

## **The materiality of the reproduced image**

'Always a thief and never caught' is Egon Van Herreweghe's (°1985) first solo exhibition in Belgium. Until the 15th of June, Netwerk will continue to exhibit the findings of his balanced search for the materiality of the reproduced image.

Van Herreweghe poses a legitimate question: should we continue to produce new images? His concern regarding the current level of visual pollution in society – every street corner and bus plastered with images – may seem strange coming from someone whose occupation is dependent upon images. Van Herreweghe studied photography at KASK and later specialised at Sint Lucas Antwerp and HISK. Although his perspective has been shaped by his photographic training, one gets the impression from the exhibition that the artist is not entirely content with the medium. Rather than attaching images to some form of carrier, the artist is primarily interested in the materiality of the carrier. But due to the speed with which images are now displayed and consumed, this materiality is stretched paper-thin and the intimacy of the experience is suppressed.

This first solo exhibition offers the artist a reflective distance. The photographic image is not used as a means of communication or representation; it is instead deployed strategically for its intrinsic exploitability. Why should the artist be satisfied with the residues of frozen time when a new realisation of the image is burgeoning in its very folds and seams? While searching for the materiality of the image, the artist never assumes that there is such a thing as a blank page. Rather, within every image can be found the germ of a new image. Through certain artistic interventions such as erasing, ripping, masking and covering, Van Herreweghe gets under the skin of the image. There, in the folds of the visible hides the essence of the matter, infinitely divisible and unfoldable. 'Plica ex Plica', writes Gilles Deleuze: in every fold a new fold is created.

Characteristic of Van Herreweghe's deconstructive working process is a series in which several colourful ads from Vogue magazine have been manipulated. The women, staring lustily, bear not a single fold or wrinkle. Multiple layers of foundation cream deny these heavily coated faces any materiality. Van Herreweghe shatters this idealised image by wiping the printed skin with a solvent-doused cloth. He adds nothing but exposes the layers and textures under the surface of the image with almost archaeological precision. In the adjoining exhibition spaces, the artist proceeds with his visual research in a similar way. A wall-sized monochrome reproduction of a

Baroque painting is stripped of all context and caption. The nameless image exudes a bold aggressiveness: the intertwined bodies are manipulated in such a way that they repeatedly become the victims of an invisible sword of Damocles. The dramatic rips and tears Van Herreweghe makes in the reproduction make this threat all the more palpable.

Rather than having a destructive, iconoclastic attitude, spurred on by fear of the power of representation, the artist believes that the image can be reinterpreted and actualised ad infinitum. Van Herreweghe's artistic practice is consequently characterised by an incisive paradox. While the reappropriation of an existing image is often regarded as yielding a weak copy or echo of the original, Van Herreweghe invites us to see this repetition as a creative act. His oeuvre thus becomes a commentary on how the original image can, through a striving for authenticity, acquire an almost auratic status. Van Herreweghe interprets the reproducible image – here the printed photograph – as a vessel for culture. Ever the thief, the artist operates within the rips and folds of the existing material and in doing so transcends the existing visual order. As a result, gaping voids appear, the bounding lines of which trace newly exposed possibilities.

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Elke Couchez, 2014