

Interview with Aglaia Konrad & Egon van Herreweghe

Two artists with a shared love for the photographic image. One of them loves the act of photographing 'too much', whilst the other one never actually takes photographs himself. Two different generations, but with the same fondness for tangible media and the tactile qualities of a work. This conversation opened with an apparently fundamental question.

Joachim Naudts — *Both your practices embrace the analogue – that is: the physical existence of an image. What is the status of a digital (or digitally derived) image in relation to your work?*

Aglaia Konrad — I am an analogue, haptic person. Weight, format and matter are things that I want to be able to incorporate and make use of. A digital image on a screen means nothing to me. I see an image, but that is only a starting point. What is its actual size? What kind of tonality does it have? *Making the work* is a lot more difficult and complex than *taking the photograph*.

Egon van Herreweghe — We often juxtapose new (digital) technology and older media, as if the former were a literal, immaterial mirroring of what we already know. As far as I'm concerned, they are two totally different spheres, and each of them has its distinct possibilities. We are still in a transition period, which explains why digital technology is still often looked down upon. Of course, my work is also about materiality, but rather more specifically about the relation between the image and its medium. Digital technology is just as much a type of art medium, bearing its proper characteristics. The diversity in analogue means and craftsmanship seems to be diminishing. This has sometimes been a source of frustration in the past, but nowadays I try not to embark upon it anymore.

AK — I'm not at all bothered by the fact that something is disappearing. Something else will always take its place. In 1991, I was one of the first photographers to work with translucent film on glass, or to print large-format images and paste them onto a wall. The material at the time, by Gevaert or Dupont, no longer exists, so now everything is simply printed digitally.

Egon, tell us, what then is your point of view on the potential of the digital?

EvH — My education was analogue-based, which often makes me feel like a fossil in a digital world. But I think that the frictions and the conflicts between image and meaning, and how we deal with them, are often addressed more strikingly in a digital context. It is precisely for this reason that I admire

artists of an older generation, who suddenly start to create *Second Life* inspired work. How is it possible that they are so flexible, while until recently I was still busy fiddling with photocopying machines? *(laughs)*

JN — *Can you give us a tangible example? In your most recent exhibition (The Ideal Husband, with Thomas Min, at the Jan Colle Galerij, Ghent), you showed a work made with 3D animation.*



Egon van Herreweghe — *The Ideal Husband*, 2016

EvH — The exhibition was about male stereotypes in our visual culture. The work you refer to is based on an advertisement for a men's fragrance. The ad features a nocturnal, dark-blue landscape, with snow-covered mountain tops and a reflecting sea surface. It contains so many interesting visual references that appeal to me, that I looked for a dynamic way to give shape to this non-existent landscape. I've managed to do this by using computer animation and digitally manipulating the landscape, thus emphasizing the fictional aspect of the adventurer, en route towards an heroic landscape. Not quite your classic appropriation, but a new original, that hopefully has a more subtle impact.

JN — *For years now, both analogue and digital technologies have made it possible to collect, or even to take massive amounts of photographs in a short time. In both your works as well, this concept of abundance plays an important role.*

AK — In fact, it already starts earlier. I take a keen interest in observing the world. I love to frame my gaze, enabling me to shift the emphasis towards something else. The city, our built environment, is always my starting point. Everything that is built is man-made, so every single image also tells us something about ourselves. For me, abundance represents the multifaceted way of observing things and reflecting on them. As a result, I don't believe that a photograph has only one single meaning.

JN — *Is Undecided Frames a way of unsettling that one-sided perspective?*



Aglaia Konrad — Undecided Frame (Porto 2011)

AK — Initially it wasn't so much about that in fact. I own a huge archive and a lot of my work emerges by rereading or revisiting that archive. I often put dots beneath the photographs on my contact sheets. It means that I liked this or that one better. I often make two or three successive shots, but they are never identical. Why did I prefer this particular one better back then? It has a lot to do with the medium: it reflects both the given moment in time and the act of framing, therefore also including the intermediate time span. When you choose an image, you do so within the mindset of that moment. Years later, you develop a different way of looking at things. I find it very interesting to confront myself with my archive, to conceptualise it, and in doing so, to create new work. Consequently, my

photographs can be placed in all sorts of different contexts. I could make work based on nothing but my archive for years, but I just love photographing so much. *(laughs)*

JN — *Egon, how come this is so different in your case? You hardly ever take any photographs yourself anymore.*

EvH — That's right. I'm just no good at it and that's probably why I've never found the act of photographing to be satisfactory. On the other hand, I've taken great pleasure in collecting and researching existing images very early on.

JN — *Where do you find them then?*

EvH — Everywhere. Just empty your letterbox. Everything you do, or come across, is an image: every entrance ticket, every invitation, every second on the street ... I often get the feeling that these pictures choose me. The underlying logic is highly personal and autobiographical. In most cases it's a constructed image, as is the case with advertisements, in which an artificial reality is composed. Such images always contain an entire vocabulary of other images.

JN — *Are these deliberate references?*

EvH — Yes, these images are created hyper consciously. They are expensive to make and to publish, so I assume that nothing is left to chance. That is precisely what I find so intriguing: where does this image come from, for what purpose, why was it placed here at this moment, and in this way? And how does all this appeal to me? I try to disentangle this construction to get a view of who I am. How do they know me so well? And am I in fact not just simply made by them?

JN — *In your Vogue Paintings you render that deconstruction in a highly visual way. You soak off pigments from the existing pages of a Vogue magazine and then you use these pigments to paint over that same page. The initial colour and some references are retained, but you deliberately erase some of the figurative aspects. To what extent is randomness involved in the process?*



Egon van Herreweghe — Vogue Painting, Paintings and Sculpture FOAM 2014

EvH — It's very similar to painting: the point where I stop is the point where I think I can no longer add anything to it. In fact, the soaking off and the painting are carried out simultaneously. You almost always take it too far, and then it becomes a grey sludge, a slush. But the link with the original is always maintained: it is literally a page out of a fashion magazine, which is why it has that particular

format. Vogue is also the only magazine that is most suitable for this technique: afterwards the page still looks just as neat as it did before, which gives rise to an interesting kind of friction.

JN — *Aglaia, Concrete City was the first time you worked with an archive of postcards. How different was that compared to working with your own images?*



Aglaia Konrad — Concrete City, 2012

AK — It is indeed quite different. For years I've sent postcards to my friends, but I also always bought one for myself because I found them so beautiful. At one point I realised that they could potentially be photographs by Aglaia Konrad – potentially. They're all exclusively postcards of modernist architecture, so they depict a part of architectural history. But they also have a political facet: someone once decided to make a picture postcard of a specific building. Subsequently, someone commissioned a photographer, who in turn chose his composition and who ultimately took the photograph. It is one big process of decision-making.

JN — *Your love for architecture has apparently remained undiminished. Where does it come from?*

AK — Already at a young age I was highly aware of how spaces affect me. In small spaces it feels as though I am supporting the ceiling with my own head. In Vienna, rooms in apartments that are no larger than 12 square metres are not simply called a room or a space, but a kabinet. A 'cabinet' measuring 12 square metres can feel quite vast, if it's 4 metres high and if it has a large window. If the space only measures 2.40 metres and has a tiny little window, then you suddenly find yourself in a

prison cell. Those 12 square metres remain the same, but the space is different. I've always found it fascinating to look at architecture, at any possible stage. If I were to be appointed as city photographer, I would go and visit every building site. I love building sites, the equipment, the machines. But I also find it interesting to see what labour means in the twenty-first century, and how it has evolved, compared to 50 years ago. For me architecture captures the whole of human existence, and labour is one of its most important aspects.



Aglaia Konrad — *China Rushes*, 2016 | thematised the aspect of labour in *China Rushes*.

In this work I showed 20 videos in a piece of furniture. These are unedited observations of human activities in the public space, all made in China. The rush in China after 1989 is almost brutal and cynical. I recorded the economies in all possible forms, including the ones with a very human side to it. From the construction of motorways to that of subways, but also for instance how poor people go and collect bricks from ruins, to clean them and sell them on again.

JN — *I would like to conclude by discussing your shared interest in the physical aspects of the exhibition space and how your work engages directly with it. Egon, what I have in mind are the blow-ups of reproductions of classical paintings that you then paste onto walls like it were wallpaper. How do you determine the format in that process?*



Egon van Herreweghe — It takes two to make an accident, HISK 2015

EvH — Location is key. This was in an impressive wooden stairwell that was three floors high, which meant you couldn't stand back from the walls. A stairwell is a central space, an interspace connecting all sorts of rooms. Up there, I put up a picture that visitors would come across several occasions during their visit to the exhibition. When you look at the photograph, it might seem quite remarkable, but not all visitors actually saw the work. If you stand very close to it, you only see a sort of 'noise'; it's the grid of the original print. The image was printed on thin paper and I also tore out pieces. Rather than performing an anecdotal act, the mauling is my way of further enforcing the disruption of the representation.

The image itself is a reproduction of Géricault's *The Raft of the Medusa*, a painting that displays a specific hierarchy: down below are the corpses, in-between the half dead, and right on top there those that still cherish hope. The latter are the survivors and probably also the greatest bastards. It's not the heroes that survived, but the strongest ones.

JN — *Aglaia, why did you start using a similar technique (huge enlargements of images put up on walls as wallpaper) in the 1990s already?*

AK — Architecture is built space. When you walk through it you experience it physically and psychically. I wanted to make the images revolving round architecture, in the broadest sense, respond to the built architecture of the exhibition space. Every space has its specific spatial, material and formal dimensions, and I want the work to be able to relate to that. For instance, I made work on large windows, which brings about a kind of parallel reality that is only present as an image. You're making these two realities overlap, by presenting them in this way.

I have already put this into practice in one of my first exhibitions, in 1991 or 1992, in the provincial museum of Hasselt, the current Z33. Up until today, I first need to see the architecture of a building before I can develop a concept for an exhibition. Every place, every space elicits something different and demands a different approach. In Hasselt there was a large window in the main stairwell and I chose that place to exhibit. It was a nice intermediate space, between indoors and outdoors. Much like the stairwell where Egon hung his work, the visitor here makes an interesting movement, ascending to the top and then coming back down.

JN — *And so we've come full circle.*

Interview conducted on 20 March 2017 in Brussels. Proofreading by Kim Schepens.

Joachim Naudts (BE, °1982) started curating exhibitions on contemporary photography in 2008. He has curated over 20 exhibitions for FOMU (museum of photography, Antwerp, Belgium), including *The Still Point of the Turning World – Between Film and Photography* (2017), *Mijn vlakke land* (My Flat Land, 2015), *Broomberg & Chanarin – Everything was Beautiful and nothing Hurt* (2014) and *Power!*

Photos! Freedom! (2013). He's chief-editor of the FOMUmagazines *Extra* and *.tiff*. In 2012 he became board member of photography research network *Scherptediepte – Depth of Field* He's regularly invited as a jury-member, speaker, curator, writer and guest teacher.