



ARCHIVO PAPERS

JOURNAL OF PHOTOGRAPHY AND VISUAL CULTURE

ISSN (Online) 2184-9218

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To cite this article:

Paula Ribeiro Lobo (2022) Interview: Ernst Van Alphen, *Archivo Papers Journal*, 2(1), 13-21.

Published online: 31 May 2022.

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INTERVIEW

ERNST VAN ALPHEN

PAULA RIBEIRO LOBO 

Ernst van Alphen is Emeritus Professor of Literary Studies at the Leiden University Centre for the Arts in Society. Particularly interested in issues central to modern and postmodern literature and in the relation between literature, critical theory and the visual arts, his work encompasses research on articulations between trauma and memory and their role in literary and artistic representation, gender studies, and problems related to archive, image and photography. Amongst numerous publications, Van Alphen authored books such as *Logs of Sculpture* (2022, in press), *Productive Archiving* (2022, in press), *Shame! and Masculinity* (2021), *Failed Images. Photography and Its Counter-Practices* (2018), *Staging the Archive: Art and Photography in Times of New Media* (2014), *Art In Mind: How contemporary Images Shape Thought* (2005), *Armando: Shaping Memory* (2000), *Caught by History: Holocaust effects in contemporary art, literature and theory* (1997), and *Francis Bacon and the Loss of Self* (1992). As co-editor, also published *How to Do Things with Affects – Affective Triggers in Aesthetic Forms and Cultural Practices* (with Tomáš Jirsa, 2019), and *The Rhetoric of Sincerity* (with Mieke Bal & Carel Smith, 2009).

Paula Ribeiro Lobo | Our relation to the idea of Time has long been under theoretical revision. Concepts such as contemporary, supermodern, altermodern, heterochronic, among others, have been consistently put forward in the last two decades to address the difficulty of periodisation, not only when considering cultural and geographical specificities in artistic production, but also the need to place ourselves within a historical perspective. As an academic who has worked extensively on the relation between the arts and thought, how would you define the current debates on time?

Ernst van Alphen | I am not sure if the terms you mention, *contemporary*, *supermodern*, *altermodern*, *heterochronic*, all concern periodisation. The contemporary, for example, has nothing to do with characterising the present condition, rather, it concerns the temporality of the art experience. Literally, it means “togetherness in time”. As Mieke Bal has argued, this togetherness can only happen in the present, in an exhibition for instance. Even when we look at old art, or read a text about an old historical figure, we do that in the present and they have their effect in the time we live in, which makes them contemporaneous. Heterochronic differs from the contemporaneous by a reflection on time that does not take the experience of time as a starting point; it concerns the incongruous encounters of different temporalities. In each historical moment different temporalities come together because, for instance, old points of view clash with modern points of view.

But when we think about periodisation different terms circulate: postmodern, post-post-modern, supermodern, altermodern. When we try to periodise movements of literature and art, postmodernism is no longer relevant. However, when we think of it as a social condition, postmodernity it is still very relevant. Discussions about postmodernism and postmodernity always begin with the question of whether it concerns an absolute break with modernity/modernism, or is it continuous with it? The answer is both. Depending on what you give emphasis to, supermodern and altermodern are then other manifestations of postmodernity.

Ribeiro Lobo | The individual experience of time contributes to the instability of the images – especially when considering the viewer as the agent who activates meanings and, therefore, who interferes in how images relate to referents and historical contexts. However, as you recently wrote in the text *Clashing Time Frames* (2022), “Although many photographs can be seen as snapshots from a continuous stream of time, some images resist such a reading”. What makes images resist historicist readings and categorisations?

Van Alphen | Historicist readings and categorisations are not impelled by images; they are imposed on images by disciplinary traditions. In Art History, historicist readings are more or less an axiom. Other notions of time than a chronological one are unimaginable, latterly un-imaginable: one does not understand other temporalities or other time frames. And when a historicist reading of certain

images is just irrelevant, we can always redirect this mode of reading on the artist who made these images, that is always possible, although usually also rather uninteresting, what does not help us to understand these images.

But you ask this question in relation to a text I wrote about one specific image of the Polish photographer Pavel Bownik, titled *The Urn*. It is a simple matter to describe the objects in Bownik's photograph; the same can be said about the process by which the artist captured the image. However, there is a grave and disturbing gap between what we see in the photograph and what we know about the objects we recognise there. It is extremely difficult to understand this image phenomenologically; that is, what *happens* when the viewer looks at this image in which time frames clash. In this case, a phenomenological reading from the perspective of the viewer is necessary, because a factual or formal description of the image is not very interesting and cannot convey or explain the image's impact.

Ribeiro Lobo | On the one hand, both the documentary impulse and the manipulation of photographic images are as old as the photographic praxis. On the other hand, and considering the technical age we live in, the more we question the reliability of images the more we tend to need them to counter fake news or the memory crisis. Is it possible to surpass this paradox?

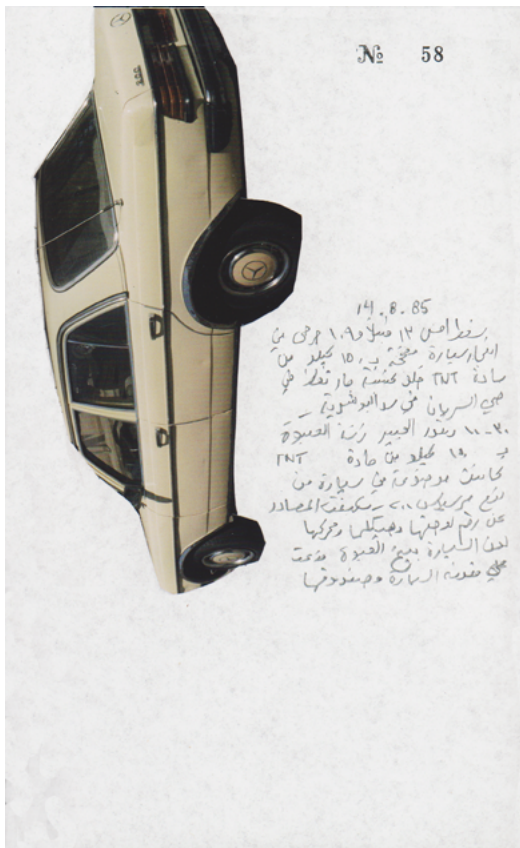
Van Alphen | In a strict sense, images are never reliable, as I have argued in *Failed Images. Photography and its Counter-Practices*. The problem here is a naive understanding of the documentary impulse. Images are always constructions, and that applies also to documentary images. One should not make an opposition between reliable (truthful) versus unreliable images (fake or false). One should first ask in what sense or what way an image is constructed, and next: does it make the image reliable or not? That is a matter of degree. Even images that are photoshopped can still be reliable, depending on what the subject of the photograph is.

Ribeiro Lobo | The systematic clash of personal time and historical time can lead to productive practices, as you sustained in your book *Staging the Archive: Art and Photography in the Age of New Media* (2014). By subverting traditional temporality and at the same time reinforcing our perception of the instability of present time, how do the arts contribute to expanding modes of producing knowledge?

Van Alphen | I can best give an answer by focusing on specific archival practices in art and in culture. Exclusions from the archive are inherent to any archival organisation. This explains why memories and knowledge 'outside the archive' are also part of the archive, in the sense of being produced by archival rules of exclusion. Therefore, an archival organisation has, by definition, an inside as well as an outside. In recent years many social and artistic practices have had the ambition to include items or identities that were until now overlooked or excluded from archival organisation. A good example is the listing, hence, archiving of

identities which were for a long time grouped together as so-called “perverse”, now indicated as LGBTQ+. While I am critical of the fact that identities are being boxed-in by listing them in this way, a positive effect is that identities that were for a long time unimaginable or invisible suddenly can be named. Until rather recently, they were excluded from the archival categories prevalent in Western societies. Their inclusion means that they are now acknowledged in their existence, because, as argued earlier, outside the archive there is no proof of one’s existence.

Many contemporary art practices foreground these exclusions from the archive by presenting them as yet another archive. Artists highlight this residue



[Left]
© Walid Raad, Notebook Volume 38.
Already Been in a Lake of Fire. plate 58:
'Mercedes, 200. beige, August 14, 1985,
10.30. Beirut, Mar Takla. 13 killed, 109
injured, 150 kg of TNT'

[Right]
© Walid Raad: Notebook Volume 38.
Already Been in a Lake of Fire. plate 57:
Volvo B20 or B30. blue. June 19, 1985.
21.09 Corniche of the sea. Tripoli.
79 killed. 150 injured. 150kg of TNT.
Hexogen. 2003.

of the archive by collecting images that were until then not considered to be “archivable”. These excluded images are still there but cannot be looked at because, according to the accepted discursive rules, they do not show or articulate anything worth knowing. An example of such an artistic practice transforming exclusions from the archive into an archive in its own right is the *Black Photo Album*, by South African photographer Santu Mofokeng. Another example of an artistic practice based on an inclusion into the archive that has so far been excluded is the work of Lebanese artist Walid Raad. He has had a great impact on the re-thinking of the archive and its effect. Raad and his fictional collaborators of “The Atlas Group” donated work to the Archive of The Atlas Group. To give an example, *Missing Lebanese Wars*, consisting of plates and a notebook, was deposited in *The Atlas Group Archive* by a well-known (but fictional) Lebanese historian, named Dr. Fadl

Fakhouri. Other fictive legatees of the archive are Asma Taffan (*Let's be Honest, the weather helped*, 1992), and Habib Fathallah (*I Might Die Before I Get a Rifle*, 1993). Walid Raad himself also donated work to the archive (*We Decided to Let Them Say, "We are Convinced," Twice*). The project of *The Atlas Group* unfolded between 1989 and 2004. In 2004, Raad decided to end this so-called collaborative project. In 2006 a retrospective exhibition was organised that showed the complete Atlas Group Archive in one single place, the Hamburger Bahnhof in Berlin¹.

By means of the works in *The Atlas Group Archive*, Raad questions the mediation and archiving of information. This artistic, fictional archive enables the exploration of new epistemic and cognitive models. This new knowledge challenges the kind of knowledge that is disseminated by the dominant mass media and by Western discourses on terrorism, colonialism and orientalism. The presentation of artistic works as belonging to an archive directs the attention to the cognitive conflicts and problems thematised by these works. Walid Raad explains why the archive as a place is the necessary framework for his cognitive project:

I like to think that I always work from facts. But I always proceed from the understanding that there are different kinds of facts; some facts are historical, some are sociological, some are emotional, some are economic, and some are aesthetic. And some of these facts can sometimes only be experienced in a place we call fiction. I tend to think in terms of different kinds of facts and the places that permit their emergence².

Besides fiction, the other place in the work of Walid Raad that permits these facts to emerge and become visible and knowable is the archive. Most people outside Lebanon know only vaguely that during the twentieth century wars have been fought, with the Lebanese (by Israel) and among the Lebanese. One remembers especially its glorious past, namely the capital Beirut as the equivalent to Paris in the Middle East. The very destructive wars that have ruined the country have sunken into oblivion. As a result, they have no real existence anymore, they are no longer present in our memories. Through his artistic project, integrating fact and fiction, Raad includes and transforms forgotten histories into archival knowledge.

Ribeiro Lobo | When addressing the articulations between photography and colonialism, either by delving into institutional archives or by making use of vernacular images and/or recreations, artistic practices are dealing with complex histories and multiple temporalities. Given their potential for both critique and mediation, do such works require particular methodological approaches?

Van Alphen | When we delve into institutional archives or when we make use of vernacular images in order to analyse colonialism, we have to first ask one very important question: who is representing whom or what? Usually, these images are not self-representations of colonised people, because those images are not

included in institutional archives. In institutional archives one usually finds Western representations of colonised people. But in the last twenty years people who were so far excluded from the archive, especially as subjects, have now begun to create their own archives, resulting in queer archives, black archives, or postcolonial archives. An example of an archival book practice transforming exclusions from the archive into an archive in its own right, is the *Black Photo Album* by South African photographer Santu Mofokeng, mentioned above. The *Black Photo Album* is the result of an investigation of images that were commissioned by black working- and middle-class families in South Africa in the period between 1890-1950. It was during this period that South-Africa developed and implemented a racist political system. In this era it was still common practice to depict African people in the same visual language as animals, as part of the fauna in their own natural habitat. In the ideologies of authoritative knowledge, they were considered as "natives" and the official "archivable" images had to confirm such a notion of African people. The photographs commissioned by black people and representing them as bourgeois families did not fit this ideology and were excluded from the archives of official knowledge.

These images remain scattered in the private domain and are largely invisible. In the words of Santu Mofokeng:

They have been left behind by dead relatives, where they sometimes hang on obscure parlour walls in the townships. In some families they are coveted as treasures, displacing totems in discursive narratives about identity, lineage and personality. And because, to some people, photographs contain the "shadow" of the subject, they are carefully guarded from the ill-will of witches and enemies. In other families they are being destroyed as rubbish during spring-cleans because of interruptions in continuity or disaffection with the encapsulated meanings and history of the images. Most often they lie hidden to rot through neglect in kists, cupboards, cardboard boxes and plastic bags. (2011: 230)

Mofokeng's *Black Photo Album* reverses the exclusion of these images from the authoritative public domain. He collects these images and the stories about the subjects of the photographs. It is important that images that have so far been excluded from public archives, are now presented now within the archival genre of the artist book. But photographs from the *Black Photo Album* are shown as well within the context of the gallery and the museum. Mofokeng presents them in a new format in combination with the stories. By doing this, the neglected memories and images are inserted into the public domain, and form the archive from which until now they had been excluded. This reanimation of the invisible exclusions from the archive implies much more than bringing to life almost forgotten memories. By making these images into archival objects, the ideology that subjected African people to the lower orders in the 'family of men' is rewritten.



© Santu Mofokeng,
All images are from *Black PhotoAlbum/*
Look at Me 1890-1950, c. 2011.

Ribeiro Lobo | In order to control historical narratives and externalise blame, photography and documentary practices have been used by despotic regimes to commit mass atrocities. Such archival iniquities have been increasingly tackled by artists who utilise the potential of the photographic to address historical events and absent or underrepresented traumas. Yet, although these artworks are envisaged as catalysts for engagement and change, their effect might also be rapidly undermined by their aestheticization and circulation in social media – would you agree?

Van Alphen | Aestheticization and circulation in social media are two very different issues. Aestheticization is not by definition bad because it can activate a careful and slow mode of looking that may be of crucial importance in engaging the viewer. When these kinds of engaged artworks circulate on social media it depends on what the context is in which they circulate. Social media is especially used to circulate sensational images, or funny images. But artists show their work themselves on, for example, Instagram. It can be very useful, especially because there are other artists who follow these artists on this social medium.

Ribeiro Lobo | From “trace-image” to “fiction-image”, as Philippe Dubois put it (2016), the temporal regimes of images have become increasingly undistinguished. Considering, as you wrote, that we keep *imagining* the past, do cinematic thresholds and the destabilisation of the post-photographic act as discursive synchronisations, the same way we intersect facts and fictional narratives to measure our individual relationship with time?

Van Alphen | There is a lot of misunderstanding about the concept of fiction. In common sense thinking, fiction is the opposite of fact and truth, so it is a lie and not true. However, a more important understanding of fiction is Coleridge's who said that fiction is a 'lied truth'. This definition deconstructs the binary opposition

between fact and fiction, because it is a truth as well as a lie. So, intersecting facts with fictional narratives suggests a problem but is, in fact, no problem at all. This intersection does not complicate truthfulness, but just combines two different modes of relating to the world: a historical and a fictional one. A fiction is not fake news, but is a lied truth, an imaginary way of producing truths.

Ribeiro Lobo | Time is perceived in contemporaneity, according to Keith Moxey (2013), as "*a form of 'non-time', one in which history no longer operates, [an idea that] threatens to impoverish not only our sense of the alterity of the past but also our appreciation of the differences between cultures*". What is your perspective on the subject?

Van Alphen | I agree with the first part of Moxey's statement, that time is perceived in contemporaneity, but not with the second part, that contemporaneity results in non-time, in which history no longer operates. Let me just quote what I answered to your first question: "As Mieke Bal has argued, this togetherness of contemporaneity can only happen in the present, in an exhibition for instance. Even when we look at old art, or read a text about an old historical figure, we do that in the present, and they have their effect in the time we live in, which makes them contemporaneous. Heterochronic differs from the contemporaneous by a reflection on time that does not take *the experience of time* as a starting point; it concerns the incongruous encounters of different temporalities. In each historical moment different temporalities come together because, for instance, old points of view clash with modern points of view." So, Moxey's conclusion that contemporaneity results in non-time is just wrong. Contemporaneity implies togetherness of different historical moments, and this togetherness enables us to see differences between different historical moments and periods. But Moxey was trained as an art historian; thus chronological thinking of history remains the standard basis from which contemporaneity is evaluated as negative because as non-time.

Ribeiro Lobo | We can relate the potential of art's political effect with a "durational looking", to use Mieke Bal's expression, in order to conceive the possibility of art as a democratic space of encounter. Considering that we live in a time of near-permanent interruption, as you sustained in *Attention for Distraction: Modernity, Modernism and Perception* (2017), how can subjectivity, with its biased stances, relate to the idea of democratic encounter?

Van Alphen | I have difficulty in understanding your question, because you relate many different things to each other which are for me rather unrelated. You write about "art as democratic space," "durational looking," "time of near-permanent interruption," and then, lastly, the question "how can subjectivity relate to the idea of democratic encounter"? Let just rephrase the question as follows: what can

the function of art be in times of near-permanent interruption? In a way you have already given the answer to this question by raising the issue of durational looking. When art is able to activate a different mode of looking than the one which is common since the beginning of modernity, namely a durational one, then art can still be very important and also have political effects.

Ribeiro Lobo | I understand your perspective, but I disagree with the idea that contemporaneity is being evaluated in such a negative tone by art historians – as exemplified by the interdisciplinary articulations that have been setting the conceptual basis for numerous debates, research projects and publications. During the last decades art history has not only been promoting the togetherness of different historical moments but also, and correlatedly, has been questioning its own chronological thinking of history. So, let me ask it this way: since artworks or images do not represent the same for everybody, if one removes temporal structures or any sort of historical reference how can one tackle current extremist political appropriations and uses of artworks and images?

Van Alphen | I do not believe that it is possible to completely remove temporal frameworks; and also the present is a temporal framework. As I said earlier, I do not believe in non-time as the result of contemporaneity, as Moxey does. When one wants to tackle political appropriations of artworks and images, the issue is not that historical frameworks are being ignored, but one should ask the question how appropriate or relevant is the historical framework that is being activated, and that framework can also be the present.

Ribeiro Lobo | As you sustained in *Attention for Distraction: Modernity, Modernism and Perception* (2017), we live in a time of near-permanent interruption. What can the function of art be in a time like ours, particularly when considering the present war in Europe?

Van Alphen | I am afraid that art is rather powerless in times of war. Art is very important but we should not ask art to function in impossible ways.

1 The complete contents of the archive are published in the following book: The Atlas Group (1989 – 2004), *A Project by Walid Raad* (Köln: Walter König, 2006).

2 Gunilla Knape, "Afterword", in Walid Raad: *I might Die before I get a Rifle* (Göttingen, 2011), p. 99.