One folder was labelled 'Bandung Workshop', the other was unlabelled. Was this other folder also from a workshop in Bandung, Indonesia? When was this workshop held? Was it held by the Gate Foundation? What program was it a part of? The following two archive folders (43 and 44) comprised correspondence on the Weather Report, a program of Rienke Enghardt, a Dutch artist traveling through Asia and sharing drawings with artists from the places they were visiting. Our assumption became that this Bandung workshop and these drawings were somehow attached to the Weather Report project. No true evidence pointed to this conclusion other than the inorganic organization that the Gate Foundation archive took on after its abrupt arrival at the Van Abbemuseum. Our assumption came from the (lack of) context surrounding what papers we saw.

In an internal seminar with museum staff members in October 2018, we used the example of these drawings as a way to demonstrate a void in the archive. While the Gate Foundation archive included material on well-known figures such as Lawrence Weiner, Marina Abramović, and Keith Piper, it also included literal 'unnamed' – drawings from this Bandung workshop devoid of any identity. The Indonesian artists who created something remained nameless in the 'final' archive.



By November 2018, we were working our way through the re-organization process and had come to the Gate Foundation's 1996 project 'Orientatie/Orientasi', an exhibition of five Indonesian and five Dutch artists held in Jakarta and the Dutch city of Leiden. While flipping through the loose photographs, we came across a picture of a man sitting on the floor amongst papers of pencil drawings. A handful of the drawings were legible and we ran to grab the Bandung Workshop folder. Thumbing through this folder, we were able to find two of the drawings from the photograph. Looking more closely at the Orientatie/Orientasi archive we found more references to a Bandung workshop, as well as other workshops in Jakarta and Yogyakarta. Were one of these the second folder or was it a continuation of the Bandung workshop? And what prompted the drawings? While the names of the individual artists remain a mystery, a context began to emerge for these folders of drawings. The information was always there, somewhere in the Gate Foundation archive, but the lack of a structure made understanding that information impossible.

By making the archive accessible, we hope that users can reactivate the information in this 'dormant' archive. Now that the Gate Foundation is available for use, this information can be turned into knowledge. Stories can be told, voices can be heard. Perhaps other organizations can learn from what happened from the Gate's funding situation, or a model can be developed for funding and developing an arts organization in the culturally-diverse Netherlands. With this in mind, we invite you to visit and look over the inventory, read what can now be accessed in the museum's archive, and see what reactivations are possible.

## NOTES

- 1 susan pui san lok, 'Through the Gate/an(g)archivery', in Nick Aikens (ed), *Deviant Practice Research Programme 2016-2017*, Van Abbemuseum, p. 184
- 2 *Ibid.*, pp. 183-184





# Recoding Art: Van Abbemuseum collection

Bruno Moreschi  
Gabriel Pereira



## 1. EXPERIMENTAL METHODOLOGY: HONOURING UNEXPECTED NOISES

**MORESCHI:** My arrival for the on-site research at the Van Abbemuseum began with a coincidence that sets the tone of the methodology applied in our research. As soon as the taxi dropped me off in the Eindhoven house where I would stay for 20 days, I noticed a sign near the entrance stating that the composer Edgar Varèse had lived for nine months in that same street.

When Varèse lived in that street sixty years earlier, he was creating *Poème Electronique*, a commission from the Philips company. The eight-minutes song would become the soundtrack of the pavilion created by Le Corbusier at the 1958 *Brussels World's Fair*. For this composition, Varèse gathered trivial sounds from Eindhoven, noises that would only be the disposable sounds of everyday life for many. The composer, exhibiting keen attention and sensitivity, saw poetic power in these sounds and produced a striking composition.

In this research, we follow a similar path: valuing what seems insignificant for many. On the first day in Eindhoven, the Van Abbemuseum's friendly Information and Communications Technology coordinator Peter Classen handed Moreschi a pen drive with 654 images from the works of the museum's collection that are now exhibited (*The Making Of Modern Art* and *The Way Beyond Art*). Via internet, the images were sent to Pereira, who already knew exactly what to do as soon as he received them.

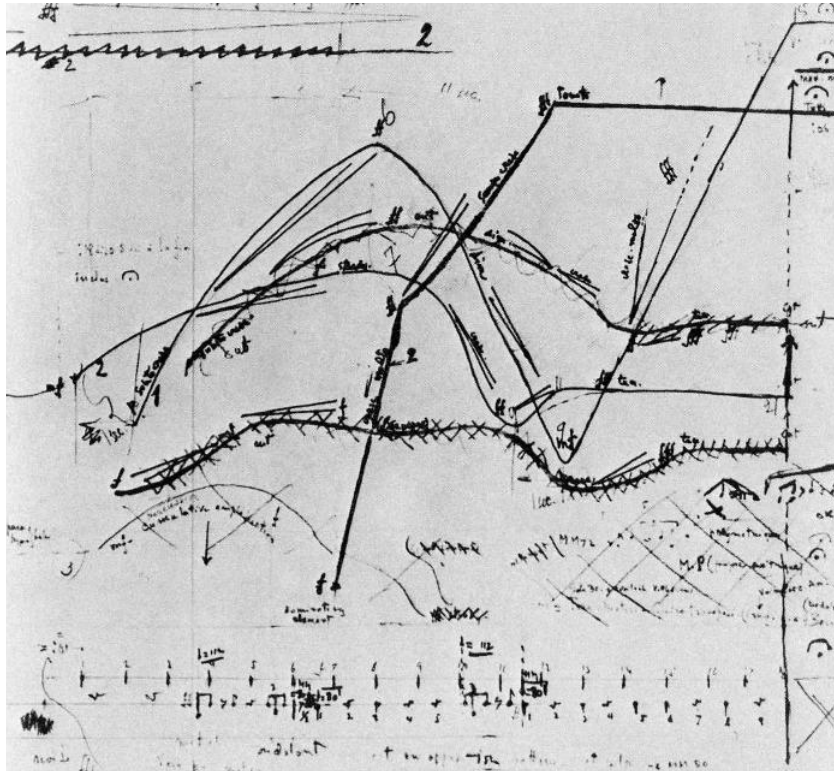


Fig. 1: Diagram of work for *Poème électronique*, 1957-1958, by Edgard Varèse.

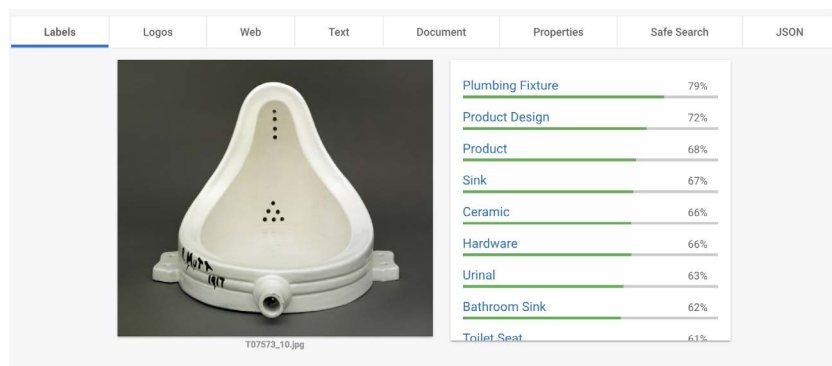


Fig. 2: Print from the e-mail that Moreschi received from Pereira, with the reading of Duchamp's *Fountain* by the AI Google Cloud Vision. None of the results considered the image a photograph of an artwork.

PEREIRA: On 23 October 2017, I sent an email to Moreschi. It included two images: a painting of Christ and Duchamp's *Fountain*. The email went on with a series of graphics, percentages, and keywords that all analysed these two images that were at no point interpreted as art. Duchamp's *Fountain* was described as a plumbing fixture, product design and as... a urinal. Google's state-of-the-art AI, Google Cloud Vision, was behind this reading. As someone who was not yet specialized in Artificial Intelligence, Moreschi was fascinated by these results.

That email was just the beginning of what would later become this research. To create a new way of interpreting this set of images, Pereira created a script to send the images of the artworks to six of the most commonly used commercial AI services: Google, Microsoft, Amazon, IBM, Facebook, and the widely used YOLO library. The results obtained for each artwork are shown through a custom web interface, which is accessible and open-source (enabling other readings and analyses by other people). As soon as we had inserted the photographs from the museum collection, we named this open-source website *Recoding Art*.

According to a logic of physical detachment that often characterizes the digital and although Moreschi sojourned a couple of blocks away from the museum and its collection, the first two weeks of his stay in Eindhoven did not focus on the museum itself (and its physical works). Instead, he dedicated all his time analysing the approximately 55,000 results obtained from the analyses of the 654 works (available in the interface *Recoding Art*) while building a method capable of organizing these results through identifying patterns.



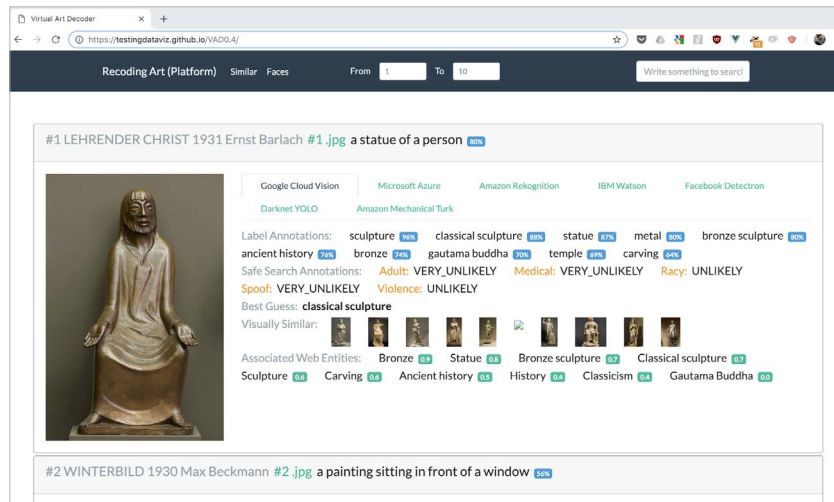


Fig. 3: Recoding Art, an open-source website with the Van Abbemuseum artworks' reading by AIs.

To understand the development of this methodology, we can turn to the soundtrack used by Moreschi in this results-screening process – as sung by Bjork, ‘My headphones / They saved my life’. Much of the results’ analysis materialised as he listened to Brian Eno and Peter Schmidt. Following Varèse’s logic of appreciating what is generally overlooked, in 1975, long-time friends Peter Schmidt and Brian Eno created a set of cards called *Oblique Strategies* designed to aid the artistic process.<sup>1</sup> One of the cards epitomizes our methodological approach. It states: ‘Honour thy error as a hidden intention.’ The advice proved valuable in a selection process involving interpretations that initially seemed like blatant misunderstandings by dumb machines. We decided to steer away from a feeling of superiority related to the technological systems we were using. The cards in the deck and Varèse’s strategy of composing music using sounds that usually go unnoticed were fundamental to a type of methodology that would make Moreschi look carefully at the interpretations by the AIs, minimizing a search for results that were ‘true’ or ‘correct’. On the contrary: we decided to value the unexpected outcomes.

This stance differs from some studies of AI systems that focus on the mistakes and biases of AI (and how to avoid and fix them).<sup>2</sup> Indeed, this quest for algorithmic accountability and ethics is important, given the amount of problems AI already causes and the way in which these errors affect people (especially underserved minorities and marginalized communities). However, focusing on ‘solving bias’ may serve as a diversion from critically interrogating these systems and understanding them in their complexity (Powles & Nissenbaum, 2018). In this work, we turn to the glitches of commercial Computer Vision not as something that needs to be improved for increasing the system’s overall efficacy (i.e. fixing the algorithm),<sup>3</sup> but as a way of speculating on the machinations of systems, both the AI systems analysed and the art system as a whole. It is about showing that these systems are neither a ‘given’, nor ‘certain’ – thus contributing not to a simplistic and capitalist idea of ‘algorithm effectiveness’, but towards the goal of understanding AI’s operating structures. This movement may point to speculative changes and corrections to these systems, but at the same time embraces some of these unexpected results as enabling a more poetic and experimental understanding of reality.

## 2. INSTITUTIONAL CRITIQUE 2.0

MORESCHI: In the 14 days I spent analysing the Van Abbemuseum collection as shown through our Recoding Art interface, I tried to cast aside the rationality stemming from at least a decade of working as an artist. Many of those results had a freshness that I had not felt in a long time. It was two weeks of an intense and fascinating process of denaturalization: it felt as if I was coming into contact with contemporary art for the first time in my life.



As the following examples confirm, our experience in using AIs to interpret images of artworks can be seen as a new mode of Institutional Critique.<sup>4</sup> Widespread since the 1970s, the term refers to a series of procedures seeking to reveal the structures that make the art system function. As American artist Andrea Fraser points out in *What is Institutional Criticism?*, this mode of analytical approximation of art and its elements follows some propositions, the first of which consists in always considering social context to understand what is seen as art. This practice takes care of sites above all as *social sites*, structured sets of relationships that are fundamentally social relations. To say that they are social relations does not mean to oppose them to intersubjective or even intra-subjective relations, but to say that a site is a social field of these relations. (Fraser 2005)

According to Fraser, art is never the object of art, but rather, it is a network interconnected with this object of socially-constructed elements. Our AI experiments were successful in revealing this construction and more. Using Recoding Art, we were able to broaden the range of social relationships evidenced by Fraser, now in a digital layer. Our institutional critique 2.0 proposed here and put into practice permeates the exchange of social relations in the museum's physical space and considers the exchanges that also took place in digital layers in an increasingly-organized world according to the criteria and categories of commercial AI systems. As Fraser and other practitioners of institutional criticism discuss, art is not isolated from the social transformations of its context, so it is very pertinent to pursue an updated institutional critique now by adding the layers of digital infrastructures of the museum and its collection – understanding it as part of such a contemporary social context of works of art. In other words, our defence here is for institutional critique to be updated to include social exchanges (including new processes of artistic legitimation) now resulting from

AIs. Processes such as computer vision are causing significant changes in society, and this is also directly reflected in the understanding of works of art and museums. Since institutional criticism is a direct consequence of the context of art, these transformations in the field must now also be considered by those who are currently interested in conducting studies of institutional criticism.

An anecdote by British writer Rudyard Kipling illustrates this detached stance, which is common to both Institutional Critique and to the process of reading images by AIs. Kipling (2013), says that Adam, the first man in the world, sat next to a tree and scratched something in the clay with a small twig. It was 'the first rough drawing the world has ever seen' and 'a jubilation for the vigorous heart of this man'. That's until the Devil appears, walks up and whispers behind the foliage: 'It's beautiful, Adam, but... is this Art?' Because they are not trained to read images of contemporary art, AIs used as practices of Institutional Critique do as the Devil did with Adam. Thinking about their results without prejudice and with an open mind is a possible way to distance ourselves from the specialized codes of art and create relevant materials for the critical study of art and its system. Additionally, many of these results can help mediate these works to non-specialized audiences, initiating a more accessible relationship with these objects. Among the results are:

### 1. Art as everyday objects

Interpretations such as these show that, beyond their discourse, artworks consist of materials that can also be found outside of the museum context, i.e., in everyday life. This is the case when Duchamp's Fountain, which bears the signature of the artist, is interpreted as an actual urinal. Such readings invite us to see artworks in a way that is disconnected from the idea of authorship. Analysing these results is tantamount to thinking about the process of symbolic transformation



of artworks, one of the processes underpinning contemporary art. These results – much like the results in the following pages – help removing any so-called aura from the art object, transforming a very important art collection into an assortment of easily-recognizable objects.



#23 LICHT-RAUM MODULATOR (1922-1930) replica 1970 László Moholy-Nagy #23.jpg a lamp that is lit up at night 40%

Google Cloud Vision Microsoft Azure Amazon Rekognition IBM Watson Facebook Detectron Darknet YOLO Amazon Mechanical Turk

Label Annotations: lighting 77% light fixture 74% lamp 64% still life photography 57% lighting accessory 51%

Safe Search Annotations: Adult: VERY\_UNLIKELY Medical: VERY\_UNLIKELY Racy: VERY\_UNLIKELY Spoof: VERY\_UNLIKELY

Violence: VERY\_UNLIKELY

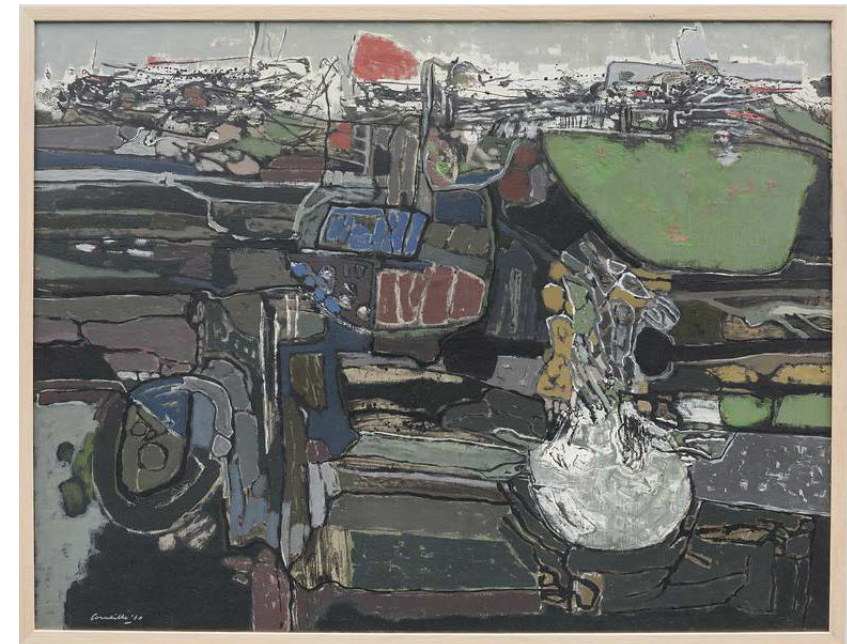
Best Guess: laszlo moholy nagy light space modulator

Visually Similar: [Thumbnail 1] [Thumbnail 2] [Thumbnail 3] [Thumbnail 4] [Thumbnail 5] [Thumbnail 6] [Thumbnail 7] [Thumbnail 8] [Thumbnail 9]

Associated Web Entities: Light-Space Modulator 1.0 Light 0.9 Bauhaus 0.4 Art 0.3 Modulation 0.5 Photonics 0.3 Light art 0.5

Artist 0.4 Constructivism 0.4 Design 0.4

Fig. 4 *Licht-raum Modulator* (1922-1930, replica 1970), by László Moholy-Nagy, described by Microsoft's AI as 'a lamp that is lit up at night', a similar result to Google's AI ('lighting', 'lamp', 'light fixtures'). Darknet YOLO (open-source AI) goes further and sees the work as a possible 'boat', which helps us to construct an interesting hypothesis: that, from the interpretive logic of AIs, the circular reflection on the wall can be a full moon in the high sea.



a close up of an old computer 39%

ejection seat (/support/seat/ejection seat)

50%

Fig. 5 Corneille's *Aux Abords De La Grande Cité* (1960) read as 'ejection seat' and 'a close-up of an old computer'. Many works analysed by Microsoft Azure's AI are understood as close-ups of something. Since the gaze of AI does not function from the human logic of physical distance between the observer and the observed, the concepts of closeness and depth radically change here – anything that is not recognizable at first may indeed be the detail of an everyday object.



#11 INTERROGATION (WHAT KIND OF BIRD ARE YOU?) 1956-1958 Max Ernst #11.jpg a close up of a decorated tree 26%

Label Annotations: red 96%, art 96%, orange 92%, painting 80%, acrylic paint 76%, modern art 77%, visual arts 72%, illustration 72%, paint 71%, artwork 62%

Safe Search Annotations: Adult: VERY\_UNLIKELY, Medical: LIKELY, Racy: VERY\_UNLIKELY, Spoof: VERY\_UNLIKELY, Violence: UNLIKELY

Best Guess: max ernst what kind of bird are you

Visually Similar: [Three small image thumbnails]

Associated Web Entities: Painting 1.2, Interrogation (what kind of bird are you?) 1.0, Art 0.7, Artist 0.6, Visual arts 0.5, Painter 0.5, Sculptor 0.5, Modern art 0.5, Drawing 0.5, Image 0.5

jack-o'-lantern (halloween) (/lamp/jack-o'-lantern (halloween)) 50%

Fig. 6 *Interrogation (What Kind of Bird Are You?)* (1956-1958), by Max Ernst, read by IBM's AI as a 'jack-o'-lantern', the pumpkin traditionally carved on Halloween in the United States – an example that shows how AI interpretations are fashioned from an American ethnocentric logic. This example also demonstrates that the fact that works by well-known artists in the collection being read as art does not prevent them from also being interpreted as things unrelated to the artistic context. It is interesting to see the multifaceted ability of AIs to offer, within the same set of results, both the legitimated layer of the image as well as its pre-art state.

Label Annotations: picture frame 77%, window 64%, paint 54%, door 52%, rectangle 52%, molding 51%

passepoutout (frame) (/supporting structure/framework/passepartout (frame)) 60%

frame (/supporting structure/framework/frame) 60%

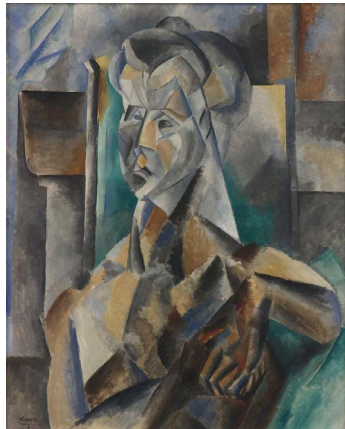


Fig. 7 Some images received interpretations prioritizing the physical structures protecting or supporting the works ('picture frame', 'framework', 'supporting structure') rather than their legitimized artistic content. This happened with Ben Nicholson's *White Relief* (1936), often understood by AIs as a frame, and Jannis Kounellis' *Untitled* (1980) which, for Google, relates to the image of a shelf, which in fact is something necessary for exhibiting the work. Such results de-structure the hierarchy between layers of the art object that are considered to be artistic and non-artistic, inviting us to envision envelopes and bases as part of the artistic structure often indispensable in the legitimation of what art is. Framed works are also often read as television monitors, which leads us to the second group of results.



## 2. IKEA shopping cart

In at least one of their results, the vast majority of the works (almost 80%) were read as consumer products easily found in department stores. Such results are valuable in critical art studies for underlining the fact that artworks are essentially commodities – even if much more expensive than curtains –, especially in a capitalist consumer society.<sup>5</sup>



Gargoyle 60% Ornament 60%

Tags (from caption): building statue sitting cat bird old table graffiti street covered man standing phone perched

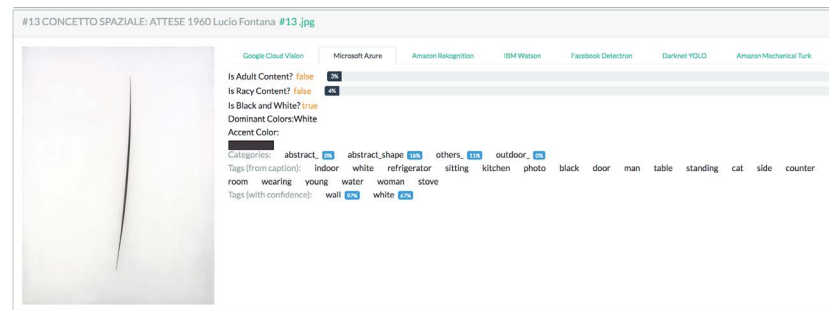
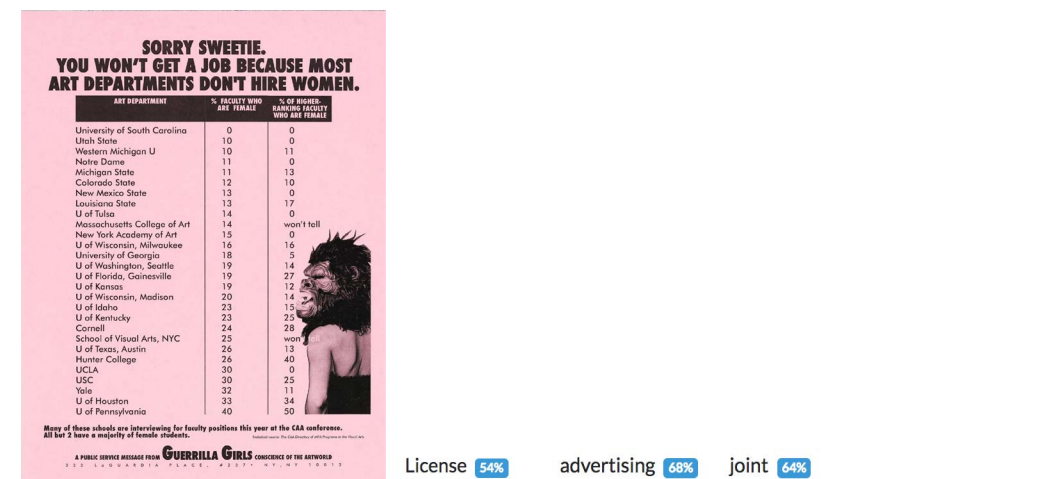
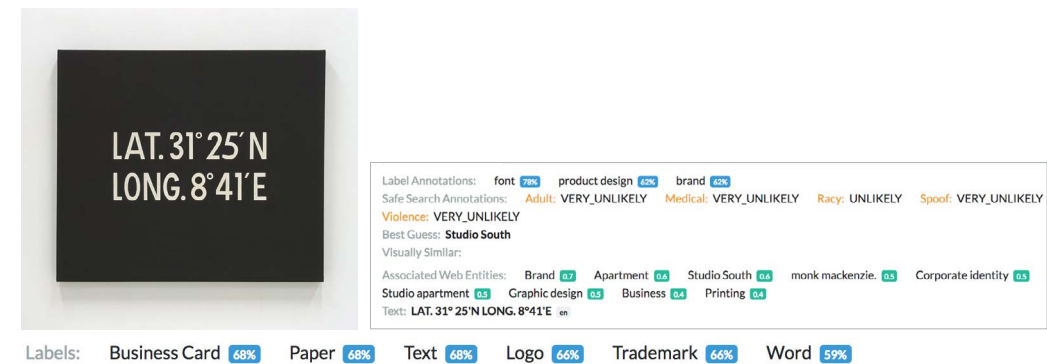
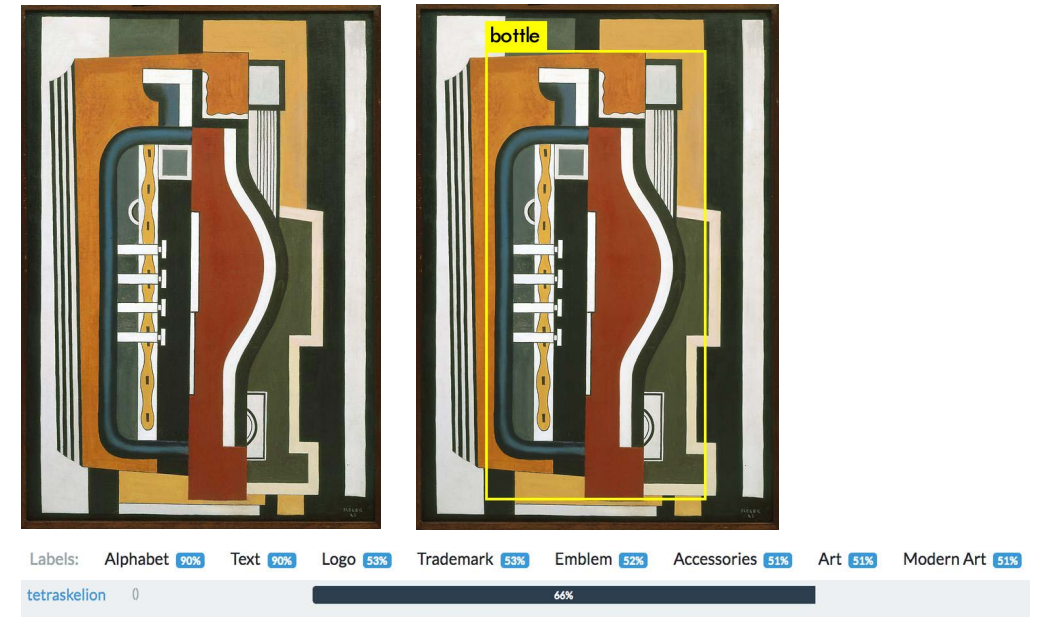


Fig. 8 *Femme en vert* (1909), by Pablo Picasso, as a 'gargoyle', 'ornament' and 'phone'. And *Concetto Spaziale: Attese* (1960), by Lucio Fontana, as a 'refrigerator', 'stove' and 'kitchen'.

Fig. 9: Cubist works and pieces with textual content tend to be related not only to marketable objects ('product design', 'bottle'), but also to specific companies or universal ideas of the business world. This is the case with Fernand Léger's *L'accordéon* (1926), which is connected to the Tetra-skelion Software, a company in Jaipur (IN) offering technological solutions for travel agencies. The same is true for *LAT. 31°25'N, LONG. 8°41'E* (1965), by On Kawara, ('brand', 'business', 'corporate identity') and the poster *Sorry, Sweetie, Way To Go, Dude!* (1994), by Guerrilla Girls, ('license', 'advertising', 'joint'). This demonstrates that the AI readings' capitalist logic is broader than just interpreting images as products – it also includes notions and practices not necessarily related to a consumer society.



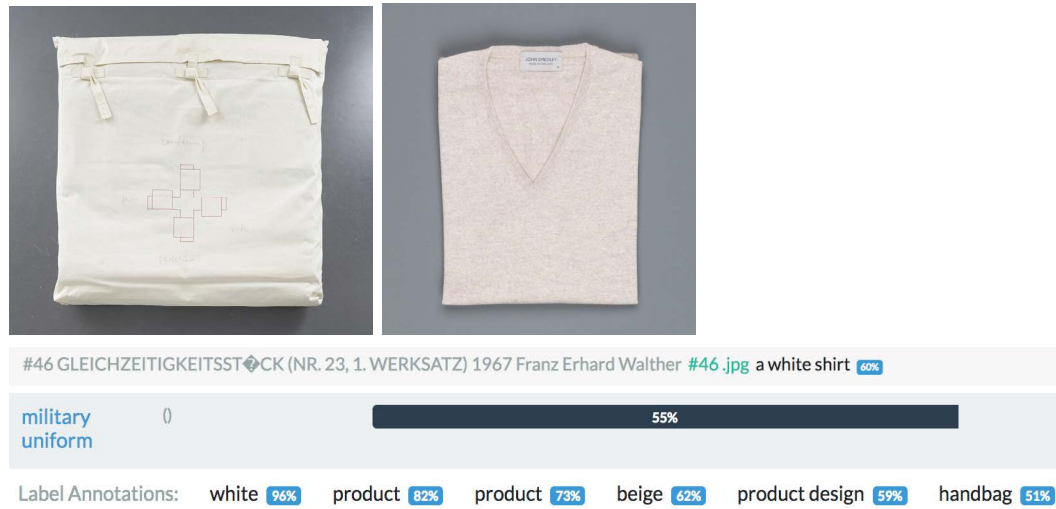


Fig. 10 *Gleichzeitigkeitsstück (Nr. 23, 1. Werksatz)* (1967), by Franz Erhard Walther as 'a white shirt', 'military uniform', 'handbag' and a lot of t-shirt images as visually similar. *Balance (Nr. 26, 1. Werksatz)* (1967), by Franz Erhard Walther as 'a bag of luggage', 'clothes' and a lot of trousers images. *Politisch (Nr. 36, 1. Werksatz)* (1967), by Franz Erhard Walther, as 'fabric'. Performance fabrics are almost always read as fashion clothes or accessories by AIs, which makes sense since many were worn by artists and/or the public. Here, interestingly, AIs actually agree with contemporary art, since most artists, curators and art critics do not consider these fabrics actual works of art either, but documentary remnants of a previous artistic experience.



Labels: Art 89% Modern Art 89% Cushion 52% Home Decor 52% Cushion 56%



Dance 66% Dance Pose 66% Leisure Activities 66% Clothing 51% Evening Dress 51% Gown 51% Robe 51%

#10 OOGST ca. 1932-1937 Victor Dolphijn #10.jpg a group of people posing for the camera 83%

Fig. 11 As seen in *La Roche-Guyon* (1909), by Georges Braque, and *Vaas met Bloemen* (1929), by Jan Sluijters, colourful paintings tend to be read as cushions, which reminds us how the visual content of works of art can expand beyond the museum and fit into more popular household goods. Results such as these also relate to museum shops and their practices of transforming images of artworks into souvenirs.

Fig. 12: As with *Oogst* (ca. 1932-1937), by Victor Dolphijn, images containing people are interpreted according to the objects that appear in the pictures. In almost every work including a human representation, results relate to their clothing and other personal objects – including moments when these objects were identified as opposed to the humans holding them. Such results serve as a reminder of the way in which building an individual's identity in a capitalist society is shaped through the objects they possess and the properties of such objects. The same painting was also described as 'a group of people posing for the camera' and as a possible 'dance pose', which takes us to the idea of displaying these products, and to the following category.





### 3. Self-promotion

In figurative paintings, AI tends to read people as posing for the camera, which poetically shows how art is a space for human exhibitionism – including selfies and people practicing sports. These results invite us to think of art as an essentially social and egoic practice by human beings, a process of constant self-affirmation.

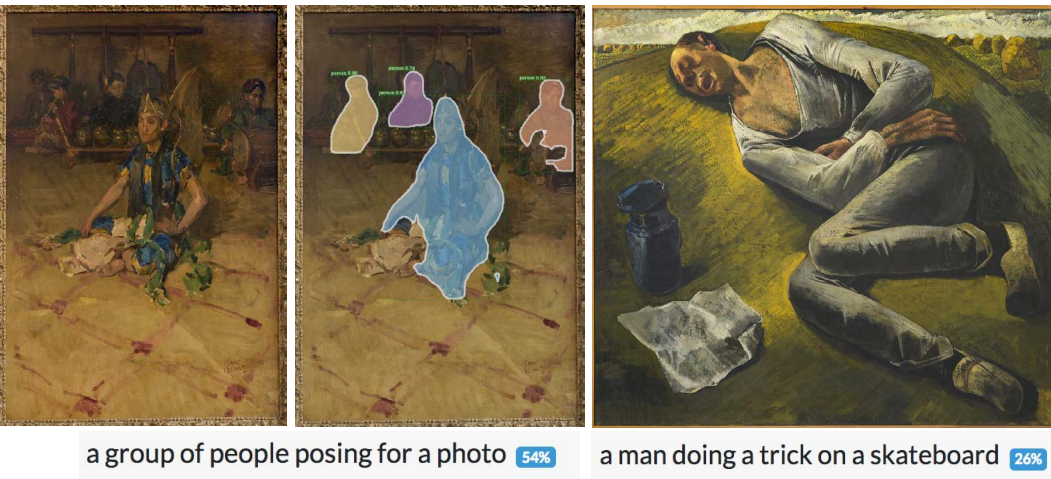


Fig. 13 *Javaanse Danser* (ca.1921-1922), by Isaac Israëls, described as 'a group of people posing for a photo'. *Slapende Boer* (1936), by Hendrik Chabot, as a skater doing tricks.

### 4. New titles

Microsoft Azure Computer Vision is an AI service that describes images in short sentences. During our experiment at the Van Abbemuseum, we carried-out a detachment exercise linked to the artists and their intentions: we started using these descriptions as new titles for works in the collection. These types of procedures help demystifying the authorship and origin of art objects, creating less fetishized paths of comprehension. Because they are almost always amusing, phrases such as these can be valuable

material for art classes for non-specialists and young students. Moreover, concerning textual results: Google's AI sometimes identifies texts where there actually are none, thus creating curious descriptions.

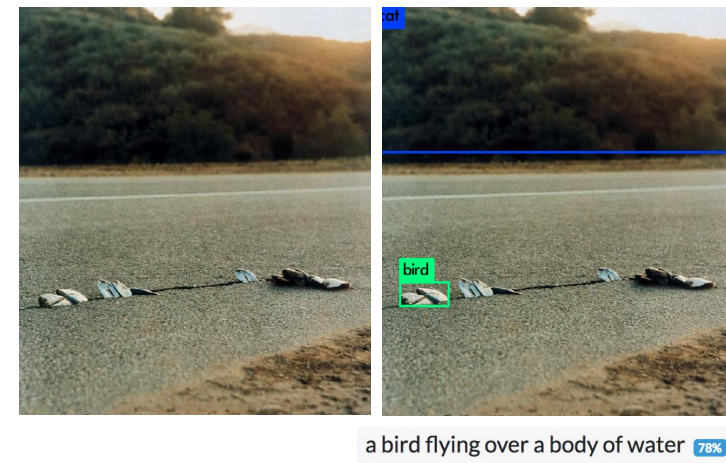
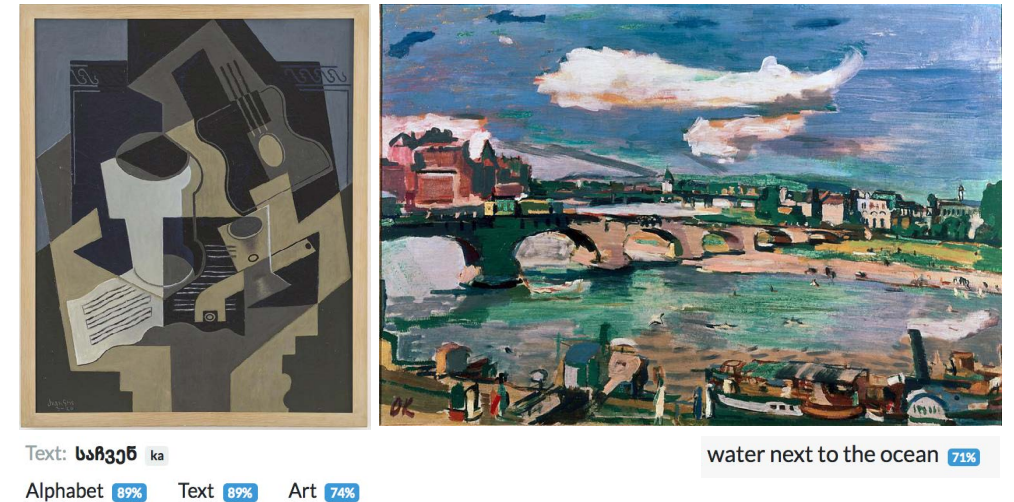
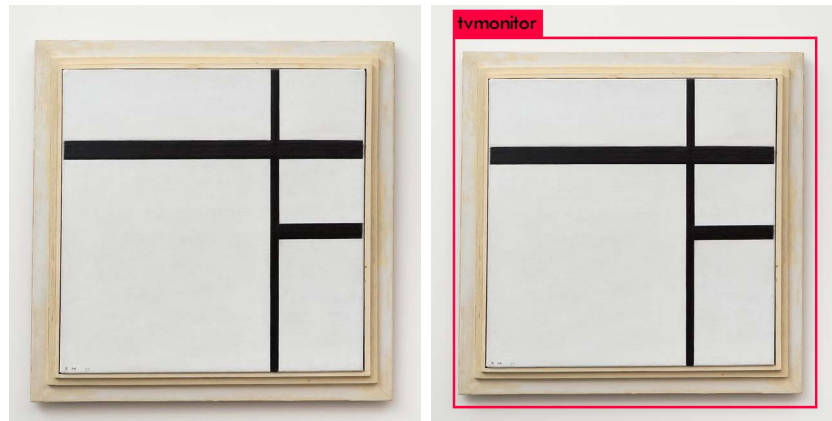


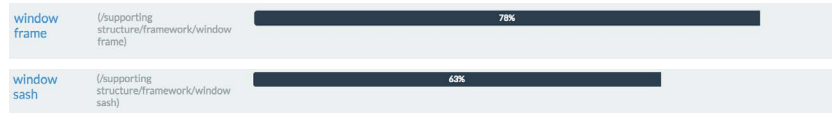
Fig. 14 According to Google Cloud Vision, Juan Gris' painting *Nature Morte* (1920) contains a Georgian word, which becomes 'display' when translated into English by Google Translate. *Augustusbrücke Dresden* (1923), by Oskar Kokoschka, was summed up by Microsoft's AI as 'water next to the ocean', adding more poetry to the scene. Ger van Elk's *Discovery of the Sardines* (1971) is described as 'a bird flying over a body of water', completely reversing the image's idea of aridity.





door cabinet shelf blue sink room table

Tags (with confidence): wall 98% window 91% indoor 89% building 88%



#9 COMPOSITIE XXII 1922 Theo van Doesburg #9 .jpg a close up of a door 63%

Fig. 15 Piet Mondriaan's *Composition En Blanc Et Noir II* (1930), was read as 'a close up of a window', 'window frame', 'window sash' and 'table'. *Compositie XXII* (1922), by Theo van Doesburg, was read as 'a close up of a door'.

## 5. Passages: windows, doors and (why not?) some tables

Poetically, this shows that the area contained within the frame of an artwork creates a space that follows different rules than the space outside of it, and that goes on beyond the wall where the artwork is placed – a microsystem that has values and significations of its own. Almost every time there was an interpretation of a 'window', there was also a 'TV monitor'. Although typical for the first and second groups of this list (Art as objects and IKEA shopping cart), identifying monitors also suggests a depth extension of the exhibited work. The works read as tables certainly were interpreted as such since a framed painting can visually look like a table when seen from above. This recurring result can be seen as an invitation to view paintings from other perspectives, not only face-to-face or at eye level.

## 6. New temporalities

When AIs do not understand the historical context of an artwork, it allows us to look at art as a different kind of object – stripping it away from authorship and historicity. Readings such as these can help in the construction of new Art History narratives, helping to build new associations between societies from different regions and/or periods.





Label Annotations: sculpture 96% classical sculpture 88% statue 87% metal 80% bronze sculpture 80% ancient history 76% bronze 74% gautama buddha 70% temple 69% carving 64%

Labels: Art 95% Sculpture 95% Buddha 88% Worship 88%

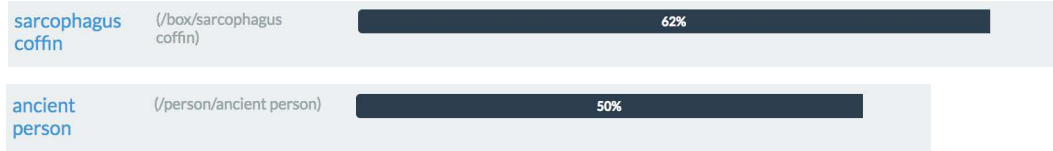


Fig. 16 *Lehrender Christ* (1931), by Ernst Barlach, read as 'Buddha', 'sarcophagus coffin', and was associated to images of Ancient Greek sculptures.



© Can Stock Photo



© Can Stock Photo

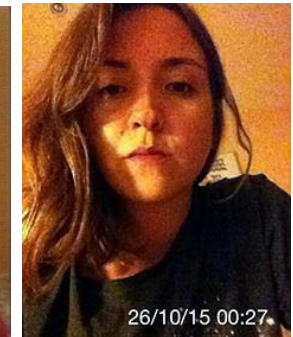


Fig 17 Google's AI associated Constant Permeke's *Dorp in de lente* (1936) with images of firewood, which suggests a later moment for the trees represented in this bucolic painting. The same AI related the frame of Martha Rosler's video *Martha Rosler Reads Vogue* (1982) with the image of a younger woman – it could be a younger Rosler, but in fact is another artist, Spaniard Cristina Garrido.

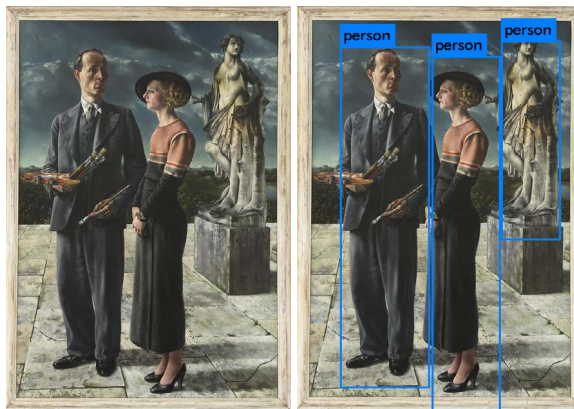


## 7. Personification processes

Very often, images of artworks were read as actual people, or still, the performance of human tasks. Images read as people show how the AI's understanding system does not differentiate between the concepts of representation and presence. Many sculptures (not necessarily human bodies) were also read as people, thus emphasizing the physical strength of large works. It was also interesting to note the human attributions related to some works, such as a painting 'sitting down'—a typical process of prosopopoeia.



a painting sitting in front of a window 56%



person 99% outdoor 97% standing 80%

Fig. 18: In Max Beckmann's painting *Winterbild* (1930), the readings of different AIs prove complementary. For Microsoft Azure Computer Vision, the work is 'a painting sitting in front of a window'. Seated where, exactly? Probably in one of the two chairs read by Darknet YOLO's AI. Similarly, the sculpture in the background of Carel Willink's painting *Schilder Met Zijn Vrouw* (1934) was read as a person standing near the couple.

## 8. Visual similarities, new and more democratic possibilities

The fact that AIs associate museum artworks with other images of similar visual forms in their databases<sup>6</sup> results in a maximized mode of experiments that have long characterized the study of artistic images. Many associative processes of these 'intelligences' refer to practices developed by historians such as Aby Warburg and his *Mnemosyne Atlas*.<sup>7</sup> Consequently, taking these results in consideration may be important for expanding this field.

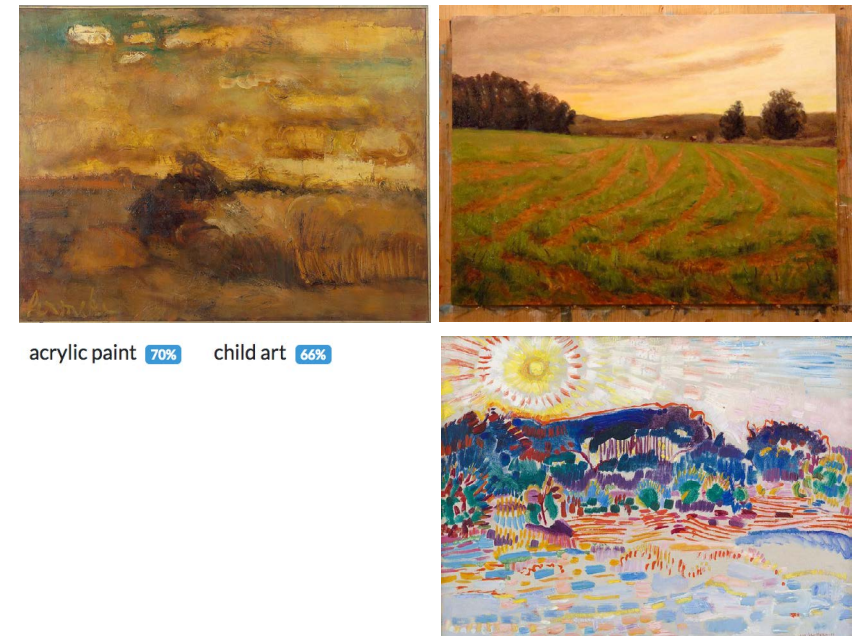


Fig. 19 Some associations of images created approximations of consecrated works with artistic manifestations that are not considered 'museum art'. This is the case of Constant Permeke's *Zomer* (1932) compared by Google's AI to an amateur painting by an unknown artist. Jan Sluijters's *Landschap* (1910) was interpreted as a possible painting by a child, corroborating with the idea that modern art focused on abstract and unconscious experiences, as opposed to the academic realism of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.



### 9. Incomprehensible yet extremely poetic results (that we really like)

As is always the case with some works in any museum collection, many of the AI results were not fully categorisable into homogeneous groups of results. This shows that art and AI share a high load of unpredictability. These results also suggest a possible use of the AI readings in the expansion of the poetic layers of art, contrary to the productivist and efficiency-focused logic of those who argue that AIs must necessarily provide precise results.

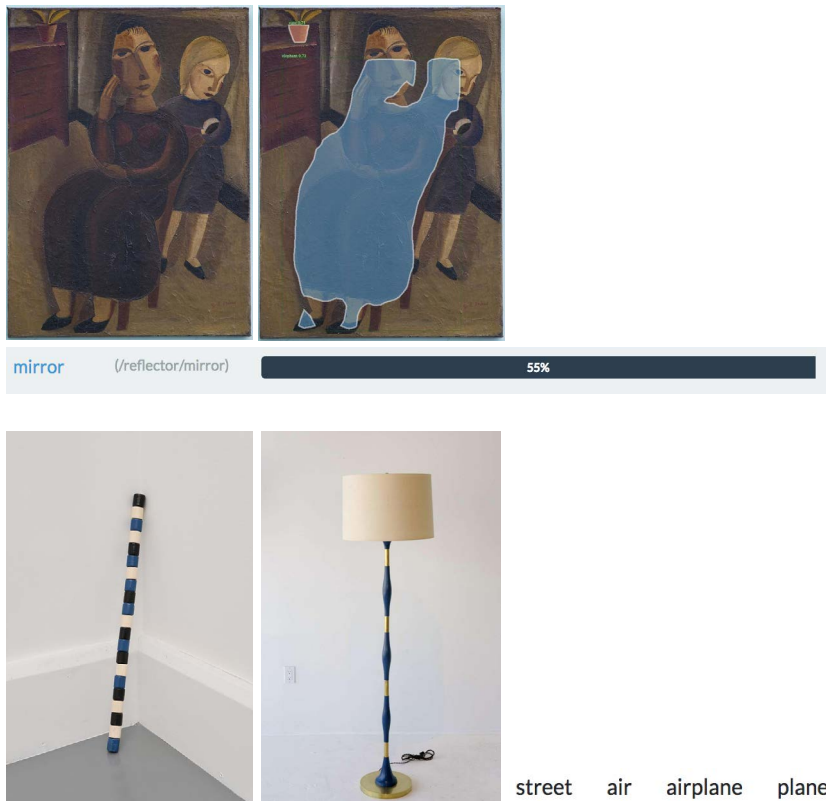


Fig. 20 In Gus de Smet's painting *Moeder en Kind* (1922), an elephant (marked in blue) is read in the room by Facebook's AI. This was one of the whimsical cases where a work was read as a 'mirror', referring to the idea that the understanding of an artwork is a reflection, a consequence of the way of thinking of those who look at it. Microsoft's AI went beyond the idea of object and added in André Cadere's conceptual work *B 12000030 =25= = 16X17= NOIR BLANC BLEU* (1975) the information 'air' – the true context of art and all other things of this world. But, of course, since not everything is poetry in the AIs, Google has associated this conceptual work to the image of a... lamp.

### 3. THE HUMAN LAYERS OF AI

Our methodology of attending to unexpected results also explored the human layers of Artificial Intelligence systems. This happened during the last week of the residency as Pereira and Moreschi worked together. As we were quite familiar with the new collection of artworks that emerged from the AI analyses, we decided to interact with Amazon Mechanical Turkers to better understand the human layers of AI and avoid the oversimplified idea that the AIs used were fully-automated. These workers are responsible for doing tasks that are still impossible for computers, such as classifying images inside predefined categories, thus creating the training data for AIs. We surveyed a random sample of Turkers, asking them for descriptions of some of the collection's artworks, and whether they considered these so-called artworks to be art.

The experiences with the Turkers in this research are a continuation of previous explorations by Moreschi and Pereira on how non-specialized analysis can help to better understand and engage in the codified and elitist system of contemporary art. At about the same time as this research was developed at the Van Abbemuseum, we also carried out the project *Another 33rd São Paulo Biennial* commissioned by the '33rd São Paulo Biennial'. In an attempt to create an inventory of actions that broadened the understanding of the almost three months-long of this biennial, we carried out various experiments ranging from working with the AIs on historical photos to developing an audio guide with the biennial's cleaning, operations, and education staff. Like many Turkers, these individuals are not considered as experts in the art system. To consider their views, which are almost always ignored, is also a way of following the methodology of valuing understandings which, because they are not formally institutionalized, are usually deemed as mistaken views – something with which we obviously strongly disagree.





What do you think	Description	Is this Art?	Have you been paid fairly?	Completion time (seconds)	Reward
I think it is a classy nude painting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>nude woman laying on bed with back facing viewer</li> <li>woman in the nude on a bed with back facing viewer</li> <li>painting of a nude woman on a bed with back facing viewer</li> </ul>	yes	yes	115	\$0.40
It is very well composed and has a great palate of color	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>woman lies prone in bed</li> <li>woman resting, soundly</li> <li>a woman at rest</li> </ul>	yes	yes	132	\$0.40
I think that the woman is ugly.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>There is a woman naked, facing the bed, laying down.</li> <li>Laying down on white sheets is a naked woman on a bed.</li> <li>The woman without clothing is holding her arm over a pillow, while naked.</li> </ul>	yes	no	159	\$0.40
Very sexual Sleeping	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Sleeping on the bed.</li> <li>Very Nude showing.</li> <li>Without dress sleeping on the bed.</li> </ul>	yes	yes	161	\$0.40
It's bland.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Woman sleeping on couch</li> <li>Naked woman sleeping on couch</li> <li>Nude form from behind</li> </ul>	yes	no	124	\$0.40

Fig 21 Jan Sluijters's painting *Liggend Naakt* (1931) described by 5 different Turkers. One of them thinks it is 'very sexual', while another says 'the woman is ugly'. These descriptions exhibit sexist and objectifying visions of women's bodies and nakedness, which we also got to see embedded in the AI systems we surveyed. Other readings are more formal, yet poetic, such as 'a woman at rest'. It took no longer than two minutes for 5 different turkers to complete the task. They all agree: the image is Art.



Fig 22 Rosângela Silveira Jerônimo (general cleaning assistant of the Biennial) comments on one of the paintings by the artist Vânia Mignone, located on the 3rd floor of the 33rd Biennial, in the action Audio guide: more voices, part of the Another 33rd São Paulo Biennial project. © Filipe Berndt e Iriana Turozi

PEREIRA: Thinking about non-specialists in AI, we found it important to show the human labour behind these algorithms, as a way of raising awareness of what AI actually is. In the short video we made, we tried to use an accessible language (unlike much of the video art produced today) to show this infrastructure, explain the role of Turkers, and use their own voices to read descriptions they would give to images of artworks, thus foregrounding their contribution to AI systems. At the same time, we denaturalize Artificial Intelligences, as both AI and human Turker readings are shown to have similarities (as well as differences). This relates to academic calls for increasing literacy on datafication and its processes.



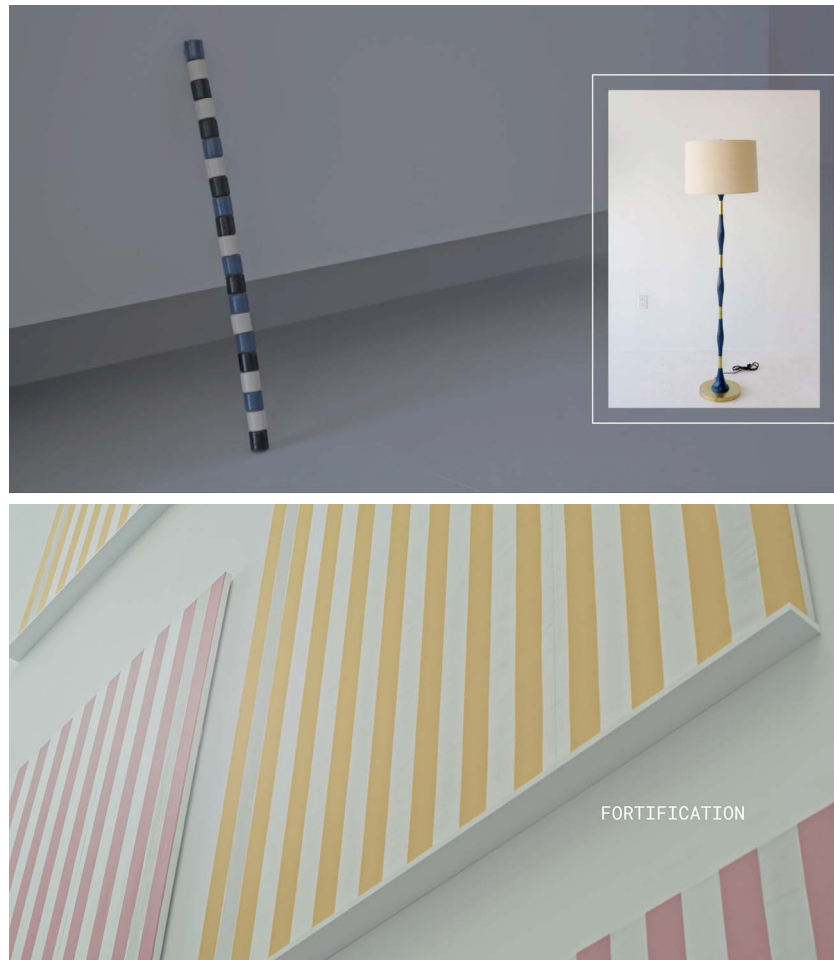


Fig. 23: Stills of short film *Recording Art*.

#### 4. THE RESULTS OF THE RESEARCH: MULTIPLE CRACKS IN THE CONTEMPORARY MUSEUM

In most of our collaborative projects we avoid making our research into a single final output. We believe that making this research into a single art object would invariably contribute to an excessive aestheticization and would limit the artistic potency of the work. The one-year experiment with the Van Abbemuseum collection and AIs resulted in this paper, a short film, graphic materials such as museum labels with interpretations of works, as well as a possible exhibition project.

The short film *Recording Art* is a research report that directly details our exploratory movements. But it is also video art, since once again, the mediation with the works was denaturalized through filming: many scenes of the film were made partially or completely with eyes shut to deconstruct the persuasive power of the exhibitions' displays. A similar denaturalization also takes place with one of the film's narrators, Lisa, one of the artificial voices of IBM Watson Text to Speech. At one point, Lisa asks the audience why she has a female voice before answering herself by showing how she can be understood as a digital representation of female objectification already present in society (Cross 2017).

A possible scenario for exhibiting the film at the museum was drafted by collaborator Flavio Franzosi in 3D images (Fig. 25). In this exhibition room, works from the museum's collection are displayed side-by-side and at the same hierarchical level as some trivial consumer objects that appeared when AIs read the works in question.

Thus, Pablo Picasso's painting *Femme en vert* (1909) is placed next to a child's drawing, and Piet Mondriaan's *Composition En Blanc Et Noir II* (1930) relates equally



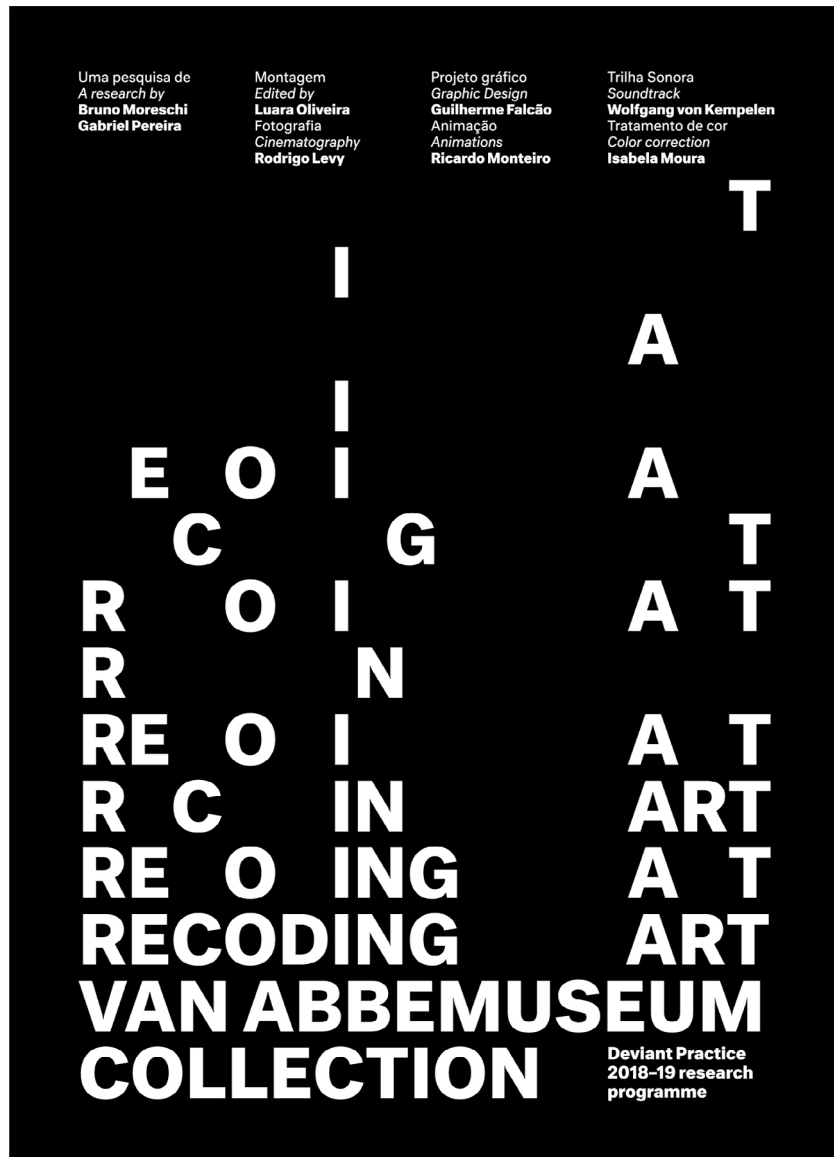


Fig. 24: Poster for short film *Recoding Art*. Design by Guilherme Falcão.

to a dish drainer and a window frame. The video was also intended to be shown on three different screens in this room, each displaying one of its parts. While the movie is played on one of the screens, the other two are inactive, representing the likely outcome were this video read by one of the AIs: it becomes an ordinary TV screen, and its support is valued over its narrative content.

The research results also materialized in the format of labels. They were designed to contaminate two spaces of legitimation of the works of the collection. The first is the exhibition space itself, with the insertion of these labels next to the official tags, in a kind of new informational layer of the works. They are no longer determined by the curators but by the commercial AIs and their databases.

The other space is the Van Abbemuseum website, in particular on pages showing images and basic information on the works in the collection (see an example here). The idea consists in providing site visitors with a link on those pages that, when clicked, display the AI results label of the work in question (Fig. 27).

Offering these AI readings to the public has multiple objectives. Since they provide more tangible insights into these objects, the readings can be used as materials for the museum educators. They also help democratize the discussion on the problematic ways in which AIs are applied today in the most diverse layers of our society. Finally – obviously – the results are often comical – and a little humour in a contemporary art museum is always welcome.<sup>8</sup>





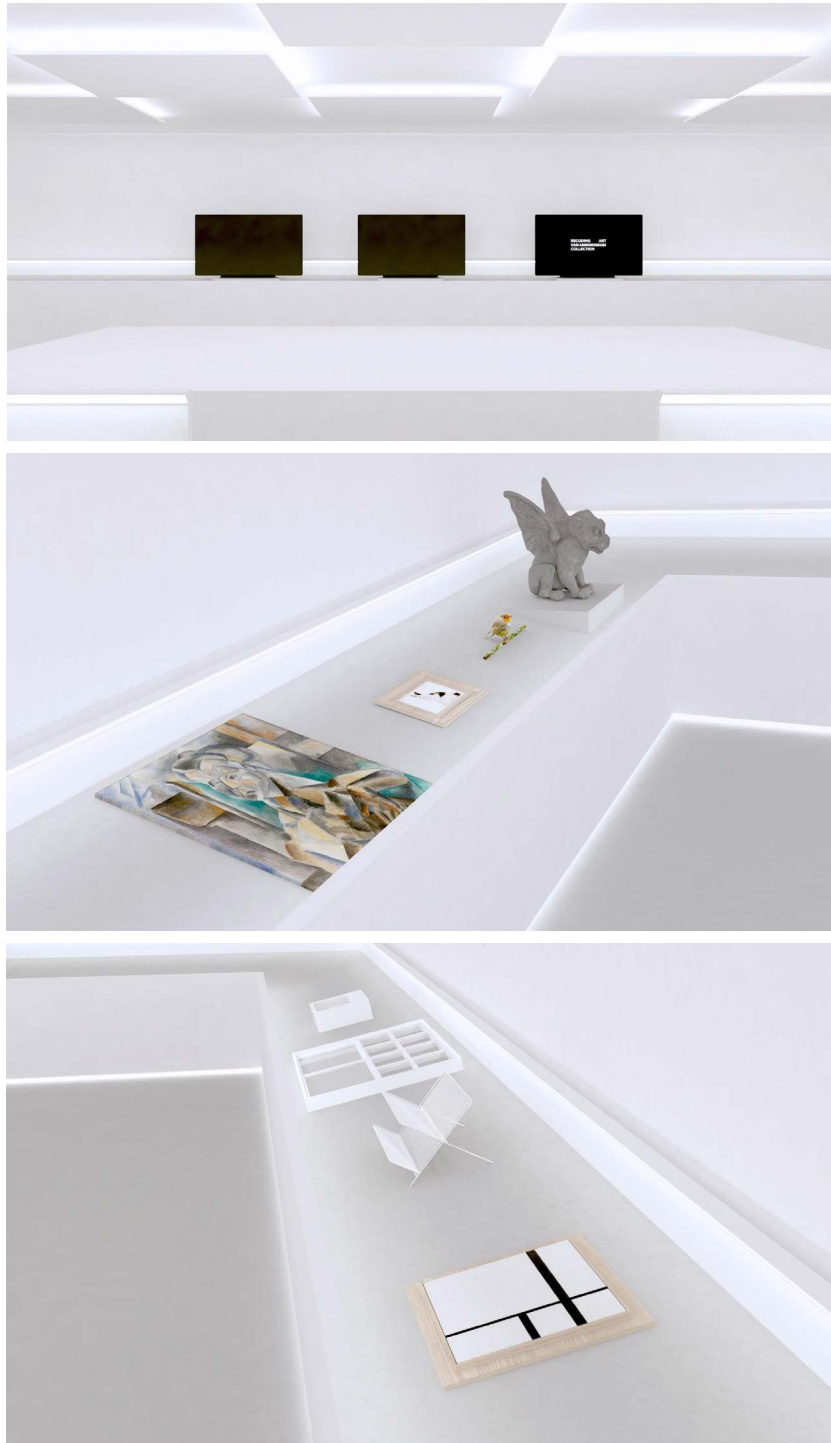


Fig. 25: 3Ds of possible exhibition proposal of the video Recoding Art: Van Abbemuseum collection.

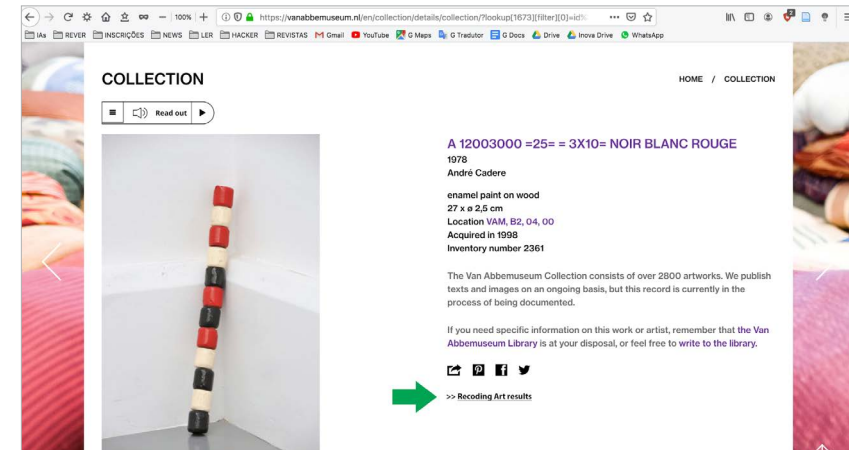



Fig. 26: The green arrow shows a possible place for the link with AI results of the work in question on the official Van Abbemuseum website. When the visitor clicks the link, a new page opens with tags like the following images.

This research can contribute to art education in museums. Through this text and the other results of the research, we propose that people, as exhibition visitors, experiment with the distanced look of AI as a way of critically thinking about the art system. We hope that it helps create new relationships, openings, and connections for non-specialists to explore art critically. Instead of museums using commercially-available AI from Big Tech, uncritically, why not make more radical and creative uses of technology? We can critically use AI to open cracks inside of the museum for self-reflection, in a way that is characteristic of institutional critique.

As AI continues to grow, change and 'improve', we understand these results in their limitations: they are a snapshot of how they worked when we experimented with them. As increasingly data is produced in our everyday lives and interactions, and as companies hoard and process greater swaths of data to continually train these models, it also continually changes the way in which art is read. In our experience throughout our research, we have seen both minor and major changes, which we think point to the simultaneously productive and critical instability of AI and Art.



**work, artist, year**  
BOERDERIJ  
Heinrich Campendonk, 1919

---


**data**  
A group of stuffed animals  
building (79%)  
poster (78%)  
shadow box (61%)  
different, skiing, bus, snow  
possible racy (probably because there are women)

---


**products**  
toyshop, retail store, computer, table

---

**similar images**



recoding art van abbemuseum collection



**work, artist, year**  
we  
Cornille, 1968

---


**data**  
A close up of an old computer  
asphalt (62%)  
brick (58%)  
comic book (55%)  
intersection (52%)  
Thrift Shop (music by Macklemore & Ryan Lewis)  
camouflage, ejection seat, electrical device

---


**products**  
table, computer

---

**similar images**



recoding art van abbemuseum collection



**work, artist, year**  
MY NECK, MY BACK CURVE SILENT  
Karin Arink, 1993

---



**data**  
a close up of food  
a cat sleeping  
invertebrate animal, animal with shell (paper nautilus, chambered nautilus, shellfish)  
visually similar: Laocoonte, indian religious cadaver, straitjacket  
possible a racy image

---

**products**  
food product (vegetable), garlic (98%)

---

**similar images**

recoding art van abbemuseum collection

Fig. 27 Examples of labels next to the images of the artworks interpreted by the AIs. Design by Guilherme Falcão.

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## NOTES

- 1 The entire project, including the contents of the cards, is documented on a website created by musician and educator Gregory Alan Taylor with the permission of Brian Eno.
- 2 For works related to this, see for example O'Neil (2016) and Eubanks (2018).
- 3 Of course, the subject matter of this research (artworks from a collection) is also particularly suitable for this approach, since, unlike predictive policing and other egregious algorithmic systems, these errors do not directly harm others.
- 4 The use of AIs to reveal processes of the art system also connects to Conceptual Art practices, especially in the premises written by artist Sol Lewitt (Paragraphs on Conceptual Art 1967) that defend non-logical and non-specialized artistic understandings. Some of his sentences include 'Irrational judgements lead to new experience', 'The artist may not necessarily understand his [sic] own art. His perception is neither better nor worse than that of others' and 'There are many elements involved in a work of art. The most important are the most obvious'.
- 5 AI software is also an outcome of capitalism and consumerism, and its logic reinforces the reading of artworks in this way. Rather than untangling these two systems, we are interested in how one exposes the other.
- 6 A considerable part of the visually-similar images the Google Cloud Vision points to are in low resolution, which brings us to a document that is typical of our era. In *In Defense of the Poor Image*, artist and researcher Hito Steyerl (2009) writes about the importance of analyzing these images: 'Poor images are the contemporary Wretched of the Screen, the debris of audiovisual production, the trash that washes up on the digital economies' shores. They testify to the violent dislocation, transferrals, and displacement of images – their acceleration and circulation within the vicious cycles of audiovisual capitalism. Poor images are dragged around the globe as commodities or their effigies, as gifts or as bounty. Poor images show the rare, the obvious, and the unbelievable – that is, if we can still manage to decipher it. (...) The circulation of poor images feeds into both capitalist media assembly lines and alternative audiovisual economies. In addition to a lot of confusion and stupefaction, it also possibly creates disruptive movements of thought and affect.'
- 7 UCLA professor Christopher D. Johnson writes about this Warburg project: 'Begun in 1924 and left unfinished at the time of his death in 1929, the *Mnemosyne Atlas* is Aby Warburg's attempt to map the "afterlife of antiquity", or how images of great symbolic, intellectual, and emotional power emerge in Western antiquity and then reappear and are reanimated in the art and cosmology of later times and places, from Alexandrian Greece to Weimar Germany (...)' In its 'last version,' the *Mnemosyne Atlas* consisted of sixty-three panels (Tafeln). Using wooden boards, measuring approximately 150 x 200



cm and covered with black cloth, Warburg arranged and rearranged, in a lengthy combinatory process of addition and subtraction, black and white photographs of art-historical and cosmographical images.'

- 8 An interesting experience may also be the creation of an alternative printed catalog of the museum collection with the official information about the works, but replacing the official images of the pieces with their 'most similar image', as found by the AIs in the internet.



# Meaningful Matter: Testing Feminist Pedagogies in the Exhibition Space

Ana S González  
Rueda



As a research programme, Deviant Practice positions itself as challenging long-held assumptions and ‘veering off the entrenched path’ (Van Abbemuseum n.d.). It is concerned with Charles Esche’s conception of ‘the demodernising possibility’<sup>1</sup> which – inspired by decolonial thinking – involves questioning the modern traditions of the art museum and thinking beyond fundamental modern dichotomies such as West or rest, mind or body (2017, p. 215). In response to the museum’s invitation to question ‘suppositions, hierarchies and modes of working’ (Van Abbemuseum n.d.), I chose to draw attention to the pedagogies inherent to the exhibition space.

My project particularly focused on the encounter of the public with the contemporary art collection display ‘The Way Beyond Art’. I was intent on questioning the educational hierarchies between curators, artworks, and visitors as well as challenging preconceptions about the kind of knowledge exhibitions propose.

To do so, I proposed working with feminist new materialist pedagogies<sup>2</sup>, which would allow me to unsettle the androcentric canon of knowledge production. This pedagogical approach can be helpful to question the hierarchies that determine the ways of knowing, thinking, and acting in the museum. Additionally, it can disrupt the conventional transmission-based educational model and instead, puts forward

a co-creative, 'intra-active material process' (Revelles Benavente and Cielemecka 2016). Rather than looking at the 'inter-actions' between separate entities, intra-action refers to 'the mutual constitution of entangled agencies' (Barad 2007, p. 33). In the context of the museum, we can think of the intra-active relationship between works, visitors, building, text, furniture, guards, and how everyone and everything mutually affects each other (Lenz Taguchi 2010, pp. 30, 39). By rethinking conventions and questioning pedagogical authority (Revelles Benavente and Cielemecka 2016), feminist new materialist pedagogies emphasise both the making and unmaking as a collective process. I was particularly interested in testing their ability to 'break-through' established dichotomies (Dolphijn and van der Tuin 2012, p. 96) between meaning and matter and visitors and artworks. These pedagogies prioritise the process of diverging, rather than a certain end result (Revelles Benavente and Cielemecka 2016), which makes them highly pertinent to the Deviant Practice research platform.

'The Way Beyond Art' offered an exceptional opportunity to test feminist new materialist pedagogies and examine intra-active relationships within the museum. Can and Asli Altay's exhibition design is based on a series of atmospheres that challenge the conventions of the modern museum such as the white cube model or the privileged position of the eye. The designers were interested in encouraging bodily experience and worked with 'triggers' and 'intensities' to bring together visitors (conceived as 'users'), display, and artworks and to foster actions and reactions between them. Working in collaboration with curators Christiane Berndes, Charles Esche, and Steven ten Thije, the designers compiled an inventory of architectural typologies to create 'atmosphere rooms' for Land, Home, and Work, the three central topics of the exhibition. In Land, for instance, the hypostyle worked as a starting point to create a forest-like structure of

interconnecting columns. In the next room, the watchtower and the *khayma* (a collective tent) provide contrasting positions: a high surveying point and an invitation to sit and slow down. The anatomical theatre served as inspiration in Work, which includes a table allowing visitors to inspect the works closely. Rather than resorting to wall text or labels, curatorial discourse was integrated in the form of binders that introduce thematic sections and offer interpretative guidance. Crucially, the designers conceived the exhibition as an ecosystem, a site of action and reaction between works, users, and atmospheres ('The Way Beyond Art' opening with Can & Asli Altay 2017). Their design foregrounds the reciprocal relationship between all agents within the exhibition space, which makes it unusually welcoming to a feminist new materialist approach.

Previous experimental projects at the museum also centred on the encounter between the public and the contemporary art collection. 'Play Van Abbe' (2011) invited visitors to play the roles of pilgrims, tourists, flaneurs, and workers to try out different ways of experiencing the exhibition. Sara Wookey's 'Point.Punt' (2013) reflected on the presence and movement of bodies through the museum. This project examined the position of bodies in relation to artworks and the restriction of movement by learned socially acceptable behaviour. Visitors received a pack including a cushion, maps, a notebook, and diagrams that suggested ways of repositioning their body during the visit. Currently, the 'Multisensory Museum' (2019-2021) redesigns the exhibition space considering all the senses. My project for the Deviant Practice research programme investigated the visitors' experience from a pedagogical perspective, seeking to contribute demodernising meaning-production strategies.

In the first section of this chapter, I introduce physicist and feminist theorist Karen Barad's notion of diffraction





'Movement-as-learning', 4 May 2019. Photography: Marcel de Buck. Archives Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, The Netherlands.

as a key methodological tool of the project. I discuss diffractive pedagogies (a feminist new materialist approach) and present their relevance to museum studies. Then, I elaborate on the movement-as-learning sessions conducted at the Van Abbemuseum. Following Barad, and based on a seminar with the museum's curatorial and mediation teams, the second part of this chapter concentrates on rethinking the notion of mediation from a performative framework. To conclude, I outline the value of feminist new materialist pedagogies to exhibition-making today.

### DIFFRACTIVE PEDAGOGIES: MOVING-AS-LEARNING AT THE MUSEUM

Barad's work focuses on the inextricable link between matter and meaning. She is interested in the challenges presented by quantum physics to the modernist worldview and its radical rethinking of the nature of knowledge and being (2007, pp. 3, 6, 24). For example, quantum physics throws into doubt the Western metaphysics notion that the world is inhabited by independent, individual things with specific properties. This questioning has profound implications, such as the need to rethink the binary distinction between interior and exterior. Barad concentrates on issues such as the possibility of objectivity, the meaning-making process, and the relationship between discourse and materiality (2007, pp. 19, 23f.). Her understanding of the 'integral' relationship between human and nonhuman, material and discursive, their collaboration and mutual involvement, present an exciting perspective for museum studies. Her work advances as a 'transdisciplinary engagement' starting from the proposition by physicist Niels Bohr that 'we are part of the nature that we seek to understand' (Barad 2007, pp. 25f.).

**Barad's elaboration of 'diffraction' was fundamental to the project. Diffraction is a physical phenomenon**





'Movement-as-learning', 4 May 2019. Photography: Marcel de Buck. Archives Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, The Netherlands.

observed in wave behaviour. It refers to wave patterns and their overlapping and spreading. Think, for example, of the rings formed by drops of rain falling into a puddle or rocks thrown in the water (Barad 2007, pp. 28, 76f.). According to classical physics, only waves (not particles) produce diffraction patterns. However, this principle was challenged by the 'wave-particle duality paradox': the experimental finding in the early 20th century that electrons behave as particles or as waves under different circumstances. At the time, the two-slit experiment demonstrated that the measuring apparatus is inseparable from the phenomenon observed. Barad highlights the measurement process as a critical moment during which the natural and the social, and meaning and matter meet (2007, pp. 29, 67, 81). She argues that the quantum conception of diffraction 'troubles the very notion of *dichotomy*', the splitting into two and differencing between this or that. Barad applies diffractive analysis to think, for example, about queer and mestiza identities (identifying as both male and female, black and white). Diffraction 'queers binaries' and involves rethinking the notion of a definite boundary between object and subject (Barad 2014, pp. 168ff.). In the context of the museum, it implies questioning the presumed gap between works and visitors.

Starting from the impossibility of separating bodies from their surrounding objects and environments, diffractive pedagogies concentrate on materiality and entanglement and explore ways to simultaneously 'produce, embody, and theorise' (Hickey-Moody et al. 2016, p. 213). My project brought this pedagogical approach into the exhibition space to shift attention to our physical, material, and bodily experience. Museums are 'material institutions par excellence', and yet, as Sandra Dudley observes, their way of working precludes visitors from physically and directly engaging with the objects on display (2012, p.1). Diffractive pedagogies are similarly concerned with the physical aspects of learning and involve staying





'Movement-as-learning', 19 March 2019.  
Photography Ana S González Rueda & Loes Janssen

with the discomfort of not knowing (Hickey-Moody et al. 2016, p. 213), a common situation in contemporary art exhibitions. These pedagogies require dealing with preconceptions about the kind of knowledge expected in a particular setting, and, at the same time, entail rethinking 'what legitimate knowledge looks (and feels) like' (Hickey-Moody et al. 2016, p. 215). In the context of museum studies, Dudley argues that directly engaging with the objects on display is meaningful in its own right, not just as a step to interpret them. While she recognises that the work of museums to improve accessibility is valuable and important, Dudley notes that these efforts – particularly textual interpretation – often undermine physical engagement (2012, p.6). She refers to the conventional, informational approach whereby an artwork is conceived as an 'object-information package' that supports a specific narrative as if it were incomplete without its discursive context. Instead, she is interested in the creative and transformative potential of a materialist model that draws attention to the 'enmeshing of the physical thing and human, sensory perceptions of it' (Dudley 2010, p. 3ff.). Diffractive pedagogies allow us to concentrate on these entanglements.

The ocularcentric approach to display remains a fundamental concern. Historically, it is based on the Enlightenment's connection between vision and rational cognition, with eyes carried by tired, uncomfortable bodies. As Helen Rees Leahy observes, knowing how to look also requires knowing how to stand and how to read an exhibition script (2012, p. 5). Tony Bennett underlines that the ocularcentric approach implies that 'the thing is subordinated to the word', which also means that sight is subordinated to the curator's 'controlling intellect' (1998, p. 354f.). The challenge then consists in moving away from the modernist, human imposition of meaning onto objects (Dudley 2010, p. 13). Throughout the project, I wanted to draw attention to the intra-relationships between bodies and things and their





entanglement in the exhibition's environment as well as looking into the implication of mediators, visitors, works, and displays in the interpretive and learning process.

We are used to forms of didactic, disembodied learning at the museum; gallery tours and visitor guides often rely on the transmission of expert knowledge to the audience. In this case, I decided to try 'movement-as-learning', a diffractive pedagogical strategy that addresses the problem of the body as a site of learning (Hickey-Moody et al. 2016, p.214). In collaboration with yoga instructor and museum educator Marieke Verberne, we planned and led two sessions, first working with the museum volunteers, and then inviting the general public. These sessions aimed to highlight the way that we have learned to move in the museum: keeping a certain pace, a specific distance from the works, an acceptable volume level, etc. They also involved rethinking the movement and presence of our bodies in galleries. We briefly introduced these ideas to the participants and reassured them by explaining that there is no right or wrong way to move and no need to worry about looking interesting, rather the idea was to focus on how they felt. Then, we asked them to come up with positions or gestures for 'certainty' and 'uncertainty'. The transition between these two states gave us our first moves. For 'uncertainty', participants closed their bodies down, crouching and adopting unstable positions, sometimes standing on one foot or scratching their heads. 'Certainty' postures were more stable and confident, feet firmly grounded, standing tall, chest lifted. We all tried each other's moves. Then, we started playing with scale (making smaller and larger movements) and worked with choreographic scaffolding to bring them together. It was difficult to stop ourselves from verbally interpreting movements and keep thinking through our bodies. We chose to build our collective choreography by following each other's movements in silence. During the sessions, the body was conceived as discourse,

each move as a meaningful 'embodied concept' (Hickey-Moody et al. 2016, p. 216). By means of 'thinking in action' (Hickey-Moody et al. 2016, p. 225), the exercise blurred the limit between inner and outer experience.

The second part of these sessions consisted of working in pairs with 'active' and 'passive' postures or gestures in relation to works or displays chosen by the participants. They went close to Sheela Gowda's large-scale print *Protest, My Son* (2011), leaning in and raising their arms, mimicking the positions in the image, joining the scene of the protest. For her 'passive' posture, a volunteer stepped aside and leaned against the wall, looking sideways at the work. Others engaged with Céline Condorelli's *The Bottom Line* (2014) and Füsün Onur's *Let's Meet at the Orient* (1995). They crouched down to look into the metallic container or laid on the floor, gazing at the bright blue balloon. They ran in circles inside, causing the metallic curtain to flutter and walked around, softly grazing it. Others hurried across the room, glancing at each of the works, or rubbing their hands in excitement. We finished the session by drawing attention to our need for interpretive, explanatory closure, the urge to reach the right answer. Instead, we focused on questioning this expectation and considering how and what we can learn by leaving things open and making room for indeterminacy. Working with a smaller group of seven participants during our first session offered the time and space required for more meaningful engagement with the works. The larger group proved more difficult to handle, and we were not always able to encourage participants to explore other ways of moving, rather than merely acknowledging their usual postures and gestures in front of the works. Nonetheless, the sessions were fun, albeit sometimes uncomfortable when participants felt unsure of what to think or do. From a feminist new materialist perspective, experiencing and working with this playfulness and discomfort





'Movement-as-learning', 19 March 2019. Photography Ana S González Rueda.

is central to the learning process. For the second part of the project, I took a step back to delve into the potential contribution of these pedagogies to curatorial mediation.

### RETHINKING MEDIATION FROM A PERFORMATIVE FRAMEWORK

During a seminar with the curatorial and mediation teams, we concentrated on rethinking mediation from a feminist new materialist perspective.<sup>3</sup> As a basis for our discussion, I proposed reading an excerpt from Barad's book *Meeting the Universe Halfway* in which she addresses the shift from representationalism to a performative framework (2007, pp. 46-50), together with 'Curating/Curatorial', a conversation between Irit Rogoff and Beatrice von Bismarck (2010, pp. 21-38). Under representationalism, Barad refers to a tripartite system: knowledge (representation), the known (what is represented), and the knower (who does the representing) where representations serve a mediating function (2007, p. 46ff.). At the museum – and more specifically, within 'The Way Beyond Art' – we can think of the text in the binders, the works, and the curators and mediators respectively. Barad underlines that while representationalism is deep-rooted in Western culture and widely considered as common sense, it is historically contingent. She notes that representationalism is an outcome of the Cartesian distinction between internal and external that results in 'the asymmetrical faith in word over world' (2007, p. 48f.). Therefore, I suggest that representationalism cannot be taken for granted in working towards demodernising the museum.

As an alternative, the performative approach concentrates on the practices of representing and their effects. Within this framework, knowledge has less to do with distanced learning than with direct material engagement. For Barad, it allows investigating boundary-





'Movement-as-learning', 4 May 2019. Photography Marcel de Buck. Archives Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, The Netherlands.

making practices that separate objects from subjects (2007, pp. 49, 93). She makes a distinction between representationalism's strict barrier between subject and object, and performativity's attention to the emergence of subject and object through their intra-actions. Under representationalism, we understand words and things as separate entities, and there is a clear distinction between the knower and the known sustained by the notion of distanced, objective learning. In contrast, performativity implies the examination of material-discursive phenomena and the knower is conceived as part of – and directly engaging with the world (Barad 2007, p.89). How does the distinction between representationalism and performativity compare with that between curating and the curatorial?

Rogoff considers curating as a representational practice that focuses on the end product, while the curatorial concentrates on 'the trajectory of activity' with an emphasis on 'an ongoing process' (2010, pp. 22f., 27). Under the curatorial, von Bismarck observes that 'objects, people, spaces, and contexts' are interconnected (2010, p. 28). The curatorial shifts emphasis from presentation to experience and rethinks exhibitions as spaces where things take place. Rather than sharing expertise, the curator enables undetermined processes of collaborative knowledge production (Sternfeld and Ziaja 2012, p. 22f.). Working towards a performative conception of mediation thus implies challenging the conventional approach and the attempt to close a presumed gap in understanding between works and visitors.

At the Van Abbemuseum, we talked about the organisational distinction between curatorial and mediation teams, particularly in relation to the production of meaning. We discussed where and when does mediation take place? Who is involved in developing ideas and making decisions? What kind of boundaries need to break down? What work has already been done? For



example, we considered the museum constituencies as a way of initiating a conversation and developing a project with the public. Nevertheless, the question of how to allow time for each exhibition to unfold and redistribute and manage the staff's workload remains.

The museum's team is interested in exploring the 'types of knowledge that the body can give rise to as a demodernising methodology' that moves away from Cartesian thinking. In this sense, we must rid ourselves of the entrenched idea that 'representations (that is their meaning or content) are more accessible to us than the things they supposedly represent' (the artworks, in this case) (Rouse 1996, p.209). In my view, attending to meaning-making processes in place and thinking beyond the mind and body dichotomy is crucial to the task of demodernising the museum. Regarding mediation, we talked about the team's efforts to move away from answers and steer towards questions and the difficulty of dealing with visitors' expectations of stable meaning and expert knowledge. The programme of the Van Abbemuseum has explored different ways of experiencing art. For example, the team referred to 'Play' (2011) as a 'labour-intensive' project. We considered this programme in relation to Rogoff and von Bismarck's call for exhibitions that work hard and in which the audience works hard in a constant, transformative process. Beyond the labour involved in setting up a show, they refer to open-ended exhibitions that continue to produce work (2010, p.33f.). Here, the curatorial is conceived as an 'epistemic structure' that generates an 'event of knowledge', a 'send-off' without a predetermined outcome (Rogoff and von Bismarck 2010, p. 23). To incorporate these processes into the collection displays, we must also consider the material aspects of learning and the body's part in the production of meaning.

Another key concern for the team consists in making the gallery space more hospitable and welcoming to bodies so that they want to move and make noise; they intend to create a space that can stall the urge to refer to language and understanding. In this respect, a crucial question is: how to extend the creative moment instead of immediately falling back on discourse as a colonising system that provides a sense of security? The session involved thinking about ways of contextualising and framing artworks and questioning the kind of knowledge and learning in place within the collection displays. We considered these issues in relation to Rogoff's notion of 'unframed knowledge' which implies treating knowledge not as information but as a series of proposals or provocations. Rogoff describes a back-and-forth fluid movement between exhibitions and the field of knowledge (2010, p. 31f.). She proposes working at the seams as a way of staying with the problem: 'Seams are both a continuous matter and an opening up', they undermine the boundaries between one thing and another (Rogoff and von Bismarck 2010, p. 36).

Delving into the experience of learning at the museum allowed us to think of deviant alternatives. According to Elizabeth Ellsworth: 'Knowledge, once it is defined, taught and used as a "thing made", is dead. It has been forced to give up that which "really exists": its nature when it is a thing in the making, continuously evolving through our understanding of the world and our own bodies' experience of and participation in that world' (2005, p. 1). Rethinking curatorial mediation from a performative framework allows us to recover what Ellsworth calls '*thinking-feeling*, the embodied sensation of *making sense*', the very experience of producing knowledge which is the basis of learning (2005, p. 1). With this in mind, we can conceive exhibitions *in the making* through our embodied experience and interactions with the works and the galleries' environment.



The project set out to question the educational hierarchies and types of knowledge and learning proposed by ‘The Way Beyond Art’, the current contemporary art collection display at the Van Abbemuseum. Challenging the presumption that understanding what curators have to say about a work equals knowing the work, the project explored an alternative pedagogical approach within the exhibition space. Feminist new materialist pedagogies, and in particular diffractive pedagogies, were the primary means used to address the entanglement and intra-active relationship between visitors, works, displays, discourse, and the galleries’ atmosphere. The sessions conducted at the Van Abbemuseum show that the emphasis of these pedagogies on the body as a site of learning, and on the interdependent flowing relationship between meaning and matter, subject and object, thinking and feeling, can support meaning-making processes in the wider context of the ‘demodernising possibility’ (Esche 2017). More work is needed to further incorporate feminist new materialist pedagogies into exhibition-making, especially during the conceptualising and planning stages. By moving away from the notion of knowledge ‘as a tool for prediction and control’ and emphasising the playful, pleasurable aspects of learning (Ellsworth 2005, p.2), the project highlights the value of this pedagogical approach in framing deviant, more imaginative encounters with contemporary art.

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## NOTES

- 1 As a reference for assessing art globally, Western art history has always been inadequate. Its underlying hegemonic and colonial structures, its hierarchical categorizations and its linear, progressive thinking are no longer able to explain the art world and its products. The questions that this crisis raises are manifold. How can the legacy of modernity as a concept and an on-going tradition be addressed? Can recent scholarly insights and proposals for transnational and cross-cultural understandings of modernism be translated into museum practices? The speakers are all committed to historical analysis as a valuable tool to map relationships between different artistic practices and to museums as sites where new narratives can be told.
- 2 New materialism builds on the ‘linguistic turn’ and its emphasis on language to draw attention to the role of material agency in the constitution of reality (See Lenz Taguchi 2010, p.12).
- 3 Session with Nick Aikens (Research Curator), Christiane Berndes (Head of Collection), Loes Janssen (Public Mediation), Haiko Sleumer and Hilde Van der Heijden (Communication and education). 20 March 2019, Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven.



# Negotiating Jeopardy: Use Value, the Body and Political Dissent: The Autonomy Project Revisited

John Byrne



In October 2011, The Van Abbemuseum hosted 'The Autonomy Conference' as part of the ongoing 'Autonomy Project'. Set against the backdrop of the Arab Spring and the burgeoning Occupy/Indignados Movements, contributors to the debate included Jacques Rancière, Peter Osborne, Tania Bruguera, Gerald Raunig, Isabell Lorey, Thomas Hirschhorn, Ruth Sondregger, Kim Mereiene, Franco Berardi and Hito Steyerl. For those involved in the Autonomy Project itself, the Conference marked a turning point in our thinking, scope and ambition.

Rather than attempting to revivify the term 'autonomy' as a means to enable more open, porous and social engagements with artworks in museum and gallery spaces, the project started looking towards the ideas of use, use value and usership as a means to radically re-think the terms and conditions of what art, art institutions and our experiences of art could be or become. In a Keynote discussion with Charles Esche (Director of The Van Abbemuseum) and Nicos Papastergiadis (University of Melbourne) Jacques Rancière emphasised this mood with his opening remark: 'Autonomy is not one of my words'. (Papastergiadis & Esche, 2014, p. 29). Rancière went on to explain scepticism with the etymological roots of autonomy – autos (meaning self) and nomos (firstly meaning a part, a portion or a territory before coming to mean 'the law') and, stemming from this, 'the whole question of the relation between three terms: territory, selfhood and self-legislation.' (Papastergiadis & Esche, 2014, p. 29). In this light,



Rancière spoke of the problematic relationships inherent between art and activism at a time of political crisis. Developing his ideas of dissensus and politics as the act of the unseen and the unheard claiming a voice, Rancière asked ‘how do you put together... three things: the public manifestation of something that remained invisible; a break with the normal order of things, which also means with legality; and, third, the creation of a form of empowerment of people.’ (Papastergiadis & Esche, 2014, p. 32). For me, these three connected questions cut to the core of our struggle, releasing the term ‘autonomy’ from its neoliberal capture – where it has increasingly become a fixed and non-negotiable term to validate radical funding cuts to the arts under the premise that the arts are exemplary forms of self-reliance and self-governance.

As part of my current research, I have been looking back at both the Autonomy Project and the Autonomy Symposium as a means to rethink how this period of collaboration, facilitated by the Van Abbemuseum, shaped and formed some of my subsequent contributions to the L’Internationale Project ‘The Uses of Art: The Legacies of 1848 and 1989’ and which underpinned some of my ongoing reflections relative to the work or labour of art, ‘The Constituent Museum’ project, and my current research into what I see as the political necessity for Museums and Galleries to use art as a constituent means of negotiating jeopardy. In turn, this provides me with the opportunity to try and make some retrospective sense of more than a decade of engagement with this process. What follows is a partial account of some of the fundamental themes and issues that I started pulling together within the book project that I am undertaking with the support of the Van Abbemuseum’s Deviant Practice Research Programme and the Whitworth and Manchester Galleries. For the purposes of this paper, I also tried to pull out those lines of flight which resonate most directly with the fraught relationships linking physical

and social body with reference to museums and the social production of ‘Bodies of Knowledge’.

## I.

The Autonomy Project, initiated in 2010, had its roots from the 2008 Global Financial Crash, major bailouts to Banks and Financial institutions, and the resulting response of neoliberal global austerity. In this context, cuts to ‘non-essential’ budgets – such as those set aside for the arts – marked a significant radical change toward the absolute financial instrumentalization of public institutions, including museums and galleries, that had been underway since the collapse of the Eastern Block in 1989. As a result, the Autonomy project was initially an attempt to recapture and repurpose one of the main terms and conditions of Modernist art practice – that of artistic autonomy – and to reopen its fixed and institutionalised meaning as a condition of disinterested aesthetic contemplation and engagement that could only be provided by Modern Art museums. Instead, the Autonomy Project set out to re-vivify the term autonomy as a site of social, political and economic – as well as aesthetic – contest, a territory to be struggled over and fought for. As Charles Esche pointed out, this would obviously mean that any repurposing of the term Autonomy would have to run counter to common sense and often strongly-held and guarded beliefs. Nevertheless, envisaging autonomy as a socially produced construct – rather than as an *a priori* given – and as something that has to be fought for and taken from those who would misuse or misconstrue the term for purposes of power and control, offered those involved with the projet with an opportunity to imagine ourselves otherwise at a time of global crisis.

What we did not realise when we undertook this project was just how far-reaching its consequences might prove. What started out as an attempt to rethink how



audiences or visitors of museums and galleries might experience art in a more democratic and meaningful way soon turned into the realisation that museums and galleries – and art itself – had to be fundamentally re-thought, or re-imagined, if commodified absorption into luxury tourism, leisure and cultural industries was to be avoided. Instead of thinking about the ways in which we might re-democratise and re-activate the established terms and conditions that currently dictate a ‘top down’, one-way public access to art (where an expert culture governs the culturally-correct understanding and uses of art taking place within the physical and ideological purview of their institutional architectures), we started reflecting how museums and galleries could play a key role in the re-democratisation and re-activation of the public body itself via the uses of art.

From my own perspective, this initially meant accepting that, under our current condition of neo-liberal occupation, there is no longer any form of *a priori* alterity that can be offered by art or, for that matter, by the work or labour of art itself. Rather than seeing this admission as raising a white flag to neoliberalism, I argued that having ‘no inside out or outside in’ would allow us to begin re-imagining a condition of capitalist colonisation that, to paraphrase Mark Fisher, currently occupies the horizon of the thinkable. Instead of falling back into the historical trap of ‘art for art’s sake’ autonomy – where useless usefulness and purposeless purpose are seen as ways in which art can simply fly in the face of financial instrumentalization – I began to argue that the condition of neo-liberal occupation was asymmetrical. What I meant by this was that the languages of alterity and the left, once so clearly distinguishable from the terms and conditions that delimited the right, had already been successfully occupied and repurposed inside neoliberal discourses of self-management, deregulation and fiscal responsibility. And if this was the case, then any form of socially and politically

radical art would now have to recapture, reoccupy and repurpose its own terms and conditions of use and usership from within the operational overcodes of a globalised, neoliberal logic.

In this light, I also started reconsidering my relationship to history and theory, more specifically the tradition of Marxist Social History and Theory that conditioned my own thinking around art. One of the conundrums – or more accurately the Gordian Knot – of Marxist art history and theory has been the fraught relationship of art to autonomy and heteronomy, or – more commonly – of the alleged line that divides high art from everyday life – a line which, more often than not, has been drawn between the notion of the autonomous sovereign individual and the confused and inexact ambiguity of the social mass or social body. However, I would argue that this perennial impasse, exemplified by Adorno’s famous response to Benjamin’s article ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’ – that art and life are the torn halves of an integral freedom, to which however they do not add up (Adorno, 1936) – also holds within it a clue to its resolution. What if we begin to look back at a time before this ‘split’ between art and life happened? What if we also started asking why this ‘split’ appeared as a necessary precondition for the existence of art as we know it or knew it to be? And what clues lie waiting for us in the rubble of forgotten history, that will help us to rethink, reimagine and remake ourselves today?

As we started scratching away at the historical conditions that underpinned the autonomy/heteronomy bifurcation, increasing possibilities and alternatives for thinking through and beyond this historical impasse seemed to emerge and converge. For example, the growing difficulty in reconciling use or use value to the alienation of mechanised mass production that emerged during the 18th and 19th centuries, which clearly underpinned a shift toward the idea that art for





art's sake could provide a moral and ethical rebuff to the instrumentalization of mechanised *laissez-faire* capitalism – were also clearly expressed in Marx' writings. This struggle is perhaps most evident in the early pages of Marx' *Kapital Volume I*, where he tries to draw a plausible distinction between use value and exchange value. For Marx, initially, use value is an ethical, political and moral imperative – it is a bodily, physical necessity, a compelling function of our humanness (a material and qualitative pre-requisite for our continued subsistence) – whereas exchange value is an abstract, quantitative mental process. In this light, Marx's insistence on the bodily necessity of use value is more than a moral and ethical imperative – it is an insistence on the social (as mankind works to produce the conditions of its own reproduction, individuals enter into relationships that are inescapably social in their nature). Simultaneously, Marx's insistence on the bodily necessity of social use value also enables him to isolate the point at which use value starts mutating into abstract labour-power under the conditions of Capitalism. As a historical shift takes place in the general labour force, from the experience of actively making or participating in the means of subsistence to simply selling labour power as a tool within an increasingly extended manufacturing process, we begin to experience a circulation and sale of goods that, in themselves, seem to have magically appeared in the 'absence' of this increasingly exploitative labour process. This seismic historical shift, I began to argue, also marks the point at which Capital's new forms of alienated labour and use value became simultaneously haunted by a mythologised historical past and an imagined revolutionary future – a future where the individual and the social body (as the Proletariat to be) are reunited through valorised forms of useful and fulfilling labour. And this is also precisely the point when historical narratives of 'returns' – to craft (the arts and craft movement for instance) started intersecting with mechanized futurologies of a social

machine age that is yet to come (Futurism, Constructivism, Bauhaus, etc.)

## II.

One way of beginning to think and act both through and between these extremes of social nostalgia or utopian futurology is, I would argue, also offered by Rancière. However, I'm not thinking of Rancière's suggestion of a meta-politics of aesthetics here – as a means of usefully rethinking the interconnectedness and emplotments of political and aesthetic activities that are, fundamentally, made of the same stuff (of a politics and aesthetics that are, in essence, mechanisms for the re-distribution of the sensible, or of making 'sense of sense and sense' as Rancière puts it). Instead, I am thinking here of the Rancière of *The Nights of Labour: The Workers' Dream in Nineteenth-Century France* (1989); of the Rancière who looks back to the future at the historical struggle of artisans, workers and craftsmen who used writing - and the growing availability of ground-up political publications in the 1840s - as a means to reuse and challenge existing languages of power and control. In doing so, Rancière consciously avoids the trap of projecting a revolutionary and proletarian class that is yet to be – a mythologized class that somehow stands at the ready to free itself from the shackles and yoke of capitalist oppression (when, and only when, it is brought to the full consciousness of its own servitude by enlightened bourgeois revolutionaries). Instead, he paints a more plausible picture of everyday micropolitical dissent – a rhizomatic reuse of the existing languages of mastery made by a class that is already entirely conscious of its own fixed position inside the hierarchies of power. For Rancière, this existing class of fully-conscious workers, who are willing to reuse a language that is always too mutable and porous to be owned completely by the hand of their masters, encompasses more revolutionary



**potential than an idealized and abstracted proletariat:**

A worker who had never learned how to write and yet tried to compose verses to suit the taste of his times was perhaps more of a danger to the prevailing ideological order than a worker who performed revolutionary songs... Perhaps the truly dangerous classes are not so much the uncivilized ones thought to undermine society from below, but rather the migrants who move at the borders between classes, individuals and groups who develop capabilities within themselves which are useless for the improvement of their material lives and which in fact are liable to make them despise material concerns. (Rancière, J. 1988, p.50)

**This type of work or labour of art, this continual and migrant reuse and reconfiguration of the possibilities offered by language, technology and existing architectures and protocols of power is now, I would argue, the kind of work – or labour – the work or labour of art has now become. As I have already argued, the use value of art within the asymmetrical context of neoliberal occupation becomes the activation of non-alienated forms of social labour allowing for the possibility of alternative and otherwise to be kept open as resources for thinking and doing against the grain. And, if there are no pre-given alterities or asylum-like safe havens from which these activities can be launched, then the work or labour of art must become one of social and collective recapture of the very terms and conditions of possibility. And if this is so, then the work or labour of art cannot simply remain a condition of refusal, it must entail the activity of making and doing otherwise.**

**Another way of thinking through this contemporary urgency - of envisaging the work or labour of art as a form of active recapture from within - can again be found in the historical analysis of Jacques Rancière; this time in his excavation and reactivation of a story**

**written by 19th century joiner and lifelong prolific writer Gabriel Gauny and that first appeared in one of the many journals that arose during the 1848 revolution in France. This story, which was the only writing to be published by Gauny in his lifetime, describes the work of a casual floor layer. More importantly, Gauny uses the story to describe the complex attitude of a skilled worker who believes that he is less exploited than a day labourer. In Gauny's narrative, the skilled worker, who is more or less allowed to get on with his job in his own time as long as the result is perfect, feels himself to have more ownership of his own arms than an unskilled labourer who is constantly supervised by his bosses. This gives the floor layer a delusory sense of freedom and emancipation – delusory in the sense that he knows that his so-called freedom is earned at the expense of spending more time and effort over his labour than is necessarily required. Conversely, the skilled labourer in the story derives a genuine, secret pleasure from this delusory emancipation which is earned at the cost of his own exploitation. In this light, Rancière argues that texts such as Gauny's do not merely represent everyday experience through description but instead, they reinvent the everyday through the reframing of individual experience within the redistribution of the sensible.**

**For Rancière, the distribution of the sensible means:**

[...] a relation between occupations and equipment, between being in a specific space and time, performing specific activities, and being endowed with capacities of seeing, saying, and doing that 'fit' those activities. A distribution of the sensible is a matrix that defines a set of relations between sense and sense: that is, between a form of sensory experience and interpretation which makes sense of it. It ties an occupation to a presumption. (Rancière, J. 2009, p. 275)

**As such, Rancière argues that the delusion in Gauny's story represents 'both a tiny shift and a decisive upheaval in the understanding of the relationship between exploitation and delusion'.**



What would seem helpful here is that, via Gauny, Rancière offers a way of thinking beyond the current neo-liberal fixity by which any forms of oppositional practice seem doomed to repeat the instrumentalised logic of the commodity. Rancière is also offering a way to open up a new understanding of the Marxist concept of ideology and its relationship to political art, one which is useful in addressing the false separation of use value and art that has plagued us since the latter half of the 19th Century. Whereas classical Marxist theories would see ideology as a delusional misrepresentation of the truth in the interest of a ruling class – with the concomitant proviso that uncovering the ideological misrepresentation of exploitation would ensure the revolutionary uprising of the proletariat – Rancière argues that the ‘schema of knowledge and ignorance, reality and illusion, actually covers up a mere tautology: people are where they are because they are incapable of being elsewhere’. (Rancière, J. 2009, p.275 italics). In other words, people do not occupy specific roles and functions because they either ignore, or are simply incapable of perceiving, the reasons why they occupy a specific position – people are incapacitated simply because they occupy those positions in the first place. ‘The point’ argues Rancière ‘is that those who have the occupation of workers are supposed to be equipped for that occupation and for activities related to it. They are supposed to be equipped for working, not for peripheral activities such as looking around and investigating how society at large works’. (Rancière, J. 2009, p. 275)

The acceptance of inequality, or the schematic organisation of occupations, is resolved for Rancière through the ‘egalitarian mode of the story’ that simultaneously ties empirical fact to ‘belief’ and enables this belief to be addressed through the common sense rhetorical mechanism of ‘as if’. Rancière uses the example of the two reasons Plato gives for workers to remain in their place. First comes the temporal and

material argument whereby workers should remain in their place because they have no time to go elsewhere – their time is taken up by work. Second comes a mythological reason – the gods mixed iron in the makeup of workers and gold in the makeup of those others whose job it is to deal with the common good. By combining mythos and logos, fiction and fact, a particular distribution of the sensible is established and maintained. For Rancière, the worker in Gauny’s text starts reversing the logic of his allotted place, not through the revolutionary rupture caused by a sudden understanding or knowledge of his position, but by becoming ‘less aware of exploitation and pushing aside, thereby, its sensory grip’ (Rancière, J. 2009, p. 277 italics).

It is a subversion of a given distribution of the sensible. What is overturned is the relationship between what is done by one’s arms, what is looked at by one’s eyes, what is felt as a sensory pleasure, and what is thought of as an intellectual concern. It is the relationship between an occupation, the space-time where it is fulfilled, and the sensory equipment for doing it. This subversion implies the reframing of a common sense. A common sense does not mean a consensus but, on the contrary, a polemical place, a confrontation between opposite common senses or opposite ways of framing what is common. (Rancière, J. 2009, p.277)

This reframing of common sense as a space where conflicting common senses collide allows Rancière to do two things. First, it allows him to map out what he sees as the key relationship between aesthetics and politics – if politics is about polemical reframings of common sense then it is, above all, an aesthetic affair. Second, it allows him to remind us that the widespread idea of the worker’s voice is derived from a continual and complex aggregate of multiple reframing operations taking place within and across the distribution of the sensible at a given historical period. As with the



example of Gauny's letter, these activities are predominantly accomplished through common forms of reading and writing. For Rancière, reading is not simply a passive activity whereby pleasure and knowledge can be gained from a fixed text, it is a form of the redistribution of the sensible which is activated through writing. In turn, writing is an activity where words or signs are continually released from narratives of mastery, from fixed social structures that would seek to impose consensual forms of meanings upon them, and become available to anybody. And here, I would argue, we can see clear correspondences between Rancière's insistence that words or signs are 'released' from the fixed conditions of mastery, an insistence on the emancipatory potential of language as a material and productive force, and Marx's notion that use value – as a bodily, political and moral imperative – is predicated upon the ongoing social production of work or labour. This is important to keep in mind, since, in a further letter to his friend Ponty, Gauny recommends the activity of reading as a means to secure freedom. 'Plunge into terrible readings. That will awaken passions in your wretched existence, and the labourer needs them to stand tall in the face of that which is ready to devour him.' (Rancière, J. 2009, p.277).

For Rancière, reading in this sense becomes an active means by which the labourer can steal some of the symbolic gold, formerly fused only in the souls of his masters, and thus contribute to a redistribution of power. The reading and writing activity does not only make messages or representations available to the passive subject; it makes passions available that can be used as forces of change. In turn, Rancière argues that the triggering or arousing of these passions, not simply the messages imbued in literature by particular authors, makes the activities of reading and writing political. By 'breaking the rules that made definite forms of feeling and expression fit definite characters or subject matters', (Rancière, J. 2009, p.279),

literature was able to contribute to the production of the aesthetic as a new form of experience. For Rancière, this shift in aesthetics was made possible by a historically-specific redistribution of the sensible that occurred during the rise of the bourgeois epoch. As emblems of power and religious iconography started to lose their original purpose due to their relocation within the new symbolic forms of museums and art histories, they became available to all as a new recombinant resource.

What Rancière offers us, though his readings of Gauny, is a means by which it becomes possible to conceive a dialectical micro-politics of resistance as relay - one that is continually worked out and worked through a myriad of redeployments, or repositionings, within the structural fabric of political consensus. In this model, Gauny's 1848 article acts as an example of the emancipatory potential held within new modes of art that, through a historical reimagining and reactivation of their relationship to use value and the work or labour of art, can provide us with the means to recapture and redistribute the previously fixed positions and modalities of autonomy and heteronomy. In this sense, the political content of art would no longer be identical with – or reducible to – its aesthetic content. Nor would its potential or impact depend on identifying and uncovering false-truths that belie the real conditions of subsistence and exploitation. Instead, Gauny's writings point towards new ways of recapturing the common fabric of enunciation, and towards a new shared language of previously fixed signs and symbols that can be recombined and re-distributed to form new meanings, precepts and possibilities. Also, it makes it possible to think how this process, this simultaneous working of and ongoing contribution to the use value of art, can happen within an uneven and unequal distribution of power and control under the conditions of neoliberal occupation. Gauny's floor layer is all too painfully aware of the true conditions of his own



historical exploitation whilst, at the same time, being able to wilfully carve out the space within which he can truly begin to imagine the condition of his freedom. This delusory state that offers the real possibility for material change does not arise with the sudden realization of ideological misrepresentation. Nor is it prompted by art which reveals a state of inequality that would otherwise remain incomprehensible to those caught in its grip. Instead, it is brought about inside a lived experience of inequality and by a shift in the aesthetic enabling the possibility for altering the spatial relations of power and control through the use value of art.

### III.

However, if Rancière's reactivation of Gabriel Gauny starts offering us an overall strategy for the work or labour of art as a form of immanent resistance through micropolitical acts of recapture and redistribution (which, I would argue, is also the use value of art as a qualitative and bodily recuperation of non-alienated social labour), we might also start thinking more tactically: what really happens to the role and function of art when the hallmarks of modernist avant-garde resistance have long since been co-opted by the rhetoric of financial capitalism, and, more specifically, by the economically-driven model of the culture industries? And if this is the case, if artists – or for that matter art institutions – who see themselves as progressive progenitors of artistic possibility can no longer simply reach out to the well-rehearsed mantras of artistic autonomy and cultural alterity, how might this activation of recapture within the conditions of neoliberal occupation begin or be affected? Whilst today, both left and right increasingly occupy the same territory of rhetorical discourse surrounding freedom and community, the implications for our traditional understandings of the work or labour of art would appear to be stark.

For me, another way of beginning to think and act our way through and out of this impasse was offered during the Autonomy Symposium by Franco Berardi, as he began to rehearse some of the arguments that would subsequently form the basis of his book *The Uprising: On Poetry and Finance* (2012a). For Berardi, the radical deregulation of neoliberal capital is predicated upon the increasing abstraction of language from the body. He suggests that deregulatory logic relies on the possibility of endlessly connecting and reconfiguring language into regulated, recombinable and meaningless components. This, he argues, runs counter to the open, porous, and poetic use of language as a fluid form of conjunction – as an endlessly-open means of understanding ourselves and each other through evolving forms of communication and growth. In this light, Berardi proposes that the new job of the artist or poet is to return non-alienated forms of porous, mutable, and productive language to the physical and social body. By recombining language, autonomy and production in this manner, Berardi – like Rancière – also allows us to go back to the future: we can begin rethinking the potential of radical alternatives while simultaneously returning to the social and historical bifurcation of use value and exchange value. More specifically, Berardi insists on the distinction between abstract and connective forms of language from material and conjunctive uses of language. Doing so, he consciously replays Marx's struggle with the co-dependency of use value and exchange value and its development through the imposition of capitalism and of abstracted forms of use value as an ideological means of measurement and calibration.

Thus, we can again see clear parallels beginning to emerge. On the one hand, between connective forms of language and the quantitative abstraction of exchange value. On the other, between conjunctive and productive uses of language with the bodily, political and ethical necessity of use-value. Here, the use of language



provides a material means to challenge the established status quo of economic predicates and determinates through the material production of new social meanings and autonomies. The latter are capable of escaping the gravity of power and its reliance on increasingly interchangeable, centralised, and regulated forms of connectivity. In this scenario, the job of the artist or poet becomes the work or labour of keeping language alive when there are no longer any simple distinctions between autonomy and heteronomy. If this is the case, then it also emerges that the work or labour of art is no longer to unite, bridge, or combine the seemingly irreconcilable – but rather, consists in operating a form of social possibility, or use value, within an already networked and saturated world of deregulatory and delusory logic.

Here, Berardi starts to provide us a useful resource for strategically rethinking what kind of work, or labour, the work of art has now become within a globalised and networked neoliberal economy; that of returning an instrumentalised and abstracted language reconfigured as a porous and mutable form of poetry to the physical and social body. But how, we might then ask, is it possible to imagine (let alone effect) such a strategy within a dispersed, networked and asymmetrical society that is already predicated upon forms of alienation, instrumentalization, and abstraction on every level? How can we even begin to imagine forms of resistance and organization based on the use value of art, when all forms of traditional organisation and resistance (class, race, gender, religion, sexuality, party affiliation) seem to collapse into each other under the weight of flexibilization and the exploitation of precarious labour? How, we might ask, does one radicalise – either collectively or individually – when all trust in the mechanisms of inherited political affiliation seem to be lost? As we have already seen, the stakes are high. When Berardi started discussing these ideas at the Autonomy Symposium at the Van Abbemuseum in 2011, the

ground-up activism of the Arab Spring and the Occupy movements seemed to offer examples of spontaneous and collective resistance. However, their subsequent (and often violent) re-appropriation into more vicious forms of networked and centralised governmental suppression has once again brought me back to rethinking opposition on a tactical, micro and rhizomatic level - not simply because the institutions of power appear to be impregnable, but precisely because their occupation depends on forms of day-to-day complicity that are best disrupted through the recapture, and viral re-distribution, of non-alienated social labour.

For example, in an interview with Berardi that I conducted shortly after the Autonomy Symposium (which appears in the *'The Autonomy Project - Newspaper 3: At Work as Autonomy and Use Value: Connection and Conjunction'*), our conversation turned once again to the question of the physical body. More specifically, Berardi argued that, on a micro level, the overcode of digital semiocapital is invalidating the ethical sensibilities of a generation, while the 'conscious organism' is forced to become 'compatible with the connective machine'. For Berardi:

This mutation is provoking a sort of dulling of conjunctive ability of human cognition, partially of sensibility, the essential conjunctive faculty in the first connective generation, the generation that has learned more words from a machine than from the mother. [...] This mutation is actually provoking painful effects on the conscious organism, and these effects can be interpreted with the categories of psychopathology: dyslexia, anxiety and apathy, panic and depression. (Berardi, F. 2012b, p. 55)

Considering this, Berardi reminds us of Guattari's use of the 'Ritornello' or refrain. For Guattari, the refrain is an obsessive form of ritual that enables individuals to find points of identification, to territorialise and



represent themselves in relation with the surrounding world. As such, Berardi reminds us that the refrain is also the semiotization mechanism that enables individuals, groups, a people, a subculture or movement to receive, process and re-project the world according to reproducible and communicable formats. For Berardi, the societal transformations brought about by capitalism have been dependent upon the physical refrains of the factory, the production line, and the salary. However, digital economies have caused the emergence of new refrains of 'electronic fragmentation, information overload, acceleration [and] acceleration of the semiotic exchange.' (Berardi, F. 2012, p. 55) As such, Berardi argues that the process of cognitive reformatting of the individual and social body is underway. Doing so, Berardi also reminds us that under the asymmetrical conditions of neoliberal occupation, the forms of recapture and resistance that we can best effect are through and across the continually-shifting borders of connective semicapital. And if this is the case, then the job or work of the artist that consists in returning poetry to the body must be played-out through and between the fault lines of connective semicapital as forms of micro-resistance.

Furthermore, I would also argue that the lines of micro resistance can no longer be played out exclusively in public spaces – the asymmetrical occupation of neoliberal logic is such that, as Berardi points out, the occupation of our very bodies is also underway. And if this is the case, then I would argue that the work or labour of art now resides in the recapture and reactivation of non-alienated and social forms of labour: it depends upon the taking back of those forms of social making and doing, on a bodily and human scale, that would allow us to reoccupy and reformat the abstract and quantitative mechanisms of neoliberal logic.

#### IV.

Within this context, perhaps the most decisive contribution to the Autonomy Symposium resided in Tania Bruguera's call for an international Association of Arte Útil. What would it be like, Bruguera asked, if artists became less concerned with offering hypothetical solutions to global problems and, instead, began to act as instigators in the production of local solutions to matters of urgency? As an example, Bruguera pointed to her own role in the initiation of the 'Immigrant Movement International' project; a multipurpose community space, hosted by Queens Museum New York, aiming to develop 'an international think tank that recognises (im)migrants role in the advancement of society at large'. (IMI Mission Statement n.d.) After the Autonomy Symposium (and in collaboration with Queens Museum, The Van Abbemuseum, and Grizedale Arts) Bruguera continued to expand the idea of an Asociación de Arte Útil (or AAÚ) as an ongoing, rhizomatic and propositional network of artists, activists, critics, thinkers, makers and doers committed to the use of art as a social change tool. In 2013, this resulted in the exhibition *The Museum of Arte Útil*, where The Van Abbemuseum challenged its own terms and conditions of display by becoming an active and user-led space, or 'Social Power Plant', where 'art's use value and social function' would be analysed. (Van Abbemuseum n.d.) At the core of The Museum of Arte Útil, and providing 'fuel' for the 'Social Power Plant', was the archive of the Association of Arte Útil - a growing online resource of contemporary and historical projects in which art has been used as a tool for direct social, political and economic action. Key to the Archive of the AAÚ, and fundamental to the concept of the Museum of Arte Útil, is the insistence that both can only be activated through their use as open-source tools for social change. The idea is that the Museum and archive of Arte Útil will continue to provide an ongoing toolkit for activism - one that can be used by constituencies



around the world as a means to re-address and change their urgencies and current conditions. Held within the idea of The Museum and Association of Arte Útil - or, more specifically, within the commitment to use art as a tool for the shared production of 1:1 scale/real time social, political and economic alternative - lies the possibility for the constituent production and exchange of shared knowledge as active forms of commoning. Moreover, underpinning this commitment to the uses of art as a social tool for affecting real change – or ‘artivism’ to coin one of Bruguera’s own terms – resides the further potential for the constituent production and subsequent social extraction of use value from within the proposed frameworks of The Museum of Arte Útil.

However, if this potential is to be achieved, it will necessitate a seismic shift in our own responses and physical relationships to culture from our current role as passive spectators and toward our active participation as users. This will also require a concomitant shift away from the traditional notion that individual bodies contemplate autonomous and disinterested aesthetic objects, and to a history, theory and practice of art predicated on the idea that the use value of art – as a bodily, political and ethical imperative – is socially produced. After all, it is only by actively sharing, shaping, rethinking and reforming our culture together as a growing and fluid social body of producers, that we will retain any hope of providing real, material and emancipatory change as a society. It is also here that the ongoing act of negotiating jeopardy, of recapturing and repurposing the very possibility on non-alienated and productive social labour becomes visible in the production of local, albeit networked, bodies of rhizomatic knowledge. Concurrently, and as Rancièrè, Berardi and Bruguera demonstrate, this activist knowledge is something that can now only be taken from within a shifting condition of asymmetry; by reoccupying language, by stealing gold from the gods, by using one’s arms and hands to transgress the borders that would

fix types of labour in their place. However, if this form of recapture from within is to be the new work or labour of art, we must also accept that there are no longer any clear, defined or fixed borders: the asymmetrical network of neoliberal occupation now appears as complex and ineffable flows of semicapital continually blurring the boundaries of public and private space – and increasingly capable of financializing and capitalizing every form of online and offline exchange. It is here, at the very juncture where bodies are lacerated and homogenised by the constant biorhythms of neoliberal occupation, that the use value of art could provide us with a material, qualitative and bodily tool for effecting and negotiating real social change (across micro as well as macro political levels). It provides a tool for redistributing the sensible, for keeping open forms of social process and change that would allow us to resist the instrumentalizing and dehumanizing impositions of the neoliberal overcode.

Accordingly, such a seismic shift in our uses of art would come with the responsibility to accept that the fundamental terms or conditions of a primarily Western and Modernist engagement with art, as we know it or knew it to be, are abandoned. This process will mean more than the simple repurposing of terms such as ‘autonomy’. It will infer the wholesale decolonialisation and demodernisation of our current institutions of embodied knowledge through processes of active archiving and the open source co-production of new possibility and shared, negotiable meaning. In turn, this will depend upon a shift away from making sense of or evaluating art in terms of its aesthetic or autonomous role and function. Instead, it will demand that we start rethinking and re-evaluating the role and function of art in terms of its social use and use value. Currently, I would argue that the available tools for repurposing our evaluation of art in terms of its use value reside outside the common purview of a western epistemology of art. Instead, they reside in ground-up oppositional





forms of activist re-imaginings and re-makings of the social and political body – such as those offered by the Democratic Confederation of Abdullah Ocalan and epitomised by Zapatismo’s slow and decentralised non-representational politics. However, if we are not prepared to accept the challenge of actively using art as a tool participating in the production of new bodies of knowledge, preferring instead to cling on to the cherished assumption (or ideological comfort blanket) that art as we know it or knew it somehow offers a alterity beyond our current conditions of asymmetrical struggle, then we run the risk of standing on the sidelines while the pressing concerns of alt-right dictatorship and environmental catastrophe engulf us.

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# The Department of Sexual Revolution Studies

Eimear Walshe



In November 2018, I worked with the Van Abbemuseum to host The Department of Sexual Revolution Studies. The purpose of this platform was to create a public programme of interdisciplinary discussions around the subject of ‘Sexual Revolution’ and its implications in various fields. I organised these discussions through a series of talks and workshops in the museum, which asked: how can contemporary sexual practices help us to better understand the relationship between sexuality and society today, including issues such as politics, housing, and technology?<sup>1</sup>

## PROGRESS AND REVOLUTION

In Ireland, I live in a social and political environment that has become quite invested in the idea of ‘social progress’ as an inevitability. This is of course hinged on measurable recent historic changes such as the gradual secularisation of state institutions, the decriminalisation of abortion and birth control, the extension of rights to LGBTQ people, etc. There seems to be a number of motivations for this attachment. Perhaps on one hand, we hold a hopeful and proud vision of repairing the fabric of a nation in the republic’s post-colonial context, and perhaps, on the other hand, we are involved in a shame-led project in reputation management, as a latecomer to ‘civilisation’ and ‘modernity’. One strategic use of this purportedly optimistic, progress-oriented vision of history can be the overwriting of – or simple distraction from – persistent inequalities related to economic, racial, or social injustices. Further still, the progress-oriented vision can be used in the international context in a similar way to pink-washing<sup>2</sup>. To my mind, this emerging trajectory in Ireland resonates within the Dutch context, where the narrative of social (including sexual) progress



Gerard Byrne, *New Sexual Lifestyles*, black and white photograph, 2003. Image courtesy the artist.

actually feeds into a national supremacist self-image. It also manifests itself in the scapegoating of nations for holding less progressive sexual policy, many of which are in place as a result of settler and religious colonialism. Ireland offers an interesting example of a nation that has 'come full circle', now quick to condemn the religious fundamentalism, criminalization, and incarceration which until very recently was part of its own social fabric, and arguably still is. Similarly, the term 'Sexual Revolution' is envisioned as a singular universal transformative event, something that took place in late 60s and 70s USA and UK, and 'spread' from this central historical and geographical nexus. This prevalent vision of history overlooks the role of international movements, localised agitation, individual acts of resistance, and persistent reaction and setbacks. Geographically, this is a 'trickle down' understanding of how sexual change occurs in social attitude, law and behaviour. Historically, it leaves us with an irreconcilable proposition: taking a term like 'revolution' (useful for its implications of always-imminent counter-revolution) which gives us a cyclical understanding of time, and fixing it onto a linear 'before and after' 'progress' timeline. I argue that the implications for those of us who have benefitted from sexual social progress are then quite serious, leaving us with an incentive to complicate and question such visions of history.

## NEW SEXUAL LIFESTYLES

Quoting Gayatri Spivak, Van Abbemuseum curator and Deviant Practice initiator Nick Aikens invites us to think about the Van Abbemuseum collection as 'Tools for Reading and Writing'.<sup>3</sup> The Department of Sexual Revolution Studies engaged with this notion quite directly. The program orientates itself in relation to a work in the current collection display of the Van Abbemuseum - the multi-channel video installation and series of seven photographs titled *New Sexual*



*Lifestyles* (2003) by Gerard Byrne. It is an artwork which – I will suggest – complicates the narrative of progress-orientation in history in various ways. This video installation comprises alternating loops on TV monitors, which restage a panel discussion from a 1973 edition of *Playboy* magazine between ‘Experts of the Sexual Revolution’ – swingers, sex workers, psychologists, and pornographers. Instead of realistically re-enacting this text, the *Playboy* panellists are played by Irish actors in Byrne’s video. Many of the actors can be recognised from Irish TV or Soap Operas. The contrast between the material and the actors is emphasised by their faltering American accents, sometimes to humorous effect. The Irish actors stumble over terms like ‘orgasm’, ‘group sex’, ‘masturbating’, and ‘S&M’, which appear in the script of the original interview in *Playboy* Magazine. However, this incongruity doesn’t necessarily set up a clear hierarchy between the ‘enlightened’, ‘progressive’ source of the text (the discourse in *Playboy* in 1973 leaves a lot to be desired) and the ‘repressed’, ‘unsophisticated’ site of the video work (in 2003, Ireland was still 15 years away from decriminalising abortion). Rather, in this video work, one context, with all of its problems and specificities, is pushed awkwardly through another context. *New Sexual Lifestyles* does not situate itself in an ahistorical progress-without-context, but instead, the viewer is overwhelmed with contrasting contextual factors. The lack of ease with which one nation’s self-narration applies to another lights up the incoherency of a progress-oriented, centralized vision and emphasizes the way in which sexuality is geographically and historically specific. There is a wry irony in the subtitle of the original *Playboy* article, as photographed by Byrne – ‘a symposium on emerging behaviour patterns, from open marriage to group sex’. As we learn in the course of our sessions in the Van Abbemuseum, these ‘new sexual lifestyles’ are not new at all, and have long established and varied histories, albeit sometimes under different names. Furthermore, with the benefit

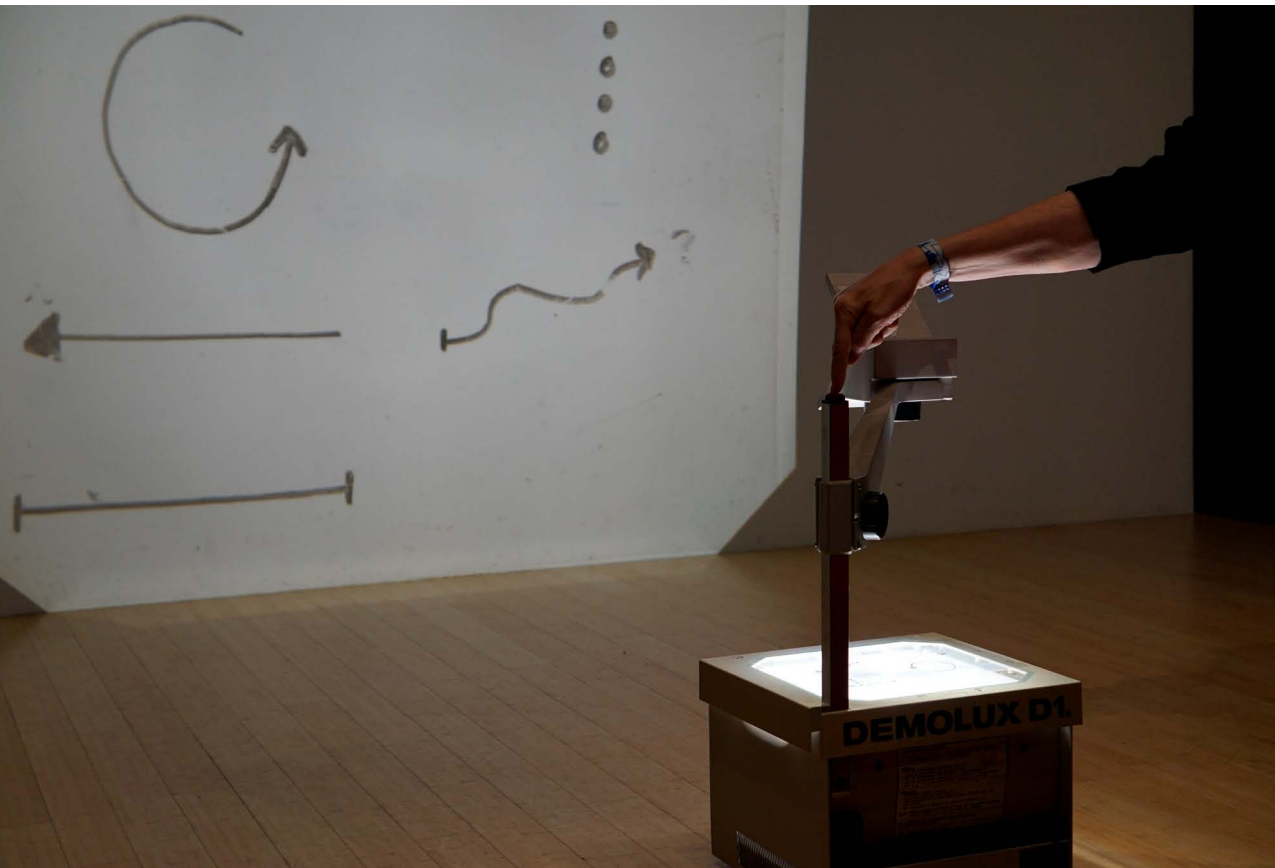
of hindsight, many of the subjects presented – far from being now normalised and demystified at this point in history – remain firmly taboo, or seem perpetually unresolvable.

To further expand on the idea of artworks as tools for reading and writing, *New Sexual Lifestyles* itself provided a format that was influential as a learning model – a cacophonous roundtable that allowed participants to be conscious of the many contradictions at play. Through this format of discussion, I hoped that the subject of sexuality could lead us towards and provide means for thinking through a wide variety of subjects, becoming a knowledge producer of sorts. Through presentations, workshops and role-plays, we looked together at ‘deviant sexualities’ fuelled or fed by more complicated libidinal economies, for instance how some forms of cuckolding are stimulated by white supremacy, how the pleasure of dogging has a different spin when it’s the result of housing insecurity, and whether ‘hook-up culture’ has its legacy in sexual liberationist history or more so reflects our current hyper-transient neoliberal social-economic bind. We repeatedly find that while ‘deviance’ is often attributed with a definitively positive or negative moral character within different contexts, the notion of deviance can serve or frame many different agendas. Below, I will try to illustrate the specific ways in which an artwork in the collection became a generative ‘Tool for Reading and Writing’.

## THE MUSEUM PROGRAMME

Each week, the participants comprised a mixture of members of the public and students from the Design Academy BA and MA courses, with eleven second year Design Academy students attending as an elective course. Students who found the material had particular application within their own studies were also





Time visualisation: 'Progress, Revolution, Repetition', Session 1: TIME.  
Image: Niek Tijssse Klasen

offered studio visits during which subjects were discussed further depending on individual design practices and personal interests. Both the Design Academy and the Van Abbemuseum proved very hospitable environments for an extra-institutional body. Both institutions think critically and creatively about the terms on which they produce, categorise, and present knowledge, from whom the knowledge originates, who it is intended for, and who it serves. This meant that there was scope for objects of study which reached far beyond the standard design education remit. For instance, the sexual and romantic dynamics in Dolly Parton and Charlie Pride's country music was presented alongside the work of adult film actor Lex Steele; a religious painting by Jaques Yverni from 1435 was compared with a meme from 2015 on Twitter; the sexual implications of The Communist Manifesto were deliberated in relation to the TV segment where Ellen comes out on Oprah. As a group, we also took the opportunity to use the various spaces and resources of the Van Abbemuseum. Each session took place in a different part of the Museum: The Auditorium, the Parliament, the Leslokaal (education room), the Werksalon, and the Library. To consolidate and reflect on the ideas discussed in the sessions, we made additional visits to the museum clock tower, the duck pond, and the gender-neutral toilets. To give a sense of each session's approach and subjects, I have included extracts of the material and ideas that comprised The Department of Sexual Revolution Studies in the following sections of this paper.

## WEEK 1 - TIME

Before turning our attention to the discussion of sexuality, we first concentrated on the 'revolution' aspect of the programme's title. The way in which we visualise time in the short and long term may impact our understanding, expectations and feelings around



sex, relationships, politics, etc. We did some exercises to help us think about how we each personally map temporal ideas onto spatial images and how these images relate to time framings in stories, songs and artworks.

As mentioned above, the interview text of *New Sexual Lifestyles* was framed in the original Playboy as a survey of a significant moment in history (The USA in 1973). The text was then re-contextualised in Byrne's artwork within the aesthetics of a different historic moment (Ireland in 2003). In turn, this work is now displayed in the Van Abbemuseum, a contemporary art museum, which is also in the business of presenting history. With these different historical narratives in mind, we debated the merits of another pertinent museum display, this time in Amsterdam's 'Temple of Venus' Sexmuseum: a multimedia installation by an author/artist whose name the Sexmuseum itself doesn't seem to have a public record of.

'At this display, you press a button with your preferred language, and the lights come on, a voiceover starts to play, and this huge cylinder that's set into the wall starts to turn. On every part of its surface is a painting attempting to depict the entirety of human sexuality past, present and future. It frames human history in more or less 'progressive' terms, but it also presents it as a dialectic between forms of generative desire, and forms of social repression based on religion, respectability etc. It illustrates how real life sexualities can deviate from the official sexual morals of a given period. Most significantly for me, it shows a cause-and-effect, or action-and-reaction, relationship through history, by having people from different moments in (albeit a very Eurocentric understanding of) history, have sex with each other, through time. So, a woman being eaten out by a man from a piece of Greek pottery reaches out to touch the breast of an ancient Egyptian lady. A medieval torturer is involved in a gangbang

chain that reaches all the way into the enlightenment, while overhead a NASA space pilot flies through the air embracing his sex robot. While the voiceover makes some speculations about a cyber-technological-space-utopian-pornographic future, it ends on an ambivalent note: that the future will be dictated by the desires, fantasies, and action of the viewers presently watching the display. And then suddenly, the mechanism stops, ominously ready to start the rotation again from Adam and Eve.<sup>4</sup>

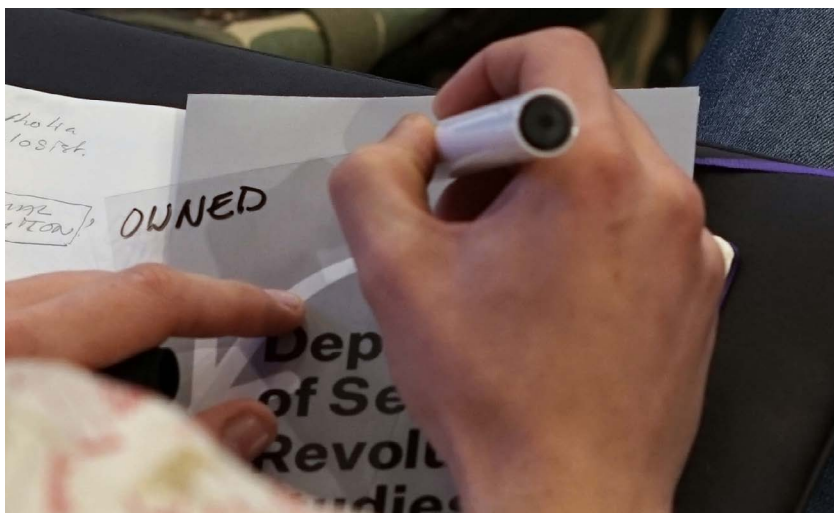
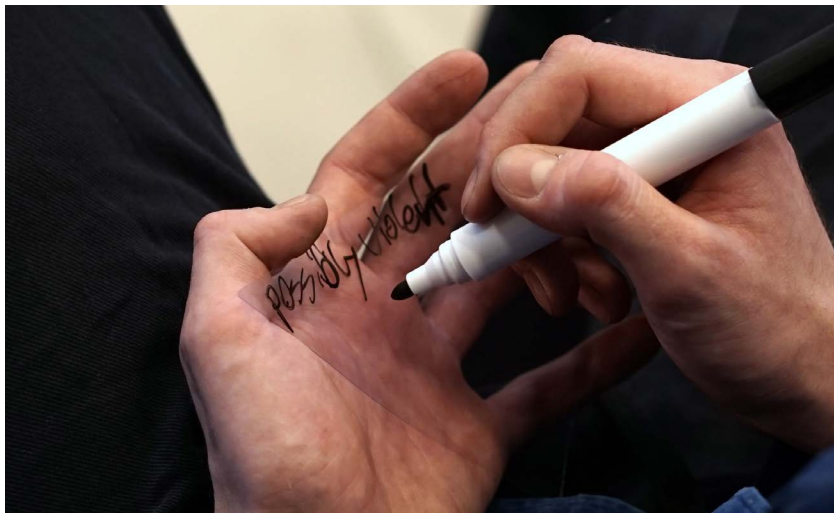
## WEEK 2 – CUCK

If my wife cheated, I'd kill her. She's part of my property. I mean, I am a sexist. And since I pay the bills, I feel I *own* her, the way I own my car, and I don't lend my car out to people.<sup>5</sup>

The thematic of the second week was quite directly inspired by a quote from *New Sexual Lifestyles* above. The contribution is made by divisive US pornographer Al Goldstein, then editor of Screw magazine and presenter of TV show Midnight Blue.

The rest of the interview panel react with confusion and shock to his statement, they question how a man so preoccupied with individual and sexual liberation (Goldstein defended Screw magazine though several first amendment cases against obscenity charges and consistently held an anti-authoritarian, more-is-more attitude towards sexuality) could hold in such a hypocritical attitude towards his wife. In this session we asked: Why does Goldstein hold this double standard? How would you feel if you were Goldstein's wife and were spoken about in this way? Centrally, what is the nature of the anxiety that Goldstein displays here, a feeling so intense that he would hypothetically rather murder his wife than forgive her infidelity?





Participants respond to watching Al Goldstein speak about his wife in Gerard Byrne's *New Sexual Lifestyles*, 2003, Session 2: CUCK. Image: Niek Tijssse Klasen.

We discussed this in relation to the psychology of cuckolding. Derived from Cuckold, the term 'Cuck' has had a moment of online popularity in recent years, both as a pornography search term and as an alt-right insult used against those that hold socialist, feminist, anti-racist, and pro-LGBT sentiments. Like a political macrocosm of Goldstein's sexual insecurity, the anxiety of the alt-right is a fixated fear of being replaced, made redundant, having one's undeserved entitlements revoked (those bestowed by white supremacy and patriarchy respectively). With this in mind, we shifted our attention towards the question of what we can learn from the deep and diverse history of the sexual practice of cuckolding as it appears in religion, literature, and popular culture. I argue that the emotional elements at play in the world of cuckolding, including the fear of women's sexuality, anti-immigration anxiety, men's sexual insecurity, the jealous possession of women as objects, disgust at male submission, and internalised homophobia which are all embroiled in 'Cuck' as an insult, are each urgently relevant in confronting the global rise of the right wing politics today.

### WEEK 3 - KINK

In *New Sexual Lifestyles*, sexologist/swinger Eberhard Kronhausen ties the history of sadism and masochism to militarism and corporal punishment.<sup>6</sup> Many other cultural and political forms of violence have influenced the development of aesthetics and modes of sexual practices through sexual role play, re-appropriation and re-enactment. Below is an example of a workshop role-play experiment we participated in:

'I've made these name tags for you, which you can wear for the duration of the exercise, or even better, for the rest of class. The nametags will describe a number of sexual preferences, fetishes, or positions that you (in the game) like, or that are part of your new assigned





Role play exercise: Top/Bottom/Switch, Session 3: KINK.  
Image: Niek Tijssse Klasen

sexual identity (in the game). If your sexuality within the exercise freaks you out, that's okay, try to see the sexuality described as a character who you are playing, and see if you can empathise with the desire, even if you don't think you could experience the desire yourself. Most of you have more than one desire, and there is usually more than one person in the group who will have a corresponding desire. It is unlikely that you will find one person in the group who will fulfil all of your desires. If you find someone who fulfils one of your desires but not all, don't worry, it's not that you haven't found the right one, it's that you haven't found the right two, three or four. Please keep your partners informed of your other partners. If you go off looking for more new partners, please let your existing partner know so that they can do the same.<sup>17</sup>

This exercise had several purposes: initially it was an opportunity to empathise with more uncommon sexualities. It also created scenarios for negotiating complex sexual and relationship boundaries in a non-sexualised environment, while viewing desire as plural and relational. There was also the challenge of working through language and distinctions, (for example, 'topping' implies action, rather than domination per se) interpretation and clarification, and imagination. For the purpose of the course, I hoped that it could also edge us towards a more embodied understanding that domination and submission are not totalised states of being but can be fragmented, temporary, and that one can occupy both positions simultaneously.

This understanding opened a discussion on how nations, groups and individuals can occupy both the dominator and dominated role simultaneously in non-sexual and profoundly non-consensual contexts, through interpersonal violence and economic, colonial or cultural exploitation on a political scale. Ireland has experienced a long documented history of settler colonisation of land, culture and resources, leading







Gerard Byrne, *New Sexual Lifestyles*, colour photograph, 2003.  
Image courtesy the artist.

Exercise: Feelings felt the first time overhearing someone having sex,  
Session 4: BUNK. Image: Niek Tjisse Klasen.

in the past to famine, economic instability, and mass displacement. At the same time, Ireland has been responsible for and financially supported extensive Catholic imperialism. Neither of these sets of histories negates the other.

*In the same way as there are many types of domination, there are also many types of colonial or imperial forces, e.g., settler colonialism, resource colonization, cultural/religious imperialism, internal colonization within a country e.g.: unequitable sharing or taking of resources/ gentrification/ resource depletion. These types can also exist independently of one another, or coexist. A country can be colonized in one respect, and a coloniser in another, either simultaneously, or successively.<sup>8</sup>*

While not universally usable, I have found that this framework (taking sexual knowledge as a route into political understanding) has very useful application in a context such as the Netherlands, where in many instances speaking about 'extreme' or unusual sexuality seems less taboo than speaking about colonialism.

#### WEEK 4 - BUNK

A modernist summerhouse in the Irish countryside by Scott Tallon Walker provides the set in which *New Sexual Lifestyles* is filmed. The building itself feels like a character in the work, its interior architecture conspicuously housing the re-enacted panel discussion. Something under-discussed in conversations concerning sexuality is the material, infrastructural and pragmatic factors that permit, prohibit, inform, or contain it. There are many laws which effectively prevent or discourage sex in public. For the most part, this leaves sexuality contingent on access to private property. Therefore, the nature of the property, the



privacy that can be found within it, and the terms on which you are permitted to access it must be significantly impactful. The way that a given society distributes, shares and uses indoor domestic space plays a huge role in the majority of people's sexual experiences. In week four, we looked at both the material factors and the social attitude that make up this bind. To illustrate the material element, we played a role-play game similar to the previous week's, but this time we assigned different levels of housing access to each participant (the 'hotel owner' won the game outright of course, granting access to all the other players to sleep together in his hotel, on the condition they also all sleep with him).

*I will pass around a transparent sheet. On the left please make a note of location, words or emotions you associate with: The first time you overheard sex, or the first time you felt you saw an 'excessive' public display of affection. And on the right please note: The first time you were overheard having sex, or if you were ever told to 'GET A ROOM!'<sup>9</sup>*

The emotions we brainstormed from the perspective of unexpectedly overhearing or witnessing intimacy include: 'Anger, disgust, grossed out, exposed, embarrassed, conflicted, annoyed and tired'. From the perspective of someone being overheard, or scolded for 'excessive' display of affection: 'Embarrassment and laughter, smug, angry, shame, shock, intrigue'. One participant contributed 'probably turned on' to both lists. We discussed these emotional responses, which helped form a sense of the social scripts of sexuality in domestic spaces on both sides of the wall.

## WEEK 5 - HOOK

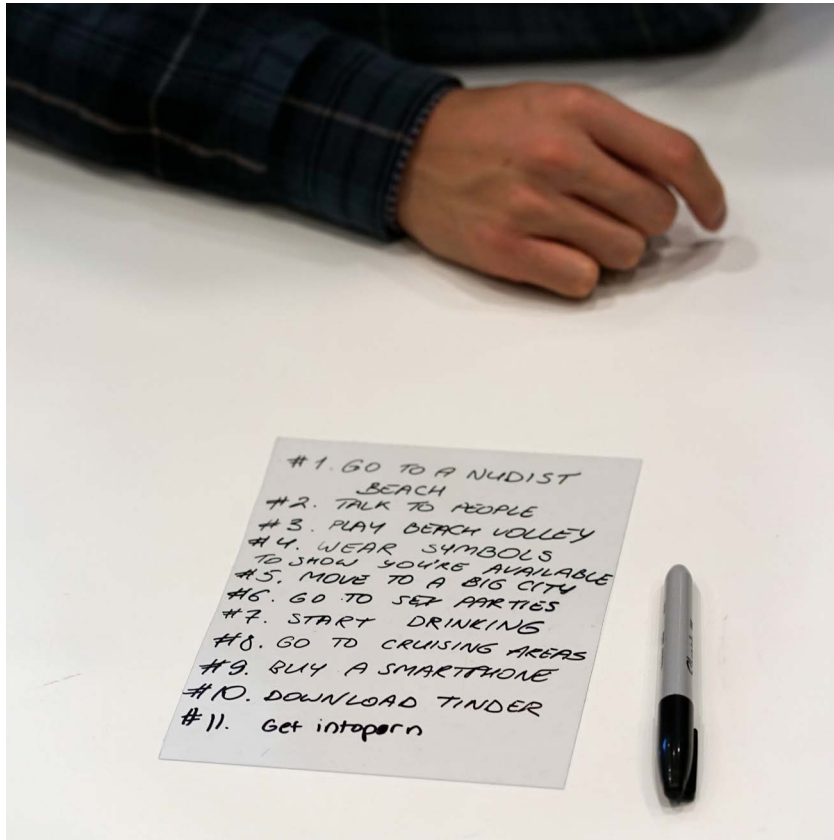
*'Everything has its price. Let's not bullshit ourselves into thinking that marriage, one-night stands, orgies, or anything else, doesn't have that price. I just want my wives to know the 'terms of sale' before they sign the contract'.<sup>10</sup>*

Though highly cynical, this quote drawn here again from Al Goldstein's character in *New Sexual Lifestyles* does give food for thought on the interplay between sexuality, relationships, and the economy in which they exist. It stands to reason that a given economy will affect a potential sexual partner's availability, mobility, freedom, aspirations, uncertainty, access, etc., which in turn will affect relationship values and structures. In relation to a later exhibition project, Byrne also refers to this connection:

*'Monogamy has connotations that have become explicitly ideological since the Sexual Revolution - bearing a tone that, strangely, is not about personal freedom in the narcissistic sense, so pervasive in free-market thought.'<sup>11</sup>*

'Hook-up' is a term given to a set of sexual practices prevalent in neoliberal and 'post-monogamous' society. Though there is a plethora of individual definitions for what this kind of sexual encounter constitutes, there does seem to be a set of associated qualifying precedents: being relatively unplanned, involving low levels of commitment (or none), and a suspension of certain types of communication or emotional vulnerability. To investigate these precedents, our final workshop exercise was a contradiction in terms: two groups competed to make an effective 10-step plan for a hook-up. Central to the contradiction in this exercise was the question of communicating intent. Certain types of frank, upfront discussions aimed at signalling that a hook-up is being sought actually negated the





Exercise: 10-step plan for a hook-up with various economic, sexual, chemical and technological limitations, Session 5: HOOK.  
Image: Niek Tijssse Klasen

unserious casual and ambivalent tone required. Falling somewhat short of being a practice of personal freedom, 'hook-up' seems to encompass social forms that brings its own set of censoriousness, restrictions, and orthodoxies of style.

Rather than representing opposites or being mutually exclusive, my contention is that hook-ups and monogamy are mutually supportive. And rather than being pluralistic, the rituals around a hook-up can function as a microcosmic timeline of monogamy – what it might feel like to be monogamous for one night, or one hour. And, short of exploding and expanding the potential roles one can occupy, the subsuming of hook-ups into an existing monogamous culture seems to announce a relatively fixed two-class system of worth, with property-related orientation to the 'other': disposable hook-up vs possessable wife, with the possibility of 'upward mobility' between these sexual classes creating a greater sense of horizon than might actually be the case. As illustrated through the housing role play from the previous week, both forms are contingent on economic class stratification and tend to prioritise personal liberty over community.

The neoliberal economy has informed the material conditions in which relationships exist today, monogamous or otherwise. However, non-monogamous practices do not directly stem from a neoliberal economy. The ideological implications of monogamy actually pre-date the 20th century, particularly in the imposition of monogamous modes of family and social organisation as part of the colonialist, Christianising, and 'civilising' invasions of Europeans across the globe.

*'Let's think back to Bernardo Buil, the priest accompanying Christopher Columbus on his second trip across the Atlantic (whose awful statue in Barcelona we saw get fucked in the face by Chilean porno activist Maria Basura last week)<sup>12</sup>. The Taino*



*people, who lived in the Caribbean, and who Buil tried and failed to convert to Christianity, were not monogamous. The same was true of the indigenous Tahitians before the invasion of Captain Cook and Joseph Banks. Joseph Banks interfered with and took advantage of the sexual and social worlds of the Tahitians. At the same time he condemned them for it. On returning home, he used the 'uncivilised' sexualities of indigenous people to justify furthering the colonial mission of the United Kingdom.<sup>13</sup> In this way the narrative of 'progress' erases the many pre-colonial indigenous traditions which were already functioning alternatives to what we in the European Christian tradition may now understand as the status quo.<sup>14</sup>*

Speaking from the European context, we are aware of the ways in which the period of modernity and capitalism is associated with increased individual sexual freedom. However, this trajectory is not a universal experience, and to a certain extent has been at the expense of colonised nations, extracted resources, and exploited labour. Furthermore, exactly what types of sexuality constitute acceptable 'civilised' behaviour within a European context has made huge local and social shifts between polygamy, aristocratic pederasty, religiously regulated monogamy, and individual liberty-centred social values. A consistent factor, however, is a supremacist self-image of the European status quo and the imperialist imposition of these norms upon others. This is perhaps the strongest indication against any arguments of 'progress', with its tendency to segregate issues of gender and sexuality from questions of economic injustice and equitable distribution of access, shelter, and leisure time without which 'sexual liberation' is only notional.

## DEVIANCE OR...?

A number of considerations arise when thinking about Deviant Practice as a set of research methodologies. The idea of embarking on a path oblique to the road cut by history, by the mainstream, by good taste, or by those who abuse or exploit power through wealth, race, or gender might tempt us to fall into a binary logic. Bluntly put: that everything associated with hegemony is bad and that therefore, all deviance must be good. In 2017, my first round of research at the museum presented public discussions on queer and feminist separatism, a social form superficially easy to categorise as 'deviant'. However, it transpired that this form of deviance was itself rife with contradictions and enforced orthodoxies, with the result that the hegemony it sought to escape was reproduced at a different scale. Conversely, the 2018 programme was an exercise in demonstrating that deviance is an assimilated integral and functioning element of capitalism, colonialism, and white supremacy. For example, in 2016, cuckolding experienced a surge in popularity as a porn search term and relatedly became a sexual fixation of the alt right, whose 'radical' political positions have now been accepted in the mainstream. In this way, a sexual practice which is absolutely deviant – at least in relation to the conventions of heterosexual monogamy – has been instrumentalised to maintain the violent status quo. This demonstrates that deviance is not a stable category with a reliable ethos. Instead, it can serve any end of the political spectrum, including the authoritarianism it seems to be at odds with.

## THE DESIRING MUSEUM

'What museum wouldn't want a Department of Sexual Revolution Studies?!' was programme curator Nick Aikens' very generous response to my proposal for





Time Visualisation: '1973 and 2003', 'Progress and Revolution', 'Our Lifetime', Session 1: TIME. Image: Niek Tjisse Klasen.



this project. Realistically, I can think of many. I have experiences of museum contexts in which such discussion is still taboo, and others where it might even be thought of as passé. This project in particular was proposed in consideration of a number of factors: limited approaches to sex education, single issues reform discourse in politics, the undervaluing of the epistemic potentials of sexual knowledge, and the lack of self-consciousness about what kind of political conditions have afforded us sexual freedoms. This project was developed with the intent of supporting the many Design Academy students who were already working with correlated ideas in areas such as sex toy design, the place of technology in intimacy, gender division in sport, and the relationship between clothing and gender design. Additionally, it demonstrated how the knowledge derived from sexuality can create useful frameworks for students working in seemingly-unrelated fields. The Department of Sexual Revolution Studies benefitted from the support and openness of the Van Abbemuseum in no small part because of several preceding museum projects, including the Queer Glossary, Qwearing the Collection, and the *Why Am I Here?* residency programme.<sup>15</sup> In his 2011 paper, 'The Deviant Institution', Charles Esche calls on practitioners to diversify the methodologies of museum work and to 'join in constructing forms of deviance that disobey the rules we have inherited'. Moreover, he also encourages self-analysis regarding 'what kinds of sites would be necessary to allow such histories and activities to gain more public support and visibility.'<sup>16</sup>

This question of how museums might operate as sites of deviance persists. Additionally, it seems critical to reflect on the implications of a museum's desire for deviance. While other institutions often become comfortable in their practices, a commitment to deviance pragmatically means that there is some element of the institution that constantly remains opened to transformation. Since the Van Abbemuseum takes a critical

view of its own implication in modernity, colonialism, and the market, it has proved itself to be effective at applying and incorporating the research and knowledge produced in the museum in its everyday practices. The desire to deviate is transformative insofar as it recognises that political action isn't identity-bound, though the making-public of this desire over time does accumulate into an institutional identity, a process which feels very much underway at the Van Abbe-museum. A central question for any museum is how and when to make visible this process, which can be tentative, difficult, and based in trial and error. Which parts of this process should be made public, and which transformations should take place behind the scenes? It is my argument that both kinds of projects are necessary, worthwhile and compatible. The Department of Sexual Revolution Studies constitutes elements based in immediacy, proximity, context and conversation, and other aspects which were public facing, the effects of such projects can still resonate in material and immaterial ways beyond the duration of the programme.

## NOTES

- 1 Department of Sexual Revolution Studies, press release and student info sheet, distributed on campus and on Van Abbe website, 2018
- 2 Where the extension of rights to particular sexual minorities is used by corporations or nations for the improvement of optics, especially when used to overshadow or erase other human rights abuses, or imperialist interventions in nations understood as less 'sexually progressive'.
- 3 Nick Aikens, *Off-The-Way, Deviant Practice: An Introduction*, Deviant Practice Research Programme 2016-17, Van Abbemuseum.
- 4 Department of Sexual Revolution Studies, Session 1, INTRO, Van Abbemuseum Auditorium.
- 5 Gerard Byrne, *New Sexual Lifestyles*, 2003 (Source text: Al Goldstein quoted in Playboy Magazine New Sexual Lifestyles September 1973).
- 6 Gerard Byrne, *New Sexual Lifestyles*, 2003 (Source text: Eberhard Kronhausen quoted in Playboy Magazine, New Sexual Lifestyles September 1973).
- 7 Department of Sexual Revolution Studies, Session 3, KINK, Van Abbemuseum Leslokaal.
- 8 Department of Sexual Revolution Studies, Session 3, KINK, Van Abbemuseum Leslokaal.
- 9 Department of Sexual Revolution Studies, Session 4, BUNK, Van Abbemuseum Werksalon.
- 10 Gerard Byrne, *New Sexual Lifestyles*, 2003 (Source text: Al Goldstein quoted in Playboy Magazine New Sexual Lifestyles September 1973).
- 11 Gerard Byrne, cited by Tirdad Zolghadr, SOLO Gerard Byrne and the Exhibition as Regimen in Gerard Byrne 'A late evening in the future' 2015.
- 12 <https://fuckthefascism.noblogs.org>
- 13 Fara, Patricia (2003). *Sex, Botany and Empire: The Story of Carl Linnaeus and Joseph Banks*. Cambridge: Icon Books
- 14 Department of Sexual Revolution Studies, Session 3, KINK, Van Abbemuseum Library.
- 15 The Queer Glossary was developed in the Van Abbe in 2015 by sociologist Alice Venir, with contributions from Olle Lundin and Marisa Miller as an informal and personal introduction to queer terminology for Van Abbemuseum Staff and visitors. Qwearing the Collection, by Olle Lundin, is a set of wearable tools incorporating the Queer Glossary and drawing on images from artworks in the Van Abbe collection. *Why am I here?* was a residency and symposium in 2018 curated by Alice Venir and Julius Thissen with Artists Mavi Veloso, Olave Basabose and Geo Wyeth, which looked critically at how the Van Abbemuseum might promote inclusionary practices for the trans community.
- 16 Charles Esche, 'The Deviant Art Institution', *Performing the institution*, Lisbon: Kunsthalle Lissabon and ATLAS Projectos.



# 'Vagevuur'

## Sam Ashby



16 September 2018, 23:55

'Eindhoven used to have the dirtiest gay club in the world.'

The message from Matthew lit up the screen of my phone which lay next to me on the cheap IKEA foam mattress. Outside the window, the metallic form of the Philips Stadium – home of local football team FC Eindhoven – loomed above the trees in the dark like a spaceship. Giant LCD screens beamed action shots of their players into my room. I had arrived in the small Dutch city a few days before and was staying in a house provided by the Van Abbemuseum for visiting artists.

I opened my laptop and searched online for information about the club but found almost nothing, just a couple of local Dutch articles from 2008 about its closure, which I Google translated. The club was called Vagevuur – *Purgatory* – the place (or state of suffering), according to Catholic doctrine, where we expiate our sins before going to heaven. Not the usual name for a fetish club, I thought. One article described it as 'a foundation that organized parties and all kinds of extreme activities for gays'. The club closed for good in 2008 following an enquiry by the local office of the right wing party LPF (List Pim Fortuyn), which found that the Eindhoven municipality had been providing a subsidized work-place within the organisation.

Another article quoted a statement from the club's website: 'the continuation of our party activities is no longer possible in a responsible manner'. The article ended by observing that 'as a result of an EO broadcast of Netwerk and articles in this newspaper, threats were made to the address of the foundation.' *Threats*. It appears that the club closed due to right wing pressure and media coverage resulting in homophobic

intimidation. I clicked a link to vagevuur.com but was redirected to a site offering the domain for sale.

I had been invited to stay in Eindhoven for two months as part of the Van Abbemuseum's Deviant Practice research programme. I intended to pursue my research into rural queer communities, an ongoing project that had been inspired by my own move to rural West Yorkshire three years prior. As a queer who grew up in the rural south of England, I thought that going back to the countryside after living in the city for 15 years would be easy, but the dissonance I felt between my romantic expectation and the reality of rural isolation led me to explore queer rural lives, perhaps as templates against which to align myself. By focusing on the rural, I had been questioning what it meant to be queer outside the city, where so much of our identity is coded and enacted through our relationship to designed space, architecture, metropolitan networks, and urban economies.

\* \* \*

Soon after arriving in Eindhoven, I did what many gay men would probably do in my position – alone and in a new city – and downloaded gay dating app Grindr. After some time scrolling through the grid of faces, and anonymous torsos, I started chatting with a guy in his early-30s who invited me over to his place in the North of the city. After we'd fucked, I asked him if he had ever been to *Vagevuur*. To my surprise, he told me he had been a regular at their Golden Shower (urine fetish) parties. He first visited the club when he was 18 and went there a number of times before it closed. He spoke of it affectionately, saying it was a friendly space. He told me that he worked as an architect, so I asked him if he could draw a plan of the club from memory. Instead, he took me to his bathroom and pissed on me in the shower.

I quickly settled into a routine, cycling to the museum each morning to work in the library, and jogging in a park in the South of the city in the evening. I would run along a single broad path through the flat landscape until a main road marked a natural end point where I would turn back, barely noticing the anonymous looking, black-painted brick building, which sat inside an enclosed car park by the road. It wasn't until a week or so into my stay that I took any notice of the building and the faded fabric banners publicizing it to passing drivers as Sauna Tibet. Without realising, I had been running to a gay sauna every day. I entertained the idea that I had been inexorably drawn there. This coincidence became a cinematic layer upon my broadening perception of the city and of the specific history of the club, an echo of the ways in which men who desire men found each other long before the days of the internet and apps, seeking each other out in towns and cities, picking up barely perceptible signals and delineating their own queer topography. I wondered whether many of the men who frequented the Sauna had been to *Vagevuur*. The evening I went inside it was quiet. I'd forgotten to ask the silver-haired, muscular Polish man who cruised me and took me to a cabin where I fucked him on a black pvc-covered mattress.

\* \* \*

A week into my stay I took the train to Amsterdam to visit IHLIA, the Dutch LGBT archive. I had arranged to meet their archivist, Jasper, to discuss my research. Jasper welcomed me at the entrance and took me downstairs to his office. Confined to a tiny room in the basement, the staff are custodians to Europe's largest LGBT heritage collection. After some time talking about my research and the geographical specificity of the country – flat, agricultural, unromanticised – and a search through the archive records, we conceded that I would be unlikely to find any evidence of contemporary or historical rural queer communities in the





Netherlands, besides some occasional Radical Faerie gatherings that had taken place on the West Frisian island of Terschelling. Perhaps so as not to leave me too disappointed, Jasper told me about a radical gay activist group that had been active in Eindhoven from the late 1970s until the mid-1980s – De Roze Driehoek, or *The Pink Triangle*. The group had named themselves after the symbol used by the Nazis in concentration camps to identify and shame homosexuals. The pink triangle was reclaimed by queer activists in the 1970s as a badge of honour and remembrance, and so this name placed the Eindhoven group within a broader international context of the gay liberation movement. Jasper showed me a photograph of the group, the men all wearing what they termed ‘political drag’, which looked as if they had raided my grandmother’s wardrobe. I asked him if he knew anything about *Vagevuur*, and he smiled knowingly. ‘Roze Driehoek and *Vagevuur* were connected’, he said. ‘The club was started by the group’.

In the archive’s storage room, Jasper piled three heavy file boxes onto my outstretched arms before leading me back through the labyrinthine halls to his office. Two of the boxes contained publications by Roze Driehoek called *Sodomieter* and *De Verkeerde K(r)ant* (which playfully translates to both *The Wrong Side* and *The Wrong Newspaper*). The third box contained a publication by *Vagevuur* called *ITCH*, an extraordinary magazine that launched in the early 90s and ran for over 20 issues. The cover of the first issue featured a breath-taking photograph of a pair of black leather boots hanging from a man’s shaved testicles by the laces. Jasper and I pored over the publications which contained articles on the variety of fetishes catered for by the club including military, piss, fisting, rubber, leather, and scat (shit). Design quirks emerged issue after issue: One page included a ‘sample’ patch of piss-stained fabric stapled onto an article on ‘Golden Showers’, another issue featured a swatch of rubber.

The image of an erect cock had an actual, metal ring looped through two tiny holes in the page to look like a piercing; a pop-up-book-style treatment of a toilet cubicle revealed a man sucking off another man through a glory hole.

One name that kept popping-up in the editorial pages was H, the manager of *Vagevuur*. Jasper searched through the archive records and found an email address for him, which I noted down. I felt a common excitement with Jasper who told me he hadn’t seen the material before and wondered if it had seen the light of day since being donated.

That evening, I went to a launch party for my friend Richard’s new book at San Seriffe, an art book shop in the heart of the city’s red light district. At the end of the evening, Richard introduced me to Gert and Mattias, a handsome couple in their 60s who were simultaneously friendly, curious, and exquisitely clad in vivid floral prints. I spoke about my interest in Roze Driehoek and *Vagevuur*, and they told me they were part of the Rooie Flikkers – Red Faggots, a gay activist group active in Amsterdam in the late-70s and early 80s, and said they could get me in touch with a former member of Roze Driehoek and a friend who organised scat parties at *Vagevuur*. They invited me to dinner next time I was in town. Our meeting felt serendipitous, another strange coincidence.

\* \* \*



Email to H, 11 September 2018 at 13:51

Dear H,

I hope you are well.

I am a British artist currently visiting Eindhoven for a research residency at the Van Abbemuseum.

I have been exploring the radical history of the town, and came across your name a few times in Vagevuur's incredible publication, 'ITCH'.

Would you be happy to meet up some time to talk with me? I am in Eindhoven for all of September.

I look forward to hearing from you.

All the best,  
Sam

\* \* \*

In an attempt to make contact with other people connected to Vagevuur, I joined Recon, an online gay hook-up app for gay men into BDSM and kink.

I created a profile, uploaded a photograph of myself, and wrote:

Hello, I'm an artist visiting Eindhoven. I am developing a project about Vagevuur, the fetish club which closed in 2008. I am interested in speaking to men who visited Vagevuur, in order to collect memories about the club. I will respect your anonymity. Please don't hesitate to get in touch!

It wasn't long before I was getting replies from men curious about why I was interested in the club. Many of them were eager to tell me about their experiences. All of them spoke fondly of the place and expressed regret about its closure. The site seemed to stand in

for a lack of cruising space in the area, allowing for guys to explore their fantasies in private, but it was hard to imagine how the online community translated into the real world without a local meeting place like Vagevuur.

I received a message from CBTactive,

'I was a member of Vagevuur society. What is your project precisely about and what do you plan to do!?'

His profile showed off a remarkable array of cock and ball torture devices, or 'gadgets' as he called them. All hand-made, and remarkably crafted. Willing cocks and balls are pushed through holes in leather-covered boards, and bound hard against the flat surface by nylon ropes, slim like laces, which are looped through small metal rings, criss-crossing up the shaft as if caught in a cat's cradle. Balls are stretched away from the body by ropes wrapped around the scrotum, each loop of rope pulling the balls further and further away from the body. In one image, specially made clamps compress testicles between two padded leather boards. In another, small clothes pegs are attached to the skin of the penis in two lines running along each side of the hard shaft and wrapping all the way around the base of the head in a kind of crown. Another shows a hard cock pulled from left to right and right to left by small individual nooses attached along its shaft, contorting the usually straight cock into a zigzag.

I am reminded of a photograph by Robert Mapplethorpe in his 1978 series X Portfolio. It shows a penis strapped to a board, the cock and balls distorted by the tension of the cord which render it almost abstract. Blood, which appears black in the monochrome image, seems to emerge from the head of the penis, dripping down haphazardly along the bulging flesh of the shaft. The balls appear as individual spheres – each has cord wrapped so tightly around it they look as if they might pop.



I don't remember where I first saw this image, along with the other homoerotic sadomasochistic images in the X Portfolio, but I remember that they were presented flat in a large vitrine which split the 13 images into two rows, each row facing out, so people walked around, looking down onto the silver gelatine prints. The display sat high above the eyeline of most children, lest they be corrupted by the sight of a man pissing in another man's mouth, or of a man with the tip of his little finger pushed all the way into his urethra. I remember the low lighting, which heightened their forbidden nature, and the hushed atmosphere in the room, simultaneously a reverence to and horror at the images. This was probably my first encounter with gay fetish images, and it stuck in my mind. At that moment, Mapplethorpe's work defined a gay fetish aesthetic, one that I found cold and dangerous. In contrast, CBTactive's images looked cleaner, less dangerous, like something I might want to try.

I replied to him, describing my interest in tracing the history of the club back to its radical activist beginnings. He quickly wrote back, telling me that he organized a number of parties at Vagevuur: SM Saturday evenings, SM Sunday afternoons, Military and CBT (cock and ball torture) parties. He invited me to visit him in Amsterdam and a few days later on a bridge over a canal in the West of the city. He was a sweet, unassuming guy probably in his late 40s or early 50s. He had close-cropped sandy hair and wore military-influenced clothes: combat shorts, khaki t-shirt, and dog tags. As he walked me to his apartment, I realised that the anonymous meeting point was perhaps more for his benefit than mine, as I could have been anyone. Inside his small, bright and modern apartment, my nervousness quickly disappeared as soon as we started talking.

'Vagevuur was the only club that felt like home to me', he told me.

I immediately wanted to record the conversation, but he asked me not to. We spoke for two hours about the club, what it was like, and what happened to it.

Later, I wrote down some impressions of our conversation:

The space was mostly comprised of a large cellar which was divided into different spaces by a labyrinthine series of walls. The bar was upstairs, a smaller space, but which also contained a large wheel which people could be attached to. The decor of the club would be changed to correspond with the particular event that was happening. Different people or organisations organised different events. The club was volunteer run. The smell was neutral. CBTactive started going when he was pretty young. He didn't go to every party, people generally went to the night that their kink corresponded to. The dress code was very strict. Doors were open for an hour, then no one else was allowed entry. Safe sex was the rule, and there was zero tolerance of drugs. Anyone seen fucking without a condom or on drugs was removed from the club. If you didn't match the dress code, you would only be allowed in naked. It was sociable. One would tend to partner off – there was no expectation to take part in huge orgies involving everyone. Their regular water sports and fisting parties were most popular, along with their bi-annual scat parties, with up to 200 people attending. It was a safe space. All the rules were there in order to allow like-minded people to enjoy themselves without judgement.

Before I left, CBTactive gave me a copy of a book of photography that Vagevuur had produced which he



had designed. It was a slim hardback, 8 inches square, with a matt black cover around which ran a graphic line drawing of barbed wire printed in metallic silver ink. The title 'St Matthew 19:10-12 / Ephesians 4:7-9' ran along the spine in white. Each double page spread of images in the book had been created by a different member of the Vagevuur community along the theme of 'contrasts'. In one spread, a suited businessman on a bike pauses outside a modern, glass-fronted office building to speak on his mobile phone. On the page opposite, the same man is naked apart from a black studded leather harness and leather chaps. He lays down in a sling, his legs spread wide while another man fists him to the middle of the forearm.

Other images seemed to be clear homages to Mapplethorpe, with their black and white photography and anonymously cropped details of bodies in fetish wear. The photographs made me think about the way we assume our identities as gay men, trying these looks on for size, adopting appealing masculine symbols of denim, leather, jockstraps, sportswear, rubber... all imbued with generations of some unreachable meaning, as if part of a queer collective unconscious.

Other images were taken inside Vagevuur, revealing tantalising glimpses of the space. In one, a man in a skinhead-inspired outfit of high laced black boots, bleached tight denim, and tight black rubber top, stands amidst the bunkbeds in the dormitory where customers travelling from far away could spend the night. The military-grade bunkbeds are unmade, and a crucifix hangs on the wall.

CBTactive flicked through the book and showed me a photo of a heavily tattooed man with a shaved head sitting on a toilet. He looks up at the camera, his mouth wide open, with what looks like shit on his tongue. His face expresses a kind of gleeful confrontation. 'That's H', CBTactive said. On the page opposite is a

painting of Jesus leading three apostles through a field of wheat. In the distance stands the Vagevuur building, barely looking out of place. CBTactive points at the apostle looking most attentively at Jesus. 'That's H too'. I'm amazed to see that H has photoshopped his face onto the apostle's. The religious themes abounding would seem strange were it not for the fact that Eindhoven was predominantly Roman Catholic at the time of Rose Driehoek's founding in the late-1970s. Indeed, it was against this repressive climate that much of their actions were directed. H's subversive appropriation of the Roman Catholic doctrine and aesthetic into Vagevuur seemed to be a way to make sense of this past.

After saying goodbye to CBTactive, I went to meet Gert and Mattias in their canal side apartment in the centre of Amsterdam. Gert greeted me on the top floor of the building and showed me inside their light-flooded apartment bursting to the seams with books, beautiful objects, artworks, and furniture. He gave me a tour of the shelves which housed the largest private collection of queer books I have ever seen – he guessed there were around 7,000 titles. They were arranged in loose themes, including cultural and literary history, early sexology, perversion and fetishism, BDSM, sociology, paedophilia, and male prostitution. Gert – an anthropologist, sociologist, and pioneer in the field of Gay Studies – began his collection in the 1970s with the books of German sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld. He told me that in 1979, he and Mattias were visited by the French philosopher Guy Hocquenghem and filmmaker Lionel Soukaz, who were collaborating on *Race d'ep*, a film tracing the historical development of a 20th century homosexual identity and told in four dramatized chapters. It is Gert's books that make up an extended sequence about Hirschfeld in the second part of *Race d'ep* – 'Le 3e sexe, ou des années folles à l'extermination' ('The Third Sex, or the roaring twenties until extermination'). The sequence recalls the end of



the sexually-free days of Berlin during the Weimar era and the rise of the Nazis who destroyed Hirschfeld's library and research archive at his remarkable Institut für Sexualwissenschaft, a terrible precursor to the extermination of tens of thousands of queer people in concentration camps. The film has long been a touchstone in queer cinema for me, so as I found myself amongst the books that helped define it, I became aware that I was surrounded by the entire scope of ancient and modern gay history. I felt again that this research was leading from one strange coincidence to another: the secret history of this fetish club following the intimate rhythms of my own taste.

\* \* \*

A few weeks into my stay I visited Luc Brandts, a local gay historian who carried out a large study on the history of the local gay rights movement published as *Tussen repressie en provocatie: Geschiedenis van de homo- en lesbische emancipatie in Eindhoven 1948-1990* (Between repression and provocation: History of gay and lesbian emancipation in Eindhoven 1948-1990). Luc ends his queer history of Eindhoven when the Roze Driehoek turned inwards and started to use their building on Hemelrijken to explore their sexuality, a direction which would eventually become Vagevuur. From public-facing activism, to private sex.

Luc had arranged a number of research materials on his desk for me as prompts, including issues of *De Verkeerde K(r)ant*, and a number of photographs of the Roze Driehoek. During our conversation he told me that one of Roze Driehoek's regular activities was going to local cruising sites to protect gay men from gay bashers, blowing whistles to scare off the attackers. I asked him where the cruising took place, and he said that most cruising happened in Anne Frankplantsoen, the park located directly opposite the Van Abbemuseum. He told me it had remained a popular

cruising site until relatively recently when the local municipality had the bushes cut down. Luc mentioned another site – a stop along the A67 motorway that runs East towards the border with Germany. He said it was named Blauwe Kei after the blue stones that were found in the ground there. I assumed he meant a geological peculiarity whereby blue-coloured stones rose to the surface or were dug up in the tilling of the soil. After I left Luc's, the stones began to form part of a fictional narrative in my mind in which glowing boulders emerged from the ground at particular sites of queer significance, ancient markers – or portals even – connecting past and present.

Later back at the house, I emailed Luc to confirm which variety of stone he had meant. He replied,

'A blue stone was, in almost every case, a natural stone from the Ardennes area, Belgium, called 'Arduin' or Belgian hardstone. It is dark grey stone with a blue hue and was sometimes used to mark special places. In Nijmegen, I know, there is one on the ancient market-place, to mark the place where public executions and other punishments were done. And Arduin was also used to sculpt border stones. When a 'blauwe kei' is found in the countryside, it mostly is such a border marking, of which the existence had been forgotten. If you search for 'blauwe kei' in Google maps, you find dozens of them, they were not uncommon. Arduin was simply the best natural stone to sculpt – it is also much used as a threshold – which was found relatively nearby and because of that was the cheapest.'

Luc's reference to public executions and punishments stood out. During our conversation I had learned that, until the early-19th century, men and women were executed for homosexuality – or 'sodomy' as it was then known – in the Netherlands. The presence of the blue stone as a marker on both a site where queers and heretics were probably killed and where they now cruised was an uncanny echo of my imaginary portals.



My inclination to assign the stones with magical significance was indicative of my subjective failures which meant I could only ever partially grasp at the meaning of my subject. And yet the stones were also symbolic of the strange coincidences that had led me through this research, glowing bodies guiding me through the sediment of sex and death to touch other bodies. I began to think about the ways in which I could define the outcome of my research and memorialise the history of Vagevuur, to make my own glowing blue stone.

\* \* \*

He who longs to strengthen his spirit  
must go beyond obedience and respect.  
He will continue to honour some laws  
but he will mostly violate  
both law and custom and live beyond  
the established and deficient norm.  
Pleasure will have much to teach him.  
He will not be afraid of the destructive act;  
one half of the house must be pulled down.  
This way he will grow virtuously into knowledge.

'Strengthening the Spirit' by C. P. Cavafy (1903)

Text displayed above the bar at the first Vagevuur on Hemelrijken.

\* \* \*

Between 1998 and 2005, Vagevuur produced eight porn videos, each catering to a different fetish (Mud, SM, Leather, Rubber, Sportswear, Gunge, and Scat). Initially released on VHS and subsequently on DVD, seven of these were sold via mail order through advertisements in *ITCH*, and eventually online through their website. One video – documentation of a scat party – was not officially released but privately circulated amongst the regulars of the party.

The videos are notable for their amateur production values. Each was produced entirely by volunteers and featured regulars from the club. The videos were in effect made by the Vagevuur collective, for the Vagevuur collective, and as such did not enter a public retail arena. This made finding copies difficult, and none were kept at the IHLIA archives.

I had originally heard about the videos from Matthew, my friend who had told me about the existence of the club. Matthew owned copies of *Mud Party* (1998) and *SM: Everlasting Desire* (1999-2001) on DVD, which he had purchased from the Vagevuur website. However, my first encounter with these films was on VHS at the home of Ad in Delft, at the recommendation of Gert and Matthias, who had been friends with Ad since their early activist days.

I visited Ad one gloriously sunny morning. He greeted me, wearing big plush brown smiling poop emoji slippers, at his bright yellow door which faced onto a canal to the East of the city. He led me up the steep staircase to his scruffy first floor apartment. A veritable museum of homoerotic art covered the walls, and piles of queer-themed books sat collecting dust. He made me a cup of tea in a mug that read 'If I gave a shit, you'd be the first person I'd give it to', and we sat down to discuss Vagevuur.

Ad had been a regular at the scat parties that he also helped organise, assisting an artist known as Martin of Holland who started the parties back in the early 90s, before they made Vagevuur their regular home. Martin made explicit drawings in the vein of Tom of Finland. Shit and piss featured prominently, as did giant cocks and uniforms, but what really set them apart from Tom's voluptuously endowed men was how surreal they were. In one, a group of naked men try to climb into a giant's messy arsehole. In another, a reclining blonde man, surrounded by horned devils, shits out



two devil babies, one of which suckles on his oversized nipple – a coprophilic riff on *Rosemary's Baby* perhaps? Ad showed me drawing after drawing by Martin, which he had assembled in a publication entitled *The Brown Book*.

A heavy-set man with a bald head and dark eyes loomed out of a large painting hanging above Ad's fireplace. 'That's Pim Fortuyn, an old mate and rim-buddy of mine', Ad proclaimed after I asked him about it. It took me a moment to realise that this man was the leader of LPF (List Pim Fortuyn), the very same right wing party implicated in the closure of Vagevuur in 2008. Six years before that, in 2002, Pim had been assassinated by environmentalist and animal rights activist Volkert van der Graaf. Pim was a notorious figure in Dutch politics at the time, with his contentious views on multiculturalism, immigration and Islam. According to Ad, Pim – an out gay man – had been a regular at Vagevuur, as well as Rotterdam's gay motor club bar De Shaft. I was somewhat stunned by this revelation, and asked whether this was the reason why LPF had put pressure on Vagevuur. He denied it, suggesting that Vagevuur had actually closed due to internal reasons.

Ad found his copy of the Scat Party DVD and inserted it into the player. I quickly averted my eyes from the shit-eating on screen but couldn't escape the noise. I started giggling uncontrollably, perhaps as a means of protecting my senses. It was an unexpectedly visceral reaction. I endured a few minutes and then asked Ad to turn it off.

Undeterred, he dusted off two Vagevuur VHS tapes, *Mud Party* (1998) and *SM: Everlasting Desire* (1999–2001) for me, but like most people he no longer owned a VHS player, so he took me downstairs to meet his friend Eric, a photographer who was in the process of digitising his personal archive. Eric and Ad had been activists together, and were in a queer punk music

collective called Softies around the time of the Rose Driehoek. Eric set the computer and videotapes to record and showed me some old photos of their activist days before I said goodbye and headed back to Eindhoven.

Something about the Pim Fortuyn link kept bugging me, so I emailed Ad to ask him to confirm why he felt it had closed down. He replied:

'The demise of the Vagevuur is still a hot topic to this day. H, who managed the club, is a trusted source I think. Not so the people who formed the last Vagevuur board. They were of the totally politically correct coward sort. They tried to get across that the Ultra-Right parties in the Eindhoven city council were to blame, questioning why the city funded a salary for H.

They were only too glad (the last Vagevuur society governors, that is) to put a stop to it. They were the type that would walk around there in spotless expensive leathers and would scream if a piss-stain (or worse) would ruin it, They also halted everything that was nice at Vagevuur, i.e. the anarchy, the scat and fist parties, the filming there, their magazine Itch, their Bed and Breakfast, etc.'

It was sad to think of the club closing due to internal factors. It was easier to imagine that Vagevuur simply closed due to the local LPF office's exposure of the club's council funding, that this was another case of right wing oppression of queer expression. H had yet to reply to my email, and so this aspect would remain a mystery until I could speak to him.

Eric emailed me a link to download the digital transfers of the VHS tapes. The videos begin with a legal notice that is familiar to anyone who has watched a full length commercially-produced porn film. This is followed by the Vagevuur Video logo which consists of a photograph which playfully adapts the centre panel of Peter



Paul Ruben's 1610 triptych 'Raising of the Cross'. The painting depicts a group of strong, muscular figures lifting up the pale body of Christ nailed to the cross. In this version, a tanned, muscular, short-haired and moustachioed-Jesus wears a crown of black barbed wire and is bound to the cross with leather cuffs (the only piercing is the metal rings through each nipple). Christ is surrounded by four men: a balding, shaven-headed macho man wearing a chain harness, a young, innocent-looking soldier, a tattooed muscular man, and in the clearest reference to the painting, a man in a turban and tunic, whose right hand rests on Jesus' chest. The image playfully disrupts the Catholic iconography of the original painting but retains its sense of intense devotion to the details of ritual experience.

\* \* \*

Welcome to the mysteries of the world of SM. SM is a world of domination and submission. The perfect relationship is one where two people are able to satisfy each other and fulfil fantasies. This does not mean that every master, or 'dominant' if you prefer, has to be a sadist. It is also equally true that every slave (submissive) doesn't have to be a masochist. These people do exist, but they're quite rare, and hopefully they find each other. But if the relationship is only one-sided, then it is doomed to fail. A good SM relationship is built upon trust. A true slave will only give himself to someone he has faith in and can respect. Also, a good master will earn that trust and respect by satisfying the desires of the slave. The driving force to being a good master is basically a desire to be in control and dominate the relationship. Psychological domination is a very big part of SM. A loud voice is not always the best way to get results. I can control with a look and a pointed finger. A master must be able to control the relationship with confidence and authority. This he must learn and

earn and a slave in turn must show and indicate if necessary by body language that what the master is doing is not only acceptable but enjoyed. So, the master learns the limitations but also the possibilities of the slave to serve him well and improve with time. Sex is of course an important part of a good SM relationship, but it is not the main reason for the play. Forced sex and rape are fantasies many people have but they would not be willing to enter into a commitment with an SM Master. The same rule applies to the master whose only sexual desire is to force sexual activities onto another. He can get that in any bar darkroom with complete anonymity, with no responsibility, but that is not SM. You can go down different roads to fulfil each other's fantasies. It can be a play of master and slave, or playing a dominant and masochist role. Everything is possible but nothing is compulsory. Enjoy this video by following the adventures of the main character, Johnny Cash. If it opens up ideas and creates new desires, then it has been worthwhile.

Opening narration from *SM: Everlasting Desire*  
(Vagevuur Collective, 1999–2001)

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Towards the end of my stay, I met a woman who worked at the museum who told me that she knew someone who lived in the original Vagevuur building – a photographer who had been part of the Roze Driehoek. She gave me his email address and, a week or so after I contacted him and on the eve of my departure, he finally replied, inviting me over for coffee.

I arrived at an unassuming brick building on Hemelrijken, which roughly translates to English as Heavenly Realms. In 1984, the local municipality gave Roze Driehoek the building for 100 guilders a month, in order to keep them off the streets where they had been causing trouble





with their various protests and actions. The group named the building Vagevuur, and used it to host parties, house a café, and publish issues of *De Verkeerde 'K(rant)*. As the group gradually disbanded due to activist fatigue, drug addiction, and AIDS-related deaths, a smaller group led by H started hosting fetish parties in the venue, and opened up Vagevuur to local fetish groups who needed a space to play. Eventually, with only H left, Vagevuur the fetish club was born. It stayed in this location from 1986 to 1996, when it moved to a building in the east of the city after ongoing trouble with the neighbours. It was amusing to think that behind this door on a quiet, residential street, all sorts of so-called 'extreme' sex was taking place.

I was greeted by John, a handsome, smiling, silver-haired man wearing indigo blue jeans and a black shirt. John later told me he was 70 years old, but he looked much younger. He welcomed me inside. It was a bright open space, clean and modern, with contemporary furniture and abstract artwork hanging on the walls. The building bore no relation to a fetish club, but John told me that when he and his ex-partner renovated the building, they had removed a row of urinals, several cages, and a giant cement pool. The pool had been built especially for the mud parties, but came in handy for water sports and scat too.

John made us coffee, served up slices of apple cake with whipped cream, and we sat down at the kitchen table to talk. He had pulled a few binders of his work relating to Roze Driehoek and Vagevuur from his archive and I was excited to see that he had photographed the image of Jesus and his apostles that became the Vagevuur logo. In the same series, he had also taken shots of various scenes that H commissioned to promote the club's new location. They explored the individual fetishes of water sports, fisting, SM, military, and rubber. The images were stunning, and I immediately asked him if I could exhibit them at the Van

Abbemuseum. John told me that he didn't have the copyright and that he would need to ask H for permission. As we talked more, the conversation moved from Vagevuur to my own interest in the subject, and before long I had reached my hands across the table to take his. Together we created an intimate space in which I felt able to share stories of my expanding desires and the ways they seemed to be intersecting with the research. John told me of his recent heart-ache, and his own relationship to SM. We revealed that we were both more comfortable in the submissive role, which somehow only magnified the intimacy between us.

After a long time talking, John showed me upstairs to his bedroom, which contained a sling, a pommel horse, and a wild array of dildos, hoods, whips, blindfolds, and restraints. This was my first personal invite into this sort of space, and I explored the room as I would a library. I picked up various objects and, impressed by how many were handmade, asked him about them. He told me he had hosted leather craft workshops at Vagevuur, helping people to make their own leather fetish wear and objects. Each item has its own specific use, and this use had been learned by John through someone or some experience and was now being taught to me. It was the gentlest introduction, a kind of imparting of knowledge, though not in a formal way. Each object held the promise of its use in the intricacies of its form.

John invited me into the sling that hung from four chains attached to the ceiling. I had previously encountered slings hanging expectantly in dark corners of gay sex clubs, but I had never felt confident or comfortable enough to try one, despite my curiosity. I thought about it for a moment, and encouraged by John, removed my clothes and pulled myself into the leather hammock, awkwardly adjusting myself so that the sling supported my weight comfortably. John fastened leather cuffs to my ankles and secured them to the chains so that my



legs hung in place above me, spread wide, exposing me. As I laid there suspended above the ground, I imagined how it would have felt to be like this in Vagevuur, open to the touch of numerous strangers. John placed a leather blindfold over my eyes. It felt cool on my face before warming to the temperature of my skin. After some time spent in the dark, anticipating his next move, I felt John wrap some rope around the base of my stiff cock, carefully looping the cord around it a few times, before twisting it around my balls and slowly stretching them away from my body. Next, he attached clamps to my nipples, and I felt a sensation that pleased me more than I ever expected. It was not uncomfortable but strangely comforting. John's hands explored my body, focusing on my arsehole, which he lubed up and fingered for a while before slowly inserting a dildo. He fucked me with it, while jerking and sucking my cock until I came.

\* \* \*

Email from H: 26 February 2019, at 11:35am

Hello Sam,

Pink Triangle was activist, Vagevuur was not, (it was an) underground subculture (and) that was a conscious choice.

We have never sought publicity or allowed media. None of the employees in any way have ever given permission for public access to images or text outside their own circuit.

After we were forced into publicity, we immediately closed. I spoke to 1 former board member, he would also find it very annoying if history were to be revived.

So, it's about my responsibility to protect former employees who participated in the subculture and never intended to make things public. (it was underground – not public!)

I myself have also distanced myself, hopefully you respect that and references, locations and people are not included in the project.

Greetings

H

\* \* \*

What do you do with a story that doesn't want to be told?

The restrictions placed on the Vagevuur material by its former manager make sense to me. These films and publications were produced for a highly specific audience that actively contributed to the subculture of fetish for which Vagevuur was creating a space. Their films were produced by, directed by, and featured members of the community, all eager to facilitate the fantasies of their community. But what happens when you take these films and images and put them in a museum, making them available to the public? How does the public – albeit a discerning and liberally-minded art audience – respond to the vision of fisting, cock and ball torture, piss, and scat? What does removing the material from its context of creation or intention do?

I see this material as fundamental, the product of a politically-motivated subculture that created their own space, outside the commonplace commercial structures defining so many gay spaces. For 22 years, H and his volunteers made a success of Vagevuur while staying true to their values. The material is not mine, and as yet much of it exists outside of the archive, so despite having collected a lot of it together, I now question what I can ethically do with it.

At the end of this process, what remains open and full of potential is my personal response to the subject: my



own process, my growing relationship with sado-masochism, my interactions and new friendships, sexual encounters and the various frustrations have all become the subject of the research.

Towards the end of my stay, I confessed to Jasper – the archivist at the LGBT archive – that my research had not been entirely academic but had also become personal. ‘What took you so long?’ he asked, articulating what seemed clear to him from the beginning. The next time we met, he brought me a book from his personal library, a collection of essays called *Leatherfolk*, edited by Mark Thompson and published in 1991. The book explores the cultural, historical, and personal significance of SM from both straight and gay perspectives.

While reading it on the train to Eindhoven, one essay in particular stood out: ‘SM and the psychology of gay male initiation: An archetypal perspective’ by Robert M. Hopke, a Jungian psychotherapist based in Berkley, California. In his text, Hopke makes links between gay male SM initiation rituals and traditional tribal initiation and puberty rites, revealing their parallel qualities to show how gay men can find deep connections to their community, collective history, and own body through SM rituals. He highlights the three stages of initiation typically applied to tribal rites: separation, transition, and incorporation, suggesting they are a close match to the structure of many SM scenes:

‘The stage of transition is inaugurated within SM scenes in ways uncannily similar to the kinds of bodily torments and manipulations that in native cultures are meant to develop the limits of the initiate’s endurance and usher him into masculinity out of boyhood: suspension, piercing, penis and testicle stretching, cutting, tattooing, and semen ingestion. Likewise, the stage of transition, in which the initiate is on the threshold between who he has

been and who he is to become, is often likened to the state of death, a ‘liminal state.’ Both in gay male SM and in native cultures, therefore, we come upon appropriate ritual markers for the deathlike, liminal aspect of this stage as well: bondage, mummification, confinement to closets, and, of course, the shrouding of the body in black leather.’

As I read the essay, I began to reflect on my own artistic research process – one that had become deeply personal and corporeal. While I already understood my own aesthetic and political appreciation of Vagevuur, and had started pushing my own boundaries into the realm of SM, I began to consider the research as a process of individuation. I mapped my own journey into the history of Vagevuur onto the three act structure of the initiation rites – separation, transition, and incorporation – and saw that my research had functioned as a kind of SM initiation through the acquiring of knowledge and practice.

Separation occurred when I moved to Eindhoven. I sought the knowledge and guidance of a number of older men, whose access to the history I was researching put them in the authoritative role of ‘master’. I was the eager initiate, seeking to find a truth that would somehow transform me through the creation of a new work. Spaces like the LGBT archive, CBTactive’s home, and Gert & Matthias’ library became playrooms for an intergenerational transmission of knowledge, where I was suspended in and moved through that liminal space between not-knowing and understanding. In John’s home in the original Vagevuur, my body hung in his leather sling, legs held open to receive him and his insight and skill at giving pain and pleasure. I started envisaging SM as an invocation of the past, a way to connect myself to older generations, both intellectually and sexually. The undertaking of these SM rites also connected me to the dead through generations of hidden meanings that were now marking my body.



Incorporation came from the recognition of new masters who accepted me into these spaces, but also from my own understanding of myself in relation to my subject. The process of researching Vagevuur connected me to a dispersed but still vibrant community. It provided me intellectual and sexual sustenance in a process of formulating my identity and assigning it a lineage. All of the coincidences and uncanny details of my research functioned like invitations from those who came before me, a glowing blue portal to a world of desire and kinship that held far more for me than I had ever anticipated.

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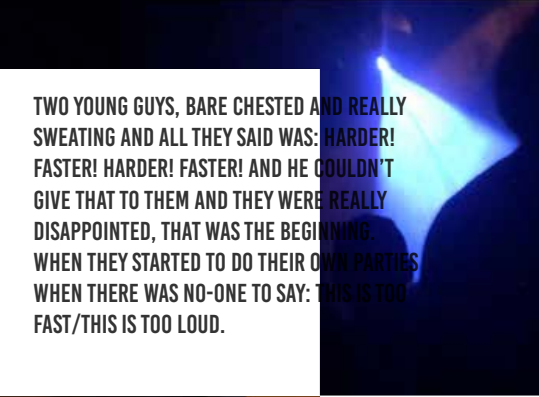
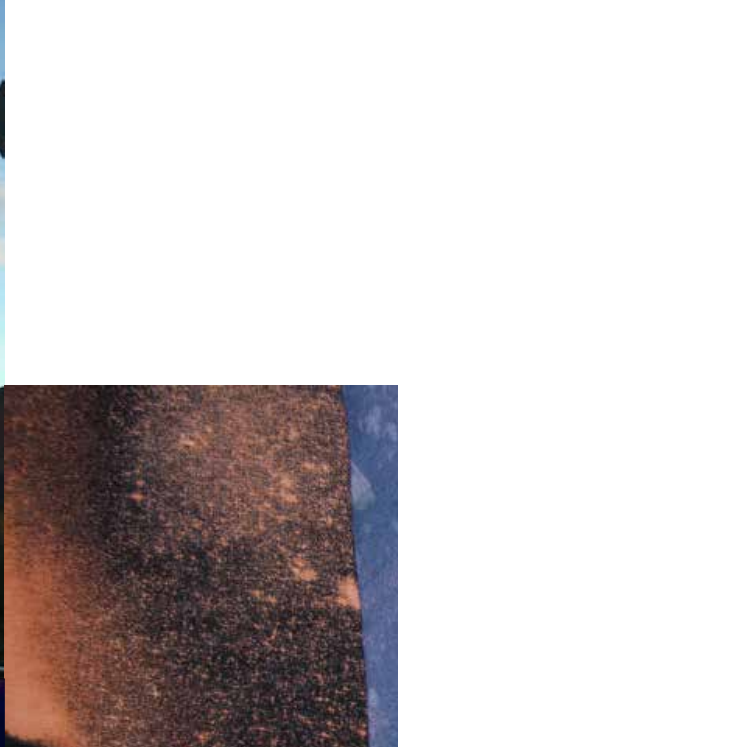
‘Between Earth and Heaven, All Things are Possible’  
Text in silver letters above the door at Vagevuur.



# Hardcore Eindhoven

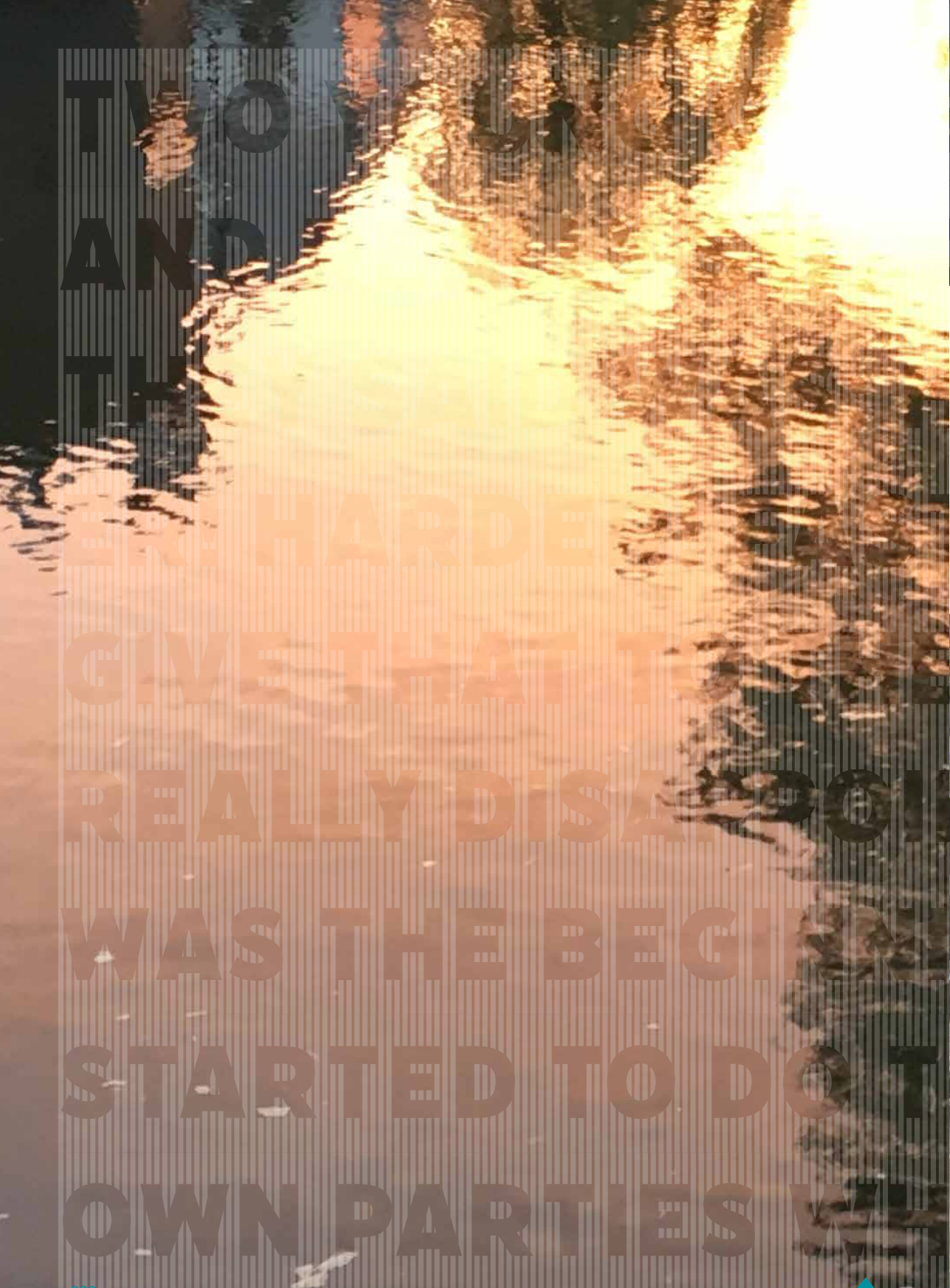
## Anthea Black & Mikiki





TWO YOUNG GUYS, BARE CHESTED AND REALLY SWEATING AND ALL THEY SAID WAS: HARDER! FASTER! HARDER! FASTER! AND HE COULDN'T GIVE THAT TO THEM AND THEY WERE REALLY DISAPPOINTED, THAT WAS THE BEGINNING. WHEN THEY STARTED TO DO THEIR OWN PARTIES WHEN THERE WAS NO-ONE TO SAY: THIS IS TOO FAST/THIS IS TOO LOUD.





TWO  
AND  
TWO  
WARD  
GIVE  
REALLY  
WAS  
STARTED  
OWN

YOU  
UN  
AND  
DAILY  
DISA  
THE  
BEG  
TO DO  
PARTIES





HIS ASS IN THE AIR, BUBBLING AT 180BPM  
I WAS MESMERIZED BY HIS BUTT JIGGLING. WOW, THIS IS GOOD.

IT WAS VERY MACHO, STILL IS.  
IF YOU HAVE A SLIGHTLY MASOCHISTIC INCLINE, THEN THAT'S PERFECT FOR YOU  
AS WILL HAPPILY IGNORE YOU AND THINK YOU'RE A FAG.

THE SKINHEAD/SCALLY THING IS PRETTY MUCH A GENERAL THING BECAUSE OF  
TO HANG OUT IN THE HARDCORE PUNK SCENE. THEY WERE ALL IN THE SAME OUTFIT,  
WITH A SHAVED HEAD. I LOOKED LIKE THEM AS WELL. SHIRT I WAS WEARING  
MY OWN.

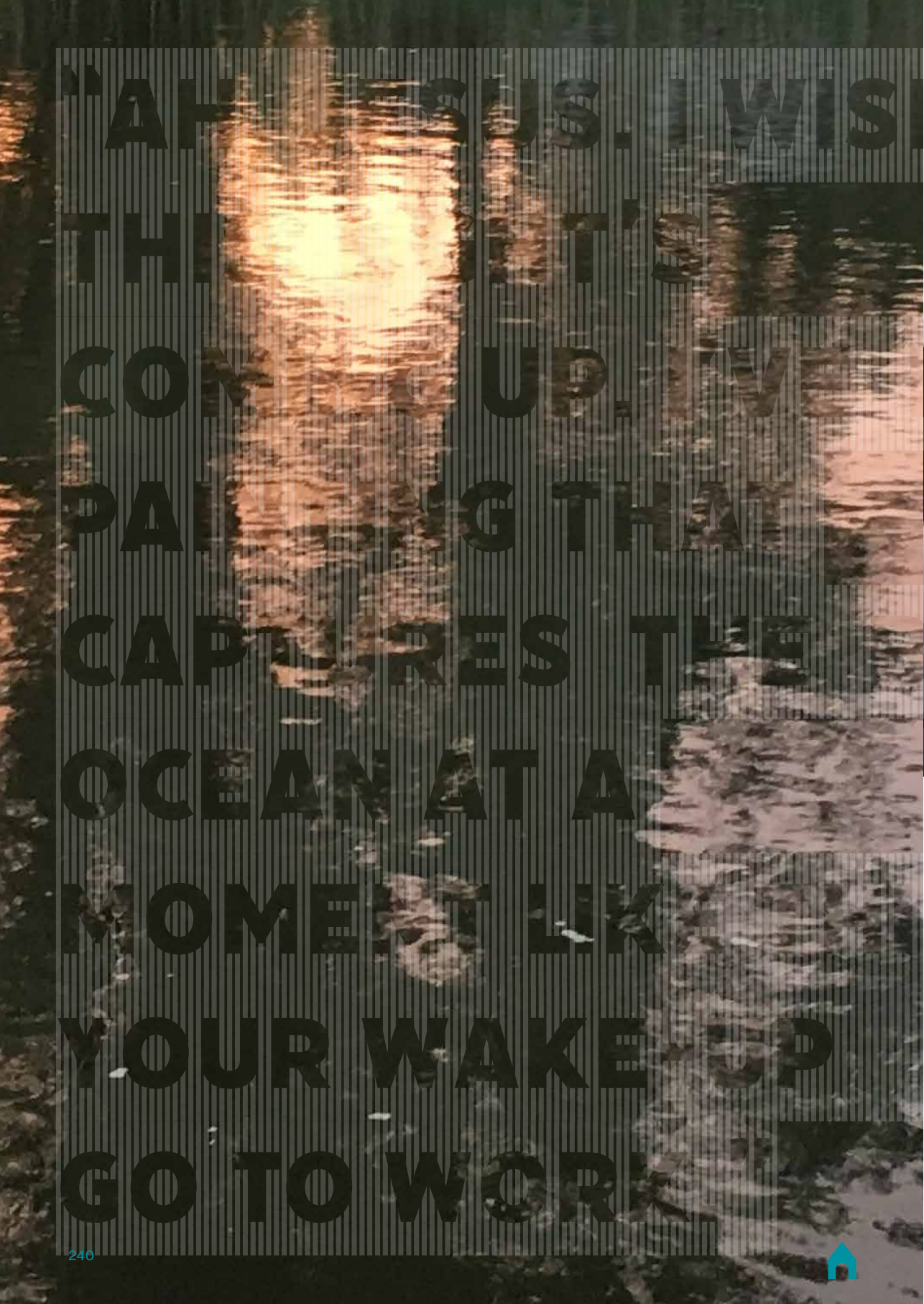
THAT'S VERY SIMILAR TO HAVING AN EXPERIENCE WITH A GAY OR PARTY GUY,  
THERE'S A KIND OF CAMARADERIE, A BROTHERLY THING THAT YOU ABSOLUTELY  
DON'T GET IN THE GAY SCENE AT ALL.

I CAME BACK TO CENTRAL POLITICS, THINGS REMAINING AS MUCH THE CORE  
LIBERAL VALUES OF OUR COUNTRY THAT I DO THINK IS VERY UNIQUE SOMETHING  
ABOUT WHERE YOU COULD ACTUALLY TALK ABOUT A NATION AND THE CULTURE OF  
A NATION IS THAT WE HAD CORE VALUES THAT WERE  
INFLUENCED BY SOCIALIST ATTITUDE BUT STILL VERY DEMOCRATIC WITHOUT ANY  
RISK OF IT BECOMING A KIND OF MARXIST SLAVE LABOUR. YES YOU ARE HAPPY AS  
A WORKER BEE KIND OF THING. ... STUFF WAS REMAINING SOMEWHAT THE SAME,  
BUT THE IDEA OF THE CENTRAL ELEMENT WAS TO PRESERVE THOSE VALUES AND  
IMPROVE THE SITUATION FOR THE PEOPLE AND MAKE THEM EVEN MORE HAPPY WITH  
THAT BUT SUDDENLY YOU GET ALL THESE POPULIST POLITICIANS AND THEY'RE  
LIKE "NO NO NO FOREIGNERS OUT" AND I KIND OF GOT A SKEWED OPINION IN THE  
SENSE THAT, OK IF PEOPLE ARE GOING TO BELIEVE IN THAT BLATANT LYING AND  
PEOPLE HAVE ACTUALLY NO INTEREST IN POLITICS BUT GO FOR A SOUND-BYTE...

I STILL FIND THAT TO BE ONE OF THE CORE TRUTHS ABOUT PRIVILEGE. I'M STILL  
A WHITE CISGENDER MALE...



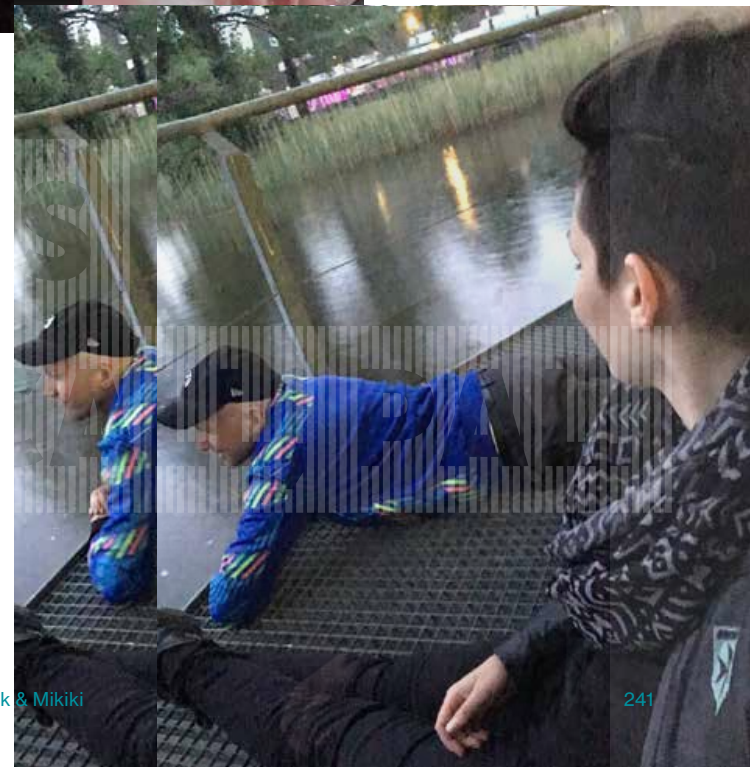




"AH... SUS. I WIS  
THI... IT'S  
CON... UP. I W  
PAL... G THA  
CAP... RES THE  
OCEAN AT A  
MOMENT LIK  
YOUR WAKE-UP  
GO TO WORK



NEVER S  
BEAUTY O





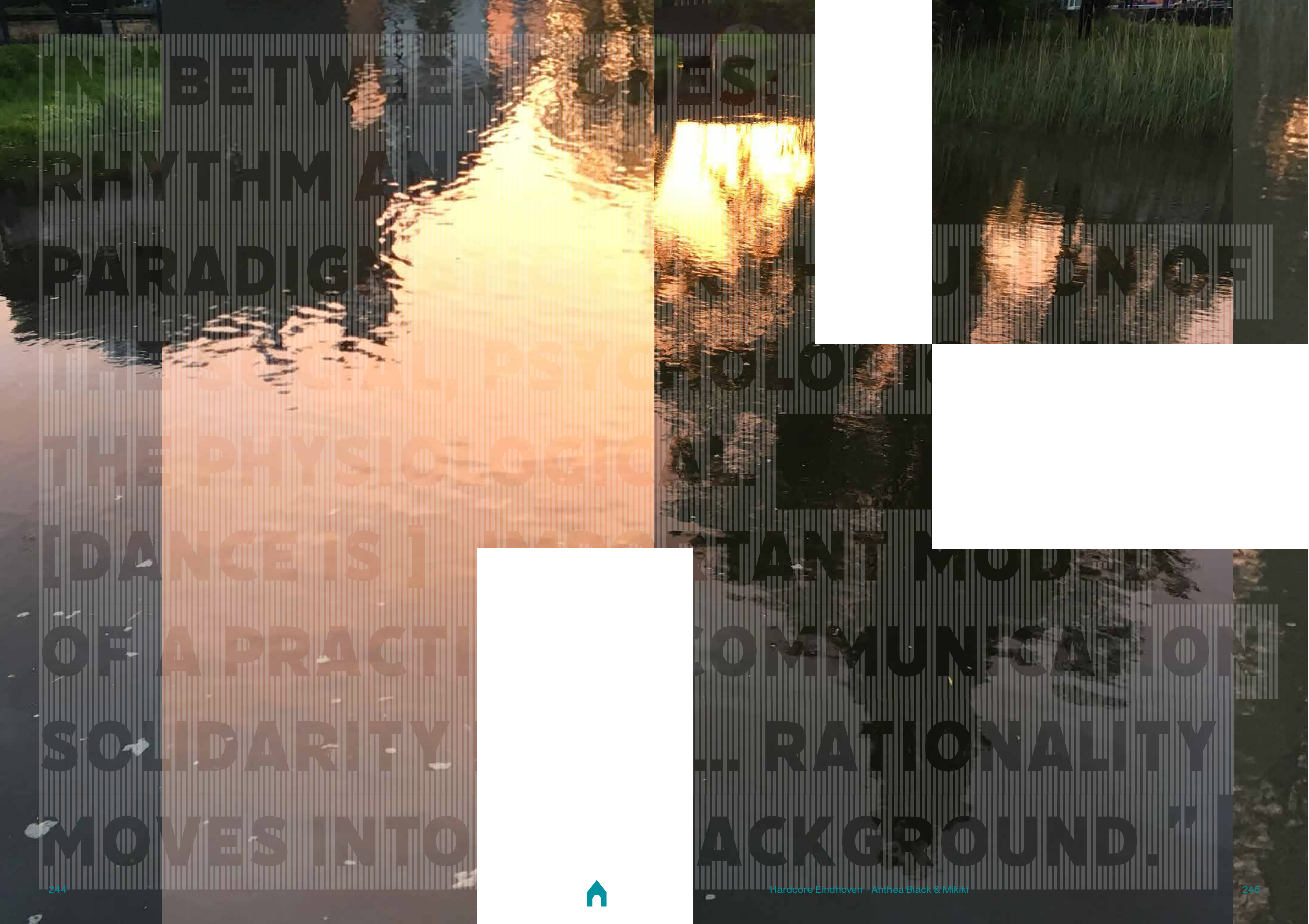
ARE WE WORRIED RESEARCHING A LARGELY WHITE SUBCULTURE IS PASSÉ? OR THAT IT'S FURTHER ENTRENCHING WHITE MODELS OF CULTURAL RESEARCH AND PRESERVATION? OR DID WE HAVE SPECIFIC CLAIMS / ASSOCIATIONS OF GABBER WITH RACISM TO CONTEND WITH AND UNDERSTAND? IT SEEMS TO ME ADDRESSING RACE IS ALSO PARTLY ABOUT ADDRESSING DUTCH TOLERANCE AND BENEVOLENCE, PERHAPS EVEN HOW THIS MYTH OF BENEVOLENCE ALLOWS SUBCULTURES LIKE GABBER TO "LIVE AND LET LIVE," AND HOW WHITENESS DISMISSES CLAIMS OF RACISM TO MAKE ITSELF FEEL OK.

THERE'S A VERY DISTINCT PERCEPTION AMONGST SOME PEOPLE OF COLOUR IN HOLLAND THAT SEE GABBER FANS AS THREATENING THAT'S UNDERSTANDABLE, ALSO GABBER IS VERY NATIONALIST, IT'S A SYMBOL OF DUTCH PRIDE AT IT'S HEIGHT AS WELL. IT WAS A VERY DUTCH THING.

I THINK THERE'S A REALLY EASY LINK TO MAKE WITH NATIONALIST PRIDE, AND THAT IS A SLIPPERY SLOPE AROUND CLOSING BORDERS.

THE WORKING CLASS THING SOUNDS DIFFERENT. PART OF THE NETHERLANDS IS DEFINITELY RACIST. IN EVERY COUNTRY IT'S PLAIN TO SEE. WE SEE THAT REFLECTED IN GABBER, TOO.





IN BETWEEN ONES:  
RHYTHM AND  
PARADIGM  
THE JUNCTION OF  
SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY  
THE PHYSIOLOGICAL  
DANCE IS I  
OF A PRACTICE  
SOLIDARITY  
MOVES INTO  
STANT MOD  
COMMUNICATION  
RATIONALITY  
BACKGROUND.”



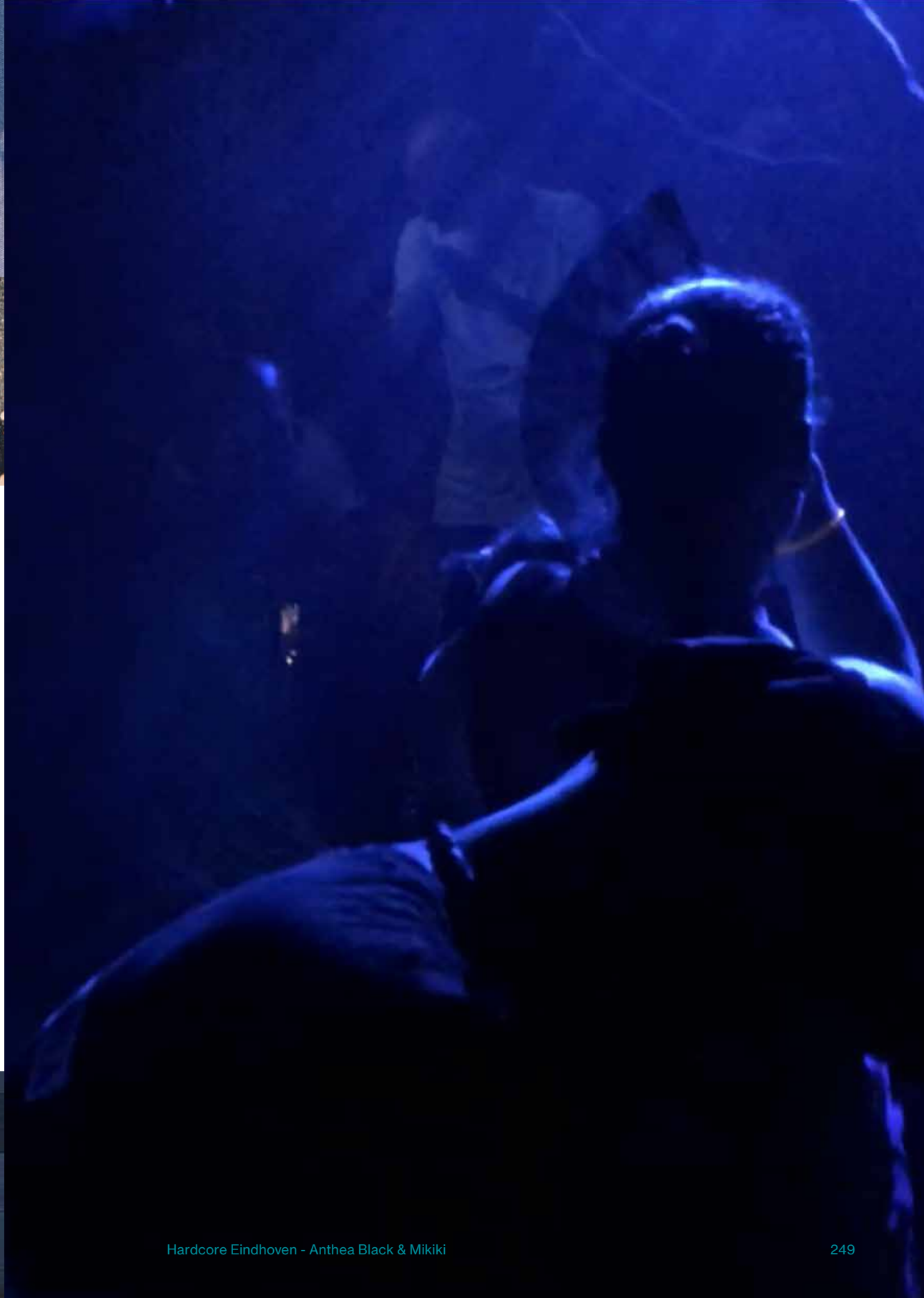
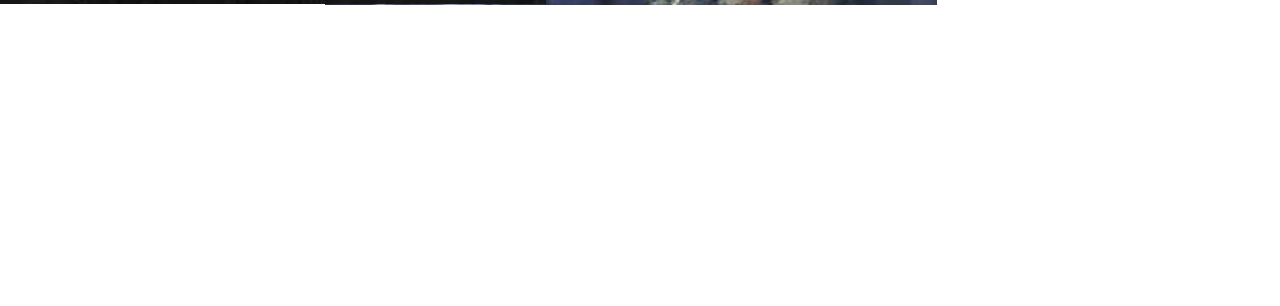
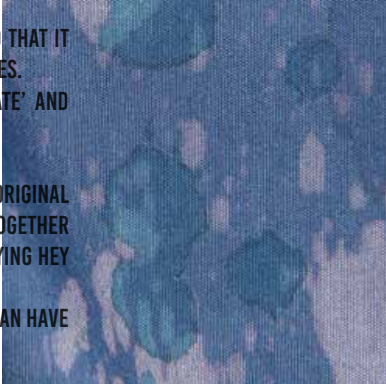
ECSTATIC COMMUNITY ... IS  
ASSOCIATED WITH AN  
UNCONTROLLED WILDNESS THAT  
CAN ENTAIL, FOR A LIMITED PERIOD  
OF TIME, A COMPLETE  
EFFACEMENT OF ALL SOCIAL  
DIFFERENCE AND ORDER,  
EXPLODING BOUNDARIES OF AN  
EXISTING SOCIETY





WHAT YOU SAID ABOUT THE LOOKS AND THAT IT MIGHT LOOK THREATENING? WELL IT DOES. THE WORD GABBER IS 'YOU'RE MY MATE' AND WE'RE DOING THIS TOGETHER!

GABBER WHICH IS A CHILD OF THE ORIGINAL SCENE - THE WHOLE IDEA OF GETTING TOGETHER WITH YOUR FRIENDS AND PARTYING, SAYING HEY GABBER LET'S GO AND HAVE A DRINK. IT'S AS MUCH LOVE AND PEACE AS YOU CAN HAVE WITH WHITE TRASH HOOLIGANS.



CAPITALISM IS CAPTURING  
SMALLER AND SMALLER  
EXTREME  
EFFECTS  
NOW  
WITHIN  
THE WORKDAY, AS  
CONSTANTLY  
PRODUCTIVITY?



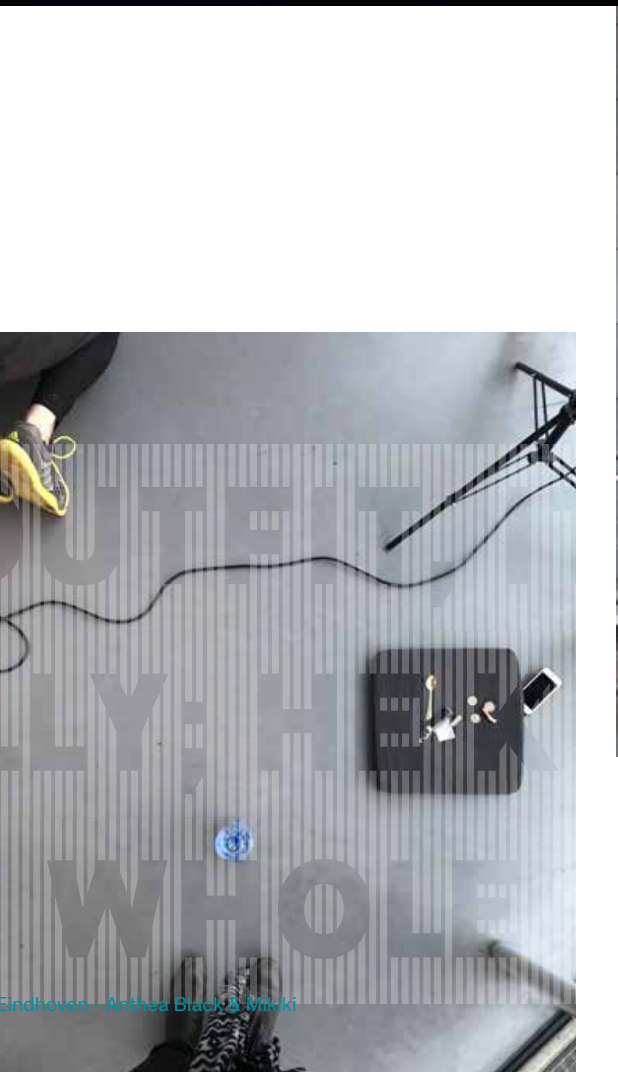
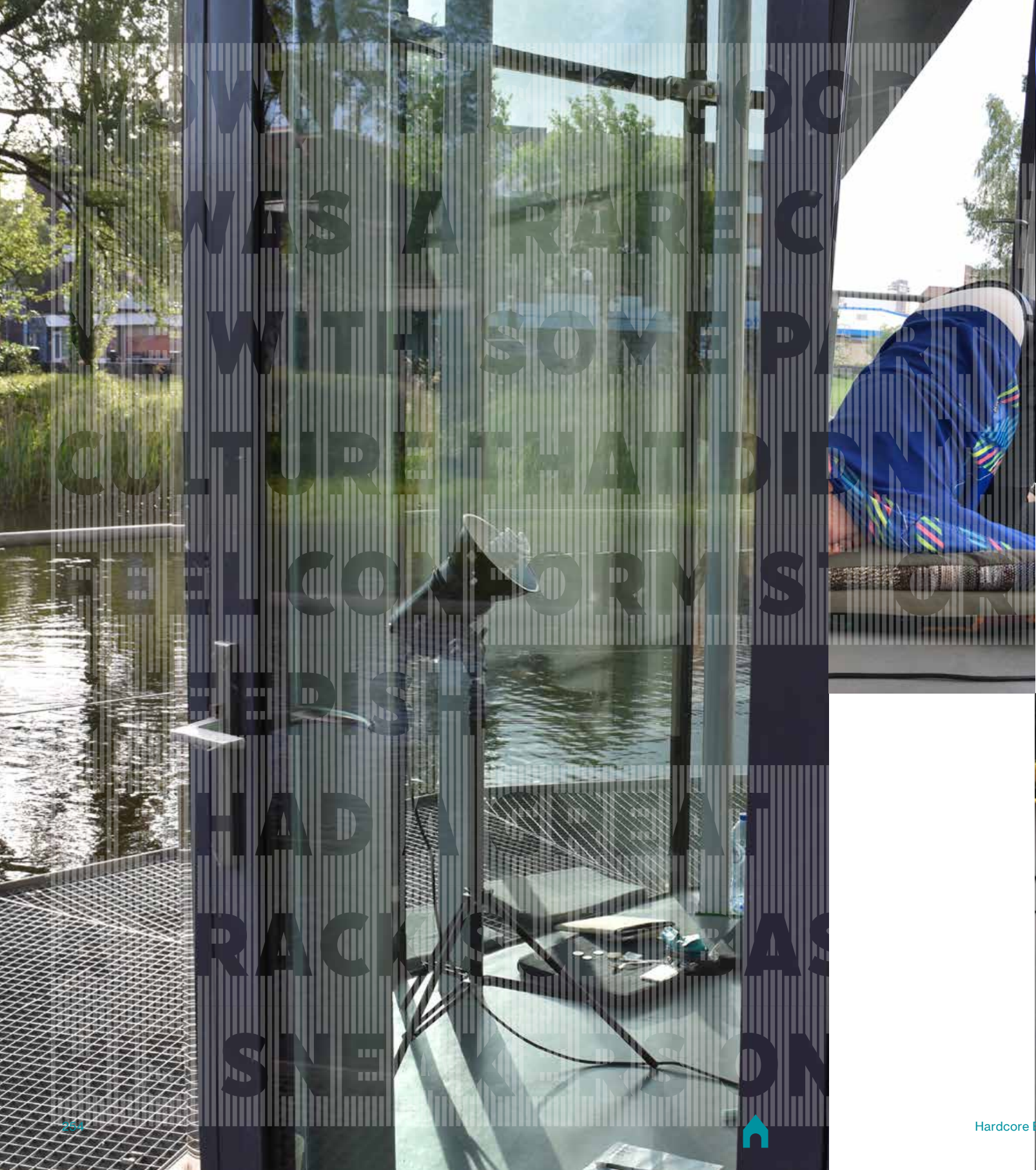


IN "BETWEEN ZONES" MUNDER SUGGESTS  
 "...BODILY MOVEMENT IN GROUPS CAN  
 DEVELOP COMMUNAL FEELINGS OF BELONGING  
 AND SYMPATHIES FOR OTHERS BEYOND  
 THE CONTROL OF REASON."


THIS FORMS OUR UNDERSTANDING OF WHAT IS  
 PROFESSIONAL AND PERMISSIBLE WITHIN A  
 MUSEUM, IN A GRAND COLLAPSE OF WORK AND  
 LEISURE INTO ENDURANCE DANCE AND  
 DRUG USE.

QUESTIONS OF OBJECTIVITY IN ART HISTORY  
 AND CRITICISM, VS. PARTICIPATION BECOMING  
 DISINHIBITED WHEN IN GROUP FORMATS  
 WITH SLOWED REACTION TIME. WHAT DO WE  
 SEEK TO RELEASE THE BODY, AND WHAT DO  
 THOSE GESTURES SERVE, AS WE MOVE THROUGH  
 THE WORLD? AND HOW DOES THIS FIT POLITICALLY  
 WITHIN THE PRACTICE OF "DEVIANCY"  
 AND UNDERSTANDING OF TIME AND SPACE  
 AS A MANIFESTATION OF SOMETHING FORMERLY  
 INVISIBLE?









"DROP IT HAPPY MIX," 3 STEPS AHEAD, SAMPLE:  
MICHAEL DOUGLAS IN WALL STREET (1987)

ANTHEA BLACK AND MIKIKI, IN-PERSON INTERVIEWS:  
JESSICA DE ABREU, AIDEN DOLAN, DICKIE GERARDUS  
IZAAK, AND GERT VAN VEEN. 2018-2019.

ROBIN DIANGELO, "WHITE FRAGILITY," INTERNATIONAL  
JOURNAL OF CRITICAL PEDAGOGY. 2011.

JACK HALBERSTAM, IN A QUEER TIME AND PLACE: TRANS-  
GENDER BODIES. SUBCULTURAL LIVES, 2005.

RAPHAEL GYGAX AND HEIKE MUNDER, EDS. BETWEEN  
ZONES: ON THE REPRESENTATION OF THE PERFORMATIVE  
AND NOTATION OF MOVEMENT, 2010.

GLORIA WEKKER, WHITE INNOCENCE: PARADOXES OF  
COLONIALISM AND RACE. 2016.



# Contributors' Biographies

## NICK AIKENS

Nick Aikens' practice encompasses curating, editing, writing and teaching. He is a curator at the Van Abbemuseum (since 2012) where he leads the Deviant Practice research programme and a PhD candidate at Valand Art Academy, University of Gothenburg (since 2018). He is a Research Affiliate, CCC at the Visual Arts Department, HEAD, Geneva (since 2016) and a member of the editorial board for L'Internationale Online (since 2013). He is a tutor at the Dutch Art Institute (since 2013) and was recently a tutor at the Design Academy Eindhoven (2015-17).

## SAM ASHBY

Sam Ashby is a British artist, graphic designer, and publisher. Since 2010 he has collaborated with writers, academics, and artists on his publication Little Joe, 'a magazine about queers and cinema, mostly.' His first film *The Colour of His Hair* (2017) premiered at International Film Festival Rotterdam 2017 and won the Best Documentary prize at London Short Film Festival 2018.

## ANTHEA BLACK

Anthea Black is a Canadian artist, writer, and cultural worker based in San Francisco and Toronto. Her studio work addresses feminist and queer history, collaboration, materiality and labour, takes the form of print, artist publishing and performance. She has exhibited in Canada, the US, France, Germany, the Netherlands and Norway. Black is co-editor of *Handbook: Supporting Queer and Trans Students in Art and Design Education* with Shamina Chherawala and *The New Politics of the Handmade: Art, Craft, Design* with Nicole Burisch and co-publisher of *The HIV Howler: Transmitting Art and Activism* with Jessica Whitbread. She is an assistant professor in Printmedia and Graduate Fine Arts at the California College of the Arts.

## JOHN BYRNE

John Byrne is a Reader in The Uses of Art at Liverpool John Moores University where he is also the Director of The City Lab. From 2008 Byrne worked closely with the Van Abbemuseum on 'The Autonomy Project' and, in 2013, Byrne coordinated Liverpool John Moores University's participation in the L'Internationale project 'The Uses of Art: The Legacy of 1848 and 1989'. In September 2015 Byrne took on the role of coordinator for the L'Internationale 'Constituencies' Research Strand and was lead editor on the resulting publication 'The Constituent Museum: Constellations of Knowledge, Politics (Valiz, 2018). Byrne became a Narrator/Curator of the L'Internationale 'Glossary of Common Knowledge' in 2015. Byrne has been an active member of The Association of Arte Útil (AAU) since 2013 when he collaborated with The AAU, Grizedale Arts and Tate Liverpool to run an 'Office of Useful Art' during Tate Liverpool's 'Art Turning Left' show (2013/2014). Byrne has coordinated numerous pop up Offices of Useful Art at Liverpool School of Art and Design, The Granby 4 Streets area of Toxteth in Liverpool, and at the Florrie Institute in Liverpool.

## JESSICA DE ABREU

Jessica de Abreu (1989) graduated from the department of Social and Cultural Anthropology and Culture, Organization and Management at VU University Amsterdam. Her passionate commitment to the field of African Diaspora, led to researches on upward social mobility in New York, Amsterdam, and London. Her recent research on Organizational Anthropology focused on social entrepreneurship in Black British communities from post- and decolonial perspectives. She is a board member of New Urban Collective and co-founder of The Black Archives, which is one of the first historical archives in the Netherlands that focuses on Black Dutch history, and beyond.



## MICHELLE DE WIT

Michelle de Wit completed the research master Arts and Culture: Art Studies at the University of Amsterdam in 2017. Her project for the Deviant Programme is a continuation of her MA thesis, in which she focused on the presentation of Alexandr Rodchenko's Gulag photomontages for the journal *USSR in Construction* in Dutch museums today. Michelle currently works as a freelance researcher, with a specific focus on art and politics.

## MICHAEL KARABINOS

Michael Karabinos is an archival theorist based in Amsterdam. He received his PhD from Leiden University in 2015. Combining questions on the nature of archives with their role in the decolonization of Southeast Asia, he has had work published in *Bijdragen tot de land- taal- en volkenkunde*, *Information & Culture* and *The Journal of Contemporary Archival Science*, among others, and is co-editor of the book *Colonial Legacy in South-east Asia: The Dutch Archives*. He is a former visiting fellow at Nanyang Technological University (Singapore) and previously served as the director of the National Geographic Map Collection in Washington, DC (USA).

## MIKIKI

Mikiki is a performance and video artist and queer community health activist of Acadian/Mi'kmaq and Irish descent from Newfoundland, Canada. They later moved to Calgary to work as the Director of TRUCK Gallery. Their work has been presented throughout Canada and internationally in self-produced interventions, artist-run centres and public galleries. Their identity as an artist is intrinsically linked to their history of work as a sexual health educator and harm reduction worker. Mikiki's creative themes often address safety, attitudes about drug use and responsibility, disclosure of sexual identity and health status, community building through skills sharing, testimonial and story-telling. Mikiki has worked as a sexuality counselor in public schools, a bathhouse attendant, a Drag Queen Karaoke hostess, a health and welfare worker for gay men, a Harm Reduction Street Outreach worker and an HIV tester. Mikiki currently lives in Toronto.

## BRUNO MORESCHI

Bruno Moreschi (São Paulo, Brasil, 1982) is a researcher and visual artist with projects that approach the system of visual arts itself, specially its physical and virtual spaces of legitimization, and focus on decoding the field, revealing its hidden procedures. For your PhD (Unicamp, BR, and exchange at University of Arts of Helsinki, FI), Moreschi conducted emancipated experiences at historical museums in South America and Europe. Artworks in collections and projects in São Paulo Museum Contemporary Art, 33rd São Paulo Biennial, Colombia National Museum and CA2M. Visit Bruno Moreschi's website here ([brunomoreschi.com](http://brunomoreschi.com)).

## ANA S GONZÁLEZ RUEDA

Ana S González Rueda is an independent curator. She holds a PhD in Museum and Gallery Studies from the University of St Andrews and an MA in Curating Contemporary Art from the University of Essex. Her doctoral dissertation is titled 'Inherent Pedagogies: Critical Approaches to Exhibition Making in the 2000s'.

## EVELIEN SCHELTINGA

Evelien Scheltinga is a curator and researcher. She took part in the research for the exhibition *The Stedelijk in wartime* at the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam (2015) and had a curatorial traineeship at the Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven. She is part of a research group based in Morocco, focussing on different museum models. She worked with Jonas Staal on various projects and exhibitions. Currently she is assistant curator at the Van Abbemuseum.

## EIMEAR WALSHE

Eimear Walshe is an artist and writer, working between Ireland and the Netherlands. They are two-time Research Fellow at the Van Abbemuseum, where the endeavor to extend academic study in Queer Theory and Feminist Epistemology to the production of sculpture, publishing, performances, lectures, and country music.



## COLOPHON

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